

# TRADITION AND INFLUENCE



**Carl Tighe**

The Latin word *tradere* – from which we derive the word tradition - was made up of two words *trans* and *dare* - literally *dare to cross* or *to hand over*, and it had several important senses:

- ◆ to hand something over
- ◆ to deliver something
- ◆ to trade
- ◆ to hand down knowledge
- ◆ to pass on a doctrine
- ◆ to surrender or betray

This same root word gave rise to several other English words including *tread* and *trot*, indicating that *tradition* is connected on some historical level to the idea of following a track or pathway.

*Tradere* is also the root of the English words *betray*, *traitor* & *treason*, although the sense of a connection to these words now seems to have been lost to modern English. But *tradere* is linked to the word *translate*. Shakespeare, whether he knew Latin or not, seems to have been aware of this element of betrayal in the roots of *translate*. He uses it to great effect in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - 'Oh Bottom, thou art translated'. He also makes use of this sense of the word to different effect when Othello uses *traduce*, meaning to misrepresent, lie or change.

These meanings are all part of Shakespeare's understanding of this group of words, but it is in Shakespeare's lifetime that the word *tradition* assumes the main meanings we now recognise: the handing down of knowledge, actions or habits of mind, respect for things, established forms and habits, a way of life, handed down from father to son. And Shakespeare used the word in this way in *Henry V* (V i) and *Richard II* (III ii).

But there are other aspects to the word. In the late 14th century, Wycliffe, in one of the earliest recorded uses of the word, wrote of a 'silfe made' *tradicion*, a suitably enigmatic and contradictory entry into the language. The OED has 15th century references to 'a trewe tradicion', and at the end of the 16th century to 'old songs delivered... by tradition from their fathers'. Frances Bacon at the start of the 17th century referred to 'transferring our knowledge to others' as 'Tradition or Delivery'. And this is the meaning that passed into modern English, the one we are most familiar with. The historian E. H. Carr wrote that historical consciousness, history itself:

....begins with the handing down of tradition; and tradition means the carrying of the habits and lessons of the past into the future.<sup>1</sup>

In Roget's *Thesaurus* a whole series of related words are supplied including: *narrative*, *immemorial*, *orthodox* & *conformity*.

---

<sup>1</sup> E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, 1964), 108.

What are the characteristics of a traditional society? And how traditional are we? It is possible to list some of the major characteristics of the traditional societies of, for example, Africa: agriculture; using simple tools and technology; a crop rotation system; craft industries; arts (weaving, woodworking, blacksmithing, oral poetry); local produce markets with women traders; different languages and ethnic groups; tribal empires; a social structure that includes tribal élites, chieftainship, kingship, clans, a peasantry and slavery/serfdom; myths of origin with claims for descent groups from named ancestors; oral genealogies as a form of history and record of ownership; localised government; village communities; land ownership by descent groups; bride wealth as part of local alliances; family gods; facial scars; taboos; clothing to identify groups etc.; witchcraft; 'traditional' medicine;; community elders; women as property; polygamy; generosity as a sign of wealth.<sup>2</sup>

Most European societies have lost their traditional lifestyle. We are far removed from these things, but we still have a vague idea of what these things are, even if we only learned about them at school. But several vestiges of our traditional life have survived - mainly in superstitions, the meaning of dreams, belief in ghosts and fortune tellers, reading tea leaves, horoscopes, lucky numbers, lucky charms, bracelets and ritual acts for good fortune. And Britain, because it was the first industrial power and the first urban society, is probably the furthest of all the European societies from a traditional existence. Britain's cities lost their links to the country and to traditional rural culture very early. For us this is normal. The hard thing for us to appreciate is that the rest of the world is not like Britain.

Clearly in Britain much that is labelled 'traditional' is no longer anything to do with us. Royalty hardly concerns us: we don't even stand for the national anthem. And the traditions of *Ye Olde Englande* are hardly ours - we don't practice archery on the village green, or dance around the Maypole, we don't duck scolds or burn witches. Because of the BSE scare and the rise of vegetarianism, most of us do not touch *Ye roast beef of Olde Englande*. Most of us can't readily identify herbs or give the names and habits of animals or birds. The countryside is a rather worrying place. Tradition, for most of us, is now linked vaguely with the Heritage Industry (including the Royal Family), Fox Hunting, Conservatism, folk music, CAMRA, and anything labelled 'natural' or 'organic'. Basically tradition means Christmas dinner – which was invented by the Victorians.

