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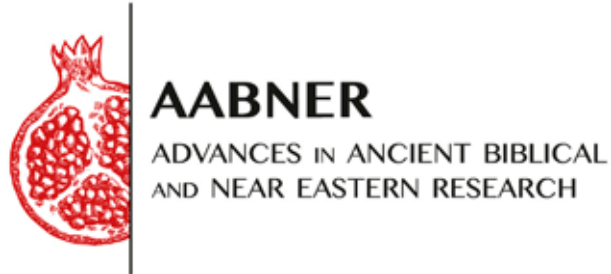
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RETHINKING TRADITION INHERITANCE: RESTORING THE INDIVIDUAL

Andrew Tobolowsky

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Abstract

This essay addresses the phenomenon of “tradition inheritance” as a whole, but especially in the ancient world. It is focused on how much the Romantic vision of traditions handed down through the generations, by entire generations, has shaped scholarly views of what is and is not possible or likely when an author redeploys an inherited tradition. Arguing that this Groupist vision of tradition inheritance is a holdover from nineteenth-century Romantic assumptions about peoples and their traditions, it asks what happens when we imagine that author fully as an individual as creative and as empowered as we are today. It suggests that this would undermine conservative models of tradition inheritance in quite a significant way and open the door to thinking more clearly and accurately about what someone, even an ancient someone, might do with the stories they know.



Questo saggio affronta il fenomeno della “trasmissione della tradizione” nel suo complesso, ma in particolare nel mondo antico. Si concentra su quanto la visione romantica delle tradizioni tramandate di generazione in generazione, da intere comunità, abbia influenzato le prospettive degli studiosi su ciò che sia o non sia possibile o plausibile quando un autore riutilizza una tradizione ricevuta. Sostenendo che questa visione “collettivista” della trasmissione della tradizione sia un retaggio delle concezioni romantiche ottocentesche sui popoli e le loro tradizioni, il saggio si chiede che cosa accada quando immaginiamo pienamente l'autore come individuo, creativo e dotato di autonomia tanto quanto lo siamo noi oggi. Suggerisce che ciò metterebbe seriamente in discussione i modelli conservatori di trasmissione della tradizione e aprirebbe la strada a un modo più chiaro e accurato di pensare a ciò che qualcuno, anche una persona dell'antichità, potrebbe fare con le storie che conosce.



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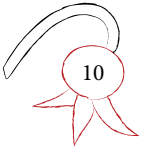


Introduction

In the study of the ancient world, and especially of places like ancient Israel, Judah, Greece, and Rome that have left behind such a robust literary record, the study of traditions has a central role to play. Since even this robust literary record is far less substantial than we would like it to be, especially in comparison to the study of more recent periods, investigating the relationship between what survives and what does not is an essential part of illuminating the past. And in these investigations, we very often have to make up our minds, specifically, about how what survives relates to older versions of the *same story* or at least other stories about the *same events and figures*. Here, because we once again do not have nearly as much evidence as we could wish, what conclusions we reach depend a great deal on how we understand what is *likely* to happen to a story over time. This is what I call “tradition inheritance,” the phenomenology of what happens when traditions are passed down over time.

The purpose of this article is to address the continued prevalence, implicit and explicit, of what I will call “conservative” models of tradition inheritance, which I have tended to oppose in my own work to “redescriptive” models (Tobolowsky 2022b, 50–65). Basically, a conservative model is one where we assume that there are what amounts to hard and fast rules for what can happen to narratives over time. By contrast, a redescriptive model is one in which there may be things someone retelling a story is *unlikely* to do but nothing they absolutely must not do, and where there is an essential fluidity, rather than an essential stability, to inheritance.

What I will show in what follows is that while the idea of conservative tradition inheritance is, of course, deeply embedded in cultural constructions of what makes something a tradition in the first place, its continued operation in scholarship is mainly due to the legacy of outdated, Romantic ideas about the historical development of traditions and their relationship to ethnic groups. Traditions, qua traditions, can and do survive in roughly similar forms for long periods of time, especially in contexts with robust cultures of writing and reading. But the idea that there are things that a traditional author in a particular context is actually *unable* to do to a story handed down actively requires Romantic visions of *collective* authorship and *collective* inheritance—generation to generation in a literal sense—to be supportable as a practical matter. When we reckon with individuals instead of collectives, we begin to have to grapple with how many more actors are involved in the process of inheritance over time, as well as the inherent subjectivity of individual apprehensions of even such touchstones as what the traditional story is and what constitutes its essence. As a result, tradition inheritance is necessarily much more creative, unpredictable, and uncontrolled than these conservative models allow.



Rules for Inheritance

Let me be clear from the beginning. “Traditions” and “the “traditional,” in and of themselves, are not terms that necessarily tell us anything about the history of the story or practice in question. What makes

something traditional is that it is culturally constructed as traditional. It is an emic description of how something, for example, a narrative, is understood by a given community, within that community. Thus, a story can be understood as a tradition, operate like one, and therefore *actually be one* even if a scholar could demonstrate that it was of quite recent vintage. In these cases, of course, no “tradition inheritance” took place. In addition, I acknowledge a sort of Ship of Theseus problem in my argument here. In other words, as I am arguing that tradition inheritance was far more dynamic, creative, and unpredictable than in many recent treatments, we might in some cases quickly encounter the question “how much can ‘a tradition’ change before it ceases to be ‘the tradition?’”

This, however, is why, in the past, I have tended to speak in terms of the *elements* of stories rather than *full stories*: familiar plot points, events, and characters (Tobolowsky 2020a, 459). Obviously, many traditions *are* actually stories that are, in some way or another, passed down over time. But it is in part the idea that the whole story is the irreducible atom of inheritance that makes it hard to move on from conservative models. In my view, if we think in terms of cultural repertoires of familiar characters, events, and plot points—which is to say, the ingredients of stories—which are passed down over long periods of time, we can capture the essential dynamic between preservation and redescription that is such a noted feature of inheritance much more accurately while still leaving room for human creativity and agency. In other words, I think we can get a better start on the whole problem by thinking in terms of what individual authors do with repertoires rather than in terms of what authors can do with a discrete story passed down through the generations, and much more so than when thinking in terms of what a “generation” or a “people” can do.

At any rate, it is the case that certain familiar events, characters, and even plots continue to play a role in certain cultural milieus for quite long periods of time, and we do need to have a clear sense of what a given author is likely to do with them. This is, therefore, an essay about the mechanics of inheritance in *any given case*, which is to say that I am less interested here in the history of any particular tradition than the sphere of what it is possible, or likely, for an author to do at the moment



when they address themselves to “the tradition.” More specifically, I want to talk about these instances of tradition inheritance in antiquity when an Israelite or Judahite or Greek or Roman author interacts with a story that they regard as traditional and tries to retell it, or even to consciously create a version of it, or to expand upon it in some way. And I am interested in this topic for two reasons: first, because again, with so little to work with, so much depends upon what models we use, and second, because here specifically “conservative” models are still common. More simply, there remain a number of scholars who believe that there are rules for inheritance, things that an author in a traditional context will not or even cannot do.

Such a scholar might say, along with Fritz Graf, that “a myth is not a specific poetic text, it is the subject material, a plot fixed in broad outline and with characters no less fixed, which an individual poet is free to alter only within limits” (1993, 2). They might say with Irad Malkin that “if the poem is about Odysseus, the hero must come to Ithaca and nowhere else” (1998, 50). They might say with Casey Dué that “the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were traditional poems whose stories were deeply ingrained in the culture that produced them, and though the poems unquestionably evolved over time, they do so within a conservative and highly sophisticated system” (2019, 14).¹ They might say with Jan Assmann—a particularly important influence on contemporary scholarship on ancient traditions—that “the cultural memory of the tribe” is “burned into the tribal novice during his initiation,” resulting in “the institutionalization of a social memory” in a way that is durable over time (Assmann and Livingstone 2006, 91–92). Or, they might say with David M. Carr that “the main point” of scribal training in ancient Israel “was to ‘incise’ such texts word for word on the minds of the next generation,” which resulted in texts that “served ... as numinous symbols of the hallowed ancient tradition, as learning aids, and as reference points to insure accurate performance” in oral contexts (2010, 18).

