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INTRODUCTION

Ideas of Literary Tradition

THIS BOOK INVESTIGATES THE ROLE of tradition in our understanding and teaching of literature. As soon as you start to look into the question of literary tradition, one very surprising fact emerges. Whereas modern readers sometimes think of literary tradition as something which goes back to the origins of literature, in fact people have spoken about literary traditions only in the last 160 years. For once, we can say exactly when the term was first used. On 12 April 1858, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve gave a lecture at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris entitled “Qu’est-ce-que c’est la tradition littéraire?” which he published as one of his *Causeries du lundi* that same year.¹ Early in the twentieth century, in 1919, T. S. Eliot could begin his lecture on “Tradition and the Individual Talent” by saying, “In English writing we seldom speak of tradition.”² Since the 1940s literary scholars seem to have used the phrase “literary tradition” almost continuously, though there has been less use since a peak about twenty years ago. Of course, the practice of using the past in order to write new texts originated long before 1858, but people used different words to discuss it, words like “imitation,” “models,” “inheritance,” and “borrowing.” These words mostly placed more emphasis on the writer’s choice and agency, whereas “tradition” seems more monolithic and coercive.

Almost equally surprising is the wide discrepancy in the valuation of the word “tradition” by different authors. For some modern-

ists, postmodernists, and presentists, tradition is the enemy of original thought and therefore significant literature must be regarded as an attack on traditional modes of thought and expression. In sociology it is customary to treat “tradition” as the opposite of modernity or rationality. T. W. Adorno, who, as we shall see, saw tradition somewhat differently, famously wrote about the proper way of hating tradition, as if that was some sort of ethical imperative for modern thinkers and writers.³ Tradition often represents the old-fashioned, such as a habit of musical performance which falsifies the composer’s intention by incorporating anachronistic practices. In that case, the early music movement set out to sweep aside centuries of accumulated tradition in favor of authentic performances on early instruments.

But are there ways in which writers and readers can and perhaps must use tradition? Robert Conn has shown how, in the early twentieth century, Alfonso Reyes attempted to create a distinctive profile for Latin American literature by reorienting its connection with tradition. Reyes emphasized a combination of native literary traditions, Greek rather than Latin models, and a revised approach to the literary heritage of the Spanish language in order to create a distinctive role for Latin American writers and intellectuals within modern global literature, even as he was negotiating the difficulties of his own political position within and outside Mexico.⁴ Arnold Schoenberg, by general consent the most revolutionary innovator in twentieth-century music, claimed that he had “written new music which being based on tradition is destined to become tradition.”⁵ The contemporary Italian writer Elena Ferrante insists that good writing emerges from a knowledge of literary tradition, even when that tradition seems hostile to or ignorant of what the writer wants to do.

Writing is also the story of what we have read and are reading, of the quality of our reading, and a good story, finally, is one written from the depths of our life, from the heart of our relations with others, from the heights of the books we’ve liked.⁶

She makes the argument that the writer must know literary traditions and be able to alter and add to them, particularly in relation to women’s writing, which she sees as obliged to confront both male literary tradition and the specificity of female experience.⁷ For her the literatures of the past, high and low, are a great resource, but

also one which must be enlarged and changed in order to address important neglected female issues, especially around motherhood.

We, all of us women, need to build a genealogy of our own, one that will embolden us, define us, allow us to see ourselves outside the tradition through which men have viewed, represented, evaluated and catalogued us—for millennia. Theirs is a potent tradition, rich with splendid works but one that has excluded much, too much, of what is ours. To narrate thoroughly, freely—even provocatively—our own “more than this” is important: it contributes to the drawing of a map of what we are or what we want to be.⁸

For Ferrante, while the male tradition is imposing and rich and can hardly be ignored, the responsibility of the woman writer is to create a female tradition which will enable further thought and writing by better defining what women are and what they want to be.

In this introduction, I discuss the ways in which the related notions of tradition and literary tradition have been used and analyzed. I begin by showing the complexity of the word’s meanings and associations through a survey of its uses, based firmly on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the work of Harry Levin. Then I consider the influential literary approach to tradition in the work of the first French and English critics to exploit the term, Sainte-Beuve and T. S. Eliot. Next I describe the generally negative approach to tradition in the sociological tradition, to which Adorno’s somewhat different views also belong, and the more positive view usually taken by anthropologists. Then I discuss the historical analysis of the invention of tradition as presented in the influential collection of essays under that title edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983). Then I look in some detail at the very rich account of tradition presented in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1960). This survey of ideas will put me in a position finally to identify some themes to be discussed in the more detailed individual studies which follow.

A History of the Word “Tradition”

The word “tradition” has a rich and sometimes controversial history. Some meanings of the word which are not directly relevant to literary contexts are nevertheless present to readers as implications

or associations. This survey of usage follows Harry Levin's essay "The Tradition of Tradition" (1951), lightly supplemented with observations drawn largely from *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which was probably his major source, as it was for Raymond Williams in his brief account in *Keywords*.⁹ The Latin word *traditio* is derived from the verb *tradere*, "to hand over." This means that the two primary meanings of *traditio* in classical Latin are "to surrender" and "to betray." These meanings are not really relevant to our investigation, but one should be aware of them in reading Latin sources.

