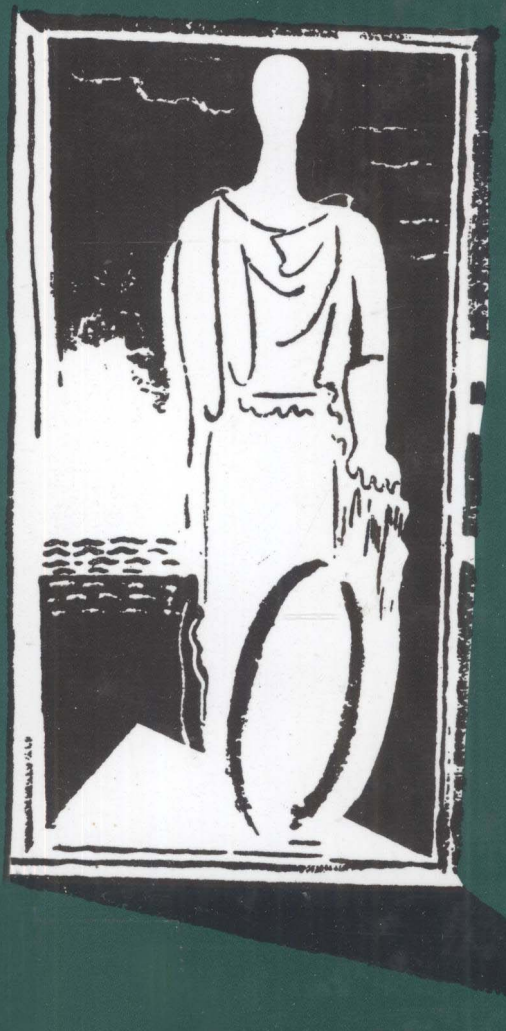
T. S. Eliot

AND THE CONCEPT OF TRADITION



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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521880022

First published 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
T. S. Eliot and the concept of tradition / edited by Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p. 215) and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-521-88002-2 (hardback)
ISBN-10: 0-521-88002-5 (hardback)
1. Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888–1965 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888–1965 – Influence. 3. Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888–1965 – Knowledge – Literature. 4. American literature – 20th century – History and criticism – Theory, etc. 5. Influence (Literary, artistic, etc.) – History – 20th century. 6. Criticism – United States – History – 20th century. 7. Modernism (Literature) – United States. 8. Canon (Literature) 9. United States – Intellectual life – 20th century. I. Cianci, Giovanni. II. Harding, Jason. III. Title.
PS3509.L43Z872464 2007
821.912–dc22 2007013263

ISBN 978-0-521-88002-2 hardback

Acknowledgements

The conception of this volume emerged from the stimulating discussions that took place at the interdisciplinary conference 'Re-Reading T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent"' held at the University of Milan in May 2004. We are grateful to the Rector for hosting this conference and to Alessandro Valenzisi and Marta Sironi for their organization of the exhibition 'T. S. Eliot and the Avant-Garde', documenting the modernist London artistic context in the years 1914–20. We would also like to thank Andrea Carosso, Emanuele Ferrari and Elio Franzini for their valuable contributions to these 'catalytic' proceedings.

Various people have provided assistance and support throughout the arduous process of readying this collection for publication. Nikky Twyman, Frances Whistler and Michael Foster helped with the copy-editing of individual chapters. The organizational skills of Marco Manunta have been invaluable. We are indebted to Valentina Pontolillo D'Elia for compiling the index. Finally, we would like to thank the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press for their constructive comments and Ray Ryan and Maartje Scheltens for their editorial care.

PERMISSIONS

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Abbreviations

ASG	*After Strange Gods*. London: Faber and Faber, 1934.
CPP	*The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.
FLA	*For Lancelot Andrewes*. London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928.
IMH	*Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.
KEPB	*Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*. London: Faber and Faber, 1964.
LI	*The Letters of T. S. Eliot, vol. I, 1898–1922*, ed. Valerie Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
NTDC	*Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber and Faber, 1948.
OPP	*On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957.
SE	*Selected Essays*, 3rd enlarged edition. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.
SP	*Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode. London: Faber and Faber, 1975.
SW	*The Sacred Wood*, 2nd edition. London: Methuen, 1928.
TCC	*To Criticize the Critic*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965.
UPUC	*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, 2nd edition. London: Faber and Faber, 1964.
VMP	*The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
WLF	*The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, ed. Valerie Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.

