

“Ancient Springs”?

**A Study of Kathleen Raine’s retrospective assembling of
Edwin Muir, David Jones, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins.**

**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy by
Michele Caroline Watson.**

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Abstract

This thesis reads Kathleen Raine's retrospectively assembled representation of Edwin Muir, David Jones, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins in the light of the mode of '...the learning of the Imagination'¹, an alternative canon to Auden, Larkin etc., of which Raine is the high priest. Raine developed her canonical redress in her studies of William Blake and W.B. Yeats, which culminated in her establishing the Temenos Academy and the Temenos Academy Review.

Raine is right. She is right at least that these poets follow something of the same creed and practice and they do constitute an alternative to the more accepted canon of Auden, MacNeice, and Larkin. This is the main concern of my thesis. Whether Kathleen Raine is right in thinking that they should replace the established canon is for the reader to decide. I do not come to a decision, but the thesis may help to settle the matter.

Chapters One, Two, Three and Four follow the lives of Edwin Muir, David Jones, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins, with individual readings of their poetry, adopting a Rainean approach, and also broader soundings in critical responses to their works both past and present. The use of Platonic concepts and Christian patterning to anchor poetry is linked to Raine's critique of what constitutes the imaginative tradition, and her search for true poets perpetuating the tradition. Close consideration is given to the biographical context of each poet, and the concepts and priorities expressed in the accompanying critical assessments of each poet. I argue then that Raine's assembling of the four poets is valid. She prompts us to appreciate a rich gathering in of conceptual, aesthetic and religious strands, a resonant binding of those poets isolated by plural specialisations.

¹ 'Symbolic thought establishes by means of multiple allusion through images, associations with a whole field of thought, which I have called the 'learning of the Imagination'. *Temenos* (9, 1988), p.206.

To Mum and Dad, for Bryn Rhedyn, The Summerhouse and countless gifts of love.

And always two,
Clearing bramble
Turning the earth
Knowing wood and seed
Our mother and father.

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Abbreviated Titles

Kathleen Raine

- IJP* = *The Inner Journey of the Poet* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982)
DAS = *Defending Ancient Springs* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1985)

Edwin Muir

- WM* = *We Moderns* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918)
ELS = *Essays on Literature and Society* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949, revised 1965)
A = *An Autobiography* (1954; repr, Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993)
EP = *The Estate of Poetry* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962)
SL = *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir* ed. P.H. Butter, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974)
SP = *Edwin Muir: Selected Prose* ed. George Mackay Brown (London: John Murray, 1987)
TI = *The Truth of the Imagination: Uncollected Essays and Reviews by Edwin Muir* ed. P.H. Butter (Aberdeen University Press, 1988)
CP = *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir* ed. P.H. Butter (Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1991)

David Jones

- IP* = *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1937)
A = *The Anathemata* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1952)
E&A = *Epoch and Artist* ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber & Faber, 1959)
SL = *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1974)
DJL = *David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins* ed. Ruth Pryor (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976)
DG = *The Dying Gaul* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1978)
DGC = *Dai Greatcoat: A self-portrait of David Jones in his letters* ed. René Hague, (London: Faber & Faber, 1980)
WP = *Wedding Poems* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2002)

David Gascoyne

- RB* = *Roman Balcony and Other Poems* (London: Lincoln Williams, 1932)
- OD* = *Opening Day* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1933)
- SSS* = *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1935; London: Frank Cass & Co., 1970; San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982)
- HM* = *Hölderlin's Madness* (London: J.M. Dent, 1938)
- CP* = *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
- CJ* = *Collected Journals, 1936-1942*, introduced by Kathleen Raine (London: Skoob Books Publishing, 1990)
- SP* = *Selected Prose 1934 – 1996*, edited by Alan Clodd, Roger Scott and Stephen Stuart-Smith (London: Enitharmon Press, 1997)
- A* = *April: A Novella* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2000)

Vernon Watkins

- DTL* = *Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins* edited with an introduction by Vernon Watkins (London: Dent/Faber, 1957)
- DJL* = *David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins* ed. Ruth Pryor (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976)
- CP* = *The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins* (1986; repr with corrections, Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 2000)
- NSP* = *Vernon Watkins: New Selected Poems* edited with an introduction by Richard Ramsbotham (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2006)

Introduction

I have spoken of these poets I have known, who were my friends, in an attempt to discover, and in their enduring words to communicate my own belief that poetry is the proper language of the soul; a speech that never ceases to tell those who are in the time-world of a timeless region that lies beyond the reach of intellectual judgements and evaluations.²

A retrospective of a poet's, or any artist's life and works is bound necessarily to assume the aspect of the person, or people assembling it. A poet thought to hold unquestionably secure status among 'the great' in one era, might be a non-entity in another, though a certain few seem to have attained the inner sanctum of assured immortality. Edwin Muir, David Jones, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins have been identified retrospectively by Kathleen Raine as being representative of what she terms to be poets of tradition and imagination. The poets take their place alongside William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W.B. Yeats, P.B. Shelley, John Keats and French poet St. John Perse, in two volumes of collected essays, *The Inner Journey of the Poet* and *Defending Ancient Springs*. Though it may be partly accidental, with these two volumes Raine creates an alternative canon-in-miniature of a certain type of poetic character. The arrangement of essays on the subject of poetry and art, instancing particular poets, recalls the collections by John Dryden, Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold, and more recently Kenneth Allott's very influential *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (1950), which set up a sort of English modern canon in the early 1950s and 60s. These poets and critics were similarly absorbed in the task of assessing, listing and in certain respects, cataloguing their predecessors' and contemporaries' literary achievements. Raine's collections were not as deliberately organised as Dryden's et al, in that they sought, perhaps, to create a chronicle of the English poetic identity. Raine's collections are rather 'gatherings', occasional papers from talks and seminars, but they are nonetheless intriguing in their resolutely embattled stance, and their display of concern regarding the nature of rating, placing and canonising poets. The poets this thesis is concerned with from the collection, were contemporaries and friends of Raine from the 1930s through to the 1970s (and into the twenty-first century in the case of David Gascoyne), at a time when she herself was embarking on and developing her own poetic and scholarly career. I consider Raine's

longevity to have afforded her a unique perspective of those times, and the length of her view has helped to shape the place of these poets in literary history.

But what prompted Raine to select and champion these poets? A large portion of her motivation sprang from her studies in William Blake, whom she referred to as ‘...my own Master...’³ and which culminated in her major scholarly work, ‘...a prolonged and serious study of Blake’s sources...’⁴ *Blake and Tradition*. Through studying Blake, Raine discovered the *Sophia Perennis* embodied in his work:

...In what one may call a ‘learning of the imagination’ stemming from Plato, embodied in the writings of the Neoplatonists, the Gnostic and Hermetic writings, the Cabbala and the cryptic texts of the Alchemists, the Rosicrucians...⁵

In this schema are included the great world religions, particularly their mystical branches. How can Raine’s understanding of framework of the *Sophia Perennis* be said to inform our understanding of Muir, Jones, Gascoyne and Watkins? And does it provide a valid context for assembling them as poets of kind? In terms of Modern and Postmodern theorising on literature, Raine’s ‘assemblages’ appeared at a moment when postmodernity could be said to have been emerging, the era when pastiche, stylistic fragmentation and spectacle in art and literature became the logical accompaniment to the transition to new stages of global capitalism and the accompanying disdain for the cult of enduring structures which characterised both intellectual, aesthetic, and political programmes beforehand. These were developments that deeply concerned Raine, who it seems was galvanised to re-assert ideas concerning the demise and loss of true culture, as a result of this era of accelerated transition. The encounter with fragmentation was of course a concern that underscored the critical writing of the moderns, most particularly T.S. Eliot and before Eliot, Matthew Arnold. Raine never employs such terms as modernism or postmodernism in her critical essays, she sedulously avoids critical terminology as indeed representative of a paradigm she holds responsible for the desacralisation of the arts and thus poetry:

Great art simply cannot come into being on a foundation of secular materialism.⁶

² *The Inner Journey of the Poet* by Kathleen Raine ed. Brian Keeble (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p.98. From the essay ‘Waste Land, Holy Land.’

³ ‘The Vertical Dimension’ (Kenneth Allott Memorial Lecture, University of Liverpool, 1991) by Kathleen Raine, *Temenos* (11, Wellingborough: September Press, 1990), p.195.

⁴ *Blake and Tradition* by Kathleen Raine (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p.ix.

⁵ *Poetry and the Frontiers of Consciousness* by Kathleen Raine (The Guild of Pastoral Psychology, 1985), p.12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.10.

Raine presents the *Sophia Perennis*, an ages old religious, cultural tradition, as antidote. There is no suggestion that her studies offer anything new, as she puts it herself ‘...this is not...after all a particularly original view...’⁷

The canon of the learning of the imagination is constant.⁸

Sacred tradition is not retrospective but rather a continuous renewal.⁹

Raine never claimed the Muir, Jones, Gascoyne and Watkins constituted a group; they were rather friends whom she believed happened to represent her view in their art and poetry. This thesis is an endeavour, through Raine’s treatment of each poet, to trace a discernible pattern of correspondences in their work. This is not to imply that these poets find their complete exegesis in the categories of Raine’s *Sophia Perennis*. Edwin Muir, David Jones, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins held individual conceptions of their respective poetic endeavours. Nonetheless, I argue that these four poets participate in Raine’s poetics of spiritual communion that rejects the depersonalisation of poetry into an isolated relationship between reader and text and the consequent disembodiment of language:

To recreate a common language for the communication of knowledge of spiritual realities, and of the invisible order of the psyche, is the problem now for any serious artist or poet...¹⁰

It is not the aim of my argument to identify a single set of rules that unites these writers in a shared literary practice. Each chapter traces the lives, religious intimations and poetic ideals and achievements of the four poets, underscored by a testing of Raine’s pronouncements. To register the insights of Raine is to remind ourselves that, though not new, hers is a position that needs to be re-affirmed.

All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body: that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in a cradle
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world.¹¹

⁷ *The Inner Journey of the Poet* by Kathleen Raine ed. Brian Keeble (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p.21. From the essay ‘Premises and Poetry.’

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁹ *Pearl: A Modernised Version of the Middle English Poem* by Victor Watts (London: Enitharmon Press, 2005), p.12. From the Introduction by Kathleen Raine

¹⁰ *The Inner Journey of the Poet* by Kathleen Raine, ed. Brian Keeble (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p.13. From the essay ‘What is Man?’

¹¹ From ‘The Phases of the Moon’ by W.B. Yeats, quoted by Kathleen Raine in *The Inner Journey of the Poet* ed. Brian Keeble (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), p.173.

This thesis consists of four chapters: - Chapter One: Edwin Muir; Chapter Two: David Jones; Chapter Three: David Gascoyne; Chapter Four: Vernon Watkins. The chapters present the poets in chronological order, apart from David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins. I wished to create a 'space' between the two 'Welsh-nesses' of David Jones and Vernon Watkins, and there were certain stylistic similarities between Gascoyne and Jones that I wanted to emphasise by placing them consecutively. My conclusion is embedded in the final chapter, the closing Watkins poem providing an apt summation of the thesis.

Edwin Muir (1887-1959)



Edwin Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, 1959
Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. P. H. Butler, London: The Hogarth Press, 1954.
Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. George Mackay Brown, London: John Murray, 1957.
Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. George Mackay Brown, London: John Murray, 1957.
Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. George Mackay Brown, London: John Murray, 1957.

Edwin Muir and W. G. Sebald
Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. George Mackay Brown, London: John Murray, 1957.
Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. George Mackay Brown, London: John Murray, 1957.
Muir, *The Edinburgh Review*, ed. George Mackay Brown, London: John Murray, 1957.

Edwin Muir (1887-1959)

Major Publications

Poetry

- First Poems* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1925)
Chorus of the Newly Dead (London: The Hogarth Press, 1926)
Variations on a Time Theme (London: J.M. Dent, 1934)
Journeys and Places (London: Dent, 1937)
The Narrow Place (London: Faber and Faber, 1943)
The Voyage (London: Faber and Faber, 1946)
The Labyrinth (London: Faber and Faber, 1949)
One Foot in Eden (London: Faber and Faber, 1956)

Prose

- We Moderns* Under the pseudonym "Edward Moore" (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918)
Latitudes (London: Andrew Melrose, 1924)
Transition Essays on Contemporary Literature (London: The Hogarth Press, 1926)
The Marionette (London: The Hogarth Press, 1927)
The Structure of the Novel (London: The Hogarth Press, 1928)
John Knox – Portrait of a Calvinist (London: Cape, 1929)
The Three Brothers (London: Heinemann, 1931)
Poor Tom (London: Dent, 1932)
Scottish Journey (London: William Heinemann/Victor Gollancz, 1935)
Social Credit and the Labour Party, a pamphlet, 1935
Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer (London: George Routledge, 1936)
The Story and the Fable: An Autobiography (London: Harrap, 1940)
Essays on Literature and Society (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949, revised 1965)
An Autobiography (1954; repr, Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993)

Posthumous Editions

- Collected Poems 1921-1958* (London: Faber and Faber 1960, revised 1963, 1984)
The Estate of Poetry (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962)
Selected Poems ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1965)
Selected Letters of Edwin Muir ed. P.H. Butter, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974)
Edwin Muir: Selected Prose ed. George Mackay Brown (London: John Murray, 1987)
The Truth of the Imagination: Uncollected Essays and Reviews by Edwin Muir ed. P.H. Butter (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988)
The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir ed. P.H. Butter, (Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1991)

Translations by Edwin and Willa Muir

- 43 Volumes, all but 3 translated from German. Among the most important are:
Broch, Hermann: *The Sleepwalkers* (London: Secker, 1932); *The Unknown Quantity* (Collins, 1935).
Kafka, Franz: *The Castle* (London: Secker, 1930); *The Trial* (London: Gollancz, 1937); *America* (London: Routledge, 1940).

The Place of Edwin Muir

It is the first task of the true modern to destroy the domination of the present.¹²

From his earliest expressions in writing, Edwin Muir was deeply concerned with time. It was a concern that drove his intellectual development as a young man and proved the shifting foundation of his art. In *We Moderns*, the section titled 'Domination of the Present' is a polemic against newfangled-ness:

To be modern in the accepted, intellectually fashionable sense: what is that? To propagate always the newest theory...to be the least possible distance behind the times, behind the latest second of the times...and, of course, to assume one is "in the circle" and to adopt the tone of the circle: in short, to make ideas a matter of fashion...to be intellectually without foundation, principles or taste. How did this convention arise? Perhaps out of lack of leisure: superficiality is bound to engulf a generation who abandon leisure. But to be enslaved to the present in this way is the most *dangerous* form of superficiality: it is to be ignorant of the very thing that makes Man significant, and with idiotic cheerfulness and unconcern to render his existence meaningless and trivial. In two ways can Man become sublime; by regarding himself as the heir of a great tradition: by making himself a forerunner...For the past and the future are greater than the present: the sense of continuity is necessary for human dignity.¹³

There are echoes of Matthew Arnold¹⁴ here, a preoccupation with culture and tradition which remained at the heart of Muir's motivation as writer. The historical sense, a devotion to which Muir associated with a dangerous and culturally debilitating relativity, was to be ever counter-balanced with 'the sense of continuity', of being 'heir of a great tradition'. In his letters Muir confessed to his 'obsession with Time'¹⁵ and wrote of his misgivings about history and science:

¹² *WM*, p.127.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.124-125.

¹⁴ Muir knew Arnold, referring regularly to him in his column 'Our Generation' for *The New Age* 1920-1922.

¹⁵ *SL*, p.84. From a letter to Stephen Spender, 4th May, 1935. In a letter of 12th May 1940 to Herbert Read, Muir wrote: 'I feel I probably have a sort of obsession about Time, and I wish I could look at it more objectively. Instead of seeing Time as the dimension of growth, I see everything passing away – the other pole, and I expect there is some perversity in my attitude, though on the other hand it is what stimulates my particular kind of imagination.' *Ibid.*, p.120.

My own feeling is that in allowing ourselves to adopt a purely historical view of human life we are losing half of it; for history...is a sort of substitution of the technique of existence for the content; there are ever so many things about which it can tell us nothing...¹⁶

...In the last resort we live by immaterial realities; that is our real life; the rest is more or less machinery. We are moved about, caught, wedged, clamped in this machinery; and that is what is called history.¹⁷

...Great as science is, I am troubled by the thought (often expressed) that knowledge means power, and that power falls into the hands of scoundrels and fanatics...For we have so much knowledge of things, and so little knowledge of ourselves. I am trying to gratify my plea for imagination, and my conviction that our development for the last 3 or 4 centuries has been a lop-sided one.¹⁸

Relatively late in life when Muir was in his mid-thirties, his intellectually driven concerns finally found expression in poetry. Michael Hamburger wrote in 1974 of, 'the timeless concerns that made Muir anachronistic in his lifetime'¹⁹ and the 'peculiar awkwardness'²⁰ of his poetry. Kathleen Raine, writing some ten years before, found no such 'awkwardness', regarding Muir naturally as 'heir of a great tradition' and championing his poetry less as an anachronism than as remnant of a vision of time and reality that made modernity itself the anachronism.

In *Defending Ancient Springs*, Kathleen Raine's first book of critical essays, Raine contrasts Edwin Muir's poetry with that of the 'political' poets of his era asserting that his poems 'survive...a change of background'²¹ that, 'they owe nothing to the accidental circumstances of the moment in which they were written or in which we read them'²² and therefore, 'time does not fade them.'²³

Edwin Muir, a poet who never followed fashion, has...given...permanent expression to his world...²⁴

Reviewing David Gascoyne's collection, *A Vagrant and Other Poems*, Edwin Muir wrote:

¹⁶ Ibid., p.86. From a letter to Stephen Spender, 4th September, 1935.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.108. From a letter to Sydney Schiff, 16th January, 1939.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.160. From a letter to Alec Aitken, 28th June, 1951.

¹⁹ *Lines Review* (No.50, September 1974), p.41.

²⁰ Ibid., p.40.

²¹ *DAS*, p.1.

²² Ibid., p.1.

²³ Ibid., p.1.

²⁴ Ibid., p.1.

Mr. Gascoyne belongs to no school. He has no style except his own, which is so pure that it seems to leave no room for idiosyncrasy...No poet of his generation abuses English so little or uses it with more precision and felicity than Mr. Gascoyne. This is due in part, perhaps, to his sense of the permanent in human experience, for that makes utterance simple and unaffected. In this volume he deals chiefly with contemporary life, but his imagination, while deeply concerned with that life, passed straight through it to the permanent. That, indeed, it may be plain, is the only way in which the contemporary can be illuminated and given meaning beyond itself.²⁵

There is a clear convergence between Raine's appreciation of Muir's poetry and Muir's of David Gascoyne's. Reviewing *The Truth of the Imagination: Some Uncollected Reviews and Essays* by Muir, in which Muir's review is collected, Raine notes the connection:

Edwin Muir was himself a poet concerned with 'permanent things' and the world of the imagination at a time when these were...out of fashion; which doubtless explains his greater warmth towards David Gascoyne...than to other poets writing at that time...²⁶

I agree with the parallel Raine draws between Muir and Gascoyne and would argue that Muir's comments regarding Gascoyne's belonging to 'no school', his purity of style and his 'simple and unaffected' utterance are attributes equally suited to Muir's own poetic endeavour and oeuvre; attributes that as equally have made his placing as poet problematic.²⁷ Muir's poetic vision, reflected in his comments on Gascoyne, earned him, however, a place in Kathleen Raine's retrospectively assembled canon of poets and artists, belonging to the *Sophia Perennis*, to what Raine determined to be the true tradition of poetry, the imaginative tradition; one in which the concepts of permanence and timelessness are binding, and in which the human scale is measured and explored in the light of eternity and eternal truths.

In her essay, Raine takes Muir's poem 'Day and Night' as representative of Muir's personal vision of permanence, which is shown to be connected with the world of night and dream. In the poem

²⁵ *TI*, p.111. From Muir's review of *A Vagrant and Other Poems* by David Gascoyne. *The Observer* (24th December 1950).

²⁶ *Temenos* (9, September Press, 1988), p.260. From 'The Truth of the Imagination' review by Kathleen Raine of Edwin Muir's *The Truth of the Imagination*.

²⁷ For example: 'Recent historical accounts of modern British poetry either have difficulty in situating Muir, or implicitly write him out of the canon altogether.' *Edwin Muir Centenary Assessments* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), p.102. From 'Edwin Muir as European Poet' by Ritchie Robertson.

Muir contrasts the transient nature of conscious day with the 'ancestral, impersonal yet deeply wise with the wisdom of countless generations'²⁸ nature of night:

I wrap the blanket of night
About me, fold on fold on fold –
And remember how as a child
Lost in the newness of the light
I first discovered what is old
From the night and the soft night wind.
For in the daytime all was new,
Moving in light and in the mind
All at once, thought, shape and hue.
Extravagant novelty too wild
For the new eyes of a child.

The night, the night alone is old
And showed me only what I knew,
Knew, yet never had been told;
A speech that from the darkness grew
Too deep for daily tongues to say,
Archaic dialogue of a few
Upon the sixth or seventh day.
And shapes too simple for a place
In the day's shrill complexity
Came and were more natural, more
Expected than my father's face
Smiling across the open door,
More simple than the sanded floor
In unexplained simplicity.²⁹

The poem, collected in *One Foot in Eden*, Muir's last volume of poetry, gathers together Muir's preoccupation with time and eternity, day and night, the old and the new. The 'shrill complexity' of fleeting day and sensory plethora is presented as finding meaning and coherence 'from the darkness'. Darkness is associated with an ancient source from which the poet rediscovers the language he believes necessary for the creation of poetry, which is also the source of truth and meaning, without which the 'daily tongues' are an empty clatter. The poem refers to a prelapsarian utterance, the word which creates by nomination and the suggestion of a reality, linguistic and physical, immune to the divisiveness of Cartesian discourse. Muir distrusted the 'new', which is typically linked with day in his poetry, in the human arena, associating it with the endless cycle of natural generation which has no history, writing of *The Tragedy of King Lear*:

The conflict in *Lear* is a conflict between the sacred tradition of human society, which is old, and nature, which is always new, for it has no background.³⁰

²⁸ *DAS*, p.2.

²⁹ *CP*, pp.221-222. From the poem 'Day and Night'.

³⁰ *A*, p.53. In later life Muir was to modify his view of animals and nature. They too became blessed and meaningful in the Christian pattern.

Raine asserts that Muir possessed the remnants of an 'ancestral imagination', that he had experienced directly as a child something of the ancient source of poetry via the oral tradition of ballads, to which in later life he found access in dreams and visions. This is a view corroborated by Muir in his autobiography and acknowledged in a letter to Raine in response to her review of his collection *The Labyrinth*:

I should like to thank you for your very understanding review of my poems, the review comes far nearest to my own feelings about them. I feel very grateful to you. I was interested particularly in what you said of the ancestral imagination which you said was still found in Ireland and Wales and Scotland. I hope it is also in England – I feel you yourself have some of it. I think I got some from Orkney ...³¹

In it Raine wrote:

[Muir] evokes with quiet sureness the archetypes that lie latent in each of us. One has the sense not so much of reading his poems as of reliving them, for he has the bard's gift of speaking the dreams of his tribe. Such poetry still comes from Ireland, Wales and Scotland, where racial memories are relatively undisturbed, and the gods not too far away for the poet to call back.³²

In a later letter to Raine, regarding his application to the Bollingen Foundation, Muir wrote:

Thank you for your letter...I have added, as you suggested, that I fancy the work on ballads would give me something for my own poetry and perhaps something to other poets too. I do hope the project will come off; for it will give me time for something which I shall enjoy doing and take me back again into the roots of poetry, where we should all be, and away from fashion. I have made a genuflection to Jung, as Herbert and Eliot, these wise men, advise...You say that for poetry Cambridge is a spiritual desert, but I want the landscape, the soil, things shaped by generations with affection and made into a human scene. I shall try to get up to Orkney this Summer if it can be managed at all. I suppose what is wrong with me here is that I am hungry. Horrible thought: I don't know whether Eden was ever here.³³

³¹ *SL*, p.153.

³² *The Observer*, 7 August 1949.

³³ *SL*, pp.184-5. This letter was written from America in 1956 where Muir was giving lectures on poetry at Harvard. Though he and Willa enjoyed their time in America, it is clear Muir felt its lack of cultural and spiritual heritage.

The idea of 'the roots of poetry' accords with that of an 'ancestral imagination' and Muir adds a further cultural requirement, when 'culture' is understood in the sense that Jane Austen used it.³⁴ To be 'heir of a great tradition' in a Rainean sense requires the convergence of a complex of factors not merely literary and artistic, but involving the whole man, his physical and his spiritual origins. Even so, it is worth mentioning at this point that Muir's 'ancestral imagination' had little, if any, connection with Celtic origins. In an exchange of letters between Muir and Eliot, the issue was briefly discussed, the notes attached to the letters providing:

Horace Gregory had written that 'since the death of W.B. Yeats, no mature poet of Celtic origin has made so impressive a contribution to modern literature as Edwin Muir', and Eliot has asked how 'an old Viking like yourself' felt 'about being called "a poet of Celtic origin"'.³⁵

Muir responded to Eliot's enquiry with:

I didn't see the quotation from Horace Gregory, but I feel it would have run better if it had said, 'Since...no Orkney poet has...as Edwin Muir.' Celtic origin is hard to establish, and the Orkney people are a mixture of everything....³⁶

Kathleen Raine does not refer to Muir as Celtic, but she does stress the importance of 'roots' in her reading of Muir's poetry, as she does with Vernon Watkins, since a strong element in her thesis regarding these poets involves the nature of their poetic initiation, which she maintains is derived from an ancient source of wisdom rather than something that can be learnt via purely literary or educational means.

Thus, Muir's Orkney ancestry appears to be a vital factor in his placing as poet.³⁷ In Scotland, Muir is a controversial figure. In his book, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* published in 1936, Muir asserted that Scotland was without a literary tradition and its academics devoid of critical ability. The publication of the book resulted in a permanent rupture in relations with Hugh MacDiarmid, once a close friend of Muir's and chief proponent of the Scottish literary 'Renaissance' in the 1930s. The central issue in the debate was a Scottish writer's choice of

³⁴ See *The Song of the Earth* by Jonathan Bate (Picador, 2000), pp.3-8.

³⁵ *SL*, p.188. Letter to T.S. Eliot, 17th October, 1956.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.188.

³⁷ As Kathleen Raine stressed to me in interview in April 2003. Muir wrote to his brother-in-law: '...I'm not Scotch, I'm an Orkney man, a good Scandinavian, and my true country is Norway, or Denmark, or Iceland, or some place like that. But this is nonsense, I'm afraid, though there's some sense in it...' *SL*, p.64. Letter to George Thorburn, 14th May, 1927.

language. Should a writer use Scots or English? For Muir it was more or less a case of two stools. If a writer chose Scots then he would automatically restrict his audience and never be fully understood beyond the border. On the other hand, a Scottish writer writing in English had not had the necessary nurturing in English literary heritage to feel completely at ease using English as the medium for expression. The implications of this naturally reflect on the reception Muir's work has received.³⁸ The infamous pronouncements that 'Scotsmen feel in one language and think in another'³⁹ and '...a Scottish writer who wishes to achieve some approximation of completeness has no choice but to absorb the English tradition, and...if he thoroughly does this his work belongs not merely to Scottish literature but to English literature as well...'⁴⁰, continues to be debated. Once he had written the offending book, however, Muir refused to rise to the debate that ensued and did not write again on the subject.⁴¹ Considering his great admiration for Scots and Orkney ballads, his own writing of a number of ballads in Scots, and his ambition to write a book on ballads it is puzzling that Muir had so little time for modern Scots poets. Muir resolutely kept his distance, as he did from any such debates or causes in his later years, though this is not to say that he did not have strong convictions about Scotland and its politics throughout his life. Reflecting on Muir's ambiguous relationship with Scotland, Seamus Heaney describes him thus:

Scottish by birth and attachment, English by language and cultural adaptation... For it seems to me that Muir's Scottishness – I will call it this, in full knowledge that he was here too a man of double placing, a Scot and an Orcadian – Muir's Scottishness, once assailable for not displaying a sufficiently nationalist fervour or not sporting the correct ethnic regalia, now appears pristine in the light of an older alliance between Scotland and Europe. Far more important than the dutiful local colour of such a poems as 'Scotland's Winter' and the pious historical roll-calling of 'Scotland 1941' is the Pictish bareness of 'Prometheus's Grave' or the tragic sense in a poem like 'Troy', of an abandoned culture being fanatically and absurdly

³⁸ *Verse* (Vol. 6, No.1, March 1989), p.22. 'The Place of Edwin Muir'. Seamus Heaney comments: '(But) the impression of a man shaky on his verbal pins has also to do with the poet's subliminal hesitancy between the oral culture that his ear was founded on and a more print-based discourse acquired by him later as a clerk, writer and administrator.'

³⁹ From Muir's *Scott and Scotland* quoted by Sheila G. Hearn in 'Tradition and the Individual Scot', *Cencrastus* (No.13, Summer 1983), p.21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁴¹ Willa Muir stresses its unusualness, having described the closed and rather stuffy community of St Andrews while the Muirs lived there and 'Edwin's aversion from Scottish parochialism' p.196. She writes: '...when Edwin sat down to do *Scott and Scotland* something of a very different nature emerged, with an undertone of personal exasperation in it, to be found in no other book of Edwin's...The uncharacteristic acerbity of Edwin's remarks about Scotland was a measure of the effect living in St Andrews had had on him...' *Belonging* by Willa Muir (Hogarth Press, 1968), pp.194-5.

guarded. Not to mention frontier poems like 'The Interrogation', which is a border ballad of an entirely contemporary sort. Poems like these, and, of course 'The Combat' and 'The Horses' open a path where there is free coming and going between local conditions and a reality that is the dominant one of the age. Such poems bypassed the need for mediation through English poetic norms. They came at the matters which had haunted 'the Thirties poets' but did not employ their topical political idiom or rhetoric of concern, and they thereby robbed the Scottish/English difference of much of its determining power. By displaying little obvious anxiety about English cultural domination, by accepting with equanimity the gifts it bestowed and then walking a little dreamily to one side and on into Europe, Muir is a figure whose legacy has not been fully appreciated.⁴²

I agree with Heaney on Muir's 'double placing' and his verdict on Muir's sidelined 'dreamy' path into Europe and literary achievement.⁴³ This corresponds, in certain respects, with Raine's view when she writes of Muir's literary affinities:

It was in German literature, from his early readings of Heine and Nietzsche, to his later studies of Kleist, Hölderlin, Kafka, and Hofmannsthal, that he probably found his deepest affinities. He expresses, in his own work, much rather the European than the English experience...⁴⁴

Muir's placing as poet can be seen to be anomalous, though Raine was not alone in her relatively early championing of Muir. Five years before Raine first published *Defending Ancient Springs*, Elizabeth Jennings published *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems*, identifying a Christian mystical tradition in western poetry, with Edwin Muir firmly in the ranks.

Before considering Jennings's study of Muir as poet in the Western European Christian mystical tradition, some defining of terms would be apt, since, as Jennings puts it:

⁴² *Verse* (Vol. 6, No.1, March 1989), p.33. 'The Place of Edwin Muir' by Seamus Heaney.

⁴³ Heaney's view is supported by others. Susan Manning writes of Muir's '...rightful place as a writer of European rather than national stature and affiliations' (*Cambridge Quarterly* Vol.18, No.4 1989), p.412, Ritchie Robertson of Muir's '...indebtedness to specifically European traditions of writing.' (*Edwin Muir Centenary Assessments*, Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), p.103. And Iain Bamforth values Muir '...as one of the last, and greatest European traditionalists.' (*Times Literary Supplement*, March 4-10, 1988), p.253. Alan Ross placed Muir thus: 'Muir works out his poems through legendary themes; the imagery is often heraldic or biblical. His poems arise out of considerations of guilt, racial deviations, archetypal heresies and Man's fall from grace. He is a poet of the imaginative subconscious, a translator of intuition, with affinities to Hölderlin, Rimbaud and Kafka.' *Poetry 1945-1950* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1951), p.15.

⁴⁴ *DAS*, p.5.

‘Mystical’ is one of the most misused words in the English language...It is, in fact, employed to cover up an unwillingness to define meanings and feelings; it is a counter for the inchoate, a cipher for the half-understood.⁴⁵

Jennings derives her foundational use of the word from two sources, firstly;

I shall now give the definition of the word supplied by Dom Cuthbert Butler in his exhaustive and invaluable work entitled *Western Mysticism* – ‘The mystic’s claim’, he says, ‘is expressed by Christian mystics as “the experimental perceptions of God’s Presence and Being”, and especially “union with God” – a union, that is, not merely psychological, in conforming the will to God’s Will, but, it may be said, ontological of the soul with God, spirit with Spirit. And they declare that the experience is a momentary foretaste of the bliss of heaven.’ Put quite simply, mysticism is the study of direct union with God, a union which reaches beyond the senses and beyond reason.⁴⁶

And secondly:

A year or two ago Professor Zaehner, in his careful study *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, introduced a large measure of clarity to this subject by dividing mysticism into three specific kinds – first, a sense of union with the created world, second, a belief in the self as the Absolute Reality, and third, a direct, supra-rational union with a personal God by means of love. It is this third definition which I shall be employing throughout the chapters which follow.⁴⁷

The definitions form the foundation of Jennings’s studies, which begin with St Augustine and conclude with Hart Crane.

Jennings’s opening remarks on Muir are strikingly similar to those Raine would make in her essay, though the development of her theme is as strikingly different:

Outside literary movements, unswayed by fashions or passing tastes, [Muir] allowed his verse to grow as his own life grew. His poetry *was* his life not a marginal comment on it. The late verse, though shining with acceptance and more profound in meaning and interpretation than the earlier, is one with it; he could not have written his splendid last triumphant poems if

⁴⁵ *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* by Elizabeth Jennings (1961; repr, Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p.13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.16-17.

the earlier struggling ones had not preceded them. In this, Muir's development makes an interesting comparison with the mystic's experience of prayer.⁴⁸

By way of explicating her comparison, Jennings likens Muir's poetry to the writings of Teresa of Avila. She posits that they both 'appropriated every kind of natural image...to encompass and express'⁴⁹ their experiences, but where 'everything' in the saint's writing was 'employed to express her vision of God and of the universe'⁵⁰, Muir's poetry was 'both the source and fulfilment of his vision' that the 'experience came to him *in terms* of imagery'⁵¹. Jennings locates the origin of Muir's vision, as does Raine, with his childhood in the Orkneys, his experience of that particular place and time quickening in him '...the belief that our life is lived on two planes, the actual and the fabulous. This double vision is the central theme of Muir's poetry.'⁵² Yet Jennings's reading of Muir's poetry differs in one essential from that of Raine's in the direction her understanding of Muir's poetry takes regarding 'the double vision':

He took the dogmas of Christianity and gave them a new and dramatic life.⁵³

Edwin Muir was a Christian though he admits in his *Autobiography* that, quite late in life, he suddenly became aware that he had been a Christian for a long time without fully realizing it.⁵⁴

Raine would later assert:

...If he was a Christian poet he was so by convergence of symbol, not by subscription to doctrine. His wine could never be measured in any pint-pot of orthodoxy; for in revealing in part the mystery, he leaves it still a mystery.⁵⁵

In the sense that Muir was a Christian 'for a long time without fully realizing it', Raine's first statement regarding 'convergence of symbol' here is not so far from Jennings's view of Muir's use of the 'dogmas', though there is a suggestion that 'doctrine' has little truck with symbol. Raine's

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.148.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.148.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.148.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.148. Ritchie Robertson makes a similar observation regarding Muir's imagery, in connection with Muir's debt to Kafka: 'Kafka does not excogitate a philosophical system and then set it down in a set of images, each with a fixed and as it were allegorical meaning; rather, imagery is Kafka's instrument for thinking...To borrow...from Muir's introduction to *The Castle*: 'the progress of invention coincides with the exploring and creating thought, so that in being carried forward by the action we are at the same time participators in the discovery and spectators of a world being built.' Now these formulations also apply to Muir. His imagery, I would want to argue, works in the same way: not as the allegorical expression of a pre-formed thought, but as the medium in which thought is conducted.' *Edwin Muir Centenary Assessments* (ASLS, 1990), p.108. 'Edwin Muir as European Poet'.

⁵² Ibid., p.149. Here Jennings quotes from J.C.Hall's introduction to Muir's *Collected Poems*.

⁵³ Ibid., p.150.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.153.

following comment, however, with its pejoratively determined 'orthodoxy', reveals, I would argue, less of Muir's tentativeness about his faith:

I'm a sort of illicit Christian, a gate-crasher, hoping in my own way to slip in

At David's hip yet.⁵⁶

And more of Raine's personal difficulties with Christianity. The implicit suggestion that 'orthodoxy' explains away mystery, displays a restricted understanding of the term and its significance for Christians, especially Christian poets, through the centuries. Even so, Muir wrote in a letter to George Barker:

There does seem to me a decisive difference between the kind of belief on which religion is founded, and the kind of imaginative assent we give to poetry.⁵⁷

This is, perhaps, a more measured reflection in a similar vein.

Reading Muir as a Christian and mystic poet, Jennings draws attention to Muir's 'treatment of time' in relation to 'his view of the meaning of life' and 'the idea of human tragedy':

It has sometimes been said, I think wrongly, that the tragic sense of life is incompatible with Christian beliefs. It is certainly true that the Redemption, which was fulfilled by Christ's death on the Cross, saved man not only from damnation but also from despair; but those who hold too simplistic a view of this doctrine maintain that for the convinced Christian tragedy is thus impossible.⁵⁸

Jennings counters that Christianity only offers the 'opportunity for salvation'⁵⁹, which man has 'the free will' and 'liberty' to reject. Thus religious writers such as Dante and Milton, both favourites of Muir, '...have realized that a Christian conception of tragedy, with all its terrifying consequences, can sometimes be far more effective than the Greek one...'⁶⁰

I think it is this entirely Christian conception of evil, death and tragedy that gives depth to Muir's vision of life. It is the shadow side of his verse, a darkness that can never be entirely cast off. His work is affirmative, yes, but there are no easy answers in it. Thus the state of

⁵⁵ *DAS*, p.12.

⁵⁶ *SL*, p.116. Letter to William Soutar, 3rd February, 1940.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.94. Letter dated 31st March, 1937.

⁵⁸ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings (1961; repr Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p.153.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.153.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.153. In his novel *The Marionette* Muir modelled the metaphysical structure of the work on Faustian tragedy.

pure acceptance which Muir expressed in his later poems was an acceptance won *through* suffering not by an evasion of suffering.⁶¹

I agree with Jennings's analysis here, and find her further comments on the poem 'The Journey Back' equally convincing:

'The Journey Back' ends with a vision of triumph won through striving and also through arduous surrender. It is a Christian vision penetrated with the light of Muir's intense awareness of it, and so brought to life anew. The image of the harvest is taken straight from the New Testament:

There's no prize in this race; the prize is elsewhere,
Here only to be run for. There's no harvest
Though all around the fields are white with harvest.
There is our journey's ground; we pass unseeing.
But we have watched against the evening sky,
Tranquil and bright, the golden harvester.⁶²

Jennings describes Muir as '...living among the symbols he has brought to life.' That Jennings believes Christian symbols are capable of such a re-vivifying in an imaginative context, separates her study from Raine's who did not share that belief. I would argue, that despite this discrepancy Raine's placing of Muir with Jones, Gascoyne and Watkins⁶³ still stands, Jennings's different reading of Muir's oeuvre strengthening such a placing.

Other Posthumous Assessments

Since Edwin Muir's death in 1959 critical responses to his works have been divided, even polarized. Edwin Muir holds an uncertain place in literary history. There is doubt. A comment on Muir, made by Scottish artist William Johnstone, having illustrated a selection of Muir's poetry, articulates one perspective of the condition. Johnstone locates any uncertainty concerning the poet's achievement solely within the poet himself, rather than his work:

The poems, re-read over many years, contain layered depths of unconscious feeling and tension. The poet never realized that he was a true man of genius; he remained a man of doubt.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., p.153.

⁶² Ibid., pp.160-161.

⁶³ Jennings includes David Gascoyne in her study, and refers to David Jones's critical writings. I find it a curious omission that Vernon Watkins is not included, since his poetry and poetic vision share much in common with Muir.

⁶⁴ *Lithographs* by William Johnstone with poems by Edwin Muir, 1981.

In contrast, a review in *The Times Literary Supplement* of *The Complete Poems* is considerably less sanguine in its estimation of Muir's achievement as a poet. The reviewer begins:

If we are accustomed to thinking of Edwin Muir as a sort of saint, it is only partly because he is so depicted in *An Autobiography* (1940; 1954) and in his widow Willa's fiercely partisan memoir, *Belonging* (1968). The pose convinces through its consistency with the monkish remoteness of the poetry. To say this is less to assent to the success of Muir's work than to highlight its deficiencies: the chaste, unshowy quality of the verse is a virtue more appropriate to the cloister than the page... The poems never quite lose their thin-blooded, enervated character. Even those among them for which the highest claims have been made – “The Combat”, “The Journey Back” and “The Labyrinth” – set their action at too great a remove from the quotidian to implicate the reader in the outcome.⁶⁵

That Muir's poems can be said to ‘contain layered depths of unconscious feeling and tension,’ on the one hand and to have a ‘thin-blooded, enervated character’ on the other reveals the disparate readings the poems can produce. The words ‘doubt,’ ‘saint,’ ‘pose,’ ‘chaste,’ ‘monkish remoteness’ and ‘quotidian’ are each representative of certain issues and ambiguities surrounding Muir and his work. To begin with ‘doubt’; Muir doubted his achievement as a poet, and he feared towards the end of his life that he had only one poem within him that he had repeated endlessly:

I've been rather daunted in the last year or two by the fear that I am keeping on writing the same poem ...I have written very few poems lately, but many parts of poems which ceased when they seemed to be taking the same old course.⁶⁶

Doubt concerning his ability as a poet seems to have dogged Muir until the end, and found its beginnings in his rather painful self-consciousness at being a late-starter, at being what he considered inadequately educated, at writing in the language of a poetic tradition he did not feel to be his own. Yet he persevered, felt compelled to write poetry corresponding to his vision. Muir's religious leanings were similarly underscored by a tense balancing of doubt and faith.

In Muir's autobiography the most obvious phase of doubt and insecurity in his life can be located in its Glasgow episode, though the seeds of disintegration are planted in the final years in

⁶⁵ *The Times Literary Supplement* (01/01/93), p.6. ‘The Vision Thing’ by Patrick Crotty. In *The Times Literary Supplement* of 4th July, 1952, the anonymous reviewer makes very similar objections, reviewing Muir's *Collected Poems 1921-1951*: ‘If we could more frequently step out of the floating vagueness of symbolism...to something more actual, more tangibly of the world we know, and less of the doubtful world we make through dreams and literature, we should feel happier in being securely interested in the poetry.’ (p.423)

⁶⁶ *CP*, p.361. From a letter to Norman MacCaig, 23 April 1958.

Orkney. The effect these years had on Muir's psyche provides some answers to the accusation of his assuming a 'pose' of saintliness. Muir's years as an office clerk in Glasgow and Greenock were years of depression and degradation from which he felt he had to escape to live; there is a suggestion that Muir contemplated suicide during this period.⁶⁷ It seems plausible that Muir might seek to block out these memories and reconstruct himself, assuming a kind of 'pose' in order to survive.⁶⁸ That he consciously reconstructs himself as a saint is another matter. What may seem now a 'pose' of saintliness is a matter of history, for now the 'warts and all' generation dominates, which is no less a 'pose' and totally anathema to Muir's apprehension of what the true 'self' was. But Patrick Crotty articulated an uneasiness shared by others with Muir's 'cultivated' persona that can equally be applied to his poetry. The pejorative application of the words 'chaste' and 'monkish remoteness' also bear testimony to the secularist's struggle with what appears to be an intractably inaccessible religiosity.⁶⁹

Connected to Muir's 'cloistered' poetry is the absence of 'the quotidian' in his work; Muir's dedicated avoidance of day-to-day detail in both his poetry and prose. Again there is the matter of history. Muir started writing at a time when certain proprieties of taste and behaviour were observed. Muir took these proprieties seriously and sincerely, he was wary of 'vulgarity', a term which included divulging personal information. In a letter to H.L. Menken, American journalist, editor, critic and an influential man of letters, Muir wrote:

I've been so grateful for the kind reception you have given my book, and for your enquiries, that I find I've told you more than I intended! It has been my rule since the beginning, and I intend it still to be so, to make my work stand on its own feet, and not to let *the public* know

⁶⁷ In *An Autobiography* Muir writes: At last one night, as I was walking along the Clyde with a friend, I said casually, hardly knowing what I was saying, merely speaking my thoughts, 'If I don't get out of this place I expect I'll jump in there some night.' The friend was concerned enough to secure Muir a job back in Glasgow. p.126

⁶⁸ Peter Scupham makes some interesting remarks on the genesis of autobiography in this light: '*An Autobiography* is a compelling account of the way in which a poetic was consciously built out of isolation and distance – an isolation both spatial and temporal...It was some thirty years after leaving Wyre that the first poems came, and Wyre...became the lost domain.' *PN Review* (Vol.25, No.5, May-June 1999), p.53. I agree that Muir creates a sense of 'isolation and distance' in his work, but do not find this necessarily inhibiting, nor does it prevent a type of participation with the work.

⁶⁹ In a review of *Pilgrim Journey: John Henry Newman 1801-1845* (by Vincent Ferrer Blehl), Revd Geoffrey Rowell writes: 'Hagiography today has a pejorative flavour. The lives of saints and the portrayal of holiness can so easily produce a saccharine unreality or result in an expurgated version of a life which is bloodless, sexless and devoid of struggle. Perhaps, as Iris Murdoch often suggested, art can only portray goodness tangentially – by hints and guesses, or by the touch of seeming madness in the holy fool. Yet for the Christian, the incarnate reality of transforming grace in human lives is at the heart of the Gospel. Without saints, the Christian faith is reduced to speculative theory and abstraction... Blehl's book must be welcomed as a reminder that we only understand John Henry Newman as we are prepared ourselves to give credibility to his quest for holiness, and see that as the centre of his life.' (TLS, No. 5222, 02/05/03), p.27. I find these remarks pertinent to much of the argument surrounding Muir's achievement. Muir was certainly preoccupied with the idea of holiness and the possibility, for humans, of the incarnate, entirely good man. It was not until the Muirs were in Rome, late in the poet's life, that he actually experienced a living cultural tradition bodying forth the Incarnation.

that it was written by tinker, tailor, soldier, clerk or anything else. There is too much of that, I feel, and I should very much dislike to have any of my private interests made public.⁷⁰

There is a mixture of diffidence and pride in this, perhaps a little shame at being a clerk. Throughout his life Muir did not alter his stance on maintaining his privacy. However, it is worth remembering that for his time Muir was certainly neither intellectually hidebound nor conservative. *We Moderns* was considered radical, even shocking enough for Willa to lose her job, when she informed her employers of her intention to marry its author. The letter also reveals what became for Muir a growing preoccupation, the idea of an anonymous, amorphous reading public and its significance for the writer. It was, for Muir, a political, moral and literary issue, for the loss of a communal audience left it for writers to create a community of expression in the void, or else become as fragmented and contingent as society appeared to have become. Though such a condition is now a given, for Muir such a fragmentation of community and therefore audience seemed an evil, for he equated 'the good' (morality and literature were inseparable for Muir) with the order and continuity of a living tradition.⁷¹

William Johnstone's description of Muir as a 'man of doubt' presents the poet not only as 'modern', but also as one in the Keatsian mould, having perhaps the uneasy privilege of the gift of 'negative capability.'⁷² Muir was familiar with Keatsian poetics and identified his experience of imaginative creation within a broadly 'romantic' tradition. In a letter to novelist and friend, Sydney Schiff, Muir defines his idea of what he felt constituted 'being a romantic':

As for being a romantic, I agree that I am, at least if you admit that all the part of literature which is interested in the undeveloped and potential part of the human spirit is romantic.

And in a sense I think you are romantic too. I am not much concerned with the label.

⁷⁰ *SL*, p. 22. This letter was written from Glasgow, 13 July 1919. In the notes Butter writes: 'Thanks to Menken's influence *We Moderns* was published in America, under Muir's own name and with a preface by Menken, in 1920.'

⁷¹ In a letter to Stephen Spender, Muir reflects on this '...I was born in a different age, and on top of that in a different world; for the Orkney Islands where I passed my childhood was at that time the same as they had been two hundred years before; untouched by Industrialism, and still bound to an old co-operative life which preceded that... That really means that I was born over two hundred years ago...so no wonder if my poetry is an acquired taste...' (*SL*, p.93)

⁷² For example, 'I have a persistent image, from the time of the Muirs' stay in St Andrews, of Edwin on the edge, or forming a second row by himself, of a semicircle listening to discussion, and occasionally intervening with an observation, which did not draw attention to itself, yet my memory of him is more defined than that of any other in the group. An extract from another letter of Keats, to his brothers, points to the character of his achievement as poet: "...& at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." *The Integrity of Edwin Muir* by George Bruce from *Edwin Muir: Centenary Assessments* (Association For Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), p.3. In the same book, another paper describes the 'kind of passivity and receptivity' of the mystic as 'very near indeed to that "negative capability" which Keats sees as the condition of poetic inspiration.' (*Ibid.*, p.122.) 'Edwin Muir: Untutored Mystic' by N.D. O'Donoghue.

Classical literature is a very good thing if we would be classical; it is like asking a man to be calm when his house is burning. All this does not mean, of course, that we should be indefinite and sloppy; it only means that we should be true to our experience in the world of transition and therefore of instability and possibility in which we live.⁷³

Being true to one's 'experience in the world of transition and therefore of instability and possibility' echoes Keats's dictum, but the reference to the 'undeveloped and potential part of the human spirit' suggests Nietzsche's ideas, a major German Romantic influence on Muir's early intellectual development. In his later years Muir transmuted the rather fevered Nietzschean 'potentiality' into a hope in humanity linked to his understanding of the immortality of the soul and Christianity.

In 1926, *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* was published by the Hogarth Press. The book includes some prescient remarks on the nature of criticism, particularly in relation to Kathleen Raine's retrospective championing of Muir. The first short essay in the collection is titled 'The Zeitgeist'. In his analysis Muir describes it thus:

We feel it as a thing pressing in upon us, a force against which we can never be prepared, for we do not know its strength, its attributes, or the means by which it operates.⁷⁴

He continues describing the effect the *Zeitgeist* might have on a writer:

When the force determining men's lives is indefinable, inescapable, and overpowering, it will arouse hostility in those who realize its power, and this hostility will be the more intense the more complete the realisation. A man who apprehends the power of the age will regard himself as its enemy; like Milton, Swift, Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley and a host of other writers, he will show a distaste almost grotesque for contemporary habitudes of thought.

This hostility is in certain writers inevitable; it is in effect a testing of the age by itself, an

⁷³ *SL*, p.57. Letter to Sydney Schiff, St Tropez, 23 June, 1926. Three years earlier Muir had published an essay 'The Meaning of Romanticism' in the American journal *The Freeman*: 'To him [the romantic] the object is not only itself, but something else as well. The earth is not as definite as it seemed to the classical writers, nor is heaven as far away. On the contrary, they are aspects of one reality. Heaven is no longer heaven, but a background for human life and the life of nature; a background which is at the same time the mystical ground of all life. Romantic poetry is the poetry of this two-fold vision, which in contemplating the object perceives a second object behind it. This second perception, whereby as by a stroke of sorcery the aspect of nature is changed, Arnold called 'natural magic'; and it was at first the peculiar gift of a people with second-sight, the Celts, from whom primarily, and secondarily from the adjacent Scots who wrote the ballads which Percy collected, the inspiration of the modern romantic movement came.' *Chapman* (No.49, 1995), p.5. Muir's analysis of Romanticism, as it is expressed here, coincides closely with Kathleen Raine's conception of the true source of poetic inspiration over the ages. Muir's designation of the Celts as the inspiration of 'the modern romantic movement' also corresponds with Raine's insistence on the vital importance of 'ancestral imagination' in Muir's poetry, which she also divined as central to Vernon Watkins's poetry. Similarly, Raine identifies both Muir and Watkins with a bardic tradition.

⁷⁴ *Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature* by Edwin Muir (London: The Hogarth Press, 1926), p.4.

assaying process from which, its deceptions and fashions burned away, the age emerges in greater purity. For all great writers are of their time, though they sometimes think of themselves as outside and against it; and when they attain expression in art the age is interrogating itself, is being differentiated for the purpose of self-realization.⁷⁵

As well as voicing a modern distrust of appearances, 'deceptions and fashions', there is a developing awareness of the 'unwritten' shadow against which the written defines itself. The passage reveals Muir's concerns, concerns that persisted throughout his career as writer and poet, and which apply in turn, to Kathleen Raine. It could be said of Muir that he shows 'a distaste almost grotesque for the contemporary habitudes of thought' in almost every aspect of his work; in his life he was actively engaged, particularly with the Socialist movement. That he ascribes this sentiment with considerable urgency, and an air of authority to Milton *et al*, reveals his own feelings of resentment and anger at his 'age' and the personal grief he had endured and considered a consequence of that 'age'. The drive for 'purity' could be regarded as a reaction to the years of squalor Muir endured during his years in Glasgow. A similar distaste and hostility for certain features of contemporaneity provided Kathleen Raine with criteria for selecting and placing her special group of poets; ancients in the modern world.

In his preface to Muir's *Selected Poems*, published posthumously by Faber and Faber, T.S. Eliot wrote:

As my correspondence files indicate, it was only in the last years of Edwin Muir's life, when he brought his later poems to me for publication, that I saw much of him, and I cannot say that I ever came to know him really intimately. He was a reserved, reticent man, not fluent in conversation. Yet his personality made a deep impression upon me, and especially the impression of one very rare and precious quality. There have been other encounters in my life with men who have left me with the impression of this particular quality, including several men whom I have never come to know well. They have been those men of whom I should say without hesitation, that they were men of complete *integrity*. And as I have grown older, I have come to realise how rare this quality is. That utter honesty with oneself and with the world is no more common among letters than among men of other occupations. I stress this unmistakable integrity, because I came to recognize it in Edwin Muir's work as

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.4, 5.

well as in the man himself. The work and the man are one: his autobiography, and the lecture on Orcadian folk poetry, which is the first of his Norton lectures at Harvard, help us to understand his own poetry. And I cannot believe that Edwin Muir ever uttered one disingenuous word in speech, or committed one disingenuous word to print.⁷⁶

This feeds into what might be called the hagiographic school of Muir criticism, where the poet's moral and personal qualities are considered anterior to his poetic gifts. Eliot, in characteristically guarded and dispassionate manner seems to be reacting to some kind of perceived threat that makes him stress this aspect of Muir above all others. Eliot's championing of Muir and his poetry, while it may have been informed by a different set of artistic and literary values, bears an interesting relationship with Kathleen Raine's. Raine writes also of Muir's 'integrity'⁷⁷, her critique of Muir's poetry passing through the surfaces and textual attitudes of language to the embodied truth that the poetry seeks to represent. This corresponded with Muir's view of writing poetry:

I'm not much concerned with imaginative 'creation', but rather with true and false imagination.⁷⁸

Raine understood the seamlessness that Muir strove for in his poetry. As another critic has put it:

The words exercise a self-denying ordinance which casts all the light on the object of contemplation, retaining the merest glimmer of visibility for themselves. This is rare in a poet – Muir's apparent lack of interest in words for their own sake has made him one of the most puzzling in the company of modern poets...⁷⁹

In a letter to George Barker, Muir wrote:

I'm a round peg in a square hole, or rather, being an angular Scotsman, the square peg in a round hole; I've spent half my life rubbing off my corners instead of sharpening them...and I don't know whether even now I fit the beautiful perfect O of poetry very comfortably.⁸⁰

Muir's remark, which I would argue reflects the 'self-denying' quality of words in his poetry noticed by Manning, is considered 'disturbing' by Michael Hamburger:

⁷⁶ *Selected Poems* by Edwin Muir, ed. T.S. Eliot (Faber & Faber, 1965), p.9.

⁷⁷ *DAS*, p.1.

⁷⁸ *SL*, p.160. From a letter to Alec Aitken, 28th June, 1951. Of D.H. Lawrence, Muir wrote: '...he is primarily an artist in words, that he is more interested in language than in his subject matter, and that his interest in the one gets between us and the other – a very fundamental sin against art, it seems to me.' From a letter to Sydney Schiff, 6th October, 1924. *Ibid.*, p.42.

⁷⁹ *Cambridge Quarterly* (Vol.18, No.4 1989), p.402. 'Edwin Muir and the Modern' by Susan Manning.

⁸⁰ *SL*, p.87. Letter from St Andrews, 14th February 1936.

What is that 'beautiful perfect O of poetry' for which Muir had to rub off his corners? The whole anomaly of his position as a writer – 'alienation' would be the word if it weren't so inappropriate to a man who made so little fuss about himself, who blamed no one for the hardships and humiliation that often came close to breaking him – is in those words.⁸¹

While Raine is content to accept the seemingly achieved poise of Muir's poetry and autobiographical writings, attributing such an achievement to Muir's rare glimpses of an ancestrally rooted tradition of imaginative creativity, and glimpses that reach farther to eternal truths, there are others, like Hamburger, who have detected an antithetical strand of 'alienation' in Muir's work, which makes it capable of analysis. I would argue that there is place for both responses to Muir's life and oeuvre, such duality bearing the oddly indirect force of his poetic presence:

Our present-day literary movements...we can not trust in any sense. The only thing of which we are certain is our complexity; and from that, until we have changed, everything great in our literature will inevitably derive its truth; for art is true to what we are and not to what we wish to be. This complexity is our heritage from a romantic vision which has sunk in and which with its second-sight has made everything questionable.⁸²

⁸¹ *Lines Review* (No.50, September 1974), p.38. From 'Edwin Muir's Letters' by Michael Hamburger.

⁸² *Chapman* (No. 49, 1995), p.10. 'The Meaning of Romanticism' by Edwin Muir, first published in the American journal *The Freeman* (December-January 1923-4).

The Making of the Poet: Background, Education, Livelihood and Religion

We do not want facts; we want the philosophical spectacle of a man profoundly moved by the passions of his character and his times.⁸³

Edwin Muir was not a writer interested in facts; or it might be more accurate to say that the factual and the literal aspects of writing did not interest him. Muir cut his writing teeth in his mid-to-late twenties on contributing aphorisms in the style of Nietzsche to the radical, intellectual journal *The New Age*, edited by A. R. Orage in London. By the time of his death in 1959, he had become a respected critic and poet, having been made a C.B.E., with four Honorary Doctorates. His childhood in Orkney and youth in Glasgow seem, perhaps, unlikely beginnings for such a career, but such beginnings determined the kind of poet and writer Muir was to become, as well as the kind of poet and writer he was perceived to be. Muir had none of the educational or social privileges and advantages that other important British writers of his era had, such as W. H. Auden, William Empson or George Orwell. T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound were also born into the upper echelons of American society. It could be added that Muir's 'place' in the literary canon, as poet and critic, hinges significantly on this distinction, as with David Jones, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins. He came from a remote Orkney island, worked as an office clerk in Glasgow from the age of sixteen and was a self-supporting auto-didact from the age of eighteen. These are only some of the facts, but they open a way into the complex chambers of Muir's poetic psyche to reveal indeed the 'spectacle of a man profoundly moved by the passions of his character and his times'.

Muir was born into a family of tenant farmers in Deerness in Orkney on a farm called 'The Folly.' When he was two his family moved to another farm, 'The Bu', in the island of Wyre, where they remained for five years before moving again to the smaller farm 'Helye,' where they spent only a year. Soon they moved to a farm on mainland Orkney, near Kirkwall called 'Garth' where they lived a further five years. At Garth the Muir family started to break up, two of Muir's elder brothers, and his elder sister left to find work in Kirkwall, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Finally, he and the remaining members of his immediate family also moved, to Glasgow, when Edwin was fourteen. In his autobiography, first published in 1940 under the title *The Story and the Fable*, Muir does not detail the

⁸³ From the introduction to *Cinq Mars* by Alfred de Vigny (1825) quoted in an article by Fiona MacCarthy, *The Guardian* (8th February 2003), p.4.

reasons for these moves from farm to farm, glossing over them briefly as the result of exactions from a bad landlord, in the case of The Bu, or the farm itself being bad, in the case of Garth:

The land was poor and had constantly to be drained; the dwelling-house was damp; in the rooms where we slept worms writhed up between the stone flags in wet weather.⁸⁴

Though the apparently unhappy period at Garth is significant in terms of Muir's educational development and academic grounding – he became an avid reader, and it was at school in Kirkwall that he first encountered English poetry, this probably the determining factor in Muir's decision to write poetry in English rather than Scots – it is the years at The Bu that are regarded as fundamental to understanding his poetry, both in his view and in that of Kathleen Raine, and have contributed most to the posthumous shaping of his poetic reputation.

Muir believed that his recollection of childhood experiences at The Bu provided the imaginative foundation for his poetry, almost to the complete exclusion of the lengthy period he lived in Glasgow. Towards the end of Muir's time in Glasgow he began formulating his 'theory of childhood', which foreshadowed his first forays into writing poetry. Muir recounts a walk he took with John Holms, a close and influential friend, in the countryside around Glasgow. After a long summer day, they stop at the gate of a field with 'rounded haycoles':

Perhaps it was this that recalled to Holms Traherne's 'orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown,' for he began to recite the passage, which moved me more deeply than Donne. He held Traherne's and Vaughan's and Wordsworth's theory of childhood, which was bound up with his belief in immortality; in time he converted me to it, or rather made me realise that my own belief was the same as his.⁸⁵

Since Muir here more or less declares his belief in a 'theory of childhood' it is worth looking at a much more developed and involved statement he made on the subject in a post-script to the autobiography. It is concerned with the nature of the adult's backward glance, how an adult perceives his or her past and more especially, childhood:

I can think of three ways in which men may look into that mirror which shows life as it is lived, and each would give back a different picture. There is the glance of experience which discerns a world where wrong triumphs and right suffers, where greed succeeds and generosity fails and selfish illusion reigns. This is the world of the realist, who has forgotten

⁸⁴ *A* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1993), p.57.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.173.

his childhood or has dismissed it as unimportant, as if he had been born fully equipped to deal with life at the age of thirty. Then there is the glance of the man who in maturity has kept a memory of his childhood. Perhaps simply by virtue of that memory he sees in the mirror an indefeasible rightness beneath the wrongness of things; a struggle between good and evil, and not merely the victory of evil; and to him the rightness of human life has a deeper reality, a more fundamental appositeness, than the evil, as being more truly native to man. This, to our credit, is our normal view of life. The third glance into the mirror is given only to the greatest poets and mystics at the greatest moments, and is beyond rational description. The world the mystical poet sees is a world in which both good and evil have their place legitimately: in which the king on his throne and the rebel raising his standard in the market place, the tyrant and the slave, the assassin and the victim, each plays a part in a supertemporal drama which at every moment, in its totality, issues in glory and meaning and fulfilment. St Augustine saw it and so did Blake; it is the supreme vision of human life, because it reconciles all opposites; but it transcends our moral struggle, for in life we are ourselves the opposites and must act as best we can.⁸⁶

Though he does not state it explicitly in this particular passage, in the autobiography Muir equates the third vision with the childhood vision:

I think of this picture or vision as that state in which the earth, the houses on the earth, and the life of every human being are related to the sky overarching them; as if the sky fitted the earth and the earth the sky. Certain dreams convince me that a child has this vision, in which there is a completer harmony of all things with each other than he will know again.⁸⁷

It is ultimately this adult apprehension of the childhood vision, which is also a vision of eternity, that concerns Muir.

If remembrance of the childhood vision supplies the adult with the means to overcome the dichotomy between idea and object, and in turn, to be able to move from isolated subjectivity to an enlightened objectivity, the 'backward glance' is not solely nostalgic. The labyrinthine windings of the memory are always regarded as potentially treacherous. In the poem, 'The Return', an old man revisiting the scenes of his youth, hears 'sweet' voices recalling him, only to discover that:

⁸⁶ *A*, pp.280, 281.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.23, 24.

... all within
Rises before me there, rises against me,
A sweet and terrible labyrinth of longing,
So that I turn aside and take the road
That always, early or late, runs on before.⁸⁸

In another poem, 'Dialogue', Muir shows that the backward glance is the starting point for beginning to understand one's self and one's life. Eden may be lost, but the experience of Eden illuminates the dark, confusing windings of the fallen world. But Eden can never be regained:

But now, looking again, I see wall, roof and door
Are changed, and my house looks out on foreign
ground.
This is not the end of the world's road.⁸⁹

Personal memories were not entirely to be trusted.⁹⁰ This may be one of the reasons Muir persistently sought to universalize his memory and locate it within a broader context of ancestral memory and ultimately the Christian pattern.

In terms of his later development as a poet, 'the ancestral pattern' that Muir sought for his poetry, novels and critical works was revealed in the written tradition from The Bible and the Greek legacy to modern writers such as Hölderlin and Kafka, combined with his specific cultural heritage. Yet his childhood in Orkney gave him his cultural and spiritual roots. Muir's descriptions of the near self-sufficient life of the tenant farmer are unsentimental whilst recreating an idyll of a simple life now almost unimaginable, though to many the following passage, for example, is symptomatic of a writer whose idealizing tendency has created the 'supreme fiction':

I cannot say how much my idea of a good life was influenced by my early upbringing, but it seems to me that the life of the little island of Wyre was a good one, and that its sins were mere sins of the flesh, which are excusable, and not sins of the spirit. The farmers did not know ambition and the petty torments of ambition; they did not realize what competition was, though they lived at the end of Queen Victoria's reign; they helped one another with their work when help was required, following the old usage; they had a culture made up of legend, folk-song, and the poetry and prose of the Bible; they had customs which sanctioned their instinctive feelings for the earth; their life was an order, and a good order. So that when

⁸⁸ *CP*, p.160.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.252.

⁹⁰ Muir thought 'historical' writings were deceptive, but he none-the-less venerated memory: 'Our feeling of life comes from the present, our knowledge of life from the past... But remember, remember: we begin to die when we stop remembering.' *A*, pp.279, 294. From Appendix I, 'Yesterday's Mirror: Afterthoughts to an Autobiography.'

my father and mother left Orkney for Glasgow when I was fourteen, we were plunged out of order into chaos.⁹¹

Muir's memories of the years at The Bu are worth looking at more closely.

The Bu was the largest farm on the island of Wyre, measuring ninety-three acres. It seems that the poet's father James Muir, certainly had some ambition of making his way in the world, albeit if that ambition was none other than to make a success of farming on a small island. Muir describes his father thus:

He was a little, slight man with the soft brown beard of one who had never used a razor. His head was inclined sideways like the heads of statues of medieval saints; this had a natural cause, a contracted neck muscle; yet it seemed merely the outward mark of his character, which was gentle and meditative...He was a religious man, but not strict or ostentatiously pious; he attended church irregularly but reverently; he often omitted grace before meals for long stretches; then he would remember and begin again. Every Sunday night he gathered us together to read a chapter of the Bible and kneel down in prayer. These Sunday nights are among my happiest memories; there was a feeling of complete security and union among us as we sat reading about David or Elijah...⁹²

There is no reason to distrust this fond and delightful description, and in so far as it is truthful it also illuminates something of the writer's character. Muir never ceased to venerate the memory of his parents, and at the end of his life wrote feelingly of them in his diary, which entry, in turn, provided the basis for his last poem, unfinished and completed posthumously by Willa. 'Gentleness' is a term frequently attached to Edwin Muir and his works, usually counter-balanced by steeliness.⁹³ Some instinct raises a question to the effect of how far it is plausible that a person could be so gentle – regarding both Muir and his father. But, as such, perhaps it must remain a question, though it is

⁹¹ *SP* p.128.

⁹² *A*, pp.16, 17.

⁹³ 'There was little morbidity in the parties the Muirs gave in their flat. Willa's heartiness infected everyone, even the shy students. She kept the wine flowing, and our plates full of savouries and cakes: a bounteous never-silent provider. On those occasions, Edwin sat in a corner taking tiny sips from his wine-glass, silent and gentle and smiling, as if part of him was in another world....What was this mild amiable smiling character who drifted for a few years through the corridors and garden paths of Newbattle Abbey? Not Edwin Muir. What is not evident in the article is an inner resilient core of toughness – only that could have saved him from the clash of two cultures that killed, in a very short time, four of his family after they moved to Glasgow. No one becomes a poet and critic of his stature who isn't possessed of an unwavering dedication. These aspects of Edwin Muir are not at all apparent in the above – I note with some shame. *Akros* (Vol.16, No.47, August 1981), pp.9-10. 'Edwin Muir at Newbattle' by George Mackay Brown.

certainly part of what distinguishes Muir from other writers of his time.⁹⁴ In both Peter Butter's biography of Muir, *Man and Poet*, and in George Marshall's convincing archival work, *In a Distant Isle – The Orkney Background of Edwin Muir*, there is some confirmation of the portrait of Muir's father at least, based on interviews with local Orkney people who still remembered him. One of these is quoted in Butter's work:

...Mr Magnus Flaws, (who) remembered James Muir as "a fine gentleman" – a phrase which shows the pleasant lack of class-consciousness in Orkney – James Muir, I was told, had in youth been fond of the bottle, but gave it up after one of the children who was sleeping with him said: 'I don't like the smell of that coo's milk you've been drinking, father.' He was not a very efficient farmer. The singing at the Bu was famous, Magnus Flaws told me; and 'when James of the Bu came round to our house in the evening, we children never got our home-work done'...Not only the neighbouring children's home-work, but the work on the farm also was sometimes behind hand. One day the landlord came over from Rousay, and pointing in his military way with a short cane at muck which had not been removed from byre or stable for several days said: 'Muck, muck; muck means money – if it's in the right place.' Writing to Kathleen Raine near the end of his life Muir admitted that he 'would have been a bad farmer, as my father was – and I'm thankful for that too; he had all the good qualities of the Orkney peasantry, without the bad acquisitive ones that narrow life down.'⁹⁵

Muir made similar rather sweeping value judgements throughout his writing career, and was opposed to the Capitalist ideal ('bad acquisitive') that the creation of wealth, or determined pursuit of material wealth and economic growth, could or would ultimately benefit all. He also doubted its effects on the moral nature of Man. There is a paradox in this, however, for had James Muir been a more financially astute farmer, the family could have remained in Orkney, and the disastrous move to Glasgow need never have happened. On top of this, Muir is warm in his praise of the prosperous farms in Orkney that he revisited in the 1930s and wrote about in *Scottish Journey*; he puts their success down purely

⁹⁴ Sheila G. Hearn takes to task Muir's seemingly gentle innocence as part of an autobiographical agenda: 'An autobiography is, basically, an attempt to make sense of the past: to examine the significance of the events of a life and to discern an order in them. Despite his claim not to be able to "bring life into a neat pattern", Muir's autobiography is particularly strong in this respect, tracing a religious development through the vividly realised scenes on the apparently random progress from Orkney to Newbattle...The events selected...reveal Muir's constant effort to fit his past to present convictions...The interest of the autobiography is that it reveals the way in which Muir would present an ideologically determined interpretation of the past while claiming ideological innocence...and the ability to hide his ideological motives behind an apparently innocent persona became the defining characteristic of his persona.' *Cencrastus* (No.7, Winter 1981-82), pp.46-47. From the review 'Edwin Muir: The Myth of the Man.'

to 'science.' However, Muir maintains that the communities remained much as they had been a hundred years before; or at least that there were still recognizable communities in existence despite changes in agricultural methods. In Muir's mind, Orkney was always the 'ideal place', though he never managed to return there to live, despite hankerings to do so.⁹⁶

That Muir was aware of the pitfalls of idealizing the past is evident in the tensions one can perceive, in his poetry especially, but also throughout his oeuvre. In *Scottish Journey* Muir is ready to acknowledge the benefits of improvements in hygiene and the basic standard of living for many people, as a result of advances in science and technology, particularly in the slum areas he had known in his youth. What he lamented was what he perceived as the breakdown of communities. He felt this was partly a result of improved communications, people were no longer so dependent on one another; but more than anything he adduced it as a fundamental change in social mores, set in motion by industrialization and the tenets of Capitalism. Essentially Muir was opposed to an individualism that he equated with Capitalism, and never relinquished his hope for a more egalitarian and communally orientated society. It should not be forgotten that during his twenties Muir was actively involved in Socialist groups and was instrumental in establishing the National Union of clerks in his region of Scotland. He appears not to consider this period as pertinent to his poetry in his autobiography, but it should not be overlooked, since his vision of the 'ideal' place is at least in part a reaction against the increasing commercialization and urbanization of human society.

The perceived inconsistencies, then, such as his forbearance towards his father's failure as a farmer, or his lauding the prosperous Orkney farmers with their acumen in adopting new technologies, while seemingly retaining a sense of community, are borne out for Muir by the quality in human life he felt that he and his parents had possessed and that the Orkney farmers seemed still to possess which he valued above all. These qualities might be defined as being in possession of a communal spirit founded on a cooperative modesty, humility and simplicity, with the crowning virtue of grace. Muir believed that such a 'culture' created peace and enlarged the capacity for love and generosity of spirit,

⁹⁵ *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* by Peter Butter (Oliver & Boyd Ltd., 1966), pp.2, 3.

⁹⁶ The Muirs went for a holiday in Orkney in 1935 as part of the trip Edwin needed to do to write *Scottish Journey*. During the holiday their tentative plans to move to St.Andrews were set back when the house they had hoped to rent was let to another. Willa wrote, 'Instead of being disappointed, Edwin, it appeared, was nursing the idea of staying permanently in Orkney'. *Belonging* (p.180) Willa was not keen to do so. She felt they would be too far 'out on a limb'. In the end, as a result of Willa's serious illness, the Muirs did not stay in Orkney, but one senses in Willa's writing an uncomfortable guilt, 'Orkney had been Edwin's starting place, but I could not feel it was meant to be his destination. After all, he said himself that Orkney lay outside the main stream of future social development. He would be less cut off from the contemporary world in St.Andrews.' (p.183)

resulting in 'an order, and a good order'. George Marshall's archival work reveals that the Muirs' landlord, General Burroughs was particularly exacting with his rents. Yet the facts surrounding the loss of 'paradise' are not of immediate consequence for Muir; as man and poet it was a larger canvas he sought in which to place and interpret his experience. It is not simply that he had had a happy childhood, as perceived with all the accoutrements of his political convictions, but that being able to recall the experience opened to his mature consciousness a level of vision he believed essential to living a full, meaningful and complete adult life. On an artistic level, it is possible to draw a similar conclusion. The poetry could not be made without the vision.

In Muir's first published prose work, *We Moderns* (1918), the beginnings of an ethos are discernible that came to literary fruition in *The Story and the Fable* (1940). In an attack on contemporary drama by 'modern realists' Muir berates the dramatists for betraying what he considers to be 'the proper aim of art'. It is to 'the Greeks' that he appeals:

The Greeks did not aim at the reproduction but the interpretation of life, for which they would accept no symbol less noble than those *ideal* figures which move in the world of classic tragedy.⁹⁷

Throughout Muir's oeuvre there is a preoccupation with symbolic analogies and a search for a sense of nobility in the everyday, attaining to the rarefied plane of *ideal* figures. Yet, particularly in the late poems, there is an undercurrent of unease and the tension of antithetical awareness, which does not permit a single reading: the tension of Muir's modernity and, arguably, his Christianity. It would be unfair to suggest that the Wyre section of the *Autobiography* is exclusively a vision of archetypal figures and symbols belonging to an abstract ideal of Paradise. The depiction of Muir's cousin Sutherland, for example, is vivid and immediate, as are his descriptions of major events in the farming calendar. That Muir's idyll is located or enacted 'in a distant isle', however, reinforces the image of a man who preferred to be at a remove from his audience. It is interesting that Marshall suggests that Muir's memory of Orkney would correspond more accurately with his father's boyhood, rather than his own. It seems the memory of his parents was never far from Muir's thoughts. In many ways, though the autobiography is beautifully descriptive, illuminating and engaging, it is also rather impersonal and at times oblique. Throughout the work Muir refers to Willa only ever as 'my wife', and another important relationship, only slightly touched upon, is that with his son, Gavin. Sheila G.

⁹⁷ *WM*, pp.15, 16.

Hearn draws attention to the work's '*literariness*'⁹⁸. Towards the end of the 'Wyre' section, Muir makes clear his book, if not deliberately literary, is at least motivated by artistic concerns:

The problem that confronts an autobiographer even more urgently than other men is, How can he know himself? I am writing about myself in this book, yet I do not know what I am. I know my name, the date and place of my birth, the appearance of the places I have lived in, the people I have met, the things I have done. I know something of the society which dictates many of my actions, thoughts, and feelings. I know a little about history, and can explain to myself in a rough-and-ready fashion how that society came into being. But I know all this in an external and deceptive way, as if it were a dry legend which I had made up in collusion with mankind...This external approach, no matter how perfect, will never teach me much either about them [the figures and names in his life] or about myself.⁹⁹

The real 'historical' interest of Muir's autobiography is thus to be found when it is considered primarily a work of literary art. The mature poet reflects on his life and the pattern is discerned or sought; it begins with an idealized childhood, continues with a passionate, political youth, disillusioned and rebellious, or at least radical, followed by the more conservative, traditional older man, concerned more with his inner life than transient externalities such as political movements. Finally, he rediscovers, in part, the Original vision, is freed from the contingencies of the world, finding permanence in continuity, thus achieving a more expansive vision of life. This design runs parallel with a fable of Edenic Innocence preceding a Fall, followed by redemption, revealing how deeply mythical and religious patterns affected Muir, and also that he sought such patterns intuitively, to give a context to both his literary and personal development:

The experiences that Muir recounts in the later chapters of his autobiography are, on the face of it, those of a travelled man of the world. The course of his life took him to the industrial horrors of Glasgow immediately prior to the first world war, to literary London, to Austria and Czechoslovakia at a time when central Europe was simmering for another war, to Scotland again during the second world war, to Prague during the Communist coup of 1948, to the British Council in Rome, to the headship of an adult education college near Edinburgh, to America as a visiting professor, and to retirement in Cambridge. Yet no reader of his

⁹⁸ *Cenrastus* (No.7, Winter 1981-82), p. 47. 'Edwin Muir: The Myth of the Man.'

⁹⁹ *A*, p.40.

work can doubt that the six years spent in Wyre were what counted most or that it is the early chapters of *An Autobiography* that illumine Muir's poetry.¹⁰⁰

I agree with this view, but will argue that the late poems move beyond the *Autobiography* and require an adjustment of perspective; they illuminate the past, rather than vice versa.

The early part of Muir's autobiography is interspersed with references to his educational progress and his resulting gravitation to literature and poetry as the prime concerns of his life. His formal education did not begin until he was seven, 'on account of bad health,' up to which age his learning had consisted primarily of family readings from the Bible, the recitation of local ballads from the Orcadian oral tradition and his father's witch stories:

...in his own time he had known several witches, who had 'taken the profit of the corn,' turned the milk sour, and wrecked ships by raising storms. Many of these stories I have heard since in other versions, and these obviously come from a store of legends that gathered when witch-burning was common in Scotland. In one a Sanday farmer, coming back for his dinner, saw the local witch's black cat slinking out of his house. He rushed in, snatched up his gun, and let fly at it. The cat was leaping over a stone dyke when he fired; it stumbled and gave a great screech, then ran away, dragging one hind-leg after it. Next day the witch sent for the doctor to set her leg. My father told this story so well that I could see the farmer with the smoking gun in his hands, and the black cat stumbling over the grey stone wall and running away with a twisted, crablike glide. When my father told his witch stories we sat up very late; we were afraid to go to bed.¹⁰¹

Muir writes of this period with approval in contrast with an evident disapproval of the systematic nature of schooling. As a delicate child his school initiation seems to have been a negative and claustrophobic experience:

I disliked school from the start. The classroom which had to serve us all, with its smell of ink, chalk, slate pencils, corduroy, and varnish, made me feel as if my head were stuffed with hot cotton-wool, and I realized quite clearly that I was caught and there was no escape.¹⁰²

Ill health and a fear of being trapped dogged Muir throughout his life and have a bearing on his preoccupations as a poet. It would be possible at this point to make a caricature of Muir's memoir,

¹⁰⁰ *In A Distant Isle: The Orkney background of Edwin Muir* by George Marshall (Aberdeen: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p.6.

¹⁰¹ *A*, p.3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.41.

with the leading protagonist a sickly, hyper-sensitive, somewhat mollycoddled youngest child, essentially solitary, a voracious reader, destined for poetry. A semi-parallel with Shelley's boyhood is discernible. There is also a Wordsworthian aspect to his narrative, where the child is fostered by nature and bridles under the imposition of dusty learning. His description of the walk to school in Kirkwall recalls Blake's poem of the reluctant schoolboy.¹⁰³

Regarding the efforts of his various school teachers, Muir singles out an English teacher, Miss Annan for particular praise:

...but for her we might never have realized what the subject meant beyond the drudgery of parsing and analysis. She opened our eyes; we felt we were a sort of aristocracy, for what we did for her we did freely.¹⁰⁴

This comment reveals Muir's elevated view of literature, for him the reading and writing of poetry was never less than a most serious and high undertaking. He was suspicious of frivolity, irony, sophistication and self-conscious cleverness.¹⁰⁵ Muir's attendance at school was sporadic, he was 'more often absent than present,' the result of which was that he had only one good year of school at the end of which the family moved to Glasgow and his schooling stopped. Notable was his sudden appetite for reading, which developed when he was around the age of nine. He states that he '...began to bolt printed matter as if it were some precious nourishing substance...'¹⁰⁶ That there was a lack of printed material at his disposal, resulted in his reading whatever he could lay hands on, including *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a curious mix of religious weekly papers and, 'a thick volume bound in calf containing a verbatim report of a controversy between a Protestant divine and a Roman Catholic priest, with a long argument on transubstantiation and many references to the Douai

¹⁰³ Muir succeeds in steering clear of pastiche by maintaining a simple story-telling style, with a lightness of touch and an underlying good humour, substantiated in a letter of his to T.S. Eliot: 'I'm very grateful to you for bringing out my collected poems, and I've been very pleased and surprised by some of the reviews. In reviews of separate volumes, I've always felt that even then critics who liked my work were faintly concerned about me and wondering if my health was improving.' *SL*, p.162. This letter to T.S.Eliot written 1 August 1952 from Kirkwall, Orkney.

¹⁰⁴ *A*, p.71.

¹⁰⁵ This is in contrast with his wife, Willa who wrote a potted biography of Muir's life thus: 'Edwin Muir lived on a small island containing one tree (known as The Tree) until he was fourteen, avoiding school, ostensibly herding his father's cows (i.e., dreaming in the pasture while they ravaged the corn and turnips), and being spoiled by his mother because he was the youngest. At the age of fourteen he went to Glasgow: saw trains and street cars for the first time in his life, learned to use a knife and fork and to wash daily. Attended church and was twice 'saved' before he struck Pascal and Nietzsche. Acquired a minute knowledge of the seamy side of Glasgow life, and a remarkable vocabulary. Developed a natural gift for 'contradictiousness'. *Belonging: A Memoir* by Willa Muir (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1968), p.107. Muir refers to his marriage to Willa as 'the most fortunate event in my life.'

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.63.

Bible.¹⁰⁷ He also read school-books such as *The People's Friend*. Muir was twelve when he had his first encounter with the English literary tradition of poetry from 'a really good poetry book' at school, 'which contained extracts from *The Excursion*, part of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, *Adonais*, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, and Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*'.¹⁰⁸ The poems he liked best were those of Keats and Arnold, finding Shelley and Wordsworth impenetrable and incomprehensible. After this initiation Muir decided that he would be an author:

By this time I had made up my mind that I would be an author when I grew up, but as my father and mother regarded 'profane' literature as sinful, had a great horror of 'novells,' as they called them, and thought poetry a vanity, I did not feel easy in my mind about my intention, and by a piece of childish casuistry decided that the book I should write would be a life of Christ, for in that way I could satisfy without offence the claims both of religion and literature.¹⁰⁹

Such 'claims' remained a constant in Muir's writing career in terms both of his choice of subject matter and style. As he grew up Muir invested much of his time in reading such works of 'great literature' as he could find:

My acquaintance with literature increased in a haphazard way, by chance discovery, while I was at Garth. I never had a course of English literature, or any guidance either in my reading or my method of reading; and this was an enormous drawback.¹¹⁰

It is interesting to note that it was English poetry that sparked Muir's passion for literature and desire to be an author, rather than the Orcadian ballads, myths and legends.¹¹¹ The conclusion could be

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp.63, 64.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.75.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.67.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.78.

¹¹¹ Like T.S. Eliot's, Muir's poetry abounds with 'deliberate' literary references, and the Orkney Islands become the setting for classical figures such as Hector and Achilles, or biblical figures like Abraham and Moses. George Mackay Brown observed: 'It has always seemed strange to me, though, that the rich medieval history of Orkney had no appeal for him. It must be that the *Orkneyinga Saga* is too crowded with ruffians and vaunters he instinctively shrank from. But from Wyre, where he passed his early childhood, he could see Egilsay and the round tower of St Magnus Church – 'it was the most beautiful thing within sight, and it rose every day against the sky until it seemed to become a sign in the fable of our lives...' But the life and character of Magnus, the peace-bringer, did not once touch his imagination. *Edwin Muir Selected Prose* (John Murray Publishers Ltd., 1987), p.6. From the introduction by George Mackay Brown. This is an interesting and telling observation. Muir found his poetic precedents elsewhere, though the ballads were dear to him, and had he lived longer he would have written a study of the Scottish ballads. Muir aligns himself with Yeats in his fondness for mythical beasts and Platonic ideals of truth and beauty. Muir's poetry can seem from certain angles, more Arcadian than Orcadian. George Marshall discovers, however, themes and images in Muir's poetry that seem to be drawn from Orkney myth. In the poem 'The Voyage', for instance, he detects a similarity between the story of this poem and a mythical voyage made by Norsemen (the original Orkney men) to Jerusalem. He points out a cult of the horse embedded in the Orkney psyche, instancing festivals devoted to the horse and the magical word that could tame a horse. He suggests that though Muir does not overtly use Orkney legends they are present in some of his poems; his fascination with horses is undeniable.

drawn from this that it was for Muir at least the written word that inspired him to write, which seems logical enough, but has a paradoxical implication with regard to the ballads. He lamented the day that the ballads were collected and written down in the poem 'Complaint of the Dying Peasantry':

Sir Patrick Spens shut in a book,
Burd Helen stretched across a page:
A few readers look
There at the effigy of our age.

The singing and the harping fled
Into the silent library;
But we are with Helen dead
And with Sir Patrick lost at sea.¹¹²

The oral, communal genesis of the ballads went hand in hand with Muir's retrospective vision of an ordered, secure, traditional community, in which people had a sense of continuity and context, imbuing their lives with meaning and making the relentless procession of time more readily comprehensible, particularly in relation to ideas of immortality and eternity. Muir believed that the loss of a shared community of experience and expression was the crux of the difficulties a modern poet faced. Muir was preoccupied with the idea of an 'audience' to the end of his life, giving a paper on the subject in Harvard in 1956. In the paper he stresses the special value of the oral tradition in which the ballads were made. It may be that this preoccupation also posed an obstacle for Muir when he embarked on writing poetry.

With the move to Glasgow and the subsequent deaths of his parents and two brothers, Muir found himself living alone and working as a clerk at the age of eighteen. He continued reading widely and eventually came to make his first forays in writing, inspired by an in-depth reading of the works of Nietzsche. Initially, in his steps to self-education there is a curious disparity between his socialist beliefs and the authors who influenced him most at that time, namely Heine and then Nietzsche. Previously, writers such as Shaw, Ibsen and Whitman had suited most Muir's 'conversion to Socialism', but Heine fed Muir's powerful desire to transcend the bleak reality of his life. Around this time Muir subscribed to *The New Age*, a journal run by A.R. Orage to whom Muir eventually wrote, and in later years worked for as assistant editor:

One day, feeling that my illusive world was beginning to crumble around me, I plucked up courage and wrote to Orage asking his advice; it was pure impertinence, for the only claim I had upon him was that I read him every week. He wrote me a long and kind letter describing

¹¹² CP, p.244. From 'Last Poems'.

his own intellectual struggles as a young man, and saying that he had been greatly helped by taking up some particular writer and studying everything he wrote, until he felt he knew the workings of a great mind. He had studied Plato for several years in this way, and he was now studying the *Mahabharata*, which he tentatively recommended to me. I took his advice to study a particular writer, but after some hesitation I chose Nietzsche instead of the *Mahabharata*; it was the choice most likely to maintain me in my suspended brooding over the future and the least likely to lead me to wisdom. ¹¹³

Muir clung to Nietzsche's ideas through the most desperate period of his life as a clerk in the bone factory in Greenock:

I did not believe in the immortality of the soul at that time; I was deep in the study of Nietzsche, and had cast off with a great sense of liberation all belief in any other life than the life we live here and now, as an imputation on the purity of immediate experience, which I had intellectually convinced myself was guiltless and beyond good and evil. ¹¹⁴

Yet ultimately for Muir the idea that man was little more than a sophisticated animal divested humans of any dignity or grace. He describes an anti-vision of the species as snuffling creatures, mere animals stuffed into hot tram-cars denuded of freedom and volition, which he experienced around this time on his way home from work. This so horrified him that he moved towards a conclusion that only a context of immortality or eternity could restore his 'original vision' of humanity, and that 'when man is swallowed up in nature nature is corrupted and man is corrupted.' ¹¹⁵

During World War One Muir began teaching himself French, having been turned down by the army when he tried to enlist. He read Molière and Stendhal, while continuing to read Socialist books. He continued reading Heine, this time a collection of his shorter poems with a 'sickly, graveyard strain', which inspired him to make his first attempts at writing poetry:

I steeped myself in that sweet poison, and began to write lonely, ironic, slightly corpse-like poems, which I sent to Orage, who accepted them. I was twenty-six, and it was my first attempt at writing. ¹¹⁶

Muir's account of his post-Orkney education and subsequent development as a writer is tinged with a sense of inadequacy and slightly bitter humour. That he survived such a desolate period of depression

¹¹³ A, p.126.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p.117.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p.118.

and ill-health seems if not heroic, then at least testament to the strength of his determination. It is as though Muir had to erase this period from his memory in order for him to write what he would consider true poetry – the poetry from this period he discounts entirely. It is significant that he chose to separate his politics (he remained a socialist all his life) from his art, at least ostensibly, since politics operate within history and Muir sought a wider, less time-dictated canvas in which to locate his poetic apprehensions. There is the impression, reading the autobiography, that Muir considered his fifteen years in Glasgow as arid and irrelevant to his development as a poet.¹¹⁷ Yet these years cannot be summarily discounted, and though Muir rejected overtly political allegiances in later life – in particular Communism – he did not give up his hopes for a more just society, which hope certainly filters its way into his poetry, albeit in a transformed manifestation and owing much to what he eventually admitted to be his Christianity.