Our first relevant meaning is based on the same verb *tradere*. "To hand over" can also mean "to teach." Thus, one of the later meanings of *traditio* is "teaching." *Traditio* can be the Latin translation of the Greek *paradosis*: the art of teaching in Plato's *Laws* 803a. This is the meaning of the word "tradition" as used in Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), as Levin pointed out.¹⁰

Second, in the Gospels we come across the word *paradosis* (translated as *traditio*) used as a contrast to the commandments of God. In Matthew 15:2–6 and Mark 7:5–13, the scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus why his disciples transgress the traditions of the ancients. Jesus replies that their traditions transgress the commandments of God, specifically the fifth commandment, to honor thy father and mother. So in this sense tradition means the Jewish history of Biblical interpretation, in this case contrasted with Christ's explication of the true meaning of God's commands.

Third, Saint Augustine in one his letters writes of a strand of Christian teaching which is *non scripta sed tradita*—not written in the Bible but handed down, including the celebration of the anniversary of Easter.¹¹ Here the idea seems to be that the explicit written Christian doctrine of the Bible is to be supplemented by traditions handed down through the Church. So whereas, in the second meaning from the Gospels, tradition was false and biblical commandment was true, here we have an idea of what is handed down both as different from what is written and as supplementing it rather than being contradicted by it. This is evidently related to the use of the Hebrew word *Mishnah* to denote the teaching which was not written down in the *Torah*, but which was given by God to Moses and handed down orally from generation to generation. In

some contexts, “tradition” carries an association of wisdom, history, or memory passed on orally rather than in writing, as in “oral tradition.”

The conflict between these second and third uses of “tradition” was revisited and inflamed at the time of the Reformation. Luther and the Protestants rejected accumulated traditions, such as the sale of indulgences, the cult of the saints, and the doctrine of purgatory, and wanted to go back to the scripture itself, the scripture alone. Catholic thinkers, on the other hand, upheld tradition as something passed down legitimately through the successors of Saint Peter. So, as Levin points out, for Milton in *Areopagitica* truth is opposed to tradition, while for the Catholic convert John Dryden in *The Hind and the Panther* scripture and tradition both contribute to true Christian teaching, because tradition is part of truth.¹² These forceful religious connotations may have been one of the reasons why the term “tradition” was not applied to literature earlier than 1858.

Fourth, Enlightenment thinkers generally sought to replace the teachings of tradition, which was now regarded as including all religious teaching, with the light of reason.¹³ In his 1999 Reith Lecture on tradition, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (born 1938) cited the Baron d’Holbach as one of those who called for a turning from tradition to the study of nature.¹⁴ Levin quotes George Eliot’s affirmation of the progress achieved by turning from tradition to reason in *The Spanish Gypsy*:

We had not walked
But for Tradition; we walk evermore
To higher paths by brightening Reason’s lamp.¹⁵

This Enlightenment sense is probably the origin for the negative views of tradition which are usual in the sociological literature. For example, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx famously wrote:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.¹⁶

He went on to explain that even the French revolutionaries presented themselves as acting in the spirit of heroes from the past, such as Roman or Greek liberators. For Marx, everything we can think or do is constrained, even malformed, by the weight of past tradition. Even gestures aimed at liberation come to be conducted in clothes borrowed from the past. Marx's task, expressed in words which may owe something to Thomas Paine's ideas, is to liberate his readers from their customary ways of thinking.¹⁷ The sociological antipathy to tradition may also be connected with Max Weber's identification of "traditional authority," in which the right to rule is handed down through heredity, as one of the three types of authority, alongside charismatic authority and legal-rational authority.¹⁸ In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams defines tradition as "a general process of handing down, with a very strong and often predominant sense of this entailing respect and duty" before noting that tradition involves selection and that the words "tradition" and "traditional" are now used dismissively, especially within forms of modernization theory.¹⁹ So we have tradition as opposed to innovation in many book titles, and tradition as opposed to modernity in many cultural histories. Sometimes tradition is distinguished from closely related words like "custom" on the grounds that tradition possesses some quasi-legal force and that traditions may be enforced by their "guardians." Thus, Giddens declares,

I shall understand "tradition" in the following way. Tradition, I shall say, is bound up with memory, specifically what Maurice Halbwachs terms "collective memory"; involves ritual; is connected with what I shall call a *formulaic notion of truth*; has "guardians"; and, unlike custom, has binding force which has a combined moral and emotional content.²⁰

Fifth, the *OED* (sense I.1.d) recognizes a cultural sense of the word in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: "a literary, artistic or musical method or style, established by a particular person or group and subsequently followed by others." This implies a deliberate choice to imitate or adapt a particular predecessor. Examples cited by the *OED* include academic uses such as "Horace had undertaken to write satire in the tradition of the form established by Lucilius" (1900) and "Writing poetry in the tradition of Donne" (1944). This sense could presumably be extended to include intel-

lectual and philosophical traditions of inquiry, which, according to the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (born 1929), make it possible to understand and evaluate conflicting arguments, both those within that tradition and those involving criticisms from other schools.

