

Tradition, Intelligence and the Artist

by

Brian Keeble

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 4. (Autumn, 1977). © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

*...the enchainment of past and future
Woven in the weakness of the changing body,
Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
Which flesh cannot endure.*

.

Only through time, time is conquered.

(Burnt Norton).

THE word “tradition”, no less than many other words one can offer as examples of extreme semantic depreciation in contemporary usage (myth,¹ symbol, mystery, spirituality, etc.), being allowed to mean almost anything inevitably comes to mean almost nothing. The difficulty is here compounded simply because the concept of tradition—even when properly understood—contains a superabundant richness of connotations such as to make neatness of definition near to impossible. It is the same with tradition as with all things whose origin can be traced back to Revelation. The problem remains one of grasping the ontological mystery of the passage from essence to manifestation—from beyond the realm of time and space to the world of continuous generation and decay.

The word “tradition” (from the Greek *paradidomi*, Latin *traditio*), indicates a transmission, a handing over, a handing down of something received. Clearly such a transmission must involve some sort of language whether written or pronounced verbally or visually. The *what* and the *how*

¹ The spectrum of meaning now attached to this word covers considerable ground. At the one extreme we have Coomaraswamy’s “myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words”, while at the other extreme there is the Shorter Oxford Dictionary’s “a purely fictitious narrative”: this last eliciting from David Jones, “...a bloody lie in fact...that is about the limit in loss of meaning”. Elsewhere, with his characteristic eye to the incarnational quality of history he glosses the word as follows: “To conserve, to develop, to bring together, to make significant for the present what the past holds, without dilution or any deleting, but rather by understanding and transubstantiating the material, this is the function of genuine myth, neither pedantic nor popularising, not indifferent to scholarship, nor antiquarian, but saying always: ‘of those thou hast given me have I lost none’.” (John 17:12) *Epoch and Artist*, (London, 1959) p. 243.

of this transmission comprise the two primary aspects of tradition. The *content* of tradition implies a vertical axis of descent as to its trans-human and integrative principle while its *modus operandi* implies a horizontal chain of transmission whose continuity is other than the historical process of change itself. It is important not to confuse the *what* and the *how* of tradition with the temporal succession of history for, in as much as a tradition is the principal attachment to a Divine Norm the spatiotemporal reflection of that Norm is consubstantial with its attachment to the Principle—cause and *effect* (which terms are appropriate for the purpose of logical discourse only) are here supra-sequential.

Indeed, both must be operative at one and the same moment if we are to save tradition from an “evolution” in which it becomes something other than what is intrinsic to its potentiality “in the beginning.” Being a form of initiation, a tradition must be transmitted in conformity with the integral meaning and possibility of the principle it expresses and from which it derives its being (Christian *love*; Moslem *Unity*; Buddhist *Self*). Self-evidently a tradition can “develop” but such development is always an extension and an application of its principle as opposed to its assimilation to any purely historical process. Any such assimilation can result in the weakening of the ontological links that bind a tradition to its reflection in a civilisation and a culture since in the very act of transmission there remains the possibility of dissolution and involvement with profane knowledge and conceptions. And only by this measure is a tradition at any period “less” true than at its inception.²

Sufficient to indicate then that tradition is far beyond being merely an accumulation of human endeavour and invention even if it does have a “history”. Granting that the external characteristics and expression of a tradition are coloured by and reflect the passage of time, nonetheless, to equate tradition with a form of historical continuity is to ignore its supra-formal essence in the name of which it remains free and objective in relation to spatio-temporal determinations.³ For in as much as its vertical axis preserves it as a mode of internal witness and as an expression of Truth tradition is never simply reducible to the contingencies of time and place. Thus it preserves that Truth knowledge of which “will make you free” (John 8.32) by providing the objective criteria by which historical “necessity” may be redeemed.⁴

² As indeed, with the convergence of tradition and profanity in our own time, making it necessary for a seeker after tradition to declare himself an anti-modern.

³ Which is nothing more than to stress that a tradition has both a transcendent and an immanent aspect. Evidently the “knower” cannot be that empirical ego, that has a “history”, since “The things of God knoweth no man, but the spirit of God”, (1 Corinthians 2:11).

