

PART ONE

A Preamble

Every year, a city in Chile hosts a late-night sit-in at a cemetery, a tradition accompanied by candlelight and Classical music. In Romania, farmers annually listen to their livestock, believing that the whispers of animals bring good luck. In Ecuador, people take their empty suitcases for a walk around the neighbourhood to bring fortune in future journeys. In Ireland, bread is banged on walls and doors, while swinging balls of fire light up the streets of Stonehaven, Scotland. These are some of the ways the New Year is traditionally welcomed. And in Germany, television stations broadcast the British comedy *Dinner for One*, a sketch about the birthday tradition of a lonely elderly woman with her manservant. The key exchange between the two characters, which has become a German catchphrase while remaining all but unknown to the British, is revealing:

“The same procedure as last year, Miss Sophie?”

“The same procedure as every year, James!”

The repetition of familiar customs is so important to the old woman that even after the friends who usually form the dinner party are dead (as is the case when this sketch takes place) the traditions must still be observed. So it falls to the manservant, James, to undertake the roles of the absent guests and drink all of their customary alcoholic beverages, “just to please” Miss Sophie. But of course, this *isn't* the same procedure as last year, this is an approximation of last year’s procedure, which itself may well become a new tradition shared between Miss Sophie and James. This whole scenario reveals two important aspects of tradition: first, that it is clearly so valued to some that it cannot be simply cast aside, and second, that it is mutable. These two attributes make for a good start on clarifying what tradition is, and I will discuss a few others that should be established before going any further.

Traditions often have their origins in the past, having been performed over a long period of time, and have an in-built hereditary element. The word itself has a lineage that extends back to Latin, in which its etymological origin is *traditio*, which literally translated means to deliver, to transmit, to hand over. Of course, at some point in the past, each tradition must have been new, and there are traditions being birthed all the time. When Bob Dylan picked up an electric guitar on stage at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, a few folk purists saw this as a challenge to the acoustic tradition. Dylan himself (according to some accounts) saw his choice of instrument as a rejection of the festival’s convention for disparaging electric amplification. Earlier in the same century, Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* broke from the artistic tradition that favoured craft to pioneer the modern tradition of emphasising interpretation – a shift from the physical to the intellectual. The committee of the Society of Independent Artists, in refusing to exhibit *Fountain*, broke from their own convention of allowing anyone to display work so long as they paid the appropriate fees (which Duchamp had paid). The only significant difference in these examples between “tradition” and “convention” is how long each had been in place and, as a result, how deeply each was established: acoustic music and artistic mode are “macro-traditions”, while

festival customs and exhibition rules are “micro-traditions”. Just like biological evolution, given enough time and acceptance, the micro would one day become the macro.

Tradition does not always need conscious compliance for its continuation. The child who understands that undertaking a certain profession is expected of him, that there have been carpenters or journalists in the family for as long as anyone can remember, is aware of the tradition he may take up. This would be a deliberate repetition of a tradition. But then we have the man who seeks permission to marry from his partner’s father, not because it is traditional but because he knows the family would find it rude if he did not do it. The man may be aware at some level of the tradition, but that is not his motivation for undertaking a practice that treats his partner like chattel – his reason is diplomacy. So the continuation of tradition is incidental here. Taking it a step further, we can turn to the teenager who refuses to participate in any of the traditions of her parents, shunning church and weekly visits to the see the cousins and disdaining the music her parents enjoy. What she does not see, of course, is that in jettisoning the traditions of her parents she is unwittingly carrying on that age-old tradition known as teenage rebellion.

There is something in each tradition that acknowledges its particular history through its repetition in the present. Even when the details alter, they do so with reference to what they have changed from, and there is some ostensibly “deeper” or more vital aspect that is being repeated. Take as an example the Holy Communion: it is a tradition that finds its roots in the past, with Christ’s last supper, and is the recurrent act of replicating that meal. To some extent, the sacrament re-enacts the literal meal in actually drinking and eating; to a greater extent, it reaffirms the spiritual message of the meal. Even as the specifics of this ritual differ amongst Christian denominations (depending who you ask, the bread and wine might literally become body and blood or remain representational) and alter according to each church (some enjoy real wine, others sip juice), the message of the act is kept alive via repetition passed down through the generations. In this we see tradition acting as a vessel for whatever belief, message, or metaphysical idea it encapsulates. The tradition itself is not the object of its practice, it is instead a way of expressing the continuity of what it represents.

Often, there is a sense of tradition as something that is handed down and accepted without question. A tradition in this sense is subjected to no reflection or consideration of its validity, it is received naively and handled ignorantly. For examples of this we can look to the prejudices preserved within families despite lacking evidence and being wildly out of touch with modernity, such as racist and homophobic opinions, young Earth creationism, and other insular religious views. But what do we make of emerging traditions that have not had the time to become unquestioned assumptions? What of the conscious evolution of traditions, the absorption of new ideas and evidence into ancient practices? What of modern religious views that have grown and altered with introspection and external observation? Indeed, what can be made of the tradition of contemplation that runs deep in many faiths and is held as central by many non-religious practices such as science, with its methods of falsification and peer review, or philosophy, that great tradition of reflection?

I want to propose a re-examination of tradition, and I will do so here with reference to religion and art. My hope is to encourage an appreciation of the nuances of tradition and its relevance in a postmodern world, especially in those western societies in which science has become the accepted or aspired to mode of discourse. I

will argue that while tradition should never be protected from scrutiny (which, when this happens, is usually achieved with appeals to “sacredness”), it is something we cannot do without. There are times to adopt tradition, times to reject it, and times to modify it – tradition should be, as Maugham tells us, “a guide and not a jailer”. Finally, I intend to advocate the affirmation of fiction in our lives, and I will suggest tradition as a pathway toward this.

Difficult Customers

In his critical examination of traditional approaches to Christianity, the former Bishop of Edinburgh Richard Holloway praises radicals within groups for the vital role they play in developing and reforming their traditions. He calls these figures “difficult customers”, and such people are themselves part of the very old tradition of religious dissent.

In societies undergoing rapid or drastic social change, tradition can be used to establish a particular political or religious order, which often means that competing traditions arise and conflict as different groups attempt to legitimise their values. This was certainly the case in England during the Reformation. Catholicism and Protestantism were in a “tug-of-war” for generations, over which time the form of Christianity seen as traditional went back and forth. In the space of less than a hundred years, the religious norm of Catholicism was usurped by Protestant dissenters, who argued that they represented the true spirit of the faith and who then became the established tradition, from which Catholics dissented, wanting to renew their own tradition.

Two centuries later, George Whitefield was a difficult customer who utilised criticism of the predominant form of Anglicanism to persuade his followers to adopt Methodism as a return to biblical tradition. In an open-air sermon, Whitefield listed to his audience offences he claimed the Anglican clergy were guilty of, including “frequenting Taverns and publick Houses”, “playing several Hours at Billiards, Bowls, and other unlawful games”, and “Plurality of Livings”. In this we see an early example of the still-practiced device of dichotomising modernity against traditional religion, characterising the former with immorality and decadence. Dissent was pivotal to perpetuating the idea that Whitefield was advocating the real tradition of Christianity. He then used the diagnosis of the clergy’s ills to offer his cure, the return to traditions that Jesus set down in the New Testament; Whitefield defended the creed of being born again, for example, as being “the very words of Christ ... repeated twice or thrice in the same Chapter [of the Bible]”. Whitefield sharpened both sides of his blade, coupling this appeal to tradition with yet another slight against the Anglican clergy, saying that “our learned Rabbies (sic) of this Age seem to me to be as ignorant of the true Nature and Effect [of baptism] as *Nicodemus* was”.

Much of what was displayed by these dissenting traditionalists is seen in today’s religious dissenters: creationists often express the notion that they are the last bastion against increasing secularisation and are the closest to the original reading of the Bible, and Evangelicals sound like Whitefield when they accuse their liberal brethren of setting unbiblical examples to their flocks. But before I take this further, we must agree on a proviso: let us not waste time pretending these strains of religious fundamentalism are the only or the true representation of each faith (which is so often assumed by both the fundamentalists and the anti-religious). They are obviously a

radical departure from the norms of secular society – Slavoj Žižek even cheekily describes those who cling to conservative notions of heterosexual marriage as the “true subversives”. But they are also not necessarily representative of the religious world at large. They are the religious dissenters of our time, and they follow in the tradition of those who attempt to characterise their rebellion as an attempt to return things to as they were.

Those Were the Days

It is often claimed by those of a right-leaning, conservative mindset that today’s society is sick and that secularism is the cause, but the cure is here if culture will only return to the Judeo-Christian tradition on which it is ostensibly founded. Back in the 1950s, American conservatives were fond of claiming that Judeo-Christian values were antithetical to communism; David Cameron, in 2012, said that “Christian teaching can help us to have the strong values that we need as a country”; more recently, Mike Huckabee complained about “secular theocracy” and claimed that America cannot survive if it does not “become, once again, a God-centred nation that understands that our laws do not come from man, they come from God”. (It is interesting to note that it is not theocracy he takes issue with, merely the *wrong kind* of theocracy.) Answers in Genesis, a socially conservative group of biblical literalists, routinely associate moral ills with secularism and moving away from their perception of Christian values. On their website, an article titled ‘The Evils of Evolution’ cites “the collapse in Christian ethics and the increase in anti-God philosophies” as the cause of “the increase of lawlessness, homosexuality, pornography, and abortion (and other products of humanistic philosophy)”.

