Johnston / Rouse / Schmidt-Biggemann (eds.)

Transforming Topoi

The Exigencies and Impositions of Tradition

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Andrew James Johnston / Margitta Rouse /
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With 4 figures

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Acknowledgments

Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann

Introduction: The Exigencies and Impositions of Tradition

The conference documented in this volume took place as long ago as June 2009. The fact that the papers presented on that occasion are now being published at all is, for the most part, due to the commendable tenacity of Andrew James Johnston and Margitta Rouse, to whom I extend cordial thanks. It does seem like something of a tradition for conference proceedings to be long in preparation. When this is indeed the case, such a tradition entails many exigencies and impositions, especially for the contributors of a collection such as the one at hand. These impositions, however, do not represent the intended meaning of the term 'exigencies' as used in the title of the conference. Our title points towards something quite different, namely the sense of unease that has a way of creeping in whenever one engages, for an extended period of time, with a topic as traditional as tradition; a feeling of discontent that manages to take hold even of self-proclaimed traditionalists such as myself. The topic of the conference was, or at least was meant to be:

The Exigencies of the Self-Evident, and Traditions as an Arsenal of Symbolic Politics

Traditions provoke a whole number of questions: Are they a precondition of the apparently given? Do they render authenticity possible in the first place, or do they relieve us of its burden? Do they protect us from the exigencies of spontaneity, or do they stand in the way of freedom? Do they themselves constitute exigencies? And if they do, in what way and for whom?

From a history of knowledge perspective, traditions certainly qualify as epistemic organizations and can be understood as cultures of observation and representation; they involve the passing on of information, and they are capable of self-referentiality; they exert their influence via images and metaphors, as

Peter-André Alt's contribution, drawing on the theories of Luhmann and Blumenberg, makes clear.

Do histories of knowledge themselves constitute exigencies of tradition, or do they render tradition accessible and manageable? Are traditions at our disposal as veritable arsenals of symbolic politics, or do they insinuate themselves quietly and undetected, creeping into our souls before we are even aware? Do they impose themselves on us without our knowing? Do they resist appropriation by our consciousness because they are deeply ingrained long before we notice them? And do we notice them only if something is amiss with what was formerly taken for granted?

It is as banal as it is evident that traditions take their time before they take root in our habitus. Yet it does seem possible to establish new traditions. Does this mean that other traditions need to be abolished first? If so, the creation of traditions would be nothing short of a revolutionary act, initiating a dialectic process in the course of which a breach of tradition turns into a tradition itself. At close inspection, an idea such as this begs the question of whether traditions can be freely constructed, or whether the invention and construction of traditions must again rely on traditional *topoi*. One such *topos* would be the denunciation of traditions as being propagated by interested parties in order to thwart revolutionary freedom. And has this revolutionary romanticism, as informed by ideological critique, not long since become topical itself?

Phillip H. Stump's account of the political principles behind conciliarism shows that – by the later Middle Ages at the latest – revolution has itself become a topos: after all, breaking with tradition is a tradition, too, figuring here as 'reform in head and members'. On the other hand, as Gideon Stiening's analysis of the impact of Hobbes's political theory demonstrates, conscious breaks with tradition provoke reactions which in turn are capable of reviving traditions supposedly long dead: rarely has Aristotelianism been more alive than in the controversy that erupted in the wake of Hobbes's revolutionizing of political ideas.

Traditions are characterized by continuity – at least that is what they would have us believe. Yet they only proclaim their continued authority when the very validity and supposedly self-evident credibility they rest on become brittle and begin to disintegrate. Traditions give rise to mistrust as soon as they start insisting on their claim of continuity. The elasticity of traditions is determined by rhetoric. They exert their influence because their topics are acknowledged and because the concomitant conclusions are accepted. If the acceptance of its constituting topoi is in question, so is tradition itself, as Margitta Rouse's essay on *The Rape of Lucrece* makes clear: Shakespeare playfully engages with the complex tradition of Lucretia-related topoi by exhibiting the temporal implications of certain aesthetic choices as rhetorical excess. Not only are the topoi

chosen by authors subject to change, but, in assessing what is new and original, these choices are continuously played off against each other.

Traditions cannot be logically deduced. Can traditions be influenced? Can the character of a tradition be reinterpreted gradually and clandestinely? How can traditions be employed in the service of symbolic politics? Are there certain limits to manipulation that lie in the very nature of the traditions in question, a nature which therefore defines them? Katharina Krause's essay on *The Grand Condé* shows that it is quite possible to use traditions aggressively when their topoi are instrumentalized as weapons for ideological purposes, or when they are consciously exploited for political self-fashioning. In cases such as these, traditions impose themselves on those who suffer defeat in the symbolic struggle.

