

Burning Through The Fade:
The Poetry of Brian Jones

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PhD THESIS

Declaration of Authorship

I, Paul Michael McLoughlin, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, the first extended consideration of the work of Brian Jones (1938-2009), serves as both a re-introduction to and a reassessment of his poetic oeuvre. It considers the work for the most part chronologically, noting developments and changes of direction. After a brief introduction and a note on context, Chapter Two deals with *Poems* (1966), which was met with popular and critical acclaim, sold over a thousand copies in its first month of publication, and brought a young poet an unusual degree of media attention that focused on what was seen as a fresh approach to domestic and personal subject matter. Chapter Three discusses *A Family Album* (1968), a set of four monologues spoken by members of an extended working-class Islington family who all use the same verse-format. Chapter Four notes how, in *Interior* (1969), the male voice is largely replaced by the female as Jones extended his range and sought to avoid too obvious autobiographical associations. Chapter Five focuses on *For Mad Mary* (1974), which again includes the influential figure of the reclusive Aunt Emily, continued Jones's interest in the verse-sequence, and introduces poems written from a historical and public perspective. *The Island Normal* (1980), discussed in Chapter Six, draws heavily on contemporary England, the English Civil War and Aeneas's journey of re-creation from Troy. Jones returns to domestic concerns in *The Children of Separation* (1985) and to political matters in the last volume published in his lifetime, *Freeborn John* (1990), collections dealt with in Chapters Seven and Eight. *New & Selected Poems* (2013), considered in Chapter Nine, includes uncollected poems that issue from both the contentment he found with his second wife in Normandy, and a greater awareness of other poetries. By this time, Jones had more or less disappeared from any kind of critical attention.

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LEGEND

Abbreviations for Publication References

- (P): *Poems* (London Magazine Editions 8, Alan Ross, London, 1966)
- (AFA): *A Family Album* (London Magazine Editions 16, Alan Ross, London, 1968)
- (I): *Interior* (Alan Ross, London, 1969)
- (P&AFA): *Poems & A Family Album* (London Magazine Editions, London, 1972)
- (TMH): *The Mantis Hand and other poems* (Arc Publications, Gillingham, Kent, 1970)
- (FMM): *For Mad Mary* (London Magazine Editions, London, 1974)
- (TSOTNL): *The Spitfire on the Northern Line* (Chatto Poets for the Young (General Editor: Leonard Clark), Chatto & Windus, London 1975)
- (TIN): *The Island Normal* (Carcenet New Press, Manchester, 1980)
- (TCOS): *The Children of Separation* (Carcenet Press, Manchester, 1985)
- (FJ): *Freeborn John* (Carcenet Press, Manchester, 1990)
- (IC-CT) 'In Conversation with Paul McLoughlin', recorded at the poet's home in Kent on 4th July, 1998. The complete transcript: Appendix 3
- (IC-PNR) 'In Conversation with Paul McLoughlin', *PN Review* 137, Vol.27 No.3 (January – February 2001) pp. 53-56
- (NS): *New & Selected Poems* (Shoestring Press, 2013)
- London Magazine* Archive: Brotherton Library Special Collections, University of Leeds, visited 29th October, 1997. (See also Fn.2, Appendix 1)
- Carcenet Archive: Carcanet Press & *PN Review* files in the Twentieth Century Archive at the John Rylands, University of Manchester Library, visited 15th April, 1996 and 11th March, 2011
- (LM-Sbks) Undated and/or unattributed review cuttings seen only in scrapbooks formerly housed in a cupboard of the *London Magazine* garden office in South Kensington. British Library Newsroom embargoes and 'blind spots' have made identification sometimes elusive.

INTRODUCTION

For the 10th Anniversary issue of *the Review* (Spring/Summer 1972),¹ Ian Hamilton invited poets and critics to look back on the preceding ten years and comment on the state of poetry as they saw it. In his contribution to the resulting Poetry Symposium, John Carey cited Brian Jones as the most exciting new poet, beside Seamus Heaney, to have emerged during that period. By then, Jones had published three collections with Alan Ross's London Magazine Editions, and the reprint of the first two in a single volume, *Poems & A Family Album* (1972), had been one of Stephen Spender's Books of the Year.² *Poems* (1966) went through three impressions in a year, selling over a thousand copies in its first month of publication, and prompting interest from the national press: Jones was the subject of a news article in the pre-tabloid *Sun*, for example. A fourth and final collection with Alan Ross, *For Mad Mary* (1974), was followed by three with Carcanet between 1980 and 1990. Both *For Mad Mary* and *The Children of Separation* (1985) were Poetry Book Society recommendations.

And yet, in 1986, when Oxford University's John Sheeran, a fan of both football and poetry, compiled a 'British and Irish Poetry Rankings', set out in four divisions like the Football League of its day, Jones was nowhere to be found.³ Poets can lose their way, of course, but the attention Jones attracted early on (including a number of television appearances) invites us to question quite why he disappeared from view. It cannot be said that Jones was critically ignored for his collections were widely reviewed, but he was not taken up by university English departments (nor did he teach in one). And although his work was occasionally included in anthologies, he rarely sent poems to magazines, the first collection of his requiring an acknowledgements page being *The Island Normal* (1980). When the publication of *The Children of Separation* (1985) was at a late planning stage, Jones asked for the poems to be returned to him because he had not retained anything like definitive

¹ *the Review: The State of Poetry – a Symposium* (No.29-30 Spring-Summer 1972)

² Stephen Spender, *The Observer* 'Books of the Year', 17th December, 1972

³ *Poetry Review*, Vol.75 No.4 (February 1986) pp.32/3

copies of them. None of this is the stuff of marketing ambition. In an interview, he acknowledged that, after ‘a period of silence’, he realized that it was the writing itself that was important to him:

It is not important in terms of being published, or being loved, or being recognised, but the actual process of writing, of working at it, is absolutely vital for my life. It’s a process I uniquely value, and I feel unhappy if I’m not engaged in it. All the rest is incidental.⁴

How can a dedicated writer remain uninterested in publication? It is a position of selflessness that is more easily understood by those who knew the man, but there is reason to feel irritated by it, too. Brian Jones died in June 2009, leaving behind the manuscript of a ‘new’ book of poems written since the publication in 1990 of his last collection, *Freeborn John*. Some of the poems had appeared in *PN Review*, *London Magazine*, *Navis* and *Poetry Review*, but many had not been published anywhere. He spent the final decade of his life in Normandy with his second wife, Noëlle, and the happiness he found with her, and his discontent with the state of Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite England, explains, at least in part, his apparent lack of desire to publish in the latter half of his career. The second section of ‘From Voltaire’s Garden and Other Entanglements’ reads, in its entirety:

When my neighbour (he lives a mile away)
stopped at the gate to chat (so much to learn!)
and asked whether I did not feel nostalgic
for my homeland, I replied
‘I do, yes, but no more than when I lived there.’
(For a moment, I felt quite like my old self!)⁵

It is this ‘old self’ who populates and informs Jones early verse, and it is instructive to consider his journey in poetry from essential unease to the something more like poise he was to find later. The final poems of his life were not free from pain, but by now the pain was that of political frustration, or the pain of others, those voiceless or trapped or marginalized or resistant, like the Maquisards, and not the personal kind that had informed much of the early, highly-praised verse.

This thesis, which constitutes the first extended engagement with Brian Jones’s work, is for the most part chronological in its approach. Thus, there are chapters on

⁴ ‘Brian Jones In Conversation with Paul McLoughlin, *PN Review* 137, Vol.27 No.3, (January-February 2001) pp.53-56. (*IC-PNR*)

⁵ Brian Jones, *New & Selected Poems* (Shoestring Press, 2013) p.221 (*NS*, 221)

each of his seven individual collections and an additional chapter on later, uncollected poems that appeared in poetry magazines.⁶

⁶ Some of these poems were eventually collected in *Brian Jones: New & Selected Poems*, op. cit. (NS)

CHAPTER ONE

A Note on Context

Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry* was first published in 1962, some four years before Brian Jones's first collection.¹ In his introduction, Alvarez famously launched a critical assault on 'the gentility principle' he felt characterised most of contemporary British verse: 'the belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, was more or less good'.² He included poems by Robert Lowell and John Berryman, established American poets, who by no longer adhering to the post-Romantic 'cult of rigid impersonality' were able to write 'poetry of immense skill and intelligence which coped with the quick of their experience, experience sometimes on the edge of disintegration and breakdown'.³ Adding poems by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton in the Revised Edition of 1966 ('their work, more than anyone else's, makes sense of my introduction'⁴) served to heighten the focus on extreme kinds of experience. All four of his American poets had histories of psychiatric illness and treatment, and three of them committed suicide. The British poetry in the anthology was noticeably different, 'rather sober verse',⁵ and included poems by Philip Larkin. Alvarez describes Larkin's earlier poem 'At Grass' as 'elegant and unpretentious and rather beautiful in its own way, a nostalgic recreation of the Platonic (or *New Yorker*) idea of the English scene, part pastoral, part sporting'.⁶

Lowell and Larkin would, however ambivalently, remain important for Jones. Their influence is rarely evident in any immediate way, though Jones's 'The Room'⁷

¹ A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Penguin, 1962). All footnotes, however, refer to the Revised Edition 1966

² *Ibid.*, p.25

³ *Ibid.* p.28/29

⁴ *Ibid.*, Preface to the Revised Edition, p.18

⁵ *Ibid.*, Preface to the Revised Edition, p.17

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.30

⁷ (*P*, 34)

and 'Bed-Sit Night'⁸ from *Poems* readily bring to mind Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney', for example.⁹ Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) had demonstrated an important shift in emphasis for the American poet, partly because it dealt not only with his family history but also with his personal history of psychological instability (which found a kind of parallel in the psychological discomfort Jones experienced during his time at Cambridge).¹⁰ It was written partly in response to the freer work of younger American poets like W. D. Snodgrass and Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg had been instrumental in Michael Horowitz's hurriedly arranged and highly successful reading-cum-happening, the International Poetry Incarnation that filled The Royal Albert Hall in London in June 1965, an event which surprised even its organisers in providing a platform for a strength of feeling for political and poetic change they could scarcely have guessed at. Jeff Nuttall would describe it as a time when the underground was 'suddenly there on the surface'.¹¹ For Ginsberg, a general desire for change was reflected, artistically, in the desire for a new kind of poetry that would recognise the need 'to respect your own feelings'¹² and in doing so facilitate the expression of those feelings. In an age he regarded as cynically repressive, he praised William Carlos Williams's quest for the 'Unworldly love / that has no hope / of the world // and that / cannot change the world / to its delight'.¹³ Ginsberg spoke of the need to value and articulate 'the deepest yearnings of your own heart, your own longing'.

Jones referred in interview to the fifties as a time when no one said anything to anyone about anything, and to the Cambridge of his day as a time when no one asked in the study of English literature who you were,¹⁴ so he might have been expected to warm to Ginsberg's call for a poetry of openness in which poets grasp the opportunity to write about what matters to them most (something Ian Hamilton would commend Jones for).¹⁵ But Jones's natural reserve would always argue

⁸ (*P*, 35)

⁹ Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (Faber and Faber, 1964) p.10

¹⁰ Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (Faber & Faber, 1959)

¹¹ Nuttall was a prominent figure in the sixties and the author of *Bomb Culture* (MacGibbon & Kee, 1968)

¹² www.myspace.com/allenginsbergliveinlondon

¹³ William Carlos Williams, 'Rain', from *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower and Other Love Poems* (New Directions, 1994)

¹⁴ (*IC-PNR*), op. cit., p.53

¹⁵ Ian Hamilton, *London Magazine* Vo.6 No.10 (January 1967) p.89

against the confessional (a term coined by M. L. Rosenthal in his review of *Life Studies*¹⁶). In any event, Jones would have been quick to join those who protested that there was more than enough art in the construction of the *Life Studies* poems to make any response that found them simple outpourings of personal emotion to be as misguided as it was reductive. In dealing with their own families and their own emotions, Jones and Lowell are less revealing than their poems might initially lead us to suppose. Nevertheless, throughout their poetic lives, both poets would struggle to keep poetry and life apart. Perhaps Jones was like Larkin, too, in this regard, because their speakers and protagonists are often difficult to separate from the poets themselves. Jones, however, would always be more concerned than either Lowell or Larkin with speaking for those who had no public voice of their own. Here he would prove closer to Tony Harrison who, when asked about his poetic gift, acknowledged the influence of two uncles, one of whom was '*a stammerer, the other dumb*'.¹⁷

Poems appeared in a decade of shifting class boundaries (something close to both Jones and Harrison) and of shifting politics (American civil rights and later the rapid escalation of the Vietnam War and the Paris riots), a decade foreshadowed in part by the Beat generation of Kerouac and Burroughs, precursors of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, and in Britain by the Liverpool poets, and by the emergence of rock 'n' roll. But for all the air of radical cultural and political change supposedly embedded in the new freedoms, the new consumerism proved infectious and rapacious, something Horovitz was disappointed by. His initial excitement ('The beat message was all about carrying one's own light, and Ginsberg was its patron saint. But it was lovely to realise there were quite a few of us chasing after the pursuit of wisdom'¹⁸) was soon tempered ('We were young, and we thought the walls of industry and military would simply crumble. It didn't happen, and by 1968 market forces had co-opted the counterculture. But for a moment back then, it looked like we had won').¹⁹ For all his working-class roots and socialist convictions, however, Brian Jones at this time was a young married man with two small children, making his way in the

¹⁶ M. L. Rosenthal, *The Nation*, 19th September, 1959

¹⁷ Tony Harrison, *from The School of Eloquence and other poems* (Rex Collings, 1978) p.7

¹⁸ Michael Horovitz, quoted in Will Hodgkinson: 'Snapshot: Allen Ginsberg at the Albert Hall', *The Guardian*. 13th June 2005

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

teaching profession and living in Canterbury. More to the point, Jones was not a joiner-in—he described himself, after one of his speakers, as 'unclubbable'²⁰—so the Beats and the Liverpool Poets would have seemed to him too loud in their espousals of what poetry should be. His approach was quieter. One is tempted to say poetically more conservative, and it is instructive to note that Jones's *Poems* and Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist*, both first collections, were published in the same year, 1966.²¹ Heaney's is also a quieter voice. However, by the time of *Freeborn John*, Jones's political mood was to have intensified and become noticeably more urgent.

Despite the apparent efforts of the Movement²² and The Group²³ to celebrate the ordinary, it was a time when none of their 'member' poets had become anything like a household name. Critics and readers of modern verse no longer shared a unifying and sustaining consensus (and could no longer think in terms of creating one—Shelley's notion of poets as 'unacknowledged legislators' was a long way away), and were not sure if Ted Hughes (or Philip Larkin or Thom Gunn, or Geoffrey Hill or any of the increasingly influential Americans) were of sufficient weight and stature to assume the role of an Eliot or an Auden. Martin Dodsworth was to edit 'a contemporary survey' ominously entitled *The Survival of Poetry* which worried over

²⁰ 'La Trahison d'un Clerc' (*FJ*, 36): 'You must know, from the outset, I am resolutely / unclubbable'.

²¹ Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (Faber and Faber, 1966)

²² A term coined by J.D.Scott, literary editor of *The Spectator* in 1954 to describe an otherwise varied group of poets including Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, John Wain, D.J.Enright and John Holloway, as well as Robert Conquest, who edited the *New Lines* anthology (Macmillan 1956) which featured their work and described the connection between them all as 'little more than a negative determination to avoid bad principles', which may be taken to be excess in terms of both theme and stylistic devices. Scott wrote of the group's 'being bored by the despair of the 40s, not much interested in suffering, and extremely impatient of poetic sensibility', a quotation cited by both David Lodge, in *Write On: Occasional Essays 1965-85* (Penguin, 1988) and Tom Chatworth in his review of Zachary Leader (ed.) *The Movement Reconsidered* (Oxford University Press, 2009) for *The Observer* (Sunday 23rd August 2009).

²³ A discussion group set up by Philip Hobsbaum at Cambridge and later reconstituted in London. The poets who met included George Macbeth, Edward Lucie-Smith (who took over the running of The Group when Hobsbaum moved to Belfast), Peter Redgrove, Alan Brownjohn, Peter Porter, Martin Bell and, occasionally, Ted Hughes. Lucie-Smith and Hobsbaum edited *A Group Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 1963, and in his introduction, the former reveals that 'the only principle to which we would all subscribe is that ... the process by which words work in poetry is something that is open to rational examination. The acceptance of this principle is, of course, impossible to certain poets, and these do not come'. He also identifies kinds of poem that were 'more popular inside the group than they are outside it. Very frank autobiographical poems—the poetry of direct experience—[and] by contrast, dramatic monologues: poems where the poet puts forward a persona quite different from his own.' The Group has often been considered the natural successor to The Movement.

some of the directions poetry appeared to be taking.²⁴ In his introduction, Dodsworth identifies a new kind of poetry that had created a new kind of audience, an audience that 'expects its poets to speak boldly, to be unafraid of emotion and to be unsympathetic towards conventional middle-class sentiments'.²⁵ The poetry it favours 'varies widely from the obvious simplicities of Adrian Henri or Roger McGough to the sophistication and difficulty of Basil Bunting or Charles Olson'.²⁶

Jones was always more interested in forms of narrative, even if his poems do not, in any straightforward sense, always tell stories. The blurb for his second collection quotes him on the subject:

I am convinced that poetry can still cope with narrative in its own way. It need not be forced to explore exclusively extreme states of mind and feeling. And its language need not be mandarin or exotic. I have tried to be colloquial, and at the same time to make no sacrifices of subtlety and depth.²⁷

The references to 'extreme states of mind and feeling' and 'mandarin and exotic' language are clearly responses to Alvarez and Berryman. Their ways were not Jones's. Peter Porter, reviewing *The Island Normal*, refers back to this blurb-statement and comments on Jones's success in achieving his aim:

Jones believes that poetry need not surrender to fiction all the stories that need telling, but his poems retain the tightness of verse and the authenticity of good cadences. There is as much truth to surface detail in this work as in any recent novel, with a good deal of eloquence added.²⁸

Jones's concern for 'subtlety and depth' reveals sensitivity to the demands of both truth and art. Truth and strength of feeling do not of themselves make poems, and Alvarez is careful in his introduction to acknowledge as much: 'to walk naked is, of course, no guarantee of achievement in the arts—often the contrary'.²⁹ Jones's outline of his approach to *A Family Album* shows him equally careful to show he is aware of the dangers of real-life storytelling:

²⁴ Martin Dodsworth (ed.), *The Survival of Poetry* (Faber & Faber, 1970). The book began as a series of lectures on recent poetry in England and America given at the University of London's Department of Extra-Mural Studies in 1968.

²⁵ Ibid. p.12

²⁶ Ibid. p.12

²⁷ Brian Jones, *A Family Album* (London Magazine Editions, 1968)

²⁸ Peter Porter, 'Life in the museum', *The Observer*, 8th June 1980

²⁹ A. Alvarez, op. cit., p.29

As the poem is born out of a great admiration and respect for my own unliterary family, I wished to make it accessible. I am greatly in sympathy with Owen's concern that his fellow soldiers should not look at his poems, shake their heads and say 'No compris'. Of course many won't compris, but it's the best dictum to work by.³⁰

But art can be difficult to square with life and, in fact, the admiration and respect Jones refers to here were not always readily to be discerned by those apparently depicted in his work, nor by any who knew those apparently depicted, especially when parts of the stories told were not taken from life. People were hurt and, while Jones took time to realize this, he took longer to understand it. It did not prevent 'real' people from populating his poems.

Recalling his being drawn to Jones's poems, Peter Bland was keen to contextualize their appeal:

The poems suggested working-class origins and sympathies, but unlike Dunn's *Terry Street*³¹ or, slightly later, Harrison's *School of Eloquence*,³² this wasn't a two-up, two-down sort of world. It was something new—something slightly barren and apart—the poet as post-war domestic man isolated from all the obvious signs of belonging.³³

Bland was recognizing 'the flip-side of the '60s, with not a Biba or a King's Road in sight', a world which meant that for many, and especially for those attempting to establish some measure of independence from a background of hardship, life was far distant from the freedoms of Carnaby Street and California. Bland is persuasive in suggesting that the milieu he describes explained, at least in part, the success of *Poems* (in terms of both sales and critical response). It was because 'a new generation knew where he came from':

The territory was the new No-Man's Land of nuclear family isolation and social exclusion. The poems were accessible without being simplistic, and the often touching narratives of man-and-wife isolated in their domestic cul-de-sac, were, for all their youthful self-consciousness, skilfully handled.³⁴

³⁰ Quoted in the inside-front-cover blurb to *A Family Album* (1968)

³¹ Douglas Dunn, *Terry Street* (Faber and Faber, London, 1969)

³² Tony Harrison, *from The School of Eloquence & Other Poem*, op. cit.

³³ 'A Second Look: Messages from the Edge – Peter Bland on the Poetry of Brian Jones', *Poetry Review*, Vol.89 No.2 (Summer 1989) p.52

³⁴ It has to be admitted—as Hugo Williams, Alan Ross's then assistant at *London Magazine*, has asserted—that some of the success resulted from Brian Jones's being mistaken for the Rolling Stone of the same name.

Jones's was a new voice for a particular kind of burgeoning middle-class, though he would probably have balked at such a description of himself. Nevertheless, a Cambridge education and a teaching post at Kent College in Canterbury (Jones had moved there with his wife and two young children in 1964) clearly raised him free of second-class-citizenship.

But the move from London may (and not entirely unwittingly on Jones's part) have begun the process of his being side-lined, a process to which he was also to contribute in other ways. He was, as Michael Schmidt would later have it, beginning to make himself 'invisible'.³⁵ *Poems* was so well received that Jones appeared in a number of television arts programmes both as poet and commentator, and he was one of the subjects of 'A Couple of Brians' (the other was Brian Patten), a BBC *Omnibus* documentary³⁶ directed by Don Taylor.³⁷ He was publicly known to an extent that few poets ever enjoy, while still in his twenties. He had by this time also attended a few meetings of Edward Lucie-Smith's *Poets' Workshop*. Yet his propensity for unclubbability was evident from early on. He began to turn down invitations for further appearances on television, no doubt for what to him at the time seemed pressing and persuasive reasons, but, as is the way with arts and entertainment, the invitations soon stopped coming, and he had soon given up attending *Poets' Workshop* meetings, having felt uneasy when he was there.³⁸

³⁵ A view expressed in an informal conversation between Michael Schmidt and Paul McLoughlin in the offices of Carcanet Press in the Corn Exchange, Manchester on 16th April, 1996.

³⁶ The BBC's arts-based *Omnibus* ran from 1967 to 2003, so Taylor's programme was one of the first in the series.

³⁷ Don Taylor directed a number of David Mercer plays in the early 1960s, including the 'Generations' trilogy and *A Suitable Case for Treatment*. Mercer's work in relation to Jones is discussed at the beginning of Chapter 3. See p.37

³⁸ Curiously, though Jones was clear on this matter (he referred to his unease about being welcomed by Edward Lucie-Smith in a smoking jacket, perhaps the host?) neither Lucie-Smith nor Peter Porter, both of whom were to review Jones's books, could recall Jones's ever having attended. (See Appendix 3, p.302)

CHAPTER TWO

Poems (1966): A New Voice

1. Husband and Wife

Brian Jones's first collection¹ begins with a group of poems involving his wife, although two more accurately derive from what John Carey referred to as 'temporary wifelessness'.² In 'Seeing My Wife Go Out Alone', the poet is reminded of the 'jaunty step I once desired' and goes on to reflect on the effects of marriage, recognizing finally that the separation we all own is unbridgeable. Here, in the first poem, we discover themes of distance, solitariness and history that will recur throughout Jones's work ('As distance interposes, you resume / Your solitary history'). There is tenderness here, love, but there is also recognition of the eroding effect of love on the one loved ('I've learnt more intimately, this is defeat') and of intimacy's failure to unite:

Lying on your soft belly, joined
Still at the thighs, and at the breast by sweat,
Not daring to raise my face from your pillowed hair
To find your eyes wide open, scanning
Unchallenged space, where all the questions start. (p.7)

The poem does not set out to break any new formal ground, though its deployment of blank verse displays technical accomplishment. Its opening two languorous dactylic lines ('Left at the window, helpless at your going, / Watching unusual space lengthen between us'), for example, facilitate the third line's perfect cadence by pointing up the apt jauntness of its iambic pentameter ('I note a jaunty step I once desired'). Nevertheless, the openness with which the poet addresses personal and domestic subject-matter is where the real interest lies, and it is this openness that attracted the interest of critics like Carey.

¹ Brian Jones, *Poems* (London Magazine Editions 8, Alan Ross, 1966)

² John Carey, *New Statesman*, 23rd December, 1966.

‘Husband to Wife: Party-Going’, the second poem in the collection, is at once formally more ambitious and constrained, each of its three seven-line stanzas of half-rhymed couplets closing with a two-line refrain that undergoes subtle transformation. The awkward stiffness of having to stand in someone else's house waiting to be welcomed formally is beautifully caught in 'statued in other light', and the further gentler imperative, 'Allow the host to ease you from your coat', another perfect iambic pentameter, has us following the action as it happens. Of particular note is the way that verb tenses guide us through a sequence that is all in the re-imagined past: arrival at the party is in the present tense; the enforced formality of responding to one another in, as it were, a strange land, is foreseen by way of the future tense; and leaving the party is recalled in the past tense when the couple are safely home. This has been facilitated almost imperceptibly by a succession of imperative verbs until the final line's 'Walked' recalls the actual first meeting. This is a love poem that remembers the excitement of beginnings:

Stand where the stairs bend,
A formal distance from me, then descend
With delicacy conscious but not false
And take my arm, as if I were someone else. (p.8)

The formality of the occasion enables them to become ‘strangers’ again, to explore ‘the subtly-voiced nuances’ of the ‘someone else’ they fell in love with, and to rediscover:

Among chirruping of voices, clink of glass,
Those simple needs that turned us into lovers,
How solitary was the wilderness
Until we met, took leave of hosts and guests,
And with delicate consciousness of what was false
Walked off together, as if there were no one else. (p.8)

The deliberate artifice of the poem’s formal structure mirrors this knowing subterfuge. In the final stanza, ‘then’ and ‘now’ grow indistinguishable, the past tense of ‘Walked off together’ promising a present renewal, the ‘someone else’ of the first two stanzas becoming ‘no one else’ in the third; and it is, perhaps, the sensuousness (or at least, the delicacy) of the lovers’ (re)discovery of each other that prompted Frederick Grubb to say of this poem: ‘An intuition of what has happened, is happening, and may happen, just below the surface of events, is contained in [the

personal poems'] immediacy. One feels this in "Husband to Wife".³ Grevel Lindop, reviewing the later volume, *The Children of Separation* (1985), outlines Jones's approach in similar fashion: 'A characteristic technique of his best work is to circle the subject, registering oblique glances at it, so that the central concern emerges by implication rather than statement'.⁴

'Celebration - For Karen' (Jones's first wife) takes the form of a sonnet, though the rhymes are once again approximate. For H. L. Williams, the first '(t)hree brilliant lines . . . show that here is an authentic poet'.⁵

Outside, ice begins
and a moon locked among frost-prickings
of stars is taut with light. (p.9)

In 'frost-prickings / of stars', one notes, too, not only what Peter Porter identified as an example of the 'authority of cadences',⁶ but also what Michael Cayley would call 'the precise swoop of language in which Jones delights'.⁷ In the remaining five lines of the octave, as C. B. Cox observed, 'the city landscape beautifully expresses the quiet security of the lovers':⁸

Silence hardens round our city. What
can move, what can disturb? Traffic
will not intrude tonight; the docks
are tranced with cranes, and ships
nudge the oiled wharves as if in sleep. (p.9)

But the 'quiet security' identified by Cox is unstable. The historical perspective introduced in the concluding sestet contrasts the comfort of 'constructed certainties', enjoyed in the firelight, with the harsh realities of 'loss and barter and exchange' which were met only by trading 'the personal for the new and strange'. In his interview with Jennifer Campbell, Jones referred to the 'regular, respectable life' of his 'perfect bourgeois family', but went on to acknowledge that 'The darkness

³ Frederick Grubb, 'Poetry Now', *BBC Radio Third Programme*, broadcast on 19th January 1967.

⁴ Grevel Lindop, 'Journeying Backward', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26th November, 1986. 'Fancy Bread' is cited by Lindop as a notable example of this 'characteristic technique'.

⁵ H. L. Williams, 'Poet of clarity', *Western Mail*, 3rd December, 1966.

⁶ Peter Porter, 'Life in the museum', *The Observer*, 8th June, 1980.

⁷ Michael Cayley, 'The Word Future' *PN Review* 19, Vol.7 No.5, (May-June, 1981)

⁸ C.B.Cox, *The Spectator*, 9th December, 1966. Interestingly, C.B.Cox is one of the few editors to whom Jones offered poems for magazine publication (as distinct, that is, from those editors who were also his publishers). These poems (I know of three which appeared in the Spring and Winter issues of Cox's *Critical Quarterly*, Vol.14 Nos.1&4, 1972) remain uncollected.

inside every poet makes him react against these kinds of surroundings'.⁹ The 'certainties', in being 'constructed', are susceptible; they can be dismantled. A poem that might have veered off into the sentimental gains strength from being rooted in the darkness Jones refers to.

'To A Wife Gone Away' and 'The Measure of the Need' complete the opening group of poems about a married couple's domestic relationship, but deal with more extreme emotions, as does 'Sunday Outing' which is placed towards the rear of the collection. In all six poems, the speaker addresses his wife directly, even when she is temporarily absent, and it is this form of dramatic monologue that distinguishes them from other first-person poems. 'To A Wife Gone Away' makes use of enjambment to generate an accelerating sense of unease until the decisively end-stopped and declaratively Lowell-like 'You have no history' ushers in a closing crescendo that rises to a state of near-panic. It is also more overtly erotic, the lust that 'smears my flesh, maddens' de-personalizing his wife ('I have scorched your voice away, your tenderness'). The poem ends:

You are a fragment, one of the bellies, groins
I slink among. O climb out of my head
that tight silence! Remind me. Be gathered
and complete again. The hot need
goads and crazes, but what's lost of you
torments with a long ache to be recalled. (p.10)

The poet is looking back for beginnings again, for 'what's lost of you', for the calm of being 'gathered / and complete again', for love to waylay lust, but Ian Hamilton was not impressed:

The 'tight silence', the 'hot need', the 'long ache'; these are, after all, the key emotions he is supposed to be expressing but for all the juggling with groins and bellies he is finally content to call up the old abstractions.¹⁰

Hamilton's objections issue, of course, from Pound's warning to poets that they should go in fear of abstraction. The same passage, however, was to bring a very different response from Elizabeth Jennings:

The first part of this book is impressive mainly for its clever statements about personal relationships and a keen eye for natural objects and places.¹¹

⁹ Jennifer Campbell, 'Pacesetters', *The Sun*, 20th January, 1967.

¹⁰ Ian Hamilton, *London Magazine*, January 1967, op. cit.

¹¹ Elizabeth Jennings, *The Scotsman*, 5th August, 1972.

Jennings directs us to the way 'To a Wife Gone Away' ends, and also enthuses about what she calls 'this vivid line and a half' from 'The Measure of the Need' ('I can recall / no words, but total fright'). Hamilton would want the 'fright' exemplified, but Jennings finds power in the repressed emotion of Jones's abstractions. Michael Cayley, in exemplifying his important observation that what interests Jones 'is more the world of feeling than that of ideas', has this to say:

The preoccupation with emotion is linked with a self-awareness in Jones's personae which is a precondition of the monologue form as he employs it. Thus in 'To a Wife Gone Away' lust makes 'passing hags' seem to 'strut with sensual virtues' and schoolgirls 'triumph' across the husband's view. The consciously inflated tone makes it clear that the speaker is fully aware of how frustration is distorting his perception of an unattractive reality.¹²

This is well-observed: Jones's characters, including 'himself', do not, as Cayley goes on to say, tend to delve at great length into 'the tortuous processes of the human mind', as in 'the metaphysical gymnastics of a Sludge or a Dominus Hyacinthus',¹³ but their loathing of anything that smacks of pretentiousness makes them ever-conscious of the dangers of self-absorption.¹⁴ The frustration of an unfulfilled life is most evident in *Poems* in the husband, but he does not wish to be seen to be consumed by it. Neither, it is clear, does Jones. Cayley summarises the approach by noting that Jones's speakers 'are not detached observers but involved themselves in the situations they describe'.¹⁵ And the speakers are varied. Frederick Grubb said of Jones that 'he is a good catcher of styles: indeed, Mr Jones's many voices are so convincing that it's anybody's guess which is his own'.¹⁶ This principle of personae-voices involved in what they describe would continue to inform many of the poems in Jones's further collections.¹⁷

If 'Husband to Wife: Party-Going' cleverly and lovingly uses the party's requisite formality to recreate the excitement of a couple's initial attraction to one another,

¹² Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root: Some Thoughts on the Poetry of Brian Jones' in *Poetry Nation*, No.2, 1974, p.102

¹³ Ibid., p.101. 'Mr. Sludge, "The Medium"' and Dominus Hyacinthus (*The Ring and the Book*, Bk. 8) are characters from poems by Robert Browning. Both deliver dramatic monologues.

¹⁴ cf. 'The images that others have of us / sustain and kill' from 'At Badgers Mount' (TCOS, 26)

¹⁵ Cayley, op. cit., p.99 (See also Fn.59, p.29)

¹⁶ Frederick Grubb, op. cit.

¹⁷ Such voices are to be found in the four characters of *A Family Album*, in the several women personae and the frontier guard of *Interior*, in 'The Courtenay Play', in which we hear the voices of those involved in what is more than an agricultural revolt; in *The Island Normal*'s Horace and Andrew Marvell; and in the apocalyptic survivor in *The Children of Separation*.

the innocence of remembered beginnings turns, in 'Sunday Outing', into the experience of forgetfulness, and results in a kind of angry nostalgia:

Do you recall hour after hour
Spent watching dusk or dawn inch up? What was your head
Vacant with then? Tell me, love, what did I speak of?
How did we manage without dogs and hags? (p.54)

The vacancy referred to here is the 'unchallenged space' wondered at in the opening poem. The husband is impatient with the usual worries that set in once a journey is under way: did anyone let the dog in, leave the tap running; is the 'hag from below' pilfering from unlocked rooms; is gas escaping? But he is also parenthetically tetchy – '(chuck that fag away)', '(look this way damn you)' – and anxious to recall the 'hour after hour / Spent watching dusk or dawn inch up' in earlier, less anxious times.¹⁸ The closing question, 'How did we manage without dogs and hags?' is a despairing comment on both the current state of the relationship in particular and the demeaning effect of the order that passes for domestic life in general.

If Jones is preoccupied with control, it is with control over the necessities of circumstance, over his 'hot need' and his psychological anxiety, rather than with anything like personal power over or control of the woman and the situation she is in.¹⁹ 'The Measure of the Need' captures a couple's fearful reactions to a storm that keeps them awake, the violence of its verbs ('bruises', 'smacks', 'savages') helping to establish the woman's 'total fright'. These verbs describe powerful, physical effects, but they give way to the realisation that 'To lie apart // in a threatened house' is not the nightmare it appears to be but rather something that 'reinstates', that brings them closer together again. The poet is more concerned with the psychological, and Jones's speaker attempts to empathise with his partner:

I am remembering what you said
was it an hour ago? was it about
some fear of thunderous nights? I can recall
no words, but total fright

and a wind battering. (p.11)

¹⁸ This is not the only example in Jones of parentheses being used as a structural device. See, for example, the late poem, 'Night of Separations' (NS, 220)

¹⁹ As, for example, in Ian Hamilton's 'The Storm' (first published in a pamphlet, *Pretending not to Sleep*, which formed part of *the Review* No.13, 1964) or in Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover'.

Jones may have been thinking here of Edward Thomas's 'Out in the Dark':

And I and star and wind and deer
Are in the dark together, - near,
Yet far, - and fear
Drums on my ear
In that sage company drear.

How weak and little is the light,
All the universe of sight,
Love and delight,
If you love it not, of night.²⁰

Interestingly, it is a woman, his daughter Baba (Myfanwy), who speaks in Thomas's poem (he said as much in a letter to Eleanor Farjeon).²¹ Fear of thunder and fear of night are clearly related psychologically. Jones, like Edward Thomas, is less inclined to dwell on the elemental power of nature, than he is on the need for companionship and safety. At the same time, his speaker's words carry a quality of threat in themselves:

and what are words,
if I murmur them, but curtains in a draught,
usurped and menacing. (p.11)

But the couple lie apart, and she shows no sign of needing anything more than his presence, while he seeks, not altogether convincingly, to reassure her:

To lie apart
in a threatened home, to buffet
down vast nights, while every small
habit of self and daylight bobs
away on darkness, is no nightmare, love,

being the measure of the need that makes
dearer the way the dawn gathers your face,
settles curtains, and reinstates
my presence through the awareness in your hand. (p.11)

These poems are an attempt to acknowledge the complexities and ambivalences of love. The 'need' refers to all the ways in which the self is challenged, even in what purports to be a loving and companionable relationship, one that, as is the way of things, has its darker moments.

²⁰ R. George Thomas (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* (Oxford Poets, OUP, 1981) p.125

²¹ Letter to Eleanor Farjeon, 27th December, 1916. Quoted in R. George Thomas, op. cit., p.172.

2. 'Thaw' and Other Susceptibilities

The Jones that Hamilton praises is to be found in poems like 'Thaw', one of three he singles out in the collection because they are instances of 'the metaphoric density and control which most of the other poems seem merely on the brink of'.²² (The other two are 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' and 'Bed-Sit. Night'.) 'Thaw' is a poem that tells of the world after snow, when movement resumes after a period of apparent stasis. What is observed is carefully described: 'snowmen shrink to tiny pyramids'; 'rising like a tide the grass / wells over snow and leaves it islanded'; 'stones and jutting tree-roots shine'. The language, however, suggests other kinds of thaw, in a relationship, for example. It is about release from anxiety: snowmen's 'eyes of frizzled coke roll out like tears', hills 'like withheld waves tremble to move'. When spring emerges through snow, 'Time lives again', while:

the heart that through the rigid months became
a memory of spring, an easy yearning,
must be itself again, trembling, susceptible. (p.55)

This dichotomy between movement and stasis, between rigidity and trembling susceptibility, might serve as an emblem for the plight of the individual in much of Jones's world. As we have seen, this plight necessitates the 'constructed certainties' of 'Celebration – for Karen'. Stiffness and rigidity, behavioural signs of discomfort, arrest development everywhere and appear regularly in this collection: 'statued in other light';²³ 'a moon locked among frost-prickings / of stars is taut with light';²⁴ 'Silence hardens round our city';²⁵ 'Arms rather stiff, the shoulders tensioned high';²⁶ 'My hope is rigid in my flesh';²⁷ 'its menace stiff and chill';²⁸ 'the taut circumference of his hurt';²⁹ 'While space hardens';³⁰ 'Is rigid and voiceless / Shrunk beyond will and stir'.³¹ And if movement is a quickening into life, in Jones it is often threatened: 'perilous warm promise';³² 'precarious / Attempt';³³ 'One quiver of the heart'.³⁴

²² Ian Hamilton, *London Magazine* (January 1967) op. cit.

²³ 'Husband to Wife: Party-Going' (*P*, 8)

²⁴ 'Celebration – For Karen' (*P*, 9)

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ 'Seeing My Wife Go Out Alone' (*P*, 7)

²⁷ 'He Drives' (*P*, 22/3)

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 'Spring Requiem' (*P*, 25)

³⁰ 'Bed-Sit. Night' (*P*, 35)

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' (*P*, 29)

³³ 'The Unlikely Stubborn Patch' (*P*, 48)

The same dichotomy also features strongly in both of the 'Two Preludes'. The first of these is ostensibly about a woman working out her frustrations on the pastry she is making. The pastry is called 'old voluptuary', implying sexual inadequacy in one once given over to sensual pleasure, the woman punishing the man for his lack of masculinity. The pastry is being manoeuvred, pounded, crushed, stabbed, pummelled and yet remains 'flat . . . puffy and compliant'. The language tells not only of growing anxiety but also of a dangerous and destructive power:

My hands stray – look, they brush at daylight,
do other things. O God maintain
the precarious, teetering skill of my hands! (p.22)

For Jones's speaker 'other things' are those free from destructive intensity. The final line's 'precarious, teetering' is a more manic version of 'Thaw's 'trembling, susceptible'.

In the second of the preludes, a man (whom one supposes by way of juxtaposition to be the husband of the woman making pastry) drives his car. The urgency of address and the mechanised treatment of the driver's body lend the poem a constant sense of danger, an urgency compounded by hunting images. As in 'Husband to Wife: Party-Going', Jones adopts a strict stanza form, in this instance of eight lines in which alliterative and internal chimes replace formal rhymes. The form's rigidity serves to heighten the speaker's volatile state of mind, the driver inviting any traditionally hunted creature who will oblige ('Rabbit, maimed bird, hare') to 'redefine' him by scuttling in front of his car, causing him to brake sharply with predictable consequence. By not doing so, the desired assassin-saviour is berated ('Creature, in shadow, / Somewhere you prolong / Cruelly this torment of watching'). What he watches are his hands on the wheel as if they were 'another's hands an indifferent yard away'. This alienation is caught again in the final stanza's dark dismissal of religion:

I have no message
For hands to sweat by,
No prayer for your sharp scuttle across my brain.
I only see high concrete arms
Swoop and swoop with dangling unlit lamps

³⁴ 'Talking Landscape' (*P*, 47)

And over roofs a white spire stride,
hunting roadwards, its menace stiff and chill
With unconcern.

(p.23)

Jonathan Raban likened Jones in this poem to Douglas Dunn's second volume, *The Happier Life*:

Like Dunn, Jones tends to get into tangles when he goes after bigger fish, thrashing the water with much literary false casting ('Bits of a broken / Purpose, a litter / Of meaning scattered functioning into the void' etc.) and glooming into deep and serious pools. On his home stream, he's excellent; on Eliot's River, he's awkward and out of place.³⁵

This preference for the domestic poems was to become a common theme among critics of Jones's work, but the idea of 'purpose', of things and events and behaviour, being grounded in a reason for their existing is a defining facet in everything Jones writes and thinks. If a purpose has been broken then the way has been lost, the subject has forgotten what it is for. In Jones's work, this is an existential idea, not a religious one. It crops up again and again: a flower is 'edible sometimes, sometimes for breaking, / Sometimes best sat on' ('Introduction'); 'Grey tides / Mingle what purposes your eye supposed' ('How To Catch Tiddlers'); 'The path runs, robbed long ago of purpose' ('The Unlikely Patch'); and it is to be found in later volumes, for example in rails 'narrowing into the distance their certainty of purpose' ('Introductory: 1944').³⁶ This notion of 'purpose' would eventually lead Jones to the work of the clinical psychologist, David Smail, who argued that people were systematically being denied, in an age of individual consumerism, any public purpose.³⁷

Abstractions like 'purpose', 'need' and 'ache' were also important for Jones in enabling him to distance his poems from their autobiographical sources. He came down from Cambridge, temporarily, in the late nineteen-fifties, having suffered from night sweats born of anxiety. This anxiety had developed into a near-breakdown, and it was inevitable, perhaps, that such severe psychological unease would find its way into his poetry, though it is not directly referred to in any autobiographical way, nor is it dealt with in anything like the openness that informs

³⁵ Jonathan Raban, *The Spectator*, 22nd July, 1972.

³⁶ (*TCOS*, 9)

³⁷ David Smail, *Taking Care: An Alternative to Therapy* (Dent, 1987).

his domestic situation. In conversation, Jones said that none of his early poems dealt with how he was really feeling at the time:

Poems was a great success, and there's a freshness about it, but it doesn't touch what I was feeling. It doesn't really touch . . . the nightmare, the anguish – apart from some. There are some that begin to, like 'She Makes Pastry' and 'He Drives'. That is the line, if I'd had the courage, I'd have pushed forward.³⁸

Perhaps part of what Jones meant here is that he might have written the poems about psychological unease in the first person, as Robert Lowell's does in 'Skunk Hour' ('My mind's not right').³⁹

The decision to deny the reader any obvious biographical 'drops of honey' is always an artistic one but Jones's reasons were multiple.⁴⁰ He came to believe that he had lacked the courage to confront his illness directly in these early poems, but it might equally be argued that he was temperamentally unsuited to the kind of approach advocated by Ginsberg⁴¹ or Alvarez⁴², and exemplified by Lowell and Plath. He may have felt frustrated by the Fifties' demand for those suffering to do so in silence, but he would never have countenanced 'letting it all hang out'. He would have agreed, for example, with Graeme Richardson that in Peter Redgrove's poetry 'really the central problem is excess'.⁴³ Jones would have recognized what Alvarez called 'the gentility principle' in British verse without disparaging it. In order to write like Lowell or Plath or Redgrove, he would first have had to overcome, to bully himself out of, a natural reserve. Nevertheless, while Jones chastised himself for not facing 'the full range of his experience with his full intelligence',⁴⁴ the opening domestic poems of his first collection emotionally went beyond anything to

³⁸ (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.309

³⁹ 'Skunk Hour' in *Life Studies* (Faber & Faber, 1959) p.104 in the extended 1966 edition.

⁴⁰ See letter from BJ to MS re blurb for *The Children of Separation*, 5th August 1985, Carcanet Archive. (See also Fn.5, p.149)

⁴¹ www.myspace.com/allenginsbergliveinlondon (Click on 'Music' then select 1' 57" track 'AG'):

'respect for our own feelings is really important, that you're not to be intimidated out by the culture, out of the deepest thing that you have in your heart, which is your own longings'.

⁴² A. Alvarez (ed.), *The New Poetry*, op. cit.: 'What poetry needs, in brief, is a new seriousness. I would define this seriousness simply as the poet's ability and willingness to face the full range of his experience with his full intelligence' (p.28).

⁴³ Graeme Richardson, 'Saving Peter Redgrove from Oblivion', *The Times Literary Supplement*, www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1019512.ece

⁴⁴ Alvarez, op. cit., p.28

be found in the 'New Lines' anthology in which Robert Conquest sought to highlight the so-called Movement poets.⁴⁵

Even in the opening poems, however, those highly regarded for their openness, there is a reined-in Englishness about the speaker's agonising about sex. If one is going to be frank, then there are more graphic words than the 'groins' found in 'To a Wife Gone Away' and the 'old abstractions' disliked by Hamilton ('hot need', 'long ache', for example). The poems issue from their speaker's failure to connect, from a lack of fulfilment, and from the tight-lipped repression the nineteen-sixties were attempting to dislodge. They are also shaped by a desire to include personal anxieties without, as it were, parading them. Phrases like 'your tenderness' in 'To a Wife Gone Away', belong to the Cambridge of Jones's time there, 'tenderness' being a *Scrutiny*, Leavisite word. Jones has spoken about his days at Cambridge and about needing 'someone to say "Who are you? Talk about yourself"':

But this was scrupulously not allowed. It was the text, the words – and I think generally, for me, the discipline of English Literature at Cambridge reinforced the sense of something being buried, withheld.⁴⁶

This sensed 'something being buried' is clearly a consequence of learning not to 'talk about yourself'.

The openness critics admired in Jones (though some, like Elizabeth Jennings, admired the reserve, too) lay in the direct, even fearless, way in which the speaker addressed his wife. Yet openness will always entail risk, the finest work often issuing from the tension between openness and reserve. One of the major risks is that of being read autobiographically. In Lowell, Plath, Larkin and Jones it is more than usually difficult to disentangle the poems' speakers from their real-life sources. Jones chooses dramatic monologue or third-person narration depending on how 'open' he deems it appropriate to be. He is temperamentally closer to Larkin, but his characters can be more resistant to their lot. Sometimes when this happens, as in the 'Two Preludes', he succeeds in writing powerful verse, but the desire of the writer to keep his distance can also result in what is less convincing (why call himself 'David' in *A Family Album*, for example, when all other speakers retain their real-

⁴⁵ Robert Conquest, *New Lines* (Macmillan, 1956).

⁴⁶ (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.308

life names?). In the end, however, it is not Jones's wish to write autobiographical (let alone 'confessional') verse, despite, as with poets everywhere, his life-experiences clearly informing the poems. Jones's poetry is propelled by tensions: between private and public; openness and reserve; life and art. But, to return to Carey's phrase, it is against the 'eye-opening' way in which these tensions are presented that Jones is to be judged.⁴⁷

3. Edward Thomas

The publisher's blurb on the back cover of *Poems* includes the following:

Although he would not press the association too closely, (Jones) feels some affinity with Edward Thomas, the poet killed in the First World War, who is the subject of one of the poems in this first collection. The affinity is not to be found in the subjects chosen, but in the search for identity; and in the sense of menace hovering over what man makes of himself, of his relationships, and of the world he finds himself in.⁴⁸

The poem referred to here is 'A Garland for Edward Thomas'. Jones identified very closely with Thomas, indeed at times believed he *was* him.⁴⁹ Thomas's woods are here in its first section, as are the lanes 'catching the sun, prompting journey / And promising arrival'⁵⁰. In the second section may be found other emblems of the kind Jones was often to use: ordinariness ('The slightest flowers were your familiars')⁵¹ and a hope rooted in an 'unvibrant' moon shining over the 'lonely and the poor'. For C. B. Cox, Jones 'handles life as gently as Thomas "Hand-cradling a wren's egg, sensing all / The perilous warm promise of the shell"'.⁵² This is a rich image of beauty and precariousness involving intimations of both life and death, an image that leads us to the final stanza's eulogy where Jones finds in Thomas 'charity', an 'intricate design of love and wants' and an 'honesty that shirked a specious noise' (a phrase Cox feels applies to Jones's own poetry). Among these 'wants', Jones

⁴⁷ John Carey, op. cit. ('Brian Jones reminds his reader eye-openingly of out-of-the-way sensations').

⁴⁸ Penned in all probability by Alan Ross, although a young Hugo Williams was Ross's poetry assistant-editor at *London Magazine*.

⁴⁹ Jones said 'Edward Thomas wrote in a letter, "Everybody thinks they're Hamlet, but I know I'm Hamlet." When I read that, I knew I was Edward Thomas' (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p. 310.

⁵⁰ Leaving and returning feature most particularly in 'Return Journey' (*TCOS*, 49/50).

⁵¹ Jones's preference for flowers like the lowly marguerite reveals itself in *The Children of Separation*. (*TCOS*, 44: 'How did we come not to trust these mundane plenitudes')

⁵² C. B. Cox, op. cit.

foregrounds a search for identity, something Ross commented on in Jones.⁵³ One of Jones's later poems, 'Return Journey', admits that to say "This is mine" is 'a daunting task for one, / well past forty, still learning how to say / "This is me"'. Thomas was forty when he died in the trenches.⁵⁴

The elegiac reverence with which Jones approaches his subject in 'A Garland' impressed Thomas's widow, who contacted him and suggested he visit her. Jones was to regret not acting on this invitation, because not long afterwards Helen Thomas died. The poem was later included in an Enitharmon anthology.⁵⁵ This is what Jones had to say there:

At critical times in my life, his poetry has been with me . . . in my pocket, beside my bed. When things are falling apart, what he says and how he says it is a toughness, something enduring, seasoned, tried, triumphant. I've sometimes misused him for an easy nostalgia to simplify things, but that is me, not him. I love his wryness, his niggling persistence and determination to say what is just and accurate, both in sense and in rhythm. I like the way he felt for so long that it was impossible to write poetry. I like the way it came to be written under the looming cliff-face of death. I like the way nearly all his poems show him just triumphing over the 'poetic', the struggle hard and violent. I like the way his poems run like an austere, authentic thin seam through the art of this century, with its styles and postures and impersonalities and claims and grandiosities and martyrdoms and stances . . . I love all those, too, but I think I need most his distilling poetry from a grave, inevitable and earnest voice. Ironically tinged.⁵⁶

Jones reveals a great deal here about what he seeks in his own writing: toughness; authenticity; the determination to say what is just and accurate; the avoidance of easy nostalgia; a contributing austerity; triumph over the 'poetic'; and a voice of inevitability tinged with irony.

But there are other attributes, perhaps more readily traceable to Philip Larkin than to Edward Thomas, to be found in Jones's work. There is humour, for example, and the anxiety of suppressed desire in the first of a pair of poems about finding lodgings. If 'The Room', with its 'Brown stick-furniture; a gas ring; / Bay window

⁵³ Back page blurb for *Poems*

⁵⁴ (*TCOS*, 49)

⁵⁵ Anne Harvey (compiler), *Elected Friends: Poems for and about Edward Thomas* (Enitharmon Press, 1991) p.120

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p.120

bulging north', reminds us of Mr. Bleaney,⁵⁷ it nevertheless avoids the severity of the moral judgement Larkin fears ('that how we live measures our own nature').⁵⁸ The search expires because the protagonist has found himself a room. The literal becomes bathos. The Greek landlady (first referred to simply as 'the Greek', which the unwary will take to mean male) is another of Jones's unfulfilled characters, her faltering English prompting unintentional *double-entendres* ('I must take gentlemen'). When they look at each other they 'estimate' not the rent, but 'Desire against requirement', the line-break ('estimate / Desire') designed to prompt in the reader a smile tinged with sadness, because the unexpected (and thus comic) image also implies the shared loneliness of those who silently endure.⁵⁹ The final couplet, in recognizing not so much inadequacy as circumstance, reveals concern about control: 'Our eyes meet and confirm / Respect for what intentions brings us to'. 'Bed-Sit. Night', in which the protagonist undresses for bed, is again informed by the necessities of circumstance ('what choice has brought me to') and ends with the kind of observant mix of concrete and abstract that is a characteristic of Jones, his noticing his jacket hanging on the back of a door 'stiff / With tomorrow's character'.⁶⁰

4. Physical Activity

In what was, for a very long time, the only essay written on Jones's work, Michael Cayley observed that 'achievement in Jones's world lies largely in physical activity'.⁶¹ 'Stripping Walls' is one example of such activity. In this poem of self-deprecation, the poet finds favour with the baker, the greengrocer, and the laundryman, who normally find him difficult to talk to, through undertaking a bit of D.I.Y. Angling is another example. When Jones tells his son how best to go about it, this less strenuous activity is clearly seen to offer its exponents a similar sense of something worth doing being done.⁶² Michael Cayley greatly admired the poem:

⁵⁷ Philip Larkin, 'Mr Bleaney', from *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit.. p.10

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Another of the Jones speakers 'involved in the situations they describe'. (See footnote 15, p.19)

⁶⁰ John Carey, *New Statesman*, 23.12.66, op. cit.

⁶¹ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit. p.103

⁶² 'Introduction' is another poem addressed to Stephen, when he was very much younger.

In 'How to Catch Tiddlers', a virtuoso poem in which the simple instructions given to a boy are the sole means by which the reader is led to imagine the boy's movements, success is symbolised by 'the titchy black squirm'.⁶³

Jonathan Raban finds delight in the 'sheer carpenterly craftsmanship of the poem', in the way in which Jones can 'make a line of words follow the sequence of an action or a thread of close observation'.⁶⁴ It is easy for the reader to share in Cayley's enthusiasm and Raban's delight:

The hand, and, now, near an old glance somewhere,
A sleek shape holding its body constant,
Firm in its fluid world. Move on. Watch
Only the net. You are a hand only,
Steering, controlling. Now look.
Inside that silent bulge the shape
Breaks black and firm. (p.41)

Once the fish is caught, the speaker tells his son, he can relax: 'You have achieved'.

'The Garden of a London House' finds the protagonist again engaging in strenuous physical activity, this time tending to a garden. It is a subject that will be returned to in an important late poem, 'From Voltaire's Garden and Other Entanglements',⁶⁵ which invites comparison with Ford Madox Ford's late poem about gardening, 'L'oubli-, Temps de Sècheresse'.⁶⁶ Jones's poem, like 'Stripping Walls', finds the poet engaged in the kind of activity one supposes he only engages in out of necessity. Again Ian Hamilton was derisory about it, deciding that it contained 'over-much Redgrovia posturing in the back garden'.⁶⁷ But Cayley approves of Jones's speaker, 'who starts to tidy a garden which has run to riot, simultaneously relishes "each merciless attack" on the rank vegetation, and discovers an unexpected childlike delight in the magic insects he finds',⁶⁸ a discovery that overcomes unease. A sudden and atypical burst of industry has revealed to the poet the intricacy and spontaneity of the natural world. He notices

⁶³ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit., p.103

⁶⁴ Jonathan Raban, op. cit.

⁶⁵ (NS, 221)

⁶⁶ Ford Madox Ford, *Buckshee* (Pym-Randall Press, 1936/1963), pp.14-18. Ford's poem is also one that achieves a measure of contentment made possible by a new (and in Ford's case, late) relationship. See further discussion on p.246

⁶⁷ Ian Hamilton, *London Magazine* (January 1967) op. cit.

⁶⁸ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit., p.103

what Norman MacCaig memorably noticed, in 'I Took My Mind a Walk'⁶⁹, 'how extraordinary / ordinary things are, or how ordinary / extraordinary things are':⁷⁰

And here, in this low world, my gaze
(First time in months)
Focused; things from void took size;
I noticed ants

Spontaneously appear on stones,
A magic spider,
A snail's intense life through its horns'
Translucent quiver. (p.52)

Such a 'translucent quiver' returns us momentarily to the precariousness of existence, but the speaker is still pleased by what he has achieved:

And now, washed, tired, in starched, clean shirt,
With blistered hands,
I gaze where I have made a start
To make amends (p.53)

The need to 'make amends' comes as something of a surprise here, until one recalls his feeling pleased, in 'Stripping Walls', that he has not been chewing his nails and gazing through windows. Nor is he here.⁷¹ Engaged in physical activity (what the practical will always call hard work), he does not have to worry about the moral implications inherent in adopting the role of artist.

Cayley also intriguingly observed that in Jones 'Dying itself can take the form of activity'.⁷² In 'Death of a Cat', he notes, 'death is a final cat-and-mouse game with the roles reversed', but it is a game that nevertheless also involves resistance in the form of an assertion of independence. Jones's cat dies well, and helps demonstrate that Christopher Smart had not closed the book on good cat poems.⁷³ H. L. Williams admired Jones's poem:

⁶⁹ Norman MacCaig, 'I Took My Mind a Walk' in *Surroundings* (Chatto & Windus with the Hogarth Press, 1966), published in the same year as Jones's *Poems*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ The speaker will experience similar magical discoveries in 'From Voltaire and Other Entanglements' (*NS*, 221-232).

⁷² In addition to 'Death of a Cat', Cayley also cites 'Emily's fish flipping off the Hastings beach' ('Where Walls Take Root', *op. cit.*, p.103)

⁷³ Jones has written an unpublished book for children of poems about cats. A grand-daughter read one of these poems at his funeral service in Normandy in 2009. Jones was a lifelong lover of cats.

Compassion and acuteness of eye are two of (Jones's) strongest qualities, and nowhere do they find better expression than in 'Death of a Cat', in which sentiment is triumphantly avoided.⁷⁴

The failing creature refuses to yield, will not tolerate any changes in its routines.

The second of the poem's two verse-paragraphs reads as follows:

And death was a wind that tested regularly
The strength the cat had left, and in its walk
Puffed on its flank and made it totter
Then courteously desisted. Death can wait.
Powerless, with crude tears, we watched the cat
Totter and reassert itself again and again
Its life the fuel for its will to live
Until the bones appeared, blood dried in veins,
The pelt was ragbag remnants, the eyes gone out-of-the-way
And the wind's task was easy and the cat fell. (p.38)

Some may feel that 'crude tears' forces the pace a little but this is impressively achieved writing.

'My Father' includes an altogether more controversial death in a poem that was to cause a good deal of family pain. It is a poem of praise in which Jones, or rather the speaker (this is a critical distinction, given the poem's reception), admires his father's steadfast qualities. He is likened to a warrior who gets up at six, expertly makes up a fire in the hearth and sets it alight: 'It was his hour // and dark preserved it. At seven / the station claimed him'. Jones's way of looking is revealed here. He sees a personality mostly buried beneath his responsibilities. The boy's job was menial, but preparatory, that of 'opening curtains', not only to let in the emergent day, but also his emergent life.⁷⁵ The metaphor is hard to miss, each day the boy opening up the way to his becoming a man. The poem's second section begins 'He is dead' and describes how, as in 'Introduction', father is revisited in son. Characteristics inherited include his father's eyes, hands, skin. Nevertheless, and importantly, the boy does not appear to have inherited what he calls his father's best gift:

[how] to be alone an hour
and use it well, then stride
out into frowsy light, the day
surrendered, but not counted lost. (p.39)

⁷⁴ H. L. Williams, *Western Mail*, 3rd December, 1966, op. cit..

⁷⁵ Interestingly, 'My role was opening windows' became 'My job was opening curtains' for the 1972 reissue (*P&AFA*, 35), 'role' presumably felt to be overly formal.

There is envy here alongside the admiration. The activity poems highlighted Jones's artistic unease (poetry would never be as practical, as useful, as stripping walls or gardening). Here we are reminded of Jones's remark to Jennifer Campbell:

I dislike dabblers. I try to write something every night. Not sitting waiting for inspiration. It's the kind of discipline that helps in the end. Now if I have a day or two without writing I have a feeling of frustration, a sense of guilt.⁷⁶

Jones felt uncomfortable when reminded much later in his life he'd said such a thing.⁷⁷ It is a little irascible for a man noted for his tolerance, but it is, nevertheless, an attitude rooted in the unease that informs the entire volume. In fact, Jones's father wasn't dead. The poem uses the admittedly startling assertion that he is in a poetic device that serves to recognize that, as a grown man, the speaker will now inherit nothing new from his father. But Jones was beset by telephone calls of condolence from friends, relatives and acquaintances. He was, characteristically, but perhaps surprisingly all the same, flabbergasted. How could they think his father was dead? Jones would be even further discomfited to discover (though not immediately) that his father was hurt by the poem. There are questions raised in this anecdote about the responsibilities of writers over and against real-life 'truths'. (Might the Elizabeth Bishop he came to revere have berated Jones, as she berated her friend Robert Lowell, with her famous retort, 'art just isn't worth that much'?⁷⁸) These are questions that will continue to raise their heads, not least in later pieces like the title poem from *The Children of Separation*.

5. Miss Emily

Poems also includes a group of Miss Emily poems. Three of these ('Miss Emily Removes Two Photographs from the Album',⁷⁹ 'Miss Emily – Hastings 1913',⁸⁰ and

⁷⁶ Jennifer Campbell, op. cit.

⁷⁷ (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.313

⁷⁸ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Selected Letters* (Edited and Introduced by Robert Giroux) (Farrar, Straus, Giroux / Chatto & Windus, 1994) p.562.

⁷⁹ (*P*, 12)

⁸⁰ (*P*, 16)

‘Miss Emily – Evacuee’⁸¹ would later be integrated into *A Family Album*. Emily is central to Jones's poetic. She is always there in the background. Jones elaborates:

I think in every volume I’ve written, there’s been a poem about her. The very first one I wrote was about visiting Miss Emily, going down into the basement flat—and there was this figure in the flat, and you’re actually walking around and seeing what it is like and thinking this is a place of inertia, this is a place of death—and you’ve got to pull yourself together and get out. And although it’s a simple poem, it says something I was concerned with, and still am concerned with. What was the cost of pulling your cuffs down and getting out, and what was the cost of staying? This woman was a kind of white root of our family. And in one of the poems, ‘In Memory: E.S.’ in *The Island Normal*, I describe the time when I came away from Cambridge feeling I was breaking down and I went to stay with her – she put me up in her back room – and I felt this affinity with this woman, who was anorexic, she’d never weighed more than five stone. She was a mess – agoraphobic, anorexic – she seemed to be like a conductor taking all the tensions of our family that none of us would take. She took them into herself, and that image, of the darkness where it all starts, seemed to carry me through images of the darkness flooding in, the terror. She was suffocated.⁸²

‘Visiting Miss Emily’⁸³, written in unrhymed tercets, takes the reader down into her ‘underground cavern’, and we follow him, just as we followed the progress of the boy learning how to catch tiddlers. He whistles through the railings (perhaps an agreed sign to alert her to his arrival) and, once in the room, he tells us:

make as much noise as you can –
Hum, whistle, scrape a chair – before
She enters with that curious and catching malady

Of never having been or done anything. (p.20)

Then she puts on a show, regaling him with stories, laughing at her own naiveté (‘during the war she’d dive under the bed / So that the falling bomb would bounce back from the springs’) until, in a reversal of fortune, he is the one ‘groaning and wheezing, helpless’. Both fascinated and appalled by this formidable, eccentric woman, he has to remind himself she is his kin, his mother's considerably older sister, and is plunged into darker thoughts. Hadn’t he seen somewhere:

That paleness of eyes? that pallor of cheeks?
Haven’t you known what it is to slump like that?
Isn’t this cavern familiar? and the filtered daylight? (p.21)

⁸¹ (*P*, 18)

⁸² (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.311

⁸³ (*P*, 20)

Perhaps the boy remembers another death, another funeral, or just looking at himself in the mirror. Eventually he is consumed by the need to escape, telling himself to ‘Think of tomorrow as a day when the real begins’. Normalcy is safety. When Jones is later escaping temporarily from Cambridge, however, in search of a different kind of solace, it is Emily he goes to. The poem’s themes of duty, family ties and the business of living will inform more than *A Family Album*.

In ‘Miss Emily At Her Mother’s Grave’, we find her confiding in her mother, trying to sustain a cherished bond. Jones captures both the stillness of the graveside situation and Emily’s desire for continuity:

If I look up
carefully, the air not disturbed,
nothing moves. We are alone.
We are as we were. (p.15)

That Emily is full of care is made manifest in a single line-break that succeeds in recognizing both her feelings for her mother and the trials of her own existence. It is a poignant moment when the reclusive figure seeks solidarity with what she finds most real. The stones and roots that press into her knees and hands are to Emily welcome reminders of a life of pain and endurance, and what they ‘say’ constitute grounds for a conspiratorial celebration with her mother of a permanence Emily will not ‘adjust . . . with flowers’. Flowers, somehow, make the private public, and she will have nothing to do with such gestures.

Both poems might usefully have contributed to *A Family Album*, but would have needed reworking into the seven-line stanza form Jones employed for the sequence. The tercets of ‘Visiting Miss Emily’ and the fact that its speaker is the young boy preclude its inclusion (nor is it a monologue) – but the irregularity of the sixteen lines of ‘Miss Emily at her Mother’s Grave’ might more readily have been converted into two seven- line stanzas. Another reason for its not being converted may be that its language is more restrained and polite than that we find Emily using in the later sequence that followed hard on the heels of *Poems*.

CHAPTER THREE

A Family Album (1968): The Best Dictum

1. 1960s' Television Drama

A Family Album follows three generations of a North London family on its journey from working-class Islington to a post-Second World War overspill prefab in Greenford, and on, in the later nineteen-fifties, to a real brick house in the suburbs.¹ It is a single poem comprised of four monologues spoken respectively by Aunt Emily, her brother-in-law, Bill; her Uncle Fred; and her nephew, David (Bill and Ada's son).² Other working-class family histories in verse, including D. J. Enright's *The Terrible Shears: Scenes from a Twenties Childhood* (1973) and Tony Harrison's *From The School of Eloquence and other poems* (1975) would appear during the following decade but they would be whole books written from the single perspective of an adult narrator looking back on childhood and growing up. Robert Lowell's family was famous and patrician, Jones's of a dramatically lower social order. The *Life Studies* poems were written from the point-of-view of a poet-narrator who does not share or approve of the values that inform his inheritance. Jones's 1968 collection is unique in allowing members of the family, in speaking for themselves, to reveal his roots for him, and to show clearly why 'David' wants to escape from a past peopled by those he nevertheless has admiration for.

A closer source of comparison for *A Family Album* may be provided by the television dramas that provoked considerable public and critical attention during the mid to late sixties. *The Wednesday Play* (BBC-1) was a wide-ranging weekly series that gained early praise and notoriety as a result of its tackling contentious issues, more often than not focusing on urban working-class life: John Hopkins's *Fable*

¹ In real life, Bill and Ada and their five children (including Brian, the eldest) moved from Greenford to Slough in the late fifties.

² Thus, Bill and Ada were David's parents, Emily (real name Emma) his maternal aunt and Fred his great-uncle. David's paternal grandparents also feature in Bill's sequence, but his maternal grandparents play no part and are not referred to, probably because they were no longer alive when the poem's time-scale begins.

imagines apartheid in reverse in a Britain under black rule, and the same writer's *Horror of Darkness* involves homosexuality. David Mercer's *And Did Those Feet* is a satire on social class, or more particularly on the decline of the upper classes, while his *In Two Minds* deals with schizophrenia and the family pressures both he and R.D Laing³ felt helped shape it into being. First broadcast in 1967, *In Two Minds* later became the 1971 film, *Family Life*, for which Mercer also provided the screenplay.⁴ Other early plays in the series concerned themselves with a workers' takeover, capital punishment, homelessness, and child abuse. As Oliver Wake has observed, 'These plays demonstrated that *The Wednesday Play* was not only seeking to highlight social issues, but was actively attempting to influence public opinion'.⁵

The point of interest for Jones's poetry here is that Mercer, like Hopkins, deals with the psychology of family life, the first presenting a harrowing example of social and familial alienation, the second adopting the strategy of presenting each person's experience and interpretation of the same events. John Hopkins's *Talking to a Stranger* (part of the *Theatre 625* series of dramas on BBC-2)⁶ recounts the events and circumstances leading to a mother's suicide, from the points-of-view of daughter, son, father and mother in a quartet of self-contained plays, each of which comprises part of the complete work. Hopkins' play is less overtly concerned with 'attempting to influence public opinion' than Mercer's, but both *In Two Minds* and *Talking to a Stranger* are contemporaneous examples from television drama of what Jones called, in alluding to Alvarez, 'extreme states of mind and feeling'. While both are realistic portrayals of family life, however, neither is born, as Jones's work is, out of a great admiration and respect for the families they present. Furthermore, while Jones's poem may own any number of dramatic properties—Jonathan Raban described it as 'a lovely piece of sound writing, in the kind of half-breed, radio verse

³ R.D.Laing argued in *The Divided Self* (Tavistock Books 1960/Pelican Books 1965) that schizophrenia was what a later editorial in *The Guardian* (26th August 2011) would refer to as 'a rational response to intolerable pressures'.

⁴ Both television play and film were directed by Ken Loach. It is interesting to observe the partnerships of writer and director that characterised *Theatre 625* and *The Wednesday Play* series. Among the most prominent were John Hopkins and Christopher Morahan; David Mercer and Alan Bridges (*In Two Minds* was the only one of Mercer's television plays to be directed by Ken Loach); and Dennis Potter and Gareth Davies.

⁵ Oliver Wake, BFI, www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/454700/

⁶ John Hopkins, *Talking to a Stranger: Four Television Plays* (Penguin Modern Playwrights 5, Penguin 1967). The plays, directed by Christopher Morahan, were first transmitted by *Theatre 625* on BBC-2 on 2nd, 9th, 16th, & 23rd October, 1966.

genre that no one has practised since Louis MacNeice⁷—it retains essential and formal elements of verse. John Cotton, in his review for *Tribune*,⁸ focuses on the poem's political context, but is careful, too, to recognize its poetic qualities:

Why a poem and not a novel then? Jones's way is to let each of the four members of the family speak through a monologue so that we receive the family history from four points of view and as the monologues interrelate and overlap the fears and concerns of each character can be seen in the family perspective. A method which combined with skilful use of free verse forms using a language close to the colloquial of the characters themselves, enables the poet to concentrate the story in a way that could not be done in prose. It is the forging of a new form of narrative verse and the skill with which the colloquial is handled which make *A Family Album* such an exciting and important work. It is Brian Jones's triumph to have expressed the tragedy of this everyday life.

The features Cotton identifies here, the monologues' different perspectives, 'a new form of narrative verse' and Jones's handling of the colloquial in verse, are important to any assessment of both the poem's sections and the poem as a whole.

2. *A Family Album*

a. Emily

The opening poem in the 'Emily' section begins as if a playscript:

Eldest. Little woman
from the start. Loved horses
clacking over cobbles.
Punched once by a carter who flogged
shivering flanks till I bled tears
ran shouting up to him
ended up on my arse. (p.8)

The clipped manner of speaking displays a matter-of-factness that is rooted in a reluctance to talk about herself, a fear of protesting too much, of using too many 'I's. The very first line-break creates an effect not possible in prose, its play on 'little' and 'woman' and 'start', its fusing of child and adult, distancing her immediately from anything we might recognize from Louisa M Alcott's heroines, a distance confirmed

⁷ Jonathan Raban, in his review of *Poems & A Family Album* (LME 1972) in *The Spectator*, 22nd July 1972).

⁸ John Cotton, 'A tragedy of everyday life', *Tribune*, 28th June 1868, p.11

in the colloquial 'arse'.⁹ As the third stanza will tell us (by which time we already know), this is London. The choice of the participle 'clacking' is quasi-onomatopoeic and the first example, perhaps, of the poet providing his monologuers with words they might not use themselves. Of the four speakers, Emily and Uncle Fred might normally be expected to be covered by Basil Bernstein's 'restricted code'; Bill's manner of speech reflects his making his way in the world, not simply socially and commercially but also his personal journey from 'restricted' to 'elaborated code';¹⁰ David's comfortable fluency clearly belongs with the 'elaborated'.

The seven-line stanza that is used throughout, serving all speakers and every contributory poem, does not immediately reveal its one rhyme on lines 5 and 7: 'tears' and 'arse' being half-rhymes at best. It is the second ('shoved ... loved'), third ('turned . . . burned'), and fourth ('shadows . . . windows') in which this rhyme-feature is firmly established. The second stanza also establishes some of Emily's defining sympathies:

Liked the way cats padded
for food, padded off, kept neat,
were ill in corners.
Mother worked. I fed kids,
kissed, soaped them, shoved
all into bed. And it
was horses and cats I loved.

This love of horses stems from their being downtrodden and badly treated, her love of cats from their being fiercely independent creatures who kept themselves to themselves and 'were ill in corners', like Emily herself.

One of the 'kids' Emily looks after is her much-younger sister, Ada.¹¹ Once she is describing Ada, Emily becomes more expansive and grammatical:

Ada, though, she was
a beauty, lovely little kid.
When she was born her nails

⁹ 'flogged' is another example of the effect a line-break can create and prose cannot. It could be a colloquial form of 'sold' until we reach the following line.

¹⁰ Basil Bernstein, *Class, Code and Control: Volume 1 - Theoretical Studies Towards A Sociology of Language* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Books, 1971).

¹¹ In real life, Jones's aunt Emma, clearly the model for Emily, was born in November 1903. Ada, her sister and Jones's mother, was born in November 1913. The relationship between the real and the fictional in this poem is discussed in the chapter on *A Family Album*, and elsewhere in the thesis. See also more detailed Footnote 19, p.46

so faintly there, took my breath away.
And that milky smell. She turned,
when I held her, to my tits.
My face burned.

The insertion of the strictly unnecessary 'she' in the first line is again idiomatic. The description is full of love and generosity (qualities Jones would always admire in Emily), feelings one can almost *hear* in the delicacy of 'so faintly there', an expression which, despite its rightness in context, is perhaps another that Emily would not herself have used. There is a wonder here (the nails 'took my breath away') that will feature again, and is made more poignant by the fact that Emily remains a spinster for life.

Now we are introduced to pre-First World War London, 'the part / where they piggy-backed kids to school / for lack of shoes, where gas lamps / swelled and shrank the street'. It was a young Emily who was 'shrunk' by the wind in Hastings. Here, in the first poem, we learn of her part-time teenage job and more:

Mornings were dirty, I traipsed
for years to the jew's place,
bent in a line of benders over cloth,
stitched gaudy clothes, listened
to unseen horses' hooves
cracking the cobbles, dared not speak,
slyly watched clouds and roofs.

The mornings were 'dirty' perhaps because of the streets she walked—to what we suppose to be an East End sweatshop (Brick Lane, for example, is walkable from Islington)¹²—or because of the conditions in which she worked. She is drawn again to the horses she identifies with. When she looks up and out, she is 'slyly' watching freedom. Also notable is the way a single 'I' is coerced into serving a succession of verbs ('traipsed', 'bent', 'stitched', 'listened'), this return to a near 'I'-less account of herself continuing into the following stanza as we learn how Emily:

Grew skinny with bad ears, cared
for beauty only in my Ada,
on Fridays curled her hair for her, shaped
frocks for her from remnants of the jew's.

¹² From Cloudesley Square, N1 to Brick Lane, E2 is approximately three miles.

Emily's claiming Ada for her own (together with the repetition of 'for her') is more than an expression of kinship. It is the closest she will come to motherhood. For the first time in the poem the sentence crosses the stanza-break as Emily enthuses about her younger sister:

She was lovely, leisured,
haughty, undaunted by school,
she was family-treasured,

like the Klondyke nugget, brought
by Uncle Fred, or the model ship
our father carved, when a Pacific calm
fastened him in the blue—
so remote and rare was she,
fragile and small, a frail
shaving of a possibility.

Sound is important to this enthusiasm, the alliterative 'l' of 'lovely and leisured' being supported by 'school', and by the assonance of 'haughty, undaunted'; and the revealing comparisons (the Klondyke nugget and the model ship) which anticipate later sections of the poem, introduce us to Uncle Fred and Bill. The rhyme referring to Ada is full, and literary ('leisured – treasured), while 'family-treasured' is an example of Jones's fondness for Keatsian compound, hyphenated words.¹³ The closing stanza ends on the kind of trembling note found in the earlier poem 'Thaw',¹⁴ its rhyme less resounding ('she' – 'possibility'). The inversion of 'So remote and rare was she' is Emily's attempt to catch, in a harsh environment, the tremulous nature of Ada's beauty, and underscores what might otherwise syntactically have appeared contrived for the sake of a rhyme. And 'possibility' is a recurrent theme.

A sudden switch of time and place for the second of the Emily poems announces *A Family Album's* modus operandi. It is for the reader to piece together such opportune details as are released, much as Emily, looking after Ada, 'shaped frocks for her from remnants of the jew's'. Here we are transported to Hastings where a

¹³ A notable example is 'sex-vile' (*P*, 12 / *P&AFA*, 60). Jones uses hyphens where others might not: gas-lamps (p.8/55), sea-front' and 'red-raw' (p.10/57), 'shirt-tail' (p.14/62) sick-rooms (p.27/77), 'bomb-sites' (p.80). Elsewhere, examples are more conventional: for example, 'piggy-backed' (p.8/55), 'three-day', 'knee-hunched' and 'firm-faced' (p.10/57), 'lonely-looking' (p.30/80), 'low-born' and 'knees-up'. (p.43/89)

¹⁴ (*P*, 55)

young Emily is part of 'a three-day charity trip' for disadvantaged children.¹⁵ Once again there is a playscript setting of scene: 'Hastings.'. On her very first morning there, she is made aware of difference, watching 'small / tough men handle rods, and send / a weighted line hissing miles in a quick curve—':

another breed
from me and my Londoners, squat, firm-faced,
I felt a weed

as their kids in the shocking wind
rasped twine through their fingers, managed hooks,
while their wives sat on stones, knee-hunched,
unflinching, in a trance of competence.

The small, tough men invite comparison with an Emily who is thin and weak, but what she is noticing is not so much a personal as a generic difference. The strong physical activity evidenced by 'rasped' and 'unflinching' is, as they would expect, 'a trance of competence'. The 'trance' as an image of natural and personal pre-occupation had appeared in 'Celebration—for Karen' where 'the docks are tranced with cranes'¹⁶, and would feature again in *A Family Album* where Bill's is 'a tranced and waiting love' when he attends to his new-born son, David. This process of eye-opening observation is caught in the stanza's closing rhyme: 'Then I saw / a landed fish flip separate from shingle / its gills red-raw'. Her account of watching the fish 'writhe and squirm' and the women 'chewing bread' is told in a way that suggests the biblical story of loaves and fishes is informing Emily's response to what she sees:¹⁷

And there
and there and there and all over were fish
fish fish gaping, twitching, eyes aghast,
dying and dead
and women sat among them, watching
or chewing bread.

The women sitting among the dead make for a powerful image, the feminist import of which would not, presumably, occur to Emily. For her, others equal action. But on a bench away from the wind in 'a small tattered garden for the old', she is among 'old men with dripping noses, and old / women crooning alone, or talking death' and

¹⁵ This poem appeared first in *Poems* under the title 'Miss Emily – Hastings 1913', in the summer of which year Emma would have been 9 years old.

¹⁶ (*P*, 9)

¹⁷ Jones may, of course, have also been thinking of Elizabeth Bishop's famous poem, - 'The Fish', *Complete Poems* (Chatto & Windus, 1983/1991) p.42 - though she was mostly a later influence.

away from action. The word 'old' has appeared three times in two lines, ending both, and reminds us of Emily's opening assessment of herself as 'Little old woman / from the start'. In Hastings her unease is caught in a repeated 'I', her recognition that she is who she is, in the spotlight, a fish out of water:

I sat moaning and white
crying for London. When I undressed they beat me,
seeing my new drawers stained with shite.

The early-to-mid twentieth century word 'drawers' identifies the time, while 'shite' is not only class-bound but also provides a telling, contrasting rhyme with 'white'. It is a word that would attain more widespread use later in the century. Here, of course, its confident assertiveness is also a self-conscious euphemism for the more vulgar 'shit'.

A similarly self-admonitory repetition of 'I' returns at the end of the next Emily poem, an account of being forcibly taken to the hospital by Bill and Ada to have her 'bad ears' seen to. When Bill 'let go once', she escaped and headed off for the anywhere of Barnet on a trolley bus:

Daft. I was daft. I know it now.
As soon as autumn fogs come down
I pay for it. And when
winter shuts me up with my weaknesses
I doubly wish that time again.

The poem is mostly an account of the courtship of Bill and Ada. He had 'loved her months in secret' and had a stiffness about him that Emily liked. She called it 'pride, a kind / of dignity'. He was a man who would rise in the world, but who at this point in his life was 'a man / walking a cliff, // tense against the fall', a man local kids were not sure about and therefore wary of. Perhaps Emily sees something of herself in him. Certainly, she is inclined to side with him, twice calling Ada a 'bitch'. Emily loved her little sister but was moved to rage by her, too. When she is remembering the way Ada taunted Bill, we find Emily speaking as she thinks (arguably more convincingly, or at least more authentically, than Eliot's East End drinker in *The Waste Land's* 'A Game of Chess', who is a type whereas Emily is resolutely Emily):

I told her straight
she took the piss
too often—warned her straight.
But one kiss

and a blue look from those eyes, and he
was grovelling.

He had a temper ('You'd see / him snap behind his eyes'), and he and Ada would row, throwing things at walls and each other. It was the language they used that really shocked Emily. This was not language used to identify class (her 'shite', for example), it was 'vile' and became 'sex-vile' when their anger dissolved and segued into wooing. It is when Ada witnesses (and the reader learns of) Bill's squalid home life that the form opens out under the momentum of Emily's account:

And what she found left her crying half the night
and me dangling beside her, helpless, mute,
listening to it all.

He lived in a real slum with his parents and eight others. The 'dark and stench' made Ada retch. Bill, asthmatic, 'lay / in a room stained brown against the bugs', 'crying like a woman' and biting his fist 'with shame and rage' when he saw that someone had alerted her. She saw Bill's father 'bronchial in a chair' and his mother 'washing cups / in a scummed bath, wiping up / on a shirt-tail'. After that, Emily tells us, Ada 'understood / and loved the stiffness in him'.

Another playscript opening ('John.') invites us to a disturbing, even distressing scene. He is addressed directly, though it is the remembered John who died in the war Emily speaks to. It is a tender memorial rooted in loneliness and unfulfilment, but it develops the roughness of Bill's and Ada's 'sex-vile' into something more desperate and fearful, where sexual desire is revealed in hysteria. When John is reported dead, she returns to the canal bridge where John's 'hands / were brash':

Under them
I seeped and stank

ashamed, was open and wanted
and wanted. Felt you throb hard
rise dig my leg. Lay on slime
was slime was open
and wanted and wanted.

The form shrinks and tightens up under the effort of utterance, of remembering. 'I' is resisted again, The 'I' that serves 'seeped' also serves 'stank', 'was', 'wanted', 'Felt', 'Lay' and more. Punctuation, too, is squeezed. And the imagery has been prepared for earlier in the poem where the canal 'stinks', and kids scrawl on 'putrid brick' and

the bank is 'perilous with slime'. Jones is concentrating Emily's terror of what for her is the unknown. And it remains unknown. Under the bridge (the verb particularly apposite) she 'swam suddenly with tears':

The choke of your mouth, your
vast tongue choking me, the squirm
of your belly were brutes. I battered them off.
I still smooth my dress,
have stayed virgin. It is
a kind of faithfulness.

