The Anatomy of Literary Tradition

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The Anatomy of Literary Tradition

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Abstract

The term ‘literary tradition’ is ubiquitous in literary scholarship. It is also greatly under-theorized. While there have been many efforts to define and understand related terms like ‘canon’, ‘influence’, and ‘literary history’, similar treatments of ‘literary tradition’ are comparatively rare. One reason for this gap in the theoretical literature is that there is no single understanding of literary tradition. Different scholars employ different understandings of the concept depending on context and critical aims.

In order to better understand this difficult idea, ‘literary tradition’, I look at how it is employed in the works of a variety of critics and scholars from different eras, ideological backgrounds, and schools of criticism. In doing so, however, we find that not only are there many different understandings of tradition, there is also an inconsistent and manifold set of critical terminology used to describe it. In order to bring some order to this conceptual and terminological confusion, I develop a new conceptual framework which maps differing notions of tradition according to a single set of criteria with an associated and consistent vocabulary. Using this framework, seemingly incommensurable versions of literary tradition are placed on the same plane of discourse for the purposes of comparative analysis. The resulting ‘models’ of tradition that I identify constitute a first attempt at a typology of literary tradition.
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Special thanks must go to my parents for letting their adult son move back into his old room, years after they figured they had seen the back of him.

Most of all, I’d like to thank Sootie and Elise for providing me with a home and a family. I would not have been able to finish this project without their love and support.
Conventions used in this thesis:

For clarity, I have used a bold typeface to draw attention to parts of direct quotes that I consider especially pertinent.

The specialized terminology (i.e. tradition$^{content}$, tradition$^{chain}$, and tradition$^{weight}$) is explained in Chapter 1, section 1.5.
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INTRODUCTION

Tradition in its most general modern sense is a particularly difficult word.\(^1\)

RAYMOND WILLIAMS

Tradition and modernity are the most troubling concepts in cultural analysis. We are never quite sure what they mean.\(^2\)

BRIAN STOCK

The proper starting point for any de-mystification has to be a return to the commonal. Let me ask then: What is literary tradition?\(^3\)

HAROLD BLOOM

PREFACE

In the *Rights of Man* (1791), Thomas Paine expressed a desire to examine facts ‘unmutilated by contrivance, or the errors of tradition’.\(^4\) As a man of the enlightenment, influenced by the ‘Sapere aude!’ convictions of the French *philosophes*, Paine was expressing a sentiment that was felt by many in Europe and elsewhere during the eighteenth century and which has been felt and expressed many times since.\(^5\) And yet, in the context of modern literary scholarship, the presumed source of those errors—

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\(^1\) Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 2014), 314.


tradition—lives, as Paine writes elsewhere in the same work, ‘immured within the Bastille of a word’. It is the goal of this thesis to unlock the concept behind the word ‘tradition’.

But perhaps this prison metaphor is misleading, suggesting that tradition is a stale and superannuated concept—archaic, inflexible, lacking in critical vitality and theoretical sophistication—safely ‘locked up,’ away from the concerns of modern scholars. On the contrary, as this thesis demonstrates, obscured behind the venerable signifier ‘tradition’ lies a concept as protean and malleable as any in literary criticism. Rather than being archaic and inflexible, there are as many notions of tradition as there are scholarly and critical tendencies, ranging from the earliest works of criticism to the present day. But because these manifold understandings are concealed behind this murky word ‘tradition’, and because this term is employed with considerable frequency in literary discourse, the notion of literary tradition is deserving of much greater theoretical attention than it has received to date.

This thesis, therefore, is chiefly motivated by the following questions: Is ‘tradition’ a critical term that has reached the limit of its usefulness in literary criticism, and should be retired in favour of more task-specific and theoretically determined critical concepts? Or can some order be brought to its multifarious nature, allowing for a more clearly defined understanding of the concept itself, and of its role in literary criticism, past and present?

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6 Paine, Rights of Man.
What is Literary Tradition?

Literary tradition is at once among the most ubiquitous notions in literary scholarship and one of the least elaborated. It is a concept invoked in countless works of criticism and has inspired scores of debates in which it has been extolled and denounced with equal vigour. And yet, if one asks, ‘what is literary tradition?’, an answer is not immediately forthcoming. Despite the frequency with which the word ‘tradition’ appears in literary scholarship, there have been relatively few attempts to theorize the concept in detail. As the above epigraphs by scholars as theoretically and ideologically diverse as Raymond Williams, Brian Stock, and Harold Bloom attest, the notion of tradition lacks clarity among literary critics who nevertheless carry on using it to signify a seemingly fundamental aspect of literary activity. Indeed, all three authors have employed the notion extensively in their work.\(^7\) The attitude shown towards tradition by many scholars recalls that which Saint Augustine held towards the not unrelated notion of time: ‘If no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I do not know’.\(^8\)

The lack of theorization of tradition is all the more surprising given that it has been a key term in modern literary theory from at least the time of T.S. Eliot’s essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), a work which has been referred to as ‘perhaps the most influential text in twentieth-century literary education in English-speaking countries, as well as countries in which literary education in English is significant’.\(^9\) Ever since the

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\(^7\) For example, see: Harold Bloom, The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life (New Haven, 2011); Stock, Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past, Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford, 1977). These works will be discussed in detail in the course of this thesis.


publication of Eliot’s essay, the notion of literary tradition has been critiqued, attacked, defended, taken for granted, and ignored, all the while remaining an elusive concept in spite of its prevalence.

The paucity of theoretical accounts of tradition is not unique to the study of literature. The philosopher Roger Scruton, for example, complains that, rather than signifying a specific phenomenon, the term ‘tradition’ usually ‘substitutes for a considerable lack of theory’. In the field of sociology, Edward Shils pre-empts criticisms of his book, *Tradition* (1981), by blaming the work’s faults and oversights on the lack of any previous comprehensive treatments of his topic; in short, there is no sociological ‘tradition’ of writing about tradition. Without an existing body of work on the topic, Shils has nothing to build upon or react against when formulating his own views on the subject.

Shils’s book is a key influence on the present thesis because of what I regard as an analogous state, in respect of the hazy understanding of tradition, between the field of sociology (when his book was published in 1981) and the state of literary studies today. While acknowledging the abundance of sociological studies dealing with specific traditions, Shils nevertheless claimed that his book was the first sociological work to try

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12 Richard W. Mooody, however, takes issue with Shils’s claim that there is was existing body of sociological literature on tradition: ‘When I first read Shils 1981 book, *Tradition*, it angered me... I felt that Shils had failed to acknowledge the work of men and women with whom I had studied, and whose work on traditions I admired... I judged Shils to have violated an important tradition in science and scholarship, the tradition of citing the relevant literature. I believed that it was especially “anti-传统al” for Shils to have failed to cite the work of his colleagues... I could not believe that Shils, who is celebrated for his omnivorous reading, did not know about their work’. See: Richard W Mooody, ‘Tradition: Why Shils and Polanyi Abandoned the Action Frame of Reference’, *Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical*, 39/3 (2013), 21.
and see ‘the common ground and elements’ of all traditions.\(^{13}\) The distinction Shils is making is between, on the one hand, tradition as a concept, and on the other, the specific cultural phenomena which fall under that concept. Tradition as a concept is conceived in the abstract, independent of any characteristics belonging to specific instances of tradition. Shils attempts to describe the former—tradition as a concept—in order to bring a greater conceptual clarity to the study of the latter, i.e. the specific manifestations of cultural tradition which form one of the major objects of empirical sociological investigation.

In contemporary literary studies the situation is much the same. Despite an abundance of scholarship dealing with specific literary traditions, there is no significant body of critical work that examines literary tradition as a concept. It is, as one scholar puts it, ‘frequently invoked but very little studied or defined’\(^{14}\). There are thousands of books and papers, many possessing titles with forms such as ‘[X] and the [Y] Tradition’, which describe, attack, and defend traditions of many varieties, large and small. Examples from recent years include Containing Multitudes: Walt Whitman and the British Literary Tradition (2014) by Gary Schmidgall, Chameleon Poet: R.S. Thomas and the Literary Tradition (2013) by S. J. Perry, and Bucolic Ecology: Virgil’s Eclogues and the Environmental Literary Tradition (2008) by Timothy Saunders.\(^{15}\) Yet despite the abundance of such studies, very few scholars have attempted a detailed conceptual

\(^{13}\) Shils, Tradition, vii.
account of literary tradition. Among the few who have attempted to do so is Michael C. Drout in his book *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (2006). In the introduction to this work, Drout describes the dearth of scholarly treatments of literary tradition as a concept:

Tradition shapes every facet of cultural production, consumption, and change ... But as far as I have been able to discover, there exists no effectively descriptive theory of tradition, no explanation of how traditions are created, constituted, modified, and recognized.\(^6\)

He goes on to cite the importance of work by scholars in elucidating the notion of tradition—notably Yves Congar, Karl Morrison, Edward Shils, Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Karl Popper—yet insists none of their writings meet the criteria he set out for a comprehensive theory of tradition.\(^7\) While Drout’s list of scholars who have elucidated the notion of tradition is not exhaustive, he correctly identifies a major gap in the literature.\(^8\) The proliferation of scholarship concerning specific traditions, alongside criticism which attacks the very idea of tradition, demands a greater understanding of the common ground (if such exists) and the differences between various examples of literary tradition.

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\(^7\) Drout, *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century*, n. 1. The work of some of these writers will be examined or cited in the course of this thesis.

On the possibility of a common ground, literary scholar Patrick Colm Hogan argues sceptically that ‘in addition to differences among traditions and differences among individuals, there will be certain sorts of difference among types of tradition’. But even if Hogan is correct in this assumption, a better understanding of these different types of tradition would enable the relations between various literary traditions to be more adequately and systematically mapped than they are at present. Furthermore, if any common ground among otherwise heterogeneous literary traditions does exist, we might reasonably expect to locate it in the conceptual structure of tradition conceived more generally. A greater understanding among literary scholars of that structure could potentially shed new light on the relationship that holds between literary traditions and other cultural traditions. In short, what is needed is a theoretical explication of literary tradition understood in the abstract.

**Aims of the Present Thesis**

As desirable as a comprehensive account of the concept of literary tradition might be, this thesis has more modest aims. Before a study of the type described above is attempted, it is necessary to know how the concepts *tradition* and *literary tradition* have been understood and employed in literary scholarship until now. Is the same word ‘tradition’ being applied consistently to the same kind of thing or process, or is it used to refer to different, perhaps incommensurable, literary phenomena? This thesis, therefore,

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19 Patrick Colm Hogan, ‘Of Literary Universals: Ninety-Five Theses’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 32/1 (2008), 152. Unfortunately for my purposes, due to the manifesto-like nature of Hogan’s article it confines itself to such pronouncements without offering any guidance on the matter.
represents an initial step towards addressing the described gap in scholarship by providing a systematic study of the way tradition has been, and continues to be, understood by literary critics and scholars. The value of doing so is twofold: firstly, it will contribute to our understanding of the various ways that the term ‘literary tradition’ has been and continues to be used in practice by literary critics. Secondly, it lays the groundwork for a subsequent attempt to theorize the notion of literary tradition, ensuring that any such attempt can take into consideration existing understandings of the concept.

In order to systematize the ways in which ‘literary tradition’ is used by critics, a common frame of reference is necessary. Critics have addressed the concept of literary tradition with different degrees of explicitness, often only indirectly; and different critics employ idiosyncratic and seemingly incommensurable terminology to discuss tradition. One of the central claims of this thesis is that underlying many, if not most, examples of literary criticism and theory there is a model of literary tradition of one type or another. By ‘model of tradition’, I am referring to the framework of assumptions about tradition, to the extent that they can be known, that underlies and informs a specific work of literary scholarship, a body of critical work by a scholar, or a school of criticism. In some instances, a model may determine the shape of the theory or criticism which it subtends, while in other cases the model of literary tradition may follow from the critical goals being pursued or the ideological stance of the work. This distinction does not especially matter for the present purpose, since the aim of this thesis is to map and analyse models of tradition themselves, rather than how consistently or effectively they inform the critical work built on them. To this end, I outline an analytical framework that resolves the concept of tradition into its constituent parts, these being its contextual, transmissive,
and normative aspects.\footnote{See Chapter 1, sections 1.5, 2.1.5.4, for a detailed description of these categories.} This framework enables the mapping of different models of tradition according to a standardized set of criteria, while employing a common terminology. I am thereby able to compare and contrast models of tradition found in a theoretically diverse selection of critical texts.

There are limits to such an ‘objective’ approach, however, which will become clear in the later chapters of this thesis.\footnote{See Chapter 5 especially.} As literary critics, one of our primary functions is to interpret texts, and our view of tradition affects how we approach this task. Therefore, in the background of this thesis’s examination of the different ways tradition has been understood by critics, is a second inquiry concerning the implications that different understandings of literary tradition have for the interpretation of literary texts: how does a particular conception of tradition aid, hinder, or otherwise affect the construal of textual meaning in literary works? This question comes to the fore in Chapter 5 of this thesis, giving the enquiry a hermeneutic orientation—that is, an orientation towards understanding the conditions under which textual interpretation occurs.\footnote{In keeping with the limited goals of this thesis I am concerned with how a particular conception of tradition affects interpretation, not of the effects of tradition itself; an account of which is beyond the scope of the present investigation. I will consider some possible directions for future enquiries of this nature in my conclusion.} While most of the critical texts examined in Chapters 2-4 represent a variety of approaches to literary criticism—by which I mean texts ‘devoted to the comparison and analysis, to the interpretation and evaluation of works of literature’, along with literary history and literary theory— Chapter 5 concentrates instead on texts that are more usually classified as hermeneutic theory or philosophical hermeneutics. These latter texts frequently
demonstrate understandings of literary tradition that exceed the boundaries of the analytical framework developed in Chapter 1 and applied in Chapters 2-4. This study, therefore, has a dual purpose: as an examination of the concept of literary tradition in existing scholarship; and in laying the groundwork for a potential future project detailing a hermeneutics of literary tradition.23

Chapter Plan

This thesis will be divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 consists of four parts; the first two parts further develop the argument that ‘literary tradition’ is an overlooked concept in literary scholarship and examines some of the possible reasons for this oversight. The next part examines various definitions of literary tradition, along with definitions of tradition gleaned from other academic disciplines. The etymology of the word ‘tradition’ is also traced, teasing out several important characteristics which form the basis of the analytical framework developed in the last part of the chapter. This framework resolves the concept of tradition into its constituent aspects—its content, its chain of transmission, and its normative effect—and pairs them with a standardized terminology that will be used throughout the rest of the thesis.

Chapter 2 examines models of tradition that emphasize literary tradition’s content over its transmissive or normative dimensions. The major feature of such models is simultaneity, and this way of conceiving of tradition is identified in art and poetry dating from the past seven centuries including Geoffrey Chaucer’s The House of Fame and the

23 Some of the possible directions this project might take are foreshadowed in Chapter 5 and the Conclusion of this thesis.
paintings of Raphael. Major critical writings examined in this chapter are from the late 19th and early 20th century, including works by Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, T. S. Eliot, and E. M. Forster.

Chapter 3 examines models of tradition in which the chain of transmission is treated as the most prominent feature. Such models underlie the work of scholars, especially literary historians, who are keen to demonstrate continuity in the historical development of genres and other forms, or to trace the development of literary elements across long periods of time. While many scholars are mentioned in this chapter, the work of Ernst Robert Curtius receives the closest treatment on the grounds that he is perhaps the most influential scholar whose work rests on a continuous model of tradition and because his work is unusually explicit in detailing its philosophical and methodological presuppositions.

Chapter 4 looks at the work of scholars who emphasize literary tradition’s normative dimension. It focuses on a lineage of critics and thinkers whose work is influenced by Marxist thought and who explore the possibility that traditions can be actively shaped for ideological ends. Among those whose writings are examined are Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, György Lukács, and, especially, Raymond Williams.

While the conceptions of tradition that are examined in these three chapters can be mapped according to the analytical framework developed in Chapter 1, the work of the scholars examined in Chapter 5 challenges the explanatory power of that framework. The critical writings examined in this chapter are primarily hermeneutical in orientation, being mostly concerned with the possibility of literary interpretation and understanding.
The two major figures of this chapter are Hans-Georg Gadamer and E. D. Hirsch, the latter providing a critique of the former.
CHAPTER ONE

MAPPING A NEGLECTED CONCEPT

‘Tradition’, of course, is a term with many forces—and often very little at all.†
F. R. LEAVIS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

An investigation into the notion of literary tradition inevitably begins with prior assumptions about what is being investigated. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, there is little agreement among scholars concerning even the most basic assumptions. Not only are there conflicting viewpoints about the way that literary tradition should be conceptualized, there is not even a consensus concerning the identity of the phenomena under investigation—i.e. of what is being described by the various conceptualizations.

Dictionary definitions provide little clarification. Among the definitions of ‘tradition’ given by the Oxford English Dictionary is:

A belief, statement, custom, etc., handed down by non-written means (esp. word of mouth, or practice) from generation to generation.‡

This definition has an intuitive appeal; most accounts of tradition do involve something being passed from one generation to the next. Yet even putting aside the problematic stipulation about ‘non-written means’, which obviously poses a problem for literary tradition, it is not evident that the definition captures what critics and scholars mean when they refer to such entities as ‘the great tradition’, ‘the classical tradition’, ‘the

Western tradition’, etc. In addition to what is ‘handed down’, many of the accounts of tradition examined in this thesis also contain an implication of continued existence—i.e., that knowledge or belief of something’s *having been* handed down and which marks it as ‘traditional’ in the first place. Furthermore, the word ‘tradition’ in a literary context usually connotes the effective or affective power of *that* which *has been* handed down—i.e., what makes tradition more than merely a representation of the past and enables it to shape the present and future.

The inadequacy of a definition which describes ‘tradition’ in such limited terms—i.e. of ‘handing down’—is further evident when we turn to actual examples of literary criticism. For instance, in *The Anatomy of Influence* (2011) Harold Bloom describes Samuel Beckett as ‘the final great original in Western literary tradition’. Bloom is characteristically inconsistent on this point: in the earlier *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002), writing of the death of the eponymous hero of Goethe’s *Faust*, he declares that ‘more than Goethe’s Faust dies here: the entire Western literary tradition from Homer through Dante on to Shakespeare and Goethe attains its conclusion’. The validity of such judgements aside, in arguing for the places of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Beckett in ‘Western literary tradition’, Bloom is surely invoking something far more complex than is described in the above *OED* definition. A mere continuous ‘handing down’ hardly warrants the significance which Bloom attaches to membership of this tradition. Furthermore, if ‘Western literary tradition’ is merely a matter of generational continuity, Bloom’s claim to have identified

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the conclusion of that tradition requires an explanation, since these authors and their works are still published and read today. Defining ‘tradition’ merely as the handing down of something from generation to generation captures only one aspect of a complex process; it fails to suggest the richness, depth, and nuances of human culture, considered in both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Whatever the specifics of Bloom’s own understanding of literary tradition may be, his use of the phrase ‘Western literary tradition’ in this context seems intended to signify some of that complexity.

Understanding the notion of literary influence in literary criticism requires a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing insights from linguistic fields such as lexicography and etymology, as well as other disciplines that have wrestled with tradition as a concept such as philosophy, sociology, theology, jurisprudence, and anthropology. Combining the insights of these methodical examinations with less systematic observations drawn from literary criticism, the rest of this chapter is devoted to constructing a framework that is employed in the following chapters for comparing and contrasting different understandings of tradition.

I begin by looking at the imbalance between the extensive employment of the concept of tradition and the comparative lack of theorization, followed by an examination of several possible reasons for this gap in scholarship, including the unassuming nature of the word ‘tradition’ in scholarly discourse, its employment as a way of avoiding detailed argument, and the overlap between the notion of tradition and other concepts in the humanities and literary studies. I then examine some of the various attempts to define tradition by literary critics, lexicographers, and scholars in several other disciplines. While demonstrating the inadequacy of any one specific definition in understanding literary
tradition, I draw out the key elements from a variety of approaches which will then be used to outline the basic analytical framework to be employed in subsequent chapters. The final section of this chapter is devoted to describing this framework, including an outline of the major aspects of tradition that it maps and establishing the standard terminology that will be employed in subsequent chapters.

1.2 TRADITION IN LITERARY CRITICISM

1.2.1 The Prevalence of Tradition as a Concept in Literary Criticism

Scholars, commentators, pedagogues, critics, journalists, philologists, professors—pick a marker of authority and judgement and you confront the idea of tradition.5

Seth Lerer

If, for the moment, we retain the key feature gleaned from the aforementioned OED definition of tradition—i.e. that it involves something being handed down from generation to generation—we may conclude that, in common with most other areas of cultural activity, tradition is everywhere to be found in literature and literary studies.6 The very title of this thesis, The Anatomy of Literary Tradition, is traditional in this sense. It belongs to a tradition of book-naming that originated nearly four centuries ago with Robert Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621).7 The OED dates Burton’s particular usage of the word ‘anatomy’ back to the mid-16th century, defining it as: ‘The dissection or dividing of anything material or immaterial, for the purpose of examining its

5 Lerer, Tradition, 1.
7 Robert Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy (New York, 2001). It is worth noting that virtually every mention of tradition in The Anatomy of Melancholy is disapproving: e.g. ‘where God hath ceremonies, the devil will have his traditions’ (pg. 321).
parts’. Ever since Burton’s ‘dissection’ of melancholic affliction, and especially in recent decades, the number of kindred anatomies has continued to grow. From Robert O. Paxton’s *The Anatomy of Fascism* (2004) to the Arbinger Institute’s *The Anatomy of Peace* (2006), the eponymous offspring of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* have steadily increased in number. In the field of literary studies, Harold Bloom published his already-mentioned *The Anatomy of Influence* in 2011. The title of this work is a twofold allusion: firstly to Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and secondly to Bloom’s previous work, *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). In the ‘Praeludium’ to *The Anatomy of Influence*, Bloom identifies Burton’s book as the model for his own, adding that his critical mentor, Samuel Johnson, also ‘read Burton to pieces’. Bloom also mentions the influences of W. B. C. Watkins’ *An Anatomy of Milton’s Verse* and Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), thereby placing himself in a critical tradition in addition to one of book-naming.

This inherited practice of book-naming might seem trivial as far as traditions go, hardly on a par with ‘the Western literary tradition’; yet it is not without purpose. For

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10 Bloom, *Anatomy*.
example, by explicitly placing my own thesis in this lineage, I hope to accomplish at least two things: firstly, to indicate at the outset the nature of my project. Like the books just cited, as well as other works whose titles take the same form (see footnote 9), the aim of this thesis is a detailed examination of the parts and structure of my chosen subject matter. The matter dissected herein is the concept of literary tradition as it appears in literary criticism and scholarship. Secondly, there is a rhetorical strategy involved. By consciously alluding to Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (and other similarly titled works) I hope to escape censure for the impertinent use of the definite article in my own thesis title—I have, after all, subordinated myself to a tradition, and surely there is nothing impertinent about that (or so I would have the reader think). Then again, as of this writing there are no other conceptual analyses of literary tradition of comparable detail and breadth; so, for the time being at least, this thesis really does stand as the anatomy of literary tradition.

As this brief account of the title of my thesis suggests, elements of tradition, understood as a process of ‘handing down’, can be found in almost any aspect of literature and its study. Wherever literary practices (e.g. book naming conventions) persist, tradition is present.\(^{14}\) Yet in his influential essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, T. S. Eliot claims that ‘[in] English writing we seldom speak of tradition’.\(^{15}\) While that statement may have been true in 1919 when Eliot wrote it, since then a vast body of critical and scholarly writing about English literature has appeared in which the concept

\(^{14}\) The above account also suggests a normative aspect of tradition that is not covered by the *OED* definition cited above. More will be said on this later in this chapter.

of tradition appears with notable frequency. This change is evident in the introduction to the collection *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Poetry* (2002), in which Barbara Garlick writes that ‘one of the most debated issues in literary discussion hinges on the question of tradition and how far writers fit into or diverge from the demands of tradition’.16 She is borne out by the fact that throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, critical studies which contain the word ‘tradition’ in their title have been a regular event. There are famous landmark works such as Granville Hicks’s *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (1933), F. R. Leavis’s *The Great Tradition* (1948), Gilbert Highet’s *The Classical Tradition* (1949), and M. H. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1973).17 There have also been major anthologies of literature and criticism whose selections are based on the premise that they belong to a common tradition—e.g. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends* (2006)—or to a set of related traditions—e.g. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English* (2007).18 And there has been an abundance of recent scholarly titles, a small number of which include:

- *Rereading Women: Thirty Years of Exploring Our Literary Traditions* (2011)

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This list contains no more than a tiny fraction of recent book-length scholarly works which include the word ‘tradition’ in their title. But even this limited sample indicates both academic literary criticism’s ongoing concern with tradition, as well as the sheer variety of phenomena that are regarded as either comprising a tradition or being affected by one.

1.2.2 Literary Tradition: An Unexamined Concept

Despite the frequency of the term ‘tradition’ in literary criticism, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the concept by scholars. While there has been a great deal of scholarship engaged with literary tradition—conceived either as a monolithic cultural

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entity, e.g. the Western tradition, or in terms of a plurality of individual traditions, e.g. the African American literary tradition, the poetic tradition, the genteel tradition, etc.—there has nonetheless been very little scholarship dedicated to an examination of literary tradition conceived in the abstract. Scholars who have remarked on this gap in scholarship include Michael D. C. Drout and Brian Stock. Stock, opposing tradition to the concept of modernity, writes that:

The field of study is ... somewhat unbalanced. There are dozens of works on modernity, and many more if one includes related notions like modernism, modernization, and postmodernism. There are far fewer inquiries into the nature of tradition, and few indeed that have a theoretical dimension.

One possible reason for this neglect is suggested by the critic and philosopher Stein Haugom Olsen. Olsen argues that the alternative notion of *canon* has replaced that of tradition in literary studies in recent decades. Despite being frequently alluded to in literary criticism,

the concept of tradition ... has ceased to be the focus of an ongoing debate about the nature and value of works of the literary past and their relation to the literature of the present.

While some notable exceptions will be examined in this thesis, Olsen’s claim that contemporary literary scholars are generally reluctant to tackle the problem of tradition directly, preferring to employ newer critical concepts, such as canon, to discuss matters that older writers associated with tradition, is broadly correct. Unfortunately, Olsen’s own account largely defines tradition in terms of what it is not, i.e. canonicity, without

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21 Stock, *Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past*, 159. Stock’s book straddles multiple disciplines including literary study, sociology, history, and anthropology. His claim can therefore be understood as applying to the humanities as a whole.
22 Olsen, ‘Canons and Tradition’, 147–60. See section 1.3.4 for more detail on the distinction between canon and tradition.
ever getting around to describing what it is. He does outline a few features of tradition that belong to many other accounts: e.g. identifying the content of the tradition with some form of literary ‘practice’; and possessing some form of continuity (though the latter is explained primarily in terms of ‘influence’).23 But he also insists that tradition is fundamentally ‘anonymous’—i.e. ‘it cannot be changed by authoritative fiat’—and that it is ‘linked to the notion of culture’, an observation that does little to elucidate the concept.24 Indeed, Olsen’s preference for the notion of tradition over canon is rooted in the former’s non-specificity, writing: ‘the notion of “tradition” has a broad range of applications in various spheres of life which provides a broad commonsense basis for its use in literary studies’.25

Some critics have taken the opposite path of translating the notion of tradition into terms of other concepts which are ostensibly better understood or more theoretically useful. For example, Göran Hermerén, finding the notion of tradition unclear, tries to account for it in terms of influence.26 However, as I demonstrate in section 1.3.3.3 which deals with Hermerén’s work in more detail, the notion of tradition is extremely resistant to such reductionist strategies. More recently, in *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (2006), Michael D. C. Drout attempts to explain literary tradition in terms of memetics, based on the Darwinian notion that ‘culture evolves through the differential reproduction of self replicating

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23 Olsen, ‘Canon and Tradition’, 158.
24 Olsen, ‘Canon and Tradition’, 159.
entities’ that are ‘copied in and spread among human minds’. Drout expands his notion of the literary meme to cover influence as well as tradition in *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Saxon Literature: An Evolutionary Cognitivist Approach* (2011). Reversing Hermerén’s strategy, he first attempts to translate influence into tradition, which is in turn translated into the survival of memes. However, even supposing the validity of Drout’s thesis, the recent date of its formulation and its reliance on developments in the field of cognitive science somewhat militates against it being what was meant by earlier critics who refer to ‘literary tradition’ in their work. Furthermore, as this thesis will show, Drout’s exercise in literary scientism is also inconsistent with what the overwhelming majority of contemporary critics mean by ‘literary tradition’. Even if Drout’s claim that meme theory can show us ‘how tradition works’ is accepted as an account of cultural transmission, the insights gained would add nothing to our understanding of tradition as a concept employed in literary criticism other than his own.

The rare attempts to define tradition without reverting to other concepts have not fared much better. In the promisingly titled ‘What is Tradition?’, from his book *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern* (1992), Gerald L. Bruns concedes at the outset that he ‘cannot promise to produce a clear idea of what tradition is’, insisting that in his examination the concept behaves ‘as if it were trying to resist conceptualization’. Instead, he writes that ‘it will be enough if I can just make it harder for people to speak of tradition in the usual way, without a second thought’. Likewise, the title of Seth Lerer’s

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Tradition: A Feeling For the Literary Past (2016), suggests a contribution to the understanding of literary tradition. Unlike Bruns, Lerer is prepared to advance some notions of what tradition is: ‘Tradition, in my view, is not a thing, it is an activity. To work within a tradition is to make anew, not just to curate’. Unfortunately that is about as precise as Lerer gets, since his work is actually concerned with the question of ‘how we can have an unironic, affective relationship to the literary past in an age marked by historical self-consciousness, critical distance, and shifts in cultural literacy’. Instead of developing his definition further, Lerer’s conceptualization of tradition becomes more capacious and, as a result, less insightful: ‘That is my sense of tradition: a continuous process in which we see the past through the present’. Lerer is also contradictory, while his initial definition states that tradition ‘is not a thing’, he goes on to argue that a literary tradition ‘is the assembly of works and writers, drawn from history, but realigned into an object of study or pleasure or teaching’, a move which leaves tradition sounding less like an activity and much more like a thing.

Despite his own imprecise formulation of literary tradition, Lerer’s work makes an important contribution to the understanding of literary tradition in its first chapter: ‘Traditions of Tradition’. In this chapter, Lerer sets out to do what this thesis attempts on a much larger scale: ‘reviewing the traditions of tradition—by looking at the ways in which the term has been invoked (for good and bad) by a variety of literary critics’. Even apart from length (Lerer devotes only a handful of pages to this task) the present thesis

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31 Lerer, Tradition, vii.
32 Lerer, Tradition, vii.
33 Lerer, Tradition, viii.
34 Lerer, Tradition, x.
35 Lerer, Tradition, 4.
differs from Lerer’s chapter in its comparative approach, whereas Lerer is content to assemble a series of impressionistic quotes from a variety of scholars that touch on the notion of tradition. Yet while it may leave one wanting a more analytic approach, Lerer’s book, along with the earlier piece by Stein Haugom Olsen, indicates a renewed interest in the notion of tradition.

This is much more than another recent work with the promising title *Rethinking Tradition in English Language and Literary Studies* (2017) accomplishes. Unfortunately, none of the contributors to this collection actually do anything that amounts to ‘rethinking tradition’. Even the editors, who claim ‘a dedication to establishing new approaches toward the relationship between tradition and contemporariness’ seem to take both concepts very much for granted.\(^\text{36}\) At most, the essays in the collection engage in a ‘evaluation of traditional posits’, which is to say that they are concerned with specific traditions and not tradition in the abstract. Misnamed as the collection may be, its title serves as a useful example of the imprecise way the term ‘tradition’ is invoked in modern scholarship.

### 1.3 The Neglect of Tradition in Literary Criticism

While the aforementioned works purporting to deal with literary tradition may not provide satisfactory answers to the questions asked in this thesis, their very existence suggests a recent surge of interest in the subject. If so, it is proper that some consideration be given to the reasons that the notion of literary tradition has been so frequently

\(^{36}\) Babić, Bijelić and Penda, *Rethinking Tradition*, vii.
overlooked in the past. The possible causes are manifold: the influence of formalist approaches for much of the 20th century; tradition’s perceived opposition to rationalism by enlightenment thinkers; the association of tradition with reactionary politics and many others. A detailed discussion of these must be postponed for another project. In this section, I will merely indicate some of the major factors that provide the context for much of what follows: the unassuming nature of the word ‘tradition’ in both academic and non-academic discourse; the exploitation of this characteristic by some scholars; and lastly, the overlap that exists between the concept of literary tradition and various other critical terms employed by critics—namely, ‘culture’, ‘ideology’, ‘influence’, ‘canon’, and even ‘literature’ itself.

1.3.1 ‘Tradition’: An Unassuming Word

The fact that ‘tradition’ is a term familiar from everyday usage most likely plays a role in its neglect by literary scholars. Unlike other contested terms such as ‘historicism’ or ‘temporality’, words which rarely appear outside of academic discourse, ‘tradition’ finds

39 A not unfounded association. For example, the notion of tradition dominates the works of the anti-liberal Italian philosopher Julius Evola: ‘In the world of Tradition the most important foundation of the authority and of the right (ius) of kings and chiefs, and the reason they were obeyed, feared, and venerated, was essentially their transcendent and nonhuman quality’ (7). See: Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, trans. by Guido Stucco (Rochester, 1995).
40 Edward Shils dates the neglect of tradition among scholars from the Enlightenment. For the *philosophes*, ‘the traditionality which was pervasive in the *ancien régime*, but not to the exclusion of considerations of interest and power, helped to sustain these other features of the society which were abhorrent to rationalists, secularists, progressives, and egalitarians. Traditionality became associated with a particular kind of society and culture... The first entry on the agenda of the Enlightenment was therefore to do away with traditionality as such; with its demise, all the particular substantive traditions would likewise go’ (6). While agreeing with Shils’s timeline, the legal scholar H. Patrick Glenn argues that recently a reversal in tradition’s fortune has occurred: he claims that ‘after two or three centuries of neglect and opprobrium in the western world,’ tradition has ‘recently received renewed attention’. He argues that intellectuals are turning to tradition ‘as a possible means of maintaining social coherence and identity in liberal, industrialized societies’ (xxiv). See Shils, *Tradition*; H. Patrick Glenn, *Legal Traditions of the World: Sustainable Diversity in Law*, 5th edn (Oxford, 2014).
its way into everyday language. In a 2015 interview on CNN, Donald Trump, then a candidate running in the Republican Party presidential primaries, told the interviewer, ‘I’m for traditional marriage’.41 The following year, on the day of his inauguration, President-elect Trump attended the pre-inaugural worship service at St. John’s Episcopal Church across the street from the White House, an event which an online article published by The Nation described as part of ‘a long-running tradition on Inauguration Day’.42 When we hear or read the word ‘tradition’ on such occasions, most of us—in the manner of Augustine when regarding the notion of time43—have an instinctive understanding of what is being evoked in the given context, even if we are unable to put this understanding into our own words. Most probably a sense is evoked of something having come down to us from the past, and which warrants our attention in some way. It is usually only when it is invoked in the grand hieratic manner of a Harold Bloom—‘Tradition is not only a handing down or process of benign transmission; it is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion’44—or in a highly politicized context such as feminist literary theory—‘the lost continent of the female tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English literature’45—that the word ‘tradition’ strikes us at all.

It is perhaps a consequence of this colloquial ubiquity that literary scholars have rarely bothered to examine the word or the concept in greater detail. ‘Tradition’ is a word that, to borrow a phrase from C. S. Lewis, causes very little ‘semantic discomfort’.46 Semantic discomfort, according to Lewis, is felt by readers when they detect a possible gap between the sense they are applying to a word, and what the author likely intended. This is especially evident when reading old books that contain words whose sense has changed over time, or which had multiple senses to begin with. The words which are most dangerous to a correct interpretation of a text, Lewis argues, are those whose meaning has altered, but not drastically enough to produce the effect of semantic discomfort in readers which would alert them to the shift. Even more troublesome, I would argue, are words like ‘tradition’ which, having undergone many shifts in meaning and having accumulated a great many senses, cannot even be assigned a determinate meaning in their everyday contemporary usage. Despite this, ‘tradition’ is commonly employed and usually passes without notice. While this might not hinder ordinary communication, it does present a problem in academic usage where a particular conception of tradition may have major theoretical ramifications. Nevertheless, the employment of the word ‘tradition’ in academic discourse ordinarily mirrors the imprecise everyday usage. This is shown by the fact that a single work of scholarship may employ the word ‘tradition’ in a variety of senses without ever causing the reader any apparent interpretive difficulties. ‘Tradition’ fails, as Lewis puts it, to ‘[rouse one], like a terrier to the game’, and consequently disparate and potentially incommensurate usages easily go unnoticed and unchecked.47

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For example, in David Lodge’s classic work of criticism, *The Art of Fiction* (1992), the term ‘tradition’, including its adjectival and adverbial forms, appears a relatively modest thirty-three times. Of these, three are referring to non-literary matters such as ‘traditional religious belief’ or the ‘traditional age of majority’.

The greater number, however, relate to literature. Yet, even in these instances there is a wide range of application. Some instances refer to technical or stylistic matters: for example, ‘traditional narrative’, ‘the classic realist tradition’, or ‘the traditional model of good literary prose’. Other instances refer to literary genres: e.g. ‘the literary tradition of autobiography’, ‘traditional romance’, the ‘gothic-horror tradition’. Elsewhere, what is referred to is much more specific, such as the literary afterlife of a single author or work: e.g. ‘the Dickensian tradition’, or ‘the tradition of Thomas More’s *Utopia*’. In one even more specific instance, Lodge appears to retrospectively construct a tradition in order to locate his own novel, *Small World* (1984), within it:

In associating coincidence with ‘farce’, [Henry James] was no doubt thinking of French boulevard comedies at the turn of the century, by writers like Georges Feydeau, which all turn on sexually compromising situations, and *Small World* belongs to this tradition.

Whether or not such a made-to-order lineage—i.e. Feydeau → James → Lodge—is a tradition in the proper sense will be considered at greater length in Chapter 4. At present, we should simply note that the above example of a literary tradition appears very different in kind to, for instance, ‘the long humanist tradition of autobiographical fiction’

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49 Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 147, 183, 90.
51 Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, 58, 143.
which Lodge refers to elsewhere, and whose pedigree he does not feel similarly obliged to provide.\textsuperscript{54} Lastly, there are references to literary traditions of the broadest kind: ‘traditional fiction’, ‘traditional literary discourse’, and ‘the inherited literary traditions of England and Europe’.\textsuperscript{55}

In all the foregoing examples, it is not entirely clear whether there is a common meaning to the word ‘tradition’ shared by all instances of Lodge’s usage. However, this is not because the examples themselves are unclear; most of them are reasonably specific in identifying the aspect of literature that is being labelled as traditional. Rather, it is the concept of tradition itself that requires elucidation.

The situation is exacerbated by the existence of another usage of ‘tradition’ that is as common in literary scholarship as it is elsewhere, and which I am not directly concerned with in this thesis. In this usage, the word ‘tradition’ denotes the similarity of an action with an earlier action. It can be demonstrated by the following quote drawn from the 1999 preface of Judith Butler’s \textit{Gender Trouble}: ‘As Drucilla Cornell, in the tradition of Adorno, reminds me: there is nothing radical about common sense’.\textsuperscript{56} It could be argued that Butler is placing Cornell in a tradition of which Theodor Adorno is either the originator or one of Cornell’s most immediate or noteworthy predecessors. It is more likely, however, that Butler simply means that Cornell’s reminder to her is \textit{in the manner} of Adorno—i.e., it shares some key features with something that Adorno had written

\textsuperscript{54} Lodge, \textit{The Art of Fiction}, 222.  
\textsuperscript{55} Lodge, \textit{The Art of Fiction}, 14, 127, 18.  
\textsuperscript{56} Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity} (New York, 2007), xix.
previously. Sure enough, in *Minima Moralia* (1951), Adorno wrote the following apropos common sense:

Common sense ... shares with the dialectic a freedom from dogma, narrow-mindedness and prejudice. Its sobriety undeniably constitutes a moment of critical thinking. But its lack of passionate commitment makes it, all the same, the sworn enemy of such thinking.\(^{57}\)

If by writing ‘in the tradition of Adorno’ Butler is simply pointing to the similarities between the position put forth by Cornell and the one earlier expressed by Adorno, then her use of ‘tradition’ is figurative and, as it does not imply any views about how tradition works, needn’t concern us. Such usage might, however, suggest something about attitudes towards tradition as a source of authority and it is worth considering the rhetorical strategies involved in referring to something as being a tradition. This line of thought is taken up in Chapter 4 when I consider the normative aspect of tradition.

1.3.2 **Tradition as a Ploy in Academic Discourse**

Given that the word ‘tradition’ signifies many things, its use by literary critics runs the danger of rendering significant conceptual and theoretical differences invisible. ‘Tradition’ can act as a conceptual ‘black box’, concealing any number of contradictory meanings behind an unassuming signifier. The philosopher Roger Scruton argues that the very slipperiness of the word makes it an attractive and effective means of avoiding precision and obscuring gaps in arguments. Scruton, who frequently deals with tradition and its implications in both his philosophical and political writings, suggests that the use of the word ‘tradition’ by scholars in the humanities often ‘substitutes for a considerable

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lack of theory’. This charge is echoed by Michael D. C. Drout in relation to literary criticism, writing that many critics prefer to see tradition as ‘a nebulous force’ or a vague but sinister ‘conspiracy by hegemonic interests’, rather than attempt any conceptual clarification which might not serve their interpretations so well.

The tendency of scholars to employ the term ‘tradition’ in a deliberately vague and open-ended fashion is not new. Despite its title, F. R. Leavis’s famous and controversial book, *The Great Tradition* (1948), allows the titular concept to go virtually unremarked, let alone theorized. The closest it comes to defining literary tradition is the tautological statement that by ‘great tradition’ Leavis means simply ‘the tradition to which what is great in English fiction belongs’. Literary tradition is thereby reduced to a label for a list of works with a particular quality or qualities that mark them in some sense ‘great’. If the great tradition consists of books that are great, then it follows that the Western tradition should consist of books that are Occidental in origin, the Romantic tradition of works that are romantic, and the literary tradition of anything that exhibits literary qualities, however they may be defined. Leavis, aware of the inadequacy of this definition, offers a partial defence for his loose conception of tradition on the grounds

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60 Leavis does discuss the notion of tradition elsewhere. See especially: F. R. Leavis, *Education and the University: A Sketch for an 'English School*', Revised (London, 1948), 15–21, 127–34. Here too, however, he takes the notion of literary tradition, despite calling it a ‘vague concept’, very much for granted: literary tradition, he insists, is unquestionably and producibly “there” (17).  
61 Leavis, *Great Tradition*, 16.  
62 Harry Levin noted this way back in 1950: ‘Faced with [the plurality of traditions], some critics undertake to single out one particular tradition and dub it “the great”. Thereupon they reopen the eternal debate of criticism … over what does and what doesn’t constitute greatness’. See: Harry Levin, *Contexts of Criticism* (Cambridge, 1969), 56.
that limiting the great tradition to ‘the great novelists’ (which according to him are: Jane
Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad) is useful:

To insist on the pre-eminent few in this way is not to be indifferent to tradition; on
the contrary, it is the way towards understanding what tradition is... There is a habit
nowadays of suggesting that there is a tradition of ‘the English Novel’, and that all
that can be said of the tradition (that being its peculiarity) is that ‘the English Novel’
can be anything you like. To distinguish the major novelists in the spirit proposed is
to form a more useful idea of tradition (and to recognize that the conventionally
established view of the past of English fiction needs to be drastically revised). It is in
terms of the major novelists, those significant in the way suggested, that tradition in
any serious sense, has its significance.61

Thus, for Leavis, tradition does not refer to something determinate. Rather, it is a
convention which is capable of being redefined so that it establishes a new configuration
of ‘great’ works and authors that suit the critic’s purpose. It is tempting to write this off as
an attempt by Leavis to co-opt the authority of tradition, appending it to any author
whose work he is partial to, denying it to those he isn’t. Nevertheless, the very fact that
Leavis—who R. P. Bilan described as a careful writer who ‘isn’t often guilty of such
pointless rhetoric’—offers such a clumsy definition of tradition suggests the difficulties
involved in pinning down tradition in a literary context.64

A related, though epistemologically inflated, notion of tradition was suggested by
Michel Foucault in a 1971 televised debate with Noam Chomsky. Foucault claims that
‘tradition’ is a word that is used to signify ideas which fall under the category of ‘general
collective phenomena’—that ‘by definition can’t be “attributed” [to an individual]’.65 In
other words, tradition becomes a way of marking off a particular class of cultural
phenomena as an area of inquiry or, to the contrary, marking off phenomena from an

61 Leavis, Great Tradition, 11.
64 R. P. Bilan, The Literary Criticism of F. R. Leavis (Cambridge, 1979), 139.
65 Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, Human Nature: Justice vs Power, ed. by Fons Elders (London, 2011),
18.
area of inquiry. This latter usage, in particular, becomes highly relevant within an epistemic framework that operates according to ‘the principle of the sovereignty of the subject applied to the history of knowledge’. Collective phenomena that fall under the category of ‘tradition’—which Foucault links to ‘common thought’, and ‘prejudices’ of the “myths” of a period—are an obstacle to truth, since truth can only be uncovered by the individual subject. As such, collective phenomena become something to ‘surmount or to outlive’. Tradition, so conceived, is not a body of knowledge, but rather a barrier to knowledge, at least in so far as such knowledge may be understood to meet the criteria of truth that obtains in the subject-oriented epistemological framework that Foucault insists prevails. Whereas Levis employs ‘tradition’ to delimit and authorize a particular realm of inquiry, Foucault suggests that the concept of tradition functions to exclude certain phenomena from constituting a valid area of inquiry within the truth regime that has dominated since the Enlightenment.

1.3.3 The Conceptual Overlap of Tradition with Other Concepts

Whereas section 1.3.2 addressed the multiple or nebulous senses of the word ‘tradition’ as a reason for its neglect in literary scholarship, I turn now to a further conceptual confusion that results from this polysemy. Tradition, however it is variously defined, usually connotes the transmission of some aspect of culture across time. As such, it

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69 Foucault’s own position challenged this understanding of tradition: he regarded this particular ‘romantic’ view of truth and discovery as resulting from ‘superimposing the theory of knowledge and the subject of knowledge on the history of knowledge’. Truth, in his view, was an ‘effect of knowledge’. A conception of tradition which employs Foucault’s notion of the ‘productive capacity of knowledge as a collective practice’ is no doubt worth exploring, but it is not one that is taken up in the present thesis. See: Chomsky and Foucault, *Human Nature*, 19–20.
overlaps with many other concepts: for example, habit, custom, and ritual. Even though in practice the word ‘tradition’ may encompass these and other related concepts and they are often used interchangeably, it is nevertheless possible to define each of these with greater precision to make the distinctions more rigid. Roger Scruton does this in the context of political thought, insisting that ‘tradition must be distinguished from habit, and from mechanized response’.\(^{70}\)

There are other concepts, especially those used in literary studies and the humanities, whose relationship to, and possible overlap with, tradition is somewhat more difficult to determine. The existence of such concepts, and their use by literary critics, may have contributed to the neglect of literary tradition since in most cases these overlapping concepts have already received extensive theoretical elaboration. This allows them to be applied with greater precision, since each has the benefit of a body of critical literature in which they have been extensively fleshed out by other critics.

While a list of all such terms which have potential conceptual overlap with tradition would be lengthy, I will briefly examine five in this chapter, with the modest goal of suggesting some of the ways in which this overlap might occur. The first two—culture and ideology—are widely used across many disciplines in the humanities. The remaining three—influence, canon, and literature—are more commonly associated with literary studies.

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1.3.3.1  **Culture**

It might be assumed that when we speak of tradition we are effectively speaking about culture. One modern textbook of cultural anthropology, for example, defines culture as ‘the learned and shared knowledge that people use to generate behaviour and interpret experience’?⁷¹ The definition goes on to distinguish between behaviour and knowledge:

> Important to this definition is the idea that culture is a kind of knowledge, not behavior. It is in people’s heads. It reflects the mental categories they learn from others as they grow up. It helps them generate behavior and interpret what they experience. At the moment of birth, we lack a culture. We don’t yet have a system of beliefs, knowledge, and patterns of customary behavior. But from that moment until we die, each of us participates in a kind of universal schooling that teaches us our native culture. Laughing and smiling are genetic responses, but as infants we soon learn when to smile, when to laugh, and even how to laugh. We also inherit the potential to cry, but we must learn our cultural rules for when crying is appropriate.⁷²

Culture, according to this definition, is a knowledge process in which ‘mental categories’ are inherited and passed on via socialization. Many of the characteristics that are commonly associated with tradition—i.e. customary behaviour, inheritance, normativity—are present in this definition.

However, the word ‘culture’ used in the above sense was only introduced into the English language in the late nineteenth century by the critic Matthew Arnold and the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor.⁷³ There is also a conceptual overlap between common views about tradition and earlier conceptions of culture, such as that advanced by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) who distinguished between culture and civilization. Roger Scruton writes: ‘**Kultur**, for Herder, is the life-blood of a people, the flow of moral energy that holds society intact. **Zivilisation**, by contrast, is the veneer of manners, law

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⁷² Spradley and McCurdy, *Conformity and Conflict*.
and technical knowhow’.74 There is a temptation, based on this quote, to extend the metaphor: i.e. by supposing that if culture is the life-blood or moral energy of a people, then tradition represents the ‘veins’ through which it flows.

