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WAR AND RECONCILIATION IN DAVID JONES' IN PARENTHESIS

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Abstract: David Jones' long poem *In Parenthesis* was his first literary work, and approaches the First World War in an atypical way. It is written from the point of view of a direct personal participation in the conflict, and is characterised by an attention to the minute physical particulars of the daily life of a soldier on the front, but the detailed physicality of this portrayal coexists with layers of cultural allusion, including allusions to war narratives from earlier stages of European culture, and allusions to sacred history. Jones' own participation in the First World War as a private on the Western Front serves as the basis for the descriptions of everyday war life. I shall explore how Jones is able to turn a minute description of ordinary British soldiers' experience of the First World War into a statement of a reconciliatory meaning of the event and of conflict in general, and I shall show how he achieves this through placing the action within the setting of a metaphysical scheme in which a present physical reality carries echoes of past physical realities, which together evoke and make present a transcendental reality carrying the possibility of a reconciliatory perspective. Jones' complex web of allusions to past conflicts in European history creates a context within which he can create a meaning for seemingly meaningless war experiences. I shall discuss the way that Jones uses Celtic cultural motifs in order to convey the meaning of defeat at a spiritual level leading to victory at higher, spiritual and cultural levels.

David Jones is perhaps equally known for his art work as for his poetry, and while he trained as an artist from his youth, his first writings were a response to the First World War, in which he participated, and these writings crystallised into *In Parenthesis*, his first poetic work, and one of his two major works, the other being *The Anathemata*. Jones was recognised by T. S. Eliot and Yeats as a major poet, but his written work had been comparatively neglected, possibly because of its difficulty. *In Parenthesis*, however, is his most accessible work, giving a striking direct insight into the everyday life of a British soldier at the Front during the First World War, along with the complex network of allusions which also characterises the work.

While Jones can be classified as a literary modernist, and was viewed by Eliot as being of the same school as himself and Ezra Pound (Eliot vii-viii), Jones uses modernist techniques to his own ends, expressing a traditional world view which might be unexpected in a modernist. *In Parenthesis* is a work containing free verse and prose, so that it is difficult definitively to categorise it as a long poem. As well as the

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experimentation in form, the work is characteristically modernist in its often colloquial language, and its attention to precise, physical, and, what might seem to be banal, detail.¹ Combining an unsentimental physical portrayal of reality with, often esoteric, allusions to international culture and religion, again makes him resemble other high modernist poets. However his purpose in minute physical description is not to portray banality, and his purpose in abstruse allusion not to achieve unintelligibility to the non-élite reader, but rather to portray a spiritualised world, one in which physical objects are inhabited by cultural and spiritual significances.² The multilayeredness of the world Jones writes of allows him a space within which to combine war at a physical level and reconciliation at a spiritual level. I shall try to show this in what follows.

Jones was an ordinary private during the First World War, joining an Anglo-Welsh regiment (the Royal Welch Fusiliers), arriving in France in December 1915, was on or near the Front until he was wounded in July 1916, and later spent another period there, from October 1916 until early 1918, when he was taken ill with trench fever (see Jones “In illo tempore” 27-9). *In Parenthesis* covers the first of these two periods (Jones *In Parenthesis*³ ix), and is narrated from the point of view of a private called John Ball, whose experiences closely follow Jones’ own. The work starts with parade ground training in Britain prior to departure, describes the march to the seaport and embarkation, the arrival in France, and a period then spent behind the trenches, followed by the approach to the trenches, and the first period spent in the trenches. This section of events takes place in Parts One to Four, and involves little actual fighting, concentrating on everyday sights, sounds, and routines. Then the narrative moves forward, and in Parts Five to Seven the march towards what was to be the Battle of the Somme is described, as well as an episode in the Battle, the attack on Mametz Wood, during which John Ball is injured, as Jones was himself. The fact that only one of the seven parts, Part 7, is about fighting, is one way in which the work is profoundly realistic, since it portrays the training, patrolling, and waiting around, which formed a large part of military life. Jones makes sure he records the everyday military slang of the time, explaining it in the footnotes he provides himself – for example ‘gun-fire’, the tea drunk first thing in the morning (Jones *IP* 3, 192 note 3 to Part I), or ‘cushy’, the term used to describe quiet sections of the front, although also used by soldiers moving away from the front when describing where they had been to their replacements (Jones *IP* 35, 195 note 17). Jones is also careful to describe equipment and surroundings, again often providing additional information in his footnotes. For example, he gives a detailed picture of how trenches were designed, talking of the fire-bays, division points in a front line trench, and fire-steps, a kind of bench against the front wall of fire-bays, which could be stood on, sat on, or used to place things on (Jones *IP* 49, 50, 198 notes 33 and 34) – also, the wooden slats, which were supposed to provide walkways in the trenches, but were sometimes, in poor

¹ Pacey 45, for example, notes Jones’ attention to the particular, and compares it to Gerard Manley Hopkins.

