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**Autor:** Patea, Viorica  
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# Pound and Eliot's Sense of History and Tradition as Re-lived Experience<sup>1</sup>

Viorica Patea

Based on Pound and Eliot's theoretical formulations and poetics, the present paper argues that their sense of history and tradition is not an archaeological reconstruction, but an act of interpretation, which enhances the horizons of selfhood while engaging a dialogue with a bygone other. Unlike postmodernism, modernism did not conceive of anteriority as a rupture with the past nor a slaying of father figures, but of an existential valorization of tradition. Pound and Eliot's notion of tradition is that of a cubist historiography of perpetually varying cultural alignments, synthesized in the consciousness of the present. Their poetics focus on the problematic relationship between the interpreter and the past. History is conceived as a re-lived experience, made possible by the visionary imagination. Pound and Eliot's historical reconstructions reveal the relative character of knowledge, limited by our perceptions and our socio-historical context. Moreover, they lead to awareness of an existing complex of transcultural universals. Eliot's concept of tradition is partly influenced by Bradley's notion of experience as an originally unified whole and by the idea that meaning is not autonomous and depends on an order of relationships. Eliot and Pound's ideal order of atemporal monuments is not a closed, static system of fixed standards of value, but a live continuum open to change and in need of constant interpretation.

If the postmodern sensibility perceives tradition as a metaphor of castration, the modernist temper conceived it as a means of enhancing the horizons of selfhood and set out to engage a dialogue with a bygone other. Pound and Eliot did not apprehend modernity as an act of rupture with the past nor as a slaying of father figures, but as existential

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valorization of tradition by acts of transhistorical identification and interpretation. Both assumed the task of what Longenbach (1987) calls the "existential historian"<sup>2</sup> who, according to Bradley, endeavors "to breathe the life of the present into the death of the past" (Bradley, 32). Thus, in the mind of the poet, the past becomes woven into the tissue of the present.

Around 1900, philosophical speculation questioned the very nature of historical knowledge. In opposition to the prevailing positivist assumptions and Nietzsche's antihistoricism, the philosophical theories of Bradley, Dilthey, Croce, Bergson, Ortega, Burckhardt or Collingwood divested historic truth of its claims of scientific objectivity (Longenbach, 1987). Directly, or indirectly, their theories were to have a bearing on Pound and Eliot's poetics of history. Eroded by the relativism and solipsism inherent in romantic aesthetics, the premises of the old historicism were foundering. For all its claims to scientific objectivity, it became evident that positivist historicism could not extricate itself from the interpreter's own historicity. In *Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), Bradley argued: "the past varies with the present, and can never do otherwise because it is always the present on which it rests" (32). In his own analysis of Bradley's views, Eliot explained that the "ideas of the past are true, not by correspondence with a real past, but by their coherence with each other and ultimately with the present moment; an idea of the past is true by virtue of relations among ideas" (*Knowledge and Experience* 54).

In this interpretation, scientific objectivity was subordinated to personal insight and imaginative penetration. Historical reconstruction was envisaged as a process of aesthetic intuition where the interpreter borrowed the tools of the artist in order to resurrect the "lived experience" of a particular time that was no longer there. Thus, historical inquiry like the poetic quest was a kind of existential encounter across time, grounded, as Longenbach persuasively remarks, in the rediscovery of the "I in the Thou" (16).

Early on in their careers, Eliot contended that the historical sense was not a form of "archaeological reconstruction" (*Selected Essays* 13) whereas Pound applauded the historical approach of the German an-

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<sup>2</sup> Longenbach is using Jameson's term in "Marxism and Historicism" (51). Longenbach's study remains to this day the most comprehensive analysis of Eliot and Pound's poetics of history. Schwartz's approach to Pound's use of history in *The Matrix of Modernism* (133-154) offers an accurate brief treatment of the subject.

thropologist Frobenius, because his methodology differentiated itself from the antiquarian's accumulation of data. "His archeology," Pound observed, "is not retrospective, it is immediate" (*Kulchur* 57). Historical investigation, Pound insisted, had to disclose the present and future potentialities of the past: "research goes not only into past and forgotten life, but points to tomorrow's water supply [. . .] it is a double charge, a sense of two sets of values and their relation" (*Kulchur* 57). For both poets, history, and for that matter tradition, were grounded in the shifting perspectives of "an interpreted past and an interpreting present" (Ricoeur 221).

