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Literature as History: Misreading David Jones's *In Parenthesis*

As Paul Fussell's book *The Great War and Modern Memory* persuasively demonstrates, it is now virtually impossible to separate our knowledge of the historical reality of World War I from our consciousness of the literature produced by that conflict. The result has been, in effect, to make only one modern reading of literature dealing with World War I possible: literature as history. This historically conditioned reading does a disservice to one of the most remarkable literary achievements to come out of World War I, David Jones's *In Parenthesis*.

To read *In Parenthesis* as history is to mis-read it, for this long, innovative poem drawing on Jones's experiences on the Western Front originated neither as *cri de coeur* from the trenches nor as exorcising memoir of the post-war decade. *In Parenthesis* began as a conscious experiment in form. In the late 1920s Jones, already a painter of some repute, was laid up with a minor illness while staying with his parents. Doodling to amuse himself, he started doing some sketches of things he remembered from his war experience. Thinking about captions for these preliminary drawings, he found himself becoming interested in the formal problems of verbal, as opposed to visual, art:

I had views as to what a painting ought to be: A 'thing' having abstract qualities by which it coheres and without which it can be said not to exist. Further that it 'shows forth' something, is representational. If this was true of one art I supposed it to be true of another. I knew how the inter-stresses of the 'formal' and the 'contential' created so precarious a balance in the case of drawing or painting. . . .

I had yet to discover in what manner these nice problems of 'form' and 'content' occur in the making of a writing. (*E&A* 30)

Jones's exploration of these formal problems over the next few years led to the poem that was published in 1937 by Faber (having been accepted by Faber editor T.S. Eliot as "a work of genius" [Note vii]).

A full appreciation of *In Parenthesis* as a conscious effort in form, literature rather than history, requires some awareness of the aesthetic principles Jones brings to his "making of a writing." These are principles he had already formulated in the field of drawing (he believes that "what goes for one art goes for all of 'em, in some manner" [*E&A* 129]), and the aesthetic quality is always invigorated by spiritual beliefs. The most fundamental of these principles is that man is by nature an artist because he is by nature a sign-maker; the signs which constitute his art are all expressions

of that archetypal form-making and ordering implicit in the credal clause *per quem omnia facta sunt*. That is . . . they partake in some sense, however difficult to posit, of that juxtaposing by which what was *inanis et vacua* became radiant with form and abhorrent of vacua by the action of the Artifex, the Logos (*E&A* 160)

Man's art or form-making/sign-making is characterized by a playful quality, the concept of 'the gratuitous,' for man alone of all the animals is capable of reflecting what Jacques Maritain identifies as the only "absolutely 'gratuitous' work of art . . . the universe," the archetypal act of gratuitousness which all art expresses (77, 127).

Post-Impressionist theory (a painting "is not a representation of a mountain, it is 'mountain' under the form of paint" (*E&A* 170)) another shaping aesthetic influence for *In Parenthesis*, one again given force by Jones's spiritual beliefs. Post-Impressionist theory becomes an analogy for the eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation, and thus leads to Jones's view that all art acts as "anamnesis," in the theological sense he borrows from Gregory Dix:

"[anamnesis] is not quite easy to represent accurately in English, words like 'remembrance' or 'memorial' having for us a connotation of something *absent* which is only mentally recollected. But in the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testament *anamnesis* and the cognate verb have a sense of 'recalling' or 're-presenting' before God an event in the past so that it becomes *here and now operative by its effects*." (*E&A* 126)

A final crucial aesthetic/spiritual principle at work in *In Parenthesis* is Jones's view that a striving towards formal unity is inherent in the nature of art. All art is a " 'fitting together' " (*E&A* 151) and, in the language of Thomist philosophy,

can only make one thing, that is: a 'shape.' . . . If then all art of its nature tends to make a shape it tends towards a relationship of shapes which we ordinarily call form, and if it tends towards form then it must reach towards splendour of form . . . all art, as such, has beauty for its end. (DG 143)

All art, then, reaches towards "that perfection which is unity" (DG 156), and its "unifying of parts to an end" (DG 146) is an expression of the " 'desire and pursuit of the whole' [that] is native to us all" (E&A 153). It is in this striving towards the proportional relationship of shapes that art, whatever its subject-matter, has as its goal "delight" (E&A 164). It is the poem's delight in its own form, as well as its permeation by Christian values, that is often a stumbling-block for the modern reader determined to read *In Parenthesis* as historical artefact rather than as art.

