WRITING ON THE WALL: A REINTERPRETATION OF THOMAS JONES'S *A WALL IN NAPLES* (NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON)

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In his 1985 Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture, Lawrence Gowing described Thomas Jones's series of small Naples oil paintings as achieving 'an enveloping unity by means quite opposite to dramatic illustration. They are gentle and precise and they illustrate nothing. They simply *are*.'[1] He describes Jones's *A Wall In Naples*, now in the National Gallery, London (reproduced below) as 'one of the great microcosms of painting [...] built grandly out of the very stuff of illusion, that stuff of quite finite and endless potential'.[2]

Other commentators have since picked up this idea of nothingness and run with it, describing *A Wall in Naples* as being 'about nothing',[3] or 'almost nothing at all',[4] suggesting that 'Not only is nothing happening in this picture, but nothing has happened or is going to happen',[5] that it was 'not so much a wall as a segment of abstract patterning',[6] that 'it was a repudiation of narrative',[7] and even that it evinced signs of the depressed mind at work.[8] Thomas Jones had, after all, described himself as being 'from childhood ever of a melancholy turn'.[9] Most critics have agreed that *A Wall In Naples* is 'carefully calculated in its effects',[10] and that in it the artist's 'ambitions went beyond the compositional'.[11]

However, I think that *A Wall in Naples* has been entirely misunderstood and the purpose of this essay is to explain how and why this has happened. Its ambitions certainly do go beyond the compositional and it also evinces 'intimations of

1 Lawrence Gowing, *The Originality of Thomas Jones*. Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture, 1985 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p 52.

2 Ibid., p. 47.

3 Tom Lubbock, *The Independent*, 19 October 2006 < http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/great-works/jones-thomas-a-wall-in-naples-1782-744416.html> [accessed 1 December 2016].

4 Andrew Graham Dixon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 2003 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3604963/Plain-astonishing.html> [accessed 1 December 2016].

5 Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2003 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2003/may/15/artsfeatures1> [accessed 1 December 2016].

6 Michael Glover, *The Independent*, 6 May 2011 < http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/great-works/great-works-a-wall-in-naples-circa-1782-112-x-158cm-thomas-jones-2279457.html> [accessed 1 December 2016].

7 Jones, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2003.

8 Allan Ingram and Leigh Wetherall Dickson, '18th-Century Blues: Assembling the Melancholy Mind'. Lecture delivered to the conference 'Before Depression, 1660–1800', Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, June 2008 <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/1520/> [accessed 1 December 2016].

9 *The Memoirs of Thomas Jones*, ed. by A. P. Oppé. The Walpole Society 32 (London, 1951), p. 4.

10 *Thomas Jones (1742–1803): An Artist Rediscovered*, ed. by Ann Sumner and Greg Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 225.

11 Osi Rhys Osmond, 'An Artist Rediscovered' review article, *Planet*, 159 (June/July 2003), p. 124.

mortality'[12] – not subconsciously or incidentally but entirely intentionally, for *A Wall in Naples* is not in fact a painting of an actual wall in Naples, or indeed a wall anywhere; it is Thomas Jones's Platonic ideal of a wall in Naples, each facet of its composition a metaphor employed in the construction of a symbolic landscape that has held its secrets for more than two centuries.

Thomas Jones (1742–1803) was born on 26 September 1742 at Trefonen near Llandrindod into a strongly Welsh Dissenting family of landed gentry. Their good fortune was to own the land from which two of the town's main spa waters issued. However, Jones's father disliked the hubbub surrounding the ensuing tourist boom and moved his growing family a few miles down the road to Pencerrig near Builth Wells. Jones was taught, along with his older brother John, by a series of private tutors and then briefly at Christ College Brecon. He developed an early interest in art but a career in such a discipline was deemed too precarious, and when his mother's uncle, John Hope, offered to finance his studies at Oxford on the understanding he would go into the Church, the offer was gratefully accepted by the family, if not by Jones himself.

Two years later, this uncle died intestate and, since Jones's family were unable to continue supporting his studies, he returned home. Happily, a friend of his father, Charles Powell, whose house near Brecon had been like a second home to the young Thomas and who was a great supporter of the arts, persuaded the Jones family to allow Thomas to go to London to study art, firstly, in 1761, for two years at William Shipley's Drawing School, where Jones met his lifelong friend William Pars, and then in 1763 for a further two years as apprentice to fellow Welshman Richard Wilson (1713/14–1782).

