

## **Conversations with Tradition**

*MH editors*

If we gaze back to the beginning of the last century through a literary lens and with the issue of tradition in mind, we may gesture quite broadly toward a process of diminishment regarding how tradition is addressed and understood. In their attempt to assess and recover from the excesses of the nineteenth century, early Modernist writers often construed the past as something from which one ought to twist free or as something somehow gone awry, whether in personal or civil realms. As the twentieth century came into its own, the focus on the past turns, slowly, to a focus on personal memory, as if ‘the past’ as a subject—and as something subject to the decay of tradition in the nineteenth century—was too unwieldy and too much a grave. Thus Walter Benjamin on Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka. As the past was narrowed down to individual memory, and the troubled question of personal identity pressed insistently within culture, the individual was further diminished to a voice, which, without much ground on which to rest, had difficulty trusting itself or the newly deserted surroundings. Thus Theodor Adorno on Samuel Beckett. As the current of Modernism trickled towards post-Modernism, this doubtful voice predominated—one turned inward on itself and its assumed boundaries and trickster nature. Of course, to speak this broadly is to do injustice to writers such as William Faulkner, Thomas Mann, Hermann Broch, or Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom the world as depicted by others never diminished.

Within recent memory, however, writers and artists have attempted to give resonant space for a lengthier engagement with questions of the past, tradition, memory, culture, and personal identity in ways that, in clarifying the matter, offer potential ground for more good work to be done. In W. G. Sebald’s prose fictions, for example, we see individuals struggling to recover lost cultural memory, although without the partly-recovered memories being a part of a living tradition. And in Lazlo Krasznahorkai’s work we see forms of tradition and memory that retain their power and presence, but which are largely unintelligible for the individuals involved in the stories. Tradition is real and present, but it affects the myopic—the spiritually partially-sighted—and therefore either devastates or occupies a devastated place.

If we shift from what has been articulated to what is subtly lived, however, we may consider anew the significance of tradition for our time and place. The question of tradition is the question of personal and communal meaning in time. Tradition, ‘that which is lived and handed down,’ is part of our everyday lives, whether we recognise it or not. In our own habits and dreams, in our conversations with others or with ourselves, in our communities and institutions, in our cultural heritage and religions, in the public square and in our private spaces, various traditions give depth and texture to our sense of being and to our various ways of understanding the world. Whether accepted, rejected, or lived unconsciously, tradition saturates our notions of self, friend, and community. Nonetheless, in our time—which, on the surface, is often hostile to notions of tradition—the question of tradition is frequently met with feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (finding tradition too large a responsibility to bear) or with a sense of self-importance that leads to self-assertion (finding tradition a threat to one’s

perceived identity, one's sense of self). In this way, the question of tradition is one of confrontation, rather than conversation.<sup>1</sup>

To be in conversation with tradition means to attend to it, to come face to face with it, in one's own life and in the lives of others; it means to neither blindly accept nor fearfully reject tradition, but rather to work to perceive and understand its contours, and how it thickens communal and personal life. This understanding must be critical, for the benefits of tradition are all-too-often mistaken and misused, in which case tradition turns into an ideology that has neither room nor capacity for difference. When this happens, instead of being a fructifying landscape of meaning, tradition becomes instead a weapon of colonisation, a way of avoiding or overturning ethical presence to the other person or community to which one relates. Rather than an openness and responsibility to other people and cultures, it becomes a force of insularity, a way of dismissing the world insofar as the world is not made in one's own image. To a large extent, this way of construing and living tradition has its grounds in personal fear and neuroses and does little more than harm in general and mask in particular.

This negative misunderstanding of tradition, and the dangers it poses, frequently and lamentably overshadow the positive character of tradition. For to have one's life deepened, to see how and to what degree one participates in a larger, grander continuum of meaning, is both heartening and thought-provoking. It is heartening because it shows that one is not alone, that one is rather part of a larger struggle or search for meaning in life; it is thought-provoking, for the work involved in accepting and affirming for oneself meaning that arises from elsewhere is an involved task—one that requires balancing between what is valuable in a tradition and one's own integrity and identity in time and place. In this way, tradition is not necessarily something to be rejected either as an overwhelming presence or a threat to one's identity; rather, tradition may become part of our familiar world, part of the way in which we navigate our everyday lives and work through our sense of past, present, and future. To see tradition in this way is to affirm how it is a dialogic partner to one's own experience, which helps deepen, rather than diminish, how one lives and relates in the world in time. Instead of a difficult burden to be confronted, tradition becomes a meaningful environment for working through the 'ultimate' questions of life, and becomes an edifying presence in the life of a person and community. Indeed, realising the truth of a tradition personally is an ongoing responsibility, and done ethically, it is the primary way in which tradition avoids devolving into ideology.

The effort to make real the various truths of tradition in one's life involves a particular set of issues and difficulties; for we live in a time when the public face of religions—most pressing are the various fundamentalisms—has assumed not just a threatening and ugly countenance, but has affected so many lives to the point of anticipated and realised war; and we live in a time when the so-called guardians of the humanities—universities—have often narrowed their focus to the point of merely asserting various bent forms of wounded or resentful critique—critique which is so lacking in openness and hospitality to the great works of the distant and near past that one might with some justification name this way of thinking about literature and ideas as non-thinking (and when this happens, as Bakhtin warns, we impoverish the past and do not enrich ourselves); and finally, we live in a time when the public guardians of culture—our

museums—often have become limited to a form of deadened and deadening preservation—that is, objects and artefacts in our museums are presented as and understood to be confined in time, indices (perhaps) of another era or place, often presented exotically, but not as elements in time of the continuity and convergences involved in our ongoing shared and different stories, as living parts of our cultural, communal, and personal past and present.

