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978-0-521-88002-2 - T. S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition

Edited by Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction**Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding*

The taste and ideas of one generation are not those of the next. This next generation in its turn arrives; – first its sharpshooters, its quick-witted, audacious light troops; then the elephantine main body. The imposing array of its predecessor it confidently assails, riddles it with bullets, passes over the body. It goes hard then with many popular reputations, with many authorities once oracular.

Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism* (1865)

No age can have been more rich than ours in writers determined to give expression to the differences which separate them from the past and not to the resemblances which connect them with it. It would be invidious to mention names, but the most casual reader dipping into poetry, into fiction, into biography can hardly fail to be impressed by the courage, the sincerity, in a word by the widespread originality of our time.

Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (1925)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines tradition as ‘The action of transmitting or “handing down”, or fact of being handed down, from one to another, or from generation to generation; transmission of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, or the like.’¹ The principal affirmation of this book is the continuing importance of cultural traditions; a commitment owing to the dynamism and the complexity of the process of ‘handing down’. All the essays in this volume subject the concept of tradition to rigorous examination by rereading T.S. Eliot’s seminal 1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ – a major landmark in the development of modern literary criticism. In fact, this essay has a strong claim to be seen as the most resonant and widely discussed critical statement of twentieth-century Anglo-American literary theory. It has certainly been a fountainhead and indispensable reference point for subsequent examinations of cultural and artistic traditions.

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A measure of the enormous impact Eliot's essay has had in reorienting twentieth-century literary studies can be gauged from the number of books seeking to define and delimit the 'tradition' of English literature. In *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), F. R. Leavis made the emphatic claim that Eliot had effected 'a decisive reordering of the tradition of English poetry' and in *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936) he performed a critical synopsis of Eliot's revisionist literary history, tracing 'the main lines of development in the English tradition' from the meta-physical poets.² Across the Atlantic, Cleanth Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) similarly praised modernist poetry for a rediscovery of seventeenth-century uses of 'wit', paradox and irony, while downplaying the importance of the romantic inheritance. The case for a more complex continuity between nineteenth-century poetry and the modernist revolution was proposed by B. Ifor Evans in *Tradition and Romanticism* (1940), in Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (1957) and by M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971).³ Leavis extended the doctrine of tradition to the English novel in a study called simply *The Great Tradition* (1948), a book so influential that more catholic accounts of the subsequent terrain, such as Walter Allen's *Tradition and Dream* (1964), attempted to tackle (and broaden) the concept head on. In 1965, the year *Life* magazine christened the foregoing cultural era the 'Age of Eliot', Richard Ellmann and Charles Feidelson Jr produced a weighty compendium of documents seeking to delineate the 'backgrounds' of modern critical thought, entitled *The Modern Tradition*. In *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), Elaine Showalter proudly announced the unearthing of a 'female literary tradition' that had arisen 'like Atlantis from the sea of English literature'.⁴ The proliferation of alternative traditions of English literature has often sought to recuperate rather than jettison the term, as, for example, in Bernard W. Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987), Jonathan Bate's *Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), Karen R. Lawrence's collection *Decolonizing Tradition* (1991) and Gregory Wood's *A History of Gay Literature: The Men's Tradition* (1998).

In the light of these vigorous academic reformulations of tradition, it is useful to ponder the reasons for the present-day theoretical suspicion towards Eliot's essay. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is habitually treated by postmodern critics with misunderstanding, insouciance, or even resentment. A large part of the problem arises from the mistake of associating Eliot's modernist manifesto with the opinions of the later

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conservative cultural critic. Unfortunately, the authoritarian opinions espoused in *After Strange Gods* (1934) struggled to refashion his conception of tradition in line with the avowedly reactionary cultural politics of the American Southern Agrarians. Eliot's deployment of tradition in the defence of Christian 'orthodoxy' has suffered the same fate as the highly unfashionable theories of the American New Critics. John Guillory has traced in impressive detail how the triumph in American Academe of the modernist revolution associated with Eliot's practice and precepts was underpinned by the conservative 'doxa' of New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks.⁵ The hostility that characterised poststructuralist and feminist reactions to this New Critical orthodoxy is itself worthy of consideration. Harold Bloom approached Eliot's legacy as the strong precursor to be 'misread' and deconstructed.⁶ Similarly, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar took 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' as the cornerstone of a patriarchal modernist canon subjugating female writers.⁷ This abeyance of sympathetic attention to the subtleties of Eliot's essay can also be felt by comparing successive generations of British critics. Raymond Williams carefully sifted the historical record to construct rival cultural traditions to Eliot, but his student Terry Eagleton resorted to scornful parody. For Eagleton, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' maintains: 'A literary work can be valid only by existing in the tradition, as a Christian can be saved only by living in God. This, like divine grace, is an inscrutable affair: the Tradition, like the Almighty or some whimsical absolute monarch, sometimes withholds its favour from "major" literary reputations and bestows it instead on some humble little text buried in the historical backwoods.'⁸

