



Truth-telling versus literary allusion in David Jones's 'In Parenthesis' (1937)

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Criticism of the literature of the First World War sometimes finds a place both for realism ' what we might call 'truth-telling' ' and for fictionalised structure. Andrew Rutherford, writing in 1978, praises the abilities of post-war novelists to give new shape to experience, arguing that 'honesty, inclusiveness, psychological and moral insight, and the accurate notation of experience are all desiderata in war literature, but they are not sufficient in themselves: they must be combined with the search for an appropriate form and the struggle to articulate through this the author's complex vision of the truth.' He applauds writers who can unite 'art with authenticity, fictional sophistication with documentary and psychological realism' (1).

More recent criticism has focused on identifying (and condemning) those writers who through such formal strategies, may be said to share some 'complicity' with war. Margot Norris provides a succinct appraisal of the dilemma when she asks the question: 'Can modern art overcome its internal constitutive difficulty in addressing the violent, the cruel, and the ugly without transforming it into beauty, without endowing it with aesthetic effects, without arousing pleasure, without bringing to redemption what should be irredeemable?' (2).

[David Jones's](#) war poem *In Parenthesis*, which at its most basic level is a fictionalised, poetic account mirroring his own service as a foot-soldier in the First World War, has polarised opinion along these two lines. It has evoked a hostile response from certain critics who find the 'truth-telling?', journalistic approach to be most appropriate, when dealing with the subject of war. These critics are suspicious of fictionalisation, and narrative experiment. Jones's fans, on the other hand, applaud the poem for its modernist characteristics; its use of allusion and quotation, the writer's willingness to create something new out of lived experience. But can such 'distance' and fictionalisation be a good thing? In his Preface to *In Parenthesis*, Jones makes it clear that the lapse of ten years between the event and the beginning of its retelling (he began to write the poem in 1928) gave the poem a form it would not have had, if it had been attempted earlier. The temporal distance allowed the writer 'to appreciate some things which, at the time of suffering, the flesh was too weak to appraise' [IP, 'Preface?', x] (3).

Another 'belated' writer whom Jones admired, [Edmund Blunden](#) (writing in the Preface to the Second Edition of his 1928 book, *Undertones of War*), felt with hindsight that his work contained numerous distortions caused by poor memory. He had inadvertently 'telescoped' situations, times and places. But he argues that these 'uncertainties' might actually constitute a new kind of genuineness . This idea of a memorial (rather than strictly factual) 'genuineness' is important. Although both Jones and Blunden express a certain trepidation at writing so long after the fact (and although Blunden remains more committed to a factual re-telling of real events than does Jones), both turn away from anxieties over accuracy and realism to endorse a new idea of truth-telling in war

literature. If the 'flesh was too weak' to appraise war in the heat of battle, as Jones claims in his Preface, the author writing from memory can nonetheless make new and profound insights. To this end, Jones takes an innovative approach throughout *In Parenthesis* (one which is in keeping with the allusive tendencies of modernist poetics). He colours his depictions of the war with allusions to other texts, often centuries older, which act as corollaries for the soldiers' experience. The battles of Malory's knights in his *Morte d'Arthur*, or Shakespeare's *Henry V* - to give just two examples amongst many - are brought into play.

These references to older literary works might seem arcane and therefore irrelevant, and yet - and this is a fact which is often missed - their appearance has a very strong basis in the reality of ordinary soldiers' experiences (admittedly, we are speaking here of the more literarily-inclined soldiers). We see an example of this in Part 6 of *In Parenthesis*. On the eve of battle, three friends sit together on a grassy hill. They are fictionalised incarnations of Jones and his friends Leslie Poulter and Reginald (?Reggie?) Allen. They discuss, amongst other things, their current reading:

They talked of ordinary things [...] Of the possible duration of the war. Of how they would meet and in what good places afterwards [...] Of if you'd ever read the books of Mr. Wells. Of the poetry of Rupert Brooke. Of how you really couldn't very well carry more than one book at a time in your pack. Of the losses of the Battalion since they'd come to France. [*In Parenthesis*, p. 139]

This passage gains a deep poignancy, when we realise that one of the three - identified here only as 'Reggie?', 'his friend with the Lewis guns' - is the 'PTE. R.A. LEWIS-GUNNER' memorialised by Jones on the [dedication-page](#) at the very start of *In Parenthesis*. The dedication tells us that Reggie was killed at Ypres in the winter of 1916-17.

That Jones's war becomes a highly literary, allusive construction in *In Parenthesis* (a landscape populated by the ghosts of other war texts) is partly a result of the artifice of the poet 'reshaping' his experiences, recalling the conflict in tranquillity; holding other tales of war in his mind as he goes, and weaving them in to his account. But it also harks back to lived experience, to Jones and his two friends with their books in their packs, seeking comfort - or at least a sense of shared experience - in their shared reading. The soldiers of *In Parenthesis* look, not only to the writers of 'today' (H. G. Wells, or Rupert Brooke), but to very ancient texts. One of the poem's most 'poetic' characters, Lance-Corporal Lewis, surveying the damage of a trench-mortar, finds the closest parallels to the destruction in his memories of ancient Welsh legends.

Some modern critics have found the literary parallels of *In Parenthesis* disquieting. Paul Fussell thinks that they 'ennoble' the matter of modern war by suggesting untenable continuities between past and present conflicts and he sees *In Parenthesis* as a failure (4). But we should I think see it as articulating a truth beyond the purely documentary; going back to Rutherford's idea of 'psychological realism'. The literary allusions of *In Parenthesis* contain a psychological truth about the way in which humans look for corollaries for their own experience. The battles of 'now' and 'long ago' (as Jones writes in an essay of 1943), are constantly brought to bear upon one another in the mind of the reading soldier.

In both the first and second World Wars, it was fairly common for soldiers to carry miscellanies of prose or verse in their kit. Through its allusions *In Parenthesis* is itself a miscellany: a place where past and present literary accounts of war collide. In 1939, an excerpt from Part Two of *In Parenthesis* was actually included in a miscellany entitled *The Knapsack*, compiled by Jones's friend, the poet and critic Herbert Read, at the start of the Second World War (5). This collection, small-format and printed on thin paper, was produced with the intention that a soldier would be able to carry it in his pack. It was a miscellany of writings on the subject of war and conflict, from Shakespeare through to the 'moderns' - Jones being one of the most 'up to date'. In other words, it was intended to fulfil a need, to be precisely 'we might intuit' - the sort of book that David Jones and Reggie Allen would have liked to carry with them into war; containing and charting many different literary

interpretations of conflict through the ages.

1. Andrew Rutherford, *The Literature of War: Five studies in Heroic Virtue* (London, 1978), p. 99.
2. Margot Norris, *Writing War in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottesville, 2000), p. 20.
3. Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (London, 1982) 'Preface to the Second Edition?', p. 9.
4. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975), p. 147.
5. Herbert Read, *The Knapsack: A Pocket Book of Prose and Verse* (London, 1939). Read included a section from the end of Part Two of *In Parenthesis*, under the title 'Strange New Things'.

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