A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.²¹

Each culture possesses a shared schema by means of which each agent is able to make the actions of others intelligible.²² For MacIntyre these philosophical traditions are characterized by their ability to be questioned, adapted, and improved. Any tradition may eventually realize its inadequacy, especially in relation to other traditions.²³

A final, more specialized meaning is hidden somewhere among these: the idea that tradition provides esoteric or secret wisdom. The book titles of Kathleen Raine's *Blake and Tradition* and F.A.C. Wilson's *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* intend to indicate that they will be considering the presence of esoteric wisdom in the works of their chosen poets. Thus, the *OED* records that tradition is sometimes used to translate the Hebrew word *Cabbala*, in addition to its more usual role in translating *Mishnah*.

Meanings and associations of the adjective "traditional" may also be important to our understanding of tradition. In folk music, for example, many songs are simply known as traditional, with the implication that authorship occurred so far back and the song has since been subject to so much adaptation by singers that it is now part of the common repertory of musicians rather than the property of any one writer. Such songs were first passed on from singer to hearer and later transcribed. At both stages, new singers could change words, notes, or sequences, or they could set a given song text to a new tune, whether freshly written or previously "belonging" to an earlier song. Such creative uses of material could in turn be

checked or reversed by more scholarly singers who insisted that a particular tune or method of singing belonged to a particular song. Thus, traditional folk music has mechanisms which promote both creativity and limits to free uses of material, but arguably a song becomes a folksong at the moment when singers other than its first author introduce changes to the song.

The word “tradition” is also linked to literature through the concept of a textual tradition—the process by which an older text has been handed down to later generations through the copying of its words. Any manual copying of a manuscript tends to introduce new mistakes, which gradually make the text harder to understand. Scholarly attempts to rectify supposed corruption of a text by making the text better fit later conceptions of grammar and coherence can corrupt the text still further. The modern editors of a text attempt to remove such corruptions by comparing as many copied versions of it as possible. Thus, manuscript copying was both essential to the preservation of a text and instrumental in introducing errors into it.²⁴ The institutional copying of tablets of text as part of the training of Babylonian scribes is the reason why scholars hope eventually to recover the whole text of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, of which we currently have around five-sixths.²⁵

As the *OED* indicates (senses I.1.a and c), all these meanings of the word “tradition” invoke the idea of a doctrine or custom being handed on from generation to generation and/or of a practice which is generally accepted and has been established for some time within a society. This social element in the meaning of tradition forms part of tradition’s coercive power, but it also makes it possible for writers to bounce off or reform shared previous understandings in order to make something new. Some uses of the word imply very different and even contradictory views of the value of tradition. We notice that tradition is often invoked at times of change—to justify conservatism, to give reasons for change, or to suggest that something apparently new which one proposes is in fact a return to previous practice. One attraction of the word to its users may be a certain vagueness and breadth of implication. I know, for example, that I have sometimes used the phrase “Aristotelian tradition” when discussing a doctrine which was taught in medieval or Renaissance schools but was not in Aristotle’s own text, and yet was also not

presented as an innovation by one of his major followers. It seemed more honest to regard the doctrine as part of a tradition rather than as the distinctive opinion of any philosopher. At the same time the term's inherent breadth enabled me to assert a connection to Aristotle and the teaching of his school which I could not prove in detail. As we shall see in the case of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, critics sometimes assert that a phrase or idea is part of a tradition in order to deny that a writer obtained it from a particular named source (in this case Petrarch).

We need to understand why the term has become so useful and so widely used, but we should also as readers ask why and with what implications the word is used in particular instances. We should be especially careful to ask questions when people speak of "the tradition" or of "tradition" with no further qualification, sometimes implying that there is only one tradition and that it is somehow complete and self-evident. Fortunately, writers at an early stage of a national literature tend to be aware that they are making use of materials from other literatures as well as from what they know of their native folklore. The idea of a literary tradition is most often invoked by writers to support and justify something new, and by readers to propose a new understanding of a particular text through its relationship to past texts. When we examine the implications of both near-synonyms of "tradition" and words which historically preceded it in literary discourse, such as "imitation," "inheritance," "models," and "borrowing," it becomes apparent that these words all imply more selection on the part of the author. Writers sometimes choose to speak of a literary tradition as if to imply that the compelling force of the past absolved them from responsibility for their choices of models.

Sainte-Beuve and Eliot

We turn now to the writers who introduced and developed the concept of literary tradition, Sainte-Beuve and Eliot. In his 1858 lecture "Qu'est-ce que c'est la tradition littéraire?" the French literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869) treats literary tradition as a kind of pantheon. Near the beginning of the lecture, he sets out a three-line outline consisting of three brief sentences.

There is a tradition.

How should it be understood.

How should it be maintained.²⁶

For much of the lecture Saint-Beuve outlines the content of this tradition, which is European in origin (Homer, Virgil, Horace, Shakespeare), but then primarily French and based firmly on the authors of the seventeenth century (*le grand siècle*), especially Molière. But the tradition is not only a matter of the works worthy of memory gathered in our libraries; it also includes our laws, our institutions, our customs, and our origin. “It consists in a certain principle of reason and culture which has penetrated deeply into the character of this Gaulish nation.”²⁷ Tradition on this presentation equates very closely with a sort of idealized French nationalism. When it comes to maintaining this literary tradition, Sainte-Beuve’s main point is that one must possess it complete, ancient and modern, and that one should not concentrate on a few authors and neglect others.²⁸ At the same time one should check the tradition, verify it, and rejuvenate it. Sainte-Beuve introduces two key ideas which have added a strong political flavor to discussions of literary tradition: that literary tradition involves establishing a canon of great works, and that literary tradition is an expression of national identity.

