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JAMES JOYCE:
TRADITION, AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT

1. There seems to be a clear link between James Joyce's writing and his notion of tradition, Eliot's essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and the recent debate on the end of literature and the future of literary criticism. Such a broad perspective connects the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* to the present and thus Joyce, his writing, his ideas of literature and art appear equally relevant. This relevance has increased in recent years; the current upheaval in the global market has aggravated a crisis that was already apparent in the humanities and in literature, where the high cost of printing books has imposed new modes of approaching and reading the text. Indeed, the technological and psychological challenges involved in such a shift have brought about a reconsideration of the function of tradition and memory. It was Italo Calvino, who, in 1988 with *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, speculated on the fate of literature and of books in the so-called post-industrial, technological age, affirming that his faith in the future of literature was based upon a knowledge that there are things that only literature, with its own distinctive means, can provide. Can we still share his faith nowadays? And, what is more, are we sure that literature can still dispose of its "own distinctive means"? Indeed, since 1988 the gap has widened between products packaged to become best-sellers, or successful literature of the most diverse varieties, and writing for a purpose – as James Joyce, among others, did – which goes beyond surface reality and expresses a vision of the world from within.

Reaffirming the necessary links and the complex, multifarious relationships between tradition and memory on the one hand and individual talent on the other, Joyce's worldview and his aesthetic and ethical engagement in writing still present us with a seminal challenge. In these times, when escalating conflicts – both ideological and social – are causing an increasing fragmentation of our national and individual identities, a renewed aware-

ness of a specific literary tradition and memory, as witnessed in Joyce's work, is necessary in order to give fresh input to an enlightened western tradition of tolerance and a vindication of rights. It comprises a strengthening of identities, and an opposition to that new Leviathan, the all-consuming rule of the market, while working to promote forms of utopian peaceful co-existence in a more tolerant world.

When reflecting on such a topic as Joyce and his complex relation to modernism, tradition and individual talent, one must consider two different perspectives, i.e. two distinct trains of associations of ideas. On the one hand there is the philosophical principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*, inherited from Renaissance culture. At once straightforward and deeply sophisticated, this notion permeates Joyce's work in many ways, and on so many different levels, from his very earliest essays, written at the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the second, immediate association is with *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, T.S. Eliot's famous essay of 1919 and its multifarious, varied reception in the critical landscape of the twentieth century.

Joyce's writing is a metamorphous and polysemous palimpsest where the western literary tradition appears both inscribed and displayed, as in a "kind of encyclopaedia" – perhaps a rather obvious quotation from the well-known letter to Carlo Linati¹. Indeed, an essential part of Joyce's identity, complex and simple, rational and instinctive, lucid and passionate, is rooted in opposition. Born in a small European capital, Joyce was also a citizen of Europe and the world, as Stephen Dedalus noted in his own writing, in "the flyleaf of the geography"². Proud as he was of his Irishness, though sceptical about the Gaelic revival, Joyce was an untiring reader of the whole of western culture and "tradition" – both high and lowbrow – from classic literature to the most modern, revolutionary, literary and linguistically avant-garde. He was also a keen player of Irish ballads and songs, though forever impatient with the self-pitying provincialism of tearful nostalgia. What is surprising about Joyce's temper and his intertextual, inclusive and open writing is how his conceptual and referential approaches to tradition involve no tendency whatsoever towards conservatism; on the contrary, they consistently voice an inquisitive attitude, always receptive to the new, as far as both formal narrative strategies and linguistic creativity and complexity

¹ J. Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. by Stuart Gilbert, Faber & Faber, London 1957, letter to Carlo Linati, September 21st 1920, p.146.

