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"Remembering David Jones"

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Remembering David Jones*

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My purpose here is to give some account of the visits I made to the artist David Jones from 1968 to his death in 1974. There were perhaps a dozen such visits in all, and during this time I came to look upon David Jones as a friend. However busy he might be, however unwell, he was always welcoming and gave generous attention to my many enquiries about his work.

It was in 1947, the year before I was born, that David Jones moved to the Monksdene Hotel (later Northwick Lodge), a small private hotel in Northwick Park Road, Harrow Hill, close to the playing fields of the prestigious Harrow Boys School. He was still living there when I first visited him in 1968, and I remember almost the first thing he did when I entered his lodgings was to point out the tree that he could see from the window and which inspired the painting *Trees at Harrow*, which now hangs in the Old Speech Room Gallery, part of Harrow School.

At this time I had been working on an extensive Arthurian writing for about six years, and had only recently read *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata* on the recommendation of another great Arthurian poet, John Heath-Stubbs. I was curious about the man who had written these remarkable works and who, I now discovered, was also a painter.

I had come across an article by Sir Kenneth Clarke, in which he discussed some recent paintings by David Jones, among them one called *Trystan ac Essyllt*, which being on an Arthurian subject greatly excited my interest. I found out where the artist lived and wrote asking where I might see the picture. A few days later the phone rang and I first heard that curiously attenuated voice with its almost Churchillian undertones. Typically he was apologetic. 'If you want to see the painting, I'm afraid you'll have to come here.' 'Here' was of course Monksdene, and I was not slow to accept the invitation.

I remember it was a very cold, wet day when I traveled to Harrow-on-the-Hill, and that I was more than a bit apprehensive of the meeting. I had been told, I think by William Cookson—the editor of *Agenda*

* A version of this essay was given as a talk as part of the study day 'Starlight Order', arranged jointly by the David Jones Society and the Temenos Academy at the Art Workers Guild, London on 11 March 2017.

magazine, which did so much to promote David Jones's work in the '60s and '70s—that he was a shy, reserved man, and I wasn't sure how I would fare when it came to talking with him.

I need not have worried. Once the formalities had been observed, we talked freely, not to begin with about art or his own work, but about our mutual fascination with the myths and history of the British hero Arthur.

The room where we talked was one of the most crowded I had ever been in. There were books everywhere, on tables, chairs, piled up on a chest of drawers. They almost covered the narrow bed, which stood against one wall, and overflowed onto the floor. (I wondered if David Jones ever actually slept in the bed, or simply drifted in and out of sleep in the battered wing chair where he sat for most of the time I was there.) A litter of paints, brushes, jam jars and palette knives covered one table, all of them carefully arranged; laid out almost as if they were a soldier's equipment laid out ready for inspection. Amongst them was an incised stone on which was carved the word CYMRY, a word often used to signify Arthur's band of warriors, as well as the Welsh nation.¹

Several pictures and inscriptions decorated the walls, but the painting I had come to see was brought forth, with something of a flourish, from under the bed. (There were several other paintings stored there, as David ruefully told me he did not have enough wall space to hang everything, and, with a shrug, 'What can you do . . .?')

David was then in his early 70s, I a mere 20. He was rather untidily dressed in an ancient grey suit and grey flannel shirt. He was quite frail looking, his hair grey and roughly cut—his eyes grey-blue. His handshake was dry and firm, and he was possessed of a remarkably sweet smile. His speech was slow, and slightly slurred, the result of a stroke, and there were often long gaps between sentences which I found initially difficult as I am a talker and hate silence. But I became used to the rhythm of David's thoughts and in the end came to enjoy our silent moments as companionable.

He asked about my Arthurian work and we talked about that for a while, pausing so that I could finally look at the painting of *Trystan ac Essyllt*.² David Jones's own account of the picture, quoted at length by Arthur Giardelli in the second *Agenda* special issue, was almost identical to the one David gave me.