² Blamires 4 describes how there is no division between the sacred and the secular in Jones’ vision of the wholeness life.

³ From now on *IP*.

repair, constituting an obstacle, and even floating up in waterlogged trenches, obstructing those moving around particularly at night (Jones *IP* 77, 206 note 31). He talks of how hessian, the material used to make sandbags, was omnipresent, being the surface of sandbag constructions, and also employed in various ways as a general purpose cloth (Jones *IP* 70, 205 note 5). He also mentions the slang names of various weapons, and describes, for example, how rifles were cleaned, with gauze or boiling water (Jones *IP* 63, 203 note 6). The daily routine at the front is explained, with the standing at guard at dawn and dusk every day, likely times for attack, and the subsequent more relaxed period, when rifles were cleaned (Jones *IP* 59, 63, 202 note 3). He even notes details about the opposing German army, for example the way their grey uniforms could be glimpsed in the distance (Jones *IP* 67, 204 note 16), and his impression that the German trenches were more complex and better organised than the British ones (Jones *IP* 52, 199-200 note 41).

The outstanding feature of *In Parenthesis* running in parallel with the vivid everyday physical detail is the dense network of allusions which permeates all parts of the work.⁴ Many of these concern war narratives from earlier stages of European history, but Jones provides a bridge between the literary allusions and the descriptions of everyday life in the trenches by means of extensive reference to popular culture of the time, particularly to songs which might be heard in the trenches, these songs and sayings forming a continuous tissue with the popular military terminology and slang, and thus with the physical descriptions of life. Another complexity in the network of allusions stems from Jones' attempt to portray the related but distinct cultures of the Welsh and English members of his regiment. To start with the most popular and contemporary level of the allusions, *In Parenthesis* is saturated with quotations from songs that were sung by soldiers at the front. In this way the cultural milieu at the front is recorded. Jones takes care to represent the songs of the different groups, at one point, for example, having the sound of a German carol, "Es ist ein' Ros' entsprungen", drift across from the German trench, to be answered, from the British trench, by a music-hall song "Casey Jones" (Jones *IP* 67-8, 205 note 17). Other songs include the nursery rhyme 'Oh dear what can the matter be' (Jones *IP* 48), the old soldiers' song "Old Soldiers' Never Die" (Jones *IP* 84, 210 note 38), and, not to leave out the Welsh element, the Welsh rugby fans' song "Sospan fach" is alluded to (Jones *IP* 53, 201 note 44). The songs show that the First World War environment carries its own complex folklore, and open the way for Jones to introduce levels of cultural resonance, echoes of previous conflicts, ones of which the participants themselves in the First World War may be unaware, but the relevance of which is established by the contexts in which they are introduced. Jones once again, at this level of references to previous conflicts in Western European culture, seeks to link the various national groups participating in the First World War to narratives of earlier wars in which their antecedents have participated. Of English war narratives woven into the work particularly prominent is Malory's treatment of the King Arthur legend, especially in Part Four, which is subtitled "King's Pellam's Launde", from Malory. It

⁴ Dilworth 62 explains this allusiveness by saying that the pattern in *In Parenthesis* is one of a "generation of motifs" replacing the "development of plot".

starts with a Malory quotation and refers to Malory at least once more during the section (Jones *IP* 57, 202 note 1, 59, 202 note 2, 70, 205 note 12). Malory's works on Arthur provide an English account of Welsh legendary material so allow a twining of the Welsh and English traditions, as well as resonating with Arthurian material from other sources which Jones includes.⁵ Non-Arthurian English references include allusions to the Anglo-Saxon war poems, *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon* (Jones *IP* 54, 202 note 47). The continental, and in particular, French, tradition is included by the prominent allusions to the *Chanson de Roland*, especially in the final section, Part Seven – the final lines of Part Seven, and thereby of the work, (apart from the notes, and a final set of scriptural quotations), are in fact taken from the final lines of the *Chanson de Roland*, in a translation by Jones' friend René Hague ('The geste says this, and the man who was on the field...and who wrote the book...the man who does not know this has not understood anything.' Jones *IP* 187, see also Jones *IP* 225 note 48). There are also hints at Germanic, in the form of Scandinavian, legend and mythology, for example in a hint at the "grey wolf" of Nordic mythology (explained in his notes) in connection to the colour of the German uniforms as seen from the allied trenches (Jones *IP* 67, 204-5 note 16). Jones emphasises elsewhere that British culture is part of European culture generally (for example, in "An Aspect of the Art of England"⁶), but the First World War context of course demands a continental dimension to the allusions.

