



‘The Present of things Past’ Notes on Tradition

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Abstract

The article revisits some influential arguments about tradition; its aim is to highlight the dynamic nature of tradition, one that allows for change and transformation. In contrast with an idea of tradition as a fixed and formalized set of normative practices handed down by repetition, the article favours an understanding of tradition that is closely attentive to the continuous construction and reinterpretation of the past. In the process of its transmission, tradition is reformulated and reshaped in response to altering cultural needs; its continuity relies on successive reconfigurations.

Keywords: *Textual Mobility, Tradition, Transmission, Transformation*

Bvt that which is now cleere, and plaine, is, that neither *tymes* past, nor *tymes* future, haue any being. Nor is it properly sayd, that there *are*, three *Tymes*. But thus peradventure, it might properly be sayd, that there are three *Tymes*; The *present, concerning things past; the present, concerning things present; and the present, concerning things future*. For there are three such kinds of things, as these, in the mind; but I see them not any were els. The *Present* of things *Past*, by *Memory*; the *Present* of things *Present*, by *Inspection*; the *Present* of things *Future*, by *Expectation*.
The Confessions of the Incomparable Doctovr S. Augustine, Translated into English [by Matthew Tobie] 1620.

Tradition is a moving image of the past.
P. Rabinov, *Symbolic Domination*, 1975.

1. ‘The hand of the gardener’

When in 1981, sociologist Edward Shils published *Tradition*, the first comprehensive study of the history, meaning and ‘prospects’ of tradition, he explained his pioneering endeavour by stating that his ‘book about tradition is evidence of the need

for tradition' (1981, vii). Although, as Shils highlights, many books about 'particular traditions' had already been published, there was 'however no book about tradition which tri[ed] to see the common ground and elements of tradition and which analyz[ed] what difference tradition makes in human life' (vii). Tradition, in his words,

means many things. In its barest, most elementary sense, it means simply a *traditum*; it is anything that is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present. It makes no statement about what is handed down or in what particular combination or whether it is a physical object or a cultural construction; it says nothing about how long it has been handed down or in what manner, whether orally or in written forms. The degree of rational deliberation which has entered into its creation, presentation, and reception likewise has nothing to do with whether it is a tradition ... the anonymity of its authors or creators ... makes no difference as to whether it is a tradition. The decisive criterion is that, having been created through human actions, through thought and imagination, it is handed down from one generation to the next. Being handed down does not logically entail any normative, mandatory proposition ... any explicit expectation that it should be accepted, appreciated, reenacted, or otherwise assimilated. (12)

One of Shils' aims was to counteract negative and dismissive ideas of tradition, viewed in opposition to 'liberty' and creativity,¹ and to propose a more nuanced understanding of tradition that highlighted its complex relationships to individuality and wilful agency, as well as the inevitability and limitedness of its authority.

Shils' project was originally presented at the Conference on the Future of Freedom, held in Milan under the auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in 1955, and then published in 1958. He expressed his position metaphorically, associating tradition with the gardener's hand:

Tradition is not the dead hand of the past but rather the hand of the gardener, which nourishes and elicits tendencies of judgment which would otherwise not be strong enough to emerge on their own. In this respect tradition is an encouragement to incipient individuality rather than its enemy. It is a stimulant to moral judgment and self-discipline rather than an opiate. (1958, 156)

As Yacoov Yadgar argues, Shils' statement critically confronts a prevalent idea of tradition as something which is, 'at best, of relevance only for understanding of the past', surely lacking relevance for understanding the present or the future' ... this sentiment has become foundational in the construction of the modern, Western self' (Yadgar 2013, 452).

Shils' words resonate with T.S. Eliot's opening of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1920), published more than thirty years before, that highlights the derogative overtone that the word 'tradition' possessed:

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to 'the tradition' or to 'a tradition'; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and-so is 'traditional' or even 'too traditional.' Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure. If otherwise, it is vaguely approbative, with the implication, as to the work approved, of some pleasing archaeological reconstruction. You can hardly make the word agreeable to English ears without this comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology. (1960, 47)²

¹ On the relationship between 'creativity' and 'tradition', see Kristeller (1983).