1. You can see this in the *Agenda* 'David Jones Special Issue': *Agenda* 5:1–3 (Spring–Summer 1967).

2. Now in the Tate Britain Gallery, London.

They're sailing into a headwind and so are having to furl the mainsail. The only sail you'd use is the fore sail, which has slipped, and the chap in the cabin is wondering what the hell has happened to the thing. The little figure a trifle aft [and] to the right of Essyllt is labouring to belay the cordage. The lovers have been larking about in the cabin and are in their dressing gowns, so to speak. I wanted them on deck because I wouldn't have known what to do about that confined space in the cabin. Essyllt is triumphant, in line and at one with the vessel itself. Tristan is letting his hawk fly.

Trystan and Essyllt are on the deck of the ship carrying them from Ireland to Cornwall, where Essyllt is to marry King March. They have just unwittingly drunk a love potion intended to ensure a successful union in Cornwall, and look at each other over the rim of the fateful cup. The thing which you notice first about them, is the way Essyllt dominates the figure of Tristan, who seems almost lost between the lines of her body and the crisscrossing masts and spars of the ship. The vessel itself, as in all David Jones pictures where inanimate objects, both natural and artificial, appear, is executed in remarkable detail, every piece of planking, rope and rivet described with painstaking care. It was especially important, he told me, to get everything right about that ship. 'You could really sail her, you see,' he said. He did not regard the picture as finished, but did not suppose he would do any more work on it now. He was particularly concerned with the details of the small jolly boat towed behind the larger vessel. Every piece of it had to be exact, and though I could see nothing wrong, David insisted that it still needed more work. When I commented on the diminished nature of Trystan, his reply was characteristic: 'O,' he said, 'he's had it!'

At this point we were interrupted by the arrival of his doctor—the first indication I had of the recurrent ill-health which had dogged him since his First World War service in the trenches of the Western Front. He apologized, and said that if I didn't mind waiting ten minutes or so we could have tea and talk some more.

When we did it was mostly about Arthur again, and as we ate thinly sliced cucumber sandwiches and drank china tea, I outlined the plan of my own *Arthuriad*, and David brought out a large piece of cardboard on which were pasted dozens of small pieces of variously coloured paper with spidery writing on them, connected by a network of crisscrossing lines. This, he explained, was a kind of Arthurian map, a palimpsest that showed graphically the layered development to the

cycle from its earliest Celtic beginnings down to Blake, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. I remember him saying how much inspiration he got from the description of the no longer extant painting by Blake: *The Ancient Britons*—‘which was all about the Sleeping King and how he would come back one day’. This was to form a significant part of his later work, *The Sleeping Lord*.

The chart was a remarkable thing, really a work of art in itself, throwing light on David Jones’s use of the Arthurian cycle in his work. Everything is recorded here: the early Celtic works; Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* which introduced Merlin into the picture; the high mediaeval, referenced by Sir Thomas Malory’s great saga; and even the French *chansons de geste*. I knew at once that David Jones was extremely knowledgeable on the subject, and our subsequent conversations took on a whole new depth. The map has been reproduced several times since then, but at the time I think no one other than his close circle of friends had seen it.

After this he showed me several more paintings including the marvelous *Y Cyfarchiad i Fair* (‘The Greeting to Mary’, 1963–4), which places the events of the Annunciation against the background of legendary Welsh hills. This fantastic background, thronged with birds, horses, stags, and littered with ruined towers and broken columns, is filled with the numinous sense of time—or perhaps one should say timelessness—which permeates all of David Jones’s work. It epitomizes, for me, the way in which he used landscape as the repository of past memories, as the storehouse of the world’s history. It is as though, in this particular painting, he was seeing the whole spectrum of the ages mirrored in those timeless hills—the Annunciation of Christ being only the latest event to which they bear witness. As with most of his works it reflects also the personal revelation that came early in his life in the shattered landscape of no-mans-land, and brought about his conversion to Roman Catholicism. He drew my attention specifically to the plaited fence which curves around the feet of the Virgin like a living border to her robe, and told me that this had actually existed: he had drawn it faithfully in Wales years before, and kept the sketch until he came to work on the painting. As with details of the ship in the Trystan picture, it was obviously important to him to get things ‘just right’.

At one point he mentioned working with Eric Gill on the lettering for a war memorial in Oxford—the only work available to artists after the war—and now in the chapel of New College. With typical humour David said, with a straight face: ‘I did the commas . . .’