Yet while some literary scholars may well hold views about tradition which presuppose either Herder’s view of culture, or some variation on the ‘Arnoldian’ version stated earlier, many others do not. In fact, as Stuart Hall has written, ‘the concept of culture ... is exceedingly slippery, vague, and amorphous, with multifarious and diverse meanings’.75 It would be to little purpose, therefore, to try and understand a concept whose difficulty is unacknowledged—i.e. tradition—in terms of another around which there is very little consensus: i.e. culture. Consequently, for the purposes of comparing the different understandings of tradition found in literary criticism, it is necessary to distinguish the idea of culture—with its multiple meanings and potential metaphysical and moral implications—from that of tradition.76 In the following chapters I have followed the example of the sociologist Edward Shils in adopting as neutral an approach as possible, attempting to trace the outlines of different conceptions of literary tradition without imposing the sort of metaphysical or moral implications demanded by a Herderian, Arnoldian, or any other existing definition of culture. Neither Shils’s conceptual framework nor my own is necessarily incompatible with these definitions of culture, but by excluding such concerns from any initial formulations, I am better able to analyse different conceptions of tradition without adopting the framework—philosophical,

76 Though, as we shall see, tradition may have metaphysical and moral implications of its own.
ideological, or otherwise—of either a particular theory of culture, or of any conception of tradition which arises from such a theory.

1.3.3.2 Ideology

Another concept with a potential conceptual overlap with tradition is ideology. Michael Freeden writes that ‘one central feature of ideologies is to link both diachronic and synchronic facts selectively in a web of resourceful imagination’, a formulation that bears some resemblance to several of the conceptions of tradition examined in this thesis (see especially Chapter 4).\(^7\) And in his influential paper, ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ (1970), Louis Althusser lists ‘literary culture’—along with many other cultural elements often regarded as falling into the category of tradition: e.g. rules of good behaviour, civic values, ‘proper’ rules of language, etc.—as things whose \textit{perpetuation} is necessary to the reproduction of labour power.\(^8\) Althusser argues that for labour power to reproduce, in addition to a reproduction of its skills there is required a reproduction of labour power’s submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology by the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly by the agents of exploitation and repression. The latter group, for Althusser, includes producers of literature, so that they too will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words’.\(^9\)

Yet Althusser’s formulation of ideology as inclusive of tradition stands in contrast to that of Alvin Gouldner, who proposes a conception of ideology in contradistinction to

tradition. Gouldner argues that ideology ‘promises a *detraditionalization* of society and of communication’ (emphasis added). This is because ideology allows for ‘new kinds of claims and new kinds of legitimations [for those claims]’ than those that are possible in a society in which a traditional mode of thought dominates. In such a society, the legitimate consists of ‘the What Has Been, the Old’. According to Gouldner:

The *tradition-dissolving* consequences of ideology arise, in part, because they enable actors to acquire distance from the at-hand immediacies of everyday life ... Ideologies, then, enable people more effectively to pursue interests without being restricted by particularistic ties and by the *conventional bonds of sentiment or loyalty* that kinsmen and neighbours owe one another. ... Ideology serves to uproot people; to further uproot the already uprooted, to extricate them from immediate and *traditional social structures* to elude the limits of the ‘common sense’ and the limiting perspective of ordinary language, thus enabling persons to pursue projects they have chosen.

But whether or not either of these accounts by Althusser and Gouldner of the relationship between tradition and ideology is correct, the matter has little bearing on this thesis. This is because, regardless of whether or not tradition is best understood under the rubric of ideology, as was the case with culture many scholars who employ the concept of literary tradition in their work manifestly do not share these assumptions. And while an ideological critique of the ways tradition has been understood and made use of by literary scholars is no doubt possible, it is first necessary to know what those understandings of literary tradition are which are being critiqued, and to describe and catalogue them in all their variety.

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83 Gouldner, ‘Ideological Discourse as Rationality and False Consciousness’, 204.

84 For some examples of those who do, see Chapter 4 of this thesis.
1.3.3.3  

**Influence**

Turning to a concept more usually associated with literary criticism, we again encounter the same difficulty of conceptual overlap that was present between tradition and culture/ideology. Any attempt to theorize or define literary tradition needs to address the fact that it intersects with many other literary critical concepts, and some justification is required if it is to exist alongside them in the standard critical vocabulary. Examples of literary concepts which share some features with tradition include influence, canon, genre, reception, and literary history. Many instances of the word ‘tradition’ in literary scholarship denote meanings that, to a greater or lesser extent, are shared with these and other concepts. There is good reason, therefore, to try to understand tradition in terms of such concepts as these which have already benefitted from being the subjects of extensive theoretical investigation. But a brief look at an example of this sort of theoretical reductionism suggests why the concept of tradition deserves to remain an object of inquiry in its own right.

In his book, *Influence in Art and Literature* (1975), Göran Hermerén attempts a systematic investigation of what critics and scholars mean by the term ‘influence’. What makes Hermerén’s book interesting from the perspective of the present study is his reductionist analysis of the meaning of the word ‘tradition’, which he attempts to explain in terms of influence. He examines the possibility that influence is ‘a relationship between individual or singular works’, whereas tradition is ‘a relation between an individual work and a class of works’. 85

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I suggest that the notion of tradition should be analyzed along the following lines: X and Y belong to the same literary tradition, if and only if the following requirements are satisfied:

a) X and Y are both literary works;
b) there is some kind of similarity between X and Y;
c) there is a direct or indirect influence relation between X and Y.

... here the notion of tradition is defined partly in terms of the notion of influence; hence these notions are not incompatible with each other.\(^{86}\)

In attempting to give precision to the meaning of a ubiquitous but (then) under-theorized critical term, ‘influence’, Hermerén’s project bears a superficial resemblance to the present inquiry into literary tradition.\(^{87}\) However, in his desire to give a detailed taxonomy of ‘influence’—to ‘analyze and make precise the tools which art historians and students of literary history use’—Hermerén ignores the fact that many (perhaps most) uses of ‘influence’ are ambiguous and not especially clear in their reference. As one reviewer of the book concluded, the term ‘influence’ is ‘commonly used in a far freer sense than the author’s restrictions will allow, and his arguments will chasten no one’.\(^{88}\) Like ‘influence’, many of the most interesting uses of ‘tradition’ occur when the word is employed in a freer, more ambiguous manner than a strict definition or the sort of logical reductionism that Hermerén is attempting will allow. Consequently, I have chosen not to attempt the same sort of logical analysis in the present study, preferring instead to examine specific instances where the concept is used in literary criticism.

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\(^{86}\) Hermerén, *Influence in Art and Literature*, 305.

\(^{87}\) Hermerén’s book appeared only two years after Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* and the same year as the latter’s *A Map of Misreading*, works which, far more than Hermerén’s, helped to bring the notion of influence and influence studies back to the forefront of critical attention. See: Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry,* Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford, 1975).

1.3.3.4 Canon

Possibly the concept that most obviously overlaps with literary tradition in academic usage is that of canon, and the fortunes of literary tradition as a critical concept have been to some extent tied to this alternative conception of literary heritage. In Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals (1990), Charles Altieri defines canons as follows:

Canons are efforts to define a culture by proposing a normative archive sustaining those powers and states of being that offer the fullest possible education in a version of what the culture’s history makes possible.89

This definition suggests many of the key features usually associated with literary tradition: an ‘archive’ of cultural productions, a normative aspect, and a historical dimension. Note also that Altieri’s definition distinguishes canon from culture: canons are rather ‘efforts to define a culture’ (emphasis added). Thus, if literary tradition is synonymous with literary canon, then the relationship between literary tradition and culture is likewise made clear.

But identifying literary tradition with, or alternatively distinguishing it from, the notion of canon is not a straightforward matter, even in the work of individual critics. For example, some critics treat canon as conceptually inseparable from literary tradition, yet not synonymous. In Tradition: A Feeling for the Literary Past (2017), Seth Lerer claims that literary history lies ‘between the intersection of the history of literature and the literary canon’ in which ‘a literary tradition ... is the assembly of works and writers, drawn from history, but realigned into an object of study or pleasure or teaching’.90 For Lerer,

90 Lerer, Tradition.
then, literary tradition is neither synchronic nor diachronic (these being associated with
canon and literary history respectively) but is instead where these two aspects of literature
meet (though what this signifies in practice is less clear from Lerer’s account). Canon is
therefore one of the major axes of literary tradition, forming the content, if you will, of
tradition.

On the other hand, Stein Haugom Olsen regards canon (in the sense used by literary
critics) as a recent innovation that has usurped the place of tradition in literary discourse:
‘Until the early 1960s there were debates about the nature, content, and value of the
literary tradition’.91 Olsen points out that tradition remains a part of the vocabulary of
modern critics, but that ‘the concept has ceased to be the focus of an ongoing debate
about the nature and value of works of the literary past and their relation to the literature
of the present’.92 That this has not been entirely satisfactory is proposed by Olsen in
‘Canon and Tradition’ (2015) in which he argues that tradition might actually be a more
theoretically useful notion than canon for understanding literary heritage, avoiding many
of the fruitless debates engendered by the latter concept.93

In the present thesis, I propose to make no strict distinction between canon and
tradition; which is to say that I shall not assume that talk of canon precludes the notion of
tradition. This is especially the case in Chapter 2, where I discuss the notion of
simultaneous tradition, many examples of which could also be analysed as examples of
canon-based thinking.

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1.3.3.5 Literature

Yet another possible reason why literary tradition remains such a vague concept in literary studies might be that it is buried within the equally vague and even more ubiquitous concept of literature itself. According to Christopher Cannon, the modern usage of ‘literature’ first appears in English at the conclusion of the Middle English period in *The Life of St Werburge of Chester* (c.1513) by Henry Bradshaw (1450-1513).\(^94\) Cannon argues that, in contrast with earlier usages of ‘literature’ which meant ‘books’ or ‘learning’, Bradshaw additionally gave the word the ethical, affective, and aesthetic senses that are familiar from modern usage.\(^95\) ‘What were mankynde without lytterature? / Full lytell worthy / blynded by ignoraunce’.\(^96\)

I suggest that Bradshaw’s emphasis on writing’s ability to preserve and transmit cultural heritage is even more fundamental to his conception of literature: ‘The actis of the apostoles / with the doctours four, Be preserued by wrytyng / and put in memorie, With the lyues of saintes many a noble storie’.\(^97\) Furthermore, for Bradshaw, literature is not merely one possible way of transmitting tradition among many, but the only effective method: ‘The notable actes / of our fathers, I say, / (yf littyterature were nat) might nat nowe be tolde, / Nor auncient histories and cronycles olde’.\(^98\) The focus on Saints’ lives, ancient histories, and chronicles suggests that Bradshaw’s emphasis on tradition

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\(^{94}\) Christopher Cannon, *Middle English Literature* (Cambridge, 2008), 150.

\(^{95}\) Cannon, *Middle English Literature*, 150–51.


\(^{97}\) Bradshaw, *The Life of Saint Werburge of Chester*, vv. 2.33-35.

\(^{98}\) Bradshaw, *The Life of Saint Werburge of Chester*, vv. 2.26-28. This is a view shared by many modern theologians in arguing for the primacy of the written word of the Bible over other forms of the ‘Word of God’ (e.g. personal address). See, for example: Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (London, 1994), 50.
‘preserved by wrytyng’ is closely tied to his views about the type of works deserving of the appellation ‘literature’ as he defines it. As Cannon points out, ‘Bradshaw includes any “wryting” made valuable by the “lernynge” it has “preserved” in the new category he is assembling’.99 Canon formation is thus a major part of this new understanding of literature. This is not, of course, to suggest that literature was not already fulfilling this traditional function prior to Bradshaw’s formulation. Nor did this new conception of literature arise in a vacuum:

A rich set of classical traditions was important to this emergence as well, but the change also involved both a general moment and a number of significant acts of real ‘creativity’ which I will associate with the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, not so much because he was extraordinarily innovative (although he was), but because the new forms, practices and ideas he introduced into English poetry were hugely significant as they became ‘in their turn models’.100

This suggests that English literature—which was always a medium for transmitting tradition, as well as itself subject to the normative power of past literary examples—now became aware of itself as a tradition. Literature was now explicitly the content of tradition, as well as the medium of transmission. Christopher Cannon writes:

This is hardly the ‘birth’ of English literature, not least because Bradshaw’s confidence is a fairly strong indication that this birth has long ago occurred. But it is the emergence of a new self-consciousness, a new clarity about the nature and function of English writing in that writing, an awareness that is itself a significant cultural change.101

It is the context of classical and Christian traditions, combined with a new awareness of literature not merely as the bearer of traditions of an extra-literary nature (i.e. the lives of the Saints) but as a category of tradition in its own right, that creates a new,
intrinsically *traditional* understanding of literature. Bradshaw’s use of ‘litterature’ is an early example of this self-conscious awareness of the traditional character of English literature *qua litterature*. Centuries later, in the writings of more historically-minded critics and scholars, this concern would become much more explicit. Nonetheless, an awareness of literature’s traditional character is present in a nascent form five centuries ago in Bradshaw’s *Life of St Werburge*.

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The fact that there is no general agreement on the conceptual overlap between tradition and the concepts described above suggests that the notion of literary tradition is worth investigating in its own right. It may be that one or more of these or other concepts do overlap to an extent that renders the notion of literary tradition conceptually redundant. In literary studies, the fact that the concepts of influence and canon have been heavily theorized, while tradition has not, may be an indication that scholars have found the former to be more useful in the investigation of literature. Nevertheless, that tradition has been put forward as an alternative concept to both influence and canon, and that scholars and critics continue to invoke ‘literary tradition’ in their work despite having these apparently well formulated concepts at hand, at the very least suggests judgement should be suspended pending further investigation.
1.4 Defining Tradition

1.4.1 Defined by Critics

Having examined some of the reasons why tradition may have been overlooked by literary scholars, and how this can lead to ambiguous usage in criticism, I shall turn now to some examples where individual scholars have employed the notion of tradition with some degree of deliberation. Occasionally, individual scholars will define tradition as they wish it to be understood in their own work, though such examples are the exception to the rule and rarely achieve precision. The examples examined in this section all date from after 1967 and are roughly contemporary with the theoretical turn in literary studies. During this period, there was a trend in literary criticism towards showing a greater theoretical self-awareness about concepts like literary tradition. Nevertheless, even though the following examples are instances in which ‘tradition’ has been used with more care than is normal, the semantic flexibility of the word remains very much in evidence.

To begin with, in Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry (1979) Philip Hobsbaum writes that:

The concept of tradition in this book is the key theme that links its several chapters together. The basic form in English is that of Piers Plowman: narrative verse in a highly alliterative idiom; and it is surprising how constant this métier has been. [...] The claim put forward is that the central line of English poetry—the tradition, so to speak—is earthy, alliterative, colloquial, with a strong regard for structure and the claims of plot.102

In this passage, tradition is defined as a set of characteristics that have had a ‘constant’ presence in a particular national literature over time, these characteristics being typified by William Langland’s poem. In claiming that these characteristics form the ‘central line
of English poetry’, Hobsbaum might initially seem to be suggesting that those same characteristics, which also comprise the theme linking his chapters, have not been selected to impose order on the material but exist prior to his choice to study them. At the same time, Hobsbaum seems to acknowledge that this is not truly a tradition in the sense in which the word often implies: he writes that this ‘central line’ is ‘the tradition, so to speak’ (emphasis added), implying that the word is being employed in a nonstandard or figurative manner, leaving it to the reader to discern precisely to what extent the word ‘tradition’ is signifying a diachronic cultural entity of some sort, and to what extent it is a useful critical metaphor that has the organizational function of linking the chapters of the book together and the pedagogical one of limiting the ‘bewildering proliferation of poetry in English’ to an amount manageable for the university student.103

Hobsbaum, then, provides a narrow, though imprecise, account of tradition, tailored for the purposes of this particular work of scholarship, only as precise as it needs to be for that purpose. Another approach to the concept of literary tradition can be seen in the following excerpt from *The Tradition of Smollett* (1967) by Robert Giddings:

> The influence of the picaresque tradition which concerns us in this study, the branch of the tradition which provided Smollett with a tradition in which to write and which in turn produced its unmistakable effect on Dickens, came to England across the Channel, from France.104

Here, the term tradition is used three times in a single sentence, and the quote reveals a much broader conception of tradition than that found in Hobsbaum. The tradition that Giddings is concerned with is ‘the picaresque tradition’. This in turn is a branch of a larger tradition, the one which provided Smollett with a tradition ‘in which to write’.

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103 Hobsbaum, *Tradition and Experiment in English Poetry*, xii.
Giddings clarifies elsewhere that it was the picaresque branch that came from France rather than the larger tradition of which it was but a part. The latter was comprised of many other traditions, most of which were native (or at least were naturalized, having been resident for some time) to Smollett’s England. Therefore, one might surmise that a literary tradition consists of various sub-strands of tradition that coalesce in the work of a writer like Smollett. Those traditions are then passed on together in their newly combined form to subsequent authors, at least to the extent of producing an ‘unmistakable effect’ upon some of them.

Even from this brief passage, Giddings’s unarticulated conception of tradition—or, at least, of this particular tradition—can be partially constructed/re-constructed: firstly, the tradition’s content consists of a generic form (i.e. the picaresque novel). This content is distinct and separable from the medium through which it is transmitted, in this case the novels which manifest the picaresque genre. Secondly, the tradition consists of divisible sub-branches, each with its own individual content and each having its own unique origin. Thirdly, once combined, these individual branches of tradition are transmittable as a new tradition; in the case of this example, the picaresque tradition has combined with others to form Smollett’s working tradition. Whether this new complex of existing traditions is a tradition at birth by virtue of its ‘traditional’ content, or whether it can only be considered a tradition when it too has been transmitted a sufficient amount of times, is not addressed. Lastly, these traditions have some effect, normative or otherwise, on those who inherit them.

Thus, even from this brief excerpt, we can see that Giddings’s conception of literary tradition, such as it is, addresses several aspects of tradition: what a tradition is (i.e. a
literary genre), certain aspects of its transmission (individual traditions which cluster together and are transmitted as a new tradition), and a tradition’s effect on later writers (encouraging further works to be written in the same genre). Later in this chapter, I will argue that these are the three major dimensions of literary tradition, according to which different understandings of tradition can be compared.

My third example of the way that ‘tradition’ is employed in literary scholarship is to be found in Derek Brewer’s *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (1982). Brewer is much more explicit than either Hobsbaum or Giddings in stating the theoretical assumptions he is making about tradition. He also is much more concerned with the normative effect of tradition than either Hobsbaum—who is largely concerned with the content of a tradition, so as to limit the scope of his study—and Giddings—who, although he touches on normative concerns, is more directly concerned with describing the diachronic structure of the picaresque tradition. In Brewer, however, the normative aspect is inherent in the very structure of tradition. He begins by describing ‘two main “vectors” or lines of force’ that are at work in the history of any art or literature:105

One is the ‘tradition’, that is, both the similarities between a sequence of images and our sense that these similarities are normative, our recognition that they show how such images should appear. The other vector may be summed up as the demands which contemporary experience makes upon the images... The vector of tradition is complex in the images themselves and the skills required in creating them. The sequence of images that compose the essential thread of the tradition is historically interrelated, not a mere succession, but not (usually) causally related as we often think historical accounts should be. The vector of contemporary demand is even more complex and variable, comprising as it may social, economic, political,

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105 Derek Brewer, *Tradition and Innovation in Chaucer* (London, 1982), 1. In this passage Brewer is referring to images found in the fine arts. He begins his discussion of tradition by a consideration of images, he says, because literature, which uses language, adds the further complication of being ‘already a very complex system of images, subject to exactly the same sort of conditioning from tradition and contemporary requirements. The verbal work of art is carved out of an art of verbal work’ (2).
psychological, personal factors, whose strength and relative proportions will vary with each work of art.106

The first thing to note is that Brewer has placed the initial instance of the word ‘tradition’ in inverted commas. This is not uncommon among literary scholars and suggests either a dissatisfaction with the concept of tradition in whatever sense is intended, or at the very least an ambivalence with the word’s multivalent, polysemic usage.107 In re-conceptualizing tradition as the intersection of competing ‘vectors’, Brewer articulates a theme what will emerge in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis: the tension between tradition as a normative force, and the interpretive situation and demands of readers. According to Brewer, the consequence of this dynamic interplay between tradition and the present is that ‘works of art of the same kind in the same tradition differ from each other because the two vectors are never the same’.108

One of the consequences of locating a work at the intersection of these two vectors—the normative influence of tradition and the interpretive situation of the reader—is that the constantly shifting demands of the present interact with tradition such that even a particular work is never a stable entity with fixed meanings and significance. In this interplay, Brewer identifies the ‘vector of contemporary demand’ as the ‘main agent of change’.109 Contemporary factors not only affect what a reader requires a work of literature to do, but even determines whether or not the tradition that the vector of contemporary demand intersects with is ‘attainable, or desired’.110 That is to say, the

106 Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 1.
107 See above, section 1.3.1.
108 Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 1.
109 Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 2.
110 Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 2.
demands of the reader to some extent create the tradition. Paradoxically, by prioritizing the vector of contemporary demand, Brewer not only puts into question the extent to which a tradition has a normative effect on a reader (rather than the other way around), he also raises doubt as to the existence or continued existence of the tradition so-called: ‘The functions we require of the [work] inevitably change, sometimes to such an extent that the sequence of [works] itself suddenly decays’.111

As stated earlier, the above examples of criticism which employ the notion of tradition are unusual in the explicitness with which tradition is treated. By contrast, most scholarship appears simply to take the notion of tradition for granted, or else allows the understanding of tradition to be governed by the theoretical or ideological assumptions of whichever disciplinary approach or theoretical framework a critic is operating under. It is precisely these assumptions about tradition that this thesis aims to elucidate. The sections which follow are intended to draw out the major features of the concept of tradition, in order to construct a framework for analysing the concept in critical writings in which the guiding assumptions are less openly stated.

1.4.2 Defined in other Disciplines

While literary scholars have been coy about defining tradition, other disciplines have not shown the same hesitation. Over the course of the latter half of the twentieth century there have been significant efforts to theorize tradition in the philosophy of science, political and moral philosophy, historiography, anthropology, biblical hermeneutics,

111 Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 2. In support of this formulation of tradition, Brewer cites T. S. Eliot’s conception of tradition (which will be discussed in Chapter 2) which states that each new work changes the tradition, and that this does not merely alter what comes after, but ‘interacts and changes the composition of the whole’ See ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ in: Eliot, ‘Tradition’, 13–22.
jurisprudence, theology, and sociology—just to name a few. Throughout this thesis I will be drawing on scholarship from other disciplines in order to shed light on different conceptions of literary tradition. However, it must also be kept in mind that the definitions of tradition found there, while often more rigorously conceived than those found in the field of literary studies, are usually tailored to meet the specific epistemological requirements of those disciplines.

Tradition became an important term in sociological literature through the writing of Max Weber, especially his essay, ‘The Three Pure Types of Legitimate Rule’ (1922). Yet, as the later sociologist Edward Shils argues, despite Weber’s inclusion of ‘traditional authority’ in his tripartite classification of authority, he ‘did not allow much of a place for tradition in his account of modern society’. This was not true, however, of Shils’s own

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112 Among works that deal with tradition in a non-literary context which nonetheless contain insights that have proven useful for thinking about literary tradition, the following proved especially useful: From philosophy I have gleaned much from the many writings of Roger Scruton, Michahel Oakeshott’s essay ‘Rationalism in Politics’ (1962), and Alasdair MacIntyre’s Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (1988). From the field of anthropology, J.C. Heesterman’s The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kinship, and Society (1985) is particularly good on the internal dynamics of cultural traditions. Among legal scholarship, I have been especially reliant on Legal Traditions of the World: Sustainable Diversity in Lawby H. Patrick Glenn. Other such works are mentioned in the main text of this thesis. See: Roger Scruton, Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey (London, 1996); Roger Scruton, A Short History of Modern Philosophy, 2nd edn (London, 2002); Roger Scruton, The Meaning of Conservatism, 3rd edn (London, 2001); Scruton, An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Culture; Oakeshott, ‘Rationalism in Politics’, 5–42; Alasdair MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame, 1988); J. C. Heesterman, The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kinship, and Society (Chicago, 1985); Glenn, Legal Traditions.

113 Shils, Tradition, 10.
writings, many of which give tradition the primary focus. Shils’s most comprehensive treatment of the topic is his 1981 book, *Tradition*, which is a summation of several decades’ thinking on the subject of tradition, the insights of which are contained throughout this thesis. The major value of Shils’s work in relation to the present thesis lies both in his detailed analysis of the various shades of traditional behaviour, and in his broad conception of what may constitute a tradition. This latter characteristic contrasts with the narrow conceptions of tradition often found in other disciplines. Shils argues that:

> Traditionality is compatible with almost any substantive content. All accomplished patterns of the human mind, all patterns of belief or modes of thinking, all achieved patterns of social relationships, all technical practices, and all physical artifacts or natural objects are susceptible to become objects in a process of transmission; each is capable of becoming a tradition.\(^{115}\)

In the present thesis, I have tried to take a similarly inclusive attitude regarding my initial assumptions, thereby allowing the various understandings of tradition held by critics to define their own content.

It is, however, instructive to consider narrower definitions of tradition. Such an example of tradition being defined in order to serve a specific purpose is found in the work of the Catholic neo-Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper. Pieper’s works on the subject

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\(^{115}\) Shils, *Tradition*, 16.
of tradition include Überlieferung: Begriff und Anspruch (1970, translated as Tradition: Concept and Claim [2008]) and Tradition als Herausforderung: Außsätze und Reden (1963, translated as Tradition as Challenge: Essays and Speeches [2015]). In contrast to Shils’s sociologically informed identification of the content of tradition in terms of ‘patterns’ of mind and behaviour, Pieper regarded tradition as the transmission of something fixed and unchanging, where what is passed on is ‘what has been received, and nothing else’. While Pieper is not referring exclusively to sacred tradition, his formulation is nevertheless tailor-made for the specific theological context where it describes the preservations of ‘a doctrine, a precedent, or an institution’ that has been ‘preserved and kept present and so to speak available without subtraction or addition, unadulterated and unmixed with anything foreign or inappropriate through the passage of time from the beginning’. The accomplishment of tradition, according to Pieper, is that it ‘precisely does not grow’.

Regardless of whether this conception of tradition is suitable to a theological context (even then, it is clearly incompatible with many strands of Protestant and liberal theology) it is in any case difficult to square Pieper’s static view of tradition, designed to preserve sacred tradition intact, with dynamic, evolving processes such as, for instance, the common law tradition, let alone a complex cultural entity like literature. And yet, despite the inapplicability of Pieper’s definition to many of the common referents to

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116 Josef Pieper, Tradition: Concept and Claim, trans. by E. Christian Kopff (South Bend, 2010); Josef Pieper, Tradition as Challenge: Essays and Speeches, trans. by Dan Farrelly (South Bend, 2015).
118 Pieper, Tradition: Concept and Claim, 21.
120 For more on common law understood as an evolving tradition, see: Scruton, Meaning of Tradition, 31–33.
which scholars apply the word ‘tradition’ in a literary context, its consideration in the present context demonstrates the usefulness of attending to non-literary accounts of tradition. The gap between Pieper’s narrow definition, and the more protean requirements of a theory of literary tradition, draws attention to a paradox in much thinking about tradition: the conflict between continuity and change, a theme taken up at greater length in Chapter 3.

From the above discussion, we can already list the following characteristics that must be accounted for in a conceptual framework designed to classify and compare different understandings of literary tradition: there is the contentual aspect of tradition, concerned with what is being handed down. Then there is the transmissive aspect of tradition that describes the process of handing down, as well as the knowledge or belief of something as having been handed down. Thirdly, there is the normative aspect of tradition which describes the effect that a tradition has on those who receive it. Additionally, the framework will have to be broad enough to encompass an indefinite variety of traditional content, as well as the possibility that that content will alter over the course of its transmissions.

1.4.3 Dictionary Definitions

The preceding sections demonstrate why a rigid definition of ‘literary tradition’ that would cover even the most common usages by literary critics is neither desirable nor possible: the term is used in too many different senses. The task, therefore, is to categorize these different senses of ‘tradition’, and to determine the ways, if any, in which they relate to one another. In this regard, even if a single definition is impossible, an examination of
the etymology and various definitions of ‘tradition’ put forth in both a literary and non-literary context is worthwhile for the purpose of discovering the most common features which are ascribed to tradition.

It might be supposed that in the usage of literary scholars, ‘tradition’ denotes something specifically literary in nature. Definitions drawn from dictionaries of literary terms support this contention to varying degrees. For example, Chris Baldick’s *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2008) states that ‘in practice, [tradition] means a specific selection of works arranged according to a certain interpretation of the past, usually made in order to lend authority to present critical arguments’.\(^{121}\) J. A. Cuddon’s *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1999), however, gives a much broader definition, declaring that tradition ‘denotes the inherited past which is available for the writer to study and learn from’, an inheritance that includes ‘the writer’s native language, literary forms, codes, devices, conventions ... and various cultures from the past’.\(^{122}\) While these definitions may be accurate in certain instances, in this thesis I argue that in many works of literary criticism a much wider, or narrower, range of meaning is implied by ‘literary tradition’.

Even if one or more of the above definitions is provisionally accepted, many questions remain unanswered: is literary tradition a subspecies or subset of cultural tradition? Are there multiple literary traditions or just one, i.e. ‘the literary tradition’? If there are many, do they share a structural likeness, or do they exist independently, each existing according


to an internal logic of its own (in which case, what unites them all as traditions?). Then there is the matter of tradition. The above definition by Chris Baldick posits that literary tradition consists of ‘works’. But if works is taken to mean the output of authors in the form of texts, does literary tradition consist of physical texts, ideal texts, or a knowledge of texts? And what then of literary forms, habits of literary composition, the reputation of literary works or their authors; do they too fall into the category of literary tradition? But even if we provisionally accept one of the above definitions of ‘literary tradition’, there remains the more fundamental question of what is meant by ‘tradition’. This surely requires an answer before we can say anything concerning traditions of a specifically literary kind. So, what is tradition?

While there are various contradictory accounts of the etymology of ‘tradition’, most of these are in agreement that the modern English word has its etymon in the classical Latin word, trādere, the meaning of which is ‘to hand over, to hand on, to deliver, hence to betray’.\(^{123}\) Trādere consists of, trā-, the combining form of trans (‘beyond, hence, by weakening, across’) and –dere, the combining form of dare: ‘to place, hence to place in the hands of’.\(^{124}\) The past participle of trādere, trāditus, gives the noun trāditō, trāditionis, which yielded the Medieval French tradition, which made its way into English. The OED claims that the modern English word is only partly a borrowing from the French, and Eric Partridge suggests that the derivative tradition might have come from the Medieval Latin, trādītionālis.\(^{125}\)

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\(^{124}\) Partridge, *Origins*, 733.

\(^{125}\) Partridge, *Origins*, 733.
In any case, ‘tradition’ has had many meanings since it entered the English language, not all of which will concern us here. Of the fourteen senses listed in the 2nd edition of the 
*OED*, the most relevant to our present enquiry are the following:126

4.a. The action of transmitting or ‘handing down’, or fact of being handed down, from one to another, or from generation to generation; transmission of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, or the like, esp. by word of mouth or by practice without writing. Chiefly in phrase by tradition.

5.a. That which is thus handed down; a statement, belief, or practice transmitted (esp. orally) from generation to generation.

5.b. More vaguely: A long established and generally accepted custom or method of procedure, having almost the force of a law; an immemorial usage; the body (or any one) of the experiences and usages of any branch or school of art or literature, handed down by predecessors and generally followed.

Sense 4.a concerns the process of transmission, preserving the sense of the Latin verb *trādere*, but adding a historical dimension—‘handing on’ has become ‘handing down’.

Sense 5.a, on the other hand, defines tradition in terms of how it exists in time—i.e. ‘Tradition’ as the content of the process described in sense 4.a (‘that which is thus handed down’). 5.b, which the definition itself describes as vague, takes account of both the diachronic and synchronic aspects of tradition. However, it also introduces the normative element: i.e. tradition having ‘almost the force of law’. The question before us is which of these three senses, if any, is meant when speaking of ‘literary tradition’? In this regard, senses 4.a and 5.a both posit tradition as something other than writing. This opposition finds its way into disciplines that study oral societies, where ‘traditional’ often refers to

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126 This definition of ‘tradition’ is drawn from the improved entry found in the *OED’s* 2nd edition. In December 2015, the *OED* 4th edition updated the online entry for ‘tradition’ which had stood unchanged since the original entry was composed in 1913 for the 3rd edition. Despite the improvements of the new entry, I have largely relied upon the entry in the 2nd edition of the *OED*. This is partly because I was not made aware of the update until a late stage of my research; partly because thinking about the limitations of the original entry is useful for understanding the limitations in the understanding of literary tradition; and partly because the earlier entry better reflects the understanding of tradition that persists in many fields, including literary studies, to the present day.
oral culture or culture which pre-dates the invention of writing. This partly stems from
the necessity in oral cultures for the preservation of knowledge, but also from the
inherent conservatism (traditionality) necessitated by oral societies, as Walter Ong argues
in his influential work *Orality and Literacy* (1982):

> Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud
soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again
what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly
traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits
intellectual experimentation. Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and
society regards highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it,
who know and can tell the stories of the days of old. By storing knowledge outside
the mind, writing and, even more, print downgrade the figures of the wise old man
and the wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of
something new.\(^\text{127}\)

While Ong’s views have been subject to criticism, the perceived link between tradition
and oral culture has persisted.\(^\text{128}\) Despite that, the two are no longer considered
synonymous: as Bruce A. Rosenberg points out, ‘literacy has become so much the norm
that we no longer think of “oral tradition” as redundant, though “tradition” originally
meant transmission by word of mouth or by custom’.\(^\text{129}\) As the very notion of literary
tradition attests, the presumed association of orality and tradition no longer holds.

But even apart from their failure to properly account for written traditions, the *OED*
definitions 4.a and 5.a both fall short of describing the usage of the word ‘tradition’ by
literary scholars. If we recall the example examined in section 1.4.1, in which Robert
Giddings writes of ‘the tradition which provided Tobias Smollett with a tradition in
which to write and which in turn produced its unmistakable effect on Charles Dickens’,


\(^{128}\) For criticism of Ong see: Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, 1999); and
the chapter ‘On beyond Ong: the bases of a revised theory of orality and literacy’ in Joyce Coleman, *Public
Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge, 1996), 1–33.

he seems to identify ‘tradition’ with both the handing on and that which is handed on. One could argue that the first usage of ‘tradition’ in the Giddings quote refers to the act of handing down a tradition, and the second usage to that which was handed down.

However, neither definition captures the normative effect that the tradition Giddings is describing (understood in both aforesaid senses) had on Smollett and Dickens. Furthermore, tradition as understood by Giddings is something that a person can write ‘in’; however such a relationship between the individual and tradition is not captured in the OED definitions 4.a and 5.a.

Despite its self-confessed vagueness, sense 5.b of the OED is more promising for our purposes. Firstly, it includes ‘the experiences and usages of any branch or school of art or literature’, thereby being the first to explicitly acknowledge the possibility of traditions of a literary kind. Secondly, it captures the normative element suggested by Giddings’s usage: i.e. that the customs or methods of procedure ‘almost have the force of law’ and are ‘generally followed’. This sense, then, captures the transmissive and the normative character of Giddings’ understanding of tradition. It fails, however, as a possible definition of tradition in a literary context due to its limited range of possible content. While it applies perfectly to methods of literary composition, it does not encompass the reception of literature, recurring themes and tropes, individual authors and works, or the physical survival of texts, all of which, as we have seen, are sometimes the referent of ‘literary tradition’, and not always discretely. For example, in the passage by Derek Brewer quoted in section 1.4.1, tradition exists both ‘in the images themselves and the skills
required in creating them’.\footnote{Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 1.} Furthermore, for Brewer it is the images (or literary themes and tropes) and not the methods by which they are created, that ‘compose the essential thread of the tradition’, and give it a historical interrelation.\footnote{Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 1.}

None of the definitions provided by the OED, then, adequately describe tradition in the sense being written about by many literary critics. Taken together, however, these three senses of ‘tradition’ adumbrate the basic outlines of the analytical framework detailed in section 1.5 of this chapter, with senses 4.a, 5.a, and 5.b respectively suggesting the transmissive, substantive, and normative aspects of tradition. These same three aspects of tradition can also be found in Raymond Williams’s entry for ‘tradition’ in his book, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (1976). Rather than attempting to provide a fixed definition, Williams instead gives a historical account of the active senses that the word has taken: ‘tradition survives in English as a description of a general process of handing down’, adding that there is ‘a very strong and often predominant sense of this entailing respect and duty’.\footnote{Williams, Keywords, 314.} Williams makes a distinction between the active and passive senses of ‘tradition’ which align roughly to the diachronic and synchronic dimensions that emerged from the OED definitions: i.e. the handing down, and what is handed down, respectively. While acknowledging the passive sense of tradition—that is, the thing that has been handed down, both in its own right and its temporal existence—Williams, taking the Latin trādere as his starting point, focuses on the four active senses: delivery, handing down knowledge, passing on a doctrine, and surrender or betrayal. It is the
second and third of these meanings, i.e. handing down knowledge and passing on
doctrine, that Williams claims became the source for the word’s development in English.
The normative dimension of tradition, he argues, grows out of the social obligations that
emerge from the active sense, the act of transmission. ‘It is easy’, writes Williams, ‘to see
how a general word for matters handed down from father to son could become
specialized, within one form of thought, to the idea of necessary respect and duty’.\footnote{133}

I will discuss Williams’s views on tradition at greater length in Chapter 4. For now, it is
enough to note three major characteristics of tradition that are raised by his *Keywords*
entry:

1) Tradition involves a handing down of something.

2) Tradition may also refer to the thing being handed down.

3) There is a normative element to both of the previous senses, implying duty or
respect.

Once again, we encounter these three elements which correspond with the three
dimensions of tradition derived from the *OED* definitions above: the transmissive,
contentual, and normative aspects of tradition. These are the three major characteristics
of tradition that any theoretical framework designed to compare different views about
literary traditions must address.

\footnote{133 Williams, *Keywords*, 314.}
1.5 Analytical Model

1.5.1 Introduction

Apart from the demonstrated differences among critics in the way they understand literary tradition, there are also differences in the terminology they use, even concerning those aspects of literary tradition which are agreed upon. In section 1.3.3, I argued that concepts such as culture, ideology, influence, and canon, often overlap with tradition. To add to this confusion, words such as ‘tradition’, ‘culture’, ‘canon’, ‘heritage’, ‘history’, ‘taste’, ‘custom’, and many others, are often used loosely and interchangeably by critics. This results in a situation, described by the literary scholar M. H. Abrams in his work *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), in which theories ‘cannot readily be compared at all, because they lack a common ground on which to meet and clash’.134 Abrams is concerned with theories of poetry, but his diagnosis readily applies to theories and models of tradition.135 What is required is a common frame of reference; an analytical framework that will, to quote Abrams, ‘translate as many sets as possible onto a single plane of discourse’.136 Such a framework has to be broad enough to capture the key features of the models of tradition found in the majority of literary theory and criticism, while at the same time drawing attention to those models whose differences are such that they are not encompassed by the assumptions present in the framework.

Taking the insights gleaned in the previous sections, and following the example of

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135 Throughout thesis I will refer to ‘models’ of tradition to signify the assumptions about tradition that, explicitly or implicitly, underpin a scholar’s work. I reserve the word ‘theories’ for those cases where a scholar has given an explicit, theoretical account of the notion of literary tradition.
Abrams’s ‘Co-ordinates of Art Criticism’, found in his introduction to *The Mirror and the Lamp*, I have decided to classify models of tradition according to an analytic scheme which can be illustrated as follows:

As the diagram suggests, I am delineating models of tradition—placed in the middle as the thing to be explained—according to three co-ordinates: content, chain, and weight. Each of these denote a different aspect of tradition.

This scheme also provides the common terminology that I shall employ when analyzing different models of tradition. Other scholars have noted the necessity of a more specialized vocabulary for discussing tradition. For example, Edward Shils calls the transmitted thing a *traditum* (pl. *tradita*) to distinguish it from the process of transmission. Since in its common usage the word ‘tradition’ may refer to either the thing transmitted, the process of transmission, or both simultaneously, Shils’s introduction of this terminology is intended to avoid confusion.\(^{137}\) Likewise, Brian Stock points to the usefulness of distinguishing the content of a tradition from its transmission. He writes: ‘for traditions to be operative in society, they must be transmitted. There is not only a *traditum*; there is also a *traditio*’.\(^{138}\)

The downside of employing the Latin-derived terminology, favoured by Stock and Shils, is twofold. Firstly, it introduces two new unfamiliar terms (not to mention that an additional term would be required to capture the normative dimension) into an already complicated array. Furthermore, these terms—*tradtum* and *traditto*—themselves overlap in meaning with what many critics mean to signify by the word ‘tradition’ itself. Critics rarely speak of *either* the content, chain, or weight, of tradition, but instead imply all three while emphasizing one of them. That is to say, the concept of tradition in its actual employment in literary criticism rarely divides into clean conceptual categories, but rather is intended to indicate a *primary orientation* towards one of the three aspects—content, chain, or weight—while retaining the other two dimensions.

As a solution, whenever I have felt it necessary or helpful to make a clear distinction between an understanding of tradition which emphasizes one of the three major characteristics, I will indicate this by the following convention in which the contents of the brackets are altered according to the aspect of tradition that is being referred to or emphasized:

\[
\text{tradition}^{[\text{content}]} \quad \text{tradition}^{[\text{chain}]} \quad \text{tradition}^{[\text{weight}]}
\]

This convention has several merits: firstly, it limits the introduction of new terminology into a situation where, as we have seen, there is already an abundance of critical jargon. Secondly, the terminology correlates with the analytical framework in a precise way, linking the central concept, tradition, and its respective co-ordinates in a common terminological form. This has the benefit of indicating the limits of the analytic framework: where the terminology does not capture a particular critic’s usage of ‘tradition’, the analytic framework is also most likely insufficient. Lastly, the
terminological convention I have adopted communicates the hierarchy of the concept, subordinating the co-ordinates of tradition to the central idea. In practice, it allows the primary orientation of a critic’s usage to be indicated, while still permitting the use of the word ‘tradition’ which, for all its ambiguity, is the most intuitive word in many situations.

Using this conceptual framework, and employing the corresponding terminology, most of the models of tradition in the works of criticism examined in this thesis can be adequately mapped, and those instances for which it is insufficient are themselves instructive. Furthermore, it will emerge that while models of tradition usually involve all three aspects—content, chain, and weight—most are oriented most towards one of these aspects more than the others. Since the central chapters of this thesis (Chapters 2-4) are organized according to which aspect of tradition is given the most emphasis in the works they examine, a brief description of these follows.\textsuperscript{139}

1.5.2 Content

The first co-ordinate of my analytical framework is content. Content refers to the substance or the ‘what’ of tradition: what it is that is being handed down or perceived as having been handed down, whether a material object, an idea, a practice, or anything else. The unlimited variety of traditional content that is possible is suggested by Edward Shils,

\textsuperscript{139} Note: It should be emphasized that this meta-model (with its co-ordinates of content, chain, and weight) is being posited exclusively as a tool for analysing the models of tradition contained in literary scholarship. It is not to be confused for a model of, or an attempt to define, tradition itself. Furthermore, no claim is being made that the various models of tradition that can be mapped according to this framework are merely different perspectives of the same object, either conceptual or empirical. At most, this analytical meta-model provides a common framework to place different models on the same plane of discourse for the purposes of comparison.
who writes that a tradition is ‘anything which is transmitted or handed down from the
past to the present’. In short, when referring to the content of a tradition, I mean
simply the thing that is transmitted, distinct from the process of transmission, or the
effect that it has on whoever receives it.

As stated, Shils places no restrictions on the possible content:

Tradition—that which is handed down—includes material objects, beliefs about all
sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions. It includes
buildings, monuments, landscapes, sculptures, paintings, books, tools, machines. It
includes all that a society of a given time possesses and which already existed when its
present possessors came upon it and which is not solely the product of physical
processes in the external world or exclusively the result of ecological and physiological
necessity. The Iliad, in a recently printed English translation, is a traditum, so is the
Parthenon.

The last sentence of this quotation prompts a question pertinent to the present study:
what is the specific content of literary tradition? As I have already demonstrated, in many
instances where scholars and critics refer to literary tradition, the answer to this question
is unclear. Asking about the content of a specific instance of literary tradition,
straightforward as the question may seem, introduces a layer of complexity into the
broader question of what scholars mean when they refer to literary tradition more
generally. Different answers are possible—e.g. texts, authors, genres, interpretations,
etc.—depending on how, or even whether, the other co-ordinates of a tradition are
emphasized. Indeed, the possible content of literary tradition is constrained by the issue
of transmission, which governs the possibility of anything becoming traditional in the
first place. As we shall see in Chapter 2, however, not all models of tradition address this
issue. At this stage, a few brief comments about the possible content of literary tradition

140 Shils, Tradition, 12.
141 Shils, Tradition, 12.
are offered by way of consideration of the fact that traditions are disseminated via, in, and of literary texts, with the goal of demonstrating that each of these modes of transmitting literary tradition presupposes a different kind of traditional content.

Traditions that are transmitted via literary texts are those which are not intrinsically literary—e.g. myths, historical events and persons, rituals, institutional arrangements, laws, etc.—but which are transmitted via the physical and signifying properties of literature (usually books). While it is tempting to declare that these are not strictly literary traditions, it should be noted that an enormous amount of such information may accompany the existence of a text in the form of paratexts—i.e. ‘all the liminal devices ... that mediate the relations between text and reader’—such as prefaces, reviews, scholarly criticism, literary gossip, etc., such that it is not easy to draw a distinction between what can and cannot be said to be in a text. For example, the reader of Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar (1963) almost invariably has some awareness of the details of its author’s life: that she married the poet Ted Hughes, that theirs was an unhappy marriage, that she suffered from depression, and that she committed suicide at a young age. Additionally, for a large number of readers, accompanying these facts is all manner of speculation about Plath’s private life that may or may not have a basis in reality. In the context of literary tradition, the veracity of such information does not really matter. The germane point is that they are transmitted in concert with the text of The Bell Jar. These things are not intrinsically literary, but they are usually shared and passed on via texts (literary histories, reviews, magazines, biographies, movies) and in some sense

'accompany' the text of *The Bell Jar*, they are part of the Plath tradition. The importance of such non-literary traditions to a work's subsequent history is recognized by Frances McCullough in her forward to the HarperCollins edition of *The Bell Jar*. She frames the work in terms of Plath's 'tragic death', arguing that 'the book's subsequent history has everything to do with that fact'. What makes these extra-textual factors traditional is that, regardless of their basis in historical reality, they are transmitted from generation to generation as faithfully as the words which comprise *The Bell Jar* text.

Traditions transmitted *via* literature may be contrasted with those traditions that are transmitted *in* literary texts. The latter traditions are intrinsically literary: they consist of formal textual properties such as stylistic or generic conventions. These are passed on and disseminated *in* the literary texts themselves, apart from which they cannot exist. An example of this is would be the sonnet form. While the sonnet has been described in its various forms (Petrarchan, Occitan, Shakespearean, Spenserian, etc.) it has largely been transmitted through the printing of sonnets themselves which manifest and exemplify those forms. It is tempting to treat this form of literary tradition as analogous to those traditions, identified by Shils, whose content is a *practice*, consisting of various actions:

The transmissible parts of *practices* are the patterns or images of actions which they imply or present and the beliefs requiring, recommending, regulating, permitting, or prohibiting, the re-enactment of those patterns. What particular actions and complexes and sequences of actions leave behind are the conditions for subsequent actions, images in memory and documents of what they were when they happened and, under certain conditions, normative precedents or prescriptions for future actions.

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144 Shils, *Tradition*, 12.
In some respects, certain traditional literary content such as generic forms do fulfil these conditions: they certainly leave behind the conditions and possibility for their subsequent use by authors—‘normative precedents or prescriptions for future actions’.\textsuperscript{145} It also makes a certain amount of sense to regard genres as being, to some extent, practices; generic forms are, after all, tied to reading and writing as \textit{practiced} by individuals.\textsuperscript{146} However, the situation is complicated by the fact that the expectations created by genres and generic forms belong to communicative actions. Their instantiation in a text serves as the mark of the action, as well as the medium that preserves and enables it to be transmitted to future generations. Thus traditions\textsuperscript{content} of this sort do not conform to traditional practices as described by Shils, in which ‘it is not the particular concrete actions which are transmitted’ because ‘an action ceases to exist once it is performed’.\textsuperscript{147} Unless the ‘action’ of writing is understood as being limited to the physical act of composition and disregards the continued existence of the text produced by that act, then Shils’s formulation is too rigid to be applied to literary forms of tradition.

Lastly, by traditions\textsuperscript{content} of literary texts, I am referring to material textual traditions—i.e. the physical survival of specific literary texts through book preservation, republishing, storage in libraries and personal collections, and so forth. In this case, the tradition\textsuperscript{content} consists of actual books as physical artefacts, as well as manuscripts, instances of data storage, and any other physical manifestations of a text. Unlike

\textsuperscript{145} Shils, \textit{Tradition}, 12.
\textsuperscript{146} E. D. Hirsch, for example, formulates genre explicitly as interpretive \textit{practice}. John Frow writes that ‘in [Hirsch’s] understanding of it, genre is neither a collection of texts nor a set of lists of essential features of texts but an interpretive process’. I discuss Hirsch’s conception of genre (and its relationship to tradition) at greater length in Chapter 5. See: John Frow, \textit{Genre}, 2nd edn (London, 2015), 110.
\textsuperscript{147} Shils, \textit{Tradition}, 12.
traditions transmitted via literature, or traditions immanent in literature, textual traditions do not necessarily rely on readers for their perpetuation. Texts, as artefacts, may continue to exist so long as they are physically preserved. Historically, however, the survival of a textual tradition is heavily dependent on those texts being read. As Hugh Kenner argues, ‘when an inability to stay interested in Sappho lasted longer than the parchment she was copied on, the poems of Sappho were lost’. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, where the notion of the continuity of literary tradition is examined.

