The Significance of "Y Goddodin" to David Jones's "In Parenthesis"

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In Parenthesis consists of a simple plot woven into a tapestry of literary references. David Jones's allusions encompass a wide range of human history and culture. He draws upon Shakespeare, Chaucer, Malory, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Song of Roland, *The Mabinogion*, the *Bible*, and the Roman Catholic missal. But Welsh poet Aneirin's *Y Gododdin* provides the core of this frame of reference. While Jones uses quotations from a variety of works for the titles of the sections, each title is accompanied by a quotation from *Y Gododdin*; and the title of the book itself, *In Parenthesis*, is supplemented by a line from the Welsh poem — written in Welsh. *Y Gododdin*, then, is the one continuous strand to which *In Parenthesis* is bound. This sixth-century Welsh poem represents a heroic age, when Britain was the Island of Britain, and not yet divided into separate segments. The Welsh language was spoken in parts of Scotland and Northern England, as well as in Wales; and, for David Jones, it appears to symbolize a certain unity of thought and purpose which has not been possible since the fragmentation of Britain, into England, Scotland, and Wales.

With his frequent references to other battles in other places at other times, Jones incorporates the concept of war into the normal order of things. Conflict is presented as part of the human condition and accepted as such. What is important is the way men behave under the stress of battle. Both David Jones and Aneirin seek out goodness in the midst of the misery and destruction of war. Both accept the inevitability of conflict; and neither conveys any sense of anger or frustration at the futility of war. What does permeate their work is a sense of overwhelming sadness for the loss of the precious humanity which they describe.

Unlike David Jones, who was a soldier, Aneirin was employed at the court of King Mynddog as a sort of war propagandist. It is unlikely that Aneirin actually fought in the battle of Catraeth: his function would be that of an observer rather than that of a warrior. This, of course, goes far to explain the fact that he, the poet, is the only survivor of the battle. Aneirin was not a poet in the sense that Jones is a poet—an independent and self-motivated artist influenced only by his own individual philosophy; Aneirin performed a task of considerable importance to the aristocratic society in which he lived: he sang the praises of the military heroes and mourned their deaths. The oral nature of the poetry would ensure that the glory of the noble warriors permeated the whole social structure. The strength and courage of the soldiers is celebrated throughout *Y Gododdin*:

> when he heard
> The war-cry, he spared none he pursued
> He'd not turn from a battle till blood
> Flowed, like rushes hewed men who'd not flee.[1]

and

> Although they were being slain, they slew;
> Till the world ends, they will be honoured.
> [12(XC).3]

Aneirin does his job well. But, like all great poets, he manages to infuse his work with a poetic truth, something which transcends any outward purpose which the poetry might have. And, just as, on the surface, Vergil appears to be praising Augustus's regime in *The Aeneid* while subtly criticizing it, so Aneirin conveys the bitter sadness of war while superficially celebrating its glory. The personal philosophies of Aneirin and Jones are really very close — once the cloak of respectability has been lifted from Aneirin's work.

Y Gododdin and *In Parenthesis* are, quite obviously, both based upon personal experience, but they do not give an intensely personal view of their respective battlefields. Their objective is to portray the collective experience of war. Aneirin does not speak of his own experience of war: he speaks of "men" and "Godod-

din's war-band." His poem includes descriptions of individual heroes, but begins:

> Men went to Catraeth, keen their war-band
> [1(VIII).1]

and ends

> Three hundred gold torqued men attacked . . .
> Tragic, but a single man returned.
> [12(XC).1,6]

That Aneirin speaks of himself in the third person at the end of the poem, is significant in that it places him anonymously within the group. Private Ball does not distinguish himself in battle any more than Aneirin does. His place is in "B" company; and, when he is the only one left, he fades into anonymity.

