

CHAPTER 9
BEYOND THE LIMITS OF ART AND WAR
TRAUMA

DAVID JONES 'IN PARENTHESIS'

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At 6.00 pm on Monday 11 November 1985, a memorial to the poets of the First World War was unveiled in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. The unveiler was Ted Hughes, the Poet Laureate; the Oration was delivered by Michael Howard, Oxford's Regius Professor of Modern History. The idea was conceived by the Dean of Westminster, Edward Carpenter, who had originally thought the memorial should name up to seven representative poets. In the event, after consultations with scholars and interested parties, the list contained sixteen: Richard Aldington, Laurence Binyon, Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Gibson, Robert Graves, Julian Grenfell, Ivor Gurney, David Jones, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen, Herbert Read, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Sorley and Edward Thomas. All had fought in the war and all except Robert Graves were by this time dead. Poems by fourteen of the sixteen writers were read at the ceremony by Hughes and famous actors. The two whose poetry was omitted were Blunden and Jones.¹

Jones's harrowing epic *In Parenthesis* – his literary response to the war in which the total fatalities, in excess of 17 million, dwarfed those of all previous human history – had by 1985 fallen out of fashion. In this essay, after providing background information on this nearly forgotten figure,² I argue that the reason for his masterpiece's fall from grace was that it was perceived as too extreme in every sense. It was a product of extreme trauma suffered in an extreme situation – a man-made death-trap of barbed wire, vermin, machine-gun fire and mud. It took place at the threshold where imperial nations slaughtered each other's menfolk as they struggled to push forward the peripheral edges, the extreme boundaries, of their territorial power, or, as Jones put it in the language of Roman fortifications, to hold 'their crumbling limites intact' (89).³ It could be argued that no authentic literary response to this unprecedented war should fail, correspondingly, to test the limits of literary sensibility. *In Parenthesis* was extreme in the amount of time it took to write (it was not published until 1937), in length, in acoustic effects, in its collision of realistic detail with numinous supernatural elements, in aesthetic experimentalism, in its chaotic and brutal classicism, in recondite allusiveness, in obscenity of language, in its implicit questioning of the legitimacy of writing poetry about war and in its dispassionate refusal to offer either a coherent critique of militarism or a recognizably partisan political ideology.

The phrase *in extremis* could scarcely more appropriate to the experience of this artist and poet during the First World War. Jones was already considering a conversion



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to the Roman Catholic Church, of which he became a committed member shortly after the war.⁴ He was thus familiar with the sacrament of ‘extreme unction’, in which those near death are anointed by a priest in their final or ‘extreme’ moments.⁵ But a hundred years ago that phrase still had a related medical application. Military records describing the deaths of men as a result of injuries sustained during combat employed the phrase in a (now near-obsolete) sense to describe a man on the verge of dying: Private Samuel Kelley of the Royal Marine Light Infantry ‘was injured by a shell which took off both his legs below the knees. He also had a scalp wound and fracture of the occiput. He was attended during the action and later removed to the sick bay. He was *in extremis* when seen and died about 2 hours after the action ceased at 9 pm.’ Walter Young, a Seaman R.N.R,

‘received a perforating wound of the chest, the splinter entered below angle of left scapula behind, perforating pleura lung and ribs behind and in front and lodged below the outer side of left nipple just beneath the skin. He was attended to during the action and later removed at the sick bay. He was *in extremis* and died at 9–30 p.m.’⁶

David Jones, whose *In Parenthesis* doppelgänger is Private Ball, was himself badly injured in action (183):

And to Private Ball it came as if a rigid beam of great weight flailed about his calves, caught from behind by ballista-baulk let fly or aft-beam slewed to clout gunnel-walker below below below.

When golden vanities make about,
you’ve got no legs to stand on.⁷

He thought it disproportionate in its violence considering the fragility of us.
The warm fluid percolates between his toes and his left boot fills, as when you tread in a puddle – he crawled away in the opposite direction.

Jones was never physically strong, and there is even a wry humour underlying his perception of the extremity of the force which took him down as disproportionate ‘considering the fragility of us’. Jones also watched close friends die during or shortly after combat. *In Extremis* would have been as suitable a title as *In Parenthesis*.

The son of a Welsh-speaking printer, Jones was raised in a lower-middle-class suburban London home. He attended state school. He was backward academically and struggled to read; his quicker elder sister, to whom he was devoted, read aloud to him. A favourite was Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome*.⁸ At the age of thirteen, in 1909, he enrolled at Camberwell School of Art, where he developed his natural talents in watercolours and engraving. He enlisted in the 15th battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, the battalion known as the London Welsh, on 2 January 1915. He was newly nineteen and had previously tried to enlist twice. The Artists’ Rifles had rejected him because of insufficient chest expansion and the Welsh Horse did not think it helped



that he knew nothing about horses. Jones's father wrote to David Lloyd George, who was still Chancellor of the Exchequer, and drumming up patriotic fervour among the Welsh; soon the inarticulate teenaged art student had enlisted and was being trained at Llandudno.⁹ After mustering near Winchester the whole 38th (Welsh) Division embarked at Southampton for Le Havre in December 1915, trained for a fortnight at Warne, southeast of St Omer, and then moved to the front line at Neuve Chapelle. The battalion eventually moved south in preparation for the Somme offensive of July 1916, when Jones, like his poetic doublet John Ball, was shot in the left leg in the attack on Mametz Wood.¹⁰

This engagement was one of the most brutal of the war. There was prolonged machine-gun fire without intermission and bayonet fighting at close quarters. Jones's division suffered a staggering 4,000 casualties. Robert Graves also fought in the battle, the aftermath of which he described immediately afterwards: 'It was full of dead Prussian Guards, big men, and dead Royal Welch Fusiliers and South Wales Borderers, little men. Not a single tree in the wood remained unbroken.'¹¹ Graves's own poem on Mametz Wood, 'A Dead Boche', written in 1916, is conventional in form, yet conveys something of the same physical disgust as Jones's much later work:

To you who'd read my songs of War
And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
'War's Hell!' and if you doubt the same,
Today I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:
Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.¹²