Pound and Eliot countered a dehumanized philological tradition with new methods of scholarship based on a personal poetics in which the past became existentially and psychologically fused in the mind of the contemporary public. To them, historical understanding became a way of uncovering the past realities that live in the present by means of imaginary translations, visionary re-adaptations and recreations.

Neither Pound nor Eliot sanctified tradition; both warned against scholarly encumbrance and mere philological interest divorced from the concerns of the present. Accumulation of historical data as an end in itself could not infuse life into the dry bones of history. Excessive attachment to the past was as fallacious as its ignorance. "Tradition," Eliot took pains to explain, did not mean "stopping in the same place" (*Letters* 317-8), and neither did it amount to escapist fantasies or futile attempts to restore the past.

Pound decried the "husks and shells of the thoughts that have already been lived by others" (*Literary Essays* 371) just as Eliot warned against the imitation that amputates the individual talent (*Selected Essays* 15). Together they indicted the life-denying worship of the past and degenerated forms of nostalgia. In Cantos XIV and XV, Pound placed academics together with politicians and profiteers in hell, thus linking the fight against sterile scholarship with the affirmation of the idealistic individualism of the Renaissance. Historical knowledge could not lose its link with "vital values" just as "the ideal of scholarship" could not supplant "the ideal of humanity" (Pound, *Selected Prose* 161-2).

Starting from the awareness that the past can be understood only in the light of the present, Eliot contends: "the study of the past [. . .] should make us more conscious of what we are, and of our own limitations, and give us more understanding of the world in which we now live" (*Poetry and Poets* 192). To both Pound and Eliot, the exploration of



the history of our tradition and that of foreign cultures brings about an encounter with all that is unfamiliar, unknown, forgotten, and fundamentally other in our selves. The new and the old expand the boundaries of selfhood and deepen our capacity for self-understanding and self-enlargement. They pose a challenge to complacent and self-indulgent assumptions of Euro-centric superiority.

In *History as System*, Ortega asserts, "the past is not past because it happened to others but because it forms part of our present, of what we are in the form of having been, because, in short, it is *our* past. Life as a reality is absolute presence; we cannot say that *there* is anything unless it is present, of this moment. If then, *there* is a past, it must be something present, something active in us *now*" (212). Eliot believed that the dead writers seemed "remote from us because we know so much more than they did," yet he was quick to add that they are precisely, "that which we know" (*Selected Essays* 16). Eliot's philosophy of "point of view," an adaptation of Bradley's "finite center," is consonant with Ortega's perspectivism. His 1916 doctoral dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*, analyzes the epistemological challenge posed by the existence of multiple perspectives to meaning and understanding, which require a sense of coherence and unity derived from the experience of different points of view.

Eliot defended the temporality, historicity and situatedness of all interpretation and refuted the assumptions of unprejudiced objectivity. Except in his short-lived early objectivist phase when he believed he could know the object as it really was,<sup>3</sup> he maintained man's mutability over time and recognized that "we are all limited by circumstances, if not by capacities" (*Criticize* 104), and that our "limitations become manifest in the perspective of history" (*Use of Poetry* 141-2).

In these interpretations, history is not a monolithic block, but a system of relations and points of view that stretch over loops, blanks, intervals, and zones of uncertainties. With its "broken bundle of mirrors" ("Near Perigord" *Personae* 154) and "cunning passages, contrived corridors" ("Gerontion" 22), history fosters indecision, insecurity and uncertainties about the events themselves. In Canto XIII, Pound invokes nostalgically "A day when the historians left blanks in their writings, / I mean for things they did not know" (60). Yet this sense of incompleteness is not denied but accepted as part of the cognitive process itself.

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<sup>3</sup> Especially in "The Perfect Critic" (1920) and "The Function of Criticism" (1923).

