

Tradition and Orthodoxy

T. S. ELIOT

A RECENT first visit to Virginia afforded me an appropriate occasion to reconsider a subject on which, some fifteen years ago, I wrote an essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent". In the South one finds, I imagine, at least some recollection of a "tradition", such as the influx of foreign populations has almost effaced in some parts of the North, and such as never established itself in the West: though it is hardly to be expected that a tradition here, any more than anywhere else, should be found in healthy and flourishing growth.

I have been much interested, since the publication a few years ago of a book called *I'll Take My Stand*, in what is sometimes called the agrarian movement in the South, and look forward to any further statements by the same group of writers. My first, and no doubt superficial impressions of their country—I speak as a New Englander—have strengthened my feeling of sympathy with those authors: no one, surely, can cross the Potomac for the first time without being struck by differences so great that their

extinction could only mean the death of both cultures. I had previously been led to wonder, in travelling from Boston to New York, at what point Connecticut ceases to be a New England state and is transformed into a New York suburb; but to cross into Virginia is as definite an experience as to cross from England to Wales, almost as definite as to cross the English Channel. And the differences here, with no difference of language or race to support them, have had to survive the immense pressure towards monotony exerted by the industrial expansion of the latter part of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century. The Civil War was certainly the greatest disaster in the whole of American history; it is just as certainly a disaster from which the country has never recovered, and perhaps never will: we are always too ready to assume that the good effects of wars, if any, abide permanently while the ill effects are obliterated by time. Yet I think that the chances for the re-establishment of a native culture are perhaps better in the South than in New England. The Southerners are farther away from New York; they have been less industrialized and less invaded by foreign races; and they have a more opulent soil.

My local feelings were stirred very sadly by my first view of New England, on arriving from Montreal, and journeying all one day through the beautiful desolate country of Vermont. Those hills had once, I suppose, been covered with primeval forest; the forest was razed to make sheep pastures for the English settlers; now the sheep are gone, and most of the descendants of the settlers, and a new forest appeared blazing with the melancholy glory of October maple

and beech and birch scattered among the evergreens; and after this procession of scarlet and golden and purple wilderness you descend to the sordor of the half-dead mill towns of southern New Hampshire and Massachusetts. It is not necessarily those lands which are the most fertile or most favoured in climate that seem to me the happiest, but those in which a long struggle of adaptation between man and his environment has brought out the best qualities of both; in which the landscape has been moulded by numerous generations of one race, and in which the landscape in turn has modified the race to its own character. And those New England mountains seemed to me to give evidence of a human success so meagre and transitory as to be more desperate than utter failure.

I know very well that the aim of the "neo-agrarians" in the South will be qualified as quixotic, as a hopeless stand for a cause which was lost long before they were born. It will be said that the whole current of economic determinism is against them, and economic determinism is today a god before whom we all fall down and worship with all kinds of music. I believe that these matters may ultimately be determined by what people want; that when anything is generally accepted as desirable, economic laws can be upset in order to achieve it; that it does not so much matter at present whether any measures put forward are practical, as whether the aim is a good aim, and the alternatives intolerable. There are, at the present stage, more serious difficulties in the revival or establishment of a tradition and a way of life, which require immediate consideration.

Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the main-

tenance of certain dogmatic beliefs; these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of "the same people living in the same place". It involves a good deal which can be called *taboo*: that this word is used in our time in an almost exclusively derogatory sense is to me a curiosity of some significance. We become conscious of these items, or conscious of their importance, usually only after they have begun to fall into desuetude, as we are aware of the leaves of a tree when the autumn wind begins to blow them off—when they have separately ceased to be vital. Energy may be wasted at that point in a frantic endeavour to collect the leaves as they fall and gum them onto the branches: but the sound tree will put forth new leaves, and the dry tree should be put to the axe. We are always in danger, in clinging to an old tradition, or attempting to re-establish one, of confusing the vital and the unessential, the real and the sentimental. Our second danger is to associate tradition with the immovable; to think of it as something hostile to all change; to aim to return to some previous condition which we imagine as having been capable of preservation in perpetuity, instead of aiming to stimulate the life which produced that condition in its time.

It is not of advantage to us to indulge a sentimental attitude towards the past. For one thing, in even the very best living tradition there is always a mixture of good and bad, and much that deserves criticism; and for another, tradition is not a matter of feeling alone.

Nor can we safely, without very critical examination, dig ourselves in stubbornly to a few dogmatic notions, for what is a healthy belief at one time may, unless it is one of the few fundamental things, be a pernicious prejudice at another. Nor should we cling to traditions as a way of asserting our superiority over less favoured peoples. What we can do is to use our minds, remembering that a tradition without intelligence is not worth having, to discover what is the best life for us not as a political abstraction, but as a particular people in a particular place; what in the past is worth preserving and what should be rejected; and what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire. Stability is obviously necessary. You are hardly likely to develop tradition except where the bulk of the population is relatively so well off where it is that it has no incentive or pressure to move about. The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both become adulterate.* What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. There must be a proper balance between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated.

