

## **DAVID JONES AND THE SELF-CONSCIOUS USES OF TRADITION**

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***Abstract:** This paper will explore the way that the poetry of David Jones, while generally recognised as being modernist, nevertheless promotes a continuation of the Western literary tradition (as opposed to more revolutionary strands of modernism), but does this while introducing a self-conscious understanding of the role and workings of tradition, an element lacking in pre-modern traditional literature. Other figures with a similar interest in the viability of a self-consciously understood practice of (literary or philosophical) tradition, in continuity with pre-modern tradition, but in modern conditions (Thomas Mann, John Henry Newman, Alasdair MacIntyre), will also be discussed.*

***Keywords:** David Jones, modernism, self-consciousness, tradition.*

### **1. Introduction**

The twentieth-century Anglo-Welsh poet and painter David Jones is regularly described as a modernist in relation to his poetry, and was recognised as one of their own by prominent modernist poets, such as T. S. Eliot (2003:vii-viii), but at the same time he had a profound concern with tradition, and his poetic work abounds with historical motifs. In this paper I shall argue that his modernism and traditionalism are not necessarily contradictory, but, while anti-traditional strands of modernism undoubtedly exist, there are other strands of modernism, which attempt to save tradition by re-presenting it in a deliberate, theoretically self-conscious way. This self-conscious use of tradition involves the development of a theory of tradition, which users of tradition in earlier epochs did not need, when the spontaneous use of tradition was still the norm. I shall discuss the theory of tradition, as it started to be developed by Newman, and has continued to be developed by MacIntyre, and shall then explore how a self-conscious attitude to tradition informs attempts by Thomas Mann, Evelyn Waugh, and finally, David Jones (on whom most emphasis will be placed), to reinstate tradition even while making room for the insights made available by the modern experience.

### **2. The Self-Conscious Uses of Tradition**

John Henry Newman was led to theorise tradition and how it works during the period leading up to his conversion to Catholicism from Anglicanism, as part of an attempt to respond to Anglican criticisms of Catholic doctrine, criticisms which claimed that Catholic

doctrine contained elements not contained in early Christian beliefs. His answer to these criticisms was formulated in his *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* of 1845, in which he argues that a living tradition can, over time, develop, explicitly, ideas which are implicit, but undeveloped, in forms of the tradition. He illustrates this argument with an attempt to show how later definitions of doctrine, which have taken place during the Catholic Church's history, may have unfolded the original content of the earlier belief in a way earlier believers would not have been able to, but do not contain anything which does not follow from what they did believe. Thus a tradition can change in the sense of developing, without changing in the sense of discarding its basic principles and ceasing to be the same tradition. The first chapter, 'The Development of Ideas', explains in general terms how any living idea develops over time, as its various facets are examined, described, a theory emerges, as well as a systematisation for the various aspects, and how this process continues open-endedly. Newman's theory has been taken up and developed recently by philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, the virtue ethicist, who, in his book *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988: 353-4), recognised Newman's contribution to elaborating the theorisation of tradition. The following quotation illustrates MacIntyre's understanding of how tradition works, in the context of traditions of scientific theorising: "The criterion of a successful theory is that it enables us to understand its predecessors in a newly intelligible way. ... It introduces new standards for evaluating the past ... It recasts the narrative which constitutes the continuous reconstruction of the scientific tradition" (MacIntyre 2006:11). Thus a tradition, to have a claim to truth, must be able to explain the story of its development in terms of the way it has faced the challenges it has met during its development, and how it has either incorporated or rejected elements of theory according to criteria it carries within itself.

