
Eliot's Modernist Manifesto

Viorica Patea



Publisher
AFEA

Electronic version

URL: <http://transatlantica.revues.org/8088>

ISSN: 1765-2766

Electronic reference

Viorica Patea, « Eliot's Modernist Manifesto », *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2016, Online since 16 January 2017, connection on 27 February 2017. URL : <http://transatlantica.revues.org/8088>

This text was automatically generated on 27 February 2017.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Eliot's Modernist Manifesto

Viorica Patea

- 1 Published in the final two issues of *The Egoist*, in September and December of 1919, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was soon destined to become an "instant classic."¹ By mid-century, this essay was accepted as the "gospel" of literary theory (Schuchard, 73). Eliot famously proclaimed: "Tradition [...] cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" (SE 14).² Since then, generation after generation of writers and critics have attested to the importance of this essay not only in Eliot's works but also in the development of modern literary criticism. Eliot, the young American expatriate, tried to forge a grand new poetic idiom that embraced nothing less than "the mind of Europe." His new poetics consisted of a constant revival of timeless values that he believed had a regenerative effect on the human spirit and needed to be reasserted. Eliot's "monuments" were invested with a normative character that reminds us of Gadamer's "eminent texts." It seems that a poetics spanning the world's heritage, whether to revive or simply to overcome the past, was mainly an American enterprise, as in the case of another cosmopolitan expatriate such as Pound
- 2 While reconsidering concepts such as history, time, and literary tradition, Eliot questioned the nature of the creative process and of artistic renewal, and the relationship between novelty and tradition, change and permanence, and art and life or history. Comparable in its significance to Wordsworth's Preface (1800) to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Eliot's essay was to become *the* modernist manifesto. As such, it has exacted a tremendous amount of labor from an array of scholars who have tried to decipher its many paradoxical formulations.
- 3 As Stan Smith rightly observes, Modernist newness is characterized by the tension between novelty and origins (Smith, 2). "Making it new" meant in Anglo-American modernism a return to the origins, a recovery of that which has been forgotten, a dialogical confrontation with the burden of the past, which led to transformative acts of translations, re-adaptations, and re-recreations.³ Artistic creativity drew on a dialectical exchange between tradition and innovation, the recovery of past forms and the forging of new voices. Eliot's restorations are visionary explorations of the mind of Europe that for

him stretches from the classical fathers (Homer, Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare) back to the Magdalenian draughtsmen.

- 4 In essence, Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is that great artists are indispensable and that poetry has to be written with a "historical sense" which, different from mere nostalgia, has to be inherited "by great labour," an endeavor that "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (SE, 14). Therefore, a poet is compelled 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 of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (SE, 14). In connection with the idea of tradition, Eliot elaborates on the doctrine of impersonality according to which the poet must continually surrender "to something which is more valuable. The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (SE, 17). He supports his argument with a number of paradoxical statements: "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (SE 18) only to conclude with the same conundrum: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (SE 21).
- 5 Eliot witnessed the end of the theoretical vogue he had inaugurated in the pages of *The Egoist*, and at the end of the twentieth century, his theories seemed no longer fashionable. His erudite idiom was taken as a privileged and exclusive form of discourse of the dominant ideology. Poet critics such as Karl Shapiro made a plea *In Defense of Ignorance* (1960).⁴ Inimical to change, the concept of tradition itself seemed to go against the grain of the intellectual framework of modernity keen on progress and newness. Modern literary criticism became suspicious of value judgments and used theory to assault the assertions of tradition (Graff, 1987, 247-62). Post-structuralist critics, such as Harold Bloom, considered Eliot a forefather to be misread, mistrusted and deconstructed: he had "enslaved" literature with his "insights," "preferences and prejudices" (1). From feminist quarters, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpreted Eliot's essay as the paragon of the patriarchal modernist canon that subjugates female women by means of a "sexualized idiom," and "exclude[d] them from the literary canon" along with Pound's *The ABC of Reading* (1934), William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), and Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought-Urn* (1947) (154). The essay was also subjected to a severe ideological critique by scholars with a Marxist bias: Terry Eagleton scornfully derided Eliot's legacy, reducing it to a mere authoritarian cultural ideology in the spirit of Orwell's "two legs good, four legs bad": "Eliot's own solution is an extreme right-wing authoritarianism: men and women must sacrifice their petty 'personalities' and opinions to an impersonal order. In the sphere of literature, this impersonal order is the Tradition. [...] This arbitrary construct, however, is the paradoxically imbued with the force of an absolute authority."⁵
- 6 Postmodern critics have often misunderstood or even resented Eliot's theoretical presuppositions. If at present, the essay is being criticized because it makes a plea for order and stability, in 1919, when it was published, it sounded deeply subversive. Eliot's new formulations of tradition were taken as something that provoked originality, not as something that holds it back. Like Wordsworth almost a century earlier, Eliot had called for the necessity of a revolution in which "a violent stimulus of novelty is required" (TCC, 184) and announced that "culture," although "traditional [...] loves novelty."⁶

