

Searching In War Unending

On David Jones in the Centenary of the WWI Armistice

Douglas Penick

You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you," as Alan Furst had Trotsky remark. And it is true that war will always be in wait; it is unquestionably an ambient part of our common fate. Look at the totality of human history:

somewhere there has always been, is always tribe fighting tribe, nation subjugating nation, race destroying race. We know that right now somewhere new wars are being planned, even as old wars are still unresolved. And every war, large or small, will break the bounds of whatever its soldiers previously considered inviolable norms of human behavior. To win, or merely to escape defeat, combatants will make use of all material resources, make any demand on civilian and soldier, make violence total. As Clausewitz stated: "War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force."¹ Thus violence in warfare always goes beyond all ethical or moral limits, inflicting pain goes beyond imagination, beyond all previously accepted limits. In the human realm, there is never a moment when somewhere war is not shattering the secure conventions of the living, and there is never a moment when the wounds of wars remembered close.

Many Europeans felt the First World War, with its endless mud and trenches, poison gas, machine guns, barbed wire, long range artillery, tanks, its 10 million killed and 20 million wounded, constituted a descent into barbarity that signaled the collapse of Western values and institutions. Until that time, Europe had thought itself progressing towards broader fields of

equality and higher levels of material ease. This suddenly stopped, and no one could understand why it had happened.

Thus many European artists of the early 20th century turned to a re-examination of the structure and elements of their arts and to re-assembling these in a way that linked the deepest longings of the past with the violence and disruptions of contemporary truths. Although many of the most distinctive of early 20th century works of, say, Joyce, Picasso, Schoenberg, Marinetti, Ives, Virginia Woolf, Apollinaire, Proust, Ungaretti, among many others, are said to emerge from a rebellion against their predecessors, it is far truer to look at these artists as struggling to discover and re-create new foundations for art and culture after the horrific debacle of WWI.

It is strange that David Jones' great epic of World War I, *In Parenthesis* has not found a central place in the canons of English and European literature. It is stranger still that, even now, it is so little known. It has the unique beauty and authenticity of a work central in a culture. Indeed many found it so. When it was published, T.S.Eliot called it a work of genius as did W.B.Yeats, while Auden believed it was "a masterpiece" in which Jones did "for the British and Germans what Homer did for the Greeks and the Trojans". It is always in print, but ask for it at a bookstore, and the odds are overwhelming that the sales people will give you a kind but blank stare.²

Perhaps it is because *In Parenthesis* so deeply embodies the breath and rhythms of the battlefield and because Jones' subsequent work never leaves the world of war, that he remains unassimilable in cultural curricula that blindly assume there is some kind of permanence in the fleeting certainties of momentary peace.

David Jones did not, it seems, set out to be a writer. He was born in 1895 to a working family. Before the war, he was a promising art student. Then, like so many others, at the age of

20, he was enlisted in the army in 1915. He was wounded in the leg in July 1916 at Mametz Woods in the battle of the Somme. Some months later, he returned to the trenches until 1918. His life in England afterwards was marked by greater professional success but deepening inner unsettledness. He began to experience bouts of tormented sleeplessness, loss of inspiration, inertia. In 1927, Jones' friend, René Hague described his nervous unravelling, a breakdown prompted, this time, by a failed love.

David's boat was sailing with a fair wind towards a clear horizon. Then in January 1927 the mast snapped. Thereafter he could only row. He rowed bravely but, pulling at the oars, he could not see ahead. Denied the vision of hope, he could only see what lay behind—the smoldering ruins of man's history and a litter of broken things.³

Looking back at ever more distant horizons, what captured Jones' gaze were the epics of Sir Thomas Mallory, the Welsh and Celtic bard songs, the histories of the Venerable Bede and Chrétien de Troyes and Froissart. There he found the unending lineage of soldiers and the continuous suffering of battle, wounds, terror, bravery and death, all extending into the Roman past and before.

As Peter Levi came to put it: "He uses the whole backward and abyss of time. He is not dictated to by conventional historical time, but things are present or not to him in a single densely woven tapestry."⁴ The discovery of this abyss, this weaving came to him in writing, first in *In Parenthesis*, and remained as art and emblem of sacrament thereafter, even if to visit there became an ever more costly and painful journey.

From the outset of his time in the trenches, Jones had made drawings of the shattered landscape of war, the soldiers waiting, the streaks of artillery barrages, and he wrote notes about a soldier's life. In 1927, he read, for the first time, the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. This was somehow a springboard to combine so many influences and begin his first great poem. His battlefield notes became its opening. Throughout the poem, prose and verse are interspersed.