The concept of tradition expounded by thinkers such as Newman and MacIntyre, as of a rational system of thought, with potential for growth, and which can be understood, reflexively, from within itself, through the telling of its own story, contrasts with enlightenment views of tradition as irrational and requiring replacement by rational systems of thought newly constructed from simple foundations. A number of writers of the period during which modernism was flourishing, and who may be considered as modernist at least in some respects, nevertheless departed from the enlightenment anti-traditional approach favoured by many modernists, and cultivated a reaffirmation of tradition, but tradition conscious of its own modes of development, rather than an unselfconscious pre-modern kind of tradition. I shall use the late writings of Thomas Mann as my first illustration of this current.

In his 1945 novel *Doktor Faustus* Thomas Mann thematised the modern artist who sees the artist's task as the defeating of traditions and the creation of a traditionless art. He did this by creating a character, Adrian Leverkühn, who is a twentieth-century avant-garde composer. Leverkühn aims to compose the ultimate example of a piece in each musical genre, in order to bring each genre to a close, and then, having defeated all traditional genres, he intends to compose a piece of music which owes nothing to tradition. Mann, who was aware of twelve-tone serialism, has Leverkühn attempt to compose a piece of music which is totally mathematically planned, and free of all convention, but which can nevertheless express emotion. In the novel the piece is described as having succeeded in conveying an extreme

kind of emotion, but only at the cost of the devil's help. This conclusion can be interpreted as meaning that the cost of the creation of a non-traditional, and, the novel suggests, inhumane, art, is the collapse of humanistic civilisation. Significantly, the novel shows Leverkühn, just before he sinks into madness, proclaiming his regret over the path he has taken, and stating that he could have tried to establish a 'Lebensgrund' ('ground for living') for the beautiful work of art, rather than embarking on the intoxicating but destructive course he did. Before and after *Doktor Faustus*, Mann wrote works which can be understood as his attempts both to reflect on and to attempt to put into practice his alternative project of a humanistic continuation of cultural and artistic traditions after the crisis of modernity Zeder (1995:51-4).

Before writing *Doktor Faustus* Mann wrote a series of four novels based on the biblical Joseph story. Mann rewrites the story in intricate detail, full of explorations of the psychology of the characters, of a kind which the original does not contain, and which are not characteristic of pre-modern works of literature. So Mann adds layers to the traditional story which would have been characteristic of no century earlier than the twentieth, but does this while accommodating the traditional story. His version neither denies nor affirms the transcendental dimension of the original story, so a dose of twentieth-century scepticism coexists with the recognised religious context of the original story. The novels also contain a reflexive element: they comment on their own method. So, for example, in first of the novels, *Die Geschichten Jaakobs* (*The Tales of Jacob*), the way that the listeners understand Isaac's retelling of the story of his coming close to being sacrificed, is described in this way: "...they [the listeners] had heard it [the story] as if with a double ear but in fact simply – just as we really hear a speech with two ears or see a thing with two eyes but grasp it with one sense" (1991: 185). This quotation affirms the principle that there can be different layers of meaning in a story, which do not cancel each other out, but are understood together. Nevertheless Mann's retelling adds a different kind of element to the multilayeredness which Isaac's pre-modern audience has taken in, Mann suggests, spontaneously as a unity, since it thematises this process of understanding a multilayered story, and so for Mann's readers the understanding does not happen without reflectivity.

After *Doktor Faustus* Mann wrote a short novel, *Der Erwählte*, which may also give an indication of how Mann thought art in and after modernity could incorporate the civilisational tradition in a way which is affirming but also leaves enough distance for new perspectives to be included and cast their colour on the overall picture. The story is a kind of exaggerated medieval hagiography, in which the hero commits incest by accident, but later becomes a holy man, and then pope. The tone is one of affectionate irony: while it is not clear that Mann fully shares the kind of Catholic beliefs that the writers of a real medieval hagiography would subscribe to, and the reader is likely to conclude that he does not, he nevertheless celebrates the spirit of forgiveness, which he presents as the core value of the type of medieval story he is ironising, and of the story he is writing (Baumgart 1964:163,180). While some critics have interpreted Mann's ironic tone in this novel as expressing a rejection of medieval values, his irony in this novel can be, and I argue, should be, interpreted as an affectionate irony, which affirms what it sees as the central humane values of the tradition, while abstaining from a final judgement on other dimensions, such as what the metaphysical foundations of those values might be.