- 7 Eliot's most influential essay has a degree of complexity that goes beyond the ideological criticism to which it has been subjected. The aim of this paper is to explore Eliot's manifesto from the point of view of both the romantic and the modernist aesthetics, and to revisit the great disparity between Eliot the experimentalist avant-garde poet who advocates the aesthetics of fragmentation and the critic who pleads for self-surrender and the wholeness of tradition. My intention is, first, to relate Eliot's concepts of tradition and impersonality to the revolution that took place in the visual arts in the first decades of the twentieth century, whose experimental language he tried to transfer to poetic practice; and second, to show the way in which his theories go beyond romantic limitations and present strong affinities with modern trends of philosophical thinking, such as historicist hermeneutics, relativism and pragmatism, which continue to condition our current postmodern debates.
- 8 Part of our current misunderstanding of Eliot's essay is due to our imposition of postmodern concerns on another time and context. Back in 1919, the romantic aesthetics of direct expression of emotions created a sense of *déjà vu*. Eliot's great contribution consisted in doing away with the obsolete romantic language and in reconceiving literary criticism as something different from mere biographical studies. Eliot's bookishness and culturally charged poetic idiom challenged the prevailing literary standards of the Arnold Benetts of his time who had brought about a moment of cultural stagnation by claiming that "technique" was a sign of decadence caused by the "professionalism in art."⁷ Conversely, by mid-century, during "the tranquilized fifties," the prevailing formalist techniques of the New Critics, whom Eliot had inspired, but had never unequivocally acknowledged, seemed hollow and self-deluding. Reviled in the 1920s as "a drunken bolshevik" (Spender, 11), Eliot gradually acquired the status of a god-fatherly institution, and by the late 1950s, he was considered rather like a literary dictator. In 1945 Delmore Schwartz hailed Eliot as the "International Hero," the poet of the postwar age, whose work, of all the moderns "had direct and comprehensive concern with the essential nature of modern life" (126-28). Four years later, Schwartz refers to Eliot as a "literary dictator" (313). Eliot's connection to the Church of England and his later conservative views on culture make us forget his advocacy for change and novelty in both poetry and criticism.
- 9 On both sides of the Atlantic, the new poetic idioms experienced a disaffiliation with Eliotic modernism. Eliot's interest in transcendental orders and timeless wholeness seemed foreign to the postmodern sensibility. In the U.S., the postwar poetics of groups such as the Beats, the Confessionals, and the "Deep Image" poets or those of "The Movement" in the U.K., notably Philip Larkin or Kingsley Amis,⁸ envisaged a new aesthetic of personal breakthrough to more intimate experiences formerly considered taboo, grounded in the psychological disturbance and emotional distress of a troubled self enmeshed in a disquieting family history. They participated in the revolt against impersonality by reinstating the autobiographical first person, and the cult of the spontaneous unmediated moment. The stage was set for a new poetics of openness, rawness and nakedness and Eliot represented, as Marjorie Perloff affirmed in her influential *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981), a moment of closure. The postwar generations of poets irrupted with accessible, rebellious, and shocking confessions of psychological exposure while engaging in an Oedipal drama of deconstructing their predecessors. Helen Vendler infamously excluded Eliot from her edition of *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1985) which, nevertheless, opened with the poems of

Wallace Stevens, already dead by 1955. Other modernists, who died after him, like Williams (1963) and Pound (1972), were also excluded.

“The Mind of Europe”

- 10 To go further, it seems crucial to turn to the revolutions in the visual arts, since this dimension of Eliot's work is one of the least analyzed aspects, despite the fact that early reviewers linked his poems to the visual avant-garde (Cianci, 128; Brugière, 2005). In London, Eliot frequented both the Bloomsbury and Vorticist circles and, mostly via Pound, became exposed to the ferment of the artistic avant-garde at a moment of intense interdisciplinary cross-fertilization. In his first letter to Isabella Stewart Gardner, the art collector and founder of the museum in Boston that bears her name today, Eliot gave a detailed chronicle of the current artistic milieu. The letter documents his familiarity with the works of Edward Wadsworth, Gaudier-Brzeska, Wyndham Lewis, and Jacob Epstein, and his admiration for the new theories of T.E. Hulme (L, 94). Eliot became the assistant editor of *The Egoist* in 1917, replacing Richard Aldington who enlisted in the army. In its pages he crystallized his sense of tradition. The *Egoist*, as the refashioned *New Freewoman* was now called, was clearly not a stronghold of authoritarian or patriarchal values, but a forum for radical individualism. As Jason Harding remarks, the term, “Egoism,” introduced by Joseph Addison from the French in 1714 with derogatory connotations, had a strong Nietzschean ring threatening the notions of Victorian morality, which professed the virtues of altruism (92). The journal also actively popularized Max Stirner's rejection of all previous philosophical, intellectual and political systems in favor of a consummate egoism whose only reality is the individual ego.⁹
- 11 Wartime London witnessed the confrontation between the English and Italian avant-garde over the role of tradition. Although Vorticism had a strong affinity with Cubism and Futurism, the Vorticists violently rejected the Italians' intention of making a tabula rasa of the past and destroying all museums and libraries. Eliot's novel articulation of tradition was a response to the impasse of the vanguards in the crisis after the Great War. The modernists had launched a fierce assault on the conventional complacencies of a stagnant culture, yet when confronted with the actual violence of the war, they felt that art had to provide a sense of coherence, order, and control necessary for survival. Eliot reinvented tradition as a remedy against loss and postwar trauma. He refashioned it as an antidote to the collapse of a culture that had to be saved from anarchy and nihilism, (and also from DADA aesthetics). In the midst of his own personal wreckage and that of his civilization, he relied on tradition, that is, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” as he wrote in *The Waste Land* (l. 430).
- 12 His reformulation of tradition was a compromise between the innovative stimuli of both the prewar tumultuous phase of artistic avant-garde and the need for general reconstruction. In this sense, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” combined experimentalism with the general postwar tendency towards order, evident in the work of many other European avant-garde artists between 1917-1920, a period in which artists such as Picasso, André Derain, Giorgio de Chirico, Gino Severini also return to figuration.
- 13 Giovanni Cianci (124-27) documents the way in which key terms in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” are steeped in the art terminology typical of most avant-garde controversies of the time. Eliot's reference to “significant emotion” is reminiscent of Clive Bell's “significant form” in his aesthetic theory *Art* (1914). The “existing