This collection helps to explain why 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' has been – especially in postmodern debates over the literary canon – the recipient of ideological critiques, and yet it also demonstrates how many of these adversarial readings are superficial textbook travesties of the animating spirit of Eliot's most influential essay. Christopher Ricks has challenged a contemptuous reference in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (1994) to 'the placid unanimity of the great tradition and of the West that gloried in it' with the observation: 'What tradition of the "placid" can it be which had to reckon with Dickens and Carlyle, Milton and Swift, Dante and Racine, Blake and Cobbett?' His point is that postmodernism runs the risk of an 'insolently mendacious misrepresentation' of the intelligence and commitment with which earlier critics – Eliot, Empson and Trilling, for example – confronted great works of literature.⁹ In his study of the making of the modern literary canon, Jan Gorak has shown: 'T. S. Eliot, a figure often blamed for our current

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canonical malaise, on several occasions attacks canons on the same grounds for which he now finds himself attacked: the grounds of exclusion and repression . . . No less than Edward Said or Jonathan Culler, Eliot associates “canonical” with blind submission to unquestioned authority, the confusion of living guides with classical *dodos*.¹⁰

It is important to remember that ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ was first published in September and December 1919 in the avant-garde ‘little magazine’ *The Egoist*, a reincarnation of the feminist fortnightly *The New Freewoman*, and clearly no citadel of authoritarian or patriarchal values.¹¹ When Eliot placed the essay at the front of the first edition of *Selected Essays* (1932), he mistakenly dated it to 1917, thus positioning the essay as the wellspring of his entire critical oeuvre. In point of fact, Eliot’s novel articulation of tradition was a response to the cultural and intellectual crisis facing Europe after the Great War and the summation of a series of radical assaults on a moribund London literary establishment. This essay was an impassioned plea for postwar cultural reconstruction; it was not intended as a political treatise. Rather, it offered the imaginative writer a *modus operandi* leading away from the profoundly disabling angst then prevalent across much of Europe. ‘Tradition’ was conceived as an incitement to, not a curb upon, artistic creativity. In essence, Eliot contended that the real originality of a gifted or ‘individual talent’ was to be found in the reanimation and redirection of tradition – only a factitious originality could result from disowning or ignoring the efforts and achieved excellence of previous generations.

This is the first book expressly devoted to re-examining Eliot’s idea of tradition. The volume contains fourteen chapters commissioned from a distinguished team of international scholars. These contributions represent a diversity of critical approaches: from the perspectives of contemporary literary theory; by means of comparative, historical and art historical contextualization; and through a series of exemplary case studies examining Eliot’s sense of tradition in counterpoint with the theories of other twentieth-century intellectual figures. Founded upon the coherence and integration of the volume as a whole, it should be evident that the prismatic reflections displayed in these chapters extend well beyond the field of Eliot studies. In effect, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ serves principally as the gateway to a wide-ranging reinterpretation of the place of traditions in post-modern cultural debate. We believe that one of the strengths of this collection is the dialogues it inaugurates between Anglo-American and Continental investigations into (or interrogations of) the continuing presence of our cultural and artistic traditions.

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The first section reconsiders the key concepts of tradition and impersonality. Aleida Assmann traces the origins of tradition in Roman law to recent formulations designed to ward off the ‘demon of chronology’. Although the rise of the ‘historical spirit’ throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries underscored the impact of time and change on cultural values, Assmann points out that the notion of tradition did not simply disappear with the advent of modernity. On the contrary, the concept was reconfigured by modernists, such as Eliot, who feared the corrosive effects of cultural decay and forgetting. In truth, Eliot’s conception of the ‘historical sense’ helped to sever tradition from history in an ordered yet dynamically evolving ‘system’. This advocacy of system – revealing continuity through change – is, as Assmann reminds us, a belief shared by several of the most significant European thinkers of the day. Conversely, Stan Smith approaches the question of tradition from the vantage point of deconstructive free-play; from the side of subversion rather than stability. Smith ruminates upon one of Eliot’s characteristic rhetorical gestures – namely, the hesitant transgression of boundaries. He employs the subtle indirections of poststructuralism to unpick an aporia at the heart of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. In his deft reading of this essay within Eliot’s oeuvre, Smith suggests that the individual talent must transgress the frontier between the past and the present, in order to commune with the dead poets through the Orphean voice of tradition. He detects a Romantic idealist, perhaps a clairvoyant, impulse behind this metaphysical step.

