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Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

Title

'Tradition' and the Solitary Singer: Taking Exception to T.S. Eliot's Literary Legacy

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2qk211z8>

Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 21(1)

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Publication Date

2008

DOI

10.5070/B3211007660

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When T.S. Eliot speaks of *tradition* in his pivotal discussion of “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” it seems clear that he is arguing with a specific frame of reference in mind, namely, that of the literary history of Europe, and of England in particular. Nevertheless, he does not neglect to formulate his assertions along altogether universal lines (a sense of his theoretical comprehensiveness is conveyed in sweeping phrases such as “no poet, no artist of any kind...”), making it both possible and promising to attempt a comparison of the poetic philosophies uttered by this formidable poet-scholar on the one hand, and by that other American bard, the lounging, shifty song-writer who is a “free channel of himself,” and whose innovative synthesis of the person and the poem is proclaimed by nearly every verse pertinent to these themes, on the other. Applying Eliot’s ideas of tradition to Walt Whitman is useful in illustrating the enigmatic nature and “strangeness” of this earlier poet, as well as in highlighting the ambiguities and flexibilities of Eliot’s seemingly compact text. Though the two figures are apparently joined in a relation of philosophic polarity, it becomes evident upon closer examination that Whitman’s poetic convictions in fact rework a number of Eliot’s affirmations about literary ‘timelessness,’ while unbeknownst or, more precisely, unacknowledged by Eliot, exhibiting a potential to inscribe themselves within that very theory which might single Whitman out irremediably as the “exception to the rule.”

Both poets articulate a common concern with the evolution and constancy of ‘great’ poetry through time, however, it is Whitman who modifies in advance, and in not entirely antithetical ways, Eliot’s often ‘deathly’ and highly retrospective regard for literary temporality, opting for a prescient and notably more ‘lively’ conception of his art.¹ Throughout the brilliantly ambitious preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman provides an expansive and artful account of his understanding of poetry and its theoretical placement over time, at once a progressive and a salutatory process of acknowledging past excellence midst an ever onward trek. Moreover, he remarks at length upon the kind of past-conscious standpoint Eliot would articulate in the next century when he reasons, “Past and present and future are not disjointed but joined. The great poet forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is” (Whitman, 7). Although he relents slightly in this example from the customarily defiant stance toward precipatory influence that typifies much of his work, it is notable that Whitman annexes (or more specifically, anticipates) Eliot’s belated aesthetic orientation and fashions out of it a personal awareness of art’s mutability over time. He attributes to this chronological understanding an undeniably futuristic element, which is to say that Whitman’s poetic thinking is in large degree an anticipation and eye ever toward the future, though he does not shy from a wide collaboration of temporal tropes in his poetry, masterfully illustrated by the poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” Speaking presumably from the stance of Walt Whitman, the man, he addresses in this lyric an audience whose particular salience arises from their specific futurity: “On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross are more curious to me than you suppose, / And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might

¹ I use the terms “lively” and “deathly” consciously. That is, far from suggesting that Eliot seeks to administer a theory of unsavory (read: necrophilic) devotion to the past, my purpose is instead to uncover the ways in which his theory itself is embedded in such figuratively ambivalent and often dismissive discourse, that it displays a curious want of attention to the projected value of art and its customs. In this sense, notwithstanding his perception of the past as a living phenomenon, Eliot centers rhetorically upon a rearward trope almost to the exclusion of the more augural (and vitally charged) posture held by Whitman.

suppose” (Whitman, 134). It seems reasonable to conclude from Whitman’s cognizance of his future readers, as well as his implicit consciousness of the historical operation of his poetry as a mode of documenting for those readers the realities of his contemporary moment, that the poet’s inspiration is derived substantially from what is yet to come, perhaps mitigating what has previously transpired. Put concretely, at the same time as the poet “learns the lesson, he places himself where the future becomes present” (Whitman, 7).

