OVERLAPPING IDENTITIES IN DAVID JONES' POETRY

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Abstract: *David Jones was a twentieth-century British modernist poet, with mixed English and Welsh parentage, and a concern about the English and Welsh elements in British identity, as well as the place of British identity in European, and Western, identity. I shall examine how Jones expresses this concern in his poetry and propose that it is Jones' teleological world view which allows him to see different levels of identity as harmonising rather than as in conflict.*

Key words: *identity, Britishness, Catholicism.*

David Jones was an Anglo-Welsh poet and artist, contemporary of the modernist poets, and considered to be one of them, who had a special concern with British identity, with its composition and its place in larger identities. I shall here present his understanding of British identity in its relationship to English and Welsh identity and to European and Western identity, as he portrays it through his poetry.

David Jones is equally well-known for his art and his writing, and his writing is divided between essayistic writing and poetry. His main volumes of poetic writing were *In Parenthesis*, a work based on his experiences as a soldier in the First World War, and which is sometimes classified as a novel, *The Anathemata*, a long poem, which could be considered an epic poem, about the history of Britain and its relation to world and sacred history, and a collection called *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*, poems dealing with themes such as the Roman garrison in Palestine during the time of the New Testament, and the Arthur legend – it is to these works that I shall be referring. His style is modernist in that he writes in free verse, which at times is hard to distinguish from prose, and his writing is densely allusive and also multilingual, containing significant quantities of Welsh and Latin, with other languages also making an appearance. T. S. Eliot, in his introduction to *In Parenthesis*, classes Jones with the foremost modernist writers: "David Jones is a representative of the same literary generation as Joyce, Pound and myself, if four men born between 1882 and 1895 can be regarded as belonging to the same literary generation." ("A Note of Introduction", in JONES, 2003: vii) He was also admired by Yeats and Auden (see Mervyn "Foreword", in JONES, 2003: i).

David Jones was born in London and his mother was English, daughter of a Thames-side maker of ships' parts, but his father was Welsh and he experienced an affinity with Welsh culture from a young age: as he puts it himself, "From about the age of six, I felt I belonged to my father's people and their land, though brought up in an entirely English atmosphere." ("In Illo Tempore", in JONES, 1978: 23). He took a strong interest in Welsh history, language and mythology, and this interest became an important dimension of his poetry. He participated in the First World War, in a London-Welsh regiment, between periods at art school, and after the First World War, in 1921, became a Catholic ("Autobiographical Talk", in JONES, 1959: 28), a step which was to play an important part in the formulation of his theory of art, and which took him away from the low-church home tradition of his childhood, although he recalls having

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leanings to a Catholic type of sacramentalism from an early age: he was caught setting up an improvised Good Friday procession in the garden at the age of about seven, as he recounts in a later letter (JONES, 2008: 246-7). He did not start his writing career until after the First World War, inspired by his experiences as a soldier to start composing *In Parenthesis.* However, in parallel with his poetic works he developed a theory of art, which he discussed in detail in the prefaces and notes to his poetic works, and in many essays. His theory of art is based on the idea of sacramentality: that is, he believes that works of art are analogous to religious sacraments, in that they do not just imitate something, but make it present (see "Art and Sacrament", in JONES, 1959: 173-5). He regards the characteristic of being artists as the defining characteristic of humans, who, in his cosmology, are uniquely placed as mediators of the material and spiritual worlds, and thus equipped to be sign-makers (see *ibid.* 176-8). His world view, with its insistence on the reality of the material and the spiritual, is characterised by layerings and hierarchies, leading him to an interest in archaeology and geology as well as cultural history. He frequently talks of "deposits" (as noted by PIGGOTT, 1996: 333), of accumulations of cultural material, and one layer in an accumulation does not destroy, remove, or invalidate those below. This world view is crucial to how he tackles the complex issue of British identity.

