

BOOK REVIEWS

- 208 ROBICHAUD, PAUL. *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages, & Modernism*. Washington, DC: Catholic U of America P, 2007. Pp. 204. US \$59.95 hardcover.

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In a 1955 radio broadcast on the Roman roads in Britain, "The Viae," the London-Welsh visual artist and poet David Jones drew an analogy between the gradual collapse of Romanized Britain and the tumultuous history of the first half of the twentieth century. For those living in such periods, he maintained, one's experience is that of "the end of a world." The recognition—or creation—of such a parallel between distant eras shows the clear influence of Spengler's historiography on Jones's thinking: correspondence included in *Dai Greatcoat* bears witness to his immersion during the early 1940s in *The Decline of the West*; and Spengler's gloomy prognosis would find public expression in his important essay of these years, "The Myth of Arthur" (1942). Nearly two decades before, Yeats too had found confirmation in Spengler of the cyclical view of history imparted to him by his otherworldly "instructors" and codified in the first edition of *A Vision*. Yet Jones's response to living in the early chill of a civilization approaching its wintry end is neither the Irish poet's exultant "tragic joy" nor the German philosopher's stony acceptance. Rather, through the formal innovations of modernist visual and verbal art, the twentieth-century artist, he maintained, could recover the fragmentary but rich "deposits" of past periods of socio-cultural vitality and growth.

In *Making the Past Present: David Jones, the Middle Ages, & Modernism*, Paul Robichaud deals briefly with Jones's indebtedness to, and diversion from, Spengler's

ideas (the topic has been treated at length by Jonathan Miles and Kathleen Henderson Staudt, to whom Robichaud refers the reader). At the heart of this study is less the complex kinship between Jones's "analogical imagination" and "Spengler's metahistory" (7) than a detailed consideration of the era of British and European history at the core of Jones's project of cultural resuscitation: the early Middle Ages, a period for Jones of enormous "cultural possibility," one in which "Roman, Christian, Celtic and Germanic traditions conflict and cooperate to lay the foundations of Europe" (6). In order to excavate this bedrock of the West, Jones's major verbal artworks, *In Parenthesis*, *The Anathemata* and *The Sleeping Lord*, deploy allusion, quotation, collage and decentered form, techniques that in part derive from, in part find a chime in, the writings of Eliot, Joyce and Pound. If Jones's paintings and inscriptions are thoroughly informed by post-impressionism's theory of "significant form," his texts' modernist forms equally aspire to impart to the deposits they dredge from history something of the quiddity, the objectivity, of the post-impressionist artwork.

Robichaud is highly attentive to the manner in which modernist devices in these texts are employed with the aim of representing, in non-mimetic fashion, the medieval matter valorised by Jones. Peppering this study is a large number of bravura close readings which fully do justice to Jones's extraordinary *poesis*. Yet these analyses are very far from exercises in an ahistorical formalism; instead, they are tied firmly to a detailed contextual argument regarding the *sources* of Jones's medievalism. Thus, a rewardingly detailed explication of the passage in *The Anathemata* describing Gwenhwyfar at Midnight Mass is made in the service of distinguishing Jones's depiction of Arthur's wife from that in William Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere." In so doing, Robichaud's objective is to illustrate the manner in which Jones subjects the medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites, which he encountered and admired as a student at Camberwell School of Arts, to "modernist revision" (6). To an extent, Robichaud argues, Jones is continuing and developing the Pre-Raphaelite urge to bring past and present into a fruitful engagement with one another. However, like Kandinsky, to whom Robichaud surprisingly but convincingly compares him, Jones came to see as anachronistic the attempt to recreate forms long since outmoded—witness the dead, spiritless pastiche of the Victorian Gothic Revival, the religious architecture of which is contrasted, at the opening of *The Anathemata*, with the "living floriations / under the leaping arches" of the original Gothic cathedrals.

Jones's childhood enthusiasm for the Middle Ages came, in adulthood, to fuse with his belief in the artist as a craftsperson, with poetic "making" conceived along Aristotelian lines rather than according to Romantic and post-Romantic ideas of "inspiration." Robichaud draws attention to the importance of Eric Gill to Jones's conception of the creative arts as essentially artisanal, after the fashion of preindustrial labour. He also rightly contests the tendentious claim of Elizabeth Ward in *David Jones: Mythmaker* that Jones's aesthetic, in this respect, lacks the social and political dimension of Gill's. However, in ascribing "radical implications" to Jones's "alternative to the alienated labour of postindustrial modernity," he fails to follow through

