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A BARD IN THE TRENCHES

David Jones as an artist of The Waste Land

ABSTRACT: When *The Waste Land* was published in 1922, David Jones, a 27-year-old Anglo-Welsh painter, was living in the English countryside with a monastic community of artists. A World War I veteran who had been injured in the tragic battle at the Somme, Jones had converted to Catholicism and was developing a modernist aesthetics, producing paintings and engravings where scenes from the gospels (the flagellation, the crucifixion, the empty tomb) were set on the French front, carried out by helpless British infantrymen. *The Waste Land* was a transformative read for Jones, who thought it embodied the ‘metaphysical disaster’ (Musil 1922) of the war. In later years, Jones began writing about his own wartime experience (Dilworth 1994, 2017): with Eliot’s help and encouragement, he published *In Parenthesis* (1937), an epic poem (praised by W.H. Auden and Igor Stravinsky, among others) that moved the modernist myth of the waste land from Eliot’s London to the literal wasteland of the trenches. This paper examines Jones’s mythic method, underpinned by his conception of the artist as a ‘maker’ (Jones 1959); it shows how his works blurred the boundaries between artforms by juxtaposing paintings and inscriptions to prose and verse. Jones’s singular perspective as a modernist soldier-bard, drawing from Christian liturgy and Arthurian myth, and the intertextual dialogue with Eliot’s poem, suggest an original reading of the waste land as a ritual space for remembrance, representation, and re-enactment: a useful critical category for a theory of modernism, and a metaphor for the work of art itself.

KEYWORDS: David Jones, T.S. Eliot, Poetry, Modernism, Great War.

In 1922, Thomas Stearns Eliot defined the waste land of Arthurian myth as a fundamental space of modernism. More than a decade later, he oversaw the publication of a poem that expanded the waste land’s symbolic potential and explored it as a physical geography, as well as a ritual one. The poem was called *In Parenthesis* and its author was David Jones. Jones has been called a “lost modernist” because his works saw the light much later – and to a narrower recognition – than those of other modernist writers. However, he was hugely admired by figures such as W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Seamus Heaney as well as T.S. Eliot, with whom Jones developed an artistic and personal relationship, one of reciprocal admiration and friendship despite differences in character and poetic choices (Dilworth 2021, 1).¹ Informed by his first-

¹ Even Igor Stravinsky, whom Jones admired, praised his poetry, and went so far as to propose that they work together on an opera, for which Jones would write the libretto. The poet, however, was not interested. Their encounter is documented in Dilworth 2021, 1292. For more on Jones’s relationship with Eliot, see Dilworth 1994.

person experience as a soldier on the French front, Jones's poetry is a polyphonic and liturgical mapping of the waste land as a space of text, reality, and myth – one that employs different modes of language to build an elaborate spatial poetics, ultimately problematising the work of art itself.

While *The Waste Land* was destined to have a decisive impact on Jones's life, he did not read it until a few years after its publication. When Eliot's book first came out, Jones was living in Ditchling, a village in the English countryside, with a community of Christian artists inspired by Medieval craftsmanship (Dilworth 2021, 275). He was learning engraving from his friend and mentor Eric Gill and working as a carpenter's apprentice, while developing his own artistic practice. Born in London in 1895 to an English mother and a Welsh father, Jones had always had great talent for drawing and painting – as a teenager, he had trained at an arts school in Camberwell (Dilworth 2021, 63). He had moved to Ditchling in January 1922, shortly after converting to Roman Catholicism. Many of his works from the period pair evangelical subjects with an associative iconography. In one painting from around 1921, for example, Jones depicts the arrest of Christ by a group of soldiers wearing British uniforms from the First War World. Even before *The Waste Land*, Jones was already thinking like a modernist.

