

David Jones: Theory of Art; Theory of Culture

Seminar hosted by the David Jones Research Center, 7 & 8 March, 2019
Booth Special Collections, Georgetown University Library

Narrative

The work and thought of the British artist and WWI veteran David Jones (1895-1974) commands a unique perspective on the deeply intertwined questions of the theory of art and the theory of culture in the 20th century. Jones not only had extensive first-hand experience of total war, both as a private in the trenches of WWI and as a Londoner during the Blitz, but also communicated his experience in an interpenetrated corpus of visual art, prose, and poetic writing. Jones's sense of artistic form crosses the boundaries of the visual and the verbal in order to respond to the crisis of what he described as "unmaking" in his 1937 poem of WWI, *In Parenthesis*. As Mark Greif's (2015) and Alan Jacobs's (2018) recent studies indicate, the postwar period presented a unique "crisis" for artists and intellectuals in the West who found themselves confronted with challenges to traditional narratives about human identity and the nature of human flourishing. The work of David Jones places the theory of art at the very center of this crisis, drawing on the thinking of neo-Aristotelian-Thomist philosophers such as Jacques Maritain to regard the fine arts in light of the gamut of human making and so broaden the discussion to show how art encompasses more fundamental questions of human work, technology, religion, leisure, and politics.

This seminar situates the contribution of Jones's cultural and aesthetic theory and multimedia corpus in the immediate context of 20th-century artistic practice and theories of art and culture. It will particularly seek to show the unique light that Jones sheds on the understanding of war in the 20th century, narratives of modern secularization, and experiments in visual and poetic form that respond to the ruptures and new continuities that these cultural shifts incur.

Panel I: David Jones in "The Age of the Crisis of Man"

Thomas Berenato (University of Virginia), "Epoch and Artist in the Age of the Crisis of Man"

This paper re-reads Jones's 1959 *Epoch & Artist* in light of Mark Greif's analysis (2015) of midcentury "crisis-of-man" discourse. Greif restricts his discussion to American novels, but his insights into the pre-history and afterlife of the glut of writing about "universal" or "abstract" Man in the decade-and-a-half after the end of World War II are essential to understanding the milieu out of and into which Jones wrote the essays collected in this first and only volume of his prose published in his lifetime. Hannah Arendt's contemporary study *The Human Condition* (1958) emerges as a point of contrast from which to judge Jones's prose paean to *homo faber*.

Thomas Berenato is a co-organizer of this seminar. He is also co-editor of a new volume of Jones's unpublished prose just out summer 2018 from Bloomsbury Academic.

Anna Svendsen (Franciscan University of Steubenville), "David Jones and 'Artistic Activity'"

It is well-documented that David Jones and the circle of craftsmen of the Guild of St. Joseph and St. Dominic with whom he worked at Ditchling in the 1920s drew their primary "philosophy of art"

from the first English translation of Jacques Maritain's *Art et Scholastique* (Fr. John O'Connor's *The Philosophy of Art*) printed by the Ditchling house press in 1921. Maritain's work gave the basis for much of Jones, Gill and other's social criticism and reaction to the loss of the place of human "making" in their culture more generally, a loss they saw as the suffocation of a fundamental dimension of human flourishing. There is no evidence that David Jones would have read "*Activité Artistique*": *Philosophie du Faire* (1967) by the French Dominican philosopher and theologian, Marie-Dominique Philippe, but Philippe's work in many ways is a response to and continuation of the questions inaugurated by Maritain and a neo-Aristotelian-Thomistic realistic perspective, and fills out the implications of many of Maritain's, and by extension David Jones', questions about the importance not only of the "artwork" itself but more fundamentally the role of "artistic activity" from which it proceeds. This paper will explore aspects of Jones's philosophy of art as in fact gesturing towards the greater question of the philosophy of work and artistic activity that was a central question for mid-twentieth century philosophy.

Anna Svendsen recently defended her doctoral thesis, *The Shape of Sacrifice in David Jones' Landscape of War* at the University of York, UK. She is an Associate Director of the David Jones Research Center in Washington, DC and is currently teaching classes in medieval and modern literature at Franciscan University of Steubenville (Ohio).