At that time, Richard Wilson was pioneering the art of landscape painting in Britain and Jones was soon a keen disciple. After finishing his apprenticeship, Jones attempted for a few years to make a career for himself in Britain, but with only mixed success. In one sense, however, in these years he was merely waiting for the moment when he could embark on the great adventure of his life: on 15 October 1776 he set out for Italy, where he would remain for the next seven years. Some time in 1779 he started a relationship with his housekeeper, Maria Moncke, who became the mother of his two daughters and whom he later married. She was Danish, a widow, and a convert to Catholicism, none of which Jones's family would have found acceptable. In 1782 and 1783, still in Italy, Thomas Jones created some of the most arresting and beautiful images in eighteenth-century landscape painting.

Until the 1950s, Thomas Jones was of interest only to a few scholars of eighteenth-century art. Then two things happened: in 1951 his memoir was reprinted by the Walpole Society,[13] and in 1954 and 1955 a number of previously unknown small oils and watercolours came up for sale at Christie's in London. Both created minor sensations, the former because it was an invaluable historical source for the life of an artist in eighteenth-century Britain, indeed the first such autobiography, and the latter because the paintings, hitherto known only to a small

12 Ibid., p. 124.
13 Oppé (ed.), *Memoirs of Thomas Jones*.

circle of family and friends, were stunningly original. These paintings chimed with a late twentieth-century aesthetic sensibility of post-this and post-that and precipitated immediate calls for a reassessment of Thomas Jones's reputation. In the particular case of *A Wall In Naples*, this aesthetic understanding was applied to the apparent blankness of the subject to create a critical consensus that has altered little since. *A Wall In Naples* is seen as exhibiting an almost contemporary sense of disaffection, presciently so, for it seemed to anticipate particular strands of modernism, specifically abstraction and photography. It has become the iconic image in the Thomas Jones canon. At the time of the major exhibition of his work in 2003, 'An Artist Redisovered', marking the bicentenary of his death, it was referred to as his 'high altar piece'.[14] It is, but not in the sense that the writer, Peter Lord, intended. It is a work that is constantly singled out, drawing writers and critics like moths to a flame – not bad for a painting measuring little more than four inches by six. The apparent calculation and innovations in composition and perspective, however, are not the result of mere happenstance: they are the by-products in fact of a much more interesting intent.

If we allow our eyes to lose focus, the painting will start to reveal this much more specific, stranger, and deeper purpose. The shutters are closed not, as has been suggested, against the Mediterranean light,[15] but because they cannot be opened. Thomas Jones has not articulated them. They are quite literally painted shut. In fact, they are not shutters at all, or only incidentally, but painted to allow two cruciforms to be hidden in plain sight. Would Jones really have painted them like this accidentally and then painted the finest of washing lines across the central pair, especially when he has taken the trouble to articulate the shutters in his other paintings in the Naples series or in his drawings? Indeed, he seems to have enjoyed the added compositional playfulness that the opening and closing of shutters allowed him. To the right of *A Wall in Naples*, it seems as if Jones considered painting a third shuttered window, a third cross. This would have rendered the meaning all too clearly, and since it seems certain that he painted *A Wall in Naples* as an aid to some deeply private process of introspective reassessment, this would only have undermined his purpose, for secrecy is at the very heart of this painting. It may well be, of course, that he liked the idea of this 'ghost' window, as he did not try to remove all trace of it and it does add to the overall harmony of the composition. Perhaps he left it as his own little cryptic joke. The three windows would then recall not only the traditional image of Calvary but of the Trinity: from left to right, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

By painting a shadow line in the render Thomas Jones subtly extends the horizontal of the central cruciform whilst the long white cloth directly extends the vertical and suggests the wasted body of the crucified Christ, whilst the sag of the blue and white cloths on the washing line recalls the sag of Christ's arms and at the same time flags up the emptiness of the cross and focuses our minds where Jones intended to focus his own: on the idea of the resurrection, the pre-eminent

14 Peter Lord, 'A Belated Rise To Fame', *New Welsh Review*, 61 (Autumn 2003), p. 32.

15 Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian*, 19 September 2012 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/picture/2012/sep/19/thomas-jones-wall-in-naples> [accessed 1 December 2016].