He would have shown me more, I think, and offered to play some LP's he had of readings from *The Tribune's Visitation* and *The Fatigues* (made, I believe, for the archives of an American university); but it was growing late, and having no wish to tire him, I left, promising to return and listen to the records on another day.

In fact it was more than a year before I visited Monksdene again, this time to discuss a proposed bibliography of David's writings. Then, as before, he was generous with his time, showing me magazines to which he had contributed over the years, and answering various fresh questions. Finally he settled back in his ancient, battered wing chair and turned his attention to other matters.

We spoke of the house in which he had lived in Harrow itself before moving down the hill to Monksdene. He recalled with affection the lovely big window from which he been able to look out over half of Middlesex and Kent, and which he missed sadly. On learning that I lived at this time in Kensington, he launched into a stream of reminiscences of his days there during the Second World War, when he had lived in a house just off Kensington Church Street. From his window there, he had been able to see an old water tower, part of the Camden Waterworks, which somehow defied the air raids, and he was delighted to hear that it still stood. (It has since fallen to a more irrevocable force, that of re-development.)

Now ranging further back in time, he spoke briefly (and apart from one other occasion, for the only time) of his own wartime experiences. Most of what he said was about other men, whom he so faithfully portrayed in his wartime sketchbooks. He spoke of the 'instant camaraderie' that existed between the men, especially the private soldiers who could, he said, have come from almost any period of our history except for their uniforms. I mentioned Robert Graves, who had served in the same Regiment of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers at the time. They had met only once and David had found him arrogant. 'A rather distant sort of chap. Very much of the officer class, and a little odd.'

Someone else he got to know at that time was Herbert Read, the poet and critic, with whom he continued to correspond to within a few days of the latter's death. 'He was one of the bravest men I ever met. He had cancer you know, but never let on what pain he must have suffered. His letters were always cheerful.'

I asked if he ever met Mervyn Peake, another artist/writer whom I much admired, and he remembered doing so once. 'Strange sort of chap. Didn't like his stuff much. Very morbid. He was a war artist

wasn't he? Believe he was sent to Belsen. Must have been an awful shock for him.'

I asked about some other people he had known, including René Hague, for whose press he had done some early work, and whose portrait he painted; and of course Eric Gill, with whom he shared a house at Ditchling for several years and whom he seemed to regard almost as a saint.

After this he put on the records he had promised to play, and as I listened to his voice, with its underlying cockney twang and the marvelous smattering of Welsh and Latin words, I understood how right he was to insist that his work should be read aloud whenever possible. It was truly scored for voice.

Even casual conversations were always a little bit like listening to parts of *In Parenthesis*. His range of quotations—anything from St Augustine to the *Mabinogion*—was vast, studded with Welsh and Latinate words. The origins of words fascinated him, and he would always trace a word to its source if he could. I remember one such—*Amherawdr* (Emperor)—the title sometimes given to King Arthur in Welsh texts. He kept returning to this even after we had moved on to other topics. Finally he got down his Welsh dictionary to look it up. Having confirmed the meaning we agreed it was important that the warrior Arthur (his character as a great mediaeval King yet to be re-invented) should be given a Roman title signifying his power.

Another thing that I remember about this visit is of taking along my copy of the first *Agenda* issue to be dedicated to his work and asking him to sign it. On the page opposite his photograph he inscribed my name and 'from David J.'. The way in which he did this illustrates his fascination with lettering. Using two pens, one with red ink and the other with black, both of which he held in his hand as he wrote, he inscribed each letter in both my name and his, pausing and considering each mark—complaining that the pens were only cheap ballpoints and not really suitable for writing anything more important than a shopping list!—so that in the end it was almost as though he was embarking on one of the wonderful inscriptions for which he is so justly admired. Later, he signed a copy of the 1963 edition of *In Parenthesis*, carefully adding the word 'uncorrected' in brackets after his name.

There were several visits after this one, throughout 1970, and another in 1971. In one of these I took a poem which I had written for him, and which he was good enough to praise.

After this it was not until the exhibition of David's work at the National Book League in 1972, which I attended, that I learned he had suffered a bad fall earlier that year. It probably happened when he was trying to reach down a book from one of the tottering piles in his room. The resulting damage to his hip meant his admittance to the Calgary Nursing Home in Sudbury Hill, where he was to remain until his death in 1974, cared for by the Little Company of Mary, or 'the Blue Sisters' as David called them.

