

Emerson's "Quotation and Originality": A Reconciliation between Tradition and Individuality; and A Harbinger of Intertextuality

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Abstract: T. S. Eliot's critical apotheosis "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919) has received undivided critical attention on the subject of the dispute between antiquity and authorial originality, besides also being viewed as a forerunner of the post-modernist theory of intertextuality. What this paper argues is that decades before Eliot, American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson presaged Eliot in his contribution—first, to the inquiry into literary history; and second, to the theory of intertextuality, in his essay "Quotation and Originality" published in his work *Letters and Social Aims* (1875). The first section of the paper enunciates how by dismantling the prejudice of "pure originality" (1886, 170), Emerson akin to the Eliotesque vision, locates the act of artistic creation, suffused with the fusion of the twin faculties of assimilation and originality, as an act marrying the echoes of the past to the cadences of the present—a process of artistic transfusion that not only makes the borrowing one's own, but also goes on to accentuate its own originality. The second section of the paper articulates how Emerson's expatriation of the inextricable inter-referentiality of art and culture delves unknowingly, but almost prophetically, into the realms of Bakhtinian, Kristevan and Barthesian intertextuality.

Keywords: Emerson, Eliot, quotation, originality, tradition, intertextuality

INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot's critical manifesto "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919) has been heralded by critics as one of the earliest emphatic attempts at exposing the imprecations underlying the much celebrated cult of creative genius and the oft-overvalued ideal of originality, as well as a harbinger of the post-modernist academic parlance of intertextuality. However, decades before Eliot's apotheosis, the gimlet-eyed American essayist, lecturer and philosopher Ralph Waldo

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Emerson (1803-1882) wrote an essay entitled “Quotation and Originality” in one of his later, lesser known works, *Letters and Social Aims* (1875)—an essay which hearkened the contiguity between the echoes of the past and the voices of the present; the inextricable intellectual indebtedness and inter-sectionality which suffuses every act of artistic creation and cultural production. The prevalent trends in Emersonian scholarship have concentrated on mining his Orientalist orientations, his socio-religious reformist impulses, his contribution to the abolition campaign; and, more recently, his deconstructivist ethos. This paper attempts to conduct a close-reading of Emerson’s aforementioned essay, by drawing analogies to Eliot’s “Tradition and Individual Talent” in two respects—first, through an assessment of Emerson’s contribution to the literary debate of originality versus antiquity; and secondly, how Emerson after dismantling the notion of originality, portends the inevitable, invariable fact that every text is a mosaic of quotations, allusions and inter-cultural references, referring and reiterating the already said and already written—what Kristeva and Barthes call intertextuality.

QUOTATION / TRADITION AND ORIGINALITY / INDIVIDUAL TALENT

The conflict between classical antiquity and contemporary writers is a recurrent dispute which has been permeating literary and artistic circles for centuries. Formally originating in seventeenth-century England and France, in the much popular “Ancients versus the Moderns” feud, the dispute between tradition and creative freedom gained further traction in T. S. Eliot’s modernist critical apotheosis “Tradition and Individual Talent” (1919). In the post-modernist epoch, the debate was reignited in Harold Bloom’s virulent denouncement of the influence of the past as a repressive, self-hindering “influenza” (Bloom 1997, 38) in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). Should antiquity be undermined and originality extolled? Or are the classical writers, giants who can only be emulated, yet never surpassed; and their modern descendants merely pygmies, slated to work under the shadow of their antecedents? The question is a vexing one. Emerson and Eliot, both well-versed in classical philosophy and literature, envision a new equation which is a conscious eschewal of the commonplace notion of literary antiquity as a conflict or competition between the old and the new, the past and the present, the ancients and the moderns. Their counter-proposition posits the literary tradition as a continuum of

working and reworking, altering and restoring, statement and restatement, marrying the echoes of the ancient past to the fresh voices of the present. The titles of the two essays, "Quotation and Originality" and "Tradition and Individual Talent," are critically poised between the two duelling poles of quotation/tradition and originality/individual talent; but, more importantly, joined by a coordinating conjunction "and"—a conjunction which by its very definition joins two entities of equal weightage. True to the grammatical and syntactic equation enmeshed in the rubrics, Emerson and Eliot strive to dissolve the tension, and establish equilibrium between the two presumably antagonistic and contending forces.

