"THE AGENT": PROBING INTO AGENCY

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The title of David Jones's unfinished sequence, "The Agent," which imagines a conversation between the biblical figures of Judas and Caiaphas as they justify the crucifixion of Christ to themselves and each other, points to the central issue of agency, in all its rich homonymy. Indeed an agent is someone who acts (from Latin *agere*), though the question remains, for whom and for what purpose. Jones's fragment asks: Were Judas and Caiaphas ever free agents? Did they act, or were they acted on? Probing into the agency of these characters in the sequence leads us to examine two central intertextual relationships which make this fragment one of Jones's most perplexing and challenging pieces.

Given the subject matter it is perhaps unsurprising that the Bible is one of Jones's main sources of inspiration. The characterization of the two figures, and their motivations for playing a part in the crucifixion, are developed through biblical allusions and symbolism interwoven in such a way as to retain the multiplicity of the sources. Yet Jones further complicates the agency of Judas and Caiaphas by infusing their language and outlook with contemporary civilizational discourse. Indeed, a close analysis of the fragment reveals its deep, though largely uncharted, relationship with Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918-22). While Jones's readings of Spengler have long been accepted to have shaped his understanding of cyclical patterns of history, civilizational decline and the "Break", "The Agent" responds directly to Spengler's dualism of "truth" and "fact", which characterises the division between periods of "culture" and "civilization" and between man's reactions to these eras. The sequence also reframes – through the conversation of Judas and Caiaphas – the meeting of Jesus and Pilate which Spengler examined and interpreted as "a scene appallingly distinct and overwhelming in its symbolism, such as the world's history had never before and has never since looked at". 2

I

After providing a brief introduction to the textual history and style of "The Agent", this article will contextualize the portrayal of agency in relation to the characters of Judas and Caiaphas. It will focus on Judas in relation to Jones's creative revision of the biblical sources and on Caiaphas in connection with Spengler's exploration of the "symbolism" and dualism inherent in the events surrounding the crucifixion. Jones placed a great burden on his characters by making them archetypes of these wider theological and historico-philosophical discourses; indeed, this complexity may account for Jones's inability to complete the fragment for publication and for the lack of coherence felt by some readers. Yet this conceptual burden can provide intriguing evidence for Jones's own preoccupations and beliefs. Analysing the dialogues of Judas and Caiaphas on their own agency and motivations elucidates some of the essential, though problematic, questions Jones was grappling with in the 1940s (and in later revisions of the piece) surrounding free will and man's response to civilizational decline.

While precisely dating "The Agent" is impossible, letters and manuscript notes reveal that Jones was working on "a conversation between Judas and Caiaphas" from "1940 (or thereabouts)". He was certainly immersed in writing "The Agent" during the early years of the 1940s (which coincides with the inscription in Jones's copy of Spengler's *Decline of the West* "Aug 19th 1941"), after which he revised the fragment in 1962 and possibly again at later dates. The Agent' was a central part of the vast collection of manuscripts comprising an epic-length collection of Roman poetry, unfinished at Jones's death in 1974. These have been edited in two different versions. In 1981 Agenda published The Roman Quarry and other sequences, collated by Jones's friends René Hague and Harman Grisewood. More recently, Thomas Goldpaugh has edited The Grail Mass and other works in which he includes further manuscript materials from the National Library of Wales. The newer edition follows the MSS more closely but is as yet unpublished. Hague and Grisewood designate "The Agent" as the title for four sections of poetry: Judas's soliloquy, an examination of the Last Supper, the conversation of Judas and Caiaphas, and a Roman soldier's perspective on the arrest of Christ. Goldpaugh presents only an enlarged version of the third section — the conversation

under that title. So as to maintain the most complete analysis of the predicament of Judas and
 Caiaphas we will use sections one and three from *The Roman Quarry*, but will refer to Goldpaugh's version when it interpolates materials not found in the earlier edition.

