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# The Sign-Making of David Jones

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#### NOTES

<sup>5</sup> He is probably referring to Robert Creeley, the "Figure of Outward" to whom he dedicated *The Maximus Poems* and of whom he said, "I have learned more from him than from any living man. . . ." *Letters for Origin: 1950-1955*, ed. Albert Glover (London: Cape Goliard, in association with Crossman Publishers, 1968), p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> Olson defiantly rejects God (the action is tropic: "turned away / turned") yet acknowledges His veracity and terrible perfection. In his response to hierarchy ("we who throw down hierarchy") he dethrones the father.

<sup>7</sup> Olson was not, it seems, his own best editor. In publishing *In Cold Hell, In Thicket* he relied on Creeley. Creeley's editing of Olson's *Selected Writings* should also be noted because it presents the Olson he finds most useful. For him *Mayan Letters* and "Apollonius of Tyana" are central texts, the latter the pivot of the book. His selection from *The Maximus Poems*, the final section of the book, includes only poems of high merit and, among them, those in which dream materials are conspicuous.

<sup>8</sup> For Olson, much of the excitement is in reading Frances Rose-Troup's *John White: The Patriarch of Dorchester and the Founder of Massachusetts*, a book, Mrs. Rose-Troup notes, that had been seen before publication by Samuel Eliot Morison and not sufficiently acknowledged in his *Builders of the Bay Colony*. In the earlier installment Olson had relied on Morison's graceful but less evidential, less authoritative book for information about the founding and the career of John Smith.

<sup>9</sup> Significantly, also, Kunt Circle. See *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps following Olson, Garland ends *The Gloucester Guide* with a description of this statue and recognition of casualties at sea. For Olson, the memorial's inscription ("They that go down to the sea in ships") may have recalled Pound's opening line.

<sup>11</sup> See also "Pacific Lament," an early poem on death at sea, a poem of turning in which death becomes repose at the source.

<sup>12</sup> I wish to acknowledge my debt to the many scholars who have recently written about Olson, and especially to George F. Butterick for, among other things, his annotations of these poems.

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#### CRITICISM / KATHLEEN RAINE

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### The Sign-Making of David Jones

"In the late nineteen-twenties and early 'thirties among my most immediate friends there used to be discussed something that we christened 'The Break.' We did not discover the phenomenon so described; it had been evident in various ways to various people for perhaps a century; it is now, I suppose, apparent to most. Or at least most now see that in the nineteenth century, Western Man moved across a Rubicon which, if as unseen as the 38th parallel, seems to have been as definitive as the Styx."

This statement (written in 1953) from the Introduction to David Jones's *Anthemata* defines his standpoint. With his death in October, 1974, the last English writer of genius who wrote from within European Christendom has taken his place in history. No false hope of revival or recovery

of the great living cultural unity of which he was himself a part lessened for him the sorrow of the passing; but neither did his clear recognition that there is no going back cause him to renounce the passing values, or to come to terms with invading barbarism. In the depth and beauty of his own statement of the terminal experience of a civilization, there is no despair: only an affirmation of the enduring value of that which is about to be lost. But no capitulation:

“And whether we are the kind of chaps who feel inclined to plan this or that local *coup*, or whether we feel we must go to earth with the yellow-skirted Fayes, that the nipping of our cultural December is a little too much, that a very private and secret labyrinthine life is indicated—in either case, the words of Professor Ker’s *Dark Ages* may be remembered: ‘But the gods who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation.’”

The fragments gathered in *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments* (New York: Chilmark Press, 1974; \$7.95) are each complete in themselves; although, with David Jones’s habit of working over his writings it can never be said that any form would have been final absolutely. Most had been composed as sections of a larger work that, towards the end of his life, he must have realized would never be completed. He had been contemplating a third work on the scale of his epic of the first World War, *In Parenthesis*, and of *The Anathemata*, his consecration and celebration of “the matter of Britain.” This third work, of which he talked to his friends over many years, had for its center and pivot the Passion of Christ on that day, in or about the year 30 A.D., to which all previous history had tended, and from which all subsequent history was to be determined. One might say that his theme was Christendom itself, historic act and fact seen in the light of sacred meaning. David Jones, a devout (though latterly disillusioned) Catholic convert, was in no way a mystic. To him the divine Incarnation stands firmly in its historic setting. He relates that Event to the Roman world as it then was, and, by implication, to our world also, within the circumference of Christendom of which the Crucifixion is the center. Rome, whose army occupied Jerusalem in that year, is an exemplar of every secular and dehumanizing totalitarianism. The Roman army is all armies, but, at the same time, he makes it living to us as an experience undergone by men from many lands, of diverse cultures, yoked together under the tyranny of the world-Imperium. From Etruria, from Greece, from Germany and Gaul, and (above all) from far Britain, his own land, then ruled by Shakespeare’s “radiant Cymbeline,” are drawn representative members of those races later to constitute Christendom itself.