We realise that this is a fairly bleak picture; however, in order to diagnose what is ill, one must spend some time with it to see how and why it mistakes what might be essentially good and vivifying in the institutions and activities we've set out here. If we think about them—and if we may agree with Hans-Georg Gadamer when he says that thinking is essentially dialogic, an opening up and dwelling with certain fundamental questions necessitated by the subject matter—then three large matters stand before us to be addressed: the question of the past and identity in time; the question of authority; and the question of appropriation, or, put differently, the question of 'one's own'.

The question of the past is the largest and probably most fraught of these questions. We may agree with Faulkner when he says that 'the past is never dead. It isn't even past'—and strive to see how what has been done and said and thought prior to and alongside our own brief lives provides a context for our own sense of things; this is to assume two things: first, some measure of shared human nature that remains inexhaustible by time and place; and second, that particular expressions and realisations of culture may not encompass the whole—for one voice cannot say all there is to be said about how and why and who we are. The question of the past involves considering how what happened becomes us—both in the sense of helps shape who we are now, in time, and also in the sense of how the past augments what is in and around us every day. However, despite being disarmingly massive, the past is not monolithic; we must work to discern the various elements that make up what precedes us in time, which may be framed as a question of authority.

The question of authority is complex and often muddied through personal projection: how may we determine which aspects, which ideas and activities, which meaningful forms become or remain true for us? How may we know where to turn beyond ourselves? David Goa has suggested three main sources for authority in the twentieth century: first, the authority of (personal) experience; second, the authority of institution; and third, the authority of tradition. In the first case, we accept as determining only those things felt in our own lives: our own experiences of love, loss, joy, friendship, community, purpose, etc. become definitive for us. In this way, unless something 'rings true' to our own experience, we have difficulty in granting it some truth or place as we continue. Thus a difficult experience of church, family, marriage, vocation, etc., colours how we greet these things in the future. This is potentially very problematic, for insofar as the last century was, so to speak, an unhappy one, we may have to work hard to recover some reasonable sense of things we recognise now only with difficulty, if at all. In the second case, various institutions—or perhaps more precisely, various common or shared activities understood as institutions—dictate meaning in time. The church as institution, the university, the museum, the market, the political order as institution instruct us about how and why we are, and whether we capitulate or resist, if we allow this form of authority to be

the touchstone—our point of reference—for our particular sense of things, we are in its thrall. Bakhtin calls this type of authority externally persuasive: it imposes meaning from without rather than from within a gentle understanding of personhood. Finally, we may consider tradition as a ground of authority. Here we simply offer two quotations. The first is from *Notes on the Cinematographer*, in which Robert Bresson outlines his artistic ethos. He writes: ‘Nothing is durable but what is caught up in rhythms. Bend content to form and sense to rhythms.’ The second is from Bakhtin’s essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’: he differentiates between what he calls ‘authoritative discourse’ and ‘internally persuasive discourse’, and regarding the latter he notes: ‘The semantic of an internally persuasive discourse is *not finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogise it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean* ... the essence of the internally persuasive word [is] that word’s semantic openness to us, its capacity for further creative life in the context of our ideological consciousness, its unfinishedness and the inexhaustibility of our further dialogic interaction with it. We have not yet learned from it all it might tell us; we can take it into new contexts, attach it to new material, put it in a new situation in order to wrest new answers from it, new insights into its meaning, and even wrest from it new words of its own (since another’s discourse, if productive, gives birth to a new word from us in response) (*DI* 346-7). Perhaps these two ideas—the durable in rhythm, and the ongoing generous liveliness or vitality of the internally persuasive word will make some sense in our conversations with tradition.

Thirdly, we have the question of appropriation, or the question of ‘one’s own.’ In the face of the diverse past and various forms of authority, how do we labour to appropriate something, to bring what is essential in something else into productive relation to what is essential in what we already have? ‘Proper’ means of something’s own essence; ‘appropriate’ means fitting with the nature of something; ‘to appropriate’ means to bring into one’s own, to note and address what is essential across time and difference, to integrate it into our own person and not to lose but rather enrich our own integrity in this process—integrity both in the sense of the internal coherence of our person and also in the sense of ethical decency, humaneness. This involves a cultivation of a certain ethos—a way of comporting ourselves when we think and act—that tends towards what is good in time and space, and refuses to be limited to our own interests, insights, and commitments.

This ethos or comportment is primarily prosaic: it realises and manifests itself in ordinary ways on ordinary days, and it is here—rather than in exceptional or ‘memorable’ moments—that the beauty and truth of tradition come across strongest. For traditions saturate all parts of life, and arguable it is when we’re not deliberately engaged with it or enacting it that it proves most important. And in these small, ‘lesser’, prosaic moments<sup>ii</sup>, we may discern hints of how tradition informs and clarifies our sense of self and other, of community and culture, of our responsibility or thralldom to the past, and our hopes, expectations, and idols concerning the future.

---

<sup>i</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Vindication of Tradition* and Edwards Shils' *Tradition* stand apart as significant studies of what is good in tradition without falling for empty praise or blame.

<sup>ii</sup> This terminology is in part indebted to the work of Gary Saul Morson, who has written about prosaics, time, ethics, and aesthetics.