² J. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin, London 1992, p. 12.

are concerned. Moreover, it is his individual talent that bestows a persistent confrontational dimension to his work, both in its aims as well as in its theoretical and aesthetical modalities. Individual talent is what sustains him – in the various stages of writing – in the creation of complex ambitious narrative structures which are offered to the reader as new *summae*, both diachronic and synchronic, of human events. All alike in the intense awareness of their human material, different only, on each occasion, in the topographical scope of the cross-section of humanity to which they refer, their common challenge is that of attaining the total ‘realism’ that only a deeply allusive and inclusive text can convey. And this is how tradition and revolution, otherwise eternal opponents, seem to coincide in polyphonic novels such as *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

2. The word ‘tradition’, from the Latin verb *tradere*, which, in turn, derives from *trans-dare*, can be defined in different ways: for Cicero it meant ‘delivery’, for Quintilian it suggested ‘teaching’, while Tacitus defined it as ‘narration’. In the OED the meaning derives from ‘surrender’, i.e. a handing down, such as a handed-down saying, or instructions or doctrine delivered, as in phrases like *traditio evangelica* or *catholica traditio* in Tertullian. In all these cases the notion of ‘tradition’ implies the transference of cultural items, in an anthropological sense, from something antecedent to something consequent, perhaps involving families, groups, generations, social classes or society itself. A complex of traditions forms over time, working at various levels which may eventually attain the heights of artistic-literary style and philosophical-scientific thought. And the inheritance of tradition often tends to be transformed into a representation of ‘truth’. A cycle is thus activated: truth appeals to tradition and tradition is identified with truth, sanctioning beliefs, worldviews, assertions and actions, whose very durability seems to make them inviolate. Moreover, the further back in time that they are rooted, the more they make claim to having an almost automatic right to legitimacy. Greek philosophers often appealed to tradition; in *Metaphysics*, Aristotle distinguishes traditions rooted in myth and therefore, in his opinion, less truthful, from those that have been stripped of any content that is not philosophical. And what makes them believable is the fact that they were established *in illo tempore* and passed down to later generations.

The eighteenth century witnessed the affirmation of a belief in the unilinear progress of mankind. In opposition to the cyclical determinism of ancient and Renaissance naturalism came the interpretation of *corsi e ricorsi*, cycles and recurring cycles, in various stages of civilisation. This was laid

out in Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova*, published in 1744, the year of its author's death. The "new science" is the science of human history because there is the probability of a science guaranteed by the *verum factum* principle. What is certain is that Man is maker of the human world, consisting of institutions, language, myths, laws and traditions ... history is made by Man and therefore, with the assistance of Divine Providence, it is possible for Man to acquire knowledge. Philology, the knowledge of what is certain, ascertains facts, while philosophy, the knowledge of truth, orders them.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the concept of the 'sublime', revived and reformulated from the ancients, also became the expression of a subjective dimension, producing both Ossianic and cemeterial poetry, as well as a taste for the Gothic, for ruins and for the Middle Ages. Here there was also a need to define national identity, a need which had already begun to be felt in the Puritan, middle-class revolution. The fervour that Burke expressed for the Glorious Revolution in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, was an argument for the nobility and the prime importance of a national tradition, in this case inspired by the events of the previous century which were bloodless, if compared to those of the French Revolution.

On the other hand, the culture of enlightenment led to a remorseless criticism of tradition and superstition, although the syllogism "tradition equals the past and the past equals tradition and superstition" did not always hold; in British culture, a scientific approach to reality and research based on rigorous scientific methods and precise mathematical instruments had been widespread since the time of Francis Bacon. There were, however, those who expressed doubts concerning the potentially negative interpretation of the concept of tradition, proposing an idea of Man that was not wholly traceable to nature and reason and less willing to believe that history always goes forward in a continual process of reason, liberated from superstition and prejudice. In fact the great Age of Enlightenment did not remove the notion of tradition as a function, above all, as an anthropological function. The intellectuals of the *Encyclopédie* also had to face the culture, the behaviour and the very real traditions of the lower social orders. The latter were not in the least touched by the biting criticism that Voltaire and the Encyclopedists directed at their "superstitions" and, more generally, at the old institutions that were still dear to them. On the eve of the Industrial Revolution, most people still lived according to ancient traditions and habits. Even Voltaire – who in his 1756 essay on the customs of nations again claims that it is the role of reason to rid history of the darkness which obscures it – notes that tradition, even though the antithesis of the critical spirit, covers a much wider area

than that of nature and pure reason. The *esprit* of a country is the common denominator of its distinctive culture, the sum of all the events that distinguish the history of a nation. And if *Sturm und Drang* was soon to revise the idea of tradition definitively, the later Hegelian concept of tradition found its highest expression in the exaltation of the German spirit, which, from the time of the Reformation, and through a continual process of enrichment, was to achieve its very essence in the ethical state. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, genius and tradition took on ambiguous shades of meaning and, in Restoration Europe, were used as an opportunity to contain and contest the spread of revolutionary principles in the name of national tradition. Of necessity, the modern idea of nation and of nation state exalted the concept of national identity based on distinct traditions.