Emerson (1886, 169) begins his essay with the imagery of "suction," the process of cultural accumulation and literary assimilation, topping it up in the next paragraph with a trenchant dismissal of the idea of originality—"there is no pure originality. All minds quote" (Ibid, 170)—much in the same way as Eliot (1933, 23) in *After Strange Gods* disrupts the stable notions of absolute originality and the glorification of "novelty or genius. . . for their own sake." Eliot begins his diatribe with his disapproval of critics' pervasive search for artistic uniqueness, their over-valuation of "what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of man" (Ibid, 43) in the work of art; following it up with his own counter-affirmation that resemblance and similitude to one's literary ancestors is an attestation of individual talent: "not only the best, but the most individual parts . . . may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (Ibid.). The greatness of inter-referentiality is eulogized by Emerson in a more placid, quintessentially Emersonian manner: "Our best thought came from others" (Emerson 1886, 187); "Next to originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it" (Ibid, 182). Artistic merit lay in expression, and the power of utterance; not in the act of origination or monopolization of thought. The proclivity to search for the original, the individual, and the unique is an innate human disposition, one that unfortunately trivializes and discredits the praise and reverence due, not only to the past authors themselves, but also to the immaculate strokes, the inevitable impressions their works have etched upon the canvas of present artists. Both Emerson and Eliot dismantle the deep-rooted prejudice that quotation and imitation are marks of artistic inferiority and subordination of creative genius; as Emerson puts it, "Quotation confesses inferiority" (Ibid, 179).

. . . literary artists and critics generally see tradition as something from the past, but not simply as heritage, which suggests only inheriting a product. Tradition . . . suggests a dynamic process involving not only what is given but also what is accepted. That is, receiving tradition is an interpretive event . . . not a rote exercise. (Baker 2000, 108)

It is well established in academic scholarship that Eliot never intended Tradition to be an inherited product handed down generations, *apropos* to a blind, subservient, impudent process of imitation, serving the vagaries of expediency. Borrowing is not a simple reproduction; a mechanical imitation of old wine in a new bottle; but an act of re-appropriation, entailing “great labour” and sweat (Eliot 1920, 43). Emerson anticipates the diligence, tenacity and complexity inherent in the utilization of tradition; for much before Eliot, he highlighted the problematics which every act of imitation and creation is fraught with. Difficulty, complexity, contradictions and ambiguities inevitably inhere in every process of borrowing and assimilation—“In fact, it is as difficult to appropriate the thought of others, as it is to invent. Always some steep transition, some sudden alteration of temperature . . . betrays the foreign interpolation” (Emerson 1886, 184).

According to Eliot, if the most individual parts of a work are those where “the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (Eliot 1920, 43), Emerson carries this claim even further, by insinuating that every act of quotation executed “nobly” serves as an “official canonization” of his ancestor (Emerson 1886, 186); and that the process of assimilation accentuates not only the borrower’s originality, but stretches further to accentuate the originality of the originals (Ibid, 182). As Ruth Finnegan (2011, 262) puts it, “But to quote is not only to see them (past words and voices) as before and beyond, but to bring them to the present and take them to yourself”. Employing illustrations of past literary greats, Emerson expresses something very similar to what Finnegan articulates—any act of drawing upon one’s literary antecedents, when done nobly, practicably, and with genius, is akin to make the borrowing one’s own:

When Shakespeare is charged with debts to his authors, Landor replies “Yet he was more original than originals. He breathed upon dead bodies and brought them to life.” . . . Wordsworth as soon as he heard a good thing, caught it up, meditated upon it, and very soon reproduced it in his conversation and writing. If De Quincey said, “That is what I told you,”

he replied, "No, that is mine,--mine, and not yours. (Emerson 1886, 182-83)

Both Emerson and Eliot locate the process of creation as a critical synthesis of the twin powers of borrowing and assimilating, quoting and incorporating. They transmute the act of appropriation from the plane of Aristotelian mimesis, to an act of ingenuous re-invention—one breathing a new life upon the old. Debunking the notion that appropriation is derogatory to creative genius, both Eliot and Emerson herald allusion and quotation as a Rosetta stone for tracing artistic wisdom and genius.

