

ART, SACRAMENT, ANAMNESIS

Thomas Dilworth. *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet*. Counterpoint, 2017.

Mark Scroggins

David Jones (1895-1974), Londoner by birth and Welshman by ancestry and conscious adoption, is by no means a “lost modernist,” but he has certainly received far less critical, scholarly, and popular attention than such household names as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. Within the niche market of twentieth-century poetry, his work has occupied a small and very particular sub-niche: prized by students of Great War writing, Anglo-Welsh poetry, and Roman Catholic culture, pored over by scholars of British modernism; but rarely discussed outside of those circles, and even more rarely assigned on classroom syllabi. Thomas Dilworth’s impressive *David Jones*, the first full-length critical biography of the poet and painter, presents itself in part as a recovery project, aimed at making Jones’s work visible and available to a wider public. One can only hope it’s successful; at the very least, Dilworth’s book is a splendid example of biography-making, unlikely to be superseded for many decades to come.

Many of the “high” modernists born in the last two decades of the nineteenth century have been well-served by biographers, from Richard Ellmann’s massive 1959 life of Joyce, to lives of Eliot by Peter Ackroyd (sturdy) and Lyndall Gordon (illuminating), to A. David Moody’s recently completed, monumental three-volume life of Pound. There have been several good biographies of Stein, and several quite excellent ones of Woolf. Other modernists have been less fortunate. Wyndham Lewis, for instance, still awaits a biographer adequate to the task of capturing his prickly genius.

Indeed, it’s worth considering the question whether literary biography as we know it—expansive and detailed like the Victorian “life and letters” volumes, informed by deep research, yet detached and critical in the manner pioneered in Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians*—is not in itself a peculiarly modernist genre. If so, Dilworth’s *David Jones* can stand as exemplary within the genre: while Dilworth yields to no one in his admiration for Jones’s creative achievement, he steadfastly refuses to heroize or apotheosize his subject, presenting Jones as a complex, damaged, and ultimately somewhat forlorn figure, even in the face of his artistic triumph.

Dilworth’s four-part subtitle—*Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet*—telegraphs the different aspects of Jones’s career that he intends to illuminate.

He makes handy work of that second term (“soldier”), narrating straightforwardly but with incisive detail Jones’s Great War front-line service between 1915 and 1918, and dwelling particularly on his experiences in the first Battle of the Somme, which Jones drew upon and transfigured in *In Parenthesis* (1937), the first of his two great book-length poems.

Of course, as the first and third of those terms indicate (“engraver” and “painter”), Jones began his creative and professional life as a visual artist, studying at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts; he had some notion of making a living as a book illustrator. He would over the years illustrate a number of books, both with masterful engravings and drawings, but would become far better known for his paintings and (much later) his painted inscriptions. Dilworth devotes a good deal of energy to discussing Jones’s drawings and paintings, which is entirely appropriate for a critical biography whose central thesis is Jones’s preëminent importance both in the visual and verbal arts. And one of the great joys of *David Jones* is its wealth of beautifully-printed reproductions of Jones’s artworks, disposed throughout the text in just the right places. (No flipping back and forth between a given passage of text to a separate section of illustrations, that is.)

As a modernist painter, Jones never abandoned representation, though he had a good deal of sympathy with artists who pushed much further towards pure abstraction. (There was great mutual admiration, for instance, between Jones and Ben Nicholson.) His mature paintings are marvels of complex iconography, striving for a kind of interwoven signification that Jones identified as essentially “Celtic.” Dilworth does a fine job of untangling these works, singling out their meaningful elements and describing the visual work done by their distortions of perspective and play among foreground and background. Sometimes, unfortunately, his discussion of Jones’s pictures descends to a kind of pedestrian docent-speak; and the reader’s confidence in Dilworth’s art-history credentials is not enhanced by his confusion (on at least one and possibly two occasions) of the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais with the French painter Jean-François Millet. (And to write that “Roger Fry affirmed [Clive] Bell’s formalism in *Vision and Design*, repeating Ruskin’s contention that art is neither useful nor moral” is simply nonsense, so far as Ruskin is concerned.)

