An Atheist Looks at The Anathemata

1 Introduction

About *The Anathemata* of David Jones

David Jones writes in his Preface to *The Anathemata*:

> "I have made a heap of all I could find . . . the blessed things that have taken on what is cursed and the profane things that somehow are redeemed: the delights and also the 'ornaments', both in the primary sense of gear and paraphernalia and in the sense of what simply adorns; the donated and votive things, the things dedicated after whatever fashion, the things in some sense made separate, being 'laid up from other things'; things, or some aspect of them, that partake of the extra-utile and of the gratuitous; things that are the signs of something other, together with those signs that not only have the nature of a sign, but are themselves, under some mode, what they signify. Things set up, lifted up, or in whatever manner made over to the gods."

He explains that he calls these things set apart by the Greek word 'anathemata' (pronounced an-a-*the*-ma-ta, with the stress on the third syllable).

The poem deals with important questions: What is the importance of human culture? What is the significance of myth? What is the role of art, religion and language in understanding the world? How can man affirm his own identity as artist, poet and sacramentalist throughout the centuries? These are questions of cultural history. I shall call these the Four Big Questions which are addressed in *The Anathemata*.

So *The Anathemata* of David Jones is a work about, *inter alia*, cultural history which takes the form of a poem. Like any history, it expresses the viewpoint of the author on the historical material, and the selection and interpretation of material is chosen to reflect that viewpoint. Like any poem, the presentation of the selected material is governed by the concerns of the poet with the arrangements, associations and euphonics of words, and paying attention to a symbolic point of view as much as a narrative one. It is therefore inevitable that tensions will arise between the historian and the poet — they may disagree, for example, about both the role and the importance of chronological presentation and the significance of whether or not a particular event occurred as a matter of historical fact. How these tensions are resolved is through a process of negotiation, which then itself becomes a piece of cultural history which will inform the structure and text of the poem. We can see these things happening in the poem, and I will point out where I detect such tensions, and resolutions where they occur.

One of the major problems for the 21st century reader is that much of the shared background that DJ took for granted can no longer be assumed. We can no longer assume the reader to have the necessary knowledge of the Bible, the works of Homer and Virgil, The Matter of Britain, or the structure of the Catholic Mass. Help

is at hand, however, in the form of the internet of knowledge. The following links should be consulted by those who are uncertain in their knowledge of the basic texts. Other links are scattered through my notes as and when I think they might be helpful.

> David Jones was, at least for a time, influenced by the ideas of Oswald Spengler. Wikipedia has a long article on his most influential work, *The Decline of the West*; but you can get enough for a first reading of *The Anathemata* from the Introduction, General Context and Overview of the Wikipedia article.
>
> He also assumes familiarity with the structure of the Catholic Mass. Although some things have changed since his day, the general shape of the liturgy with its prayers in Latin with an English translation can be found in this pdf.
>
> The Last Supper and Crucifixion narrative is recorded in the Gospels. The most complete version is that of St John, though the preparation for the Last Supper and a simpler narrative is given in St Mark. These links use the New Jerusalem Bible translation (the best modern translation authorised by the Roman Catholic church).
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> A useful book with much source material which DJ refers to is *Myths and Legends of the British Isles* by Richard Barber, cheaply available secondhand through Amazon, though it does not deal with the Matter of Britain, for which I use the Penguin edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.
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> There are many translations of Homer (the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and Virgil (the *Aeneid*) available. I happen to have the Penguin Classics ones. Wikipedia, of course, has summaries.
>
> Books that I have found helpful on *The Anathemata* generally are David Blamires, *David Jones: Artist and Writer*; Neil Corcoran, *The Song of Deeds*; Thomas Dilworth, *The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones*; Rene Hague, *A Commentary on The Anathemata of David Jones*.
>
> There is not a lot on the Web about *The Anathemata*. DJ as a painter is better represented, since it is easy to put pictures online. More generally, Wikipedia is a good starting point for an overview of his work, and the videos pointed to by the article are worth watching. Arduity is a blog about one man's attempts to get to grips with *The Anathemata* and other difficult writings. The David Jones Society apparently still exists, but the website and journal are no longer being maintained. With a bit of exploration, you can find some scholarly articles and studies. But basically, to find out more you have to go back to books.