His treatment of the theme, historically meticulous as it is, cannot, how-

ever, be described as realistic; for no detail is without its inner resonance, its network of associations in literature or liturgy. Man, for David Jones, is a sign-making animal. He finds meaning in, or rather imparts meaning to, those things he touches and uses and sees about him. He thus creates an interior dimension of significance, of sacrament, in the uniquely human relationship with the world. David Jones is within that old tradition for which the "human" is, specifically, that in which we differ from our animal kindred. The "trousered ape" (one of C. S. Lewis's happy phrases) of modern behaviorism and the like is not, in this sense, "human" at all, but acting from the animal nature, which, of course, we also share, as we do many of the properties of vegetation and inanimate matter. As human beings, ours is the world of the immeasurable values and qualities of things.

A passage in *The Tribune's Visitation* (to take an example) implicitly contrasts two uses of the common elements of our daily food: bread and wine. The sacred table of the Christian Mass is called to the reader's mind in the Roman soldiery's taking of the recruitment oath: *Idem in me*. The soldier who is sworn in makes a renunciation of those things that "signify" all other loyalties, love of family and place, all that pertains to him as an individual:

"See! I break this barrack bread, I drink with you, this  
issue cup, I salute, with you, these mutilated *signa*, I  
with you have cried with all of us the ratifying formula:  
*Idem in me*.

So, if the same oath serve  
why, let the same illusions fall away."

In contrast with the dehumanizing world-state of *The Tribune's Visitation* stands *The Tutelar of the Place*, the Mother-Goddess: "She that loves place, time, demarcation, hearth, kin, enclosure, site, differential cult, though she is but one mother of us all: one earth brings us all forth, one womb receives us all, yet to each she is other, named of some name other . . ."

In his celebration of the particular, of all that is "counter, original, spare, strange," David Jones turns always to his own roots: to Wales, her places and her flowers, historic site and heroic legend, her language (a little confusing this, excellent footnotes notwithstanding), her history made "sacred" by association and memory of individual and race. His national literature has given him his reconciling symbol at the passing of an age: the "Sleeping Lord" is of course Arthur, Britain's "once and future king." The old king will return, and, in the words of Yeats (who also bore witness to the advent of the Rough Beast), "workman, noble and saint" will be disinterred from the "rich, dark nothing" in which all things are latent. The Welsh race preserves, for reasons both historic and linguistic, what is in fact the sacred

history of the whole English nation. The Welsh are the "ancient Britons," as Blake also had recognized in a phrase David Jones liked to quote: "The deeds of Arthur are the deeds of Albion."

David Jones has been compared with Blake for several bad reasons. It is true that both expressed themselves with equal mastery in words and in paint; true that Blake's illuminated books may be compared with David Jones's lettered inscriptions. Yet on the whole he was not in sympathy with Blake's somewhat loud tones, greatly preferring Coleridge's artistry. The New Age of which Blake felt himself to be a prophet, David Jones bitterly hated as the dark age beyond civilization. Blake's great originality lies in his opening of inner worlds, the exploration of interior states of the psyche; David Jones, by contrast, is totally objective, historical, and wholly "incarnational" (to borrow his own word). Blake, who praised the "minute particulars," seldom embodied them. And yet in one respect these two may be compared, for both were, in the strict sense of the word, bards: both were the recorders of national sacred history. In neither does the personal experience obtrude itself. Blake sought to record, not his own subjectivity but the inner state of the English nation, "the Giant Albion"; and David Jones's *Sleeping Lord* is likewise the soul of the nation someday perhaps to be awakened "In England's green and pleasant land." *The Sleeping Lord* (1967) is the last and one of the finest of his works.

