

“Style” and “The Historical Sense:” Historiography and Self-knowledge in Nietzsche and T.S. Eliot

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Abstract: Nietzsche’s view of the possibility of self-knowledge, a convoluted and much-debated topic in Nietzsche scholarship, in continental philosophy generally, and in contemporary analytic discussions of self-knowledge, finds its most clear presentation in his middle and mature works. Connecting his philosophy of history to his discussions of self-knowledge provides a compelling account of self-knowledge through the “doing” of history. This paper analyzes the philosophical models of history found in Nietzsche’s works and in T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” I first argue that Nietzsche’s historical model is primarily aesthetic, with an emphasis on the role of history in the development of a form of self-knowledge. Further, I argue that Eliot’s conception of the poetic work and the poet is a concrete example of the development of historical self-knowledge. Finally, I suggest that Eliot’s poet is an aesthetic embodiment of Nietzsche’s often quoted “style” motif. Eliot’s concept of the poet and the historiography he indirectly models through his theory of literary criticism provides an example of Nietzsche’s person of “style,” allowing philosophers to gain greater insight into Nietzsche’s conception of the self.

Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* (G.M.) is an intensely historical work. For Nietzsche, the problems of morality, Christianity, and asceticism can be traced historically, which allows the philosopher to identify origins, manifestations, and present purposes. A historical project such as Nietzsche’s genealogy necessitates a historiography: a theoretical structure that allows the philosopher or the historian to account the development of ideas through past events. Historiography, as I refer to it here, roughly follows the standard definition found in philosophical literature. Tucker defines it as “[w]hat historians write, about past events, about history.”¹ In this paper,

1 Aviezer Tucker, ed., *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and*

historiography refers to the body of speech (from Nietzsche and Eliot) about the past and speech about the past is typically structural. Thus, historiography will refer to the *way* or *method* that we talk about the past.

In G.M., history is primarily an accounting of the development of ideas. Nietzsche approaches the accounting of intellectual history by developing a creative historiography based upon the individual will, or more specifically, “the will to power.”² His approach (strongly influenced by Nietzsche’s reading of Schopenhauer) allows him to speak about the past as a development of the will to power through time.

T.S. Eliot, in his 1919 critical essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” operates under a similar historiography, or way of speaking about the past, to Nietzsche’s. His essay is a work of literary theory, focused on developing an aesthetic model for understanding the value and creation of poetry. While their arguments seem superficially distinct and, in some ways, even opposed, both Nietzsche and Eliot view history as primarily creative, with its source within the individual will. In fact, both utilize the term “historical sense” to describe this creative force (per Kaufmann’s *Beyond Good and Evil* [B.G.E.] translation).³

Eliot’s examination of the poet’s place in historical contexts mirrors Nietzsche’s concept of history as an aesthetic phenomenon produced through the doing of history. In his examination of the role of the poet within a historical context and discourse, Eliot argues that the poet exerts influence on past works. Similarly, Nietzsche sees history as a creation of the present, with the objectivity of past events always created and influenced by one’s own experiences and perspectives (perspectival knowledge). Eliot’s arguments about the creation of a work of art provide insight into Nietzsche’s view of the constructed life, a life of “style,” as he expresses a desirable life in *The Gay Science* (G.S.).⁴ Nietzsche’s life of “style” is a life of artistic creation, a life formed in the creation of history itself.

Ultimately, I will argue that because of the remarkable similarities between Eliot’s aesthetic historiography of tradition and Nietzsche’s genealogy, Eliot’s case study of the poet provides us with a model for understanding Nietzsche’s historical self-knowledge as demonstrated by the person of style. To do so, I will frame the two thinkers’ conceptions of history, showing that, contrary to possible superficial impressions, Eliot’s historiography mirrors Nietzsche’s. Next, I will show that Nietzsche’s conceptualization of history is aesthetic and ingrained with Nietzsche’s view of a character of “style.” I will further argue that Eliot’s understanding of the work of art as influential on past works helps to concretely evaluate what a life of style may look like, furthering Nietzsche’s project.