monuments” that form an “ideal” and “simultaneous order,” (SE, 15) and the reference to the poet’s “programme for the métier of poetry” (SE, 16), belong to the same semantic field of the *rappel à l'ordre* aesthetics in France and Italy, “Ritorno al mestiere,” a call launched by Giorgio de Chirico in the art journal *Valori Plastici* in 1918.

- 14 Another relevant repercussion of the visual arts on Eliot is to be found in his reference to “the rock drawings of the Magdalenian draughtsmen”—which he visited on August 9, 1919 on a walking tour in Southern France—as fundamental elements that define the mind of Europe. All avant-garde artistic movements celebrated “primitive” art and emphasized the continuity between modernity and prehistory. T.E. Hulme’s conception of art was to have a lasting influence on the evolution of modernism and its wavering between subjectivism and objectivism. Influenced by Worringer’s treatise, *Abstraction and Empathy*, Hulme (227) discerned in abstract art the impulse of primitive art to transcend nature and achieve the “monumental stability and permanence.”
- 15 One year before the publication of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot declared in “Tarr,” the review of Wyndham Lewis’s novel: “The artist is more *primitive*, as well as more civilized, than his contemporaries, his experience is deeper than civilization” (106). In “War-Paint and Feathers” (1919) he insisted on the relevance of primitivism and urged the poet to explore “the stratifications of history that cover savagery” (1036), since the pre-logical regions out of which myth emerged constitute the unconscious foundations of our psyche. Until the end of his life, Eliot was to remain a strong advocate of primitivism, which he regarded as the fountainhead of modern art: “[P]rimitive art and poetry help our understanding of civilized art and poetry” (Eliot, 1919, 1036). The artist had a privileged role in the exploration of the unconscious depths of the psyche to which he alone had access: “the pre-logical mentality persists in civilised man, but becomes available only to or through the poet” (UP, 148). He proclaimed that “poetry begins [...] with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential percussion and rhythm;” for that reason, “one might say that the poet is *older* than other human beings” (UP, 155). Eliot conceived of the process of poetic creation as visionary incursions into the past and searched for anthropological origins that were explored by the language of depth psychology. Later in life, he understood the creative process as an act of “sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end” (UP, 119). Furthermore, in “The Three Voices of Poetry,” he grounded the wellspring of the process of composition in the “unknown, *dark psychic material* [...] with which the poet struggles” (OPP, 100).
- 16 When defining tradition, Eliot refers to “a simultaneous order,” and “a simultaneous existence” (SE, 15) in which the temporal and the timeless coexist. As Assmann aptly remarks, Eliot was exorcizing the “demon of chronology” inherent in linear and evolutionary conceptions of time, in order to articulate a new discourse in art, history and literature (11-13). Simultaneism was a specific artistic movement inaugurated by Robert and Sonia Delaunay in 1911, which introduced a prominent strategy of avant-garde experimentation in Cubism and Futurism that broke down the barriers of time and space. Eliot’s poetic strategy in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” or *The Waste Land* also consisted in breaking down spatial and temporal boundaries, a method by which he tried to rescue art from its mimetic representations. Furthermore, simultaneity is also a fundamental dimension of Jung’s collective unconscious and of Bergson’s conception of time as a category in which past, present, and future coexist. Studying under Bergson at the Collège de France (1910-11), Eliot was conscious of the impact his philosophy had on

the revolution in visual arts and he realized that “[d]iscussion of Bergson was apt to be involved with discussions of Matisse and Picasso” (Eliot, 1934, 451).