It was there I visited him next, in 1973, to discuss an article I had been asked to write on the use of landscape in his writing and drawing. William Cookson was there, I remember, and there was some talk of the *Kensington Mass* on which David was working, part of which was subsequently published by *Agenda*, and in a more complete version in the recently finished work of Thomas Goldpaugh.

David did not seem greatly changed, though he found it difficult to move about. He was, perhaps, more stooped, and seemed somewhat smaller; but his eyes were still clear and bright, and despite long periods of silence his talk was as fresh as it had ever been.

The confinement, together with the regular hours of the nursing home, irked him, and he talked of leaving as soon as he could. He still kept on the old room at Monksdene, though the contents had been locked away for safety in a bank vault, and he looked forward to getting back there. Meanwhile, he had some books, but nothing like as many as before, and even two or three pictures. These were not hung, however, but stood leaning against the wall—the only decoration allowed being a crucifix, which hung above his bed. Still, the room had none of the cold, impersonal quality of a hospital, it was warm and comfortable and the Sisters were kind to him—though one rolled her eyes and spoke to me later of 'Mr. Jones's "determined nature"'—and his endless requests for tea.

I made several more visits that year, taking to him a number of Arthurian books from my own collection that he requested and for which he was immensely grateful. He was especially glad to have *The Legendary History of Britain* by J. S. P. Tatlock, which was, he said, 'an old friend'. I remember one occasion, when he seemed more tired than usual, when I sat and read to him from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, which I think he loved more than any other book about the Arthurian legend. His favourite quotation, which has remained a favourite of my own, was from the climax of the Grail Quest, where Christ himself appears to the knights and says:

'My Knights and my Sergeants and my True Children, which be come out of daily life into spiritual life, I will now no longer hide me from you, but you shall see now a part of my secrets and my hidden things: now hold and receive the high meat which you have so much desired.' Then took he himself the holy vessel and came to Galahad –and there he received his Saviour, and after him so received all his fellows; and they thought it so sweet that it was marvelous to tell. Then said he to Galahad: 'Son, do you see what I hold between my hands?' 'Nay,' said he, 'but if you will tell me.' 'This is,' said he, 'the holy dish wherein I ate the Lamb on Sher Thursday. And you have seen openly that which you most desired to see, but yet have you not seen it as openly as you shall see it in the city of Sarras, in the spiritual place. Therefore you must go hence to serve again this holy vessel; for this night it shall depart from the realm of Logres, that it shall never be seen more here.'³

He also asked if I would read some of Tennyson's great poem about the death of Arthur, quoting from memory the sonorous lines:

So all day long the noise of battle rolled
 Among the mountains by the winter sea;
 Until King Arthur's Table, man by man,
 Had fallen in Lyonesse about their lord,
 King Arthur. Then, because his wound was deep,
 The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,
 And bore him to a chapel nigh the field,
 A broken chancel with a broken cross,
 That stood on a dark strait of barren land:
 On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
 Lay a great water, and the moon was full.⁴

There seemed no real change in his condition. He had suffered a second, slight fall shortly before this, and there was no sign of his leaving Calvary. We talked little on this occasion and sadly there were times when he did not seem to remember who I was, though I believe he was glad to see someone.

3. Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Book XVII chapter 20; citing the edition by J. Matthews (London: Cassell & Co., 2000).

4. 'The Death of Arthur', in Alfred Tennyson: *Idylls of the King* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983).

The next occasion when I visited was towards the end of September 1974, when I took along a young friend, an art student who was studying calligraphy at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, where David himself had studied in the years 1909 to 1914, and who greatly admired his work. He was ill in bed with a heavy cold, and did little more than briefly clasp my hand, apologizing for not being able to talk.

After this I kept in touch by telephone with the nursing home, and by the middle of October learned that he was much improved and would be glad to receive a visit.

I went along, again accompanied by my friend, on a bright Sunday afternoon. We found him up and clad in dressing gown and pajamas, with manuscript books and pens in front of him, though he only seemed to play with these and never actually wrote anything down. This was the manuscript that I now know to be part of the recently reconstructed version of *The Grail Mass*. He seemed glad to see us both, and was obviously in a happy frame of mind, glad to be working on the text of his poem again. I remember how the writing sloped down the page from left to right, the handwriting still clear though somewhat shaky, and written alternately in red and black ink, as if David was indeed scoring it to an internal music.