² Shils acknowledges an intellectual debt to T.S. Eliot in the 'Preface' of *Tradition* and draws attention to Eliot's 'unfathomably deep thought on tradition' (1981, viii) throughout his book.

The negative treatment of tradition underlined by Eliot and Shils has its roots in the Enlightenment belief in analytical reason and empirical science which strongly opposed traditional, inherited knowledge, perceived as a hindrance to innovation and creativity, to change, modernity and progress.³ Traditional beliefs, Shils adds, could not be tested rationally and scientifically, they were beliefs 'because they had been believed previously' (1981, 21). Tradition became associated with ignorance and superstition and set against scientific knowledge and rationality as antitheses (5). However, Shils argues, the success achieved by the Enlightenment is due to 'its becoming a tradition' (325) and to the fact that 'it was promulgated and pursued in a society in which substantive traditions were rather strong' (*ibid.*).⁴

Another important and strictly interrelated aspect has contributed to the dismissive attitude toward tradition: it surfaced strongly at the beginning of the twentieth century but can be traced back to Descartes' idea of the individual who achieves their potential by means of disengagement from the burden of the (inherited) rules, beliefs and ideals imposed on the 'self' (10-11).⁵ The ideal of a sovereign and independent individual freed from the fetters of tradition and authority 'has become a formative stage in the construction of the modern subject, or self' (Yadgar 2013, 453).⁶ The conception of a subject who is potentially detached, and independent from their past has brought to life dichotomies between (individual) liberty and tradition, modernity and tradition, science and tradition, as well as derivative ideas opposing tradition with truth, rationality, objectivity, and so on (455), antinomies which have become accepted and, at least until recently, 'taken for granted' and rarely challenged.

In a more recent study, Yadgar has advocated an alternative understanding of tradition, one that 'manages to avoid and overcome the false dichotomies that have dominated social-scientific thought, such as that of the ... allegedly inherent antimony between tradition and individuality or between tradition and modernity, between truth and authority, between science and tradition, etc.' At the heart of this understanding is 'an emphasis on tradition's foundational, or constitutive nature' (2013, 455). From this perspective,

tradition emerges as a rather dynamic meta-structure into which one is born and within which and through which one acquires her sense of the world, and develops her sense of agency, subjectivity, or selfhood: in short, her individuality. Tradition is thus viewed as the infrastructure that both enables our self-understanding and sets its limits, even when this self-understanding comes to be defined by its rebelliousness against tradition. This view also stresses that tradition is meaningless without its actual, contemporaneous interpretation-application by individuals and communities, thus highlighting the rather dynamic nature of tradition. In other words, this understanding of tradition is closely attentive to the continuous formation and reformation of our constitutive past. (455-456)⁷

³ In Shils' words, '[c]hange has become coterminous with progress; innovation has become coterminous with improvement' (Shils 1981, 4). For a full discussion of the practice and prestige of 'scientific knowledge', the Enlightenment program and the 'Traditionality of Reason', see 4-10; 21-23; 323-325).

⁴ Shils defines 'substantive traditionality', 'one of the major patterns of human thought', as 'the appreciation of the accomplishments and wisdom of the past and of the institutions especially impregnated with tradition, as well as the desirability of regarding patterns inherited from the past as valid guides' (21).

⁵ Yadgar quotes the opening of Descartes's first meditation as an illuminating example of how 'self-liberation' from the past and the traditional system of knowledge was considered the basis for the acquisition of 'true' knowledge (2013, 452). My discussion of tradition in this article is indebted to Yadgar's study.

⁶ Opening his note, 'The Tradition', published as part of the 'Editorial Comment' in *Poetry* (1914, 3, 4), Ezra Pound remarks that 'The tradition is a beauty which we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us' (137). His terse words make here reference to the two 'great lyric traditions ... that of the Melic poets and that of Provence' (*ibid.*).

⁷ In order to illuminate the complex nature of tradition, Yadgar resorts to three compelling analogies: 'tradition as language', 'tradition as narrative' and 'tradition as horizon' (2013, 457-469).

What Yadgar highlights here is both the inevitable influence that tradition has on the individual and their relevant community and the limits of this influence, since we, bearers of tradition, are also its interpreters: we do not only maintain it and make its survival possible but, more crucially, constantly (re)shape it.