By the end of October 1916 Jones returned to the front, in 1917 seeing action again northwest of Ypres. By this time a bond had developed between the front-line fighters on both sides. All enmity was directed towards army officers and politicians; this may explain the part of the dedication to *In Parenthesis* which honours 'the enemy front-fighters who shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure.'¹³ Jones had no interest in institutional politics. But in the poem his unwavering loyalty, focalized viewpoints and subject-matter all relate to the experience of the ordinary soldier, making *In Parenthesis* inescapably political with a small 'p'. Hirst has defined the distinction between the officers Owen and Sassoon on the one hand and Jones on the other as lying in the common soldier's uncompromised pride in his gun and sense of responsibility to his regiment.¹⁴ Cohen has identified the contrast between the dispassionate tone of Jones and the other war poets as consisting in Jones's achievement in 'forcing the



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reader to protest rather than doing it for him,' in a manner 'unlike any other World War I poet'.¹⁵ For the question of whether war should be waged at all he held only generals and statesmen accountable, men whom he despised: 'Damn them all, all who rule and all who counsel,' he was to write later in *The Dying Gaul*.¹⁶

The commitment shown by Jones to representing in poetry the world of regular soldiers – indeed, turning their squalid everyday rituals into a sacrament which has been repeated since the dawn of time – extends to his extreme colloquialism. In the preface to *In Parenthesis* he speaks with regret about the prudish restrictions which in 1937 still circumscribed the poet's freedom to represent the blasphemous and bodily swear-words of soldier-speak accurately. He saw these words as constituting a kind of ritualized reiterative language or Homeric formula. He has felt hampered, he writes (xii):

Because the whole shape of our discourse was conditioned by the use of such words. The very repetition of them made them seem liturgical, certainly deprived them of malice, and occasionally, when skilfully disposed, and used according to established but flexible tradition, gave a kind of significance, and even at moments a dignity, to our speech. Sometimes their juxtaposition in a sentence, and when expressed under poignant circumstances, reached real poetry.

Jones was engaged in the opening stages of Passchendaele. But in February 1918, after a bad dose of trench fever, he was invalided home again. He demobilized on 15 January 1919. On both tours of duty he drew the strange world he found around him, and these drawings certainly entered the psychological crucible from which *In Parenthesis* emerged years later. As Hyne points out, Jones 'was present at a turning-point, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the technological approach to warfare. In some of the drawings therefore we see, as well as the machine-gun and the howitzer, the aeroplane, the 1917 version of the tank and the rather primitive system devised to warn of gas attacks. These drawings are truly the work of 'the man who was on the field'.¹⁷

The poem follows Private Jones's own experiences from mid-1915 to mid-1916. The first three of the poem's seven parts recount the gathering of his division, their voyage to France and their first deployments after the Iliadic opening of Part 3, in which a spectacular sunrise is followed by a full military parade. Part 4, Christmas 1915, is spent on fatigue duty behind the lines, which is how Jones really spent those days. Part 5 telescopes the actual events of spring 1916: the first, ominous issuing of metal shrapnel helmets (104), the 'quite successful raid' (106), the general alert during an unsuccessful German offensive (108), the outdoor concert (110), the march south to the Somme; an officer's reading of the 'good news' of the initial British success of July 1 (123), when the infantrymen really were 'permitted to cheer'. Part 6 correlates to the confused marching which robbed the battalion of sleep and brought it to battle exhausted, closing with a profoundly Homeric simile comparing the battalion to a ship's crew watching another ship depart while they must beach their vessel, 'turn their



eyes from the white in-swell and get down to some job of work' (150). Part 7 is the assault on Mametz Wood on July 10, commencing at 4.15 am, followed by the digging of the trench that afternoon and the shooting of Private John Ball. This merges with the final hallucinatory sequence, initiated by the supernatural figure of the Queen of the Woods who appears and bestows branches from various types of tree on twelve of Jones's dead comrades (185–6). The time changes are insignificant: Jones's battalion entered the trenches on December 19 rather than (as in the poem) Christmas Eve, and Jones did not see what he describes in the wood until 10 July not before. He condenses the action slightly.

The action of *In Parenthesis* is therefore bracketed at one end by the second Battle of Ypres in 1915, and at the other by the climactic finale at Mametz Wood in early July 1916, the first stage of the Battle of the Somme. Ypres haunts the conversations of the men in the poem. In the set-piece section on Christmas 1915, one of the soldiers can't stop returning the conversation to that massacre (78): 'Wipers [Ypres] again./He can't keep off it – like a bloke with a pimple.' At the beginning of Part 5, in June 1916, the tension and foreboding mount as the men wait for action. One says, as he listens to the distant noise of combat (124), that it sounds as though the fighting is 'Worst 'un first Wipers – be a long chalk.'

The protracted butchery of the first Ypres battle had already changed the way people talked about war. During the seven weeks between 14 October and 30 November 1914, the British had suffered 58,155 casualties (7,960 dead, 29,562 wounded and an enormous 17,873 missing). The poison gas of the second battle of Ypres in the following May then made its own terrifying impression. These extreme developments raised for Jones, who was interested in science and technology, the prescient question of whether art could or should respond to the industrialization of war. Can chemicals which kill be aesthetic? As he writes in his preface (xiv):

It is not easy in considering a trench-mortar barrage to give praise for the action proper to chemicals – full though it may be of beauty. We feel a rubicon has been passed between striking with a hand weapon as men used to do and loosing poison from the sky as we do ourselves. We doubt the decency of our own inventions, and are certainly in terror of their possibilities.

In 1942 Jones was to write a fine study of the relationship between Western literature and militarism, 'Art in relation to war'.¹⁸ But in the *In Parenthesis* preface he already stresses that poets had once faced the same challenge with what were to become the standard symbolic objects – the technology and weaponry of Arthurian epic:

We who are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and who presume to other and more radiant affinities, are finding it difficult, as yet, to recognise these creatures of chemicals as true extensions of ourselves, that we may feel for them a native affection, which alone can make them magical for us. It would be interesting to know how we shall ennoble our new media as we have



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already ennobled and made significance our old – candle-light, fire-light, Cups, Wands, and Swords, to choose at random.