With regard to preceding custom, then, it is clear that Whitman postulates his artistry as acknowledging yet distinct from past modalities, a position that is confirmed by the allegorical and vital scene in his earliest prologue in which “the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house ... perceives that it was fittest for its days” (Whitman, 3). Of note is the marriage, here, between past forms and methods, and bodily death, a parallel Eliot expressly, if inadvertently, corroborates in his assertion that “you must set [the poet], for contrast and comparison, among the dead” (“Tradition,” 1092). The term “dead,” both a designation of mortal condition as well as a chronological reference, evokes Whitman’s particular use of death as a symbol of something antiquated or anachronistic by its very uselessness. Whitman regards what is dead as a “corpse,” or a body – literary and carnal – devoid of presence and relevance in the actualized now. Whereas Eliot’s phrases are unmistakably agonistic (he advocates a “continual surrender,” “self-sacrifice” and an “extinction of personality”), Whitman is wholly for a poetry that is alive with its poet, a poetry in which its creator exists continuously from present to future and evades denomination as ‘dead.’ This is especially germane to the subject-object fusion that Whitman enumerates on more than one occasion, from which inclusive commentary it may be surmised that the poet *necessarily* incorporates his poetry. His dramatic exultation, “And of these one and all I weave the song of myself,” thematizes the interlacing of world and poem with his innermost being (Whitman, 27). This poetic amalgamation of body and work, intricately and intimately linked, is, moreover, little doubted from his reassurance in “So Long!” that “this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man ... / It is I you hold, and who holds you” (Whitman, 266). Indeed, Whitman brought the subject of the body into poetry when conventional prosody at the time called for the eminence of the spirit, and when, later, Eliot would conjecture that “*the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates,*” or the more definitive the space between physical and non-material presence (“Tradition,” 1095, original italics). Whitman did not, like Eliot, perpetrate experiments with the surreal, but rather with the real, and he interrogated norms that proscribed words such as “pimple” or “semen” from a poem. For Whitman, this bodily terminology was equivalent to his innovational poetic vision, insuring that the poet’s body became the body poetic.

Hence, if life is what carries art forward (and toward a perceived repository of talent), then Whitman’s efforts to imbue his text with his own life counteract and question the underpinnings of a theory carefully grounded in its regard for the past as an incontrovertible bastion of artistic culture. The past is of course signified metonymically by Whitman as death itself. Whitman, in essence, stakes the claim that aesthetic genius does not, as a matter of fact, lie in the accumulated aesthetic ability of bygone eras, but instead is yet to come. Furthermore, in a turn from thematic to linguistic form, Whitman persists in his eschewal of the deceased “corpus” of traditional literature so advocated by

Eliot by grappling upon the grammatical level with that fatality which exists as part and parcel of the written word. As Roger Gilbert posits:

Theorists like Derrida and Blanchot have taught us to see the deathliness of all writing; conversely speech, particularly in the active mode [of] ... performative utterance, returns us always to an originating life-force exerting its will in and through language. Whitman's struggle with death is thus figured in the poem as a struggle ... to cross *out* of writing and into speech, into a form of language associated with life and power, not death and absence (Gilbert, 341)

This transition from dead, or written language, toward vocative expression, is effected in part through the strategy of ecphrasis, or a crying out.² Whitman, in employing this technique, can be seen to work through the acknowledgment of death, both as literal demise, but also as the limitation that mortality (seen as printed, confining words) imposes upon his forward-moving vision. In other words, Whitman seeks to shed the asphyxiating and hallowed nature of past tradition – suffocating because sealed linguistically (and historically) in printed language, hallowed because the denomination “past,” or its “historical” aspect, according to Whitman, appears to peremptorily legitimize art – which Eliot ascribes to the poets of the preceding eras: “the historical sense compels a man to write ... 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 ... order” (“Tradition,” 1093). Whitman labors instead toward a continually forward-bent and contemporary status of verse, achieving this aim linguistically by the move toward an intransigent poetry, or one which exists ceaselessly in the reader’s “now” as spoken versus penned meaning. This movement toward the spoken word is of a pair with his desire to transmit an immediate self (and thus meaning) toward his reader, and which hinges upon the fact that his is not a work preserved in the past, but one that strives ever forward toward his object, and properly eludes the anchored points of reference upon which Eliot touches as valid items of knowledge (Shakespeare Homer, Dante, etc.). Whitman’s craft, then, shrugs off this Eliotian conscription to a specific moment by operating throughout time and precisely *because it is still with us*; it is his very futuristic quality, his refusal to “stay put” and remain in the past, which enables his poems to put pressure upon Eliot’s theory of tradition. Alive poetry, or poetry that is both immortal and advancing, must therefore include both the absolute and the actual presence of the poet if it is to have any merit; for Eliot, “poetry is not ... the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (“Tradition,” 1097). The conflicted, oddly desolate idiom in which this statement is couched (“escape”) indicates an affinity, if not outright correlation, with the discourse of death. It can be concluded, in brief, that the two Americans, one expatriate in the Old World, the other loudly panegyric of the New, appear to square off along the same kind of vital and aesthetic dynamics that informed their choice of residence.