Muir's political, intellectual and artistic leanings were indissolubly tied to religion, though he never belonged to a specific Church:

My God is not that of churches, and I can reconcile myself to no church.¹¹⁸

The difficulty with me is that I have faith, but that I cannot belong to any one religious community.¹¹⁹

Muir's father had been a member of the United Presbyterian Church in Deerness, but when the family moved to Wyre their names do not appear on the list of communicants of the Rousay United Presbyterian Church. Muir describes the family's attendance at church as intermittent, though this may partly have been a consequence of their having to get to church by boat, weather permitting. While James Muir may have 'omitted grace before meal times for long stretches', it seems the Sunday evening readings from the Bible were an integral part of family life. When the family moved to Kirkwall, Muir attended two church 'revivals.' Evangelical revival movements were sweeping the country at that time. At one, he stood to join the converted. Muir's feelings about the conversion were ambivalent; he was impressed by the change that occurred in him and other boys after the event, but could not accept the change to be the result of a genuine religious experience:

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.146.

¹¹⁷ Michael Hamburger writes that Muir's '...Orkadian origin' could not '...provide him with the linguistic or formal resources capable of grappling with the sort of experience that had begun to be his when his family moved to Glasgow'. *Lines Review* (No.50, Sept 1974), p.40.

¹¹⁸ *SL*, p.107.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.115.

Among the saved were some of the roughest boys at the school; they were now incapable of speaking a rude word, and their faces shone with grace. A sort of purification had taken place in us, and it washed away the poisonous stuff which had gathered in me during the year; but it was more a natural than a spiritual cleansing, and more a communal than a personal experience, for it is certain that if the whole audience had not risen that night I should not have risen. To pretend that it was a genuine religious conversion would be ridiculous; I did not know what I was doing; I had no clear knowledge of sin or of the need for salvation; at most I wished to be rescued from the companions among whom I had fallen and to be with the good, with my father and my mother and my sister.¹²⁰

This analysis reveals Muir's distrust of mass demonstrations of any kind; he had similar feelings about the socialist rallies he attended. He understood the nature of mass-hysteria and the powerful emotion that being part of a crowd could stimulate. Muir's pejorative use of the word 'communal' is of interest here, revealing a disparity between his nostalgia for long-established communities and his personal understanding of religious experience. It would appear that he distrusted communal worship and was more Kierkegaardian, seeking personal revelation. The passage also reveals Muir's intellectual approach to religion. He may have admired his parents' simple faith, but that kind of faith was not available to him. Muir wrestled particularly with Calvinist theological doctrine, and for a period levelled the blame for much of what he perceived to be the ills of Scotland and its spiritual and cultural malaise with John Knox and the Scottish Reformation. Muir found the doctrine of predestination especially antipathetic. In his novel *The Three Brothers* he vents his feelings on the subject, through the sympathetic portrayal of the character Jock Cranston, an Anabaptist:

The Calvinists have no sense of religion and no education; they're savages.¹²¹

I would argue that Muir's complex and ambiguous relationship with Scotland has much to do with his rejection of the national faith.

During a difficult period during the Second World War when the Muirs were living in St. Andrews, Muir was surprised to find himself reciting the Lord's Prayer in a moment of deep distress. Willa was dangerously ill in hospital and he was travelling by train each day to Dundee to work as a food clerk. He could not find employment in St Andrews in either the schools or university because he did not have a degree. He wrote in his diary:

¹²⁰ *A*, p.79.

¹²¹ *The Three Brothers* by Edwin Muir (William Heinemann Ltd, 1931), p.157.

Last night, going to bed alone, I suddenly found myself (I was taking off my waistcoat) reciting the Lord's Prayer in a loud, emphatic voice – a thing I had not done for many years – with deep urgency and profound disturbed emotion. While I went on I grew more composed; as if it had been empty and craving and were being replenished, my soul grew still; every word had a strange fullness of meaning which astonished and delighted me. It was late; I had sat up reading; I was sleepy; but as I stood in the middle of the floor half-undressed, saying the prayer over and over, meaning after meaning sprang from it, overcoming me again with joyful surprise; and I realized that this simple petition was always universal and always inexhaustible, and day by day sanctified human life....Now I realized that, quite without knowing it, I was a Christian...¹²²

Though, some time before, his friend Janet Adam Smith had told him that she regarded his poetry as Christian, it was not until this moment, according to Muir, that he was finally able to recognize it himself. The culmination of Muir's religious experience occurred in Rome where he worked as director of the British Council:

I had no conception of the splendours of Christendom; I remained quite unaware of them until some years later I was sent by the British Council to Italy.¹²³

In Rome, Muir discovered the incarnational aspect of Christianity missing from Presbyterian theology. Surrounded by images of Christ and the Virgin Mary his quest for the universal, ideal figure of Man was fulfilled. It was necessary for Muir's religious sense that God was not in all respects pure actuality, but that the Word could experience the trials and uncertainties of human nature, a human centre of consciousness and a genuinely human agency. Muir describes his quest in the poem 'The Journey Back':

But there's no end, and I could break my journey
Now, here, without a loss, but that some day
I know I shall find a man who had done good
His long lifelong and is
Image of a man from whom all have diverged.
The rest is hearsay.¹²⁴

The Edenic experience in Orkney resulted in a quest to rediscover the vision, and the vision reaches its fulfilment in what was for Muir the fact of Christ's existence, or at least the possibility of a Christ:

¹²² *A*, pp.241, 242.

¹²³ *A*, p.242.

¹²⁴ *CP*, p.163.

...it was the evidences of...Incarnation that met one everywhere and gradually exerted its influence. During the time when as a boy I attended the United Presbyterian Church in Orkney, I was aware of religion chiefly as the sacred Word, and the church itself, severe and decent...seemed to cut off religion from the rest of life...as if it were a quite specific thing shut within itself, almost jealously...It did not tell me by any outward sign that the Word had been made flesh...In Rome that image was to be seen everywhere, not only in churches, but on the walls of houses, at cross-roads...in wayside shrines in the parks, and in private rooms. I remember stopping for a long time one day to look at a little plaque on the wall of a house...representing the Annunciation. An angel and a young girl, their bodies inclined towards each other, their knees bent as if they were overcome by love...gazed upon each other...and that representation of a human love so intense that it could reach no farther seemed the perfect earthly symbol of the love that passes understanding. A religion that dared to show forth such a mystery for everyone to see would have shocked the congregations of the north, would have seemed a sort of blasphemy, perhaps even an indecency. But here it was publicly shown, as Christ showed himself on earth....This open declaration was to me the very mark of Christianity, distinguishing it from older religions.¹²⁵

Susan Manning regards this passage as the 'climax' of the work, in which Muir

...finally rejected the safe hiding-places of abstraction and distance, and accepted at last in his own life that the Word and the flesh may be one...All his writing enacts the belief that truth and the word may be one, embodied reality...Muir's *Autobiography* shows how that reality had first to become true in life before it could be incarnate as art. Like the *Divina Commedia*, it is at once a story of personal survival, corrosive contemporary social criticism and a vision of Hell and redemption. This final vision of a direct human encounter with truth occurs, with beautiful aptness, in the Via degli Artisti in the centre of modern European civilisation.¹²⁶

This is a convincing summation of Muir's personal and poetic journey to faith.

¹²⁵ *A*, pp.277-278.

¹²⁶ *Cambridge Quarterly* (Vol.18, No.4 1989), pp.411-412. 'Edwin Muir and the Modern' by Susan Manning.

Poet, Poetry, Affinities

I live in safe ingenuousness while outside with all his breakers mighty Time, the ever-changing, roars in the distance, and the more quiet sun aids my endeavours. You bless benevolently each mortal man's possessions from above, you heavenly powers; oh bless mine also and grant that not too early the Fates put an end to my dreaming.¹²⁷

Edwin Muir was in his mid-thirties when he began writing poetry in earnest. It happened when he and Willa were living in Hellerau, Germany in 1922. They were living as part of a small community gathered around A.S.Neill's 'eurhythmic' school of dancing. Here, surrounded by free thinkers and in an atmosphere of openness and discussion, Muir writes that his 'imagination was beginning to waken after a long sleep.'¹²⁸ This suggests that the life in Hellerau triggered his memory of 'Eden and the millennial vision of which I had dreamt as a child.'¹²⁹ But I would argue that it was also the result of a culmination of factors that began with the Muirs' move to London. Not long after arriving in London, Muir was given the opportunity to undergo psychoanalysis. A.R. Orage introduced Muir to the analyst Maurice Nicoll, who treated him out of interest, without payment. Muir was suffering a period of depression at this time, which Orage must have perceived:

The mass of stone, brick, and mortar was daunting; the impersonal glance of the Londoner, so different from the inquisitive glance of Glasgow, gave me the feeling that I did not really exist; and my mingled dread and longing now turned upon itself and reversed its direction, so that as I gazed at an object or a face – it did not matter which, for the choice was not mine – I was no longer trying to establish a connexion with it, but hoping that it – whether animate or inanimate – would establish a connexion with me and prove that I existed. The vast solidity of my surroundings and my own craving emptiness threw me into a slightly feverish state,

¹²⁷ Hölderlin *Selected Verse*, ed. Michael Hamburger (Penguin Books, 1961), p.39. From the poem, 'My Possessions.'

¹²⁸ *A*, p.195. Peter Butter makes an interesting remark regarding one of the dreams that came to Muir in Hellerau: 'In Germany seventeen years afterwards [after the death of Muir's mother] he dreamed that he was summoned to a great, high room where his sister (he thought that the dream made a substitution here) lay dead. He passed by the silent mourners, and began to cry; he let the tears flow unchecked for a long time, then went to sit beside the dead girl. He saw a faint glow tinging her cheeks; it deepened, her eyes fluttered, and she held out her hand. "The glow appeared to come from within her; but I knew that it flowed from a warm, limpid, and healing point in my own breast. He turned to the others, "crying 'Look! I have brought her to life!'" Of the dream Butter writes: 'He was now able to weep for her [his mother] the tears which he had not been able to weep at the death. The latter part of the dream, the resurrection, refers, I think, not, or not only, to his mother, but to a buried part of himself. The intuitive, feminine part of himself, in Jungian terms his anima, was coming to life...' *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* by Peter Butter (Oliver & Boyd, 1966), pp.33, 79-80.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.196.

drove fear up into my throat, and made my lips dry, while at the centre of myself I tried to assemble my powers and assert something there, though what I did not know.¹³⁰

Peter Butter tells also of Muir's physical appearance, based on Willa's memoir:

Before he could be a whole man again he needed straightening out, physically (years of clerking had left one shoulder higher than the other) and mentally.¹³¹

Maurice Nicoll was fully versed in Freudian methodology, as well as having been a pupil of Carl Jung. He passed on to Muir Jungian theories concerning the Collective Unconscious and Archetypes, theories that were to be absorbed in Muir's poetic apprenticeship. Part of the treatment required that Muir kept a notebook in which he recorded his dreams. Muir here claims:

I had not dreamed for a long time; I had lain like Heine's dead man every night in blank nonentity, and no ghostly hand had knocked on my grave.¹³²

The important thing was that Muir was now both remembering his dreams and having them interpreted, opening up new routes of thought and imagination undoubtedly significant for his later metamorphosis into poet. Muir was already informed on the theories of Freud and was interested in the idea of the unconscious. His analysis had dramatic results.

Now dreams began to come in crowds; every night I had more of them than I could keep count of; the notebook in which I jotted them down to take to the analyst was soon filled, and I had to begin another; there seemed no end to the inventive windings of my psyche.¹³³

Muir does not detail his dreams, but relates his resistance to the analyst's interpretations of them:

I refused to admit their disreputable meanings; or agreed with a sceptical smile; yet after leaving him I was shaken with disgust and dread of myself.¹³⁴

Though it is clear that Muir felt that he benefited from analysis, he does not state exactly what the unwelcome analyses were that so shocked and appalled him. He does, however, detail the peculiar waking trances he also experienced, the most significant of which he attempted to turn into a poem, 'The Ballad of the Soul' in *First Poems*. The trance was peopled with angels and strange mythological beasts, as well as apocalyptic scenes with, for example, a '...black sun in furious circles

¹³⁰ Ibid., p.149.

¹³¹ *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet* by Peter Butter (Oliver & Boyd 1966).

¹³² *A*, p.151.

¹³³ Ibid., p.151.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p.151.

whirled'.¹³⁵ The analyst advised Muir to stop these waking trances, fearing for Muir's sanity. Muir did so, but continued revising the 'Ballad of the Soul' throughout his life. What is most important about this period in terms of Muir's eventual development as a poet is that the analysis seemed to have released him from the debilitating fear that had haunted him during his years in Glasgow and in those first months in London. The fruit of Muir's release was *First Poems*, published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press. It was the first of seven volumes of poetry that Muir would publish in his life. From these I have selected poems which seem to me best to represent Muir's poetic endeavour, development and achievement, at the same time reflecting on the poems' relation to Kathleen Raine's placing of Muir with David Jones, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins.

First Poems (1925)

It is no surprise that Muir's *First Poems* have the remote quality of dream, both in time and space, his first dream about Wyre occurring twenty-five years after he had left the island. The opening poem, 'Childhood', seems to be an attempt by the poet to capture the peculiar clarity and timeless quality that dreams sometimes possess:

Long time he lay upon the sunny hill,
 To his father's house below securely bound.
 Far off the silent, changing sound was still,
 With the black islands lying thick around.

He saw each separate height, each vaguer hue,
 Where the massed islands rolled in mist away,
 And though all ran together in his view
 He knew that unseen straits between them lay.

Often he wondered what new shores were there.
 In thought he saw the still light on the sand,
 The shallow water clear in tranquil air,
 And walked through it in joy from strand to strand.

Over the sound a ship so slow would pass
 That in the black hill's gloom it seemed to lie.
 The evening sound was smooth like sunken glass,
 And time seemed finished ere the ship passed by.

Grey tiny rocks slept round him where he lay,
 Moveless as they, more still as evening came,
 The grasses threw straight shadows far away,
 And from the house his mother called his name.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ 'This vision seems to have been his poetic initiation, an opening of the imaginative eye that he never afterwards forgot. He seemed – not in sleep, but in a state of waking trance – to be the spectator and participator of a great cosmic drama.' *DAS*, p.3. I agree with Raine's judgement here. However, Muir does not write of the vision specifically as a 'poetic initiation'; in a letter to Alec Aitken on the matter he wrote: 'The most strange and the most beautiful experience I have ever had was a waking trance, a long, very rapid series of vivid pictures...including a fight with a curious heraldic monster, and ending up in the shoulder of God, a huge figure sitting on a throne, with rings of the blessed round Him.' *SL*, p.102.

¹³⁶ *CP*, p.3.

A trance-like, spellbound stillness is achieved, particularly in the third stanza where the boy projects himself onto a distant shore, the mind's journey emphasizing somehow his physical immobility. A profound sense of the silence of the scene and its tranquility is emphasized by the mother calling from the house, though this 'naming' also brings the poem 'home' to earth in some way. The muted, immobile effect is frequently found in Muir's early poetry. The sense of paralysis could be attributed to a number of reasons. Marshall offers some illuminating thoughts on the subject, with reference to 'The Enchanted Prince', another poem from *First Poems*. He perceives a parallel between the prince 'lying on the ancient mount' and shell-shocked patients of the First World War that Maurice Nicoll had treated and kept notebooks on:

The symbolism found in dreams was, Nicoll thought, likely to be significant in these cases. He instanced a shell-shocked patient who believed he was half-buried in earth, a symbol which Nicoll read as a sign of the patient's psychological condition and a partial return to the origins of life. Here we have an account of Muir's own psychological state at the time he was treated by Nicoll. That Muir was himself quite well aware of his failure to adapt to a changed environment after his departure from Orkney is clear from his autobiography. The cultural shock that he suffered was akin to shell-shock.¹³⁷

Taking another of the *First Poems*, this time 'Horses', a similar immobility is observable:

Those lumbering horses in the steady plough,
On the bare field – I wonder why, just now,
They seemed terrible, so wild and strange,
Like magic power on the stony grange.

Perhaps some childish hour has come again,
When I watched fearful, through the blackening rain,
Their hooves like pistons in an ancient mill
Move up and down, yet seem as standing still.

Their conquering hooves which trod the stubble down
Were ritual that turned the field to brown,
And their great hulks were seraphim of gold,
Or mute ecstatic monsters on the mould.

And oh the rapture, when, one furrow done,
They marched broad-breasted to the sinking sun!
The light flowed off their bossy sides in flakes;
The furrows rolled behind like struggling snakes.

But when at dusk with steaming nostrils home
They came, they seemed gigantic in the gloam,
And warm and glowing with mysterious fire
That lit their smouldering bodies in the mire.

¹³⁷ *In A Distant Isle: The Orkney background of Edwin Muir* by George Marshall (Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p.18.

Their eyes as brilliant and as wide as night
Gleamed with a cruel apocalyptic sight.
Their manes the leaping ire of the wind
Lifted with rage invisible and blind.

Ah, now it fades! it fades! and I must pine
Again for that dread country crystalline,
Where the blank field and the still-standing tree
Were bright and fearful presences to me.¹³⁸

In this early poem once again, as with 'Childhood' and 'The Enchanted Prince' the poet seems rooted to the spot. The sensation of longing for the past vision is tinged with 'dread' revealing an ambivalence. The desire for return is countered by the stasis of the past, it is 'blank' and 'still-standing.' The horses are viewed with wonder and fear, and appear with an hallucinatory clarity, 'Their eyes as brilliant and as wide as night.' The poem is effective in conveying the rapt awe of the boy, but there is a sense of restriction.

The 'sense of paralysis' that I have observed in Muir's first poems is attributable also to the difficulties Muir encountered with technique, not solely a reflection of the poet's psychological condition. Muir, suspicious of free verse, set himself to learn the craft and art of poetry:

I had no training; I was too old to submit myself to contemporary influences; and I had acquired a deference towards ideas which made my entrance into poetry difficult. Though my imagination had begun to work I had no technique by which I could give expression to it. There were the rhythms of English poetry on the one hand, the images in my mind on the other. All I could do at the start was to force the one, creaking and complaining, into the mould of the other.¹³⁹

Towards the end of his life, Muir gave a series of lectures at Harvard titled *The Estate of Poetry*. In one of these lectures he refers to this difficulty:

To write naturally, especially in verse, is one of the most difficult things in the world; naturalness does not come easily to the awkward human race, and is an achievement of art.¹⁴⁰

When sending copies of *First Poems* and his second collection, *Chorus of the Newly Dead*, to friend Janet Adam Smith who became editor of *The Listener*, Muir wrote:

In both of them there are ghastly things: the wooden stiffness of the rhythms horrifies me now – it is as if I had sat down to write in a particularly hard and heavy overcoat. I think it

¹³⁸ *CP*, p.6.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.201.

¹⁴⁰ *EP*, p.109. From the lecture 'The Public and the Poet.'

must have been my interminable years in Glasgow offices, and the perpetual repression incident to them that made my first efforts so stiff and awkward. Also I was deep in Coleridge and the Scottish Ballads at the time: indeed could not get much out of any other kind of poetry: and that influenced my vocabulary and metre in a way I can see clearly now.

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Thus, in Muir's first attempts at writing poetry there were a number of inhibiting factors, often related to the past, that 'dread country crystalline'. Peter Butter notes the importance of Muir's autobiographical writings in relation to this:

This reliving of the past was expressed in poems and novels, but not fully until *The Story and the Fable*, the writing of which was therefore itself an important stage in his development, releasing him from obsession with time and the past and leading to the more wide-ranging, less introspective poetry of his later years.¹⁴²

Elizabeth Jennings also remarks on 'a new subtlety and strength'¹⁴³, as well as a growing Christian sensibility in Muir's post-autobiographical poetry.

The Narrow Place (1943) and After...

The first collection of poems Muir published after *An Autobiography* was *The Narrow Place* (1943). In the collection there is a departure in style and content in many of the poems, while in others there is the familiar chant and lexical landscape of the early poems. The first poem, 'To J.F.H. (1897-1934)' begins:

Shot from the sling into the perilous road,
The hundred mile long hurtling bowling alley,
To-day I saw you pass full tilt for the jack.¹⁴⁴

There is energy and pace in the lines as the metre is impelled onwards by bursts of alliterative rhythm. The subject matter is also unusual for Muir, a speeding motor-bike, and the first person is far more immediate and personal. The situation leads the poet into his customary philosophical areas of thought on the nature of time and memory, but the poem certainly affords Muir more scope for developing the theme, as the poem puts it:

A chance face flying past
Had started it all and made a hole in space.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴¹ From notes to *First Poems* in *CP*, p.301.

¹⁴² *A*, p.xiii. From the introduction by Peter Butter.

¹⁴³ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings (Carcenet, 1996), p.154.

¹⁴⁴ *CP*, p.95.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.96.

There are other poems such as 'The Wayside Station', which also mark new points of departure for Muir's imagination and style, where a new '...ease and colloquialism are apparent...' ¹⁴⁶:

Here at the wayside station, as many a morning
I watch the smoke torn from the fummy engine
Crawling across the field in serpent sorrow. ¹⁴⁷

Jennings observes:

From such a casual opening Muir can move to the quiet grandeur of,

...The lonely stream
That rode through darkness leaps the gap of light,
Its voice grown loud, and starts its winding journey
Through the day and time and war and history. ¹⁴⁸

In these lines 'the lonely stream' functions effortlessly on two planes, the actual and the symbolic, being both itself as well as signifying the continuity of time and history. There is a hopefulness in its 'leap' despite the sombre period of its composition. A poem like 'The City', however, revisits familiar territory:

All stood so silent in the silent air,
The little houses set on every hill,
A tree before each house. The people were
Tranquil, not sad nor glad. How they could till

Their simple fields, here, almost at the end,
Perplexed us. We were filled with dumb surprise
At wells and mills, and could not understand
This was an order natural and wise. ¹⁴⁹

Here is the 'mild chant' ¹⁵⁰ of Orkney, of Muir's father saying prayers, creating a secure island of words. It is as though the poet is seeking to bridge the divide between the word and its object by repetition. Muir did not experiment with words for their own sake; for him words created by nomination, which was a sacred act. Another poem in the collection, 'The Ring' is written in this strain on which Seamus Heaney makes this illuminating comment:

This is written in *terza rima*, a stanza form notable for producing a cyclic effect. Its rhyme-scheme induces a feeling of onwardness being returned to an original point, a sense of simultaneous progress and pivoting. Furthermore, the shape of reality conveyed by these technical means corresponds to the structure of Muir's poetic myth and to the direction of his emotional impulse which is, as we have seen, regressive. Muir found a resolving image of

¹⁴⁶ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings (Carcenet, 1996), p.155.

¹⁴⁷ *CP*, p.96.

¹⁴⁸ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings (Carcenet, 1996), p.155.

¹⁴⁹ *CP*, p.108.

¹⁵⁰ *A*, p.16.

human destiny in an Orkney kept inviolate by imagination. The Great Memory, the storehouse of the archetypes – whatever one wants to call the source of those forms paradigmatic of both a desirable civilisation and the immortal life – all of this Muir was able to consign within a remembered integrity of time and place and action.¹⁵¹

These comments draw together a number of threads thus far in considering Muir's life and poetry. As Heaney indicates, the technique complements the thematic objective or encapsulates the 'poetic myth'. However, Heaney finds, regarding this poem, that Muir:

...allowed the impulse towards resolved poetic closure to impose its veto too cursorily upon much that was unresolvable, malignant, and untiringly destructive.¹⁵²

There is, I agree, in much of Muir's works an overarching impulse to the good resolution, which reflects his faith in the immortality of the soul within a cosmic order, where Man could find his place and meaning. But I would counter that the 'unresolvable, malignant, and untiringly destructive' also have their voice and place, particularly in Muir's *'Last Poems.'*¹⁵³

Other poems in *The Narrow Place* chart Muir's spiritual, as well as his imaginative, emancipation and development. N.D.O'Donoghue relates such a development to Muir's rediscovery of the Lord's Prayer:

If one thinks on it carefully, the prayer that our poet found himself praying 'with deep urgency and profound disturbed emotion' provided, and still provides, the only real viaticum for the journey into darkness and terror...For the Lord's Prayer is, at its culminating point, a protection prayer...Temptation is the 'test', the *peirasmos*, that utterly terrifying and annihilating undoing which Jesus encountered in Gethsemane, and deliverance from evil is deliverance from *pon ros*, the cruel and seemingly all-powerful adversary who can claim to be Lord of the World.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ *Verse* (Vol. 6, No.1, March 1989), p.26. 'The Place of Edwin Muir' by Seamus Heaney.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.27.

¹⁵³ Poems such as, 'After a Hypothetical War', 'The Desolations', 'The Last War', 'The Nightmare of Peace' and 'The Day Before the Last Day'. Christopher Wiseman writes: 'Few poets have delineated breakdown and neurosis in society and self so clearly as Muir, and his visions of hell are the more frightening because he never raises his voice in his poetry. Few have seen the fragmented self so clearly...and much of his best work deals with a civilization of pain and ugliness, in which we see glimpses of grace and hope. He knew that health and integration constantly strive to assert themselves, but are often defeated, and he had to find the poetic to convey this apprehension in a concrete way...The view of humanity in 'After a Hypothetical War' is truly horrific.' *Edwin Muir: Centenary Assessments* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), p.129. From 'The Buried Grace: Edwin Muir and Symbols of Transformation.'

¹⁵⁴ *Edwin Muir: Centenary Assessments* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), p.121. From the paper 'Edwin Muir: The Untutored Mystic' by N.D. O'Donoghue.

O'Donoghue finds Muir, '...following Jesus into that darkest and deepest place of testing and undoing' in the poem 'The Grove:'¹⁵⁵

There was no road at all to that high place
But through the smothering grove,
Where as we went the shadows wove
Adulterous shapes of animal hate and love.
The idol-crowded nightmare Space,
Wood beyond wood, tree behind tree,
And every tree an empty face...

Did we see or dream it? And the jungle cities –
For there were cities there and civilizations
Deep in the forest; powers and dominations
Like shapes begotten by dreaming animals,
Proud animal dreams uplifted high,
Booted and saddled on the animal's back
And staring with the arrogant animal's eye...

We trod the maze like horses in a mill,
And then passed through it
As in a dream of the will.
How could it be? There was the stifling grove,
Yet here was light; what wonder led us to it?¹⁵⁶

The obfuscation of the 'grove' evokes an image of Hell, yet the poem passes through it to 'light'.

O'Donoghue connects the journey of the poem with the Lord's Prayer, observing that the prayer 'goes down into that darkness and smother', but that primarily it 'opens up to the Father, and to the great spaces of the heavens for which all his life long Muir so ardently yearned:'¹⁵⁷

'The Bird' written presumably about the same time as the Lord's Prayer experience, expresses this with, for Muir, unusual abandon:

...Where
In all the crystalline world was there to find
For you so delicate walking and airy winging
A floor so perfect, so firm and so fair,
And where a ceiling and walls so sweetly ringing,
Whenever you sing, to your clear singing?
The wide-winged soul itself can ask no more
Than such a pure resilient and endless floor
For its strong-pinioned plunging and soaring and upward and
upward springing.¹⁵⁸

The poem is, unusually for Muir, as O'Donoghue remarks, Hopkinsesque, recalling 'The Windhover' in particular, with the force and energy of rhythm enlivening the symbolism connecting bird and soul.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p.121.

¹⁵⁶ CP, pp. 109-110.

¹⁵⁷ *Edwin Muir: Centenary Assessments* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), p.122. From the paper 'Edwin Muir: The Untutored Mystic' by N.D. O'Donoghue.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p.122.

O'Donoghue chooses as key text for 'understanding the life-long mystical undercurrent'¹⁵⁹ in Muir's work, a poem from *The Voyage* (1946), Muir's next collection. The poem, 'In Love For Long', O'Donoghue describes as '...simple to the point of naiveté in structure and language, yet intense, powerful and, in a sense, definitive...each stanza vividly states and restates what might be called a many-sided paradox, a paradox that achieves unity and intelligibility at the very end in a single and triumphant image.'¹⁶⁰ I agree with O'Donoghue's view that the poem is in a sense, 'definitive'. In its language and form cohere seamlessly, though not simplistically:

I've been in love for long
 With what I cannot tell
 And will contrive a song
 For the intangible
 That has no mould or shape,
 From which there's no escape...

It not any thing,
 And yet all being is;
 Being, being, being,
 Its burden and its bliss.
 How can I ever prove
 What it is I love?

This happy happy love
 Is sieged with crying sorrows,
 Crushed beneath and above
 Between to-days and morrows;
 A little paradise
 Held in the world's vice.

And there it is content
 And careless as a child,
 And in imprisonment
 Flourishes sweet and wild;
 In wrong, beyond wrong,
 All the world's day long.

This love a moment known
 For what I do not know
 And in a moment gone
 Is like the happy doe
 That keeps its perfect laws
 Between the tiger's paws
 And vindicates its cause.¹⁶¹

I agree with O'Donoghue's reading of the poem, which I would argue in its simultaneous 'simplicity and profundity'¹⁶² recalls the metaphysical poetry of Herbert and Donne¹⁶³ (as well as more obvious Blakean echoes). What O'Donoghue finds most striking in the poem is that:

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p.122.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p.123.

¹⁶¹ CP, pp.153-154.

Muir manages to point at once towards the centre of Platonism and the centre of Christianity: the Platonism of the intelligible world of being itself, *to ontEs on* ('the being of being'), and the numinous world of the Lamb of God, the lamb slain, and yet alive for ever... We know that over the Christian centuries mysticism has flourished almost exclusively in the Platonic-Christian tradition. Muir, as poet and mystic, stands in this tradition... But if for Muir, as for many others, Christianity finds its horizon in Platonism, yet there is something more in Christian mysticism than its Platonic horizon. That something more is the Cross, set darkly and luminously against that horizon: being, goodness, truth set up for denial and destruction and yet surviving annihilation and contradiction... beyond all reasonable end. Christ and the disciple who follows him is the doe that 'Keeps its perfect laws/Between the tiger's paws/And vindicates its cause.'¹⁶⁴

O'Donoghue asserts that Muir's 'greatest originality' as poet is his placing '...the Christian cross at the centre of Plato's intelligible world of the Ideas of being, truth, unity, goodness and beauty'.¹⁶⁵ I find this convincing with regard to this particular poem and is applicable to many of Muir's later poems. It is a view of Muir's poetry that Kathleen Raine's placing does not accommodate. Raine was reluctant to place Muir as a Christian poet, writing the poem 'The Annunciation':

For him, the meeting of the Angel and the woman is essentially a poem about the eternal nature of love, not a poem describing an unique historical event.¹⁶⁶

I do not agree with Raine's view here. I would argue that for Muir the poem was about 'the eternal nature of love' crucially embodied in 'an unique historical event', that the Annunciation was a unique moment where time intersected with eternity. Christ's presence on earth was the apotheosis of that possible intersection of the divine and the eternal within human temporality, thus imbuing the human with meaning and validating Muir's long cherished belief in the immortality of the soul:

The angel and the girl are met.
Earth was the only meeting place.
For the embodied never yet
Travelled beyond the shore of space.
The eternal spirits in freedom go.

See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,

¹⁶² *Edwin Muir: Centenary Assessments* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), p.122. From the paper 'Edwin Muir: The Untutored Mystic' by N.D. O'Donoghue.

¹⁶³ I am thinking here of Herbert's 'Love' poems and Donne's 'little room' that is an 'everywhere'.

¹⁶⁴ *Edwin Muir: Centenary Assessments* (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1990), pp.124-125.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.126.

¹⁶⁶ *DAS*, pp.12-13.

Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there. He's come to her
From far beyond the farthest star,
Feathered through time. Immediacy
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss
That from their limbs all movement takes.
Yet the increasing rapture brings
So great a wonder that it makes
Each feather tremble on his wings.

Outside the window footsteps fall
Into the ordinary day
And with the sun along the wall
Pursue their unreturning way.
Sound's perpetual roundabout
Rolls its numbered octaves out
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune.

But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make,
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their gaze would never break.¹⁶⁷

Friedrich Hölderlin and Muir

It is possible to argue that no single poet, foreign or British, influenced Muir more profoundly than this German contemporary of Wordsworth.¹⁶⁸

Muir had read deeply and was deeply impressed by Hölderlin's work.¹⁶⁹ In the first of three essays devoted to Hölderlin, Muir cites him as second only to Goethe, providing German poetry with the divine or mystical element he believed to be absent from Goethe's work:

Now Hölderlin is the chief mystical poet of Germany, as Goethe is its chief human poet. Goethe was greatest when he was pure artist; Hölderlin, when he was half-artist, half-prophet. To use very simple terms, Goethe was inspired by a vision of human life as it is eternally; whereas Hölderlin had his eyes fixed on the mystical goal towards which humanity

¹⁶⁷ *CP*, p.206. From Muir's last collection *One Foot in Eden* (1956).

¹⁶⁸ *Lines Review* (No.69, June 1979), p.15. From 'Edwin Muir: The German Aspect' by Howard Gaskill. Kathleen Raine notes the influence in her essay on Muir: 'Visionary as he was, Muir is perhaps at his surest when he writes of middle earth; yet he never writes of the human scene without some haunting of the larger presences of the gods; and sometimes he writes of the gods themselves, catching an echo from Hölderlin:

About the well of life where we are made
Spirits of earth and heavens together lie.
They do not turn their bright heads at our coming.
So deep their dream of pure commingled being.

DAS, pp.15, 16.

¹⁶⁹ Muir wrote to Stephen Spender 'The more I have looked into Hölderlin and attempted to render his quality of imagination, the more convinced I have become of my incapacity to do so. I have read the prophetic poems again and again for the last twelve years...' *SL*, p.85n. Hölderlin has been recognised as the major German poetic influence on Muir's work. The German Romantics, Nietzsche, Goethe and Heine, as well as later writers, especially Kafka and Hermann Broch were also important influences. Muir was familiar with French literature but it did not capture his

is moving, and that chiefly inspired his genius. He was most truly himself when he described mankind not in its eternal normal state, but in its movement to a sanctified end.¹⁷⁰

These statements, I would argue, could equally be applied to the movement of Muir's poetry, for though Muir's vision is most often retrospective, memory is employed to provide a balance for the precarious present, so that the glimpses of continuity underlying the transience of the march of time help to enable a vision of the future where there is a synthesis of the human soul with the eternal (or God) beyond death that sanctifies and gives meaning to the end. Muir was particularly attracted to Hölderlin's poem 'Patmos'¹⁷¹, as Howard Gaskill remarks, paraphrasing Muir's essay:

The relevance of Hölderlin to the geometry of Muir's imaginative world is apparent in his fascination with the image in 'Patmos' of 'God's quiet sign in the thundering sky and Christ standing beneath it His life long', which for Muir expresses the union of the two truths, a truth transcending time, and a truth immanent in time, permanence and alternation. He associates it with his own image of timeless human life as the intersection and interpenetration of a stationary beam falling from heaven and the craving, aspiring dust rising for ever to meet it, in denial or submission, in ignorance or comprehension. Muir has a natural, and perhaps traditional tendency to think of the eternal and the temporal, the ideal and the phenomenal, the Fable and the Story, in terms of the vertical and the horizontal.¹⁷²

These remarks recall O'Donoghue's argument that Muir places 'the Christian cross at the centre of Plato's intelligible world of the Ideas'. It was a pattern that Muir found in Hölderlin:

...To show by what means and in what sense Hölderlin transcended the relativity of history, one must comprehend his conception of poetry. It is expressed in the poem itself. When the heavenly progress turns higher, he says, a redeeming sign is sent, 'and that is the staff of song shining downwards, for nothing is common'.¹⁷³

While it is clear that Muir admired Hölderlin's poetry, and felt an affinity for Hölderlin's poetic vision, Gaskill writes:

imagination or appeal to his literary tastes as much as the German.

¹⁷⁰ *The Truth of The Imagination* by Edwin Muir, ed. Peter Butter (Aberdeen University Press, 1988), p.168.

¹⁷¹ Muir's most detailed essay on Hölderlin, 'Hölderlin's *Patmos*' was published in *The European Quarterly* in 1935. In the essay, Muir is intrigued by the difficulty Hölderlin had in striking a balance between the Greek gods and Christ. Hölderlin found Christ's difference extremely difficult to assimilate justly and poetically.

¹⁷² *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (Vol.XVI, No.1, January 1980), pp.23-24. From 'Hölderlin and the Poetry of Edwin Muir' by P.H. Gaskill.

¹⁷³ *ELS*, p.101.

Its influence on his own poetry is, however, diffuse and difficult to isolate.¹⁷⁴

Yet Gaskill acknowledges:

It is difficult not to think of Hölderlin when we read:

But they, the gods, as large and bright as clouds,
Conversed across the sounds in tranquil voices
High in the sky above the untroubled sea,
And their eternal dialogue was peace
Where all these things were woven, and this our life
Was as a chord deep in that dialogue,
As easy utterance of harmonious words,
Spontaneous syllables bodying forth a world.¹⁷⁵

Michael Hamburger, writing on Hölderlin, is helpful in understanding how Hölderlin could resonate through Muir's poetry:

[Hölderlin] ...uses an astronomical term, 'the eccentric course', to describe the pattern that underlay his own development and the development of each of his works. Hence his habit of returning to early themes and even to finished poems in later years, not merely to improve or elaborate on them, but to join the old to the new, the downward motion to the upward, to trace the full cycle of growth. Hence, too, the extraordinarily small vocabulary of this great poet, who achieved variety by modulation, rather than multiplicity of themes and concepts. True, the vocabulary grew very much larger towards the end of his creative period, corresponding to the wider range of themes in his last hymns and fragments...¹⁷⁶

The cycle that yet allows for progression, the revisiting of images and rewriting of poems, the small vocabulary achieving 'variety by modulation', inhere also in Muir's work.

It must be remembered when writing of Muir's debt to Hölderlin, that Muir called Hölderlin, '...the great modern representative figure', of 'Plato's idea of "divine madness"',¹⁷⁷ though he does not extrapolate on what this signified for himself as poet. It may bear some relation to the darker, fragmented aspect of modernity which Seamus Heaney notes in a description of Muir's poetry:

...a combination of primal song chant and the differentiated, alienated precisions of the modern world.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (Vol.XVI, No.1, January 1980), p.26. From 'Hölderlin and the Poetry of Edwin Muir' by P.H. Gaskill.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.26. Gaskill quotes from the poem, 'The Labyrinth.'

¹⁷⁶ *Hölderlin Selected Verse*, ed. Michael Hamburger (Penguin Books, 1961), p.xx. From the introduction by Michael Hamburger.

¹⁷⁷ *SL*, p.187. Letter to Janet Adam Smith 26th September, 1956.

¹⁷⁸ *Verse* (Vol. 6, No.1, March 1989), p.27. 'The Place of Edwin Muir' by Seamus Heaney.

This description, I would argue, fits the majority of Muir's later poems. Muir imaginatively came to balance the truths of eternity with the doubts and uncertainties of the modern era. In a short poem 'The Late Wasp' Muir draws on lines from a Hölderlin poem, transforming the high German drama into a simple, yet deep, morning reverie:

You came through all the dying summer
Came every morning to our breakfast table,
A lonely bachelor mummer,
And fed on the marmalade
So deeply, all your strength was scarcely able
To prise you from the sweet pit you had made, –
And your blue thoroughfares have felt a change;
They have grown colder;
And it is strange
How the familiar avenues of the air
Crumble now, crumble; the good air will not hold,
All cracked and perished with the cold;
And down you dive through nothing and through despair.¹⁷⁹

It is, I think, extraordinary, that Muir can transform the simple, everyday scene into an emblematic one, without losing the strong evocation of a real, slightly chilly *al fresco* breakfast where the poet's ready sympathy for the wasp betrays his own chilly feelings about aging and the prospect of death. The poem is a modern lament at the passing of time, and one which, unusually for Muir, does not seek the good resolution.

Last Poems

The heart could never speak
But that the Word was spoken.
We hear the heart break
Here with hearts unbroken.
Time, teach us the art
The breaks and heals the heart.

Heart, you would be dumb
But that your word was said
In time, and the echoes come
Thronging from the dead.
Time, teach us the art
That resurrects the heart.

Tongue, you can only say
Syllables, joy and pain,
Till time, having its way,
Makes the world live again.
Time, merciful lord,
Grant us to learn your word.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ CP, pp.232-233. From Muir's last collection *One Foot in Eden* (1956). Hölderlin's poem reads: 'You wander up there in the light/On soft lawns, spiritual beings...Fateless, like the sleeping child, breathe the heavenly ones. Chastely nourished in separate buds, the spirit blooms in them for ever, and spiritual eyes gaze in still, eternal clarity. But to us is given/ In no state to rest/ They vanish, they fall/The suffering mortals/Blindlings from

This lyric, originally written in the first person singular,¹⁸¹ is a petition or prayer that presents the paradoxes of time and eternity, the necessary silence that forms meaning for utterance, the loss of the dead that yet live in the present, and the art that requires the contraries of joy and pain in time before enduring form can be given to the experience. It is also, I would argue, a firmly Christian poem, an appeal to the Logos that makes the sanctification of time possible. This was one of the last poems Muir wrote and was never published, existing only in manuscript form. It could be read, as a kind of final statement on Muir's preoccupation with time as it gradually came to resolution in his apprehension of the incarnated Logos.

Muir's last poem left unfinished and completed by Willa, on the other hand, gathers together many other ideas that preoccupied Muir throughout his life, in a condensed and illuminating way. It recalls the legends, folk tales and fairy stories his father told and his mother sang in the form of ballads, as well as the regular readings from the Bible that transformed the landscape of the island in the boy's imagination. On one level it confirms Muir's belief in ancestral memory while also presenting on a simpler level how his parents provided him not only with a physical, but also an imaginative context in which to apprehend his world and suggesting, perhaps, an alternative, Platonic, ending to the Fable:

I have been taught by dreams and fantasies
Learned from the friendly and the darker phantoms
And got great knowledge and courtesy from the dead
Kinsmen and kinswomen, ancestors and friends
But from two mainly
Who gave me birth

Have learned and drunk from that unspending good
These founts whose learned windings keep
My feet from straying
To the deadly path

That leads into the sultry labyrinth
Where all is bright and the flare
Consumes and shrivels
The moist fruit.

one/Hour to another/Like water from cliff/ To cliff flung downward/Yearlong into the unknown below.' From Muir's translation in *The Freeman* (1st August, 1923), p.489.

¹⁸⁰ *CP*, p.267.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.363. According to Peter Butter's 'Notes'.

Have drawn at last from time which takes away
And taking leaves all things in their right place
An image of forever,
The one and whole
And now that time grows shorter, I perceive
That Plato's is the truest poetry
And that these shadows
Are cast by the true.¹⁸²

Muir's last words were, 'There are no absolutes, no absolutes'¹⁸³ which seem to contradict the last poem he attempted to write, perhaps a final testimony to the inclusiveness of his poetic vision.

Then suddenly again I watch the old
Worn saga write across my years and find,
Scene after scene, the tale my father told,
But I in the middle blind, as Homer blind,

Dark on the highway, groping in the light,
Threading my dazzling way within my night.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² CP, p.274.

¹⁸³ *Belonging* by Willa Muir (The Hogarth Press, 1968), p.315.

¹⁸⁴ CP, p.157. From 'Too Much' in *The Labyrinth* (1949).

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Posthumous Editions

Poetry

The Kensington Man (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)

The Roman Quarry (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)

Wedding Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)

Prose

David Jones: Letters to P. S. Taylor (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)

The Dying Gaul (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)

David Jones: A Study (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)

David Jones: The Letters (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)

David Jones: The Letters (London: Faber & Faber, 1930)



of Wales Press, 1930

London: Faber & Faber

Durham (Canada)

David Jones (1895 -1974)

Major Publications

Poetry

In Parenthesis (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1937)

The Anathemata (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1952)

The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1974)

The Narrows (Agenda, Vol. 11: 4, Vol.12: 1, Autumn-Winter, 1973/74)

Prose

Epoch and Artist ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber & Faber, 1959)

Posthumous Editions

Poetry

The Kensington Mass (London: Agenda Editions, 1975)

The Roman Quarry (London: Agenda Editions, 1981)

Wedding Poems (London: Enitharmon Press, 2002)

Prose

David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins ed. Ruth Pryor (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976)

The Dying Gaul (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1978)

Dai Greatcoat: A self-portrait of David Jones in his letters ed. René Hague, (London: Faber & Faber, 1980)

Inner Necessities: The Letters of David Jones to Desmond Chute ed. Thomas Dilworth (Toronto: Anson-Cartwright Editions, 1984)

The Place of David Jones

You will observe the golden lily-flowers powdered to drape a million
and a half disemboweled yeanlings.
There's a sight for you that is in our genuine European tradition.¹⁸⁵

When Troy towers are a feeble analogy and
The Harrying of the North a child's tale, when
fear rules and bombast pretends to competence.
Because of the detestable counsel, directly
because of the merchants' rule...

...At the time of the howling, in the days
of the final desolations...¹⁸⁶

David Jones has never lacked dedicated supporters and admirers, many of them influential and respected in their respective fields.¹⁸⁷ Yet his achievement as artist and poet remains a thorny subject, not necessarily regarding the quality (though this is also disputed) of his work, but often because of some of its informing principles.¹⁸⁸ The recent publication of two previously unpublished poems, 'Prothalamion' and 'Epithalamion' written in 1940, collected in *Wedding Poems*, drew fire from one critic believing the work displayed dubious ideological leanings, even pro-Nazi sympathies. The reviewer, William Wootten, takes issue with Jones's inclusion of the word 'plutocracy' in 'Epithalamion':

In September 1940 'plutocracy' was a word overwhelmingly associated with Nazi propaganda; and while to equate Jones's poetry completely with such propaganda would be to overstate the case, Jones is allowing himself to sound less like James Joyce than William Joyce.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁵ *SL*, p.100. From 'The Book of Balaam's Ass'.

¹⁸⁶ *WP*, p.32. From 'Prothalamion'.

¹⁸⁷ Notably: T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Igor Stravinsky, Hugh MacDiarmid, Sir Kenneth Clark, H.S. Ede, Herbert Read, Harold Rosenberg, Michael Alexander, Vernon Watkins, Kathleen Raine and Seamus Heaney.

¹⁸⁸ Jones's 'informing principles' were inextricably bound up with life experiences, the two most important of these were his participation as a Private in the First World War and his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1921. A third major preoccupation of Jones's was the 'matter of Britain' especially in its Welsh Celtic emanation. In a letter to Harman Grisewood, Jones wrote: '...I'm certain that I owe a huge debt to influences and persons operating from round about the middle of the 1st World War and continuing until, well, I suppose the late 1930s. The Catholic Church, people such as *yourself* in particular, and Christopher D[awson] and Tom B[urns], etc. etc. Joyce, of course, Tom E[liot] evidently, Spengler, [Maurice] de la Taille, von Hugel, *all* seemed to provide a kind of 'unity of indirect reference...' *DGC*, p.185.

¹⁸⁹ *London Review of Books* (25th September 2003), p.27. 'At the Thirteenth Hour' by William Wootten.

Wootten then quotes Jones from an unpublished essay, where Jones refers to 'the unnamed forces that control commodities and gold' and 'the iniquities...of international Jewry'.¹⁹⁰ Wootten refers to Eric Gill and Oswald Spengler who, Wootten avers, 'seem models of restraint'¹⁹¹ in their views on merchants and civilizational phases, in comparison with Jones. He accuses Jones of an '...inability to free his mind of the First World War' and hence, 'his failure to understand the imperatives of the Second.'¹⁹² Wootten complains of 'Jones's peculiar sense of national, religious and cultural identity', where he '...uses the past to blur the moral and political certainties of the present' and employs 'a complex verbal texture that is often wilfully obscure' necessitating 'acres of footnotes'.¹⁹³ Wootten recognizes *In Parenthesis* as a 'classic of both Modernism and First World War writing, and unlike what one expects from either' (what does one expect?). While harbouring reservations concerning *The Anthemata* and *The Sleeping Lord*, he concedes that there is 'a great deal that is interesting and valuable' in them 'despite their follies and faults':¹⁹⁴

Jones is often compared to Pound, but seldom approached with anything like the same critical caution. Partly because he has always deserved to be better known than he is, his champions tend to ignore or indulge both his weaknesses and what is ideologically problematic in his writing and his art. Dilworth's edition of *Wedding Poems* succeeds only in showcasing all that is wrong with David Jones and the cult that surrounds him.¹⁹⁵

Though there are necessarily gaps of exposition and argument in such an article, I consider it useful in opening up points for discussion which have a bearing on Jones's place in Western artistic and literary canons, and correspondingly in relation to Kathleen Raine's placing.

Wootten's polemic is pertinent and even helpful in this sense; not least in the response it elicited from Thomas Dilworth, leading Jones scholar and editor of *Wedding Poems*.

It seems a shame that William Wootten's review of my edition of David Jones's wedding poems...will, largely for political reasons, dissuade many from reading Jones, who is in my view the greatest native British poet since Hopkins. In seeing Jones as ideologically pro-

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p.28. Jones wrote: 'For a number of easily appreciated and quite authentic reasons we none of us much relish the prospect of our past opinions (expressed, maybe, with regard to a particular occasion) being given a new lease of life in changed conditions and we ourselves changed also...What we say at such and such a time we would not necessarily say at a later time, indeed the likelihood is all the other way, and even if we say in 1958 what we said in 1950 what is connoted will, in some fashion, be other.' *E&A* (p.11)

¹⁹¹ *London Review of Books* (25th September 2003), p.28. 'At the Thirteenth Hour' by William Wootten.

¹⁹² Ibid., p.28.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

Fascist, Wootten badly mistakes the direction of the political energy of Jones's poetry. No other poet in the past century comes close to him in consistently and thoroughly opposing totalitarianism.¹⁹⁶

The lines are clearly drawn, and though the opposition is not straightforwardly a polarity of 'simple hagiography or uncomprehending excoriation'¹⁹⁷, such stances are implied in some of the terms chosen by the writers. Wootten's reference to Jones's '...peculiar sense of national, religious and cultural identity...' is interesting, since Raine finds nothing 'peculiar' in Jones. What both Raine and Jones considered 'peculiar', were the times in which they lived. They believed their era constituted an unprecedented fragmentation of '...national, religious and cultural identity'. Dilworth does not address this in his letter, but his assertion that Jones is 'the greatest native British poet since Hopkins', is, I would argue related, and is both provocative and interesting, passing over Hardy, Auden and Hughes to name only a few, as well as positing Jones in a tradition of great British poetry that has an unequivocally religious aspect.¹⁹⁸ But the association with Hopkins is not problematic in the sense that the ideological and political mire in which Wootten has implicated Jones is. William Blissett recalls and records conversations with Jones from an initial visit in 1959 and consequent visits, until Jones's death in October 1974:

We talked about the tragedy of Germany, and he made the admission (rather, tore the admission out of himself) that he had been quite pro-German in the appeasement era, out of fellow-feeling for the 'enemy front-fighters against whom we found ourselves by misadventure', having dismissed all earlier reports of Nazi cruelty and nihilism as propaganda, like the stories of soldiers crucified on hay ricks in the Great War. The truth came as a terrible shock, and he has been pondering ever since on whether a new age of torment and outrage has opened or whether the old securities and decencies had been an illusion all the time.¹⁹⁹

These late reflections could be said to reveal Jones's naïveté, but may also be said to reveal his instinctive tendency to think in terms of 'ages'; how one impinges on another and how difficult it is fully to comprehend the patterns of history.

¹⁹⁶ *London Review of Books* (Vol.25, No. 20). Letters web-page, 'At the 13th Hour' by Thomas Dilworth.

¹⁹⁷ *David Jones Mythmaker* by Elizabeth Ward (Manchester University Press, 1983), p.6.

¹⁹⁸ From Jones's writing it is clear that he felt an affinity with Hopkins, both in terms of his Welsh sympathies – their interest in the metrical intricacies of early Welsh verse and its alliteration, and the culture of Wales, the special qualities of the land and its people - and his shared religious faith. To a lesser degree they also admired the soldier and were inspired by the glories and tragedies of ships and the sea.

It was not until Elizabeth Ward's book, *David Jones Mythmaker* (1983), Thomas Dilworth's paper 'David Jones and Fascism' (1986), and Derek Shiel's and Jonathan Miles's book *The Maker Unmade* (1995) Jones and 'ideology' received dedicated critical attention. Most recently, Keith Alldritt devotes a chapter of his Jones biography to 'The Attractions of Adolf Hitler', in which he draws substantially on Dilworth's paper. Alldritt concludes that Jones has:

'...been made by history to appear naïve and misguided, if not wicked. At the end of the war, as the extent of Nazi atrocities became clear, he realized his error. A friend reports him saying quite simply: 'I got that Nazi thing wrong.'²⁰⁰

Dilworth refers to Jones's admission of error and adds that Jones considered himself:

Not wrong in his agreement with aspects of their political criticism – he had always disapproved of the 'corrective measures' proposed by Hitler – but wrong in imagining the Nazis incapable of such extremes of evil. He never published an admission of error because he had never made his position public – none of the quotations for which Wootten holds him accountable was published by Jones; but in private he was candid and forthright about his mistake.²⁰¹

Dilworth provides additional information with which to contextualize Jones's use of 'plutocracy':

It is a term Jones first acquired not from Hitler but in 1929 from his friend the historian Christopher Dawson, who was ardently anti-Fascist.²⁰²

The debate here is fuelled by exegetical as well as 'ethical' concerns. Wootten is not condemning Jones's work outright, but is close to calling for an entire reappraisal of it, in the light of evidence that Jones may have been following, to twenty-first century sensibilities, a 'dubious' ideological agenda, which may not have been previously or adequately admitted. I consider Dilworth's response a sufficient countering of the assertions made by Wootten.

In his 'Foreword' to the poems, Dilworth describes 'Prothalamion' as 'a powerfully beautiful work and, as a commemoration of the Blitz ought now to take its place beside T.S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding', and Dylan Thomas's 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' and 'Ceremony After a Fire Raid'.²⁰³ 'Epithalamion' he considers 'remarkable in its allusive richness and historical sweep and deserves to be ranked, with 'Prothalamion', among the best poems of the war

¹⁹⁹ *The Long Conversation: A Memoir of David Jones* by William Blissett (Oxford University Press, 1981), p.12.

²⁰⁰ *David Jones Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2003), p.113.

²⁰¹ *London Review of Books* (Vol.25, No. 20) Letters web-page, 'At the 13th Hour' by Thomas Dilworth.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

years.’²⁰⁴ Here is a very definite urging to set Jones in his ‘rightful place’. Dilworth shows a strong sense of the importance of a ‘mainstream’ inclusive canon; that Jones should not be excluded. This stance contrasts with Kathleen Raine’s, who more or less accepts the existence of a canon of ‘outsiders’, but these outsiders belong to a far greater order of artistic achievement than that created by ‘critical’ consensus, academicians and/or a book buying public. Yet Dilworth’s approach has some recognisably similar traits to Raine’s. As one reader’s response to the *Wedding Poems* is fraught with contemporary anxieties concerning race, ideology, religion and identity – that call for ‘critical caution’ – then is more starkly contrasted a response to the poems concerned with myth and the artefacts of man, considered within ‘the artifice of eternity.’²⁰⁵ Dilworth opens his commentary on ‘Epithalamion’ thus, focusing on Jones’s ‘...historicising imagination...’²⁰⁶

It is essentially a chronological list of beautiful women from Helen of Troy at the beginning of western culture to Margaret Grisewood now. But it is also a modulation between these women and their social and cultural contexts. In the changing relation between figure and ground is a nexus of powerfully ambiguous feeling – a liminal space sometimes of harmony, more often, of discomfort. Sometimes the contrast between beauty and its context is the irreducible difference between aesthetics and ethics, a difference which is, in the poem, the subject of medieval debate (lines 28 – 44).²⁰⁷

These poems, here specifically ‘Epithalamion’, presented as a gift, were conceived on a similarly ambitious scale as *The Anathemata*. Jones provided notes for ‘Epithalamion’ (with addenda by Dilworth in this edition). ‘Epithalamion’ begins:

Helen we have read of and
the girdle-loosers, those
half-celestial, who shine for us yet from our
true origins
the three who contested the orchard’s gift
the grey-eyed and gilt-tressed (strict-bound, or
strayed for the Peloponnesian winds)
in the old time, and
more intimate for us
those later wonders, as
Guenever, Elaine, with
both the Iseults,

²⁰³ *WP*, p.8. From ‘Foreword’ by Thomas Dilworth.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

²⁰⁵ *Yeats’s Poems* ed. A. Norman Jeffares (1989; Houndsmill: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1996), p.301. From ‘Sailing to Byzantium’.

²⁰⁶ *The Song of Deeds A Study of The Anathemata of David Jones* by Neil Corcoran (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982), p.38. Here concerned with *The Anathemata*, I think Corcoran’s description applies to all Jones’s oeuvre.

²⁰⁷ *WP*, p.49.

the French 'Colette that made the lame to go
 the Nordic *Eddeva* (whose neck they praised)
 searching under the flares, where the *aesc* – wall
 gave, and splintered trophies pile
 (from Dux – tent in new-fangle tongue hear
 Alde sung, Carles! The *chanson* of the deeds).²⁰⁸

In these first eighteen lines there is a considerable mythological roving of the eye. The second line 'the girdle-loosers' might appear an incongruous, archaic phrase. Dilworth provides:

'Girdle-loosers' in line 2 are women who loosen their belts or waist-sashes to accept intercourse (Jones had read about a woman 'releasing her girdle of maidenhood' in Jackson Knight's *Cumaeen Gates*, p. 125). In Greek myth and epic, many such women are 'half-celestial' (line 3), one of these being Helen of Troy (line 1), sired on human Leda by celestial Zeus in the form of a swan.²⁰⁹

Thus the carnal is linked with the divine in the form of woman, perhaps foreshadowing the Incarnation of Christ in Mary's *fiat mihi*. There may be an indirect reference to Sir Thomas Wyatt's 'They Flee From Me'. Scattered through 'Epithalamion' are phrases that recall the poem, 'in new-fangle tongue' (line 17) and 'should earl's child, with starry fingers, now begin, these to unlace, that to unpin, this with deliberation lift, or this let deftly fall' (lines 56 – 59). That the Wyatt poem is a lament both piquant and poignant evoking the hollowness of loss, countered by the bittersweet consolations of memory, contributes to the curious ambiguity of the poem in its double-edged celebration of the bride. 'Epithalamion' may appear impersonal in its chronological listing and the employment of a not especially inclusive 'we' rather than the first person, but I would argue that the poem betrays the stirring of memories the marriage must have occasioned.

Jones gave Margaret an engraving, *The Bride*, made in 1930 when Petra Gill, to whom Jones had been

engaged from 1924 to 1927, married Denis Tegetmeier. For a man who never married and did not experience any kind of connubial relationship, writing these poems must have initiated a complex emotional searching and re-examination of old wounds. Considering the paintings of the early 1940s in conjunction with the wedding poems is useful here.²¹⁰ The painting *Aphrodite in Aulis*, which

²⁰⁸ *WP*, p.34.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.50.

²¹⁰ Miles and Shiel present a compelling psychological study of the paintings of this period, particularly with reference to symptoms of sexual anxiety and repressed eroticism. They also relate studies by psychologist Wilhelm Reich on the: '...sexual and psychological precondition of Fascist thought. Just as the capacity to work can be impaired by sexual frustration so can sexual suppression, in Reich's view, give rise to "conservatism, fear of freedom, in a word, reactionary thinking." On a national scale, Fascism can be seen as "the resistance of a

Dilworth describes as the 'sororal' twin to 'Epithalamion', was made at 'approximately the same time from the same imaginative matrix'²¹¹:

This was his first major painting in nearly a decade. It was made possible by his admiration for Fouquet's Virgin, by his idealized love for Margaret and the feminine beauty she embodied, by his chaste participation in Harman's love affair, and by the heating-up of the war, which paradoxically relieved him of depression and neurotic anxiety. For him, the Blitz was a distraction from, or external balance to, emotional distress, lifting a depression that, waxing and waning, had afflicted him for over a decade. This painting would remain for him special. He would never offer it for sale.²¹²

Dilworth's tone is positive, but, I would argue, exhibits the difficulties of grasping the state of Jones's mind and emotions. Could Jones reasonably be said to be 'relieved' of 'neurotic anxiety' by an 'idealized love' and 'chaste participation' in a love affair? In *The Maker Unmade*, which explores and assesses primarily Jones's artistic achievement, written some time before the discovery of the wedding poems, the authors' interpretation of *Aphrodite in Aulis* is, I think, more penetrating:

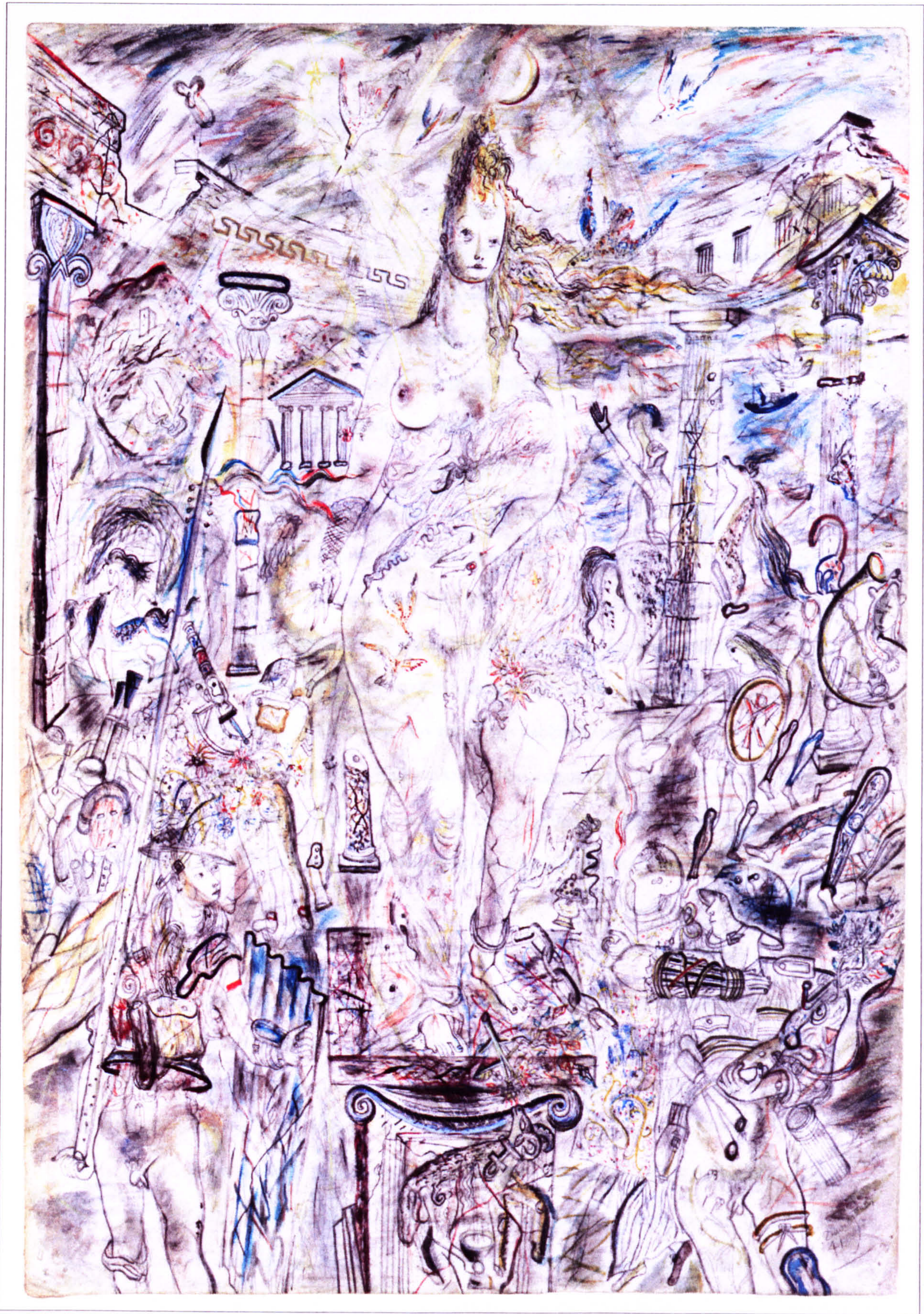
Both *Aphrodite in Aulis* and *The Mother of the West* were made in the early years of the Second World War at a time when Jones was deep in his reading of Spengler, so it is hardly surprising that both combat and ideas about contemporaneity were very much on his mind...Clearly, the figure of Aphrodite, part statue, part woman, on a plinth yet chained, wicked yet innocent, voluptuous yet coy is a mother of the West. She is venerated by these men but she has also given birth to them, had sex with them and has been wounded by them. Jones wrote to René Hague that

My intention in changing Iphegenia to Aphrodite in the title was to include *all* female cult-figures, as I have written somewhere the figure is all goddesses rolled into one – wounded of necessity as are all things worthy of our worship – she's mother-figure and *virgo inter virgines* – the pierced woman and mother and all her foretypes.

sexually as well as economically deadly sick society to the painful but resolute revolutionary tendencies towards sexual as well as economic freedom, a freedom the very thought of which instills the reactionary man with mortal terror." Anxiety about cultural loss and collapse became embroiled in Jones's wrestling with his suppressed sexuality. The mythological paintings are so often cries of sexual as well as civilizational *angst*.' (*David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren/Poetry Wales Ltd, 1995, 2003), pp.258-259.

²¹¹ Ibid., p.12.

²¹² Ibid., p.31.



... *Aphrodite in Aulis*, with its vision of woman as both maimed and venerated suggests the source of the poet and painter's sexual distress. Women so defined, so symbolised could only be adored, abhorred or forgiven, they could hardly be lived with as a partner.²¹³

These observations could equally be applied to *The Wedding Poems*. As Dilworth states, there is more 'discomfort' than 'harmony' in the poems. The strenuous and searching involvement of the poet with his subject could easily be missed by the reader overwhelmed by the plethora of detail and the incantatory, pressing movement of the paradoxically fragmented lines. These two poems with their absence of lyricism, proclamatory tone and energetic, slightly tricky form of cataloguing are distinctively Jones. There is a tangible delight in words:

The pallid moistener of the basil-flower, the
fractious wards that stagnant moats confine,
those who looked-out from slits in granges.
Those coltish paramours also, in Lincoln skirts
Tucked-up for greenwood-kings.²¹⁴

The phrase 'pallid moistener' is perhaps deliberately affected. There is a sense that Jones is mocking Victorian archaisms in the phrase 'fractious wards', recalling perhaps, *Mariana in the Moated Grange*. There is a hint at the naughty and bawdy in the last line. Is there something almost self-consciously clever and school-boyish in these poems? Jones habitually referred to Margaret as 'heavenly' and she remains a curiously distant, rather blank presence in the material accompanying the poems, as well as the poems themselves. And yet 'Epithalamion' is a poem concerned with physicality as much as it is with archetypal versions of the female, a constant balancing in Jones's oeuvre.

Earlier Assessments

From a preliminary study of some of the recent developments in Jones research, it is apparent that a just appraisal of his achievement as artist, poet and essayist will be coloured by a complex of issues. One constant is Jones's assuredly 'eccentric', if not outright, peripheral place. T.S. Eliot reveals his awareness for this potentiality in his introduction to *In Parenthesis*:

In Parenthesis was first published in London in 1937. I am proud to share the responsibility for that first publication. On reading the book in typescript I was deeply moved. I then regarded it, and still regard it, as a work of genius... When *In Parenthesis* is widely enough

²¹³ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren/Poetry Wales Ltd, 1995, 2003), pp. 233, 234, 235.

²¹⁴ *WP*, p.35.

known – as it will be in time – it will no doubt undergo the same sort of detective analysis and exegesis as the later work of James Joyce and the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound... Those who read *In Parenthesis* for the first time, need to know nothing more than this and what the author tells us in his own Preface, except that *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata* have been greatly admired by a number of writers whose opinions usually command attention...²¹⁵

As an apology for the work, whilst appearing staunchly committed to it, it contains an undercurrent of uncertainty. It reveals that, almost twenty-five years on from its first publication, *In Parenthesis* had not reached the readership Eliot had conceivably believed it would. But Eliot still asserts that 'it will be' known 'in time'²¹⁶. Having been 'proud' to be the first publisher of the work, it is natural that its publisher would be reluctant to admit error.²¹⁷ Where Eliot appears to strive to create a canon, Jones's work resists.

A special edition of *Agenda* published in 1967 collected a range of appreciations of Jones, which include attempts to place it:

Despite the high opinion that David Jones's work enjoys among writers as distinguished as Eliot and Auden, he is probably better known as an artist than as a poet. He belongs to no school, and has not yet been classified. As David Jones is *sui generis* it may help to place him by naming some of his admirations. It may briefly be said that he shares some of the ideas of Ruskin, Morris (and Eric Gill), greatly respects Hopkins, and seems much influenced by Eliot and Joyce. But few of David Jones's debts are literary and stylistic; his style is all his own. His chief reverence is for things rather than poets, and especially two things: the Catholic Church and the history of Britain.²¹⁸

In 'A Note on David Jones', in the same publication, another essayist presents a now familiar theme:

It is not likely that he will ever be a popular poet... For many people, he can be lightly dismissed as an irrelevant, eccentric antiquarian. For those who are prepared to spend time in the company of his two major works, *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*, their reward is sure.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ *IP*, pp.vii, viii. From 'A Note of Introduction' by T.S. Eliot in 1961.

²¹⁶ 'In Parenthesis, which is still not widely known, is one of the enduring works that came out of the First World War.' *The New Statesman and Nation* (22nd November, 1952), p.607. From a review by Kathleen Raine.

²¹⁷ John Simon refers to Eliot's praise of *In Parenthesis* as 'legitimizing his intellectual offspring.' (*The New Republic*, May 21 1962), pp. 21 – 23. In the review, 'From Waste to Wonderland', critical of Jones, considering him merely an imitator of Eliot, Joyce and Hopkins.

²¹⁸ *Agenda* (Vol.5, Nos.1 – 3, Spring-Summer 1967), p.116. From an essay by Michael Alexander.

²¹⁹ *Agenda* (Vol.5, Nos. 1–3, Spring-Summer 1967), p.172. From an essay by Ancirin Talfan Davies.

These themes – Jones’s influences and debts, his ‘things’ or *res*, and his eluding classification ²²⁰ – are constant in each successive rendering of his work, not least Kathleen Raine’s, whose position on David Jones did not alter over the years – from her first acquaintance with his art in the late 1930s, her first meeting with Jones in 1946 and subsequent friendship, her extended reviews of *In Parenthesis*, *The Anathemata*, and *Epoch & Artist*, her two major papers on Jones published in 1974 and 1978 respectively – to her last review of *Wedding Poems* in 2002. What distinguishes Raine’s position on Jones is her firmly shifting Jones from the Joyce, Pound, Eliot equation to one instead of G.M. Hopkins, Edwin Muir, Vernon Watkins, David Gascoyne and St. John Perse. David Jones certainly recognized his affinities with Hopkins and St. John Perse ²²¹. Later in life a friendship developed with Watkins, where there was a mutual admiration for one another’s literary productions:

Vernon Watkins had read and admired *In Parenthesis* soon after its publication in 1937; but when he heard Douglas Cleverdon’s adaptation broadcast on the Third Programme in 1946, he was, as he said himself, “bowled over” by it. From that time on he recognized David Jones as one of the great poets of the age.²²²

Vernon Watkins was to be instrumental in Jones’s work being published in the U.S.A. Edwin Muir wrote a cautious but generally favourable review of *The Anathemata* for *The Observer*. David Blamires, writing in 1971, acknowledges Raine’s grouping of these poets ‘who she feels are faithful to the spiritual depth of “true poetry” and find new ways of exploring and expressing it.’²²³

Permanence and mutability, continuity and obsolescence are concerns for the poet, the publisher and the critic. The struggles with perspective and context, form and content confront each of these agents with their particular imperatives. On the one hand there is Kathleen Raine with, ‘To ‘discover’ David Jones is to enter an élite.’²²⁴ On the other, David Wheatley announces:

David Jones (1895-1974) is one of the great neglected figures of modern British poetry...²²⁵

²²⁰ Paul Hills, curator of a major David Jones Tate retrospective in 1981, wrote: ‘David Jones belongs to that line of British poet-painters, so exceptional to our culture, of which Blake and Rossetti are the great exemplars.’ *David Jones Catalogue* (Tate Gallery Publications Department, 1981), p.7.

²²¹ In a letter to W.H. Auden, Jones wrote: ‘Oh, by the way, I was interested that you mentioned St. John Perse’s *Vents* in your review in *Encounter*, because that other poem of his, *Anabase*, with Tom Eliot’s translation on the opposite page, pub. 1930, was, I should say...a poem that made a pretty big impression on me when it was published...’ *DGC*, p.163. St John Perse was another poet Kathleen Raine championed in her book *Defending Ancient Springs*.

²²² *DJL*, p.7.

²²³ *David Jones: Artist and Writer* by David Blamires (Manchester University Press, 1971), p.193.

²²⁴ *David Jones Solitary Perfectionist* by Kathleen Raine (Golgonooza Press, 1974), p.1.

²²⁵ *The Guardian* (26th October 2002), p.25. From ‘Spirit of ecstasy’ by David Wheatley.

In the case of Kathleen Raine, David Jones welcomed her analyses of his work, as did Edwin Muir, as approximating to an accurate grasp of its intentions. Jones wanted to be understood and felt, as artist, a responsibility to the public, though well aware of the fractured, disparate state of that 'public':

I am very grateful to Kathleen Raine for her understanding review (of *The Anathemata*), and as the *New Statesman* has a wide sale, it may do some good.²²⁶

It seems now that there is a place for Raine's type of epistemological certainty, her strenuous efforts at validating a type of poetic tradition, though not, perhaps, for reasons she would welcome. Ironically, the contemporary condition of fragmentation (epistemologically and culturally), permits the survival of a multitude of poetic assemblings. Fragmentation allows for a type of freedom, even a type of 'cultural continuity'. Yet fragmentation was the spectre stalking David Jones's creative impulse toward unity, while presenting tantalising opportunities for an allusive and collagist style and conceptualization. I would argue that Jones attempted to work both within the demands of fragmentation and a vestigial tradition. In the preface to *The Anathemata* he wrote:

It may be that the kind of thing I have been trying to make is no longer makeable in the kind of way in which I have tried to make it...I regard my book as a series of fragments, fragmented bits, chance scraps really, of records of things, vestiges of sorts and kinds of *disciplinae*, that have come my way by this channel or that influence. Pieces of stuffs that happen to mean something to me and which I see as perhaps making a kind of coat of many colours, such as belonged to 'that dreamer' in the Hebrew myth. Things to which I would give a related form, just as one does in painting a picture. You use the things that are yours to use because they happen to be lying about the place or site or lying within the orbit of your 'tradition'. It is very desirable in the arts to know the meaning of the word ex-orbitant, or there is pastiche or worse...Of course, in any case, there may well be pastiche, padding, things not gestant and superficialities of all sorts; but all this is inevitable if you get outside what I believe Blake called the artist's horizon. I have tried to keep inside it.²²⁷

The awareness of attempting to create and participate in a shared tradition and a sense of duty to the essential nature of that tradition are crucial features of David Jones's artistic ethos. The same was true for Edwin Muir, David Gascoyne and Vernon Watkins. In contrast, Frank Kermode wrote in his

²²⁶ *DGC*, p.156.

²²⁷ *A*, pp.16, 34.

preface to a collection of interviews with poets, including David Jones, Vernon Watkins, Elizabeth Jennings, George MacBeth, Norman Nicholson, Sylvia Plath and Roy Fuller, among others:

Poetry, it would seem is no longer 'the scholar's art.' These men may be learned, but their learning is not essential to their poetry, and they have no common tradition of poetry.²²⁸

The 'tradition' that Raine posits and defends, stretches to include poets as diverse as Rabindranath Tagore and Jean Mambriño; the 'traditional' poetic fetch can be broad – as long as there is culture, and that necessarily incorporates a religious tradition. Mambriño was a Jesuit priest, Tagore 'rooted in the age-old and still living tradition of India's mainstream of spiritual civilization'²²⁹. David Jones was fascinated and frustrated by the possibilities and impossibilities he encountered in his attempts at 'making', with his dual apprehension of both Raine's and Kermode's positions. His work often appears precarious:

'...So that when asked to what end does my work proceed I can do no more than answer in the most tentative and hesitant fashion imaginable, thus: Perhaps it is in the maintenance of some sort of single plank in some sort of bridge.'²³⁰

²²⁸ *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with contemporary poets* ed. Peter Orr (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p.xi.

²²⁹ *Temenos Academy Review* (No.5, Autumn 2002), p.206. Extract from Kathleen Raine's review of *Rabindranath Tagore, Jottings, Sparks: The Collected Brief Poems* Translated with an Introduction by William Radice (Angel Books, 2002).

²³⁰ *DG*, p.1.

The Making of the Artist and Poet: Education, Religion & Livelihood

From about the age of six, I felt I belonged to my father's people and their land, though brought up in an entirely English atmosphere.²³¹

Wales

This apparently uncomplicated statement holds in balance two features of the artist poet's identity which I consider to be key elements in the matrix of complex 'difficulties' often perceived in David Jones's work that have resulted in, or at least contributed to, its marginalization and peripheral placing: his devotion to Wales and his suburban London upbringing. As a child, Jones responded enthusiastically and imaginatively to his Welsh connections and his father's lost heritage.²³² His 'initial visit' to his relatives in Wales 'made an indelible mark, not to be erased.'²³³ As mature artist poet, Jones assimilated the original enthusiasm into a passionate semi-systemized defence of traditional, locally differentiated culture. Celtic Wales was to become also an emanation of a unified, universal culture, most often identified as Western European Christendom of the Middle Ages. This, Jones contrasted with what he regarded, with increasing perturbation, the secular, placeless, rootless and therefore culture-less encroaching 'megalopolitan technocracy', terms Jones borrowed from Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. In a paper 'Wales and Visual Form', Jones wrote:

Finally we have the present situation where...to a large extent and in all essentials a common dead-level machine-culture which in the nature of things can take no regard of differentiations and immemorial ways and tends to be actively inimical to all such, and which quite inevitably causes the hands to lose their cunning and saps the whole integral feeling and changes the entire rhythm, puts a premium on 'town intelligence' at the expense of 'country understanding', relegates the 'crafts' to the category of things to be 'preserved' or 'encouraged' and to be contemplated in 'leisure hours', for those who like 'old-fashioned ways' while others can enjoy that same leisure in the scenery museums that were once the living countryside. Do not let it be supposed that these contemporary efforts at preservation

²³¹ DG, p.23. From 'In Illo tempore.'

²³² David's father, James Jones was born in 1860 of a wholly Welsh family, which none the less was Anglican and had become Anglicised to the extent that speaking only English was considered the way to progress and succeed in society. Jones's father left home to work, firstly in Liverpool, before moving to London...[He] could, and would, sing Welsh songs which the young artist strove to imitate but: 'His rather feeble grasp of the Welsh language was a pain and sadness for him, feelings which his son David came very much to share.' *David Jones: Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2003), p.2.

or encouragement are to be despised any more than are the laudable efforts to preserve 'the scenery' from the vileness of the building contractors – but we *must* understand the true nature of the situation and be under no illusions.²³⁴

The Welsh connection is drawn on to support and exemplify a larger concern. I agree to an extent with René Hague when he states:

It was a great sorrow to David that he was cut off from Wales, but he was cut off from a Wales for which he had no more than a sentimental love. He was widely read in Welsh history, but the Wales he loved ended with the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffyd on 11 December 1282...and reached back into a Wales of myth and not of fact. This statement would, I fear, have brought from David the ultimate and most damning reproach of Nominalism. He held fast to the reality of universals, and among his universals was 'Welshness'. Of modern Wales he had little or no knowledge.²³⁵

I would argue that Jones possessed something more than a 'sentimental love' for Wales, considering its connection with wider ranging issues, and especially in the case of the 'Wales of myth' because 'myth' was a word to which Jones attached 'commanding force'²³⁶:

...so that for him myth is truth expressed in artefacture, the truth of the former consisting in the being of the latter. And it is here that his use coincides with the Christian use of 'mystery', so that what, in pre-Christian times, was 'mere' myth becomes, when Christianised, the revelation of mystery.²³⁷

As well as expressing the 'truth' of myth and the 'revelation of mystery', Jones defined 'artefacture' by its gratuitous and intransitive quality (following Maritain and Eric Gill), in opposition to the solely 'utile' productions of humanity and the necessarily utile productions of nature. Jones believed the 'extra-utile' quality of human production to be *the* defining quality of a 'culture':

In a "culture" the "utile" and the "extra-utile" are, to this degree or that, married, inter-meddled, the maiden "sign" or "sacrament" is not by any means wholly "forlorn"...Technics may...be "built-in" to the mammal called "man"...but owing to certain slowly developed thought-processes an obsession with the technological causes man to be Man-the-Technocrat;

²³³ DG, p.23. From 'In Illo tempore.'

²³⁴ Ibid., pp.86, 87.

²³⁵ DGC, p.24.

²³⁶ *A Commentary on The Anathemata of David Jones* by René Hague (Christopher Skelton: Skelton's Press, 1977), p.9.

²³⁷ Ibid., p.9.

then it becomes next to impossible for him to see any sense in the sign-world. He can and does still require “entertainment” of every conceivable sort. It is a psychological necessity. (“Cultural activities”.)²³⁸

Jones could not accept ‘culture’ as merely ‘a psychological necessity’ and rebelled against the departmentalizing and specialization of human activity. This is an important common thread with Raine, Muir et al.

Though Jones may have had ‘little or no knowledge of Modern Wales’ he understood Wales to retain a thread of continuity with traditional culture and ‘the sign-world’, especially via its language: ‘

... the only continuous living link with antiquity is the language which those of you who are Welsh-speaking have the honour to be using today.’²³⁹

The phrase a ‘living link with antiquity’ is central to Jones’s linguistic and creative relationship with Wales and his Welsh heritage. In terms of historical contextualization, he discovered from his reading in Welsh history that the line of Welsh mediaeval princes ‘stemmed straight from Roman Britain.’²⁴⁰ It was critical for Jones to be able to discern in his readings in Welsh history and poetry an ideal, splendidly mythologised culture, integrated with his faith, Roman Catholicism. The link was to provide him with material for his art and poetry, necessary for authenticating their seriousness of intent and grandeur of scope:

The beginnings can be said to be associated with the man known to Welsh tradition as Cunedda Wledig. He appears to have been a Romano-British official and to have come of a family of such officials. In which case his religion was probably the official one, Christianity.²⁴¹

The association with Wales provided Jones personal access to a once not only distinctive culture tradition, but one that was ‘a survival from the disintegration of what had been the Diocese of Britain’²⁴², Roman Christendom:

For quite unlike the Scottic, Pictish, Saxon and Angle Kingdoms which arose as forces exterior to and as invaders of the disintegrating provinces of the Empire, Wales arose from within that disintegration.²⁴³

²³⁸ Ibid., p.18.

²³⁹ *DG*, p.35. From ‘A London Artist Looks at Contemporary Wales’ (1959).

²⁴⁰ *E&A*, p. 41. From ‘Wales and the Crown’ (1953).

²⁴¹ Ibid., p.41.

There is thus a strong connection between Jones's disaffection and disillusion with the 'megalopolitan technocracy', analogous in Jones's mind with the Roman Empire, for which it is useful to remember Jones maintained an ambivalent attitude, and his affinity for Wales. Jones was able to translate his antipathy for the mechanized, industrialized, increasingly commercialised urban and secular polity of England, into a passionate defence of the local, the particular, the authentic and ultimately the sacred, in the terminally side-lined, and in his view, uniquely 'historic' Wales.

Importantly, the human history of Wales was inextricably associated with its topography, flora and fauna. The land and its creatures were imbued with significance. Visual imagining and re-presenting of the land and its creatures is most strikingly encountered in parts of *The Anathemata* and *The Sleeping Lord*. Yet it would be inaccurate to describe Jones a 'nature poet'. Jones was closer to Blake than Wordsworth in his apprehension of the natural world:

Kathleen Raine has described how Jones was less at home in the Lake District than in the Welsh hills around Capel-y-ffin, 'lacking the consecration of sites by mankind's story, it lacked, for David, a necessary dimension. Wordsworth could enjoy "nature" untouched by man; but for David, as for Blake, "nature without man is barren".' ...Jones was more interested in the human quality of making than in the creative power of God; emotionally and temperamentally, that is; as an orthodox Catholic he would of course have assented to the idea that ultimately all derives from and reflects the Creator.²⁴⁴

This is reminiscent of Muir's '...I want the landscape, the soil, things shaped by generations with affection and made into a human scene...' For Jones, the natural world played a central and significant role in his understanding of the impact on the human psyche of the de-naturing impetus of technological advances and therefore, for him, the de-sacralisation of human apprehension, much as it did for Muir and Watkins:

That our culture has accelerated every line of advance into the territory of physical science is well appreciated – but not so well understood are the unforeseen, subsidiary effects of this achievement. We stroke cats, pluck flowers, tie ribands, assist at the manual acts of religion, make some kind of love, write poems, paint pictures, are generally at one with that creaturely world inherited from our remote beginnings. Our perception of many things is heightened

²⁴² Ibid., p.45.

²⁴³ Ibid., p.45.

²⁴⁴ *David Jones: Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.99. From 'David Jones and the Idea of Art' by Bernard Bergonzi.

and clarified. Yet must we do gas-drill, be attuned to many new-fangled technicalities, respond to increasingly exacting mechanical devices; some fascinating and compelling, others sinister in the extreme; all requiring a new and strange direction of mind, a new sensitivity certainly, but at a considerable cost ... We who are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and who presume to other and more radiant affinities, are finding it difficult, as yet, to recognize these creatures of chemicals as true extensions of ourselves, that we may feel for them native affection, which alone can make them magical for us. It would be interesting to know how we shall ennoble our new media as we have already ennobled and made significant our old – candle-light, fire-light, Cups, Wands and Swords, to choose at random.²⁴⁵

Jones's 'native affection' for the yet largely rural, agricultural Wales and its Celtic-Roman history, provided the bed-rock for his thought and procedure as artist in his attempt to explore the relationship between the 'many new-fangled technicalities' and 'increasingly exacting mechanical devices' and 'that creaturely world inherited from our remote beginnings'.

While Jones developed a quasi-intellectual understanding of his relationship with Wales which supported his notions concerning culture and religion in a Western European context, he stressed the centrality of an 'immediate' emotional context. Jones attaches 'primary importance' to the 'living, dying or dead traditions' that were 'heard with one's own ears from one's own parents or near relatives or immediate forbears.'²⁴⁶

I am speaking of channels only, but of immediate channels and such as condition all that passes through them, and which condition also one's subsequent attitude to all the rest.²⁴⁷

Jones was keenly aware that his attachment to Wales must not be 'nominal'. It must be absolutely sincere for his work to be 'authentic' and not an ersatz antiquarianism; he was ever on his guard against such weaknesses as those that he perceived, for example, in many works of the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement, which he considered to be too literary, contrived and without genuine vitality.²⁴⁸

The connection had to be secure enough to afford Jones an integrity of 'place' and culture.

²⁴⁵ *E&A*, p.37.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.135. Preface to *The Anathemata*.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.135.

²⁴⁸ Miles & Shiel quote Jones in *The Maker Unmade* regarding the painting *Gwener*: 'It is a *bit* pre-Raphaelite and that won't do, for me, in 1959. I have got a bit of pre-Raphaelite lurking in me, and, it ain't no bloody good vis-à-vis painting.' p.227.

In her review of *In Parenthesis*, Raine echoes Jones's concerns apropos the creative process and the creation of a poetic identity in terms of the 'given'²⁴⁹:

The poet's learning is gathered by a vital process; he selects what he loves in painting, poetry, history; his knowledge grows about a core of life; it is not amassed by the mechanical routine of academic study...No merely academic study of "sources", whether in the author's notes or those of others, can bring to the reader the experience of participation in the symbols of a religion, a racial heritage, or a heritage of poems and stories, hills and rivers known and loved in common by the poet and his people. The museums of the world are full of dead images which once were informed by a living spirit; but the poet's concern is only with what is living. David Jones may be the last of the British bards, but he is still working within the living tradition of Christendom and the Celtic civilisation.²⁵⁰

Though Jones approved Raine's reviews, there are inherent problems in her wrangling with notions of inherited knowledge and education, in that at root neither she, nor the poets she champions were truly inheritors of a cultural tradition – as Jones was at pains to make clear in many of his writings. They were only inheritors in part, their accretion of poetic 'goods' a retrospective and self-conscious activity, but crucially one motivated by love. The sorrow for Jones was his possession of love for 'the symbols of a religion, a racial heritage, or a heritage of poems and stories, hills and rivers', but no experience of true 'participation'. Even so, Jones agreed with Raine in so far as the 'lines of communication' with the past must be kept open by poets, in a quasi-bardic capacity. These 'lines' must be 'contactual and real' as far as possible, which defines an experience that is not primarily cerebral. The handing down of stories and songs within the family were indeed of primary importance for Jones and Muir. As Jones was keen to assert:

I am in no sense a scholar, but an artist, and it is paramount for any artist that he should use whatever happens to be to hand. For artists depend on the immediate and the contactual and their apperception must have a 'now-ness' about it. *But*, in our present megalopolitan technocracy the artist must still remain a 'rememberer' (part of the official bardic function in earlier phases of society).²⁵¹

As it was, Raine recognised that Jones's 'context' represented:

²⁴⁹ In her paper on Jones, Raine reiterates her position: 'The first test of what is ours is that it is 'given'. *JJP*, p.123.