In his essay of 24 October 1850, “What Is a Classic?,” which is in many ways a first attempt at the topics broached in the lecture on tradition, Sainte-Beuve had taken a more open attitude to the classic. There he explicitly rejects the received opinion that the classic is a universally admired old author and seeks to replace it with a new and wider definition.

A true classic is an author who has enriched the human spirit, who has truly added to its wealth, who has made a further step forward, . . . who has made his thought, his observation or his invention, under any kind of form as long as it is generous and great, delicate and sensitive, healthy and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to everyone in a style which is both his own and also universal, a style which is new without pretentious novelty, new and ancient at the same time, comfortably contemporary with all ages.²⁹

At this point, Sainte-Beuve defines the classic according to what the writer does with ideas, emotions, and language, not according to antiquity and wide acceptance. A little earlier in the same essay, he insists that a few scattered writers of talent are not enough to give a nation a solid and imposing foundation of literary wealth. "The idea of the classic implies in itself something which has continuity and consistency, which makes a whole and a tradition, which orders itself, which is transmitted and which lasts."³⁰ So great work can be new, but the idea of the classic implies a certain continuity and tradition. Later in the essay, he explains that while Montaigne was a kind of premature classic of the family of Horace, capricious as a lost child, the true French classics begin with the seventeenth century, and particularly with Corneille, Molière, and La Fontaine.³¹ E. R. Curtius comments on the connections between Sainte-Beuve's ideas here and the mid-second century CE critic Aulus Gellius, who coined the term "classic" in *Noctes Atticae* XIX.8.³²

In his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) deplores the kind of literary tradition which involves "merely following the ways of the immediate generation," but also wants to insist that real tradition has a positive value for a poet. He argues that the best and most individual parts of a poet's work "may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." Tradition cannot be inherited: you must labor for it. To acquire tradition is to develop a historical sense "not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."³³ Eliot advocates a sort of pantheon of all the writers of the European tradition and the individual national traditions, but he sees the individual possession of this tradition as a prerequisite for writing good poetry. His vision of the pantheon always allows a place for the new; indeed, he sees the pantheon as existing mainly to make possible what is new.

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art

among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.³⁴

So Eliot endorses the idea of tradition as a pantheon but positions it as the cradle as well as the destination of what is truly new. He believes that in order to write something really good, the poet needs an acute possession of what has been written before. The idea that good writing depends on wide and thorough reading of previous writers is also supported in a more open and less ideologically loaded way by contemporary teachers of creative writing. David Morley, for example, teaches students that to be an original creative writer, one must first become an original reader, finding a path of one's own through a mixture of wide and intensive reading.³⁵

Like the earlier Sainte-Beuve, Eliot's aim is to rescue literary tradition from meaning merely the continuation of the old and to assert its value in encouraging really significant new writing. At the same time, there is a strong implication that the work that he values conforms to the traditions as well as changing them. He gives pride of place to European traditions (Homer, Dante, Shakespeare) and avoids Sainte-Beuve's implications concerning national identity, yet he is aware that he is also addressing the topic of English literature, and his only quoted example is from the Jacobean dramatist Thomas Middleton.³⁶ Part of Eliot's intention may be to direct writers away from the reading of their recent predecessors and back to alternative models deeper in the past of European literature.

The influential British literary critic F. R. Leavis (1895–1978), who saw himself as following Eliot, identifies his “great tradition” in 1948 mainly with the special qualities of the major novelists who count, “in the sense that they not only change the possibilities of art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life.”³⁷ In a way that parallels Eliot's portrayal of the “individual talent” operating in relation to tradition, Leavis sees Jane Austen as in some sense creating the traditions from which she learns.

If the influences bearing down on her hadn't comprised something fairly to be called tradition she couldn't have found herself and her true direction; but her relation to tradition is a creative one. She not only makes tradition for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect: as we look back beyond her we see what goes before, and see because of her, potentialities and significances brought out in such a way that, for us, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her.³⁸

Leavis says that Austen makes a tradition in her present out of writers who happen to be useful to her. Leavis's thoughtful and generous phrasing here serves to undermine his book's grand contention that the significant tradition in the English novel can be restricted to three (or sometimes five) authors. His own restrictive reader's tradition makes space for much more varied and open traditions created by writers out of materials they find helpful. George Eliot's well-known familiarity with French, German, and Russian writing renders Leavis's focus on English-language writers more questionable.³⁹ At the very least his nationalistic sense of tradition must be expanded to include writers in other languages and from outside Europe.

Sociologists, Anthropologists, and Historians

As we have seen, Eliot's generally positive view of tradition acknowledges the negative aspects of merely following the past. Social theorists in particular have tended to take a negative view of tradition and have emphasized the opposition between tradition and modernity. In his T. S. Eliot Lectures of 1974, the American sociologist Edward Shils (1910–1995) expresses his surprise that the social sciences have ignored tradition and paints a picture in which progress and change are widely approved while tradition, linked with superstition and dogma, is disparaged.⁴⁰ He observes that, while a tradition is likely to change over three generations, its proponents may regard it as unchanged.⁴¹ Shils sees tradition as opposed both by rationalizers and by individualists, but he nevertheless sees it as playing an important role.⁴² What tradition provides is widely accepted because it permits life to move along lines set and anticipated from past experience and thus makes the future more certain and

explicable.⁴³ The darker side of this kind of reassurance is that it may permit oppressive and prejudicial behaviors to be perceived as normal and acceptable. Anthony Giddens regards late modernity as a “post-traditional society.” Whereas in premodern societies tradition provided a relatively fixed horizon of action, supervised by the guardians of tradition, in late modernity people are forced to live in a more open and reflexive way. Where Giddens sees the revival of some traditions in the present as evidence of tradition becoming reflexive in order to survive through reinvention and reinterpretation, his critics respond that traditions have often in the past been reflexive and shown an ability to develop in relation to new circumstances.⁴⁴

For the German Marxist philosopher T. W. Adorno (1903–1969), the category of “tradition” is essentially feudal.