In his own poem we feel him struggling to ‘ennoble’ the new media of destruction: he revels in the ‘randomness’ of the items – some related to chemical warfare – stockpiled in the trench dugout he calls home (90):

Picks, shovels, dredging-ladles, carriers, containers, gas-rattles, two of Mrs. Thingumajig’s patent gas-dispersing flappers, emptied S.A.A. boxes, grenade boxes, two bales of revetting-wire, pine stakes; rusted-to-bright-orange barbed wire of curious design – three coils of it; fine good new dark efficient corkscrew staples, splayed-out all ways; three drums of whale oil, the splintered stock of a Mauser rifle, two unexploded yellow-ochre toffee-apples, their strong rods unrusted; three left-leg gum-boots; a Scotch officer’s fine bright bonnet; some type of broken pump, its rubber slack punctured, coiled like a dead slime-beast, reared its brass nozzle out from under rum-jar and picket-maul.

This trove piled haphazardly, half-submerged. You must have a lumber room where you have habitation.

The unique style of *In Parenthesis* is well exemplified by this almost Homeric catalogue of military equipment. The poem’s quality was recognized instantly when it appeared in the late 1930s. It was held, by people whose judgement cannot lightly be dismissed, to be by far the most important literary response to the First World War. Hyperbolic admiration was expressed by such titanic literary figures as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot (who wrote a complimentary ‘Note of Introduction’ to preface the first edition), W.H. Auden, Graham Greene and Peter Levi.¹⁹ It won the prestigious Hawthornden Prize for imaginative literature in 1938. Yet the poem has also suffered almost incomprehensible extremes of neglect. To my knowledge no classicist except Oswyn Murray has noticed or appreciated it or grappled with its idiosyncratic classicism, part of which is what Murray insightfully identifies as Jones’s ‘obsession with the frontier walls of the Roman empire and their prefigurement of the trenches.’²⁰ Elizabeth Vandiver, regrettably, does not discuss Jones at all in her otherwise commendable 2010 study of the relationship between Greek and Roman literature and poetic responses to the First World War, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles*.

One reason for the neglect may be the intensity of the relationship between Jones’s poetry and his prolific work as an artist. *In Parenthesis* sometimes presents its classical allusions as an invitation to visualize a work of visual art: the cadaver of lance-corporal Aneirin Lewis is ‘more blistered’ than ‘painted Troy Towers’ (155). It is admittedly possible to read *In Parenthesis*, which began as a series of pictures rather than words, in isolation from Jones’s paintings and drawings.²¹ But the ink and watercolour frontispiece he created for the poem offers, stylistically, a fast-track route into understanding the impact of his verbal technique: it is thickly textured, pulses with activity and life, gives the impression of chaos only just under aesthetic control, and sits on a cusp between





Figure 9.1 Frontispiece to *In Parenthesis* (ink and watercolour, 1937). Copyright the Estate of David Jones and the National Museum of Wales.

figurative/realist art and symbolism or abstract-expressionism. Every inch is crammed with detail – other soldiers, horses, barbed wire, shovels, rats. The central figure is a half-naked foot soldier, with an injured leg, whose limbs partly fuse with the jagged branches of the menacing wood. They both crucify him and enfold him. And that suggestion of crucifixion lends the image a religious dimension, icon like and transcendent. There is a poetic, ordered quality and an aspiration to offer a universal meaning. What it represents is not glorious but nor is it despicable: it is men in the process of doing and suffering. It subverts the celebrated war poets across all cultural history by asking in what sense can be war legitimately have a poetics, if at all. The picture is the intimate counterpart of the passage where Jones describes taking the first of the two hits he received in the battle at Mametz Wood (179):



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You know the bough hangs low, by your bruised lips and the smart to your cheek bone.

When the shivered rowan fell
you couldn't hear the fall of it.

Barrage with counter-barrage shockt
deprive all several sounds of their identity,
what dark convulsed cacophony
conditions each disparity

and the trembling woods are vortex for the storm;
through which their bodies grope the mazy charnel-ways – seek to distinguish
men from walking trees and branchy moving like a Birnam copse.

The phrase 'dark convulsed cacophony' reminds us that even to call *In Parenthesis* a 'poetic' response is not without problems: a large proportion of the text is printed, like this passage, as prose which is not only syntactically disjointed but contains few rhythmical qualities which are identifiably 'poetic'.

Critics have been reluctant to designate it a prose poem, but I am not clear why; by the 1930s the genre was well established.²² It may be significant that the earliest manifestations of the form are the passages in prose *within* poetic texts which feature in early Bible translations. The name John Ball is an adaptation of the canonical character who had represented the typical Englishman in political cartoons since the eighteenth century; yet it is also the name of a Lollard rebel priest at the time of the 1381 Peasants' revolt, a rhyming preacher who came up with the original couplet, 'When Adam delved and Eve span,/Who was then the Gentleman?' This John Ball used the English translations of the Vernacular Latin Bible called the Wycliffe Bible, which features both verse and prose. Jones may have come across Ball in the novel by William Morris (whom he admired), *A Dream of John Ball* (1888). In *In Parenthesis*, in a French bar, Ball's companion asks a 'ma'm'selle' for drinks (he asks in prose). Then, swaying his pelvis 'like a corner-boy', he launches into song (103):

*He shall die
he shall die
with one
mighty swipe I
will I will
diss-lo-cate his bloody jaw.*

At this point Jones's omniscient narrator, intermittently merged with John Ball, tells us:

He reverts to the discipline of prose.

Jones here draws attention to the jarring hybridity of his form. He is going beyond the very limits of poetry as the other War Poets generally understood it, and as our



young are taught to understand it – that is, as rhyming verse in conventional stanzas. He finds these limits inadequate. He revered James Joyce, and it shows. He combines free indirect discourse, dialogue (usually fragments of dialogue), description, sensory evocation and dense allusiveness. This fusion requires, as he puts it, the ‘discipline of prose’ if it is to do justice to the extreme psychic and physiological bombardment which he had undergone in the trenches and on the Somme, as well as presumably during his own first serious nervous breakdown of 1932, when he was midway through writing the poem.

