

Minor Prophets: David Jones and Contemporary Art at Blackfriars, Cambridge

Fr Dominic White OP

This is my part of the opening night exhibition address on 25 September 2021, given with my co-curator Sr. Rose Rolling OP. The exhibition is now fully online and can be viewed at <http://www.blackfriarscambridge.org.uk/2021/10/15/online-art-exhibition/>.

A very warm welcome to our exhibition *Minor Prophets: David Jones and Contemporary Art at Blackfriars, Cambridge*, our celebration for 800 years of the Dominican Order (Order of Preachers, OP) in Britain.

We at Blackfriars are the proud owners of some works by David Jones works because of his friendship with some of the members of the community back in the 1950s and 60s. So I thought I would research more on his relationship with the community, his visits and so on. He must have come here, surely, as evidence from Kettle's Yard, the contemporary art gallery just down the hill, shows that he visited Jim Ede there when it was his house. But finding out whether Jones visited us was about as easy as reading his poetry. It's strangely fitting to the elusiveness of this great artist who is only now gaining full recognition, that I could find no record at all of any visits to Blackfriars. The house chronicle, especially when the meticulous Brother James was keeping it from the late 1960s to early 1980s, carefully notes who all the visitors and guests were. Jim Ede came by to look at one of our David Joneses on 12 March 1973, just a year before Jones died. On 27 November 1968 a Mr Falkener came to lunch, from the press of the Ditchling artists' community which had been so formative for Jones and where he had become a Lay Dominican. Walter Shewring, the art historian, an old friend of Jones, also came to stay in on 29 March 1974.¹ But no mention of David Jones himself. His death on 28 October 1974 also goes unmentioned in the house chronicle. Fr Thomas Gilby OP, the prior and distinguished scholar of St. Thomas Aquinas, was in and out of hospital, the English Dominican Province was in the middle of a crucial restructuring consultation, and the most frequent visitor was the long-suffering Mr Scrivener, the local electrician, tending the dodgy lighting system.² Perhaps, during his visits to Jim Ede, David Jones popped into Blackfriars for Mass sometimes, hunched

¹ House Chronicle of Blackfriars, Cambridge, English Dominican Archives. The chronicle is not paginated.

² Ibid.

over with his mop of hair and crumpled suit, then a quick chat with one of the friars afterwards, maybe even breakfast. Perhaps. But we just don't know.

In a letter to Thomas Gilby, dated 1 July 1963, Jones admits to ill health, with the implication that this has confined him to home³ – though poverty could also be a reason. But in a letter dated 4 July, he writes, “Remember me to anybody I know at Blackfriars; I believe Illtud is still in the U.S., isn't he? [...] It would be *jolly* nice to see you again but I don't suppose you are ever in Harrow and what with one thing or another I seem stuck here.”⁴

Does this suggest that Jones visited? The letters do show that Fr Illtud, with whom Jones shared Welsh heritage and language, visited David Jones in the rented room which was his home.⁵ But this was more than just a kind priest visiting a fragile member of his flock. The letters to the friars suggest a relationship of equals. For all Jones' fulsome expressions of gratitude and nerves – he lived with war-induced PTSD and depression – his enquiry to the philosopher Thomas Gilby about the Four Causes in *Barbara Celarent* (Gilby's fun introduction to Aquinas written while a naval chaplain in WW2)⁶ is also constructively critical of Gilby's position. The transformative power of beauty in *The Ancient Mariner*, when the mariner is set free by accepting beauty of water-snakes that surround his becalmed vessel – Jones asks, in terms of scholastic philosophy, what kind of cause is beauty? Gilby must have responded by return, because Jones wrote in a second letter on 4 July, after much gratitude and apology, that yes, beauty's the efficient cause, but he implies a different view from Gilby's: a sense of beauty above this – “I wanted, if I could, without explanation, to convey to the reader that the visual, seen, natural beauty of the water-snakes moved the heart of the Mariner...”⁷ It must not be

³ Published in Aidan Nichols, *Dominican Gallery: Portrait of a Culture* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1997), pp. 418-419.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 419-420.

⁵ Letter from David Jones to Illtud Evans OP, 20 May 1964, English Dominican Archives.