Jones's imagination had been shaped by his time on the frontline of the Great War, between 1916 and 1919, as an infantryman in the 15th Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers (Dilworth 2021, 100), and especially his involvement in the battle at the Somme, where he had suffered a leg injury and many of his companions had died.² Jones's months in the trenches felt like an initiation, as he connected his day-to-day confrontations with fear and danger to themes from his Christian and Welsh background. When he finally came upon *The Waste Land*, in 1926 or 1927, he had already read Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, all major sources of Eliot's poem. In a sense, Jones was the ideal reader of *The Waste Land*, as he was immediately aware of the text's references and implications:

His initial response had been an Archimedean 'That's it!' 'At last,' he thought, 'a chap has written a real poem about real things.' ... 'It mirrors our civilizational phase with absolute validity.' (Dilworth 2021, 493)

Jones found that the "fragments" and "ruins" of *The Waste Land* embodied what Robert Musil described in the same years as a "metaphysical disaster," one that revealed a "lack of spiritual organization" in western societies (Musil 1922, 42-45). Later on, Jones found his own words for this sentiment, pondering the "broken emblems" and "dead

² The strand of battle Jones took part in took place in Mametz wood in July 1916. Afterwards, Jones was brought back to Britain to recover. While he did return to France before his final dismissal in January 1919, it was that first experience that left him with the most vivid and traumatic memories. (Savoia 1985, 19)

symbols” of modernity.³ (Jones 1937, 54; 1952, 50) But while the epicentre of Eliot’s waste land had been post-war London, Jones felt that this newborn modernist myth belonged in the French front. After a long creative process, slowed down at times by health problems but encouraged by Eliot, Jones published his own modernist poem, *In Parenthesis*, in 1937. Freely alternating prose and verse, rich and varied in language, the genre-bending literary work recounts the journey of its fictional protagonist, Private John Ball, to the frontline in 1916.⁴ Built concentrically, the poem’s structure relies on architectural symmetries and on a meticulous arrangement of the text in the space of each page, with heavy use of indentations and stark changes in the length of paragraphs and lines.⁵

The intertextual relationship between *In Parenthesis* and *The Waste Land* is perhaps best exemplified by details. In one passage, Jones evokes the atmosphere of a night in the trenches:

You can hear the silence of it:
you can hear the rat of no-man's-land
rut-out intricacies,
weasel-out his patient workings,
scrut, scrut, sscrut . . .
(Jones 1937, 54)

The appearance of a rat recalls Eliot’s poem: “A rat crept softly through the vegetation / Dragging its slimy belly on the bank” (Eliot 2015, 62). Notably, Eliot’s rat is accompanied by the mention of “White bodies naked on the low damp ground / And bones cast in a little low dry garret / Rattled by the rat’s foot only.” But while the rat in *In*

³ In the preface of his 1952 poem *The Anathemata*, Jones also mentions a line from Nennius’s *Historia Brittonum*: “I have made a heap of all that I could find.” As Francesca Brooks puts it, Nennius, just like Jones, “claims to be writing from the waste lands and ruins of culture, where he is plagued by the fear that the intangible and immaterial rewards of knowledge are destined to become untraceable” (Brooks 2021, 95).

⁴ The genre of *In Parenthesis* has been the subject of debate. Without a doubt, any autobiographical content has been substantially reworked – this is not a diaristic book. Establishing whether it is a novel or a poem, however, proves harder. A hybrid artist by nature, Jones was not interested in boundaries of genre, as demonstrated by his exclusive use of words like writing, fragment and stuff when talking about his literary works. The term poem has been generally preferred by critics, notably by leading Jones scholar Thomas Dilworth, who observed that “whether in verse or not, its language almost always approaches the maximum aural and connotative potential of poetry” (Dilworth 1988, 38). Umberto Rossi, on the other hand, sees *In Parenthesis* as “an anomalous, deconstructed novel,” contending that contaminations are the norm for a genre that was “born inclusively” (Rossi 2007). While both arguments have their reasons, a wider look at Jones’s production reveals that he always alternates prose and verse to broaden the visual and spatial potential, regardless of the presence (or absence) of a narrative. He does so in *The Anathemata*, for example, which is definitely not a novel as it is built on form and association – but attributing it to a different genre than *In Parenthesis* would be misleading. *In Parenthesis* is a modernist poem, like *The Waste Land* and Saint-John Perse’s *Anabase*.

⁵ More on the symmetries between chapters in Blisset 1998. For an overview of Jones’s system of parentheses, see Dilworth 1991.