Foreword

Sir Frank Kermode

'Tradition . . . cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.' I believe it was Harry Levin who first commented on the strangeness of this remark. Tradition ordinarily refers to what is handed on, with the implication that everybody gets it free, whether they want it or not. That Eliot's essay uses the term in a different sense, or in several different senses, is clear enough, and so is the fact that great labour has been expended on the effort to decide what that sense or senses were. Many have disliked the essay, but it can't be brushed aside as too vague or too pompous to have historical value, and of course questions concerning the 'presentness' of the past are involved and cannot be easily waved away.

As a consequence, an enormous amount of labour has been expended on the elucidation of the famous and occasionally rather obscure manifesto of which the paradoxical statement concerning tradition forms so central a part. The contributors whose labours made possible the present volume seem to me to have had much success; they have added substantially to our understanding of Eliot's meaning. They enrich and perhaps even make more respectable the argument of what is, for all its daring and all its air of authority, a piece of literary journalism the better part of a hundred years old. They give us reasons to believe in its classical status, alongside 'Longinus' or Sidney's *Apology* or the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads.* If it was ever in danger of neglect, they have revived our attention to it; the sheer variety of what they have to say testifies to its right to that tribute. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is certainly shown to be patient of interpretation, which is one attribute of classic texts.

In the opening chapter Aleida Assmann reminds us of the legal origins of the idea of tradition – the enemy of time, change and death. She remarks that the concept of tradition was retained, perhaps against the odds, 'in the intellectual framework of modernity', and the purpose and consequences of this retention are the concern of many other contributors. A desire to transcend the temporal is one motive for valuing tradition as a way of

exempting art from the threat of the contingent. The image of an existing order which accommodates novelties, making 'a conformity between old and new' which does not invalidate that intemporal wholeness, is central to Eliot's idea. It resembles the scholastic invention of the *aevum*, an order of duration distinct from both time and eternity, the time of the angels. The *aevum* was a speculative instrument, intended for purely philosophical use, which came to enjoy great but unexpected practical success. So, in modern literary thought, did 'tradition'. Perhaps, with suitable modification and expansion, it still does.

Marjorie Perloff is one of those who take an interest in contemporary opposition to the cluster of ideas sketched by Eliot – in writers and artists who want no transcendental order, no intemporal wholeness – concentrating, as is proper, on Marcel Duchamp. But she finds him to be a little more interested in Eliot's ideas than most of us had thought likely. There was bound to be some reciprocal influence between the revised notions of tradition and the anti-passéistes who needed to reject them. For instance, Wallace Stevens, in his formative years, knew Duchamp and interested himself in that artist's work, though we do not think of him as anti-traditional and certainly not as Dadaist.

Jewel Spears Brooker attends to another very important aspect of Eliot's thinking: the notion of self-surrender and the related idea of impersonality. It is possible that the discussion of these topics is, in the end, the most valuable part of Eliot's essay. Other contributors concern themselves with two large topics: the relation of Eliot's thought to the thought of his contemporaries, and the effect of that thought on later poetry and criticism. Clive Wilmer attends to the English poets who came after Eliot and felt obliged to do something about him. Bernard Brugière develops and refreshes the familiar theme of Eliot's French reading, emphasizing the importance of Charles Maurras to Eliot's predominantly Latin conception of that transcendent 'whole'. Massimo Bacigalupo adds to our knowledge concerning the influence of Pound; Max Saunders does the same for Ford Madox Ford. Jason Harding informs us about the poet's energetic participation, in articles written for such little magazines as *The Egoist*, in the criticism of some obvious enemies, like the Futurists and the Dadaists. Those modernists whose passion for the present requires the destruction of the past (meaning that part of it that has been saved by the claims of the intemporal) are the enemies of this modernist. Other contributors introduce modern anthropology to augment our rather too familiar acquaintance with Jane Harrison; and yet others introduce into the conversation the names of Alois Riegl, Hans Blumenberg and Walter Benjamin.

All are performing a service that the very manner of Eliot's essay – and the authority he claimed and won – have from the outset made necessary. What he says about tradition and about the individual talent absolutely requires commentary. We see from Stan Smith's essay that it is possible to take a fresh look at the piece and, after generations of comment, still find things calling for elucidation, like the quotation from Aristotle's *De Anima* at the head of the final section. In this manner, much comparable enlightenment will be found throughout this volume.

Contents

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.

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 metaphysical 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

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