By the eighteenth century British intellectuals had developed a profound sense of history, of national history with a strong awareness of past tradition. In August 1770, David Hume, author of *The History of England*, wrote in a letter to the publisher William Strahan: "I believe this is the historical age and this is the historical nation."³ And some years later the die-hard Tory Walter Scott felt that an interest in the history of Scotland included a passion for the traditions of the Highlands and the Lowlands, with their ballads and clans, their language and their folklore. This cultural tradition was revisited in Scott's historical novels, a tradition which was confirmed, recorded and then presented to the English reader as an affirmation of identity that had to be maintained in order to participate in the 1707 Act of Union with greater awareness and without regret. Scott thus sees a constructive, progressive function to the preservation of national traditions within the political asset of Great Britain. For Thomas Carlyle, on the other hand, tradition is the object of nostalgia for a lost past in relation to a present which suffers the contradictions of rampant industrialisation.

To conclude this partial, cursory survey of the fortunes of the notion of tradition, we come to the twentieth-century perspective. From our standpoint, Joyce's work can be considered the highest contribution to, and interpretation of, that dynamic, modernist interrelation between an untiring memory, covering the whole scope of western traditions, revisited from their very origins, and the pressures of the individual talent. Joyce the critic declares that whoever writes – whether artist or man of letters – needs to refer

³ D. Hume, 'Letter XLII', in *Letters of David Hume to William Strahan*, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1888.

to a literary tradition. Perceptively refracted through the new inquisitive spirit of *fin de siècle* culture and its own sense of tradition, Joyce's 'temperament' – that is, his "delusion that he is an artist by temperament"⁴ – and his individual talent experience a continual process of metamorphosis and expansion through the infinite jest of an inexhaustible linguistic challenge and the irony and parody inherent in the epyphanic *mise en scene* of polysemic language. A scattering of quotations, chosen almost at random, and present throughout the Joyce macrotext, provide clear evidence of this truth.

3. "Mangan, it must be remembered, wrote with no native literary tradition to guide him and for a public which cared for matters of the day and for poetry only so far as it might illustrate these"⁵: about five years later, these themes – the guilt-inducing absence of a literary tradition discussed by Joyce in 'James Clarence Mangan' – would be taken up and revised in the Italian version of the essay, as well as in *Stephen Hero*. This early description of James Clarence Mangan is undoubtedly another self portrait, while the text itself is interspersed with so many extratextual references that it evokes parallels, both synchronic, and diachronic, with the world of tradition. Plato, Dante, Leonardo da Vinci, Swedenborg, Blake, Shelley, Leopardi, Poe, Pater, Flaubert and also Ibsen and Yeats all play a comparative role in this dramatic rendition of the portrait. The author of this description claims that "Mangan [...] wrote with no native literary tradition to guide him"⁶. There was no pre-established Irish literary tradition and indeed it is a tradition which James Clarence Mangan lacked; it is what he would have needed in order to express a vision of the world which could be autonomous and free from the sanctions of the strict canons and models of other traditions. An eventual 'native' literary tradition, in fact, could provide the artist with a direction, protecting him from the dispersal of an occasionally obscure language; a native tradition which could remove the threat of being a desperate writer, so often evidenced by Mangan's "contorted" style.

The best of what he [Mangan] has written makes its appeal surely, because it was conceived by *the imagination* which he called, I think, the mother of

⁴ J. Joyce, "But the delusion which will never leave me is that I am an artist by temperament", letter to Stanislaus Joyce, around 24th September 1905, in *Selected Letters by James Joyce*, ed. R. Ellmann, Faber & Faber, London 1975, p.77.

⁵ J. Joyce, 'James Clarence Mangan' (1902), in *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p.56.