Christian image of hope. This is a painting that is all about hope, a looking forward, whatever the personal or psychological environment from which it sprang. It is the very opposite of a painting of a depressed mind at work. The bright jewel-like colours and sun-drenched wall alone should have been enough to dispel that particular hypothesis even if, beyond the wall, there were not a small rectangle of clear, pellucid blue, symbolizing the hope and promise of heaven, of the life of the world to come.

So when in his memoir Jones writes: 'From my very Childhood I was ever of rather a melancholy turn,' we must remember that he is writing this memoir late in life and he is in some way trying to give meaning to his actions and to give the story of his life an arc.[16] In eighteenth-century Britain, Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621, was still widely read and admired.[17] It was the 'go-to' text for insights into the human mind. The term 'depression' had yet to be coined and the human state of mind was defined by degrees of 'melancholy'. In using this word of himself, Thomas Jones did not mean that he suffered from depression; he was merely laying claim to a much lower-level and rather vague sense of artistic melancholy, of the kind that was deemed necessary for the production of good, meaningful, and heartfelt work. One of Jones's defining character traits, and one that becomes increasingly obvious as one reads his memoir, is that he is a rather happy-go-lucky fellow, one who is up for anything and who, when things do not go right for him, which they often do not, almost immediately moves on and plots an alternative strategy. He does not take to his bed for a week, he tries something else, and always he carries on painting, at least whilst he is still trying to make a career for himself as an artist. Later in life, of course, he was almost always too busy to paint or draw, preoccupied with the commitments involved in managing the substantial family estate, Pencerrig, which he inherited in 1787 after the death of his older brother John, yet still 'at times, indeed, amusing myself with my beloved Art'.[18]

If we now compare *A Wall in Naples* with the painting from the series of small Naples oils it most closely resembles, *Houses at Naples*, in Manchester University's Whitworth Art Gallery (reproduced below), we are struck more by the differences than the similarities between the two. True, *Houses at Naples* and *A Wall in Naples* share a similar low viewpoint and perhaps both were painted whilst Jones was renting ground floor rooms in the Capella Vecchia, a small convent in the Naples suburb of Chiaia, for two weeks from 9 May 1782.[19] However, the colours in the Whitworth painting are much more muted and the houses have a wonderfully solid three-dimensionality, a much more lived-in reality. The sad, grey washing hanging at the windows also looks much more believable. These are as obviously and observedly someone's clothes as those hanging from the balustrade in *A Wall in Naples* are not. These clothes (in *Houses*) have clearly served some purpose before being laundered and hung out to dry – many times by the look of them. Even

16 Oppé (ed.), *Memoirs of Thomas Jones*, p. 4.
17 Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2001).
18 Oppé (ed.), *Memoirs of Thomas Jones,* p. 142.
19 Ibid., p. 110.

the sketchy foreground vegetation has an observed reality and depth missing from the greenery in *A Wall in Naples*, which seems by contrast to be almost devoid of perspective, as though it has not been observed in reality, but made up. The slight foreshortening of the balcony and the dark shadows cast by a midday sun give the painting its only depth. The whole resembles nothing so much as a stage backdrop, an adaptation of reality. Were the central shutters to be thrown open it seems more likely they would reveal the continuation of the flat deep blue of the sky rather than a dark Neapolitan room.

On this backdrop Thomas Jones has draped washing of such an unlikely brilliance that it is surely working to more purpose than merely a compositional conceit, enabling the artist to 'echo [...] the colours' in sky, wall, and vegetation,[20] while 'the three colours that surround the wall [are] subtly echoed in the laundry'.[21] Why would an artist place four such pieces of washing centre-stage like this, as though they were the protagonists in their own little drama, unless they had a coded value beyond mere representation? Indeed, this bizarre display of washing resembles nothing so much as a deliberately run-up grouping of maritime signal flags. Thomas Jones was, after all, rarely far from the shoreline or indeed off the water during his time in Naples. This is attested by numerous accounts of outings in his memoirs and by almost twenty pages in his Naples sketchbook (now in the National Museum of Wales) devoted to lively drawings of boats and ships of all types. The annotations to these drawings reveal a familiarity with the type and nationality of the ships that he observed, perhaps drawn from his knowledge of national ensigns. Frigates, a Passage Boat and Half-Galley, a Dutch Dogger, a Polacca, and Xebecs are all noted. Jones must surely have been familiar, too, with ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore communication by means of signal flags.