A primary emphasis on *In Parenthesis* as literature rather than history does not, of course, preclude an awareness that the poem has a historical context. It does, however, allow one to recognize that in Jones's conscious attempts to incorporate history in the poem, artistic/spiritual beliefs are again the key. He agrees with T. S. Eliot's assertion that the artist must possess "the historical sense . . . a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence . . . a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together." ("Tradition" 14). Jones also recognizes that the artist must draw on the past, both public and private, because it is inextricably part of his art: "there is, in the principle that informs the poetic art, a something which cannot be disengaged from the mythus, deposits, *matière*, ethos, whole *res* of which the poet is himself a product" (E&A 117). The specific war experience that Jones is writing about itself calls up the past: "I suppose at no other time did one so much live with a consciousness of the past, the very remote, and the more immediate and trivial past, both superficially and more subtly" (xi).

However, in Jones's view of the artist's historical function there is also a clear spiritual element:

in our present megalopolitan technocracy the artist must still remain a 'rememberer' (part of the official bardic function in earlier phases of society). . . . My view is that all artists, whether they know it or not, whether they would repudiate the notion or not, are in fact 'showers forth' of things which tend to be impoverished, or misconceived, or altogether lost or wilfully set aside in the preoccupations of our present intense technological phase, but which, none the less, belong to man. (DG [17])

The artist, who according to Jones is responsible not “for” but “to the future” (*E&A* 141), must try to ‘show forth’ historical experience as human experience; that is, he must try to indicate how any given historical event expresses or affects human nature itself. For Jones, any attempt to understand or present modern historical events must struggle with what he sees as the crucial problem of the modern age, “the dilemma of Technological Man, with his alienation from the creaturely and from the thought-modes of Man-the-Artist” (*DG* 174):

in the age of technics the tendency is for creativeness to become dehumanized, for contrivance to usurp imagination, for the will toward shape to become almost indistinguishable from a mere will toward power. . . . Power-extension and multiplication become the objectives, and the utile is the sole factor determining the forms, and the symbolic loses altogether its central and presiding position. (*E&A* 104)

In Parenthesis, then, as the Preface makes clear, draws part of the power of its presentation of World War I’s horrors from Jones’s ability to see the war, both literally and metaphorically, as an expression of “the dilemma of Technological Man”:

It is not easy in considering a trench-mortar barrage to give praise for the action proper to chemicals — full though it may be of beauty. We feel a rubicon has been passed between striking with a hand weapon as man used to do and loosing poison from the sky as we do ourselves. We doubt the decency of our own inventions, and are certainly in terror of their possibilities. That our culture has accelerated every line of advance into the territory of physical science is well appreciated — but not so well understood are the unforeseen, subsidiary effects of this achievement. (xiv)

As Jones goes on to illustrate the contradictions thrust upon man by “the age of technics,” his poem’s awareness of the war as an assault on the spirit as well as the body of man becomes more evident:

We stroke cats, pluck flowers, tie ribands, assist at the manual acts of religion, make some kind of love, write poems, paint pictures, are generally at one with that creaturely world inherited from our remote beginnings. Our perception of many things is heightened and clarified. Yet must we do gas-drill, be attuned to 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. (xiv)

There is indeed a historical consciousness that informs Jones’s poem about World War I, but as the perceptive reader soon realizes, this is a

consciousness that incorporates what Northrop Frye calls “Weltgeschichte” — world history — as part of its primary concern with what he calls “Heilsgeschichte” — spiritual history (9).