My concern with assertions like these is not that they fail to *gesture* at an important reality: that sometimes a familiar story can survive in



¹ The full quote continues “of composition in performance that claimed to be inspired by the Muses, who were believed to have witnessed the events recounted.”

its main particulars for quite a long time, or that familiar stories are not, on some level, told again and again. It is, instead, whether it is really still plausible to believe that some combination of cultural conditioning and technical training can limit the variety of inheritance to this extreme degree. I suspect, first of all, that each of these scholars is mistaken about the extent of *intentional* creativity—that, in fact, it may always have occurred to an author to tell a story in which Odysseus went somewhere else, or where something else happened in the “tribal” past. But just as importantly, I do not think that, under present assumptions, it is practically possible for “the tradition” to be preserved to the degree required in the above models because they rely on a level of collective fidelity that is only imaginable in contexts where collective action is more possible than it now seems to be.

To be sure, arguments like Carr’s that at least refer to practical and technical mechanisms of preservation are better than others. Scribal training clearly is one mechanism that would *tend* to preserve traditions over long periods of time—at least literally in the sense that someone who copies a text that they encounter has preserved it, whether or not that scribe, in their daily life, would also always feel bound to tell the story the same way. But the latter is actually an important issue. Carr himself is a sensitive reader of the dynamic interplay between oral and written storytelling, but I am considerably more skeptical about his view that “orality and writing technology are joint means for accomplishing a common goal: accurate recall of the treasured tradition” (2005, 7). It is one thing to imagine that someone looking at a text can repeat it word for word and another to imagine that they can leave the room and perform the same trick, even if they had every intention of doing just that.

In other words, in my view, the recognition that if we soften the idea that there are *rules* for inheritance even only to the point of suggesting there are guidelines, conservative models will inevitably fail. In that case, we would no longer be able to think in terms of a kind of self-perpetuating, automatic process of preservation but instead in terms of individuals, with all the individuality, creativity, and agency that individuals have. We have to think not about one chain of transmission reaching back through the centuries, but about how many



different people over centuries would *perform* in following *guidelines*, even if they all had the intention to follow them, which is, in my view, not clear. But even if they did, they would not all understand what the guidelines mean and demand of them in the same way. And the more individuals we need to imagine who are even just a little bit free to make big changes, the more and more kinds of changes we must imagine are possible, especially over long periods of time. Then, with the individuality of individuals in view, we have to ask whether, even if the vast majority of authors were attempting to follow the guidelines and even doing a basically good job, there might not have been a few authors here and there who felt like breaking the guidelines on purpose and introducing quite a different story into the repertoire—where it, by hook or by crook, might become “traditional” too. We would have to wonder whether a group of authors in one context, attempting to preserve “the” tradition, if they live near other authors who have no such compunctions, might nevertheless be influenced by the innovations of the latter. All of these possibilities are ones that open up when moving from “rule” even to “guideline,” where change must be multiplied by time and the number of authors. As a result, even a really strong tendency to preserve would still result in a fundamentally different model when we take all the moving parts into consideration.

Ultimately, what I will argue in what follows is that the survival of conservative models is actually a legacy of *Romantic* understandings of where traditions came from and how they were passed down. What we have failed to appreciate, however, is that conservative models only made sense in their original Romantic context because of additional Romantic assumptions that are no longer valid, including the collective authorship of early traditions and Romantic constructions of the ethnic group as a fundamentally real and well-defined entity in the world. It is through the lens of these assumptions that it was reasonable to imagine that tradition inheritance could follow the rules, because the ethnic group could collectively produce and decide what the major stories were, and could hand them down, not person to person, but generation to generation. The more we multiply the actors involved, the less anything like a conservative model will make sense, because we are multiplying the decisions that needed to be made, and the number of



individual apprehensions engaged in making them, to an extraordinary degree.

In addition, I will suggest that the survival of what is essentially a Romantic model is also the result of another Romantic legacy, which is the attribution of much more relative value to the business of recovering the “original” tradition and the “authentic” memory than it actually has. Since it is stability over time that makes these acts of recovery possible, scholars are highly motivated—consciously or not!—to find some reason to make a great deal of stability seem possible, too. Certainly, it is true that a “redescriptive model” would threaten our capacity to achieve the results that have historically been imbued with the greatest value (Tobolowsky 2022b, 50–65). But that does not mean they actually *have* a greater value under the lens of what can be done with a tradition in later periods. Prior to this discussion, however, I will illustrate how important deciding on a model of tradition inheritance can be.



The Psychology of the Individual

In a recent study, I investigated one example that clearly distills the problem I am discussing here: the conceptual problem of the Babylonian Talmud. This one, like the Jerusalem Talmud, is composed of the Mishnah and a commentary on the Mishnah called the Gemara, and its history is now understood very differently in scholarly contexts than in traditional ones (Tobolowsky 2025, 52–56). In the latter, the Mishnah is a collection that goes back in some ways to the work of Judah ha-Nasi and even Rabbi Akiva in the first and second centuries CE, distilling the learning of the early rabbinic generations—the Tannaim or teachers—and of others going all the way back to an oral law entrusted to Moses at Mt. Sinai.² As for the commentary, traditionalists understand it to have been largely completed by the work of the Amoraim, or speakers, before the end of the fifth century CE with minor kinds of wrapping-up tasks left to later generations (Strack and Stemberger 1991, 192–213). In

² See, generally, Strack and Stemberger 1991, 131–44; Neusner 1994, xx; Strassfeld 2023, 10.

the last few decades, however, scholarship has become more and more aware of the importance of the authors of the “Stam,” the anonymous voice that introduces and coordinates supposed rabbinic quotations and constitutes “over half of the total text of the Babylonian Talmud” (Elman 2005, 19).³

In terms of tradition inheritance, then, we might think of the rabbinic quotations that compose the raw materials of the Mishnah and the (in this case Babylonian) Talmud as the tradition and the Stam as its heirs. Obviously, a great deal depends on how we understand the relationship between the two in terms of basic questions about how we should also understand what the Talmud fundamentally *is*. David Weiss Halivni, who ignited the modern debate about the Stam, argued it was innately conservative: the “Stammaim” did little more than faithfully “reconstruct the argumentation” of prior generations of sages which had been “entrusted ... to transmitters so that it be preserved for future generations” (2013, 4–5). As a result, despite highlighting the work of the Stam, his argument did not move the conversation far from the traditional view. The Babylonian Talmud remains essentially the distillation of Tannaitic and Amoraic wisdom.

Here, we see a common pattern in the study of ancient traditions, where a discovery that might plausibly introduce dynamism and change into the scholarly construction of a tradition history is instead defanged. We can also see how much depends on what model we start with by acknowledging that, very often, this defanging process is based on little more than *assertion*. Why should we think the Stammaim did—or did not—faithfully “reconstruct the argumentation” of prior generations? We simply have to decide whether we think they did or did not. There not only is not but there *cannot* be any evidence that the Stammaim were necessarily of a conservative persuasion to the level that Weiss Halivni proposes. Meanwhile, to me, the starting question is not only “What were heirs like the Stammaim trying to do?” but also “What was it even possible for them to do?”

In other words, one major question here is just how conservative even simply selecting and arranging inherited material can *actually* be

³ See also Amsler 2023, 4–5.



in practice. If two different people attending the same lecture might come away with two different senses of the most important points and arguments, or two different people reading the same book with two different senses of the narrative's significance, why would the same principle not apply to two different Stammain encountering the same repertoire of received wisdom? How then could they avoid arriving at a different sense of what quotations and arrangements most distill "the" wisdom of the ancients too, even if that is all both of them intended to do? And these are the kinds of recognitions that emerge naturally when we insist on thinking in terms of actual, fully realized individuals as the medium of transmission rather than abstracting the problem to a matter of "generations." Individuals understand things differently from each other.