Jones understood intuitively the impossibility of reconciling the unprecedented experience of the First World War to inherited poetic forms. Only in Jones among the so-called British War Poets does the formal, aesthetic revolution we call Modernism, the ideological expression of the historical, economic and sociopolitical contradictions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, become welded to the historical events in which those contradictions tragically exploded in open military conflict. To put it another way: the First World War and Modernism are inseparable, as military and aesthetic instantiations of the same crisis in the global political order. The crisis involved the apocalyptic collision of forces unleashed by new technologies (the internal combustion engine; aviation; telecommunications; chemical munitions); it entailed the industrialization of Germany, pressure on the internal geopolitical borders of Europe, the rise of Proletarian radicalism and cracks in the old orders of British, French, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian imperialism. It is hardly surprising that the older literary forms – lyricism and realism in fiction, metre and rhyme in poetry – failed to delimit the aesthetic expression of such a crisis. Yet among the so-called War Poets, Jones is the only figure (except arguably Rosenberg) who can be described as a Modernist. *In Parenthesis* assumes the innovations of Pound in metre and Eliot, especially *The Waste Land* (1922), in atmosphere. The more famous War Poets used conventional poetic structures inherited from the Victorians; for the most part their diction is conventional, even obsolescent.

Their very conventionality, which makes them seem so accessible, is of course one reason why they are so popular: by offering no formal surprises, they are easily learned and performed. More importantly, their generic form keeps the terrible experiences they aesthetically process safe, hermetically sealed in an antiseptic box labelled ‘The Past’. This past is a recognized formal category which makes the First World War the end of an old cultural epoch (the Victorian Age, the British Empire, the world before women and workers were liberated, unironic patriotism morphing into guilt-laden pacifism) rather than the foundation stone of a new epoch (global war, the industrialization of death, nuclear weapons and terrifying racism and nationalism). *In Parenthesis* is an exhausting and arduous read. Reading it after the more famous War Poets is like tackling Joyce’s *Ulysses* after Thomas Hardy. Yet it will always be important precisely because it does so fearlessly attempt to fuse the *appropriate* aesthetic form to the historical moment, the emergent aesthetic consciousness of the epoch of the war with the stress of the physical, lived reality which he experienced as a soldier. As Dudley puts it:



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As a result of staging the modern idiom in the *in extremis* of war, Jones applies a greater degree of pressure to it, one that ruptures smaller fissures already sensed in Pound, Joyce, or Eliot. In so doing, Jones is exploding one tension at the heart of modernity: the seeming failure to find a poetic or narrative mode adequate to control and convey the extent and gravity of the problems of the modern world.²³

The aesthetic extremity and the tonal strangeness of *In Parenthesis* were unique achievements, even if they simultaneously explain why it will never appear on GCSE syllabuses or be recited in Westminster Abbey.

This point is best illustrated by the only explicit reference Jones makes in the work to any other War Poet. The sequence comes in the sixth of the seventh parts, a tense episode in which the soldiers are waiting, terrified, for the Mametz assault (135):

Besides which there was the heavy battery operating just beneath the ridge, at a kept interval of minutes, with unnerving inevitability, as a malign chronometer, ticking off with each discharge an exactly measured progress toward a certain and prearranged hour of apocalypse.

Here Jones strains to evoke the topics they discussed way back then, as they tried to calm their nerves: John Ball is talking to two of his closest companions, a man with the Lewis guns (a newly invented light machine-gun), and the most educated and intellectual of those we meet, Signaller Olivier (139–40):

These three seldom met except for very brief periods out of the line – at Brigade rest perhaps – or if some accident of billeting threw them near together. These three loved each other, but the routine of their lives made chances of fore-gathering rare. These two with linked arms walked together in a sequestered place above the company lines and found a grassy slope to sit down on. And Signaller Olivier came soon and sat with them. And you feel a bit less windy.

They talked of ordinary things. Of each one's friends at home; those friends unknown to either of the other two. Of the possible duration of the war. Of how they would meet and in what good places afterwards. Of the dissimilar merits of Welshmen and Cockneys. Of the diverse virtues of Regular and Temporary Officers. Of if you'd ever read the books of Mr. Wells. Of the poetry of Rupert Brooke. Of how you really couldn't very well carry more than one book at a time in your pack. Of the losses of the Battalion since they'd come to France. Of the hateful discomfort of having no greatcoats with fighting-order, of how bad this was. Of how everybody ought rightly to have Burberry's, like officers. Of how German knee boots were more proper to trench war than puttees. Of how privileged Olivier was because he could manage to secrete a few personal belongings along with the signaller's impedimenta. Of how he was known to be a favourite with the Regimental and how he'd feel the draught if he were back with his platoon. Of whether they three would be together for the Duration, and how you hoped so very much indeed. Of



captains of thousands and of hundreds, of corporals, of many things. Of the Lloyd George administration, of the Greek, who Olivier said was important, of whom John Ball had never previously heard.²⁴ Of the neutrality of Spain. Of whether the French nation was nice or nasty. Of whether anyone would ever get leave and what it would be like if you did. Of how stripes, stars, chevrons, specialisations, jobs away from the battalion, and all distinguishing marks were better resisted for as long as possible. Of how it were best to take no particular notice, to let the stuff go over you, how it were wise to lie doggo and to wait the end.

The mention of Brooke is historically accurate. He had come to sudden fame when on 11 March 1915 the *Times Literary Supplement* had published two of his sonnets ('IV: The Dead' and 'V: The Soldier'). 'The Soldier' had then been read on Easter Sunday, 4 April, from the pulpit of St Paul's Cathedral, shortly before Brooke died of blood poisoning on the island of Skyros. Brooke's *1914 & Other Poems*, containing the five famous sonnets, was published the following month and was reprinted no fewer than eleven times before the end of 1915. Yes, his verses were in the minds of the men who went to fight on the Somme. But no, verses like his could no longer be adequate to an emotionally honest trenches survivor like Jones trying to memorialize those days in the literary idiom of the post-war epoch.