However, consistently with Jones' special interests, allusions from Welsh history and legend are particularly dense. Jones, with a Welsh father, and an abiding interest in Welsh culture, did not, as he makes clear in many places in his writing, including in the Preface to *In Parenthesis* (see Jones *IP* xiii), view Welsh culture as only relevant to Wales. Rather he saw it also as the substrate culture for Britain as a whole, through the British Celts, who are the cultural forebears of the Welsh, but inhabited most of Britain before the advent of the Angle-Saxons. Jones presents the members of the regiment in *In Parenthesis* as having a longer cultural memory than the English,⁷ perhaps carrying the memories of the Island of Britain on behalf of their English comrades, as for example, in the case of the Welsh soldier, Dai, who utters the "boast", a speech, Jones explains in the notes, modelled on a speech by the early Welsh poet Taliesin, in which he lists the historical occasions, particularly battles, at which his fathers, and, through them, he, has been present: he has been, for example, with the Roman army, at Arthur's battles, and has also witnessed Christ's Passion (Jones *IP* 79-84, 207-10, notes 37 and A-N). Among the many strands of Welsh legend and history referred to, is the early poem the *Y Goddodin*, providing the quotation below the title on the title page ("seinnyessit e gledyf ym penn mameu" – his sword rang in mothers' heads – see Jones *IP* title page and 191-2 notes 1 and 4), as well as quotations (in English) on the title page for each of the seven sections (see Jones *IP* 191-2 notes 1 and 4). This possibly sixth-century poem is written from the

⁵ For the influence of Malory on Jones, see Robichaud 15-25.

⁶ Jones writes in this essay, "As the whole of our culture, lock stock and barrel, is but a part of Western European culture and has, historically and at each turn taken its cue from continental developments (I speak of main trends and not of details) ..." (60)

⁷ As pointed out, for example by Hooker 15-6, or Blissett 105.

point of view of a group of British Celts who lose a battle heavily to the Angles during the post Roman era. It is particularly significant for Jones' purposes because the British Celtic group is not from a location now in Wales but from elsewhere in Britain, perhaps the Edinburgh area, and the battle is fought in a location thought to be in Yorkshire. Thus the poem supports Jones' contention that Welsh culture and folklore is of relevance to the whole Island, not only to Wales.⁸ Another area of Welsh legend particularly emphasised by Jones is that related to Arthur. While the Arthur legend originated in Welsh culture it is better known in the wider world through its English and French, and even German, versions, but Jones makes a point of highlighting the Welsh forms of the legend. Again, the Welsh Arthur legends allow Jones to emphasise that Welsh legend is not only about Wales, but about Britain generally, since Arthur in Welsh legend, and, possibly in history, is a post-Roman British Celt fighting the Anglo-Saxons at a time when dominance over Britain was yet to be decided. In addition, Jones is able to put references to the legendary Welsh Arthur in the context of the heritage of the Roman Empire in Britain, implying a continuity between Arthur and Roman Imperial leaders, and thus that Welsh culture is the bridge between Roman Britain and Modern Britain, a favourite theme of his (see Jones *IP* 80, 208 notes G and H).

David Jones had a theory, which he expounded in detail in an essay called "The Dying Gaul", according to which Celtic culture tends to be about defeat, but that the defeat represents victory at a deeper level. His starting point in the essay is to consider the famous eponymous classical statue, and he concludes that Celtic culture is not dead, but in fact is shaping leading artistic expression of recent times, such as James Joyce's writing (Jones "The Dying Gaul" 58). The war narratives which Jones alludes to in *In Parenthesis* are narratives of defeat – Malory's Arthur dies without having achieved overall victory, the *Chanson de Roland* is about the death of Roland, the *Battle of Maldon* is about an Anglo-Saxon defeat against the Vikings, and the various Welsh war legends tend to be about defeat of the British Celts by the Anglo-Saxons, as in *Y Gododdin*, which is about a particularly disastrous defeat. The First World War itself is not presented from the point view of its being a victory in *In Parenthesis*, but rather as an occasion of immense loss for both sides, and the climax of the work is John Ball's injury during the Battle of the Somme, a particularly violent episode during the middle of the war which resulted in little obvious benefit for either side.⁹ The Germans when mentioned in the poem are viewed by Jones as comrades in misfortune, rather than as the enemy, as in the dedication just after the Preface, which includes "the enemy front-fighters who shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure" (Jones *IP* xvii). In his essay "The Myth of Arthur" Jones points out that at the same time as the British Celts were losing battles to the Anglo-Saxons, British Celtic missionaries were cultivating and spreading Christianity, and he also suggests that Arthur, in a way, came back as Saint David (see especially Jones *IP* 251-2, 259). So the Christianised Romano-British culture