Both works are episodic rather than continuous narrative. There is no climax, no central point in *Y Gododdin*. Aneirin states, near the beginning of the poem:

> At court the Gododdin say there came
> Before Madawg's tent on his return
> But a single man in a hundred.
> [6(II).4]

There is a sense of acceptance in the poem, of "emotion recollected in tranquillity." Jones captures this sense in his work. Even in Part 7, when the soldiers are dying one by one, as they do in *Y Gododdin*, there is no dramatic import, no climax, no resolution. Aneirin accomplishes this sense of serenity in the midst of battle by continuous references to the lives of the soldiers as ordinary men at peace, loved by their families, respected by their friends:

> Issac, much-honoured man from the South. . . .
> Genial and generous,
> Well-mannered over mead . . .
> Not stained, stainless; not faulty, faultless.
> His sword rang in the heads of mothers.
> [7(XXVII).1,3,4,7,8]

In *In Parenthesis*, Jones does not emphasize the civilian lives of the men so much as their behaviour, and relations with each other

in the trenches, when they are not actually engaged in battle. The soldiers demonstrate all the qualities of their characters which would be apparent in their lives at home. Then, when it is time for them to die, although the fear and terror of death are manifest, so also are the tenderness and humanity of the men:

> Lift gently Dai, gentleness befits his gunshot wound in the lower bowel . . .[2]

Here, Jones juxtaposes compassion with a particularly cruel and ugly death — two extremes of human existence.

In Parenthesis does not glorify war as does the poetry of Rupert Brooke; nor does it rage at the senselessness and waste of war as the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon does. David Jones uses the situation of war to strip man of his civilized social trappings and present him as "unaccommodated man." That Jones discovers so much gentleness and humanity in the wretchedness of the trenches is an affirmation of man's ability to transcend the evil that is beyond his control. Just as Aneirin never criticizes or questions Mynyddog's orders, neither does David Jones hold up the generals to hard scrutiny, although there is some mild satirizing of military leaders. Jones, like Aneirin, is concerned chiefly with the behaviour and emotions of the soldiers with each other rather than in relation to those in command.

A comparison between the prosody of Aneirin and that of David Jones is not feasible. *Y Gododdin* consists of a number of verses of inconsistent length. The lines do not conform to any standard metre: like Latin poetry, they are dependent upon the number of syllables in the line. There is a strict rhyme scheme, with almost all the end syllables of each line rhyming:

> Gwyr a aeth Gatraeth oedd ffraeth eu llu;
> Glasfedd eu hancywn, a gwenwyn fu.
> Trichant trwy beiriant yn catäu —
> A gwedi elwch tawelwch fu.[3]

David Jones is not restricted by formal convention. *In Parenthesis* is not definable as a particular art form, and does not fit neatly into any genre. It is a mixture of prose and poetry. There is, however, one way in which the forms of Aneirin's poetry and Jones's writing are similar: they are meant to be both said and

heard. *Y Gododdin*, like most Welsh poetry, is oral poetry, and, thus, demands much emphasis upon the texture and musicality of the words. *In Parenthesis* demands this same attention to sound. The shape of the words on the page forms a complex system of patterns, inviting the reader to experiment with the sounds they make. For instance, the following must be read aloud for full effect:

> Which nearer
> which so rarely insular,
> unmade his harmonies,
> honouring
> this rare and indivisible
> New Light
> for us
> over the still morning honouring. (p. 68)

Jones's syntax and structure forbid haste. His words must be read slowly and deliberately; and, like a musical score, they must be practised before mastery and full comprehension is achieved. Such mastery over words is inherent in Welsh literary tradition. To understand this, one only has to observe a Welsh poetry-speaking competition in an Eisteddfod, where skilled reciters "perform" one poem in turn, hoping to be judged best interpreter of that particular piece of poetry. David Jones brings this element to English imaginative literature.