Such conservatives are blandly repetitive with this kind of rhetoric, taking every possible opportunity to parrot such sentiments of “culture wars”, but this is just one half of their ultimate position; just as Whitehall did with his Methodism, the creationists offer a response to what they dissent from in the form of a proposed return to tradition. Biblical literalists claim authority in their interpretation of the Bible often by claiming it is not *their* interpretation but that of the authors of the Bible, including Jesus himself. They appeal to the authority of a tradition that they assert predates their own modern, politically-entwined view of Christianity. Answers in Genesis list numerous passages from the Bible that appear to endorse a literal reading of Genesis, as well as suggesting that the New Testament author Paul built his doctrine of salvation on the original sin of a literal Adam. This call to a supposed tradition of reading Genesis as scientific truth is the basis for a wider foundation of traditions most biblical literalists also subscribe to: heteronormative marriage, opposition to reproductive rights, and theocratic legislation all find support in such ahistorical, literal renditions of the Bible. And notice that supporters of each of these issues tend to justify their positions on the basis of tradition: the factitious concept of “traditional marriage”, nostalgia for pre-Roe-versus-Wade societies, and the insistence that Western nations were founded on “Judeo-Christian principles”. Those who think this way should reflect on Proust’s truism that the “remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were”.

But this literalism is shunned by vast swathes of believers in the same Bible, who also reject as mythic the bygone time for which conservatives express nostalgia. It has been claimed by many scholars, both within the faith and outside of it, that

creationism is a twentieth-century hermeneutic. According to them, important figures in Christian theology such as Aquinas and Augustine would not only have had no difficulty embracing evolutionary theory and Big Bang cosmology but would have joined modern scholars in laughing off creationism. Whether this is an accurate assessment of those figures is irrelevant here; what matters is the fact that these modern Christians appeal to a tradition within Christianity to support their position. Taking this further, Karen Armstrong claims that the major religions all took allegorical interpretations of their respective holy books until the “modern period”, when the Enlightenment championed reason and science over myth as the singular pathway to knowledge. As science gained ground, interpretations of scriptures as scientific documents came about, largely as a response to the authority that science and scientists were increasingly claiming and, as a result, removing from the Church. This is the way that the dialogue between science and religion has been portrayed and popularised by those fighting for either side, resulting in a bizarre conflict between literalists insisting their Bible is scientific and a certain kind of atheist denouncing the Bible for not being scientific enough. It has also been argued by Stephen Tomkins and others that the modern fetishisation of the Bible emerged from the Protestant Reformation: Protestants dissented from the emphasis in Catholicism on the rituals and hierarchy of the church, placing authority in the Scriptures and removing it from the clergy. They felt that this prioritising of the Bible returned the faith to its founding tradition. Of the more liberal religious movements, on the other hand, one might question their *à la carte* theology; it often appears that they select arguably modern values and ambiguous sections of holy texts to create a collage that allows them to live by secular ideals while feeling they are part of a religious tradition. Even so, this only strengthens the argument that tradition holds great appeal. What we have seen here are further attempts to establish the superiority or validity of a religious worldview by claiming it belongs to a tradition.

For the fundamentalists, the closer to the “traditional” literal reading of the Bible the better. But while they argue that they are most loyal to the text, the modern majority of Christians declare that they are most faithful to the original *spirit* of the faith. Both groups, then, are appealing to tradition – they are simply appealing to different traditions. The founding tenets of Christianity are embodied in a text that is situated in the past, and tradition is to some degree about the past, about what has come before. There is also an element of timelessness that must be considered: the “truths” contained in religion, whether scientific or spiritual, must be at some level outside of history and context, as God supposedly is. In this regard, the modern believer is not so much attempting to return (either herself or the world in which she lives) to an earlier time, but is attempting to escape time itself, to locate certain principles, ideas and values that have a continuity, a timelessness, which necessitates a link between the past and today – and presumably to the future. Tradition is a profoundly useful way of achieving this.

A Positive Nothing

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries present what, at first glance, appear to be brand new issues never before addressed by humanity: the advent of online communities; the rise of conspicuous atheism, noticeable for its growing number of subscribers and the volume of its collective voice in the public and political domain;

the discovery and incorporation into human identity of genetics and quantum science. In the light of such apparent novelties, many began to believe that there could in fact be something “new under the sun”. These subjects appeared to represent a breaking away from tradition, a new baseline from which history would begin again. (Francis Fukuyama went so far as to suggest we had entered the “end of history” – not the end of *events*, as his work has often been misread as claiming, but the uniform application of Western liberal democracy.) I want to offer a different reading of the situation, one in which these “new” aspects of human life deliberately make use of traditions – both borrowed and invented – and in which they tacitly belong to traditions despite appearances to the contrary.

Atheism is not a modern idea. The term “atheist” to denote a person who rejects gods seems to have originated in the mid-1500s, though deities began to vanish from the contemplative lives of certain Jains, Buddhists, Hindus and Taoists as early as the sixth century BCE. The ways in which these forms of atheism were defined vary, but atheism can today be distilled to the notion that it is the non-acceptance of the existence of deities. But there is a relatively new worldview whose members share an inclination toward post-enlightenment science and a rejection of God concepts. This worldview goes beyond non-acceptance of religion and is firmly anti-theistic. This movement is unfortunately known as “New Atheism”. Those who reject this label on the grounds that, as I mentioned, atheism is a single answer to a single question are right to do so. But there is still this worldview or movement that undeniably exists and – out of convenience for the language-oriented species we are – needs a shorthand with which to speak of it. So, while there is much that can be said against the label, I will adopt it here for clarity, to distinguish it from philosophically pure atheism. Many figures who might be considered New Atheists (Richard Dawkins, Lawrence Krauss, Sam Harris) have at different times rejected or have at least questioned the label. Lawrence Krauss has insisted that “New Atheism ... is an inappropriate term ... It’s the same, good old-fashioned atheism that’s always been there.” By now, this attempt to attach a contemporary viewpoint to a traditional form should be familiar to the reader. And the denial that there is a worldview that needs such a label at all reminds me very much of the Evangelical Christians who insist they are not religious: both use semantic contortions to reject a descriptive term, as if that will deflect criticism from that which the word is intended to represent.

There is a joke:

A nihilist walks into a bar.

It was pointless.

In this scenario, it is the very nothing the nihilist embraces which gives the joke its punch-line. The essence of the joke and its humour are contained in this emptiness. Similarly, the poem ‘Antigonish’ by Hughes Mearns describes an unnerving meeting on the stairs between the poet persona and a “man who wasn’t there”. The poet tells us the man “wasn’t there again today, / I wish, I wish he’d go away”. It is the absence of the man that carries the unsettling atmosphere of the poem; it is the nothingness that carries the weight of meaning here. In these examples, we see how “nothing” can have a positive quality. This also gives the lie to the trendy argument that due to the absence at the heart of atheism – the fact that it is predicated on a nothing, a lack of belief – it cannot carry any positive charge sufficient to form a worldview around. New Atheism contains, like our joke or Mearns’ poem, a positive nothing.

There is a tendency amongst those not affiliated with any religion, especially those who are younger, to be suspicious of tradition, often associating it with outdated views so that tradition appears to be an uncritical acceptance of prejudice: racism and homophobia have both been traditional, and many prominent traditions in Western culture are or have their history mired in religion. Even Christmas, as secularised as it has become, is still problematic for the non-Christian forced to make concessions to religious tradition or else risk being ostracised as a killjoy. (This is also a perennial distraction from questions of greed and inequality around the holiday; a critical analysis of capitalism is far less sexy than pointing out the Pagan aspects of Christmas, or worrying that Santa Claus might be a lie that primes children for religious indoctrination.) But the concept of tradition is persistent, and New Atheism as well as other forms of non-faith has begun adopting various forms of it. The benefits of tradition (and ritual) are essentially the driving point of Alain de Botton's *Religion For Atheists*, as well as the motivating principle behind other projects he has championed, including a "temple" for atheists inscribed with binary-code, and secular sermons (complete with self-conscious, awkward singing of pop songs as hymns). De Botton has said that these are all inspired by a "need to get back to that sermon tradition".