Tradition is opposed to rationality, even though the one took shape in the other. Its medium is not consciousness but the pregiven, unreflected and binding existence of social forms—the actuality of the past; unintentionally this notion of binding existence was transmitted to the intellectual/spiritual sphere. Tradition in the strict sense is incompatible with bourgeois society.⁴⁵

In opposing tradition to both modernity and rationality, Adorno seems to be drawing on the conventional sociological sense in which tradition is the antonym of modernity. Art has the obligation to respond to the loss of tradition.

Contemporary art as a whole responds to this loss of tradition. Having lost what tradition guaranteed—the self-evident relation to its object, to its materials and techniques—it must reflect upon them from within. Art now senses the hollow and fictional character of traditional aspects of culture; important artists chip them away like plaster with a hammer.⁴⁶

Even though tradition has lost its former relationship to reality, it remains indispensable.

Thus tradition today poses an insoluble contradiction. There is no tradition today and none can be conjured, yet when every tradition has been extinguished the march towards barbarism will begin.⁴⁷

The response Adorno tentatively advocates is an uncompromisingly critical rewriting of tradition, taking an appropriate distance, in the full awareness that the meaning that underpins tradition has been “unmasked in the catastrophe.” The exemplary figures here seem to be Beckett and Giacometti, who use and mock the resources of tradition while refusing to be assimilated within it. By denying tradition, the artist may be able to retrieve it.⁴⁸ While on the one hand Adorno believes that modern life, including both bourgeois society and the catastrophe of Nazism, makes tradition untenable, on the other he also seems to feel the need for older music and poetry and to wish that somehow valid new music and poetry could be made.

Where sociology as a discipline tends toward a negative view of tradition, anthropology and folklore studies are understandably more positive. Anthropologists often aim to recover knowledge about the pre-contact or pre-conquest traditions of indigenous peoples. Much of their research is conducted through collecting oral evidence about the meanings of customary practices and about the histories of villages and peoples. Folklorists, too, work mainly from material originally collected aurally. Tradition may be the memory of a culture. Thus, for anthropologists, tradition may be both a method of study and a goal of knowledge. Some anthropologists have pointed out the difficulty of both strands of this enterprise: the limitations of oral evidence and the risk that the traditions which anthropologists discuss are to some degree their own inventions.⁴⁹

A crucial point which has emerged from historical studies of tradition is that traditions are made and remade in history often for the benefit of the powerful. The case studies in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s collection of historical essays, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), show that many traditions taken to be ancient were in fact invented for political and social purposes relatively recently. The most famous is Hugh Trevor-Roper’s demonstration that all the paraphernalia of highland tradition, which was later to become Scottish tradition, the bagpipes, the kilts, the clan tartans, and so on, were in fact an invention—in some instances involving literary forgery—of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Before that time the highlands and islands of Scotland were essentially Irish, in culture as well as in language. These new traditions were

invented in an attempt to rewrite Scottish history to create an indigenous culture for Scotland.⁵⁰

In his introduction to the collection, Eric Hobsbawm emphasizes the connection between invented tradition and nationalism. For him that connection exemplifies a reaction to a new situation which takes the form of reference to an old situation in order to give to a desired change the sanction of precedent—in these cases an invented precedent.⁵¹ Hobsbawm identifies three overlapping types of invented tradition: first, those which establish and symbolize social cohesion and membership of groups (such as invented initiation ceremonies); second, those which establish or legitimize institutions, status, or authority; and third, those whose main aim is socialization and the inculcation of beliefs, value systems, and conventions of behavior.⁵² The history of the invention of traditions shows us that traditions are not a historical given. Traditions are detected, promoted, and sometimes even invented by later writers for social and political purposes of their own.

The studies collected by Hobsbawm and Ranger illustrate how tradition, which purports to sum up the wisdom of the past, in fact is deployed, or invented, for purposes in the present.⁵³ Even though Ranger later came to prefer the term “imagined” over “invented,” he insists that, in the colonial period, even genuinely old African traditions were reimagined for new purposes.⁵⁴

The point of invented tradition is not so much that sometimes traditions are invented out of nothing (though that has happened) as that the decisive move is made in the present, when choices are made about which items to use and how to use them. Since the idea of tradition tends to conceal both the present orientation and the real motivation, it is important to focus on the later moments at which tradition is used or invoked rather than the earlier moments in which that tradition is claimed to have originated.