Similarly, the poetic universe of *The Waste Land* is also haunted by a consciousness of fragmentation. The poem is built upon a heap of disconnected fragments, which the protagonist has shored against his ruins.

Eliot recognized that interpretation tells us more about the subjective and historical mind frame of the reader than about the text itself and that our knowledge of the past is inevitably filtered by the limited horizon of our historical situation: "a work of historical fiction is much more a document of its own time than on the time portrayed. Equally relative, because equally passed through the sieve of our own interpretation, but enabling us to extend and solidify this interpretation of the past which is its meaning, its sense, for us" (Eliot, *Savonarola* vii). Influenced by Bradley's relativist philosophy of history, he asserted: "the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (*Selected Essays* 16).

Throughout his work, Eliot affirmed the relative character of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> His point of departure was the awareness that "there is no *absolute* point of view" (*Knowledge and Experience* 22). To him all interpretations were inherently subjective, limited by our perceptions and foregrounded in our spatio-temporal, socio-historical world: "Every period of history is seen differently by every other period; the past is in perpetual flux, although only the past can be known" (*Savonarola* vii).

From his early student years, Eliot engaged in serious philosophical examination of the nature of interpretation and concerned himself with its role in the theory of knowledge. To him 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.<sup>5</sup> For him, all interpretations, including scientific explanations of reality, were relative and could not account for the real facts (*Knowledge and Experience* 165).<sup>6</sup> Like Heidegger and Gadamer after him, he abandoned the pretension of unexamined assumptions and recognized that all understanding in-

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<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Eliot's concept of tradition in relation to Bradley's philosophy see Levenson 187-93; Jain 144-58, 205-243; Longenbach 164-176.

<sup>6</sup> In his early paper "Interpretation of Ritual" Eliot contended that all interpretations are relative and cannot account for the real facts (Jain 115). Years later, in 1926, he reformulated his early observations in the "Introduction" he wrote to *Savonarola* (viii), a dramatic poem written by his mother.

volved some prejudice. Since any viewpoint is inevitably limited by our preconceptions and prestructuring categories, the only honest way of coping with our cognitive limitations consists in being aware of our prejudice: "if it be objected that this is a prejudice [. . .] I can only reply that one must criticize from some of point of view and that it is better to know what one's point of view is" (*Selected Essays* 114).

Eliot insisted on the fallibility of all interpretations, yet he also emphasized that human knowledge could not do without interpretation. Experience cannot speak for itself and cannot be known intuitively from the inside. In order to be understood it has to be translated and interpreted by means of analytical, ratiocinative processes that distance us from the lived moment: "there may be an essential part of error in all interpretation, without which it would be no interpretation at all. [. . .] If we lived it completely we should need no interpretation; but on our plane of appearances our interpretations themselves are part of our living" (Eliot, *The Wheel of Fire* xi). Eliot's historical pluralism was due to his awareness of human error, finitude, and mutability in time (Jain 214). Despite his visionary moments, Eliot remained a skeptic. Throughout his life, he was acutely aware of the value of competing philosophical perspectives yet regarded all bodies of belief as partial and subject to correction by other views and systems.

Eliot's historical sense conceived the past as an integral living part of the present, involving "a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (*Selected Essays* 14). Along the same lines, Pound had affirmed in *The Spirit of Romance*: "All ages are contemporaneous. [. . .] This is especially true of literature, where the real time is independent of the apparent, and where many dead men are our grandchildren's contemporaries, while many of our contemporaries have been already gathered into Abraham's bosom" (6). "The past," Eliot was to write later in "Dry Salvages," "has another pattern and ceases to be a mere sequence / Or even development" (*CPP* 132). Like Pound, he rejected the assumptions of a linear and evolutionary conception of history. No longer based on patterns of linear progress, history was a palimpsest in which the layers of time were laden with the voices of the dead and their transcendent projections. Its pattern of "timeless moments" ("Little Gidding," *CPP* 144) was haunted by a reality outside time and inhabited by lost memories and future possibilities. Along the same lines, Pound argued: "we do not know the past in chronological sequence [. . .] but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddy-

ing out from us and from our own time" (*Kulchur* 60). For both poets, this relevance of the past to the present led to a further awareness of the fundamental unity of "the timeless and the temporal" (Eliot, *Selected Essays* 14). Eliot pleaded for an unusually fluid relationship between the present, art, and history. By 1918, he had outlined in "The Hawthorne Aspect" a doctrine of aesthetics that predicated modernity on an immersion in the past (47-53). He argued that "a large part of a poet's inspiration must come from his knowledge of history" and that "interest in the past, and . . . [the] interest in the present are one" ("A Note on Ezra Pound" 4-5).