- 17 Eliot's theoretical pronouncements and poetic practice parallel the experimental techniques of visual artists such as Wyndham Lewis, Charles Wadsworth, or Jacob Epstein who went beyond the limitations of nature in their non-representational compositions. Eliot appropriated these techniques and transferred them to his poetic experiments: his theory of impersonality, formulated in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “the objective correlative” in “Hamlet” (1919), are inseparable from the experiments that had taken place in the non-figurative visual arts.¹⁰ Like the avant-garde plastic artists, Eliot learned to distance himself from experience, to present reality as a series of points of view, distorting and decomposing it in simultaneously shifting perspectives, fragments, broken narratives by means of juxtapositions, fragmentations, and collages. The theory of impersonality enabled him to drop the convention of a stable lyric voice and to replace direct self-exposure by a series of dramatizations of the conflicts of a consciousness at odds with itself. Eliot brought about “a new immediacy, a new literalness, and a new abstract intimacy for poetry” that run counter traditional notions of selfhood and “provide richer imaginative alternatives” (Altieri, 198). Eliot's technique of “depersonalization” allowed him to dislocate discourse, to break down temporal continuity and narrative sequence, to conceive personality as a “zone” or a “field of consciousness” (Kenner, 35-36). The “I” is composed of a collage of voices, masks, registers and points of view that articulate an assemblage of many psychic registers and historical and cultural identities. As Altieri magisterially argued, by these strategies, Eliot invented a new means for dramatizing psychic forces and inner conflicts while recomposing subjectivity into a new geometry that shapes the non-discursive, nonlinear space of interior life (189–209). While the objective correlative unites subjectivity with its objects, impersonality, Eliot's *via negativa*, offers the literal representation of the interplay of psychic forces free from the impositions of a univocal interpretive strategies: “Poetry then had to be impersonal and complex—not because such attributes secured the authority of culture but because the poet needed means of resisting the illusory authority of both the poet's descriptive capacities and his or her seductive personality” (Altieri, 198). By means of impersonality and the objective correlative Eliot overcame the dead end of solipsism translating the self's inner conflicts into larger symptoms of one's culture. To Confessional poets like Lowell, Berryman, Plath, Roethke, Eliot showed how to take on victimizing stances in such a way as to go beyond autobiography and make intimate suffering culturally representative. Berryman's Henry and the dialogue between his id, ego, and libidinal self are fashioned on Prufrock. Plath, Lowell, Roethke take Eliot's model by which the extremities of voice articulate the many dynamic aspects of the self. Their projections of selfhood are the result of a detached consciousness that objectively faces its own antagonistic dynamism. Moreover, despite their personal disclosures, neither of the Confessional poets actually relies on autobiography for success. Berryman was outraged by his identification with Henry. In an interview with Peter Stitt in 1972 he reacted “with rage and contempt” at the label “confessional.” Lowell avowed that his persona was fictional and required of a poem, as he manifested in his praise of Frost, to have “the virtue of a photograph but all the finish of art” (Seidel, 1988, 71). Plath's “Daddy” is a constructed persona that combines autobiography with historical trauma. In 1962 she declared in an interview to Peter Orr: “I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most

terrific, like madness, being tortured [...] with an informed and an intelligent mind.” (Web) To Confessional poets Eliot set the example of how to embody a fragmented mind in a fragmented world. To some, like Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Robert Lowell or Seamus Heaney he showed how to confront the ghosts of history and to others he provided antidotes against the contemporary dissociations of sensibility.

- 18 As a modernist manifesto, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” engages in a conversation with two other seminal texts: Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) to which Eliot refers directly, and Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” (1846), more indirectly so. These two essays lie at the origins of modernity, representing signposts of opposite traditions, one foregrounding the primacy of feelings and emotions, the other the preeminence of artistic control.
- 19 Reflecting on Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility” (SE, 21) Eliot formulates what was to become the modernist campaign against romantic aesthetics.¹¹ Taking exception to Wordsworth’s “inexact formula,” Eliot begins by advocating the poets’ absolute control over his material, but while doing so, he turns his argument on its head only to emphasize the unpredictable, unconscious basis of the artistic process. Eliot counters his romantic predecessor and contends that the creative process “is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor [...] tranquility” (SE, 21). Instead, he substitutes Wordsworth’s concepts with “a concentration that does not happen consciously or of deliberation,” “a passive attending upon the event” (SE, 21). Eliot’s overt critique of Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* might suggest that he might have been in agreement with Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” (1846), which debunks the poetics of romantic sensibility and privileges the artist’s complete aesthetic control over his work. Poe was the originator of a tradition whose motto, “art for art’s sake,” extends from Gautier, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry to Eliot. He was the first to discard the Romantic notion of artistic creation as an organic, spontaneous growth for the sake of form, design, intention, and above all “effect.” He stressed the autonomy or self-sufficiency of the work of art, of the “poem *per se*,” “written solely for the poem’s sake,” and foregrounded the formal and rational craft of the artist (700). For Poe the process of composition unfolded “with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (677). One might read Eliot’s essay as another treatise that offers a glimpse of the process of artistic composition, an alternative to Poe’s explanation of the way in which he had written “The Raven.” At the outset, Eliot seemed to subscribe to Poe’s claims about the poet’s mastery and control. Yet, paradoxically, in his quarrel with Wordsworth, Eliot, the theorist of impersonality, far from debunking emotions as one might expect, only deepens the sense of the unconscious in the process of poetic creation.
- 20 In the end, Eliot succeeds in countering both Wordsworth and Poe. Although Eliot never forsakes control as he proves in the passage in which he distinguishes between “the man who suffers” and “the mind which creates” (SE 18), he in fact comes to the conclusion that the act of poetic creation is something the artist has no control over. It does not depend on his deliberate intention. The creative process is nothing more than a long wait for a flash of unexpected intuition from the unconscious.

The Doctrine of Impersonality

- 21 Steeped in a quasi-mystical language, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” makes a strong case for the poet’s self-surrender and his total commitment to his art. Although it

addresses the concerns of contemporary history, Eliot “proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism” (SE, 21) and concentrates on “the process of depersonalization” (SE, 17). Eliot did not invent the notion of “depersonalization,” but rather modernized an older romantic concept. In 1830 as a reaction to Keats and Shelley’s immediate immersion in selfhood, Tennyson and Browning, each on their own, developed the dramatic monologue¹² as a means to objectify the Romantic self in the imagined speech of poetic personae who reveal themselves in dramatic soliloquies. Eliot’s “escape from personality” is an allusion to Keats’s notions of indeterminate, self-effaced and chameleonic nature of the poet, corroborated by his explicit reference to the “Ode to a Nightingale” in his essay (SE, 19). His individual talent, fashioned as an impersonal catalyst, harks back to Keats’s notion of “negative capability,” of dwelling, “in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (79).