Gadamer

The crucial idea that the moment of tradition (and in his terms, of experience) involves a confrontation between present and past is developed in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s intense meditation on reading and deep analysis of tradition in *Truth and Method* (1960).⁵⁵

Gadamer (1900–2002) developed a philosophical hermeneutics on the basis of his studies of Dilthey, Heidegger, and classical philology. He introduces his magnum opus *Truth and Method* as an investigation of the phenomenon of understanding (p. xxi).

The following investigations . . . are concerned to seek the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method, wherever that experience is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy. (p. xxii)

Gadamer foregrounds the truth which is experienced through art.⁵⁶ He begins by defending “the experience of truth that comes to us through the work of art” and develops from that “a conception of knowledge and of truth that corresponds to the whole of our hermeneutic experience” (p. xxiii). He wants to recognize in the phenomenon of understanding not only an experience of truth which needs to be justified philosophically but also a way of doing philosophy (p. xxiii). Rather than providing a set of rules for interpretation, he aims to understand what happens in the act of understanding (p. xxviii). He believes that the act of understanding precedes and makes possible scientific knowledge (p. xxix). His book aims to ask a question concerning all human experience of the world and all human living, namely, how is understanding possible (pp. xxix–xxx)? This question gives his work a metaphysical tinge, since he believes that understanding constitutes the basic being in motion of being in the world (*Dasein*; p. xxx).

For Gadamer, tradition is central to the phenomenon of understanding. Even when he seems to focus more on the interpretation of particular texts, the idea that the encounter with tradition shapes understanding underlies his comments.

Just as in the experience of art we are concerned with truths that go essentially beyond the range of methodical knowledge, so the same thing is true of the whole of the human sciences: in them our historical tradition in all its forms is certainly made the *object* of investigation, but at the same time *truth comes to speech in it*. Fundamentally, the experience of historical tradition reaches far beyond those aspects of it that can be objectively investigated. (p. xxiii)

The encounter with tradition makes possible the experience of something as true. Although our understanding of history tends to

overestimate elements of change over things which remain the same, traditions are not weakened by the modern consciousness of history (p. xxiv). Rather “tradition, which consists in part in handing down self-evident traditional material, must have become questionable before it can become explicitly conscious that appropriating tradition is a hermeneutic task” (p. xxxiii). Gadamer believes that “the element of effective history affects all understanding of tradition” (p. xxxiii). His central concept of historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) is imbued with what he regards as a legitimate ambiguity, since it means both “the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history, and the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined” (p. xxxiv).

It is not only that historical tradition and the natural order of life constitute the unity of the world in which we live as men; the way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions, the way we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened. (p. xxiv)

Being situated within a historical tradition is what opens us up to the possibility of experiencing understanding.

It is not always absolutely clear what Gadamer means by tradition. On occasion he exemplifies tradition through his studies of responses to works of art, verses of the Bible, or injunctions of the law. On page 462, he gives as possible examples a single book or a single historical event (Homer’s *Iliad* or Alexander’s Indian campaign), but elsewhere he talks of the obligation to confront the whole tradition, which must mean at least very many books and may mean even all the principal expressions of western European culture. In moving between expansive ideas of a whole heritage and particular examples, he follows other writers in exploiting the vagueness which may have helped the word “tradition” become used so widely.

For me, the most attractive and productive part of Gadamer’s argument is in the detailed picture he presents of the experience of understanding.⁵⁷ Understanding involves a dialogue with tradition.

In opening up an old text or considering a historical event, we begin with prejudices about what it will mean (pp. 277–307).⁵⁸ By observing our own prejudices and listening to what the text says to us, by taking it seriously as an interlocutor, we change our earlier views and come to understanding.⁵⁹

Hermeneutical experience is concerned with *tradition*. This is what is to be experienced. But tradition is not simply a process . . . it is *language*—i.e. it expresses itself like a Thou (p. 358). . . . A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light. It is like the relation between I and Thou. (p. 360)

Tradition is made through a kind of conversation between the old text and the new reader. We must acknowledge what we think already before we can learn what tradition or the text has to tell us.

To be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible. Knowing and recognizing this constitutes the third, and highest, type of hermeneutical experience: the openness to tradition characteristic of historically effected consciousness. It too has a real analogue in the I's experience of the Thou. In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e. not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond. . . . Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept that there are some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so. This is the parallel to the hermeneutical experience. I must allow tradition's claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness but in such a way that it has something to say to me. (p. 361)

As readers in conversation with tradition, we recognize that a tradition may have things to teach us which run counter to our initial prejudices. By acknowledging our prejudices and by listening with an open mind to what tradition tells us, we put ourselves in a position to experience understanding. Historically effected consciousness lets itself “experience tradition and [keeps itself] open to the

truth claim encountered in it” (pp. 361–62). In this conversation, which always takes place in language, questions on the part of both questioner and answerer are articulated and their horizons of understanding are merged (pp. 245, 306).⁶⁰ “The hermeneutical experience is linguistic in nature; there is a dialogue between tradition and its interpreter” (p. 461).⁶¹ In this experience, something happens which is not fully in the control of the interpreter. The actual occurrence “is made possible only because the word that has come down to us as tradition and to which we are to listen really encounters us and does so as if it addressed us and is concerned with us” (p. 461). The hermeneutical experience involves being addressed by the text and listening to what the text has to tell us.