A similar point can be made by thinking about the ancient Greek and Roman presences in the poem. They are relatively slight, certainly in comparison with those of medieval Arthurian literature and the presentation of John Ball and his companions as the heroes of knightly legend. In the first of the seven parts, the only certain invocation of classics comes when Ball and his comrades are on parade while assembling for embarkation to France (6). The band plays. 'Broken catches on the wind-gust came shrilly back: *Of Hector and Lysander and such great names as these* – the march proper to them.' This well-known line belongs to 'The British Grenadiers', the traditional eighteenth-century marching song of all British fusilier companies, following 'Some talk of Alexander, and some of Hercules'. The proper names Hector and Alexander later crop up in banter between the men: 'When did they pass you out Hector-boy'; 'They get warmed to it – they're well away in tactics and strategy and the disciplines of the wars – like so many Alexanders' (78). So these classical warriors are part *both* of the realistic fragmentary soundscape Jones evokes *and* of his diachronic vision of war – a vision which presents the First World War as an unavoidable, ritualized confrontation replaying an atavistic human urge to combat going back to the songs of antiquity. That is, the evocations of the past generations of warriors are fundamental to the poem's objective humanism, an objective humanism however fused, in Jones's unique manner, with a more mysterious, sacramental quality.

That humanism and ritualism are nevertheless also humane. Some of the classical allusions are deployed in a comic vein, somewhat absurdly appearing in passages where the sentiment and language are bathetic, or at least far from heroic: when Jones compiles a catalogue of figures resented by the others because they somehow manage to offload some of the contents of their kit bags onto the officers' transport vehicles, a reference to Julius Caesar's favoured bodyguards jostles with army slang and twentieth-century nicknames (118):

anyone feeling awkward and O, O, O, it's a lovely war with poppies on the up-platform for a perpetual memorial of his body.'

In the third Part, Jones describes the way that the 'rat of no-man's-land' and birds 'whose proud eyes watched the broken emblems droop and drag dust' join the soldiers in a process of Ovidian physical transformation as they acclimatise to the distorted, unnatural world of the trenches and 'suffer with us this metamorphosis' (54). But the richest seam of classical allusions of *In Parenthesis* is delayed until the section which is also the most formally 'poetic', if this quality is defined in terms of abbreviated colometry and sustained rhetorical flow. This is the boast of Dai Greatcoat, Jones's homage to the 'flyting' speech of Diomedes to Glaucus in the *Iliad* book 6 as well as an ironic salute to David Lloyd-George, who had personally helped Jones enlist but, more importantly, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, had pressed for Britain to intervene in the war in support of Belgium. Dai proclaims his qualifications for the status of warrior, citing the participation of himself and his forefathers in the entire history of biblical and European warfare, mingling his Hebrew, classical and Welsh historical narratives with dizzying abandon. His fathers, he tells us, fought with the Black Prince of Wales, with Abel against Cain. Dai himself 'built a shit-house for Artaxerxes', the Persian King from 404 until 358 BCE who vanquished his brother in Xenophon's *Anabasis* and was famous for initiating architectural projects at Susa and Ecbatana (78–9). Dai fought with the biblical Saul, who was armed like Saint Derfel of Wales; he fought (80) 'in the standing wheat in Cantium' (Kent, where Julius Caesar landed in 55 BCE). He opens a passage mostly consisting of a list of Arthurian battles at places with Latin names (e.g. 'in regione Linnuis'), drawn from the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, with a claim to have been 'Socrates, my feet are colder than you think on this Potidaean duck-board'. He associates himself with the army of the Trojan exile Brutus who 'dugged the outer vallum' at 'Troy Novaunt' (81), and with the giant-king Brân of Welsh mythology (82) and his sister Branwen, whose marriage to the King of Ireland caused a catastrophic war. He fought with the Archangel Michael in the War in Heaven described in Revelation 12:7–13 but he also 'served Longinus that Dux bat-blind and bent; the Dandy Xth are my regiment' (83–4). Longinus was the blind soldier who according to Roman Catholic tradition pierced the crucified Jesus's side with a spear, and the Tenth Legion were much favoured by Julius Caesar, fighting under him in almost every battle of the Gallic War.

Dai's uncommon aria on past military exploits, at the centre of a poem of which the aesthetics look determinedly forwards into the future, anchors the action at a fixed point in a transhistorical process which stretches way back to the earliest conflicts recorded in European literature and even beyond. This diachronic perspective is bound up with Jones's identity as an Anglo-Welshman fighting in the Welsh Fusiliers. In the preface (x) he says that he went to war alongside Londoners and Welshmen, who bore together in their bodies 'the genuine tradition of the Island of Britain ... Those are before Caractacus was'. The Caractacus allusion recalls the use of the defiant Briton Caractacus, celebrated by Tacitus, in early twentieth-century British imperial propaganda; Caractacus became melded in the public imagination with the spirit of the Welsh-speaking Lloyd George, and the Caractacus story was used to foster an



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appetite for joining up among the Welsh working class. In the wake of Elgar's cantata *Caractacus* (1898) there had been an Edwardian craze for school plays and amateur theatricals, often in Welsh, arousing Welsh boys to martial valour. The most famous and influential of these plays was by Beriah Gwynfe Evans, who also wrote a hagiography of Lloyd-George.²⁵ Such dramas usually fused two episodes in Tacitus. First, his account in *Annals* 12 of the combat between the Roman general Publius Ostorius Scapula and the Silures, 'a naturally fierce people and now full of confidence in the might of Caractacus, who by many an indecisive and many a successful battle had raised himself far above all the other generals of the Britons,' and Caractacus's defiant speech in the Roman forum. The second episode is Tacitus's completely separate account in 14.29–30 of the revolt of the Icenii in 62 CE, under Nero.

But it is the climax of *In Parenthesis* which contains the most emotionally intense engagements with classical war poetry, in a sequence which places the *Aeneid* inescapably before us. John Ball, who shares Jones's skill at draughtsmanship, contemplates the wooded grove where the direct combat is later to take place. And he turns into an avatar of Virgil's Aeneas on his quest for the golden bough growing on a tree within the sanctuary of Diana of the Wood, Diana Nemorensis, near Aricia in the Alban hills (*Aeneid* 6.136–8; *In Parenthesis* 66–7), a mythical journey made even more famous by inspiring the title and intellectual project of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890)²⁶:

Keep date with the genius of the place – come with a weapon or effectual branch
– and here this winter copse might well be special to Diana's Jack, for none might
attempt it, but by perilous bough-plucking.