To create the literary work of art that is *In Parenthesis*, Jones had to grapple with the formal problems raised by the aesthetic/spiritual principles described above, which colour his view of art, human nature, and historical experience. More specifically, he had to try to resolve the formal contradictions inherent in any art dealing with the subject-matter of war:

the modern artist, attempting . . . to ‘interpret,’ to ‘illustrate,’ to find a way of ‘saying again under other forms,’ modern war in terms of modern art. . . . would be faced with the profoundest contradictions and he must resolve them all, not losing one, and still create delight. It is this business of gathering all things in that torments the artist. . . . (DG 141)

Jones’s belief that great art “is both peace and war; it must make the lion lie by the lamb *without anyone noticing*” (DG 140-41), meant that in fulfilling the artist’s historical role while “‘saying again under other forms’” the reality that was World War I, he was confronted with two major and contradictory historical truths to embody. He had to represent the violent, irrational horror of the war as experienced both exteriorly and interiorly; and, in order to re-present the war experience *sub specie aeternitatis*, he had to “show forth” within this first depiction the presence of the universal truth which for him conditions all history and experience, that of ultimate goodness existing in an apparently wicked world, unifying and ordering even chaos.

In Parenthesis succeeds in its formal embodiment of these conflicting concerns. The first impression the poem’s form gives the reader is a vivid one of chaos. The very typography is a source of confusion. After experimenting with such presentations as that of a double-sided newspaper column, Jones settled on the published form, persuading Faber to have it printed by René Hague, whom Jones called “more than an aid . . . a collaborator I know no one else so aware of both the nature of a writing and of how to print it” (IP xv). The reader is immediately disoriented by the fact that the work’s typography switches back and forth between the conventions for prose and poetry, without apparent reason. In addition, part of the ‘printed’ text consists of white spaces, both vertical and horizontal (these are meant to be read as infinitely recessive re-enactments of what Jones calls “the space between” (IP xv) experiences, in one of which he wrote his poem). A first reading of the poem is unlikely to recognize that the narrative

traces a relatively straightforward linear movement of a particular military unit as it goes from England to France, through training and trench service to the climax of the Battle of the Somme. The linear progression is unclear at first because it is constantly subverted by the convolutions of the language communicating the movement. Dislocated syntax, words with multiple grammatical functions, unidentified and fluid pronouns, omitted punctuation, and shifting tenses continually halt the forward reading. Compressed images bring the narrative to a stop as the mind searches to fill in the gaps (more "space between"), and extended images have a similar result because they stretch thought out like a thin elastic band before allowing it to rebound. We can establish that there is a dominant 'recording consciousness' in John Ball, the poem's apparent centre, but other, hard-to-recognize voices frequently intrude. Conventional characterization has been virtually eliminated, and we 'know' the characters only as we tentatively 'know' most of the action: through the constantly shifting voices that deliver the poem.

All of this confusion in the form of the poem is intended to convey, to 're-present,' the chaos of the war. However, even as Jones is embodying this chaos, he is also ordering the material inwardly, thus creating an artistic tension that is the key to the poem's resolution of the aesthetic/spiritual and historical contradictions at its core. For instance, John Ball's first experience of a shell is frozen with cinematic skill even as the shell's explosive power bursts through in the diction:

The exact disposition of small things — the precise shapes of trees, the tilt of a bucket, the movement of a straw, the disappearing right boot of Sergeant Snell — all minute noises, separate and distinct, in a stillness charged through with some approaching violence — registered not by the ear nor any single faculty — an on-rushing pervasion, saturating all existence; with exactitude, logarithmic, dial-timed, millesimal — of calculated velocity, some mean chemist's contrivance, a stinking physicist's destroying toy.

. . . Out of the vortex, rifling the air it came — bright, brass-shod, Pandoran; with all-filling screaming the howling crescendo's up-piling snapt. The universal world, breath held, one half second, a bludgeoned stillness. Then the pent violence released a consummation of all burstings out; all sudden up-rendings and rivings-through — all taking out of vents — all barrier-breaking — all unmaking. Pernitric begetting — the dissolving and splitting of solid things. (24)

There is a similar revelation of form underlying chaos in a passage describing the worried soldiers' novice march to the Front:

Half-minds, far away, divergent, own-thought thinking, tucked away unknown thoughts; feet following file friends, each his own thought-maze alone treading; intricate, twist about, own thoughts, all unknown thoughts, to the next so close following on. (37)

The sounds and rhythm here, at first glance dislocated, soon show themselves bound together in an intricate pattern of alliteration, consonance, and assonance that reflects the labyrinthine march itself.