Where to get traditions from is a more difficult question for the New Atheist to answer. There is no founding scripture, and New Atheism claims that even the most esteemed works of science or philosophy are, in principle, subject to scrutiny; finding a historical element within atheism and then engaging with it in a predefined way, rather than as an autonomous individual, doesn't sit comfortably with these precepts. And unlike the Catholics during the Reformation who claimed their religion was "there first", or the Protestants who claimed their "biblical principles" preceded Catholic practices, there can be no appeal to history for atheism – worldviews we would recognise as religious by far predate anything we would identify today as atheistic, so atheism cannot appeal to an Edenic time before religion to which it hopes to return. There are those who assert that individuals are born atheists but are corrupted by religious teaching or indoctrination. The people presupposing this vision of innate non-belief then present their atheism as a return to a "natural state", a renewal of childhood freedom from theistic baggage. This is an appeal to a tradition within a much shorter time-frame, on the scale of an individual life rather than centuries of human thought. This might be labeled as a "tradition of biology", a term that would also aptly describe the modern desire to justify human behaviours (such as homosexuality) with simplistic evolutionary accounts (even though moral arguments can be made without recourse to a "gay gene"). In another direction, there is always a wellspring of tradition in religion itself, which we have seen with de Botton's appropriation of Christian liturgy, and is evident in the concept of being a "cultural Christian", and in Anthony Grayling's "secular bible".

The predominant belief within New Atheism is that it is the proper representation of the Enlightenment tradition: the Enlightenment (goes the narrative) established the primacy of reason and the scientific method while banishing superstition and dogma, but increasingly over the last century faith and fuzzy thinking have fought back and are encroaching on the public sphere. New Atheism does not represent anything new here, it is simply an assertion of Enlightenment values, a return to which will serve as a panacea for fundamentalism. Christopher Hitchens, in his eloquent manner and not adverse to sporadic exaggeration, described the tradition of atheists as one that "brings us through Galileo and Spinoza and Thomas Paine and Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson and Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein", a tradition

that “beats [religious tradition] every time intellectually”. This account of the retreat and then return of fundamentalism is highly questionable, especially the unqualified dichotomy it portrays of religion and backwardness on one side, atheism and progress on the other. But others have been more equitable in their depictions of non-religious traditions: Greg Epstein gives a thoughtful if slightly trimmed history of humanism in his book, *Good Without God*, and for a thorough and provocative account of irreligious responses to the Nietzschean diagnosis of a universe without gods or meaning, see Peter Watson’s impressive *The Age of Nothing*. What we are seeing in all of these accounts is that atheism, humanism, secularism, non-belief, and a dozen or so other labels of this kind are being given a backstory to flesh out a sense of community and meaning for which tradition is a ready-made and powerful tool of accessing.

Some or even all of these proposed traditions may appear at times to be what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger termed “invented traditions”, in that they claim a history or an age to traditions that have in reality come about quite recently. Their invention may or may not be deliberate – Grayling’s *Good Book* is clearly a conscious invention, while the “tradition of biology” is proposed as a factual element of evolutionary history – and I would argue that some of these would be better described as “adopted traditions”. There is also a legitimate debate to be had about comparisons between these invented traditions and those of the creationists who, as mentioned, represent their modern literalism as historically traditional. However, I am concerned here with the question of *why* traditions (invented or otherwise) remain with us. I mention the concept of inventing traditions only to pose the question again, from a new angle: why bother to invent them at all?

On a final note, after exalting the history of humanism, Christopher Hitchens went on to say that he could not do without the traditions associated with church, including the devotional poems of Donne, Gothic architecture, or classical religious music. This is a kind of inversion what we see in liberal theology – while the modern believer retains their faith and utilises modern values and scientific discoveries, the atheist in this case asserts their non-belief while selecting religious traditions worth holding on to. The difference between this and what we looked at earlier with Grayling and de Botton is that here there is no effort made to ingratiate one in to another, the various appropriated traditions remain distinct from one another. This is further confirmation that tradition is useful, malleable, and nuanced.

A Tether in Time

And so we return to the question that most concerns us here: what is it that draws individuals and groups back to the past and keeps us invoking tradition? Clearly, a sense of tradition lends a kind of validation to emerging ideas, both secular and religious. This is a fact that can and has been utilised to create stability and cohesion amongst groups, and it can and has been manipulated to create appeal for ideas that otherwise might die on their own. In *Event*, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes the New, an original act or idea, as a “traumatic intrusion ... which remains unacceptable for the predominant view”. Perhaps, then, it is precisely this “trauma” that tradition protects us from, by softening the blow and making the new more palatable by dressing it in the familiar clothing of established traditions. In many cases, this “traditionalising” – the cloaking of ideas in the garb of tradition – has been an organic

emergence due to the make-up of human nature: we seek patterns and instinctively reinforce them. This happens consciously when people undertake acts that they believe are entwined with the pattern's continuation – Skinner's pigeons and seasonal rituals to invoke the return of crops next year attest to this. It also happens unconsciously, as in the well-established notion of confirmation bias and reinforcement theory – an individual continues with the regularity of superstition to seek out avenues of information that support their pre-existing beliefs. In other instances, as I have discussed above, “traditionalising” is a deliberate act on the part of influential figures within movements who appreciate the tremendous value tradition has in validating worldviews. Tradition can also serve to attach individuals to a larger collective, which is not necessarily as nefarious as it might seem to the ardent individualist. Obviously, tradition as a tool is open to abuse, and one need only look to the propaganda of totalitarian states to see the worst of this, so I will explain why I claim that tradition is not only a valuable resource but also an indispensable one.

In *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*, Penelope Lively writes of three forms of memory: procedural, semantic, and autobiographical memory. This last form of memory is that which creates coherent self-identities, filling in the chronology of a lifetime with scenes and experiences that form a sense of “self”. It also allows individuals to bond socially through the disclosing of personal experiences, to create intimacy between two or more people through the sharing of memories. Tradition also fulfills these functions. Autobiographical memory and tradition provide vital context with which individuals and the groups they form make sense of the past and the present as a unified narrative, rather than having events cast adrift in a meaningless jumble of effects without cause. We need memory, as Lively puts it, because “the mind needs its tether in time”, and she emphasises that a sense of the past tethers us to the world, to a narrative, to a context. This is equally true of tradition, which links us to history. Tradition acts much like Proust's (near stale by now) madeleine, invoking memories by provoking the senses and linking the present to the disappeared past via objects and acts that occur in both temporal locations. Tradition connects *then* with *now*, matches cause to effect, and helps individuals and groups build identities, which in turn creates stability. Tradition is our collective memory.

But there are better and worse ways in which tradition can be adopted for this end. Simply memorising facts – by rote, pneumatic devices, or other gimmicks – is not enough for the information to have much breadth or depth, and the same is true of automatic or thoughtless tradition. Memorising a list of dates may keep a chronology in your head for an exam, but the knowledge is superficial and unlikely to serve a purpose outside of the narrow confines of the test. Equally, repeating traditions for the sake of repeating them – tradition for tradition's sake – will not confer much upon your life and will have little relevance outside of the mosque, Sunday mornings, school assemblies, or wherever they are performed without feeling.

I will return in part three to the ways in which I propose we should develop and use tradition wisely. For now, I turn to the artists and their complicated relationship with tradition.

PART TWO

The Tradition of Artistic Dissent

The Irish poet Louis MacNeice wrote that for a piece of art to be recognizable, it “must be traditional; but to be worth recognizing, it must be something new”. This tension between tradition and originality, which finds its most explicit expression perhaps in the modernist movement of which MacNeice was a member, is one that no contemporary artist can avoid. The artist is often seen as embodying one side of a binary position, which is that they produce something that is either traditional or unique. But this is not a true dichotomy, and the situation is more nuanced and interesting than popular images of the artist currently allow.

If it is intelligible to speak of religious or political traditions, it is fair to speak of artistic traditions. Throughout history, artistic movements have emerged from prior artistic groups, before going on to inform later schools of thought. These movements – the Romantics, realism, modernism, postmodernism, to name only a few – clearly constitute traditions. This is an idea that seems trivially obvious when laid out on the page, but the relationship between art and tradition is often seen quite differently, as one of outright antipathy, a hostility felt on both sides: certain proponents of “tradition” condemn modern art as immoral and vulgar, while artists who are prominent in culture present themselves as above conventional values and determinedly unique. Perhaps because of its association with the past, “tradition” is colloquially used to imply something set externally from oneself and to be followed, and artists (at least since the Romantic ideal took hold) tend to prefer to lead – if not others, then at least lead themselves, to be on the outside, reporting back to the masses their singular view of the world. The ostensible antagonism between tradition and art can be seen across diverse artistic movements: the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their defiance of the Royal Academy of Arts; Cézanne’s eschewing traditional painting styles that achieve a “final perfection which earns the admiration of imbeciles”; the anti-art ideology of Dada. But this is a relatively modern idea of art, with its roots as mentioned with the Romantics, who saw artists as voices for the numinous.

Twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism continued this tradition of anti-tradition. In her seminal essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, Virginia Woolf famously declared that “on or about December 1910 human character changed”. Woolf immediately qualifies her chosen date as being necessarily arbitrary, because the when of it is not as important as the change itself. Much has been written about the scientific and philosophical validity of such a change; in *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker mounts an informed critique against the idea that human nature, as a description of biological facts, can simply alter. But as interesting in a literal-minded way these responses are, they miss the point and force of Woolf’s argument. To receive her idea as intended, change “human nature” to “human experience” (and then add whatever caveats against eurocentrism feel necessary). Woolf was addressing the view that contemporary culture felt different to that of the past, a belief that was foundational to the modernist movement. Modernism rejected traditional modes of artistic expression, religious belief, philosophical and scientific enquiry, and social etiquette, deeming them incapable of speaking to the modern, industrialised world.

