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978-0-521-12143-9 - T. S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition

Edited by Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding

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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.

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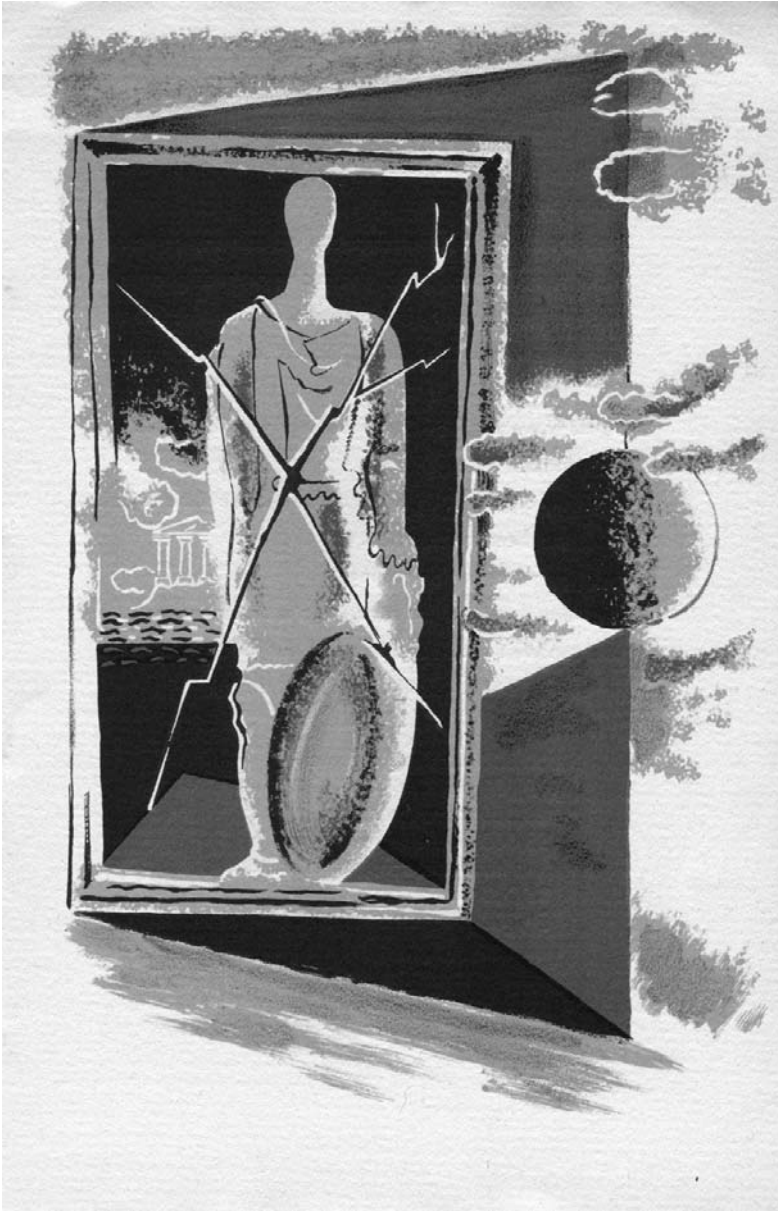


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Acknowledgements

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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

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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.

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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.