Kathleen Henderson Staudt (Wesley Theological Seminary), "*Eia Domine Deus*': David Jones, *Poiesis*, and the Secular Imaginary in a Post-Christian Era"

David Jones lamented the deterioration of what he called "the material for effective signs" -- the words, meanings and cultural contexts that he drew on as a Christian poet and artist committed to the making of "valid signs." The secularism theories of Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre reveal Jones's originality among Modernists in his awareness not only of the "break" with previous eras but of the practical effect, for the artist, of the fragmentation of meanings and cultural traditions characteristic of a post-Christian era. The lens of Secularism theory allows us to find in Jones more subtle insights than his own invocation of Oswald Spengler and Christopher Dawson as diagnosticians of cultural decline and reveal his important contributions to theoretical reflection on the importance of practice and spiritual discipline in his understanding of the work of the artist in an increasingly alien culture. This paper will explore the relevance of David Jones's cultural theory to critical reflection on secularism in our time, and will illustrate the experiential dimension of his theory through an examination of his manuscript revisions to "A, a, a *DOMINE DEUS*," a poem of lament about the deterioration of what Jones called his *materia poetica*, published in two versions in his lifetime, and worked over and revised from the mid-1930s to its publication in *The Sleeping Lord* in 1974.

Kathleen Henderson Staudt teaches Christian Spirituality, Theology and the Arts at Wesley Theological Seminary and Virginia Theological Seminary and serves as Academic Director of the David Jones Research Center. She is co-editor most recently of *David Jones on Religion, Politics and Culture: Unpublished Prose* (Bloomsbury 2018) and is the author of *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics*, as well as many articles and reviews on Jones and his era. A practicing poet, she has also published three volumes of poetry, most recently *Good Places*.

Panel II: David Jones *vis-à-vis* 20th-century Poets

Tom Villis (Regent's University London), "Oswald Spengler, David Jones W. B. Yeats, and Historical Decline"

This paper compares the reception of the ideas of Oswald Spengler in the poetry and other writings of David Jones and W.B. Yeats. Both writers fell under Spengler's spell for a time, and both writers ended up rejecting many of his conclusions. The paper begins by analysing Spengler's broader reception in British culture, before considering in more detail the extent to which his ideas were incorporated into the work of the two poets. Yeats saw in Spengler a common spirit and a way of interpreting the despair of post-war Europe and an Ireland torn apart by civil war. Even though he had not read Spengler before writing *A Vision*, he was so struck by the similarity that he felt that they were both writing from *Spiritus Mundi*. For Jones, Spengler seemed to confirm his views about cultural decline which he associated with his concept of the 'Break'. To an extent, Spenglerian ideas also underpinned both writers' occasional positive pronouncements on fascism. However, for both writers their admiration of Spengler only went so far. For Yeats, his early enthusiasm became something of an embarrassment. For Jones, Spengler's cultural pessimism clashed with his own cosmic optimism. However, the idiosyncratic views of history constructed by both writers continued to show the influence of Spengler even after the Second World War. The conclusion hopes to show how Spengler was adopted into two influential poetic analyses of historical change.

Tom Villis is a Reader in History and Politics at Regent's University London. He was born in Durham and educated at the universities of Edinburgh, Grenoble and Cambridge. Tom is the author of *Reaction and the Avant-Garde* (I. B. Tauris, 2006) and *British Catholics and Fascism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). He has also recently contributed to two new books on *David Jones: David Jones: A Christian Modernist* (Brill, 2017) and *David Jones on Religion, Politics, and Culture* (Bloomsbury, 2018). He lives in Cambridge, UK.

Paul Robichaud (Albertus Magnus College), "Edward Thomas and David Jones: Cultural Identity, Reception, and Welsh Literature in English"

At a glance, it is difficult to imagine two twentieth-century poets more different than Edward Thomas and David Jones. Where Thomas wrote lyric poems that employ the traditional resources of meter, rhyme, and stanza, Jones embraced the formal innovations of modernism, creating a hybrid of prose and free verse that he designated "a shape in words." Thomas's resolutely secular, post-Christian worldview is similarly at odds with Jones's sacramental vision, rooted in Catholic theology and practice. Yet, as English-born writers with Welsh parents, both Jones and Thomas struggled with a conflicted sense of cultural and national identity that shaped their work as well, as its critical reception, in important ways. Soon after his death at Arras in 1917, Thomas was taken up by the English literary establishment as a quintessentially English poet with a modern, questioning sensibility. In his recent work on Thomas, Andrew Webb traces the individual and institutional forces at work in this process, while examining how other forces gradually produced a distinctively Welsh literature in English. Revising the theoretical and critical approaches taken by Webb, I map out some of the institutions and processes at work in David Jones's divided reception as a writer, who in his own lifetime was taken up by more established Welsh literary institutions, but whose

work has struggled over the last half-century to earn acceptance in the mainstream canon of British modernist literature.