⁴ Here an important qualification arises. In speaking of tradition as an expression of Truth and as a form of gnosis there is no intention of implying that the Tradition is a sort of amalgam and summation of all the differing sacred traditions completing and perfecting them in a way each of them is incapable of doing on its own. To be sure there is such a Tradition—inseparable from the Spirit—but in so far as man has access to it in his earthly life it exists, as it were, potentially and only becomes actual in the manner and

The all too easy assimilation of tradition to the continuity of history comes about as the result of a fatal error, one that could hardly be made were it not for that latter day conception of man as, to all intents and purposes, an autonomous, soulless being trapped in the existential isolation of an ontology that acknowledges only the dualistic claims of mind against matter. This post-Cartesian conception discards outright the soul as the active organ of spiritual perception. Its proper role denied, what hope is there that the soul can act as the ever-present witness to those internal qualities that elude the funeral cortege of time? He who seeks possession of a living tradition understands the need to free himself from the illusion that the “archives” of the past represents the vital substance of a tradition. For him the spiritual regeneration of the soul alone permits in turn the renewal of tradition. Only here, in the soul, is the association of tradition with change (without which association there could be no possibility of renewal, only the sterility and the deception of the customary and the commonplace) wrested from the impotence of being interpreted exclusively in terms of all that man himself has contributed to the wreckage of historical time. Only in the subtle ontology of its inherent perceptions can the soul recognise those qualitative essences whose forms cheat that inner death that insists that the past can never be freed from what made it the past.⁵

By means of metaphysical intuition and imagination the man of tradition is characterised by the quality of his inspiration. To him is entrusted a kind of knowledge in the light of which the question of a “preservation”(in effect a form of historical inertia) of tradition against the forces of that which is anti-traditional hardly arises simply because he embodies all that gave rise to the past expression of tradition. His knowledge penetrates far beyond the fixed and tangible forms of time and space to disclose the domain of their meaning—a meaning that analogises all that is inherent in a tradition in terms of the fulfillment of its original revelation. Thus the man of tradition is innovatory in the true sense for he makes new, in conscious *re*-cognition, that which was unconscious and by that token unknown.

To speak of rigorously dissociating tradition from all that threatens to lose it among the contents of history is another way of saying that tradition is capable of preserving an objective norm by which man can know what he is apart from what is merely *of* him. Only in so far as man is can he think or act. Any conception of man that seeks to define him in terms of his “thinking” and his “acting” must be inadequate to his full nature (however much such “thoughts” and “acts” may offer clues) since such a definition shelves the metaphysical question as to *who* is the agent who “thinks” and “acts”. It is the nature of the agent that defines the subject, so that

mode of the several sacred traditions as they address themselves to the collectivity whose destiny they represent. “A supra-formal synthesis cannot be recast in terms of a formal syncretism.” Whitall N. Perry in *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (London, 1971) p. 20. See also “The Tradition and the Traditions: The Confrontation of Religious Doctrines” by Philip Sherrard in *Religious Studies*, 10, pp. 407-417.

⁵ See Henry Corbin’s “The Force of Traditional Philosophy in Iran Today” in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2 No. 1, 1968, pp. 12-26.

whereas the subject may “know” of its psycho-physical existence it nonetheless becomes a metaphysical absurdity to regard the agent as an object of knowledge in respect of the individual ego. And this implies the effective reality of a mode of consciousness whereby the intelligence may know its ultimate nature without reducing it to the subjective contingencies of individual “thoughts” and “act”. We have to conclude then that man can embody Truth in an objective fashion. In which case it becomes necessary to define this specific mode of intelligence, which it is, no less, the function of tradition, to preserve and perpetuate.

“Tradition is the *unique mode* of receiving [Truth]. We say specifically *unique mode* and not *uniform mode*, for to Tradition in its pure notion there belongs nothing formal. It does not impose on human consciousness formal guarantees of the truth of faith, but gives access to the discovery of their inner evidence. It is not the content of Revelation, but the light that reveals it; it is not the word, but the living breath which makes the words heard at the same time as the silence from which it came; it is not the Truth, but a communication of the Spirit of truth outside which the Truth cannot be received.”⁶

It becomes clear, then, that the *unique mode* of a tradition presupposes the spiritual nature of an intelligence whose function is that of discernment between the Real and the illusory, the Permanent and the impermanent and moreover implies the function of a will to secure attachment to the Real and the Permanent. And this in turn presupposes allegiance to the spiritual path of an orthodox religion the economy of whose means is guard against the artifice of individualistic improvisation and the habitual forms of inertia. Furthermore, as a form of spiritual heredity whose ontological value is attained by means of a philosophic knowledge harnessed to spiritual experience it tests the coherence of inspiration and the integrity of expression in all that man “thinks” and “does”. And this in order to hold him fast to those reverberations of the Spirit scattered like beacons throughout the dark cavern of individual consciousness.