This was the motivating principle: to find “new” ways of representing and engaging with modernity, an ideal expressed since with Ezra Pound’s commonly misunderstood injunction to “make it new”. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane characterise modernism as informed by then-modern advances in science and social theory such as “Heisenberg’s ‘Uncertainty principle’” and “existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity”, as well as the writings of “Marx, Freud and Darwin”. The modernists sought to disestablish tradition from art in order to confront the audience with the so-called “shock of the new”, and it is because of this that I will for the most part turn to the modernists to examine my theme.

A Rare, Rare Fiddle

While modernism was challenging conventions left over from Victorian society, Katherine Mansfield went further and – as a modernist herself – challenged the tradition of modernism. Her use of female protagonists and feminine viewpoints went against the grain of masculinity that ran through most modernist writing. Men had largely been the preoccupation of literature until Mansfield’s time (apart from the few stand-out examples such as Jane Austen or Emma Bovary – a character written by a man). Mansfield disrupted this oligopoly not only with the inclusion of female protagonists but by making them internally complex; the very fact that many of them suffer crises of identity is a challenge to the notion that the female identity and role is defined by the predetermined and reductive ideals of the patriarchy. In short, when the tradition was for simplistic and unambiguous females, Mansfield created complex, uncertain, fully human women.

We find one of these tradition-shunning characters in a short story called ‘Bliss’ (1918). In the story, Bertha Young (a name that invokes the sexual naivety of the character) is reveling in a sudden sensation of “absolute bliss” that makes her want to “take dancing steps” and “bowl a hoop, to throw something up in the air”. The sensation – in a manner that represents its uncontainable nature – takes on first the childish imagery of dancing and laughing, then that of the natural with the “late afternoon sun” and “every finger and toe”, then adopts musical symbolism, transforming Bertha into an instrument waiting to be played. “Why,” she wonders, “be given a body if you have to keep it shut up in a case like a rare, rare fiddle?” And Bertha Young is certainly a “rare fiddle”, a complex individual who desires autonomy and resists being the instrument of anyone else. This is, in fact, a source of confusion for the character as she suffers from a fractured identity, struggling to reconcile her individual identity with the one externally imposed on her by society. The bliss that Bertha feels is sensuous: she is “overcome” by this feeling that “burned in [her] bosom”. It is linked to her femininity, causing her to see in her reflection “a woman, radiant”, and eventually it becomes clear that this is a sexual awakening. However, Bertha doesn’t have the language to convey this – she is forced to repeat certain words and phrases for emphasis (“Bliss – absolute bliss!”) because she lacks other words to communicate these feelings. Bertha’s passion is confusing even to herself; she doesn’t know its source, it never gets a satisfying release, and the nature of it causes complex reactions in Bertha. She embraces and fears her sensuality: “She hardly dared to breathe for fear of fanning it higher, and yet she breathed deeply, deeply.” This fear resulted primarily from the patriarchy of Western societies, which had until then dismissed and sometimes demonised female sexuality. But the

acceptance and enjoyment she feels is a defiance of this tradition. Bertha knows her bliss will be dismissed as her simply being “drunk and disorderly”, and in this way society – like her restricted vocabulary – is a straitjacket on her. But she attempts to defy this status quo by expressing the joy inside of her. After trying and failing to put it into words – her attempt is “not quite what I mean” – Bertha tries to express her affection for her child, but the nanny quashes this. (Yes, she has a child and therefore must have had sex, and this is not in conflict with her evident ignorance of her own sexuality; this is anecdotal evidence that, in her culture, a woman’s enjoyment was not a necessary component of sex.) Bertha also attempts to channel her “bliss” into the fruit in the fruit bowl and the pear tree in the garden, both of which fail her. Each of these suppressions of her bliss – through her lacking the means of self-expression, by societal norms, and by stropny nannies – place the conservative traditions of Mansfield’s time toward female sexuality under scrutiny.

Bertha’s dissatisfaction comes not only from her inability to express herself but also from an absence of reciprocation. Even if she were able to send a message, it is not enough to send it one way – she would experience a greater satisfaction if her experience were not monologic but part of a dialogue. This is first hinted at when the nanny interferes with the connection between mother and child. Of course, even had she not interfered, the baby could not return the sentiment of love in any conscious way and the “communication” would still be incomplete. The most poignant case of frustrated communion is the moment she shares with Pearl toward the end of the story, in which they are “understanding each other perfectly”. It is a striking moment, and here Bertha becomes eloquent (as compared to the frenetic language at the start of the story) with transcendent description of “unearthly light” and “creatures of another world”. Even her use of repetition, so simple before, becomes a more elegant alliteration (“... unearthly light, understanding ...”, “... burned in their bosoms ...”, “... hair and hands”). But the sad irony turns out to be that Pearl is having an affair with Bertha’s husband; Pearl and Bertha don’t understand each other at all. The final hope that Bertha’s “bliss” might be understood and even reciprocated by another woman is dashed, demonstrating the need for female comradery if the male-dominated tradition was to be challenged successfully.

This call for solidarity is an important theme in Mansfield’s works. In ‘Bliss’, women are the sources of much consternation. Although Bertha’s perfidious husband shares blame for the affair, it is the betrayal of Pearl that really seems to hurt Bertha – Mansfield gives us no intimate moments between Bertha and her husband, nothing like the scene featuring Bertha and Pearl. There is also the earlier interference in her “bliss” by the nanny. Bertha even gets in her own way, arguably, when she transfers her affection for Pearl toward the “dark room – the warm bed” of her husband, possibly as a result of the negative social attitudes toward same-sex attraction at that time. In a more enlightened society, she might have been free to pursue the true object of her desire, rather than submitting to a “traditional” relationship. In her critique of traditional views of femininity, Mansfield directed her criticism not only at the patriarchy but also at her fellow women, warning against becoming part of the system of female oppression. What she is calling for is the formation of a new tradition (which finally found clear expression in the later women’s liberation movements). It is not enough in itself to be a lone figure standing against established traditions, because individuals vanish from history; the individual must become more than themselves so that their voice will not be overwhelmed, so their ideas will not die with them. Mansfield recognised that a new tradition needed to take the place of the one she was writing against.

Mansfield owed much of the success of her cultural criticisms to the traditions she emerged from and wrote within, and in this sense it can be argued that Mansfield came at the “right time”: the coalescence of disparate traditions such as female suffrage, modernism’s fascination with the internal world, and psychoanalytic ideas of female sexuality created the right cultural environment in which Mansfield’s feminist break from patriarchal traditions in both society and art could flourish. Her writing subsequently contributed to the gathering snowball of these movements and became a cause as well as an effect. Her literary reactions against gender roles and sexuality resonated through subsequent generations, and her influence can be seen in the work of Allen Ginsberg, which appeared almost forty years later and which I will turn to next.

Howl

Allen Ginsberg was, in his own words, one of “six unknown poets ... [who] decided to defy the system of academic poetry”. Nowhere is this idea more in play in Ginsberg’s work than in his long poem ‘Howl’ (1956). Ginsberg believed intellectual culture at that time was led by “scholars of war,” having sold itself out to the militaristic ideology of cold-war America and the insular paranoia of the McCarthy era. Universities were cathedrals of the elite and part of a tradition that rejected “the best minds” Ginsberg knew, “who were expelled from the academies” for the unorthodox ways they thought. In his own case, he was kicked out of Columbia University for publishing an “obscene ode” (as he refers to it in ‘Howl’), which in reality was simply a message he’d fingered across a dusty window. Here, he is expressing his sense of otherness from the intelligentsia who rejected his artistic works. In this sense, the cultural elite had itself become a tradition from which avant-garde literature might deviate. This is an invaluable process, by which advance in any field is made. Progress – which may be defined differently depending on whether it is progress in science, the arts, or society generally – must be assimilated into the existing paradigm, or create a new one, and from this place further advance can be made. To make it a metaphor, an explorer can only travel so far from her basecamp each day, but if she sets up a new camp at the furthest point in each day’s journey, she will be able to explore further still the next day. Traditions can be seen then as the basecamp from which the artist sets out to find new lands, where new traditions can be established.