So what might these flags be signalling to us? By 1782, the proposed date of *A Wall in Naples*, Thomas Jones had been living in Italy for six years. During this time, he was an avid cultural tourist, visiting churches and classical ruins and viewing private collections of paintings. This formed an integral part of what he saw as his ongoing artistic education. So it is simply inconceivable that he would have been unaware of the iconography of colour, especially with regard to the Christian tradition. If we accept this, the washing takes on an altogether greater significance. White is the colour of Christ, of innocence, and of the high Holy Days, including, of course, Easter. Blue is the Virgin Mary's colour, green the colour of renewal, resurrection, and hope. The earthy background browns might also stand for poverty, humility, and even the enclosed monastic life. If we recall that Jones might have painted *A Wall in Naples* whilst staying in a convent, the Capella Vecchia, the wall might even symbolize the barrier between this world and the next. Not for Jones a Baroque Catholic soufflé of clouds and sun, but rather a simple, clear blue, Protestant Heaven. The wall may have hidden from him an unknown and uncertain future but it was a future he nevertheless saw as full of possibility, of bright sunshine, of hope, and one in which he had every confidence.

20 Francis W. Hawcroft, *Travels in Italy 1776–1783: Based on the Memoirs of Thomas Jones* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 1988), p. 92.

21 Sumner and Smith (eds), *Thomas Jones*, p. 115.

Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence in the painting is the arc of what is usually viewed as water staining that curves down to the left of the central window. At first sight it looks to be the beautifully painted lightening of render and brick caused by the repeated passage of water. However, the more we look, the stranger and stranger it appears. What manner of repeated water action could possibly have produced such a stain? There are essentially two hydrological processes that can lead to marking on a wall such as this, one passive, the other active. The passive process typically involves rainwater soaking into the stone, brick, and mortar, and either dissolving chemicals or carrying off particles in suspension as the material of the wall becomes saturated. The water then runs down the wall, and as it loses momentum or evaporates it is unable to maintain either the particles in suspension or the chemicals in solution and they are deposited in a series of stains. These will follow the uneven contours of the wall but will be of a roughly vertical nature. There are many examples in Jones's Naples paintings of the results of this process, not least beneath the left-hand window in *A Wall in Naples*. It is a process whose results he must have observed on a daily basis and carefully noted.

An active process, by contrast, would involve the gradual removal of the surface of a wall and would require a regular and vigorous flow of water. If it is to make a hard-edged mark on a wall, as it appears to have done to the left of the central window in *A Wall in Naples*, that flow must be consistent; but where, at that point on the wall, would such a flow of water have come from? There is no downspout, it is too far from any possible guttering from the *lastricia*, the flat roof space typical of Naples buildings, and there certainly would not have been any internal plumbing in a house of this type in the eighteenth century. In any case, such a spout would not be directed at the wall, as Jones must have noted whilst painting another work in the National Museum of Wales, *Buildings in Naples*. The presence of the four pieces of laundry obviously suggests the possibility of discarded washing water, but how and why would that water be discarded down exactly the same section of wall each time? A sensible person surely would have thrown any dirty water off the balcony and away from the wall, perhaps with a warning shout of 'Heads!' or at least the Italian equivalent! Besides, the laundry in a property such as this in eighteenth-century Naples would have been taken to a communal washing place where any dirty washing water would have been discarded. Even had water somehow been discarded down the wall, that action on an uneven wall surface could hardly have produced such a distinctive stain. Even if Thomas Jones was filling an idle hour on a day when, for whatever reason, he could not or did not want to paint outside, would he really have painted such a stain by accident? Of course not, he would have seen too many examples of how water staining manifested itself on the walls of buildings in Naples for him to have painted such a stain either from a failure of observation or in error.

As a confirmation of Jones's powers of observation, we have the testimony of the Reverend William Gilpin, who visited Thomas Johnes of Hafod near Aberystwyth in 1787. Johnes was a friend and patron of Thomas Jones and he showed Gilpin some paintings that Jones had done for him – which it seems likely were destroyed in a fire in March 1807 which gutted the house. Jones was dismissed by Gilpin as

'one of your religious copyists',[22] meaning that he was perhaps over-literal in his style and observation. If a contemporary of Thomas Jones, who sees no virtue in pure accuracy of observation, chooses just such a trait to damn him, is it likely that such a 'religious copyist' would get a water stain so wrong accidentally? If not, then surely Thomas Jones must have painted it like this deliberately for some other more private reason.

