

Tradition as Communication

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Tradition is communication, the passing on of (social) culture through shared practices and lore. It is an expression of an intense emotional bond between performer and source and, by extension, the cultural manifestations of that relationship at the intersections of memory, orality, and literacy.

The vertical, diachronic sweep of cultural knowledge passes on and preserves material over centuries, whereas horizontal, synchronic tradition in the small social unit exists in one person's memory, or in the passing on of knowledge, a technique, a song, or a custom. Although I agree with William Motherwell that "it is worthy of remark how excellently well tradition serves as a substitute for more efficient and less mutable channels of communicating the things of past ages," I am not particularly concerned with its antiquity, but with the tradition of today that remains, above all, an interpersonal, social, and usually verbal, art.

Oral tradition is a part of everyday life. It does not become mere "verbal tradition" over time, nor does oral re-creation necessarily break down to become mere memorization. The key is in how a tradition bearer regards her source. Most performers cite a source, oral or graphic, which is seen as authoritative. When one wishes to confer legitimacy on traditional knowledge, one has recourse to those from whom one learned it; there is a need for such higher authority. Today, when that source may be a person, a page, or a recording, it is the performer's *relationship* to it that defines traditionality. What matters is a sense of cultural authority, as important today as it was hundreds of years ago.

To accept the idea of an authority figure or version is not to say that a performer must look outside herself for an act to be considered traditional. When someone is part of a traditional framework of communication, her own cultural creations are, by definition, part of that tradition. Though the manifestation is new, the structure and its cultural foundation are not. If tradition is process rather than content, as I believe it is, the mechanics are essentially the same today as they were in preliterate times. In addition, a distinction between aural and visual memories can exist even without

writing; a single performer can employ both systems, or a combination of the two. A song can be remembered by actual or mental reference to writing or print, or perhaps the place in which it was learned, while another can be recalled as an aural map, evoking the singer from whom the song was learned or the sound of a particular performing environment.

Tradition always evolves, of course, but for some time has been negotiating the strange transition between domestic, private tradition and the public, commercialized, commodified tradition we take for granted today. Movement between private and public performance, along with developments in learning and propagation, creates new repertoires and environments for traditional acts without necessarily destroying pre-existing means, which undoubtedly continue to flourish where individual abilities and suitable social micro-environments exist. Such transitions take place on a myriad of individual and family levels, in many places and at many times, not to the whole of society at a single moment. Tradition, therefore, becomes ever more rich and complex. While much of its content changes, much of its method does not.

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