For now, however, the essential point is simply that the more creativity and agency we attribute to later heirs to an inherited body of materials the less we will think about what they do with it in terms of simply passing it on. And in this case, thinking about the potential presence of Stammaitic agendas has opened the door to recognizing even more dramatic and later examples of tradition reinvention. There is clear evidence, for example, that even as late as the twelfth century there were "those who changed the texts ... not just in parts that 'seem like an interpretation,' but 'in the words of the tannai'im and amora'im themselves'" (Vidas 2022, 208).⁴ Naturally, this raises the question of how many of the quotations employed by the Stammain are not quotations at all, in the sense of something simply passed down and repeated, but also "reformulations, if not outright creations" of what is *presented* as an inheritance (Gross 2024, 22). In other words, given that "the traditional" is a construction, it may be that it has done for many scholars precisely what it is intended to do, giving the aura of time-tested authority to later inventions.

In the study of the Hebrew Bible itself, similar problems abound. As well they might! Biblical texts are less overtly constructed as an attempt to codify and distill inherited traditions than the Babylonian Talmud. But many biblical narratives are still constructed by the combination



⁴ Vidas is quoting the words of Rabbi Jacob ben Meir.

and redaction of preexisting materials. In addition, since virtually every text that survives from ancient Israel and Judah for the entire period of biblical composition survives in the Hebrew Bible alone, we once again very often have to decide for ourselves how we think the most influential shapers of a text would have proceeded when interacting both with the preexisting traditions that they *do* include—how willing they would be to add or subtract or change texts in ways that fundamentally reshape the meaning—and, of course, the traditions that they do not include. Which is to say, we need to *decide* whether it makes more sense to imagine them attempting to be comprehensive or selective in including existing narratives in order even to make sense of what we actually have in the Hebrew Bible: something more like a vision of what “the Israelites” or “the Judahites” believed, at least in a given period, or what a particular group with particular interests wanted to represent as the beliefs and traditions of “the Israelites.”



An obvious example is the Documentary Hypothesis, which has long been shaped by at least conservative-leaning assumptions. Joel Baden, for one, has argued that the job of the redactor who produced the Pentateuch from inherited traditions was “to effect the combination of the sources into a single story—no more, no less” (2012, 208). And in my own work, I have frequently encountered the idea of conservative inheritance in contemporary studies of the traditions of the twelve tribes of Israel. The problem here is a common one of the sort that highlights why what assumptions we start with make such a difference to where our conclusions end up. We have known for quite a long time that the vast majority of texts that actually present the familiar twelve tribe paradigm are widely regarded as products of the sixth century BCE or later, after the kingdoms of Israel and Judah had already been conquered (Tobolowsky 2017, 44–45). For them to reflect early tribal realities fairly well, it would *have* to be the case that conservative inheritance was the norm over many centuries of transmission in a largely oral culture. And this is what is generally asserted.

In other words, it is still common to argue that the surprisingly large number of relatively late depictions of early tribal Israel are all, to some considerable extent, reflections of traditions that were passed down and essentially preserved up until that point rather than dynamic attempts

to redescribe tribal Israel for some purpose or another. Some of these arguments, like Carr's above, assert the presence of mechanical explanations for preservation, such as the supposed existence of scribal operations in the "palace schools of Samaria and Jerusalem" (Knauf and Guillaume 2016, 45–46). Others simply rely on vague and equally un-evidenced assertions such as one scholar's claim that "the representation of social relations in a genealogical form is typical of the Iron Age" (Liverani 2005, 42). Still others continue to assert that our inability to explain certain aspects of the tradition with reference to later realities that we know about, such as the prominence of the tribe of Reuben, must have an explanation in the presence of kernels of truth reflecting such an early period that only this tidbit of information remains to testify to it (Weingart 2019, 28–29).⁵

I have argued elsewhere that the mere presence of *so many* relatively late descriptions of tribal Israel make all of these unlikely, since it hardly seems as if so many different authors could have been so motivated to produce tribal lists merely to reproduce the same basic idea that everyone already knew.⁶ But what we see in all of these cases is similar. We have a surviving tradition or body of traditions that clearly has some dependence on earlier traditions, but there is no absolutely clear proof of how the interaction between heir and inheritance proceeded. If we assume conservative inheritance, we will imagine what survives mainly in its capacity as a kind of repository of time-honored wisdom or knowledge. If we do not, the very same traditions will look very different, all because there is nothing much to go on in the first place.

So, for example, consider something like what we have in the first nine chapters of the books of Chronicles. Here, there is an apparent attempt at representing more or less the entire biblical vision of the



⁵ Weingart acknowledges that the twelve tribes tradition was fluid at one point, and progressed through multiple stages, but that, nevertheless, "the established version as a system of twelve tribes including Judah ... coincided in all likelihood with processes that are usually treated under the heading of state formation," which is to say, very early. After that, in her view, the tradition was "established and essentially fixed" (2019, 30).

⁶ See, most recently, Tobolowsky 2022a.

history of ancient Israel in the form of a genealogy spanning most of the first nine chapters. In other words, 1 Chron 1 presents a genealogical account of the relationships between biblical figures from Adam to Jacob, as well as other figures such as Seir and various Edomites. 1 Chron 2 offers a genealogy of Judah, 3 of the family of David, 4 of other Judahites and Simeonites, 5 of Reubenites, Gadites, and Manassites, and so on. Obviously, much depends on whether we imagine an author simply reproducing materials as faithfully as possible or reinventing them in some way— *and* on whether we imagine the combination of preexisting materials itself as an essentially faithful or essentially creative activity. Also, obviously, we have little enough to go on and will therefore reach very different conclusions depending on what we think is *likely* to be true.



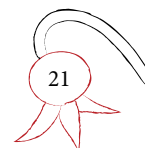
In this case, sometimes we can see clear relationships between the Chronicles text and other biblical texts, including in 1 Chron 1, where much of the genealogy is identical to various genealogies found in Genesis (Tobolowsky 2016). In other cases, figures are mentioned who do not appear in the rest of the Hebrew Bible.⁷ In still others, we do see figures who are mentioned elsewhere but are not given genealogies in those places, either at all or in such depth—for example, Ethan, Heman, Calcol, and Darda. In 1 Kgs 4:31, we are told that Solomon was wiser than these men but nothing else about them, while in 1 Chron 2:6 they are represented as the sons of Zerah, son of Judah. The Judge Ehud is apparently made the son of Gera in 1 Chron 8:6 just as he is in Judges 3 but also given sons and grandsons who do not appear in Judges. We have to make up our own minds about whether to imagine the interaction between author and source as essentially conservative, essentially creative, or somewhere in between. If we think it is *likely* that we have a conservative author here—a traditionalist who had no ambitions beyond distilling traditions that had been handed down through the generations into an easily comprehensible, comprehensive form—we may use this text as a source for even very early genealogical traditions. However, if we think that we have a dynamic author, someone who in combining and rewriting inherited traditions reinvented them too—

⁷ See, generally, Knoppers 2004.

and even, more than likely, actively changed, added to, and subtracted from their source materials—then of course we will also think that this text may preserve little for certain beyond the agenda of the last authors and editors who too powerfully transformed whatever came before for it to still seem to be what it was before.

To be absolutely clear, I think that authors of both persuasions can exist. However, I believe that the latter is far more common than many other scholars do and that in this specific case there is even some evidence for it. Note, as one example, the well-known redefinition of Samuel from an apparent Ephraimite in the books of Samuel to a Levite or a Kohathite in 1 Chron 6:13—it was likely done to better fit, or rather retrofit, his priestly profile (Tobolowsky 2022a, 164). But that is not the same as saying that there are no authors who were *trying* to be faithful stewards of what they see as “the tradition” or that the results of their efforts are not much closer to what already existed than those of the authors who had no such concerns. That, however, is why in this essay I am focusing instead on whether it is even possible for traditionalists to preserve the tradition as well as they would like or for “the tradition” to be preserved as well as in conservative models, and on whether even someone who attempted to combine traditions they already knew into a comprehensive form like the Chronicles genealogy will, nevertheless, and more or less inevitably, produce something different than someone else would.

