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***DAVID JONES' THE ANATHEMATA:
IS MODERN EPIC POSSIBLE?***

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Abstract: *The epic poem is a problematic genre in the modern era, and might be regarded as having ceased to thrive in Western Literature since the Renaissance. Attempts have been made in criticism to assert that the genre of the epic poem has been replaced by the novel, a genre representative of the modern world view. In this article I shall discuss the reasons for the modern era being a sterile period for the genre of the epic poem. I shall suggest that modern thought is characterised by a scepticism and fragmentariness inconsistent with the cosmic vision which the full epic seeks to express. Traditional epics portray a cosmos in which natural and supernatural realms interact with each other, and modern writers rarely clearly portray the coexistence and interaction of two such realms. The Anglo-Welsh modernist poet and painter David Jones, however, wrote as one of his two main literary works *The Anathemata*, a long poem which is epic in scope and theme, while embodying at the same time a modern fragmentariness. That he is able to attempt and, arguably, succeed in presenting an epic vision during the time of high modernism is due, I shall argue, to his adherence to a pre-modern world view (including an evocation of natural and supernatural realms and their interaction), adapting it, however, to modern circumstances. I shall endeavour to show how *The Anathemata* embodies a full cosmic vision, in the traditional epic fashion, while the author is also able to incorporate elements reflective of modern conditions into the form of his text.*

The genre of epic poetry has fallen from prominence during the modern era, the last age in which works uncontroversially assignable to the genre flourished being the modern era's very beginning, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless, attempts at writing epic poetic works have continued to be made, even during the twentieth century, though the character of the resultant works is very varied, and their generic affiliation less than obvious. David Jones, Anglo-Welsh artist and poet, a literary modernist at least stylistically, admired by Eliot, Yeats and Auden, wrote a long poem, *The Anathemata*, which is clearly epic in scope and ambition, but which he himself nevertheless subtitled 'Fragments of an Attempted Writing'. After briefly considering the reasons for the modern era being a problematic time for the epic genre, I shall explore why David Jones' world view predisposes him towards an epic vision, and discuss whether *The Anathemata* is an epic poem, whether it is modern, and whether it can be

both. The question as to whether *The Anathemata* is in fact an epic poem has not been prominent as an explicit debate in the critical literature, although critics have noted parallels between Jones' work, and that of poets who are widely recognised as epic, such as Virgil and Dante (see note 9). Whether a modernist long poem can be an epic poem is a question with implications for the understanding of genres and historicity, as the genre of the epic poem has often been regarded as not being at home in modern conditions, as I explain below.

The epic is a public, communal genre, and the lack of a shared discourse in modern society has arguably held back the production of epic poems, as well as rendering unconvincing the attempts sometimes made at identifying the novel as the modern equivalent of the epic poem. As Ian Watt puts it, writing against Hegel's claim that the novel is the modern equivalent of the epic poem:

Nevertheless, it is surely evident that the actual similarities [between the epic poem and the novel] are of such a theoretical and abstract nature that one cannot make much of them without neglecting most of the specific literary characteristics of the two forms: the epic is, after all, an oral and poetic genre dealing with the public and usually remarkable deeds of historical or legendary persons engaged in a collective rather than an individual enterprise; and none of these things can be said of the novel. (239-40)

According to Alasdair MacIntyre, not only did modern economic individualism, displacing the dominance of religious values, coincide with, and, in fact, cause, the rise of the novel, but even a late epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, already shows the qualities, exhibited by its most striking character, which will characterise the protagonists of novels:

The novel with its stress on individual experience and its value is about to emerge as the dominant literary form [in the eighteenth century]. Social life becomes essentially an arena for the struggles and conflicts of individual wills. The first ancestor of all these individuals is perhaps Milton's Satan, who brought Blake over to the devil's party and has been seen as the first Whig. (MacIntyre 146)

The fact that it is Satan who becomes the most acclaimed character in *Paradise Lost*, probably against Milton's intentions, suggests that Milton's own world view may already be too modern for him to be able to write an epic poem effectively – if Satan is interpreted by readers as the hero, Milton has not succeeded in providing the discursive foundation for a new communal venture in the way he set out to do by attempting an epic poem, but has accidentally contributed to, or at least resonated with, a social setting characterised by loosened social ties. The modern individualism which favours the novel rather than the epic poem stems from a rejection of the kind of holistic and hierarchical world view common in premodern societies, world views which assign human individuals fixed places in a universal order, including an overarching spiritual dimension. These holistic visions are portrayed in epic poems; however, the modern era is known not for shared holistic visions, but rather for fragmentation, as famously

represented in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's fictional *Letter of Lord Chandos*, in which the imagined letter-writer, writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century, early in the modern era, finds that his holistic visions fall to pieces: 'Everything for me fell apart into pieces, and the pieces into yet more pieces, and nothing would any longer let itself be encompassed in a single concept' (52 – my translation).¹ Modern thought has tended to deconstruct, rather than elaborate, holistic world views, and has been characterised by scepticism as to various traditional concepts; where holistic schemes have been attempted during the modern period, they have tended not to accommodate and represent different layers of existence, such as the human and divine realms, as the world views found in premodern epic poems do, and they have failed to shape the imaginative world of whole communities, issuing rather in controversy.

