

Eliot and the Paradox of History

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WRITER'S COMMENT: Contrary to how my papers usually come together—panicked, hyper-caffeinated, submitted twelve minutes past twelve—this paper unraveled slowly one afternoon, in an effort to read away the day and avoid work. While we might then call it the product of “procrastination,” the euphemism “wandering” is, perhaps, more apt here. It’s my hope that wandering will emerge as the essay’s real subject. Underlying all its talk of the “past” and the “future” is a commitment to a horizon of wandering: one centered on failing, on missing the mark, on believing you’re headed to the known and familiar, and then finally to end up at a place that can be found only by having misread the signs meant to lead you home. Wandering, in short, as not just the presence of the outside discovered through the process of the journey in, but also as the inside seen through and made coherent by its ruptures. The outside simultaneously de-forming and re-forming the inside. The new simultaneously resisting and reconstituting the old. The future simultaneously negating and regenerating the past.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Opening up Canvas, our online platform, I expected to see the usual array of student responses to the blog prompt I had posted a few days earlier. What I didn't expect to see was a new topic, labeled “Eliot and the Paradox of History.” The heading was curious, as we hadn't discussed T.S. Eliot in class yet; the readings had only just been assigned. Clicking on the post, I discovered that the piece was extensive—much longer than a typical blog post. Reading on, I was instantly absorbed in what would become Michael's

exquisite essay on Eliot's classic modernist essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Michael argues persuasively and eloquently that Eliot's concept of tradition is deeply intertwined with the modernist imperative to "make it new." By doing so, Michael illuminates Eliot's deployment of the past as a source of inspiration, yet one that is entirely contingent on the future that it creates. I was impressed not only by Michael's compelling prose, but by his ability to completely reinvigorate Eliot's work. Eliot's essay from 1919 becomes not just relevant again, but pressing—urgent. Michael captures Eliot's significance to the modernist moment, yet also helps us define any moment in which we strive to move forward, but can only do so only by reckoning with, rewriting, and ultimately producing the past. This is one of the best essays on Eliot that I've read.

—*Jasmine Kitses, Department of English*

As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition and the meaning of these traces is not given; it changes continually with the transformations of the signifier's network. Every historical rupture, every advent of a new master-signifier, changes retroactively the meaning of all tradition, restructures the narration of the past, makes it readable in another, new way.

Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*

Perhaps it is possible to see the concerns of another Eliot—the Eliot of "Tradition and the Individual Talent." . . . It was in this essay that Eliot . . . described the reciprocal relationship between the canonical and the new. The new defines itself in response to what is already established; at the same time, the established has to reconfigure itself in response to the new. Eliot's claim was that the exhaustion of the future does not even leave us with the past. Tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified. A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all.

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*

By reading “Tradition and the Individual Talent” through a Žižekian lens, theorist Mark Fisher not only underscores T. S. Eliot’s emphasis on the dialectical relationship between the past and the present (the old and the new), but also outlines what he sees as a dual tendency in modernism—that is, both its preoccupation with history and its orientation toward the future (its visions both for a break with the past, on the one hand, as well as for the creation of a program for the future, on the other). For Fisher, it is precisely this orientation toward the “future”—in the sense of a political future, a cultural or artistic future (the culturally or artistically “new”)—that creates the past, that brings “tradition” into existence (Fisher, 3). In the present’s “response to what is already established,” claims Fisher, the present forms itself while simultaneously reshaping and “reconfiguring” the past (3). The past is the past only to the extent that the present challenges it and, through this challenge, articulates itself and imagines or “responds” with an (alternative) vision for the future (3). What Fisher attempts to argue, then, is that in Eliot’s formulation of history, the past does not exist in itself, on its own terms, prepackaged, predetermined, predefined; rather, it is the future that “retroactively” gives the past its “meaning” (Žižek, 58). The future produces the past, it “restructures” the past—or as Žižek might put it, the “coordinates” of the future’s “symbolic order” generate “another, new” constellation, “another, new” frame through which the past becomes what it “will have [always] been” (58). In Fisher and Žižek’s dialectical framework, if we can say that the future comes out of the past, it is equally true to say that the past comes out of the future.

Though Fisher’s reading of Eliot may appear as heavy-handed erudition, I expound on it at such length because I believe it offers crucial insight into Eliot’s paradoxical understanding of history. Throughout the essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Eliot considers the past to be present and in part echoes the famous lines from Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*—“The past is never dead. It’s not even past”—with Faulkner’s basic assertion being about the weight of history, the way the past impinges on the present and influences it through the congealed and unconscious traces of underlying historical forces. And to a degree, Eliot’s understanding of history does acknowledge history’s endlessness, its persistence into the present; yet, his understanding also takes into account the “retroactivity” at work in the present’s attempt to narrate the past (Žižek, 111). The present decides what the past is and what it

means—in other words, the present is always in the process of rewriting the past and constructing it anew: precisely because the past is never settled, precisely because the past has the living, breathing presence that Faulkner ascribes to it. In effect a paradox, Eliot's view of history sees history not in terms of the events of the past (as purely determinative world-historical forces), but in terms of the future's articulation of those events (as retroactive interpretive and narrativizing processes). Just as the future is determined by the past, in the sense of a causally linear model of temporality, so too is the existence of the past entirely contingent on the future, in the sense of an exegetic or (psycho)analytic procedure aiming to explain and interpret the past. With this dialectical bind, Eliot posits that the past dies—that history vanishes—the moment the present cannot imagine a future which, more than simply rejecting the order that came before it, proposes an alternative vision capable of transforming the old.