After all, consider what would have to be true for someone not only to *attempt* to codify the inherited traditions of their cultural milieu—which many people in many places have—but to actually *do* it. First, there would have to be a set of traditions that were clearly understood by all concerned—which would not have to be an entire society but at least, say, an entire set of scribes or priests or bards—as *the* traditions of the group, a particular, mutually agreed-upon set that could be passed down like a package. Next, every individual author, when they sat down to write, would have to be able to produce essentially the same version of each of these stories as anyone else would, which means that it would have to be perfectly clear to everyone exactly what the right version of the story was. If it was even the case that an individual author, being an individual, would have an idiosyncratic sense of what traditions



were important and of what the important bits were, the whole thing would fall apart. Two authors engaged, as far as they knew, in the same business, with the same understanding of what they were up to, would nevertheless produce meaningfully different compositions with results that—like a game of broken telephone—only grew more divergent over time.

Again, my view is that there used to be a set of explanations that made these things possible embedded in a *Romantic* vision of the histories of both ethnic nations and “their” traditions. It is this phenomenon above all that made it plausible to imagine an individual serving *as a kind of mouthpiece for the group* under certain circumstances. I think that the downfall of this vision ought to have taken conservative models with it. That it has not, in my view, owes most of all to the way that scholars have gone about trying to recreate the conditions under which it might be possible to preserve conservative inheritance by making assertions about how different kinds of training and different forms of social pressure can provide a suitable substitute. However, there is no substitute once we start reckoning with individuals rather than groups—once, that is, we dispense with Romantic notions of the agency of the collective. But we turn now to a consideration of what those notions were and how they continue to operate.



Romantic Influences

When I speak, here, of Romantic assumptions, what I have particularly in mind is the Romantic vision of the ethnic nation associated with Johann Gottfried Herder. This is a vision that still survives, in some ways into the present, as “primordialism”: a vision of the ethnic group as a primordial *formation* that persists, in a stable essence, throughout the whole history of that group. As I have argued before, Herder’s vision of the ethnic nation was also a vision of tradition inheritance, which was especially informed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s idealization of the purity and innocence of childhood (Tobolowsky 2024, 27–41). Herder

imagined the early nation as essentially childlike, according to this idealized vision, and went from there.⁸

The end result was really quite a comprehensive account of where the major traditions of the ethnic group come from and what happens to them over time. It began with the idea that an early nation, in the first blush of national youth, composes traditions very differently than later authors will or can. First, these early traditions were to be understood as the purest and most innocent distillation of its national character, because, at that time, the ethnic group was most in touch with that character. Second, these traditions, for the most part, were to be understood as a kind of *memory*, though generally distorted because the early nation was at once too innocent for creative invention and too unsophisticated for professional historiography.⁹ Third, and most crucially for us, they were to be understood as *collective* productions. Since everyone involved was equally in touch with the pure spirit of the ethnic group, any composition would still be an expression of “the collective memory of the people” even if “collected ... or written down in a specific historical version by one single author” (Lampart 2004, 171). Finally, it was generally assumed that since these traditions could never be equaled by generations farther from the flame of ethnic creation, they were never replaced but remained always part of the sacred, unique heritage of that ethnic group. Indeed, from a Romantic Nationalist perspective,



⁸ In other words, Herder analogized the era of national origins to national childhood. See Engelstein 2017, 134. As William Wilson observes, in Herder, “folk poets ... were national poets—the agents through whom the true character of a nation made itself manifest” (2006, 116). As Jacqueline Vayntrub notes, this idea precedes Herder and can be found in the work of Giambattista Vico and Sir Francis Bacon (2019, 47).

⁹ In a previous study, I quoted Hermann Gunkel’s gloss of this position: “Uncivilised races do not write history; they are incapable of reproducing their experiences objectively ... only in poetical form, in song and saga, are unlettered tribes able to report historical occurrences ... Thus we find among the civilized peoples of antiquity two distinct kinds of historical records side by side: history proper and popular tradition, the latter treating in naïve poetical fashion partly the same subjects as the former, and partly the events of older, prehistoric times” (Gunkel 1901, 7 quoted in Tobolowsky 2024, 39 n. 38).

the recovery of these stories in their original form was a shortcut to *restoring* the nation to itself in later, less vibrant ages in all its pride and strength.¹⁰

There is, as it happens, no basis for any of this—which is hardly surprising in the context of a model that was developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries based on little more than intuition! Early traditions are not meaningfully different from later ones either in quality or character. Traditions can be based on real events, or not, but a much neglected point is that there seems to be no reason to suspect that traditions based on real events fare differently over time than those that are not—that they have an easier time becoming important in a culture than those that are not, or are more likely to be inherited by the next generation than those that are not, or get passed down because they are more historical than another. They do not survive better, get changed less, or remain more prominent more easily. After all, in most cases, how could later generations even tell the difference? What special token shall the authentic memory have to show to *prove* its difference from other traditions in a context where all are *believed* to be true?¹¹ This means that the fact that a tradition is based on a real event would be, in practice, almost meaningless. The event would not be the reason it survived, nor would the reality behind it tell us anything much about how it was going to change over time.

The most important point for us, however, indeed begins with the role that the idea of the ethnic group as a functioning collective played in approaches to traditions. In the Romantic model, there is both collective *authorship* and collective *inheritance*. The ethnic group passes “its” traditions on down through the generations. Authorship, however, is simply not—and never was—*collective*.¹² A cultural group of any size cannot, of course, really get together and create, or tell, or pass on a



¹⁰ Fox 1987; Abrahams 1993; Williamson 2004, 1–2; Wilson 2006.

¹¹ I make this point as well in Tobolowsky 2024, 132.

¹² As Albert Lord observed already in *The Singer of Tales*, the idea of “folk epic” was originally abandoned—though in his view “looking in the right direction”—“because no one could show how the people as a whole could compose a poem” (1960, 6).

story. And whatever there is to say about how much any person's individual understandings are shaped by the culture they live in, even so they have an individual, rather than a group, mind. As for collective *inheritance*, the idea of a generation passing on a tradition to generation in its capacity as an entire generation, the crucial, and I think largely unrecognized point, is that this only makes sense within the primordialist model, in which ethnic groups are real historical entities with clear boundaries and a stable essence over time. Today, under the aegis of constructivist models, even to speak in terms of "ethnic groups" is, as Rogers Brubaker has argued, to reify their real, rather than ascriptive, existence.¹³ Since what ethnic groups really have is an ascriptive existence: they are unable to act collectively because there is, in a sense, no "they." Instead, the "group" consists of many different parts that relate to a repertoire of ethnic concepts in somewhat different ways—and certainly dynamically rather than stably over time. Such an entity is, of course, too inchoate to either have or pass on a single set of stories in a simplistic fashion.

Another way to put it is that collective models of authorship allowed for the imagination of conservative tradition inheritance over time because they dramatically reduced the number of moving parts there were in the whole business. The downfall of collective models of authorship works *horizontally* to multiply the number of contributors to the process, each with their own apprehensions and creative agency. They may all be influenced by a shared set of cultural scripts and a familiar repertoire of figures and events, but they will not respond to those scripts or redeploy that repertoire in exactly the same way as anyone else as they can when we inappropriately imagine a generation of people *as* a single collective. Then, the downfall of primordialism works *vertically* to multiply the diversity of heirs of traditions who are not simply part of an ethnic generation but are individuals who relate to circulating ethnic concepts in individual ways. Together, the two require us to account for a far too complex a network of producers and heirs to imagine anything very much like the stable inheritance over time allowed by the model of generation passing on to generation.

¹³ See, esp., Brubaker 2004; Brubaker 2006, 1–22.