Draughtsman at Army made note on a blue-print of the significance of that
grove as one of his strong-points; this wooded rise as the gate of their enemies, a
door at whose splintered posts, Janus-wise emplacements shield an automatic fire.

In the mirror: below the wood, his undulating breastworks all along, he sees
and loses, thinks he sees again, grey movement for the grey stillness, where the
sand-bag wall dipped a little.

Anyone among Jones's readers familiar with either the *Aeneid* or Frazerian anthropology will understand that terrible violence is about to take place here. At Aricia, each successive priest of Diana, each 'King of the Wood' (Rex Nemorensis) was replaced in the cult when a runaway slave mounted a challenge and then killed the incumbent priest in a ritual sacrifice taking the form of single combat. The allusion to the grey 'mirror' which Ball thinks he sees beneath the sand-bag walls calls to mind the great circular Lake Nemi at Aricia, which made such an impression on Britons who toured classical sites in Italy in the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Turner's watercolour of 1840 shows the classical ruins in the lower right-hand section, while a girl tends her goats beside the mirror-like disc of water high in the Alban hills. Macaulay's poem 'The Battle of the Lake Regillus' in *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842) helped young Victorians and Edwardians, including Jones, embed the grim succession ritual of the King of the Wood in their memories:



The still glassy lake that sleeps
Beneath Aricia's trees
Those trees in whose dim shadow
The ghastly priest doth reign,
The priest who slew the slayer,
And shall himself be slain.

The 'golden bough' sequence of *In Parenthesis* now segues into another classical vision seen by Ball at the wood:

His eyes turned again to where the wood thinned to separate broken
trees; to where great strippings-off hanged from tenuous fibres
swaying, whitened to decay – as swung
immolations
for the northern Cybele.
The hanged, the offerant:
 himself to himself
 on the tree.
Whose own,
whose grey war-band, beyond the stapled war-net –
(as grey-banded rodents for a shelving warren – cooped in their
complex runnels, where the sea-fret percolates).
Come from outlandish places,
from beyond the world,
from the Hercynian –
they were at breakfast and were cold as he, they too made their
dole.

The descent into the lethal Underworld of Mametz Wood is made more sinister by the image of vegetation swinging from trees like sacrifices for a northern Cybele, the ancient near eastern goddess for whom men voluntarily castrated themselves; the German foe are called men from outlandish places beyond even Hercynia. The passage and the description of the gateway to the trenches as (44) 'this gate of Mars armipotente, the grisly place, like flat painted scene in top-lights' crude disclosing' are both informed by W.F. Jackson Knight's translation of *Aeneid* 7.601–5, on the twin Roman Gates of War (as a fellow Roman Catholic, Jones was deeply influenced by this classical scholar and expert on Virgil and Augustine):

There was a sacred custom in Latium, Land of the West, which the Alban Cities continuously observed, and Rome, supreme in all the world, observes today when Romans first stir Mars to engage battle, alike if they prepare to launch war's miseries with might and main on Getae, Hyrcanians, or Arabs, or to journey to India, in the track of dawn, and to bid the Parthians hand our standards back. There are



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twin Gates of War, for by that name men call them; and they are hallowed by men's awe and the dread presence of heartless Mars. A hundred bars of bronze, and iron's tough, everlasting strength, close them, and Janus, never moving from that threshold, is their guard. When the senators have irrevocably decided for battle, the consul himself, a figure conspicuous in Quirine toga of State and Sabine cincture, unbolts these gates, and their hinge-posts groan; it is he who calls the fighting forth, then the rest of their manhood follows, and the bronze horns, in hoarse assent, add their breath.²⁷

For Jones, the First World War was a great sacrificial offering to both Diana of the Wood and Cybele of the North but also the latest in the perpetual re-opening of the primordial Gates of War, consecrated to Mars.

The poem's strong affinity with a mythical *nekuia* reminds us that the descent to the Underworld had become one of the most 'the single most important myth for Modernist authors.'²⁸ T.S. Eliot said that Tiresias was the unifying figure of the nightmarish *The Waste Land* (1922), at 'the evening hour that strives/Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea.'²⁹ In 1935 Ezra Pound, whose first *Canto* begins with Tiresias, said that the *nekuia* was an atavistic remembering of primeval rites capable of putting us in touch with the earliest Mediterranean sensibilities.³⁰ Joyce in the Hades chapter of *Ulysses* 'represented the material and spiritual dislocations produced by Western capitalism as an infernal condition,'³¹ and one which led directly to the hellish trenches of the First World War. And Jones's poem portrays a *katabasis* which has no corresponding *anabasis*, except the unachievable goal of 'ascendancy' over the enemy after climbing upwards from a trench and 'over the top' (114):

It all went west with the tin-hat – that harbinger of their anabasis, of these latter days, of a more purposed hate, and the establishment of unquestioned ascendancy in no-man's-land.

Jones's *katabasis* is the journey into the darkness of Mametz Wood, in the final, seventh section finally called simply 'the dark wood' (165), in a resounding echo of the *selva oscura* of the second line of the *Inferno* of Dante Alighieri. On the approach to and inside the dark wood, John Ball is injured and many of his comrades die. This climactic section opens in Latin, with allusions to two passages of the vulgate Latin Bible: *invenimus eum in campis silvae* (we have found it in the fields of the woods), which in Psalm 131.6 refers to the tabernacle David vows to build for God. Then come the evocative words from the Vulgate version of the Lamentations of Jeremiah for the fall of Jerusalem, *matribus suis dixerunt: ubi est triticum et vinum? cum deficerent quasi vulnerati ... cum exhalarent animas suas in sinu matrum suarum*. (They say to their mothers, Where is grain and wine? When they swoon as the wounded ... /When their soul is poured out into their mothers' bosom.)

