

MEMORY, POETRY AND TRADITION FOR T.S. ELIOT AND WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

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Abstract: T.S. Eliot, in his famous essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” overtly attacks the Romanticist understanding of poetry in England, which was defined by William Wordsworth as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity”. What brings Eliot and Wordsworth together in this paper is their interests in memory as the main source of inspiration while creating art. Wordsworth’s interest in personal memory made him an autobiographical poet constantly transforming his diaries into lyrical poems. Eliot, on the contrary, approaches to memory as collective memory, never considering himself outside the cultural continuum the product of which he is, and instead of the autobiographical tone he assumes a rather impersonal one in his poetry.

Keywords: *T.S. Eliot, William Wordsworth, private memory, collective memory, tradition, poetry*

Résumé: Dans son fameux essai “Tradition and Individual Talent” T. S. Eliot attaque l’interprétation de la poésie anglaise par le romantisme, définie par William Wordsworth comme “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity”. Ce qui rapproche Eliot et Wordsworth dans cet article, c’est leur intérêt commun à la mémoire comme première source d’inspiration pendant le processus de création. L’intérêt de Wordsworth concernant la propre mémoire a fait de lui un poète autobiographique transformant ses propres dictionnaires en poèmes lyriques. Eliot, au contraire, traite de la mémoire en tant que mémoire collective, ne se considérant jamais en dehors du continuum culturel, mais en tant que produit de celui-ci. Au lieu d’aborder une tonalité autobiographique dans sa poésie il se penche plutôt vers l’expression objective.

Mots-clés: *T.S. Eliot, William Wordsworth, mémoire personnelle, mémoire collective, tradition, poésie*

This study is about two poets—Wordsworth and Eliot—for whom memory functions as the main source of inspiration. Although memory seems to be a common aspect in the poetry of both, the difference in their perception of memory is the key that sets their poetry as two irreconcilable opposites. Eliot’s “Tradition and Individual Talent” and Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” are ample resources to form an understanding of how radically different perceptions these two poets have of time, memory, and tradition. In these texts, both poets systematized and prescribed the essentials of their poetry.

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T.S. Eliot, in his famous essay “Tradition and Individual Talent” overtly attacks the Romanticist understanding of poetry which was defined by William Wordsworth as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility”. As its very title indicates “Tradition and Individual Talent” analyses the aporia of authority and individual by believing that the former operates under classical traditions, whereas the latter resides in romanticist idealism. For Eliot, individual seems to be “what is the peculiar essence of the man, the very difference of the poet from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors.” [Tradition: 37-38] Therefore, the idea of “individual” can be formed insofar as it is placed in a context which enables one to make comparisons with the past and contemporary others. Tradition, for Eliot, is a matter of wider significance. It cannot be inherited, it is obtained by great labor; it involves the historical sense which involves a perception not only of the *pastness* of the past, but of its presence. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal, is what makes a writer traditional. Hence, tradition, for Eliot, is not something to avoid but, on the contrary, something to surrender. Eliot’s treatment of the past, present and future as immanent and simultaneous is the very essence of Eliot’s difference from Wordsworth.

Wordsworth’s biggest mistake, from the viewpoint of Eliot, is to treat “tradition” as the nightmare of the *Lyrical Ballads*, as something to be avoided in order to create new appreciations of art. For we all need to know tradition if we wish to outrun it. Being a more conventional and less emotional poet, Eliot rejects Wordsworth’s poetry on two grounds:

- 1- its break from culture and tradition,
- 2- its emphasis on the personal emotions, private consciousness/
memory and inner voice.

Tradition, for Eliot, is the particular continuum into which an individual is born. “Culture is what makes life worth living” [Notes: 295] and tradition involves all habitual actions and customs which represent the blood kinship of the same people living in the same space. A man, for him, is hardly a human being at all until he has entered a tradition or social contact. Therefore, no poet can be appreciated or privileged without his relation to the dead poets and artists. No poet can be valued alone. By saying “art never improves, but the material of it is never quite the same” he approximates art and tradition, because his concept of tradition is transhistorical, and his idea of history is cyclical. Therefore, if traditions are collective, that is to say, impersonal and anonymous then art has to be impersonal and anonymous as well. The poet has to function as a catalyst that mixes disparate elements with his own presence without leaving any trace of his own presence, and, by being inert, neutral and unchanged, he has to add to the great continuum of tradition. He says: “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.” [Tradition: 41] For Eliot, poet’s personality is just a particular medium and in this medium impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. So, the emphasis is never on personality but always on

the medium of it. That's why he favored metaphysical poets while he devalued romantics. Consequently, he believes that "emotion recollected in tranquility" is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion nor recollection. An expression of significant emotion has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal and the poet cannot reach impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. [*Tradition*: 43-44]

