

Martin Potter*

NATURE IN MODERNITY: CAN IT SIGNIFY? – DAVID JONES AND NATURAL OBJECTS AS SIGNS

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Abstract: *Since the Enlightenment nature has often been seen as a resource for exploitation rather than as an object of wonder. A combination of utilitarian modes of thought, the growth in the prestige of science and technology, and processes of industrialization, has favoured the tendency to view natural objects as part of a chain of utility, and to disregard other ways of understanding them. Other ways of understanding them would include the symbolic mode of understanding, the mode by which they are often understood when invoked in art works. During the early twentieth century a number of artists and writers, of whom David Jones was one, discussed the concept of 'the Break', a cultural break in the way natural objects have been regarded, such that at some point in modernity they have ceased to be understandable as symbols by the prevailing culture, with problematic consequences for the practice of the arts. Similar insights were discussed in the nineteenth century by writers such as Morris and Ruskin. Jones introduced to consideration of the problem a mode of theorising indebted to Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy. In this paper I shall discuss the background to Jones' preoccupation with the concept of 'the Break', how he understood the concept philosophically, and how he attempted to address, in his own artistic activity, and especially in his poetry, the problems he saw as resulting from 'the Break' for the practice of the arts.*

* University of Bucharest, Romania