For it must be emphasized that despite all the classicism of the *katabasis* and Dai Greatcoat sequences, Jones's *In Parenthesis* is also a profoundly Christian poem, partly





David Jones *In Parenthesis*

structured on the ritual sequence of the Eucharist. It reflects its author's devout Roman Catholic religious outlook, and abounds in sacramental imagery.³² But its classicism functions to reveal Christianity to be an outgrowth of a far earlier, pagan theology. The 'Christmas' sequence is introduced thus (65):

It was yet quite early in the morning, at the time of Saturnalia, when men properly are in winter quarters, lighting His birthday candles – all a green-o.

When children look with serious eyes on brand-new miracles, and red berry sheen makes a Moses-bush, to mirror in multiplicity the hearth-stones creature of fire.

For the conjurings of ancient Greece and Rome are above all crucial to the poem's peculiarly objective tone, its gaze like children 'with serious eyes.' It is not a patriotic poem. It is not a protest poem. It is certainly not a pacifist poem. The war may have been senseless, even absurd, but the men who fought in it were not.

In one of the finest passages, Jones defines, I think, what he is trying to do (88–9; the passage needs to be read in the knowledge that the Arthurian knight mentioned, Ewein, diverted streams of water to create fountains or to flow over Merlin's stone):

This was a country where men from their first habitation had not to rest, but to always dyke and drain if they would outwit the water, or leave the place to fowl and amphibious beasts. It was a bad country to contend in, when such contention most required a way of life below the ground. Yet by fascinated track they come to within their walls. They labour with the bulging gabions, they ladle and wattle: like Ewein, they are familiar with the path of a water-course; they make conduits, they divert and block and restore the breaches. Two armies face and hold their crumbling *limites* intact. They're worthy of an intelligent song for all the stupidity of their contest. A boast for the dyke keepers, for the march wardens.

In Parenthesis is indisputably an 'intelligent song' to celebrate the deeds of the warriors of the Somme; 'the stupidity of their contest' is not the point at issue. It is not that the infantrymen do not suffer and do not experience powerful emotions. But their varied voices, and Ball's intermittently prominent consciousness, along with the subdued, Homerically non-judgemental omniscient narrator, combine to present the appalling events with a curious detachment. Despite its use of epigraphs to each of its seven sections taken from *Y Gododdin*, a medieval Welsh poem attributed to the bard Aneirin, and consisting of elegies to the men who fell at the battle of Catraeth in about 600 CE, *In Parenthesis* is not itself elegiac.³³ Nor is its vision predominantly tragic: there is no attempt to investigate the *causes* of the suffering and absolutely no emotive lingering on physical or psychic trauma. There is, however, a conspicuous reference to Melpomene, Muse of Tragedy, in the very final sequence. After Ball is wounded, his thoughts veer between the stretcher-bearers removing him from battle and the hospital to which he is taken, where (186) 'Mrs. Willy Hartington has learned to draw sheets and so has Miss





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Melpomené; and on the south lawns, men walk in red white and blue under the cedars and by every green tree and beside comfortable waters’.

Miss Melpomené belongs not to the sufferings of battle but to the future of the wounded soldier, to the period of recuperation. She was one of the figures from the poem whom Jones sketched in the manuscript – one of his many instantiations of an eternal goddess-figure, alluring, mythic, mysterious, part Helen of Troy, part Diana of the Woods, part Virgin Mary. She has a Modernist precedent in Molly Bloom of James Joyce’s 1922 *Ulysses*, ‘Gea-Tellus, fulfilled, recumbent’, and she prefigures the Ur-matriarchal divinity proposed in *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948) by that other Mametz Wood survivor, Robert Graves.³⁴

For, despite all the squalid accumulated details about the environment and everyday routines of the men in the trenches, *In Parenthesis* does lend war, although no sentimental, crudely sacrificial, elegiac or tragic overtones, a *metaphysical* aspect. This emerges as a strange relationship between the men who wage it and its abstraction or symbolic expression as a mysterious, eternal feminine principle, simultaneously mother, lover and female genius loci.³⁵ Dai Greatcoat’s speech fused into one female ‘toast of the Rig’ment’ a woman called ‘Helen Camulodunum’ (at the Battle of Camulodunum, the British Iceni massacred the Ninth Legion of the Roman army in 61 CE), the Virgin Mary under her Roman Catholic title ‘Mediatrice’, a figure from a popular proverbial rhyme (‘clement and loving, she’s Friday’s child, she’s loving and giving’), and the Welsh folktale heroine Elen Luyddawg, also known as Saint Helen of Caernarfon (80–1):

She’s the girl with the sparkling eyes, she’s the Bracelet Giver, she’s a regular draw with the labour companies, whereby the paved army-paths are hers that grid the island which is her dower. Elen Luyddawg she is – more she is than Helen Argive.

But Jones’s eternally recurring feminine principle also appears in the form of Argive Helen’s sister Penelope, waiting at home with the family dog, the ‘mademoiselle at Croix Barbée’ waiting for her man to return, one of the ‘green girls in broken keeps’ who ‘have only mastiff-guards’ (35).

Men have always offered themselves up to the feminine archetypal figure, half-way between gentle nun and lascivious whore, whom Jones chillingly calls ‘sweet sister Death’ (162–3):

But sweet sister death has gone debauched today and stalks on this high ground with strumpet confidence, makes no coy veiling of her appetite but leers from you to me with all her parts discovered.

By one and one the line gaps, where her fancy will – howsoever they may howl for their virginity she holds them – who impinge less on space sink limply to a heap nourish a lesser category of being like those other who fructify the land like Tristram Lamorak de Galis Alisand le Orphelin Beaumains who was youngest or all of them in shaft-shade at strait Thermopylae or the sweet brothers Balin and Balan embraced beneath their single monument.



The technological ways in which they wage it may have changed for ever in the First World War, especially in the chlorine gas at Ypres. But war was, is, and perhaps always will be. Spartan Greeks, cracking jokes about fighting in the shade of the Persians' myriad arrows, sacrificed themselves at Thermopylae; Arthurian knights died in the battle charges of the Middle Ages. In order to treat the instance in which he participated with the respect and intelligence it deserves Jones ultimately evokes, if lightly, the ancient metaphor of combat as sexual coitus. As he puts it himself in the Preface, authors who wrote about fighting in the past had no problem (xv), since 'for them the embrace of battle seemed one with the embrace of lovers'.