⁶ J. Joyce, 'James Clarence Mangan' (1902), in *op.cit.*, p.56.

things, whose dream are we, who imageth us to herself, and to ourselves, and imageth ourselves in us – the power before whose breath the mind in creation is (to use Shelley’s image) as a fading coal.⁷

The “imagination”, the “mother of things”, with its dual role – “imageth us to herself, and to ourselves, and imageth ourselves in us” – appears to compensate for the absence of a native literary tradition: the individual talent of the poet can call upon her. However, the absence of a genuine native literary tradition sets the poet against history: “Mangan is the type of his race. History encloses him so straitly”⁸. History is a prison for the poet, just as it will later become a nightmare for Stephen Dedalus.

Despite the emphasis on the absence of a native literary tradition, the numerous intertextual citations throughout the essay and the various allusions in the discourse – already hinted at above – point to a broader scheme of reference for Mangan, reaching far beyond Ireland. It is that of a dynamic, cyclic tradition, where “the ancient gods, who are visions of the divine names, die and come to life many times and though there is dusk about their feet and darkness in their indifferent eyes, the miracle of light is renewed eternally in the imaginative soul”⁹. Thus the notion of tradition suggested here at the end of the essay, is of a cyclical process that continues over the centuries:

In those vast courses which enfold us and in that great memory which is greater and more generous than our memory, no life, no moment of exaltation is ever lost; and all those who have written nobly have not written in vain, though the desperate and the weary have never heard the silver laughter of wisdom.¹⁰

The concept of duration, which suggests the images of the passing of time, where both past and future are found in the present, presents a view of the tradition of western culture, and of the whole of human history, as an interrupted cyclical flow – again synchronic and diachronic – uniting the

⁷ J. Joyce, ‘James Clarence Mangan’ (1902), in *op.cit.*, pp.56-57; for Joyce’s debt to P.B. Shelley’s aesthetics and *A Defense of Poetry* (written in 1821 and published posthumously), see, among others, also F. Ruggieri, ‘The fading coal and the enchantment of the heart’, in F. Ruggieri ed., *Romantic Joyce*, Joyce Studies in Italy, vol. 8, Bulzoni, Rome 2003. Joyce quotes Shelley’s phrase again in a 1907 lecture on Mangan, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and in *Ulysses*; my italics.

⁸ J. Joyce, ‘James Clarence Mangan’ (1902), in *op.cit.*, p.59.

⁹ J. Joyce, ‘James Clarence Mangan’ (1902), in *op.cit.*, p.60.

¹⁰ J. Joyce, *ibid.*

living and the dead. In this sense, the reference, also here, to a community of the living and the dead is telling. In fact just a few years later, in 1907, the same year as the Italian version of the 1902 essay, the well-known finale of *The Dead* was written: “the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”¹¹ The fatal, silent invasion of the ineluctably falling snow, covering the surface of the inhabited earth, extends and suggests the vision of a unified, quiescent timeless macrocosm: a universe perceived as a microcosm beyond time both by Gabriel Conroy – the silent actor-spectator, talking to himself as in a soliloquy – and by the silenced reader-spectator. That microcosm is the real, aeternal, “world without end”, evoked by that continuous cycle of “the living and the dead” and “the descent of their last end”, suggesting the Catholic notion of the church and the “community of the saints”.

In the concluding paragraph, through the names of mythical places linked to the lives and adventures of legendary characters such as Saint Patrick¹², Gabriel Conroy, though undermined and weakened in his certainties, feels the deep pulse of nature and finds himself in tune with the rhythm of the universe. Once more it is the feelings and the thoughts, the representation of an individual in the present and his relationship with the different past of another, which ushers in the idea of a human tradition, of a continuity of life, of that “sacred chain”, as Herder called it in his *Philosophy of History*, which links men to the past and maintains and transmits everything that has been done by those who have preceded them.

In a letter from Trieste dated September 24th 1905, in which Joyce asks Stanislaus for information and details to include in some of the stories in *Dubliners*, he also expresses his nostalgia for the Irish weather: “I went out yesterday for a walk in a big wood outside Trieste. The damned monotonous summer was over and the rain and soft air made me think of the beautiful (I am serious) climate of Ireland. I hate a damn silly sun that makes men into butter”¹³. Then he prays, “O vague Something behind Everything [...] For the love of the Lord Christ change my curse-o’-God state of affairs.”¹⁴ Above

¹¹ J. Joyce, ‘The Dead’ in *Dubliners*, Penguin, London 1992, p.224.