The following two chapters in this section are focused upon the doctrine of impersonality. Jewel Spears Brooker explores Eliot’s rejection of expressive theories of poetics. Eliot’s metaphors of ‘self-surrender’ and ‘self-sacrifice’ are, she notes, part of a dialectical process enabling the poet to refine ordinary human emotions into ‘art emotions’. Paradoxically, it is this eschewal of the romantic poet’s autonomous self that permits the articulation of personal emotion. Brooker closes with an illuminating comparison of Eliot’s poetic with the corresponding theories of Pound, Joyce, Conrad and Yeats. Clive Wilmer extends this fruitful line of enquiry in his account of the response of several post-Second World War poets to Eliot’s impersonal theory. He persuasively demonstrates that ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ was the orthodoxy against which a younger generation of poets defined their work. With a poet’s eye for detail, Wilmer sees the wry detachment of Philip Larkin’s broodings, or the dramatic personae of Thom Gunn, as a development rather than a simple rejection of Eliot’s poetic masks. Even Sylvia Plath’s ‘confessional’ volumes, Wilmer

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argues, are not ultimately dependent upon autobiography for their success. Critics have often seen the work of Larkin and Plath too narrowly through the lens of their truculent public statements. Wilmer's thoughtful chapter corrects this oversight. He concludes with some fascinating reflections upon Geoffrey Hill's agon with Eliot's dividing legacies.

The second section of this volume offers detailed historical contextualization. Bernard Brugière reads 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in the light of several French intellectuals that Eliot was reading at the time of the essay's composition. While Jules Laforgue's witty, urbane poetry offered a much-needed touchstone as Eliot sought to reinvigorate the modern lyric, Charles Maurras's grand vision of a civilizing European tradition – both timeless and time-bound – stands ominously behind Eliot's controversial 'European idea'. Taken together, this French background represents a rejection of his American inheritance. Jason Harding resituates 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' firmly within the networks of the avant-garde little magazines. Far from being conservative in tendency, Harding shows that Eliot's idea of tradition emerged from rival versions of modernism propagated in wartime London. In the series of programmatic articles Eliot contributed as assistant editor of *The Egoist*, he spelled out his critical differences from the 'egoism' of Imagism, Futurism and Dada. Instead, Eliot advocated a deep inwardness with the work of past poets: it was a programme designed to recast Europe's fragmenting cultural monuments following the cataclysm of the Great War. The extent to which Eliot forged the modernist 'tradition of the new' in tandem with Ezra Pound is examined in Massimo Bacigalupo's contribution to this volume. Bacigalupo gives good reasons to suppose that Eliot's championing of the 'historical method' reveals an awareness of Pound's critical writings, in particular the study of Romance literature. Elements of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' – for instance, the advocacy of depersonalization and of the timelessness of classic works of art – have antecedents in Pound's critical pronouncements. The process by which these two palaeo-modernists 'gathered from the air a live tradition' (to quote *The Cantos*) is elegantly portrayed by Bacigalupo as a case of creative reciprocity.

The chapters in the third section of this collection widen the focus of enquiry to encompass art-historical (including theories of art) and anthropological dimensions. Giovanni Cianci uncovers the traces of various avant-garde artistic controversies in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Terms borrowed from contemporary art criticism – for example, 'significant form', 'primitivism' and 'simultaneity' – resurface in Eliot's essay, helping him to articulate a radical redefinition of tradition. Cianci illuminates the

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milieu in which ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ was mediated by repositioning it not only among the revolutionary prewar movements in the visual arts but also the postwar *rappel à l’ordre*. Michael Hollington proposes a hitherto neglected art-historical context when he investigates the intriguing possibility that Eliot was aware of – via T. E. Hulme and Herbert Read – the work of Alois Riegl. The historical relativism of Riegl’s notion of the *Kunstwollen* or the ‘will to art’ anticipates Eliot’s attraction to so-called ‘primitive art’. Hollington suggests that this historical overlap may serve to enrich our understanding of Eliot’s cryptic reference to the prehistoric cave paintings he had seen in the summer of 1919.

Claudia Corti further explores Eliot’s ‘mythical method’ in her account of the affinities between ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and German hermeneutics. In a refreshing extension of the familiar comparisons drawn with F. H. Bradley’s idealist metaphysics, she contends that the theories propounded in Hans Blumenberg’s *Work on Myth* are coterminous with Eliot’s essay. As aesthetic theorists, both Eliot and Blumenberg advocated the ‘optimisation’ of cultural tradition, conceived of as a ‘living whole’ which is continually being ‘readjusted’ through an ongoing process of reinterpretation. Caroline Patey elucidates a textual source relating to Eliot’s engagement, during the years he sketched out his notion of tradition, with prehistoric cultures. Patey recounts Eliot’s studies in ethnology, his reading of Emile Durkheim on ritual, as well as his attendance at Josiah Royce’s ethnology-based seminars at Harvard. These interests were reflected in the reviews Eliot wrote in the period 1916 to 1919. Furthermore, Patey highlights likely crossings from the writings of the anthropologists Spencer and Gillen into ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, not to mention remarkable echoes of their Australian fieldwork in the linguistic texture and desert imagery of *The Waste Land*.

