David Jones[1]

by Kathleen Raine

The process by which the enduring reputation of one writer emerges among many of (at the time) apparently equal merit is mysterious. We do not so much change our minds as discover them; no dramatic reversal is involved but a gradual enlightenment makes it clear that (as in the present case) David Jones is such a figure. The supreme quality of his art (using the word in its inclusive sense, for it would be impossible, so closely related is the technique of his drawing to that of his use of words, to say that David Jones is an artist who also writes, or the reverse) has long been apparent to an inner circle of his friends, which included T. S. Eliot; but he has never at any time been a widely read, still less a fashionable writer, nor is he ever likely to become so, for his work is too fine and subtle and learned for popular taste. To 'discover' David Jones is to enter an élite.

It was for a time possible for my generation to persuade ourselves that 'the late Yeats' was a different and incomparably better poet than 'the early Yeats' in order to justify what was really a change in ourselves and not in the poet. In the case of David Jones nothing of the kind would be possible. In the current number of *Agenda* there are several pieces of recent writing (or recently completed, for David Jones has a habit of laying aside pieces of work for years and then getting them out and working over them) but these are not technically different from, or necessarily better or worse than, *In Parenthesis*, his poetic novel, or epic poem, of the first World War. At most the later writings are more richly complex, more wrought; but the matter, the vision and the craftsmanship are essentially the same throughout; his work stands as a whole, beautiful in its coherence.

Perhaps it is a change of background that in time sorts out the valuable from the worthless. I have lived long enough to see this happen more than once; as, for example, with Surrealism. At the time intoxicating, the productions of this school, seen in the cold light of retrospect, have no more power over the imagination than the turnip-lantern and the broomstick of other witches' sabbaths. The prestige among his contemporaries of Ben Nicholson and the Abstract movement had the effect of making David Jones's early work seem old-fashioned; an impression which time has removed, if not reversed. This is not to say that what finally survives lacks the sense of the contemporary—on the contrary, it will appear that

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David Jones, or Edwin Muir, or whoever it may be, possessed just that sense of the truth about their actual present the avant-garde always and necessarily lacks; for it is harder to attain, through wisdom, scholarship, or mere bitter experience, the power to measure and evaluate the values of some particular moment, than to go with the tide.

I belong to the first generation to have been subjected to the notion that art must be 'revolutionary', must break with the 'conventions' and the 'restrictions' of tradition, the 'rules' of painting, the forms of verse, and that writers and artists, freed from the 'trammels' of knowledge and skill, will then be 'free' to 'create'. The young will always respond to the call for emancipation from all those restricting rules of the arts because it is always easier to dispense with knowledge than to acquire it; but those who like myself grew up with the writings of Herbert Read have lived long enough to discover that the originality of those who dispense with the old skills and rules makes for a uniformity of style and content (or the absence of these) without precedent. Ignorance is as uniform as skill and knowledge are various; and as T. S. Eliot once said to me the worst kind of imitation is unconscious imitation. Those who reject traditional skills and knowledge do not thereby become possessed of some new and fontal vision, but rather imitate unconsciously, pick up what is in the air, the victims of ideologies of whose precise content they are for the most part unaware. This iconoclastic fashion would surely by now have been reversed but for one fatal difference between revolutionary destructiveness and the practice of any art or skill—its ease: revolutionary iconoclasm is, in every field, the easy way and to destroy the labour of ages the work of a moment. But no other time has made a virtue of its want of skill and of its ignorance a new mode of knowledge. We might despair but for one other natural law: the irreversibility of knowledge. We may from knowing less (and the same is true of all skills) come to know more; but we cannot, from knowledge and finer perception, revert to ignorance and insensitivity. This may be one of the causes of the mysterious process by which true art is, in course of time, infallibly recognized.

The truth is rather that every renaissance in the arts springs from a rediscovery, a return to certain abiding principles, and therefore to tradition, and to those artists who have in their time and place participated in this unbroken continuity of knowledge. It is now clear that the apparent verbal chaos of James Joyce (as it seemed at the time) is not an 'emancipation' from the rules of language but, on the contrary, a linguistic virtuosity made possible only by Joyce's vast knowledge of language and its structure. The traditionalism of even Eliot and Pound was to some extent obscured by their use of 'free verse'. David Jones, more consistently traditional than any of his contemporaries save Joyce, has all along proclaimed that true art comes from the deep roots and the ancient springs. Time

has justified him as an artist and at the same time made clear his affinities with his great contemporaries.