We must also remember that—in spite of every means of transport that can be devised—the local com-

* Or else you may get a *caste* system, based on original distinctions of race, as in India: which is a very different matter from *classes*, which presuppose homogeneity of race and a fundamental equality. But social classes, as distinct from economic classes, hardly exist today.

munity must always be the most permanent, and that the concept of the nation is by no means fixed and invariable.* It is, so to speak, only one *fluctuating circle* of loyalties between the centre, the family and the local community, and the periphery of humanity entire. Its strength and its geographical size depend upon the comprehensiveness of a way of life which can harmonize parts with distinct local characters of their own. When it becomes no more than a centralized machinery it may affect some of its parts to their detriment, or to what they believe to be their detriment; and we get the regional movements which have appeared within recent years. It is only a law of nature, that local patriotism, when it represents a distinct tradition and culture, takes precedence over a more abstract national patriotism.

So far I have only pronounced a few doctrines all of which have been developed by other writers.** I do not intend to trespass upon their fields. I wish simply to indicate the connotation which the term *tradition* has for me, before proceeding to associate it with the concept of *orthodoxy*, which seems to me more fundamental (with its opposite, *heterodoxy*, for

* "To place the redemptive work of the Christian Faith in social affairs in its proper setting, it is necessary to have clearly in mind at the outset that the consciousness of 'the nation' as the social unit is a very recent and contingent experience. It belongs to a limited historical period and is bound up with certain specific happenings, theories of society and attitudes to life as a whole." (V. A. Demant, *God, Man and Society*, p. 146).

** I should not like to hold any one of them responsible for all of my opinions, however, especially any that the reader may find irritating. I have in mind Mr. Chesterton and his "distributism". Mr. Christopher Dawson (*The Making of Europe*), Mr. Demant and Mr. M. B. Redkitt and their colleagues. I have also in mind the views of Mr. Allen Tate and his friends as evinced in *I'll Take My Stand*, and those of several Scottish nationalists.

which I shall also use the term *heresy*) than the pair *classicism-romanticism* which is frequently used.

As we use the term *tradition* to include a good deal more than "traditional religious beliefs", so I am here giving the term *orthodoxy* a similar inclusiveness; and though of course I believe that a right tradition for us must be also a Christian tradition, and that orthodoxy in general implies Christian orthodoxy, I do not propose to lead the present discussion to a theological conclusion.

The relation between tradition and orthodoxy in the past is evident enough; as is also the great difference there may be between being an orthodox Christian and a member of the Tory Party. But Conservatism, so far as it has ever existed, so far as it has ever been intelligent, and not merely one of the names for hand-to-mouth party politics, has been associated with the defense of tradition, ideally if not often in fact. On the other hand, there was certainly, a hundred years ago, a relation between the Liberalism which attacked the Church and the Liberalism which appeared in politics. According to a contemporary, William Palmer, the former

were eager to eliminate from the Prayer-book the belief in the Scriptures, the Creeds, the Atonement, the worship of Christ. They called for the admission of Unitarian infidels as fellow-believers. They would eviscerate the Prayer-book, reduce the Articles to a deistic formulary, abolish all subscriptions or adhesions to formularies, and reduce religion to a state of anarchy and dissolution. These notions were widely spread. They were advocated in numberless publications, and greedily received by a democratic, thoughtless public. . . . Christianity, as it had existed for eighteen centuries, was unrepresented in this turmoil. [Quoted in *Northern Catholicism*, p. 9.]

It is well to remember that this sort of Liberalism was flourishing a century ago; it is also well to remember that it is flourishing still. Not many months ago I read an article by an eminent Liberal divine from which I have preserved the following sentence:

We now have at hand an apparatus which, though not yet able to discover reality, is fully competent to identify and to eliminate the disproportionate mass of error which has found lodgment in our creeds and codes. The factual untruth and the fallacious inference are being steadily eliminated from the hereditary body of religious faith and moral practice.

And, in order not to limit my instances to theology, I will quote from another contemporary Liberal practitioner, a literary critic this time:

Aided by psycho-analysis, which gave them new weapons, many of the poets and dramatists of our day have dug into the most perverse of human complexes, exposing them with the scalpel of a surgeon rather than that of a philosopher.