These, then, are the main types of content found in literary traditions. However, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, these categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. For example, traditions of literary texts may also contain traditions of the other two types outlined above. In the present thesis, I limit myself to trying to discover the nature of the traditional content implied by the various models under review.

1.5.3 Chain

I have dubbed the second co-ordinate of my analytical framework chain—short for ‘chain of transmission’—by which I mean the aggregate instances of a tradition being, in some sense, ‘handed down’. Following the convention of the previous section, I will refer to this aspect of tradition as: tradition.

If we are to regard a tradition as a trans-historical object, tradition refers to the continued existence of that object, perpetuated via transmission from one generation

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to the next.\textsuperscript{49} However, embedded in this category is a further distinction between the objective fact of a tradition’s transmission—that is, the aggregate of transmissions that have occurred across a period of time in which the tradition existed—and the phenomenological fact of that tradition being received as something preceded, and potentially succeeded, by a chain of transmission, regardless of whether that history is known, or even whether it is real. The paths of transmission may be entirely mysterious, or there may be gaps in the record, but at the very least a continued existence is posited and labelled a ‘tradition’. The essential point is that a tradition is \textit{experienced} as something having a continuous existence across a span of time.\textsuperscript{50}

What the chain dimension of the framework does not refer to, however, is the \textit{mode} of the tradition’s transmission. This is the reason I have chosen to use the word ‘chain’ as opposed to ‘transmission’ for the terminology. The latter emphasizes the act or means of transmitting a tradition, inevitably raising questions about \textit{how} it was transmitted. Most of the models which are examined in this thesis pay little attention to the material or mental processes involved in transmitting traditions from one generation to the next. In those instances where these factors do play a role—for instance, in Elizabeth L. Eisenstein’s critique of Ernst Robert Curtius—the introduction of

\textsuperscript{49} ‘Generation,’ in this context, does not necessarily refer to human generations. Edward Shils writes that speaking in terms of generations ‘is not very precise because generations are themselves of different durations and their boundaries are too vague. In a school, for example, where children spend four years, a generation may be only four years long’. Given this flexibility, I have chosen to leave the notion of generation undefined in this framework, allowing each model to define it (or not) for themselves. See: Shils, \textit{Tradition}, 15.

\textsuperscript{50} This aspect of tradition will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4 when I look at the notion of ‘invented’ traditions.
material considerations bridges the conceptual divide between tradition\textsuperscript{[b]tain} and tradition\textsuperscript{[content]}\textsuperscript{151}

1.5.4 Weight

The last dimension that is accounted for by the analytic model I have proposed is literary tradition’s affective and effective properties. That is to say, the aspect of literary tradition that is concerned with the impact a tradition\textsuperscript{[content]} makes on those who receive it. In this manner, one might think of tradition as having a ‘force’, just as Derek Brewer did in the passage examined in section 1.4.1, where he referred to the ‘vector of tradition’ which has a ‘line of force’.\textsuperscript{152} Hence, we might speak of the ‘force of tradition’ in much the same way as we speak of the ‘force of argument’. But we also speak of the ‘weight of argument’, which conveys not only the effective power of the argument, but also the affective power on the person receiving it. It is in this sense that I have opted for the term weight as the third co-ordinate of the analytic framework, to signify tradition’s normative dimension.\textsuperscript{153}

The basic assumptions I have adopted concerning the nature of this normative dimension are those outlined by Emile Durkheim in The Rules of Sociological Method (1895) and which have exerted a strong influence in the sociological understanding of tradition ever since it was published. Although Durkheim is concerned broadly with a

\textsuperscript{151} See Chapter 3, section 3.5.3.
\textsuperscript{152} Brewer, Tradition and Innovation, 1.
\textsuperscript{153} Besides conveying both the affective and effective force of tradition, ‘weight of tradition’ is a customary usage. In Chapter 4, I will examine its famous invocation by Karl Marx who writes that tradition ‘weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’. See: Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)Modern Interpretations, ed. by Mark Cowling and James Martin, trans. by Terrell Carver (London, 2002), 39.
category of facts which he refers to as ‘social’, this includes those which are grouped under the heading of ‘literary’.\footnote{Emile Durkheim, \textit{The Rules of Sociological Method}, ed. by George E. G. Catlin, trans. by Sarah A. Sokway and John H. Mueller, 8th edn (New York, 1966), 3.} He points out that the fact that certain beliefs and practices are inherited by an individual ‘implies their existence outside of himself’, and that this externality is experienced as a constraining and compelling force:

These types of conduct or thought are not only external to the individual but are, moreover, endowed with coercive power, by virtue of which they impose themselves upon him, independent of his individual will.\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Rules}, 2.} Furthermore, this coercive power is primarily felt when it is resisted, rather than when the individual conforms to it. Despite this, however, the pressure that such inherited facts and beliefs exert is always real and present:

If the complacency with which we permit ourselves to be carried along conceals the pressure undergone, nevertheless it does not abolish it. Thus, air is no less heavy because we do not detect its weight.\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Rules}, 5.}

This aspect of tradition is especially important in considerations of the normative effect of literary tradition because it emphasizes its being relative in nature as opposed to strictly deterministic. Since many, if not most, understandings of tradition\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Rules}, 5.} held by literary critics involve the possibility of resisting or breaking with traditions, a straightforward cause and effect understanding of tradition’s normative dimension does not sufficiently capture such usages. Durkheim’s traditional conception of the social fact, on the other hand, as something ‘distinct from its individual manifestations’, makes allowances for this more flexible conception of tradition:

Collective habits are inherent not only in the successive acts which they determine but, by a privilege of which we find no example in the biological realm, they are given permanent expression in a formula which is repeated from mouth to mouth,
transmitted by education, and even fixed in writing ... [which] can exist without being actually applied.\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Rules}, 7.}

Thus, in so far as one possesses a tradition, it is ‘obligatory’; but in so far as the tradition is specifically manifested in its coercive effect on an individual’s actions, it is not necessarily so. This separation between the tradition’s existence and its application by individuals will prove necessary when considering the relationship not only between critics and tradition, but also the relation of writers and readers to tradition. But while it is tempting to go further in drawing on Durkheim’s account of social facts and identifying traditions as collectively held, though individually implemented, this would introduce too rigid a constraint in the analytic model.

My reluctance to be more specific at this stage about the normative aspect of tradition also extends to the nature of the coercive effect. The authority of inherited beliefs and practices is attributed by Durkheim to their ‘collective and ancient’ character which ‘education has taught us to recognize and respect’.\footnote{Durkheim, \textit{Rules}, 9.} But since this explanation assumes that traditions are collectively held (which I have already ruled out as an axiomatic assumption) as well as of great antiquity (which is also a premature restriction) I have not followed him in this regard. It is enough, for now, to posit tradition as having a normative effect, leaving further exploration of this aspect to Chapter 4, in which my analysis of various Marxist views of literary tradition brings the normative aspect to the fore.
1.6 Conclusion

In outlining this analytic framework (or meta-model) of literary tradition, I am cognizant of the fact that it will appear naïve or simplistic as an account of literary tradition, especially in comparison to some of the critical texts that are analysed according to its terms of reference in the following chapters. Yet this is precisely what is needed. As I have argued, for the most part theoretical treatments of literary tradition are widely dispersed among scholarship, employing idiosyncratic terminologies, and varying enormously along ideological lines and disciplinary boundaries. Consequently, the commonalities in these various critical accounts remain difficult to assess, leaving the notion of literary tradition, despite its ubiquity, vague and diffuse. The strength of the analytic framework presented in this chapter lies precisely in its simplicity and perspicuity.

The primary goal of this thesis is to map the conceptual structure of various models of tradition, rather than to pass judgement on how effectively they capture real-world phenomena. Hence, the framework developed in this chapter is not a definition of tradition as I believe it to really be. It is, rather, an aid to recognizing what we are looking for in models of tradition, and as such is open to amendment and extension. By having a clearly formulated conception of the major features contained in most models of literary tradition at the outset of this investigation, the subtleties and distinctive features present within individual variations of those models can be better discerned and made available for comparative analysis. Such a framework is, by necessity, subjective and personal. But it is only a starting point in the enquiry. Once the territory has been charted, using this framework as an aid just so long as it is useful, then the work of definition may begin.
Chapter Two
Visions of Parnassus:
The Simultaneous Model of Literary Tradition

2.1 Introduction

This chapter surveys literature and literary scholarship whose critical metaphors and theoretical underpinnings point to a shared model of tradition that I call the *simultaneous model of tradition* (sometimes abbreviated to *simultaneous tradition* or *simultaneous model*). This term is a deliberate allusion to an oft-quoted passage in T. S. Eliot’s 1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ in which Eliot describes ‘the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of [a poet’s] own country’ as having ‘a simultaneous existence’ and composing ‘a simultaneous order’.

Eliot’s articulation of the simultaneous model of tradition, as we will see, is perhaps the most influential account of literary tradition of the last century and certainly the most influential expression of the simultaneous model. This being so, it inevitably features prominently in this chapter. However, Eliot’s essay was preceded by centuries of writing which describes literary and cultural inheritance in similar terms to those given theoretical expression in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’—i.e. a selection of authors or works which compose a simultaneous order that impinges in some manner on latter day readers.

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and writers. Furthermore, the concept of simultaneous tradition has not been restricted to critical writings and has frequently been represented in poetry and even the visual arts.

This chapter will scrutinize instances of both critical and creative expressions of the simultaneous model of tradition dated between the 14th and 20th centuries, charting the migration of a visual motif found in painting and poetry of the late middle ages and renaissance, to its role as a major critical metaphor in literary criticism of the 19th and 20th centuries. I begin by describing several famous expressions of the simultaneous model in the paintings of Raphael, the poetry of Chaucer, and the prose of Jonathan Swift, before turning to the work of three influential literary critics who described this model of tradition in their work: Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, T. S. Eliot, and E. M. Forster. These critics are at variance with each other regarding their personal and theoretical views about literature, including how literary tradition ought to be conceived. For example, Sainte-Beuve regarded a literary work primarily as a vehicle to understanding the personality of the author.² Eliot, on the other hand, writes of ‘a continual extinction of personality’,³ preferring to emphasize the ‘the complex interactions between the artist and the broad historical and cultural context of which he or she is a part’.⁴ Despite the vast and apparently unbridgeable gulf between these two approaches, both critics are linked by their shared emphasis of the content of literary tradition over its transmissive or normative dimensions. Moreover, this shared emphasis resulted in their developing structurally similar models of tradition to elucidate the contextual aspect. Once again,

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this is not to suggest that other factors such as the transmission or normativity of tradition are ignored entirely by Sainte-Beuve, Eliot, and Forster. Rather, the content of tradition serves as the focal point to which their respective views on literary tradition are anchored.

2.2 Early Manifestations of the Simultaneous Model of Tradition

2.2.1 Depicting Parnassus in Painting and Sculpture

Throughout the history of art and literature, one finds examples of literary tradition represented as an ideal order: that is, classics (either works or authors) depicted in a way that places them in a temporally simultaneous relationship with each other. This was a recurring theme in European painting and sculpture for several centuries (see figures I and II) and was achieved by placing the figural representations of historical authors in a common physical space. A notable example is found in Raphael’s fresco, ‘The Parnassus’ (c.1509-1511), found in the Stanze di Raffaello of the Vatican alongside the more famous and similarly themed ‘The School of Athens’ (see Fig. 1). The painting depicts the god Apollo, surrounded by the Nine muses. They in turn are surrounded by eighteen of the greatest poets of history.
What distinguishes Raphael’s painting for our purpose, is that the poets of antiquity—Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Sappho, etc.—and more recent poets—Petrarch, Jacopo Sannazaro, Francesco Berni, etc.—are shown inhabiting the same physical space as each other.\(^5\) In the words of one 19th century writer:

> As it is an imaginary scene, Raphael was free to bring together poets of different ages and countries, grouping them by the natural association of one with another. In this mythic realm time and space are as nothing, and the poets are united in the higher fellowship of the inspired imagination.\(^6\)

Thus, liberated from historical chronology, Raphael was free to show the shared qualities of, and relationships between, various historical and contemporary writers as they affected someone in the 16th century. While thirteen centuries may separate the authors of the *Aeneid* and *The Divine Comedy*, both are equally ‘present’ to later readers of their

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\(^5\) These figures are identified as such in: Estelle M. Hurll, ed., *Raphael: A Collection of Fifteen Pictures and a Portrait of the Painter* (Boston, 1899), 64. This is speculative, however, and other identifications are possible.

works. The composition also gives some indication of the relative hierarchical position of the different poets within the tradition. The most famous poets (Homer, Virgil, and Dante) are positioned nearest to the top, level with the Muses themselves in fact, whereas Sappho, the lone female poet, takes the lowest position, partially turned away from the other figures and restricted to gazing upon the interactions of the other poets. This suggests that, while Sappho is regarded as one of the great poets, and therefore rightly inhabits the same space as Homer, Dante et al. in forming a part of the total conception of the classical and modern poetic tradition, nevertheless she is not as integral to the tradition as the other figures in the painting.

![Figure 2. Henry Hugh Armstead Frieze of Parnassus (detail of the south side) c. 1872](image)

The figures, from left to right, depict: Pierre Corneille, Molière, Miguel de Cervantes, Virgil, Dante Alighieri, Pythagoras, Homer, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller.

We can see this hierarchical structure replicated with alterations in a later Parnassian scene which has the mythological elements removed: ‘The Frieze of Parnassus’ at the Albert Memorial in London (c. 1872, see Fig. 2). Here, instead of the God Apollo and the Muses, the central figure is Homer himself, flanked by Dante and Shakespeare who sit at his feet. Virgil (who has been slightly demoted by the inclusion of Shakespeare), Chaucer, Milton, and, rather curiously, Pythagoras, stand immediately beside him. The rest of the scene is filled out with poets who are second only to these central figures in the esteem of
the 19th century: Goethe, Cervantes, Molière, Schiller, etc. But even the lesser figures in
the composition are shown inhabiting a common physical space with their poetical
superiors, suggesting a relationship exists between them that transcends time and real-
world space.

2.2.2 The Past Present: Geoffrey Chaucer’s The House of Fame

The example of Raphael’s ‘Parnassus’ provides a useful comparison to the earliest
literary depiction of simultaneous tradition examined in this chapter: Geoffrey Chaucer’s
The House of Fame (c.1379). In The House of Fame, the narrator, ‘Geoffrey’, recounts a
dream in which he is transported by a great eagle to the House of the goddess Fame, who
is responsible for bestowing upon individuals fame and eminence on the one hand,
infamy or obscurity on the other. As in the above Parnassian scenes depicted in painting
and sculpture, the House of Fame exists outside of chronological time; it is a space where
individuals from throughout history can jostle alongside each other in simultaneous
existence. In this idealized space, they exist in the same manner that their fame does from
a contemporary perspective; for example, Homer and Ovid were both famous in
Chaucer’s time despite being separated by many centuries, not only from Chaucer but
from each other. This simultaneity is depicted in Chaucer’s poem when, while
wandering through the House of Fame, Geoffrey the narrator encounters a collection of

7 It does not matter either, that ‘Homer’ is most likely a fictional entity. As Barbara Graziosi writes: ‘the
fictionality ... of the ancient material on Homer’s life does not warrant our ‘disregard’. Precisely because
they are fictional, early speculations about the author of the Homeric poems must ultimately derive from
an encounter between the poems and their ancient audiences’. These ancient receptions of ‘Homer’,
then, forged an essential link in the chain of transmission that preserved the Homeric tradition, thus
enabling Homer, historical personage or not, to be the object of fame in Chaucer’s time. See Barbara
Graziosi, Inventing Homer: The Early Reception of Epic (Cambridge, 2002), 2.
pillars upon which stand some of his greatest literary precursors. These include the great authors of antiquity—Homer, Statius, Virgil, and Ovid—alongside the more recent writers, Guido delle Colonne and Geoffrey of Monmouth. What connects these authors is that they all took the Trojan War as their subject matter. Together, they may be said to form a literary tradition—though Chaucer does not use the term which had not yet established itself in the English language—despite their works encompassing multiple genres and spanning two millennia.⁸

Chaucer’s pillars of fame, however, are not depicted as mere monuments, built to commemorate past achievements. Instead, by using imagery to show their continuing presence due to their enduring fame, the internal dynamics of that tradition are revealed. Geoffrey the narrator witnesses the great authors of the past jostling among themselves for present day fame:

But yet I gan ful wel espie,
Betwix hem was a litil envy.
Oon seyde that Omer made lyes,
Feyninge in hys poverties,
And was to Grekes favourable;
Therfor held he hyt but fable. (1475-1480)⁹

[Yet I began clearly to perceive,
Between them existed some envy.
One said that Homer made lies,
Feigning in his poetry,
And was favourable to the Greeks;
Therefore, he regarded it as mere fable.]

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⁸ The earliest usage recorded by the OED comes from a text approximately contemporary with Chaucer’s poem: the early version of the Wycliffite bible (1384), from a passage in Matthew XV.2 which refers to the ‘tradiciouns... of elder men’, a translation of the Latin ‘traditionem’. See Chapter 1 for more on the etymology of ‘tradition’. See: ‘tradition, n.’, OED Online <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204302> [accessed 7 March 2017].

The literary tradition seen here in Chaucer’s poem—indeed, quite literally seen by the narrator—is not an eternal and harmonious order such as that painted by Raphael. Instead, the scene is one of *agon*, suggesting an ongoing struggle for fame that plays out across the centuries, but which is always encountered and comprehended in the present. But more than merely depicting the internal dynamics of literary tradition, Chaucer also portrays the relation between a reader and that tradition. The reader, after all, encounters literary tradition very much as Geoffrey the narrator encounters it in the poem, represented by the pillars in the House of Fame; which is to say, all at once and in its entirety.

Chaucer’s image of the pillars thus illustrates three aspects of simultaneous tradition. Firstly, it portrays the relationship of an author to the works of the past that exert a simultaneous influence. Secondly, it depicts a similar relationship between literature and readers; after all, as readers of Chaucer’s poem, we encounter the pillars of fame concurrently with the poem’s narrator who represents the author. This distinction between, on the one hand, the relationship of authors to tradition, and on the other hand, between readers and tradition, is one which persists in modern criticism that employs the simultaneous model. Several of the texts examined later in this chapter emphasize one or the other depending on the critical aims pursued. Lastly, the pillars allegorize the internal dynamics of a tradition understood as the great authors of the past co-existing in a simultaneous relationship to one another where each is forever ‘vying’ with other authors, ancient and modern, for the attention of the present; hence, the ‘litel envye’ Geoffrey observes existing between them. These two features—the grasping of past authors and works as a simultaneous whole, and the elements of this
simultaneous whole viewed as relational and shifting—constitute the major structural characteristics of the simultaneous model of tradition as it was described more than five centuries later in the critical language of Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’.

2.2.3 Civil War on Parnassus: Jonathan Swift’s The Battle of the Books

Unlike the harmonious view of literary tradition found in Raphael’s painting, Chaucer presents a more dynamic view of tradition, understood in terms of conflict and struggle between the great authors of the past. This way of understanding literary heritage is brought closer to modern critical discourse in Johnathan Swift’s satire The Battle of the Books (1704). It was originally a published with A Tale of a Tub (1704) under the full title of An Account of a Battel Between the Antient and Modern Books in St James’s Library. The subject of this satire was the so called querelle des Anciens et des Modernes controversy which arose in France and spread to Britain in the 1690s. The controversy pitted those who ‘contended that a poet could do no better than imitate the ancient authors’ against those who believed the achievements of contemporary writers had surpassed the ancients and that literary innovation was to be applauded rather than derided. As historian Rens Bod writes: ‘The “Quarrel” was foremost a dispute between authority and innovation’. But while authority and innovation are an important element in any discussion of literary tradition (and will receive closer attention in Chapters 3 and 4), Swift’s contribution to the controversy is most immediately relevant

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12 Bod, New History, 235.
because of the way he chose to depict the controversy in his satire.\textsuperscript{13} He combines the Parnassian motif found in Raphael’s fresco with the violent internal dynamics of tradition illustrated in *The House of Fame* where the literary hierarchy is a finite one, ordered and re-ordered by conflict between competing classics. 

Admission to the ‘Parnassian heights’ comes at the cost of the overthrow of its existing inhabitants.

The scene is set by Swift as follows:

This quarrel first began, as I have heard it affirmed by an old dweller in the neighbourhood, about a small spot of ground, lying and being upon one of the two tops of the hill Parnassus; the highest and largest of which had, it seems, been time out of mind in quiet possession of certain tenants, called the Ancients; and the other was held by the Moderns.\textsuperscript{14}

Swift, however, transposes this mythological scene to the interior of a modern library (specifically the King’s Library in St. James’s Palace)

\textsuperscript{13} Another aspect of Swift’s *The Battle of the Books* that I have not dealt with in this chapter concerns the question of whether it is really the ancients who possess the greatest antiquity since, after all, they are from the infancy of learning whereas the moderns represent its greatest maturity. In Chapter 4 of this thesis I examine a similar line of reasoning employed by Karl Marx. Marx, however, makes this argument in the service of a very different conclusion, i.e. that it explains the continued interest in the ancients. See Chapter 4, section 4.2.

and the inhabitants of his Parnassus are not the historical personages, nor their fame and reputation, but rather the texts they have left behind (See Fig. 3). Swift makes this clear at the outset:

I must warn the reader to beware of applying to persons what is here meant only of books, in the most literal sense. So, when Virgil is mentioned, we are not to understand the person of a famous poet called by that name; but only certain sheets of paper bound up in leather, containing in print the works of the said poet: and so of the rest.\(^{15}\)

This represents a development in the conception of simultaneous tradition by making explicit the distinction between the authors and their works. While Swift’s intention in making this distinction is largely in the service of the piece’s satirical aims, allowing him to alter the setting to the interior of a library, it nonetheless demonstrates an awareness on his part that the literary tradition\(^{[content]}\) that is inherited by contemporaries is, ultimately, ‘only certain sheets of paper bound up in leather’. The relocation of the Parnassian scene from an idealized Hellenic landscape to a modern library not only demythologizes the setting, but also demythologizes the ‘metaphysics’ of literary tradition, giving it a materialistic orientation. In this vein, and unlike any of the other accounts of simultaneous tradition described in this chapter, Swift draws connections between the survival of texts as works, and the survival of texts as material objects:

[F]or fear of mutual violence against each other, it was thought prudent by our ancestors to bind them to the peace with strong iron chains. Of which invention the original occasion was this: When the works of Scotus first came out, they were carried to a certain library, and had lodgings appointed to them; but this author was no sooner settled than he went to visit his master Aristotle; and there both concerted together to seize Plato by main force, and turn him out from his ancient station among the divines, where he had peaceably dwelt near eight hundred years. The attempt succeeded, and the two usurpers have reigned ever since in his stead: but, to maintain quiet for the future, it was decreed that all polemics of the larger size should be held fast with a chain.\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) Swift, *Satires*, 144.
\(^{16}\) Swift, *Satires*, 148.
Here Swift demonstrates that the conflict between the works and authors of literary tradition is not something that occurs at some transcendental level, or even as a merely mental event in the minds of readers, but rather is played out in the world via the physical preservation and destruction of texts. It is not merely ‘fame’ that sustains classics, but their material survival as marks on paper. Here we have an explicit acknowledgement of the indivisible nature of literary tradition where the tradition as content is inseparable from its transmission: ‘a restless spirit haunts over every book, till dust or worms have seized upon it; which to some may happen in a few days, but to others later’.17

Swift’s acknowledgement of the material aspect of literary tradition also affects the structure of the simultaneous model. While Chaucer also pictured literary tradition as an eternal conflict, his image of the pillars suggests that each classic stands or falls on its individual merits which are intrinsic; the internal dynamics he imagines follow from this assumption. Swift, on the other hand, sees the ‘Quarrel’ as the result of material interventions taking place in the present. Whereas Swift (or the narrator) suggests that works ancient and modern should be ‘mixed, that, like the blending of contrary poisons, their malignity might be employed among themselves’, the library of his satire has separated them into various ‘camps’. The moderns are lodged, Swift writes,

in the fairest apartments; when, at the same time, whatever book had the boldness to own itself for an advocate of the ancients was buried alive in some obscure corner, and threatened, upon the least displeasure, to be turned out of doors.18

Swift thereby introduces the notion of selection, something which later critics are highly conscious of, regardless of whether they themselves adopt the simultaneous model.19

17 Swift, Satires, 148.
18 Swift, Satires, 149.
19 See Chapter 4 for more on selection and tradition.
2.3 The Simultaneous Model of Tradition in Modern Criticism

In *The Battle of the Books*, Swift employed the Parnassian visual metaphor representing tradition conceived as a simultaneous order for the purpose of illustrating and making his own contribution to a live critical debate, albeit in the form of a literary satire. For the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine writings that conform more closely to the modern conventions of scholarship and criticism, predominantly the critical essay and the academic lecture. However, rather than abandoning the Parnassian motif employed by creative writers and artists, critics of the 19th and 20th century retained it, modified it to suit contemporary tastes, and used it to illustrate the most recent thinking about the complex interplay between the literary past and present.

2.3.1 Sainte-Beuve’s Temple of Taste

The nineteenth-century French literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804 - 1869) is perhaps most well-known for his defence of the notion that a work of literature is an expression of its author’s personality. Wimsatt and Brooks write of him:

[H]is most pronounced critical insight and most radical method, so far as he was a methodical critic, lay in the depth of his devotion to the personality of the author behind the work. The work existed mainly to provide him clues to the charting of that rich hinterland.\(^{20}\)

In his inaugural lecture delivered to the *École Normale* in 1858, however, Sainte-Beuve chose for his topic: ‘Of a Literary Tradition; And in What Sense the Term Should be Understood’. He had been appointed Professor of French Language and Literature the previous year, and his address expressed his eagerness to survey ‘the principal literary

\(^{20}\) Wimsatt and Brooks, *Short History*, 535.
works of our most brilliant century’. 21 The lecture was intended to open the session by demonstrating ‘the spirit which [he meant] to bring to that examination’. 22 Like many critics discussed in this thesis, Sainte-Beuve believed literary tradition is intimately bound up with the function of literary scholarship as practiced by himself and his audience. While his criticism treats individual works of literature as ‘indistinguishable from the whole organization of [the author]’, he nevertheless regarded the broader objective of literary scholarship as the conservation of a tradition 23 that transcended those individual authors:

You are the persons who will hereafter have as your special office and ministry to watch over the tradition, the transmission of classical and humane letters, to interpret them continually to each fresh generation of young persons. . . . We have to embrace, to understand, never to desert the inheritance received from those illustrious masters and fathers, an inheritance which, from Homer down to the latest classic of yesterday (if there is to be a classic of yesterday), forms the brightest and most solid portion of our intellectual capital. 24

Yet despite both his call for the conservation of tradition 23 and the title of his lecture—‘Of a Literary Tradition; And in What Sense the Term Should be Understood’—Sainte-Beuve takes the notion of tradition very much for granted. It is not something that requires any explanation: ‘There is a tradition,’ he declares, ‘who would deny it?’ 25 Because the fact of tradition is self-evident to Sainte-Beuve, what remains to be done in his opinion is to ask: ‘In what sense must we understand it—in what sense is it

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23 Quoted in: Winsatt and Brooks, Short History, 535.
our duty to maintain it?\textsuperscript{26} However, despite the promise of the lecture title, in this particular lecture the first question consistently gives way to the second.

With respect to the second question, the duty of care towards the literary tradition that Sainte-Beuve calls for is underpinned by the very large claims which he makes for that tradition. While the basis, or content, of the literary tradition might be ‘the collection of memorable works which we bring together in our libraries’, this is not the extent of literary tradition’s reach.\textsuperscript{27} According to Sainte-Beuve, a large part of literary tradition ‘has passed into our laws, into our institutions, into our manners, into the education which we unconsciously inherit, into our habits, and into ... fundamental conceptions’.\textsuperscript{28}

Literary tradition is thus entangled in the broader national culture of France. The works of literature which become classics are those which function as vehicles to pass worthy cultural values on to subsequent generations of Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. Sainte-Beuve here incorporates two differing conceptions of tradition\textsuperscript{content} into the one model: tradition as an \textit{unconscious} inheritance, and tradition as \textit{conscious} labour. Whereas, T. S. Eliot later conceived literary tradition predominantly in the latter sense (see below), Sainte-Beuve regards both as necessary for tradition to fulfil its cultural function. The role of the literary critic is the conscious maintenance of literary tradition\textsuperscript{content}, thereby helping to facilitate the unconscious inheritance of the values inscribed in the literature belonging that tradition\textsuperscript{content} by the rest of society. The role of literature and its

\textsuperscript{26} Sainte-Beuve, ‘Literary Tradition’, 22.
\textsuperscript{27} Sainte-Beuve, ‘Literary Tradition’, 23.
\textsuperscript{28} Sainte-Beuve, ‘Literary Tradition’, 23.
traditions is thereby elevated beyond merely aesthetic concerns; what is at stake for Sainte-
Beuve is nothing less than the cultural well-being of the French nation.

And yet, while Sainte-Beuve’s understanding of tradition is a nationalistic conception,
he recognizes its roots lie elsewhere, foremost in its classical inheritance:

The very literature of chivalry which we see breaking forth, for the first time, in its
precocious and brilliant development in the south of our own France, beside the
Mediterranean, seems to have been brushed and caressed by some distant breath
from ancient shores, which may have brought within it some invisible seed.\textsuperscript{29}

Exactly how this ‘distant breath’ was received by those who were ‘brushed and
caressed’ by it remains obscure in Sainte-Beuve’s address to the audience of the \textit{École
Normale}.\textsuperscript{30} There is a clue, however, in his comments concerning Dante—specifically
Dante’s relation to tradition expressed in the \textit{Divina Commedia}:

Would Dante have had the idea and power to compose his monumental poem,
belonging completely to the Middle Ages, if he had not perceived what tradition,
incomplete as it was, had transmitted to him, in the way of memories, reminiscences,
or fertile illusions, and if he had not literally had Virgil for his guide, support and
half fabulous patron?\textsuperscript{31}

The apparent conflation in this passage between Dante the author of the \textit{Commedia}, and
‘Dante’ the protagonist of the poem, runs counter to most modern criticism where even
the ‘implied’ authorial voice heard in the work is regarded as distinct from the actual
individual responsible for its composition.\textsuperscript{32} Sainte-Beuve recognizes no such distinctions.
Collapsing the boundary between Dante and his fictional persona is quite consistent with

\textsuperscript{29}Sainte-Beuve, ‘Literary Tradition’, 26.
\textsuperscript{30}Sainte-Beuve’s silence on this matter is frustrating, but, as this thesis demonstrates, such silence is not
untypical of literary critics who are wont to speak of tradition without addressing the actual
circumstances of transmission and dissemination.
\textsuperscript{31}Sainte-Beuve, ‘Literary Tradition’, 27.
his views about the relationship between work and author. As quoted above, the poem is ‘indistinguishable from the whole organization of the man’.33

But it is also possible to make sense of the passage while maintaining the stricter (though not radical) separation between author and work without abandoning Sainte-Beuve’s insistence that literature is an expression and extension of the author’s personality. If Virgil’s literary output, with which Dante was familiar, is regarded as being in some respect co-extensive with Virgil the man, then Dante really could be said to have ‘literally had Virgil for his guide’ much as his namesake in the Commedia does. Here we begin to see the outlines of a notion of tradition in which the ongoing influence of authors and works of the past are formulated in ‘present’ terms—a key feature of the simultaneous model. In keeping with this, in his discussion of the stylistic features of 17th and 18th century French literature, Sainte-Beuve writes ‘we are glad to recognize that delicate sentiment of love and courtesy which belongs to chivalry ... side by side with Atticism and urbanity’.34 His use of the spatial metaphor, ‘side by side’, in describing the simultaneous influence of classical and medieval literary culture on the development of French literature recalls the visual depiction of tradition in spatial terms in Chaucer’s The House of Fame, as well as artworks depicting the Parnassian theme.

In fact, despite the title of his lecture to the École Normale, neither Sainte-Beuve’s conception of tradition nor his reliance on the Parnassian visual motif are given their fullest expression there. That is found in an essay he published eight years earlier titled:

33 Quoted in: Wimsatt and Brooks, Short History, 535.
'What is a Classic?' (1850). In that essay, Sainte-Beuve defines the notion of 'a classic' as follows:

A true classic, as I should like to hear it defined, is an author who has enriched the human mind, who has really augmented its treasures, who has made it take one more step forward, who has discovered some unequivocal moral truth, or has once more seized hold of some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and explored; who has rendered his thought, his observation, or his discovery under no matter what form, but broad and large, refined, sensible, sane, and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to all in a style of his own which yet belongs to all the world, in a style which is new without neologisms, new and ancient, easily contemporaneous at every age.35

For Sainte-Beuve, then, an author is deemed a classic by virtue of the fact that they added to human self-understanding. That they are able to do this is due both to their originality and their traditionality—they exhibit 'a style which is new without neologisms'. This suggests that the newness is not bought at the cost of eschewing the existing forms of expression, but rather that which is original is communicated via traditional forms, hence being 'new and ancient' at the same time.36 Sainte-Beuve’s idea of literary tradition[content] is not simply an aggregate of all authors or works which meet his definition of a classic in the manner of F. R. Leavis.37 Rather, the notion of the tradition is already bound up in his definition of the classic: ‘That idea of a classic implies in itself something which has sequence and solidity, which forms a whole and makes a tradition’.38 A classic, on this account, is only a classic in the context of the literary tradition it belongs to and, indeed, constitutes. A partial answer to the essay’s titular question, 'What is a Classic?', might go something like: ‘a classic is something which helps

37 See previous chapter.
38 Sainte-Beuve, ‘Classic’, 3. This notion of sequence in relation to literary tradition will be explored further in the next chapter.
to form, and is formed in return, by literary tradition’. We see here how the various
dimensions of tradition, in this case *content* and *chain*, cannot be treated as absolutely
separate categories.

To illustrate this ‘sequence and solidity’ implied by traditional content, with its
intimation of temporality, Sainte-Beuve paradoxically invokes the atemporal image of a
‘temple of taste’. The temple is a variation and elaboration of the by now familiar
Parnassian motif: It is a ‘Pantheon of all the nobility of mankind—of all those who have
had a notable and lasting share in increasing the sum of the pleasures and possessions of
the mind’.39 Like the visual descriptions of the simultaneous model found in Chaucer’s
*The House of Fame* or Raphael’s Parnassian fresco, the great authors whose works
comprise literary tradition are depicted as existing together in a common physical space.
As in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, placing the classics in physical proximity to each other is a
critical metaphor expressing the simultaneous effect that they have upon the mind of a
contemporary reader. Despite their proximity, however, Sainte-Beuve’s order, like
Raphael’s, is not egalitarian but one based on a strict hierarchy. He writes,

> I would give everyone the place due to him, from Shakespeare, the most unfettered of
> creative geniuses and unconsciously the greatest of the classics, to Andieux, the very
> last of the classics in miniature.40

Unlike Chaucer’s poem or Swift’s satire, the hierarchy of Sainte-Beuve’s temple of taste
does not emerge from a clash of competing claims played out historically but is instead a
rationally imposed order. Foreshadowing Eliot seven decades later, Sainte-Beuve regards
tradition as something that needs to be, if not constructed, then at the very least

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constantly rebuilt. However, in contrast to his exhortations in the École Normale lecture to take up the critic’s burden in actively shaping tradition and by extension national culture, in ‘What is a Classic?’ Sainte-Beuve affects a somewhat unconvinving modesty towards the task of determining what is worthy of inclusion in the temple: ‘As for me, who would in no sense pretend (as is evident) to be the architect or director of such a temple, I will confine myself to expressing some wishes—competing for the specification, as it were’.42

The specifications that Sainte-Beuve proposes mostly relate to the criteria that determines which authors are to be granted admission to his temple of taste. Sainte-Beuve is—despite his claims to the contrary—constructing a tradition that is decidedly European in character, with an emphasis on France’s national literature. Nonetheless, while his view of the cultural function of tradition is nationalist in conception, he is not excessively parochial by the standards of nineteenth century French littératoires.43 While he insists that ‘Homer always and everywhere would be the first in it, the most like a god’, Sainte-Beuve also cites ‘three Homers long ignored by us, who also themselves have made grand and admirable epics, the Hindoo poets Valmiki and Vyasa, and the Persian Firdousi’.44 Of these, he writes ‘in the realm of taste, it is a good thing to know, at least, that such men exist, and not to split up the human race’.45 The gesture is a token one however, for he continues:

Having paid this homage to what it is sufficient to perceive and recognise, we would quit our own boundaries no more, and we would divert our eyes with a thousand splendid and agreeable sights, and rejoice in a thousand various and surprising meetings; yet their apparent confusion would never be wanting in concord and harmony.  

Here, then, we find a justification for setting the boundaries of a tradition along ethnocultural lines. The basic structural character of the simultaneous model of tradition is that it consists of various traditional elements that, through their contact, change and are changed by each other. For this to take place—what Sainte-Beuve calls ‘a thousand various and surprising meetings’—there needs to be a ‘concord and harmony’ that can only exist among those works that are suitably occidental in character.  

The different nations would each have a special nook kept for it, but the authors would delight in coming out of it, and as they walk about they would recognise, where least they expect it, their brothers or their masters. Lucretius, for example, would love to discuss with Milton the origin of the world and the disentanglement of chaos; but as they argue each after his manner, they will but agree about the divine representations of poetry and nature.  

Lucretius and Milton, despite being separated by seventeen centuries and belonging to different nations, belong together in the tradition; whereas those poets of India and the Middle East do not. What is at issue here is not simply recognizing the ideological underpinnings of the tradition, but of determining whether the boundaries of tradition are constructed by the individual critic or whether they result inevitably from the nature of the tradition’s content. Sainte-Beuve includes Valmiki, Vyasa, and Firdousi out of recognition for other traditions while acknowledging that the divide between those traditions and his own is, in the last resort, unbridgeable.

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On the surface, Sainte-Beuve’s romantic nationalism would seem to have little in common with the criticism of the two other major figures examined to be examined in this chapter, T. S. Eliot and E. M. Forster. Yet, despite their differences, all three are connected via their holding a simultaneous conception of tradition, and by their use of Parnassian imagery to convey this abstract critical concept. While Sainte-Beuve’s description of the Temple of Taste is ultimately a poetic rendering of the critic’s relation to the literary past rather than an attempt to illustrate the internal structure of tradition, he nevertheless points the way to the simultaneous understanding of tradition held by Eliot and Forster. Despite the vast shifts in critical and intellectual fashion that occurred in the intervening decades between Sainte-Beuve and his modernist descendants—in particular, a move away from the historicism and organicism that characterizes much nineteenth-century thinking towards the systemic approach that prevailed in the twentieth, along with the ever-widening gulf between the identity of a work and its author—the Frenchman’s incorporation of the Parnassian image into the critical toolkit of modern scholarship proved a lasting contribution to literary criticism.

2.3.2 Tradition Present and Tradition Past: T. S. Eliot’s Simultaneous Order

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. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.49

T. S. Eliot

In the realm of literary studies, the key figure in any discussion of the complicated relationship between literary modernism and tradition is T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). The

cross-cultural merging of traditions occurred in Eliot’s life, as well as his art and criticism. Austin Warren describes how Eliot ‘began his intellectual career by adopting the double lineage of Sanskrit and Greek antiquities’ and ‘ended up becoming an Anglo-Catholic and a British citizen: “joining” two institutions not his by birth’.\textsuperscript{50} Tradition, both literary and non-literary, was a common theme in Eliot’s literary and cultural criticism throughout his life, but it is his earliest statement of this theme, to which I now turn, which remains the most famous and influential.

Ever since it was published in 1919, Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ has cast a long shadow over consideration of the role of tradition in literature and of the nature of specifically literary traditions.\textsuperscript{51} Though short—scarcely ten pages when reprinted in Eliot’s Selected Essays—the essay nevertheless ranks as one of the most famous and frequently anthologized pieces of literary theory ever written. As mentioned earlier, according to Leigh Dale, Eliot’s essay is ‘perhaps the most influential text in twentieth-century literary education in English-speaking countries, as well as countries in which literary education in English is significant’.\textsuperscript{52} Furthermore, Eliot’s formulation of tradition has had an influence that extends far beyond the discipline of literary studies: for instance, the philosophers Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley write that among his many writings, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ is perhaps Eliot’s ‘most important contribution to the theory of art’\textsuperscript{53}; and the sociologist Edward Shils acknowledges his

\textsuperscript{50} Austin Warren, In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren, ed. by George A. Panichas (Macon, 1996), 190.

\textsuperscript{51} Part I of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ was originally published in the September 1919 issue of The Egoist, and Part’s II and III were published in the following issue released in December. The pages cited in this chapter, however, refer to the essay’s appearance in Eliot’s Selected Essays (3rd Edition 1961).

\textsuperscript{52} Dale, The Enchantment of English: Professing English Literatures in Australian Universities, 181.

\textsuperscript{53} Neill and Ridley, Philos. Art Readings Anc. Mod., 53.
debt to Eliot ‘whose writings had done so much to arouse and nourish my mind on tradition’.

And yet, for all its influence, it is important to keep the limited aims of Eliot’s essay in perspective. While some have seen it as the ‘fountainhead and indispensable reference point’ of Anglo-American literary theory, Hugh Kenner rightly complains that this short essay, written quite early in Eliot’s career as a critic, ‘has been investigated with too much solemnity, as though it were Eliot’s “theory of poetry”’. Such reservations have not prevented a great many attempts by literary scholars to derive profound insights from the essay concerning tradition and its role in poetic creation—both Eliot’s and that of poets more generally. For example, Jean-Michel Rabaté regards the ideas put forth in Eliot’s essay as ‘the founding stone which helped him build his poetics’. And in his study, *T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition*, Seán Lucy claims that these ‘fundamental themes and ideas [about tradition] run through the writings of T. S. Eliot and influence his work at every level: in his verse, his plays and his critical studies’. But however suggestive it might be in its broad outline, the essay is short on specifics. It neither sets out to, nor does it, provide a coherent account of either literary tradition—in the entire essay, the word ‘tradition’ and its adjectival form appear a total of ten times—or tradition’s role in poetic creation.

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Furthermore, despite Lucy’s claim that the ideas contained in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ were a pervasive influence throughout Eliot’s career, it is a matter of controversy as to whether Eliot’s views on tradition remained consistent over time, or whether they changed in concert with the various stages of his own artistic, political, and philosophical development. In the introduction to *T.S. Eliot and The Concept of Tradition* (2007), editors Giovanni Cianci and Jason Harding claim interpretations of Eliot’s notion of tradition tend to fall into one of two camps. Those in the first camp regard the model of tradition described in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ as being congruent with Eliot’s later, overtly right-wing ideas about culture, along the lines of those he expressed in *After Strange Gods* (1934). In that work, Eliot insists on the need for cultural homogeneity for tradition to flourish, arguing ‘the population should be homogenous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate’. While this alone is probably enough to be a source of discomfort to a majority of modern scholars, it is Eliot’s insistence that the most important aspects of cultural unity are race and religion that provokes the strongest reaction, especially when expressed in his notorious statement that ‘reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable’. Needless to say, any connection between ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and these later pronouncements would be an unfortunate one.

However, the question at hand is not whether Eliot’s earlier writings contained the seed of these later views, but instead whether the understanding of tradition which

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underpinned these works had altered in the interval, regardless of the ideological shift. Interpreters that fall into the second camp are those scholars who claim the essay outlines a more radical formulation of literary tradition than the older, more reactionary Eliot would be prepared to countenance. I have adopted this second view in the analysis which follows.

For the purposes of this thesis, I do not intend to add to an ever-growing chorus of interpretations of Eliot’s essay. Notwithstanding, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ is undoubtedly the most influential critical text concerning literary tradition of the last century and, as such, is unavoidable in a study such as this. I will limit myself to discussing two aspects of the essay which have a direct bearing on the present purpose of describing models of tradition in critical and scholarly texts, many of which have been influenced by Eliot’s model, even if only in a very general way: specifically, the notion of simultaneous order and the view that tradition is not inherited but sought out.

2.3.2.1 Simultaneous Order

In ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Eliot points to a ‘prejudice’ against tradition which shows itself in a desire for originality: ‘our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else’. We ‘dwell,’ he writes, ‘with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors’, a view which places Eliot in the lineage of critics already discussed, going back to the ‘querelle des Anciens et des Modernes’ of the 17th century. Sainte-Beuve, in particular, had also drawn attention to the bias for innovation, writing disapprovingly that

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disproportionate importance and literary value are attributed to works hitherto unknown ... People are proud of “finds”, merely curious (when they are that), which cost no thought, no effort of the mind, but merely the trouble of going and picking them up.⁶²

Against the desire to innovate, Eliot posits that the best and most original poetry is produced by poets with a strong connection to tradition, that is to say, those poets whose literary predecessors ‘assert their immortality most vigorously’ in their work.⁶³ This statement contains an obvious paradox: how can those aspects of poetry which are at once the most original be at the same time the most traditional? According to Eliot, the crux of the matter lies with our inadequate conception of tradition itself and, by implication, originality. Another conception is required:

[I]f the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, ‘tradition’ should positively be discouraged.⁶⁴

This view puts Eliot at odds with conservative theorists of tradition such as Josef Pieper, and Roger Scruton. For example, while Pieper does conceive of tradition as a process of ‘following the ways of the immediate generation’, his contention that we ‘do not accept the traditum “because it is traditional,” but because [we] are convinced that it is true and valid’ does not suggest timidity.⁶⁵ And when Scruton writes that ‘when someone acts from tradition he sees what he does now as belonging to a pattern that transcends the pattern of his present interest, binding it to what has previously been done’, he does not

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⁶⁵Pieper, Tradition: Concept and Claim, 17. In fairness to Eliot, Pieper does claim that ‘the person who hands down tradition can see through the traditum just as little as the recipient of tradition’ (18). Pieper apparently sees no contradiction between the opacity of tradition, so conceived, and the acceptance of tradition on the basis of truth and validity as expressed in the quote above.
suggest blindness.\textsuperscript{66} But regardless of whether Eliot’s characterization of this other form of tradition is just, it serves to distinguish the form of tradition that he is advocating.

The form of tradition favoured by Eliot can be understood as his response to the apparent opposition between originality and tradition, an opposition which as we have seen was also denied by Sainte-Beuve. But far more explicitly than his predecessor, Eliot seeks to redefine tradition as a reciprocal relationship between past and present whereby the past is changed by the present, and the present by the past. As Jean-Michel Rabaté puts it: ‘if one views European literature as a simultaneous whole, the first logical consequence is that the past is altered by the creation of novelty’.\textsuperscript{67} The ability for the present to alter the past is a consequence of what Eliot calls ‘the historical sense’. The historical sense ‘invokes a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence’.\textsuperscript{68} Though speaking of both the presence and pastness of the past, in Eliot’s model of tradition the presence of the past is paramount. Tradition’s presence, perceived through the historical sense,

compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.\textsuperscript{69}

Here then, the simultaneous model of tradition—which has been illustrated by the visual critical metaphors of Chaucer’s pillars of fame and Sainte-Beuve’s temple of taste—

\textsuperscript{66} Scruton, \textit{Meaning of Tradition}, 34.
is given belated theoretical treatment.⁷⁰ In doing so, Eliot implicitly demarcates simultaneous tradition from other models, such as that which Remy de Gourmont, a key influence on Eliot, termed ‘continuous tradition’ and which is illustrated by the critical metaphor of a linked chain.⁷¹ What distinguishes the two models from each other is their respective emphases: the simultaneous model prioritizes tradition’s content, while the continuous model stresses the chain of transmission. In choosing to focus on the presence of past literary achievements, Eliot orients his model towards the content of tradition: i.e. that which is present to the individual author who ‘possesses’ a tradition. This contrasts with the critical metaphor of tradition as a chain, in which the past is linked to the present. Unlike simultaneous tradition, the continuous model does not require the entirety of a tradition’s content to be present, but merely linked in some fashion from the past to the present. Eliot’s simultaneous model, on the other hand, requires the content of a tradition to be present in order to be considered a tradition at all. This explains why the individual’s relation to tradition cannot be ‘blind’, since blindness rules out the major relation of the individual to a tradition: the conscious possession of its content. The tradition cannot be present if one is blind to its content. Sainte-Beuve also insisted on tradition being ‘visible’: tradition, he writes, ‘exists all traced out. It is visible like those immense, magnificent avenues or roads which used to traverse the empire’.⁷² Tradition’s

⁷⁰ Katherine Ebury reminds us that modernism supplied its own imaginative representations of simultaneous tradition: ‘Eliot’s lack of clear distinctions between past, present and future so that all poets are contemporaries is not unlike other manifestations of relativistic cosmic time in modernism, such as Yeats’s Great Wheel in A Vision, where figures from different historical periods exist together in a phase as though they were contemporaries, or in the complex historical simultaneity of Joyce’s Finnegans Wake’. See Katherine Ebury, Modernism and Cosmology: Absurd Lights (Basingstoke, 2014), 20.
⁷¹ See Chapter 3.
‘visibility’ then is one of the recurring characteristics—indeed, a structurally necessary one—of the simultaneous model of literary tradition. It was already present in the 14th century, when Chaucer’s narrator literally sees the literary tradition[content] in the House of Fame.

