

Contribution to the online conference organized by the David Jones Research Center on 26-27 May 2022: “The Long Conversations: David Jones, Modernism and Friendship”

Delayed and relayed – conversation between David Jones and Louis Bonnerot

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‘Delayed and relayed’, this is what my ‘long conversation’ with David Jones has been.

It was David Jones’s obituary that triggered my interest in his complex and many-layered work, so I never had the privilege of meeting him in person. But I met, and indeed became friend with, some of his close friends, Peter Orr and René Hague, as well as scholars who had met him or entertained a long epistolary conversation with him. Three and a half years ago, most unexpectedly, I came upon another long and fascinatingly intricate conversation between the painter-poet and one of his early academic admirers and exegetes who soon became a friend of his, namely Professor Louis Bonnerot. Actually *I* did not ‘come upon it’, it came upon me. After his mother Luce Bonnerot had died, when he had to sort out papers, Louis Bonnerot’s son Emmanuel got in touch and asked if I’d be interested in David Jones’s letters to his father. The letters are now at the University of Wales Library, with other David Jones manuscripts and documents. But Emmanuel Bonnerot provided me with scanned copies.

As anything written by Jones they make for exciting but also tantalizingly irritating reading. I propose to illustrate the two elderly men’s friendship with three letters: two fairly short ones (two pages, so on one single sheet of paper) written towards the beginning and at the very end of their correspondence, and one that runs to four pages (others run to six or eight pages). We’ll first look at the short ones, then move to the longer one, dated 11 November 1972 and mainly dealing with “The Tribune’s Visitation”.

The letter dated January 4th, 1965 is not the first one they exchanged. They started corresponding five years earlier, but the 1960 letter is more of a formal introduction and in this sense of less interest. The family name ‘Bonnerot’ is crossed out, with a side note referring to what he writes in the first paragraph, namely that they are “sufficiently ‘introduced’ by now” to drop the ‘Mr.’ and the family names. However, he still uses a rather formal closing phrase (‘Yours very sincerely,’). In February 1974 (Jones’ very last letter to Louis Bonnerot), he addresses his friend with the Welsh word of endearment ‘*annwyl*’ and plays with colours; the closing words are warmer

and more intimate “How are you, please give my affectionate message to Luce. Love from David Jones”, though he never left off his own family name in the signature.

In all of his letters, as indeed in real life, David Jones is not only self-effacing but at times close to self-deprecating, as when he writes “I’m terribly glad that you feel the visit was not fruitless” (4 January 1965, page 1) or “I also feel a bit ashamed that you should spend so much time and exertion on my stuff . . . At the same time I would like to express my sincere gratitude that you should find it worthwhile.” (February 1974 letter, page 1), and again, on page 2 of that last letter, “I wanted only to thank you with all my heart for your great kindness & care”.

The meandering structure, or absence of structure, in his letters very much reflects a casual conversation between intimate friends. It is also highlighted by his almost compulsive use of ever widening margins, so that practically every square centimeter is covered with his spindly handwriting. Marginal notes literally run into each other, without ever quite colliding. This may be a habit contracted in the trenches, when every scrap of paper was precious for an artist. And indeed his drawings too are often incredibly crowded.

In that January 1965 letter, he comments on a meeting – then on the discomfort of his current lodgings (though never complaining), he enquires into the other’s needs, and generously offers explanations on his own printed work (here mainly *The Anathemata* and *The Dream of Private Clitus*), then without any transition adds a kind opinion on Prof. Johnson’s book on poets of the first World War, and returns to more private concerns with a reference to a Mrs. Finzi, who will be mentioned on and off.

In the last 1974 letter the left margins have become huge. Unlike what happens in most other letters, and in the other one I am showing, they are not filled with additions and after-thoughts, but with the continuation of the main text of the letter, with the very last additions occurring on the first page: a recurring, apologetic N.B. about someone waiting and no time for re-reading, followed, in obvious haste (the waiting person was probably getting impatient) with three corrections in the newly printed book *The Sleeping Lords and Other Fragments*.

After mentioning some of the health issues that had prevented him from working and even from ‘attending to correspondence’, he devoted most of this letter to whether the word *fragments* used in the title is adequate or not. He goes back to his writing while in London during the WWII, which resulted in *The Anathemata* and a number of other pieces or, as he writes, “materia poetica”, some of them now collected in *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*. He acknowledges that at the time

he was not “properly aware that *The Anathemata* was quite as complete a cyclic pattern as it is”, with the Oblation on Maundy Thursday making the Immolation on Good Friday “inescapable”, and consequently could not have any other writing added to it.

As we can now see from the two collections of left-over MSS (*The Roman Quarry and other Sequences*, edited by Harman Grisewood and René Hague, Agenda Editions, 1981 and *The Grail Mass and Other Works*, edited by Thomas Goldpaugh and Jamie Callison, Bloomsbury, 2021) they could be structured into cycles too, with some twitching and pinching. But after his two book-length literary achievements, and while fighting mental and psychological ailments, David Jones never found time and strength to work on this. The few words he writes to describe *The Sleeping Lord* almost at the end of this letter are a terse summing up of the collection, those “bits of writing”, he writes, are “mainly concerned either with soldiers cockney or welsh of the 1914-18 war transferred to the world of Roma Aurea Roma or [with] Welsh Celts of history or legends”, “mainly” because this leaves out the opening prayer “a a Domine Deus” and the closing fragment from the sequence *The Book of Balaam’s Ass*. There is something quite moving I find in this nutshell summary occurring at the end of this last letter.

The letter written in November 1972 was written in reply to Bonnerot’s sending a transcript of the translation of “The Tribune’s Visitation” that he and Lucien Malmarmey had produced, and is mainly about this piece. But in his opening apologies Jones describes at some length an exhibition of his visual work that was to take place in several venues in Wales and the issue of the catalogue, which would be the same as that of a previous, much smaller, exhibition in London because there were too many unsold copies. Prompted by what seems to have been a comment of Bonnerot’s on the 4th C Christian author Vegetius he shifts to speculations on how Roman soldiers took their oaths of allegiance depending on the time and mode of recruitment. Next, on the third page, which he aptly describes as ‘a mess’, after some praise for passages where he feels the French works better than his English, he develops convoluted considerations on his use of the word ‘weighty’ to describe the Persians by contrast with ‘unstable Britain’, translated by Bonnerot as *Perses pesants*; he explains he wanted to convey a sense of gravitas as well as the fact the Persians were a more serious threat to the Roman empire than the Britons, and is therefore not quite satisfied with *pesants*. (in the merged commented translations that will be published by the Presses universitaires de Liège I propose *pondérés*.)

On the fourth page he comments on the mystery of how different languages work: "How extraordinary this whole business of linguistics is – I mean how some word or expression conveys exactly & with further evocations something that has to be said in a quite other fashion in some different language & sometimes can hardly be conveyed at all, and it is so chancy." This is an uninformed, naïve approach to translation yet somehow also quite accurate.

Although he had left school at 14 to be trained as a visual artist Jones was not unduly impressed by university professors like Louis Bonnerot. On the other hand I hope Bonnerot was duly impressed by the all-round genius of David Jones.