

David Jones, Artist and Writer: ¹⁸¹

by René Hague

After reading David Blamires' book,¹ with digressions into similar essays and a re-reading of much of David Jones's own work, I am as one who has just finished a long journey through familiar and cherished country with a companion who, though congenial, talkative and interesting, has some distressing peculiarities of speech and temper: so that, when we return to our starting point, I am pleased to be relieved for a while of his company, and yet anxious to meet him again and renew the conversation. A fastidious reader will not make his way through more than a few pages of David Blamires' book, for he will find too much that is objectionable in the style: and yet it would be ungenerous to quote from the many examples of pompous jargon covering poverty of thought, of vagueness which assumes the air of profundity, of worn-out clichés which slip from the pen of the careless or hurried writer. Ungenerous for two reasons: in the first place, because such writing has become so common that I do in truth believe that were one now to write with the clarity and economy of a Newman there would be many readers who would be unwilling and even unable to make the effort that should correspond to Newman's. In the second place, Blamires writes about things which are difficult to pin down and define, and all of us—all who have had to make a similar attempt, particularly in connexion with David Jones—know but too well how great is the temptation to grope for clarity by adding one vague approximation to another. It will not do, therefore, to be over-fastidious: there may be a core of gold beneath this slovenly exterior.

Gold for whom? For the man who has 'only vaguely heard' of David Jones and wants to know who he is, what he has written and painted, what it 'is about', and what is its peculiar value. This man (and I am astonished that so many, if Blamires' estimate is correct, should be in such a position of ignorance) will find his questions answered with varying degrees of competence and accuracy. When Blamires is engaged purely in the recording of fact, in description based on careful observation, and analysis, his writing is valuable. Any omissions or inaccuracies are comparatively unimportant. As an introduction, the book is well and simply planned; and the chapter on, and incidental references to, the visual arts are no mere addition but structurally incorporated in Blamires' vision of David Jones' work.

An important rider, however, should be added to this—one which Blamires, and everyone who has tried to write about David Jones, would accept: everything that is said has already been said much more fully and more clearly by David Jones himself. (I am speaking not of detail but of matter which serves a general introduc-

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tory purpose.) Leaf through the pages of this book, and when your eye is caught by a passage of brilliant illumination, you will find that it is a quotation from *Epoch and Artist*. Does no one go the source and read the man himself? I sit here and write about Blamires writing about David Jones—I might even be writing about Blamires writing about John Holloway writing about David Jones if I did not think Holloway's criticism too childish to note. Is there any need for me to say, for example, that on pages 114-15 Blamires presents again, with but little distortion, what David Jones has to say about the origins of his 'fragments of an attempted writing', or that he understands, and passes on to his reader, what David Jones means by 'the holiness in a common object'?

And yet, profitless though it may be, I cannot refrain from some comments on Blamires' presentation, for he seems at times either to exaggerate or to be too uncritical of what he derives from David Jones, or even completely to miss the point—even though he may earlier have understood that same point. I have two things particularly in mind. The first is summed up in a sentence at the head of page 116: 'The fact that he (David Jones) is a devout Roman Catholic explains the constant reference to the Bible, the missal and medieval Latin hymnody in the form of direct quotation, allusion or paraphrase, and this source provides the basic framework for his ideas and their exposition.' (This is written, I should note, not about *Epoch and Artist*, but about the *Anathemata*, and betrays, to my mind, an odd confusion between thing made and idea contained or expounded.) 'Devout Roman Catholic' is an unhappy phrase in any case (though perhaps only a devout Roman Catholic can understand that), but the one thing that devout Roman Catholicism does not do is to explain 'the basic framework': not unless you so water down the meaning of basic framework as to make the sentence not worth writing. It is as useless a comment as would be the comment that David Jones writes in English because he was brought up as an English-speaker. This has just been brought home to me with great force by a re-reading of the essay 'Art and Sacrament', where it becomes plain that in this context Catholicism has even less importance than David Jones attributes to it in the apology which opens that essay.