The style of Jones's poetry in "The Agent" is also worth examining. An acute ear for spoken language is an overriding feature and there are, for the most part, differences between the voices of Judas and Caiaphas. Judas displays a form of colloquial orality reminiscent of Cockney speech (elision of the vowel in the possessive adjective - "y'r Grace", "m' Lord Pontiff, use of the expletive "bugger".6). Caiaphas, in general, uses a more formal, patronizing language; yet he is not above including an idiomatic phrase such as "cock a snook" (142) or referring to Cicero as "Tully," which stands for Tullius, his middle name (148). Difficulties can arise however due to the characters' preference for speaking to and about themselves. As in many of Jones's Roman fragments, the place is Jerusalem and it is the night when Jesus ate the last supper with his disciples, told them he was to be betrayed and arrested, then crossed the Kedron stream to the "ascertained place" (140), the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet the text belies such simplicity. A number of other places are called upon, if only through mythological references (the "Ten Towns", "Babylon" and "Olympus" (133) and "hilly Thabor" (138)). Moreover, Jones splices various periods, not shirking from bold anachronism, both in what is referred to (as the sequence mentions Jerome and his lion (148) and Adolf Hitler (146)) and in the mode of telling, which involves quotations from Malory's Morte d'Artur (137, 139) and nursery rhymes (133), along with phraseology which mixes ancient and modern languages (such as German and Latin in "she of the kultur-dispersal urbes" (148)). Such conflation of different periods was the foundation of Jones's developing "analogy" between British and Roman troops of occupation, and periods of declining civilisation.

The clearest intertextual relationship maintained throughout the "The Agent" is unsurprisingly with the Bible and it is in this context that we can begin to consider the presentation of agency. Jones's wealth of knowledge – developed through his evangelical upbringing, Catholic

conversion and deep theological considerations around the paschal mystery and its relation to the Mass – is displayed in the complexity of the allusions he interweaved throughout "The Agent." For example, calling King David "chrism'd Daphnis" (135), referring to Isaiah as "the ducal son of Amoz" (144) or interpolating long footnotes comparing the Sadducees and Pharisees (fn. 3, 134). Moreover, the overt self-justification and almost nihilistic acceptance of his role revealed in Judas's soliloquy betrays a deep confusion about his motivations which to some extent mirrors the contradiction present in the accounts of his actions in the canonical gospels.

Matthew juxtaposes two conflicting narratives. On the one hand Jesus announces "and the Son of Man is betrayed to be crucified" (26:2), and on the other Judas goes to the chief priests, sells his betrayal, and "[seeks] opportunity to betray him" (26:16); or, as juxtaposed in Jesus's words, "The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed!" (26:24). The account is almost identical in Mark 14 and fairly similar in Luke 22, except that Luke includes the detail that Satan is supposed to have entered Judas's body. John, on the other hand, proposes a different version of Jesus's relationship with Judas: "And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly" (13:26-27). Interestingly, in John's Gospel, Jesus is the one who feeds Judas with Satan, as it were, and who explicitly orders him to go and do the deed. We see how the complex issue that is developed in "The Agent" is already present in the Gospels' narratives. Judas is a traitor, but obeying divine orders. He appears to act of his own accord but is also possessed by Satan. Jesus is betrayed and about to be flogged and crucified, but he is offering his life to redeem the sins of the world - agnus dei qui tollis peccata mundi (the lamb of God that takes the sins of the world). The unfathomable mystery of this paradox, central to the liturgy of the Mass, imbues Jones's characterization of Judas. Jones appears to have had these sources in mind as he references all four Gospels in his footnotes, and certainly Judas appears in Jones's fragment as a man torn between conflicting powers. 10

In section one of "The Agent" Judas has already accepted that he must betray Christ yet his motivation is unclear. While he mentions the "counted silver" (132) that awaits him, his most convincing arguments are religious. As he struggles to justify the need "to do what must be done" (132), Judas uses the language of predestination. He claims that "Israel's senate, Yahve's Gerousia, yes, and He, / himself, would leave no retreat" (133) and asks himself "See prevenient Yahve / guiding this expedience – / what's from you / but straight obedience?" (132). Jones's Judas is fully aware that this obedience will cost him both his life and his soul:

That suits me best,

where Sheol's hollow synthesis

sets final term to all antithesis. (135)

Although Judas is soon to take his own life, or in Jones's phrasing enter "Sheol", he appears to accept that as the other Apostles drink "his cup" in Heaven he will "drain whatever vintage / this lamb's wrath / permits in Tarturus" (133-34). Judas even prophesises that he will betray Satan – "I'll sell him as well, / and lead a faction-war in hell" (134) – in a sense reiterating his loyalty to, and sacrifice for, God.