Jones said of his method:

It is paramount for any artist to use whatever happens to be to hand. For artists depend on the immediate and the contractual and their apperception must have a 'now-ness about it. But,' in our present megalopolitan technocracy, the artist must still remain a 'rememberer' (part of the official bardic function in earlier phases of society.⁵

He characterized his endeavor in this way: "We are compelled to not only applaud victories but to count casualties, and in each case they are to be found littering the field, as after any victory. We must count our dead and not pretend they are alive."⁶ Or, as is more likely now, overwhelmed by the sheer numbers and scale of waste, pretend that they never lived at all. "We must be careful with our rejections or there will be a disintegration—all will fall apart."⁷ Accordingly, he concluded the opening section, describing the soldiers' arrival in France, like this:

Toward evening on the same day, they entrained in cattle trucks; and on the third day, which was a Sunday, sunny and cold, and French women in deep black were

hurrying across flat land—they descended from their grimy, littered, limb restricting, slatted vehicles and stretched and shivered at a siding. You feel exposed and apprehensive in this new world.⁸

Jones' epic proceeds quickly in small intimacies and has a simple enough structure. It begins with:

- a) soldiers, newly conscripted from their lives as shop keepers, carpenters, waiters, teachers, all bemused finding themselves absorbed in the newness of military hierarchy;
- b) their descent into the world of trench war,
- c) living there, with the shelling, the damp, the fear and tenderness;
- d) a futile charge into emplaced guns; Death and entry into vast world.

And all is subsumed in a deeper unfolding music. The assonance and cadences that animate *In Parenthesis* bear an ever-unfolding compassion as they embrace the specifics of time and movement. Jones touches on all he passes by with such unflinching kindness; briefly he holds in his hand all the small moments by which men hide from the truth to keep sane. And waiting for him, as for all the newly arrived soldiers is the world of the trenches, a domain of earth ripped apart. Here they will enter a world between life and death that cannot be described or understood. Those who lead them there understand this. And there is a kind of fear that is something deeper than fear.

Here's part of Jones' evocation of men going, for the first time, into the trenches as Mr. Jenkins, the officer in charge, urges them on through a gate that marks the entrance down the earthworks:

Far thuddings faintly heard in the stranger-world: where the road leads, where no man goes, where the straight road leads; where the road had led old men asleep on wagons beneath the green, girls with baskets, linen palled, children dawdling from the Mysteries on a Sunday morning.

Field battery flashing showed the nature of the place the kindlier night had hid, the tufted avenue denuded, lopt, deprived of height; stript stumps for flowering limbs ...

Move on No 1—get 'em into file, Corporal—move on by section—put those cigarettes out—no lights past the barrier. Past the little gate.

Mr. Jenkins watched them file through, himself following, like Western-hill shepherd.

Past the little gate.

Into the field of upturned defenses, into the burial yard-

The grinning and the gnashing and the sore dreading—nor saw he any light in that place.

Jaguar-gun, wind carried, barks again from X zone.

In virid-bright illuminating he sees his precious charge, singly going, each following each, fleecy coated ... on sheepwalk's lateral restricting, between the lopped colonnade

Shuts down again the close dark: the stumbling dark of the blind, that Breughel knew about—ditch circumscribed; this all depriving darkness split now by crazy flashing; marking hugely clear the split bowels of trees, splinter spike, leper-ashen, sprawling the receding unknowable, wall of night—the slithery causeway—his little flock, his armed bishopric, going with weary limbs⁹

In 1929, he began reading parts to friends, and in his later preface to the poem, he characterized the world of war and hinted at the music he found there in this way:

...the day by day in the Waste Land, the sudden violences and the long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment ... (where) the landscape spoke 'with a grimly voice (Mallory)... At no time did one live with such a consciousness of the past...

We search how we may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful, to us.¹⁰

In his clipped music, Jones brings us into an expanse of shifting phenomena. As an artist, he is a humble servant. Jones and his comrades obey the orders to launch a hopeless and headlong assault on the German emplaced machine guns in the Mametz Woods. His company kills many Germans, but they are cut down. Jones is wounded. As he lies, surrounded in the woods, against a broken tree, he sees many others, also lying in the woods. Through the shredded fabric of reality, a metaphysical (for want of better shorthand) pagan and Christian world emerges as a background which the living sense, appeal to, and are taken back by. The inhuman extremes of violence have opened a portal through which the non-human now manifest. Thus, the transient living find experience intensified and deepened, linked to other worlds and times. The trees assume an ancient magic, and the soldiers are transformed, elevated. In his poem, he presents it like this:

The trees are very high in the wan signal-beam, for whose slow gyration their wounded boughs seem as malignant limbs, maneuvering for advantage.