One way of looking at the canon is to say that it is a 'line' of writing that stretches back through time, and that it constitutes a kind of 'handing on' of styles, ideas, discussions, identities and continuities. Taken together these things help us not only to define a particular tradition of writing, but to define a literary culture, to set that within a national history and contribute to a cultural identity. A literary tradition says this is us, our history, who we are.

---

<sup>2</sup> Drawn from: P. C. Lloyd, *Africa in Social Change* (Harmondsworth, 1969); U. Maclean, *Magical Medicine: A Nigerian Case Study* (Harmondsworth, 1971).

The playwright Ben Jonson spoke of following the literary models of the ancients 'as guides, not commanders'.<sup>3</sup> For some this was to take the idea of tradition too lightly. Arturo Pérez-Reverte, for example, wrote of the obsessive traditions of honour and loyalty associated with fencing in 19th century Spain:

Beauty, beauty with a capital B, can be found only in the cult of tradition, in the rigorous exercise of those gestures and words that have been repeated and preserved by men down the centuries.... We must always remember that beauty resides in preserving precisely what others allow to fall away.<sup>4</sup>

The preservation of tradition is often seen as an attempt to pickle things as they were during some lost golden age.

T. S. Eliot spoke of tradition as a creative and informing power operating on the poet specifically as a craftsman.<sup>5</sup> He did not think of it as operating in the same way on the generally cultivated reader or cultured person. However, he did not really get down to identifying the factors in tradition that operated on the writer to produce new works of literature out of or in relation to the works of earlier writers. To a certain extent this was inevitable since each individual writer takes from the past what they want or need and argues with it in private in their own way to produce new works that may appear to have very little relation to what has gone before except that they are in the same language and the argument may be buried deep within the language of their creation.

Tradition does not encourage us to believe that things change. But traditions are not rigid. If they are to survive in some form or another, they must be flexible. Don't we always invent tradition? And don't we always re-invent the traditions that are of most use to us, letting other traditions go quietly into oblivion? The historian Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out that almost all traditions currently known to us are no more than a couple of generations old. Like Scottish tartan, re-invented by a Lancashire cloth manufacturer, almost everything we now regard as traditional, was 'invented' fairly recently.<sup>6</sup> For example, Ian McKewan in his script for the film *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983) mentions that this traditional meal, of bread, cheese and pickles, is not age old as its image suggests, but was dreamed up in the 1960s as an ad-campaign to sell cheese and pickles.

Tradition, it seems, looks in two directions. It looks back to the past and to the examples provided there. But it also looks forward to see how what it knows at present might develop and extend what has already been done. For writers of all kinds tradition is one of the biggest blocks to creativity. How can I write a book as good as the ones I read? Can I step outside the accepted canon? Has it all been said before? How fully can I emerge or get away from a tradition to become an individual writing for myself? Am I

---

<sup>3</sup> Ben Jonson, 'Discoverie XXI', in: *Jonson's Works* ed. Gifford Cunningham (London, 1875).

<sup>4</sup> A. Pérez-Reverte, *The Fencing Master* (Madrid, 1988; London, 1999), 110-11.

<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in *Selected Prose* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1953), 21-30.

<sup>6</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition* (London, 1983).

reinterpreting what has already been done? Can I ever hope to be absolutely new in what I write? If I do write something new, absolutely new, will anybody understand it?