In the end the poem achieves an elegiac note. It is, as Larkin would have it, 'intensely sad'.¹⁸

One notable and important effect this poem achieves is the way in which Emily's response to the situation she describes contrasts with how the reader may respond to that same description. Emily's tone is one of regret for not seizing an opportunity that does not appear to have arisen or been entertained again. She had been fearful and is conscious of what she calls her own 'timidities'. She recalls John with affection, but 'walls seep', 'canal stinks', 'putrid brick', 'perilous with slime', 'I seeped and stank' describes a grim reality in language timid readers may resist. It is not the usual language of affection or desire. Sex and withdrawal are played out in the mud and slime of lust and shame where she 'wanted and wanted / and wanted' (the line-break here prolonging both lust and shame). The 'choke' of John's mouth and tongue and the 'squirm' of his 'belly' (an Emily word) lead only to tears where the slant of 'lamps / and moon' suggests an altogether more romantic scene, even if the image *in situ* serves suddenly to induce fear. Elegy is finally born of the tension of a speaker who knows the world is harsh, where experience, if there is to be any, entails mud and slime, who intuits somehow that it should be better, but refuses to judge. She is an innocent victim not so much of sexual oppression as of a world she struggles to contend with. When she returns to wherever was home at the time, 'They' (it isn't clear who) wash her 'like a child'. The squalid nature of the description is, for Emily, though not for the reader, simply matter-of-fact, and she does not spare herself any blushes. If she is damaged by the experience, then that damage helps confirm the

¹⁸ Philip Larkin, 'Money', in *High Windows* (Faber and Faber, 1974) p.40.

separation she accepts for herself. It is a precarious position and one which the Jones of night-sweats would have empathized with.¹⁹

Emily then introduces us to the Bedfordshire of her evacuation during the Second World War in language that again issues from the poet rather than the character ('the smoulder / of haws in hedgerows', 'the feel / of mushrooms . . . tender with creamy peel', 'the gum-eyed cows') and in highly organized verse in which sound is a prominent feature: the Conradian 'enormous quiet of nights' echoed in 'autumn', a similar echo of 'now' in 'mouth', and the heavily alliterative and assonantal 'ripe fruits (feel juice ...)' and 'every field, and every day'. The only decidedly Emily-words in the first six stanzas are the 'tits' piglets nudge blindly for (instead of 'teats'), 'niggers' (locals speaking slowly to evacuees as missionaries were believed to speak to Africans), and the 'nana' she felt when holding wild flowers. Again she thinks of 'my London' in terms of ownership and belonging, but acknowledges that the evacuees' hosts were always kind. They were just not *her* kind. Her voice returns. They had reasonably expected a 'kid', had got her instead ('a spinster, 40, who'd had T.B. / thinned to six scrawny stone, / who cried for home'). Her host would come to console her with hot milk and 'tell her what Christ had said', and the tone of the poem grows gentler, less alliterative, and more reflective:

But I was lost. She didn't know how lost,
how I'd sit watching trains pass
straight as a dart for London, moan
for the cats I'd had put down, for

¹⁹ NOTE ON THE POEM AND REAL LIFE The First World War took place when Emma was aged ten to fourteen, which is too young for the encounter she describes. The Second World War took place when she was aged thirty-five to forty-one, which is too late. No one in the family can remember a John or anyone resembling him, so it seems he is an imagined character. Nevertheless, Emily is very clearly a version of Emma. The steps down into the dark basement flat, the love of cats and horses, her bad ears, the trips to Hastings and to hospital are true to life, as is Emily's account of Bill's family's circumstances. And Emma was alive when *A Family Album* was published, as, of course, were Bill and Ada, who are given the names of Jones's parents. This does not matter to most readers, but it may matter to members of the family, and it is a problem exacerbated by all bar one of them (Jones's much younger brother, Dylan) not being readers of modern verse. The distinction between life and art can appear specious to those who may feel slighted by their representations. Certainly, although Dylan was never upset by the poem and his parents remained both generously proud of and silently bemused by it, he still hopes Aunt Emma never had to read about taking part in that encounter with the fictitious John, or being forced to relive Hastings and the hospital; and he still cannot fathom why his brother should have published the poem in the lifetime of those named (or near-named) in it. Nor is he able to understand why Jones changed his own name to David. Conversely, he regards *A Family Album* as a remarkable and in many ways brave piece of work. The water is further ruffled by his belief that his brother meant the poem as a tribute to the family, a way of honouring those represented. There is an essay to written about the naivety, wisdom and candour of art at work here. (See also Fn.11, p.39)

my Ada in Northampton,
and for planes
to drone this way, reducing her, Christ,
cows, pigs to flames.^{20 21}

The opening stanza of the final Emily poem adopts a very open short-lined form which is again less alliterative. It is another poem that begins in playscript fashion: 'The hospital.'. It is where she learned she 'couldn't go mad'. She is perplexed, therefore, why she is not allowed a fork to eat with. She begins to objectify herself again (as she had done earlier in 'Little old woman / from the start' and 'Some fretful nights / an old maid remembers'):

My hands were innocent. Always
I watched them. They stayed
faithful, could have sewn seams,
cut cheese into cubes, forked
meat. Similarly my legs
surprised me and walked.

The final stanza stands as a kind of summary of the Emily poems, returning to the constant theme of separation, showing her aware of her own predicament and personality, and closing with an image of independence and control, and a plea founded on not asking for much:

That was the way back, separation.
At last I wanted a fork
more than sanity, my cats
more than a lost simplicity.
And that's
enough for starting home with:
love of a fork and two cats.

There is even a telling note here of a characteristic self-deprecating humour. She is a remarkable and memorable creation. As John Cotton has observed:

Emily [is] like a chorus in whom are focused the tensions and stresses of family ties that are created by the aspirations and attitudes of the different generations. It is she who captures our sympathy, as she does that of her

²⁰ This is the only incidence of an eight-line stanza in the entire poem. It is possible that 'my Ada in Northampton, and for planes' was originally a single line, and that this error was missed at the proof-reading stage in 1966 and not emended for the joint *Poems & A Family Album* reissue in 1972.

²¹ In fact Brian's Aunt Emma was evacuated with him and his mother, Ada, to Northampton. Just to complicate matters, Brian had another Aunt Emma, his father's sister, and she it was who lived in Bedfordshire. It is this that perhaps gave Jones the idea later to place 'Emily' there.

family, a sympathy which serves to preserve the family ties however strained they may become.²²

Line-length expands and retracts in response to Emily's mood and how difficult she finds it to achieve utterance. When she grows more reflective, for example, the form expands; when she deals with more painful material, the form tightens up. This formal variety within a universal seven-line stanza also serves the other speakers.

b. Bill

Bill spends his formative years in the straitened circumstances described by Emily and witnessed by Ada. Unlike his sister-in-law, he is not prepared to suffer his lot and determines to better himself. He does well at work and moves out to the suburbs. His narrative is that of a man growing progressively more free, but his success is qualified by a seeming lack of joy and by what happens to his son, David. His section begins with the speaker using the poet's voice ('a hush of snow', 'Spring's explosion', 'Cars snuffled', the church that 'thickened quietly'). The coldness of a severe winter is mirrored in the cold politics of impending war ('Hope stiffened / in Europe's snow'). Bill recalls listening to his first child 'twist in the womb', and a significant stanza-break brings Bill and the reader up-to-date, inviting comparison with the frame-of-mind in which Emily left hospital ('And that's / enough for starting home with: / love of a fork and two cats'):

O it was love
that winter—a tranced and waiting love. It was
all I crave

now, withered up by work,
five children scattered through the world, a wife
dozing before the set;
it was all I had dreamed in Raer Street

When his wife, Ada, returns home from hospital with their son, 'she and my child were the frail and total / grounds for my praise'. Frailty is another of Jones's recurring themes. And all the while Europe prepared for war. In the 'stunned acres' of a 'snowy Europe', only the family 'seemed awake, alert / in a wealth of blankets'

²² John Cotton, *op. cit.*

until Em arrives, afraid and in need of all manner of shelter, and, with a garrulousness born of fear, 'spoke till dawn' in 'a chaos of memories'. The radio news revealed 'how the world had sickened in the night / with automatic illness'.²³ The public, the political, the familial coalesce and are momentarily only assuaged amid Ada's tears by a good old English cup of tea.

Bill and Ada rent a flat in Islington close to Emily's basement flat and just far enough away from his parents that fleeting visits may be excused. The effort to improve one's lot has traditionally led to family tensions, and there is a clear sense that Bill and Ada have ambitions to rise from the gloom of his family home. When they called in, they saw 'the old girl / slommoking in curlers' and dad 'remote with illness' and 'silent / with the disgrace // of what he'd let things come to', a reflection that reminds of 'what choice has brought me to' ('Bed-Sit, Night', *Poems*). Ada brushes off overly attendant local children and neighbours as if her son would catch 'not only fleas from them, but / the manners of them'. This social tension, a kind of distancing, will recur when Bill and Ada call on their son, now grown up and married, and leave 'well-treated visitors / essential strangers', scant reward it seems for their concern to protect their growing child, to give him something better. The square Bill and Ada move to has a 'flaking dignity / sealed from the rest of Islington', and this dignity will remain important to Bill throughout his life (and to the poem). But there are moments of revelation in the squalid family home of Bill's parents. Richard Holmes was impressed by the way Jones 'can make the new blaze out of the old, like the moment when Grandad grows expansive in his armchair in Islington and suddenly begins to tell of great seabirds'.²⁴ These are tales Bill had heard 'in the magic dark / or in gaslight fluttering / from a broken mantle—a sailor's world' now lost forever, except for its being passed on as 'those hints of possibility // that goad young blood, and dissolve the walls / of sick-rooms', a recurrence of the Fisher King idea that the quest generates good health, in this instance that the adventure of being at sea, of experiencing the new is in itself a positive force. Such passing on is what Dennis Potter's impassioned Parliamentary candidate is doing

²³ 'automatic' is an interesting choice of adjective here, and one that perhaps harps back to Eliot's typist, who 'smooths her hair with automatic hand' ('The Waste Land: III The Fire Sermon'). John Forth suggests (in an email dated 15th January, 2014) that both 'illness' and 'hand' are automatic because in driving themselves they have become matters of habit.

²⁴ Richard Holmes, 'Poetry: inside history of small conflicts', *The Times*, 'Saturday Review', 29th June, 1968

when he speaks of his coal-mining father's ability to 'draw an apple on the margins of a newspaper which was so good, so ripe, so perfectly rounded and shaded, that you *ached* to pluck it off the page'.²⁵ There is a Lawrentian yearning at work here, as may be discerned in Bill's father's reverie.²⁶ But Bill does not want what his father has come to, or had forced on him, for his own son. His father after all does not want it for himself. He is being smothered by the kind of neighbourliness Bill, too, wants to escape from:

Gently we took away
our son, forgotten now
as the old boy muttered, and
left him there
before she came back, with half the neighbourhood
and his nightly beer.

Bill's war began when, 'without a hint / of anything remarkable', his ship set sail from England. Leaving and returning home would prove a resilient theme in Jones's poetry and here looks forward to, for example, 'Return Journey' (in *The Island Normal*, 1980). For someone in Bill's circumstances war was a legitimate if enforced means of escape from life as he knew it, something he quickly became aware of:

And in three days
I was less a conscript, torn from home, was more
a man locked up for twenty years
in a London slum
bound for a foreign land at last

The 'thump' of the engines reminds of the nurses 'thumping past' as Emily waited her chance to escape from the hospital, and the 'slithering' of ropes on 'rain-greased decks' of her 'slithering on the shine' of polished floors when she made her escape. Bill's is another kind of escape, not back to what he knows, but ahead to what he doesn't. He was now 'engaged in all the wonder' he had 'dreamed of years before, when Raer Street / stank and peeled in the sun / of London summers'. This is a wonder related to the young Ada who took Emily's 'breath away' and the great seabirds Bill heard about in the 'magic dark'. Bill's attention here is clearly on

²⁵ Dennis Potter, *The Nigel Barton Plays* (Penguin Books, 1967) p.122. *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* and *Vote, Vote, Vote For Nigel Barton* were respectively first transmitted by BBC1 in the Wednesday Play Series on 8th and 15th December, 1965.

²⁶ See for example D. H. Lawrence's 1929 essay 'Nottingham and the Mining Country': 'The middle classes jeer at the colliers for buying pianos—but what is the piano, often as not, but a blind reaching out for beauty'.

himself; there are numerous instances of 'I' ('I was less a conscript', 'I was a child', 'I was engaged', 'I had dreamed', 'I was making up for it— / the sense of loss', 'a private joy / I hugged at night'). In the end, Bill's war proved uneventful: he 'fired three aimless bullets, saw all the sights, / and nearly reached Rome'. Not made of heroic stuff, Bill was not about to build a new city, his 'almost reaching Rome' an unwitting pointer to Jones's later sequence, also in *The Island Normal*, called 'Aeneas and After'. Bill's was among the less heralded experiences of war, but he had experienced escape.

After the war, moving to Greenford with Ada and David are sailing into another kind of action. As they set off, watching 'our London roll away from us', 'our' refers to an ownership he no longer wants. For him and his family there was to be 'no more Islington'. But leaving was a wrench. David, looking back at Em 'stranded on the kerb // so lonely-looking Ada cried for her', and his dad 'swallowed a clutch of tears', had 'eyes like plates'. Interestingly, Bill reverts to North London-speak with 'There was waterworks again'. But soon they saw 'some green' and seem to have entered a Philip Larkin poem as the view they passed 'spanned a few fields and hedges, showed / some tiny men at cricket, a stream, a park'. It was a view that persuaded Bill he was doing right for his son, taking him to an area with 'some space and air at last / where he could kick a ball, and climb a tree, / and not be cursed'.

And Bill makes his way in the world and in business, wearing a bow-tie to his boss's party. It was progress, even if they still felt uncomfortable, Bill 'not knowing what to say, and watching / Ada clutch // her handbag, nodding like / some puppet at all they said'. The Greenford prefab years had become increasingly hard, with four additional children joining 'David' , but the council had moved them into 'real brick at last' and he had grown with the company, the firm 'now part of a bloody great empire' and he was managing the depot. He was proud of what had been achieved, though he knew only too well that 'getting the posh man's ease takes more / than putting on his clothes'. For Jones this is a rare venture into aphorism, and serves as a reflection of Bill's very real pride.

Bill's final poem is in four stanzas of lines that vary between two and five words in length. The subject-matter is painful, David's 'illness', and, just as the form constricted for Emily when she was struggling towards a necessary utterance, so Bill has to squeeze out feelings of deep sadness, regret and guilt: 'Something has happened, mental, like Em'. He sees his son 'suffer alone / behind brilliant eyes', the brilliance academic as well as physiological, and with Ada attempts to 'trace / what guilts of ours / have ruined your face', suggesting that David's parents fear their son's malaise is the price all have to pay for the nuclear family's social advancement. For Bill, the pride that 'swelled' when David shone at school and left for Cambridge was also what broke David: 'My son, it was us made you ill, / gluttons of promise. / Forgive us. Be well.' Bill's is a soberingly generous response to the sufferings of his son, sufferings that bewilder and sadden him and are beyond his reach. It is a response that searches for a balance Bill manifestly believes he has failed to achieve. The poem, too, is a form of art arriving at some kind of balance, and in doing so looks forward to the 'At Great Tew' section of *The Island Normal*.

c. Uncle Fred

Uncle Fred is granted one poem only, in which he is to be found 'snarling through his last teeth at the loss of the Boer War, of the Empire, of his own dignity'²⁷ He wears his North London roots like a badge of virtue and is determined to set himself against doctors and their like: 'Give them the shits I will— / that's what old men's for—'. His language identifies him, the generational 'jollop' accompanied by a good deal of obscenity. He likes to 'frighten Ada and her tribe' and 'make their precious David, pampered twerp, / go green around the gills'. There is a relatively lengthy account of his pulling out one of his own teeth, an account in which he delights in his own perceived manliness. He is defiant in the face of experience and progress: 'I'm ninety, can hardly walk, / but what I learnt near seventy years ago— / sticking at what's to be done— / will see me through'. Only Em is allowed to help him and then only because he regards that as his due. His is a curt take-it-or-leave-it attitude that has long ago blotted out any vestige of finer feelings. In structural terms in the

²⁷ Richard Holmes, 'Poetry: Inside history of small conflicts', op. cit.

poem as a whole he acts almost as a kind of intervallic comic relief and certainly succeeds in helping the reader recover from the sadness of Bill before engaging with David's own account of his troubles.

d. David

David's account is characterized by the reticence that features throughout Jones's work. Neither the character, David, nor the real-life Brian on whom he is so clearly based, would entertain being as forthright as Lowell's admission in 'Skunk Hour' that 'My mind's not right', and for this reason Jones would forever remain unlikely to gain the favour of Alvarez. David acknowledges difficulties but he refers to them almost euphemistically, as when he is discussing their effect on his marriage. 'We did not speak', he says:

but drew together tenderly, and heard
such silence, felt such peace, as we
had thought forever lost in the cruel months
when my illness gnawed at us both,
and silence
signified pain.

What he calls his 'withdrawal into loneliness' is not of the same order of admission as Lowell's, but that may be, Jones might claim, because his psychological unease, however serious, was not of the same clinical order (or disorder) as that of his American counterpart. His account of his own disorder links him instead with his Aunt Emily, whose room on his wedding day he avoids visiting because it 'recalls what I've inherited'.

The first David poem also recalls his wedding reception, where 'her tribe / (all well-to-do)' looked on warily at 'the reined / and ominous exuberance' of his 'lot', he and his wife helpless with laughter and cruel precision at the memory of it all, especially when 'the more outrageous' of the Jones clan ('the ones / carefully uninvited') 'arrive in force' and inquire about the 'knees-up'. There is a distance created here: 'Perhaps in time / I'll go back, move among them, even laugh. /

Perhaps. In time'.²⁸ It is a distance that will inform the second of the three David poems, too, a poem that recalls 'My Father' from Jones's first collection. Both poems claim someone is dead, but both mean that a son has assumed independent responsibility for his own actions and decisions, has left his parents behind. 'A death lies between us' in this poem mirrors 'He is dead' in the earlier poem. It is a striking poetic device that seeks to put some distance between poet and persona, child and adult, child and parent. In the second poem, the child has died by becoming a man who now has a child of his own. Like the poet, David is someone who succeeded at school and won an exhibitioner scholarship to Cambridge where he 'broke down'. Again, Jones is not making it easy for his real family to respond to the poem, however poignant it might otherwise be. The distance can appear callous, as when David describes his visiting parents as 'all they should be— / predictable', but it is also a recognition of separation.

The book ends where it began, with Emily. David's empathy with her is almost absolute: 'Our eyes meet / and we share / what is never mentioned now—what we have had to bear // and solve in our own ways—she knows / the horrors inside the head, the loneliness, / the snap and the flooding dark, / the dreadful sleep, / and waking at night / to find the dream maintained, / the sweat of fright'. And yet, for David, Emily is the embodiment of a kind of victory: she has won back 'control / over the very place, the darkneses / that triumphed once'. She may have 'stayed vulnerable', but memorably, she 'made pain home'. When David looks at her, he sees himself and other possibilities.

²⁸ Ian Hamilton was haughtily superior about David in his *Observer* review, describing him as 'that standard fifties figure, the college boy cut off by education from his glowing roots'. Perhaps 'glowing' is an unchecked typographical error and should read 'growing', but if 'glowing' is right, then Hamilton is arguably lining up with Uncle Fred, who described David as a 'precious . . . pampered twerp'. Hamilton's dismissive attitude demonstrates how problematical writing poetry about social class can be in terms of its reception. He clearly does not empathize with David, or with Jones. He fits the latter's regret that many readers, especially those with no experience of working-class life, would never have any idea what he was talking about.

3. Martha Blake and Other Observations

In his review of the poem, John Jordan could think 'only of Austin Clarke's Martha Blake as in any way comparable as a fully rounded 'character' in verse' to Jones's Emily.²⁹ Martha's oppression, however, is religious rather than social or political. She is set off against the secular world, and every morning takes Holy Communion:

So to begin the common day
She needs a miracle,
Knowing the safety of angels
That see her home again,
Yet ignorant of all the rest,
The hidden grace that people
Hurrying to business
Look after in the street.³⁰

When in early morning she 'dares / The silence of the street', she resembles more the Mad Mary who sets out through the streets of Islington (in the title poem of *For Mad Mary*). A later poem, 'Martha Blake at Fifty-One',³¹ details the physical ailments that are not alleviated by Martha's religious faith. Like Emily, she is deemed to be difficult:

Mother Superior believed
That she was obstinate, self-willed.
Sisters ignored her, hands-in-sleeves,
Beside a pantry-shelf
Or counting pillow-case, soiled sheet,
They gave her purgatives.
Soul-less, she tottered to the toilet.
Only her body lived.

Refused the daily sacrament 'by regulation', she has effectively been stripped of her 'soul', the only part of her her upbringing told her mattered. Her arrival in hospital is noted by the heavily symbolic 'Big gate clanged', which Hugh Maxton points out 'anticipates the opening section of Clarke's long autobiographical poem "Mnemosyne Lay In Dust" (1966) in which his *alter ego*, Maurice Devane, is taken to St Patrick's Hospital by taxi and "Gates opened, / closed with a clang". Maxton concludes 'That "Martha Blake at Fifty-One" has its coded meaning as spiritual

²⁹ John Jordan, 'Poetry', *The Irish Press*, 5th August, 1972

³⁰ Austin Clarke, 'Martha Blake' (1961) in Hugh Maxton (ed.) *Austin Clarke: Selected Poems* (The Lilliput Press, 1991) pp.62/3

³¹ Austin Clarke, 'Martha Clarke at Fifty-One', *ibid.*, pp.87-92

autobiography can hardly be denied'.³² Emma/Emily isn't Jones, but she shares some of his experiences, which in both their cases were existential rather than spiritual.³³ There is no need, therefore, for Jones to engage in any coding. The biggest difference between the portrayals of Emily and Martha is that Emily speaks for herself while Clarke speaks for and about Martha. Part of Clarke's purpose is an attack on the Catholic Church. Emily may behave as she does because she cannot bring herself to behave in the way that conformity demands, but Martha suffers for her soul and the Church does nothing (and apparently can do nothing) to help her. There is an element of blame in Clarke's poem that is missing from Jones's Emily.

It is his allowing his characters to speak for themselves that distinguishes Jones's long poem from others of comparative interest. It is interesting to muse on what Jones includes and what he doesn't. The story, such as it is, and our understanding of the characters involved, is incremental or exponential. They tell us about each other. The poem begins and ends with Emily, because David's final poem, the last of the book, is about her. She is central to David's (and Jones's) concerns. David's own section is comparatively short, perhaps because, like Emily, he does not relish talking about himself (which is a recurrence of reserve, of course). The most intriguing question, however, is why Ada, David's mother, Bill's wife, and Emily's sister, is not given a section and therefore a voice of her own. The answer probably lies in Emily representing, ironically, the maternal side of David's family, with Bill representing David's paternal inheritance. Giving Ada a section would have courted unnecessary repetition, but it might have provided us with an alternative view of Emily. It is a revealing omission, one that the suspicious might feel raises questions about David's attitude towards and relationship with his mother. Clearly David empathizes with his aunt, and it is this empathy that is the foundation on which the whole poem is built.

Formally, the poem is interesting, too, because all four characters use the same seven-line stanza, a choice that risks different characters not being sufficiently individuated. This isn't the only risk, for writing about 'characters' risks sentimentalizing them. As noted earlier, Jones was clear that he did not want anyone

³² Hugh Maxton (ed.) *Austin Clarke: Selected Poems*, op. cit., Note 18 p.238

³³ Clearly, however, the meanings 'spiritual' and 'existential' overlap here.

turning away from this book saying 'no compris', the more particularly because it was intended as a long poem in *praise* of his family. He knows many will not 'compris', but he feels it is, in this case, still 'the best dictum'. Clarity is to be aspired to, says Don Paterson, whatever the risk: 'Your *reputation* should be risked. The reader's mental health should be at risk. Their unchallenged assumptions about the world should be at risk. You should risk it *not coming off*.³⁴ But for Paterson it is clarity that matters: 'I don't think form can be risky in itself.' He also believes, moreover, that 'risk is also writing with real feeling'. For Jones to write artfully with feeling and clarity about genuine 'characters' risked sentimentalizing them, a risk overcome by the momentum he generates in the telling.

³⁴ 'I think clarity is the way to go.' Don Paterson talks to Ahren Warner in *Poetry London*, Spring 2013

CHAPTER FOUR

Interior (1969): Towards New Islands

It was with *Interior* (1969) that Jones began to find metaphors and personae that might serve to carry and conceal his personal concerns, with the result that, in this collection, the representative speaker ceases to be suburban husband and father and becomes instead predominantly wife and mother. It was a volume much admired by Michael Longley, who believed that Jones was ‘now delving deeper into the no man’s land between his imagination and his circumstances’:

This involves three rewarding approaches. Firstly, he contemplates bravely his artistic ruthlessness and the darker areas of his own mind that are uncovered as a result. Secondly, he tries to isolate and so render archetypal and resonant the little ceremonies and rituals buried in the humdrum daily round and at the same time be true to the frightening biological simplicities they disguise, but also the merciful blurring they effect. Thirdly, he maps with a disquieting blend of fear and wonder feminine self-containment.¹

Interior is also a collection in which the sequence makes its first significant appearance as a formal device. It begins, however, with the domestic poet.

1. A Circuit Breaking

Jones’s is a record of social mobility, not into 60s’ coolness, but rather into beleaguered domesticity. There is more than enough in the early volumes to place Jones in the burgeoning social milieu described by Peter Bland as ‘post-war domestic man isolated from all the obvious signs of belonging’,² but the photographs on the back of the dust-jacket of *Interior*, Jones’s third collection in four years, coming only one year after *A Family Album*, seem an attempt to present family life in a happier light. These snaps of the poet, his wife, and their two young

¹ Michael Longley, ‘New Poetry’, *The Irish Times*, 11th October 1969.

² Peter Bland, *Poetry Review* (Summer 1989), op. cit.

children in a local park, attracted the attention of more than one reviewer.³ A landscape shot shows mother with daughter, father with son, sharing a joke as they walk past a park. It is an engaging study of a functional family. But the photographs above it, of the daughter on a swing being pushed first by father then by mother tell a rather more complex story. In the first of these, attention is focused on the daughter, who is pointing at something out of shot. Her parents' smiles are muted. In the second, neither looks at an apparently disgruntled daughter: mother looks right, father left, and neither is smiling. It is not, perhaps, the picture of familial bliss the poet may have hoped for. Rather, this last portrait in particular is more in tune with the unease that has always been evident in Jones's poems. P. J. Kavanagh was of a mind to complain:

On the back of his dust-jacket is a triptych photograph, the Jones family out for a walk; Mr Jones, pretty Mrs Jones, little Miss Jones. I am therefore embarrassed by first-person poems that begin – “In sleep I fondle my groin / dreaming your feel.”⁴ I mean to say! If he's going to be that frank he might leave Mrs Jones out of it – or not allow such photographs. (Come to that, if he's going to be frank why does he say “groin”? but let that pass.)⁵

This objection might be thought to point up a certain prurience in the reviewer, but Jones's poetry is often anxious about sex, and the apparent openness of his writing about his domestic life is, at times, circumscribed by such anxiety.

‘I Know She Sleeps’,⁶ the first poem in the collection, recreates an uncomfortable revelation for the poet, that he is wholly himself only when his wife and children are asleep upstairs. Once she has switched off the bedroom light, the poet acknowledges ‘a circuit breaking by which I am complete’. If she is presented as ‘a mind’ that ‘has suddenly ceased to prowl’, the children are also imagined as predators, sleeping ‘with the primal quick breast-heavings of / stoat or fox’. This last is not the only phrase to remind of Ted Hughes's ‘The Thought-Fox’⁷ (‘Till,

³ P. J. Kavanagh, *The Guardian*, 13th November 1969; Clive James, 'Adding up the detail', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20th November 1969.

⁴ ‘From the Frontier’, p.17. Kavanagh's argument is somewhat undermined by the poem's title and its placement after ‘Three Poems of a Frontier Guard’. It is dangerous to identify the speaker with the poet, although such identification is tempting. The frontier guard was, one presumes, an attempt by Jones to lend some distance to his own domestic situation.

⁵ P. J. Kavanagh, *op. cit.*

⁶ (I, 7)

⁷ Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain*, (Faber and Faber, 1957) p.14

with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox ... The page is printed'⁸), for later in the poem the words Jones is writing are 'scant / as bird-tracks in the snow—thin / hieroglyphs of presence, tokens of / a single skirmish in a hungry place'. In 'The Thought-Fox', the poet suffers an irruption into his life. Hughes 'had written nothing for a year or so'.⁹ The fox, therefore represents a creative force, something Hughes was, and remained, indebted to:

... every time I read the poem the fox comes up again out of the darkness and steps into my head. And I suppose that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time someone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out in the darkness and come walking towards them.¹⁰

By comparison, Jones's life as a poet is threatened by domesticity, even if he wishes this were not so. He 'would assert / public disgrace, and the primacy of love' but sees only 'the ink impress / a silent wilderness'. It is the lamp by which he works that 'holds what is left of light and warmth' while the words on the page are seen as 'tokens of / a single skirmish in a hungry place'. His unease is revealed, too, in the poem's balancing of abstraction and the particular—'primal quick breast-heavings', 'grotesque distance sucked close on a screen', 'hieroglyphs of presence'. It as if the irruptions in Jones's life are now asleep upstairs. He is not, as Hughes is, thinking of posterity. He is trying to write his way out of unease.

The poem might, indeed, be thought too grand and rhetorical for its own good, were it not saved by the way the sentences move. The two sentences of the opening stanza's first and last half-lines ('I know she sleeps ... // ... Their sheets are warm as leaves') frame and contribute to scene-setting information, presented as stage-directions in verse. The second stanza's opening repeats 'I know she sleeps', but, interestingly, what was a sentence now introduces a clause, 'for the silence comes / immediate', and the observation introduces the poet and his frame of mind, like Yeats in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. Jones seeks a similar sanctuary heard 'in the deep heart's core'. The stanza's second sentence runs over into the first line of the third stanza and introduces the 'adjacent falsehoods' and the 'grotesque distance' that characterise his domestic situation and the world in which he lives. Similarly

8 Ibid.

9 Ted Hughes, 'Capturing Animals' in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (ed. William Scammell) (Faber & Faber, 1994), p.14.

10 *Winter Pollen*, op. cit., p.15

the third stanza runs into the fourth where the opening ‘but’ contrasts what the poet ‘would’ do with what he has. The ‘single skirmish in a hungry place’ refers equally to his marriage and to his attempt at a poem. What had opened with simple assertion (‘I know she sleeps’) closes with a sentence of six-and-a-half lines, that, once into the final stanza, employs enjambed line-breaks that capture the poet’s unease (‘scant / as’; ‘thin / hieroglyphs’; ‘tokens of / a single skirmish’). Earlier line-breaks (with the exception of ‘breast-heavings of / stoat or fox’ which might be held to enact the children’s breathing) had scrupulously responded to units of sense.

‘Trinket Box’¹¹ begins with a reference to a child who, because asleep, similarly facilitates a moment of stillness, when a significance other than that of being a parent is possible. On this occasion, the speaker’s wife is nostalgically sifting through a ‘long-neglected’ jewellery box, but he is excluded from an absorption that ‘banishes’ him. Nevertheless, his gentle, tender tone staves off the opening poem’s unease, at least until the closing stanza, and even then projects the unease as hers. A bracelet she is fastening to her wrist has become ‘A memory lying cold against your flesh’.¹² The inference here is that it is not only the bracelet that is cold (but, in any event, ‘cold’ is his word not hers as far as we can tell). They may be man and wife, but they are separated by an unwanted unease. The poet may feel isolation but harbours no ill-feeling. The poem succeeds in the particularity with which ‘tarnished brooch’ and ‘Pale turquoise’ bracelet are handled, and in another comparison drawn from the animal world—though in this case the comparison is as tender as the movement it describes:

Over a tarnished brooch your fingers
 Isolate clasp and curve with touch
 So innocent, so wonderingly reserved,

 I think of how a foal, just dropped,
 Nudges, shivers from, nudges again,
 The sudden earth, its membranes
 Fresh, still focusing. You have
 No memory.

¹¹ (*I*, 13)

¹² cf. ‘O body, / aching with touch, its memory’ in ‘A Wife’s Tale’ 1 (*I*, 37). Of course, bracelet flesh and body also remind of Eliot’s famous borrowing (‘A bracelet of bright hair about the bone’ in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’) from John Donne’s ‘The Relic’.

But this image of primal innocence is short-lived, and memory returns at the end, to discover only loss.

The exclusion the poet feels is not always as benevolently expressed. In “February and Your Own Home”, Jones might be addressing himself, for everything seen appears to emanate from isolation in the ‘quietest of quiet places / where it always happens most terribly’. Spring gathers in the garden ‘out of your hands’, the carpet breathes ‘under its skin’ and the protagonist is left to ‘hug / the anguish’ that ‘suddenly defines’ him. The poem’s horizons broaden into seeing ‘nordic families cross the land . . . hunting promises’. It is something a protagonist ‘who valued ceremony / whose wife cries in the unused kitchen / whose children sleep in another country’ would understand. He is clearly trapped in an unsuccessful marriage, something the poet is prepared to acknowledge here by way of the displacement facilitated by a lyrical address to himself as ‘you’.

‘Preserving the Injured’, while ostensibly about the family cat, is also a poem about the poet and his home life. The family chooses to nurse the cat rather than have it put down, hoping it will feel at home among ‘old certainties’. We follow the cat’s resistance to rehabilitation:

But nothing. The cat sniffs,
and trembles, and remains stranger.
Home is suddenly where, out of the blue,
a scream enters the bone if you come too close.

That the poem may be a projection of existential terror is a reading encouraged by the bleakness of some of its lines, however compassionate they may be in relation to the cat.

‘On Holiday’ is more direct, startling even, with the matter-of-factness of its opening line: ‘Mistress mother tart wife’. What stands out here is ‘tart’, but the absence of commas shows that all four are anyway one and the same person. It would be insensitive, however, to suppose that any of these nouns are improper or intended to hurt: ‘mistress’ and ‘tart’ enjoy the excitement of risk that is inappropriate to the other more sober roles. The wife is therefore seen in all her guises or manifestations, whether ‘daft’ or ‘sexy’ or ‘brisk’. Yet diversity cannot overcome the separateness that he feels. Watching her ‘climb / and dwindle among

the timeless rocks’, he sees that what holds her ‘like a stone’ is ‘distance’. She has become for him, as Pater observed of the Mona Lisa, ‘older than the rocks among which she sits’.¹³ The reference to her ‘scanning the beach for kids’ recalls the earlier reference to her ‘scanning / Unchallenged space, where all the questions start’.¹⁴ Such images of isolation, separateness and distance proliferate in Jones’s verse; they are amongst its defining characteristics. They contribute to what Jones would recognize, in interview, as the ‘pain’ that inhabits his poetry.¹⁵

That domesticity strangles romantic yearning is elsewhere related to the writing of poetry, which is made possible only when the poet is ‘complete’. In ‘Captain Cook’s Charts’, a poem about Navy Day at Plymouth, it is the ships that ‘oppress’. They are ‘prosaic and deadly’. Inside, radar equipment is recognized as ‘the gear of certainty’ (which the poet lacks), but it is not the huge charts he finds himself drawn to. Rather, he is struck by ‘what look like signatures’ but turn out to be ‘hints of continents, broken shores, / fragments of tides’ that remind him of the ‘Bits of a broken / Purpose, a litter / of meaning scattered functioning into void’ he divined in ‘He Drives’.¹⁶ They are presumed to be Captain Cook’s because they are hand-drawn, but there is more to be found for:

casually in a corner
of an unnamed sea, scratched with a drying nib,
rides a sketchy ship, sailing towards those hazards.

Echoes of Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ and Yeats’s ‘Second Coming’ (and ‘Sailing to Byzantium’) confirm the poet’s preoccupations. Hazarding integrity and completion, making an attempt upon the world, and risking adventure are trapped inside domesticity.¹⁷ That they lie ‘casually in a corner’ means they and their significance might easily be missed.

The vulnerability and danger implicit in creative acts inform ‘Smugglers’ Route’ which may be read as a poem about smuggling poetry into the world: ‘The journey seems devious— / the route never declares its purpose’. Poetry is contraband. The

¹³ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Macmillan, London, 1893) pp.98/9

¹⁴ ‘Seeing My Wife Go Out Alone’, (*P*, 7)

¹⁵ (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.339

¹⁶ (*P*, 23)

¹⁷ Risking adventure here prefigures Horace’s concern for the more adventurous Vergil in *The Island Normal* (1980)

smuggler perfects economy, finds ‘the briefest way to safety’, to ‘the whispered sanctuary of the inn’. The smuggler’s life enjoys, in its telling, the glamour and picturesqueness of the adventure book, but is born of ‘fear and greed’:

The need was brutal that made such brevity.
A man was shot here. He plunged backwards, taking
a scream grown legendary, clutching still
as he hit the sea a cask he had smuggled from it.

Clutching the cask of poetry is a hazardous business. Assertions like ‘The need was brutal’ have served other contexts in Jones’s work. *Poems* includes ‘The Measure of the Need’,¹⁸ and the very notion of ‘need’ often appears fraught with danger: in the desire for fulfilment to be found in the first of the Lorca poems,¹⁹ for example, and in a woman’s fear of losing control and revealing the true purpose of her being at a party.²⁰ Apprehensions of danger in various guises inform other poems, too. In ‘She Makes Pastry’ (O God maintain / the precarious, teetering skill of my hands!) and ‘He Drives’ (‘menace stiff and chill / With unconcern’) it is evident in the registering of precariousness and menace. Danger informs any attempt made upon the world. One such attempt is poetry. Interestingly, it is knowledge that in Denise Levertov’s poem of the same name is ‘Contraband’.²¹

‘At the Sea’s Edge’²² is a poem that invites direct comparison with Larkin’s ‘To the Sea’,²³ which Jones’s poem would appear to pre-date.²⁴ Both poets are watchers, detached but drawn to what they witness. Larkin concentrates on duty:

It may be that through habit these do best,
Coming to water clumsily undressed
Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.

Jones is more concerned with the weakness of the body. He mercilessly catalogues ‘a bulging gut’, ‘thighs rippled in whiteness’, necks and groins that are ‘seared with the surgeon’s knife’ and his own ‘thin chest’. His ‘meagre men’:

¹⁸ (*P*, 11)

¹⁹ ‘Six Poems on Themes from Lorca’ (*I*, 30)

²⁰ ‘A Wife’s Tale’ (*I*, 42/3)

²¹ Denise Levertov, *Evening Train* (New Directions, 1992) p.112

²² (*I*, 12)

²³ Philip Larkin, *High Windows*, op. cit. p.9

²⁴ In his *Philip Larkin: A Bibliography 1933 – 1994* (Oak Knoll Press, New Castle, DE, 2002), Barry Bloomfield reveals that Larkin’s poem was written in October 1969, thus after Jones’s.

note a sail
rapt in distant haze, present a curve
flawless and timeless, and the sea and sky
softly define what never will be reached—
a final sweeping line, a stunned composure.

They exhibit the kind of spiritual yearning Lawrence identified in the Nottinghamshire miners who bought pianos they could not play. For them, a piano was not a piece of furniture, but a source of beauty to set against the ugliness of their lives.²⁵ Larkin's 'white steamer stuck in the afternoon' is simply 'further off'. Later in the poem it has gone. In Jones, the 'blue detachment' through which the yachts 'glide' is not only sea, it is also his existential situation; and it is not just a sail that is 'rapt in a distant haze', but the admiring 'meagre' observers. Like Lawrence's miners, they demonstrate, without quite fulfilling, the brute need of the poet to risk everything. What people want, Lawrence claims, is the transcendence of art. So does Jones, although his people cling to 'a narrow safety'.

It is worth commenting on the *kind* of detachment exhibited by the two poets. Larkin's is ruefully surprised that the Englishness he describes is 'still going on'. Jones regards himself as one of those he observes ('we parade our imperfections') even if he fails to connect. He will stay true to this association with those he describes, as is evident in many of the poems in *Freeborn John* (1990), most particularly in 'A View from Stansted', where the proponents of Thatcher's Britain 'are coming / home to us down the inevitable lanes / to claim their birthright and to wear our face'.²⁶ Jones's 'us' and 'our' are set against an appropriating 'their'. His people are also more closely realised than Larkin's. Their 'imperfections' are described (the men who thrust out 'a bulging gut', the mother of three whose stomach 'sags / incapable of emptiness'). Larkin's poem generalises those he observes into young and old. The distance he maintains is part of his poem's polish, its mid-sentence rhymes so unobtrusive one scarcely notices them. Jones's poem, in taking in a broader picture than he usually describes, is less aesthetically finished. There are, perhaps, too many *wheres*, for example, and there are times (for example, 'bulging gut') when compassion threatens to spill over into distaste (an accusation often levelled against Larkin, too), but there is a nervous tension in Jones's account

²⁵ D. H. Lawrence, 'Nottingham and the Mining Country', op. cit.

²⁶ (*FJ*, 13)

of those who have ‘lived, / crumpled, endured’ that reaches a climax (the ‘meagre men’ rapt before the ‘flawless and timeless’ sea) before being organized into the awed assurance of the ending’s ‘stunned composure’. Edginess in Larkin is always subsumed by the consummate skill of the shaping poet. Jones’s can spin close to panic.

‘Death of a Cultured Golfing Motorist’²⁷ finds Jones responding to the demise of someone he didn’t know, whose death he learned about through hearsay. The epigraph quotes a witness at the inquest into the man’s death, and it is this quotation that generates the poem. This is the first time in Jones’s work thus far that he appears to have taken his subject from outside his own immediate experience. Jones imagines the events leading up to the man’s death. The man is at ease with the world and his place in it. He is returning from a successful round of golf (‘The greens played like a dream’) and is at the wheel of a car he can hear ‘croon like advertisement’. Everything in his life is ‘Perfect. Perfect’. The next time he looks in his mirror however, he sees ‘tomorrow make its move’, an altogether different kind of perfection. But this is not a solemn poem; the tone is gently ironic rather than satirical. Even the middle-classes can be caught out by death; they, too, must beware of self-satisfaction. Jones, locked into a domesticity that, if sustained, will draw him relentlessly closer to the cultured golfer, is nevertheless more distant from this driver and his world than he is from the sagging stomachs and bulging guts he observed on the beach. At least, his background renders him more distant. The poem also reveals a discomfort with the place of art in the world. The violin music, with its reference to Klee, is at home in the golfer’s world. It has become part of a *culture* that banishes the likes of this poet. Art here has ceased to be contraband; it has been commandeered as an adornment of the perfect middle-class life.

The ironic tone induces a smile from the reader, and Jones is good at humour. *Poems* had included ‘Stripping Walls’²⁸ and ‘A Vision of the End from Margate Sands’.²⁹ *Interior* largely eschews the surrealism of these two earlier poems, but he can still laugh at his own expense. ‘In A University Library’ finds him affecting a

²⁷ (*I*, 21)

²⁸ (*P*, 42)

²⁹ (*P*, 44-6)

yearning for the academic life of the scholar. He does not dwell on what is implied, namely that a university library is yet another location in which he feels uneasy. The books themselves become the focus for his yearning:

I yearn most for the scholar's horn-rimmed stoop
over books so winnowed of flesh, so parched,
that words are precise as maiden aunts, a
bony geometry imposed on doubt.

And yet, this is a description of his Aunt Em, too, the woman Jones took refuge with when he came down temporarily from Cambridge. The solace he sought in her is the solace he here seeks in books. We know that, despite his claiming to have passed them 'without a second glance', he is distracted by the 'gentle faces and lyric hair' of girls, because, finally, at the table with his book his 'blood runs loutish / as sunlight strokes the pages where they swell / in sumptuous buttocky mounds from the shadowed spine'. 'In a University Library' is a poem admired by the poet and critic, Michael Cayley:

On the whole [Jones] avoids the intellectual posturing by which some Movement poems express a complex of viewpoints, and his speakers are not detached observers but involve themselves in the situations they describe. Jones is certainly capable of the sort of 'cleverness' associated with the Movement, as 'In a University Library' shows. Here lines like

So here I am, game for another try.
Across hushed floors I follow appropriate rules—
check catalogues, use cards, go straight to a shelf,
extract one book with unambiguous hand . . .

might be by Larkin, especially the first line with its wry use of the slang word 'game'. But the subject of the poem—that the pages of the books, which should contain words

precise as maiden aunts, a
bony geometry imposed on doubt
swell 'in sumptuous buttocky mounds' in the sunlight, reasserting the sensual instead of providing the expected escape into the intellectual—is typical Jones.³⁰

'At the Zoo' thrills with the kind of highly visual imagery that would later characterise the Martian school of poets.³¹ In the parrot house, 'A cockatoo / froths pink against the cage'; in the monkey house, 'The gibbons / swoop through their scallop rhythms / on pipecleaner arms'³². Such examples of what Cayley calls 'sheer energy of imagination'³³ show Jones enjoying himself, but he is still siding

³⁰ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit. pp. 99/100

³¹ The most notable of whom, perhaps, were Craig Raine and Christopher Reid.

with the outsider. Looking at the 'ten-a-penny' yellow-white cockatoo, 'We sympathize. They know as well as us / beauty's a freak, and always wins the nut'. Similarly, when the chimps 'scrape / their human knuckles', we 'feel them bleed'. But private fears get the better of us:

But when
a comic demon from a gothic dream
hurtles against the bars, chatters
or shrieks through grotesque lips

its urgent, private language, then
we mock the gibberish, recoil and laugh,
remote in lonely customs, each
expecting only what he knows of grief.

In the final section, Chi-Chi is remembered as 'the panda that wouldn't be shagged', and we are invited to marvel at her resistance:

Here we stand, in our twosomes threesomes foursomes,
wondering how she dared, and how she can
in public view, in this gorgeous spinster's apartment,
sprawl with such brazen ease in the sensual sun.

The tone and the diction may make us laugh, but the continuity of theme of resistance is clear. Chi-Chi is a more 'brazen' version of Aunt Em. Chi-Chi is Freeborn John.

2. Sequences on Japanese Themes

a. From the Frontier

One significant dimension of *Interior* is Jones's development of the sequence. In addition to the three poems that comprise 'At the Zoo', the collection has six

³² cf. Craig Raine's 'Wasps with Donald McGill bathing suits / were learning to swim in my cider glass' ('Facts of Life' from *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1979), p.40); or Christopher Reid's 'Pity the poor weightlifter / alone on his catasta, // who carries his pregnant belly / in the hammock of his leotard' ('Baldanders' from *Arcadia*, (Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 22.

³³ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit., p.101

sequences, including 'Three Poems of a Frontier Guard'; 'A Girl's Words: a sequence on Japanese themes'; and 'Six Poems on Themes from Lorca'.³⁴

The first two of these derive from Japanese themes. Jones had been reading *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*,³⁵ and grew fascinated by its recurrent concerns, identified by Anthony Thwaite in his introduction to the anthology:

Over the ages and in the various themes of the poet, the characteristic of much of Japanese poetry is its gentle melancholy; unrequited or fading love, the sad lessons of transience which nature teaches us, the quiet pleasures of solitude, all these can be found in the poems of the first anthology of the eighth century A.D. and in the most recent slim volume. Yet at these two extremes of time, one can find other and more urgent things, equally representative of the complex Japanese personality: the tough stoicism of some of the frontier guards' poems; Ōtomo Yakamochi's squib *Making fun of a thin man* (also from the eighth century);³⁶ the violence and sensuality and satirical edge of much modern work.

In interview, Jones made much of his having lived on what he called 'faultlines', educational, professional, domestic, social and poetic.³⁷ It is clear that he felt drawn to the Japanese frontier guards for just this reason. The principal difference between Jones's poems and those of his Japanese models derives from the more expansive English tradition. Traditional Japanese forms are notable for their 'ellipsis, brevity and pregnancy', their distrust of the 'brash and too well defined', of 'out and out statements and forthright outbursts' that have replaced 'gentle hint and muted suggestion'.³⁸ Jones's poems are longer and more detailed narratives, though they do retain a measure of ellipsis and pregnancy. Similarly, while they often progress by way of statements, these statements are never brash or forthright, and there is still work for the reader to do.

³⁴ The sequence has been an important feature of Brian Jones's poetry from the outset. His first collection, *Poems*, is the only one without a sequence, though even there, the Aunt Emily poems would ultimately be relocated in *A Family Album*, an extended series of inter-related monologues. Also in *Poems*, 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' (in four sections) and 'Two Preludes' ('She Makes Pastry' / 'He Drives') point towards what would become for Jones a favoured format.

³⁵ Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite (trs.), *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1964).

³⁶ *Idem.*, p. 65

³⁷ (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.329

³⁸ Bownas and Thwaite, *op. cit.*, p. xxxix

The first two of the ‘Three Poems of a Frontier Guard’³⁹ take the form of dramatic monologues spoken by the guard. In the first, he anticipates being called for duty and having to leave his wife for the border; in the second, he is absorbed in carrying out his duties.⁴⁰ The very first line of the first poem introduces a rhetorical trope (‘No room is free from it’) that will be repeated in part across a line break (‘no room / is free’) half way through the poem. What ‘it’ refers to is a nagging reminder, not only of his persistent unease, but also of the ‘distance-muted trumpet’ (heard presumably from the window he rises to, sobbing) that repeatedly ‘nags, nags’ because it is the voice of a vocation calling him to where he *wishes* to be. It is a reminder that replaces the usual domestic rituals. He knows that he ‘must leave to be the last eyes of the known’.⁴¹ In the second poem, he has become ‘an eye that the least flicker astounds’. The language that in the first poem had not always escaped from the poet’s residual anxiety about sex (‘draw her loins down to me / under the open-eyed and legal lamp’) here describes the finely-tuned enforced alertness of his new-found frame of mind. He has an urgent purpose:

I am a lethal hand that will punish a breeze
I am a most delicate hairspring instrument,
A needle poised, moving when danger moves.

He was never so alert at home, ‘Not under your hands, not under your wandering mouth’. Out here, on the faultline, he shivers ‘to sense / The merest threat of touch, the stray twig’s reach / Towards the nerve’. At the same time, this is an environment in which ‘every bush is fixed / In unambiguous gestures’, and he is conscious that ‘[S]omething is choosing me, etching my shape / Against the unfocused world. It waits to kill’. This language is more alarmed and extreme than any that appears in the Bownas and Thwaite anthology. Their selection of poems concentrates on the sadness of parting:

The dreadful order
I have received.
From tomorrow
With the grass I sleep,
No wife being with me. [by Mononobe Akimochi]⁴²

³⁹ (*I*, 14-16)

⁴⁰ Cf. ‘I Know She Sleeps’, p.7, which finds its speaker ‘complete’ because separated from his wife and children who are asleep upstairs. Domestic duties are held in abeyance.

⁴¹ The ‘plot’ of this first frontier guard poem (‘I must leave to be the last eyes of the known’) has much in common with that of Dino Buzzati’s 1940 novel, *The Tartar Steppe*. (Secker & Warburg, 1952), translated by Stuart Hood.

⁴² Bownas and Thwaite (trs.), op. cit., p. 54

While the leaves of the bamboo rustle
On a cold and frosty night,
The seven layers of clobber I wear
Are not so warm, not so warm
As the body of my wife. [by a guard]⁴³

Jones's is a language that owes more to Edward Thomas than the Japanese. He has said of Thomas: 'It's significant that he started to write poetry when he was a soldier willing and ready to die. When all the decisions and greynesses were swept away and life was painful and clear and simple, then the poetry was permitted to come out'.⁴⁴ When Jones talks about the earlier poet 'just triumphing over the 'poetic'' and about being able 'to feel the tremors in the poetry', he might also be talking about his own frontier guard poems.⁴⁵ This is the poetry made possible by someone on the edge, geographically and psychologically, when emotion has taken the place of ideas.

The final poem in the sequence carries its own title, 'The Two Voices', and the two parts represent a personality split by the situation it finds itself in, the one voice urging him to be satisfied with what he has achieved, the other urging him to move on. One is the voice of caution, the other the voice of risk.⁴⁶ Cayley is interesting on this dichotomy:

. . . the frontier guard splits himself into two voices like the two angels of Marlowe's *Faustus*. One urges him to be content with what he has done: already he has 'encroached beyond the possible, / Extended power, raped knowledge' (the word 'raped' brings to mind the cost in human terms of his achievement), and the forest ahead will not yield even if he does attempt to invade it—the foragers he sends out will only 'struggle back at last / With footling information'. The other voice, the one which closes the poem, orders him to move out of the settlement he has created since he 'cannot rest where walls take root / And wrinkle with frost and sun'.⁴⁷

However, like the guard he dramatizes, Jones has always feared the searchlights guarding civilisation more than the shadows where eventually an enemy will etch

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ (*IC-PNR*) p.53

⁴⁵ Brian Jones, quoted in Anne Harvey (compiler). *Elected Friends: Poems for and about Edward Thomas*, op. cit., p.120.

⁴⁶ Jones will return to this dichotomy in *The Island Normal* (1980). See, for example, 'Horace Bids Farewell to Vergil', pp.67-8, the opening poem of 'Aeneas and After'.

⁴⁷ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit., p. 102

his 'shape / Against an unfocused world' in death'.⁴⁸ This is, once again, the voice of the artist's brute need to risk everything. It is a voice that Jones would listen to.

The sequence is followed immediately by the single poem 'From the Frontier'. We are back with the poet, but juxtaposition identifies him with the frontier guard who has been speaking to us. This is the opening P. J. Kavanagh objected to. He, too, notices the sexual reserve that allows locutions like 'groin' and 'membrane' into an apparent attempt to lay bare the sexual adrenalin that follows parting. But what persists is not so much libido as 'another lust', one that we now recognize as the second of 'The Two Voices'. In the wasteland's distant trees he discerns 'uneasy memories':

This is the territory
all fear to reach—a zone like old age
where place and flesh
fade out of substance into glimpse and taunt.
Just short of forgotten, the familiar halts.

The Audenesque ending of the first voice ('And where you have found forest, dream a city') and the imperative with which the second voice concludes ('Move out') are, perhaps synthesized in 'From the Frontier' ('This is the territory / all fear to reach').⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ That Jones becomes increasingly interested in history as a source of poetry is another reason to invoke Auden here. John Lucas, in his *Modern English Poetry: Hardy to Hughes* (Batsford, 1985), writes: 'It is *history* which is Auden's concern, that sense of being caught up in a process. I suppose this is why he makes so much of being on the frontier or on a border'. Lucas draws in particular from 'Dover' and 'Look, Stranger', both set where land and sea meet. In 'Voltaire at Ferney', the French historian and philosopher is described as being 'like a sentinel', a guard who 'cannot sleep'. In all three poems, Auden 'dramatizes his awareness of being between two states' and this sense of liminality features strongly in Jones, most particularly, perhaps, in 'Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge' (*TIN*, 89-91). All of this will lead to Jones's 'From Voltaire's Garden and Other Entanglements' (*NS*, 221-232)

b. 'A Girl's Words'

'A Girl's Words'⁵⁰ carries the subtitle 'a sequence on Japanese themes'. When this short sequence first appeared in *London Magazine*,⁵¹ the subtitle read 'Six fragments from the Japanese', suggesting that Jones was engaged in constructing versions of existing poems or part-poems, much as he was to do in 'Six Poems on Themes from Lorca'. It is possible to identify the specific Lorca poems on which he was working, but correspondences of this kind are much less clear in the case of 'A Girl's Words'. The Japanese tone is altogether more accepting of fate and less assertive than that of Jones's girl. She speaks, unsurprisingly, in a modern voice, idiomatic, colloquial. Her sorrowful pleas are couched in a language that harbours stubborn resistance. She is even at times brazen, and certainly so by comparison with her Japanese forebears.

Jones's poem is in six sections in which an abandoned seventeen year old lover contemplates her situation.⁵² In the first section, she has been used. 'For him, it was a night well-spent'. She is left to 'haunt the docks / pestered by sailors'⁵³, to see only 'how quick a ship can vanish, / how fog can tumble upon a bay and heart'. These lines rehearse traditional Japanese themes:

In the autumn field,
Over the rice ears,
The morning mist trails,
Vanishing somewhere . . .
Can my love fade too?
[by Empress Iwa No Hime]⁵⁴

In the second section, she has been made 'shameless. She sees 'swagger', his 'strutting return'⁵⁵ in the sailors she accosts in the street, but he does not return. In

⁵⁰ (*I*, 24-25)

⁵¹ *London Magazine*, Vol. 7 No. 4, June 1967

⁵² 'A Girl's Words' prefigures, perhaps, Jones's later, uncollected prose poem in four sections, which appears to have been loosely based on Marguerite Duras's life and on her novel, *The Lover* (tr. Barbara Bray, Flamingo, 1986). It is one of several poems on writers and artists who had a connection with the area of Normandy in which Jones settled with his second wife. 'No Season to Speak' appeared in *P.N.Review* 137 Vol.27 No.3 (January-February 2001)

⁵³ cf. 'On the road to the Palace - / Palace basking in the sun - / Men walk in their crowds. / But the man for whom I long / Is one and one alone'—Hitomaro Kashū, in *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, op. cit., p. 29

⁵⁴ *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, op. cit., p. 7

⁵⁵ cf. 'Silver clasp / On his sword / Slung proudly at his thigh, / As he swaggers down / The broad walks of Nara: / Who might he be?—Kagura, in *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, op. cit., p. 88

the third section, she recalls their nights of passion, but can only torture her pillow with her nails, where once she ‘seared his back, his back sweet with my tears’.⁵⁶ (The protagonist in 'A Wife's Tale' sees her fingers on her lover's back 'anxious with pleasure'.)

But she is not deterred. In the fourth section, she declares she will come to him; he will see ‘a shadow / flitting among the willows’⁵⁷. In the fifth section, they will be ‘reckless’; she will risk the world’s wrath. Reunited with him, she will tease her lover (‘Gently, love, gently! / My father prizes me like a fragile vase’), and will not heed her father’s warnings: ‘I can learn / to groom my hair in cunning coils and waves’. Such an outburst would not be approved of by traditional Japanese poets, or in the society of which they were a part. In the sixth section, she returns to the reality of her situation. The modern girl’s judgement on men is the result of experience:

the best are wanderers; their hearts are ships
that launch them into fog, towards new islands.

The poem and the sequence therefore end on a note of revelation that echoes the poignancy of traditional Japanese imagery, but combines it with the hard-edged realism of the modern mind.

3. 'Six Poems On Themes From Lorca'⁵⁸

It is productive to consider the six poems, not only as ‘original’ poems in their own right, but also as responses to the Lorcan themes on which they are based. In fact, the themes may be traced to six specific source poems. The vehicles for these themes are an unidentified young woman seeking fulfilment; an isolated and barren orange tree; the colour green presented as an emblem of life; an unfaithful wife; a woman whose practice of the art of embroidery contends with an active but consciously repressed sexuality; and a young girl whose innocent playfulness

⁵⁶ cf. ‘When my love becomes / All-powerful, / I turn inside out / My garments of the night, / Night dark as leopard-flower’—Ono Komachi, in *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, op. cit., p. 85

⁵⁷ cf. ‘Overtaken by the dark, / The shade beneath a tree / I make my inn; / And tonight my host / Shall be a flower—Taira Tadanori, in *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*, op. cit., p. 99

⁵⁸ (*I*, 30-35)

unsettles an onlooker (whom one assumes to be an older male). Such emphases on isolation, separation and sexual frustration contribute to the over-arching theme of desire, the repressed struggle for fulfilment in the face of convention. It is a theme already evident in Jones's earlier work.⁵⁹

The first poem concerns an unidentified 'she' who is driven to go in search of more. The poem opens at the break of day when cock-crow 'scrapes like a blade of light against the darkness'. This suggestion of violence is strengthened by 'her naked shoulders' being likened to 'a smouldering metal' as they 'glow on the ice-white linen'. For her, 'the spell is already broken', though quite what spell is unclear: the spell of adulthood, of sex, of marriage? 'Already' begins successive stanzas: 'Already she moves among us' without appearing to reveal what it is that she seeks. 'Already she stands / remote' from her husband's (or her lover's) bed, with 'lust in her loins / dried like his last night's seed'. The community attempts to manage her, to console her, to reason with her. They point out that what lies beyond the village is death in the form of the sea 'where to journey is to drown'. They know the dangers of experience. A voice she knows, presumably her mother's, urges her to wash and to braid her hair 'against insanity'. As with all of the poems in this sequence, the situation remains unresolved, as if the poems themselves are an enactment of the unfulfilled desire they describe. In the mind of the unidentified woman, life must have more to offer, but the seeking of more is so fraught with danger that friends and family fear on her behalf—though such warnings are not enough, it seems, to divert her from her goal.

In Jones's own life, the struggle against impending breakdown informed his time at Cambridge. It informed, too, the character of David in *A Family Album*. Sexual frustration, the result of a similarly inchoate and, one supposes, innocent (if not ignorant) and wholly discouraged desire, is an important contributory factor to the tension inherent in many of Jones's domestic poems on married and family life. But

⁵⁹ The six source poems are as follows: 1. 'Romance de la pena negra' ('Ballad of the Black Sorrow'): *Primer Romancero Gitano* No. 7; 2. 'Cancion del naranjo seco' ('Song of the Withered / Dead Orange-tree'): *Canciones* 1921-1924; 3. 'Romance sonambulo' ('Somnambular / Sleepwalking Ballad'): *Primer Romancero Gitano* No. 4; 4. 'La casada infiel' ('The Faithless Wife'): *Primer Romancero Gitano* No. 6; 5. 'La monja gitana' ('The Gypsy Nun'): *Primer Romancero Gitano* No. 5; 6. 'Preciosa y el aire' ('Preciosa and the Wind'): *Primer Romancero Gitano* No. 2. Brian Jones's most likely source for Lorca's poems was: Rolfe Humphries (translator), *The Gypsy Ballads of Gabriel Lorca* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington IL, 1953, 3rd edition 1963). J. L. Gili's bilingual edition (*Lorca*, Penguin, 1967) did not include the sixth poem.

Jones's struggle with sex and sexuality is less bold than that of the woman in his poem, and less bold still than that of the woman in Lorca's poem, which we will come to later. It reveals itself in the perhaps unwitting politeness of his sexual imagery: 'loins', for example, being similar to the 'groins' of 'To a Wife Gone Away'.⁶⁰ What is more convincing as an enactment of the woman's state of mind is the repetition of 'seeking', as the end-word in the first two lines of the third stanza; and the imagistic phrase 'huge plains of daylight' sandwiched by the repeated 'seeking', is characteristic of Jones's ability to surprise. Here 'daylight' serves almost as an abstraction, the grounded 'plains' failing to control the infinity of all that exists beyond them, of all that is desired.

There is also a hint of melancholy in the poem's unresolved conclusion, a melancholy which informs the second poem in the sequence. An orange-tree (commonly found in Lorca's Andalusia, but rare enough in England to render its inclusion in Jones's poem the more arbitrary) 'has been an age dead'. Once, it was fertile ('when times were legendary'), bearing fruit 'wild and free as the blood of gods', but now it 'echoes in green corridors' of healthier trees. It is without purpose and cannot, apparently, even look forward to a 'tender axe' to free it into death. It has become 'wholly outcry', a phrase that recalls Hughes's 'stones cry out under the horizons' ('Wind')⁶¹ and 'over the roofs go his eyes and outcry' ('Esther's Tomcat').⁶² The orange-tree is associated with the girl of the first poem by way of juxtaposition. Certainly she does not want to echo in the corridors of normality. She hankers after the kind of green that fills the third poem where it represents all that is vital and sexually alive. It is 'boisterous', 'soft-tongued and eager'. It 'sprawls', 'gallivants' and 'fumbles'. It drenches the air which in turn 'billows across the garden / too vast for the garden alone'. Importantly, it spreads through lives the poem's speaker cannot see, 'over the plains'. Distance contrasts with rootedness, life with death. But this glimpse of expansive freedom is checked in stanza 3 ('Death is protean also'), which returns us to the 'famished tree' of the previous poem.

If the speaker of the third poem is revealed only momentarily (with reference to what cannot be seen), the fourth poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue,

⁶⁰ (P, 10)

⁶¹ Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain*, op. cit., p.40

⁶² Ted Hughes, *Lupercal*, (Faber and Faber, 1960), p.23

spoken by an unfaithful wife who appears to be not only excusing her own infidelity in terms of reawakened desire ('it was the body / trembling again, a sudden flow of memory'), but also exonerating her lover because she told him she was unmarried. She feels 'the cold shock of the world, the living / grass against [her] limbs'. The act takes place in the [orange-] grove and is particularized by being described by an individual speaker, but the vastness of 'plains of daylight' and green-drenched air are echoed in the 'huge' and 'lavish' imagery of the final stanza:

And then his body
reared up between me and the sky, killed
the moon, obliterated stars,
descended huge upon me, lavish
and tender, because I was unmarried.

The delay of the word 'tender', facilitated by the line-break, frees the lover from any suggestion of his having forced himself upon her, while the moon and stars and the infinity of sky conspire to deliver the climaxes of both poem and sexual union. By telling him she is unmarried, she is granting him sexual permission (a speech act that generates its own frisson: 'To lie to him was voluptuous'). It also suggests a belief that this kind of sex is not to be had in marriage.

Such dangerous abandonment to a moment of ecstasy (one of the possible outcomes of the desire redolent in the opening poem's young woman) is now balanced by the repressed sexuality of the woman who embroiders. The poem's formal arrangement of lines into lozenge shapes such as one might find in mosaics or, indeed, embroidered patterns, mirrors the woman's activity and her expertise. The obsessive intensity with which she plies her skill is captured in the poem's imagery of violent constraint. The sun is 'clamped like a golden beast / in the steel teeth of the sky', flowers 'stand fixed in fullness' and the lime is 'stunned'. The word 'fold' appears five times as she concentrates on minute details to suggest the imprisonment of repetition. The pain of her repressed sexuality and seriousness grows more and more apparent—in the fold 'stained minutely crimson / veined meagre green', the first-word rhyme intensifying the repetition; and in the 'rigid flowers' that 'fill the / same fold falling from / the chained hand like / one cry'. There is poignancy in the contrast between the tenderness of the previous poem's passion and the violence here implied in the protagonist's submission to the demands of celibacy. The closing 'cry', of course, creates a link with the second

poem's 'outcry'. For the woman here, however, embroidery is an act of containment and displacement.

In the sixth and final poem, the point-of-view switches to that of an observer, presumably that of an older male witnessing and being unsettled by the innocent and joyful abandon of a young girl out in a strong wind. Displacement is evident here, too: the wind 'moans / like a man in love among the rocks' when one imagines it to be the man who 'moans' in reality. The girl 'scurfs her hair back into braids', an action that relates her to the young woman in the first poem. But this observer is being spoken to by the poem's speaker ('Do you see her?')—the girl is at two removes. This distancing effect lends weight to the poem's, and the sequence's, closing image:

And that is the very wind
that howls in fury at your windows, snaps
mouthfuls of tiles, and will not let you speak.

The violence of the wind threatens to unleash a similar violence in the observer. This is a repression that forbids even speech, that is like the 'smouldering metal' that earlier described the young woman's naked shoulders glowing on 'the ice-white linen'. It extends to men as well as women.

The desire searching for expression in the opening poem may lead, metaphorically to death by drowning or to the purposelessness of the 'random' fruitless orange-tree. It recognises the vitality of life, even if death 'is protean also'; it may lead inexorably and triumphantly to infidelity, or to an enforced but precarious displacement. Nevertheless, it is a desire that always threatens to express itself. The final poem, however, adds a further dimension in that it asks questions of the sequence's presiding voice, that of the poet. The sexual unease that finds expression, however guardedly, elsewhere in Jones's work here points to a passion he would scarcely allow in his more personal poems. But the desire that informs the six poems under consideration is also a metaphor for the poet's own experience of repressed emotion, the sense of isolation and separation generated (or at least exacerbated) by his education.

4. *Interior*

Michael Longley commented in a review of *Interior* how apposite the title was, and, as we have seen, commended Jones for managing to map ‘with a disquieting blend of fear and wonder feminine self-containment’.⁶³ Jones had undergone a course of Jungian therapy⁶⁴ which suggests his strategy of using a number of women speakers may have been a response to the Jungian concept of the anima, the archetype symbolizing the unconscious female component of the male psyche.⁶⁵ What is particularly pertinent here, perhaps, is the opportunity the female voice afforded Jones to address his own anxieties. The women of these sequences display the kind of yearning that characterised Jones’s troubled journey through adolescence and his time at Cambridge. Such anxieties were carefully controlled in *Poems* and were contained within the unitary stanza-form of the extended narrative of *A Family Album*. The blurb accompanying *Interior* is accurate in describing the new collection as ‘more varied in scope than its predecessors’ in ‘mixing the domestic and the uneasy in disconcerting manner’. Adopting female personae was one of the ways, perhaps the most significant way, of broadening the scope of his poetry to take account of his feeling trapped by domestic life, of feeling that there were areas of experience and feeling that he was himself suppressing. The female personae granted him the distance necessary for personal anxieties to be explored without drawing attention to their autobiographical roots.

The collection ends with the title-poem, which is also concerned with the female experience, this time the housewife who inhabits a painting by the seventeenth-

⁶³ Michael Longley, ‘New poetry’, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Revealed during a conversation between the poet and Paul McLoughlin, 2nd August 2000

⁶⁵ Jung’s notion of ‘individuation’ or ‘differentiation’ was also important to Jones for he thought it enables us to re-engage with important parts of ourselves that we may have lost touch with as a result of the socializing process through which we learn to exercise that self-control which civilized society appears to deem essential. Aunt Emily and the young woman in David Mercer’s *In Two Minds* exemplify those who cannot inculcate in themselves the behavioural traits that such self-control would encourage. Liardet, in ‘The Courtenay Play’, in *For Mad Mary* (1974), believed that it was the role of education to promote this self-control. Liardet, the government lawyer sent to report back on the eighteenth-century agricultural uprising in Kent, concluded that the unlettered need education for this very reason. He said: ‘I wish men good, you see, and I know what good is— / freedom from wild and personal dreams / that lead to bloodshed or to unquiet nights’.

century Dutch painter, Pieter de Hooch.⁶⁶ The poem explores her domestic situation. Peter Sutton has summarised the importance of family life in Holland at this time, noting that Dutch artists, including de Hooch, grew increasingly preoccupied with domestic themes that clearly reflected the ‘emerging social ideals about the family and the roles of women’:⁶⁷

[T]he extended family of the Middle Ages was gradually replaced by the nuclear family, especially in wealthy countries like the Netherlands. The Dutch celebrated the family as the primary social unit and regarded domestic virtue and order as the highest social priority.

Sutton also reminds us that:

There followed in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a flood of domestic conduct books. Without question the most influential of these family books in the Netherlands was *Houwelyck* (1625) by Jacob Cats, the Pensionary of Holland and the country’s most popular poet and moralist . . . He stresses that the wife’s “domain is in the kitchen”, inventorying her responsibilities there, including the linen, laundry, marketing, the supervision of the maids and their preparation of the meals, as well as child-rearing . . . Foreign observers rarely failed to mention the premium that the Dutch placed on a woman’s domestic skills and the cleanliness of their homes and streets.⁶⁸

Jones’s anxieties about being trapped in the ritual life of domesticity clearly make such a woman of interest. As do notions of guilt that emerge more clearly in some of his other women, perhaps (as in the Lorca sequence or ‘A Wife’s Tale’, for example, both of which involve adultery). Oddly, however, hers (unlike those of women in the Lorcan sequence or ‘A Wife’s Tale’) is a world of certainties. The corner she sits in is hers. All the details of the room are just so; ‘the footstool, the low nursing-chair, / the favoured drying herbs’. Around her is ‘the orbit / of wholesome dignities—a towel / casually eternal on a chair, earthenware pots, sun-contented’ (as indeed is she, one supposes, with the light flooding in through a window). It adds up to ‘a harmony whose elements / are the fears and glories of extended love’. Nevertheless, the poem concludes with a more ambiguous image:

⁶⁶ Jones tells me that, although he cannot now recall which one, he was thinking of a particular painting. The closest I have yet managed to find, in terms of the painting’s details, which the poem lists, is *Woman Nursing an Infant with a Child and a Dog* c 1658-60 (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Palace of the Legion of Honor). There are, however, no ‘drying herbs’ in this picture, and the towel is draped over a shallow cupboard, not ‘on a chair’. No other painting I have managed to view, however, includes as many of the poem’s details as this one does.

⁶⁷ Peter Sutton, *Pieter de Hooch*, Dulwich Picture Gallery, Wadsworth Atheneum, in association with Yale University Press, 1998

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 68 & 70

above her humdrum pose is set
a crystal vase, singing with light,
a persisting unsoiled splendour; and by
the window, where the spacious Dutch day beats,
a linnet, in a simply-fashioned cage.

Fears and glories are paradoxical bedfellows, perhaps, but while the caged bird might be thought to be for Jones a defining image of entrapment, it might also have carried an altogether different symbolism. Sutton acknowledges that:

In the painting in San Francisco, the tiny bird in its cage on the wall above the nursing mother might be just another household pet but also could recall, in its context, an emblem by Cats of a birdcage with the motto “Bly door slaverny” (Joy through Slavery); the appended verses celebrate chaste love and the pleasures that the confinements of marriage bring to those it enslaves.⁶⁹

Thus the harmony Jones describes is delicately poised. It may be that he is attempting to see the world through the eyes of his wife.⁷⁰ It is a generous poem that celebrates the ‘wholesome dignities of married life’.

Interior is a collection clearly organized around two areas of interest: first, the female voice replacing the male in an attempt to deflect critical attention away from autobiographical material and, at the same time, to extend the poet’s range; and, second, the development of Jones’s deployment of the poetic sequence. Though his next volume is a more eclectic affair, the contents page has only five entries. One of these refers to the title-sequence, ‘For Mad Mary’; another is ‘The Courtenay Play’ (an ambitious poem about a play, and a work that represents Jones’s first schematic use of historical sources). The other three are more properly groups of more or less related poems under umbrella headings. Together they provide further evidence of the poet’s desire to diversify.

⁶⁹ Peter Sutton, op. cit., p. 74

⁷⁰ Jones told me on 2nd August 2000 that he was invited, on the strength of *Interior*, to appear in a *Man Alive* television programme, in which he was to represent the female perspective. The programme, chaired by Desmond Wilcox, was not, for Jones, a happy affair. As he says, would anyone now invite a man to represent a woman’s point-of-view? But it is of interest, given the book’s preoccupations, that he *was* invited to do just this.

CHAPTER FIVE

For Mad Mary (1974): The Possibilities of Glory

1. 'At Varykino'

The opening poems in *For Mad Mary* (1974) suggest continuity with *Interior* in attempting to find consolation in domestic life, to see goodness in his marriage beyond the pain of incompatibility. In 'Gardening Sunday', for example, a wife is observed: 'This could be a young girl—such absorption, // and the lifted forearm plumped' (p.9). He concludes:

Now she tucks up like a girl
on the kitchen step, gathering on her hair

the dwindling lustre of this Sunday
while I wash hands and make the tea for her.

The jars stand full of fruit. People spend
their fifty years going no farther.

The poem's couplets are apt for a loving relationship. Jones and his wife appear properly together here, but full rhymes, it seems, would be dishonest in what reads—given what we know of the relationship and references to it in earlier poems—as an attempt to embrace the *possibility* of happiness. It argues for the kind of compromise that would stifle the Soledad Montoya of 'Six Poems on Themes from Lorca'.¹ One has also begun to be persuaded that such compromise has been stifling the poet, too. The ambivalence of Jones's stance is supported by the tentative nature of the half-rhymes (hair/her/farther), the last lent further distance by its feminine ending.

Jones is engaged here in an attempt to persuade himself to look generously at, and, perhaps, be grateful for, what he has. After all, 'People spend / their fifty years going no further', a Larkinesque flourish offering a summative view on the significance of what has been observed. One thinks of the endings of 'I Remember,

¹ (*I*, 30-35)

‘Arenig Morning’ recounts the Jones family’s journey (for a holiday break) to Merioneth in Wales. It is a journey that takes them through the heart of England, from Kent, through the Midlands counties of Warwickshire and Worcestershire and into Wales. In an opening that puts us in mind of Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’⁶, the Joneses’ had been a ‘murderous journey’:

whole counties in storm;
night-arrival, the sky
grin after grin
of lightning; then to awake
bewildered in a new room
the air sour
with remembered scents

It is characteristic of Jones that he should feel bewildered in a new place, the juxtaposition of ‘new’ and ‘remembered’ intimating that his anxieties cannot be left behind. The later poem, ‘Overnight’ (*TIN*, 9) recalls stopping ‘somewhere in England at a place / nondescript, halfway to our intention’ and succeeding only in having ‘come in from the night to feel exclusion’. In ‘Arenig Morning’, the poet holds his wife, seeking refuge in companionship, imagining how, in the landscape outside, ‘tiny anonymous / creatures, having no right to survive, / rise from earth, and atomise the air.’ The journey, recounted initially by way of ‘remembered scents’, develops into a narrative that responds to a series of sensual imperatives notable for their nervous insistence: ‘Look . . . See . . . Watch . . . Listen . . .’ The vulnerability of the travellers is never in doubt. They seek refuge in each other.

It is the need for such refuge that also informs the attitudes of Yury, Tonya and Lara towards Varykino in *Doctor Zhivago*, and serendipity for Jones that the cottage he and his family arrive at in Wales should bear the same name. Pasternak’s novel thus provides the title, ‘At Varykino’, for the first group of poems in *For Mad Mary*. There are numerous parallels, not least those relating to the opening two poems. Pasternak’s eponymous hero first visits Varykino with his wife, Tonya, whose family home it had been. He looks at her in wonder: ‘I have noticed how quick, strong and tireless she is, how cleverly she plans her work so as to waste as little time as possible between one job and another’. Admiration of work well done

⁶ T.S.Eliot, ‘Journey of the Magi’, in *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (Faber and Faber, 1963) p.109: (‘A cold coming we had of it / Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey; / The ways deep and the weather sharp / The very dead of winter.’)

is implicit in Jones's 'Gardening Sunday', but the way he looks at his wife remains, in its effect upon this reader at least, a form of struggling to connect. Yury believes his wife to be pregnant again:

At the moment of child-birth, every woman has the same aura of isolation, as though she were abandoned, alone. At this vital moment the man's part is as irrelevant as if he had never had anything to do with it, as though the whole thing were gratuitous. (p.255)

What informs so many of Jones's poems is precisely the sense of isolation Yury describes. The wife in de Hooch's domestic interior, however contented with her lot, is alone.

The Joneses had moved from London to Canterbury in the 'sixties and the poet has clearly linked the Zhivagos' escape from Moscow, the new political capital of Russia, with his escape from the literary capital of London. In addition, the long drive from Canterbury to mid-Wales would have provided a further link. The two journeys are clearly not comparable in scale or significance but they offer both Jones's speaker and Zhivago opportunities to reflect on relationships and the life of the writer. When Strelnikov, Lara's husband and, for the time being, a powerful figure in the civil war's Red Army, asks why he should want to leave Moscow 'for such an out-of-the-way lair' as Varykino, Zhivago replies, 'That's just the idea. In search of quiet, retirement and obscurity' (p.227). Later in the novel, we will find Zhivago in the library in the nearby town of Yuryatin, having promised himself that, once recovered from a slight chill, he must 'go to the town library and read up the ethnography of the region' (p.257). 'The Courtenay Play' (pp.57-86), which forms the penultimate section of *For Mad Mary*, is the result of Jones having 'read up' on a nineteenth century labourers' uprising in the region to which he had moved.

The library in Yuryatin, of course, is where Zhivago meets up again with Lara. It is not difficult to see how the doctor's love for his wife, Tonya, and for Lara, a double life that generates guilt alongside passion, should find an echo in Jones's protagonist's struggle between the domesticity he would enjoy with his wife and his yearning for the greater fulfilment a Lara-figure represents. Certainly the speaker in

these poems would have found Yury's struggle instructive. When winter sets in at Varykino, Yury begins to keep a diary. First, he quotes from Tyutchev:

‘What a summer, what a summer!
This is magic indeed.
And how, I ask you, did it come to us
Unsought and undeserved?’ (p.252)

Jones, too, can be subject to this kind of revelation, as has been observed, but he is less rapturous. Both 'People spend / their fifty years going no farther' and 'all of thirty years / brought us here' imply he may be asking too much of his marital relationship. The 'luckless, reckless, uncomplaining love' (p.392) with which Zhivago clearly feels he has been blessed in his relationship with Lara may have represented for Jones a goal he wished were achievable.

When Zhivago returns to Varykino, this time with Lara, he watches her and her daughter sleep:

He saw the two sleeping heads on their snow-white pillows. The purity of their features, and of the clean linen and the clean rooms, and of the night, the snow, the stars, the moon, surged through his heart in a single wave of meaning, and roused in him a joyful sense of the triumphant purity of being. (p.392)

Jones's protagonist had also at times written with regard and affection about his wife (in the early collections and here in the opening two poems), but nowhere does he describe her, as he later will his new partner, as anything like 'a bomb of love'.⁷ Similarly, Zhivago had earlier written of Tonya with regard and affection (if never with the passion reserved for Lara): 'Tonya and I have never drifted apart and this year of work has brought us even closer together'(p.255).

Such work in Jones's poems includes the joint venture of chopping wood. It is an ordinary act, but one senses Jones reminding himself that, as for Yury, 'The fabulous is never anything but the commonplace touched by the hand of genius' (p.259). In 'Earth Landing' from *The Children of Separation* (1985) Jones acknowledges that 'It is the ordinary that shocks', an ordinariness exemplified by 'close-order marguerites bright eyed and stubborn'. The Wordsworth of 'Tintern Abbey' is in the background here, too, reminding us that we should recognize and cherish felt experience, but in Pasternak's novel and Jones's poems such recognition

⁷ 'Four Poems of Noelle' (FJ, 84)

is set against continually hankering after a better, future life that is forever on its way. 'Man is born to live', says Zhivago, 'not to prepare for life' (p.269). Those who inspired and inspire revolution 'aren't at home in anything except change and turmoil' (p.269). The result for them is continually having to live with upheaval.

It is when Jones is observing his children that such feelings about living rather than preparing for life become clearer, the poet experiencing a love that demands continuity rather than the upheaval involved in change. It is notable, however, that in the two poems, 'Stephen's Nightmare' and 'For Cathy, On Going to Turn out her Light', Zhivago's 'single wave of meaning' and 'joyful sense of the triumphant purity of being' appear to be possible again only when his children (and his wife) are asleep. The children in both poems cannot disturb his concentration, and one feels that Jones needs this kind of separation in order to focus. As does Yury.

The first of the two poems, 'Stephen's Nightmare', adopts the formal organisation of 'Chopping Wood', that is of a single stanza without capitals or punctuation. It progresses by way of a series of oppositions:

his dream was a hunt but he was not caught
his fear was a shout but it made no noise
his mother was love but she did not come
his dark was an ocean but he did not drown

As a father, Jones worries that the light-bulb blazing by Stephen's bed is a manifestation of 'his father's logic in his head', but recognizes that 'our metaphors do not change our fate', the spider Stephen fears 'does not kill', and a father's voice 'does not calm'. It is just as well that nightmares are not realized, the father appears to be persuading himself, if the voice of reason cannot help. The relief reality brings in this series of oppositions cannot prevent dreams recurring. Looking at his son, the father fears he is looking at his own vulnerability.

In watching his daughter sleep, Jones envies the invention of her innocence (and the innocence of her invention), the way she animates her dolls and toys into on-going narratives. For her, it is a game, but adult life is different:

My dreams are secret, footpadding through darkness
for fear the day arrest them. You scatter

dreams through the world and let them take their chance.
You sleep now, with the bedside lamp still glaring,
knowing your dolls still read, your gold shoes dance.

The imagery here ('footpadding', 'arrest') is redolent of guilt and theft, and reminiscent of 'Smuggler's Route' in *Interior* (p.11), where a 'glamorous' smuggler secreted a cask brought in from the 'guilty sea'. It is another poem about poetry as contraband. The poet's real life, it seems, is clandestine and furtive.

