T.S. Eliot first published "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in 1919. Though it made an impact when it appeared, it was more influential when it was republished in a collection of essays entitled The Sacred Wood the following year. I would like to use Eliot's essay as a point of departure both to offer some observations about his sense of tradition and to suggest some of the ways, as a poet, he attempted to position himself in terms of his contemporaries and his precursors. I have used the expression 'sense of tradition' because tradition, I suspect, for Eliot was a term whose value was more strategic than conceptual. More important than its range of meanings was the way it was used. In offering this suggestion, I am mindful of Wittgenstein's caution: "Don't ask for the meaning; ask for the use."1 And I am also mindful of the issues raised by Borges in his essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," reprinted in Labyrinths.

"I wish to formulate and justify here some sceptical proposals concerning the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition. My scepticism does not relate to the difficulty or impossibility of solving this problem, but rather to its very existence. I believe we are faced with a mere rhetorical topic which lends itself to pathetic elaborations; rather than with a true mental difficulty. I take it we are dealing with an appearance, a simulacrum, a pseudo problem."2

At this point the reader could reasonably expect a black page in the style of Book I chapter 12 of Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy — evidence that Borges had put down his pen, placed his chair under his desk, locked his study door and gone off to catch butterflies or play golf. Instead, we have an elegant essay that explores, without 'pathetic elaboration,' a number of proposals:

1. that national traditions declare themselves to a writer as a 'point of departure and perhaps an archetype'

2. that traditions are identifiable

3. that a national style presupposes a national tradition

4. that the Argentine writer, having been cut off from Europe, is essentially bereft of tradition.

Borges takes each of these proposals in turn and finds them invalid, because, he argues, it is writers themselves, regardless of and in some cases even despite their intentions, who, through the very act of writing well, generate traditions. "Anything we Argentine writers can do successfully," he concludes, "will become part of our Argentine tradition. . . . I believe that if we surrender ourselves to that voluntary dream which is artistic creation, we shall be Argentine and we shall be good or tolerable writers."3

I would like to pick up some of the threads of Borges' argument, to play Theseus to his Ariadne, in the hope that they will guide us through the labyrinth of Eliot's essay.4

As I have mentioned, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was first published in 1919 — two years after Eliot's first volume of poetry, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and three years before the publication of *The Waste Land* (1922). The essay is thus entre les deux oeuvres — looking back to the self-conscious, derivative, ironic/parodic Laforguian attutenizing of the early poetry, and looking forward to the echoic referentiality of those fragments he would attempt to shore against his ruin. This Janus-like stance discloses a fundamental dichotomy in the essay. On the one hand, Eliot is engaged with the conscious process of creation, with the notion of the writer as to poien the maker, the skilled crafts-person who works within a particular tradition after they have served an apprenticeship. On the other hand, he is trying to come to terms with what might be called the role of the

4 This paper was written and delivered before I encountered a very valuable book, Richard Shusterman, *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York 1988). While I agree with most of Shusterman's arguments, I have concentrated on Eliot's literary heritage and the way his critical theories informed his poetic practice.
unconscious in creativity, where the writer is *vates* — the seer, the prophetic voice, who, as Adler has argued, transcends his time only because he is more attuned to its rhythms than his contemporaries. Thus, the seeming atemporality of the writer's work has its origins in his profound contemporaneity.

Borges uses the phrase "voluntary dream" to signify the spontaneous, willed free association of creativity, the unprompted surrender of the individual to constituting and reconstituting experience. Eliot, in distinguishing between the immature and the mature artist says that 'the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of 'personality', not being necessarily more interesting, or having 'more to say', but rather by being a more perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations." To pursue his own analogy, the writer is at once the inert vessel and the inert catalyst, and the mix of chemicals or gasses which, when they are brought into contact with one another in the presence of the catalyst, will react to produce a new substance. Eliot is careful not to subvert his analogy by laboriously identifying the vessel and the catalyst with the conscious, and the chemical reaction with the unconscious, or any other such combination, partly, I suspect, because he knows that the two cannot be so neatly delineated, and partly because, as Borges signals with his recourse to

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6 Eliot's attempt to pursue both sides of the argument leads him into making some curious statements. For example, T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (1932; London 1976), p.21: 'There is a great deal in the writing of poetry which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious.' Hereafter Eliot, "Tradition." The notion of choosing between the conscious and the unconscious seems problematic.

oxymoron, the generative power of creativity derives from contraries which are inextricably united.