Ginsberg did not limit his scorn to academics; he had serious criticisms of the culture in which he lived, and he took the opportunity in ‘Howl’ to reject many of its traditions. He prepares the reader for this going in by titling the poem ‘Howl’: this is going to be a heartfelt expression of despair, pain, and passion. The fact that it is a howl, a sound commonly attributed to wolves, denotes the deterioration of culture and civility, the reversion to animalistic “madness”, “naked” like a wild creature. This is not going to be polite, nothing like the stuffy attitudes of “respectable” tradition, it will be animalistic – but it is also structured. Ginsberg’s arguments against the oppressive heterosexist and capitalist traditions of 1950’s America unfold over three parts:

Part 1 of the poem is a “lament for the Lamb in America,” detailing the plight of “the best minds of [his] generation”. His was a society that had compelled Ginsberg to conform to traditional American norms and deny his homosexuality by

dating a woman and seeking psychoanalytic therapy to suppress his nature. This compulsion was the natural outcome of readily accepted cultural assumptions about masculinity and the “abnormal” nature of homosexuality – homosexuality was a crime according to the courts and a mental illness according to the American Psychological Association. But in this poem, Ginsberg defies traditional morality by describing gay anal sex in blunt, aggressive words. In one of the most explicit moments, Ginsberg describes men who “let themselves be fucked in the ass”. The real coup d'état of this comes in the rebellious follow up, “and screamed with joy,” expressing enjoyment of this sex-act, as well as delivering a witty subversion of expectation in juxtaposing “screamed” with “joy” rather than “pain”.

In Part 2, Ginsberg cuts down the industrialised, capitalist society in which he lives, criticising it for being “the monster ... that preys on the Lamb,” a monster he names “Moloch”. The unobtainable dollars he writes of pertain to the unequal distribution of wealth in society. ‘Howl’ appropriates the cry of Jesus on the cross, “Eli eli lama sabachthani,” which roughly translates to, “Oh god, why have you forsaken me?” This comment on society’s forsaking of the “greatest minds”, leaving them “destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked”, is an outright rejection of that American sacred cow of capitalism. Ginsberg and his “best minds” protested the consumerist tradition by distributing “supercommunist pamphlets”, before they “wailed down Wall.” Here, he conflates Wall Street with the Wailing Wall, one of the most sacred places in the Jewish faith; he is indicating the way that American society worships the dollar, with Wall Street as its own holy place. Ginsberg has playfully and importantly used themes and imagery from religious traditions in his critique of socio-economic traditions.

In Part 3, Carl Solomon serves as a stand-in for those “best minds” of Ginsberg’s generation – and possibly, given the prophetic tone of the poem, for humanity as a whole. After all, it is not another group of humans Ginsberg decries, but a system he personifies as a menacing god. There is also a suggestion that these “best minds” are opening up avenues to a kind of salvation. After all, he describes them as “angelheaded hipsters” who are “burning for the ancient heavenly connection,” suggestive of a spiritual relationship with the universe, which directly opposes to materialistic nature of American culture. Ginsberg does not seem sectarian in his search for enlightenment, writing that he and his spiritual comrades both “bared their brains” to “El” (a Jewish name for God) and saw “Mohammedan angels”, and he later mentions Jesus. And though his point-of-view is decidedly male-centric, a homosexual “male gaze”, it is broad in other regards – in the third line, for instance, he speaks of “negro streets”, referencing the African-American culture the Beats were so fascinated with. In fact, this is further proof that they were reacting to specific traditions and not rejecting it entirely: Ginsberg had much to say, in ‘Howl’ and elsewhere, against white American traditions, but he valued and utilised minority traditions. As we have seen, drugs, jazz and Eastern spirituality all get the thumbs up.

‘Howl’ extensively references popular culture – there are the “saintly motorcyclists” that allude to Marlon Brando’s persona in *The Wild One*, the jazz that that his “hipsters” contemplate and which saturates the text with its rhythms, and iconic landmarks, from the psychiatric hospital “Bellevue ... to the Brooklyn Bridge”. Ginsberg goes further than simple cultural nods and defamiliarises these well-known items. When he writes of “Bickford’s” and “desolate Fugazzi’s”, both of which were popular New York spots where Beats hung out (and Ginsberg briefly worked at Fugazzi’s), he offers a unique angle from which to see them: he describes Bickford’s as emitting “submarine light” and Fugazzi’s as somewhere to listen to “the crack of

doom on the hydrogen jukebox.” We also see this defamiliarisation at work in his litany in the “Footnote to Howl”, in which everything from the nose to the typewriter to the madman is “holy!” – a clear attempt to raise the commonplace to transcendence. The insistent repetition of “holy” adds to this by evoking a sense of religious rapture or ecstasy. Essentially, he is taking the new, the modern of his time, and shaking off (to borrow a phrase from Richard Dawkins) the “anaesthetic of familiarity”, in accordance with the modernists’ dictum to administer the “shock of the new”.

This endorsement of a modernist ideal is not the only evidence of influence in Ginsberg’s poem. In spite of his skilled efforts to make the poem read as a brand new, spontaneous, from-the-gut “howl”, it is clear that he had internalised elements of previous artistic traditions, which had in their time consciously rejected earlier literary traditions. T S Eliot’s Alfred Prufrock with his countless religious references comes through in Ginsberg’s biblical allusions. The use of anaphora and long lines recalls Whitman. The lack of conventional punctuation and the continuous, run-on sentences recall the stream-of-conscious experiments of Joyce and Woolf. ‘Howl’ also continues the older tradition of the Romantics, with their reaction against industrialisation and commitment to vague spirituality, often preferring the mysterious over the knowable. From these traditions, Ginsberg wrote a poem that attempted to overturn other, less favoured traditions.

Hermetic Hermeneutics

As seen, the distinction between art and tradition is not always clear, and there are ways in which even the most avant-garde art can become institutionalised. This is not to say that it necessarily joins a prior tradition – instead, it might create a new one. Either way, art itself becomes the convention against which the next generation of experimental artists reacts. This is the reason that an artwork once considered shocking is often accepted quite readily (even passively) in later years, its offensive elements later recognised as societal norms, or even seen as quaint or banal. The transgressive references to homosexuality in Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ are no longer very daring (though no less important). It is unlikely that ‘Howl’, if released today, would receive as much negative attention, and it would certainly not be the subject of an obscenity trial as it was sixty years ago. This process of dissent and acceptance is dialectical in nature: society or the current artistic tradition holds a position; the artist makes a counter-proposition; eventually, the original thesis is overturned in favour of the antithesis, or a synthesis emerges, or the antithesis goes nowhere and the status quo remains as it was.

Beyond the artistic world, tradition still presents us with many examples of that which ought to be contested and rejected. I have referred above to some of the specific traditions that artists (and scientists, theologians, philosophers, activists, and many thoughtful “ordinary” people) rightly attempted to overturn: homophobia, assumptions about gender roles, misogyny, and others. But what many of these particular traditions often held in common was the assumptive nature of them, that they were considered axiomatic, if they were considered at all. It was simply enough that those ideas were “traditional” for many in society to accept them. This unreflective approach to these ideas is in large part what kept them in place for so long, but it also meant that they did not hold up well to scrutiny when it finally came.

It is this kind of tradition that must be rejected wholesale; if what the tradition serves is valid and valuable, we must seek to understand it and evaluate it on its merits, rather than unquestioningly embracing it. This is the only way society can hope to not make so many of these mistakes in the future, mistakes of assuming harmful and unfair prejudices because they are insulated within tradition. A respect for tradition merely for its own sake prevents enquiry and critical appraisal of ideas, stunting intellectual growth and preserving unfounded certainty. Anyone with an interest in combating fundamentalism of all kinds needs to recognise that tradition for tradition's sake is the same kind of circular reasoning that reinforces fundamentalist ideologies:

Q: "How do you know the Bible is true?"

A: "Because the Bible says it is."

Q: "But that's circular reasoning."

A: "According to you it is, but in Colossians, Paul warns against being cheated through 'philosophy and vain deceit'."

Q: "Why should we care what Paul says?"

A: "Because it's in the Bible, and the Bible is true ..."

This is a worldview perfectly sealed in by its own nonsense and impervious to criticism, a hermetic hermeneutic, and it leads to the dangerous and arrogant certainty of fundamentalists. Regarding tradition, the above back-and-forth needs only particular words changed:

Q: "How do you know this tradition is correct/worth following?"

A: "Because it's traditional."

Q: "But that's circular reasoning."

A: "You just think that because you don't follow this tradition."

Q: "So why should I follow this tradition?"

A: "Because it's traditional ..."

We should be forever vigilant against lazy, circular uses of tradition. We should not, however, attempt to throw *tradition* out because of specific historical and current misuses. A greater understanding of the uses of traditions and how it can be dangerous, as well as why we should bother with such an understanding rather than simply rejecting tradition entirely (as if that were possible), is what I will explore next, in part three.

PART THREE

The Immortality of the Dead

The Malagasy people of Madagascar have a funerary tradition known as the “turning of the bones”. Once every seven years, they bring the bodies of their ancestors out of family tombs, wrap them in fresh cloth, then dance with the corpses accompanied by live music. As happens with many customs over time, it is now a significant event for bringing together relatives (those still living as well as those deceased) and reinforcing social ties. But the tradition is primarily intended as a way of respecting the dead, and the conscious acknowledgement of the past these bodies represent is important. At this ritual, the dead are physically present as bodies, but they are also present in the memories the living carry and in hereditary traits that give the dead continued life; it is not only the proverbial sins of the father that pass on, but his eye colour, or a grandmother’s nervous tick, or an athletic build that has blessed successive generations. And just as the dead return to life in unintentional echoes and deliberate homage, the dead find similar immortality in the arts.