- 22 From the French symbolists who saw art as a form of artistic self-purgation, Eliot took the filter of irony. Laforgue’s monologues introduced the ironic *dédoublement* of the personality. Split into the subject and object of its own reflections, the poetic persona became a self-observing voice unfolding in interior monologues in which ideas, voices, and feelings were played off against each other. Laforgue’s characters were especially appealing to the modernist spirit. Trapped in the dreary space of the quotidian, conscious of their romantic aspirations yet ridiculing themselves, and being ridiculed by the surrounding world, they longed for an ideal reality that was grotesquely undermined by real conditions.
- 23 Yet how does one succeed in escaping one’s own personality? Eliot uses a series of archaeological and chemical metaphors and visualizes the poet in various stances: as sacrificially surrendering his personality, and also as a passive “catalyst,” the latter image being the Eliotian version of Joyce’s invisible and indifferent artist God paring his fingernails.¹³ He envisages the poet as a “finely perfected medium,” endowed with “inert, neutral” perception. His mind, “only a medium not a personality” (SE, 20) “has, not ‘a personality’ to express” (SE, 20), is described by a series of metaphors, “a catalyst” (SE, 18), “[a] receptacle,” “[a] shred of platinum.” Stan Smith (2007, 28) aptly argues that Eliot’s metaphor of the mind as catalyst, unchanged by the changes it effects, is a modern, pseudo-scientific version of the Neo-Platonic metaphysical concept that refers to the divine creative power of Aristotle’s unmoved mover, cited in the cryptic epigraph, “mind is, no doubt, something more divine and impassible” [*De Anima* Book I:4 (408b29)], which introduces the third part of Eliot’s essay (SE, 21).
- 24 Eliot’s artist is a divided self: a mind imprisoned within the walls of personality, which blindly reacts to external and internal stimuli, and a mind, which, free from the immediacy of emotions, “digest[s] and transmute[s] the passions that are its material” (SE, 18). Eliot takes his thesis further, and asserts that the greater the cleavage between the two, the more perfect the artist, since “the difference between art and events is always absolute” (SE, 19). For him, art is essentially an insurrectionary force, a kind of “anti-destiny,” to use André Malraux or Gilbert Durand’s formulations. The poet’s mind takes on the role of a receptacle intent on “seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images” (SE, 19), until an unexpected “fusion” takes place. The “new compound” (SE, 19) that emerges out of this unexpected “concentration” is radically different from the original emotions. This fusion itself is a sudden transfiguration into something new which

brings together the personal and the impersonal, the concrete and the universal, and the time and the timeless.

- 25 The creative act is for Eliot a form of annihilation of the poet's will and personality: "What happens is a continual self-surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (SE, 17). This escape from will is a release from rational control (Brugière, 2007, 87) which propitiates, as he was to explain in 1933, a quest for the "deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate" (UP, 155).
- 26 For all his theory that the poet is a deliberate master of his craft, in virtue of the cleavage between "the man who suffers" and "the mind which creates," the process of poetic creation is ultimately unpredictable, a long wait for something to happen, comparable to the rhapsod's helpless wait for the Muse's song that will inspire him. Eliot's "concentration," "fusion," "new combinations" do not happen consciously or deliberately at the poet's command. The intensity of the artistic process, the pressure under which the fusion takes place, does in no way depend on the poet's active intervention.
- 27 It turns out that Eliot, the impersonal poet par excellence, advocates a poetics premised on the quest for the unnamable, the unaccountable, and the unspoken. Eliot's process of composition draws heavily on the unconscious. Later on in life, he continued analyzing the process of composition in a series of essays "The Music of Poetry" (1942), "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953), and "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956). Eliot affirmed: "there is in all great poetry something which must remain unaccountable however complete might be our knowledge of the poet, and that is what matters most" (OPP, 112). A poem "may be something larger than its author's conscious purpose, and something remote from its origins" (OPP, 30). Poetry is born of an "unknown, dark psychic material" (OPP, 100), an "obscure impulse" (OPP, 98) or "inert embryo" (OPP, 97) active in "the unconscious mind" (OPP, 101), which takes the form of a haunting "demon," an oppressive "burden" against which the poet "feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing." And the poetic word is "a kind of exorcism of this demon" (OPP, 98). Meanwhile, the poetic composition is a mysterious coming into being: "When the poem has been made, something new has happened, something that cannot be wholly explained by *anything that went before*. That, I believe is what we mean by 'creation.'" (OPP, 112) In "The Music of Poetry," Eliot affirmed that "the poet is occupied with the frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meaning still exists" (OPP, 30).
- 28 Artistic creation spells a reiterative semantics of rupture and metamorphosis into a new whole (Brugière, 2007, 87). The poetic quest is always a striving for something larger and higher than the individual. It is a sudden process of transfiguration during which the particular and finite attain the universal (Corti, 155). Eliot's great poet, be it Shakespeare, Yeats or Valéry, "is occupied with the struggle [...] to transmute his personal and private agonies into [...] something universal and impersonal" (SE, 137). Yet, the impersonality of art does not mean a divorce "from personal experience and passion," but an expansion or intensification of "personal emotion" which "is extended and completed in something impersonal" (Eliot, 1924, 14). Eliot solves the clash between tradition and the individual talent by transforming the poet into a medium that becomes the intermediary between two realms, the particular and the universal, the personal and the impersonal, the transient and the permanent, the specific and the general.