We are as much informed of the writer's genius by what he selects as by what he originates. We read the quotation with his eyes, and find a new and fervent sense, as a passage from one of the poets, well recited, borrows new interest from the rendering. (Emerson 1886, 185)

Opposed to the Romantic or Harold Bloomian assumptions, the association between present and past artists is not exclusively marred by conflict; but rather, it is one of cooperation—"a reciprocal artistic influence that runs both ways" (Dettmar 2019)—connecting authority to innovation; facilitating communication between the past and the present. Some critics may argue that Eliot's relationship to tradition is perhaps much more fraught with ambiguities and complexities, compared to Emerson's rather straightforward transactional exchange, one that is "honorable to both" (Emerson 1886, 180). However what unites Eliot and Emerson is their hankering for the need to strike a balance between the two distinct poles—between heretical individuality/absolute originality; and the old orthodox aporia of tradition/antiquity.

In 1933, fourteen years after his monumental "Tradition and Individual Talent," Eliot's *After Strange Gods* was published, initially framed in the form of a lecture, as a glossary and cautionary note to his readers about over-reliance on tradition, the dangers of clinging to an old one, or indulging in "a sentimental attitude to the past" (Eliot 1933, 19). Eliot never intended his 1919 apotheosis to be misconstrued as deprecation of novelty, rather he posited it as a Buddhist middle-path hinged between replication of "the exact idiom of a predecessor" and "exaggerated novelty" (Ibid, 23, 24). Emerson's essay, decades before Eliot, serves as a pre-emptory injunction against the over-idealization of past—incurring too "vast mental indebtedness" (Emerson 1886,

180) would invariably court the dangers of intellectual turpitude; thereby reducing all literature to eavesdropping and all art to Chinese imitation (Ibid, 179). The creative process ideally entails a synchronic yet diachronic paradoxical negotiation between the contending tides of individuality and conformity, between identity and diversity, between the timeless past and the contemporary context of the present.

Eliot's hypostatization of the literary tradition as a fluid, flexible, continually renewing systemic whole is a reconciliation and equilibrium between historicity and contemporaneity, individuality and conformity; and the historical sense to Eliot connotes, the awareness of the "pastness of the past" as well as its "presence"; "a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal" (Eliot 1920, 44). Emerson partially deviates from Eliot towards the concluding later half of his essay, possibly because of his Romanticist, humanistic proclivities, which subsume the "preponderance of the Past" to the singular power of "Genius" (Emerson 1886, 191). The Romantic cult tends to nurture a view of the artist as a divine creator; and the notion of the immaculate superiority of his creative genius postulates the artistic mind as the origin of everything, whereby the apprehension of the present becomes an act which "makes the Past forgotten" (Ibid.). So does Emerson contradict himself by extolling Genius, the indefeasible persistency to be unique and individual, the supremacy of the indispensable Present?

We cannot overstate our debt to the Past, but the moment has the supreme claim. The Past is for us; but the sole terms on which it can be ours are its subordination to the Present. Only an inventor knows how to borrow . . . This vast memory is only raw material. The divine gift is the ever instant life, which receives and uses and creates, and can well bury the old . . . (Emerson 1886, 193)

Although in the third last paragraph of the essay Emerson applies his definition of originality to the process of "being, being one's self, and reporting accurately what we see and are" (Ibid, 191), what needs to be noted is that the alternative to the predominance of the past is "genius", *not* originality. What does Emerson imply by the term "genius"? It is the return to revision, re-appropriation and reconciliation, of the impressions and sensations received from the external world; their subsequent fusion, "right distribution and expression" (Ibid.). Eliot mandates a re-reading of the past, a process of relating to the past not only with his historical sense, but with the awareness that it needs to be read in light of the present, in light of the

context. Eliot's fear of the dangers of misconception of tradition being usurped by orthodoxy (similar to the Bloomian anxiety of influence amputating creative liberty) impelled him to coin a literary tradition that harmonizes all the antagonistic forces—therefore the present has to be created out of the vestiges of the past; *but* with an awareness of the past, for the past never had the privilege of knowing itself as well as we can see, comprehend and utilize it in hindsight. Emerson anticipates the Eliotesque concomitance of the past and the present, touching upon it with a rather Romanticist supervention of divine artistic genius, of piety, which equates the faculty of borrowing to the power of invention, and supplants the supremacy of the past, with the novelty of "instant life" in the present. If Eliot's literary and cultural tradition is "a dialectical phenomenon . . . [wherein] we grasp hold of what has been as something else, which while being something else is at the same time our own and nothing but our own" (quoted in Kramer 1975, 21); Emersonian quotation too, is, in the words of Ruth Finnegan (2011, 261):

