

DAVID JONES

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‘THE only artist retaining the image and its allusions today is David Jones, and his paintings exhibit very clearly the enormous difficulty of finding pictorially the relation between it and the coherent whole—for unlike Rossetti and like Dante he is not content to see his image in the unknown.’

These words are found in the concluding passage of Nicolette Gray’s study of the Romantic Image¹ and of the dilemma to which it gives rise in the art of today. Her thesis is that Dante was not content to see the vision of Beatrice as prefiguring a reality beyond herself, but in addition he needed to know what is the nature of the relation. To Dante there was available the idea of a world order as really existing. But by the end of the eighteenth century this knowledge of the whole was reduced to an abstract idea of order so attenuated ‘that it had no place for the particular’. Thus the idea of the image became divorced from order, romantic from classical art. Henceforth the artist can with certainty use no valid terms in which the mind can rest.

No one is more fully aware of the difficulty this thesis presents to the artist than Mr David Jones. He has met the difficulty frontally not only as painter but intellectually as a scholar, as shewn in his hitherto un-collected critical writing, and as a poet in *In Parenthesis*. He comprehends our cultural predicament and has allowed himself in his work no evasion of the formidable difficulties that arise for one who adds to an artist’s response to the material world a need to endow the result with a validity that stands the tests of the intellect. He knows that an art work is a creature of time and place; but that it must shew forth by reason of its human authorship some recognition of the eternal verities. He knows too, as many do not, that this recognition cannot be made good merely by sign or symbol; it must inhere in the quality of the work itself seen as a made thing. ‘If you would draw a bruiser’, he writes, ‘don’t neglect to remember the fragility of his flesh or you will be liable to make only a vulgar *tour-de-force* and to obscure the essential humanity of your gross man. There should

1 *Rossetti, Dante and Ourselves*, Nicolette Gray; Faber & Faber 1945.

always be a bit of lion in your lamb. The successful art work is one where no ingredient of creation is lost, where no item on the list in the *Benedicite Omnia Opera Dominum* is denied or forgotten. This is not easy.² No, indeed. It was never easy. But how can it be done at all at a time when there is no generally recognised notion of *omnia opera*, and when the idea of humanity is being replaced by that of a *machine gouvernée*?

We can see how this problem in its early stages and in different ways vexed the minds of Blake and Hopkins. With both of these David Jones has obvious affinities. The work of each was altogether singular in its time. They were more keenly aware than their contemporaries of the difficulties made for them as artists by the cultural and civilisational situation in which they lived. They were aware of it, not only as men with fine intellectual perceptions, but experientially as practitioners working at their material. Yet one of these lived in the world we know through the novels of Jane Austen and the other lived in the England of Trollope. And these worlds were Arcadias compared with what confronts us now. David Jones resembles Blake and Hopkins in taking up the artistic problem over an immense range of sensibilities and ideas. This impression of *range* is the first that anyone must receive from looking through the volume of reproductions that appeared in 1943. There are the animal drawings, the portraits, the sea pictures, landscapes, still life, and the great Arthurian subject pictures. Each of these shows the application of a special set of sensibilities—a pictorial vocabulary invented by the artist as proper for this particular sort of work and for no other. And since this volume³ has appeared there have been still new departures seen at the David Jones Exhibition of 1948. The assurance and vitality of, for example, *Vexilla Regis* and *Aphrodite in Aulis*⁴ are proof that this daring artist can send his mind with renewed vigour into the most sublime regions.

Though his work taken as a whole shews so great a range of sensibility and expression, the effect is by no means one of discontinuity. There is a recognisable character throughout. One might risk some description of it in a single sentence as follows.

2 Autobiographical notes written by the artist at the request of Mr H. S. Ede, by whom copies have been presented to the library of the Tate Gallery.

3 *David Jones, Modern Penguin Painters*, 1943.

4 Reproduced in *Signature* 1949 as illustrations to an article on David Jones by Nicolett Gray.

In David Jones' work the image is presented in the context of a known world order, the particular is universalised, the universal is individuated. The impression given by some writers is of a tentative quality. The word *diaphanous*, for example, used by more than one, may well be apt to express his delicacy of colour and line, but such language tends to obscure the effect of a concrete and rational statement which the pictures surely give. In this sense David Jones is classical rather than romantic. I do not mean that a study of his pictures technically will yield a Poussin-like *rationale*; but they shew us a world in which the mysterious and intricate are known; they shew us the sublime as explicable even when it is not explained. The soldier caught upon the wire, the albatross transfixed, the cup amid the briars, the still life named 'Hierarchy', the wounded knights in Queen Guenever's chamber, the great Aphrodite upon her altar—all these visual sights, in their various ways astonishing in what they reveal, yet leave upon the mind the peace of an exact statement.