It is clear, then, that a tradition is the intrinsic mode of a specific body of revealed truth—is indeed the integral ontological *light* by which the amplitude of the Divine Emptiness undertakes its cosmogonic unfolding into human consciousness. Like all metaphysical knowledge, tradition takes account of the inexpressible—the Silence that permits the Word—the Void that permits all manifestations. Which explains why a tradition, as a mode of consciousness, permits intelligence to hold a mirror to the Infinite in order to recognise, in accordance with cosmic principles, its affinity with It. Tradition cannot be improvised from human means for by the terms of a tradition the human state as such is by definition a mode of ignorance—a blindness that cannot, by merely having recourse to itself, overcome its own unknowingness.

We recognise, then, that in as much as a tradition is that light “outside which the Truth cannot be received”, it represents a perspective by which the human subject may overcome those

⁶ Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, 1975, pp. 151-152. The present essay is particularly indebted to Chapter 8 “Tradition and Traditions” from which the above quotation is taken.

very limitations that make him an individual. Like metaphysical intuition it implies immutable criteria with respect to intelligence and to the objectivity of the knowing subject's knowledge of the Real. For if, as is self-evident, "nothing is known except in the mode of the knower" then there can be no certainty as to the objective truth of the knower's knowledge of himself unless a distinction is possible between intellect and mind. To lump together discursive thought, intuition and "intelligence" as faculties of a vaguely defined "mind" and then to suppose that "mind" to be entirely subjective in its nature is to degrade the ontological and objective status of Truth and the intellect.

As Schuon has pointed out this subjective hypothesis harbours a fundamental inconsistency:

That man can never pass beyond what is "subjective" and human is the most gratuitous and contradictory of hypotheses. Who then defines "human subjectivity" as such? If it is human subjectivity itself which does so, then there is no such thing as objective knowledge and no definition is possible; if something other than this subjectivity does so, then it is clearly wrong to say that man cannot pass beyond it. It is clear that no definition has value apart from its objectivity, that is to say apart from absence of error; on the other hand one cannot seek to enclose the Universe in the "subjective and human" while at the same time admiring of a point of view beyond this same subjectivity which can consequently define it.

By the same token it is clear that the subject as "human subjectivity" can no more be said to "think" for itself than one can say that an eye can see "vision" itself. For, as Schuon continues,

If it is the man who defines himself, what objective value can be attached to this definition? And, if there is no objective value, no transcendent criterion, why think? If it is enough to be a man in order to be in the right, why seek to refute human errors.⁷

Thus, if the ontological status between Truth and intelligence is to be maintained then the apparent diversity of the subjective modes of assumed ground—the patterns of individual "thoughts"—must be reconciled to an objective principle, namely, the divine Intellect (*Nous*)—a consciousness without plurality which human intelligence reflects and embodies. All traditions teach how the many individual dispositions of mind are essentially consubstantial with a supra-human Intellect that transcends the "separateness" of individual consciousness to provide the true and ultimate ground of an understanding *in common*.

*

*

*

⁷ Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (trans. by Macleod Matheson) 1954, pp. 16-17.

What then of the relationship between tradition, intelligence and art? We recall that to the pure notion of tradition there belongs nothing formal. On the other hand art is itself inseparable from a formal language of some sort. In the case of a sacred art whose forms express the Divine Norm of a tradition that formal language offers a supportive context for a contemplation of the inherent spiritual riches of the tradition in question. Its forms recall and repeat the intellectual unfolding of the tradition causing the Archetypal Reality to reverberate in the human soul.

This furnishes a clue as to the importance of forms in art for it must be understood that to any form whatever, a given quality of being is inescapably attached. Which is nothing more than to say that since forms take shape under scrutiny of the intelligence they have the capacity to embody truth or falsehood—to “reveal” or “veil” truth. Moreover, whenever the creative will of the artist is inter-penetrated by genuine spiritual experience there exists a rigorous analogy between the Archetypes and their formal reflections. This analogy between the Ideas of the Spiritual world and the world of transitory forms exists according to definite cosmic principles which have the power to transmute formal manifestation as such in a symbolic expression of the Spirit. For this reason, and this reason alone, the symbolic language that is the integral expression of a tradition is not conceived according to the arbitrary impulses of the “individual talent” of the artist but is communicated by the *unique mode* of a tradition—its “living breath”.