In his unequivocal rejection of the kind of tradition T.S. Eliot would make a convincing case for nearly seven decades later, Whitman does in fact posit his own theory of the fluid interface between

² One can readily observe this favored poetic device in the metonymic speech-act “Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta!” or in the apostrophic imperative “Receive the summer sky, you water!” that pepper “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and which compel a reconstruction of the statement as vigorous oral command, in opposition to mere thematic and formal intricacy devoid of what Eliot terms “personality” and what Whitman has already correlated with vitality (Whitman, 139).

past, present, and, most importantly, future works of art. In describing Emerson, the most immediate figure of long-standing tradition to whom he has access, and whom Whitman would encounter and emulate personally and poetically throughout his many years as the singer of America, he still has this to say regarding his self-owned 'Master's' poetic tendencies: "Emerson is sane and sweet-breathed, but always literary, always smacks of the libraries. Precious, indeed, are the libraries, yet they must know their place. In Literature, at its very greatest there is singularly little or no vestige of literature."³ Albeit delivered in an artistically sanctimonious, self-promotional vein that belies Whitman's true reverence and esteem for Emerson, in this endeavor to disengage himself from acknowledged convention, Whitman suggestively distinguishes between literature – the works of man or woman that form a recognized canon – and Literature – the abstract notion of all artistic writing. Literature, it may be inferred, appears independently of referential specificity; it does not hold communion with particular forms or conventions but stands apart as an example of eternally "great work," irregardless of standard or transmitted practice. This seems to be a singular disavowal of the kind of argument Eliot is making in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he cites not a few examples of the types of artistic references one should 'collect' in the library of the intellect, naming "change [as] a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen" ("Tradition," 1094). Mental accumulation and recognition of the stellar works of the past clearly does not suppose either their open or downplayed presence within a poem, but it does suggest something of an innate interaction and dialect with precedence that is not so defining a characteristic in his fellow poet's artistic vision. As he claims in "Song of Myself," Whitman is a sort of artistic medium, aptly figured as a river, for the inspired communication and flow of knowledge. He explains, "through me the afflatus surging and surging, . . . through me the current and index" (Whitman, 34). Whitman's more ubiquitous conception of art, that is, art that embraces a plethora of diverse "currents," and which ultimately proceeds toward an acknowledged yet unknown end, devalues this call for an accrued litany of literature (and other artistic works) and functions by segueing nicely with his claim for the reincarnatory spirit that characterizes the passage of literary time.

In the opening line of his first edition foreword our poet auspiciously claims that "America does not repel the past... the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms," forming and fusing an almost renascent logic with his aesthetic vision (Whitman, 3). That is, in his disavowal of simply deterring the past and gesturing instead, by means of such rhetoric as "passed into," toward a register of evolution or transmission, Whitman departs from an Eliotian take on tradition as a fixed idea (also mutating from age to age, yet in an identifiable, structured way that operates according to those crucial Arnoldian "touchstones" of accepted worth or merit) and reasons instead for a kind of vibrant force or creative energy that perpetually advances from past to present, and back again, continuously, assuming new forms or shapes as it moves ever forward with life itself. The poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is itself a visual celebration of the fleeting scenes that pass before our poet and which he admits will have disappeared in the future, or our present. He dedicates an entire section to this far-sighted communion with the reader:

³ The Feinberg-Whitman Collection, the Library of Congress.

These, and all else, were to me the same as they are to you;
 I project myself a moment to tell you—also I return

.....
 Others the same—others who look back on me, because I looked forward to them,
 The time will come, though I stop here today and tonight (Whitman, 136)

This poem, then, affords us a rare insight into the thoughts of a poet speaking from the past, and it is worth noting that Whitman does not seek to anchor or make his readers beholden to him as a member of that bygone scene. Rather, his aim is simply to remind the reader of all that he represents, and to “return” afterward, acknowledging in that single refrain (“also I return”) that he is “fittest for his days” and makes no artistic claim upon his recipients, gently rejecting in this fashion Eliot’s nostalgic theoretical orientation by embodying that very “past” tradition, and claiming its insulation, of which Eliot speaks. The later poet does in truth maintain tradition’s continuous modification over time, yet even this claim entails a rather fixed aspect, inconsistent with the shifting, transitional dynamic of art according to Whitman and who consciously rejects the view that tradition exerts a deadening weight on literature. The past ways are, taken singly, cadaverous, since this vital energy has passed out of them, and we must recognize that “what was fittest for its days” is not so true for contemporary and impending, or imminent, cultural and artistic practice.