The other aspect foregrounded by Yadgar is the dynamic nature of tradition: it is handed down but evolves to fit the conditions of new environments with which, inevitably, it interacts and engages. This entails perhaps that different instantiations of tradition compete and cooperate with, as well as influence one another, through the mediation of human agency. Our relationship to tradition appears dialogical in nature. Moreover, 'the continuous formation and reformation of our constitutive past' shows the 'openness' of past events to acquire new meanings in the ongoing present: the past is a permanent construction, an action that takes place in the present.⁸

Our knowledge of the past depends on what has survived to the present: only traces, fragments of evidence, selective remembrances of what ever existed remain. From these remnants, we attempt to reconstruct the past and create narratives that try to bridge the many gaps, aware that these (multiple) 'stories', being interpretations, albeit based on the evidence possessed, are never complete and are, instead, always open to revision. This means, among other things, that our inferences, conceptual and explanatory models are deeply interconnected to the transmission of the past. In this sense, tradition is 'accumulated knowledge': what is handed down also bears 'memory' of its different interpretations.

2. *Moving Images of the Past*

The refusal to acknowledge the value of tradition was associated with another long-held assumption: the idea that tradition has an essentially 'static' and unchanging nature. According to this view, tradition is considered as a kind of monolith, a fixed entity passed down to us from the past, carrying authoritative prescriptions about 'what we should believe to be true and how we should behave in the present' (Yadgar 2013, 454); in this sense, the past is a given and stagnant 'fact'. The idea that tradition is an invariable, self-contained system was reinforced by the publication in 1983 of a highly influential collection of essays, *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by two distinguished historians, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger.⁹ The book emphasizes the

⁸ It is worth mentioning here a collection of essays, *Detradizionalization*, edited by Paul Heelas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris (1996), meant as a contribution to the debate around the role of traditions in contemporary society. In the introduction to the volume, Paul Heelas gives a working definition of 'detradizionalization' which 'involves a shift of authority: from "without" to "within". It entails the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural orders of things. Individual subjects are themselves called upon to exercise authority in the face of the disorder and contingency which is thereby generated. "Voice" is displaced from established sources, coming to rest with the self' (2). This radical position is opposed, in the same volume, by the so-called 'coexistence thesis' which 'holds that people ... always live in terms of those typically conflicting demands associated, on the one hand, with voices of authority emanating from realms transcending the self qua self, and, on the other, with those voices emanating from the desires, expectations, and competitive or idiosyncratic aspirations of the individual' (7). According to the latter view, processes of detradizionalization occur 'alongside, or together with, tradition-maintenance, re-traditionalization and the construction of new traditions' (2). Importance is thus given to the changing character of tradition and its refashionings.

⁹ The book is the result of a conference organised in 1978 by the journal *Past and Present*. After its first publication in 1983, the book was reprinted on a yearly basis, with a second edition in 1992. The latter has since been reprinted several times. Guy Beiner reports that an examination of academic citations carried out between 1990 and 2000 shows that the book was considered highly influential in the study of modern political and social history (2001, 1 and 9, note 1).

artificiality of traditions: they are 'inventions' aptly constructed to serve ideological purposes.¹⁰ In the introductory essay, Hobsbawm explains the sense he attributes to 'invented tradition', by stating that the phrase

is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (1983, 1)

He further clarifies the nature of invention,

insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. (2)¹¹

In his discussion of *The Invention of Tradition*, Guy Beiner interrogates the central concepts of Hobsbawm's thesis and points to some 'serious lacunae' in the project. In particular, in contrast to his idea of invariance as the main characteristic of tradition, Beiner calls attention to the 'inherently dynamic nature of tradition', to which it follows that the essential feature of tradition is 'adaptability, which facilitates (often transparently) modification to changing historical circumstances so as to maintain relevance and vitality' (2001, 2, 3). In order to better capture the nature of tradition, he calls for a 'reinvention of tradition', a phrase that sheds light on 'a creative process involving renewal, reinterpretation and revision' (2007, 272). To 'reinvent tradition' becomes a necessary step for keeping the past vital: it is the 'present' contribution to a larger cultural inheritance which future generations may renew, reinterpret and revise in their turn. Interpretations and reinterpretations of the past are indeed processes that take place in the present: they highlight the authority of the past over us and, at the same time, our agency in constructing this very past (Yadgar 2013, 456).