Finally I should like to say quite emphatically that I have written this essay and made this website not for people who have read *The Anathemata*, but for those who haven't. The former will find, probably, that it contains little that has not been said elsewhere, and better, by others. But it is not you who are my primary audience. What I want to get across is what it feels like to encounter *The Anathemata* for the first time. It is for this reason that I have not quoted explicit references to the text for my claims, and have on occasions simplified my account (and perhaps over-simplified it, though I hope not seriously).

The Anathemata demands, but also repays, effort in the reading. And it needs reading twice on a first reading. It is like a well, where the deeper you drop your bucket, the more you get out of it. I recommend that you first read it silently and

show all the commentary, which I have tried to make as complete as possible, though I am always pleased to hear of any difficulties or further obscurities you find. Then once you feel you know roughly what it is about, read it again aloud, slowly, with deliberation as the author has requested. I have designed the presentation so that this second reading can be uncluttered by commentary so you can concentrate on the sounds of the words, as is essential for any poem.

Overall narrative structure of *The Anathemata*

The whole poem is framed in the context of the Catholic Mass. Within this frame, there are eight sections to *The Anathemata*.

The first four sections deal with the cultural deposits of Britain in linked historical-geographical terms. It begins with prehistory and works progressively and exploratively to a point where the separate identity of Britain begins, and the geographic focus narrows correspondingly.

1 Rite and Fore-time

We begin with a celebration of the Mass, which is seen as another instance of man celebrating his gods (in fore-time). Our human culture is set within the context of the geological formation of our land as we know it.

2 Middle-sea and Lear-sea

This deals with the heyday of Mediterranean (Greek and Roman) civilisation. Time and place become more specific and there is an extended sea journey metaphor of the links of culture, including a voyage to Britain.

3 Angle-land

The short section brings the invasions of the continental Teutons into Britain into focus and another sea voyage up the east coast and perhaps into the Arctic Ocean is described.

4 Redriff

This section pinpoints Rotherhithe (where David Jones's mother hailed from and his grandfather worked as a shipwright) as a particular place which symbolises the nature of the British sea-faring tradition.

The last four sections of the poem reshape the basic material in contexts wider than the historial-geographical.

5 The Lady of the Pool

The Lady of the Pool (of London) is spoken almost entirely in the voice of a shore-based lavender-seller of medieval times who symbolises

London, Britain and Mother Earth.

6 Keel, Ram, Stauros

In this complex section the world of nature and the world of the utile are seen symbolised by the wood that forms one primary material of man's creative endeavour. In three metamorphoses wood is celebrated in the forms of an archetypal ship ('Keel'), engines of of war ('Ram'), and the Cross of Christ ('Stauros').

7 Mabinog's Liturgy

The section deals with the theme of birth in a broader Celtic setting. In contrast to the Lady of the Pool, which is about an individual woman, it is concerned with various manifestations of femininty acknowledging the importance of the birth and infancy of Christ (the *Mabinog* or poet at the start of his calling). A substantial part of the section deals with Gwenhwyfar, the wife of Arthur King of Britain, at Mass on Christmas Eve, who seems to me to here symbolise the eternal feminine.

8 Sherthursdaye and Venus Day

This final section links the Annunciation and Nativity with the Last Supper and Crucifixion and with the successful quest of the Holy Grail and returns to the liturgy of the Mass.

2 Stories

We all inhabit a set of stories. These stories define who we are, they influence the responsibilities we assume, they provide us with a set of basic constructs, moral concepts, historical narrative and metaphors we use to make sense of the world and allusions we use in expressing that sense; and each story has its own concept of truth. Examples of such stories are the Christian story (in one of its many forms), the scientific story, the story of a journey or artistic endeavour, the story of a quest and so on. We all have our own stories of life and love and death. We can also re-enact past stories of others, as when at the end of *In Parenthesis* the writer realises that he is re-enacting the story of the death of Roland, in the French romance *Le Chanson de Roland*. *The Anathemata* is for David Jones his set of stories.

I am not here going to explain or retell DJ's stories. That has already been done by others, with more detail than I wish to go into and more understanding than I am capable of. What I want to do is to recount my reaction to the stories he tells, coming to them as a British but non-Welsh atheist with a background in mathematical physics, computer science, and philosophy of language, who also has read widely in English language poetry and literature; that is as someone with some, but not a lot, of shared background with DJ.

I must admit that knowing of his Welsh and Catholic background, I expected *The*

Anathemata to be a bit alien — not that I mind reading literature alien to me, but I sometimes have difficulty empathising with it as much as I think it deserves. But somewhat to my surprise, on close and detailed study of *The Anathemata*, I found that this was not the case, and I found in myself a lot of sympathy with what he says (at least in my interpretation thereof). For example I found much less of the Catholic element that I expected and more of a particular reading of cultural history, within which were addressed the Four Big Questions I mentioned earlier.