If we again consider the religious tradition in art, a much more convincing, if stranger, explanation for this water stain becomes possible. If the washing is meant to suggest Christ's body, then perhaps the stain is the spurt of blood gushing from the wound in Christ's side made by the centurion's spearthrust during the crucifixion. This is a commonly depicted motif in Italian painting and Jones would have seen many examples. Far from being a stain on the wall, it is a stain in front of the wall and of the air, a metaphorical stain. Its pictorial point of origin is of course the green cloth of hope.

The early Renaissance, almost Byzantine, style of an artist like Duccio di Buoninsegna (c. 1255/1260–c. 1318/19), who often painted his religious tableaux on flat gold-leaf backgrounds, might also better explain Thomas Jones's own 'flat-on' composition rather than any supposed prescient modernism.[23] We know, for example, that Jones visited Siena Cathedral on 23 November 1776 on his way to Rome, where he would have seen Duccio's magnificent altarpiece, the Maestà.[24] One of the panels on the reverse of the altarpiece is just such a crucifixion as may have influenced Jones. The three crosses are arranged symmetrically on a flat gold background and on the central cross an arc of blood spurts from Christ's side.

This all clearly adds weight to the argument that Jones's *A Wall in Naples* is not an observed landscape but a created one, and one created to a very specific end. Thomas Jones was certainly no stranger to the whole idea of metaphor as a valid form of pictorial motivation. If we go back and look at his artistic output, this painting can be seen to be in no way anomalous or out of character. He was after all 'an exception to his class, his background his country and his time'.[25] Apprenticed for two years to Richard Wilson, he had been taught to manipulate and exaggerate the landscape in pursuit of the sublime. Subsequently he had made a number of allegorical paintings, firstly in collaboration with John Hamilton Mortimer, who painted the figures whilst he did the landscape, and then on his own, such as *The Bard* now in the National Museum in Cardiff. *A Wall in Naples* admittedly takes this idea of symbolism to another level but the secrecy of the imagery owes everything to the secrecy of his intent. This is not a painting that is intended to flatter the ego of a patron who can recognize a scene from mythology and decode it, it is an image intended entirely for private contemplation.

Given that Thomas Jones makes no great claims to religiosity in his memoir, it might at first sight seem odd that he should choose to express deeply-held feelings in this way. However, we need to remember that the memoir is not a diary; it

22 Prys Morgan, 'Thomas Jones of Pencerrig', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1984), 51–76 (p. 71).

23 Lubbock, *The Independent*, 19 October 2006: 'The house is seen flat-on, not at a receding slope.'

24 Oppé (ed.), *Memoirs of Thomas Jones,* p. 51.

25 Morgan, 'Thomas Jones of Pencerrig', p. 75.

was probably written over a period of several years later in his life and not finally finished until 1798. It was intended primarily to explain and give an account of his adventures and artistic life in Italy. It is true that Jones expresses some disquiet about Catholic imagery on his travels, but how else would he have been able to express his most deeply-held beliefs, beliefs he did not feel able to share openly but could relive every time he looked at *A Wall in Naples*, except through his art? He does mention attending church and the restraining effect of his moral upbringing on his student behaviour at Oxford,[26] but by and large religious reflection is not germane to the account of an artistic life that is the subject of his memoir. His family would have been familiar with his church-going activities, or not, as the case may be, but documenting them would not have formed part of Jones's motivation in penning his memoir.

Whatever it was, his was not a showy Christianity. Maria Moncke, the mother of his two daughters and later his wife, was a Catholic and we do not know to what extent her Catholicism compromised or called into question Jones's own religious views, but he may have felt unable to express his feelings too strongly one way or another in a written account that she would have at least heard read aloud, if not read herself.[27] Furthermore, at the time it was difficult to gain the office of High Sheriff of Radnorshire as an active member of the Welsh Dissenting church, as Thomas's brother John had done in 1737.[28] Jones's father, perhaps a more principled or less pragmatic man, never was after all. So when Ioan Thomas, who preached the funeral sermon for Jones's mother at Caebach chapel in 1789, lamented a lack of religion in the family at Pencerrig after her death,[29] this supposed spiritual lack might best be seen in the light of all these conflicting loyalties, and perhaps as reflecting a lack of ostentatious religiosity rather than none at all. These conflicts would have been already present in Jones's mind in 1782 and would have added further impetus to his need to produce a meditative painting that must at least in part have been intended to explore his religiosity. Indeed, how else was he to express some deeper religious turmoil that he wished to keep private than within an artistic tradition and code with which he was familiar? And why would he not, whilst out on one of his many sketching and walking trips, notice perhaps with amusement the 'cross' shapes in the shutters and file that thought away for future reference?