What we have observed so far shows how demanding and challenging a thorough discussion of tradition can be. It is demanding because it involves extensive and interdisciplinary knowledge in the fields of both social sciences and humanities; it is challenging because it confronts many complex and interrelated questions that require likewise complex and interrelated answers.

Some of the issues at stake concern our grip of the past, the ways we perceive and reconstruct the past, how it acquires new meanings and properties in time, how it 'changes' or 'emerges' as history unfurls, how it allows the formation of new concepts which could not have been known or applied by past actors. These aspects bring into play the degree of human agency in the process of gripping, perceiving, and reconstructing the past. They also address the options open to us as agents who are in part constrained and enabled by the conceptions of what we might be or do.¹²

¹⁰ One may notice, in passing, that if all traditions are invented, then, dichotomies, such as liberty and tradition, modernity and tradition, science and tradition, are themselves invented.

¹¹ In his review of the collection, while acknowledging that 'the invention of tradition is a splendidly subversive phrase', Peter Burke highlights some 'serious ambiguities'. Hobsbawm – Burke argues – 'contrasts invented traditions with what he calls "the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions"'. But where does his "adaptability" ... end, and invention begin? Given that all traditions change, is it possible or useful to attempt to discriminate the "genuine" antiques from the fakes? "Invention" is a process which may be more or less deliberate, more or less sudden' (1986, 317). Discussing the term 'tradition', J.C. Nyíri argues that 'fictitious traditions' 'do not necessarily fall ... outside the boundaries of traditions proper' (1992, 73).

¹² According to Shils, changes in traditions are connected to the 'exercise of imagination': 'without imagination no significant modifications in the traditions which provide patterns of belief and which control the circumstances

Our knowledge of the past results from ‘a transfer of information’; this involves a process of transmission and an act of communication. In its multiple original meaning of imparting and making common, ‘communication’ is central to the sharing of tradition; the transmission of tradition is in itself an act of communication. As K. W. Deutsch argues, communication binds together social entities: ‘both society and community are developed by social learning, and ... a community consists of people who have learned to communicate with each other and to understand each other well beyond the mere interchange of goods and service’ (1966, 91). Furthermore, Deutsch adds,

the relatively coherent and stable structure of memories, habits, and values ... depends on existing facilities for social communication, both from the past to the present and between contemporaries. Such communication requires facilities for storing, recalling, and recombining information, channels for its dissemination and interaction, and facilities for deriving further information, as well as new changes in purposes and values, from these processes. (75)

Deutsch’s reflections do not concern the ‘contents’ of the information communicated; they concentrate, instead, on its complexity. In his words, ‘We cannot measure directly the piety, the beauty, courage, or steadfastness of human beings, but we can measure to a significant extent the ranges and kinds of messages which they can transmit to each other, the speed and accuracy with which they can do so, and the price in effort and in lost information which they have to pay’ (91): the richer the cooperation among human beings in ‘developing and sharing intangible treasures of knowledge, art, and values, the greater their need for ... varied ... and accurate communication’ (*ibid.*). Among other things, communication involves the use of technologies for ‘storing’, ‘recalling’, ‘recombining’, ‘disseminating’ information, technologies that inevitably inflect, shape, or even construct the meaning of what is communicated.

Communication makes the continuity of tradition and human history possible: it is in, and by communication that traditions are transmitted; without transmission, the past will vanish. But traditions are cultural practices, not products,¹³ their transmission ‘cannot be described as a game of “pass the parcel” in which remnants from the past are passed on intact, without any modification, only to resurface in their original-archaic form’ (Beiner 2001, 2-3). In the process of transmission, which is not necessarily linear or cyclical, traditions are ‘translated’ and appropriated under different historical circumstances, they are reinterpreted, ‘contaminated’,¹⁴ suitably adapted to new contexts, an action that involves acceptance and integration into existing practices but also the risk of (partial) loss.¹⁵ Their transformation is, in turn, potentially trans-

of action could be made ... Imagination, directly or indirectly, is the great modifier of tradition’ (1981, 228). For his discussion on the function of imagination and the role of charismatic figures, see *ibid.*, 228-235.