Having established his model of tradition as consisting of the literature of the past existing in a simultaneous order, Eliot briefly sketches the internal dynamics of that order:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervision of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values, of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.73

At any given time, a tradition consists as a system of interrelated elements—the works of the past—each of which responds to changes within the system. In her essay, ‘Exorcizing the Demon of Chronology: T.S. Eliot’s Reinvention of Tradition’, Aleida Assmann argues that Eliot’s model of tradition must necessarily be understood not in terms of the organicist thinking which dominated 19th century, but instead according to the ‘new paradigm of wholeness’ which emerged in the early 20th century—i.e. system.74

Although the term ‘system’ does not appear in Eliot’s essay, his concept of tradition is systemic in the technical sense of the term. Whenever Eliot refers to something as a ‘whole’, he is clearly giving a precise description of the wholeness of a system. It is in this context of systemic thinking and discourse, developed at the beginning of the twentieth century in various disciplines, that Eliot redefined or rather reinvented his concept of tradition.75

In regarding tradition systemically, the individual elements of a tradition—regardless of whether they are authors, books, or other traditions—are not treated as discrete, independent entities, but instead are relational. Their meaning or significance is altered in relation to the other contents that make up the totality of the tradition.\textsuperscript{76}

This systemic and relational formulation of tradition is illustrated in various ways in the texts examined in this chapter, whether in the spatial arrangements of Raphael’s paintings or their literary equivalent in Chaucer and Swift, or in the criticism of Sainte-Beuve, Eliot and E.M. Forster (see below). Invariably these artists, writers, and critics seek to find a way to express tradition experienced simultaneously, in which each individual element of traditional content in the larger tradition-complex is, in some sense, present to all the rest, each one altering, and being altered in turn, by every other. Since these elements are usually understood to be past authors and their works, and since the addition of a new personality or work into the ‘ideal order’ alters these elements, the present can be said to alter the past. In Eliot’s words:

> Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.\textsuperscript{77}

2.3.2.2. \textit{Obtained by Great Labour}

Another major component of Eliot’s simultaneous model of tradition relates to the 
\textit{location} of tradition. While the medium by which literary tradition\textsuperscript{content} is transmitted remains books and other textual artefacts, the tradition\textsuperscript{content} qua tradition is primarily

\textsuperscript{76} In what sense meaning or significance is altered is not always made explicit by critics who employ the simultaneous model. It must be deduced from the individual critical texts or critical practices that the simultaneous model underlies. Instances will be discussed below.

located in the consciousness of those who have inherited them through reading those texts. Rather than being diffused within a society or culture (in the manner of Chaucer’s ‘fame’) or embodied in physical artefacts (like the books in Swift’s libraries) the ideal order which Eliot posits is possessed by the individuals who have troubled themselves to attain it. It is because of its individualistic and deliberately constructed character that Eliot’s tradition cannot be a blind process of inheritance. Tradition\[^{content}\], on this account, is not a matter of passing on an inheritance. Instead, it is a re-gathering (note the similarity to Remy de Gourmont’s ‘renewed tradition’ examined in the next chapter) of an endlessly overlapping sequence of simultaneous ideal orders, each one held by an individual in possession of the necessary historical sense.

The fact that, for Eliot, tradition is not something that the reader is inevitably entangled and implicated in, allows him to develop a notion of tradition that is the very opposite of an unconscious inheritance. Indeed, according to Eliot tradition ‘cannot be inherited’, and ‘if you want it you must obtain it by great labour’.\[^{78}\] Since what is obtained by this labour is knowledge of authors and works—i.e. the content of the European literary tradition—Eliot’s conception of tradition is thus heavily orientated away from tradition’s chain of transmission and towards its content. Transmission is a secondary function of the process of re-gathering. This process is described by Eliot’s mentor, Ezra Pound, in *ABC of Reading*: ‘A man wanting to conserve a tradition,’ writes Pound, ‘would always do well to find out, first, what it is’.\[^{79}\] Only when one has gained knowledge of a tradition’s content can they be said to possess a tradition at all.

Another distinction that is implicit in Eliot’s essay, and one which will be revisited in
greater detail in Chapter 4, is between tradition that is inherited and tradition that has
been constructed. That Eliot had this distinction on his mind is demonstrated in a letter he
wrote to Mary Hutchinson in July 1919, just prior to writing ‘Tradition and the
Individual Talent’. In the letter, he distinguishes between ‘civilization which is
impersonal and traditional ... and which forms people unconsciously ... and culture—
which is a personal interest and curiosity in particular things’.\textsuperscript{80} Jean-Michel Rabaté
points out that in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, Eliot altered this argument by
placing tradition ‘on the side of “culture” and not of “civilization”’.\textsuperscript{81} I would argue that
in making this shift, it was necessary to reformulate tradition in order to align it with the
‘personal interest and curiosity in particular things’, rather than the unconscious
inheritance of civilization which is what many then meant, and still do mean, by
‘tradition’.\textsuperscript{82}

Before leaving Eliot for E. M. Forster, it is worth considering one of the aspects of
Eliot’s formulation of tradition\textsuperscript{content} that Forster was directly responding to. That is the
fact that tradition\textsuperscript{content} must be gained by ‘great labour’—i.e. that it is a highly exclusive,
even elitist understanding of tradition. Rather than being conceived as a distributed body
of knowledge, only those individuals in possession of the time, intelligence, education,
and aesthetic sensibility required to attain it may possess, let along benefit from, literary
tradition\textsuperscript{content}. The French critic and poet, Remy de Gourmont, suggested something

\textsuperscript{80} T.S. Eliot, The Letters of T.S. Eliot Volume 1: 1898-1922, ed. by Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton, Revised
\textsuperscript{81} Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Tradition’, 212.
\textsuperscript{82} It could also be argued that Eliot doesn’t maintain the distinction between culture and civilization in
‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, thereby allowing tradition to cover to both.
along these lines when he wrote that ‘[t]he true masters of tradition are those who, like Sainte-Beuve, have despised nothing, have wished to understand everything’. And if there were any doubts about the degree of elitism involved in the thinking of Eliot and his contemporaries, we need only turn to his friend and mentor Ezra Pound. In *ABC of Reading*, Pound offers guidance to those who would seek to possess the literary tradition:

> Let the student brace himself and prepare for the worst. I am coming to my list of the minimum that a man would have to read if he hoped to know what a given new book was worth.

Pound’s list includes poetry in a variety of European languages (translations are, of course, unacceptable) along with such exhortations as: ‘Anyone who is too lazy to master the comparatively small glossary necessary to understand Chaucer deserves to be shut out from the reading of good books for ever’. Pound is not oblivious to the plight of those readers whose dedication to learning is not comparable to his own. However, he is unbending in his estimation of the minimum amount of literature one must read in order achieve anything like expertise in literary judgement:

> AT ABOUT THIS POINT the weak-hearted reader usually sits down in the road, removes his shoes and weeps that he ‘is a bad linguist’ or that he or she can’t possibly learn all those languages.

> One has to divide the readers who want to be experts from those who do not, and divide, as it were, those who want to see the world from those who merely want to know WHAT PART OF IT THEY LIVE IN.

But if tradition cannot be inherited and must, instead, be gained by effort, questions are raised about the communicability and common resemblance of these simultaneous traditional orders. Even if we restrict ourselves to the evaluation of works in a tradition,

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84 Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 41.
86 Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 42. The idiosyncratic use of upper case is in the original.
what purpose would this serve unless others shared the same tradition in order to validate that judgement? Can tradition thus understood be passed on? And if not, in what sense is this order a ‘tradition’ as the word is usually taken to mean? Perhaps simultaneous tradition, at least in Eliot and Pound’s understanding, is merely an individual’s construction from (or personal perspective of) tradition conceived in the more usual way as continuous, public, and shared. These issues are raised not merely to draw attention to the elitism of Eliot and Pound, but to draw attention to the considerations which frame the conception of an alternative notion of tradition examined in the next section. That alternative notion, detailed in E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*, is both inspired by, and a response to, Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, and explicitly addresses many of the issues just raised.

2.3.3 Aspects of Tradition: E. M. Forster’s Circular Reading Room

Half-knowledge is very communicable; not so knowledge.87 Mary Coleridge

One of the earliest significant critical works to be influenced by Eliot’s model of tradition is the novelist E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), based on the 1927 Clark Lectures which Forster delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge.88 The previous year’s Clark lectures had been delivered by none other than T. S. Eliot himself, lecturing on ‘The Metaphysical Poetry of the 17th Century’.89 It is no great surprise then that Eliot,

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88 While Forster never mentions ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ by name (though he does mention *The Sacred Wood* which includes it), the idea that Forster was influenced by it has long been considered the case. For example, in *Literature of the 1920s: Writers Among the Ruins* (Edinburgh, 2012), Chris Baldick writes that *Aspects of a Novel* contains ‘a similar repudiation of literary-historical temporality’ and was ‘possibly inspired by Eliot’ (91).
a poet whom Forster ‘admired guardedly’, was very much on his mind when planning his own lectures.90

Forster, however, immediately sets himself apart from Eliot by emphasizing the particularity of his own literary form, the novel. He stresses the manifold influences which defy scholars’ attempts to speak of a singular tradition of the novel:

It is most distinctly one of the moister areas of literature — irrigated by a hundred rills and occasionally denigrating into a swamp. I do not wonder that the poets despise it, though they sometimes find themselves in it by accident.91

Unlike Eliot, Forster holds a notion of literary tradition92 that is not tied to a specified geographic area or homogenous cultural group. He insists that ‘English Literature’ refers to those works written in English, and not ‘as published south of Tweed or east of the Atlantic, or north of the Equator: we need not attend to geographical accidents, they can be left to the politicians’.93 However naïve this might appear in a modern theoretical context in which critics are less inclined to treat the English language as an ideologically neutral medium, discounting geography nonetheless affects how the boundaries of Forster’s literary tradition94 are defined.95 Despite the apparent inclusiveness of his definition, an English literature delimited solely by linguistic barriers presents a rather more restricted field of enquiry than does Eliot’s ‘literature of Europe’, drawing as it does from a number of national literatures written in many languages.96 Forster gives two justifications for this move. The first is on the pragmatic grounds of narrowing his topic. The second justification is an evaluative one: Forster insists that

92 Forster, Aspects, 25.
restricting his enquiry to novels written in English recognizes the ‘unpleasant and unpatriotic truth’ that the English novel has yet to achieve the greatness of its continental cousin.95

In any case, Forster suggests that, Eliot’s views notwithstanding, English writers have ‘never been much influenced by the continentals’.96 Yet, even while keeping within the sharply delimited field of English language fiction Forster is keen to avoid any discussion of influence. Indeed, the most important single factor determining Forster’s methodological approach to his analysis of the novel is his determination ‘to talk as little as possible about influence’.97 This stance puts him at odds with later scholars like Harold Bloom for whom influence is the central feature of literary tradition[chain]. ‘Tradition’, Bloom writes, ‘is influence that extends past one generation’.98 Forster’s decision to eschew any discussion of influence is not a rejection of the notion that influence plays a role in literary tradition but instead arises from his attitude towards chronology and periodization in literary scholarship: ‘[The] idea of a period or development in time, with its consequent emphasis on influences and schools, happens to be exactly what I am hoping to avoid’.99 The reason for this avoidance is revealed in Forster’s warning against ‘the danger of pseudo-scholarship’ which he defines in opposition to a genuine scholarship.100 Of such genuine scholars, Forster writes:

No one is more triumphant than the man who chooses a worthy subject and masters all its facts and the leading facts of the subjects neighbouring. He can then do what he likes. He can, if his subject is the novel, lecture on it chronologically if he wishes,

95 Forster, Aspects, 26.
96 Forster, Aspects, 26.
97 Forster, Aspects, 26.
98 Bloom, A Map of Misreading 32.
99 Forster, Aspects, 27.
100 Forster, Aspects, 27.
because he has read all the important novels of the past four centuries, many of the
unimportant ones, and has adequate knowledge of any collateral facts that bear upon
English fiction.\(^{101}\)

The genuine scholar can take a chronological approach precisely because he has all the
necessary information, both textual and contextual, that is required to make judgements
concerning lines of influence. Yet, according to Forster, those who can lay claim to such
mastery are few in number:

The [genuine] scholar, like the philosopher, can contemplate the river of time. He
contemplates it not as a whole, but he can see the facts, the personalities, floating past
him, and estimates the relations between them and if his conclusions could be as
valuable to us as they are to himself he would long ago have civilized the human race.
As you know, he has failed. True scholarship is incommunicable, true scholars rare.\(^{102}\)

The image used here to suggest the relation between the ‘true scholar’ and literary
tradition is that of time (and tradition) as a river. In his analysis of the ‘river of time’
metaphor, the philosopher J. J. C. Smart argues that the river image can suggest two
alternative conceptions of time and our relation to it, depending on the context. The first
evokes the experience of ‘advancing through time, from the past into the future, much as
a ship advances through the sea into unknown waters’.\(^{103}\) Forster’s employment of the
‘river of time’ image, however, in which the scholar contemplates ‘the facts, the
personalities, floating past him’ is much more in line with Smart’s description of the
second conception of time represented by the river metaphor:

[W]e think of ourselves as stationary, watching time go by, just as we may stand on a
bridge and watch leaves and sticks float down the stream underneath us. Events, we
sometimes think, are like such leaves and sticks; they approach from the future, are
momentarily in the present, and then recede further and further into the past. Thus
instead of speaking of our advance through time we often speak of the flow of
time.\(^{104}\)

\(^{104}\) Smart, ‘The River of Time’, 484. See also, Daniel Rosenberg and Anthony Grafton, *Cartographies of
Time* (New York, 2010), 108–11.
In true scholarship, as Forster describes it, the river of tradition is not seen in its totality, but is limited by the scholar’s position, so to speak, *on the shore*. Nonetheless, in principle at least, the scholar can make sense of the flux of history and tradition. If this critical metaphor is taken seriously, then the position of the individual in relation to literary tradition—as a neutral observer—is difficult, even impossible, to achieve according to many of the scholars discussed in this thesis.\(^{105}\) Regardless, Forster claims that the scholarly disposition and industry required to assume this detached, objective, viewpoint is extremely uncommon.

In addition to being rare, Forster insists that the perspective of the true scholar is incommunicable. Despite the temporally fixed viewpoint, the ‘view’ illustrated by the river of time metaphor is one of unceasing flux. Forster deems the usual methods of making sense of the vast number of facts and personalities ‘floating past’—i.e. historical periodization or categorization according to school or subject matter—to be the tools of the pseudo-scholar.\(^ {106}\) At the same time he concedes that without such tools, crude and distortive though they may be, the genuine scholar is unable to communicate his perspective. The pseudo-scholar employs spurious chronological approaches and periodization *precisely* because, unlike true scholarship, they are communicable.\(^ {107}\)

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\(^{105}\) See especially Chapter 4 and 5 of this thesis, in which the positionality of the recipient (and observer) of tradition comes to the fore.


\(^{107}\) Forster’s views resemble those of Benedetto Croce, which were then highly influential. On the subject of periodization, Croce insisted that ‘the practical needs of historicism and of learning make themselves felt here’. However, Croce also believed that this tendency was inseparable from human thought, arguing that periodization of history ‘has maintained itself and will maintain itself so long as our consciousness shall persist in its present phase’. Forster, on the other hand, seems to take a view more along the lines of that described by David Perkins: ‘we tend to regard periods as necessary fictions. They are necessary because ... one cannot write history or literary history without periodizing’. See Benedetto Croce, *History: It’s Theory and Practice*, trans. by Douglas Ainslie (New York, 1921), 112–13; David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore, 1992), 65.
2.3.3.1  *Forster’s Circular Reading Room*

There is a parallel here between the demanding knowledge requirements of ‘true scholarship’ put forward by Forster, and the ‘great labour’ required to obtain the European literary tradition[content] in Eliot and Pound’s writings. In both cases the issue of communicability is at stake. Unlike Eliot and Pound, for whom this difficulty is a direct result of their simultaneous conception of tradition, Forster invokes his simultaneous model as a way of eradicating that difficulty. Instead of being the source of the problem, tradition[content] for Forster functions as an epistemic workaround to the problem of the literary history’s incommunicable complexity. Forster concedes that, despite their shortcomings, the critical tools associated with pseudo-scholarship cannot, in the end, be dispensed with:

Most of us are pseudo-scholars, and I want to consider our characteristics with sympathy and respect, for we are a very large and quite powerful class, eminent in Church and State, we control the education of the Empire, we lend to the Press such distinction as it consents to receive, and we are a welcome asset at dinner parties.\[108\]

Ultimately, Forster’s sympathies are with pseudo-scholars like himself. He regards pseudo-scholarship as ‘the homage paid by ignorance to learning’.\[109\] Whereas the rare true scholar can see the outlines of tradition, most people cannot, instead relying on makeshift pseudo-scholarly devices like periodization as a compromise.

But if the conception of literary tradition illustrated by the river-of-time image is inimical to pseudo-scholarly efforts, a new critical metaphor is required. Accordingly, Forster’s decision to explicitly reject periodization and the river-of-time image in *Aspects of the Novel* is accompanied by the introduction of a replacement image that illustrates

literary tradition from the standpoint of the pseudo-scholar. Eschewing chronology, he invites us to imagine ‘that all ... novelists are at work in a circular room’ and that they are all ‘writing their novels at once’ (see Fig. 4). Forster hereby supplies one of the most memorable visual metaphors for the simultaneous model of tradition in modern criticism:

We are to visualize the English novelists not as floating down that stream which bears all its sons away unless they are careful, but as seated together in a room, a circular room, a sort of British Museum reading-room—all writing their novels simultaneously. They do not, as they sit there, think “I live under Queen Victoria, I under Anne, I carry on the tradition of Trollope, I am reacting against Aldous Huxley.”

Forster then further boils down this image to the credo, ‘History develops, Art stands still’, a position which he admits is a ‘crude motto... almost a slogan’. While he regards the introduction of the circular room metaphor as a necessary move, he insists that this view of tradition (and by implication the simultaneous model which it represents) may not be employed without ‘admitting its vulgarity. It contains only a partial truth’. The notion that art ‘stands still’ is, Forster concedes, specifically formulated to suit his present task—i.e. to discuss the novel in terms of its non-temporal ‘aspects’, rather than its historical development. Accordingly, Forster argues, the imagined inhabitants of the reading room would not understand Professor Oliver Elton’s claim that ‘after 1847 the

110 Forster, Aspects, 31.
111 Forster, Aspects, 27.
112 Forster, Aspects, 36. Aleida Assmann, on the other hand, quotes the phrase ‘History develops, Art stands still’ as evidence that Forster ‘explicitly opposed historicism and the burden of knowledge collected by literary historians, which he believed had no use, unless to keep academics busy’. Forster’s own reservations about the ‘crude motto’, quoted above, seem to militate against this interpretation. See: Assmann, ‘Exorcizing the Demon’, 18.
113 Forster, Aspects, 37.
114 According to Aleida Assmann, ‘the word “aspect” was intentionally chosen as a term that lacked any reference to time’. Assmann, ‘Exorcizing the Demon’, 18.
novel of passion was never to be the same again’. The novels of passion prior to 1847 are no less accessible to those authors writing after that date than they were to their contemporaries. The image also suggests—though, unlike Eliot, Forster does not make much of this feature—that the novel of passion is also in some sense contemporary with authors of prior ages. However, in *E. M. Forster’s Modernism* (2002), David Medalie argues that such speculation is misguided: those who invest a great deal in the reading room image, ‘finding in it, for instance, a stance akin to the ahistoricism of New Criticism’, are taking Forster’s reading room ‘too seriously’, adding that it is intended to be ‘tongue-in cheek’.

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115 Forster, *Aspects*, 27.
this possibility for further investigation since he explicitly states that the reading room image isn’t meant to represent what literary tradition or history is like, but is a heuristic scholarly tool; one that achieves ‘an imperfect vision, but it is suited to our powers’.

And yet, Forster’s repeated caveats about the limits of the reading room image suggest his seriousness in formulating it was greater than Medalie allows. One of the caveats offered by Forster is that the simultaneous model represented by the circular reading room ‘debars us ... from considering whether the human mind alters from generation to generation’. To show that this is an acceptable compromise, however, he compares his contemporaries with the Elizabethans, insisting that ‘[f]our thousand, fourteen thousand years, might give us pause, but four hundred years is nothing in the life of our race, and does not allow for any measurable change’. Excluding a purely biological interpretation, the suggestion that there has been no ‘measurable change’ in the human mind over the last four hundred years of human history would be unlikely to go unchallenged today, suggesting as it does a universalism that is at odds with the historical approaches that have dominated literary studies in the last several decades. Nevertheless, Forster’s efforts to anticipate and answer criticism and accusations of his model’s shortcomings suggest that his intentions in formulating it were sincere.

Forster in fact concedes that the problem of change in the simultaneous model he proposes is more serious when we turn from human beings to what he apparently regards as a separate issue: ‘the development of tradition’. The tradition whose occluded
development Forster feels most keenly is that of fictional technique which, unlike the people who employ it, apparently does ‘alter from generation to generation’ 124 To illustrate this, Forster points to the resemblance in ‘aim and general effect’ between the writings of the 18th century writer Lawrence Sterne and the 20th century writer Virginia Woolf. The latter resembles the former because she belongs to a ‘later phase’ of the same tradition. 122 This identification is very much taken for granted, and Forster does not give any indication as to what it is that enables him to identify Woolf and Sterne as belonging the same tradition in the first place. Whether it is some quality that is common to the works of both writers, or whether there is some identifiable line of descent that leads from one to the other remains unstated. Forster simply asserts that such questions cannot be answered and that all there is left for critics is to ‘admit we are the poorer’ for it. 123 In the next chapter, I will examine the work of scholars whose attempts to answer those questions leads them to place a far greater emphasis on the question of continuity in literary tradition.

2.3.3.2 Differences with Eliot’s Model

Despite being contemporaries and despite both adopting some variation of the simultaneous model, it would be a mistake to equate Eliot and Forster’s views on tradition. Forster certainly did not, and he concludes the introductory chapter to Aspects of the Novel with a direct comparison between himself and Eliot. He begins by quoting Eliot’s book The Sacred Wood (1920):

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121 Forster, Aspects, 37.
122 Forster, Aspects, 37.
123 Forster, Aspects, 37.
It is part of the business of the critic to preserve tradition—where a good tradition exists. It is part of his business to see literature steadily and to see it whole; and this is eminently to see it not as consecrated by time, but to see it beyond time...

This is in line with the view of tradition Eliot presented in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, where tradition must be obtained and possessed as a simultaneous whole in which past and present works exist alongside and alter each other in turn. Forster’s response is to reject Eliot’s first demand—to preserve tradition—and to reconfigure the second part about seeing literature as a whole and ‘beyond time’:

The first duty we cannot perform, the second we must try to perform. We can neither examine nor preserve tradition. But we can visualize the novelists as sitting in one room, and force them, by our very ignorance, from the limitations of date and place. I think that is worth doing, or I should not have ventured to undertake this course.

The origin of the difference between their two positions is located in their different conceptions of the true shape of tradition. As Jean-Michel Rabaté argues, Eliot’s theory of tradition has a phenomenological foundation based on ‘the endless problematization of memory and perception’ which can also be found in Eliot’s poetry, especially ‘The Waste Land’. Tradition, insofar as it is identified with the presence of the past, is a selective and personal structuring of ‘discontinuous fragments’. The theory put forth in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ is an attempt to theorize the relation of the individual to those fragments. In contrast, Forster employs the river-of-time image to depict the true character of tradition, only invoking the simultaneous model, illustrated by the reading room, as part of his critical methodology. Hence, unlike Eliot, Forster does not address the temporal complexities that arise from a simultaneous and relational

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125 Forster, Aspects, 38.
model of tradition because such a model does not accurately depict how tradition really is. For all their similarities, Forster and Eliot’s respective models of tradition are epistemologically incompatible and have entirely different critical functions.

But lest it be thought that Forster’s account of literary tradition was theoretically timid or naïve in comparison to Eliot’s, it is worth remembering that Forster’s account of the simultaneous model is put forward in full recognition that it is a methodological fiction, created to accomplish critical work. Furthermore, he is aware than in doing so he is setting himself against Eliot’s ontological conception of tradition; at no time does Forster fall into the error of mistaking his circular reading room notion of tradition for the way literary tradition really is. Indeed, as David Medalie points out, at the end of Aspects of the Novel, Forster retracts his simultaneous model of literary tradition, reminding the reader that at the beginning of the lectures he ‘laid it down as an axiom’, but that ‘if we had the power or license to take a wider view ... we might not conclude like this’.  

Medalie even suggests that Forster suspended the flux of history ‘in order to provoke an awareness of how easy it is to do so’. Whether or not this is so, in acknowledging the instrumental nature of his conception of literary tradition as a critical fiction, Forster shows a sophisticated awareness of the gap between the model of tradition that he employs and literary tradition itself, whatever that may be.

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128 Forster, Aspects, 153.
129 Medalie, E. M. Forster’s Modernism, 106.
2.4 Conclusion

What each of the descriptions of literary tradition examined in this chapter demonstrate is that the simultaneous model can be broadly characterized as accentuating the content of tradition over its transmissive and normative aspects. The focus is on what is being transmitted over the how and why. These other dimensions are, to some extent, necessarily present in the simultaneous model but they are not of primary concern. It is the emphasis on content that determines the model’s structure. The major variation in this model over time is the degree to which those employing it regard tradition as an ideal order, eternal and harmonious, or as a conflict between the various elements that make up a tradition’s content. In the works of Chaucer and Swift this conflict is represented in literal terms—jostling among rivals in Chaucer; civil war in Swift. By the twentieth century, adherents of the simultaneous model have ceased to conceive of literary tradition as the perpetuation of a single tradition but rather as being composed of multiple strands of tradition which compete for attention. The two twentieth century figures which I have dealt with—Eliot and Forster—each made an important contribution to the development of the simultaneous model, bringing to it an understanding which we continue to share today. Eliot reconceived the simultaneous model in terms of the concept of a system, borrowing from the intellectual currents of his day and finally achieving a technical vocabulary for talking about literary tradition which had been lacking for all models of tradition, not just the simultaneous. Forster made the less recognized, but equally vital, contribution of recognizing that a model of tradition need not be understood as a mimetic representation of an actual phenomenon, but instead as a critical or cultural construct which can be employed when useful and
discarded when the limits of its effectiveness are reached. This last point concerning the possibility that models of literary tradition are useful fictions, created to accomplish critical or cultural work, will become a major focus of the next chapter in which I examine the continuous model of tradition.
Chapter Three
Taking the Long View: The Continuous Model of Literary Tradition

Continuity of the literary tradition—a simplified expression for a very complicated state of things.¹

Ernst Robert Curtius

The mind cannot conceive or bring forth its fruit unless it is steeped in a vast flood of literature.²

Petronius

3.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, in the course of examining various scholarly and artistic expressions of the simultaneous model of tradition, I examined the novelist E. M. Forster’s professed reasons for adopting that model. Unlike T. S. Eliot, who regarded simultaneous tradition as a ‘form’ of tradition that was a necessary aid to the writer, Forster adopted the model in the interests of pedagogical heuristics and epistemological compromise. For convenience, I will call the problematic alternative to the simultaneous model described by Forster the long view of tradition. The long view is illustrated by the critical metaphor of time-as-a-river which was discussed in the previous chapter. If the visual metaphors of tradition invoked by Chaucer, Swift, Sainte-Beuve, and Forster, are

¹ Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1990), 393.
intended to convey a synchronic view of tradition, then the view of tradition suggested by the time-as-a-river metaphor is manifestly diachronic.

By the time Forster wrote *Aspects of the Novel*, the time-as-a-river metaphor was well-worn, which is perhaps one of the reasons that the alternative synchronic view of tradition espoused by Forster and Eliot seemed refreshing, despite its own lengthy pedigree. On the other hand, it is possible that the time-as-a-river metaphor simply no longer resonated with readers as a way of describing their relationship to literary history.

As the art critic and historian James Elkins writes in his essay ‘Introduction to an Abandoned Book’, from a modernist or postmodern perspective

the rivers of Renaissance traditions seem to have divided into Baroque streams and then into Enlightenment rivulets. By the time romanticism was waning and modernism was getting underway in the mid-nineteenth century, only a few Renaissance traditions were still in play. There were many revivals but few continuous discourses or shared problems. With twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism, the sparse rivulets soaked into the ground and vanished, leaving what appears to be an entirely new landscape.3

In this passage, Elkins identifies the key aspect of tradition that the time-as-a-river metaphor is intended to illustrate: *continuity*. In this respect, it is related to other critical metaphors which emphasize the unbroken path from one point in cultural history to another, or from one cultural product to a subsequent one. For example, the German literary scholar Ernst Robert Curtius, whose work is examined in this chapter, illustrated continuity in literary tradition via the image of roads leading from the literature of the past to that of the present (or at least as near to the present as Curtius was prepared to go):

Virgil and Dante have long had a place in the innermost circle of my admiration. What were the roads that led from the one to the other? This question increasingly preoccupied me. The answer could not but found in the Latin continuity of the

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Middle Ages. And that in turn was a portion of the European tradition, which has Homer at its beginning and at its end, as we see today, Goethe.4

What is evident from this quote is not only Curtius’s deep concern for what he calls ‘the European tradition’, but his belief that it is a matter of some importance that the later contents of this tradition—such as works of Goethe—are understood to be in some sense continuous with the works of Classical antiquity. The detailed understanding and knowledge of European literary history required to grasp this continuity is precisely what Forster regarded as being beyond the abilities of most readers. One who is capable of this long view, Forster argues, ‘contemplates [literary history/tradition] not as a whole, but he can see the facts, the personalities, floating past him, and estimate the relations between them’.5 But as the last chapter made clear, in addition to being exceedingly difficult to attain, Forster regarded such a vantage point as impossible to communicate.

In this chapter, I examine the possibility, contra Forster, of holding the long view of tradition in literary scholarship. I argue that this perspective involves the adoption of a model of tradition that I refer to as the continuous model. Of the three major aspects of tradition outlined in the introduction—content, chain, and weight—the continuous model is concerned primarily with the second: chain. More precisely, the continuous model emphasizes the real or perceived chain of transmission which is responsible for the continued existence of literary traditions6[content] over time. Unlike Eliot, who stresses that tradition6[content] ‘cannot be inherited’, and unlike Forster who believes that literary tradition6[chain] can be grasped chronologically only by a select few, scholars who adopt the

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4 Curtius, ELLMA, vii.
5 Forster, Aspects, 28.
continuous model proceed on the assumption that both claims are false. On the contrary, the underlying assumptions contained in the continuous model include the understanding that: a) tradition is manifested by an ongoing process of cultural transmission from generation to generation, and that b) tradition so understood can be comprehended in its temporal dimension.

This chapter begins with a brief account of tradition conceived in terms of its chain of transmission, followed by some discussion of the notions of change and continuity which are inseparable from any discussion of the long view of tradition. Following this, I look at the paradoxes of tradition in relation to modernism (literary and otherwise), where these theoretical concerns were raised by writers and artists to a practical concern. I argue that, despite typically being described as desirous to break with tradition, many modernists were deeply concerned to establish continuity with their artistic forebears. The second half of the chapter then shifts to an examination of how the continuous model of literary tradition, despite tensions, has been a dominant model among literary historians from the 18th century onwards, concluding with an account of the continuous model in Ernst Robert Curtius’s major work, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*.

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3.2 What is continuity of tradition?

For traditions to be operative in society, they must be transmitted. There is not only a traditum; there is also a traditio.7

Brian Stock

Continuity of tradition can be understood in several distinct though related ways, all of them to some extent signified in this thesis by the term tradition[chain]:

i. It may refer to the historical and trans-historical identity of a tradition[content].

ii. Alternatively, it may refer to the aggregate of transmissions that has occurred across a period of time in which the tradition[content] exists, whether or not these are known or knowable.

iii. It may also refer to the mode of transmission of a tradition[content].

The reason I have chosen to use the term ‘chain’ rather than ‘transmission’ to signify this dimension of tradition is that the latter term emphasizes the third aspect listed above—i.e. the act or the means of transmitting tradition[content]. While I intend the chain dimension of my analytical framework to be flexible enough to encompass all the aspects of transmission listed above, the majority of the critical works examined in this thesis (and the models of tradition that underpin them) have little to say about the actual mechanics of how traditions[content] are passed on from one generation to the next.8 What I and most of the scholars whose works I examine are mainly concerned with is the conceptual structure generated by assumptions about the relationship between the content of tradition and its transmission. ‘Chain’, being short for ‘chain of transmission’, better captures this relationship as it connotes the tradition as a whole: i.e. the aggregate of all

7 Stock, Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past, 162.
8 As we will see later in the chapter, an omission of this kind forms the basis of Elizabeth Eisenstein’s critique of Ernst Robert Curtius.
acts of transmission, either actual or perceived, that have taken place over the lifetime of the tradition.

A further reason to largely exclude the mode of transmission from consideration of the continuous model is that it is often not easily distinguished from the content of tradition. For example, in the case of many non-literary traditions, transmission is accomplished through ritual. The forms of ritual themselves constitute the content of a tradition and must be distinguished from the actualization of that form in a specific instance of their performance which properly falls under the mode of transmission. In yet other cases the mode of transmission involves the preservation of a material object. If the object is unique, then the content of the tradition is limited to the object itself and any traditional interpretations that accompany it. However, in some cases the tradition consists not of any objects in particular, but involves the continual manufacture of like objects, e.g. the forging of samurai swords. The content of the tradition in such cases includes a ritual form (i.e. the methods of manufacture) and the specific instantiations of that form (the various objects which are produced). In such cases, both the form and its actualization may constitute the content of the tradition. In short: the distinction between the mode of a tradition’s transmission and the content of a tradition is frequently impossible to make with precision.

These considerations are pertinent to literary tradition which often involves both form and specific instantiations of those forms: for instance, genres and the works belonging to them. Nevertheless, while this might suggest a weakness in the content-chain-weight framework, outside of a few specialized areas such as genre studies the vast majority of literary criticism has tended to overlook the subtle distinctions between
traditional content and its mode of transmission. More specifically, details about how a
tradition is transmitted have tended to fall outside the scope of the models of tradition
that most literary critics employ as guiding assumptions in their work. Tradition\textsuperscript{chain},
therefore, will most often refer to a tradition’s historical and epistemological existence—
i.e. the tradition’s objective historical existence, and what can be known about it.\textsuperscript{9}

\textbf{3.3 Continuity and Change}

A tradition is an accumulation through time of inspired works, created by people
who do not have tradition on their minds. If they have anything on their minds, it is
their own uniqueness: the ways in which they do not fit in, not the ways they do.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Clive James}

As stated, the \textit{chain} dimension of tradition encompasses the trans-historical existence
of a tradition\textsuperscript{content}. This raises the problem of how a tradition\textsuperscript{chain} can be identified,
both in theory and in practice. Since this thesis is concerned with the assumptions that
underlie the various models of tradition employed by literary critics, I am choosing to
focus on the theoretical aspect of this problem which can be best understood though the
complementary notions of \textit{continuity} and \textit{change}.

The word ‘change’ rivals ‘modernity’ for the honour of being considered the standard
antonym of ‘tradition’.\textsuperscript{11} In his 1919 essay collection, \textit{Tradition and Change: Studies in
Contemporary Literature}, the critic Arthur Waugh writes:

\begin{quote}
Tradition and Change: it is the perpetual conflict of the ages. Who can hope to retain
the heart of youth, when once the foot is weary and the eye grown dim? And who
can discriminate justly between the ideals by which he was fostered and fed, and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9} Nevertheless, a more detailed consideration of the mechanics and mode of transmission of literary traditions
could conceivably shed a great deal of light on the nature of some material traditions that are in many respects,
‘literary’: e.g. the physical preservation of texts, or traditions of bookmaking.

\textsuperscript{10} Clive James, \textit{Cultural Amnesia: Necessary Memories from History and the Arts} (New York, 2007), 158.

\textsuperscript{11} Stock, \textit{Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past}, 159.
those that his children assure him are the only perfect password to wisdom and to truth.\textsuperscript{12}

But according to Brian Stock, the notion that tradition and change are opposing forces has only persisted since the post-enlightenment influence of Kant and Hegel, and reinforced by thinkers like Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. It is only since then, Stock argues, that modernity itself has been identified with change.\textsuperscript{13}

Edward Shils is also concerned with the issue of change and its relation to tradition—and specifically literary tradition. Recognizing the difficulty of illustrating continuity in a literary context, Shils draws on the visual arts to illustrate his points. Whereas in the previous chapter visual art was shown depicting a specific model of tradition (in that case, the simultaneous model), Shils instead draws attention to the similar ontology of painting and literature concerning the continuity of tradition.\textsuperscript{14}

A particular painting remains the same over the course of its transmission, subject to the processes of deterioration and maintenance of physical substances and the modifications wrought by vandals and illicit improvers; a particular literary or religious text likewise having been definitively established—a very problematic conception—remains the same through numerous reprintings.\textsuperscript{15}

It is clear from Shils’s account, that any model of literary tradition that deals with evolving content (genre, style, canons) needs to be flexible enough to account for change at several levels. Not only do authorial practices evolve, but also those of readers. Shils points to the fact that ‘interpretation of a text does not remain the same equally among all the recipients at a given time or among the recipients who succeed each other in time’.\textsuperscript{16}

Furthermore, even the physical texts themselves are not static trans-historical objects but

\textsuperscript{13} Stock, \textit{Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past}, 159–60.
\textsuperscript{14} Compare with Curtius’s opposing view (section 3.5.3).
\textsuperscript{15} Shils, \textit{Tradition}, 13.
\textsuperscript{16} Shils, \textit{Tradition}, 13.
undergo changes over time. As Jerome McGann writes in *The Textual Tradition* (1991), ‘the textual condition’s only immutable law is the law of change’.¹⁷

In his account of literary tradition⁹, Shils means all of the above types of change. The term ‘literary’ is defined very broadly to include, for instance, philosophical traditions⁹ transmitted via literature. These he describes in terms of a series of always shifting combinations of images and symbols:

> Constellations of symbols, clusters of images, are received and modified. They change in the process of transmission as interpretations are made of the tradition presented; they change also while they are in the possession of their recipients. This chain of variants of a tradition is also called a tradition, as in the “platonic tradition” or the “Kantian tradition.” As a temporal chain, a tradition is a sequence of variation on received and transmitted themes.¹⁸

Shils is therefore in agreement with the point I have already made: i.e. that the word ‘tradition’ can refer not only to the specific content of a tradition, but to the chain of transmission. However, he has extended this formulation by asserting that the chain of transmission is also a ‘chain of variants’. In this he differs from the static view of tradition held, for instance, by the catholic philosopher Josef Pieper who regards the content of tradition to be fixed and unchanging through all of its stages of transmission.¹⁹ To be otherwise for Pieper is to be something other than tradition. Shils, on the other hand, seemingly places tradition’s emphasis on change, rather than continuity.

But this raises the following question: if tradition is to be conceived of as a ‘sequence’ as Shils would have it, and if the members of that sequence display variation, where is the unity of the sequence to be found? What is it that enables someone to examine the temporal chain of a tradition at two different points in time, and identify

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them as belonging to the same tradition? Shils merely hints at a few possible answers. One is the idea that what links all of the individual variations in traditional sequences ‘may consist in common themes’. In the earlier quote, Shils offers ‘the platonic tradition’ and ‘the Kantian tradition’ as examples of tradition which evolved over time, but which can be understood thematically. Furthermore, the names of these tradition also signify the second possibly unifying element: i.e. ‘descent from a common origin’. These two unifying elements, theme and origin, can be thought of as working together to produce unity in a tradition. For instance, Plato’s corpus stands at the beginning of ‘the Platonic tradition’, and all subsequent variations on his philosophy, and variations on those variations, can be said to still possess the same ‘Platonic’ theme. Elsewhere, Shils raises the possibility that unity is found in the nature of variation itself: ‘The connectedness’, he suggests, consists in ‘the contiguity of presentation and departure’. That is, a variation must exhibit enough similarities with the preceding variation in the temporal sequence in order that it is recognizable as being in the tradition, even as it extends the tradition in new ways.

This last characteristic, however, suggests that accounting for what enables someone to look at the ‘temporal chain’ of a tradition at two different points in time and identify both points as belonging to the same tradition is exceedingly complex. Once it is allowed that traditions can change across generations of transmissions, one can no longer appeal to the content itself for a unifying element. Even assuming one can examine two

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different variations in the same temporal chain—an assumption that will be placed under a great deal of scrutiny in Chapter 5 of this thesis—one would also need to be familiar with enough of the variations that exist between those two points in time in order to trace the sequence from one point to the other. If too many stages of variation are missing from our knowledge of the sequence, then it may not be possible to link an earlier and a later variation on the basis of what the content shows about itself.

From the preceding observations we must conclude that, even if change is regarded as being central to literary tradition as Edward Shils argues it must, once we turn to the matter of how a tradition is identified as such the issue of continuity is inescapable.23 But even more so than change, continuity is a difficult concept; as one writer puts it: continuity is ‘a sprawling concept ... ambiguously conceived and loosely applied’.24 For example, in The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past (2002), the historian John Lewis Gaddis describes continuity as follows:

> By continuities, I mean patterns that extend across time. These are not laws, like gravity or entropy; they are not even theories, like relativity or natural selection. They are simply phenomena that recur with sufficient regularity to make themselves apparent to us.25

But as this section will demonstrate, at least in relation to literary tradition, continuity may also be conceived as a background assumption whose regularity is not apparent until broken by change.

It is certainly the case that in literary criticism change is often emphasized over continuity, reasons for which include the value placed by critics on originality. Eliot refers

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23 Shils, Tradition, 244–45.
to this preference in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, writing that we ‘dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessor’ because ‘novelty is better than repetition’.26 This preference among critics of focusing on originality rather than continuity may also be attributed to the fact that change is more easily identified. Change is marked by difference, while continuity is often only apparent when it is disrupted. Take, for instance, the continuity of a generic literary convention: it is precisely when an author chooses to break with the convention in a conspicuous manner that its presence is most keenly felt. A famous example of this is the notorious ending of Agatha Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926), in which the killer is revealed to be the narrator. This plot device was shocking to readers of the 1920s, in part because it upended a convention that many had never consciously formulated: i.e. ‘the detective narrator was never to be considered a suspect’27 Not only did Christie break with the conventions of the detective genre, she broke a convention that most readers never even noticed was there. But the fact that readers had not noticed the convention (despite its being observed in every detective story they had ever read) did not stop it from being ‘a cardinal assumption’ of the genre.28 This example illustrates how it is possible for a tradition’s continuity to be most evident when broken: the hundreds of other detective stories which observed the generic convention that the narrator is not a suspect did much less to draw it to the attention of readers than a single outlier where the rule was not observed. This was, of course, a familiar notion among structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes who, as Jonathan Culler writes, ‘used the idea of a systematic account of

27 Charles J. Rzepka, Detective Fiction (Cambridge, 2005), 155.
28 Rzepka, Detective Fiction, 155.
literature as a horizon against which the anomalies that constitute the better part of literature stand out and become comprehensible.\textsuperscript{29}

The foregoing example also accords with the views of the mathematician Salomon Bochner, whose work on continuity in relation to mathematical functions is framed by a detailed study of the idea of continuity in the wider intellectual culture of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries.\textsuperscript{30} According to Bochner,

in the nineteenth century continuity was, philosophically, at any rate, the normal state, the state to be expected, and discontinuity was never felt to be a state entirely in its own right but somehow a deviation and aberration from a state of continuity. A state of discontinuity, however remarkable, was usually contrapuntally submerged in a state of continuity which somehow was the dominant one.\textsuperscript{31}

If there was `a widespread predilection for continuity in all areas of knowledge` during the nineteenth century, the example of Christie`s \textit{The Murder of Roger Ackroyd} is evidence that continuity was still a dominant assumption in the popular literary culture of the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{32} However, it also suggests that the dominance of continuity takes the form of a background assumption, usually taken for granted. Only when that assumption is disturbed, as it was by Christie, does it become explicitly known and understood. On the other hand, Eliot`s `Tradition and the Individual Talent` suggests that in literary criticism, it is the breaks in continuity that receive the lion`s share of attention by critics. I would argue, however, that Eliot`s statement that `the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their


\textsuperscript{31}Bochner, `Singularities`, 327–28.

\textsuperscript{32}Bochner, `Continuity`, 493.
immortality most vigorously’ is another way of putting Bochner’s belief that discontinuity is ‘contrapuntally submerged in a state of continuity’ which remains dominant.\textsuperscript{35}

Over the course of the twentieth century, the idea that continuity is a default state was increasingly questioned in a variety of disciplines. Mathematicians such as Cauchy, Dedekind and Cantor worked to give continuity a precise mathematical definition in response to new developments in the theory of functions and topology. At the same time, a similar upending of the assumption of continuity’s ‘natural’ status occurred in other areas of intellectual enquiry, including the humanities.\textsuperscript{34} However, Bochner insists that although continuity has been ‘shorn of its exclusiveness’ during the twentieth century, it has nevertheless been ‘not in the least reduced in its importance’:\textsuperscript{35}

In most academic fields, scientific and humanistic, continuity has been compelled to accept an accommodation with certain features of discontinuity, and, on the whole, a salutary balance between continuity and discontinuity has come about.\textsuperscript{36}

This is the view taken, for instance, by self-described ‘traditional’ scholar Jeroen Vanheste in his book \textit{Guardians of the Humanist Legacy: The Classicism of T.S. Eliot’s Criterion Network and its Relevance to our Postmodern World} (2007). Vanheste insists that:

the paradigm of the humanities is one of ‘tradition and renewal’: acknowledging the significance of cultural tradition, not by conservatively clinging to it but rather by questioning it and investigating its relevance to our age, thus searching for a balance between cultural continuity and renewal.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{33}Bochner, ‘Singularity’, 328. It should be noted that not everyone agrees with the opposition between critics and authors regarding change and continuity suggested. For example, in \textit{The Anxiety of Influence}, Harold Bloom reverses the formula, claiming that ‘critics, in their secret hearts, love continuities, but he who lives with continuity alone cannot be a poet’ (78). See: Bloom, \textit{The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry}.

\textsuperscript{34}Bochner, ‘Singularity’, 330.

\textsuperscript{35}Bochner, ‘Singularity’, 330.

\textsuperscript{36}Bochner, ‘Singularity’, 330.

But as Vanheste readily admits, the humanities have undergone seismic shifts since Bochner wrote of the ‘salutary balance between continuity and discontinuity’ in 1973. The balance between continuity and discontinuity was disturbed by, to list a few examples: Gaston Bachelard’s concept of ‘epistemological rupture’ which challenged positivist notions of continual progress; Thomas Kuhn’s notion of the ‘paradigm shift’ described in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962); and Michel Foucault’s emphasis on discontinuity in history explored in The Archaeology of Knowledge (1969).38 The suspicion of continuity expressed by these writers also affected the study of literature, for instance in in the writings of Hans Robert Jauss. In his paper ‘Modernity and Literary Tradition’, which is in part an attack on the very notion of tradition founded on continuity, Jauss complains of the tendency of literary critics to fall back on ‘the mystical continuity of an essential European culture’.39 This tendency is apparently manifested in the practice of dissolving historical antitheses ‘into the transhistorical continuity of all time since Christ’s birth’.40

I am not concerned here with whether or not tradition conceived in Jauss’s terms (or Kuhn’s, Foucault’s, et al.) is correct; this could prove difficult in any case since Jauss regards tradition as ‘one of the ruses of philological metaphysics’.41 Rather, I am interested in whether or not his disparaging account of literary tradition resembles assumptions that are actually held by other scholars. Accordingly, the rest of this chapter

is devoted to identifying assumptions related to the continuity of tradition, firstly in the
works of figures associated with artistic and literary modernism, and secondly in the
scholarly output of literary historians ranging from the 18th century to the present day.

3.4 Modernism and Tradition

No period is more eclectically traditional than that of modernism. Peter Conrad

In the last chapter, I examined T.S. Eliot’s essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. Because it was published in 1919, the year before Eliot published his epochal poem ‘The Waste Land’, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ is often read as an account of literary tradition from a modernist perspective. I took the position, however, that Eliot’s essay describes a variation of a much older model of tradition, which I termed the simultaneous model. The simultaneous model emphasises the content of tradition as it exists in a simultaneous order in any particular present. Put another way, it describes tradition from a synchronic point of view. In this section, I shall show that among modernists (in literature and the other arts) there existed understandings of tradition that emphasised the diachronic perspective and which point to an alternative model of tradition—i.e. the continuous model—that, on the face of it, might seem antithetical to modernist sensibilities. This furthers the aims of the previous chapter of undermining the commonly held notion that the simultaneous model, especially as it was made famous in Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, is a product of modernist thought which superseded theoretically naïve ideas about tradition that preceded it. Chapter 1 already

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established that the simultaneous model far predates modernism; this section argues that the continuous model never went away, but on the contrary was at the heart of modernist thinking about tradition.