The distinguished mark of David Jones' work is, then, this awareness of order, a reference to the known, a delight in the particular and a perception of unity in what seems dissimilar. So that, for example, a chair by the sea partakes of the wateriness of the element that is next to it and yet loses nothing of its own chair-like quality. Rather is this very quality enhanced, and all the other objects in the room are given a special 'by-the-sea'-like character in which their own individuality shines forth.

This characteristic of David Jones is well shewn by *In Parenthesis*.⁵ The book is largely a chronicle of a particular battle; but it is also the whole experience of the Western Front War in 1914-1918. It expresses, too, no one can doubt, the essence of warfare at any time in our history. This effect is not achieved by generalisation, but by the enhancement of the particular.

'Guns of swift response opened in his back areas. In turn his howitzers coal-boxed the Supports.

So gathered with uneven pulse the night-antiphonal: mortared-canisters careened oblique descent with meteor trail; and men were dumb and held their breath for this, as for no thing other.'⁶

It is important in dwelling upon the disposition of mind that

⁵ Published by Faber & Faber, 1937, awarded the Hawthornden Prize.

⁶ *In Parenthesis* part 4. p. 90.

has been described to realise that Mr Jones' art does not itself directly proceed from these ideas, nor indeed from any pictorial or poetic theory. His aesthetic is the basic Aristotelian conception of the artist or poet as *maker*. His concern is with truth. Truth in art is the truth of what is well made. In a recent article⁷ David Jones writes of the distinction between 'art' and 'artefact': 'I can see no difference, of kind, but only of infinite degrees, between any work of the "arts of form" once *utility has to any degree* been overpassed and where the quality of *gratuitousness has to any degree* been operative, whether it be a wooden spoon carved by a Welsh peasant for his sweetheart, or Bewcastle Cross, or our old favourite, the Aphrodite of Melos, or Picasso's *Chandelier, pot et casserole émaillée*, or the enamelled "Battersea shield" in the British Museum, or the head-stones in Cookham churchyard (which my contemporary, Stanley Spencer, loves so well), or the beasts in manganese in the Lascaux caves, or Fouquet's Virgin of Melun, or the Capel Garmon fire-dogs, or Leonardo's Virgin and St Ann. In all these almost absurdly diverse works, utilitarian death has been swallowed up in the victory of the gratuitous. It is the only rubicon I know of dividing the activities of man. I understand the theologians to say that God's creation of the cosmos was a gratuitous act: it is interesting therefore that it is that very quality of gratuitousness which we recognise in the creative works of man. A kind of worship is implicit in the works of man-the-artist. There is little or no point, so it seems to me, in stressing the differences of degree. I believe the tendency to stress those differences of degree and to posit a difference of kind comes from theorists rather than from workmen, from "philosophers" rather than from "makers".'

The aesthetic of the gratuitous is at odds with our present day world. And it is dangerous for an artist to be in opposition to his time. He must be of his time even when he is in advance. But if the time is against the art-work itself, is against the gratuitous, what then? What we see about us nowadays is the artist coming to terms with the forces of propaganda; or reacting against this trend of propaganda by various theories of 'protest' such as the surrealism of the 'Thirties. Mr Jones shews a most sensitive awareness of all this. But his response to it is singular. He is concerned more and more to ascertain by the most cautious

⁷ Berenson's *Aesthetics and History* by David Jones. *Dublin Review*, September 1950.

reconnaissance the area that is left to the artist and to work within it. He knows that his task is with the primary virtues of the artist. He is to resume within himself the aesthetic wisdom of our culture and to assert the primary truth however late-in-the-day it may be. This he does with charm and grace rather than with controversy and attack. He who has most to say is yet the most eirenical of our artists and the most withdrawn. He will argue against no school. He will see the good and the bad whether it is in the newest design for a 'bus or the latest from the Paris studios. He bears bravely his burden of wisdom. May we come to learn more and more from him, and whether as appreciators of art or as makers try to regard with something of his spirit the difficult work of redeeming the time which is the painful privilege of the artist in any age.

NOTE.—The May issue of *BLACKFRIARS* will contain an illustrated article on the paintings of Roy de Maistre by William Gibson, Keeper of the National Gallery.