In the Cathy poem, the fact that the father's dreams are 'secret' suggests that they are not only unknown by others but also withheld from them. There is an analogy here with Yuri Zhivago withholding what he feels from his wife.

Yury was deceiving Tonya and what he concealed from her was becoming increasingly grave and illicit. This was something unheard-of between them. (p.274)

Jones similarly worries he is deceiving both his wife and his children with his secret dreams, just as Yuri Zhivago had done, and this fear lends a sense of desperation to the ending of 'The Lane' (p.14):

The pressure of your hand in my hand:
small round warmth, a charm
pressed into a grip.

Jones's protagonist's 'secret dream' may be his fear that this is a charm he is unable to accept.

Jones introduced his own reading of the section's title poem in a BBC Radio broadcast by saying of it:

This poem is called 'At Varykino'. Varykino, of course, is the place referred to by Pasternak in his novel *Doctor Zhivago*. It's where Zhivago holes up, really, with Lara, and it coincided with me, in my life at a time when I'd spent some time in a cottage in Wales, and looking back upon this poem it seems to me to be the culmination, or, really, the last statement I had to make about, if you like, the domestic life. Memories of the novel, memories of the place in Wales, and memories of my own writing up to this time go into this poem.⁸

Jones always thought of himself as a poet, and always worked at being a poet. But he did not play the role of the professional poet and retained an uncomfortable

⁸ 'Contemporary Poets Reading Their Own Poems: Brian Jones'. Recorded on 10th March 1973. National Sound Archive. Reference No. C144. Tape No. 1876.

ambivalence about taking part in the literary life. His professional work as a teacher, in secondary school and adult education, was important to him. It was his public life. And in this sense he would have echoed Zhivago's aims:

'I should like to be of use as a doctor or a farmer, and at the same time to be at work on something lasting, something fundamental; I should very much like to be writing a work of art or science.' (p.258)

The poem, 'At Varykino', as Jones suggests, draws together many of the earlier threads (the children, the nursery, their toys, their nightmares, companionship in new surroundings, an unforgiving landscape) into a concentration on 'an end to things'. Here the poem takes us into Zhivago's novel, into Tonya's family home, but whilst Jones projects himself into this situation, he is, at the same time, more difficult to place there:

walking to bed we pass
the portraits
the hands like heirlooms
the bequeathed smile
the head travelling centuries like a moon
then lie together
warm this particular night
our child sleeps twenty years away
the snow is audible like approaching wheels
my hand shapes your darkness head to heel

Portraits, heirlooms, bequeathed smiles speak of better times, when the servants knew their place and were grateful for it. Now these trappings of privilege are historical artefacts, their erstwhile owners, 'the frail aristos', having removed to Rome and Paris 'dispossessed / feeling the wind so keenly on the boulevards'. The couple with their children await the 'final day' of their fate. The wolves that patrol the 'edge of the estate', the 'files of men with awkward weapons / stepping this way with the footprints of mammoths', the arrival of Komarovsky, tormentor of Lara (and perversely for a while her saviour), with 'his black coat / his collar mountainous against the wind' are all from the Zhivago story, but the servants Komarovsky's arrival 'scatters' in Jones's poem are already long gone in Pasternak's novel. The poem therefore seems to be about the demise of the privileged classes in the face of revolution, of the 'stamping men' who are on their way to liberate the servants. Jones is usually on the side of the liberator, so it is worth pausing to consider quite what the poem has in mind here. Is Jones finding in

Yury's marriage, a marriage illuminated in its inadequacy by the ravages of revolution, a warning against the delusion of domestic security?

'At Varykino' is preceded by three poems about death. John Bayley, in his introduction to the Everyman edition of *Dr Zhivago*, notes that both Strelnikov and Zhivago, Lara's husband and her lover, 'continue on the verge of death to catch hold of every "livingness" in life, like the shaking of the carpet by one's beloved, or the look of the ambulance that takes the "heart casualty to hospital"'.⁹ Jones's fascination with living on faultlines is nowhere more in evidence than in his conviction that Edward Thomas, the poet he so admired, finally embraced poetry in a fever of composition towards the end of his life precisely because he knew his life was coming to an end. Jones would have been drawn to Strelnikov's questioning of Zhivago. On learning from him that Lara had continued, despite their separation and her liaison with Zhivago, to love him, Strelnikov asks:

'Forgive me, if it isn't intruding on something too intimate, can you remember the circumstances in which she said this?'

'She had been doing this room, and she went outside to shake the carpet.'

'Sorry, which carpet? There are two.'

'That one, the larger one.'

'It would have been too heavy for her. Did you help her?'

'Yes.'

'You held it at either end and she leaned right back, and threw up her arms high as on a swing, turning away her face from the blowing dust, and screwed up her eyes and laughed? Isn't that how it was? Don't I know her ways! And then you walked towards each other folding up the heavy carpet first in two and then in four, and she joked and pulled faces, didn't she? Didn't she?' (p.414)

For Bayley 'that little exchange really goes to the heart of the matter of love, and brings tears to the eyes in doing so':

It is more important for Strelnikov to establish the facts, to be reminded of the way in which his wife shook a carpet, than it is to hear from Zhivago – his rival after all – Lara's praise of his own personality. (p.xxv)

The following morning Strelnikov commits suicide, Zhivago finding him lying 'across the path with his head in a snowdrift' (p.415). Memorably, the 'drops of blood which had spurted away and rolled in the snow made beads like iced rowanberries' (p.415), the fruit earlier associated with Lara when Zhivago was escaping from captivity and was vowing to find his lover again, 'my rowan tree, my

⁹ John Bayley, Introduction to the Everyman's Library edition of *Doctor Zhivago* (op. cit.), p.xxvi

own flesh and blood' (p.338). Lara has been remembered through particularities and for her association with the landscape that has played such a signal part in the lives of all concerned.¹⁰ It is this dual concentration on detail and impending death, found in the pages of Pasternak's novel, that may, however tangentially, have reminded Jones of the death of a boy at school 'three years ago'.

Like Strelnikov, the boy (in 'A Death') had committed suicide, and his death had been responded to as if it had not been an important one. The title's indefinite article prepares us for this. Curiously, it is the 'Adonis-like gym-master' who found the boy 'in the corner-block lavatory / during the day', but the boy's death seems not to have disturbed his routine:

Astounded I saw him the next day
ritual in pure white striding with orange
basket-ball under his arm to keep his timetable.

This is another poem that exemplifies Jones's interest in those society would normalise but succeeds only in destroying. The gym-master figure is a familiar enough figure in stories of school and threatens, despite the seriousness of Jones's intent, to become a sub-Dotheboys Hall caricature. It is Jones's bewilderment that life can be so lightly dismissed, its loss swept under a carpet of routine, that lends the poem the poignancy it retains. Jones was not a great admirer of the poetry of Robert Frost, whom he believed was always too much in control of what he was doing (a criticism that could not be levelled against Frost's friend, and Jones's great influence, Edward Thomas, whose poems read rather as a working out of what is being considered). Nevertheless, the alarmingly realistic ending of the American poet's 'Out, Out –' (1916) offers a contrast to Jones's bewilderment. It is a poem about the accidental death of a boy and about the response of those who loved him: 'And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs'.¹¹ Sentimentality is avoided by the title's allusion to *Macbeth* and also, more tellingly, by a brutal, matter-of-fact recognition of what, failing suicide, must unavoidably be.

¹⁰ This kind of particularity is evident in, for example, in 'Gardening Sunday': 'the lifted forearm plumped'; and has been evident since the opening poem in Jones's first collection, 'Seeing my Wife Go Out Alone' (*Poems*, 1966, p.7): 'Arms rather stiff, the shoulders tensioned high'. Interestingly, this poem also includes the lines, 'I see now that I have failed to liberate, / That liberation is not part of love'.

¹¹ Robert Frost, *Selected Poems* (Penguin Books, 1973), p.90

Death is personified in 'Amor Mortis', weighing up a teacher whose fascination with its grim regard is brought home to him, remotely, perhaps, through news of the death of 'fond aunts' (yet another reference, one supposes, to the Aunt Em who has featured so prominently in earlier collections, and whom we are about to meet again in 'For Mad Mary') but more urgently by a colleague who 'Won a squash point with a fine / Dying drop-shot from a wrist gone slack / And never knew'. The image here risks bad taste, but it also issues from the protagonist-observer's fascination with death. If he is half in love, himself, with 'easeful death', he is persuaded nonetheless by a life cut short and unfulfilled (the victim is a music teacher who regrets that 'Bach is not yet fully understood') to resist death's advances. The reference to a wife who 'tended him, and enjoyed their muted / Autumn Cornish holidays' adds another detail that helps to lend the victim particularity. The protagonist's retreat, his recognition that he does not wish to 'leave ideas so orphaned' is too much for his adversary:

Death, of course,
Deathly bored with him, turned eyes elsewhere,
Seducing the younger men who did not care.

This closing image is a disturbing reminder that Death, denied a willing recruit, will re-cast its arbitrary sweep instead, surprising those who are young and full of life. Pasternak's novel provides Jones with a group of characters, Zhivago, Strelnikov, Tonya, Lara, who, in their various relationships, present parallels through which he can ponder his own predicament. The reader does well, however, to remember with John Bayley that '*Doctor Zhivago* is first and foremost a political novel' (p.ix). 'The Courtenay Play' will act as an historical bridge for now, but it is with his next collection, *The Island Normal*,¹² his first for Carcanet, that Jones will properly turn his attention to the more-than-domestic.

¹²Brian Jones, *The Island Normal* (Carcanet, Manchester, 1980)

2. 'For Mad Mary'

'For Mad Mary' might arguably have been Jones's most overtly autobiographical poem except that, as elsewhere, at critical moments, he does not provide all of the information that would enable the reader (or the critic) to establish quite what is going on. This withholding of information ensures that the poem does not become a piece of unmediated confessional writing, but it otherwise comes close. The poem's narrator is returning to the area of his (and Jones's) childhood. The eponymous figure who has died is a woman who habitually roamed the streets of Islington, making 'bow-waves of mother-whispered kids', flinging food at cats, and hurling abuse at the churches she despised. The principal character of the poem, however, remains unnamed but is clearly the Aunt Em we have already encountered. The speaker is staying one night with his aunt in order to accompany her to Mary's funeral. The timescale indicated in the poem would confirm Jones's visits as the source of its action, which switches abruptly from one era to another and back again, from the speaker's childhood to the present day of the funeral, taking in both his eighteen-year-old self seeking refuge with his aunt and a pub conversation on a later visit, when he is now twenty-six. Also featured is the speaker's current family home, eight miles from the sea. It is a long poem in four sections, the first being formally the most varied. There are verse paragraphs, quatrains, and tercets whose line-lengths expand and contract according to narrative need.

Mary is quickly established as an eccentric figure with whom Emily unsurprisingly empathises, one quirky resister being recognized by another. Mary walks through Islington with a slow rhythm that 'measured hours of kerb'. The schoolboy speaker, bored during 'dusty, uneventful holidays', watches her with bewildered fascination. One day, 'a game of violence' is interrupted when he and his friends happen on a burst bag of prisms at the roadside and are struck with wonder by the colours. The prisms splinter the gang into its constituent parts, into a dozen absorbed children 'staring at the sky', until a dark cloud unnerves one of the boys into proclaiming "It's Mary's soul". And the boys 'shrank to a gang again'. In fact, Mary is there, too, in her 'crouched fury', two words that will identify her more than once. The boys 'belted homewards, shrieking and clutching glass' and

the speaker remembers 'windows opening' and 'heads stuck out with jewels in their eyes' as Mary passed 'scorching the church with screams'. Jones does not often engage in this kind of overtly poetic imagery. Here glass, prisms, windows, jewels coalesce into a kind of shining that represents the gangs' awed response to Mary and the possibilities the prisms open up beyond the world the boys inhabit.

The second section begins by describing the dilapidated 'street of sad attempts' in Islington that the poem's 'skinny aunt' (and real-life Emma) had steadfastly refused to leave. The speaker has returned to accompany her the next day to the funeral, but Em is irritated that he is to stay only one night and the speaker feels uncomfortable. The car-keys his right hand 'fidgets' become a totem of his new life: 'I could stand, grab the keys, / add a jacket to myself, add a tie, /add car to myself'. Keys, jacket, tie, car represent the trappings of his successful escape from his aunt's world. He thinks of his wife and children 'eight miles from the sea', but his aunt's is a place of continuing significance for him: 'This is the room I never left', he acknowledges. 'I knew death in this room / summer by summer'. He remembers as a child holding his head 'in a socket of hands'. Clearly, there is a strong emotional tie between the boy and his aunt, a tie that has endured into his adulthood. However, when the day of the funeral arrives, the speaker attends to his aunt much as 'a guard coming off duty' might, an image that, given its context, aptly projects the reader to both prison and psychiatric ward with equal discomfort. The journey through the cemetery is a hierarchical descent through social classes: from miniature, moneyed Victorian metropolis, through 'suburbs of flimsy / pathos', to a 'wasteground // shanty of the poor / dead'. There is a minister by Mary's grave and 'one official mourner'. The speaker and his aunt do not join them, a telling decision not wholly the result of late arrival. They are, as Jones has said of himself, resolutely 'unclubbable'.

The third section is completed by the speaker recounting a pub conversation with a man called Skinner, named, as it were allegorically, after what he does. He bought a house in the Square, 'stripped / all life-accretions from its floors and walls, / gleamed it with slime, and sold it very well'. Then repeated the process. His words were 'unanswerable' and in the face of them most of the 'natives' moved out. Even those who held out eventually leave to take up residence in 'towering glassy heaps',

where they are ‘kept mute / by screens and cheapjack furnishings astute // sub-Skinners rook them with’. But they retain something of Mary, ‘a need / half-glimpsed, a raging to be freed’, a kind of ‘wordless fury’. The rage is also the speaker’s. To him, Skinner is ‘a monstrous shape, / its blind head raised, slithering across / the black mouthwatering areas near King’s Cross’. The speaker’s is a venomous eloquence, like Mary’s ‘locked and savage tongue’.

The final section recounts the speaker’s journey back home through Kent as ‘greengold oils / assuage the rage of metals’ with London in his rear-view mirror and the windscreen ‘registering a cultured land’ ahead. It represents another liminal, in-between moment: ‘a moment’s poise between dream and dream’. ‘At Great Tew’, in *The Island Normal*, will investigate this triumvirate of poise, dream and existential crisis more convincingly. Here, it leads only to a final moment of doubt. The speaker objectifies and interrogates himself (‘Where do you go / cool-white-handed right-minded / driving man with ashen eyes’). He has a home, a garden, and a family, and appears sustained by the belief that it is ‘Not what makes man, but what man makes’, an aphorism made of the same cloth as Larkin’s ‘How we live measures our own nature’. But it is an uneasily willed contentment (‘constructed certainties’)¹³ that cannot answer the question posed by a memento of Mary, ‘this propped scrap / hurtled at what end?’, the kind of existential worrying that will be derided by the government barrister Liardet in ‘The Courtenay Play’. Alan Ross, Jones’s publisher at the time, described Mary as one who ‘embodies the imprisoned capabilities of all of us’.¹⁴ In ‘For Mad Mary’, the three principals, Mary, the speaker, and his aunt, are all troubled figures travelling determinedly against the grain.

3. ‘Credits’

If *For Mad Mary*, Jones’s final book with Alan Ross’s London Magazine Editions, is a transitional one (it is a volume of five contrasting sections and sequences, some similar to earlier work, others clearly intent on extending Jones’s poetic range). It gained immediate recognition from the Poetry Book Society, which awarded it a

¹³ (*P*, 9)

¹⁴ Inside front cover blurb: *For Mad Mary* (1974)

Recommendation in the autumn of 1974; the Choice was Douglas Dunn's second collection, *Love or Nothing*.¹⁵

Jones regarded the fourth section, 'The Courtenay Play' as 'emotionally central to the volume, and technically the most adventurous poem I've attempted'¹⁶ and was persuaded that 'the poems which precede 'The Courtenay Play' in this volume, and which did in fact pre-date it, were all leading me to it'.¹⁷ In the light of such a statement, the third section, entitled 'Credits', has the appearance of containing a group of shorter poems the poet could not fit into any of the other, ostensibly more unified sections. Certainly the poems here vary in their appeal and efficacy, but the section and the poems in it are not without significant interest. They are revealing in terms of the poet's orientation and the influences he embraces in his attempt to broaden his horizons.

The opening poem, 'Stalled', looks forward technically and formally to the opening poem of Jones's next book, his first with his new publisher, Carcanet.¹⁸ Both take the form of a single stanza and are notable for the careful attention paid to the effects of line-endings. Thematically, the two are also related. Both are concerned with outsiders, those who struggle to connect. In 'Overnight', the protagonist is checking into a hotel (or motel) with his wife; in 'Stalled' the subject of the poem is a woman whose seizure at the wheel of her car goes, initially at least, unnoticed. A line of motorists, some with their engines switched off ('pathetic but diligent / ecologists who can do no more'), wait at a level crossing until the train 'had smacked through at ninety / dead empty with all lights blazing'. When it becomes clear that the woman is not quickly going to be able to get started (because of what they assumed must be 'an engine stalled or something broken'), they 'indicated, pulled out, passed her'. All is neat and tidy and as it should be in a world of politeness and motoring convention, until it occurs to the protagonist having seen as he passed 'the small hand like a white rag / up at the mouth and the eyes riveted ahead', and, he surmises, to others who must also have similarly seen, 'that it was not the car had broken, but the woman'. It is a cleverly-worked conclusion (and a

¹⁵ Douglas Dunn, *Love or Nothing* (Faber and Faber, London, 1974)

¹⁶ Brian Jones, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin No.82*: Autumn 1974.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ 'Overnight' (*TIN*, 9)

convincing one), but Jones came to grow dissatisfied with the kind of poem he felt he could write well, and all too easily, and ‘Stalled’ may be cited as a good example of just such a poem:

I found myself not wishing to be associated with the particular English tradition of rather tight and enclosed and safe anecdotal verse, which I think I can do . . . It is an aspect of my writing that I have some disquiet about. I can close down my poetry, I can tidy it up, I can give it shape, and for me all of this is spurious.¹⁹

Having said that, the poem *is* well-written: the verbs are apt (the train ‘smacked through’, the crossing-keeper ‘scampered / down steps’); the line-breaks surprise and illuminate (‘pathetic but diligent / ecologists’, ‘at ninety / dead empty’, ‘would not get started / not in our time there’; the adjectives ordinary but accurate (‘blazing’, ‘fluttering’); and the poem is compact, the whole working like a periodic sentence in which the main idea is withheld until the end. It would be unfair to suggest (as Jones appears to be beginning to suggest about poems of this kind) that artifice serves itself rather more than its subject. There is, instead, real compassion here for the kind of suffering Jones has had experience of himself, a compassion that is enabled in the reader, too, by the poet’s skill. It is a poem that may well be ‘tight and enclosed and safe’ but it is accomplished for all that, and difficult to square against Jones’s own charge of spuriousness. Tightness and enclosure and safety are indeed part of its accomplishment.

‘Cloud’ is a poem that might have been included in the ‘At Varykino’ section. That it isn’t is perhaps because that section already includes poems that address similar concerns: the long journey across country; the speaker’s children; a hint of psychological unease. ‘Cloud’ also includes references to the poet’s reading at the time. It begins by establishing the poet’s mood as he ponders ‘the origin of cloud’, musing brought about by noticing a sky that ‘rushed westward’ on the journey home from the ‘damp house’ in mid-Wales. That the clouds never quite clear perhaps suggests that one of the purposes of a short break, to clear the mind, had also not been achieved. He wished to be isolated (in order to read) but his children were with him ‘smouldering / and furious there’s no Disney’ to watch. The poet’s response is a shrugged ‘*quoi faire*’, in French because of the shrug, perhaps, or an

¹⁹ (IC-PNR) p.55

ironic recognition of his rise to the middle-classes, for whom some knowledge of French is *de rigueur*. What the poet is reading, Ivan Illich's *The Celebration of Awareness*, is a formidable and radical critique of western democracy's institutions and their unintentional effects: hospitals, for example, make patients ill, while schools makes students stupid. Illich's anarchic take on society would have found an enthusiastic response in Jones, who, as a teacher, felt schools in the UK were more concerned with the behavioural politics of power and self-containment than they were with knowledge and the development of critical judgement.

Instead of Disney, the children have Flossie the dog to amuse themselves with. She is notable for her 'shambling and shaggy refusal / to be aristocratic'. Are we being asked to compare Flossie's behaviour with Tramp's, the speaker re-imagining the situation he is in for his *own* amusement? The 'querulous edge' with which Flossie's whine 'sets the hall ringing' is one 'Virginia Woolf would not despise', presumably because at least Flossie's behaviour is superior to that of Hans, Woolf's dog, who was known for interrupting parties by getting sick and relieving itself on the hearthrug. Whatever the allusions here, Jones is clearly having fun at his own expense (seeing a disjunction between Illich and the Jones children's craving for Disney, perhaps), and concludes the poem with a sideways glance at what he is self-consciously disposed to see as conclusive evidence of collective vulnerability: 'observe / the whiskies and the cars heading for Wales'. They are heading for where he has just been. And he knows what will happen. Children are not alone in needing to be amused.

If 'Clouds', in its irregularity of line, recognizes that 'It clearly doesn't take much bared nerve / to feel the intolerable', the following poem, 'Credits' is altogether more experimental, perhaps more than anything Jones had published before. There are no capital letters and no punctuation, and the poem invites conjecture about new influences (the Christopher Middleton of 'The Thousand Things'²⁰ springs to mind, or the Americans e.e.cummings or Robert Duncan).²¹

²⁰ Christopher Middleton, *Torse* 3 (Longman, 1962). Also in Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Penguin, 1962/1966), p.139, and in *Penguin Modern Poets* 4 (Penguin, 1963) p.50

The title suggests a stocktaking of life's positives, but turns out to relate to the credits that roll at the beginning or end of a film. What happens is that 'the horseman shot leans to caress the horse' at which point 'the film stops' as 'the credits roll through him'. The credits continue until they 'empty themselves' as the horseman 'leans fading / the words gone the cast gone the noise / leaning has faded / cannot recall if he started from death or life'. It is a most un-Jones-like poem. Importantly, the experience of the horseman, half-life half-death, cannot be attributed to the poem's speaker because the experimental form serves to impersonalize. It also deals with another art form that is not poetry. Its jerky, even joky, juxtaposition of the film's stop-start progress and the credits continuing to roll regardless represents a way of trying to be serious in a different way. 'Credits' might perhaps be seen as a means of going through the motions of being the happy family man.

4. 'The Courtenay Play'

When Brian Jones moved to Canterbury, he came into contact with a story about an agricultural labourers' uprising in 1838, an encounter that resulted in 'The Courtenay Play'. He was evidently sufficiently taken with it to wish it published separately, as a book in its own right (though Alan Ross was not to be persuaded). Jones clearly felt it to be an important project. He mentioned it in a BBC Radio interview with Peter Orr,²² and he had this to say about it in his contribution to the Poetry Book Society Bulletin, when *For Mad Mary* was made a PBS Recommendation for Autumn 1974:

I find I'm always on the watch for the set of coincidences which hint there is a work somewhere in the offing: one weekend, I saw Peter Brook's production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', travelled back to Kent the next day, through Dagenham, Fordland, and that evening came across, in a little church guide in Hernhill, the story of a remarkable uprising of Kentish labourers.²³

²¹ Jones told me in interview that he had been reading a good deal of American poetry (*IC-PNR*, p.55), but this is likely to have been predominantly in the 1990s, after the publication of *Freeborn John*. In this event, Middleton's poem remains the most likely source here, a likelihood supported by the poem's extensive use of repetition.

²² 'The Poet Speaks: Brian Jones & Peter Orr'. *BBC Radio*, Recorded on 10th March 1973. *National Sound Archive*, Reference No. 144, Tape No. 1877.

²³ *PBS Bulletin No.82*, op. cit.

Brook's innovative and experimental production was clearly a significant influence on Jones as he embarked on a kind of poem he had never before attempted. Much as it is difficult to think of forerunners in English verse to Jones's earlier *A Family Album* (1968), so one struggles to find precursors for 'The Courtenay Play'.

The Centre for Kentish Studies and Canterbury Library hold numerous texts and documents relating to the affair, but Barry Reay's 1990 historiographical account is possibly the most complete (and reliable). Reay begins:

On a warm May afternoon in 1838 (31 May, to be precise), two groups of men faced each other across a clearing in a wood in Kent, not far from Canterbury. A grossly outnumbered band of agricultural labourers confronted an armed detachment of the 45th Infantry Regiment, a number of the local landed elite (gentry and farmers), and a hastily commissioned group of constables. The labourers were led by a man known locally as 'Sir William Courtenay', but who was really one John Nicholls Tom, a former maltster from Cornwall. Within minutes of the confrontation, about twenty men, most of them followers of Courtenay, lay dead, dying, or wounded. (Several, it would become clear from the coroner's inquest, had been both bayoneted and shot.) It was, as was observed at the time, 'a most desperate affray'; in the words of the historian E.P. Thompson, 'perhaps the most desperate on English soil since 1745'.²⁴

Rather than viewing the story as one of ignorant, vulnerable villagers succumbing to the zealous imposture of a megalomaniac who even had the temerity to stand for parliament as the member for Canterbury (and poll respectably), Jones looked to the psychological complexity of the motivations of Courtenay's followers, who had until then been trapped inside their hedgerows, his interest aroused by the terrible fate that awaited those who dared to dream of a greater glory. They included Edward Curling, a sixteen-year-old hedgecutter:

When Courtenay came and on Boughton Hill
sidled with the sun on a horse from Revelations
and sent words bowling down the hill like stones,
that night Curling dreamed.

The next day he joined Courtenay's troupe and 'travelled through the lanes of Dargate, Waterham, Graveney' helping to 'set up plays on the unploughed edge of fields, / in farmyards, water-meadows, wherever labourers / stood silent as their crops or slouched like cattle'. He is, we are told by the actor-narrator, 'not dead yet'.

²⁴ Barry Reay, *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Workers: Rural: Life and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990)

We 'can watch him perform'. We 'will not see Courtenay', however. In real life, having claimed immortality, he was when dead laid out on a table in the local inn for all to see. Very soon, the Dover road was 'studded with little stalls / selling vials of Courtenay blood, and relics'. Courtenay may not have been the messiah he claimed to be, but to the memento-hunters he might as well have been. In addition to Courtenay, Jones's 'Play' lists nine doomed protagonists who 'do not know there is no more script to learn'.

Act One begins with an elegiac invitation into the barn that here serves as the theatre but then housed those arrested after the battle in Bossenden Wood. They were led across country and into the barn 'hooded with sacks'. There is to be no suspense: 'Easiest, beginning with them dead. / In life they marched behind a loaf of bread / raised on a pole', the traditional image of popular protest. Now they are buried under simple headstones. The satirical edge of 'This is fringe theatre. And has always been' associates both actors and those they portray as living in social margins (the kind of people who would always attract Jones's attention).

The narrator of the opening 'scene' is a member of the audience watching the post-1970 show. When the second scene begins, it is clear we have a new narrator, the production's. But there is a further layer because this narrator is an actor playing someone from Courtenay's time. He apologises on behalf of those 'presenting' the 'performance': 'We have no real actors'. This nineteenth-century narrator, operating much as the Stage Manager does in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938), reminds his audience that with him it saw the Courtenay troupe's 'last' (that is to say, 'final') performance, which had begun with a romance in which heroine and hero climbed down from their cart 'like very gods / thoughtlessly descending in their love / to stroll our earth'. Their conversation, to the ears of nineteenth-century Kentish men and women, was the music of 'Irrelevant sweet words', irrelevant because carefree, which is to say free from the harsh imperatives that informed their lives. The performance succeeds in making them feel 'cheated, knowing only the language / to curse and buy with'. When later on that evening, after the performance, 'The heroine / was fucked by a cowman in full moonlight on a grave', life had rudely mirrored art, and the authorities acted quickly, banishing both perpetrators, presumably without concerning themselves with the consequences such banishment

might entail ('the baked roads gave no sign / the next day of the route they had taken'). Both participants, heroine and cowman, like the agricultural labourers before them, have been prompted to enact a dream, and, as the barrister, Liardet, will impress on us later, dreams are to be 'contained' for the good of all. The 'last performance' had also included a version of 'George & the Dragon', which sets the whole in the tradition of the mediaeval mummer plays, which enacted well known legends, myths and stories. There are 'no real actors' because the actors are (and always had been) amateurs. Indeed, the whole amateur tradition, exemplified by the Mummers being members of the community, may parallel Jones's reluctance to play the part of the 'professional' poet, a reluctance which may itself be read as a kind of class statement, a concern that he maintain contact with those he wishes to represent, to remain faithful to them, even if he has grown and been educated away from them. But there are also no 'real' actors because, of course, those directly involved in the uprising are no longer around to tell their tale.

The dream (perhaps Jones's rural equivalent of the 'blind, unsatisfied craving for beauty' Lawrence discerned in Nottinghamshire miners) is transferred to Dagenham, where workers at the Ford factory have replaced the nineteenth-century agricultural labourers. Fordism has replaced agrarianism. For the agricultural worker of Courtenay's and Liardet's time, the dream of something better was predominantly dormant because 'better' was far out of reach. And even when the dream was, as it were, awakened, albeit by a charlatan, 'better' remained a largely inchoate concept. By the time of Harold Wilson's 1964 Labour government and Edward Heath's 1970 Conservative government, it looked like a Ford car. Mass production and assembly-line techniques meant that Ford workers were able to afford to buy the cars they were involved in making. The repetitive nature of the work, the assembly line having broken down the production process into a succession of clearly identified and endlessly repeated tasks, offered opportunities for twentieth-century unskilled labourers, but its 'better' would have been judged illusory by Kropotkin because focused primarily on material gain.²⁵ Interestingly, Jones would use a quotation from Kropotkin's 'An Appeal to the Young' ('place your hands on the sources of its ugliness') as epigraph to the title section of his next

²⁵ Peter Kropotkin, 'An Appeal to the Young', first published in French as 'Aux Jeunes Gens' in Kropotkin's paper *La Révolte* in June, July and August, 1880, and as a pamphlet soon after.

collection, *The Island Normal*. And the urgency that fuelled Jones's desire to have *Freeborn John* published as quickly as possible suggests he had decided that Margaret Thatcher's rise to power had been as resistible as Arturo Ui's. Like Brecht's, Jones's 'Play' acts not only as historical reminder but also as warning. However, the opportunity afforded Liardet to put the government's case demonstrates an openness in Jones's approach that the poet would later struggle to sustain. At the same time, the narrator recognizes himself as a product of the new economic age, not least because he is a driver:

Ford rolls soft, rubbering gravel
upon clay. Ford
dreams its successor. I am Ford's dream.

In the first Ford Interlude, the narrator recalled his journey through Dagenham on a Sunday in Spring (a re-enactment of the poet returning from London having seen Brook's production), seeing Ford workers attending to their own Fords: polishing the 'fixed grins of grilles', wiping 'the unwondering eyes of headlamps', engaged in minor repairs that release 'black flows of pus' or grunting 'to ease free nuts'. In a later poem, 'Return to Wasteground' (*The Island Normal*), the speaker recoils from a Volvo that snubs him 'front on with its blank and armoured face'. Cars may be symbols of social advancement but they can be ominously threatening possessions, too. The second Ford Interlude segues back to the nineteenth century, where an invitation is extended by the fog to join in the Courtenay experience, and we are 'shown' the surrounding area and the 'hedgcutters, cowmen, cowmen's wives' who wait 'knowing a three day march / meant for them a name cut clean on stone'.

In Act Two, we 'witness' the suffering of Sarah Culver and Thomas Mears at the hands of the Sergeant, and of Thomas Griggs, 'who would not attend / Hernhill Church "because there was no glory"'. Liardet, called in after the event to make a detailed report on the neighbourhood to the Central Society of Education, is the 'official man' whose stamina outlasts Courtenay's 'wild lights'. Like Danforth and Hale in *The Crucible* (another play about extreme and unexpected events unfolding in an erstwhile unexceptional place far from the seat of power),²⁶ Liardet enters 'on the edge of an event', as if from another world, as 'religious Thomas Griggs begins

²⁶ Arthur Miller's play was first performed at the Martin Beck Theater on Broadway in 1953.

his wail // for mercy'. He has been reduced to bare bones, physically and psychologically, by illness and torture ('He is neck. He is point of chin. / He is cartilage of a nose'). The statement of one of the accused, Edward Wraight, is that of a man unused to words. There is no punctuation and the syntax is illuminatingly tortuous. In her translator's note on Adolf Muschg's extraordinary story 'The Scythe Hand or The Homestead',²⁷ Marlis Zeller Cambon draws attention to the eponymous defendant's speaking to a Court of Enquiry in:

the halting voice of a mountain peasant who in the antiquated rhetorical flourishes of another world grafted upon his alpine dialect, pleads for a court's understanding of his life's circumstances. His language accentuates the gulf between the moral codes of a respectable society and the creature needs of a humanity on the fringe.²⁸

So it is with Wraight, the agricultural labourer. He knows he is at the mercy of the authorities. His plea is a respectful attempt to explain his life's circumstances to a powerful outsider. His fear of a legal system he cannot hope to fathom is evident in his pleas for restraint and proportion:

knowing to be punished is what I must and
right and wanting only that guilt
to be punished and that other things should not
but be understood of me first and then others

He sees and experiences hardship ('how men can work under a rainbow being still / bent backs as if under a goad') but cannot see any real connection between himself and those in power ('so to call / men brothers Mr Liardet such men all men / is hard and easier to point the gun and blow / the face away'). Liardet's world and his are those of ruler and ruled, of those who presume to know better and those who remain bemused.

Mistress Hadlow teaches her 'six unlettered children' the letters of the alphabet by reference to things they know:

U a horseshoe ready for the hoof
L a flail propped against a wall
A an oast-house top with a cross-beam
easiest of all
O a nothing an empty eye

²⁷ Adolf Muschg, *The Blue Man & other stories*, translated by Marlis Zeller-Cambon & Michael Hamburger (Carcenet, Manchester, 1983). The story had first appeared in English (as 'The Scythe Hand') in *Encounter*, November 1975, pp.3-9

²⁸ Marlis Zeller-Cambon, translator's note to Adolf Muschg, op. cit., pp.8/9

The alphabet is being taken possession of in a language of belonging and connection. It is the opposite of alienation. Eventually, we are told, she spells out their names, and suddenly the possibilities generated by the wires she had bent into the shapes of letters became endless. It is this endless prospect that informs her justification for supporting Courtenay:

if I should lie forever as I stand
now here in a cruel darkness
punished that I should pursue
things forbidden unobtainable
shall I blame the innocent
eyes of watching children
their slates filled with lives
their gaze steadily full of me?

This, poetically, is a genuinely achieved sadness. Those 'things forbidden unobtainable' are the dream made manifest. The labourers' moment is brief; they will be brutally crushed; and lessons for ensuing generations will be formalized (with the intention that they be internalized). And so, historically, it goes on. This is the kind of process decried by Kropotkin, Foucault, Illich, Laing (and by Jones, who variously admired and referenced all four) as a mechanism of control.

During the Interval we hear what Alan Ross has characterised as 'the tormented talkers of our own time'.²⁹ One has given up on poetry ('all those dreams'), particularly the Matthew Arnold recalled from school ('In the States, back there, / we're so exposed / the darkling plain crap'), art still apparently spelling danger to the untutored mind. Another sees the Ford factory at Dagenham as 'a circle of hell'. But, if Jones might reasonably have been expected to have made much of the proximity of Canterbury, the historical seat of Anglicanism, instead he turned west to Dagenham, a twentieth-century seat of mass-production. Act Three finishes with *Liardet's masques for our time*: a lobotomised, Lazarus-like modern labourer programmed 'with perfect grammar'; a woman who stares into a Welsh lake that 'stirs and throws a wet / battering wind / down a road empty but for a stone' that has 'already survived her'; a couple who are each other's 'sole achievement', who now hope only 'to bow and curtsy to each other / and sit down together in the danceless room'. The twentieth century offers little solace. Geoffrey Hill may well feel 'brow-

²⁹ Inside front dust-jacket blurb for *For Mad Mary* (1974)

beaten'³⁰ by a past described by David Gervais as 'less a place to escape to than an open sore that still vexes us',³¹ but Jones seems equally vexed by the 'danceless' present.

Before this prelude to an ending in which we 'see' the stage dismantled and the props put away, Liardet enters to address the 'audience'. It is a memorable speech act by both character and poet. Liardet feels his role in the affair is susceptible to misunderstanding by a twentieth-century audience, and so, like the knights in Eliot's *Canterbury* play, he feels constrained to explain himself and his actions: 'you are from an age which makes / its imperfections a universal condition, / worrying about foundations, while / aspirations were my age's concern'.

What is remarkable about Liardet's speech is Jones's managing to characterise his and the labourers' unease through the point of view of an outsider who otherwise might simply constitute the enemy. Liardet states his case by way of a critique of modern day angst. He prefers, for all their private imperfections, to hold with the 'certainties' of the past. The point of education, he argues is to establish 'safeguards against superstition'. That is why the great brick tower Liardet's report had had hoisted above Dunkirk Church and the heads of ignorant labourers was for him 'a civilising necessity'. We may well accuse him of hypocrisy, he admits, but the charge he'd put on us is one of timidity 'based on the cult of self'. Belief in an impostor 'with a smattering of Bible knowledge / and no instilled discretion' was not to be countenanced. In our century we speak of indoctrination:

although such freedom as you find
runs from you at night in sweat, and makes your cities
echo with howls like a forest where man

never raised a home. Such freedom
is imprisonment for me.

Jones, it might be argued, in recalling his own Cambridge 'night-sweats', is using Liardet as a means of questioning his own, and the twentieth-century's, ostensibly

³⁰ Quoted by Henry Hart in Peter Robinson (ed.), *Geoffrey Hill: Essays On His Work* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1984), p.12.

³¹ David Gervais, 'Home-Made Englands: History and Nostalgia in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Tony Harrison', in C. C. Barfoot (ed.), *In Black and Gold: Contiguous Traditions in Post-War British Poetry* (Rodopi: DQR Studies in Literature 13, 1994), p.46

more liberal values. Liardet has no qualms about the infliction of punishment: 'People are varied in their propensities: / I do not have to be the torturer'. His argument is designed to unsettle self-congratulatory notions of caring. 'My age', he reminds us, with an assured flourish, 'lacks the refinements of torture invented by you.'

Art, too, must be controlled: 'A theatre is the place for plays - a barn like this, / in simple terms, prevents plays slopping over':

Dreams, then, must be contained.
The church contains them, and a well-run school,
and a theatre with seats, and a play performed by others
who pick their props up and go on their way.

This is an Aristotelian rather than Brechtian view of art and its purposes. Liardet is 'unequivocal' and 'dreamless' and causes dreams in no one. Instead, he reminds them of 'strength and certainty'. This identification of 'strength' with 'certainty' assumes that together they provide assurance that those in charge should be left to decide what's best. In *The Socialist Case* (1937), Douglas Jay famously asserted that 'in the case of nutrition and health, just as in the case of education, the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves.'³² Liardet would agree: 'I wish men good, you see, and know what good is— / freedom from wild and personal dreams / that lead to bloodshed or to unquiet nights'. But Jay and Liardet could hardly be expected to agree on what good is. Liardet pities us our exile, for when he faces those he would civilise he 'can speak words of comfort or rebuke':

Meeting these nine as equals, you
find nothing to say,
leaving them as you found them: which means worse.

We may despair of a society that deported or executed those who dreamed, but it is 'less hard / to die knowing of certainty'. Liardet's knowingly constructed certainties may be anathema to a twentieth-century poet who knew what night sweats felt like, but they nevertheless lend Liardet a peace of mind, however spurious. An added irony here, of course, is that the latter's report 'was one / of many that shaped a school system for all'. It was a system that eventually would offer Jones the

³² (Faber and Faber, 1937)

grammar school and Cambridge education he would not otherwise have 'enjoyed', but it also led to the educational 'certainties' of Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher (which were not at all what Jay would have had in mind). Liardet's performance is a rhetorical tour-de-force. The poet, John Forth, has this to say about the man:

Liardet offers us 'instrumental' and 'conditional' as if they were both accurate and opposites. He is dangerous, as any pseudo-fascist from another century will be dangerous, but, interestingly, he does not say dreams are to be 'suppressed' but that they have to be 'contained'. This is not the same thing. We don't like him, sure enough, but this might be partly because he is honest about what we like to keep hidden (violence, which he calls torture, as a means to control). In the end it's all a trick, but a clever and satisfying one in that we're often ready to believe bland generalisations about our age and its shortcomings, especially if we feel ourselves living against the grain to begin with. Jones is exploiting our gullibility in some ways.³³

One of the ways in which Jones is 'exploiting our gullibility' is by including us (and himself) in the system he critiques, and in so doing is revealing our complicity. It is this complicity that Liardet regards as a manifestation of timidity, a reluctance to face the consequences of the modern point of view we like to think of as more humane than that of our forebears. Our obsession with appearing to care is unintelligible to Liardet because it does not address the question of why we should care.

This in turn prompts the question why Jones's poem should matter to the modern reader. *Freeborn John* suggests an answer. The opening sonnet celebrates the resistance of the Leveller, John Lilburne, and 'A View from Stansted' attacks the silencing of dissident voices in the 1980s:

A cold vision is settling into place: barbed
certainties that mark red in the balance-sheet
the questioner, the immigrant, the reflective;
it crushes discourse beneath its monologue
and proves dreams pathology; sees us scrabbling
on a dying planet and sneers Why not? Colonised
England wakes to find itself facing itself
in the rigid lines of winners and losers,
Its vaunting irony, its booted curled-lip
humour, its scything realism that takes
every thought at the knee, its trip-wire horror

³³ Email from John Forth to Paul McLoughlin, 10th September, 2013

of all touch except tickle and rape, are coming
home to us down the inevitable lanes
to claim their birthright and to wear our face.

This is Liardet's legacy and Jones is nowhere angrier. He is a poet of the dispossessed, who remain dispossessed even in an ostensibly more liberal age.

CHAPTER SIX

The Island Normal (1980): A Search For Poise

1. A Note on Normality

Speaking about his novel, *House Mother Normal*,¹ B. S. Johnson said:

What I wanted to do was take an evening in an old people's home, and see a single set of events through the eyes of not less than eight old people. Due to the various deformities and deficiencies of the inmates, these events would seem to be progressively "abnormal" to the reader. At the end there would be the viewpoint of the House Mother, an apparently "normal" person, and the events themselves would then seem to be so bizarre that everything that had come before would seem "normal" by comparison.²

Brian Jones's earlier *A Family Album* (1968) had allowed four members of the same extended family to tell their own stories. Johnson's characters, too, speak for themselves in their allocated chapters. Furthermore, the novelist's 'inmates' with their working-class backgrounds and manner of speaking own a goodly similarity with *A Family Album*'s Aunt Em and her Uncle Fred, though Jones's speakers are the feistier. Both Jones and Johnson were probably influenced, as has been observed earlier, by the 1960s' television dramas, which included David Mercer's *In Two Minds*, a play that dealt with schizophrenia. The title of Jones's 1980 collection makes the same quasi-allegorical use of the word 'normal' as Johnson's novel had in 1971. Jones's England's 'normal' is crumbling, as are Johnson's characters, and its progress is as dysfunctional as the governance exhibited in the *House Mother*, who cannot be said to care for those in her charge. As is posited in the work of R. D. Laing, what is by common consent regarded as 'normal' seems to have exchanged places with what is 'abnormal'³

¹ B. S. Johnson, *House Mother Normal* (Collins, 1971; Quartet Books PB, 1973)

² Quoted in 1streading's Blog: 'A Year of Reading Dangerously: B S Johnson'

<http://1streading.wordpress.com/2011/01/05/house-mother-normal/>

³ See, for example, Laing's *The Divided Self* (Tavistock Publications, 1960; Pelican Books, 1965)

2. A Change of Publisher

*The Island Normal*⁴ was Jones's seventh collection of poems. The six earlier collections included a 1970 pamphlet⁵ for an emergent publisher (who, literally, turned up on his doorstep asking for poems), and a volume commissioned by Leonard Clark for his 'Chatto Poets for the Young' series⁶ ("designed to satisfy the need for short books of high quality contemporary poetry written with young people in mind.");⁷ but Jones remained in all essentials a London Magazine poet, Alan Ross having published four collections by 1974, and a reissue of the first two books in a single hardback edition in 1972. It might have been expected, therefore, that Ross would continue to be his publisher. Instead, *For Mad Mary* (1974) proved to be Jones's last for London Magazine Editions.

Letters from Jones to Alan Ross suggest that the reasons for a change of publisher were not merely financial (though this would certainly have been a significant factor).⁸ One undated letter from Jones is clear:⁹

Let's shelve the notion of volume of poems. It's clear you're not enthusiastic and you may be right. I haven't the confidence in my own stuff to be able to shout in its defence.¹⁰

Nevertheless, a number of the poems from *The Island Normal* were accepted for and first appeared in *London Magazine*.¹¹ Clearly, however, Ross was not always impressed. 'Her Party' and 'Supplement Story' are mentioned as having been

⁴ *The Island Normal*, op. cit.

⁵ *The Mantis Hand and other poems* (Arc, Gillingham, Kent, 1970); a pamphlet, edited by Tony Ward, issued in a limited edition of 250, of which 25 were signed and numbered by the author

⁶ *The Spitfire on the Northern Line* ('Chatto Poets for the Young', Chatto & Windus, London, 1975)

⁷ Back-cover blurb, presumably written by the series' General Editor, Leonard Clark

⁸ By the late 'seventies, Ross had more or less given up book publishing. An expensive libel action resulting from a 1973 piece by Dotson Rader ('The Private Letters of Tennessee Williams') did not help the financial situation. Ross did publish Roy Fuller's *The Reign of Sparrows* in 1980 but by now LME had become very much an *ad hoc* enterprise. Subsequent publications tended to be supported by private underwriters. A glance at the list of London Magazine Editions advertised for sale in the penultimate February-March 2001 issue (Ross died in the February) will show that most of the books were available pre-1980. Financial constraints in the 'eighties were even more pronounced and one wonders how the magazine survived as it did.

⁹ *The Island Normal* must be the manuscript referred to. It is the first volume Ross rejected, and Carcanet published this and subsequent collections.

¹⁰ *London Magazine* Archive, University of Leeds Brotherton Library Special Collections

¹¹ 'The Island Normal', 'Overnight', 'Too Late', 'Holiday Report', and 'Minnis Bay' first appeared in *London Magazine* Vol.16 No.1 (April-May 1976); 'The Slaughterhouse Foreman's Son', 'The Slaughterhouse Foreman's Daughter', and 'The Slaughterhouse Foreman's Wife' in Vol.16 No.6 (February-March 1977); 'Cambridge, Class of 19—', 'In Memory', and 'Return to Wasteground' in Vol.17 No.6 (December 1977)

retained, in three of Jones's letters: dated 16th February 1976, 24th October 1976, and 24th April 1977.¹² The first of these begins:

Thanks for the letter and advice – I felt as soon as I'd mailed the poems to you that perhaps it was premature. I had sent *all* the poems I'd written in the last year, and had not perhaps allowed enough time for the weaker ones to show themselves to me.¹³

'Her Party' eventually appeared in *Poetry Review*.¹⁴ Ross was no doubt acting as any helpful editor might, but his taking for *London Magazine* eleven poems from a manuscript (or part-manuscript) he had long had in his possession (some of the poems for well over a year) makes one wonder what his misgivings might have been.¹⁵ It is to be regretted that the *London Magazine* archive does not include Ross's letters (perhaps because he did not copy them). That Ross, nevertheless, asked after the collection, and even suggested an alternative publisher, is evident from a subsequent Jones letter:

Thank you for your kind enquiry – no, I haven't found a publisher yet and funnily enough the first refusal came from Oxford! I sent it there about six months ago, and despite praise for the poems which I think was more than the usual blah they decided against it. The ostensible reason was an already heavy commitment and a full list.

I hope you are keeping well, and all financial heads are above water.¹⁶

Jones then turned to Michael Schmidt's Manchester-based Carcanet where his manuscript was warmly received:

Peter Jones and I have read the poems with unusual enthusiasm. It is the most interesting collection by a British poet that has reached us for some time, and we would like to publish it. It is certainly a more interesting collection than your earlier books which I have always enjoyed (though I've not seen *For Mad Mary*).¹⁷

The letter also included a request to use the 'Aeneas and After' sequence in *PN Review*, the poetry magazine then jointly edited by Schmidt, Donald Davie and C.H.Sisson. It is interesting to observe that *The Island Normal* is the first of Jones's

¹² *London Magazine* Archive, op. cit.

¹³ Letter from Brian Jones to Alan Ross, 16th February 1976: *London Magazine* Archive, op. cit.

¹⁴ Vol.69 No.2 (December 1979) along with 'A Sunflower Out of Place' and three as yet uncollected poems.

¹⁵ When I visited Alan Ross in the *London Magazine* office in South Kensington, he enquired rather quizzically why I was still interested in Jones. Ross clearly felt that Jones's early work was to be preferred to what followed, but this view, shared by Sutherland-Smith, is too general to point up specific misgivings. I would guess they have to do with Jones's poetry becoming more 'public'.

¹⁶ Letter from Brian Jones to Alan Ross, 31st October 1978: *London Magazine* Archive, op. cit.

¹⁷ Letter from Michael Schmidt to Brian Jones, 14th February 1979: Carcanet Archive

collections to carry an acknowledgements note. With rare and unacknowledged exceptions poems in the earlier books had been first published in *London Magazine*, if at all.¹⁸ *The Island Normal* lists nine sources,¹⁹ indicating, perhaps, Ross's waning enthusiasm and Jones's being forced to find new outlets.²⁰

Jones's attitude towards completed work would strike many as careless. One letter to Ross, for example, asks that copies of poems be returned in time for a reading:

My problem is that the definitive versions are with you and I wonder if you cd. send me copies of the following (all from the last section of the collection):

Horace bids farewell to Vergil
Aeneas Poems
The Centre (I think that's the title)²¹
At Great Tew²²

Michael Schmidt was to write to Jones prior to the publication of *The Children of Separation* in 1985 urgently requesting, *inter alia*, the required order of poems. One can only imagine his reaction on reading Jones's reply.²³

I must have misunderstood the order of things, as I was waiting to receive proofs of the poems I sent, with a view to my ordering the poems etc. I do, in fact, need a copy of the poems as I did not keep copies of every poem I sent you. Could you send me the poems or a photocopy and I'll correct, order and do the necessary.

The only time in his poetry 'career' he seemed at all exercised about getting his poems published came with *Freeborn John*, which correspondence with Michael Schmidt reveals Jones regarded as a necessary act of political intervention.²⁴

¹⁸ e.g. 'A Wife's Tale' in *The Critical Quarterly*, Vol.9 No.2 (Summer 1997) and 'From a Frontier Guard' in *Poetry Review*, Vol. LIX No.1(both, the latter as 'From the Frontier', subsequently in *Interior*, Alan Ross Ltd., 1969)

¹⁹ *The Sunday Times*, *London Magazine*, *Poetry South-East*, *Bananas*, *Poetry Review*, *The Little Word Machine*, *PN Review*, *P.E.N. New Poems 1977-8*, and *Poetry Dimension 5*.

²⁰ *London Magazine* apart, the history of Jones's poems appearing in poetry magazines is largely one of his being asked. Michael Schmidt asked Jones, for example, if he could use the sequence 'Aeneas and After' for his own *PN Review*. Finding new outlets must have been a frustration for one so uninterested in the 'business' of getting into print. Jones expressed to me his astonishment at Sylvia Plath's systematic and determined efficiency in getting her work published.

²¹ A reference, presumably, to what was eventually called 'Upon Crappleton House' in *The Island Normal*, pp.80/1

²² Letter from Brian Jones to Alan Ross, 17th October. (1976/1977?): *London Magazine* Archive.

²³ Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt, 30th May, 1985: Carcanet Archive

3. The Collection's Architecture

Jones's letter to Michael Schmidt enclosing the manuscript of *The Island Normal* is both helpful and revealing:

There are three sections. The first consists mainly of responses to features of contemporary England; the second uses the figure of Aeneas to explore the necessities and pains of re-creation; the third, through the figures of Falkland and Marvell, meditates on different reactions to civil war. In the Marvell poem, the other poet referred to is Milton.

Clearly, you will have your own opinions as to the success or otherwise of this shape and its components but this is a collection which has obsessed me for over three years – as an entity with inner coherences and references. It is the most consciously organized of my collections and I really see it as one poem.²⁵

It is not, perhaps, unusual to find a poet inclined towards regarding his work as one poem. Don Paterson, for example, has “never managed to think of poetry as anything but one big book that you publish in instalments . . . Any thematic coherence any book might have is dependent purely on the strength of my obsessions at the time.”²⁶ Nevertheless, Jones is referring to what he says has been ‘consciously organized’, and it is the collection's resultant unity and coherence that Hubert Moore responds to in his review:

The Island Normal works, (...) as every now and then a book of poems can work, as an integrated whole (...) The book plunges forward gathering its scars, until, in the third section, it reaches a climax – in 17th century England – with a 60-line poem called ‘At Great Tew’. We are with Viscount Falkland – a man of taste and balance – staring ‘Across an English field ... / into the mirror of an English field’, into which he proceeds suicidally to ride, becoming, as he does so, ‘a small island of one man’ between two armies of Englishmen hell-bent on destroying each other. It's a terrifying moment. And it's where the book's narrative has been leading us.²⁷

The back-cover blurb for Jones's book tells us that ‘Like his earlier collections, the book is carefully structured so that the individual poems and sections contribute to a compelling whole’. Other reviewers, in addition to Moore, also picked up on the

²⁴ ‘I would be pleased to hear from you as soon as possible abt yr view of the collection I sent. Apart from the usual anxiety a writer feels about his work, there are other things that make me feel impatient about this particular work at this particular time. I do feel it has a political urgency and relevance in a country where appalling things are happening’: Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt, dated 14th July, 1988: Carcanet Archive. (*Freeborn John* was published in 1990.)

²⁵ Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt, 10th February 1979: Carcanet Archive.

²⁶ Don Paterson, ‘Double Vision’, PBS Bulletin No.198, written on his *Landing Light* (Faber and Faber, 2003) being selected as The Poetry Book Society's Choice for Autumn 2003

²⁷ Hubert Moore, *South East Arts Review* (Spring 1980) p.38

collection's structure, and the ways in which the sections are linked. Gavin Ewart, for example, believed the collection's sixty-one poems 'deal mostly, either directly or indirectly (in poems featuring Roman history or legend) with the sadnesses and disillusion of modern living, the uneasiness in material sufficiency',²⁸ while Grevel Lindop considered the book's three sequences 'inextricably linked', the final poem bringing us back to 'the island from which we set out'.²⁹ In this way, contemporary England is not simply considered as it is but also through the refracting lenses of renewal, consolation, and the English Civil War. The title section alone comprises forty-eight poems, which makes it longer than many a full collection, but the broadening of perspective offered by Aeneas and Falkland and Marvell serves to set in greater relief what Martin Dodsworth called 'the want of happiness' that characterises many of the opening poems.³⁰

4. Somewhere in Contemporary England

'Overnight', the first in a wide ranging sequence of poems on the state of contemporary England,³¹ begins in fatigue and 'irritated boredom':³²

Stopping somewhere in England at a place
nondescript, halfway to our intention,
we get a bed and garage the hot car,
lugging only the one white case upstairs
to a room we barely look at.³³

Jones's 'somewhere' with its surprising fusion of vagueness and precision reminds of Larkin, the more so because 'nondescript' is a direct borrowing from the latter's 'The Whitsun Weddings',³⁴ and 'somewhere' reads like a compacted memory of the same poet's 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere'.³⁵ The comparison with Larkin will arise again at intervals throughout the title-section, and, while proving transitory on each occasion, nevertheless suggests itself as an example of what

²⁸ Gavin Ewart, *British Book News*, November 1980.

²⁹ Grevel Lindop, 'Classical Norms', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16th May 1980, p.562

³⁰ Martin Dodsworth, 'A Decent Length', *The Guardian*, 20th March, 1980, p.9

³¹ i.e. England in the late 1970s.

³² Paul Mills, 'Extending the Limits', *Poetry Review* Vol.71 No.1, (June 1981)

³³ (*TIN*, 9)

³⁴ Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit., p.21-3

³⁵ Philip Larkin, 'I Remember, I Remember', *The Less Deceived* (The Marvell Press, London, 1955), p.39

Bloom called the anxiety of influence.³⁶ Jones acknowledged that Larkin was a poet who spoke to him, but it was an uneasy relationship and there is an underlying sense in Jones of wanting to revisit Larkin and, as it were, rewrite him from a social(ist) base.³⁷

We are in another poem about an interrupted journey, this time involving car rather than train (as in Larkin or Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop' or Louis MacNiece's 'Autumn Journal'). The speaker and his wife eat 'what's here and pass no comment' because 'it's chance after all that we've alighted / between the poles of choice'.³⁸ The couple are evidently too weary to interest themselves in their surroundings. It is not only the car that is hot (under the bonnet) but also the travellers (under the collar) and the physical effort, generally a redeeming image in Jones, of 'lugging only the one white case upstairs' is almost beyond them. The tiredness, of course, need not be limited to present chores. The 'poles of choice' are where they have been and where they are headed for, but the rest of the poem (indicated here by the line being split, with the second half dropped down to form an emphatic caesura) discovers significance in the halfway, importance in the provisional. Paul Mills has commented on the provisionality inherent in 'halfway to our intention', 'it doesn't matter', 'it's chance after all'—

(...) these things seen halfway are as significant and undiscovered as the places which did matter, which are worth remembering, and which weren't arrived at by chance.³⁹

'But' may be the poem's pivot, as, indeed it is in 'Mr Bleaney',⁴⁰ yet, suddenly, this could no longer be Larkin. The reader is addressed directly and invited to become part of the scene: 'But look at her face'.⁴¹ From this point on, the guests' interest grows; there is, in what had been merely the 'place' with which it rhymes, a

³⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford University Press, 1973; 2nd edition 1997)

³⁷ In interview in 1998, eight years after the publication of his final individual collection, *Freeborn John*, Jones spoke about the English tradition of anecdotal verse and about Larkin in particular: 'Much as I admire Larkin – and he speaks to me – there is something about the approach to life I find dismal'. (*IC-CT*) p.321

³⁸ Since poems in earlier volumes have very often been 'domestic', it is reasonable to assume that, without evidence to the contrary, the speaker's companion is wife rather than partner or lover.

³⁹ Paul Mills, 'Extending the limits', op. cit.

⁴⁰ Philip Larkin. 'Mr Bleaney', op. cit. ('But if he stood and watched ... I don't know'.)

⁴¹ cf. the direct address in earlier Jones poems: in his response to a painting by de Hooch in the title poem of *Interior* ('See / the footstool, the low nursing chair').

‘face’ to attend to, that of the landlady whose child is ‘howling’ in another ‘somewhere’, located in ‘whatever part is private in this house’.⁴² This image of the landlady as one of ‘the really trapped’ links her to many other characters in Jones’s verse.⁴³ He is aware of this enduring theme in his poetry:

Somehow I could see in [‘Mad Mary’] all the enclosures and stiflings of my childhood and culture. I could see that also in my Aunt Em, the woman shut in her basement flat, with the darkness flooding in, as I had been shut in the prefab of my grammar school years. All these images of people being shut in, and the Courtenay figures with sacks over their heads, being punished and shut in a barn.⁴⁴

Being ‘really trapped’, of course, contrasts with the visitors being ‘halfway’. The landlady acts as she must, and the competing imperatives of professional and parental duty awaken the speakers’ interest, even if what is recognised is prompting them, as Larkin has it, to ‘whisper at their own distress’.⁴⁵ If their current ‘somewhere’ is one of their host’s necessary ‘poles of choice’, there have been, for them, other, similar times:

We glimpse again all those momentous wheres
we’re always absent from, as when
the train unscheduled stops, or the tyre
flattens in an irrelevant street.⁴⁶

The absence of an expected verb (‘makes’) transforms ‘unscheduled stops’ from adjective-and-noun into adverb-and-verb, creating an inversion prefigured in the earlier ‘place / nondescript’ (and in the collection’s title). But it also emphasizes the process of moving and not-moving, and de-emphasizes place: a ‘stop’ is ‘somewhere’. This foregrounding of ‘unscheduled’ is an obvious reference to Edward Thomas’s ‘Unwontedly’. ‘Adlestrop’, also the source for Larkin’s train poems, is, like Jones’s ‘Overnight’, a poem about an interrupted journey and the

⁴² From the vantage of the end of *The Island Normal*, both ‘private’ and ‘house’ put us in mind of Andrew Marvell, the former to be found in ‘To His Coy Mistress’, the latter in ‘Upon Appleton House’. The final poem in Jones’s collection, of course, is ‘Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge’.

⁴³ e.g. the eponymous figure in the title poem of Jones’s previous collection, *For Mad Mary*; his Aunt Em (again represented in *The Island Normal* in ‘In Memory: E.S.’); characters in ‘The Courtenay Play’. These and numerous others are recognised and revisited in one way or another in the couple’s hostess.

⁴⁴ (*IC-PNR*) p.54

⁴⁵ Philip Larkin, ‘Ambulances’ in *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit., p.33.

⁴⁶ The way the ordinary are contrasted with ‘momentous wheres’ here recalls (for me, at least) Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ in which the Old Masters are acutely aware that ‘human suffering ... takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along’.

interest aroused in what might otherwise have passed notice.⁴⁷ Now, the couple find themselves observing their surroundings more closely, beyond ‘the normal rate of jettison’:

Later we lie actually studying a room—
someone’s taste of paper and curtaining, someone’s
odd aside of a landscape, raw, unframed;
restlessly sleepless on futile snags of question
who have come in from the night to feel exclusion.

The similarly indeterminate ‘someone’ has suddenly replaced ‘somewhere’. The landlady may have aroused their interest but they remain separate from her and her life. They are struck by the reality of her otherness, marked by the ‘somewhere’ where the child cried. Her life is another ‘momentous where’ they cannot know.

Paul Mills found himself drawn to the couple’s growing interest in their landlady:

Excluded by the privacy of ‘someone’s taste of paper and curtaining’ the couple nevertheless begin to feel what is almost tenderness, a shared sympathy for someone they don’t know. But a sympathy that is ‘so far and no further’. The emotion is woven around the objects they see.⁴⁸

In discussing the final two stanzas of John Montague’s ‘All Legendary Obstacles’ (in which the poem’s lovers walk away along the platform kissing, watched by an old lady who had been the woman’s travelling companion for days and who now ‘marked / A neat circle on the glass / With her glove’⁴⁹ in order to watch them), John Lucas notes that:

(...) it is the presence of a watcher that gives the moment its significance. And it is altogether typical, or so I think, that the old lady on the train should at this moment become a kind of voyeur. This is a condition of travel. What you see from the window is invariably a life from which you are excluded but to which you may feel in some way drawn.⁵⁰

Larkin is the voyeur in ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ and, as Lucas also observes, Larkin’s train journey is one of discovery.⁵¹ What separates him from those he

⁴⁷ Edward Thomas, ‘Adlestrop’, *Selected Poems*, edited by R.S.Thomas (Faber and Faber, London, 1964), p.48.

⁴⁸ Paul Mills, ‘Extending the limits’, op. cit.

⁴⁹ John Montague, ‘All Legendary Obstacles’ from *Collected Poems* (The Gallery Press, 1995) p.217

⁵⁰ John Lucas, ‘Discovering England: the View from the Train’ from *Starting to Explain: Essays on Twentieth Century British and Irish Poetry* (Trent Editions, Nottingham, 2003), pp. 74/5. The essay first appeared in a special issue of *Literature and History*, 6.2 (Autumn 1997).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.89

muses on is ‘a fact of class to which the journey’s travelling coincidence momentarily at least both testifies and by an effort of imaginative sympathy overcomes’.⁵²

Jones, however, is not separated by class from those he observes. He has been made more aware of kinds of difference and separation that have been both highlighted and exacerbated by his own education. It is because the ‘emotion is woven around the objects [the couple] see’ that the poem may successfully end on an abstraction. The abstract here is felt. And in Jones it always has been. The speaker and his wife have come in from the night to feel the same anxiety that concluded the first poem in Jones’s first collection. In ‘Overnight’, Jones again ends on questions and sleeplessness, but now with an explicit emphasis on ‘exclusion’, on the anxiety of not belonging, of a failure to connect. ‘Turn-off’, another poem involving a break in a car journey, develops this alienation further: ‘I am a visitor / to my own country // and the guide books / are out of date’. It is the want of a sense of belonging that prompts Jones’s use of indeterminates like ‘somewhere’ and ‘someone’

‘Unchallenged space’⁵³ recalls Larkin’s ‘unfenced existence’,⁵⁴ ‘long perspectives’⁵⁵ and ‘high windows’⁵⁶ and the way the poems they are from (respectively, ‘Here’, ‘Reference Back’ and ‘High Windows’) end on an opening out on to a much broader vista than the poems might earlier have led us to expect. This broadening, universalizing effect ends ‘Overnight’, too, except that the effect has now been achieved by way of the abstraction ‘exclusion’. Jones’s ‘unchallenged space’ and ‘exclusion’, the one a reminder of vulnerability, the other a failure to connect, may be felt to be more closely related to existential terror than either of Larkin’s images. Jones, too, is finding his subjects in the ordinary, but unlike Larkin, he is less able to remain detached from those he observes—and these observed others, like the landlady in ‘Overnight’, lead him back inexorably to

⁵² Ibid., p.89

⁵³ (P, 7)

⁵⁴ Philip Larkin, ‘Here’ (in *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit. p.9). It is to Larkin’s ‘unfenced existence’ that Jones’s phrase ‘Unchallenged space’ might be traced.

⁵⁵ Philip Larkin, ‘Reference Back’, in *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit., p. 40

⁵⁶ Philip Larkin, ‘High Windows’, in *High Windows* op. cit., p17

himself and what he called his own ‘terrible sense of existentialist terror’.⁵⁷ What Larkin observes also leads to self-reflection, of course, but his tone is more one of empathetic resignation than one of identification.

Larkin’s ‘I Remember, I Remember’ also involves a view from a train. In ‘Inter City’, Jones takes his turn, but for him it is the train itself that tells of modern life. He is only an ‘Occasional user’ and given, therefore, to romanticising the train. He still expects ‘Karenina / steam about the ankles / and the strops uncles // used for razors / dangling to open windows’. But Jones is recalling, by way of the ‘Nostalgia and literature’ to which he is alert, the kind of train that no longer exists. This is not the kind that ‘unscheduled stops’, nor is it a train for ‘heard birdsong’. The modern train, rather, is one that ‘makes decisions / for you’, doors opening ‘as you approach’. Nor may windows be dropped or wound down. Instead, in a further Larkin echo, ‘All places feel like nowhere’ and the train, in which the speaker is trapped, brings on a kind of surrender, a time of suspension when responsibility recedes.⁵⁸ Jones begins to lose himself in memories of old-style trains, memories (in another echo from Larkin: ‘where my childhood was unspent’)⁵⁹ from ‘old times / I never knew’:

I am helpless and sit still.
Like life, it takes us whether we will
or not. I remember old times
I never knew: a lady climbs

out to pluck a primrose
as the train slows.
A man bounces, dreaming lechery.
A place that fosters free

⁵⁷ (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4. p.307

⁵⁸ cf. “I’m very fond of boats myself. I like the way they’re—contained. You don’t have to worry about where to go, or whether to go at all—the question doesn’t arise, because you on a *boat*, aren’t you?” Guildenstern in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Faber and Faber, 1967) p.72. Interestingly, for Michel Foucault (in his essay, ‘Des Espace Autres’, a work that considers the contemporary importance of space and unspace, which he felt had superseded history) ‘the ship is the heteratopia par excellence’. Jones spoke in interview about his liking for Foucault’s work (*IC-PNRi*, p.54). Michel de Certeau’s *L’invitation du Quotidien (The Practice of Everyday Life)* might also be consulted here, particularly his thoughts on the creative resistance exercised by ordinary people. Space (heteratopias) and resistance are recurring themes in Jones’s work. For Larkin and Jones (and Guildenstern) the salient features of the train (boat) journey relieve us temporarily of the need to resist.

⁵⁹ ‘I Remember, I Remember’, op. cit.

will, where a woman can stand
watching the passing features of the land
dissolve with speed, waiting for
the moment to fling outwards with the door.

This a Larkin ending, too, for it opens out with the door into a longer perspective that is implied rather than shown. This is the world that is beyond us, the world of ‘Unchallenged space’. But it is also a past possibility, not in the present.

There are technical attributes informing ‘Inter City’ that are worthy of attention, beyond our wondering whether the tightness and expertise of Larkin’s forms may have been an intuitive influence. Jones rarely rhymes at line-ends, generally preferring internal rhyme, assonance, consonance, and other sound-correlations, but ‘Inter City’ is written in quatrains, pairs of rhyming (or near-rhyming) couplets, in which the rhymes grow clearer as the poem progresses. The last four quatrains, including those quoted above, use full rhymes, as if the moment of captured suspension has somehow facilitated clarity of thought or the kind of harmony that Jones spoke of in his BBC Radio interview with Peter Orr, of ‘things finding a relationship with each other’.⁶⁰ What is also notable is the accumulation of meaning that is built up by Jones’s use of line-breaks. There is a stop after ‘sit still’ but what we hear next is ‘Like life’, which phrase now takes on a Janus-like quality of attaching itself not only to what it introduces but also to what it follows. ‘I remember old times’ is a unit of sense deepened and made more psychologically interesting by ‘I never knew’. They are not personal memories. That a woman can stand ‘watching the passing features of the land’ is again a thought complete in itself, until ‘dissolve with speed’ lends it greater authority and, paradoxically, particularity.

‘Inter City’ is a poem that encompasses many of Jones’s perennial concerns: the relentless impersonality of progress; the poetry and poetic themes of Edward Thomas; Russian literature, here represented by Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*; empathy with other lives, with people who in other less educated circumstances he would, he suspects, feel closer to; the existential terror that attends the ends of things, whether journeys or days; his unclubbability; his sense of estrangement. As in ‘Overnight’,

⁶⁰ ‘The Poet Speaks: Brian Jones & Peter Orr’, op. cit.

emotions are revealed in the clarity of the poem's observations, with the result that the poem ends with our being drawn into a narrative that is suddenly left to continue without us.

5. Here in Contemporary England (and Elsewhere)

The Whitsun Weddings opens with a poem called 'Here' where 'Here' is an England ultimately represented by 'Isolate villages' beyond Hull and its environs;⁶¹ Jones's poem of the same title⁶² is firmly ensconced in a Kentish town centre that Pan (in the form of a flute-playing busker who 'enchants pennies on the steps of the closed bank') has descended to from the 'ancient hillsides'. Jones's busker knows where to make his pitch, because he 'knows the odds'. The busy modern town is thus seen in a potent mix of contemporary and ancient images: archaeologists with their 'amateur / camaraderie' have 'two more days of dig and clipboard / before the pros move in with yellow // ironclad bulldozers' and 'the 'clanking drills / replace a third time the pedestrian precinct / ruined by delivery vans and sneaky saloons'.⁶³ The town's 'citizens' cast the 'foreigners' they 'hate' (mostly, given their proximity, the French) as latter day invaders 'on pillaging day-trips', although Jones's sympathy (or at least his attention) seems drawn towards those who remain outside the pale of recognised achievement (or of self-regulating citizenship): the busker; the 'stentorian who dares an argument / placarded with the Socialist Weekly / like the boy in Dickens who bit',⁶⁴ even the 'catholic pigeons' who do not avoid busker and company as all others do, because they 'eat anywhere'. The detritus left by the respectable is swept away on Monday in the 'cleansing of the streets', much like the 'chocolate papers, tea leaves, and, between // The rocks. the rusting soup-cans' to be found in Larkin's 'To the Sea'.⁶⁵ If anything, the rubbish abandoned to be

⁶¹ The fact that Larkin's poem takes the reader out to the coast makes it questionable whether it describes a train journey as is generally assumed. No train travels or travelled here. Perhaps it is best to regard the poem as a composite of several journeys: some by train; others by car.

⁶² (*TIN*, 23)

⁶³ cf. Larkin writing about 'raw estates' in 'Here'.

⁶⁴ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, V: 'Sometimes, I remember, I resigned myself to thoughts of home and Pegotty, and to endeavouring, in a confused blind way, to recall how I had felt, and what sort of boy I used to be, before I bit Mr Murdstone.' [p. 84 in *Complete Works, David Copperfield I*, Centennial Edition, distributed by Heron Books]

⁶⁵ Philip Larkin, *High Windows*, op. cit., p. 9

cleansed in Jones's poem is more squalid than that left by Larkin's people who are at least attempting to enjoy themselves. The cultural desert implied by the 'Here' of Jones's town is not restricted to England or Kent, however, because the very next poem, paired with 'Here' not only by placement but also by its complementary title, 'Elsewhere', discovers the vulgar tat of tourist shops in Arles where both Van Gogh and Gauguin stayed and painted:

Angling a quick kill, mayfly tourist shops
 stock sunflower prints and Gauguin-labelled beers
 and endless shelves of bonsai chaises Van Gogh.
 We half-search for a stall of plastic ears.⁶⁶

But this is not just a cultural desert. In 'Elsewhere', culture has been commodified and tamed to the point where the passion behind Van Gogh's cutting off his own ear can be imagined as commemorated by plastic mementoes.⁶⁷ In the England of Jones's 'Here', the pillaging day-trips' present a different form of invasion. This is a world of downmarket commerce, of making money any way one can, where buskers form 'a small competitive / queue' for 'licences'.

'Summer Slides' is a series of snapshots of England separated by a choral 'click'. The individual and separate quatrains are innovative and non-Larkinesque ways of capturing the fragmentation of an England in decline. They are also haiku-like in their concise registering of so many of Jones's concerns. The first quatrain, for example, picks up on the ubiquity of media noise⁶⁸ and the refuge craved in a hotel bedroom (even if the 'escape' is another form of the 'exclusion' felt by the couple in 'Overnight'):

Everywhere, music bleeds
 from walls.
 To escape, we gorge fried rice
 in a hotel bedroom.

The hotel, of course, also highlights transience, non-belonging and unrootedness. At Blists Hill's Victorian town, one of Shropshire's ten Ironbridge Gorge Museums, the speaker and his partner 'compare postcards' and in the Lake District, noting the air cool 'god's green muscles', they 'study maps'. The non-capitalisation of 'god' reminds us Jones's is a secular vision. The world has found other gods: postcards

⁶⁶ 'Elsewhere', (*TIN*, 24)

⁶⁷ I'm told that, in Jerusalem, one may buy plastic crowns of thorns.

⁶⁸ In 'Minnis Bay', transistor radios are busy 'feeding the heads' of day-trippers. (*TIN*, 15)

and maps have replaced Wordsworth's search for immanence. Elsewhere Jones notes:

The picnickers rise
from their false-rustic tables.
There is so much more to see
now England's a museum.

Both the simulacra of 'false-rustic' and the heritage culture of England as a museum are important not only to 'Summer Slides' but also to Jones's collection as a whole. David Gervais, in the final chapter of *Literary Englands* ('Afterword: A homemade past'), quotes from Jonathan Raban's account of the town of Rye in East Sussex:

Its very failure as a town had emerged as a marketable commodity for which there was an apparently unlimited international demand. Stagnation and decay, smartly painted and packaged, were selling like hot cakes. Looking at the Rye town model, I thought how horribly well it might be made to work as a representation of Britain at large.⁶⁹

Gervais summarizes this view by saying, 'Modern England is in danger of becoming a museum of itself'. Indeed, in Julian Barnes's *England, England*, Sir Jack Pitman, a 'grotesque, visionary tycoon' (and a disturbingly recognizable figure of modern life) constructs on the Isle of Wight 'a vast heritage centre containing everything "English" from Buck House to Stonehenge, from Manchester to the White Cliffs of Dover'.⁷⁰

6. The Garden of Contemporary England

Given that Jones worked first in a school in Canterbury and then in adult education, particularly in the Thanet area, it is unsurprising to find poems in this collection set in Kent, the county traditionally known as the Garden of England (largely because of its abundance of orchards and hop gardens). Jones would not be expected to use the phrase, probably because he recognized it as a marketing slogan. Instead, in 'On the Edge', Jones calls it the 'arsehole of England', a phrase that because of the county's shape and geographical position takes on a comically accurate aspect.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Jonathan Raban, *Coasting* (Pan Books, 1987) p.210.

⁷⁰ Julian Barnes, *England, England* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1998) Dust Jacket blurb.

⁷¹ Michael Cayley also noted this in his review of the collection ('The Word Future', *PN Review* 19, op. cit.): 'think of the old British School of Motoring ads where Britain was portrayed as a driver and the phrase is anatomically exact for part of the Kent coast'.

On the never-ending sands of ‘Minnis Bay’, there is ‘nothing to do’, as if life, too, has been ‘thinned tuneless’ like the culture broadcast from transistors on the beach. And the phrase ‘thinned tuneless’ almost lets the reader hear the transistors’ low quality, tinny sound. The listeners are also at the mercy of a new consumerism which peddles ‘French-named creams’, crisps and cola. It is where convalescents are ‘horribly sent . . . to do nothing in vacant places’, another kind of ‘nowhere’ in the grip of the media. The town is resigned to its own demise. This is the end of England in more ways than one. Such hopelessness is captured in ‘On the Edge’:

The Victorian towns crumble their piecrust
derivative splendours and are losing trade.
Decisions are made here. The word ‘future’
bandied as if it were an option.

The theme of decay also informs ‘Summer: A Kent Village’ where the speaker finds ‘the rot of ancient masteries’, those of country house and religion (‘the gabled fine house and the great / vicarage staking the boundaries’). The church that ‘grows among trees’ is now ‘unemphatic’ and a ‘piddling / stream barely makes it under the bridge’. Throughout the collection’s opening title-sequence, Michael Cayley finds ‘the sense of a society where human achievement is at best an illusion, more often abandoned’.⁷² The wasteground that used to house the visiting fair⁷³ is now a car salesroom in which everything is seen in terms of virility and gender roles:

wide-lapelled young men, their raspberry
and mustard wool ties tumescingly knotted: the wives
nuzzling older differentials with their uplifts.

The only cause for return is a Volvo, a foreign car, and a symbol of the new opulence of post-war England:

A sheer and satiny one
stands like a celebrity no one dares approach
at the heart of the party. It cuts me dead
front on with its blank and armoured face.

Harold Macmillan had said in the late nineteen-fifties, ‘Let’s be frank about it; most of our people have never had it so good’,⁷⁴ and it wasn’t long before owning a car

⁷² Michael Cayley, ‘The Word Future’, op. cit.

⁷³ ‘Return to Wasteground (*TIN*, 17)

⁷⁴ In a speech delivered at Bedford on 20th July, 1957, though he was probably taking his lead from the Democratic Party’s slogan (‘You Never Had It So Good’) in the U.S. election campaign of 1952.

was no longer the preserve of the moneyed classes. The rise of popular culture, however, did not take the form envisaged by Lawrence or Hoggart. John Morris, controller of the Third Programme between 1952 and 1958, had this to say in his introduction to an anthology of its productions:

It was decided from the beginning that the Third programme should not compromise; it should make no concessions to popular taste (...) any attempt to “brighten-up” by “talking down” to our listeners would inevitably have led to a general lowering of intellectual standards.⁷⁵

Doubtless, Jones would have been uncomfortable with any implication that standards were the property of the few, but he would have applauded high quality broadcasting being available to all.⁷⁶ His ‘Footnote to a Decline and Fall’ satirises what television entertainment had become. Jones saves his angriest attention for those who tried to persuade a growing audience that ‘High art is crap. / Polysyllable is pretension.’⁷⁷ As the concept of ‘entertainment’ as an escape from life took greater hold, so it became, as it were, part of the normality it purported to take people out of. ‘Footnote to a Decline and Fall’ is a protest against an incipient philistinism, both ‘popular’ and institutional, a protest that would reach its height in *Freeborn John* (1990).

7. The Boredom of Normality

The collection’s title-poem, ‘The Island Normal’, deals with leaving and returning to an England that is at once home and a repository of normality and limitation:

So often we push off from it, bored stiff
by its rightness, taking ages to jettison
the blue prescription of its near-shore waters,
and in no time we know we’ve insufficient
stomach for the great swell

⁷⁵ Quoted in Neil Powell’s ‘Third Best’, *PN Review* Vol. 31 No. 3 (January – February 2005) p. 6.

⁷⁶ I’m told that Peter Maxwell Davies attributes his entire early ‘working-class’ musical education to listening to the Third Programme.

⁷⁷ Brian Jones told me in conversation that he had always loathed a Sam Cooke pop song dating from 1960, called ‘Wonderful World’ because of the sentiment of its lyrics: “Don’t know much about history, / Don’t know much biology. / Don’t know much about a science book, / Don’t know much about the French I took. / But I do know that I love you, / And I know that if you love me, too, / What a wonderful world this would be.”

A number of critics identified the boredom that forms part of Jones's critique of contemporary England. Andrew Motion, for example, wrote of the 'tedium and apathy' into which England is 'accused' by Jones to have 'slumped'.⁷⁸ Michael Cayley sees this boredom as 'a sense of lost purpose' in which the reader is taken on the journey from 'a nondescript 'somewhere' to the 'arsehole of England'.⁷⁹ Peter Bland finds 'an instantly recognizable if rundown landscape'.⁸⁰ Returning, getting back, however, is 'miraculous—it's really miraculous'. The 'Island' heaves up 'as if unanchored and full of compassion', precisely those attributes it seems devoid of when familiar. Suddenly the bay's blues are 'gorgeous' and 'stepping on to the jetty, the wood creaking, / we're primed, it feels, like Odysseus with marvels'. Even this euphoria is qualified, however:

But since we've been nowhere, precisely Nowhere,
of all those quiet Normalists, who shore-based know
the obvious horrors of ocean, who will listen?

Humphrey Clucas noted this strange and haltingly regenerative defamiliarisation:

Brian Jones's title-poem is perhaps the key to his work. It concerns the attempt to escape the boredom of normality, the failure to go far enough, the miracle of safe returns, and the lack of anything to say to those who stay behind.⁸¹

A failure to go far enough is a function of what, in 'Fearful', Jones calls 'romantic agoraphobia'. Because of insufficient engagement with the *other*, it results in where the travellers have been turning out to be 'Nowhere'. It is stay-at-home Horace wanting nevertheless something of Vergil's adventurousness, without quite managing properly to embrace it.⁸² And it isn't so much the lack of anything to say, perhaps, as the futility of saying it. The problem of 'who will listen?' prompts a telling reflection by Grevel Lindop:

One solution Jones found in many of his best poems was to set his dark subjects of mental, emotional and social disturbance at the centre of the pastoral landscapes he was so adept at creating. 'Return to Wasteground'

⁷⁸ Andrew Motion, 'A Dishonoured Myth', *New Statesman*, 8th February, 1980.

⁷⁹ Michael Cayley, 'The Word Future', *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ Peter Bland, 'Exile and late Vuillard', *London Magazine* Vol. 20 Nos.5&6 (August-September 1980) p.111. Bland remains the critic who has noticed most Jones's concern with the effects of social class.

⁸¹ Humphrey Clucas, 'Geographies', in *Agenda*, Vol. 19 Nos. 2/3, 1980.

⁸² 'Horace Bids Farewell to Vergil' (*TIN*, 67/68)

shows a patch of what is now called edgeland, natural territory for Jones, taken over by a car showroom.⁸³

Martin Dodsworth describes the ‘normal state’ of Jones’s island as ‘repulsive’⁸⁴ and Grevel Lindop reminds us that ‘the secret of normality is that it knows the horrors and guiltily prefers not to be reminded of them’.⁸⁵ Futility and guilt may be different issues but in Jones they are always closely linked. Interestingly, Jones grants both ‘Nowhere’ and ‘Normalists’ the capitals of allegory, as if they were a real place and its inhabitants, because learning about normality and learning to normalise ourselves gains us access to everywhere civilised and thus to the accommodating boredom that is nowhere. Not wishing to stay but feeling uncomfortable elsewhere may also repeat the ambivalence about marriage in Jones’s earlier collections, its being both imprisoning and secure. The speaker of ‘Fearful’ presents himself as ‘a natural for footloose / speculation and shouldered haversack’ but asks ‘Why does space hate me?’