Historiographies:

Here, I will lay out the theories of history presented by Nietzsche and Eliot, showing

Historiography (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2009), xii.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998), 2:§12.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), §224; T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Perspecta* 19 (1982): 37, JSTOR.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Random House, 1974), §290.

their similarities and the possibility for a hybridization of the aesthetic subjects that, for both figures, are at once products and creators of their historical contexts. In 1916, Eliot published a book review in *The International Journal of Ethics* that reviewed a book on Nietzsche’s philosophy. The review is not particularly complementary of Nietzsche, with Eliot’s primary criticism resting in Nietzsche’s lack of systematic treatment of traditional philosophical subjects. Eliot expresses his sentiment regarding Nietzsche’s lack of a systematic philosophy: “Sometimes he holds that the mind alters things; sometimes that there is no other nature than that we know.”⁵ The most revealing part of the review, however, Eliot leaves us at the end, in which he laments the author’s lack of discussion about Nietzsche’s philosophy of art. Eliot writes, “we regret the omission of any account of Nietzsche’s views on art, with the interesting pessimism with respect to the future of art evinced in *Human, All-too-Human* (sic).”⁶ Eliot’s observations are informative to our own treatment of Nietzsche: his philosophy of art is nuanced and deserving of critical engagement. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” first published three years after his book review, provides excellent comparative material for such a study.

In the essay, Eliot makes an argument for a history of art in which the work of art is impersonal, a result of its context and influences. The author of a poem acts as a stimulant for creation to take place in response to material already present in the author’s environment. Eliot compares an author to a piece of platinum that causes a chemical reaction to take place between two chemicals, “oxygen and sulphur dioxide.”⁷ The platinum does not change in any way during the reaction, nor does it end up in the product; rather, it only causes the reaction to take place.

Eliot’s poet, like the platinum in his metaphor, only causes creation to take place as a result of preceding and surrounding influences. Creation, for Eliot, is a historical product as much as a contemporary one, with a work of art proceeding from its predecessors. He notes, “the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past.”⁸ The moment of creation, then, is “the present moment of the past,” a living history in which what *was* actively shapes what *is* and what *will be*.

However, the past, or as Eliot frames it, tradition, is not an immediately accessible resource for the poet. He argues that one needs “the historical sense,” “a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together. . . . And it is at the same time what makes a writer more acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.”⁹ For a poet to write historically, she must be historically minded. Eliot describes what one could term a temporal geography, a space that an author must actively inhabit as a city finds itself on a map, in relation to all that surrounds it. The

5 T.S. Eliot, “Book Review of *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* by A. Wolf,” *The International Journal of Ethics* 26, no. 3 (1916): 427.

6 Eliot, “Book Review of *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* by A. Wolf,” 427.

7 Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 39.

8 Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 42.

9 Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 37.

larger the map's scale, the greater one's historical sense will be.

The poet's awareness of her temporal position leads to what Eliot terms "an escape from personality," suggesting an apparent contradiction, but which is resolved when understood in the light of closer reading of Nietzsche's historical model.¹⁰ The poet recognizes that she is writing impersonally, writing not as a lone individual, but instead as the product of tradition. In many respects, this seems to contradict many of Nietzsche's claims about the role of individuality in the development of strength. However, much of this apparent contradiction finds its source in an unnuanced interpretation of Nietzsche's own historiography, and further, in his framing of the development of an individual.

Nietzsche's conception about self-knowledge, is, like Eliot's, impersonal and situated rather in a broader context. In G.M. 1 Nietzsche discusses the possibility of self-knowledge. He says, "We remain of necessity strangers to ourselves, we do not understand ourselves, we *must* mistake ourselves, for us the maxim reads to all eternity: 'each is furthest from himself.'"¹¹ Self-knowledge, according to Nietzsche, is epistemically inaccessible. Internally contained self-knowledge is not a possibility. The genealogical project of G.M. relies on a non-internal conception of the self. Instead, Nietzsche argues that we must look to tradition, to the process of intellectual and moral development through time, that we can understand ourselves, and eventually, to create identity as an aesthetic phenomenon. He goes further in B.G.E., arguing that contemporaneous knowledge of greatness (of character and aesthetic achievement) is also inaccessible.¹²

How then, could history itself be possible for Nietzsche? If one cannot evaluate what has occurred in the past, then a historical sense seems to be outside of human experience. Nietzsche addresses this problem (in a similar move to Eliot's temporal geography) by describing the individual as a being in time. He says, "The greatest events and thoughts . . . are comprehended last: the generations that are contemporaneous with them do not *experience* such events—they live right past them."¹³ Typically, people live *past* history; instead of identifying contemporaneous events as individual events, they experience its flow as life itself, the present moment. Comprehension occurs "last," as a product of comprehension, or as Nietzsche's German reads, *Begreifen*, which can also be translated as realization or recognition.¹⁴ One recognizes the past, and in so doing, is enabled to make aesthetic judgements.