Judas appears to have little agency or control over his actions as he portrays himself in his soliloquy as following a divine plan. Again biblical references are central as Judas associates himself with Haman who planned to "destroy" the Jews and died on the gallows (Esther 3:5-7:10):

Hamans don't hang on every tree.

They're key men

and most integral to the pattern:

so would I be. (133)

Likewise, Jones strays into Greek mythology to give Judas further analogies of betrayal to explore the "part" that he must play:

Zeus and Prometheus change attributes,

and so are one.

So still, perhaps, I've part with him,

some part,

the other half

to work the drama out. (133)

Thus Judas hopes to be one with Christ just as Prometheus is one with Zeus. The passage plays on the word "part": to be involved in and to split his identity and dissociate the loving and the betraying aspects both of which are central to conclude the "drama". While Judas has accepted his role and the consequences, the wretchedness of his plight is further clarified in section three of "The Agent" in which we learn of his deep admiration, if not love, for the man he will betray. As the High Priest presumably voices some (unrecorded) aspersion on the character of the Nazarene, Judas launches into a passionate defence of Christ's beauty, significantly expressed through the adjective "fair" and with echoes of The Song of Songs. Judas's words might well express love, even physical love in the pointed reference to the man's body:

he's very fair to look upon, y'r Grace, in all his members... he's shining fair, y'r Grace... he's altogether lovely – that's what gets you... he's strong as the cedars when he takes off his coat – O m' lord Pontiff, that's the bugger of it! (141)

While Caiaphas too uses biblical allusion to examine his own agency and justify his actions, it is in the figure of Judas that Jones deeply interrogates the theological issue of compliance and free will. So for Judas in "The Agent" as it was in the Bible, the ultimate conundrum is theological: how to comprehend the strange design of a loving God who sacrifices his only Son with Judas as collateral damage. Indeed, Judas, the agent, both traitor and instrument in God's scheme, hints at the questions this raises:

O how they'll be put to it down the history maze!

O Ariadne, lend your guiding thread

to sacred doctors and to exegetes who'll seek to worry out how love could seem to speak so harsh.

Ah! truth and fact – are you wedded in the night I tread? (132-3)

Judas's confusion therefore becomes our own as the reader is left asking whether the "love" for Christ, which will "speak so harsh," emanates from God or Judas, or indeed from them both.

Probing into the complexity with which Jones tackles the issue of free will in Judas's agency and motivations can help us to understand the intertextual relationship developed between this fragment and the biblical narratives. Yet, Jones does not contain his examination of agency within these boundaries. Instead, as we can see in Judas's final question about "truth and fact," Jones chose to complicate his character further by involving him, but more particularly Caiaphas, in the broader dualisms central to the work of Spengler.

While Jones was aware of Spengler before the 1940s, it was in the early years of this decade that he began to interrogate Spengler's philosophy of history in earnest. In a letter to Grisewood on 26 February 1942, Jones wrote:

I've been immersed in Spengler, I'm battling with him. [...] A lot of it one just reads as if one were reading one's own exact thoughts for the past twenty years [...].¹¹

Like many critics, Jones disliked the nihilism in Spengler's exhortations to accept rather than fight cultural decline. In *Decline of the West*, Spengler wrote: "He who does not acknowledge this in his heart, ceases to be counted among the men of his generation [...]." In the margin, Jones noted "he might be merely an intelligent person who knows he is living in a kind of hell." Despite his fears, Jones never accepted Spengler's declarations that decline was inevitable. Indeed, for Jones they were paradoxical as he read in Spengler's works not only "enormous sympathy and understanding of greatness in both religion and art no less than in political and military achievement" but also a

profound sense of loss beneath the outward pessimism. Jones's reading of Spengler's character was perceptive; in a letter of 1914 Spengler admitted: "What lies before us [...] is unconsoling, if one thinks and feels as a man of culture." Thus when Jones created figures in his poetry who expound Spengler's doctrines they are often, like Spengler himself, simultaneously nostalgic and nihilistic.