Both poets are absorbed by the sights and sounds of war, the armour, the weapons, the paraphernalia of war. They each conjure up a three dimensional vision of war which invades all the senses. Aneirin luxuriates in the physical beauty of the young men, in the splendour of their fine horses and exquisitely wrought armour:

> Swift thick-maned stallions
> Beneath a fine stripling's thighs,
> Broad lightweight buckler
> On a slim steed's crupper
> Glittering blue blades,
> Gold-bordered garments.
> [5(I).3]

Jones describes, in great detail, even the most humble and inconsequential accoutrements of the soldier:

> Shining sanded mess-tin giving back the cold early light. (p. 2)

And colour is as important to Jones as it is to Aneirin, although it is confined to the setting rather than to the soldiers themselves, who are all dressed in khaki. Jones describes a face of downland chalk:

> And grass tufts too, were like they grow on seaward hills — with small wiry flowers against the white, and with the return of summer's proper way, after the two-day storm, blue-winged butterflies, dance between, flowery bank and your burnished fore-sight guard. (p. 131)

This preoccupation with colour and texture, common to Aneirin and Jones, brings vivid reality to the intellectual contemplation of war. Both poets make the reader see and feel the experiences of a soldier in their entirety.

Part 7 of *In Parenthesis* is closest to *Y Gododdin* in structure and theme. For the epigram, Jones chooses Aneirin's plea to the Gododdin to join the celebratory song of the warriors, to praise their great courage, to mourn their deaths. Jones develops this theme along the same lines as *Y Gododdin*. He employs a system of "verses" of varying lengths. These sections are not verse in the strict sense of the word, some of them taking the form of *vers libre*, others an irregular prose form. The narrative becomes, here, the personal testimonial of Private John Ball, thus paralleling that of Aneirin, who, like Ball, is the sole survivor of the battle. *Y Gododdin* is an expression of the bravery and character of single individuals, and also of the collective qualities displayed by those individuals in a unified force:

> Warriors rose together, formed ranks.
> With a single mind they assaulted.
> [9(LVIII).1-2]

Jones closely follows this format, devoting as much attention to the actions of individuals as he does to the group. But no one soldier shines out from this group. All are heroes — like the heroes of *Y Gododdin*.

Jones contrasts the manner of death in the trenches with that of death on the battlefield at Catraeth:

> Properly organized chemists can let make
> more riving
> power than ever Twrch Trwyth;
> more blistered he is than painted Troy Towers
> and unwholer, limb from limb, than any of them
> fallen at Catraeth . . . (p. 155)

The horror of chemical warfare is its remoteness from those who use it. In ancient Britain, death itself was no less violent, but the instrument of death was connected to a living being who took as great a chance of being killed as of killing another. The sword is considered a noble, mystical weapon; it suggests the valour of the swordsman as well as the death of his victim. Mustard gas creates only the image of a grotesquely disfigured man. The fact that this corpse is none other than Aneirin Merddyn Lewis, who is so acutely aware of his chivalric past, gives this image stark significance.

Jones make an important distinction between Private Watcyn, the Anglicized South Walian (an alienated Walian?), and Lance-Corporal Aneirin Lewis, who is a true Welshman, possessing a deep awareness of his own culture and tradition. There is some poignancy in Lewis's revelation that he can share his rich recollections of his heritage neither with his fellow British soldiers nor with Watcyn, who is, ostensibly, a Welshman:

> for although Watcyn knew everything about the Neath fifteen, and could sing Sospan Fach to make the traverse ring, he might have been an Englishman when it came to matters near to Aneirin's heart. (p. 89)

Lieutenant Jenkins has a Welsh name, but appears even more alienated from Welsh tradition than does Watcyn. With Jenkins, though, the alienation appears to be a function of class rather than his place of origin. He is solidly upper-class. He "got his full lieutenancy on his twenty-first birthday, and a parcel from Fortnum and Mason" (p. 107). What could be more foreign to Aneirin Lewis than Fortnum and Mason? These shades of Welshness probably express David Jones's own frustration at being "Anglo-Welsh" and yet having little of the Welsh language and culture in his own background. It is paradoxical that the great weight of myth which hangs upon Aneirin Lewis actually

cuts him off from his fellow soldiers. There is no one to whom he can relate. And here is apparent the chasm which separates Aneirin the poet from Aneirin the soldier; an ancient heroic age from our modern age. The fragmentation of modern society stands out in sharp contrast with the unity of culture and philosophy which binds together the warriors of *Y Gododdin*.