Parenthesis and its onomatopoeic treatment might suggest a direct derivation from *The Waste Land*, the source of Jones's imagery is rather different. A drawing Jones made in November 1916, when stationed in the Flanders, portrays two dead rats, "shot during the pulling down of an old dugout in Ploegsteert Wood," as explained by a handwritten note in the corner of the page. A more expressionistic ecphrasis for this picture can be found in Part 4 of *In Parenthesis*: "swollen rat-body turned-turtle to the clear morning" (Jones 1937, 75).

The waste land, with its mythic and sensorial attributes, had clearly been part of Jones's imagination ever since the war (though Eliot's poem had helped him understand its poetic potential). But *In Parenthesis* never fully codifies it. Instead, the expression and its variants – *wasteland*, *wastelands*, *waste*, or *land made waste* – are disseminated in the text with a certain parsimoniousness, if not reticence. The poetic voice refrains from suggesting an interpretation and instead focuses on shaping a space, entreating the reader with a hermeneutic task. The only instance where Jones directly addresses the topic is in the preface:

[...] I think the day by day in the Waste Land, the sudden violences and the long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence, profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment. It is perhaps best described in Malory, book iv, chapter 15—that landscape spoke 'with a grimly voice'.⁶ (Jones 1937, X-XI)

Jones is talking about the myth of the Grail, a major source for Modernism – the legend of a knight who ends up in a barren and infertile land, where he meets the Fisher King, who seems to suffer from the same sickness that is affecting the soil. The Grail knight also visits a castle, where mysteries and visions suggest the presence of a supernatural danger. Mirroring the Grail myth's themes and structure, the narrative of *In Parenthesis* begins in England, where in Part 1 Jones's alter-ego, Private John Ball, is getting ready to cross the Channel with his battalion. The reader then accompanies John Ball to France, gradually approaching the frontline, getting closer to battle, and finally reaching to Jones's personal heart of darkness, the centre of the waste land.

Along this journey, Jones's writing alternates between mimetic modes (narrative, dramatic, lyrical) and the associative or allusive mode, where remembrance generates a transition into myth. (Dilworth 1988, 38) The occurrences of the associative mode within the poem signal the nature of the waste land as a space of myth. For Jones, the waste land is where *mimesis* and *mythos* are one. This intersectional space opens dramatically at the end of Part 2, when a sudden shrapnel burst becomes the first sign of the soldiers' proximity to tragedy and sorrow. In Part 3, the poem's geography begins to unravel through the rhythmical crossings of literal and metaphorical thresholds (a door, a stream, the edge of the forest). When the regiment marching through the French countryside by night streams through a seemingly unimportant cattle gate, the poem's

⁶ Jones makes a small quoting mistake – the passage he references here is in book VI, chapter 15.

language seems to have incorporated the sensorial shock of that first burst and turned it into a sort of heightened perception:

No. 1—get ‘em into file corporal—move on by section—put those cigarettes out—no lights
past the barrier. Past the little gate.
Mr. Jenkins watched them file through, himself following, like western-hill shepherd.
Past the little gate,
into the field of upturned defences,
into the burial-yard—
the grinning and the gnashing and the sore dreading—nor saw he any light in that place.
(Jones 1937, 31)

This is a clear example of David Jones’s mythic method. He associates the officer’s order to put out the cigarettes to the Good Friday liturgy, in which the priest walks up to the altar – a place of sacrifice – without lights and incense. An even stronger allusion concerns an episode of Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*: when approaching the Chapel Perelous – a dark and menacing place that poses a fatal danger – Sir Lancelot goes through a “little gate,” walks into a churchyard, and sees “many fair rich shields turned up-so-down” – that is, “upturned defences,” like the damaged artillery that scattered the broken landscape of the French front (Malory 2013, 215). The association is sealed by Malory’s mention of a “grimly voice,” the same words Jones resorted to in the preface when describing the atmosphere in the trenches.