Jones's works abound with Spenglerian terms, such as "megalopolitan," phrases like "cultural December," and concepts, for example, "Caesarism" – the rise of the dictator in the final stage of decline – which Jones dramatized in his poetry through the figure of "Caesar" who represents pure civilization, militarism, and state control. Moreover, at the heart of Jones's Roman poetry lay Spengler's conceptualization of the "break" between culture and civilization, in which the dualism of "truth" and "fact" could be used to divide types of men: cultural truth-men, with their religious history and artistic world-view, and civilizational fact-men, with their political history and pragmatic world-view. Jones used this dualism to shape the agency and motivations of his characters in "The Agent."

Both Jones and Spengler were historically and theologically intrigued by the meeting of Jesus and Pilate – Jones created the pencil and watercolour work "Pilate Washing his Hands" (1922) while Spengler situated his analysis at the centre of the second volume of *Decline of the West* and wrote a dramatic piece on the subject in his later years.¹⁷ Jones's side-lines, and a note written on a flyleaf, in his copy of Spengler's history testify to his interest in the passage in which Pilate, the fact-man, meets Jesus, the truth-man:¹⁸

when Jesus was taken before Pilate, then the world of facts and the world of truths were face to face in immediate and implacable hostility. [...] In the famous question of the Roman Procurator: "What is truth?" [...] the silent feeling of Jesus answers this question by that other which is decisive in all things of religion – What is actuality? For Pilate actuality was all; for him nothing. [...] There is no bridge between directional Time and timeless Eternity, between the course of history and

the *existence* of a divine world-order [...] *This is the final meaning of the moment in which Jesus and Pilate confronted one another*. In the one world, the historical, the Roman caused the Galilean to be crucified – that was his Destiny. In the other world, Rome was cast for perdition and the Cross became the pledge of Redemption – that was the "will of God."¹⁹

Spengler makes Christ's passion the central point in history at which the fact-world of history confronts the truth-world of religion with the men of either side unable to reconcile their opposing conceptions of time. In response to this passage, Jones created "The Agent" to explore the collision between the men and worlds of fact and truth and to nuance Spengler's interpretation. Not only did Jones change the perspective on the crucifixion, by focusing on Judas and Caiaphas, but he shaped his characters and their motivations, particularly Caiaphas, so as to fundamentally question Spengler's thesis.

In an untitled and undated piece found amongst his papers, Jones appears to reply directly to the passage from *Decline of the West*:

"modern" intellectuals, [...] theologians, school-men, priests monks etc – all these are the "truth-men" & all those concerned with the actual government of states, all "aristocracies", [...] all who have to make decisions of policy & power are "factmen". Well I think there's a great deal of actuality in this, but, quite clearly the division is far, far, too arbitrary, because we are all a bit of both. Pilate, no matter how much he was like a British official involved in some unintelligible squabble among "the natives," was clearly very much a bit of both [...] That seems to me the weakness of his thesis – when it comes down to individual persons. But I think there is reality in the idea taken generally – that is that the expression "truth-men" & "factmen" does indicate a real dichotomy which can only resolve itself "outside time". 20

"The Agent" can be read as an exploration of this "real dichotomy" as Caiaphas, and to some extent Judas, are torn between their adherence to "facts" and their innate attraction to "truth." Jones's decision to use his poetry to reveal the "weakness" of Spengler's "division" by making Caiaphas in particular "a bit of both" further complicates any reading of the characters' agency or motivations.

In the third section of the fragment, Judas accepts that he will "sell" Jesus "for y'r coin bright" (141) but his motivation appears to be psychological:

By y'r Grace's leave, the bargained silver's in exchange for facts [...] I'm fond of facts – dreams are my bugbear. That's why I'm here. (141)