At the same time, as I have already suggested, another legacy of the *combination* of all of the principles just described is working against the broad acceptance of these recognitions. In a nutshell, these principles have produced what I have elsewhere called a “qualitative framework.” This is a value hierarchy in which the study of the early tradition is much more important and much more revealing than the study of the surviving text (Tobolowsky 2024, 16–24). Scholars who embrace this view, implicitly or explicitly, will want to preserve access to early traditions. And, since once again what we often have are relatively late texts with an unknown relationship to earlier traditions, conservative models are the main recourse for preserving this access. As a result, the history of scholarship over the last century or so has produced many attempts to discover some mechanism by which the ideas of collective authorship and inheritance could be reinvented on a new and more theoretically sophisticated basis. In my view, however, these are not only misguided, but they would also not exist if we had a different value system because there would be no reason to have them. Finally, moving on from this legacy completely is the key to moving on from conservative models.



What Is the Relationship between Storyteller and Story?

In addition to my above-stated protestations that I am not trying to deny that tradition inheritance can be more or less conservative, I also do not intend to deny that cultural milieux exert influence on what stories are likely to be told and how they are likely to be told. One of the points I am trying to make, however, is that “likely” is actually *very* different from “must be,” and in a way that has compounding effects over time. Again, even two people who might want to “play by the rules” might end up with a different sense of what they actually are, and if it is even just *possible* for one person to discard them altogether, then there is nothing a storyteller *cannot* do, only things they are unlikely to do (Tobolowsky 2020b, 177). In addition, I am arguing that the shift from a collective to an individual model of tradition inheritance forces us to reckon with individual apprehensions of what the traditions are and

with individual responses to the presence of cultural scripts. We now have to account for the fact that even with a shared repertoire of stories individuals will encounter different stories in different ways and will respond to cultural scripts differently from each other.

Before I dig more deeply into this issue, however, it is worth taking a moment to briefly consider the note I ended the previous section on: how the argument that there are rules for inheritance has been preserved over the course of the last century. Broadly speaking, it is my opinion that when we raise our eyes to this history, what we see is how powerfully the desire to preserve the viability of the search for the original tradition has operated within it.¹⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, scholars of ancient Greek and biblical traditions had already reached essentially contemporary conclusions about when many of their key texts, especially Homer and the Pentateuch, had actually taken on familiar, literary form. But in the early twentieth century, some, and most famously William Foxwell Albright and Martin Nilsson, attempted to dispel skepticism about tradition inheritance by, in a sense, toting up correspondences between the relevant traditions and the archaeological and epigraphic record.¹⁵ Others, and most famously Milman Parry, tried to achieve the same end by claiming that the special training of oral poets in oral societies could preserve the fundamental essence of a whole body of traditional literature over extraordinarily long periods of time even when that was, already, clearly not true in other cases.¹⁶

In both cases, subsequent research would show that these conclusions, and others like them, were fundamentally wrong. The robust correspondences the Albright school and Nilsson had seen were, at best, profoundly overstated, and in any case the fact that a story may once have been based on real events tells us very little about how much it has



¹⁴ For a longer account of this history, and my view of it, see Tobolowsky 2024, 30–109.

¹⁵ See, esp., Nilsson 1932; Nilsson 1933; Albright 1942; Albright 1946.

¹⁶ Parry 1930; Parry 1932; Parry 1933. Already in the 1910s, studies had shown that “the older ideal of a folk community preserving its traditions faithfully over the centuries could no longer be substantiated” (Kirkpatrick 1988, 45; see also Tobolowsky 2024, 87).

changed in the interim, as I noted above.¹⁷ Oral-formulaic theorists still exist but now acknowledge that oral poetry works differently in different places. And, as Rosalind Thomas has observed, the view that oral traditions are or can be stable over time is actually an “effect” caused by oral traditions’ own truth claims rather than a reality—one that is accepted, where it is accepted, precisely because it cannot be checked against the oral traditions of earlier generations (1995, 7).¹⁸ Even so, we see many scholars pursuing what I tend to think of as “exceptions,” supposedly reasons why in one case or another the fluidity that we acknowledge is generally the lot of stories over time simply would not be in operation (Tobolowsky 2024, 256). There are still those who argue that oral traditions, rather than being much *more* fluid than written traditions, are, in oral cultures, typically stable—essentially because an awareness of how easy it would be for them to change is supposed to foster a training regimen that keeps them stable. Then, there are those who think, without being able to demonstrate, that ancient traditions and ancient societies play by different rules than their modern counterparts and that, as a result, conservative modes of tradition inheritance may survive in the study of ancient traditions despite how much evidence has mounted against them elsewhere (Evans 2017).

Still more insidious has been the tendency, throughout this period, to turn theoretical developments in other fields into defenses of conservative models regardless of whether a more appropriate reading of said developments would really suggest any such thing. A relatively early case in point is Frank Moore Cross’s well-known use of oral-formulaic theory to construct the Pentateuch as an originally oral epic.¹⁹ This was never a very plausible argument. As John Van Seters observed almost as soon as Cross made it, Cross’s idea, which really went back to Albright, that it was common for ancient authors to turn oral or literary epics into prose narratives in “secondary adaptation” has essentially no



¹⁷ See, generally, Thompson 1974; Van Seters 1975; Finley 1978.

¹⁸ See, generally, Finnegan 1970; Finnegan 1977; Foley 1988; Foley 1991.

¹⁹ Cross 1983; Cross 1998.

examples to support it.²⁰ But the more important point is that even the oral-formulaicists, many of whom were Cross's colleagues at Harvard, would not argue, as Cross did, that *having been* an oral epic meant that the original Pentateuchal narrative would also have been the "national" and "normative" composition of the early Israelites, giving "meaning" and "self-understanding to a people or nation" (Cross 1983, 19, 17–18).²¹ This, along with Cross's view that such an epic would have been a product of the "Israelite league" as a whole, is a quintessentially Romantic vision and it was Cross's mistake to imagine that oral-formulaicism had the power to re-establish it (1983, 31).

In more recent years, a particular construction of cultural or collective memory has played much the same role and has experienced the same problems.²² Collective memory is a very real phenomenon, but the term is misleading. It, first of all, is *not* akin to the Romantic vision of early impressions of formative experiences being passed down through the generations but instead is very much like individual memory—which is to say, there is a lot more forgetting, selective remembering, and replacing than people used to think.²³ Neither, for those who study collective memory itself, does it mean that an entire cultural group can really have an essentially shared vision of the past in common. Instead, it is more like certain ideas about the past, and certain ways of thinking about it, circulate in a cultural milieu and *inform* how individuals are likely to relate them. In other words, as Astrid Erll (2022) has put it: "*Collective*



²⁰ Albright 1946, 35; Van Seters 1997, 22. This study of Van Seters's was originally published in 1983.

²¹ See, generally, Tobolowsky 2023, 16–17.

²² As Daniel Pioske notes, attention to cultural memory is "a positive development indicative of more nuanced, careful readings of ... texts for historical considerations" but "the growing currency of memory for historical research across the social sciences has nevertheless made the term susceptible to becoming a catchword utilized frequently as a simple substitute or synonym for older notions of 'tradition,' 'folklore,' 'Märchen,' 'Heldensagen,' or 'Geschichts-Legende' once common to biblical historians" (2015, 294). See also Miller 2011, 7 n. 57; Wilson 2017, 32.

²³ See Olick and Robbins 1998; Wertsch 2007; Wertsch 2009; Erll 2010; Wilson 2017, 24.

remembering does not mean that all individuals would have identical mental representations in their mind. It means that certain versions of the past are actualized again and again within social groups (via discourses, media, practices).” We would expect, as Eviatar Zerubavel observes, for “young Americans” to “invoke the same historical figures,” or many of the same figures, if “asked to list the names that first come to mind in connection with U.S. history ... George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin” (Zerubavel 2003, 3). We would not expect them to have the exact same sense of the significance of any of these figures and their lives, or be able to relate the same set of facts. Indeed, in the 2020s it is very easy to recognize that someone like Thomas Jefferson will mean very different things to different people.