It is often assumed that Ezra Pound’s modernist command to “make it new” is a call for pure novelty, and such readings focus on the “new” of the statement. But the “it” is overlooked – wrongly, because this is the true object of the imperative. The legacy of Pound’s use of the expression frequently obscures its genealogy: Michael North argues in his book *Novelty* that Pound borrowed the phrase from Confucius. This recycling is rather fitting to the interpretation I want to explore, which focuses on the object of Pound’s injunction rather than its complement: what is “it” that we are enjoined to make new? “It” represents the traditional components of culture – poetry, literature, religion, philosophy – that have lost their vitality, and which he seeks to reinvigorate by making them “new” again. And this is exactly my theme. There is nothing truly new, nothing entirely original; the most seemingly novel creations, however tailored to modernity, all owe a debt to traditions that came before. Ideas can only be said to be new in the dialectical sense of synthesis, which means that without its precursors (those theses and antitheses from which it arose) it would not exist.

The poet T S Eliot wrote about this in an essay called ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. Despite being a self-styled modernist, he dissented from the modernist rejection of tradition, insisting that the contemporary world can only be fully understood with reference to its history. To comprehend where one stands in the present moment, one must look back at the path that led to this place. (Some view of the path ahead, an idea where it might lead, is also beneficial.) It is a sense of place along a timeline that makes sense of the very notion of contemporaneity; this grounding in time, which Eliot calls a “historical sense”, is what makes the artist aware of “his place in time” instead of drifting in a meaningless soup of moments with no relation to each other. It is this need for contrast with and relation to the past that Eliot writes of when he claims that a poet cannot be valued in isolation, but must be set “among the dead” poets and artists. It is here that these dead poets – along with the traditions they represent, the history they are a part of – come alive again in the present and “assert their immortality”. This is not to say that art is simply a regurgitation of the past, that modern art should be a glorified display of traditional

work. Eliot is not denying innovation in art; rather he is claiming that true progress occurs only through an appreciation and appropriation of tradition.

The insidious preoccupation with originality in present times, especially in western cultures, needs addressing. The obsession with novelty is not only ubiquitous in art, which I shall turn to shortly, but is foundational to the individualism that dominates advanced capitalist thought. It begins with the inherent uniqueness that makes each person special, as we are all taught from an increasingly younger age. It is not *de rigueur* to consider a person special for traits he or she shares with the rest of their species: imagination, or self-awareness, or the ability to think about ethics. It is not enough to be part of a unique group; everyone must be unique on their own terms. It is this commitment to individuality that contributes to the unease some people feel about social movements such as Occupy, in which the desired result is a collective voice, to be part of a unified action, and to have one's personal goals deliberately set among the personal goals of many other people. In this sense, it is more desirable to be the one in a hundred rather than part of the 99%. It is also unfashionable to critically examine the utility or value of such "specialness". Charles Manson must be unique if each individual is supposed to be, but his uniqueness is not widely celebrated; indeed, it could be said that the qualities that made him so distinctive are those for which we lock him up. But for the majority of people who have "unique" traits that society does not condemn them for, consumerism is the predominant mode of expression of this individuality. Modern marketing operates as a paradox that seeks to appeal to the largest group of individuals possible – an absurdity that finds its natural expression in tailored advertising: information about a particular consumer's choices is compared with the aggregate shopping habits of other consumers and other products to "predict" what the first consumer will want to buy. In essence, the individuality of each consumer is asserted through the place they occupy in a statistical group.

These ideals about the uniqueness of individuals come in part out of the Romanticism of poets such as Keats and Wordsworth who saw their roles as poets setting them above the commonplace. This grandiose notion eventually broadened to include all artists. The most popular conception of the artist today is as an underdog, toiling away in loneliness and desperation, often poverty, to produce something transcendent. It was easy for modernists to go the further step of presenting themselves as cut off not only from the commonplace of the present but also from the past and from tradition too. The keyword became "original". Works of art were to be "new", and originality was the measure of a successful artist. It is against this trend that Eliot was writing in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Today, the argument has been broadened to include subjects outside of art. The philosopher John Gray even contends that all of history runs in cycles, repeating itself at fundamental levels although the details may alter, which is itself a restatement of the biblical aphorism, "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun."

This is not, however, to say that everything is *merely* a repetition, that there can be no novelty, and it certainly should not lead to fatalistic resignation. Originality is not the only or the most important ideal to which art should aspire. Authenticity is by far a more valuable guide to the artist. After all, much of the concern with art being original is due to the misconception that if an artist is not doing something entirely his or her own, it must be less honest. So we see that honesty, *authenticity*, is really at the heart of the matter. Therefore, if an artist is authentic in the work she produces, she may use whatever tools are required to achieve that. We already accept a limited

sense of borrowing when we concede that a writer will use the language that already exists, that an artist will use pre-established methods of communication such as pens and oils. Even when we praise an artist for an inventive use of something, an elbow instead of a paintbrush or a urinal in place of a canvas, they are “borrowing” something that already exists. If an artist can make similar use of a tradition and create something authentic with it, or create her own work within a tradition, so be it. This is something close to what Tolstoy thought of as “sincerity” in art. Tolstoy does concern himself with “individuality”, which might be construed as a call to originality or novelty, but it is the sincerity that he claims is the most important aspect of an artist’s work. This is the claim I am making too – that if a work is honest in its intentions, sincere in what it tries to express, then the media through which this is achieved is of far less importance.

There is another reason to revisit the past or engage with artistic traditions. The writer André Gide claimed that although “everything that needs to be said has already been said”, not everyone has heard it and so “everything must be said again.” Certain truths of existence and human conditions are timeless and apply to each generation, but later generations may miss or not understand or not connect with the ways in which these truths were expressed by past generations. This makes it vital that these messages are re-examined and re-expressed time and again. It may also be that it is not the same message via new expressions, but the same expressions with a new message. The painter Édouard Manet famously took as inspiration the Renaissance artists and then used their traditions to confront modern life; his *Olympia*, for example, echoes Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* but spins the details to portray a very different woman with modern values antithetical to many of those associated with the earlier painting.

It is in these ways that the dead poets and artists Eliot wrote of maintain an immortality. This immortality is not simply vanity on the artist’s part, the actualisation of their very human desire to persevere through the ages and leave a lasting impression, the intellectual equivalent of leaving a handprint in wet cement. It has benefits to those of us here in the future of those past artists, benefits that justify our keeping those artists alive. Many of these benefits are to do with those I wrote of at the end of part one, where I discussed tradition as a form of collective memory. The past enriches our understanding of the present, and tradition is the vessel in which the past is carried into the future, as well as being the language with which we engage the past in dialogue. More than that, however, the past is necessary in forming and maintaining narratives, stories about our individual lives and collective cultures. Just as an amnesiac struggles to make sense of his identity, a culture that forgets its history is fragmented and its participants lose any sense of interconnectedness with any person or any time other than themselves and their present. The present is, in Baudelaire’s description of modernity, “transient” and “fleeting” – which is no stable foundation on which lives can be maintained. It is for this reason that the dead must live on in the stories told by the living.

To Live a Life of Stories

Iris Murdoch once wrote that “man is a creature who makes pictures of himself, and then comes to resemble that picture”. We are in possession of the ability to not only make sense of things as we find them but to deliberately change what we find,

including our selves. We are all accustomed to the idea of creating characters in fiction, and I propose that this can be extended to ourselves in reality. To be clear, we already create characters for ourselves, as each of us attempts to conform our behaviour, speech, hairstyles, and consumer choices to an ideal we mentally create for ourselves, to be like someone we know and admire or someone we wish existed; I am endorsing a more conscious approach to this, and a rethinking of the rigid way we often hold our created selves to a narrow definition of truth. To do this is to live a life of fictions.

Fiction is essentially a narrative that we know is not true, while “true” in this context means empirical, objective, and often – if not always – scientifically verifiable. I take no issue with this definition of truth, but I do contest the idea that only truth is necessary to live well. Truth should be primary, not to be superseded by faith or wishful thinking. In a conversation on the faith position of creationism versus the scientific position of evolution, our definition of truth here is the one that matters (because it works). But what of the question, *Do I have it in me to stand out from the crowd?* Or the question, *How do others cope with loss?* Certainly neurobiology, for one, has much to say on these matters, but so does fiction. Novels and poetry are undoubtedly one of the most common places humans seek answers and solace, across religious and non-religious communities. And in order to access what fiction offers, no one must believe the story to be literally true.

