

Tradition in Thomas Stearns Eliot's 'The Hollow Men'

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Abstract

The present paper investigates the application of Eliot's concept of 'tradition' as appeared in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' on his poem 'The Hollow Men'. The paper sheds light on the sources of the poem as well as the influences of other writers on his writing of it. Through alluding to different texts from old as well as modern, Eliot enriches his poem and let his readers share the poem knowledge with other texts.

The Concept of Tradition

Tradition denotes the inherited past which is available for the writers to study and learn from. The primary meaning of tradition that is passed down from generation to generation through custom and practice. Every writer begins with some sort of tradition behind him and in some way modifies or influences that tradition (Cuddon, 1982, pp.702-3).

As a critic, Eliot views the importance of tradition in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). By 'tradition', Eliot means the writers of the past as a whole. It is used in a wider sense, it is not restricted only to literary tradition, but it also refers to social, historical, political, economical, cultural, and even ideological tradition. Eliot's tradition does not mean merely imitation or blind adherence to the way of the writers of the past. Tradition cannot be inherited but obtained by those who have the historical sense (Calder, 1987, p.87). For Sigg (1989, p.111) the historical sense is a sense of timeless and of the temporal together which makes a writer to feel that the whole literature of Europe, from the ancient time of Rome to his own century form one continuous literary tradition. He is conscious of his relation with those writers of the past. To make the idea more clear Eliot (1951, p.14) mentions that;

"Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not 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 the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional"

Eliot's concept of 'tradition' was dynamic and not static. He saw the literary tradition as an evolving and transforming canon. He believed that the past; in the form of literary tradition, informed and enlivened the present (Castle, 2007,

p.23). The writers in the present must seek guidance from the past. The past directs and guides the present, it helps to understand the present and the present through light on the past.

According to Eliot, the contemporary writer does not have to approach the past as a scholar. His job is to 'absorb' knowledge from whichever dead writers strike him. The 'modern' poet will 'develop or procure consciousness of the past' (Calder, 1987, pp.89-90). Literary texts are always constructed by and within a context or tradition. For that, Eliot argues that no poet has his complete meaning alone without the relation to the dead poets. No text makes sense without other texts, every text is what Roland Barthes calls 'a new tissue of past citation' (Bennett and Rolye, 2004, p.6).

Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is about the relation of the writer to tradition. New literary work is written out of an engagement with the past (Julius, 1995, pp.150-1). The individual talent of the writer became a part of and transforming that tradition if they could create 'the new work of art.' While each work remains itself, it takes on an additional aspect, a qualification of meaning, in the larger context. Eliot's observation about literature in general is precisely applicable to his own carrier as a poet.

Eliot's works as that of Pound, Joyce, 'Men of 1914' who turned to art in search of a productive mimesis, which may defined in terms of intertextuality rather than by presupposing some relation between text and reality. It was steeped in the habit of textual imitation (of allusion, citation, pastiche, translation), constantly undermined an aesthetic spontaneous desire. He occupies a central position as the most influential poet-critic of modern age. Eliot the critic spoke what he had practiced as poet. He was able to carry his critical theory with conviction mainly because his criticism came out of his poetry-workshop.

Tradition in 'The Hollow Men'

Although, 'The Waste Land' remains Eliot's richest poem of tradition because its power to generate associations through its manifold voices and images and cadences is so vast. But in terms of artistic structure, 'The Hollow Men' can be seen as advance to 'The Waste Land.' 'The Hollow Men' was the outgrowth of several years' experimentation. 'The Waste Land' describes modern world as a barren land, but 'The Hollow Men' deals with the inhabitants of this world. Eliot believed that 'A large part of any poet's "inspiration" must come from reading and from his knowledge of history' (Moody, 1994, p.182).

Tradition can be applied to the use of the literary devices such as allusion and epigraphs. Allusion fits into the existing system of reference and meaning, which supports the contemporary work of art but is also altered by it. As the contemporary work of art forms a terminus of relations tying it to previous works of art, new relations thereby established shift preexisting one (Sigg, 1989, p.201). Allusion is often a kind of appeal to a reader to share some experience with a writer. An allusion may enrich the work by association and give it depth when using allusions a writer tends to assure an established literary tradition, a body

with a common knowledge with an audience sharing that tradition and an ability on the part of the audience to 'pick up' the reference (Cuddon, 1982, p.31).