To better understand Jones’s creative process, we must remember he was first and foremost a figurative artist. During his time in the French front, Private Jones made numerous sketches, like one from 1916 depicting the aftermath of a shrapnel burst in Givenchy. These drawings might have a documentary purpose, but their deeper objective is to build a spatial and visual memory of the war. For Jones, everything begins with remembering images. Indeed, for years after the war, Jones only addressed the war obliquely in his paintings.⁷ The language of *In Parenthesis*’s first chapters, therefore, is richly descriptive and analytical, as if meticulously painting an image of the waste land’s broken landscape:

They passed a small building lying back from the road, that appeared deserted, its roof and nearer wall damaged at some time and now repaired with boarding. Perhaps they’d have some kind of fire, at all events it looked sordid and unloved. He drew back into his but lately lifted gloom. (Jones 1937, 19)
A splintered tree scattered its winter limbs, spilled its life low on the ground. (Jones 1937, 21)

Only when the sensorial memory has been re-established, the poem gradually introduces the first associative flashes, transitioning from remembrance to representation. Jones’s thinking of representation is also apparent in his visual works. A painting on a wooden board made in Ditchling depicts the mocking of Jesus; the right side of an engraving from 1922 shows soldiers guarding Christ’s tomb. In both cases,

⁷ For more on how Jones’s paintings allude to the war landscape, see Banks and Hills, 2015.

some of the soldiers are wearing helmets that identify them as British infantrymen from World War One. This associative approach plays an essential role in *In Parenthesis*, particularly in its centre piece, the inner parenthesis of the poem, the boast of Dai Greatcoat. Another double of the author (Dai is a Welsh abbreviation for David, and Jones was known among his friends for wearing large raincoats), Dai is a Welsh soldier-bard who, like Eliot's Tiresias, claims to have "foresuffered all:"⁸

I served Longinus that Dux bat-blind and bent;
the Dandy Xth are my regiment;
who diced
Crown and Mud-hook
under the Tree . . .
(Jones 1937, 83)

By stating to have witnessed Christ's death (Longinus is the Roman soldier who, according to legend, pierced the side of Jesus while he was hanging on the cross), Dai Greatcoat embodies the juxtaposition of epochs in Jones's figurative work. The image of Christ's body on the "tree of the cross" sparks visions of the dead soldiers laying "under the Tree" after the battle of Mametz wood, that takes place in the final chapter. An individual's guilt and trauma are thus projected in a wider historical and mythical dimension:

I was the spear in Balin's hand
that made waste King Pellam's land.
(Jones 1937, 79)

At the very heart of *In Parenthesis*, Jones returns to Malory, with a reference to the story of two brothers, Balin and Balan, mortally wounding each other in a duel. According to legend, this was the event that created the waste land. The mention of a fratricidal killing reveals Jones's deeper feelings about the war he had fought in. The epigraph that opens the poem dedicates it, among others, "to the enemy front-fighters who shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure" (Jones 1937, XVII). This theme of fraternity and sacrifice is also brought back in the very last page, with a line from the *Song of Songs*: "This is my beloved and this is my friend" (Jones 1937, 226).

There is, however, an even deeper level to Jones's poetics. Influenced by his theoretical readings, among which John Livingston Lowes, Oswald Spengler, and the Christian existentialists Jacques Maritain and Maurice de La Taille, Jones had developed a complex and layered – although at times convoluted – theory of creation and

⁸ For the similarities between Dai Greatcoat and the author, see Jones 1980, 11. Dai's cultural identity is relevant. In Jones's imagination, shaped by his Welsh roots and an intense fascination with literary works like the *Mabinogion*, Wales was "a historical symbol of cultural wholeness and vitality" (Robichaud 2007, 47). In Jones's late writings, Wales forms a polarity with the Rome, seen as "a powerful tool with which to fight against the fall of civilisation and for the potential of cultural renewal" (Hunter Evans 2022, 11).

representation. He regarded the artist as a craftsman and a “maker,” and the work of art as a physical manifestation:

In so far as form is brought into being there is reality. ‘Something’ not ‘nothing’, moreover a new ‘something’ has come into existence. And if, as we aver, man’s form-making has in itself the nature of a sign, then these formal realities, which the art of strategy creates, must in some sense or other, be signa. But of what can they possibly be significant? What do they show forth, re-present, recall, or in any sense, reflect?” (Jones 1959, 163)