To Eliot (who resembles Faulkner, in this instance), history and tradition are not repositories for the collection of dust and “dead letters.” In fact, in his view, a sustained interaction with tradition is a basic requisite for the creation of the new. The past is, for Eliot, unquestionably alive, and he expresses this belief with his demand for poets to develop an “historical sense,” by which he means “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot, 37). Here, tradition contains more than the “pastness” of antiquated generic tropes; tradition instead holds a “presence” that (in)forms the present. The impact of the past thus carries on far beyond its epoch, or as Faulkner says, “It's not even past.” Rather, the past is part of the present-day atmosphere and deeply embedded in the terrain of poetic form and “aesthetic” convention (37). Precisely by considering it the poet's job to build this inclusive historical outlook that treats the past less as a cheap source of inspiration and more as a vigorous and dynamic texture from which poets learn, Eliot links the horizon of the new to a poet's engagement with tradition. On the one hand, then, the historical sense inserts the poet into the “living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written,” enabling him to “procure the consciousness of the past” (39). On the other hand, it seemingly compels the living poet to “assert” the “immortality” of “dead poets,” to partake in their legacy (37).

However, Eliot does not intend for this “assertion” to mean that the poet ought to develop a nostalgia for tradition. He does not conceive of the historical sense as a retreat into the safety of tradition. Quite the

opposite is true: to engage the historical sense and enter “tradition” is more to introduce a “complication” in terms of the new than it is to acquiesce to the model of the old (Eliot, 38). Eliot brings to light this full scope of his belief in the historical sense when he emphasizes that tradition is not only “not given” (Žižek, 58), but “cannot be inherited” (Eliot, 37). While he does go on to stress that “if you want [tradition] you must obtain it by great labour” to once again frame the poet’s knowledge of the past as central to artistic production, this emphasis on the “great labour” of embracing tradition should not translate into a “blind or timid adherence” to tradition (37). Such “conformity” directly opposes Eliot’s conception of the historical sense: it amounts to little more than “repetition” and mimicry (38), and thus implies a debased form of simulation or reiteration that fundamentally lacks what Eliot calls a poet’s “conscious[ness] of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity” (37). For a poet to have true historical sense, he cannot simply “repeat” and “conform” to tradition, because pure “repetition” and “conformity” disavow his “awareness” of “his place in time” (38). To do so would be to ignore his own historical circumstance, “his own contemporaneity.” To do so would lead the poet to create works of art as if history had come to a halt, as if there were no distance between “his place in time” and that of the era(s) that had preceded him. The past would be present—and the present would be past. Insofar as the poet fails to recognize this gap and takes the “presence” of the past to mean only the “pastness” of the present, the artistic possibility of the new, “the really new,” starts to disintegrate (37). The historical sense requires the channeling of a legacy or lineage, as Eliot says, the “feeling . . . [of] the whole of the literature of Europe” (37); at the same time, however, the historical sense requires the poet to devote his energies to “surrendering himself wholly to the work *to be done*,” to the work of the present in its orientation toward the future (42, added emphasis). Not only must tradition be worked for, studied, “obtained” through “great labour”; the present should look at tradition as that which animates it, as that which gives it its life, its world, its claim to self—its claim to the future, even. Somewhat paradoxically, of course, without an orientation toward the future, the distinctions between the past and present would fall out of sight. There would be no difference of “complication,” just the flatline of “repetition.”

With this last formulation of the exchange between the past and the present, we can detect the subtle double move that completes the

retroactivity of Eliot's dialectic: more than simply constituting a horizon for the creation and development of the new, the past is itself made by the future it opens the space for—the past only becomes “itself” in the future. Standing as a tradition not “inherited,” but “obtained” through “great labour,” the past becomes the past only after the fact, in the process of defining it. Eliot attests to the retroactive quality of this relationship rather explicitly when he discusses how a “new work” causes a “shift” in the “existing order”: “The existing monuments [of the canon] form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new. . . . Whoever has approved this idea of order . . . will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (Eliot, 37). With its “introduction of the new”—with its effort to imagine a future—the present “restructures” the past, as it “alters” the arrangement of the “existing monuments” and produces from this “alteration” a “new [set of] combinations” (39). Admittedly, this reading of “new combinations” may be a bit of an overextension of Eliot's definition, since he tends to conceptualize “new combinations” in terms of “emotions and feelings,” as a “fusion” or “transmutation” of these affective “elements” (40). Even so, it might not be too much of a stretch, since Eliot believes that the poet achieves the feat of “new combinations” only through the “great labour” of struggling with tradition. The “combinations” are of “emotions and feelings,” but they are all only possible because the present has attempted to “alter” the past, to “reconfigure” the elements that make history, history. The effort to introduce the new and imagine an alternative future calls for the rewriting of history, for a critique of the past, because no past means no future. By the same token, moreover, through this very effort, the future in effect creates the past it seeks to reject. The future is what gives the past a shape and what “restructures” its order. And that is the final leg of Eliot's paradox: no future means no past.

So what does this paradox ultimately say about Eliot's understanding of history? On the one hand, the paradox captures how much of a story, how much of an illusion, any understanding of the past is. It regards history as an unstable narrative, as a story that is constantly turning out to be another story. On the other hand, however, the paradox also considers this continual rewriting of history to be a process necessary for imagining the future and developing the new. The present proposes a vision of what's to come by challenging and critiquing what came before,

with the result being a reformulation of the past. In other words, the paradox through which Eliot understands history runs along the lines of a dialectic: the future cannot exist without the past, but it is the future which creates the past; the past directs and determines the future, but without the future, the past will have ceased to be. For there to be a past at all, there has to be a sense of the future. History is, in this view, a product of the future, just as much as the future is a product of history.

Works Cited

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