In Jones's Roman poetry "dreams" are associated with culture-men and so Judas's attempt to replace them with "facts" reveals the underlying confusion in his world view. This contradiction is developed more fully in the figure of Caiaphas. On the surface, Caiaphas appears pure fact-man; he admits to being "fond of facts" (150) and justifies his role on a level of practicality as Jesus's death will improve the relationship between Judea and the empire as "ours is a physician's work / [...] we need an *azazel*. / A goat's a goat, / the lot's on him" (149-50). Caiaphas's insistence on portraying his actions of those of a "physician" reveals his need to justify his part in the crucifixion on the basis of a necessary sacrifice for the greater good: "This skin of Juda suffers ichthyosis enough: / ours is a physician's work" (149). He claims to be cleansing the "skin of Juda" by sacrificing Christ to protect the Jewish people from the wrath of Rome. Indeed, the High Priest accepts the rule of Rome and the destructive nature of empire as inevitable: "Ceasar's sun to shine from the Caspian / to the magic hills of the Cymry" (144). Through his chilling pragmatism Caiaphas concludes, akin to Spengler, that Caesarism must not be only tolerated but embraced:

here, necessarily and first, we're faced with Caesar's interests: accommodate we must – or, be what no man can effectively be – Caesar's enemy. Such farce, being men

concerned only with the effectual, we need not entertain. (149)

In these ways, Caiaphas clearly resembles a late-civilizational fact-man as he comprehends the degradation of culture in his time and accepts the loss, as he accepts the rule of Rome and his role in preserving Caesar's peace.

Yet within his acute awareness of the distinction between truth and fact, and of the consequences of his rejection of Christ for acceptance of Rome, Caiaphas's diatribe becomes a kind of eulogy. He describes in detail the cultural sterility of the "impoverished age" into which his own late civilization progresses:²²

Mark the changed fact-world! for, to be sure, its change will demand and determine what is possible in deeds, and so what is formally possible in songs of deeds. (145)

Jones's Caiaphas understands both the difficulty of creation in this fact-world and the antithesis between fact-man and poet that Spengler highlights:

Hence that acute antagonism [...] which every Late period knows; the man of fact and the poet do not and cannot understand one another.²³

In developing this analysis of the poet as truth-man, Caiaphas states:

It takes a bit of the priest, Iscariot, to make the best prophet – and, as we see, the best poet. [...] you'll find it sober and unfamiliar truth. (144)

Underneath the pragmatic acceptance, and subtle edge of sarcasm, there is a bitterness in Caiaphas's words which reveals a deep anguish at the loss of creative, and spiritual, opportunity. He describes the effect upon himself, and others, in terms of burden and disease: "actuality is our lode. Her light is chilly, and we confess to ague" (142). Caiaphas also appears to lament what will come when he acknowledges:

I would not intermeddle seeming fantasy with fact, but we who sit in office, seeing and seeing in detail – and that uncommon close – the present shape, not being blind,

foresee in part, and as God wills, the shapeless future – nor is it pleasant, no, no, it's hideous. (142)

While he accepts this bleak vision of the future as inevitable Caiaphas's ability to "forsee" imbues him with the spirit of prophecy and, as we know from his description, this makes him not only priest but also poet. In an exhortation to Judas to accept their roles, Caiaphas reveals how their actions are constrained by the fact-world in which they live and the necessity to act as fact-men to survive. He understands the power of the act they will commit and creates a kind of poetic prophecy for the parts they have been forced to play:

You see, Iscariot, we're both fond of facts - let's face our facts together and our remembered names shall together tell of this night's rememorable act -

 $memorable\ yes,\ commemorative-yes,$

and, immemorial, too. (150)

Here, in the almost hypnotic repetition of the "m" sounds of memory, a kind of dramatic irony prevails as Caiaphas's allegiance to facts transforms into an unwitting celebration of the mystery in which he and Judas perform their allotted roles.

The conflict between truth and fact within the character of Caiaphas, reflects Jones's disbelief that "any given man" can be "wholly one or the other" as "These reiterated and vital distinctions which S[pengler] makes so clearly, are, in all men so merged." Within his Roman poetry, Jones occasionally incorporated Spengler's pure man of fact in figures such as "Brasso" from "The Dream of Private Clitus" (c.1940), who is described as "a fact-man to knock / sideways and fragmentate these dreamed unities." Yet more often his central characters who speak directly to the reader, such as the "Tribune" from "The Tribune's Visitation (1958)" – who claims to "serve contemporary fact" while simultaneously treasuring "the remembered things" – emerge as complex mixtures of the pragmatism of the fact-man and the nostalgia of the culture-man.