Jones would expand this conception of artmaking in his second poem, *The Anathemata* (1952), where the act of creation is defined as the lifting up of “an efficacious sign,” like the eucharist in Catholic liturgy.⁹ But his key idea is that of representation as *presenting again*, as a re-enactment. In his *Note of Introduction* to *In Parenthesis*, T.S. Eliot warns: “understanding begins in the sensibility: we must have the experience before we attempt to explore the sources of the work itself” (Jones 1937, VII). For Jones, the reader had to re-live the soldiers’ journey of mystery and pain – this concrete re-enactment of memory was essential, as it could unveil the real significance of war. That is why he concluded the final chapter by rephrasing a line from the *Chanson de Roland*: “the man who does not know this has not understood anything” (Jones 1937, 187). The soldier’s experience of the war might feel like a surreal parenthesis, almost impossible to recount – “when you come from this waste your tongue is not loosed,” declares a line in Part 5 – but what is *in parenthesis*, Jones suggests, is far from neglectable, and is key to understanding.¹⁰

The space of *In Parenthesis* brings together the text, the physical reality of history, and myth, with each dimension sustaining the others. The poem is enclosed within a frontispiece and a tailpiece – two drawings by Jones depicting the waste land with its leafless trees and barbed wire, and its inhabitants (a soldier, once again mixing elements from history and myth, and the sacrificial scapegoat). This suggests an analogy between the waste land and the work of art itself – one that sheds light on the theoretical framework of modernism as a whole, especially by calling into question the role of the aesthetic pole.

The reader of *In Parenthesis* is urged to go on a quest, or to ask questions, just like the wandering knight who is scolded when he does not question the supernatural visions at the Fisher King’s court.¹¹ The invitation addressed to the reader is highlighted by the use,

⁹ Jones’s conception of poetry as a “sacramental act” (see Henderson Staudt 1985) was reinforced by his interest for lettering and the crafting of inscriptions, which he appreciated as a “profoundly incarnational medium” (Powell 2020).

¹⁰ Rachel Pomery notes that the parentheses in Jones’s text serve as “a ritually separated space for attention” (Pomery 2020, 107).

¹¹ Jones addresses the Grail knight’s silence at the climax of Dai’s boast: “You ought to ask: Why, / what is this, / what’s the meaning of this. / Because you don’t ask, / although the spear-shaft / drips, / there’s neither steading—not a roof-tree” (Jones 1937, 84). Vincent B. Sherry provides a convincing perspective of Dai’s enigmatic nature and the ensuing invitation to the reader: “Dai . . . aims riddles at his reader, and, as in most riddles, the speaker is the subject. Recurring throughout the Boast, these enigmas of the

throughout the poem, of a polyphonic *you*, referring at the same time to the protagonist, to an individual reader and perhaps to a community.¹² In several instances, the poem seems to invite further investigation (a consequence perhaps of the encyclopaedic apparatus of notes of various kinds – most of them either clarifying aspects of life in the trenches or unwinding some of the mythical references). One tread seems particularly significant: it has to do with the role of nature, the Shakespearean character of Ophelia, and, once again, the relationship between *In Parenthesis* and *The Waste Land*.

At one point in Part 3, after a long march, the battalion is very close to the frontline. The unreal and unsettling atmosphere is contrasted by the familiar words of soldiers getting ready to sleep:

For the wagon lines—forgot last night—
 good night Dai
 Good night Mick.
 ...
 Good night Parrott
 good night Bess.
 Good night good night—buck up—he gets nasty later on.
 Good night, bon swores ‘Waladr. Nos dawch, Jac-y-dandi.
 Night night.
 (Jones 1937, 29)

This polyphony of voices (among them, the Welsh one of Dai Greatcoat) is an echo of Eliot’s “Good night ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night” (Eliot 2015, 61).¹³ Eliot’s lines, of course, are an exact quotation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, where Ophelia utters the words “good night, sweet ladies” shortly before drowning. As she sinks, Ophelia looks like a water nymph, “a creature native and endued / unto that element” (Shakespeare 1998, 319). In the moment of her tragic *death by water*, Ophelia becomes one with nature. Whether intended or not (although Jones must have been fully aware of the Shakespearean references in *The Waste Land*), this correspondence anticipates the events that close the poem.¹⁴ In the final battle, the soldiers’ bodies are absorbed by the woods, in a mystical fusion between the human and natural element. This arboreal liturgy, announced throughout the poem by the talk of “metamorphosis” and the descriptions of soldiers almost melting with the landscape, coincides with the

soldier’s character are a major source of unity in it. Each is projected as though teasing, ‘What am I?’ (Sherry 1982, 115).