. . . the interweaving of others' words and voices in our own – we do indeed evoke the past and the far removed, hear the words and voices of others, set texts at a distance, look from outside ourselves. But *also*, by that very act, we brand the past with the present, capture others' voices into our own, draw the distant to ourselves. In quoting we simultaneously enact past and present, enstage both ourselves and others.

INTERTEXTUALITY

If we confine ourselves to literature, 'tis easy to see that the debt is immense to past thought. None escapes it. The originals are not original. There is imitation, model and suggestion, to the very archangels, if we knew their history. The first book tyrannizes over the other. (Emerson 1886, 172)

If "Quotation and Originality" resounds with the trumpet dinning the abnegation of the premise of authorial originality and exclusiveness, Emerson to amplify his argument further refers, perhaps unknowingly, to the core tenet of post-modernist intertextuality—the idea that every text, literary and cultural, is woven out of numerous already existing texts. The inextricable relationality and inter-connectedness between the writer and his literary predecessors; the undeniable sway of the echoes of the past in shaping the cadences of the present takes us into

the domain of what post-modern linguists and theorists term “intertextuality.” Coined by Julia Kristeva in “Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1966) and “The Bounded Text” (1966-67), it refers to the idea that language and literary texts, far from being static, closed, autonomous entities, are actually dynamic, open spaces—intertexts—drawing their existence and substance in relation to other pre-existing texts. If “each word (text) is an intersection of other words (texts),” then any text becomes, in Kristeva’s terms, “a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva 1980, 66). Every text looks back at, and is invariably indebted to the text that comes before—“The first book tyrannizes over the other” (Emerson 1886, 172) is an idea that Emerson insinuates, in a diction perhaps slightly tinged with the Bloomian discomfiture with the influence of one’s artistic precursors.

Intertextuality, although conventionally considered a post-modernist academic parlance, dates back to antiquity—traceable in the classical discourses on Greek and Roman art and culture, theorized by Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus. Eliot’s “Tradition and Individual Talent” has often been held by critics as a forerunner to post-modernist inter-textuality—Kevin Dettmar (2019) foregrounds Eliot’s essay as one of the earliest attempts to formulate what would come to be called ‘intertextuality’; Maria Alfaro (1996, 271) credits Eliot as “perhaps the first” to dismiss originality and herald intellectual indebtedness to literary ancestors from an intertextual perspective. Emerson’s essay has eluded their vantage and critical attention in this respect as well. To decentre the ingrained notions of originality, uniqueness, singularity and autonomy (Allen 2000, 6), Emerson highlights the inter-referentiality and consonances shared between texts and pre-existent texts; how every author’s work bears echoes, traces and impressions; be it direct or indirect; implicit or explicit, to other authors and their texts—“Read Tasso, and you think of Virgil; read Virgil and you think of Homer. . . Hegel pre-exists in Proclus, and long before, in Heraclitus and Parmenides . . . originality will disappear to such as are either wellread or thoughtful” (Emerson 1886, 172)—an inter-referentiality that Emerson *un-limits* and extends from the Eliotesque confines of European culture and tradition, itinerating it into a much wider, more expansive, all-encompassing trans-continental heritage, hitherto eclipsed from the human eyes for centuries—“It is only within this century that England and America discovered that their nursery-tales were old German and Scandinavian stories; and

now it appears that they came from India, . . . have been warbled and babbled between nurses and children for unknown thousands of years" (Ibid, 178).