The early observations Eliot made in 1918 on Pound's historical method reflect, in fact, his own conception of history. Pound was Eliot's ideal poet of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (Longenbach 63). He adumbrated the modernist poetics of history and showed Eliot how to "proceed by acquiring the entire past" (Eliot, "The Method of Mr. Pound" 1065). Pound's method consisted in "expressing oneself through historical masks" eventually leading to the revelation of the present (Eliot, "The Method" 1065). His supreme mask was that of Isis. The title of literary essays, *I Gather the Limbs of Osiris* (1911-12) in which he announced his "new method in scholarship," was a figurative representation of his poetics of history. Like the Egyptian goddess who reassembled the dead and strewn limbs of Osiris in order to ensure his resurrection, the poet would have to treasure the remnants of the past and infuse life into its lifeless ruins. The reassembling of the fallen god is a trope for the poet's endeavor to gather "from air a live tradition" (Canto LXXXI 522) in pursuit of the "beauty lost in years" (*The Classic Nob* 27).

The motif of the journey to the dead is central to Pound's oeuvre and to his particular way of "making it new." Odysseus pouring blood for the ghosts in Canto I is the metaphor of Pound's historical reconstruction (Longenbach 17). Just as Odysseus gives life to the ghosts to penetrate the mysteries of the past which shape his future, Pound will give voice to the ghosts of the dead that will resonate for the remaining 115 Cantos in the space of the present.

Eliot considered Pound's translations exemplary forms that set the models for the revitalization of tradition. In fact, many of Pound's poems are actual "rites of remembrance" (Schwartz 133). In "Euripides and Professor Murray," Eliot praised Pound's translations and called for "an eye which can see the past in its place with its definite differences

from the present, and yet so lively that it shall be as present to us as the present" (*Selected Essays* 64). For both Eliot and Pound the past was re-born in the mind of the modern translator (Eliot, "A Note" 5). In Pound's poetic translations or re-creations, artistic and historical realities are contemporary and timeless. An eloquent example of this strategy of "calling the past to life" (Eliot, "A Note" 5) is his early poem "Histrion" (1908):

No man has dared to write this thing as yet,  
 And yet I know, how the souls of all men great  
 At times pass through us,  
 And we are melted into them, and are not  
 Save reflexions of their souls.  
 Thus I am Dante for a space and am  
 One Francois Villon, ballad-lord and thief  
 Or am such holy ones I may not write,  
 Lest blasphemy be writ against my name;  
 This for an instant and the name is gone.

The poet is the man at the center in whom, from whom and through whom the old masters can live on. Their ideal forms survive in the individual consciousness of the artist whose poetry becomes, in turn, the medium for their endurance. These almost legendary literary figures serve, like most of Pound's dramatic speakers, as identifying projections of a modern *Zeitgeist*.

'Tis in the midmost us there glows a sphere  
 Translucent, molten gold, that is the "I"  
 And into this form projects itself:  
 Christus, or John, or eke Florentine;  
 And as the clear space is not if a form's  
 Imposed thereon,  
 So cease we all being for the time,  
 And these, the Masters of the Soul, live on (*CEP* 71)

"Make it new" was Pound's particular way of recovering lost experience and reconstituting it anew for a new age. Pound's imperative did not signify a rupture with the past, yet it entailed a particular dialectic between continuity and disruption, fixity and change. It implied a process in which the past was neither lost nor repeated, but re-grounded in the sensibility of the present and modified by the modern interpretative consciousness.



