In Parenthesis, a "shape in words"

Christine Pagnoulle

David Jones (1895-1974) was a gifted visual artist who at 20 listlessly enlisted and became a private in His Majesty's Army for four years. When he came back to civilian life, much the worse in his mind though not in his artistic skills, he felt he had to account for his experience in the trenches. He had drawn a lot, but drawing, though powerfully evocative, did not manage to convey the complexity of what he had been through. He had, as he put it, to create "a shape in words." Telling his story of the Great War thus turned him into a writer.

After *In Parenthesis*, published by Faber and Faber in 1937, he published four more books, all with Faber and Faber, namely two collections of essays (*Epoch and Artist*, 1959, and *The Dying Gaul and Other Writings*, published posthumously in 1978), a most ambitious epic *Anathemata* (1952), which encompasses the story of the Earth and of Humankind all revolving on the fulcrum of the Crucifixion and the Eucharist, and *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments* (1974), pieces he had salvaged from the rambling sequences his friends and devoted critics tried to organize after his death.[1] Those last two works definitely belong to poetry, whereas his first publication is of a more hybrid nature.

In the 1937 book he did not (would not? could not?) account for all he had gone through over those years. The period he covers in *In Parenthesis* are the first six months or so of his life as a private in a foot regiment, from a training camp in England in December 1915 to the Battle of the Somme in early July 1916. As he explains at the beginning of his Preface,

> The latter roughly marks a change in the character of our lives in the Infantry on the West Front. From then onward things hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair, took on a more sinister aspect. The wholesale slaughter of the later years, the conscripted levies filling the gaps in every file of four, knocked the bottom out of the intimate, continuing, domestic life of small contingent of men, within whose structure Roland could find, and, for a reasonable while, enjoy, his Oliver. (ix)

What is described in this work is at times hair-raising enough, yet it can still be accommodated within an esthetic design. Jones did try to give a literary form to subsequent events. It resulted in possibly the most puzzling and uncanny of his posthumously published sequences, *The Book of Balaam's Ass*.[2] His own puzzlement in front of newfangled mechanical devices or the use of chemicals is also expressed in his Preface (xiv). It is poignantly conveyed in the opening fragment of *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*: "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." (9) Those lines can be found in the last paragraph of the posthumous sequence, but caught in a sinister pornographic context which excludes any hope of redemption.

In some respects *In Parenthesis* can be compared to a rather conventional novel. It has a main character, Private John Ball, with other main characters introduced on the first page (Lieutenant Jenkins, Sergeant Snell, Corporal Quilter, Lance-Corporal Aneirin Merddyn Lewis). Its narrative

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[1] See *The Roman Quarry and Other Sequences*, Harman Grisewood and René Hague eds, London, Agenda, 1979, and *The Grail Mass and Other Works*, Tomas Goldpaugh and Jamie Callison eds, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.
[2] David Jones, *Le Livre de l'ânesse de Balaam / The Book of Balaam's Ass*, bilingual edition, translation Christine Pagnoulle, Millau, Clapas, 2003.

unfolds in chronological order, though several months are skipped between Part 4 and Part 5, and, as also happens in actual life, time can be fleeting (a couple of pages covering several weeks, as in Part 2 and Part 5) or intensely concentrated, as in Part 4, with about 40 pages for the short hours of daylight on Christmas Day, their first day on the Front, which was quiet enough, or in Part 7, which tells the long day of the assault on Mametz Wood. It strikes a fine balance between autobiographical memories of what happened to Private Jones and a fictionalized dimension that is compatible with echoes of medieval heroic romances and with the redemptive gesture that is central in the Roman Catholic liturgy.

How does poetry work its way into this narrative? Elasticity of time is common enough in novels. So are frequent shifts in the use of tenses and of pronouns, with the main character often referred to in the second person ('you'); there are some 'we', particularly in dialogues, but hardly any first person singular except, most notably, all through Dai's boast right in the middle of the book, which grimly celebrates the permanence of war[3]; the third person, either singular ('he', 'Jerry') or plural, often refers to the enemy, but an enemy, as the author reminds us in his dedication "who shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure."