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Literary modernism, along with related movements in the visual arts and music, has a complex, seemingly paradoxical, relationship with tradition. As I mentioned above, change and modernity are rivals for the most commonly posited concepts that oppose tradition, and both of these notions seem to be at the heart of early 20th century modernism. On the one hand, modernists set out to reject the traditions of the day, especially artistic traditions. This rejection, however, did not necessarily indicate an intention to break with the past. Instead, it often followed upon a sense that such a break had already occurred. This sense of almost metaphysical discontinuity with the past was famously expressed by Virginia Woolf when she wrote that ‘in or about December, 1910, human character changed’.43

For Woolf and others, the customary forms of expression were no longer adequate to depict life in the modern era. The German sociologist Georg Simmel wrote of this tendency at the time, in relation to the futurist movement:

Futurism has advanced to this extreme consequence of our situation in the arts: a passionate desire for the expression of life, for which traditional forms are inadequate, but for which no new forms have been devised, and which therefore seeks pure expression in a negation of form, or in forms that are almost provocatively abstruse a violation of the very nature of creativity in order to escape its other inherent paradox. Nowhere, perhaps, do we see more forcefully than in some of the

manifestations of futurism that once again the forms that life created as dwelling-places have become its prisons.44

In order to do justice to what they regarded as a qualitatively new form of life, writers, along with artists, musicians, architects, and exponents of nearly every other field of creative human endeavour, dedicated themselves to, in the words of Ezra Pound, ‘make it new’.45 According to Raymond Williams, ‘Futurists, Imagists, Surrealists, Cubists, Vorticists, Formalists and Constructivists all variously announced their arrival with a passionate and scornful vision of the new’.46 The philosopher Roger Scruton describes modernists as ‘committed to the modern age, believing that traditions must be overthrown or redefined in order to do justice to the new forms of experience’.47 According to Scruton, ‘for a modernist it is intellectually, morally or culturally necessary to manifest one’s modernity, to “challenge” what resists it, and to pour scorn on those who take refuge in the values and habits of a superseded age’.48 Hence a commitment to modernity is also a commitment against the past or, more specifically, against that aspect of the past which survives in the present—namely, tradition. In the case of the Futurists, this commitment against the past was both explicit and unqualified: In ‘The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’ (1909)—ironically a document that itself

44 Georg Simmel, Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings, ed. by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London, 1997), 94. It should be noted that the term ‘futurism’ is frequently used by some of the writers dealt with in this thesis to denote not just those artists and writers associated with the Futurist movement proper, but with modernist aesthetics more generally. It is often difficult to discern between these two usages, but the distinction hardly matters for the present thesis and the arguments concerning one usually holds for the other.
46 Raymond Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, in The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists ed. by Tony Pinkney (London, 1994), 33. Williams, however, criticizes this standard formulation of modernism in the same article. I shall examine his arguments in Chapter 4 of this thesis.
47 Scruton, Modern Philosophy, 2.
48 Scruton, Modern Philosophy, 2.
launched a literary tradition, that of the artist’s manifesto—the founder of the Futurist
movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wrote:49

Do you really want to waste all your best energies in this unending, futile
veneration for the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, diminished,
trampled down?

Make no mistake, I’m convinced that for an artist to go every day to museums and
libraries and academies (the cemeteries of wasted effort, calvaries of crucified dreams,
records of impulses cut short!...) is every bit as harmful as the prolonged over-
protectiveness of parents for certain young people who get carried away by their
talent and ambition. For those who are dying anyway, for the invalids, for the
prisoners—who cares? The admirable past may be a balm to their worries, since for
them the future is a closed book... but we, the powerful young Futurists, don’t
want to have anything to do with it, the past!50

And yet despite his fervent renunciation of the past, many of the most important
figures associated with early twentieth-century modernism evinced a less overtly
dismissive and much less easily categorized attitude towards tradition than did Marinetti.
This is often more evident in practice than theory. In the visual arts, for example,
modernism’s complex relation to tradition is demonstrated by Pablo Picasso’s ‘African
Period’, which consisted in the artist’s appropriation of visual motifs from African art,
most famously in his painting Les Demoiselles d’Avignon. While the French were
fascinated by the exotic nature of the cultural artefacts imported from their African
empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they had little use for
them as works of art.51 The art critic Robert Hughes writes:

Picasso thought they did matter—but as raw material. Both he and Braque owned
African carvings, but they had no anthropological interest in them at all. They didn’t
care about their ritual uses, they knew nothing about their original tribal meanings
(which assigned art a very different function to any use it could have in Paris), or
about the societies from which the masks came. Probably (although the art historian

49 Furthermore, Marinetti’s manifesto could not completely break with the past that it professes to, despite
being ‘at once a new genre and a reinvention (or a remix) of the political original, The Communist
Manifesto (1848)’. Alex Danchev, ed., 100 Artists’ Manifestos: From The Futurists To The Stuckists
50 F. T. Marinetti, ‘The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’, in 100 Artists’ Manifestos: From the
piously hopes it was otherwise) their idea of African tribal societies was not far from the one most Frenchmen had—jungle drums, bones in noses, missionary stew. In this respect, Cubism was like a dainty parody of the imperial model.\textsuperscript{32}

At first glance, Picasso’s method would appear to be the very opposite of a traditional approach to art. However, as Hughes argues, such cultural appropriation can be understood as a response to the fear that the major traditions of Western art ‘had at last run out’.\textsuperscript{33} Though Picasso and his contemporaries had little understanding of the foreign cultural traditions they were exploiting in order to renew their own waning aesthetic traditions, it was precisely the importance they attached to having a vital artistic tradition that made the ‘untapped cultural resources’ of Africa so attractive.\textsuperscript{34} Rather than seeking to cast off tradition altogether, what Picasso and many of his contemporaries sought was a new way of being traditional.\textsuperscript{35} Thus is was not merely as ‘raw material’ that Picasso and the cubists turned to African traditions, but as a way of continuing the existing Western traditions which they feared were in danger of expiring.

From a more literary perspective, the modernist engagement with tradition can be directly seen in the writing of the French symbolist poet and critic, Remy de Gourmont. De Gourmont’s major statement on literary tradition, ‘Tradition and Other Things’, appeared in the July 1914 issue of the early modernist literary magazine, \textit{The Egoist}.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{32} Hughes, \textit{Shock of the New}, 20.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Hughes, \textit{Shock of the New}, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Hughes, \textit{Shock of the New}, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{35} The modernist reaction against tradition was complemented by a formalist turn in aesthetic theory which posited common aesthetic properties belonging to works of different eras and cultural traditions. Clive Bell (1881-1964) wrote that those with the capacity for aesthetic appreciation are ‘raised above the accidents of time and place’. The historical context of a work of art was irrelevant to the appreciation of its ‘significant form’: ‘To those who have and hold a sense of the significance of form what does it matter whether the forms that move them were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago?’. On this view, great art is eternal and universal because an appreciation of form is eternal and universal. Clive Bell, ‘The Aesthetic Hypothesis’, in \textit{The Philosophy of Art: Readings Ancient and Modern}, ed. by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley (New York, 1995), 109–10.
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Consisting of a series of brief, enigmatic reflections and aphorisms, the piece’s literary modernist pedigree is further attested by the fact that it was the leading article in an issue that featured criticism by Ezra Pound and the serialization of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Despite this, De Gourmont’s reflections do not amount to a coherent model of tradition from a modernist standpoint. There are several passages, however, which effectively illustrate the paradoxical relationship between tradition and modernism, and which point to a continuous model of tradition that contrasts with Eliot’s from five years later.

De Gourmont begins by casting a sceptical eye at tradition (or perhaps traditionalists) while acknowledging that producing work in a traditional vein is to some extent inevitable:

> We must not boast too much of tradition. It is no great merit to place our feet exactly in the tracks which indicate the road; it is a natural tendency. Though it is not very wrong to give way to this tendency, it is better to attempt a new path. Necessarily, it becomes confounded here and there with the old. We must resign ourselves, but without arrogance. The deed is less meritorious than unavoidable.66

This passage establishes De Gourmont as being, like Eliot and Forster after him, primarily concerned with the relationship between tradition and *authors* rather than readers, a consistent feature of early 20th century engagements with the concept of tradition. He describes tradition as ‘a great power opposing the originality of writers’, labelling it ‘very oppressive’.57 Yet, despite defining it in opposition to originality, De Gourmont’s notion of tradition also implies that it is not something that can ever be entirely overcome.

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Throughout ‘Tradition and Other Things’, De Gourmont returns to the theme of tradition as being simultaneously intolerable, inescapable, and necessary:

They have taken beforehand all my words, all my phrases, all my ideas. Oh, these obligatory ancestors! They bind me. They suffocate me. Far from drawing tighter the bonds of tradition we should release the brains which it binds.58

Yet despite being quite clear who the villains of tradition are—i.e. his ‘obligatory ancestors’—elsewhere De Gourmont is agnostic about the possible content of the literary traditions that ‘bind’ him:

Tradition—I find it everywhere. All the past can be a part of tradition. Why this and not that? Why the laborious mysticism of Bossuet and not the spontaneous irony of Voltaire?59

As with so many other aspects of tradition, De Gourmont is of two minds about the answer to this question. On the one hand, he insists that time is required for an author to attain the status of a classic and thereby become a part of literary tradition. Authors and their works, he claims, must pass ‘through a flattening mill! Ronsard has been three hundred and fifty years becoming a classic and the Chanson de Roland eight hundred years’.60 Only by a proven longevity does an author become traditional. Yet, elsewhere, De Gourmont takes a different line, suggesting that ‘tradition is a choice and not a fact’ by virtue of the possibility of accepting some works and authors of the past as traditional while rejecting others.61

This apparent contradiction—i.e. between tradition as a product of time and tradition as a product of choice—may have something to do with the fact that, unlike Eliot, De Gourmont explicitly distinguishes between types of tradition.  

There is the continuous tradition and there is the renewed tradition. They must not be confounded. The seventeenth century believed that it was renewing the bond with antiquity. The Romanticists believed that they had rediscovered the Middle Ages. These discontinued traditions are more fertile when the period which is renewed is distant and unknown.

This distinction, between renewed and continuous tradition, corresponds roughly with the distinction made in the present thesis between the simultaneous model of tradition explored in the previous chapter, and the model which is the subject of the present chapter (and I have followed De Gourmont’s lead in naming it the continuous model). De Gourmont’s insistence that they ‘must not be confounded’ suggests that, for him, these two types of tradition are not merely different perspectives on the same underlying phenomenon, but rather phenomena of a qualitatively different sort. Nevertheless, elsewhere he suggests how continuous tradition and renewed tradition might be reconciled:

Tradition is a long chain with alternate rings of gold and lead. You do not accept the whole of tradition? Then tradition is a choice and not a fact. Considered as a fact tradition is merely a mass of contradictory tendencies.

If the image of a ‘long chain’ is taken to illustrate continuous tradition, then renewed traditions are created by a process of selection from this chain of ‘contradictory tendencies’. The previously mentioned role of time as a sorting mechanism might be

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62 Eliot does refer to his model of simultaneous tradition as an alternative ‘form of tradition’, contrasting it to that of ‘following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes’, but it is not clear that this is anything more than a different way of conceptualizing the same thing. See: Eliot, ‘Tradition’, 14.
interpreted as making it clear which of the ‘rings’—i.e. works or authors—are ‘gold’, and which ‘lead’. This formulation demonstrates why I have deemed De Gourmont’s model of tradition, frustratingly inconsistent and vague though it is, to be primarily concerned with *continuity*. Tradition conceived as a ‘long chain’ is no mere passive reflection of the history of literary culture; and De Gourmont does not deem something to be tradition simply by virtue of having survived into the present. Rather, a work is deemed traditional by being continually affirmed as worthy of special status. Therefore, it is the continuity of the content, rather than the process of transmission, that is De Gourmont’s object of inquiry.

Piecing together a model from the meagre evidence provided by De Gourmont, one can see the outlines of a model of tradition that is concerned with continuity in the following sense: literary tradition is conceived as a continuous ‘chain’ that links literary culture of the past to the present, a continuity that is conceived as a whole (or a significant segment) of the tradition’s total temporal existence, rather than from the point of view of
an author’s relation to the immediately preceding past.\textsuperscript{65} This, of course, recalls ‘the long view’ of tradition formulated by E. M. Forster, which he described as being virtually impossible to achieve.

\section*{3.5 Literary History and Continuity}

Continuism has greatly influenced the routines of academic research, and it has been involved in an unprecedented growth of scholarship and of historically oriented analyses in many compartments of knowledge. Whether it be the study of the origins of the \textit{Iliad} or the Old Testament, of Herodotus or Diogenes Laërtius, of a play of Shakespeare... there is always a strain of continuism involved in the investigation.\textsuperscript{66}

\textbf{Salomon Bochner}

The critic and the scholar, when they are properly qualified, spend at least as much time dismantling their own continuity as reinforcing it.\textsuperscript{67}

\textbf{Clive James}

One group of writers who have never been able to dispense with some formulation or another of the long-view of tradition are literary historians. More or less from the beginning of their discipline (certainly from the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, as will be shown below), literary historians have been attempting to chart the progress of literature across large

\textsuperscript{65} One possible reason that De Gourmont’s views on tradition are rarely cited is that they are highly contradictory. Whereas I have focused on his raising the prospect of a ‘continuous’ tradition, later in the same piece he casts doubt on the perceived inner connection of tradition conceived chronologically: ‘People who say to me, “You are in the tradition of Montaigne,” amuse me, for I am no great reader of the “Essais”—a fact of which I am almost ashamed. The greater part of the discoveries of professors on the formation and tradition of minds is of this sort. The traditional man cannot see analogous tendencies in two minds without thinking the later comer is an imitator of the earlier. School habits.’ (262) This brief, somewhat ambiguous statement is developed no further, but it is possible to interpret his questioning ‘the later comer’ being an ‘imitator of the earlier’ as simply referring to the fact that tradition does not necessarily proceed in a straight forwardly deterministic way, in which cause and effect can be clearly identified. (The problems related to establishing lines of influence in this manner is explored in Göran Hermerén’s \textit{Influence in Art and Literature} (1973), which includes a brief section (305-308) that attempts to reduce the notion of \textit{tradition} to that of \textit{influence}.) On the other hand, De Gourmont’s remark might also be interpreted as raising the possibility that an earlier text might be influenced by a later one. This possibility of the past being altered by the present is a key notion in T. S. Eliot’s model of tradition, and introduces issues related to interpretation that are taken up in Chapter 5. But whether Eliot’s model was influenced by De Gourmont in this regard, or whether de Gourmont’s suggestive musings take on this meaning in light of Eliot’s later work—in very much the manner being discussed—is uncertain. See: Hermerén, \textit{Influence in Art and Literature}.

\textsuperscript{66} Bochner, ‘Continuity’, 503.

\textsuperscript{67} James, \textit{Cultural Amnesia} 158.
temporal spans. In order to do so, some notion of continuity is necessary in order for the resulting accumulation of facts to have a coherence beyond the merely chronological.

In the case of E. M. Forster, who was not a literary historian, the adoption of the simultaneous model was in the interests of pedagogic heuristics and epistemological compromise. Forster was not alone during the early 20th century in confronting the problem of grappling with the overwhelming immensity of the literary past. Arthur Quiller-Couch, who was attempting to develop an English curriculum at Cambridge in the 1910’s, wrote of the despair felt by aspiring scholars. For example, if one is trying to become acquainted with the literature produced between 1700-1785, you might turn to your *Cambridge History of English Literature*, and you will find that the mere bibliography of those eighty-five years occupies something like five or six hundred pages—five or six hundred pages of titles and authors in simple enumeration! The brain reels ... But stretch the list back to Chaucer, back through Chaucer to those alleged prose writings in the Wessex dialect, then forward from 1785 to Wordsworth, to Byron, to Dickens, Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, Meredith, even to this year in which literature still lives and engenders; and the brain, if not too giddy indeed, stands as Satan stood on the brink of Chaos—‘Pondering his voyage; for no narrow frith / He had to cross’—and sees itself, with him, now plumbing a vast vacuity, and anon nigh-foundered, ‘treading the crude consistence.’

He concludes: ‘The whole business of reading English Literature in two years, to *know* it in any reputable sense of the word ... is, in short, impossible’. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Forster judged this ‘long view’, as both unfitted to his purpose—formal criticism—and, in common with Quiller-Couch, overwhelmingly difficult to achieve (not to mention impossible to communicate). So, while Forster’s use of the simultaneous model of tradition was a way of bringing order to literary history and tradition, nothing was lost in the process that would affect his own critical aims.

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69 Quiller-Couch, *Art of Reading* 5–6.
But Forster’s ability to adopt the simultaneous model for his purposes is a luxury not shared by most literary historians. For them, the simultaneous view presents the following problems:

a) It eliminates the diachronic dimension of literary study, which for most is at least partially the object of their attention.

b) It introduces an anachronistic point of view, whereby the past can be altered by the present.

It is also important to note that, regardless of which model of tradition is adopted, and despite a considerable overlap, literary tradition and literary history do not correspond conceptually. This is evident on the grounds of linguistic usage alone. While it might be possible to maintain that ‘classical tradition’ is synonymous with ‘classical history’, or that ‘the Romantic tradition’ is merely an alternative label for ‘the history of Romanticism’, the same can hardly be said for ‘the great tradition’ or ‘the Dickensian tradition’. As I showed in Chapter 1, F.R. Leavis’s notion of ‘the great tradition’ is both far more and far less than a history of ‘great’ literature. It is more in the sense that Leavis is suggesting the works and authors included in that category have a particular claim to our moral and cultural interest; but it is less in the sense that it excludes all but a handful of works out of the vastness of the English literary corpus. Likewise, the notion of ‘the Dickensian

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70 Leavis, Great Tradition, 16.
tradition’ does not refer merely the works which are attributed to Charles Dickens, though what more is implied depends on the specific context of its usage.\footnote{For example, Dickens scholars William Oddie and Michael Slater use the term ‘Dickensian tradition’ to identify certain recurring tropes contained in Dickens’s works such as ‘inspirational virgins’ (Oddie 90) or the figure of the ‘hopeless lover’ (Slater 284). On the other hand, Anthony Burgess is referring to working methods when he refers to ‘a novelist in the Dickensian tradition’ (64). See: William Oddie, Dickens and Carlyle: The Question of Influence (London, 1972); Michael Slater, Dickens and Women (Stanford, 1983); Anthony Burgess, The Ink Trade: Selected Journalism 1961-1993 ed. by Will Carr (Manchester, 2018).}

Yet despite the differences, traditions are at least partially constitutive of written literary histories, if only because the historian is both heavily dependent on received historical traditions\footnote{Perkins, Is Literary History Possible?, 9. (Emphasis added). The fact that many of these new approaches grew out of a critique of existing literary traditions points to another significant difference between literary history and tradition. That is, it would scarcely make sense for critics to attack ‘literary tradition’ for being patriarchal, Eurocentric, elitist, etc., if all that ‘literary tradition’ means is ‘the history of literature’. If it did mean that, then patriarchy, Eurocentrism, and so forth, are merely facts of history rather than a force acting in history (this distinction is especially evident in the works of critics and thinkers discussed in Chapter 4 which focuses on the normative dimension of literary tradition).} and engaged in perpetuating or altering the same. Put another way, the manner in which literary tradition is conceived has philosophical and methodological consequences for the practice of literary historians. In Is Literary History Possible? (1992), David Perkins describes how between the 1960s and 1980s a new generation of scholars was rediscovering literary history via ‘constructions of literary traditions of women, gays, ethnic groups, political movements, socioeconomic classes, and new, third world countries’.\footnote{It is worth noting, however, that Perkins’s speaks of the ‘construction’ of traditions rather than the ‘reconstruction’. This distinction is further explored in Chapter 4.} For a good many literary historians then, the task of literary history is to describe literary traditions as they exist and develop in time.\footnote{It is worth noting, however, that Perkins’s speaks of the ‘construction’ of traditions rather than the ‘reconstruction’. This distinction is further explored in Chapter 4.} Doing so, however, means that the historian must be able to isolate traditions as historical entities, demonstrating their \textit{continuous} existence during the period under examination. Hence, the problem of continuity with regard to literary tradition has close links to the
historiographical problems that arise from the writing of literary history and there is a
great deal of overlapping concern.

Perkins points to one way in which literary history overlaps and interacts with literary
tradition when he argues for the ‘the overwhelming role of tradition in the role of
taxonomizing’ literature, and how received critical traditions strongly affect the shape of
any attempted literary history:74

[T]he number of ideas one has time and occasion to consider and correct is small in
comparison to the total number of ideas one harbors. The content of anyone’s mind
consists mostly of received ideas, including the traditional taxonomies. It takes so
much more energy, so much more knowledge and reflection, to disturb the received
system than to accept and apply it, that anyone can revise it at only a few points.
Hence, in any comprehensive literary history, the main source of taxonomies will
be cultural transmission.75

On this account, the literary historian is in the position of attempting to investigate
historical traditions according to historical categories that are also derived from
tradition—perhaps even the same traditions which constitute the object of
investigation.76 Furthermore, Perkins identifies what he calls ‘the conservative influence
of the audience’ where, because ‘readers already know the traditional taxonomies, they
expect them in literary histories’.77 Consequently, at least according to Perkins’s analysis,
tradition affects literary history at almost every level: the selection and emphasis of subject
matter, its organization, periodization, availability of evidence, the reception of the
historian’s efforts, etc.

74 Perkins, Is Literary History Possible?, 69.
75 Perkins, Is Literary History Possible?, 73.
76 Such circularity will emerge again in Chapter IV, and whether or not the circularity is vicious or virtuous is a
central theme of Chapter V.
77 Perkins, Is Literary History Possible?, 73.
Perkins himself is sceptical about approaches to literary history which stress historical continuities, this scepticism stemming from his concern with the effect tradition has on the writing and reception of literary history produced in an academic context. As such, he is attempting to theorize what is really going on when literary historians attempt to write history. The present thesis, by contrast, is concerned with the assumptions about tradition held by scholars, independent of how these assumptions inform their critical practice. As such, considerations about whether the continuities identified by literary historians are real or imagined, whether they are discovered or constructed, and whether they are ideologically troublesome, are outside the scope of the present inquiry. What concerns me is the structural and philosophical assumptions that comprise the framework within which scholars may assert continuity at all. As such, the quotations from many of the literary histories analysed below are drawn from prefaces and introductory remarks in works of literary history, rather than the historiographical results which followed.

3.5.1 The 18th Century

From Helicon’s harmonious springs
A thousand rills their mazy progress take...78

Thomas Gray

While this thesis is not a work of intellectual history and does not attempt to locate the precise emergence of the various models of literary tradition, nevertheless it can be said with reasonable confidence that, so far as English literary scholarship is concerned, the continuous model of literary tradition emerged in the 18th century. This is because that era saw the rise of an antiquarian interest in the English literary past—and, one might say,

a new consciousness of literature itself—as well as the development of what David Fairer labels ‘a national literary history’. 79 This new notion of the literary past was ‘a more capacious and historicized notion than the old fixed canon of great writers, and it encouraged a living sense of continuity’. 80

An early example of the rising concern with demonstrating the historical continuity of English literature is found in John Dryden’s preface to his Fables, Ancient and Modern (1700). Published in the year of his death, the preface is not usually considered his most notable contribution to literary criticism, though it has been praised as being ‘the best of his prose’. 81 The book itself consists of translations of Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, along with original poems by Dryden. An anthological work with a purpose, Fables, Ancient and Modern is intended to draw connections between the works of classical antiquity and the middle ages, and the English poetry being produced during Dryden’s time. The critic David Bywaters writes that the Fables were written with ‘the general purpose of situating the poet in relation to literary tradition’ and Dryden’s preface states this in reasonably explicit terms. 82

In the preface, Dryden conceptualizes the literary past in terms of a family lineage:

Milton was the Poetical son of Spencer, and Mr. Waller of Fairfax; for we have our Lineal Descents and Clans, as well as other Families: Spencer more than once insinuates, that the Soul of Chaucer was transfus’d into his Body. 83

Dryden himself does not maintain any literal belief that the souls of writers are transferred to their descendants (nor is it likely that Spenser did, for that matter). For

80 Fairer, ‘Creating a National Poetry’, 177.
81 Ifor Evans, A Short History of English Literature, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth, 1973), 53.
him, the continuity of tradition is conceived quite literally in terms of continuing the
literary content (story, characters, setting) of a previous writer. He illustrates this
relationship with the example of Virgil and Homer. ‘Homer’s Invention’, Dryden argues,
‘was more copious’ than Virgil’s, and the dependence of the latter on the material
provided by his predecessor means that ‘if Homer had not led the Way, it was not in
Virgil to have begun Heroick Poetry’.

For nothing can be more evident, than that the Roman Poem is but the Second Part
of the Iliad, a Continuation of the same Story: and the Persons already form’d: The
Manners of Aeneas, are those of Hector superadded to those which Homer gave him.
The Adventures of Ulysses in the Odyssey, are imitated in the first Six Books of
Virgil’s Aeneis and though the Accidents are not the same (which would have arg’d
him of a servile, copying, and total Barrenness of Invention), yet the Seas were the
same in which both the Heroes wander’d.

Notably, Dryden does not link chronological precedence to aesthetic precedence. While
he rates Homer higher than Virgil because ‘Invention be the first Vertue of an Epick
Poet’, the same criteria do not apply to Ovid and Chaucer. Like Virgil, both of those
poets ‘built on the Inventions of other Men’; but in Dryden’s estimation, Chaucer, unlike
Ovid, ‘had something of his own’ to add to the inherited elements, making him the better
poet of the two.

Dryden’s highly literal understanding of ‘continuity’ in the literary tradition—i.e. that
of individual poets borrowing from and extending the works of their poetic ancestors—
was not to be the dominant model of literary tradition in the 18th century. Half a century
after Dryden’s death, a more fittingly poetic understanding was given expression by
Thomas Gray in his poem ‘The Progress of Poesy: A Pindaric Ode’. Written in 1754, it

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84 Dryden, Works, 269.
85 Dryden, Works, 269.
86 Dryden, Works, 271.
takes as one of its subjects the continuity of poetry from the Ancient Greeks to the English Poets of the day. The path of poetry is traced from its origin in Ancient Greece: ‘Where each old poetic Mountain / Inspiration breath’d around’ (73-4). The first movement was from Greece to Italy: ‘... the sad Nine in Greece’s evil hour / Left their Parnassus for the Latian plains’ (77-8). In these lines, the central structural element of Gray’s notion of literary tradition is revealed. The muses symbolize the continuous element in the history of poetry. It is not merely that the Roman poets such as Virgil succeeded the Greek forebears, but rather that something was tangibly passed from one to the other. The exact nature of what is transmitted, however, remains obscure, hidden behind the metaphor of the muses. The title of the poem, however, refers to the ‘progress of poesy’, hence one may infer that the muses signify not merely poetry, since Greece and Rome did not cease to produce verse, but rather a true poetry: poetry of a higher order. Understood thus, two aspects of Gray’s view of poetic tradition may be deduced: firstly, that true poetry (represented as being inspired by the muses) can only exist under the right environmental conditions (e.g. the Greece of Homer or the Rome of Virgil). Secondly, that is does not merely arise where such conditions obtain, but rather ‘migrates’, thus maintaining a connection with the true poetry that preceded it.

The muses, just as they scorned Greece for Italy, ‘scorn the pomp of tyrant-Power’ (79) (i.e. Imperial Rome) and seek a new home in Britain:

When Latium had her lofty spirit lost,
They sought, oh Albion! next thy sea-encircled coast. (81-2)
Once in Britain, the level of historical magnification increases: where before the muses were traced according to the empire or culture they resided in, now their presence is traced through individual poets. The first of these mentioned is Shakespeare:

Far from the sun and summer-gale,
In thy green lap of Nature’s Darling laid,
What time, where lucid Avon stray’d,
To Him the mighty Mother did unveil
Her aweful face: The dauntless Child
Stretch’d forth his little arms, and smiled.
This pencil take (she said) whose colours clear
Richly paint the vernal year:
Thine too these golden keys, immortal Boy!
This can unlock the gates of Joy;
Of Horrour that, and thrilling Fears,
Or ope the sacred source of sympathetic Tears. (83-94)

To match the more intimate history which is found at the level of the individual author, the image of the muses is replaced by a more suitably personal entity—‘the mighty Mother’—and the relationship painted as one between a mother and her offspring.

Shakespeare is followed by John Milton (‘He saw; but blasted with excess of light, / Closed his eyes in endless night.’ [101-2]) and afterwards by John Dryden, the first poet to be mentioned by name. Along with being mentioned by name, Dryden’s actual poetic style is described—‘Two Courser of ethereal race’ (105) which, according to notes in the 1768 edition of Gray’s poems, are ‘meant to express the stately march and sounding energy of Dryden’s rhymes’—the poem thereby achieving the maximum degree of historical magnification. With Dryden, however, the sequence ends. The poem concludes by wondering where the spirit of true poetry, now described as a ‘Lyre divine’, will emerge next: ‘...what daring Spirit / Wakes thee now?’ (112-3).

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While Gray’s poem is not exactly a scholarly work, it nevertheless expressed both a
desire to understand poetry in light of a continuous tradition that stretched back in
history, while also providing the crude outlines of a model for doing so. Gray himself had
ambitions to write a history of English poetry which would include poems written by
himself as ‘specimens of the Style that reigned in ancient times among the neighbouring
nations, or those who had subdued the greater part of this Island, and were our
Progenitors’, a useful reminder that the line between the literary practitioner and the
literary scholar was not so clearly defined at this period. As James Turner writes, ‘no one
then thought of this sort of literary history as a self-conscious, erudite pursuit’.89 In any
event, the project was dropped when he discovered a friend of his, Thomas Warton (1728-
90), ‘a Person well qualified to do it justice, both by his taste, and his researches into
antiquity’ was already embarked upon such a project.90

When Gray finished ‘The Progress of Poesy’, he sent it to Warton in a letter dated the
26th December 1754. Warton was later to be the Poet Laureate, but he is perhaps best
known for the history already alluded to which was eventually published in three
volumes between 1774 and 1781 as: The History of English Poetry from the Close of the
Eleventh to the Commencement of the Eighteenth Century. While Johnson’s biographical
approach in his Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (1779-81) may be better
remembered today, for a long time Warton’s history was just as well known.91 As late as

1954, the *Oxford History of English Literature* lists Warton’s work as ‘still the best account [of late medieval poetry] to begin on’.²⁵

In the very first sentence of his history, Warton declares his intention to establish the continuity of English poetry from the past to the present day:

> In an age advanced to the highest degree of refinement, that species of curiosity commences, which is busied in contemplating the progress of social life, in displaying the gradations of science, and in tracing the transitions from barbarism to civility.²⁶

This quote, with its praise for the present day’s ‘refinement’ when compared with the ‘barbarism’ of the past, also makes clear that Warton regarded the ‘progress of poesy’ as a progress of culture more generally. Establishing the continuity from past to present in literary history is also a way of re-affirming the superiority of the present: ‘We look back on the savage condition of our ancestors with the triumph of superiority; we are pleased to mark the steps by which we have been raised from rudeness to elegance’.²⁴ The reasons for doing so are not merely rooted in a parochial preference for the literature of the present—what Warton calls the ‘fruitless gratification of fancy’.²⁵ Rather it provides the context against which aesthetic judgements are made and validated: ‘It teaches us to set a just estimation on our own acquisitions’.²⁶

Warton writes that ‘I have chose (sic) to exhibit the history of our poetry in a chronological series: not distributing my matter into detached articles, of periodical divisions, or of general heads’.²⁷ But he also makes it clear that a chronological

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presentation, establishing the continuity of English poetry, was not necessarily the most obvious choice. He rejected the plans of others who proposed different systems of arrangement that did not emphasise chronological continuity, because such systems ‘sacrificed much useful intelligence to the observance of arrangement; and in the place of that satisfaction which results from a clearness and a fulness of information, seemed only to substitute the merit of disposition and the praise of contrivance’.\(^{98}\) In articulating the limitations of periodization as an organizing principle, Warton is anticipating the concerns of David Perkins (see above) by more than two centuries.

That Warton was not merely a chronicler of English poetry, but rather is concerned that his presentation demonstrates a continuous tradition, is established by his point of departure. He chose not to include Anglo-Saxon literature as part of his history since he perceived a break existed between that period of English literature and that following the Norman conquest: ‘Saxon poetry has no connection with the nature and purpose of my present undertaking’.\(^{99}\)

That mighty revolution obliterated almost all relation to the former inhabitants of this island; and produced that signal change in our policy, contribution, and public manners, the effects of which have reached modern times. The beginning of these annals seems therefore to be most properly dated from that era, when our national character began to dawn.\(^{100}\)

We can see here, a feature that will recur in later literary histories which employ some variation of the continuous model, whereby the continuity of literary tradition is established via an appeal to a broader cultural or political continuity. Whereas Gray appealed to the figurative notion of ‘the muses’ for the basis of continuity, Warton’s

remarks suggest that continuity is located outside of literature itself. The tension between these two points of view provide the locus around which much of the following analysis revolves.

3.5.2 The 19th and 20th Centuries

In the 18th century examples examined above, continuity is stressed while, at the same time, the basis for this continuity is never clearly identified. By the following century, the rise of a more precise philological and historiographical practice demanded better accounts of the unity of historical writings. The emphasis on continuity itself remained paramount. According to Salomon Bochner, nineteenth century historiography was ‘dominated by continuity of one kind or another. Continuity was a framework for, or at least a leading strand in, any history, ancient or modern, general or special, political or economical, Biblical or philosophical’.101 Literary history of the nineteenth century shared this framework, though in common with other fields of historiography, practitioners differed over the source of continuity. For example, in his History of German Literature since the Death of Lessing (1866), Heinrich Julian Schmidt (1818-1886) found the ‘inner connection’ of Germany literary history in the ‘spiritual battle of Germany’ itself, which ‘formed a picture quite as unified and interconnected as any spiritual battle’.102 The English critic George Saintsbury (1845-1933), on the other hand, in his influential A Short History of English Literature (1898), found continuity in certain forms of ‘wit’ and

‘wisdom’ originating in the literature of the middle ages and which ‘passing through all English literature, act as tie-rods to maintain its continuity’.103

The emphasis that literary historians placed on continuity continued into the twentieth century. However, as we get closer to the present, many works of literary history exhibit a growing tension between the perceived need for continuity in the interests of unity and a growing scepticism directed towards the very notion of unity in historical accounts. Whereas in the nineteenth century the great German historian Leopold von Ranke could insist on the importance of maintaining ‘the unity of conception’ in the writing of history, twentieth century scholars such as David Perkins maintain that the very tools with which this is accomplished, such as periodization, are culturally contingent, usually the products of tradition (recall, for example, the already quoted passage by Perkins arguing for the ‘overwhelming role of tradition in the role of taxonomizing’).104

Yet while many of the literary historians whose works are examined below share Perkins’s scepticism of unified historical accounts to varying degrees, most still insist that the content of their historical narratives is unified by some legitimate form of continuity. Furthermore, most employ the historical taxonomic categories that Perkins finds so problematic. But whereas ‘traditional taxonomies’ trouble Perkins precisely because they are the product of tradition, many of the writers quoted do not share his aversion to inherited categories. Indeed, as I shall demonstrate, some of them even identify the

continuity which they point to in their historical narratives with literary tradition itself. This suggests that an underlying assumption of many literary histories is that the unity of their literary-historical accounts is dependent upon the underlying unity of a continuous literary tradition.

A common strategy of early and mid-twentieth century literary historians, such as Sir Ifor Evans (1899-1982), is to provide continuity to their histories by anchoring them to non-literary traditions such as we already saw from Warton in the 18th century. For example, in Evans’s *A Short History of English Drama* (1948), he writes that ‘the drama of England is more than an account of authors and plays, for it concerns the whole continuing tradition of the theatre’.105 By linking his history to the extra-literary theatrical tradition, gaps in one history may be bridged by the other. However, Evans also feels that there are ‘permanent traditions’ in English literature.106 In his book *English Literature: Values and Traditions*, he argues that, despite the impression one might get when leafing through the pages of *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, confronted by the hundreds of thousands of book titles, they do in fact ‘belong to one continuous tradition however diverse and variegated’.107 He goes on to say that,

> it can be maintained, and this without distortion, that there can be discovered in these long continued and voluminous manifestations certain characteristics recurring from one age to another which give to all parts of English literature a definable quality, even a unity.108

For Evans, the continuity and unity that are contained in the history of English literature is not a matter of mere chronological plenitude. After all, *The Cambridge Bibliography*
already demonstrates such plenitude beyond all possible doubt: there is nothing that amounts to a gap in the chronology for most of the 1600 years it covers. But the continuity and unity that Evans is referring to once again lies at least partially outside of the literature itself: ‘these permanent or persistent features are ultimately a reflection of English life itself and of the history and society of England’.  

This is a point of view Evans shares, though for very different reasons, with his contemporary Arnold Kettle (1916-1986). Indeed, Kettle goes much further by reversing the priorities of the literary history: the purpose of his book, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (1951), is ‘not to attempt a history of the English Novel ... because the novel, like every other literary form, is a product of history’. Instead, Kettle, a Marxist, wishes to ‘indicate something of the historical development of fiction’ by describing the evolving connection between works and their social background. It is this connection, Kettle claims, that gives a great novel its interest not only in its own time, but thereafter. Writing of Samuel Richardson’s novel *Clarissa* (1748), he claims that:

> We shall not enjoy *Clarissa* unless we approach it sympathetically, through history. But if we approach it *only* through history we shall not enjoy it either. The past and the present are at once different and inseparable. It is precisely because he stumbled on one of the real, contemporary dilemmas of his own time that Richardson achieved an art which has relevance to ours.

Kettle’s attempt to understand literary tradition through a Marxist lens raises a lot of theoretical questions that are dealt with in detail in the next chapter. What is relevant to the present discussion is that Kettle identifies unity and continuity by looking outside of the works of literature themselves, understanding their development in relation to

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changes in society. On this account, the continuity in literary history properly done is
provided by history itself.

A very different approach is taken by Evans’s and Kettle’s contemporary, Gilbert
Highet (1906-1978) who, in *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on
Western Literature* (1949), locates the continuity within literature itself:

> The Greeks invented nearly all the *literary patterns* which we use: tragedy and
> comedy, epic and romance, and many more. In the course of their two thousand
> years of writing they worked out innumerable themes—some as light as ‘Drink to me
> only with thine eyes’, others as powerful as a brave man’s journey through hell.
> *These themes and patterns they passed on* to the Romans, who developed them
> and added much of their own.\(^\text{112}\)

Highet’s approach is very similar to that expressed two and a half centuries earlier by John
Dryden, though with a slightly more sophisticated grasp of the materials. As David
Hopkins puts it, Dryden was ‘struck by the patterns of artistic lineage, consanguinity, and
congeniality that link [Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Chaucer] together and with himself’.\(^\text{113}\)
Highet likewise identifies ‘patterns’ in the literature of the past, but instead of characters,
plots, etc., the units of continuity are genres, themes, poetic imagery and archetypal
myths. Highet’s approach also bears a resemblance to Thomas Gray’s more insubstantial
notion of continuity—that is, in the guise of spirit, muse, or soul—when he insists that
the outlines of the story told in *The Classical Tradition* could have been illustrated by
materials other than literature: politics, law, philosophy, religion, fine arts, etc. This is, he
argues, because ‘in civilization as in human life, the present is the child of the past. Only,
in the life of the spirit, it is permitted to select our ancestors, and to choose the best’.\(^\text{114}\)

\(^{112}\) Highet, *Classical Tradition*, vii.

\(^{113}\) David Hopkins, ‘Dryden as Translator’, *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2014
    <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-
    9780199935338-e-10> [accessed 20 February 2019].

\(^{114}\) Highet, *Classical Tradition*, 2.

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The continuity is thus established by a kind of ‘spiritual’ inheritance, but one that is not simply thrust upon the heir, but which involves a process of selection. This notion of tradition will be further developed in the next chapter which deals with what I have termed: the selective model.

The rising interest among English critics in the novel during this period led to the history of that form becoming a battleground for the issues being discussed; but not all literary historians of the period were quite so keen to establish continuity and unity in the history of the novel. Walter Allen (1911-1995), for example, opens his classic history *The English Novel* (1954) with an attack on what he sees as an excessive emphasis on chronological continuity by many literary historians, a tendency which leads to bad history:

> Literary historians, horrified it seems by the newness of the form, have commonly thought it necessary to provide the novel with a *respectable antiquity*, much as the genealogist fits out the parvenu with an impeccable family tree. In their own way they have been very successful; at any rate they have succeeded admirably in confusing categories. They have managed to write, for instance, of the *Chanson de Roland and Euphues* as though these works really had some connexion with the novels of Richardson and Dickens. They have deviously devised such labels as the ‘Elizabathan Novel’, the ‘Jacobean Novel’, terms whose only fault is that they *imply a relationship between the works so described and novels as we know them that does not exist.*\(^{135}\)

Allen thus predates David Perkins by several decades in his scepticism of periodic categories. Unlike Evans and Kettle, Allen insists that the continuity and unity of a history should be located in the works themselves, specifically aspects of form, rather than any social background, or by relating it to the development of another, non-literary, subject. He believes that many historians of the novel have been too capacious in their definition of the novel, often confounding it with fiction:

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In their eagerness to **supply the novel with a dignified ancestry** they have behaved rather like a man who, setting out to write a history of the motor-car, should think it proper to begin by devoting a third of his space to the evolution of the ox-cart.\(^{116}\)

This desire to create or ‘discover’ a tradition where one may not necessarily exist will be examined in the next chapter of this thesis. Meanwhile, it is worth pointing out that Allen also objects to imposed continuities on philosophical grounds: like Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, he does not believe that art progresses: ‘there is nothing in the development of art analogous with material progress’ and, therefore, ‘any notion of evolution in the form of the novel that can be equated with improvement’ must be rejected.\(^{117}\)

Whereas Allen regards the novel’s essential difference from previous forms as innate, Ian Watt (1917-1999), in his influential work *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (1957), writes that it is necessary to define the novel in such a way as to ‘exclude previous types of narrative’.\(^{118}\) In other words, Watt was concerned with demonstrating the novel’s break from previous kinds of writing by imposing his own definition of the form. In the work’s preface he suggests this is a pragmatic move, describing the fact that he has not ‘made more than incidental reference to the earlier traditions of fiction’ as ‘regrettable’, but that he is justified on the grounds that the key figures in his study, Richardson and Fielding, ‘viewed their work as involving a break with the old-fashioned romances’.\(^{119}\)

Allen’s and Watt’s questioning of strong continuity in the development of the novel prompted a belated response in *The True Story of the Novel* (1997) by Margaret Ann

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Doody (1939- ). Doody not only embraces the idea of the ‘Elizabethan novel’ and the ‘Jacobean novel’, but extends her account back in time to Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* in the fourth century B.C. Whereas Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* justified its starting point in the eighteenth-century by invoking the belief of the novelists of that era (specifically Richardson and Fielding) that they were breaking with the ‘romances’ of prior eras, Doody instead believes that ‘the concept of “Romance” as distinct from “Novel” has outworn its usefulness, and that at its most useful it created limitations and encouraged blind spots’. The major aim of her history is to eliminate such blind spots by establishing the continuity of the modern novel (i.e. since Defoe) with the literature of antiquity, thereby undermining the false unity of a history that begins in the 18th century—‘to change the “background” to the eighteenth-century novel’, writes Doody, ‘it would be necessary, I realized, to go very far back indeed’.

This book is an attempt to trace connections rather than to assert division. Of course it is true that many exciting divisions can be described and explored, but it seems to me that we cannot deal properly with subsets until we know more of the whole set.

In this way, Doody’s book is a late twentieth century throwback to the situation Bochner described as being characteristic of nineteenth-century historiography—i.e. a state in which discontinuity was ‘contrapuntally submerged in a state of continuity which somehow was the dominant one’. However, unlike earlier literary historians for whom the assumption of continuity’s dominance was a given, Doody is aware that other approaches are possible:

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121 Doody, *True Story*, xvii.
123 Bochner, ‘Singularities’, 328.
If I assert the interconnectedness of a history, and boldly venture to treat an
admittedly protean form as if constantly visible from century to century, I do not
mean that it is the only way to treat the subject. ... If I emphasize discontinuities, it is
because discontinuity, absolute division, has been harshly and hastily asserted before
now.124

Standing in contrast to Watt’s and Doody’s strong theoretical justification for the
unity of the history of literature—Watt by delimiting the field, Doody by expanding it—
is Peter Quennell’s (1905-1993) *A History of English Literature* (1973), a work which
proudly proclaims that it has ‘no doctrinaire theories to propose’.125 Quennell’s history
takes a biographical approach, supplemented by comments relating to the historical and
social context of the authors being discussed:

> Throughout we have assumed that the reader’s enjoyment of a book is always
> increased if he can place its author against the correct historical and social
> background, and knows something of the personal experiences that may have helped
> to bring it into being.126

Although he focuses exclusively on a small selection of ‘[individuals] of genius’, Quennell
insists that there is an internal unity to their work and therefore to his history.127 This, he
argues, is because there is an internal unity to literary history itself:

> We have been assisted by the fact that English literature has run a remarkably
> coherent course. There have been gaps, temporarily barren periods ... but, at regular
> intervals, a man of genius has emerged to give the literary art a new direction; and
> such artists, besides looking ahead, have kept an attentive eye on the historic past,
> with the result that Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson and Matthew
> Arnold, however much they may differ in method, still seem members of the same
> family, proud to acknowledge their joint inheritance and glad to remember that
> they spoke a common language.128

This passage attempts to draw out the continuity of literary history, while acknowledging
the gaps—‘temporary barren periods’. Quennell first suggests the continuity by

employing the familiar time-as-a-river metaphor in the first sentence, suggesting that English literature ‘has run a remarkably coherent course’. The gaps which do emerge are bridged by the tendency of the major authors—contrary to what Ian Watt said about Richardson and Fielding—to cast their attention backwards to their literary past, so that they share a common heritage: ‘their joint inheritance’. There is no place in this conception of literary history for those who fall outside the tradition that Quennell describes; that is, those who do not feel proud—or at least obligated—to acknowledge Dryden, Pope, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson and Matthew as ‘members of the same family’. The benefit from a historiographical perspective of adopting such a model of literary history is that those authors and works which are to be included are self-selecting: one doesn’t need to recognize an author or work as belonging to a tradition—it is proclaimed by the authors themselves in their works. Tracing the course of the tradition is a matter of following the citations. Furthermore, it firmly links the continuity in literary history to literary tradition by acknowledging a normative dimension and framing this in terms of an ‘inheritance’. Quennell’s history, then, traces the passage of a tradition which is self-identifying and self-propagating.

It could be asserted that Quennell seeks, and apparently succeeds, in finding a natural continuity by adopting the ‘great man’ view of literary history. Such an approach was at odds with the intellectual currents of the 1970s and 1980s. Quennell, who operated outside of academia, could afford to ignore the vicissitudes of scholarly fashion. But his

129 Quennell, History, 8.
130 Quennell, History, 8.
131 Quennell, History, 8.
approach contrasts with that taken, for instance, by Peter Conrad (1948-) in *The Everyman History of English Literature* (1985). Conrad emphasizes the overall character of English Literature at the expense of the individual characteristics of the authors and works which comprise it:

> I wanted to show that the works of the more than a thousand years that this narrative covers themselves comprise one indivisible unending book. This conviction underlies and interconnects my history. Literature seems to me a collaborative—almost a familial—activity, marrying the past with the present and from that union generating the future. [...] Recalled and recapitulated in its entirety by every literary generation, the past enlivens and invigorates the present. The furthest-reaching literary futures in England are often restorations of the remotest past. Shaw’s intellectualised Utopia, millennia hence, goes back to Methuselah. In a special and unique sense, the literary history of England is timeless.132

Here Conrad invokes both the continuous and simultaneous models of tradition. On the one hand, the literary past can be understood chronologically as a narrative in which the literary production of a thousand years is indivisible and interconnected—‘one indivisible unending book’. On the other hand, the past is ‘recalled and recapitulated in its entirety’ for each new generation of readers, which is highly reminiscent of Eliot’s notion that tradition must be constantly obtained’—and indeed re-obtained—‘by ‘great labour’133

Whether this is unique to England’s literary history, as Conrad claims, is less important than the possibility that diachronic and synchronic conceptions of tradition—continuous and simultaneous tradition respectively—can be understood as different ways of describing the same temporal phenomenon of literary inheritance. Indeed, elsewhere in the *Everyman History* Conrad virtually formulates simultaneous and continuous tradition in terms of each other:

> As an ultimate proof of English literature’s continuity, there is no secession in it of the modern from the past. No period is more eclectically traditional than that of

modernism the contemporary means the simultaneous presence of the past. Applied to literary history, the relativity theory turns temporal succession into spatial companionship. Thus, the simultaneous model of literary tradition is simply one way of describing the tradition’s continuity from the perspective of the individual that encounters it at a particular point in time. Modernism, far from representing a break in the continuity of the English literary tradition, instead made that tradition explicit both in theory and in practice. By drawing attention to the simultaneous presence of the literary past for those in the present, Modernists such as Eliot and Pound elucidated those points of continuity between past and present and the bi-directionality of influence between the two, to a greater degree than had previously been the case.

The foregoing examples constitute too limited a sample to conclude that continuity of tradition emerges as the common denominator in literary history. What it does show, however is that a concern with the problem of continuity is a concern shared by literary historians of a variety of approaches. Furthermore, this concern is entangled with the notion of tradition since the thread of continuity is usually traced according to some tradition—i.e. some constant that is present in the works surveyed and passed on via those works. Even in those histories which aim at an objective description of literary history, what is passed on and the paths which that inheritance took—i.e. the traditional aspect—forms the basis of the historical narrative. And, as we saw in the case of Peter Conrad’s Everyman History, a change in historiographical approach may be accompanied by a change in the model of tradition that underlies the history. The extent to which one is the cause of the other is outside the bounds of this work; it is enough to

\[134\] Conrad, Everyman History, 600.
note that in literary histories, claims of continuity or historical unity are frequently also
claims about the underlying model of tradition.