'Normally we should not have far to seek: the flowers for the muse's garland would be gathered from the ancestral burial-mound —always and inevitably fecund ground, yielding perennial and familiar blossoms, watered and, maybe, potted, perhaps 'improved' by ourselves. It becomes more difficult when the bulldozers have all but obliterated the mounds, when all that is left of the potting-sheds are the disused hypocausts, and when where was this site and were these foci there is *terra informis*.'

Such has been the reversal of values that the obliteration of traditional sanctities, so unanswerably described in this passage from the preface to the *Anathemata*, that those allusions and landmarks which should normally give lucidity to a work of art have appeared to many readers of David Jones (accustomed only to *terra informis*) to be a cause in it of obscurity. But an obscurity that in the end proves to be a lucidity; as Kenneth Clark writes in his contribution to *Agenda*: 'All the great poets I have known have given very simple explanations of their most obscure passages; all the bad poets have given very profound explanations of their banal ones'.

David Jones, Welsh only on his father's side and a Londoner, has felt perhaps the more strongly the sense of exile and the pull of his Welsh traditional inheritance; as Yeats, educated in England, was the more aware of Ireland, or English-born Coomaraswamy, aesthetic philosopher of tradition, of India. His conversion to the Catholic faith was to his art as necessary as was (perhaps) Joyce's breaking of trammels which bound him too tightly to an inherited Catholicism; which remained nevertheless the matter of all his work. David Jones's affinity with Joyce is probably more essential than is Beckett's, who shares with Joyce those aspects which are personal or of his time. What is individual in Joyce and David Jones is far more fundamentally shaped by their Catholicism than is with the case of Eliot; who, like Pound, is rather eclectic than traditional in his use of the matter of the past, Christian or otherwise.

Why the writing of David Jones makes in this respect so different an impression from that of Eliot and Pound is an interesting, if unanswerable, question. The distinction between a living tradition, and a dead one, a revival, or an academic interest in a tradition, is not simple. A Church may for some be a museum, for others a shrine, and the difference be wholly subjective. Some conversions (like many of Europeans or Americans to Buddhism or some other alien cult) serve only to destroy the tradition they seek to assume. Even if we cannot quite say this of Eliot's Anglicanism, one may still feel that there was something literary about it; every religion is also a culture, and some conversions are mainly cultural. If David Jones's imagination has been so deeply formed by his Catholicism it may be because the bond of the apostolic succession through which

he entered upon it was strengthened by human loves and affections, his early association with Eric Gill and his family and circle. Or it may be because he is essentially a visual artist, concerned with the physical, the 'incarnational' and sacramental reality of the sensible world.

Many readers have found David Jones's other roots, in the 'matter' of Britain and of Rome, alien and arbitrary. Yet the figure of Arthur has never been devoid of mythological power even in England. Tennyson probably obscured rather than transmitted this sense, which Blake had, that 'the deeds of Arthur are the deeds of Albion'. David Jones, in restoring to the Arthurian 'matter' the sobriety of history, archaeology and topography, reminds us that the romance which Tennyson culled from its roots and transformed for purposes purely and simply aesthetic is more enduring than any single poet's use of it. As for Imperial Rome, two aspects of its greatness have continued into our own present: the Catholic liturgy and the historic events upon which the faith is based; and the Army. David Jones himself served in it in the trenches of the first World War; and the situation of Private Clitus of No. 1 Cohort in the first years of the Christian era does not have the effect of removing him in the distance of time but, on the contrary, of making the entire time-span from the day of the Crucifixion to the present suddenly and vividly contemporaneous. The serious and beautiful use of the Cockney speech of the common soldier, interwoven with a workman-like accuracy in the detail of historic allusion, is partly responsible for this; but, even more, the poet's own living participation, his situation and orientation within a historic whole, experienced as such; his heartfelt regionalism no less of time than of place; without which no sense of nationhood, or those greater unities which contain us within a civilization, can survive. Of the normality of such larger participations David Jones's work reminds those of us who, through no will of our own, are heirs only to *terra informis*.