¹² The use of *you* is exemplified by the closing sentence of Part 1: “You feel exposed an apprehensive in this new world” (Jones 1937, 9). Here, it is both John Ball and the reader who are confronted with a “new world” – for the former, it is the unknown landscape of the French countryside; for the latter, it is the obscure geography of the poem itself.

¹³ As Dilworth points out, the words “night night” also echo the Anna Livia chapter of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, which Jones knew by heart. (Dilworth 2008, 40)

¹⁴ Jones often thinking of Ophelia when writing the poem is confirmed by the other instances where he appears to quote her. (Dilworth 2008, 51; 66)

conjuring of a fairy-like figure, the Queen of the Woods. It is the only time in the poem when myth, instead of appearing in flashes and allusions, seems to infiltrate reality. Advancing over the bodies of the fallen, the Queen of the Woods honours both British and German soldiers with floral tributes, choosing them according to rank and cultural specificity:

The Queen of the Woods has cut bright boughs of various flowering.

...

Some she gives white berries
 some she gives brown
 Emil has a curious crown it's
 made of golden saxifrage.
 Fatty wears sweet-briar,
 he will reign with her for a thousand years.
 For Balder she reaches high to fetch his.
 Ulrich smiles for his myrtle wand. . .
 (Jones 1937, 185)

The Queen of the Woods has the traits of several female deities (Dilworth 1988, 141). But the manner of her ritual, and the complex symbolism of the plants she chooses for her initiates, is again reminiscent of Ophelia:

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray, love, remember. And there is
 pansies, that's for thoughts.

...

There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you; and here's some
 for me. (Shakespeare 1998, 307-308)

On her last scene before metaphorically turning into a nymph, Ophelia herself officiates a sort of funeral ritual, offering flowers to characters who are about to die (herself included). In Shakespeare, this scene precedes the tragedy, in Jones it follows it – but in both cases, a female figure with a powerful link with nature attempts to restore the natural order that a circle of human violence has disrupted. Her pondered gestures remind us that *In Parenthesis* itself, with its liturgical pace, is a “ritual of death” (Marfè 2021, 508). After a journey of remembrance, representation, and re-enactment, the poet's effort to put loss and tragedy into words opens a possibility for restoration, inspired by the Grail knight's bid to “free the rivers” and heal the waste land.

In his book about the literature of the Great War, Bernard Bergonzi identifies a Hotspur-Falstaff polarity: while the Hotspur function highlights the bravery and glory of combat, the Falstaff function is an anti-heroic conception of war as a pointless massacre

(Bergonzi 1965, 11-19; 198-212).¹⁵ While both aspects (especially Falstaff's attitude) have a place in Jones's poetics, *In Parenthesis* operates on a completely different level, which I would call the *Ophelia function* – one where the essential elements are memory, liturgy, and mourning. The unspeakable image at the heart of *In Parenthesis* is a sorrowful maze of bodies, trees, and bullets.¹⁶ Eliot's "death by water" in the river Thames finds a powerful counterpoint in Jones's "death by forest" in the wood of Mametz.

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¹⁵ While Fussell 1975 harshly criticized *In Parenthesis* for supposedly exalting the experience of the Great War by raising it to the rank of mythology, Sherry 1982b brilliantly showed how such judgment lacked a real understanding of Jones's poetics. To Jones, myth was not a device to glorify, but rather a pathway to memory (and his minute descriptions of life in the trenches provide plenty of opportunities to experience the brutality of war).

¹⁶ In his late fragment *The Dream of Private Clitus* (1964), Jones explicitly links the forest, the cathedral, and the maze, displaying once again his poetics of space and architecture. (Jones 1974, 16)

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