²⁵⁰ *Poetry* (CI: 6 March 1963), pp. 429, 430. From the review of *In Parenthesis*, 'An Epic Poet' by Kathleen Raine.

...An all but a lost norm: the Catholic religion and its symbols, its liturgy and its Latin; and the Welsh poems and stories, especially the Arthurian cycle and *Y Gododdin*: the epic tradition of the British race, though few know it.²⁵²

Though Raine and Jones diverged in their apprehension of the religious foundations of their creative principles, Raine adhering to a Neo-Platonic manifestation of the *Sophia Perennis* and Jones committed to an Aristotelian, Neo-Thomist and Incarnational faith, they shared a belief in the crucial role played by an individual's ancestral connections. This was true too for Edwin Muir.

The notion of ancestry was no comfortable or conveniently selective appropriating of history but an intense scrutiny of what one could discern validly as one's 'own'. Raine, Jones and Muir drew on their parents' ancestry and reached back to their more distant forbears necessarily, for in each case, save Jones's mother, a born Londoner, their parents were displaced people, moreover, they were displaced people of humble origin, of farmers and crafts-people, transplanted into an urban environment, where to a degree they became part of the amorphous and anonymous urban populace:

We know ourselves in terms of our inheritance, and are made what we are by our own past and that of our ancestors, natural and spiritual, and this is true no less of unlettered men than of aristocracies.²⁵³

The development of the adult psyche is here presented as dependent on a retrospective assimilation of one's 'inheritance'. Like Edwin Muir, David Jones set about autobiography in a manner that was consistent with all his other forms of 'making'. In seeking to construct the foundational context for his work Jones, like Muir, charts his progress from informing childhood apprehensions of identity in essays and occasional papers rather than memoir, to create a consistent pattern of development. Jones makes an observation on his approach remarkably similar to Muir's thoughts on the 'fable' and the 'story':

There is only one tale to tell even though the telling is patient of endless development and ingenuity and can take on a million variant forms. I imagine something of this sort to be implicit in what Picasso is reported as saying: I do not seek, I find.²⁵⁴

Jones's method is to 'find' his strata of deposits, exemplified for him in the 'Celticity' of James Joyce:

²⁵¹ *DG*, p.1. From 'Statement to the Bollingen Foundation, 1959.'

²⁵² *Poetry* (CI: 6 March 1963), p.42. From 'An Epic Poet' by Kathleen Raine.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.42.

²⁵⁴ *DG*, p.35.

...The most creative literary genius of this century, using English as the *lingua franca* of a megalopolitan civilisation, developed an art-form showing an essential Celticity as intricate, complex, flexible, exact and abstract as anything from the visual arts of La Tène or Kells or from the aural intricacies of medieval Welsh metric, an art-form in which the Celtic demands with regard to place, site, identity, are a hundred-fold fulfilled. As an art forged in exile by a man of our placeless cosmopolis, yet an art wholly determined by place, *a* place, an exact site, an art which, for its *materia poetica*, employs stuff from all the strata and the flux, from before and before again, to weave a word-web, a sound-web, round the 'Town of the Ford of Hurdles' as Dublin was called by the Goidels.²⁵⁵

The passage reveals some of the criteria under which Jones himself worked. Jones's art could as well be described as 'forged in exile by a man of our placeless cosmopolis'. In a letter to René Hague, Jones wrote:

...As a matter of fact I feel *utterly* in exile of late, more and more. Everybody one *really* knows is separated and inside me for all this 'interest' (in e.g. U.S. A.) about my work etc. I feel completely isolated in some curious kind of way.²⁵⁶

Jones shared a feeling of exile and isolation with Edwin Muir also a London, or at least city dweller, for large portions of his life, who felt equally that his 'place' was elsewhere. The condition of exile is strongly linked to the poets' belief that an authentic art must derive from a unified culture – a unity which draws its validity from a continuity of tradition which is itself founded in the eternal and ultimately the Divine. As Jones put it:

More and more, throughout the last decades and still more today, any plastic feeling must be looked for not in 'places' – there can hardly be said to be 'places' in that sense: the *genii* and *numina* of place 'troop to th'infernall jail' in a way Milton never saw. We all are as uprooted as the nation of the Jews and that is why we weep when we remember Sion – the old local Sions with their variants of the form-creating human cultures. We all are of the diaspora now...²⁵⁷

Like Edwin Muir, David Jones's hyper-sensitivity to the transitional period in which they lived and his interpretation of the probable outcome of the changes in society that he observed, and thus 'the

²⁵⁵ *DG*, p.58. From 'The Dying Gaul.'

²⁵⁶ *DGC*, p.218. From a letter dated January 1965.

²⁵⁷ *E&A*, p.141. From a letter written to *Granta*, March 1953.

arts', found him striving to accommodate an acceptance of inevitable change with a strong sense of loss and an urgent need to preserve what was left of tradition.

London

Though Brockley was Jones's birthplace and primary residence until his mother's death in 1937, after which date he was only ever a visitor to his father there, he appears to have felt little significant attachment to the place. The traditions Jones revived that have any connection with London are those that filtered down to Jones, via stories told by his mother, of his grandfather, Ebenezer Bradshaw. Brockley itself provided Jones with very little material for his artistic agenda – though he did produce a few paintings of his suburban neighbourhood.

He divided much of his adult life between Brockley, staying with friends for extended periods, including the vital periods with Gill's communities in Ditchling and Capel-y-ffin, and for a while living in a hotel in Sidmouth. He found relative stability only much later in life occupying a single room in a large house, Northwick Lodge in Harrow, for sixteen years (1947-64). Jones's itinerant status is likely to have contributed to his often feeling isolated, exacerbated by his uncertainties regarding 'class':

The class question was a persistent problem; Petra Tegetmeier remembered Jones's parents as humble and ordinary with a pinch of Cockney in their speech. In the late twenties Jones found himself in the world of debutantes and Lords, for among that class and among the Catholic intelligentsia he found people who were aware of the mighty drama of culture and civilization and yet who were not 'of the left', an impossible political position because of its denial of 'the supernatural order'. Yet negotiating the demands of the social situation was a source of constant anxiety; he recalled being '*terrified* of Lady Chichester and chaps coming and me all in rags'. Jones revealed his discomfort in a letter to Tom Burns, describing himself as

'supernumerary, attached, pending allocation to unit' (as the military jargon goes) to the upper classes – yet with my roots among the lower orders (of whom I have *great fear* and whose reactions I *hate*, but for whom I feel a deep *understanding* at the same time).

He went on to praise the apparent anonymity of the army and, indeed, one might add to that the asocial context of communities like Ditchling, and Capel-y-ffin.²⁵⁸

Jones was also shy of artistic groupings despite his involvement with Eric Gill's communities and being a member of Ben Nicholson's 7 & 5 Society for a number of years. Jones wrote:

First perhaps it should be said that I was in a somewhat peripheral position to the major 'movements' of that time. Perhaps 'complex' or 'ambiguous' might be a better adjective than 'peripheral' to convey my position *vis-à-vis* certain well-known and defined trends, I don't know... There were a number of converging reasons for this. For one thing I had, and have something of an antipathy to groups with stated aims.²⁵⁹

The Muirs, while certainly involved for a period in the London literary scene, especially during the time they lived in Hampstead, were also 'outsiders'.

If David Jones developed his personal, historical sense of imaginative and poetic origin largely from his father's ancestry, he also drew considerably on his maternal grandfather's history as 'mast- and block-maker of Rotherhithe, as has been remarked.'²⁶⁰ The section 'Redriff' (Rotherhithe) in *The Anathemata* is devoted solely to Ebenezer Bradshaw and his craft:

To the mature poet and artist, it was important that his maternal grandfather, Ebenezer Bradshaw, had been a mast-and-block maker in Rotherhithe, for that ancestry was a lanyard that linked him to ships, to the Pool of London, and to all that pertains to the craft of the ship's carpenter. From the family tradition he learnt a respect for craftsmanship, for the right making of things –

we'll fay that hounding trim and proper

He has Eb Bradshaw proclaim in his great poem...*The Anathemata*.²⁶¹

René Hague stressed the importance of Jones's London connections:

In spite of all David's attempts to Cambrianize his work...and in spite of his devotion to a great Welsh myth, it was the English tradition that was most completely assimilated, and everything in his work that is most convincing, sincere, and based on real knowledge and understanding is English. And the core of that English tradition, lying in the riverside and the city of London, came to him from his mother and her memories of her youth in Rotherhithe.

²⁵⁸ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren Poetry Wales Ltd, 1995, 2003), pp.252, 253.

²⁵⁹ *DG*, p.41. From 'Notes on the 1930s.'

²⁶⁰ *E&A*, p.19.

Even his father, in spite of his love of Wales, helped by first turning David towards the main current of English literature.²⁶²

Hague firmly places Jones and his work in 'the English tradition'. This 'tradition' appears to comprise two strands: the 'core' which is Jones's maternal inheritance of London's history; and 'the main current of English literature'. The London sections of *The Anathemata* bear out Jones's 'real knowledge' and assimilation of his mother's stories. There is also the ingenious interweaving in *In Parenthesis* of the Cockney idiom of the infantrymen with the 'main current of English literature' as it was passed on to Jones by his lower middle class, yet considerably educated and well read family. Like Muir, Jones's family possessed a depth of familiarity with works such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, The Bible and Milton. Keith Alldritt remarks on Ebenezer Bradshaw:

He died before David was born, but from listening to the many memories of his mother and his grandmother David knew him to have been a forceful personality who read the Book of Common Prayer, the Bible and poetry by Milton every morning before having breakfast with his wife. Ebenezer would then set off for his riverside workshop where he would do his accounting and supervise the working of timber imported from distant places such as Norway, the Indies and Oregon.²⁶³

This kind of 'possession' of a text was a factor affecting the lives of Jones and Muir. That certain critical texts were completely absorbed into the lives of immediate forbears indicates the vestiges of a communal literary heritage, where poetry especially played an actual and vital role in the day-to-day lives of fairly ordinary people. Jones took particular pleasure in the richly idiomatic language of his older relatives:

...I *had* to tell you about that Thackeray thing – 'Well, sir, I think I know the time of day'. I laughed like anything when I heard it and I still chuckle over it. It has that absolute authenticity, hasn't it? It reminds me of things that some of my mother's relatives used to say, when I was a little tiny boy, at the turn of the century. I recall an old man who wore *always* a silk hat and who used to say, 'Don't he put the butter on' – perhaps after listening to some sermon... There was then a much more *unified culture*, I think, for all this bloody stuff about democracy, for as you know we were pretty poor, but the standard of living was, I think pretty high in some respects – unless of course one was *really* poor, and then it was

²⁶¹ *David Jones* by Paul Hills (Tate Gallery Publications Department, 1981), p.19.

²⁶² *E&A*, p.23.

awful, no doubt. But even for them nothing was ersatz and now *everything* is ersatz, it seems to me.²⁶⁴

Jones's pleasure in his memories of his family and relatives and his incorporation of those memories into his grander 'makings' are one with his drive to create a linguistic heritage.

Of David Jones's childhood in Brockley, the key events selected by Jones from memory tend toward creating the image of a special, different child, exceptional in the environment into which he was born. Jones was a gifted child artist and by the age of six he felt not only that he belonged to his 'father's people', but had also decided that 'when I grew up there was only one thing that I would do':

...I cannot recall a time when drawing of some sort was not an accustomed activity and one which I supposed I should pursue later in life...I was so backward at my lessons that I regarded drawing as a counter-weight to my deficiency in all else. To attempt to convey on paper this or that object seemed to me as natural a desire as, say, stroking a cat, and I couldn't understand why my brother and sister had not the same compulsion.²⁶⁵

Writing, however, did not arise from a natural prompting. Jones found the encounter with language a torturous, if endlessly captivating one. Jones, like Muir, started writing poetry relatively late in life. He was forty-two when he made his first attempts with *In Parenthesis*. Both poets had had emotionally eventful, and often traumatic experiences in their youth and young adulthood, Jones losing his elder brother in his teens and enduring the bleak and brutal life of the First World War trenches in his early twenties. Though the poetic renditions of their experiences vary stylistically and formally, the content shares a timbre of 'lateness' in time and life, and an urge toward elevated remembrance.

Jones attended the Camberwell School of Art from the age of fourteen after an unremarkable schooling in more conventional establishments. The first of these was what Jones describes as a 'dame-school' run by two young women 'for a handful of small children'. Jones learnt to read under the enchanting guidance of the more attractive teacher who 'had two long plaits of peat-dark hair, a very white skin and a smile that would do justice to Creirwy of Llyn Tegid, the love of Garwy Hirt -

²⁶³ *David Jones Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2003), p.3.

²⁶⁴ *DGC*, pp. 185,186. 'These poets were paying language a new kind of attention. They were manifesting the Romantic interest in the vernacular, in the homemade, in the idiosyncrasies of the local. They were partaking in the century's concern with languages as living organisms, every cell responsive to any sensation one cell undergoes, all language "fossil poetry." And they were responding to the sheer weight of literary history: to the distance, now, and strangeness (thus *faery* not *fairy*) of so much earlier poetry (in writing *Jerry* Keats remembers Spenser, for whom in turn the word was an archaism)... For the Romantics, harking back to foretime, discovered literary history.' *The Pound Era* by Hugh Kenner (Faber and Faber, 1975), p.129.

though I was not to know of them for many years.’²⁶⁶ It is typical that Jones creates a delightful fairy-tale genre story from his experience of learning to read, as well as relating it to a Welsh fable – and that it involves a muse-type figure effecting a metamorphosis. It is interesting that Muir is similarly initiated into the world of reading and literature by an enchanting female teacher. At home, Jones remembers his sister reading him children’s versions of tales from Malory as well as a tale ‘The Knight of the Sparrowhawk’ adapted for children from *The Mabinogion* in the series, Books for Bairns, which was his first and favourite story. His father read them *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and later Jones read George Borrow’s *Wild Wales*, Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of the *Mabinogion*, John Richard Green’s *History of the English People*, O.M. Edwards’s *Short History of Wales*, and a weighty history book by John Rhys and Brynmor-Jones *The Welsh People* given to him by his father in 1911 to which he continued to refer in adulthood. Jones never mentions his time at a local state school, which he attended until he was able to persuade his parents to send him to art school:

It seems likely that he took little interest in conventional schooling, although he did win a book, *Birds I Have Known*, as a school prize for grammar in the summer of 1907 when he was eleven.²⁶⁷

Once at Camberwell Jones was set to making drawings of plaster casts from classical antiquity:

When I should have been having Latin declensions and the elements of Greek knocked into me, aside from other *disciplinae* of various sorts.²⁶⁸

Jones’s favoured subjects for painting did not alter substantially during his lifetime: animals, historical (especially medieval) and mythological subjects, and scenes through windows (landscapes and seascapes). The curriculum at Camberwell unusually included a course in English literature.²⁶⁹ There was also a course on illustration. Yet, ‘...despite the influence of his father’s work, David Jones was determined to avoid becoming a ‘commercial artist’.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁵ DG, pp.23, 24. Extract from ‘In illo tempore.’

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p.24.

²⁶⁷ *David Jones: Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2003), p.13.

²⁶⁸ DG, p.26.

²⁶⁹ ‘In Eric Gill’s *Letters*, one of the first mentions of David Jones is of his ‘reading *Twelfth Night*’ to Gill’s daughter Petra...even if it was an amorous ploy, it suggests a real delight in literature. During Jones’s years at Camberwell, the courses included Shakespeare, ballads, lyrics, as well as some Chaucer and Coleridge – all favourite areas of reference or borrowing for David Jones’s own poetry.’ *The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.21.

²⁷⁰ *The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.21.

At the end of his time at Camberwell, Jones was relieved from wondering 'what sort of shape the future might have for an artist of no particular qualifications when he left art school'²⁷¹ by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914:

In January 1915, being in a battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, as part of the 38th (Welsh) Division, I found myself...on the coast of Gwynedd...doing squad drill on the esplanade at Llandudno.²⁷²

Jones served with the battalion on the Western Front from December 1915 to February 1918. He was demobilized in December 1918. The war, as for many of his generation, was to change everything:

The First World War made an impact on David Jones that he himself was slow to understand.²⁷³

Whilst the war was to provide Jones with the material for *In Parenthesis*, an event occurred, recorded in the poem, which was to be crucial in shaping Jones's artistic and poetic endeavour:

This was his first sight of the celebrating of the Catholic Mass...David felt the cold very badly at the front, and when he was in the rear of the trenches he would often go searching for wood with which to build himself a fire. One dark evening he came upon a rickety byre or outhouse. A light glimmered through a crack and David put his eye to it. In side was a priest in vestments with two candles flickering on an improvised altar. Before the priest there were figures in khaki...David watched for a while but then moved on. Years later he recalled that 'I didn't think that I ought to stay long as it seemed rather like an uninitiated bloke prying on the Mysteries of a Cult. But it made a big impression on me.'²⁷⁴

Jones's description of the event in a letter to René Hague in 1973, includes a comment on the 'oneness' he perceived between 'the Offerant and those toughs that clustered round him in the dim-lit byre – a thing I had never felt remotely as a Protestant at the Office of Holy Communion in spite of the insistence of Protestant theology on the 'priesthood of the laity'.²⁷⁵ The 'oneness' is created for Jones at least in part by the use of Latin, 'the historic language of unity.'²⁷⁶ Jones was attracted to the Roman Catholic celebration of the Mass and its continuity with the past resonating through the Latin liturgical forms. Jones's parents were devout Anglicans, though they adhered to different wings of the

²⁷¹ DG, p.27.

²⁷² Ibid., p.27.

²⁷³ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.23.

²⁷⁴ *David Jones: Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2003), p.35.

²⁷⁵ DGC, p.249.

Church. His mother was sympathetic to the High Church and to the beliefs of the Victorian theologian Edward Pusey, while his father was Evangelical and a lay reader at St George's of Brockley. His father was to be distressed by Jones's conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1921, though ultimately a serious rift did not develop between them.

Jones's conversion came after '...a succession of formative aesthetic and spiritual experiences'²⁷⁷ while he was a student at the Westminster School of Art, which he was able to attend on a government grant awarded to ex-servicemen. Keith Alldritt identifies El Greco's *Agony in the Garden* on public view in the National Gallery and Eric Gill's Stations of the Cross in Westminster Cathedral, as impressing 'the twenty-three-year-old ex-serviceman ... now starting the long process of coming to terms with all the many and various horrors which he had witnessed in the trenches.'²⁷⁸ At Westminster, Jones encountered discussions of Post-Impressionist:

He found that 'one of the more rewarding notions implicit in the post-Impressionist idea was that a work is a "thing" and not (necessarily) the impression of some other thing. For example, that it is the "abstract" quality in any painting (no matter how "realistic") that causes the painting to have "being"; and which alone gives it the right to be claimed as an art-work...'²⁷⁹

Bernard Meninsky and Walter Sickert, two of Jones's teachers at Westminster encouraged students to explore such avant-garde ideas in their work – Meninsky had exhibited with the Vorticists, the group led by Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis. As Jones was developing his aesthetic ideas, his religious convictions similarly evolved:

At this time he often went as an observer to the Catholic sacrament of the Mass, frequently in Westminster Cathedral. He pondered deeply the words and the rituals of the sacrament and also the relationship between art and sacrament...²⁸⁰

Where Jones diverged most markedly from Clive Bell and Roger Fry's theories of Post-Impressionism (a term coined by Fry)²⁸¹, was his analogical placing of the idea of 'significant form' with what he believed took place during the Mass:

²⁷⁶ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.117. 'The Welsh Thing in Here' by William Blissett.

²⁷⁷ *David Jones: Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2003), p.41.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.41.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.43.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.46.

²⁸¹ *Modernism, 1910 – 1945: Image to Apocalypse* by Jane Goldman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p.43.

As his understanding of the Eucharist deepened, an unexpected analogy presented itself. 'I used to say to chaps that I thought the theory of Post-Impressionism, about a painting and what not being a *thing* and not the impression of something, was analogous to what the Catholic Church maintained in her dogma of the Mass – they thought I was cracked (especially the Catholic ones!)'.²⁸²

Miles and Shiel refer to Jones's years at Westminster as 'a period when the intellectual questions, which were about to determine the basis for his life's work, began to trouble Jones. He was in the process of turning to religion as the source of succour and replenishment and it became pivotal to his whole understanding of the need, purpose and practice of art.'²⁸³

Towards the end of his time at Westminster Jones came into contact with Father John O'Connor and Eric Gill. Father O'Connor is described by Alldritt as 'a great lover and connoisseur of art.'²⁸⁴

The Catholic priest who was to play a most important part in David's religious evolution was a colourful figure...O'Connor was worldly, highly perceptive and eccentric...he was also an intellectual and a serious theologian. Greatly interested in the thoughts of Jacques Maritain ...Father O'Connor was in the early 1920s the translator into English of Maritain's *Art et Scholastique* under the title *The Philosophy of Art*. David read this work and was much influenced by it.²⁸⁵

In January 1921 Jones went to Ditchling for his first meeting with Eric Gill 'aesthete and convert to Catholicism'²⁸⁶ on O'Connor's recommendation:

The meeting that day was a crucial occasion in David's life: for the next twenty years his life would be conditioned socially, professionally, intellectually and emotionally by his relationship with Eric Gill and with Gill's family and friends.²⁸⁷

Eric Gill was a forceful, highly idiosyncratic figure 'fired by the rich brew of ideas that he assimilated and accommodated to his particular concept of Roman Catholicism: Fabian, Socialist and Distributist notions.'²⁸⁸

²⁸² *David Jones* by Paul Hills (Tate Gallery Publications Department, 1981), p.20.

²⁸³ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.40.

²⁸⁴ *David Jones Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson, 2003), p.42.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.42.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.46.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.46.

²⁸⁸ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.47.

Miles and Shiel consider Jones's choice of Gill as master 'in ways an odd, but as it transpired, supremely important choice; for good or bad...' ²⁸⁹ They also remark, tellingly when Jones's life and work is contextualized in relation to Edwin Muir's, that:

While there is ample evidence in his work in the early 1920s of an acquaintance, not only with Post-Impressionism, but also with the earliest phase of Cubism, Jones appeared indifferent, certainly isolated, quaintly parochial and somewhat eccentric in the choosing of his artistic models and masters. ²⁹⁰

The isolation and eccentricity have already been noted, the addition of 'parochial' is perhaps unexpected as Jones was a Londoner by birth. What is interesting about this term is that it defines Jones as set apart from the metropolitan movements, at a time when there was an enormous ferment of ideas and discussion concerning art and literature, despite being ideally placed to participate. Gill's community at Ditchling was certainly unconventional; Gill describing the Guild as 'primarily a religious fraternity for those who make things with their hands.' ²⁹¹ Jones's own unconventional schooling may have been a factor in his gravitation toward Gill and Ditchling, and more particularly his increasing interest in Roman Catholicism, which could hardly be described as of a 'quaintly parochial' community.

Ditchling provided Jones with a home and working environment away from Brockley. Though Jones had strong affections for his parents, his relationship with them was neither uncomplicated nor without tensions:

Some unidentified notes...possibly for an application to the Artists' Benevolent Fund, speak of his 'long-standing chronic neurosis' as being not only 'related to experiences in being wounded in the 1914-1918 war' but also 'to early domestic worries', worries perhaps centred on the death of his older brother, Harold. Later, during his first sustained period of nervous breakdown in the early thirties, Jones preferred the haven of H.S. Ede's house in Hampstead and thought it less 'struggle than going back to Brockley'. To be caught up in domestic trivia during or after Armageddon was something that many First World War fighters eschewed and which, after the war, led to incomprehension and isolation. ²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p.44. Elizabeth Ward, in *David Jones Mythmaker* (Manchester University Press, 1983) remarks that: 'Ditchling represents only one instance of a series of modern attempts to adapt the *philosophia perennis* to the twentieth century.' (p.31)

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p.44.

²⁹¹ Ibid., p.44.

²⁹² Ibid., p.244.

At Ditchling, 'there had been several shell-shocked young men' and 'Gill was quick to appreciate Jones's emotional condition and set him to work doing physical tasks such as painting windows'.²⁹³ Gill wrote to Father O'Connor, after his first meeting with David, that he hoped to 'knock some corners off him'.²⁹⁴ Kathleen Raine, who believed in the 'unlearning' of academically imbibed ideas in order to return to poetic and imaginative origins bears some similarities to Gill's wish to resemble a medieval artisan, working within a 'corporate' tradition – culturally, historically and metaphysically united. When Jones finally went to live at Ditchling, he thrived there and stayed, with occasional trips to Brockley, for three years. Though Gill's influence on Jones's life was profound, Jones maintained an artistic sensibility quite distinctively his own:

Donald Attwater recorded that Jones was 'a disciple of Eric's mind' but 'not of all his ideas', and in fact, Jones recalled that he 'disagreed' with Gill 'over all sorts of things'. Hague gave an accurate picture when he stated that Jones took 'many fundamental principles from Eric Gill', and summed it up excellently when he wrote that 'Eric had an enduring influence on David's thought – if little or none on his work'.²⁹⁵

Gill was concerned with the 'how' of making, concentrating on the skill and craft involved:

Our concern, first of all, is to make things as well as we know how, and as well as we know how means 'how' rather than 'why' or 'what'.²⁹⁶

David Jones was at least as interested in the 'why' and 'what' of art:

Eric regretted that there was no tradition within which to work or from which to advance. David rejoiced that for the first time in history the absence of tradition left the artist free...American critic, Harold Rosenberg...observed that Jones took pleasure in the questions raised by the twentieth century, daring it to knock him down. Of course, an absence of tradition is as perplexing as it is tantalizing, so perhaps what initially attracted Jones was a certain security and impersonality in Gill's hieratic approach to art.²⁹⁷

At the time that David Jones joined the community, French Catholic theologian and philosopher Jacques Maritain's work *Art et Scolastique*, was often at the centre of discussions and was 'an

²⁹³ Ibid., p.46.

²⁹⁴ DGC, p.29.

²⁹⁵ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.51.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p.44. Eric Gill letter to David Jones, 5th March, 1921 (private collection).

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p.46.

important intellectual influence'.²⁹⁸ For Jones, the most important aspect of the book was in its aesthetic implications.

Using Thomist terms, 'art' is defined by Maritain as 'a virtue of the practical intellect in the realm of *making*.'²⁹⁹ However, Maritain is aware that 'art' in the sense of Fine Art, was a concept that did not exist in the Middle Ages, when there was no distinction between art and craft, or between the artist and the artisan. Eric Gill responded enthusiastically to the medieval ideal presented by Maritain, wishing to be called a workman and not an artist. He also read Maritain's ideas as 'a major indictment of industrial civilisation' where 'the workman could no longer be truly an artist, when his work was no longer an integral part of his being, and being responsible for what he made'³⁰⁰. David Jones, while adopting 'a similar stance, regarding *homo sapiens* as *homo faber*, and man...as essentially man-as-artist'³⁰¹, considered himself an artist, 'in the narrow sense, who shared a predicament with other twentieth-century artists, and painters in particular.'³⁰² In this, Jones shared a tension with the philosopher, in terms of accommodating the aesthetic developments of his day with the traditions of the past:

Maritain, though he believed in the medieval ideal of the artist as a craftsman who was an integral part of the community, whether a sculptor or a carpenter, was at the same time a thoroughly modern lover of the Fine Arts, in a way that reflected his historical situation...Although there was no scholastic theory or even concept of the Fine Arts, Maritain devises one by adding...the transcendental idea of the beautiful... 'each kind of being *is* in its own way, is *good* in its own way, is *beautiful* in its own way'. Or in language with a more Platonic ring, 'Beauty is one of the divine attributes.'³⁰³

²⁹⁸ *David Jones: Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.89. From 'David Jones and the Idea of Art' by Bernard Bergonzi.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.90.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.90.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.90.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p.91.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.91. Bergonzi quotes Maritain from *Art and Scholasticism* (London, 1946). One of David Jones's favourite phrases was Aquinas's '*Id quod visum placet*' – that which being seen pleases. In a letter to Philip Haggren, during his first stay in the monastery on Caldey Island (three miles from Tenby), Jones wrote of '...a superb plantation of new trees...which is thrilling, very thrilling – like the Garden of Gethsemane and the Garden of the Tomb and the Garden of – well – the other sort of garden, where Venus disports herself ... a garden of small trees and winding paths...I have nearly been demented trying to capture its beauty even but vaguely.'*DGC*, p.34.

Maritain applies the “divine attribute” of beauty as the ‘end’ of the Fine Arts, and as ‘beautiful’ a work of Fine Art belongs ‘to the realm of the spirit and dives deep into transcendence and the infinity of being.’³⁰⁴ Bergonzi observes:

Maritain’s formulation begins in Thomism, but it picks up the notion of the aesthetic as it originated in eighteenth-century Germany, summarized in Kant’s ideal for art of ‘purposiveness without purpose’.³⁰⁵

David Jones replicates this idea in his attempt to combine ‘the Thomist and Aristotelian concept of art as human making (a practical activity), and the Enlightenment and Romantic concept of aesthetic activity as gratuitous’.³⁰⁶ Bergonzi considers this a ‘division’ and a source of tension in both Maritain’s and Jones’s works.

The notion with which Jones’s work is here associated, of diving ‘...deep into transcendence and the infinity of being’, corresponds with Raine’s assembling of Jones with Muir, Gascoyne and Watkins in their neo-Platonic and Christian capacities. Referring to *The Anathemata* and Jones’s understanding of ‘signification’, Bergonzi observes:

Jones’s principle of thought was associative, where one thing continually recalls or invokes another, however remote in time and place. He did not believe the connections to be random, as everything fitted together somehow in the mythic shapes that directed his thinking... There is a telling remark in one of his letters, in which he praises the classical scholar Jackson Knight ‘...if there were one or two more Jackson Knights who combined real slap-up scholarship with a nose for the pattern and the eternal correspondence of this with that, it would be jolly nice and helpful’.³⁰⁷

In Bergonzi’s view the “eternal correspondence of this with that” recalls ‘the mental world of late nineteenth-century *Symboliste* thought, and its occultist and neo-Platonic elements’³⁰⁸ and on quoting Baudelaire’s sonnet *Correspondances* states:

When Jones invokes ‘eternal correspondence’ he seems to me closer to this world [Baudelaire’s] than to the eschatological world of mainstream Christianity.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁴ *David Jones: Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.92. Bergonzi quotes Maritain from *Art and Scholasticism* (London, 1946).

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.92.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.92.

³⁰⁷ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.96.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.97.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.97.

This presents a perspective on Jones's work which is not typically perceived and lends itself well to Raine's inclusion of Jones in her alternative canon. Though Jones shied away from abstract art and, similarly, the Platonic notion of ideal, eternally existing forms, or archetypes, his aesthetic interpretation of *anamnesis* and transubstantiation³¹⁰ as eternal acts of remembrance has an identifiable analogy with both Raine and Muir's understanding of the act of poetry. What defines Jones's approach to 'making' is a different focus of emphasis:

...The belief of the Catholic Church commits its adherents, in a most inescapable manner, to the body and the embodied; hence to history, to locality, to epoch and site, to sense-perception, to the contactual, the known, the felt, the seen, the handled, the cared for, the tended, the conserved; to the qualitative and to the intimate. All of which and more especially the two last, precludes the ersatz, and tends to a certain mistrust of the unembodied concept.³¹¹

In the years that followed the guild moved to Capel-y-Ffin in Wales and Jones became engaged to Petra Gill. There Jones developed as a painter and engraver. Miles and Shiel note with regard to Jones's art, that during this period:

...Gill's stylistic influence on Jones was diminishing. There is a feeling of airiness in Jones's best Capel, Caldey and French [Jones accompanied the Gills to Salies-de-Bèarn, country associated with Roman Gaul and *Le Chanson de Roland*, in 1928] pictures...³¹²

However, towards the end of 1926 Petra had decided to end the engagement, sending a message to Jones then staying on Caldey Island:

Philip Hagreen recalled that 'David suffered most grievously...he had taken the solemn betrothal as a vow. A German bullet had gone through his leg but the news that came to him on Caldey went through his heart.'³¹³

Despite this emotional blow, the following years proved important and productive, Jones no longer living in Wales, but once more based with his parents in Brockley and joining them in a bungalow in Portslade, near Brighton, where they holidayed. In 1927, Jones joined the Society of Wood Engravers; he exhibited for the first time in London in a joint exhibition with Eric Gill, thus meeting

³¹⁰ Bergonzi quotes Jones's view that the artist '...is, at bottom and always, an inveterate believer in "transubstantiations" of some sort. The sign must *be* the things signified under the forms of his particular art'. *David Jones: Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.96.

³¹¹ DG, p.167. 'A Christmas Message' (first published in *The Catholic Herald*, 2 December 1960).

³¹² *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.50.

³¹³ *David Jones Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson, 2003), pp. 62, 63.

H.S. [Jim] Ede, curator at the Tate Gallery, who was to become a close and invaluable friend. In 1928 Jones was elected to the 'Seven and Five Society' whose members included, Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Ivon Hitchens and Christopher Wood, and was able to exhibit with the Society until 1933 when he was voted out. At Capel he had met René Hague who was to become one of his lifelong friends and would introduce him to a circle of Catholic intellectuals, including Harman Grisewood, in London, some of whom would provide Jones with the ever needed 'roof over his head' in the years to come.

In 1928, on returning from France, Eric Gill moved again, to Piggotts in Buckinghamshire, finding Wales too isolated. Having exhibited a second time with Gill, Jones met Helen Sutherland an informed art collector who eventually became Jones's patron. Keith Aldritt defines these years from 1928 to 1932 as 'years of attainment' for Jones as an artist. Miles and Shiel suggest that such hectic activity precipitated to a degree Jones's first breakdown:

The increasing intensity of Jones's work during the packed four to five year period immediately before his first breakdown reflects the increasingly full life that he was leading. There was the constant moving from Brockley to Chelsea, to Hampstead, to Portslade, to Caldey, to Gill's new establishment at Piggotts, and to Rock Hall in Northumberland, the house of his admirer and collector Helen Sutherland ... It is small wonder that Jones felt himself to be in a fluid and uncertain world in which it was difficult for him to focus. The pace of life, as his writing began to expand into a full-length book and as he began to exhibit more frequently, was both exhilarating and breathtaking, if not bewildering and even frightening. In a sense, Jones couldn't quite accommodate the vigour of his own energy.³¹⁴

In Portslade, in 1928, Jones 'began to write down some sentences.'³¹⁵ These sentences formed the beginnings of *In Parenthesis* which would be completed in 1932, but would remain unpublished until almost ten years later:

The phenomenal task of writing *In Parenthesis* was, to all intents and purposes, completed at Piggotts on 18 August, 1932, and towards the end of the four-year period in which he had been writing it, he had also produced more than fifty watercolours a year. The writing had brought back the most testing period of his life.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.130.

³¹⁵ *DG*, p.29.

³¹⁶ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.167.

Late in 1932, after months of insomnia, Jones had his first nervous breakdown 'the combined result of the great expense of artistic excitement after the break-up of his engagement and a delayed reaction to the war'.³¹⁷ None the less, 1932 signaled Jones's arrival as poet.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p.122.

Poet, Poetry, Affinities

In Parenthesis – First Published by Faber and Faber in 1937

Language is the armoury of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests.³¹⁸

In his essays, letters and in accounts of his conversation, David Jones habitually resorted to military terminology:

Ars is adamant about one thing: she compels you to do an infantryman's job. She insists on the tactile. The artist in man is the infantryman in man, so that, unless the central contention of these pages is untrue, all men are aboriginally *of* this infantry, though not all serve *with* this infantry.³¹⁹

As an integral part of the 'armoury' of Jones's mind, the language of combat and the army became an expressive 'voice' through which he forged his identity. Tom Burns, a very close friend of Jones's, described the artist at one of the many parties held at the Burns's flat in Chelsea:

In a strange way you seemed to set the tone of the party. There was something magnetic about you; the small unkempt, unknown painter from Brockley – from outer space as far as most people in the room were concerned. Trench language and the realism that lay behind it coloured your talk. It seemed to put you at ease with everyone, though there was no obvious common bond.³²⁰

Though Burns's 'letter' to Jones – written after Jones's death as part of Burns's autobiography – is informed by a great affection, it confirms Jones's feelings of uncertainty regarding class and his social status. Perhaps to describe Jones as 'from outer space' was simply intended as gentle humour; from any perspective it reveals that Jones's involvement with the 'Chelsea group' was peripheral – to the degree that Burns does not perceive Jones as an integrated figure in the party. More importantly, the passage records Jones's use of 'trench language', to put himself 'at ease with everyone'. The 'infantryman' persona permeated Jones's social, as well as his literary interactions, providing him with a lively and colourful vocabulary and idiom, and in a sense, a much needed 'mask'. Miles and Shiel reflect on the impact life in the trenches is very likely to have had on Jones's psyche:

³¹⁸ *Biographia Literaria* by S.T. Coleridge ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1907) II 22 (Chapter XVI). Quoted by William Blissett in the essay 'The Syntax of Violence' (*David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias, The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.197.

³¹⁹ *E&A*, pp183, 184. From 'The Utile'.

³²⁰ Tom Burns, from his autobiography *The Use of Memory*, quoted by Keith Alldritt (*David Jones Writer and Artist*, Constable & Robinson, 2003), pp.74,75.

Certainly, the perturbation of war stayed with him; a remark like 'he never got out of the trenches' registers more than a *penchant* for army slang and military metaphors.³²¹

Kathleen Raine relates a similar comment in her autobiography:

'He still lives in a dug-out,' I remember someone saying of him with much perception.³²²

Rather obliquely, Raine associates this perception of Jones with her own statement that '...every true poet is wild in a different way...' citing Edwin Muir, Dylan Thomas, Vernon Watkins and Winifred Nicholson as further examples. My interpretation of this grouping, with especial reference to Jones, is that Raine may have had in mind, Jones's deep sympathy for animals and the 'creaturely', and in particular his affectionate attitude to the rats in the trenches. His 'dug-out' evoking natural shelters burrowed by animals. In any other sense Jones was anything but 'wild', though he does describe his artistic method thus:

...I *only* know *one* way to draw and that is in a kind of fierce concentration. The only times a drawing is good is when you nearly *break* yourself *turning the corner* from a muddle to a clarity, and it takes every *ounce* of nervous effort to be any good...³²³

There is a 'wildness', a certain fierceness, in this. Jones liked to quote Blake's 'Do you paint sir in fear and trembling?' reflecting his very *physical* approach to painting. Kathleen Raine responds most keenly to Jones's evocations, both written and painted, of the natural world and his celebration of creation. She links Jones's response to the natural world with Blake's dictum 'For everything that lives is Holy.'

Miles and Shiel refer to the First World War trenches and no man's land infiltrating Jones's imagination as a 'broken world,'³²⁴ almost becoming the 'objective correlative' of all Jones's experience, a concept or image that would have resonated with many of Jones's contemporaries:

No one who survived 1916 was the same as before...It was worse for the youngsters like David who at 21 were beginning their adult life – and yet were maimed for ever after...every impressionable person who fought in the front line trenches did suffer some permanent damage which went under the generic name of shell-shock.³²⁵

³²¹ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.210.

³²² *Autobiographies* by Kathleen Raine (Skoob Books Publishing Ltd, 1991), p.329.

³²³ *DGC*, p.83.

³²⁴ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.29.

³²⁵ Harman Grisewood quoted in *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.252.

While Jones suffered from 'traumatic neurosis' (or shell-shock), he considered his problems, both psychological and artistic, to arise from his 'civilisational situation' at least as much as from his actual experiences in the front line trenches. The 'broken world' may have reached its apotheosis in the war, but it was for Jones the condition of civilization in his time. In the Preface to *In Parenthesis*, Jones's apology is an adumbration of all his written work that will follow:

This writing has to do with some things I saw, felt, & was part of. The period covered begins early in December 1915 and ends early in July 1916. The first date corresponds to my going to France. 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 contingents of men, within whose structure Roland could find, and, for a reasonable while, enjoy, his Oliver. In the earlier months there was a certain attractive amateurishness, and elbow-room for idiosyncrasy that connected one with a less exacting past.³²⁶

From a change in methods of warfare, Jones extends the scope of the change to include an entire civilization.

Elizabeth Ward identifies the 'change' as summarizing 'the central dichotomy of David Jones's own private myth' which 'anticipates the extension of this dichotomy into metaphor.'³²⁷

In the first place it seeks to identify the increasingly mechanical and, hence, increasingly 'sinister' aspect of the fighting with corresponding changes in the nature of contemporary civilian (post-war) life: 'Just as now there are glimpses in our ways of another England – yet we know the truth. Even while we watch the boatman mending his sail, the petroleum is hurting the sea. So did we in 1916 sense a change.'³²⁸

Ward identifies Jones's 'real-life battalion, the London Welsh' as constituting 'a symbolic locus of resistance of the traditional forms of life under the impact of technological change, of which the war, then, becomes merely an extreme manifestation ...'³²⁹ Ward views *In Parenthesis's* success as a work and its 'force of argument' to be the consequence of an achieved 'balance of purposes', where 'its

³²⁶ *IP*, p.ix.

³²⁷ *David Jones Mythmaker* by Elizabeth Ward (Manchester University Press, 1983), p.107.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.107. Ward quotes David Jones from the preface to *In Parenthesis*.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.108.

primitivist, anti-technological argument is unexpectedly strengthened' by its 'brilliantly detailed evocation of the soldiers' lives'. Kathleen Raine refers to 'traditional values' as the foundational, informing context of the work:

In Parenthesis might be read as an account of the shattering of these values; or it may be read as their supreme affirmation; for David Jones's ability to confront and sustain, as a continuously imaginative act, so much that is beyond the normal compass of endurance, is itself a triumph of the human spirit at the moment when, in retrospect, it is hard not to say that civilization ended and barbarism began. He perceives and evaluates in terms of traditional values.³³⁰

At this point, Raine might be read as a mouthpiece for the kind of values Paul Fussell perceived and discredited in *In Parenthesis*. In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Fussell regards *In Parenthesis* an 'honourable miscarriage':

The trouble is that the meddling intellect, taking the form this time of a sentimental Victorian literary Arthurianism after Tennyson and Morris, has romanticized the war. If we place *In Parenthesis* next to Masefield's *Gallipoli*, with its panoply of epigraphs from the *Song of Roland*, we can see its kinship with documents which are overtly patriotic and even propagandist.³³¹

Fussell presents Jones's values as romanticizing, reactionary, sentimental, patriotic even propagandist. Miles and Shiel offer an interpretation which, while not attaining to the grandeur of Raine, I find corresponds with and lends support to Raine's reading of the work, countering Fussell's, in my view, mistaken condemnation:

When, a decade after the war had ended, he [Jones] came to explore the conflict in a searching manner, it was not only the humanity of the behaviour of the men in the trenches but the sense of 're-participating in history' that he wished to celebrate. What was most important to Jones was not the preservation of the Edwardian vision of 'Old England' but an attempt to place the war in the context of related conflicts. By the early 1930s, he had absorbed Eliot's and Pound's lesson about the 'presence' of the past and had come to feel

³³⁰ *Poetry* CI: 6 (March, 1963), pp.426, 427. From the review of *In Parenthesis*, 'An Epic Poet' by Kathleen Raine.

³³¹ *The Great War and Modern Memory* by Paul Fussell (Oxford University Press, 1975), p.147.

that the 'texture' of any 'historic present' was 'linked, necessarily, with a whole historic past'.³³²

The 'traditional values' Raine identifies in *In Parenthesis* have little to do with preserving an Edwardian *status quo* or articulating patriotic zeal, but instead are 'our inheritance...our past...and our ancestors, natural and spiritual'³³³, akin to Miles and Shiel's 'whole historic past'.

Jacques Darras, French poet and translator of *The Anathemata*, makes some insightful comments on Jones's relationship with Eliot and Pound in his paper 'The Sleep of the Tongue':

One always needs a tradition to put one's back against. Christianity whether in its neo-Platonic or Aristotelian form is the home we have to start from, Eliot would say. This is where your American poets' almost blind journey back into European culture at the most critical moment is still so significant. They did so, running against the European grain of modernism, in a Europe that was still busy untying its past chains. They did so, pointing out to reluctant Europeans that no Europe to come could forget early medieval culture or theology...David Jones was the lone European to welcome them on their and his own ground. Casting himself into the part of another Welsh anchorite sailing in his pinnace on the ocean of times, he enacted Christianity's apostolic journey for an age of unfaith.³³⁴

Kathleen Raine has a similar view of Jones's artistic impulse:

David Jones, most learned of the Welsh poets, has used Christian, Welsh, and Arthurian sacred and heroic lore as the epic and mythological setting of the common soldier fighting in the trenches of the First World War. By this means he places the anonymous and forgotten dead within heroic legend and the order of Christian redemption.³³⁵

The dimension of 'Christian redemption' in the work, which Raine recognizes, is a continuation, as with the notion of 'making' already noted, of Jones's preoccupations as a painter; the search for 'formal goodness'.³³⁶

Thomas R. Whitaker's analysis in his paper '*In Parenthesis* and the Poetics of Passage', which links Jones's procedure as a writer with his procedure as painter, interprets Jones's search for

³³² *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.209.

³³³ *Poetry* CI: 6 (March, 1963), pp.426, 427. From the review of *In Parenthesis*, 'An Epic Poet' by Kathleen Raine.

³³⁴ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills, (Scholar Press, 1997), p.130.

³³⁵ *DAS*, p.133. From 'On The Mythological'. In the essay Raine describes Jones's capacity as the 'gift for the whole' which she also applies to Vernon Watkins, Joyce, Muir and Yeats. It is a capacity derived 'necessarily' from 'an imaginative vision'.

³³⁶ *IP*, p.xiii.

‘formal goodness’ in *In Parenthesis*, providing parallels with Raine’s observations on ‘heroic legend and the order of Christian redemption’:

The young visual artist was...committed to a poetics of passage rooted in Thomist thought. Aquinas could proceed from the Aristotelian particulars of the world toward the Divine or ultimately Real...Christian versions of empirical yet teleological procedures...More recently Jacques Maritain had synthesised those versions, with post-Kantian and symbolist modifications.³³⁷

Raine posits a similar ‘poetics of passage’:

For David Jones the situation of men in even the worst conditions of war was certainly not one of mere passivity; most of B-company are killed in action but they are not therefore cannon-fodder; they are still enduring the human condition with courage and fear, with companionship and patience, and their death is not meaningless. The ‘good kind of peace’ [Jones] saw afar off is not wholly absent from them, or from the total impression of the book.³³⁸

Both Whitaker and Raine perceive the affirmative impulse informing the work. What Whitaker offers in addition to Raine’s acknowledgement of the Christian *telos* at work in *In Parenthesis* is a textual analysis of the ‘affirmative impulse’ which I believe sheds light on the relationship between Raine’s retrospectively grouped poets. Whitaker looks at the ‘formal strategies’ of the ‘literary generation’ to which Jones belonged and places him firmly within it:

Whether these works are ‘modern epics’ like *Anabasis*, *Ulysses*, *The Cantos*, *The Bridge*, and *Paterson*, or non-epic sequences like *Duino Elegies*, *The Waste Land*, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, *Four Quartets*, and *Trilogy*, they are internalized quests...committed to...the ‘poetics of passage’. Recognizing our loss of traditional meanings, they must seek through changing tropes, myths, and modes of discourse a new grounding in community and cosmos. Hence they are self-revising, metamorphic, and incomplete. Experiential and empirical in their local strategies but teleological in orientation, they trace labyrinthine paths toward some Word, Music, Light, Self, Angel, or Imagination in which we participate. And

³³⁷ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.33. Extract from ‘*In Parenthesis* and the Poetics of Passage’ by Thomas R. Whitaker.

³³⁸ *IJP*, p.131, 132. From the essay ‘David Jones and the Actually Loved and Known’.

though each remains a fragmentary gesture toward the hidden principle of its figurative world, its major tropes and larger forms tend to compose an icon of its source and end.³³⁹

Unlike Jones, Edwin Muir did not write long poems, but Muir's works are much concerned with 'passage' often involving journeys and the labyrinthine constructs of memory with both its deceptions and epiphanies. Their impulse is towards a unity of vision, a tendency 'toward the hidden principle', which is ultimately the Christian revelation. *In Parenthesis* charts an actual journey. At the same time it is the journey of Everyman and anticipates *The Anathemata* whose subject:

... as described in Jones's boldly Pauline statement is: 'the argosy or voyage of the Redeemer, consisting of his entire sufferings and his death, his conquest of hades, his resurrection and his return in triumph to heaven', which somehow includes the 'whole argosy of mankind, and, in some sense, of all sentient being, and, perhaps of insentient too'...Because making a work is an actual journey, it became here both an analogue and an aspect of the religious voyage.³⁴⁰

Raine, Whitaker and Ward value *In Parenthesis* above *The Anathemata*, though Jones thought the latter 'a lot better than *In Parenthesis*.'³⁴¹

I would like to add here an account of Elizabeth Ward's critique of *In Parenthesis*. Ward finds in Jones's viewpoint evidence of:

...a specific cultural pattern which, in opposition to the supposedly rationalist and materialist 'civilisational trend' of the post-war years, deliberately sought its sources of inspiration in the primitive, the occult or the mystical...there was in common a feeling that non-rational and sub-conscious sources of inspiration had been repressed at the expense of man's capacity to imagine, or create, acts of transcendental significance.³⁴²

Ward relates these observations to Jung's theories and places Jones's *In Parenthesis* 'within the boundaries of this broad and vague configuration of thought', as a literary manifestation of a 'movement of dissent' and a 'formal consequence of the ideologically-inspired impulse to regain access to the pre-conscious mind, or merely to invoke values different from those of a technologically-

³³⁹ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.32. From 'In Parenthesis and the Poetics of Passage' by Thomas R. Whitaker.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.36. It must be added here that Jones, '...had no intention whatever in presuming to compare the varied maims, death-strokes, miseries, acts of courage etc of the two contending forces, ours or those 'against whom we found ourselves by misadventure', with the Passion, self-Oblation and subsequent Immolation and death of the Cult-hero of our Xtian tradition. For that is a unique and profound Mystery of Faith.' *DGC*, p191. From a letter to René Hague, July 1973, p.246.

³⁴¹ *DGC*, p.191. From a letter to Harman Grisewood, May 1962.

controlled society.’³⁴³ It appears that Ward makes no distinction between the Platonic and Aristotelian foundations of works written counter to a ‘rationalist’ and ‘materialist’ interpretation of reality and writing. Her view is that such works share an ideological impulse.

However, as Raine has rightly observed, Jones was not interested in Jung’s notion of the ‘collective unconscious’, she writes:

His symbols have nothing to do with the unconscious; David was a Thomist and an Aristotelian; he was not concerned with a mythological inner landscape: the real is for him always incarnate. But incarnation is itself a sacramental meeting of heaven and earth. Nothing in ‘the unconscious’ could ever have for David a mystery comparable in dignity with the actually seen and known.³⁴⁴

The point of departure is located in the ‘impulse’; for Raine it is not a question of ideology, but of imaginative vision and the individual human potential for glimpses of an ‘eternal reality’ corresponding with an inner realm of being. Ward is able to accept *In Parenthesis* as a resolved work of imagination because of its ‘freedom from dogmatic primitivism, a freedom won through the maintenance of a creative tension between ‘myth’ and the unassimilable ambiguities of ordinary human experience’. I would argue that this is limited appraisal of *In Parenthesis*, for it discounts the religious impulse of the work, the crucial dimension.

In Parenthesis opens with the ‘changing tropes, myths, and modes of discourse’ consistent with Jones’s times:

’49 Wyatt, 01549 Wyatt.
Coming sergeant.
Pick ’em up, pick em’ up – I’ll stalk within yer chamber.
Private Leg ... sick.
Private Ball ... absent.
’01 Ball, ’01 Ball, Ball of No.1.
Where’s Ball, 25201 Ball – you corporal,
Ball of your section.
Movement round and about the Commanding Officer.
Bugler, will you sound ‘Orderly Sergeants’.

A hurrying of feet from three companies converging on the little group apart where on horses sit the central command. But from ‘B’ Company there is no such darting out. The Orderly Sergeant of ‘B’ is licking the stub end of his lead pencil; it divides a little his fairish moist moustache.

Heavily jolting and sideways 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

³⁴² *David Jones Mythmaker* by Elizabeth Ward (Manchester University Press, 1983), p.81.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.117.

³⁴⁴ *IJP*, p.121. From ‘David Jones and the Actually Loved and Known.’

grounds and to refectories. The silence, of a high order,
full of peril in the breaking of it, like the coming on parade
of John Ball.³⁴⁵

An allusive method is already at work, which Whitaker suggests tends 'toward a fullness of figurative meaning'.³⁴⁶

He [Jones] started an early draft with that strange roll-call – 'Private Leg sick – Private Ball absent' – which will pick up the emphasis in the frontispiece on the soldier's naked vulnerable genitalia and also look forward to the end of Part 7, where a wounded leg results in the absencing of Ball from action ... Everyone recognises the allusion to Wyatt's tenderly erotic poem, 'They flee from me', but no one, I think, has yet explicated the serial number. Thomas Wyatt died in 1542, but 1549 saw the appearance of two important works: *The Book of Common Prayer*, on which David Jones was brought up, and Wyatt's posthumously published work, *Certain Psalms Chosen out of the Psalter of David* – in which a penitential David sings therapeutically from a cave-mouth... That opening leads to more complex initiations.³⁴⁷

Related to the sense of the physical vulnerability of the men, is Jones's veneration of the comradeship in arms that he encountered during the war. Another critic has noted that *In Parenthesis* is 'a kind of love poem',³⁴⁸ and Miles and Shiel state:

Jones felt that the greatest impression which the war made upon him was the 'extreme *tenderness* of the men in action to each other'; so much so, in fact, that the 'ill-treatment of a prisoner' could seem 'repellent'.³⁴⁹

Even without an interpretation of possible allusions the opening sequence has a resonant impact, immediately plunging the reader into the sensory and mental experiences of the soldiers.

Kathleen Raine values most the more obviously 'poetic' sections of the work, and especially those concerned with the natural world and/or the broad mythological current, which she is able to identify as manifesting the *Sophia Perennis* in albeit a 'historical' than 'archetypal' mode. The section known as 'Dai's boast' tends toward the latter distinction, correspondingly requiring extended annotation, and has attracted more critical attention than any other – including Raine's; it is a section

³⁴⁵ *IP*, p.1.

³⁴⁶ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.40. From 'In Parenthesis and the Poetics of Passage' by Thomas R. Whitaker.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.40. From 'In Parenthesis and the Poetics of Passage' by Thomas R. Whitaker.

³⁴⁸ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.218. Extract from 'Spilled Bitterness: In Parenthesis in History' by Neil Corcoran.

she refers to in her 1963 review as exemplifying Jones's 'network of words and images...interwoven with every remembered richness of a language that is...a heritage that has been known and loved by those who have spoken or written it':³⁵⁰

This Dai adjusts his slipping shoulder-straps, wraps close
his misfit outsize greatcoat – he articulates his English with
an alien care.

My fathers were with the Black Prinse of Wales
at the passion of
the blind Bohemian king.
They served in these fields,
it is in the histories that you can read it, Corporal – boys
Gower, they were – it is writ down – yes.

Wot about Methuselum, Taffy?
I was with Abel when his brother found him,
under the green tree.
I built a shit-house for Artaxerxes.
I was the spear in Balin's hand
that made waste King Pellam's land...³⁵¹

'Dai's boast' is situated at the mid-point of the work, Whitaker describing it as the 'central climax':

Without losing touch with the particularity of suffering, *In Parenthesis* moves through a wide variety of sensibilities toward a more inclusive 'you', and through memories of old catastrophes and bloody myths toward a metaphysical order to be discerned in the 'bankruptcy of the occasion' (IP 2) and in truncated and riddling signs.³⁵²

The 'boast' stretches over six pages and contains biblical, mythological and historical figures invoked by Jones to participate in the 'now' of his experience, for this moment in the work embodied in 'Dai Greatcoat':

... an ambiguously passive agent who is a violent and yet healing image of expanding subjectivity. His parenthetical boast condenses the poetics of passage in ways both traditional and modern. Behind it are Taliesin, Mongan, and He who said: 'Before Abraham, was, I am.' 'I was not altogether unmindful,' said David Jones, 'of the boast of John 7. 58' (IP 207). Behind it also, whether Jones was mindful or not, is Krishna's boast in the *Bahgavad Gita*, which reveals that he is the Supreme Self. In our own time, Whitman, Pater, Yeats, Sandburg, Hughes, and Auden have composed remarkably similar lyrics of transmigration, metamorphosis, and endurance...More than a figure for a secular mythos,

³⁴⁹ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.26.

³⁵⁰ *Poetry* CI: 6 (March, 1963), pp.429. From the review of *In Parenthesis* 'An Epic Poet' by Kathleen Raine.

³⁵¹ *IP*, p.79.

³⁵² *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.40, 41. From 'In Parenthesis and the Poetics of Passage' by Thomas R. Whitaker.

Dai is the violent and ambiguous flesh, bearer of the spirit, which can become an agency of the sacred.³⁵³

Whitaker's appraisal of 'Dai Greatcoat' and his 'boast' is, in my view, accurate in its perception of the density of Jones's imagining, its informing 'faith' (and its mysterious relationship with 'doubt'), and the unnerving potentiality and reach of its allusiveness. It also lends support to and clarifies Raine's position and inclusion of Jones in her assembly of 'poets of the imagination'.³⁵⁴

There is a final aspect of *In Parenthesis* to which I would like to draw attention. It is well explored by Neil Corcoran in his paper 'Spilled Bitterness: *In Parenthesis* in History'. Corcoran perceives a 'subversive'³⁵⁵ element in Jones's writing which I believe can be linked to a reading of Jones's 'unconscious' figuring in his work. This has repercussions regarding Jones's link with Muir, Gascoyne and Watkins. There are two passages which Corcoran selects, one from *The Book of Balaam's Ass*, a work Jones defined as 'a link of sorts between the two widely separated books: *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*'³⁵⁶, and the other from Part 7 of *In Parenthesis*. To begin, from *The Book of Balaam's Ass*, also a work concerned with the First World War:

Tilly-vally Mr Pistol that'a a petty tale of y'r Gallia wars.
Gauffer it well and troupe it fine, pad it out to impressive proportions, grace it from the ancients. Gee! I do like a bloody lie turned gallantly romantical, fantastical, glossed by the old gang from the foundations of the world. Press every allusion into your Ambrosian racket, ransack the sacred canon and have by heart the sweet Tudor magician, gather your sanctions and weave your allegories, roseate your lenses, serve up the bitter dregs in silver-gilt, bless it before and behind and swamp it with baptismal and continual dew.

No, Lavinia, won't wash, and that you know well enough. To adopt the initial formula, 'Ladies and gentlemen, I will remove the hat.' You will observe the golden lily-flowers powdered to drape a million and a half-disembowelled yeanlings.

There's a sight for you that is in our genuine European tradition.
Lime-wash over the tar-brush?

No, but rather, cistern the waters of Camelot to lave your lousy Linen. The salient is Broceliande, these twain indeed are one.³⁵⁷

As Corcoran remarks, 'because of the unfinished and, presumably, unrevised state of the fragment, it is impossible to say who is "speaking" here.'³⁵⁸

³⁵³ Ibid., p. 41.

³⁵⁴ Vernon Watkins also wrote a version of 'Taliesin's boast' which I will compare with 'Dai's boast' in the Watkins chapter.

³⁵⁵ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.220. From 'Spilled Bitterness: *In Parenthesis* in History' by Neil Corcoran.

³⁵⁶ *SL*, p.97.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., pp.99, 100.

³⁵⁸ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.209. From 'Spilled Bitterness: *In Parenthesis* in History' by Neil Corcoran.

The passage seems to irrupt more or less of its own accord into a text apparently reporting conversations about the experience of war, and it is impossible to decide what kinds of irony may eventually have been made to play over these lines. As they stand, however, it is at least possible to regard them as something quite extraordinary: as a savagely hostile criticism of the procedures of *In Parenthesis* composed by the author himself prior to the work's completion.³⁵⁹

Despite his uncertainties regarding Jones's intention behind these lines, Corcoran acutely considers it 'quite remarkable that at such an early stage in the work's history [*The Book of Balaam's Ass* was begun before the publication of *In Parenthesis*] its author should display himself so articulately alert to its potential to attract a particular kind of derogatory criticism.'³⁶⁰ Corcoran compares Jones's 'alertness' to that of critics who 'have also felt compelled to address a sensed tension between material and manner, subject and procedure, experience and myth'.³⁶¹ If the passage from *The Book of Balaam's Ass* 'irrupts' in the text, I consider its effect to be one of release, a release from an overly contrived envisioning of racial and cultural myth (there are echoes of Muir's mistrust of 'Absolutes'), and a disclosure of Jones's capacity for 'negative capability'.

The passage Corcoran selects from Part 7 of *In Parenthesis* also contains what Corcoran terms the 'saving grace of anxiety and insecurity' that feed back 'into the poem's mythical material itself.'³⁶² The passage presents a moment where Jones delineates the limitations of memory and its potential for 'breakdown':

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.

In the Little Hours they sing the Song of Degrees
and of the coals that lie waste.
Soul pass through torrent
and the whole situation is intolerable.

He found him all gone to pieces and not pulling himself to-
gether nor making the best of things. When they found him his
friends came on him in the secluded fire-bay who miserably
wept for the pity of it all and for the thing shortly to come to
pass and no hills to cover us.³⁶³

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p.210.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p.212.

³⁶¹ Ibid., p.213.

³⁶² Ibid., p.224.

³⁶³ *IP*, p.153.

Part 7 is the final section of the work, ‘...in which the men meet their deaths, and it seems to act as an almost deconstructive index of the incapacity of this writing to convey this reality:’³⁶⁴

“The memory lets escape what is over and above”: what constitutes this writing is only a fraction of what constituted the event, a “pint-pot” filled from a potentially “milliard-quart measure” (a “milliard” is a thousand million). What is left over and above, as “super-flow,” as surplus, as the ungovernable and unmeasurable, as everything that puts pressure on the text but is not itself text, is “spilled bitterness.”...The lines, therefore, also throw attention onto the act of making itself, onto the perilously fragmented individual memory which is the poem’s sole authority, and onto the particular process of imaginative reconstruction (for Mnemosyne is the mother of the muses) which is its behaviour.³⁶⁵

I find this an illuminating reading of the passage in question; it recalls Jones’s description of his work as being “the maintenance of some sort of plank in some sort of bridge” in his statement to the Bollingen Foundation and a similar statement in his essay ‘Art in relation to War:’

Like Boethius, who they call ‘the bridge’, we in our distress and bewilderment must clutch at what true definitions we can find to bridge over our intolerable waters, for as the physical; in the end depends on *morale*, so in the end do *morale* and the moral depend on what is true.³⁶⁶

The ‘intolerable waters’ are strongly present in this opening sequence of Part 7; the deluge of memory (personal and racial perhaps); the torrent which the Soul must pass through (the dark night of the soul); the soldier’s miserable weeping in his ‘distress and bewilderment’. The ‘true definitions’ point to Jones’s ‘sacred’ works and Corcoran interestingly states:

What Seamus Heaney has called the “opulence of Jones’ imagining” was clearly deeply compelled and satisfied by the attractions of his recovered and recuperated mythical material, and *In Parenthesis* is of course a poem gratefully allusive to literature, liturgy and myth.³⁶⁷

This allows for a freer or more spacious reading of not only *In Parenthesis*, but also *The Anathemata* and *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*. As Corcoran points out, ‘*In Parenthesis* ends not with the absolving and consolatory gesture, but with the continuity of violence, not with the Queen of the Woods, but with “these latest succours: / green Kimmerii to bear up the war” (IP, 187) – new

³⁶⁴ David Jones *Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.214.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., p.214.

³⁶⁶ DG, p.148.

³⁶⁷ David Jones *Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.224.

yeanelings for disembowelment.³⁶⁸ In relation to his discussion on the ‘tension’ between ‘the assuaging and emollient reconciliations of myth’ and an unassimilable ‘heightened realism’³⁶⁹ Corcoran concludes his essay with an intriguing parallel between ‘dream’ (myth) and ‘nightmare’ (reality):

In Part 3 of *In Parenthesis* John Ball dozes while marching and intermittently dreams of being back at art school:

Hurdles on jerks-course all hard-edged for inefficient will not obtain the prize one, who beat the air; wooden donkeys for the shins of nervous newcomer to the crowded night-class, step over to get your place beside Mirita; it’s a winding mile between hostile matter from the swing-door, in and out the easel forest in and out barging, all of ’em annoyed with the past-pushing with clumsy furniture. Stepping over Miss Weston’s thrown about belongings. Across his night dream the nightmare awaking:
Move on – get a move on – step over – up over. (IP, 32-3)

“Miss Weston” there is slyly knowing... since Jones’ indebtedness for some of the mythical material of his poem is, of course, to Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*.³⁷⁰

While Corcoran accords the ‘nightmare waking’ (‘unaccommodated and irreducible fact’) more weight than the ‘night dream’ in terms of the ‘truth’ of the poem, stating that ‘*In Parenthesis* therefore steps over Miss Weston’s thrown about belongings too’ as constituting part of ‘the dream of *In Parenthesis*, its long “deep-sleep” dream of history and pre-history, of myth and liturgy and literature.’³⁷¹ I would argue that the ‘dream’ is no less troubled or ‘irreducible’. The ‘nervous newcomer to the crowded night-class’ could be understood as Jones’s paralyzing sense of inadequacy in the face of the demands of his work and artistic heritage;³⁷² the stumbling over ‘the easel forest’ revealing Jones’s extremely ‘physical’ and difficult relationship with his art – the forest also suggesting the ease with which one can lose one’s way. I find the ‘dream’ denser, more disturbing and more revealing in some ways, than the mind-numbing physical demands of the ‘nightmare awaking’; or perhaps the toil and anguish is equal in both, one darkly reflecting the other; the text does not choose. The correspondence between ‘dream’ and ‘nightmare’ is at least an indication that Jones had assimilated some of the interest of his era apportioned to the significance of dreams – a subject of central importance to his contemporaries Raine, Muir, Watkins and Gascoyne.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p.225. I would add here that both *The Anathemata* and *The Sleeping Lord* close with a question.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., p.224.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., p.225.

³⁷¹ Ibid., p.225.

The Anthemata – First Published by Faber and Faber in 1952

It occasionally happens that book-reviewers' standards are made ridiculous by the appearance of a work of art of permanent value. I am thus embarrassed for want of honest words in which to convey this judgement of David Jones's *Anthemata*.³⁷³

Am I dotty? For some fifteen years now Mr. David Jones has made me ask myself this question. When *In Parenthesis* came out in 1938, I thought it – I think so still – the greatest book about the First World War that I had read. But nobody seemed to notice or write about it. Having lived with *The Anthemata* for the last ten months, I feel as certain as one can feel of anything that it is one of the most important poems of our time. But where are the bells? Where are the cannon?³⁷⁴

Jones gives the feeling that he is playing with the deepest things in human legend and history, taking part in the most serious of games, but forgetting that we are ignorant of the rules.³⁷⁵

...If you haven't got a kind of racial myth expressed in war to write about and don't know about our old friend 'love' and are not interested in 'making a story', it seems all you can do is to ramble on about the things you think about on the whole all the time, and that is what I think this is about ... It is about how everything turns into something else, and how you can never tell when a bonza is cropping up or the Holy Ghost is going to turn something inside out, and how everything is a balls-up and a kind of 'Praise' at the same time.³⁷⁶

A work beyond "honest words", defying adequate description; a puzzle, "Am I dotty?"; the "most serious of games"; a "balls-up and a kind of 'Praise' ", these are some of the earliest responses *The*

³⁷² The 'crowded night-class' recalls Harold Bloom's observations in *The Anxiety of Influence* - the fear inspired in the creative mind by an 'irreducible' tradition which removes the artist's ability to express himself freely, or originally.

³⁷³ *The New Statesman and Nation* (22nd November, 1952), p.607. From 'Books in General', a review of *The Anthemata* by Kathleen Raine.

³⁷⁴ *Encounter* (Vol.2, No.2, February 1954), p.67. From 'A Contemporary Epic' a review of *The Anthemata* by W.H. Auden.

³⁷⁵ *The Observer* (2nd November, 1952), p.9. From 'Correspondences', a review of *The Anthemata* by Edwin Muir.

Anathemata elicited (excluding the latter, a reflexive commentary by Jones on his work). There were other less admiring first reviews, intoning the poem's 'obscurity', 'difficulty' and 'pedantry', or its failure to communicate:

We get a word, and a word, and a word, we don't hear anyone speak. Mr. Jones is a scrupulous bard with a word-hoard, and the words are cleanly and lovingly juxtaposed. But the juxtapositions remain oddly antiseptic. They are always evocative, in a quickeningly un-sensual way; but one keeps looking at the foot-notes to see what it is that they are supposed to evoke.³⁷⁷

The Anathemata, a poem concerned with 'time' and the significance in 'time' of the Mass, is a work that took twelve years to complete. At this point, I shall focus on Raine's review of *The Anathemata* and her developing relationship with David Jones as fellow poet and thinker.

Before Raine reviewed *The Anathemata* she had not so long since made her first acquaintance with David Jones, in person, at Cockley Moor in the Lake District in 1946:

I first met David at the house of our mutual friend Helen Sutherland. I had of course seen some of his paintings before this closer familiarity; for he was always appreciated by his fellow artists in both arts, although even now scarcely known to 'the general public', for whom he is too subtle, too delicately gentle a spirit for those who see in gentleness weakness and in violence strength.³⁷⁸

Without engaging with Raine's forthright opinions on the nature of Jones's art in contrast with the public reception of his art (the notion of a 'general public' being a complex and unstable one at any time), it is pertinent to Raine's eventual review of *The Anathemata* (and her later papers on Jones's work) that Jones was in the process of writing *The Anathemata* while at Cockley Moor, and that Raine was a sounding board for some of its passages:

In a letter of 23 August 1946 he described the setting of the house as 'wild and remote' but the interior had 'all Helen's civilised feeling just as Rock had'. He especially admired Helen's collection of Ben Nicholson's paintings. A fellow guest at Cockley Moor that month was Kathleen Raine, a poet who would become an important commentator on, and propagandist for David's work. David read aloud passages from what would become *The*

³⁷⁶ DGC, p.86. Though Jones is here referring to his abandoned work 'The Book of Balaam's Ass' I found the passage pertinent to *The Anathemata*.

³⁷⁷ *Poetry* (Vol.LXXXIII, No. 5, February 1954), pp.295-301. From 'Seedless Fruit', a review of *The Anathemata* by Hugh Kenner.

Anthemata to Kathleen and Helen. Having now abandoned 'The Book of Balaam's Ass'; this new project was his principal literary concern. He reported that the ladies at Cockley Moor seemed to like what he read 'quite a bit', but, he conceded, 'I'm afraid it's damned obscure'.³⁷⁹

Thus, when it was finally published in 1952, Raine already knew, in part, what Jones intended for and by the work. She had also begun developing more confidently her own poetic identity and critical and scholarly persona. From two letters written by Jones after *The Anthemata's* publication, it is clear that he valued Raine's 'propaganda'. To Jim Ede he wrote:

...I've been (between ourselves) somewhat cast down over its reception. True, there have been two or three good reviews, Kathleen Raine's in particular.³⁸⁰

and to Auden, initially thanking him for his review in *Encounter*:

...Yes, I appreciated it *very greatly*, for a number of reasons, but chiefly because you, who are a poet, liked it and understood it, and bothered to write about it in an objective way...I did have a few appreciatory reviews when it came out, such as Kathleen Raine's good one in *N[ew] S[tatesman]*...³⁸¹

While it is true that any poet will be grateful for an appreciative review, it is important that Jones found Raine's criticism both apt and accurate (my interpretation of a 'good' review). A closer analysis of the review reveals Raine's poetic criteria which she will continue to apply in later, more developed studies and in which she will cite Jones, Muir, Watkins and Gascoyne as related proponents of those criteria.

By way of approach Raine briefly summarizes her view of Jones's painting, enunciating its 'sacramental' quality' achieved via 'allusion and symbolic depth in no sense literary':

By whatever names, David Jones knows how to invoke those gods that transmute temporal into eternal creatures.³⁸²

The transmutation that Raine experiences in Jones's painting, she also finds in his writing:

'...Completely within the frontiers of the medium, he conveys the same translucence'.³⁸³

³⁷⁸ *IJP*, p.119.

³⁷⁹ *David Jones Writer and Artist* by Keith Alldritt (Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2003), p.135. Raine experienced the same while staying with the Muirs in Cambridge, she and Willa providing Edwin with a critical (though naturally favourable) sounding board.

³⁸⁰ *DGC*, p.154.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.160.

³⁸² *The New Statesman and Nation* (22nd November, 1952), p.607. From 'Books in General', a review of *The Anthemata* by Kathleen Raine.

Raine then tackles the formal and stylistic devices of the work:

On the page it looks like the *Cantos*; the attention to spacing is not primarily a visual device (as in Mallarmé, for example) but meant to give, as in music, the right notation for the deliberate incantation of words to be read aloud. *Anthemata* is a poem to be spoken. Declaimed, as the author directs, “with deliberation,” it sounds like the more lyrical passages of *Finnegans Wake*, passing almost imperceptibly from heightened prose rhythms to organic patterns of rhyme and half-rhyme and alliteration, used with Welsh intricacy.³⁸⁴

Raine is perceptive in her limited acknowledgement of the work’s similarity in appearance to the *Cantos* and more especially in her appreciation of Jones’s debt to Joyce, particularly *Finnegans Wake*. Perhaps she knew Jones had not read the *Cantos* until after writing *The Anthemata*, and of Jones’s fondness for the *Anna Livia Plurabelle* section of the *Wake*, which René Hague had read to him in about 1928. Kathleen Henderson Staudt supports Raine’s reading with her observation that:

Jones’s appreciation for *Finnegans Wake* separates him in important ways from his modernist contemporaries. Eliot, while enthusiastic about *Ulysses*, was reserved and somewhat mystified in his evaluation of the *Wake*. Jones, however, says almost nothing about *Ulysses* or *Dubliners* in his essays or letters; he reserves most of his praise for what he calls the objective and incarnational use of language and myth in the *Wake*...³⁸⁵

By way of guide for the 1952 reader, Raine chooses to concentrate on Jones’s preface to *The Anthemata*, which is a formidable piece of writing in itself. The first passage from the preface that Raine selects is Jones’s general declaration of personal and by extension, poetic identity:

The artist is writing about “one’s own ‘Thing’ ”; but
this “*res*” is unavoidably part and parcel of the Western Christian *res* as inherited by
a person whose perceptions are totally conditioned and limited by and dependent
upon his being indigenous to this island. In this it is necessarily insular; within
which insularity there are further conditionings contingent upon his being a

³⁸³ Ibid., p.607. It is curious that Raine chooses the word “translucence” to describe Jones’s writing, particularly in the case of *The Anthemata*, for many critiques stress the hard, resistant quality of Jones’s writing, its opacity – a quality which corresponds with his idea of making a ‘thing’ in words, that the words are not simply referent but a tangible presence in themselves. Even so, Raine is correct in the sense that Jones’s writing is at least inherently symbolic. As she explains in her essay ‘On the symbol’: ‘The symbol is characterized by a translucence of the special in the Individual, or the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity of which it is representative.’ These are assertions with which I believe Jones would wholeheartedly have agreed.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., p.607.

Londoner, of Welsh and English parentage, of Protestant upbringing, of Catholic subscription.³⁸⁶

Raine associates Jones's statement with Eliot's 'conception of tradition', but qualifies the association by marking the distinction that Jones's 'thing' is more than a literary or an intellectual conditioning, the poet

'...must work within the limits of his love. There must be no mugging-up, no 'ought to know' or 'try to feel; for only what is actually loved and known can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*.' David Jones's scholarship is the eclecticism of love, and as such is inimitable.³⁸⁷

There is certainly no doubting the intensely personal nature of Jones's artistic endeavour; that his pursuits scholarly and imaginative were an extension of his quest to understand himself and his place in both personal and Christian contexts. Raine demonstrates this, quoting an extract from the poem, a poem extremely difficult to quote from, because of its continuously reflexive or self-referential construction, a labyrinthine quality which has been read as 'the archetypal pattern of initiation.'³⁸⁸

The Christian *mythus* runs through the book; the figure of Christ-Taliesin travels towards the "unabiding omphalos" of time along the "green dryad-ways that lead to Taff and Taf," from the geological beginnings:

As, down among the paleo-zoe:
he brights his ichthyic sign
so brights he the middle-zone
where the uterine forms
are some beginnings of his creature.
Brighter yet over the mammal'd Pliocene
for these continuings
Certainly must praise him;
How else, in his good time
should the amorous Silvy
to her sweetest dear
her fairest bosom have shown?
How else we?
Or he himself?

And so down to the beautiful concluding image:

How else from the weathered mantle-rock
and the dark humus spread

³⁸⁵ *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics* by Kathleen Henderson Staudt (University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.130.

³⁸⁶ *The New Statesman and Nation* (22nd November, 1952), p.607. From 'Books in General', a review of *The Anathemata* by Kathleen Raine.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.607. Here Raine quotes from the preface to *The Anathemata* (Faber and Faber, 1952), p.24.

³⁸⁸ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.278. From 'In the Labyrinth: An Exploration of *The Anathemata*' by Jeremy Hooker.

(where is exacted the night labour
where the essential and labouring worm
saps micro-workings all the dark day long for
his creatures of air)
Should his barlies grow
who said
I am your Bread?³⁸⁹

Jeremy Hooker discovers in *The Anthemata* an 'archetypal pattern', with 'the initiation, the rebirth, the change of state or the passage from one world or dimension to another.'³⁹⁰ The 'pattern' is patient 'of varying degrees of completeness, as a unifying principle:'

It is not procrustean, though it will be conditioned by the writer's beliefs. It should also be said that, although the idea of archetypes in its modern form obviously owes a lot to Jung, there is no reason why the truth of the archetype should be considered to be only psychological, instead of a universal truth in which the psyche recognizes its deepest needs. This should be borne in mind together with the fact that David Jones saw myth not as fiction, but as a vessel of reality, which to him was "sacred and religious", according to his specific belief.³⁹¹

The pattern discerned by Hooker is labyrinthine in quality where, 'the labyrinth is intimately connected with the ritual pattern of initiation as the place, often a tomb or cave, where in ancient times the initiate participated in the cosmic marriage between earth mother and sacred king.'³⁹² I find this pattern in the section from the poem quoted by Raine, 'where the uterine forms are some beginnings of his creature.' Hooker posits that 'the entry into the labyrinth for the purpose of rebirth is still a potent metaphor.'³⁹³ Jones certainly seemed aware of such metaphorical potential in his poem referring to 'the meanderings that comprise this book' and by observing that 'making a work is not thinking thoughts but accomplishing an actual journey.'³⁹⁴

The Anthemata does indeed accomplish a journey, a journey of intricate and by no means aimless "meanderings" that "returns to its beginnings," and it leads the reader through the maze in order "to disclose, to show forth something." The journey is based on two principal quest motifs – the Grail Quest and the Otherworld Voyage – together with the historical

³⁸⁹ *The New Statesman and Nation* (22nd November, 1952), p.607. From 'Books in General', a review of *The Anthemata* by Kathleen Raine. Here Raine quotes from *The Anthemata* (Faber and Faber, 1952), pp.74 – 82 (abridged).

³⁹⁰ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.278. From 'In the Labyrinth: An Exploration of *The Anthemata*' by Jeremy Hooker.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.278, 279.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p.279.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.279.

voyages of the argonauts. Each of these is sufficiently complex in itself but all are united by the common element or symbol of water, by the fact that each is a quest which involves crossing the water, and by the comprehensive archetypal pattern of initiation to which each belongs. Each journey entails facing dangers and even death with the object of winning new life or a new beginning; each is associated with a union of the male and female principles; each either starts from the same center, to which it returns, or, in the case of the argonauts, helps to prepare or propagate the centre, which is, of course, the Cross; symbolically, each begins from and returns to the same place.³⁹⁵

Thus, the 'Christian *mythus*' Raine perceives running through the poem provides the 'centre' and the 'circumference' of the poem, informing the archetypal patterning of quest and labyrinth. Jones's highly complex, British 'Genesis' myth is 'organic' in that it has an organized physical structure where Jones pushes language to a kind of 'physical' extreme, 'a veritable torcular, squeezing every drain of evocation from the word-forms of that language or languages. And that involves a bagful of *mythus*...' ³⁹⁶ So much depends on the 'squeezing of evocation' from that 'bagful of *mythus*'. As Raine remarks in her review:

The tradition, of course, is broken beyond repair.³⁹⁷

Jones was indeed doubtful of his attempt:

The times are late and get later, not by decades but by years and months. This tempo of change, which in the world of affairs and in the physical sciences makes schemes and data out-moded and irrelevant overnight, presents peculiar and phenomenal difficulties to the making of works, and almost insuperable difficulties to the making of certain kinds of works...The reason is not far to seek. The artist deals wholly in signs. But there is a time factor affecting these signs. If a requisite now-ness is not present, the sign, valid in itself, is apt to suffer a kind of invalidation...It may be that the kind of thing I have been trying to make is no longer makeable in the kind of way which I have tried to make it.³⁹⁸

Jones refers to 'The Break' which he believes to have occurred in the nineteenth century when:

³⁹⁴ *A*, p.33.

³⁹⁵ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.83. From 'In the Labyrinth: An Exploration of *The Anathemata*' by Jeremy Hooker.

³⁹⁶ *A*, p.20. From the preface.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.607.

³⁹⁸ *A*, p.15. Extract quoted from the preface.

Western Man moved across a rubicon which, if as unseen as the 38th Parallel, seems to have been as definitive as the Styx...But it was not the memory-effacing Lethe that was crossed; and consequently, although man has found much to his liking, advantage, and considerable wonderment, he has still retained ineradicable longings for, as it were, the farther shore.³⁹⁹

On one level *The Anathemata* could be read as an expression of those 'ineradicable longings for...the farther shore'.

What perturbed Edwin Muir, who assumed that Jones imitated Pound, as well as Eliot and Joyce, was Jones's linguistic and thematic experimentation. His uneasiness, I believe, springs partly from a mistrust of experimentation with words. He understood that should ambiguity or word-play be the dominant mode, the poet and poem were at risk of removing the possibility of expressing permanence or a sense of the 'real', which he experienced as the religious (in the sense of binding, securing, as well as transformative) function of words. If language became destabilized, it lost its 'naming' power, the power to incant, invoke and evoke – at least at the level where Muir believed poetry to operate. However, Muir did find an 'obscure delight' in the poem and acknowledged that 'it does sometimes achieve communication on a level few poets attempt to communicate'.⁴⁰⁰ While the element of play in the work suggests a potential for ambiguity and irony, there is little that could be identified as ironic in *The Anathemata*. I find Kathleen Henderson Staudt's observation apt:

Jones appreciates the play of language in Joyce as a supreme modern example of the gratuitous in poetic art, and he attempts in parts of *The Anathemata* to adapt the linguistic techniques of Joyce's playful and parodic *Wake* to his own more solemn quest for cultural continuity.⁴⁰¹

The phrase 'solemn quest' is suitable and fitting. However, as Hugh Kenner found, the evocative force of the poem, if dependent on a 'bagful of mythus' unfamiliar to the reader, no matter how ingeniously interwoven, will be diffused even lost. On the other hand, it was the linguistic artistry and the scale of Jones's labyrinthine artifice, which attracted Auden's interest and praise.⁴⁰² I find, in more recent

³⁹⁹ Ibid., pp.15,16. Extract quoted from the preface.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., p.9. David Blamires considers Muir's comments to have 'struck the key that has remained dominant' in critical responses to the poem. *David Jones: artist and writer* (Manchester University Press, 1978), p.113.

⁴⁰¹ *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics* by Kathleen Henderson Staudt (University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp.130, 131.

⁴⁰² Auden's remarks on the poem reflect his own dictum on the four questions he would put to critics to test their discernment: 'Do you like, and by like I really mean like, not approve of on principle:

1. Long lists of proper names such as the Old Testament genealogies or the Catalogue of ships in *The Iliad*?
2. Riddles and all other ways of not calling a spade a spade?

analyses of *The Anathemata*, a convergence of Raine's perception of the various transmutations of the 'mythus' within it, Auden's recognition of lexical craftsmanship, and Muir's sense of a kind of 'supra-communication'.

Kathleen Raine identifies the theme of *The Anathemata* as: 'The timeless moment of an eternal Now'⁴⁰³ and that for Jones:

'It was the Mass and its timeless significance for humanity in all times and places, even on the eve of battle, that for him 'made sense of everything', offering to all who are born and who die 'a good kind of peace'.⁴⁰⁴

As with *In Parenthesis* there is an 'affirmative passage' in *The Anathemata*, but the passage is less recognizably linear (though, as Corcoran notes, *In Parenthesis* ends with the continuation of war). Jones states in the preface that the poem 'occurs' in the time of the Mass, that is, in no particular historical or secular location of time. On the related subject of the resurrection William Blissett writes:

Close to David's deepest religious concern – he spoke with great seriousness – is the meaning of the resurrection of the dead. How different it is, how incompatible with, the idea of necessary progress, no matter how spiritualized.⁴⁰⁵

In his exceptionally close reading of *The Anathemata*, Patrick Deane demonstrates how 'at the elemental level of lexis, grammar and syntax'⁴⁰⁶ the work thwarts, even resists interpretation that seeks a sense of 'necessary progress.' Deane also proposes that Jones's 'grammatical' choices are an attempt to 'body forth' in the text the mystery of the Incarnation. The notion of word-play for Deane 'asserts that the text is composed of things, verbal "objects" brought in relation with one another.'⁴⁰⁷ And it is in Jones's specific arrangement of these "objects" and their 'relation with one another' that *The Anathemata* reveals its meaning or intention.

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3. Complicated verse forms of great technical difficulty, such as Englyns, Drott-Kvaetts, Sestinas, even if their content is trivial?
 4. Conscious theatrical exaggeration, pieces of baroque flattery like Dryden's welcome to the Duchess of Ormond?

If a critic could truthfully answer 'yes' to all four, then I should trust his judgement implicitly on all literary matters. (*Making, Knowing and Judging* (Clarendon Press, 1956)), pp.19.

The Anathemata contains all these aspects, no doubt eliciting Auden's favourable response to the work.

⁴⁰³ *IJP*, p.132. From 'David Jones and the Actually Known and Loved'.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.132.

⁴⁰⁵ *The Long Conversation: A Memoir of David Jones* by William Blissett (Oxford University Press, 1981), p.67.

⁴⁰⁶ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.307. From 'The Text as "Valid Matter": Language and Style in *The Anathemata*' by Patrick Deane.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.314.

The opening passage of the poem is 'an almost paradigmatic version of what will become so common later on in the text: language "groping" towards a new verbal "shape," culminating in a boldly inscribed phrase.'⁴⁰⁸

We already and first of all discern him making this thing
other. His groping syntax, if we attend, already shapes:
ADSCRIPTAM, RATAM, RATIONABILEM...and by pre-
application and for *them*, under modes and patterns altogether
theirs, the holy and venerable hands lift up an efficacious
sign.⁴⁰⁹

Deane draws a contrast between two possible readings of the passage:

The reader's first response is...to assume that the phrase "this thing" has a referent beyond the text: the process by which it is "made other" or "laid up from other things" is given priority, and the way in which syntax "gropes" towards an inscribed, "set apart" (A, 64) verbal "shape" is regarded as little more than an imitation of that action.⁴¹⁰

He then posits an alternative reading, '...for there are a number of ambiguities and other linguistic features which, if accorded the "due attention" Jones requested for each word (A, 35), must to some extent destabilize such an interpretation.'⁴¹¹

To begin with, what we "already and first of all discern" is far from clear: the first sentence of the poem is a string of anaphoric deictics, words apparently referring to previous elements in the utterance, which are strikingly referent-less. The reader can have no way of knowing precisely what "this thing" is, or who is meant by "him" or "*them*."⁴¹²

Deane suggests that "this thing" could refer to the text, or language itself, as well as performing a "transparent" function pointing beyond itself to a world of non-verbal objects and actions. This dual perspective gives the text a 'material "otherness"', according to Deane, and 'its grammar ensures a high degree of linguistic opaqueness, so there can be no effacement of the verbal object...but the moment we concede that "this thing" might refer to the linguistic object itself, the subject of the enunciation (the speaker of the text) becomes peculiarly de-centred.'⁴¹³

At the root of this effect is the strong connection which the opening "We" establishes between the speaker of the text and its reader...Now, if "this thing" is the text itself, the

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., p.315.

⁴⁰⁹ A, p.49.

⁴¹⁰ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.315. From 'The Text as "Valid Matter": Language and Style in *The Anathemata*' by Patrick Deane.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p.315.

⁴¹² Ibid., p.315.