A tradition can be something noble, and it can be something fake. On the other hand, however, the survival of something does not necessarily denote an intact tradition. The persistence of older forms of speech or 'traditional' practices like community shows or well dressing, particularly in village communities, does not indicate a powerful and vibrant continuance of an earlier tradition, but simply that the tradition is not altogether dead. People often appeal to the idea of tradition to imply that an age-old practice is more legitimate than a more recent habit. For example when Prince Charles was invested as the Prince of Wales the British establishment wanted to make claims on notions of heritage, tradition and ancient right. But to do so it had to invent a ceremony that used all kinds of archaic language, because, although they wanted to sanction the arrangement by appeal to tradition (the first Prince of Wales was proclaimed by Edward I in 1301), the proposed investiture ceremony had in fact no precedent, no political legitimacy in the eyes of many Welsh people (particularly the Welsh speakers), and no appropriate modern ceremonial language - certainly not in Welsh. So palace officials invented a traditional sounding ceremony stuffed with references to 'fealty' and 'obsequance' and phrases like 'liege lord', which had no modern meaning or content.

\*

It is often remarked that great writers are also great readers... Often reading a book leads us to another book, and perhaps even to writing a book. Sometimes reading a poem leads us to write a poem. We may call this literary history, influence or inspiration. These are simply different ways at looking how writers affect one another and lead each other to respond and think about certain things. We can't always trace these lines of thought, response and influence in any simple way. Sometimes they are hard to spot, but in total, over time, a 'line of thought' gives us part of a literary tradition.

Here is a recent example. Thomas Hardy's poem, 'In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'' was written in January 1916. In this poem a farmer leads his horse as he farms his fields: as he does so, a young man and his lover walk by. This simple poem was written by Hardy for a Conservative paper, the *Saturday Review*, in January 1916. Hardy was asked for a heartening poem at a time when public opinion was turning against the war. In a way it gave rise to Edward Thomas' poem, 'As the team's head-brass' written later that year in July 1916, just before he requested front line duty. He was sent to Arras where he was killed a short while later in 1917.

Many years later Seamus Heaney revisited both these poems with, 'In a Field'. Heaney was invited by the poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, to contribute to a memorial anthology marking the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. She asked poets to respond to poetry, letters and diary entries from the time. Heaney chose Edward Thomas's great poem, 'As The Team's Head Brass'. In response Heaney wrote 'In a Field', completed in June 2013, two months before his own death.

### **Thomas Hardy, In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations' (January 1916)**

I

Only a man harrowing clods  
In a slow silent walk  
With an old horse that stumbles and nods  
Half asleep as they stalk.

II

Only thin smoke without flame  
From the heaps of couch-grass;  
Yet this will go onward the same  
Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight  
Come whispering by:  
War's annals will cloud into night  
Ere their story die.

### **Edward Thomas, 'As the Team's Head-brass' (July 1916)**

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn  
The lovers disappeared into the wood.  
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm  
That strewed the angle of the fallow, and  
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square  
Of charlock. Every time the horses turned  
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned  
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,  
About the weather, next about the war.  
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,  
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed  
Once more.

The blizzard felled the elm whose crest  
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,  
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'  
'When the war's over.' So the talk began -  
One minute and an interval of ten,  
A minute more and the same interval.  
'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps?'  
'If I could only come back again, I should.'

I could spare an arm, I shouldn't want to lose  
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,  
I should want nothing more... Have many gone  
From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.  
Only two teams work on the farm this year.  
One of my mates is dead. The second day  
In France they killed him. It was back in March,  
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if  
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'  
'And I should not have sat here. Everything  
Would have been different. For it would have been  
Another world.' 'Ay, and a better, though  
If we could see all all might seem good.' Then  
The lovers came out of the wood again:  
The horses started and for the last time  
I watched the clods crumble and topple over  
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

### **Seamus Heaney, 'In a Field' (2013)**

And there I was in the middle of a field,  
The furrows once called 'scores' still with their gloss,  
The tractor with its hoisted plough just gone  
Snarling at an unexpected speed  
Out on the road. Last of the jobs,  
The windings had been ploughed, furrows turned  
Three ply or four round each of the four sides  
Of the breathing land, to mark it off  
And out. Within that boundary now  
Step the fleshy earth and follow  
The long healed footprints of one who arrived  
From nowhere, unfamiliar and de-mobbed,  
In buttoned khaki and buffed army boots,  
Bruising the turned-up acres of our back field  
To stumble from the windings' magic ring  
And take me by a hand to lead me back  
Through the same old gate into the yard  
Where everyone has suddenly appeared,  
All standing waiting.