In the 1970s Roland Barthes locating the text as "a tissue, a woven fabric" (Barthes 1977, 159) popularized the image of the text as a web, a weave—a garment woven from the threads of "already said," "already written" and "already read" (Allen 2000, 6). Surprisingly, Emerson anticipates Barthesian imagery in his assertion of the text as a woven fabric, knit with threads which are a twist of the two strands, "the warp and woof of every moment [old and new]" (Emerson 1886, 170). The Barthesian model posits all human acts of thought, cognition and writing as emanating from "the cultural space of the *déjà*, the already spoken, written, read" (Barthes 1987, 47). The post-modernists and post-structuralists have imbued intertextuality with a fervid cultural dimension, for every thought, action and production lies not only within literary heritage of pre-existent texts, but also within the cultural kernel of texts, quotes and discourses, as well as the linguistic medium of communication (the linguistic aspect is taken up in the next paragraph). This cultural inter-relationality is hearkened by Emerson, for he too expands the horizon, itinerating borrowings from textual literary confines, into a much wider inter-disciplinary gallery—as he puts it: "We quote not only books and proverbs, but arts, sciences, religion, customs, and laws . . . by imitation" (Emerson 1886, 170). The prophetic maxims of philosophy, the filaments constituting the myriads of mythological fables, the communions of worshippers composing the psalms and liturgies—all are quotations and borrowings; everything is the product of Barthesian *déjà*; the Emersonian "imitation, model and suggestion" (Ibid, 172).

Language is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone; yet he is no more to be credited with the grand result than the aculeph which adds a cell to the coral reef. (Emerson 1886, 189-90)

If Eliot articulates the dependence of an artist on the literary tradition, Emerson does not stop at that; he goes ahead of Eliot, in his configuration of the artist, not only as an amorphous figure perpetuating and renewing literature and its legacy; but also as one among the plethora of bricklayers, laying the foundation of the system of language. Intertextuality is not limited to the inter-sectionality of literary texts, but extends most vigorously into the realm of linguistics and language, as articulated by Bakhtin. Emerson anticipates the

Saussurean stress on the author figure as working within *langue* or the system of language in general, as well as the literary system in particular (Allen 2000, 11). From the Bakhtinian view all speech acts and utterances are relational, not singular—“all stem from a recognition that language is never our own, that there is no single human subject” (Ibid, 27). According to Bakhtin, all speech acts and utterances are mosaic of all that people have thought, verbalized, enunciated, before; and language is composed from quotations composed from uncountable, untraceable sources. The idea of a single authorial origin of a word or utterance is deconstructed by Emerson, in his humble acknowledgment of the myriad of contributors: “Our benefactors are as many as the children who invented speech, word by word” (Emerson 1886, 189). The antiquity that Emerson talks about is not just the European literary and cultural tradition spanning from Homer to the Magdalenian draughtsmen of Eliot; but a more enormous antiquity—more inclusive and all-encompassing—“not . . . a coterie of prompters that filled a sitting room, but in a circle of intelligences that reached through all thinkers, poets, inventors, . . . men and women, English, German, Celt, Aryan, Ninevite, Copt. . . back to the first negro” (Ibid.)—for according to Emerson, all these people, over the course of centuries, with their cellular benefactions have helped constitute the vast reef of language, linguistics and literature as we have come to see it today.

CONCLUSION

It is inevitable that you are indebted to the past. You are fed and formed by it. . . . every individual is only a momentary fixation of what was yesterday another's, is today his, and will belong to a third tomorrow. So it is in thought. Our knowledge is the amassed thought and experience of innumerable minds: our language, our science, . . . country, customs, laws, our ambitions. . . all these we never made, we found them ready-made; we but quote them. (Emerson 1886, 190)

It may be concluded that Emerson's oft-eclipsed essay “Quotation and Originality” presages Eliot's ideas on the contiguity between past and present when it comes to the process of artistic creation. Emerson's vision of the fusion of the two strains of quotation / antiquity / tradition and originality / genius / talent is much more harmonious and transactional than Eliot's, despite its simultaneous awareness of the difficulties inhering in every act of appropriation. Moreover, his essay

evinces more manifestly than Eliot's, a situating of the act of creation as more of a process of appropriation and quotation—taking us directly into the theoretical pantheon of intertextuality—an Emersonian intertextuality which is bewilderingly as cultural, linguistic, and as inclusive as post-modernist intertextuality, which has been woven out of literary and cultural strains of thought and life.

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