⁴¹³ Ibid., p.316.

speaker's own words, then the subject of the enunciation is signified in both "We" and "him": he is both the one who discerns and the one discerned. This is a further extension of the text's self-reflexiveness, and one is reminded of the regressive epigraph, "IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT..."⁴¹⁴

This, 'de-centering of the speaking subject ... leaves the reader deprived of a stable interpretative centre...' so that '...“meaning” and “content” will remain perpetually unsettled...' and the reader '...is forced to grope for meaning in the “shape” of the text, a verbal object which holds him up with ambiguity, word-play, and the disruption of continuity.'⁴¹⁵

Denied the transcendent, hermeneutical position promised by the opening "We", he is committed to the linguistic "body and the embodied" (DG, 167).⁴¹⁶

I find this interpretation of Jones's style and method helpful, if knotty. It helps to unravel the complex linguistic weave of the work, which places the reader simultaneously within the 'weft' of the work *and* with the writer working the loom. The curious dual implication of reader and 'maker' is made additionally complex by Jones's manipulation of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic construction of the text. For Deane 'this is found in the phrase "already and first of all"' which may seem 'little more than an overt sign that the reader is entering *in media res*:'

As the second word in the work, "already" impresses in the reader's mind the idea that there is a world of action and event in existence anterior to the genesis of language, or of the text at least.⁴¹⁷

However, Deane identifies this opening phrase as the point where 'the problems begin' with regard to the 'instability' of the text:

The "and" which joins them ["already and first of all"] suggests an identity of meaning, and the second phrase is to a large extent over-shadowed in the reading by "already" so the fact that they do not exactly co-operate is very easily missed. But of course the elements pull in opposite directions: "already" away from the textuality of the text and towards the continuity of the announced subject, "first of all" towards the text itself, the experience of the reader, and the genesis of enunciation. "Already and first of all" collocates continuity and origin in

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p.317.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p.317.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., p.317.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p.317.

much the same way that the institution of the eucharist is later said to be “birthday and anniversary”.⁴¹⁸

Deane asserts that by ‘not only failing to exclude one of the two contradictory elements, (by means of the powerful conjunction “and”) but also insisting upon their equivalent significance’, the ‘coherence of the syntagmatic axis’ is challenged, and ‘the meaning of the work’s opening lines will not “settle”:⁴¹⁹

The result is that, to a large extent, the horizontal movement of the text is an exploration of “vertical” possibilities, as if the syntagmatic axis were partly the paradigmatic one laid on its side...The inclusion of mutually fugitive elements subverts coherence and...prevents the establishment of continuity. The effect is disconcerting at the narrative level as open contradiction is at the grammatical, and both bind the reader into a world of words. This phenomenon – the syntactical connection of alternative terms, epitomized by “already and first of all” – is iconically related to central elements in the work’s content, and ultimately to its underlying ideology.⁴²⁰

The inclusiveness of Jones’s style here presented in terms of ‘Saussure’s axial metaphor’⁴²¹ Deane then relates to Jones’s description of *The Anathemata* as “a kind of ‘dance round the maypole’ of the stauros”⁴²², and that:

...if the work can be said to have a single subject, it is surely the reconciliation of time and timelessness effected by Christ’s sacrifice and emblemized by his cross, where horizontal and vertical come together. The world transformed by the Incarnation and Crucifixion is precisely the “thing” which this verbal “shape”, *The Anathemata* seeks to render, and so it is not surprising to find the origins of its resistant textuality in a strategy which reconciles the syntagmatic and paradigmatic linguistic axes, syntax and parataxis, diachronic and synchronic time.⁴²³

I agree with this analysis and would argue that the linking of Jones’s intent to present a ‘reconciliation of time and timelessness’ with his stylistic technique, gives weight to and justifies Raine’s assertion

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., p.317.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., p.318.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p.319.

⁴²¹ Ibid., p.21.

⁴²² *Inner Necessities: The Letters of David Jones to Desmond Chute* ed. Thomas Dilworth (Anson-Cartwright Editions, 1984), p.75.

⁴²³ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.321. From ‘The Text as “Valid Matter”: Language and Style in *The Anathemata*’ by Patrick Deane.

that the theme of *The Anathemata* is ‘...the simultaneity and unity of all human life in the eternal presence of God.’⁴²⁴ Deane regards the work as ‘an artefact built upon the principle of association rather than grammatical subordination; it is a paradigm rather than a syntagma or sequence’.⁴²⁵

It can therefore be said that the resistant materiality of *The Anathemata* is, to a very great extent, the product of style. It is a style distinguished less by the particular character of its lexical and grammatical choices (though of course these are significant) than by the writer’s apparent reluctance to choose at all. Thus, while Saussure argues that in order for language to be coherent certain choices *must* be made, certain elements kept out of discourse, David Jones “participates in no excommunications ...[and tends] to include rather than to exclude.” In a letter to H.S. Ede he writes that the artist “must deny nothing ...must integrate everything,” and in those words we can see why the sequential movement of his text so frequently gives way to excursions along the paradigmatic axis. “The successful art work,” he tells Ede, “is one where no ingredient of creation is lost, where no item on the list in the *Benedicite Omnia Opera Dominum* is denied or forgotten” (HSE, 11).⁴²⁶

Jones’s desire for inclusiveness is extraordinary and I find a sympathy with Charles Tomlinson’s comment (on *In Parenthesis*, but I think it applies equally well to *The Anathemata*) that:

...One is always left in two minds by Jones – one admires the range...yet one remains uncomfortably aware that any given insight is likely to be crushed by imaginative overcrowding, by relentless typological parallels.⁴²⁷

None the less Tomlinson commends Jones’s work in that it:

...helps to rectify a loss of cultural memory and reminds us that under the dull new suburb the altar stone of the mother goddesses and the spirit of place may well still exist.⁴²⁸

This is a comment which sits well with Raine’s concept of the function of poetry and her criteria for assembling Jones with Muir, Gascoyne and Watkins.

Deane concludes his study by analyzing the word ‘anathemata’ itself. He defines it as ‘an amphibole, a word with two contradictory meanings:’

⁴²⁴ *IJP*, p.132. From the essay ‘David Jones and the Actually Known and Loved’.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.323.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.327.

⁴²⁷ *The Sense of the Past: Three Twentieth Century British Poets* by Charles Tomlinson (The Kenneth Allott Lectures, No.3. Liverpool University Press, 1983.) The other two poets are Basil Bunting and Geoffrey Hill.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

As Carson Daly has pointed out, what the term stands for is “neither of its two opposite definitions, but the idea of contradiction itself.” And for David Jones, of course, contradiction is not an indication of meaninglessness, but rather of multiplicity. Thus “anathemata” means all things, accursed or devoted, “counter, parti, pied, several” (SL, 62).⁴²⁹

Jones’s strategy is reminiscent of Blake’s dictum ‘Without contraries is no progression’; Deane suggests that Jones’s strategies of ‘open-ness’ and ‘amphibolic construction’ make ‘an anamnesis of the Word:’

In a letter to Aneurin Talfan Davies, Jones elaborates on his statement that each of his works was intended to be a plenum, to contain “the entirety or totality in a little place or space.” He draws an analogy between the work and Christ, “the *Baban* (Babe) in the Ventricle of Mair (Mary),” proposing this sacred text as a motto for artists: *quem totus non capit orbis, in tua se clausit viscera factus homo.*⁴³⁰

Deane then presents Christ’s ‘boast’ as it appears in the section ‘Mabinog’s Liturgy’, proposing that its ‘amphibolic constructions ...allow language to contain usually uncontainable extensions of meaning’ and that they find ‘their archetype in Christ:’⁴³¹

But what does his Boast say?
Alpha es et O that which
 the whole world cannot hold.
 Atheling to the heaven-king.
 Shepherd of Greekland.
 Harrower of Annwn.
 Freer of the Waters.
 Chief Physician and
dux et pontifex
 Gwledig Nefoedd and
 Walda of every land
et vocabitur WONDERFUL.⁴³²

In its paratactic arrangement Deane finds:

The most distinctive stylistic feature of *The Anathemata* – a linguistic materiality derived from the constant failure to exclude lexical, narrative, and other alternatives from the body of the discourse – appears, in fact, to be a poetic response to the Incarnation.⁴³³

⁴²⁹ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.327. From ‘The Text as “Valid Matter”: Language and Style in *The Anathemata*’ by Patrick Deane.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.328.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, p.328.

⁴³² *A*, pp.207, 208.

It is, in my view, an ingenious and illuminating assessment of the intention and method of *The Anathemata*.

As a 'poetic response to the Incarnation' there are a passages that succeed in their inclusiveness, overflowing with an energy and originality unimpeded by allusion, creating the 'sense of delight' which Jones wished 'most of all' of his 'mystery, *misterium* or *ministerium*:'⁴³⁴

Before the microgranites and the clay-bonded erratics
wrenched from the diorites of Aldasa, or off the Goat Height
in the firth-way, or from the Clota-sides or torn from either
Dalriada, with what was harrowed-out *in via*, up, from the
long-drowned out-crops, under, coalesced and southed by
the North Channel.

As though the sea itself were sea-borne
and under weigh
as if the whole Ivernian *mare*
directed from hyperboreal control-points by strategi of the
axis were one complex of formation in depth, moving on a
frontage widening with each lesser degree of latitude.

Heading toward, right astride
to one degree beyond
Ffraid Santes' fire-track
where Brendan shall cry from his sea-horse
Mirabilis Deus in sanctis suis!

From before all time
the New Light beams for them
and with eternal clarities
infulsit and athwart
the fore-times:
era, period, epoch, hemera.
Through all orogeny:
group, system, series, zone.

Brighting at the five life-layers
species, species, genera, families, order.
Piercing the eskered silt, discovering every stria, each score
and macula, lighting all the fragile laminae of the shales.
However Calypso has shuffled the marked pack, veiling with
early the late.
Through all unconformities and the sills without sequence
glorying the under-dapple.⁴³⁵

The Sleeping Lord and other fragments – First Published by Faber & Faber 1974

...The particular quarry that the mind of the poet seeks to capture is a very elusive beast indeed. Perhaps we can say that the country to be hunted, the habitat of that quarry, where

⁴³³ David Jones *Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.329. From 'The Text as "Valid Matter": Language and Style in *The Anathemata*' by Patrick Deane.
⁴³⁴ A, p.34.

the 'forms' lurk that he's after, will be found to be part of vast, densely wooded, inherited and entailed domains. It is in that 'sacred wood' that the spoor of those 'forms' is to be tracked. The 'specific factor' to be captured will be pungent with the smell of, asperged with the dew of those thickets. The *venator poeta* cannot escape that tangled brake...⁴³⁶

According to this passage, poetry, at least in Jones's understanding, demands the metaphorical, the significant; its 'specific factor' associated with a sacred terrain, where a kind of baptism or initiation occurs. Here, by illustration, is an extract from *The Hunt*, the ante-penultimate poem of *The Sleeping Lord and Other Fragments*. The subject is an unnamed 'lord', 'the Arthur-type, evoking flower-decked Adonis and thorn-scarred Christ but named as neither and unnamed as Arthur'⁴³⁷, leading 'all the war-bands of the Island'⁴³⁸ in chase of the boar, Trwyth, which has been ravaging the land, for Culhwch in order that he might wed Olwen, one of the stories from the *Mabinogion*:

And if his eyes, from their scrutiny of the hog-track and from considering the hog, turned to consider the men of the host (so that the eyes of the men of the host met his eyes) it would be difficult to speak of so extreme a metamorphosis.

When they paused at the check
when they drew breath.

And the sweat of the men of the host and of the horses salted the dew of the forest-floor and the hard-breathing of the many men and of the dogs and of the horses woke the fauna-cry of the Great Forest and shook the silent flora.

And the extremity of anger
alternating with sorrow

of the Arya
on the furrowed faces

transmogrified the calm face
of the morning

as when the change-wind stirs
and the colours change in the boding thunder-calm

because this was the Day
of the Passion of the Men of Britain

when they hunted the Hog
life for life.⁴³⁹

The 'quarry' hunted is dangerous, even sinister in comparison with the 'quarry' the poet hunts, yet the similarities between the two passages illustrate Jones's associative, figurative and analogical habit of thought. In her analysis of *The Hunt*, Elizabeth Ward traces the 'inner purposefulness' of the poem and how 'the very place of 'The Hunt' in the programmatic collection of fragments which comprise

⁴³⁵ *A*, pp.73, 74.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.116,117.

⁴³⁷ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.374. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck.

⁴³⁸ *SL*, p.69. From the 'Notes'.

⁴³⁹ *SL*, pp.68, 69.

The Sleeping Lord will suffuse 'the central 'figures of Arthur, Trwch Trwyth and even the forested landscape of South Wales...with the special significance of David Jones's contemporary vision:'⁴⁴⁰

The language of 'The Hunt' is shot through with images of transfiguration reminiscent of earlier works as disparate as *In Parenthesis* and 'The Fatigue'...The agent of transfiguration throughout is the Welsh forest itself, the natural world being invested with a quality of sacredness and identified with a healing efficacy...Arthur's image is seen to be interchangeable with the image of the forest, anticipating even at the level of rhythm the chief motif of the book's title poem: 'Does the land wait the sleeping lord/or is the wasted land/that very lord who sleeps?':

(indeed was it he riding the forest-ride or was
the tangled forest riding?)
for the thorns and flowers of the forest and the bright elm-shoots
and the twisted tanglewood of stamen and stem clung and meshed
him and starred him with variety
and the green tendrils gartered him and briary loops galloon him
with splinter-spike and broken blossom twining his royal
needlework
and ruby petal-points counter
the countless points of his wounds.⁴⁴¹

The metamorphic quality of the writing, where the boundaries of distinction between the forest and Arthur become blurred, releases, for Ward, a 'flurry of implications:':

The passage recalls in the first place – through echoes of ballad or folk-song – the primitive, childlike and rural ambience of the first half of 'The Tutelar of the Place'. The quality of pastoral is further reinforced by the revealing echo of Hopkins...But what the passage chiefly recalls, superimposed upon this composite of pastoral and primitive, is the crucifixion-scene from 'The Fatigue', which also witnesses an 'extreme ...metamorphosis' and similarly captures a sense of transfigured fragility through an imagery of flowers. Thus a new equivalence is suggested: Arthur and Christ, tree and cross, 'splinter-spike' and 'iron briars', are suddenly intricated in a net-work of cross-references, the two heroes sharing an identical relationship with the natural world, which they simultaneously represent and are represented by.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴⁰ *David Jones Mythmaker* by Elizabeth Ward (Manchester University Press, 1983), pp.191, 192.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.192.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, p.192,193.

This interpretation of Jones's 'net-work of cross-references' is convincing, and Ward's final statement on 'The Hunt' provides a succinct reflection on Jones's dominant preoccupations affecting *The Sleeping Lord* as a whole:

'The Hunt' thus reaffirms the values constant throughout the whole book: the primitivist exaltation of 'locality' and the natural world as repositories of the sacred; and identification of the local legendary hero with the Christ (and vice versa) in order to solemnise, or 'mythologise', primitivist ideals *vis-à-vis* the alleged agents of destruction – in this case the boar, in the case of the applied myth, the utilitarian values of technological civilisation.⁴⁴³

While there is an 'exaltation of locality' in the sequence of poems, I would argue that it is certainly not unalloyed, and in the relationship between the 'primitivist' and 'the utilitarian values of technological civilisation' the opposition is not without some ambivalence. This is where I find Ward's account of the poems too rigid, for there is a shuttling back and forth of themes in the sequence which does not conform to a ready judgement or resolution.

The Sleeping Lord was the last of Jones's major written works to be published in his lifetime. It consists, in part, of fragments rejected from *The Anathemata* and taken from *The Roman Quarry*. Though the poems derive from a longer planned work, it was one Jones was never able to complete. Correspondingly, Ward finds that the fragments possess a 'thematic, if not poetic coherence'. However, Ward finds the collection 'tentative and 'repetitive' as a result of Jones's 'increasing single-mindedness:'

The book's almost Yeatsian quality of 'thoughts hammered into unity' gives it unusual polemical force, but at the same time bears witness to a schematization of ideas inimical to real poetic spontaneity.⁴⁴⁴

Seamus Heaney's review of the collection presents alternatively:

The Sleeping Lord is David Jones's fourth full length work, or "writing". It carries, as an addendum to the title, "and other fragments", but if the pieces included here are fragments, they have been dressed to a pattern that allows us to project the coherence and pressure of the structure where they belong. The book fits into that megalithic shape founded on *In*

⁴⁴³ Ibid., p.193,194. This reading is further supported by Tony Stoneburner in 'Notes Toward Performing 'The Sleeping Lord' (*David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias, National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.351: ' "The Sleeping Lord" faces the social and ecological consequences of colonial industrialization and recalls the legendary defense by Arthur against the ravaging boar (a parallelism between devastation by superhuman/supernatural evil beast and devastation of human beings and nature by colonial industrialization emerges).'

Parenthesis and raised through *The Anathemata* and *Epoch and Artist*...Where Yeats hammered his thoughts into unity, David Jones is still engaged in “making a heap of all that he can find”...He is literally an extraordinary writer, who has tackled, single-handed, the task of creating a British counter-culture: and if the whole enterprise occasionally appears programmatic, it is certainly passionate.⁴⁴⁵

The disparity between Ward and Heaney’s readings of the collection interesting, particularly in their contrasting references to Yeats. The ‘British counter-culture’ that Heaney enthusiastically refers to as Jones’s ‘single-handed’ creation, sets Jones in a very different category from the more usual assignation ‘conservative’, or Miles and Shiel’s ‘ideologically trapped’⁴⁴⁶ (which agrees with Ward’s view).

Neither Ward, nor Miles and Shiel seem consider to what degree their responses to Jones – his work and ideas – are determined by the ideological ‘trappings’ of their own age. Kathleen Henderson Staudt offers a more balanced and just assessment of the ‘ideological’ placing of Jones and his work in answer to Ward:

Though her account of the ideological climate of this period [the 1930s] is quite valuable and provocative, Ward’s identification of Jones’s aesthetic ideas with what she sees as the protofascist political ideology of his contemporaries is not convincing, largely because she tends to portray all forms of Catholic conservatism as based on ideas that are “if not flagrantly illiberal,” then “anti-democratic” (51). These ideologically loaded terms condemn Jones, along with his associates, for an unwillingness to embrace wholeheartedly the technological progress and the democratic institutions of the time...The dualism implicit in Ward’s methods is clearest when she criticizes Jones’s *The Sleeping Lord* for the obvious dialectical opposition it establishes between the Roman world of military and technological empire...with rural and medieval Welsh culture and legend. In a striking line from “The Tutelar of the Place”, one of Jones’s Celtic speakers prays to be defended “in all times of *Gleichschaltung*, in the days of central economies”. Ward finds disturbing political implications in Jones’s failure here to distinguish between fascist and Marxist forms of centralized control...At the same time she condemns the primitivism of Celtic culture, which

⁴⁴⁴ *David Jones Mythmaker* by Elizabeth Ward (Manchester University Press, 1983), p.157.

⁴⁴⁵ *The Spectator* (4th May, 1974) p.547. From a review of *The Sleeping Lord*, ‘Now and in England’ by Seamus Heaney.

⁴⁴⁶ *David Jones: The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles & Derek Shiel (Seren, 1995, 2003), p.7.

embodies Jones's redemptive vision in this poem, pointing out that the defense of such primitivism is a fundamental precept of the fascist ideology that the poem seems to condemn. This criticism exemplifies the way in which rigid ideological categories can lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Jones's poetic intentions. Jones's work insists repeatedly that the activities of artist and sign-makers assert human creative freedom in the face of all totalitarian impositions of value, whether conservative, liberal, political, religious, or aesthetic. In her eagerness to establish Jones's sympathy with antidemocratic ideologies, Ward appears to miss the more complex ideological implications of his suspicion of all institutionalized forms of what he calls "the utile"...including, later in his life, his distress at liturgical reforms in his own, Roman Catholic church.⁴⁴⁷

Staudt's defence of Jones's 'poetic intentions' supports Raine's reading of Jones, and is pertinent also to Raine's associating Jones with Muir and Watkins, since these poets also could be said to champion 'the primitivism of Celtic culture.'

Heaney's review of *The Sleeping Lord and other fragments* provides further insights; Heaney sites Jones in a 'parochial'⁴⁴⁸ British tradition:

Picking up where the Oxford Movement left off, his effort has been to graft a healing tissue over the wound in English consciousness inflicted by the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution. Roman Britain united and maintained within the wall of the Roman world by legionaries bound by their *sacramentum* or oath of enlistment, medieval catholic Britain bonded to Rome by the ministry of a sacramental *ecclesia*, these worlds centred round a divine purpose, round an *urbs* at once of earth and heaven, poled on the axis of the cross, afford a myth for his alternative society. And underlying both worlds, irrigating and embroidering the imperium from beyond the island, are the insular Celtic and British traditions. All this he has wrought into a shield to flourish in the face of the gorgon megalopolis.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics* by Kathleen Henderson Staudt (University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.21.

⁴⁴⁸ In a recent review of a new collection of Patrick Kavanagh's poetry, Heaney put: 'His instruction and example helped us to see an essential difference between what he called the parochial and provincial mentalities ("All great civilizations are based on the parish").' *The Guardian Review* (January 1st, 2005), p.9. I find the distinction appropriate in placing Jones, for 'parochial' implies a small, contained and distinctive community, but one that was part of a much greater 'communion'. Despite being a Londoner, as a church-goer Jones would have retained a sense of belonging to a parish within the metropolis.

⁴⁴⁹ *The Spectator* (4th May, 1974), p.547. From a review of *The Sleeping Lord*, 'Now and in England' by Seamus Heaney.

Heaney's identification of a continuity in the bond between the Roman legionaries' *sacramentum* and the 'ministry of a sacramental *ecclesia*' is, I think, valid and it provides a thematic foundation for the sequence of poems, and includes *The Book of Balaam's Ass*, in the sense that a contrastive and comparative theme of soldiery runs through the whole sequence, which otherwise appears redundantly appended to the other poems, being neither obviously of the Roman-Palestinian group, nor the Arthurian-Celtic group. John Peck presents a study that expands on Heaney's ideas, where the poems form a coherent sequence, based to an extent on the '*sacramentum*' and the 'ministry of a sacramental *ecclesia*' as thematic threads. Where Peck's reading differs from Heaney's is in the function of the poems; Heaney regards them as a 'healing tissue' grafted over the 'wound of English consciousness', while Peck does not find in the poems such a consolatory or therapeutic function or intention. He considers that Jones's choice in placing *The Book of Balaam's Ass* as the end piece to the sequence reveals not so much an indication of faith in redressing a continuity of tradition, however etiolated, but the continuity only of an interrogative and anticipatory mode as one appropriate to his time. However, Jones's 'myth' for an 'alternative society' that Heaney posits is, I find, clarified and given weight by Peck's argument, which supports Heaney's assertion regarding Jones that:

His withdrawal of assent from the technocracy does not, however, take the form of a sentimental primitivism.⁴⁵⁰

Heaney justifies this assertion by referring to 'the historical and theological disciplines of Jones's imagination...' and his use of 'authentic images', which expose the retrieved tradition 'as a form of truth'.⁴⁵¹

Peck suggests that Jones aims at 'the redeeming or Percivalian question'⁴⁵² in his essays, which aim he also finds present in Jones's poetry, creating an anxiety that prevents the poems from becoming polemical and disrupting the programme Grisewood and Hague discerned toward a grand design of ' "pre-application or ...retroactive application" of non-Christian cultures to the Christian drama...'⁴⁵³, or Ward's reading which places the Roman-Palestinian poems in direct mutually exclusive, opposition to the Arthurian-Celtic poems. In the case of *The Sleeping Lord and other fragments*, Peck initially considers the poems 'The Hunt' and 'The Sleeping Lord' together:

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., p.547.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p.547.

⁴⁵² *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.369. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., p.367.

As “The Hunt” lays it out, this phase contains the head-on battle with evil (the destructive Hog), but “The Sleeping Lord” sets against this the *longue durée* of retrenched waiting for transformation, and a myth of the lord’s deferred return in the Celtic defeat-tradition. I believe that the Percival form of questioning, disoriented and genuinely inquiring, is most at home in this phase of Jones’ understanding, for within his developmental sequence the sleeping lord hangs in two-way fashion between heroic struggle and dormancy...Here Jones’s poetic language works...with both “shattering” and “cohering” force.⁴⁵⁴

By placing the poems in a kind of hermeneutical hiatus, Peck creates a different sense of the structuring of all the poems in the sequence and in their thematic and poetic relationships. While Peck acknowledges a ‘splitting’, a duality, at work in the poems, he does not perceive judgement or prophecy resounding from the text, in the sense that via the poems Jones intends a definitive judgement on his civilisational situation. Instead he finds that Jones’s poetics is ‘...patiently dual...’⁴⁵⁵ Peck charts the thematic movement of the sequence:

The last stage of his *figura* is split within itself: Roman administrator sacrificing the locality he loves, against the Son crucified by him, whose sacrifice rejustifies bonds to local maternal ground. More crudely but more clearly than elsewhere, Jones found his elemental pattern. For the splitting reflects our own dispositions to conflict – we still divide among reductive handlings of the natural ground and weaker but persistent homages to it which, in the remarrying mode of myth, can at least imagine a willing sacrifice. This split, crying out for a resolution that has not yet appeared, grimly stays, to what ends no one can say.⁴⁵⁶

The ‘Roman administrator’, I take as a metaphor for whatever happens to be the dominant force in any period of human culture or civilization. This may take the form of an Imperial army or a utilitarian ideology, which must sacrifice the ‘extra-utile’ – that which defines the spiritual reality of humanity, which for Jones is inextricably linked with place and locality. This sacrifice will ultimately bring about a future resistance to that dominant force. As Jones put it:

Finally, I would repeat that as far as I can see we are all very like men forced into guerrilla tactics – we operate in a terrain over-run by the enemy – and pretty efficiently administered by him. And whether we are the kind of chaps who feel inclined to plan this or that local *coup*, or whether we feel we must go to earth with the yellow-skirted Feyes, that the nipping

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., pp.370, 371.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., p.371.

of our cultural December is a little too much, that a very private and secret labyrinthine life is indicated – in either case, the words of Professor Ker’s *Dark Ages* may be remembered: ‘But the gods who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation.’⁴⁵⁷

The times appear bleak to Jones, but he persists in his search for ‘valid signs’ by perhaps more ‘primitive’ means than, say Spengler would acknowledge:

More difficult is the labyrinthine hearing of spiritual promise in ruin’s prospect.⁴⁵⁸

Thus Heaney’s comment, with reference to the last lines of the title piece of the sequence, that one can read ‘backward from here, or forward towards this point’ suggests that in his reading also, the title poem creates the defining context for the others.

Reading ‘The Tutelar of the Place’ in the light of ‘The Sleeping Lord’ hanging ‘in two-way fashion between heroic struggle and dormancy’, Peck suggests that ‘feminine protection passes with [Jones’s] other motifs into the suspended phase’.⁴⁵⁹ ‘The Tutelar of the Place’ takes the form of a litany where a series of petitions becomes increasingly bleak and desperate. It is placed directly after ‘The Tribune’s Visitation’ of the Roman-Palestinian group which has closed with a mock ‘Mass’ in which the sacred has become profane:

See! I break this barrack bread, I drink with you, this issue cup,
I salute, with you, these mutilated signa, I with you have cried
with all of us the ratifying formula: *Idem in me*.

So, if the same oath serve
why, let the same illusions fall away.

Let the gnosis of necessity infuse our hearts, for we have
purged out the leaven of illusion.
If then we are dead to nature

yet we live
to Caesar
from Caesar’s womb we issue

by a second birth.⁴⁶⁰

By way of contrast ‘The Tutelar of the Place’ opens with:

She that loves place, time, demarcation, hearth, kin, enclosure,
site, differentiated cult, though she is but one mother of us all:
one earth brings us all forth, one womb receives us all, yet to each
she is other, named of some name other ...

... other sons, beyond
hill, over strath, or never so neighbouring by nigh field or near

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., p.371.

⁴⁵⁷ *E&A*, p.106. From the essay ‘Religion and the Muses’.

⁴⁵⁸ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.374. From ‘Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons’ by John Peck

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., p.375.

⁴⁶⁰ *SL*, p.58.

crannog up stream. What co-tidal line can plot if nigrin or flax-head marching their wattles be cognate or german of common totem?

Tellus of the myriad names answers to but one name: From this tump she answers Jac o' the Tump only if he call Great-Jill-of-the-tump-that-bare-me, not if he cry by some new fangle moder of far gentes over the flud, fer-foddes name from anaphora of far folk won't woo her; she's a rare one for locality.⁴⁶¹

The two versions of 'prayer' and the language in which they are expressed appear mutually exclusive.

The Roman legionaries' oath of allegiance is 'anathema' to the 'Tellus of the myriad names' who 'answers to but one name'. In a passage reminiscent of the 'groping syntax' of the opening lines of *The Anathemata* Jones presents what appears to be his difficulty in discovering the correct 'name' of the 'tutelar', perhaps speaking as representative of any poet of his time:

Who laud and magnify with made, mutable and beggarly elements the unmade immutable begettings and precessions of fair-height, with halting sequences and unresolved rhythms, searchingly, with what's to hand, under the inconstant lights that hover world-flats, that bright by fit and start the tangle of world-wood, rifting the dark drifts for the wanderers that wind the world-meander, who seek hidden grammar to give back anathema its first benignity.

Gathering all things in, twining each bruised stem to the swaying trellis of the dance, the dance about the sawn lode-stake on the hill where the hidden stillness is at the core of the struggle, the dance around the green lode-tree on far fair-height where the secret guerdons hang and the bright prizes nod, where sits the queen *in Rosenhage* eating the honey-cake, where the king sits, counting-out his man-geld, rhyming the audits of all the world-holdings.⁴⁶²

There is in this passage the attempt, "halting" and "unresolved", to proceed 'from the known to the unknown', though 'the known' appears insubstantial as "what's to hand, under the inconstant lights" that bright "by fit and start the tangle of world-wood." Those who attempt to "laud and magnify" are "wanderers that wind the world-meander". It is unclear "who" is speaking and in these terms Jones asks the reader to reflect on the poem's endeavour with him. There is the search for the 'hidden grammar' and a 'gathering of all things in' – where the named and the naming might become one. Of significance is "the sawn lode-stake on the/hill where the hidden stillness is the core of struggle", for the hill will also become the dwelling of 'the sleeping lord' recalling Peck's central placing of "heroic struggle and dormancy" in the sequence of poems. The petitions to 'The Tutelar of the Place' become more urgent:

Queen of the differentiated sites, administratrix of the demarcations, let our cry come unto you.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., p.59.

⁴⁶² Ibid., pp.60,61.

In all time of imperium save us when the
mercatores come save us
 from the guile of the *negotiators* save us from the *missi*,
 from the agents,
 who think no shame
 by inquest to audit what is shameful to tell
 deliver us.⁴⁶³

The poem concludes with an acknowledgement of a civilizational or cultural death, but there is a suggestion that the 'death' may be necessary for rebirth, a second coming:

When the technicians manipulate the dead limbs of our culture
 as though it yet had life, have mercy on us. Open unto us, let us
 enter a second time within your stola-folds in those days –
 ventricle and refuge both, *hendref* for world-winter, asylum from
 world-storm. Womb of the Lamb spoiler of the Ram.⁴⁶⁴

While this poem has often been understood to represent Jones's pessimistic view of humanity in the twentieth century, I would argue that in the reflected light of the "heroic struggle" about to be enacted in the 'The Hunt' and the metamorphic poetry of 'The Sleeping Lord,' its near despair is counter-balanced.

The placing of 'The Book of Balaam's Ass' as the end-piece of the sequence is further proof for Peck that Jones 'holds on to "the whole weight of what lies hidden" and that 'he refuses "both to isolate a part and then to develop and embroider it" (E&A, 234):'⁴⁶⁵

He bends poetry to this strain to keep the discontinuous power of change, so alive within the stuff he would transmit it, and especially in its Thulic background available to our own attitudes... This sense of things, attuned to harmonics of change within accumulations, can *check* the headlong tendency of expectation to flee from defeat-under-way into either despair or false hopes... Jones will presume to say only that "the culture-tangle" wounds a man innerly, in Hopkins' terms 'self-wrung' and 'shelterless' with groans and cries.⁴⁶⁶

That Peck considers Jones to have possessed a sense of things "attuned to harmonics of change within accumulations" is, I find, appropriate to the fluidity of the motifs and themes running through *The Sleeping Lord and other fragments*:

Jones might still try to redeem a nationalism... as he would maintain an ambivalent perception of the Roman donation rather than chuck it out as wholly contaminated.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶³ Ibid., p.62.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., p.64.

⁴⁶⁵ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.374. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., pp.379, 380.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p.389.

It is important here to point out that Peck's re-interpretation of the functioning of the duality in the sequence of poems does not tend toward synthesis, which would be at odds with Jones who mistrusted, for example, Teilhard de Chardin's theory that the universe was moving toward synthesis.

As Peck puts it:

He reframed a myth of suspended potency, within the geology of the Tellus, to shield the historical sense from enthusiasm and deformation, whether revivalist or apocalyptic.⁴⁶⁸

Which echoes Jones's comment:

The people who 'believe in progress' and the people who look back wistfully are almost equally unreal.⁴⁶⁹

From 'The Sleeping Lord' itself, Peck focuses on the last part of the poem which introduces a slightly comic figure, one recognisably Jones in his typically self-deprecating portrait of himself as an inept soldier 'a knocker over of piles', 'a parade's despair'. This figure seems to embody a metaphorical role of the poet. The section where the figure appears follows a series of lamentations for the degradation of the natural environment which is an embodiment of the sleeping lord, beginning with the land and its rivers and moving on to the sea and its creatures. It closes with the hoarse, stricken cry of a gull:

Is his royal anger ferriaged
where black-rimed Rhymni
soils her Marcher-banks
Do the bells of St.Mellon's
toll his dolour
are his sighs canalled
where mountain-ash
droops her bright head
for the black pall of Merthyr?
Do Afan and Nedd west it away
does grimed Ogwr toss on a fouled ripple
his broken-heart flow
out to widening Hafren
and does she, the Confluence Queen
queenly bear on her spume-frilled frock
a maimed king's sleep bane? ...
... Does the blind & unchoosing creature of sea know the
marking and indelible balm from flotsomed sewage and the
seaped valley-waste?
Does the tide-beasts' maw
drain down the princely tears
with the mullocked slag-wash
Of Special Areas?
Can the tumbling and gregarious porpoises

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p.387.

⁴⁶⁹ DG, p.153.

does the aloof and infrequent seal
 that suns his puckered back
 and barks from Pirus' rock
 tell the dole-tally of a drowned *taeog* from a
 Gwledig's golden collar, refracted in Giltar shoal?

Or, is the dying gull
 on her sea-hearse
 that drifts the oily bourne
 to tomb at turn of tide
 her own stricken cantor?⁴⁷⁰

The "Golden collar" is the torque of a Gaul, 'the Dying Gaul' and Jones 'crying his harsh pun, blows not the battle trumpet but the horn of lament.'⁴⁷¹ As the poem concludes the 'cry' or lament is transferred to the sleeping lord 'the in-cry of this phase, lodged in the mothering hills... This cry carries the hunt lord's battle wrath into the dream-time of buried change.'⁴⁷²

But yet he sleeps:
 when he shifts a little in his fitfull
 slumber does a covering stone dislodge
 and roll to Reynoldstone?
 When he fretfully turns
 crying out in a great voice
 in his fierce sleep-anger
 does the habergeon'd sentinel
 alert himself sudden
 from his middle-watch doze
 in the crenelled traverse-bay
 of the outer bailey wall
 Does he cock his weather-ear, enquiringly
 lest what's on the west wind
 from over beyond the rising contours
 may signify that in the broken
 tir y blaenau *
 these broken dregs of Troea
 yet again muster?
 Does he nudge his drowsing mate?
 Do the pair of them
 say to each other: 'Twere not other
 than wind-cry, for sure – yet
 best to warn the serjeant below... ..
 you never know, mate:
 wind-stir may be, most like to be,
 as between us do agree
 or – stir of gramarye
 or whatsoever of ferly – who should say?
 or solid substantiality?
 you never know *what* may be
 – not hereabouts.
 No wiseman's son *born* do know
 not in these whoreson March-lands

⁴⁷⁰ *SL*, pp.92, 93.

⁴⁷¹ *David Jones Man and Poet* Ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.372. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, p.380.

* *tir y blaenau*: land of the border uplands. Pronounce approximately teerr uh blein-ei.

of this Welshry.⁴⁷³

The 'habergeon'd sentinel' takes the role of the poet, dozing on his 'middle-watch' suddenly alerted to the presence of something "of ferly" or "solid substantiality", by the sound of a rock dislodged:

Sentinels: one probably cannot over-stress Jones' reliance on a self-correcting vigilance, something like the proper sentinel's attitude, carried in his frequent reflections on the "Two Marches" of matter and spirit. The uniform pressures in modern life towards disembodiment, away from life in a place and work on material, dissolve what holds human duality in balance (DG, 88-90), and to this the adequate sentinel stays constantly alert, suspecting that the cry will be for compensating embodiment even when that cannot be.⁴⁷⁴

Peck's interpretation is apt in terms of Jones's use of myth, as it is voiced by the sentinels:

The sentinels who discount the cry read the winds of change with our mixed hermeneutics – their indecision reflects the split between reductive no-nonsense measures and an inadequately irrational alertness to our fate...For Jones rekindled myth and its persistent candle light...⁴⁷⁵

There is also an aspect of humour and delight in Jones's portrayal of the sentinels which lends the text finally a kind of freedom; it wears its symbols lightly.

The Book of Balaam's Ass is contrastingly bleak; the sentinel's outpost surveys a formless and devastated terrain. It forms a requiem to the preceding poems, though Peck discerns an element of requiem in Jones's handling of his material in 'The Sleeping Lord:'

His balancing act in "The Sleeping Lord" honors defeat through requiem, ends requiem decisively and confidently, and then holds back from nurturing prophecies – in order to frame the poetry of his bequest, a shelterless survivor's summa.⁴⁷⁶

The soldiers in *The Book of Balaam's Ass* are utterly exposed in the denuded landscape in contrast with the men in the Roman poems:

Nor yet was there aid or covering wing, or upright, or linden hedge or agger or pareduct or mothering skirt for a frightened last-born, or gunnal for the evil swell; or anything drawn to mask or shadow, or brunt-bearing mound of salvation, nor any sweet flowing water to check the scent, or any device to stay a ravaging pursuer, or conduit or sewer for a felon's joy, or blanket for head for dark imagining in an evil tower, nor your scutum for his

⁴⁷³ *SL*, pp.94, 95, 96.

⁴⁷⁴ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.381. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.382, 383.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.382.

trauma, nor any go-between nor ballast to jettison to rectify the deadly list on her, nor cool and immediate dock for nettle in that hedgeless field, nor any reef to take the outer squall...

... There was no help for them either on that open plain because the virtue of the land was perished and there was not grass but only broken earth and low foliage of iron; and from the tangled spread of the iron hedge hung the garments peculiar to the men of Ireland and their accoutrements, and the limbs and carcasses of the Irish were stretched on some of the iron bushes, because the men of Ireland had made an attempt on the Mill in the early Spring of '15 and again in high summer by express command of the G.O.C. in C. So that the Mill was named on English trench maps: Irish Mill, but on enemy maps it was called Aachen Haus. And as there was no help for the men of Ireland so there was no help for the men of Britain.⁴⁷⁷

The main bulk of the poem is given over to the naming of soldiers, after which Jones lists the cries of the soldiers as they meet their deaths on the 'open plain:'

The dying call not only on lovers, friends, relatives, mothers, Christ, the saints, and the founder of the Western Patriarchate...but also on an older foundation...The impossibility of naming the key modern experience, which comes with a "fanned-flashing to the higher dislocations" (IP, 30), makes the re-calling of origins *in extremis*, of root-sources eradicated by that very experience, the last way of staying human.⁴⁷⁸

On all the devices of the peoples, on all anointed stones, on fertile goddesses, that covering arbours might spring up on that open plain for poor maimed men to make their couches there.

On her that wept for a wounded palm that she got by a mortal spear that she might salve gaping groin that the race might not be without generation.

On the unknown God.

Each calling according to what breasts had fed them – for rite follows matriachate when y'r brain-pan's stove in.⁴⁷⁹

Peck offers that the poem 'acknowledges the maternal principle as every dying soldier's bottom line'⁴⁸⁰ and is 'assiduous' in its 'inclusiveness'. I would add that for Jones the 'maternal principle' was embodied in Mary, mother of Christ.

As Jones states in an earlier passage from the poem, 'while there is breath it's only right to bear immemorial witness'.⁴⁸¹ This Jones attempts 'from the side of the crippled masculine (reflecting

⁴⁷⁷ *SL*, pp. 100, 104, 105.

⁴⁷⁸ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.382. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck

⁴⁷⁹ *SL*, p.110.

⁴⁸⁰ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.382. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck

⁴⁸¹ *SL*, p.99.

too, one must somehow say, his own crippling dependencies and his uncertain social status).⁴⁸² The 'shelterless survivor's summa' most obviously applies to 'The Book of Balaam's Ass' and I agree with Peck in considering it a 'more primitive litany' than the other poems in the sequence; it is certainly the barest, least embroidered piece of writing Jones published. Even so, the 'summa' spans the reach of the other poems, to 'bear immemorial witness' extending back and forth across time in British and European myth and Judaeo-Christian history. Concluding his interpretation of *The Sleeping Lord*, Peck refers to:

...the welter of sophisticated reprimativisations with which poets confront us in our century [twentieth], among them Eliot, Pound, Charles Olson, Snyder, Jones and Bonnefoy. But it is evident that David Jones did not invoke the Mysteries for the sake of poetics...Jones's poetry does not hypothetically remember itself; it actually litanizes the dead and gives memorious voice to the dying.⁴⁸³

As the last work published in his lifetime, it is significant that Jones placed 'The Book of Balaam's Ass' as the final word. It is clear from letters written by Jones towards the end of his life that the war was increasingly uppermost in his mind. In conversation with William Blissett, on the 23rd April 1974, Jones remarked:

'It's funny, that practically the whole of the actual experience of life I have been able to use in my writing comes from the Western Front, 1915-1916, and from the few weeks in Jerusalem in the mid-1930s.'⁴⁸⁴

The Kensington Mass & The Narrows – Agenda Editions, 1975

All our swords
ring in the heads of mothers, and
the world-mother knows the iron thrust
that gives not life
but reaps down the fragile womb-fruit
like early barley.
Green and beardless is the barley-mow
that the world-mother weeps for.⁴⁸⁵

In his essay 'On David Jones', Frank Kermode refers to Auerbach's work *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*:

⁴⁸² *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.392. From 'Poems for Britain, Poems for Sons' by John Peck.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.391.

⁴⁸⁴ *The Long conversation: A Memoir of David Jones* by William Blissett (Oxford University Press, 1981), p.136.

⁴⁸⁵ *Agenda* (Vol.11, No.4 – Vol.12, No.1, Autumn-Winter, 1973/4), p.16. From *The Narrows* by David Jones.

This very learned book argues that the inception of Christianity superseded all previous modes of representing reality because thenceforth the most important events could, as in the life of Christ, combine the heroic and humble in such a way that an elevated style could absorb every kind of detail, and yet impose upon that detail a 'figural' interpretation, as if every particular event signified precisely 'something other,' yet 'without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now.' And Auerbach goes on to show that modern 'realism' lacks this 'figural' quality.⁴⁸⁶

Auerbach's 'argument', thus presented, is very suggestive of Jones's understanding of 'signification' most obviously in art, but also in writing, *The Anathemata* being the prime example. As Jones puts it:

I suppose all my stuff has on the whole been centred around the Queen of Heaven and cult hero – son and spouse.

In her study 'The Tribune and the Tutelar', Teresa Godwin Phelps reads the poems 'The Tribune's Visitation' and 'The Tutelar of the Place' as representing the division of the masculine and feminine principles:

The modern world is too "masculine": "it is to be hoped," he wrote in 1940, "that this masculine emphasis is tempered by the saving scepticism of the female mind; there is a danger of Juno being put into a concentration camp, of her being liquidated" (E&A, 240-1).⁴⁸⁷

According to Phelps, Jones believed that in Christianity, the 'masculine and feminine values coalesce'.⁴⁸⁸ This suggestion is supported by Jones's reference to Mary Magdalen's anointing of Christ's feet in the essay 'Use and sign':

When Mary Maudlen fractured the alabaster of nard over the feet of the hero of the Christian cult, the Sir Mordred at the dinner-party asked: to what purpose is this waste? But the cult-hero himself said: Let her alone. What she does is for a pre-signification of my death, and wherever my saga is sung in the whole universal world, this sign-making of her shall be sung also, for a memorial of her. A totally inutile act, but a two-fold anamnesis (that is, a double and effectual re-calling). First of the hero Himself and then of the mistress of all contemplatives and the tutelary figure of all that belongs to *poiesis*. The woman from

⁴⁸⁶ *Puzzles and Epiphanies* by Frank Kermode (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p.32.

⁴⁸⁷ *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.332. From 'The Tribune and the Tutelar' by Teresa Godwin Phelps.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.338.

Magdala ...wasting her own time and the party funds: an embarrassment if not a scandal. But an act which is of the very essence of *all* poetry and, by the same token, of any religion worth consideration.⁴⁸⁹

Christopher Dawson, 'to whose writings and conversation' Jones felt 'especially indebted,'⁴⁹⁰ regarded the 'hidden peasant culture as the guardian of the most fundamental human values, and in particular as the custodian of religious tradition...vital to the survival of any civilized society.'⁴⁹¹

Jones obviously sympathizes with Dawson's conviction that true "culture" has its foundation in religious sensibility and that this sensibility is fundamental to "man".⁴⁹²

Jones draws together the feminine and masculine in both his understanding of Christianity and what constitutes a 'true "culture"':

We have spoken of a duality in man; perhaps we had better spoken of a nuptials. For thus far, over the whole of man's existence, a mutual intermingling of the utile and the inutile has characterized his cultures. Indeed that marriage is what we mean by a human culture.⁴⁹³

The lines from *The Narrows* reveal Jones's enduring concern with the feminine, in this instance a mother's loss. The lines contain oblique references to Mary and Christ, as Jones was fond of relating John Barleycorn to Christ as a resurrection motif, with its pagan and natural connotations.

Jones's own relationships with women often proved a critical source of suffering, as well as joy, in his life, an area about which relatively little is known. In his preface to *Dai Greatcoat*, Hague writes:

The letters chosen for this collection have been taken almost entirely from four series, addressed to four friends [Jim Ede, Tom Burns, Harman Grisewood and Hague himself]...This means that what is printed concentrates on a single aspect of the man...A very different aspect of the writer could have emerged, from his letters to the classical scholar Jackson Knight, for example, to his patron Helen Sutherland, to other women friends...⁴⁹⁴

Such a 'very different aspect' has yet to emerge, though it is known that Jones was in love at least three times in his life – firstly with Petra Gill, then with Lady Prudence Pelham and finally with

⁴⁸⁹ *DG*, p.183. Extract from the essay 'Use and Sign'.

⁴⁹⁰ *A*, p.36.

⁴⁹¹ *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics* by Kathleen Henderson Staudt (University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.125.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, p.125.

⁴⁹³ *DG*, p.179. Extract from the essay 'Use and Sign'.

Valerie Price. There is evidence enough in certain available letters, that Jones was deeply affected by his relationships with these women:

Writing to Grisewood about his inability to face up to difficulties with Prudence Pelham he observed:

I do see why Launcelot ran 'wood mad' in the trackless forest for four years so that no man might know him is easily understandable, but all one does is to smoke cigarettes and drink an extra whisky or something.⁴⁹⁵

Jones's sad resignation is touching, contrasted as it is with Launcelot's running 'wood mad'; almost a chasm of loneliness. As Miles and Shiel suggest, Jones was isolated to the extent that many of his friends '...considered him as an 'honorary celibate priest' and indeed it is obvious that the residue of sentiments nurtured at Ditchling including thoughts about becoming a monk lingered on over the decades.'⁴⁹⁶ While romantic love was fraught with difficulties for Jones his friendships with women often provided him with practical, and professional, if not emotional support.

Kathleen Raine not only became an important supporter of Jones's work, she provided practical assistance and, as with Edwin Muir, encouraged Jones to apply for a Bollingen award, in which application he was successful. Raine and Jones remained in fairly regular contact after becoming acquainted in 1946. Raine considered Jones 'a very great maker both in words and in those other 'signs' – as he would have said – pictorial images.'⁴⁹⁷

David Jones, more consistently traditional than any of his contemporaries save Joyce, has all along proclaimed that true art comes from deep roots and the ancient springs.⁴⁹⁸ She linked him with Edwin Muir by the enduring quality of their work, though here she is referring to Jones's painting:

The prestige among his contemporaries of Ben Nicholson and the Abstract movement had the effect of making David Jones's early work seem old-fashioned; an impression which time has removed, if not reversed. This is not to say that what finally survives lacks the sense of the contemporary – on the contrary, it will appear that David Jones, or Edwin Muir, or whoever it may be, possessed just that sense of the truth about their actual present the *avant*

⁴⁹⁴ *DGC*, pp.12, 13.

⁴⁹⁵ *David Jones The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel (Seren Press, 1995, 2003), p.257.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.259. Stravinsky commented to Stephen Spender that visiting David Jones was like 'visiting a holy man in his cell'. (*David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Matthias (The National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1989), p.53. From Stephen Spender's essay 'David Jones'.

⁴⁹⁷ *IJP*, p.118.

garde always and necessarily lacks; for it is harder to attain through wisdom, scholarship, or mere bitter experience, the power to measure and evaluate the values of some particular moment, than to go with the tide.⁴⁹⁹

Raine shared with Vernon Watkins an apprehension of the renewal and revivifying of the 'ancient springs' in Jones's work. Among his papers when he died, his wife, Gwen Watkins found a paragraph Watkins had written after reading *The Anathemata* titled "Note on Permanence":

It seems to me that in our age there is a much greater understanding of effect, than of permanence. Permanence itself is suspect in the eyes and minds of many artists, as they believe that all is flux. The dimensions of time are so complex that in a sense this is true. Yet to create art and neglect the Greater Eternity which Blake believed in, or some equivalent of it, is to work in confusion.⁵⁰⁰

That the note was inserted in Watkins's copy of *The Anathemata*, suggests that Watkins considered it a work of 'permanence', which Jones attained to. Though Jones repudiated any 'mystical' leanings, there seems to be an attempt at least in his poetry to achieve 'hypostasis', to capture the timeless moment, which at the same time is every moment. Quoting Henry Vaughan's lines when he, '...saw Eternity the other night/Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light', Miles and Shiel perceive an attempt to capture such a vision in Jones's painting shortly before his first breakdown:

The desire evidently unsettled Jones even though he wished to see with eyes that looked beyond;...And yet, he confessed that he loathed the slippery word 'mystic' by which he meant 'that human being who is more directly in union with God than are most of us' and quite despaired of his distance from such a position, unable to think of 'anyone more bound up in terrestrial comforts etc. than I am – it revolts me to think of it.' Nonetheless, the concept of mysticism preoccupied him throughout his life and the failure of his aspiration to approach more closely into communion with God was sublimated by his growing obsession with the forms of religious celebration.⁵⁰¹

As Michael Alexander wrote in his essay 'David Jones, Hierophant':

⁴⁹⁸ *David Jones Solitary Perfectionist* by Kathleen Raine (Golgonooza Press, 1974), p.3.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁵⁰⁰ *David Jones Letters to Vernon Watkins* ed. Ruth Pryor (University of Wales Press, 1976), p.7.

⁵⁰¹ *David Jones The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel (Seren Press, 1995, 2003), p.138.

...he obstinately works everything into relation with a central preoccupation – in his case religious anamnesis.⁵⁰²

This is a view that supports Raine's approach to Jones's work – 'religious anamnesis' indeed a strong unifying trait Jones shared with Muir, Gascoyne and Watkins.

Kathleen Raine referred to Jones as 'the last English writer of genius who wrote from within European Christendom.'⁵⁰³ A view supported by Simon Lewty:

As an artist he worked entirely within the context of European Christian tradition – possibly one of the last artists of stature to do so – yet he was also, in his own way, a 'modern'.⁵⁰⁴

These observations are confirmed in a sense by Jones, writing of *The Anthemata*:

I tried very hard to make a lucid, impersonal statement with regard to those things which have made us *all* – of this island...Nor indeed is the 'Catholic' element there because I happen to be a Catholic, but rather because historically speaking (and leaving aside the truth or untruth of the Christian religion) it is the Catholic thing which has determined so much of our history and conditioned the thought of us *all*.⁵⁰⁵

Ten years later, in letters to Harman Grisewood, Jones wrote '...the whole cultural situation has changed so *rapidly* and I work so *slowly*...in my more or less 'Ivory Tower' existence...I feel bogus, and about as dated as *The Yellow Book*.'⁵⁰⁶ Kathleen Raine and Simon Lewty's claims for Jones's achievement and status can be seen to be accurate, in that Jones viewed his endeavour as an act of salvage and remembrance of the last vestiges of the British traditions of European Christendom. T.S. Eliot's 'A note on *In Parenthesis* and *The Anthemata* is more circumspect:

Every author of works of imagination is trying to tell us about the world as he sees it.

Nowadays, the more such a writer has to communicate, the more difficulty he may have communicating it. So he must endeavour to convey a sense of his own private world – the world *he* lives in – *the* world as he has experienced it; he must turn that world inside out for you to look at, as if he was emptying out his pockets on the table in front of you. Would you be annoyed to find that the contents of his pocket differed from yours? It seem to me that if we approach these authors in the right way we shall find that in coming to understand the

⁵⁰² *Agenda* (Vol.11, No.4 – Vol.12 No.1, Autumn/Winter 1973/74), p.121.

⁵⁰³ *The Iowa Review* (No.6, Summer-Fall, 1975), p.96. From 'The Sign-Making of David Jones' by Kathleen Raine.

⁵⁰⁴ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.63. From 'The Palimpsest' by Simon Lewty.

⁵⁰⁵ *DGC*, pp.155, 156. Extract from a letter to H.S. Ede, December 1952.

different worlds in which each of them lives, we shall, each of us, come to know more about his own. And this is, at least, a surcease of solitude.⁵⁰⁷

The curiously humble image of the poet 'emptying out his pockets' may appear incongruous, but I find it a fitting counterbalance to the larger claims made on behalf of his work and one that sits with certain anecdotes:

The china on David's windowsill...didn't really become itself for him until it had been broken and mended again. Beware of the resolved, despite the continuous struggle to achieve it.⁵⁰⁸

David Jones explored and developed a 'transformational' religious poetry idiosyncratically British – as Jones perceived 'the folk tradition of the insular Celts' so does he attempt to reflect this in his poetry:

...A half-aquatic world – it is one of its most fascinating characteristics – it introduces a feeling of transparency and interpenetration of one element with another, of transposition and metamorphosis. The hedges of mist vanish or come again under the application of magic...the mists over peat-bog and tarn and *traeth* disclose or lose before our eyes drifting stumps and tussocks. It is unstable, the isles float, where was a *caer* or a *llys* now is a glassy expanse.⁵⁰⁹

The instability of physical or material reality expressed in the Celtic tradition is, however, tempered by its style:

There is in the whole Celtic thing an elusive hardness, a bent towards the intricate and towards the abstract, there is also a certain punctiliousness, especially with regard to received formulae. At least some of these same characteristics are, I think, quite clearly observable from *La Tène* to *Finnegan's Wake*.⁵¹⁰

In Jones's poetry the 'intricate' and the 'abstract' are worked into an environment of 'transposition and metamorphosis', an 'elusive hardness' (the paratactic sequencing of words) is yet translucent and evocative. Jones, in his later poems, as with Edwin Muir, referred increasingly to the figure of the

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., pp.185, 191. Letters to Harman Grisewood, October 1961, May 1962.

⁵⁰⁷ *Dock Leaves* (Vol.6 No.16, Spring 1955), pp.21-23. 'A Note on *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata*' by T.S.Eliot.

⁵⁰⁸ *David Jones, Artist and Poet* ed. Paul Hills (Scolar Press, 1997), p.63. From 'Seeing and Showing' by Simon Brett.

⁵⁰⁹ *E&A*, pp. 238, 239. From 'The Myth of Arthur'.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., pp.198, 199. From 'The Heritage of Early Britain'.

'labyrinth' – and its melting boundaries of time, history and thought. In the last poem that Jones prepared for publication, *The Kensington Mass* he closes with the valediction:

Down the meander and crooked labyrinth of time and maze
of history, or historia intermeddled with potent and light –
giving, life-giving, cult-making mythos
we hear as yet that third crow
dawn crow of dolour
as clear as we hear
 the echoing blast
from Roncesvalles
 and with it, of necessity
the straight, exact, rational and true
'Sirs, you are set for sorrow'.

But what of the Fisherman ...⁵¹¹

⁵¹¹ *The Kensington Mass* by David Jones (Agenda, Winter 1974), pp.10, 11.

David Gascoyne (1916 -2001)

Major Publications

Poetry

- Roman Balcony and Other Poems* (London: Lincoln Williams, 1932)
Man's Life is this Meat (London: Parton Press, 1936)
Hölderlin's Madness (London: J.M. Dent, 1938)
Poems 1937-1942 (London: Editions: Poetry London, 1943)
A Vagrant and Other Poems (London: John Lehman, 1950)
Night Thoughts (London: André Deutsch, 1956; New York: Grove Poems, 1956; Paris: Alysamps, 1995)
Collected Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press & André Deutsch, 1965)
Penguin Modern Poets 17, with Kathleen Raine and W.S. Graham (London: Penguin Books, 1970)
The Sun at Midnight: Poems and Aphorisms (London: Enitharmon Press, 1970)
Three Poems (London: Enitharmon Press, 1976)
Early Poems (Warwick: Greville Press, 1980)
La Mano de Poeta, bi-lingual selection of poems, edited by Francesca Romani Paci (Genoa: Edizioni S. Marco dei Giustiniani, 1982)
Five Early Uncollected Poems (Leamington Spa: Other Branch Readings, 1984)
Collected Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)
Extracts from 'A Kind of Declaration' & Prelude to a New Fin-de-Siècle (Warwick: Greville Press, 1988)
Tankens Doft, selection of poems, edited by Lars-Inge Nilsson (Lund: Ellerströms, 1988)
Miserere: poèmes 1937-1942 (Paris: Granit, 1989)
Three Remanences (London: Private Press, 1994)
Selected Poems (London: Enitharmon Press, 1994)

Prose

- Opening Day* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1933)
A Short Survey of Surrealism (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1935; London: Frank Cass & Co., 1970; San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1982)
Thomas Carlyle (London: Longman, Green & Co., 1952; reprinted 1963, 1969)
Paris Journal 1937-1939, with a preface by Lawrence Durrell (London: Enitharmon Press, 1978)
Journal, 1936-37 (London: Enitharmon Press, 1980)
Journal de Paris et d'ailleurs, 1936-1942 (Paris: Flammarion, 1984)
Rencontres avec Benjamin Fondane (Cognac: Arcane 17, 1984)
Collected Journals, 1936-1942, introduced by Kathleen Raine (London: Skoob Books Publishing, 1990)
Lawrence Durrell (London: Private Press, 1993)
The Fire of Vision: David Gascoyne and George Barker edited and introduced by Roger Scott (London: Private Press, 1996)
Selected Prose 1934 – 1996, edited by Alan Clodd, Roger Scott and Stephen Stuart-Smith (London: Enitharmon Press, 1997)

Translations

- 12 Volumes, all but 2 translated from French. Among the most important are:
André Breton, *What is Surrealism?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936)
Paul Eluard, *Thorns of Thunder*, Selected poems edited by George Reavey (London: Europa Press & Stanley Nott, 1936; trans. with Samuel Beckett, George Reavey and Ruthven Todd)
Pierre Jean Jouve, *The Unconscious, Spirituality, Catastrophe* (Child Okeford: Words Press, 1988)
Poems of Milosz (London: Enitharmon Press, 1993)
Collected Verse Translations, edited by Alan Clodd and Robin Skelton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970)
Selected Verse Translations (London: Enitharmon Press, 1996)

The Place of David Gascoyne

With the death of Edwin Muir, David Gascoyne is, I think, the only living poet, apart from Eliot, in the true mystical tradition.⁵¹²

Thus Elizabeth Jennings opens her chapter on David Gascoyne in her book, *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* placing him unhesitatingly as successor to Edwin Muir (not discounting the reference to Eliot, but there is an implication that Jennings regards Eliot as a kind of constant). Jennings is concerned with the Western European Christian mystical tradition and its relationship with poetry. Such an investigation might appear substantially similar to Raine's approach to categorizing Muir, Jones, Gascoyne and Watkins, in that some of the earliest writings of the mystical branch of Western Christianity, those, for example, of Dionysius the Areopagite, articulate not only a 'transcendental mysticism in theological terms'⁵¹³, but also fuse 'the mystical interpretation of Scripture with philosophy, in particular with Neo-Platonism.'⁵¹⁴ Platonism and Neo-Platonism, for Raine, constituted the Western emanation of the *Sophia Perennis*, expressed by poets and artists via the Imagination. Raine's reading of the poets in question involves a fusing of Neo-Platonic, Christian and ancient mythological elements. Jennings writes:

One of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate that mystical experience comes from a source similar to, if not identical with, that of poetry, but is also itself a perfectly suitable subject-matter for poetry.⁵¹⁵

Discovering an affinity of source between the mystical and the poetic experience is necessary to Jennings's study because she includes secular, non-Christian poets in her canon, such as Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane (the latter greatly admired by Gascoyne, to whom he dedicated a poem on the poet's suicide), describing Stevens as a poet of 'vision without belief,'⁵¹⁶ and Crane as possessing a 'repeated desire for loss of self in some transcendent experience or being, that brings him in line with the more orthodox mystical seekers after God'.⁵¹⁷ Jennings's reference to an undefined 'source', suggests to me something akin to Raine's 'ancient springs.'

⁵¹² *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* by Elizabeth Jennings (1961; Manchester: Carcanet 1996), p.190.

⁵¹³ *The Ground of Being: Foundations of Christian Mysticism* by Joseph Milne (London: Temenos Academy Papers No.20, Temenos Academy, 2004), p.24.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁵¹⁵ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, pp.17-18.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.201.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.224.

As with Edwin Muir, Jennings presents a lucid and informed account, from the perspective of a Roman Catholic, of David Gascoyne's Christian poetics, a perspective that Raine always acknowledges, but rarely develops since she regards Christianity as an aspect, rather than the informing pattern or body of the poets' lives and works. The chapter on David Gascoyne is headed, 'The Restoration of Symbols', a bold title in view of, for example, David Jones's funereal divinations on the meaningful use of the symbolic, in a traditional rather than a French 'symbolist' sense, in either poetry or art in his era and future eras. However, Jennings asserts that Gascoyne succeeds in revivifying and transforming 'the old symbols', which 'bad religious art so often renders lifeless', displaying them instead 'alive, in an entirely contemporary setting'.⁵¹⁸ Jennings places Gascoyne unequivocally as a literary descendant of the metaphysical poets:

If it is not directly influenced by it, his work undoubtedly leads directly back to the visionary poetry of Vaughan, Herbert and Traherne. Yet his work is emphatically of this time and this place – concrete, rooted, exact.⁵¹⁹

This placing corresponds, to a degree, with Gascoyne's view. In interview in 1986, when asked within which 'movement' or 'poetic tradition' he would situate himself, he responded:

It's obvious that at first I was under the influence of the Imagists...But it is difficult to say exactly which of my favourite poets influenced me unless perhaps a general idea of a 'Christian totality'. In a sense, I feel sympathy with a specifically English metaphysical tradition.⁵²⁰

Gascoyne's reference to 'a general idea of 'Christian totality'', recalls David Jones's *The Anathemata*, where Christ spans all time, from the very beginnings of the earth and is thus present with Man from his beginnings, if not made yet made manifest – a standard and foundational Christian concept.

Jennings continues:

Much of his early work was surrealist in form and expression and greatly influenced by French writers of the time...He has also written in French himself; I do not think, however, that he really found his own voice or his own individual means of expression until he started writing the poems which appeared in the volume entitled *Poems 1937-42* – a book aptly illustrated by Graham Sutherland, another visionary and tormented artist who also had affinities with surrealism. The prevailing themes of this book are war, suffering and the

⁵¹⁸ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, p.191.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.190.

loneliness of modern man. These are the overt themes; beneath them, however, is the private voice seeking to express the poet's own struggle for meaning and for unity. The poems are profoundly Christian...⁵²¹

Jennings takes *Poems 1937-42* and within this the 'Miserere' sequence, for the core of her study:

In the magnificent sequence of poems called 'Miserere' which opens the book, the poet, in lines of extreme lucidity, examines the depths of man's guilt and the terror of life without God. The traditional 'dark night of the soul' is transferred to Christ himself – Christ who is both the victim and the conqueror:

... God's wounds are numbered.
All is now withdrawn: void yawns
The rock-hewn tomb. There is no more
Regeneration in the stricken sun ...

Thus may it be: and worse.
And may we know Thy perfect darkness
And may we into Hell descend with Thee.

The poet sees himself as a part of Christ, prepared to endure intolerable suffering and even to touch the edge of despair, but never finally to become hopeless.⁵²²

I agree with Jennings's interpretation of this poem, the 'dark night of the soul' perhaps the enduring theme of Gascoyne's poetry. The image here, in the first instance, is that of the harrowing of hell, of visiting the depths of death where Christ would find those who longed for redemption without fully knowing it, such as Moses and all the virtuous of the Jews who lived before Him. This forms the most famous section of Langland's 'Piers Plowman' which Gascoyne knew and considered one of his most significant antecedents, above Chaucer. Following tradition, Christ's body is seen in the tomb, whilst His spirit goes down to the depths of death and releases the pent-up souls. I would argue that Gascoyne intends to activate these established meanings, but also that these meanings are vaguer and more suggestive in the poem, as though we with Christ descend into hell both in the customary sense of the word, and as a psychological experience. In his essay on Gascoyne, Derek Stanford writes of this poem:

We arrive on the scene at the end of the drama: virtue has been crucified, and humanity enters a period of negation. Later we shall see how this negative sense is the pillar of Gascoyne's poetry; how absence, denial, and frustration are viewed by the poet as the key

⁵²⁰ 'Extracts from an Interview with Michel Rémy', *Temenos* (7, September Press, 1986), p.267.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.190-191.

⁵²² *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, p.191.

human constants...By this aesthetic “leap in the dark” the poet has tried to bring himself close to the image and person of the deity. But here, as opposed to Kierkegaard, for whom belief is followed by love, the process with Gascoyne comes to an end. For him, this deity – this being who is virtue – appears to have succumbed like any mortal man. Or if indeed he is granted resurrection, the poet himself cannot follow his ascent; cannot feel or share any life beyond the tomb.⁵²³

I agree to a point with Stanford’s evaluation of the poem here, with the qualification that in this poem there is the implicit suggestion that by the process of ‘unknowing’, Gascoyne spiritually and therefore aesthetically perceived a state of resolution and being beyond the tomb. As in *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante reaches the lowest point of hell, the centre of earth, Satan’s navel, then discovers that any further descent is in fact movement upwards, Gascoyne, reaches the lowest point after which, there has to be resurgence. The poem can be read as one of displacement and loss, but it also fits with Jennings’s description of mysticism as ‘...a direct, supra-rational union with a personal God by means of love.’⁵²⁴ Gascoyne’s poetic attempt to participate in the death of Christ and going further than that into some unimaginable further dimension of death, and his petition to be able to accompany Christ, would more or less necessarily have to be described as love. In this love is a kind of implicit hope. Even so, the poem ends with the following lines, which Jennings omits in her study:

The hope of faith no more,
No height no depth no sign
And no more history.⁵²⁵

There are, however, mystics who write of such absolute absence of faith and hope in a stance which nevertheless does not wholly deny it and this is conventionally associated with Christ’s, ‘My God, My God why hast thou forsaken me’.

Jennings finds an affirming vision in the poem ‘Sanctus’, which poem she identifies as ‘the heart of the sequence’⁵²⁶, quoting its closing lines:

... to understand
Is to endure, withstand the withering blight
Of winter night’s long desperation, war,
Confusion, till at the dense core
Of this existence all the spirit’s force
Becomes acceptance of blind eyes
To see no more. Then they may see at last;
And all they see their vision sanctifies.⁵²⁷

⁵²³ *The Freedom of Poetry* by Derek Stanford (Falcon Press, 1947), p.50.

⁵²⁴ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, p.17.

⁵²⁵ *CP*, p.89.

On the strength of these lines Jennings writes:

It shows more completely than any of the other poems that it is the poet's vision itself which sanctifies and radiates. The vision is the end not the means and once it has been achieved, however fleetingly, it illuminates all things outside it while itself remaining locked in its own lyrical form and music. This is the hard-won triumph of all great visionary poetry.⁵²⁸

I agree with Jennings's response to the poem. The section of the poem quoted moves through suffering to illumination and finally a fleeting but no less sanctifying vision.

The 'Miserere' sequence closes with the poem 'Ecce Homo', the opening lines of which seem to present a deliberate and scorching counterpoint to the closing line of 'Sanctus':

Whose is this horrifying face,
This putrid flesh, discoloured, flayed,
Fed on by flies, scorched by the sun?
Whose are these hollow red-filmed eyes
And thorn-spiked head and spear-stuck side?
Behold the Man: He is Man's Son.⁵²⁹

Gascoyne's Cross is a vision of horror. Jennings describes the poem simply as 'a kind of coda to the whole sequence':

It brings the passion and crucifixion down to human and contemporary terms: it refuses to ignore disgust and horror...

...Terrifying as the subject of this sequence is, Gascoyne has handled it with a dexterity that never deteriorates into mere smoothness, and with an unremitting candour and clarity. His subject is confusion and despair but his verse is easy and confident. The words embody the vision and the fact of being able to speak is itself a kind of small redemption.⁵³⁰

I detect here an uneasiness in Jennings's response to this poem, perhaps with the paradox of the ease and confidence of the verse in contrast with its subject matter, perhaps with Gascoyne's histrionic diction.

While Jennings's chapter on Gascoyne does not pretend to be an exhaustive account of his poetic subjects and methods, her method could be said to share some similarities with that put forward

⁵²⁶ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, p.193.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.193.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.193.

⁵²⁹ *CP*, p.92.

⁵³⁰ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, pp.193, 194.

by Erich Heller in his work *The Disinherited Mind* published in 1952, described and critiqued by Michael Hamburger as 'anti-aestheticism with a vengeance...'⁵³¹

He treats every work of literature, imaginative and historical alike, as though its primary function were to expound a body of beliefs and ideas...Heller's insistence that everywhere and at all times 'the poetry is the ideas, and the ideas are the poetry' slurs over the very distinction which it is the main business of criticism to establish; and his constant appeals to moral, metaphysical and religious criteria which are never stated or defined greatly weaken his case ...⁵³²

Hamburger's complaint could be applied to Jennings's account of both Gascoyne's and Muir's poetry (as could Raine's). It is a complaint to which David Jones was acutely sensitive in his deliberations over the tendency of modern art towards abstract, as opposed to figurative representation. For him this was a false dichotomy. Jones hankered for art as it had been in past times. In the middle ages, for example, there was clearly a huge sense of beauty and its importance, such as the public parading of paintings through the streets of Florence before being put in the Cathedral, but there was almost no sense of art as art, or any interest in developing a separate theory of aesthetics. The two impulses were identical. During the periods of Renaissance and Reformation the separation between art and religion opened up the possibility of treating of the idea of an aesthetic impulse separated from moral or religious tenets. One of the features of the poetics of Muir, Jones, Gascoyne and Watkins is that, to a greater or lesser degree, they were working against such a separation.

In preceding chapters in her book Jennings discusses from an aesthetic angle her proposal that '...mysticism (contemplation) and poetry (making) spring from the same creative source,'⁵³³ presenting an examination of the creative enactment that constitutes a poem. In her treatment of St. Augustine, she cites R. P. Blackmur's essay on Augustine's *De Musica*, as a demonstration of the possibility that poetry itself can attain to a form of mysticism:

'The fourth century,' Mr. Blackmur says, 'towards the end of which Augustine wrote his treatise, was not an age of poetry, or at any rate not an age of what seems to us great poetry; and it does not seem to have been to Augustine either, for his citations are from Virgil and Horace and Catullus chiefly, who were for him about as old as Chaucer for us. What

⁵³¹ *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry since Baudelaire* by Michael Hamburger (1968: repr, Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), p.12.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, pp.13, 14.

⁵³³ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, p.18.

survived, apart from the old poetry itself, was the procedure of poetry, its theoretic form, which had the name and seemed to have the habit of numbers ... It was the study of this numerical aspect of verse which gave correct control of variations of sound, and it was the numbers themselves which were the vestiges, indeed the manifestations, of the reality in the intimate core of being from which poetry or music drew its power.' This last phrase about 'the intimate core of being' would seem of exceptional importance in a study of Augustine's transmission of his mystical experience. Mr. Blackmur would appear, I think rightly, to be suggesting that for Augustine poetry, music, indeed all art, sprang from the very centre of the human soul, that centre which, in the mystical experience, knows direct contact of God.⁵³⁴

Here, the reference to 'the procedure of poetry, its theoretic form' and the possible achievement of 'manifestations, of the reality in the intimate core of being', bear some relation to the concern with the 'act and place' of poetry with which modern poets grappled, as well as the relationship between language and things and the nature of poetic utterance. While Wallace Stevens would write:

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the res itself and not about it.⁵³⁵

Jennings, again quoting Blackmur has:

...to Augustine the numbers made the form of the meaning according to laws which, with licenses of silence and elision allowed for, were absolute, were of interest in verse because of universal application, and were themselves a kind of limit to human knowledge, a form of being, or a form of revelation; claims to which we are sufficiently used in our own time.'...While Augustine could find a symbol of infinity in mathematics, and hence in music, he could also trace the revelatory power of poetry to the *things*, concrete not abstract, for which words were only counters ... In other words, art is exalted to a high place, words represent without debasing, and direct experience of God can not only be expressed in poetry or poetic prose *after* the experience is over, but the very writing of poetry or of exalted prose is itself a kind of contact with God. And it can be a contact with God because all art is a participation in the eternal act of creation.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ Ibid., p.29.

⁵³⁵ *Selected Poems* by Wallace Stevens (Faber and Faber, 1972), p.135. From the poem 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven'.

⁵³⁶ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, pp.29, 30.

Gascoyne as poet, locked in his fallen condition, strives for the *logos*, the word that is being, that is 'the act of creation', but is forever denied the 'participation in the eternal act of creation' because of a seemingly insuperable division within himself, discernible in the very act of writing. Writing for *Temenos 1* (the first of Kathleen Raine's journals devoted to 'the arts of the Imagination') in 1982, Gascoyne states:

'...Original Sin (knowledge) and the Fall of Man are undoubted facts for me... I happen to believe less and less in the possibility of saying anything of significance adequately or conclusively, and that to attempt to do so is to risk losing oneself in the quicksands of discursive verbosity, digressiveness and one-sidedness. George Steiner...has also remarked in *After Babel* that 'The concept of the "lacking word" marks modern literature'; and that 'Goethe and Victor Hugo were probably the last major poets to find that language was sufficient for their needs.'⁵³⁷

Gascoyne's poetry, in the light of Jennings's study, could be said to be an attempt to validate traditional Christian patterns of imagery and symbol in a modern context; an attempt to restore the "lacking word", the *logos* in the face of the Fall and Original Sin.

Kathleen Raine's 1966 essay on Gascoyne is titled 'David Gascoyne and the Prophetic Role', collected in *Defending Ancient Springs*. It follows immediately chapters on Edwin Muir and Vernon Watkins. Raine characteristically begins by claiming Gascoyne as a poet of the 'Imagination' despite his coming from the 'lower middle-class suburbs':⁵³⁸

...talent is at home anywhere, and numbers of writers have described suburban life in terms of suburban or working-class values; have made those values articulate, comprehensible, acceptable. Some would see in this articulation the sole task of literature...But true imagination is an alien presence in any society. Always it seems to manifest itself in a way which cannot be explained, and there is perhaps no section of society, and no kind of society into which some bearer of this supernatural gift has not at some time been born. There is nothing, in David Gascoyne's kind and quality of imagination, which is typical of, expressive of, suburban values or modes of thought...⁵³⁹

Raine seems to suggest that there is some intrinsic gap between suburban consciousness and both poetry and a sort of mystical intuition. The origins of this are perhaps the consequence of a number of

⁵³⁷ *SP*, pp. 42, 43.

⁵³⁸ *DAS*, p.35.

factors, such as Raine's attachment to Yeats's dictum regarding 'heroic and religious truths'⁵⁴⁰ gleaned from older poetry such as Homer, which delineates an heroic society not a suburban one and thus identifies poetry with a bolder world. It could also spring from a tradition that comes from courtly love poetry which despises bourgeois non-risk-taking life. There is the Romantic tradition which turns away from city life and sometimes adopts the prophetic mode, and the anti-bourgeois rantings of Baudelaire (and to an extent Rimbaud and French 19th poetry), which Eliot admired, where the poetic task is to outrage and defy bourgeois assumptions. Auden did not seek to evade a suburban or middle class conversational tone in his poetry, nor did Macneice, but Muir, Jones, Gascoyne and Watkins could not accommodate their poetic sensibilities in such an idiom. Raine is interested in the idea of an aristocracy of artists – perhaps an idea implanted from Yeats? Her comments on Gascoyne's background show this. She herself was brought up in Ilford and was painfully self-conscious of this fact during her time at Cambridge.

However, it is Raine's eventual description of Gascoyne as a prophetic or oracular poet that is, for my purposes, of primary interest. Such a figure, though connected with romanticism, is of an ancient tradition and has historical connotations unlike the a-historical mystic. Raine examines Gascoyne's juvenilia, surrealist and Marxist phases and reconstructs, to a degree, the literary contexts and environment into which Gascoyne was born and became involved, an essential aspect of Gascoyne and his work, for as poet and writer he was deeply committed to and affected by literary and political movements of his day. While Raine detects intimations of Gascoyne's imaginative potential in his earlier works both in prose and poetry, it is in his collection of poems *Hölderlin's Madness* that she finds a clear and significant transformation in the poet's progress:

Hölderlin's Madness was published in 1938...and in Hölderlin [Gascoyne] found a doctrine of poetic inspiration which was to transform at once his theory and his style. Indeed, from this time traces of the surrealist manner and imagery almost entirely disappear from his work, to be superseded by a lyricism whose exaltation is reminiscent of Hölderlin; with whom, it seems (as formerly with Rimbaud) the poet now began for a time almost to identify himself, so close an affinity did he discover. This work is a series of 'free adaptations' from

⁵³⁹ Ibid., p.35.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., p.18. Raine quotes Yeats without reference.

Hölderlin, linked by original poems and prefaced by an introduction which is in the nature of a new declaration of prophetic faith.⁵⁴¹

Raine proceeds, quoting a number of passages from Gascoyne's preface, to elucidate this 'new declaration':

'What is, then, the secret world to which the poet penetrates, the world discovered by the poet-seer? 'The poet is he who sees', wrote André Gide. 'And what does he see? Paradise!' And in fact this is so, if by Paradise we mean a state of autonomous existence unsubjected to necessity, a state of perfect freedom, without time or age, and if the non-rational imagination of the poet is distinguished precisely by its ignorance of Necessity's irrevocable laws.'⁵⁴²

Raine adds:

The fragmented subliminal psyche has now given place to a vision of an imaginative wholeness towards which the poet had long been feeling his way... With his progress from surrealism to Hölderlin, David Gascoyne passed once and for all beyond a view of the soul explicitly materialist, to the perennial doctrine:

'Both these poets (Rimbaud and Hölderlin) belonged to the tradition of the *seer*. That is to say that their *ars poetica* was an offspring of the Platonic doctrine of poetic inspiration. They believed the poet to be capable of penetrating a secret world and receiving the dictation of a transcendental inner voice.'⁵⁴³

Yet Raine does not examine the poems in *Hölderlin's Madness* to demonstrate her claim that Gascoyne has 'passed once and for all ... to the perennial doctrine'. For, though she finds 'the evident mark of Hölderlin's influence'⁵⁴⁴ Raine continues:

There was one more step to be taken by the poet who was to write the religious (and specifically Christian) poems which are his enduring gift to the world... The crisis [the imminence of a Second World War] that brought the French surrealists who were most serious to political maturity, and swept away the rest, brought David Gascoyne the spiritual maturity whose evidence is first seen in *Poems 1937-1942*. Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Chestov, Berdiaev superseded the 'sacred books' of his surrealist and romantic phases... The eight poems of this series are in praise of the 'Eternal Christ'; the poet speaks from these

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., pp.54, 55.

⁵⁴² Ibid., p.55. Raine quotes from David Gascoyne's preface to *Hölderlin's Madness* (p.11).

⁵⁴³ Ibid., p.55, 57.

⁵⁴⁴ *DAS*, p.58.

depths of our fallen world, in a voice of sustained eloquence, as if at last the angel spoke... Not one of these poems falls below the level of that oracular speech which from this time possessed him. He often spoke of Joachim of Flora, first prophet of the 'age of the Holy Spirit' which, so he foretold, was to follow the 'age of the Son'. In that age, so David Gascoyne believed, we live; or are about to live, for he is, supremely, the poet of the Entombment which must precede the Resurrection.⁵⁴⁵

Again like Jennings, Raine here assumes an approach which concentrates on the 'propositional' aspect of Gascoyne's poetry, seeking primarily to expound the ontological shaping of Gascoyne's endeavour. I consider Raine's closing statement, that Gascoyne is 'supremely, the poet of the Entombment which must precede the Resurrection' of particular interest and significance. Both David Jones and Edwin Muir could be said to share such a position; in Jones's *Sleeping Lord* and in Muir's *The Labyrinth* there is that sense of transition in suspension, a chrysaline stage of artistic and spiritual development, or expectation.

Michel Rémy discusses at some length the significance of 'entombment' and the 'open tomb' in Gascoyne's oeuvre. He regards it a constant theme in the poems, discoverable in different guises in *Poems 1937-42*:

The space of Gascoyne's texts, or equally (his) interior space such as in 'Chambre d'Hôtel' or 'Eros Absconditus', or equally the public garden in 'Jardin du Palais Royal' or 'Winter Garden'...or the hill of Golgotha, are all spaces where...the passion of the divided subject is played out. These are closed spaces in which the closure shakes, where something tries to generate itself with a view to regenerating the subject, dark places where the light is never totally absent, places split by indecision between clarity and obscurity, marked by the moment of brutal separation...but also of insoluble questioning, essential spaces in which the essential hides, such as the open empty tomb which is 'encrypted' to 'de-encrypt'; all the spaces of these texts are the journeys of being, between day and night, sun and rain, water and earth, sense and absence of sense, the present and the non-present...What has to undertaken is the opening of the boundaries. One meets here...a central image of all the poetry of Gascoyne, at least in this period, that of the gaping tomb, the open sepulchre, at the same time sign of absence, of abandon, but also sign of resurrection: 'Unnumbered wings:

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., p.58.

and Ah! voluminous / The cloudy chasm like a gaping mouth / From whence the last deep cry so thoroughly torn / Unseals the Sepulchre of holy rock'. [From 'The Descent']...The Son of Man has left the earth because he is again alive and it is in the depths of the pharaohonic tomb that the candidate for resurrection must be taken; the tomb is the place of initiation, in what is to come, and not of death and burial.⁵⁴⁶ {My translation}

In Gascoyne and Jones the state is more specifically Christian in its articulation than in Muir. Both Jennings and Raine regard Gascoyne as a religious poet, but they differ in their interpretations of Gascoyne's expression of his religious convictions.

David Gascoyne's death in 2001 occasioned a number of obituaries in British and French newspapers. Among them, the claims of both Jennings and Raine find support, with additional assessments that point to a greater heterogeneity in Gascoyne's poetry: its influences, reception and critical interpretations. The contributor to *Libération* states:

Le poète anglais David Gascoyne...était le dernier représentant de la generation appelée "néoromantique" ou "moderniste", dont faisait partie Dylan Thomas...Ami de Benjamin Fondane et de Pierre Jean Jouve, il se tourne vers une expression de plus en plus philosophique et métaphysique.⁵⁴⁷

Gascoyne is also described as a 'neo-Romantic' in *The Times*, with the contributor adding that:

...Gascoyne was familiar with contemporary Europe and European philosophical and artistic movements to a degree many of his contemporaries were not, and was in tune with Surrealism and Existentialism in their early days. The involvement with Surrealism tended, in the end, to hang like an albatross round his neck, and he had to repudiate it...In 1937 he first made contact with the poet-philosopher Benjamin Fondane and discovered Pierre Jean Jouve. It was a significant turning point...Gascoyne's *Hölderlin's Madness* (1938), with four original poems interpolated in the "free adaptations" of the German poet, was his response to Jouve's *Poèmes de la folie de Hölderlin*. In Gascoyne's third collection, *Poems 1937-42*...he found his mature voice and emerged as a religious poet.⁵⁴⁸

Sebastian Barker, writing for *The Independent* makes the following observations:

⁵⁴⁶ *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), pp. 52, 53, 54.

⁵⁴⁷ Anonymous obituary from *Libération* newspaper, 28/11/2001. Web page.

⁵⁴⁸ Anonymous obituary from *The Times*, 28/11/2001. Web page.

When a poet as pure as David Gascoyne dies, the main fact about him cries out to be said. This is that although he was a precocious and prodigious talent, publishing his first book of poetry *Roman Balcony* at 16, his definitive *A Short Survey of Surrealism* at 19, and helping organize the 1936 London International Surrealist Exhibition at 20, he was first and foremost one of the great religious poets of England produced in the 20th century...He immersed himself in the world of Surrealists, living with them, taking their radical political agenda to heart. But life alone in a room in Paris before the Second World War elicited a strange birth. Gascoyne discovered, through Pascal, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Léon Chestov, the elusive mystery of Christianity...It is no exaggeration to say the David Gascoyne's life was a long search for meaning. And, if the mind has mountains, it most certainly has "cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed" into which he plunged. Gerard Manley Hopkins, quoted here, could be thought of as a role model, if we leave out the Catholicism, for, like Hopkins's, Gascoyne's best poetry comes to us precisely because an outwardly religious stance offers no ground of being for either poet. Both follow the path known as the *via negativa*...Gascoyne's search for an authentic God and authentic Christianity rested on his self-taught ontological approach to philosophy and his scorching personal honesty. Chestov inspired him to "the violence with which alone is the Kingdom of Heaven to be taken".⁵⁴⁹

Presenting a somewhat differing appreciation, Valentine Cunningham has:

David Gascoyne...was that rarity among 20th-century English writers: a poet who sustained a fully European consciousness and enjoyed a wide European reputation. The last survivor of the neo-romantic group of poets, who included Dylan Thomas, W.S. Graham and George Barker, he achieved early importance and fame as Britain's first serious advocate of surrealism as a mode of writing poems and painting – he remained more or less loyal to the surrealist vision all his life...He spent much of the later 1930s in his beloved Paris, where he lodged with Lawrence Durrell and Anaïs Nin, and cultivated the acquaintance of surrealist poets, as well as people like Picasso and Henry Miller. The 19th-century lyric poet Friedrich Hölderlin provoked a turning point for Gascoyne's work at this time, but he was a dangerous friend, too; like Hölderlin, Gascoyne was already troubled by depressions, and what he feared might be madness – or "going out of my mind", as he noted in 1939.⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁹ Obituary from *The Independent*, by Sebastian Barker 28/11/2001. Web page.

⁵⁵⁰ Obituary from *The Guardian*, by Valentine Cunningham, 27/11/2001, p.20.

The Telegraph has:

David Gascoyne, the poet who has died aged 85, published his first collection at 16, and immediately found himself compared with Arthur Rimbaud; and like Rimbaud, he was to promise rather more than he performed.⁵⁵¹

While there are the claims for Gascoyne as a religious poet, there are numerous other appellations, most noticeably 'neo-Romantic', 'modernist', 'philosophical', 'metaphysical' and 'European'. Surrealism and existentialism are high-lighted (surrealism from two opposing viewpoints), as are influences such as Arthur Rimbaud, Benjamin Fondane, Pierre Jean Jouve, Kierkegaard, Chestov and Heidegger, as well as the already familiar Hölderlin. The references to Dylan Thomas, George Barker and W.S. Graham introduce a new group of poets unmentioned in Jennings's and Raine's essays and groupings.

Jane Goldman writes, having described Dylan Thomas as 'one of the fathers of Apocalypse' and W.S. Graham as 'a fringe member of Apocalypse':

David Gascoyne (1916-2001) is another poet of the Apocalypse...⁵⁵²

The Apocalypse group leaders were Nicholas Moore, Henry Treece, J.F. Hendry and G. S. Fraser according to Francis Scarfe, quoted by Goldman, and he summarises their aims thus:

- 1) That Man was in need of greater freedom, economic no less than aesthetic, from machines and mechanistic thinking.
- 2) That no existent political system, Left or Right; no artistic ideology, Surrealism or the political school of Auden, was able to provide this freedom.
- 3) That the Machine Age had exerted too strong an influence on art, and had prevented the individual development of Man.
- 4) That myth, as a personal means of reintegrating the personality, had been neglected and despised.⁵⁵³

Goldman follows the Scarfe quotation with:

But if this is beginning to sound somewhat Eliotic in its Spenglerian dread and its interest in myth as unifying agency, then, note that the Apocalyptic movement, according to Scarfe shuns objectivism, if not exactly Eliotic impersonality, and the Apocalyptic movement

is to mean liberation from a purely objective world, a reaction against the objective world, a reaction against the objective reporting of the 'thirties, against mass-observation and the parochial conception of "observing" which was evolved by the

⁵⁵¹ Anonymous obituary in *The Telegraph*, 27/11/2001. Web page.

⁵⁵² *Modernism, 1910 – 1945: Image to Apocalypse* by Jane Goldman (Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p.242. Dylan Thomas and W.S. Graham references p.240.

followers of Auden and Grigson. Its literary ancestors are said to be Revelations, Shakespeare, Webster, Blake, Donne, Hopkins and Kafka. (157)

Eliot's ideal order of "Tradition" has been reorganised so that Classicism embraces Romanticism, Donne...is side by side with Blake. Anarchism, organicism, and a customised surrealism are the key qualities: "Apocalypse is, then, a de-mechanizing, or a de-materializing of Surrealism."⁵⁵⁴

I would argue that it is a bold assertion to define Gascoyne as 'another poet of the Apocalypse.' As far as his journal records, he had no acquaintance with the leaders of the group as listed by Scarfe. He certainly knew Thomas, Barker (who is also mentioned) and Graham and admired their work, but he never considered them to share his vision of the poet's rôle or purpose. However, the 'manifesto' of the Apocalypse poets, according to Scarfe, undoubtedly voices similar concerns to those that Gascoyne harboured on his return to Britain from Paris when the Second World War broke out. It has certain resonances with poetic concerns that troubled Muir and Jones too. But Gascoyne's readings in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jacob Boehme and Meister Eckhart were to provide him with a *Religio Poetae* that would separate him from any easy attachment to a group.