Tradition and History

- 29 Now what does it mean to have “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (SE, 14)? And what does Eliot mean when he says that “interest in the past, and [...] interest in the present are one”? (Eliot, 1918b, 4-5). Like Stephan Dedalus, Eliot also tried to escape the nightmare of history¹⁴ and his historical sense was in no way a form of “archaeological reconstruction” (SE, 13).
- 30 There are many new lines of thought in Eliot's conception of tradition. His stance on literary understanding and interpretation brings him close to new hermeneutic historicism, Gadamer's relativism, and the pragmatists' emphasis on contextual limitations and function of knowledge. Eliot's essay is on the same line as the new hermeneutic interpretations of history by philosophers like Bradley, Dilthey, Croce, Bergson, Ortega, Burkhardt or Collingwood for whom historic truth depends on the interpreter's own historicity and contemporary prejudications. Historical re-construction did not rely on a cumulus of data but on aesthetic intuition. Similar to the poetic quest it presupposed a kind of existential encounter across time, the rediscovery of a present “I” in the “Thou” of the past (Longenbach, 16). Except for the brief positivistic objectivist phase at the beginning of his career, which was a rejection of the Hegelian idealist tradition represented by Bradley, Eliot believed that our understanding is limited by our concrete historical situation.
- 31 For one thing, by reconceiving tradition as a compendium of “systems in relation to which, and only in relation to which, individual works of literary art, and the works of individual artists, have their significance” (SE, 23-24), Eliot introduced a new paradigm for wholeness, which is no longer “organic”—like the traditional nineteenth-century model premised on attributes of life, soul, spirit, etc.—but “systemic,” that is, indebted to Saussurean structuralist theories (Assmann, 18-22).
- 32 Eliot conceived of tradition in philosophically idealistic terms as a universal unifying reality, “a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” (SE, 17), yet he did not give up consensus as a standard of validity. In his analysis of the Bradleyan philosophy, Eliot affirmed the relative character of knowledge.¹⁵ His point of departure was the awareness that “there is no *absolute* point of view” (KE, 22) and that reality was “a selection and combination of various presentations to various viewpoints” (KE, 142). All interpretations were inherently subjective statements, and truth did not reside in a statement's correspondence with an object of reality, but in consensus, in its position relative to other statements within a system.¹⁶ Indebted to Bradley for whom no fact has its own meaning alone, Eliot explained that just as facts cannot be disentangled from the systems of interpretations that contain them, “no poet, no artist of any art has his meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (SE, 15).
- 33 Tradition presupposed a process of mutual readjustments and refashionings. “[T]he past,” Eliot said “is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (SE, 15). Subject to the dialectics of continuity and change, fixity and flux, tradition was a consensual construct predicated on unity and tensions.¹⁷ Moreover, for Eliot, consensus was not synonymous with cultural uniformity, but on the contrary, it had to be challenged and refashioned by the needs of the present.

34 With his theorization about tradition, Eliot, as Levenson brilliantly affirmed, revised the “habit of modern mind,” and advanced a new theory of understanding (186). He substituted the notion of a metaphysical absolute with that of tradition, and hereby opted for a relative and secular principle of authority that avoided the pitfalls of solipsism without transgressing the empiricist constraints of verifiability (Levenson, 185-6). His goal was to overcome the existence of absolute immutably fixed meanings while rescuing literary tradition from the ravages of time and oblivion. Eliot’s important contribution consists in going beyond the backbone of historicist thinking by overcoming the classic opposition between contingent historicity and tradition’s atemporality. He did not do away with these categories but integrated them into a vectorial field in which they could coexist and interact. Simultaneity and synchrony become the guarantees of a “holistic framework” that enlarged the scope of meaning and human understanding. There is little doubt that Eliot’s ideal order and sense of tradition are essentially Western and foremost Christian. Yet, his notion of tradition retrieves the immemorial past of the archaic culture of “Magdalenian draughtsmen.” Through his literary allusions and the “mythical method” by which he established a comparison between “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot, 1923, 483) and a mythicized antiquity, Eliot went against the very elements that define Western culture: linear conceptions of history, evolutionary optimism and rationalist prejudice. In his theory of a “unified sensibility” he defied modern positivistic thought which deprived existence of spiritual values and feeling. In the two major poems that mark the beginning and end of his literary career, from *The Waste Land* (1922) to *Four Quartets* (1942), Eliot’s poetic work attempted to articulate the universal language of the common spirituality of East and West, Hinduism, Platonism and Christianity. Furthermore his bookishness and literary allusions do not reflect an exclusive sense of superiority, but they foreground the existence of a common cultural perspective that cuts across cultural, geographical, historical divides. In consequence, Eliot’s tradition is not a closed, static system encapsulated in the past, but a flexible structure, open to change, refinement and innovation. It extends into the future and requires both imaginative creativity and critical interpretive discernment from each generation of readers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALTIERI, Charles, “Eliot’s Impact on Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Poetry,” *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David Moody, 1994, 189-209.

ASSMANN, Aleida, “Exorcizing the Demon of Chronology: T.S. Eliot’s Reinvention of Tradition,” *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 2007, 13-25.

BACIGALUPO, Massimo, “Tradition in 1919: Pound, Eliot and the ‘Historical Method,’” *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 2007, 103-16.