David Jones is doubtless the last of the bards, since it seems that the Age of Aquarius is characterized by those "rootless uniformities" that made David suffer in his very senses. It was almost physically painful to him to go out and subject himself to the crossing of the Waste Land that lay between his room, so full of simple things made significant, and the Harrow underground station to which he would always so courteously escort a visiting friend.

If David Jones disliked the modern world he was none the less very much of the present he so powerfully criticized. To be of the avant-garde is one thing; to understand a contemporary situation quite another. In order to be the critic of any present it is needful to have some standard of values by which to measure that present. Every civilization possesses such a standard, embodied in a tradition which includes elements both heroic and religious, together with the arts and the language in which the interior experience and aspiration of a culture is embodied. For David Jones the standards were those of Catholic Christendom. It was I think the Greek scholar Edith Hamilton who defined the barbarian as one who has no cultural past. By contrast, for the civilized the whole past of their culture is as a part of themselves. To David Jones the Caesars and the saints, Dante and Malory, Coleridge and Taliessin, are contemporaneous.

It is one of the powers of the written word to make the thoughts of Bronze Age Achilles as accessible to us as those of Mohammed Ali. Yet I

wonder if this experience of living within a unity of culture, unbroken from Homer to ourselves, will be known to future generations? Overnight a church may become a museum, not by any act of government, but by some change in ourselves, through which the rites, in which we had as children participated in a living way, become folklore. Nor can mere education restore life to a lost culture: knowledge is not, as such, participation. David Jones announced the advent of the new Dark Age his friend T. S. Eliot only foresaw.

Yet he valued that quality of “nowness” (his own word) which he shares with Joyce, whom he greatly admired, and with Eliot. Every word is wrought, chosen, and placed with consummate artistry. I do not know whether a transatlantic ear will catch the living echo of the very speech and voice of the “Tommy” of the First World War in *The Dream of Private Clitus* or *The Wall*. For David Jones’s hero is, after all, the “common man” of his century, and especially the common soldier, who, willingly and with dignity, has borne the burden of war. If David Jones’s common man is scarcely recognizable in terms of our new philosophies which exalt “the masses” yet deny value to the individual life, it is because of the unusual light in which he is seen. That unusual light is the light of consecration. It was after he had seen, through a chink in the wall of a barn, in France, behind the trenches, a Catholic priest giving out the sacred bread to common soldiers about to go “over the top,” that he himself, a young private, became a convert to that faith. If he refused to worship the modern gods of “progress” it was not because he was unaware of their advent:

A, a, a, DOMINE DEUS

I said, Ah! what shall I write?

I enquired up and down.

(He’s tricked me before  
with his manifold lurking-places.)

I looked for His symbol at the door.

I have looked for a long while

at the textures and contours.

I have run a hand over the trivial intersections.

I have journeyed among the dead forms

causation projects from pillar to pylon.

I have tired the eyes of the mind

regarding the colours and lights.

I have felt for His Wounds

in nozzles and containers.

I have wondered for the automatic devices.

I have tested the inane patterns

without prejudice.  
I have been on my guard  
not to condemn the unfamiliar.  
For it is easy to miss Him  
at the turn of a civilisation.

I have watched the wheels go round in case I might see the living creatures like the appearance of lamps, in case I might see the Living God projected from the Machine. I have said to the perfected steel, be my sister and for the glassy towers I thought I felt some beginnings of His creature, but *A, a, a, Domine Deus*, my hands found the glazed work unrefined and the terrible crystal a stage-paste . . . *Eia, Domine Deus*.

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TWO POEMS / RONALD JOHNSON

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Wor(1)ds 20, *Jan 1st*

“For Orpheus’ lute was strung with poets’ sinews”

METAMORPHOSED ALL SINGING EYES AND EARS

Prophesying Day & Night  
being’s

stream,  
the sonata-ed

transient.

TRANCE:

A  
*live.*

*Solitude like a fist  
in the solar plexus.*

*(the snake  
root to the many-colored coils of)*

*(its lidless I  
rapt at the spiral nothing-  
ness)*