¹² See J. V.Kelleher, *Irish History and Mythology in James Joyce’s ‘The Dead’*, Review of Politics 27, (1965); D.T. Torchiana, ‘The Dead: I follow Saint Patrick’, in *Backgrounds for Joyce’s Dubliners*, Allen & Unwin, Winchester Mass. 1986, pp.223-257.

¹³ J. Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. R.Ellmann, Faber &Faber, London 1966, vol.II, p.109.

¹⁴ J. Joyce, *op.cit.*, p.110.

all, however, he expresses the belief that “it is impossible that the delusion I have with regard to my power to write will be killed by adverse circumstances. But the delusion which will never leave me is that *I am an artist by temperament*.”¹⁵ In a speech which is at times contradictory, he adds that Renan and Newman, for example, “are excellent writers but they seem to have very little of the temperament I mean.”¹⁶ Joyce is still convinced of the great distance between literature, that is, writing of the world that is around us, and the “drama”, which is true art¹⁷. Joyce recognised the temperament of the artist in himself as the natural disposition of his talent towards art; his natural inclination and propensity to art is the mark of his artistic talent. And even in the darkest despair, he never for one moment questioned the faith he had in his own “individual talent” as an artist.

Tradition is also the whole of real life outside himself, the life that the artist has to acknowledge and accept just as he sees through his own eyes, as Joyce stated in ‘Drama and Life’. The artist must not isolate himself, but neither can he give in to the easy conditioning of the crowd, because “no man said the Nolan, can be a lover of the true or the good, unless he abhors the multitude; and the artist, though he may employ the crowd, is very careful to isolate himself”¹⁸. Again the necessity of a balance is proposed, between being part of the experience of a real life, past and present, that is, the human comedy of this world at large, the life, the opinions and the traditions of mankind, and maintaining a distance from any form of convention and conditioning in order to be guided by one’s own free temperament, which is the mark of one’s own individual talent.

For Stephen in *Stephen Hero*, however, talent is not the only thing the artist requires. It is necessary for him

to labour incessantly at his art if he wishes to express completely even the simplest conception and he believed that every moment of inspiration must be paid for in advance. He was not convinced of the truth of the saying [*poeta nascitur, non fit*] ‘The poet is born, not made’, but he was quite sure of the truth of this at least [*Poema fit, non nascitur*] ‘The poem is made not born’.¹⁹

¹⁵ J. Joyce, *ibid.*; my italics.

¹⁶ J. Joyce, *ibid.*

¹⁷ See ‘Royal Hibernian Academy’ (1899) and ‘Drama and Life’ (1900) in J. Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing, op.cit.*, pp17-22 and 23-29.

¹⁸ J. Joyce, ‘The Day of the Rabblement’, in *op.cit.*, p.50.

¹⁹ J. Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. T. Spencer, Panther, London 1979, p.34.

The text continues:

The burgher notion of the poet Byron in undress pouring out verses just as a city fountain pours out water seemed to Stephen characteristic of most popular judgements on esthetic matters and he combated the notion at its root by confirming solemnly to Maurice, 'Isolation is the first principle of artistic economy'.²⁰

Talent and the temperament of the artist need work and, to quote Giordano Bruno again, always need isolation.

In 1907, in the Italian lecture on Mangan given at the Università Popolare in Trieste, Joyce takes up the main themes of the 1902 essay and underlines the concept that had been laid out in the earlier work: "Bisogna però tenere in mente che il Mangan scrisse *senza una tradizione letteraria nativa* e scrisse per un pubblico che si interessò soltanto nei fatti del giorno, pretendendo ch'era compito unico del vate illustrare questi fatti."²¹ Here Joyce again emphasises the serious absence of an Irish literary tradition that could sustain a poet and the negative presence of a public which is only attentive to small everyday events and demands that the poet should share the same concerns.