At this point I may do well to anticipate a possible misunderstanding. In applying the standard of orthodoxy to contemporary literature my emphasis will be upon its collective rather than its static meaning. A superficial apprehension of the term might suggest the assumption that everything worth saying has been said, and that the possible forms of expression have all been discovered and developed; the assumption that novelty of form and of substance was always to be deprecated. What is objectionable, from the point of view which I have adopted, is not novelty or originality in themselves, but their glorification for their own

sake. The artist's concern with originality, certainly, may be considered as largely negative: he wishes only to avoid saying what has already been said as well as possible. But I am not here occupied with the standards, ideals, and rules which the artist or writer should set before himself, but with the way in which his work should be taken by the reader; not with the aberrations of writers, but with those of readers and critics. To assert that a work is "original" should be very modest praise: it should be no more than to say that the work is not patently negligible.

Contemporary literature may conveniently be divided as follows. There is first that which attempts to do what has already been done perfectly, and it is to this superfluous kind of writing that the word "traditional" is commonly applied: *misapplied*, for the word itself implies a movement. Tradition cannot mean standing still. Of course, no writer ever admits to himself that he has *no* originality; but the fact that a writer can be satisfied to use the exact idiom of a predecessor is very suspicious; you cannot write satire in the line of Pope or the stanza of Byron. The second kind of contemporary writing aims at an exaggerated novelty, a novelty usually of a trifling kind, which conceals from the uncritical reader a fundamental commonplaceness. If you examine the work of any great innovator in chronological order, you may expect to find that the author has been driven on, step by step, in his innovations, by an inner necessity, and that the novelty of form has rather been forced upon him by his material than deliberately sought. It is well also to remember that what any one writer can contribute in the way of "originality" is very small indeed, and has

often a pitifully small relation to the mass of his writings.

As for the small number of writers, in this or any other period, who are worth taking seriously, I am very far from asserting that any of these is wholly "orthodox" or even that it would be relevant to rank them according to degrees of orthodoxy. It is not fair, for one thing, to judge the individual by what can be actual only in society as a whole; and most of us are heretical in one way or another. Nor is the responsibility solely with the individual. Furthermore, the essential of any important heresy is not simply that it is wrong: it is that it is partly right. It is characteristic of the more interesting heretics, in the context in which I use the term, that they have an exceptionally acute perception, or profound insight, of some part of the truth; an insight more important often than the indirect perceptions of those who are aware of more, but less acutely aware of anything. So far as we are able to redress the balance, effect the compensation, ourselves, we may find such authors of the greatest value. If we value them as they value themselves we shall go astray. And in the present state of affairs, with the low degree of education to be expected of public and of reviewers, we are more likely to go wrong than right; we must remember too, that an heresy is apt to have a seductive simplicity, to make a direct and persuasive appeal to intellect and emotions, and to be altogether more plausible than the truth.

It will already have been observed that my contrast of heresy and orthodoxy has some analogy to the more usual one of romanticism and classicism; and I wish to emphasize this analogy myself, as a safeguard against

carrying it too far. I would wish in any case to make the point that these are not matters with which creative writers can afford to bother over-much, or matters with which they do, as a rule, in practice greatly concern themselves. It is true that from time to time writers have labelled themselves "romanticists" or "classicists", just as they have from time to time banded themselves together under other names. These names which groups of writers and artists give themselves are the delight of professors and historians of literature, but should not be taken very seriously; their chief value is temporary and political—that, simply, of helping to make the authors known to a contemporary public; and I doubt whether any poet has ever done himself anything but harm by attempting to write as a "romantic" or as a "classicist". No sensible author, in the midst of something that he is trying to write, can stop to consider whether it is going to be romantic or the opposite. At the moment when one writes, one is what one is, and the damages of a lifetime, and of having been born into an unsettled or a torpid society, cannot be repaired at the moment of composition.

The danger of using terms like "romantic" and "classic"—this does not however give us permission to avoid them altogether—does not spring so much from the confusion caused by those who use these terms about their own work, as from inevitable shifts of meaning in context. We do not mean quite the same thing when we speak of a writer as romantic, as we do when we speak of a literary period as romantic. Furthermore, we may have in mind, on any particular occasion, certain virtues or vices more or less justly associated with one term or the other, and it is doubt-

ful whether there is any total sum of virtues or of vices which may be arrogated to either class. The opportunities for systematic misunderstanding, and for futile controversy, are accordingly almost ideal; and discussion of the subject is generally conducted by excitement of passion and prejudice, rather than by reason. Finally—and this is the most important point—the differences represented by these two terms are not such as can be confined to a purely literary context. In using them, you are ultimately bringing in all human values, and according to your own scheme of valuation. A thoroughgoing classicist is likely to be a thoroughgoing individualist, like the late Irving Babbitt; so that one should be on guard, in using such terms, against being thoroughgoing:

When we press such a term to an exactness which it will not bear, confusions are bound to occur. Such, for instance, is the association sometimes made between classicism and Catholicism. It is possible for a man to adhere to both; but he should not be under the delusion that the connection is necessarily objective: it may spring from some unity within himself, but that unity, as it is in him, may not be valid for the rest of the world. And you cannot treat on the same footing the maintenance of religious and literary principles. I have said that you cannot restrict the terms "romantic" and "classical", as professors of literature conveniently do, to the literary context; but on the other hand you cannot wholly free them from that context either. There is surely something wrong when a critic divides all works of art neatly into one group and the other and then plumps for the romantic or the classical as a whole. Whichever you like in theory, it is sus-

picious if you prefer works altogether of one class in practice: probably you have either made the terms merely names for what you admire and for what you do not, or you have forced and falsified your tastes.* Here again is the error of being too thoroughgoing.

I may as well admit at this point that in this discussion of terms I have my own log to roll. Some years ago, in the preface to a small volume of essays, I made a sort of summary declaration of faith in matters religious, political, and literary.** The facility with which this statement has been quoted has helped to reveal to me that as it stands the statement is injudicious. It may suggest that the three subjects are of equal importance to me, which is not so; it may suggest that I accept all three beliefs on the same grounds, which is not so; and it may suggest that I believe that they all hang together or fall together, which would be the most serious misunderstanding of all. That there are connections for me I of course admit, but these illuminate my own mind rather than the external world; and I now see that there was danger of suggesting to outsiders that the Faith is a political principle or a literary fashion, and the sum of all a dramatic posture.

From another aspect also I have a personal interest in the clearing up of the use of the terms with which I have been concerned. My friend Dr. Paul Elmer More is not the first critic to call attention to an apparent incoherence between my verse and my critical

* For instance: two of my own favourite authors are Sir Thomas Malory and Racine.

** EDITOR'S NOTE: "The general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion." (*For Lancelot Andrewes*, p. vii.)

prose—though he is the first whose perplexity on this account has caused me any distress. It would appear that while I maintain the most correct opinions in my criticism, I do nothing but violate them in my verse; and thus appear in a double, if not double-faced rôle. I feel no shame in this matter. I am not, of course, interested by those critics who praise my criticism in order to discredit my verse, or those who praise my verse in order to discredit my opinions in religious or social affairs; I am only interested in answering those critics who, like Dr. More, have paid me the compliment—deserved or not does not here matter—of expressing some approval of both. I should say that in one's prose reflections one may legitimately be occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can only deal with actuality. Why, I would ask, is most religious verse so bad; and why does so little religious verse reach the highest levels of poetry? Largely, I think, because of a pious insincerity. The capacity for writing poetry is rare; the capacity for religious emotion of the first intensity is rare; and it is to be expected that the existence of both capacities in the same individual should be rarer still. People who write devotional verse are usually writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel. Likewise, in an age like the present, it could only be poetry of the very greatest rank that could be genuinely what Dr. More would be obliged to call "classical"; poets of lower ability—that is all but such as half a dozen perhaps in the world's history—could only be "classical" by being pseudo-classical; by being unfaithful and dishonest to their experience. It should hardly be necessary to add that the "classical" is just as unpredictable as the romantic, and that most of us would

not recognize a classical writer if he appeared, so queer and horrifying he would seem even to those who clamour for him.

I hold—in summing up—that a *tradition* is rather a way of feeling and acting which characterizes a group throughout generations; and that it must largely be, or that many of the elements in it must be, unconscious; whereas the maintenance of *orthodoxy* is a matter which calls for the exercise of all our conscious intelligence. The two will therefore considerably complement each other. Not only is it possible to conceive of a tradition being definitely bad; a good tradition might, in changing circumstances, become out of date. Tradition has not the means to criticize itself; it may perpetuate much that is trivial or of transient significance as well as what is vital and permanent. And while tradition, being a matter of good habits, is necessarily real only in a social group, orthodoxy exists whether realized in anyone's thought or not. Orthodoxy also, of course, represents a consensus between the living and the dead: but a whole generation might conceivably pass without any orthodox thought; or, as by Athanasius, orthodoxy may be upheld by one man against the world. Tradition may be conceived as a by-product of right living, not to be aimed at directly. It is of the blood, so to speak, rather than of the brain: it is the means by which the vitality of the past enriches the life of the present. In the co-operation of both is the reconciliation of thought and feeling. The concepts of *romantic* and *classic* are both more limited in scope and less definite in meaning. Accordingly they do not carry with them the implication of abso-

lute value which those who have defended one against the other would give them: it is only in particular contexts that they can be contrasted in this way, and there are always values more important than any that either of these terms can adequately represent.

[This article is based on one of the Page-Barbour Lectures given by Mr. Eliot at the University of Virginia, 1933.]