In *The Genealogy of Morality*, which is itself a historical project that relies on one's recognition and interpretation of the historical event, Nietzsche expands on his view of the role of history, arguing that it is dynamic and organic, constantly changing based upon new orderings or curations. In 2:12, we find a brief genealogy of punishment. In explaining his genealogical methodology for examining punishment, Nietzsche says, "the entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a practice can be a continuous sign-chain of ever

new interpretations and arrangements, whose causes need not be connected even among themselves."¹⁵ History, then, is not merely the progression of a continuous chain of events leading to the present. Rather, it is something constructed through interpretation and re-interpretation, the product of contemporaneous realization and recognition. As we interpret the events of the past, they become something new, helping to frame current experience. Nietzsche's genealogy, then, is a reflection on and realization of how interpretation has created the historical record.

While I focus here on the role of history in Nietzsche's later works, many philosophers have spent more time discussing the role of history in his earlier works, especially *The Birth of Tragedy* and "On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life." Robert Doran, writing about both works, notes, "there is nevertheless a common project (and one that Nietzsche would never completely abandon): that of an existentialist historiography under the aegis of art."¹⁶ This "existentialist historiography" continues in his later works with his focus on the formation of the individual as a temporal, and more importantly, temporally aware being. The place of the individual is always historically situated, even without reflection and recognition of the unique events of the past.

While much has been written on Nietzsche's theory of history and its creation, few have examined it in conversation with Eliot. In "Modern Monuments: T.S. Eliot, Nietzsche, and the Problem of History," however, John Zilcosky reads Nietzsche's essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in conversation with "Tradition and the Individual Talent," making a compelling argument that Eliot's concept of the preservation of tradition is compatible with and informative to Nietzsche's view of history. Zilcosky restricts his analysis to evaluate only literary creation, comparing the two author's aesthetic models in conversation with continental thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Georges Bataille. His analysis, which, like Doran's, focuses on "History and the Disservice of Life," is the only focused academic treatment of Nietzsche's historiography in conversation with Eliot, making it a valuable resource for our analysis.

In his treatment, Zilcosky explains that Eliot conceptualizes history as accumulative, yet also tightly ordered and curated.¹⁷ For example, Eliot suggests "that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."¹⁸ History, Eliot says, finds itself gathered and bound together in the individual poet, making the past at once contemporaneous and historical. Thus, Eliot's creation of poetry is as dynamic as it is historical, with the recombination and chemical restructuring of substances, or in other words, of historical events. It is not pure accumulation, as Eliot himself posits, but rather a dynamic system—much like Nietzsche's historical model.

Nietzsche, according to Zilcosky, similarly does not see history as purely

10 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 42.

11 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, preface, §1.

12 Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," §285.

13 Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," §285.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Bose* (Project Gutenberg, 2005); *LEO German-English Dictionary*, s.v. "Begreifen," 2024.

15 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 2:§12.

16 Robert Doran, "Nietzsche: Utility, Aesthetics, History," *Comparative Literature Studies* 37, no. 3 (2000): 321, JSTOR.

17 John Zilcosky, "Modern Monuments: T.S. Eliot, Nietzsche, and the Problem of History," *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 1 (2005): 29, JSTOR.

18 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 37.

accumulative, but instead as corrosive, leading to a consistent loss of the past in favor of the mental representation of events. In “History and the Disservice of Life,” Nietzsche uses allegories of monuments, chains, and mountain peaks to describe this decay. Zilcosky notes, “History is always a history of misrepresentation and of mourning. The past is either forgotten, or, if it is remembered, it is ‘damaged’ in the process.”¹⁹ History, then, is something that changes. This echoes Eliot’s view of the simultaneous existence of the past and the present. For example, one may have eaten an apple yesterday, but if it is not relevant to her experience the next day, she will likely not experience the event historically. However, if her current experience (say, eating another apple) causes her to reflect or reconsider the previous event, then that event and her conception of its causes become historical. She frames her experience in reference to the historical event, shifting her understanding of other, related events.

Despite the key difference between their accumulative and corrosive models, both thinkers frame history in a similar way, with each event or literary work influenced by the works that follow it. Hannah Sullivan summarizes this vision of history in Eliot’s historiography: “Eliot saw history as a method of epistemic organization rather than a line connecting the past to the present.”²⁰ Sullivan insightfully identifies the role of the poet and the historian as “epistemic organization,” the end of which, according to Nietzsche, is comprehension (or *Begreifen*). “Epistemic organization,” an act of historical creation or creativity, enables aesthetic judgement (for Nietzsche) and the poetic work (for Eliot). Thus, their understandings of history differ only in history’s possibility of dynamism, or important change, not in its mode of creation or the aesthetic effects (ultimately, the development of a historical self-knowledge).