Jones's frequent use of Welsh words and phrases indicates a certain ambivalence in the poet. They may have been inserted for their sheer beauty and musical texture; but, while an English reader might be familiar with the Latin words and phrases used by Jones or, at least, manage to pronounce them and "hear" them in the context of the poetry, Welsh words are likely to produce an insurmountable problem in both understanding and pronunciation. Jones weaves the Welsh language into the English language with perfect cadence:

> The water in the trench drain ran as fast as stream in Nant Honddu in the early months, when you go to get the milk from Peny-maes. (p. 77)

For a reader with no understanding of Welsh, surely this sentence must sound ugly and disrhythmic. For whom are these lines written? Jones is no Dylan Thomas; he is not painting a poignant picture of Welsh life for English readers. He is addressing those who know how to pronounce "Honddu" and who know all about trudging to fetch the milk on a chill February morning. As an Anglo-Welsh author writing in English, Jones's first responsibility, it seems, is to his English audience; but there is a hint of the esoteric, a narrowness, in these slivers of Welsh life, which exclude the English reader. It is almost as if David Jones, if only in these brief allusions, wants to emulate Aneirin, who addresses an audience with a shared tradition and a common inheritance. It is, of course, much easier for Aneirin to appeal to shared values than it is for David Jones. *Y Gododdin* relates to shared experience, shared religion, shared culture. Jones cannot rely on collective beliefs. He mentions the "dissimilar merits of Welshmen and Cockneys" (p. 139) and also the alienation of Welshman from Welshman. What Jones can relate to are those basic human traits which transcend culture and religion — loyalty, courage, and

compassion. Jones does make brief allusions to the Christian faith, but there is no dependence on faith as a deliverer. Christianity is alluded to in much the same way as are myth and ancient history — as part of a collage of experience, no single component of which is more significant than any other.

Neither *Y Gododdin* nor *In Parenthesis* can be considered epic. Their scope is not cosmic; their heroes, although depicted as brave compassionate men, do not explore the Universe, either physically or psychologically, as does the traditional epic hero. Each poet examines the role of the soldier as part of a group, consisting of men similar to himself. While epics such as *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* depict war from the standpoint of a single individual who seems to stand above and apart from his fellow soldiers, *Y Gododdin* and *In Parenthesis* convey a sense of shared sensation and experience. The true epic hero is in control — if not of his own destiny then of the method of arriving at it. Aneirin's warriors are "Fighting for Eidin's treasure and mead / On Mynyddawg's orders" [4(XCV).3]. Jones's foot soldiers follow their generals' orders and are as remote from the conception of those orders as are the men of Catraeth.

When David Jones turns to Welsh history and mythology, he is not using a borrowed allusory device, but one which lives and breathes still in the strong oral tradition of Wales. Ancient Welsh myths and poetry are incanted regularly at the Gorsedd rituals and the Eisteddfodau. Jones is not only attempting to universalize the particular with his references to Welsh history and mythology; he is seeking something intensely personal — the realization of his own identity as a Welshman. And, in rooting out the Welshness in himself, he exposes the Celtic heritage of the British people.

NOTES

[1] Aneirin, "Y Gododdin," 6 (II).3. In *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse in English* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977). All subsequent references will be to this translation and cited in the text.

[2] David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (Faber and Faber: London, 1969), p. 176. All subsequent references will be to this edition and cited in the text.

[3] Thomas Parry, ed., "Y Gododdin," 1 (VIII).1-4. In *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).