David Jones, as a poet, is regarded as a modernist, and T. S. Eliot, in his introduction to Jones' other major work, *In Parenthesis*, classes Jones with himself, Ezra Pound and James Joyce (vii-viii)². However, modernism is especially associated with a sense of the fragmentation of culture, and Eliot himself, in *The Waste Land*, could do no more than collect fragments ('These fragments I have shored against my ruins'), and while admittedly he seeks to rediscover a holistic vision in his later, post-conversion, phase, his expression of what he sees remains diffident, and no dantesque edifice emerges. Jones, however, though he shares the modernists' view that civilisation is in steep decline, if not collapse, during the twentieth century, has from the beginning of his writing career a world view which, I suggest, predisposes him to an epic mode of writing (critics such as Blamires and Dilworth have seen an epic quality in *The Anathemata* – see note 9).

Jones was an essayist as well as a creative writer and so gives the critic substantial help in understanding his philosophy by presenting it himself in his essays. He developed a theory of art based on the idea of sacramentality, an understanding which harmonised with the Catholic religious affiliation which he adopted in his twenties,³ although he recalls himself having a leaning towards a sacramental understanding even as a child.⁴ He explains his theory, among other places, in the essay 'Art and Sacrament' (*Epoch and Artist* 143-79), where he asserts that the defining quality of the human, the being which unites the spiritual and material worlds, is being an artist (178), and that the process of signification involved in art is analogous to the operation of sacraments as understood in Catholic theology: what is signified is also made present (173-5). To Jones,

¹ 'Es zerfiel mir alles in Teile, die Teile wieder in Teile, und nichts mehr ließ sich mit einem Begriff umspannen.'

² 'The work of David Jones has some affinity with that of James Joyce ... and with the later work of Ezra Pound, and with my own. ... David Jones is a representative of the same literary generation as Joyce and Pound and myself, if four men born between 1882 and 1895 can be regarded as of the same literary generation.'

³ See Jones 'Autobiographical Talk', *Epoch and Artist* 28, where he recounts important early influences on him.

⁴ See Jones *Dai Greatcoat* 246-7, where he recalls enacting a Good Friday ritual in the garden of his house, when about seven, despite his home's low-church atmosphere.

a sense of locality is also necessary for artistic signification: as he says, in praise of James Joyce, and explaining how he believes art works, 'It was from the *particular* that he made the *general* shine out' ('Notes on the 1930s', *The Dying Gaul and Other Writings* 46). For Jones, having been born and having grown up in London, with a Welsh father and an English mother, his local references are British, and he refers particularly frequently to London and Wales. His Welsh affinity made him specially aware of early British history, and he understands the Welsh as being the descendants of the British population at the time of the Roman Empire, and the carriers of remnants of Roman-British tradition. Jones sees the poet's function as 'bardic', as a 'rememberer' for a society or cultural group, even if the poet lives in a modern society which does not officially recognise such a calling (*The Dying Gaul and Other Writings* 46-7; also 'Preface', *The Anathemata* 20-1).

This theoretical orientation predisposes Jones to write poetry which is epic in two important ways, poetry which is public in its concerns, and which expresses a complete, universal vision, and I shall now discuss how *The Anathemata* is an epic poem in these two respects.⁵

The Anathemata is a public poem, in that it addresses the common concerns of a large community, in its case the history of the island of Britain and its inhabitants, as is in fact declared in the dedication facing the first page of the poem, which dedicates it to his parents, and ancestors, and to the native population of the island.⁶ The poem covers the history of Britain starting from geological prehistory, continuing through British-Roman history and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, and moving on to the history of London, alluding to periods in its development from pre-Roman times to the twentieth century. His theme is the forming of Britain and its population, and his emphasis is on culture, myth and legend rather than on historical events. In the extensive 'Preface' to *The Anathemata* he uses the word 'deposits' (20) to describe this cultural inheritance which he wishes, as a poet, to recall, a word which invites a comparison between geological and cultural processes of formation. While the geological processes of formation are represented in the first section (of eight), 'Rite and Fore-Time', in the second, 'Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea', he represents the arrival of aspects of civilisation to Britain from the Mediterranean in antiquity by portraying a ship's voyage from Greece to London, a ship which returns later in the poem, and whose crew represent peoples who contributed to forming Mediterranean civilisation, thereby also to British culture. The most important non-Mediterranean arrival to Britain, that of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, is commemorated in the third section, 'Angle-Land', which explores their Germanic heritage, and imagines the liminal period during which both Celtic Britons and Anglo-Saxons contended for dominance of the island. The arrival of the Mediterranean boat in the port of London sets up the fourth and fifth sections, which concentrate on London, 'Redriff', which is about ship-building by the Thames (a trade his maternal grandfather had been involved with),

⁵ In a similar point, Corcoran 14-5 notes the political nature of the poetry in *The Anathemata*.