3.5.3 Ernst Robert Curtius’s European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages

By the current division into Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Period,
[Europe] is ... dismembered into chronological fragments. On pedagogical grounds,
this ... dismemberment is necessary to a certain extent (usually exceeded in practice).
But it is equally necessary on pedagogical grounds to offset it by superimposing a
general view upon it.135

Ernst Robert Curtius

The literary historians whose work has been discussed in the previous section all
demonstrated an underlying concern for continuity, a concern which was often tied to
their assumptions about literary tradition or tradition in a literary context. For most of
them, however, this concern was mentioned in passing or merely implied. In this final
section, I examine the work of Ernst Robert Curtius whose concern for the continuity of
literary tradition formed the very basis of his most famous work: *European Literature
and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948) (referred to henceforth as *ELLMA*). More than any
other major work of literary scholarship, *ELLMA* places the continuity of literary
tradition at the centre of its critical aims: it intends to demonstrate that a continuity exists
across a large expanse of European literary history. In his review of the book, Leo Spitzer
describes Curtius’s attempt to inspire in the reader the ‘realization of the historical
continuity of our European civilization’.136

Page after page is devoted to the enumeration of texts intended to demonstrate a
particular conviction of the author on the historical continuity in the expression of
a thought or in an artistic device; and the quotations from Shakespeare, Milton,
Calderon, or Goethe, when appearing against the medieval background are made to

136 Leo Spitzer, ‘Europaische Literatur Und Lateinisches Mittelalter by Ernst Robert Curtius’, *The American
appear in a new light—as less original, more traditional, at least as concerns their content.\textsuperscript{137}

In his review, Spitzer also touches on the apparent paradox between Curtius the modernist—Curtius wrote for T.S. Eliot’s journal \textit{The Criterion} and in 1927 he translated ‘The Wasteland’ into German—and Curtius the scholar of tradition: ‘How should we explain, in the later work of a great scholar, the repudiation of his earlier work: the prophet of a new Europe become “a prophet turned backward”?…\textsuperscript{138} Spitzer suggests that Curtius’s preoccupation with demonstrating the historical continuity of European literature stemmed as much from his unease at the rise of Hitlerism as with theoretical considerations: ‘It was logical that an aristocratic mind such as Curtius’s should, before the onslaught of the plebeian hordes, retreat into the Latin past of Germany, into a difficult subject matter, one inaccessible to the minds of the Rosenberg stamp’.\textsuperscript{139} Spitzer claims the change that overtook Curtius manifests itself in two key works of the early 1930s:

In 1932, with the publication of the book \textit{Deutscher Geist in Gefahr} and the study \textit{Josef Manrique und der Kaisergedanke: a sudden change of interest manifested itself on the part of the ‘modernist’ Curtius. In the first, he issued a warning to Germany, on the verge of turning Nazi, and called her back to Humanism and her cultural past; in the second, we see an abandonment of all aesthetic, philosophic and modernist tendencies, only historical and philological questions being treated: the late medieval Spanish poet studied here was only considered as a link in a thousand-year-old tradition which can be retraced to the rhetorical exercises of late antiquity and which is reflected in medieval Latin historiography.\textsuperscript{140}

Since 1932, Curtius continued to produce a stream of scholarly articles, ‘always stressing the continuity of the poetic tradition from (late) antiquity up to the Romance and

\textsuperscript{137} Spitzer, ‘Europäische Literatur’, 427.
\textsuperscript{138} Spitzer, ‘Europäische Literatur’, 426.
\textsuperscript{139} Spitzer, ‘Europäische Literatur’, 426. Note: The ‘Rosenberg stamp’ refers to the seal of the Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce (ERR) which was tasked with appropriating valuable cultural property belonging to Jews and others deemed enemies of the state.
\textsuperscript{140} Spitzer, ‘Europäische Literatur’, 426.
European literatures’.141 Curtius himself affirms this, and in his foreword to the English translation of *ELLMA*, he echoes Spitzer’s analysis of his motives: ‘When the German catastrophe came, I decided to serve the idea of a medievalistic Humanism by studying the Latin literature of the Middle Ages’.142 These remarks by Spitzer and Curtius are significant because they cast some light on Curtius’s views on the ‘driving force of tradition[chain], one in which “such historical convulsions as wars and revolution’ play a major role.143

Thucydides was induced to undertake his history because he regarded the Peloponnesian War as the greatest war of all times. Augustine wrote his *City of God* under the impact of Alaric’s conquest of Rome. Machiavelli’s political and historical writings are his reaction to the French expeditions into Italy. The revolution of 1789 and the Napoleonic wars provoked Hegel’s Philosophy of History. Upon the defeat in 1871 followed Taine’s revision of French history, upon establishment of the Hohenzollern empire, Nietzsche’s ‘unseasonable’ essay on the ‘Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life’—a precursor of the modern discussions of ‘historicism’. The end of the first World War was responsible for the resonance Spengler’s *Decline of the West* found in Germany.144

However, it is not the ‘engine’ of tradition that Curtius is anxious to divulge in *ELLMA*, but rather its resultant continuity. In the previous section, I briefly discussed *The Classical Tradition* by the Scottish-American critic, Gilbert Highet. Though published the year after Curtius’s work appeared (too soon to take advantage of its insights), it can be fruitfully understood as a pre-cursor to *ELLMA*. This is because both are attempting to demonstrate the continuity of classical literature with that of Modern Europe. However, by Highet’s own admission a vast gap exists in his chronology, 145 Spitzer, ‘Europäische Literatur’, 426. 146 Curtius, *ELLMA*, viii. For more on the danger Curtius was exposed to by the rise of Nazism; see: Jason Harding, *The Criterion: Cultural Politics and Periodical Networks in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford, 2002), 218–20. A less sympathetic account can be found in: James, *Cultural Amnesia*, 154–60. 143 Curtius, *ELLMA*, 3. 144 Curtius, *ELLMA*, 3–4.
between the Romans and the ‘rediscovery’ of classical civilization—a process that Hight argues takes place, sporadically at first, after 1100 A.D.145 Whereas Curtius is attempting to bridge this gap by showing that a large body of Latin literature exists from this period which has been largely ignored, Hight is more concerned with the re-emergence of Classical influences in the literature of the new vernacular tongues.146 Hight is aware that Latin continued to be spoken and written during this time—‘until at least 1860’—he nevertheless concludes that ‘the history of Latin literature written by modern authors is so different from that of the other European literatures of our era that it must be treated separately’.147 In other words, despite the assertion of a continuity between ancient and modern European literature, a massive discontinuity of many centuries is present within this tradition[chain], Curtius’s book proceeds from the presumption that this judgement of Hight’s is mistaken:

Virgil and Dante have long had a place in the innermost circle of my admiration. What were the roads that led from the one to the other? ... The answer could not but be found in the Latin continuity of the Middle Ages. And that in turn was a portion of the European tradition, which has Homer at its beginning and at its end, as we see today, Goethe. (vii)

In other words, whereas Hight insists that the centuries of post-classical European literary history which were dominated by Latin ought to be regarded as a discontinuity in the Classical tradition, Curtius sees those same centuries as forming a bridge between classical and modern literary culture. In order to assert this, however, he recognizes that the fact that the literature forming this cultural bridge is written in Latin is not in itself sufficient to assert a traditional continuity. Instead, Curtius sets out to trace the path of

145 Hight, Classical Tradition, 1–2.
146 Hight, Classical Tradition, vii–viii.
147 Hight, Classical Tradition, 3.
common elements from their origin in classical literature, through works of the Latin middle ages which Hight referred as radically ‘different’, and into the works of the modern period. The constant presence of such elements is the basis upon which the unity and, more importantly, the continuity of European literature may be asserted: ‘to illuminate the unity of that tradition in space and time by the application of new methods’.\(^ {148}\) As to the specific nature of the elements of continuity, i.e. Curtius’s *topoi*, I will restrict myself to some brief remarks. Nor will I dwell on Curtius’s identification of individual *topoi* or the relative merits of those identifications. I am primarily concerned with the extent to which the model of tradition that underpins *ELLMA* is affected by Curtius’s account of continuity in the European literary tradition.

Right at the outset and more than once in the course of *ELLMA*, Curtius hints at the nature of his project by citing the influence of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung; in particular, the latter’s notion of the archetype.\(^ {149}\) Jung describes these as:

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\text{[M]ental forms whose presence cannot be explained by anything in the individual’s own life and which seem to be aboriginal, innate, and inherited shapes of the human mind ... The archetype is a tendency to form ... representations of a motif—representations which can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern.}\(^ {150}\)
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Adapted for his own purpose, Curtius reformulates the idea under the name *topos* to mean a literary commonplace, whether in the form of a recurring image, verbal pattern, rhetorical device, etc. In identifying these elements as the units of literary continuity, he is also drawing on the ideas of the historian Arnold J. Toynbee as found in his *A Study of*
Like Toynbee, Curtius intends that his selection of ‘ultimate elements’ and his tracing of their ‘inner development’ will achieve a birds-eye view of literary history. Comparing his method to ‘aerial photography’, Curtius writes: ‘If we attempt to embrace two or two and a half millenniums of Western literature in one view, we can make discoveries which are impossible from a church steeple’.

Hence Curtius’s notion of tradition takes proper account of the twin perspectives discussed earlier in the chapter. He is concerned with grasping the tradition as it extends backwards into the past and forward into the future by identifying the content as topoi which can be identified and reiterated by authors and readers. Secondly, he is intent on grasping tradition in the aggregate; that is to say, he wishes to adopt Forster’s long view of literary tradition without losing the communicability of that tradition nor reducing it to units which are simplistic and reductive (i.e. periodization). His starting point is not dissimilar from Forster’s; lamenting the unmanageability of literary history due to its overwhelming size, he writes: ‘In the intellectual chaos of the present it has become necessary and happily not impossible to demonstrate [the] unity’ of the European literary tradition. But whereas Forster despairs of many people ever achieving

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153 Yet another key influence is indicated by the second of the book’s two dedicatees: Aby Warburg (1866-1929), who was concerned with the ‘memory of art, in the readoption of vivid images and symbols in different epochs and cultures’. Astrid Eller, *Memory in Culture*, trans. by Sara B. Young (Basingstoke, 2011), 19.


155 Curtius, *ELLMA*, ix.

154 On the matter of communicability, Curtius is actually somewhat ambivalent. While his aim in *ELLMA* is to achieve a ‘universal standpoint’ (viii), he also concedes that ‘the protagonists of progress in historical understanding are always isolated individuals’ (3), an attitude no dissimilar to Forster’s in *Aspects of the Novel* when he writes ‘true scholarship is incommunicable, true scholars are rare’ (28). Curtius shares with Eliot and Ezra Pound an acceptance of the difficulty in attaining tradition. In regard to implementing the sort of program required to teach literature from the sort of macro-perspective that he is recommending, Curtius accepts that ‘we will spend whatever time it takes. And if one life is not long enough? Then several lives will accomplish it’ (14).

155 Curtius, *ELLMA*, viii.
the standpoint necessary to grasp that unity, Curtius argues that ‘such a standpoint is afforded by Latinity’. Reconstructing the great sweep of literary tradition without the large gap found in accounts like that of Hight, Curtius is able to identify the necessary units of tradition (topoi) and then employ those units to illustrate the unity of the long span of literary history. And he does so without resorting, as does Forster, to detemporalizing it—the unavoidable consequence of adopting the simultaneous model— for the sake of pedagogical necessity.

Curtius’s work is important in the context of examining the continuous model of literary tradition because he unifies the notion of literary tradition, understood in terms of specific literary content, with the aims of literary history conceived on a macroscopic scale. The continuous model in his ELLMA is not merely a passive set of assumptions which underlie the historical thesis and impose order and manageability, but rather a tool that is consciously employed in order to allow deep chronological investigations to take place.

Criticisms of Curtius’s approach to literary tradition appeared almost immediately upon ELLMA’s publication, starting with his friend Leo Spitzer’s influential review already mentioned. One major criticism is that his emphasis on the continuity of topoi is at the expense of any significance attached to individual works or authors in the tradition. For example, Curtius dismissed certain aesthetic criticisms of the poem, Coplas en la muerte de su padre, by the Castilian poet, Jorge Manrique (c. 1440 – 1479) that were made by the scholar Rosmarie Burkhart. Burkhart found the poem’s use of a certain trope of

196 Curtius, ELLMA, viii.
classical literature (namely *ubi sunt*) to be unsuccessful. Curtius dismissed her concerns as irrelevant, arguing that the poem’s use of *ubi sunt* was indeed significant, but not for aesthetic reasons—or at least not for aesthetic reasons of the kind that Burkhart was citing. Rather, as the Manrique scholar Nancy Marino writes, Curtius regarded the poem’s use of the trope as significant because ‘it was a link between the use of this rhetorical tradition in ancient times and during the Renaissance’. As such, significance is attributed to poems or poets in accordance to their place within the literary tradition. But what exactly does it mean for a work or author to be judged as significant within a tradition? Nancy Marino suggests that ‘for Curtius, the greatness of a man could only be measured by his comparison to acknowledged greats in exemplars’. Yet, surely this is precisely what Burkhart was attempting to do when she found Manrique’s use of *ubi sunt* to be ineffective. To judge a particular use of a long-established rhetorical trope as being unsuccessful implies that the poet failed to accomplish by its use what others had previously.

Another major critique of Curtius’s conception of literary tradition has to do with a literary work’s ontological status, and how that relates to its material being. One of the questions raised in Chapter 1 of this thesis was whether literary tradition can be treated as a discrete phenomenon, distinct from other forms of cultural tradition. In *ELLMA*, Curtius distinguishes literary tradition from other artistic traditions, in particular those of the visual arts such as painting and architecture. Literature has:

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158 Curtius, *ELLMA*, viii.
159 Marino, *Jorge Manrique*, 118.
different forms of movement, of growth, of continuity, from art. It possesses a freedom which is denied to art. For literature, all the past is present, or can become so. Homer is brought to us anew in a new translation, and Rudolf Alexander Schröder’s Homer is different from Voss’s. I can take up Homer or Plato at any hour, I ‘have’ him then, and have him wholly. He exists in innumerable copies. The Parthenon and St. Peter’s exist only once, I can make them visible to me by photographs only partially and shadowily. But their photographs give me no marble, I cannot touch them, cannot walk about in them, as I can in the Odyssey or the Divina Commedia.\(^{160}\)

Curtius’s point about the relative freedom of dissemination of a literary work compared to that of a visual artwork which is inseparable from its original physical incarnation is relatively uncontroversial, and his point about the Parthenon and St. Peter’s only existing in the singular versus the innumerable copies of Homer and Plato is trivially true. However, he goes much further than merely making a point about the material transmission of literary work in his claim that he can ‘take up Homer or Plato at any hour’ and ‘have’ him then, and have him wholly’.\(^{161}\) His passionate, even erotic, language, points to Curtius’s insistence on some basic ontological differences between a work of literature and a work of art:

> In the book, the poem is really present. I do not “have” a Titian either in a photograph or in the most nearly perfect copy, even if the latter were available for a few dollars. With the literature of all times and peoples I can have a direct, intimate, and engrossing vital relationship, with art not. Works of art I have to contemplate in museums. The book is more real by far than the picture. ... The possibility of having Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe at any time and “wholly” shows that literature has a different mode of existence from art. But from this it follows that literary creation is subject to other laws than artistic creation.\(^{162}\)

But the nature of this ontological difference remains elusive. At first glance, Curtius seems to be arguing that, unlike a reproduction of a painting, a copy of a work of literature is sufficient to experience it ‘wholly’. No recourse to an ‘original’ is necessary.

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\(^{160}\) Curtius, *ELLMA*, 14.

\(^{161}\) Curtius, *ELLMA*, 14.

However, he undermines this elsewhere in *ELLMA* by arguing that, in the middle ages, reception and transmission of literature ‘represent as it were the two halves of a sphere’ and that ‘[t]he unity of this world was shattered by the invention of printing’. In *The Printing Press As an Agent of Change* (1979), Elizabeth Eisenstein argues that Curtius believed manuscripts copied by scribes were better able to transmit the literary tradition than the printing press. But as she points out, such a view ignores ‘all the evidence that shows piecemeal copying was common—at least as far back as the ninth century’. For Eisenstein, this makes Curtius’s ideas about literary transmission unsound, and she criticises him for regarding ‘scribal book production, in a somewhat fanciful and romantic vein’.

A quasi-spiritual belief that medieval scribes had an inherent advantage over the printing press in transmitting literary tradition might help explain why Curtius is reluctant to trace the continuity of European literature beyond the works of Goethe in the early 19th century. It also suggests that his model of tradition is unusable in relation to the last two centuries of literature, certainly a major limitation. ‘Perhaps’, Eisenstein suggests, ‘this explains how Curtius can assert: ‘we have modernized our railroads but not our system of transmitting tradition’, despite several centuries of development in printing

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163 Curtius, *ELLMA*, 328.
technology and book distribution. The irony is that Curtius’s reconceptualization of tradition itself had no validity in the age of rail.

\[166\] Curtius, *ELLMA*, 6.

\[167\] Of course, it is possible to simply ignore the fanciful textual metaphysics and simply take Curtius’s model of tradition purely in its structural terms. After all, as Eisenstein points out, ‘That an otherwise careful scholar entertains the notion of summarizing such a change [as the introduction of printing] in a single sentence is surely remarkable’ (6-7). However, it does demonstrate that the continuous model of tradition, more so than the simultaneous model, is inextricably entangled in the material and ontological aspects of literary transmission.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the continuous model of tradition as it relates to two major areas of cultural and literary activity. The first—literary and artistic modernism—where a concern with the continuity of tradition might not be expected; the second—literary historiography—where a concern with tradition is often explicit and has generated a lot of critical debate.

The examination of modernism yielded the observation that, contrary to what has frequently been observed, many artists and writers associated with that label were deeply concerned with maintaining a link with past traditions. Furthermore, the poet Remy de Gourmont offers an alternative view of tradition to that of T.S. Eliot, whose simultaneous model of tradition is often taken as the modernist standard. Contrary to Eliot, De Gourmont’s understanding of tradition emphasizes temporal continuity, illustrated by the critical metaphor of a ‘chain’.

In turning to literary historiography, I established that, even though literary tradition is not conceptually synonymous to literary history, assumptions about the former often underlie and inform the practice of the latter. Quite a few major theoretical debates
within literary historiography, especially those concerning the unity of subject matter, can be restated in terms of a debate about the validity of a continuous model of tradition. As we saw, this debate was given the most explicit treatment in the work of Ernst Robert Curtius, especially his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. However, as critics of Curtius have pointed out, his work is contingent upon beliefs about texts and their transmission which are not easily established; beliefs, furthermore, which, whatever their validity in a medieval context, undermine his model of tradition in a modern (i.e. since Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century) context.

In the next chapter, I will examine a lineage of critics and thinkers whose understanding of these matters, unlike Curtius, is rooted in the materiality of literature and its socio-political function. In doing so, the third dimension of tradition identified in my analytic framework—normativity, or *weight*—will come to the forefront of my analysis and suggest yet a third major model, one that is oriented around the process of selection in the formation of literary traditions.
Chapter Four
Escaping Marx’s Nightmare: The Selective Model of Literary Tradition

What devices, traditions, ceremonies, have they not invented in all ages to keep men in obedience, to enrich themselves?  
Robert Burton (1577–1640)

Most versions of ‘tradition’ can be quickly shown to be radically selective.  
Raymond Williams

4.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I have described two models of tradition—the simultaneous model and the continuous model—that respectively prioritize the contentual and transmissive aspects of literacy tradition. Put another way, these models focus on what exists as a tradition, and the continuity of that existence.

There is, however, another major aspect of tradition that has been largely overlooked by the critics and scholars who have made use of these models: the question of why some literary works survive while others are lost to history. For those who employ the simultaneous model, T. S. Eliot among them, emphasis is given to the a-temporal relations that exist between elements which make up the simultaneous order. But Eliot largely overlooks the fact that the order is comprised of just those elements and not

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1 Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, III.331.
2 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 115.
others. Sometimes, as in the work of Sainte-Beuve and Remy de Gourmont, an appeal is made to the sorting effect of time, what Franco Moretti more recently called ‘the slaughterhouse of literature’. Yet, due to the synchronic structure of the simultaneous model which draws attention away from (or even brackets out entirely) tradition’s temporal dimension, the sorting process remains obscure. On the other hand, as the last chapter showed, time plays an essential role in the continuous model which stresses a tradition’s diachronic interconnectedness and unity. Even so, as in the case of Ernst Robert Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, the question of why a tradition survives gives way to the brute fact that it did, and to the challenge of identifying the continuous quantity. In this respect, both the simultaneous and continuous models share a lop-sided emphasis on the *reception* of literary tradition at the expense of its *perpetuation*. Whereas the simultaneous model takes tradition[content] just as it is, having been deposited in the present, the continuous model, by looking for what is constant in the chain of receptions, emphasizes the path a tradition[content] took to get to a particular stage in its development rather than the underlying process driving it.

In this chapter I examine the work of a group of critics and thinkers for whom the ‘underlying process’ is a leading concern. On the surface, what these writers have in common is the influence of Marxist thought, regardless of whether they themselves are

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officially or effectively Marxists. But even more broadly, most of the writers whose work is examined share the following:

a) The belief that tradition is, to quote Raymond Williams, ‘an actively shaping force’.

b) A conviction that tradition is a problem to be addressed, and not only a problem for literary studies.

Given this emphasis on tradition’s normative aspect—i.e. tradition’s capacity to affect or effect behaviour in people—and the belief that literary tradition has ramifications that go beyond the aesthetic or purely literary, the stakes are inevitably raised. Hence there is a lot more explicit theorizing about tradition by the critics examined in this chapter than by those in the previous chapters. The major model of tradition that is described in this chapter, which I call ‘the selective model of tradition’, is a model in the sense that the simultaneous and continuous models are. However, it is also an explicitly articulated theory, associated primarily with a single individual: the Welsh literary critic and cultural theorist Raymond Williams.

Throughout his career, Williams wrestled with the problem of tradition in both literary and non-literary contexts. In his role as a revisionist Marxist thinker, he attempted to formulate a theory of culture in which tradition is not elided as he felt it was in classical

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4 This category is too fuzzy to be applied rigorously in any case. Even Raymond Williams, whose work is central to this chapter, has had his Marxist credentials questioned. For example, in 1976, Perry Anderson wrote in the New Left Review that Williams’s work, ‘while it has corresponded closely to the pattern of Western Marxism in its typically aesthetic and cultural focus, has not been that of a Marxist’. See John Eldridge and Lizzie Eldridge, Raymond Williams: Making Connections (London, 1994), 9.

5 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 115.

6 Indeed, the label ‘selective tradition’ is adopted from Raymond Williams’s account of culture in: Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (London, 1961), 66.
Marxist thought, but instead is foregrounded and given a central explanatory function. In his role as a literary scholar, Williams sought to apply the theoretical insights gained in that other role to relate the present literary culture’s ‘interpretation [of the past] to the particular contemporary values on which it rests’ and to ‘confront us with the real nature of the choices we are making.’\footnote{Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, 69. (Emphasis added)} One of the shared outcomes of both spheres of Williams’s life was his theory of selective tradition.

The rest of this chapter is as follows: To properly understand the broad problematic that Williams was responding to with his theory of tradition, I give a brief outline of some of the ideas of various philosophers and theorists—not only of literature, but also of history, culture, and politics—who preceded him in confronting the problem of tradition in a Marxist context. Those I have focused on are Karl Marx himself, as well Leon Trotsky and Georg Lukács. The latter two figures were chosen because they are among the most influential Marxist literary critics, and because their writings extend the discussion of traditional continuity begun in the last chapter. After examining the notion of tradition in the writings of these thinkers, I outline how Raymond Williams’s theory of culture (and the role tradition plays in it) directly addresses the problem of tradition in Marxist thought that first emerges in Marx’s own writings. The last part of this chapter examines some key critiques and extensions of Williams’s theory, drawing especially on the work of Jane Tompkins—whose book \textit{Sensational Designs} (1985) can be read as a response to one of the major gaps in Williams’s cultural theory regarding the notion of
literary value—as well as the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger’s notion of ‘Invented tradition’.

### 4.2 The Problem of Persistence

If we made love like Anacreon and Sappho there would be nothing more absurd; if like Terence nothing more bourgeois; if like Lucian nothing more coarse. All ages have their own characteristic tone.⁸

Saint-Évremond

Is Achilles possible with powder and lead?⁹

Karl Marx

According to Raymond Williams, the concept of tradition had been overlooked or, as he puts it, ‘radically ignored’ in Marxist cultural thought.¹⁰ This, he argues, is because it had typically been ‘diagnosed as superstructure’—i.e. ‘a secondary factor, which may at most modify other and more decisive historical processes’.¹¹ Certainly if, according to philosopher Robert L. Wicks, from a Marxist perspective ‘the economic system’s basic structure prescribes the contours of a society’s legal and political systems, along with its art, religion, and philosophy’, one could easily assign tradition to the category of superstructure.¹² In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams claims that, in addition to being regarded as superstructure, tradition has been incorrectly formulated in Marxist

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thought. Persistently the concept ‘has been commonly understood as a relatively inert, historicized segment of a social structure: tradition as the surviving past’.13 This view of tradition can certainly be attributed to many of the writers examined in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis. Even Eliot’s simultaneous order, the dynamic, relational structure which could hardly be labelled as ‘inert’, mainly describes a version of tradition comprised of those elements of the past that remain in the present; a present which is, to some extent, constituted by them: we ‘know so much more’ than the dead writers, Eliot writes, because ‘they are that which we know’.14 This understanding of tradition takes account of its transmissive and contentual dimensions (i.e. the survival of a tradition and that which survives) but largely ignores the normative dimension, especially to the extent that the latter determines which of those past elements remain and why.

Furthermore, from a Marxist perspective, at least according to Raymond Williams’s characterization of classical Marxism in *Marxism and Literature*, models of tradition that stress the continued survival of aspects of the past are faulty.15 If the content of tradition is identified as superstructure, then how to explain the apparent continued existence of traditions after the material productive forces of a society have changed? This problem

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15 Williams is dismissive of the simplistic interpretation offered by some Marxists of ‘the proposition of the determining base and the determined superstructure’, suggesting these views were not held by Marx but arose in the ‘transition from Marx to Marxism’ (Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 75). Williams was not, however, denying the superstructural theory of culture entirely. Instead he was arguing that instead of culture being merely a product of economic determinism, there were instead ‘multiple determinisms’ which could not be located only on side of the base-superstructure model (Snedeker 110). Stuart Hall later supported Williams’s account of Marxist thought of the era, and especially Marxist literary criticism, writing: ‘It is extremely bad and simplistic! ... Its “Marxism” is a straightforward, mechanical application of the base-superstructure model to an analysis of the production of literature’ (20). See: George Snedeker, ‘Between Humanism and Social Theory: The Cultural Criticism of Raymond Williams’, *Rethinking Marxism*, 6/1 (1993), 104–14; Hall, *Cultural Studies* 1983, 20.
was described by the American author James T. Farrell in his 1936 book, *A Note on Literary Criticism*, as follows:

Certain works of literature possess a human worth and a carry-over power which endow them with a relatively inherent persistence-value after they have been divorced from the material conditions and the society out of which they have been created. ... We are led to conclude that some works that we now view as the literature of the present will, with the passage of time, also be added to the literature of the past. When that occurs, we shall necessarily be faced with the problem of considering their persistence-value.16

Farrell was a Marxist, though one who has been described as having 'done more heavy damage in exposing the contradictions and rank absurdities of the Marxist aesthetic ... than any of the so-called “bourgeois” critics’!7 As a Marxist, he recognized the contradiction of assigning an ‘inherent persistence-value’ to a work of literature. But as reader of literature from the past, he was unable to deny that some works continued to speak to him, long after the social and economic conditions that produced them ceased to exist.

More than five decades later, in a review of *The Death of Literature* by Alvin Kernan, the critic D. G. Myers described an even stronger version of the Marxist thesis, one which questions the historical continuity of the very notion of literature. Myers insists that this strong form of historicism, in addition to forming the basis of Kernan’s book, is ‘familiar to anyone who has read much literary scholarship in recent years’.18 On this view, it is not merely individual elements of literary activity such as specific works and genres that are

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historically determined, but the concept of literature itself. This view is, according to
Myers, ‘a frankly Marxist one: literature, capitalism, and the political conception of the
individual all emerged at about the same time, in response to the same material
conditions’:19

What is now called ‘literature’ was born in the eighteenth century. Before then there
was writing, but no authors; printed texts, but no publishing. For literature is not a
thing like a chair, the essence of which can be wrapped up for all time in a tidy
formula ... but is instead a social practice, undertaken at a distinct time and in a dis-
tinct place, requiring certain institutional arrangements for its support. ... [Literature]
is saggingly dependent upon such aspects of modern society as high
literacy rates, copyright law, the taboo against plagiarism, dictionaries with
prescriptions on usage, research libraries, criticism, scholarship, and the university
curriculum. It would be a mistake to conceive of literature as having an existence
apart from such things.20

Karl Marx himself did not go nearly as far as the critics Myers is describing, taking as he
did such notions as ‘art’ and ‘literature’ for granted. Nevertheless, he went a long way
towards pre-empting later Marxist’s concerns about the persistence of literary forms and
works in the 1857 introduction to his Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political
Economy. In that work, Marx points to the fact that in some periods the arts seem to have
flourished ‘out of all proportion to the general development of society, hence also to the
material foundation ... of its organization’.21 The examples he gives are classical Greek art
and the works of Shakespeare. Marx also states that some artistic forms—his example is a
literary form: the epic, which flourished in England during the late eighteenth and early
nineteenth century— ‘can no longer be produced in their world epoch-making, classical

19 Myers, ‘Who Killed Literature?’, n.p. Myers adds, however, that ‘although the central propositions of his
book are derived from Marxist thinking, himself is no Marxist. He merely swings the club from the other
end’ (n.p.).
20 Myers, ‘Who Killed Literature?’, (n.p.).
21 Marx, Grundrisse, 110.
stature’.\textsuperscript{22} The epic literary form, Marx argues, was specific to, and only possible during, ‘an undeveloped stage of artistic development’\textsuperscript{23}

Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer’s bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish\textsuperscript{24}

Having established that art is ‘bound up with certain forms of social development’, Marx clearly states the problem that was later raised by Farrell and Williams, stressing art’s affective and normative capacity: ‘The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model’.\textsuperscript{25} Marx’s own answer to the problem he raises is to suggest that Greek art has ‘charm’, not \textit{despite but precisely because} it represents an earlier stage in human development:

A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child’s naïveté, and must he himself not strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage? Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children? Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm?\textsuperscript{26}

According to Marx, then, Greek art holds ‘charm’ for us moderns not because it exceeds its historical conditions of production, but the exact opposite: because ‘the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return’.\textsuperscript{27} Marx essentially reduces the ongoing interest in the Western literary and artistic tradition to an extreme case of cultural nostalgia.\textsuperscript{28} This reading is challenged by Terry Eagleton, who

\textsuperscript{22} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 110. For more on the flourishing of the epic form in the nineteenth century, see: Stuart Curran, \textit{Poetic Form and British Romanticism} (New York, 1989), 158.
\textsuperscript{23} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 110.
\textsuperscript{24} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 111.
\textsuperscript{25} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 111.
\textsuperscript{26} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 111.
\textsuperscript{27} Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, 111.
\textsuperscript{28} As Jon Elster writes, ‘Even in his most carefully written works, Marx’s intellectual energy was not matched by a comparable level of intellectual discipline’ (2). However, the point of this section is not to critique the consistency of Marx’s thought, but to bring out those elements that comprise the problematic that Raymond Williams is responding to in his theory of tradition. See Jon Elster, \textit{An Introduction to Karl Marx} (Cambridge, 1986).
argues that the passage could only be interpreted as suggesting that ‘a liking for Greek art is a nostalgic lapse back into childhood’ by ‘hostile critics’ determined to take Marx out of context.\textsuperscript{29} What Marx is really saying, according to Eagleton, is that ‘the “childlike” world of the Greeks is attractive because it thrives within certain measured limits’ that have been ‘overridden by bourgeois society in its limitless demand to produce and consume’.\textsuperscript{30} I would argue, however, that Eagleton’s reading is essentially a paraphrase of Marx’s own words, only using the less sentimental language of modern theory: ‘charm’ becomes ‘attraction’; the ‘historic childhood of humanity’ becomes a world which ‘thrives within certain measured limits’. Otherwise, Eagleton’s interpretation remains essentially the same as those whose reading of Marx he is criticizing. In a 1973 working paper on Marx’s Grundrisse for Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Stuart Hall—hardly one of Eagleton’s ‘hostile critics’—described Marx’s answer to the problem of the continuing relevance of past art as ‘unsatisfactory in almost every respect’, all the more so because the theoretical issues involved are ‘in our times, progressively central and determining’.\textsuperscript{31} As we shall see, while he was not affiliated with the CCCS directly, Raymond Williams’s theory of culture and the model of tradition that supports it can be read as an attempt to address the gap that Hall (along with Farrell and others before him) identified in Marx’s account of cultural tradition.

\textsuperscript{29} Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 11.
\textsuperscript{30} Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, 11. On the other hand, in his biography of Marx, David McLellan states that he does not think Marx provides a ‘direct answer’ to the question at all, and his comments on the ‘historic childhood of humanity’ merely pose another question. See David McLellan, Karl Marx: His Life and Thought (St Albans, 1976), 292–93.
\textsuperscript{31} Stuart Hall, A ‘Reading’ of Marx’s 1857 Introduction to the Grundrisse (Birmingham, 1973), 64–65.
4.3 Dead Generations

Marx’s difficulty with the notion of tradition, which revealed itself in an aesthetic context in the Grundrisse, arises in an illuminating fashion in his political essay The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852). The opening section of the Eighteenth Brumaire contains one of Marx’s best-known passages which also happens to be one of the most frequently cited quotations about tradition in Western literature:32

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.33

According to Marx, tradition paved the way for the bourgeois ‘revolution’ of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, an event which is portrayed in the Eighteenth Brumaire as a grotesque parody of the French Revolution and Napoleon Bonaparte’s seizure of power in 1799. On this account, tradition is an inheritance whose normative character generates an authority that can be wielded for political gain. Marx argues that, ‘unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless required heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war, and national conflict to bring it into the world’.34 Hence, the lowly revolutionaries of 1851 appealed to the traditions of their 18th century forebears—‘the self deceptions that they needed’—to disguise both their own weakness and the ‘bourgeois character of their struggles’35

Caussidière after Danton, Louis Blanc after Robespierre, the montagne [democratic socialists] of 1848–51 after the montagne [Jacobin democrats] of 1793–5, and then the London constable [Louis Bonaparte], with a dozen of the best debt-ridden lieutenants, after the little corporal [Napoleon Bonaparte], with his roundtable of

military marshals! The eighteenth Brumaire of the fool after the eighteenth Brumaire of the genius. Tradition is thereby associated with the negative traits of deception, oppression, and farce (indeed, the *Eighteenth Brumaire* begins with Marx’s famous reformulation of Hegel in which history occurs ‘the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce’).37

Marx returns to the theme of tradition in Article III of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* in the context of the party-political struggles between the Orléanists and the legitimists. He argues that the differences between them were ultimately not based on principle or adherence to their respective traditions—viz. ‘the lily and tricolour, the royal house of Bourbon and the royal house of Orléans’—but instead grew out of the differences in ‘their material conditions of existence’: ‘it was the old opposition between town and country, the rivalry between capital and landed property’.38 It is from these underlying material conditions that ‘social conditions of existence’ arise, ‘an entire superstructure of different and peculiarly formed sentiments, delusions, modes of thought and outlooks on life’.39

Such is the standard stuff of Marx’s (and Marxist) thought that Williams was referring to when he complained that tradition was incorrectly identified as superstructure. After all, on this account, it is no great leap to imagine that tradition (including literary tradition) falls into the category of the social conditions of existence. This understanding

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38 Marx, ‘Eighteenth Brumaire’, 42.  
39 Marx, ‘Eighteenth Brumaire’, 43.
is thrown into doubt, however, by Marx’s subsequent comments concerning how
superstructure affects the consciousness of individuals and constrains their actions:

The single individual, to whom [the social conditions of existence] are transmitted
through tradition and upbringing, can imagine that they form the real motives and
starting-point for his actions.\(^4^0\)

Here, ‘tradition’ is related to the inherited conditions which constrain the actions of
individuals (or at least appear that way to them) yet Marx implies that they stem from
something other than the underlying material conditions. Tradition\(^4^1\) is the
mechanism by which those conditions are transmitted to the individual. The introduction
of this rather ‘un-Marxist’ idea in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is remarked upon by the
contemporary Marxist scholar and translator, Terrell Carver:\(^4^2\)

The most astonishingly original and egregiously underestimated of Marx’s devices in
the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is not the idea that people make history albeit under
constraints. The novelty is rather the identification of ‘circumstances, given and
inherited’—not with economic conditions or relations of production or any such
‘material’ feature of experience—but with something quite different: ‘tradition from
all the dead generations’ weighing ‘like a nightmare on the brain of the living’;\(^4^2\)

Carver, writing within the context of political philosophy, is mostly concerned with
drawing attention to the passage’s ‘shock for the contemporary reader’ who approaches
the text within the well-defined expectations formed by the subsequent Marxist
tradition.\(^4^3\) This neatly brings together the question of tradition\(^4^1\) in a historical and
political context, and the interpretive problems it poses in a literary context. Carver
writes:

> Around Marx there is a highly developed politics of reading. Readers do not read just
> as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they read in present

\(^{4^0}\) Marx, ‘Eighteenth Brumaire’, 43.
\(^{4^1}\) Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx*, 2.
\(^{4^2}\) Terrell Carver, ‘Imagery/Writing, Imagination/Politics: Reading Marx through the Eighteenth
Brumaire’, in *Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire: (Post)Modern Interpretations*, ed. by Mark Cowling and
\(^{4^3}\) Carver, ‘Imagery/Writing’, 121.
circumstances, given and inherited. There are nightmares weighing on their brains, and disciplinary practices violating their choices. Shifting all the dead generations is really very hard work.\(^{44}\)

By alluding to the opening of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*—‘nightmares weighing on their brains’—Carver brings Marx’s insights about tradition, derived from his own reading of the text, to bear upon the problem of interpreting Marx in the twenty-first century. This includes the interpretation of those very parts of the text where Marx deals with tradition, which is where Carver has derived the insights that inform his own reading. The apparent circularity involved in this process does not deter Carver who seems to regard the task of ‘shifting all the dead generations’, to achieve a reading of Marx that is not obscured by tradition\(^{[weight]}\), as difficult but not impossible. These issues will be taken up in greater detail in Chapter 5, where I examine the work of hermeneutic scholars for whom this circularity makes tradition a productive force in the interpretation of texts. For the moment, however, it is enough to note that, despite finding the act of reading Marx’s statements about ‘tradition’ through the later Marxist tradition highly suggestive in thinking about the problems of interpretation, the paradox of tradition itself remains unresolved. The persistence of traditions\(^{[content]}\) remains a problem from a Marxist perspective, even when what persists came from the pen of Marx himself.

### 4.4 Revolutionary Traditionalists: Trotsky and Lukács

Respect for the classical heritage of humanity in aesthetics means that the great Marxists look for the true highroad of history, the true direction of its development, the true course of the historical curve, the formula of which they know; because they know the formula they do not fly off at a tangent at every hump in the graph, as

\(^{44}\) Carver, ‘Imagery/Writing’, 113.
modern thinkers often do because of their theoretical rejection of the idea that there is any such thing as an unchanged general line of development. Georg Lukács

We Marxists live in traditions... Leon Trotsky

The complicated relationship between literary tradition and non-literary traditions (e.g. the political traditions described in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*) is further developed in two of the most influential works of Marxist literary theory: Leon Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* (1924) and Georg Lukács’s *Studies in European Realism* (1945). Both authors in their own way attempt to align literary tradition (both the concept and the phenomenon) with Marxist principles: Trotsky by positing a ‘Marxist tradition’ that nourishes new revolutionary forms of literature while maintaining Marx’s negative judgement of the traditions of dead generations; and Lukács by arguing that, contrary to expectation, the tradition of the bourgeois realist novel is, or ought to be, cherished by Marxists for being politically and aesthetically consonant with their principles. Neither writers provide a detailed model of tradition that would have satisfied Williams or Hall. But between them they indicate the possibility of a Marxist conception of tradition that a) captures the relationship between literary tradition and socio-political concerns; and b) captures the interplay between different *types* of literary tradition, e.g. generic traditions and interpretive traditions.

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4.4.1 Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* (1924)

Are there no reliable Anti-Futurists?\[^{47}\]  

*Vladimir Lenin*

In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky defends the notion of tradition from a Marxist revolutionary perspective, doing so during a critique of Futurism.\[^{48}\] As mentioned in Chapter 3, in both their work and their manifestos the Futurists proclaimed a commitment to modernity which entailed a thoroughgoing rejection of the past. Trotsky agrees that, on the surface, Futurism’s ‘lack of respect for old values’ makes for a potentially good fit with his own revolutionary aims.\[^{49}\] He goes on to argue, however, that the Futurist’s apparent break with tradition is merely rhetorical, and that ‘Futurism is no less a product of the poetic past than any other literary school of the present day’.\[^{50}\]

To say that Futurism has freed art of its thousand-year-old bonds of bourgeoisdom is to estimate thousands of years very cheaply. The call of the Futurists to break with the past, to do away with Pushkin, to liquidate tradition, etc., has a meaning in so far as it is addressed to the old literary caste, to the closed in circle of intelligentsia. In other words, it has meaning only insofar as the Futurists are busy cutting the cord which binds them to the priests of bourgeois literary tradition.\[^{51}\]

By comparison, Trotsky claims that the working class is not required to heed the Futurist’s call to ‘break with the past’ because they never came under the sway of that past to begin with.\[^{52}\] While commending the Futurists’ attempt to ‘push away’ from the past,


\[^{48}\] The conflict between the artistic avant-garde and the ideological demands of political and cultural revolution which Trotsky was addressing at a theoretical level was also playing out in the post-revolution years at an institutional level. The avant-gardists such as the Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatole Lunacharsky, embraced a creed that, in Eric Hobsbawm’s words, stated: ‘The past was dead. Art and society could be made anew’ (226). Meanwhile, the Bolshevik leadership wanted to maintain the heritage and institutions of high culture, which most of them, notably the Futurists had wanted to raze’ (226). See: Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Art and Revolution’, in *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2014), 224–29.


Trotsky upbraids them for having ‘nothing in their soul which calls for new forms’.\(^{53}\) Not that the Futurists didn’t invent new forms; Trotsky in fact defines a ‘Futurist’ as a ‘revolutionary innovator of form’.\(^{54}\) However, he compares this type of revolutionary unfavourably to the communist, who is ‘a political revolutionary’.\(^{55}\) And it is this latter kind of revolution that is called for; the Futurists, he complains, ‘simply sing the old feelings over again with slightly new words’.\(^{56}\)

Ultimately, Trotsky’s objection to Futurism stems less from their rejection or failure to reject tradition \textit{tout court}, than it does from their belonging to the wrong (i.e. bourgeois) tradition. A mere change of form is simply a new vehicle for the existing bourgeois values. Dubbing them ‘Bohemian nihilists’, he accuses them of failing to manifest the ‘proletarian revolutionism’ which is inherent in the tradition\(^{57}\) of Marxism:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{We Marxists live in traditions, and we have not stopped being revolutionists on account of it. We elaborated and lived through the traditions of the Paris Commune, and even before our first revolution. Then the traditions of 1905 were added to them, by which we nourished ourselves and by which we prepared the second revolution. Going farther back, we connected the Commune with the June days of 1848, and with the great French Revolution. In the field of theory, we based ourselves, through Marx, on Hegel and on English classical political economy. We were educated, and we entered the struggle during an organic epoch, and we lived on revolutionary traditions.\(^{57}\)}
\end{quote}

Furthermore, Trotsky’s Marxist traditions\(^{57}\), unlike Futurism, had produced new forms of literature ‘which declared a merciless war upon “bourgeoisdom”’.\(^{58}\) Trotsky is quick to add that he is not advocating an art driven purely by a political agenda; art, he writes, should be ‘judged by its own law, the law of art’.\(^{59}\) Rather, for Trotsky, Marxism

\(^{53}\) Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 115.
\(^{54}\) Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 116.
\(^{55}\) Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 116.
\(^{56}\) Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 115.
\(^{58}\) Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 116.
\(^{59}\) Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 116.
can explain why certain artistic forms arose when they did, and on the basis of those reasons offer a critique such as the one he levels at the Futurists.\footnote{\textit{Trotsky, Literature and Revolution}, 116. An alternative view of the Futurists’ relation to tradition than that held by Trotsky—i.e. that they were narrowly concerned with breaking from the bourgeois tradition which nurtured them—can be found in Jacques Rancière’s \textit{The Politics of Aesthetics} (2000). Rancière claims that ‘when the Futurists ... declared the end of art ... they proposed an end of art equivalent to the identification of art with the life of the community’, a conception of art influenced by Romantic philosophy that Rancière also identifies with Marx’s early writings before his break with German Idealism. See Jacques Rancière, \textit{The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible}, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2009), 24, 44.}

One need not go as far as Paul N. Siegel who argues that, ‘far from minimizing the role of tradition in literature’, Trotsky ‘insists on it as much as does T. S. Eliot’.\footnote{\textit{On Literature and Art}, ed. by Paul N. Siegel, 2nd edn (New York, 1977), 11.} However, as can be seen from this account, Trotsky explicitly recognizes that tradition is both inescapable and, for the ‘correct’ development of literature, indispensable. While he does not expand these insights into a more general account of the role of tradition in literary development, he does advance the notion that non-literary traditions (e.g. historical, political, and theoretical traditions) underwrite the creation of new literary forms. Such forms, however, are not all equally legitimate from a Marxist revolutionary perspective, and the failure of the Futurists to derive their new literary forms from tradition\footnote{Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 116.} that were sufficiently revolutionary in character means that their ultimate role in the history of literature was reactionary: ‘[j]ust as the wind always returns to its own circles, so these literary revolutionists and destroyers of traditions found their way to the Academy’.\footnote{Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, 116.}
4.4.2 Lukács’s *Studies in European Realism* (1948)

The link drawn by Trotsky between literary tradition and tradition understood more generally is further developed by Georg Lukács in the introduction to his work *Studies in European Realism* (1948). Lukács’s and Trotsky’s criticism has a lot in common: both reject the possibilities offered to literature by Futurism and related avant-garde literary movements; both assert that there is no inherent contradiction between tradition and Marxist principles; most importantly for their own critical practice, both men believe that it is the job of the Marxist critic to identify *false* traditions in order to redirect attention to *true* ones—i.e. traditions that, if they do not advance the cause of revolutionary Marxism, will at least, as Lukács puts it, ‘assist in mitigating the pains of labour’ accompanying the ‘birth-pangs of a new world’.63

Yet despite their similarities, Lukács and Trotsky form opposing views about both the nature and content of the sort of traditions worth preserving. Whereas Trotsky lambasts the Futurists for being unable to escape their debt to bourgeois literary tradition, Lukács takes the converse position. Far from denouncing their remaining ties to bourgeois culture, Lukács denounces the Futurists for abandoning the most bourgeois of all literary traditions: realist fiction. The irony of Lukács’s defence of realism is that it is based on many of the same arguments that lead Trotsky to denounce that same tradition.

Upon closer examination of Lukács’s critique of Futurism, however, it becomes apparent how he formed such different views about bourgeois literary tradition to Trotsky, despite the apparent commonalities in their thinking. Lukács argues that

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if literature is to be a potential factor of national rebirth, it must itself be reborn in its purely literary, formal, aesthetic aspects as well. It must break with reactionary, conservative traditions which hamper it and resist the seeping-in of decadent influences which lead into a blind alley.64

This echoes the call by both Trotsky and the Futurists themselves for new forms of literary expression. However, while Lukács would agree with both concerning the need to break with conservative literary traditions, he disagrees with each (for different reasons) about what those traditions are. Both Trotsky and the Futurists identify conservative literary traditions with bourgeois literary forms, even as Trotsky accuses the Futurists of still being in thrall to it. While Lukács agrees with Trotsky that the Futurists represent a reactionary tradition, he disagrees that this reactionary tradition is that of bourgeois literary form. Rather, the Futurists are the true heirs to a modernist, anti-traditional tendency in art that constitutes precisely the tradition that Lukács wishes to break with. Consequently, Lukács finds himself in the curious position of arguing that it is modernism that is the tradition of reaction, ironically doing so on the grounds of its specific form of anti-traditionalism. Describing the modernist attitude to bourgeois literary tradition, he writes:

‘But all this is long out of date,’ the modernists cry. ‘All this is the undesirable, outwork legacy of the nineteenth century,’ say those who—intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously—support the Fascist ideology and its pseudo-revolutionary rejections of the past.65

In other words, Lukács is claiming in common with Trotsky that the problem with the Futurists is not that they are anti-traditional, but that their anti-traditionalism serves to perpetuate a different, wrong tradition. Consequently, Futurism is merely ‘decadence

64 Lukács, Studies in European Realism, 18.
65 Lukács, Studies in European Realism, 4.
masquerading as innovation’.\textsuperscript{66} Lukács departs from Trotsky, however, in claiming that the Futurists not only perpetuate the wrong tradition—becoming, in the process, a proxy for fascism—but that the chief tradition they are attempting to break with—bourgeois realist fiction—is actually the right tradition.

The rightness of realism in Lukács’s thinking becomes apparent when it is contrasted to the tradition he is objecting to, and which he identifies with Futurism and other forms of modernism. The critic David Ayers describes that tradition as being comprised of literature ‘which seeks only to reflect and imitate the fragmentation of individual consciousness—such as expressionism or the more contemporary surrealism’; such writing does not represent the true fragmentation of reality.\textsuperscript{67} True to his Marxist beliefs, Lukács identifies the true fragmentation as the result of capitalism. According to David Ayers, Lukács believed that ‘capitalism breaks social reality into fragments ... so the individual will experience reality in a partial and fragmented way’.\textsuperscript{68} A detailed account of how this fragmentation occurs is outside the scope of this thesis; what is significant is that, according to Lukács, different writers and the literary traditions they belong to represent contrary responses to this fragmented reality.\textsuperscript{69} He writes:

\textsuperscript{66} Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}, 17.
\textsuperscript{67} David Ayers, \textit{Literary Theory: A Reintroduction} (Malden, 2008), 142. Note: The looseness with which I am using the words Futurism and modernism in this section is a result of their usage by Lukács. He freely and synonymously employed the terms ‘Futurism’, ‘modernism’, and others referring to mostly avant-garde literary movements. For example, David Ayers points out that Lukács referred to James Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses} (1922) as ‘surrealist’, a label few critics today would apply to that work (142).
\textsuperscript{68} Ayers, \textit{Literary Theory}, 142.
Today a considerable section of modern artists has given up the Fraunhofer-like [see footnote] struggle and is content with finding, by means of new aesthetic theories, a justification for the emotional chaos of their works.\textsuperscript{70} Examples of authors belonging to the primary tradition which Lukács is rejecting—i.e. those whose work is content to depict aspects of the fragmented consciousness—include: Gustave Flaubert, André Gide, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce. The Futurists, and modernist writers more generally, were merely the latest addition to this tradition whose subjective and fragmentary approach to literary art Lukács regards as a ‘mutilation of the essence of man’.\textsuperscript{71} ‘[T]he concept of the complete human personality’, Lukács writes, is ‘the social and historical task humanity has to solve’.\textsuperscript{72} Despite being convinced that the fragmentation of consciousness is a consequence of capitalism, it is to the bourgeois literary tradition of realism, rejected by both the Futurists and Trotsky, that Lukács turns to for an answer. Instead of identifying the authors of bourgeois realist fiction as the ruling class’s ideologues—those who Marx says ‘make the formation of the illusions of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood’\textsuperscript{73}—Lukács instead sees them as providing ‘an unbiased investigation of life and the setting aside of these false traditions of modern literature’ which ‘leads easily enough to the uncovering of the true

\textsuperscript{70} Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}, 7. Note: Joseph von Fraunhofer (1787-1826) was the inventor of the spectroscope whose work led to the insight that the solar spectrum was, contrary to prior belief, discontinuous. See Isaac Asimov, \textit{Understanding Physics} (Dorchester, 1988), II.58.

