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Article: The Messy Making of David Jones's *Anthemata*

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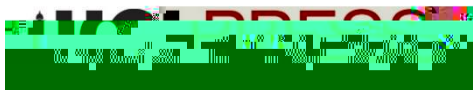
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## Anathemata

In May 1938, David Jones (1895-1974) compared a new project he was just beginning with his long narrative war poem, *In Parenthesis*, published in the previous year:

I don't know if any of it is any good. A very rambling affair – sometimes it all seems balls and sometimes I like it in places. But I.P. was chained to a sequence of events which made it always a straightforward affair, whereas this effort is, I fear, about 'ideas'[.]<sup>1</sup>

He never explicitly seeks to resolve the problems which arise in his discussion for a reason; as he states in the Preface to *The Anathemata*, 'I do not raise these questions in order to answer them, for I do not know what the answers may be'.<sup>4</sup> 'Art and Sacrament' is an aporetic text: it explores the nature of the *aporia* – 'a perplexing difficulty' according to the Oxford English Dictionary, but by the implications of its etymology also the far more Jonesian (because paradoxical) 'impassable path' – which prevents a systematic resolution of the issues which form the basis of its investigation. The aporetic method, systematized by Aristotle in *The Metaphysics*, forms the instinctive basis of Jones's investigation; he is perplexed by the nature of the arts in modernity (he is in a state of *aporia*) and seeks in the course of the essay to establish what is causing this perplexity (what the *aporai* are). In other words, Jones seeks as a first step to move from a state of puzzlement to a statement of the puzzle.

The central *aporia* in Jones's thought resides in the conflict between



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bounty it brings. But the hardest thing of all to think about is chance, which denies the very form and purpose of thought itself. Mess makes this possible.<sup>11</sup>

Within the terms of this formulation – where determinism and its absence gather to themselves, respectively, meaning and value and their absence – Trotter employs the idea of mess in the course of his study in a multitude of subtly different ways in order to explore how writers and artists, and so their cultures, felt for contingency. I find this formulation useful for looking specifically at David Jones's process of writing *The Anthemata* for one dominant reason.

The current and accepted account of how *The Anthemata* was written places itself safely at the very heart of a deterministic way of thinking about literary production. In a faultlessly efficient and self-validating movement between cause and effect, Jones is said to have achieved in the form of his poem (its effect) a sign for his worldview (its cause). As we shall see, this reading relies on reducing the mess of Jones's poem and the mess of his ideas into order, which is exactly the eventuality Jones avoided through the development of his method of writing the poem. There is at play a two-fold determinism in relation to literary form here: first there came the deterministic writing of the poem; following this, criticism makes a deterministic reading of that form. The critics who have explored the process by which the poem was written find that their and Jones's determinisms coincide; this co-incidence pivots on those critics' assured discovery of the intended form of the poem. The location of Jones's intended meaning validates the construction of a conception of the intended form, which entrenches a reading of his intended meaning, and so on.

If Jones's intention can be located, his achievement can be measured – I see this as an important motivating aspect behind this intention-focused critical manoeuvre. However, the result – that Jones can be judged to be a great and thus underrated writer – is problematic: the systems of determinism, creative and critical, which underpin the measurement of Jones's achievement involve exactly the reductive or systematic mode of thinking which the process of the making of Jones's poem endeavoured to escape. One of my purposes in this essay is to try to tease out an alternative way of evaluating Jones's making, one which does not posit the meaning of the work and the value of Jones as its creator only by recourse to such a deterministic approach. The way in which I have done this is to look at the mess of the manuscript of *The Anthemata*; and the effect of this is that the role of chance, a role which subverts the existiiis ffbb7t4phrt'k-k7e4ptrbu h doebrbffhft7veghrt'k-k7nc4ptro-rfu4pfjrbffu

attribute of the foundational action (making) of man in Jones's thought.

### The Anathemata

Most Jones scholars, when discussing the form of *The Anathemata*, use a spatial metaphor.<sup>12</sup> The two scholars who refer to the manuscripts of *The Anathemata*, Thomas Dilworth and Thomas Goldpaugh, find in them justification for their own take on the spatial form of the poem: the former, a series of concentric rings; the latter







Far more significant, however, is the second reason: the insertions which Jones made to his text are not equivalent to the foliational strata visible in the diagram; each foliational stratum is composed of a huge number of minute, genetically interdependent insertions. The truth of the matter is that the critical reliance upon the foliational code for a reading of the poem's intended form is misguided because Jones's code was an effect of his way of working, not that way of working in itself. The manuscript evidence is indeed indisputable, but only if we consider its textual mess as well as its foliational order. The critical move to a consideration of this mess enables us, as Trotter makes clear, to reveal that Jones's method, far from being deterministic, relied upon chance.

### The Anathemata

In his Preface to *The Anathemata*, Jones compares the writing of his book to the movement of his mind:

In a sense the fragments that compose this book are about, or around and about, matters of all sorts which, by a kind of quasi-free association, are apt to stir in my mind at any time.

This 'quasi-free association' relies on the action of 'mental associations, liaisons,









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repetition. The spatial metaphor I would like to suggest for the form of *The Anthemata* is the fractal because this metaphor stresses the irregular, fragmentary state of the poem, its formal 'self-similarity', its self-replicating genesis, but most importantly in the current context, the fractal is analogical to Jones's poem through its ultimate form both residing in and being unimaginable at the base level of its generation – its final shape appears as if by chance.



An example of a Julia set fractal

If fractals can be strikingly beautiful, an important additional characteristic in this context is that they might very well not be beautiful; the complex visual shape generated by a repeated simple function is a surprise.



### Mandelbrot and Julia set fractals

And it is here that the fractal is most apt in representing the form of *The Anathemata*, of whose success Jones was never sure during its making: the aesthetic quality of the overall pattern which arises is a game of chance; it may please, and it may not; in a sense its formal generation is entirely gratuitous. The form of *The Anathemata* as a beautiful mess was possible because of the gratuitousness which inhered to its writing. I would suggest that the poem's making asserts a meaning and value for chance: by enabling the gratuitous production of a literary work, chance, the core generative principle of Jones's discovered method, can be seen as a device for proclaiming the very meaning and value of being human through enabling a making to occur under seemingly impossible conditions.



eight pages long was through the accretion of insertions. The insertions that enacted this growth are genetically identical to the preliminary insertions to the eight-page fragment that are foliated 5A onwards. This in itself refutes the idea that Jone