⁶ 'Parentibus meis et prioribus eorum et omnibus indigenis omnis candidae insulae Brittonum gentis.' (48)

and ‘The Lady of the Pool’, a long and important section in which London-lore is set forth, including ancient Welsh-British legends concerning London’s foundation, and more modern traditions which Jones recalls from his London upbringing. London archaeology, especially the layering of medieval Christian churches over pagan foundations, is important in this section. So Jones, using the materials he knows best, has attempted to encapsulate a representation of Britain’s cultural development from its origins to the present day, and to present the cultural history of Britain in a way of relevance to any inhabitant of Britain. His concern for the distinctness yet interweaving of Welsh and English cultures, and, more generally, Celtic and Germanic cultures in Britain, is potentially an important contribution to an understanding of British identity.

The second characteristic feature of epic poems which I shall suggest is also characteristic of *The Anathemata* is completeness.⁷ The public element of history-telling discussed above already brings in a sense of completeness, through its comprehensive spanning of history from pre-history to the time of the poem’s writing, as well as through its attempt to show something representative of the whole island’s culture, even if doing this through a special focus on times and places most known about by the poet. However, beyond this, the poem expresses an all-encompassing metaphysical vision, the type of vision which few twentieth-century writers laid claim to. In Jones’ case the metaphysical framework is a religious, specifically Catholic, one, but presented in his own particular and characteristic manner, with emphases of his own, all however consistent with the overall framework. In Jones’ theory, as mentioned above, art is analogous to religious sacrament, and the liturgy of the eucharist, the church’s principal sacrament, specifically in the form of the classical Roman liturgy, is made the intertext for the whole poem, and is constantly recalled, with frequent Latin quotations interspersed in the text: for example, the poem starts with a priest saying the words ‘ADSCRIPTAM, RATAM, RATIONABILEM’ (49),⁸ from the Canon of the Mass. The liturgical references also contribute to bringing into the poem’s world of allusions and intertexts the events of the New Testament. The portrayal of history in the poem is seen in the light of a religious-metaphysical purpose, with humankind teleologically oriented towards a spiritual destiny. Jones’ special emphasis within this framework is his insistence that nothing and no one is lost – his metaphors of geological layering indicate that, for example, pre-Christian culture phases are not things that should not have been, but necessary things, without which the entire edifice could not be built. Thus all stages of culture deserve commemoration, and all witness to the complete universal vision, as Jones expresses in the line immediately below the poem’s heading on its first page, ‘TESTE DAVID CUM SYBILLA’ (‘with David and the Sybil as witnesses’ 49), a phrase taken from the requiem mass, and used by Jones to assert, and assert that the Church asserts, that both Hebrew and pagan traditions support and contribute to the Christian worldview. While this

⁷ Blamires 4 remarks on the comprehensiveness of Jones’ worldview.

⁸ ‘ascribed, ratified, reasonable’ (my translation)

metaphysical vision is present throughout the poem, it is particularly the focus in the final three sections, 'Keel, Ram, Stauros' (in which the ship sails back to Greece), 'Mabinog's Liturgy' (with an emphasis on Christmas), and 'Sherthursdaye and Venus Day' (with an emphasis on Good Friday). Thus Jones' poem may be compared with such classic epic poems as the Iliad and the Odyssey, or the Aeneid,⁹ in which decisions in the divine world play out in worldly events, and shape the history of peoples, or Dante's Divine Comedy, in which a concern as to the soteriological scheme for humanity is shown.