But if art history is not quite Dilworth’s forte, no one has proven himself more dedicated to the explication and assessment of Jones’s poetry, as demonstrated in his previous books, *Reading David Jones* (University of Wales Press, 2008) and the excellent, ground-breaking *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones* (University of Toronto Press, 1988). These are two essential items in the small but growing library of Jones scholarship,

and Dilworth's analyses of Jones's writing in his biography rest upon the insights he gained in writing them. Oddly enough, however, the discussions of *In Parenthesis*, *The Anathemata*, and Jones's shorter poems in *David Jones* seem a trifle wan and truncated in comparison to Dilworth's sometimes expansive explorations of the paintings and drawings—as if the biographer felt that his reader could afford to look elsewhere for extended literary-critical discussions. This reader at least wished he had indulged himself a bit more.

David Jones was a great artist, but a deeply damaged human being. Dilworth chronicles, with great sensitivity and sympathy, his “breakdown” of 1932, almost certainly caused by war-related PTSD, and yet another major breakdown in 1946. The effects of this latter depression were at first relieved by intense psychotherapy, enabling Jones to return to painting and writing—and to produce *The Anathemata* (1952), his second, and greater, masterpiece. Later, reflecting the overall shifts in psychiatric fashion, his physicians would turn from therapy to an ill-adjusted regimen of medications—amphetamines in the morning, barbiturates in the evening, more or less constant lithium—effectively shutting down Jones's creative production for something like a decade.

Jones's problems did not entirely stem from his time at the front. In the later 1940s, Jones's therapist diagnosed an unresolved Oedipal complex exacerbated by his wartime experiences, and suggested quite plausibly that this was in large part responsible for the poet's “blocked” sexuality. Dilworth deals with Jones's sex life (or lack thereof) with an exemplary mixture of candor and sensitivity. Jones had several long-term love affairs, perhaps the most important of them with Petra Gill, daughter of his friend and mentor, the sculptor and typographer Eric Gill; he and Petra were engaged for a while. But Jones appears, like Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, to have died a virgin. He was by no means a prude, however, and the sex act and its resulting fecundity form an important motif in his mature writings.

While Dilworth deals with Jones's sexuality straightforwardly and non-judgmentally, perhaps the strangest lapse in the biography is his comment on Gill's giving up incestuous relations with his daughter Betty. “Accomplished with much internal struggle and the help of confessors,” Dilworth writes, “Gill's change of behaviour was an impressive moral achievement.” Maybe for Gill—I suspect most readers will find less cause for celebration. Dilworth, anxious above all to establish that Gill and his daughter Petra were not involved during the period when Jones and Petra were engaged, passes over in silence the fact that Gill would continue to sleep with various women other than his wife (including his sister) and would even experiment with the family dog. Some “moral achievement.” (The whole passage is

worth reading in conjunction with Fiona MacCarthy's 1989 *Eric Gill*.)

Jones won plaudits from the highest ranks of the British intelligentsia: Eliot, Auden, Anthony Burgess, and John Betjeman praised his poetry; Kenneth Clark extolled his paintings and designs. He won a slew of prizes and honorary degrees, and was awarded a CBE. Even the Queen Mother read his poems and bought his pictures. (Queen Elizabeth herself, he commented acidly, "has the taste of a naval officer's wife.") Why then has Jones—despite his championing by some quite eloquent American writers, among them W. S. Merwin, Guy Davenport, and John Matthias—never quite "caught on" across the Atlantic? Dilworth addresses this only once directly, noting that Faber had failed to include *The Anathemata* in its poetry list: "Generic misidentification postponed academic interpretation and, together with delay in finding a US publisher, kept Jones's long poem from the attention of the American 'New Critics', who analyzed and canonized the other important achievements of literary modernism."

That may be part of the problem, but I think the reasons Jones's works are not better known in the US are rather more complex. For one thing, while *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata* are undeniably masterpieces in a high modernist mode, they are somewhat *belated* masterpieces. *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were published in 1922; the first mass-market installment of Pound's life's work, *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, appeared in 1930. *In Parenthesis* was not published until almost two decades after the end of the Great War, and was received with some acclaim—it could be, and was, to some degree assimilated to the familiar genre of "war memoir"—but its reception was somewhat muted by the specter of another looming conflict. By the time *The Anathemata*, a far less linear and immediately digestible composition, was published in 1952, high modernism had come to seem a rather distant pre-war affair, its canon already hardening into shape. The book was indeed poorly distributed in the US, but American critics ("New" and otherwise) in the rapidly expanding postwar academy were finding more than enough to occupy them in explicating Eliot, Pound, Faulkner, and Joyce. Academic careers, after all, could be made from those names.