Pound's historical reconstructions take as their point of departure the recognition of an existing complex of transcultural universals. His system of correspondences, drawn between different cultures, eras, and geographical spaces is marked by moments of illuminations that break the chains of time and disclose atemporal structures of existence. Pound's historical method includes the gathering of historical documents giving the illusion that history narrates itself and the presentation of "luminous details" that evoke the essence of the past. Pound's strong sense of a shared psychic kinship unites human beings across time and allows the self to transcend temporal limitations. Illuminations, transcendent visions of beauty, magic moments of metamorphosis pervade his poetic universe. Yet, in spite of the noumenal reality of these dynamic clusters, Pound's universe is not an ordered static whole of universal significances. The meaning of these Platonic essences remains fluid, open, protean, shifting and dependent on the point of view. They are existentially changed with each new individual act of interpretation. Pound's *paideuma* draws on this energetic "tangle or complex of the in-rooted ideas of any period" (*Kulchur* 57) that represents the wellspring of tradition.

For Pound, "art is a fluid moving above and over the minds of men" and the artist concerns himself with "that which flows" (*Romance* 5-6). Therefore, the modern long poem needed "a form that would not exclude something merely because it didn't fit" (Hall 38). The new form simultaneously expressed Pound's aspiration for universality and his consciousness of fragmentation. The new open polyphonic structure presented a texture of discontinuities, endings without finality, and disruption of linear sequences. The modern poem defied formal completeness and proportion, broke down chronology and units of time and subverted traditional distinctions of verse forms and genres. Wrenched from the all-sufficiency of one single narrating perspective and unifying vision, it allowed for a constant play of shifting points of view.

Pound defined an epic as "a poem including history" (*Literary Essays* 86). *The Cantos* narrate "the tale of the tribe," yet at the same time they also document a record of personal struggle, Pound's unique form of life-writing, which illustrates his personal and ideal involvement with history. Fraught with autobiography and history, Pound's poem aspires to unite the cultures of America, Europe, and Asia in an attempt to forge a new civilization out of the noblest elements of various cultures.



*The Cantos* share Emerson's belief that by the act of writing history, translating documents, visualizing ghosts, the poet makes history and helps build a better culture. By reawakening the voices of the dead he reenacts the essential mystery of a forgotten cultural past needed for the foundation of a new civilization. Pound explained that he was writing "to resist the view that Europe and civilization are going to Hell" (Hall 57). Like the *Cantos*, *The Waste Land* ends with a glimpse of light, a provisional revelation, and a few fragments with which to redeem a world in ruins. Pound and Eliot's philosophy of tradition is a cubist historiography of perpetually varying cultural alignments, synthesized in the consciousness of the present (Kermode 236). The new principles of form, Eliot's collage and Pound's ideogram, fuse history and myth in timeless crystallizations of culture, cutting across parallel traditions.

The *Cantos*' formal provocation is "to build up a circle of reference – taking the modern mind to be the medieval mind with wash after wash of classical culture poured over it since the Renaissance" (Hall 39). The modern long poem was bound to grasp the "heteroclitc contents of contemporary consciousness," with its "fight for light versus subconsciousness . . . obscurities and penumbras (Hall 57). Pound abandoned the pre-established unity of the epic, and was well aware that Dante's cosmos as well as the roadmap the middle ages possessed of heaven were no longer available (*Selected Letters* 232; Hall 38, 58). Hence, the epic loses its vertical orientation and unfolds on a horizontal plane. Pound's quest is a voyage across the dark seas of history that proceeds in a characteristically non-sequential, intermittent fashion. Occasionally, moments of illuminations, visions of light, divine energies or paradisaical states of mind break the chains of time, reveal that which endures in spite of centuries of change, and bestow meaning on a confused and oblivious world.

Similarly, history in *The Waste Land* is not a linear, forward progression from past to present. History is a matter of palimpsests, widening perspectives, and overlapping traditions. As Levenson aptly remarks, the cultural legacy exists in the form of a mass of finite perceptions, perspectives, and individual points of view (Levenson 198). The juxtaposition of different historical epochs debunks the idea of linear progress and rescues the simultaneities and synchronicities of time. Multiple temporal perspectives, cultural contexts, states of consciousness enter into unsettling, dynamic relationships.

