

# Basil Bunting On David Jones

THOMAS DILWORTH

In the spring of 1979, I wrote to the author of *Briggflatts* asking his opinion of David Jones (1895-1974), whom I considered, as I still do, the greatest British poet of the twentieth century. The author of two epic-length poems, *In Parenthesis* (1937) and *The Anathemata* (1952), Jones had always been a poet's poet. In his lifetime, he was admired and praised in print by T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. Bunting, Louis Zukofsky and John Montague, all admirers especially of *The Anathemata*, visited him in the late 1960s. (Ginsberg wanted to visit, but Jones declined.)

At Jones's death in 1974, Hugh MacDiarmid acclaimed him as "the best English poet of the twentieth century", but he died in 1978 without publishing this evaluation.<sup>1</sup> That prompted me to write to Bunting for his assessment of Jones with a view to using it in print. His response is, therefore, his considered opinion; that of one important British poet about another, greater, British poet who was not then, and is to some extent still not now, widely read or critically appreciated. Bunting's reply, below, may be read as an elaboration on his comment, during an interview in 1977, that "Yeats and Pound and Eliot with David Jones [...] MacDiarmid, [...] and Zukofsky [...] provide a galaxy of poets as splendid as any century can show, and I hope that when things get filtered down by time they will all be clearly visible still."<sup>2</sup>

After the death of David Jones in 1974, Bunting seemed to me to be the preeminent living British poet, and I told him so in my letter. In his response, of 18 April 1979, he refers to that as buttering him up.<sup>3</sup>

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1 MacDiarmid speaking at Central London Polytechnic, 19 October 1974.

2 Bunting quoted by Roland Nord, 'A Bibliography of Works about Basil Bunting,' in *Basil Bunting Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrel (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1980), p. 412.

3 I am grateful to the Trustee of the Estate of Basil Bunting for permission to publish this letter in its entirety. It is typed on the front of a sheet of paper with letterhead and, at the bottom, telephone number printed in red, partly struck through with typed 'x's; continued briefly on the reverse of the sheet, and signed in blue ballpoint pen.

Basil Bunting      ~~Shadingfield~~ — ~~Wylam~~ — ~~Northumberland~~

107 Stidingedge  
Blackfell  
Washington  
Tyne & Wear  
ENGLAND

18 April 1979

Dear Mr Dilworth

I am very surprised to hear that David Jones is 'virtually unread' in North America. If you are right it shows a very silly state of affairs. You don't have to butter me up to get me to say that David Jones seems to me one of the bouquet of poets who have made this century the most fruitful in English poetry since the XVIth

By now most people would agree that Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Carlos Williams and Zukofsky form an astonishing centrepiece for the century's literary history and it seems to me that David Jones must be placed close to them. His technical skill, though no doubt less varied than theirs, was very great and most scrupulously exact. He had an advantage over them in his familiarity with the complicated skills of Welsh poetry, which he never seemed to imitate but which yet permeates all his verse. The scope of his knowledge was very wide and more accurate than that of, say, Pound. His writing can change from song to something near prose and back again imperceptibly and very rapidly.

It did seem to me, however, that he had said his say. After *The Anathemata* he could write only what were in effect more anathemata. Considering how widely *The Anathemata* ranges, that is not a great deficiency, but it does leave him less universally available than Pound or Yeats or Zukofsky. His reputation may be somewhat harmed by enthusiastic Catholic propagandists who always claim too much for their converts, but in fact he made but in spite of them he made the Mass a complex of symbols capable of ordering and interpreting pretty well the whole 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 hope you are able to induce Americans to give themselves the enormous pleasure of reading David Jones and absorbing the wonderful tirades of sound which carry his meaning.

Telephone ~~06-6142355~~  
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I hope this will serve you.

Yours faithfully  
B Bunting