The issue of British identity is of course complex due to the combination of groups that consider themselves as nationalities living together on the Island of Britain, not to mention issues such as the relationship with Ireland. As I have mentioned, Jones' Welsh ancestry on his paternal side made him strongly aware of the distinctness of Welsh culture, but his approach to British identity was also affected in important ways by his Catholic conversion. Although Wales and Ireland fell under English domination during the Middle Ages, the union of England and Scotland and the accompanying attempt at the creation of a British national identity did not occur until after the Reformation, and it has been argued, for example by the theologian Aidan Nichols, that the timing of British unification has led British Catholics to tend to view British identity as something Protestant, and to feel more attached to separate English, Welsh and Scottish identities (NICHOLS, 2008: 23-4). Therefore in forming a concept of British identity which is not dependent on post-Reformation Protestant nation-building discourse a Catholic writer is likely to insist on the distinctness of the component nationalities of Britain, at the same time as bringing them together, as Jones in fact does. Being Catholic and being partly Welsh also give Jones a distinct historical perspective, to the extent that British Catholics and Welsh people are both interested in earlier historical periods than is typically the case with people from the English Protestant majority culture, who tend to view the Tudor period as the period of national greatness, and to regard anything prior to the Reformation as very distant, an attitude of which Jones was critical (see STAUDT, 1994: 153). British Catholics often view the Middle Ages as the golden period in British history, and the Welsh are interested in the period before the loss of independence in 1283. Thus Jones' Welsh and Catholic viewpoints require a looking back into history in support of the task of interpreting identity in the present. Jones' Catholic angle also makes him sensitive to the cultural links between Britain and the European continent, and to links to the Mediterranean in particular.

Having introduced David Jones and his background I shall now discuss how British national identities feature in his poetry, first tackling Welsh and English identities separately, then looking at how they combine, and after this considering how the European dimension is included. David Jones' emphasis on Welshness is one of the

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most striking characteristics of his poetry, and has even drawn criticism: René Hague, a close friend and generally an admirer, felt that Jones' knowledge and experience of Wales was insufficient to justify the Welsh emphasis in his poetry (see Hague "Introductory", in JONES, 2008: 23). However, this criticism is perhaps misplaced, as Wales for Jones was a cultural topos and a place of the imagination, as has been pointed out by Kathleen Henderson Staudt (STAUDT, 1994: 16), who compares David Jones' Wales to, for example, Yeats' Byzantium; she also notices that, unlike Yeats, Jones' concern is nevertheless with the real place as well as with the cultural gestalt. Jones introduces extensive references to Welsh history and mythology, often including words and phrases in Welsh, throughout his poetic work. In *In Parenthesis* the main character, John Ball, is a member of a London-Welsh regiment, as Jones was himself, and the Welsh members of the regiment introduce Welsh folklore and mythology, singing Welsh folksongs and making Welsh cultural allusions. Of two significant episodes through which long Welsh cultural memories are evoked, one is the "boast", in which a Welsh soldier makes a speech recalling the Welsh involvement in various historical events (JONES, 2003: 79-84), alluding to a number of Jones' favourite Welsh legendary figures, such as Brân, a mythical personage associated with London, Elen Lluddawg, a heroine from the mythology regarding the sub-Roman period, and King Arthur ("The Director of Toil" JONES, 2003: 82). Another episode soon after the "boast", describes another Welsh soldier, Lance-Corporal Lewis, as someone who "fed on" matters of Welsh cultural history, such as the legendary descent of the Welsh from Aeneas (Jones, 2003: 89), in contrast to English people and Welsh people from Anglicised parts of Wales. In *The Anathemata*, a kind of epic poem but with no main characters present through the poem as a whole, Jones again makes extensive reference to the same set of Welsh-related allusions, and includes plentiful Welsh vocabulary. In the section "Mabinog's Liturgy" he uses the Welsh story cycle *The Mabinogion* as an intertext for the New Testament. In the collection *The Sleeping Lord* Welsh-related motifs abound, such as that of rulers sleeping in caves and due to return, and the legend of the boar called Trwyth, who devastated Wales. Apart from drawing attention to aspects of Welsh myth and legend which would be familiar to Welsh speakers, but unfamiliar to others, Jones also specially concentrates on the period in which the transition happened from the end of the Roman Empire in Britain to the independent Welsh princes, a period well-known to Welsh speakers but largely unknown to English speakers. Jones, in emphasising this period, is highlighting a number of points, including the fact that Welsh culture is a living link to the Roman presence in Britain, unlike English culture, which arrived and developed after the Romans had left, and the fact that the Welsh were the British in Roman times.

The English, in contrast to the Welsh, are, in *In Parenthesis* a short-memoried people, and the cultural allusions associated with the London soldiers are often contemporary ones, related to popular early twentieth-century London culture. In *The Anathemata* Jones devotes a section ("Angle-Land") to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon peoples in Britain, and another section ("Refriff") to the Thames-side ship-building tradition, which he was connected to through his paternal grandfather. An association is also sometimes made between the empire-building, practical Roman mentality, particularly in the form of professional soldiers, and cockneys, as in "The Tribune's Visitation" in *The Sleeping Lord*. Jones tends, however, to bring up Englishness in ways which show up its connections with Welsh culture, allowing a kind of interleaving of the two to be seen.

