

With David Jones After Seventy Years

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In 2009, at the *David Jones: Culture and Artifice* conference in Washington DC, I gave a paper that I called ‘Seventy Years with David Jones’. It reached back as far as my discovery as a schoolboy of *In Parenthesis*, then a new book; it traced the stages of my coming to know the writer and artist, our meetings and the fifteen years of correspondence and visits, leading to my last memoir, *The Long Conversation* (1981).

As a relaxed concluding section to this report, I have set down a little list of projects and continuing questions that I hope to see other investigators begin or continue, or complete as I leave the scene.

Manuscript Studies: Of a value to match Thomas Dilworth’s long-awaited full essential biography of David Jones, which appears in 2017, would be a close study amounting to a transcript of the manuscripts deposited in The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. My own days of perusal of the *In Parenthesis* manuscripts made me aware of the early and continuing presence of soldierly strong language – no ‘hampering’ at any point. It impressed me with the gradual replacement of the soldier-boy-victim Bobby Saunders by the more mature and active, because historically aware, figure of John Ball. The manuscript pages will pose problems of presentation because Jones regularly, instead of crossing out a phrase, will recopy a whole page, sometimes making it difficult to recognize the final form.

Jones's Associates and Influences: Certain remarkable persons close to Jones the painter, writer and thinker, may have independent claims to further treatment. Christopher Dawson is already receiving it, but the names of Rene Hague, Harman Grisewood, Douglas Cleverdon, Tom Burns and Peter Orr come to mind, not to mention people in the art world as well as close and sympathetic readers among his fellow poets.

Questions for further pursuit: Amongst all poets, past and present, Jones is perhaps the most persistent poser of questions. The highly interrogative *The Anathemata* ends on a question mark. To join these, here are some questions that future students may be moved to consider.

1. The origin, nature and place in his work of the primitive. He read Frazer's *The Golden Bough* from his youth, as the volume appeared, which made him one of the best-equipped readers of *The Waste Land* in the 1920s. Some of his drawings have been likened to cave-drawings. In old age, he read and re-read Theodore Kroeber's *Ishi*, an account of the rescue of the sole survivor of a California Indian tribe, the last speaker of its language and the last to exercise its skills.
2. From 1930 he read and returned to T.S. Eliot's translation of St. John Perse's *Anabasis*. This appears to be the only avowed stylistic influence on his writing. Jones often proclaimed Joyce to be what a mediaeval poet would call his 'author'. However, he never read *Ulysses*, and the dominant stylistic feature of *Finnegan's Wake*, incessant word-coinage, delighted him but did not inspire imitation
3. The quality, loyal but highly personal, of his catholic spirituality, which permitted him as a young Dominican tertiary, to side (permanently, as it

turned out), with the Jesuit Maurice de la Taille on an important point of theology, against the fulminations of the Dominican Vincent McNabb, a preaching friar with a vengeance, who suspected him of retaining a ‘yeast of evil’ (A.V. ‘leaven of malice). He later suffered severe anguish at what he termed the destruction of the liturgy at Vatican II. (The opening to other churches and other faiths he welcomed, never having been accusatory or triumphalist.) This will require a close and informed treatment of theological issue.

4. Jones may be conceded to have a Catholic mind. Did he have an historian’s mind? The first positive answer rests on the fact that he stands out among poets for the fullness and accuracy of his annotation, much of it historical. The books in his library show a strong concentration on history and literature. The literature is mainly texts, with only a few critical works. The historical works include many detailed studies, especially in the fields of Christian Antiquity and Wales through the ages. This proves a disciplined approach to historical questions quite distinct from his undoubted interest, a consuming interest, in the exciting metahistorical speculations of Oswald Spengler and their soft answer, not dismissal, by Christopher Dawson, a friend over many years. Serious students of Jones still need to follow the lead of Kathleen Henderson Staudt and Paul Robichaud and to read that lugubrious old heathen and that learned Catholic gentleman, as we still need to be aware of Jones’s pursuit of accurate historical detail.
5. The term ‘patriotic poet’ may seem a hundred years out of date to apply to David Jones in the sense it could easily be applied to Spenser, or Drayton, Tennyson or Doughty. But he was a Briton, of Welsh extraction,

celebrating yearly the anniversaries of Nelson and Llewellyn, the last indigenous Prince of Wales, celebrating too in prose the Roman *viae* and in poetry the mediaeval Pool of London. The thousand–page *London Encyclopaedia* (2008), lists in its index twenty-six Joneses, not including David. A scandal!

6. Two incidental duties may often present themselves in any discussion of war writing in the centennial years. Erich Maria Remarque cries aloud for a revaluation at a reduced rank. *All Quiet* is an ‘essay-read’ compared to *In Parenthesis*, but that should not be the prime determinant of judgment. Paul Fussell, in his often-useful *The Great War in Modern Memory*, has a disastrous chapter on ‘The Honorable Miscarriage of *In Parenthesis*’, whatever that means! It must be firmly rebutted, paragraph by paragraph
7. And finally, a matter of professional concern to many of us, the questionable position of David Jones in academic study and assessment. As I see it, it has been the major victim of the abrupt closing of the canon of ‘High Modernism’. A whole generation of ‘Modernist Specialists’ in departments of English, who had faithfully, nay doggedly, grappled with the *Cantos* and *Paterson*, read every last word of Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Circle, and everything that T.S. Eliot ever mentioned, from *Babu de Montparnasse* to Aurelian Townsend with his ‘pleasing tinkle’, and had clocked their thousand hours with *Finnegan’s Wake*, felt themselves let off reading *The Anathemata*. Too late! Too late! And the next generation found themselves obliged to lavish their time on Jacques Derrida and half a dozen other literary theorists, mainly French, with little

time left over for any literature at all, only ‘texts’, all on the same level, all inviting ‘deconstruction/, that parody of ‘making this thing other’.

The academic conference, the secular modern answer to the pilgrimage, tends to feature canonized writers and their canons, the guardians of their shrines. The economy of travel grants and citations has encouraged large turnouts and mandated the short paper of 30 minutes, or less. This does not at all suit writers as quiet, and as deep, as Jones. No time! No time! The casualty of the dinky paper is quotation, the speaking, the delivery of literature as a made thing. The very thing we are supposed to be talking about we have no time to speak of, no time to let it speak for itself.

Courage! David Jones has always had it, over many decades, his loyal readers, some eminent, many not. He stays in print. This in spite of being ignored by major leaders of critical opinion – Northrop Frye and F.R. Leavis, by Frank Kermode and Helen Gardiner, by Randall Jarrell and Harold Bloom, who had other, quite valuable, things to do. The annual T.S. Eliot Conference, at his birthplace, St Louis, always allows a substantial time at the end for volunteers to come forward and simply recite Eliot poems of their choice. At several Jones events we have been privileged to hear Ton Durham recite ‘The Tribune’s Visitation’ and other poems, including extracts from *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*, at once obeying and justifying the poet’s insistence on the spoken quality of his writings, which are ‘things’ with a ‘feel’.

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