⁸ This unifying symbolism of *Y Gododdin* in *In Parenthesis* is mentioned by Blamires 82-3. For *Y Gododdin* in *In Parenthesis* see also Robichaud 55-69.

⁹ Staudt 19 points out, interestingly, that the unprecedented nature of the civilisational collapse of which the First World War is part stands out in comparison with the narratives of earlier conflicts.

was to survive in its religious aspect and ultimately convert its pagan Germanic conquerors. It is this idea, that apparent defeat can mean victory at a deeper level, which provides the bridge between the level of historical and legendary allusions to earlier war narratives in *In Parenthesis*, and the metaphysical and religious level of meaning Jones is attempting to introduce. Jones' allusions to Celtic legends of underground sleepers, buried heroes who will, in some way, return in the future, characters such as Arthur himself, the Irish MacÓg, the head of Brân under the White Hill in London, and others (Jones *IP* 51, 198-9 note 36; 83, 209 note K) constitute another bridge towards the biblical level of allusion, suggesting the idea of resurrection.

The religious allusions in *In Parenthesis* are not as pervasive as in Jones' later work *The Anathemata* but nonetheless they hold the key to pulling the disparate elements together into an overarching meaning. An important point at which sacred history enters the work is when Dai, during "the boast", having detailed the various battles he, or his forebears, have been present at, claims to have seen Christ's Passion – Jones explains in the note that the a legion which, according to legend, was present (the Xth Fretensis) was also involved in the Roman conquest of Britain (Jones *IP* 83, 210 note L). Christ's Passion here is partly presented as an event which happened in world history, along with other events, although the religious significance is also indicated, for example in the phrase "whose Five Sufficient Blossoms/ yield for us" (Jones *IP* 83), a phrase referring to Christ's five wounds, and to their soteriological role in a religious dimension. *In Parenthesis* can be seen as a work which builds slowly to a climax, and Part Seven, the section which presents an actual battle, is the one which starts with a series of biblical and liturgical allusions and quotations, referring to suffering, for example from the traditional *Tenebrae* service for Good Friday (Jones *IP* 153, 220 notes 2 and 3). The section ends with a quotation from the *Chanson de Roland*, as mentioned above, but then, after the section of endnotes, comes a series of biblical quotations in capital letters, some in Latin and some in English, referenced but not explained. The first, "ET VIDI ... AGNUM STANTEM TAMQUAM OCCISUM"¹⁰ (Jones *IP* 226), is from the Apocalypse, and the lamb is traditionally interpreted as a Christ figure – in this case, the lamb, standing although killed, represents the resurrection. The second, "THE GOAT ON WHICH THE LOT FELL LET HIM GO FOR A SCAPEGOAT UNTO THE WILDERNESS" (Jones *IP* 226), is from Leviticus, and if this goat is interpreted as a type of the Christ figure, then it represents Christ's standing in for the rest of humanity for the purpose of redemption (Jones possibly also having in mind that those caught up in the War suffer on behalf of others more fortunate). These two of the six quotations are sufficient to allow Jones' overall scheme for the cosmic significance of *In Parenthesis* to be seen.

What Jones presents in *In Parenthesis* is a pyramid of signification, the base, taking up most of the material, being the physical, everyday presentation of war life, the middle consisting of the fairly frequent allusions to past war legends and histories of Western Europe, and the pinnacle being the rare but highly significant religious allusions, specifically to Christ's Passion. The idea that defeat and suffering can signify victory and

¹⁰ "and I saw ... a lamb standing, although killed" (my translation).

redemption on a higher level is built up through the emphasis on narratives of defeat in the cultures of some of the cultural groups participating in the War, narratives which themselves survive and are formative of surviving cultural communities. The allusions to these narratives are the bridge which allows the descriptions of everyday life and the allusions to supernatural redemption to be connected conceptually. Thus a vision of cosmic history is elaborated which, through the idea of the necessary connection between suffering and redemption, offers to make sense of the, on the surface, senseless suffering of the First World War.

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