On the other hand, Wordsworth gave significance to the autobiographical writing. He put into his poetry his personal experiences, private memories, sensations, perceptions all of which enabled him to form intellectual and philosophical ideas derived from simple, rustic and natural environment. He versified them through his inner voice and emphasized the sincerity and immediate presence of the poet—in flesh and blood—in an attempt to befriend his readers. He is a poet who is "a man speaking to man, choosing incidents and situations from common life describing them in a selection of language really used by men, coloring them with imagination, avoiding ostentatious expressions". He is never like the poets who "confer honor upon themselves, and their art, separating themselves from the sympathies of men, indulging in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites of their own creation." [*Preface*: 650] Purpose of the poet, for Wordsworth, is to create immediate pleasure by virtue of using a simple language.

Indeed from the side of Wordsworth, Eliot could easily be viewed as one of those poets who wrote for fickle tastes and fickle appetites in a polished language which cannot be comprehended by ordinary men. As a result, he becomes one of those who can by no means create immediate pleasure. In other words, Wordsworth puts into each reader's hand a lantern to guide him, whereas Eliot leaves them in darkness.

Eliot obviously takes his views of tradition and cultural heritage from the counter-revolutionist Charles Maurras, his views on philosophy from F. H. Bradley and his views of memory and time from Henry Bergson. As an important literary figure, Eliot declared himself to be a classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion. "He always stressed the importance of a hierarchical social organization culminating in hereditary aristocracy." [ASHER, 1998: 8] He learned from Maurras that in order to avoid chaos which is formed by unbridled emotion, equality, individualism and revolution one must absolutely surrender himself to tradition, hierarchy, reason and community. For him, all forms of revolution are attempts of forgetting the past, erasing the memories which have kept the society together. That is why Rousseau was a sort of anti-Christ figure, the origin of chaos for Eliot. For him, "the greatest fault of Rousseau and Romanticists was their intense egotism and insincerity. Romanticism stands for excess in any direction." [ASHER, 1998: 38] Eliot's emphasis on hierarchical society goes parallel with Halbwachs' statement that: "The function of nobility in feudal and monarch societies is to maintain and even to create tradition and the collective memory lived within it. Family has the same function in a microcosmic way."

[1992: 92] By the time of “The Waste Land”, Eliot is fully convinced that one either sustains the tradition or is perversely parasitic upon it. For no one can exist in spiritual comfort outside the tradition. This explains his being a classicist in literature, royalist in politics and Anglo-Catholic in religion, because he believed that orthodoxy and conservatism protect the memory, myth and history of the collectivities whereas revolutionist individualism and liberalism destroy them by their tendency to forget. These views automatically put Eliot on the opposite corner of Wordsworth who was an anti-royalist (i.e. democratic/liberalist), anti-classicist (i.e. Romanticist) and anti-Catholic (i.e. Protestant). Eliot’s strong wish to purge the classical tradition from the taint of Romanticism stems from his belief in the idea of revolution as an artificial break in the causal continuity of time and an open attack on the traditional heritage. For Eliot the 17th-century bloody Revolution which resulted in the beheading of Charles I, and the 18th-century French Revolution started the decay of authority by virtue of being direct interruptions in the natural flow of time and thus caused “a dissociation of sensibility from which Europe never recovered”. [*Metaphysical Poets*: 64] That’s why, for Eliot, the poets before the 17th century were fortunate to live in an age when philosophy, religion and art, public and private morality were not yet dissociated. This explains the reason of Eliot’s appreciation of Donne’s or Dante’s poetry and disdain for Wordsworth’s. Eliot prefers classicism which connotes order, objectivity, heritage and rationality to romanticism which connotes chaos, individualism, rebellion, personal emotions and experiences.