The artist, whose practical methods are nonetheless contemplatively based, proceeds to realise in outward works certain spiritual possibilities within himself. But the forms he creates are not the expression of his “individuality” as such. Arising from the depth of his being (that mysterious realm where the ontological roots of things are plunged into Being Itself) and because of the obvious continuity between human sensibility and the forms of the natural world they become the symbolic (never the vague or “abstract”)⁸ reflection of that knower or agent who is the objective witness of the individual subjectivity. In this way the traditional artist is able to surmount the limited means of his particular talent to give expression to a reality that transcends all that is merely “human”.

⁸ It is a classic error of modernism to suppose that the intangible realities of the Spirit can be symbolically expressed in arbitrary abstractions. First of all the expression of Universal forms requires inspiration and inspiration (as opposed to its frequent surrogate, “stimulation”) is inseparable from the integral ontology of a particular tradition. Man is trans-formed by inspiration he does not manipulate it. Secondly, because of the rigorous analogy of forms that is again integral to the continuity present at every level of being the Spirit is not approached other than through the forms appropriate to man in his natural state of sensibility. Expressed otherwise; the world is not other than as it “appears”. In as much as it is of God it is God and its forms are such as they are on account of the Divine Will whose expression they remain but according to the quantitative conditions that pertain to the degree of being at which they are manifest. The Spirit is “hidden” in forms which themselves predetermine the manner of Its actualisation. This is not to deny those “abstract”, primordial symbols, the Cross, the Circle, the Spiral, etc., which are in any case consecrated according to a particular revelation.

According to the integral spirituality of a tradition the artist is able to transfigure the environment of man, in all its multitudinous distraction, with an order that reflects and recalls both the primordial economy and the Infinite Unity of the Divine Artist. Every act of formal creation in a traditional context establishes a correspondence between the cosmic and the human worlds. And since the latter is without value and meaning apart from the former an art that adequately expresses a traditional vision serves as a continual reminding of the primordial orientation of man towards a physical-metaphysical bipolarity of experience.

*

*

*

We can safely claim, then, that the word “tradition” is more likely to be misused than understood in its primal sense. In connection with the arts of our own anti-traditional culture the notion of tradition, not surprisingly, is used now as a threat of censure indicative of aesthetic obsolescence, now as the synonym for any custom whose meaning, being no longer understood, is held to have been superseded, as well as a host of other misapplications. In fact it is no longer certain whether tradition is of the least significance now that, having become an exclusively aesthetic (as opposed to a rhetorical) activity, art and its *avant garde*, with an eye to its destruction, have adopted a “progressive” view and claimed tradition as a disposable corpse. But such aberrations are merely the logical extension of that “traditionalism” that characteristically invokes the “historical sense” instituted by the humanism of the Renaissance.

The over-riding factors that determined the appearance of “humanism” were, generally speaking, the reduction of intelligence to discursive knowledge coupled with a desire to understand the world on its own terms. The first was fatal for the objectivity of the intellect while the second reduced reality to the matrix of causal appearances on the one hand and their mental formulation on the other. All this followed on from the excessive logicity of late scholastic philosophy and permitted, in time, the gradual supereminence of rational thought as the dominant and exclusive agent of all intellection. The peculiar and defining characteristic of such a substitution involves the subjectivity of mental forms as the arbiter of truth and the reduction of reality to the one same ontological level. In effect this development obscured the fact that intellectual certitude depends upon being able to grasp the qualitative essences of things rather than being able to give an exhaustive account of their external characteristics.

In such an impoverished spiritual climate the transcendent world of Archetypes becomes “idealised” and “abstracted”—the conditions that permit their representation in symbolic forms atrophies. What art gains in human expression it loses in spiritual content: namely the ability of form to express essence and the understanding of essence as involving the realisation of its hidden archetype. The systematic development of the fragmentation of knowledge (now severed from its transcendent principle of unity and homogeneity) gave rise to, amongst others, a “philosophy” of aesthetics limited to an autonomous domain of psycho-physical experience. Thus, entirely superficial and contingent factors such as “genius”, taste, style, assumed a

determining role in the understanding of art. “Progress”, having replaced tradition, was underway. That sanctuary of objectivity and immutability so delicately preserved in the traditional climate of art was abandoned in the intellectual and spiritual dissipation of subjective “feelings” and observation. The vicissitudes of apathy, distraction, day-dreaming and other forms of escape from the Real that so well express the nature of the individual *ego* could count no longer on the intuitive support of a truly spiritual and objective language of forms. The individual henceforth is imprisoned by passing fancy, by habit, by automatic action. Indeed, art comes to express just such vicissitudes of subjectivity for in the absence of actualised, spiritual imagination, the meaning of creativity itself shrinks to merely private dimensions.