The trees of the wood beware each other

And under each a man sitting;

Their seemly faces as carved in a sardonyx stone; as undiademmed princes turn their gracious profiles in a hidden seal, so did these appear, under the changing light.

For that waning you would believe this flaxen head had for its broken pedestal these bent Silurian shoulders.

*For the pale flares extinction you don't know if under his close lids, his
eye-balls watch you. You would say by the turn of steel at his wide brow he is not
of our men where he leans with his open fist in Dai's bosom against the White
Stone.*

Hung so about, you make between these your close escape.

The secret princes between the leaning trees have diadems given them.

*Life the leveler hugs her impudent equality—she may proceed at once to less
discriminating zones.*

The Queen of the Woods has cut bright boughs of various flowering.

*These knew her influential eyes. Her awarding hands can pluck for each their
fragile prize.*

*She speaks to them according to precedence. She knows what's due to this elect
society. She can choose twelve gentle-men. She knows who is most lord among
the high trees and on the open down.*

Some she gives white berries

some she gives brown.

*Emil has a curious crown it's
made of golden saxifrage.
Fatty wears sweet briar,
he will reign with her for a thousand years.
For Balder she reaches high to fetch his.
Ulrich smiles for his myrtle wand.
That swine, Lillywjhite has daisies to his chain—you'd hardly credit it.
...
She carries to Aneiron-in-the-nullah a rowan sprig, for the glory of Guenedota.
You couldn't hear what she said to him, because she was careful for the
Disciplines of Wars.¹¹*

In the decade after *In Parenthesis* was published, World War II loomed, was fought and ended. Jones' 1932 nervous breakdown returned more intensely in 1947. The notes for and composition of *Anathemata* emerged in this period. *Anathemata*, as he said, derived from his 'forced' (by his nervous breakdown) visit to the Middle East and Palestine. And seeing soldiers lazing about and gossiping there reminded him so clearly of both the centurions who witnessed the crucifixion and his companions in WWI in the Pas de Calais and the Somme. The unending life of soldiering consciously became, from then on, an enduring strand in all his work, intertwined with the continuing renewal of heart and inspiration which is represented in the mass.

But Jones was painfully aware that this stream now flowed through a different and harsher landscape. As he said:

We feel a Rubicon has been passed between striking with a hand weapon as men used to do and loosing poison from the sky as we do ourselves. Our perception of many things is heightened and clarified. Yet must we do gas-drill, be attuned to many newfangled technicalities, respond to increasingly exacting mechanical devices; some fascinating and compelling, others sinister in the extreme; all requiring a new and strange direction of the mind, a new sensitivity certainly, but at a considerable cost.¹²

There is, in all Jones' work, this constantly being drawn back into the terrors and visions that rise from our past and do not depart. It is, over and over, solemnly, re-finding the source and re-enacting, making anew the forms of mystery, blessedness, beauty and enduring solace. To go back into the violence and destruction of the war he endured and link it with warriors past, to let it find its place amid the vaster experience of his predecessors on the battlefield, to find an organic coherence. For Jones, art is not something that is done once. It is our nature that prompts us to rediscover it, to offer it again and again. Thus, for him, art and the Eucharist flower in the same stream.

In his writing, the spiritual or metaphysical background becomes more of a foreground, (In *Anthemata*, the allusions will become more extensive and more recondite.) There is layer of meaning on layer on layer, each with its pattern. But in the end, they create uncertain juxtapositions, density of meanings and a kind of transparency that call to mind his paintings. And then (and these too will become more prominent) there is the introduction and the notes. These seem not to be glosses on the text or even frames, but something beyond those. They discuss particulars of armament, military organization (British or Roman), geographical

nomenclature, etc., and often do not actually illuminate the text itself; rather, they connect the text, in a literal way, to the history of objects, societies, social orders, earlier literatures. The introduction mainly seem involved with Jones' states of mind and artistic procedures. Thus this apparent scholarly apparatus may not be that at all, may not be intended to illuminate the text by providing outside references. Jones is, it seems, presenting the poems as utterly embedded in and inextricable from other registers of living and concern. For him, the only way forward is to encompass what is true in the path of an art to which one sacrifices oneself in the same way as soldiers sacrifice themselves.