Similarly the weaving of historical or allegorical echoes in the names of characters is a device found in classical novels too. John Ball was the name of one of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt in the 14th century; it is also common enough to stand for Everyman. The name of the Welsh lance-corporal brings together a bard (Aneirin), a magician (Merddyn) and a murdered prince (Lewis, a modern form of Llywelyn). The first names of Lieutenant Jenkins (Piers Dorian Isambart) have aristocratic and literary associations. Independently of names, in Part 7 we encounter a 'naked' allegory in the figure of the Queen of the Woods, granting vegetal awards to fallen soldiers, irrespective of their nationalities. Such allegorical intrusions are not unheard of in traditional novels either. A profuse use of quotations (from the Bible, the Liturgy, medieval romances, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Hopkins, poems found in Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English verse*) can also occur in novels. What is less expected, though, is the number of end-notes documenting them or providing accurate details on weapons or wartime procedures. Actually, notes were not associated with poems either, until T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*.

The book is structured in seven parts, with quotations, or composite quotations, as titles, and passages from the 6th century poem *Y Gododdin*[4] as epigraphs. This is all part of a deliberate distancing strategy, as when the most dramatic parts begin with quotations.[5] Sure enough, the quotations refer to tragic events, but they introduce an additional literary filter. Significantly, there is much more such filtering in Part 7, which otherwise is a direct relation of senseless slaughtering, than, say, in Part 4, though the enemy's proximity can repeatedly be felt but without casualties among men who are busy organizing some sort of everyday life. Does this at times rather obtrusive recourse to derivative literary allusions, as in the paragraph that begins "But sweet sister death has gone debauched today," in which the dead are compared to heroic figures in medieval epics or to biblical characters (162-163), denote as such the impact of poetry? Not necessarily, though as we shall see those pages are sheer poetry for other reasons.

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[3] "I was with Abel when his brother found him" / "I was the spear in Balin's hand" / "I was the Loricated Legions" / "I marched, sixty thousands marched who marched for Kynan and Elen because of foreign machinations" / "I was in Michael's trench when bright Lucifer bulged his primal salient out", etc. (79-84).

[4] Like many Celtic poems it commemorates a defeat and is told by one of the three survivors.

[5] The opening of Part 3, when they are groping their way to the front on a murky December night, quotes rubrics of the Good Friday office. Less dramatically, the first lines of Part 4, when Ball wakes up at dawn, are an almost pastoral quotation from Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Part 6 begins with a potpourri of military passages from the same book. Most strikingly, the first paragraph of Part 7 is almost entirely in Latin and combines a line from a Psalm and a passage of Jeremiah's Lamentations used in the Good Friday liturgy, with the second line (in English) recalling Cain's murder of Abel.

Punctuation is definitely unconventional. Jones never uses quotations marks, and hardly ever any question or exclamation marks. Readers have to *hear* when the text turns into a dialogue and carefully piece together who is saying what. Such reliance on the *oral* quality of the text is a feature that undoubtedly belongs to the field of poetry.

Indeed poetry cannot be defined by the use of verse vs prose but by a sustained attention to form – to sounds and rhythm. Even if read silently it calls on the readers' ears. In what follows I propose to examine some passages, selected almost at random, and attempt to show how they are earmarked by this poetic tension and attention.

The first page presents a glitch in the 'liturgy of a regiment departing' (4) – John Ball's late arrival. The paragraph that describes his hurrying with ill-fitted gear illustrates the combination of accuracy in details and mastery of syntax and assonances.

> Heavily jolting and sideway jostling, the noise of liquid shaken in a small vessel by a regular jogging movement, a certain clinking ending in a shuffling of the feet sidelong – all clear and distinct in that silence peculiar to parade grounds and to refectories.

The absence of a main verb reflects the precarious balance in Ball's steps. The participles "jolting" and "jostling" (echoed in "jogging") call up the sound of liquid before we come upon the noun "noise." Other verbs are close to onomatopoeia, such as "clinking" and "shuffling."