By contrast, Eliot’s notion of novelty appears in this light to replace a blanketing concept of tradition with something that looks and feels suspiciously like a heavily structured tradition. In rendering his ‘novel’ conceptualization of literary standards, Eliot declares, “To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art” (“Tradition,” 1093). Through a somewhat complicated set of axioms, Eliot designates artistic “freshness” as proof of its innate conformity; that is, the very departure from normative artistic practice effects its inclusion within the accepted system of (innovative) creative production. In short, inventiveness is merely an attribute of convention, whilst Whitman’s newness, product of a renaissance of the poetic capacity, attains true freshness in that the past has effectively been laid to rest, permitting an authentic generation and surge of new art; there is, under this amorphous theory, no “standard” from which to depart, unlike that of Eliot.

In their common attempt to explicate “great” poetry, Eliot and Whitman diverge topically in their arguments concerning the imaginative position of the poet, as the former’s treatise, shorn of accommodating language toward a body of literary production that is non-European, contravenes Whitman’s blazoned championing of America. Although their ideas work in many ways against each other, in turning a blind eye to the distinct geographical spaces and historical difference between North America and England, he omits to imagine a nodal point at which the two definitions may potentially be reconciled. Whitman’s understanding of poetic greatness is characteristically expansive and cosmic in scope, whereas Eliot expresses a more careful and tapered valuation; for the latter, “No artist produces great art ... by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly” (“Tradition,” 1089). This assertion, tending toward an objective perception of aesthetic craftsmanship, and which does not seem to adequately answer Whitman’s own exceptionality, suggests a code of literary value that calls for a deeper evaluation of its theoretical assumptions. Whitman, in

particular, is one of those artists capable of producing “great art,” yet who notably eludes categorization within Eliot’s system of sundered self and verse. Whitman not only constitutes in large measure his most inherent identity through the vehicle of poetic song, but makes it his prerogative to do so. Furthermore, the word “indirectly” connotes personal absence, while Whitman the poet is at hand, in the most absolute sense, throughout the pages of his poetry, his cordial company with the reader quite literally emanating from every page. It is moreover notable that Whitman’s early verse, prior to the inaugural publication of *Leaves of Grass*, and cast in a language divorced from its creative speaker, leaves something to be desired in its belabored imitation of classical models. For instance, in his first published poem entitled “Our Future Lot,” a configuration with features very clearly redolent of William Cullen Bryant’s celebrated, canonical composition “Thanatopsis,” Whitman meditates rather uninspiringly upon death: “O, powerless is this struggling brain / To pierce this mighty mystery; / In dark, uncertain awe it waits / The common doom—to die!” (Loving, 43). In spite of his measured pentameter, the observance of a formal ‘tradition’ of his time, and filtered through the mortal distress of a removed speaker, Whitman fails to procure the transformative manifestation of meaning Eliot outlines in a chemical metaphor as the interaction of the mind, or “shred of platinum,” with oxygen and sulphur dioxide: “This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged” (“Tradition,” 1095). Under these criteria, which outline the inexorable ‘reaction’ between, on the one hand, the element of inspiration and, on the other, the removal of the personal influence from the poetic process, Whitman’s ousting of self ultimately falls flat.

It is true, after all, that when Eliot speaks of combustion he is referring to the concoction of a new substance, and not an artificial blend, that is, not the kind of imping of established patterns that Whitman here pretends. Yet Eliot’s theory tends to attenuate the originary, vitally productive and life-charged poetic philosophy by which Whitman is guided. Indeed, Eliot’s conception of art is not dissimilar to the philosophy of his Spanish avant-garde contemporary and fellow critic, José Ortega y Gasset, whose famous tract, “La deshumanización del arte” or “Dehumanization of Art” directly succeeded Eliot’s text and outlines the critical task of separating art from a Romantic as well as modern artistic consciousness in which a persistent mirroring of life vividly marks the style of both movements. For Ortega, “Vida es una cosa, poesía es otra” / “Life is one thing, poetry is another” (Ortega y Gasset). In a striking instance of theoretical conformity, Eliot precedes Ortega by coining the term “depersonalization,” explaining that “it is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science” (“Tradition,” 1095). Although his metaphor is primarily a chemical one, his use of the surgical phrase “operate” bespeaks an argument informed by multiple categories of scientific inquiry, most especially that of the medical field. Eliot’s discourse itself, in short, is aligned with the sterile practice of medicine (and practice of criticism) that holds as its basic tenet the dissection of art. That is, the relation between the scientist-critic who figuratively opens poetry to examination converts art into a kind of cadaver, or dead matter subject to scientific inspection. Of course, this is a common protest among artists who resent critical infringement upon their work, as well as, I think, a bit of an exaggeration in Eliot’s case; however, the fundamental language of systematic investigation meshes well with Eliot’s often ‘deadened’ posture toward the unique circumstance of Whitman.