I was puzzled as to why I was not as unsympathetic as I thought I might be, given the way the story of the Catholic Mass infuses everything. It was as if his choice of religious language, metaphor and allusion was, almost inadvertantly, saying something interesting once I abstracted it away from a particular story. For example, once I saw that DJ's repeated insistence on the importance of the Nativity, Last Supper and Crucifixion as somehow cohering together was another –and very profound– instance or archetype of the life/love/death story that things started clicking into place. I can understand and agree with Basil Bunting when in a letter to Thomas Dilworth he wrote "... the Mass is a complex of symbols capable of ordering and interpreting pretty well the whole of the history of the world and the whole order of nature. I can say that because I am not a Catholic and am thoroughly out of sympathy with Catholicism".

I also noticed that DJ concentrates on the stories that happen every day –birth, ritual meals, crucifixion (yes, still, unfortunately), enactment of religious rite, making gratuitous art– and not on stories outside our normal experience such as resurrection, revitalisation of the dead, and other assorted miracles. These everyday events, though, are often bound together with metaphorical language so as to make what Shelley calls "before unapprehended relations of things, thus enabling them to be seen in a new light and from a different perspective". This is what metaphor does, it uses a word in a radically different context from its normal use thus forcing a new interpretation of the word, and I shall discuss it further in the next section. I also noticed how he uses another poetic technique: redrawing the boundaries of objects so that two objects normally conceived of as being separate are unified into a single object — an object here may but need not be an everyday physical thing; it can also be an idea, a symbol ("And the fire and the rose are one", to quote another poet). I shall have more to say on this in Section 4.

Finally, I began to discern two levels of story in the poem. There are individual stories such as the voyage, the Great Cycle of winter and summer, three episodes in the life of Christ; and there is a higher level of story which combines these into a larger story concerned with the Four Big Questions. This story emerges from the poem as a whole; what interested me was how this effect can occur in language, not just in DJ's use of it, but what it is about poetic language that makes this effect possible. Again, I shall discuss this in more detail in Section 4.

3 Metaphor

> [Poets'] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension,

> until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts;
>
> P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*

The claim that metaphor is central to the processes of language use is one that is now widely granted. I have read enough poetry to be familiar with simile – 'this is like that' – and its extension, when there are enough likenesses, to metaphor – 'this is that, but in a different context' – which is the relationship that Shelley noted in his essay quoted above. The important point about metaphor is the the same word is used, but in a radically different context which forces us to seek a new meaning for the same word. Doing this a lot becomes difficult for the reader, but can lead to a breakthrough in re-understanding. This is why and when The Anathemata works as a poem. Poets also use symbolism – 'this is itself and also represents or stands for that' — in the same way, and the distinction between symbolism and metaphor is not always clear cut. But metaphor goes further than just similes. To quote one noted philosopher of language, "Paradox is the most extreme form of metaphor, just as metaphor is the most extreme kind of simile." (Margaret Masterman, quoted in Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words*, p. 126). (She is using the word "paradox" here because she is discussing the use of language in a scientific context, where there is clear meaning attached to the words 'true' and 'false'. In poetic language, there may be no such clear distinction; but there may well be confusion and contradiction if the poet uses too many metaphors which do not work together too well in trying to express the poet's intention.) What she is getting at is that language such as poetic language which violates with increasing recklessness the ordinary rules of consistency and coherence may end up saying something that is less preposterously untrue (in the usual sense of 'true') than a literal interpretation would suggest. She argues that only by engaging with the "paradox" can one finally arrive at, in her words, "a fully ripened stage of tense despair, out of which some unforeseen intellectual leap can come".

This striking last phrase seems to summarise very well my own experience of engaging with *The Anathemata*. Metaphor gives you another way of looking at something –a blackbird, say– or even 13 ways if you have enough poetic imagination. You frame the thing in different ways and contexts. But push this further and you get to the point of tense despair where to see the thing clearly, you need to imagine drastically different vantage points from which to see, points which in fact you can't occupy simultaneously, and which will deliver apparent contradictions or confusions if you try to put them together. We take differing conceptions of what the poet has written, in different contexts and imaginatively summon up material distant in space and time and location in the poem in order to picture to ourselves more clearly the complex nature of what the poet is describing.