with a necessarily dialectical reading to substantiate his point. Jones, after all, was a deeply conservative Catholic convert, whose views on culture echo those of Eliot and Christopher Dawson (the latter's influence on Jones is profitably explored by Robichaud). This is not to concur with Ward's claim that Jones was, at best, a proto-fascist: a naïve essay on *Mein Kampf*, written in 1939 but unpublished until 1986, does not equate with, let us say, Pound's rantings over Rome Radio; and Robichaud, following Thomas Dilworth and Staudt, comprehensively rebuts Ward's charge. Where the radicalism of this self-avowed royalist arguably lies is in the important distinction Jones draws between the utile and the gratuitous, as in the essay "Art and Sacrament" and its accompanying Note. The utilitarian object, unlike the gratuitous artwork, performs the operations of instrumental reason; the artwork, by way on contrast, resists conscription to a world increasingly dominated by instrumentality, and in its autonomy offers a mute critique of a world given over to functionality. After all, in embracing modernism, Jones, in contrast to Gill, was not seeking in some sense to return to the Middle Ages; instead his work *stages* the earlier period in the present as part of its critical engagement with modernity.

A crucial prop for Jones in such staging is Welsh language and its literature. Robichaud devotes a chapter to Jones's "imagined Wales" and valuably connects the painter-poet's Celticism to the cultural nationalism of writer and ideologue Saunders Lewis. Taking a lead from Tony Conran, Robichaud sees Jones and Saunders as upholding the *traddodiad*, the "traditional" Wales of Arthur, of *Y Gododdin* and *The Mabinogion*, and of its last prince, Llywelyn, slaughtered by Edward I's army in 1282. In this chapter Robichaud meticulously explores Jones's use of medieval Welsh literature, paying careful attention to the translations Jones used, a topic previously neglected in Jones studies.

Robichaud's Conclusion examines Jones's influence on contemporary poetry, specifically the work of Geoffrey Hill, R. S. Thomas, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon. In contrast to the rigour of much of the preceding analysis of Jones's poetry, the interpretations offered in this final chapter are somewhat nugatory. That Jones lies behind Hill's *Mercian Hymns* is self-evident; but Robichaud says little more than that. The fact that Heaney has translated Middle Irish and Old English texts and on several occasions made use of such literature in his own poems may be said to find a parallel of a kind with Jones's medievalism; but, critically speaking, it is an unproductive juxtaposition. Even less so, is the connection Robichaud makes between Jones and Muldoon. By his own admission, Robichaud isn't sure of any "direct influence" (179) in this case; and to point to the two poets shared interest in Joycean polyphony merely recognises the importance of Joyce for any linguistically innovative poet writing in the wake of the *Wake*. Furthermore, by confining himself to British and Irish poets, Robichaud sadly omits discussion of John Matthias (himself a critic of Jones and, as such, included in Robichaud's bibliography), several of whose poetic sequences are, by his own admission, influenced by Jones. Of the major work "A Compostela Diptych," for instance, Matthias has acknowledged that Jones is "Stylistically [...]"

once again a welcome and benevolent presence." Given Matthias's close biographical connections with Britain, and the importance of its history and culture to a substantial part of his oeuvre, it seems a missed opportunity not to have considered his work in this context.

Aside from its Conclusion, however, this study contributes a good deal to the existing critical literature on Jones. Hopefully, it will stimulate further study of one of the most profoundly original poets of the twentieth century.

CHAI, LEON. *Romantic Theory: Forms of Reflexivity in the Romantic Era*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2006. Pp. xx + 283. US \$55.00.

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Leon Chai has produced an impressive study of European Romantic theory and theorizing that helps to place the current state of critical theory in historical perspective. The underlying premise of Chai's study is that for the past two decades, after the "failure of [Michel Foucault's] *The Order of Things* and other structuralist attempts at a universal theory simply led people to write off the possibility of any such project," the resulting critical eclecticism "nonetheless hints at a wish to go beyond a field-specific level of theory" (viii). In order understand the nature of the problem and thereby hold open the possibility of moving beyond it, Chai proposes going back to the Romantic period, which he characterizes as "the moment when theory first began to display the tendency toward self-reflexivity that we identify as a hallmark of the modern" (ix).

As Chai notes, the return to the theory of the Romantic period obliges him to respond to the New Historicist critique of Romantic theory, which views it as the result of a failed struggle to produce a workable program capable of subduing the material conditions of existence and harnessing them in the service of art, philosophy, and political thought. In this context both Chai and the New Historicists (McGann, Liu, Levinson, and Chandler) are looking at the same phenomenon and valorizing it differently: one person's self-reflexivity in response to the material conditions of history is another's bad-faith transcendence or fictive editing of those conditions. In both instances, however, the playing out of those material conditions is what gives rise to theory that responds to them.

Chai's first chapter discusses the use that P.B. Shelley makes of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in "The Triumph of Life." Both texts are to a large extent responses to the evanescence that characterizes human relations—indeed, human existence itself. The Saint-Preux who returns to the now-married Julie after a six-year hiatus is a fictional character created by Rousseau as the double or the avatar of Rousseau in his relationship with his readers, and this is the Rousseau that the speaker of "The Triumph" encounters. In this aspect Rousseau exemplifies the way in which self-re-

flexivity, at work cultivating “emotion for its own sake[,] precludes the possibility of any relation to others because of its tendency to produce its own perpetual cycle” (11). The way beyond such a cycle involves traveling the via negative in pursuit of an ever-tantalizing, ever-deferred essentiality.