On the last page of Part 2 the approach and explosion of a shell is rendered in a quick and chaotic succession of gerunds, this specifically English form thanks to which verbs are also nouns, thus infusing the sentence with a sense of action, which contrasts with Private Ball's stunned immobility.

> Out of the vortex, rifling the air it came – bright, brass-shod, Pandoran; with all-filling screaming the howling crescendo's up-piling snapt. The universal world, breath held, one half-second, a bludgeoned stillness. Then the pent violence released a consummation of all burstings out; all sudden up-rendings and rivings-through – all taking-out of vents – all barrier-breaking – all unmaking. Pernitric begetting – the dissolving and splitting of solid things. (24)

The breath-taking syncopation introduced by dashes, the inverted syntax with the verbs at the end of clauses, the dramatic isolation of the two words ("all unmaking"), all contribute to readers experiencing something of the trauma lived by soldiers for whom it was their first contact with the violence of war.

The progress of Ball's platoon towards the Frontline by night in Part 3 is full of whispering, of muffled greetings, of grumbling counter-orders. They proceed under an inconstant moon on unreliable duckboards.

> Break in the boards – pass it back.
> The fluid mud is icily discomforting that circles your thighs; and Corporal Quilter sprawls full length; two of them help him to his feet, his rifle like a river-bed salvaged antique – which dark fumbling assistance brings the whole file to a standstill – who call out huskily, to move on; to get a move on, and now perversely – slower in front, go slower in front. (45)

Hesitation, confusion, delay are conveyed in a groping jagged syntax and the merging of spoken words and narrative voice. In the second sentence the gap between antecedent and relative clause somehow makes the mud even more discomforting; the next two relative clauses bump into each other, as do the men.

The following passage in Part 4 occurs at a moment of very low tension. The men are sitting in the trench, almost idly.

> Mr Jenkins and his platoon sergeant came again from their tour of inspection; mired and blue-slimed with liquid mud from 'P' sap, where No. 4 kept watch in isolation in a night-digged ditch, dyked between enemy and friend. The two detailed for section's rations silently rose up, together with the lance-corporal; as silently fell behind, filed heavy-footed, disappeared at the earth-work's turn. (68)

The syntax here is almost standard, but not quite. Two semi-colons introduce slightly longer pauses (as though denoting some weariness?). The part of the sentence that describes the condition of the lieutenant and his sergeant (« mired and blue-slimed with liquid mud ») has the rhythm of a pentameter and is mimetically cloying through the repetition of the labial [m] and the liquid [l]. Two lines below the ditch (not even a trench, just a precarious excavation) is at it were dug again in the d-alliteration. Just as soldiers do not waste their breath on unnecessary words, transitions are left out.

At some point in Part 5 when weapons are allocated the text contrasts elite soldiers, who fight on their own and "know exactly how to behave" with "the rifle strength"

> the essential footmob, the platoon wallahs, the small men who permanently are with their sections, who have no qualifications, who look surprisedly from a confusion of gear, who endure all things. (126)

Their bewilderment is captured in the unusual adverb "surprisedly." The passage suggests both that they are needed (as cannon fodder) and that they will never get the hang of things, or indeed that the whole context is utterly absurd, as is suggested two pages further in an exchange between a runner (who merely repeats "Yes sir" and a tantrum-prone form-master.

Towards the end of Part 6, as friends are watching the battle-ground, the indirect way in which he refers to the scattered corpses makes them even more vividly horrid.

