IN PARENTHESIS

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*The forgotten yet seismic shift in the retelling of war*

BY MOLLY HUNT

‘I have only tried to make a shape in words’ David Jones

The epic poem *In Parenthesis*, written by David Jones, was published in 1937 and meticulously recounts the movements of a certain Private John Ball as he embarks on a 7 month long journey with his battalion during the First World War. Jones explores both the desolation and fructification of Mametz wood and harnesses its ancient powers to retell the harrowing of war from a profound and unique viewpoint.

The poem is split into seven parts, beginning with the soldier’s march to Southampton in high spirits, and ends in the topsy-turvy enchanted setting that is Mametz Wood. It is here where Ball, wounded and on the cusp of death, encounters the powerful Queen of the Woods who enters the post battle wasteland bearing ‘bright

boughs of various flowering.’ She lays these upon the broken branches and men, declaring that ‘the secret princes between the leaning trees have diadems given them’ as she gives her promise that they will ‘reign with her for a thousand years.’ Her enchanting presence helps to create a preternatural world which runs parallel with that of traditional tales of life in the trenches, opening the cosmos to the possibility of the Everyman soldier morphing like a phoenix into a warrior from ancient Brythonic times or a knight seeking the Grail. David Jones, the only survivor in his battalion, transformed and condensed his experiences into the character of Private Ball, whose story, although simple in nature and arguably generic, is elevated to the status of pagan legend. He, as the vehicle through which we observe war, is

able to look through the simple lens of reality and see the spiritual realm beyond.

The poem actually began as a series of abstracted drawings Jones produced during and after his time as a soldier. Starting as fully formed, ordered and interpretable drawings, the torment of war can be seen to have eaten away at Jones’s mind as his sketches became more and more sporadic and disconnected. There is a clear link between the increasing abstraction of his drawings and the effects of war. Eventually, these drawings gave birth to short bits of text until finally the hand of an artist was replaced by that of a poet – thus creating *In Parenthesis*. This starkly visceral rendition of war has, in the words of Auden, ‘done for the British and the Germans, what Homer did for the Greeks and the Trojans.’

The actual title *In Parenthesis* gives a subtle insight into the various uncertainties facing Jones’s life not only at the time he wrote the poem, but also when he served in the army. Acutely aware of the transition period he was living through, Jones saw the end of an era – signified by the death of Ball’s battalion in the poem – and the beginning of a new one in the form of the hope provided by the Queen of the Woods. This in-between period of limbo acts as the parentheses - that bubble of unreality which exists between two pieces of history.

Jones was primarily an artist whose overarching style was that of printmaking and engravings although he dabbled in watercolour and charcoal later on in life. He harnessed the Celtic idea that art can be used as a method to look into another dimension; the world of ancestors, history and myth. The change in artistic style that saw the fragmentation of his art is also mirrored in the writing style of *In Parenthesis.* The beginning is highly detailed and realistic with military coordinates that make Ball’s steps entirely traceable. As the poem goes on, he lets myth and legend infuse the text until it becomes a dense mass of imagery, merging reality and myth into a thick fabric that is extremely difficult for the reader to interpret.

Regarded by many critics as an inventive and literary artist, Jones always managed to portray a clear narrative despite the rather abstracted and convoluted style he’d developed later in life. There is a sense of elusiveness to his work which is presented through a highly Celtic lens of myth, which culminates in the appearance of The Queen of the Woods. Her ancient femme fatale quality as both Queen of Heaven and whore of Babylon makes her impossible to define in human terms. Jones himself was a converted catholic and thus linked his Queen of the Woods to the figure of Mary and her transient yet mortal nature. She alone possesses the power of regeneration, not only of Mametz Wood but also of the men who die there in war. Her origins, although purposefully ambiguous, hail from ancient goddesses, believed to be the primal divinity prior to Pagan and Roman beliefs.

Novelist and critic Robert Graves also served during the First World War and wrote a book called *The White Goddess* which similarly underlines the notion that war awakens this divine, female deity. Her presence is a force which can transmute the horrors of war into goodness. Although Jones never went back to Mametz Wood, he took great interest in the fact that those who had returned, described it as a graceful and alluring place due to nature’s reclaiming of the land.

Naturally, writers and poets such as Graves and Jones were unfashionable at the time of their release due to their unique perspective on the outcomes and consequences of war. Whilst they categorically acknowledge the disruption of war, the underlying motif in their work is beauty and the importance of recycling experiences. *In Parenthesis* is the perfect suspension between an obituary to humanity, our destructive activities and the art we create in doing so.

*In Parenthesis* is fundamentally inspired by the medieval Welsh poem *Y Gododdin*. Simplistic in form, the poem recounts a tale in which 300 men from the Brythonic kingdom of Gododdin are feasted by their Lord for an entire year before being taken to the sight of battle against the Angles. The consequences are devastating, with 299 of the soldiers dying, the only survivor being the poet himself. Just as it is his duty to recall the story of his fellow soldiers’ death, Jones makes it Ball’s duty as the only survivor, to do the same with those who died at the Somme. It is the burden of the Bard to retell the tragic tale ad infinitum. Ball’s tragedy is that he survives and doesn’t die with his comrades. He crawls out of the wood and rests his rifle ‘under the oak’ as an offering to the gods of Mametz. The language reverts back to intense realism, the spell under which we have been dreaming, is broken and Ball must return to the real world.

I have described this epic poem as a seismic shift in the retelling of war simply because of what Jones *himself* said about the work stating that, ‘I did not intend this as a “war book” – it happens to be concerned with war. I should prefer it to be about a good kind of peace.’ After all, if we’ve learnt anything, it is that whilst war can cause great pain and anguish, there will always be something for people like Jones to grip onto and turn into a spark that will eventually ignite a flame of dazzling creativity.