One further piece of 'evidence', albeit of a circumstantial nature, is the fact that Thomas Jones did not sign, date, or locate *A Wall in Naples*, unlike the other Naples paintings which are all annotated in at least some form. *A Wall in Naples* is merely assumed by association to have been painted in 1782 in Naples. Jones was unusually assiduous in the annotation of both sketches and paintings. Of course, it could be a simple oversight, but it is one more piece added to the pile of coincidence associated with this painting. In the case of a landscape, a signature, a date, and a location imply certainty. They are saying, I, the artist, saw this view,

26 Oppé (ed.), *Memoirs of Thomas Jones,* p. 6.

27 There is some reason to believe that Maria Moncke may have been illiterate. See R. C. B. Oliver, *The Family History of Thomas Jones the Artist of Pencerrig, Radnorshire*, (Llandysul: J. D. Lewis and Sons Ltd, 1970), p. 27.

28 Ibid., p. 18; Morgan, 'Thomas Jones of Pencerrig', p. 53.

29 Morgan, 'Thomas Jones of Pencerrig', pp. 70–71.

here, on this date and I am happy with my interpretation of it. If *A Wall in Naples* is in fact a metaphorical construct, Jones may well have felt uneasy owning up to the feelings he had expressed in it and he certainly could not have claimed it as being a specific view of Naples made on a specific date. He had ample opportunity to do this, after all: the Naples paintings were still in his possession at his death and they would have been kept in all probability in some kind of portfolio which he would get out both to remind himself of his time in Italy and perhaps to show friends and family. He would have noted time and again that this particular painting was unsigned, undated, and unlocated. Moreover, he did finish off a number of his Italian paintings after his return to Britain, as well as working up new paintings from sketches, and he seems to have had no compunction about annotating these.

Why did Thomas Jones paint *A Wall in Naples*? If it was indeed painted in 1782, though 'its place in the sequence' (of finished studies done in Naples) 'can only be surmised',[30] then at its simplest level Jones might have been expressing his optimism for his and his family's future life when they returned to Britain, a course he had decided on sometime that year. But it is also, I believe, a meditation on faith and mortality and an object of devotion, an eminently portable and very Protestant altarpiece. In 1782 there were three deaths that would have affected Jones deeply: in May, his mentor Richard Wilson; some time in the autumn, his best friend William Pars, who had often lived as part of the Jones household in Italy; and on 26 October, his father, of whom he was deeply fond, although he did not receive news of his father's death until a letter finally arrived from his brother on 6 December. Jones's father left him as much in his will as was permissible under the law to a second son and this would have made a return to Britain with his new family a much more comfortable and altogether more hopeful prospect, both financially as well as personally, as he admits: 'I did not think it prudent for some time to own the connexion' (to Maria Moncke, his housekeeper).[31] It was a connection his family were probably unaware of until after their return to Britain, a return that it is possible he might not have made, despite his admitted homesickness, were his father still alive.[32] Jones could not assume his inheritance was secure, given his irregular relationship with Maria Moncke. The death of Richard Wilson also offered an opportunity for someone to take on the mantle of great British landscapist and there is reason to believe that Jones saw himself as the heir apparent. The problem, as ever, is the lack of a date on *A Wall in Naples*, though clearly the year alone would be insufficient to explain fully the motivation behind it.

In his memoir, Thomas Jones wrote that '[...] throughout allmost every Occurrence in life, it has ever been my misfortune to be "as one born out of due Time"'.[33] He is laying claim here to something much more significant than being 'a nobody in a foreign land, standing outside his time'.[34] He is quoting 1

30 Judy Egerton, *The British School*. National Gallery Catalogues (London: National Gallery Publications, 1998), p. 189.