In his early novels, written during the interwar period, Evelyn Waugh engaged in satire and parody, a stage which Mann's fictional composer Leverkühn goes through before making the 'breakthrough' to serialism with demonic help. Waugh's breakthrough is to a more balanced and empathetic voice, and his short novel *Helena* can be seen as an experiment in many ways similar to Mann's *Der Erwählte*, although Waugh's base position is even more traditional than Mann's. Like Mann Waugh goes back in history and retells, and, to a large extent invents, a story with elements of an old legend. Waugh invests the story with a psychological depth which earlier versions lacked, like Mann, but, unlike Mann, uses the technique of deliberate anachronism to emphasise the present relevance of the tale, including modern (twentieth-century) slang to help emphasise the parallel he wants to make between the late Roman Empire, and the late British Empire of his time (Patey 1998:294-5). Waugh is careful to point out, in the preface, the extent to which his story is not based on fact (see Waugh 1963: 9-10) – in contrast to the way a pre-modern legend might be presented – but, like Mann, he wants his modern version of an older legend to celebrate a value which he shares with writers of pre-modern legends. In his case, unlike Mann's celebration of the value of forgiveness, he is celebrating the belief that the world has material and spiritual elements, both true and both good. As can be seen from the value, shared with the pre-modern writers, which Waugh emphasises, as opposed to that chosen by Mann, an important difference between Waugh and Mann is that Waugh is a theist, and, in fact, a Catholic, like the writers of legends about Helena, and so shares a large field of metaphysical assumptions with them, whereas Mann's shared ground with his pre-modern predecessors is less extensive, since he is only sure that he shares a belief in the importance of humanistic values with them, not that he shares their understanding of what the metaphysical foundations of those values is.

David Jones was a poet and essayist (and painter), and so discussed in his essays the same artistic strategies he tried to put into practice in his poetry, as well as in his painting. Jones valued both the Western cultural tradition, a tradition in which he saw the role of the Catholic Church as central, and the traditions of more narrowly defined locations, which he believed it was the poet's vocation to embody in his or her art. In his short essay 'James Joyce's Dublin' Jones praises Joyce for basing his artistic practice on the specificities of a local culture, as well as for putting this local culture (that of the Dublin of Joyce's youth) in the spatially and temporally wider framework of Western culture, respecting its physical details and recognising the multiple layers of influence which have contributed to making it. He suggests that English was the right language for Joyce's project, as it is the lingua franca of the day (Jones 1959a:304). So Jones sees Joyce's literary project as capturing the Western tradition, in its development up to his time, using the language of his time, but capturing the whole tradition, and capturing it by meticulously recording physical details. Interestingly, in Joyce's technique, widely seen as characteristic of high modernism, Jones discerns a Celtic delight in intricacy, as well as a traditional Catholic, philosophically Thomist, commitment to the idea that knowledge starts from the particular and moves to the general (Jones 1978: 58; 1959a:306).

David Jones has an unusual perspective on British tradition for an English-language writer, because he is immersed in the Welsh view of British history, which contains a continuous historical consciousness of the history of Britain reaching back to Roman times.

He presents this longer Welsh historical memory as not of exclusively Welsh interest, but as relevant to all inhabitants of the Island of Britain, and he stresses that the Welsh historical tradition has always understood the Island to be a single realm, a point he makes in his essay 'Wales and the Crown' (1959b:45). So his understanding of the tradition of the Island of Britain, which he intends to celebrate artistically, is inclusive, including the Welsh and English strands (and the Scottish, though his knowledge in this case is more limited, and he believes in writing about what he knows), and he is inclusive also in terms of the wider Western context, Christian and pre-Christian, inside which he constantly situates the British tradition.