Paul Robichaud, a native of Toronto, is professor and chair of English at Albertus Magnus College. He has published essays on a variety of modern poets, including David Jones, Geoffrey Hill, T.S. Eliot, and Louis MacNeice. His book *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages, and Modernism* was published by The Catholic University of America Press in 2007. He is currently completing a second book, *Mapping the Isles in British Modernism*.

Panel III: Visual & Verbal Intersections

Diane DeBell (Anglia Ruskin University, UK), “Excavating Connections in David Jones’s Work: The Visual and Verbal Imagination”

How does the human imagination move between the visual and the verbal? And is the analysis restricted by our tendency/desire/habit of categorising?

Rene Hague once commented with respect to Jones' poetry that his "dramatic voices operate like the unifying middle tone in a painting" with emphasis on sound and focused heavily on technique. Stanley Spencer used the descriptive phrase "safely gathered in" about Jones' work and these words became paradigmatic for Jones -- for his poetry and his painting.

In the 1930s, Kenneth Clark referred to Jones as "the best water colourist since Blake." At the same time, Jones was writing *In Parenthesis*, a masterpiece of modern experimental poetry in the traditions of William Blake and Malory. His understanding of poetry was informed by a dislike of contemporary British versification and lyric. In its place, he looked to the power and delicacy of a Celtic aesthetic. *In Parenthesis* (1937) is a painter's poem as *Guinevere* (1940) is a writer's painting.

In this paper, I will explore the capacity Jones had to work within both the visual and the verbal aesthetic via his concept of "shape." What does this phrase mean? How does it work in both poetry and painting?

Diane DeBell (Professor Emeritus at Anglia Ruskin University, FRSA, FCMI, and MRSL) is a graduate (BA Phi Beta Kappa and MA) in English Literature (USA) and PhD (UK). Her doctoral thesis (University of East Anglia UK) *Poetry and Religion in the Major Writings of David Jones* (326 pp) is listed under her married name, Diane Cook.

Jeremy Stevens (Columbia University), “David Jones's Painted Inscriptions: Aesthetics, Religion, and Public Religious Art”

David Jones’s sacramental theory of artistic creation speaks to a live issue in scholarly studies of modernism: the relationship between aesthetics and religion in the period. That there is such a relationship goes against traditional secularization theory, which posited that the two were differentiated into independent spheres and (especially in the case of religion) increasingly separated from public life. In this paper, I will read Jones’s painted inscriptions as informed by his critical perspective on this issue, negotiating the boundary of the religious and aesthetic, private and public. I will argue that in the inscriptions Jones explores the connection between poetry and cathedrals which he posits in his essay “Religion and the Muses,” and that the painted inscriptions' implicit

reference to the carved letters of classical monuments and church devotional art gestures toward a public function not unlike Eric Gill's Stations of the Cross (with which Jones was familiar). Yet this is a public function which the inscriptions might only fulfill with difficulty due to modern obstacles to realizing the aesthetic values of modernism and the religious tenets of Catholicism. Jones's dissatisfaction with reproductions of his work can therefore be read as informed by his pessimistic outlook for public religious art. Yet, despite these challenges, I will argue that Jones's inscriptions look forward to a time when Catholicism and contemporary aesthetics might be reconciled in a more public role for both.

Jeremy Stevens is a PhD student at Columbia University, where he is writing a dissertation on how the twentieth-century lyric engages with secularization. He has presented research on David Jones at meetings of *The Conference on Christianity and Literature* and the *Modernist Studies Association*.

Jasmine Hunter Evans (Bath Spa University), “David Jones and Cultural Theory: Inscriptional Practice as Cultural Preservation”

The works of David Jones are intrinsically shaped by his belief in the decline of the West and by his response to the break he perceived between the cultural past and the civilizational present. In the “Preface” to *The Anathemata*, Jones described his approach to creating art out of the fragmentation of culture through the words of Nennius: ‘I have made a heap of all that I could find’. Yet the seeming simplicity of this image hides a complex vision of cultural preservation. Through reconsidering Jones’s innovative inscriptional practice, in which diverse cultural materials are revived, re-presented and reformed into new cohesive works that are at once poetry and visual art (such as *SQUALENTEM BARBAM* (1940-43), *QUIA PER INCARNATI* (1949-50), *CLOELIA CORNELIA* (1959) and *EXTENSIS MANIBUS* (1964)), this paper will explore his theory of cultural renewal. It will examine Jones’s dynamic interpretation of cultural preservation, his visualization of culture as a living tradition with the capacity to decline and to regenerate, and the importance of ancient Rome within his reimagining of Western cultural heritage. While Jones’s comprehension of cultural decline emerged in dialogue with his contemporaries, including T. S. Eliot, Christopher Dawson and Jackson Knight, the philosophy which connects all his works and unites his cultural, artistic and historical theories remains fundamentally original and (like his corpus of painted inscriptions) demands further critical attention.