⁶ Thomas Gilby OP, *Barbara Celarent: A Description of Scholastic Dialectic* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1949).

⁷ Letter of 4 July, Nichols, pp. 419-420.

reduced to intellectualisation, to *only* words. An embodied approach which is in fact central to the Dominican tradition.

Fr Illtud must have soothed Jones's nerves over the risk of photos taken of his [*Angel Playing the Viola di Braccio*](#), which you see here this evening, somehow being published before they were due to appear in a Christmas card from Faber & Faber.⁸ That's almost certainly how we got the original: in a fine article on David Jones, Fr Bob Ombres OP, who lived here at Blackfriars with another friend of David Jones's, Fr Conrad Pepler, gives us the vital information that Jones gave some of his works to Blackfriars⁹ – four of the works you see tonight.

This gifting is also a mark of the generosity, the life of gift, which distinguished an artist who was materially very poor, but rich in spirit, friendship, vision and talent. His trust in the power of gift can be traced in large part to his faith in the Eucharist, the sacred meal in which, according to Christian faith, bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, transforming in turn the partakers, their relationships, and gathering together in one all good things – an idea beloved of Jones and so formative on his art.

As elusive as David Jones is Fr Aelred Whitacre OP, born nine years before Jones, in 1882: a Dominican friar and high-flying philosopher and theologian who spent much of his Dominican life in Edinburgh. Fr Aelred was born into a family of artisans and industrialists in Birmingham and, as was often the custom at the time, entered religious life at the age of only 17.¹⁰ He was also a very gifted sculptor, who took part in major exhibitions in Edinburgh.¹¹ He died in 1944. You'll see his moving crucifixion relief over the altar in the lower chapel, as well as his St. Michael over the old front door of St. Michael's house, now the north wing of our priory. As elusive as David Jones: careful searches through the archives and house chronicle, and even

⁸ Letter from David Jones to Illtud Evans OP, 16 March 1961, English Dominican Archives.

⁹ Robert Ombres, "On Not Meeting Jones", *The Chesterton Review*, vol. XXIII, no. 1/2, February-May 1997, pp. 235-237: see p. 236.

¹⁰ Walter Gumbley OP, *Obituary Notices of the English Dominicans from 1555 to 1952* (London: Blackfriars Publications, 1955), p. 178.

¹¹ As evidenced by photographs in the English Dominican Archives.

enquiries to the Edinburgh art world, have yielded precisely nothing about Fr Aelred's training as a sculptor or even the commissioning of the two pieces for our house. Ah well...

But are we too hung up on biography? Are we too focussed on the detective work (and sometimes nosiness) of minutely reconstructing artists' lives, rather than the bigger reality which their art gestures towards and represents?

What you see around you tonight, works by David Jones, Aelred Whitacre and contemporary artists from our congregation, represent a distinctive culture, a living community tradition, which we might call prophetic.

A pivotal moment in this tradition was David Jones's meeting with a highly gifted artist, visionary, flawed and an appalling abuser: Eric Gill. On the recommendation of Fr John O'Connor, who was the model for G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Jones came to the Catholic artists' community Gill had founded in Ditchling, near Brighton, in 1921, in the Arts & Crafts tradition of William Morris.¹² In an obituary of Gill, Jones, who at the time was newly graduated from art school and feeling utterly lost, recalled a three-hour conversation with him. Gill, busy sculpting, encouraged him to "start again with something that can be done with reasonable certainty".¹³ With his strong emphasis on work, and on the artist as the intellectual who makes things (an idea he got from the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain), Eric Gill opened for Jones a world of sacrament – that is of signs which actually do what they represent, something which is central to Catholic Christianity. Jones became a Catholic, and lived for three years at Ditchling. The Ditchling community was closely associated with the English Dominican friars, including Aelred Whitacre, who often visited and gave retreats.¹⁴

¹² Keith Aldritt, *David Jones: Writer and Artist* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2003), pp. 51-52; Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), pp. 64-83; on David Jones as a Lay Dominican, see also René Hague (ed.), *Dai Greatcoat* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p. 30; Ombres, *op. cit.*

¹³ David Jones, "Eric Gill: *an Appreciation*", *The Tablet*, 10 November 1940. Republished (and most easily accessible) in David Jones, ed. Harman Grisewood, *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), pp. 296-302: this citation, p. 297.