8. Other Personae & Characters

In *The Island Normal*, there are poems that deal with other lives, and there were critics, like Andrew Motion, who preferred the distancing effect this kind of displacement achieves, feeling uncomfortable with the intensely personal:

(...) in his most successful pieces [Jones] allows the stress of isolation to force him out of himself and into the personality of another character. The result is a degree of imaginative freedom which enables him to deepen the significance of his recurrent preoccupations.⁸⁶

The female personae of *Interior* (1969) had suggested that Jones had grown tired of seeing the material he had used regarded as straightforwardly autobiographical. Better to avoid the issue, then, by focussing the reader’s attention on other lives. In *The Island Normal*, the poems involving the slaughterhouse foreman and his family are at once examples of this kind of displacement and further forays into the world of dramatic monologue. But even here the poet is never far away, for these are still

⁸³ Grevel Lindop, ‘The Mirror of an English Field’, *PN Review* 218, Vol.40 No.6 (July-August, 2014)

⁸⁴ Martin Dodsworth, ‘A Decent Length’, op. cit.

⁸⁵ Grevel Lindop, ‘Classical Norms’, op. cit.

⁸⁶ Andrew Motion, ‘A Dishonoured Myth’, op. cit., pp. 214/5.

family poems. 'The Slaughterhouse Foreman's Son' recognizes all manner of class significances in his position. His father's promotion to a position that enabled him to come home in the evening no longer reeking of the slaughterhouse coincided with his 'entering grammar school / noosed in a black and silver tie', the transferred noose transformed into a metaphor for isolation and estrangement and enforced advancement:

On Sundays
we walked stiffly together in our new success
and have never since that time said what we thought.

This response of keeping one's feelings and opinions to oneself is what characterised the nineteen-fifties for Jones. In the late nineteen-nineties, he would say of his teenage years: 'I'm the product of John Major's wonderful 1950s' culture where nobody said anything to anyone about anything.'⁸⁷ Jones was referring to John Major's 'Back to Basics' campaign in 1993, but even retrospectively, it suggests the relevance of Jones's late 1970s' exploration of 1950s' childhood?⁸⁸ Here, the son relates to 'the departing cows' who are led away 'nodding yes yes to their fate'. This image reappears in 'March the Twenty-First' where cattle are seen 'crossing a field with that yes-yes of heads / as if the earth murmured and they agreed'.⁸⁹

Grevel Lindop summarized the responses of son, daughter and wife to what he called 'this heavy taciturn man' as, respectively, 'glum indifference, fascinated emotional dependence and martyred acquiescence'.⁹⁰ The slaughterer himself knows he is an outcast, a scapegoat, and protests the honesty of his work by comparing the abattoir to the brewery that 'swallows coachloads whole / and spews them two hours later, pissed'. He has no time for their hypocrisy: 'If they came here, I'd make them leave clear-eyed'. He would speak out like Conrad's Marlow about the hypocrisy of those who seem to have forgotten that they are protected

⁸⁷ (*IC-PNR*) p.53.

⁸⁸ Ironically, the campaign foundered in a quagmire of political sleaze that led to a number of ministerial and party resignations. Perhaps it would be mischievous to suggest that this met with a wry, not to say triumphal, grin from Jones.

⁸⁹ This kind of exact visual representation of animal behaviour again puts me in mind of MacCaig: 'A hen stares at nothing with one eye, / Then picks it up' from 'Summer Farm' in *Selected Poems* (Chatto & Windus, 1997) p. 3.

⁹⁰ Grevel Lindop, 'Classical Norms', *op. cit.*

from having to rely on their own innate strength by ‘stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman’.⁹¹ He would make meat-eaters face their guilty secret.

The slaughterer may be trapped in a world of violence, but he knows who he is to the point of obstinacy. The woman of ‘Her Testament’ is equally defiant, if despairing: ‘All the fictions have failed’. She lives now in a world in which ‘Only decay thrives’. She has burned her paintings because they were ‘love-letters to myself’. They praised the bright and the ephemeral but now she prefers darkness:

They will find me, my effects
lodged between head and feet,
rotten and cold.
No lavender deceits.

Her counterpart in ‘Her Party’ reviews what’s left when ‘the god is dead’ and the party is over. Is the god ‘love’? The trappings of contentment (the conversation, the background Bach, ‘thick arithmetic’) paper over cracks. The aftermath is the usual mess to be cleaned away, then some desultory love-making at the climax of which she recalls the evening’s gossip. Then her husband-partner is ‘snoring and gone small’, a formulation that for Michael Cayley demonstrates Jones’s ‘ability to extract poetry out of everyday events and to draw more than one layer of meaning.’⁹² Both the penis and the man have ‘gone small’. When he has ‘toppled sideways’ to sleep ‘like a stone’, she is left to herself. It is another poem that ends on questions in a mind hankering after ‘quiet dreams’.

9. Politics (and Anarchy)

Jones’s anarchic aunt and the ‘air of putrefaction’ found in ‘Too Late’ bring us back to the title-sequence’s epigraph: ‘place your hands on the sources of its ugliness’, a quotation from Kropotkin’s ‘An Appeal to the Young’, first published in 1890.⁹³ It

⁹¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Part 2.

⁹² Michael Cayley, *P.N.Review* 19, op. cit.

⁹³ http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/kropotkin/appealtoyoung.html Prince Peter Kropotkin (1842- 1921) was an anarchist-communist theorist, activist and writer of a number of classic anarchist works, including *Mutual Aid* (1890-6). In the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (for which he wrote the "anarchy" definition in the famed 11th edition), Kropotkin describes himself: *Although he achieved renown in a number of different fields, ranging from geography & zoology to sociology & history, he shunned material success for the life of a revolutionist.*

is addressed to young men and women about to enter the professions. Would-be doctors, scientists, lawyers, engineers, and artists of all kinds are asked to consider what the purpose of such roles might and should be and invited to pledge themselves to the cause of what Kropotkin calls socialism, but might better be described as anarchism. Kropotkin argues by way of examples that the benefits of each of these professions reach only a few and suggests how these professions might better align themselves to work for the poor. He speaks of a society ‘hastening to putrefaction’⁹⁴ and goes on to address poets, sculptors and musicians, each of whom is invited to ‘place your hand on the causes of its ugliness’. It should be the artist’s business ‘to tell us what a rational life would be if it did not encounter at every step the follies and the ignominies of our present social order’. Jones’s verse and his desire to provide a voice for ‘those who cannot speak’ are a response to this invitation. While Jones might not choose to be termed an anarchist, it seems likely that he would nod in agreement with George Woodcock’s summary of the anarchist ideal:

It is precisely as an ideal, as a touchstone to judge the existing world, that the Anarchist vision is useful (...) Anarchism is a moral and social doctrine before it is a political one; it stands as a permanent reminder of the perils of national and corporate giantism and of the virtues of local interests and loyalties. It teaches the vigilance by which man may be able to avoid such bleak utopias as those of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell.⁹⁵

Peter Bland was impressed by Jones’s commitment in *The Island Normal*:

Jones is writing excellent political poetry without ever mentioning a political party. He’s developed a means of heightened reportage where language works at an extraordinary level of observed intensity.⁹⁶

Examples of such ‘observed intensity’ have already been noted but it is easy to add to the list. ‘The Winter Harvesters’ is a powerful account of Jones’s admiration for the physical effort involved and the suffering it speaks clearly of:

Two faces raise,
cold, bitter, the human narrowed to
function like the blades in their chunk grip.
The sun slings from them nodding shadows.

⁹⁴ cf. ‘Too Late’^s ‘air of putrefaction’ (*TIN*, 12)

⁹⁵ George Woodcock, ‘Anarchism’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1975), Macropaedia 1, p.813

⁹⁶ Peter Bland, ‘Exile and Late Vuillard’, op. cit., p. 111.

The nodding shadows remind of the ‘yes yes’ of the slaughterhouse cattle nodding to their fate. This is language chiselled out of a shrunken, granite store containing nothing polysyllabic, its ‘chunk’ grip as exactly surprising as the sun that ‘slings’. To know the relentlessness of such lives is to ‘flounder bewildered’. We see more of this hammered language in ‘Turn-Off’, another journey-poem in which the speaker seeks temporary refuge from the ‘bland endlessness of by-passes’. Its picture of England is the record of adjectives: ‘withering stump of a stopped road’; ‘decrepit settlement’; ‘splintered sign’; ‘simplified sickness of currency’; and violent verbs in its later stages: ‘shouts’; ‘buffeted’; ‘slammed’; ‘thumps’. It is writing of this kind that prompted Paul Mills to detect ‘a tone in which we begin to hear a hopeless whisper of futility’.⁹⁷ ‘That House’, a ten-line poem that manages to say something about the English idyll, and myth, and self-delusion, and pretentiousness, ends on a Larkinesque note: ‘Marvellous, the sweet fields Misery grazes / and is still Misery’. There is no consolation to be had in religion, either. Inside a cathedral, ‘Georgian ice-white elegant slabs / are cakes to sweeten death’ and ‘headless children wait with a headless mother’.⁹⁸ Patients in ‘Of Gods’ are reduced to ‘Godless debris’ who, like the priest who visits them and asks ‘How are we’, know that ‘some gods / Die before men’.⁹⁹ But the statuary of tombstones can ‘Engender awe’. We may not understand how ‘this thinking sphere / can cross from Here to whatever There / is, although the one thing sure’, but we still find ourselves ‘gazing at the names of dust’. It is the kind of consolation found in art, in the paintings of Samuel Palmer, for example, or the way we ‘grip aesthetics like a charm’.¹⁰⁰ Yet it appears we still ‘clamour for an Eden whose gates clanged / forever ago’; we have, it seems, ‘learnt nothing’.¹⁰¹

Given Jones’s antipathy to all things religious, one response to the opening section of *The Island Normal* might be to regard it as anti-sacramental, that the crumbling England he sees is an outward sign of his own inner want of grace.

⁹⁷ Paul Mills, ‘Extending the Limits’, op. cit.

⁹⁸ ‘Cathedral’ (*TIN*, 32)

⁹⁹ (*TIN*, 33)

¹⁰⁰ ‘Cathedral’, op. cit.

¹⁰¹ Two quotations are from ‘At Shoreham’ (*TIN*, 38). There are other poems about art in the collection, including ‘Confrontation’ (39) which also concerns Palmer. See also ‘Naïve Painting’ (56), ‘A Sunflower Out of Place’ (59), ‘Wood Carver’ (60), ‘Conrad and Night’ (61) and ‘Enter Spring’ (62).

Certainly, as Dodsworth and others have observed, Jones's apparent want of something to praise¹⁰² is at its height in this section, yet, as with Larkin, the consistent quality of phrase and observation is more than sufficient at least to offset any threateningly depressive mood. As Dodsworth acknowledges, 'there is much that is brilliantly caught'. The remaining two sections of the collection are, therefore, in their different ways, attempts to find greater poise and ease of mind.

10. The Necessities and Pains of Recreation

'Aeneas and After' was a new venture, described by Jones as one that 'uses the figure of Aeneas to explore the necessities and pains of re-creation'.¹⁰³ The sequence was much admired by Michael Schmidt who, in accepting the collection for Carcanet, asked if he could take it for *PN Review*. Carcanet's 'Advance Information' included the following note:

The Island Normal includes the outstanding sequence 'Aeneas and After', taking Jones's concern with character and context into an historical and legendary sphere, invoking in brilliant parodic translation Horatian odes and revisiting ground explored by Andrew Marvell. The effect is not 'literary' but civic in the broadest sense. Jones's concerns are with cultural connection which he reveals by careful ordering of images and by his brilliant wit.¹⁰⁴

The Marvell ground revisited is the former's 'Upon Appleton House' (itself part of the long tradition of the country-house poem) against which Jones sets the final poem in his sequence, 'Upon Crappleton House'. The 'civic' rather than 'literary' effect he refers to is achieved through his interest in the ideas of duty and service that combine to create a public life (specifically here the civic duty involved in reconstructing and recreating a society after the destruction of Troy). The sequence encapsulates a number of technical advances in the use of a variety of forms and a growing use of rhyme - and, importantly, in its more detached attention to themes like home and the (re-)creative process itself, the latter involving the setting down of new roots (and perhaps the word's Middle English sense of 'consolation'). It also

¹⁰² Martin Dodsworth felt Jones's 'want of happiness' to be 'debilitating' ('A decent length' op. cit.), while John Horder ('The moonlit door', *The Times Educational Supplement*, 11th July, 1980) regrets that Jones seems unable to 'enjoy himself'.

¹⁰³ Brian Jones letter to Michael Schmidt dated 10th February 1979, Carcanet Archive.

¹⁰⁴ Advance Information flier produced by Carcanet.

represents a transition in the poet's development, a time when he wanted to build on the innovative historical approach he had used in 'The Courtenay Play':¹⁰⁵

I think, like most poets, I'm a magpie — that something is opportunistically there when I want it (...) And I think that's what happened with ... the Aeneas sequence, which I was very pleased with. I learnt Latin at school. I wasn't doing poetry. I was struggling through translations and then, much later in my life, around the time of *The Island Normal* I suddenly found I was drawn to look at *The Aeneid* in Latin. Something had taken me to it, perhaps because of its sense of overwhelming sadness and loss and the need to find something else — again the faultline between two worlds. That was coming up because I was on the point of leaving many things, including my marriage, and here was this terrible sadness of a man leaving, the sadness of a wife or lover trying to re-call him. So what was happening in various aspects of my life, my private life, my professional life, led to the Vergil surfacing again.¹⁰⁶

'Aeneas and After' does indeed point up the 'private traumas behind the public role',¹⁰⁷ for both epic hero and poet, drawing on material from the 'lives' of both, but the reader is less likely than before in Jones to identify him with the protagonist.

The first poem is an Horatian Ode in which home-loving Horace bemoans the departure to sea of his friend, the more adventurous and driven Vergil.¹⁰⁸ A pastiche of Horace's 'To the ship of Vergil',¹⁰⁹ it employs the same form as 'Inter City', that of quatrains each containing two rhymed couplets, and its subject-matter is the same as that which informs 'Fearful'. Horace fears for his friend and cannot understand why any rational man should want to surrender himself to the dubious mercy of the sea. Jones has written successful humorous poems before, and this is another — 'I hold it truth a man with brains / should keep his hat on when it rains' — but Horace is very much in earnest: 'A poet's life and art should be / twin warriors against extremity' and we are left in no doubt that setting sail is just such an extremity.¹¹⁰ For Jones, however, Horace and Vergil represent the dichotomy made clear in 'Fearful': he is drawn to adventure but fears what is *other*. As the sequence

¹⁰⁵ *For Mad Mary*, London Magazine Editions, 1974, pp. 57-86

¹⁰⁶ (*IC-PNR*) pp.53/4

¹⁰⁷ Humphrey Clucas, 'Geographies', op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ Publius Vergilius Maro's name in English is generally spelt 'Virgil' but Jones always spells it 'Vergil', in accordance with its Latin root.

¹⁰⁹ *Odes*, I iii

¹¹⁰ Formally, the rhyming tetrameters resemble those of Auden's 'New Year Letter' (e.g. 'Yet truth, like love and sleep resents / Approaches that are too intense') and call to mind the wit of Pope's pentameters. Both Auden and Jones's Horace in this mode are affecting to presume they are speaking to a readership that is invited to agree with them.

continues, it becomes ever clearer that Horace, in pleading with Vergil not to set sail, speaks for both Aeneas's wife, Creusa, and his lover, Dido, neither of whom want him to leave. Nor, indeed, does the poet's own wife want her husband to leave.

When his ship is blown by the winds to Carthage, Aeneas is drawn to Dido's bed. Nevertheless he feels abandoned: 'When gods leave, fate pales to obligation', but he seems unaware that the gods have left because he has temporarily abandoned his duties in order to pursue his passionate liaison with Dido. This fourth section of 'Aeneas' finishes with a memorably devastating fear of ethics in a secular world as Aeneas wakes worrying about preparations: 'Are / these the new gods—Detail? Banality?'¹¹¹ Are the gods in this poem a manifestation of the moral support system that can crumble in the face of radical change (especially change involving romantic love)? The poem finishes with Aeneas foreseeing 'The Site of Rome', the city his descendants will establish. He sees the future 'fulfilling prophecy' (clearly Aeneas's life is not his own) in the guise of 'a young prince', Turnus, whom he must 'track down / and with a joyous / savagery, that leaves my soldiers / stunned, nail and despoil'. The juxtaposition of 'joyous' and 'savagery' across a line-break is an example of the kind of poetic achievement that led to Michael Schmidt's describing 'Aeneas and After' as an 'outstanding sequence'. Jones would have marvelled at and simultaneously recoiled from Aeneas's piety in the face of the physical and emotional trials the gods submitted him to, but Aeneas's experiences provide a telling and timeless metaphor for the consequences of duty and romantic love, of responsibility and betrayal, consequences Jones would have been conscious of in contemplating 'leaving many things'.¹¹²

When he actually arrives in Italy, Aeneas considers the tribes and discovers them worshipping foolish gods, sun and moon, though by now these might equally be detail and banality.¹¹³ He knows his goal is to establish peace as the normal

¹¹¹ Jones (as his later sequence 'Caesar's Progress' would confirm) was clearly of the belief that, without any real sense of what is was *for*, education had similarly been reduced to 'detail' and 'banality'.

¹¹² These 'things' would have included his marriage and his country, two homes, one inside the other. He was to live the last decades of his life in Normandy with his second wife. The links with Aeneas in this sense are clear.

¹¹³ 'Aeneas Considers The Tribes' (*TIN*, 72)

condition. Accordingly, he must rid the land of intolerance: ‘Our temples must house all gods, and to raise / them, men with ocean-tempered minds’ which presumably means Aeneases not Horaces.¹¹⁴ This leaves Aeneas appearing to feel the need, in a new land, as a leader of men, to facilitate a morality that is not derived from any particular supernatural revelation or guidance (the twin sources of religious ethics).

‘Firstfruit’ has been quoted in its entirety by both Michael Cayley and Peter Bland, the former because of its ‘taut power’, the latter because of its growing sense of ‘a larger living stream within which we peddle our provincialisms of a consumer heaven’:

At dawn
the women of the conquered

ringed the settlement.
By next dawn

the future had found its womb.
Delighted by relief

and a clutch of new tricks
the men

hewed rooftrees
and planked the sky.

Before the memorable and miraculous image caught in the poem’s final line,¹¹⁵ the ‘taut power’ Cayley commends is evident in how much a poem of thirty-six words (fourteen of which are prepositions or connectives) can encompass: the juxtaposition of ‘women’ and ‘womb’ by inference secures future offspring who may inherit the home that is being created (importantly by both conquerors and conquered); for the men, the conquerors, the new ground’s promise of security and safety constitutes a welcome ‘relief’ after so much travelling by sea; the

¹¹⁴ cf. Liardet’s appraisal of the area of Kent he was sent to (‘The Courtenay Play’: *FMM*,). Liardet’s anti-Enlightenment response is decidedly less compassionate and inclusive than Aeneas’s pre-Christian appraisal of the tribes of Italy.

¹¹⁵ The turning of noun into verb appears to create the neologism ‘planked’, which may have been prompted by Vergil’s account of the building of Misenus’s funeral pyre (*Aeneid*, Book VI). Jones had been ‘struggling through translations’ (See Fn.106, p.134) and re-reading *The Aeneid* in Latin. He may, nevertheless, have encountered ‘A pyre high-heaped with planks of oak and resinous / With pine’ in Patric Dickinson’s translation (Mentor Books, 1961, p.126).

consumerism Bland refers to is encapsulated in the ambiguity of the ‘clutch of new tricks’ the men have learned, tricks that are not only the creative skills generated in solving problems of settlement as they arise, but also subterfuges that conceal intentions from those they would keep out (as the truculent man building a high fence in ‘Summer: A Kent Village’ is doing). These are new ways of coping and flourishing.

Creusa is not named in ‘Aeneas’ and, as a result, may represent any wife watching her world disappearing behind her. But there are other unnamed characters elsewhere in the sequence. In ‘On’, a title that speaks of continuity, ‘There was one spoke of another journey’; ‘Firstfoot’ begins with a ‘shadow figure’; ‘Presence’ begins and ends with ‘another in the room’. And there are poems entitled ‘To Sleep’ and ‘The Dream’. We are in the realm of shades, visions and the unconscious, as in Vergil: Aeneas hears his father; ‘sees’ his dead wife; and meets the shade of Dido in the underworld. If Jones were on the verge of ‘leaving many things’ there would be imagined voices variously advising him, pleading with him, or telling him what he should do. But there is a sense of inevitability, too, as in fate. He has to go. It is this personal connection felt with the story of Aeneas that lends the poems their independence and ambiguity. They are not wholly set in Aeneas’s time. In ‘On’, the speaker may be retreating into himself while his family, perhaps sensing something is wrong, ‘watched him / farther and farther off / in that quietening corner of the room’.

There are other rooms than Dido’s. In ‘the wood beyond the settlement’, in ‘Firstfoot’, the speaker could be in the ramshackle caravan Jones occupied once he had left the family home;¹¹⁶ in ‘Presence’, a ghost story, the speaker knows timelessly he is ‘himself alone’; in ‘To Sleep’ (which appears to involve the beach on which Misenus’s funeral pyre was erected and where the ships are moored) he wakes, ‘knowing he had dreamed’, into the reality of a new set of circumstances. The release referred to in the title of ‘A Release’ is that of an old man who shrinks from a position of significance to one where ‘Nobody / knew he had been born’. He

¹¹⁶ ‘At Badgers Mount’ (*TCOS*, 26-29)

could be anyone who had ‘fought for years’. He has become Jones’s Aunt Em, who knew ‘the world was crazy, embodied it, and laughed’.¹¹⁷

‘The Dream’, initially the closing poem in the sequence, could be taking place before Aeneas’s arrival in Italy or in his old age. Whichever it was, he knew, ‘before it came’, the voice’s question: ‘Is this / place dusk or dawn?’ In other words, was this the end or a beginning? The end of Aeneas’s journey, of course, had been a new beginning. If we remind ourselves of the changes Jones was contemplating in his own private and professional life, we understand the ambiguity (and, perhaps, the apprehension) that would pit Marvell’s uncertainties against Milton’s heroic certainties.¹¹⁸

‘Upon Crappleton House’, which in the original manuscript found itself in the final section, ‘At Great Tew’, was moved to ‘Aeneas and After’, presumably because having arrived in a new land it was appropriate that something should be built: ‘And now, they said, there must be a Centre’.¹¹⁹ It makes, with the opening Ode, a pair of humorous bookends. This last poem takes its epigraph from Andrew Marvell, a poet to whom Jones is indebted both here and elsewhere (‘The Beasts are by their Dens exprest’), and, of course, plays on Marvell’s title, ‘Upon Appleton House’. The poem, in Grevel Lindop’s words, describes, ‘much more effectively than its crude title would suggest’, the building of ‘a hideous modern Arts Centre’:

This poem is itself the last in a sequence, about the establishment of cities and the responsibilities of man as builder and social being, which takes as its starting point the *Aeneid* and Vergil’s departure on the voyage of his poem. Which brings us, of course, back to the island from which we set out.¹²⁰

The poem’s first section sees the centre built by the ‘hefty’, ‘rogue toughs’, ‘a plasterer’, and ‘a strange / remote man with the secret of glass’. Then, in a passage that might have been a translation from *The Aeneid*: ‘Out of the woods / chimed the strike of axes, // and, tall, fine-fingered, one / ruled and planed and stacked / sweet

¹¹⁷ (*TIN*, 58)

¹¹⁸ ‘Jones prefers the reticence of Marvell to the heroic certainties of Milton’ is an observation made by Robert Hampson in conversation with Paul McLoughlin. See also Fn.145, p.146

¹¹⁹ Or so Brian Jones supposed when I asked him about this.

¹²⁰ Grevel Lindop, ‘Classical Norms’, op. cit.

resinous planks'.¹²¹ This carpenter-joiner is a descendant of Aeneas's men. When the job was done, just as God had done, looking at what he had created,¹²² they all 'stood back to see that it was good'.

'It was disastrous', Part 2 of Jones's poem comically begins. The Centre turns out to have been poorly designed. Nothing works as it should. Nothing rhymes (except presumably where it shouldn't):

No vision that they had of man
could be accommodated in
this bleak and bald
reverberating barn

even the letters of whose name
sunk in a hunk of porage concrete
appeared slowly like slugs
only in rain.

Part 3 retells the tale in terms of Aeneas and his men: 'So many leagues of emptiness / travelled, such pain / endured, and still incompetence / flowered from design'. It is difficult not to conclude that Aeneas would not have got far with a team of twentieth-century craftsmen, whose Centre had 'sprung crooked / straight from the heart', the product of the detail and banality Aeneas feared at Carthage.

11. Different Reactions to Civil War.

'Upon Appleton House' was a country house poem written while Marvell was staying at Sir Thomas Fairfax's Nunappleton Estate as tutor to the Lord General's daughter, Mary. Marvell praises the house's restraint, its 'sober frame'' discerning in its design confirmation that 'Things greater are in less contained'.¹²³ Later in the poem he reflects on the Civil War and, as in his remarkable account of the death of Charles I in 'An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland' ('He nothing common did or mean / Upon that memorable scene'), holds conflicting views in a

¹²¹ See Fn.115, p.136: *The Aeneid*, Book VI: 'A pyre high-heaped with planks of oak and resinous / With pine' in Patric Dickinson's translation (Mentor Books, 1961, p.126).

¹²² Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 10: And God saw that it was good'.

¹²³ The 'holy mathematics' by which Appleton House was built contrasts with Crappleton House's (presumably inaccurate) 'remembered proportions'. (*TIN*, 80)

creative tension that displays tact and a great understanding of complexity.¹²⁴ An irrigation-flood leads the poet to meditate on trees and birds and, when the flood subsides, he reclines on the river bank fishing, placing himself, as J. Mark Neumann has observed ‘on the boundary between earth and water, reality and imagination’.¹²⁵ It is the boundary Jones referred to as ‘the faultline between two worlds’, the in-between, liminal state that will inform the title poem of the collection’s final section. But, unlike Milton who wrote a sonnet in praise of Fairfax, Jones would not have warmed to a military hero whose last service as Commander-in-Chief of the Parliamentary Army was the suppression of the Leveller mutiny at Burford in May 1649 (even if, in a further example of the complexities of allegiance that characterized the Civil War, Fairfax resigned from the parliamentary cause as a result of his opposition to Charles I’s execution).¹²⁶ Similarly, the crumbling, twentieth-century England recorded in many of the poems that follow ‘Overnight’ may be, *inter alia*, one of neglect and decay, but it still harbours values Jones approves.¹²⁷ Like Marvell’s, Jones’s view of the past and its people is complex. There are multiple Englands, and he is alive to the dangers of nostalgia: his poems’ speakers, for example, often know how feeling informs perception for good and ill.¹²⁸

‘At Great Tew’, the first of two poems in the collection’s third and final section to which it gives its name, is at once both a bleak, imagined narrative and a source of celebration. Jones is returning to Civil War England to help him understand his own century and also to help him understand his own poetic. What draws Jones to Carey, Viscount Falkland, is the despair that led him to commit suicide in a reckless

¹²⁴ Marvell always preserved a precariously balanced view of the Civil War, partly it has to be acknowledged because of his need of patronage, which in this instance may have derived from Marvell and Fairfax sharing a Cambridge education. Milton was also educated there, as indeed was Jones, though all three poets came from much humbler backgrounds than Fairfax. Jones was much more taken by Fairfax’s contemporary, Cary, Viscount Falkland (1610-43), who despairs when faced with ‘the simplicity of alignment’.

¹²⁵ J. Mark Neumann, ‘Andrew Marvell and the Experience of Nunappleton House’: Andrew Marvell Society Newsletter, Vol.3 No.1 – Summer 2011. (www.standrews.ac.uk/marvellsociety/newsletter/j-mark-heumann-andrew-marvell-and-the-experience-of-nunappleton-house/).

¹²⁶ Jones admired the resistance of the Leveller, John Lilburne. See ‘Introductory 1638: Freeborn John’ (*FJ*, 9)

¹²⁷ Discussed in Section 5 of this chapter.

¹²⁸ In ‘Where Walls Take Root’, *op. cit.*, p.102, Michael Cayley wrote of an earlier poem, ‘Thus in “To a Wife Gone Away” (...) (t)he consciously inflated tone makes it clear that the speaker is fully aware of how frustration is distorting his perception of an unattractive reality.’

act of bravery born of his realisation that the Civil War was not about to reach any speedy, or even-handed, conclusion. Falkland had opposed the policies of Charles I, but later became the king's secretary of state when the puritans assumed power and were clearly uninterested in compromise. Jones's narrative finds Falkland in low spirits: 'As he could not heal his country's disease, / he longed for death.' In the early morning light:

Across an English field he stares
into the mirror of an English field
where small fires blossom.
Between the fields, the dark fume of a hedge,
and a linking gap . . .

The 'linking gap' should be an opportunity for compromise, but it remains implacably a way through to meet the enemy in battle. Falkland bemoans 'the simplicity of alignment', people's seemingly endless desire to belong at whatever cost, a simplicity that leads 'inexorably / to a misty field at dawn'. When battle commences, he heads for 'that gap / clean in the hedge where image coincides / with image and a hail of lead'. It is the manner of his death that brings the two sides together, if only fleetingly, in a passage that recalls Marvell's Horatian Ode: 'Comrades / and foes, stunned, rein back to admire / this career of death momentarily'. But it is the admiration of incomprehension.

The kind of world Falkland despaired of is suddenly brought up to date, as if we had been reading about it all while picnicking:

The Sunday paper brightly features
'suicide chic', the hagiography
of exemplary failures:
a poet toppling from a bridge,
an aviator heading out to sea.
the tone of commendation and the staring
ikons of centrality sit well
among advertisements which also fail
to mention price and efficacy . . .

This section of the poem looks forward to Carol Ann Duffy's later 'The War Photographer'¹²⁹ in which she takes on the persona of the photographer, Don McCullin, whose black-and-white records of war were similarly found to 'sit well'

¹²⁹ Carol Ann Duffy, *Standing Female Nude* (Anvil Press, 1985)

among brightly-lit features extolling the pleasures of life. In 'At Great Tew', Jones continues with his interrogation of contemporary, mediatized culture:

The Sunday's camera would have caught it well:
that split astonished second when
two hell-bent forces faltered as there lay
between them a small island of one man;
until one side saw in the death
bravery flowering from a certain cause,

the other, panic from a loss of nerve,
and craning forward, screaming, both came on.

The 'small island of one man' challenges Donne's famous dictum that 'No man is an Island'. The opposing views of 'bravery' and 'loss of nerve' illustrate the provisionality that remains one of Jones's quintessential concerns.

12. Things Finding a Relationship With Each Other

For two centuries after his death, Andrew Marvell, the subject / speaker of the collection's final poem, was known not so much for his poetry as for his opposition (in prose) to Charles II. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that Marvell's poetic reputation proper began to emerge, and then it was at the expense of his politics. Before that the view of the critic, A.C.Benson, had prevailed: "the singer of an April mood, who might have bloomed year after year in young and ardent hearts, was buried in the dust of politics, in the valley of the dead."¹³⁰

According to a more recent commentator, Blair Worden:

Benson wrote in the dawn of academic literary criticism, which for most of the 20th century would share his disdainful aestheticism (. . .) Only recently have the political poems – his *Horatian Ode* on Cromwell (surely the finest political poem in the language), his other Commonwealth verse, and his Restoration satires – won equivalent attention.¹³¹

Criticism has often regarded the politics of class, particularly in modern verse, with suspicion and, Jones is sure, with no little incomprehension. Speaking of his later volume, *Freeborn John* (Carcanet, 1990), Jones said:

¹³⁰ A.C.Benson, 'Andrew Marvell' in *Essays* (William Heinemann, 1896). Quoted in Blair Worden, 'From the poetical to the political', review of Nigel Smith (ed.), *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (Longman, London, 2003) in *The Sunday Telegraph*, August 31st, 2003.

¹³¹ Blair Worden, *Ibid.*

I did have some difficulties, for instance in the reception of that book. I remember Michael Schmidt talking to me about that, and I suddenly felt, here is a man who belongs to a world I don't belong to, who doesn't belong to the world I belong to. I think there is a dimension in the literary world who don't really know what was happening [in Thatcher's 'eighties].¹³²

It is this critical incomprehension (rather than any resistance inherent in the making of poetry itself) that led Jones to wonder 'how far you can use poetry to speak about specific things that are happening in politics'.¹³³ It is easy to see how Jones would find attractive the even-handed poise of the Horatian Ode Blair Worden commends,¹³⁴ the way in which Marvell, a supporter of Cromwell, risks sympathy for the king and warns of the hubristic temptations of leadership. The manner in which Charles I is said to have accepted his fate—'But with his keener eye / The axe's edge did try'¹³⁵—is paralleled by the endurance of Marvell's Leveller contemporary, John Lilburne, in Jones's 'Introductory 1638: Freeborn John':

'His mouth
then cried 'Wake, England!' – till with wadding tamped.
At which – O wonderful – I saw his feet
risk their small liberty to stamp ... stamp ... stamp.'¹³⁶

What Jones is admiring here, and in Marvell, is integrity of a kind he recognises in those who struggle to preserve identity (but *within* political commitment) in a world that would normalise them against their wishes. Jones's eye-witness to humiliation and torture inevitably and tellingly sees things from a radically different class perspective. Jones's interest and his felt responsibility lie in a form of class consciousness that compels him to speak for those who, as it were, cannot speak for themselves. In this sense, Jones is a political poet.¹³⁷ Jones admires Marvell's ability successfully to apply an even-handed compassion to poetic craft, and it is this he seeks to emulate in 'Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge', the collection's final poem and one that offers itself as a kind of manifesto.

¹³² (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.335

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Blair Worden, *op. cit.*

¹³⁵ 'An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland', *The Complete Poems* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1972), p.56

¹³⁶ (*FJ*, 9)

¹³⁷ 'I have a strong sense of anger. I feel furious at the neglect of millions of people in our country who have passion, intelligence, and all these things are not being used, and if I fail to speak for them, and other people like me fail to speak for them, I think we are culpable in a very important way.' *The Poet Speaks: Brian Jones & Peter Orr*, National Sound Archive, *op. cit.*

As the poem's extended title reminds us, 'In 1653, Marvell became tutor to Oliver Cromwell's ward',¹³⁸ but it is the waiting to greet his charge that enables Marvell (and Jones) to reflect on the nature of art, its relationship to its own time, the responsibilities of the poet, and the future that is implicit in the present. The speaker looks out onto a formal garden that has seen better days:

The fountain spatters the stone boys.
An endless rainbow dribbles back
To sway the water-lilies.

But if Jones is entering the persona of Marvell, this is not immediately evident (the poem's title allowing for a third-person narrative); indeed, when we enter the poem, there are signs of more recent influence. In 'The Public Garden',¹³⁹ Robert Lowell remembers when 'Bubbles filled / the fountain'. Now 'That fountain's failing waters flash around / the garden. Nothing catches fire.' Jones's 'stone boys' are Lowell's 'stone lions', but both boys and lions are dwarfed, in another Lowell poem ('For the Union Dead') by the altogether grander civic monument of 'Colonel Shaw / and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry / on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief'.¹⁴⁰ The 'bubbles' are here, too, in a poem that looks back on another Civil War. Here, it is the 'old South Boston Aquarium' that no longer offers the thrill it once afforded the young writer.¹⁴¹ In a remarkable and virtuosic series of juxtapositions in which Lowell sets North against South, Aquarium against Sahara, Sahara against snow, stands against falling into ruin, the second stanza recalls more thrilling times:

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

In Jones's poem, the traditional symbols of creativity and renewal, fountain and rainbow, can only spatter and dribble; yet Jones's Marvell is not plunged into the despair that led to Falkland's suicidal act of reckless bravery. Art, and hope, can

¹³⁸ William Dutton, who also became Cromwell's prospective son-in-law, though the projected marriage with Frances Cromwell did not take place. Before becoming Dutton's tutor, Marvell was recommended by Milton (referred to later in Jones's poem) for the post of Assistant Latin Secretary to the Council of State but was not appointed.

¹³⁹ Robert Lowell, *For the Union Dead* (Faber and Faber, 1965) p. 26.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-2.

¹⁴¹ The importance of Lowell to Jones is clear. Martin Dodsworth in his review of *The Island Normal* (*The Guardian*, 20th March, 1980), for example, finds that 'There's more than a touch of Lowell's *Life Studies*, though without the interest in ancestry.' See also Tim Dooley review, p.288

persist, even in the most unlikely places—and, importantly, may be created as well as found.¹⁴²

Poise
Is what the drizzling droplets lack

Then gain once more when thrust up high
By artifice to slide the groove
Ordained against this garden's sky
The rainbow hovers there to prove

Art's function: how it can beget
From wasteful slop of water what
Is glittering yet is not wet.
For art is real and is not.

Here the language of moderation ('poise'), the language of craft and making ('artifice'; 'art is real and is not'), and the language of religion ('ordained', 'beget', and by association 'rainbow')¹⁴³ reveal Marvell's world-view and aspirations. In Jones's poem, the poise the droplets lack then regain and the sought-after 'grove of calm / Some quintessential spot of mind / Beneath disturbance and alarm' is the poetic poise Jones has been working towards throughout this collection. Another term for this poise is harmony, something Jones has said he finds necessary before writing can take place at all:

There's a phrase in Wordsworth about the pleasure that we feel when we are 'worthy of ourselves', and I think it is that that the poems come from. It doesn't mean to say the poems are not sometimes poems which are rather dark, or poems of disturbance, but the feeling I have at the time, the feeling I'm trying to capture and give shape to, is one of joy, harmony, things finding a relationship with each other, and these things are within me.¹⁴⁴

But if art can facilitate this poise or harmony (or emerge as a result of it), then it needs a stimulus ('art requires a sun'). The rainbow that 'hovers there to prove // Art's function' may be an image of beauty, but it is also a reminder of the covenant between God and earth's creatures, including man, and of the covenant between the writer and his art. The rainbow, therefore, must be created, for the 'drizzling droplets' may regain their poise only when they are raised up by artifice.

¹⁴² Jones said (Ibid.) that this final sequence 'through the figures of Falkland and Marvell meditates on different responses to civil war.'

¹⁴³ cf. The covenant of Moses (the rainbow), which, presumably, informs 'The rainbow dances against heaven. / A covenant has been agreed' later in Jones's poem.

¹⁴⁴ *The Poet Speaks: Brian Jones & Peter Orr*, op. cit.

The religious imagery continues in an ironic reference to the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. Marvell (and Jones) are attracted to the pure in heart:

Blest are those peoples bathed in sun
Of certainties. Their simple songs
Shine effortlessly and are one.
Eden must be where art belongs.

This kind of ‘simplicity’, however, is beyond the speaker’s grasp, even if he must continually strive to get closer to it. The irony is caught in a line-break that reveals the ‘sun’ not as the sun art needs, but the ‘sun / Of certainties’. For both Marvell and Jones, one suspects, certainty is the stuff of bad faith. The artist must, somehow (someone must) gain access to the necessary ‘grove of calm’ that is the object of the search for a moment of poise. This ‘grove of calm’ takes us back to the various ‘somewheres’ of the collection’s opening poems, but what is being sought here is a place worth reaching, and it will be reached by way of the tentative and the precarious. As has been observed earlier, Jones prefers the reticence of Marvell to the heroic certainties and assertions of Milton.¹⁴⁵ But the search is a struggle. The artist must find a way of achieving a harmony of ‘stanzas intricate with rhymes’ as the gardener achieves season after season in his garden. The gardener’s harmony is that of harnessing ‘wildness between walls’, a harmony that incorporates both artifice and nature.

The poem becomes, therefore, not so much a dramatic as a reflective monologue. By entering Marvell’s persona, Jones is also investigating his own poetic. ‘Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge’ ends with a stanza that manages to be both Marvellian and quintessentially Jones:

A tightrope discipline of mind,
My present to the future which
Approaches, nervous as a hind,
Green fields, or slaughter in a ditch.

It is a stark opposition. The future approaches like the weather in ‘Summer: A Kent Village’. It is poised halfway, offering at least the possibility of peace, unlike that offered in ‘On the Edge’, the final poem in the collection’s opening sequence:

¹⁴⁵ See Fn.118, p.138. (A similar point is made by Humphrey Clucas (‘Geographies’, op. cit.) who described Jones in relation to Marvell as ‘One reticent poet studying another’.)

The Victorian towns crumble their piecrust
derivative splendours and are losing trade.
Decisions are made here. The word 'future'
bandied as if it were an option.

Marvell's 'present to the future', the 'tightrope discipline of mind', provides grounds for hope, a hope Jones would regard as properly and undemonstratively authentic.

13. A Collection of One Poem

Jones spoke of *The Island Normal* as 'an entity with inner coherences and references', calling it 'the most organized' of his collections, and it is instructive to probe, by way of conclusion, why he regard it as 'one poem'. The obvious sense of this view is that the three sections form a unified whole which each helps to create. The opening title-section looks at a crumbling England and involves the poet (and other contemporary personae) as observer; the second follows Aeneas's journey from the ruin of Troy to, as it were, the present day in poems that make use of details from the poet's life in an ostensibly more distanced way; the third discerns in reactions to the English Civil War values that were deemed worth preserving then and are worth preserving now. In this sense *The Island Normal* is a map not only of the then-England, but also a map of the poet's mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Children of Separation: Unexpected Generosities

1. Art & Li(v)es

The title of Jones's eighth collection¹ is an attempt to draw together what Tim Dooley refers to as the 'disparate material of his personal life and political preoccupations'.² Jones recognized in conversation the way his poetry, even volume by volume, had oscillated between private and public.³ In this volume we meet, among others, wartime evacuees, those struggling in the aftermath of a nuclear war, the eponymous children of a broken marriage, and Prospero and Miranda preparing for new lives; so many separations that we begin to see dislocation everywhere. 'Return Journey', for example, tells of a journey out and back across the English Channel that prompts reflections on 'England and home', perennial themes in Jones. There are poems about art (crucifixion and resurrection in Cimabue and Piero, for example) and, as the volume progresses, about a burgeoning new relationship that brings with it the illuminating and perhaps surprisingly calming need to become more attentive to a different culture, one for which the English Channel is *la Manche*. Separation is belonging's relative, and movement from one to the other lends the collection its shape. Jones expressed his satisfaction at the shape in a letter to Michael Schmidt:

I like the movement through the 'bomb' poems at the beginning, through 'Prospero and Miranda', 'Female Realities', 'The Children of Separation' to 'Barbizon'.⁴

But Jones was concerned about the proposed blurb for the collection:

Thinking about the blurb you read to me over the 'phone, I should like you to omit the phrase about 'breakdown of marriage'. I have found in the past that a personal detail of that kind in the blurb has been like a drop of honey

¹ His sixth discrete collection for adults. *Poems* and *A Family Album* were reissued under the same hard cover by London Magazines Editions (1972) and *The Spitfire on the Northern Line* (1975) was a collection for the 'Chatto Poets for the Young' series.

² Tim Dooley, *Tim British Book News* (March 1986, p.180)

³ In conversation with Paul McLoughlin at a cricket match in Kent in 1998. See also Fn.3 p.172

⁴ Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt, 4th October, 1984. Carcanet Archive, op. cit.

to the bees / bears / flies of the reviewers. Often to the detriment of wider concerns. Could you substitute 'breakdown of relationships' or some such phrase, which is probably more relevant and less likely to distract critical attention.⁵

Schmidt, it transpired, had already anticipated Jones's reticence and amended the phrase. If the poet's unease remains evident, however, his desire to avoid the excesses of 'confessional' verse points to an integrity that Jones holds dear. By this time, Jones was already aware that the collection had been made a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for the winter of 1985,⁶ and this was likely to have exacerbated his concern about inviting what he regarded as the wrong kind of attention.

When asked in interview about the relationship between life and lives and poems, Jones said:

I've just finished [giving] a course on Art & Lives, with the 'v' in brackets. We were looking at the Plath-Hughes thing. But all these issues are becoming increasingly a concern. How do writers use this material? Why do writers use it, as we do? . . . What am I doing? What is the fall-out of what I'm doing?⁷

The title poem of *The Children of Separation* is another case in point:

... when my marriage broke down, my daughter was seventeen and she took the whole thing very hard. When I took her out in the car, she would say absolutely nothing. And it took a long time for her to start talking. I was forever offering her the chance, and when she did start talking, what came back was a lot of punishing things about what I had done. One of the things she'd start talking about was some of the poems that said something about her. For example in 'The Children of Separation', the title poem about the child on the train.⁸

Having conversations with various members of his family about such poems proved fruitful and cathartic in the end but not before they had given rise to a kind of bewildered resentment. Robert Lowell, a poet Jones greatly admired, admitted to causing this kind of pain as well:

I have sat and listened to too many
words of the collaborating muse,

⁵ Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt dated 5th August 1985. Carcanet Archive. op. cit. (See also Fn.40, p.25)

⁶ Letter from Robyn Marsack to Brian Jones, dated 26th July, 1985. Carcanet Archive, op. cit.

⁷ (*IC-CT*) p.316

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.317

and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,
not avoiding injury to others,
not avoiding injury to myself –
to ask compassion . . . this book, half-fiction,
an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting –

my eyes have seen what my hand did.⁹

The fictionalizing of Lowell's engagement with 'real' people's lives led his friend Elizabeth Bishop famously to protest about his use of his ex-wife's letters, which he had changed: '*art just isn't worth that much*'¹⁰ Cal was guilty of what Bishop (quoting Thomas Hardy) called 'infinite mischief'.¹¹ Jones's fictionalizing arose by way of selection from what was 'true' and clearly recognizable to those involved. This may be what countless writers have done and continue to do, but Jones, rather than failing to count the cost (like Lowell), instead failed to foresee the possible effects of what he did.

One of the reasons for Jones's considering *The Children of Separation* to be 'a good and solid collection'¹² was that 'the poems are *about* something'.¹³ What the poems were about was separation in its various guises, all of which were prompted, it is to be supposed, by the breakdown of the relationship that was his first marriage. It is what moved him to consider the various plights of those who look out from their own separateness on to 'the gross world'.¹⁴

2. At Badgers Mount

The opening of 'At Badgers Mount', an unrhymed sonnet-sequence, highlights the thin wall between life and art. When Jones writes, 'When I left one gallery / twenty years long and found a flaking / caravan flimsy under tapping apple-boughs', he is dealing in the literal truth. He left the family home (after a twenty year marriage) and went to live for a while in a ramshackle caravan. If the walkers passing by, or

⁹ Robert Lowell, 'Dolphin', from *The Dolphin*, Faber and Faber, 1973, p.78.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Bishop, letter to Robert Lowell 21st March, 1972 (in Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art: The Selected Letters*, ed. and introduced by Robert Giroux, Chatto & Windus, 1994, p.562)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt, dated 22nd June, 1985. Carcanet Archive, op. cit.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 'Barbizon 5', (*TCOS*, 48)

the owner of the caravan site, saw ‘a bronzed romantic in his peace-camp - / dropped-out and speculative’, Jones could reassure himself that ‘for all comes night, and its gallery of mirrors’. This second ‘gallery’ reminds us that we are in the presence of art not life, but knowledge of the life makes the opening section, and the stimulus for the poem, easier to contextualize. This is not the Greenham-Common-style resistance that ‘peace-camp’ might suggest (until, that is, the final poem in the sequence). Jones was able to endure his caravan-site separation, perhaps, because he imagined that to others he looked somehow heroic. And he knew that others suffered, too. But knowledge of this real-life kind also moves to close poems off. Without it we are more attentive to the poem’s effects: its attention to detail; its lexical and syntactical precision (the landlord ‘richly hauling a winter’s heat from woods / in silvered lengths’ and his wife ‘brooding / earth-motherly over vegetables in the kitchen’), and its self-deprecating humour in the second section.

He has brought some of his treasured books with him, which he turns to choose from at night, after ‘Hugging the existence of the last voice / on the emptying wavebands’

No end to the shame
of the cultivated man once the sinking has begun
and his sweating hand reaches to choose among
Arnold, Milton, Shakespeare, Mogadon.

The benzodiazepine releases him into sleep and into dreams that rehearse his wartime childhood experience. This is a sequence that encapsulates many of Jones’s favoured themes. The two women the child ‘lies between’ are his mother and his reclusive Aunt Em. Out there in what Jones (in ‘Barbizon’) calls ‘the gross world’ is ‘a distant, romantic war’, romantic because it is a source not only of wonder to the child but also, perhaps, of heroism in the face of evil to the father, who ‘will soon receive / shrapnel in his bronzed left arm’. Though his father will return, the balance of the household those left behind (wife, son, sister-in-law) have grown used to while the erstwhile man-of-the-house was at war will ‘never be redressed’.¹⁵ The child lives in ‘a world all female’ under a moon that ‘hints valleys and

¹⁵ On p. 8 of his *Next Year Will be Better* (Five Leaves Publications, 2010), John Lucas writes ‘And for many of us, our fathers became presences in our lives only when those lives had begun to take shape’. He is referring to the phenomenon of men returning from war and resuming their roles as head of the household in homes that (however much they had been missed) had learned to operate without them.

secrecies'. To open the plywood door is to venture out into the world of danger: 'His feet are bare, but he begins to move / up a long slope steadily, like a drawn sea'.¹⁶ It is a characteristic of Jones's poems that they often end in recognition of this kind of uncertainty.

Back 'At Badgers Mount', however, 'the princess waits in her cocoon of sleep' as he contemplates his current surroundings, 'a wreck invaded by waves of nettle and briar, / settling into a past'. He wonders was this caravan 'the husk of a fulfilled purpose, or emblem / of all that a life can expect?' This section recalls not only Aeneas at Carthage but also Philip Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney'. Jones admired Larkin ('he speaks to me') but felt that there was 'something about the approach to life' that he found 'dismal and unhelpful, the encapsulating experience in anecdotes in poems'¹⁷. Jones finds resistance to the dismal here when the caravan that is generally indistinguishable from 'green rampage' is suddenly marked out 'when the moon glances'

The sequence 'At Badgers Mount' is becoming the story of Jones's life. Now, it is early morning and he is locked in a waking dream, where 'blurred hand-spread shadows – the outside birds / orchestrated to fury by Spring' disturb his 'dawn-light walls'. He aches 'with the grief of dreams', endures the 'centuries of faces / around whose lips were smiles of stinking blood' he saw often in his anxiety to settle. The dream-birds become songful starlings as the day takes shape, an emerging world in which 'everywhere is unhurried recognition', made possible by the early light that usurps the 'night-presiding dream'. It is a time, too, when art, freed from anxiety, comes into its own. There is something Keatsian in the way in which the speaker returns to the 'real' world in which 'watchfulness and acceptance' are clearly not recompense enough :

The starlings are slicks of tar shining poured
on the orchard posts. Their throats crawl iridescence
and throb with song like a heart. Dozens of others
run oil over wet grass. So metaphor should be casual

¹⁶ The pronoun 'He' suggests a sudden switch bringing us sharply back into the present, to the 'flaking caravan' of the first poem in the sequence, but, as the fourth poem begins 'Another caravan awaits him in the wood / a wreck invaded by waves of nettle and briar' (in other words, the 'flaking caravan'), the plywood door must belong instead to an earlier caravan in which the two women and the boy enjoyed a short break by the sea. However, this is far from clear.

¹⁷ (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.320

as colloquialism, and the night-presiding dream
be incorporated into the hand opening the plywood
door into nettles and the cobwebbed milk-path.
Something infinitely precarious about this hour
hazes over the landowner's clear intentions
among the woodpiles. He is flanked by two children
holding flowers, whose purpose seems to be
a presentation of large watchfulness and acceptance.
A promise of red broods in the apple trees
and everywhere is unhurried recognition.

Jones's 'gallery twenty years long' had produced two children, but he is finding it difficult to recognize in himself anything like the landowner's 'clear intentions'. The 'hour' is as precarious as Jones's state of mind. It is the neither-here-nor-there world he inhabits all the time. Its precariousness, a recurring theme, recalls the 'perilous warm promise' of an egg-shell¹⁸ and the 'trembling, susceptible' re-emergence of the world after a thaw.¹⁹

What he is seeking he has always sought. The moon that marked out his caravan hints at 'the most intransigent illusion' that is 'the good place'. And it puts him in mind of the nineteenth-century English artist, Samuel Palmer, for whom the moon was a potent image.²⁰ Palmer came from the picturesque village of Shoreham in Kent, just the other side of the M25 from Badgers Mount. Progress may be the inexorable march of the roadmakers, but 'Palmer's moon still rises, the moon he quit to recover'.

But there is no escaping Greenham Common. The 'unarguable blatant caricature / of a nightmare cartoon, declares I am, we are, / the children of war:

women hooking dolls onto barbed wire,
butcher-birds aborting the future, and the primed
silos itching to eject their zero spunk.

The 'forlorn' police, charged with keeping the peace, have the look 'of stunned revelation': 'They are designed for small-scale beat-up and backstreet / terrors, not for apocalypse and symbol'. They face the protesters as if on one side of a civil war

¹⁸ 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' (*P*, 29)

¹⁹ 'Thaw' (*P*, 55)

²⁰ See, for example, Palmer's 'A Cornfield by Moonlight with the Evening Star' (c1840) or 'The Harvest Moon', a drawing for 'A Pastoral Scene' (c1831-2). There were poems involving Palmer in *The Island Normal*.

that is beyond their comprehension. Meanwhile, in the distance, lies ‘what we breed best - / a row of military awaiting the time to fruit’. If the woman who ‘hangs not a doll but unfinished knitting / begun for me’ is a dreamlike amalgam of his mother and his second wife, Jones is careful to end the sequence on a more political note that wonders at our being remembered for our capacity to destroy ourselves.

The real-life separation that occasioned many of the poems in *The Children of Separation* is what informs the collection’s consideration of all manner of other separations. Interestingly, the sequence invites comparison with the very different poetic informing Lee Harwood’s ‘One, Two, Three’.²¹ Harwood’s approach is more elliptical and opaque but many of his concerns are those of Jones, too. He worries about art and our reception of it; he worries about various forms of separation; he worries about the ways in which we convert history into dubious forms of what we like to call ‘knowledge’; he worries about how ‘the survivors of the disaster’ are able to transmit their knowledge to the next generation:

And the years pass until one generation dies
and their knowledge with them
leaving behind only feelings of confused longing
that quietly spread beyond any conscious resentment.

If, as Robert Sheppard has noted, ‘the realm of “private separations” [is] a recurrent theme for Harwood’,²² so, too, is it for Jones, as, indeed, is the realm of ‘longing’ and the nostalgia that Harwood’s ‘confused’ variant causes. Both Jones’s ‘At Badgers Mount’ and Harwood’s ‘One, Two, Three’, in their different ways, address private and public, and historical and political matters.

3. Systemic Violence

Jones’s liking for sequences is again evident in this collection. In addition to ‘At Badgers Mount’, we find the opening ‘Introductory: 1944’, ‘Fancy Bread’, ‘Prospero to Miranda’, ‘Barbizon’ and ‘Semur-en-Brionnais’. There are also the

²¹ Lee Harwood, *Crossing the Frozen River: Selected Poems* (Paladin, 1988) pp.169-171. The poem appeared first in *Sinking Colony* (Fulcrum Press, 1970) and again in *HMS Little Fox* (Oasis Books, 1975).

²² Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents* (Liverpool University Press, 2005) p.115. Sheppard’s commentary on Harwood’s ‘One, Two, Three’ is on pp.112-6.

poems collected under the title 'Four Poems' which are 'the 'bomb' poems Jones referred to when describing the book's progress to Michael Schmidt. One characteristic of some of Jones's longer sequences is the continuing experiment with narrative. *A Family Album* had been a book-length series of monologues; 'The Courtenay Play' in *For Mad Mary* is, as described by John Killick, 'more of a poetic commentary on the action than a drama per se'; and 'Aeneas and After' in *The Island Normal* takes the reader on a journey of re-creation.

'Introductory: 1944' (described by Grevel Lindop as 'a magnificent sequence')²³ begins with Jones taking on the role of witness-cum-apologist for the wartime evacuees, of whom he is one, 'ranked in a hall / neat and crammed as sprigs in a seed box'. This first section, 'Fed and Watered', packs a range of conflicting images - military, educational, vegetable, violent, mechanical, yearning, desirous - into a concise setting of the scene. The children are about to witness their 'first harvest'; the 'whirring blades' that make 'rabbits squeal and leap through an air / whirled gold' are picked up in the cane's 'whistling downcurve slicing through the palm'. And there is a barely repressed repository of feeling, 'a withheld sensual / ecstasy'. He and his fellow-evacuees are seen as 'yearning to handle ourselves / and each other' and the cane comes down, as Herbert Lomas observed, 'like a guillotine - the little animals must be potential political opponents'.²⁴ We then meet 'The Attendants', tellingly described by Grevel Lindop as 'a scattering of mildly-threatening adults restlessly living out the last months of the war in a featureless Midlands village'.²⁵ These include Mr Greville with his 'languorously sensual recall' of afternoons in the garden shed with Mrs Evans. He cycles to work at night 'to fashion / metal killing-objects in the factory near the canal'. Pauline, 'another war-flung woman', is representative of a working-class that is slow to realise its power. She has 'fluttered several hearts among the beet-fields' yet harbours 'a dim mysterious sense of being exploited'. Miss Cowan is a lonely and disappointed teacher who 'hates the children with their futures and whisperings'. Peter, 'himself wounded / from birth by a withered ankle', now teaches the wounded, knowing that

²³ Grevel Lindop, 'The Mirror of an English Field', *PN Review* 218, op. cit.

²⁴ Herbert Lomas, 'No Enemy But Time', *London Magazine* Vol.25 No.6, March 1986, p.91.

²⁵ Grevel Lindop, 'Journeying Backward', op cit.

‘after the war there must be a new world’ and that ‘Lonely students like himself will found it’. He is a kind of straitened twentieth-century Aeneas.

The poem then leaps to 1983 and a train taking the narrator to Nottingham where he will read his ‘unhappy poems’ to ‘a scatter of listeners’ (The station and the train play a significant role throughout the poem. They represent comings and goings, change and the future. They feature in the sections on Mr Greville, Pauline, and Peter.) This train is ‘oddly anachronistic – / a lovely slow swayer with soft bouncing seats, corridors / and windows set in walnut’ and the journey is in danger of lulling him into an unwelcome nostalgia. He dreams of his mother waiting for him on another station and ‘vast arrests of feeling ... hold their shapes like armatures’ and threaten to ‘foul all journeys but the journey backward’. Lindop praised Jones’s ability to convey ‘painful and uncertain states, embodied in the chance details of landscape or domestic environment’.²⁶ Yet he is not entirely persuaded:

The ‘summer world’ passing like a series of walnut-framed paintings, however, indicates Jones’s weaker side: a tendency to compose too neatly, to pursue the picturesque to the point of sentimentality.²⁷

Lomas rightly discerned at the end of the poem an alertness in Jones to the danger of nostalgia (“‘Vast arrests of feeling’ have become the armatures that subsequent events wrap around—“and foul all journeys but the journey backward””) but Lindop’s point remains a serious one.²⁸

‘Fancy Bread’ also begins in the classroom. It is a singing lesson in which a teacher ‘flogs a desk with a pitted rule’ and ‘pounds / bum keys on the jangling upright’, the violent verbs and the demotic adjective undermining the beauty the teacher is trying, not very expertly, to celebrate. The boys are lost in the ecstasy of derision and force him ‘to wheel, teeth bared, the rule aloft’. The second section finds the narrator ‘lost in unmapped lanes, / lured by a music which is England audible’ appearing to discover by chance the teacher in his garden ‘whispering / love-breath to an English flute’ while cornflowers ‘bend at him their own weight, like the failure / of all ambition’. The image, for all its idyllic suggestiveness, is a

²⁶ Grevel Lindop, ‘Journeying Backward’, op. cit.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Herbert Lomas, ‘No Enemy but Time’, op. cit. (“‘Vast arrests of feeling’ have become the armatures that subsequent events wrap around—“and foul all journeys but the journey backward”).

disturbing one for the onlooker who would ‘brood now upon violence, / creep quietly away and brood upon violence, / upon Fancy mutilated in its cradle’. The nature of the violence is not immediately clear. Was the real violence not so much that threatened by the teacher as that of the cruelty of the children’s response, or that of an educational system that led inexorably to both, or the systemic violence that has reduced this sensitive, music-loving man to the violent teacher?²⁹ The title alludes to the song from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, ‘Tell me where is Fancy bred’.³⁰ The poem is based on a childish phonetic failure, the pre-pubescent ‘imported beauty from the juniors’ singing instead ‘Where is Fancy Bread’. The song tells us that Fancy is ‘engendered in the eyes, / With gazing fed; and Fancy dies / In the cradle where it lies’. The feeding images of ‘nourished’ and ‘fed’ serve to reinforce the misunderstanding, but Fancy cannot live long without the deeper love the teacher is hoping forlornly and inexpertly to encourage. After the young narrator hears that the teacher’s gift was ‘to engender / a love for music in hundreds of young men / or, where he found a love, to nourish it’ that night he dreams of Fancy Bread: ‘In dream, I gorge it, and awake unfed’. The sadness of the closing line is truly elegiac and prompts us to wonder whether Jones saw something of himself in this teacher, whose loneliness is rooted in a failure to connect.

In the first of ‘Four Poems’, the survivalist ‘Inheritor’ prepares with his metal bow and ‘a quiver of steel arrows’ for life after the bomb, ‘perfecting his brainchildren / on rabbits’. It is a bleak, apocalyptic vision. In ‘Aftermath’ the bomb has left the protagonist with the responsibility for ‘work done, or still to be undertaken’. It is a responsibility he describes as one that ‘like a weapon weights my shoulders down’. The strange meeting of the third poem’s title involves the persona and the inheritor, who, alarmed, ‘Fingers a bow. Walks on.’ Herbert Lomas suggests that ‘The future is perhaps a metaphor for having drunk the present and seen the spider’³¹. ‘Ware Cliffs’, the fourth and final poem in the sequence refers to a geological feature near Lyme Regis on the south coast of England. It reveals the ‘huge club sandwiches of the extinct’, an image for the kind of evidence the bomb will leave behind for future inspection. It is where the narrator imagines himself

²⁹ See Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (Profile Books, 2008; First paperback edition 2009) for Žižek’s account of objective or ‘systemic’ violence.

³⁰ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Act III scene ii), ll.63ff

³¹ Herbert Lomas, ‘No Enemy But Time’, op. cit.

stored screaming, until ‘a creature stoops / to loosen the black pattern of my scream, palming it with pitying incomprehension’. Clearly centuries have passed (‘their mountains pile above me’), and the uncomprehending ‘creature’ is from a post-human age.

4. Painful and Uncertain States: A Myth of Innocence

When ‘that real world’ comes, after the bomb, the inheritor’s bolts ‘will split people – the marauders, scavengers, screamers trailing their skins.’ In this line, division is into types or classes. But the individual, too, may be split. In Shakespeare’s play, the spirit Ariel tells of how he would ‘divide, / And burn in many places’, and ‘flame distinctly / Then meet and join’³². In ‘Prospero to Miranda’, a sequence of five unrhymed sonnets, Jones’s Prospero is telling his daughter a bedtime story in which he casts himself as a tree. He had been a much admired ruler in Milan, but he yearned for his books and time to reflect:

O how I ached with the weight of beauty,
the responsible act of holding the high
head steady against the gaze of admirers,
against the wind that breathed a music from me.
My trunk groaned to be so slender, bearing so much.

We are back with the evacuees of ‘1944’ who ‘groan a withheld sensual / ecstasy’, with Peter, who ‘yearns to give’, with the ‘music that is England audible’, with what in the collection’s title poem Jones calls ‘the ache of wholeness’. The poems circle round the same preoccupations. The yearning is indeed more than Prospero can bear: ‘My ache was intolerable. I split and hurled / my pain in a screaming arc across the sky’.

In Shakespeare’s play, Ariel, unable to accede to his mistress Sycorax’s ‘earthy’ demands, was confined ‘in her most unmitigable rage / Into a cloven pine’, where he vented his ‘groans’. The cover to *The Children of Separation* depicts a split tree,

³² The device of spirits dividing and rejoining is common enough in literature. John Donne and Alexander Pope have made use of it, to name only two.

an illustration Carcanet struggled to achieve (and felt pleased with).³³ In the context of Ariel's punishment, this split also suggests a release. In Jones's poem, the pain takes on an identity of its own and 'hovered loving near me'. Prospero had made 'a venom of the light and air' which makes it sound like an Ariel figure, but it was also 'ugly ... as I always knew I was':

It became
its own creature. I lay fulfilled. Centuries
rotted me sweet. I settled. I became earth.

When Prospero 'made gape / the pine'³⁴, it was Ariel he released, but this creature in Jones's poem can only be Caliban, who remains for Auden's Prospero 'my impervious disgrace',³⁵ for whom Shakespeare's counterpart never properly takes responsibility (forgiveness is another matter). Jones's Prospero presents himself, more inclusively, as a kind of trinity made of earth, spirit and human nature. When the Jones tree toppled 'sighing', we are put in mind of Ariel's telling Caliban in the closing song in the Auden poem that what they shall become is 'one evaporating sigh', the counterpart of Shakespeare's Prospero who says 'our little life / Is rounded with a sleep'³⁶ (and 'Every third thought shall be my grave'³⁷). Ultimately this may be a reference to the leaving of life but it also refers to rebirth³⁸. Jan Kott has this to say about Caliban and his Prospero in *The Tempest*:

Caliban has no magic wand, and no wizard's staff will help him. He has mistaken a drunkard for God. But he has entered the path trodden by Prospero. He has undergone a trial and has lost his illusions. He has to make a fresh start once more. Just as Prospero has to make a fresh start when he returns to Milan to become Duke once more. 'I'll be wise hereafter,' says Caliban at the end.³⁹

Auden's characters would, perhaps, have been too schematically realized for Jones's purposes. Arthur Kirsch tells us of a complex diagram of oppositions drawn up by Auden, including who-represents-what (Prospero is Ego, for example, and

³³ Undated letter (almost certainly late August 1985) from Michael Schmidt to Brian Jones: 'The split tree caused us a great deal of difficulty but we have won at last and I hope you will like the cover.' Carcanet Archive.

³⁴ *The Tempest*, Act I scene ii) 292/3

³⁵ W. H. Auden *The Sea and the Mirror* (Faber and Faber, 1945) p.12

³⁶ Act IV scene i) 157-8

³⁷ Act V scene i) 311

³⁸ 'I should be glad of another death': 'Journey of the Magi' (from *Ariel Poems*) in T. S. Eliot *Selected Poems*, op. cit. p.98

³⁹ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (Methuen, 1965, pp.273/4)

Caliban life)⁴⁰ but 'Prospero to Miranda' suggests Jones would have agreed that 'Prospero' embodies all of these oppositions within himself.⁴¹

The third section is one of dreams that coat Jones's Prospero with 'shimmer', suggesting that we are with Ariel again, who in Shakespeare's play hangs 'glistening apparel' on the line for Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban to find. But 'Towards dawn, the dreams grew wild' and the remainder of this third sonnet describes what appears to be the birth of Caliban. The monster 'shambled out' like some kind of Yeatsian rough beast.⁴² 'It screamed for a mate to hurt' just as in Shakespeare's version, Caliban tries to ravish the Miranda being here addressed. 'It itched to breed. I felt the itch, and moaned'. In the fourth sonnet, this Caliban creature climbs into Prospero's bed, as might a child into its parents' bed. Prospero's pain now reverts to Ariel ('that thing of light and air') awaiting its freedom ('ticking its countdown'). Looking at his dual creation, Prospero prays that he may 'break like a staff whatever pride / it is that hates that creature and sets it free'.

And this, Prospero tells his daughter in Jones's poem's final section, is where she appeared, 'wide-eyed and watchful of my face'. Nevertheless communication is difficult:

I tell you my story endlessly, as a man
imprisoned hopelessly talks to his visitor
across the impenetrable space between them.

He does not believe in her, perhaps because she is too good to be true and belongs in 'a myth of innocence on some other island'. Kirsch observes how:

Both Shakespeare's Prospero and Auden's are sceptical of the romantic hyperboles of Miranda and Ferdinand. Prospero says dryly to Miranda in *The Tempest* that Ferdinand's world seems 'brave' to her only because of its novelty⁴³. Auden's Prospero asks, more pointedly,

*Will a Miranda who is
No longer a silly lovesick little goose,
When Ferdinand and his brave world are her profession,*

⁴⁰ Arthur Kirsch, Introduction to *the Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest* (Princeton University Press, 2003)

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming': 'And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born'.

⁴³ Act V scene i) 183/4

*Go into raptures over existing at all?*⁴⁴

Jones's Prospero seems unable to find the words to speak. But he acknowledges that she is his daughter 'waiting quietly at my feet / in an age-old posture of subservience.' The poem ends on an elusive note with Prospero wondering 'Why do I refuse to speak the words 'Tell me' / like a bucket lowered in a well of sweet water?' Perhaps the poem is ultimately concerned with the way our children become unreachable, or with our inability to ask them the necessary questions.

Jones's 'Prospero to Miranda' is an ambitious undertaking that finds the poet extending his narrative gift. It also represents an attempt to find a suitably complex metaphor on which to hang the 'glistening apparel' of his preoccupations. There are some who will find the attempt not direct enough. Certainly the sequence attracted not a single mention in the few reviews the book received. But the control of the poem's progress and the apparently effortless ways in which both Shakespeare and Auden have been put to new use remain impressive.

5. Impossible Words

The collection's title poem has been described by John Killick as 'a heartbreaking achievement' and 'a key text for our times, in which single parenthood has become a commonplace to be pilloried by politicians'.⁴⁵ For Killick the poem's effect is achieved 'not by battering the reader but by the fragile poise of its utterance'.⁴⁶ It is a poem that Peter Forbes included in his *Scanning the Century: The Penguin Book of the Twentieth Century in Poetry*⁴⁷. Lomas also liked this poem, saying of it:

In the best of this book, such as 'The Children of Separation' itself, a poem on the pain divorce has brought the children, feeling dictates flow, language surges on disturbance, not organized by syntax.⁴⁸

The poem begins:

⁴⁴ Arthur Kirsch, op. cit.

⁴⁵ John Killick, 'The Ache of Wholeness' in *The North* 15, 1994.

⁴⁶ Ibid. It was just such a search for poise that Jones admired in the poetry of Andrew Marvell, and Jones's 1980 volume, *The Island Normal*, might itself be seen to be characterised by a similar quest.

⁴⁷ Peter Forbes (editor), *Scanning the Century: The Penguin Book of the Twentieth Century in Poetry* (Viking, in association with The Poetry Society, 1999, p.318/9)

⁴⁸ Herbert Lomas. op. cit.

While waiting for you to come, I imagine you sitting
in a stopped train between stations, feeling
at peace in no-man's-land, where there is no need
to say 'we' or 'our' or 'home', or other impossible words,

where the poppies among the corn
recall distant universal pain
cushioned in history and innocence.

As we have seen, the train and the station play an important role in this collection's 'Introductory: 1944'. Here the unscheduled stop creates another liminal, in-between place, this time occupied by the children of separation who are on their way to visit their father. This is no-man's-land where the language of connection ('we'. 'our', 'home') prompts a brave image of greater loss in the poppies of war. Interestingly, Jones's originally had 'a distant universal pain', the removal of the article establishing universality the more convincingly. It is the tone of compassionate and humble resignation that allows this image to work. There is a genuine attempt to see things through the eyes of the children, to grasp how newly strange they must feel:

Suddenly, you are among the ranks of those
who once seemed as unlikely, as remote,
as the handicapped, the poor, the mad –

the children of separation, those who are given
two Christmases to halve the pain
and find it doubled, those who are more prey
to nostalgia than old men, who have been betrayed

by language and now handle it like bombs

We have already had examples of the way language has taken on new meanings, the familiar words that have now become the impossible, the hopeless questions that cannot be trusted, the shows of affection that begin to be interpreted as 'a thicket of spies'. Everything has changed and identity has been undermined and shown to be fragile and dependent:

What remains of the self if everything that was
is now framed in the inverted commas of 'seemed'?

The narrator imagines 'the brakes sighing', like the toppling tree in 'Prospero to Miranda' (father to child again), and 'the train resuming the purpose of the rails', a purpose denied the suddenly disengaged children. The narrator is aware of his own duplicity, of having locked his children out of his life by way of a protective deceit:

We will walk through fields I am still making mine,
and when the time comes for someone to say 'Let's go home'

no-one will say it. On the platform, we will wait to be parted,
your hand clutching a ticket to somewhere rejected.

The telling final image of rejection is projected on to the children, although they are returning to a place rejected not by them but by their father. Jones originally had 'somewhere I rejected'.

6. New Arrivals

By the time the collection has progressed to the 'Barbizon' sequence, it is clear that the protagonist is in a new relationship, a relationship that has required new arrivals for both parties. In 'Approaching Islands' the new woman wears a Madagascar flowered dress. Her hands grip 'oats and marguerites and purple currant':

You are beginning to arrive. Your hands
will place this small and English haul in a white
vase against the window and then in the tall bed
hold me. I too am learning to arrive.
Midnight. Your arms are tightening on an English
coast of flowers and fruit. My face against you
admits a Madagascar of dangerous blooms.

Tim Dooley clearly saw a developmental significance informing poems like this one, which

express the childlike exclusivity of new lovers whose mutual preoccupation is complicated and heightened by the fact that each is discovering another country, another culture in the other⁴⁹.

Poems like this one also strike a new note in that existential anxiety is being replaced by something closer to happiness, or at least the prospect of it. The reader may be reminded of the wartime Peter at the railway station, sitting 'at the heart of arrival'. 'He yearns to give, but is an empty receptacle / awaiting love'. The 'Madagascar of dangerous blooms' suggest themselves as a belated rite of passage.

⁴⁹ Tim Dooley, op. cit. The new 'country' is literally France and the new 'culture' that of France.

The opening section of 'Barbizon' considers 'Marguerites in a green glass' and asks 'How did we come not to trust these mundane plenitudes?' In this section we look out on 'a landscape of distances that shocks a window / and you breathe freely to recognise // the plenitude of the commonplace'. This delight in the ordinary requires peace of mind. What anxiety expects to find is something altogether different, 'the drunkard's / gritty-scalped morning-after poverty'. Disturbingly, the protagonist asserts that 'Our one true and indiscreet friend is the dream' and ushers in an extended image unusually allusive for Jones: Dream 'reaches / its hand towards us':

through night's broken window
promising infinite moors and air to breathe, and we preferred
to saw the wrist against the jags of fear, and to awake
reaching for words and the world-voiced morning paper,
pumping sweat for dawn to cool.

The dream, of course, is that of the visitor, Lockwood, at the beginning of *Wuthering Heights*, reaching out to 'silence' the repeated knocking of a fir-bough against the window. Instead of a branch, he encountered the hand of Catherine Linton. Overcome with fear, he 'pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro, till the blood ran down, and soaked the bedclothes'.⁵⁰ In the life of Jones's protagonist, the dream has been prompted by the new relationship that represents a significant change for him; and by the Jungian therapy Jones had undertaken. Jones's continuing interest in dream is not only evident in this poem but also elsewhere ('The Dream' for example, in 'Aeneas and After', and the counter-ego encountered in the same sequence's 'Firstfoot').

What attracted mid-nineteenth century artists to the Barbizon area was the desire to concentrate on the simple and ordinary, insisting, for example, that landscape be allowed to be landscape. They were 'to look rather than copy, to feel rather than analyze'.⁵¹ Michael Cayley had said of Brian Jones that 'What interests him is more the world of feeling than that of ideas',⁵² so it can be no surprise to find Jones drawn to the work of the Barbizon school; to Millet, in particular, one imagines,

⁵⁰ Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights* (1847) (Penguin Books, 1965) Chapter 3, p.67.

⁵¹ Dita Amory, 'The Barbizon School: French Painters of Nature' (Robert Lehman Collection, The Metropolitan Museum, New York) (www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bfpn/hd_bfpn.htm)

⁵² Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit., p.102

given the ‘blunt realism and quiet dignity’⁵³ with which he represented farm labourers. In John Lucas’s recent collection, *Things To Say*, ‘The Knitting Lesson’ considers Millet’s painting of the same name that depicts a mother guiding her daughter’s hand. The poem recalls a visit to Millet’s house in Barbizon:

He will have stood as I stand now, no
doubt about it, caught in the spell
of their absorbed endeavour,
knowing he’ll make a drawing to record
such tender care, and suddenly knowing too
that this is *all* he can do,
this, which is art’s insufficient reward.⁵⁴

John Lucas writes elsewhere:

I saw Millet’s drawing in the big exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1974 and it’s stayed with me ever since. Then much more recently, I saw a lovely terracotta sculpture at the V & A which reminded me of Millet: uncondescending, exact warmth of observation.⁵⁵

It is precisely such ‘uncondescending, exact warmth of observation’ that Jones aspires to in describing his farm labourers, or, indeed, the marguerites that represent ‘the simple and ordinary’.

Jones visited the Auberge Ganne in 1983, which was newly established in the 1820s when it provided lodging for many of the painters, who would venture out into the nearby Forest of Fontainebleau when weather permitted (though Théodore Rousseau painted outdoors in the forest in all climates). When Jones visited, with him were three companions. This fact is drawn on in ‘Barbizon’. However, while Jones is concerned to regain narrative ground lost unnecessarily to the novelist, he remains reluctant to provide all the background information that would help the reader *place* the poem and contextualize it as a novelist might. We know they are in ‘a monastic room on stilts’ and that their arrival is likened to the arrival of the painters, but we are not told who the other three are.⁵⁶ The four sit under trees for a picnic, outside as the painters were, and where ‘aristocrats played’. They relive their dreams. One adopts an impressionist pose, reminding us that the Barbizon School

⁵³ Dita Amory, *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ John Lucas, *Things To Say* (Five Leaves Publications, 2010) p.22.

⁵⁵ John Lucas, in a private letter to Paul McLoughlin, dated 14th November, 2010. (The sculpture he refers to is the ‘Terracotta portrait bust of Eugénie Maria Wynne’ by Aimé-Jules Dalou, 1875.)

⁵⁶ Brian’s widow, Noëlle, told me by email (2nd December, 2010) that the visitors were herself, Brian, her mother, and her son, Nick.

was a precursor to Impressionism; another confesses a desire to have been a traveller who lived out of a caravan; a third, the protagonist, celebrates a new situation ‘like a mind released from despair’; the fourth celebrates a return to France. We are told only as much as we need to know.⁵⁷ Replete and ‘Cargoes’ with their ‘reclaimed pasts’, they are ‘ready now to rise, depart’. They have a group photograph taken, it seems at the insistence of their host, who has found in the place she runs ‘a perfect blend of ingredients’. The way in which she describes her customers reveals a typical Jonesian quest for something more, though in this case she may be doing no more than anticipating future nostalgia and yearning:

The cafes in good time
will be replenished, and those yearning jaws,
let them talk achingly of the quiche and ham –

a stretched hunger flowers into a passion
and they will fall upon their food like lovers!

In a telling final image, the host’s courteous smile ‘escorts’ the quartet’s departure ‘as a sighing artist releases a masterwork to the gross world’. The ‘gross world’ is one in which the lives of artists become heritage and a commodity to be packaged and sold, albeit a package that allows the visitor to explore and experience the spirit of the place. Jones’s widow recalls it as ‘an exceptional place, full of the ghosts of those painters ... it also was the bottom of an ocean in another age, hence the presence of boulders and rocks where the painters sculpted each other’s heads!’⁵⁸

7. Return Journey

‘Return Journey’ finds the lovers on a ferry in mid-Channel fog ‘where the quit shore and the approaching are unreal, / invisible and undeserved’. It is an in-between state of a wholly new kind for Jones because it is filled with hope. ‘The final gift’:

is to look calmly on the surrounding hills
or walls, on the stretch of moderately
worked garden, the past with its approximations,
the future with its death, and to say

⁵⁷ Noëlle returned from Algeria, where she had lived with her family, when the troubles erupted there.

⁵⁸ Noëlle Jones, email to Paul McLoughlin, op. cit.

‘This is mine’ – a daunting task for one,
well past forty, still learning how to say
‘This is me’.

It is a mood of gratitude, too, for the ‘gift’ of a woman who pestered him into finding ‘a moon / blazing’ where he ‘imagined more dark lane’. The future may hold death but that death has now been put back as the new emerges. ‘The shore’:

subtly becomes a harbour, then a quay. The light
is crystal and undeceived. Arm linked in arm
we sway across slats, and where the land begins
begins the road, inward, returning, and then on.

In Normandy, it seemed the couple ‘would go unhaunted, / beached in that ark among the woods’,⁵⁹ the new house suddenly recalling the caravan Jones had moved into at Badgers Mount. They enjoyed waking ‘to every last thing we had chosen - / each other, and an unquestioning // elsewhere, absorbed with autumn’. They drank ‘the thickening milk’ that came ‘udder-warm’ and a neighbour, a retired baker, brought them ‘chunk bread from his bakehouse basement’. But there are always ghosts. A walk takes them past the local cemetery with its war-dead and induces in the woman a ‘silent scream’ as she feels like ‘a vessel’ into which the past is poured. It is as if she knows, when she passes them, what she was born for: ‘Not death, but for them to live through me’. Jones learns that ‘those were battlefields I crossed next day, / a silence of millions’. His partner’s change of mood has made clear what these fields held, as he brings home the following morning’s milk ‘from those death-watered pastures’. The poem ends with a familiar and persistent reference: ‘And I came through woods towards you like a future’.

This second half of ‘In Normandy’, however, strikes a rare note of anguish among poems celebrating a newly-won peace. In ‘Retakes’, looking at old photographs and retracing with a camera of their own ‘the old photographer’s steps’, they somehow expected to be made to feel fearful, but they end up smiling at their own portraits. They are pleasantly surprised that they have unearthed no ‘hint of ghost’. In ‘Spring Arrival’, the protagonist celebrates, in seven slant-rhymed couplets ‘The scale of things!’, how ‘tiny and perfect’ flowers, ‘a cram of

⁵⁹ ‘In Normandy’ (*TCOS*, 55)

mischievous delight' may be achieved 'in a rush of two days' sun' where lovers can 'with luck' take half a lifetime to arrive. It is a poem so poised (the exclamation mark of 'The scale of things!' and the obviousness of some of its adjectives—'sensational', 'perfect'—showing it to be aware of the danger of toppling over into self-parody or, worse, sentimentality) as to find the poet relaxed enough to indulge in that favourite pastime of poets: making lists.⁶⁰ 'My Stick', a poem that began life as a Christmas poem sent out to friends, celebrates Jones's walking companion in a list that journeys through its possibilities with a welcome wit ('It conducts definitive Elgar, it finds the greens').⁶¹

8. 'Semur-en-Brionnais'

This delight in lists informs the opening of the collection's final sequence, 'Semur-en-Brionnais'⁶², as Jones rehearses the faltering ways in which love is born, until it ventures out of doors in summer, where it is 'applauded' (presumably in a succession of weddings) in Semur's small square. The second section acknowledges the way love 'receives / and hosts distances'. What it observes is a reflection of itself, including 'the svelte lizards // flashing to cracks / brilliant as thoughts / lost on waking'. For all that, the section closes with a hint of foreboding because love 'will never be elsewhere / from that pained shocked face // at the opened door / of the village we pass through / never to revisit'. In this poem, unlike 'In Normandy', history is recorded in an evening *Son et Lumiere* presentation of 'plague-summers, wine-frozen winters' and later the decades 'of nothing, the nothing of life happening'⁶³. The most significant event happens after the organized presentation. They sit in a café, watching everything being dismantled, until one youth 'risks the top of his old van / to free from wires a paper kite / and return it to the child who flew it there'. The child is nothing to the youth ('not his child, not his village's, nor

⁶⁰ Poise, of course, is a characteristic of Marvell's that Jones was keen to acknowledge and pay homage to in 'Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge' (*TIN*, pp.89-91): 'Poise / Is what the drizzling droplets lack // Then gain once more when thrust up high / By artifice'. (*TIN*, 89)

⁶¹ Many poets make a habit of sending out an annual Christmas poem. Lawrence Sail, for example, has just published a collection of his: *Songs of the Darkness: Poems for Christmas* (Enitharmon, 2010).

⁶² A mediæval village in the Borgogne region of Saône-et-Loire in eastern France.