Learning that my friend was at Camberwell, he recalled his own five years there with obvious pleasure, though admitting that he left feeling 'muddled' about the differences between painting and drawing.

With some amusement he recounted his first day at the college, when he managed to knock over and break a plaster cast of Apollo with a lamb. He wondered if it was still there (it is not) and enquired after the casts of the Venus of Melos and the Dioscuri, which he remembered drawing on more than one occasion. 'I was too young to be allowed into the life class you see. It remained a mystery to me for quite a while. I used to wonder what went on in there! When I did finally get in I was a bit shy of the models.'

He still had some contact with the college, including Ieuan Reese, the calligrapher, who remembers how David used to phone up to ask the pronunciation of various Welsh words.

One of the sisters brought us tea, bread and jam and Swiss roll, and we talked about the Turner exhibition at the Royal Academy. David had a great regard for Turner's 'Sheer bloody use of colour!' He wished he could see the exhibition, but 'didn't really feel up to it at the moment'.

We spoke about other artists who had made an early impression on him. El Greco he described as a 'revelation'. He had not known there were painters like that. Later there was Blake, who interested him initially for the way writing could form an important part of painting—an aspect that was to become essential to him in his maturer work.

This reminded me of the Blakean references in *In Parenthesis* and he said that he found the 'savagery' of Blake's line 'exhilarating and terrifying at the same time'. I reminded him of his earlier references to Blake's now lost picture *The Ancient Britons*, and he at once turned to the notes at the end of the book, quoting:

In the last Battle of King Arthur, only three Britons escaped; these were the Strongest man, the Beautifullest man, and the Ugliest man; these three marched through the field unsubdued, as Gods, and the Sun of Britain set, but shall rise again with tenfold splendour when Arthur shall awake from sleep and resume his dominion over Earth and Ocean.⁵

This mention of battle led David to talk about his own wartime experiences. He had almost always avoided this topic before, and I had respected this, knowing how terrible it must have been. Now he said that he could 'remember everything about that time much better than I can remember what happened last week'. The discomfort, the cold and wet and mud, and of course the endless screaming of shells—these were as clear to him as they had been then. Just before we left he made an enigmatic statement that has often puzzled me. He looked at me directly and said: 'People didn't expect me to come back. They weren't sure what to make of it when I did.'

Before we left I asked what, if anything, he was working on. He shrugged, smiled at us gently: 'Not much, really,' he said. A few days later he was dead, shortly before his 79th birthday.

Years before, David had painted a self-portrait which he called *Human Being* (1931). Thus he was to me, and it is as such, rather than as one of the truly great artists and writers of our time, that I remember him foremost. Always reticent, shy even, he showed none of the pain and sadness that was present in life. His paintings, likewise, were almost without exception serene.

These notes are not about the things he said of his work, because in all that time I knew him, and in all my visits, we scarcely ever talked

5. *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1987). See Part 3 note 36, p. 199.

of these things. Our common interests gave us sufficient material for the hours we spent in conversation of the Welsh *Cymry*—the word, you will remember, carved into the stone in David's old room—and of the Arthurian mythos to which his own works have made such a distinguished addition.

It is not and was not for me to pass judgement on him as an artist. There are many more who can do so better than I. But I do believe that the hugely compressed statements on myth and prehistory that are present in all his writings and the best of the later paintings, will last as long as anything his contemporaries have produced.

In some ways David remained a soldier: Private Jones, 15th Battalion Welsh Fusiliers. He liked to paint from indoors, looking out. His room on top of the house in Harrow was a lookout post; the crowded quarters he occupied in Monksdene were famously described as his dugout. From there he surveyed the world which he saw, not as a momentary thing, but as a process, beginning in the Jurassic age and earlier, and continuing into unimaginable futures.

I was only one of many who benefited from David Jones's generosity, his extraordinary sweetness and kindness. Perhaps these few words will convey something of him to others who did not have the great good fortune to know him personally. They are my token of thanks offered to his memory.

