

Article

## **Jolas, Maria (1893–1987)**

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### **Abstract**

Maria Jolas was an important, if backstage, figure in the literary modernist movement in France and the USA. The wife and close collaborator of Eugene Jolas, she made significant contributions, as translator and editor, to transition, her husband's highly influential little magazine. A lifelong friend of the Joyce family, Samuel Beckett, and Nathalie Sarraute, among others, she left a mark on the cultural currents of the time, and valuable correspondence. While her interrupted early career as a singer initially brought Jolas to Paris from her native USA, this city saw her develop as a woman of letters, a human rights activist, an innovative educator, and founder of the influential *École Bilingue de Neuilly*.

Maria Jolas was born on 12 January 1893 in Louisville, Kentucky. She was the daughter of the head of the local Gas and Electric Company, and her family were descended from a sister of Thomas Jefferson. Maria's parents prepared her for a musical career, declining a scholarship offered by the University of Chicago. Voice and piano lessons took her to New York, Berlin, New York again, and eventually Paris where she followed her teacher, soprano Giulia Valda, in 1919.

In 1926, Maria married the journalist Eugene Jolas, and the couple settled in Paris and later in the nearby village of Colombey-les-deux-Églises (a house later acquired by General de Gaulle). The following twelve years were largely devoted to transition, Eugene Jolas' brainchild which grew into a leading modernist publication of the time. Maria, whose inheritance made the project possible, gradually became her husband's right hand as secretary, editor, translator, and co-translator (e.g. with Kafka's 'Metamorphosis' in 1936–8). Her contributions include work by Léon-Paul Fargue, Philippe Soupault, Raymond Roussel, André Breton, Robert Desnos, Roger Vitrac, Bernard Faÿ, and Jean Paulhan. Maria also co-edited an anthology of Southern American singing with her husband, published under his name and entitled *Le nègre qui chante*.

In 1932, Maria Jolas founded the *École bilingue de Neuilly* (1932–40) together with the French linguist Hermine Priestman-Bréal. This started a successful experiment in bilingual education: soon, the school welcomed 145 students, among them Stephen J. Joyce, the writer's grandson, and the art collector Peggy Guggenheim's daughter Pegeen. Two daughters grew up during these pre-war years, Betsy (born 1926), later a well-known composer, and Marie Christine Georgia, known as Tina (born 1929); another girl (1930) died in infancy.

The Jolases remained in France until the war led them to seek refuge in the USA in 1940. There, Maria joined *France Forever* (1941) and two years later founded the *Cantine La Marseillaise* in New York for the benefit of the Free French forces. While Eugene's journalistic work took him all over the gradually de-Nazi'ed world, Maria took over his work for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in 1944 followed in his footsteps and joined the *Office of War Information* as the head of the French language section. During the war Jolas supported the French cause from her native America; with characteristic symmetry, she later became a voice in the overseas opposition to the war in Vietnam and a leader of the *Paris American Committee to Stop War*, this time from the other side of the Atlantic. In May 1958, she helped to organize an international conference in Paris entitled 'The Responsibility of Women in the Nuclear Age'.

Jolas' friendship with James Joyce deserves special mention. Along with Eugene, she was one of Joyce's "first readers"; she also took care of Joyce's daughter Lucia when her mental health worsened, and saved Joyce's archive and possessions from post-war Paris in 1949. Jolas played an important role in establishing the critical interpretative tradition of Joyce's work. She was, for example, responsible for the "first major Joyce exhibition in Paris in 1949, shortly followed by a Joyce Yearbook, and took part in Joyce's centenary celebrations in 1982. She continued to meet with scholars of Joyce up until her "final years, which she spent between Paris and her house in

Chérence, near La Roche-Guyon, in Normandy.

After her husband's death in 1952, Jolas continued his efforts to build a unified cultural space across the Atlantic, notably with her translations of the philosopher Gaston Bachelard and twelve novels by the writer Nathalie Sarraute; her translation of Sarraute's *Between Life and Death* won her the prestigious Scott Moncrief prize in 1970. Maria Jolas also managed and organized her own and her late husband's papers; they were acquired by the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library at Yale University upon her death in 1987, at the age of 94.

### References and further reading

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- Jolas, Maria (2004) *Woman of Action, A Memoir and Other Writings*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, Columbia: University of South Carolina.
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