⁶³ cf. Philip Larkin's 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere', from 'I remember, I Remember' in *The Less Deceived* (The Marvell Press, 1955)

his nation's). It was 'a slow and generous act that warms / the roots of speech as it untangles string'

In the next section, the village reverts to normality, but in Jones's poem this takes on an almost hallucinogenic horror. The village, viewed from afar, becomes 'a meaningless rubble' in which 'Only a smattering of poppies / were coherent with an old story'. Even Jones's trusted marguerites were 'stringy remnants from vanished legends'. In this post-apocalyptic modern world, 'Sometimes the phone / shrilled for help in the unlit hall', leading the couple to hold each other 'like the only things we deserved'. Yet they are in the throes of creating another past, one that will contain their burgeoning relationship, and this creativity, born of a troubled history, is 'an embrace of memory'. It becomes reassuring to know that people will come to Semur, 'as they came last night', to applaud not so much *Son et Lumiere* displays as 'small unexpected generousities'.

9. Sonnets

John Killick believed that the best poems in *The Children of Separation* (and these included the title poem)

attain a degree of wisdom coupled with a plangency of word-music which marks them out from those of most of his contemporaries. Only George Barker is capable of a comparable lyric intensity.⁶⁴

Such a judgement insists that Jones is significantly more than an innovative narrative poet. Peter Bland had already recognized in Jones 'a compellingly fluent poetic voice'⁶⁵. When Bland says that Jones has 'no room for frills', he is referring to what he calls a 'sense of immediacy – urgency even'⁶⁶. The 'plangency of word-music', Killick refers to is easily exemplified—the couple grown apart in 'Cutting' who once enjoyed gardening and blackberrying now 'lash with lawyers and secateur the past'; the eponymous 'Snowmen' with 'their ice-lips / clamped on pipes'; or at Lullingstone's Roman villa where 'Your face is brilliant with starlight

⁶⁴ John Killick, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Peter Bland, 'Messages from the Edge', op. cit.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

and distress'.⁶⁷ It is clear that Jones worried over matters of word-music and line-break and concision. This concern is evident in all his verse but perhaps most obviously draws attention to itself in more formal poems, and in *The Children of Separation*, there are more sonnets than in the sum total of all Jones's earlier work. There are seventeen stand-alone examples in the collection in addition to those that comprise the sequences 'Fancy Bread', 'Four Poems', 'Prospero to Miranda', 'At Badgers Mount',⁶⁸ and they cover a range of feeling, both domestic and distanced, in other words both personal and observed.

The stand-alone sonnets are also carefully placed in the collection. 'A Falklands Veteran' (which identifies what it calls 'a special subtle tenderness in a goodnight kiss') appears immediately after the 'bomb' poems; 'Piero's Resurrection' considers what it calls 'a Christ Nightmare' after 'Prospero and Miranda' begin to reinvent their relationship with themselves and the world, and before 'Cutting' which deals with a failed relationship; a group of seven sonnets placed centrally in the book introduces us to the persona's new partner, while the meeting between father and child recorded in 'Oxford' ('We love our children, hate ourselves in them') precedes the title poem. These sonnets, unsurprisingly, house Jones's perennial preoccupations (for example, *inter alia*, wholeness, yearning, history, separation, decay, family) carefully framed by the 'lyric intensity' and 'compellingly fluent poetic voice' Killick and Bland referred to. These qualities are in evidence in 'A View' in which 'High indolent clouds fatten their gold berries / and trail the hillsides with nonchalant shade'. This last is about pain and a new lover's attempt to accommodate and assuage it. Notably it is a poem in which Jones counters Robert Lowell's 'My mind's not right' with 'My mind's free', two tellingly short sentences. Jones's tone in these poems is one of a poet struggling to emerge from a painful past, and it is this tone that differentiates him from Larkin's or Heaney's differing forms of confident assertiveness. Jones's is an art that is trying to rid itself of pain.

⁶⁷ 'Cutting' (*TCOS*, 20); 'Snowmen' (*TCOS*, 34); 'At Lullingstone' (*TCOS*, 35).

⁶⁸ There are 42 unrhymed sonnets in the first 43 pages of *The Children of Separation*. Only Part 2 of 'Introductory: 1944' (p.7), "Merely an impulse to beautify" (p.31) and 'The Children of Separation' (pp.40/1) are in other forms. Interestingly, perhaps, from 'Barbizon' (pp.44ff) to the end of the book (p.62) there are no more sonnets. By this time the new relationship has been properly established.

10. No Small Murders

‘No Small Murders’, the title of the book’s final poem is also the title that late in the day Jones wanted to use for the collection as a whole. Michael Schmidt had sent a letter urgently requesting the finalized text (by 22nd June, 1985) because he wanted the collection to be considered by The Poetry Book Society. Jones’s reply is dated 22nd June:

I do hope these reach you on time. I have made one or two small alterations and added a final poem – ‘No Small Murders’. Would it be possible to have that as a title for the collection? I really do like it as a title and feel it is very appropriate⁶⁹

The poem is a favourite of the poet’s younger brother, Dylan,⁷⁰ who introduced and read it at an event in Sevenoaks organized to celebrate Brian’s life and work. His account of the poem highlights many of his brother’s themes

[W]e cannot escape the consequences of our actions. There are no 'small murders' - everything has resonance. A single 'wound' 'seeds a landscape' 'smears cities'. I suppose it's like the butterfly effect. One small act ripples out - endlessly - affecting everything else. We also arrive burdened with the events of the past. They hang behind us 'like fists of dust'. And we must not try to absolve ourselves from this energy & violence - we must not evade this guilt 'claiming it was our right' - 'we did not understand'. BUT... life goes on re-affirming itself - insignificant 'transparencies' are the desired 'frail alternatives to absence' - & there remains that hope & longing for - 'calm water on a wind-ruffled day' which - like the violence & disarray - is also universal - & too 'easily forgotten'..... like the timeless gesture of kindness, hopefulness, open-ness, positive humanity embodied in 'the taking of offered hands, or offering hands'.⁷¹

What Dylan Jones refers to as the ‘timeless gesture of kindness’ is what Jones most cherishes. It is the ‘slow and generous act’ of the youth in ‘Semur-en-Brionnais’, one of the ‘unexpected generousities’ that ‘warms the roots of speech’. The ‘taking of offered hands, or offering hands’ is a fitting end to a collection that has battled its way through pain to a kind of peace. *Freeborn John*, Jones next book, the last published in his lifetime, finds him in more satirical mood. It is an angry response to Thatcher’s England.

⁶⁹ Brian Jones, Letter to Michael Schmidt, dated 22nd June, 1985 (Carcenet Archive) There is no record of Schmidt’s responding to this request. It wasn’t taken up.

⁷⁰ Dylan was apparently named after Dylan Thomas at Brian’s suggestion. Brian had been asked by his (and Dylan’s) mother for just such a suggestion.

⁷¹ Dylan Jones, email to Paul McLoughlin, 8th May 2010.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Freeborn John (1990): All Trapped In What They Should Be

1. Political Urgency

The Children of Separation, Brian Jones's second collection with Carcanet, explored the pain of 'the breaking tensions between a man and a woman, and their consequences'¹ before opening out into the calmer world of a new relationship. It might reasonably be anticipated, then, that the next book would be a happier affair. This was not to prove the case. Jones observed in conversation that he had noticed that his books tended to oscillate between private and public.² If *The Children of Separation* had been largely private in its promptings, *Freeborn John* issued from more public concerns.³ The original manuscript, called *Enemies' Country*, was sent to Michael Schmidt on 12th March 1988 with an accompanying letter:

These poems have all been written since THE CHILDREN OF SEPARATION and use personal / professional experiences as well as the general experience of being alive in 80s' Britain. I also use the great storm that struck us in October (from my point of view it was fortuitous, and provided me with pertinent imagery for the Stansted section, as well as the photo at the beginning).⁴

Jones wrote again in July enquiring after his manuscript, this second letter revealing his severe disquiet about public life and the effects political and professional developments were having on him and on his teaching colleagues:

I'd be pleased to hear from you as soon as possible abt yr view of the collection I sent. Apart from the usual anxiety a writer feels about his work, there are other things that make me feel impatient about this particular work at this particular time. I do feel it has a topical (political?) urgency and relevance in a country where appalling things(?) are happening. It might be

¹ Back cover blurb, written by the publisher Michael Schmidt, in anticipation of Jones's objection to any mention of a failed marriage.

² In conversation with Paul McLoughlin, who was at the time the manager and coach of the Middlesex U/14 cricket team that was playing Kent in the summer of 1998. Jones arrived in his Morris Traveller, the body of which still sits in the garden of the Jones house in Normandy (though it now holds flowers). Even so, Morris Travellers were a rarity as late as the 1990s. See Fn.3 p.148.

³ Brian Jones, *Freeborn John* (Carcanet, 1990)

⁴ Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt, dated 12th March 1988, accompanying manuscript of *Enemies' Country* for consideration. Carcanet Archive, op. cit. Accession 3 Box 350.

that this is an aspect of the work which does not appeal to you but it is one I value and wish to be heard, as a contribution to protest and resistance. I am also in a precarious position at the moment and wd like some certainty abt the collection's future. You know I work in Adult Education. Many of the experiences & fears and much of the pain and protest in the collection arise from my work & the way it & devoted people in it have been treated over the past few years. Things have recently worsened. It seems as if Kent are on the edge of destroying the AE service, & I will be one of the bits of wreckage, quite probably out of work by April next. The treatment of the service is, for me, an epitome of what is happening throughout the country, where reflection, discourse, democratic values of questioning, empowerment and democratic structures are being crushed under the juggernaut of monologue, philistinism and contempt for liberal values. You can probably see why the collection & its fate mean so much to me.⁵

Schmidt was apologetic about not having replied more promptly. *Enemies' Country* was a collection he admired and wished to publish, but there were difficulties, some relating to what it was hoped were temporary cash-flow problems for his publishing house, the previous distributing company he had used having gone first into receivership and then into liquidation.⁶ Another difficulty, however, issued from the commercial 'unsuccess'⁷ of Jones's work: 'Carcenet – if we are to continue publishing your work – must devise with you a marketing plan'⁸. However sensible this suggestion may have been in business terms, it was hardly designed to assuage the ferocity of Jones's anger at the Conservative government of the day.

Schmidt advised that, whilst wanting to be sensitive to Jones's request for some urgency, there was 'effectively no chance of publication in 1989. The book would come early in 1990'⁹ Clearly Jones wanted his 'contribution to protest and resistance' to see the light of day before then, even if necessarily only in the form of individual poems or sequences; so he turned to Alan Ross's *London Magazine*, which had published his first four collections. What he sent Ross was the 'Stansted Sonnets' sequence:

I wonder if you would be interested in the enclosed, for the L.M. They make up a section of a collection I've just completed - 'Enemies' Country' -

⁵ Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt dated 14th July 1988. Carcanet Archive, op. cit. Accession 3 Box 267.

⁶ Ibid. Unsigned letter from Michael Schmidt to Brian Jones (beginning Dear Bryan [sic]) dated 15th July 1988.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The book was eventually an October 1990 publication.

which explores some of the experiences of being in Britain now. This section grew from a visit with my father to the war-memorial at Stansted (not the airport Stansted) just after the tempest of last autumn had shattered much of the village.¹⁰

This letter is dated 28th July, only ten days or so after he would have received what Schmidt had acknowledged had not been ‘an easy letter to write (or read, I expect)’.¹¹ Ross accepted the sequence¹² and it soon appeared in his magazine (together with photographs taken by Jones’s friend, John Walker). Jones was pleased that Ross had his ‘Stansted Sonnets’ in print so promptly after accepting them.¹³

Freeborn John contains a number of poem-sequences and multi-sectioned poems to add to the many that informed Jones’s earlier collections: ‘Stansted Sonnets’, dedicated to the poet’s father, makes use of family, social and political histories to comment on the current condition of England; ‘Caesar’s Progress’ is ‘a satirical anatomy of power’¹⁴ that ‘takes the form of imperial anachronism’¹⁵; ‘La Trahison d’un Clerc’ is a further assault on the self-serving opportunism generated by authoritarianism; ‘Exiled Voices’ is a group of poems that provides an experiential commentary on how it feels to be marginalised; ‘The Cherry Orchard’ muses on personal responsibility and complicity in the face of oppression and the traumas it can induce, and is a further example of Jones’s attempting to speak, as it were, for those who have no voice; ‘Snow Pieces’ ranges from lyricism to the near-surrealist discursive, and reflects on the effects of disruption; ‘Father and Son’ examines one of the essential relationships, its first eight poems concerning the poet and his father, its last concerning the poet and his son, and exemplifies Jones’s perennial search for some kind of poise (or ‘peace’, as the epigraph from Peter Handke’s *Slow*

¹⁰ Letter from Brian Jones to Alan Ross, dated 28th July, 1988, *London Magazine* Archive, op. cit.

¹¹ The sentence that follows, the letter’s last, is ‘Given our high profile in the media just now, I am especially disheartened’. I have yet to determine what was prompting this ‘high profile’.

¹² In a letter that Jones answered on 26th August 1988.

¹³ Brian Jones’s letter to Alan Ross dated 2nd December [1988] acknowledges receipt of the issue carrying the Stansted Poems: ‘it’s good to see them in print’. They appeared in *London Magazine* (December 88/January 89, Vol. 28 Nos. 9/10) carrying the epigraph from Geoffrey Hill that eventually came to serve as the epigraph for ‘Caesar’s Progress’. It is the epigraph from which the original title of the collection was taken.

¹⁴ William Scammell, ‘Highly Indignant’, a review of *Freeborn John* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6th September, 1991, p.23

¹⁵ Sean O’Brien, from a review in *London Magazine* (February/March 1991), p.119.

Homecoming has it);¹⁶ ‘Shadowings’ has been interpreted as a six-part parody of Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns*¹⁷ and a further exploration of childhood influences; and ‘After Tempest’, an eclectic and formally varied response to the great storm of October 1987, concludes with an image of resistance that returns the volume and the reader to its beginning.

The epigraphs to these sequences make for interesting reading in themselves and tell us something about the volume’s unity of purpose, its poems coalescing into a political act. They cover a wide range, from the overtly political to the sociological and the familial, but they share an interest in resistance. The epigraph to ‘Caesar’s Progress’, for example is taken from Geoffrey Hill’s long poem about Charles Péguy (1873-1914):

This is your enemies’ country which they took
in the small hours an age before you woke¹⁸

What the enemies bring with them is captured in the withering quotation from William Walwyn that serves as epigraph to ‘La Trahison d’un Clerc’: ‘Compulsion and enforcement may make a confused mass of dissembling hypocrites, not a congregation of believers’.¹⁹ One of the reasons authoritarianism (and ‘strong’ government) gains and sustains its grip on power is precisely because there will always be ‘dissembling hypocrites’ ready to serve its certainty of purpose. Chekhov, whom Jones cites in the epigraph to his poem ‘The Cherry Orchard’ (itself, of course, named after the seminal Chekhov play), knew this was a dilemma, too, for the writer: ‘I know of no context, religious or political, in which to set us. Therefore, I describe us as we are’.²⁰ However, describing things as they are will rarely threaten a regime.

¹⁶ ‘His reality became the form he achieved, the form that does not lament transience or the vicissitudes of history, but transmits an existence in peace’. Peter Handke, *Slow Homecoming* (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, New York, 1985; Mandarin (Methuen Modern Fiction), London, 1986)

¹⁷ Don Paterson, ‘Reviewing for Caesar’, *Poetry Review* Vol.80 No4 (Winter 1990/1)

¹⁸ Geoffrey Hill, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (Agenda Editions and André Deutsch, 1983, Section 4, p.14). Hill says in an afterword (p.31): ‘Péguy, stubborn rancours and mishaps and all, is one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences, of our century. I offer *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* as my homage to his ‘defeat’.

¹⁹ William Walwyn: *A Whisper in the Ear of Thomas Edwards* (1646). See also Fn.65, p.188

²⁰ Jones does not reference this quotation, but it may be a version of the following from one of Chekhov’s letters to D.V. Grigorovich (quoted in Yarmolinsky, A., trans., *The Cherry Orchard*, The Arvon Theatre Library, New York, 1965): ‘As I have no political, religious and philosophical view of the universe; I change it every month and will be compelled to limit myself solely to descriptions of how my chief characters make love, get married, give birth, meet death, and how they talk’.

The mood of anger is furthered by the epigraph to 'Exiled Voices' from the work of the clinical psychologist, David Smail: 'The greatest violence done to people in our society is to rob them of a public life'.²¹ Perhaps the most pertinent of all the epigraphs, it does not, however, immediately reveal its import. Jones's creative writing work with prisoners might suggest that he is referring to the detrimental effects of incarceration, but the 'violence' here is not (or not only) that done by the penal system but rather the way in which the economics of daily life and the stifling of debate has removed all opportunity for ordinary people to contribute to the world they live in. The inclusive sweep of Smail's argument is made clear in his next sentence:

As people are persuaded by an unremitting barrage of commercial propaganda that their happiness lies in the indulgence and satisfaction of their private needs and impulses, they are simultaneously stripped of the possibility of developing and using talents, resources and interests that they can place at the disposal of others and enact for the public good.²²

Smail looked not only at how commercial interests damage individuals, but also at how these interests themselves both feed and arise from political and business adherence to prevailing right-wing economic ideology.²³

The economic structures we inhabit rob most of us of any function extended out into public space, so that our existence becomes imploded into an impacted preoccupation with our selves and our needs; they *exploit* private impulses at the same time as *appropriating* public function.²⁴

While the government was applying monetarist policies in the economic sphere and a National Curriculum in education, individuals did not need much persuading to buy into, as it were, their own demise. The small hours coup, borrowed from Hill, is a metaphor for the way in which, for Jones, democratic structures and liberal values in Britain have been crushed by stealth, almost without our knowing, and certainly to Jones's mind, without our being aware of the extent of its happening.

²¹ David Smail, *Taking Care*, op. cit.

²² Ibid.

²³ During the 'eighties the Thatcher government leaned heavily on the ideas of the American economist, Milton Friedman, a principal exponent of free-market monetarism, though I daresay Friedman cannot be blamed for what the market wants to trade in.

²⁴ Smail, *Taking Care*, op. cit. p. 124

2. Enemies' Country

The opening poem, 'Introductory 1638: Freeborn John', added later, was to give the collection its eventual name. This change is in keeping with Jones's prevailing interest in the English Civil War, but there are critics who would question the wisdom of returning to this historical period, critics who would have preferred, one imagines, had they known of it, the original allusion. Jones had revealed an interest in the English Civil War in the earlier *The Island Normal*. There, poems involving Marvell and Cromwell and Viscount Falkland develop historical and civic themes 'with a new urgency and pertinence'.²⁵ Though clearly drawn to Geoffrey Hill's idea, Jones switches the reader's attention back from Peguy's France to John Lilburne's England. Lilburne, leader of the Levellers, a radical democratic party prominent during the Civil War, becomes Jones's Péguy. Sean O'Brien was to complain that there wasn't enough history in the new collection 'to relate the natural world to democratic liberties' but acknowledged that 'the very act of groping for a past implies that Jones is correct to suggest that the Right has stolen a march on the future'.²⁶ Too much of the history O'Brien was bemoaning the lack of would have meant for Jones his going back over old ground, a difficulty that might have been overcome, perhaps, by retaining *Enemies Country* as his title. Hill, after all, is also known for his interest in 'the condition of England', and the phrase 'Enemies' Country' itself comes from the seventeenth-century work of Thomas Nashe²⁷ and William Davenant.²⁸ Péguy and Lilburne resist in the face of powerful, and for them pernicious forces, but the broader international scope of the former avoids any unintentional parochialism that might derive from Lilburne's nickname. That he was

²⁵ Publisher's back cover blurb.

²⁶ Sean O'Brien, *London Magazine* (February/March 1991) p.119, op. cit.

²⁷ *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. R.B.McKerrow, reprinted with corrections and supplementary notes by F.P.Wilson, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1966), i. 258 "In 'the Epistle Dedicatorie' of *Strange News*, an attack on the Cambridge pedant *G.H.*, Nashe commends the work of his 'verie friend' Apis lapis (Mr Beeston) with this flourish: 'Thou art a good fellow I know, and hadst rather spend ieastns than monie. Let it be the taske of thy best tearmes, to safeguard this booke through the enemies country.'" (Quoted in Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) p.xi).

²⁸ *Sir William Davenant's Gondibert*, ed. D.F.Gladish (Oxford 1971), 24: "Davenant, in the Author's Preface to *Gondibert*, has his conceit of 'the vast field of Learning. where the Learned ... lye ... malitiously in Ambush' and where one must travail ...' as 'through the Enemy's country'" (Quoted in Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) p.xi).

at least aware of this problem is suggested by Jones's pressing Caesar into use as a thinly-veiled representation of Margaret Thatcher.

It is instructive to observe the inverted commas that frame the opening poem,²⁹ because this is the first time in Jones's *oeuvre* that he has drawn attention to the speaker of a poem in this way, and it is a distancing device that will appear elsewhere in this collection, too.³⁰ It is tempting to suppose that when inverted commas are not used (as in 'Exiled Voices') Jones is not anxious (as he has often proved) to avoid any possibility of being identified with his speakers. What is being witnessed and admired in the poem is the indomitable resistance of John Lilburne who, in 1638, in addition to being fined and ultimately imprisoned for helping to smuggle into England Puritan pamphlets printed in the Netherlands, was also publicly whipped and pilloried. The witness might, at the poem's outset, be talking of any number of historical repressions, including the policies of the nineteenth-century government Jones is alarmed by: 'If people knew the times where they were cast, / they'd look about them'.

Both Lilburne's witness and Jones want to use the printed word to persuade people to look around them, to 'see the Great squares grown shambles, note / how Execution, flagrantly empowered, // lops ears that hear, melts eyes that see':

The main ignore
the iron in the flesh and soul, twitch down
the brim of tact, and squint the ground.

The imagery here is striking and offers an answer to those who would say that political verse is undone by the very strength of its commitment. Tom Paulin's combative introduction as editor to *The Faber Book of Political Verse* begins 'We have been taught, many of us, that art and politics are separated by the thickest and most enduring of partitions',³¹ but goes on to complain that 'One of the dogmas of the ahistorical school of literary criticism is that political commitment necessarily

²⁹ The poem, 'Introductory: 1638 Freeborn John', was not included in the original manuscript (*Enemies' Country*). The inverted commas were a further addition at the proof-reading stage.

³⁰ It is used in the seventh poem of 'Caesar's Progress', and in four of the six sections of Jones's sequence 'The Cherry Orchard'.

³¹ Tom Paulin (ed.) *The Faber Book of Political Verse* Faber (Faber and Faber, 1986): Introduction, p.15.

damages a poem.³² He rails against ‘the aristocratic, hierarchical, conservative tradition which Arnold and T. S. Eliot have floated as the major cultural hegemony in these islands’. Brian Jones’s anger, directed as much of it is, at the Conservative Party government of the day, might lead us to suppose he would support Paulin’s views. Jones suspected that even his own publisher, Michael Schmidt of Carcanet Press, who had in his under-graduate days worked for Eliot, was simply incapable, at a class level, of comprehending his anger, of understanding what his poems were attempting to do. The United Kingdom was not Eastern Europe. There was no need for a Zbigniew Herbert or a Tadeusz Różewicz or a Miroslav Holub. Perhaps Jones believed that, from the perspective of the class war, there were those who, three and a half centuries later, still clung to the conviction that in the English Civil War the wrong side won.

George Steiner begins his *TLS* review of Paulin’s anthology in a similarly combative mood: ‘Literature is political to its roots’.³³ But Paulin does not, Steiner complains, make ‘any attempt to register the depth and delicacy of the issues raised by the inter-penetrations of the fictive and the political, of *poiesis* and programme’.³⁴ Steiner agrees with Paulin that much of contemporary English poetry avoids dealing with its post-colonial modernity. English poetry’s Narcissus ‘gazes into a drained pool’. Jones would have responded favourably to Steiner’s reference to Canetti:

As Elias Canetti often reminds us, the statement by a writer that his poem or novel or play, had it been better, ought to have stopped this war or that massacre, is not empty megalomania. It is, rather, a talismanic pointer to the imperative humanity, to the claims on totality, which underlie poetic creation.³⁵

As early as 1973, Jones had expressed his desire to be a ‘spokesman’³⁶ for those who, unlike himself, do not have ‘the gift of words’³⁷. Speaking of what was to become the title poem of *For Mad Mary*, Jones says:

³² Ibid. p.17.

³³ George Steiner, ‘Criticisms of life, voices of protest’, a review of Tom Paulin (ed.) *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (Faber and Faber, 1986) in *Times Literary Supplement*, May 23 1986, pp.547/8.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *The Poet Speaks: Brian Jones & Peter Orr*, op. cit.

³⁷ Ibid.

One of the weaknesses of English poetry at the moment, I think, is that it's extraordinarily metropolitan, and it is not politically aware. I know that can sound very dangerous—we all know how unsuccessful was thirties' commitment and so on—but I think we're in a world where an intelligent man, if he's a writer, has to be politically aware in some way or another. So I hope that the Mad Mary poem is, in a sense, politically aware. It's about trapped people, about people enclosed in their streets, in their views, surrounded by other people who are happy to keep them in that situation. So, for me, it's not a case of intelligence, it's a sense of responsibility. I have a responsibility. I have a gift of language. I have got a gift that I increasingly feel has got to be put to a particular use. I've got to be a spokesman.

One imagines he would have applauded Jon Silkin for saying 'The image ... is too often confection fed to a gluttoned and pampered consumer; it achieves nothing beyond its sensory and local pleasures. Consciousness is not extended'.³⁸ Jones wants to burst through the conservative politeness he sees shielding a more brutish force and, like the Shakespeare of Sonnet LXVI before him, does not wish to see his art 'tongue-tied by authority'

3. 'Stansted Sonnets'

Jones's letter to Alan Ross suggested that the 'central poem' of 'Stansted Sonnets' was the seventh (of nine), because it expressed 'the cold horror I am feeling about this country at the moment'³⁹. Comparing the poem, 'A View from Stansted',⁴⁰ with the prose extract from Jones's letter to Michael Schmidt cited earlier is immediately to recognize the poet at work:

The treatment of the [adult education] service is, for me, an epitome of what is happening throughout the country, where reflection, discourse, democratic values of questioning, empowerment and democratic structures are being crushed under the juggernaut of monologue, philistinism and contempt for liberal values.

The unsubtle 'juggernaut' has been replaced by the intentionality of a 'cold vision', and this sinister near-abstraction is bodied by the striking and totalitarian images that follow; for example the 'scything realism that takes / every thought at the knee'. What lends the poem its power is precisely this kind of juxtaposition of

³⁸ Jon Silkin (ed.), *Poetry of the Committed Individual* (Victor Gollancz, London / Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973): Introduction, p.38

³⁹ Letter to Alan Ross dated 28th July 1988 *London Magazine Archive*, op. cit.

⁴⁰ (*FJ*, 13) and quoted in full here on p.108.

concrete metaphor and abstract category: ‘barbed / certainties’; ‘crushes discourse’; ‘proves dreams pathology’; ‘vaunting irony’; ‘trip-wire horror’; ‘inevitable lanes’. Latinate formality and restraint are enlivened by the active adjectives and verbs. William Scammell is not entirely persuaded, though he does find *Freeborn John* ‘an interesting and readable book, honourably bewildered by what there is left to believe in’⁴¹. He, too, quotes this ‘sonnet’ in its entirety before commenting on it:

The indignation is clear enough, and so is its relevance. The trip-wire, the scythe and the lanes, however, seem to take us back to Wilfred Owen’s or Edward Thomas’s England, though for what reason is not clear. As to the form, I don’t see why fourteen unrhymed and unmetred lines should be called a sonnet.⁴²

Beyond our wondering quite why a carefully structured and patterned poem of fourteen lines might *not* be called a sonnet, Scammell’s other objection points up at least one of the difficulties faced by the writer of impassioned, committed verse, namely that he is likely, on the one hand, to be ignored by those who believe that art and politics are and should remain separate, and, on the other, to be regarded as stating the obvious by those closer to sharing his political views. One imagines Jones protesting that the ‘Stansted Sonnets’ were prompted by a visit made with his father to the small village in Kent, exactly the kind of place written about by Edward Thomas in his travel journals (and there can be no doubting the passion Jones had for Thomas’s poetry). Images of the First World War arise naturally when Jones and his father stop by the War Memorial there; which would also explain being taken back to Wilfred Owen’s England. Owen, for Jones, was an exemplar of those who would speak for others.

The first poem in the sequence, entitled ‘At the War Memorial’, begins with the kind of muscularity that Michael Schmidt praised as the energy of Jones’s language:⁴³

Together like yoked oxen we lean
into this tailgate slam of tempest.
An equal brevity of stauched stride.

⁴¹ William Scammell, ‘Highly Indignant’, op. cit., p.23

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Letter from Michael Schmidt to Brian Jones dated 26th June, 1985: re *The Children of Separation*. Carcanet Archive, op. cit.

The syntax of the first line links the spondee of 'yoked ox(en)' and the appropriately heavy stress of the final word, 'lean'; 'Together', 'tailgate' and 'tempest' alliteratively enclose the powerful monosyllables of 'yoked', 'lean' and 'slam'. It is a heavily accentuated verse that catches the physical effort of moving against a strong wind. And the short 'stunched stride' this physical effort entailed is also a way of bringing father and son closer than they had been for some years; it created a 'muscular understanding after / lame decades'. The names on the memorial are the familial names of Stansted, and the figure that rises above them is that of a 'svelte youth', the adjective making clear that this was no Stansted youth. The 'svelte youth'⁴⁴ is the bronze figure of the second sonnet, but the speaker here notices that:

Between spread, raised arms
crackles a leap of frond: Peace,
on which, in our line of sight, he hangs nailed.

Jones links the lives lost in two world wars to a rather different crucifixion with no loss of emphasis on sacrifice. This is highly organized writing that channels its anger by exacting a strict control over rhythm, image and register.

While the first three sonnets and 'A View from Stansted' deal with public, national themes, the other five sections are more closely concerned with the family matters stirred up by the new 'muscular understanding' between father and son. 'Get-together' recalls family sing-songs in the pub: 'When Joneses meet, they embrace in a great / sigh of alignment' and 'Men kiss men / most unEnglishly' and woman leave 'scarlet and mauve hearts' on the cheeks of the 'new-Jones spouses' they kiss. Jones may be paying tribute here but he knows he can never properly belong to all of this, nor, one imagines, would he wish to. 'Family Album' finds Jones looking at old photographs of his ancestors, including his 'eighteen-year-old / virgin grandmother' whose 'visionary eyes' and 'winged shoulders' put us in mind of the memorial's bronze figure, her 'unblinking / arrogant insistence' recalling the figure's 'Insistent sacrifice'. Sacrifice is also revisited in the penultimate sonnet: the Joneses have been 'available as headstones, prompt as fodder'. They have 'kicked / Indians in the stomach, Gatlinged / Zulus, jeered black, subtle wingers'. But serve they did, as Jones tellingly observes: 'England is posthumous with our fidelity'. The poem closes with the apocalyptic outriders from 'After Hurricane', who 'rev their

⁴⁴ 'youth' replaced the original manuscript's 'statue', momentarily bringing the figure to life.

machines to cruise towards our Yes'.⁴⁵ The final sonnet, addressed directly to his father begins with the now-governing outriders wearing 'helmets over their brains' and kicking 'machines to life'. Somehow, Jones wants his father to resist on all our behalves. He wants him, when 'they arrive / to force our door like confident guests', to:

be there, in that magisterial chair,
 a history spread on your lap,
 with me, my children, and the framed ghosts
 attentive, like drinkers at a source.⁴⁶

The only gods to be found in these poems are Labour ministers and fathers. 'My Father's Faith', for example, refers to the hope offered him in his view by the post-war Labour government and not to any religious deity. The child Jones accompanies his father to see and listen to the architect of the welfare state, Aneurin Bevan, 'at the cavernous end of a barn' while the naïve son could not believe that Labour was in electoral trouble. How could this be? 'Surely God could swing it!' He watched as his father listened to the wireless, to the 'watchful dwarf in glasses': 'You wept / hearing clipped Atlee's curt goodbye. / God after God packing into the past.'

4. 'Caesar's Progress

Jones found in Julius Caesar an historical figure who could bear the satirical weight he wished to settle on Margaret Thatcher and on the kind of inflexible managers he associated with her style of leadership. Sean O'Brien finds the 'imperial anachronism'⁴⁷ of 'Caesar's Progress' promising:

This form of Eastern Europeanism is potentially very fruitful, but Jones too often telegraphs his punches. The imagined context, here and in 'La Trahesion d'un Clerc' is paper-thin⁴⁸

⁴⁵ In 'The Slaughterhouse Foreman's Son' (*TIN*, 25) the slaughterhouse cattle are led 'nodding yes yes to their fate'.

⁴⁶ (*FJ*, 58). The chair will appear five times in all in *Freeborn John* on pp.14, 42, 58, 61 & 70. That is to say, respectively: in the last of the 'Stansted Sonnets' ('be there, in that magisterial chair'); in 'Exiled Voices 3', where the speaker responded to being visited by 'a ghost of buried tenderness'; in 'My Father Begins to Tell his Story' ('A magisterial chair'); in 'My Father's Last meeting with his Father' ('his father slammed back / in his green chair'); and in 'A View from the Boundary' ('my / authoritative green // armchair').

⁴⁷ Sean O'Brien, op. cit.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

‘Eastern Europeanism’ is presumably a reference to the poetry of, say, Herbert, Popa, or Holub, poets forced by political circumstance to write in a kind of code. Holub’s ‘A Boy’s Head’, for example, is ostensibly simply a wish list (‘a project / for doing away with piano lessons’) and joyful imaginings (‘a river / that flows upwards’), but the poem’s conclusion is more taxing in its apparent guilelessness. A boy’s head ‘just cannot be trimmed. // ‘I believe / that only what cannot be trimmed / is a head. // There is much promise / in the circumstance / that so many people have heads’.⁴⁹ It may be said that the poem *gains* from its need for circumspection, such that it becomes a poem about freedom of thought in general and not just freedom of political thought. While Jones was free from the kind of governmental reprisal practised in Eastern European countries like Holub’s Czechoslovakia, he would nevertheless claim, presumably, that the kind of repression Holub’s poem is resisting also exists in the so-called ‘free’ societies such as the U.K., exerting its control by claiming to represent the very ‘freedom’ it threatens. The managers satirized by Jones are first and foremost those of the world of education but the satire may be applied almost universally to modern management structures across industry and, particularly, the so-called ‘service industries’, private and public, and the language that sustains them. It is a management style that responds to any form of dissent with incredulity, dismissing it as ‘negative’. O’Brien’s pointer to ‘Eastern Europeanism’ recognizes Jones’s felt need to find an effective vehicle for protesting against such a repressive regime, but it is surely part of Jones’s point that coded messages ought not to be necessary in a democratic state, in a society that supposedly values freedom of expression.

‘Caesar’s Progress’⁵⁰ is a fourteen poem sequence that takes as its epigraph the Geoffrey Hill quotation that gave Jones his original title for the collection, *Enemies’ Country*. The first poem, ‘Images of Caesar’, addresses itself to busts and statues that reveal the tyrant: ‘He outstares the changing light / and makes no plea // to be understood, liked, or forgiven’. Jones cites those representations preferred by Stoffels⁵¹ (‘that brutal-jowled / bust in Naples’⁵²) and Nieburger (‘that green basalt

⁴⁹ Translated from the Czech by Ian Milner.

⁵⁰ Called ‘Caesar’s Campaigns’ in the original manuscript.

⁵¹ Nineteenth-century archaeologist who continued Napoleon III’s *Histoire de Jules Cesar* (English translation, New York 1865) in *Histoire de Jules Cesar; la guerre civile* (Paris. 1887).

⁵² In the Museo Archaeologica Nazionale di Napoli.

block in Berlin')⁵³, but neither is the one Jones is drawn to,⁵⁴ that has him 'wearily reiterate / "This is the one"', the one in which Caesar 'outstares the light', the Caesar who, it is clear, 'has shed blood without remorse'⁵⁵. It persuades Jones that this is the Caesar who laid siege to Uxellodunum, the last Gallic outpost to resist, then cut off the hands of all surviving rebels and scattered them throughout Gaul, an act of casual ruthlessness that Jones records in 'Caesar Punishes the Tribe'.

As the sequence proceeds, Jones continues to contrast Caesar to the tribe(s) he is subjugating to his will. 'Pre-History of the Tribe' notes the primitive and 'scrupulous' customs and art that inform its people's attempt 'to assume / The claws and godhead of their inheritance'. They are a people who 'At this distance ... appear / The least harmful fruit of earth'. But, as 'Caesar's Progress' immediately observes:

No conqueror concerns himself with questions
Of ethnography: the word is no more in
His vocabulary than in a poet's

and the tribe is 'Ill-equipped to resist that high-principled / Juggernaut crushing roads of scruple and bone'. The scattered hands of 'Caesar Punishes the Tribe' are a fearsome warning to anyone who would resist. 'The Schooling of the Tribe' is a poem Don Paterson praises for its skilful handling of 'the tale of a monstrous empire, its capricious director and sinister bureaucracy'.⁵⁶ In 'Caesar Chooses Leaders from the Tribe', suitable candidates for advancement are given appropriate words to use ('Control // Leadership, Decision-making, Management') and words to interpret (Negotiation, / Consultation, Team') with the result that:

All were punished
Some with preferment and the memory

Of wholeness. Some with wholeness and a desk
In a cobwebbed street of a province.

And those sent to the provinces, those who had preserved the wholeness of integrity, are watched, '(v)ery carefully'. The circumstance of dissenters being sent to the provinces is an important one for Jones, for it signals a new ruthlessness,

⁵³ In the Altes Museum, Berlin.

⁵⁴ Though Jones gives no indication which bust or statue this is, nor where it might be found.

⁵⁵ Naples and Berlin may also serve to conjure up the historically more recent tyrannies of Mussolini and Hitler

⁵⁶ Don Paterson, 'Reviewing for Caesar', *op. cit.*

although it is not historically new.⁵⁷ But it is not something Jones expected to see happening around him. One of Jones's highly respected colleagues in the Kent Adult Education service found himself moved to the outskirts where he could do little 'damage'. It was a 'punishment' Jones found unforgivable.

'Caesar's Laureate' incorporates another of Jones's favourite themes, one he had spoken of in both his BBC interview with Peter Orr⁵⁸ and his *PN Review* interview,⁵⁹ namely that his poems often deal with those who are trapped. Here the laureate is judging competition poems, all written with a view to placating Caesar, the poets, like their poems 'All trapped in what they should be'. Being as they are required to be, with no realistic chance of being otherwise with impunity, features strongly in the remaining poems in the sequence, poems that are more openly satirical. The toadyish 'Application for a Post in Caesar's Bureaucracy' is a vehicle for Jones's wit in bringing cynical self-interest to life. It includes the personal pronoun 'I' eighteen times in fourteen seven-line stanzas, opening five of them, and opening a further seven individual lines. The possessive variant 'my' appears seven times, opening one stanza and beginning five further lines. It is a poem of self-satisfied self-absorption, and it includes some telling line-breaks:

I am, of course, not a complete
shit, nor a total yes-man
yet ...

The new dispensation would have us believe that 'positive' can float free from its 'negative' counterpart. In 'Caesar's Circular, after Implementation of the Four Year Plan', sweet reason takes on menace:

Those who have disappeared
Received, we can assure you,
Appropriate recompense. The demoted
Will receive counselling in our Retraining Centres

⁵⁷ 'At the time, what was happening in my professional life in Adult Education was also what was happening in England, where voices were being silenced. It might seem ridiculous, but I knew some superb people who were literally being 'sent out' – 'We're not sacking you, but you've been sent out there – you're being moved from this position of importance and you're to go and look after that little place over there' (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, p.334

⁵⁸ *The Poet Speaks*, op. cit. ['For Mad Mary'] is about trapped people, about people enclosed in their streets, in their views, surrounded by other people who are happy to keep them there'.

⁵⁹ (*IC-PNR*): 'I was thinking back over some of my books, and what kept leering out at me were images of people trapped, locked inside something, their own fear, their own terror, the Courtenay Play people who were locked inside their own hedgerows. Over and over it has to do with people who were enclosed, and with structures of deprivation' (p.55).

And in time will apply for posts
Like different men and women.

The 'disappeared' includes those moved far enough from the centre, physically as well as professionally, to negate whatever threat they are deemed to (re)present. The couplet stanzas of 'Action Plan of Caesar's Inspectorate' satirise the process of dealing with dissent:

He offers his hands
We chop them at the wrist

He phrases a meaning
We invert it in commas

...

He embraces wholeness
We put him on an island

He moves inward
We announce him mad

The final poem in the sequence, 'For a Nativity', returns us to the age of Caesar and, ostensibly, to the birth of Christ. Jones links the paranoia of the tyrant, which sees every birth as a potential threat, with modern performance management criteria:

There is the pattering of tiny feet:
it is the Imperial Extinguisher
scuttling to every stable in the land
with the official Aims and Objectives.

Thatcher puts Jones in mind not only of Caesar and management-speak but also of the Herod who ordered the massacre of the innocents.

5. 'La Trahesion d'un Clerc

If Sean O'Brien found 'the imagined context' in 'La Trahison d'un Clerc' 'paper-thin', John Lucas thought the sequence 'a triumph of exuberant, rough-sabring wit'.⁶⁰ Jones's dominant concern in this volume with oppressive leadership and governance is immediately evident once more in the sequence's epigraph about

⁶⁰ John Lucas, 'Poets rough and smooth', *New Statesman & Society*, 30th November 1990.

‘dissembling hypocrites’ taken from William Walwyn’s *A Whisper in the Ear of Mr Thomas Edwards*.⁶¹ Walwyn was, with John Lilburne, the Freeborn John he greatly admired and collaborated with, a founding member of the Levellers, a pamphleteer, and a believer in religious freedom and toleration. Once again Jones’s interest in the English Civil War has provided him with apposite material.

The ‘paper-thin’ context that O’Brien perceives may be a little subtler than the critic supposes, for the relationship between the poet and his speaker represents another example of Jones’s not wishing to look down from a great moral height on those he accuses, but rather to hold himself to be in some contributory way also culpable. It is not the authorities that are guilty of the treason referred to in the poem’s title⁶² but the government employee who delights in leaking government documents without escaping from complicity in the horrors he abhors. The government worker, Jones’s speaker, who appears to work in the office of the Chief Executive, introduces himself, as has Jones in real life, as one who is ‘resolutely / unclubbable’.⁶³ The speaker delights in his role as independent intellectual who works for the party but secretly seeks to undermine it. However much he imagines himself as some kind of conduit for good, as a kind of virtuous Iago, he nevertheless recognizes that his actions do not free him from charges of complicity: he goes on working for those he abhors to secure his pension: ‘I know, now, that / is terrible’.

During the course of this eight-part sequence, he leaks five confidential documents to someone it would appear more openly resistant than he, someone who has been removed to a distant outpost. He attaches ‘a memo to the disciplinary think-tank’; ‘a confidential proposal / to sell your buildings, and to loose you down

⁶¹ ‘Compulsion and enforcement may make a confused mass of dissembling hypocrites, not a congregation of believers’. See also Fn.21, p.175. *A Word in the Ear of Mr Thomas Edwards* (1646) was written in response to an attack on him by Thomas Edwards in the latter’s *Gangraena*. Edwards accused Walwyn of condemning the scriptures and of being ‘a seeker, a dangerous man, a stronghead’.

⁶² *La Trahison des Clerc* (‘The Treason of the Intellectuals’), a polemical essay by Julian Benda (1867-1956), published in 1927. Benda accused intellectuals of a failure to speak out against the betrayal of intellectual values by the political right. He regarded this failure as treasonous.

⁶³ In answer to the question ‘Why have you never mixed in literary circles’ (in a Questionnaire compiled by Paul McLoughlin and completed by the poet and returned under the cover of his letter to McLoughlin, dated 4th October, 1997), Brian Jones wrote that this was ‘a big and complicated topic which I’d prefer to talk about. Issues of self-confidence, class, non-clubbability, physical discomfort, distaste, sense of unreality/alienation etc. etc.’ See Appendix 3, p.303.

the wing / for market-forces to prey on' (a document his correspondent has been entreated to use 'as you will to wreak the utmost damage'); a paper 'which names all those employees / suspected of resisting the new culture, and who / are to be purged at the next review'; a directive 'photocopied / from a jotter, which outlines in barbaric grammar / procedures for privatizing care of the gormless'; and 'details of the closure of your department / and guidance as to how to avoid standard recompense / in the face of union demands'. The beginning of the second poem in the sequence demonstrates Jones's wit:

The Chief Executive is wetting himself. He ranges
our dismal corridors howling 'Leaks' like a deprived
Welshman on St David's Day, or an indigent plumber.

The adjectives are well-chosen, too, for the corridors are indeed witnesses to 'bad days' and the plumbers would have to be needy to engage in such dirty tricks, otherwise (and aptly for the speaker) the stuff of farce. The Chief Executive is the butt of much of the narrator's criticism. For example, the speaker is 'deeply offended / by the constant mis-use of 'will' for 'shall' / and by the structural absence of the possessive apostrophe' in the Chief Executive's communications:

The latter bespeaks no respect for proper
ownership, and a preference (also exemplified
in the refusal to use full stops with abbreviations)
for unseemly haste, curtailment of courtesies,
and disregard for procedures

This passage highlights Jones's awareness that the educated and the accomplished should tread carefully, not least because these matters of accuracy do not come easily to those the speaker later refers to as 'hoi polloi and oik', whose side he would have us believe he is on. But the speaker's erudition is the source of his humour. He calls his boss a 'Vergil of Market Forces',⁶⁴ one engaged in:

rewriting all our stories
into an epic clarity and persuasiveness; leading the tribe
from a bankrupt homeland (justly in ashes) towards
a cost-efficient new foundation, ringing with Roman virtue

This is, of course, the view of the culturally superior and the politically oppressed. Those doing the ruling presumably regard their actions as those of strong

⁶⁴ Again Jones is calling on familiar sources. See the sequence 'Aeneas and After' in *The Island Normal*. op. cit, the opening poem of which is 'Horace Bids Farewell to Vergil'.

leadership. They adopt, and get away with this behaviour partly because they are in power but partly, too, because ‘hoi polloi and oik’ must be shown how they are being oppressed. Hence the leak of documents to those who might facilitate the necessary alternative education. The speaker finds particularly distasteful ‘the absence of Vergilian / silvered sadness, the decent trace of tears’.⁶⁵ The ‘barbaric grammar’ takes on, for the speaker, the role of portent.

The poem’s final section broadens the sequence’s reach. Here, as we have seen, the speaker acknowledges his culpability in the face of the braver action taken by his correspondent:

You stood and were counted
out; while I maintain the irony of an oblique
unfocussed stance ... I know, now, that
is terrible

He can only say in his defence that his ‘whole schooling / was to survive’. The event that appears to have had such a striking effect on him bears remarkable similarities to the suicide of Jan Palach, the student who set fire to himself in Wenceslas Square in Prague on 16th January 1969. The reason for Palach’s doing this was a matter of concern to the specialist who attended to his fatal burns:

It was not so much in opposition to the Soviet occupation, but the demoralization which was setting in, that people were not only giving up, but giving in. And he wanted to stop that demoralization. I think the people in the street, the multitude of people in the street, silent, with sad eyes, serious faces, which when you looked at those people you understood that everyone understands, all the decent people who were on the verge of making compromises⁶⁶

Making specific reference to Palach and the Prague Spring would have threatened to unbalance Jones’s arguments. There were no Thatcherite tanks in Kentish town squares, but the metaphorical tanks of the barbaric grammarians were threatening to crush discourse in a land the political rhetoric of which purported to espouse freedom of speech. For Jones the problem was, as his political adversaries might have it, ‘a clear and present danger’. Abuse of language was a symptom of greater ills.

⁶⁵ A reference to the famous phrase from *The Aeneid* Book I: ‘sunt lacrimae rerum’ (‘there are the tears of things’) in a passage where Aeneas is responding with awe to a mural in Carthage of the Trojan War.

⁶⁶ Jaroslava Maserová on Radio Prague, <http://radio.cz/en/article/36607>, 21st January 2003.

6. 'Exiled Voices'

If Jones admired the poetry of Edward Thomas partly at least because 'it came to be written under the looming cliff-face of death'⁶⁷, a similar fascination may have been what drew him to the fifteenth-century French poet François Villon, who William Carlos Williams believed 'must have had a premonition of his death from his earliest days'⁶⁸. More particularly, the 2,032 lines of Villon's *Le grand testament* were composed while the poet was under sentence of death by hanging ('*pendu et étranglé*'). Villon is to be found in the first of the nine poems that comprise 'Exiled Voices'. The poem tells of Jones's contacting by phone on New Year's Eve a friend and colleague, presumably the colleague who had been transferred to the 'far province' in 'La Trahison d'un Clerc':

Scarred and thinned down this crackling line
you are finally a voice they could not make disappear.
It is as if I had stumbled on Villon's cell

the night before the promised gibbet:
a mouth close to earth, insistent on words⁶⁹

The former colleague and Villon are instantly linked, by way of their resistance to the powers-that-be, to the collection's eponymous hero, Freeborn John. Jones is once again also siding with the trapped.

It is clear from the second poem in the sequence that Jones's speaker has accepted his thirty pieces of silver, manifest, *inter alia*, in the 'twin-carburettor // overhead camshaft four-wheel drive / automatic coupé' he drives and the 'casual user allowance' that he is 'learning to fiddle'. There is also in this section a clear attempt by Jones to distance himself from his speaker, because the real Jones would

⁶⁷ Brian Jones, quoted in Anne Harvey (compiler), *Elected Friends: Poems for and about Edward Thomas*, op. cit., p.120. Vernon Scannell's Introduction notes that 'On 14 July 1915 Edward Thomas enlisted in The Artists' Rifles and was later commissioned in the Royal Artillery. He was killed at the battle of Arras on 9 April 1917' (p.9) All the poems were written between November 1914 and 13 January 1917.

⁶⁸ William Carlos Williams in his Introduction to Anthony Bonner (translator & provider of short biography and notes), *The Complete Works of François Villon* (Bantam Books, 1960) p. xii

⁶⁹ Although the title's sequence is pluralised, suggesting more than one voice, all nine sections can be read as letters from the teacher who has remained in post to his colleague who was sent to the provinces as a result of his outspokenness (*IC-CT*, p.335). The plural 'Voices' becomes on this interpretation a means of allowing the experience of one to stand for the experience of many, including the satirist writing 'Caesar's Progress' and the treasonous clerk of 'La Trahison d'un Clerc'.

not embrace the trendiness implicit in the ‘automatic coupé’ the former drives. A distinction is also being made between the private life of gardening and the employed life of managing (‘under supervision’) an educational budget. At work the speaker becomes a function of a system that he does not privately subscribe to and that offers him no opportunity for ‘developing and using talents, resources and interests, which [he] can place at the disposal of others and enact for the public good’.⁷⁰ Everything he does must carry with it the stamp of ‘approval’, a word Jones makes much of, using it four times.⁷¹ He budgets for the ‘approved educational needs / of approved learners’, learners here being classified as if juvenile offenders in an ‘approved school’. Learners must learn to seek and achieve approval. For Jones, the term ‘approved’ is symptomatic of the way in which education has been commandeered by the authorities.

In the fifth poem, the teacher again opposes a management system seen as being at best cynical and at worst mindless: ‘They treat us like fools, / setting impossible tasks’ before returning to their rooms ‘where the Silver Book / gleams like a blade’.⁷² This is the brave new top-down world of targets:

What do they care about our dreams?
Little gracenotes and curlicues
around an iron tune.
They pay us, and life’s
as simple as that.

The imagery of musical embellishment ‘around an iron tune’ is striking. However, this is a voice that recognizes the inadequacy of thought and subtlety in the face of action:

We are too clever by half.
Clauses, parentheses, footnotes,

⁷⁰ David Smail, *Taking Care*, op. cit., p.125.

⁷¹ In one of a series of weekly interviews designed and formatted to elicit authors’ literary tastes, the biographer, writer and radio broadcaster, Humphrey Carpenter (1946 – 2005), in answer to the stock question ‘What is your favourite quotation?’ cited John Betjeman’s ‘Approval of what is approved of’ as ‘A brilliant way of describing the herd instinct of Groucho Clubland.’ (*The Sunday Times* Books: Booknews: Bibliophile, 23rd August 1998) (<http://www.oocities.org/soho/atrium/9231/litra/BIBLIOFL.HTM>)

⁷² The Silver Book was a term used to denote lecturers’ terms and conditions of employment, before it was superseded in the Thatcher era. Here it may perhaps be taken as a metaphor for the Ofsted inspection manual.

ironic equivocations.
*They went straight through the gates
to the heart of fear*⁷³

It is this being told who he is, or who he must now be, that angers Jones. It is the kind of imposition that informs the sixth poem. His passport identifies him as ‘British’, something he resents:

I wanted to write ‘English’
for its sly evasive music
and sensual valleys,
its twists and turns and unlocatable
laconic heart.
But that could not be tolerated.
They had to move me on
like a folk-song into a new setting,
atonal and without atmosphere.
‘British’ will do for that.

Read superficially, this might be taken as a form of xenophobia, but the poem addresses the ‘boorish / bullying’ that moves people on.

The seventh poem recognizes that the strength of feeling given voice to in this sequence may surprise. This not Eastern Europe. No one is being murdered. ‘If we had words like ‘cell’ / ‘interrogation’. and ‘been shot’, // perhaps we might believe ourselves’. We ought to ‘get on with it / and think ourselves lucky’. Jones wonders who will want to read what he has to say. Will those he opposes and recoils from even understand what he is saying, or is ‘speaking for ourselves’ simply a ‘poetry with a limited / circulation’? The poem’s conclusion involves a poetic sleight of hand: ‘Life is handed to us on a plate’:

It doesn’t matter whose head it is.
Our punishment is that it is not ours.

The poem acknowledges that survival may itself be a kind of punishment. One does not need to be shot, or end up like John the Baptist.

⁷³ ‘too clever by half’ is a phrase famously used by the Marquess of Salisbury about Iain Macleod, the Secretary of State for the Colonies (1959-1961) in the Harold Macmillan Conservative government of the day. Salisbury was commenting on Macleod’s role in negotiations over the future of Rhodesia. It is a remark that might be thought to characterize a national prejudice against all things intellectual.

In the final poem, the garden hosts conversations between the like-minded and is a place of solace. But the realist intervenes to insist that protest is futile, that ‘your intent / to hurt by your angry flounce away’ will achieve nothing more than additional, detrimental entries in the blue and red columns of profit and loss. But this turns out to be the clerk anticipating what the regime will say. For the speaker the question remains ‘How do we *stay*?’ and the answer lies in the occasional moments when the authorities ‘step off the edge of their agenda’, when the woman who ‘is not expected to hear / has cleared their cups and listens’. This land of serendipitous, occasional opportunity is where the clerk, ‘blood-boltered’ will stay.⁷⁴ He asks his correspondent finally, ‘Are you to be there with me? Shall we try?’ It is an aspiration to become one of Auden’s ‘Ironic points of light’ that ‘Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages’, to ‘Show an affirming flame’.⁷⁵ It carries with it pathos and more than a hint of exasperation.

7. ‘Letter from Elsewhere’

Placed after ‘La Trahison d’un Clerc’ and ‘Exiled Voices’ in *Freeborn John*, but originally the final poem of ‘Caesar’s Progress’ in *Enemies’ Country*, ‘Letter from Elsewhere’ is distant in tone from anything in that sequence, even though the latter’s fourteen poems themselves cover a varied tonal range. It is a poem of high seriousness and, because conscious of the dangers of assuming the high moral ground, a poem of self-mockery, too. As a result, Jones may have felt that it carried with it a damaging propensity for undermining much that the Caesar sequence had achieved (as might the claims it makes for the power of love). The poem begins with a rhetorical charge that risks alienating the sympathetic reader:

It was not quite as we’d imagined
when we honed the splendour of consciousness
housed in the bodies of the just

John Hartley Williams considered this opening a considerable risk:

At first some of the phrasing puts you off: honing ‘the splendour of consciousness / housed in the bodies of the just’ defines the self-righteousness of

⁷⁴ Cf. ‘For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me’ (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Act IV Scene 1)

⁷⁵ W.H.Auden, ‘September 1, 1939’, in *Another Time* (Faber and Faber, 1940).

the romantic poet, I suppose, but in stanza one it almost stopped me going on. I realise it's self-mockery, but still ...⁷⁶

The plural pronoun in the first two lines draws in all those who had prepared for the better world thought to be implicit in reason and moral obligation. But the poem chronicles a solitary walk taken by the speaker. The walk had taken him through woodland and field into the land of, as it were, 'an alien regime', his enemies' country, only to discover there an unexpected peace of mind, where 'daylight at this moment gleams'. It is a poem about thwarted expectations, both good and bad.

He had first approached a clearing, 'a sun-thronged lozenge'. The path taken in Jones's poem is one that 'tussocked down' to a 'fordable' river in which a few stones 'slurred their rondures'. The language is self-consciously imposing (though the reader may revise this impression later, coming to regard it as playfully arch): 'fordable' takes us back to Caesar and his campaigns; and 'rondures' is the most grand of these locutions – the river's stones may well be gracefully rounded, but the seldom-used word 'rondures' seems almost to be admiring itself.

This strangely heightened, romanticized language would strike many as portentous. But the language changes with the terrain:

And I emerged

squelching through the pats of cows that were
technically barbarian into the daisies
and buttercups of an alien regime. I had crossed
the Border!

Beyond the playfully onomatopæic 'squelching' lies the equally playful 'technically barbarian', a locution that cannot quite yet shake off the earlier trappings of romantic high-seriousness. Across the border what had been most feared in meetings in 'smoke-anguished rooms' ('the trembling / rifle-sights of death-starved guards' on one side, and the 'torturing altars' of the 'shaggy' barbarians on the other) conspire to make the speaker feel as if he were charting a course between two violent forces.⁷⁷ Instead, 'the stream chattered gaily away' and 'cows munched and

⁷⁶ John Hartley Williams: in an email to Paul McLoughlin, dated 20th May 2011.

⁷⁷ See, for example, 'Three Poems of a Frontier Guard' and 'From the Frontier' in Brian Jones, (*I*, 14-17)

sputtered'. A few lines further on the opposing forces appear to have been in cahoots:

and if soldiers patrolled a barbed border
and barbarians cared, it was solely

in a collusive myth

There were none of the expected traps to be negotiated, until

At last I stood as uneventfully
as hawthorn on the far bank, and the guard

who slammed lead punishingly through me
was Nostalgia: an immense sunlight
on abandoned hills: a song suddenly
perfected on a forgiven tongue.

The languages of heightened romanticism and of an unexpected contentment ('trip-wires' and 'snipers' replaced by 'a kind / of love, a defining by relationship') are now superseded by the surprise of allegory and lyricism. The poet, John Forth, has this to say:

It seems the protagonist has crossed into a realm where the old battles have been lost, where it's actually peaceful and even some of the old dreams ('love'?) have been fulfilled.⁷⁸

Forth warms to the poem's 'earthiness' and its 'great last line' ('I have no excuse for desire. And I envy you') but wonders whether the lyrical images don't rather pile up on themselves, as if the reader were witnessing a tendency to 'forage among several images and use them all'. It is what the poet is foraging for, however, that is the real point of interest, and, in this respect, the poem can be read as a kind of probing of the artist's responsibility.

For John Hartley Williams the 'collusive myth' is 'that of being trapped between the formalist fascists with their barbed wire and rifle sights on the one hand and the shaggy barbarians on the other', and that other in-between he characterizes as being stuck between 'the romantic ideals that drive the poet on' ('the torturing altars' of the 'shaggy / welcoming figures') and 'the knowledge that romantic ideals get you nowhere' (their 'backlog of impotence').⁷⁹ But Williams, while liking the way the

⁷⁸ John Forth in an email to Paul McLoughlin, 11th May 2011.

⁷⁹ John Hartley Williams, *op. cit.* 'Remember what Pound said about the natural object being the adequate symbol?'

myth is ‘embedded in the well-described progress of someone on a springtime walk, crossing a stream’, has reservations about what he calls the poem’s ‘moralising’. The problem for Williams in this poem is precisely that ‘that word “love” creeps in’, and, moreover, that, in an unexpectedly Presbyterian note, the kind of love discovered is likened to ‘a hand // reaching for blackberries’ that ‘expects a thorn / to make an autumn ritual complete’, a reading that it is supported in its expectation of punishment by the final line’s ‘I have no excuse for desire’. But the speaker’s point is, surely, that this time the expected pain did not materialize (just as the walker had not encountered ‘trip-wires’), that it is precisely the purity of a new-found and unexpected love that precludes the necessity for the kind of yearning and longing that had characterized so much of Jones’s verse. It therefore represents an important discovery. The closing ‘I envy you’ reminds us that all along he has been addressing the colleague ‘sent to the far province’. That the speaker envies his colleague tells us he feels guilty and duplicitous because he did not, as his colleague did, stand up for what he believed in and make his resistance clear. This has become an ethical concern both professional (involving his role as a teacher) and artistic (involving his role as a poet). Eliminating the ‘moralising’ and the ‘love’, and ending on the ‘forgiven tongue’, would not have made this clear. It might, arguably, have made it, for some, a better poem, but it would also have made it a very different poem.

‘Letter from Elsewhere’ also develops further the notion of ‘elsewhere’. Its final stanza finds the speaker alive in ‘his chosen dream, having parted company / with the possibility of being elsewhere’. In ‘The Importance of Elsewhere’, Larkin’s elsewhere is a matter of living and working abroad, where ‘no elsewhere underwrites my existence’⁸⁰. The literal ‘elsewhere’ for Jones is presumably Normandy in the native France of his second wife, but his poem is more diffuse and ambitious than Larkin’s, which does not attempt to mythologize place. ‘Elsewhere’ for Jones may simply be ‘here’, where the transferred colleague does not live, and thus constitute a kind of internal banishment. If ‘elsewhere’ is where the speaker is, then the poem’s title takes on an irony it would not immediately own. It may be that finally Jones’s speaker is acknowledging that physically inhabited space is

⁸⁰ *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit., p.34.

unimportant measured against the desired ‘grove of calm’,⁸¹ which can be anywhere.

Jones’s poem presents itself ultimately as an important companion piece to set alongside ‘Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge’, the poetic manifesto with which he brought *The Island Normal* to a close. It is a poem that reverberates beyond the attention of any attempt to fit a strictly logical template over it (as, arguably, this analysis of it has done). Logical readers of Jones’s verse might want to challenge the poem’s last line, especially when he remained to the end a poet who always wanted a public role, and they might also wonder how far a new relationship had temporarily clouded his better judgement. But Jones would surely argue that the stanza in which he allegorizes ‘Nostalgia’ shows him to be aware of these dangers, and ask, anyway, why he should not celebrate the discovery of a place ‘where daylight at this moment gleams’. Jones’s background and the place education had taken him to, which was far beyond the ‘simplest songs’ of those he would speak for, had led to his seeing enemies round every corner and to a tendency, perhaps, to succumb to his own ‘simplicity of alignment’.⁸² There is humility in such an acknowledgement, a recognition, perhaps, that there has been something in himself he has been resisting in addition to the systemic violence of institutional oppression. The discovery that ‘torturing altars’ can turn into a form of nostalgia risks a sentimentality that threatens, as Jones must well have known, the balance required by what Williams calls ‘hovering between the well-policed fascist state and the daisies and buttercups of la-la land’. If ‘love’ is proffered as the reason for this discovery, then it threatens, too, the poise aspired to by a poet who would always want a public role.

8. ‘Snow Pieces’

After the satire and anger and pain of the first half of *Freeborn John*, it is something of a relief to find Brian Jones, the poet, enjoying himself. The winter of 1984/5 had been particularly cold and snowy. In early January, Kent (where Jones was living)

⁸¹ ‘Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge’ (*TIN*, 89)

⁸² ‘At Great Tew’ (*TIN*, 88)

and East Anglia had six inches of snow and in February southern England generally experienced snowfalls of between six and twelve inches with substantial drifting taking place. Heavy snowfalls bring with them a break from normality; people are allowed to slow down, and the emergency services, including the army, take up tasks that are not so usual for them. In the snow, unless conditions become seriously difficult, and sometimes even then, there is a camaraderie that arises out of necessity and temporary shortages with their queues and rations. Heavy snowfalls bring fears, too, because people have time on their hands to think, to reflect on their lives. 'Snow Pieces' is a response to and in some ways a celebration of these eventualities.⁸³

The first poem in 'Snow Pieces' is formally adventurous, at least for Jones. It is cast in tercets in which a central three-stress line is flanked by two single-stress lines. This formal arrangement means that every word on the page is more than usually exposed. A couple are returning home through 'canyons' of snow, the woman shyly 'testing / the perimeters' of the man's 'wary // silence' while both are aware of carrying the 'new secret' of their relationship.⁸⁴ That his 'wary silence' appears to exist within 'perimeters' suggests this is another example of being trapped, and the single-word line 'soldiers' enhances this foreboding. But there is no conflict to engage in for the soldiers; they have been:

imported to keep the roads
open

to food
and influence

That they are not accustomed to this kind of assignment is evident in the poem's closing sentence with its juxtaposition of senses ('Their blank eyes / heard all') but what gives the poem its strength and composure is the way in which a single stanza-break takes the reader from the potential war-zone of 'perimeters' and secrets and

⁸³ *The Children of Separation* was published in 1985. 'Snow Pieces', dealing with the first months of the same year, came a little too late for inclusion in that collection but was five years old by the time it appeared in *Freeborn John*.

⁸⁴ The gap between the writing of 'Snow Pieces' and its appearance in print also explains why the poem refers to a 'new' secret, which a biographer would take to be Jones's relationship with Noëlle Soret. The relationship was neither 'new' nor 'secret' by the time *Freeborn John* was published in 1990.

‘soldiers / imported to keep roads / open ’ to the peaceful mission of facilitating ‘food / and influence’.

The second poem, in unrhymed pairs of three and two-stressed lines, opens on the magical qualities of snow ‘trembling’ on hedges and branches (as waterdrops will tremble on the lapel of a schoolboy’s blazer in ‘Shadowings’),⁸⁵ but acknowledges personal unease in the grip of bad weather, as if ‘something cannot be appeased’. This unease, presenting itself as if a function of the apparent safety of being indoors, has also prompted poems from Jones’s contemporaries Ted Hughes⁸⁶ and Seamus Heaney.⁸⁷ But Hughes and Heaney are decidedly more dramatic, and the absence of ‘we’ in Jones’s poem makes his experience less immediately threatening or ominous and points to a relative peace of mind, unusual for him, that perhaps issues from the strength and relief of his new relationship.

Ludic images energize the third poem: those queuing for milk enjoy ‘a bonhomie of incandescent need’; the television newsreels are ‘scratchy’ because reception is being interfered with; and

The milkman magics and bestows
and declares emptiness.

He throws returns into the snow mound
like spears of ice,
like transparent bangers in a white mash.

These are the images of a poet enjoying himself. They are worthy of Norman MacCaig or Craig Raine. When in Jones’s poem the returning couple arrive home to ‘dead phones and the last candle’, they are ‘impressed by this show of power’, but they are reassured by it rather than alarmed.

⁸⁵ (FJ, 73-5)

⁸⁶ See ‘Wind’ in Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain*, op. cit.:

We watch the fire blazing
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the window tremble to come in (p.40)

⁸⁷ See ‘Storm on the Island’ in Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (Faber and Faber, 1966):

when it begins, the flung spray hits
the very windows, spits like a tame cat
turned savage.. We just sit tight while wind dives
and strafes invisibly (p.51)

The epigraph to ‘Snow Pieces’ is from a Pushkin poem, more specifically D. M. Thomas’s translation of ‘Demons’⁸⁸: ‘Clouds are whirling, clouds are scurrying, / Dark is the sky, and dark the night’. The first two lines of Pushkin’s opening quatrain, included in the *Enemies’ Country* manuscript but not in *Freeborn John*, ‘The moon through total darkness hurrying / Illuminates the snow in flight’, make the obvious ‘snow’ connection.⁸⁹ By omitting this allusion, Jones makes us think of a storm (rather than a snowstorm) and makes us dwell on the darkness rather than the snow. Apart from the unease identified in the second poem this ‘darkness’ does not appear to be the focus of Jones’s attention, and even then the unease, as has been noted, is not dramatized as it is in the Hughes and Heaney poems. Pushkin, another poet who dealt in everyday social life, is described by D. M. Thomas as ‘a Romantic in the exuberance of his imagination; yet ... concise and restrained’.⁹⁰ Exuberance of imagination is evident in the images, the vivid comparisons, of Jones’s poem, while restraint informs the ‘new secret’. But ‘Demons’, as its title suggests, is a fearful account of a journey through snow of a man and his coach-driver. They are forced by circumstance to battle against fierce physical and metaphysical forces. This is a snowstorm in the mind as well as the terrain. The poem also, as Thomas suggests, ‘reaches out across a century to the delirium of 1917’.⁹¹

Significantly, the speaker throughout the sequence has been observer rather than participant for the most part, and this point of view persists in the fourth and final section, which is much the lengthiest. We are witness to a doctor’s waiting room, which, in snowbound times, becomes a capsule enclosing the modern working man. The men have time on their hands find in themselves all manner of medical condition:

Little discoveries
of need and failure shine in the icy sun

⁸⁸ D.M.Thomas (translator), *Alexander Pushkin: The Bronze Horseman and Other Poems* (Penguin, 1982) p.75. There is no acknowledgement to this effect in *Freeborn John*.

⁸⁹ The complete opening quatrain from Pushkin’s ‘Demons’ formed the epigraph to ‘Snow Pieces’ in *Enemies’ Country*:

The moon through total darkness hurrying
Illuminates the snow in flight;
Clouds are whirling, clouds are scurrying,
Dark is the sky, and dark the night.

⁹⁰ D. M. Thomas (ed.), *Pushkin: The Bronze Horseman and Other Poems* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982), p.12.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.14.

on the blocked roads that once pumped them
to trains and motorways

They are as uncomfortable in this domestic scenario as are the soldiers alleviating need. These are ordinary men used to going to work. This is a country alien to them:

There are strange zones of existence
on the margins of every system,
exclusions, rejections.

This kind of bewildered displacement is felt by those who do not properly understand what is happening to them. For these working men everything has been transformed to habit. With the involuntary leisure time enforced by the weather, unfulfilled dreams return to nag them.

In a world that has become ‘wholly Now’ ‘the snowplough performs an act of memory / uncovering a root of lane from the main road’ and ‘Abandoned cars / brood like amnesiacs in their white cells’. Jones’s speaker appears to draw on the work of the clinical psychologist David Smail once more. He has ‘a vision’ of a world in which those marginalized are suddenly given a public life, in which each person is a microcosm of a just world. But what for the time being is happening in the real world of the waiting room is that ‘(t)he men are struggling with the embarrassment / of looking at one another, of acknowledging / ‘I am here’. At work, everyone is busy; there is no need to look at anyone else, at least in any way unconnected to the work. The poem ends on an interesting but perhaps hopelessly romantic possibility’:

They avert their gaze, study
The children, the snow, the cars. But when

Their eyes meet, they blaze, and it is like
Embracing⁹²

Jones is an admirer of Kropotkin, who provided the epigraph for *The Island Normal*. The goal of ‘embracing’, of discovering in co-operation a public life, is certainly one Kropotkin would have applauded.⁹³

⁹² The convention is, of course, for three dots. Perhaps nine is a printing error, but it might equally in its excess point up an ironic recognition that however desirable ‘embracing’ might be it is at best highly unlikely.

9. 'Father and Son'

'Father and Son' is a sequence of eight poems, which the reader might reasonably expect to feature 'the kinship of Jones'. Six of the poems involve a father and his son, one the father and his father, and the last the son and his son. So, four generations in all. 'My Father Begins to Tell his Story' features the emblematic 'magisterial chair', a family heirloom that is clearly a recurrent memory for the poet.⁹⁴ Perhaps it is the 'ghost of buried tenderness' we encountered in the third section of 'Exiled Voices' that is prompting the father to 'confess' here to a life of insistent rigidity, 'the unrenounced blue stare / that presided marriage, stanch'd its own / proclivities in children / and froze // itself in fury'. The language of rigidity ('stare'; 'presided'; 'stanch'd'; 'froze'; 'tamp'd') gives way to that of a relaxation of self-repression that does not come easily ('loosens'; 'curdle'; 'snapped'; 'release'; 'falter'). It was a moment of significance not only for his father, but also for a generation encouraged to keep themselves (and their problems) to themselves, the moment when 'One man / speaks for all when he revisits his silence'. The poet recognizes this kind of crisis in himself. Perhaps it is another example of Larkin's 'speaking' to him, the Larkin of 'Man hands on misery to man',⁹⁵ a line commandeered by Jones in the sequence's final poem. Certainly, it is a bold and memorable conclusion, one that William Scammell quoted in his review as an example of the 'eloquence' with which Jones can express anger 'about Thatcher's England'⁹⁶. While it is not immediately clear how the poem's domestic context generates a public and political one, Jones may have been motivated by the Thatcher government's espoused return to the supposed virtues of the Victorian age and saw in his father what this had produced, the rigidity of resolve and pride that amounted to self-repression. The father in Jones's poem, in beginning to tell his story, is managing a 'small conquest' over the kind of self-repression that resulted in silence and the lack of communication.

⁹³ The final section of 'Snow Pieces' will be considered again in the light of Elizabeth Bishop's 'In the Waiting Room' in the chapter on 'Last Poems'. See p.220

⁹⁴ See Fn.50, p.183

⁹⁵ 'This Be The Verse' in *High Windows*, op. cit., p.30

⁹⁶ William Scammell, 'Highly Indignant', op. cit.

‘My Father Reveals a Photograph’ is more opaque. It is an image of the father when young and camping with the Boy Scouts, though all we have by way of reference in the poem is the ‘sepia tent’ he looks out from. The first section ends on an image of yearning:

His palm extends
towards emptiness.

His mind is the ocean
on which it drifts.

The second section is mysterious. Dylan Jones has likened it to ‘a landscape of the imagination’.⁹⁷ The focus shifts to the son who stands ‘in the valley’ of his father’s gaze, ‘where a fleet of headstones // drove at him under the moon / full tilt on their bone sea’. The eyes that watch the son looking at the photo are faded because the photographic image has aged, but they remain eyes that once ‘admitted the metaphors / of their own richness’. In the third section one presumes the father-boy is back home from scout-camp and now taking refuge in the larder Dylan Jones referred to as a ‘coal-hole’ (a small cellar that made a good hiding place or retreat) from which he filches pigs’ trotters and bread to supplement what is probably his meagre diet. Later, ‘battening welds of unlikelihood / inside an album’, the father worries that he might be turning into ‘the provenance of his dying father’. The sense of looking out at the world with trepidation is heightened by images of restricted vision and light in a number of the poems: ‘the enlacements / of Spring-haunted branches’;⁹⁸ ‘stone-blind butting at the light’;⁹⁹ ‘deep in the webbed dust’;¹⁰⁰ and ‘the webbed attic’.¹⁰¹

‘My Father’s Last Meeting with his Father’ features again the magisterial green chair of authority. The older man is dying (‘hawking / large nothings out of his lungs’) and his son, the father of the sequence’s title, is saddened that he can do nothing to help. Indeed, when asked where he has been, the son answers, ‘Nowhere’, an innocent enough reply, however evasive it might also be. It becomes, however, a poetic device, a tellingly simple illustration of how a poem can infuse

⁹⁷ Dylan Jones, email to Paul McLoughlin, 21st June 2011. See also Fn.108, p.205

⁹⁸ ‘My Father Begins to Tell his Story’, p.58.

⁹⁹ ‘My Father Reveals a Photograph’ i), p. 59.

¹⁰⁰ ‘My Father Reveals a Photograph’ iii), p.59.

¹⁰¹ ‘My Father’s Last Meeting with his Father’, p.61

the ordinary with importance. This negative tells us about the distance between father and son, a distance that had informed the opening poem's 'confession' made across a similar divide between the earlier father and son. Theirs is a world of nothings and nowheres. The meeting 'felt like a test failed' as the father's father sat 'slammed back // in the green chair'. The gas mantle that provided light with its 'flared wings' dates the meeting concisely, while the 'Klondyke nugget' found later in the attic along with postcards depicting 'disappearing / windjammers' both point up the desire for adventure and a better life.¹⁰² They also point up earlier experiences not communicated. That 'No one could tell him more' confirms a failure to communicate on any kind of intimate level, but it is precisely this not being told that is the son's inheritance.

Two later poems deal with the father's jobs, delivering crystal radio sets to customers 'in high, chrome flats' and working in a meat market, where he is visited by the girl-friend who would become his wife and the son's mother. The first is an extended metaphor for the way social class sacrifices natural talent and sensitivity (or the potential for these things) to economic need. Once his employer lets him try out one of the radios, listened to through headsets, by way of which he 'glimpsed universes', he was consigned to travel 'like Tantalus / excluded from a tasted // joy, tormented / by the unheard vastness of his gift'.¹⁰³ This kind of suppression is a major theme in Jones's work, and it is deftly realized in this poem. The other job finds the father in a brutal world of male camaraderie, of 'crimped tripes' and 'rippled brains' and 'gutters pig-pink', a world that is, as if magically, invaded by a cheekily calculated and romantic visit by his girlfriend, all dolled up with her 'film-star's legs / and jaunty pillbox hat'.¹⁰⁴ In these two poems the dream implicit in the grandfather's Klondyke nugget is represented by the radio set and Hollywood glamour.

The penultimate poem in the sequence, 'My Father Talks of his Life and Death', is another hint at the inevitability of inheritance. The father's life has been one of

¹⁰² Dylan Jones, Brian's brother, revealed in an email to Paul McLoughlin (21st June 2011, op.cit.) that their grandfather (the father in these poems) sailed on a windjammer to New Zealand when he was seventeen years-old. But he only stayed two years and then returned. See also Fn.103, p.204

¹⁰³ See 'I see you as Sisyphus, the world your stone' ('Exiled Voices', p.44) and the final poem, 'I Think of Sisyphus', p.93

¹⁰⁴ A story later retold in a prose piece called 'Too' that appeared in *Navis* 4, Autumn 1995

necessity, dependent on ‘the benevolence of my masters’. In a passage that links father and son, the former recalls something his son once said (and which has featured in other poems in this collection):

I remember you told me once of Villon,
wrestling for truth the night before the gibbet.
I have emerged into that, the cell whose keepers

no longer bother to observe.

The final poem, formally different and much longer, consists of fifty-two unrhymed tercets. It is addressed to Stephen, Jones’s son, who it appears is going abroad. It introduces a fourth generation to the sequence. Its title ‘A View from the Boundary’ alerts us to another of Jones’s familiar themes, that of living on the faultline, of borders with their guards, but it should also remind of cricket. The playing area becomes a planet, and a receptacle for the poet’s thoughts. As is often the case, someone’s imminent departure precipitates a guilty reassessment. Here the ‘air of loss’ is ‘like being a father // who has not told his story / or invited yours’. This is a generational reconstituting not only of the speaker’s grandfather (‘One man / speaks for all when he revisits his silences’)¹⁰⁵ but also of the speaker’s father (‘No one could tell him more. / Which was his inheritance’)¹⁰⁶. It is, like ‘My Father Begins to Tell his Story’, both confession and apology for parental shortcomings. It also serves as a summary of the sequence’s arguments and preoccupations.

The father is watching his son playing cricket and musing on the latter’s announcement that he is going to live abroad. The speaker regrets spending too much time writing poems and too little attending to his offspring. Jones employs numerous metaphors for his creative predilections: he ‘froze the flame / for its meaning’ and ‘A leaf casually falling / had to be perfected’. Creative drive blinded him to other obligations: ‘I never asked you who you were’. This sudden directness manages to startle because effectively contextualized and rhetorically prepared for. The cricketing allusions help to characterize the poet’s self-reflection:

Soon you will not turn
when a bowler turns
but continue walking

¹⁰⁵ ‘My Father Begins to Tell his Story’, p.58.

¹⁰⁶ ‘My Father’s Last Meeting with his Father’, p.61.

across the boundary
quite out of sight

and into my mind
where I have always talked best.

This is a significant admission. The solitariness of opening ‘sealed letters / for comfort / in estranged rooms’ is now seen as unrewarding. A plane above the match ‘dwindles to nothing / as we do / silently while not seeming to move’. And these musings open into a summary of the sequence’s concerns and, one imagines, identifies its creative source:

I have been approaching you
as my father unseen

for years arrived
one afternoon in my
authoritative green

armchair an old
upright man at last
stooping to admit

words to himself and me
‘mistake’ and ‘dreamed’
and ‘wish’ and ‘waste’

Man hands on misery
to man¹⁰⁷ when he does
not hand himself

The real interest here is that the misery is not so much that of genetic inheritance as that of a lack of genuine engagement. The poem ends with a long Laingian investigation of love and the need to ‘re-invent // rituals’ for demonstrating familial love. The cricketing metaphor informs the poem’s conclusion:

and if our only
myth is a quiet
game eccentrically
played where quirks
and lapses and luck
subsume themselves

to a small harmony
in a brief time
between an empty

¹⁰⁷ Philip Larkin, ‘This Be The Verse’, *High Windows*, op. cit.

field and an
empty field it is
no less a proper place

These fields of choice are decidedly less dramatic than the English fields that faced Falkland in the Civil War. Indeed the entire poem is an aspiration to the ‘grove of calm’ Jones had his Andrew Marvell admire.¹⁰⁸ The poem, which is also reminiscent of Auden’s ‘New Year Letter’,¹⁰⁹ maintains a notably quiet tone throughout. The confession does not entail any emotional hand-wringing, though it is no less sincere for that. Its problem for the reader is whether or not it manages to avoid the descent into sentimentality. The fact that the speaker resists eulogising his son might be seen as an argument in support of the poet.

10. Grammar School Days

Another group of poems provides a selected childhood history. In terms of subject-matter each of the six poems might have been included in ‘Shadowings’ as they involve: a son playing chess with his father; learning about women; maths and history lessons; an encounter with the headmaster; a childhood river; and a game of cricket. Given that the first of these includes 1950 in its title and the last 1951, it is reasonable to assume that the entire group of poems covers a period of only a couple of years. They may not add anything new to the Jones canon but they are superbly realized. In ‘Chess 1950’ (Jones would have been eleven years old then and a first-year pupil at Ealing Grammar School) his father plays to win (not to teach his son the niceties of the game), rolls his own cigarettes, and listens to Slim Whitman ‘wailing a lost love’, which last prompts his wife to provide a wonderful joke for the poet: ‘Poor sod, said my mother, / he doesn’t know where she is’. The joke is magnified because it takes the reader a moment of two to realize that it is Whitman she is referring to and not her husband. It is only when one realizes that she *couldn’t* be referring to him that the wryness of the humour emerges. This is a poem about beginnings which ends:

¹⁰⁸ ‘a grove of calm / Some quintessential spot of mind / Beneath disturbance and alarm’ from ‘Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge’ in *The Island Normal* (1980), p.89.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Yet truth, like love and sleep, resents / Approaches that are too intense’, W. H. Auden, ‘New Year Letter’ in Edward Mendelson (ed.) *Collected Poems* (Faber and Faber, 1978), p.166.

Gambits, sacrifices,
your trembling hands
played them all.
Against me they won.

Opposite you
a new school tie
playing by the book.
The first page of the book.

‘Q.E.D’ is set in a maths classroom in which the teacher is exhorting the boys to give up their bus-seats to women “because there are often things happening to them / which we can’t understand”. This form of nineteen-fifties’ sex education (hinted at mysteriously rather than explained) leads in this instance both to mild alarm and an amused incredulity: ‘We hung at bus-stops and scanned the girls for clues’. The teacher is another of Jones’s sexually repressed characters (‘his chalk-stiff fingers throbbled the desk’) who immediately hides behind his ‘fearful’ disciplinarian demeanour and does not speak of the matter again: ‘But the angles and curves of his geometry / were forever a muttered code at which we trembled’.¹¹⁰

For William Scammell these childhood poems are among those in which Jones’s poetry ‘comes most alive’; for example:

... in his youthful self *versus* the Headmaster ‘black with experience and compromise’: ‘On my side were Joyce, James Dean / and a vague rive gauche: / white faced, black-haired women / and irrefutable epigrams’.