The second chapter discusses the attempts of F.A. Wolf and Friedrich Schlegel to theorize the subjectivity of ancient Greek texts—Wolf in his *Prolegomena to Homer*, Schlegel primarily in his “Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie.” The historical and cultural remoteness of the ancient texts—compounded by the fact that, because it arose in an oral culture, there was no one single, canonical version of Homer—necessitate the use of theory as a form of cultural and critical mediation: “all we get, at best, is Greek subjectivity, mediated by our own” (50).

212 Moving from the material circumstances of remote antiquity to those of Hegel’s immediate historical present, Chai very cleverly links the Napoleonic tactics of the Battle of Jena (October 14, 1806), at which time Hegel resided there, to the preface of the latter’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. By 1806, Napoleon had perfected the *manoeuvre sur les derrières*, the tactic of attacking the flank or rear of his enemy’s formation rather than employing a frontal assault. The way that Hegel’s subject knows and is validated is both immediate and indirect, in the sense that the subject grasps the true not as substance (that which persists through change), but as subject (self). Moreover, the true as often appears on the margins of consciousness—the flank, as it were—as its does as the focus of consciousness.

From the first section, devoted to the humanities, Chai next turns to science and mathematics, with chapters on the physiologist Bichât, the chemist Davy, and the mathematician Galois. Bichât is implicated in the regrounding of Romantic theory in the life sciences by moving away from the notion of a single vital force—call it *élan vital* or *Lebenskraft*—to a dynamic of observation giving rise to theory, followed by theory being tested by experiment. Davy did much the same for theory in chemistry—especially in the discovery of elements—as the first for theory in the life sciences, with this difference: Davy knew himself well enough to know that the mind’s eye sees what it wants to see, hence the need for rigorous experimental protocols to prevent subjectivity from masquerading as chemistry. Galois attempted, by means of a system of classifying algebraic equations according to the manner in which they could be solved, to raise the status of mathematical theory and metatheory above that of mathematical knowledge. By means of the latter, “Galois could hope to extend the scope of theory, and in the process give the unknown a more definite shape” (152).

The third section of *Romantic Theory* deals with Coleridge, Mary Shelley, and Hölderlin. Coleridge is noteworthy for the inward turn that theory takes in his discourse. While he is curiously postmodern (and post-theoretical) in Chai’s view, in the sense that he does not believe that theory discovers knowledge or prepares one to seek and discover it, Coleridge does believe that “the primary role of theory...was as a means to reflection” (166). Mary Shelley is strongly ambivalent about theory. It “saves us from chaos” (185), but it distances us to the extent of interdicting intersubjectiv-

ity. The only way out of this dilemma is speculative thinking, which at the very least recuperates the intersubjectivity. In his poem “Patmos,” Hölderlin struggles with the limits that theory places on such major undertakings as the struggle to conceptualize God. “For theory...the nearness of God might just be the nearness of another subjectivity” (211). And yet, theory’s failure in “those epiphanic moments of consciousness” (211) when the mind confronts God is a source of comfort for Hölderlin, precisely because that failure reinscribes humanity’s place in this world, occupying a medial position, a little lower than the angels.

The book ends twice—once with a conclusion, and again with an epilogue. In the former, Chai looks at Romantic theory in its historical context, in which it is noteworthy in two ways. First, all foregoing qualifications duly noted, “the Romantic period really witnessed the triumph of theory” (215). Second, the triumph is in large measure the result of the novel ways that Romantic theory refashioned the stuff of knowledge, much of which had been in circulation for some time, by means of synthesis. Napoleon is Chai’s case in point. The military strategies and tactics he employed were widely known and in circulation. What distinguishes him from other military strategists and tacticians is the power with which he “form[ed] an original synthesis” (218) and the agility with which he implemented it.

213 The epilogue presents Romantic theory as a cautionary tale and a way of thinking about the future direction(s) for theory. Chai correctly observes that what we have learned about armed conflict has not carried over to theory. While we now acknowledge that the notion of “a war to end all wars” is a patent absurdity, “what every theory wants to be is the final word on theory” (232). Romantic theory “now had to meet a new requirement rather than just expose the inadequacy of earlier efforts...to show how all its predecessors had figured in a development that culminated in itself” (233). Here I offer a mild demur to Chai’s contention that the only way to continue to theorize after “the final word on theory” is by means of metatheory. As a gloomy humanist, I propose that theories will always continue to succeed theories, when historical and intellectual circumstances are propitious for such succession, just as the recent age of theory, energized by the French, and above all the Paris summer of 1968, succeeded the age of Romantic theory, about which Leon Chai writes so knowledgeable, so cogently, and so well.