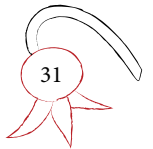


Today, the gloss on collective memory that remains common in the study of ancient traditions is one especially associated with Assmann, and it certainly does revive past and outdated understandings. Indeed, I have argued before that Assmann’s assertion that “in the world of non-written memory transmission the heir to tradition is measured by the amount of this invisible tradition that he is able to embody and present” echoes, more or less precisely, Milman Parry’s prior assertion that “the good singer wins his fame by his ease and versatility in handling a tradition which he knows more thoroughly than anyone else.”²⁴ This term “heir to tradition” is important. In imagining an individual approaching “the tradition” on a one-to-one basis, Assmann makes plausible that there will be no ambiguity about which stories should be told or how. But the main point is once again that he has taken a theory that really makes a much more complicated and nuanced point and reinvents it to ostensibly restore the viability of conservative transmission over time.

Again, it is my conviction that if fewer people felt that it was so important to recover early traditions compared to studying later texts—because of the value hierarchy Romanticism constructs—they would

²⁴ Parry 1932, 15; Assmann and Livingstone 2006, 83. As Robert Miller notes: “Assman marshals no evidence in support of this ... view... but it allows him to conclude that the precise knowledge of oral texts required in oral societies limits cultural literacy to an elite few in a sharper form than in written cultures” (2011, 7 n. 57).

not find themselves casting about so for some theory or exception that lets them do it. These arguments about why a given text might really reflect a much earlier tradition virtually intact would not be so popular and their flaws would be more visible. But of course, it is also true that cultural forces, existing above the level of the individual, profoundly influence what stories get told and how, and produce sometimes quite remarkable continuities in what stories are popular over long periods of time. So, it is also still a matter of figuring out how to properly characterize the role that these influences play, and to account for impressive continuities over time, in a way that accurately captures their operation. And it is not surprising that the presence of both should produce models that *stress* cultural forces and continuity over the individuality of any particular author. In my view, however, what really dooms conservative models is the combination of the fact that cultural influences are not themselves well controlled enough that individuals receive them all at once, and only in a particular set of contexts, and the ineradicable individuality of human apprehension.²⁵



In the first case, we might take our cues from a related conversation that has developed, in recent years around the concept of “history culture.” More specifically, the idea of history culture emerged in the 1970s in the context of debates about history *education*, which, in an era where education is often compulsory, is a major modern way of socializing individuals into a shared understanding of the past. The problem that these debates sought to address, however, was that historians interested in how historical memory is formed had typically focused their attention on debates *between professional historians*, which is to say how the image of somebody like Abraham Lincoln changed in the scholarly literature over the course of decades.²⁶

²⁵ Once, as Erll and Ann Rigney observed, this was a discussion that orbited around “identifying the ‘sites of memory’ that act as placeholders for the memories of particular groups,” another one-to-one relationship. Diverse “cultural processes” are now observed to be at work constantly making and remaking what memory seems to be (2006, 111).

²⁶ “History educationalists started to look deeper into the extracurricular sources of historical thinking. Until that time, in many European countries

In reality, however, the average person will get their ideas about history not from scholarly journals or even from the classroom alone, but from “museums, exhibitions, historically inclined cultural industries, commemorations, mass media and similar institutions”—in short, from *all around* (Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 74–75).²⁷ In addition, these spheres do not operate independently of each other but are intertwined and need to be investigated collectively in a comprehensive fashion.²⁸ For example, scholars are drawn to what seem to be hot topics, and scholarship helps give shape to how they are presented in more popular venues. And certainly, local variants of traditions can be surprisingly influential in shaping official, supraregional versions in much the same vein. An example I often use in the classroom is Alexander Hamilton, who always had some presence in popular memory but certainly a much more marginal one before the advent of the popular musical. After the musical, however, scholarly interest grew more intense, museums sought to capitalize on the popularity of the show, and so on and so forth.

Thus, in more recent years, history culture has been used as an “umbrella” term for “a people’s relationships to the past,” meaning the full range of phenomena that constitute debates about the past and the interconnections between them (Grever and Adriaansen, 73).²⁹ In other

national curricula of history education and history textbooks were based on a hermeneutic tradition, which regarded historical knowledge as the product of an ‘internal discourse of professional historians’ (Rüsen 1987, 278); see Grever and Adriaansen 2017.

²⁷ Michael Hattem adds that “history culture goes beyond just traditional historical works by considering articulations of the past throughout a society’s culture” (2020, 4).

²⁸ “In this conceptual framework, academic and (semi) popular institutions that constitute historical knowledge, which are usually studied independent of each other, are analyzed in a single framework. It is the interplay between institutions (e.g. universities, schools, museums, monuments, media) and strategies of memory and dissemination (e.g. socialization, scholarly research political justification, appropriation) where ... historical culture works as a synthesizing concept” (Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75).

²⁹ It “encompasses all references to and uses of the past in a given society” (Hattem 2020, 4).



words, it “encompasses all references to and uses of the past in a given society. History culture goes beyond just traditional historical works by considering articulations of the past throughout a society’s culture” (Hattem 2020, 4–5). It is a reflection of what books people are reading, what movies and TV shows are popular, what podcasts people are listening to, and much else besides. Likewise, when we say that an individual is influenced by their “story culture” we have to imagine that they, too, are not only encountering stories in the controlled context of professional storytellers practicing their art in official settings but everywhere and often not as full stories at all.

In other words, we can certainly ask whether two different people will *like* the same stories—or whether one was always more engaged by stories about Jacob, or Herakles, or Deborah, or Ruth, the same way someone today might be particularly interested in *Game of Thrones* lore, or *Lord of the Rings*, or really into Norse mythology. We can ask what personal experiences might shape their affinity for one story or another, what they might have been told as a bedtime story, or what figures and events would have been more important locally than regionally. But we can also note that a statue, or a painting, or a vase can preserve the fragment of a story that someone might encounter everywhere. A ritual, local or otherwise, might conjure a story or part of a story. A mythic battlefield or the site of some great deed nearby might reflect part of one—one of the deeds of Herakles, say, but not, in every case, his entire life. A politician, then as now, might choose to use a familiar story about the past to some end and change it in the process, or a priest might do so with an ancient sermon.

This multiplicity of story elements constitutes the culture that influences the individual, not the discrete package imagined in collective, Romantic models. The individual, for their part, will interact with, and be shaped by, that culture in their own particular way, not as little more than part of a generation. The combination of multiple influences operating disparately on multiple individuals will introduce a randomness to the situation such that two people will not form the same sense of what the important stories are. And then, yes, from time to time an individual will go rogue, so to speak. As Suze Rotolo observes in her memoir of Greenwich Village in the sixties: “Some folksingers believed they had to



perform a song authentically in the traditional style with no deviation from the way the original singer sang it on the scratchy old LPs they listened to” (2009, 161). Others, of course, did not! Note the controversy over Bob Dylan’s use of an electric guitar at the Newport Folk Festival recently featured in the biopic, *A Complete Unknown* (2024, directed by James Mangold). When we have to move on from a collective model to an individual one, we have to encompass the presence of all of these moving parts and see where that takes us.

Tradition Inheritance Reimagined



Think of it this way. Say that it really was the case that our Stammaim, discussed above, had no intentions but to “reconstruct the argumentation” of the Tannaim that had been “entrusted ... to transmitters so that it be preserved for future generations” as Weiss Halivni argued (2013, 4–5). Could they do it? More importantly, would it be obvious what “the argumentation of the Tannaim” was? In a collective model, everyone—mystically as it were—shares a sense of what the cultural heritage of the ethnic nation is. But is there a single obvious and uncontroversial way of putting inherited quotations together into artificial disputations? Might two different editors, each a staunch traditionalist, have even a different sense of what a given ancient rabbi was trying to say, and its implications—as, indeed, the rabbis featured in the Talmuds themselves did of the rabbinic sayings and biblical quotations of an earlier age? (Tobolowsky 2025, 12–17). Might it seem obvious to one that Rabbi Judah had the better point, in a way that struck them as objective, while another thought it was Rabbi Nahman, and might they not arrange this inheritance to express what they—equally but differently—thought was objectively correct? Would not two different collections of the same inherited traditions result?