The headmaster responds to his request to resign ‘a prefect’s tasselled cap’ with “More Shelleyan gestures, Jones?” but shook his hand with “For my sake make one lyric that lasts”, recognizing early the poet in the boy. But when the boy returns twenty years on he is not remembered. He finds the headmaster’s ‘bristling / energy clamped into hieratic / chairbound splendour by a wrecked heart’. Nevertheless, there is something about the man that has led to his remaining a continuing influence on the adult poet, ‘one of those I had to please or placate. / The ground control of every flight’.

In ‘Near Greenford 1951’ Jones, out for a walk, ‘unexpectedly comes across some men playing cricket’:

¹¹⁰ cf. Mr Greville, Miss Cowans and Peter in ‘Introductory 1944’ (*TCOS*, 7-10)

the bowler six times looped a slow ball
like a deeply considered question,
and six times the batsman in his plum cap
leaned very attentively and returned an answer.

‘Here,’ Don Paterson observes, ‘the delivery of the poet is beautifully matched to the delivery of the bowler’.¹¹¹ The seventh of the childhood quatrain-poems. ‘The Offer, The Refusal’ deals with the father being offered a loan by his boss ‘to buy a real brick house’ (the Joneses lived in a post-war prefab) ‘because I’m valued’. It is an offer he turns down through a mixture, one supposes, of pride and independence. It is a refusal that leaves his family ‘stunned with grief and admiration’, but it takes its toll on the refuser, too:

Meanwhile, my father forked the passive earth
with vicious lacerating twists, brooding on how,
night after night, year after year, he had dreamed
his dismissal, after a prolonged trial for treachery.

There is an unsurprising ambivalence of response on display here of a man trapped in the class wars, but it grows in significance in the volume when the treachery is probed a little. Who is being betrayed and who is doing the betraying? Was it his class he feared he was betraying by being seen hobnobbing with his employer who drove a Rolls Royce that ‘stirred a sea of faces’ in the Joneses’ unassuming neighbourhood of prefabricated housing and ‘de-created our street / to its cardboard and tarred lumps’? The forceful adjectives ‘vicious, lacerating’ tell their own tale of self-repression.

These childhood poems may first present themselves as ‘tight and enclosed and safe’, as examples of the kind of poetry Jones had supposedly grown dissatisfied with. But there is an openness and fluency about them that suggest he had found ways of reinvigorating what he had grown tired of. *Freeborn John* would be the worse without them because, even if for no other reason, they help the reader to contextualize more sharply the protest poems from earlier in the collection.

¹¹¹ Don Paterson, ‘Reviewing for Caesar’, op. cit.

11. 'After Tempest'

The final section of *Freeborn John* is a compilation of three sections from the original *Enemies' Country* manuscript: 'Noëlle', 'Interlude: after tempest', and 'Prologue'.¹¹² The resulting 'After Tempest' carries the overall epigraph from Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: 'Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux'.¹¹³ The idea that Sisyphus is *not* happy, that the artist's task is instead a journey of despair, is not to be countenanced, particularly as Jones's new relationship has provided him with fresh hope and the opportunity to channel his furies in a more positive light.

The 'Four Poems of Noëlle' were probably written only a short time after the final poems of *The Children of Separation*.¹¹⁴ The first begins with a reference to the caravan park where Jones lived after the break-up of his first marriage ('You found me among rubble') and welcomes Noëlle's helping him to rechannel his rage. She is 'like a bomb of love' who ensures he avoids 'the alignment with self-pity / the pact with a wheedling past'. Jones is aware of his shortcomings and is not above berating himself. She 'doused the false lights / and scattered my fence of words', and she gives voice to the poem's concluding lines:

'Don't curl like dead peel¹¹⁵
over bitterness. Don't dance
to dead strings. Let's uncage eternity!'

This is a reworking of a well-travelled quotation from the Zen Buddhist poet, Shinkichi Takahashi:

Don't curl like orange peel, don't ape
a mummified past. Uncage eternity.

Jones turns 'mummified' into 'wheedling' in order to own to his perpetually complaining and finding fault. It neatly encapsulates Noëlle's argument but it raises an interesting issue which is also evident in the third poem, 'A Moment from Algeria'. Jones imagines the young Noëlle, who was born in France but grew up as

¹¹² Originally sections 5, 8 and 9 respectively. Carcanet Archive

¹¹³ Ibid. 'One must believe that Sisyphus is happy' / 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy'.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. The original order for the 'Noëlle' poems (of which there were five) was:

1. 'Born by the mythic sea' (2 in *Freeborn John*)
2. 'White Walls' (omitted)
3. 'You found me among rubble' (1 in *Freeborn John*)
4. 'I conjure here ...' (3 in *Freeborn John* with title added: 'A Moment from Algeria')
5. 'Tell me of that land' (omitted)

¹¹⁵ Ibid. The original manuscript has 'Don't curl like a dead lemon'.

a girl in Algeria, dancing into the town square ‘as volleys unbuckled / a soldier from his trappings’, an occasion recounted by her. He asks what she recalls from that time and she replies:

‘His eyes’ bequest, the unaligned
unanswerable desire of creatures’

As with the version of Takahashi, one wonders if people ever really *speak* like this. Beyond this, however, the reason the spoken word in these two poems strikes an odd note may have less to do with any supposed lack of eloquence on the part of the character to whom the lines are given,¹¹⁶ and more to do with the formality of its heightened tone at conversational moments of tenderness (however passionate).

The fourth and final poem in the sequence differs from the first three in that it appears to be spoken by the Noëlle character, though there are no indicative markers to this effect. She listens as he types in another room, and her eloquence is again evident though more natural in the written word: ‘You are gathering yourself / in those small trugs which are poems’. The rarely-used ‘trugs’¹¹⁷ surprises but earns its place because the caravan site where she finds her future lover lies beside an orchard ‘where the fruit still hangs / to be picked and brought shining back’. The camp ‘where people stayed, looked into our eyes, / and vanished like Troy’ takes the reader back to the final section (‘Newsreel’) of ‘At Badgers Mount’, where in his caravan Jones watches the television news report on the policing required to rein in the women of Greenham Common who were protesting against Britain providing placements for American weapons. Significantly, however, the speaker here will not submit to the anger at the end of ‘Newsreel’. Her approach is altogether more conciliatory, and healing:

You are keeping
rendez-vous, after all these years

with the waiting ghosts. Whatever you find,
embrace. They are what I mean

¹¹⁶ It hardly needs asserting that Noëlle Soret Jones was a highly articulate woman, fluent in English as well as her native French.

¹¹⁷ Trug: ‘A shallow oblong basket made of strips of wood, traditionally used for carrying garden flowers and produce’. Origin from late Middle English (denoting a basin): perhaps a dialect variant of “trough” (OED)

whenever I embrace you. I will be waiting, too,
to be found afresh, enlightened by your journey.

The collection's final two poems formed Section 9 of *Enemies' Country*. The first of these, 'Snowstorm Viewed from Love', was originally called 'Snowstorm Image'. The poem itself remains the same, however, and succeeds, rather as 'Snow Pieces' did, in helping us visualise the snowbound environment which is the poem's source: 'All shapes disband themselves / in this soft explosion'. But the whiteness becomes emblematic and travels inside - into his bed where it defines his lover's shoulder beside him 'and, beyond, the empty / whiteness smoothly awaiting / whatever colours I dream'. 'Tomorrow' together they will build from snow 'something like a man or woman / unflinching under a jaunty hat'.¹¹⁸ The whiteness travels seamlessly from natural world of snow outside to his partner's shoulder and beyond to 'whatever colours' the relationship will create. It is a telling, extended metaphor that works almost without our noticing.

Balls of snow become the rock Sisyphus was fated to push repeatedly up the side of a hill only to watch helplessly as it rolls back down again. In what one suspects is an important poem for Jones, because it acts as a summing up of the volume and its themes, and presents a reflection of his new, happier outlook, he revives the myth through the simple expedient of taking it linguistically into the twentieth century. We encounter Jones's Sisyphus 'thrusting / a rock upward on fate's down escalator'. He made an appearance earlier in the collection, in 'Exiled Voices'. There the speaker contrasts his correspondent with the mythical figure, who represents his friend banished to the border country:

I see you as Sisyphus, the world your stone,

shouldering upwards in history's spotlight.
But for me it was always darkness. I was always alone.¹¹⁹

This is the Jones of pain, familiar from earlier work, and indeed from most of *Freeborn John*, but the final poem goes beyond the endless labour of an impossible

¹¹⁸ Jones associates the word 'jaunty' with three important women in his life. Here, in 'Snowstorm Viewed From Love' it is used in connection with a hat worn by his second wife (*FJ*, 92). 'In 'My Father's Second Job' (*FJ*, 65) he writes of his mother's 'jaunty pillbox hat', which also features in the prose piece 'Too' (*Navis* 4, op. cit.): 'She must take that hat. The jaunty one with the great bow at the front'. In 'Seeing My Wife Go Out Alone' (*P*, 7), he notes 'a jaunty step I once desired'.

¹¹⁹ 'Exiled Voices, 4' (*FJ*, 44)

dream to recognize that ‘Each inch – each gruded fraction / of inch – is achievement’. And this achievement is seen as ‘the only end’. The poem presents itself as allegory because Sense, Nothing, Hope and Despair are all capitalized: Sense ‘smiles at the heart of things’; Nothing is a burden on ‘a height / overlooking Nothing’; and ‘Sisyphus thinks he is asserting Hope. But he / is combatant with Despair’. This despair takes the form of ‘gravity, and commonsense, and the laws of proportion’:

He yearns as he shoves. On the desirable heights
the gods of limit preside.¹²⁰ They cannot kill
Sisyphus, despite the tombstones of their vision.
His visionary eyes stare at his feet. He is

The poem had begun with a lower-case letter and seemed to be a continuation of the title (*I Think of Sisyphus* ‘endlessly resuming his endless task’). It ends without a full stop, inviting the reader, like Sisyphus, to start over again (He is / endlessly resuming his endless task’.¹²¹ And this refers not just to the single poem because by staring at his feet Sisyphus has become John Lilburne, who despite being pilloried and gagged stamped his. The collection has come full circle.

¹²⁰ In ‘The Watchers’ (1932), Auden, addressing Gemini, wrote ‘O Lords of Limit, training dark and light’, and provided Geoffrey Hill with the title for his book of essays on Renaissance and Restoration writers, *The Lords of Limit* (Andre Deutsch, 1984). Jones’s phrase ‘gods of limit’ is a further suggestion that he had been reading Hill.

¹²¹ cf. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, the first sentence of which (riverrun, past Eve and Adams, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and environs’) is the end of the novel’s closing sentence (‘Away a lone a last a loved a long the’)

CHAPTER NINE

Burning Through The Fade: Last Poems

1. *Ding an Sich* and Other Admirations

The final section of *Freeborn John* includes four poems that run consecutively and arise from a poetic very different from that we have come to expect from Jones. They make for thin shapes on the page, their lines mostly comprised of one or two words, surrounded by a great deal of empty space. ‘Nature’ exemplifies the approach:

The thing itself
is silent.
Impatience battens

on the fern,
the mountain,
the tree.

And when
snow falls
it is

not enough.
And yellow
lilies

in a blue
vase
must bear

so much
of a particular
house,

and sunlight
touching them
is burdened.¹

¹ (*FJ*, 90)

The opening line might be a response to the whole of nature, or, as proves the case, the beginning of an assertion the following line completes. It is also more or less a translation of Kant's noumenological category of what is unknowable (*'ding an sich'*: 'the thing-in-itself'), the essence the poem (in a deliberately anti-poetic way) is setting out to present. The import of the two lines together is that nature is not to be explained through personification; it cannot, in human terms, speak, although, as the poem amply demonstrates, it has much to say. In an intriguing mix of abstract and concrete what 'Impatience battens' on is fern, mountain and tree; and 'it is' mimics the opening line in appearing to be an awed response (to the 'thing-in-itself'), this time to fallen snow, only to lead to the surprising 'not enough'; 'yellow' and 'blue' turn out to be not the natural colours of light and sky but of 'lilies' and the vase they are in; that they (the lilies) 'must bear // so much' points surely to human endurance (relinquishing some of the poem's resistance to personification); and the sunlight that touches them is similarly 'burdened', as if nature has its troubles, too. If the line-break is a variously controlling and creative feature of all poetry (it might even lay claim to being one of poetry's categorical imperatives), the shortness of the lines in poems like 'Nature' foregrounds and draws immediate attention to its effects. In this way, with the line-break serving as a defamiliarizing agent, the seemingly slight grows substantial.

Perhaps 'it is // not enough' alerts us to a new influence, that of Denise Levertov, whose *O Taste and See*² was first published in 1962.³ The opening couplet of the title poem ('The world is / not with us enough') appears at first to be a counter to Wordsworth's 1807 sonnet 'The World is Too Much with Us' but turns out to be very much in accord with it. Wordsworth's complaint is that we have lost touch with nature, the world that is 'too much with us' being that of a dispiriting industrial revolution. Levertov's complaint is, similarly, that we have become deaf and blind to what the world has to offer, the world for her being 'nature' rather than what threatens it.⁴ Jones's poem is not, as Levertov's is, an entreaty to notice and enjoy the world, nor is it a despairing existential argument (though it has something of

² A quotation from Psalm 38.

³ Denise Levertov, *O Taste and See* (New Directions Books, New York, 1962)

⁴ Jones may also have been thinking of lines from Louis MacNeice's 'Snow': 'World is sadder than we fancy it. // World is crazier and more of it than we think'. (*Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 1946, p.30)

both). It is, rather, a poem of empathetic recognition born of looking closely both at the natural and at what is constructed, and the struggle towards accepting whatever solace they offer.

A further link to Levertov may be traced to another poem from the same collection, 'The Breathing'.⁵ The 'absolute / patience' of 'happiness itself, a breathing / too quiet to hear' that Levertov responds to (and embodies in her poem) becomes in Jones's post-storm poem the 'impatience' of an unsettled world. In Jones's 'Walk by Storm-Wrecked Wood' it is memory that enables the speaker to recall how the 'lost / woodlands ...sang / and in what / atmospheres'. A later poem by Mark Doty about a salt marsh, instructively entitled 'Description', ends:

And if we *say*
the marsh, if we forge
terms for it, then isn't it

contained in us,
a little,
the brightness?⁶

These short-line poems by Jones and Doty are indebted to William Carlos Williams and to Levertov, as is the desire to see (and to describe) what *is* and in so doing to capture something of the 'brightness'. The result is a kind of awe, a miraculous awakening to the real, a lyrically intense means of recording significance that requires the reader to notice, too.

In the early 1990s, Jones had been seeking a new approach and found himself drawn 'for example, to the poetry of Paul Celan and a whole range of non-English poets, including Ashbery, who were working in different ways.'⁷ His sense of dissatisfaction had been not only to do with poetry, however, but derived also from what he came to regard as a personal cultural deprivation:

Part of the distaste for what I'd written has come from the greater contact I've had with France since my second marriage, just being in touch with another culture ... I did not realise how limited my cultural background was. There are other poetries beyond English poetry, other ways of thinking and

⁵ Levertov's influence is also evident in the first two sections of 'Snow Pieces' (*FJ*, 54/5)

⁶ Mark Doty, *Atlantis* (Cape, 1996) pp.1-3.

⁷ (*IC-PNR*) p.55.

feeling about life ... I wanted in some way to move away from the anecdotal tradition, to see how far one could go without story.⁸

Given the poems in 'After Tempest', this range of non-English poets (many of them North American by birth or residence) would have included William Carlos Williams and Denise Levertov.

But this did not mean he had turned his back on more obvious favourites and influences, such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop:

Lowell and Bishop for me are not so much starting and finishing points of a journey but polarities between which I swing, the generators of whatever electric spark I have. I see in Lowell (and in some of his followers and peers, like Plath and Berryman) an anguished desire to be God and to be as famous as God. This gives his poetry a sweaty inadequacy, a strain at inclusiveness, a restless torturing of language as if it is the primal material for creating the universe and only he can wrest significant shape from it. In this he is archetypal, all poets know what he means!⁹

Clearly, any poet interested in narrative and writing in the 1960s is likely to have been influenced by Lowell's *Life Studies*, a collection that includes poems about members of the poet's family, and marked the emergence of a radical change of style from earlier work. It was first published in 1959 in both New York and London.¹⁰ The influence of Lowell is discernible from the outset, as we have seen, in Jones's *Poems* (1966) and *A Family Album* (1968). It is an influence that persists, too, even if the emphases change. Lowell, commenting on his own 'Skunk Hour', the final poem in *Life Studies*, said he felt that 'the best style for poetry was none of the many poetic styles in English, but something like the prose of Chekhov and Flaubert',¹¹ and one critic referred to 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow' as creating 'a whole Chekhovian miniature world'.¹² Jones's last published collection, *Freeborn John*, includes a sequence entitled 'The Cherry Orchard' and the poems written after that time include one called 'Several Flauberts'. The latter poem, concerning statues of Flaubert in various stages of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p.56.

¹⁰ Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, New York, 1959 and Faber and Faber, London, 1959) The prose 'autobiographical fragment' '91 Revere Street', did not appear in a British Faber edition until 1968, by which time Jones's *Poems* (1966) and *A Family Album* (1968) had been published by Alan Ross.

¹¹ Anthony Ostroff (ed.), *The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic* (Little, Brown, 1964) p.108.

¹² J.F.Crick, *Robert Lowell* (Oliver & Boyd, 1974) p.54.

disrepair in the nineteenth-century French novelist's home town of Rouen in Normandy (not far from Jones's new home) ends with an image that puts us in mind of the death of Emma Bovary.¹³ But however much Jones may have warmed (as Lowell did) to Chekhov and Flaubert, he had now also 'lost faith in story-telling'.¹⁴ Once again he found himself in sympathy with Edward Thomas, 'all those years where he felt it was impossible to write poems'.¹⁵

The influence of Elizabeth Bishop was not so immediate. In a review published in *London Magazine* as early as 1968, Jones wrote enthusiastically about her work. 'The great thing about Miss Bishop's poetry' he wrote back then, 'is that it grows more alive as time passes'.¹⁶ This would prove the case because in 1998 he would acknowledge this growth again, saying that she had become for him 'the poet of the twentieth century. Of that there is no doubt'.¹⁷ Bishop's influence on Jones's work burgeoned until it challenged (and perhaps overtook) that of Lowell, her friend and contemporary. Jones was acutely aware of this development: 'I've been trying to move back to being able to tell stories, but in a different way. The person who has helped me most has been and continues to be Elizabeth Bishop'.¹⁸

Once this connection has been made, it is easy to see why Jones should have been drawn to Bishop. Certainly there are shared themes. The fourth and final section of 'Snow Pieces', from *Freeborn John*, for example, is set in a doctor's waiting room, where, as we have seen, men usually busy but temporarily unable to work because of the snow are unsettled (apparently into a catalogue of minor illnesses) by having the time to think:

A great wave of snow has lifted them
onto a high remote region of glittering
pointlessness, where they can hear their heart
and all its misses, and what the night dreams

¹³ 'Several Flauberts' appeared in *Poetry Review*, Volume 89 No.4 (Winter 1999/2000) p.36. The final line 'a black trickle from a beautiful dead mouth' was subsequently changed to 'the poisoned seep of stupid mouths' (*Burning Through The Fade*, unpublished manuscript). The revised poem appears in *Brian Jones: New & Selected Poems*, op. cit. (NS, 208). The translated quotation records Emma's death in *Madame Bovary*.

¹⁴ (*IC-PNR*) p.55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Brian Jones, 'Singling Out', *London Magazine*, Volume 7 No.12 (March 1968) p84/5

¹⁷ (*IC-PNR*) p.55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

cannot be dispersed through a stiff agenda,
or lunchtime gin, or an office of banter

The setting recalls Bishop's 'In The Waiting Room', which finds a child in a dentist's waiting room among adults. The discovery she makes is that not only is she her separate self but she is also like others, to whom she is unwantedly connected: 'you are an *I* / you are an *Elizabeth* / you are one of *them*'. She knew there and then that 'nothing stranger / had ever happened, that nothing / stranger could ever happen'. Anne Stevenson has described it as 'a poem of existential terror',¹⁹ a description that might easily have been applied to any number of Jones's poems.²⁰ It is one of his principal themes. Another is that of 'home'. 'The Island Normal', 'Fearful' and 'Horace Bids Farewell to Vergil' all variously deal with leaving home and returning to it and in doing so deal with notions of normality and adventurousness, of the romance of travel being stifled by agoraphobia. One of Bishop's collections was entitled *Questions of Travel* and the title poem engages with a similar dichotomy.²¹ A traveller takes a notebook and writes:

*"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come
to imagined places, ...
Should we have stayed at home,
wherever that may be?"*

This is a resolutely post-romantic, and studiously unsentimental stance. It is echoed in Jones's 'Return Journey'²²: 'The place we are flying from / is where we are heading'.²³

Many of Bishop's poems set off from the hinterland between sleep (with its 'armoured cars of dreams')²⁴ and waking (when the image of the city comes 'distorted and revealed')²⁵. This kind of liminal state is a favourite area for Jones, too. But the reason for Bishop's eventual influence is more than thematic and relates to both William Carlos Williams's and Denise Levertov's determination to let the

¹⁹ Anne Stevenson, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* (Agenda/Bellew, 1998) p.33.

²⁰ See, for example, and particularly, 'Two Preludes: I. She Makes Pastry II. He Drives' in *Poems* (1966)

²¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *Questions of Travel* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976)

²² (*TCOS*, 50)

²³ Brian Jones, 'Poetry and Pose', *London Magazine*, Vol.8 No.1 April 1968, p.73 ('where you end up is a pretty clear indication of where you were always going'). See also discussion of 'Different and Again' on pp.231/2)

²⁴ 'Sleeping Standing Up', *Complete Poems* (Chatto & Windus, 1991) p.30.

²⁵ 'Love Lies Sleeping', *Complete Poems*, op. cit. p.17.

world, as it were, speak for itself. Levertov interprets the psalm's 'O taste and see' to mean that we immerse ourselves in all that life has to offer, that life is a matter of 'living in the orchard and being // hungry and plucking / the fruit'.²⁶ This is an attitude towards life and experience that is echoed in Bishop's poem, 'The Riverman':

Look, it stands to reason
that everything we need
can be obtained from the river ...
one just has to know how to find it

Jones's quest for a new approach to writing was his own attempt to discover how to find ways of incorporating happiness into his poetry. What he needed was a way of growing more inclusive, and it was in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop that he found a key:

I've started to write in an anecdotal style again, but in a way that is giving me more pleasure, that is freer, and more relaxed. I'm also trying to find a way of writing poetry that expresses happiness, something I've got from Elizabeth Bishop.²⁷

What he found in 'The Moose', for example, was 'an astonishingly relaxed way of celebrating what is'.²⁸ Bishop's reflection on the moose's intervention in the lives of those on the bus includes:

Why, why do we feel
(we all feel) this sweet
sensation of joy

This is radically different from the 'desire to be God' that Jones discerned and understood in Lowell (and Plath). And it is radically different from the pain that inhabits so much of Jones's earlier poetry. In Bishop, he said, he encountered:

the sense of the astonishing and limitless adequacy of the given self, if only you can follow that self unanxiously through all the labyrinths of how it feels and sees and hears.²⁹

Eliot may have described the poet's progress as 'a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'³⁰ but Jones was drawn to the humility which characterizes Bishop's loss of self, the way in which she demonstrates that joy can

²⁶ Denise Levertov, *O Taste and See* (New Direction, 1962) p.53.

²⁷ *(IC-PNR)* p.55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.56.

³⁰ T.S.Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry & Criticism* (Methuen, 1920) p.53 (in the University Paperbacks edition, 1960)

provide material for poetry. And this joy was to be found in the ordinary, in the passengers on the bus, for example, who, as Anne Stevenson has it, are ‘drawn out of themselves by something natural’.³¹ Jones had long since championed the ordinary (‘How did we come not to trust these mundane plenitudes’ he had asked of ‘Marguerites in a green glass’ much earlier),³² now he looked for a way to free the natural from pain, to capture something of the sense Bishop gives of ‘art standing wonderingly in front of the amplitude of life’ rather than ‘Lowell’s sense of art overwhelming life’.³³

2. Things As They Are

Following *Freeborn John*, Jones was published in two issues of a short-lived magazine called *Navis*,³⁴ and in *P.N.Review*,³⁵ *Poetry Review*³⁶ and *London Magazine*.³⁷ These poems³⁸ reveal further evidence of Jones’s desire to develop a revised poetic. ‘Among the Stones’³⁹ concludes with trees in the wind ‘bending back / on muscled necks / to howl their pain’. The howl is a surprising development in a short-lined poem that begins in a more genial mood. Jones has been gardening for three days, at his new home in Normandy, and has grown ‘familiar’ with stones, with their sounds, with their resistance or the way they sometimes yield easily ‘to the rake’s sensual tickle’, a further example of Jones’s facility for finely-chosen locutions, but also an example of his attempt to describe things as they are. Some

³¹ Anne Stevenson, op.cit., p.87.

³² ‘Barbizon 1: Prelude’ (*TCOS*, 44)

³³ (*IC-PNR*) p.56.

³⁴ *Navis*, edited by Robert Bush and Bill Morley, ran to only seven issues. Morley was a friend of Jones’s. Jones has poems in Nos. 1 and 4. No.4 also includes the short prose piece (‘Too’) that recalls his father working at Smithfield Market and being visited there before their marriage by his wife, Brian Jones’s mother.

³⁵ *PN Review* 129 Vol.26/1 (September – October 1999): Twelve Poems, pp12-15; *PN Review* 137, op. cit.: Nine Poems, pp.56-58; and *P.N.Review* 201 Vol38/1 (September – October 2011) ‘From Voltaire’s Garden and Other Entanglements’, pp.48-51

³⁶ *Poetry Review* (Vol.89/4, Winter 1999/2000): Two Poems

³⁷ *London Magazine* (Vol.40/11&12, February/March 2001): ‘The Helmask’, pp.63/4

³⁸ Some of which, along with many others as yet unpublished were organized into *Burning Through The Fade*, a new collection Jones hoped to have published, though he had not by the time of his death in 2009 submitted the manuscript to his publisher, Michael Schmidt for consideration. Schmidt would subsequently turn down the collection, as did Peter Sansom and John Killick at *Smith/Doorstop*. Seventeen of these ‘new’ poems eventually appeared in *Brian Jones: New & Selected Poems*, op. cit. (*NS*)

³⁹ *PN Review* 137, op. cit., p.56 [as ‘Stones’]

stones emerge slowly 'like a drowned rising'. It is a poem that again entertains the Sisyphus image with which *Freeborn John* concluded⁴⁰:

This is how
I begin to see the future:
a steady Sisyphus
of disclosures,
my body stooped
in question
and receiving
stone answer after
stone answer.

The speaker is attracted to what he perceives as the stoical life of raking stones, the kind of acceptance he is seeking, and his idyll is disturbed only when he looks up and sees trees reaching skywards. The howl comes from a mix of suffering and yearning, familiar Jones themes.⁴¹

'Wind',⁴² another short-lined poem, is a quieter response to its subject than Hughes's poem of the same name,⁴³ and more obviously lyrical, even though the wind described is forceful and insistent. The speaker appears in the third of the poem's four quatrains and is made to gasp but is not overwhelmed. The wind threatens 'foliage, flowers, / whatever lifts and yearns', but these do not 'howl their pain' as did the trees in 'Among the Stones'. The latter and 'Wind' were the first two of nine poems first published with an interview of Jones in *PN Review* 137, and they are representative of Jones's foray into a new poetic area.⁴⁴ Paul Mills greatly admired what Jones was attempting to do, but he remained ambivalent about the measure of success the poet had achieved. He found what he called 'a tendency to the poetic' and quoted as examples 'sharded green' (from 'Coming to Terms')⁴⁵ and the verb 'skirrs' (from 'Wind'), words he found 'embarrassing', because it was like 'listening to someone speaking a language knowingly not the present currency of

⁴⁰ 'I Think of Sisyphus' in (*FJ*, 93). See also 'Exiled Voices 4' (*FJ*, 44), 'Among the Stones', *PN Review*, op. cit., and the cricket in 'October' (*NS*, 216)

⁴¹ See also 'Trails': 'as if nothing had ever yearned' (*NS*, 213); 'i.m': 'yearning and resentment' (*Navis* No.1); and 'Wind' ('whatever lifts and yearns') (*PN Review* 137, op. cit., p.56.)

⁴² *PN Review* 137, op. cit. p.56

⁴³ Ted Hughes, *The Hawk in the Rain*, op. cit. p.40

⁴⁴ The nine poems were 'Stones' (later retitled 'Among the Stones'), 'Wind', 'Rain', 'Coming to Terms', 'Morning in the New Home', '20 Riverside Close Hanwell W7', 'Renoir's Girl', 'No Season to Speak' and 'October'.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, Jones, as if anticipating such an objection, replaced 'sharded' with 'shattering' in the manuscript of *Burning Through The Fade*.

exchange but trying it anyway'.⁴⁶ And he wondered whether the 'short lines and interrupted flow' of 'Stones', didn't represent 'a mistrust, perhaps of rhythm'.⁴⁷ He acknowledges that Jones is attempting is to capture the 'lyric amazement, the sense that tiny alterations of light and space perspective fully absorb his attention, and that behind or immanent within these details lies the staggering "what is"'.⁴⁸

Another poem, 'October',⁴⁹ one of those Mills most admired among the nine he was responding to, succeeds in catching something of Bishop's celebratory tone by allowing nature not only to speak for itself but also to serve as a benchmark against which to measure human endeavour. The Sisyphus of *Freeborn John* and 'Among the Stones' here assumes the form of an insect, a cricket with 'one crooked rear leg missing':

so that levering upwards on a doorpost
it curves and falls and starts again and pauses
to feed with fastidious foreclaw its ascetic head
or to nibble a claw clean, elbows out –
so human, I shudder

The poet is intent on the closest observation: butterflies ('their slightly tattered wings flattened / as solar panels against the earth'), a woodpecker and a pair of jays ('heavy birds quite public') take up, with the cricket, more than twenty-three longer lines, and even if the poem allows the possibility of a darker inanimate note ('where a death-touched patch of leaves / a yellow outrider among lingering greens, / strikes a tree with a hot light worthy of July'), it nevertheless ends on a moment of triumphant light. There is nothing apocalyptic about this outrider. The poet is recognizing happiness in things other than himself. What is particularly noticeable, however, about the three poems considered in this section is that there are no people in them, only the poet himself – and this, at a late stage in his development, is a new feature in Jones's poetry.⁵⁰ John Killick was impressed by Jones's 'deepening

⁴⁶ Letter from Paul Mills to Paul McLoughlin, dated 9th March, 2001.

⁴⁷ The poem that appeared in *PN Review* 137, op. cit., was entitled 'Stones'. The *Burning Through The Fade* version is called 'Among the Stones'.

⁴⁸ Jones would himself acknowledge this attempt in the long poem, 'From Voltaire's Garden and Other Entanglements' that closes *Burning Through the Fade* ('trying like mad to describe things as they are') (*NS*, 226)

⁴⁹ (*NS*, 216)

⁵⁰ Paul Mills commented on this solitariness in his remarks about 'Renoir's Girl', a poem that will be considered later.

response to nature'. 'October', he wrote, 'is an exquisite poem of detailed description, but not lacking in its sense of human correspondence'.⁵¹

3. Last Poems of England

Jones mostly does have people in his poems. The first issue of *Navis* includes 'At Meopham Green',⁵² a poem set in the same area of Kent where the village of Stansted is to be found, and due west of New Ash Green where Jones lived for several years. 'At Meopham Green' is one of several poems that arise from walks in the country taken by Jones and Noëlle, his second wife. It is a poem that records what is seen:

The hawthorn curdles to its moment:
mayflowers swirled with dust
enter and quit perfection
seamlessly, their shadow
displacing edge after edge
of light. [, as if there were endless
pause]

Here the two lovers acknowledge that, dead, they 'shall leap all laws' to be with each other and in doing so feel their bodies 'push against time'. When 'a woman wheels a child / into a pink avenue, to vanish / into a slumber of consciousness / where we would have all things / preserved', she and the reader have entered again the liminal state that features (as has already been observed) in many of Jones's and Bishop's poems. This in-between-ness is also to be found in a couple of lines (bracketed above) later cut from the published poem for the manuscript of *Burning Through The Fade*.⁵³ It reminds of the 'preference for pause'⁵⁴ referred to in 'The Cherry Orchard' in *Freeborn John*, 'pause' being the state referred to elsewhere in the same poem as somewhere on the way between departure and arrival, or, as it were, between sleep and waking. But the sense of there being not enough time before death separates them comes when reality returns with the sounding of the

⁵¹ John Killick, from an untitled review of *Brian Jones; New & Selected Poems* for *Acumen* (accepted for a forthcoming issue).

⁵² (*NS*, 211) and *Navis* No.1 (Spring 1993), p.2 (as 'Meopham Green')

⁵³ The poem first appeared in *Navis* No.1, Spring 1993 under the title 'Meopham Green'. It is written in couplets, including 'displacing edge after edge / of light, as if there were endless // pause.' In *Burning Through The Fade* and *New & Selected Poems*, the poem appears as a single stanza.

⁵⁴ (*FJ*, 52)

end of playtime in a nearby school. From its playground they had heard ‘Voices of children /cram the air’. The lovers are left more conscious of themselves:

we walk, sharing the weight
of something gleaming and precarious,
withdrawing, like colour from the flowers.

Earlier in the poem, it was spring that had turned ‘like a gleam-bearing fish / slowly away into unresonant / darkness’. Now the gleam and the precariousness seem to represent a recognition of separation. It is an uneasy end to an excellent poem that succeeds (despite its better intentions, one suspects) in discovering the elusiveness of Bishop’s kind of celebration.

There are other new poems set in the north-west area of Kent, three of which belong by way of both subject-matter and poetic with the ‘After Tempest’ poems of *Freeborn John*. The earliest of these, ‘Five Footpaths’,⁵⁵ is a sequence of short walking-snapshots that attempt to establish places passed, to recognize what is, and to let in whatever beauty may be found. There are moments, annotations of place, when a lightness of tone effectively catches the post-Tempest scene (‘Coldharbour. More name than place. / Some stumps. Detritus of the Great Gale’).⁵⁶ The same lightness of tone characterizes the response to a house, in which ‘The usual small domestic murders / no doubt took place’ and ‘Now, astonishing flowers bloom’, a house almost self-deprecatingly adjudged to be ‘Well worth a visit’.⁵⁷ This lightly humorous approach is maintained in FP 202 when the speaker asks how where he is can be called ‘Dark Wood:

How fair it is!
A stand of ancient forest.
Gluts of primrose
in Spring.
Nuts and berries
in their season.
Secretive glades.
Everyone’s childhood!

⁵⁵ *Navis* No.4 (Autumn 1995) pp.2-3. In the fifth section (‘PF202’) lines ‘Will you enter?’(which followed ‘A stand of ancient forest’) and ‘Essential England’ (which followed ‘Everyone’s childhood’) have been removed, and the line ‘Secretive glades’ added (after ‘in their season’)

⁵⁶ ‘Five Footpaths: FP 198’, op. cit.

⁵⁷ ‘Five Footpaths: FP 201’, op. cit.

This short sequence can be seen as an attempt by Jones to ‘open up’,⁵⁸ to become more inclusive, like Levertov and Bishop. A second poem, ‘This Corner Once More’⁵⁹ also deals with a familiar place defamiliarized by the storm. The title also, perhaps, contains an ironic allusion to the famous phrase from Rupert Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’. For Jones, England is now a ‘foreign field’: his home is in Normandy; he is no longer a local but a messenger, and visiting is ‘To arrive not as before’. This change enables him to revert to the notion of ‘Elsewhere’ (here allegorized) that had informed earlier poems⁶⁰ and would continue to be of significance in other new poems. Being elsewhere also relates to ‘a forever / darkening towards not this’ (Renoir’s Girl)⁶¹ and to heading for ‘whatever is defined / as not death’ (‘i.m.’).⁶² The ending of ‘This Corner Once More’ is intriguing, not least because it focuses our attention on how the mind is able to retain pictures of what is no longer physically there: ‘I turn to leave towards this memory’. The end of the poem creates and positions itself in another ‘in-between’ as it turns from the evoked landscape to the memory it has become. This is a defining kind of Jonesian sensitivity, the recognition of two complementary forms of reality, the concrete and the remembered, the former paradoxically ephemeral, the latter permanent.

Another, shorter, poem issuing from the same kind of duality is ‘One Usual Mile’. A familiar walk (‘Seafield’s apple tree, the bench / of Stansted, a sign that swung’) has been devastated by the great gale of October 1987:

But it is still ‘my walk’,
or ‘the way I go’.

Habit lengthening to prophecy.
Today rhyming well enough with yesterday.⁶³

There is a sense here that things die only if we allow them to, even if they will eventually die *with* us. That the real world is an approximation memory completes.

⁵⁸ (*IC-PNR*) p.55.

⁵⁹ *PN Review* 129 (1999). op. cit., Jones did not include this poem in the manuscript of *Burning Through The Fade*

⁶⁰ See, for example, ‘Letter from Elsewhere’ (*FJ*, 48-9)

⁶¹ *P.N.Review* 137 (2001), op. cit., p.57 and (*NS*, 210)

⁶² *Navis* No.1 (Spring 1993) p.7. In Section 6 of the same poem (*Navis* p.6), ‘Nothing’ is allegorized, just as ‘Nowhere’ and ‘Normalists’ were in ‘The Island Normal’ (*TIN*, 11) and as ‘Elsewhere’ is in ‘This Corner Once More’ (*PN Review* 129, op. cit.)

⁶³ *PN Review* 129, op. cit., p.14

In Larkin's 'Dockery and Son', our 'innate assumptions' become 'habit' before they 'harden into all we've got'. In Jones's poem, 'all we've got' becomes 'prophecy', a less tangible outcome, a projection of the past into the future.

4. La Guerre

As we have seen, when Jones moved to Kent in the 1960s, he found himself drawn to the story of the nineteenth-century agricultural workers revolt that took place in and around Hernhill and this led to the innovative 'The Courtenay Play'.⁶⁴ History awaited him in Normandy, too, for the area he moved to had been important for the French Resistance, the Maquisards. The result was a group of poems with which Jones opened the manuscript of *Burning Through The Fade*. 'Rue Jean Moulin (1899-1945)' takes its title from a side street in Pont Audemer named after a French Resistance hero. Now people sunbathe: 'this gorgeous flesh sunned to perfection / among rocks jumbled like skulls'.⁶⁵ 'Beg-Meil: The Beach',⁶⁶ a 'branch of light' on which fruit sway 'as they did before *Pour la Patrie* / took root in the Square' provides some sense of life going on. 'Monuments des Maquisards'⁶⁷ discovers a 'granite block ... where three names and their code names / glitter in sunk gold', a monument that recalls the statue of the 'svelte youth'⁶⁸ in Stansted.

⁶⁴ 'The Courtenay Play', (*FMM*, 57-86)

⁶⁵ Uncollected poem which opens the ms of the unpublished *Burning Through The Fade*. The poem reads, in full:

RUE JEAN MOULIN (1899-1943)
Some give so much. Just so much.
A name pincered from a mouth. A scream
jolted towards an incessant face.

To yield more would be to yield a world
blind and babbling. As he was, almost,
whose bequests are the small excursion trains

butting through willow-herb
past scars, once halts, from which
roads still run to what we dare not name;

and this gorgeous flesh sunned to perfection
among rocks jumbled like skulls;
and quietly repeated dawns in this street.

⁶⁶ *Navis* No.1 (Spring 1993) p.3

⁶⁷ *Poetry Review* Vol. 89 No.4 (Winter 1999/2000) pp.36/7

⁶⁸ 'At the War Memorial', 'Stansted Sonnets 1' in (*FJ*, 10)

The notion of resistance is of central importance to Jones – and it finds a new inflection in Normandy.

‘Manneville: the Museum of Resistance’⁶⁹ is a place that ‘opens rarely’. It needs an ‘emotional day / (liberation, important saints)’ before ‘the single door / will give into filtered light / beneath the cupola’. There is no charge ‘to be scrutinized by these faces that said *No*’.⁷⁰ We learn that the non-professional who mans the museum has ‘a clear vocation elsewhere - / sheep, perhaps, or cider orchards’, and that the place closes early. There is something pleasingly speculative and random about all of this and it sets up a surprising conclusion:

The gaze of all this follows me
back down to the sharp nostalgia of *here*,
its choice of large and small coffees.

The ending avoids the sentimentality of solemnity and catches the way something serious enough to be remembered solemnly can produce such lethargy and apparent carelessness. It is a poem about a serious matter that is wary of the pretentiousness it might have fallen prey to. To smile in response to it is not to be disrespectful or irreverent.

5. From a New Home in France

‘About a House’ appears to be spoken by the owner who has just sold the poet and his wife a house outside Pont Audemer in Normandy. He does not presume to know what has led to his interlocutor buying his house. Instead he points to the fruit trees he had recently planted, saying, “Remember to stake them against the wind. I was deflected from that.” There will be further mention of these fruit trees in other Jones poems from this time. The final stanza suggests an illness being the cause of selling up and goes some way towards explaining why, earlier, the speaker referred

⁶⁹ (*NS*, 207) and *P.N.Review* 129 (1999), op. cit., p.12, the latter being significantly revised for inclusion in *Burning Through The Fade*. It is the revised version (*NS*, 207) that is discussed here, although there will be many who believe the revised version inferior to the first.

⁷⁰ cf. ‘From Voltaire’s Garden and Other Entanglements’ (*NS*, 221) in which the speaker finds himself being gazed at by cows: ‘The scanning animal scanned, imagine it!’

to being ‘suddenly / on the brink, staring.’⁷¹ There is a real sense of the speaker being the romantic Jones is not (for example in phrases like the ‘oyster distances’ he will ‘whisk’ his wife away to ‘for whatever remains of forever’). The absence of any response from the buyer is perhaps a measure of the distance between them. But it also suggests an unease prompted by memories of the poet’s having been himself once ‘suddenly on the brink, staring’. This kind of unease is also evident in ‘Chez’, a poem of ten rhymed quatrains that records a visit to new neighbours. If other poems from this time provide examples of a new openness⁷² (‘I’ve started to write in an anecdotal style again, but in a way that is freer and more relaxed’) then ‘Chez’ demonstrates Jones’s ability to carry this anecdotal openness over into more formal verse. The meeting in the neighbours’ garden for aperitifs bears hallmarks of an understandable initial awkwardness. The gnomes, brought down from the loft in April and ‘spaced evenly, in little groups of consolation’, are somehow symptomatic of this unease, as is the dog that strains against his chain’s ‘maddening short range’ as the newly-arrived ‘approach across the trim white gravel’. There is a conventional conservatism about the neighbours. A granny had died five years ago ‘*In pain / but drugged praise be to God*’⁷³. Their daughter arrives from her ‘smaller house across the lane’. The daughter has brought her five-year-old son, who sustains the family’s three-generation occupation of the lane. Jones notices differences between his place and theirs (‘Timbers we’ve featured, they’ve plastered over’). It is clear the only connection beyond every good intention is an address, a separation neatly caught:

On different journeys, for a while we coincide
 and like the passengers on trains that pass each other,
 are left with strange longings. Monsieur
 comments on my study, all those books,
 and Madame warns They’ll help to pass the winter.

And on their way home across the lane, the daughter’s difference from her parents is observed in her preferences:

⁷¹ The version of the poem published in *PN Review* 129, op. cit., included an additional stanza (between the final version’s stanzas 3 and 4) making this clearer: “‘She may smile at you, / as you lift your glass yet again, / but it was not so / the day she returned with the news’.

⁷² ‘Forerunner’ (*NS*, 214), ‘Coming to Terms’ (*PN Review* 137), ‘Recognition’ (*NS*, 215), and ‘October’ (*NS*, 216) are examples.

⁷³ There is an argument for ‘but drugged, praise be to God’ being in italics like ‘*In pain*’, largely because Jones would not say ‘praise be to God’. It is italicised in *New & Selected Poems* (*NS*, 218).

Back past the dog still hoping to break the chain.
The daughter's meadow-land's awash with sun
that juts a shadow from each garden feature.
No gnomes. But owls, bears, toads. All spaced alone.

The final sentence is unobtrusively startling. It takes us back to the opening's 'little groups of consolation' in a way that more than suggests our attempts at camaraderie are tentative at best. There is a sense throughout the poem of a clash between two opposing cultures, not nationalistic but the practical and sensible over and against the cerebral and artistic. Is the decision on Jones's part to rhyme the poem a subliminal determination to demonstrate his skill in what he does in the face of his neighbours' failure to comprehend its point?

His new wife does appear in 'Recognition',⁷⁴ another poem prompted by the kind of intense observation that informs others written from France.⁷⁵ It is a poem in which memory also plays an important role, a particular cuckoo reminding Jones of a particular smile. Both cuckoo and smile represent significant moments. For Jones, the former had always been 'bodiless, one of Spring's exuberant throwaways'. In his Normandy garden, he sees one close up, so that now 'cuckoo' will always bring to mind that particular 'awkward' bird, just as Noëlle's smile in watching the bird returns him to Badgers Mount eighteen years earlier:

when you turned in a white dress sprigged with orange flowers
to gaze in delight through a gather of marguerites
not at a bird but at me, suddenly stopped, incredulous
to be so recognised, hardly daring
(is this me?) to climb nearer.

The observant reader will recognise the same 'white Madagascar flowered dress' from 'Approaching Islands' in *The Children of Separation* (1985). Jones returns to the same memories, the same images, because they capture significant moments.

'Different and Again'⁷⁶ includes the photographic image, 'burning through the fade', that would become the title of the further collection Jones hoped to publish. It is a rich, filmic image offering itself as way of describing how significance endures,

⁷⁴ (NS, 215)

⁷⁵ Such poems include 'Among the Stones' 'Wind', 'Rain' (all *PN Review* 137), 'October' (NS 216) and 'Trails' (NS, 213) in all of which poems the poet appears to have been alone.

⁷⁶ *P.N.Review* 129 (1999) p.13 and (NS, 212)

will somehow outlast our conscious memory of it, to emerge when photographs are consulted, or when they are simply happened on, serendipitously, while looking for something else. The ‘new’ relationship the poem records, was by then long enough established for the couple to unearth a pair of forgotten photographs. It is another poem in which the poet is alert to the danger of sentimentality. Peace of mind and contentment enable praise of what is ordinary:

Can you believe it?
These things to call ours? A hawthorn
lingering its cream into the dusk,
a telephone at rest and those we care for
safely undefined⁷⁷

The hawthorn features in a goodly number of these new poems, more or less taking the place of the lowly marguerite that played the same representative role in earlier poems.⁷⁸ But here, in the new home, this feeling of well-being must not be overplayed: ‘We are not such fools’. The recovered photographs reveal the lovers ‘passion-gaunt and young, / burning through the fade’. This last phrase (after the Keatsian port-manteau ‘passion-gaunt’) is a memorable and inexhaustible image involving memory and preservation, art and permanence, and it sets up the poem’s conclusion:

Remember now?
We do not learn, and that is our salvation.
A shutter blinks and we are there again,
gifted and unaware, just further towards
an outcome, whose form as this night falls
is grateful, hawthorn-drenched.⁷⁹

Peace has been earned and, it seems, was always coming. This is at one with Larkin’s ‘what something hidden from us chose’⁸⁰ and not only features elsewhere in Jones’s poetry but also derives from an essay he wrote for *London Magazine* on the work of Cecil Day Lewis, which Jones ends with a thought that is ‘something else for a young poet to ponder on: where you end up is a pretty clear indication of

⁷⁷ The *PN Review* version has ‘wonderfully undefined’, which misses the peace and contentment inherent in ‘safely’

⁷⁸ Hawthorns are also mentioned in ‘Manneville, The Museum of Resistance’ (*PN Review* 129, op. cit.); ‘At Meopham Green’ (*Navis* No.1); ‘i.m.’ (*Navis* No 1); ‘Wind’ (*PN Review* 137); and ‘This Corner Once More’ (*PN Review* 129), op. cit., in other words in poems emanating from both France and England.

⁷⁹ The otherwise religious locution ‘salvation’ takes on a lilt worthy of Oscar Wilde here. Presumably they have not allowed themselves to grow away from being ‘gifted and unaware’. But it may also reinforce the determinist idea that they were always going to meet.

⁸⁰ ‘Dockery and Son’, *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit. p.38

where you were always going'.⁸¹ It is this thought that informs 'towards an outcome' here, 'becoming what it always was' in 'i.m.'⁸², and 'where / you were might be where you had / been waiting for yourself' in the *PN Review* version of 'Renoir's Girl'.⁸³ One wonders, however, how far Jones believed his assertion obtained in his own work, where, for example, the gratitude with which 'Different and Again' ends suggests not only that Jones is very much surprised his life turned out as well as it did, but also that he would be hard put to find this happiness pre-figured in his earlier work. Photographs only reveal what will be after it has happened, but they also reveal and preserve what may have been obliterated in real life.

6. Gardening and Other Work

There are several new poems from France that find the poet working in his new garden. Michael Cayley had identified Jones's respect for physical labour in an essay dating from 1974.⁸⁴ It represents tangible achievement even if, as Cayley observes, 'Physical man, proud of his dexterity, is also brutal'.⁸⁵ In 'Morning in the New Home',⁸⁶ the poet is up early heaving heavy shutters out of their moorings and casting them down against a wall. Again the format is one of verse-paragraphs that allow an anecdote to be told in a freer way. The poem tracks a journey from dark into light, from 'pitchblack shuttered rooms' to 'where the day / has poured suddenly and brimmed, / hot and at once / like the tea in your breakfast bowl'. The touch is light, but the journey is not without its disturbing imagery: the shutters are carried 'like riot-shields'; they are cast down against a wall 'clatteringly, as police must do / at the fag-end of a brutish duty', (described within the poem as 'an image awkwardly persisting'). It is a poem Paul Mills admired, in part because it reminded him of 'the Jones of *The Island Normal* in its wider reference and awareness of social relationships, conflicts, function of shutting out other kinds of light'.⁸⁷ That

⁸¹ Brian Jones, 'Poetry and Pose', op. cit.

⁸² *Navis* No.1, op. cit.

⁸³ (*NS*, 210)

⁸⁴ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.103

⁸⁶ *PN Review* 137, op. cit.

⁸⁷ Paul Mills, email, op. cit.

the shutters are carried ‘like riot-shields’ is also a reminder of the prophecy in the Book of Isaiah that people shall beat their ‘swords into ploughshares’ and their ‘spears into pruning hooks’.⁸⁸ Despite being in a new home and a new relationship, Jones is still influenced by memories of violence recorded in the final section of ‘At Badgers Mount’ in which a newsreel declares we are ‘the children of war’.⁸⁹ These memories clearly persist as a trace of another existence.

In ‘Forerunner’,⁹⁰ the poet tends and tells of the garden he has inherited from the previous owner. It is a poem that provides a good example of the new Jones’s determination not to close down his poetry, not to tidy it up, not to give it spurious shape.⁹¹ It takes the form of a single block of loosely scanned blank verse and a separated conclusion of four lines of more varied length. Content determines form. It begins in very assured style:

Widowed she put up the barricades, these looping wires
around whose barbed crust the acacias
thickened their trunks, honeysuckle merrily prospered,
and holly welded its dark shine, slowly

Not wanting to tidy verse up unnecessarily does not entail abandoning technique. The sounds are carefully marshalled so as to appear relaxed and spontaneous (‘widowed/wires/welded; ‘barricades/around/barbed/rust/trunks/merrily/dark; ‘thickened/trunks’; ‘merrily/holly; ‘shine/ slowly’). The enjoyable physicality of activity is mirrored in the accomplishment of the verse:

Planting a lilac, I find the worked black soil
of her potager, as the blade sinks smoothly
rooting ornament where she cropped necessity

The workings and experiences of the two gardeners are telescoped by suggested continuities: the cuckoos, ‘including the one that coughs?’ or the chaffinches:

toppling their quick notes
into Pretty weird and Good to be here?
(What would she have heard in French?)

⁸⁸ Isaiah 2:4 (KJV), In Joel (3:10) the process is reversed: ‘Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong’. (‘let the weak say, I am strong’)

⁸⁹ (TCOS, 29)

⁹⁰ (NS, 214)

⁹¹ ‘I can close my poetry down, I can tidy it up, I can give it shape, and for me all of this is spurious’ (IC-PNR) p.55, op. cit.. See also p.97

Parentheses play their tonal part once more, as a kind of bemused, intrigued aside. Remnants from the ‘old’ garden are still around or thinly concealed, until the unification of past and present is almost complete, ‘the cherry tree she planted flowering in splendour’: ‘It was like turning a corner / and coming face to face’.

‘Coming to Terms’ is formally similar to ‘Forerunner’ and finds the poet in his garden again.⁹² We see him ‘bounce the barrow between residual islands’ of detritus ‘interlaced with softer living things’. The flayed gas-mask he uncovers was the subject of a poem published in *London Magazine*.⁹³ What he finds are likened to his memories that he can ‘hoard or skip’: As the poem’s title recognizes, he is coming to terms with a new garden, but the garden is described in terms that remind of earlier poems (and an earlier owner):

The trees are preparing fruit which expect
other hands, and their great erotic trunks,
cleft and oozing, writhe with a slow trapped
ecstasy, like a myth endlessly being told
that insouciantly incorporates my moment

The language is Lorcan in its sensuality (‘a slow trapped ecstasy’ takes us to a host of other Jones poems). And the myth slides ‘insouciantly’ back into the poet’s more prosaic present, creating another, effortless continuity. The poem ends by focussing again on the wheelbarrow:

Its balloon-wheel
– carefree, bounding, sod-it-all and jolly –
is one way of handling things

It is an ending that creates the kind of circularity and formal neatness Jones had grown wary of, but the relaxed tone is one of acceptance that it is, after all, ‘one way of handling things’. There are other ways, of course, and the poet has been experimenting with them. He is well aware that his earlier poetic self could hardly have been described as ‘carefree, bounding, sod-it-all and jolly’. He looks at the wheelbarrow with a kind of amused shrug, as if chastened by his own worrying over things.

⁹² *PN Review* 137, op. cit., p.57

⁹³ ‘The Helmask’ in *London Magazine* Vol.40 Nos. 11&12, op. cit.

If gardening is one kind of work, writing, of course, is another. 'Day Out' draws attention to the poet at his work:

What should be (as I imagine it is
for these bodies lounging in the salt-edged sun)
a partial switch-off from time, becomes,
as the foam-laved sand shifts beneath my feet
like time itself, an urgent recall
to the small room of poetry-making
where, like a goblin from some northern tale,
I must sweat against time to make something
starlike, sharp and hard,
to hang like light struck from the flint of forever
above the drift of what we do with days.⁹⁴

The 'urgent recall' should not surprise us because, after all, writing is the kind of work we expect Jones to be about. Like memory and photographs, poems are attempts to 'make something / starlike, sharp and hard' to set against the vicissitudes of time. Once again, the use of parentheses is effective, here as a means of not presuming to know what others are thinking and as a means of dissociation, a recognition of his separation from those he is observing. The repetition of the word 'time' (it appears three times in six lines in the middle of the poem) is bold, particularly in the light of its being one of the poem's principal themes. The last line also carries echoes of Larkin's poem 'Days',⁹⁵ which asks what they are for, and allusions of this kind point to an awareness of being involved in the making of art. It is rare to find Jones writing directly about writing.

Paul Mills, responding to Jones's 'trying to find a way of writing poetry that expresses happiness',⁹⁶ felt that 'happiness' wasn't quite the right word, that 'it's more of a sense, or a possible assumption that, on some plane, life is meant to be lived in a state of elation, joy'⁹⁷ and 'resonance' was perhaps a better way of describing this state, that 'one is in a state of resonance'. Furthermore, the reason for Jones's being in this state might simply, among other possibilities, have 'something to do with love—with the poet's sexual, social, or family circumstances'. Whatever it was, in his poems, Jones seemed to have 'left behind an earlier temperament – one which saw exclusively English gloom – and gone for

⁹⁴ (NS, 220)

⁹⁵ Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit., p.27

⁹⁶ (IC-PNR) p.55

⁹⁷ Paul Mills, email, op. cit.

something else which is the stuff of the resonant self'. But a poet can't just say he is in a state of resonance, 'it needs something else, some form and approach to it as immediate experience'. Mills cites Whitman, Bishop and Snyder as poets who have managed to do this successfully⁹⁸ Jones's being engaged in attempting to do it would go some way towards explaining why he spoke 'with such enthusiasm about certain American poets and about his experience of France'.

'Renoir's Girl' present itself as an interesting case in point. The artist produced a series of paintings of the cathedral in Rouen, the nearest city to Pont Audemer.. The painting that led to Jones's ekphrastic poem, 'Renoir's Girl',⁹⁹ however, is probably *Bal du Moulin de la Galette* (1876):

Years in moments, words
ripe as silence, glimpses
among trees or bruised walls

where, just hesitantly, and for
it seemed always, sunlight would not budge
and you not let slip from it, and it

was for me to be there. And so
over and over again when I passed
from this – as a patch of light

caught and left that day the painted
patch of light on her shoulder, painted
to confirm how brief it was,

that dancing moment under the trees,
and how she turned to acknowledge who
perhaps was watching – I saw only

what was entering quiet reaches
beyond what I had framed, a forever
darkening towards not this.

Renoir may have caught the patch of sunlight on the girl's shoulder, the moment seized and preserved, but he has not caught what is 'beyond' the frame, the temporal process of the life that will continue without him. The circumstance Renoir paints is representative of many in Jones's (or anyone's) life. In Jones's

⁹⁸ The specific poems cited are Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, part 44 ; Elizabeth Bishop's 'The Map' and Gary Snyder's 'Piute Creek'.

⁹⁹ (NS, 210), op. cit.

unsent submission note accompanying the manuscript of *Burning Through The Fade*, he has this to say about the poem:

‘*Renoir’s Girl*’ in the second part, contains an image of real sunlight resting a moment on a patch of sunlight painted on a girl’s shoulder. It’s an image central to this section¹⁰⁰ which is concerned with a consciousness moving among uncertainties of place, memory and relationships¹⁰¹

The poem has four characters: the painter (who ‘painted / the patch of light’); the girl he paints; the poet (the poem’s ‘I’); and the girl(s) the poet looks at (the poem’s ‘you’), but the pronouns do not immediately yield their identities, which have to be worked for. This kind of challenge is evident in other aspects of the poem, too. Quite how the ‘real sunlight resting on a [painted] patch of sunlight’ signifies is not easy to fathom in the poem. John Hartley Williams likes the poem’s elegiac quality but finds some of the syntax ‘a bit precious’:

I think he’s trying to overcomplicate what is, in truth, a rather commonplace sort of observation. He takes a number of clichés (‘years in moments’ – ‘it was just a moment but it seemed like years’; ‘words ripe as silence’ – ‘her silence spoke volumes’) and tries to upstage them¹⁰²

Perhaps upstaging clichés is what poets are constantly doing, trying to breathe new life into what were once significant observations, and clearly this is what Jones is doing here; but Williams’s point is supported by the fact that the poem begins with these ‘clichés’ and begins with them elliptically. Interestingly, the published, magazine version of the poem¹⁰³ has an additional opening stanza that, while not strictly necessary, at least avoids the difficulty of the revised version:

Among all this, I shall never have
engaged what so many times
I embrace. There have been

years in moments ...

There was another stanza later removed. It was the fourth and involved a slight alteration in the previous line for the current version:

¹⁰⁰ The section of *Burning Through The Fade* referred to here contains fifteen poems set in West London (childhood memories), Kent and Normandy. Of those fifteen, eight are discussed in this chapter: ‘Five Footpaths’; ‘29 Riverside Close Hanwell W7’; ‘One Usual Mile’; ‘Renoir’s Girl’; ‘At Meopham Green’; ‘Different and Again’; ‘Trails’; and ‘i.m.’.

¹⁰¹ It is interesting to find Jones here (in another rather thinly-veiled attempt to forge a gap between himself and his poetic persona, referring to himself as ‘a consciousness’)

¹⁰² John Hartley Williams in an email to Paul McLoughlin, 10th October, 2011

¹⁰³ *PN Review* 137, op. cit., p.57

and you not slip from it, as if
 really it had come true at last, and where
 you were might be where you had
 been waiting for yourself, and it
 was for me to be there ...

It is easy to see why Jones might not have wanted to persevere with an unmediated cliché ('it had come true at last') and, as in the original opening stanza, some unconvincing line-breaks, but he was also excising the determinist idea that had cropped up elsewhere in his work, and seemed to have a part to play here: 'where / you were might be where you had / been waiting for yourself'.¹⁰⁴ The result of the revisions is an elliptical opening, a second stanza that includes 'it' three times in two lines, a now rather exposed cliché ('it was for me to be there') and the elided 'would' in 'you not slip from it'. But the complexity of the poem's 'simple' idea is caught in the long, parenthetical thought in the middle of the poem, which reveals that it is in fact Jones (and not Renoir) who is attracted to a girl (other than Renoir's) and finds himself first imag(in)ing a lifetime spent with her and then watching her entering the 'quiet reaches / beyond what I had framed, a forever / darkening towards not this', another somewhere he has always been heading for; in other words, where he is. The closing line gains in authority with its quiet allusion to the close of Blake's 'The Echoing Green' ('And sport no more seen / On the darkening Green'). The link between Jones and Renoir, between poet and painter is cleverly caught in the word 'framed'. It is a meticulously-wrought poem that keeps yielding more (and one that Mills found himself reading 'more and more').

7. Animals

In the interestingly experimental 'Night of Separations',¹⁰⁵ Jones deals in a new way with familiar themes:

Tonight the cows are crying out under the wind.
 Several men, stamping though mud, have removed the calves
 leaving the field to cows and to their anguish.

¹⁰⁴ See the references earlier in this chapter (pp.232/3 and related footnotes 81-83) to Jones's Cecil Day Lewis essay and the poems 'i.m' and 'Renoir's Girl', and to 'Return Journey' (p.220 Fn.23)

¹⁰⁵ (NS, 220)

(I find this a difficult word).
So the calves are orphaned and the cows unchilded.
(these are also difficult words).
Perhaps the wind will close it all down
and in the knife-edge dawn there will be no (grief)
and no sign of the lost (infants).
Hot milk will pump into weeping casks
that have no lips and cannot grow.
But at this moment, this moment under the wind,
(anguish cries into absence and it feels forever).

As the poem progresses, it is accompanied by a parenthetical commentary that will fuse with what it is commenting on. Initially, Jones pauses to identify words he finds ‘difficult’ but the parenthesized ‘(grief)’ and ‘(infants)’ retain their syntactical roles, and establish the parenthetical pattern of what is ‘difficult’. This is a development that takes the Levertov influence a step further (in a poem of lines longer than are generally to be found in her work). The poem’s closing couplet completes the fusion by allowing the parenthesized clauses to complete the sentence (that began with a pair of unparenthesized phrases). Commentary has become substance. In this way a rhetorical device – or, rather, a typographical convention - becomes the poem’s principal driving force as anguish moves into the parentheses.

The celebratory note at the close of ‘October’ (‘a hot light worthy of July’) may also be found in ‘A Birth’, a companion-piece to ‘Night of Separations’. Here a cow and its new-born calf take the place of the cricket in ‘October’, and again the imagery is bold: the calf ‘cling-filmed like a gift / shines in the great indifference / of its own and sudden being’. Its mother eschews all sentimentality by ‘pushing snout and lariat tongue’ in urging its calf into a first show of independence. The calf ‘squirms, unfolding limbs, / at this injunction to be more than be’. It is this being prompted into immediate action that interests the observer.¹⁰⁶

What Jones is admiring is what in humans might be called ‘good faith’, which animals by their very nature, exemplify. The behaviour of cow and calf is as free of

¹⁰⁶ There remains something syntactical awkward about the final line’s ‘to be more than be’. Nevertheless, grammatically if not poetically, ‘to do more than be’ or ‘to more than be’ would be, strictly speaking, more accurate. That they read and sound less felicitous may explain Jones opting for an appropriately quirky alternative.

sophistry as Hughes's roosting hawk¹⁰⁷ but remains, however unwittingly, a model against which we might measure our tendency to self-delusion. Animals have no choice in the matter, of course. Human consciousness generates anxiety and one way of alleviating such anxiety is the acceptance of what is seen and experienced, of what Jones called in Bishop 'the given self', through celebration, the active correlative of stoicism.

In responding to the symbolic force of the much-anthologized 'The Moose',¹⁰⁸ Anne Stevenson had this to say:

One never wants to make too much of terminology, but it may be worth suggesting that in 'The Moose' Elizabeth Bishop, in her instinctive way, was reaching back for the earliest form in which people conceded power to the animals they at once feared and exploited, revered and depended upon. Behind the civilized and creature-diminishing conventions of the fable lie thousands of years of primitive *totemic* art, tribal acknowledgement by imitation or depiction of the beasts' intrinsic importance to human societies.¹⁰⁹

Jones's admiration of animals is perhaps less than 'totemic' (one might use this term more readily in relation to Ted Hughes's animals) but he responds to cricket and cow in such a way as to suggest he sees them as emblematic of qualities humans struggle to emulate. They open us up to ourselves, something Stevenson also highlights in her response to another of Bishop's poems:

The unknown bird and the little dog in 'Five Flights Up' are minor versions of the moose; they call attention to the otherness in which we suffer – an otherness that ultimately absorbs suffering through indifference, opening a door in the dark through which we pass to go on living¹¹⁰

The earlier guilt-ridden Jones would have struggled to accept the salving power of such indifference. Now he is more responsive to its healing properties.

'Oscar the Donkey' may well be Jones's moose.¹¹¹ It is not a journey-poem like Bishop's (or Larkin's) but it does involve an encounter that gives the poet more than a little pause. The donkey appears to be sad:

¹⁰⁷ 'There is no sophistry in my body: / My manners are tearing off heads': 'Hawk Roosting' in *Lupercal* (Faber and Faber, 1960) p.26

¹⁰⁸ A poem Jones deeply admired and adopted as a model. (*IC-CT*) pp.337/8. Jones compares Bishop's poem favourably to Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings' (*The Whitsun Weddings*, op. cit.)

¹⁰⁹ Anne Stevenson, op.cit. p.86

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p.122

¹¹¹ (*NS*, 218/9)

Whenever I leave, he points his muzzle
skyward, and wheezes desolation

In doing so the donkey is aligning itself with the trees ‘bending back / on muscled
necks / to howl their pain’ in ‘Among the Stones’. The speaker responds:

I always turn back (saying *just once*)
to offer daisy-starred rips of grass:
a man and an animal engaging awkwardly again
across more than wire

The danger of succumbing to the sentimental is overcome by the pair engaging
‘across more than wire’, across, that is, a species barrier, too, however much the
wire grounds the meeting in the reality of their difference. The donkey is being
imagined in its perceived melancholia to belong with the trapped and the enclosed,
like Aunt Em or Mad Mary or the agricultural workers in nineteenth-century Kent.
It is even being imagined to belong with the women of ‘Six Poems on a Theme
from Lorca’ who yearn for a more fulfilling life. It is quintessential Jones (this
explains why he ‘must’ halt for the beast). But the poet has shown himself before to
be alert to the danger of becoming a parody of himself: ‘The images that others
have of us / sustain and kill’ he wrote in ‘At Badgers Mount’.¹¹² Tonally, the poem
contains at least a hint of acknowledging as melodrama ‘vast imprisoned needs’
(‘which I must halt for’). The poet knows that he halts in similar fashion when his
cat interrupts him while he is writing. He does this because the cat is old, though he
wonders, parenthetically, ‘(does she know that?)’; and because she adores him,
though he wonders, again parenthetically, ‘(is this true?)’¹¹³ But the donkey may not
be there next time. It may have been moved on to another pasture by a farmer who
is ‘no sentimentalist’ – or may be gone ‘absolutely’. So the poet walks on intent on
preserving these encounters. This he does by determining ‘to store in memory that
muffled stumble’:

one of those treasured coherences
remaindered among things gone away
or going, a small narrative

whose conjunctions are what love imagines.

The poem concludes:

¹¹² ‘At Badgers Mount 1’, (*TCOS*, 26)

¹¹³ This use of parentheses has become an important rhetorical device for Jones as can be seen from their adoption in ‘Night of Separations’ (See p.240/1 above)

Tonight, I use my words to brim
every hoof-dent with moonlight,
float dew on every neck-hair caught on the wire.

The poet is almost relieved to take refuge in his art after such an encounter.

8. Revisitings

For all the forging of a new style, there are other poems written post-*Freeborn John* that revisit familiar interests, some written in a more readily familiar Jones style. He may have become dissatisfied with earlier ways of doing things, for example with what he called 'safe, anecdotal verse' but he knew he did this well and was never likely to abandon it altogether.¹¹⁴ There are family poems, including '29 Riverside Close Hanwell W7'¹¹⁵ which one imagines Jones subsequently thinking of as bridging a gap between 'old' and 'new'. Jones, visiting England, revisits the site of the prefab he lay on the roof of in his grammar-school years 'and itched for the world'.¹¹⁶ The poem presents a mix of memory and what is, of loss and belonging, of images of himself and his parents and a local girl he knew, fusing into a satisfying whole:

Where there are so many absences,
barriers of space, perspectives
oddly aligned from dead windows,

there persists the struggle to stand
accurately where I once stood, with just
that way of looking, as if what was then seen

has no call to be otherwise: the tar-slimed
nuggets still to be loosened and kicked, the prefabs
a flotilla under the moon, Wendy just too fat

to be perfectly beautiful, but wholly loved.
I see me stumbling through this *somewhere*
naming it *bedroom*, or viewing the blood-bruised currants

sprung from my father's lonely furious dig,

¹¹⁴ This may also help explain the prose piece, entitled 'Too', op. cit. which uses material relating to the poet's mother that had already contributed to 'My Father's Second Job' (*FJ*, 64/5)

¹¹⁵ (*NS*, 209) and *P.N.Review* 137 (2001) p.57

¹¹⁶ 'Fearful' (*TIN*, 51)

or her in arms still pumping madness down
through suds. Time rids everything

but us of what we would keep, to become
this changed street we haunt and disbelieve,
this cul-de-sac where others are at home.¹¹⁷

It is familiar Jones country: the concern with ways of looking; with family and the consequences of what happens; the detail and the reflection; but it is a poem free from angst. There is no sense of the poet's wanting to go back there, or of his being unduly affected by it. It is an acceptance of how things are and how they progress and how they are recalled. It is a poem that knows things change, and that there is no going back. The unrhymed tercets allow the poem to breathe. One is scarcely aware, for example, that the opening sentence spans three stanzas and a line. And the relaxed tone is well-sustained. Metaphor is sparsely employed ('tar-slimed nuggets', the 'flotilla' of prefabs, 'pumping madness'); there is a surprisingly affectionate use of the colloquial ('just too fat / to be beautiful'); and the closing pun on 'home' is not insistent.

There have been a number of poems about Jones's Aunt Em before, and there are two further Aunt Em poems written after *Freeborn John*. 'i.m.'¹¹⁸ is an episodic piece in eleven short sections that pays homage to Aunt Em and reads like a distillation of all the poems Jones had written about her: her reclusiveness, her 'Word-baffled eloquence', her ten- or twelve-page notebook-autobiography, her 'silence / opening upon silence', her 'not being'; her 'small / unyielding grit'.and a still-born child. In the earlier 'In Memory: E.S.'¹¹⁹ Jones had written 'Thank you for everything. / Old atheist-hypochondriac-anarchist, who knew / the world was crazy, embodied it, and laughed'¹²⁰. In 'i.m.', he tries to piece together 'something bright' to remember her by 'when the spruced cars / head for whatever is defined / as not death'.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Interestingly, the poem suggests he is imagining revisiting his former home, that he is not actually there.

¹¹⁸ *Navis* No.1 (Spring 1993) pp.4-8

¹¹⁹ (*TIN*, 57-8)

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* p.58

¹²¹ cf. 'not this' in 'Renoir's Girl' (*NS*, 210)

9. From Voltaire's Garden and Other Entanglements

The final section of Jones's manuscript, *Burning Through The Fade*, contains a single poem, 'From Voltaire's Garden and Other Entanglements'¹²². In preparing the collection for submission to Michael Schmidt at Carcanet, Jones wrote a note explaining the volume's shape. He had this to say about the final section:

Part Four is an extended dramatic monologue. the speaker is an 'enlightened' and disenchanting figure who finds that *cultiver son jardin* is a testing and unsettling activity! It's meant to sound like Voltaire speaking – but I let him range beyond the eighteenth century. It's a section I really enjoyed writing and I think it has a genuine originality. All the collection's themes are rehandled here.¹²³

It is a lengthy poem in eight sections that takes as its epigraph a quotation from Voltaire's letters,¹²⁴ which itself is a version of the conclusion of *Candide*.¹²⁵ In the face of the world's troubles, individuals should nurture their own talents, should cultivate themselves in the hope that were everyone to do this then the world might look after itself. The intention may have been that the speaker should sound like Voltaire, but there is a remarkable level of identification here. The speaker sounds just like Brian Jones in the garden of his home in Normandy and, apart from a reference to his drafting *Candide* at the end of the fourth section, there is little else to connect the speaker particularly with Voltaire. But that, for the reader, scarcely matters. What lends the piece its originality is the new openness and relaxed style honed under the influence of poets like Denise Levertov and, most particularly, Elizabeth Bishop. The themes that are 'rehandled' through the prism of gardening and physical labour include: our relationship with animals and the natural world; describing things 'as they are'; application and expertise; selflessness and self-regard; humility; and the recognition of mortality. Taking Voltaire's advice, Jones, 'honourably bewildered by what there is left to believe in',¹²⁶ withdraws to his garden in the hope of becoming one of the just exchanging their messages.¹²⁷

¹²² (NS, 221-232) and *P.N.Review* 201 Vol.38 No.2 (September-October 2011) pp.48-51

¹²³ Note written to accompany manuscript of *Burning Through The Fade*. In the keeping of both Paul McLoughlin and Noëlle Soret Jones. The note is dated 23rd March, 2009. Jones died on 25th June, three months later, before any submission was made.

¹²⁴ 'Je sais seulement que la terre tremble depuis deux ans et que les hommes ensanglantent la surface depuis longtemps. Que faire a tout cela? Cultiver son jardin et sa vigne'.

¹²⁵ "Excellently observed," answered Candide; "but let us cultivate our garden." (The final sentence of *Candide*)

¹²⁶ William Scammell, op. cit.

¹²⁷ W.H.Auden, 'September 1, 1939'. op. cit., p.106

Perhaps there is a further possible influence at work here because, as was suggested in the chapter on *Poems*,¹²⁸ Jones's poem invites comparison with Ford Madox Ford's 'L'Oubli—, Temps de Sécheresse', another poem made possible by the unexpected happiness generated by a new relationship. Ford's poem is set in a garden in the south of France during a time of drought. Tony Roberts has described it as 'a self-portrait in contentment' and an exercise in the poet's 'taking stock'. The poem, he suggests, provides 'a taste of life at Villa Paul' (with the painter Janice Biala), one that is 'symbolic of a lifetime's struggles'.¹²⁹ Roberts borrows from Kenneth Rexroth's introduction to the 1966 edition of *Buckshee* in regarding Ford's last poems as being 'the fruit of a late love'. Rexroth had said of the poem:

The rhythms of 'L'Oubli—, Temps de Sécheresse' twist and untwist, and rhyme and assonance chime and counterchime, quietly, subtly, and yet with a gripping intensity that is a perfect expression of the sadness of a love found late.¹³⁰

Rhythms that twist and untwist, and rhymes that chime and counter-chime remind us of Jones's regard for Edward Thomas, even if Ford's rhythms and rhymes are less syntactically tortured than Thomas's can be. There is, however, in Ford's more relaxed style similar evidence of a mind working away as we read, trying to make sense of the problems and circumstances being addressed. Reflecting on the birds that have flown north from Africa lured only, it seems, by the drought, Ford addresses his partner:

... perhaps we shall hear them only after
All harvests gathered, the time of all fruits being done,
We — oh, but not too severed by time nor walking apart!
Shall pluck and cry the one to the other, walking along the folds of
Cap Brun:
'The herb . . . Oblivion!'¹³¹

Jones was living in Normandy only because of a new relationship. He was unexpectedly happy (and writing in the freer and more relaxed style that was clearly giving him pleasure¹³²), and in his poem is engaged in his garden in the kind of physical activity that had always pleased him (without, perhaps, bringing him anything like the lasting solace that is now, perhaps, just possible). But it is a poem

¹²⁸ See discussion of 'The Garden of a London House' (*P*, 52/3) p.30

¹²⁹ Tony Roberts, 'The Last of England: Four Portraits of Ford Madox Ford', *PN Review* 205, Vol.38 No.5 (May-June 2012) pp.57-60

¹³⁰ Kenneth Rexroth, Foreword II to Ford Madox Ford, *Buckshee*, op. cit., p.xxi

¹³¹ Ford Madox Ford, *Buckshee*, op. cit., p.17

¹³² (*IC-PNR*) p.55

that also represents a point of rest, because, in terms of its placement at least, Jones's last. And it's last line cleverly achieves what it ponders on, namely finding 'the right wrong-footing way to leave the stage!'

All the post-*Freeborn John* poems involving gardening and physical exertion¹³³ have been leading here. By the time of the longer Voltaire poem, his tone is not so much disenchanted as self-effacing: 'It's instructive being stared at by stones'. And the stones do not need him, even though he is the gardener and ostensibly their lord and master. They are not like his erstwhile students who looked up at him with 'compliant faces'. This time when he looks up he finds cows gazing at him: 'The scanning animal scanned, imagine it!':

I was simply a small accident of presence
that would disappear when they chose to turn away,
a *something* that was about to have had its moment.

This is matter-of-factly the way things are. The cows simply confirm the stones' 'cool Socratic way of asking 'And?''¹³⁴

This good-natured self-deprecation is continued in the second section, a triumph of tone and concision that while owing much to Elizabeth Bishop also owns a humour she would have struggled to match. In the second section, for example, he jokes about feeling 'quite like my old self'.¹³⁵ But the reader might be excused for demurring. This is not like the old self. It is a new voice that feels a different kind of nostalgia, and a new, more relaxed tone. One is tempted to suppose that this tone is the result not only of a change of poetic direction but also of a new-found sense of contentment fashioned by the kind of relationship Jones must not until now have thought possible for himself. Separation from his neighbour, their essential difference in outlook and interest, is no longer an existential problem but rather a source of neighbourly amusement.

¹³³ See, for example, 'Among the Stones', 'Wind', 'Coming to Terms' and 'Morning in the New Home' (all in *PN Review* 137) and 'Forerunner' (*NS*, 214).

¹³⁴ The Australian poet, Les Murray, had something similar to say in a recent collection: 'Tired of understanding / life, the animals approach man / to be mystified', 'Twelve Poems' in *The Biplane Houses* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006) p.13

¹³⁵ (*NS*, 221). This second section is also quoted in full in the Introduction, p.6.

This self-effacing strain takes root and by the third section has become a defining feature. A nostalgia born of treating animals as if they were human is now avoided because the speaker is clearly conscious of his own limitations, limitations that are themselves occasioned by human consciousness and a failure to grasp the natural order of things. What he admires and prefers in animals ('They have the beauty of limit', his cat being 'entirely cat') is not surpassed by owning and applying a consciousness they do not share. He believed he was helping great-tit chicks by shielding them from the sun with an improvised umbrella and moving it around when he realised '(like a savage)' that '*the sun moved!*' But the patient cat waited until, on the tenth day, the chicks spilled out, and it ate them. The speaker's response is once again parenthetical: '(Again / existence tightrope-walking the twin plunges / of farce and tragedy)', the melodramatic, writerly language knowingly self-referential. It is a sobering experience:

It's tempting, after a bruising,
to prefer the company of earth.
For two days after, I *tilled the soil*
for its black, rich-scented peace.
And the black stones
rose in stare.

The speaker here may be allowing the poet to apply his new-found poetic, but he is also taking stock of his life and achievements. The parenthetical is providing any number of clues as to where we are heading: '(O those gazing stones!)' and '(So much still to learn! / And all so obvious!)'.

Having turned to the earth for company and decided on gardening as an answer to disenchantment, parentheses continue to take the reader into the speaker's confidence:

Deciding whether or not to remove brambles
(in my case, fifty yards of them, eight yards deep)
is an involved and thorny matter.
To start with it's perfectly possible to live with brambles
(and my instinct, after all, has always been
that all change is for the worse).
And then do I want to lose the morning glimpse
of rabbits bounding in and out the tangle?
Or autumn's sensual gift
of berries on the lips and tongue?
(You see, I'm using the present tense,

the relaxed shrug of hypothesis,
as if I'm toying with possibilities.)

In fact, he 'birthed the future barbarously' by hiring a machine and ripping the brambles up 'leaf, stem and root'. Where there were brambles is now 'a scatter of trees': '(I planted them too close, but let that be / a problem for inheritors)', as the brambles were for him, presumably. The writer's delight in language will be regarded, he knows, as 'shilly-shallying' but the reason for his getting rid of the brambles is 'painful', it requires admitting that 'what fuelled me behind that gross machine' was fear of being overrun by weeds: 'eight yards, then ten, then twelve', and it left him appalled at how a 'furious relish' could allow his 'reasonable hands' to 'lavish slaughter' on 'writhing stems and weeping roots'. And as is often the case, one confession leads to another, again parenthetical:

(And do you know I fear to swim as well,
to feel my feet
lift from the sand and hover over
I-know-not-what unnamed uncategorised beast?
I never admitted this, the days I lay
at the sea's edge, conspicuously clever,
drafting *Candide*.)

That Voltaire-Jones is neither swimmer nor gardener is no surprise, perhaps. They are activities that call for specialised expertise and being brave enough to venture into the unknown. Against this, being 'conspicuously clever' seems to offer them little.

The land has no such qualms about justifying its existence. It 'hosts' two trees that are the subject of the fifth section, the first alive with pears, the second dead but home to the 'throb' of butterflies. The first contains some memorable images of the natural world:

Through dark spatters, like finger-bruises,
glitters surface
to scab like tiny salt-pans,
but sweet,
hosting green-gold gluts of flies
that when wasps muscle in
scare violently, like a bottle shattering.

Again short lines remind of Levertov, and the fluid form allows Jones to engage his highly visual images with a freedom he might earlier have struggled to release. The

tree is far from happy because all day it ‘seethes’ behind its ‘palisade of suckers / as if furious with itself and the world’. We are familiar with this mix of energy and discontent in Jones’s work. What followed in the *PN Review* version are seven lines that tell of hornets ‘big as your whole thumb’ moving in on the wasps.¹³⁶ But these lines were later withdrawn, presumably in the interest of giving the two trees equal attention. The poem in its later form (as Section 5 of this longer poem) consists of a single opening line announcing the trees’ existence followed by two seventeen-line stanzas. One might be tempted to wonder whether this is not Jones returning to his old ways of tidying up his poems were it not for the balance and clarity that is achieved as a result. The ending is worth pausing over. The magazine version ends:

They stand a few yards apart,
oddly right.
I watch them like some third.

The revised version extends this to read:

They stand a few yards apart,
themselves, and oddly right.
And now *I* arrive – an unbidden
restless third
trying like mad to describe things *as they are*.

The revised version makes the ‘third’ more natural and the writer is again acknowledging his intention (‘to describe things *as they are*’).

In Section 6, Voltaire and Jones are linked by history, by war and the threat of ecological disaster, by ‘news of the idiot world’ (and, of course, by parentheses):

(it’s my passing neighbour, who’s chosen to convert
our *chat* into a daily bulletin) where ten thousand troops
are being mobilised (no change there then)
for the next war (nor there) and the rising sea,
drawn ever upwards by the magnet
not of the moon but our *special* (from *species*)
ineptitude, has swept aside whole towns (built on the sites
of other towns previously swept away).

The Seven Years’ War becomes inexorably the invasion of Iraq. There is a tendency to suppose that this is the way things will always be and that it is futile to demur in the face of overwhelming odds, but this is not what we would expect from the writer of *Freeborn John*. He is more circumspect now, however. He is no longer the

¹³⁶ *PN Review* 129, op. cit., p.15

tone of the poet who was anxious for *Freeborn John* urgently to see the light of day as a ‘contribution to protest and resistance’.¹³⁷ When he sees a bull ‘endlessly ambling up to cows / to sniff, and being endlessly disappointed’, the speaker admits that ‘in my vulnerably lowered state / *it really got to me!*’ Once again the admission and the italics acknowledge that his protest might be dismissed simply as hysteria. He sees the ‘lust-crazed’ bull enjoying a few ‘unconjoined self-pleasuring moments’ before being consigned to ‘the knacker’s yard’ as a startlingly lurid (and pathetic) metaphor for life. The section ends with Voltaire-Jones becoming Hamlet in a fit of self-mocking capitals, exclamations and italics:

Behold me then –
Enlightenment Scans the Abyss of Despair!
except I did not feel
generic, merely a huddled one-off, hugging
my infinitely meaningful body
against *unthinkable* void!
Irrational, I know! As for that smile –
when I saw the bull sniff pointlessly once more
and bash its doleful head against the tree,
I did feel my lips flicker – but then settle
into a shape of pity, grudgingly.