- Berryman, John, "The Art of Poetry, 16. Interviewed by Peter A. Stitt," *The Paris Review*, no. 53, Winter 1972. <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4052/the-art-of-poetry-no-16-john-berryman>> (last accessed on August 20, 2016).
- BLOOM, Harold, *T.S. Eliot: Modern Critical Views*, New York, Chelsea House, 1985.
- BRADLEY, F.H., *Presuppositions of Critical History*, Oxford, James Parker & Co, 1874.
- BRUGIÈRE, Bernard, review of *T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker, *Transatlantica*, no. 1, 2005 <<http://transatlantica.revues.org/860>> (last accessed on August 20, 2014).
- , "French Influences and Echoes in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,'" *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 2007, 75-89.
- CIANCI, Giovanni and Jason Harding, eds., *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- , "Reading T.S. Eliot Visually: Tradition in the Context of Modernist Art," *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 2007, 119-130.
- CORTI, Claudia, "'A living whole': from T.S. Eliot's Tradition to Hans Blumenberg's Work on Myth," *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 2007, 147-160.
- CULLER, A. Dwight, "Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue," *PMLA*, no. 90, 1975, 366.
- DURAND, Gilbert, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Grenoble, Allier, 1959, 439.
- EAGLETON, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983.
- ELIOT, T.S., "Reflection on *Vers Libre*," *The New Statesman*, vol. 8, no. 204, 3 March 1917, 518-19.
- , "Tarr," *The Egoist*, vol. 5, no. 8, September 1918, 105-106.
- , "A Note on Ezra Pound," *To-Day*, no. 4, September 1918, 3-9.
- , "War-Paint and Feathers," *Athenaeum*, no. 4668, 17 October 1919, 1036.
- , "London Letter," *The Dial* vol. 74, no. 4, April 1921, 451.
- , "Ulysses, Order and Myth," *Dial*, vol. 75, no. 5, November 1923, 483; *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1975, 177.
- , "A Brief Introduction to the Method of Paul Valéry," Paul VALÉRY, *Le Serpent*, London, Cobden-Sanderson 1924, 7-15.
- , "A Commentary," *Criterion* vol. 13, no. 52, April 1934, 451.
- , *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1962.
- , *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1964.
- , *Selected Essays*, London, Faber and Faber, 1972.
- , *To Criticize the Critic*, London, Faber, 1985.
- , *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, London, Faber, 1987.
- , *The Letters of T.S. Eliot, I (1898-1922)*, ed. Valerie Eliot, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1988.
- GRAFF, Gerald, "Tradition versus Theory," *Professing Literature*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987, 247-62.

- GILBERT, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, eds., *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, vol. I, The War of Words*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, 125-62.
- HARDING, Jason, "Tradition and Egoism: T.S. Eliot and *The Egoist*," *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 2007, 90-102.
- HULME, T.E. "Modern Art and its Philosophy," *Collected Writings of T.E. Hulme*, ed. Karen Csengeri, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994.
- JAIN, Manju, *T.S. Eliot and American Philosophy: The Harvard Years*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- JOYCE, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in *A James Joyce Reader*, London, Penguin, 1993.
- , *Ulysses*, ed. Hans Walter Gabler et al., London, The Bodley Head, 1986.
- KEATS, John, *Selected Letters*, ed. John Barnard, London, Penguin Classics, 2014, 79.
- KENNER, Hugh, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, New York, Harcourt Brace and World, 1959.
- LEVENSON, Michael, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- LONGENBACH, James, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot and the Sense of the Past*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987.
- , "Mature Poets steal': Eliot's allusive Practice," *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David Moody, 1994, 176-188.
- PATEA, Viorica, "The Poetics of the Avant-garde: Modernist Poetry and Visual Arts," *The Visual Culture of Modernism*, ed. Deborah Madsen and Mario Klarer, SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature, no. 26, Tübingen, Narr, 2011, 137-152.
- PERLOFF, Marjorie, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Plath, Sylvia, "An Interview with Peter Orr," 1962. <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm> (last accessed on August 20th, 2016).
- POE, Edgar Allan, *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. G. R. Thompson, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.
- POUND, Ezra, *Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot, London, Faber, 1954.
- , *The Spirit of Romance*, New York, New Directions, 1968.
- SCHUCHARD, Ronald, *Eliot's Dark Angel. Intersections of Life and Art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.
- SHAPIRO, Karl, *In Defense of Ignorance*, New York, Random House, 1960, 3-60.
- SHUSTERMAN, Richard, *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.
- , "Eliot as Philosopher," *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David Moody, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 31-47.
- SCHWARTZ, Delmore, *Selected Essays*, ed. Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- SEIDEL, Frederick, "The Art of Poetry: Robert Lowell," Jeffrey Myers, ed., *Robert Lowell : Interviews and Memoirs*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1988.

SMITH, Stan, *The Origins of Modernism: Eliot, Pound Yeats and the Rhetoric of Renewal*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994.

---, "Proper Frontiers: Transgression and the Individual Talent," *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 2007, 26-40.

SPENDER, Stephen, "The New Orthodoxies," *The Arts at Mid-Century*, New York, Horizon Press, 1954.

VENDLER, Helen, ed., *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1985.

WILMER, Clive, "The Later Fortunes of Impersonality: 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,'" *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, ed. Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding, 58-72.