This complaint is connected with another, which goes deeper: that, while Blamires understands what David Jones means when the later says, with Nennius, 'I have made a heap of all that I could find', he does not understand (or constantly forgets) the accidental nature of that heap. Here, I believe, we do indeed have something to talk about, for I get the impression that Blamires confuses what the poem (any poem, I mean) is made of, and the unique thing which it is. This may well be accounted for by the exegetical nature of his writing (particularly in our Alexandrian climate), but there are indications that the reason lies deeper. One is to be found on

pages 203-4, where, speaking of Hugh MacDiarmid and David Jones, Blamires says that 'they are not among the ranks of those poets who appear to have read nothing else apart from their own poems and perhaps the *Daily Mirror*'. The gibe may be justified, but it is not the smallness of the heap which justifies it, nor even its possible vulgarity: in this we are as magpies, and make what thing we can with what glitter attracts us. In any case, lock a poor prisoner in a stone cell and let him scratch with but a rusty nail, and he may well produce marks, a carving, poem, drawing, as instinct with a sense of the transcendental as even a man with so rich a heap as David Jones. What is more, I might well add that (to me) the quotation from MacDiarmid illustrates the danger of the heap-as-poem, the crude, unordered, heap: by which I mean that spelling out the content so literally as MacDiarmid does has the same effect as explaining a joke. Does it, indeed, matter what rubbish you have in your heap—Yeats, for example? Does it matter if you do not even recognize the contents—Pound's mistranslations?

To move to more sacred and more dangerous ground: Blamires ends a comparison between the *Anathemata* and (here, indeed, we have a magpie-selected source) the *Aeneid*, as follows (p. 205): 'The poetry of Vergil has endured for two thousand years, focussed as it is in the *Aeneid* on the destiny of one man, though attempting the history of a people. That perhaps is the key to its success.' Unless we take this as no more than an elaborate way of saying that Vergil chose a good subject, surely it offers a most astonishing explanation of the success of the *Aeneid*. Another great poem 'focusses' on the destiny of one man, without attempting the history of a people. Does that (even with the modern precautionary 'perhaps') provide the key to the success of the *Odyssey*? Or does it mean that the *Odyssey* is a failure? I cite this passage only as an exaggeration in Blamires' writing, for I welcome the parallel between the *Anathemata* and the *Aeneid*. It needs, however, to be carried much further, with much greater knowledge of Vergil, if it is not to be merely superficial.

When writing of the *Anathemata*, Blamires' very knowledge and enthusiasm drives him to an untenably extreme position. I would commend to any reader a passage (pp. 199-200) which starts from an accurate and intelligent observation of the matter of the poem and ends by putting forward an extravagant view in which what derives from the purely accidental (David Jones' birth, parentage, reading, war service) is confused with the essential. 'As far as Britain is concerned', the passage ends, 'the myths are Celtic and this determines the dominance of the Welsh in David Jones' *materia poetica*. There is nothing in the strictly English tradition that can mediate the reality of a myth. What is numinous in English literature derives from sources that are other than English, i.e. the Matter of Britain, the Bible, Greece and Rome.' Margery Kempe, Richard Rolle, Juliana of Norwich, *The Dream of the Rood*; is there nothing peculiarly

English in the way these, and countless others, 'mediate the reality of a myth', nothing to suggest that the English, untouched by other influences, can be aware of the sacramental? Underlying the sentences quoted is a reference to the unexceptionable wish *ut dum visibiliter cognoscimus, per hunc in invisibilium amorem rapiamur*. Are we to conclude that all nations which have no share in this particular western tradition are barred from the tables of the Gods? Or is it only the English? And, without crossing the Atlantic, what about those who, this side of the Channel, were isolated for so long? Was there no entry into the *invisibilia* through Fer Diad's shattered corpse at the ford? What endless modifications, reservations, contradictions, those sentences demand. Are they not a contradiction of the whole theme Blamires has been expounding, the World in a Grain of Sand, the Infinity in the palm of your hand, from which he aptly starts—the numinous (as he would say) in the commonest object made by *homo faber* everywhere and at all times? David Jones again puts it best (*Epoch and Artist*, p. 178) where he speaks of sacramentalism as normal to man, and no tradition can lack this common element. It is as though, in explaining what is to be known in a poem, in analysing its materials, Blamires lost sight of the thing itself, the 'shape in words'. The subject, useful and important as it may be to understand its source and the many things to which it is related, is nothing. In another context, a man much concerned with what is true and what is false in these matters has written of 'the realities which it is the true purpose of art to disclose'—and it should be noted that 'disclose' does not mean 'communicate'. 'These realities', says Harman Grisewood in *The Painted Kipper* (p. 43), 'are nothing else but the art works themselves. To consider art as a means of knowing, we must consider first of all the work itself as the object of knowledge, and not any other reality which the art work may be thought to represent or have as its "subject". The evidence of the artist forbids us to believe, though we might like to believe it, that the artist has for his subject anything else but the image for the art work that he is to make substantial in stone, words, wood, paint, sound, or any other material that both suits that image and suits the skill the artist has.' With this one should consider another passage, too long to quote, from *Epoch and Artist* (pp. 171-2), in which David Jones speaks, reminiscently, of Post-impressionism and 'the unity of all made things'.