Furthermore, current popular opinion, shared by the common reader and sophisticated interpreter alike, is that throughout Joyce's work, from the earliest writing to the last experimental line of *Finnegans Wake*, there is a constant increase in the active recourse to tradition. It is never revisited with nostalgia, but is formally and technically saved from oblivion in being reinterpreted by a modernist spirit, a true individual talent.

4. What is meant by the word tradition today? One could certainly give many different definitions, and, depending on the context, all of some worth. In *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode, 1960)*, Hans Georg Gadamer²², defines the notion of tradition by suggesting that our historic conscience is always filled with "a multiplicity of voices that echo the past". Only in the multiplicity of these voices is there a past, and even when reduced to a display of folklore, tradition has a certain claim and, to a great extent, determines our status and our behaviour. From this point of view, tradition coincides with one's historical conscience.

²⁰ J. Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, *ibid.*

²¹ J. Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*, *op. cit.*, p.265; my italics.

²² H.G.Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Tübingen 1960; *Truth and Method.*, 2nd rev. edition. Trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall, Crossroad, New York 2004.

What, however, is the meaning that TS Eliot ascribed to 'tradition' and to the 'individual talent' in his famous essay of 1919? Some statements by Eliot provide a sort of preamble to the central theme. According to Eliot, "Every nation, every race, has not only its creative, but its own critical turn of mind"²³. A few lines later he alludes to what he means by "individual". He recognises our tendency to concentrate,

when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles any one else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors [...]. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most *individual* parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality more vigorously.²⁴

He then passes to the main topic. Tradition, in his opinion, is not only "a form of handing down [...] following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid reverence to its success [...]. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. *It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour*"²⁵. In a relatively recent "Foreword" to a selection of essays on *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*²⁶, edited by Cianci and Harding, Frank Kermode takes this last sentence ("It cannot be inherited...") and comments on the strangeness of the remark. Kermode recalls that perhaps it was Harry Levin who first noted the oddness of this definition and he adds: "Tradition ordinarily refers to what is handed on, with the implication that everybody gets it free, whether they want it or not."²⁷ That Eliot's essay uses the term in a different sense, or in several different senses, is clear enough and so is the fact that great labour has been expended in the effort to decide what that sense or senses were. Indeed, Kermode's judgement of Eliot's essay is by no means charitable, saying as he does of the essays in the book, "They enrich

²³ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *Selected Prose*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1963, p.22.

²⁴ T.S. Eliot, *ibid.* my italics.

²⁵ T.S. Eliot, *op.cit.*, pp.22-23, my italics.

²⁶ G. Cianci and J. Harding eds., *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007.

²⁷ G. Cianci and J. Harding eds., *op.cit.*, p.xiii.

and perhaps even make more respectable the argument of what is, for all its daring and all its air of authority, a piece of literary journalism the better part of a hundred years old.”²⁸ Eliot himself continues thus:

It [tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not only with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature in Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.²⁹

And he continues, “No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists”³⁰.

The sense of history therefore seems to coincide with a sense of tradition and together they suggest an image of a continual flow, a comprehensive memory that unites the dead and the living and, permeates all human action, even that which has never been written. For Eliot, therefore, “the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career”³¹. There then follows the passage on the “depersonalization” of the work of art and “its relation to the sense of tradition”, illustrated by the much-quoted image of the chemical reaction:

It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.³²

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ in *op.cit.*, pp.22-23.

³⁰ T.S. Eliot, *ibid.*

³¹ T.S. Eliot, *op.cit.*, p.25.

³² T.S.Eliot, *ibid.*

In the Foreword to *T.S. Eliot and the Concept of Tradition*, Kermode perhaps does not do full justice to Eliot in describing his essay as a “famous and rather obscure manifesto, of which the paradoxical statement concerning tradition forms so central a part”³³. The real limitation to the thoroughness of that collection may lie in the fact that none of the essays mentions Joyce’s view of tradition or his relevance to the theory of depersonalization, so often mentioned in his letters, in *Stephen Hero* and in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Indeed, perhaps the merits and shortcomings of T.S. Eliot’s essay might be explained by the fact that, while writing it in 1919, he had Joyce in mind; Joyce, the man and the artist, for whom just a few years later, in 1923, he would write in *The Dial*, ‘*Ulysses*, Order and Myth’.

³³ F. Kermode, *op.cit.*, xiii.

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