It is revealing to compare this humanist “traditionalism” which effectively divides man from the primary knowledge that lends permanent intelligibility to his existence with a traditional culture. Consider a modern church, for instance, in contrast to the Medieval Cathedral. The former is the deployment of a passing taste in invention and design allied to fashionable conceptions as to the appropriate use of materials. The Cathedral, on the other hand has an intelligible structure that is assimilable, in every detail, to metaphysical principles. It is properly envisaged as a *re*-presentation of the underlying structure of the cosmic *form* and proves by that much that man recapitulates that *form* within himself. Moreover, the medieval mason, having a positive link with the Divine Norm of a tradition expresses in his work a degree of spiritual amplitude and radiance in work of perfect mastery and repose.⁹

When we contemplate traditional works of art we are struck by three things: the perfect way in which they are realised both in respect to their material nature and to their content; the self-effacing quality of their expressive means; and their style which is at once both timeless and yet characteristic of a particular cycle of history. Such a style may persist for centuries since its forms are adequate to the tasks they perform—to reveal the hidden secrets of human destiny in a symbolism that does not search but embodies what is given and therefore possessed with certainty.

The art of an anti-traditional culture, on the other hand, is seldom more than a type of repository for what is exceptional and extra-ordinary in the historical period and personality of its creator. It is neither adequate to his nature nor can it satisfy man’s real needs which are immediately practical if ultimately spiritual as concerns the possible attainment of self-realisation.

⁹ One cannot help noticing that in cultures where a Divine Norm is absent and where art is created according to the canon of a passing fashion or style there is a sort of monomania to achieve “immortality” through fame, as though any permanent value could be attached to such a conception in a world characterised by rapid change. In a traditional culture, by contrast, where the transitory nature of man’s earthly life is frankly admitted and where the question of an earthly immortality” would be a contradiction in terms art always expresses an Eternal beauty.

*

*

*

During the early part of this century a number of authors whose views on the subject of tradition were subsequently to exert widespread influence made attempts to define its nature and significance from the point of view of the practice of their art. This concern was itself symptomatic of a sense of its general loss so much so that the question of its effective survival has become a major obsession for the modern mind. At war with himself it is natural enough that man is at war with tradition. In the ensuing struggle what has been lost? Certainly all but the remotest possibility of establishing a vital relationship between art, beauty and Truth.

T. S. Eliot, was certainly expressing the standpoint of modern intellectualism, with its instinctive sense of its own impotence, and therefore opposition, to Tradition, when he wrote in his influential essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.”¹⁰ For our present purposes the perfect gloss on these last words (even if not quite expressive of what their author intended) comes from a poet of an earlier generation: “In a society that has cast out imaginative tradition, only a few people—three or four thousand out of millions—favoured by their own characters and by happier circumstances, and only then after much labour, have understanding of imaginative things, and yet ‘the imagination is the man himself’...”¹¹

The contrast is immediately apparent: for Yeats tradition is immanent and of man’s essential nature. With Eliot (for whom tradition “cannot be inherited”), despite his claim that it “...involves the historical sense...which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal”,¹² tradition is external to man and has its roots in the notion of the contemporaneous value of man’s past cultural “successes” (Eliot’s word). It is really a view dominated by time and, in as much as it implicitly formulates a philosophy of man, attempts to derive the inter-relationship between tradition, intellect and the individual from “outmoded” phases of man’s cultural past. Indeed, on the basis of this derivation Eliot went on to enunciate his own theory of creative de-personalization with its agent the “objective correlative”.

In all this the ontological roots of tradition are themselves obscured. Man cannot on the basis of anything so vague as a sense of the contemporary relevance of bits of his own created past arrive at an objective criterion of value. What man *does* can only be valued against what man is—which points to the need to take account in all thinking of the non-discursive essence of the intelligence and in all actions of the uncreated essence of the being.