> And you saw the whole depth of the advance and gauged the nature of the contest yard by yard, and made some estimate of the expenditure and how they'd bargained for each hundred feet with Shylock batteries. You marked how meshed intricacies of wire and cunning nest had played sharp tricks on green and eager plaintiffs. They lay heaped for his bloody suing. (148)

The paragraph mixes the vocabulary of trade and law, with the running metaphor of Shylock's bargain for a pound of flesh in *The Merchant of Venice*, a play which, among other things, describes the emergence of capitalist venture, of which the Great War marked a bleak culmination. Here the syntax is cautious and balanced like the merciless calculation presiding over strategic moves with human pawns (the image of the chessboard is used in the next part, page 165). Adjectives are unobtrusively contrasted, since "sharp" means both cutting and quick-witted while "green" here means naïve, unsuspecting but also points at the devastated vegetation. This is not, however, a one-sided indictment on the Germans but on warmongers at large. Some lines further on the next page we come upon an empathic sharing of the anguish experienced by "the old women in Bavaria" when they think of their boys on the Front.

The experience of unleashed violence in Part 7 echoes the shell at the end of Part 2, but multiplied beyond what can be accommodated by human senses.

> The memory lets escape what is over and above –
> as spilled bitterness, unmeasured, poured-out,
> and again drenched down – demoniac-pouring:
> who grins who pours to fill flood and super-flow insensately,

pint-pot – from milliard-quart measure.

The three alliterating verbs ("fill flood and super flow") contribute to a sense of drowning. The absurd juxtaposition of incompatible scales also calls upon alliterations. "Surfeit of fear" is conveyed through other metaphors on page 156,

> the sensibility of these instruments to register,
> fails;
> needle dithers disorientate.
> The responsive mercury plays laggard to such fevers –

The passage about "sweet sister death" mentioned above compares the Reaper with a wanton whore who picks their virginity as she kills them. The first lines are as nakedly obscene as the situation they are in

> But sweet sister death has gone debauched today and stalks on this high ground with strumpet confidence, makes no coy veiling of her appetite but leers from you to me with all her parts discovered. (162)

Yet in the following lines, in which we revert to the syncopation of verse, there is a kind of solace in the evocation of legendary figures, dead though they are, a comfort that may be echoed in the balanced swing of the lines.

The impact of this "shape in words" on our bodies is particularly acute all through this climactic last part. The moment at the darkest point of night when a bullet eventually hits Ball's leg is described in one of the few prose passages in this part.

> Where his fiery sickle garners you:
> Fanged-flash and darkt-fire thrring and thrrung athwart thdrill a Wimshurst pandemonium drill with dynamo druv staccato bark at you like Berthe Krupp's terrier bitch and rattlesnakes for bare legs; sweat you on the sudden like masher bimp's back-firing No.3 model for Granny Bodger at 1.30 a.m. rratle a chatter you like a Vitus neurotic, harrow your vertebrae, bore your brain-pan before you can say Fanny – and comfortably over open sights:
> the gentleman must be mowed. (182)

Lexical coinage is underscored by sounds that suggest machine-gun mowing. The passage is framed by references to harvest, with the last line quoted echoing the old Somerset folksong "John Barleycorn," so that through the physical pain ("harrow your vertebrae, bore your brain-pan" we are aware of the continuity of life. Indeed "the gentleman," i.e. "Sir John Barleycorn," must be mowed, must die, for new life to grow.

The work's last words are almost a quotation from *The Song of Roland.*

> The geste says this and the man who was on the field . . . and who wrote the book . . . the man who does not know this has not understood anything.

In the old French text we read "*Ço dit la Geste e cil ki el camp fut . . . / E fist la charte . . . / Ki tant ne set ne l'ad prod entendut."* Yet these words are not at all the last ones and ellipses conceal a dissociation of characters: the man who was on the field, "Li ber Gilles," in the French text, and the book he wrote was the charter of an abbey he founded, whereas the subject of the last sentence is everyone and anyone. But clearly restoring the original French would run against the logic of these concluding lines, which fit in with other epic poems: the story is told by one of the survivors, John Ball and David Jones merging into the one figure of the reliable witness.

One final word to answer the general question raised in this issue: what does poetry do to a novel and more generally to fiction writing, or indeed writing *tout court*? It adds to the intensity of the language, it makes it vibrate and reverberate. And I would argue that poetry is woven into any good piece of writing.

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