Tradition as a social continuum exists through rituals, customs, and myths on the one hand, and rules, hereditary aristocracy and hierarchy on the other. In other words, tradition essentially depends on the memory of collectivities. As Gregory Jay states “inheritance is not natural, spontaneous or free. It requires a mechanism or medium of transference, a system of exchange whose characteristics intervene to transform what is passed on. The structures of language, metaphor and memory have their kinship with the organization of inheritance.” [1983: 48]

At this point we need to examine the distinction between collective memory and private memory. If we follow Augustine’s views on memory, we can say that at its surface level memory does seem to be radically singular. My memories are not yours, and the memories of one person cannot be transferred into the memory of another. As mine, memory is a model of *mineness*, of private possession. The past in my memory, therefore, is my past. From this perspective we may say that Wordsworth affiliates with the Augustinian understanding of private memory by being a poet of his own past. But, for Paul Ricoeur, it was Halbwachs who employed memory for the first time in the third person. Halbwachs was the first to claim that memory is essentially collective and not personal. Halbwachs’ text basically says: in order to remember we need others. A person, for him, remembers only by situating himself within the viewpoint of one or several groups and one or several currents of collective thought. [RICOEUR, 2004: 120-121] The awareness of the *situatedness* of a person within social groups and the perception of

past as not personal but as collective puts Eliot on the axis of Halbwachs illustrating Eliot's insistence on the impersonal voice in his poetry. His lines from *Four Quartets* illustrate well Eliot's perception of time as impersonal.

"Time present and time past
 Are both perhaps present in time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.
 What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation.
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.
 Footfalls echo in the memory
 Down the passage which we did not take
 Towards the door we never opened
 Into the rose-garden. My words echo
 Thus, in your mind."

(*Burnt Norton*, Part I)

Eliot employs the depersonalized voice as the voice of humility whereas Wordsworth always chooses to be in his poetry in flesh and blood with the concern of sounding more sincere and intimate. Eliot challenges the inward voice of Wordsworth for being the reflection of not sincerity but of egotism and pride.

Both poets represent their observations, experiences, sufferings, emotions by means of filtering them through memory. Wordsworth consistently builds his narrative and lyrical poems on his recollections, and meditations related to his personal experience. For him, the function of memory is to impose on his experiences the control of art. As Parrish puts it "memory provides him a dramatic dimension of time enabling him to meditate, select and then compose bringing together his imagination and sense of the remembered realities". [1973: 14] Before emotions recollected in tranquility come the senses. Organic sensibility implies the capacity to receive impressions through senses. These sense impressions, visual and other were stored by Wordsworth in his memory. "He would let an impression sink into his mind and interrogate his memory after an interval" [SMITH, 1955: 15-16]. His poetry was arising from his memory. He was a collector of sensibility, and the poet of his recollections on these sensibilities. For Perkins, "his poems were like confessions reflecting the life of the poet. Poetry is a personal utterance for him." [1964: 32] He seeks out the world of nature but validates it in the world of time, placing it in a context in which it can be remembered. Regueiro amply states that "while he is collecting images and sensibility, he uses his bodily eye, but while writing he uses the inward eye examining the self between what it remembers itself to have been and what it recognizes itself to be. He is always thankful to his remembrances." [1976: 47] Regueiro also states that this self-recognition and maturity leads Wordsworth to an experience not of continuity but of isolation. [1976: 48] Most of his poems open in

the past tense pointing to the fact that a private past experience is remembered and becomes once again the subject of the poem. In "Tintern Abbey" the poet remembers the past in its absence. He remembers his remembrance of the landscape and tries to connect it to its presence in his mind.

"For Regueiro,

Memory in Wordsworth functions as a force of abstraction of a withdrawal from the immediacy of nature. It enables him to bind his days each to each with natural piety. The memory recollects the experience without regaining it and accounts for change in terms of growth and maturation. His inward eye is the vision of his memory. His ability to recollect at will far exceeds the loss of the immediate perception and the initial experience." [1976: 65]

Eliot's sense of knowledge and experience—which is also his dissertation title—is impersonal, and abstract. He takes as his metalanguage, the memory in the singular, by means of abstracting it to provide a sense of a unified reality for all those who remember. This memory in the singular is the memory of the collectivities, the pure procedural memory in the most Bergsonian sense. Wordsworth, on the other hand, deals with memories/recollections in the plural, and the outcome is his private, individual memories, or to put it in Bergson's terms, his habit or declarative memory. Eliot, thus, tries to bring forth a vision of things that was shared by all and is shared no more. That is why he is nostalgic when he implies a unified perspective of reality while alluding to the past with all its myths, ancient figures and dead poets. For him, what is lost in the modern times is the mythological dimension which allowed man to participate in life as part of a larger whole.