¹⁴ Conrad Pepler, "In Diebus Illis: Some Memories of Ditchling", *The Chesterton Review*, vol. VIII, no. 4, November 1982, pp. 333-352: see p. 345.

Stephen Pepler, son of Ditchling's co-founder Hilary Pepler, would become Fr Conrad of the Dominican Order, and a good friend and correspondent of Jones's. The men of the Ditchling community, including Jones, became lay members of the Dominican Order, as the Guild of St. Joseph (a carpenter, of course) and St. Dominic. When Gill split with Hilary Pepler and moved to Wales, Jones followed him, again to France, but then went his own way.

Jones's obituary for Gill in *The Tablet*,¹⁵ a Catholic weekly, is full of praise, especially for Gill's lettering which started a tradition that is still alive and well in the [Cardozo Kindersley workshop](#) here in Cambridge. Jones was full of gratitude for a dear friend, but he chooses his words very carefully. Indeed, it seems he wants to draw clear boundaries between himself and Gill.¹⁶ He acknowledges that Gill's doctrinaire approach was open to criticism. Gill was determined "to effect order in his life", the antithesis of a bohemian, but full of "acid and sweeping generalizations" in controversy.¹⁷ Since then the devastating disorder of Gill's private life has become apparent:¹⁸ there may be more than meets the eye in Jones's tribute to Gill's wife and daughters at the end of the obituary.

Jones was something of an innocent – he can portray the body and indeed the erotic in a way that is loving and does not tip over into lust, as it sadly does in much of Gill's work. Jones seems much less concerned with imposing order in his collage-like drawings and poems, which collect fragments that might otherwise be lost. But he is paradoxically more ordered than Gill, because he is free.

I suggest that Jones – and the other artists whose work you see displayed here tonight, who include Lay Dominicans – succeeded in what is a key aspect of not just Catholic spirituality, but Dominican spirituality – that is, the goodness of creation and the body, and the spirituality of matter. The Dominicans, or Order of Preachers, who came to England 800 years ago this year, were founded almost unintentionally by Dominic Guzmán, a Spanish priest of the 12th

¹⁵ See n. 13.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Elizabeth Powell for this observation.

¹⁷ Jones, p. 302.

¹⁸ See Fiona McCarthy, *Eric Gill* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989).

century, was travelling through the south of France, where he met the Cathars.¹⁹ Today we might call them a protest movement: living in severe poverty under oppressive and violent rulers, these people came to the understandable conclusion that the physical world, including the body, was evil. For the Cathars, a real spiritual life was about the soul escaping from the physical world.

Dominic was moved by their suffering and anguished by their pessimism. Imitating their simplicity of life, he successfully dialogued with them in a new kind of preaching. He brought them healing in convincing them of the goodness of the body and the created world, something central to Christianity, while at the same time learning from them about the importance of social justice.

It's often through the materiality of art that the Order of Preachers, or Dominicans, which St Dominic founded and spread rapidly, has preached the goodness of the body and creation, and the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Dominican artists include Fra Angelico, of course David Jones, and James MacMillan, and recently I took part with thirty other Dominican friars, sisters and laity in Estonia for an arts-based mission. All the art, music and cinema you see here tonight is by Dominican friars, sisters and laity, prophets of the goodness of matter and the healing and redemption of matter: matter which is so often victim of humankind's cruelty to nature and to each other. Prophecy of angels made visible, family life as a place of hope, visions of the possible good, true and beautiful. And in the activity in the Upper Chapel you will have the opportunity to take part in this vision yourself.

I now hand over to Sr Rose for a deeper consideration of the prophetic nature of art.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Fr Richard Finn OP, Archivist of the English Dominicans, Fr Bob Ombres OP, Dr Elizabeth Powell and Abbot Geoffrey Scott OSB and Fr Oliver Holt OSB of Douai Abbey for their help with my research.

¹⁹ See Marie-Humbert Vicaire, *Saint Dominic and His Times*, trans. Kathleen Pond (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), pp. 49-53, 98-114; Vladimir Koudelka, *Dominic*, trans. Consuelo Fissler & Simon Tugwell (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), pp. 7-8.