This is a minor epiphany, perhaps, but its effect is if anything heightened by a doleful self-awareness of separation, just as it is at the same time buffered by it.

This separateness and continued reflection on the value of art introduces us to the man who has been employed to cut the hedge and other duties his tools and expertise made him better equipped for. And he focuses our gardener’s thoughts:

This man has entered my life. Not his words
(we scarcely understand each other)
but the gravid bulk of him, his gentle shouldering
of so much I’d thought valuable to the sidelines

For Voltaire-Jones, gardening with its physical exertion comes as a welcome relief from being ‘conspicuously clever’. Not so for this man, who seems complete in himself and what he does. He arrived in an orange tractor that ‘pattered fruitily / behind which a trailer bounced, like an emblem / of puppyish anticipation’. The poet’s fascination is clear in the way we learn by way of copious lists what was held

¹³⁷ Letter from Brian Jones to Michael Schmidt dated 14th July 1988. Carcanet Archive, op. cit., Accession 3 Box 267.

in the trailer: three ‘coffins’ neatly packed with tools and accessories (all of which are lovingly described) for a hundred and one gardening jobs. The man knows what he is doing, has even brought a mole-box: ‘He’d noticed an incipient plague / and come prepared! / (‘But only’ he said, sensitive to my shudder / ‘if you want me to’).

And he is efficient:

By twilight, the hedge was cut, the lopped waste
trimmed into logs (stacked by the shed), the twigs
and rotten branches slung into the trailer,
driven down the lane to a field (he’d fixed this
with a farmer-friend), tipped out and burned
(the fire started with the oil-rinsed tyre).
A whisky-aperitif (after, of course, a meticulous
stacking of boxes and trailer) and he’d gone.

Although the poet wants to make sense of this fascination, to find ‘the *essence*’ of the man, all he can see is ‘*difference*’. Unlike the poet, who is forever ‘dipping’ his pen and ‘gushing words like a frog its spawn’, the man ‘*lies in close*, says little, / endlessly adjusts (so detailed!) his every act / to the grain and character of things’. The truth that hits the poet is a genuine epiphany: ‘Everything is more important than him!’ The writer by implication is self-regarding, perhaps even vain. This feeling of inferiority is furthered when the poet-gardener drives to the man’s home to pay him, but jams the money under the door without knocking, and leaves. What gave him pause was what he saw through the window, a man playing cards with what must have been his grandchild. The result is a Wordsworthian moment:

He was smiling
and leaning back. It was the space that shocked me,
the silent space between them. It said
I do not matter. I am here for her.
I am what she will leave behind and sometimes remember.
And he was wholly that. It was enough.

There are none of the trappings of modern life (‘no book, glass of whisky, TV screen / radio music, gardening journal’): ‘He was where I have never been, *just there!*’. Our gardener drives home past the same house, signposts, and trees: ‘And my cleverness has nothing to say about them’.

The final section finds the speaker grown aware of approaching death (in Jones’s case made very aware of it by prolonged illness). The feeling has been provoked (in the poem) by finding in the garden, among ‘inadvertent scatterings’, what he

neologically calls a ‘helmask’,¹³⁸ ‘vague enough with rot to have performed / in any of three wars’, its sockets tracking him ‘as if everything is still and always happening’. He also finds a pair of secateurs he had let drop a few week earlier, ‘the curved blades plunged / in earth – a kamikaze parakeet!’ It makes him muse (like Hardy in ‘Afterwards’) on how visible he will be when he has gone: ‘I felt the air beginning to slip / through and past me’. He knows the ‘hand-span of my tomes’ tells the new reader ‘*I’m here!*’, but little else. The seasons will go on recurring and he will ‘slide across them into absence, / strewing strange elliptical mysteries / that pose the question *Who?*’:

There’s a charm in this, a kind of puckish wit
(a goat-smile coming on?) so I’m lending
chance a hand. I’ve *chained* that misplaced broolly
(the one, remember, that parasolled the chicks?)
to the stone gate-post. In time new generations
of passing neighbours or proprietors
will halt amused, imagining
from that wind-chewed posturing skeleton
a creature that might once have strained for flight
and never made it, or a clawing hand
that vainly tried to write words on the wind!
So, this grinning rationalist will have vanished into
metaphor! How I *like* that! (I’ve often pondered
on the right wrong-footing way to leave the stage!)

This is the poem’s (and the unpublished collection’s) conclusion and it might easily stand as a lyric poem in its own right. If Jones was right in thinking that his poem had ‘a genuine originality’, such originality is to be found in the manner of its telling. The relaxed tone may have been learned from Elizabeth Bishop, but the way in which the sections (and the images) cohere, and the rational, good-natured voice that takes the reader into its confidence right to the end (and in a way that proffers poetic technique and expertise as a humble gift) suggest ‘From Voltaire’s Garden and Other Entanglements’ is without real precedent in English poetry. In that it joins ‘A Family Album’ and ‘The Courtenay Play’. The poem as a whole shows readers what they have missed as a result of Jones’s comparative lack of interest in publishing after *Freeborn John*.

¹³⁸ This discovery is dealt with at greater length in the poem called ‘The Helmask’, that appeared in *London Magazine* Vol.40 Nos. 11 & 12, op. cit.

APPENDIX 1

RECEPTION¹

1. *Poems* (1966)

The story of Brian Jones's reception is one that begins with a degree of attention surprising for a young poet². Jones's first collection, *Poems*³, went through three impressions in a year, its first edition of 1,000 copies selling out in three weeks. A news item in *The Times* newspaper reported Alan Ross, Jones's publisher, as saying "It is almost unheard of for a first volume to sell out within a month of printing."⁴ The same news item, and another in a local Kent newspaper⁵ (Jones had been living in Canterbury since 1964), both refer to a Sunday evening television appearance on BBC Television's *The Look of the Week* in which the presenter, Robert Robinson, introduced a reading by Jones of three of the poems that would be found in his first collection. Jones was reported as saying, "I'm rather pleased and very surprised to have sold so many copies. I imagine this television appearance must have something to do with it."⁶

¹ In addition to the *London Magazine* archives and other sources mentioned in Footnote 2, two visits were made, in 1997 and 2011 respectively, to the University of Manchester John Rylands Library, which houses the Carcanet Press and *PN Review* archives. Visits were also made to the British Library Sound Archives and the British Library Newspaper Archive.

² The *London Magazine Editions* review references (and BBC Radio programme details and scripts) relate to the *London Magazine* archive, a series of review scrapbooks housed in a cupboard in the *London Magazine* 'office', a shed in the garden of a house in Thurloe Road, South Kensington. The 'archive' scrapbooks were loaned to the current writer who made photocopies of the relevant items. It proved a valuable resource. Visits were also made to the British Library Sound Archive in Euston Road and to the British Library Newspaper Archives in Colindale (and later in Euston Road). Additional information was found in the *London Magazine* archive in the Special Collections section of the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, and in the newspaper and magazine cuttings files at The Saison Poetry Library, Level 5, Royal Festival Hall. Further *London Magazine* reviews and articles were found in the magazine and journal sections of the University of London libraries in Senate House and at Royal Holloway (RHUL), Egham.

³ Brian Jones, *Poems* (Alan Ross, London Magazine Editions 8, 1966).

⁴ *The Times*, 'Poems sell out', 11th January, 1967.

⁵ Local Kent newspaper (advertisements on the reverse mention Herne Bay and Faversham), 'Local Poet On T.V.', date unknown (December 1966/January 1967?). Cutting in *London Magazine* review-scrapbook.

⁶ *The Times*, op.cit.

More surprisingly, perhaps, *The Sun* newspaper ran an interview feature on Brian Jones.⁷ Under the regular feature banner ‘Pacesetters’, a sub-heading read ‘A handsome young British poet has just achieved what only a dozen other poets have done in the last half century’ and continued, in a further sub-heading in smaller type, ‘His first book of poems - 1,000 copies - has sold out in three weeks.’ It is worth remarking that, while *The Sun* was at that time a broadsheet newspaper⁸ (though, nonetheless, towards the ‘popular’ end of the market), the article, which took the form of a reported interview, was spread over three columns, ran to over 600 words and quoted a total of thirteen lines from three poems. Jennifer Campbell’s newspaper ‘interview’ subsequently formed the basis of a BBC Radio External Services Productions *Magazine Miscellany* report by Bryan Waller,⁹ and *Poems* had, by this time, been reviewed on BBC Radio’s *Poetry Now* by Frederick Grubb.¹⁰ Hugo Williams, Ross’s poetry editor/assistant at *London Magazine* at the time, revealed that he was in no doubt that many who bought *Poems* mistakenly took Jones to be his namesake and a member of the Rolling Stones.¹¹

Whatever the reasons for the first collection’s sales success (one imagines other young poets appearing briefly on television without encouraging such sales), the collection was widely, if not extensively, reviewed. Some of the poems had appeared in *The Observer* and *The Spectator*¹² and in *London Magazine*.¹³ and the sturdy, ‘pocket-sized’ paperback format of the *London Magazine Editions* series had

⁷ Jennifer Campbell, ‘Pacesetters’, *The Sun*, 20th January, 1967.

⁸ It was, none the less, towards the ‘popular’ end of the market.

⁹ BBC External Productions *Magazine Miscellany No.15*: Part Two, Item 4: ‘A Poet in Demand’ by Bryan Waller. The typescript is dated 20th January, 1967. The accompanying memorandum sent to Alan Ross and signed by Christopher Marsden, European Talks, was dated 3rd February, 1967 and reads, ‘Talks on the following books have been broadcast in English in the European Service... and circulated for possible use in translation in our forty language services.’ The Date of Broadcast in English reads, ‘To be arranged’. I am not aware when, on which service(s) or even if the report was eventually broadcast. I doubt that it is now possible to find out.

¹⁰ Frederick Grubb, BBC Radio Third Programme, *Poetry Now* (Producer: George MacBeth), broadcast on 19th January, 1967. Jones’s ‘Husband to Wife’ was read by one of Harvey Hall, Frances Hooker and Hugh Dickson. Other volumes reviewed by Grubb in the same programme were *Positives* by Thom Gunn and *High and Low* by John Betjeman.

¹¹ Hugo Williams in conversation with Paul McLoughlin during one of the workshop sessions both have regularly attended at Colin Falk’s Hampstead flat (sometime in the last several years).

¹² Cited in local Kent newspaper, op.cit.

¹³ *London Magazine*, May 1964, Vol.4 No.2 (Two Preludes: ‘She Makes Pastry’, ‘He Drives’); December 1964, Vol.4 No.9 (‘The Beast’, ‘Seeing My Wife Go Out Alone’); March 1965, Vol.4 No.12 (‘Miss Emily Removes Two Photos from the Album’); February 1966, Vol.5 No.11 (‘Local Custom’, ‘Convalescent Spring’, ‘To a Wife Gone Away’); July 1966, Vol.6 No.4 (‘Sunday Outing’, ‘Runner’, ‘Thaw’).

itself attracted attention.¹⁴ but it is surely reasonable to conclude that the television appearance had ‘something to do’, not only with sales, but also with where and how often the volume was reviewed, and the attention afforded it by BBC Radio.

Frederick Grubb’s radio review¹⁵ is worth quoting in full because it introduces us to a number of characteristics to which other critics will refer:

After Betjeman’s singing line, Mr Brian Jones’s first book seems conversational. His poems often tell stories, and can be disappointing when they go on too long. When this is avoided it is because an extravaganza ends in wit, or sheer gusto delights the reader.¹⁶ When it is not avoided, it is because the unity has been enticed away into particular insights, fine in themselves but out of step with the theme.¹⁷ Or the poet may become impatient, and cram his lines so that they fail to communicate.¹⁸ He’s a good catcher of styles: indeed, Mr Jones’s many voices are so convincing that it’s anybody’s guess which is his own. My guess is that he should be more personal, for his work in this vein has an old-style formality, a slightly hieratic dignity, which is unusual today. And this type of mannerism, his own, is neither founded on, nor results in, any repression of frankness. One sees this in the Miss Emily monologues¹⁹, where the form encourages frankness. Miss Emily, with her fierce, frustrated passions, her racy idiom, and her exposure to life makes most other monologue-speakers in contemporary verse look like party bores.²⁰ To return to the personal poems, these supple narratives, operating in fairly strict frameworks, always make a discovery. An intuition of what has happened, is happening, and may happen, just below the surface of events, is contained in their immediacy. One feels this in this poem, ‘Husband to Wife.’²¹

¹⁴ ‘Whatever garlands the Muses bestow on publishers will have been delivered to Alan Ross for his cheap, elegant *London Magazine* editions’: *New Statesman*, 23rd December, 1966. *The Times*, at around the same time, was similarly complimentary: ‘All these London Magazine editions have a tough format with large black type, stitched spines, and a sensible, healthy look like wholemeal sandwiches cut narrow for the traveller’s pocket.’

¹⁵ Frederick Grubb, op.cit.

¹⁶ Grubb does not give any examples, but he may have a poem like ‘Stripping Walls’ in mind (though Ian Hamilton was not an admirer of the poem.)

¹⁷ Again no examples are given, but Grubb may have been thinking of longer poems like ‘The Beast’ and ‘A Vision of the End from Margate Sands’.

¹⁸ Perhaps ‘Lucifer in Starlight’ or ‘The Fool’ or even ‘Two Preludes’, although this last was an important poem for Jones because it got closer to catching his psychological frame of mind at the time than any other poem in the collection.

¹⁹ ‘Miss Emily Removes Two Photos from the Album’ (p.12); ‘Miss Emily at her Mother’s Grave’ (p.15); ‘Miss Emily - Hastings 1913’ (p.16); ‘Miss Emily - Evacuee’ (p.18); ‘Visiting Miss Emily’ (p.20) - all in *Poems*, op.cit.

²⁰ John Jordan (‘Poetry’, *The Irish Press*, 5th August, 1972) referred to Austin Clarke’s Martha Blake as the only other character in poetry written in English to come close to Jones’s Miss Emily. See p.55

²¹ ‘Husband to Wife: Part Going’ (*P*, 8) (discussed in Chapter Two on *Poems*).

Grubb's first observation here, that Jones's work seems 'conversational', is one Jones is likely to have approved of. *Poems*' back cover blurb refers to Jones's affinity with Edward Thomas,²² and Thomas's post-Wordsworthian commitment to the language of ordinary speech as the 'speech of poetry' is one that Jones has always shared. Reviewing Yeats's *Poems* (1908), Edward Thomas revealed that he had been:

more than ever struck by the beauty of the ordinary speeches which, in their naturalness and real poetry, prove as much as Wordsworth's *Preface* that the speech of poetry can be that of life.²³

Andrew Motion has pointed to Thomas's insistence on ordinary speech not being restricted to matters of vocabulary.²⁴ The natural speaking voice could not transfer to the page vocal inflexions, accents or gestures, and this led Thomas to deviate from the demands of traditional prosody (and of strict adherence to rhyme) where fidelity to the spoken word demanded that he should do so. Edward Thomas, in being less than confident or assertive, was important to Jones both personally and in terms of formal development, Thomas's clause-strung syntax tellingly reflective of a troubled mind at work. Jones liked Auden's description of poetry as 'memorable speech' but resisted the latter's confident authority.²⁵ In the blurb for the cover of *Poems*, Alan Ross is careful accurately to identify the nature of Jones's felt association with Thomas:

The affinity is not to be found in the subjects chosen, but in the search for identity, and in the sense of menace hovering over what man makes of himself, of his relationships, and of the world he finds himself in.²⁶

The search for identity informs poems throughout Jones's oeuvre. 'Return Journey' (from *The Children of Separation*), for example, finds him musing on the

²² The blurb reads in full: 'Although he would not press the association too closely, [Jones] feels some affinity with Edward Thomas, the poet killed in the First World War, who is the subject of one of the poems in this first collection. The affinity is not to be found in the subjects chosen, but in the search for identity, and in the sense of menace hovering over what man makes of himself, of his relationships, and of the world he finds himself in.'

²³ *Daily Chronicle*, 1st January 1909; Edward Thomas's reviews in University College Library, Cardiff, Vol.4 p.1, in Edna Longley (ed.), *A Language Not To be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas* (Carcenet: Reissue edition, 1981, p.82).

²⁴ Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p.60.

²⁵ Jones did, however, admire much of Auden's poetry, especially for their remaining resolutely on the side, as it were, of the common man. 'Musée des Beaux Arts' and 'September 1, 1939' are two obvious examples.

²⁶ Blurb probably written by Alan Ross, but possibly by Hugo Williams.

difficulty of saying 'This is mine' ('a daunting task for one, / well past forty, still learning how to say / "This is me"').²⁷

Grubb's radio review establishes some of the key areas of response and preoccupation to be found in later reviews: the interest in narrative; the conversational tone; Jones's strikingly frank approach to personal and domestic subjects; the way in which the poems 'always make a discovery' (or find a startling and precise locution;²⁸ the manner of the Miss Emily poems. Even if Jones's interests in history and politics are not so clearly delineated in *Poems* as they would be in later volumes, Grubb's closing comments (made before a reading of 'Husband to Wife') identify in the poems 'an intuition of what has happened, is happening, and may happen, just below the surface of events, is contained in their immediacy'. It remains for the reader a helpful introduction to Jones's poetry.

Other critics, too, would comment on many of the features identified by Grubb, though they did not tend to follow up on Jones being 'a good catcher of styles' or on the 'many voices' (that are 'so convincing that it's anybody's guess which is his own'). Thus, Grubb's 'guess' that Jones should concentrate on writing 'personal' poems finds echoes in a number of reviews throughout Jones's poetic career. Martin Seymour-Smith, for example, in his article on Jones for *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, finds the later work 'predictable and less original than the personal note sounded in the first poems.'²⁹ Herbert Lomas, while liking *The Children of Separation* (1985), suggested that Jones would still do well to look again at the first ten poems of his first collection and in so doing remind himself of the poet who wrote them.³⁰ Most refer (and not always approvingly) to the originality of some of Jones's work, his frankness, his use of voices, his striking imagery, but they do not always agree on the efficacy of Jones's formal techniques. *Poems* provoked a range of responses.

²⁷ (*TCOS*, 49)

²⁸ As in 'planked the sky' (*TIN*, 75), an image greatly admired by Michael Cayley.

²⁹ Martin Seymour-Smith, in Ian Hamilton (ed), *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, (Oxford University Press, 1994) p.259.

³⁰ Herbert Lomas, 'No Enemy but Time', *London Magazine*, Vol.25 No.6, March 1986.

In a review headed ‘A Poet of Clarity’, H.L. Williams was impressed:³¹ ‘Brian Jones combines clarity of vision with clarity of language, and the result is an admirable collection which gives him a leading place amongst our younger poets.’ He quotes what he calls ‘three brilliant lines’ from ‘Celebration - For Karen’ (‘Outside, ice begins / and a moon locked among frost-pickings / of stars is taut with light’), commends Jones’s avoidance of sentimentality in ‘Death of a Cat’.³² and his capacity for finding ‘an original phrase that rivets the attention’. He finds humour (‘a rare quality in modern verse’) in ‘Stripping Walls’³³ and it is only when he comes to the Miss Emily poems that he finds cause for dissatisfaction. Here, writes Williams, Jones is ‘not quite so successful as when writing about his own experience.’ Williams, however, does not say what is less successful about these poems and is wrong in supposing they do not issue from Jones's life-experiences.³⁴ In *The Spectator*, C.B. Cox³⁵ praises Jones’s handling life ‘as gently as Thomas “hand-cradling a wren’s egg, sensing all / The perilous warm promise of the shell”’³⁶ and also quotes from ‘Celebration - For Karen’ in which ‘the city landscape beautifully expresses the quiet security of the lovers.’ For Cox, Jones ‘presents intimate details of family life and sex with delicacy and honesty (the David Holbrook school)’.³⁷ John Carey in his *New Statesman* review finds Jones ‘mostly domestic in his slant’:

but reminding his reader eye-openingly of out-of-the-way sensations like convalescence and temporary wifelessness, as well as commoner ones like noticing from bed your jacket hanging ‘stiff with tomorrow’s character’³⁸

³¹ H.L. Williams, *Western Mail*, 3rd December 1966.

³² (P, 38). e.g. ‘And the wind’s task was easy and the cat fell’. [*My example from the poem*]

³³ (P, 42)

³⁴ Jones’s Aunt Emily was a formative influence on his life and what he writes about her or has her say is either from direct experience or from accounts of her life he heard from her. See (*IC-PNR*) and (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4, *passim*

³⁵ C.B. Cox, *The Spectator*, *op. cit.*

³⁶ ‘A Garland for Edward Thomas’ III (P, 29)

³⁷ A selection of poems by David Holbrook may be found in *Penguin Modern Poets 4* (1963) (with Christopher Middleton and David Wevill). He wrote extensively about literature, culture and education, as well as producing poetry and novels. See, for example, *English for Maturity* (1961), on teaching English, and *Creativity and Popular Culture* (1994). After Cambridge he became editor, initially with Edgell Rickword, of the communist cultural periodical *Our Time*.

³⁸ John Carey, ‘Unpolitical Auden’, *New Statesman*, 23rd December 1966.

Joe Scott-Clark in *The Queen*³⁹ describes *Poems* as ‘a collection worthy of note’ by ‘a young poet’ who writes ‘with a real appreciation of poetic nuance in English’, but *The Morning Star*⁴⁰ found Jones not ‘disturbed enough by the world he lives in - not yet, anyway - to have as much in common with Edward Thomas, who was killed in the First World War’. Michael Longley in *The Irish Times*⁴¹ was more strident, wondering whether the pocket-sized format was ‘really an advantage’ and concluding that while Jones was ‘endearing in his concerns, he had, as yet, ‘no idea of the shape of a poem’:

His suburban ramblings map the home counties odyssey from kitchen sink to sink unit. Behind the overall blur a pleasant personality is discernible, but in the meantime, this English poet’s home is his castle.’

This is a rare example of Jones’s personal poems not being commended. Cyril Connolly⁴² in the *Sunday Times*, was inclined to agree: Jones wrote fluently, but ‘(t)he poems are clotted and something more will have to happen before they achieve form or music’, a reference to what Grubb had identified as Jones’s occasional tendency to ‘cram his lines so that they fail to communicate.’⁴³ Reviewers less than enthusiastic about Jones tended to base their criticisms on what they deemed to be formal inadequacies.

The most extensive review of *Poems* appeared in *London Magazine*,⁴⁴ which was edited by Jones’s then-publisher, Alan Ross. That the review was less than wholly favourable is a testament to Ross’s editorial (and entrepreneurial) generosity and openness. Ian Hamilton, well-known as the editor of the influential little magazine *the Review*, believed that Jones ‘has a good deal more energy than he quite knows what to do with.’ Jones is found too often to be ‘reaching for the nearest adjective – ‘the bitter waves’, ‘the striding hills’, ‘the sagging slums’⁴⁵ and of being ‘content to call up all the old abstractions’ (as in ‘To a Wife Gone Away’).

³⁹ Joe Scott-Clark, *The Queen*, 10th November 1966.

⁴⁰ *Morning Star*, ‘New poetry’, (1966-7) (*LM-Sbks*)

⁴¹ Michael Longley, ‘Recent poetry’, *Irish Times*, 21st January, 1967

⁴² Cyril Connolly, ‘Imagination and humanity’, *The Sunday Times*, 18th December, 1966

⁴³ Frederick Grubb, op.cit.

⁴⁴ Ian Hamilton, *London Magazine*, Vol.6 No.7, January 1967.

⁴⁵ All three examples are from ‘A Vision of the End from Margate Sands’ (*P*, 44-46) though the *New Statesman* review (op. cit.) reveals John Carey’s admiration for the poem, something also recalled in conversation by Michael Cayley, a student of Carey’s and the author of what until the 1990s the only essay on Jones’s work.

Hamilton, like Frederick Grubb,⁴⁶ tires of some of Jones's longer poems, particularly 'Stripping Walls' (admired by H.L. Williams among others) in which 'a genuinely witty idea gets done to death by repetition and buried by a slick conclusion.':

Jones is clearly aiming for something exposed and utterly unsophisticated, and wants to get as harsh a concrete edge as possible; too often, though, this adds up to little more than a great flurry of surface violence, a self-conscious wielding of tough consonants and fleshy images. At the centre of such urgent muscularity there is a deadly vagueness:

You are a fragment, one of the bellies, groins
I slink among. O climb out of my head,
That tight silence! Remind me. Be gathered
And complete again. The hot need
Goads and and crazes, but what's lost of you
torments with the long ache to be recalled.

The 'tight silence', the 'hot need', the 'long ache'; these are, after all, the key emotions he is supposed to be expressing but for all the juggling with groins and bellies he is finally content to call up all the old abstractions

Nevertheless, Hamilton finds Jones a 'promising prospect':

If, as happens only intermittently throughout this book, he can consistently tighten up, attempt to focus his restless vocabulary into images that will cut free in some genuinely poetic way from the experience that enriches them, he may well do something really fine. He has a lively eye, an admirable willingness to write directly out of what matters to him most, and his verbal resources are almost certainly a good deal subtler than he's yet discovered. Poems like 'Bed-Sit Night', 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' and 'Thaw'⁴⁷ all offer instances of that metaphoric density and control which most other poems seem merely on the brink of.

Reviewing Jones's second collection, Hamilton begins, 'Brian Jones's first book *Poems* (1966) was one of the most promising of recent years. Though much of it was facile and too frantically souped up, the best poems were very good indeed.'⁴⁸

Responses to Jones's first collection might be seen to fall into two general camps: the one admiring of his fresh approach to familiar, domestic subjects, the other critical of what was found to be over-wrought and relatively shapeless. Perhaps Hamilton's *London Magazine* review was the most perceptive, though his

⁴⁶ Frederick Grubb, op.cit.

⁴⁷ (*P*, 35; 28-9; 55 respectively)

⁴⁸ Ian Hamilton, *The Observer*, 'Public gestures, private poems', 30th June, 1968.

commendation of Jones's intermittent 'metaphoric density and control'⁴⁹ issued from his liking for and advocacy of *the Review*-inspired minimalist poetry that came to the fore in the early 'seventies.⁵⁰ Hamilton would have to wait, for parts of the Aeneas sequence in *The Island Normal* (1980), perhaps, until he found what he was inviting in his review of the first book.

2. *A Family Album* (1968)

In a short notice in *English Studies*,⁵¹ *A Family Album* is described as giving 'words with convincing unsentimentality to the wordless - Emily, Bill, Uncle Fred - Wordsworth's subjects, unromantic sufferers.'⁵² The 'Emily' poems in Jones's first collection had won praise from Frederick Grubb. Now, John Cotton⁵³ is fulsome in his enthusiasm for the extended work in which the poems reappear.⁵⁴

He had been impressed by Jones's *Poems*:

but it was when at a *Tribune* Poetry Reading I heard him read extracts from his latest work, *A Family Album*, that I realised that here was one of the best and most important of our younger poets.

Cotton is alert to Jones's ability to capture voices other than his own, something Grubb had also observed (though this quality was not picked up on by other critics in relation to *Poems*). In this second collection, effectively a single poem of narrative reflection with four family relations speaking consecutively, Emily takes

⁴⁹ Ian Hamilton, *London Magazine*, op. cit.

⁵⁰ 'At the beginning of the 1970s, the minimalist poetry associated with Ian Hamilton's *Review* was in the ascendancy. There had been other collective ventures in the 60s, including those included in *A Group Anthology* and *Children of Albion*, but minimalism was the poetry that seemed historically "right", offering a method whereby "ordinariness" could be retained in poetry yet need not be treated with 1950s-like rationalism. By withholding "explanatory" information and "prose-links", poets like Hamilton, David Harsent, Colin Falck and Hugo Williams were able to charge quotidian reality with mystery or dread.' Blake Morrison, 'Young Poets in the 1970s', in Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (eds.), *British Poetry Since 1970: a critical survey* (Manchester, Carcanet, 1980), pp.146/7

⁵¹ *English Studies*, 51, 1st February 1970, the cutting from which was sent to Alan Ross by Professor R.W.Zandvoort, Amersfoort, Holland.

⁵² Jones would speak in a BBC Radio interview in 1973 (discussing 'For Mad Mary' which would appear in the collection of the same title in 1974) of his desire to 'be a spokesman' for those who have, as it were, no voice of their own. He describes it as 'a responsibility'.

⁵³ John Cotton, *Tribune*, 28th June 1968

⁵⁴ Two of the Emily poems from *Poems* did not reappear because they do not share the form adopted by all four speakers (including Emily) in *A Family Album*

her place alongside Bill, Uncle Fred, and David, characters based on Jones's father, uncle and himself:⁵⁵

It is the forging of a new kind of narrative verse and the skill with which the colloquial is handled which make *A Family Album* such an exciting and important work. It is Brian Jones's triumph to have expressed the tragedy of this everyday life.

Richard Holmes⁵⁶ was similarly impressed:

Brian Jones writes with passionate colloquial sympathy about incidents we can all recognize, the daily pressures behind living in England now.⁵⁷ Using a series of dramatic monologues - funny, sour or lyrical - he does that most difficult thing, tell a story at direct poetic intensity. Like Aunt Emily he can feel each person as special, as "touchy as a nettle" . . . The present book, in its openness and originality, puts him on the front line of the new English poetry. It is writing to startle anyone, with the jerky detailed authenticity of your own home-movie. He can make the new blaze out of the old . . .⁵⁸

David Harsent in *The Times Literary Supplement* was of the view that 'by and large' the poem's form succeeded in both interrelating the characters and preserving their individual identities.⁵⁹ The speech rhythms Jones uses 'can tighten up, or relax, without interrupting the progress of the poem and this adaptability enables the poet to switch from (say) the slangy, gruff voice of Uncle Fred to the quiet edginess of David, without incongruity and without any radical change of form.'

The formal arrangement of the poems in *A Family Album* (seven-line stanzas with a single rhyme on five and seven) was original to Jones, and perhaps unsurprisingly critics were divided as to its success. Where Cotton, Holmes and Harsent welcome the form's elasticity and its facility for capturing a range of voices, Ian Hamilton, Alan Brownjohn and Julian Symons were less convinced.

⁵⁵ No reviewer would notice at this stage that all of these characters more or less retained their 'real' names, except for Jones himself, who became 'David'

⁵⁶ Richard Holmes, *The Times Saturday Review*, 'Poetry: inside histories of small conflicts', 29th June 1968

⁵⁷ The idea of 'living in England now' was to play an increasing part in Jones's development, culminating in the anger of his final book, *Freeborn John*.

⁵⁸ Reviewing the 1980 collection, *The Island Normal*, Paul Mills believed that Jones 'has taught us new ways of seeing, and brought us to new districts of our mind' ('Extending the Limits', *Poetry Review*, Vol.71 No.1 June 1981)

⁵⁹ David Harsent, 'Paperbacks, Pamphlets and Private Presses', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 31st October, 1968

Hamilton finds *A Family Album*,⁶⁰ ‘less uneven but also less arresting’⁶¹ than *Poems*. Once again, Jones is castigated for ‘the loose adjective, the rush of pounding consonants, the melodrama’⁶². Hamilton is concerned that, while Jones’s attempt at ‘a kind of verse drama: monologues from four members of a northern [sic] English family interpenetrate to form a record of their battle from slum poverty to suburban discomfiture’ is worthy enough, the characters do not come across as ‘the deeply separate people they’re supposed to be.’⁶³

David, the youngest and the last to speak, is that standard fifties-figure, the college boy cut off by education from his glowing roots: 'Perhaps in time / I'll go back, move among them, even laugh. / Perhaps. In time'. In spite of period furnishings, this guilty, glamorising note is heard throughout and it invests the whole sequence with a rather presumptuous monotony of tone; the energetically heaped details of slum nastiness, the tough-lipped passages about the war—much of this sort of unburdening seems too arrogantly guessed at.

Heaped details, however energetic, are unlikely to satisfy Hamilton's minimalist, neo-imagistic stance and his discerning a 'presumptuous monotony of tone' might be more convincing had he not mistakenly taken this to be a Northern family and not one made up of representations of characters from Jones's own extended family. The speakers are from Islington in London. Unlike Harsent, Hamilton rues their being ‘stuck with the same stanza form; an ingenious seven-liner that pivots on a single rhyme - useful for the discursive freedom it allows but neat enough to get tedious.’ But 'that standard fifties-figure' asks class-based questions of the reviewer. Where is Hamilton looking from? Would he dismiss the college boy's angst so readily ('that standard fifties-figure') had he known similar roots, or at least experienced them closer to hand? And why call them 'glowing' if not to say that it is not only the stanza-form that is tedious but also the pain of class-estrangement. Jones was repeatedly to be saddened by being read by those who he felt, for reasons of class, would never be able to get close to understanding what he was saying.

⁶⁰ Brian Jones, *A Family Album* (Alan Ross, London Magazine Editions 16, 1968)

⁶¹ Ian Hamilton, *The Observer*, ‘Public gestures, private poems’, op. cit.

⁶² Hamilton does not furnish us with examples of these 'weaknesses'

⁶³ It is interesting to recall that in October 1966, BBC Television broadcast John Hopkins quartet of plays, ‘Talking to a Stranger’ (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1967). Each of the plays is self-contained as well as being part of the complete work. Each play focuses on one of the four members of the family (his or her story, as it were), what happens ‘off’ in one play, happening ‘on’ in another. Tom Stoppard (‘Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead’ and Alan Ayckbourn (‘The Norman Conquests’) were to make later use of these devices. Given the proximity of Hopkins’s ‘play’. one wonders whether Jones saw it and was influenced by it when he came to ‘compile’ *A Family Album*.

Nevertheless, as with the first book, Hamilton feels there are ‘memorable passages’, even if ‘they tend to break through in spite of the book’s master plan.’ To speak of a ‘master plan’ is to anticipate Jones’s habitual practice of conceiving of his collections as single poems, or at least as series of linked poems or sequences. Nor is *A Family Album* Jones’s only attempt at creating a sort of verse drama, as later sequences, and in particular ‘The Courtenay Play’⁶⁴ from *For Mad Mary*, would show - and, as other critics would acknowledge, Jones’s verse forms in such dramatic poems are unprecedented in English verse.

Alan Brownjohn, in *New Statesman*,⁶⁵ while recognising Jones’s ‘unconventionally venturesome’ formal methodology (Hamilton concedes that the stanza form is ‘ingenious’), and divining ‘a cumulative effect of pathos and raw grimness’, also sounds Hamilton’s misgivings, not only by expressing his disappointment that ‘in the end, the pieces don’t really coalesce into a convincing whole’ but also in regretting that ‘passages of descriptive shrewdness or compassion alternate with too much jejune plodding - or something rather resembling social condescension.’⁶⁶ Julian Symons⁶⁷ agrees with Hamilton that ‘it was a mistake to let Emily, Bill, Uncle Fred and young David express themselves in the same seven-line stanza with a single rhyme or near-rhyme’, but while considering the poem, in the end, ‘a failure’ Symons concludes that it is ‘still a poem full of lively intelligence and unfulfilled potential (if only he’d vary the technique a bit, one thinks, if only the emotional range were less narrow) which leaves Mr. Jones well ahead of his English competitors in the White Hope of Poetry Stakes’⁶⁸. Interestingly, while Hamilton, Brownjohn and Symons express some misgivings, they all discern distinct promise in the work under review.

⁶⁴ (*FMM*, 57-86)

⁶⁵ Alan Brownjohn, ‘Pre-Beat’, *New Statesman*, 2nd August 1968

⁶⁶ Ian Hamilton had suggested that ‘Brian Jones has a good deal more energy than he quite knows how to use; at present it is either teetering over into something wispily sentimental or swelling way beyond its subject into mere grandiloquence’ (*London Magazine*, op. cit., p.88). The issue of class will remain an important one throughout Jones’s work, and in a post-modernist age, Tony Harrison notwithstanding, it is an unfashionable theme.

⁶⁷ Julian Symons, *Punch*, 24th July 1968

⁶⁸ cf. Richard Holmes, who believed *A Family Album* put Jones ‘on the front line of the new English poetry’ (‘Poetry: inside histories of small conflicts’, op.cit.)

Some critics will always be uncomfortable with the subject-matter and form others welcome. What some see as ‘condescension’, others see as ‘authenticity’. Where Brownjohn finds ‘social condescension’, Hamilton a ‘presumptuous monotony of tone’, and Symons a narrow emotional range, Cotton finds triumph. It is at least interesting to note in passing that those most critical of Jones’s poem, Alan Brownjohn and Ian Hamilton, were both associated with poetic ‘movements’, the former with The Group⁶⁹ and the latter with *the Review*⁷⁰, and therefore responded from different theoretical positions⁷¹. Cotton, writing in *The Tribune* from an openly Socialist perspective, would more readily have responded to the issues of social class that identified the speakers in *A Family Album*. Others were not so driven by poetic theories. Or political or social theories, for that matter. The sixties were a time of shifting class boundaries and shifting politics but the shifting did not appear to occupy reviewers of Jones's work. Beyond all else, Richard Holmes’s suggestion that the success or failure of *A Family Album* is rooted in its formal organisation also identifies the issue on which critics divided.

⁶⁹ A discussion group set up by Philip Hobsbaum at Cambridge and later reconstituted in London. The poets who met included George MacBeth, Edward Lucie-Smith (who took over the running of The Group when Hobsbaum moved to Belfast), Peter Redgrove, Alan Brownjohn, Peter Porter, Martin Bell and, occasionally, Ted Hughes. Lucie-Smith and Hobsbaum edited *A Group Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 1963, and in his introduction, the former reveals that ‘the only principle to which we would all subscribe is that ... the process by which words work in poetry is something that is open to rational examination. The acceptance of this principal is, of course, impossible to certain poets, and these do not come’. He also identifies kinds of poem that were ‘more popular inside the group than they are outside it. Very frank autobiographical poems—the poetry of direct experience—[and] by contrast, dramatic monologues: poems where the poet puts forward a persona quite different from his own’. The Group has often been considered the natural successor to The Movement

⁷⁰ In his obituary notice for *The Guardian* (Saturday 29 December 2001), Blake Morrison describes Hamilton as ‘a Romantic with high ambitions for a poetry of personal authenticity’, and *the Review* as ‘a poetry magazine ... famous for its trenchancy’. As well as denting established reputations, Hamilton attracted other young, like-minded poets and critics—David Harsent, Hugo Williams, Colin Falck and Michael Fried among them—who together formed a school dedicated to a terse, imagist minimalism: a verse with the ‘courage of its constrictions’. Hugo Williams was the poetry ‘editor’ with Alan Ross at *London Magazine* and involved in the publication of Jones's early collections; Hamilton is at times characteristically severe in his criticism of Jones, but also had a high regard for him and wanted to see him achieve the kind of poetry Hamilton thought him capable of; both Harsent and Falck also reviewed collections by Jones.

⁷¹ The theoretical positions of Brownjohn and Hamilton may have differed but they were not mutually exclusive. Where The Group encouraged ‘the poetry of direct experience’, *the Review* looked for ‘a poetry of personal authenticity’

3. *Poems & A Family Album* (1972)

Poems and *A Family Album* had both been produced in Alan Ross's *London Magazine Editions*' slimline, pocket-sized paperback format. In 1972, they were reissued under one hardback cover.⁷² and it might have led to reviewers reassessing first impressions, but all reviewers this time around were new. Jonathan Raban⁷³ was enthusiastic about Jones's 'marital poems, his conversation pieces ('Stripping Walls')⁷⁴ and his poems for and about children', but identifies some less satisfactory areas:

Jones tends to get into tangles when he goes for bigger fish, thrashing the water with much literary false casting ("Bits of a broken / Purpose, a litter / Of meaning scattered functioning into the void . . ."⁷⁵ and so forth) and glooming into deep and serious pools. On his home stream, he's excellent; on Eliot's river, he's awkward and out of place.

Raban strikes an interesting note about *A Family Album*, when he suggests it would make 'a forty-five-minute programme on Radio 3; its voices are genuine and sharp and nicely timed.' He is not so sure the poem works as well on the page, where 'it never gets up enough steam to become a whole poem' (a point similar to that made earlier by Brownjohn.⁷⁶) 'It may not be the best poem in the world,' Raban concludes, 'but it's a lovely piece of sound writing, in the kind of half-breed, radio verse genre that no one has practised since Louis MacNeice.' Elizabeth Jennings⁷⁷ can fault Jones only 'on his somewhat monotonous rhythms and unadventurousness with regard to poetic forms.' Jones had by now been criticised for a monotony of tone, and for imposing the same stanza-form on a number of disparate characters, but Jennings's remark about Jones's approach to form ('unadventurousness') might initially surprise here (given the originality of the stanza-form in *A Family Album*) were it not for *The Times*⁷⁸ and the *Irish Times*⁷⁹ having earlier detected what they regarded as a careless approach to poetic form. These caveats apart, Jennings

⁷² Brian Jones, *Poems & A Family Album*, (Alan Ross, *London Magazine Editions*, 1972)

⁷³ Jonathan Raban, *The Spectator*, 22nd July 1972

⁷⁴ (*P*, 42) and (*PAFA*, 38)

⁷⁵ 'Two Preludes II: 'He Drives' (*P*, 22 and *P&AF*, 18)

⁷⁶ Alan Brownjohn, *New Statesman*, 2nd August 1968, op.cit.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Jennings, *The Scotsman*, 5th August 1972

⁷⁸ Cyril Connolly, 'Imagination and humanity', op.cit.

⁷⁹ Michael Longley, *Irish Times*, op.cit.

admires Jones's '[s]harp imagery, careful language, and strong feelings', all of which combine to make this hardback reissue 'exceptional'.

Elsewhere, critics were unanimous in their praise of the volume. Stephen Spender⁸⁰ made it one of his Books of the Year; John Jordan⁸¹ knew of nothing in English verse quite like *A Family Album* ('At the moment of writing I can think only of Austin Clarke's Martha Blake as in any way comparable [to Jones's Miss Emily] as a fully rounded "character" in verse'). He 'would not lend Mr. Jones's book to anyone with a light heart.' Robert Nye⁸² was pleased to find 'a number of good poems here, mostly discovered in domestic situations that verge on the private or the trivial but avoid tipping over', while Douglas Hill⁸³ praised, in *Poems*, Jones's 'delicacy of touch and the totality of his awareness', and, in *A Family Album*, 'the unusual negative capability that later produced that astonishing series of dramatic monologues.' Like Clive James⁸⁴ in *The Observer*, Douglas Hill welcomed the availability of the earlier volumes in a new hardback edition.

None, however, was as lavish in praise as Gabriel Rosenstock,⁸⁵ who came to the poems late, his review appearing in 1974, some nine years after *Poems* and two years after the double-handed reissue. For Rosenstock, 'Seeing My Wife Go Out Alone'⁸⁶ (which he quotes in full) 'must be one of the finest poems of the decade'; it had 'a freshness, a moving intimacy, a delicately-balanced authority rarely found in contemporary English letters'. So disenchanted had Rosenstock become that he had written his own book of poems in Irish; but now Jones had 'infused new life into the English language'. What makes Brian Jones 'vastly superior to most of his contemporaries', he goes on to say, 'is that his conscience is imbued with the dynamism, the sadness, the triumph of contemporary moral reality'.

⁸⁰ Stephen Spender, *The Observer*, 'Books of the Year', 17th December 1972

⁸¹ John Jordan, 'Poetry', *Irish Press*, 5th August. 1972. op.cit.

⁸² Robert Nye, 'A poet whose technical skills turn orthodoxy into freedom' (a reference to Elizabeth Daryush), *The Times*, 14th September, 1972

⁸³ Douglas Hill, *Tribune* (1972?) (*LM-Sbks*)

⁸⁴ Clive James, *The Observer*, 2nd July 1972

⁸⁵ Gabriel Rosenstock, *Rose (Eire)*, March 1974

⁸⁶ (*P*, 7 and *P&AFA*, 9))

4. *Interior* (1969)

Before the first two collections were reissued in a single hardback edition, Jones had produced a third, *Interior*, in 1969.⁸⁷ One of its sequences, 'Six Poems on Themes from Lorca' provoked a revealing polarity of responses. Robert Nye, for example, singled them out as 'look[ing] like what they are: a deliberate attempt to do something different. They are depressingly banal.'⁸⁸ Another reviewer⁸⁹ liked the collection's 'honesty' but felt it was precisely such honesty 'that lets us see always the poet [Jones] might be if he risked more.' Jones, the writer feels, 'has not enough reason for writing', but clearly disagrees with Nye about the Lorca poems, considering them the best in the book, a view shared by Michael Cayley in what at the time was the only essay to have been written on Jones's poetry,⁹⁰ and by Richard Holmes, who had enthused about *A Family Album*, and found in the Lorca poems Jones's 'characteristic bold, open touch'.⁹¹ *Interior* was, indeed, 'a deliberate attempt to do something different': it includes a number of sequences, three of which (including the Lorca poems) focus on the points-of-view, one might say on the inner turmoil, of women (risking further barbs from his admirer, Ian Hamilton, that such turmoil was 'presumptuously guessed-at'). The attempt, as may be seen, received mixed reviews.

On the other hand, Michael Longley regretted that he had 'underestimated' Jones's first book, 'and consequently missed out on the second.'⁹² It was a gap 'the many excellences' of *Interior* obliged him to fill. Longley finds the title 'beautifully apt, suggesting interiors both domestic and mental.' But Jones is now 'delving deeper and exploring the no man's land between his imagination and his circumstances':

This involves three rewarding approaches. Firstly he contemplates bravely his artistic ruthlessness and the darker areas of his own mind which are uncovered as a result. Secondly, he tries to isolate and so render archetypal and resonant the little ceremonies and rituals buried in the humdrum daily round and at the same time be true to not only the

⁸⁷ Brian Jones, *Interior* (Alan Ross, *London Magazine Editions*, 1969)

⁸⁸ Robert Nye, , *The Birmingham Post*, 8th November, 1969

⁸⁹ *Cambridge Evening News*, 'An Excellence with Tradition', 31st January 1970 (*LM-Sbks*)

⁹⁰ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root: Some Thoughts on the Poetry of Brian Jones' in *Poetry Nation*, No.2, 1974, pp.99-105

⁹¹ Richard Holmes, *The Times*, 4th October 1969

⁹² Michael Longley, 'New Poetry', *The Irish Times*, 11th October 1969

frightening biological simplicities they disguise, but also the merciful blurring they effect. Thirdly, he maps with a disquieting blend of fear and wonder feminine self-containment. Three short sequences, “A Wife’s Tale”, “A Girl’s Words” and “Three Poems of a Frontier Guard”, are the highlights of a very satisfying collection.⁹³

The significance of Longley's response seems to be in giving the 'domestic' quality of Jones's poetry a new aspect, no longer historical but still moral ('merciful blurring'). The emphases on darkness and the feminine are both new and important, though they are not noticed by other reviewers.

Thus for Lyman Andrews, *Interior* marked ‘a definite advance’ on earlier work. Jones’s was ‘a fresh voice, capable of exploring his chosen terrain in a series of correspondences that many of his contemporaries will envy.’⁹⁴ P. J. Kavanagh admired the book, finding Jones best ‘when he’s most relaxed’ and ‘capable of sustaining the right, surprising image.’⁹⁵ Like Michael Cayley,⁹⁶ he is struck by ‘In a University Library’,⁹⁷ and like *The Cambridge Evening News*’s reviewer, he finds the Lorca poems best of all.⁹⁸ Derek Stanford⁹⁹ hoped that the new book would meet with the same ‘merited success’ that *Poems* had enjoyed, agreeing with the collection’s blurb note description of the poems as ‘mixing the domestic and the uneasy.’¹⁰⁰

Ian Hamilton, however, was clearly still waiting for the ‘something really fine’ he believed Jones capable of.¹⁰¹ This latest volume he found ‘damp’ with ‘an air of painstaking contrivance’ hanging over the whole book (‘contrivance’ reminding him, presumably, of what, in *A Family Album*, he had found ‘too arrogantly guessed at’)¹⁰². Martin Dodsworth¹⁰³ suggested that Jones was ‘going through a difficult

⁹³ Longley's is a review referred to in the chapter on *Interior*.

⁹⁴ Lyman Andrews, *The Sunday Times*, 26th October 1969

⁹⁵ P. J. Kavanagh, *The Guardian*, 13th November 1969

⁹⁶ See also Section 5

⁹⁷ (*I*, 23)

⁹⁸ Kavanagh’s one cavil, an objection to the ‘real life’ photographs on the back cover as an intrusion into the lives of members of his family, is an issue to which I shall return

⁹⁹ Derek Stanford, *Books & Bookmen*, November 1969

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, Stanford also refers to Jones’s move to Canterbury, ‘away from London’s literary ballyhoo’ which, he felt, did not imply ‘any easy withdrawal into Arcadia.’ Nevertheless, the move was significant in terms of Jones’s reluctance to live the life of literary networks and connections..

¹⁰¹ Ian Hamilton, *The Observer*, ‘Once more with feeling’, 7th December 1969

¹⁰² Ian Hamilton, ‘Public gestures, private poems’, op.cit.

¹⁰³ Martin Dodsworth, *The Listener*, 11th December 1969

patch.’ The new book was ‘indecisive and uneven, but not dull.’ Clive James in *The Times Literary Supplement*¹⁰⁴ was also ambivalent, discerning two levels of language, the one evincing ‘a gift for complex presentation’, the other more suited to essay-writing. Alan Brownjohn¹⁰⁵ and Robert Nye¹⁰⁶ liked the new domestic poems ‘I know she sleeps’¹⁰⁷ and ‘Trinket box’¹⁰⁸, but were less happy when Jones ventured further afield. For Brownjohn ‘the more elaborate pieces, where images take on glibness, and his oddly oblique allegorical sequences (‘A Wife’s Tale’)¹⁰⁹ are less good, the point vanishing in a kind of romantic vagueness.’ Richard Holmes, as well as liking the Lorca poems, was intrigued by the ‘disturbing inner drama’ of the frontier poems,¹¹⁰ but felt that difficulties were also becoming apparent, particularly ‘a heaviness, an intractability about the verse line, and an extreme uncertainty in approaching and handling abstractions.’

The polarized reactions to 'Six Poems on Themes from Lorca' and some of the rather tentatively guarded misgivings suggest critics felt unsure about Jones attempting more than one 'something different'. Longley viewed these changes of direction, or rather new layerings, more positively (and perhaps more perceptively).

5. *Some Thoughts*

Michael Cayley’s essay in *Poetry Nation*¹¹¹ was the only such piece written on Brian Jones’s poetry before the mid-nineties. Drawing on the first three books, Cayley likens Jones to Larkin. Both, he says, ‘share a preoccupation with middle-class society, both use a language that is on the whole simple and colloquial, both resort to personae, both take their subjects from their immediate, unspectacular environment.’ What Jones does not share with Larkin is the latter’s ‘detached manner’; Jones’s speakers are, on the contrary, ‘involved themselves in the

¹⁰⁴ Clive James, ‘Adding Up The Detail’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20th November 1969.

¹⁰⁵ Alan Brownjohn, ‘Rival Claims’, *New Statesman*, 5th December 1969

¹⁰⁶ Robert Nye, *The Birmingham Post*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁷ (*I*, 7)

¹⁰⁸ (*I*, 13)

¹⁰⁹ (*I*, 36)

¹¹⁰ (*I*, 14-17)

¹¹¹ Michael Cayley, ‘Where Walls Take Root’, op. cit.

situations they describe.’ This is not to say that Jones always avoids the kind of cleverness Cayley identifies with the Movement poets, though even then, as in ‘In a University Library’¹¹² the poem ends by ‘reasserting the sensual instead of providing the expected escape into the intellectual.’ Jones takes a book to a table where he becomes ‘a bulk of silence’ and the words ‘swell / in sumptuous buttocky mounds from the shadowed spine.

On the cover of *A Family Album*, Jones had worried that:

Poets have unnecessarily lost too much ground to novelists in our time. I am convinced that poetry can still cope with narrative in its own way. It need not be forced to explore exclusively personal or extreme states of mind and feeling. And its language need not be mandarin or esoteric. I have tried to be colloquial, and at the same time to make no sacrifices of subtlety and depth . . . I wished to make it accessible.

But Jones, says Cayley, uses language ‘far more concentrated than the rambling flow of everyday conversation and thought.’ Though he does not refer here to the poetic theories of Edward Thomas – to the need, in adopting the speech of life itself, to compensate on the page for the absence of intonation, inflexion and gesture – Cayley does suggest that it would be wrong ‘to see the poem as yet another Wordsworthian attempt to go back to the language and feeling of common men’. Jones had said more about accessibility than Cayley considers here. The blurb continued:

I am greatly in sympathy with Owen’s concern that his fellow soldiers should not look at his poems, shake their heads and say ‘No compris’. Of course, many won’t compris, but it’s the best dictum to work by.

This is a complex area, and one that would tax Jones further in later years. He revealed in my interview with him,¹¹³ for example, that his divorce brought all manner of family misgivings to the surface relating to the way Jones had ‘included’ members of his family in his poems. Jones remained determined throughout his work not to lose contact with his family and the class he was, in many ways, educated beyond, (though he has not always, by his own account, been sensitive to the ways in which his references to family would be received by them). As we have

¹¹² (*I*, p.23)

¹¹³ Brian Jones ‘In Conversation with Paul McLoughlin’, recorded at the poet’s home in Kent on 4th July 1998 (*IC-CT*) Appendix 4 See, for example, p.316

seen, Ian Hamilton seemed unsympathetic to this not uncommon 1950s, post-1944-Education-Act situation in his review of *A Family Album*.

Cayley compares Jones's use of the colloquial with that of Alan Bold whose verse he finds little more than 'chopped-up rhetorical prose'. Jones, however, is praised for the way in which he 'avoids the dangers of triteness and laxness' through 'sheer energy of imagination', the way in which he 'cultivates the vital word or image.' Cayley supports his argument here with quotations from 'Spring Requiem'¹¹⁴ ('The leaves *sprawl chittering* across sunlight')¹¹⁵ and from 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' ('Scabs of shade / Peeled off with the wind, and the sun snoozed in mild brick').¹¹⁶

He also makes much of Jones's dramatic monologues possessing, like Browning's, 'a sense of constant activity.' Indeed, Jones is not only 'mimetic of movement' but also: 'envelops his subjects': 'the smell of the sea which, like a sailor testing his land-legs, breezes in "with its rolling gait and monstrous tales, / fluttering landlocked hearts like ready virgins"'¹¹⁷ Where Jones differs from Browning is that 'what interests him is more the world of feeling than that of ideas'. Jones's speakers are 'fully aware' of how frustration is distorting their own perception 'of an unattractive reality'. The frontier guard, for example, 'splits himself into two voices like the two angels of Marlowe's *Faustus*.'¹¹⁸ One orders him to be content with what he has done; the other to move out of the settlement he has created since he 'cannot rest where walls take root / And wrinkle with frost and sun.'¹¹⁹ The continuing tussle between the home-lover and the adventurer, between the agoraphobic and the footloose would re-emerge in a later volume and, indeed, might be viewed as an informing theme in Jones's work.¹²⁰

The remainder of Cayley's article searches for what Jones regards as achievement. He finds it in 'physical activity', citing as examples poems such as

¹¹⁴ (*P*, 25)

¹¹⁵ Cayley's italics

¹¹⁶ (*P*, 28)

¹¹⁷ 'Captain Cook's Charts', (*I*, 10)

¹¹⁸ 'Three poems of a frontier guard' (*I*, 14-16) and 'From the frontier' (*I*, 17)

¹¹⁹ 'Three poems of a frontier guard: 3 The Two Voices ii' (*I*, 16)

¹²⁰ Brian Jones, *The Island Normal* (Manchester, Carcanet 1980). See, for example, 'Horace Bids Farewell to Aeneas' from 'Aeneas and After' (p.67), and 'Fearful' (p.51)

‘Stripping Walls’¹²¹ and ‘How To Catch Tiddlers’¹²², both from the first collection. ‘The Beast’¹²³ develops this theme of being dissatisfied with what has been achieved. It is, says, Cayley, ‘a rare exercise in parable’. Where Jones’s beast (which represents ‘violence, energy and hope of revolution’) differs from the pigs in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is that once the revolution has been achieved the humans/pigs ‘are discontented with the new bureaucracy they have created.’ They are ‘imbeciled by / Vacant horizons and star-punctured sky’, the stars symbolising, for Cayley, ‘the severe questioning of what has been achieved.’

Cayley concludes with a further comparison with Larkin:

Like Larkin, Jones sees the placidity of life in post-war Britain as a veneer disguising an essential unease. In Larkin’s case, this unease emanates from a sense of purposelessness in a godless world where the Welfare State is always there to fall back on . . . // At the back of Jones’s work, on the other hand, behind the exuberance of his language and the ‘low mimetic’ which accurately represents everyday situations and feelings, lies a vision of a natural world which can be most readily rediscovered when physical activity sloughs away the constraints and conventions of daily life.

This comparison with Larkin is new in responses to Jones's work, and this is an important point to bear in mind when discussing the individual volumes, particularly given the fact that Larkin was growing in 'acceptability' in the late sixties (and would become ever more popular and difficult for academics to ignore). Also new is the perception of what Cayley calls 'essential unease'. This is a defining feature of Jones's work. David in *A Family Album* is an example of this unease, and his being a version of the poet is a factor not picked up on by reviewers. Cayley also does well to highlight the importance to Jones of physicality as a relief from such unease; and being more interested in 'the world of feeling than that of ideas' relates back to the same unease.

¹²¹ (P, 42)

¹²² (P, 41)

¹²³ (P, 32/3)

6. *For Mad Mary* (1974)

*For Mad Mary*¹²⁴ was Jones's final collection under the London Magazine imprint, and it gained a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. The Contents page lists not individual poems but the five sections that make up the book. One of these is the title sequence,¹²⁵ a single poem in four parts, featuring the eponymous Mary and, once again, Aunt Emily; 'The Courtenay Play',¹²⁶ is a complex, almost rhapsodic construct, a kind of verse drama (about the performance of a play depicting leading characters from the last agricultural labourers' uprising in England that took place in nineteenth-century Kent);¹²⁷ and the opening section, 'At Varykino', contains many of the personal, domestic poems (here more or less family holiday poems) of the kind that had attracted much of Jones's early critical acclaim.

Once again, it was the originality of Jones's treatment of the personal and the domestic that pleased reviewers. The *Hibernia* review commends Jones's 'fresh observation' of ordinary events and thought the collection worthy of a longer notice.¹²⁸ Keith Brace is attracted to Jones's 'quirky, edgy, sympathetic view of ordinary personal and communal situations'.¹²⁹ Peter Porter admires the way that, at his best, Jones can discover 'a fine way of making old topics new' and finds him 'almost always rewarding to read.'¹³⁰ P. J. Kavanagh¹³¹ considers Jones 'verbally interesting without being clotted - and truthful': Jones 'notices much and makes poems out of his noticing.'

On a broader front, responding in a more overtly political way to the issues raised in the book's various sections and sequences, Martin Booth describes Jones as a poet who has 'the brilliant knack of tying in people with events and places and his characters are enormous in their range and meaning.'¹³² This is a long way from

¹²⁴ Brian Jones, *For Mad Mary* (Alan Ross, *London Magazine Editions*, 1974)

¹²⁵ (*FMM*, 27-42)

¹²⁶ (*FMM*, 57-86)

¹²⁷ Kent is the county Jones and his family moved to in the mod-sixties. He would live and work in Kent until moving to Normandy in France in the 1990s

¹²⁸ Jack Holland, 'A Heap of Broken Images', *Hibernia*, 24th January 1975

¹²⁹ Keith Brace, *The Birmingham Post*, 10th June 1975

¹³⁰ Peter Porter, *The Observer*, 23rd March 1975

¹³¹ P. J. Kavanagh, *The Guardian*, 15th May 1975

¹³² Martin Booth, *Tribune*, 'Characterisation and rediscovery' (early 1975?) (*LM-Sbks*)

Hamilton's view that Jones's characters do not come across as 'the deeply separate people they're supposed to be'.¹³³ Of the title poem, Booth says:

One could dwell for long on a poem like this: it encompasses everything and is the true poem, meaning something to all men and much to a few . . . Jones' poetry is often quiet in tone. It does not shout or seek effect, but attains it by a masterful use of language.¹³⁴

The admiration is clear, but quite what Booth is saying is not. Presumably the final 'it' here means 'effect', but we are left having to guess that the effect is the 'tying in people with events and places' he alluded to earlier.¹³⁵

Peter Porter, while pleased by Jones's ability to make 'old topics new' is, otherwise more guarded. Style, he says 'as something separate from its subject-matter, is instantly encountered on opening Brian Jones's latest book'. Sometimes, as in the 'urban indifference and insanity of the title poem and the nineteenth century chiasm' of 'The Courtenay Play' (the two sequences Booth most admired), Porter finds 'too many words, with too great a sense of strain'. Nevertheless, 'Jones has other moods than the nostalgic and the minatory' and 'the peculiarities of his style (New London Gothic it might be called) should not distract from its power'. Jones (and Jenny Joseph)¹³⁶ are felt to represent 'the independent mood of contemporary British poetry, a seriousness of intent which can afford to ignore the Modernist/Traditionalist warfare raging around them.' One unfortunate consequence of ignoring this warfare, however, is, in effect, the danger of being critically sidelined.

Other critics found other flaws. Richard Keeble, like Porter, 'finds too many words' in the poems.¹³⁷ While finding Jones 'impressive and entertaining', he can also find him 'almost embarrassingly simple' or, worse, 'irritatingly obscure.' For Edna Longley 'the overall impact is of careful writing rather than imaginative

¹³³ Ian Hamilton, *The Observer*, 'Public gestures, private poems' (op. cit.)

¹³⁴ Such is Booth's enthusiasm for this collection, it is more than a little surprising to find no mention of Jones in Booth's survey of British Poetry 1964-1984 [Martin Booth, *British Poetry 1964-1984: Driving through the Barricades* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1985)]

¹³⁵ An example of Jones's 'masterful use of language' would have helped here, but perhaps this is one of the difficulties arising from having to keep reviews brief.

¹³⁶ Porter was also reviewing Jenny Joseph's *Rose in the Afternoon* (Dent, 1984)

¹³⁷ Richard Keeble, *Cambridge Evening News*, 20th February 1975

ignition.’¹³⁸ She is another who prefers Jones in domestic vein (as in ‘For Cathy, on going to turn out her light’)¹³⁹ where he achieves ‘his most authentic¹⁴⁰ expression.’ Alan Brownjohn is once again not won over. The title-poem and ‘The Courtenay Play’ represent ‘a courageous attempt to widen his concerns; but length doesn’t suit him.’¹⁴¹ Given that Jones was, indeed, engaged in ‘an attempt to widen his concerns’ this last criticism is one that may have particularly hurt or rankled. Colin Falck¹⁴², Ian Hamilton’s Associate Editor at *the Review*, is determinedly dismissive at times. Describing Mad Mary as ‘a Crazy Jane-type figure of extreme tiresomeness who never quite comes on stage but who seems to have haunted various people’s lives in Islington’, he grumbles that there ‘doesn’t seem any good reason why she should haunt ours.’ He complains that ‘The Courtenay Play’ is not a play but a narrative poem ‘blown up from a forgotten (and as far as poetry is concerned one might think justly so) fragment of Kentish labouring history.’ Yet even Falck concedes that ‘[w]hen he wants to, Jones can write a very good ordinary poetry of our time, free of prosodic hang-ups and with no straining after big effects. It’s a pity he can’t be content with this . . .’. Once again, it is Jones’s treatment of the immediately personal and the domestic that most appeals. It is also significant that Falck is saying that Mad Mary and the characters from ‘The Courtenay Play’ are not worthy of *public* attention, perhaps because the personal is less present in these poems.¹⁴³ Perhaps, again, because they refer to working-class history and experience.

7. *The Island Normal* (1980)

After submitting the manuscript of *The Island Normal*,¹⁴⁴ Jones received a swift and enthusiastic reply from Michael Schmidt:

Peter Jones and I have read the poems with unusual enthusiasm. It is the most interesting collection by a British poet that has reached us for some

¹³⁸ Edna Longley, ‘Recent Poetry’, *The Irish Times*, 10th May, 1975

¹³⁹ (*FMM*, p.13)

¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Edna Longley quoted Jones’s ‘A Garland for Edward Thomas’ (from *Poems*) in her edition of *Edward Thomas: Poems and Last Poems*, (Collins, 1973) p.9

¹⁴¹ Alan Brownjohn, ‘Opening Lines’ *New Statesman*, 25th April, 1975

¹⁴² Colin Falck, ‘Leaving something behind’, *The New Review*, Vol.1 No.11 (February 1975), p.69

¹⁴³ cf. p.284: ‘And poetry reviews had more or less ceased to appear in national daily and Sunday newspapers. *The Guardian* and *The Observer* reviews of *The Island Normal* were the last national newspaper notices relating to any of Jones’s collections.’

¹⁴⁴ Brian Jones, *The Island Normal* (Manchester, Carcanet 1980)

time, and we would like to publish it. It is certainly a more interesting collection than your earlier books which I have always enjoyed (though I've not seen *For Mad Mary*).¹⁴⁵

When the collection appeared, it attracted two lengthy magazine reviews and prominent attention by reviewers such as Peter Porter, Grevel Lindop, Martin Dodsworth, Andrew Motion, John Heath-Stubbs, Paul Mills and Michael Cayley. This kind of attention suggested that Jones might finally be taken up by the world of the academy, but this was not to prove the case and the book sold few copies.¹⁴⁶

Peter Porter¹⁴⁷ felt that the new collection marked 'that time in a writer's work when he breaks from the ruck of accomplished talents to become a force in his own right.' Referring back to Jones's belief that poetry need not surrender to fiction all the stories that need telling', Porter believed the poems contained 'as much truth to surface detail ... as any recent novel, with a good deal of eloquence added', the poet retaining 'the tightness of verse and the authority of good cadences.' Jones's 'most impressive quality is his power of clothing the ordinary in numinous dress.' John Heath-Stubbs¹⁴⁸ disagrees. While sympathising with the desire to reclaim lost ground from the novelist, Jones 'does not seem to have much grasp of the strategy required. It is not enough that poetry itself should become prosy.'¹⁴⁹

Paul Mills¹⁵⁰ believed that Jones had 'taught us new ways of seeing, and brought us to a new district in our minds.'¹⁵¹ Mills, like Cayley before him, compares Jones to Larkin, but suggests that where 'Larkin evokes nostalgia when read now', in Jones's work 'energy is released just when we might imagine the dust had settled.' Paying particular attention to the collection's opening poem, 'Overnight'¹⁵² Mills finds that:

¹⁴⁵ Michael Schmidt, letter to Brian Jones dated 14th February 1979 in reply to Jones's letter enclosing manuscript, dated 10th February 1979. Carcanet Archive.

¹⁴⁶ A letter dated 15th July, 1988 from Michael Schmidt to Jones (prior to the eventual publication of *Freeborn John* in 1990) refers to Carcanet's 'unsuccess with your work'. Schmidt also referred to Jones's poor sales record in a conversation with Paul McLoughlin at Carcanet's Manchester offices. It was a record that was both surprising and a matter of disappointment to Schmidt.

¹⁴⁷ Peter Porter, 'Life in the museum', *The Observer*, 8th June 1980.

¹⁴⁸ John Heath-Stubbs, 'Moral and metrical', *The Tablet*, 15th March 1980.

¹⁴⁹ cf. earlier criticisms of what was deemed to be 'clutter' and 'too many words' in Jones's poetry?

¹⁵⁰ Paul Mills, 'Extending the Limits', *Poetry Review*, Vol.71 No.1 June 1981.

¹⁵¹ Recognition of originality in approach is not new – Porter, Rosenstock and Holland had noted it earlier – but Mills's is perhaps the most striking and memorable example.

¹⁵² (*TIN*, 9)

If there was any tenderness in Larkin for the thinness, the cheap fabric of people's lives, now it is gone, and here in Brian Jones the space it left is occupied by something which seems at first less composed and genial, by a tone in which we begin to hear a hopeless whisper of futility.

Larkin is conscious of his separation from those he observe, nor does he wish to be part of their world. This is often mistakenly taken as a kind of superior disdain, which misses the mark altogether. Jones, though he shares Larkin's sense of separation, is always closer to what he describes. He and his wife arrive at the strange house (a bed-and-breakfast establishment, one imagines) and progress from 'irritated boredom' with the landlady and her environment to 'what is almost tenderness, a shared sympathy for someone they don't know.' As Mills points out, there is 'no nostalgia and not likely to be for the world which Jones describes: 'He watches the wastegrounds with a sardonic glare'. Throughout the book, 'the mood of unhampered intelligence, observing life, things, people and events, makes every poem a freshening force.' This sense of a relation to what is being observed, the emphasis on complex feeling involving 'tenderness', is an important contributory element in Jones's poetry, but the futility that Mills discerns in *The Island Normal* is a mood keenly felt by other reviewers.

Martin Dodsworth recognises that for Jones the island's normal state is repulsive, but finds in his sub-Lowellian verse that 'the want of happiness is debilitating'.¹⁵³ John Horder¹⁵⁴ makes the same point but is more irritated. He reaches Jones by way of C.H.Sisson and in doing so make an interesting general observation about poetry at the beginning of a new decade:

In *Exactions*¹⁵⁵ actual enjoyment of God, life, or a self that exists eternally in life or after death, still seems to elude him. Maybe all these things are too much to expect from any English poet at the present time. Maybe Mr Sisson's technical expertise, which is of a high order, ends up by being as much of vice as a virtue. Brian Jones, whose *The Island Normal* is his seventh anthology, is even more of a perfectionist than Sisson, and seems to enjoy himself less. The most tiresome thing is that there are any number of highly accomplished poems here, as in all his six other books. The title-poem and 'In Memory: E.S.' are both wrought out of real love for their subjects, as are others

¹⁵³ Martin Dodsworth, 'A decent length', *The Guardian*, 20th March 1980.

¹⁵⁴ John Horder, 'The moonlit door', *The Times Educational Supplement*, 11th July 1980.

¹⁵⁵ C.H.Sisson's *Exactions* (Carcenet, 1980).

Andrew Motion also finds Jones's response to 'living in England today' less than uplifting.¹⁵⁶ He finds that Jones's book is 'engagingly honest and concerned, but only rarely avoids being tainted by the limitations it spends so much time attacking':

England is repeatedly accused of having slumped into tedium and apathy, but his expressions of disenchantment are unrewardingly mild, compared to the strength of feeling that provokes them:

The battens are slammed in place
on the surviving myths:
the returning father

the ripening smells of the big meal,
the soft excluding swish of curtains.¹⁵⁷

Interestingly Peter Porter quotes the same passage (and its ensuing half dozen lines) with approval. 'Turn Off', he says, 'is a poem which speaks for more than Jones's own feelings, for the prevalent mood of alienation'. But Motion acknowledges the theme of exclusion, that even tame, domesticated prospects are enough to make Jones feel 'a visitor / to my own country' and this in turn leads to praise for the 'most successful pieces' in which Jones allows the stress of isolation to force him out of himself and into the personality of another character':

The result is a degree of imaginative freedom which enables him to deepen the significance of his recurrent preoccupations, and this is often accompanied – in 'Aeneas', for example – by a corresponding increase in the interest of his language:

Failure clings to us like a tradition.
A steersman overboard
welters from beach to beach.
My dreams hatch his cries for burial.
Every morning I must see to it
that my face comes up from bad dreams like the sun.

Motion's criticism involving what he sees as a discrepancy between strength of feeling and the lack of a commensurate interest in the language used to express it may as well have referred to Jones's later collection, *Freeborn John*, and points up

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Motion, 'A dishonoured myth', *New Statesman* 8th February 1980.

¹⁵⁷ The verb 'slammed' is hardly mild but it is set against abstract 'myths', cooking smells and the 'swish' of curtains are threatened by. Nevertheless the key feature here is surely exclusion, something also felt in the collection's opening poem, 'Overnight' (coming inside 'to feel exclusion') (*TIN*, 9)

the problems surrounding political verse in Britain and its reception.¹⁵⁸ Peter Bland did not agree with Motion:

Jones is writing excellent political poetry without ever mentioning a political party. He's developed a means of heightened reportage where language works at an extraordinary level of observed intensity

Bland had, earlier in his review, quoted from 'On the Edge' in order to exemplify the 'nondescript' England Jones presents:

The Victorian towns crumble their piecrust
derivative spleadours and are losing trade.
Decisions are made here. The word 'future'
bandied as if it were an option

Michael Cayley quotes the same passage, enthusing that 'the words "as if" carry an immense weight':

The future is closing in, not opening out. Throughout the [title-] sequence is the sense of a society where human achievement is at best an illusion, more often abandoned'

Michael Cayley¹⁵⁹ also reads the domesticity in Jones's poems rather differently from Motion (who on the face of it seems to prefer Jones's *not* being personal). For him 'the superficial simplicity of many of the poems masks a resonant and disturbing depth', an observation that chimes with Michael Longley's response to *Interior*; and in particular with the way in which Jones 'contemplates bravely his artistic ruthlessness and the darker areas of his own mind which are uncovered as a result'.¹⁶⁰ Cayley had referred in his *Poetry Nation* article in 1974 to Jones's worrying over 'what has been achieved', and finds this concern in evidence once more: 'Throughout the [title-] sequence is the sense of a society where human achievement is at best an illusion, more often abandoned.'¹⁶¹ The new collection provides further examples of the 'virtuoso energy' of earlier volumes and 'the same ability to incorporate colloquialisms.' Cayley is a great admirer of Jones's work. He says of *The Island Normal*:

The sense of the purposelessness of the present, of the essential ambiguity – the suspicion of futility – attaching to heroic endeavours, has lent to his collection a new weight, directing Jones's mastery of local effect to wider ends.

¹⁵⁸ Discussed at various points in the main thesis, particularly in the chapter on *Freeborn John*.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Cayley, 'The Word Future', op. cit.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Longley, 'New Poetry', op. cit.

¹⁶¹ Michael Cayley, 'The Word Future', op. cit.

Other reviewers picked up on this sense of ‘the purposelessness of the present’. Thus Gavin Ewart commends Jones for describing ‘the sadnesses and disillusion of modern living’ with ‘imagination ... and complete visual and auditory rightness’.¹⁶² Hubert Moore believes Jones has managed ‘triumphantly’ to follow his earlier ‘successful’ books and that the volume is a particular example of how poems can have an accumulative sequential effect in addition to succeeding individually.¹⁶³ He notices that the entire collection can be read as ‘one long poem’.¹⁶⁴ Humphrey Clucas thinks the title poem is the key to Jones’s work in that ‘it concerns the attempt to escape the boredom of normalcy, the failure to go far enough, the miracle of safe returns, and the lack of anything to say to those who stayed behind.’¹⁶⁵ But, he goes on, the sequence is too long and suffers from an ‘unvarying tone.’ Perhaps this response is of a kind with Dodsworth’s and Horder’s, but it also recalls earlier references by Hamilton and Brownjohn to a monotony of tone. The sequence ‘Aeneas and After’¹⁶⁶ is felt to be better, the tensions between ‘private and public, gods and humans, past and future’ being ‘well caught.’ Clucas likes, too, ‘Andrew Marvell Awaits His Charge’ where he recognises ‘one reticent poet studying another’.

Grevel Lindop, like Clucas, finds significance in the book’s title, which refers, he says, to both ‘a state of mind and present-day England.’¹⁶⁷ The volume demonstrates that ‘the secret of normality is that it knows the horrors and guiltily prefers not to be reminded of them’. What unifies the collection for Lindop is Jones’s ‘concern with truth-telling’. *The Island Normal* is ‘austere without coldness and colloquial without slackness’, a judgment Michael Schmidt would use in promoting Jones’s later books. And it is a judgement Lindop upheld when reviewing the *New & Selected Poems* of 2013. There Lindop spends time with the poem ‘Fearful’:

The poem ends ‘When I was a child and real I lay / on our tar roof and itched for the world’. The nostalgia for childhood is quintessentially

¹⁶² Gavin Ewart, *British Book News*, November 1980.

¹⁶³ Hubert Moore, *South East Arts Review*, Spring 1980.

¹⁶⁴ In the letter to Michael Schmidt enclosing the manuscript for consideration (Carcenet Archive), Jones wrote: ‘It is the most consciously organized of all my collections and I really see it as one poem.’

¹⁶⁵ Humphrey Clucas, ‘Geographies’, *Agenda* (Vol.19 Nos.2/3).

¹⁶⁶ (*TIN*, 65-84)

¹⁶⁷ Grevel Lindop, ‘Classical norms’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16th May 1980.

Romantic; but that phrase ‘a child and real’ breaks through to something far deeper and very disturbing, implying not merely that childhood consciousness is somehow better, but also that all consciousness since has been false, *unreal*. This sense of a discomfort with his own mind is very pervasive in Jones’s work and gives it a fascinating quality, both thought-provoking and elusive. We find ourselves coming back to the poems, partly to see what exactly they say, which is not always what we thought at first reading, and partly to assess our own complicated reactions.¹⁶⁸

One review from as far away as Cape Town, South Africa, might suggest an international reception, but, disappointingly, it remains somewhat tetchily reluctant to progress beyond an objection to Jones’s having used words like ‘shagged’ and ‘crap’.¹⁶⁹ Lawrence Sail’s review for *Stand*, however, serves as an excellent summary of critical responses to *The Island Normal*. It refers to Jones’s withering description of England, to the inherent danger of a descent into the monotony of tone others had discerned, of Jones being hoist by his own petard, to the historical forays of the ‘Aeneas and After’ sequence and to the search for poise in the collection’s final section, ‘At Great Tew’. It is worth quoting in full:

Brian Jones pictures the present age as virtually beyond any kind of reconstruction, and England as a country characterised by ‘the rot of ancient masteries’, where people must cope as best they can with noise and the gleaming impoverishments of contemporary life. The world of ideals, a better world, as well as the remembered past, is there as a yardstick, but beyond recapture—‘precisely Nowhere’, as the title-poem puts it, while in *Overnight* ‘We glimpse again all those momentous wheres / we’re always absent from’. The best poems either focus on the absolutely specific (there is a very good one about a pier, and another about a train journey), or imaginatively create their own terms, like those about the slaughterhouse foreman and his family. While the most successful poems about England are sustained by an abrasive vigour, Jones does not always avoid the damp squib, or the danger that too much description of the failed and wearisome may itself become wearisome. More importantly, he may not entirely escape the charge that, like the dentist in one of his poems, his success is dependent upon the very decay that he condemns. Here the second section of the book, *Aeneas and After*, seems to me crucial. In its celebration of the endless potential of life, and of the idea of home, it suggests that truth is both more positive and more complex than the interpretations of opposing factions can allow. All this adds breadth and perspective. The fine poem with which the collection ends, *Andrew Marvell Awaits his Charge*, draws together many of these elements, using the seventeenth century to depict the dilemmas of the twentieth:

¹⁶⁸ Grevel Lindop, ‘The Mirror of an English Field’, *PN Review* 218, op. cit.

¹⁶⁹ *The Argus*, Cape Town. Reviewer and date of review not known. Photocopy of review sent to Carcanet ‘with the compliments of the editor’. Carcanet Archive.

For us, who cope with words, who know
The cries of butchered innocents
And how they pray who left them so,
The irony of reticence

Is all the crop we dare produce,
A tiny plot of sheltered green

Happily the crop here is considerably richer.¹⁷⁰

Sail's recognizes several features of Jones's work: the yardstick of a world 'beyond recapture'; an 'abrasive vigour'; the 'failed and wearisome'; 'celebration of the endless potential of life'; the idea of home; the reductionism inherent in the arguments of opposing factions; and the breadth and perspective lent by historical approaches. All are formulations of observations made in others' responses but, collected together here, they constitute an insightful review.

8. *The Children of Separation* (1985)

Jones's second Carcanet book¹⁷¹ (even though it won him, for a second time, a Poetry Book Society Recommendation) did not attract anything like the same level of attention afforded its predecessor, *The Island Normal*. Peter Porter had suggested that Jones had broken from 'the ruck of accomplished talents to become a force in his own right', and relatively lengthy consideration from Paul Mills, Michael Cayley and Grevel Lindop, as we have seen, might have led readers to suppose that Jones was now to be regarded as a significant, even major figure. This time around, however, (and oddly, given the extent of Mills's piece on *The Island Normal*) there was to be no review of *The Children of Separation* in *Poetry Review*. And poetry reviews had more or less ceased to appear in national daily and Sunday newspapers. *The Guardian* and *The Observer* reviews of *The Island Normal* were the last national newspaper notices relating to any of Jones's collections. It was a national trend that variously affected all poetry publishers and poets.

¹⁷⁰ Lawrence Sail, *Stand Magazine*, Vol.22 No.1, p.68.

¹⁷¹ Brian Jones, *The Children of Separation* (Manchester, Carcanet, 1985)

Grevel Lindop,¹⁷² by now established as an admirer of Jones's work, takes his cue from his sense of a lack of general recognition. Why, he asks, 'is Brian Jones so little known, so rarely discussed?' before proffering a possible explanation:

The reasons for this neglect are not entirely obscure. Much of Jones's poetry is of a subtlety and delicacy that are not fully apparent at a first reading, and may remain altogether invisible to a hasty or unreflective reader; but also, Jones is not always a good judge of his own work, tending to admit bland or sentimental writing alongside material of great strength and originality.

What Lindop describes as 'bland and sentimental writing' mentioned might be what others have earlier discerned as 'tenderness'. Such deficiencies seem to be located by Lindop in the volume's later poems, those issuing from and written about the new, burgeoning relationship that would become his second marriage. Interestingly, 'bland and sentimental' may, for Lindop, point to Jones's first poetic forays into being happy, into the writing of a poetry of praise.

In locating examples of 'strength and originality', Lindop highlights Jones's approach to a subject:

A characteristic technique of his best work is to circle the subject, registering oblique glances at it, or just past it, so that the central concern emerges by implication rather than statement. This enables Jones to evoke extremely delicate (sometimes tenuous) relationships between one perception or feeling and another by a telling juxtaposition of subtly contrasting or disjunctive images. *The Children of Separation* contains several outstanding poems of this kind, most notably 'Fancy Bread', an elegy for a music teacher.

'Fancy Bread'¹⁷³ is indeed a good example of an approach that encourages the reader to look again by avoiding direct statement. Another poem that adopts this approach is one we are also directed to, the long opening poem, 'Introductory: 1944'¹⁷⁴, of which Lindop says:

Despite its vividness, "1944" is not an easy poem. The relationships of the characters, the identity of poet and child, the possible relevance of childhood trauma to the material breakdown referred to later in the book, all remain elusive. Yet Jones is a master at conveying painful and uncertain states, embodied in the chance details of landscape or domestic environment.

¹⁷² Grevel Lindop. 'Journeying backward', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26th November 1986.

¹⁷³ (*TCOS*, 11)

¹⁷⁴ (*TCOS*, 7)

Against this accomplishment is set Jones's tendency 'to pursue the picturesque to the point of sentimentality':

Jones's weakness for pictorialism leads him to certain predictable failures: too many poems about dreams, brightly coloured but pointless; too many poems about photography; too much concern with how others may see him.

It is conceded that Jones shows himself aware of such dangers in 'the excellent sequence' 'At Badgers Mount'¹⁷⁵ ('The images that others have of us / sustain and kill'), but Lindop does not find this enough, despite the many fine poems, to make *The Children of Separation* 'quite the showcase one would wish to see of Jones's talent.' He concludes by suggesting that 'ruthless pruning . . . could produce a quite outstanding *Selected Poems* from the whole range of his published work.'¹⁷⁶

One senses Herbert Lomas asking himself similar questions as to why Jones is not, by now, a more established figure.¹⁷⁷ Lomas finds much to admire in the new collection, yet it strikes him:

in spite of the agony and grace of this volume, that Jones has lost a little of that touch that made the best of *Poems*, 1966, such compulsive reading. No stodge has crept in, but there's a slight Parnassian tendency to write *about* rather than dramatize. In the best of this book, such as 'The Children of Separation' itself, a poem on the pain divorce has brought the children, feeling dictates flow, language surges on disturbance, not organized *by* syntax. But there is much less of that narrative, drama, syntactical verve, pronounced intonation, lean and strong choice of verb, minimalization of adjective, and intensification of *moments justes* with choice rhymes. Perhaps he should study again the first ten or eleven poems in his first book; but this is not to denigrate another steady volume from a strong talent.