Dilworth I think underplays the challenges Jones's writing poses to readers, academic or otherwise. *In Parenthesis*, doubtless Jones's most widely known book, is a gripping and emotionally charged account of the western front; but it is also—as its explanatory notes make clear—a kind of palimpsest, overlaying the immediacies of 1915-1916 upon a millennium of the western war literature, from Malory and *Henry V* to *The Waste Land*. This was how the young history- and literature-obsessed David Jones perceived his own going to war, as he makes clear in the Preface:

I suppose at no 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. No one, I suppose, could see infantry in tin-hats, with ground-sheets over their shoulders, with sharpened pine-stakes in their hands, and not recall

‘...or may we cram,
Within this wooden O...’

Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), has shown how common it was for wartime poets and memoirists to interpret their experience through the language and categories of canonical literature; but *In Parenthesis* stands apart in the degree to which it presents the foot soldier’s experience as embedded in and inextricable from an age-old matrix of history, literature, and myth. *In Parenthesis* is to the first Battle of the Somme what *Ulysses* is to 1904 Dublin.

In Parenthesis’s notes cannot help but remind one of the (in)famous notes to Eliot’s *Waste Land*, though they’re far more seriously intended than that “remarkable exposition of bogus scholarship” (Eliot’s own later dismissal). “I ask the reader to consult the notes with the text,” Jones writes, “as I regard some of them as integral to it.” Those notes occupy a thirty-five page block at the end of *In Parenthesis*. In *The Anathemata* (1952), Jones’s other masterpiece, source notes and glosses appear as footnotes, sometimes shouldering the poem’s text high up onto the page—and even, on several occasions, taking up full facing pages. (Of *The Anathemata*’s 200 pages, I’d estimate that between 2/5 and half of the actual *words* are notes.) If that weren’t enough, three years after the Jones’s death the poet’s friend René Hague published *A Commentary on The Anathemata of David Jones*, a passage-by-passage exegesis, written in consultation with Jones, several score pages longer than the poem itself. Clearly, like *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, and *The Cantos*, *The Anathemata* is one of those high modernist works that requires intense study to yield up its treasures. As Joseph Frank said of *Ulysses*, it cannot be read—only re-read.

With that proviso in mind, however, it’s hard to deny that *The Anathemata* (pronounced “Anathémata”) is one of the richest and most provocative monuments of high modernism. The title means, as Jones explains in his Preface (a kind of long and discursive *ars poetica*), “Things set up, lifted up, or in whatever manner made over to the gods.” If Jones’s art in *In Parenthesis* is largely memorializing, here it is both memorializing and sacramental: a “kind of *anamnesis* of, i. e.,...an effective recalling of, something loved,” and an offering and “lifting up” of “valid signs.” The poem, which is needless to say impossible briefly to summarize, is loosely structured around the Roman

Catholic mass; Jones, like Eric Gill, was a devout adult convert to Catholicism. At its heart it celebrates the central mystery of the Christian religion, the Incarnation: the creator God making himself human in the person of Jesus Christ.

That central celebration is embedded within a dense forest of allusion and reference, the “mythus and deposits” that comprise the Western—specifically British—“cultural complex.” Jones ranges from pre-human geology, through the earliest art-making of the Lascaux cave paintings, through the Roman occupation of Britain, all the way down to contemporary Cockney London, drawing continual lines of connection and isomorphism among multifarious historical, mythological, and literary manifestations, all of which converge upon the figures of the Virgin Mary, the Christ child, and the Savior crucified. Jones’s theology might be avant-garde indeed—I’m no judge of such matters—but his reverence and deep love for the meaningful forms by which humanity has represented its relationship with the sacred, from the Venus of Willendorf, to the Latin Vulgate, to the Mass itself, pulses throughout the poem.

Jones had his doubts, however, about how *readable* his work might prove. Much influenced by Oswald Spengler’s vision (in *The Decline of the West*) of cultures passing through definable “life-cycles,” Jones saw himself as writing “in a late and complex phase of a phenomenally complex civilization,” and the complex referentiality of his work as an unavoidable expression of the millennia-old sedimentation of Christian culture. But he was unsure of how much a mid-twentieth-century readership could make of those cultural “deposits”:

There have been cultural phases when the maker and the society in which he lived shared an enclosed and common background, where the terms of reference were common to all. It would be an affectation to pretend that such was our situation today.

