

# Ts eliot and tradition



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History is often seen as a way of advancing to the next stage and improving the cultural values of the past. However, for T.

S. Eliot, modernity had ruptured its connection to a more vital past and was as a result impoverished. History is instead characterized by regression and ruptures. In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," his idea of tradition shows retrogression instead of progression. Eliot argues that "the whole literature of Europe from Homer" (49) is an archive of works affecting authors in the present moment and is in turn influenced by those authors in the present.

In other words, the poet's predecessors are those to whom he is indebted for all that he has inherited: his language, his rationale, his perspective, and his standards of conduct.

He acknowledges his debt by allowing these ancestors deliver their ideas through his literary pieces. Paradoxically, the more willingly he lets them to speak, which is to indicate the less he self-indulgently attempts to make his work appear original with him, the more fully his work brings the impression of his individuality.

In a way, for Eliot, the word "tradition" thus is the ability to restructure the elements of collection of works so as to demonstrate a new connection to it and to create a sense of simultaneity between past and present, as demonstrated in his work, *The Waste Land*. In the essay, Eliot admires the literary tradition and indicates that poets are those who write with a sense of connection with the predecessors.

He argues that “ No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance... Is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets” (49).

A poet is thus not an individual disconnected from the foundation of literary history, because the poet cannot create original art without being able to recognize the entire past of literature and how his or her art connects to that past. In this way, when a piece of new art compares or contrasts to the art created previous to it, art from the past is simultaneously affected by the new art. Eliot also links this literal critical concept of simultaneity between past and present to the act of breathing, indicating the act “ as inevitable” (48).

Eliot connects the idea to this two-way process of respiration, because literary tradition appears to be a repetitive process of recirculation.

Writing in present of the past inevitably exults in the action of taking in and then recirculation tradition, similar to the action of inhaling and exhaling. Through this comparison, poets are thus interconnected and influence the past of poetry just as the past influences them, neglecting historical and chronological differences among the works.

The Romantic notion of originality and creativity contradicts with Eliot's idea of art as having “ a simultaneous existence and composition a simultaneous order” (49). The Romantics assert that the artist must have the ability to create the most exclusive work without learning from any other work. For instance, Coleridge Biographic Literary appreciates poetry as the

forming of ‘ deep feeling’ through profound thought’ into words that acquire a ‘ sense of novelty and freshness’ (166).

Similarly, Frederica Schlep asserts that If poems are “ not completely unique, free and true, then... They’re worthless” (15).

Shelley emphasizes poetic Inspiration of the greatest thus place their poetic value upon originality and unique expression, celebrating sense of creativity and rejecting the idea of imitation. Eliot’s essay clearly initiates a movement away from originality.

Instead of perceiving past poets as competition, Eliot views past poets and their works as a medium to cultivate and sharpen contemporary poetry. Eliot recognizes that association with predecessors is seemingly inevitable for all present poets, but emphasizes the shared state of this association, by which all works are Judged not only against but by each other.

Eliot does not see himself or his contemporaries as arriving after the dead poets. Rather, he views current poets as participating in the permanent present of creative sensibility. In the relationship that Eliot envisions, previous works are measured by the new to the same extent that new works are measured by the old.

For Eliot, a work of art requires viewing the works of predecessors in order to make connection between present and past. Therefore, Eliot appears to be calling for an abandonment of Romantic ideal of originality.

In other words, originality consists not in pure creation out of nothing, but in re-shaping and changing traditional elements in new ways. In addition,

Elite's notion of simultaneity refutes the Futurists' relation to the past.

Futurists view the past as a hindrance to the innovative power of the future.

In the Manifesto of Futurism, Marinetti states " why should we look back.

.. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed" (43). This statement thus illustrates Futurists' hatred of the past and indicates their admiration for speed and technology.

He asserts this doctrine of Futurism by indicating his desire to " destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind" (43). This Futurist ideal extends to their literary theory which was intent upon increasing the expressiveness of language. A Futurist poet would discharge words from the page like a machine gun firing bullets. This they did with a variety of techniques both visually and sonically. They were especially interested in those methods which would blur the borderline between the dimensions to create a kinesthesia: by evoking all of the senses, the work would have a more profound impact (White 10).