When evaluated together, Nietzsche’s and Eliot’s historiographies help to frame a conception of history as a phenomenon with its source in the individual acting as an intermediary between past events or works and the present. The historian (or the poet) synthesizes the past into the present. Nietzsche’s “genealogy” and Eliot’s “tradition” represent philosophical and literary approaches to historiography that perform the synthesizing historical work of the poet. This work is aesthetic, focused on reinterpretation of the past and its relevance to the individual. Through this work, the individual crafts herself as a product of what she “survey[s]” within herself.²¹ The work of history is the work of crafting a self, of creativity in the midst of context. In Nietzsche’s later works, I will argue, this crafting is the work of the person of “style.”

“Style,” Self-Knowledge, and the Poet:

I will now utilize the development of an aesthetic, historical self-knowledge in Nietzsche and Eliot’s works to analyze Nietzsche’s concept of “style.” I will show that Eliot’s figure of the poet effectively demonstrates the capacity of style, better than Nietzsche himself does in his mature works. Style is an important theme throughout all of Nietzsche’s works. According to Mark Alfano’s forthcoming digital humanities study of style in Nietzsche’s works, Nietzsche refers to “style” over 100 times in various contexts.

19 Zilcosky, “Modern Monuments,” 28–29.

20 Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 144.

21 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §290.

An aesthetic characterization, Nietzsche applies the concept in various scenarios. Oftentimes, as in G.S. 99, Nietzsche criticizes or praises artists for their sense of style or their aesthetic contributions. In G.S. 290, titled “*What is needful*,” Nietzsche argues that style is “practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses dot the eye.” The stylish person is an artist, one who is self-aware, at least to the extent that she crafts an “artistic plan” based upon her “strengths and weaknesses.”

This presents an issue, however, because of Nietzsche’s insistence that self-knowledge is not possible. Paul Katsafanas discusses Nietzsche’s arguments regarding self-knowledge in comparison with Kant. He says, “If each action were motivated by one or several desires and affects, then it would be easy enough to identify them. However, Nietzsche believes that the etiology of our actions is far more complex than this.”²² Self-knowledge lies beyond the capacity of typical human epistemology in the same way that non-subject oriented history does—a hypothetical history, or “the view from nowhere,” as Thomas Nagel puts it.²³ Nietzsche notes while discussing his genealogy of the “origin and purpose of punishment,” “However well one has grasped the *utility* of some physiological organ, one has still not comprehended anything regarding its genesis.”²⁴ How then, if one is unable to develop self-knowledge or historical knowledge through etiological analysis, can she develop the style that Nietzsche so highly praises?

History, it seems, is a pathway to self-knowledge for Nietzsche. In other words, greatness, taste, or aesthetic appreciation are products of our “historical sense.”²⁵ History allows us to develop an image of where we came from, creating an identity we can rely upon that does not depend on a personality-based self-knowledge, but rather in the impersonality of history. This is not to say, however, that history is purely impersonal. Rather, the doing of history creates personality, or as Eliot may frame it, the poetic content of a poet’s work.

Nietzsche’s genealogical project traces the past to understand the present not in terms of direct causes-and-effects, but rather, in terms of interpretation and re-interpretation. As quoted earlier, “a practice can be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and arrangements.”²⁶ For example, take a woman reflecting on a childhood experience being bitten by a dog multiple times, once at age twenty, once at age forty, and once at age sixty. At age twenty, she has a fear of large dogs, which she connects to her childhood experience. At age forty, she has overcome her fear of dogs and looks back on the experience with humor, reflecting on her family’s Cocker-Spaniel and the initial trepidation each of her children experienced learning to live with the dog. At age sixty,

22 Paul Katsafanas, “4. Kant and Nietzsche on Self-Knowledge,” in *Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity*, ed. Joao Constancio (De Gruyter, 2015), 117.

23 Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1; see Nagel 4 for his description of Nietzsche’s critique.

24 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 2:§12.

25 Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” §224.

26 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 2:§12.

she remembers the death of her dog with melancholy, remembering the previous periods of reflection.