'The Hollow Men' is commonly invited us to read it through the spectacles of books and history; Joseph Conrad's 1902 novella 'Heart of Darkness,' William Shakespeare's 1599 play 'Julius Caesar,' all three parts of Dante Alighieri's fourteenth century masterpiece 'Divine Comedy,' and the Gunpowder Plot. Knowledge of the sources enriches and illuminates the poem (Scofield, 1988, p, 139).

According to Eliot himself, in a January 1935 letter, that the title 'The Hollow Men' was made up by combining one word from William Morris's romance 'The Hollow Land,' with another word from Rudyard Kipling's 'The Broken Men.' The phrase also occurs in Shakespeare's play 'Julius Caesar' (Calder, 1987, p.97) Act IV, scene ii, line 23, in which Brutus describes Cassius as a false friend. Eliot refers to the conflict in the mind of Brutus pondering on the problem of his association with conspiracy to murder Julius Caesar. Brutus then described as a false friend that Cassius has turned out to be; *'But hollow men, like horses hot at hard.'*

'The Hollow Men' has two epigraphs; both indicate two lines of analogy drawn by 'The Hollow Men' revealing the basic theme of the poem. 'Mistuh Kurtz – he dead' is the black contemptuous announcement that the remarkable white god of the Congo has expired. The source for this epigraph is Conrad's novella; 'Heart of Darkness.' Ezra Pound had convinced Eliot to discard it from the original draft of 'The Waste Land' to the epigraph to 'The Hollow Men.' The second part of Eliot's epigraph, meanwhile, although it comes from an entirely different context, this one historical rather than literary, perhaps also points to an individual whose misguided idealism proved to be his undoing. 'A Penny for the Old Guy' is the formula by which children solicit money for fireworks on Guy Fawkes Day; the fifth of November, 1605. It origins in a centuries-old English celebration, variously called Guy Fawkes Day, Bonfire Night, and, in New England until the late 18th century, Pope Day. The festivities, such as they are, find their origin in the discovery and suppression of the infamous Gunpowder Plot, a conspiracy among a band of English Roman Catholics to blow up Parliament (Murphy, 2007, p. 253). The connection between Kurtz and Guy Fawkes is that both are 'lost / Violent soul' commemorated only as the 'the hollow men / ... the stuffed men.' Indeed, Marlow calls Kurtz 'hollow at the core.' That in another aspect Kurtz and Guy Fawkes are not completely hollow, since the one, as Marlow acknowledged, attains an affirmative victory by recognizing the 'horror' and the other commits himself to action, services but to reduce by comparison the dignity of Eliot's own hollow men (Smith, 1956, p.103).

The use of the straw stuffed effigies is reported by Sir James Frazer as being identified with falls rituals celebrating the death of the fertility god or Fisher King. Part I of the poem specifically depicts the scarecrow effigies of Guy Fawkes or the hollow men in the modern waste land. The dryness, aridness, of

the waste land is certainly appeared in the first lines. One of these is the speaker himself waiting among the other straw dummies for the consuming fire. To this state he has come, apparently through his refusal of the vision; like Tiresias or Dante's Ugoline at the last, he is sightless (Smith, 1956, p.103). 'The Hollow Men' recalls the murderous sterility of scenes from 'The Waste Land,' where dogs dig up corpses from gardens, the cruel month of April breeds lilacs from the dead land, and the gurgle of the polluted river evokes distraught visions of mortality in the Fisher king's abandoned son:

*"White bodies naked on the low damp ground
And bones cast in a little low dry garret,
Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year."*

Here, as in 'The Hollow Men,' Eliot connects meaningless human intercourse with nature's indifference-abandoned graves and empty churches give home to rats, and dry grass.

In 1924 Eliot contributed an Introduction to Paul Valéry's 'Le Serpent'. In discussing some other poems that had attracted him, he quoted two stanzas of Valery's 'Cantique Des Colonnes' and in so doing disclosed a model for two lines of 'The Hollow Men' written a few weeks before the edition appeared:

*Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;*

He had fitted a phrase of Marlow in 'Heart of Darkness' – 'a vision of grayness without form' – describing Marlow's feelings after the death of Kurtz. The hollow men are those who are rejected by heaven and hell because they have neither sinned nor been actively virtuous. They have abstained; have failed to live (Raine, 2006, p. 17). Like Dante's Inferno, the inhabitants of Eliot's hell on earth are consigned to the above extract. Eliot's poem argues that life has become a kind of purgatory, where:

*"Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men."*

To be remembered as violent, lost or even soulless (as Kurtz) would be a better than to be forgotten. Memory is survival. Here Eliot suggests that the loss of voice and sight contribute to the disintegration of culture. Eliot ends part I of 'The Hollow Men,' however, by strongly suggesting that these hollow men, though living, also might as well be wandering through Dante Aligher's Inferno. Ultimately, however, it makes little difference whether we imagine that the hollow men are literally or figuratively dead, for that is the very point: For them, the difference is a negligible one. (Murphy, 2007, p. 255)

The eyes introduced in part I continued in part II. The hollow men are transfixed by eyes they dared not to meet in dream. From the beginning, Eliot's hollow men fail to confront their own selfhood whether this is conceived as a

Dantesque heart of light; it is the eyes of Beatrice in Purgotrio, or Conradian heart of darkness; the burning eyes of the mad Kurtz (Moody, 1994, p.110).

Part III, 'This Is the Dead Land,' appeared in the Chapbook in the autumn of 1924 under the title 'Doris's Dream Songs.' Some lines of part III had occurred in 'The Waste Land' manuscript. The 'stone images' in the 'cactus land' might well be those of 'The Burial of the Dead.' It seems to contain a paraphrase of two lines from James Thomson's 'Art' (part III). In the Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism Eliot has cited the passage. Thomson had written:

*Singing is sweet; but be sure of that,
Lips only sing when they cannot kiss.*

In writing,

*Lips that would kiss
From prayers to broken stone,*

Eliot perhaps had also in mind Juliet's line '...lips that they must use in prayer' and the whole sonnet-dialogue between her and Romeo at their first meeting (Romeo and Juliet, Act I, scene V, line 95 ff.) (Smith, 1956, pp. 101-2). Prayer is 'The supplication of a dead man's hand'—everyone in Limbo being dead. The trembling lips are a reminiscence of Dante's Paolo and Francesca—'labocca mi bació tutto tremante' [kissed my mouth all trembling]—which Eliot quotes in his essay on Dante (Raine, 2006, p. 19).

The hollow men are 'gathered on the beach of this tumid river' recall the crowd of the 'trimmers' or the 'uncommitted' on the banks of the Acheron in Canto III of the Inferno, being denied access into hell proper as they are, though sightless, they seem at least able to imagine Dante's 'multifoliate rose.' It is his emblem and image of the blessed in paradiso. The 'eye' of Eliot's poem recall the marked awareness of eyes and sight throughout those Cantos of the Purgatorio in which Dante encounters Beatrice (XXX, particularly lines 66-78, and XXXI, particularly lines 118-22). The parallels intensify the feeling that the hollow men is reaching after some experience in which a love which has failed is transformed into a spiritual awareness (Scofield, 1988, pp.144-5):

*Sightless, Unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose*

As part IV ends, it seems that the 'hope only / Of [these] empty men' is that somewhere there is the peace and contentment of salvation, but it is not there for them (Murphy, 2007, p. 256). The rose is the only hope of the hollow men. Readers who familiar with Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness,' for them the 'tumid river' will bring to mind the banks of the Congo, where Conrad's narrator Marlow steps into the 'gloomy circle of some Inferno' and encounters '[b]lack shapes' that 'crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair' (Chintiz, 2009, p.170).

Part V was first printed in poems 1909-1925. The first four lines begins with a parody of 'Here we go round the mulberry bush,' which isn't simply a nursery rhyme, but describes behaviour that is enigmatically empty. Echoing the chant of the May games, 'here we go gathering nuts in May ...At five o'clock in the morning,' with its reminiscence of the maypole dance and the 'country copulatives,' they underscore the sexual nature of the plight with which the poem deals (Smith, 1956, pp.106-7). It reflects the influence of Valéry's 'Le Cintiére marin,' from which Eliot culled the line 'Entre le vide et l'événement pur,' comparing it in his Introduction with a speech of Brutus in Julius Caesar (Act II, scene I, lines 63-5):

*Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first action, all the interim is
Like a phantasm or a hideous dream.*