The unique status of *In Parenthesis* as a thoroughgoing Modernist poem on the First World War, and by a combatant, has elicited a few fine critical responses from scholars of English and Comparative Literature.³⁶ But much damage was done to its reputation by Paul Fussell's obtuse critique in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), a cult book which has for years been routinely cited in every First World War bibliography. Labelling it an 'honourable miscarriage', Fussell claimed, bafflingly, that Jones merely reproduced the medieval chivalry of the late Victorian period and re-used its high diction without irony:

The trouble is that the meddling intellect, taking the form this time of a sentimental Literary Arthurianism after Tennyson and Morris, has romanticised the war. If we place *In Parenthesis* next to Masefield's *Gallipoli*, with its panoply of epigraphs from *The Song of Roland*, we can see its kinship with documents which are overtly patriotic and even propagandistic.³⁷

This is about as tone-deaf a response to poetic diction as it is possible to imagine. It needs to be corrected by Robichaud's patient demonstration that Jones's response to the Middle Ages, far from being derivatively romantic, is profoundly innovative³⁸; it marks a violent break with pre-Raphaelite medievalism by seeing the chivalric age through a Modernist lens. The same, as I have tried to show here, can be said of Jones's classicism. Murray also realized that Fussell was mistaken, but for a different reason. Murray's interpretation correctly points out that Jones was trying to make sense of human experience and never aspired to create 'literature'.³⁹ He stressed to a friend in 1962 that no critic had ever yet understood 'the altogether different point of departure of my stuff "from the writing or poetry" or "prose" as conceived by "writers"; whether good or bad, from blokes like Rupert Brooke right on through Sassoon and even Owen and Graves and even T.S.E. It is next to impossible for me to indicate what the difference is'.⁴⁰ If we listen hard to *In Parenthesis* we can hear that difference at work in a painstaking, Herculean, craftsman-like attempt to use words to evoke authentically the sustained extremes of trench warfare, some unusually disturbing material and psychological experiences, and find in that act of authentic evocation a poetics – even a metaphysics – of human courage and competence. These are worthy of an intelligent song despite the stupidity of the contest.

To make that song as intelligent as the combatants in the First World War deserved, Jones took twenty years, during which he suffered mental problems, travelled to France and Jerusalem and also read avidly. By 1937 the books in his personal collection included



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not only numerous volumes related to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chaucer, the Arthurian legends, the history of Christianity and Welsh language and literature, but many on classical mythology and Roman Britain. There was also a large group of translations from and studies of classical authors: a Latin grammar, a Latin dictionary, a Greek grammar, a dictionary of New Testament Greek, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Gilbert Murray's translation of Euripides's *Trojan Women* (1916), all of Caesar's writings, the *Aeneid*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, Horace, Lucretius and a volume of Warmington's *Remains of Old Latin*.⁴¹

Jones's systematic process of self-education across those two decades between fighting and publishing *In Parenthesis* transformed its allusive depth and cultural complexity, but he explained its title thus:

This writing is called 'In Parenthesis' because I have written it in a kind of space between – I don't know between quite what – but as you turn aside to do something; and because for us amateur soldiers (and especially for the writer, who was not only an amateur, but grotesquely incompetent, a knocker-over of piles, a parade's despair) the war itself was a parenthesis – how glad we thought we were to step outside its brackets at the end of '18 – and also because our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis.⁴²

War takes place between outbreak and peace treaty. Life takes place between the brackets constituted by birth and death. But in retrospect it is difficult not to see Jones's poem as created in the parenthesis between the two World Wars. The new order which emerged from the first created the circumstances which made the second inevitable. Old monarchies were replaced by shaky republics and governments with extended powers which became breeding grounds for ethnic nationalism and resentment about the national boundaries demarcated under the Versailles Treaty. The crumbling of the old European world empires abroad seemed reflected in the financial ruin and demoralization of the European continent at home. And in a picture now in the Tate Gallery which Jones completed just after the beginning of the Blitz in 1941, and which has powerful correspondences with the frontispiece to *In Parenthesis*, the connection between the two wars is made terrifyingly visual.⁴³ It is centred on a female nude of a full-bodied, Rubens-esque type which he had drawn several times before.⁴⁴ But this one he entitled just 'Aphrodite', after considering titles reflecting his belief in a universal type of the goddess 'Aphrodite Pandemos: The Triple Goddess', 'Turan' (the Etruscan love goddess) and 'The Lady', names inscribed on the back of the only known study for the work (also held in the Tate Gallery).⁴⁵ A friend suggested 'Aphrodite in Aulis' in 1949, the title by which it has been subsequently known, since Jones accepted the implicit allusion to the sacrifice of Iphigenia enthusiastically.

At the centre stands Aphrodite, with the crescent moon and stars belonging to the Madonna of Revelation 12, a cult figure in whom Jones wrote that he wanted to embrace 'all female cult figures, all goddesses rolled into one, mother-figure and





Figure 9.2 'Aphrodite in Aulis' (pencil, ink and watercolour on paper, 1941). Copyright the Estate of David Jones and the Tate Gallery, London.

virgo inter virgines, the pierced woman and mother and all her foretypes⁴⁶ She is shackled by one ankle to the sacrificial altar on which she stands, as the statue of Aphrodite was shackled in her temple at Sparta (Pausanias 3.15.22). Like the soldier in the frontispiece, she seems wholly trapped within a chaotic frame crammed with disturbing detail. A crumbling classical edifice with four columns, in each of the classical orders, seems to represent the threatened disintegration of civilization. The barrage balloon in the top left-hand corner signals the new technology of the new war, and there are soldiers and arms from many periods of history. But by far the most prominent, in the foreground, are the British and German soldiers with the uniform and equipment of the First World War. This Aphrodite, a signifier of the transhistorical lust for war, drawn from the ancient Greek world, occupies the parenthetical space on the canvas between the brackets constituted by the men in the trenches and the barrage balloon, respectively. As in *In Parenthesis*, in this picture Jones employs artistic form and the diachronic depth offered by classical imagery to crystallize and lend permanence to the acute psychological and physical turmoil undergone by soldiers, across time, *in extremis*.