The historical life of a tradition depends on its being constantly interpreted (p. 397). Whether the tradition is a text or a historical event, it comes into being only when the reader listens to it, interprets it, and applies it in language in relation to the circumstances of the time of interpretation. The linguistic communication between present and tradition is the event that takes place in all understanding (p. 463). That communication takes shape in a series of hypotheses which must be expressed and then amended in order to reach closer to the meaning of the text. The reader starts out from prejudices and reaches toward true understanding.

A person who is trying to understand a text has to keep something at a distance—namely everything that suggests itself, on the basis of his own prejudices, as the meaning expected—as soon as it is rejected by the sense of the text itself. . . . Explicating the whole of meaning towards which understanding is directed forces us to make interpretive conjectures and to take them back again. The self-cancellation of the interpretation makes it possible for the thing itself—the meaning of the text—to assert itself. (p. 465)

The reader’s prejudices and the context of previous interpretations always form part of the hermeneutical experience (p. 472).

Only because between the text and its interpreter there is no automatic accord can a hermeneutical experience make us share in the text. Only because a text has to be brought out of its alienness and assimilated is there anything for the person trying to understand it to say. Only because the text calls for it does interpretation take place, and only in the

way called for. . . . *Thus the dialectic of question and answer always precedes the dialectic of interpretation. It is what determines understanding as an event.* (p. 472, emphasis in original)

There is no automatic agreement between text and interpreter, but because the text calls for interpretation, readers must make the attempt to give true value to what the text is saying, in the way that the text or the tradition determines. Both the prejudices which readers bring to the text and their capacity to listen to what the text is telling them, and to reject hypotheses of interpretation which do not match what the text says, are essential to the process of understanding.

Gadamer's account of the thinking and dialogue which make up the experience of understanding a text is exceptionally rich and can offer us materials with which to think even if we do not engage with the full philosophical implications of his book. Since neither the critique of Gadamer's position by Habermas nor Ricoeur's attempt to find a middle between the two positions really affects Gadamer's analysis of the interaction between reader and text, I do not discuss them here.⁶² At the same time, I would want to give a greater place to the reader's individual choices than Gadamer seems to allow when he says, for example, "it is literally more correct to say that language speaks us rather than that we speak it" (p. 463). When Gadamer writes of the primacy of the game over the players playing it, or of the sense that the players are being played by the game (p. 106), it seems to me that he allows too little space for the individual skills and choices of the players.⁶³ The game puts compelling restrictions on what the players can do, but nevertheless it is the response of the individual players to those circumstances that makes the game worth watching. While I would accept that the tradition only comes into existence as we interpret it, I would still want to give the individual reader considerable agency within the conversation that is interpretation.

Using Literary Traditions

From Gadamer, and from the studies collected by Hobsbawm and Ranger, we have learned about the importance of the moment at which a later writer chooses to invoke a text or a tradition from the

past. Gadamer emphasizes the moment at which a reader confronts a text from the tradition and tries to use her knowledge of tradition to make sense of that text and of her experience of the world through that text. That is what tradition really consists of: a sequence of moments in which individual readers and writers make use of what previous writers and thinkers give them in order to make something new. This moment of individual understanding of a particular text does not contradict the essentially social nature of tradition; rather, it depends on that social assumption, in order both to make a new intervention worthwhile and to communicate with readers. Tradition, seen as a moment of confrontation with an older text or opinion, makes it possible to learn things from the past and to convey them onwards. Where knowledge of such doctrines and texts is shared by writer and audience, the range of ideas conveyed by a new text is enhanced, since the audience has greater awareness of the alternative view which the writer makes meaning by differing from. An audience's awareness that a writer is expanding the reach of an existing genre or working against its grain would be examples.

It would be quite possible to investigate the role of tradition in literature by analyzing the development of one or more particular literary traditions. For example, one might study the development of satire, noting its origin in Near Eastern texts; its correspondence with the deep human need to criticize the condition of the world and attack the faults of other people; the enduring expression given by Horace and Juvenal to different aspects and styles of criticism; Renaissance writers' imitations of Juvenal and Horace in Latin and in vernacular languages; the particular ways in which Cervantes, Pope, and Swift, for example, worked with and developed the forms and conventions of the genre; and finally, the exploitations by Ayi Kwei Armah and Bessie Head of the conventions of satire to find ways of confronting the social realities of Ghana and Botswana. Such a history would show both the changes which writers made to the conventions of satire and the ways in which those conventions enabled and encouraged certain kinds of writing (including in texts which are not entirely or formally satire). It seems to me, however, that the real historical leverage of such a study would remain with the moments in which individual authors used their inheritance (whether from direct reading of individual texts or from the conven-

tions absorbed from magazines and critics) to say something about their own situation (even as they were doubtless also blinded by tradition to other aspects of their situation).

Focusing on the moment of contact rather than the longer development helps us to see that literary tradition is made and developed as it is used in the present moment to interpret old texts and to make new ones. What the reader or writer brings to reading is crucial to what will emerge, as is the willingness to be addressed by, and to listen intently and critically to, the older text. Far from being an obstacle that a writer must set aside in order to write well, knowledge of earlier writing—knowledge of tradition—makes better writing possible. And different readers and writers will use tradition in different ways and will talk about it differently, as we shall see. Because those who create or reinforce tradition in the present do so for the sake of something which they want to do, we must be alert to the motivations of the proponents and users of particular traditions.