In the second paragraph of his essay, with perhaps a gesture to his own early work, Eliot advances the idea that tradition and true creativity share a symbiotic relationship:

". . . we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism. One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity."8

The closing image is a forceful one. Unfortunately, Eliot offers only suggestions about the way this society of dead poets asserts itself. Perhaps, for the most part they are simply present, as Auden images them, peering over the shoulder of the poet as he writes; though, evidently, the best poetry is produced when these ghostly figures begin to intrude, to "assert their immortality most vigorously." The nature of this intrusion is left undefined. It is certainly not as fraught as that posited by Harold Bloom in The Anxiety of Influence. The writer, Bloom has argued, in his anxiety to generate space for his artistic endeavour, to enable his voice to be heard above the competing voices of the past, creatively misinterprets his precursors. Fearing that what he wishes to say may have already been said, he appropriates those voices and distorts them in such a way as to create

space for his own voice. The process Eliot images in his essay seems more impersonal, intermittent, decorous.

"No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets... The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities."

The notion of a pre-existent order which structures the experience of the individual is one that Eliot had begun to explore while he was a graduate research student at Harvard writing a thesis on the philosophy of F.H. Bradley. But he may, as Peter Ackroyd has pointed out, have first come across it in a book by Irving Babbitt, who was one of his lecturers at Harvard. In Masters of Modern French Criticism, Babbitt describes tradition as "the constant adjustment... of the experience of the past to meet the changing needs of the present." One of the difficulties with Eliot's argument, however, is the way he conflates statements about the creation of

11 For example, T.S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (London 1964), p.60: "Facts are not merely found in the world and laid together like bricks, but every fact has in a sense its place prepared for it before it arrives, and without the implication of a system in which it belongs the fact is not a fact at all."
a text with statements about its reception. Eliot appears to be wanting to argue two ways — one for the writer and the other for the reader. Even if the writer is not aware of the existing order, then the reader may well be.

The processes of alteration and direction that Eliot talks about in the above passage are amply illustrated by his own relationship to the Metaphysicals. First brought into prominence by Sir Herbert Grierson's pioneer edition of the poems of John Donne in 1912, Eliot took them as precursors, as part of a tradition that prefigured his own individual talent.

His relation to the Metaphysicals operated at two levels — in his poetry and in his critical writing, though neither should be thought as being distinct from the other. The poetry impinged on the critical writing, and the critical writing fed the poetry in ways that perhaps still need to be thoroughly examined. The Metaphysicals, for example, are scouted in *The Wasteland*. Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress":

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But at my back I alwaies hear
Times winged Charriot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lye
Desarts of vast Eternity.¹³
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becomes in Part III, "The Fire Sermon":

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But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeny to Mrs Porter in the spring.
O the moon shines bright on Mrs Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water
Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la cupole.¹⁴
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While the significance of what Eliot has achieved here, to employ his own terminology, is the appreciation of his relation to the "dead poets," that relation goes beyond the quasi-scholarly decorum described in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." There is more than modification, than slight alteration or readjustment. Marvell's poem has been appropriated in a way perhaps best explained by Richard Ellmann's theory of eminent domain. Ellmann, *pace* Bloom, has argued that the artistic temperament is more predatory than anxious, that creative energies are urgent rather than defensive, and that the writer seizes what he can from his precursors and fashions and refashions it to his own purposes. Marvell's poem has certainly been appropriated, perhaps even expropriated. His "always hear" has become "from time to time I hear." The apocalyptic symbol of "Time's winged chariot" has been transposed into the minor key of "horns and motors," the metaphysical conceit whereby "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together" being reduced to a single image of the swarming disorder of modern day traffic. And while perhaps the word 'horns' retains some of its apocalyptic resonance of Marvell's symbology, it also has sexual overtones, overtones that sound and resound throughout Eliot's poem.

Two processes are at work here; one, I think, outlined in the third paragraph of "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and the other in a passage in an essay Eliot wrote on the Metaphysicals in 1921. To consider the 1919 essay first. Rejoining the argument where he asserts that "the most individual parts of a writer's work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously," Eliot goes on to say:

"Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical

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sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.*7

It is the historical sense that enabled Eliot to appropriate Marvell for his poem. As he wrote in an essay on Marvell, first published in 1921, "a whole civilization resides in these lines."*8 Eliot himself believed that behind them lay Horace's,

\[
pallida Mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas, \\regumque turres \ldots
\]

and Catullus',

\[
nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux, \\nox est perpetua una dormienda.20
\]

But it was also the historical sense that enabled Eliot to juxtapose his appropriation of Marvell with the hony-tonk rhythms of a street ballad,

\[\text{Ibid., p.14.}\]
\[\text{Horace, Odes, I. 4. 13-14. C.E. Bennett, trans., Horace: Odes and Epodes (Cambridge, Mass. & London 1978), p.17: 'Pale death with foot impartial knocks at the poor man's cottage and at the princes' palaces.' I am indebted to Professor Graeme Clarke, the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, for locating this and the following reference.}\]
\[\text{Catullus, Poem 5, ll. 5-6. F.W. Cornish et. al., trans., Catullus Tibullus Pervigilium Veneris (Cambridge, Mass. & London 1976), p.7: 'For us, when the short light has once set, remains to be slept the sleep of one unbroken night.'}\]
reported to him, as he says in a note to *The Wasteland*, from Sydney, Australia:

> But at my back from time to time I hear  
> The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring  
> Sweeny to Mrs Porter in the spring.  
> O the moon shone bright on Mrs Porter  
> And on her daughter  
> They wash their feet in soda water  
> Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la cupole!