His learning is, within his chosen limits, extensive and exact; and yet it is always a poet's learning, for one has the sense always that he knows only what he loves. The learning of an artist differs from that of a scholar not in what he knows, but in how he knows. If the cordage of the ship and the position of the stars is, in a painting of Tristan and Yseult, in every minute particular as correctly given as the gear of the trench warfare in which David Jones himself took part, this is no mere knowledge of the memory but the enhanced perception of a devotion neither aesthetic nor academic. The meticulous objectivity of these details bears therefore the imprint of his inimitable personal signature. We can more easily detach Eliot's (even more Pound's) allusive quotations from their context than we can those of David Jones; for the poetry of Eliot is in the nature of a structure, David Jones's work intrinsically organic. Nicolette Gray's article on his lettering and inscriptions well illustrates this

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quality in an art which not even Eric Gill made so personal or so profound an expression. The very letters of the words of the liturgy are hallowed by his touch; a quality long lost from the relationship with their material of all but a dwindling few among artists and craftsmen, but once (Yeats saw it in the work of Byzantium) a common human heritage. The abandonment of the Latin liturgy within the Church is itself an expression of the widespread loss of the sense which the art of David Jones seeks to restore, in some measure, to this time.

Whoever has been in the artist's room must have been impressed by the way in which everything in it—a pair of embroidery scissors, a postcard of the spiral carvings of New Grange, a common nail in a glass goblet—somehow radiates the same sacramental quality we find in his work. A kitchen knife with *Ste Paule* carved in its cheap bone handle is illustrated in this number of *Agenda*, a simple example of the art of consecration—the antithesis of the desecrating impotence of 'pop' art—which is David Jones's peculiar genius.

Of the fifty pages of the author's own writing, the magnificent section entitled *The Sleeping Lord* is newly completed and published for the first time. The short, bitter *A,a,a Domine Deus* (1938 and 1966) —less a denunciation of the machine than a cry of pain that recalls William Blake's 'these things we artists hate'—is not elsewhere easily accessible, though I believe it has appeared, as is often the case with David Jones's writings, in some little-known publication. The other pieces are mostly from his work in progress, a report by eye-witnesses upon the Roman world at the time of the Crucifixion. This work, so far as we can at present judge of it, combines the allusive complexity of the *Anathemata* with the idiomatic immediacy of *In Parenthesis*. The frequency of two datings at the foot of these writings, often fifteen or twenty years apart, suggests the meticulous reshaping and enriching process which every sentence has undergone before it receives the final form in which it is at last, and reluctantly, released for publication. There is a certain intellectual and temperamental affinity between David Jones and that earlier sensitive, solitary perfectionist, Thomas Gray; who was likewise, his nervous retirement and his retrospective and archaeological passion notwithstanding, a poet who transformed the sensibility of his age and changed the direction of English poetry.

Just as it is almost impossible to write good criticism of worthless work, so the critical and exegetic contributions to *Agenda* almost without exception suggest that good work elicits good criticism. Occasionally the contributions are repetitive, covering much the same ground. The expository articles by René Hague and David Blamires are valuable introductions to the writings they discuss; both are close friends of the author and can therefore be taken as corresponding to his intentions. A contribution from Stuart Piggott testifies to the artist's truth to his archaeological material, which

'had bitten deeply into the consciousness of at least one archaeologist'. Saunders Lewis's short note on *Epoch and Artist* illustrates the continuity of his style from his occasional to his more elaborate writings, but perhaps more might have been said of his criticism as such; some of the most trenchant and noteworthy of our time. Contributions from N. K. Sanders, Kenneth Clark and Louis Bonnerot illustrate the wide range of interest in his work.

The very look of the magazine, its beautiful cover with the artist's own lettering and his 'Merlin appears to Arthur in the form of a child', the perfectionism of the photography and typography is of a quality throughout that we have not seen for years. Here at last is a magazine which is what it should be, free from journalism, from the blight of the academic cancer, from amateurism or avant-gardism; the contributors without exception merely assume, without having to state or justify, that only the highest standards are relevant to the discussion of any serious work. The immensity of the relief with which the reader is able to enjoy such work reminds us of how far contemporary standards have fallen below any which in a literate society would have been recognized. Since the *Criterion* there has not been, with the possible exception of *Horizon*, anything of the kind in England.

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