Michel Rémy, discusses the difficulties attached to placing Gascoyne with regard to his final oeuvre and in terms of his influences. He argues, that most critical approaches to Gascoyne's work focus on, or single out a poem or group of poems to illustrate a particular, or pet theory, rather than tracing the evolution of Gascoyne's poetic process, which Rémy argues, never achieved resolution, thus constituting the essence of Gascoyne's art:

Almost all critical articles class David Gascoyne as 'visionary' or 'metaphysical', satisfying themselves with such convenient titles, the first because it evades by its generality the tensions at work in the writing, the second because it is *set down*, in a tradition sanctioned by academia and the history of literature. It is as well to remember that David Gascoyne always criticized the sense of the title "Metaphysical Poems" for his *Poems 1937 – 42* or for his *Collected Poems*, to which he preferred "Metapsychological", but his successive editors seem to have been happy to take no notice. One of the rare suitable labels is that of Kathleen Raine, when she described his voice as "prophetic". For the prophet is the link between here and there, now and later, he is someone who literally sees double, at once the same and the

⁵⁵³ Ibid., p. 239. Goldman quotes from Francis Scarfe's *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry, 1930 – 1941* (Routledge, 1942), p.156.

other, the different and the unique, the present and the future, in a sort of fundamental blurring of these two categories, one being contained in the other. But if one does not take care, one or other of these three labels could obscure the *work* of this writing and find its origin in the evolution of isolated texts or groups of texts, in the eclipsing of what is written through successive texts. The problem in the study of each of these poems, is the same as that which places the division of the texts collected by Robin Skelton into four “books”: the danger of fragmentation, of treating each as a ‘stand alone’ which can be isolated from the whole work (which is not, though, a finished or rounded whole), as if David Gascoyne let himself be drawn from one influence to another in a series of ‘mimicries’, lacking any project; in sum, this would be to deny completely the ‘what is to come’, the dissatisfaction, incompleteness, which characterizes his text. It would be to deny *desire*. More than texts, we are dealing with *writing*; more than a writer, we are dealing with someone writing.⁵⁵⁵ {My translation}

I find much of Rémy’s discussion pertinent to Raine’s selection of Gascoyne, Muir, Jones and Watkins as poets representing for her a marginalized concept of poetry in an already marginal occupation. Raine traces Gascoyne’s development as novelist and poet from his beginnings and detects a thread of continuity in his work similar to Rémy’s. For example, her comment which links Gascoyne’s earlier poetry with his later:

It was the Messianic aspect of surrealism (and also of Marxism) which had most strongly appealed to David Gascoyne to whom it would no more occur to regard the tasks of the

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 239, 240.

⁵⁵⁵ *David Gascoyne, ou, L’urgence de l’inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), pp.37, 38.

‘La plupart des articles critiques qui portent sur les diverses publications de David Gascoyne reviennent pratiquement tous à le classer comme “visionnaire” ou comme “métaphysique”, se satisfaisant de telles étiquettes, la première parce qu’elle escamote par sa généralité les tensions à l’œuvre dans l’écriture, la seconde parce qu’elle *inscrit*, dans une tradition sanctionnée par les académies et l’histoire de la littérature. Il est bon de rappeler à ce propos que David Gascoyne a toujours critiqué l’utilisation du titre “Metaphysical Poems” dans ses *Poems 1937 – 42* ou dans les *Collected Poems*, auquel il préférerait “Metapsychological”, mais ses éditeurs successifs semblent bel et bien être passés outre. En fait, l’une des rares appellations qui pourraient convenir serait celle de Kathleen Raine lorsqu’elle qualifie la voix de David Gascoyne de “prophétique”. Car le prophète est bien le lien entre ici et là-bas, maintenant et plus tard, il est celui qui voit littéralement double, à la fois le même et l’autre, le différent et l’unique, le présent et le futur, en une sorte d’indistinction fondamentale de ces deux catégories, l’une étant contenue dans l’autre. Mais il est à craindre si l’on ne fait pas attention, que l’une ou l’autre de ces trois appellations fasse oublier le *travail* même de cette écriture et trouve son origine dans l’évaluation isolée de textes ou de groupes de textes, dans l’occultation de ce qui s’écrit à *travers* ces textes successifs. Le problème, dans l’étude de chacun de ces poèmes, est le même que celui pose la division de ses textes réunis par Robin Skelton en quatre “livres”: le danger de fragmentation, le danger de traiter chaque “partie” comme un tout que l’on pourrait isoler de l’ensemble (que n’est même pas un ensemble fini), comme se David Gascoyne s’était laissé dériver d’une influence à l’autre en une série de mimétismes, hors de tout projet; bref, ce serait nier totalement l’à-venir, l’insatisfaction, l’incomplétude constitutifs de son texte, ce serait en nier le *desir*. Plus que des textes, nous avons affaire à de l’écriture; plus qu’à un écrivain, nous avons affaire à un écrivain.’

Imagination as 'literary' than to Blake or to Shelley. 'One can state quite simply that their actions and their painting belong to that vast enterprise of re-creating the universe to which both Lautréamont and Lenin gave themselves entirely' (*A Short Survey of Surrealism*, p.81). David Gascoyne too gave himself entirely to that aim; the only possible human aim, as he would see it.⁵⁵⁶

I would argue that Rémy's insistence on the 'incompleteness' of Gascoyne's enterprise, understood as an intrinsic creative motivation in Gascoyne's processes as a writer, has resonances with Raine's description of Gascoyne as poet of the 'Entombment', that there is an essential anticipatory aspect to the prophetic or oracular voice. The label 'visionary' is more than simply convenient, as Rémy regards it. It is integral to the notion of desire for a continually deferred fulfilment, which acts as an unstable but dynamic creative spur.

Rémy argues that Gascoyne's writing requires a deliberately 'off-balance' or de-centred treatment:

David Gascoyne presents a self which goes off at a tangent, distancing himself in a sort of hopeless ballet between belonging and not belonging. That is why in the history of twentieth century literature he is unclassifiable... This is the more remarkable because the thirties were marked by a strong current of social poetry where one encounters too often the tendency to reduce, by an over-emphasis on *facts*, whether they be of an historic, political or biographical nature.⁵⁵⁷ {My Translation}

While I find Rémy over-emphatic in his anti-historicizing stance and his insistence on texts and intertextuality as providing the key to adept, accurate criticism, there is, in his description of Gascoyne as 'belonging' and 'not belonging', in his 'unclassifiable' status, a correspondence with Raine's pronouncements, though Raine does not base her assessment on a principle that shares much with Rémy's. None of the poets considered readily belongs to any of the 'movements' of their day. They remained 'outsiders' in one way or another, posthumously as well as during their lifetimes. Raine does not admit ambivalence into her critical vocabulary, as Rémy does, seeking instead a rooted ontological

⁵⁵⁶ DAS, p.60.

⁵⁵⁷ *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p.20. 'David Gascoyne...met en scène un moi qui va en se latéralisant, en s'étendant de lui-même en une sorte de ballet désespéré entre l'appartenance et la désappartenance. C'est pourquoi il est dans l'histoire de la littérature du vingtième siècle, proprement inclassable...Ceci est d'autant plus remarquable que les années trente ont été, pour cette même histoire littéraire, marquées par un fort courant de poésie sociale auquel on a trop

and aesthetic tradition with which to authenticate their use of language and to sort with the poets, thus giving their disparateness definition, though there are variations within the tradition. Rémy's reference to a 'hopeless dance (ballet)' has resonances with the ancient tradition of the poet as inspired being and maker, as in Plato's *Ion*, who cannot but 'dance', hopelessly or otherwise.

Of a different generation from Edwin Muir and David Jones, David Gascoyne entered a literary era that had become increasingly polarized by the time Gascoyne plunged into literary life in 1932 with the publication of his first collection of poems *Roman Balcony*. As well as the legacy from modernists Eliot and Pound, there were the New Country poets Auden, Day Lewis, Spender and MacNeice finding prominence. In France, the Symbolists had been succeeded by Surrealism. In Gascoyne's *Collected Journals 1936–42* there is a tangible excitement at the ferment of literary activity in both Britain and France in which he was, at times, intensely involved. Gascoyne was metropolitan and cosmopolitan in a way that Muir, Jones and Watkins were not. Despite Muir and Jones living in cities, they felt and were isolated from the literary scene in a way that Gascoyne was not. Michael Hamburger makes an observation concerning Baudelaire, that he was, '...one of the first poets to grapple with some of the realities of the modern megalopolitan scene.'⁵⁵⁸ Hamburger continues, making observations which also serve to illuminate and illustrate many of the strands, divisions, developments and preoccupations that Gascoyne displays in his writing:

Both as a poet and as a critic, Baudelaire's practice was more classical than is generally granted. Because he was an allegorical poet, rather than a Symbolist, most of his poetry conforms to Samuel Johnson's classical prescription that 'the business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species, to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations ...' Baudelaire's attitudes, on the other hand, were bound to reflect his situation in his own age, and particularly the isolation which ...was the common predicament of the Romantics and Symbolists. Baudelaire's self-contradictions, and his dilemma itself,

souvent tendance à les ramener, ainsi que par une véritable obsession des *faits*, qu'ils soient de nature historique, politique ou biographique.'

⁵⁵⁸ *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry* by Michael Hamburger (Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), p. 28.

were due to the almost intolerable strain of being a classical, or near-classical, artist in a modern society.⁵⁵⁹

I would argue that Gascoyne experienced such a dual positioning. His aesthetic sensibility made him feel isolated and alienated from the social mores into which he was born so that in his early poetry he was sympathetic to the Symbolists' interiorised and private world of images. At the same time he struggled with the need to express in a universal way his poetic apprehension of his life and times – progressively more so as his poetry developed, becoming increasingly allegorical and morally committed. However, Baudelaire's 'self-contradictions' which resulted in him being '...a socialist, a conservative and a fascist, a mystical pantheist and an orthodox Catholic, a Satanist, a puritan and a pagan, etc., etc.,'⁵⁶⁰ according to Hamburger, were considerably more pronounced than those that Gascoyne displays. Muir and Jones were nearer Baudelaire's generation and were also troubled by similar aesthetic and moral tensions yet they were not attracted to the French expression and idiom that Gascoyne found especially sympathetic. Hamburger quotes Baudelaire with:

'Je ne crois pas qu'il soit scandalisant de considerer toute infraction à la morale, au beau moral, comme une espèce de faute contre le rythme et la prosodie universels.' [I do not think it is shocking to consider every infraction of morality, of the morally beautiful, as a kind of offence against the universal rhythm and prosody.]⁵⁶¹

adding the following comment:

This is an example of the auxiliary religion; it is a statement designed to throw a very flimsy bridge across the gulf between the aesthetic and the ethical orders. The fact is that Baudelaire the man didn't believe in a 'universal rhythm and prosody' which would have co-ordinated the aesthetic and the ethical functions of poetry without any effort on the poet's part; but the artist would have liked to believe in it, and the pseudo-belief was useful to the poet.⁵⁶²

Yet Gascoyne sought strenuously to unite his aesthetic and religious convictions with his poetic utterance, to reclaim an authentic order and belief compatible with poetic creation. Gascoyne believed in the possibility of a 'bridge', though he did express some reservations concerning the torturous

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid., pp.15, 16.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., p.18.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., p.18.

⁵⁶² Ibid., pp. 18, 19.

relationship between poetry and 'Truth'.⁵⁶³ It is likely that Gascoyne would have disagreed with Hamburger's comment:

It may be that the aesthetic order will never again be re-integrated with a larger one, as Kierkegaard set out to do in Baudelaire's lifetime.⁵⁶⁴

Gascoyne could not have been satisfied with an 'auxiliary religion' or 'pseudo-belief.' Perhaps Gascoyne had more in common with Arthur Rimbaud and to a degree Mallarmé anyway, at least in his pre-Kierkegaardian, *Hölderlin's Madness* stage:

...While Mallarmé withdrew into the sanctum of Art, Rimbaud prepared to take the next step, to re-create the world by the power of his imagination. Whereas Mallarmé merely disparaged 'le mirage brutal, la cite, ses gouvernements, le code,' [...that brutal mirage, the city, its governments, its law] and could therefore devote himself to the refinement of his medium, Rimbaud was in active rebellion against society, morality and even God. It followed that art could be only a means to this end, a weapon of revolt; and when Rimbaud recognized his spiritual defeat in this greater struggle the mere weapon became a worthless thing. On the rough draft of the work that recorded his struggle and defeat, *Une Saison en enfer*, he scribbled these words: 'Maintenant je puis dire que l'art est une sottise.' ['I can say now that art is an imbecility']... Together with Lautréamont, whose *Chants de Maldoror* was almost contemporary with *Une Saison en enfer*, Rimbaud became the precursor of Surrealism and other experimental movements of this century.⁵⁶⁵

In a lecture given to the Oxford Union in 1936, Gascoyne makes claims for poetry that echo Rimbaud's initial fervour and faith in poetry as a 'weapon of revolt':

It has always seemed to me that Poetry is by no means restricted to the printed page. I believe that Poetry is destined to break all its bounds and to become a sort of supreme expression of the communal imagination, uniting and surpassing all the other arts. At this

⁵⁶³ 'I have been preoccupied in one way or another with the apparent conflict between a concern for Truth, regarded as something ever to be sought for in this life but which one can never be certain of having found without the gift of that ultimate faith for which, if one is granted its achievement, Truth is a Person, and the pursuit of poetry, which Pascal, for instance, regarded as a probably frivolous diversion from what should be our most constant and overriding concern...Poetry and Truth, then, may be seen as contradictory concerns...We are familiar with Keats' answer to the question: I have always found this highly questionable. Christianity is quite as disturbing as it is consoling. Truth is undeniably sometimes hideous, as the suffering not only of Christ but of innumerable ordinary human beings...' *SP*, p. 53.

⁵⁶⁴ *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry* by Michael Hamburger (Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), p.15.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9. {Hamburger's translations}

point I am going to give you four quotations from widely different sources, all of which indicate the direction that I believe Poetry is destined to take:

1. Lautréamont: 'Poetry should be made by all, not one.'
2. I.A. Richards: 'Poetry will supersede religion.'
3. Herbert Read: 'Art will then become life.'⁵⁶⁶

Une Saison en enfer was an enormously important work for Gascoyne. Referring to Kierkegaard's *Journals*, Gascoyne wrote:

This is a book I have long desired to possess, but perhaps I had not fully realized...how tremendously important a book it is, for me particularly. A book that I feel is bound to become a major influence in my life; one among a very few others, such as Pascal's *Pensées* and Rimbaud's *Saison en Enfer*.⁵⁶⁷

Indeed, Gascoyne's poetic character and career bear some resemblance to the romantic stereotype, the 'poète maudit' coined by Paul Verlaine in his collection of essays on Mallarmé, Rimbaud and other French poets, *Les Poètes maudits* published in 1884.

In Gascoyne's preface to *Hölderlin's Madness*, there is an indication that Gascoyne found the extreme quality of Hölderlin's life and works a necessary staging post for a poet encountering the beginnings of modernity whose logical development might lead him to become a 'poète maudit':

In Hölderlin, in fact, we find the whole adventure of the romantics epitomized in its profoundest sense: he carried within himself the germ of the development and the resolution of its contradiction. He was one of the most thorough-going of romantics, because he went mad, and madness is the logical development of romanticism, because his poetry is stronger than despair, and reaches into the future and the light.⁵⁶⁸

Valentine Cunningham considered Hölderlin a 'dangerous friend' for Gascoyne. In interview and in the 'Afterword' to his *Collected Journals*, Gascoyne discusses his mental breakdowns in the light of his association with the notion of the 'poète maudit'. The interviewer suggests:

There is a whole subculture associated with the idea of the *poète maudit*: did he feel that there was a real link between his history of mental illness and his creativity? He answered slowly, choosing his words carefully:

⁵⁶⁶ *SP*, p.31. 'The Future of the Lyrical Imagination' given to the Oxford Union in 1936.

⁵⁶⁷ *CJ*, p.283.

⁵⁶⁸ *Hölderlin's Madness* by David Gascoyne (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 19th May 1938), p.2. Interestingly, this first edition of the poems was printed and bound by René Hague and Eric Gill.

'It's difficult to say. The root cause of my mental breakdown was a severe and prolonged amphetamine addiction.'

Did he see that as the only cause? Again he answered carefully and rather quietly.

'Probably not the only cause. To me, poetry is a mysterious gift of putting words together in a certain way. Poetry is like a substance, the words stick together as though they were magnetized to each other. I am a poet who wrote himself out when young and then went mad.'⁵⁶⁹

The *Journals* testify to the intensity with which Gascoyne regarded his life when a young man, as one reviewer noted:

...He is the brilliant and suffering poet of any age, whose first preoccupation is always the same: 'how after long and incessant struggling and painful development, one might [achieve the] force to enable one to make *coherence* of oneself; to see – not the answer to any Sphinx's riddle or Solomon's Key – but something like a finally convincing image of the significance of one's life, an *assurance of destiny*.' The clumsy, cluttering words fall over each other in the writer's desperate attempt to say exactly what he means. Then he gets into a firmer stride: 'Coherence: a gathering together of the dispersed powers of one's personality. Such a state could not be lasting, but might, nevertheless, permanently alter the *level* of one's life. Attainment to a lasting deliverance from the trivial and the unmeaning: from the quicksands.'⁵⁷⁰

To live at such a pitch of intensity, eventually to be exacerbated by amphetamine addiction might well prove impossible psychologically to sustain. Though there are marked differences in their breakdowns, Gascoyne, Muir, Jones and Watkins each suffered from over-burdened sensibilities. Their apprehension of reality and the attempt to distill that apprehension in poetry or painting placed too great a strain on them both mentally and physically. However, Gascoyne ultimately rejected the label 'poète maudit' on discovering that he had been grouped as such by a French academician in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (No. 436):

The context in which Philippe Barthelet refers to me and five other far more illustrious (and dead) poets is his contention that those writers who find themselves called upon to quit the illusory tranquility of 'everyday life', in order to face the unknown and ask the kind of

⁵⁶⁹ *SP*, p. 53. Interview by Lucien Jenkins.

questions that logical positivists dismiss as perniciously meaningless, have most often to pay for their defiance by ending up on the wrong side of the barrier set up by the secular authorities to divide sanity and normality from their supposed opposites, or, as a quaint vernacularism used to have it, in Queer Street. A French expression commonly used to designate such figures is *poètes maudits*. Being still alive and reinstated at last on the safer shore of recovered mental balance, I am inclined to shun the histrionic glamour associated with the tag *maudit*. It is one that might well be applied to such a poet as Dylan Thomas, when one thinks of his last years, but how he would have mocked it as a young man! It would be fatuous of me to regard my poetic output as seriously rivaling that of Dylan Thomas, and I am as much alarmed as gratified to find myself being placed by a serious French critic in a sort of pantheon devoted to doomed visionaries.⁵⁷¹

While, ostensibly, Gascoyne would appear to have little in common with Edwin Muir, David Jones and Vernon Watkins, particularly in his urban and French influences and interests, his revelatory discovery of Hölderlin was also shared by Muir and Watkins. Similarly, the centrality of Christ in his philosophical explorations is shared with them. Raine singles out these 'doomed visionaries', but she does not seek to blur the distinctive individuality of each poet's oeuvre, instead drawing out correspondences in their underlying themes.

⁵⁷⁰ *The Observer* (Sunday 20th August 1978), p.22. 'A Poet in Paris' review of David Gascoyne's *Journal 1937 – 1939* by Philip Toynbee.

⁵⁷¹ *CJ*, p. 390.

The Making of the Poet – Education, Religion and Livelihood

In his novel *Opening Day* the sixteen-year-old author has drawn, obviously, upon his own memories; and without a trace of vanity notes the loneliness which is the inevitable lot of the young child of genius ‘born in exile.’⁵⁷²

Most immediately striking when tracing David Gascoyne’s evolution as poet is his extreme youth in publishing when compared with Edwin Muir, David Jones, Vernon Watkins and Kathleen Raine. Gascoyne had written most of the poetry he is remembered for between the ages of twenty-one and forty; David Jones did not publish *In Parenthesis*, his first poetic work, until he was forty. Edwin Muir, Vernon Watkins and Kathleen Raine similarly only achieved publication when they reached their mid-thirties. Theirs is a poetry of assimilated and distilled experience whereas Gascoyne’s is a more immediate poetry, akin to a creative reflex action to the literary experiments and movements of the moment. This disparity is not necessarily significant in itself, but the generational gap, as well as other contributory factors, distinguishes Gascoyne from them in some crucial respects, particularly in the early development of his poetic identity. At the same time, there remain detectable similarities in their poetic preoccupations and productions. Gascoyne was a near contemporary of Kathleen Raine (born 1908) and of Vernon Watkins (born 1906), and was later an admirer of Watkins’s poetry, as evidenced in his review of *The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins*, written in 1987.⁵⁷³ However, their chosen paths to becoming poets could not have been more different. Gascoyne immersed himself in the urban literary life and world of London and Paris. While Muir, Jones and Raine were all urban dwellers, their creative dwelling places could be said to be far removed from the ‘modern megalopolitan scene’⁵⁷⁴ and they favoured the natural world for an initiation into apprehending reality and the function of the imagination in relation to reality as did Watkins. Gascoyne on the other hand considered ‘the city’ his original and necessary creative dwelling place, as revealed in a letter written to a friend in 1937:

What you said about the country. You know I am not quite so insensitive as not to be able to appreciate all there is to take [in] there in what I yet cannot help regarding always as another world. I’ll tell you what it is: it’s peaceful, regular and deep and, in the untouched place, dignified with all the breadth and breath of the Original; yes, I know; but it’s all the same

⁵⁷² *DAS*, p.35.

⁵⁷³ See Vernon Watkins chapter for Gascoyne’s review.

Innocent and Inhuman. It matters very much *at times* to be alone and to be in contact with the original and the untainted and the open. But our human faces are irrevocably turned away from all that world; and the life of our own times towards which they must be turned, if we are to be properly alive, is not (in that sense) inhuman; it is *not* innocent...the country will never be more for me, I'm afraid, however long at a time I may stay there, than a place where one takes a breathing-space, where one spends weekends: I could never take permanent root there. You might not believe it, after all that I've said, but I really have the deepest of feelings for landscapes and skylines, and all the atmosphere of woods or beaches, and know the names of most wild flowers, and can read weather signs, and form passionate attachments for certain fields and banks of streams; but now, I never can quite get away from the idea that all those things are the proper setting for the innocence of childhood and that, compared with the crazy scene that we witnessed in Regent Street last night, for instance, too much like the Paradise from which our forefathers were chased out (and quite right too). Alone in the deep greens and moistures of the country, with the thrushes bursting their bonny throats and the trees sprouting away like fireworks and God's sun beating down upon the grass and roses all around, I should after a while begin to pine, I half sadly confess, for a whiff of the fine old corpse of the bedlam cities, and a sight of poor neurotic tongue-tied frantic humanity lurching about the streets and clawing its face with its nails and climbing incessantly in and out of its sweaty bed, singing its odd merry ditty to itself the whole while and never stopping.⁵⁷⁵

Gascoyne's views on the countryside are revealing. He identifies qualities and characteristics that are strongly reminiscent of Raine, Muir and Watkins's work, and to a more circumscribed degree Jones's. However, they are not qualities conducive to Gascoyne's idea of the place and purpose of poetry at this stage in his development. The phrase 'the untouched place, dignified with all the breadth and breath of the Original' recalls aspects of romanticism. Raine et al would have agreed with the statement, and with 'But our human faces are irrevocably turned away from all that world.' Their endeavour was a lifelong search to retrieve the 'innocent' vision of childhood which they equated, as Gascoyne does here, with the Edenic state. Gascoyne was still relatively young when expressing these

⁵⁷⁴ *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry* by Michael Hamburger (Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), p. 28.

⁵⁷⁵ *A*, pp. 115, 116. The letter is part of an appendix of previously uncollected extracts from Gascoyne's journals and notebooks from the same year.

views. In later essays he was much less dismissive of the significance of the 'childhood' vision.⁵⁷⁶

And what he encountered in the city proved dispiriting and disquieting a, 'mechanized inferno full of confused and alienated masses'.⁵⁷⁷ Gascoyne might be regarded essentially as an urban poet. In order to gain a fuller insight into his poetic character and possible affinities with Muir, Jones and Watkins, it is worth considering the important influences and experiences of his childhood and education.

Born in Harrow in October 1916, the first child of respectable lower-middle class parents, Gascoyne's early childhood was peripatetic as a result of his father's job:

Leslie Noel Gascoyne, of possibly Huguenot descent, worked first in the Pall Mall, London branch of the Midland bank, and as a result of his various transfers and promotions...Gascoyne lived successively near Edinburgh, in Bournemouth, in Salisbury, and in the small Hampshire town of Fordingbridge...⁵⁷⁸

Gascoyne's mother was the niece of 'Winifred Emery, a well-known actress married to the actor manager Cyril Maude' and 'has been described by Gascoyne as "a frustrated actress"'.⁵⁷⁹ Little else is known of Gascoyne's parents other than their tolerance and acceptance of their unconventional son:

My parents' attitude towards me is not in the least possessive; they are very understanding and considerate and have always allowed me complete freedom since early adolescence.⁵⁸⁰

In the same passage Gascoyne concedes 'I was a spoilt child'.⁵⁸¹ Michel Rémy remarks in his biographical account of Gascoyne's upbringing:

Very early he revealed himself to be of a rather fragile constitution at the same time as having a gifted sensibility, or rather an uncommon sensitivity.⁵⁸² {My Translation}

⁵⁷⁶ Gascoyne refers to Thomas Traherne, quoting from the *Centuries of Meditation* to support his argument. He considers the primacy of 'false materialist philosophy' to rest on an over-confidence in the capability of Man's reasoning powers: 'For a Christian existential philosopher, all we highly rational, educated men are in reality all we still to a very large extent ignorant and unconscious men, just as all we respectable citizens are in reality all we miserable sinners... "For we must disrobe ourselves of all false colours, and uncliothe our Souls of evil Habits," says Thomas Traherne, "...All our Thoughts must be Infantlike and clear; the Powers of our Soul free from the Leaven of this World, and disentangled from men's conceits and customs. Grit in the eye or yellow jaundice will not let a Man see those Objects truly that are before it. And therefore it is requisite that we should be as very Strangers to the Thoughts, Customs and Opinions of men in this World, as if we were but little children." *SP*, p. 89.

⁵⁷⁷ *SP*, p. 127. From 'The Poet and the City' published in *Cahiers sur la poésie 2* (Université de Bordeaux, 1984).

⁵⁷⁸ *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets, 1914 - 1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p.141. Gascoyne entry by Philip Gardner.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.141.

⁵⁸⁰ *A*, pp. 115, 116. The extract is from an appendix of previously uncollected material from Gascoyne's journals and notebooks of 1937. In the 'Afterword' to the journals Gascoyne was to write: 'It has for years been one of my ambitions to devote a separate memoir to [my parents]...it was not until both were dead that I fully realized how exceptional my in many ways ordinary parents were.' (*CJ* (Skoob Books Publishing, 1991), p. 372. It does not appear that Gascoyne was able to do this. One is reminded of Muir's last poem (unfinished) where he attempted to honour his parents' memory. David Jones was similarly devoted to his parents and their memory.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.116.

Rémy bases this observation on extracts from Gascoyne's semi-autobiographical novel *Opening Day*, which he justifies, with some qualification:

In his novel *Opening Day*, the autobiographical nature of which should not be underestimated, despite the denials of its author...⁵⁸³ {My Translation}

The passage that Rémy selects to illustrate Gascoyne's rareness of sensibility and sensitivity from an early age, is one also chosen by Kathleen Raine to demonstrate his 'the qualitative discernment of the imagination'⁵⁸⁴:

When they first moved into this white stucco Parkstone house the road in which it stood was merely a sandy cart-track of rough stones, although there were a number of new houses situated on it. When it rained it constituted a maze of miniature streams and perilous cataracts down which to float straws or matchboxes. Along the edge of the road grass grew at random among the sharp-edged flints and with it clusters of small spark-like yellow blossoms that he learnt to know by the name of "Lady's Slipper". The name appealed to his imagination and stuck in his memory.⁵⁸⁵

There are further descriptions of natural phenomena in the novel that bear testimony to Gascoyne's epistolary protestations to knowing the countryside intimately and its deep impression on him. The writing reveals Gascoyne's acute visual perception connecting the imagination with exterior objects. In a passage reminiscent of Traherne, Gascoyne renders a child's perception of experience:

...He lived in the strange and antique solemnity of a world of semi-consciousness, through the bright dreams of which only those things that were especially pleasing, beautiful or new, unpleasant, horrible or terrifying could penetrate... He lived in a land of fairy tales, bright coloured and crisp...he was not then old enough to realize the existence of another spiritual world of sight and suggestion apart from the world of tangible surfaces and which, at that

⁵⁸² *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p. 11.

'Très tôt, il se révèle être de constitution assez fragile en même temps que doué d'une sensibilité, ou plutôt d'une sensibilité, peu communes.'

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.11.

'Dans son roman, *Opening Day* dont le caractère autobiographique ne saurait être sous-estimé malgré les dénégations de son auteur...'

⁵⁸⁴ *DAS*, p.39.

⁵⁸⁵ *OD*, pp. 24, 25.

age, had he been able to realize it, was nearer to the bounds of mundane possibility that ever it would be again.⁵⁸⁶

This perception of a child's unknowing or innocent vision of experience and its closeness to 'another spiritual world of sight and suggestion', is common to Muir, Raine and to an extent Jones.

Another formative 'revisiting' in *Opening Day* occurs when Gascoyne describes Salisbury cathedral where the poet was schooled and was a chorister. In interview, Gascoyne refers to his time at Salisbury:

...when asked: 'Did he think of himself as a religious poet?' Gascoyne replied: 'I suppose I cannot deny that I am one. I was brought up as a Protestant, though my parents were agnostics. When I was eight I became a chorister at Salisbury Cathedral. We went to Matins and Evensong twice a day except Wednesday and Holy Communion as well as Matins on Sundays.'⁵⁸⁷

In answer to a self-posed question regarding his 'reputation as being a Christian poet', Gascoyne responded:

I have received the benefit of a conventional Christian upbringing, and still believe, in fortunately, still recurrent moments of certain conviction, in the unprecedented occurrences of the Incarnation and in the meaningfulness of the term Resurrection.⁵⁸⁸

As novelist, Gascoyne describes Salisbury thus:

The Cathedral astonished one as one approached it. From lawns of an exemplary smoothness stretched out square and flat almost all the way round it, it shot up suddenly towards the clouds, rugged cliffs of an astounding vigour. Out of the grass it rose like a tremendous tree, petrified and sterilized in all its diversity of ornamental foliage by some antique winter of prodigious violence...And in this gothic forest of stone-foliaged pillars played at endless goblin pranks the gargoyles and those mythical monsters their tame companions. The spirits of the dead passed in a slow, invisible procession for ever up the nave. Inside the Cathedral time was condensed into merely the meaningless murmur of the bells imprisoned in the

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 31. While this particular passage is largely concerned with the child's apprehension of external experience and events, Gascoyne also explores the imaginative world offered to a child via stories. He describes entering into the world of writing: 'He was transformed into an eternal region'. (p.39). Like Muir and Jones the art or *poesis* effects the 'transformation' into the 'eternal region' rather than the direct experience of the world itself.

⁵⁸⁷ *SP*, p. 47.

⁵⁸⁸ 'A Kind of Declaration' *Temenos* (1, September Press, 1982), p.11. This stance bears strong similarities to that of Edwin Muir, David Jones and Vernon Watkins.

spire...Every service was to him a wonder. At Evensong, when a subdued and vernal twilight penetrated the very ancient windows, bathing tombs in beauty, they sang long and dramatic operatic anthems...or passages taken from *Elijah* or the *Messiah* ...and impassioned choruses about the Daughter of Zion and the Redeemed of the Lord and They that sow in Tears.⁵⁸⁹

Referring to the same extract, Rémy writes:

It was at this moment that a profound interest in religious symbolism began to awaken in him.⁵⁹⁰ {My Translation}

In 1930 the Gascoynes moved back to London where Gascoyne attended Regent Street Polytechnic.

Very little is cited of Gascoyne's schooling there, other than the occasional brief reference:

I was very bad at French at school...On the way home from school I would go down the Charing Cross Road and visit Zwemmer's and buy back numbers of *transition* and *La Révolution surréaliste*. Then I began to want to read Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Baudelaire and so on in the original...When I was fourteen I read somewhere an article by an old literary hack of the 1890s, Arthur Symons, in which he wrote in a somewhat summary fashion about Arthur Rimbaud. At that time I had an unbridled taste for the exotic, and the unusual; black magic, demonology, erotica, the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, mystical and mysterious writers. I immediately recognized that Rimbaud was someone of interest to me. Although I could then scarcely read French, I bought his works and...I started to translate them almost word for word...I decided I wanted to be a poet or at least a writer. As I was making no progress at all in the school I was attending, which I found horribly boring, my parents agreed to my leaving.⁵⁹¹

Philip Gardner contributes:

By 1932...it seemed clear to [Gascoyne's] headmaster that he would never pass any examinations, and to his "great relief" he was removed from the school at the age of sixteen.

⁵⁸⁹ *OD*, pp. 44, 45. The 'wonder' of the services and the music is significant. Gascoyne's poetry bears traces of antiphonal structuring and the regular intoning of the liturgy. Gascoyne maintained a lifelong love of music and was a pianist.

⁵⁹⁰ *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p. 12.

'C'est à ce moment-là qu'un profond intérêt dans le symbolisme de la religion commence à s'éveiller en lui.' Rémy's assertion recalls Muir's realisation of religious symbolism in Rome and Jones's affinity for religious symbolism. Christian religious symbolism did not hold the same evocative power for Raine, who was more attracted to Greek mythological gods and heroes.

⁵⁹¹ *SP*, pp. 51, 52. From 'David Gascoyne in Interview'.

Henceforth he received no more formal education and dedicated himself to self-fulfilment as a writer by way of a life-style of an old-fashioned “bohemian” sort: hand-to-mouth, alternating between hope and despair, gregarious on the surface but inwardly solitary.⁵⁹²

However, reflecting on his reactions to the outbreak of war in 1939, Gascoyne reveals similar doubts to Muir and Jones regarding his chosen path of auto-didacticism:

Objectifications of my own essential inner reactions to the development of the war, with the intention of ‘providing useful material for the future historian’ of individual life during this crazy period. (But I should never be ‘useful’ to anyone in this latter sense, I imagine, now that I have individualized myself to such an extent that I am sometimes afraid of becoming considered a queer, cranky fellow (of a kind such as no-one can have any real sympathy with). – Perhaps my not having been through the smoothing-out process of going to a University has something to do with this...)⁵⁹³

This concern was expressed in 1939 when Gascoyne was twenty-three; at sixteen when he left Regent Street Polytechnic he was not assailed by such doubts. In the introduction to his *Collected Poems* 1988 Gascoyne recounts:

In 1932, while still a day-boy at a West End secondary school, I persuaded an obscure publishing firm in a Court off the Charing Cross Road to publish, under the title *Roman Balcony*, a collection of poems...⁵⁹⁴

The following year, having left the Polytechnic, was yet more successful for the young writer:

1933 was something of an *annus mirabilis* for me. It was the year when Geoffrey Grigson...began publishing...his small, adventurous, and soon influential periodical *New Verse*. In one of its earliest issues Grigson published ‘And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis,’ the result of my first attempt to produce a sequence of lines of poetry according to the orthodox surrealist formula...In November 1933, A.R. Orage published in his *New*

⁵⁹² *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets 1914-1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p.141. In interview in 1978 Gascoyne states: ‘You see I was never any good at exams. I just had to be self-educated.’ From an interview with Nicholas de Jongh in *The Guardian* (3/10/1978), p.8.

⁵⁹³ *CJ*, p. 266.

⁵⁹⁴ *CP*, p. xiii from Introductory Notes. *Roman Balcony* was received thus: ‘Many of Mr. Gascoyne’s verses contain a series of carefully marked impressions...his prevalent mood is one of exhaustion and despair. At times...he gives a distinctive pattern to his sense of life’s meaninglessness.’ (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 2/2/1933), p.79.

English Weekly, to which I was to become for a few years an occasional contributor, the series of short surrealist texts...I have retitled 'Automatic Album Leaves'.⁵⁹⁵

In the same year *Opening Day* was published, the advance royalties from which 'contributed to financing my first visit to Paris, where I was able to spend the last three months of 1933.'⁵⁹⁶

The publication of *Opening Day*, his poems that appeared in *New Verse*, and his surrealist pieces and art reviews in *The New English Weekly*, launched Gascoyne into the London literary scene of the 1930s, one of the hubs of which was David Archer's Parton Street Bookshop. It was here that Gascoyne met and formed friendships with Roger Roughton and George Barker as well as other writers and artists listed by Gascoyne in the 'Afterword' of his journals:

It must have been largely through George Reavey, whom I'd encountered at David Archer's Parton Street Bookshop, that I first made the acquaintance of many people who continued to play a role in my life for some time to come. George belonged to the illustrious Cambridge generation that also contained William Empson, Malcolm Lowry, Kathleen Raine, Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and Michael Redgrave, to name but a few...It was through him that I first met the painter Julian Trevelyan ...through Julian in turn I met S.W. Hayter.⁵⁹⁷

On his visit to Paris, Gascoyne then met Cyril Connolly with whom he maintained an acquaintance for many years, and visited the studio of surrealist painter Max Ernst. In 1934, on his return to England, Gascoyne shared a flat with Roger Roughton who was shortly to establish the journal *Contemporary Poetry and Prose* which was international in outlook and provided a forum for surrealism in England:

This little magazine ran to 10 numbers, and may fairly be ranked as the most adventurous and consistently superior in quality of the many small literary magazines of the period. It did not perhaps achieve the prestige of Grigson's *New Verse*...which had broken new ground in format and content; nor did it rely on contributions from representatives of the *New Signatures/New Country* generation that had immediately preceded us. The translations

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., p. xiv. A. R. Orage was an important figure in Edwin Muir's early writing career

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., p. xiv. The *Times Literary Review's* treatment of the novel was not especially enthusiastic, referring to the writing's 'metallic' quality 'apt for a style which nowhere suggests the bloom or plasticity of living matter'. The reviewer suggests that the novel at times 'perilously approaches parody'. (*Times Literary Supplement*, 28/9/1933).

⁵⁹⁷ *CJ*, p.343.

Roughton published were not only from members of the surrealist movement, many of which were versions of mine and included at my suggestion.⁵⁹⁸

I find Philip Gardner's summing up of this period apt:

The mid-1930s were for Gascoyne the crucible in which his best work was shaped, with slow concentration and in moods of alternating elation and depression... Influenced first by 1890s aestheticism and by imagism (both fashions international, and particularly French, in their affiliations), Gascoyne turned in 1933 toward surrealism, which seemed to him "to correspond to certain instincts of non-conformism and revolt which I had always recognised in myself."⁵⁹⁹

Commissioned by Cobden-Sanderson to write a book outlining surrealism, Gascoyne returned to Paris, meeting on this visit Paul Eluard and André Breton. The fruits of his research were published in 1935 in the book *A Short Survey of Surrealism*.

A Short Survey of Surrealism cannot be said to show any direct affinities with the critical prose writings of Muir, Jones and Raine, but Gascoyne's interpretation of surrealism and his argument for its validity appeal to the broader aesthetic and political dicta of the movement, as set out by André Breton in the first surrealist manifesto, arguing for its compatibility with Marxist tenets on the grounds of its universal, aesthetically non-specialist application:

The most vital feature of Surrealism is its exclusive interest in that point at which literature and art give place to real life, that point at which the imagination seeks to express itself in a more concrete form than words or plastic images.⁶⁰⁰

That Surrealism was more than a simply literary movement, that it was envisioned as a way to live is presented in a slightly different way by Geoffrey Thurley:

But Surrealism is more than a technique: Surrealism takes its place in a complex metaphysical tradition more exciting intellectually even where it seems less sheerly *serious* than the English tradition. Moreover, this continental tradition is namely the continuance into the age of scepticism of the great Catholic tradition of the Cathedrals and of Dante: the world of Surrealism is geared to axes of damnation and bliss, of *Spleen et Idéal*. And it is evident that Gascoyne felt naturally in these terms. If he is, as I have suggested, essentially a

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., p.356.

⁵⁹⁹ *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets 1914-1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p.143. Gascoyne entry by Philip Gardner.

⁶⁰⁰ SSS, p.57.

moralist, Surrealism, despite its whimsical by-products, was essentially a moralistic idiom, a product of a world-situation of plethora and horror.'

This is an illuminating analysis of Surrealism, which places Gascoyne more strongly with Muir and Jones in their poetic and 'metaphysical' explorations.⁶⁰¹

With Surrealism Gascoyne called for the unfettering of the Imagination from the 'chains of preconception,'⁶⁰² defining its potential thus:

Intellectually it was and still is a question of exposing by every available means, and to learn at all price to identify, the factitious nature of the conflicts hypocritically calculated to hinder the setting on foot of any unusual agitation to give mankind were it only a faint understanding of its latent possibilities and to inspire it to free itself from its fetters by the all the means available. The horror of death, the pantomime of the beyond, the total breakdown of the most beautiful intellect in dream, the towers of Babel, the mirror of inconstancies, the insuperable silver-splashed wall of the brain, all these startling images of human catastrophes are perhaps nothing but images after all... There is a hint in all this of a belief that there exists a certain spiritual plane on which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are not conceived of as opposites. It would therefore be vain to attribute to Surrealism any other motive than the hope to determine the plane, as it would be absurd to ascribe to it a purely destructive or constructive character: the point at issue being precisely this, that construction and destruction should no longer be flaunted against one another.⁶⁰³

Claiming Surrealism's potential to free man's imagination, opening new planes of perception, is decidedly Blakean. This passage also has resonances with Muir's 'third glance' in his description of three views of life available to humans written in his autobiography.⁶⁰⁴

Gascoyne, like Muir, refers to Blake when citing a tradition of 'making' that is not the exclusive domain of official Surrealism:

Surrealistic painting is not the *monopoly* of those artists who have devoted their whole energies to a systematic exploration of surrealist means of expression in the plastic domain...for surrealistic art has existed at all times and in all countries. Uccello, Bosch,

⁶⁰¹ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.99. From 'David Gascoyne: Phenomena of Zero'.

⁶⁰² SSS, p.56.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., p.70.

Breughel, Callot, El Greco, Goya, Blake, certain Pre-Raphaelites, Millet, Boecklin, Gustave Moreau, Aubrey Beardsley...to mention only a few, all may be regarded as surrealist artists, and nearly all the best so-called 'primitive' art may be regarded as surrealist also. All drawing, painting or sculpture that is not primarily or exclusively preoccupied with aesthetic form ...or with the mere reproduction of the bald external appearance of logical reality, may legitimately be termed surrealist in the widest sense of the word.⁶⁰⁵

By such a definition David Jones's art could quite readily be defined as surrealist and his endeavour to evoke the eternal through the particular, drawing on symbolic and mythological figures. It is to be wondered what Breton and Aragon would have made of Gascoyne's inclusive, tradition-bearing Surrealism. However, by this stage, Aragon had already broken with Breton to adopt the 'party-line', finding the aestheticism of the original movement too bourgeois. It is clear where Gascoyne's loyalties resided:

Again and again the Surrealists have been forced to point out that a consciousness of the class-struggle does not necessarily express itself in terms of 'socialist realism', that the need for writing of the propaganda type does not in itself condemn research along other lines...Surrealism being a form of psychological research in the domain of writing and painting, the Surrealists are helping to lay the foundations of a new, universal culture, and should not be expected to be immediately concerned, *in their researches*, with the practical facts of political struggle, though they have always shown themselves to be deeply concerned with it in their 'outside' declarations.⁶⁰⁶

Yet in 1934 in answer to the question 'Have you been influenced by Freud and how do you regard him?' posed by *New Verse* to a number of poets, Gascoyne responded:

I have never been directly influenced by Freud in my poetry, but I have been indirectly influenced by him through the Surrealists. To give oneself up at any time to writing poems without the control of reason is, I imagine, to have in a way come under the influence of Freud. I no longer find this navel-gazing activity at all satisfying. The Surrealists themselves have a definite justification for writing in this way, but for an English poet with continually growing political convictions it must soon become impossible.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁴ See 'Edwin Muir Chapter', p.23.

⁶⁰⁵ SSS, p.79.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., p.67, 87.

⁶⁰⁷ *New Verse* (October 1934), pp. 11-13. Answers to 'An Enquiry'.

In September 1936 Gascoyne would write in his journal:

I joined the C.P. yesterday...There is no longer any honest alternative for me than direct action in the direction of Communism...I have had to admit that *nothing* I have written so far is of the least value, and very nearly came to the conclusion, once and for all, that writing is 'no use' anyway...⁶⁰⁸

By late October of the same year Gascoyne was in Barcelona working for 'the Propaganda Ministry, translating news bulletins during the day, and broadcasting them, in English, from a studio...every evening at 6 o'clock.'⁶⁰⁹

As Gascoyne was to distance himself from Surrealism, ostensibly for political reasons, reflecting on his time in Barcelona he was later to write of his yet more short-lived enthusiasm for Communism:

What I saw of the Anarchists in Barcelona I found on the whole very sympathetic...In spite of the United Front, supposed to join together all left-wing factions against Franco, which was proclaimed at about the time we arrived there (it did not last much longer than a fortnight), I came to find that the Communists hated the Anarchists and the P.O.U.M. (Trotskyists) much more than they hated the Fascists, and I think this was the beginning of my disillusionment with Communism as a means of creating a better world.⁶¹⁰

Gascoyne did not stay long in Spain, returning to England to give a lecture on Surrealism at the Oxford Union after a few weeks. On his return he resumed contact with Humphrey Jennings, Kathleen Raine, and Charles Madge (her then husband):

[Madge] and Kathleen then lived in a charming small house, near Humphrey Jennings...I well remember going out there in the evening on several occasions during what must have been the conclusion of 1936, to take part in the discussions which led to the foundation of Mass Observation.⁶¹¹

Briefly involved in Mass Observation, Gascoyne 'began to lose an active interest'⁶¹² when Tony Harrison became co-founder and moved the project to a more scientific, anthropological footing, rather than Jennings's original conception of 'a sounding of the English Unconscious'.⁶¹³ In these

⁶⁰⁸ *CJ*, p.10, 11.

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁶¹¹ *Journal 1936-37* by David Gascoyne (Enitharmon Press, 1980), p.9. Extract from the 'Introductory Notes'.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, p.11.

final months of 1936 and those of early 1937 Gascoyne's journals reveal the young poet searching for a personal and poetic *raison d'être* having moved away from both Surrealism and Communism. A meeting with Geoffrey Grigson in March 1937 occasioned the following outburst:

An unsatisfactory evening really, a waste of time, the talk entirely literary. What is he to do to brighten up *New Verse*, Geoffrey enquires. God knows! *Je m'en fous!* And all those ghastly letters he has collected from his contemporaries and other people, – what a horribly fatuous world is the world of 'young poets' and critics and all the rest! I don't want any more to do with it.⁶¹⁴

Similarly dissatisfied with the demands of Communism, Gascoyne argued with himself over the validity of his then 'novel in progress' *A Quiet Mind*:

The problem I still face is that of how to relate the type of writing of *A Quiet Mind* to the fact that I am a Communist? Apart from the fact that I simply don't believe in either the necessity or the efficacy of directly propagandist literature, nor in 'Socialist realism'⁶¹⁵

A slightly later entry in the journal shows Gascoyne reaching towards a clearer sense of his writing identity:

Perhaps I may become a 'social' writer, but I shall never be a 'political' one. Apart from other objections, the influence of the political writer can be only temporary, even though it may be a vital one during a short period of time. One may be born an artist and yet, for (I think mistaken) moral reasons, decide to sacrifice the more free and autonomous laws of artistic creation to those of the necessity of time and place; yet if one *is* an artist, and can have the courage to decide to *be* one, I still believe that one's work stands a greater chance of being of service to society in the long run. I am talking of the moral-psychological artist. The time limit or speed of the influence of the undisguisedly political writer is self-evidently that of historical events, or very nearly; that of the moral-psychological writer is slower, wearing consequently deeper in the end.⁶¹⁶

Gascoyne's shift from the 'political' to the 'moral-psychological' places him in closer community with Muir and Jones, who were both concerned to write poetry of their times which yet transcended the times, the idea of an enduring, universal poetry a central preoccupation.

⁶¹⁴ *CJ*, p.51.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.61.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.65.

Gascoyne spent the first months of 1937 writing the novella *April*, but allowed himself opportunities to record insights and reflections in his journal:

It is nearly eleven – but if only it were a dark, warm night, with a moon shining, and there were a long, straight road along which one could walk for hours and have absolutely no idea of where it went! If there were something, or someone at the end of the road! Am I really religious? Am I in exile, yearning for some ridiculous, yes, some absurd assurance of a sustaining power to which I might one day return, as to an old forgotten lover's arms, still faithful after years and years of absence? What a fool! What a chaotic, feckless, insatiable fool! And vain; because I know only too well that I am priding myself on being a fool, because I know fools are – blessed?...The whole development of my thought during the last few months seems to me now to be leading in a direction from which one might form the conclusion that I was meant to be a teacher, or preacher: one who makes propaganda for a morality or a personal philosophy...It seems to me that modern man is in dire need of having the Way redefined for him in terms that he can understand...There can be no hope for the Revolution unless it is accompanied by a great *spiritual* awakening and rebirth. This cannot be accomplished, I am convinced, until the last remnant of the official ideology of Christianity has been swept away...Have been reading Plato's *Phaedrus* and am just going to read *The Banquet*. Must have been a Platonist all along and have never known it before! ...I know quite certainly what I want: to achieve significance and coherence, to achieve spiritual greatness...To be worthy of Pascal, Kierkegaard, Dostoevski, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Nietzsche...⁶¹⁷

Here, Gascoyne's veering towards religious convictions and aspirations, indicates the direction in which his poetry was to develop, evidenced in *Hölderlin's Madness* and most fully in *Poems 1937-1942*. On completion of *April* in August 1937, Gascoyne was once more in Paris experiencing 'the pillory of penury.'⁶¹⁸ In September he chanced upon a collection of Pierre Jean Jouve's poetry, a

⁶¹⁷ *CJ*, pp.67, 95, 96, 100, 104.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.121. By the end of the year things had improved: 'Since the last entry in this book, so much has happened, the interval has been so rich: in people, events, unexpected happenings...I have been practically happy...' (p.141). One of the 'new friendships' Gascoyne attributes this turn in events to was with Anaïs Nin. In her diaries she makes this perceptive comment: 'Visit from David Gascoyne, only twenty-one, a child prodigy. I don't know his poetry, only his reputation. A mystical, poetic boy, but bound like a dead Arab by multiple tight white bandages. He leaves me his diary, full of reticences and evasions.' (*The Journals of Anaïs Nin 1934-1939 Vol.2*, ed. Gunther Stuhlman (Quartet Books Ltd, 1974), p.278. I find a correspondence here with Michel Rémy's view of Gascoyne as a poet of 'entombment' and 'inachèvement'. Gascoyne records of himself: 'It seems at the

discovery that was to produce a dramatic renaissance in the young poet's creative motivation and capability:

In the autumn of 1937, my discovery of a copy of the 1930 edition of Pierre Jean Jouve's *Poèmes de la Folie de Hölderlin* in a book-dealer's box on the Paris quays marked a turning-point in my approach to poetry...⁶¹⁹

Describing Jouve's influence, Gascoyne refers to Jouve's wife Blanche Reverchon, a Freudian analyst from whom Gascoyne received treatment:

Although Jouve was not a member of the Surrealist group...there was a connection that he too used the unconscious as a source of poetry. But at the same time there was a spiritual dimension which is lacking in Surrealist poetry. Jouve uses the material that the Surrealists used. His poetic art is the cultivation of spontaneity to obtain contact with the unconscious...I think Blanche confided in him a lot of the material of the analyses that she conducted...It was only Jouve who had the idea of spirituality and the erotic force being interconnected: the esoteric idea, the Smaragdine Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, the saying that that which is above is as that which is below for the creation of the One Thing. That is to say, the finally unified world in which spirit and matter are no longer seen as in contradiction, and reason and imagination are no longer opposites, nor subjectivity and objectivity.⁶²⁰

Reviewing a new edition of Jouve's oeuvre Gascoyne would add:

Though brought up a Catholic, Jouve escapes all easy categorization as a religious poet...Underpinning all his more specifically religious poetry is what has now long been known as 'negative theology', and in all that he wrote, as in his character, asceticism is inseparable from sensuality.⁶²¹

Yet, despite Gascoyne's new friendship and poetic 'turning point', and the resulting resurgence in his poetic output much influenced by Jouve, the latter years of the 1930s were fraught with difficulties, Gascoyne frequently on the brink of despair. His journals contain references to depression and 'angoisse':⁶²²

moment as though I were in the draughty and uncomfortable position of being half in the womb and half out of it.' (From a letter to Lawrence Durrell, 18/10/1937, *CJ*), p.140.

⁶¹⁹ *CP*, p. xvii from Introductory Notes.

⁶²⁰ *SP*, p.50. Extract from 'David Gascoyne in Interview' by Lucien Jenkins.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, p.346. From 'The ascetic sensualist', review of Pierre Jean Jouve, 1988.

⁶²² *CJ*, p.142. Journal entry 10/02/1938.

A sense of a world of beings who each one carry the burden of their own void about with them behind their mask, and do not know how to communicate their need and suffering...I wonder every now and then, whether it is really worth it, – this endless poverty, borrowing, uncertainty, frustration, – all for the sake of a possibility that I may one day write something that will have value.⁶²³

The strain of Gascoyne's impoverished, itinerant status, his alternating between his parents' home in Teddington, digs in Paris and staying with friends resembles Jones's. On a brief visit home in April 1938 Gascoyne recorded:

I don't belong here any more; I am a stranger; I am absent. No other experience than this short return could have given me more convincing proof that my life belongs elsewhere, and is on a different plane.⁶²⁴

Back in Paris he would write:

What I have definitely realized about myself recently is that I belong to the same category of men as the Wandering Jew, Don Juan (not in the vulgar 'amorous' sense, but spiritually), etc. Never to find lasting repose in any place, on any breast, never to see the final vision nor grasp the object of one's search.⁶²⁵

These entries reveal what Michel Rémy has identified as an essential quality of all Gascoyne's literary and philosophical endeavour. Rémy describes Gascoyne as:

...one of the most ardent poets of the twentieth century, who never ceased to live the paradox central to all spiritual quests, that is, the glorification and the abnegation of the subject. One could never say that David Gascoyne 'found' or 'completed'. He did not cease, and yet ceaselessly passes from one state to the other...towards "a more complete sense of self"...a knowledge that one cannot attain unless one does not stop looking.⁶²⁶ {My Translation}

This is a convincing description of Gascoyne's poetic identity. Like Muir and Jones, Gascoyne possesses, or at least seeks to possess the Keatsian quality of 'negative capability', where there is an attempt to suspend the 'ego' and simply 'be' in the presence of reality, which for these poets

⁶²³ Ibid., pp.143, 144.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., p.150.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., p.160.

⁶²⁶ *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p. 16.

'...d'un des plus ardents poètes du vingtième siècle, qui n'a jamais cessé vivre le paradoxe central à toute quête spirituelle, celui de la glorification et de l'abnégation du sujet. Jamais on ne pourra dire que David Gascoyne a

ultimately is God. It was perhaps especially difficult for Gascoyne to achieve such a state, Geoffrey Thurley finding in Gascoyne's poetry 'a master, an ego, and he never succeeded in eradicating the traces of his own voice.'⁶²⁷

In addition to his physical and emotional rootlessness, Gascoyne's affiliation with France and French literature separated him from English literary movements giving him a sense of artistic isolation, which might be compared with Muir, Jones and Watkins.⁶²⁸

Gascoyne pondered his understanding of the difference between his idea of poetry and the kind of poetry being written by English poets in the thirties:

This morning received by post three volumes of new poetry from Fabers: Auden, Spender and MacNeice. More and more, I feel the existence of a great gap between their generation's conception of poetry and my own...Poetry is not verse, it is not rhetoric, it is not an epigrammatic way of saying something that can be stated in prose, nor is it argument or reportage. In England the whole question needs to be cleared up and restated. What I call poetry is not understood in England, but I believe it to be something of far greater value than what is at present understood there. The tradition of modern English poetry is really something quite different from the tradition of Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Rilke, Lorca, Jouve. – I belong to Europe before I belong to England. The values I believe in are European values and not English ones.⁶²⁹

Gascoyne's concerns regarding poetry, indeed the possibility of writing the kind of poetry he believed in, were exacerbated by growing fears that a second war in Europe was imminent and that his ideal vision of Europe was on the verge of disintegration:

One needs tremendous determination to do creative work of any sort in a world so disordered and uncertain as the world today. *Crise de la politique, crise de l'homme, crise de l'esprit* ...Cannot work because of a gnawing feeling of hopelessness and anxiety about the future.⁶³⁰

trouvé, qu'il a abouti. Il n'a cessé, et ne cesse encore, de passer d'une étape à l'autre...vers cette "plus complète connaissance de soi"...une connaissance qu'on ne peut atteindre qu'en ne s'arrêtant jamais.'

⁶²⁷ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), pp. 98, 99.

⁶²⁸ Geoffrey Thurley observes: 'The return to England and the coming of the War left Gascoyne stranded, high and dry on the mud-flats of a dubious reality...Perhaps it was precisely his total estrangement – as Paris-orientated ex-Surrealist from culture...as night-walking poet from social 'responsibility' – that gave Gascoyne in one way a more real appreciation of his position than partial integration in the corpus of society could have. For the poet is always alienated. Gascoyne's alienation was unusually complete. *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), pp. 111, 112.

⁶²⁹ *CJ*, pp.169, 170.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.175. Like David Jones, Gascoyne was unconvinced that war was the best solution to the 'European situation'. Decidedly unlike Jones, Gascoyne had no admiration for Hitler: 'Listened to the wireless account of

Gascoyne did, however, continue to make plans for projected written works according to his idea of 'the tradition of Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Rilke, Lorca, Jouve', in the face of his sense of desolation and 'financial crisis.'⁶³¹

Want to write an essay on 'The Apotheosis of Lautréamont ...stressing the importance of the 'magical' theory of poetry in the understanding of L.; the surrender of English poetry to rationalism, of English poets to rationalist critics and of the necessity for the poet today to create a super-rationalist faith *ex nihilo*. Reiteration of the idea that the practice of magic (in poetry) involves 'damnation' (Hölderlin goes mad, Rimbaud abandons writing, Lautréamont dies abnormally young): i.e. the poet's destiny is to risk madness despair and death for the sake of the possibility of redeeming existence by means of the secret power of the Word.'⁶³²

This, and other projected works, are referred to by Gascoyne under various titles during this period, none of which reached publication (at least under these titles), such as 'Come Dungeon Dark', 'The Anointed', 'Blind Man's Buff' and 'Son of the Evening.' Even so, he was also writing the poetry which would eventually be collected in *Poems 1937-1942*.

Gascoyne remained in Paris until March 1939, at the end of which month he returned to live with his family in England. Rereading Baudelaire and Nietzsche, Gascoyne describes himself in August of the same year as: 'In the middle of a severe *spiritual crisis*.'⁶³³ The entries in his journal over the last few days of August before war was declared become increasingly urgent and portentous:

Sat on a bench in Leicester Square gardens, realizing that I have definitely 'been called' to be one of those who are to announce the true underlying event taking place during this century... Was possessed, as I sat there, by a sombre, strange excitement...as though in the

Hitler's speech to Germany tonight. One had quite clearly the impression of a madman speaking: his whole attitude and manner indicate an advanced stage of paranoia. It is quite unpredictable what he will do next... Either he accepts the terms of the London-Paris agreement in which case peace may be saved, or he insists on the complete destruction of Czechoslovakia by force, in which case there will undoubtedly be war... In spite of everything, I still cannot believe that, of the two evils between which Europe has to choose, the disappearance of Czechoslovakia is the worst. One could not publish this opinion tomorrow without being accused of being pro-fascist. Very soon, people will cease to think any more, and we shall all be carried away by slogans and virtuous indignation.' *CJ*, p.187. Entry dated 26/09/1938. Geoffrey Thurley adds: 'Gascoyne is decidedly undecided about the events: the War is seen as an ignorant disaster, in which neither side can claim the moral right.' *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.112.

⁶³¹ *CJ*, p.198.

⁶³² *Ibid.*, p.199.

⁶³³ *Ibid.*, p. 252. Gascoyne also feared for his sanity, writing in July 1939: 'For the first time in my life I am beginning to realize that there is a definite (though fortunately still fairly remote) possibility of my going 'out of my mind...'' (p.251) and in August: 'I'm becoming gradually more and more dotty, fanatical, otherworldly.' (p.258)

pangs of giving birth to a new spiritual reality...Am I to become a sort of Prophet after these days in the Wilderness?⁶³⁴

When war was declared on the third of September Gascoyne wrote: 'Today, the individual is transcended...Overwhelmingly conscious of the communal drama, I have not, I cannot, lose consciousness of 'my' individual drama.'⁶³⁵ As Hugh Haughton observes:

With the world in 'severe crisis', he felt his 'interior crisis' more intensely than ever, and during the early months of the war he seems to have achieved a sense of triumphant missionary certainty about his identity and vocation...The ex-Surrealist had become a metaphysical fantasist.⁶³⁶

An entry in Gascoyne's diary lends this view some support:

Vita Nuova. In spite of the War (probably in fact, *because* of it), I have truly emerged at last from the dark, constricting chrysalis of the last few years of my life and now *I am*. Everything – inner and outer, and the whole relationship between them – is now clear; I have accepted the great fundamental contradiction, and have died of it; and am risen again; and now the old Contradiction is no more. It now remains to me to write down my total vision, if possible, before getting called up for some form or other of national service...My book will be a sort of philosophically-determined prophecy (The Greater Crisis: the Holy Revolution: the New Christendom).⁶³⁷

In this apostrophic outburst Haughton detects a pre-figuring of 'the poetry of "The Greater Crisis" of the early war years – Gascoyne's period of greatest creativity', but also of 'the breakdowns and long periods of hospitalization that followed the war.'⁶³⁸ I agree with this judgement, with the reservation that Gascoyne attributes his breakdowns not solely to 'metaphysical' fantasizing, but to a large degree on his growing addiction to amphetamine abuse.

As it turned out, Gascoyne was rejected as unfit for national service for medical reasons, and, after a stint as a ship's cook on board a Navy vessel, was employed by ENSA:

During those six years I stayed from time to time with friends near Bath, in South Devon, Glasgow, Oxford and East Sussex...Towards the end of the period...negotiations were going

⁶³⁴ Ibid., pp. 254, 255.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., p.261.

⁶³⁶ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), p.14. From 'Writing the Night' a review of Gascoyne's *Selected Poems* (Enitharmon Press, 1994) by Hugh Haughton.

⁶³⁷ *CJ*, p.274.

⁶³⁸ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), p.14. From 'Writing the Night' by Hugh Haughton.

on with Tambimuttu, whose P(oetry) L(ondon) Editions published my *Poems 1937-42*, illustrated by Graham Sutherland, in 1943.⁶³⁹

The proposed 'philosophically-determined' book is not mentioned again. In his 'Afterword' to the collected journals Gascoyne refers to a book he wrote 'outlining the possibility of formulating what I called 'dialectical supermaterialism', proposing to reconcile metaphysics with revolutionary ideology by means of what I chose to nominate with the neologism 'logontology' (logos ontology 'the secret power of the word').'⁶⁴⁰ This book was, he writes, 'predestined, on account of my complete lack of the necessary training and discipline, to inevitable failure:'

I gave the book a title derived from an exploration of alchemy: *The Sun at Midnight*, which is indicative of a millenarian/utopian optimism in the face of the blackness of the mid-20th century human condition that was bound to make it appear un- rather than super- anything. By the time I had actually completed this opus, and the manuscripts had been returned sufficiently often to make me realize that the time I had spent on it was effectively wasted, I was seriously addicted to the abuse of amphetamines.⁶⁴¹

Gascoyne documents his addiction in some detail in the following paragraphs, dating its beginnings to some time in 1939.⁶⁴² The amphetamines which Gascoyne took (in the form of a 'Benzedrine Catarrh Inhaler, then available in chemists), initially to relieve 'perennial catarrh', he soon discovered to have other subsidiary effects:

Prolonged and repeated use demonstrated that the menthol-suffused fumes thus obtained soon have the equally powerful effect of counteracting the tendency to apathy that assails those prone to fits of dejection.⁶⁴³

Gascoyne's addiction had near fatal consequences. He suffered a ruptured stomach ulcer which required a complete blood transfusion, resulting from 'the abrasion of the intestinal lining by the

⁶³⁹ *CJ*, p.380, from the 'Afterword' written in December 1989. This was Gascoyne's second attempt at publishing the poems, the collection having been declined in 1939 by T.S. Eliot (Faber & Faber). Philip Gardner comments: '...the Sinhalese poet Tambimuttu, was perhaps the most celebrated, and percipient figure in British poetry publishing during the 1940s.' (*Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets 1914-1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p. 144. Kathleen Raine, also rejected by Eliot, found a publisher in Tambimuttu. Her first collection appeared in the same series as Gascoyne's, her poems illustrated by Barbara Hepworth.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.382.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.382.

⁶⁴² Gascoyne writes: 'I have claimed an inability exactly to recall when my Benzedrine addiction began. But having turned back to glance at my Journal entry for August 16th 1939...I find the words '*White Nights*' (underlined). This is to me sufficient indication that I was already staying awake for nights on end during the feverish end of summer that preceded the final declaration of war against Hitler's Germany on September 3rd; and I cannot doubt that this was as much on account of having consumed strong doses of Benzedrine as of being consumed with anxiety on account of the imminence of the chaos of war. (*CJ*, p.384).

powerfully amphetamized and mentholated fluid I had been consuming regularly for months on end'⁶⁴⁴. Despite such 'drastic consequences', Gascoyne's resolution 'never to use Methadrine again was...deplorably short-lived':

I cannot embark here on an account of the sequel to my relapse, but should nevertheless relate that in succeeding years I began to suffer increasingly from aural hallucinations, continual inner voices murmuring utterances that were never quite comprehensible. This in turn led to a kind of paranoia that only momentarily persuaded my simultaneously lucid sane self that I was being watched disapprovingly by shadowy vigilante groups.⁶⁴⁵

By the time *Poems 1937-42* was published in 1943, Gascoyne was in the midst of his amphetamine addiction. After the war, Gascoyne lived briefly in Paris:

...where in his poem "A Vagrant" he described himself as "although anxious still just sane," leading a life of "quasi-dereliction" in which he strayed "slowly along quais towards the end of afternoons / That lead to evenings empty of engagements." In a psychological trough again, after the intense peak of his wartime poems, he chose to remain outside a society of "sleepsickness-rotted sheep," yet was unsure whether "the strain of doing nothing is too great / A price to pay for spiritual integrity."⁶⁴⁶

Reflecting on 'the rising 1940s' Stephen Spender recounts meeting Gascoyne in Paris, 'who was then, in a highly nervous condition:'

Gascoyne said – rather wildly perhaps – that he was convinced that with the falling of the atomic bomb an event had taken place within human consciousness. It was as though the barriers which enclosed people's minds had been broken down and they were aware of living within a situation so overwhelming that they shared a single consciousness.⁶⁴⁷

In the late 40s and early 50s, though suffering from the side-effects of amphetamine abuse, Gascoyne maintained literary contacts and published his last two major works.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., p.383.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., p.387.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., p.388. During this period Gascoyne stayed with Raine who writes in her autobiography: 'David took refuge with me for a while. He was, at that time even more ill...He used to say that it was as if his 'brain leaked'; (he later described it as 'like a transistor set inside his head', on which all kinds of voices not his own spoke, wept, declaimed, argued chanted...). But he read continuously, widely and deeply in works of mystical philosophy, and existentialism, and talked, rapidly and eloquently, of the divine vision which haunted his darkness like the sun at midnight – an image he himself used – of Boehme, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard, Chestov, all the dark visionaries. He was writing then the poems of *A Vagrant* and *Night Thoughts*...He would lie for hours face downwards on his bed, or wander long in solitary night-walks.' (*Autobiographies* by Kathleen Raine, Skoob Books, 1991), p.227.

⁶⁴⁶ *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets 1914-1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p. 146. Gascoyne entry by Philip Gardner.

A Vagrant and Other Poems was published in 1950 by John Lehman, and in 1951 Gascoyne was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature:

In the same year, he visited and gave readings in the United States and Canada in company with Kathleen Raine and the Scottish poet W.S. Graham...⁶⁴⁸

After the tour Gascoyne went to Vancouver Island, British Columbia to visit his parents who had retired and emigrated there in 1946. On returning to England a year later:

Douglas Cleverdon of the BBC commissioned me to write a work for voices and music for the Third Programme. This turned out to be *Night Thoughts*, written in a relatively short space of time, and with the exception of the Eluard elegy the only poem of any kind I had been able to write since 1950. It was finally broadcast in December 1955...By that time I had gone to live in France, and was to spend the summer in Aix-en-Provence, the winter in Paris, for ten consecutive years, except for occasional brief visits to England. During this period I was incapable of writing a line due to the block ...that had resulted from long abuse of amphetamines...⁶⁴⁹

In 1964, Gascoyne suffered the onset of a severe nervous breakdown as a result of which he had to return permanently to England.⁶⁵⁰ In 1965 on the death of his father Gascoyne suffered a second breakdown and over the following ten years lived alternately in his parents' home in the Isle of Wight and a local asylum, writing occasionally:

There, a miracle occurred. A therapist named Judy Tyler read one of his poems, 'September Sun,' to the inmates. When he [Gascoyne] claimed it as his, she thought it one more of his delusions. But they married, and lived happily thereafter on the island.⁶⁵¹

At the end of an article written in 1986 recounting his experience in the asylum, Gascoyne reflects:

⁶⁴⁷ *World Within World* by Stephen Spender (Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p. 282.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.146.

⁶⁴⁹ *CP*, p.xxi. From Introductory notes.

⁶⁵⁰ In interview in 1992 Gascoyne related briefly the story of his breakdowns: 'I still have not written the story of what happened to me in Paris in 1964. I tried to get into the Elysée to see de Gaulle. I was set upon in the entrance to the Elysée Palace...I tried to explain that I had a mission to see de Gaulle. These *Babus*, great big tough men, four of them, began to close in on me and I began to struggle and you know, when you're in that state you become extremely strong and have an amazing influx of violence. I was taken to the nearest *gendarmerie* and was kept there for the whole afternoon. Two people from the British consulate came to try to get me out...and I slapped their faces. I found myself in hospital in a straitjacket. They finally said I must go back to England but on no account to live alone.' So, in his early forties, Gascoyne went to live with his parents on the Isle of Wight. 'My parents were very sweet but I had the terrible feeling that they must think I was a complete failure. My *Collected Poems*, came out in 1965 and I thought, "Thank goodness, at least I have got this to show them." Then my father died and I had acute depression. I went off my head in London.' *SP*, p.50. Extract from 'David Gascoyne in Interview' by Lucien Jenkins.

⁶⁵¹ Extract from *The Guardian* newspaper obituary by Valentine Cunningham, 27/11/2001, p.20.

What I want to end by saying is that I do not regret for a moment having been out of my mind. It seems to me now that in fact I went far deeper *into* it than I'd ever been before, and that having been able to return as sane as I am now...helps me to understand the true cost of sanity better... 'The whole world is our hospital,' says Eliot, and I'm still here only because I've learnt to live with it.⁶⁵²

The intensity with which Gascoyne lived and his integrity to his vision of poetry and philosophy resemble, in an extreme form, the commitment to an ideal of *poesis* shared by Muir, Jones and Watkins who each suffered breakdowns and acute depression. In the 'Afterword' to his journals, having rejected his status as a *poète maudit* he continues:

This being so, I am prompted to bring this Afterword to a close by attempting to answer the question as to whether the path I chose to follow as a poet at the time when I was writing the preceding Journals can be considered to have been (drugs and visions apart) an intrinsically dangerous, possibly fatal one.⁶⁵³

And concludes, recalling Muir's and Jones's labyrinthine seeking and sense of latency:

Materialist scientific rationalism has left us with an irredeemably meaningless universe, in which the history of humanity is but a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. The call to challenge the implicit nihilism of the world-view that has dominated the century now drawing to a close leads whoever hears it onto a path finally indistinguishable from that of initiation.⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵² *SP*, p.227. From 'Self Dishcharged' (*Resurgence*, No.115 (March/April 1986)).

⁶⁵³ *CJ*, p. 391.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.395.

Poet, Poetry, Affinities

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.⁶⁵⁵

In the same year that Hart Crane wrote *The Broken Tower*, shortly after the completion of which the poet committed suicide, David Gascoyne published his first collection of poems, *Roman Balcony*. The collection introduces a young poet with a keenly developed sense of having entered a 'broken world':

Along the highways strewn with ashen filth
The ragged pilgrims come to the new Metropolis,
That cruel City, built of stone and steel,
Where unveiled passions, unashamed crimes,
The windy avenues traverse, where lust
Wars bitterly with lust, where naked lights
Illumine nightly what the day concealed...

Nor art nor music flourishes in this decline;
the world degenerates, has lost its mind.
We hang our harps upon the trees to weep
And with our brushes paint disintegration's signs.⁶⁵⁶

From the poem titled 'The New Isaiah', dedicated to Oswald Spengler, these lines display a suitably Spenglerian vision of 'disintegration', if not quite fragmentation and decline, embodied in the city at night. The lines adumbrate what were to be some of Gascoyne's enduring preoccupations – degeneracy in society and art, insanity, mythological and symbolic stylization, and the disintegration and fragmentation of the individual's identity in the face of existence in the metropolis and a world from which God has withdrawn.⁶⁵⁷ Like Muir and Jones before him, one of Gascoyne's early influences was Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (first published in 1926), a work which appears to have captured and coincided with a presentiment of endings, with a terminal apprehension of Western European civilization. *Roman Balcony* also contains a series of prose-poems titled 'Mirabilia' with an epigraph from Emanuel Swedenborg:

⁶⁵⁵ *Hart Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. Alan Trachtenberg (Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1982), p.213. Quoted by Harold Bloom in his paper 'Hart Crane's Gnosis.'

⁶⁵⁶ *RB*, pp. 75, 76. From the poem 'The New Isaiah' dedicated to Oswald Spengler.

⁶⁵⁷ The epigraph to *Night Thoughts*, Gascoyne's last major work, is from Hölderlin: 'Aber weh! es wandelt in Nacht, es wohnt, wie in Orcus Ohne Goettliches unser Geschlecht.' [But alas! our generation walks in night, dwells in Hades, without the Divine...] In which poem Gascoyne revisits the 'infernal' city at night.

“...Neither are the gates and doors of Hell visible except to those about to enter there; for these they are opened, and then there appears gloomy and, as it were, sooty caverns, tending obliquely downwards to the abyss where again there are several doors.”⁶⁵⁸

Here, another Gascoynian preoccupation is introduced, the experience of Hell and the abyss – concepts that Gascoyne would revisit and explore throughout his poetic career. It is of interest that Gascoyne chose to quote from Swedenborg, well-documented as an influence on William Blake’s thought and writing, perhaps England’s poet exemplar of the city and the imagination.⁶⁵⁹ The passages in ‘Mirabilia’ present various images of Hell with rivers, mountains and islands possessed by evil spirits. The city is also a place of damnation:

In the outskirts of the great cities enormous evil lurks unsuspected. Along the dreary pavements pass invisible demons.⁶⁶⁰

The young, night-walking poet stumbles through a graveyard and encounters vampires devouring their victims (perhaps a reflection of Poe’s influence). Finally, he invokes the prophetic voice (rather as Blake does):

O Voice of Centuries!
Call and awaken us. We languish in darkness.⁶⁶¹

With less ghoulish indulgence and histrionic diction, Gascoyne returns to the infernal city in his last major work, the radiophonic poem *Night Thoughts*, broadcast in 1955. For the main part, the poems collected in *Roman Balcony* are short lyrical pieces, written, as Gascoyne has stated, under the influence of the Imagists, such as the following from a series titled ‘Five Netsukés for Hottara Sonja’:

With her small hands, an elegant lady
Sits making music on her samisen,
Smiling at the melodies awakened from the strings.

Wryly tasting the half of a lemon
Her playful tame monkey sits at her side
Dressed in a tunic embroidered with red strawberries.

But Death, a skeleton carefully carved,
Leans over, leering, from behind, unseen,
Hiding the grin of his teeth with an ivory fan.⁶⁶²

⁶⁵⁸ *RB*, p.80.

⁶⁵⁹ Gascoyne would defend Blake from Roger Fry’s imputation of his being a ‘literary artist’ in a review of Fry’s book *Reflections on British Painting*: ‘Mr. Fry is too much concerned with the idea that literary art is bad art and that Blake was above all a literary artist to be able to appreciate the supernatural quality of Blake’s rhythmic line...Mr. Fry insists, as though to excuse the artist’s faults, that Blake was the “victim” of “a well-recognised form of mental disease.” That is the narrowest possible view to take. Blake was no more mad than many another genius.’ (*New English Weekly*, 5/4/1934), p.591.

⁶⁶⁰ *RB*, p.84.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁶⁶² *CP*, p.4.

There is a suggestion here, of the taste for the exotic and the decadent, the Epicureanism of the aesthete, to which Gascoyne was attracted, as well as a strong visual detailing which would form the distinguishing feature of Gascoyne's consciously surrealist poetry.⁶⁶³

Gascoyne's second collection of poetry *Man's Life is this Meat*, published in 1936 at the same time as the London International Surrealist Exhibition, was avowedly surrealist:

The title of the 1936 Parton Press collection was the result of a meeting with Geoffrey Grigson during which he produced a sample-book of printers' type-faces, which when opened at random showed the words 'man's life' in one sort of type at the end of the bottom line on the left-hand page, and 'this meat' in a different type of lettering at the beginning of the top line of the page opposite: as an example of what the surrealists described as 'objective hazard', this seemed at the time an ideal title.⁶⁶⁴

Gascoyne describes the poems in this collection as being 'united by the basic aim of achieving the greatest possible spontaneity, but this aim can produce results of considerable variety.'⁶⁶⁵ Reviewing the collection for *The Criterion*, Janet Adam-Smith finds the label 'surrealist':

...more interesting for the psychological critic than the general reader, that while [such a label] may tell us how the poem came into existence...cannot help much with our appreciation of the result.⁶⁶⁶

Adam-Smith outlines the dominant mode she perceives as Gascoyne's method of composing poetry:

Mr. Gascoyne is predominantly a visualizer, and his affinities are rather with the French surrealists than with those English writers whom they call surrealist, Lear and Carroll, who tend to the verbal fantasy which is expressed in play of rhyme and metre, puns and invented words. The startling collision of words which have been postulated as one of the results of surrealist writing are not so apparent in Mr. Gascoyne's poems as startling collisions of images. Often his nouns and adjectives pair off as comfortably as in the most conservative verse – fevered breath, strident cries, cruel claws... 'The Diabolical Principle' and 'The Rites of Hysteria' seem to be verbal notations of visual images rather than the direct action of

⁶⁶³ Gascoyne remarks: 'The visual sense is very strong for me. I might describe myself as a scopophile, a voyeur.' *SP*, p.50. From 'David Gascoyne in Interview' by Lucien Jenkins.

⁶⁶⁴ *CP*, p.xv.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.xv.

⁶⁶⁶ *The Criterion* (Vol. XV, No. LXI, July 1936), p.733. From 'Books of the quarter'.

automotive psychique pure issuing in words. If we had not looked at Miró, Dali and Ernst, I think we should not find Mr. Gascoyne's poems half so effective.⁶⁶⁷

Philip Gardener, in his account of the poems, supports Adam-Smith's assessment:

Some of the poems, such as "The Very Image," dedicated to René Magritte, and "Salvador Dali," simply transcribe the dislocated images of paintings. Others, such as "Lozanne" and "Phenomena," are prose poems couched, for all the oddity of their juxtaposed impressions, in correct and elaborate sentences. A few, including "the Cubical Dome," "The Diabolic Principle," and "The Rites of Hysteria," display the kind of un-punctuated, nonlogical sequence that seems as likely to represent a willed suspension of logic as an irrepressible outflowing of subconscious material... These outpourings seem now as much of a convention as what they rebel against.⁶⁶⁸

Gardner finds the non-surrealist poems in the collection more successful and indicative of the direction Gascoyne's poetry was to take:

It is in poems such as "Unspoken," "Educative Process," and "Antennae," where emerging logic and a subtler rhythm combine with language both imagist and emotive, that Gascoyne achieves memorableness... Here, and in the resonance of "The Unattained," which is not at all surrealist, Gascoyne begins also to suggest the sense of a higher plane of existence, reached for and occasionally experienced, that gives his best work its emotional power.⁶⁶⁹

I agree in general with these responses to the collection. 'The Very Image' indeed appears to be a transcription of 'the dislocated images of paintings':

An image of my grandmother
her head appearing upside-down upon a cloud
the cloud transfixed on the steeple
of a deserted railway station
far away

An image of an aqueduct
with a dead crow hanging from the first arch
a modern-style chair from the second
a fir tree lodged in the third
and the whole scene sprinkled with snow ...⁶⁷⁰

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 733, 734.

⁶⁶⁸ *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets 1914-1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p.143. Gascoyne entry by Philip Gardner.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., p.143.

⁶⁷⁰ CP, p.47.

However, Michel Rémy, in his study of the collection, attributes it with much greater significance. Rather than regarding surrealism as a discrete phase he finds evidence in the poems of a creative approach and method that acted as a necessary precursor to Gascoyne's other poetic works, as well as discerning a mode of poetic creation intrinsic to all Gascoyne's poetry. Rémy asserts 'the absolutely capital importance of David Gascoyne's surrealist work...through the innumerable echoes and developments which it gave rise to.'⁶⁷¹ {My translation} Rémy supports his assertion with reference to the poem 'And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis' (published in *New Verse* in 1933), stating that the poem '...never ceased to inform the work of David Gascoyne'⁶⁷²:

white curtains of infinite fatigue
dominating the starborn heritage of the colonies of St Francis
white curtains of tortured destinies
inheriting the calamities of the plagues of the desert
encourage the waistlines of women to expand
and the eyes of men to enlarge like pocket-cameras
teach children to sin at the age of Five
to cut out the eyes of their sisters with nail-scissors
to run into the streets and offer themselves to unfrocked priests
and to engrave the foreheads of their footmen with purple signs
for the year is open the year is complete
the year is full of unforeseen happenings
and the time of earthquakes is at hand.⁶⁷³

Rémy describes these lines as resembling a theatrical production ('mise en scène'), 'where time is a present which never stops to be lived' ('où le temps est un présent qui n'arrête pas d'être habité'), where the each scene is disquieting in its negation of the next.⁶⁷⁴ However, it is not so much in the images and the 'rush of references, which prove to be impossible to integrate' (la bousculade des références qui s'avèrent inintégrables), that Rémy locates significance, but in 'the blanks between each of them' (que les blancs entre chacune d'elles):⁶⁷⁵

These are the hiatuses between the fragments which make the poem, like all Gascoyne's surrealist texts, a creative gesture of a space in constant delimitation. This gesture is the

⁶⁷¹ *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p.73.

'l'importance absolument capitale de travail surréaliste de David Gascoyne...à travers les innombrables échos et développements qu'il a suscités.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, p.73. '...n'ait jamais laissé d'informer le travail de David Gascoyne.'

⁶⁷³ *CP*, p. 25.

⁶⁷⁴ *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p. 74. My translation and paraphrase of Rémy's critique.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.74.

foundation of what will later become the problem of the Flaw, the Fault, the Absence, the Blind Vision...⁶⁷⁶ {My translation}

Rémy equates the 'blanks' and 'hiatuses' of Gascoyne's surrealist poems with what would become Gascoyne's quest for an understanding of a kind of Christian existentialism, the forever unattainable experience of pure being or pure presence in the created world because of the Fall, where Man acquired knowledge creating a duality between a sense of separateness and the desire for completeness. As Rémy points out, Gascoyne turns to the myth of Isis and Osiris in *The Sun at Midnight*. An enduring symbolization of Man's fragmented condition:

Isis will never find the sex of Osiris, the fragments recovered will never be more than the traces of the final or original failure, there are no longer any places henceforth, to distinguish.⁶⁷⁷ {My translation}

Rémy concludes his theory thus:

The great inaugurating lesson of Surrealism is it not the basic impossibility of Presence? The impossibility of which, he proclaims, constitutes all writing? All, at the same time is complete and incomplete; this is what *Man's Life is This Meat* repeats without ceasing throughout the eighteen surrealist poems, the foundational collection of the Gascoynian problem of 'lack of origins'.⁶⁷⁸ {My translation}

I agree with Rémy's critique of the role surrealism played for Gascoyne, in so far as it provided him with a channel to explore the capacity for poetry to express or capture an authentic aspect of reality ('Presence'), where the fragmentation of meaning effected via language is at the same time an attempt to create a genuine encounter with language and, by extension with Reality. As Gascoyne explains in interview:

That was what appealed to me in Surrealism, the attempt to overcome the contradiction between all these aspects of reality (spirit and matter; reason and imagination; subjectivity

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., p.74. 'Ce sont les hiatus entre les fragments qui font de ce poème, come tous les textes surréalistes de Gascoyne, un geste créateur d'un espace en dé-limitation constante. Ce geste...est fondateur de ce qui sera plus tard la problématique de la Faille, de la Faute, de l'Absence, de la Vision aveugle...'

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., p.74. 'Isis ne trouvera jamais le sexe d'Osiris, les fragments retrouvés ne seront tous que des traces du manqué final, ou orginel, il n'y a plus lieu, dorénavant, de distinguer.'

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., p.74. 'Ainsi, la grande leçon inauguratrice du Surréalisme n'est-elle pas l'impossibilité radicale de toute Présence, impossibilité qu'il proclame constitutive de toute écriture? Tout, à la fois, s'achève et s'inachève; c'est ce que *Man's Life is This Meat* ne cesse de répéter le long de ses dix-huit poèmes surréalistes, recueil fondateur de toute la problématique gascoynienne de l'inorigination.'

and objectivity). Industrial, scientific, imperialistic society thrives on these contradictions in which you have Either/Or instead of And.⁶⁷⁹

In another interview, with Rémy, Gascoyne describes the importance of Surrealism as ‘very great’ that ‘the spirit of surrealism is eternal’ and that he ‘never renounced it.’⁶⁸⁰ However, Gascoyne would also remark:

But it is a very brief period of my life, belonging to the Surrealist Movement, writing Surrealist poetry. I disliked the label “Surrealist Poet” which was hung round my neck for years and years, long after I had stopped writing automatically.⁶⁸¹

Nonetheless, while Gascoyne ultimately abandoned the practice of surrealism (if not the spirit), I find Rémy’s observations convincing, particularly in his closer study of the linguistic devices Gascoyne employed in his surrealist verse.

Rémy gives the title ‘La Juxtaposition en chute libre’ (Juxtaposition in Free Fall) to the section of his study focused on Gascoyne’s surrealist period. Rémy suggests that, in the case of surrealist poetry:

The sense of such a text or its network of meaning isn’t diffused (through the poem) or waiting to be reassembled; it is the search for these networks which is never resolved...⁶⁸²

{My translation}

The idea of unresolved, perhaps unresolvable networks of meaning is presented as the intrinsic formative motivation of Gascoyne’s surrealist poems. The written texts ‘place themselves, in intermediary places – spatial as well as temporal – that is to say, in places where the viewer or reader has to take part in the process of creating meaning.’⁶⁸³ This interpretation is reminiscent of Patrick Deane’s reading of *The Anathemata*, particularly when compared with Rémy’s treatment of lines from the poem ‘Yves Tanguy’:

In the last strophe of which the sense is suspended by the ambiguity of the antecedent of “Whose”, which dislocates all *situation* of the text, installing it in a ‘world of total latency’:

{My translation}

⁶⁷⁹ *SP*, p.50. From ‘David Gascoyne in Interview’ by Lucien Jenkins.

⁶⁸⁰ *Temenos* (7, September Press, 1986), pp. 270, 271. From an interview with Michel Rémy.

⁶⁸¹ *SP*, p.50. From ‘David Gascoyne in Interview’ by Lucien Jenkins.

⁶⁸² *David Gascoyne, ou, L’urgence de l’inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p.75. ‘Le “sens” d’un tel texte ou son réseau significant n’est pas diffuse ou en attente de rassemblement; c’est plutôt la recherché même de ces réseaux qui n’est jamais résolue...’

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.75. My paraphrase.

Planetary seed
 Sown by the grotesque wind
 Whose head is so swollen with rumours
 Whose hands are so urgent with tumours
 Whose feet are so deep in the sand.⁶⁸⁴

The dislocation of the text via grammatical ambiguity is a device employed by Jones throughout *The Anathemata*, where the reader is similarly involved in creating meaning, thus destabilizing conventional readerly expectations. The sense that language is in a constant process of becoming, rather than achieving completed meaning was, for Jones, an attempt at evoking the bodying forth of the Word, the mystery of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. The world of *The Anathemata* might also be described as one of 'total latency' and *The Sleeping Lord* continues and develops this theme. To a lesser degree, certain poems of Muir such as 'The Labyrinth' and 'The Journey Back' are concerned with latency and becoming as well as return. There is, additionally, an associated theme of initiation present in each of the poet's works by their use of labyrinthine themes and forms. In the case of Gascoyne, the sense of latency or 'inachèvement' at this surrealist stage cannot be said to have any connection with an imminent 'bodying forth' of the 'word' or an attempt at such an embodiment. I will argue that his later poems at least attain to a state of embodiment or presence. Rémy describes this stage as 'le rituel de 'inachevé' [the ritual of the unattainable] and associates it with Gascoyne's response to Spengler, lighting on the poem 'The Diabolical Principle' to demonstrate the Spenglerian principle of history to which, according to Rémy, Gascoyne implicitly refers:

For Spengler the principle is the decadence of Western civilization, the impasse of history between materialism and idealism, where it loses direction and meaning. The whole poem is marked by the concept of the fall and of breaking in strophe after strophe: {My translation}

A worm slithers from the earth and the shell is broken
 A giant mazed misery tears the veil to shreds
 Stop it tormentor stop the angry planet before it breaks the sky

Having shattered the untapped barrel
 Having given up hope for water
 Having shaken the chosen words in a hat
 History opened its head like a wallet
 And folded itself inside.⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁸⁴ David Gascoyne, *ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p.76.