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For example, in *In Parethesis* a major intertext is Malory's writings on King Arthur, a combination of Welsh legendary material (which has passed through continental channels) with an English presentation. In *The Anathemata* the important middle section "The Lady of the Pool" features a London lavender seller, Elen Monica, conversing with a sea-captain, although only she is heard, and her speech, alluding to a multitude of elements of London myth and legend, emphasises the Welsh lore relating to London, such as the story of Lludd, mythical founder of London, and Brân, whose head, in Welsh myth, was buried under the White Hill (identified with the site of the Tower of London), to protect the island of Britain (see JONES, 1972: 163 note 3). This inclusion of Welsh London-related myth makes known to English-language readers the existence of a Welsh-British phase of London's history, probably previously unknown to them, and shows Welsh culture as a culture of the whole island of Britain, and as a foundation of English culture, rather than as the culture only of a Western fringe. While Scotland is only occasionally mentioned by Jones, who thereby adheres to his poetic principle that the poet should write about what he is familiar with, bringing out the general from the particular (see Jones "Notes on the 1930s", in Jones 1978: 46), Scotland's internal Celtic-Germanic ethnic complex is indirectly commented on through Jones concentration on the encounter between the Celts and the Anglo-Saxons in the sub-Roman period, many of the British Celts having been based in what is now Scotland, such as the group commemorated in the oldest Welsh poem, the *Gododdin*. The *Gododdin* is an important intertext for *In Parenthesis*, and recounts a battle between Angles and a group of Britons who were based in the area where Edinburgh now is.

David Jones does not have an exclusively insular perspective, and in fact takes pains to introduce an ultra-insular context into his poetic work. In *In Parenthesis*, the action of which is set on the First World War's Western Front, on the continent, he tries to do this by including European intertexts. For example, he makes the *Chanson de Roland* a key intertext, and includes German words and phrases, wishing to draw attention to cultural commonality rather than division with the opposition. In *The Anathemata* the first section ("Rite and Foretime"), which is partly about the geological formation of Britain, recalls the time when Britain was not yet geographically isolated (see JONES, 1972: 64). Two of the sections ('Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea' and "Keel, Ram, Stauros") concern the voyage of a ship, in the ancient period, from the Mediterranean to Britain, and back, representing the way that British civilisation has in many ways been developed from Mediterranean sources. The final two sections ("Mabinog's Liturgy" and "Sherthursdaye and Venus Day"), emphasising the events of the New Testament, connect British culture with the Eastern Mediterranean. The Roman Empire is important for Jones, being the conduit to Britain of many cultural influences, including the Church, which he sees as a kind of successor organisation to the Roman Empire, and, in addition, a frequent theme, present in most of the poems of the collection *The Sleeping Lord*, is that of the Roman Empire as a precursor of the British Empire. Influenced by his reading of Spengler, and inspired by seeing British soldiers in Jerusalem during his visit there during the British Mandate (see JONES, 2008: 56-6), he draws a parallel between the late British Empire of the twentieth century, a period, he believes, of civilisational decline, and the late Roman Empire of the early Christian period, a period during which a civilisation passes from its zenith towards its eventual dissolution and replacement. He imagines, in many of the poems of *The Sleeping Lord*, British soldiers in the Roman army, and goes further, imagining them present in Jerusalem during the events of the New Testament. He also mentions in the preface to

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"The Fatigue" (JONES, 1995: 25) a legion which was present in Britain and Palestine at different times.

As we have seen, Jones has a complex vision of British identity. British identity for him is at once composed of distinct identities, such as Welsh and English, and also participates in overarching European and Western identities and cultural currents. His account however is not one of irreconcilable conflicts but of coexistences and interweavings. His metaphysical vision helps him in resolving the cultural complexities he portrays into an ultimate harmony. His world view is teleological, seeing a spiritual purpose in human history: therefore all elements which build up that cultural history, which allows the purposes of Providence to be fulfilled in the world, are legitimate, and to be treasured. Every individual's and every group's identity is a composite of all elements that have gone into its development, and it is the poet's task to commemorate all these elements on behalf of the groups the identities pertain to. Just as, in the divine plan, the purpose is that no individual should be lost ("Whoever he was/ *Dona eis requiem*/ *sempiternam*./ (He would not lose him/ *... non perdidi*/ *ex eis quemquam*.)" JONES, 1972: 66), the poet wishes not to lose any strand in the cultural weave he is celebrating.

David Jones poetry is not typical for his period, in that, though he believed he was living through a period of decline, he does not focus on crisis. Looking at human events from a metaphysical level elevated above the world's surface, like Chaucer's Troilus, he sees purpose in the confusion, and richness in the complexity. British identity, like any national identity, to Jones, is not of an absolute value, but is a step on the way to beatitude.

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