In discussing the examples which follow, I shall be concerned with the degree of free choice involved in the process of using and belonging to a literary tradition. Using the word “tradition” implies that this previous body of work is somehow imposingly out there. The earlier word “imitation” made it clearer that a writer was to some extent selecting a model to learn from or to react to. Some models were culturally required—for example, Cicero as a model for writing Latin prose—but one could always choose to imitate other models. Of course, the choice is not entirely free. It would probably be impossible to write a poem or a tragedy if one had no models to work from. Estimating the degree of free choice is a matter of tactful reading of particular instances, but I think it would be misleading to think either that the writer has no choice about the models or that the writer has a completely free choice.

Reading Gadamer, the literary critics, and the social theorists brings up a key problem with the idea of “the tradition.” Is the writer or reader required to undertake a whole enormous task of learning, or is tradition also being used when writers and readers have a dialogue with a single work or with a small corpus of works? Individual texts have to be used locally before a more general knowledge of tradition is even conceivable. Or perhaps we should acknowledge that, despite the insistence of authorities on the subject, possessing

the whole of any tradition is actually impossible. My proposal to focus on the moment in which an author confronts one earlier text may help us avoid this problem.

It is quite possible that the vagueness of the word “tradition” encourages us to see cultures or eras as a systematic whole in a rather misleading way. We may be better off to acknowledge that we can only ever know a part of our native literary tradition and that we need to be open to learning more about both our own traditions and the traditions of other cultures. Pretending that there is one tradition which a particular writer or critic possesses entire may in fact be a way of closing off attention to potential literary resources. Listening to Ferrante and reacting to Sainte-Beuve and Leavis should lead us to insist on broadening our idea of the traditions to which writers and readers may be open. Our concept of tradition must be international, must include the traditions of women and of marginalized groups within our societies, and, increasingly, must be open to texts and ideas from outside Europe.

At the same time as we observe the positive potential of learning from and using a particular audience’s knowledge of traditions, we must also acknowledge that framing a text in relation to a previous text or genre may have the effect of limiting what a writer can say and of blinding the writer to certain problems and prejudices. This problem makes it all the more necessary to investigate a writer’s aims in using or invoking a particular text and to be alert to the assumptions or blindnesses that may accompany a given text or genre. As much as tradition meets real psychological needs for belief in continuity, tradition also represents power and proclaims a kind of inevitability. Writers or politicians may invoke tradition as a way of evading responsibility for the consequences of something which they are in fact choosing to do. We shall therefore need to pay attention to the ways in which writers look back at the texts they have written and used as models, and to their suggestions to other writers about how to use past texts. In the examples which follow, both Petrarch and Gaskell seem to be aware that they are helping to make possible future writing, while Chaucer self-consciously and humorously exploits the idea of his dependence on earlier writing to limit possible criticisms of his work. Some writers, consciously or not, have turned out to be very productive for future writing, while oth-

ers, who absorb as much or more from their reading, seem to be essentially inimitable or imitable only at the level of phrase or episode.

More positively, tradition can also play a psychological role. Knowing the example of previous writers or having their overt support can provide a writer with the courage to pursue a particular line of writing, as Matisse claimed to have been strengthened in all his artistic endeavors by his daily knowledge of Cezanne's *Three Bathers*.⁶⁴

We also need to be alert to the differences between readers' and writers' traditions, and we must investigate the connections between them. Writers select certain texts and organize certain types of tradition in order to write new texts, while readers construct traditions in order to make sense of a particular text, a wider fragment of their reading, or their experience more generally. Writers must always be readers first, but they may choose widely and unexpectedly in searching for material which stimulates them for a particular project. Readers may have a wider range of purposes in view in their constructions of traditions, and the traditions they create may have a stronger implication of denying status to texts they omit. Gadamer's account seems always explicitly to be concerned with reading, but it is easy to see how his idea that a text is only ever realized by being interpreted and applied could be adapted to writing a new text out of one's experience of reading, as Chaucer did in writing *Troilus and Criseyde*, which could be looked on as an interpretation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*.

Within some of these discussions of the value of tradition for thinkers and writers lies the question of how writers learn their craft. Renaissance rhetoric was very clear-sighted about this issue in its focus on imitation, which involved both the choice of model and the ways in which the model would be followed. For Eliot and for Morley, a thorough study of some earlier writers was an essential foundation for anyone writing on their own account. In the studies which follow, we shall see both how authors learned from their predecessors and how they advised their contemporaries about learning to write and using models.

Finally, there are two issues which I want to acknowledge and then park. Discussions of literary tradition since the 1850s have

been very closely bound up with, and in fact dominated by, questions of the establishment of a canon of literature and questions of national identity. We need to recognize that these issues arise and that concepts of tradition contribute to our ways of thinking about them, but I would also suggest that people's opinions and motivations in relation to nationalism and canons have too often obstructed their thinking about the ways in which literary tradition operates. I shall write about particular authors' use of their reading in order to analyze the possible effects of working out of reading, out of a tradition, and also because these particular authors interest and appeal to me. I am not arguing or assuming that these authors form the basis for a canon or a national tradition. Evidently they do not, since the authors discussed here neither represent a single national tradition nor include writers who would have to be included in a canon of European or world literature, such as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy. But I do recognize that ideas of tradition have implications both for canon formation and for nationalism, and I shall return to these issues in the conclusion.⁶⁵

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