The unifying forces visible at work in the diction and rhythm of these passages are also continuously shaping the chaotic qualities of the entire poem. Disparate images throughout the poem create an initially bewildering effect, but they are all held within what Jones calls the process of “imaginative, rather than ‘free’ association” (*E&A* 249). As T.S. Eliot has said, “There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts” (Preface 8), and a recurrent ordering pattern of imagery in *In Parenthesis* is drawn from the Front’s watery landscape. The physical journey of the soldiers — their march towards the climactic battle on the Somme — is also a spiritual journey, allowing them inclusion in a favourite prayer of Jones’s, one of seafarers in peril: “‘Count us among his argonauts whose argosy you plead’” (*DG* 190). For example, during the final battle the soldiers come under fire while digging a shallow defensive trench, and the man next to Ball is hit. Ball finds his Field Dressing inadequate to staunch “so fast a tide,” “futile as frantic seaman’s shift bunged to stoved bulwark,” and soon “the darking flood percolates and he dies in your arms” (174). The notion of water thus introduced drifts away temporarily as shifting voices continue the passage; Ball is reprimanded by an N.C.O.: “And get back to that digging can’t yer—/this aint a bloody Wake” (174), a statement immediately contradicted by the poem’s move into an elegiac voice:

for these dead, who soon will have their dead
for burial clods heaped over.
Nor time for halsing
nor to clip green wounds
nor weeping Maries bringing anointments
neither any word spoken
nor no decent nor appropriate sowing of this seed
nor remembrance of the harvesting
of the renascent cycle
and return
nor shaving of the head nor ritual incising for these
viriles under each tree.
No one sings: Lully lully
for the mate whose blood runs down. (174)

Echoes of Malory, the Bible, and Frazer all intermingle in this passage as the repeated negatives underline the tragic loss. However, the word "tree" moves the allusive focus of the passage to the terrible *rite de passage* of Christ on the Cross, an allusion reinforced by the concluding lines, which bring in via folk song the "Corpus Christi Carol." The echo of the "Corpus Christi Carol" and the image of flowing blood lead into the lines which follow: "Corposant his signal flare/makes its slow parabola/where acorn hanging cross-trees tangle" (175). The term "cross-trees," as well as evoking the Cross with its holy body, refers to part of a ship's mast, and so returns the passage to the imagery of ships and water with which it began. The wood of the Cross is the wood of the 'ship' in which all mankind sails to redemption. The corposant, or St. Elmo's fire, is the sign of the Dioscuri or the Twin Brothers (the name of the ship in Acts xxviii.11 which carries Paul safely to Rome after a previous shipwreck). In mariners' lore, a corposant on a ship's rigging signifies that the ship will reach harbour safely, so the passage suggests that there is ultimate hope for mankind in his spiritual journey, caught up though he is at the moment in the terrible storm of war.

In these examples and throughout the poem, Jones's intertwined aesthetic and spiritual principles enable him to re-create in the form of *In Parenthesis* the timeless universal battle between chaos and order that he saw being enacted on the battlefields of World War I. Despite the poem's vivid depiction of war's horrors, it has an overall affirmative tone that results from the artistic imposition of order on chaos, which for Jones, as was pointed out earlier, always echoes the "archetypal form-making and ordering implicit in the credal clause *per quem omnia facta sunt*" (E&A 160). This artistic and spiritual vision embodied in *In Parenthesis* does not seem to pose a problem for critics who read the poem as literature; even critics who dissociate themselves from Christian values in general can, like Jeremy Hooker, respond freely to the work on a symbolic level (7, 11).