¹³ As Beiner states, ‘Objects do not intrinsically retain memory. Rather memory was generated through the meaning and interpretations that were attached to objects’ (2007, 242). Shils discusses the ‘endurance of past objects’ and maintains that ‘The inherent durability of material objects ... and the durability of the physical landscape enables the past to live into the present’ (1981, 63ff.). But material objects are themselves subject to time and decay, disintegration and erosion as well as deliberate destruction. Insofar as they survive, they do so only if they are maintained and protected, and, sometimes, adapted to new uses. Their preservation and restoration involve interventions that change their appearance, acts that, in turn, affect the way in which objects are perceived (64-68). For an illuminating study of the concept and practice of ‘conservation in art, architecture and literature’ and their philosophical theoretical foundations, see Eggert (2009).

¹⁴ ‘Contamination’ is here used with a ‘positive’ meaning as loosely defined by Greetham (2010, 1, 10, 43-55).

¹⁵ In an almost epigrammatic way, Shils maintains that ‘Traditions change because the circumstances to which they refer change. Traditions, to survive, must be fitting to the circumstances in which they operate and to which they are directed’ (1981, 258).

formative; traditions respond to changes in human/cultural experience and, at the same time, may question some of its assumptions. The past continues to exist and be transformed. Transmission involves the use of technologies and techniques for 'storing', 'recalling', 'recombining', 'disseminating' information, technologies and techniques that inevitably inflect, shape, or even construct the meaning of what is communicated: 'forms effect meaning' (McKenzie 1986, 13).

In a sense, to say that traditional knowledge is transmitted is to state the obvious; what appears particularly demanding is to account for the ways in which that knowledge is converted into cultural structures and behaviours. The questions at stake encompass how we inherit the past, what it really means to reinterpret and re-elaborate the past in different 'presents', and also, what are the relationships among the different temporalities in which processes of transmission occur.¹⁶

In order to better capture the dynamic and complex relationships between tradition, transmission and transformation, we can turn to the concept of 'transformission', originally introduced by Randall McLeod in textual studies and editorial theory in connection to early modern documents:

just walk into virtually any Renaissance document, and it is liable to open in its own small ways into multiplicity, into non-identity with itself. By attending to such examples of text's mis-self-representation, we can gauge something of what I call its "transformission"—how it was *transformed* as it was *transmitted*. (And since we don't have texts that aren't transmitted, transformission should cover most everything). (1991, 266)¹⁷

The term and concept may be fruitfully adopted and applied to all forms of cultural texts and tradition. Following D.F. McKenzie, 'text' is here used 'to include verbal, visual, oral and numeric data, in the form of maps, print, and music, of archive of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information, everything in fact from epigraphy to the latest forms of discography' (1986, 13). In this sense, McLeod's idea of 'transformission' does, indeed,

¹⁶ Most studies on tradition have in fact shed light on the interpretation of the phenomenon but have not claimed to offer 'explanations' of how tradition works. Among the few exceptions, see two monograph studies by M.D.C. Drout, *How Tradition Works* (2006) and *Tradition and Influence* (2013). In the first, Drout examines tradition in ways similar to some of those evolutionary biologists use for the investigation of the spread and success of genes. He develops a theory of tradition in terms of 'memetics' that, in his view, helps one understand how traditions are 'repeated' and appropriated in new environments or else acting to reshape those environments. In *Tradition and Influence*, Drout expands his memetic theory of tradition (seen as a particular kind of influence); his aim is to examine the various ways in which influence works and to develop a general theory of influence. Drout's approach here is slightly different, more literary and less historical than in his previous book. From a different perspective and focusing on how we inherit the past and other related issues, see Gagliardi, Latour and Memelsdorff (2010). The volume is the result of an interdisciplinary seminar, held in 2007, where invited experts from different cultural traditions discussed issues of conservation and restoration in different fields. In addition to the introductions to each seminar session, the book also contains the discussions following the presentations. For a recent and interesting discussion on 'héritage' (meaning both legacy and heritage as well as inheritance), see Birnbaum (2017), a volume collecting intellectuals' and artists' reflections on the concept of héritage'.