Jasmine Hunter Evans completed her AHRC funded interdisciplinary thesis – ‘David Jones and Rome: Reimagining the Decline of Western Civilisation’ – at the University of Exeter in 2015. Since this time she has continued to prepare and publish articles and chapters on Jones, while also collaborating with Dr Anne Price-Owen on digitising newly discovered 16mm film footage of Jones. She co-organised the ‘David Jones: Dialogues with the Past’ conference at the University of York in 2016 and co-edited the David Jones Special Issue of *Religion & Literature* (2018) with Anna Svendsen. Her interdisciplinary research in English Literature and Classics examines the ways in which Jones received and reimagined ancient Rome in his poetry, essays, letters and visual artworks.

Panel IV: Jones and Women

Anne Price-Owen (University of Trinity St. David), “David Jones: Mythologizing Women”

During his life David Jones encountered many women. He admired a number of them, some he depended on, others he was tenderly disposed to, and in general, he considered women ‘kind and creaturely’ beings. Basically, he loved women, and there were some that he loved very much, so much so, that he appears to have elevated them almost to the state of mythical beings.

This paper argues that the women with whom Jones was particularly friendly include Dorothea Travis, Petra Gill, Prudence Pelham, Nicolette Gray, and Valerie Wynne-Williams. These are women he knew exceptionally well, often at different periods in his life, but with whom he sustained friendships for life. Of these, Petra Gill, Prudence Pelham and Valerie Wynne-Williams are those he held in highest esteem, so much so, that he treated them almost as ethereal beings. Significantly, David Jones fell in love with all three women, respectively.

This discussion focuses on these ‘mythic’ women, all of whom Jones depicted in the graphic medium. Moreover, in elevating Petra, Prudence and Valerie to this mythologized state, they were metaphorically out of his reach. Notably, all three married alternative suitors, a state that Jones accepted, if despondently. Because of his unrequited feelings towards each woman, and their apparent rejection of him, Jones, consciously or otherwise, placed each on a pedestal, thus exalting them to the status of goddess.

Anne Price-Owen is Research and Postgraduate Tutor at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Swansea Campus, UK. She is head of the David Jones Society and editor of the *David Jones Journal*.

Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta (Massachusetts College of Art and Design), “Sister Death, the Queen of the Woods and the Mother of Christ: *In Parenthesis* and the Operatic Feminine”

Across his body of written and visual work, David Jones’s portrayal of the feminine is complicated—more often than not infused with romantic, mythical overtones. Arthurian women, goddesses, and typological figures abound in his work. Although *In Parenthesis* is largely populated by the men of John Ball’s platoon, significant female figures dot the war landscape. From Alice the Barmaid, to the Queen of the Woods, who offers a floral ritual to memorialize the dead, the women’s perspectives add notes of the maternal and of sacredness. The 2016 Welsh National Opera adaptation of *In Parenthesis* by Iain Bell actually doubles down on the presence of the feminine in several ways. The work of memorializing that begins and ends the opera is by a women’s chorus; the narrative function of the poem is divided between the Bard of Britannia (baritone) and the Bard of Germania (soprano)—the latter of whom is triple cast, also singing Alice the Barmaid and the Queen of the Woods. This paper examines the poem’s presence of the feminine as it is adaptively transcoded into the operatic forms of choruses, arias, and narration. A particular point of discussion will be the opera’s conclusion, which inserts a Marian hymn in places of Jones’s quotation from *La Chanson de Roland*. This interpretive choice departs from the original and asserts the poem’s implicit sacred feminine in a climactic musical moment.

Jennie-Rebecca Falcetta is Associate Professor of Liberal Arts at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Areas of research and publication include modernism and word and image studies.