'La dernière strophe dont le sens est suspendu par l'ambiguïté de l'antécédent de "Whose", disloque toute situation du texte, l'installant dans un "monde de latence totale"'

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., p.77. 'Pour Spengler, ce principe, c'est la decadence de la civilisation occidentale, l'impasse où se trouve l'histoire prise entre le matérialisme et où elle perd son sens. Tout le poème est marqué par le concept de chute et celui de brisure, strophe après strophe.'

The final lines, where there appears to be an equation between history and plutocratic forces, where history becomes currency, are, I would argue, 'Spenglerian'. Words have become mere objects of chance shaken in a hat – a speculation – rather than possessing any intrinsic value. Water, so closely associated with life and traditionally, poetic inspiration, is absent, the world becoming a desert. The poem is dislocated:

The destruction is that of the conventional exterior reality as given in its limits; it is at the price of this that the power of vision can be re-established.⁶⁸⁶ {My translation}

The 'power of vision' might be said to be emergent in Gascoyne's surrealist poems collected in *Man's Life is This Meat*. In each poem transformational potential remains latent, 'beginnings and endings are suspended by chains and gaps, by their automatic and semi-automatic juxtapositions to leave drifting a kind of tension before a rapport can be established, thus indicating the perpetual deferment of any total meeting with the Other.'⁶⁸⁷ Rémy therefore finds it unsurprising (on ne s'étonne plus) that Gascoyne was fascinated by the writing of Hölderlin 'et sa fragmentation obsessionnelle' and that Hölderlin, 'ne fut pas une influence sur Gascoyne mais qu'il fit partie totalement de son travail' (was not an influence on Gascoyne but became a total part of his work).⁶⁸⁸

As has been remarked, Gascoyne's discovery of Pierre Jean Jouve's *La Folie de Hölderlin* effected a 'turning point' in his 'approach to poetry':

I had not so much become disillusioned with Surrealism as begun to wish to explore other territories than the sub- or unconscious, the oneiric and the aleatory.⁶⁸⁹

The 'other territories' that Hölderlin (via Jouve) presented have been suggested.⁶⁹⁰ However, there are other related 'territories' in the Hölderlinian landscape that Gascoyne outlines in his preface to *Hölderlin's Madness*, which have a further bearing on Raine's placing Gascoyne with Muir, Jones and Watkins. Muir himself remarks on one such 'territory' in his guardedly positive review of the collection:

The least satisfactory part of this short volume is the preface, which is somewhat melodramatic; nevertheless, it brings us closer to Hölderlin...Mr. Gascoyne regards Hölderlin as a seer, in much the same sense as Rimbaud considered himself a seer. Mr.

⁶⁸⁶ *David Gascoyne, ou, L'urgence de l'inexprimé* by Michel Rémy (Nancy Presses, Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), p. 82. 'La destruction est celle de la réalité extérieure conventionnelle, donnée dans ses limites; c'est à son prix le pouvoir de vision peut se rétablir.'

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.82. My paraphrase of Rémy's text.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁶⁸⁹ *CP*, p. xvii, From Introductory Notes.

Gascoyne's idea that seership involves damnation, or madness, is not so defensible; though perhaps he is right in holding that it is "one of the basic ideas underlying the romantic movement and provides a key to the understanding of the whole period," at least in Germany. He remarks illuminatingly in passing that it is the central idea of "Faust". At any rate, Mr Gascoyne raises a number of interesting points which still have relevance today.⁶⁹¹

Muir considered Hölderlin chiefly a mystical poet, centring on the serene visions of repose and harmony expressed in Hölderlin's poems. It is interesting that Muir shows uneasiness with Gascoyne's association of 'seership' with 'damnation or madness', only grudgingly admitting that it might be 'one of the basic ideas underlying the romantic movement'. Muir, having suffered severe depression as a young man and having undergone perplexing and disturbing psychoanalytical treatment, was perhaps more sensible of the dangers of extolling Hölderlin's 'madness' than the youthful Gascoyne. In terms of Gascoyne's poetry, which Muir unreservedly praises,⁶⁹² his discovery of the German Romantic Movement offered him another style and dimension of poetry that developed his tendency toward the 'visionary' idiom nascent in his surrealist work. Gascoyne describes the German Romantic Movement thus:

...the wonderful period of *Sturm und Drang*. Mind linking spark with mind, thought and aspiration seeking to express themselves through many mouths at once, a simultaneous rallying to the summons of historical necessity...⁶⁹³

He continues, listing the major figures of the movement:

Schelling, Fichte, Jean-Paul, Ludwig Tiecke, Hoffman, Achim and Bettina von Arnim, Clemens Bretano, Eichendorf and Mörike, Kleist, Chamisso, La Motte-Foqué, Georg Büchner, Ritter, Novalis and Hölderlin...These are the poets and philosophers of nostalgia and the night. A disturbed night, whose paths lead far among forgotten things, mysterious dreams and madness. And yet a night that precedes the dawn, and is full of longing for the

⁶⁹⁰ See pp.8-9.

⁶⁹¹ *The Scotsman* (June 13th 1938). From the review by Edwin Muir 'German Poetry'.

⁶⁹² 'Hölderlin's *Madness* contains...four poems by Mr Gascoyne himself, which, though not directly about his subject, fit easily into the book, and are worth reading for their own sake...But the most valuable part of the book is his renderings of Hölderlin's poems, which have the great merit of being made by a poet: the first essential of poetic translation, beside which strict accuracy is of little account. These translations undoubtedly give an idea of the quality of Hölderlin's poetry and convey something of its greatness.' *The Scotsman* (June 13th 1938). From the review 'German Poetry' by Edwin Muir.

⁶⁹³ *HM*, p. 2.

sun. These poets look forward out of their night; and Hölderlin in his madness wrote always of sunlight and dazzling air, and the islands of the Mediterranean.⁶⁹⁴

Gascoyne aligns Hölderlin's poetry with that of Blake, Beddoes, Coleridge, Gérard de Nerval and Rimbaud. He writes that:

For Hölderlin, as for almost all the romantics of his period (and particularly Novalis), and for Rimbaud (as for the Baudelaire of *Correspondances*), the writing of poetry was something far more than the act of composition; rather was it an activity by means of which it was possible to attain to hitherto unknown degrees of consciousness, a sort of rite, entailing the highest metaphysical implications and with a non-euclidian logic of its own.⁶⁹⁵

With this new poetic direction, Gascoyne's poetry operates in a new territory, no longer the fragmented, shifting, dislocated scenes of his surrealist poems, but instead symbolic landscapes become his imaginative domain, such as 'Figure in the landscape', the first of the poems in the collection:

The verdant valleys full of rivers
Sang a fresh song to the thirsty hills.
The river sang:
'Our mother is the Night, into the Day we flow. The mills
Which toil our waters have no thirst. We flow
Like light.'
And the great birds
Which dwell among the rocks, flew down
Into the dales to drink, and their dark wings
Threw flying shades across the pastures green.
At dawn the rivers flowed into the sea.
The mountain birds
Rose out of sleep like a winged cloud, a single fleet,
And flew into a newly-risen sun.⁶⁹⁶

For Muir the idyllic landscapes of his poetry recall those of his Orkney childhood, but the action of raising a landscape to mythological or fable-like status is common to both him and Gascoyne: Another shared feature of their 'Hölderlinian' poems is the road in the landscape and the traveller upon the road alienated from the natural harmony around him:

Across the agonizing land there fled
Among the landscape's limbs (the limbs
Of a vast denuded body torn and vanquished from within)
The chaste white road,
Prolonged into the distance like a plaint.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., p.2.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid., p.11.

⁶⁹⁶ *Collected Verse Translations* by David Gascoyne ed. Alan Clodd & Robin Skelton (Oxford University Press, 1970), p.92.

Quartets, Auden's *New Year Letter* and H.D.'s *Trilogy* and Wallace Stevens's *Parts of a World* in the States... The crisis of the European war, though indirectly, provided some urgent coherence to his poetry of coherence lost. To make sense of it, *Hölderlin's Madness* and *Miserere* sought to resurrect and intertwine two redemptive mythical archetypes, Orpheus and Christ. The brief sequence *Hölderlin's Madness* portrays the 'agonising land' like a 'vast denuded body torn and vanquished from within' and seeks via the myth of Orpheus with his 'shattered lyre', to evoke some spiritual renovation.⁶⁹⁹

I find in this assessment correspondences between Gascoyne's use of 'mythical archetypes' and David Jones's in his poem *The Sleeping Lord*. Like Gascoyne, Jones equates the devastated land (or land in the process of degradation) with a body, but instead of evoking Orpheus as Gascoyne does to awake and renovate the land, Jones resorts to the myth of King Arthur, whom he intertwines symbolically with Christ. As Gascoyne had no particular affinity for British myths he chose a more universally recognised mythical figure to embody his theme. At this point he had not incorporated Christ in his poetic symbolism. In Francis Scarfe's colourful 1938 review of the poems there is no reference to a sense of 'historical crisis.' Such a sense may have occasioned the poems, though Gascoyne's journals do not overtly state this. He was certainly highly sensitized to the crises of his times, whilst also being deeply self-involved with his spiritual, intellectual and artistic development. There is, however, an acknowledgement of the poems' potential function in the face of crisis or despair:

Hölderlin's Madness is a tribute to all those who, victims and pioneers of hallucination, outcasts of the womb, the heart, the head, guilty of all the misdeeds of their fathers and womenfolk, yet innocent of all active crime, have left a refuge, an outlet, a justification, a clue to salvation, in their poetry.⁷⁰⁰

Scarfe's closing epithet 'a clue to salvation' seems a suitably modest description of Gascoyne's endeavour in the collection of poems that accompany his translations of Hölderlin. As with Jones and

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 92, 93.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 93, 94.

⁶⁹⁹ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), pp.15, 16. From 'Writing the Night' by Hugh Haughton. Derek Stanford relates a story from around 1946: 'Once, at some professedly fancy-dress party, Charles Hamblett had met him standing in a corner, with a length of rope dangling over both shoulders. As he was not otherwise dressed in costume, Charles asked who he was supposed to be. 'Don't you see the rope?' replied David. 'I'm Gerard de Nerval. You know he went mad and hanged himself.' There was, indeed, always a touch of Dostoevskian extremity about him...' *Inside the Forties* by Derek Stanford (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1977), pp.109, 110.

⁷⁰⁰ *Twentieth Century Verse* (No.11, 1938). From a review of *Hölderlin's Madness* by Francis Scarfe.

Muir the poetry resides in an unresolved state of quest, in this instance formed in terms of the German Romantic Movement and a retelling of the Orphic myth.

Poems 1937-1942 is described by Gavin Ewart as, 'the work on which Mr Gascoyne's reputation mainly (and very rightly) rests.'⁷⁰¹ Published by Tambimuttu's Poetry London, having been rejected by Eliot at Fabers, the collection of fifty-seven poems (and five translations of poems by Pierre Jean Jouve), represents Gascoyne's most substantial body of work, and has consequently received more critical attention than his other volumes of poetry. Kathleen Raine, reviewing the collection on its appearance, despite certain reservations – 'the sheer badness of some of the writing – the excess of adjectives, or the violent words flung into galvanize mere cobwebs of meaning' – acknowledges Gascoyne's poetic achievement:

There remains a minority of real poets, who combine the gifts of sensibility and technique that justify their following a way of life that must always be the right one for only a very few. I believe that David Gascoyne is one of these.⁷⁰²

Raine's initial appraisal of Gascoyne's poetry is perhaps surprisingly severe and yet her comments have a certain bearing on his relation to Muir and Jones, in terms of their Rainean grouping:

David Gascoyne's worst fault as a poet is a tendency to be over-literary. Unlike that of the Auden school, his language is not the spoken idiom of any group; and (unlike Dylan Thomas) not that of any individual either. One has the impression that David Gascoyne has steeped himself in the French until English to him has become like a foreign language – with all the novelty of a foreign language, as well as its deadness...there is an impartiality in the selection of the *mot juste* in this dead foreign English that is forceful. It is well to remember, besides, that common speech is not our only living language. There is an interior idiom of thought that often retains a sort of ritual formalism. The mind is not forever at the microphone, and has its hieratic as well as its daily idiom...⁷⁰³

Gascoyne's idiosyncratic use of English has since been remarked upon by other critics, discovering a curious stiltedness:

Gascoyne's greatest difficulty as a poet was anchoring his 'visionary' scenarios in time and place, especially through the most crucial anchor of all, what Stevens called the 'speech of the time'. On the evidence of his verse, he had no ear for speech at all, a risk for any poet but

⁷⁰¹ *The London Magazine* (Vol.5 No.8, November 1965), p.90. From 'A Voice in the Dark' by Gavin Ewart.

⁷⁰² *The Dublin Review* (No.429, April 1944), p.188.

perhaps an especially dangerous one for a would-be 'metaphysical'...When Gascoyne said he belonged to Europe rather than England, you can see what he had in mind, but too much of the poetry as a result seems to occupy an uneasy linguistic no man's land, somewhere between Paris and home in Teddington...even his best poems – the 'Rites of Hysteria' or *Hölderlin's Madness* – read like stalled translations for poems that might well be arresting in another tongue...too many of the poems read as arrested utterances from an earlier period of English verse – the period of Keats, Shelley, Beddoes...Beside Auden or MacNeice or Empson...Gascoyne's transcendental dialect seems out of touch with contemporary speech and feeling...⁷⁰⁴

or an unusual archaism of diction:

Perhaps as a result of his Surrealist apprenticeship, Gascoyne emerged...as a far more archaic poet than many who had never been as significant exponents of the international *avant garde* style as he had. Rhythm and metre in the latter poetry are regular and almost bookish, the diction is sprinkled with 'e'en' and 'O'er'. Moreover, he never attained a facility which might have compromised the strange originality of conception which marks not only the Surrealist pieces, but the later poems of relationship. He remains a slightly stiff poet...His poetry is at once the most archaic and the least conventional of its time, and the antique ungainliness of much of his work really does seem essential to its effect.⁷⁰⁵

I agree with these observations, and find in them some views that might well be applied to the poetry of Edwin Muir, David Jones and Vernon Watkins. These poets were ill at ease with the idiom of demotic English, though Jones succeeded in capturing the idiom of the trench soldiers he had known. In the face of the newer ironic and semantically sophisticated poetry emerging at the time they were writing, they share a deliberateness, even a heaviness of composition that displays their unease. Yet, in the case of Muir, Gascoyne and Watkins music and its relationship with poetry is essential, contributing to the chant-like quality of some of their verse, which Muir inherited from Orkney ballads and Gascoyne from his experience of cathedral music. Watkins always insisted that he wrote for the ear 'to an instrument'. Gascoyne may not have had an ear for the rhythms of speech, but he was certainly musical.

⁷⁰³ Ibid., p.188.

⁷⁰⁴ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), p.16. From 'Writing the Night' by Hugh Haughton.

⁷⁰⁵ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.109.

Written in years immediately leading up to and during the Second World War, *Poems 1937-42* contains poems evocative of dark and difficult times. In his memoirs, William Plomer describes these years as ones of 'fatalistic suspense that cannot be called good':

We were...confronted with what David Gascoyne has called those 'years like a prison-wall', and perhaps no English poet has commemorated more exactly that poisoned atmosphere of the ineluctable:

...night by night the same
weary anabasis
Between two wars, towards
The Future's huge abyss.⁷⁰⁶

Plomer quotes from the poem 'Noctambules' (dedicated to Djuna Barnes), which is descriptive of Paris under the shadow of the threat of imminent Nazi invasion. This is one of the poems from the section titled 'Time and Space', from which section Hugh Haughton finds 'the best poems' of the collection, listing 'Snow in Europe', 'Spring MCMXL', 'A Wartime Dawn' and 'Walking at Whitsun':

...because, uniquely among Gascoyne's work, they evoke not only his characteristically archetype-ridden Shelleyan psychodrama but that particular historical moment of wartime England – as *Little Gidding* did, but without Eliot's armoury of Anglican attitudes. But to say that is perhaps to measure him inappropriately against just the 'English tradition' he so defiantly set his face against.⁷⁰⁷

I would argue that it is somewhat wide of the mark to place Eliot in the 'English tradition', his formative literary years having been in the United States, and his literary interests of an international bent, such as his influential translation of St. John Perse's 'Anabasis', and to maintain that Gascoyne 'defiantly set his face against' it. Discussing his abandonment of surrealist practice Gascoyne states:

I did not want...to try to become a French poet, even though Philippe Soupault once said to Kathleen Raine that I was 'a French poet writing in English'. But I am before all else an English poet, I am part of that poetry which is continuous from Langland to the present time (and which has been my reading); of course I have certain preferences, but I belong to that tradition.⁷⁰⁸

Nonetheless, I find Haughton's preceding evaluation of the poems listed apt, in that they can be said to combine 'the archetype-ridden Shelleyan psychodrama' with a 'particular historic moment'. These

⁷⁰⁶ *At Home* by William Plomer (1958; repr, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p109.

⁷⁰⁷ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), p.16. From 'Writing the Night' by Hugh Haughton.

two phrases might equally well be applied to Muir and Jones's poetry – though Jones's archetypal patterning was not in a Shelleyan mode. While 'Snow in Europe' is described by Haughton as 'Hardyesque'⁷⁰⁹ and having an 'almost Mitonic grandeur of sound,'⁷¹⁰ with its closing lines:

...But when the great thaw comes,
How red shall be the melting snow, how loud the drums!⁷¹¹

'Spring MCMXL', a sonnet, is archetypal in its patterning:

...Though every land become as a black field
Dunged with the dead, drenched by the dying's blood,
Still must a punctual goddess waken and ascend
The rocky stairs, up into earth's chilled air,
And pass upon her mission through those carrion ranks,
Picking her way among a maze of broken brick
To quicken with her footsteps the short sooty grass between;
While now once more their futile matchwood empire flare and blaze
And through the smoke men gaze with bloodshot eyes
At the translucent apparition, clad in trembling nascent green,
Of one they can still recognize, though scarcely understand.⁷¹²

In the closing section of *In Parenthesis* David Jones evokes a similarly symbolic female figure, the queen of the woods, to garland the dead soldiers, like Gascoyne juxtaposing her healing image to emphasize the senselessness of destruction. 'A Wartime Dawn' is described by Haughton as:

a remarkable, detailed evocation of the city coming back to life '... before the morning's hovering advance', where the 'dragging crunch of milk-cart wheels' and 'windy whistling as the newsboy's bike winds near' are set against the fact that 'one more day of War starts everywhere.'⁷¹³

Geoffrey Thurley considers the poem in comparison with Muir's poems 'A Wayside Station':

Muir's poem ends, like Gascoyne's with the day waking to war; but it is achieved with greater deftness. A stream

Starts its winding journey
Through the day and time and war and history.

Gascoyne's punch-line is significantly more ponderous:

And one more day of War starts everywhere

⁷⁰⁸ 'Extracts from and Interview with Michel Rémy', *Temenos* 7 (September Press, 1986), p.271. It is interesting here that Gascoyne selects Langland rather than Chaucer. David Jones also favoured Langland's visionary poetry.

⁷⁰⁹ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), p.16. From 'Writing the Night' by Hugh Haughton.

⁷¹⁰ *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets, 1914 – 1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p.144. Gascoyne entry by Philip Gardner.

⁷¹¹ *CP*, p.123.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, p.127.

⁷¹³ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), p.16. From 'Writing the Night' by Hugh Haughton.

Yet the lines [of the whole poem] demonstrate the subtlety of feeling that informs the *unsubtle* concentration of his poetry: the strange memorability testifies to the presence of something much more fundamental and valuable than the ‘quality of reporting’ noted by Kenneth Allott.⁷¹⁴

It is significant that Thurley chooses to compare these two poems with their similar choice of subject matter and angle, contemplation on the strange ordinariness of daily life in spite of the war. ‘Walking at Whitsun’ shares with ‘A Wayside Station’ a sense of detachment and neutrality of tone, as well as a certain luminousness, as in the following extract, though Haughton compares the following lines from the poem not with Muir but Edward Thomas:

I tread
The white dust of a weed-bright lane; alone
Upon Time-Present’s tranquil outmost rim,
Seeing the sunlight through a lens of dread,
While anguish makes the English landscape seem
Inhuman as the jungle, and unreal
Its peace.⁷¹⁵

The most celebrated poem of this section (and by some critics of Gascoyne’s entire oeuvre) is ‘The Gravel-Pit Field’.⁷¹⁶ Philip Gardner describes the poem as possessing, ‘the quality of radiance – the ability to transcend the world without forgetting it’⁷¹⁷ echoing Elizabeth Jennings who regards it as ‘The apotheosis of this volume...Here, in beautifully controlled rhymed stanzas, Gascoyne conveys his own mystical experience.’⁷¹⁸ Derek Stanford finds that ‘...in his poem “The Gravel-pit Field”, from the hermit centre of contemplation, the poet at last becomes aware of the creative persistence of living.’⁷¹⁹ I agree with these responses to the poem. At first, the poet surveys a patch of city wasteland transforming it into an image of a denuded body, comparing ‘turbid pools’ with ‘scraps of sky decaying in / the sockets of a dead man’s stare’:

The shabby coat of coarse grass spread
Unevenly across the ruts
And humps of lumpy soil; the bits
Of stick and threads of straw; loose clumps
Of weeds with withered stalks and black
Tatters of leaf and scorched pods: all
These intertwined minutiae

⁷¹⁴ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.111.

⁷¹⁵ *CP*, p. 131.

⁷¹⁶ Gavin Ewart remarks: ‘The Gravel-Pit Field’...I take to be Mr Gascoyne’s finest poem, and justly celebrated...’ *The London Magazine* (November 1965), p.92.

⁷¹⁷ *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Poets 1914-1945* ed. Donald E. Stanford (Gale Research Company, 1983), p.146. Gascoyne entry by Philip Gardner.

⁷¹⁸ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings (Carcenet 1996), p.195.

⁷¹⁹ *The Freedom of Poetry* by Derek Stanford (Falcon Press, 1947), p.69.

Of Nature's humblest growths persist
In their endurance here like rock.⁷²⁰

From this detailing of the scene Gascoyne moves to a philosophical contemplation of the significance of the 'endurance' of the humble and disregarded, surviving in an inhospitable environment; life persisting in the wasteland:

As with untold intensity
On the far edge of Being, where
Life's last faint forms begin to lose
Name and identity and fade
Away into the Void, endures
The final thin triumphant flame
Of all that's most despoiled and bare:
So these least stones, in the extreme
Of their abasement might appear

Like the rare stones such as could have formed
A necklet worn by the dead queen
Of a great Pharaoh, in her tomb...⁷²¹

The scene is transformed by the poet's informing spirit and vision and the 'wilderness' assumes a 'cryptic face'; a breeze stirs the land so that 'a gleam / of freshness hovers everywhere': Finally, a last ray of sunshine breaks through:

The zenith's stark light thrusts a ray
Down through dusk's rolling vapours, casts
A last lucidity of day

Across the scene: and in a flash
Of insight I behold the field's
Apotheosis: No-man's-land
Between this world and the beyond,
Remote from men and yet more real
Than any human dwelling-place:
A tabernacle where one stands
As though within the empty space
Round which revolves the Sage's Wheel.⁷²²

Time and space are suspended for the poet. In this stasis he is afforded a glimpse of 'the beyond'; the earth becomes momentarily the dwelling place of the eternal. It is similar to the moment in Muir's poem 'The Annunciation', the grace of the angelic visitation suspending normal conventions of time. This is the moment David Jones anticipates in his poem 'A, a, a, Domine deus', seeking with 'the eyes of the mind' the dwelling place of the eternal. The last two lines are reminiscent of Eliot's 'still point' of a 'turning world' in *The Four Quartets*.

⁷²⁰ CP, p.132.

⁷²¹ Ibid., p.132.

⁷²² Ibid., p.133.

If, in 'The Gravel-Pit Field', Gascoyne achieves 'a flash of insight' into the eternal, via the transformation of the created world, the 'Miserere' sequence, already considered in some detail, represents Gascoyne's interior and intellectual seeking for insight and an understanding of human reality and truth in the Passion of Christ, for Gascoyne eternally re-enacted in the sufferings of humanity. Derek Stanford makes the following distinction in placing Gascoyne, with particular reference to the 'Miserere' poems:

He is, in fact, in English verse, the Kierkegaardian poet *par excellence*; whereas the younger figures who have come after him of "the Movement" – are the poets of Critical Positivism, the literary progeny of A.J. Ayer...The group of eight poems in which God's reality is accepted is the 'Miserere' sequence. The approach into the divine presence is by means of penance, pain, and expiation...The poems are like the Stations of the Cross; only here humankind is seen as accompanying the Crucified in His Suffering.⁷²³

Gascoyne had been reading Kierkegaard in French and English translations at this time, and Stanford detects clear evidence of a Kierkegaardian influence in the 'Miserere' poems:⁷²⁴

Here were the poetic equivalents of such notions as 'pleasure-perdition', 'the leap in the dark', and 'knights of faith'. Here, too, were the imaginative counter-parts of the Danish philosopher's dialectic of possibility and necessity – the systole and diastole of the human spirit. A Dostoievskian note of extremity marked most of these fervid pages. To quote Pierre Jean Jouve...

Despair has wings
Love's nacreous wings
Are those of despair
Societies can change.

Gascoyne...saw despair as the motor-force – a power which led the individual to transcend the realm of the aesthetic, carrying him by 'the leap in the dark', an act of faith, into the religious...*Poems 1937-42* represents the high-water mark of Gascoyne's career.⁷²⁵

⁷²³ *The Month*, Vol.29, No.3 (March 1963), pp.157, 163. From 'David Gascoyne: A Spiritual Itinerary' by Derek Stanford.

⁷²⁴ In interview with Michel Rémy, Gascoyne stated: 'I have never been a practising Christian and I don't go to church. I read Kierkegaard, who was very radical, and authentically religious; he was against the compromises and commercialism of the churches. It is true that I have used the figure of Christ and I would be an apostate if I were to say I do not believe in Christ and the Second Coming, but as Kierkegaard has said, one has to struggle in order to believe.' *Temenos* (7, September Press, 1986), p. 268.

⁷²⁵ *The Poetry Review* (Vol.56, No. 4, Winter 1965), p.239. From 'Gascoyne in Retrospect' by Derek Stanford. Stanford refers to Gascoyne as possessing 'something of Kierkegaard's "one man" Christianity. We remember the Danish philosopher's *Attack on Christendom*, the emphasis placed by him on "the individual" in his *Point of View...*' *The Month* (Vol.29, No.3, March 1963), p.165.

I would agree that despair provides the context and motivation for the 'Miserere' poems, added to which is a Hopkinsesque highly interiorized passion and urgency, in 'Ex Nihilo' for example:

Here am I now cast down
Beneath the black glare of a netherworld's
Dead suns, dust in my mouth, among
Dun tiers no tears refresh; am cast
Down by a lofty hand,

Hand that I love! Lord Light,
How dark is Thy arm's will and ironlike
Thy ruler's finger that has sent me here!
Far from Thy face I nothing understand,
But kiss the Hand that has consigned

Me to these latter years where I must learn
The revelation of despair, and find
Among the debris of all certainties
The hardest stone on which to found
Altar and shelter for Eternity.⁷²⁶

Where Hopkins has 'cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed', Gascoyne has 'the black glare of a netherworld's / dead suns', the Abyss (also the Void) representing for Gascoyne, 'the intolerable nature of human reality when devoid of all spiritual, metaphysical dimension.'⁷²⁷ In this poem, as with all the poems in the sequence, there are the archaic diction and 'antique ungainliness' noticed by Thurley,⁷²⁸ as well as the 'morbid earnestness' which Thurley ultimately commends as one of a variety of strategies adopted by Gascoyne keeping him

...outside the ironist-intellectualist tradition...strategies adopted precisely because they helped ... [Gascoyne] keep in touch with a more exalted, a more truly serious and committed conception of poetry than that which restricted the compass of poets like Auden, Empson and their American equivalents.'⁷²⁹

Such seriousness and distrust of irony has been noted in Muir's conception and execution of poetry, as Thurley puts it:

⁷²⁶ CP, p.91.

⁷²⁷ ⁷²⁷ Ibid., p.xix.

⁷²⁸ Here I think Gascoyne is reminiscent of Hopkins, who often has a similar awkwardness, 'I nothing understand but kiss the hand that has consigned...'

⁷²⁹ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.120. Thurley observes: 'Poems like 'Walking at Whitsun', 'The Gravel-Pit Field', and 'The Sacred Hearth' are called upon to carry an enormous burden of observation, the whole being held together only by a remorselessly earnest effort of the will...the strength of moral determination. The strange thing perhaps is that so many of his apparently ungainly descriptive assemblages do in fact hold the attention.' (Ibid., p.110). Similarly Jones's works 'carry an enormous burden' not so much of observation, but of semantic weight.

The man who mocks himself probably does so in order to avoid a more fundamental revolution within himself. In parading his self-awareness he keeps himself from self-knowledge.⁷³⁰

In 'Pietà', second poem in the sequence, chosen for its contrast with 'Ex Nihilo', an intensely subjective poem, Gascoyne presents a descriptive account of the aftermath of Christ's Passion. Gavin Ewart appraises the poem thus:

Actual beauty, in the Classical sense, occurs for the first time in a Gascoyne poem.⁷³¹

Stark in the pasture on the skull-shaped hill,
In swollen aura of disaster shrunken and
Unsheltered by the ruin of the sky,
Intensely concentrated in themselves the banded
Saints abandoned kneel.

And under the unburdened tree
Great in their midst, the rigid folds
Of a blue cloak upholding as a text
Her grief-scrawled face for the ensuing world to read,
The Mother, whose dead Son's dear head
Weighs like a precious blood-encrusted stone
On her unfathomable breast:

Holds Him God has forsaken, Word made flesh
Made ransom, to the slow smoulder of her heart
Till the catharsis of the race shall be complete.⁷³²

Stanford regards this poem as 'a central symbol with positive implications'⁷³³, here Gascoyne (like Muir and Jones) locates the 'catharsis of the race' in 'The Mother', the female principle associated with restorative virtue. Gascoyne writes with a painterly eye, explaining that 'Ecce Homo' was 'inspired by one of the panels of Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece...the result of having been impressed by the central figure in the black-and-white reproductions of this masterpiece that I first saw before the war.'⁷³⁴ What is noticeable in Gascoyne's treatment of Christian themes, in comparison with Jones and Muir, is the directness of his poetic account and the deeply and unashamedly subjective nature of much of his poetry. Both Muir and Jones more frequently resorted to universalized, archetypal figures with which to convey their personal vision. They also wished to write objective poetry of communal significance, though as they both recognised, this had become increasingly untenable in the modern world. This suggests that by the time Gascoyne was writing

⁷³⁰ Ibid., p.115.

⁷³¹ *The London Magazine* (Vol.5 No.8, November 1965), p.90. From 'A Voice in the Dark' by Gavin Ewart.

⁷³² *CP*, p.89.

⁷³³ *The Month* (Vol.29, No.3, March 1963), p.164. From 'David Gascoyne: A Spiritual Itinerary' by Derek Stanford.

⁷³⁴ *CP*, pp. xviii, xix. From 'Introductory Notes.'

poetry, all possibility of such a community of culture had vanished and the fragmentation of being and identity that haunts Jones's poetry especially had become the current mode of *poesis*. In the 'Metaphysical' section, the poems, as might be expected, are more 'abstract' and objective, though it is in 'A Wartime Dawn' (from 'Time and Place') that Gascoyne has the lines:

Until a breeze
From some pure Nowhere straying...⁷³⁵

And from 'Odeur de Pensée' of the 'Personal Poems':

... Nostalgic breezes; and it's then we sense
Remote presentiment of some intensely bright
Impending spiritual dawn, of which the pure
Immense illumination seems about to pour
In upon our existence from beyond
The edge of Knowing!⁷³⁶

These lines occasioned the scorn of one reviewer:

Pure Nowheres are too much of Mr. Gascoyne's province.⁷³⁷

Similar criticisms have been levelled at Muir's poetry. In one of the 'Metaphysical Poems' titled 'The Wall', Gascoyne presents a mythologised poet's progress:

At first my territory was a Wood:
Tanglewood, tattering tendrils, trees
Whose Grimm's-tale shadow terrified but made
A place to hide in: among traps and towers
The path I kept to had free right-of-way.

But centred later round an ambushed Well,
Reputed bottomless; and night and day
My gaze hung in the depths beneath the real
And sought the secret source of nothingness;
Until I tired of its Circean spell.

Returning to the narrow onward road
I find it leads me only to the Wall
Of Interdiction. But if my despair
Is strong enough, my spirit truly hard,
No wall shall break my will: To persevere.⁷³⁸

As a symbolic tracing of the poet's life journey there are similarities with Jones's dream-sequence of the cluttered artist's studio through which he stumbles, only to wake to an equally disturbing reality in *In Parenthesis*. Muir also draws on dream-like symbolic sequences to represent his path as poet.

Haughton finds that this and other poems of the 'Metaphysical' section 'are about comparable states of bafflement, impotence, sterility':

⁷³⁵ Ibid., p.128.

⁷³⁶ Ibid., p.115.

⁷³⁷ *Scrutiny* (Vol. xii, No.2, Spring 1944). From 'The Ultimate Vision' by R.G. Lienhardt.

⁷³⁸ *CP*, p.97.

'The Three Stars: A Prophecy', a re-writing of Yeats's 'Second Coming', which confronts the 'No-Time at the heart / Of Time (the frameless mirror's back)', aspires to find a way out:

Through all dark still to come, serene,
Ubiquitous, immaculately clear;
A magnet in the middle of the maze, to draw us on
Towards that Bethlehem beyond despair
Where from the womb of Nothing shall be born
A Son.

Poetically, the magnet failed. 'The Wall of Interdiction' was to prove harder to break through than he dreamed.⁷³⁹

I am reminded here of Jennings's remark regarding 'Ecce Homo', that in the face of what Haughton identifies in Gascoyne's poetry as 'bafflement, impotence...', '...the fact of being able to speak is itself a kind of small redemption.'⁷⁴⁰ These closing lines of 'The Three Stars' speak more of hope than bafflement, particularly in these earlier lines:

Black was the No-time as the heart
Of Time (the frameless mirror's back),
But still the Anguish shook
As though with memory and with anticipation: till
Its terror's trembling broke
By an unhoped-for miracle Negation's spell:
Death died and Birth was born with one great cry...⁷⁴¹

I would argue that 'The Three Stars' is an achieved poem, a 'kind of small redemption', and that as such the 'magnet' succeeded, poetically and therefore religiously, as I believe Gascoyne would have viewed it. Gascoyne inhabited many poetic modes, the imagist, the surrealist, and the Hölderlinean. It was, however, the Christian pattern that came to form and inform Gascoyne's poetic imagination most powerfully. It was a pattern with an integral aesthetic history which afforded Gascoyne scope for a poetry highly coloured with the staining of his personal and psychological struggles, but infused with the vari-coloured illuminations of the Old Testament, the New Testament and liturgy. I find various examples of this in poems such as 'Eve' an oddly claustrophobic, glimmering poem, a meditation on the feminine principle:

Profound the radiance issuing
From the all-inhaling mouth among
The blonde and stifling hair which falls
In heavy rivers from the high-crowned head,
While in the tension of her heat and light
The upward creeping blood whispers her name:
Insurgent, wounded and avenging one,
In whose black sex

⁷³⁹ *London Review of Books* (25th January 1996), p.14. From 'Writing the Night' by Hugh Haughton.

⁷⁴⁰ *Every Changing Shape* by Elizabeth Jennings, p.194.

⁷⁴¹ *CP*, p.106.

Our ancient culpability like a pearl is set.⁷⁴²

The poem is a highly condensed expression of the sacred vision of the female, where there seems to be some identification with the Christ figure and where the 'pearl beyond price' seems to be equated with original sin, perhaps suggesting the 'happy fault'. I would argue also that Gascoyne had thoroughly assimilated the Kierkegaardian paradox (that death was necessary in order to have life) into his personal poetics, his poetry therefore a palimpsest of modes through which the Christian pattern flashed:

Vibrant with silence is the last sealed room
That fever-quicken breathing cannot break:
Magnetic silence and unshakably doomed breath
Hung like a screen of ice
Between the cavern and the closing eyes,
Between the last day and the final scene
Of death, unwitnessed save by one:

By Omega! the angel whose dark wind
Of wings and trumpet lips
Stirs with disruptive storm the clinging folds
Of stalagmatic foliage lachrymose
Hung from the lofty crypt, where endlessly
The phalanx passes, two by three, with all
The hypnotizing fall of stairs.
Their faces are unraised as yet from sleep;
The pace is slow, and down the steep descent
Their carried candles eddy like a stream;
While on each side, through window in the rock,
Beyond the tunneled grottoes there are seen
Serene the sunless but how dazzling plains
Where like a sea resounds our open tomb.⁷⁴³

The collection of poems that followed *Poems 1937-42* was published in 1950 under the title *A Vagrant and other Poems*. Haughton is not alone in considering it a lesser work than its predecessor. Stanford writes, referring to the imagery of *Ex Nihilo*:

These images, which are like tightly coded messages, were perfected by Gascoyne in *Poems 1937-42*. Certainly, in no single poem in the following volume did he improve upon this method, the best of them hardly equalling what he achieved before.⁷⁴⁴

However, Haughton and Stanford do not form a consensus and Thurley finds in the collection Gascoyne's 'finest expression of his position.'⁷⁴⁵ If Gascoyne's poetry after *Poems 1937-42*

⁷⁴² Ibid., p.102.

⁷⁴³ Ibid., pp.104-105.

⁷⁴⁴ *The Poetry Review* (Vol.56, No. 4, Winter 1965), p.245. From 'Gascoyne in Retrospect' by Derek Stanford.

⁷⁴⁵ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.112.

constitute, for some, no improvement 'upon his method', this might be considered a consequence of a distinct change in the poet's method:

The tone of these poems is more conversational, less strained.⁷⁴⁶

The 'conversational' nature of the poems is for Stanford 'an anti-climax':

It is, in fact, the acceptance of defeat *emotionally* if not *intellectually* which the best poems in *A Vagrant* express. It seems that the world, envisaged in terms of faith, has failed to kindle Gascoyne's imagination as despair and expiation did earlier on...⁷⁴⁷

I agree with Stanford that the tone and style of Gascoyne's poetry changed dramatically in this collection, though 'September Sun: 1947' is written with paradoxically trenchant radiance, typically Gascoynian. However, I disagree with Stanford's view that 'despair and expiation' kindled Gascoyne's imagination in a way that a world 'envisaged in terms of faith' does not. I would argue that the earlier poems are equally those of faith, that despair and expiation were for Gascoyne necessary aspects of faith, that part of faith is the struggle. These later poems are less concerned with the struggle for faith and perhaps this is what Stanford misses. I do not think that the later poems enunciate an 'acceptance of defeat' (again 'September Sun' refutes this), though 'A Vagrant' carries and air of sardonic weariness:

They're much the same in most ways, these great cities. Of them
all,
Speaking of those I've seen, this one's still far the best
Big densely built-up area for a man to wander in
Should he have ceased to find shelter, relief,
Or dream in sanatorium bed...

... I already wake each day
Without a bump or too much morning sickness to routine
Which although without order wears the will out just as well
As this job-barker's programme would. His line may in the end
Provide me with a noose with which to hang myself, should I
Discover that the strain of doing nothing is too great
A price to pay for spiritual integrity...⁷⁴⁸

Here, Gascoyne confronts a similar dilemma to one Jones posed himself, the place of the poet or artist in modern society where he may feel little more than a parasite or one 'in whom the means of

⁷⁴⁶ *The London Magazine* (Vol.5 No.8, November 1965), pp. 92, 93. From 'A Voice in the Dark' by Gavin Ewart.

⁷⁴⁷ *The Month* (Vol.29, No.3, March 1963), p.166. From 'David Gascoyne: A Spiritual Itinerary' by Derek Stanford. On the other hand Anthony Cronin finds 'A Vagrant', '...one of the best poems of our time' at least partly because of its conversational tone and Gascoyne's choice of the 'dramatic monologue' to create a 'microcosm of the world'. *The London Magazine* (Vol.4, No. 7, July 1957), pp.51, 53. From 'Poetry & Ideas - II: David Gascoyne.'

⁷⁴⁸ *CP*, p.143.

livelihood swallowed up the primary vocation'⁷⁴⁹ – both existing in straitened financial circumstances most of their lives – as did the Muirs. Thurley's final summary of *A Vagrant and other Poems* is apposite:

In much of the poetry he wrote after the war, then, Gascoyne seems lost – lost in a world of friends now married, lost in the demotic, egalitarian England of Attlee and Cripps, lost in the cultural turmoil in which the Surrealists in France were also confessing bankruptcy. The poetry is correspondingly heavy-hearted, plated with observations that only occasionally raise themselves above a disenchanting accuracy.⁷⁵⁰

These observations seem especially realised in the closing lines of 'A Vagrant':

...Awkward enough, awake, yet although anxious still just sane,
I stand still in my quasi-dereliction, or but stray
Slowly along the quais towards the end of afternoons
That lead to evenings empty of engagements, or at night
Lying resigned in cosy-corner crow's-nest, listen long
To sounds of the surrounding city desultorily
Seeking in loud distraction some relief from what its nerves
Are gnawed by: I mean knowledge of its lack of *raison d'être*.
The city's lack and mine are much the same. What, oh what can
A vagrant hope to find to take the place of what was once
Our expectation of the Human City in which each man might
Morning and evening, every day, lead his own life, and Man?⁷⁵¹

As I have suggested in previous comments on 'September Sun: 1947', it would be inaccurate to deem all the poems in this collection 'disenchanted'. It opens with a Wordsworthian splendour:

Magnificent strong sun! in these last days
So prodigally generous of pristine light
That's wasted only by men's sight who will not see
And by self-darkened spirits from whose night
Can rise no longer or orison praise:

Let us consume in fire unfed like yours
And may the quickened gold within me come
To mintage in due season, and not be
Transmuted to no better end than dumb
And self-sufficient usury. These days and years

May bring the sudden call to harvesting
When if the fields Man labours only yield
Glitter and husks, then with an angrier sun may He
Who first with His gold seed the sightless field
Of Chaos planted, all our trash to cinders bring.⁷⁵²

⁷⁴⁹ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.113. Thurley quotes Stephen Spender from *Engaged in Writing*, p.20.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.115.

⁷⁵¹ *CP*, p. 144. This view of the poet was briefly envisioned in the poem 'Inferno' in *Poems 1937-42*. Gavin Ewart remarked on it in his review aptly titled 'A Voice from the Darkness': 'Very typical of one aspect of his work is 'Inferno'. The poet 'wandering / Through unnamed streets of a great nameless town'. This is not, I think,

The poem is in the exalted and condensed idiom of Gascoyne's earlier poetry. I would argue that there is a sense of exaltation in those poems of expiation and despair. Here, the vision has turned towards the 'golden harvester' of Muir's 'The Journey Back', with references to Herbert's 'Teach me my God and King' and perhaps Caliban's 'trash'. 'The Sacred Hearth' (dedicated to George Barker), another strong poem in the collection which Muir described as 'strangely beautiful'⁷⁵³, expresses a moment of enchanted vision, with lines which recall Jones's description of the terrain in which the elusive spirit of poetry dwells and a curious twist on Eliot's image of the poet's task being to turn out his pockets:

... As long as dawn
 Hung fire behind the branch-hid sky, the strong
 Magic of rustic slumber held unbroken; yet a song
 Sprang wordless from inertia in my heart, to see how near
 A neighbour strangeness ever stands to home. George, in the wood
 Of wandering among wood-hiding trees, where poets' art
 Is how to whistle in the dark, where pockets all have holes,
 All roofs for refugees have rents, we ought to know
 That there can be for us no place quite alien and unknown,
 No situation wholly hostile, if somewhere there burn
 The faithful fire of vision still awaiting our return.⁷⁵⁴

This poem, a meditation on faith takes place at the end of the night, before an impending dawn in a rural setting.

Gascoyne's last major work, *Night Thoughts*, written for radio and broadcast in 1955 then published in 1956 concludes in a similarly peaceful, rural setting though night and the city, two of Gascoyne's enduring preoccupations return. In the poem 'Farewell Chorus' from *Poems 1937-42*, are the lines:

Years like a prison-wall, frustrating though unsound
 On which the brush of History, with quick, neurotic strokes,
 Its latest and most awe-inspiring fresco soon outlined:
 Spenglerian lowering of the Western skies, red lakes
 Of civil bloodshed, free flags flagrantly torn down.⁷⁵⁵

A New Year's poem, written in 1940 there is here an apocalyptic vision of the end of Western civilization and Spengler reappears in more urgent and dramatic guise than in Gascoyne's early poem 'The New Isaiah' from *Roman Balcony*. In *Night Thoughts* Gascoyne returns to his Spenglerian theme, but now to a post-war city at night, though memories of the war linger in the opening lines. Post-war 'Man' has become yet further isolated and alienated:

as in many poets it might be, the pose of the romantic solitary; Mr Gascoyne really was different...an 'Outsider'.' *The London Magazine* (Nov. 1965), p.91.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, p.151.

⁷⁵³ *The Truth of the Imagination Some Uncollected Review and Essay by Edwin Muir* ed. P.H.Butter (Aberdeen University Press, 1988), p.112. Muir believed that this poem distilled the essence of Gascoyne's Christian faith.

⁷⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.145.

Now Man benighted huddles in his cave,
 In mighty ignorance of what he is and what he's not:
 Cave-night which every night
 His all-aloneness drives him back into:
 This is the dark, familiar, fearful place...⁷⁵⁶

From the section 'The Nightwatchers' where various voices express their fears and 'mortal anguish', the work moves to the second section titled 'Megalometropolitan carnival', the megalopolis that so perturbed and disturbed David Jones. At the beginning of the section Gascoyne lists mythological figures customarily associated poetically with the night 'Cynthia's argent chariot' and the 'ornamental names' of 'Orion', 'Mars', 'Venus', 'Betelgeuse', 'and all the rest':

But if I stand tonight,
 Not in a poem but in actual fact in, say, Trafalgar Square,
 And stare up at the heavens there, what can they mean to me?
 The glories of the Zodiak, the lovely names of stars?
 Do I see splinters of old myths stuck in the sky above my head?⁷⁵⁷

He cannot, because of the 'effervescent blaze', 'the triumph of the brain / of man over his darkness'. Yet Gascoyne's city *is* in a poem and the 'actual fact' of it is transposed by Gascoyne's vision. Michael Hamburger describes *Night Thoughts* as 'the most Baudelairean exploration of an urban inferno written since the last war':

The Battersea Power Station's 'giant stacks' become
 The pillars of a temple raised to man-made power and light
 so that a sort of Promethean or Luciferian grandeur is granted to Gascoyne's city despite the
 'fumes that rise from the abyss.' Yet, since archetypes dominate... the megalometropolis
 remains infernal.⁷⁵⁸

The night-walking poet surveys the city from 'an open hillside / A public park space':

Fearful and wonderful, that sleepless monster,
 Sphinx among cities, Megalometropolis,
 Stuns with her grave immensity all eyes beholding her:
 One's wonder gapes and quickly palls and falls into dismay,
 Knowing the roaring labyrinth deepsunk in Night below
 Teems with noctambulists too multitudinous
 For any now to fear the Minotaur.⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵⁵ CP, p. 126.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid., p.190.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid., p.194.

⁷⁵⁸ *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry since Baudelaire* by Michael Hamburger (Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), pp. 278, 279.

⁷⁵⁹ CP, p. 196.

A new myth replaces the original labyrinth myth, the new phenomenon of the 'Megalometropolis' evoking for Gascoyne a Miltonic Pandaemonium and a macabre initiation narrated in a dream-sequence:

Here is the Circus in the Square that represents
The very heart of the primeval City. Now's the time
To recollect that you've received a secret summons
To a rendezvous with the Unknown, at the foot of the Fountain
That leaps without spray, a thin glimmering quicksilver pillar,
Above the memorial marking the first fatal spot,
The meeting place of the First Person with Persons Unnamed
At the heart of the Forest that grew where the City now stands.

The quicksilver Fountain that's hovering there like a column allures
All who enter the lair of the Labyrinth-Omphalos Boss,
Whose domain lies beneath, in the earth.⁷⁶⁰

The labyrinthine underworld of the city assumes the features of the primeval, the forest, though the spring or fountain does not refresh but 'allures'. This is initiation by descent to a place of false rebirth, a labyrinth of mirrors and deceit, there are 'vast fields' of shop windows, 'galleries lined with glasscases,' 'carloads of diamondmine loot,' 'forests of flowers,' 'tropic fruit piles in tiers,' 'pin-up waxwork girls posed in parades'⁷⁶¹, an ersatz world of commercialism and the 'immense nausea of advertisements' of which Baudelaire complained.⁷⁶² Gascoyne's 'carnival' grows ever more disorientating, the 'Publicity Chorus' shouting nonsensically 'DRINK MORE DRINK! WEAR MORE CLOTHES!'⁷⁶³ The pastiche mythology approaches its climax with the 'Master of Ceremonies', a Mephistophelian figure declaring, 'the endless Carnival be left open to the Four Winds of Publicity, Gossip, Idletalk, and Rumour' Gascoyne's prescient vision of a future of faux-celebrity non-culture:

The Sleeper came here on a Quest, to find that he is lost,
Deepsunk in the confusions of a City underground,
And now looks around him, lonely and bewildered, in the midst
Of anonymous masked multitudes, surrounded by the sounds
Of Latter Pandemonium, Hell's ideal up-to-date
Metropolis of Commerce-cum-Cacophomium,
The Capital of Every Pseudo Super-City State.⁷⁶⁴

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 198, 199.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid., p.199.

⁷⁶² *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry since Baudelaire* by Michael Hamburger (Anvil Press Poetry Ltd, 1996), p.17. Hamburger continues: '...a borderline nausea, half aesthetic, half moral, which he interpreted as disgust with the 'sordid' materialism of the age. In *Night Thoughts* Gascoyne writes: 'Look! Here posters plaster the best people's eye with huge glimpses / Of scenes from the Very Best Shows of the Year by the / Star Chamber / Critics' Assembly Selected: The Most Highly Praised, the Best / Advertised, then / The most Noted for Highypaid Acting, the Most Controversial, / The Brightest, the Loudest, Most Daringly Brutal, and Quite the / Most Crude.'

⁷⁶³ CP, p.202.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid., p.202.

The final section 'Encounter with Silence' removes the solitary night-walker from the city to the countryside:

Night Thoughts. Night Music. Now from buried labyrinths and caves of the town-dweller's anxious dream, from claustrophobic corridors of nocturnal soliloquy, we move away until we can emerge into the open air in a secluded countryside.
There we shall find again the calm night world of Nature.
Nature, the Earth, Unconsciousness and Death...
...Meditations in dark gardens...⁷⁶⁵

In the garden an authentic initiation, or 'rebirth' takes place. The 'Encounter with Silence':

...breaks through to an encounter not just with silence but with what silence masks, the Universe, nothingness, oneself. The lifetime's intent listening yields first the harvest of (almost) imperceptible sounds:

Decrepid dust-blown tinkling of a crumbling pagoda's bells...
Intensely complex tight-screwed-up tattoo of tiny drums
The velvet-padded hammering of life-blood's changing pulse
The pulse of changing life is the deep underlying constant

...these are the *trouvailles* of the seer, the mystic, not of the Literary Man out for

effects... what stretches out before the poet's eye in the country night is not

Nothingness... but everything – the Universe... What was it he was listening to? And for?

This is the dilemma of symbolism – to listen, to wait, to attend, yet to nothing, or rather, 'an utterly unqualifiable something'.⁷⁶⁶

I find Thurley's account of the 'Encounter with Silence' convincing, particularly his comments on 'the dilemma of symbolism' for it relates also to the poetic endeavour of Muir and Jones. Both were concerned with 'an utterly unqualifiable something' which they sought to evoke via symbolism. As Gascoyne put it:

The symbol is a bridge between the subjective reality of personal experience and the objective reality of the Spirit. When poetry or dream can be said to be controlled by a dynamism of spiritual, as distinct from merely somatic or unconscious mental, origin, then this control must be exercised by means of the intervention of the symbol.⁷⁶⁷

In the 'Encounter with Silence' the Void is filled with the Spirit, the necessity of which Gascoyne also referred to in his 'Note on Symbolism':

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid., p.206.

⁷⁶⁶ *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), p.109.

⁷⁶⁷ *SP*, p. 77. From 'Note on Symbolism: its role in metaphysical thought'.

The Spirit can return to life only through the secret channel of our inmost individuality. Each man must undertake alone and in silence the task of creating a new spiritual reality with which to fill the Void forever underlying objective and empirical reality's changing and uncertain surface.⁷⁶⁸

In the poem, the night provides the setting for the Spirit's 'return to life':

He breathes in the night's
ancientness and freshness, slowly absorbing strength and courage for a
coming time when he will have to be reborn...

...From out of that profound night-blue abyss of starry vacancy comes the
command: 'Lift up your heart!...' I raise my spellbound head and face to
face with what I cannot name I worship and adore. I lift my heart up and it
speaks my prayer.⁷⁶⁹

Yet prayer is problematic, 'there is the question of language, the difficulty over forms and
formulae.'⁷⁷⁰

I am a man of a benighted country, famished for light, and praying
out of darkness in the dark. I do not really any longer know what
praying means. To pray by rote, repeating time-deconsecrated
words, seems vanity to me. I cannot bear to hear myself repeating
words of prayer that might be mumbled and not meant.

It is this problem of language, we see – this desire to make and keep it new – which has, with
other factors, shut Gascoyne out from the traditional world of traditional prayer and
worship.⁷⁷¹

While I agree with Stanford to a point, it is not simply an aesthetic-linguistic difficulty that
Gascoyne's narrator faces in the formulation of prayer as making and keeping 'new' seems to imply.
Inefficacy of prayer in this case springs from the deconsecrated status of words, the loss of the sacred
power of words to invoke, rather than simply their tiredness as forms or vessels of expression. I find,
however, Stanford's phrase 'experiential theology' as descriptive of Gascoyne's writing apt,
particularly in terms of the resolution of *Night Thoughts* where the silence of the garden occasions the
solitary narrator's rebirth:

In the gardens of the Night, breathed on by newly freshened air,
wrapped in the sheltering arms of shadows cast by slowly growing
things, the consolation of profound Serenity is to be found. Here, in
forgetting by degrees the crude immediacies of day, talk's trivialities,
the well-worn props and tokens of habitual routine, it is possible to
recall to mind and to draw near again to something vastly fundamental,

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid., p.78.

⁷⁶⁹ CP, p.210.

⁷⁷⁰ *The Month* (Vol.29, No.3, March 1963), p. 168. From 'David Gascoyne: A Spiritual Itinerary' by Derek Stanford.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid., p.168. Stanford quotes from *Night Thoughts*.

self-effacingly withdrawn, that has been lying there and is there all the time. It is an ever-new discovery to find it still awaiting our return, unsmiling, taciturn, yet limitlessly tolerant and all-comprehending, ready to take us back into obscurity, to share with us its poverty, to close and soothe our eyes...But there is Vigil where the walker in the gardens stands and wonders in the dark...

...something had changed in him...

...Silence had delivered its essential message to him, and he had responded. Now he feels that he no longer has the need to reassure himself with words.⁷⁷²

Gascoyne's work has passed 'to a stillness that cannot be formulated' which seems, at least for Stanford, a somewhat inadequate resolution:

The collective requirements of religion are hardly served by this position. The communication is subjective: Kierkegaard's "individual" addressing himself to "none but the lonely heart" who may profit from this strange meditation.⁷⁷³

I agree to a point with Stanford in so far as the 'strange meditation' is a solely interiorized spiritual experience. Yet poetry is not, I think, normally expected to fulfil 'the collective requirements of religion' at least not in the modern environment where the poet is a relatively isolated figure. Gascoyne, like Muir, Jones and Watkins may have hankered for a poetic idiom that was more akin to public worship, but they were driven in on themselves by the times in which they lived. They attempted to write from what Raine believed to be a perennial tradition like Keats, Hölderlin and Hopkins (despite his claim to be using speech rhythms) before them, avoiding the suggestion of ordinary discourse and writing poetically from some unknown source of words though mediated by the memory of other poetic voices. They were each opposed to what Auden et al were doing, seeking to combine the Christian pattern (as well as other mythological strands) with an idiom that reflected their time, but also reflected timelessness, between which there is perhaps a linguistic hiatus or at least a very delicate bridge. Thus in the last section of *Night Thoughts* there appear to be resonances in the lines linking them with Christ's solitary night in Gethsemane, particularly in the use of the word 'Vigil'⁷⁷⁴. And yet the poem concludes with an attempt at communication on a more common level, which Gascoyne explains in his article 'The Poet and the City':

⁷⁷² CP, p.211.

⁷⁷³ *The Month* (Vol.29, No.3, March 1963), p.169. From 'David Gascoyne: A Spiritual Itinerary' by Derek Stanford.

⁷⁷⁴ With regard to the notion of 'vigil' displayed in *Night Thoughts*, Geoffrey Thurley writes: 'The poem is, in a way, the triumph and the vindication of the symbolist *veillée*, the nocturnal vigil so familiar in poetry since Rimbaud. The vigil is of course much older than Rimbaud. In English we can return to Edward Young, whose title Gascoyne borrows, but farther to Vaughan, whose poem 'The Night' really inaugurates the whole tradition...The poem does not...strive after those spiritual rewards Rimbaud sought with such tenacity, though this search is the essence of the vigil. While *Night Thoughts* is in one sense the culminating poem in the European

One of the central themes of the entire work is the ever-increasing danger for the urbanized and technologically-orientated man of today of being swallowed up in the unthinking and manipulable masses. 'But what should it profit a man to gain the whole world yet lose his own soul?' all those individuals who struggle to preserve their independence and essential humanity feel an instinctive solidarity with one another, as I believe contemporary poets do.

Which was why I brought my 'radiophonic poem' to an end with the words:

Greetings to the solitary. Friends, fellow beings, you are not strangers to us. We are closer to one another than we realize. Let us remember one another at night, even though we do not know each other's names.⁷⁷⁵

David Gascoyne has been described as 'the poet of man's loneliness'⁷⁷⁶ writing 'poetry of suffering.'⁷⁷⁷ With *Night Thoughts*, Gascoyne attempted to 'break through' – to create a community through his poetry. His final remark in interview with Lucien Jenkins suggests that Gascoyne felt his life had served a communal function, if an unrecognized, solitary one:

He...ended the interview by citing Hölderlin, saying: 'The poet's job is to go on holding on to something like faith, through the darkness of total lack of faith, what Buber calls the eclipse of God.'⁷⁷⁸

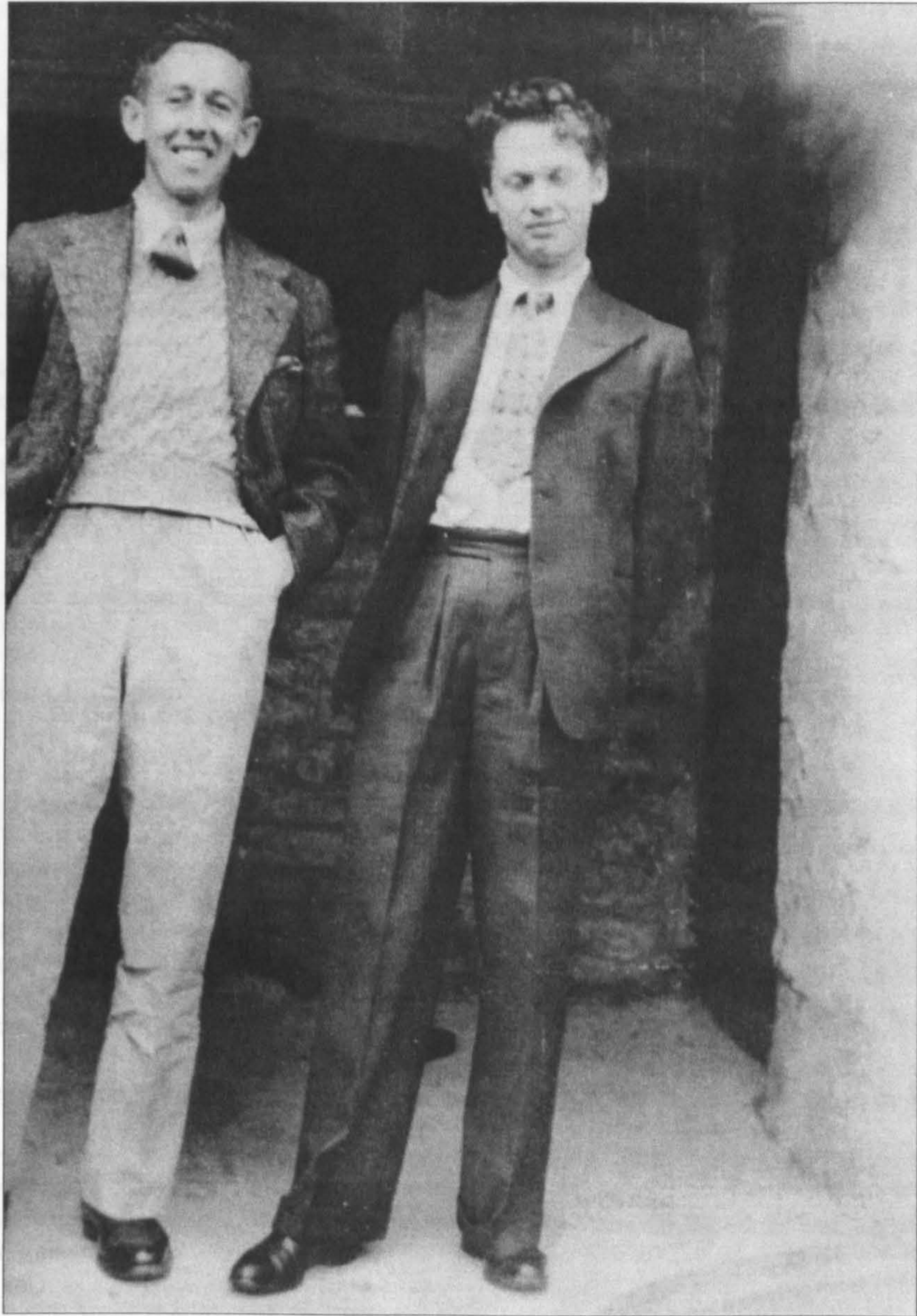
avant garde movement, in another it annuls the *raison d'être* of the *avant garde*. Its confessed aim is '...to break through the silence and the noise in the great night / Of all that is unknown to us, that weighs down in between / One lonely human being and another...' The will of the whole poem is to break through to those other islands of humanity, to reach the drifting rafts of those who, being alone, are also ready to make contact.' (*The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* by Geoffrey Thurley (Edward Arnold, 1974), pp. 116, 117. These observations recall David Jones's 'sentinel' poet in 'The Sleeping Lord.'

⁷⁷⁵ *SP*, p.132. From 'The Poet and the City'.

⁷⁷⁶ *Inside the Forties* by Derek Stanford (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1977), p.109. Stanford quotes Paul Potts.

⁷⁷⁷ *The London Magazine* (Vol.5 No.8, November 1965), p.91. From 'A Voice in the Dark' by Gavin Ewart.

⁷⁷⁸ *SP*, p.53. From 'David Gascoyne in Interview' by Lucien Jenkins.



Prose

David Jones: *Letters to Fermor* (London: Panther, 1968); University of Wales Press, 1978, edited by Ruth Pryor.

Vernon Watkins (1906 – 1967)

Major Publications

Poetry

- The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1941, second edition 1947)
The Lamp and the Veil (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1945)
The Lady with the Unicorn (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1948)
The Death Bell (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1954)
The North Sea by Heinrich Heine translated by Vernon Watkins (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1955)
Cypress and Acacia (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1959)
Affinities (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1962)
Selected Poems 1930 – 1960 (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1967)

Prose

- Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins* (London: Dent/Faber, 1957), edited with an introduction by Vernon Watkins

Posthumous Editions

Poetry

- Fidelities* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1968). *Fidelities* was prepared for publication by the author.
I That Was Born in Wales – A New Selection from the Poems of Vernon Watkins (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976). Chosen and introduced by Gwen Watkins and Ruth Pryor.
Vernon Watkins Selected Verse Translations (London: Enitharmon Press, 1977)
Uncollected Poems (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969). Chosen and arranged by Kathleen Raine.
The Ballad of the Outer Dark (London: Enitharmon Press, 1979). Chosen and arranged by Gwen Watkins.
The Breaking of the Wave (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1979). Chosen and arranged by Gwen Watkins.
The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins (1986; repr with corrections, Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 2000)
Poems for Dylan by Vernon Watkins (Ceredigion: Gomer Press, 2003). Chosen and arranged by Gwen Watkins.
Vernon Watkins: New Selected Poems (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2006), edited with an introduction by Richard Ramsbotham.

Prose

- David Jones: Letters to Vernon Watkins* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976), edited by Ruth Pryor.

The Place of Vernon Watkins

O dark, interior flame,
O spring Elijah struck:
Obscurity is fame:
Glory and praise are luck.
Nothing can live so wild
As those ambitious wings
Majestic, for love's child
Defending ancient springs.⁷⁷⁹

Of the four poets, Kathleen Raine knew Vernon Watkins personally least well⁷⁸⁰; correspondingly perhaps he has become a marginal poet even in comparison with Muir, Jones and Gascoyne, the majority of articles and books dedicated to his work published in Welsh journals or by Welsh presses. David Wright, in the Vernon Watkins edition of *Poetry Wales*, published ten years after Watkins's death, begins his introduction with:

Vernon Watkins is an undervalued poet. I was about to adorn the adjective with some modification like 'inexplicably' or 'strangely', but reflected that his comparative neglect, given the kind of poet he was and the kind of age we live in, is neither inexplicable or strange. On further reflection, I should strike out 'and the kind of age we live in' because so far as poets of uncompromising spiritual honour like Watkins are concerned, the times in which they happen to live make no difference.⁷⁸¹

The author of a study of Celtic influences in Watkins's *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* writes of '...the poverty of commentary'⁷⁸² on his work, modifying this statement with:

My hold upon Watkins's work was significantly aided by the insights provided by Kathleen Raine's milestone essay in the spring 1964 issue of *The Anglo-Welsh Review*.⁷⁸³

The essay is collected in Raine's book *Defending Ancient Springs*, and is chronologically situated between those on Edwin Muir and David Gascoyne, titled 'Vernon Watkins and the Bardic Tradition'.

⁷⁷⁹ CP, p.182. From the poem 'Art and the Ravens', *The Death Bell* (Faber & Faber, 1954).

⁷⁸⁰ According to my interview with Raine in April 2003 and her essay on Watkins in *Vernon Watkins 1906 – 1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber & Faber, 1970), where she begins: 'I met Vernon Watkins on only three occasions...'

⁷⁸¹ *Poetry Wales* 'Vernon Watkins edition' (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.7.

⁷⁸² *Vernon Watkins and the Spring of Vision* by Dora Polk (Christopher Davies Publishers Ltd, 1977), p.8.

⁷⁸³ Ibid., p.9. It must be noted that Roland Mathias had published a critical essay on Watkins in the Michaelmas 1950 edition of *Dock Leaves* and a detailed study of Watkins in 1974, both of which might be described as 'milestone' publications. The book contests Raine's placing of Watkins, a placing Polk found congruent with her own, which may be a reason for her omitting any reference to Mathias. Mathias also complains of the paucity of criticism on Watkins: 'The brevity of reviews is an exasperation as well as a consolation, a happy refuge for the uncertain. It is partly because of the illuminating silence that surrounds Watkins that I am moved to attempt to assess the qualities in his work which have earned so respectful a recognition.' *Dock Leaves* (Vol.1, No.3, Michaelmas 1950), pp.38, 39.

Raine begins by placing Watkins under Dylan Thomas's wing and, as is often the case with approaches to his work, invokes Thomas as a way-marker:

I first heard the poetry of Vernon Watkins praised in the nineteen thirties, by Dylan Thomas, who then said that he was probably the finest poet then writing in Britain... This was not an obvious judgement at the time of writing, and might have been put down partly to sympathy and affinity ... Vernon Watkins is a Welsh poet, product of the same influences that formed Dylan Thomas, only perhaps more so, since he has lived from early childhood in Wales and in the Gower Peninsula.⁷⁸⁴

In many respects this contextualising of Watkins by way of association with Thomas is inevitable. Thomas certainly loomed large in Watkins's life both as friend and creative counterpart. However, more recent appraisals of Watkins's poetry suggest that his long overshadowing by Thomas needs to be redressed and Watkins's oeuvre to be considered under its own auspices.⁷⁸⁵ Yet ultimately Raine does not group Watkins with Thomas as poets of a kind,⁷⁸⁶ her introductory comments seeming chosen more to stress Watkins's Welsh-ness in support of her eventual assertions regarding his 'bardic' inheritance, which she regards as significant above and beyond his friendship and creative relationship with Thomas. Raine will in fact write to show how, in her view, Watkins is a bard in the sense that she regards Thomas as not, as she endeavours to single out Watkins as belonging to her criteria of what constitutes a poet of the Imaginative tradition alongside Muir, Jones and Gascoyne.

As a near contemporary, Vernon Watkins's decision to quit Cambridge when a student, returning to and remaining in his native Wales, demonstrated for Raine that he was a poet 'who, having roots, knew that he must not tear them up...'⁷⁸⁷ not 'bedevilled [as she claims to have been] by an alternative he unhesitatingly rejected.'⁷⁸⁸ Here Raine is launching into her rich paradigmatic weave

⁷⁸⁴ DAS, p.17. The essay was first published in *The Anglo-Welsh Review* in 1964. Mathias states: 'Vernon Watkins's awareness of his total unfashionableness made him grateful even for the partial understanding offered by Kathleen Raine.' *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.40.

⁷⁸⁵ I refer here to articles such as Rowan Williams's, 'Swansea's Other Poet: Vernon Watkins and the Threshold between Worlds': 'It is probably fair to say that Dylan Thomas would have regarded the relative reputations of his work and that of Vernon Watkins with a typically quizzical irony; Thomas knew pretty well what kinds of poetry made fast reputations and what didn't...he would have understood why Watkins did not share such a name...So Watkins's reputation needs attention...' (*Welsh Writing in English*, Vol.8/2003), p.107.

⁷⁸⁶ 'It would be wrong to suppose that, a friend and contemporary, Vernon Watkins is the same kind of poet as Dylan Thomas, only not quite so good; neither judgment would be true, although there are, of course, resemblances.' Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs*, (Golgonooza Press, 1985), p.26.

⁷⁸⁷ DAS, p.17.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17. This 'alternative', the Cambridge of Raine's day might be viewed as *the* critical, retrospectively selected adversary with which it became Raine's life work to wrestle. There is an interesting dichotomy in Raine's attitude to her Cambridge education: on the one hand she displays a certain nostalgia for the golden days of an unashamedly élitist institution, while on the other (in later years when Raine worked in Cambridge as a

on the nature of poetic creation, which in Watkins's case she identifies with 'the Welsh bardic tradition'⁷⁸⁹:

He chose tradition (vital memory) as against education, and inspiration as against the new positivist spirit of the age; he remained true, as Yeats said poets must, to 'certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius but never abandoned'.⁷⁹⁰

The dichotomy between tradition and education here enunciated by Raine and iterated by her in her treatment of all four poets is, I find, difficult as she makes an unbridgeable distinction between a poet's traditional, or cultural inheritance of his art, for her the true initiation, and the 'educated' literary inheritance. To present such a dichotomy in absolute terms is untenable since each of the poets, and Raine herself, are indebted to their literary forebears. However, it would be true to say that Edwin Muir drew specifically on the 'vital memory' of the oral tradition of the Orkney ballads. Jones, Gascoyne and Watkins did not have first-hand experience of poetry in this way. Jones was attracted to the idea of anamnesis, which could be defined as a kind of 'vital memory.' Yet, Watkins represents for Raine a poet rooted in a still living ancestral culture and tradition, thus equipped with inherited poetic motifs and authentic access to 'the ancient springs' of inspiration:

Vernon Watkins is familiar with Coleridge's thought and with Blake's; with Plotinus and the Platonic philosophers who were their teachers as they were Yeats's. He is also well acquainted with the parallel history of German poetry; he himself has published a volume of fine translations of Heine, and a sequence of poems to Hölderlin. But one may guess that it was not by way of learning of this kind that the initiatory knowledge of the poet came to him; but rather, as he implies, by way of the vital memory of the Welsh bardic tradition. This tradition transmits, as surely as Plato or Coleridge or Blake, the doctrine of poetic inspiration.⁷⁹¹

Mathias answers Raine's assertion with:

Kathleen Raine... suggests that his "initiatory knowledge" of the tradition of the imagination and "inspiration" came not from Coleridge or Blake, Plotinus or the Platonists, Heine or

Fellow) she regarded it a cultural desert, where the spiritual qualities she believed to be integral to poetry and the other arts were systematically outcast, leaving only a denuding method of textual analysis. That Watkins had the 'poetic' courage to leave Cambridge must have appeared, to Raine, little short of an heroic act.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., p.20.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., p.18.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., p.20.

Hölderlin, but from “the vital memory of the Welsh bardic tradition”. It would be pleasant, from a purely Welsh point of view, to think that this was so, and there is no question at all that he was acquainted with Arthurian legend, the Mabinogion and such Welsh poetry as was available in translation from a very early age. But the “Welsh bardic tradition” would, in Vernon Watkins’s youth, have been much more difficult to approach without far more than a smattering of Welsh, and Kathleen Raine’s argument, examined more closely, appears to centre in the Taliesin poems, the first of which was included in *The Death Bell* (1954). Watkins’s knowledge of and interest in the poems of Taliesin, long since available in English in the translation of Lady Charlotte Guest...plainly antedates this by many years...Chronology, therefore, may be no barrier to Kathleen Raine’s thesis and the Taliesin theme to a poet already in love with the conquest of time is sufficiently plain.’⁷⁹²

In a sense, both Raine and Mathias are right: for Watkins, ‘chronology...was no barrier.’ For him, as for David Jones, the past was simultaneously present with contemporaneity. It would also be true to say that Mathias’s view (that Coleridge et al. were of equal significance, if not more, in the poet’s literary ancestry) stands because Watkins regularly acknowledges his literary debts, yet always at the level of inspiration. Watkins undoubtedly made use of the ‘Welsh bardic tradition’ (particularly in the figure of Taliesin) in so far as it provided him with symbols and imagery sympathetic and necessary to his poetic imagination, not entirely unlike David Jones. The exile David Jones is, I think, more passionate about his Welsh-ness than Vernon Watkins. Jones sought to incorporate the Welsh language in his poetry, Watkins never did and seems not to have regretted his inability to write or speak Welsh as Jones did. He was satisfied that the Welsh cadence was present in his use of English.⁷⁹³

That Watkins left Cambridge because he disagreed profoundly with the textual and linguistic analysis of literature propounded there at that time is emphasised in Mathias’s account of events:

The fact was that Vernon Watkins, although his academic results gave cause for mild satisfaction, had found Cambridge a sad disappointment...At Magdalene the bias toward

⁷⁹² *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), pp.119-120. From ‘Grief and The Circus Horse: A Study of the Mythic and Christian Themes in the Early Poetry of Vernon Watkins’.

⁷⁹³ Gwen Watkins wrote: ‘He was born in Maesteg, a small mining town in Glamorgan; but although both his parents spoke Welsh as their first language, and he himself read, with the aid of a dictionary, the poetry of Llywarch Hen and Dafydd ap Gwilym, he never learned to speak it. Yet the rhythms of that noble and ancient

language was an unwelcome surprise: the pernicketiness of the approach and the analytical, frequently astringent criticism were of a kind that Vernon quickly came to hate...He told A.C. Benson, then Master of the College...that he was interested only in writing poetry and that he didn't intend to stay in Cambridge and see it criticised out of him. Benson...retorted that if becoming a poet was his aim, he would curse the day he had been born.

Vernon...muttered that he had cursed it many times already and slammed the door as he went out.⁷⁹⁴

According to Mathias, Watkins, on breaking the news to his parents of his decision to leave Cambridge, 'followed it up with a request to his father that he should be allowed to travel in Italy for a year.'⁷⁹⁵ The request was denied and 'in the autumn of 1925 he became a junior clerk in Lloyd's branch at Butetown, Cardiff.'⁷⁹⁶ That Watkins returned to and remained in Wales initially out of necessity, his quarrel with Cambridge more the discovery that the academic ethos was antipathetic to his poetic ideals, rather than a deep cultural difference, modifies, to a degree, Raine's impulse to place Watkins in a specifically Welsh bardic tradition.⁷⁹⁷ Even so, it is likely that Watkins would have found Raine's interpretation of events more accurate in certain respects than Mathias's, simply because of its poetic rather than factual bent. Watkins may not have wanted to seek poetic roots in Wales especially, and favoured the high cultural ideal that Italy very likely represented to his imagination; but the impulse is demonstrably the same.

Towards the end of her essay, Raine discusses Yeats's powerful influence on Watkins, concluding that Watkins's poetry suffers when it most resembles Yeats's. Her further observations, which are less cloudy than those concerning bardic inheritance place Watkins in closer relation to Muir, Jones and Gascoyne:

It is not in the direction of Yeats that Vernon Watkins's natural development seems to lie.

Rather it is to some modern return to a poetry like that of the English metaphysicals,

especially Herbert and Vaughan, whose roots were Welsh. It seems that Dr. Watkins has

been for a long time moving from pagan rite to Christian sacrament...We are reminded of the

tongue beat in his blood...He never wished to write in Welsh, because the richness of the English language satisfied him completely.' From *Vernon Watkins 1906 – 1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber and Faber, 1970), p.15.

⁷⁹⁴ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.22.

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁷⁹⁷ *Wales* (23, Vol. vi, No.3, Autumn 1946), p. 23. From 'Replies to 'Wales' Questionnaire 1946'. Raine's concept of 'the bard' is very close to that of the 'prophet.' She regards Gascoyne as prophet, Jones and Muir as

perfect manner of Herbert and Vaughan, who in writing upon the most intimate themes never intrude their own personality or attempt to address ours.⁷⁹⁸

Raine's identification of Watkins's poetry with that of the English metaphysicals, particularly Herbert and Vaughan, is, I believe well judged (if tangential to the bardic premise). Her suggestion that Watkins 'has been for a long time moving from pagan rite to Christian sacrament' is more contentious. Watkins was a committed Christian by the time he was writing the poetry that he would eventually publish, or as his wife Gwen put it, '...he could never remember a time when he was not a Christian.'⁷⁹⁹ I counter that both 'pagan rite' and 'Christian sacrament' are continually present in his poetry often in antithetical conflict or tension, though sometimes held in fluid complementarities. In his notebooks and in interview Watkins consistently describes himself, as Gascoyne does, a metaphysical poet:

I think my poetry can be called metaphysical, romantic, and any other unpopular names which I accept as true.⁸⁰⁰

I have been writing poetry, with very little interruption, since I was a young child. And I find that, however much I think of other possibilities, I cannot really exert myself unless I am handling a metaphysical theme. By metaphysical I mean a theme beyond my understanding, a theme which requires verse to make it clear.⁸⁰¹

I am a metaphysical poet ... For a metaphysical poet appreciation is not enough. For me, a poem that only reflects the natural world is an incomplete poem. I do not deny the bounty of nature, the inexhaustible secrets of the world that surrounds me, but something must be added by the poem itself. The addition depends on the poet's need. My own need, so far as I

bards. The poet at visionary, seer and mystic seem to become interchangeable within the role whether that be as bard or prophet.

⁷⁹⁸ *DAS*, p. 30, 33. Gwen Watkins wrote: 'Vernon Watkins always was, and remained, Church of England. It was W. B. Yeats' style which was such a revelation to the younger poet, not his thought. As far as thought and content went, he was *always* closer to Blake (and certainly Kierkegaard) than to Yeats.' *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.64. From 'Vernon Watkins and W. B. Yeats'.

⁷⁹⁹ *Vernon Watkins 1906 – 1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber and Faber, 1970), p.16.

⁸⁰⁰ *Vernon Watkins: Notes for Poetry Readings* (National Library of Wales, MS 22480E), p.54. From typewritten manuscript 'Poetry Reading: September 27th 1966'. The term 'romantic' is a notoriously complex one. In 'A Note on my own Poetry' Watkins defines his understanding: 'The word 'Romantic' meant for me a refusal to sacrifice the sacredness of the moment and of individual experience to a general pattern'. *Vernon Watkins: Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS 22480E), p.80. From an undated, typewritten manuscript. The odd thing about this statement is that it nearly contradicts what many readers of his poetry discern, that he systematically gives precedence to a 'general pattern' in his poetry.

⁸⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 'Reading a Leighton Park, 5th December 1966', p.57.

understand it, is the reality behind nature, the reality of which nature is a set of symbols, rather than nature itself.⁸⁰²

I am not a political writer. I am entirely concerned with metaphysical truth.⁸⁰³

Fundamental truths don't change and I'm a metaphysical poet. I'm entirely concerned with those.⁸⁰⁴

I'm fundamentally a religious and metaphysical poet...what compels one if one is a metaphysical or religious poet is the further truth, you see...the hand measures.⁸⁰⁵

All made in the last year of his life, these insistent statements reflect Watkins's retrospective view of his life's work, with perhaps a sense of his future placing as a poet. Watkins appears to have favoured 'metaphysical' rather than Christian as a defining term in public readings of his poetry. In notes made for a talk on his poetry in 1947 for the B.B.C. the three preparatory manuscript drafts are revealing with regard to this. They show Watkins modifying his original position, which was explicitly Christian, to one more general:

[1st Draft] I shall make no attempt to expound my faith in poetry to-night, except to say this: it is my conviction that a poem, or any work of art, is shaped by belief.// A strong poem will therefore not emerge from a shallow and superficial belief; and although there are many beautiful Pantheistic poems I believe that the poetry of deepest sensibility is made by writers who are Christians.

[2nd Draft] ...is shaped by belief.// It does not follow that a wide belief creates better poetry than a narrow one, and I would sacrifice a great many poems for the two which John Donne wrote on his deathbed.

[3rd and final Draft] ...is shaped by belief.// The work of poetry proceeds from a single moment, and the process is so uncertain that it may take a few hours or a great many years to finish, but the final poem should correspond as closely as possible to the original vision or idea.⁸⁰⁶

In the final draft, Watkins appears to be referring to his strongly held belief that for a poem to succeed it must be freed from the dictates of time, that the poem must remain true to or continually recreate the

⁸⁰² Ibid., 'Reading at Carmarthen, 8th February 1967', p.69

⁸⁰³ Ibid., 'Reading at Carmarthen, 8th February 1967', p.70.

⁸⁰⁴ *Radio Scripts* (NLW MS22478E), p.9. 'Insert for Spectrum: Dr George Thomas interviewing Vernon Watkins' transmitted 16/02/1967.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid., p.10.

'single moment' that inspired it. Kathleen Raine, I think, correctly identifies this central belief in Watkins's poetry, relating it to Coleridge, an important influence in Watkins's development as a poet:

...It is necessary to point out that a characteristic of Watkins's poetry is the presence of some organizing idea which can only be apprehended poetically, some true cosmic or metaphysical apprehension of what Coleridge calls 'the eternal in and through the temporal.'⁸⁰⁷

This reference to Coleridge recalls especially David Jones's artistic endeavour, but also places Watkins with Muir and Gascoyne in the sense that they each grappled with the poetics of eternity, apprehended in and through the transience of individually experienced time and history.

Thus Kathleen Raine's placing of Vernon Watkins can be seen to coincide with Watkins's own verdict on his poetry, as well as establishing links with Muir, Jones and Gascoyne. I agree with Raine's placing of Watkins, in so far as his Christian rootedness was illuminated by the ancient myths and customs of Wales, as was David Jones's, and Raine's view of Watkins's 'metaphysical imagery' in relation to the twentieth century is apt:

The pre-Christian *Lay of Taliesin* has taken into its continuity the Christian revelation; and Vernon Watkins, himself within the continuity of Taliesin, expresses a vision unambiguously Christological. Throughout all the intricacies of its weaving, every moment of time and atom of space...within his cosmos is oriented within that Revelation. In mood, often even...in his 'metaphysical' imagery, Vernon Watkins calls to mind Vaughan or Herbert or Traherne; but the scope of his vision belongs peculiarly to his own time, within the cosmology of Teilhard de Chardin and the poetry of St. John Perse.⁸⁰⁸

Raine's connecting of Watkins with de Chardin and Perse is important. David Jones, for example, was distrustful of de Chardin's cosmic reach, preferring a more 'creaturely', tactile, approach to creation, yet it is easy to see that for Watkins a 'cosmic' sense appealed to his imagination. Even so, Watkins's poems contain lines such as:

I put my ear to the ground, I plant my foot
Against grey rock...⁸⁰⁹

Watkins does a lot of walking in his poems, his feet planted firmly on footpaths on the cliffs of the Gower peninsula. The sea, the elements and the flora and fauna of his immediate environment, which

⁸⁰⁶ 'A Talk on my Recent Poetry' [BBC stamp 'received 1947'; typewritten manuscript] by Vernon Watkins (NLW MS 22479E), p.25.

⁸⁰⁷ DAS, p.28.

⁸⁰⁸ *Vernon Watkins 1906-1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber & Faber, 1970), p.40. From 'The Poetry of Vernon Watkins' by Kathleen Raine.

he knew intimately and loved, vie for his attention. That he tended to transpose his immediate apprehensions into a metaphysical sphere is at the root of the difficulty of his poetry, a difficulty perceived early in his publishing career.

Early Assessments

On publication of Watkins's first collection of poetry, the earliest assessments and responses to it set the tenor, to varying degrees, for its later and even current critical reception and status. On the fly-leaf of *Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd, and other poems*, there is a short, dry paragraph introducing Watkins:

Mr Vernon Watkins is a Welsh poet whose work hitherto has appeared only in periodicals and in recent anthologies. The only influence apparent upon his poetry is one which he has thoroughly assimilated – that of W.B. Yeats. Otherwise his style differs radically from that of any of his older contemporaries, except for a racial quality which gives it something in common with that of Dylan Thomas. Mr Watkins is undoubtedly a poet with an uncommon sense of rhythm as well as of imagery.⁸¹⁰

The reference to Yeats and the association with Thomas point to a neo-Romantic casting⁸¹¹ and an Eliotic manner of placing a poet by lodging the work firmly by its influences and in its historical literary context. A subsequent reviewer of the collection is more ambitious, writing of: 'the originality of Mr. Watkins's imagination'; of 'the mystery which pours its darkness and strange potency through almost all his verses'; and of '...heavy and complicated folds of myth' obscuring 'the actual.'⁸¹² Another reviewer puts:

He has obviously been influenced by Yeats; there are occasional echoes; there is a symbolical employment of certain images...though the images are not Yeats' images...Watkins' imagery seems to owe nothing to any contemporary poet, and it makes up a whole and rests upon itself.⁸¹³

When the collection was re-published in 1947, Charles Davies again refers to Yeats and Thomas in his review, finally emphasising Watkins's difference:

⁸⁰⁹ CP, p.32. From the poem 'Stone Footing' (*Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and other poems*, 1947).

⁸¹⁰ *Ballad Of The Mari Lwyd and other poems* by Vernon Watkins (Faber and Faber Ltd, October 1941), from the fly-leaf.

⁸¹¹ In his review of CP (Golgonooza Press, 2000), William Wootten writes: '...under the influence of Dylan Thomas, he was an eager perpetrator of New Romanticism.' (*London Review of Books*, 9 August 2001), p.23. From 'In the Graveyard of Verse.' David Gascoyne has also been grouped with the 'New Romantics' and he certainly crossed paths with Dylan Thomas and George Barker. Barker was friendly with Muir and Watkins.

⁸¹² *Times Literary Supplement* (October 25th 1941), 'Poetry and Letters' section.

Poetry to him is the mystic grail itself, vehicle and pattern, message and mood, the quest of 'the Eternal Man.' [Yet, compared with Yeats and Thomas] Watkins is tied to his world in a more intimate manner. The emotional and moral climate of his poetry is different. His tough fibre demands the spiritual discipline which fidelity to origins and circumstance can impose upon his mind.⁸¹⁴

The assertion that Watkins displays 'spiritual discipline' in contrast with Yeats and Thomas is interesting. It relates to the question of 'ego' which I think links his poetry with Muir's, Jones's and Gascoyne's. It also constitutes one of the problems encountered with his (and their) poetry. The quality of self-effacement, which could be said to spring from his kind of 'spiritual discipline', is a mode which makes it difficult for his poetry to be 'heard'; his personal voice is not strong in the way that Yeats and Thomas have an unmistakably strong voice and idiom. It is this difference which I believe helped make Watkins a relatively anomalous poetic figure until Raine numbered him with Muir, Jones and Gascoyne.

As well as the reviews of *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*, some early critical responses sought to evaluate and categorise Watkins's poetry, for example, Stephen Spender's article 'Poetry in 1941' published *Horizon*:

...Vernon Watkins is the new poet who shows signs of taking the most trouble about his writing. His poems are obviously the result of great devotion to the idea of poetry and to hard work, unattached to any ulterior motive...The emotional range of his poems is limited and what, when one is talking of a man's mind, one means by 'feminine'. These are poems of pity, and of passive experience. I doubt whether poetry as isolated as this can strike the reader as more than one of the minor pleasures today, but, as such, the pleasure of Mr. Watkins's work is very real indeed.⁸¹⁵

Spender's feeling that Watkins's emotional range is 'feminine' and his doubts about the 'isolated' quality of Watkins's poetry reveal an uneasiness with Watkins's work which has endured, an uneasiness which might also be applied to some responses to David Jones's painting and poetry in relation to his portrayal of the 'feminine principle'.⁸¹⁶ The attempted renunciation of an ego-driven creativity is shared by Jones and Watkins (as well as, though less obviously, Muir and Gascoyne) and

⁸¹³ *The Listener* (18th December 1941), p.828.