Although the emotions of each reflective experience can be related to the previous experiences, the woman finds that she understands her previous experiences differently upon reflection. Each experience makes room for the next, changing the structure of the historical narrative. As we see, she gains a form of self-knowledge with each reflection, but that self-knowledge is reliant upon the structure of past events, not only her current experiences. Each event allows her to re-situate herself within a historical record, essentially creating more history. In Eliot's poetic model, each poem builds upon the next and re-shapes its past, forcing every past poem in the tradition to re-situate in response. The work of history, then, is as poetic as it is sedimentary, as curatorial as it is archival.

Nietzsche does not explore the theoretical intricacies of self-knowledge; instead, he provides a case study: *On the Genealogy of Morality*. G.M.'s project is one of gaining self-knowledge through the development of the "historical sense." Throughout, Nietzsche identifies the interpretations and re-interpretations that have led to our current understanding of morality and "the ascetic ideal."²⁷ For example, he reviews a hypothesized broad re-interpretation of the purpose of suffering at the end of the study: "The meaninglessness of suffering, not the suffering itself, was the curse that thus far lay stretched out over humanity—and the ascetic ideal offered it a meaning!"²⁸ Nietzsche's genealogy seeks to trace the interpretation of meanings, acting out his historiography.

Nietzsche does not clearly provide examples for the role of style and its incumbent self-knowledge within the individual or the artistic tradition, but Eliot's poetic model provides just such an example. While he often references individuals and art (for example, Richard Wagner and his music in G.S. 99), we do not receive the same kind of sustained treatment that he offers through intellectual history in G.M. Because of his lack of systematic treatment, we are left to pick out bits and pieces scattered throughout the early, mature, and late works.

Eliot's poet, as described in his chemistry metaphor, is a catalyst for artistic creation because of her awareness of tradition. One's awareness of tradition relies on her "historical sense," her ability to draw upon the works that float in the contextual waters. As Eliot argues, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists."²⁹ The poet is a figure who is located as much in the past as in the present, finding her identity caught up in reflection of other poets in history. In other words, she is working through genealogy.

At the beginning of his essay, Eliot references another discipline focused on the study of the past: archaeology. He says, "You can hardly make the word [tradition] agreeable to English ears without this comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology."³⁰ Digging up the past is the key to the poet's work. Without this digging, the

27 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 3:§28.

28 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 3:§28.

29 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 37.

30 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 36.

poet is only "personal," a poet without style.³¹ Personality, the poet alone in the world, is of no interest to Eliot nor Nietzsche. The poet is one who displays strength, a product of living with style.³² Eliot writes, "There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious."³³ Here, Eliot argues for a similar limitation to self-knowledge as Nietzsche, suggesting that the best poets maintain an awareness of what they ought to know (tradition) and a lack of awareness about details unimportant to their historical narrative (personality).

Style, when applied to Eliot's framework, can be aesthetically understood as the proper application of tradition to poetry. It becomes a historical phenomenon, always contextualized within a tradition. Just as Nietzsche explores the genealogy of morality, Eliot argues for the aesthetic genealogy of the poet. The poet, then, can be compared with the intellectual historian, both operating under frameworks of tradition that find their source in the seeking for self-knowledge, which Eliot may characterize as an archaeological search. The creation of the self-knowing individual begins in historical creativity.

Conclusion:

Nietzsche's person of "style," not clearly defined in his own works, becomes more clearly understood when viewed aesthetically through Eliot's notion of the poet. The poet—also the historian, chemical catalyst, and archaeologist—is one who allows the past to live contemporaneously with the present. Nietzsche's philosopher seems to take a comparable, artistic role. All that has happened before is material for new creation, for new moral "horizon[s]."³⁴ Although Nietzsche appears to seek the destruction of the past through the death of God, his project consistently shows itself to be one of reevaluation and new recognition (*Begreifen*), allowing for the philosopher to engage with the world more honestly as a self-aware individual. This self-awareness does not arise purely from self-reflection; rather, it is a product of "the historical sense."³⁵

Nietzsche's historiography, which involves temporal exertion between the past and the present, is one which is necessarily aesthetic and, to borrow Eliot's imagery, poetic. By analyzing Nietzsche's notion of history as the creation of self-knowledge, we find that "style" is the primary hallmark of the individual. This style is aesthetic and is meant to be historically evaluated, just as Nietzsche demonstrates in his numerous aphorisms discussing art, politics, and law (all of which he frames within historical contexts). History, for Nietzsche, results in the creation of the individual, and style is the proper evaluation and putting-on of history.

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