\textsuperscript{71} Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}, 9. In addition to the interiority of the writers mentioned (‘the psychologists’), Lukács also rejects the limiting exteriority of literary naturalism, typified by Zola. Both the psychologist and the naturalist ‘distorts and impoverishes the portrayal of the complete human personality’ (8).

\textsuperscript{72} Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}, 7.

\textsuperscript{73} Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, \textit{The German Ideology} (New York, 1998), 68.
circumstances’. In other words, the writers of realist fiction are not the paid up propagandists of the bourgeois capitalist class, but its greatest critics.

These ‘true circumstances’ include a rift, caused by bourgeois society between the private individual and the social individual. By a supreme irony, it is the main literary tradition of that society, i.e. realistic fiction, which is capable of bridging the divide. Lukács’s faith in realism to accomplish this task is bolstered by his unwavering belief in the mimetic possibilities of the realist novel, especially in the hands of writers of the calibre of Balzac, Tolstoy, or Thomas Mann:

A great realist such as Balzac, if the intrinsic artistic development of situations and characters he has created comes into conflict with his most cherished prejudices or even his most sacred convictions, will, without an instant’s hesitation, set aside these his own prejudices and convictions and describe what he really sees, not what he would prefer to see. ... ruthlessness towards their own subjective world-picture is the hallmark of all great realists.

The realist, therefore, has both the conviction and the formal literary methods to express a true vision of the ‘distortion of objective reality ... this division of the complete human personality’. Whereas modernist writers merely mirror the fragmentation of reality, realism is able to ‘make available the reality of capitalist social relations as a totality which lies outside consciousness’. Lukács objects to the Futurist’s rejection of bourgeois literary tradition because it is that very aesthetic tradition which enables this rejection to occur at all. As David Ayers writes, ‘What is needed [according to Lukács] is not a

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74 Lukács, Studies in European Realism, 9. Surprisingly, this view of the potential of bourgeois fiction was shared by Lenin and Trotsky, despite their general opposition to bourgeois culture. See: Ayers, Literary Theory, 61.
75 Lukács, Studies in European Realism, 9.
76 Lukács, Studies in European Realism, 11.
77 Lukács, Studies in European Realism, 9.
78 Ayers, Literary Theory, 142.
79 Lukács, Studies in European Realism, 9.
rejection of the bourgeois tradition of fiction, but an immersion in it. By embracing modern literary tradition, the full political implications of bourgeois fiction can be recognized, and the grounds of future realism prepared.\textsuperscript{80}

For the purposes of this thesis, it is essential to grasp that Lukács’s position is not merely a defence of a particular literary tradition\textsuperscript{content} that he happens to prefer for aesthetic or ideological reasons. Rather he is making claims about the role of artistic traditions\textsuperscript{chain} in the Marxist view of the unfolding of history, and therefore of the relation of tradition to the literary critic, insofar as he or she is complicit with Marxist goals. Lukács writes:

Those who do not know Marxism at all or know it only superficially or at second-hand, may be surprised by the respect for the classical heritage of mankind which one finds in the really great representatives of this doctrine and by their incessant references to that classical heritage. ... \textit{It is not by chance that the great Marxists were jealous guardians of our classical heritage in their aesthetics as well as in other spheres.} ... Respect for the classical heritage of humanity in aesthetics means that the great Marxists look for the true highroad of history, the true direction of its development, the true course of the historical curve, the formula of which they know...\textsuperscript{81}

One of the major components of the ‘classical heritage’ is the great works of literature. Lukács defines those great works as those which ‘depict man as a whole in the whole of society’, and he regards this quality as being especially prevalent in writings of the ancient Greeks, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Walter Scott.\textsuperscript{82} Realist fiction by the likes of Balzac, Tolstoy, and Mann are the latest additions to this lengthy chain which indicates the true course of historical development, whose works ‘serve as signposts in the ideological battle fought for the restoration of the unbroken human personality’\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Ayers, \textit{Literary Theory}, 142–43.
\textsuperscript{81} Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}, 4–5.
\textsuperscript{82} Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}, 5.
\textsuperscript{83} Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}, 5.
Marxism then, according to Lukács, is not merely not anti-traditional; on the contrary, the role of the critic who adopts these perspectives is obligated to ‘establish a bridge back to the classics and at the same time discover new classics in the thick of the literary struggles of our own time’. The latter part of this task will be accomplished by re-evaluating the works of bourgeois realism ‘in accordance with the historical truth’, that truth being supplied by the Marxist view of history. Lukács argues that to do this the critic needs to simultaneously look at the social forces under which the author developed as a writer, and to identify the ‘real spiritual and intellectual content’ of the work. If this method is applied to work that had been previously dismissed (as, for example, Tolstoy had by some Marxists), ‘a new picture ... will emerge’. Lukács is not claiming, however, that this method of reading is his own:

This revaluation will be new only to the non-Russian reading public. In Russian literature itself the method of appreciation outlined in the preceding has an old tradition behind it: Bielinski and Herzen were the precursors of the method, the culminating points of which are marked by the names of Lenin and Stalin.

What is required, then, is the alignment of correct tradition: on the one hand, the tradition of great works; and on the other hand, a tradition of reading which is attuned to finding what is great in those works. Neither tradition is sufficient in itself, but the alignment of both results in the uncovering of connections which provides an answer to the question posed by Lukács: ‘where is the bridge between old and new culture?’

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84 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 5.
86 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 16.
87 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 16.
88 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 16.
89 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 16.
Literary tradition, so understood, extends far beyond the bounds of the merely literary. It is a guide, Lukács writes, for those who do not wish to ‘wander without a chart in the labyrinth of our time’. Because literature can play a great role in providing the signposts pointing both to the past and future of historical development, the responsibility of writers and critics is considerable. Writers, because their works comprise the tradition, and critics because, as Lukács says: ‘never before have the traditions of great realism been so deeply buried under a rubble of social and artistic prejudice’.

Lukács thus goes a considerable distance beyond Trotsky in formulating a view of tradition that is consistent with Marxist doctrine. However, he does not answer the question that was posed by Marx, Farrell, Hall and others: how can a work of literature outlive the material and social conditions which it was created in? Lukács is aware of the problem:

[Marxists] do not regard this classical heritage as a reversion to the past; it is a necessary outcome of their philosophy of history that they should regard the past as irretrievably gone and not susceptible to renewal.

It is precisely because of the changes in condition that he champions realist fiction: because of realism’s ability to show the fragmented nature of consciousness, as opposed to merely mirroring it. Realism is therefore uniquely suited to fulfilling the task of ‘[depicting] man as a whole in the whole of society’, as that task exists in the present: ‘only truly great realism can cope with such responsibilities’. But while such realism might be unique among literary traditions in depicting the true condition of man in

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93 Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*, 5, 10.
society at a given stage of historical development, Lukács never explains how the realist
tradition alone transcends the historical process which it depicts. While both Trotsky and
Lukács persuasively argue for the importance of tradition in Marxist thought, neither
provide an answer to the problem of the persistence of tradition.

4.5 Raymond Williams and Selective Tradition

In society as a whole, and in all its particular activities, the cultural tradition can be
seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors.  Raymond Williams

The work of Raymond Williams is a response to the problem of tradition outlined by
Marx, Hall, et al., as well as a synthesis between tradition understood as a selective
mechanism of culture and the more sympathetic views of tradition commonly held by
people from a less ideologically radical background. In his critical and biographical study,
Fred Inglis writes that Williams

wrestled with certain key concepts of old Marxism in order to load them with the
words which really mattered to him—meanings, values, tradition—and thereby keep
those words out of the hands and mouths of the enemy.94

The theory of tradition that Williams advanced throughout his career can be read as part
of his twin project of rescuing tradition from monopolization by conservatives and high-
culture elites, and of rescuing Marxism from a tendency to forget the ‘connection
between thought and life’.95

Williams’s theory of tradition is embedded in, and cannot be understood without
reference to, his theory of culture. In Literary Theory: A Reintroduction, David Ayers

94 Fred Inglis, Raymond Williams (London, 2005), 238.
95 Inglis, Raymond Williams, 238.
claims that, while nineteenth-century Marxism had a tremendous influence on political thought, a corresponding Marxist theory of culture ‘lagged some decades behind’. 96 It is because such a theory was lacking that, as mentioned earlier, Williams argued that Marxist thought had typically relegated the concept of tradition to the status of ‘a secondary factor’ to ‘more decisive historical processes’. 97 His attempt to provide a Marxist theory of culture, one in which tradition is not deterministically ‘diagnosed as superstructure’ but instead operates at multiple levels of culture, resulted in his theory of selective tradition. 98 While I am primarily interested in describing this theory and other aspects of Williams’s work that directly address the notion of literary tradition, it is impossible to evade his theory of culture since, for Williams, culture and tradition are not merely inseparable, they are to some extent identical. 99

The most frequently cited account of Williams’s theory of culture is contained in The Long Revolution (1961). 100 The chapter titled ‘The Analysis of Culture’ begins by sorting definitions of culture into three general kinds: the ideal, the documentary, and the social. Briefly, they are defined as follows:

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96 Ayers, Literary Theory, 57. Ayers also gives an account (57-61) of how early Marxism’s inadequate views of culture can be attributed to the ‘radical dismissal of the state of existing culture’ in Marx and Engels’ own writings.
97 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 115.
98 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 115.
99 This in no way negates what was said in Chapter 1, where I ruled out any initial identification of tradition with culture. Williams’s theory of culture is valuable precisely because it gives a privileged place to tradition, understood in terms of the three major aspects I have identified: content, chain and, most importantly, weight.
100 It is worth noting, however, that in this phase of his career Williams avoids using overtly Marxist terminology. As Stuart Williams points out, to do so at that time would be ‘really rather a dangerous thing for intellectuals to be doing’ and that subsequently, some of William’s early books are ‘somewhat obscure ... partly the result of his having to find alternative terms for Marxist terms, with which to talk about Marxist concepts’. See: Hall, Cultural Studies 1982, 21.
- **The idea**: This is where culture is defined as ‘a state or process of human perfection, in terms of absolute or universal values’.\(^{101}\)

- **The documentary**: Culture is defined as ‘the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded’.\(^{102}\)

- **The social**: Whereby culture is defined as ‘a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour’.\(^{103}\)

What makes Williams’s theory of culture distinctive (especially amongst Marxist thinkers) is that he wishes to retain all three of the above definitions. He argues that each definition has ‘a significant reference’ and that a theory of culture therefore requires all three. Moreover, he insists that any of the definitions taken by itself without reference to the other two is ‘inadequate’.\(^{104}\) Even though Williams admits that he doesn’t ‘identify the progress of human perfection with the discovery of “absolute values” in the manner of the first definition—these being the “values of a particular tradition or society”—he nevertheless regards the ideal notion of culture as essential to capturing certain cultural phenomena.\(^{105}\) If culture is understood in terms of evolution rather than of perfection, Williams argues, then

\[\text{we are able to recognize areas of fact which the other definitions might exclude. For it seems to me to be true that meanings and values, discovered in particular societies and by particular individuals, and kept alive by social inheritance and by embodiment in particular kinds of work, have proved to be universal in the sense that}\]

\[^{101}\] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 57.
\[^{102}\] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 57.
\[^{103}\] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 57.
when they are learned, in any particular situation, they can contribute radically to the
growth of man’s powers to enrich his life, to regulate his society, and to control his
environment.\textsuperscript{106}

This passage demonstrates that Williams’s theory of culture is not merely descriptive; it is
intended to assist in shaping culture in the future by offering a better understanding of
the nature and role of tradition. By including definitions of culture that he himself does
not hold to, Williams wishes to ensure that potentially useful cultural data does not slip
through the net of analysts because they are working with a different definition.

But while the \textit{ideal} definition of culture is included in his theory for pragmatic
reasons, Williams accepts the validity of the \textit{documentary} definition without
qualification. Hence, the universality he speaks of in the above quoted passage: any social
inheritance that is gleaned from an analysis of ideal culture contributes to the growing
store of culture understood in the documentary sense. According to Williams:

\begin{quote}
\textit{It seems reasonable to speak of this tradition as a general human culture, while
adding that it can only become active within particular societies, being shaped as it
does so, by more local and temporary systems.}\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

It is notable that in this passage, where he previously spoke of ‘culture’ Williams now uses
the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ as though they were synonymous (‘this tradition as a
general human culture’) and indeed, according to his account of both, they are. The
synonymy between tradition and culture can be explained by turning to Williams’s three
levels of culture (not to be confused with the three kinds of definition just discussed).

These three levels are:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{106} Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, 59.
\textsuperscript{107} Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, 59.
\end{flushright}
I. *The lived culture:* understood as that aspect of culture which is ‘only fully accessible to those living in that time and place’.

II. *The recorded culture:* this includes any aspect of culture that is recorded, ‘from art to the most everyday facts: the culture of a period.’

III. *Selective tradition:* this is what Williams regards as the link between the other two levels of culture: ‘the factor connecting lived culture and period cultures.’

As can be seen, tradition is not the whole of culture, but rather what binds the whole of culture together. The survival of culture of a particular period, in Williams’s formulation, is ‘governed, not by the period itself, but by new periods, which gradually compose a tradition.’ The third level of culture that Williams describes, *selective tradition,* is not simply those aspects of a culture that are traditional in character—i.e. those which are an inheritance from previous generations. Instead, selective tradition is the process that joins the other two levels which are also implicated in the traditional structure. The first level of culture, i.e. the lived culture of a period, survives in various recorded forms (e.g. literary works) and becomes part of the second level: recorded culture. Here, the third level of culture, selective tradition, comes into play and the process of selection occurs, working to form the lived culture of a later generation.

Williams distinguishes this lived culture, or ‘sense of life’ from the recorded culture in the context of the nineteenth-century novel:

One can say with confidence, for example, that nobody really knows the *nineteenth-century novel* nobody has read, or could have read, all its examples, over the whole range from printed volumes to penny serials. The real specialist may know

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some hundreds; the ordinary specialist somewhat less; educated readers a decreasing number: though all will have clear ideas on the subject. A selective process, of a quite drastic kind, is at once evident, and this is true of every field of activity. Equally, of course, no nineteenth-century reader would have read all the novels; no individual in the society would have known more than a selection of its facts. But everyone living in the period would have had something which ... no later individual can wholly recover: that sense of the life within which the novels were written, and which we now approach through our selection.\footnote{Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, 66. Here Williams is grappling with the same problem that Forster identified and solved with his version of the simultaneous model (see Chapter 2). Unlike Forster, whose adoption of the simultaneous model reduced the chronological plentitude of the literary past to a manageable form, Williams identifies tradition with something other than that plenitude, namely the process by which lived culture becomes recorded culture and thereby influences the lived culture anew.}

Williams insists that this separation of culture into three levels—lived, recorded, and selective tradition—is for the purpose of analysis only. While the levels give the impression of successive stages in a cultural formation, in reality the mechanism of selection is constantly at work, even during the period in which elements destined to become part of recorded culture still only exist as lived culture. Following Marx, Williams believes that a culture’s traditions ‘will always tend to correspond to its contemporary system of interests and values’.\footnote{Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, 68.} But by positing the dynamic process of selective tradition as part of his theory of culture, he offers an answer to the question posed earlier by Marx and others: why do works and forms of art live on after the material conditions and social relations that gave rise to them have disappeared?

Williams’s answer is that rather than simply surviving, the art and literature of the past is continually selected according to needs and desires formed by the local conditions of the present. Therefore, the respect accorded the epic literary form in Marx’s day was not, as Marx would have it, because ‘the historic childhood of humanity’ has an ‘eternal charm’.\footnote{Marx, \textit{Grundrisse}, iii.} Nor are works of epic poetry such as the \textit{Iliad} valued because, in Terry
Eagleton’s words, ‘we find in them an undeveloped phase of the forces which condition us’.\textsuperscript{115} According to Williams, it is just the opposite: the value the \textit{Iliad} has in the present day is directly related to the values inherent in the lived culture of now. Likewise, it was selected in all previous periods on the basis of the values of their respective lived cultures. That is not to suggest that the value of the \textit{Iliad}, according to the theory of selective tradition, is timeless and universal in such a way that it ‘speaks’ in all times and places. Rather, each time it is brought into a present context, it is altered by the structure of feeling of that moment, and this will be a factor in subsequent selection; or as Williams puts it, the tradition of a society is ‘not an absolute body of work but a continual selection and interpretation’.\textsuperscript{116}

The process of selective tradition is also why in the case of literature, according to Williams, ‘we see again and again ... reversals and re-discoveries, returns to work apparently abandoned and dead’.\textsuperscript{117} This is because those works of literature \textit{were} dead in the sense that they were largely unread for a period of time; with changes in the social relations that determine the lived culture, those dead works are suddenly brought back to life—they have renewed relevance.\textsuperscript{118} This is the reason that Williams, radical as he was in many respects, tended to advocate an outwardly conservative view as to the main task and proper function of educational institutions such as universities. They exist, he argues, primarily in order ‘to keep large areas of past culture, if not alive, at least available’.\textsuperscript{119} It is

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Eagleton, \textit{Marxism and Literary Criticism}, p. 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, p. 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, p. 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, p. 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Williams, \textit{The Long Revolution}, p. 68.
\end{itemize}
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upon the continued availability of past culture that the possibility of such rediscoveries and renewals of tradition depend.

Although Williams refined the notion of selective tradition throughout his life, the basic outline remains the same. An example of how the notion can be employed in the service of cultural analysis is found in Williams’s posthumously published critique of modernism (and by extension, postmodernism).\(^\text{120}\) Williams is not attacking the literature and other cultural productions that are labelled ‘modernist’; rather he is questioning the label itself:

‘Modernism’ as a title for a whole cultural movement and moment has ... been retrospective as a general term since the 1950s, thereby stranding the dominant version of ‘modern’ or even ‘absolute modern’ between, say, 1890 and 1940.\(^\text{121}\)

Just as he did for the 1840s in *The Long Revolution*, Williams sets out to show that, while Modernism nominally refers to a subset of cultural activity during an actual period of lived culture, it is nevertheless a construction of the present day. Furthermore, it is a construction in the service of an ideological goal:

When we note that in English at least ... ‘avant-garde’ may be indifferently used to refer to Dadaism seventy years after the event or to recent fringe theater, the confusion both willed and involuntary which leaves our own deadly separate era in anonymity becomes less an intellectual problem and more an ideological perspective. By its point of view, all that is left to us is to become post-moderns.\(^\text{122}\)

Put in terms of Williams’s theory of culture outlined above, Modernism is a category that is created via the mechanism of selective tradition to justify the adoption of a postmodern perspective, along with all that might entail. In order to do this, it is necessary that Modernism be fixed in time and associated with a particular set of ideas.

\(^{120}\) Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’
\(^{121}\) Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 32.
\(^{122}\) Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 32.
that postmodernism can then be posited as coming ‘after’. Williams argues that
‘[d]etermining the process which fixed the moment of Modernism is a matter, as so
often, of identifying the machinery of selective tradition’. This means finding out what
motivates the inclusion in the Modernist tradition of Joyce, Proust, and Kafka, but the
exclusion of Gogol, Flaubert, and Dickens. Of course, the latter writers are all from the
nineteenth century; but the question Williams is concerned to answer is how it was
determined that writers before roughly 1890 were excluded, despite having many of
features that were subsequently considered characteristic of Modernism. The selective
tradition of ‘the late born ideology of Modernism’ rules out the earlier writers because,

In doing so, it aligns the later writers ... with Freud’s discoveries and imputes to them
a view of the primacy of the subconscious or unconscious as well as ... a radical
questioning of the process of representation. The writers are applauded for their
denaturalizing of language, their break with the allegedly prior view that language is
either a clear, transparent gloss or a mirror, and for making abruptly apparent in the
very texture of their narratives the problematic status of the author and his authority.
... The self-reflexive text assumes the center of the public and aesthetic stage, and in
doing so declamatorily repudiates the fixed forms, the settled cultural authority of the
academies and their bourgeois taste, and the very necessity of market popularity.

Instead of the ‘in or about December, 1910, human character changed’ view of
Modernism which argues that Modernist writers were responding to a change in the
human condition, Williams is instead arguing that in or about December, 1910, a whole
set of conditions existed which can be retrospectively labelled ‘Modernism’ for ideological
purposes. Modernism becomes, then, a ‘highly selected version of the modern which
then offers to appropriate the whole of modernity’. By confining Modernism to a
particular point in history, the ‘marginal or rejected’ authors of the tradition are rendered

123 Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 32.
124 Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 33.
125 Woolf, ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’, 320.
126 Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 33.
impotent, and moreover everything else is either pre-modern or post-modern:

‘Modernism is confined to this highly selective field and denied to everything else in an act of pure ideology’. 127

This example given by Williams of selective tradition in action clearly shows that the normative character of tradition results from material of the past being selected by the present for present day purposes. Not only does this offer an answer to the question this chapter began with—i.e. why some traditions survive and others die out—it also offers an account of tradition from a Marxist perspective that addresses the gap in Marx’s account of literary tradition identified by Farrell, Williams, Hall, et al.

4.6 Selective Tradition Critiqued

A dominant and traditional culture functions precisely by selecting particular voices and organising them into a tradition in order to exclude others. I don’t attribute intentionality to that, but that is how tradition functions. 128  

Stuart Hall

If I now take a more critical stance towards the model of literary tradition described above, it is because, more so than the critics examined in the previous chapters, the authors examined in this chapter are making explicit ontological and epistemological claims about tradition. Whereas the simultaneous and the continuous models may be understood as offering alternative, partial descriptions of tradition as it is commonly understood (i.e., involving the transmission of some aspect of culture from one generation to the next), the view of tradition held by Raymond Williams upends such common-sense notions entirely. Via the mechanism of selection, the present culture

127 Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 34.
constructs a view of the past for reasons that are based on contemporary concerns. And whereas E.M. Forster employed the simultaneous model for pedagogical and heuristic reasons, only to discard it when it had served its purpose, Williams and those who share some version of the selective model are making claims about how tradition, including literary tradition, really is and how it should be understood. And whether it is deemed a form of false consciousness, a tool of hegemonic domination, or simply a reflection of institutional concerns, at the end of the day the selective model is a denial of the notion of literary tradition found in almost all literary criticism prior to the mid-20th century and much since. This chapter, therefore, concludes with some critical reflections (some mine, but mostly coming from other scholars) on the selective model of literary tradition.

4.6.1 Selective Tradition and Literary Value

‘Who controls the past,’ ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.’ And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. Whatever was true now was true from everlasting to everlasting. It was quite simple.299

George Orwell

Raymond Williams’s theory of culture suggests that the historical eras that are the object of study by literary scholars are themselves a product of selective tradition. Hence, while we think of the 1840s as the era of Dickens, Thackeray, and the Brontë sisters, they were also the era of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Frederick Marryat, Catherine Sinclair, Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Mrs. Marsh, Mrs. Gore, Emma Robinson, Mrs. Trollope, and others who were largely forgotten when Williams was writing in the 1960s and who, by and large, remain so today. In The Long Revolution, Williams provides several lists of

the best-selling and, among their contemporaries, most widely-known novelists of the mid-nineteenth century. Even apart from the unfamiliarity of many of the names one cannot help but notice how many of them are women. Despite this asymmetry between the 1840s and the literary tradition’s representation of the 1840s, and despite having outlined the workings of selective tradition and the special interests involved, Williams’s conclusions are relatively restrained. He insists that:

to a considerable extent it is true that the work we now know from the 1840s is the best work of the period: that repeated reading, in a variety of situations, has sifted the good from the less bad. Yet there are other factors.130

By other factors, Williams has in mind such considerations as Disraeli’s novels being read because of his later political fame, or Elizabeth Gaskell’s for their ‘documentary interest’.131 Despite these minor caveats, Williams is still able to insist that ‘Thackeray, Dickens, and Charlotte Brontë survive on strict literary merit’ and that ‘we read Tennyson and Browning for their intrinsic interest’.132 Here the early influence of F. R. Leavis on Williams’s thought is evident.133 Leavis, according to Stuart Hall, regarded it as the job of the literary critic to ‘go through the tradition and discard the poor and not so good and the flawed, and in that way, come out with the common literary tradition’.134 Even though Williams had ultimately rejected Leavis’s narrow conception of culture and literary taste, the idea that the very criteria by which works might be judged as ‘intrinsically’ interesting might itself be a result of selective tradition seems not to occur to

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130 Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 75.
133 The nature of this influence and Williams’s rebellion against it is discussed at length in the chapter ‘Mr. Raymond Williams and Dr. F. R. Leavis’ in Fred Inglis’s biography of Williams. See Inglis, *Raymond Williams*, 193–213.
him. As he writes in *The Long Revolution*: ‘the selective tradition, which we can be certain will continue to change, is in part the emphasis of works of general value’.

But how to reconcile the ‘general value’ of works with a selective model which ought, on Williams’s account, to determine that value in concert with the historically specific conditions wherein they are activated? After all, tradition on this view is defined in the documentary sense as simply *there*; an ‘archive’ of intrinsically valuable cultural achievements which are available to posterity to be sorted through and certain elements plucked out to advance the agenda of whatever special interests rule the day. And while traditions are constructed for their normative character—Williams describes them as ‘powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification’—the actual content of tradition is depicted by Williams as lacking intrinsic value. This is why in his essay ‘On High and Popular Culture’ (1974) which largely repeats the arguments about selective tradition first found in *The Long Revolution*, Williams is able to claim that high culture ‘has no specific social structure’: rather it is a selection of traditional elements, whose previous existence may have been in service of a very different social structure, which are then ‘incorporated into a particular contemporary social structure’ and ‘which they perceive as their effective cultural traditions’. This certainly seems at odds with works of literature having intrinsic interest or general value.

Williams does, in fact, go on to suggest that this separation of tradition and social structure is an abstraction; that high culture (which in his analysis roughly equates

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135 Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 76. (Emphasis added.)
to the documentary definition of culture) ‘cannot be abstracted from [its] real social existence’. Nevertheless, he wishes to maintain the distinction long enough to dispel the notion that the matter of high culture is intrinsic to a specific social class. As Williams sees it, this mistaken notion is a result of a confusion between different levels of culture: between the recorded culture, and the contemporary social structures of lived culture. Local conditions, he argues, should not be confused with the ‘high culture’ put forward to justify them. The difference between high and low culture, therefore, is one of ‘degree of access and use’, and these are ‘contingent social and historical relationships’. But despite the introduction of special interests, Williams’s theory does not really get at why some elements of recorded culture are selected to become part of lived culture. He never asks why the lived culture might find those elements valuable in the first place. While he defines selective tradition as ‘an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present’, when it comes to literary value the full implications of this definition fail to be borne out. Stuart Hall writes:

| while Williams demonstrated that the existing literary canon can itself be reread in historical and cultural terms, he was unable to reflect on the degree of selectivity implicit within it, on the ways in which it is determined by the circumstances of its production, and on the ways it too easily ignores the languages and voices which have been excluded from the traditional culture. |

In the case of the literature of the 1840s, Williams is simply willing to accept that the works of Charles Dickens have an intrinsic, or general, value; that David Copperfield really is just better than the novels of Mrs. Marsh or Catherine Sinclair for example. Whether this is actually the case is beside the point for the present purpose; what is

138 Williams, ‘On High and Popular Culture’.
139 Williams, ‘On High and Popular Culture’.
140 Williams, ‘On High and Popular Culture’.
relevant is that Williams’s judgements concerning the intrinsic value of certain books are inconsistent with his stated theoretical principles. It is left to subsequent scholars to tease out the full implications of the selective model for literary evaluation.

One such scholar is Jane Tompkins, whose book Sensational Designs (1985) mounts a direct challenge to the idea that the value placed on works of literature is independent of the tradition[chain] that preserve them as objects to be valued:

I propose here to question the accepted view that a classic work does not depend for its status on the circumstances in which it is read and will argue exactly the reverse: that a literary classic is a product of all those circumstances of which it has traditionally been supposed to be independent.\(^{143}\)

Tompkins argues that works of literature are written ‘in order to win the belief and influence the behavior of the widest possible audience’ and that novelists ‘have designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way’.\(^{143}\) To this extent she is in agreement both with the selective model which is predicated on the normative aspect of literary works, as well as more traditional notions of authorship. Tompkins takes aim at the latter, mounting a direct challenge to the romantic notion of the author, such as that expressed by William Wordsworth when he wrote: ‘every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is enjoyed; so has it been, so it will continue to be’.\(^{144}\) As Williams pointed out, some works which were well received in their day no longer seem


\(^{143}\) Tompkins, Sensational Designs, xi.

worthy of attention by readers and critics due to various perceived deficiencies. Tompkins
sets out to ‘question the perspective from which these deficiencies spring to mind’.145

In some respects, Tompkins’s critical project is not dissimilar to Williams’s. He
believes that the aim of the study of literature is to get at the underlying reasons why
contemporary culture has created a particular version of the past, thereby learning about
contemporary cultural values. Tompkins similarly believes that the study of past works of
literature is worthwhile ‘not because they manage to escape the limitations of their
particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture
thinks about itself’.146 Both critics are concerned with how literature creates values, and
how past works are selected for attention in the present in order to create a specific
version of the past which perpetuates particular values. But of the two, only Tompkins
goes further in insisting that the selective process also generates the values which make a
work worth selecting in the first place. In this respect, Tompkins’s analysis goes
considerably deeper than Williams’s: special interests do not merely determine what gets
chosen because of a greater degree of access to past culture; they also establish the values
by which something can be considered worth choosing in the first place:

[W]orks that have attained the status of classic, and are ... believed to embody
universal values, are in fact embodying only the interests of whatever parties or
factions are responsible for maintaining them in their preeminent position.147

To illustrate her thesis, Tompkins takes the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne as an
example, showing how a pattern of interests—‘publishing practices, pedagogical and
critical traditions, economic structures, social networks, and national needs’—work to

145 Tompkins, Sensational Designs, xii.
146 Tompkins, Sensational Designs, xi.
147 Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 4.
perpetuate the life of a novel like *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) while those same interests have
condemned other books like Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) to critical
oblivion. This despite both books being similarly praised at the time of publication.

Just as Williams’s selective tradition is predicated on a work having to be ‘re-selected’
according to the values of successive generations, Tompkins argues that *The Scarlet Letter*
was

| a great novel in 1850, in 1876, in 1904, in 1942, and in 1966, but each time it is great for
different reasons. In the light of this evidence, it begins to appear that what we have
been accustomed to think of as the most enduring work of American literature is
not a stable object possessing features of enduring value, but an object that—
because of its place within institutional and cultural history—has come to embody
successive concepts of literary excellence. |

The value of the text is not intrinsic to the text itself, nor is it created by the author as
Wordsworth suggested. Rather texts are ‘always registering, or promoting, or retarding
alterations in historical conditions’ and are valued accordingly. Whereas Williams posits
two types of value of a past work of literature—i.e. the intrinsic value, aesthetic or
otherwise, and the value that it has for contemporary current cultural formations, i.e. the
‘conscious [literary] movements and tendencies’—Tompkins collapses this distinction.
She argues that both types of literary value are one and the same. Even the ‘durability’ of
certain texts is bound up in contemporary values: ‘the idea of “the classic” itself is no
more universal or interest-free than the situation of those whose business it is to interpret
literary works for the general public’. 

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In her approach to the concept of literary value, the version of selective tradition (though Tompkins does not use that label) which informs Sensational Designs is arguably truer to Williams’s ideas than his own writings. Furthermore, if viewed in the context of the tradition problematic set out at the beginning of this chapter, Tompkins’s work goes further than Williams towards answering the question of how literary traditions endure; how works survive the demise of the social and material conditions in which they were created:

[There is no need to account for the succession of interpretations by positing an ahistorical, transcendent text which calls them forth. History—the succession of cultural formations, social networks, institutional priorities, and critical perspectives—does that, and the readings thus produced are not mere approximations of an ungraspable, transhistorical entity, but a series of completions, wholly adequate to the text which each interpretive framework makes available.]^{152}

In other words, not only is their apparent survival not inconsistent with historical materialism; rather, it is through a Marxist—or at the very least, marxisant—theory of culture that this survival can be best understood.

### 4.6.2 Real History and Invented Traditions

Another common criticism of the notion of selective tradition, at least as it appears in Williams’s own work, is that it seems to presuppose what Williams calls ‘real history’. For example, Williams’s account of Modernism—and, by extension, the theoretical usefulness of the notion of selective tradition—becomes problematic for many due to his claim that the negative effects of selective tradition can be seen by comparing the Modernist tradition which we have inherited, with ‘the real history’.^{153} Such a comparison

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^{152} Tompkins, Sensational Designs, 36.

^{153} Williams, ‘When Was Modernism?’, 33.
presumes that there is some record of the past that a) remains ideologically un tarnished, and b) is available for inspection and comparison with the culturally manifested selective tradition. This concept of ‘real history’ appears explicitly in Williams’s book, *The Country and the City* (1973), where he contrasts the ideas of ‘country’ and ‘city’ found in English literature to what he believes *actually* happened in the English cities and countryside, prior to being represented. Tradition on this account is a deception. As Kevin Kavanagh writes, for Williams selective tradition ‘writes out history, or rather, writes in only a very selective version’. Another of his critics, George Snedeker, claims that Williams’s analysis ‘assumes that historical writing can provide much of the factual basis for situating literary representations’ and that these histories are not treated ‘as if they also required critical analysis. Instead they were treated as providing factual evidence for judgements concerning representation and misrepresentation’. This appeal to ‘real history’, and of the apparently clean distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘perspective’, surfaces throughout much of Williams’s work as a mark of surprising, yet considerable, theoretical naïveté.

In addition to the explicit distinction between ‘real history’ and tradition in Williams’s work, there is sometimes a further implied distinction between real traditions and fake

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157 In his essay, ‘Against the New Conformists: Williams, Jameson and the Challenge of Postmodernity’ (found in Jeff Wallace, Rod Jones and Sophie Nield, eds., *Raymond Williams Now: Knowledge, Limits and the Future* (Basingstoke, 1997), 150–51.), Kevin Kavanagh attempts to see what Williams’s selective tradition would look like, ‘transformed in the postmodern, where history itself is put under erasure’. But to do so takes him away from Williams’s own writings into the work of Frederic Jameson, David Harvey, Jean Baudrillard, and others.
traditions. For example, in *Marxism and Literature* he writes that in addition to selective tradition, there also exists another sense of tradition—albeit a ‘weaker’ sense—which resembles the standard view of ‘tradition as the surviving past’ and which may serve as a ‘retreat for groups in society which have been left stranded by some particular hegemonic development’.\(^{158}\) This distinction recalls the concept of ‘invented tradition’ in historiography and, indeed, the selective model of tradition shares a great deal with this concept which was popularized by the historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger in their edited collection, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). While not an explicitly Marxist work, the collection has often been regarded as such, not least because of the involvement of one of the most famous English Marxist intellectuals, Eric Hobsbawm.\(^{159}\) In any case, the notion of invented tradition advanced in that work is often considered akin to Williams’s selective tradition, and criticisms of the former can be usefully applied to the latter.

Invented tradition, as defined by Hobsbawm,

is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.\(^{160}\)

The problem with this definition is that Hobsbawm quickly begins to drop the adjective and elide the difference between ‘invented tradition’ and ‘tradition’. This is further accomplished by distinguishing ‘tradition’ from ‘custom’, ‘convention’, ‘routine’, etc. In

\(^{158}\) Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 115–16.

\(^{159}\) It should be remembered that Hobsbawm’s co-editor, Terrence Ranger, explicitly denied being a Marxist—‘I certainly have never been a Marxist’—and one of the contributors was the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper who was ‘decidedly un-marxist’. See Diana Jester, ‘Stuff Happens, and People Make It Happen: Theory and Practice in the Work of Terence Ranger’, *History Workshop Journal*, 73/1 (2012), 203–4.

other words, anything that might potentially be labelled a tradition is banished from consideration by assigning it to one of these other categories. As the political scientist James Alexander points out,

Hobsbawm’s thesis is hard to take seriously: for either all tradition is invented, in which case the thesis tells us nothing distinctive about modern traditions; or the thesis does tell us something about modern traditions, in which case he fails to distinguish modern ‘invented’ tradition from older (uninvented) ones.161

Even more vociferous in his attack on the usefulness of Hobsbawm’s distinction between true and false tradition was Edward Shils. He pulls no punches in his ‘sociological autobiography’:

Frivolous scholars like Professors Hobsbawm and Ranger might think that tradition is an invention of the ruling and exploiting classes to hold the lower classes in subjugation; but they have never asked themselves why the ruling classes decided to ‘invent’ tradition. Did those classes change the past by accident or as a device of exploitation? It never occurred to the two distinguished professors of London and Oxford universities to ask themselves whether the ‘inventors’ of tradition had any ground for thinking that the ‘invention of the past’ was a good idea that might render the exploitative dominion more secure. But even though the inventors of the ‘invention of the past’ are fools does not exempt serious persons from trying to understand the phenomenon of the manifold relations of the present to the past.162

Unlike Tompkins and Kavanagh who accept the validity of selective tradition and merely wish to apply it more rigorously, Shils is attacking the selective model more generally. Whereas Tompkins sees the failure to address the criteria of selection as grounds for extending the selective mechanism to cover its own principles of inclusion/exclusion, Shils instead sees this as a vindication of the intrinsic values expressed in traditions. Indeed, despite his more conservative acceptance of the value of tradition, it is possible to regard Shils as going further than Williams or Tompkins in questioning the grounds of traditional authority. Unlike them, he at least asks why tradition, invented or

otherwise, ‘was a good idea’ in the first place.\textsuperscript{163} In the case of Hobsbawm and Ranger whose views are the explicit object of Shils’s attack, their use of the true/false tradition distinction leaves them open to accusations of redundancy. In the case of Williams, the fact that he makes allowances for a kind of tradition that does not conform to the selective model suggests he recognizes that the authority of selective tradition is derived from a more authentic form of tradition. If this other ‘real’ tradition did not exist, then selective tradition would have no basis for its normative claims.

* * *

Both critiques of Williams’s selective tradition presented here—his reversion to intrinsic value, his appeal to ‘real history’, and ‘real’ versus ‘fake traditions’—can be explained by his residual attachment to older notions about culture which are at odds with his own cultural theory. Critics like Tompkins, Kavanagh, et al., do not abandon his selective model so much as purify it of such attachments so as to adopt it in a more theoretically and ideologically uncontaminated form. My reasons for detailing these critiques, however, is to demonstrate what I maintained in the introduction to this thesis: that even when critics are at pains to escape conventional or theoretically naïve notions of literary tradition, those very notions tend to slip in unawares. This demonstrates the importance of understanding the various forms that literary tradition can take since, even if one accepts some variation of the selective model as a great many modern scholars do, it is useful to recognize when other, perhaps unwelcome, notions of tradition begin to

\textsuperscript{163} Shils, \textit{Sociological Autobiography}, 130.
emerge within that framework.\textsuperscript{164} Conversely, those who hold to a different model of tradition would do well to recognize when the selective model underpins a rival critique, and to be familiar with the ideas that underpin that model.\textsuperscript{165}

4.7 Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, despite the potential contradictions outlined above, the selective model of tradition outlined by Raymond Williams and developed by Jane Tompkins and others offers a credible answer to the problem of the persistence of past traditions that has existed since Marx first articulated it in the Grundrisse. On the other hand, even though the selective model is still capable of being analysed in terms of the analytical framework outlined in Chapter 1, it raises questions of compatibility between it and other models. In the previous chapters, we saw that in the work of many critic there is no intrinsic incompatibility between the simultaneous and the continuous models. The selective model of tradition is compatible with the simultaneous model to the extent that they both share the characteristic of regarding tradition synchronically. For the simultaneous model, tradition, insofar as it exists at a given moment in time for somebody, is part of that individual’s present. The same goes if tradition is considered as the possession of a group: the ‘past’, insofar as it exists to those in the present, is always contained in the present. It is this quality that led me, in the Introduction, to posit (before rejecting) the possibility of a structuralist theory of literary tradition. As the neo-

\textsuperscript{164} The selective model is evident, for example, in the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms which defines traditions as ‘represented as having been “handed down” from past to present’ and which are ‘usually made in order to lend authority to present critical arguments’. See: Balick, Dictionary, 337.

\textsuperscript{165} This theme is taken up in the conclusions of this thesis.
structuralist anthropologist Edmund Leach argues, ‘[f]or the thinking human being all recollected experience is contemporaneous; as in myth, all events are part of a single and synchronous totality’. These qualities are also true of the selective model of tradition; the elements of past culture which make up a tradition are selected from the recorded level of culture which consists of those aspects of the past which are available in the present. Thus, while the simultaneous model is exclusively synchronic, the selective model seeks to explain how that synchronic state came to exist in configuration that it does. Whereas the simultaneous model emphasises the relational dynamics between the elements of a tradition, the selective model emphasizes the historical processes that led to the relational possibilities of the present.

Understood so, the simultaneous and selective model, while held by scholars with very different ideologies and critical projects, could be conceived as revealing different aspects of the same phenomenon. Furthermore, given this relationship between the simultaneous and the selective models, it might be thought that the selective tradition could act as the link between the simultaneous and continuous models, much as it does in Williams’s theory of culture between the lived and recorded levels of tradition. However, as the next chapter shall demonstrate, an entirely different theoretical approach is necessary to make this connection between selectivity and continuity and the model of tradition that results exceeds the bounds of both Williams’s theory of culture and the analytical framework adopted so far in this thesis.

Chapter Five
Being and Tradition: The Hermeneutic Turn in Literary Tradition

Tradition is as potent an influence upon how we read as it is in determining what is written.¹

Raymond Tallis

5.1 The Two Traditions of Tradition

The previous three chapters have examined the notion of literary tradition using the categories provided by the analytical model described in Chapter 1. The aim of this meta-model is to provide a three-dimensional analytic framework which will enable us to see the differences and similarities between diverse notions of literary tradition according to three major characteristics: the content of tradition, tradition’s real or perceived chain of transmission, and the normative effects that traditions have (respectively content, chain, and weight). While the models of tradition examined so far exhibit many variations—some of them irreconcilable due to the theoretical or ideological stances of their authors—they can nevertheless be understood and analysed according to the shared content/chain/weight framework. Even in the case of scholars like Jane Tompkins who effectively consign most traditions to the status of useful fictions invented to preserve class or gender privilege, the major terms in which those fictions may be understood and

¹ Raymond Tallis, Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory (Basingstoke, 1988), 29.
analysed are the same as when dealing with less overtly ‘suspicious’ models of tradition such as those of T. S. Eliot or Ernst Robert Curtius.

In this chapter, however, the framework outlined in chapter 1 will reveal its limitations. The authors employing the models of tradition examined herein (including Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans Robert Jauss, and Charles Martindale) belong to, or are influenced by, the field of philosophical hermeneutics. They do not conceive of tradition, literary or otherwise, in a manner that straightforwardly translates onto the same plane of discourse as the models in the previous chapters. This is because, for these scholars, tradition is not something that merely affects interpretation. Rather, it is bound up in the very act of interpretation in a way that is not easily amenable to the sort of analytical separation of components presupposed by the content/chain/weight framework. Furthermore, since, following Heidegger, the figures just mentioned understand interpretation in ontological terms—i.e. as an inextricable part of being itself—tradition’s ontological priority is likewise promoted.

It might be argued that I am committing a category error in comparing the understanding of tradition found in Heidegger and his philosophical descendants with those examined in the previous chapters of this thesis. After all, these two branches of thinking about tradition diverge to such an extent that they often share little more than the word ‘tradition’ that signifies them (and, even then, the common signifier is often only a consequence of English translation). However, the prevalence of ideas drawn from 20th century philosophical hermeneutics—especially from the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer—in debates surrounding the ontology of texts, interpretation, and literary
value, has meant that these two diverse notions of tradition have exerted a simultaneous influence on the field of literary studies that is often not easy to disentangle.

Moreover, all the models previously examined have hermeneutic implications, whether or not these are addressed by the scholars and critics who employ them. As I discussed in chapter 2, in relation to the simultaneous model, T. S. Eliot argued that no author ‘has his complete meaning alone’, but rather that such meaning must be grasped through ‘contrast and comparison, among the dead’. Relatively, in the last chapter I considered Jane Tompkins’s idea that the very standards by which a text is evaluated are a product of selective tradition. And in the Introduction, I stipulated the question of tradition’s practical implications on the interpretation of texts as a guiding consideration in this thesis. The more we know about how literary tradition affects the interpretation of texts, the greater the possibility of understanding how the different models of tradition employed by literary critics shape their critical practice. It is fitting, therefore, having surveyed models of tradition that emphasize content, transmission, and normativity, to turn now to some more hermeneutically oriented accounts of literary tradition in which the question of interpretation comes to the fore of my enquiry.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the implications of tradition from a hermeneutic standpoint, focussing on the work of classicists and biblical scholars. After having drawn out the key terms of the enquiry, I will examine the two figures that I regard as foundational for thinking about tradition from a hermeneutical standpoint: the philosopher Martin Heidegger and his disciple Hans-Georg Gadamer. By examining

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Heidegger’s work, the basic outlines of a hermeneutic model of tradition are established: a model of what tradition would have to be like to facilitate textual interpretation and decide between competing interpretations of a text.

When it comes to describing Gadamer’s views on tradition, the task is more difficult. This is because his views on tradition are difficult to pin down. They consist of fragmentary, often seemingly contradictory quotes, spread across multiple books and interviews. I have chosen, therefore, to approach his ideas through the work of one of his critics: the American literary theorist E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch’s attack on Gadamer’s account of textual interpretation is relevant to my enquiry because it is premised on the charge that Gadamer relies on a notion of tradition that is incompatible with his radically historicist stance. After closely scrutinizing both sides of this controversy, I conclude that the meta-model of tradition that I have employed thus far might still prove useful in considering the work of even those critics and scholars who, on the face of it, reject the models of tradition associated with it.

5.2 The Barnacles of Tradition

Once a historical context is consumed by memory, it contains secrets that elude excavation.³

Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh

Tradition has been a central concept in hermeneutic thought since at least the 16th century, when Lutherans such as Matthias Flacius (1520-1575) opposed the Catholic doctrine of tradition which insisted that the words of the Bible itself were insufficient for

producing a valid interpretation. The latter view was propounded by, among others, Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) who insisted that tradition, far from distorting the Bible’s original meaning, is another form of the word of God. Moreover, tradition, so conceived, is not merely an adjunct to God’s written word, the Scriptures, but necessary for the latter’s construal:

For one must note that there are two things in Scripture, written words and the sense contained in them; the words are as it were the scabbard, the sense itself is the sword of the spirit. Of these two the first is possessed by all; for whoever knows letters can read the Scriptures; but the second is not possessed by all, nor can we in many places be certain about the second unless tradition is added.5

Saint Bellarmine understood tradition as something that could be regarded separately both from the text and the interpreter. It is something that is ‘added’ to a text by an interpreter who possesses it, in order that words may be endowed with sense. By ‘tradition’, Bellarmine and others engaged in these debates meant something quite specific. As defined by the Council of Trent (1545-63), tradition includes ‘both the Scriptures and the unwritten oral traditions’ as well as writings by the Church fathers and various forms of ‘historic proof of practices of the Church as a continuing stream from its founding to the present’.6

The familiar river-of-time metaphor (‘continuing stream’) signals that we are dealing with a theological variation on the continuous model of tradition, as described in chapter 3. However, whereas the scholars discussed in that chapter invoked tradition" as a way of establishing the unity and order of a large body of temporal phenomena, Saint

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Bellarmine instead is concerned with tradition’s role in achieving a correct interpretation of the scriptures.

In the context of modern literary scholarship, the influence of hermeneutics—along with a hermeneutically informed view of tradition—on literary criticism can be seen in Charles Martindale’s book, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (1993). This work is a manifesto arguing for the introduction of modern literary and critical theory—especially reception-theory informed by 20th century philosophical hermeneutics—into classical scholarship. Martindale is especially concerned with the historical position of the reader, and the interpretive implications of that position:

> *Meaning, could we say, is always realized at the point of reception; if so, we cannot assume that an ‘intention’ is effectively communicated within any text. And also, it appears, a writer can never control the reception of his or her work, with respect either to the character of the readership or to any use which is made of that work.*

Martindale is chiefly reacting against the notion of a ‘reified text-in-itself’ with a fixed meaning—determined by the intentions of an author—that is unaltered either by the passage of time or by being placed into new contexts unforeseen at the time of writing.

Regarding this conception of the text-in-itself as an outdated myth, he characterizes it in suitably fabulous terms:

> Produced in an apocalyptic moment of creation (like the emergence of Athena out of the head of Zeus) the text comes forth fully armed with the intentions of its creator, and available and present to at least the wiser readers of the day. Unfortunately, during the intervening years, it suffers depredations from the follies, incompetences and sheer ignorance and naivety of our nearer ancestors (particularly those

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unfortunate enough to live in the Middle Ages, as we quaintly call the thousand years from St Augustine to Dante).\textsuperscript{9}

This view does acknowledge that texts are historically conditioned—i.e. that they are produced in a particular historical context and rely on the traditions, conventions, and beliefs of that particular historical moment. Hence, their availability to ‘the wiser readers of the day’. As time passes, however, the changing historical context causes texts to become distorted and therefore unavailable to readers, regardless of their wisdom.