I found this happening all the time in reading *The Anathemata*. DJ is not describing each item in his 'pile', or each story, individually, but trying to make you see that one aspect of the reality of an individual item is inextricably bound to many other items and perspectives, some of them contradictory, and of which some may be explicit in the poem while others are merely implicit or hinted at by metaphor and

symbolism.

So what is happening in *The Anathemata* is that the poet *puts pressure* on his language so that we come to see more than any one individual phrase or paragraph delivers on its own. The "tense despair" that precedes our understanding of the varied metaphors, fluidities of time and space, of historical references, all push the poet's and the reader's experience of pressure on the language, pushing towards a new intellectual patterning which invites the poet to construct it and the reader to reconstruct it. The management of that tension and the breaking through it that the poet wants to happen, is a sort of epiphany which I will characterise in the next section.

Finally, after the quotation above, Shelley continues ". . . and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse", and we can see why this might be true of *The Anathemata*. For many, some other poets included, the effort needed to overcome the tense despair engendered by the poem is simply too much. It is to help with this feeling of being swamped by its difficulty that I have created this web-based version of *The Anathemata* with its explanatory apparatus. I hope that the reading of it will help you get into the poem just as the making of it helped me, though with considerably less effort but no less success. Let me know how you get on.

4 Emergence

I can think of no better word to describe what happens in the intellectual leap arising from a complex poem like *The Anathemata* which is rich in linguistic pressure arising from differing viewpoints, language structures, and metaphors, than **emergence**.

Emergence is well known to students of systems theory. It describes something that happens to a complex dynamic system which cannot be attributed to a single component, but only to the whole set of components acting together in some way. It seems to me that something similar happens in *The Anathemata*. It arises, I think, from language under metaphorical stress and from the simultaneity of multiple overlapping stories which are fragmented in space and time, and equally fragmented in their position in the poem. (Something similar also happens in Alan Garner's novel *Boneland*.)

I am aware of three aspects that emerge; others may find more, or different ones. That is only to be expected, since there are many more. I have given these three simply because they were the first that came to mind.

The things that I find emerge are (i) Boundaries; (ii) Continuity; (iii) Place.

4.1 Boundaries

Language under pressure often forces the redrawing of boundaries of what we consider to be in the same category. This is what metaphor ("this is that") does. As I

see it, one view of what is being celebrated in the Mass is that *this* bread and *this* wine (the ostensive definition is an important part of the rite) becomes at a certain point in the celebration the Body of Christ — in other words, the boundary of what constitutes the Body of Christ now encompasses both the physical body *and* these very particular elements because the latter have changed their nature *i.e.* their state. In the Lutheran interpretation of the Eucharist, we find this explicitly stated:

'Why then should we not much more say in the Supper, "This is my body", even though bread and body are two distinct substances, and the word "this" indicates the bread? Here, too, out of two kinds of objects a union has taken place, which I shall call a "sacramental union" ' [Luther, ***Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*** (1528)].

In other words, the boundary has been redrawn and the prayer of Consecration is the act of redrawing. I find no conceptual difficulty in redrawing boundaries wherever we want to redraw them. Whether or not this analogy also works for the Catholic interpretation of the Mass is beyond the scope of this essay.

(There is an exact analogy in the modern practice of computer coding, which is based on the single ontological construct of the *object*. An object is a representation of something. It has internal state, and may be composed of other objects. Each object has a number of *methods*, which is code to inspect or change the state. An object may well have a method for adding another object to it. A computer programmer will have no difficulty in the idea of the Body Of Christ as an object, which has a method for adding *this* bread and *this* wine –themselves both being objects– to it; the method being the saying of the prayer of Consecration at an appropriate time and place in a proper context by an authorised person.)

Many many other instances of boundaries and redrawing occur in *The Anathemata* — the walls of Troy and London, the wattles round a sheepfold, the keel of a ship which can be inverted to become the roof of a church, to name but a few. Symbolism is another form of boundary drawing since, for me, metaphor is the heart of symbolism. For example, at the end of Mabinog's Liturgy (page 221) a symbolic boundary is drawn which binds together Rome and the Pleaides. There is no reason why these two disparate objects cannot be put together within the same boundary and made into a composite object, or considered as two instances of the same category so that one can stand for the other. It's just an extreme form of metaphor, and why not? It's poem, after all.