Panel V: Theological and Sacramental Perspectives

Sarah Coogan (University of Notre Dame), “Nostalgia, *Anamnesis*, and the Nation in *The Anathemata*”

While Jones’s vision of the European past has been a central theme in scholarly discussions of his work, an assessment of the relationship of his work to nostalgia specifically has not been undertaken. *The Anathemata* appears at first glance to be a highly nostalgic project, preserving within its epic structure a multitude of cultural fragments, the “things set apart” of the poem’s title. The introduction focuses on turning to the past for the resources—signs—which might give meaning and resonance to a work of art determinedly addressed to the modern world. Nonetheless, Jones remains aware that his attempt to connect past and present may prove illegible to his audience, a source of anxiety which contributes to the impression of nostalgia in his text. This paper will consider specifically whether Jones’ idea of *anamnesis*, as exemplified by *The Anathemata*, functions as an expression of nostalgia, or else a conceptual solution to it. Analyzing the poem’s affect towards the past not only offers a deeper understanding of the project itself, as it relates to Jones’s artistic theory. It allows us to consider how Jones’ view of the past forms a connecting thread between his art and his politics, and how nostalgia may illuminate his vision of the modern nation.

Sarah Coogan is a doctoral candidate in English Literature at the University of Notre Dame and a Dolores Zohrab Liebmann Fellow. Her research focuses on the intersection of nostalgia and national identity in British and Irish modernist poetry. Her dissertation examines how the modernist epic nostalgically excavates cultural memory, juxtaposing the past with the present and preserving that past in art. The project engages authors like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Lynette Roberts, and David Jones. Her work has been published in the *New Hibernia Review*, *Religion & Literature*, and the edited volume *David Jones: A Christian Modernist?* She currently serves as a managing editor for *Religion & Literature*.

Molly Hall (University of Rhode Island), “The Grace of Grass: Transformative Materiality in David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*”

David Jones’s interest in writing a Christian, spiritual materiality often intersects with his representation of a natural, national materiality in *In Parenthesis*. In Part 7, the eucharistic rite is refigured – through allusions to British literary and Welsh military history – as an ecological communion. This paper will explore the transformative materiality of Jones’s “he who with intention took grass of that field to be for / him the Species of Bread” (p. 163). In his own endnote, Jones’ describes Malorian and Welsh Battle instances of “a whole army” and “a single knight feeling himself at the point of death” who both “ate grass in token of the Body of the Lord” (n. 15, p. 221). Transubstantiation implies a symbolic conversion both of bread into Christ’s body and the conversion of the individual partaking in the eucharist into a state of sanctifying grace. In Jones’s manifestation, this act of communion relies upon a metaphor of consumption which, rather than providing access to a transcendent grace, entangles the subject in base matter – the materiality of the land itself. I hope to articulate how this elision between body and plant helps us understand an overall network of images within *In Parenthesis* that are dependent on the materiality of the surrounding environs - images mobilized by Jones, I will argue, to negotiate the tensions of national identity throughout the text.

Molly Hall is a doctoral candidate at University of Rhode Island. Her dissertation focuses on the constitutive entanglements of the British national subject in World War I modernist landscape

representation. She most recently co-edited the forthcoming *Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature* (University Press of Florida, 2019).

Joseph LaBine (University of Ottawa), “The Lion, the Unicorn, and the Headless John the Baptist in David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*”

David Jones’s epic poem *In Parenthesis* is a deeply symbolic work that overlays documentary realism with romance. To achieve this, Jones anchors allusions to romance to concrete markers in the historical record or to his own memory of the Great War. The lion’s fight with the unicorn, depicted in British nursery rhyme, finds its analogue in the German helmets that appear unicorn-like from the British line. The headless body of a soldier, “patient of baptism. . . Poor Johnny” (*IP* 40), evokes in sequence, the headless body of John the Baptist, the nativity of Christ, and the end of the world. Unicorns belong to romance, and in the text, romance has more power to evoke feelings of sympathy during the Battle of the Somme than realism. The lion’s fight with the unicorn informs the escalation of the violence at the Somme, and likewise so do the five unmistakable marks of the Snark/boojum, and the Five Holy Wounds of Christ; but all of these allusions are part of a contest between technological civilization and culture, which has its epiphany in this modern mechanized war. Jones paints myopic detail over the general outline of a lived experience, so that the full text of *In Parenthesis* gains psychological force by honouring small details from the past that are potentially threatened by exclusion from the formal historical record or by the loss of memory.

My paper for the “David Jones: Theory of Art; Theory of Culture” Seminar held at the Booth Special Collections, Georgetown University on March 7-8th, 2019, explores Jones’s aesthetics and his thinking about gratuity in *In Parenthesis*. I read Jones’s allusions within a Christian Modernist mode that reveals an essential tension between technological civilization and gratuitous culture.

Joseph LaBine is a Canadian poet and critic. He received his MA from the University of Windsor in 2015 and currently holds a SSHRC doctoral fellowship as a PhD candidate in the University of Ottawa’s English program. He has published articles on Flann O’Brien, James Joyce, and David Jones, and has been the managing editor of Flat Singles Press since 2013.