Lomas is careful to acknowledge the consistency of Jones's achievement ('no stodge has crept in'), but when he detects something less than excellent ('a slight Parnassian tendency to write *about* rather dramatize') looks, by way of illustration, to a poem that demonstrates what he feels Jones does best (where 'feeling dictates flow' and 'language surges on disturbance' and is 'not organized by syntax'). The observation about dramatization (or the growing lack of it) is a new note in critical responses to

¹⁷⁵ (*TCOS*, 26)

¹⁷⁶ Both Brian Jones and Michael Schmidt (Carcenet) revealed to me in separate conversations that a contract for a *Collected Poems* was signed but had not been acted upon as yet. Nor will it be now. See Brian Jones *New & Selected Poems*, edited and introduced by Paul McLoughlin (Shoestring Press, 2013).

¹⁷⁷ Herbert Lomas, 'No Enemy but Time', *London Magazine*, March 1986.

Jones, an observation that is the more striking coming from an admirer of Jones's work.

For Paul McLoughlin¹⁷⁸ the new collection confirmed Jones's claim to greater standing. It was 'an impressive achievement, providing further mature evidence of all we have come to associate with [the] poet . . . a narrative gift, the subtle play between surface detail and depth, the skilful deployment of a range of registers, and the resonance and cadential assurance of endings'. Similarly, Tim Dooley identifies Jones as 'part of the same, rather undervalued, middle generation of British poets as Andrew Waterman and Peter Dale':

Each of these poets displays a novelist's concern with the intimate detail of relationships, an interest in symbolic patterns or coincidence, a suspicion of 'elevated' tone and a canny eye for the minute changes in environment or behaviour that mark some shift in social history. *The Children of Separation* . . . is a particularly ambitious work both in the range of its themes and in Jones's attempt to hammer together some unity of vision out of the disparate material of his personal life and political preoccupations.¹⁷⁹

He quotes approvingly from the title poem and (even in a relatively short review) goes on to pay more attention than any other critic to the poems later in the collection that issue from the writer's new relationship. He also compares Jones's liking for unrhymed sonnets to the Lowell of *Notebook* or *Dolphin*:

Jones takes from Lowell 'the common novel plot' of half-guilty, half-pleased with itself adultery but takes, too, some of the American poet's ability to make epigram take root in the seemingly unconsidered rush of naturalistic speech. Sentences like 'The images that others have of us / sustain and kill', or 'We love our children, hate ourselves in them' blossom in the convincing contexts of peace-camps or paternal visits that Jones skilfully recreates.

Joan Forman in *The Eastern Daily Press* also highlights the new-relationship poems, preferring them because they rise above the others' 'note of dread': 'In the later poems, the balance is better, being less pessimistic, more mature'.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Paul McLoughlin, 'Something Crassly Natural', *PN Review* 55, 1987, op. cit

¹⁷⁹ Tim Dooley, *British Book News*, March 1986.

¹⁸⁰ Joan Forman, 'A life lucid and logical', *Eastern Daily Press*, 8th September, 1985. The link between pessimism and maturity will strike many as unconvincingly bizarre.

9. *Freeborn John* (1990)

As William Scammell¹⁸¹ notes, Brian Jones's most recent collection, *Freeborn John*,¹⁸² is comprised of four extended sequences, 'plus single poem ruminations on personal and social history':

A lot of it is angry about Thatcherite England, sometimes eloquently so . . . sometimes only fuzzily, but always alert to the "contumacious and licensed / proprietorship"¹⁸³ of those at the top of the heap looking down on those at the bottom, or on those committed only to paper convictions.¹⁸⁴

He quotes the seventh¹⁸⁵ of Jones's 'Stansted Sonnets' to establish the strength of the poet's indignation, but worries that the imagery is more likely to take us back to Owen or Edward Thomas and for no obvious purpose. Scammell acknowledges (as did Lindop) that Jones is conscious of the dangers inherent in his approach ('Don't curl like a dead peel / over bitterness'¹⁸⁶) before concluding (much as Lomas had done in reviewing the previous collection) that '*Freeborn John* is an interesting and readable book, honourably bewildered by what there is left to believe in.' 'Honourably', of course, is here the damaging word. There is a suggestion in it that Scammell finds Jones already old-fashioned.

Don Paterson's conclusion¹⁸⁷ is comparable, finding Jones 'a poet worth keeping faith with' despite hoping that the mood represented by much of *Freeborn John* would pass. Paterson feels that Jones is not now the poet he first read, because, while 'his domestic and existential crises are now subject to the kind of relentless mythologizing one associates with [Geoffrey] Hill', he does not, like Hill, 'restrict himself to the grander, more impersonal themes.' Instead, Jones 'uses his myths to universalize the personal.' The problem here, for Paterson, is that while 'this might make the suffering more bearable, you get a lot less sympathy for it.' In a much shorter notice, and following on from a review of Matt Simpson's *An Elegy for the*

¹⁸¹ William Scammell, 'Highly indignant', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1990.

¹⁸² Brian Jones, *Freeborn John* (Manchester, Carcanet, 1990)

¹⁸³ *Freeborn John*, 'The Cherry Orchard', 2., p.51.

¹⁸⁴ One has to speculate here as to what Scammell finds 'eloquent' and what he finds 'fuzzy'.

¹⁸⁵ *Freeborn John*, 'Stansted Sonnets', 7. 'A View from Stansted', p.13.

¹⁸⁶ *Freeborn John*, 'Four Poems of Noëlle: 1.', p.84. In fact this began life as a translation from Takahashi ('Don't curl like orange-peel. Don't ape a mummified past. Uncage eternity') and served as the epigraph to what in the original manuscript is Section 8 'Interlude: after tempest'.

¹⁸⁷ Don Paterson, 'Reviewing for Caesar', *Poetry Review*, Vol.80 No.4 (Winter 1990/91).

Galosherman,¹⁸⁸ John Lucas¹⁸⁹ describes Jones as 'a generously intended poet' but one who 'doesn't always have Simpson's knack of letting the tale do the telling'. As a result, 'rhetorical energy becomes dropsical rhodomontade'. This rather echoes Lomas's fear in reviewing *The Children of Separation* that Jones has begun to write *about* his subjects rather than dramatise them. And Lucas's 'generously' is a version of Scammell's 'honourably'. On the other hand, Lucas praises the sequence 'Father and Son', which 'contains some excellent poems', and describes 'La Trahison d'un Clerc' as 'a triumph of exuberant, rough-sabring wit'. Jones's wit has been little remarked on.

Picking up on his antipathy for Thatcherite politics, Sean O'Brien¹⁹⁰ tries to come to terms with Jones's anger, describing the collection as 'an attempt to deal with "The Condition of England" by dramatizing the atmosphere of authoritarianism and unease that has now become so pervasive as to seem almost like normality, unless you happen to be on the sharp end of its creators intentions'. *The Island Normal* was now being readdressed with a new urgency. But when O'Brien mistakes the 'storm-wrecked landscape' of 'Stansted Sonnets' as the area around London's most recent overspill airport,¹⁹¹ he wonders interestingly, if a little superiorly, whether 'Essex Man would recognize himself' in Jones's description of the 'New Order', and deems this to be at least uncertain 'given His ignorance of history' before observing parenthetically that 'at the same time, Black or Asian or Irish or Scots readers might grin sourly at the alleged novelty.' Both Scammell and O'Brien have noticed nervously that Jones's concerns are with England and Englishness and in doing so seem to imply a narrowness that perhaps misses what Jones is saying. O'Brien, however, recognizes this in the case of Atlee, wondering if he would 'even be a name to remember?':

This is part of Jones's point: the transforming electorate of 1945 were themselves descendants of those 'available as headstones, prompt as fodder; / defused by an Africa Star'. Forty years on, the Tory 'they' and the troubled 'we' are no longer separable.

¹⁸⁸ Matt Simpson, *An Elegy for the Galosherman: Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe, 1990).

¹⁸⁹ John Lucas, 'Poets rough and smooth', *New Statesman & Society*, 30th November 1990.

¹⁹⁰ Sean O'Brien, 'Long Afternoons', *London Magazine*, February/March 1991.

¹⁹¹ The Stansted being referred to is in fact a small village in Kent close to where Jones was living at the time of the tempest in October 1987.

O'Brien playfully remarks that it is 'probably unfair to blame Margaret Thatcher for the hurricane of autumn 1987, but one takes Jones's point.' There is a sense in this response and those of Scammell, Paterson and Lucas that the reviewers want to like Jones's collection rather more than they are prepared to allow themselves to say. On the other hand, their caution may be a function of wanting Jones's book to be better than they feel it is.

Just as Andrew Motion had worried about the link between language and subject-matter when reading *The Island Normal*, for example, so O'Brien does now. To take Jones point, he says, 'is not the same as accepting his language:

At times it seems an uneasy mixture of Geoffrey Hill and Jeffrey Wainwright (an odd conjunction in this context, perhaps) without Hill's capacity to argue through particulars or Wainwright's utter clarity. Elements of Auden and Porter are also present, especially in the lengthy 'Caesar's Progress', which takes the form of imperial anachronism. This form of Eastern Europeanism is potentially very fruitful, but Jones too often telegraphs his punches. The imagined context, here and in 'Trahesion d'un Clerc' is paper-thin, while in 'The Cherry Orchard' the evident strenuousness undoes the effort to recharge perception.

Here O'Brien returns to what is becoming a familiar theme in responses to Jones's later work: 'Once in a while you wish Jones would just *describe* something without ramrodding it into significance'. In the end, O'Brien does not find in *Freeborn John* 'enough history behind [the] desire to relate the natural world to democratic liberties.'¹⁹²

10. Further Thoughts

Michael Cayley's 1974 *Poetry Nation* essay on the first three *London Magazine Edition* collections¹⁹³ was the only one devoted to Jones's work to appear

¹⁹² This accusation of there being not enough history in the poems to support Jones's perceived aim is new. It is true that apart from the introductory poem (set in 1638), history in this collection derives primarily from childhood and adult (that is to say from 20th-century) memories, but Jones has used historical contexts to illuminate the present in earlier volumes. When he does so in *Freeborn John*, (as, for example, in 'Caesar's Progress'), O'Brien feels the context is 'paper-thin'. It isn't known whether he found the context in 'Aeneas and after' (in *The Island Normal*) similarly 'thin'?

¹⁹³ Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root', op. cit.

anywhere until John Killick's in 1994, Peter Bland's in 1999, and Paul McLoughlin's in 2009 and 2011.

Killick¹⁹⁴ notes Jones's inclusion in Edward Lucie-Smith's *British Poetry Since 1945*¹⁹⁵ as a Post Movement poet¹⁹⁶ intent on recording 'the joy and the unease which lie beneath the surface of an apparently placid middle-class domesticity', and agrees that several 'accomplished early poems' fit this description.¹⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Killick divines other influences, those in particular of Ted Hughes¹⁹⁸ and Edward Thomas.¹⁹⁹ More tellingly Killick asserts that with *For Mad Mary* (1974) Jones had 'fully accomplished the enlargement of scope from the domestic poet of *Poems and Interior*, by way of the transitional experiments in extended monologues of *A Family Album*, to a writer who can embrace social, political and historical themes. He spends time on the otherwise largely ignored 'The Courtenay Play' (an ambitious piece Jones believed the heart of the book), and on the 1974 collection's title poem-sequence. He also points to other, later, 'extended groups' of poems, including 'Aeneas and After' (*The Island Normal*) and 'Caesar's Progress' (*Freeborn John*). He judges the title poem of the 1985 collection *The Children of Separation* to be 'a key text for our times' ('Only George Barker is capable of a comparable lyric intensity') and in 'Cutting', 'Snowmen', 'A View', and 'No Small Murders' he finds examples of 'other poems of equal poignancy'. Killick also singles out for praise those poems 'where the public and private interact'. 'Letter from Elsewhere' (from *Freeborn John*, 1990) is cited as 'a near perfect example of the marriage of inner and outer worlds':

The poem stands as a paradigm of moral choice in the spheres of both politics and personal relationships. The only contemporary poems of a comparable density and force are those of middle-period Roy Fuller, but Jones's possess a fluency and lack of portentousness denied to the older writer.

¹⁹⁴ John Killick, 'The Ache of Wholeness' in *The North* 15, 1994, pp.36-38.

¹⁹⁵ Edward Lucie-Smith (ed), *British Poetry Since 1945* (Penguin, 1970 & 1985).

¹⁹⁶ Other poets in Lucie-Smith's 'Post Movement' section are Anthony Thwaite, Alan Brownjohn (a reviewer of some Jones's early collections), Tony Connor, Jon Stallworthy, Dom Moraes, Peter Dale, D. M. Thomas, Barry Cole, Miles Burrows, Ken Smith, and Douglas Dunn, a variegated group of poets understandably referred to by Killick as being 'herded' together (as is often the way with anthologies arranged into categories of the editor's devising).

¹⁹⁷ Killick ('The Ache of Wholeness', op. cit.) cites 'Husband to Wife: Partygoing' (included in Lucie-Smith's anthology), 'Stripping Walls' and 'I Know She Sleeps', all from *Poems* (1966).

¹⁹⁸ In 'Jellyfish Swarm' (*FMM*, 53).

¹⁹⁹ In 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' (*Poems* (LME 1966) p.28; and, inter alia, in 'Bluebells' (*The Spitfire on the Northern Line* (Chatto 1975) p.26).

For Killick, Jones's achievement needs to be brought home 'to a wider public'.²⁰⁰ It is a poetry that has 'broken through the personal/public barrier'.

Peter Bland's piece from 1999 was a contribution to a regular *Poetry Review* feature called 'A Second Look'.²⁰¹ It was commissioned by the editor of the magazine at that time, Peter Forbes, who included two of Jones's poems in his millennial anthology, *Scanning the Century*.²⁰² In getting publication dates wrong and attributing poems to collections other than those they appeared in, the essay betrays signs of having been hurried and inadequately researched, but it makes its case for Jones clearly, nevertheless; and Bland is as effusive in his praise as Killick had been. Jones's early poems:

suggested working-class origins and sympathies, but unlike Dunn's *Terry Street* or, slightly later, Harrison's *School of Eloquence*, this wasn't a two-up two-down sort of world. It was something new, something slightly barren and apart, the poet as post-war domestic man isolated from all the obvious signs of belonging.

Jones's territory was 'the new No-Man's Land of nuclear family isolation and social exclusion'. The poems were 'accessible without being simplistic, and the often touching narratives of man-and-wife isolated in their domestic cul-de-sac were, for all their youthful self-consciousness, skilfully handled.' Bland also noted the 'anger and humour' in Jones's work, believing that 'at that time, only Porter perhaps, or Gavin Ewart's *Pleasures of the Flesh*, handled similar material with equal verve'.²⁰³

Referring to a review of Elizabeth Bishop written by Jones for *London Magazine*,²⁰⁴ Bland suggests that the poetic virtues Jones finds in the American poet might equally apply to his poetry. Bishop's poems, wrote Jones, 'present a world of bristling, uncanny ordinariness' and continued 'Correspondingly, the syntax is

²⁰⁰ Killick looks forward to 'the forthcoming publication by Carcanet of Jones's *Collected Poems*'. It was never produced, though Jones maintained he had signed a contract for such a volume.

²⁰¹ Peter Bland, 'Message from the Edge' ('A Second Look': Peter Bland on the Poetry of Brian Jones), *Poetry Review*, Vol.89 No.2 (Summer 1999) pp.52-4.

²⁰² Peter Forbes (ed), *Scanning the Century: The Penguin Book of the Twentieth Century in Poetry* (Penguin, 1999). The Brian Jones poems were 'Stripping Walls' from *Poems* and the title poem, much admired by John Killick, from *The Children of Separation* (TCOS, 40-1).

²⁰³ Both Peter Porter and Gavin Ewart reviewed Jones's publications

²⁰⁴ Brian Jones, 'Singling Out', *London Magazine*, Vol.7 No.12 (March 1968) pp.84/5

simple. It makes statements. And the statements isolate, and focus our attention on what has been isolated'.²⁰⁵

Bland is possibly alone among Jones's reviewers in finding *Freeborn John* his best collection. Jones's 'leveller-like anger at England's waste of human potential arises from a deep love of his inheritance and a real fear for the future':

None of this would matter in the context of this essay if he hadn't provided us with some fine poems and a continuous thirty-year commentary from the backrooms of the dispossessed. His voice, at its most focused, is as fluent and imaginative as any over the last quarter of a century.

He concludes by joining Lindop and Killick in calling for Jones's work to be reissued in one form or another:

We're badly in need of a Jones *Selected*. All his past work is currently out-of-print . . . No new book has appeared for almost a decade.²⁰⁶ I doubt that the fires are out, but the best of what we already have will almost certainly outlast the decades with which it was so intimately and courageously concerned.

11. Critical Surveys

Although Jones gets a single mention in each of the Carcanet surveys of the 'Sixties (in connection with 'social poems')²⁰⁷ and the 'Seventies (in a discussion on 'historical sequences'),²⁰⁸ he has not been taken up by the literary academy, nor deemed to warrant mention in any of the many books in the last several decades on contemporary poetry; and, Forbes's *Scanning the Century* apart, he is not represented in any of the major anthologies of contemporary poetry.²⁰⁹ Michael Cayley's article in *Poetry Nation* was the only one published until four years after what turned out to be Jones's final collection. Reasons for the guarded response of many critics appear to reside in misgivings about his attention to matters of poetic

²⁰⁵ Bishop was to exert an increasing influence on Jones. He would come to value her writing more even than Lowell's (as indeed has much recent literary criticism)

²⁰⁶ It is now over two decades since the last book. Jones died in 2009 leaving behind an unpublished manuscript. Some of these poems are included in *Brian Jones: New & Selected Poems* (Shoestring Press, 2013)

²⁰⁷ Michael Schmidt & Grevel Lindop (eds.), *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey* (Manchester, Carcanet, 1972), p.2

²⁰⁸ Peter Jones & Michael Schmidt (eds.), *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey* (Manchester, Carcanet, 1980), p. xiv

²⁰⁹ Jones's poems, had, nevertheless, appeared in a wide range of anthologies, including school anthologies.

form; a perceived monotony of tone and rhythm; a sense of unease with some of Jones's subject-matter (particularly that which relates to social class); and a relative dissatisfaction with those poems that venture further afield than the personal and domestic poems that have won him almost universal approval. But Jones has had his admirers, too, who have pointed variously to the sharpness of his imagery; his ability to breathe new life into familiar subjects (and forms such as the dramatic monologue); his careful language; his narrative facility; his deft mixing of registers; the strength of feeling that characterises his writing; and the authenticity of his speakers - and many of these admirers (including Paul Mills, Michael Cayley, Peter Porter, Michael Longley, Grevel Lindop, John Killick and Peter Bland) have wondered at various times throughout Jones's poetic career why he is not better known and more widely discussed.

12. *New & Selected Poems* (2013)

The three lengthy (and, to date, only) reviews of *New & Selected Poems (NS)* have been enthusiastic, and grateful that Jones's poems are back in print. Thomas Ovans concludes that 'this is a fine book that deserves to be widely read';²¹⁰ Grevel Lindop that Jones's poems are 'far too good to be forgotten' and that the new volume is 'a quite outstanding *Selected Poems*';²¹¹ and John Killick that 'At his best [Jones's] poetry is indispensable'²¹². For him, the Shoestring Press *New & Selected Poems* was 'one of the two or three most significant collections of the last twelve months.' Where Ovans observes that 'what is immediately remarkable is how up-to-date even the earliest poems feel', Lindop finds that 'What is really striking about the poems from [*Poems*] included here is both how assured they are, as samples of a first publication, and also how painfully self-revealing: how unsparing in their willingness to confront the uncomfortable details of personal relationships'.

Both Killick and Lindop offer reasons for Jones's increasing paucity of critical recognition. Referring to poems such as 'Stripping Walls' and 'Husband and Wife:

²¹⁰ Thomas Ovans, *londongrip.co.uk: the international online culture magazine*, 2014

²¹¹ Grevel Lindop, 'The Mirror of an English Field', *PN Review* 218, op. cit.

²¹² John Killick, *Acumen*, (forthcoming)

Partygoing’, Killick says that Jones’s ‘was a voice that really spoke to people in ordinary language about the ordinary events of their lives, and though, sadly, Jones was to lose most of this audience, he never lost that passion for clarity and truth-telling’. He goes on to speak of:

a strain of discomfort, even anger, through [Jones’s work], which may account for its loss of popularity, and his more ambitious sequences, such as ‘The Courtenay Play’ and ‘Caesar’s Progress’, would be likely to appeal to a different public. Yet he never lost command of the plain style in his last poems, where he added a deepening response to nature.

Jones, he concludes, ‘belonged to the post-Movement generation of poets of Heaney, Harrison and Dunn, and is quite the equal of those figures’. Lindop describes Jones’s first collection, similarly, as ‘a formally more flexible, and in viewpoint almost social-realist, version of “Movement” poetry.’ And he notices Jones’s indifference towards being published:

A lack of interest in being published – together, no doubt, with the pervasive self-doubt evident from his poems at all periods – probably accounts for this; for despite selling well, receiving excellent reviews and, in his early days, being discussed alongside Heaney, Jones never became famous and hardly attracted critical attention beyond the notices of his individual volumes. You have to put out regular books, talk publicly, and establish your ‘brand’ – a notion Jones would have loathed – to become famous.

Lindop had, in an earlier review, spoken of Jones tendency to ‘admit bland or sentimental writing alongside poems of great strength and originality’ but here acknowledges that ‘the poems I complained about are mostly not in the present selection’. Lindop ends his consideration of the book’s final and lengthy poem, ‘From Voltaire’s Garden & Other Entanglements’, with ‘The poem, and the book, end on surely the most adroit and elusive coda since Robert Graves ended his 1952 *Collected Poems* ‘at a careless comma,’

APPENDIX 2

BRIAN JONES: LIST OF REVIEWS

1. General Notices

- a. Martin Seymour-Smith, in Ian Hamilton (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry* (O.U.P. 1994) p.259
- b. Anne Harvey (compiler), 'Biographical Notes on Contributors', *Elected Friends: Poems for and about Edward Thomas*, Enitharmon Press, 1991, p.120
- c. Edward Lucie-Smith, in James Vinson (ed.), *Contemporary Poets* (St. James's Press, 2nd Edition), 1975
- d. Edward Lucie-Smith, *British Poetry Since 1945* (Penguin, 1970; revised 1985) pp.268-270
- e. Michael Schmidt & Grevel Lindop (eds), *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey*, Carcanet Press, 1972
- f. Peter Jones & Michael Schmidt (eds), *British Poetry Since 1970*, Carcanet Press, 1980
- g. Raymond Durnat, *Poetry/Prose Symbiosis* (<http://durnat.com/rd-poetry-review1.htm>) [in *Poetry Review* (Autumn 1969), pp.201/2, as *prose/Poetry Symbiosis*] [See also 'Poems (1966)' and 'A Family Album (1968)']
- h. The Society of Authors: Winners of The Eric Gregory Trust Fund Awards for poets under the age of 30 (1960–2003) (<http://www.societyofauthors.org/gregwin.htm>)
- i. Selected Individual Collections published in 1966 & 1968
- j. 'Poems sell out', *The Times*, 11th January, 1967 (news item)

2. Articles & Essays

- a. Michael Cayley, 'Where Walls Take Root: Some Thoughts of the Poetry of Brian Jones', *Poetry Nation* 2, 1974, pp.99-105
- b. John Killick, 'The Ache of Wholeness': An Introduction to the poetry of Brian Jones', *The North* 15, 1994
- c. Peter Bland, 'A Second Look: Messages from the Edge: Peter Bland on the Poetry of Brian Jones', *Poetry Review*, Vol.89 No.2 (Summer 1999)
- d. Paul McLoughlin, 'Pity England', in: 'Contemporary (British) Poetry', *Hard Times*, Nr.80, Herbst (Autumn), 2006 (Germany)
- e. Paul McLoughlin, *The Guardian*, Brian Jones Obituary, 24th August, 2009
- f. Paul McLoughlin. 'Romantic Agoraphobia', *PN Review* 201, Vol.38 No.1 (September-October, 2011)
- g. Paul McLoughlin: 'Englands of Hill, Harrison & Jones' (Unpublished)
- h. Paul McLoughlin: Introduction to *Brian Jones: New & Selected Poems* (Shoestring Press, 2013) pp.xiii-xxiii

3. Interviews

- a. Jennifer Campbell, *The Sun*, 'Pacesetters', 20th January 1967
- b. BBC Radio. 'Contemporary Poets Reading Their Own Poems: Brian Jones', recorded 10th March, 1973 (National Sound Archive. Reference No. C144. Tape No.1876 [In 'Interviews' file])
- c. BBC Radio. 'The Poet Speaks: Brian Jones & Peter Orr', recorded 10th March, 1973 (National Sound Archive. Reference. No.144. Tape No.1877 [In 'Interviews' file])
- d. 'Brian Jones In Conversation With Paul McLoughlin, *PN Review* 137, January-February, 2001 (Vol. 27 No.1) [In 'Interviews' file]

4. Poems (1966)

- a. Back cover Blurb
- b. Joe Scott-Clark, *The Queen*, 'Other Good Paper Back Books', 10th November, 1966
- c. H.L.Williams, *Western Mail*, Cardiff, 'Poet of clarity', 3rd December, 1966
- d. John Carey, 'Unpolitical Auden', *New Statesman*, 23rd December, 1966
- e. Frederick Grubb, Reviewed with *Positives* by Thom Gunn and *High and Low* by John Betjeman, *BBC Radio, Third Programme*, 'Poetry Now', 19th January 1967
- f. Bryan Waller, 'A Poet in Demand': *BBC European Talks and English Service. BBC External Services Productions: Magazine Miscellany* No.15, 20th January 1967
- g. Ian Hamilton, *London Magazine*, Vol. 6 No. 10 (January 1967)
- h. [See 'Interviews'] Jennifer Campbell, *The Sun*, 'Pacesetters', 20th January 1967
- i. BBC TV *The Look of the Week*, introduced by Robert Robinson (November 1966 –January 1967)
- j. Raymond Durnat, *Poetry Review*, 'Prose/Poetry Symbiosis', Autumn 1969 (Vol.60 No.3), p.201 [See also 'General Articles' and 'A Family Album (1968)']
- k. C.B.Cox, *The Spectator*, 9th December, 1966
- l. Cyril Connolly, 'Imagination and humanity', *The Sunday Times*, 18th December, 1966
- m. Michael Longley, 'Recent poetry', *Irish Times*, 21st January, 1967
- n. 'New poetry', *Morning Star*, (1966-7) (*LM-Sbks*)
- o. Kent local newspaper, 'Local Poet on TV' (*LM-Sbks*)

5. A Family Album (1968)

- a. Back Cover Blurb
- b. John Cotton, *Tribune*, 'A tragedy of everyday life', 28th June, 1968
- c. Richard Holmes, *The Times (Saturday Review)*, 'Poetry: inside history of small conflicts', 29th June, 1968
- d. Julian Symons, *Punch*, 24th July, 1968
- e. Alan Brownjohn, 'Pre-Beat', *New Statesman*, 2nd August 1968
- f. Martin Dodsworth, 'Untiring', *The Listener*, 5th September 1968
- g. David Harsent, *Times Literary Supplement* 'Paperbacks, Pamphlets and Private Presses', Thursday 31st October, 1968, p.1220 Issue 3479 (1570 words)]

- h. R.W.Zandvoort, *English Studies* 51, 1st February 1970
 - i. Ian Hamilton, *The Observer*, 'Public gestures, private poems'. 30TH June, 1968
 - j. John Forth (15th January, 2014): email re *A Family Album*
6. Interior (1969)
- a. Richard Holmes, *The Times*, 4th October, 1969
 - b. Michael Longley, 'New Poetry', *The Irish Times*, 11 October, 1969
 - c. Lyman Andrews, *Sunday Times*, 26th October, 1969
 - d. Robert Nye, *Birmingham Post*, 8th November, 1969
 - e. P.J.Kavanagh, *The Guardian*, 13th November, 1969
 - f. Clive James, *Times Literary Supplement*, 'Adding Up the Detail', 20th November, 1969, p.1330 Issue 3534 (1157 words)
 - g. Derek Stanford, *Books & Bookmen*, November, 1969
 - h. Alan Brownjohn, *New Statesman*, 5th December, 1969
 - i. Ian Hamilton, *The Observer*, 'Once more with feeling', 7th December, 1969
 - j. Martin Dodsworth, *The Listener*, 11th[?] December, 1969
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 - b. Don Paterson, *Poetry Review*, 'Reviewing for Caesar', Winter 1990/1 (Vol.80 No.4)
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- a. Letter from Paul Mills (9th March, 2001) re poems in *PNR* 137
- b. John Hartley Williams (10th October, 2011): email on 'Renoir's Girl'
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- d. Grevel Lindop, 'The Mirror of an English Field', *PN Review* 218, Vol.40 No.6 (July-August 2014) pp. 65-7
- e. John Killick, *Acumen* (forthcoming)

APPENDIX 3

Preparatory Questionnaire

Sent by post to the poet whose replies are hand-written. Letter returning completed questionnaire dated 4th October, 1997

(Some of these questions might belong more profitably in the Interview proper.)

Q. Were you writing poetry while you were at Cambridge University (Selwyn College 1957-1960)? Were you, for example a contributor to Granta or any of the other Cambridge magazines? If not, where were you first published?

A. I was writing poetry I contributed to the University newspaper (drama reviews) and to *Granta* (poetry reviews – Donald Davie, Dom Moraes et al). First published in *Envoi*. Then *London Magazine*.

You've told me about several t.v. appearances following on from the publication of Poems. Can you recall which, and where the invitations came from? Was Frederick Grubb (fg The Group), for example, involved in this? You particularly mentioned some (late night?) Arts programmes. How did these appearances cease?

Late Night Line Up (2/3 times): Joan Bakewell

Look of the Week: Robert Robinson

Man Alive

Omnibus film: Don Taylor

I think they ceased after I turned down a couple of offers of appearances.

Edward Lucie-Smith's entry on you in Contemporary Poets (2nd Edition) lists amongst your works a radio play. 'The Lady with the Little Dog', 1962 (when you were 24?). Was this broadcast on BBC Radio? Is there a script available?

Never wrote it! A wonderfully self-generating myth which all my efforts have failed to quash!

You mentioned attending sessions of The Group, but neither Peter Porter nor Philip Hobsbaum can recollect your attending (though Porter says he remembers giving readings with you). Did I get this right, or was it the Writers' Workshop? Am I also right in remembering your feeling a little uneasy in Porter's presence?

Attended 3 sessions at Lucie-Smith's house – fed chocolate fingers by a pink EL-S. Martin Bell read some of his poems. Not uneasy with P.P. I liked him.

I have seen some of your poems in a number of anthologies, including Young British Poets (Robson); British Poetry Since 1945 (Lucie-Smith); British Poetry Since 1970 (Schmidt & Jones); Touchstones; PNR 100 (Schmidt). For the purposes of a Bibliography, can you recall others?

I need time to compile.

How did you come to write The Spitfire on the Northern Line? Was it commissioned by Chatto? By Leonard Clark? Michael Baldwin?

Commissioned by Clark.

Jane Hardy quoted you in her recent interview with Tom Paulin ('Poetry is a society dreaming'). She tells me it was something you said during a creative writing workshop she attended. She says you were the finest of all her teachers! Did such sessions help shape your own work – or are you careful (determined?) to keep teaching and writing separate? (Freeborn John uses more 'professional' material than earlier volumes.)

This is a big & ? topic which I'd prefer to talk about.

Jane Hardy recalls your liking Pinter and R.D.Laing. Is she right in remembering these writers as amongst your influences.

Pinter no. Laing always (need to explore in discussion).

You told me that The Mantis Hand came about because a local publisher expressed an interest in publishing some of your work – and that what appeared was what you had, as it were, to hand. Is the publisher the same as the present Arc? And was it all quite as casual as this sounds. It seems unlike you, somehow.

Yes, Tony Ward, I believe. It was quite casual.

How would you account for the attention with which your early work was greeted, and the relative neglect of your later work? Your move to Kent? Your not writing more about your work? Your not publishing in magazines? Your not undertaking reading 'tours'? Your not moving in literary circles? The subject-matter of your later collections?

It's difficult for me to respond to this. Everything you mention is contributory, no doubt, but we need to discuss it – if you feel it's important.

Do you still hold to the view which The Sun (way back when it was something like a newspaper!) reported you as holding that you had little patience with those who don't write something every day?

Yes.

You've never really mixed in literary circles. Why not?

A big & complicated topic which I'd prefer to talk about. Issues of self-confidence, class, non-clubbability, physical discomfort, distaste, sense of unreality / alienation etc. etc.

When we met you enthused about Michel Foucault, and about one particular American poet. Who is this (I don't think it registered at the time, but it would be very useful to know who it is)?

I enthuse about American poetry generally. It might have been John Ashbery I mentioned.

What is it that attracts you to Foucault? (Sorry, massive question ...)

Subversion, wit, free-play of mind, pose, possibilities. Talk further.

You make increasing use of epigraphs in your collections. Where did you come across David Smail, for example.

My reading in Foucault & psychology & in my role as a trainer of tutors.

Your epigraphs include a number of quotations from Russian writers. Does Russian literature feature prominently amongst your influences.

The stance and response of Russian poets towards aspects of normalisation and repression in their society are important to me.

Paul McLoughlin / Brian Jones

APPENDIX 4

BRIAN JONES IN CONVERSATION with Paul McLoughlin:
recorded at the poet's home in Kent on 4th July, 1998
THE COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Paul McLoughlin: Could I start by asking if you enjoyed your time at Cambridge; whether you were the first in your family to receive such an education?

Brian Jones: No, I didn't enjoy my time at Cambridge. When I went there, I think I was on the edge of a pretty bad breakdown, which happened while I was there - and, yes, I was the first in my family to receive such an education. The summer before I went, I suddenly had this ... There is something that Conrad said. He said something like 'One day in April in Vienna, I got into a train, and as I got into the train, I climbed into a dream, and I've been in it ever since' - and that's what I felt happened. I had this astonishing sense of loss of identity, a sense of panic - these were panic attacks, only, in those days, we didn't call it that. And I think, and quite interestingly, I told no one. And when I was at Cambridge, I mean most of the time I was there, I was waking up in night sweats ... Eventually, I left, in the middle of my second year and had some kind of perfunctory psychiatric help, and went back, wasn't offered any chance of coping that year, and eventually limped through and managed to complete my degree. The only thing that happened was that I was told that, as I'd missed those weeks, I'd have to stay on at the end of the summer term after my degree to complete my residence qualification. I got my degree, and I was in a bad

way - and I was in a bad way really throughout a lot of my twenties.

PM *How old were you when the first book appeared?*

BJ The first book appeared in '66 when I was 28.

PM *So you were writing through this time you've described?*

BJ Yes, I was writing through it. It became a way of living; living with panic and night terrors. I just kept having the image that one day my head would crack like a shell [and everything] would flood out. A feeling of being there and not being there. That was what my time at Cambridge was like.

PM *Do you think these feelings were related to your being the first in your family to reach such educational heights?*

BJ I think there were lots of things. I'm the product of John Major's wonderful 1950s' culture, where nobody said anything to anyone about anything. And I think I suffered anxieties about ... yes, I had a very isolated childhood. We were living in Greenford at the time and I was the only kid from that particular street of prefabs that went to grammar school [*Ealing Grammar*] - and in those days you had to wear a prefect's cap, and I was very isolated from that point-of-view. And I isolated myself - and the predominant image I have of myself is of lying on the roof of the prefab, from which I am still trying to come down! And I carried it with me through the time of my anxieties, which were sexual and social, until I think they erupted. What happened, I think, is that the school gave me a structure, and it is significant that it was in the period between school and university when this exploded. I remember I was sitting in a pub with a friend, when suddenly it hit me. I had

this terrible sense of 'Who am I', 'Where am I?' - a terrible sense of existentialist terror. And in a sense, I have lived with that ever since; through my university time, which was exacerbated by the fact that this was the Cambridge of 1957 - and, of course, I was living with people who'd done National Service. I got an award to go to Cambridge which enabled me to go there when I was seventeen and a half. If I hadn't got the award, I'd have had to have done my National Service. Those who got a scholarship or an exhibition to go to Cambridge were able to miss National Service - they could go straight to university. So I was there with people who were also two or three years older than me - and, of course, they were predominantly from public school. So it was an astonishingly different world. So that was an additional pressure and I became very defensive.

PM

I find that particularly interesting, because it's not until 'The Children of Separation' that one has that word in the title of one of your books, and that separation was not yours. Yet that idea of separateness seems to be evident from page one of 'Poems', if one looks at the closing image of the first poem in that book, 'Seeing My Wife Go Out Alone' ('Not daring to raise my face from your pillowed hair / To find your eyes wide open, scanning / Unchallenged space, where all the questions start'). There is a fear here, a kind of warding off - as though company might not be enough to assuage this fear. Anyway, you've said to me before that you think places like Cambridge are better now, that the courses they do there are much more interesting.

BJ

I don't know about the courses they do, but I certainly feel, looking back, I'm aware that what I'm doing now, the way I studying literature now, is so much more open and engaging and inclusive than anything I had at Cambridge. I mean, I was there when Leavis was there, and I have very powerful and

BJ

Yes. I think what we are looking at here are some very profound things that are still happening. What has my poetry been for, and what has bothered me? And when I look back on some of my early poetry, although I'm prepared to own it all, I can see throughout my life... I mean, trying to work out what my poetry is positively for, I think, perhaps, early on, being a poet and writing poetry were kind of defensive stances. *Poems* was a great success, and there's a freshness about it, but it doesn't touch what I was feeling. It doesn't really touch what I've been talking about, the nightmare, the anguish - apart from some. There are some that begin to, like 'She Makes Pastry' and 'He Drives'. That is the line, if I'd had the courage, I'd have pushed forward.

PM

The thing I find is that they appear on the surface, lots of them, to be about what might be seen as a nice, domestic arrangement, but I don't know that one can easily miss the fact that they don't feel relaxed, or, rather, that what you're describing is not relaxed. They don't feel as if they are describing domesticity as something which is free of anxiety. But I think it is interesting to consider this business of 'What's it for?' because, I know I'd have to go through and find them again, but I remember being struck by the number of times the word 'purpose' appears in your verse, or something similar had me writing in the margin 'purpose again'. It's interesting to hear you talking about these early poems, because it makes their reception seem even more distant from what you were feeling. I mean, what you've said about not writing what you wanted the courage to write is in stark contrast to the fact that some of the success that greeted 'Poems' came from what was perceived as a 'pleasantness' about them, a perception which is difficult to acknowledge even at face value.

BJ That's right. This for me was another alienating factor. I think I felt at the time there were features of every one of those poems that were subversive. At that time, the poet who meant most to me was Edward Thomas, and I could feel, when I projected my thoughts, a similarity, that the more I learned about Edward Thomas, a melancholic, a suicidal figure, and the way you could see that working its way through the rhythms and through a whole range of things he actually wrote, I reckon that ... Where Edward Thomas wrote in a letter, you know, 'Everybody thinks they're Hamlet, but I *know* I'm Hamlet'. When I read that, I knew I was Edward Thomas.

PM *You reviewed William Cooke's 'Critical Biography' of Edward Thomas in London Magazine. I was struck by Cooke's not pulling any punches. The figure he describes in the opening biographical section makes one think that his wife, Helen, was more than heroic, and although Cooke's is a study in admiration, it was shot through with the realisation that this man must have been very difficult to live with. The endings of the first two poems in 'Poems' hint at a similar, fearful figure living somehow in the dark.*

BJ I think the image of darkness is something that I've carried through. In 'A Family Album', it's in the character of Aunt Emily, who was based on an aunt of mine and whom I felt an astonishing affinity with. I think in every volume I've written, there's been a poem about her. The very first one I wrote was about visiting Miss Emily, going down into the basement flat - and there was this figure in the flat, and you're actually walking around and seeing what it is like and thinking this is a place of inertia, this is a place of death - and you've got to pull yourself together and get out. And although it's a simple poem, it says something I was concerned with, and still am concerned with. What was the cost of pulling your cuffs down and getting

Carcenet, when you appeared in one or two other magazines - but you've never really engaged in the 'business' of getting your poems published ...

BJ No, I haven't. I've often thought about that, and why, without ever coming to any firm conclusion.

PM *I once heard Gavin Ewart giving a wonderful account of envelopes and poems: six envelopes, six poems in each, and when the poems came back he swapped them around until all the magazines had seen all thirty-six poems - or more if any had been accepted along the way. And he kept on doing it.*

BJ I've been reading about the same kind of thing. I've been taking a course on Plath and Hughes, and Plath's professionalism was unbelievable. You know, she would have twenty out at a time, regularly. As soon as they came back, out they'd go again. That's the kind of professionalism that can reach desperation.

PM *Certainly it shows a kind of recognition that writing the poems is one thing and getting them published quite another.*

BJ Yes, and I don't think I've ever fully acknowledged that - [that it's something I ought to have developed].

PM *I'll come back to that. Michael Schmidt said something to me about you and your books and trying to sell them, which was that the problem was that you were invisible. 'The problem with Brian Jones is that he's invisible.' He was telling me that his biggest selling poet is Eavan Boland and he said he believes this is partly because she writes essays, including accounts of the writing of particular poems - and readers love that - having the poem and an account of its writing, how the poem came*

into being . . . Anyway, you said in an early interview with Jennifer Campbell of The Sun newspaper, in the days when it was a broadsheet, a long while ago, that you disliked dabblers, or at least that's what you were reported as saying; that you disliked dabblers and tried to write something every day, that you didn't believe in sitting around waiting for inspiration to happen. Presumably you still hold to this view - I mean, I don't know about the business of disliking dabblers, but the business of writing every day . . .

BJ I don't know about disliking dabblers, but, yes, the business of writing continuously is important to me.

PM *I wonder what form this writing takes, whether you write diaries, or keep journals, or just jot down musings . . .*

BJ I have lots of journals [*Points them out on the shelves*].

PM *And you refer back to them?*

BJ Sometimes, but they're not primarily to provide material. I think they're primarily to express feeling. But I do look back from time to time, although that can be quite depressing, to find the same issues over and over again. Also, as a teacher, I keep a regular diary. This sounds appalling, but even in the work I do with adults, lots of important issues occur, involving other people's feelings, so every time I've had a class, I write something down. I've also written lots and lots of fiction.

PM *That's an answer to a question I was going to ask - fiction which you've not done anything with . . .*

BJ No. I think that when I've done it, I'm left with the sense that, primarily, I want to write poems. I don't try to market them,

because I don't feel - they're not as high in my esteem as poetry is. And also, they become quarries and I can use them for poems.

PM I wonder whether you share Auden's exaggerated admiration for the novelist and his realisation that, obversely, novelists tend to admire the poet?

BJ What I find, taking my classes, is that I'm astonished at the confidence with which people write stories and prose and novels. When I write prose, what I seem to be faced with is the infinite number of possibilities the next sentence can take. And the possibility that that's going to stretch out to 250 pages! There are too many choices. Now, why it is that poetry doesn't present me with those choices, I don't know. I mean, poetry is much more all-or-nothing, it's difficult to work at. I *do* work at it, but I also have a sense of where it's going - a poem takes a particular curving shape - but I'm not faced with a kind of cerebral working out of the possibilities. What could be said, and said next? How do you organise this sentence?

PM If you approached writing a novel like that, it would take forever . . .

BJ I mean, I think I've done . . . I did write a novel when I was in my first teaching job. I don't think I've got it any more. I think that it was quite substantial, and I wrote it in quite a short time - but I didn't send it anywhere. I've done a fair number of stories in the last few years. Looking back on them, they've been quite interesting.

PM You published one called 'Too' in Navis.

BJ Oh, that little one, yes. That's right. That really was a tribute to my parents. I suddenly had this glimpse of the life before I appeared and it was very much ... In some ways it was a necessary comment after all the poems I've written about them or around them, a realisation of what you do when you write. This is becoming increasingly a problem, an issue for me, the way in which you write uses people.

PM *This brings on a whole area I was going to ask you about. You've talked about the darkness closing in, of feeling that all is not right, even from the very beginning, in relationships and so on. When you brought out 'Interior' (LME, 1969), there are photographs on the back cover of what appears to be a wonderfully happy family life, which P. J. Kavanagh took exception to, saying if you're going to write about these people, you don't want to shows us photographs of them, they become too real. It reminds me of Robert Lowell's poem, 'Dolphin', in which he wrote that he had 'plotted perhaps too freely with my life, / not avoiding injury to others, / not avoiding injury to myself - / to ask compassion ...'. I wondered about this relationship between life and lives and poems . . .*

BJ [Is that . . . writing (?)] Quite interestingly, I've just finished a course on Art and Lives, with the 'v' in brackets! We were looking at the Plath/Hughes thing. But all these issues are becoming increasingly a concern. How do writers use this material? Why do writers use it, as we do? That issue was really brought home when the first book, *Poems* appeared, because I read some of the poems on Robert Robinson's 'Look at the Week', so, I mean, they had incredible exposure. One of them, 'My Father', starts its second section 'He is dead'. I had 'phone calls saying 'I'm terribly sorry to hear your father is dead'. My father wasn't dead. My father was still alive, is still alive - and I remember feeling this astonishing sense of shock.

I was really shocked. When I'd written and read it, I hadn't thought of this as a possibility. I just did not have those feelings about 'My father is dead'. It's odd. I was brought up short by this. What am I doing? What is the fall-out of what I'm doing? You've told me about one of your poems that one of your old teachers has just picked up ...

PM

That's right - and the first thing that went through my mind was 'What have I said about him? Because one fictionalises these things to an extent, but looked at from the point-of-view of accurate reporting, there doesn't always appear, to an outsider, or to those one's used, to have been any good reason one has done that. One of my poems, 'Nicking the Church Lead', refers to a boy coming back from the seminary then going to jail for nicking the church lead. Well, he did come back from the seminary, and he did go to jail, but it wasn't for nicking the church lead. But here you were, the first such highly educated member of your family, writing poems which were making use of the people in your family. You were aware of an issue here as early as A Family Album, clearly, because in the blurb to that collection you say 'I am greatly in sympathy with Owen's concern that his fellow soldiers should not look at his poems, shake their heads and say 'No compris'. Of course, many won't compris, but it's the best dictum to work by'. I wonder whether you had any response from your parents, or your wife at the time, about their being subjects of your verse?

BJ

I think again, it was the tradition in my family - people don't talk. It came up later. I think things opened up when eventually I left my wife and I decided I needed to talk to my parents about this. And I had to sit down and start talking to them about my life. I couldn't believe what was coming out of my mouth. We didn't talk about these things. I was always the bright lad who was doing well. I had to tell them that I wasn't,

that I'd always lived in pain, that my marriage was not what they thought it was. That actually opened up a lot. They were then able to talk to me [infinitely . . .]. It was the opening up.

PM

That's interesting because one of the things one might come away from the poems with is that there appears to be ... I mean, here you are coming from a family that works, that appears to operate, that is not dysfunctional, and yet -

BJ

In *A Family Album*, you see in the words that are given to people, the central figures it's based on, there is a kind of profound [disquiet] about what has happened - where we are at, what are our responsibilities? So, I think 'A Family Album' is a poem that puzzled and distressed my parents. They now quote it and enjoy talking about it, show it to the neighbours, but, yes, I think it caused them a lot of pain, a lot of distress. I mean, I've talked a lot to my daughter about ... because when my marriage broke down, my daughter was 17 and she took the whole thing very hard and for endless ... when I took her out in the car, she would say absolutely nothing. And it took a long time for her to start talking. I was forever trying to talk, offering her the chance, and when she did start talking, there was a lot of ... what came back was a lot of very punishing things about what I had done. One of the things she'd start talking about was some of the poems which said something about her, for example in 'The Children of Separation', the title poem about the child on the train. I think what's good is that the poems, in some way, although it's taken a long time, have been catalysts in producing people talking. I now get on well with my daughter. That's really good, and the relationship with my parents is better. And in this sense, it has come through talking about, in one aspect, talking about what, apparently, I'd been saying about them, and why I'd been writing. Initially, it caused upset and pain - [we] hurt, be quiet! - but I've realised

by looking at the poems you can actually . . . you can have conversations about them as a matter of making things easier.

PM

That's true enough. I mean, one of my sad memories is of when I took my mother to Kerry for her seventieth birthday, to Murreigh, back to the house in which she was born, where her brother still lives with his wife. I sat in a cafe looking out on Dingle Harbour and found myself scribbling out a poem. I then had great fun in the town, having a birthday cake made, and arranging for the poem to be framed, in great haste, for my Uncle James. The people in the local Art shop thought it all a great adventure! He was very pleased, and touched, I think, at first, and he made me read it aloud, until my mother started worrying over what the poem said - about the door no longer being open for cups of tea and the time of day - you can't say that, she said. The result was that the poem he was about to hang on his wall, was put away in a drawer, where it probably remains to this day. He buried it, because he saw he might have to start explaining it ... I was going to ask whether there have been other poets, contemporary or otherwise - you've mentioned Edward Thomas - you've felt an affinity for because they were writing out of a similar kind of background. Tony Harrison writes about his working class background, for example, or Douglas Dunn, perhaps. I'm not suggesting you should do ...

BJ

I've never felt any particular sort of affinity with those two. With Harrison, I can recognise some situations - offering his parents a book and so on. Particularly, Harrison's sense of distance between the life and the writing and the world of literature, and I think, in me, that has been a shaping influence. I've mentioned to you before the Alan Rawsthorne incident, a very powerful memory - my father cleaning up the sick of this

composer - and that seemed to speak a great deal about the artist and society.

PM *Stoppard's Dadaist, Tristan Tzara, asks, in 'Travesties' 'What is an artist?', and continues: 'For every thousand people there's nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who's the artist'.*

BJ I've always had this equivocal feeling about art. This goes back to what we were talking about earlier, being [unclubbable]. Whenever I'm with, in the world of the arts and artists, I feel uneasy. I feel [. . .] and yet it's something I miss. So it's difficult ...

PM *I feel this difficulty in connecting with people like Damien Hirst, who makes me feel uncomfortable, because he deals in art that depends upon an immediate, and only an immediate, effect. There are different traditions, of course. I wonder, in the whole tradition of English poetry, including all you've enjoyed and studied, whether, in the various traditions, there is one you feel you are contributing to?*

BJ I think one of the features, and a problem for me that was already created, is the way I feel unsure about where I belong. An interesting example of this is that, since my last book of poems, what I've been doing is really working through my feeling of discontent - and that feeling of discontent has been there, for many years before that. I felt I didn't want to do what I was doing - I didn't want to do it, yet I was doing it. I didn't want to do what I'd done before - didn't want to do what I was doing - and, again, this is where I felt in sympathy with a poet like Edward Thomas, all those years where he felt it was impossible to write poems. I wanted in some way to move away from the anecdotal tradition. I didn't want to write

anecdotes in poems, which I feel I'd been doing. I wanted to see how far one could do without the story. I found myself drawn to the poetry of Paul Celan and a whole range of non-English poets, including Ashbery, who were working in different ways. And I found myself actually preferring to be silent rather than write what I had been writing.

PM *That's a long way to travel for someone who'd said earlier that he felt that poetry was ceding too much ground to the novelist, to the story writer ...*

BJ I think I needed to come back to the story, to tell it in a different way. But it's also to do with a sense of loss of . . . it's a deeply rooted thing. As you know, whatever you're writing is related to many other things in your life - and not to have faith in stories is a very profound thing. I think I'd lost faith in storytelling, and connections with a whole range of things. Even to write a sentence where two clauses were linked with a 'but' or an 'although'. I don't know if you understand what I'm saying. These things become absolutely central to a writer - how do you put one word next to another? How can you make connections if you don't feel them? What do you do? And so, what I think I've been doing, I hope, is moving back to being able to tell stories, but in a different way. The person that I think helped me most in this recently has been Elizabeth Bishop. But that journey over the past few years has gone through people like Celan and Hill, and I think, in the last year, Elizabeth Bishop has been the most important poet. Interesting to read a poet for generations and they don't click. I reviewed a Selected of Elizabeth Bishop for *London Magazine*, I think it was, or I was given it to review and didn't bother to review it¹ - and I've often read Elizabeth Bishop - 'The Fish' and

¹ Brian Jones's review of 'Selected Poems' by Elizabeth Bishop (Chatto & Windus, 15s) appeared under the heading 'Singling Out' in *London Magazine*, Vol 7 No 12 (March 1968), pp 84/5.

*He said he tries to include two good ideas in each line. I remember writing to someone saying that that was one idea more than has launched many a successful career! It relates to this business of what constitutes a story. I commented in my review of your *The Children of Separation* that you should find an interest in the naturalistic Barbizon school of painting, and that if one finds flowers in your poems, they are likely to be the modest marguerite, rather than anything grander. I wonder whether you have a determined affinity for things ordinary, that, somehow, if you came away from that, you'd be relinquishing your link with your parents.*

BJ Well, yes. It's a kind of agoraphobia. [...] These certainties. I think part of the distaste for what I'd written has come simply from, say, the greater contact I've had with France since my second marriage. Just being in touch with another culture. I mean, one of the things that struck me forcibly about Hughes's *Birthday Letters* ... [the image of the peach?]

(END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A)

TAPE 1 SIDE B

BJ After my conversation with you at the cricket match, I was thinking back over some of my books, and what kept leaping out at me were images of trapped people, of people trapped, locked inside something, their own fear, their own terror, the Courtenay Play people who were locked inside their own hedgerows. Over and over and over again, it's been to do with people who were enclosed, and with structures of deprivation.

PM *And some of the characters in 'Introductory:1944' at the beginning of 'The Children of Separation'.*

BJ Yes, that's right - and it clarified for me how my life has had in parallel education and writing. The education side, as with the poetry, is an assault on that, it's how I've handled that, both in me and in other people. Taking the sacks off people's heads, trying to open up why people - I never realised how limited my cultural background was, and it's only since I've been going abroad that I suddenly thought, Oh, God, there are other poeties rather than English poetry, other ways of thinking and feeling about life. That's what struck me about the first poem in Hughes's 'Birthday Letters', where he's in the Strand, and it ends when he eats a peach or something. Yes, a peach. I understand that - and that's what happened to me in cultural terms, I mean, not just in vegetable terms! What I thought was poetry was a particular kind of English poetry that helped to satisfy a need I had.

PM *You've already mentioned Celan, whom many would regard as exceedingly difficult . . .*

BJ Yes, he's sometimes impenetrable, but I just found it extraordinarily interesting. I was just drawn to it. I suppose the only English poems that approach it are those of Geoffrey Hill, who also can be difficult.

PM *I find myself in sympathy with readers who baulk at, say, Ashbery. I find myself responding that I don't have time as a reader to do the requisite work. Your Celan connection is really very interesting, as well as surprising. But I want to ask you also about R.D.Laing, because of the stuff you've been telling me about your work with schizophrenics and in prisons and so on - the juxtaposition of so many poems about family and an interest in somebody whose major argument was that families cause schizophrenia. You obviously felt some connection there*

BJ Yes, although I was writing before I started reading Laing. I found it immediately extraordinary - not only his approach in encouraging people to carry on the journey they're on, not to shut themselves off. I mean, in my own life, like many people in my generation ... To read Laing with his encouragement to go forward with what's happening, to follow it through, I found very helpful and exciting.

PM *I remember finding Laing exciting. There's a big difference, of course, between Laing the writer and the man who was treating people, who gets in the way and has led to his becoming discredited - but I did find it exciting because there is clearly something going on there that one recognises. Did Laing follow through to David Smail?*

BJ Yes. All these interests locked into what was going on in my professional life. When I was reading Smail, I was in charge of Adult Education and Training in this area of Kent, and I was looking at and working through different ways of helping people to teach ... and so I was drawn to things like counselling and psychology. Smail doesn't feature very greatly, but I was reading him as I was doing various things and thinking various things and there were quotations that seemed very apt.

PM *They certainly fit alongside the notion of 'Enemies' Country', which of course is from Hill. And from Laing to Foucault? I can see some connections . . .*

BJ These are all landmarks in my development and developing interests.

PM *You've said that you like Foucault because he's subversive.*

BJ Yes, he's a kind of academic Oscar Wilde, turning things upside down, inverting the obvious, suddenly creating something quite astonishing - but again with him, what I was drawn to was what was in me, this sense of variance of self which is at the heart of things. I know there is a great debunking of Foucault going on, but I think Foucault is witty, Foucault is playful, Foucault is irresponsible. And also it was for me a matter of how do we as a society and as individuals handle aspects of the self . . .

PM His is an interestingly skewed approach to history, amongst other disciplines. One is so used to things linear. He takes, as it were, a cross-sectional view, by looking at history through madness or sexuality. But aren't these things linked, and perhaps significantly for you as well, to the notion of control, to the notion of power? How this exercises itself, how it is manifest . . .

BJ I think one of the central things of Foucault that spoke to me was the way he was able to expound the ways in which we internalise the mechanisms of control, so the self can control itself. I think this was very, very powerful, and he clarified - and I think that's been central in my life and in what I write - the controlling mechanisms, the shaping mechanisms in society, in the way things are worked out, are reborn inside the individual so that the individual knows how to repress, how to shut off, how to punish the self, and doesn't need society to do it.

PM I'm sorry if I risk trivialising this, I'm conscious of having a job as a schoolteacher that entails my telling people off because they're not wearing the right thing ...

BJ The image I have from when I was a schoolteacher in London, is of walking along a corridor on duty one day when it was pissing with rain, opening a classroom door, and there were two little boys going ‘cluck - cluck’ with a table tennis ball and a bat, and I screamed at them: ‘What do you think you’re doing!’. They were only playing table tennis. And I thought: ‘What is going on?’! They were only playing table tennis . . .

PM *I know. We have a great purge going on at the moment because some boys are coming in with half their hair dyed blond - and this is being seen as some kind of horrific assault on normality. The idea ‘normality’ leads me on to something I like you to mention, because I know you are interested in this idea of normalisation and, for example, the whole Russian experience. Russian literature features to some extent in your work, at least in epigraphs, particularly in ‘Freeborn John’. Has Russian literature always been an influence?*

BJ Not particularly. As far as I can remember, I’ve always enjoyed [...] Ahkmatova, particularly her ‘Requiem’, and Pushkin, Pushkin’s accounts of freedom. It’s to do with freedom and dance, subverting, challenging. With Ahkmatova, there’s an astonishing [mix] of personal and public, handled together. Often, again, when looking back over my volumes, they’ve been private, public, private, public, and that’s one of the things I [admire] in Ahkmatova. She’s found an image, a way of putting them together so that the whole of that pool of experience is interpreted through the guts of a mother, it’s alive - a woman, a mother. Even the way she portrays her [...] So, those two poets in particular.

PM *Irina Ratushinskaya has been on a tour of interviews recently. Michael Ignatieff’s closing remarks to her, apparently, at the*

South Bank, were something to the effect that he'd like to go on talking to her all night. To which she replied 'Why don't you?'. One of the points she was making was that they were trying to get her to talk about the horror of incarceration, the appalling subjection of self before a regime, and she resisted this in a way that seems almost more heroic still than if she'd rehearsed the terrible details. She said, you don't understand the freedom it gave, the freedom to think, the freedom to write (even if paper was difficult to find on which to write). There was something irreversible about the situation, there was nothing she could do about it. It was extreme, and it couldn't be questioned. This was the situation she'd been in. Now, normally, one tends to wander around all the time thinking 'I ought to be doing this, or that' in one form or another.

BJ That's parallel, isn't it, to what happened to Edward Thomas and Wilfred Owen. It's significant that Edward Thomas starts to write poetry when he's a soldier willing and ready to die. When all the decisions are taken away, when the greynesses are swept away and life is clear and simple, painful and clear and simple, then it permits the poetry to come out.

PM *And a flood of poetry in Thomas's case. There was a close association between Edward Thomas and Robert Frost. But you're not nearly so keen on Frost, are you? Why is this?*

BJ No, I'm not very keen on Frost. I find Frost very knowing. It's fascinating putting a Frost poem next to one by Thomas. The difference is in the rhythms and the movement. Frost is very knowing. I feel he knows what all his poems are doing.

PM *I recall Stoppard saying that the trouble with bad art is that the artist knows exactly what he's doing. Yet there is a move, I think, and it's discernible even in the world of Theory, in the*

world of Lit. Crit, if you like, that Thomas is beginning to be granted his due, or perhaps he's being used as a weapon with which to beat Pound and Eliot. Edna Longley, for example, has written persuasively about the importance of Thomas and Frost.

BJ

Yes. There was an anthology of poems for and about Edward Thomas and I was asked to contribute to it - 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' is in there - compiled by Ann Harvey - and I was pleased to see [...] My 'A Garland for Edward Thomas' is quite an early one, and there are poems by people who knew him [. . .] forties. My poem appeared in '66, and it's followed by a glut: Dannie Abse, Derek Walcott, Jeremy Hooker, Norris, Kavanagh, Porter, Longley, Elizabeth Jennings, William Cooke. We were all asked to make comments - anything we wanted to say about the poems. I haven't seen this for years. Can I read it to you, what I said?

At critical times in my life, his poetry has been with me ... in my pocket, beside my bed. When things are falling apart, what he says and how he says it is a toughness, something enduring, seasoned, tried, triumphant. I have sometimes misused him for an easy nostalgia to simplify things, but that is me, not him, I love his wryness, his niggling persistence and determination to say what is just and accurate, both in sense and in rhythm. I like the way he felt for so long that it was impossible to write poetry. I like the way it came to be written under the looming cliff-face of death. I like the way nearly all his poems show him just triumphing over the 'poetic' - the struggle hard and violent. I like the way his poems run like an austere, authentic thin seam through all the art of this century, the art of this century, with its styles and postures and impersonalities and claims and grandiosities and martyrdoms and stances ... I love all those, too, but I think I need most his distilling poetry from a grave, inevitable and earnest voice. Ironically tinged.

I think I'd stand by that. He means all that to me. And I do see him as being this important strain running through the poetry of this century.

PM *He seems to be increasingly alluded to. I keep saying 'resurrected', by which, of course, I mean by academy. It seems now OK to be talking about Edward Thomas and to be talking about him alongside, or even instead of, say, Eliot. Seamus Heaney coined a wonderful phrase in talking about his own education - he said we'd all been 'Eliotised'. With Edward Thomas, there was a sense that there wasn't enough going on (it was pre-modernist, anyway). One didn't have to keep looking up references or learning Chinese, as with Pound, so he couldn't be worth studying. And I think those things you've been talking about are important to his resurgence. I particularly like your notion of his 'triumphing over the poetic'.*

BJ Yes, and often it's only just. You can feel the struggle in the poems, and some of the poems can be ...

PM *Well, he's been characterised so often as one of the Georgian poets, and that's what he was having to 'triumph' over.*

BJ I think that's something else I feel an affinity with, something I said to you in a previous conversation. I feel increasingly that anything I write comes out of being on the faultlines between things, and I think he is - I mean, in every aspect he's on the faultline: socially, artistically, poetically - and I love it. You get the tremors of being on the faultline in the poetry - in the rhythms, the uncertainties, the movement, and that's what makes what he does [...] for a moment, for a minute, so unbelievable. That's why 'Adlestrop' is so astonishing. For one minute, the blackbird sang. It's unbelievable, and it's not

because he's a Georgian. It's because he's allowing these tremors to come through.

PM *And the conversational tone, by which I mean, I suppose, what you've called 'the triumph over the poetic'. But that's always been presented as something he learned from Frost, and that may be so, but Frost may have just lent him the extra courage to do it.*

BJ Yes. I mean, Frost told him he was writing the best poetry, only in prose, didn't he. And I think he just gave him that extra push, but I do feel, more than that, it's the possibility of extinction. I'm absolutely convinced it was because there it was in front of him.

PM *I admire, in somebody so wracked, the bravery of simply coming out and saying things. I mean, in some of the reviews, too. Wasn't it Thomas who was the first to declare his hand for Ezra Pound, the first critic not to sit on the fence - Ezra Pound is a major figure - it was unequivocal. You come across someone few have heard of, you don't know much about him ... I think I've told you before that Matthew Francis, who recently had his first collection out from Faber, said he'd grown tired of reviews which offer him praise with the one hand and take it back with the other - as if the reviewer were frightened of posterity, were Matthew Francis to become the new Wordsworth or whatever. But Thomas did not draw back like this.*

Right, we mentioned 'power' earlier. Thinking back to Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators', do you think the poet has any power? Or is this not a century in which that kind of thing makes any sense? I mean, Auden has this idea, at the end of a poem he later disowned, that goes alongside his 'poetry makes

nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying . . . a mouth', where he writes: 'Yet dotted everywhere, / Ironic points of light / Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages'. I remember being tremendously struck by that, that this was something to aspire to, to be one of those 'points of light'. That seems to me to a powerful enough projection . . .

BJ I really don't know about the reading of poetry. For me, it's always been the writing of poetry that has been a major [. . .]. And that's true particularly with the groups I work with, in the mainstream of education and in creative writing classes. All I can say is that over a period of time [. . .] to develop the courage to say what is right, to find an image to carry the charge [of who you are].

PM *Without misreading it - I don't mean misreading the poems. I mean, finding the courage to say who you are and what you are feeling, and to get that right is no easy matter.*

BJ Yes, so for me, the writing is the important thing. I mean, I know what poetry has meant to me as a reader, but I don't think I'm in a position to say how [poetry] speaks to us as a society.

PM *...which is something - I suppose I'm thinking about this sense in Hill that somehow he ought to be able to say something, he ought to be able to break through to the grand analysis, however uneasy or uncomfortable he feels. But there is a sense of grandness about Hill, of someone searching for authority, an authoritative voice.*

BJ That certainly seems to be the case in the last book, 'Canaan'.

PM *That was going to lead me - this will seem like we're switching abruptly. You said in a letter when you sent in the manuscript*

of The Island Normal that although the poems were interconnected and related, you thought of the collection as really one poem. The sequence is a characteristic of your work - the contents page of 'For Mad Mary' provides an example. There are many poems in that collection but the contents page is brief because the poems are arranged into sections, if not always sequences. 'For Mad Mary' itself and 'The Courtenay Play' stand alone but the other thirty poems or so are subsumed into three sections. Is there a connection between this liking for sequences or groupings and narrative? That sequences create a kind of narrative? And there are sequences in your other collections, and some of them take us back to Aeneas or Civil War England or the Second World War. In asking you about this sequential narrative link, might I also ask what you think poets inherit from the past?

BJ

I was thinking about this when we were talking about writers like Smail. I think, like most poets, I'm a magpie - that something is opportunistically there when I feel something or wish to do something. I can remember, for instance, 'The Courtenay Play'. That was a story I was extremely drawn to when I came to Canterbury. It coincided with a time when I was reading people like Ivan Illic, 'Deschooling Society', and I was very much on the point of leaving teaching - and here, on my doorstep, was this tale of this uprising in 1830 and at the heart of it was a [Dame's?] school and a teacher and somebody sent down for a commissioner for education, Liardet, to give his report - and his report actually said that what we've got to start doing is to ensure that education - these people are educated - these people are *not* educated! - and the implication was that education has got to defuse things like this. So, suddenly, that story, which had been around, I'd known of it for some time in Canterbury, about this uprising, suddenly became the vehicle I needed to carry what were becoming

overwhelming concerns for me - like, what happens in education?, what is education for?, how do people internalise the social need that they should be quiet - and so this story of this charismatic figure leading these people walking around the lanes of Kent to some greater glory and then their being punished, that story clicked, though I'd known it for a very long time. And I think that's happened with all of them, including the Aeneas sequence, which I was very pleased with - I really enjoyed writing that and I think it's important and good. I'd always liked the Aeneid and for some reason I found - I did Latin up to A-level and Scholarship level . . .

PM *The only word I remember from my Latin studies is 'periculum', which means 'danger'!*

BJ I wasn't doing poetry. I was struggling through translations and then, quite late, around the time of *The Island Normal*, I suddenly found I was drawn to look at it in Latin. So I started to work through it in Latin. Something had taken me to it, perhaps because of the sense there of overwhelming sadness and loss and the need to find something else - again the faultline between two worlds. That was coming up because I was on the point of leaving many things, my marriage and a whole range of things, and this terrible sense of the sadness of the man and the sadness of the wife trying to [raise?] him. So here were things happening in various aspects of my life, my private life, my professional life, and suddenly this thing, that I'd already [known about], suddenly becomes the focus again. That's what's happened with all of these. The poem 'For Mad Mary', which goes well beyond the central figure of Mary - I was drawn - that was when I first got interested in reading about how society treats insanity, and although Mad Mary, that figure, doesn't become the central figure in it, she is quite important, this figure of this woman walking through the

streets, looking [down], and somehow in that I could see all the enclosures and stiflings of my childhood and my culture. Because I saw that also in my Aunt Em, the woman shut in her basement room, like me shut in the prefab, all these images of being shut in, shut in, shut in, and these Courtenay figures shut in their hedgerows, shut in by the soldiers with the sacks over their heads and punished and shut in a barn. At times these images suddenly [?surround?] my own investigations of [...] life, suddenly turns [...] I've always liked the Aeneid, and suddenly, bang, it was what I needed.

PM The Civil War, similarly? Was there a connection for you between the civil war and the '80s? John Lilburne and so on?

BJ Freeborn John. It was really the story mentioned at the beginning. How difficult it was to silence him. Systematically, they bound him and gagged him and tied his hands together and then the person reporting said 'He did stamp, stamp'. And that image became so important. At the time, what was happening in my professional life was always [?also?] what was happening in England, where voices were being silenced. It might seem ridiculous [PM: I don't think it is ridiculous at all], but I knew some superb people who were literally being sent out - we're not sacking you, but you've been sent out there - you're being moved from this position of importance and you're to go and look after that little place over there.

PM I have to explain - I'm only saying this by way of analogy for what 'seems ridiculous' - but you mentioned 'Portrait of the Artist' and on the couple of occasions I've taught that as an A-level text, I have to tell the students, to insist, that the wonderful, lengthy account of the religious retreat is not an escape into the realms of fantasy, that this is real - this is how it felt. And my experience of teaching in the 1980s was the

elimination of debate. I was no longer invited to discuss things, I was only allowed to discuss how they were to be implemented, not whether.

BJ

I did have some difficulties, for instance, in the reception of that book. I remember Michael Schmidt talking to me about that, and I suddenly felt, here is a man who belongs to a world I don't belong to, who doesn't belong to the world I belong to. I think there is a dimension in the literary world who really don't know what was happening. So it raises the issue of how far you can use poetry to speak about specific things that are happening in politics. I'm quite proud of that book, although I think it's flawed and it's got a lot of things that are inadequate about it - but I tried it. I tried to handle something that was absolutely central to our culture, about the stifling of debate, about the silencing of voices, about making people invisible. We were doing it. It wasn't just happening in Argentina, where people were being disappeared - it was happening here. And, although, looking back, there are aspects of myths I was using that weren't working, and there are faults of tone, I'm proud to have tried it and I think it does carry a sense of desperation.

PM

I'm pleased to hear you say that. I think it's interesting because part of the reception was born of the conviction that you can't do this sort of thing in poetry. You can't be angry in poems - and there is a barely concealed, but I thought rather well controlled anger in 'The Stansted Sonnets', and in other poems in the volume, even if a little more distantly, though they're none the less effective for that. I think anyone who works in the educational world and that kind of bureaucratic takeover can read 'Caesar's Progress' with recognition, and not a little humour ...

BJ Indeed. What you were saying earlier about the ‘can-do’ approach to teaching. There is a poem there that you’ve reminded me of that I’d forgotten about, about somebody applying for a job in Caesar’s Inspectorate, and the words he uses are like ‘buoyant’ - and that’s all part of it. That was when my immediate working life affected my poetry most, in that collection, and it’s one I’ll stand by - but I do feel there are people for whom these weren’t actual subjects for poetry as well.

PM *Quite so . . .*

BJ This is not the subject for poetry - write a polemic, write an article, write a satirical [piece], whatever it might be.

PM *There are those who’ve said in reviews, including one by someone I know well, that Brian Jones should go back and look again at the first half dozen poems in his first book and go back to doing that. There is at least a strand of that argument in many of the things that have been written about you. The entry by Martin Seymour-Smith, for example, in the Oxford Companion to 20th Century Poetry, was impressed by the ‘energetic, blunt poet’ of the early collections and that ‘expectations were maintained’ up to and including ‘For Mad Mary’. He is less keen after that, that ‘the satirical view taken ... of the acquisitive society and of art threatened by commercialism, while moderately effective and deeply felt, seemed predictable and less original than the personal note sounded in the first poems’. ‘Freeborn John’ didn’t get many reviews at all.*

BJ I don’t think so . . .

PM *There was one by Sean O'Brien in London Magazine - but I think, generally, it was a matter of your taking on subjects you 'shouldn't' write poems about.*

BJ Yes, there is that dimension to it, but I don't want to be defensive about this - there's always been that dimension.

PM *Going back to what you were saying about your interest in what you regard as story, I was talking to Michael Schmidt, who incidentally said he still had your Collected Poems ...*

BJ Yes, he's still got them - and I've got a signed contract for it, too - but since the bomb I haven't bothered him about it.

PM *They might not be there any more, of course. But it's interesting. Here you are saying that you are not interested in the anecdotal any more, you're not interested in that way of telling a story any more, that there are different ways, including the European influence, and so on , and Michael saying he's lost a little bit of interest in your work, and that of Rodney Pybus, for example. You belong, he thinks to a lost generation. He put you in with Pybus, Alistair Elliot and one or two others. I'm sure the reason is part of the argument he made in 'British Poetry since 1970', that, every so often, education looks around for replacements to be the new standard poets. Once you get them: Hughes, Heaney, Gunn . . . I don't know, have I missed someone?*

BJ Harrison?

PM *Well, perhaps, Harrison, though he was a little later. Hughes and Heaney were taken up by everybody. Anyone who followed on after immediately after them was in trouble. There was no way they were going to be taken on. But Michael was saying he*

had lost some interest, well, comparatively, in narrative forms of verse, and had become much more interested in form itself. I wish I'd had time when I was there, or he'd had time, to hear him develop this, to say more about what he had in mind. I mean, obviously there's the link between what is said and how it is said . . .

BJ I think, for me, one of the problems I have when I'm thinking about anecdotal poetry ... is that in my own case I can see these are an insurance of control. I think what I'm trying to do is to open up, to let more in. The shape of the story, the shape of the anecdote, is something, perhaps, I began to be suspicious of; these were things which were excluding realms of feeling, possibly.

PM *Do you think it's because the anecdotes are there to replace expressions of feeling - the anecdotes are put in place and they do their work, so there's no need to say any more.*

BJ Yes. I think that in my case, they can be an aspect of always wanting to tidy things up, to get things neat, to order things - because there is a side of me that likes reading ... I like reading things and I am very excited by ideas and I think an aspect of my writing I have some disquiet about - I can close down my poetry - I can tidy it up. I can give it shape - and for me these are all kind of spurious things. But, in fact, I think, recently, I've started to write in an anecdotal way again, but in a way that is giving me more pleasure, which is freer and more relaxed, and also I'm trying to find a way of writing poetry where I'm expressing happiness - which is what I think I've got from Elizabeth Bishop. Do you know her poem called 'The Moose'? Read 'The Moose' and read it next to Larkin's 'Whitsun Weddings'. 'The Moose' is a story of a journey on a bus, the back of a bus, through the lakes, of people getting on

and off, people walking, and a moose appears at the end. I keep reading this and thinking this is [unbelievable]. It is an astonishingly relaxed way of celebrating what is. Whatever is happening is just wonderful. And the voice is so different from Larkin's. Larkin speaks about people dressed in their bad taste and uncles talking smut and his feeling of distaste for it all, and the stanza form's so tight and anally-restrictive. In Bishop, there is a beautiful sense of rhythm.

PM *Although, in Larkin, sometimes, the surprise is in how the poem opens out at the end.*

BJ Yes, but I think the ending of 'Whitsun Weddings' is very bad. That really is a strange and [bleak] image. But I think what I'm finding in Bishop is the possibility of writing something like a narrative which is more open-ended, more inclusive - not making a point, not sealing it up [. . .] ending. And also the possibility of poetry handling feelings of pleasure, which I've not used it for before. I mean, there *are* poems of pleasure, but when I think about it, my poems have always had a lot of pain, they have been a sort of way of handling the pain adequately. But it's also been restricted.

PM *That's partly an answer to 'What are you involved in at the moment?'*

BJ Well, it's been the journey I was talking about, the sense of moving into total silence. I didn't write anything for two years, to think about how I was writing. That that disease had been growing. And I began to feel more at ease with the silence. Then I began to work on poetry that was far more [open].

(END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B)

TAPE 2, SIDE A

BJ ... much more kind of stream-of-consciousness writing. I've written a number of stories.

PM Which you'll do something with?

BJ I don't know. One of them was very long, based on the disappearance of Alain Fournier - Alain Fournier's supposed disappearance. When I look at them, these stories are all to do with the anguish I have about the writer and not being a writer, how the writer [...] And I suppose the Fournier story is about his finally being confronted by [...] I also wrote a ghost story, about a writer who dies in a house, and about his ghost who can't get out of the house, who is trapped inside the house - a very disturbing story. The writer who'd spent all his time worrying about his writing, about his career as a writer, his reputation as a writer, and how he'd neglected his wife and he'd neglected his children and it was all brought home to him and he was punished eternally.

PM Another one of your trapped figures.

BJ Another trapped figure. I think what was behind it all is that lovely line of Seamus Heaney's where he says Why couldn't you once [...] walk in the garden [...] So those are two stories which just came.

PM But clearly, it's not of much matter to you if they don't see the light of day . . .

BJ At the moment it's not. I'd like to get some of the poems I've been working on and send them to some magazines. But it has made me realise why I write, this taking stock, after this period

of silence, asking myself why do I really write, what is it for? And I do realise now, it is important to me. It is not important in terms of being published or being loved or being recognised, or anything like this, but the actual process of writing, and working at it and [...] of the language is absolutely vital for my life. It's a process I uniquely value and I feel [...] if I'm not engaged in it. And these other things, they really are incidental. I mean, in the past, I was like anybody else: who's who? - who's doing what? - writers [...] by jealousy - who's [buying] the pamphlet? - who's not? - it doesn't deserve that - and so on. I think for some time that's not been very important to me.

PM *It would be nice to see some of them, to see what you're doing.*

BJ Well, if it's all right with you - we're going away for a few weeks - and I'd like to take stock of what I've been doing and I can send you some to look at, if you think you'd like me to - but I need to look at them first.

PM *Yes, of course. I think we'll finish in a minute - I'm getting very tired! Grevel Lindop, when he was reviewing The Children of Separation in the TLS, asked 'Why is Brian Jones so little known, so rarely discussed?' and offered one possible answer: 'The reasons for this neglect are not entirely obscure. Much of Jones's poetry is of a subtlety and delicacy that are not fully apparent at first reading, and may remain altogether invisible to a hasty and unreflective reader. Also, Jones is not always a good judge of his own work, tending to admit bland or sentimental writing alongside material of great strength and originality'. One can hardly resist asking whether you've written 'bland or sentimental' verse - but I won't! Nevertheless, how good do you consider yourself a critic of your own work? I mean, do you think you are a good critic of your own work, that you know when it's right?*

BJ No, I don't know when it's right, but I do know when I feel easy about it. When I feel quite good, have a good feeling about it . . .

PM *Do you tend to write things and they more or less stay as they are, or do you put them to one side and come back to them later?*

BJ I do lots and lots of rewriting. None of them are first drafts - they've all been worked on. It would be nice if we were given an example of what is 'bland or sentimental'.

PM *I know - that was my response: Find me an example. I suspect it's when you get expressions in poems which are about pain and unease and, suddenly, we get an expression of something that's rather more pleasant - just the attempt to be happy. I'd really like to ask you - this is about faultlines again, I think ...When Hill goes back and looks and recognises a kind of nostalgia, without falling prey to it himself - it's not as if Hill is saying let's get back to those halcyon days, but rather what we have forgotten. What's worth retaining and how do I cope with the business that so much of what we've inherited comes out of people's suffering. It's about Englands, isn't it? I know Heaney calls them 'Englands of the Mind', but the Englands in Hill are almost oppositional, aren't they? I was just connecting that with what you were saying about the faultlines ... There is more than one poem - there's 'Return Journey' in The Children of Separation, and two in 'The Island Normal', about returning home, usually from the sea - and it's a kind of reflection, isn't it? What does this mean? I've been away for a while, even if, as one poem says, to Nowhere - I'm returning, what does this mean? And that has the section about someone well past forty asking how he can say This is mine' when he is not able to say*

'This is me'. Interestingly enough, the Horace-speaking- to- Vergil poem is of the same kind -.

BJ I like that one.

PM *- so do I. Isn't there in it a sense of what you've been talking about: This what I think but I wish I didn't think it, of Horace wondering why he is getting so upset and excited and agitated?*

BJ I think that poem has, in the two figures, some of the oppositions of two things that run through my poems, all of them - which give them their oscillations and movements from private to public, from love to hate to uncertainty. I mean, Horace is the home-lover and Vergil is the traveller, and yet Horace as the traveller has suddenly become the enemy - and there's another poem, 'Fearful' [*in The Island Normal*] 'I'm a romantic - it's just this unaccountable / agoraphobia that holds me back' [*continues reading the poem ...*]:

*I'm a natural for footloose
speculation and shouldered haversack -*

*the expedition of one
among mistresses and orchids
though my whole sense of travel
is of life on the skids*

*plodding from chair to set
varying the channels
irked by endless reading
of minuscule novels*

*Why does space hate me?
The trigger somewhere and the finger curled.
When I was a child and real I lay
on our tar roof and itched for the world.*

It's good, that! It's that that runs through this, too.

PM *The first house I remember living in was next door to a prefab.*

BJ One thing I am aware of is that, when I put a book of poems together, they are put together - as a book. And this happened from the very first poem in *The Island Normal*, 'Overnight', where we're coming in from the night 'to feel exclusion' - all through this you have images of ...

PM *I have to say that, if I had to make a choice of one of your poems, I might take that one, 'Overnight', because I find it remarkable - with its allusions to Thomas ('the train unscheduled stops') - and 'to what must be a child howling somewhere' reminds of Auden's 'Musee des Beaux Arts' ('that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky'). You were saying there's a whole kind of world or dimension that doesn't seem to belong to the world we live in, that doesn't recognise what's going on, that doesn't recognise what seems to be right in front of one's eyes. I sometimes think that about some of the poems I read. I read what someone else has to say about them, in books, and I end up saying No, you're missing the point entirely - why don't you see what's staring me straight in the face. But answer me a silly little question: why, in *The Island Normal*, 'Upon Crappleton House' is where it is (i.e. placed as the last poem in the 'Aeneas and After' sequence)? When this sequence was published in *PN Review*, and in the manuscript you submitted for the collection, it went as far as 'The Dream'. 'Upon Crappleton House' was added later - yet there's another Andrew Marvell-inspired poem in the sequence that follows ('At Great Tew'). Did you take 'Upon Crappleton House' away from that later sequence and relocate it as the final poem in 'Aeneas and After'?*

BJ It's such a long time ago, I really don't remember.

PM *I was just interested to discover how it came to be added later.*

BJ The sequence is called ‘Aeneas and *After*’, isn’t it . . . ?

PM *It’s just that we get another Andrew Marvell poem almost immediately afterwards. Has it been taken from there?*

BJ Well, what it felt like was, having journeyed with Aeneas and landed and fought off the beast, what you then do is build in the place. This is exactly what it was like. And what I’ve said is an obvious satire. That was actually based on a community centre in Ramsgate - a lot of what is there actually happened. A community centre built by the council and we were invited to have an Adult Education section there. Everything happened, [Reads from Part 2 of ‘*Upon Crappleton House*’]:

*It was disastrous.
The high-hung concave dish urinals
splashed piss back accurately. The tiles,
pinned arsey-versey,*

*fell like leaves at the first big wind.
The elaborate concertina-sliding
partition slid once only,
jumped a rail*

*and fell, scoring irreparably
a floor already found to be
susceptible to hard-soled shoes.*

I can only think it was put there because the next stage after the travel from the burnt city to the new city, nightmares and dreams, is to build something. This is exactly what it was like.

PM *Enough, enough . . . Thank you very much indeed!*

(END)

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