T. S. ELIOT AND THE CONCEPT OF TRADITION

T. S. Eliot’s reformulation of the idea of literary tradition has been one of the key critical concepts of the twentieth century. In this first book-length reappraisal of tradition, an international team of scholars explores the concept from a variety of theoretical and historical perspectives, including a series of illuminating case studies evaluating Eliot’s version of tradition alongside the theories of other major twentieth-century critics. This volume will be of great interest to students of literary theory, modernist studies and intellectual history, initiating a dialogue between Continental and Anglo-American investigations into the nature of literary traditions. Tradition is a concept often viewed by contemporary critics with misunderstanding or even hostility. This book powerfully reaffirms the continuing importance of our artistic and cultural traditions in shaping the past and creating the future.

GIOVANNI CIANCI is Professor of English Literature at the Università degli Studi di Milano.

JASON HARDING is Lecturer in English at the University of Durham.
Illustration from *Triumphant March* by T. S. Eliot, illustrated by E. McKnight Kauffer © Simon Rendall.
Contents

Acknowledgements vii
Notes on contributors viii
Abbreviations xii
Foreword xiii
Sir Frank Kermode xiii

Introduction
Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding 1

PART I TRADITION AND IMPERSONALITY 11

1 Exorcizing the demon of chronology: T. S. Eliot’s reinvention of tradition
Aleida Assmann 13

2 Proper frontiers: transgression and the individual talent
Stan Smith 26

3 Writing the self: dialectic and impersonality in T. S. Eliot
Jewel Spears Brooker 41

4 The later fortunes of impersonality: ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and postwar poetry
Clive Wilmer 58

PART II CONTEXTS – LITERARY 73

5 French influences and echoes in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’
Bernard Brugière 75
vi

Contents

6 Tradition and egoism: T. S. Eliot and The Egoist
Jason Harding

7 Tradition in 1919: Pound, Eliot and the ‘historical method’
Massimo Bacigalupo

PART III CONTEXTS – ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

8 Reading T. S. Eliot visually: tradition in the context of modernist art
Giovanni Cianci

9 Some art-historical contexts for ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’
Michael Hollington

10 ‘A living whole’: from T. S. Eliot’s tradition to Hans Blumenberg’s work on myth
Claudia Corti

11 Whose tradition? T. S. Eliot and the text of anthropology
Caroline Patey

PART IV CASE STUDIES

12 Duchamp’s Eliot: the detours of tradition and the persistence of individual talent
Marjorie Perloff

13 Tradition and the march of literature: T. S. Eliot and Ford Madox Ford
Max Saunders

14 At the frontiers of metaphysics: time and history in T. S. Eliot and Walter Benjamin
Brett Neilson

Select bibliography
Index
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

We hereby acknowledge permission to cite copyright material as follows: The Cantos of Ezra Pound: Copyright © 1937, 1948 by Ezra Pound. Canti postumi by Ezra Pound: Copyright © 2002 by Omar Pound and Mary de Rachewiltz. Used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. Unpublished Works by Ezra Pound: Copyright © 2007 by Omar Pound and Mary de Rachewiltz. Extracts from the writings of T. S. Eliot, Thom Gunn and Sylvia Plath: Copyright © Faber and Faber Ltd.
Notes on contributors

ALEIDA ASSMANN is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Konstanz. Two of her books, *Spaces of Memory* (1999) and *Repression of History: Obsession with History* (1999), have a strong interest in the study of memory as an individual, collective and cultural phenomena. She has been a Visiting Scholar at the universities of Rice in Texas, Princeton and Yale.

MASSIMO BACIGALUPO is Professor of American Literature at the University of Genoa. He has edited and translated T. S. Eliot’s *Poesie 1905/1920* (1995) and also Pound’s *Canti postumi* (2002) – an annotated selection from Pound’s manuscripts, many of them never before published. His edition and translation of Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf* received the Premio Fondazione Achille Marazza prize for 2003.


BERNARD BRUGIÈRE is Emeritus Professor at the University of the Sorbonne Nouvelle de Paris III. He has edited several volumes arising from the proceedings of the university research centre and has also published extensively in the fields of Victorian and twentieth-century literature. He has recently compiled a bilingual anthology of British poetry for Gallimard’s Pléiade collection.

Claudia Corti is Professor of English at the University of Florence. She is interested in the relationship between literature and the visual arts. Her most recent publications are *Shakespeare e gli emblemi* (2002), *Rivoluzione e rivelazione: William Blake tra profeti, radicali e giacobini* (2000), *Stupende fantasie: saggi su William Blake* (2002) and *Teatri e paesaggi: modi visivi del Romanticismo inglese* (2004). She was recently nominated a member of the Accademia di Scienze e Lettere La Colombria.


Michael Hollington is Professor of English at the University of Toulouse-Le Mirail. He previously taught at the University of New South Wales – where he held the chair of English – and as a lecturer in comparative literature at the University of East Anglia. He is the author of *Dickens and the Grotesque* (1984) and has published articles on Thomas Hardy, W. H. Hudson, D. H. Lawrence and the modernist novel.


Brett Neilson is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities and Languages at the University of Western Sydney. He is the author of *Free
Trade in the Bermuda Triangle and Other Tales of Counter-Globalization (2004). He has also published extensively on modernist literature and culture. He is currently editing a volume on the global drugs trade for the Tracking Globalization series.


Notes on contributors

Abbreviations


**NTDC**  *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. London: Faber and Faber, 1948.


**TCC**  *To Criticize the Critic*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965.


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.