Or imagine, as Baden argues—ignoring for the moment the potential of more complex traditio-historical models—that the goal of the redactor of the Pentateuchal sources into the familiar Pentateuch was “to effect the combination of the sources into a single story—no more, no

less” (2012, 218).³⁰ In the classroom, I often introduce the Documentary Hypothesis through Genesis 1–2, which contains two quite different accounts of creation. Among their many differences, in Gen 1:1–2:4, man and woman are created last of all and created together. In Gen 2:5–2:25, man is created first out of everything, then after all other creation, woman is created from the man’s rib. Say that we concluded that one was a more egalitarian vision than the other. What changes in our impression of what the “single story” actually says if only one is included? What changes if they are placed in the opposite order? What changes if we imagine this redactor not in the mode of combining *the* two stories but two out of five or ten—choosing the ones that best fit an agenda and leaving the rest behind, even if they imagine it is *the* agenda, the right and traditional agenda, as far as they understand it? As a result, different apprehensions of what the tradition *is*, or *should be*, would inevitably result in different accounts.

Then, imagine a more dynamic author—one who is *not* a staunch traditionalist. One of the arguments that I have repeatedly made about the twelve tribes tradition is that it is based on more than one mistaken assumption.³¹ First, in other disciplines it is no longer supposed that the purpose of charter traditions is to pass on fossilized memory. Instead, since we now know that “ethnicity is not a primordial given, but is instead repeatedly and actively structured through discursive strategies,” then “clearly myths of ethnic origin are among the very media through which such strategies operate” (Hall 1997, 41). In other words, once we acknowledge the role that primordialist constructions of an ethnic group used to play in visions of the likelihood of preservation over time, we are required to adopt a vision of tradition inheritance that allows for the now-acknowledged fluidity of ethnic constructions instead. Ethnic



³⁰ Baden’s logical point, in these and the immediately preceding pages, is a good one – that we should not call someone a redactor or compiler who did more than redact and compile – who also *authored*. But that is different from considering whether it is likely that someone simply did or could combine four pre-existing sources, some perhaps quite ancient, with no other agenda in mind.

³¹ Tobolowsky 2017; Tobolowsky 2020c; Tobolowsky 2022b; Tobolowsky 2024, 110–43.

charter traditions are expressions of ethnic identity. When ethnic identities change, they will change too. And this is doubly true of charter traditions presented in the form of segmented genealogical traditions that, from a cross-cultural perspective, seem to be *designed* to allow dynamic redescription.

As Bruce Lincoln put it: “Basic to the segmentary pattern is the principle of fission and fusion whereby the members of a total social field can recombine at different levels of integration to form aggregates of varying size” (1989, 19–20). Broadly speaking, scholars tend to believe that later twelve tribes texts preserve early tribal realities because they were only fluid before they were set down in writing, and of course it is the case that writing helps preserve traditions intact. But that does not mean we can ignore the evidence that in other contexts writing down genealogical traditions only intensified the tendency to adapt and reinvent them toward new ends.



Thus, we do have to rethink inheritance less along the lines of what cultural pressures will constrain and more along the lines of what an individual will think to do regardless. Malkin, as I noted above, argues that “if the poem is about Odysseus, the hero must come to Ithaca and nowhere else,” and certainly, it is very likely that someone will tell an audience waiting to hear something *like* the *Odyssey* quite a familiar story. But I do not see why something like this would not also be true of Helen going to Troy. And yet, there are ancient stories in which only a phantom of her went—or in which Iphigenia, traditionally sacrificed by her father, was actually spirited away to minister to Artemis (Malkin 1998, 50).³² I also do not find it hard to imagine that, in the welter of the competition over authority and legacy that Malkin himself has illuminated so well, an author in some other place, engaged in the so-common business of appropriating an authoritative tradition as founding tradition, would not in fact decide to tell a story in which Odysseus did not return home but instead came to found their city or nation.

In addition, new studies have challenged our sense of how strongly bounded cultural repertoires can be. In other words, they have shown not only how easily stories could get entangled at sites that fostered

³² See Gantz 1993, 574–75, 583–84.

prolonged contacts between groups of different origin—like “multiethnic emporia”—but also that Malkin’s at least lukewarm endorsement of David Ridgway’s suggestion that “what the Greeks had to offer” other peoples was their myths is inaccurate.³³ Instead, there was quite a consistent back and forth, with other peoples of the Mediterranean both appropriating and transforming Greek stories and doing just what the Greeks often did to theirs. The results are predictable, like a supposed Egyptian story about how Herakles worked for Osiris, but bad for conservative models.³⁴ I have, also, frequently had occasion to mention a story in Josephus where Herakles joins forces with a son of Abraham named Aphra to fight Antaios and ends up having a child with Abraham’s granddaughter (*Ant.* 1.15). Who could imagine such a story would ever be told, crossing boundaries that seem impossible to cross today? Yet there it is. Meanwhile, it may be true that in one corner of the world people were zealously guarding the *Odyssey* itself from serious alterations. But in another corner, the map of Odysseus’s travels was being extended to Etruria, where he would come to be accepted as an Etruscan hero.³⁵ If an author, attempting to rehearse “their” cultural repertoire for an audience, imagines what is theirs as something that—the historian can see—goes well beyond what is uniquely linked to their cultural *group*, the variety of the results of tradition inheritance will follow suit.

Indeed, there are some very well-known examples of the openness of story to story, reflecting patterns that conservative models ought to deny. We should not allow the fact that we tend to mentally package Greece and Rome into one “classical Mediterranean” keep us from seeing how surprising it is that Aeneas, a Greek hero, not only becomes a founder at Rome but is, in the *Aeneid*, interwoven with local traditions about figures like Romulus and Remus, who are made his descendants. Surely, there must have been a sense that to tell a story about Romulus and Remus one had to include only time-worn details about



³³ Ridgway 1992, 138; Malkin 1998, 6.

³⁴ Erich S. Gruen describes a story from Diodorus Siculus, purportedly from Egypt, in which Herakles serves as a kind of general to Osiris (2011, 266–67).

³⁵ Malkin 1998, 19, 28; Simon 2013.

their ancestry—but here comes Aeneas. How did someone—someone who supposedly could not be expected to depart very far from the store of traditional stories handed down—first decide to introduce a character—or characters—from another body of traditions as a founding figure in theirs?

In short, when it comes to tradition inheritance, some things may be likely, common, or very common, and express the acknowledged force of cultural scripts about who the essential figures are and about how to understand their stories. But many more things are possible, as Hamlet almost said to Horatio, “than are dreamt of in your [conservative] philosophy” (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5). And with so many inputs and outputs to consider, more really means *more*. An individual, who does not receive their cultural heritage in a discrete package, but experiences cultural influences in a much more diffuse and ad hoc way, may think to do almost anything with an inherited story, and so almost anything can happen—leading to almost anything *next*.



Two Analogies

In something like Assmann’s “heir of tradition” model, an individual is a link in a chain, or a vessel through which a story passes. I would like to end by proposing two different analogies for constructing the relationship between the individual and their cultural heritage that might be more useful and instructive. In the first, which concerns the nature of the interaction between story and storyteller, we might think of inherited traditions forming a kind of “natural language” for the individual. In a previous study, I addressed another issue of tradition inheritance, the fact that it is really the elements of stories, rather than “the story,” that are passed down through the generations by using the analogy of a mythic “vocabulary” (Tobolowsky 2020a). What I meant by this is that what we really inherit is a repertoire for making meaning that we, in a sense, speak through. But just because we share a repertoire, like two English speakers share much the same vocabulary, it does not mean that two people are bound to express themselves in more or less the same way.