WORDSWORTH, William, "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*," *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, Ernest De Selincourt, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, 737.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Walter Baumann for his generous feedback, assistance and support. This study is part of a research project funded by the Regional Ministry of Culture of the Regional Autonomous Government of Castile & Leon (ref. number SA342U14).
2. The following abbreviations are used in this paper for Eliot's works: OPP, *On Poetry and Poets*; SE, *Selected Essays*; TCC, *To Criticize the Critic*; L, *The Letters I (1898-1922)*; UP, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*; KE, *Knowledge and Experience*. Unless stated otherwise, all italics belong to the original texts.
3. On the tension between origin and novelty, see also Ezra Pound "The Tradition," *Poetry*, vol. 3, no. 4, January 1914 reprinted in *Literary Essays*, 91-93.
4. See especially "T.S. Eliot: The Death of Literary Judgment," 35-60.
5. "A literary work can be valid only by existing in the Tradition, as a Christian can be saved only by living in God, all poetry may be literature but only some poetry is Literature, depending on whether or not the Tradition happens to flow through it. This, like divine grace, is an inscrutable affair: the Tradition, like the Almighty or some whimsical absolute monarch, sometimes withholds favour from 'major' literary reputations and bestows it instead on some humble little text buried in the historical backwoods... Membership in the Tradition thus permits you to be at once authoritarian and self-abnegatingly humble" (Eagleton, 39-40).
6. T.S. Eliot made these statements in 1917 and 1921: "Reflection on *Vers Libre*," *The New Statesman*, vol. 8, no. 204, 3 March 1917, 518-19 (TCC, 184); and Eliot, "London Letter," *The Dial* vol. 74, no. 4, April 1921, 451.
7. "Professionalism in Art," *Times Literary Supplement*, January 31, 1918, quoted by Longenbach, 178.
8. For a perceptive analysis of the British poets' reaction to Eliot, see especially Clive Wilmer, 58-73.
9. As Stan Smith (23-24) and Giovanni Cianci (119) argue, Eliot himself seems to have been aware of the incendiary nature of his essay. He mistakenly gave 1917 as the year of publication, thus evoking the Russian Revolution. He allowed this mistake to persist even in the first edition of his *Selected Essays* (1932), and it was repeated also in his preface to the new edition of *The Use of Poetry* in 1964. This misdate persisted even in authoritative publications, such as the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory* as late as 1994.

10. For a more elaborate analysis of the relationship between modernist poetics and non-figurative visual arts, see Viorica Patea, "The Poetics of the Avant-garde: Modernist Poetry and Visual Arts," 2011, 137-152.
 11. For an interesting analysis of Wordsworth and Eliot see Massimo Bacigalupo's "Tradition in 1919: Pound, Eliot and the 'Historical Method'" (103-116).
 12. The term "dramatic monologue" was first introduced in 1857 and applied to Browning's poetry in 1859 (A. Dwight Culler, 366).
 13. "The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (*A James Joyce Reader*, 483).
 14. "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 28.
 15. Eliot declared in *Knowledge and Experience* (1916): "Any assertion about the world, or any ultimate statement about any object in the world, will inevitably be an interpretation" (*KE*, 165).
 16. For a discussion of Eliot's concept of tradition in relation to Bradley's philosophy see Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism*, 187-93; Jain, *T.S. Eliot and American Philosophy*, 144-58, 205-243; Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History*, 164-176; Shusterman, *T.S. Eliot and The Philosophy of Criticism*, 156-191, and "Eliot as Philosopher," 31-47.
 17. In *Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*, Shusterman analyzes Eliot's concept of tradition in the light of twentieth-century philosophical pragmatism and argues that like Royce, Peirce and others, Eliot shares the pragmatists' aim of enlarging consensus (158-62).
-

ABSTRACTS

This essay revisits Eliot's seminal text "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) which has been part of the central debates of literary discussions for almost a century. Although no longer an orthodoxy in our postmodern era, Eliot's essay continues to influence current critical debates. The goal of this article is to rethink Eliot's manifesto from the perspective of romantic and modernist poetics, and to reconcile the great disparity between Eliot the experimentalist avant-garde poet who advocates the aesthetics of fragmentation and the critic who pleads for the extinction of personality. This article reconsiders Eliot's concepts of tradition and impersonality in the light of the revolution that took place in the visual arts in the first decades of the twentieth century, whose experimental language he tried to transfer to poetic practice. It also analyzes the way in which his theories present affinities with modern trends of philosophical thinking, such as historicist hermeneutics, relativism and pragmatism.

Cet article propose de revisiter « Tradition and the Individual Talent » (1919), le texte critique fondateur de T.S. Eliot qui, depuis près d'un siècle, est au cœur des débats littéraires. Même si, à l'ère post-moderne, ce texte n'a plus une valeur de référence, il continue à nourrir les débats critiques. Le but de cet essai est de reconsidérer le manifeste de T.S. Eliot dans la perspective de la poétique romantique et moderniste, et de repenser la disparité entre Eliot, le poète expérimental d'avant-garde qui revendique l'esthétique de la fragmentation, et Eliot, le critique de l'impersonnel. Il s'agit donc de revenir sur les concepts de tradition et d'impersonnalité à la lumière de la révolution qui a marqué les arts visuels durant les premières décennies du XXème siècle et dont Eliot a essayé d'appliquer le langage expérimental à la pratique poétique. Ce

faisant, on tentera de dégager aussi les affinités entre les théories d'Eliot et certaines approches philosophiques, telles que l'herméneutique historique, le relativisme et le pragmatisme.

INDEX

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, Tradition, impersonality, history, avant-garde, modernism

Mots-clés: T.S. Eliot, tradition, impersonnalité, histoire, avant-garde, modernisme

AUTHOR

VIORICA PATEA