¹⁷ It is interesting to notice that, more recently, the term 'transformission' has been 're-invented' and then used by a group of French archeo-geographers. In the introduction of the 2003 issue of *Études rurales*, the editor, Gérard Chouquer, writes: 'Je suggère de créer les termes plus dynamiques de "transformission*" (transformation et transmission) et de "transformaction*" (transformation et action) pour traduire la richesse de contenu de ces processus évolutifs complexes' (§ 34). [I suggest creating the more dynamic terms of 'transformission*' (transformation and transmission) and 'transformaction*' (transformation and action) to convey the semantic richness of these complex evolutionary processes]. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine. For a full description of the theory of transformission in the field of archeogeography, see Chouquer (2013, especially, 167-187).

‘cover most everything’. It is by means of the process of transmission that cultural texts are actualized and become relevant to new contexts. They are shaped in new forms and elicit new meanings, and therefore transmit previous interpretations about their past lives and betray the different levels and kinds of ideological motions occurring during various phases of transmission in time.¹⁸

3. *‘Symbolic Constellations’ on the Move*

‘Symbolic constellations’, as Shils defines intellectual ideas, interpretations, beliefs and historical knowledge (1981, 89), though distinct from the material forms in which they are embodied, are strictly and variously interrelated with each other:

The material vehicle and the intellectual substance ... have different histories, each of which is, in certain respects but certainly not in all, the precondition and ground of the other. Elaborate philosophical ideas could not be elaborated over centuries and over widely dispersed territories without being placed in material vehicles. Could Aristotle’s ideas have been taken up with such elaborations in the Islamic world, while he was disregarded in Europe, if there had been only an oral tradition for the transmission of his work and for their study? Could he have come back to Europe again with such force if there were no manuscripts? ... The relatively small radius of diffusion of the oral intellectual cultures of particular African societies may in part be a consequence of the absence of a written form in which words, images, and ideas could be precipitated and transported. (91)

The complex, shifting relationships between the materiality and transmission of texts and their ‘essential substance’ have been the focus of several important studies by Roger Chartier, who, since 2001, identified a ‘durable contrast between the purity of the idea and its inevitable corruption by matter’ (2007, viii) and emphasized the necessity to overcome the contrast. Chartier’s illuminating, influential studies remind us, time and again, to avoid reducing texts to their ‘semantic’ contents and always pay attention to their material incarnations and the modes and modalities of their production, transmission, and reception. He also invites us to consider what he defines the ‘double historicité’ (double historicity) of the written text, a historicity related to the ‘categories d’assignation, de désignation et de classement des discours propres au temps et lieu qui sont le siens’ (categories of assignment, description and classification of discourses, specific to their time and place), and a historicity related to the ‘formes matérielles de son inscription et de sa transmission’ (material forms of its inscription and transmission). Disregard of this double historicity means ‘risquer l’anachronisme qui impose aux textes anciens des formes et des significations qui leur étaient tout à fait étrangères’ (2001, 801) (to risk anachronism to impose on ancient texts forms and meanings that were completely foreign to them).¹⁹ Chartier’s formulation highlights a dynamic, multitemporal approach to texts that calls attention to mobility, materiality and change rather than stability and immutability. It also shows that different traditions, closely and variously connected, are at work in texts: the tradition of symbolic constellations, the tradition of the material object in which the intellectual substance is embodied, and the tradition of the instruments, technologies and materials used to produce the physical artifact.

¹⁸ Significantly, the words ‘tradition’ and ‘betray’ are etymologically related, both deriving from, and sharing Latin origins.

¹⁹ For a discussion of Chartier’s idea of the double historicity of written texts, see Braida (2007, 26-38).