Finally, if Eliot situates poetic production within the disinfected remove of a hermetically sealed, depersonalized lab, in marked opposition to the intensely solipsistic self-embrace at once aligned with the embrace of the “roughs” and the real, then Whitman’s poetic delivery, by choice and by practice, as person and poet (which to him are one), occurs in the open air. He vows, in “Song of Myself,” that “I will never again mention love or death inside a house, / And I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air (Whitman, 62). Thus, in Whitman’s view, person and poetry cannot be divided from each other in a relation of hostile dualism, as several of Eliot’s precepts encourage and frankly voice as necessary (read: the “escape” of poetry from personality). Rather, according to the perennially democratic bard, the two are commingled, each assisting one another in the creative course.

At the same time, in Whitman’s encapsulation of national identity within the boundaries of his text, the union of poet and work is foregrounded as not only inevitable but imperative. For Eliot, “it is inevitable that any work on American literature should contain a good deal of stuffing ... The great figures of American literature are peculiarly isolated,”⁴ due ostensibly to the infrequency of exemplary work and the rarity of their excursions abroad, as well as their cultural seclusion (*American Literature*, 236). The term “isolation” does in fact denote here both literary and geographical remoteness, suggesting the North American nation’s manifold removals from literary as well as cultural ‘growth’ or developments rooted in the Old World. It is also worthwhile to point out that this method of viewing the United States is apt to discount the rest of America. Eliot does not use “isolated” to signify the existence of a promising antecedent; rather, he employs this phrase in a distinctly pejorative sense. Far from valorizing North America as promising territory for ingenuity, Eliot sees such isolation as synonymous with barrenness, a wasteland, perforce, and giving way to false implantations (“stuffing,” or metaphorical weeds) that ultimately stunt the value of its works overall and, more precisely, effectively inhibit its creative faculty. In other words, where Whitman sees opportunity for a new start, Eliot sees a literature in its desolate infancy.

Eliot is nevertheless not insensible to America’s “shallow” tradition (his essay is in large degree a response to this depthlessness) and thus seems to intentionally disregard such cultural and generic rawness, whereas Whitman, extolling the virtue of classical absence, constitutes himself at its very center. Why such marked divergence from two patently gifted poets in search of innovative, subversive and uniquely self-defining methods? The answer may be educed in part from Eliot’s own comment that “Literature must be judged by language, not place,” an intuitive remark whose counterclaim offers a more penetrating approach to Whitman’s richly generative material, and indeed to a number of America’s early literary works (“Disjecta Membra,” 55). That is to say, the first step toward a textual tradition (to be realized at some unspecified but assured moment in the future) according to Whitmanian precepts is an awareness of the context from which that tradition stems; that is, a national consciousness. For Whitman, personality is bridged to poetry through the demands of nation, in which emerging national selfhood *must* be articulated as inextricably joined to individual character, and in

⁴ Eliot would later recant this diagnosis, but not before implicitly deconstructing a Whitmanian practice of poetry, according to which Whitman ironically, though loosely, assimilates. I therefore take Mr. Eliot at his word and according to his theoretical disposition at this moment.

order to forge an autonomous American literary logic founded primarily upon the popular character and spirit of his time. Put succinctly, Whitman literally incorporates a modal identity in order to write of it; in his poetry, he puts that identity on record. Whitman would later substantiate this nation-poet-poetry dialectic in his observation that “the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (Whitman, 3). In order for the country to become the poem, Whitman must achieve a unified trifold of country, self and verse, literally assimilating and inhabiting his nation and his poetry into and within his artistic identity. It is this crucial stage of America as a budding contemporary character, contingent upon poetic assembly and subsequent expression, that Eliot appears to overlook and which contravenes in a sense the absolute nature of his theory of the poetic “impersonality.”