This juxtaposition presages the hollow sexuality of the jazz age — the 'twenties — of Scott Fitzgerald's glittering, empty off-stage encounters in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) where horns and motors are central to the plot; of the 'sad desire' of Francois Mauriac's *Le Désert de l'amour* (1925) and Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925); and the removed, elusive figure of Albertine in Proust's *A la Recherche de Temps Perdu* (1913-1927) — fated to arouse but never to allay a pervasive dissatisfaction. This passage from *The Wasteland*, I would argue, clearly demonstrates that aspect of tradition that makes Eliot "acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.\(^\text{21}\)

The appropriation of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" also functions in another way — a way perhaps best explained by a passage from Eliot's essay on the Metaphysicals which demonstrates yet another facet of that "historical sense" which Eliot saw as concomitant with Tradition. After comparing the Metaphysicals with Tennyson, Eliot draws the following, now famous, conclusion:

"The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza,\(^\text{21}\)

and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with
the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the
poet these experiences are always forming new wholes." 22

Behind the assertion that the mind of the poet is "constantly
amalgamating disparate experiences" lies the analogy of the inert vessel, the
inert catalyst and the mix of chemicals from "Tradition and the Individual
Talent"; and behind both lies Coleridge's theory of the imagination advanced
in the Biographia Literaria. There, in distinguishing between the imagination
and the fancy, Coleridge proposes that the imagination is that faculty which
"dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is
rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to
unify." 23 To discuss this process of unification he coined the word
"esemplastic — from the Greek eis en plattein — to shape into one." 24
The belief that the imagination is esemplastic lies behind Eliot's assertion
that the perfectly equipped poetic mind is one that is "constantly
amalgamating disparate experiences." To return to the essay on the
Metaphysicals:

"We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the
seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth,
possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of
experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their
predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti,
Guinicelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of
sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered." 25

Here is the historical sense that Eliot saw as concomitant with tradition
with a vengeance. There has been some debate, however, about whether or
not such a dissociation of sensibility did take place in the seventeenth
century, whether or not thought and feeling were irreparably sundered. Not
that Eliot has been the only one to propound the idea. W.B. Yeats, for

23 S.T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria in Kathleen Coburn, ed., The
Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Princeton & London
1983), VII, 304.
24 Ibid., p.168.
example, advances a similar theory, though he coined the more violent image of breaking into fragments, an image arguably more germane to the texture of Eliot's The Wasteland than to his own poetry, where any felt dissociation of sensibility or breaking into fragments is persistently opposed by the cohesive force of his symbology and his rhetoric. But Yeats saw the process taking place at least a century earlier: "Had not Europe shared one mind and heart, until both mind and heart began to break into fragments a little before Shakespeare's birth."26 A quatrain he wrote shortly after this, however, reveals more accord with Eliot. If Eden was the ancient agrarian past, with its holistic, mythopoetic modes of apprehension, then the fall was ushered in by the weights and measures men of the sixteenth and seventeenth century:

Locke sank into a swoon,
The garden died,
God took the spinning jenny
Out of his side.27

Whether or not such a dissociation of sensibility or breaking into fragments historically took place, is, I think, to borrow Borges phrase, a 'pseudo problem.' What is evident is that at a certain point in his imaginative development, Eliot thought that it had. The idea enabled him to construct a theory of tradition, to establish an order of past writers, to create space for himself, and to posit ways in which the past might inform and interact with the present.

Perhaps more importantly, and I feel that this has not been sufficiently appreciated by those who have studied Eliot, his theory of the dissociation of sensibility, whether it was or was not merely a simulacrum derived from thinking about tradition, was one of the main forces that enabled him to write The Wasteland. In using the word 'force' I am trying to distinguish between the intellectual importance of his indebtedness to works like Jessie L Weston's From Ritual to Romance and Sir James Frazer’s The Golden Bough, duly acknowledged by Eliot himself in his notes to The Wasteland, and a view of literature and society that empowered him to write. The theory

of the dissociation of sensibility, a consequence of his own historical sense, enabled Eliot to enact his own view of tradition, to appropriate the past in such a way as to reveal its distance from and its similarities with the present. The recourse to Marvell is again instructive here. Firstly, we have Eliot:

But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeny to Mrs Porter in the spring.