As Jones put it: "The imagination must work through what is known and known by a kind of touch¹³ And"... the workman must be dead to himself while engaged upon the work, otherwise we have that 'self-expression' which is as undesirable in the painter or writer as in the carpenter, the cantor, the half-back, or the cook."¹⁴

Jones' goal was that in a true work of art, the work is "'at unity in itself'... meaning that it is a matter of 'interjoining'. (and... poetry) is a kind of carpentry, joinery, and a bard or poet called himself...a carpenter of song."¹⁵

Embarking into the streams of David Jones' work resembles, as he said in one of his essays, "a voyage in uncertain waters (in which) we should be lucky in making a landfall or two."¹⁶ And in this journey there is the compass points of the necessary or pragmatic and the freedom endlessly expressed in the making of art.

Jones traversed the tides covering the surface of the earth, the worlds of war that ebb and flow. Rising, they shatter all continuities, all restraints, conventions, values, norms. Palaces and libraries are bombed to dust. Monuments, temples, universities, sacred altars are blown up. When the worlds of war withdraw, they leave shores littered with the wreckage of civilizations

and the bodies of those who thought they were fighting for them. Having been thrust into such a realm he remained, did not turn away, fought to elicit what is beautiful and meaningful for the benefit of us all.

It seems difficult to find David Jones in the descriptions of his character, concerns, passions, humor, conversation. There is, from the beginning an urgency and yearning that makes all these outer expressions fade. Even in the televised interviews with him, though he speaks without guile, he is concealed. However in his work, whether open or recondite, we see the movement of one who knew that this world is a world in which the insanity of rage, war and destruction is never ended, and who, with all the powers of his mind and heart was seeking to find enduring value here.

To find the mysterious transcendence that emerged in battle, to find the everlasting sacredness within his own inner torment; these two struggles were, for David Jones, inseparable. And whether enduring fame embraces him or eludes him, as long as there is language, he will always embody our deep longings in this world ever at war.

After his death, in David Jones' numerous papers was found this continuation of his 'Kensington Mass'.

*Down the meander and crooked labyrinth of time and maze of history, or historia
intermeddles with potent and light-giving, cult making mythos*

We hear as yet that third crow

Dawn crow of dolour

As clear as we hear

The echoing blast

From Roncevalles

And with it, of necessity

The straight, exact, rational and true

*'Sirs, you are set for sorrow.'*¹⁷

Notes

¹ Cited in James Hillman—A Terrible Love of War—Penguin Press, 2004—p.70

² Sale catalogue for items relating to English authors

³ Dai Greatcoat, Fabner and Faber, 1980 pp41-2

⁴ AGENDA, David Jones Special Issue. 1973/4, p.58

⁵ David Jones—The Dying Gaul—Faber 1978, p.17

⁶ D.Jones—Epoch and Artist, Faber 1959, p.92

⁷ David Jones—'The Myth of King Arthur' in NK Sandars Agenda Winter 1973/4 p.36

⁸ David Jones—In Parenthesis, NYR Books, p.9

⁹ *ibid.* pp. 30-31

¹⁰ David Jones, Epoch and Artist, Preface to In Parenthesis, Faber p 33-4, 36

¹¹ David Jones, In Parenthesis, *supra*, pp.184-6

¹² David Jones, Anathemata, Viking Press, 1965 p.37

¹³ David Jones, Epoch in Artist, *supra* p. 244)

¹⁴ David Jones, Preface to Anathemata cited by William Cookson in AGENDA 1973-4 p. 31

¹⁵ Letter from Phillip Lowery, Agenda, *supra* p.33

¹⁶ Art and Sacrament in Epoch and Artist *supra* p. 149

¹⁷ The Kensington Mass from THE ROMAN QUARRY and other sequences—ed Harman Grisewood and René Hague—Sheep Meadow Press, 1981 p. 92

Douglas Penick's short work appeared in *Tricycle, Descant, New England Review, Parabola, Chicago Quarterly, Publishers Weekly Agni, Kyoto Journal, Berfrois, The Utne Reader,* and others. He has written texts for operas (Munich Biennale, Santa Fe Opera), and, on a grant from the Witter Bynner Foundation, three separate episodes from the Gesar of Ling epic. His novel, *Following The North Star* was published by Publerati. His book of essays, *The Age of Waiting* which engages the atmospheres of ecological collapse, will be published soon by Arrowsmith Press.