Whitman’s elusive status ultimately opens troublesome doors for Eliot, who, in failing to attribute the same condition he allows for Shakespeare to Whitman’s poetic faculty, falls short of locating Whitman within his potentially capacious theory. The sheer expediency of this evasion notwithstanding, the “solution” is quite literally situated along his own line of postulation. On Whitman, Eliot is often quite cool, granting a kind of dubious praise as exemplified by the following qualification: “Whitman’s originality is both genuine and spurious. It is genuine insofar as it is a logical development of certain English prose [... and] it is spurious insofar as Whitman wrote in a way that asserts that his great prose was a new form of verse” (“Introduction,” 10). Whitman’s talent is unsurprisingly measured against the preceding English models, and his ‘error’ is his conviction in his own novelty; both alternatives are rather bleak. Indeed, Whitman is awkwardly put in line with Eliot’s standards, and he is at odds to make him do so. His oxymoronic definition of Whitman’s originality reads more like a grudging admission of that part of Whitman’s style that cannot be contained within his formulaic account than like a successful rendition of that novel quality. Further, his attempt to characterize Whitman’s style as a natural evolution into poeticized prose – betraying at the same time that “retrospective regard” that permits of no autonomous breaks with the cultural soil of the past, both temporal and topical, as represented by the Old World, or Europe – points to a misreading of the multivalent implications of this new form, as well as underlines Whitman’s fundamental incongruity within Eliot’s theory. Eliot eventually acknowledges that Whitman is “very great and ... unique in the whole history of literature,” but this evaluation, offered during a lecture in 1944 upon his brother poet, is based superficially upon Whitman’s versification, to say nothing of his radically experimental content (“Walt Whitman and Modern Poetry,” 99). Hence, albeit sincere, Eliot nevertheless neglects to give credence to certain thematic components that truly establish Whitman as “very great and unique”—such as his candid sexuality, for one, or his strange willingness to attribute a soldier’s discomfort to “mortal diarrhea”.⁵ In these and other matters, Whitman continues to elude assignment within Eliot’s view of poetics. Moreover, the nomination of Whitman as “unique in the whole history of literature,” is decidedly weak as it fails to take into new account Eliot’s own premises. In other words, Eliot dodges a suppositional bullet in categorizing Whitman as the “special case,” which might well otherwise have obliged significant reconsideration of his theoretical grounds. As Richard Badenhause puts it, “this uniqueness ascribed to Whitman is especially convenient for it keeps intact

⁵ In another example, Whitman did not attend college, and his educational development is summed in the phrase by Jerome Loving that “Brooklyn and newspaper work were this poet’s university” (Loving, 102). There were, on the other hand, a copious amount of educated poets in England, making Whitman’s achievements all the more remarkable.

all of Eliot's exclusionary structures of tradition and literary history," an observation which makes it plain that, rather than revise outright certain aspects of his doctrine, Eliot suffices to set Whitman apart (86).

In Eliot's defensive anticipation of the charge of intellectual elitism, he nonetheless provides a pragmatic yet illuminating category for the assimilation of Whitman into his rationale. Early in his piece, Eliot postulates that highly erudite knowledge is not altogether central to great poetic production and indeed might often be detrimental to it ("Tradition," 1094). He qualifies this statement by explaining, "some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it." Eliot refers in this representation of the non-educated poet "soaking up" inspiration from a particularly charged cultural medium, to Shakespeare, who functioned by "essential" rather than "academic" knowledge. In thinking, then, of Eliot's own ambivalent treatment of Whitman, the latter may in fact be assessed as one of those artists whose poetic instinct is a matter of imbibing a heightened intensity in the cultural atmosphere of his time, or the taking in and remitting of a specific American climate in its incipient stages of identity formation (such as, for instance, during the American Renaissance). His innovativeness may thus be accounted for as a fomentation and a channeling, like Shakespeare, of a future tradition rather than a conscious sourcing from an already established norm. Despite this exceedingly plausible way of contemplating Whitman's uniqueness, in which Eliot's structure of tradition at once accommodates Whitman's position as the anticipatory and aspirational poet he is, and is able to persist in the sustained reflection upon the past and present that has so defined it, Eliot is, unfortunately, disinclined to fully concede that bardic status to his poetic predecessor.

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