Eliot's 'Between the motion / And the act' echoes the words of Shakespeare, but the rhythm recalls Valéry: and 'Between the idea / And the reality' makes an approximate translation. The dramatic oppositions are between different qualities of self-destruction-between Mr. Kurtz and Guy Fawkes on the one hand, and the hollow men, among which the poet himself is numbered. The 'Shadow' may falls across philosophical abstractions, 'the idea / And the reality,' alluding to Earnest Dowson's poem 'Non sum quails eram' [I am not now as once I was] in which 'Then falls thy shadow' is used as a refrain. Here, the shadow is the symbol of weak will of a man. The Shadow is also reminiscent of 'Heart of Darkness' from which the concept of 'The Hollow Men' seems to have been partly spawned. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men,' makes the same point as Conrad's tale, when amidst echoes of the Lord's Prayer. The hollow men remind the us that between all human impulses and their fulfillment, all human aspirations and their achievements, 'Falls the Shadow' (Murphy, 2007, p. 257).

The poem concluded by sifting nursery rhyme and Lord's Prayers, truncating and fracturing both to emphasize the violent, meaningless struggle of modern men to transcend their mortal circumstances. In 'The Hollow men' as near the end of 'The Waste land,' language lapses into the familiar sounds of childhood nursery rhymes and yet they are strangely menacing. It concludes in a defeated stammer:

*For Thine is
Life is
For Thine is the*

The final line of 'The Hollow Men' 'Not with a bang but a whimper' alluding to Kipling's 'Danny Deever' in which Danny is a British soldier executed and his soul passes the earth not with a 'bang' but only 'whimpering'; 'What's that that whimpers over'ead?' Once again, as in 'The Waste Land,' there appears to be a wedding of eastern and western ideas. The problem in this poem may be stated in term of the triumvirate of Hindu belief. Siva embodies the powers of creation and destruction as manifested in sex and in the birth-death-rebirth cycle: Brahma embodies the power of mind, for he is the creator of the world; Vishnu embodies

the power of salvation to preserve man from evil. It is Vishnu who in his tenth incarnation will destroy the earth and reunite the divine and the created. The hollow men wait for final destruction because between now and then there is only an endless series of birth, death, and rebirth which is inescapable and which is, in itself a waste land not only because it is inevitable, but because it offers no salvation from the wheel on which they turn (Smith, 1956, p.101).

Eliot's lifelong habit of recycling images and lines and, in some cases, whole sections of poetry can be a source of continuing temptation and confusion. (Murphy, 2007, p. 251). According to Eliot, no poet has his value in isolation. A literary work can be valid only by existing in the tradition. The existing classics within the cramped space of the tradition politely reshuffle their positions to make room for a new comer, and look different in the light of it. Through emphatic effects of intertextuality (including quotation, allusion, reference and echo), Eliot's poem suggests that originality, the notion of beginning as singular, definable stable is severely problematic (Bennett, 2004, p. 6). Eliot is not making mere literary allusions. He is not 'imitating' these poets. Each of these references brings with it the weight of its special context, its authentic accent of reality, and thus enables Eliot to condense into a single passage. Consequently, in any effort to gauge Eliot's achievement, to indicate just what traditions have entered into the shaping of his talent, it is important to remind oneself of the actual closeness of these writers in the qualities of mind which they value. Since his own verse bears everywhere evidence of how his reading has been carried alive into his mind, and thus of his conception of tradition as awareness of poetry 'as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written.' Holding such a conception of the integral relation of the present to an alive past, believing that it is necessary for the poet to be conscious, 'not of what is dead, but of what is already living.' Triumphantly, Eliot uses the contemporary, 'modern,' Conrad as Pope used Horace (Calder, 1987, p.97). Although Conrad was not strictly a poet, and although he was still alive when his earlier prose first began to affect Eliot's poetry. The artist contributes his work to the ideal order of literary works; the literary critic assesses its place in that order. It places tradition, artist, and critic, in equilibrium. Matthiessen (1947, p.3) stated that;

"It is part of the business of the critic ... 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; to see the best work of our time and the best work of twenty-five hundred years ago with the same eyes. – introduction to The Sacred Wood."

Eliot naturally also believes that one of the marks of a mature poet is that he should be 'one who not merely restores a tradition which has been in abeyance, but one who in his poetry re-twines as many straying strands of tradition as possible.' Perhaps the process would have been more compellingly described as 'fusing together' rather than 're-twining': for only by some such process can the poet's work gain richness and density. Matthiessen(1947, p25) also stated that;

"One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least

something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest".

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