31 Oppé (ed.), *Memoirs of Thomas Jones,* p. 89.

32 Ibid., p. 121.

33 Ibid., p. 19.

34 Jones, *The Guardian*, 15 May 2003.

Corinthians 15, 8 in the King James Bible, albeit slightly inaccurately, as the text reads 'as of one born out of due time'. Paul is writing from Ephesus in present-day Turkey to the newly-established Christian church in Corinth and he is trying to emphasize the importance of two things: the resurrection as the cornerstone of the Christian message and his own authority within the early Church. He is reminding his audience that he was a witness to the reality of the resurrection even though his experience is of a secondary level, that is, out of due time, in that he did not experience the physical fact of the risen Christ like Mary Magdalene, say, or the disciples were said to have done. He merely experienced the risen Christ in a vision on the road to Damascus.

Thomas Jones is using this biblical quotation metaphorically. In the context of the memoir, he is bemoaning the fact of his neglect by William Woollett, the artist and engraver, who in 1769 was meant to be engraving his painting of Dido and Aeneas and thereby securing, as he saw it, his name. Remembering that he is writing this looking back later in his life, we can surmise that what he is actually trying to do is lay claim to a place in the great tradition of landscape painting. Perhaps he saw himself as the natural heir to Richard Wilson in Britain or, going further back, to Salvator Rosa himself, the much-admired seventeenth-century exponent of landscape art, and, by using the authority of biblical language, he simply wishes to give greater emphasis to this claim. Perhaps, too, he is bemoaning the fact that by coming later into the world he had somehow missed his chance. So if he is wishing for anything, it is that he were born earlier.

Does *A Wall in Naples* stand, as it were, alone? No: I think there are a number of other paintings in Thomas Jones's *oeuvre* in which we can detect the emergence of a personal psychological dimension. For example, Thomas Jones refers to two paintings in his memoir in September 1781 thus: 'It was about this time I began those two large views of Naples which I have still by me.'[35] One is now in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, the other in private hands. These are both painted from a similar high viewpoint to the north-west of Naples; the Cardiff one, *The Bay of Naples*, looks south-east towards Versuvius and Sorrento, the other south-west towards Ischia. The former has a deep curve of dark-shaded foliage in the foreground and a middle-ground and background washed with hazy early morning light. In the foreground, a woman with her back turned holds a babe in arms and talks to a man who faces her and, out of the painting, a toddler is off to her left. This painting is dated 1782 and it is tempting to see these figures as the Jones family just about to be caught and warmed by the rays of the rising sun, the future. The painting can easily be interpreted in a similarly optimistic fashion to *A Wall in Naples*. It also raises the possibility that the four pieces of laundry of this latter work might also stand in for Jones and his family on another simpler metaphorical level.

The second painting, which is dated 1786 and presumably only finished after the family had returned to Britain, has a similar darkened foreground and a similar optimistic morning light, this time fully lighting a tableau to the right of the painting. This is the only known painting where Jones has introduced buildings

35 Oppé (ed.), *Memoirs of Thomas Jones,* p. 107.

similar to the small Naples paintings into a larger work. A woman on the terrace looks to be hailing a man on the *lastricia* who leans over towards her. The figures are more animated than is usual in a Jones painting and it is hard not to see them as Maria and Thomas. A peculiar long white cloth, similar to the one in *A Wall in Naples*, hangs from the balcony between them and it is tempting to see this cloth doubling as a swaddling cloth and being thus symbolic of either or both of the two Jones girls born in 1780 and 1781.

It is possible to interpret this little scene further. Shakespeare's reputation had sunk after his death but enjoyed a revival in the eighteenth century after being championed, most notably, by Samuel Johnson. Thomas Jones was certainly surfing this wave. In 1778, he had painted the scene from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* where Prospero, Caliban, and Miranda spy on the shipwrecked Ferdinand. In a notebook in the National Library of Wales which Thomas Jones has filled with, presumably, his favourite quotes from the plays, he comments on and also acknowledges Dr Johnson's thoughts on the lines he has chosen. Similarly, *Romeo and Juliet* is represented by a couple of extracts including: 'But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.' Could Thomas Jones have been enjoying himself here playing with the famous Balcony Scene, reversing not only the positions of the two lovers but the time of day? Perhaps he was over-long on the *lastricia* painting most days and Maria was often calling up to him to attract his attention.