With his insistence that it involves the “historical sense” and by his inclination to see tradition as belonging in some way to cultural “success”, Eliot unavoidably adulterates the notion

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 1932, p. 14.

¹¹ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies*, 1959, p. 139.

¹² Op. cit., p. 14.

of tradition. In his view the appeal of tradition is not to those principles that, like metaphysical dreams, give body to phenomenal things, but to such externalities as can be (when spiritual conditions permit) no more than shadows against which the sacred reverberates on the human plane. It is all a question of the degree to which such “dreams” are ever-present realities of knowing and being. The synthesis of a Divine Norm (as opposed to the syncretism of a profane philosophy) is determined by an interior bond that rejoins to the archetype all that is originally intrinsic to it.

At least at the time of writing his influential essay Eliot precluded such a perspective since his definition halted “at the frontier of metaphysics.” At which point he had arrived at the threshold of tradition.¹³

The limitations of Eliot’s conclusions were perhaps predetermined; firstly, by his concern to define the nature and place of tradition from within the particular perspective of European literature and, secondly, and more importantly, by an intellectual standpoint whose foundations rested on the post-Renaissance “humanist” culture with its roots in Cartesian dualism. That is to say his “critical habits” were formed by a history and a culture whose topography of “reality”, of “truth”, and of knowledge was *anti*-traditional. For, this history and this culture are characterised by their deviation from those normal civilisations where existence and knowledge is effectively attached, through the sapiential doctrines, to the Sacred which alone, and according to its intrinsic nature, confers objectivity upon intelligence.

But this earlier view of Eliot the Critic must be weighed against the later and more comprehensive view of Eliot the Poet.¹⁴ Because his earlier poems have been valued for their “modernity” and their “originality” the achievement of his later poetry is often overshadowed. In an age riddled with the superstition of “thinking for oneself”, the “freedom” of a pathless desert must seem preferable to following a Way that is overgrown through neglect. One can only suppose this to be the premise of those who regard Eliot’s “retreat” to the Church and his “falling

¹³ Doubtless “Tradition and the Individual Talent” does not represent his most mature reflections on the subject but we are here concerned primarily with its important and subsequent widespread influence. Even when, later, he came to reconsider the essay as he did in *After Strange Gods* (1934), he could only re-define tradition as “rather a way of feeling and acting which characterises a group throughout generations; and that it must be, or that many of the elements in it must be, unconscious” (p. 29). In such a definition the question of the supra-human sources of tradition is expressly shelved so that all criteria of objectivity and permanence guaranteed by that source become subject to the limitations and contingencies of human experience. This illustrates the inversion of values, so prevalent in modern thought whereby any explanation proceeds from “below upward” instead of “above downwards”. See René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and Signs of the Times* (trans. by Lord Northbourne) 1953, Chapters I and II.

¹⁴ Eliot was later to study Sanskrit and comparative religion as well as confessing to the influence of Coomaraswamy and Schuon.

back” upon religion as a sign of weakness. Was it that Eliot discovered in maturity that the Way has been prepared by countless generations in the past but is not *in* history?

Certainly the poetry reflects the gradual development of Eliot’s understanding of the relation of individual consciousness with the space-time world and beyond—from a subjective to an objective view of its status. From the nightmarish autonomy of Prufrock’s post-Cartesian psychic world through the ambivalent subjectivity of Tiresias who,

...though blind, throbbing between two lives,
Old man with wrinkled female breasts. . . .

is no “character” but yet unites all the other characters of the poem and who “sees all” and “foresuffers all” to the Universal consciousness enunciated in Heraclitus’s “although the Logos is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding” (which forms an epigraph to “Burnt Norton” and the implications of which are a recurring theme in *Four Quartets*), the shift of emphasis can be traced.

The delusion of autonomy in each “self”-experience consists precisely in consigning the conscious intelligence to operating exclusively of the plane of subjective awareness within the matrix of “events” on the temporal plane. In the impotence of Prufrock’s

Do I dare
Disturb the Universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will revise

can we not discern the “thinking” individual who, on the basis of his private psycho-mental awareness, is locked in the self-enclosed network of a passive mind at the mercy of its own ever more reflexive and attenuated interrelationships?