Caiaphas, and to a certain extent, Judas, fall into this latter category in which their agency is

controlled by the civilizational phase in which they live. They may admit to a preference for facts, and an acceptance of the inevitability of cultural decline and the imperial world order, but we see flashes of humanity and free will in their secret sorrow and in the poetry they accidently create out of their plight.

In a letter to Grisewood on 31 May 1938, during the early formation of his Roman poetry, Jones admitted that "this effort is, I fear, about "ideas", the *one* thing I have always disliked in poetry" as it concerned the "things" he thought about "all the time." While the complexity and depth of Jones's "ideas" is essential to the historical vision and contemporary relevance of his Roman poetry, there are moments, especially in the unpublished works, where the "ideas" threaten to overwhelm the narrative, the characters and at times the reader. Through the multifaceted intertextual relationships Jones established with biblical narratives and *The Decline of the West* when writing "The Agent," he placed a heavy theological and historico-philosophic burden on the characters of Judas and Caiaphas. Their agency and motivations were inevitably deeply complicated by the discourses they represented. In particular, Judas's soliloquy draws on the dichotomy of free will and God's will in comprehending the betrayal, while Caiaphas's complex justification of his role in the crucifixion subtly undoes Spengler's dualism of truth and fact.

The investigation of agency Jones developed throughout this fragment did not, as with much of Jones's work, come to any final conclusions. Instead, it enabled Jones to approach problematic questions of central importance to his vision of religion and history in a creative form which allowed him to play out his ideas through his characters. Judas and Caiaphas may draw together, and come to represent, too many of Jones's ideas to hold any resemblance to their historical counterparts but they do allow us an insight into Jones's own agency in their creation.

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NOTES

Goldpaugh, "Traverse of the Wall" and "Cost of Empire".

Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments (1974) but the work as a whole never came together during Jones's lifetime.

¹ For previous articles which discuss Jones's reliance on Spengler, see Staudt, "Decline of the West";

² Spengler, *Decline*, Vol II, 216.

³ Jones, quoted in *Roman Quarry*, xxiii.

⁴ For further analysis of Jones's revisions, see Grisewood and Hague, "Introduction", xxiii, xxvii.

⁵ Fragments from Jones's Roman poetry were rewritten and published in *The Anathemata* (1952) and *The*

⁶ Jones, "The Agent", *The Roman Quarry Sleeping Lord*, 141. Hereafter cited by page number.

⁷ For Jones's description of this "analogy", see Jones, "Letter to Saunders Lewis" (1971), *Dai Greatcoat*, 57.

⁸ For Jones's religious upbringing see, Dilworth, *David Jones*, 8-9.

⁹ All biblical quotations are from the King James Bible.

¹⁰ Jones, "The Agent", f.n.12-13, 138; f.n.15, 139; f.n.33, 152.

¹¹ Jones, Dai Greatcoat, 115.

¹² Spengler, Decline, I, 44.

¹³ Jones, Dai Greatcoat, 115.

¹⁴ Spengler, Letters, 28.

¹⁵ For example, see Jones, "Art in Relation to War" (1942-3,1946), Dying Gaul, 127, 134.

¹⁶ For examples of Spengler's use of 'Caesarism', see *Decline*, I, 37-8, 425, II, 431-2, 464-5.

¹⁷ Farrenkopf, *Prophet*, 7

¹⁸ Jones, "* 216 Jesus & Pilate ect.", in Spengler, *Decline*, third flyleaf.

¹⁹ Spengler, Decline, Il, 216.

²⁰ Jones, "Untitled Writing", np.

²¹ For "dreams", see Jones, "The Dream of Private Clitus", *Sleeping Lord*, 16-23.

²² For a variant draft which further explores this "sterility", see Jones, *The Grail Mass*, 32.

²³ Spengler, *Decline*, I, 98.

²⁴ Jones, "Marginalia", in Spengler, *Decline*, II, 368-9.

²⁵ Jones, "Dream of Private Clitus", 21.

²⁶ Jones, "The Tribune's Visitation", *The Sleeping Lord*, 50; 52.

²⁷ Jones, *Dai Greatcoat*, 86.