In one of his most recent books, Chartier devotes particular attention to the 'migration' of texts; their mobility is examined through a careful reconstruction of each phase of their historical transmission and analysis of the plurality of circulating versions of the 'same' work (2020).²⁰ Chartier's reflections show that texts are not crystallized in history but, on the contrary, they move through history and, in their 'migrations', change, they are no longer the 'same'. New techniques of transmission, the new physical forms in which they are embodied affect, and, indeed, effect their meanings: each migration brings about new configurations and new interpretations, that fit the historical environment in which the process takes place: texts acquire new senses for new readers and might suggest new ways in which they could be used. In the course of their migrations, texts are contaminated, invaded and memorially infiltrated by other texts (Greetham 2010), filled with the multifarious 'intentions' of non-authorial agents (those of collaborators, copyists, printers, editors, translators, censors, bookseller, readers, etc.) and they witness multiple historical circumstances.²¹

Texts do not only move through history but have the ability to 'mobilize others: other texts, people, instruments, technologies, places, and space ... more generally speaking, they effect changes, both small modifications and large-scale transformation' (Asdal and Jordheim 2018, 59, 74). They act, interact and are acted upon: they are 'part of historical processes, events and discourses' (58).

4. '... by memory'

In the passage by Augustine quoted in the epigraph, another word calls for our attention, i.e. 'memory', a term loaded with meaning and applied to many phenomena. In Augustine's reflection, memory connects the temporal dimensions of the past, present and future; in other words, we summon up the past in the present with a view to the future:²² 'If you don't look back, / the future never happens', says poet Rita Dove (1999, ll. 5-6).²³

Moreover, memory has a dynamic nature, it is not simply a 'vessel which retains the record of the experience undergone in the past and of knowledge gained through the recorded and remembered experiences of others, living and dead' (Shils 1981, 50). As studies from diverse fields of knowledge have shown, the process of remembering is not a passive retrieval from a memory box but an activity always involving a reinterpretation of the past in the present; it is a reconstructive process and, as such, is susceptible to distortion and manipulation.

²⁰ The English revised version is forthcoming (2022).

²¹ In *Éditer et traduire* (2021), Chartier argues that the mobility of texts is due to different reasons: the instability of the attribution system (i.e., whether the text exhibits or not the name of the author on the title page); textual variants and revisions, whether authorial or editorial, inserted in different editions; the transformations of the material forms and publication formats in different editions, which contribute to bringing about new meanings and interpretations of the 'same' work; the 'migration' of texts from one the genre to another, and from one language to another (11-16). In this study, Chartier addresses issues concerning translation and untranslatability and claims that translation is a process that is not limited to a 'movement' from one language to another but can be fruitfully applied to works that are transformed by the different forms of their publication, although their language remains the same. In this sense, according to Chartier, different editions of the 'same' work can be considered forms of translation. Like translations, successive editions create new readerships and new meanings (15). On this issue, see also Stephen Orgel's article in this volume of *JEMS*.

²² Augustine's meditation on memory is contained in Book X of the *Confessions*.

²³ A full discussion of the concept of 'memory' and the manifold issues related to its nature and functions as well as debates concerning 'collective memory' goes beyond the scope of this article.

What is remembered and what is forgotten, and why, change over time, and are, in part at least, conditioned by history. Furthermore, what is recollected and what is obscured in the present are crucial aspects for our knowledge of the past: they are political acts that serve to build the image that a society, or a community wants to convey of itself. In this sense, the kind of past and the traditions that become manifest in the heritage of a particular society, together with the values that emerge, tell us much about the cultural constitution of that society (see Assman 1995, 133).

In the above sections, the brief overview of some of the issues concerning tradition and the complexities inherent in our relationship to the past, has highlighted the dynamic nature of tradition, one that enables the ‘continuous formation and reformation of our constitutive past’ (Yadgar 2013, 456). Tradition is understood as an ongoing interpretation of the past and, since it lives through interpretation, tradition is bound to change over time. Changes can take place by different, sometime interrelated, processes: encounters with other traditions, addition, amalgamation, absorption, fusion, ramification, disaggregation, attenuation and dissolution.²⁴ Nonetheless, despite change, traditions, in some form, survive.

Our relationship to the past can vary considerably in strength and efficacy but can never cease to exist completely; if a society, as John Berger put it: ‘is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a [society] ... than one that has been able to situate itself in history’ (Berger 2008, 26). A position that refutes a conservative idea of tradition as having an unchanging, rigidly normative and authoritative nature:

The past is never there waiting to be discovered, to be recognized by exactly what it was. History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past ... The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act. (4)

To be situated in history (and tradition) affects us but is not an obstacle to knowledge and understanding, on the contrary, it enables us to choose and act. It is what makes change possible.

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²⁴ These processes are discussed in Shils (1981, 273-286).

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