Behind which we have Marvell:

But at my back I alwaies hear
Times winged Charriot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lye
Desarts of vast Eternity.

A comparison, in terms of form, texture, diction and structure yields a number of observations. While the opening phrase "But at my back" is the same, Marvell's certainty "I always hear" has been replaced by a colloquialism — "from time to time I hear." The colloquialism not only takes away the certainty, that forward driving energy of conviction, but it also relocates the emotion, removing it from the heroic and miring it in the mundane. What is swift and sure is now worn and intermittent. A similar process is evident in the enjambment of the first and second lines. Marvell keeps his symbol operating at the level of the metaphysical. The speaker of the poem hears "Time's winged chariot." Eliot holds his verse at the level of the literal by following his subject and verb with a non figurative object. The speaker of the poem hears "the sound of horns and motors." Marvell's use of the pronoun both reveals the urgency of the speaker and involves the reader in that urgency. We are reading something about us. Eliot distances the reader. The sound that is heard "shall" (and the decorum of the modal serves only to heighten the indecorousness of what is being described) "bring Sweeny to Mrs Porter in the spring." We are being told something that is going to happen out there, beyond us.

Juxtaposed like this, it is, I think, evident that Eliot has retained sufficient of Marvell for the reader to sense, using the language of "Tradition and the Individual Talent", 'the dead poet, his ancestor, asserting his immortality most vigorously.' The diction and the situation, albeit transposed, ensure this. Marvell remains a ghostly presence, but a poltergeist nevertheless. Similarly, The Wasteland ensures, if not his immortality, at
least some form of perpetuity, and in more than just the archaeological sense, though discovering a fragment of "To His Coy Mistress" in the desert of Eliot's poem may encourage the reader to dig into the past to recover the whole of Marvell's poem. Whether or not he does, does not matter, because the reader has been introduced to Marvell, and in being introduced to him is able to be challenged by the parodic energy of Eliot's poem to relate the present to the past.

I would not want to assert that passages from Eliot's poem demonstrate that there has been a dissociation of sensibility, a sundering of thought and feeling; I do want to argue that the idea empowered Eliot to transform Marvell. It gave him the confidence to expropriate and fragment a text and it provided him with a theoretical justification for dislocating the thoughts and feelings in that text. The reader, in experiencing the difference between the two, is given a sense of history, a sense of tradition. At the same time, however, the reader is also made aware, and this is an equally important aspect of Eliot's view of tradition, of the continuity of experience, of the fact that Marvell and Eliot have both taken as their theme carpe diem. Whether or not there has been any dissociation of sensibility, there are still feelings and emotions that have been experienced and continue to be experienced.

Eliot's belief that such a process had taken place had significant consequences for his view of the modern poet, and, by implication, his view of himself as a poet. Toward the end of "Tradition and the Individual Talent", he returns to his analogy of the inert vessel and the inert catalyst. "The poet's mind," he says:

"is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."

It is also, simultaneously, the inert catalyst that facilitates the reaction.

"When the two gasses previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. The combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of the platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the
mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material."

Critics, in the main, have largely dismissed this analogy. Shusterman, for example, calls it "grotesque." And he is undoubtedly correct, though only if it is seen as a visual image for the creative process. To view it in this way, however, is to focus on the meaning rather than the use — that is the use to which Eliot may have put it. The value of the analogy lay in its use. Eliot found it useful in that it enabled him, during a critical period of his imaginative development, to offer a theory of aspects of creativity and a theory of tradition free of any concomitant theory of poetic influence. What the analogy excused or prevented him from saying was as helpful as the boundaries it imposed on explanation. In Eliot’s analogy both tradition and the poet are simply there. The chemical reaction that is creativity only takes place when elements from the past and elements from the present that can interact come together in the poet’s mind in the presence of the catalyst that is his imagination. The analogy thus enabled Eliot to image a mechanism for the creative process without having to offer an explanation for the way that process operated. It enabled him to image what he himself was doing without having to explain or justify it, and so perhaps put it in jeopardy.

It is here, it seems to me, that the parallel with Borges is most instructive. Eliot, who was about to enter his mature phase, did not possess the Argentine writer’s aplomb. He did not have the self-confidence to articulate, confront, and then dismiss current models of tradition, even though he seems to have felt the need to do so. What he did was to subvert the threat of the past by arguing that the impersonal and impervious writer posed more of a threat to tradition, than tradition to the writer. Eliot thus achieved what Borges achieved, though he did so somewhat crabwise. Tradition, for him, was a strategy for imaging the ways the past informs the present, the ways texts write authors.

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28 Shusterman, p.62.