It is tradition that provides the objective context whereby the independent reality of the separate ego must be vanquished. For only in the context of a tradition can there be found the means of discernment that serves to bind man to that innate principle which itself links man to the Eternal. Only in the passage away from private and habitual experience can the limitations that psycho-physical knowledge imposes upon the mind be overcome, as Eliot acknowledges in “The Dry Salvages”:

Men’s curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime’s death in Love,

Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

More concerned with learning than with wisdom, with mental concepts than with metaphysical penetration, with *sophistication* than with truth, that “searching curiosity” that absorbs the mind into the mirrored surface of its own protean experience at the same time obscures the uncreated essence of the intellect upon which, like a screen, all knowledge and experience is projected.

There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies
For the pattern is new in every moment
And every moment is a new and shocking
Valuation of all we have been.
 (“East Coker”).

When the contents of that “knowledge derived from experience” are studied for what they can be made to yield in relation to one another it is as if, mesmerised by its own subjective prolongations, the mind is too bemused ever to question the objective status of that which occupies it. Again, in the sapiential context of a tradition the divine ground of the intellect is admitted at the outset as the *modus operandi* of Wisdom and the need for its actualisation is taken for granted as the necessary condition of a truly objective knowledge.

There is a need, then, to acknowledge intelligence apart from its reflection in subjective “thinking”, a recognition that is effected in the humility of recognising the infinite and common essence of all being.

The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.
 (“East Coker”).

For the action of humility destroys at the roots all those notions derived from the matrix of accrued experience whose web so cunningly weaves the postulation of its own self-centered reality. Humility attacks the illusory identification of the “knowing” subject with subjectivity itself for only in the plenitude of the moment when the Knower is the sole object of all knowledge is the only possible wisdom achieved—the chasm between knowing and being finally vanquished.

In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
 You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
 You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.
("East Coker").

In the uncreated essence of all subjectivity is the sole objective end:

In my beginning is my end.

In the light of this brief discussion what conclusion might be drawn? It is this: If we are to acknowledge the importance of Eliot's views on tradition then we must do so not by turning to their formulation in his earlier critical writing but in discovering their expression in *Four Quartets* where they are at their most profound and mature. Indeed, here, as near as ever he did, Eliot implicitly declares himself an *anti*-modernist. If Eliot began his work nearer to the modernist view that the artist attracts "worship", then he certainly ended closer to the view of tradition that the artist serves *him* who would pray.

*

*

*

Study of the ancient and oral traditions of poetry yields extensive evidence that its practice was related to divine inspiration. This alone indicates the universality of the link between the past and the plane of divine energies whose imprint upon the human senses is communicated by the eternal Archetypes. Everywhere art is the expression of a sacred reality—the Delphic Oracle, Plato's *Ion*, Caedmon, Hesiod, *The Poetic Edda*, The Brahmins of India. Here we descry the spiritual adventures of man; those preludic journeys that prepare him for the place "from whence he came"—the life beyond the "time" and "place" of his earthly existence. Everywhere there is the constant attempt, founded upon traditional spiritual knowledge, to understand the phenomenal world in terms of its hierophantic and "hidden" essence. For traditional man everywhere the generated world is instinct with the sacred reality of the Spirit. For him, as for that most traditional of modern poets, Blake, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time". As in all things of a spiritual nature it comes down to the state of preparedness of the individual. For since "nothing is known except in the mode of the knower" then, as Blake well knew, the "fool sees not the same tree as the wise man sees".

As we have endeavoured to show, this “mode of the knower”, involves more than merely subjective experience, for such experience would be nothing were it not for the objective status and divine ground of the intelligence. Discursive intellect, mirroring that ground in “making sense” of phenomenal reality, has need of a point of reference beyond that reality in order to set the seal of *meaning* on what it discovers. The *ultimate* as well as logical context for an understanding of the world of time and space is one in which their origin is taken into account. Time can have no beginning *in* time; space no extensive reality *from* space itself. If we believe, as we do if only unwittingly in taking an exclusively phenomenal view of things, that the Absolute is unknowable, then the intelligence must abandon its ultimate and objective function—to distinguish the real from the illusory, truth from falsity.

We know of no traditional civilisation that, having once become “modernised”, returned to its former conditions. If such were to happen then we could be sure that there would be a heavy rejection of those values that, at the present time, seem to be the natural concomitants of the verb “to civilise”. Which is nothing more than to admit that wherever we can claim to have a true understanding of tradition, far from being the arbiters, we feel ourselves judged.