The reference notes, elucidating “unshared backgrounds,” were one concession to this situation. But even with those notes clarifying local obscurities, the overall conceptual shape of *The Anathemata* is elusive, graspable only with repeated and recursive readings. As Jones puts it,

What I have written has no plan, or at least is not planned. If it has a shape it is chiefly that it returns to its beginning. It has themes and a theme even if it wanders far. If it has a unity it is that what goes before conditions what comes after and *vice versa*.... Which means, I fear, that you won’t make much sense of one bit unless you read the lot.

If the complexity and “difficulty” of Jones’s work—aspects it shares with so much modernist writing—have impeded his reception across the Atlantic, I’d hazard as well that the deeply-rooted *Britishness* of that work has also been off-putting to many American readers. There’s something loveably Victorian about Jones’s fascination with the “matter of Britain,” a kind of hearkening back to Tennyson’s and William Morris’s Arthurianisms, but his whole-hearted embrace of Malory falls rather flat on sensibilities attuned to the more perverse and “decadent” medievalisms of Verlaine, Wagner, and even Eliot. There is nothing of the “Little Englander” about Jones’s Anglo-Welshness, whose cultural roots he traces to the Levant, Rome, the Danube forests, and who knows where else; but somehow American critics at least have found him lacking in the “internationalism” so valued in his peers Joyce, Eliot and Pound. Perhaps, to be properly recognized internationally, he should have gone into exile in Trieste or Rapallo.

Dilworth is very good indeed at delineating Jones’s public fortunes. The depression and crippling agoraphobia of his later years helped neither his reputation nor his financial situation, which at many points was dire indeed. Fame came to him despite himself, as it were: if he had possessed the knack for self-promotion of a Joyce, an Eliot, a Pound, or an Auden, his critical and public reputation might have eclipsed any of theirs. But then again, an assiduously self-promoting David Jones would not have been David Jones.

As biographer, Dilworth seems anxious to make up for Jones’s own diffidence about his work. The Preface to *David Jones* reminds one uncomfortably of those three-page promotional inserts one encounters at the beginning of the mass-market paperback editions of bestselling novels, a kind of roll-call of famous people who have said nice things about Jones over the years—from Gill, Clark, Eliot, and Auden, down through Seamus Heaney, Igor Stravinsky, Hugh MacDiarmid, W. S. Merwin, Harold Rosenberg, and Guy Davenport. It is, I’m afraid, a collection of blurbs.

More irritating is Dilworth’s propensity towards hyperbolic praise. *The Anathemata*, for instance, is “the great modern maritime poem.... Its vocabulary is extraordinarily rich, greater in variety than all the poetry of Yeats, Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Larkin combined.” “The Sleeping Lord” “may be the foremost ecological poem of the century.” Jones resembles William Blake as an engraver-painter-poet, but “Jones is the better painter and, arguably, a far greater poet.” (“Arguably” indeed!) And finally, we are told that Jones “created so much intelligent beauty during so many decades of psychological distress, that his creative life is probably the greatest existential achievement of international modernism.” I think I understand what Dilworth is getting at here—though I’m not sure I agree:

Kafka? Proust? Beckett?—but it ends his wonderful book on a slightly sour note of special pleading.

Thomas Dilworth has spent the better part of a lifetime studying and writing about Jones, and *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter Poet* is clearly the crowning achievement of his work. *David Jones* ends with a set of dates—“1985-2016”—that mark the boundaries of Dilworth’s thirty years’ labors, and that inevitably remind one of the last line of *Ulysses*: “Trieste-Zurich-Paris, 1914-1921.” In one of the very few quietly self-referential moments of his book, Dilworth recounts Jones’s reaction to a new life of Eric Gill written by a “serial biographer”: “Jones told a friend, ‘I don’t like a person’ writing ‘more than one biography in a lifetime. He cannot have researched the man properly’, which requires living into the subject.” Clearly, Dilworth has researched his man properly; and as importantly, he has selected and shaped his the fruits of his research into a gracefully written and fitly proportioned whole. (For those who want more, we are told that “The present biography is a condensation of a much longer document, which will eventually be a public website.”) And he has “lived into” his subject, enabling him to relate the poet-painter-soldier-engraver’s life with admirable clarity, candor, and sympathy. *David Jones* might not be a perfect book—what human document is, *sub specie aeternitatis*?—but I cannot recommend it highly enough, both as an adjunct to an appreciation of Jones’s literary and visual achievements, and as a literary achievement in its own right.