4.2 Continuity

There are many examples in *The Anathemata* of the emergent theme of continuity. It is not just the continuity implied in a particular story; it arises from the fact that (as DJ says on p. 35 of his Preface) "There is only one tale to tell even though the telling is patient of endless development and cam take on a million variant forms". The tale is about how our arts, religions, cultures come into being and metamorphose (to use a favourite word of his).

So the continuity we find in *The Anathemata* is not just the continuity of a voyage (like Homer) or a quest (like the Grail material) or a life (like a Gospel), though these things are all there; it is the continuity of man the maker (*homo faber*) and sacramentalist. We can see an example of this in the continuity of the celebration of

the Last Supper from then right up to now and possibly for evermore.

This sense of continuity in the story of *homo faber* is conveyed by linguistic and imaginative metamorphoses, which in a way sometimes literally and sometimes imaginatively relates artefacts from widely separated cultures. And a similar but geographic continuity is produced in the same way for the hills and mountains which pervades the work: they are here, as so often in poetry, seen as symbols of continuity despite their ups and downs in time and space. As DJ writes on page 90:

"but always / the inward continuities / of the site / of place",

which brings us nicely from Continuity to Place.

4.3 Place

One of the most striking things about *The Anathemata* is the importance of particular places. It is summed up best in *Rite and Fore-time* where the poet, writing about the hill on which Christ was crucified, says "on this hill / at a time's turn / not on any hill but on this hill" (page 53). Many of DJ 's notes are very specific about particular named places, especially in Wales. (This rootedness in named locality is also very characteristic of traditional Scottish Gaelic poetry.)

The emphasis on place, invoking a place by naming it, something found also in Wordsworth, is an indication of DJ's reflection on what it means to be in place. A place name acts both to designate a city or region, and also to institutionalise it in a geographic and/or historical setting. The place name serves to emphasise the importance of place in establishing culture and identity.

But there is more to place than just place name with all its connotations. There is also the landscape (or cityscape) of place. Landscape has its own history too; for DJ, one important part of the Welsh landscape it its geologically recent formation by glaciation, which is not only an instance of the Great Cycle (of winter and summer) theme but also an important part of the history of the place. Other scapes are London with its early Roman and medieval cityscape, Rome, Jerusalem, Troy, each with its own cityscapes to a greater or lesser extent. One of the things that emerges from this emphasis on place is that DJ feels the depth of is connection to the world — or at least parts of it — and takes it as almost a sacred responsibility to show it in picture and writing. Yet this universal connection is felt as deeply local — to Wales, to London. These places are the sacred places, which is why they are named in so much detail. His connection to them is grounded in place.

5 Summary

Putting together Boundaries, Continuity, Place gives for me something that I can only call **Home**. *The Anathemata* is –*inter multa alia*– a poem about the poet making a home for himself in the world of the stories he inhabits. Like the Mass in the poem itself, Home is where one starts from and returns to. Getting back into one's own place, the homecoming that matters most, is an ongoing task which for DJ is accomplished through the Mass. But for all of us, it calls for continuous journeying between places, crossing many boundaries, again like the poem itself. A traveller on

such a voyage can resume the direction, and regain the depth of individual life, again and again — and know it for the first time. *The Anathemata* is a song of continuous homecoming.

Not a very striking or original conclusion, perhaps; nor is Home the only theme that emerges from the poem. There are many other themes, too many to describe here. What I wanted to do was to try to show you how to approach the poem and read it, and see what emerges for you. The essence of a mature view of the world is that the environment we inhabit, and in which we construct our stories, is more than it seems; and *The Anathemata*, like all the best poetry, is concerned with complicating what seems normal in order to discover what 'normal' perception screens out. Whatever complexity does emerge, I call it a meaning of the poem. Others may well see the extreme language pushing in more of a theological direction, with more of a theological meaning emerging. A poem that has only one meaning is, for me, a very poor poem, scarcely worthy of the name. What is remarkable about *The Anathemata* is the large number of meanings that emerge in the same way through the poet's use of pressurised language.

To conclude, I can do no better than to apply to *The Anathemata* what Ursula Le Guin wrote in her review in the Guardian newspaper of Alan Garner's novel *Boneland* (which reminds me quite a bit of *The Anathemata*). I have merely changed the name of the work and replaced her word "novelist" by "poet", so it's her words but my voice:

"You figure out what it's all about gradually; as with poetry, learning another language, learning to see and think differently, the demands and rewards are intense and real. It is this element of the book, in which the obsessions come into focus and a true balance is glimpsed, that will bring me back to" *The Anathemata*, "knowing I'll find there what no other" poet "has ever given us."

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John Dobson

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