In "Tradition and Individual Talent", Eliot asserts his famous theory of poetic impersonality which could only be attained by the poet's ability to distance himself and his personal history from the thing he is creating. For him, a poet is someone who exists in his poetry, as his poetry. The poem becomes the expression of a significant emotion in itself. The ideal poem for him is never the direct expression of the poet's private experiences, feelings or memory. The poem becomes an autonomous entity and an anonymous voice articulating these significant emotions and thoughts. It is not "a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality." [1975: 43] This statement illustrates Eliot's aim to disconnect art from the expressive desires and the temporal concerns of its maker. The depersonalization of art enables Eliot to transcend the personal mode of recollection above the habitual actions of the subject by transforming it into a collective mode of consciousness and memory. This preference of collective to personal makes it possible for the artist to separate the man who feels, remembers, suffers, etc. from the man who creates. This is the distance, he believes, which the Romantics lacked. Eliot knew well that all history is an abstraction. In his examination of Wordsworth in "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" [1933] he writes: "I only affirm that all human affairs are involved with each other, that consequently all history involves an abstraction." [in UHLIG, 1990: 76] Here Eliot means that on a paradigmatic level no

experience is personal, and no person is individual unless he is placed in a social context. Northrop Frye observes that Eliot's understanding of the genuine personality is a concrete man who is in the context of certain social institutions. The ego or unregenerate personality, on the other hand, is an abstraction, it is anti-cultural and anti-traditional. [Frye, 1985: 23]

This transhistorical view of Eliot affirms Halbwachs' perception of memory as collective. As Halbwachs puts it "no memory is possible outside the frame works used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections." [1992: 41] and "since our past is inhabited by the figures we used to know, individual memory becomes a part or an aspect of group memory. Religion, tradition, social customs and family are all part of collective memory." [1992: 182]

Wordsworth's poems like "The Prelude", "Tintern Abbey", "Resolution and Independence" and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality", show his interest in personal memory which makes him an autobiographical poet constantly transforming his diaries into lyrical and narrative poems. It is always Wordsworth's remembering self who is speaking in these poems. On the contrary, it is never Eliot's remembering self who is speaking in "The Waste Land", "Four Quartets", or "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"; rather, an anonymous voice from the past echoing in the present, talking about the things past, passing and about to come. This voice is freed from the limitations of egotism, and therefore time, by revealing the whole patters of history, culture and collective memory. In his doctoral thesis entitled "Knowledge and Experience in F.H. Bradley's Philosophy" he asserts: "the past lived over is not memory and the past remembered is never lived" [1964: 51]. Here he means that the past lived over is personal experience, and the remembering present self, adds the dimension of a different awareness to it. So, the remembered thing is never the same thing as the thing that is actually experienced by our subjective past-self since we interpret it with a consciousness that is surrounding us in a collective mode. This view of past as a belonging of not the subjective self but of the collective consciousness enables Eliot to submit both himself and his poetry to time and history. He dedicates his writing to the resurrection of the mythical dimension which is a means of reaching beyond the level of temporal time. He wants to evoke our conscious individual experiences to recall the ancient and the timeless in the archives of our collective unconscious. Wordsworth finds romantic solutions to justify his personal concerns and individual needs. He escapes to lake districts and calls the past and present social systems corrupt. He isolates himself to listen to his inward voice but he lacks the philosophical outward voice of Eliot which enables a person to see through the timeless. Wordsworth concludes "Ode: Intimation of Immortality" by optimistically thanking to human heart which enables him to recall what is lost. He creates a pastoral world, a Dantean "paradiso" to describe his shepherd-like escapist, idealist, liberalist worldview. What is lost is the celestial light, the splendid vision that could only be envisioned by child who is therefore the father of man. But Eliot creates a Dantean "inferno" and offers "The Waste Land" and "Four Quartets" as the pessimistic accounts of a world occupied by isolated "hollow men" each claiming to ignore the traditions and forget the

history at the cost of forming new worldviews. Wordsworth says that “our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting” the thing forgotten is “the imperial palace”, “the splendid vision” or “the celestial light”. The nostalgia is for harmony and order. On the other hand, for Eliot, life is a process of re-membering the past, present, and future in simultaneity so as to transcend and transform them into the timeless which connotes the imperial palace of Wordsworth. That is why the end of “The Waste Land” inviting us to “shantih, shantih, shantih”—which means “peace” in Sanskrit—shows a deep yearning for the redemption and the re-association of “the dissociation of sensibility” we have undergone so far.

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