The disruptive and transformative nature of these montages exacts dynamic acts of interpretation, which, in turn, reflect on the flexible, open nature of tradition. Fragments combine, intersect, overlap and generate a perpetual flux of shifting perspectives. From the interstices of their continuities and discontinuities arise new analogies, parallels, similarities and zones of coherence that translate different systems of belief into new interpretive horizons (Levenson 210). The new aesthetic of the fragmentary unsettles the principle of totality and the possibility of fixed, immutable meanings. The gaps and discontinuities of these assemblages invest the text with dynamic energy. The discontinuous, open-ended nature of the collage is an invitation to constant interpretations on behalf of the reader, and successive generations of readers. Their interpretations become integral to the meaning and structure of the text. Within this cubist perspective, the many literary fragments that compose *The Waste Land* form a "construction by the selection and combination of various presentations to various viewpoints" (*Knowledge and Experience* 142). Yet, in spite of all the talk of objectivity and impersonality, tradition was not a solid, compact entity as Pound and Eliot pretended, but an ideal, subjective, and self-conscious construction (Jain 156). The *Cantos* and *The Waste Land* remain highly personal assemblages of fragments, literary allusions and states of consciousness. Notwithstanding their manifest aspiration of universality, Eliot and Pound's remapping of literary history is conditioned by their own individual agendas, critical preferences and poetic practices. Their selection and arrangement evidence their own, personal constructions of tradition.

*The Waste Land* like the *Cantos* are poetic illustrations of this historical sense, which, as Eliot said, "compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer [. . .] has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (*Selected Essays* 14). Eliot's historical sense culminated in an anthropological quest for origins, for beginnings and endings, that included the literary and the primitive, the personal and the unconscious as integral parts of the cultural heritage. He contended that the poet "should be aware of the stratifications of history that cover savagery" and explore the primitive, pre-logical regions out of which myth arose and which constitute the unconscious foundations of our psyche ("War-Paint and Feathers" 1036).

The subjective interaction between "tradition and the individual talent" elicits forms of visionary quests into the historical and cultural

heritage and unconscious, "the mind of Europe, a mind which changes yet abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen" (*Selected Essays* 16). Eliot's "mythical method" with which he hoped to make "the modern world possible for art" is a quest for the anthropological roots of modern psyche. The mythic framework "is simply a way of controlling, ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" ("Ulysses, Order, and Myth" 177). Myth provides the key to modern history and creates an ideal vantage point, capable of setting up a parallel to the historical. In Eliot's *The Waste Land* actions unfold at the perpetual frontier of myth and reality, plunge into intra-psychic depths and dramatize processes of psychological growth (Williamson 157). The "mythical method" allows for a realistic portrayal of the chaos of history, yet the parallel with antiquity functions as a recovery of the unconscious memory of a mind that shades off into the Jungian reality of the collective unconscious (Langbaum 102).

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Eliot's sense of tradition rests on Bradley's sense of experience as an originally unified whole. It presents certain similarities with the Bergson's stream of consciousness as well as Jung's notion of the archetypal imagination, with its blend of individual psychological history and mythic time. Eliot conceived history and tradition in philosophically idealistic terms as a universal unifying reality "a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written" (*Selected Essays* 17). He affirmed the existence of an "unconscious community" between artists of any time and invoked "a common inheritance and a common cause [that] unite artists consciously and unconsciously" (*Selected Essays* 24).

In order to prevent the impasse of solipsism, Eliot upheld the need to maintain extra individual standards of value beyond the limited reality of the ego. The "living whole" (*Selected Essays* 17) of tradition overcame the limitations of finite centers and individual points of view. Eliot subscribed to Bradley's theory of degrees of truth and reality, that denied ultimate validity to rational empiricist categories such as time, space, personality or ego. From the point of view of the absolute, these categories were finite, incomplete, and contradictory appearances, artificially

cut out from a wider whole (Jain 206-9). In Bradley's system, no judgment has its meaning alone. Every single fact is part of a larger structure. Analogously, Eliot explained that no experience is real, no fact valid unless it fits into a pattern or system of relations from where it acquires meaning.