It seems more likely than not that in these two larger paintings he was putting on record his love for the mother of his children. Did Thomas Jones lack the wit for such playful manipulation of genre? Absolutely not. His memoir bears more than a passing stylistic resemblance to the writing of Lawrence Sterne. Events are presented in an elliptical episodic fashion, the memoir is filled with the picaresque adventures of a natural storyteller, and his use of sentence construction and punctuation is stylistically distinctive. In the passage where he records his trip to Calais with the artist Joseph Farrington, a fellow apprentice of Richard Wilson, Jones writes, 'The Account of this Excursion was afterward considerably dilated under the Title of *A trip to Calais*.'[36] This expanded account was written in two small exercise books, clearly much later than the 1767 date claimed for it, indeed probably sometime after 1794 when the note in the memoir must also have been inserted. Equally clearly, it was written as an amusement and as a pastiche of both Sterne's *Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) and Tobias Smollett's *Travels through France and Italy* (1766). The fact that Thomas Jones's trip actually took place in the year between the publication of these two accounts would not have escaped his notice. Nor should it be a surprise that these two deeply personal and symbolic paintings of the Naples landscape remained in his possession, even though they were of a highly marketable quality and subject matter.

So how is it that *A Wall in Naples* has come to be so misunderstood? Firstly, there is its size. Why would such a diminutive painting have an ambition beyond mere depiction? Then there is the name, *A Wall in Naples*. This is a cataloguing convenience that further pigeonholes the painting. Thomas Jones did not call it

36 Ibid., p. 13.

that, he did not call it anything. Indeed, until the mid 1980s or so it was known as Lawrence Gowing knew it – 'Window in Naples'. The word 'window' in this title suggests entirely different thought processes: an opening even if it/they are shut, suggesting possibility, whereas a wall suggests a barrier or enclosure. It is interesting to note that it is after this change in title and around the time of the 2003 exhibition, 'An Artist Rediscovered', that the idea of nothingness coined by Gowing gains currency and the painting's blankness is interpreted as a manifestation of the artist's supposed depression.

Then there is the painting's chance history. *A Wall in Naples* remained unseen by all except family and friends until the 1950s and so it existed outside the narrative of art history. When it appeared, it was interpreted through the critical lens of the mid- to late twentieth century. It was seen as an anomaly, belonging to some prescient view of the future, and whilst it is undoubtedly a modern-looking work, anticipating some of the preoccupations of modernism and the compositional conceits of photography, this has necessarily removed it from its eighteenth-century context and therefore skewed recent interpretations of it. It is also invariably referred to as 'one of the Naples sketches' which immediately directs attention away from any question of its particular individuality.

The fact that these paintings are called sketches is not very helpful either. There is something pejorative in the term, suggesting something not completely thought out or not finished. Since they lead on to no larger work and are clearly highly finished and carefully composed, such a description is entirely spurious. Thomas Jones did not help himself by the way in which he refers to his painting at this time. In May 1781, he starts and keeps going back to a still life painting of his kitchen which he paints '*con Amore*', as a momento of his time in Naples.[37] In June 1782, he writes of sitting on his *lastricia* 'where I spent many a happy hour in painting from Nature',[38] giving the reader an impression of diversion rather than serious artistic endeavour. These works were clearly intended as reminders of his time in Naples. He refers in May 1782 to his townscapes as 'finished studies',[39] so to him at least they were no mere sketches.

As to the waning of Thomas Jones's artistic reputation, this is the fate of many artists after their deaths and it has made it easier to separate Jones's work into two almost unconnected bodies. His reputation, already in eclipse before his death, continued to decline after it through slights, neglect, and oversight. For the most part, Jones has been seen as a sub-Wilsonian copyist who inadvertently produced a small number of remarkable oil 'sketches' of whose artistic value he seemed, rather damningly, to be totally unaware. Yet he is much more than this. He is a painter of subtle psychological landscapes and, in his less hysterical take on the sublime, he can perhaps be seen as more of a precursor of the schools of artisanal realism, whether in Britain or France, that emerged in the nineteenth century than Richard Wilson. His tragedy is that history deprived him of any such recognized influence and any greater prominence.

37 Ibid., p. 103.
38 Ibid., p. 112.
39 Ibid., p. 111.

In *A Wall in Naples*, Thomas Jones painted a small but perfectly formed masterpiece and one of the great mysteries in the history of art. Far from being about nothing, it is about everything. It is both an elegy for a stalled career and a meditation on mortality. It expresses Thomas Jones's own quiet acceptance of fate and his naïve and touching hope for the future and even, perhaps, of renewed faith.

Thomas Jones, *A Wall in Naples*, about 1782 © The National Gallery, London.

Thomas Jones, *Houses at Naples* [O.1999.1].
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