⁸¹⁴ *Wales* (Vol. VIII, No.29, May 1948), p.544.

⁸¹⁵ *Horizon* (Vol. V., No.26, February 1942), p.100.

⁸¹⁶ See section on Jones's painting *Aphrodite in Aulis* and final section on *The Narrows*.

permeates their work. This may explain why some male readers of their poetry (and art) find it 'monkish' or too removed from the world of action, though the contemplative mode is traditional. Perhaps the 'feminine' emanation of creation requires a simultaneous act of self-renunciation? When Watkins's devotion to the themes of death and rebirth (as actual and spiritual events) is taken into account, his poetry can be seen to tend towards female imagery, such as the pregnant mare, with the roundness of the land replicating the fecundity of the womb, the darkness within the seed and the darkness of the cave or tomb promising rebirth, rather than male images that are found, for example, in Donne's and Hopkins's poetry.⁸¹⁷

Robert Herring, writing in the same as period Spender, hails Watkins's arrival with more confidence untroubled by subliminal questions of gender in Watkins's writing:

Vernon Watkins, who stands head and shoulders above other newcomers, is in the Royal Airforce...He is a poet of poems as a whole alertly experienced, carefully conceived, and meticulously wrought. It is possible some will think that sometimes they are overwrought but even while thinking this, those must feel that Watkins works in his own way and speaks his own grave language with authority. Rich in music, he is sustained in intellect and in absorption in his art. His world may incur the charge of being remote but to my mind it is the better for that. It is a real and rocky world, with depth in its shadows and song in its seas and forests.⁸¹⁸

A criticism often levelled at Watkins's poetry is, as with Muir's, its 'remoteness' from the quotidian world. Another is that his poetry is 'overwrought', in so far as Watkins almost always wrote in strict metrical verse forms and had little truck with free or experimental verse. His 'rich music' has been charged with being overly smooth – Watkins, like Muir and Gascoyne believing in the chant-like, incantatory quality of poetry. Like David Jones, Watkins's stature as a 'pure poet' has resulted in his being cast a 'poet's poet.'⁸¹⁹

A point of interest in Watkins's early publishing career was his brief association, as Gascoyne, with the 'Apocalyptic' movement. The book *The White Horseman: prose and verse of the*

⁸¹⁷ In 'Taliesin and the Mockers' Watkins has: 'I stood erect/ At the birth of rivers/ I observed / the designing of flowers.' *CP*, p.318.

⁸¹⁸ *Life and Letters* (Vol.33, April to June 1942), pp.14, 15. From 'Poetry in War' by Robert Herring.

⁸¹⁹ 'Vernon Watkins is perhaps 'a poet's poet': the best of his work, with the possible exception of his ballads, is undiluted pure poetry; like white light or distilled water his invisibility to the common kind and degree of attention is an attribute of this purity.' From 'Intuition's Lightning: The Poetry of Vernon Watkins' by Kathleen Raine, *The Poetry Review* (Vol. LIX, No.1, June 1968), p.47. Andrew Motion, perhaps quoting Raine writes:

new apocalypse edited by J.F.Hendry and Henry Treece published in 1941, included five poems by Watkins. The introduction to the book by G.S.Fraser, describes the 'Apocalyptic' poet thus:

As a person...the New Apocalyptic will be on the side of ... myth, the living and organic expression of human need, against the "object-machine"... To-day, we feel that we can best serve the general human interest by exercising our specific human function, which is to write poetry: to mount guard over the integrity of the imagination and the completeness of man.⁸²⁰

That Watkins was willing to contribute poems to the edition suggests that he was sympathetic to the stated aims of the group, and is significant in so far as Watkins had resisted publication of his poetry until that year. It may have been the result of his friendship with Dylan Thomas who is invoked as a fellow 'Apocalyptic poet...with an organic quality to his work'⁸²¹ in the same introduction and who had persuaded Watkins to publish at all. It does not appear that Watkins had any further contact with the Apocalyptic group. Having found a publisher in Faber and Faber he was able to pursue his own course free from the trappings of any particular group; his relative isolation in Wales may have been a further factor.⁸²² Geoffrey Bullough, after the publication of Watkins's second volume of poetry *The Lamp and the Veil*, nonetheless continues to associate Watkins with the movement, writing in 1949:

Coming to Vernon Watkins we are nearer to the Celtic effervescence of Apocalyptic sound and colour. The two volumes, *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* (1941) and *The Lamp and the Veil* (1945), both revelled in a spate of music and image, the latter with increasing mastery.⁸²³

Thus Watkins's reception by his contemporaries can be shown to have occasioned a placing which includes aspects of a developing poetic identity that criss-crosses with those of Muir, Jones and Gascoyne; key among them are his Celticism, the musical or rhythmical nature of his poetry, his distinctive use of imagery and symbolism, his 'spiritual discipline' and the remote or isolated quality of his writing.

'Vernon Watkins is often referred to as "a poet's poet" – the polite term used to describe someone who isn't read much.' From the review of *CP*, 'Going into the dark', *Times Literary Supplement* (July 3rd 1987), p.716.

⁸²⁰ *The White Horseman: prose and verse of the new apocalypse* ed. J.F.Hendry and Henry Treece (George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1941), pp. 9, 31.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, p.14

⁸²² Stephen Spender wrote: 'Amongst the Apocalyptic writers there appeared, in addition to Henry Treece: G.S.Fraser, J.F.Hendry, Norman McCaig, Nicholas Moore, Vernon Watkins, Tom Scott. Of these, only Treece and Hendry could be said really to have any aims in common.' *Poetry since 1939* (Longman's, 1946), p.58.

⁸²³ *The Trend of Modern Poetry* by Geoffrey Bullough (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1949), p.232. From 'Surrealism, The New Apocalypse.'

Posthumous assessments

After his death in 1967, Canadian critic Jane McCormick published the first bibliography of Watkins's work and criticism on his poetry. She introduces her subject thus:

It is beyond doubt that he was an important poet. He would have been so if only because he alone carried the visionary torch of Vaughan and Traherne, if only because he alone reconciled the imagination of Blake and Yeats to a thoroughly Christian context, or if only because he was able to synthesize Welsh poetry and mythology with Christian faith.⁸²⁴

Here McCormick's evaluation of Watkins can be said to converge with Raine's placing, but with the emphasis on a Christian rather than a Platonic or neo-Platonic foundation. McCormick's justification of her selection of Watkins criticism follows:

Those included show certain tendencies of critics when faced with Watkins' poetry: appreciation, with little analysis, of his technical mastery; inability or disinclination to interpret his cosmic symbols; un-awareness of his knowledge and use of French, German, and Welsh literature; and use without definition of words such as "Welsh" (often meaning Anglo-Welsh), "bardic" (often meaning old-fashioned), and "mystical" (meaning obscure).⁸²⁵

Roland Mathias, author of the only detailed study of Watkins's life and poetry, which he describes nonetheless as an 'introductory study'⁸²⁶, is keenly aware of the failings of critics listed by McCormick. He describes Watkins in his opening statement as 'the most vaguely lauded and the least understood' of 'all the Anglo-Welsh poets of the twentieth century – though he [Watkins] did not relish inclusion in such a string-bag compendium, preferring to call himself *a Welshman and an English poet*.'⁸²⁷ As with William Wootten's quibbles regarding David Jones's status and Patrick Crotty's with Edwin Muir's, Mathias charges 'London critics' with granting Watkins 'consistent eminence without examination.'⁸²⁸ This Mathias attributes in part to Faber's acceptance of Watkins's first collection of poetry, and to T.S. Eliot's continued support of Watkins throughout his poetic career. Mathias apportions some of the blame to Watkins's 'metaphysical approach to poetry, the difficulty of the symbols which he extracted, in part from the darkness and fecundity of personal

⁸²⁴ *West Coast Review* (Spring 1968), p.42. 'Vernon Watkins: A Bibliography' by Jane McCormick.

⁸²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁸²⁶ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.2.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.1.

experience, in part from his immense acquaintance with the poetry of many ages, and what P.J.

Kavanagh called in *The Guardian* of 3rd December 1970 his earnest *whoring after intangibles*.⁸²⁹

These difficulties are strikingly similar to those encountered in assessments of Muir's, Jones's and Gascoyne's work, perhaps contributing to their 'outsider' status. In 1974 Mathias maintained that:

Vernon Watkins remains largely un-understood, both in his preoccupations as a poet and in the symbolic forms he used to express them.⁸³⁰

Mathias emphasises the scholarly barriers that Watkins's poetry presents:

'...His grounding in Classical literature and mythology, his reading in English literature and in the literatures of Germany and France (to limit the claim to those European literatures with which he was best acquainted), were of such an order as would easily separate him from all but readers of real persistence.'⁸³¹

This is in contrast with Raine who acknowledges Watkins's learning, but considers it of secondary importance to the barrier that the inspired and imaginative traditional 'source' of his art presents.

Mathias counters that:

...it would not be unfair to say that the tradition of poetry in which he [Watkins] had been baptised was largely romantic and secular...⁸³²

Even so, Mathias places Watkins, as Raine had, as:

...one of the very few twentieth century representatives of the great metaphysical tradition in English poetry.⁸³³

Mathias also casts Watkins as a *sui generis* poet of his generation, much in the way that Jones and Gascoyne have been:

In his poetry Vernon Watkins remained singular, alone.⁸³⁴

As well as occasioning the first bibliography of his work, at Watkins's death a number of obituaries appeared in the press. The *Telegraph* obituarist provides:

Vernon Phillips Watkins, 61, the Welsh poet ...drew on Welsh material and legend for his works, but was regarded as being essentially an English poet in the great tradition.⁸³⁵

⁸²⁹ Ibid., p.1.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., p.2.

⁸³¹ Ibid., p.2.

⁸³² Ibid., p.30.

⁸³³ Ibid., p.2.

⁸³⁴ Ibid., p.30

⁸³⁵ *The Daily Telegraph* (10th October 1967), p.16.

The *Times* obituarist, Philip Larkin, gives a more detailed assessment with interesting links in view of Raine's grouping:

Although Vernon Watkins was a contemporary of the thirties' poets, he stood apart from them both in his work and as a poetic personality...His first book, *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*, was recommended by T.S. Eliot, who immediately discerned Watkins's metrical skill and intensity of feeling, and it bore many indications of the writers he found most deeply inspiring – the French symbolists, Hölderlin and Rilke, the ancient poets of Wales, but above all W.B. Yeats...In this and in subsequent collections...Vernon Watkins showed himself a latterday symbolist, concerned with the celebration of both spiritual and physical life, redeemed from pure aestheticism by his strongly Christian outlook.⁸³⁶

The references to the French symbolists, Hölderlin and Rilke immediately recall Gascoyne and Muir, and the notion of 'redemption' from 'pure aestheticism' by Christianity is central to the works of all four poets, present as a tension between their understanding of the nature of Art in relation to Christianity in the twentieth century.⁸³⁷ Finally, the obituary appearing in the Welsh newspaper the *Western Mail* quotes Aneurin Talfan Davies:

In a largely materialistic and irreligious world, he proclaimed the Christian virtues in his poetry and was successor in that line of Welsh metaphysical poets, Donne, Herbert and Vaughan.⁸³⁸

It may be remarked that the obituarists confidently cite Watkins's Christianity as central to his poetic endeavour, where it is entirely absent in the early notices of his poetry. This could be a reflection of Watkins's description of his purpose in the many poetry readings he gave in the years immediately preceding his death, his own retrospective shaping. Roland Mathias remarks on this:

A life, even more than a poem, may be shaped by belief: Vernon Watkins was unenthusiastic...about explaining his poems himself and positively hostile to critics who attempted to do so. Such accounts as he gave in his mature years of his poetic progress undoubtedly simplify and telescope the stages of his work and belief, and the firm, if unorthodox, Christian poet that he became looked back and shaped his view of the function

⁸³⁶ *The Times* (10th October 1967), p.10

⁸³⁷ Vernon Watkins wrote: 'Any reverence for beauty or for poetry in the abstract is, I think, an enemy of poetry itself.' *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.58.

⁸³⁸ *The Western Mail* (10th October, 1967), p.9.

of the poet no less. This is not to imply dishonesty: it was a gradual self-convincing process of the sort to which most people are subject as they grow older.⁸³⁹

As with Edwin Muir, Vernon Watkins was similarly 'a man of considerable reserve' who 'changed the terms of his experience for a more public consumption.'⁸⁴⁰ Like Muir, Jones and Gascoyne, Watkins had suffered a mental breakdown which resulted in a period of hospitalisation.⁸⁴¹ It also precipitated a formative change in his approach to writing poetry. In later years, Watkins named this breakdown a 'complete revolution of sensibility' offering only the following passage by way of elucidation:

This is only to say that I composed in the shadow of time. The act of writing itself was an heroic act, a protest against the tyranny of time. So it went on until my twenty-third year. I had read Blake's words:

Each man is in his Spectre's power
Until the arrival of that hour
When his Humanity awake
And cast his Spectre into the lake;

and the Eternity of which Blake spoke suddenly seemed to me more accessible than time itself. I experienced an upheaval which made my work hitherto worthless, a complete revolution of sensibility. It no longer seemed to me interesting that a poem should be remembered; its sole interest was that it should be valid.⁸⁴²

Roland Mathias provides a detailed account of Watkins's breakdown which I will explore more fully in the following section, considering its relevance to Watkins's development as poet and in relation to Raine's placing.

The year following Watkins's death saw the publication of 'Four Tributes' in *The Anglo-Welsh Review*. These take the form of personal reminiscence rather than critical appreciation, and are helpful to my purpose as they describe Watkins's personal traits, which I believe further consolidate an association with Muir, Jones and Gascoyne. The first describes Watkins thus:

By nature a shy and introspective person, who had known pain and misunderstanding in his life, Vernon's response to people was governed by extremely sensitive antennae. The social

⁸³⁹ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.46

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.46, 47.

⁸⁴¹ 'It is bad enough now, but in the 1920s a mental breakdown was hardly more respectable than a prison sentence. Vernon's illness was never alluded to outside his family, though the officials of Lloyds Bank were, of course, kept fully informed.' *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.19.

Vernon was urbane and witty, but with the shutters of the self only partly open. When they were fully opened, and the man himself shone through, his warmth and magnanimous spirit made an indelible mark...One of life's privileges was to sit with him...and discuss his favourite poets...Blake, Shelley (in whom he considered there was some shallowness), Keats, Dante, Rilke and Heine were old friends, and dearest of all, Yeats, who was to Vernon the supreme lyric poet of our time...Vernon was a deeply religious person in mind and attitude...He always considered himself to be a religious poet, but in his humility would confess that he was no theologian...He always held (though not in public) that a good poem was divinely inspired...Vernon the poet was Vernon the man. He wrote as he lived, with unflinching dignity and integrity, with compassion and exaltation, seeking wisdom in depth and a fuller understanding of the mystery of life.⁸⁴³

This passage recalls some descriptions of Edwin Muir which have been charged with being hagiographic. I find it striking that in obituaries and in memoirs recalling all four poets there are references to their 'warmth', 'integrity', 'magnanimity', 'gentleness' and even 'lovable-ness'⁸⁴⁴.

Another of the four tributes, by Neville Masterman, adds further, quirkier attributes:

I did come to know him fairly well as the father of a young family in that remote Pennard house, approached in winter through wind and mud...I was intensely aware of a special atmosphere, of a unique personal vision very difficult to describe and not always easy to comprehend...Though apparently ignoring many of the demands of modern civilisation, he was...very sociable and was an excellent and sensitive host. One never chewed over any of the gossip of the day and he always steered the conversation away from envy, hatred and malice or any uncharitableness. His humour, like his poetry, often based on a paradoxical and slightly bizarre way of looking at the world, expressed by a very personal use of words, was always delightful. In some ways, he preserved many of the characteristics of an English public schoolboy: conversation was a game which avoided both serious and unpleasant matters.⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴² *Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS22480 E), p.34. 'Poetry and the Audience', handwritten manuscript, December 1963.

⁸⁴³ *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (Vol.17, No.39, Summer 1968), pp.7, 8, 9. Tribute by Eryl Davies.

⁸⁴⁴ Michael Hamburger wrote: 'I shall never be able to read his poems without hearing his voice and seeing him as he was – one of the most admirable and lovable men it has been my good fortune to know.' *A Mug's Game: An Autobiography* by Michael Hamburger (Carcenet, 1973), p.264.

⁸⁴⁵ *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (Vol.17, No.39 Summer 1968), pp. 12,13.

Again similarities with Muir are traceable and in this passage Watkins's apparent old-fashioned-ness and oblique, school-boyish wit might be compared with Jones's. Masterman refers to Watkins's literary influences, a list that could as well belong to Gascoyne:

Certainly he often fished for inspiration in distant and rather forbidding waters, from Dante, Kierkegaard, Hölderlin and the German romantics, for example. These writers helped him to develop the numinous characteristics in his poetry.⁸⁴⁶

These personal and fond tributes were followed in 1970 by a collection of essays and poems commemorating Watkins's life and work by critics and fellow poets more illustrious, including Kathleen Raine, R.S. Thomas, Michael Hamburger, Hugo Williams, Marianne Moore, David Wright and Philip Larkin, published by Faber and Faber. Andrew Motion describes the 'festschrift' as bearing 'witness on page after page to what Michael Hamburger calls "an almost mystical creed" that set him [Watkins] apart from his contemporaries.'⁸⁴⁷

In view of Watkins being regarded as 'apart from his contemporaries', I consider his acquaintance with Philip Larkin illuminating in its unexpectedness, since Larkin is described, for example, as 'the hard core of the Movement'⁸⁴⁸, the antithesis of poets writing in the Imaginative tradition. The response of one very different poet to another, consolidates to a degree Raine's view. Of their 're-encounter', as Larkin describes the revival of his correspondence with Watkins after a silence of a number of years, Larkin writes:

We resumed our debate on Lawrence versus Yeats, only now it was Hardy versus Yeats: 'Hardy's poems are often right in relation to the fact and anecdote and right because they have a kind of aura belonging to his sensibility, but they are often wrong, because they leave the imagination with misgiving, remorse, the opposite of imagination's food. I'm not clear, but it's midnight...' By now I had settled into a poetic tradition very different from Vernon's, and found much of what he said unacceptable...Despite his kindness, his whimsicality, his friendliness, there was something hard and brilliant about his attachment to poetry: he never hesitated. It was something there, tangible and palpable, commanding instant and unending allegiance...In Vernon's presence poetry seemed like a living stream, in which one had only

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid., pp.13,14.

⁸⁴⁷ *Times Literary Supplement* (July 3rd 1987), p.716. From 'Going into the dark' by Andrew Motion.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid., p.716.

to dip the vessel of one's devotion. He made it clear how one could, in fact, 'live by poetry'; it was a vocation, at once difficult as sainthood and easy as breathing.⁸⁴⁹

Larkin's 'living stream' could as well be Raine's (and Watkins's) 'ancient springs'. Clearly, Larkin did not share Watkins's certainty regarding the source of poetic inspiration, which Raine naturally did. That poetry should be regarded by Watkins (in Larkin's eyes) as 'a vocation ...difficult as sainthood' relates to the 'saintliness' and 'monkish remoteness'⁸⁵⁰ attributed to Muir's life and poetry as well as David Jones who is said to have 'nurtured ideas of becoming a monk'.⁸⁵¹ Sebastian Barker wrote of the 'monk-like existence'⁸⁵² of David Gascoyne. It might be said that each of the poets discovered a paradoxical fullness of life in asceticism and withdrawal necessary for writing poetry.

Michael Hamburger, like Larkin influenced by Watkins early in his career, similarly came to diverge from Watkins in his understanding of poetry. Hamburger's main caveat is with Watkins's strict division of his daily working life from the act of writing poetry:

It was Vernon's single-mindedness, his utter refusal to make concessions in either sphere – by accepting promotion in the bank or by writing anything that he did not wish and need to write – that made his image exemplary. Yet Vernon accepted the division that tormented me. I did not want those spheres to be wholly separate; and I wanted my poems to draw on both of them, even if it meant sacrificing intensity to a wider awareness of heterogeneous, recalcitrant realities.⁸⁵³

The idea that poetry could reflect and be part of daily life is one that does not sit readily with any of the four poets. Yet each of the poets could be said to perceive poetry as the ground of reality, or at least an effort to relate the essence of the 'heterogeneous, recalcitrant realities' as they perceived them. In this effort, Watkins like Muir, Jones and Gascoyne appears a withdrawn, intense figure. Yet Watkins applied his intensity to the practical demands of his art and was instrumental in the typing and publishing of David Jones's work for its American audience, as well as his more famously documented industriousness in the case of Dylan Thomas. Despite his physical isolation on the Gower Peninsula in Wales, I would argue that Watkins position is pivotal in Raine's assembling of the four

⁸⁴⁹ *Vernon Watkins 1906 – 1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber and Faber, 1970), p.32. From 'An Encounter and a Re-encounter' by Philip Larkin, March 1968.

⁸⁵⁰ *The Times Literary Supplement* (01/01/93), p.6. From 'The Vision Thing' by Patrick Crotty.

⁸⁵¹ *David Jones The Maker Unmade* by Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel (Seren Press, 1995, 2003), p.259.

⁸⁵² Obituary from *The Independent* (28/11/2001), by Sebastian Barker.

⁸⁵³ *Vernon Watkins 1906 – 1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber and Faber, 1970), p.49. From 'Vernon Watkins, A Memoir' by Michael Hamburger.

poets. His friendship with David Jones, though begun late⁸⁵⁴ demonstrates a fundamental affinity, though their poetry is quite different at a stylistic level. Their underlying beliefs concerning the nature and writing of poetry were foundationally the same.⁸⁵⁵ David Gascoyne's review of Watkins's *Collected Poetry* reveals Gascoyne's admiration and essential understanding of Watkins's poetic purpose, albeit a late discovery.⁸⁵⁶ Edwin Muir corresponded at least once with Watkins, a letter to Vernon Watkins written in November 1957, from the Alan Clodd Library, is listed as:

Enquiring as to the fate of two poems submitted in September, and congratulating Watkins on the Guinness Prize 'which you well deserve.'⁸⁵⁷

Another letter held in the same collection is from Willa Muir to Vernon Watkins, 'written shortly after Edwin's death, thanking for condolences. "The time for comfort is not yet".'⁸⁵⁸ It seems a degree of acquaintance existed between the poets, but other than these letters, I have not traced any further correspondence, nor does Watkins refer to Muir in his notebooks and manuscripts held in the National Library of Wales. Watkins's literary 'influences' could be said to be closer to Gascoyne's, other than Hölderlin who appealed to all three, yet I find that his poetry is closer to Muir's in style and form, in the quality of his writing as well as choice of subject matter and the deliberate limitation of their poetry to circumscribed themes.⁸⁵⁹ Over the years Watkins's poetic and personal reputation can be seen to be gravitating towards a Rainean placing. In 1963 John Press wrote:

⁸⁵⁴ 'David Jones and Vernon Watkins were both, as artists, concerned with what is permanent in life; their intention was to bring to the present whatever has had meaning in the past...It is this concern to explore the past both in itself and as it relates to the present that is the source of the close affinity between them as writers...It is not surprising that, though they saw each other rarely, they should have been friends: it is only surprising that the friendship should have begun so late in their lives.' *DJL*, p.7. From the 'Foreword' by Gwen Watkins.

⁸⁵⁵ Like Jones, Watkins wrote: 'The artist is a maker. He makes, in response to something deeper than himself.' *The Listener*, (January 7th 1965), p.23. From 'New Year 1965'.

⁸⁵⁶ 'A belated notice of this exceptionally rich and rewarding volume of...poetry may well begin...by saluting the courageous enterprise of the Golgonooza Press in producing it so opportunely...Admirers of Vernon Watkins may well be astonished that his original publishers should, since the end of the Eliot era, seem to have lost interest in making his work available to the poetry-reading public...Unfortunately, current trends of criticism and appreciation appear to be incapable of arriving at a proper estimate of the lasting value of a poet of Watkins' stature. Anything like 'the bardic tradition' is apt at present to be regarded with misapprehension as representing an outdated mode of idealism. At no time either before or since his death could Watkins be thought of as a fashionable or popular poet...' *David Gascoyne Selected Prose 1934 - 1996* ed. Roger Scott (London: Enitharmon Press, 1998), pp. 349, 350. From Gascoyne's review of *CP*. It is noticeable here that Gascoyne supports Kathleen Raine's reading of Watkins's poetry.

⁸⁵⁷ Letter owned by Maggs Rare Books, CL106420. The excerpt is on their website database. Watkins had been awarded the first Guinness Prize for poetry for 'The Tributary Seasons'.

⁸⁵⁸ Maggs Rare Books, CL106444.

⁸⁵⁹ 'This dogged pursuit of a particular theme - no matter how elusive the theme might be - can't avoid seeming dreary. One has to suppose that even people who share Watkins's view of experience might find it monotonous. And for those who don't find his beliefs returning an echo, the charge of repetitiveness is reinforced...' Andrew Motion writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* (3rd July 1987), p.717. While I agree that Watkins, like Muir, restricted himself to certain themes and vocabulary. There is a development in his poetry where repetition creates layers of depth and resonance. The poems become meditations.

Vernon Watkins, George Barker, David Gascoyne, Thomas Blackburn, W.S. Graham, and David Wright, dissimilar as they are in their religious convictions and in their view of the world, hold in common with Kathleen Raine and with one another certain beliefs about the nature of poetry which are reflected in their verse.⁸⁶⁰

In 1977 the editorial for the special Vernon Watkins edition of *Poetry Wales* has:

Vernon Watkins thought and wrote in the tradition of Blake, Yeats, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard, and surely Mallarmé and Stevens.⁸⁶¹

Finally, in 2001, William Wootten casts Watkins thus:

...He is the serene Watkins, walking the Gower peninsula in a cloud of unworldly Christianity, Yeats and (very) late Symbolism; he is also the worthy Watkins the man who spent his adult life working in a bank, refusing all promotion while perfecting his poetic craft. Good behaviour and a friendship with Philip Larkin have allowed the image of Watkins as a hard-working, pleasant and largely irrelevant anachronism to prevail...forgetting how, in the 1930s and 1940s...he was an eager perpetrator of New Romanticism.⁸⁶²

Each of these extracts has resonances with similar statements on Muir and Gascoyne particularly; the case of David Jones is more complex. Even so, in a note in the *National Eisteddfod Catalogue 1964*, Watkins's description of Jones's work could easily be applied to his own:

David Jones has exhibited in his two great books *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata* a technique where power and delicacy serve each other, and, by strictness of cadence, obey a controlling vision. One property of this vision is to see as contemporary what is ancient and to see as ancient what is before his eyes. It is a religious vision projecting a symbolic art, and through this art...shines his love of man and all that is precious to him...⁸⁶³

⁸⁶⁰ *Trends in British Poetry since the Second World War* by John Press (Oxford University Press, 1963), p.51.

⁸⁶¹ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.5.

⁸⁶² *London Review of Books* (9 August 2001), p.23. From 'In the Graveyard of Verse' by William Wootten

⁸⁶³ *DJL*, p.11.

The Making of the Poet: Education, Religion and Livelihood

Watkins's dedication to the art of poetry might lead one to believe that, in Yeats's phrase, he had chosen 'perfection of the work' over that of the life. Philip Larkin, visiting Watkins after the war, in his cliff-top home in Gower, where he lived with his wife Gwen, and five children, declared otherwise: 'his house... was smallish and chalet-like, but friendly and full of character – full, too, of books and children... It was no longer possible to think of his having rejected "perfection of the life" in exchange for literary mastery.'⁸⁶⁴

Vernon Watkins, like David Gascoyne was the son of a bank manager. Like Gascoyne, Watkins's father took an indulgent attitude to his sensitive, literary son until his eighteenth year when Vernon left Cambridge, without consulting his parents, wishing instead to travel to Italy to pursue a poetic vocation. While Gascoyne was able to follow a similar desire and live in Paris, at the age of seventeen, on the proceeds of his novel *Opening Day*, Watkins had no such financial independence. At the age of eighteen, Watkins then found himself working for his father's bank in a Cardiff branch. He was to remain a bank clerk for the rest of his adult life, apart from the years of service during the Second World War. Thus Andrew Motion, reviewing *The Collected Poems* writing of Watkins's 'neglect' as a poet and attributing such perceived neglect to 'the unavoidable price of his truth to his own vision', suggests:

One way of redeeming Watkins from this neglect would be to socialize the work by showing how it related to the life. The more dramatic the career, the more the poems might benefit.

But in the sense that biographers use the phrase, Watkins didn't have much of a life.⁸⁶⁵

Compared with Gascoyne's life, David Jones's and to a degree Edwin Muir's, Vernon Watkins's life does appear uneventful, yet the casualness of Motion's remark immediately, perhaps deliberately, prompts objections, such as Richard Ramsbotham's:

A huge and detailed biography is in fact contained within Watkins's poems. 'The Muse of poetry is timeless,' wrote Watkins, adding: 'but a poet lives in time. His work is only complete if he observes two fidelities, one to his own experience and his own time, the other to the timeless and heroic truths with which he feels an imperceptible bond.'...All of

⁸⁶⁴ *NSP*, p.xxiii

⁸⁶⁵ *Times Literary Supplement* (July 3rd 1987), p.716. 'Going into the dark' by Andrew Motion.

Watkins's poems bear this personal relation, leaving within his work a sustained and intimate record of experience.⁸⁶⁶

This is not exactly a refutation of Motion's cavil since 'a huge and detailed biography' and 'a sustained and intimate record of experience' are phrases which do not in themselves imply that the 'biography' or the 'experience' are engaging or interesting. However, what exactly does Motion mean by his term 'socialize', for surely one's reading of a poem is governed also by the world one brings to a poem? I, like Ramsbotham, find an intimacy of thought and feeling in Watkins's poetry; his is not for me an alien or closed record of experience, and those experiences are vivid and absorbing. I think a necessary addition to Ramsbotham's refutation (no doubt implied in it) is that Watkins's poems reveal an exceptionally intense, vibrant inner life – his eye for the natural world is extraordinary and his religious sensibility profound. If Watkins's poems 'write the life' they operate at the level of Watkins's imaginative life only, his daily routine of running to catch the bus to get to work, doing whatever bank clerks do, cashing up at the end of the day and catching the bus home does not figure – as Motion rightly implies. R.S. Thomas in his elegy for Watkins probably comes closest to a true approximation of the 'problem' of the relationship between Watkins's apparently humdrum life and exalted art:

The Bank Clerk
It was not the shillings he heard,
But the clinking of the waves
In the gullies and rocks of
Pwll Du. Turning them over
To the customers at the counter
He offered them the rich change
Of his mind, the real coinage
Of language for their dry cheques.

Punctually in the evenings
At Pennard he returned to
The poem's sum, wrestling with it
For delight, but with the sea's
Care, that on the blank sand
Tots itself.

Clerks, businessmen,
Grouzers about the cost
Of a poet, he has balanced honourably
His accounts, but – what about you?⁸⁶⁷

Thomas's poem seems to me to encapsulate the figure of Watkins as mature poet, imagining the poet's seemingly monotonous existence enlivened by the subjective, giving coherence, integrity and a

⁸⁶⁶ *NSP*, p.xxiii

⁸⁶⁷ *Vernon Watkins 1906 – 1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber and Faber, 1970), p.34

certain grace to mundane reality. Watkins may have had an ordinary job, but he was an exceptional man if only his store of literary knowledge is taken into account, aside from his poetic character and gifts. Watkins's childhood and youth should also be considered and the crucial 'revolution of sensibility' which took place in his twenty-third year.

Vernon Watkins was born in Maesteg, Glamorganshire in June 1906 to William and Sarah Watkins. He was their second child with an older and a younger sister. The younger sister, Dorothy, provides an absorbing and insightful narrative, 'Recollected...with all the bias of total affection'⁸⁶⁸ in her unpublished biography of Vernon's 'early years.' The brief lives Dorothy paints of Watkins's parents reveals a certain unusualness, aside from the more expected but nonetheless important fact that:

Both parents were Welsh, with no hint of alien ancestry on either side.⁸⁶⁹

William Watkins was the son of an iron works manager and 'Welsh was the first language in his home.'⁸⁷⁰ Losing both his parents by the age of seventeen, William 'through hard work and intelligence'⁸⁷¹ gained a position as clerk with Lloyds Bank and became a manager before he was thirty. Sarah (Sally) Watkins (née Phillips), also a first language Welsh speaker, is described as 'a remarkable girl'⁸⁷² with a 'love of literature, especially poetry'⁸⁷³ and a 'gift for languages [which] so impressed her...headmistress that at the age of eighteen' she became 'a pupil-teacher at a German school in the Regensbürg mountains.'⁸⁷⁴

Nowadays this would seem a very normal plan, but at the end of the 19th century, in remote West Wales, it was an adventure of unprecedented boldness...Sally spent the next two years in Germany...She returned to Wales speaking German fluently and with a love of its literature which she retained all her life.⁸⁷⁵

William and Sarah were married in 1902 and settled in Swansea in 1912 where they remained until the end of the First World War.

⁸⁶⁸ *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.1.

⁸⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.1, 2.

⁸⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.2.

Vernon was born into a stable, happy, middle class home where there was never any 'shortage of books'⁸⁷⁶, to parents – a mother in particular – who valued literature. As with David Jones, Dorothy reveals:

The first and greatest influence on Vernon as a little boy were the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table which were very well told in a book called 'The King who Never Died'.⁸⁷⁷

Roland Mathias, in his biographical account of Watkins's childhood literary influences adds:

...But of the deeper heritage of myth and history obtainable from the Welsh classics he learned only from his father's very occasional readings of translations from Aneirin, Taliesin, and Llywarch Hen. Whatever he read afterwards had to fight for a place in a mind and interest already fully stocked with material 'of greater importance'.⁸⁷⁸

In terms of Watkins's character Dorothy writes:

Only his heightened imagination and sensitivity marked him out from any other small boy of his age. Vernon read fluently well before he was five. His interest in poetry must have been almost immediate.⁸⁷⁹

In Watkins's notes and in various interviews he too refers to the early beginnings of his poetic life:

I think it was very early – rather like Dylan Thomas who, I think, at 7 or 8 started writing poetry and was extraordinarily precocious. I also started extremely early, without being very precocious. I think my verse remained very derivative until I was 19 or 20. But I certainly started when I was about 7. And by the age of 9 I was collecting all the English poets I could find as presents to my parents. We had some in the house but I was filling in the gaps. Poetry occupied me continually, right up to the time I went away to school. Then through that time and through Cambridge.⁸⁸⁰

It appears that Watkins's early affinity for poetry was not discouraged in any way by his parents, as neither were David Gascoyne nor David Jones (in his case demonstrating an early aptitude for art). Muir's parents, according to the poet, had reservations. Where Watkins's childhood diverges most markedly from those of Muir, Jones and Gascoyne is in his parents' decision to send him away to

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid., p.3.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid., p.3

⁸⁷⁸ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.10.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid., p.4.

⁸⁸⁰ *Radio Scripts* (NLW MS22478E), p.128. 'Insert for Spectrum: Dr George Thomas interviewing Vernon Watkins' transmitted 16/02/1967.

school – firstly to a Preparatory school in Sussex, then to Repton in Derbyshire. Of the four poets, Watkins alone received the English public school education that Kathleen Raine regards with a kind of reverence⁸⁸¹ and which both Muir and Jones lamented their lack of possessing. At prep school Watkins was ‘as happy as a lark’⁸⁸² and in later years ‘always spoke of the school with great affection.’⁸⁸³ Mathias adds concerning the same:

The only evidence left by Vernon Watkins himself concerns his poetic development. He had taken with him some of the ‘poets’ he had acquired and his custom was to spend a considerable time on each poet in turn, by whom for that period he was dominated. But, he records, ‘my ambition was so shallow that I usually identified the longest poem as the greatest and ... I counted every night the lines of the Arthurian epic I was writing.’⁸⁸⁴

In 1920, Watkins went to Repton. Mathias finds William and Sarah Watkins’s choice of school worthy of, ‘a little speculation’⁸⁸⁵. It was ‘a school which in foundation and regime belonged to the Established Church,’⁸⁸⁶ while Watkins’s parents were both of the Welsh non-conformist tradition:

At Repton the son of firmly Congregational parents was confirmed into the Church of England, which he never thereafter left.⁸⁸⁷

Aside from religious affiliation, at Repton Watkins’s obstinate devotion to poetry continued to develop:

Poetry absorbed him...Keats and Shelley were the strongest early poetic influences...He read extremely widely, though rarely any prose, apart from the lives and letters of the poets he loved. In fact his mind was so full of poetry that there seemed little room left in it for more mundane matters. He often seemed to be living in a more lofty world than the one around him and remained impractical and absent-minded all his life.⁸⁸⁸

⁸⁸¹ ‘He lacked nothing the finest English culture (that Public School education which in another generation will have ceased to exist) could impart to an heir of the Bards’. *The Poetry Review* (Vol. LIX, No.1, June 1968), p.52. From ‘Intuition’s Lightning’ by Kathleen Raine.

⁸⁸² *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.8.

⁸⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁸⁸⁴ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.12.

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁸⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13. Neville Masterman observes: ‘Anglicanism provided a new ingredient and its liturgical attitude a means of expressing what was in part a mystical inheritance derived from elsewhere. Christianity, with its archetypal dogmas, was indeed a *given* part of his background and inheritance and a natural theme for his poems.’ *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (Vol.17, No.39, Summer 1968), p.13.

⁸⁸⁸ *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.11. Watkins adds: ‘...I wanted, at that early stage, to be ‘numbered among the English poets.’ *Vernon Watkins: Notes for Poetry Readings* Undated, typewritten manuscript at end of folder (NLW MS 22480E), p.78.

In Mathias's record of Watkins at Repton he observes that Watkins 'survived...because he depended less on the 'reality' of his surroundings than did his fellows'.⁸⁸⁹ It seems from conversations with Watkins, Mathias has gleaned that life at Repton, in the first two years was less than idyllic.⁸⁹⁰ Even so, Watkins was to flourish at the school, especially in Modern languages and mathematics, as well as finding a 'number of congenial friends,'

Among them Christopher Isherwood and Edward Upward became his immediate heroes...Both boys showed a contempt for conventional standards and took a perverse delight in flouting authority. Their influence on Vernon was not a good one...Though our parents had always encouraged us to think for ourselves and to argue freely on every subject under the sun, family life in Swansea conformed to quite conventional standards in its social aspects, so that a dichotomy was soon established between Vernon's worlds of home and school.⁸⁹¹

Mathias attaches considerable importance to this 'dichotomy' and Watkins's sixth form years at Repton. In Mathias's view, those last years represented for Watkins the equivalent lost Eden or Golden Age that Orkney represented for Muir, or the authentic community of Roman Christendom represented for Jones; for example. This view Mathias bases on letters written by Watkins to his friend Eric Falk in 1923:

In May of that year...he reported himself as enjoying a 'Rupert Brooke craze'. His whole attitude, indeed, was romantic very nearly in the Brooke manner: although devoid of fleshly consummation, it was, at least one of his friends thought, so irresponsible as to endanger his chances of getting a study in his final year. But Vernon was not interested in such considerations...he insisted he was 'right, right'. On 24th June he wrote... 'This place is wonderful; & so, also, is everybody and everything in it. In a year, I have absolutely changed my attitude to everyone. They're all wonderful now, & I love everybody ... I used to criticize

⁸⁸⁹ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.15

⁸⁹⁰ 'Like all juniors he was seriously bullied, and the absence of supervision...was a traumatic experience. When the green baize door closed on the Housemaster's domain, the world of boys took over and the homosexuality and bullying characteristic of most Public Schools of the day went unchecked. Vernon used to say in later years that only the strong stomach muscles developed on the cliffs of Gower had saved him both from submission to unwelcome advances and from the consequences of irresponsible horseplay.' *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), pp.14, 15.

⁸⁹¹ *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), pp.12, 13.

people so much; and now, with a few loathsome exceptions, everybody's being glorious...

We've come back from chapel & I can't think of anyone except Rupert Brooke.⁸⁹²

As well as rhapsodizing on Brooke, Watkins refers to his own poetic endeavour in another letter to

Falk:

I spend most of my Sundays this term writing poetry, at which I am improving considerably...I've been reading heaps of modern poems lately & they've been doing me a lot of good.⁸⁹³

In his final year at Repton, Watkins was awarded three school prizes, one a poetry prize, the others both for French and German. These Mathias considers of secondary importance to the final impression Repton made on Watkins psychologically and emotionally:

...He was, during his last four terms at Repton, romantically and uncritically happy: whatever academic advantages he had obtained from the School, the vision he carried away was in no sense academic – it was a vision of eternal, unscarred youth, bathed in poetry and love.⁸⁹⁴

In further support of his argument Mathias refers to the poem 'Revisited Waters', written by Watkins for Repton's Quartercentenary in 1957. In the sequence Mathias finds 'the poetic preoccupations of Vernon Watkins's life:'

...they make no concessions to scene or precise memory and they are totally lacking in direct autobiographical detail. Above all, they fail to make the reader aware that Repton lost was the true genesis of many of these preoccupations...there are images of the schoolboy for whom poetry was the only shield against impermanence.

Verse could for me redeem
What nature would devour,
And often by that stream
I felt a secret power.⁸⁹⁵

Mathias argues that it was the 'grief'⁸⁹⁶ of 'Repton lost' that brought baptism on Watkins's poetry, that Watkins's search for a 'shield against impermanence', initially discovered in the powers of

⁸⁹² *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.16.

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.17. Dorothy records: 'W.B. Yeats dominated his adolescent years and strongly influenced his own poetry. He never lost his admiration for him and knew most of his poetry by heart. It is doubtful whether anyone this century had a more detailed knowledge of Yeats's work...As his knowledge of French and German grew he read widely in both languages and soon started work on translations, first from Ronsard and Baudelaire, then Heine, Hölderlin and Rilke joined his poetic heroes.' (*The Early Years*), p.14.

⁸⁹⁴ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.19.

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19.

artifice and pagan myths, was ultimately found, though neither uncomplicatedly nor easily, in the immortality promised by the Christian faith, which required the 'death' of poetic ambition in terms of gaining fame or a worldly reputation.⁸⁹⁷

Mathias attaches great significance to the lost 'golden age' of Repton in his analysis of Watkins's breakdown two years after leaving Cambridge, in so far as Watkins could not accept the academic ethos of Cambridge, and equally was unfit for life as a bank clerk. He attributes these problems to Watkins's 'divorce from reality' and 'his failure to mature.'⁸⁹⁸ The view that Watkins was 'divorced from reality' is supported, to a certain extent, by Watkins in his notes:

At the age of twenty-one, the poems and letters of Keats, and the poetry of Shelley, Milton and Blake so governed me that the everyday world scarcely existed for me except as a touchstone for protest and indignation.⁸⁹⁹

Even so, Watkins only ever refers to what Mathias deems a 'breakdown' as 'a metaphysical leap'⁹⁰⁰ or, as has been noted, 'a revolution of sensibility'. He seems always to have regarded his youthful crisis in the light of his poetic development and not of personal or psychological import. But then for Watkins his life was one with his poetry and therefore could not accommodate a division between the two when regarding the events surrounding his illness. Mathias, as might be expected by the nature of his study, presents a factually detailed account which is fascinating, Watkins's crisis bearing marked similarities to David Gascoyne's.

After the 'holocaust of the academic boat',⁹⁰¹ on his decision to leave Cambridge, Watkins's father secured him a position as junior clerk in a Cardiff branch of Lloyd's bank, which he took up in the autumn of 1925. Banking was, in a sense, the best choice of profession available:

If he had to earn his living it would be in a way which made least demand upon him, so that he would be free to concentrate his main energy on writing poetry. With his quick mind and facility for figures, banking presented no problems to Vernon...⁹⁰²

⁸⁹⁶ *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.120.

⁸⁹⁷ A diary entry of 1962 reads: 'More interested that the words be sung continually by angels than received favourably by men.' *New Welsh Review* (Vol.XIII No.II, Autumn 2000), p.13. From 'A Poet in Miniature', Vernon Watkins's previously unpublished miniature diaries.

⁸⁹⁸ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias, p.23. Dorothy's verdict is similar: 'Vernon was over eighteen when he left school, but he looked a great deal younger. Although intellectually advanced he was in most ways very immature. His absorption in poetry and total lack of knowledge of all practical aspects of real life made him quite unfit to cope with the demands of self-sufficiency in university life.' (*The Early Years*), p.15.

⁸⁹⁹ *Vernon Watkins 1906-1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber & Faber, 1970), p.16. From the introduction by Gwen Watkins, quoting Watkins.

⁹⁰⁰ *Vernon Watkins: Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS22480E) p.78. 'A Note on my own Poetry' [Typewritten, undated]

On the other hand, taking up lodgings in a 'highly respectable but dull residential suburb'⁹⁰³ could not have been congenial to one of Watkins's upbringing and temperament; he was lonely and had no-one with whom to share his poetic enthusiasm:

For the first time Vernon's life must have been the opposite of his dreams. His early shyness had developed into a deep reserve. He spoke to no-one of his own writing and just when he most needed them, found no congenial friends to share his own absorption in poetry...After the constant stimulus and interest of his life until then, Vernon found his new career unutterably tedious.⁹⁰⁴

The workaday world became insufferable:

Although outwardly compliant, Vernon was inwardly rebellious and in a turmoil.

Unfortunately he hid his deep unhappiness from his family and it was an appalling shock to us all when, after a year in the Bank, he had a complete mental breakdown.⁹⁰⁵

Mathias's account of the breakdown is of interest in its resemblance to David Gascoyne's and how both poets came to regard their experiences of mental illness:

[Watkins] described to friends in later life how, one Saturday evening...he returned to his lodgings...in a state of high tension. He had been reading Blake again, and rushed hither and thither about his room shouting that he had conquered time and could control both his own destiny and that of others. This...ended when he heard an enormous crash outside: on going to the window he saw a motor-cyclist dead on the ground and his pillion passenger staggering up the path towards him, his face covered in blood. Immediately – the underlying tenderness of his nature supervening – he was convinced that *he* had willed this and

⁹⁰¹ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.24.

⁹⁰² *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.17. 'In his first years on the job he was always the quickest of the clerks at figures, but...he reverted to being the slowest when mechanisation was introduced into the Bank. Mechanical matters were a closed book to Vernon, who complained all his life about the malignancy of inanimate objects. He loathed all types of engineering and the motor car was his especial *bête noire*. He never learned to drive, let alone own one. In fact we all regarded the combustion engine as the prime polluter of the countryside. (p.17). Writing approvingly of D.H. Lawrence in his 'Modern Poetry Lectures'(1966), Watkins puts: 'He saw the world heading for destruction' so long as mankind accepted the domination of machines, and not what he advocated as the remedy for war, the civilisation of touch.' *Poetry Lectures* (NLW MS23758 C), p.22. This strongly recalls David Jones's concerns.

⁹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.18. 'There are no galleries in Cardiff, no rears, no ping-pong table, no cream-buns, no squash-courts, no milk-loaves, no Unders, no hymns, no High Debate – only one large library, & there I have not found an Oxford Concise – nor a ladder. Everything here is inferior, except a little park near here, perhaps, and a little wood not far off, so I simply pull down the blinds and ignore it...If only we could escape to a cave with certain chosen, and read aloud & tear our hair & go raving mad for an indefinite length of time without ever growing older or wiser or stronger. Then perhaps we could *physically* live Repton.' From letter to Eric Falk, 1927. The young Watkins, like Gascoyne, courted 'madness' as a necessary romantic state for inspiration.

...collapsed. The following day...he took train for Repton, visited such boys as still remembered him, attended chapel, and afterwards burst into Dr.Fisher's study, shouting that it was he, the uncomprehending Headmaster, who destroyed youth...This tirade was followed by an ineffectual attempt to assault Dr.Fisher. Within less than a minute the young man was under restraint and the Headmaster, realising that he was in a state of mental collapse, arranged for his removal to a nursing home in Derby...There he remained, often under severe physical restraint, for a considerable period of time, keeping the other patients awake at night by his endless recital of Blake. During these weeks, months, he had a religious experience whose impetus was never lost: in it he glimpsed, and drew back from, the horrors of 'the abyss'...Vernon Watkins's poetry demonstrates beyond doubt how powerfully formative this crisis was. He was still writing out of it, combating it, thirty or more years later.⁹⁰⁶

In some ways the vision of 'the horrors of the abyss', in the form of Muir's severe depression in his years as the Greenock bone factory (as well as his later breakdown on leaving the annexed Czech Republic), Jones's neurasthenia or 'shell shock' from his experience of the First World War and Gascoyne's physical and mental collapse after years of amphetamine abuse, unite these poets, though I am aware that they were not alone in such 'illness' – Ivor Gurney, for example, comes to mind. The difference with the assembled poets is, I would argue, in their religious or metaphysical paths to recovery. Writing later of his breakdown Watkins describes its effect on his life and poetry thus:

The state in which I found myself when I had experienced my metaphysical change was very much like a rebirth. I had died the death of ambition, and found that that death was only a beginning. Time itself was changed. It could never again dominate life. From that moment my poetry was changed for good...I gradually came to understand that my poetry rested upon a paradox and was a revolt against those who under-estimated the subtlety of life and death, and I came to understand that a lyric poet knows nothing until he knows that the dead are listening too.⁹⁰⁷

⁹⁰⁵ *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.19.

⁹⁰⁶ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), pp.28, 29.

⁹⁰⁷ *Vernon Watkins: Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS22480E), p.80. 'A Note on my own Poetry' [Typewritten, undated]. In another entry in the same file Watkins wrote: 'I was aware of something deeper and more powerful than time, the miracle of renewal and revolution, the body which the imagination energizes as the risen body.' (p.34)

Returning home to convalesce, Watkins was off work for a year, after which his father secured him a position in the St.Helens, Swansea branch of Lloyds:

This had the huge advantage of allowing him to live at home, where he had his own room to write in, the devoted love of his family and all the charms of Gower around him.⁹⁰⁸

For the next seven years Watkins would work every day at the bank, returning to his family home to write poetry every evening. He took annual holidays abroad with his sister Dorothy to France, Corsica, Germany, Austria and Spain where they enjoyed long and arduous walks or cycle rides in remote, often dangerous and exposed mountainous areas, always with a book of poetry handy to read and recite from. In terms of Watkins's poetic life little is recorded of this period. Watkins had determined not to publish and was satisfied that if his poetry was of worth, it would be discovered and appreciated eventually as with Gerard Manley Hopkins.

In his handwritten 'Notes and Dates of Vernon Watkins's poetic life' the poet records what must be regarded as his view of the significant events:

- 1927 Appreciation only
- 1928 METAPHYSICAL LEAP { Change in relation to AMBITION
Change in relation to STYLE
- 1935 TIME-LAG for CHANGE OF STYLE
- 1936 DYLAN
DIFFERENCE OF APPROACH
AFFINITY OF JUDGEMENT
(I persuaded him to use TITLES
He persuaded me to PUBLISH)
- 1937 First of MARI LWYD poems in 'Wales'
- 1938 Met YEATS. Asked about Wales. (Felt greatest debt – taught how a poet should grow old. Each new poem of his confirmed my own metaphysical experience. Immortality of the soul. Impossible for time to dominate a poem.)
A Christian poet. See the lives of great artists in terms of PARADOX.⁹⁰⁹

After his breakdown, Watkins destroyed all the poetry that he had written up to that time, one or two poems that were published, in the Reptonian magazine and the London Mercury survive. When, in 1935, Watkins met Dylan Thomas, his world changed:

In fact this meeting opened up a new world for Vernon, who, until then, had worked on his poems alone. He had lacked the challenge of close contact with another original mind, rooted

⁹⁰⁸ *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.20.

⁹⁰⁹ *Vernon Watkins: Talks and Lectures* (NLW MS22479E), p.49.

in the same subject, the creation of poetry...He had always been very diffident about publishing his own poems; now Dylan encouraged him to send them to the literary magazines that sprang up like mushrooms before the Second World War.⁹¹⁰

Their meeting was precipitated by the publication of Thomas's first book of poems, *Eighteen Poems*, which Watkins read with curiosity in a Swansea bookshop. Being acquainted with Thomas's uncle Watkins arranged to meet the younger poet:

We became close friends almost immediately, from an affinity which I think we both recognized at once...Dylan shared my admiration of Yeats whom he considered the greatest living poet; but Hardy was his favourite poet of the century. He disliked the sociological poetry of the thirties. My own themes were really closer to his; we were both religious poets, and neither of us had any aptitude for political reform.⁹¹¹

It seems clear that Dylan Thomas was the catalyst Watkins needed and not only in an artistic sense. Thomas helped to socialize Watkins, introducing him to his group of friends who met regularly at the Kardomah café in Swansea. In the first year of their friendship the poets shared a 'period of intense collaboration'⁹¹²; after this year with Thomas's move to Laugharne their meetings became less frequent, but they corresponded regularly. Watkins became instrumental to Thomas's poetic career, not only in discussing poetic practice, but also practically.⁹¹³ This side of their friendship is documented in *Dylan Thomas Letters to Vernon Watkins* which Watkins edited and introduced. The letters have left an impression of a 'lop-sided'⁹¹⁴ friendship with Thomas regularly asking favours, either in the form of a request for money, or help in preparing poems for publication; the letters seem often to be prompted by such concerns. Yet the letters are also sincere in their affection and contain ample example of the poets' collaborative artistic relationship. For my purposes it is Thomas's role as artistic catalyst that is important:

⁹¹⁰ *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.29.

⁹¹¹ *DTL*, pp.13, 17.

⁹¹² *The Swansea Review* (No.20, 2000), p.57. 'His sonorous pin-ups': Yeats, Thomas and Vernon Watkins' by Victor Golightly.

⁹¹³ 'Vernon was now typing all Dylan's poems for him, while working steadily on his own. Both were total perfectionists and would revise their work endlessly...' (*Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.32.

⁹¹⁴ *The Swansea Review* (No.20, 2000), p.57. 'His sonorous pin-ups': Yeats, Thomas and Vernon Watkins' by Victor Golightly.

He acknowledged Watkins's vocation and ensured that his work began to be published...most of the poems of Watkins's first book, *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*, were written after they met.⁹¹⁵

Gwen Watkins supports this view with:

...I ...think that Dylan had an immense effect on Vernon's development as a poet – I mean that he wrenched the total content away from the abstract and towards the organic. Vernon was a slow developer, and this change takes a long time to appear in his verse, but I often think that without Dylan he might have become a Welsh Swinburne.⁹¹⁶

A letter from Thomas collected in *Letters to Vernon Watkins* bears this observation out and, I would argue, has resonances with aspects of Muir's poetry:

All the words are lovely, but they *seem so chosen*, not struck out..I can see the sensitive picking of words, but none of the strong inevitable pulling that make a poem an event, a happening, an action perhaps, not a still-life or an experience put down, placed, regulated; the introduction of mist, legend, time's weir, grief's bell, & such things...seem to me "literary" and not living. They seem...to come out of the nostalgia of literature; the growth is not, like, say, Rossetti's, a hothouse growth, but one that has been seeded from a flower placed, long ago in the smelling and blowing and growing past, between pages. A motive has been rarefied, it should be made common. I don't ask you for vulgarity, though I miss it; I think I ask you for a little creative destruction, destructive creation.⁹¹⁷

This 'literary-ness' is a perceived flaw in the poetry of Muir, Jones and Gascoyne as well as the 'nostalgia'. That quality of the 'still-life' or of the poem found as a pressed flower between pages is particularly reminiscent of some of Edwin Muir's poetry. Even so, though I find Thomas's observations penetrating and true, there is an extra dimension which sustains the poems of Watkins et al, which Raine describes as requiring a 'transition of attention'⁹¹⁸. This is related to the 'cadence' of the poetry. On hearing Watkins read his poems Raine writes:

⁹¹⁵ Ibid., p.57. William Wootten notes: '...meeting Dylan Thomas was the best thing that ever happened to him. Thomas, the younger of the two by eight years, persuaded Watkins to publish.' *London Review of Books* (9th August 2001), p.23. From 'In the Graveyard of Verse.'

⁹¹⁶ *Vernon Watkins: Poet of the Elegiac Muse, The W.D. Thomas Memorial Lecture* by Gwen Watkins (University College of Swansea Press, 1973), p.13. Leslie Norris agrees: 'For Watkins...a Romantic poet with affinities which ally him to Flecker and, rhythmically...to Swinburne, is...an intellectual poet...' *Poetry Wales* (Vol. II, No.3, Winter 1966), p.3. From 'The Poetry of Vernon Watkins.'

⁹¹⁷ *DTL*, p.38.

⁹¹⁸ *Vernon Watkins 1906-1967* ed. Leslie Norris (Faber and Faber, 1970), p.36. From 'The Poetry of Vernon Watkins' by Kathleen Raine.

For the first few minutes...the ear was not attuned, as if to the speech of some celestial hierarchy not normally perceptible to human attention; but presently one heard, and the voice of the poet became audible at once in the music and in the meaning of the poetry.⁹¹⁹

If Raine's terms are typically exalted, they, in this, echo Watkins's own beliefs on 'lyrical' poetry:

I think, I believe really, that lyric poetry should be exalted or else I don't think it's worth writing.⁹²⁰

Natural speech may be excellent, but who will remember it unless it is allied to something artificial, to a particular order of music?⁹²¹

Dylan worked upon a symmetrical abstract with tactile delicacy; out of a lump of texture or nest of phrases he created music, testing everything by physical feeling, working from the concrete image outwards. I worked from music and cadence towards density of physical shape.⁹²²

The difference in compositional styles between Thomas and Watkins, thus described by Watkins, I believe links Watkins further with Muir and Gascoyne.

If Dylan Thomas represented the most important poetic friendship in Watkins's life, W.B. Yeats must be considered the most important poetic influence. In 1938 Watkins visited Yeats in his home, the result of which visit was the long poem 'Yeats in Dublin' (*The Lamp and The Veil*, 1945). Since Yeats also and inevitably stands in Kathleen Raine's tradition of poetry, is indeed the twentieth century exemplar of the tradition, then the influence of his beliefs and poetry on Watkins demands attention. As with the 'bardic' inheritance Raine claims for Watkins, it is difficult to know how far Watkins was influenced by Yeats's neo-Platonist interests, not to mention the Occult, Hinduism, Buddhism and his connection with the original Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Roland Mathias, in his self-confessedly 'summary treatment of this topic', is wary of a 'traditional' (in the Rainean sense) linking of Watkins's endeavour with Yeats's:

⁹¹⁹ *The Poetry Review* (Vol.LIX, No.1, June 1968), p.47. Raine also records the opposite experience: 'Indeed, I have read his poems at times without the miraculous shift of focus and found their intricate shifting patterns of words and images impossible to follow; there is nothing in their woven veil for logic to hold on to, no more than in the sound of a waterfall.' *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁹²⁰ *The Poet Speaks* ed. Peter Orr (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p.271.

⁹²¹ *X: A Quarterly Review* (Vol.1, No.2, March 1960), p.153. 'Aphorisms' by Vernon Watkins. Watkins returned to this subject: 'The question of what is natural speech, and what is right speech for poetry, is more intricate...It is as right for D.H. Lawrence in his poems about Birds, Beasts and Flowers, to follow the order of natural speech, with his marvellous gift of pause in the right place, as it is for Hardy to do otherwise or for Gerard Manley Hopkins to mix the two. A balance must be struck between the order of natural speech and the order of imaginative emphasis, such as is found in Milton, and the right balance is what is right for the individual genius of the poet.' *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.59.

⁹²² *DTL*, p.13. From Vernon Watkins's introduction.

It may be argued...that the addiction to Plato, the apparent point of departure for an important line in Vernon Watkins's philosophy, is another borrowing from Yeats. But this is not an issue that can possibly be dealt with here: all that can be added is that Watkins acquired, as a young man, a complete set of the works of the neo-Platonist Plotinus and read *The Enneads* once, closely enough to be able to use one or two neo-Platonic concepts. He bought Plotinus because Yeats mentions him, but how seriously he was following in the Hermetic succession is something which only further biographical and textual research can establish.⁹²³

While Raine recognises Watkins as a representative, an oracle even, of 'the Hermetic succession' through what she regards as Watkins's revival of bardic lore, a succession which is, however, baptised by the mature, explicitly Christian poet, Mathias is unwilling to grant the tradition such prominence in his reading of Watkins's poetry. Nevertheless, his study, which is of Watkins's early poetry, is largely concerned with the tension between Watkins's employment of Platonic ideas and 'pagan' myths in relation to Christian faith. There are two documents by Watkins which may help in deciding how far he could be said to have 'borrowed' from Yeats in a foundational sense. One of these is an extract from Plotinus copied by Watkins into one of his notebooks:

Plotinus. — On the Essence of the Soul (tr. McKenna)
 3rd tractate: It is admitted on clear evidence that we are borne along by the Circuit of the All.
 4th tractate: Now nothing of Real Being is ever annulled...Souls, body-bound are apt to body-punishment; clean souls no longer drawing to themselves at any point any vestige of body, are by their being, outside the bodily sphere, body-free, containing nothing of body — there where Essence is, and Being, and the Divine within the Divinity, among Those within That, such a soul must be. If you still ask Where, you must ask where those beings are — and in your seeking, seek otherwise than with the sight, and not as one seeking for body.⁹²⁴

The extracts are copied without annotation or comment therefore it is difficult to ascertain just how far Watkins took such ideas to form a basis for his philosophy or beliefs.

The second document on which I shall draw is an article Watkins wrote for an American academic journal, 'W.B. Yeats — The Religious Poet'. Mathias does not refer to Watkins's essay

⁹²³ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.57.

⁹²⁴ *Notebook and listing of poems published in periodicals and anthologies* (NLW MS 23760B), pp.36, 40. It may be that Mathias was aware of these copied excerpts — perhaps what he bases his 'one or two neo-Platonic concepts' he avers Watkins was able to use. Mathias's study has neither index nor footnotes for his quotations.

which may not have been readily accessible at that time, but it forms the basis for an article published in *Poetry Wales* in 1977 titled 'Vernon Watkins and the Influence of W.B. Yeats' by Desiree Hirst. In this article, Hirst broaches the subject that Mathias did not feel his study could sufficiently assess, namely Watkins's place in relation to 'the Hermetic succession' via Yeats and Blake. Hirst, quoting from Watkins's essay, argues that Watkins was attracted to Yeats because 'Yeats all his life had been looking for one thing, which he called "Unity of Being"'.⁹²⁵ Such search for 'unity' Hirst traces to William Blake, under whose influence she regards Yeats and Watkins to have fallen 'dramatically' and whom she regards as 'undeniably a representative of the Hermetic tradition, deriving from the Renaissance.'⁹²⁶ Hirst uses a quotation from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* to support her argument:

... 'if, happy in the lot of no created thing, he withdraws into the centre of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, in the solitary darkness of God, who is set above all things, shall surpass them all.' The struggle towards contact with the primal unity of Being was a passion, then, with Watkins, as it was with Yeats.⁹²⁷

It seems Hirst relates the desire for 'primal unity of Being' to Mirandola's text to prove the Hermetic link. However, Hirst's reading of Mirandola is mistaken, since the phrase 'set above all things' is not the language of the annihilation of difference between things and God and does not imply 'the primal unity of Being' for which Yeats strove. The passage talks of the unity of self and God which is not the same thing. Mathias provides a more accurate gloss on the same Mirandola quotation:

For Vernon Watkins withdrawal into unity (most of all a unity of darkness with God...) was something necessary, something deeply to be desired, in order to make possible not further discovery, Man's mastery over God's world, like the Hermetic philosophers, but justification and unification of what exists, the inhabiting of the heart of the universe. It was this that a poet could do before and above all others.⁹²⁸

While, according to Mathias, Yeats sought an 'aesthetic religion' to achieve 'unity of Being'

Watkins's poetic career eventually took on a different aspect:

⁹²⁵ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.84. From 'Vernon Watkins and the Influence of W.B. Yeats' by Desiree Hirst. Hirst quotes from 'W.B. Yeats – The Religious Poet' by Vernon Watkins, *University of Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (Vol.3, No.4, Winter 1962).

⁹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.84. Quoted also by Roland Mathias in his section on Yeats's influence in *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins*, p.50.

⁹²⁸ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.51.

Poetry...must concern itself less, if at all, with everyday life and moral principle as elaborated in detail: instead it must carry the mind and spirit away to the mystery at the heart of the universe, to timeless themes and impersonal questions. For Blake and Yeats very little separated the poet from the mystic, with his oracular pronouncements and his recurrent symbols of the unchanging and eternal. Watkins sought to walk this way too, and after a while of trying, did. His ultimate position as a poet, however, owed a great deal to the increasingly effective counterpoint provided by his Christian upbringing and practice, which sanctified what had originally been a 'religious' impulse from secular and unorthodox premises.⁹²⁹

Hirst also regards Watkins's difference in his Christianity, writing of Yeats:

Yeats, descended from a family containing a strong representation of Church of Ireland ministers, but influenced...by the scepticism of his agnostic father, also absorbed a great deal from the Catholicism surrounding him...But as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy there was much distasteful to him in the Church and he could never associate himself with it closely...I find it difficult to convince myself that Yeats could finally be described as a Christian in any very real sense.⁹³⁰

Hirst finds in Watkins's essay on Yeats 'signs of a certain confusion in his mind both as to the nature of the Christian faith itself in some ways, and as to Yeats's own personal position in belief:'

Watkins appears to be very anxious to assure himself that a poet with whom he shared so much and who appealed to him so profoundly, also shared, more than could be divined, the Christianity which had always meant so much to him.⁹³¹

Hirst accounts for Watkins's, in her view mistaken, discovery of a tacit Christian faith in Yeats's poetry, by stating that Watkins:

...was not in a position when he wrote on Yeats to realise quite as we do now how central to Yeats' life and thought were the occult studies he undertook, or to understand the inner history of an organisation like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn as we can...⁹³²

Mathias avows '...the several stages of Yeats's own development and the complexity of his attitudes make anything more than a summary treatment...too demanding'⁹³³ in relation to Watkins's debt to

⁹²⁹ Ibid., pp.51, 52.

⁹³⁰ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.92. From 'Vernon Watkins and the Influence of W.B. Yeats' by Desiree Hirst.

⁹³¹ Ibid., pp.93, 94.

Yeats. I shall consider Watkins's essay on Yeats in the light of Hirst's comments and her final acknowledgement that 'it is clear beyond doubt that in Yeats Vernon Watkins discovered a true comrade of his soul.'⁹³⁴

'W. B. Yeats – The Religious Poet' was published in 1962 in the University of Texas journal *Studies in Literature and Language*. At fourteen pages it is the longest piece of prose writing in print by Vernon Watkins. In a notebook held at the National Library of Wales, in an essay titled 'Theory and Act' Watkins explains his position on the subject of criticism:

How can one be sure that human judgement is a less solid thing than the act of a poem? Why should a poem, whose origins are so elusive, be necessarily more valid than the critical judgement assessing it or the critical theory which precedes it?...The general syntax of a poem or a play may be governed by theory, but its essence, or 'act', as I have called it, is conditioned by the whole imagination, and by something, a kind of luck, which theory could not predict, so that it overleaps the bounds of any restrictive category. I hope that I do not undervalue human judgement, but I feel that it is extended, or delivered from its limitations by such works. The tendentious in verse reflects the tendentious in thought, and so belongs to theory rather than to act. Poetry affirms, or it does not exist...and particularly affirmation through cadence. The recognition that in a sense all art is fragmentary and can only be completed by love is itself affirmation of the deepest kind.⁹³⁵

It is from such a position that Watkins writes about Yeats, and having read the essay a number of times I would argue that Hirst's perception of a 'certain confusion' in her judgement of Watkins's understanding of Yeats and Christianity in it misplaced, as well as her claim that 'we can' understand 'the inner history of an organisation like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn' better than Watkins. Generally her article assumes the position of a superior, more comprehensive knowledge about Yeats than Watkins. I certainly do not find that to be so. Through the essay Watkins shows a

⁹³² Ibid., p.94.

⁹³³ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), pp. 47, 48. In a letter to Michael Hamburger, Watkins wrote: 'I'm no good at criticizing anyway...I saw a review on Saturday that filled me with disgust and made me feel that any poet passing judgement on a living contemporary was damned.' (28/10/51). Hamburger comments: 'The word 'damned' was a strong word for Vernon to use, since he was charitable as he was tolerant. His use of it in this connection, like the word 'disgust', shows that his religion of art made him peculiarly vulnerable, as well as giving him an integrity and a steadfastness that I never ceased to admire.' *A Mug's Game: An Autobiography* by Michael Hamburger (Carcenet, 1973), p.260. In another letter Watkins makes the statement he would later use in the Yeats essay: 'I...believe that there can be no great criticism without love, and that the very nature and habit of most critics makes them incapable of an act of love.' (25/11/52), Ibid., p.261.

⁹³⁴ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.100. From 'Vernon Watkins and the Influence of W.B. Yeats' by Desiree Hirst.

deep intimacy with the poetry and prose writings of Yeats, his views demanding close reading and attention. Watkins's writing style is similar to Kathleen Raine's; he does not argue but writes from an intuitive premise without analysis. Nonetheless I find his intuitions valid, for his writing is suggestive and nuanced rather than didactic. I shall take one of his first 'assertions' on Yeats, one on which Hirst also alights, as indicative of Watkins's approach:

The fact is that Yeats all his life had been looking for one thing, which he called "Unity of Being"; and he was still looking for this when he died.⁹³⁶

Hirst does not quote the qualifying second part of the sentence, a key omission in my view, for in stating that Yeats was 'still looking' for Unity of Being to the end of his life, Watkins allows for an open-endedness, the implication that these mysteries do not admit of a human resolution. Unlike the way that critics such as Hirst all too easily write of Watkins as a 'Christian' poet as though it were a simple determining factor and as though he had such a thing as a simple faith, Watkins writes otherwise and is alert to the complexity of his subject. He writes with an informed sensitivity unclouded by an underlying deference and humility. I shall quote a number of passages, with commentary, which I believe reveal as much about Watkins as poet as they do about Yeats:

The early poems, which are pre-Raphaelite in style and imagery, were built upon themes of Irish myth or upon the restlessness of desire or unrequited love, and they show no association with family tradition. As he aged, his feeling for tradition deepened... his poetry had undergone a purgation; it had been purified by tragedy. While much of his early poetry seems to strain for release from conscience, every poem in the late work is a test of conscience. Every question between Self and Soul is prompted by the religious sense.⁹³⁷

Here Watkins is seeking a channel in which to express what he discerns as a moral and spiritual presence informing Yeats's later poetry. In terms almost identical to those that Kathleen Raine regularly employs in her writing on poets and poetry, Watkins continues:

Yeats did not rely for his poetry on knowledge; he relied on oracles. An oracle depends on a duality of the All and Nothing, upon omniscience, upon total ignorance, upon that moment for which both are true, upon the Nothing from which all things flow. An oracle depends upon the entire state of things and that which set them in motion. Yeats consulted many

⁹³⁵ *Vernon Watkins: Talks and Lectures* (NLW MS 22479E), pp.32, 33.

⁹³⁶ *University of Texas Studies in Literature and Language* (Vol.3, No.4, Winter 1962), p.475: From 'W.B. Yeats – The Religious Poet' by Vernon Watkins.

⁹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.475.

oracles in search of what he called “a belief which is moving”, one which would correspond to the fullest life of the imagination and the deepest expression of a man’s soul.⁹³⁸

Watkins, writing of oracular inspiration, recalls Elizabeth Jennings’s work on Muir and Gascoyne, as well as Kathleen Raine’s. Receiving poetic inspiration from another, other source than the physical or phenomenal world is akin to the mystic’s vision, similarly described by Muir in his autobiography.

Some paragraphs later, Watkins describes the paradox contained in oracular vision:

The imaginative life is inseparable from imaginative death...The aura of light which surrounds the forms in these poems is derived from a scholar’s lamp that has been quenched.⁹³⁹

The necessity for the poet of religious sensibility is to ‘quench’ the light of the intellectual capacity of the mind, to experience the ‘darkness’ of unknowing before a spiritual, and by extension a poetic or imaginative rebirth can occur. It is a kind of initiation:

That moment when faith is reversed to its opposite is the moment of dramatization, the seeing moment, when all things around him are suddenly seen in an extraordinary unity.⁹⁴⁰

This is a description which could be applied to the imaginative and spiritual experience of Muir, Jones and Gascoyne. For Watkins something akin to this happened during his mental breakdown. In the case of Yeats, Watkins quotes a passage from Yeats’s *Autobiographies*, which he believes records ‘the moment when his imagination passed from paganism to Christianity, the moment when the late work was conceived:’

I was crossing a little stream near Inchy Wood and actually in the middle of a stride from bank to bank, when an emotion never experienced before swept down upon me. I said, “That is what the devout Christian feels, that is how he surrenders his will to the will of God.” I felt an extreme surprise, for my whole imagination was pre-occupied with the pagan mythology of ancient Ireland, I was marking, in red ink, upon a large map, every sacred mountain. The next morning I woke near dawn, to hear a voice saying, “The love of God is infinite for every human soul because every human soul is unique, no other can satisfy the same need in God.”⁹⁴¹

⁹³⁸ Ibid., p.477.

⁹³⁹ Ibid., p.479.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid., p.481.

⁹⁴¹ Ibid., p.488.

It is Hirst's contention that Watkins finds in this passage a clear declaration of Yeats's Christian faith because he was anxious 'to assure himself that a poet with whom he shared so much and who appealed to him so profoundly, also shared, more than could be divined, the Christianity which had always meant so much to him'. I do not think it is straightforwardly so. Much of Watkins's essay is devoted to tracing the varied strands of Yeats's religious seeking. Watkins is certain only that Yeats possessed 'an instinctively religious sensibility.'⁹⁴²

Quite early in life Yeats felt himself destined to lead "the revolt of feeling against the intellect". In doing so he explored every avenue of religious truth, being constantly drawn to Eastern mysticism, studying the most ancient texts of Europe and Asia, and attempting to reconcile the experiences of Buddhist ascetics to the miracles of the saints in Western Christianity.⁹⁴³

Watkins spends some time discussing the importance of Plotinus (revealing a considerable depth of familiarity), as well as the Hindu mystics to Yeats. Even so, Watkins does ultimately state:

While it is easy to see how pagan, for all its religious imagery, is the early poetry of Yeats, and how Christian, for all its pagan imagery, the late, it is less easy to see how the transition was made from one to the other.⁹⁴⁴

This is a similarly misty 'transition' that Mathias has discerned in Watkins's poetic development, a transition it seems Watkins wished to delineate (as he does so with Yeats), but somehow the poetry resists. Watkins draws on late poems and the play 'The Resurrection', observing:

When Yeats is writing about Christ contact with the soil, with natural objects, and with human milk is always kept. Protective human love is celebrated as guarding and nursing divine love, although it can scarcely endure the terror of its care.⁹⁴⁵

An invisible figure of compassion dominates the last poems.⁹⁴⁶

Yet:

Yeats is a poet of religious conflict in all the late work.⁹⁴⁷

⁹⁴² Ibid., p.487.

⁹⁴³ Ibid., p.487. It is of interest to note here some remarks on Watkins's poem 'Ironies of the Self' (*Affinities*, 1962): The poem '...outlines the way in which dissolution of self...becomes a journey to innocence and thus to love...The religious sensibility here could be called Buddhist as much as Christian; or rather, Watkins's distinctive Christian voice is one in which Buddhist conceptualities are well at home.' *Welsh Writing in English* (Vol.8, 2003), pp.113-114. From 'Swansea's Other Poet' by Rowan Williams.

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid., p.488.

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid., p.488.

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid., p.488.

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid., p.484.

Watkins acknowledges Yeats's lines:

Must we part, Von Hügel, though much alike, for we
Accept the miracles of the saints and honour sanctity...
I, though heart might find relief
Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief
What seems most welcome in the tomb – play a predestined part.
Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.

He follows the quotation with:

Yet the religious faith eludes the decision of the Self. The belief is constant; the belief is moving. The momentary definition of the mind serves only to bring the poet to a new position, for every decision Yeats makes in one poem creates its opposite in another... The reader is aware, even in renunciation, of a light of faith from that renunciation which had not been apparent before the decision was taken.⁹⁴⁸

Watkins's essay on Yeats's 'religious sensibility' may tell us more about Watkins's faith than Yeats's, though the passage dealing with Yeats's explicitly Christian works is convincing in its delicacy of judgment. Compassion is not a sentiment one might expect to find in Yeats's poetry, but the 'invisible figure of compassion' is a discernible forming principle of Watkins's work, and distinguishes it.⁹⁴⁹

After the death of Yeats and the birth of Dylan Thomas's first child, Llewelyn, to whom Vernon Watkins became godfather, it was during the Second World War that Watkins met his wife Gwen, at Bletchley, where he had been posted in 1941 and where 'Vernon's knowledge of languages and quickness of mind were usefully employed in de-coding.' By the time they met, Faber had published *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*:

In the Spring of 1941 T.S. Eliot had accepted Vernon's first book of poems for Faber and Faber... *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* was pretty well received by the critics. It is difficult now to remember, or imagine, the enormous cachet derived from being a Faber poet.⁹⁵⁰

During the war Watkins, as well as meeting his wife, met poets such as Michael Hamburger, through Dylan Thomas in London, David Wright, Henry Reed and Philip Larkin. Even so, it appears that Watkins, after the publication of *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*, became once more more dedicatedly

⁹⁴⁸ Ibid., p.485.

⁹⁴⁹ 'I was keen on theological discussion, but I never had one with Vernon without concluding by telling him that he was a heretic, not an orthodox Christian... Vernon also had a conviction, acquired during his breakdown, that he had been saved from damnation by the sacrifice of Another, whom he identified as Christ. Apart from this, I think his faith was...nebulous and uncertain...' From *Portrait of a Friend* by Gwen Watkins (1983; repr, Ceredigion: Gomer Press, 2005), p.13. That Gwen Watkins refrains from divulging her own view of faith makes it impossible to judge whether or not she could really be considered more 'orthodox' than Vernon. Vernon's 'conviction...' is indeed orthodox.

⁹⁵⁰ *Portrait of a Friend* by Gwen Watkins (1983; repr, Ceredigion: Gomer Press, 2005), p.95.

solitary in his poetic endeavour, this largely because his collaborative friendship with Thomas had come to an end. After the war, in 1946, Vernon returned to the Swansea branch of Lloyd's Bank, moving into a small bungalow at Pennard, where he was to remain, with Gwen and eventually five children for the rest of his life.⁹⁵¹ T.S. Eliot continued to support Watkins and published eight collections of Watkins's poetry, from the first in 1941 to a *Selected Poems* in 1967. Watkins made occasional trips to London as well as to poetry readings around the country. Fellow poets and artists sometimes visited him at his home in Wales. In 1951 Watkins was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, as was David Gascoyne.

In 1953 Watkins's friendship and correspondence with David Jones began and Watkins visited Jones in London on a few occasions, one of which was an evening at Kathleen Raine's house in Chelsea. The friendship with Jones was one-sided in the sense that Watkins became, as he had been for Dylan Thomas, typist and editor for Jones of poems prepared for the U.S. journal *Poetry*, which Watkins had arranged.⁹⁵² Watkins admired Jones's work enough to devote considerable time and energy to the difficult task of formatting Jones's work, particularly in the light of its unusual lay-out and Jones's extreme concern over the appearance of the text on the page, which must have been a somewhat alien concern to Watkins. From the book of Jones's letters to Watkins it is clear that Jones regarded Watkins highly in his capacity as editor, typist⁹⁵³ and fellow Welshman. Their affinity as poets is implicit, yet Jones's comments on Watkins's poetic achievement are few, though enthusiastic:

I've always much liked such poems of yours as I've read. Though I've read by no means all T.S.E. has spoken to me of yr work with much appreciation – and its [sic] *alarming* how much one misses of one's contemporaries...

I greatly enjoyed hearing your *Mari Lwyd* read a bit back on the Radio, bloody good thing that one.⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁵¹ 'His own five children were a continual source of delight and inspiration to him; their fresh and innovative use of language amused him but was also a gold-mine from which he quarried nuggets for his own verse... He was exasperated by the poor quality of much verse written for children. Once driven almost to distraction by the failure of rhyme and metre in one of the Rupert Bear books he rewrote every quatrain.' *LMNTRE* (Swansea: Tŷ Llen Publications, 1999), pp. 8-9. 'Introduction' by Gwen Watkins.

⁹⁵² 'Doubtless Jones's work would have appeared in the U.S.A. at some time, but it was due to Vernon Watkins that it was published there as early as 1955.' *DJL*, p.8.

⁹⁵³ 'I think it *wonderful* that you should not mind typing this stuff out, and all the bloody corrections – I find it most tedious. I was very interested in what you tell me about Apollinaire, Stefan George and Garcia Villa...' *DJL*, p.45. This is one of many examples where Jones expresses his gratitude. It is interesting that, as with Dylan Thomas and indeed Larkin, Watkins was always keen to share his knowledge of European poets with others. This letter shows that Watkins's enthusiasms were close to both Muir's and Gascoyne's.

⁹⁵⁴ *DJL*, pp.19, 52.

As Jones became increasingly reclusive their meetings only came about when Watkins was in London – to one of which Jones refers in a letter, which also congratulates Watkins on winning the Guinness Prize for poetry.⁹⁵⁵ Most of the letters are concerned with Jones's poem *The Wall* with pages of notes on spellings of words and how the words should be arranged on the page. Though Watkins was a poet less concerned with how a poem looked than how it sounded, he must have been able to appreciate Jones's artistic vision for the end result was a success, as Jones, with typical understatement puts it, '... it looks O.K. I think.'⁹⁵⁶ In a short piece of writing, 'Some notes on the difficulties of one writer of Welsh affinity whose language is English' which Jones prepared for a Radio broadcast 'The Poet and the Public' in which Watkins was involved, Jones makes some remarks which I find striking with regard to the noted 'metaphysical' strand perceived in Watkins's poetry:

One thing that I find interesting but hardly ever referred to is that the 'English Metaphysicals' of the 17th Cent were so very largely of the Welsh border-lands... What might be called the first generation of anglicized Welshmen or part-Welshmen of more or less aristocratic status such as Vaughan & Herbert & for that matter Donne, etc, comprise the core of 'English Metaphysical' poetry. I wonder why this was? Then it ended as abruptly as it started. Milton was of course Welsh on his mother's side and so was that remarkable man Xristopher Smart... No one ever refers to these Welsh strains in the English genius – but it is there alright.⁹⁵⁷

In the last letter collected in the book Jones makes brief, but important reference to Kathleen Raine:

I have stopped taking the *Anglo-Welsh Review* but saw the copy of the one in which Kathleen R. writes on your work. I was glad to read that. I saw her some months back – I think she's in Greece now, & she told me she was writing about you...⁹⁵⁸

Jones does not discuss ideas about poetry or art with Watkins, apart from the 'notes' quoted from above where Jones extrapolates on one aspect of writing poetry that does not appear to have worried Watkins to the same extent, if at all. Most of the admiration and all of the artistic support came from Watkins's side in the friendship, yet one might glean that Jones was important to Watkins as an

⁹⁵⁵ 'It was good of you to come out on that flying morning visit, and it was nice to see you. I was awfully pleased about that poetry prize; that was a nice kind of thing to happen, and in our ancestral tongue I must send you my LLONGYFRCHIADAU'. (22nd November 1957). *DJL*, p.49.

⁹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.59. (11th April 1962)

⁹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.76. (5th September 1964)

example of what he considered to be a true poet and artist, creating works of permanence and validity.⁹⁵⁹ In his poem 'The Forge of the Solstice' Watkins pays tribute to Jones:

One scrawls on rock the names of hallowed things,
Letters and hieroglyphs that yet shall last
When darkness measures with a martyr's eye
The glories shed by life's unchanging tree.⁹⁶⁰

Watkins read the poem on the radio broadcast for which Jones had provided his 'notes'. Jones heard the broadcast and wrote afterwards:

Thank you for the kind references to my own stuff, whether it deserves it or not is not for me to say, nor indeed do I know...I want to say (leaving aside altogether the fact that you had my work along with that of others in mind when you wrote it * Though I felt honoured and touched by the tribute.*) how good a poem I thought that was with which you concluded your talk. I thought it especially good in itself, as a work & the reading of it perfect.⁹⁶¹

Jones's letters display a sympathy of artistic understanding and endeavour. In his last letter to Watkins, Jones signs off with the Welsh blessing, 'Duw fo gyda chwi' (God be with you).

In 1966, after forty years service, Vernon Watkins retired from the bank. He became the first holder of the Calouste Gulbenkian Fellowship of Poetry at University College, Swansea and was awarded an honorary D.Litt by the University of Wales the same year. In the autumn of 1967 he went to Seattle as visiting Professor of English at the University of Washington; always an active man and a keen sportsman Watkins died suddenly of a heart-attack playing tennis there. The last poem Watkins appears to have written was dedicated to Kathleen Raine:

...Within days of his death Mrs Watkins sent me the manuscript of what must have been his last poem, the ink scarcely faded on the page of a working notebook; whether he had intended more work on it Mrs Watkins does not know. This poem was addressed to me; and I cannot but receive it as a fragment of the prophetic mantle which others must now assume, though none with so good a right as he. It is in keeping with the nature of his theme that I should receive this message not from the living poet but from the fertile night of the dead.

With the permission of Gwen Watkins the poet shall speak the last words:

⁹⁵⁹ Colin Wilcockson writes: 'The two men share a high sense of the responsibility of the poet – in 'showing forth the signs' that proclaim man to be a spiritual creature, in insisting that artistic achievements throughout the millennia of man the maker are, in Milton's sacramental phrase, the 'precious life-blood' of master spirits that must vitalize our present. This shared sense of prophetic mission forms a strong bond of kinship between them. It is possible that without Vernon Watkins's encouragement some of David Jones's later poetry would not have been written.' *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), pp. 121, 122.

⁹⁶⁰ *CP*, p.251.

Tradition
(for Kathleen Raine)

The artist's patient hammering
Labours for a sudden thing.

Out of all the massing storm's
Clash of intellectual forms,
Intuition's lightning reads
That confusion in the clouds.

Unity is always more
Than all the different parts it wore:

None so intellectual
As the simplest truth of all.

Labour measures out the gap
From lightning to the thunder-clap.

Less than this, too quick for tears,
Equals Blake's six thousand years.⁹⁶²

⁹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.67. (25th October 1962)

⁹⁶² *The Poetry Review* (Vol. LIX, No.1, June 1968), pp. 53, 54. From the essay 'Intuition's Lightning' by Kathleen Raine.

Poet, Poetry, Affinities

In poetry of the soul what is fragmentary is completed by love, and the work of art is made fragmentary by love; both revolve around the same centre, and both create themselves continually in relation to their artist who was only a medium.⁹⁶³

This apparently simple statement seemed to me representative not only of the artistic conundrum facing Watkins, but of all of the poets in question. I read the statement as Watkins's interpretation of the respective roles of divine and human love in the making of poetry: 'poetry of the soul' is necessarily fragmented since the human capacity for love, which informs the soul and thus the work, is limited to the individual's personal vision of life and history, and that divine love completes the act of poetry (this is present in the notion of the necessity of mortal death for immortal resurrection). I suggest this because, as I will hope to show in this section, I believe Watkins's poetic inspiration to be Christological, that the centrality of human and divine love in his poetry is the dominant mode, above and beyond Watkins's sympathy with Plotinus and Platonic idealism. The 'centre' around which Watkins describes the properties as revolving is perhaps Christ as Logos. In this sense Watkins's artist is the 'medium' for two aspects of love; the works becoming the embodiment, the act of the meeting between the temporal and the divine or eternal.⁹⁶⁴ In this statement there is an acceptance of incompleteness, an admission of the impossibility of completeness, or complete being (unity of being) in the human realm. As I read it, the statement takes its meaning from Vernon Watkins's understanding of Christianity, a shift away from Plato's ideal forms.⁹⁶⁵ In a handwritten note titled 'Theme' Watkins put:

The human need to perpetuate oneself in unforgettable art is contrary to the indestructible diamond. Yet the need may spring from love; it may aver (?) itself in a manner never before understood and establish a dramatic counterpoint to the indestructibility of the soul. If it does this, the individual is not only himself; he is another. And there is a continual triumphing over _____ (?) in the act of love which the work performs.⁹⁶⁶

⁹⁶³ *A Mug's Game, An Autobiography* by Michael Hamburger (London: Carcanet, 1973), p.259. Letter from Watkins, 23rd June 1951.

⁹⁶⁴ Watkins wrote: 'Lyrical poetry at its best is the physical body of what the imagination recognizes as truth.' *X: A Quarterly Review* (Vol.1, No.2, March 1960), p.154. This idea echoes Jones's desire that the work should 'body forth' his faith. The art, far from being abstract, is in this sense a kind of 'incarnation'.

⁹⁶⁵ This recalls Edwin Muir's, 'There are no Absolutes, no Absolutes...'

⁹⁶⁶ *Vernon Watkins: Talks and Lectures* (NLW MS22479E), p.52. From an un-dated, handwritten note 'Theme'. The question marks indicate words I could not decipher.

Watkins's 'indestructible diamond' can be compared with Gascoyne's ideal of 'Truth' which he considered to be incompatible with the pursuit of poetry.⁹⁶⁷ Both poets sought the transformation of the self (the limited ego), which transformation might be achieved in the act of poetry, so long as that 'act' was motivated by love and given presence by the grace of divine love. There is an underlying admission in Watkins's poetry that being human makes impossible the task he set himself as poet, to conquer time, except by the fact, for Christians, of the paradoxical entry into time of the divine presence. Watkins was preoccupied with paradoxes and 'the subtlety of life and death'. These remain a mystery and a sorrow in his poetry, but are also a source of felicity. Much emphasis has been placed on the quality of 'timelessness' in Vernon Watkins's poetry, and Kathleen Raine writes also of a 'trans-human'⁹⁶⁸ quality, but this overlooks the strong chord of compassion and humanity which I find underscore many of the poems. Brian Keeble presents an apt description of Watkins's faith and its relationship to writing poetry, which has resonances with the poetic vision of Muir, Jones and Gascoyne:

Watkins always avowed himself a Christian poet. But given the richness of his poetic sources and the protean energy of his imaginative language, it should come as no surprise to find the poet's Christianity never settled into an easily definable set of 'beliefs' or 'doctrine'. As always, in the poems themselves, contours overlap and merge, themes interpenetrate one another, and symbolic images echo and reverberate through natural, pagan and religious levels of reference... Watkins's Christ is rather more the Christ who, as the incarnate Logos, validates the immanent divinity in man than he is the historical figure with his earthly mission. Through him the poet is able to explore his constant need to draw close to the paradoxical nature of reality... It was his Christian faith, over and above the pagan and mythic dimensions of his imagination, that authenticates the poet's belief that not an atom of the creation is in vain – is never lost to the eternal order of things... The new vision by which time is conquered is an emergence from the darkness of untransfigured perception as much as

⁹⁶⁷ It may also recall Hopkins's '...immortal diamond is immortal diamond.'