No life is lived entirely with reference only to the strict definition of “true” with which a popular form of contemporary atheism demolishes religious delusions. For instance, the scientifically literate atheist tends to admit that love is essentially a biological deception evolved to promote bonding between partners and contribute to the wellbeing of their offspring. But it’s a biological deception that happens to feel good and contribute to stable relationships, so we indulge it. I personally see no other reason needed to accept the emotion of love. However, despite this knowledge of the mechanistic nature of love, we still suffer jealousy and heartbreak. It’s easy to see insecurity as the product of biochemistry, until you are experiencing the feeling firsthand. I do not hurt because I have formed a pair-bonding unit with a member of my species, thus experiencing a surge in oxytocin and vasopressin; I hurt because “she is the one”, and “I will never love again”. Knowledge of cold, objective facts is not always enough to change our feelings. And when we go through the torturous process of moving on, the eventual loss of love and heartbreak is not acknowledged as a natural deficiency of those chemicals that had caused the emotions. Instead, we tell ourselves stories about our personal strength and rewrite scenes from our pasts about the lost lover – we convince ourselves that we could see signs of the coming infidelity or indicators of their waning passion. It’s all, in the end, about stories, about fiction.

It’s unfortunately common practice to move from an argument like mine to the relativist nonsense that, if everyone believes fictions, there are no grounds on which to condemn religious fundamentalism. The problem with this is that I am advocating fictions that we acknowledge to be stories, to be not true according to our earlier literal rendition of truth. We know that there was not *really* a person called Winston Smith, and we know that back in 1984 there was no superstate called Oceania. But the novel tells us truths about the ways in which we live, how we govern ourselves and others, what can happen when a single group dictates truth. Religious fundamentalism fails because it is concerned with truth and certainty, positing a real god, one that actually exists. New Atheism and religion suffer the same problem: they are both obsessed with asking whether Winston Smith (Yahweh, Allah, etc ...) is real in the scientific sense. But the other failing of the relativist view is that the view of fiction I

advocate sits alongside fact – stories complement objective reality. To live a life of stories, one need not deny the scientific truths of our universe. But to live a life of dogma means that when parts of a story come into conflict with science, the story will not grow with the new facts but wither with repetition of the same old thing.

In Virginia Woolf's gender-questioning, time-distorting faux biography *Orlando*, we see the ways in which historical studies depend on fiction, especially the importance of storytelling in understanding the past. History, as a branch of academia, makes truth claims that it backs up with dates, names and figures taken from various lines of evidence, such as the "documents, both private and personal" that Orlando's biographer claims to make use of. But Woolf's protagonist is a timeless character who defies conventional ageing and crosses historical periods, a rejection of traditional notions of "then" and "now", as well as arbitrary divisions of history. The triviality of fixed units of time is mocked when Woolf writes, "It was now November. After November comes December. Then January, February, March and April ..." By listing the months like this, Woolf highlights the banality of the repetition of these meaningless and contextless packages of time within history. It is not enough to know the facts; readers (all people really) need a narrative. Woolf exposes this tension by prioritising Orlando's subjective experience and relegating the cold facts and impersonal data to the background. This is why Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth are presented to us during their cameo roles in ways that defamiliarise them – Shakespeare, a man whose name as a symbol holds almost as much cultural influence as his work, is never named and is described as a "rather fat, rather shabby man". These historical figures have become characters more memorable than empty names in a lifeless academic paper. In this way, we are shown that history means little when laid out as a series of lifeless facts and figures; narrative, anecdote and other tools of fiction are required to bring life to what presupposes itself to be objective and empirical, creating a narrative that makes sense and imparts meaning. In this sense, history is fiction; it is the fiction that, as Bill Watterson's precocious Calvin once told us, "we invent to persuade ourselves that events are knowable and that life has order and direction".

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wrote, "One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker." This democratic view is in stark contrast to the certainty with which many groups claim truth as their own, especially those who see empirical evidence as the only factor worth considering in *any* question. When even Orlando has "an imperfect recollection of his past life" what hope does an external account, especially one apparently written so long after the fact, have of relating the entire truth of Orlando's life? Woolf has shown that biographies are to some extent fictions, while it is clear that fiction is always a biography of invented characters. The difference between the two kinds of study lies primarily in whether the biographee is a fictitious or historical person – but Woolf shows that even this is irrelevant as it is not in this information only in which the truth of the story exists.

The poet Wallace Stevens believed that a supreme fiction, one that was necessary in a post-god culture, was an idea that was known to be fictive yet believed anyway. I think he was so close, but I would disagree on one important aspect: there is no need to believe it, not in the way we normally speak of belief, certainly not in the way fundamentalists believe in gods and New Atheists do not believe in those gods. Take Estragon and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*: the problem they face is not that Godot (or whatever he represents) never arrives. The problem is their insistence

on believing that his arrival is actually possible, even certain. If they could only understand that they *choose* to wait and that in this choice they can be happy, they might cease to fret over irrelevant questions such as the objectivity of Godot's existence. Wallace Stevens also wrote that poetry should "change", "be abstract" and "give pleasure". Note that he did not say it must be anything as prosaic as "true".

Postmodernism in art continually seeks to remind the audience that they are viewing a fiction, the idea being to return the reader or viewer to "reality". This is also taken up by the New Atheists, who attempt to "break the spell" of religious belief, as if once that particular spell is broken only reality remains, as if human animals are capable of stepping outside of context and perspective. In defense of postmodernism, it can be argued that at least the movement performs this spell-breaking to draw attention to the assumptions each audience member makes. But of course this presumes the same that New Atheism takes for granted, only at one remove further, which is that it is in some sense possible to step outside of one's assumptions to examine them. Postmodernism itself is supposed to embody this "outside" view of personal perspectives. However, Slavoj Žižek claims that what the postmodernists (and by extension, I propose, the New Atheists) are doing is using "reality" (the reality of fiction, for instance, being that *I am writing, you are reading, my characters do not exist*) to escape the "Real" – which is to say the truth of fiction. This is privileging one view of truth over another in a way that is not necessary and is impoverished by the absence of the truth that fiction can access. This is especially true of those who, insistent on the hollowness of religion, miss out on what can be derived from religious traditions as personal narratives and from sacred texts as literary documents.

Religion as Art

There is an old Jewish joke that is applicable to other faiths as well. At a particular synagogue, when the Shema prayer is said, half the congregants stand while the other half remain in their seats. The standing half yell at the others to stand, and those sitting holler back that they should all sit. The rabbi, not knowing what the actual tradition is, consults one of the founders of the temple. The rabbi asks the old man, "Is it traditional to stand during this prayer?" The old man answers, "No, that's not the tradition." The rabbi asks, "Is it traditional to sit then?" The old man replies, "No, that's not the tradition." So the rabbi tells him, "The congregants fight all the time, yelling and arguing about whether they should sit or stand ..." The old man interrupts, "Yes! *That* is the tradition!"

What this joke connects to is the misguided nature of obsessing over a singular, objective truth in traditions. It is a lighter way of addressing the idea that when it comes to meaning, especially when wondering what the meaning of life might be, perhaps it is not the answer that matters but that we ask the question. Or, as Pussy Riot member Nadya Tolokonnikova eloquently put it in one of her prison letters, truth "lies in perpetual seeking". The joke also suggests that just as the tradition itself can change over time, so too can the purpose the tradition serves. This change will not always be unconscious, and I see good reasons to think that deliberate redirecting of traditions toward ends that serve our current situations is both possible and desirable. This might best be achieved with awareness of what I've advocated here in terms of fiction and whether our modern obsession with originality and post-Enlightenment

truth is the best approach to tradition. A nuanced appreciation of tradition, which falls between unquestioning acceptance and total rejection, discerns between traditions, evaluating them for potential use, for their power to invest meaning, and for their aesthetic charm. (This last criterion should not be underrated – the ornamentation of festivals and rituals, the “bells and smells” of Catholicism, say, appeal to the sensory creatures we are. They invoke the body in what would be an otherwise only mental process of inner-reflection, creating a sense of holistic “completeness”.) Under these criteria, how could religion not offer traditions worth preserving and modifying for use in the present? What we need to shed is not all religious tradition, but fundamentalism from religious tradition, the kind that refuses to adapt or lend itself to any use outside of their limited worldview.

We might reasonably wonder here at the conjunction of postmodernism and religious fundamentalism – or, more accurately, the historical coincidence of relativistic pluralism and scriptural literalism. As noted by contemporary theologians, reading the Bible as a scientific text is a modern idea, owing more to the twentieth century than to its ancient foundations or even its own content. The King James Bible declares itself inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), which the New International Version (in a rare case of a newer rendition holding its own against the poetic language of the KJV) renders as being “God-breathed”. This temperate, thoughtful sentiment has been interpreted as a more forceful, authoritarian statement, which follows a valid if unsound logic: God is infallible; his works – when uncorrupted by free-will – are perfect; therefore the Bible is perfect and infallible. Given the post-Enlightenment value placed on scientific truth, it is no mystery why those who follow this syllogism take “perfect and infallible” to mean “scientifically valid”. This applies to the fundamentalist factions of all faiths. As Richard Holloway has commented, this move has unfortunately resulted in religious voices that do not seek to be part of a conversation, but wish instead to sermonise. Literalists are unwilling as well as unable to entertain the kind of curiosity, critical exploration, and tolerance of contradiction that mark out useful dialogue. Indeed, the very precepts that define postmodernism can also negatively define scriptural literalism: where the postmodernist seeks ambiguity, a plurality of truths, and contemporary relevance, the fundamentalist seeks certainty, singular Truth, and veneration of the past. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine that a fear of the relativism that postmodernism embodies could push an individual toward a hardline position, finding consolation in an authoritarian ideology dealing in absolutes, against an uncertain and strange new world. The unspoken core of this kind of faith is that its adherents don’t want the truth to set them free.