The second of Jones' major poetic works, *The Anathemata*, is both an embodiment of his artistic principles in a work of art, and also a theoretical statement of those principles, just as the long Preface is an important statement of what he is trying to achieve in the poem. In *The Anathemata* he is attempting a kind of epic presentation and embodiment of the tradition of the Island of Britain in the context of Western civilisation. The Preface describes the 'bardic' role which he believes the poet should play in his or her society, a role which involves discovering the society's 'mythus' and embodying it in poetry – and this role adheres to the poet whether the role is explicitly recognised in the poet's society, or not, as Jones fears it is not in a modern culture (Jones 1972:20-1). As to the society's 'mythus', which it is the poet's role to embody in poetry, Jones frequently uses the word 'deposit' (e.g. Jones 1972:20, 21, 35, 40) to describe it (see Piggott 1996:333), a term which suggests the alluvial building up of land at, for example, an estuary, and which relates to geology and archaeology, both fields which play important parts in the poem.

The idea of accumulation is connected with Jones' theory of what the art work is for. As he explains right at the beginning of the Preface, he has aimed to collect everything he has found, quoting the early medieval author of *Historia Brittonum*, Nennius (see Jones 1972:9), who asserted this aim at the beginning of his work. Jones believes that the poet must gather together all materials with which he is familiar (but not those he does not know: 'There must be no mugging-up, no 'ought to know', or 'try to feel'; for only what is actually loved and known can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*' Jones 1972:24) and also that every sign collected must be allowed to signify in every way it can: "The arts abhors any loppings off of meanings or any emptying out, any lessening of the totality of connotation, any loss of recession and thickness through" (Jones 1972:24). So he is aiming at an inclusive representation of the tradition he knows, with a self-conscious awareness of the multiplicity of meanings that he is accumulating, and of how his accumulation of poetic signs represents the complex accumulation of signifying material which forms his culture.

Having shown, in the Preface, his careful consideration and detailed theorisation of what a cultural tradition is, and how an artist can approach representing it, Jones gives the reader in the poem itself a demonstration of how his theories can be put into practice. When examining the shape of *The Anathemata* it has to be borne in mind that Jones described it as a set of fragments in its subtitle, 'Fragment of an Attempted Writing', so that it cannot be regarded as constituting his complete vision; however, it is arguable that, given his ambition to represent everything he knows from the Western tradition pertaining to the Island of Britain, any attempt of his was bound to be fragmentary, since not only was he unlikely to be

able to include everything he knew, but even if he could, his would only be one poet's perspective on the whole. The poem is made up of eight sections, each of which relates to some aspect of Britain's cultural history. There is an emphasis on earlier periods, especially on the early Middle Ages, on the Welsh contribution to British cultural history, and on London, reflecting Jones' own areas of familiarity and interest. The connections of British cultural history to that of the European mainland are constantly stressed, and the whole poem is interwoven with allusions to the Catholic Church's Roman Liturgy, as well as with biblical allusions, a result of Jones' conviction that the framework which makes history intelligible is the religious framework, which he sees in Catholic terms.