Martindale charges that this simplistic conception of the nature of texts is held by many classical scholars whose philological approaches naively promise to ‘roll back the years and reveal to us the original in all its gleaming, pristine, purity’.\textsuperscript{10} The example he uses is the classicist Richard Jenkyns, whose paper, ‘Virgil and Arcadia’, explicitly addresses the problem posed to the interpretation of an ancient text by literary tradition\textsuperscript{\textit{chaining}}. The tradition in question is the ‘tradition of pastoral’, and Jenkyns is concerned with how it affects the interpretation of Virgil’s \textit{Eclogues}.\textsuperscript{11} ‘The growth of the later pastoral tradition,’ Jenkyns writes, ‘meant that many things were attributed to Virgil which are not in Virgil’.\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{Eclogues} have become ‘encrusted by the barnacles of later

\textsuperscript{9} Martindale, \textit{Redeeming the Text}. 4. Martindale’s use of theological imagery, evoking a ‘god-like’ conception of authors recalls that conjured by Roland Barthes in his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ in which he writes ‘We know now that the text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’. In this thesis I follow the example of Raymond Tallis in judging both godlike formulations of an author to be strawmen created for rhetorical effect and endowed with magical qualities that even the most ardently intentionalistic critic would scoff at. See: Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in \textit{Image-Music-Text}, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York, 1978), 146; Raymond Tallis, \textit{In Defence of Realism} (Lincoln, 1988), 72–74.

\textsuperscript{10} Martindale, \textit{Redeeming the Text}. 4. As if to prove that he himself has not fallen victim to a comparable naivety, Martindale asks: ‘I exaggerate, of course, but not much (and will my irony help, or hinder, the reception I hope for, but cannot control?)’ (4). However, if Martindale truly has as little control over his own text’s reception as he claims, one might ask what he hoped to achieve by his clarification?


\textsuperscript{12} Jenkyns, ‘Virgil and Arcadia’, 26.
Jenkyns argues that the very literary tradition fostered by Virgil’s *Eclogues* has in its turn obscured Virgil’s original intentions in that work. Reading an earlier pastoral work from the standpoint of the inheritors of the pastoral literary tradition distorts the text’s meaning: the layers of tradition that have accreted since Virgil’s time create a misleading context against which the *Eclogues* are incorrectly interpreted. The ‘true shape’ of the *Virgil’s* work can only be made apparent through an act of interpretive archaeology whereby the tradition in which the text was produced is unearthed, and the text-in-itself is thereby made present.

It is the twin assumptions by Jenkyns—namely the notion that a text has a true shape, and that the text seen in this aspect represents the text-in-itself—that Martindale objects to in *Redeeming the Text*. According to Martindale, there is nothing that can be definitely said to be in Virgil’s *Eclogues*. If meaning only ever exists at the point of reception, then there is no text-in-itself hidden under the barnacles of subsequent literary tradition, waiting for a Jenkyns to come along armed with the requisite philological knowledge to scrape them off. To the contrary, rather than encrusting some original textual object, the barnacles—literary tradition by another name—constitute the text for the reader through a process of continuous re-contextualization. In this, Martindale’s critique is influenced by Jaques Derrida. He writes:

> Texts, we can say (following Derrida), have a capacity for regrafting themselves within new contexts, and thus remaining readable. [...] In this way texts ensure their ‘iterability’ (though this formulation erases the agency involved) in a process of ‘dissemination’. In light of this, instead of treating texts as having more or less fixed

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14 For the broader debate about what can be said to be ‘in’ a text, see chapter 4 (‘Meaning’) in: Ika Willis, *Reception* (London, 2018), 142–65.
meanings located firmly within partly recoverable backgrounds, which help to explain them, we could negotiate the possible connections which can be constructed between texts.  

This instability of textual meaning is not, according to Martindale, merely a by-product of the passing of time, but rather a feature of all texts, regardless of historical distance:

“The process of recontextualization was already in motion with the text’s first receivers, so that there never was an obvious fixed original context.”

The interpretive issues posed by Jenkyns (and reframed by Martindale) have also been recognized by biblical scholars, especially in respect to the parables of the New Testament. In his work, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (1980), the theologian and hermeneutics scholar Anthony C. Thiselton explores the problems that the biblical tradition poses for the modern reader of the

‘Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector’ related by Jesus in Luke 18:9-14:

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’

13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Thiselton, citing his agreement with the progressive theologian Walter Wink, states that ‘in terms of the horizons of hearers who already stand at the end of a long Christian

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15 Martindale, *Redeeming the Text*, 16.
16 Martindale, *Redeeming the Text*, 17.
17 Luke 18:9-14 from the NRSV.
tradition, the impact of [the ‘Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector’] is quite different from what it was in its original setting.\textsuperscript{18} Another New Testament scholar, John D. Crossan, writes:

> There is an immediate problem. Parables are supposed to overturn one’s structure of expectation and therein and thereby to threaten the security of one’s man-made world. Such terms as ‘Pharisee’ and ‘Publican’ (or toll collector) evoke no immediate visual reaction or expectation from a modern reader. In fact ... the former have become almost stereotyped villains rather than the revered moral leaders they were at the time of Jesus. So our structure of expectation is not that of the original hearer of the parable.\textsuperscript{19}

According to Wink, Crossan, and Thiselton, tradition at the very least alters the significance of the parable for a later reader. But the problems raised do not merely affect the parable’s pedagogical function. If, as Crossan says, our ‘structure of expectation’ has changed along with the biblical tradition\textsuperscript{(content)}, then our generic conception has fundamentally altered and therefore our interpretation of the text with it. This reveals the second part of the modern hermeneutic question: its two-sided nature. ‘The modern reader’, writes Thiselton, ‘is also conditioned by his own place in history and tradition’.\textsuperscript{20}

Tradition\textsuperscript{(chain)} has not served merely to make the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector obscure or unintelligible, but rather has undermined its subversive function entirely:

> No one today wishes to be cast in the role of a Pharisee. Hence ... the parable is usually “understood” as a reassuring moral tale which condemns a kind of Pharisaism that everyone already wishes to avoid. A parable which originally had the function of unsettling the hearer and overturning his values now serves to confirm him in the values which he already has.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{19} Quoted in: Thiselton, The Two Horizons, 15.

\textsuperscript{20} Thiselton, The Two Horizons, 15.

\textsuperscript{21} Thiselton, The Two Horizons, 15.

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This reinforces Charles Martindale’s claim, mentioned earlier, that meaning ‘is always realized at the point of reception’, and that ‘we cannot assume that an “intention” is effectively communicated within any text’. On the other hand, the fact that Wink, Crossan, and Thiselton are apparently able to recognize the original intentions of the parable, and to draw attention to the failure of many contemporary readers to realize those intentions in their reading, gives some hope for Jenkyns’s project of scraping away the ‘barnacles’ of tradition to reveal the true shape of the text-in-itself.

However, both Jenkyns’s ‘barnacles’ metaphor and Martindale’s critique of it share an underlying assumption that tradition is responsible for a text’s changing meaning. Whether or not the possibility of an originary textual meaning is granted, the idea that a text’s meaning changes in—or in response to—subsequent tradition, however it is conceived, is accepted as a given by both scholars. Martindale, following Derrida, understands texts as undergoing a process of ‘dissemination’, producing a plurality of readings which results from the ‘structural undecidability’ of any text. Jenkyns, on the other hand, accepts that there is a correct meaning, but that it has been obscured by subsequent tradition, even if that tradition is regarded as sharing an identity with the one that produced the text in question. The disagreement between Jenkyns and Martindale is therefore not over tradition’s tendency to distort or modify a text’s meaning, but instead whether or not tradition can be ‘peeled back’ in order to recover an earlier, or original, meaning. Unlike Saint Bellarmine, who saw tradition as essential to recovering the true

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22 Martindale, Redeeming the Text, 3.
meaning of a text (in his case, the Holy scriptures), modern scholars regard tradition itself as the barrier to achieving a definitive interpretation of a text.

Furthermore, Martindale insists that Jenkyns’s distinction between the ‘barnacled text’ and the text-in-itself is a false one which would ‘only hold absolutely firm if we posit a “metaphysics” of the text and a meaning immanent within the signs regardless of any readerly activity’.\(^\text{24}\) In this claim, Martindale is influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer who speaks of ‘the naivété of a faith in method, into which anyone falls, who thinks that in understanding one is able to leave oneself out’.\(^\text{25}\) The next sections will expand on this idea, examining the possibility that not only should ‘understanding’ be viewed as part of a broader ontology of being, but that tradition should also.

5.3 **Philosophical Hermeneutics and Tradition**

5.3.1 **Martin Heidegger: Being, Time, and Tradition**

For our purposes, the most important hermeneutic re-imagining of tradition in a secular context occurred in 1927 with the publication of Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* which, while not directly related to literary interpretation, informs a great deal of the literary hermeneutics that subsequently emerged. Unfortunately, as is often the case with concepts in Heidegger’s writings, his views on tradition are difficult to disentangle from the idiosyncratic use of the German language in which he expresses them. Things are further complicated by the fact that he uses several words that could be translated as

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\(^\text{24}\) Martindale, *Redeeming the Text*, 5.

‘tradition’ (and, indeed, often are). One of them, traditionell, has the same Latin root as
the English ‘tradition’ and preserves the same connotations of handing down/handling
over.\textsuperscript{26} Additionally, there are the two terms, überliefert, meaning ‘handed down’, and
überkommen, meaning ‘having come down’.\textsuperscript{27} To add to the confusion, Heidegger also
refers to Erbe and Erbschaft which is perhaps closer to the English ‘heritage’.\textsuperscript{28} While
these terms are to some degree employed interchangeably in Being and Time, Michael
Inwood does note certain tendencies in Heidegger’s usage:

Often, though not invariably, Überlieferung is more favourable than Tradition.
Tradition is more likely to obscure and is associated with Destruktion; Überlieferung
is more likely to provide possibilities and is associated with repetition. Das
Überlieferte, ‘what is handed down to us’, is one of the meanings of geschichtlich,
‘historical’. Heidegger tends to reserve traditionell for philosophical doctrines he
dislikes: the ‘traditional concept of time’, the ‘traditional concept of truth’, and
‘traditional ontology’. But the good and bad sides of tradition cannot easily be
disentangled.\textsuperscript{29}

Moving beyond Heidegger’s individual lexicon, we may also note that Heidegger’s
conceptualization of tradition is very different from any scholar so far examined in this
thesis. Literary theorist Claus Uhlig writes that ‘every concept of tradition is a function of
a philosophy of history’.\textsuperscript{30} In Being and Time Heidegger goes further, theorizing
tradition as a function, not of history, but of time. And since, for Heidegger, being and
time ‘are as one’, tradition is also part of the fundamental structure of being.\textsuperscript{31}

\textsuperscript{26} Michael Inwood, A Heidegger Dictionary (Oxford, 1999), 225.
\textsuperscript{27} Inwood, A Heidegger Dictionary, 225. Note: the shades of different meaning between these terms might come
in very useful in helping make the distinction between what, in the Introduction, I referred to as the difference
between the objective and the phenomenological view of tradition in the continuous model. Unfortunately, in
the context of reading Heidegger in translation, they mostly add to the difficulties of interpretation.
\textsuperscript{28} Inwood, A Heidegger Dictionary, 225.
\textsuperscript{29} Inwood, A Heidegger Dictionary, 225.
\textsuperscript{31} George Steiner, Martin Heidegger (Chicago, 1989), iii.
In order to grasp what Heidegger means by tradition, it is necessary to recall the basic relationship (or identity) he posits between being (Dasein) and time:

In its factual being Da-sein always is and “what” it already was. Whether explicitly or not, it is its past. It is its own past not only in such a way that its past, as it were, pushes itself along “behind” it, and that it possesses what is past as a property that is still objectively present and at times has an effect on it. Da-sein “is” its past in the manner of its being which, roughly expressed, on each occasion “occurs” out of its future.32

Da-sein’s ‘factual being’ is what Heideggerian scholars Frank Schalow & Alfred Denker refer to as the ‘formal indication of being—there that is already charged with its hermeneutic expression in structures that we can understand’.33 Our experience of this facticity, according to Schalow and Denker, is what gives our existence its ‘immanent historicality’.34 And the historicality of being can also be conceived as the traditionality of being; the philosopher John Richardson writes that Dasein’s historicality is ‘the way we have been thrown into a tradition that has come down to us “historically”, as a heritage’.35 Heidegger himself writes:

In its manner of existing at any given time, and accordingly also with the understanding of being that belongs to it, Da-See[n] grows into a customary [überkommene] interpretation of itself and grows up in that interpretation. It understands itself in terms of this interpretation at first, and within a certain range, constantly. This understanding discloses the possibilities of its being and regulates them. Its own past—and that always means that of its “generation”—does not follow after Da-sein but rather always goes ahead of it.36

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33 Frank Schalow and Alfred Denker, Historical Dictionary of Heidegger’s Philosophy, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, No. 107, 2nd edn (Lanham, 2010), iii.
34 Schalow and Denker, Historical Dictionary, 138.
36 Heidegger, Being and Time, 19. Note: Here and below I have placed the German translation of certain words related to tradition in brackets. See: Martin Heidegger, Sein Und Zeit (Tübingen, 1967).
In this passage, Heidegger combines his hermeneutic phenomenology of existence with the notion of tradition—Dasein’s ‘customary [überkommene] interpretation of itself’.\(^{37}\) Tradition understood in these terms not only determines what Dasein is, but also ‘discloses the possibilities of its being and regulates them’ (a feature of Heideggerian tradition that, we shall see, has important implications in the work of Gadamer).\(^{38}\) Tradition is, therefore, another aspect of understanding (Verstehen) which in Being and Time refers to ‘the power to grasp one’s own possibilities for being, within the context of the lifeworld in which one exists’.\(^{39}\) Since Heidegger promotes understanding from its status as a ‘derivative phenomenon to the central feature, the keystone, of human experience’, tradition is likewise promoted.\(^{40}\) This is a very far cry from the models of tradition found in earlier chapters in which tradition needs to be sought out, grasped, and passed on in a deliberate manner, and in which tradition is distinct from the subject affected by it. In contrast, Heidegger regards tradition as part of the structure of interpretation, time, and being itself.

However, the fact that we have been ‘thrown’ \textit{into} a tradition, as John Richardson states, is not to say that we cannot take up tradition as an object of inquiry. Heidegger writes,

\begin{quote}
This elemental historicity of Dasein may remain hidden from Dasein itself. But there is a way by which it can be discovered and given proper attention. Dasein can discover tradition, preserve it, and study it explicitly. \textbf{The study of tradition [Die}
\end{quote}

\(^{37}\) This passage is drawn from Joan Stambaugh’s translation of Being and Time (1996). John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson’s translation (1962) uses the word “tradition” instead of “customary”, and the word used in the original German text is ‘überkommene’. See Martin Heidegger, \textit{Sein und Zeit} (Tübingen, 1967), 20.

\(^{38}\) Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 19.


Entdeckung von Tradition] and the disclosure of what it ‘transmits’ and how this is transmitted, can be taken hold of as a task in its own right. In this way Dasein brings itself into the kind of Being which consists in historiological inquiry and research.\footnote{Martin Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, trans. by John Macquarrie Robinson and Edward Robinson (San Francisco, 1962), 41.}

Tradition, as an aspect of the ‘elemental historicity of Dasein’, is therefore not something which can be grasped as something distinct from Dasein. Tradition is not \textit{in the world} in such a way that it can be ‘rationally analysed, set over against a contemplative subject: it is never something we can get outside of and stand over against’.\footnote{Terry Eagleton, \textit{Literary Theory: An Introduction} (Malden, 2008), 54.} But it can, as Heidegger states, be ‘taken hold of as a task in its own right’.\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 41.} What tradition looks like when taken up in this manner perhaps leads us back to the models of tradition examined in previous chapters. In their \textit{Historical Dictionary of Heidegger’s Philosophy}, Schalow and Denker suggest that ‘In a larger sense tradition ... is our culture with the distinct ways of revealing the being of entities and disclosing our being-there’.\footnote{Schalow and Denker, \textit{Historical Dictionary}, 275.} They also add that ‘In a more restricted sense, tradition ... refers to the sayings of a people that have been handed down from generation to generation’.\footnote{Schalow and Denker, \textit{Historical Dictionary}, 275–76.} By ‘sayings’, Schalow and Denker are apparently not referring to the Heideggerian notion \textit{sagen}, but rather,

...the cultural tradition of a people that has been handed down in its sayings. The sayings of a people are its proverbs, anecdotes, and oral traditions, on the one hand, and the tacit interpretations embodied in its customs, rituals, and festivals, on the other. Poetry and thinking draw on this background and transform the sayings into a configuration that articulates for a people its understanding of being.\footnote{Schalow and Denker, \textit{Historical Dictionary}, 247–48.}

Put in these terms, for the purposes of analysing tradition in the context of literary scholarship it might seem that we can take Heidegger’s ontological formulation of

\footnote{Martin Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, trans. by John Macquarrie Robinson and Edward Robinson (San Francisco, 1962), 41.}
tradition for what it is worth, and then simply return to kinds of model examined in the
previous chapters. After all, they can be understood as ‘the distinct ways of revealing the
being of entities and disclosing our being-there’ without posing any threat to alternative
formulations as models or theories.\(^{47}\) As the next section shows, however, Heidegger’s
work has been profoundly influential on some literary scholars who, rather than drawing
a distinction between the work of literary scholarship and the kind of philosophical
reflections found in *Being and Time*, have instead extended Heidegger’s ontological
notion of understanding to their own critical practice. The result of their work (especially
that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and those influenced by his work) brings new light to the
problems raised in section 5.2, concerning the stability of textual meaning over time and
against changing historical traditions.

### 5.3.2 Hans-Georg Gadamer: Temporal Distance and Tradition

> A placement between strangeness and familiarity exists between the historically
intended, distanced objectivity of the heritage and our belongingness to a tradition.

*In this ‘between’ is the true place of hermeneutics.*\(^{48}\)

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Hans-Georg Gadamer

For Heidegger, at least in the earlier phase of his career as represented by *Being and
Time*, ‘hermeneutics’ meant more than a methodology for the interpretation of texts.
Rather it was an inquiry into being itself. As the hermeneutics scholar Richard Palmer
puts it: ‘Heidegger used the word “hermeneutics” in the context of his larger quest for a
more “fundamental” ontology’.\(^{49}\) However, in this thesis I am concerned with the
narrower, more ‘regional’ question of the ways Heidegger’s thinking has affected, and

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\(^{47}\) Schalow and Denker, *Historical Dictionary*, 275.


continues to affect, literary critics and theorists, especially regarding the way they conceive of tradition. Richard Palmer alludes to this influence when he writes that ‘[h]ermeneutics as methodology of interpretation for the humanities is a derivative form resting on and growing out of the primary ontological function of interpreting. It is a regional ontology which must be based on the more fundamental ontology’.\(^{30}\) This situating of hermeneutics understood as an interpretive methodology within a larger, indeed all-encompassing, hermeneutic ontology is in a large part due to Heidegger’s influence.

If it is to Heidegger’s work that many scholars look to provide a fundamental ontology of interpretation, then the most influential figure to build a ‘regional ontology’ upon it is Hans-Georg Gadamer, most influentially in *Truth and Method* (1960). E. D. Hirsch, one of Gadamer’s most effective critics (and whose critique of Gadamer’s project will concern us in next section) describes *Truth and Method* as ‘the most substantial treatise on hermeneutic theory that has come from Germany in [the twentieth-century]’.\(^{31}\) But if *Truth and Method* is more explicitly a work of textual hermeneutics than Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, it is to the latter work that it is indebted for its philosophical foundation. Gadamer describes his connection to Heidegger in *Truth and Method* as follows:

Heidegger entered into the problems of historical hermeneutics and critique only in order to explicate the fore-structure of understanding for the purposes of ontology. Our question, by contrast, is how hermeneutics once freed from the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity, can do justice to the historicity of understanding.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{30}\) Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 130.


But, as I will describe below (section 5.3.3), Gadamer’s unwillingness to abandon the search for objectivity in interpretation led to the accusation that he had introduced a strikingly non-Heideggerian understanding of tradition into his interpretive scheme, thereby threatening the foundations of his hermeneutic project.

A concern for the understanding of texts, while not Gadamer’s sole theme, is central to *Truth and Method*. In his insistence, following Heidegger, that understanding must gaze ‘on the things themselves’, Gadamer adds that in the case of literary criticism ‘the things themselves’ are ‘meaningful texts’. Subsequently, Gadamer’s ideas have found their way, directly and indirectly, into much literary criticism—for example, Charles Martindale’s *Redeeming the Text* which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Martindale’s statement that meaning ‘is always realized at the point of reception’ is a straightforward variation of what E. D. Hirsch contends is Gadamer’s belief that ‘every putative re-cognition of a text is really a new and different cognition in which the interpreter’s own historicity is the specifica differentia’. Gadamer’s ideas have also exerted a strong influence on Reception theory more generally, particularly through the work of Gadamer’s student Hans Robert Jauss. This is clearly evident in Jauss’s most famous piece, ‘Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory’ (1970), in which he cites Gadamer ‘whose critique of historical objectivism I am assuming here’, especially the latter’s insistence on ‘the reality of history in understanding itself’.

54 Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 245.
The influence of Gadamer is also to be seen in biblical hermeneutics, especially the concept of his work which is most relevant to the issue of tradition: temporal distance. In section 5.2 of this chapter I outlined the problem which temporal distance creates for the interpretation of the ‘Parable of the Pharisee’ in the Gospel of Luke. Those encountering the parable now stand at the end of a long tradition[chain] which renders the original point of the parable difficult to grasp for modern readers. It was only natural then that biblical scholars would embrace Gadamer, since his hermeneutics is especially responsive to the fact that, as Anthony Thiselton writes, ‘today we can no longer talk innocently about understanding an ancient text, or a past tradition, in isolation from a responsible consideration of the philosophical problems that have emerged with the rise of historical consciousness’.[56] Or, as Thiselton goes on to say, using terms more familiar to this thesis, Gadamer ‘asks questions about the way in which both the interpreter and the text stand in given historical traditions’.[57] Furthermore, Gadamer reconceived the historical situatedness of interpretation in terms which makes the past, if not ‘knowable in itself’, then at least able to be brought partially within the ‘horizon of the interpreter’.[58]

Gadamer’s major statements about tradition in Truth and Method occur in the section titled ‘The rehabilitation of authority and tradition’.59 Here, he argues that ‘we have to recognize the element of tradition in historical research and inquire into its hermeneutical productivity’.60 He then goes on to give an example of a tradition—the

‘classical’—which he regards as ‘timeless’ because it ‘it overcomes historical distance by itself’.61 It does so, Gadamer writes, by virtue of being a tradition: ‘The general nature of tradition is such that only the part of the past that is not past offers the possibility of historical knowledge’.62 The promise of making tradition hermeneutically productive, of making Richard Jenkyns’s ‘barnacles of later tradition’ something which not only do not need to be ‘scraped away’, but which can assist in interpretation, is understandably a major part of the appeal of Gadamer’s ideas to scholars working with old texts.63

However, it is not the hermeneutically productive aspect of tradition that I intend to focus on, but rather the more conventional appeal to the concept of tradition by Gadamer in the face of the indeterminacy of meaning, an indeterminacy which results from his efforts to make historical distance a positive virtue in the first place.

5.3.3 E.D. Hirsch’s Critique of Tradition in Truth and Method

It is a notable characteristic of theories which reject the prerogative of the author that they attempt illicitly to convert neutral descriptive concepts into normative ones.64

E.D. HIRSCH

The most substantial critique of Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory remains the work of the Italian jurist and philosopher, Emilio Betti. His work, however, remains largely

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61 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 301.
62 Gadamer, Truth and Method, 301.
63 In this chapter, apart from Gadamer’s own writings and E.D. Hirsch’s critique of them, I have mostly relied on Richard Palmer’s Hermeneutics (1969) and David Couzens Hoy’s The Critical Circle (1978). However, both Palmer and Hoy give much more generous interpretations of Gadamer than the one in this chapter which is largely informed by Hirsch’s critique of Gadamer in Validity in Interpretation (1967). This is because both Hirsch and I are predominantly interested in Gadamer’s use of the concept of tradition, something which, as I will show, is controversial.
64 Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 250.
unavailable in English to the present day. Nevertheless, the American critic and educational theorist, E. D. Hirsch, whose hermeneutic writings are heavily indebted to Betti and who is a major figure in the history of modern hermeneutics in his own right, provides a critique of *Truth and Method* in an appendix to his most influential book, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967). Hirsch argues that Gadamer’s ideas represent a ‘radical historicism’ and amount to a ‘doctrine of indeterminacy of textual meaning’. More significantly apropos the present thesis, a key part of his critique is an assault on Gadamer’s use of the concept of tradition. Hirsch argues that invoking tradition is Gadamer’s attempt to escape the ‘nihilistic conclusion’ of his own theories.

Hirsch prefaces his critique by noting that Gadamer ‘extends and codifies the main hermeneutical concepts’ of Heidegger and others, and that his work has been taken up enthusiastically by literary critics ‘as a philosophical justification for “vital and relevant” interpretations that are unencumbered by a concern for the author’s original intention’. (We saw this earlier in the work of Charles Martindale, in his denial that texts possess an originary, primal meaning). While acknowledging some continuity between Gadamer and earlier anti-intentionalists such as the New Critics, Hirsch argues that Gadamer’s position is fundamentally different due to the fact that he ‘grounds his anti-intentionalism primarily in the radical historicism of Martin Heidegger’. The major

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65 A useful excerpt translated from Betti’s *Die Hermeneutik als Allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (1972) is available in: Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift, eds., *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur* (New York, 1990). Betti’s most significant hermeneutic work, his *Teoria generale della interpretazione* (1955-1960) is currently being translated and self-published in instalments by Giorgio A. Pinton. The quality of this translation, however, is extremely poor and unfinished at the time of writing.


feature of Heidegger’s thought in Gadamer’s work that concerns Hirsch is the
‘hermeneutical productiveness’ of historical distance. This supposed productiveness is
not one that preserves an original, determinate meaning intended by an author (and the
primary importance of such a meaning for the purposes of interpretation is the major
theme of Validity in Interpretation). Gadamer, according to Hirsch, holds out no hope
for the recovery of a text’s original meaning:

[In view of the historicity of our being, the rehabilitation of (a text’s) original
conditions is a futile undertaking. What is rehabilitated from an alien past is not the
original. In its continued alienation it has a merely secondary existence.]

Since Hirsch’s own project is a defence of objective meaning and of authorial intention as
the only valid criterion for interpretation, he is concerned with discrediting what he
identifies as Gadamer’s alternative criterion of interpretive validity: tradition.

A more detailed account of what Gadamer means by tradition will be given below, but
for the moment, I simply wish to note that Hirsch is not attacking Gadamer’s concept of
tradition or anyone else’s. Nor is he attempting to downplay tradition’s importance in
textual interpretation. Rather, he objects to the particular use he believes Gadamer is
making of the notion. According to Hirsch, Gadamer invokes tradition in order to avoid
a radical indeterminacy of textual meaning, but he does so in a manner that contains
‘inner conflicts and inconsistencies’ that render it unacceptable as a basis for hermeneutic
practice.

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70 Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 247.
71 Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 247.
72 Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 247.
Hirsch begins his critique by drawing our attention to Gadamer’s attack on the premise ‘that textual meaning is the same as the author’s meaning’. For Gadamer, to take such a position would be to locate meaning in human consciousness, a position that would be

pure romantic Psychologismus, for a text’s meaning does not lie in mental processes, which are in any case inaccessible, but in the subject matter or thing meant, the Sache, which, while independent of author and reader, is shared by both.

Hirsch, on the other hand, takes issue with the possibility of locating of meaning outside of consciousness; to do so, he argues, would be ‘a repudiation not simply of psychologism but of consciousness itself’. Accordingly, in his own writings he takes the exact opposite position:

[M]eaning is an affair of consciousness not of words ... There is no magical land of meanings outside human consciousness. Wherever meaning is connected to words, a person is making the connection.

The main problem Hirsch sees with regarding texts as being cut off from an intending person, i.e. of having ‘the autonomous being of language itself’ (which is also a position that Gadamer inherited from Heidegger) is that it leads to a total indeterminacy of meaning:

If the language of a text is not speech but rather language speaking its own meaning, then whatever that language says to us is its meaning. It means whatever we take it to mean. Reduced to its intelligible significance, the doctrine of the autonomy of a written text is the doctrine of indeterminacy of textual meaning.

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74 Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 247. In this section I am using Hirsch’s characterizations of Gadamer’s views, rather than those expressed by Gadamer himself in *Truth and Method*, because I am more concerned with the critique at this stage than Gadamer’s own position which is given attention below.
78 Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 249.
For Hirsch, the idea that a text means whatever it is taken to mean by a particular reader is untenable; his hermeneutic works are in a large part devoted to the effort of avoiding this conclusion.\(^79\)

Ironically, Hirsch’s concern in *Validity in Interpretation* is with Gadamer’s attempt to avoid the same relativistic conclusion. Even though, according to Hirsch, the arguments in *Truth and Method* lead logically to a position of interpretive relativism, Gadamer does not wish to inhabit this position any more than Hirsch does. Indeed, Hirsch argues that it is because Gadamer wants to ‘avoid this discomforting consequence’ that he ‘[conceives of] a text’s meaning as changing in time, yet determinate at any given point in time’.\(^80\)

Though admitting that this is an inference on his part, Hirsch reasons that a fear of textual indeterminacy lies behind Gadamer’s introduction of the notion of tradition. Such a concept is required by Gadamer, Hirsch argues, because even if a text’s meaning is determinate at a specific point in time, two readers who exist at the same time might disagree as to that meaning:

What principle would they have for determining who is more nearly right? They could not measure their interpretations against what the text had meant in the past, since it no longer means what it meant before.\(^81\)

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\(^80\) Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 249.

\(^81\) Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 249.
Since Gadamer has argued for the autonomy of the text, he cannot appeal to an author’s intentions. But, as Hirsch has demonstrated, he also cannot appeal to ‘what the text had meant in the past’, since meaning is always changing.

But is Hirsch’s critique of Gadamer valid? Throughout his argument, Hirsch never gives any indication that he believes the tradition Gadamer is invoking is anything other than one which could be mapped according the content/chain/weight model. He never raises the possibility that Gadamer’s conception of tradition is, like his account of interpretation, influenced by Heidegger. Thus, before we can accept or reject Hirsch’s criticism of Gadamer’s appeal to tradition for judging the validity of interpretations, it is necessary to try and explicate what the latter means by ‘tradition’.

5.3.4 Gadamer’s Understanding of Tradition

It is certainly not easy to grasp what Gadamer’s conception of literary tradition looks like, since Gadamer seems to deny the past any normative function in textual interpretation. Indeed, in a 1993 conversation with Carsten Dutt, Gadamer explicitly rejects the idea that tradition plays a normative role in interpretation: ‘The idea that authority and tradition are something one can appeal to for validation is a pure misunderstanding. Whoever appeals to authority and tradition will have no authority. Period’.

All the same, Gadamer evinces a very strong sense of, and is constantly engaged with, tradition in his work. For example, he distinguishes the humanities and social sciences

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82 Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 44. The conversation with Dutt is especially helpful since Gadamer replies to both his critics and his followers, primarily Hans Robert Jauss, concerning his use of the concept tradition.
from the natural sciences by the former’s rootedness in tradition. The humanities and social sciences, he says,

may be distinguished from the natural sciences not only through their ways of proceeding but also through the preliminary relationship they have to their subject matter; that is, through their participation in the heritage that they renew and articulate for us again and again. This is the reason I have suggested that the ideal of objective knowledge which dominates our concepts of knowledge, science, and truth, needs to be supplemented by the ideal of sharing in something, of participation. We participate in the essential expressions of human experience that have been developed in our artistic, religious, and historical tradition—and not only in ours but in all cultures; this possible participation is the true criterion for the wealth or the poverty of what we produce in our humanities and social sciences.85

In this passage, Gadamer’s conception of tradition85 as the ‘essential expressions of human experience’ recalls the Heideggerian understanding, as expressed by Schalow and Denker, in which ‘tradition ... is our culture with the distinct ways of revealing the being of entities and disclosing our being-there’.84 Also, like Heidegger, Gadamer distinguishes tradition that is invisible from tradition taken up as a present concern:

[N]obody really is fully aware of the things that cause him or her to become who he or she is. We are not just stamped by our ‘genes’ but also by the socialization through which we are in a position to gain access to our world and to the traditions in which we exist.85

Heidegger’s notion that ‘poetry and thinking draw on this background and transform the sayings into a configuration that articulates for a people its understanding of being’, is not unlike Gadamer’s contention that through the humanities traditions may be ‘[renewed] and [articulated] for us again and again’.86

The most important characteristic that Gadamer’s conception of tradition shares with Heidegger’s is its orientation to the future through the disclosure of possibility. But

85 Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 43.
whereas Heidegger was principally concerned with disclosing the possibilities of Dasein’s being, Gadamer is concerned with the only slightly less daunting project of disclosing the interpretive possibilities in acts of historical understanding.\textsuperscript{87} Yet despite the shift in emphasis, the structure of tradition remains the same between Heidegger and Gadamer. Whereas tradition in \textit{Being and Time} equates to ‘the power to grasp one’s own possibilities for being, within the context of the lifeworld in which one exists’, in Gadamer traditions ‘open up our horizons, and of course also limit them. But it is only through them that we have a horizon at all and are able to encounter something that broadens our horizons’.\textsuperscript{88} Tradition is the way \textit{into} interpretation, even as it places limitations on our interpretations through constituting the prejudices we bring to a text:

\textbf{We stand in traditions}, whether we know these traditions or not; that is, whether we are conscious of these or are so arrogant as to think we can begin without presuppositions—none of this changes \textbf{the way traditions are working on us and in our understanding}.\textsuperscript{89}

But if traditions are continually ‘working on us and in our understanding’, it is difficult to reconcile this with invoking tradition as a normative concept in order to judge the validity of particular interpretations.\textsuperscript{90} Given Gadamer’s later denial that tradition has this regulatory function, it raises the question of whether Hirsch’s characterization of the way Gadamer conceives tradition is accurate.

But if we redirect our attention away from Gadamer’s later statements and focus on his account of tradition in \textit{Truth and Method}—which, after all, is the object of Hirsch’s criticism—we find tradition is assigned an undeniably normative function, and not

\textsuperscript{87} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 19.
\textsuperscript{88} Palmer, \textit{Hermeneutics}, 131; Gadamer, \textit{Gadamer in Conversation}, 43.
\textsuperscript{89} Gadamer, \textit{Gadamer in Conversation}, 45.
\textsuperscript{90} Though, of course, the fact that it may not be \textit{invoked} as a normative concept is not to deny its \textit{normative role} in interpretation which on the Gadamerian/Heideggerian understanding is all-pervasive.
merely in the Heideggerian sense of ‘disclosing possibility’. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes that ‘we are always situated within traditions, and this is no objectifying process—i.e., we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien’.\(^9\) Up to this point, Gadamer’s understanding of tradition is still compatible with Heidegger’s in its essentials and Hirsch might well be thought to be making a category error in his criticism of Gadamer’s invoking tradition. Yet, Gadamer also claims tradition is ‘a model or exemplar’.\(^9\) The apparent inconsistency between claiming that traditions are not something alien, while at the same time claiming that they are a model for our actions—the difficulty being that a model is usually understood to be *other* than what it represents—is further problematized in the section of *Truth and Method* that immediately follows. It is this section, in fact, which has likely generated the most criticism of all Gadamer’s writings: ‘The Example of the Classical’.\(^9\) Here Gadamer introduces the ‘classical’ as a tradition that transcends historical distance and offers a stable normative standard that can be directly appealed to:

> It is a historical reality to which historical consciousness belongs and is subordinate. The ‘classical’ is something raised above the vicissitudes of changing times and changing tastes. It is immediately accessible.\(^9\)

In *Theory of Literature* (2012), literary scholar Paul Fry describes Gadamer’s appeal to tradition—which Fry identifies with the ‘classicism’ of *Truth and Method*—as the establishment of a claim that ‘we really can’t merge horizons effectively unless we have a very broad and extensive common ground to share with what we’re reading’.\(^9\)

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The great thing about classicism for Gadamer, or ‘tradition,’ is that he supposes it to be something we can share. The classical, Gadamer argues, is that which doesn’t speak mainly to its own historical moment but speaks for all time, speaks to all of us in different ways but does speak to us, proffering its claim to speak true.  

For Fry, the problem with tradition, so defined, is the risk of enshrining prejudices of past times. He gives the non-literary example of slavery, which was tolerated by many of the authors belonging to the classical tradition that Gadamer appeals to, but the acceptability of which few would now wish to maintain.

Hans Robert Jauss expresses a similar reservation to Gadamer’s introduction of the notion of the classical, though on aesthetic and interpretive rather than moral grounds. It is, he argues, an attempt to ‘elevate the concept … to the status of prototype for all historical mediation of past with present’. An appeal to a classical ideal certainly conflicts with Gadamer’s claim that one can never appeal to tradition for interpretive validation. Jauss further argues that the reason Gadamer is so keen to hold onto a conception of the classical to serve as a ‘foundation for an aesthetics of reception’ is that Gadamer’s own aesthetic understanding is limited to the conceptualization of art that was current when the classical ideal was formed, the conceptualization Jauss refers to as ‘humanism’. It follows that ‘the classical’ is little more than ‘hypostatized tradition’, which is surely inimical to Gadamer’s larger project of explicating the historically conditioned nature of understanding.

When Carsten Dutt put these objections to Gadamer, the latter insisted that ‘Jauss has completely misunderstood me!’ Rejecting out of hand any accusations that the

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100 Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 63.
classical is linked to ‘the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation’ or a mere ‘stylistic ideal’,

Gadamer defends classicism as a ‘temporal concept’.

In response, Dutt summarizes these views as follows:

What you are referring to, here, I think, is the semantic autonomy of the work; which means it does not require reconstruction and is not linked to a knowledge of its first historical context. This is a **semantic potential that is actualized across contexts**, is transcontextual. It is self-evident that this actualization, which takes place under changing effective-historical conditions, does not always have the same meaning, but rather takes place in the consciousness of that **transcontextuality in which alone the ‘timelessness’ of the classic exists**, which you designate as to this extent ‘a way of historical being’ (64–65).

Dutt’s summary of Gadamer’s position—to which Gadamer’s response is ‘Yes, indeed!’—is reminiscent of the position taken by Charles Martindale in *Redeeming the Text*, where he speaks of texts ‘reingrafting themselves within new contexts, and thus remaining readable’.

I confess, I am unable to follow Dutt in making sense of the ‘timelessness’ (notice how Dutt places the word between inverted commas in his transcription) of the classic within a ‘consciousness of ... transcontextuality’ and ‘changing effective-historical conditions’. Nevertheless, Gadamer maintains that a) tradition cannot be appealed to as a way of validating textual interpretations, and that b) this is in no way contradicted by his appeal to classicism.

Returning now to Hirsch’s critique of Gadamer—i.e. that Gadamer is appealing to tradition to confirm the validity of particular textual interpretations—it could be argued that he has not given Gadamer’s conception of tradition described in *Truth and Method* its due, especially in light of its author’s later clarifications.

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101 Gadamer, *Gadamer in Conversation*, 64.
103 Martindale, *Redeeming the Text*, 16.
104 One could go further and question Hirsch’s entire characterization of Gadamer’s project. Indeed, Gadamer seems to anticipate objections such as Hirsch’s in *Truth and Method* (90-1). My thesis, however, is restricted to a consideration of Gadamer’s use of the notion of tradition.
could be read as giving Gadamer the benefit of the doubt. That is, by conceiving of tradition as a non-normative concept, he is treating Gadamer’s historicism with a seriousness that, according to Fry and Jauss, Gadamer himself does not. What is more, Hirsch is sympathetic to Gadamer’s contention that tradition cannot be appealed to in order to validate a specific interpretation. Hirsch defines tradition in his argument as follows:

the concept of tradition with respect to a text is no more or less than the history of how a text has been interpreted. Every new interpretation by its existence belongs to and alters the tradition. Consequently tradition cannot really function as a stable, normative concept, since it is in fact a changing, descriptive concept.\footnote{Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 250.}

According to Hirsch, therefore, Gadamer’s invoking of tradition is a cheat. If a tradition in a literary context is understood as the history of a text’s reception—‘no more or less than how a text has been interpreted’—then it is merely a descriptive concept, not a normative one.\footnote{Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 250.} Thus, appealing to tradition as a standard for judging the validity of interpretations is futile because any interpretation that resulted would simply alter the tradition to its own purpose.\footnote{Besides, as Hirsch points out, while there is some similarity between Gadamer’s appeal to tradition and legal pragmatism, in law there is a ‘hierarchy of judges, and papal-like authority accrues to the highest judge’. By contrast, ‘Gadamer’s concept of tradition lacks this hierarchical structure and therefore cannot in fact save the day’. See: Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, 250.}

It might be objected that it is Hirsch, rather than Gadamer, that has defined tradition in this manner and therefore his argument is really with himself. Indeed, Gadamer implicitly refutes this characterization of tradition in *Truth and Method* when he describes the ‘classical’ as ‘something quite different from a descriptive concept ... a historical reality to which historical consciousness belongs and is subordinate’.\footnote{Gadamer, Truth and Method, 299.} Yet it is
hard to see how else tradition might be defined under Gadamer’s radically historicist framework, in which understanding of an historical object can only ever occur from the fusion of the interpreter’s historical horizon with that of the historical object. Even if tradition could somehow transcend effective-history—a problematic idea in itself—Hirsch points out that there is still the problem of knowing what the tradition says. After all, a tradition requires interpretation no less than a text: ‘the problem of determining the true character of a changing tradition is the same as the problem of determining the true character of a changing meaning’.\textsuperscript{109} And this, Hirsch insists, puts us firmly back at square one.

\section{Conclusion}

In this chapter I have tried to give an indication of how there exist understandings of literary tradition, especially those influenced by Heideggerian hermeneutics, which exceed the analytic framework that has been my guide in previous chapters. By elevating it to an ontological concept, Heidegger and his followers redefine tradition so that it exceeds the limits of the meta-model that treats tradition and its respective dimensions (content, chain, and weight) in an objective manner, detached from the human subject that it acts upon. Even in the case of the selective model, tradition is not literally identified \textit{with} whoever does the selecting, even though their subjective needs and desires will shape the outcome.

\textsuperscript{109} Hirsch, \textit{Validity in Interpretation}, 250.
However, as Hirsch’s critique of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* showed, at the very least the content/chain/weight framework is useful for investigating the possible vestigial presence of other non-hermeneutic models of tradition, even in texts which would seem to repudiate those models on theoretical grounds. This is especially important since, as this chapter suggests, a coherent hermeneutic model of literary tradition is lacking—i.e. one that can be as clearly articulated as the simultaneous, continuous, or selective models. Until such a model emerges in a body of critical writing, it is natural to expect that hermeneutic literary writings will have recourse to other models of tradition, even at the cost of theoretical inconsistency.

Of course, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to adjudicate the Gadamer/Hirsch controversy, or to offer an alternative account of tradition that bridges Heidegger and Gadamer’s ontological account, with Hirsch’s concern to maintain authorial intention as an interpretive norm. However, this chapter (along with those preceding it) indicates the theoretical problems which such an account would need to address.
Conclusion

Scholarship is the art of understanding, explaining, and restoring the literary tradition.²

Rudolf Pfeiffer

The study of literary tradition becomes essential to defining what we do as scholars and teachers.²

Seth Lerer

This thesis opened with a series of quotes. Two were by Raymond Williams and Brian Stock, insisting on the ‘difficult’ and ‘troubling’ nature of tradition, both the word and the concept. The third was by Harold Bloom, asking the fundamental question: ‘What is literary tradition?’ An answer to Bloom’s question is beyond the scope of this thesis. But by examining the uses which scholars and critics have made of this ‘difficult’ and ‘troubling’ notion in their work, some possible lines of enquiry have emerged.

This thesis has unlocked the concept behind the word ‘tradition’ as it appears in literary criticism and scholarship. A major problem facing scholars in this field has been that, not only are there many and various understandings of tradition, but there is also an inconsistent and manifold set of critical terminology used to describe it. By developing a new conceptual framework, or meta model, which mapped differing notions of tradition according to a singular set of criteria with an associated and consistent critical vocabulary, this thesis has been able to place seemingly incommensurate versions of literary tradition on the same plane of discourse for the purposes of comparative analysis.

² Lerer, Tradition, 2.

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From the beginning, I insisted that this meta-model was not intended to be taken as a model of tradition itself nor as an attempt at a definition of tradition. At most it was intended to provide a common framework for mapping various notions of tradition found in literary scholarship. However, after examining the several models found in chapter’s 2-4, it can be said that all these versions of tradition belong to a single comprehensive view of tradition. This comprehensive view, whether right or wrong, bears some relation to an everyday understanding of tradition. Even the notion of Invented Tradition falls under the comprehensive view, since it draws on other more substantive conceptions for its normative power (see Chapter 4, section 4.6.2). And while the hermeneutic model that emerged in Chapter 5 may exceed the comprehensive view—perhaps even to the extent of being ontologically incommensurate—one of its main proponents, Hans-Georg Gadamer, has been accused of retaining a non-hermeneutic notion of tradition in his work (See Chapter 5, section 5.3.3). At the very least, this suggests that holding an understanding of tradition that falls under the comprehensive view, regardless of one’s theoretical allegiances, is difficult to avoid.

Of course, the models which I have identified are subject to dispute, and they are certainly not the only formulations of tradition that are possible. But by using this provisional meta-model to draw out the major features of the ways in which different groups of scholars understand and employ the idea of tradition, I have established an analytical framework and a vocabulary for identifying and discussing literary tradition in a way that has not previously been possible. In addition to the ‘dimensions’ of tradition—content, chain, and weight—I have introduced the ‘model of tradition’ as a concept and suggested an initial typology consisting of the ‘simultaneous’, ‘continuous’,
‘selective’, and ‘hermeneutic’ models. Of course, these models represent only the tentative first steps in classifying critical understandings of literary tradition. As such, they are open to amendment and extension as a greater number of critical texts are analyzed with reference to their terms.

The success of the analytical framework is confirmed by the fact that it has allowed critical assumptions about tradition that were previously implicit or diffused throughout and across critical works to be drawn out and given due consideration. Whereas previously only those critics and scholars who made a point of talking about tradition explicitly and at some length have been remarked upon (T. S. Eliot being a notable example), now writers who may have an even more sophisticated understanding of tradition but whose views may have been ‘hidden’ behind imprecise terminology, critical images, and visual metaphors, can be drawn into, and make a contribution to, a larger conversation about the concept.

The framework also reveals the limitations of critical thinking on tradition, since even where a model of tradition can be identified, a close reading of the scholarship in question frequently reveals inconsistencies or unthinking appeals to the word ‘tradition’ that cannot be understood in any definite sense. Of course, the suggestion that critics have often been working with a vague or incomplete understanding of tradition is not intended to cast doubt on their work. After all, as Stuart Hall points out: ‘one can produce important insights on a flawed theoretical ground’.3 Rather, it points to my hope that a greater understanding of how the notion of tradition is being employed already will

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lead to a more rigorous and explicit usage in future scholarship. Such a development could open up new ways of thinking about the literary past and its relation to the present.

Moreover, the analytic model employed in this thesis also has the virtue of identifying certain mental conceptions of tradition whose existence extends beyond literary scholarship. This was especially apparent in Chapter 2, where I examined content-focused, or simultaneous, understandings of tradition. The recurring Parnassian motif was shown to appear in painting, poetry, prose, and literary scholarship from the middle ages down to the twentieth century and beyond. While commonly identified as a recurring element in the visual arts and poetry, so far as I know nobody has traced the Parnassian motif across media boundaries or linked it to famous examples of early 20th century literary criticism (i.e. Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and E. M. Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*) that still resonate with scholars today. Doing so not only suggests fresh interpretations of older works of art and poetry, but also places one of the most dominant critical metaphors in literary criticism in its broader cultural and historical context, one which extends much further back in time than is normally presumed.

This thesis, then, is only the first step in a better understanding of what we as literary scholars mean when we invoke the phrase ‘literary tradition’. Whereas I have looked to the work of scholars and critics in identifying various models of literary tradition, a future study might in turn employ those models which have been identified in the opposite direction—that is, to assist in clarifying the views of critics. Just because a work of scholarship gives some indication of employing a particular model of tradition does not mean that this is necessarily the case. Nor does it mean that only one model is present in a
given context. Whereas the present thesis, due to its narrow focus, takes scholars at their word when they express views on tradition, a future study might aim at a close reading of their scholarship using the information gleaned in this thesis. Such a study would seek to identify precisely which aspects of traditional models are truly actualized in their work.

Finally, I have attempted in this thesis to make a compelling case for the ongoing relevance of tradition as a concept in literary scholarship. Despite decades of theorizing, neologizing, and critical self-reflection among literary scholars, the unabated use of the term ‘tradition’ in their writings suggests that the notion is still doing important critical work that is unaccounted for by alternative critical concepts. Regardless of whether a critic embraces the concept of tradition or not; regardless of whether a critic even uses the word ‘tradition’ in his or her work, I contend that a critic is, to borrow a formula from John Maynard Keynes, usually the slave of some model of tradition. This thesis represents only the first step in recognizing this fact and in taking measures to better understand the nature of tradition’s influence on literary scholarship. Much more work is required, however, before we can hope to give an answer, if indeed there one, to Harold Bloom’s question of what literary tradition is.
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