Despite the narrow, dogmatic ideas of fundamentalists, the Bible itself contains a plurality of voices, messages, narratives, and narrative styles. There are poems and proverbs, parables and paradoxes, historical accounts and metaphors. There are injunctions to love and there are instructions on keeping slaves. Interestingly, the Bible even offers multiple representations of its god. In Genesis, we see a relatively unsophisticated view of Yahweh as a personified deity who physically wanders the garden of Eden, enjoying the “evening breeze”; by Exodus, Yahweh has become invisible, except in non-humanoid incarnations such as burning bushes and disembodied voices; later still, he appears bodily again, but this time as himself *and* his son (at the same time, in one form). Outside of the Bible, Yahweh is seen now in parlour tricks for the credulous – leg lengthening is a common “miracle” – and in abstract conceptions of “good” and “love” for more liberal believers. The attitude of the biblical god changes too: the Old Testament Yahweh is a character in keeping with less enlightened times, a jealous deity (Exodus 20:5 and Exodus 34:14) who

enjoys the smell of burning flesh (Exodus 29:25 and Leviticus 1:9) and commands genocide (1 Samuel 15:3); the New Testament finds him in a better mood as Jesus, healing the sick and blind (Matthew 14:14 and John 9), rebuking violence (Luke 22:51), although Jesus also invites division in society, claiming he brings not “peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). Postmodernism would seem to have an affinity with the many kinds of plurality in the Bible, and is just one of the variety of approaches a modern reader can take with this text. This is no doubt an idea that will irritate dogmatists on both sides of religious belief and non-belief, while seeming obvious to the more philosophically sophisticated. But it is an idea that still needs bringing to the fore in a society increasingly distracted from the thoughtful conversations going on beneath the deafening roar of scaremongering politicians and manipulative demagogues.

Postmodern faith is predicated on personal experience rather than doctrine. Postmodernism rejects absolute truth, and faith is increasingly defined in relation to the individual holding it; just as postmodernism shifted the emphasis from “Truth” to “truths”, modern faith acknowledges “faiths”, which makes each faith esoteric in that each is particular to the knowledge and experiences of each individual. Postmodernism is a movement that emerged from modernism and, depending whose account one reads, was either a rejection of modernism or the act of taking modernism to its extreme. But there is more in postmodernism to favour the notion that it represents some disillusionment with the infatuations of modernism, the technologies and so-called progress modernism lauded. Here we see further common ground with liberal faith, which is sceptical of the promises of science (without rejecting it wholesale) and embraces the continuing need for tradition and narrative, which religion offers them. Postmodern faith is the symbiosis of the best of the secular, the benefits and explanatory power of science as well as liberal values, with the best of religion, its rituals and community and ability to assemble facts and opinions into a meaningful story. Religion is, of course, by no means the only way of getting such things, and millions of people find them in literature, in love, in music, in charity, in sports, in craft, in video games. This is a fact acknowledged by the most progressive faiths, which seek to describe rather than prescribe, to work for those who require it and respect the other worldviews. Rather than *the* way and *the* truth, the postmodern Jesus says, “I am *a* way, *a* truth.”

Outside of the fundamentalist’s intellectual bubble, it is clear to many people that holy texts such as the Bible are more profitably approached – by believer and non-believer alike – in the manner I have suggested, with an appreciation of the plurality of voices, messages, narratives, and narrative styles that they contain. After all, this is a method that has repeatedly yielded a variety of rich readings of literature and new ways of writing fiction, so it should naturally follow that it might be as rewarding when applied to holy scriptures. For the believer, this interactive exegesis might bring her closer to her god. An engagement in dialogue is always more lucrative than receiving an unquestioned monologue. For the non-believer, a text that was previously kept from him by the pious or ignored by him as irrelevant suddenly opens itself up as a new literary source, and it can be embraced and utilised just as a reader would if a new play by Shakespeare or novel by Joyce were discovered.

Conclusion

We are, to borrow a phrase often used by Christopher Hitchens, pattern-seeking mammals. We are predisposed by evolution to see intention and chains of causality everywhere, and we have become, because of this and other factors, a storytelling species. Tradition is the acting out of stories we tell ourselves, the engagement with a story in a way that brings us to the story and the story to us. This is not a semantic game – what it means is that tradition is the simultaneous telling of a narrative and the re-shaping of it. The very act or ritual engaged in is a representation of both the history of the story and its metamorphosing present. The stories we tell about ourselves, our friends and families, our enemies, our loves and passions and fears, these make sense of things that, without a narrative, would be senseless to us. Understanding this disposes us more favourably toward new information, ideas, and ideologies. Art can be instrumental in effecting movements toward tolerance and acceptance of human rights. The astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has even said that science “does not become mainstream *until* the artists embrace the fruits of those discoveries”. But it can also be dangerous, as evidenced by the manipulation of tradition in totalitarian regimes, as well as the way tradition can preserve bad ideas when it protects them from criticism.

Just as there are more and less ethical ends that tradition can be co-opted to achieve, there are better and worse ways of approaching tradition itself. Mere repetition, for example, only empties it of symbolism and history, turning it into a glorification of the tradition itself rather than what the tradition should embody. Repetition as opposed to a sincere understanding is like slapping a child instead of telling him why he should not behave a particular way: both may result in the same better behaviour, but the slapped child will not be able to apply the lesson outside of that very specific circumstance. The child who understands the reasoning and meaning behind the lesson will have a wider knowledge base with which to approach the world. Potentially far worse than this, however, naive repetition breeds the kind of tradition that insulates ideas from critical examination. Had Ginsberg simply “respected tradition” and not cast it aside to examine what bigotries and harms the traditions of his time and place perpetuated, he could not have offered his poetic voice to conversations about gay rights, artistic form, and capitalism. In any circumstance where there are no reasons for a tradition but that “it is traditional”, we should question what may be hiding beneath that protective social layer and seek more meaningful expressions of ritual, community, identity, and transcendence. Not all traditions are created equal.

Tradition, as I have previously stated, can be a form of both personal and collective memory. It is through traditions both formal and informal – from the recitation of certain prayers, pilgrimages to Mecca, and observation of grammatical “rules” to a favourite reading spot, football chants, and the number of “kisses” placed at the end of a romantic text – that we create a sense of *this is who I am* and *this is who we are*. Traditions unify our experiences into a narrative that makes sense, rescuing us from the potential nihilism of cultural amnesia. Tradition can attach us to others, deepening our sense of humanity and humanism, while informing an individual’s sense of self.

These qualities should be valued in their own right, for the fact that they are vitally important to the present of each person. But they also have the additional value of what they offer our futures. By informing who we have been and who we are, traditions can allow us to decide and grow into who we might become, both as

individuals and as groups, cultures, and a species. Traditions can tap into Byron's "beings of the mind", those "essentially immortal" entities that are our potential existences, our as yet un-lived lives. The poet tells us that these hypothetical selves offer us that which is ordinarily denied to us in our "mortal bondage", which is to say they are a route to transcendence. Not the simplistic form of transcendence most are familiar with from religion, which is little more than a glorified question mark, a label for anything seemingly outside of the natural and therefore tied to God. No, this is transcendence of the limitations of the individual. The individual is confined to present moments in a linear sequence and, by definition, is singular. Tradition, however fleetingly, joins the individual to other individuals and reverses the flow of time to connect now to that which has come before. And each tradition is a different costume one can wear at different times, allowing us to become any one of the "beings of the mind" we desire, allowing us to choose and form our identities, so that we can continue to move forward in the direction we might desire. This is how traditions renew us, "watering the heart whose early flowers have died, [a]nd with a fresher growth replenishing the void".

In this essay, I have borrowed largely from the Christian tradition (by which I mean all of the various ways Christianity has been imagined by believers sharing the same sacred scriptures) because that is the tradition that I have been steeped in – both personally (my upbringing was in the Evangelical tradition) and culturally, as I am part of a society that has been informed and shaped by Christian traditions for more than a thousand years. I do not doubt that the motivating principle and my methods can work as well with all the other religious traditions we find the world over, but it is the place of those who identify (in whatever ways) with those other traditions to approach them as I have advocated here. This should not be taken to advocate for any kind of cultural isolationism, as if individuals should be discouraged from interacting with the traditions of other cultures. If in my reading I discover a passage in the Bhagavad Gita, a concept from Lacan, or a story by Balzac that lends itself for use in the ways described here, for illuminating other ideas through imaginative reinterpreting, or as part of the stories that make up my existence, then I will do just that. And I hope others will do likewise and benefit from seeing fictions as the substance of life.

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