The first section, 'Rite and Fore-time', introduces the prehistory of the Island of Britain, as well as of Continental Europe, reminding the reader of the time when Britain was not yet an island (Corcoran 1982:44-73). This section concentrates on geology and archaeology (as well as having a liturgical strand), talking of the formation of the land, and of various archaeological finds which have been recovered from its folds. From the second section onwards he moves forward to human history, and sets up, in second section ('Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea') the motif, which runs through much of the poem, of a ship which sails from the Mediterranean to the Port of London and back. This motif emphasises the Mediterranean origins of the civilisation which took hold in Britain. The journey out is presented as taking place in Classical times, but when the ship approaches Britain in the third section ('Angle-land'), Britain is presented during its post-Roman, early medieval phase, at the time when the Celtic Britons and the Angles and Saxons were fighting for control over the country. Another jump in time happens when in the short fourth section, 'Refriff', ship-building and repairs on the Thames are the subject, as if the same ship from the previous sections had stopped for repairs, except that some of the allusions, including one to Jones' own grandfather (Jones 1972:118), make the period the nineteenth century (while others suggest an earlier period). The culmination of the story of a ship journeying to London is the meeting of the ship's captain with a London woman, Elen Monica, in the Port of London, a section called 'The Lady of the Pool'. This section is actually a monologue by Elen Monica, though addressed to the ship's captain, or at least a ship's captain. This section is full of references to the late medieval City, although with an emphasis on underlying foundations, such as on the Celtic legends about London's founding, and pre-Christian associations with the sites of two of the many churches mentioned. The sections portraying the ship approaching Britain and the arrival in London, through their inclusion of a wide range of historical periods, give a vivid sense of the continuity of history, as a ship could have sailed from the Mediterranean, caught sight of the South Coast of Britain, and been repaired on the Thames, while the Captain visited the Port of London, at perhaps any time from Roman times until modern times, although Jones may have wanted to alert the reader to this possibility having waned during the twentieth century, with London losing its role as a port.

There are three more sections, in the first of which, 'Keel, Ram, Stauros', the ship sails back to the Mediterranean and to the classical period, while the other two are complex explorations of early British and European culture in connection with the Christmas Liturgy, and with the events of the Nativity ('Mabinog's Liturgy'), and with the Liturgies of Holy Week, and the events of the Passion ('Sherthursdaye and Venus Day'). To illustrate the self-

conscious inclusiveness of the whole poem, it is worth returning to the first section, 'Rite and Fore-time', where, in connection with the archaeological finds of early cult statuettes, Jones thinks of their makers, and prays that they may be saved on a supernatural level: "Whoever he was / *Dona ei requiem / sempiternam* / (He would not lose him / *non perdidit ex eis quemquam.*)" (Jones 1972: 66, see 65-6). These makers of cult objects of however basic a kind are, for Jones, contributors to the cultural tradition, and, representing a stage in its development, are thus necessary for the later stages to have come about. Jones, in a sense, 'saves' them artistically by making them part of his celebration of the cultural tradition, but he also imagines them saved supernaturally as part of the Christian salvation story, to which, he believes, they have also contributed, playing their part in the development of humans' receptivity to the divine plan.

### 3. Conclusion

A comparison of the works discussed above shows that there is a partial sharing of aims between Thomas Mann, Evelyn Waugh, and David Jones, although their foundational positions are different. All show a concern to save, or even re-found, the civilising tradition of Western Culture, but aim to do this without disregarding insights characteristic of the modern period. They intend, self-consciously, to view the tradition from the perspective of their time and place, and to emphasise their perspective, putting it into relation with the preceding perspectives which have contributed to forming the tradition. This view is not meant to undermine the tradition, but to develop it and to take it further, making it more capable of defending itself, through understanding its mode of growth. Where they differ is that Mann seeks to build the tradition on a foundation of humanism, possibly secular humanism, although he does not commit himself to a position on the supernatural. On the other hand, Waugh and Jones share a religious, Christian foundation, with each other, and with large parts of the tradition. Jones develops his vision of the relationship between a Christian conceptual foundation and the development of the cultural tradition further than does Waugh, by presenting the entire Western cultural tradition (and anything in world culture he does not mention he omits only because of lack of familiarity) as part of the divine plan – not only the Christian parts of the tradition, but the whole tradition. He presents this vision in *The Anathemata* through a complex weaving of cultural and liturgical elements. Thus an attention to the techniques of modernist literature can nevertheless be used for what might be described as an un-modernist goal, for the continuing of the ancient cultural tradition in a living, but stronger, form, one which understands, and states, the relativity of a given stage in the tradition's development, at the same time as the entire tradition's developing relationship with absolute values.

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