Facts are not merely found in the world and laid together like bricks, but every fact has in a sense its place prepared for it before it arrives, and without the implication of a system in which it belongs the fact is not a fact at all. (*Knowledge and Experience* 60)

And just as facts cannot be disentangled from the systems of interpretations that contain them, so "no poet, no artist has its meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is his relation to dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (*Selected Essays* 15). In Eliot's peculiar brand of holism, meaning is not autonomous and depends on an order of relationships. The individual talent does not exist in isolation, nor can the value of a work of art be determined intrinsically. Tradition provides a compendium of "systems in relation to which, and only in relation to which, individual works of art, and the works of individual artists, have their significance" (*Selected Essays* 12-13). Eliot's ideal order of atemporal monuments is less an immutable order of timeless, fixed standards of value than a live continuum in constant development, in which each work is incessantly transformed and revitalized by its interaction with other works of art.

Over the years, Eliot reiterated that tradition "cannot mean standing still" (*After Strange Gods* 25). He conceived literature as an interdependent whole, in which "the past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (*Selected Essays* 15). Tradition presupposed a process of mutual readjustment and refashioning in which, just as the past influenced the present, the present could in turn alter the significance of the past and predetermine the future. Subject to the dialectic of continuity and change, fixity and flux, tradition was a consensual construct predicated on unity and pluralistic tensions (Shusterman 158-62).<sup>7</sup> Artistic creativity drew on a dialectical exchange between tra-

<sup>7</sup> Shusterman analyzes Eliot's concept of tradition in the light of twentieth-century philosophical pragmatism that upholds consensuality as a standard of validity. He argues that like Royce, Peirce and others, Eliot shares the pragmatists' aim of enlarging consensus (156-191).



dition and innovation, the recovery of past forms and the forging of new voices. "The persistence of literary creativeness," explained Eliot, "consists in the maintenance of an unconscious balance, between tradition in the larger sense – the collective personality, so to speak, realized in the literature of the past – and the originality of the living generation" (*Poetry and Poets* 58). As time went by, Eliot's theory of tradition evolved into a theory of culture. By 1934, he viewed tradition less as a transcendental order and more as a given (Jain 134) and a matrix of a community's life and experience in a period of time (Shusterman 162). As Longenbach remarked, tradition offered Eliot a way of unifying points of view and of building bridges between isolated individual consciousnesses (203). Its function lay in providing an integrative, consensual context for its constituent works and interpreters.

Eliot insisted that "the finest tact after all can give us only an interpretation, and every interpretation [. . .] has to be taken up and reinterpreted by every thinking mind and by every civilization" (*Kulchur* 164). Literary texts are not isolated, unrelated objects but sequences that extend and comprise us in time. Eliot's notion of tradition is not a closed, static system encapsulated in the past, but a flexible structure, open to change, refinement and innovation, that extends into the future and demands constant development and interpretation. Tradition helped Eliot overcome the longstanding dichotomy between individual judgment (the "Inner Voice") and "Outer authority" (*Selected Essays* 29). It provided a solution to the impasse of a self-confining subjectivism and the chimera of a self-effacing objectivity (Shusterman 167). Tradition countered both radical objectivism and subjectivism with standards of consensual inter-subjective agreement as alternative criteria of validity. Unlike Bradley's idealism, Eliot's theory of unification of points of view did not rely on a metaphysical absolute, but on a relative and secular principle of authority that avoided the pitfalls of solipsism without transgressing empiricist constraints of verifiability (Levenson 185-6).

Pound and Eliot's poetics is rooted in a consciousness of fragmentation, yet unlike the postmodern sensibility, it does not reduce tradition to cultural relativism and fragmented narrations encapsulated in an exhausting diversity. At the foundation of their pluralism lies a nostalgia for universal wholeness. Their sense of the diverse, heterogeneous nature of reality is subsumed and guaranteed by a universal unifying principle. Their pluralism is predicated on the transcultural nature of history. Burdened by a sense of rupture, the modernist faith tries to overcome

cultural fragmentation by restoring cultural diversity to the universal dimension to which it belongs.



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