Despite showing the epic characteristics of being public and showing a complete universal vision, *The Anathemata* also exhibits features which might be thought to be inconsistent with the public and complete qualities of the epic poem, and I shall describe these in terms of fragmentariness, a quality specially associated with the modern age.¹⁰ The poem's subtitle on the title page, *Fragments of an Attempted Writing*, shows that the fragmentariness is not unconscious, and Jones further refers to it in the 'Preface', using the word 'fragments' more than once, for example: 'I regard my book more as a series of fragments, fragmented bits, chance scraps really, vestiges of sorts and kinds of *disciplinae*, that have come to me by way of this channel or that influence' (34). The fragmentariness takes various forms. The poem is divided into eight sections, of varying lengths, and the connections between them are not obvious or spelt out. The poetry is written in free verse, without rhyme or obvious meter, though with frequent but irregular alliteration, and it sometimes turns into prose. The language of the poem is mainly English, but it contains significant amounts of Welsh and Latin, and some German, and other languages. The poem is particularly untraditional in having no clear action uniting the sections, or sometimes even within single sections. It also has no clearly identifiable and fixed individual characters (Elen Monica, the London lavender seller in 'The Lady of the Pool,' is arguably more than one woman), and no single period of time when it is set. The action in two of the sections, is a sea voyage, while in one it is a conversation between a sea captain and a woman from London who is a lavender seller (but only in her words), in another a conversation between a ship captain and ship builder about repairs to a ship (with only the ship builder's words), and in another, at least initially, the sighting of the coast of Southern Britain. In some sections the action is difficult to identify: events of the New Testament,¹¹ and the idea of a celebration of the liturgy seem to be the action in the final two sections, and the action in the first section is the geological formation of Britain.¹² Much of the content of the poem comes in the form of voluminous allusions (accompanied by extensive footnotes written by the author), which evoke various traditions and periods in no particular order. In the central section, 'The Lady of the

⁹ Blamires 205 makes a comparison between *The Anathemata* and the Aeneid, as does Dilworth 153.

¹⁰ Ward (1-2, 213) sees the fragmentariness of Jones' poetic work in general as due to his view that the modern world is fragmented, and believes that *The Anathemata* is too experimental to achieve broad appeal.

¹¹ Dilworth 153 sees the Incarnation as the 'action implied but excluded'.

¹² For more on content of sections in *The Anathemata* see Corcoran 44-73.

Pool', featuring the conversation of Elen Monica, the London lavender seller, with the sea captain, during which only her voice is heard, she seems to migrate in time from one period to another as the conversation progresses. At the first encounter with the poem the reader is likely to receive the impression of a series of loosely connected, or even unconnected, separate poems, written in a similar style, and with a similar range of intertexts.

Given its undoubted fragmentary qualities, the question arises as to whether the poem transcends them in order nevertheless to express the coherent universal vision which epic poems traditionally provide. A careful contemplation of the sections does reveal several patterns which knit them together in the order in which they occur. The story of the ship journeying to Britain ('Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea'), repairs to the ship being discussed in London ('Refriff'), the sea captain meeting a London woman ('The Lady of the Pool'), and the ship returning to the Mediterranean ('Keel, Ram, Stauros'), connects the second, fourth, fifth and sixth sections. A historical progression puts prehistory first, in the first section ('Rite and Fore-Time'), ancient history second in the second section on the ship's journey to Britain ('Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea'), the end of antiquity and beginning of the middle ages in the third section, with the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon peoples ('Angle-Land'), more recent history next in the section on the sailing ship building and repairing industry on the Thames ('Redriff'), and a historical kaleidoscope, including references to the time of the poem's writing, in the fifth section ('The Lady of the Pool'). There is also a kind of series of stages in spiritual progression, in which the first section represents the physical world and its formation, the second, third, fourth and fifth sections represent human history, the sixth is a transition from the human to the divine sphere, and the fifth and sixth concentrate on the divine sphere. So, it can be argued that a coherent universal vision may be seen through the undeniable fragmentariness of the text. Modernness is also present in the modern language used by characters, especially in the somewhat cockney language used by Elen Monica, the lavender seller, in 'The Lady of the Pool' – here, as well as language characteristic of the twentieth century being included in the poem, the modernist convention of including informal colloquial language in poetry is observed.

In this article I have been arguing that *The Anathemata* embodies qualities which make it an epic poem, but in a way which allows it to be significantly different from traditional epics, and distinctively modern. The poem incorporates the public function which the epic poem traditionally has, presenting a people with its history, especially foundational history, and it embodies the universal, metaphysical scope which traditional epics do. At the same time the reader is very aware of a strong sense of fragmentariness, in the superficially disjointed sections of the poem, and in the unpredictably mobile historical setting. The lack of any named, continuously present character, and the mixing of languages and linguistic registers, typical modernist techniques, further contribute to the fragmented impression. That Jones manages to transcend the sense of fragmentation he creates and nevertheless infuse a coherent metaphysical vision is not only an artistic

achievement but also carries a meaning: despite Jones' conviction, shared with many modernist poets, that the twentieth century is the scene of the collapse of Western civilisation, Western civilisation is not, from the point of view of *The Anthemata*, the ultimate framework within which meaning can be found, but rather the metaphysical vision which forms *The Anthemata*'s background is the horizon within which the poem proclaims continued significance and hope beyond the ruins.

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