My thinking, however, has evolved because of what I believe is an even better analogy, in the sense that a “vocabulary” does not encompass the true dynamism of change over time. A “natural language” does. What makes a language “natural” is, first of all, that we use it instinctively without first learning the rules in any explicit way (Hutten 1954, 28–29). In other words, this is a language that is “acquired naturally” or “acquired [or acquirable] by ... users as a normal part of the process of maturation and socialization” (Lyons 1991, 53, 60). A child learns a language before they learn what a dependent clause is and may, in fact, go their whole lives without having to learn that particular term. Second, a natural language is something that is changed by its ongoing use in real-life situations.³⁶ We wish to say something, we have the tools for doing so—which includes not just a vocabulary but some kind of internal machine for turning it into intelligible speech—we press on. Thus, even though a language has only so many elements in it, its use is still “typically innovative without bounds, appropriate to circumstances but not caused by them” (Chomsky 2013, 649).



Can the use of an inherited repertoire of figures and events—a “traditional” corpus—function, for an individual, like a natural language? Something like this has been suggested before. At least, there have been those that argue that oral-formulaic theory itself reflects the idea of a set of narrative acts that is analogous to the operation of a natural language—Mihailo Cánovas and Cristóbal Pagán Antović, for example.³⁷ In this case, they have pointed out that scholars of oral composition typically imagine a traditional storyteller, growing up in a culture of professional storytellers, acquiring a knowledge of traditional stories more or less by osmosis—rather than in a consciously structured educational environment.³⁸ Then, during what scholars usually call

³⁶ “Language emerges from use, in a much more piecemeal, constructivist fashion driven by instinctive pattern finding, statistical elimination and lots of unconscious, Gestalt-based generalization” (Antović and Cánovas 2016a, 4).

³⁷ Antović and Cánovas 2016a; Antović and Cánovas 2016b.

³⁸ “A common complaint by cognitive linguists against appreciating literary corpora is that literature is the product of too artificial a process to be of much interest in the study of natural language. The Parry-Lord theory of oral composition

“composition in performance,” the storyteller improvises instinctively, drawing on their collected store of plot points and formulae to render a version of the narrative that is unique, fit for their current audience, and extemporaneous. As a result, the story in question is “oral, creative, and very close to being ‘natural’ in the sense required by modern linguists” (Antović and Cánovas 2016a, 4). In addition, they argue, “composition in performance ... is ... a process in which an elaborate verbal skill is acquired through instance-based generalizations emerging from usage, where transformational rules are secondary, if any” (Antović and Cánovas, 2016a, 4–5).

Elton T. E. Barker and Joel P. Christensen, who have embraced aspects of this argument in their own study of the relationship between Homer’s poems and other ancient Greek cycles—specifically the Theban Cycle—add that while traditional assumptions about the “intertextuality” of Homeric epics “wor[k] ... if we assume that the contents of the items being analyzed were more or less performed in the same story context and in the same way,” approaches based “on a natural language analogy ... allows us to embrace a healthier agnosticism about what other poems might have contained; it allows us to foreground a multiplicity of performed narratives over time” (2020, 26–27).³⁹ In other words, we can hardly know if Homer is referencing a specific poem that survives to the present, or was known in antiquity, as a stable text, or a version of the story produced in that text that nevertheless looked very different. And we cannot know which multiform a given performer might be innovating from, even if we say that the “Seven against Thebes” influenced both them and Homer.

These scholars are gesturing at what I have in mind. Cánovas and Antović, in revisiting traditional visions of oral-formulaic theory, are

refutes this argument rather easily: in oral poetic traditions there is no fixed text and no actual memorization ... Traditional epic singers ... did not learn their songs by heart, but rather improvised on the basis of patterns which they had previously interiorized through imitation” (Antović and Cánovas 2016a, 4).

³⁹ Here, they draw on John Miles Foley’s famous dictum that “oral poetry works like a language, only more so” (Barker and Christensen 2020, 24; see Foley 2002, 127).



making the point that even a broadly shared repertoire of stories and oral formulae can still produce quite unpredictable results, and that because the author is an artist what makes the results unpredictable is *instinct* as much as it is intention. Barker and Christensen, in focusing on Homer's allusions, show how other stories can function as part of a repertoire that the author can also draw on to achieve different effects. In addition, they position allusion in a context where there is not one centralized store of traditions to refer to but a complex and diverse world, only partially visible from here. Both studies reflect the types of behavior I am describing and gesture at the realities that make it necessary to evolve new models.

In focusing on the more general mechanics of tradition inheritance, however, what is really valuable about the natural language analogy are the two principles I started with. First, someone steeped in a traditional repertoire by virtue of living in a particular context does not always think consciously and deliberately about how to channel that repertoire into a new story but can do so instinctively. As a result, even if they attempt to follow an explicit set of rules, they will only be able to do so insofar as their instincts can translate those rules for their unconscious minds. Second, as languages change by use, so do stories. If even one person can innovate much more dramatically than is typical amid cultural pressures, that story can be picked up and become part of the traditional repertoire. If we have to reckon with many different actors in many generations rather than one generation, operating as a whole, the likelihood of something like that happening increases, which, of course, increases the potential for dramatic discontinuities rather than roughly stable inheritance.

Indeed, Noam Chomsky himself acknowledges that the force of normal usages exists: "We may be 'incited or inclined' by internal circumstances and internal conditions to speak in certain ways, not others," but here, too, "we are not 'compelled to do so'" (2013, 649). How could we be any different with stories? And this is the real value of a natural language analogy—it enforces a conceptual separation between the question of what traditions exist in a given context and storytelling itself. The former are the ingredients of the latter, but what can be made out of these ingredients depends on many things such as individual



apprehensions, unexpected developments, new influences, new relationships, and new geopolitical agendas. We should not imagine a professional storyteller drawing from a set stock of familiar tales. We should imagine many people whose education in stories has been far less formal—they encounter them in a wide variety of contexts, in political speeches, religious ceremonies, local sites of significance, and, piecemeal, as figures of art and architecture and in episodes of local, regional, and national significance, as much as in articulated narratives. They hear bedtime stories or have a friend who is particularly into the legends of Perseus—they have a beer with their old friend Herodotus or Pausanias when they come to town and hear some fascinating traditional gossip. And when it comes time for them to tell stories, we have to imagine not only the bard on the stage but the politician in the agora or on the rostrum, the priest at the ceremony, the individual dedicating a statue, the general inspiring the troops, and more quotidian affairs: the couple courting, the child telling his parents what he learned at school, the parents telling the child what Herakles or Jacob did on that hill or in that valley. They might consider themselves to be under the special protection of some god or patron hero for entirely personal reasons.

As for the second analogy, it concerns how scholars might comport themselves when exploring a different story world than the one we imagined, and it is a good deal simpler. I think that scholars of ancient traditions have, to a certain extent, historically inhabited a Newtonian universe of inheritance, governed by strict laws and observable forces. We have imagined ourselves as “Laplace’s demon,” a scholarly construct invented by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace, which was a being who could know the position of every atom in the universe and all forces acting upon it (Shermer 1995, 82). Such a being, Laplace reasoned, would, in a deterministic universe, be able to trace where every atom had been and calculate where it was going—and could, as a result, obtain perfect knowledge of the past and the future. Likewise, in the conservative model we imagine ourselves consistently in a position to trace the passage of a tradition from the text that survives back to where it began—back to its original core. We will also have ideas, at least, of what someone would be willing to do with it in the future.



Yet the real world of stories seems to me to be more like a quantum universe, one in which there are probabilities but not certainties. Tendencies exist, and we can describe them. But we cannot know from the alterations that have happened so far where the path of a story will lead to next. We cannot know for sure what forces have operated on it in the past, still less in the future. We cannot speak in terms of rules at all. We can only speak in terms of tendencies and possibilities. And a text that survives is not a representation, of sorts, of the first version of a similar story ever told in some inherently meaningful way: it is the record of how a particle traveling through space has been acted upon by the gravity of a new imagination and by invisible forces, some of which will remain forever unknown.

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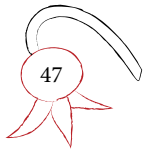
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