The final section of this book is less concerned with the workings of influence than with a series of thought-provoking parallels and contrasts. Marjorie Perloff underscores the subversive energies of the young, avant-garde Eliot by rereading ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ in the light of Marcel Duchamp’s commentary. Unlikely as this connection might at first appear, Perloff points out that Duchamp cited Eliot’s essay in an unexpected defence of ‘great art’. She suggests that Eliot’s break with romantic notions of self-expression, along with his insistence on the importance of the medium of art, has surprising affinities with Duchamp’s choice of ‘readymades’. Max Saunders ponders some notable invocations of tradition circulating in the years preceding Eliot’s essay. In particular, Ford Madox Ford’s works sketch a broader and more airy celebration of an

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internationalist tradition than Eliot's austere judgements. Saunders notes that Ford's advocacy of impressionism placed a greater emphasis on subjectivity than Eliot's impersonal dictates were willing to allow. Yet both writers apprehended tradition as an act of creative criticism, not something blindly handed down. Brett Neilson's chapter similarly reaps the rewards of 'brushing against the grain' by reading Eliot's tradition alongside Walter Benjamin's conceptions of time and history. Benjamin, who claimed the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its place within the fabric of tradition, shared Eliot's vision of the creative interpenetration of past and present and scepticism towards the liberal ideology of progress, and even employed the suggestive analogy of the catalyst.¹² Neilson's chapter strikingly juxtaposes Eliot's tradition with Benjamin's angel of history.

The chapters in this collection bear witness to the necessity of contemporary critics engaging in a liberating and fructifying reinterpretation of the wealth of the past. The renewed vitality of our cultural achievements requires a supple responsiveness, determining (in the words of Frank Kermode) those 'subtle distinctions between what ought and what ought not to be let go'.¹³ Eliot's idea of tradition offers a remarkably fertile soil in which to ground such enquiries.

NOTES

1. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 2nd edition, vol. XVIII, p. 353. See definition 4a.
2. See F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), and *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), throughout.
3. See John Middleton Murry's riposte to Eliot: 'the tradition of Romanticism is just as lofty and august as the tradition of Classicism', 'Romanticism and the Tradition', *The Criterion* 2:7 (April 1924), 273. See also Edward Lobb, *T. S. Eliot and the Romantic Critical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1981).
4. See Elaine Showalter, 'The Female Tradition', in *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago Press, 1978), pp. 3–36.
5. See John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: the Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University Press, 1993), pp. 134–75. Guillory claims that 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' 'lies behind every subsequent reflection on tradition in twentieth-century criticism, and even behind our own discourse of canon critique'.
6. Harold Bloom: 'anyone adopting the profession of teaching literature in the early 1950s entered a discipline virtually enslaved not only by Eliot's insights but by the entire span of his preferences and prejudices'; *T. S. Eliot: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), p. 1. For an account of the antagonism

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between Bloom and Eliot, see Gregory Jay, *T. S. Eliot and the Poetics of Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1983), pp. 67–79.

7. See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Tradition and the Female Talent', in *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, vol. I, The War of the Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 125–62.
8. See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 38–43.
9. See Christopher Ricks, *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 341–53.
10. See Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon* (London: Athlone, 1991), pp. 8, 77.
11. See T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent [I],' *The Egoist* 6:4 (September 1919), 54–5, and 'Tradition and the Individual Talent, II,' *The Egoist* 6:5 (November 1919), 72–3. In actual fact, Eliot did not finish the essay until mid-December and the concluding part was published later that month.
12. A brief *Criterion* notice of Eliot's *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* pointed out that a catalytic reaction involving oxygen and sulphur dioxide produces sulphuric acid and not the sulphurous acid mentioned in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', adding: 'Whether the theory of poetic creation which Mr. Eliot supports by this celebrated metaphor remains valid, is a more difficult question to decide.' See 'Books of the Quarter', *The Criterion* 12:46 (October 1932), 167. The anonymous wag, likely to have been Eliot himself, failed to correct the misdating of the essay to 1917.
13. Frank Kermode, *Pieces of My Mind: Writings, 1958–2002* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), p. x.

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PART I

Tradition and impersonality