⁹⁶⁸ 'A year or two ago I published on Vernon Watkins's poetry an essay full of admiring respect but which somehow missed the essence which upon the occasion of that reading (Leicester, 1966) I felt so strongly: 'an unworldly, or inhuman quality', so his wife Gwen Watkins, wrote to me in a letter. I replied surely not *inhuman* but perhaps *trans-human*; and she, 'I think the impersonal or "trans-human" quality in his work – and in a way in his attitude to personal relationships – was due to the fact that he saw people as immortal souls, not as personalities; and presumably the soul, though *beyond* personality, has put off things such as sex and age which it needed in time'. *The Poetry Review* (Vol. LIX, No.1, June 1968), p.49. From 'Intuition's Lightning' by Kathleen Raine.

it is an act of grace bestowed by Him who, in an analogous act, entered the darkness that was the harrowing of hell.⁹⁶⁹

I believe this 'action', the necessary entering of darkness antecedent to the bestowing of grace, is present in the works of all four poets. Watkins's published oeuvre runs to five hundred pages, I have therefore found it necessary to select those poems which seem to me best to represent Watkins's poetic endeavour and achievement, at the same time reflecting on the poems' relation to Kathleen Raine's assembling of Watkins with Muir, Jones and Gascoyne.

How does Vernon Watkins 'Pluck from night the blessing which outweighs/All the calamities and griefs of time'⁹⁷⁰? From the dark of midnight Watkins's journey to light and grace begins. The title poem of his first book of poems *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* carries distinctive Watkins themes both stylistically and in content. This will be followed by the 'Taliesin' poems, which seem to me the natural successors to the 'Mari'; I shall then look at the 'Music of Colours' series of poems, then Watkins's explicitly religious poems such as 'Good Friday', and finally a selection of poems which I have found individually striking.

The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd

The 'Ballad of the Mari Lwyd' is a long, dramatic poem; with its publication in 1941, Watkins made his entrance as poet.⁹⁷¹ Vernon Watkins wrote of its genesis:

I remember coming home very late on the last night of the year 1938. It was just before midnight, and I caught the sound of a broadcast of the Mari Lwyd ceremony which was coming from my father's old home at Taff's Well: that ceremony, traditional in Wales, in which a horse's skull was carried from house to house on the last night of the year by a party of singers, wits and impromptu poets, usually the worse for drink, who challenged the inmates to a rhyming contest, and, if they won, claimed entry and the right to food and ale. As I listened, it seemed to me that the old custom assumed terrifying proportions, for not only drunken and holy people, but the dead themselves seemed to have come to the

⁹⁶⁹ *Vernon Watkins Inspiration as Poetry, Poetry as Inspiration* by Brian Keeble (London: The Temenos Academy, Temenos Academy Papers No.19, 2002.), pp.19, 20.

⁹⁷⁰ *CP*, p.263. From 'The Replica' (*Cypress and Acacia*, 1959).

⁹⁷¹ David Wright describes its arrival thus: 'Though Watkins's use of language is less innovatory, for my generation the impact of *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* in 1941 was almost as electric as that of Auden's *Paid on Both Sides* had been a decade earlier.' *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.8.

house...The last night of the year is, then, for me a night of great mystery...The horse's skull...became the image of the Old Year which I needed, the image of New Year's Eve.⁹⁷²

Having found 'the image' Watkins worked at the composition for three years. In his explanatory note accompanying the published poem Watkins concludes with the comment:

I have attempted to bring together those who are separated. The last breath of the year is their threshold, the moment of supreme forgiveness, confusion and understanding, the profane and sacred moment impossible to realise while the clock-hands divide the Living from the Dead.⁹⁷³

If, compositionally, the poem is unusual in Watkins's oeuvre⁹⁷⁴, Watkins's sister, Dorothy, remarks that this was 'a theme that was to preoccupy him for the rest of his life' a view supported by others:

This ballad...is only one and perhaps the simplest expression of the mystery which pours its darkness and strange potency through almost all his verses.⁹⁷⁵

This poem seems an initiation which the poet has received from the ancestors, which has continued to fertilize all his future work.⁹⁷⁶

Watkins's great piece of luck...was *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*, that dialogue and dialectic of the dead and the living, the eternal and the ephemeral, the spiritual and corporeal, the transcendental and material, art and philistinism, God and Mammon: the real subject and focus of all Watkins's poetry.⁹⁷⁷

...The theme is one that will bear a good deal of exploration: it is what might be called "liminality", the occupying of a threshold. Watkins, I'd suggest, is most helpfully read as a celebrant of thresholds, an explorer of border territory, seeking to articulate the hidden

⁹⁷² *The Listener* (7th January 1965), p.22. From 'New Year 1965.' It must be noted that Watkins's account of the poem's beginnings counters Raine's assertion that the poem draws on Watkins's childhood memories, in support of her claim for Watkins as a born successor of the bardic role. Hearing the custom on a radio broadcast, Watkins was stirred by the tradition and the images it presented to his imagination, perhaps a deeper response was also at work. It does not appear that Watkins ever witnessed the ceremony in person. His sister Dorothy relates: 'Vernon first heard of this custom through his father, who could remember the mummers coming to his home.' ' *Vernon Phillips Watkins 1906-1967 The Early Years* by Dorothy Fox (NLW, Department of Duplicates – undated), p.33.

⁹⁷³ *CP*, p.40.

⁹⁷⁴ The dramatic form of the poem with various voices and stage direction was only repeated by Watkins in the poem's sequel 'The Ballad of the Outer Dark'.

⁹⁷⁵ *The Times Literary Supplement* (25th October 1941), from the anonymous review 'Beyond Time's Realm: The Changing Myths of History'.

⁹⁷⁶ *DAS*, p.25

dialogues that go on between, for example, two spheres, two registers, two sites...it is the subject for one of his best known early poems, the "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd".⁹⁷⁸

These are, admittedly, significantly varied responses to the poem in their identification of an enduring Watkins theme, the first two sharing in common a sense of the 'otherness' of Watkins's source of inspiration as contained in the poem, the latter two sharing the perception of a dialogue between that 'otherness' and its opposite as the subject of Watkins's poetic scrutiny. The 'threshold' that Rowan Williams identifies in the Ballad is that between the living and the dead. Roland Mathias describes 'the Dead' as 'as always in the Watkins legend, the intended conquerors of time', evoked in this poem as 'an attack on the materialism of so-called Christian society.'⁹⁷⁹ Kathleen Raine writes of the Dead as the 'other' mind from which Watkins drew his inspiration:

The *Mari* is a sacred cult object associated with the dead who themselves are the memory of the world immortal in the 'other' mind.⁹⁸⁰

The Dead in the Ballad are representative of '...imagination, the past, the questioning of "virtue" and the fear of death:'

In the first place, the Dead are both good and evil, not as separate souls but as a collective force (the strength of myth)...In the second place, a recognition of this duality, in which the living share, is necessary before life can be lived in the fullness of understanding. The Dead claim for the *Mari* that

...She knows all from the birth of the Flood
To this moment where we stand

...This time-conquering "holiness" (which is the holiness of the myth that grew from the original Creation, not a Christlike holiness) is the special gift of death and of those who have accepted it...But the Living wish to lose it, nevertheless...The gifts of forgiveness, self-

⁹⁷⁷ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), pp.7-8. From the Introduction by David Wright.

⁹⁷⁸ *Welsh Writing in English* (Vol.8, 2003), p.108. 'Swansea's Other Poet: Vernon Watkins and the Threshold between Worlds' by Rowan Williams.

⁹⁷⁹ *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), pp.114-115.

⁹⁸⁰ *DAS*, p.22. In her introduction to *Ballad of the Outer Dark and Other Poems* by Vernon Watkins (London: Enitharmon, 1979), Raine wrote, linking Watkins with Muir: '...Vernon Watkins saw how light is woven out of darkness, life out of death, to perfect a whole greater than either. Edwin Muir's theme was 'the story and the fable', the temporal and the archetypal; the 'other', the 'omnipresent eternal mind', he encountered as dream. For Vernon Watkins the 'other' mind is the dead.' (p.10) In a handwritten note 'To the Poetry Society' Watkins put: 'Death is an arbitrary division, and just as a poet writes for the dead, and for the unborn, as much as for the living...' *Vernon Watkins: Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS 22480E), p.48.

knowledge and vital or “religious” imagination which the Mari has to offer are stubbornly rejected. The door remains closed...⁹⁸¹

Rowan Williams suggests:

Poetry, it seems, is what happens at the dangerous edge; it is the hospitality of the living to the dead,⁹⁸²

Such hospitality is absent in the case of the Living in the Ballad:

The Ballad ends with the retreat of the Mari.⁹⁸³

Though the Dead have had ‘two-thirds of the talking time and even more of the imaginative force allotted to them’⁹⁸⁴ Mathias regards their banishment as Watkins’s recognition that his ‘was a minority view’.⁹⁸⁵

If the main action of ‘The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd’ is the confrontation and attempted reconciliation of ‘spirit’ world of the Dead and the materialistic world of the Living, its cultural and literary scope is reminiscent of David Jones’s *The Anathemata*, though less far-reaching than Jones’s work. The ‘Mari’s’ memory is ancient; through the symbol of the horse’s skull, Watkins re-imagines the notion of holiness

Great light you shall gather,
For Mari here is holy,
She saw dark thorns harrow
Your God crowned with holly.

Deeper sadness knowing
Than death’s great melancholy,
We journeyed from Calgarw,
From that skull-shaped hill.

A white horse frozen blind,
Hurled from a seawave’s hollow
Fostered by spray and wind,
Profane and priestlike thing!⁹⁸⁶

Like Jones, though less centrally, the Eucharist is present as a unifying emblem of the eternal moment, when the hands of the clock are stilled in one of the refrains of the poem:

⁹⁸¹ Ibid., pp.117-119.

⁹⁸² *Welsh Writing in English* (Vol.8, 2003), pp.108-109. From ‘Swansea’s Other Poet: Vernon Watkins and the Threshold between Worlds’ by Rowan Williams.

⁹⁸³ Ibid., p.109. Though the Dead retreat in this poem, they return and take possession of the home of the Living in the sequel ‘The Ballad of the Outer Dark’, recalling David Jones’s comment ‘...the words of Professor Ker’s *Dark Ages* may be remembered: ‘But the gods who are defeated, think that defeat no refutation.’” *Epoch and Artist Selected Writings* by David Jones (Faber and Faber, 1959), p.106.

⁹⁸⁴ *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.119.

⁹⁸⁵ Ibid., p.117.

⁹⁸⁶ *CP*, pp.48-49.

Chalice and Wafer. Wine and Bread. . . .
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.

Chalice and Wafer that blessed the dead,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread.⁹⁸⁷

Here, like Jones, Watkins could be said to be associating and utilising everything he can find within the Logos to connect the divine and the mundane. A further selection of lines, all from the bearers of the Mari develop this patterning:

The breath of a numb thing, loud and faint:
Something found and lost.
The minute drops in the minute-glass;
Conscience counts the cost.
What mounted murderous thing goes past
The room of Pentecost?
Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:
A horse's head in the frost...

In the black of En-gedi's cave we hid;
We hid in the Fall of the Bride,
And the stars flew back from the lifted lid;
We saw those horsemen ride.
We hid all night in the cowl of the wave;
Chariots and kings we saw
In Goliath's darkness, bright and brave
Felled by an ass's jaw...

We bring from white Hebron
And Ezekiel's Valley,
From the dead sea of Harlech
And mountain-girt Dolgelly,
All that singing way
From Cader to Kidwelly,
A stiff, a star-struck thing
Blown by the stinging spray
And the stinging light of the stars,
Our white, stiff thing,
Death and breath of the frost,
That has known the room of glass,
Dropped by the Milky Way
To the needle and thread of the pass...

But the pin goes in to the inmost dark
Where the dead and the living meet,
And the clock is stopped by the shock of the spark
Or the stealthy patter of sleet.
Where disdain has cast to its utmost pitch
The strands of the finished thread,
The clock goes out, and the ashes twitch,
Roused by the breaking of bread...

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.
Hark at the hands of the clock.
Lazarus comes in a shroud so white
Out of the hands of the clock.

⁹⁸⁷ Ibid., pp.42, 44.

While baskets are gathered of loaves of light,
Rape is picking the lock.
Hungering fingers, bones of the night,
Knock, knock, knock...

Resurrection's wings and corruption's moth
Beat on the window-pane.
The tombs are ripped like a table-cloth,
And madmen teach the sane.
A voice redresses those ancient wrongs
With a wrong more deep than all.
Holy Charity's bastard songs
Burst from a seawave's fall...

Know you are one with Cain the farm
And Dai of Dowlais pit;
You have thieved with Benjamin's robber's arm;
With Delilah you lay by night.
You cheated death with Barabbas the Cross
When the dice of Hell came down.
You prayed with Jo in the prisoner's fosse
And ran about Rahab's town...

None can look out and bear that sight,
None can bear the shock.
The Mari's shadow is too bright,
Her brilliance is too black.
None can bear the terror
When the pendulum swings back
Of the stiff and stuffed and stifled thing
Gleaming in the sack.⁹⁸⁸

Unlike David Jones, Watkins does not provide notes for his richly referential poetry which seems to move, almost by a kind of free association between the ancient Hebrew, the Christian, the Celtic and cosmic imagery.⁹⁸⁹ These verses from the Ballad share something of the opacity of David Jones's poetry; they also show in their anonymity the desire of the poet to universalise his 'voice' much in the manner of each of the poets.⁹⁹⁰ The 'Mari' or mare, will appear in different guises throughout Watkins's oeuvre, Watkins sharing with Muir a fondness for the horse as symbol with emblematic and

⁹⁸⁸ *CP*, pp.42, 46, 47, 48, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56.

⁹⁸⁹ Jane McCormick provides a helpful gloss: 'The strong dualism throughout...of holy and pagan reminds us that the Mari Lwyd is one of the large number of customs in which Christian elements have been imposed upon a thoroughly pagan celebration. In pre-Reformation times the mummers that accompanied the Mari included a representation of the Virgin Mary; hence in many areas the erroneous appellation "Holy Mary." The mummer's claim "For Mari here is holy" derives from both this early practice and a much earlier one – the entire procession seems to be a relic of Brythonic horse-worship...The Mari Lwyd is many things on many levels. She is a relic of horse-worship, and in a sense represents the mythologies making a last stand; she is the ancient goddess of inspiration; she is Death; ultimately she is the leader of the forces of light, the spirit of timeless wisdom and Christian forgiveness' *Poetry Wales* (Vol. A, No.2, Winter 1968), pp.4, 6. 'The Identity of the Mari Lwyd.'

⁹⁹⁰ 'I always aim at getting the ballad as hard and as anonymous as a stone...' *Radio Scripts* (NLW MS 22478E), p.129. From 'Insert for Spectrum: Dr. George Thomas interviewing Vernon Watkins' transmitted 16/2/1967. John Greening writes of Watkins ballads: 'I am not sure Vernon Watkins's plain voice has been given a chance to be heard...His ballads...are I think the medium in which he found his truest voice...It is interesting that the same is true for that other unyieldingly mystical poet with whom Watkins shares much in common – Edwin Muir. Why should the ballad form have so appealed to these two and enabled them to find a plainer style? I suppose it is

naturally evocative power, perhaps a shared Celtic strand; and David Jones's paintings often include the Welsh ponies – always transposed to symbolic significance – from his days at Capel-y-Ffin. The final verse carries another Watkins theme:

We can see that it was...a first indication of...Vernon Watkins's exploration of that 'deep but dazzling darkness' which surrounds and sustains daily consciousness. The dead are not imaginary, they are imagination itself. Paradoxically this holy unholy mystery is the warp upon which Vernon Watkins weaves his woof of evanescent joy. Light and shadow, leaf and wing, flowing water and mossy stone, bird and butterfly weave and unweave their pattern, which is perpetual celebration.⁹⁹¹

This became central to Watkins's poetic realisation of human life and the life of the natural world via the Revelation of Christianity, as the darkness of night, sleep and dreams did to Muir, the dark night of the journeying soul to Gascoyne and the darkness of the cave and entombment to David Jones.

In the image of the Mari and in the rhyming contest are the recognisable beginnings of the Taliesin theme, the figure of Taliesin becoming a favoured means for Watkins to convey his beliefs about the role of the poet. Jane McCormick makes the distinction that, 'her [the Mari's] knowledge is Taliesin's, timeless, infinite, permanent; but she has not only touched Taliesin's Spring of Vision, she is that spring.'⁹⁹² This seems substantiated by the rhymers' invocation that the Mari 'must inspire' the feast as well as the completeness of experience that she is held to represent in the ballad. It is likely that Watkins had Taliesin in mind long before the first Taliesin poem was published in *The Death Bell* in 1954:

How else should the claims of the Dead whose Mari masters time echo some of the details of Taliesin's most famous poem?

I was in Canaan when Absalom was slain;
I conveyed the Divine Spirit to the level of the vale of Hebron;
I was in the court of Don before the birth of Gwidion.
I was instructor to Eli and Enoc;
I have been winged by the genius of the splendid crosier;
I have been loquacious prior to being gifted with speech;
I was at the place of the crucifixion of the merciful Son of God;
I have been three periods in the prison of Arianrod;
I have been the chief director of the work of the tower of Nimrod;
I am a wonder whose origin is not known.

because the ballad is above all a poem to be heard.' *New Welsh Review* (Vol.XIII/I, No.49, Summer 2000), p.16. From 'Vernon Watkins: the music in the eyes.'

⁹⁹¹ *The Ballad of the Outer Dark and Other Poems* by Vernon Watkins (London: Enitharmon Press, 1979), p.11. From Kathleen Raine's introduction.

⁹⁹² *Poetry Wales* (Vol. A, No.2, Winter 1968), p.5. From 'The Identity of the Mari Lwyd' by Jane McCormick.

...The attraction of the Taliesin theme to a poet already in love with the conquest of time is sufficiently plain.⁹⁹³

It is interesting that Watkins transfers the omniscience claimed by Taliesin (a man with divine powers) to the female Mari. On the other hand, David Jones, to whom the Taliesin figure also appealed translates Taliesin's boast into 'Dai's boast' the lowly infantryman, thus reflecting his view of the task and role of the poet. For Watkins the poet is an exalted, indeed inspired figure, yet not uncomplicatedly nor unambiguously so, as will be seen with further study of the Taliesin poems.

The Taliesin Poems⁹⁹⁴

There are five poems by Watkins which are explicitly linked with the identification with Taliesin: 'Taliesin in Gower' (in *The Death Bell*, 1954), 'Taliesin and the Spring of Vision' (in *Cypress and Acacia*, 1959), 'Taliesin's Voyage' and 'Taliesin and the Mockers' (in *Affinities*, 1962), and 'Taliesin at Pwlldu' (in *Fidelities*, 1968).⁹⁹⁵

Kathleen Raine bases much of her argument for Watkins's 'bardic', and authentically poetic status, on the Taliesin poems. Lighting on 'Taliesin and the Mockers' she quotes the following lines with a commentary:

Before men walked
I was in these places.

I was here
When the mountains were laid.

I am as light
To eyes long blind,
I, the stone,
Upon every grave.

I saw black night
Flung wide like a curtain.

I looked up
At the making of stars,
I stood erect
At the birth of rivers.
I observed
The designing of flowers.

⁹⁹³ *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.120.

⁹⁹⁴ 'Taliesin the bard is thought to have lived in the sixth century... We gather from the *Mabinogion*... that Taliesin, kidnapped at sea by Irish boats while on his way to the court of king Urien Rheged at Aberllychwr, managed to escape and reached the coast of Gower by swimming.' From the essay 'Vernon Watkins' by Roberto Sanesi *Temenos* (8, 1987), p.108. Vernon Watkins wrote: 'The Welsh poet Taliesin, who claimed to have lived in all ages, is to Welsh poetry the archetype of inspiration, as Orpheus was to the Greeks.' *Vernon Watkins: Radio Scripts* (NLW MS 22478E), p.3.

⁹⁹⁵ *Temenos* (8, 1987), p.108. From 'Vernon Watkins' by Roberto Sanesi.

This spirit of the divine wisdom is also in the Taliesin legend identified with the prophetic tradition both Christian and pre-Christian. The same wisdom that was present when the mountains were laid was present at the Crucifixion, and inspires all prophetic (that is to say poetic) utterance.

Mock me they will
Those hired musicians
They at Court
Who command the schools.

Mock thought they do,
My music stands
Before and after
Accusing silence.

The argument is identical with that of Milton's Jesus defending the Jewish tradition of prophetic inspiration against Satan's last temptation, human learning.⁹⁹⁶

Rowan Williams's reading of the final verse coincides, to a degree, with Raine's:

Or possibly: the music itself is the accusing silence that surrounds the mockery of shallow speech.⁹⁹⁷

If Raine's 'prophetic utterance' is regarded as 'the music', and 'human learning' taken as her version of 'shallow speech' (which is implied). Even so, Williams regards the lines as 'leaving us with an intriguing ambiguity' and warns that a 'shamanic' reading of the poem 'needs careful handling.'

Watkins's regular voice is one in which meanings are not invariably delivered accessibly or univocally, and that too is part of a rhetoric of mortality. As in the Hölderlin sequence, truth can only be manifested through fragmentation and therefore, necessarily, ambiguity.⁹⁹⁸

While Raine does not admit ambiguity into her reading of any of the four poets' works, Williams's point provides openings and connections between Watkins, Jones, Muir and Gascoyne. Why does Raine resist admitting the presence of ambiguity in Watkins's writing? A possible reason is linked to her personal difficulties in affirming the Christian faith. In Jones's de-stabilising of the poetic text in *The Anathemata* and in the tension between 'The Tribune's Visitation' and 'The Tutelar of the Place'; in Muir's concern with the possible efficacy of words and in David Gascoyne's 'perhaps it is only the poem I cannot write which is true,' each poet admits an occupying of a liminal place of which Williams writes. In Jones and Gascoyne particularly 'fragmentation' is a result of the 'borderers' experience; a necessary condition of their endeavour. Such a condition is not an obvious aspect of

⁹⁹⁶ *DAS*, pp.20, 21.

⁹⁹⁷ *Welsh Writing in English* (Vol.8, 2003), p.115. 'Swansea's Other Poet' by Rowan Williams.

Watkins's poetry (nor Muir's) and yet I agree with Williams. In terms of Watkins's employment of Taliesin I take both Raine's and Williams's readings as valid. Watkins must have felt the magical attraction of the shape-changing 'archetype of inspiration', but he was restrained from a fully shamanic poetic flight by 'a rhetoric of mortality' with specifically Christian implications. Kathleen Raine describes the reining in thus:

The elusive figure of Taliesin unites pre-Christian with Christian themes; and in 'Taliesin and the Spring of Vision' the prophetic Bardic spirit itself seeks baptism; the cosmic spirit is reluctant to leave the freedom of timeless nature for human history, yet he makes the choice:

And you are my constant, who have endured all vicissitudes
In the cradle of sea, Fate's hands, and the spinning waters.
The measure of past grief is the measure of present joy.
Here time's glass breaks, and the world is transfigured in music.

...The cosmic voices seek to hold the poet to a world of perfection which for that very reason falls short of human perfection.

Taliesin answered: 'I have encountered the irreducible diamond
In the rock. Yet now it is over. Omniscience is not for man.
Christen me, therefore, that my acts in the dark may be just,
And adapt my partial vision to the limitation of time.'⁹⁹⁹

It must be pointed out that Roland Mathias disagrees with this reading of the moment of baptism in Watkins's poetry. Mathias maintains that 'grief' brought baptism to Watkins's poetry much earlier, not this later deliberate baptism of the Bardic spirit. This 'grief' Mathias cannot specifically identify, though he associates it with Watkins's sense of a lost golden age when confronted with the demands of mundane reality on leaving Repton – the death of youth, in the face of which, post-breakdown, Watkins gradually came to replace his Platonic concept of immortality with the Christian paradox of mortality and immortality. In terms of my study, Mathias's quibble is not critical. Mathias's reading of the term 'bardic' in Raine's application is perhaps rather limited too. When he writes that Watkins's 'business was almost incredibly greater – it was nothing less than the validation, not merely of poets gone before, but of all mankind, in an eternity of truth which new flashes of perception brought nearer' he underestimates the significance Raine attaches to 'bardic', for the bard – as prophet and oracle – is indeed validating his art 'in an eternity of truth'. Even so, Raine does not readily include 'grief' in her interpretation of her assembled poets while it seems that grief is a powerful element in all their poetry. Grief is not compatible with the exalted role of the poet and Raine tends to

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid., p.115.

⁹⁹⁹ DAS, p.33.

stress the anonymity and universal aspects of the poets' work in order to support her assertions regarding the Sophia Perennis and the anamnesis performed by the poet in recalling the 'eternity of truth'. What Mathias's reading allows, is the admittance of the limited, human condition of the poet that seeks transfiguration through his poetry. As has been seen in 'The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd', Watkins had a fondness for the fecund obscurity of darkness and its potential for re-birth. As Orpheus must enter the underworld, Taliesin in the darkness of the cave receives in the traditional myth three drops of water of inspiration and for Watkins the pagan awakening of inspiration is closely knit with the Christian baptism, which for him is also a poetic baptism.¹⁰⁰⁰

Roberto Sanesi, friend and translator of Watkins's poetry considered the first of the Taliesin poems, 'Taliesin in Gower', 'possibly most conclusive and exhaustive of the five poems.'¹⁰⁰¹ The poem begins:

Late I return, O violent, colossal, reverberant, eavesdropping sea.
 My country is here. I am foal and violet. Hawthorn breaks from my hands.
 I watch the inquisitive cormorant pry from the praying rock of Pwlldu,
 Then skim to the gulls' white colony, to Oxwich's cockle-strewn sands.

I have seen the curlew's triangular print, I know every inch of his way.
 I have gone through the door of the foundered ship, I have slept in the
 winch of the cave

With pine-log and unicorn-spiral shell secreting the colours of day;
 I have been taught the script of the stones, and I know the tongue of the
 Wave.¹⁰⁰²

Sanesi writes:

...There is no question of passively tracing the elements of a topographically recognizable landscape, nor of vaguely suggesting a place through allusions to a Welsh atmosphere as suggestive as they are casual. The *principio individuationis* functions in a meticulous fashion: each element possesses a precise reason, or acts through strict analogy. In the Taliesin cycle Gower is Gower...Oxwich is the great beach which stretches to the west of the gulf of Swansea, beyond Mumbles Head and Watkins's house; the Three Cliffs border it on the east side, and Pwlldu...is a nearby spring...And, coming immediately after the declaration of belonging to *that* country, is the play of metamorphoses, conjunctions and oppositions, the magical-mystical epiphanies belonging to ancient Celtic tradition and neo-

¹⁰⁰⁰ 'In this poem the three drops of inspiration which traditionally fell on Taliesin are imagined as falling on him in a cave. In my earlier poem 'Taliesin in Gower' he was also in a cave when landscape appeared to him not as a material thing but as a vision deriving its renewed life from the mystery of bread and wine on which he meditated in secret.' *Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS22480 E), p.7.

¹⁰⁰¹ *Temenos* (8, 1987), p.109. 'Vernon Watkins' by Roberto Sanesi.

¹⁰⁰² *CP*, p.184.

Platonism, but not devoid of those Christian elements which qualify Taliesin's new incarnation, and which are foreshadowed in the former.¹⁰⁰³

Sanesi's reading of the poem can be seen to support Kathleen Raine's designation of Watkins as bard.

Sanesi knew Watkins well and comments:

The privileged position assigned by Watkins to art as a prophetic activity, verging on mystical, and its relation to the theories and creative exercises of decadent writers such as Pater and Nietzsche, is a point which should not, perhaps, be underestimated.¹⁰⁰⁴

From this premise, Sanesi analyses the 'web of correspondences'¹⁰⁰⁵ he perceives in the poem:

'I am foal and violet', proclaims Watkins's bard. The image of the horse, which occurs so often, would not perhaps need to be interpreted in any arcane sense, and could simply be seen as an allusion to the landscape, had not Watkins, following a Welsh folk tradition, used it so extensively and consciously...¹⁰⁰⁶

Sanesi details Watkins's use of the 'Mari' and the richness of its symbolism, concluding that Watkins consciously employed 'a system of symbolic conventions:'

...And it is no accident that this system also nourished a by no means inconspicuous phase of the romantic and decadent figurative art which is part of a clearly-defined Northern tradition.¹⁰⁰⁷

Sanesi's exposition of the symbolism of the 'unicorn-spiral shell' is particularly illuminating:

...In proclamation of the mystery of the occult and elementary natural forces; and in its concrete objectivity it serves better than any other as a vehicle for the revelation of a divine macrocosm. Its structure combines the close compactness of linear, phallic form, which is suggested by the reference to the unicorn, and a curving gracefulness suggestive of femininity, which has reference to one of the most frequently recurring symbols of Celtic thought, the spiral. An ancient bestiary speaks with ambiguous interpretative hints of the unicorn, among other things: 'A virgin is led to where he is hidden, and is left there to walk

¹⁰⁰³ *Temenos* (8, 1987), p.109. 'Vernon Watkins' by Roberto Sanesi.

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.112.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.120.

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.117. Watkins wrote: 'Although I do not often read Aneurin, Taliesin and Llywarch Hen, because I have not learnt enough Welsh, I think their poetry is the finest early poetry in Britain, and unsurpassed, in its kind, since. Even through translation the force of this poetry makes itself clear. I feel the affinity with these poets which does not come from study, of history, but from instinct. Their roots go very deep; their truth is unmistakable'. (Letter to Meic Stephens, 29 January 1967, NLW MS 22464E). *Vernon Watkins New Selected Poems* ed. Richard Ramsbotham (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006), p.110. This suggests Raine had some grounds for attaching 'bardic' significance to Watkins's use of the 'Mari' and his later developments of the Taliesin theme.

by herself into the thick of the wood. Suddenly, as soon as he sees her, the unicorn leaps into her lap, and embraces her, and is taken by her... Our Lord Jesus Christ is also spiritually a unicorn, and it is said of him, "And he was loved as the Son of the Unicorns"... As for the spiral, the resistant motif of continuity (as well as of the serpent, the uroborus, sexuality, primary oracular energy, labyrinthine mystery of the spirit, etc.), it is found in the most disparate and distant times and places as a metaphor of the long and tortuous journey of the soul through death and rebirth. It is found equally, and with the same meaning, on the walls of the tombs of the sun-worshippers and on the Celtic stone crosses of the first Christian period.¹⁰⁰⁸

It seems inevitable and right that as apparently insignificant an object as a shell should be imbued with such symbolic resonance by Watkins. Like David Jones, he re-worked his poems incessantly in order to achieve the fullest expression of his vision:

In Watkins, who appears to abandon himself so freely to the ecstatic lyrical flow, the network of correspondences actually manifests a meticulous logical structure; the meanings are interchangeable, shifting from divine to profane and from pagan to Christian in a play of continuous and studied ambiguity.¹⁰⁰⁹

Sanesi's commentary is helpful in drawing out the evocative levels of 'Taliesin in Gower.' His closing comments on the poem return the reader's focus from the symbolic intent of the poem to its 'act' as poem, a subject which deeply concerned Watkins, Jones, Muir and Gascoyne:

This poem may be 'aristocratic' and perhaps 'unfashionable'; in its stylistic and conceptual structure because of its apparent aversion to history, and its leaning towards a mystical outcome... Yet in its emphasis on an anguished obsession with time and mortality, with the sense of life thus indirectly signified (the positive aspects of which should not... be underestimated), this poem also affirms an open devotion to the creative will, to the capacity of the poet to transform the world; and in so doing re-enters history and accepts its burden.

'Taliesin in Gower' is... a poem about poetry; its function is, above all, one of cognition.¹⁰¹⁰

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid., p.118. This immediately evokes the paintings of David Jones and indeed his poetry.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid., pp.118-119. Watkins wrote: '...It is a common error of critics to think that a poet's development is in a straight line. It is much more in the form of a spiral...' *Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS 22480 E), p.78. This note is placed at the end of the folder and is undated. Sanesi puts: 'The theme of the spiral, of the eternal return, of contemporaneity, of the coincidence of the whole with the part is almost an obsession.' *Temenos* 8, p.122. This recalls the action of Jones's *The Anathemata* and *In Parenthesis*.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid., p.121.

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibid., p.124.

The 'Music of Colours' poems

The first 'Music of Colours' poem, 'The Music of Colours: White Blossom' appears in *The Lady with the Unicorn*; describing the collection generally and 'White Blossom' in particular Watkins records:

In several of these poems I relate the myths to Christianity, and in the first poem I use a particular image to do so. I had walked out of my house on the cliff after a snowfall to find that the spray of the breaking waves, which had always seemed so white, looked grey. My conception is that even the iridescent myths reflected in the spray, are dark in the light of Christian vision.¹⁰¹¹

Roland Mathias suggests that the symbolism of the poem represented a 'breakthrough' for Watkins, that in the poem Watkins:

...discovered how to present his Christian belief with as much *élan* and surface brilliance as he had more than once given to myth.¹⁰¹²

In his earlier study of Vernon Watkins, Mathias wrote:

Undoubtedly Vernon Watkins...experienced considerable difficulty in bringing his poetic heritage, nourished in the Ancient World, into a coherent relationship with doctrinal Christian belief.¹⁰¹³

Mathias seeks to delineate the relationship between Watkins's mythical inheritance as poet, and his Christian faith, which for Mathias is the crux of the conflict he discerns in Watkins's poetry. Mathias discerns in Watkins's first two collections a struggle in the poet's attempt to employ the two patterns of belief, a struggle to which Mathias sees a resolution in *The Lady with the Unicorn*:

It would be difficult anywhere...to provide a poetic-time chart of what may loosely be called the re-Christianising process, if only because of the problems offered by Vernon Watkins's self-criticism. On the other hand, a careful reading of the entire works is bound to leave one conscious both of the poet's greater openness to the common plane of reality in later life and of the manner in which Christian teaching struggled hard to obtain greater control of the central mysticism. Vernon Watkins's personal life, which so little needed amending, he carried back into the Church: but his theology was never orthodox and to the very end...there

¹⁰¹¹ *Vernon Watkins: Notes for Poetry Readings* (NLW MS 22480 E), p.18. Poetry Reading at Stratford-on-Avon, 1958.

¹⁰¹² *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.109.

remained a certain dichotomy between the doctrinaire Christian...and the poet whose instinct was to reconcile, to muffle, to carry off the potential conflict to a mystic height where the issues appeared not to matter against the panoply of eternity.¹⁰¹⁴

This seems to me a just, if somewhat limited (in so far as Mathias's knowledge of religious orthodoxy is rather narrow) response to the pattern of the 'insight-symbols' (as Mathias describes them) repeated throughout Watkins's oeuvre. I have found Mathias's reading and exposition of many of Watkins's poems helpful in simply seeking to explain the possible working levels of Watkins's symbols: the Platonic, the mythological (both Celtic and Classical mythology) and the Christian. Unlike Raine, Mathias does not settle for a stark shift within one poem from the pagan, in this instance ancient Welsh, though for Raine this implies a connection with the hermetic tradition, to the Christian. However, Mathias acknowledges that the poem Raine lights on for her thesis is an unusual one for Watkins in its recognition of 'the need for a practical creed'¹⁰¹⁵ and that the poem therefore 'has a unique importance.'¹⁰¹⁶ For my purposes Raine's and Mathias's positions are close enough to sustain an assembling of Watkins with Muir, Jones and Gascoyne in their merging of 'patterns', though with each poet the Christian pattern came to encompass all others, a point which Raine is always somewhat reluctant to concede.

Mathias regards *The Lady with the Unicorn* as, 'Vernon Watkins's first collection of unquestionable stature,'¹⁰¹⁷ in which he believes the 'variety of long-lined verse-forms...carry both mythic and Christian concepts with a new and startling ease.'¹⁰¹⁸ The 'Music of Colours' begins:

White blossom, white, white shell; the Nazarene
 Walking in the ear; white touched by souls
 Who know the music by which white is seen,
 Blinding white, from strings and aureoles,
 Until that is not white, seen at the two poles,
 Nor white the Scythian hills, nor Marlowe's queen.
 The spray looked white until this snowfall.
 Now the foam is grey, the wave is dull.
 Call nothing white again, we were deceived.
 The flood of Noah dies, the rainbow is lived.
 Yet from the deluge of illusions an unknown colour is saved.

¹⁰¹³ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.88.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.52-53.

¹⁰¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.103.

¹⁰¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.103.

¹⁰¹⁷ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.111. 'It has always seemed to me that *The Lady with the Unicorn* marks Watkins's clear emergence as, at least, an important poet and certainly as a writer of very unusual and remarkable talents. *Poetry Wales* (Vol. II, No.3, Winter 1966), p.8. From essay by Leslie Norris.

¹⁰¹⁸ *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.103.

White must die black, to be born white again
From the womb of sounds, the inscrutable grain,
From the crushed, dark fibre, breaking in pain.¹⁰¹⁹

In the strong musicality of the poem an interchange between the aural and the visual is held in the dense yet light arrangement. The poem appears a Hopkinsesque¹⁰²⁰ exaltation of whiteness, Watkins following his dictum that lyric poetry must be exalted, the vision is music. It is interesting that 'the Nazarene' is 'walking' rather than speaking in the ear, odd and somehow apt.¹⁰²¹ The poem from all its sensual flooding of brightness contains obscurity and the flow of thought I have found difficult to follow. Mathias presents a reading which helps, striking some chords with Muir and Gascoyne:

That the sea...which...carried the mythic spirits, should be so outshone set off in his [Watkins's] mind that train of thought...the purity of the newly fallen snow, the immediate replica, so to speak, was more impressive by far than the whipped up furies of the foam...it was knowledge of and recognition of the initial pattern, subsequently purified by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that brought a special glory to the natural world:

I know nothing of Earth or colour until I know I lack
Original white...

It was a recognition...of an imperfection personal and general amongst humanity, of identification with the regenerative processes of nature and myth...That repeated "white" lifts the archaic and echoing syntax of the last two lines, uses it, indeed, to suggest the endless regeneration of the original vision, of the "cloud of witnesses" who have "touched" it...In nature, as in myth, "original white" is nearest in the seeming darkness, from which white may be born again

From the crushed, dark fibre, breaking in pain.

¹⁰¹⁹ *CP*, p.101.

¹⁰²⁰ I am thinking of such poems as 'God's Grandeur', 'The Starlight Night', and 'Spring' in which poems Hopkins celebrates, indeed exalts, observed particulars of the outward scene, but always within an apprehension of God's 'in-dwelling' spirit.

¹⁰²¹ Brian Keeble interprets: 'Watkins's inspirational vision is at all times inclusive. The poet as artisan, labouring at the syntactic and rhythmic intricacies of his craft, is also seen as imitating the making of the world by God through the spoken word of the Logos: in 'Music of Colours: White Blossom', Christ is assimilated to the 'original white' that is the ground of Being, and is referred to as 'Walking in the ear'. *Vernon Watkins Inspiration as Poetry. Poetry as Inspiration* by Brian Keeble (Temenos Academy Papers No.19, Temenos Academy, 1997), p.13. The connection between 'the syntactic and rhythmic' qualities of poetry and the 'rhythm' of Christ's 'walking' may reflect Watkins's predilection for walking too. It is also possible that the biblical text: 'He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught' (Isaiah 50:4) might be operative. It is where the prophet no longer receives oracles occasionally but permanently, an idea that would have appealed to Watkins. It carries no sense of walking, but the 'morning by morning' implies that it carries on through time, which is like walking.

Darkness is always the darkness of birth and possibility.¹⁰²²

In the final verses, the notion of purification through Christ is further developed, contrasted with the physicality of divine presence in Greek myth resolved in a final convergence on limited though hopeful human terms:

If there is white, or has been white, it must have been
When His eyes looked down and made the leper clean.
White will not be, apart, though the trees try
Spirals of blossom, their green conspiracy.
She who touched His garment saw no white tree.

Lovers speak of Venus, and the white doves,
Jubilant, the white girl, myth's whiteness, Jove's,
Of Leda, the swan, whitest of his loves.
Lust imagines him, web-footed Jupiter, great down
Of thundering light; love's yearning pulls him down
On the white swan-breast, the magical lawn,
Involved in plumage, mastered by the veins of dawn.

In the churchyard the yew is neither green nor black.
I know nothing of Earth or colour until I know I lack
Original white, by which the ravishing bird looks wan.
The mound of dust is nearer, white of mute dust that dies
In the soundfall's great light, the music in the eyes,
Transfiguring whiteness into shadows gone,
Utterly secret. I know you, black swan.¹⁰²³

Mathias suggests that the concluding phrase, 'makes...the point that natural whiteness is further from "original white" than is the potential of blackness:'

The black swan is the continual augur of possibility. And the form of the final statement – the "I know, you" – associates the poet firmly with that knowledge. It was through grief and darkness, not through the near-whites of nature or human satisfaction, that he had perceived the single, yet multiple, pattern of Christ.¹⁰²⁴

This is a valid reading of the poem's action, its modulation of ideas and the essential sympathy for the human condition that permeates Watkins's work, if difficult to discern at times in the plethora of imagistic language:

The mound of dust is nearer, white of mute dust that dies

Mathias's phrase 'the continual augur of possibility' is echoed in Rowan Williams's observations regarding the 'liminal' working of Watkins's poetry between dark and light, between death and life.

¹⁰²² *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), pp.110-111.

¹⁰²³ *CP* pp.101-102.

¹⁰²⁴ *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.111.

'The Music of Colours: The Blossom Scattered', the second poem in the series, returns to the theme of whiteness, but with 'a different emphasis.'¹⁰²⁵ In the first poem, neither the natural world nor the Greek mythological stories can approximate to the 'original white' of the Nazarene, and the human path to apprehending the truth of that light or white requires darkness, perhaps the *via negativa*. This second study allows the natural world stronger representative powers of God's presence. Mathias provides:

Those

Who know the music by which white is seen,
See the world's colours in flashes come and go.
The marguerite's petal is white, is wet with rain,
Is white, then loses white, and then is white again
Not from time's course, but from the living spring.

Here "original white" has become something that the Christian can see in flashes in nature's colours, and the whites of the natural petals know, as the poet does, that they are "of whitest darkness made", that they are

White born of bride and bridegroom, when they take
Love's path through Hades, engendered of dark ground.

They know, in a word, like Orpheus and Eurydice, that there is no music without loss, no white without an initial dark. The white that "flashes" may indeed for a moment, most of all at dawn, at the fledging of "pure spirit", be "original white" ...¹⁰²⁶

Mathias describes this new theme of Orpheus and Eurydice as 'the music of absence theme', which he believes runs on through the third poem, embracing all nature. The third poem 'Music of Colours: Dragonfoil and the Furnace of Colours' sings with the spectrum of colours, vibrantly, but 'the blooms speak always of Eurydice lost:'

Yet the turf tells me: she it is, no other,
Touches the rose-blaze, gathers what became her
Music. Forgetfulness holds her like a girdle
Silent. Only by absence is the song made
Audible. Orpheus, learning above Lethe,
Knows every note there.

This flower-summer, "this perennial wonder/Of fireborn blossoms" is

True for this moment, therefore never dying,

¹⁰²⁵ Ibid., p.111. It is worth noting here, in view of Raine's and Brian Keeble's conception of Watkins as Platonist, that Watkins knew Shelley and might be recalling the famous stanza towards the end of 'Adonais' where he talks of colours 'staining the white radiance of eternity' by which he means the Platonic idea of 'many-ness' representing but also tainting the purity of the One. Shelley is thinking of light as a prism but also perhaps of stained glass.

¹⁰²⁶ Ibid., pp.111-112.

...The "magic surface" of myth grows, extends. It is justified by the original Creation. But

All that is made here hides another making;

even at dawn the human spirit is blind to it.

Waking entranced, we cannot see that other
Order of colours moving in the white light.

So the bow of the 'Music of Colours' curves from poem to poem, from a triumphant perception of "original white", through a more hesitant assertion that *some* can see that white in nature's flashes of colour, to a paean of praise for the summer glory which *all* know and remember, even if it be the glory of a lower order. And of this last poem it must be said...that its regret, its sense of absence, is no more than an occasional question, posed as much by the coloured glories of mortality as by any more consistent mysticism...

Dust drops from champions where the hedge is hottest.
Foxgloves and grasses tremble where a snake basks,
Coiled under brilliance. Petals of the burnet-rose
Flash there pulsating: do the gold antennae
Feel for the white light?

The question has no separate impetus. It has been formalised in the delight of the

moment... With the 'Music of Colours' sequence all sense of an earlier dichotomy

disappears.¹⁰²⁷

The subtlety and liveliness of Watkins's metre and diction forestall a resolution in which the impossibility of complete vision might cast a shadow on the closely observed and celebrated forms of nature that Watkins knew intimately, '...though there is a metaphysical 'connection' to be made, it is rivalled, perhaps even rendered unimportant by the pulse of the living scene.'¹⁰²⁸ Another, perhaps surprising observation, is made by John Killick:

Watkins manages to walk the tightrope between the archaic and sententious on the one hand and the precious and gushing on the other without falling off...there are two aspects in his oeuvre in which he displayed a surprisingly modern sensibility. Firstly the two...ballads 'The Mari Lwyd' and 'The Outer Dark'...here he explored the possibilities of developing the traditional form in...new dramatic and symbolic ways. The other innovation is the use Watkins made in his verse of the idea of free association...in a pairing of images, in a juxtaposition of the senses...This tendency finds its fullest expression in the series... 'The Music of Colours.' This is how the second, 'The Blossom Scattered,' opens:

O but how white is white, white from shadows come,
 Sailing white of clouds, not seen before
 On any snowfield, any shore;
 Or this dense blue, delivered from the tomb,
 White of the risen body, fiery blue of sky,
 Light the saints teach us, light we learn to adore;
 Not space revealed it, but the needle's eye
 Love's dark thread holding when we began to die.

This sequence is one of the great unsung achievements of British poetry in the 20th century –
 Watkins 'making it new' with staggering aplomb.¹⁰²⁹

In 'W.B. Yeats – The Religious Poet', Watkins refers to the works of Grosseteste:

...He [Yeats] quotes Grosseteste's doctrine that light confers form upon First Matter. "Light is corporeality," he declares, "or that of which corporeality is made, a point from which spherical space flows from nothing."¹⁰³⁰

I would argue that in the 'Music of Colours' series, Watkins attempts to endow his poetry with a kind of corporeality, to replicate the Incarnation in verse. It was an endeavour which preoccupied both Jones and Gascoyne, the creation of 'presence' in language, discovered through the human presence of the divine in Christ who was Logos. In 'Dragonfoil and the furnace of colours' Watkins gives momentary precedence to the colour-filled splendours of the created earth:

Waking entranced, we cannot see that other
 Order of colours moving in the white light.
 Time is for us transfigured into colours
 Known and remembered from an earlier summer,
 Or into breakers
 Falling on gold sand, bringing all to nothing.
 Fire of the struck brand hides beneath the white spray.
 All life begins there, scattered by the rainbow;
 Yes, and the field flowers, these deceptive blossoms,
 Break from the furnace.¹⁰³¹

¹⁰²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.112-113.

¹⁰²⁸ *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.70.

¹⁰²⁹ *Scintilla* (1, 1997, Usk Valley Vaughan Association), pp.64-65. 'The Riderless Horse The poetry of Vernon Watkins' by John Killick.

¹⁰³⁰ *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* (Vol.3, No.4, Winter 1962), p.478. 'W.B. Yeats – The Religious Poet' by Vernon Watkins.

¹⁰³¹ *CP*, pp.324, 325.

Religious Poems

Touch with your fingers
The strings of song.
Love runs deeper
Than all time's wrong
I have considered
Such things long.

... Love is compounded
Of all it cast.
Sacred forgiveness
Binds all fast.
Timeless vision
Discerns no Past.

Shade of Calliope
Guard my days.
Such compassion
From dust I raise,
Nothing is valid
Except that praise.¹⁰³²

Vernon Watkins was a poet who gathered in. He was equally a poet of loss:

I am concerned chiefly with paradoxical truths, and my poems are addressed to those who underestimate the subtlety of life and death.¹⁰³³

'Touch with your fingers' is one of Watkins's 'gathering in' poems; it is a lyric of affirmation.

Watkins will have known the etymological roots of 'religion'; thus his use of 'binds'. The lyric, which is reminiscent of Wyatt's 'Blame not my lute'; as well as immediately invoking Orpheus, draws together the sensory spirit of poetry with the metaphysical and specifically Christian spirit of love. In the second verse quoted (which is the seventh of the poem), 'love' is given a curiously heavy quality, 'compounded', as though it were a vessel 'cast' of clay, moulded by the life of the individual. This seems to fit with the following verse's 'dust', moulded earth becoming unshaped earth.¹⁰³⁴ The reference to the 'Shade of Calliope', Muse of heroic poetry and mother of Orpheus, maintains the Orphic strand. The final declaration has a ringing certainty. The poem is a song, a prayer and an exhortation.¹⁰³⁵ In the sense of poetry binding or anchoring vision in belief, all Watkins's poetry is

¹⁰³² Ibid., pp.257-258. 'Touch With Your Fingers', *Cypress and Acacia* (1959).

¹⁰³³ *NSP*, p.xviii. From the introduction by Richard Ramsbotham, quoting Vernon Watkins from *Wales* (23, 1946).

¹⁰³⁴ Another possible reading of 'cast' is 'cast away' or 'cast off' suggesting the idea of forgiveness and Blake's: 'He who binds to himself a joy/Does the winged life destroy/But he who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in eternity's sun rise.' *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), p.183.

¹⁰³⁵ Roland Mathias writes of *Cypress and Acacia*; 'This collection...offers many more poems that are either dogmatic summaries of his conclusions or oblique references to them.' From *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.112. I prefer Rowan Williams's ascription of a 'liturgical quality' in Watkins's poems 'the effect of a complex ceremony in words'. *NSP*, p.ix. From the Foreword by Rowan Williams.

religious. The poems I shall consider in this section are those with explicitly Christian titles and themes.

The first of these poems appeared in *The Lady with the Unicorn* (1948), the collection in which Roland Mathias sees Watkins decisively placing the Christian pattern as the centre of his creative source. It is titled 'The Healing of the Leper:'

O, have you seen the leper healed,
And fixed your eyes upon his look?
There is the book of God revealed,
And God has made no other book.

The withered hand which time interred
Grasps in a moment the unseen.
The word we had not heard, is heard.
What we are then, we had not been.

Plotinus, preaching on heaven's floor,
Could not give praise like that loud cry
Bursting the bondage of death's door;
For we die once; indeed we die.

What Sandro Botticelli found
Rose from the river where we bathe:
Music the air, the stream the ground;
Music the dove, the rock, the faith:

... All fires the prophets' words contained
Fly to those eyes, transfixed above.
Their awful precept has remained:
'Be nothing first; and then, be love'.¹⁰³⁶

Watkins wrote that the poem 'celebrates the moment...the moment of faith, the moment which is decisive for life and death at the same time:'

The lofty thought of the Greek philosopher Plotinus seemed to me transcended by an image in Botticelli's painting, by a face whose Christian faith expressed a willingness to die and live at the same time.¹⁰³⁷

The paradox of the necessary death in order to have life was one that Watkins applied to his conception of art as well as life. For him there was no division between the two. In later years at poetry readings Watkins would explain his refusal to write poems "dominated by time", 'in the form which follows or in something very like it:'

A poet gains strength from the acceptance of death. The conquest of time lies in this acceptance, the refusal to be raised except by the true God.¹⁰³⁸

¹⁰³⁶ CP, p.136.

¹⁰³⁷ *Vernon Watkins Talks and Lectures* (NLW MS22479 E), p.32. 'A Talk on my Recent Poetry', typewritten manuscript, stamped with 'BBC received 1947'.

'The Healing of the Leper' is a poem that resoundingly expresses Watkins's statement, the leper for Watkins representing mankind. As one critic has observed, 'the primacy of direct human experience over any abstract pattern is affirmed.'¹⁰³⁹ In another Gospel poem, 'Zacchaeus in the Leaves', Watkins conveys the imagined excitement of Zacchaeus, climbing a sycamore to see Christ, equating the sycamore with 'the Tree of Life – the World Tree of all mythologies.'¹⁰⁴⁰

The myth above the myth,
 Pan above Zacchaeus;
 Zacchaeus climbing,
 Mounted above his youth,
 Alone in time
 Seeking the heavenly death,
 The crooked he had left,
 Yes, and the wise,
 To climb the tree-trunk,
 To sit in a cleft
 And see through his eyes...
 Slow the procession was coming. The drinkers remained
 Sitting cross-legged, close to the dead who were chained,
 Beggars of light. Only the man in the tree
 Looked on the road, and saw where light was ordained.¹⁰⁴¹

Roland Mathias comments on this poem:

Christianity and myth are now established at different levels on the same tree.¹⁰⁴²

It must be added here that some early Christian writers identified the cross with the world tree and in the liturgical hymn 'Crux Fidelis' the same identification is made; Christianity, in this sense, the 'moving belief' Yeats sought, in its ready appropriation of material. The poem immediately following this is 'The Song of the Good Samaritan' a parable that Watkins employs to assert the pre-dominance of Christianity and its assimilative capacity, where the destiny (or Fate) of the Samaritan figured in the 'fixed stars', which would appear 'to be that of the eternal outcast', is routed by 'the moment of choice, wherein, by the act of self-sacrifice in which he helps the abandoned traveller, he is able to find his own freedom.'¹⁰⁴³

He broke the classical falsehood, summoned awake,
 A world from dust with secret worlds of his tears,
 Shut in those heavens he heard the mythologies shake...

¹⁰³⁸ *A Ride Through the Wood: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.90.

¹⁰³⁹ *Poetry Quarterly* (Vol.12, No.1, Spring 1950), p.22. 'Pity and the fixed stars: An Approach to Vernon Watkins' by John Heath-Stubbs.

¹⁰⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.22

¹⁰⁴¹ *CP*, pp.144-145.

¹⁰⁴² *A Ride Through the Woods: Essays on Anglo-Welsh Literature* by Roland Mathias (Poetry Wales Press, 1985), p.113.

¹⁰⁴³ *Poetry Quarterly* (Vol.12, No.1, Spring 1950), p.23. 'Pity and the fixed stars: An Approach to Vernon Watkins' by John Heath-Stubbs.

And he heard through heaven the retreating distances,
Timbrels, the long gold trumpet, the Pharaoh's car,
Heroic song, gold idols, the pagan dances.

Even as a child I began to say: How far?
Parting the curtain, the winding-sheet of the dead.
The loom of the hand has the pathway of every star.

Disappearance of the proud horses! Circling in dread,
Stampeding in light, he heard the mythologies shrink,
The rushing stars, their reverberant, thundering tread;

From a little worn-away trough where asses drink,
One by one, and above them, finding the sea,
Swallows pass, and their world ripples over the brink.¹⁰⁴⁴

The poem captures the human tenderness of the parable, countered by a Miltonic retreat of the pagan myths, the tears of the Samaritan representing a type of baptism. The verse with the child's question could be read as Watkins's own experience. I find it difficult to interpret, but would argue that the vast distances of space (and time) require an anchoring. The anchoring human object in this poem is the trough, shaped by human hands, albeit 'little' and 'worn away', which contains the saving water. The natural world is present in the swallows, whose element remains unfathomable, perhaps of a different eternity. Swallows are possibly representative of the soul, thus Watkins anchors his vision in time and place while at once allowing it to fly.

Having assumed the voice of the good Samaritan, in a later poem 'Christ and Charon', Watkins assumes the voice of Christ. John Press, writing generally of Watkins's Christian poems, centres on 'Christ and Charon:'

Although his poetry is continually irradiated with Christian mysticism, Watkins seldom expounds Christian dogma, and when he does so, in such poems as... 'Good Friday', the verse betrays a certain stiffness, as if it were constricted by its sacerdotal garments. He moves with much greater freedom in the realm of myth: the tranquil sonnet, 'Christ and Charon', owes nothing to religious orthodoxy and everything to the imagination of the poet who mounts from the underworld to paradise:

I left that nightmare shore, and woke to naves
Of daybreak.¹⁰⁴⁵

Press adds:

Edwin Muir's sonnet, 'Milton', has something of the same calm and gentleness.¹⁰⁴⁶

¹⁰⁴⁴ *CP*, pp.147-148.

¹⁰⁴⁵ *Trends in British Poetry since the Second World War* by John Press (Oxford University Press, 1963), p.66.

Press's views on the 'greater freedom in the realm of myth' in contrast with the 'stiffness' of 'religious orthodoxy' is worthy of pause, for it is quite probable that for both Watkins and Muir, biblical stories and images were regarded as primary material in a way that does not contradict orthodoxy (in religious orthodoxy, the concepts articulated from the stories as dogma are equally true, but secondary. Thus the Creed is true and indispensable but remains secondary to the Scriptural narratives). Press thinks that dogma has precedence over the stories in orthodoxy, but this is not so. Press's reading of the sonnet is therefore skewed, since Watkins (like Muir, and Jones) believed in the sacred action of poetry, that certain ideas and dogmas could *only* be truly presented via stories and symbols, much in the way that Christ used parables. 'Christ and Charon' in this sense is a symbolic means for re-enacting orthodoxy in Watkins's religious imagination.

'Good Friday' (*Cypress and Acacia*) is regarded as 'lapidary' rather than stiff by Rowan Williams:

Here the cross is invoked as "the sacred root", which is then at once defined as a moment of death for the beholder; it is the moment of total loss without which nothing can be said that has honesty:

Day must die here that day may break.
Time must forsake
Time, and this moment be preferred
To any copy, light or word.

In this night we apprehend
Which has no end.
Day dies. We make our choice and say:
"This, this we seek; no second day."

The echoes are strong both of Donne's "Nocturnall upon St Lucie's Daie" and, with consummate paradox, of Herbert's "Easter" ("Can there be any day but this?"). There can be no image-making in the face of God's death; the darkness must not be artificially illuminated or the void filled. It is the baldest statement...in all of Watkins's *oeuvre*, of "negative theology", not as a conceptual tactic but as a serious and radical blockage of speech.¹⁰⁴⁷

¹⁰⁴⁶ Ibid., p.66. There is a similarity in the sonnets' movement from darkness to light. In Muir's poem darkness (Milton's blindness) prevails until the closing couplet in which Milton 'sees' the 'fields of Paradise', having heard the sounds of Hell. In Watkins's sonnet Christ wakes 'to naves/Of daybreak' in the fifth line, the remainder of the poem a vision of paradise, '...fierce lamentations' change to 'living psalms' and angels sing lullabies. There is a shared sense of calm, Muir's poem having a darker edge. 'Milton' quotations from *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir* ed. Peter Butter (Aberdeen: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1991), p.193.

¹⁰⁴⁷ *Welsh Writing in English* (Vol.8, 2003), pp.112-113. 'Swansea's Other Poet' by Rowan Williams.

I agree with Williams's reading of the poem and find striking resemblances between it and David Gascoyne's 'Tenebrae' not only in that sense of 'radical blockage of speech', but also in the slight archaism of the poetic language. If in 'Good Friday' the poet's voice enters a voiceless darkness, in his last collection, *Affinities*, Watkins enters the tomb of Mary Magdalene and assumes her voice, ultimately to celebrate her moment of faith. It is a poem that may have appealed to David Jones, who saw in Magdalene's anointing of Christ's feet a symbolic archetype of the artist's endeavour:

Never such rest I had
As before I drew breath.
Here I lie on the bed
At the point of death,
I, the Magdalen, dead
In all but faith.

Now the sorrow I lived
Is taken away.
Death now calls for the gift
And I must obey.
Joy is the certainty left:
Do not delay.

Many shall murmur of me:
'I have known such,
Fickle and bright as the sea,
Gave herself much.'
Broken at last though I be
Truth is in touch.¹⁰⁴⁸

The last lines of the poem with their reference to brokenness and 'truth' in the physicality of 'touch' show an aspect of Watkins that is rarely revealed.¹⁰⁴⁹ In the same collection a similarly 'broken' figure is recollected and commemorated, Hölderlin.

The Hölderlin Poems

As Rowan Williams remarks *Affinities* (1962) 'met with a slightly lukewarm judgement from some critics'¹⁰⁵⁰, but, following his reading of 'Good Friday' Williams finds in the collection a continuation of Watkins's 'dissolution of self' which 'becomes a journey to innocence and thus to

¹⁰⁴⁸ CP, p.326. From 'Five Poems of Magdalenian Darkness'. The fifth poem in the sequence concerns 'The Anointing,' Mary Magdalene's act that also appealed to David Jones's imagination.

¹⁰⁴⁹ It is likely that with the phrase 'truth is in touch' Watkins was thinking of the 'Noli me tangere' of Mary Magdalene or St. Thomas who doubts Christ's bodily resurrection and at the insistence of the resurrected Christ must touch Him. This is an enigmatic part of the Christian narrative which attracted many artists over the centuries. It is a locus where image, fact, narrative, symbol and meaning all merge but can't be put all together in a separate discourse. It can be put in a poem, however, and thus be connected to other things. Watkins brings together image and dogma. Watkins, like Jones was drawn to the complete vision of Medieval art, where art was dogma. In Platonic terms the phrase 'truth is in touch' has no meaning, whereas for Christianity it is a truth (amongst a cluster of others). This is an area Watkins highlights in his reading of Yeats's play 'The Resurrection' where the Greek cries 'The heart of the Phantom is beating!' having passed his hand over the risen Christ's chest.

¹⁰⁵⁰ *Welsh Writing in English* (Vol.8, 2003), p.113. 'Swansea's Other Poet' by Rowan Williams.

love.¹⁰⁵¹ The ‘affinities’ of the book’s title are some of Watkins’s ‘specific poetic “heroes”...Heine, Hölderlin, Eliot, Thomas, Charles Williams, and some of the canonical English poets of an earlier generation.’

One of the incidental excellences of this collection is the way in which each of these is celebrated with just a hint of pastiche... These tributes often recur to the themes we have been examining – notably the celebration of tragedy in the major sequence on “The Childhood of Hölderlin”, a celebration not only of Hölderlin’s own appropriation of Greek tragedy but also of the tragic in his life, the necessity of speaking about Edenic wholeness only through fragmentedness, failure, madness.¹⁰⁵²

Stephen Spender observed:

I think it is true that the modern poet turns to Hölderlin because again and again he finds that this strange poetry which combines nostalgia and prophecy and disintegration with a passionate desire for fusion expresses situations which recur in his own experience of the apocalyptic times in which we live.¹⁰⁵³

Spender’s comment seems to encapsulate the poetic feeling not only of Watkins, Gascoyne and Muir, but also David Jones who had not read Hölderlin. In his paper ‘Vernon Watkins and Hölderlin’, Ian Hilton writes:

Hölderlin was to occupy *the* dominant place amongst the German writers attracting the attention of Vernon Watkins.¹⁰⁵⁴ Hilton continues:

Biographically speaking, it is probable that Hölderlin’s tragic predicament would have been viewed, subsequently at least, with understanding and sympathy by Vernon Watkins in the light of his own psychological experience.¹⁰⁵⁵

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid., p.114.

¹⁰⁵² Ibid., p.114.

¹⁰⁵³ Ibid., p.106. Stephen Spender, *The Listener* (Vol.36, No.918, 1946).

¹⁰⁵⁴ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.102. ‘Vernon Watkins and Hölderlin’ by Ian Hilton. Hilton has prefaced this assertion with a brief account of Watkins’s translation of Heinrich Heine’s work, most particularly his translation of *The North Sea*. Heine appealed to Watkins, as he had done to Edwin Muir, but I agree with Hilton that ultimately Watkins shows more affinity with Hölderlin. As I have shown in the Muir and Gascoyne chapters, Hölderlin was a central influence. Gascoyne’s encounter with Hölderlin’s poetry effected a “revolution of sensibility” akin to Watkins’s. It is worth adding here that Watkins translated an enormous quantity of European poetry (like Gascoyne and to a lesser degree Muir, who was taken up with translating Kafka). Those translated included not only Heine and Hölderlin, but also Novalis, Valéry, Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Jammes, as well as Dante and Homer. As Gascoyne observed of Watkins, ‘...to be in possession of a truly European culture, resulting from a lifelong familiarity not only with the poets and thinkers of classical antiquity, but with the Bible, Dante, Michelangelo, Mozart, Goethe, Hölderlin, Blake and Yeats is today an achievement so rare in our British cultural environment that it risks going ignored.’ *David Gascoyne Selected Prose 1934 – 1996* ed. Roger Scott (London: Enitharmon Press, 1998), p.350.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ibid., p.105.

I agree with Hilton since Watkins, like Gascoyne, must have seen a similar pattern to his own in Hölderlin's life.

The sequence 'The Childhood of Hölderlin', 'significantly occupies the key position...' ¹⁰⁵⁶ It is densely woven, Watkins's poetic-biography in certain respects reflecting his own. The poem opens with an allusion to Taliesin, Watkins thus linking the two prophetic poets:

Surely the racing foal has discerned through darkness
The light out of which man came, and the violet-root
Has sucked the fountain over which Dante bent
And found the river of light. Yet dust is dust,
Who could rebuild from this the childhood of Hölderlin? ¹⁰⁵⁷

Watkins describes the young Hölderlin as one who dared 'look twice...into heaven:'

He looked, his eyes upheld, and the aether loved him.
In that pure instant he knew the workings of nature.
He had found stillness, the calm of beautiful bodies.
When he looked down, his eyes were blinded to shadows. ¹⁰⁵⁸

Hölderlin's vision of eternity is countered by suffering:

Refusing change, he fashioned the shafts of the Odes,
A quiver of joy. Where faith from the single eye
Travelled, the light was immortally true; yet he
Suffered. A wound was in the nature of man.
He grieved, while Spring restored green life to the tree.

Harmonious nature differed from exiled man. ¹⁰⁵⁹

The 'paradox of the double presence of grief and joy' ¹⁰⁶⁰ thus enters the poem, bearing a close resemblance to Watkins's 'revolution of sensibility', his vision of a golden and eternal youth forced to give ground to the acceptance of death and the demands of mortal existence. Even so, the second poem in the sequence presents the young, 'whole' poet:

...the mountains were his companions.
At dusk the rivers returned to the edge of the eyes.
He touched the stars, the wind, the crown of the reeds. ¹⁰⁶¹

Watkins then traces Hölderlin's early absorption of the Greek myths, 'His eyes marvelled, reading the deeds of heroes' ¹⁰⁶² and 'There sprang from ancient silence/ Music of gods, the clash of rocks on

¹⁰⁵⁶ Ibid., p.109. H.M. Waidson remarks: "The Childhood of Hölderlin' ...clearly occupies a pivotal position in the collection and grants to this poet a wealth of appreciation which is unique in the...*Affinities*.' *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (Vol.21, No.47, Summer 1972), p.132.

¹⁰⁵⁷ CP, pp.304-305.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Ibid., p.305.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Ibid., p.305.

¹⁰⁶⁰ *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (Vol.21, No.47, Summer 1972), p.132. 'Vernon Watkins and German Literature' by H.M. Waidson.

¹⁰⁶¹ CP p.305.

¹⁰⁶² Ibid., p.306.

seas.¹⁰⁶³ In the fourth poem 'Hölderlin is shown as moving towards a unification of Greek and Christian traditions:¹⁰⁶⁴

To Patmos, the last island,
He in vision came.

The lightning held him.
He thought to have seen God's face in youth
As John beheld Him,
But saw, where ages converged, the sign
Single and forever,
Poured to dust like wine.¹⁰⁶⁵

Unacknowledged by Goethe and Schiller, Hölderlin becomes the exemplification of the outsider:

Acclaiming creation hung on the word of God,
His was the hardest task, his lot to be spurned;
And yet his fragments outshine their accomplished works...

The prophets of order suffer on harmony's wheel
The tension between their vision and that which exists.¹⁰⁶⁶

Despite Hölderlin's fragmented works, a result of the duality of his vision with 'that which exists',

Hölderlin enters a 'total identification with Nature':¹⁰⁶⁷

The course of the rivers
Remained a compelling mystery; yet when he wrote
Of these, he no longer watched, he *became* the river...

He knew the rose as the rose is known to herself,
Fell with the cataract's fall, or became that eagle¹⁰⁶⁸

In the seventh poem Diotima is included as a pre-figuring of divine love:

Surely, below, the goddess lives, Diotima.
Did she not lift me, blinded, carried to godhead,
Resting with genius in clouds? The cataract thunders;
But, for the lovers, stillness.

Truth, I have seen her live, here, in the body
Moving; not a far country.¹⁰⁶⁹

With Diotima's death, Hölderlin's desolation is complete. He awaits only death:

But now it was late.
The sands were chill, no comfort in earth, and in air
The bird of night which hovered before his eyes
In premonition of exile, herald of fate,
Left him now, to return when the hour of death
Closed his lips on an incomprehensible prayer.¹⁰⁷⁰

¹⁰⁶³ Ibid., p.307.

¹⁰⁶⁴ *The Anglo-Welsh Review* (Vol.21, No.47, Summer 1972), p.132. 'Vernon Watkins and German Literature' by H.M. Waidson.

¹⁰⁶⁵ *CP* p.307.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Ibid., p.308.

¹⁰⁶⁷ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.112. 'Vernon Watkins and Hölderlin' by Ian Hilton.

¹⁰⁶⁸ *CP*, p.309.

Watkins does not end Hölderlin's life here, alone and unheard in his tower. As one of Watkins's 'heroes' the poet endures in his creation. Watkins accepts that a re-birth of the Edenic world that Hölderlin first inhabited is impossible, much as Watkins himself had to seal up the cave of his youth¹⁰⁷¹. Watkins moves to the Christian mystery:

If there could be
A second genesis of the first Adam...

Hölderlin's dream would live.
But now he speaks
In a fragmentary language...

And a world huger, torn in fragments, glory
Accessible only to faith, miraculous bridges,
Visions too great for man without the cadence
And broken utterance of our elected guide.

And still, through darkness, Nazareth, Capernaum;
The hymn to the Madonna;
Holy vibrations of unbounded joy
Still sounding from the deepest hour of man,
Grief keeping pace with joy.
Still since the great wrong and the wrong redeemed,
To live would be to suffer, from that hour.

Through him the dead speak, and the quick are changed.¹⁰⁷²

I would argue that in the persona of Hölderlin, Watkins recounts something of his own progress through life as one similarly dedicated to poetry and one who had experienced suffering, specifically in that pursuit. Yet with Watkins there is always the other side of the coin, light and dark, grief and joy, death and life. Watkins is more sanguine regarding what might be created 'in a fragmentary language' than, say David Jones. While Jones hoped his poetry might act as 'some sort of bridge' the past and the present, Watkins sings of 'miraculous bridges'.

Miscellany

Watkins describes 'The Butterflies' (*The Lady with the Unicorn*) as, '...a poem of a short life which also symbolizes the timeless moment.'¹⁰⁷³ It is a delicate poem in which the closely observed

¹⁰⁶⁹ Ibid., p.309.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Ibid., p.310.

¹⁰⁷¹ 'In 1927... Vernon's cave of youth had been sealed up. He had not grown up and left it: he had simply found himself outside, blinded and anguished by the strong light of an unpleasant reality. About the years that immediately followed the psychological crisis we have little more than surmise, but that he long remained wounded and withdrawn seems highly likely.' *Writers of Wales: Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.57.

¹⁰⁷² CP, pp.310-311. Watkins's use of the phrase 'miraculous bridges' may be an echo from Hölderlin's 'Patmos' the 'leichtgebaute Brücken' (lines 6 ff.). It is a phrase that appealed to Edwin Muir, in whose poem 'The Days' (on the seven days of creation) are the lines: 'The crescent shadow/Of the light-built bridge...' *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir* (ASLS, 1991), p.195.

¹⁰⁷³ *Vernon Watkins Talks and Lectures* (NLW MS22479 E), p.29. 'A Talk on my Recent Poetry', typewritten manuscript, stamped 'BBC received 1947'.

and loved phenomena of nature are given presence and Watkins 'makes song, sound of silent things...a kind of translation of visual into aural forms.'¹⁰⁷⁴

High, lost in light, they pair,
Butterflies blue, so fair,
Blind in stopped flight,
Twined on a thread,
Then drop where light, effaced,
Shuts, in the dread
Secret of sepalled air,
Their petals chaste.

Hid, meadow-masked from sight,
Hushed near the pulse of light,
They magnify
With round big eye
Antennae'd, that gold place.
From which the sky
Seizes their still delight,
Inventing space...

That crooked life would seem
Vain, did no falling stream
Chime a strange year
Time-changing here,
And yew-tree with no sound,
And murmuring weir,
Catch on a weaver's beam
The thread they wound

Past the farm wall, where grieves
An aspen, whose wild leaves
Toss, where roots brawl
On fosse and wall,
Gathering their green and white,
Strain, feign to fall,
And cast across the eaves
A changing light:

A dancing thread, how much
More fragile, hard to touch,
Brighter in flight,
More light than theirs
Or spiders' threads in air.
Fugitive players:
It was a pain to watch
A twine so fair

Flying so quickly gone,
Stretching their dalliance on
From plot to plot,
Not to return,
Past hedge and flowering rose,
Falling in turn,
As though the hour had shone
For none but those.¹⁰⁷⁵

¹⁰⁷⁴ *The Sewanee Review* (Vol.LXIII, No.2, Spring 1955), p.305. John Edward Healey is referring to another 'nature' poem 'The Shell', but his observation seems equally well suited to 'The Butterflies':

Through the verses Watkins holds in vibrating tension the 'music' of the butterflies on the thread of the 'life-skein'. In this poem the symbolic purpose is kept at a lighter distance than in many other 'nature' poems:

Vernon Watkins is concerned, almost always, with the animal or bird...as an evocation of an ultimate order. The object...is not observed for its own sake or for that of any exactitude in the observation: nor is it observed – and that is the crux of the matter – because that observation takes place in time, on a particular day, a particular occasion, and so reflects back onto the poet's life, his mood or predicament at the time of observation. The object observed is intended to evoke neither nostalgia nor a temporary hope: the poet seizes it not to clutch it to himself but to set it apart as a symbol of that cosmic truth that it was his life-work to portray.¹⁰⁷⁶

I would argue that 'The Butterflies' breaks, to a degree, this mould. There is a stronger sense of the particular moment that inspired the poem than the 'second pressure'¹⁰⁷⁷ where the poet seeks to orientate the moment within a symbolic pattern. The dancing flight of the butterflies is kept before our eyes and the poet's, 'It was a pain to watch.' Rooted in the earth, his eyes follow the butterflies until they disappear 'past the hedge' out of sight. It is a perfectly observed poem, constructed out of shades of light and air. The diction is reminiscent of Edwin Muir's, particularly the rather archaic '...dread/ Secret of sepalled air'. The poem expresses nostalgia and hope; the attribution of grief to the tossing leaves of the aspen might appear an obscure symbolic reference, it may well be, but the image has an ordinary truth too.

'The Man with a Field' (*Cypress and Acacia*) is another poem which expresses a more ordinary truth:

If I close my eyes I can see a man with a load of hay
Cross, this garden, guiding his wheelbarrow through the copse
To a long, low green-house littered with earthenware, glass and clay,
Then prop his scythe near the sycamore to enter it, potted with seeds,
And pause where chrysanthemums grow, with tomatoes' dragonish beads.
Stooping to fasten the door, he turns on the path which leads

¹⁰⁷⁵ CP, pp.139-140.

¹⁰⁷⁶ *Writers of Wales Vernon Watkins* by Roland Mathias (University of Wales Press, 1974), p.68.

¹⁰⁷⁷ 'I no longer associate art with the natural man. Metaphysically I have taken sides. I am interested only in work of the second pressure. True spontaneity, true art, seems to me to come, more often than not, long after the poem's first conception; it is the more powerful for being delayed and the purer for having been tried in the furnace of contraries. The poem cannot live until it has been willing to die; it cannot fly like the phoenix until it has been consumed by its own flames. Everything seems to me shallow that is not related to an inner experience which changed the man. There is nearly always, in any serious poet, a moment of change, a pivotal crisis in time that renews him.' *Unicorn* (Vol.10, Spring 1963), p.10. 'The Second Pressure in Poetry' by Vernon Watkins.'

To his rain-pitted bedroom of cellos, and low jugs catching the drops.¹⁰⁷⁸

The poem recalls Watkins's neighbour, a 'musician-turned-ploughman'¹⁰⁷⁹, in the autumn preceding his winter death. It is an elegy 'full of everyday detail and a different, more homely earthiness'¹⁰⁸⁰ and a sense of 'cultivated orderliness'¹⁰⁸¹:

This year his field lay fallow; he was late putting down his seed.
Cold December concealed with a sighing surplice of snow
His waste of neglected furrows, overgrown with mutinous weed.
Dark, bereaved like the ground, I found him feeble and sick,
And cold, for neither the sticks nor his lamp with a shrunken wick
Would light. He was gone through the wicket. His clock continued to tick,
But it stopped when the new flakes clustered on an empty room below.¹⁰⁸²

The poem is understated and personal emotion is held in check, perhaps the only poem that resembles Hardy in its concentration on familiar objects and detailing of the ordinary so that it is cast in a special light, the dominance of time and death as irrevocable loss. This poem refutes Larkin's review of the collection:

...If poets were divided into those who never get off the ground and those who never come down to earth, Mr. Watkins would be in the latter class. He remarks the visible world only to transcend it, and this sometimes confers an inhumanity and ultimately a slight boringness on his work.¹⁰⁸³

If 'A Man with a Field' laments the passing of an individual life in muted tones, Watkins was equally capable of writing with passionate energy.

'Ode at the Spring Equinox' is motivated by the poet's ecological and artistic concerns:

Gone is the solstice, gone the weaning time
Of lambs. These graze the hard
Ground, and the cliff is charred,
The gorse being burnt where now I climb.
Sparse violets, shivering, break to the low sun.
Life has already, though unseen, begun,
Yet still no sign is given; the shore
Sparkles inanimate in the span
Of headlands. Fossil now and man
Speak of a death which was not here before.
It is man's fault if it is so:
His guilt has brought him low,
And where I climb and cast a shade
I bear a consequence of that,
For the mind's load is great

¹⁰⁷⁸ CP, p.225.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Ibid., p.225.

¹⁰⁸⁰ *London Review of Books* (9th August 2001), p.24. 'In the Graveyard of Verse' by William Wootten.

¹⁰⁸¹ *New Welsh Review* (Vol. XIII, No.1, Summer 2000), p.16.

¹⁰⁸² CP, p.225.

¹⁰⁸³ *The Guardian* (12th October 1959), p.21. 'Texts and Symbols' a review of *Cypress and Acacia* by Philip Larkin.

Which knows what menace hangs on all things made.¹⁰⁸⁴

The poem has a stride and pace paralleling the poet's, as he walks his familiar cliffs. Against the 'icily keen wind' the 'savagely' blowing 'knife-wind'¹⁰⁸⁵, the poet views the scene with a sense of desolation, 'Out of this earth what hope/ Rises with larks, or what repose/Lives on the sea...'¹⁰⁸⁶ Even the goats, domestic familiars are 'incurious'¹⁰⁸⁷. The appearance of ravens, however, restores the poet's sense of possibility:

Ruffled with radiance now the black silk wings
Float out, and from this verge
I see them drop, then merge
Wind's desolation...

All is so hung that harmony,
Though pitched precariously,
Conquers uncertainty, remorse
And every flickering shaft of doubt
When the pure gift flies out
And wonder, like a spring renews its force.¹⁰⁸⁸

In the poem 'Art and the Ravens' Watkins had already symbolized ravens as representative of the poetic spirit 'defending' its 'spring' and source. Yet the poem closes warning 'against the peril of annihilation by man's ignorance and cruelty.'¹⁰⁸⁹

See, they return, riding both sea and storm:
These they have overcome, but man
Seizing the blind stone ignorance flings,
Himself can break this chain of wings
And, aiming, maim the loom where life began.
The immediate presence of that fear
Brings distant ages near.
Never let it be said that he,
Despising his own intellect,
Art and his whole Past wrecked,
And cast his planet's faith beneath the sea.¹⁰⁹⁰

The force of the poem's concern carries itself with the relentlessness of waves to the last line and its bold lamentation.

'Triads'¹⁰⁹¹ (*Fidelities*) is a poem which shows the poet moving freely in his long-created imaginative universe, but which begins with a question revealing the continued effort of inhabiting that universe through a faith that asks everything:

¹⁰⁸⁴ *CP*, pp.268-269.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.269.

¹⁰⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.269.

¹⁰⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.269.

¹⁰⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.270.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *The Hudson Review* (Vol. XIII, No.2, Summer 1960), p.289. From the review of *Cypress and Acacia* by Louis Simpson.

¹⁰⁹⁰ *CP*, p.270.

Who am I to load the year with continual misunderstanding?
I will not accuse winter of a protracted hardness,
Nor spring of callousness, nor summer of regret...

... To have held through hail, stormwinds, and black frost in darkness
Through the long months, gives meaning to the bud when it opens.
Song loses nothing of moments that are past.

So my labour is still: it is still determination
To resolve itself slowly in the weathers of knowledge.
By virtue of the hidden the poem is revealed...

... The lamb leaps: it is stubborn in its innocence.
The hawk drops, in the energy of instinct.
Dawn fires kindle perfection like a sword.

Fires: the hawk's talons, the tongue of the chameleon,
In a peacock's wings' lightning the contraction of glory,
In death the last miracle, the unconditional gift.

What do I need but patience before the unpredictable,
The endurance of the stepping-stone before the footprint,
Cadence that reconciles wisdom and the dance?

I need more, I need more. In the moment of perception,
Fit me, prayer, to lose everything that nothing may be lost.
The stone that accumulates history is falling.

History is a pageant, and all men belong to it,
We die into each other: remember how many
Confided their love, not in vain, to the same earth.¹⁰⁹²

In his address to the Poetry Society in 1966 Vernon Watkins said:

I look always for poems whose source is in conflict, poems where a great many obstacle have been overcome. Without the struggle, and a complete humility after the struggle, there is no peace.¹⁰⁹³

'Triads' begins with a struggle, the poet complaining of a period of creative aridity, looking to the natural world for reassurance that his 'darkness' will bear fruit. Yet, in this poem Watkins's vision of the regenerative processes of nature, the renewal of 'the dance' sanctified by 'the unconditional gift' of Christ's sacrifice 'in death the last miracle' do not console, 'I need more, I need more.' This is an unusual outburst for Watkins, a conflict springing from his human emotions and the demands of his vision. In the following lines, 'History is a pageant' Watkins admits, again unusually for him, 'all men belong to it'. It is a poem where the poet must fall back on his faith, frail though it may seem. Watkins invokes 'prayer' (as Gascoyne does) for those authentic words where the will or the ego is subdued and the eternal presence anchors the otherwise inexplicable transience of all things. Watkins must

¹⁰⁹¹ 'Some of the earliest Welsh literature was composed in 'Triads'.' *NSP*, p.110.

¹⁰⁹² *CP*, pp.392-393.

remind himself of the meaningfulness of ancestors and their love of life on earth. This an unsettling, troubled poem far from the 'serene'¹⁰⁹⁴ and 'frictionless'¹⁰⁹⁵ Watkins thus readily described in critical responses to his work. Yet Watkins will not allow conflict to disrupt his form, though it may seethe within it. Again there are similarities here with Muir, the repetition of favoured words such as 'still' and the sense of history as an unending pageant without significance if not completed by love.

The poem, 'I Do Not Ask a Gentle Way' (*The Breaking of the Wave*, 1979) has I think even stronger resonances with Muir's short lyrics. It presents a paradox which displays and explains something of the quality of resistance in Watkins's poetry, its crystalline hardness and its peculiar gentleness:

I do not ask a gentle way.
 Let the road be hard.
 Drag or muster all you may
 To hinder or retard.
 Making opposition strong,
 Fit me for the task of song...
 ... Since the letters first were cut
 Moss and grass have grown,
 Yet what tenderness is shut
 Under every stone.
 I proclaim in all I sing
 Tenderness the hardest thing.¹⁰⁹⁶

There is perhaps nothing especially striking or excitingly new in such lines, but I agree with David Wright that Watkins's lack of innovation is a strength.¹⁰⁹⁷ The poem is contemplative, a paradoxically vital contemplation. Rowan Williams writes:

The poetic voice for Watkins is essentially a baptised voice...¹⁰⁹⁸

Williams links 'what baptism enacts' with 'the poet's job' as:

...a dropping into the depths, which is also a letting go of aspirations to illusory immortality;
 a discovery of anchorage...¹⁰⁹⁹

¹⁰⁹³ *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.58.

¹⁰⁹⁴ *London Review of Books* () From 'In the Graveyard of Verse' by William Wootten.

¹⁰⁹⁵ *Times Literary Supplement* (1st December 2000), p.33. The brief review of *The Collected Poems* has: '...the work is oddly frictionless, as if resolved in advance of its composition.'

¹⁰⁹⁶ *CP*, p.475.

¹⁰⁹⁷ 'Watkins's use of language was not innovatory. This was a virtue, even a strength...His poetry is 'modern' and 'contemporary' even though his manner belongs...to the seventeenth century rather than the nineteenth or twentieth century.' *Poetry Wales* (Vol.12, No.4, Spring 1977), p.10. 'Introduction' by David Wright.

¹⁰⁹⁸ *Welsh Writing in English* (Vol.8, 2003), p.118. 'Swansea's Other Poet' by Rowan Williams.

¹⁰⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.118.

Yet this 'anchorage' is not so much a 'vantage point' but, 'a way of staying at the centre of every specific perception and circumstance'. This 'non-place', is where Williams believes Watkins stands, permitting him as poet 'to make us unafraid of the "outsideness" and 'the strangeness of the past':

...for this to be possible, the poet has to embrace loss, the loss of a safe standpoint within the world of ordinary "living" discourse.¹¹⁰⁰

Finally, Williams argues that 'a mythic structure grounds the acceptance of loss:'

Watkins assumes that the poetic territory or non-territory is already "occupied" – not simply by an amorphous "sacred", but by the act and suffering of God as imagined in Christian theology and sacramental practice.¹¹⁰¹

This 'boundary-crossing'¹¹⁰² informs the last poem in the *Collected Poems*, 'The Breaking of the Wave' where human loss is balanced by something like a light of faith, which seems closely linked with poetic inspiration:

The seawave breaks, breaks, breaks, and remakes the year.
See how the sea casts out the shapes it bore,
Each tide forgetting what was here before,
Seeking oblivion's pure and perfect sphere:
That ringing music lingers in the ear,
Falling through shells and sleeping in their core,
Music of waves that beat the level shore
Where footprints come, then pause, then disappear.

Yet by a pledge stronger than waves' wide span
Night can reclaim what nature overthrew:
The exalted vision Donne or Dante drew
Is lightning guarded in the mind of man.
Let the sea take what smouldering spoil it can,
Still to that fire the suffering heart is true.¹¹⁰³

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.119.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.119.

¹¹⁰² Ibid., p.120.

¹¹⁰³ CP, (p.483).

The poem, immediately recalls Tennyson's 'Break, break, break, /On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!'¹¹⁰⁴ that elegy of inconsolable loss. It recalls also Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' and could possibly be read as a reply to the image and thought of that poem (as well as, in some ways, Tennyson's poem), in which Arnold laments, in his eyes, the inexorable retreat of the 'tide of faith'. Arnold clutches at human love as a means to redress the loss, though he, like Yeats and Raine thought that art could supply what religion no longer could. Watkins and Gascoyne were initially attracted to the idea of a religion of art, but both soon rejected the notion, discovering a still living and valid potential for creativity in the Christian faith. Jones and Muir similarly found in Christianity, 'a pledge stronger than waves' wide span,' poetry becoming a made and living vessel for that truth. This, of course, is not the primary reason why Kathleen Raine presented them as an alternative to the accepted canon of modern British poetry. She preferred to find the ancient springs of a perennial philosophy still operative in them. This thesis has at least demonstrated that they are worth taking seriously in themselves and in their attitude to poetry.

¹¹⁰⁴*The Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1994), p.203. Writing on how he considered poetry should be read, Watkins refers to Tennyson: 'No reader of lyric will succeed who does not observe a monotonous base. I am easily misunderstood here. I do not mean, of course, that the whole of any lyric poem should be read on one note. I mean that the intensity of a poem is more likely to be felt and kept if it is held down by the strictness of its pattern. That is why, though I have heard Tennyson splendidly read by different people, I have only once heard the exactness of rhythm which entirely communicated the poem, and that was in an old cylindrical recording of Tennyson reading himself.' ('Poems and the Reading of Poetry' by Vernon Watkins, quoted by Roland Mathias in *Writer of Wales*, University of Wales Press, 1974), pp.55-56. In this sonnet there is a remarkable compression of Watkins's themes and images. The sea represents the uncomprehending and eroding progress of time: it 'casts out' and 'remakes the year.' The sea's music seems to provide the 'vertical' effect in the poem, the plummet falling through time (the plummet was a favourite image of Watkins's to denote the moments that cut through time) to sleep in a shell, contrasting with the horizontal, 'level' of the waves beating on the shore, erasing the footprints of man, with their beautifully enigmatic 'pause', before they disappear. 'Night', however, can 'reclaim what nature (the sea) overthrew'. This 'night' I interpret as reference to Rowan Williams's perception of Watkins's 'negative theology'. The 'suffering heart' finds its redemption in the 'fire' of renewal and rebirth. The references to Donne and Dante bear such a reading out. This is a firmly Christian poem devised in a form that very typically affirms in its closing lines and thus an apt choice for Watkins's purpose.

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