However, *In Parenthesis* most often receives critical attention within the margins of the World War I literary canon, and it is here that the post-war reading of literature as history obscures the poem's formidable artistic achievements. Its differences from the Ur-texts of this canon (such as the poems of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Isaac Rosenberg) usually lead to overt condemnation for its failure to meet historically conditioned expectations. D.J. Enright, for instance, criticizes it for being "at odds with the subject-matter" (176). Jon Silkin worries generally that

even the celebration of a 'war poet' creates unease. What appeals to us is the expression of outrage at the irony and the waste. This is as it should be, and yet it is not, if we expend our watchfulness in the easing of our guilt, our outrage. Once these are spent society is vulnerable to further wars. (273)

In Parenthesis makes him especially uneasy because of its apparent ambivalence on the morality of war: "If we honour the soldiers' martyrdom are we also to honour the tradition of soldiering, which involves killing as well?" (329). Fussell accuses *In Parenthesis* of "kinship with documents which are overtly patriotic and even propagandistic" (147), calling the poem "a deeply conservative work which uses the past not, as it often pretends to do, to shame the present, but really to ennoble it. The effect of the poem, for all its horrors, is to rationalize and even to validate the war" (147). Roy Fuller's comment on the poem takes this sort of historical criticism a logical step further:

one trouble with that remarkable work is its ideology, or rather, lack of it. We are surely too conscious of the Marxist analysis of the First World War to bear any retrospective treatment that doesn't take that analysis into account. (121-22)

"Doctrinal Adhesions," as I.A. Richards calls them (16), are not easily overcome. Certainly one could respond to such historically conditioned criticism by emphasizing that, as Colin Hughes has shown, the poem contains a wealth of historically accurate detail, despite Jones's warning to the reader not to expect "any sequence of events [to be] historically accurate" (ix). Jones himself in a letter to Bernard Bergonzi has taken exception to the frequent charge that his poem lacks historical validity: "I can truthfully say that in writing *I. P.* I introduced *nothing* that was not based on remembered (and somewhat vividly remembered) actualities whether of events or reactions and feelings, either in myself, or observed or indicated in others." However, in making the concessions necessary to literal-mindedness in a defence of the poem on historical grounds, one would, for consistency, have to ignore the fact that even the historical accuracy of *In Parenthesis* is dependent on the poem's informing artistic principles. Jones's poem is so accurate in its many details because he recognizes that to present anything *sub specie aeternitatis*, the artist must "'proceed from the known to the unknown.' The concrete, the exact dimensions, the contactual, the visual, the bodily, what the senses register, the assembled data first — then is the 'imagination' freed to get on with the job" (*E&A* 306).

A more appropriate response to the historically conditioned criticism that *In Parenthesis* so often receives is to insist that the poem be recognized as a formal work of literature, not history. The very discipline of history is itself being encouraged from within by historians like Hayden White to recognize that all history is “constructed” and has “voice.” If historians can be persuaded to accept such diversity, perhaps historically minded literary critics can be convinced of the disservice done to *In Parenthesis* when it is read as history, not literature. The perspectives on war offered by Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” or, for that matter, by Brecht’s *Mother Courage*, happen to be ideologically more acceptable to modern minds than that offered by Jones’s *In Parenthesis*, but ideological acceptability is no proof of either historical validity or literary value.

David Jones’s *In Parenthesis* has events of World War I as its obvious subject-matter, but Jones’s Preface makes it clear that he did not think of himself as writing in the genre of war literature:

I did not intend this as a ‘War Book’ — it happens to be concerned with war. I should prefer it to be about a good kind of peace — but as Mandeville says, “Of Paradys ne can I not speken propurly I was not there; it is fer beyonde and that for thinketh me. And also I was not worthi.” (xii-xiii)

Jones’s true subject is not war, but, as Harman Grisewood has said of all his work, “What we are” (6). His approach to his material is not historical but formal, a struggle to create what Eliot calls in the introduction “A work of literary art which uses the language in a new way” (vii). Jones is not being precious when he talks about *In Parenthesis* as “the making of a writing”:

I have only tried to make a shape in words, using as data the complex of sights, sounds, fears, hopes, apprehensions, smells, things exterior and interior, the landscape and paraphernalia of that singular time and of those particular men. (x)

He is expressing his determination to allow the poem, as an imaginative rather than historical construct, to explore the limits of its art and subject-matter. Faithfulness to artistic principles makes *In Parenthesis* a powerful depiction of the experience of World War I. With its formal tension between chaos and order, the poem re-presents the war; in Jones’s terms, the words have “effected what . . . [they] signified” (*IP* 3).

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