And so we come back to our heap and the shape that is made from it. What sort of heap will we have when the tradition from which our heap is drawn, now dying, is finally dead? Already David Jones can no longer say that Latin is to the Church as Cockney to the soldier, and, just as that is no longer true, so much of his pictorial symbolism will soon be unrecognized and unintelligible. But how will the new signs come, and what form will be taken by the tradition which must rise from the death of the old? The very

fact that the question is asked points to a narrowness of outlook which can be produced by a failure properly to digest what is most easily to be recognized in the *Anthemata*, as though there were some special virtue in this particular culture, liturgy, set of sign-manifestations, in this small corner of the universe, over a pathetically short period of time: whereas all David Jones' poems rest on the assumption of the continuing unity of man and his works from what has barely emerged from the hominoid to megacosmic man. With diffidence, I suggest that the sort of transformation we look for is foreshadowed by one whose thought overlapped (but never met) that of David Jones: overlapped, because of Teilhard's interest in human (and cosmic) origins: never met, because Teilhard's eyes were on the future and David Jones' work is a dirge—and as I write that word I am thinking in particular of his twice-written 'A, a, a, Domine Deus'. 'It is easy to miss Him at the turn of a civilization.' I do not think it is fanciful to see that 'turn of a civilization' as what Teilhard would call a critical point or level.

To return to the metaphor with which I started. I know very well how I would wish to continue that conversation with my companion and what form I would wish it to take. No one is better equipped than David Blamires to give us what we most need, a straightforward commentary on the poems, text and notes on the same page. Too costly an undertaking? Too much to hope for? But what a blessing it would be: and David Blamires would do it well.

NEXT MONTH IN NEW BLACKFRIARS

'The means proposed by various feminist analysts for the economic, political, psychological and sexual liberation of women always include the abolition of the nuclear family. A Christian committed to the struggle for women's liberation must question the point and form of Christian marriage as it is normally expressed. . . .' (DAPHNE NASH.)

'Pope Innocent III . . . withdrew the right of the abbesses of Las Huelgas to hear confessions . . . or to preach in public. By that time it was considered an abuse. . . . But in fact there are three Religious Rules which refer to abbesses hearing confessions. . . .' (JOAN MORRIS.)

'Another indication of the vacuous character of moral theology is what I would call the "politicization of the moral". By this I meant that . . . one's primary response to moral questions is to take a "liberal" or "conservative" stance. Thus contraception is no longer discussed in terms of the moral nature of marriage and sexuality; rather one is offered the opportunity of being for or against *Humanae Vitae*. . . .' (STANLEY HAUERWAS.)

'If I am reading about a silly degraded boy in a maze of suburban crime and nastiness, and suddenly find my emotions overwhelmed by the unusual tensions of crime and punishment, of love and purification, of interior victory swallowing up the sting of physical death, then I am entitled to wonder what my writer of popular detective fiction has suddenly achieved. . . .' (S. G. LUFF on Simenon.)

As well as J. DEREK HOLMES on Joseph Berington, the 'Prophet of Ecumenism', and M. A. BOND on Izaak Walton and the Real Truth.