In essence, they reject the idea of the past and emulate the systematic approach to writing poetry.

As a result, Eliot's sense of literary tradition is at odds against Futurism. For Eliot, " the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets... Assert their immortality" (48).

Most of a poet's knowledge comes from the works that one has learned from the poetic ancestors. From this reason, the importance of past, in Eliot's

sense, is a dynamic entity that shapes the way poetry should be written and interpreted.

Eliot departs from the Romantic and Futurist theory of the past and shows the very essence of simultaneity in his poem, *The Waste Land*. This poem parallels isolated bits of many elements of literary and mythical traditions with different sights and sounds from modernity. The result of this poetic collage asserts the recirculation and reinterpretation of the canonical texts, establishing a retrospective tradition that appears to range from several ancient allusions to sources of early twentieth centuries.

As a result, the poem offers readers a new experience which captures, in a new voice, what the other works could not. Which are often to something immediately recognized or reminiscent of a famous passage. For instance, the opening of the poem is clearly an allusion to the opening of Saucer's "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer begins his work with a description of April's "shores sots" (l. 1), which causes the flowers of spring to grow. Nevertheless, for Eliot's speaker, "April is the cruelest month" (l. 1).

This first line of the poem distorts our traditional poetic impression with an invocation of spring.

Readers can thus never approach Saucer's opening lines in a similar way again after reading the first line of *The Waste Land*. Consequently, this linking between works of past and present simultaneously affects each other and seems to suggest how the natural and religious ideals which Chaucer admires have been lost and destroyed in the age of modernity. In addition, another method of Eliot's evocation of the past would be his direct

references to acclaimed literary or historical characters in order to reconstruct the element of tradition with a different emphasis.

For example, Eliot introduces Tiresias using the first person: "I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs/ Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest" (II, 228-9). Tiresias appears not only to be an ancient figure from Homer's play *Odyssey*, but also seems to persist in present time.

Tiresias encompasses elements of past, present, and even future, because his mythological transgender state appears to allow him to unite both sexes and to bridge both the classical and modern world. Indeed, Eliot, in his notes, calls Tiresias as "a mere spectator... ND..

. The most important personage in the poem" (p. 42).

Tiresias thus plays the role of an objective observer, contemplating over the sterile lives of the typist and the clerk in the modern state without making any suggestions. Consequently, Tiresias holds the poem together by asserting the possibility of simultaneous existence between past and present.

Similarly, Eliot draws direct quotes from some famous sources in order to recognize the past in new ways and add meaning to the present.

For instance, in "The Burial of the Dead," two quotations from *Tristan and Isolde* are used to bracket some lines about the impotence and failure of a young woman and her lover.

The concurrence of past and present begins to take action. The tragic opera's theme of betrayal and adultery can be compared and contrasted with the incomplete promise of the hyacinth girl and her lover. The past then

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directs the present and is modified by the present. In a sense, the isolated bits of the play, *Tristan and Isolde*, seem to serve as reminders of the inadequacy of our own times.

At the same time, readers will remember the imperfect memories of the hyacinth girl the next time when we read the play, *Tristan and Isolde*. This recirculation of works thus completes Eliot's sense of tradition.

However, one of the counter-arguments to Eliot's philosophical discourse on the arts and poetry could be his limited definition of what consists of the canon of that tradition. He appears to take over the authority to select what embodies great poetry by contributing to defining a particular literary canon.

For example, most of the canonical texts will only happen within "the mind of Europe" (51). His sense of Western canons seems to be highly subjective and asserts the idea of masculine domination in the literary world. As a result, artists who do not inform to the Elite's sense of tradition are ignored.

Many other great feminist or speak to them. Nevertheless, Eliot's styles of invoking the past lead the readers to approach the literary canons in completely new ways. To produce works of art that are truly original, an artist must be aware of all the artists that have preceded them.

It must have been comforting to accept the idea that one was not only aligning with canonical giants by situating one's art in the current of tradition, but also influencing the way those past works were viewed by the inclusion of a new art that in turn showed admiration to past writers.