Topoi generally tend to impose themselves. This is more than merely folkloristic habitus: what is commonly accepted as natural and self-evident always has an ethical dimension. What is 'self-evident' is 'naturally' granted access to the realm of decorum; it is understood as right and proper. Here, 'understood' suggests that we could be dealing with a language-based communicative context: what is repeated and reheard time and again becomes a seemingly natural law, a 'becoming' law fit to govern our behaviour. Prior to codification, all law partakes of this nature by conforming to universal custom and common usage, to a 'natural' and self-explanatory ethos. This topical ethics is in turn a matter of course, a self-evident prop of decorum. Is this saturated taken-for-grantedness, this self-contentedly flying under the radar of rationality, what the exigencies of tradition ultimately consist in? Is this the ethics of an idyllic-cum-utopian life-world, an ideal that philosophy was still secretly catering to as late as the twentieth century, as my own contribution argues?

Whenever tradition operates as given, its claim to continuity is unproblematic and, *eo ipso,* successful. But continuity does not equal immutability. Phenomena that are taken for granted are particularly subject to change. And this process of change may well be imperceptible, as the success of a 'living' tradition depends on presenting changes as evidence of the tradition's very stability. In cases of conflict, the party of change confronts an 'ossified' tradition with a 'vital' one, or the proponents of conservatism accuse the innovators of breaking with tradition, of being revolutionaries. Does this kind of exchange of arguments constitute an instance where the competition between traditions becomes tangible? Those who consider themselves conservatives react to the innovations they are confronted with by stepping up their own claim of validity. Obviously, this process is a constant source of intellectual challenges, as Stephen Gaukroger points out: mythology constituted an imposition for Christianity, just as Christianity constituted an imposition for natural religion. *Nolens volens*, the competing claims of stability involved demonstrate that the opposite is actually the case: as they engage in confrontation, both parties are subject to transformation.

When a conflict between the supposedly 'old' and the 'new' is staged, then a new role is attributed to the former, namely that of obstructing innovation; and here too, the assertion of continuity serves as a powerful indicator of change. In this context, Maria Muccillo's and Anna Laura Puliafito's chapters dealing with the traditions of philosophical schools are especially pertinent. The institutionalized competition between Platonic and Aristotelian philosophers, on the one hand, and orthodox theologians, on the other, showcases how conservative positions change and adapt in their very attempt to suppress rival traditions.

It could be argued that, essentially, traditions are a history of memory. Traditions thrive on the dialectic of repetition, restaging the same things in ever changing ways. They draw from the well of memory; situated right on the border between the deliberate and the habitual, it would appear that they can only be understood as natural and self-evident convictions. It is as if they were reproducing without possessing an outside perspective on themselves; they tell and retell their stories over and over, in the same way and yet different each time, constituting their own history in the process, apparently unaware of metatraditions. For traditions, the retelling of stories seems to be a matter of course. Bernd Roling's chapter shows how the mythical topoi of natural philosophy simultaneously open up and obstruct certain perspectives as Early Modern naturalists engage with classical authorities. They do so in order to understand liminal worlds populated by hybrid beings such as orang-utans and other anthropomorphic creatures. Naturalists called what they encountered 'fauns', 'tritons' or 'forest men'. How else could they have made sense of their observations? Observations without [hi]stories are blind and senseless. However, these histories – these old-yet-new observations – were gradually changing natural history.

Perhaps the history of scientific and scholarly disciplines is itself a 'metatradition': as an academic discipline, it must reflect on the supposedly self-evident claims that traditions ultimately rely on. Its task is to confront and engage with the rhetoric of tradition, to identify the topoi that have become second nature and to investigate the conditions under which these topoi operate. Disciplinary history has to describe the layerings and transformations of the self-evident; and if it is to be a 'critical' history, it has to denounce the topoi of tradition as 'prejudiced' – thus are the topical exigencies imposed by academia. Such exigencies are part and parcel of a topics of science and scholarship, which is itself traditional.

The conference was hosted by a research group called *Topics and Tradition.* As key concepts, 'topics' and 'tradition' can only raise a comparatively weak claim of credibility. Their demands are less strict than those of logic, and by no means are they necessarily argumentative in structure. But they are indicative of and highlight the taken-for-grantedness that lies at the heart of habitus, custom and

common usage. Could it be that the topoi of tradition are impositions directed against consciously rule-based rationalities, the kind of rationalities that the academic engagement with language and behaviour foregrounds as its hallmark? At any rate, the research group aspired to open up new-yet-old perspectives, potentially of equal interest to scholars working in the fields of art, literature, philosophy and theology. Naturally, the question whether this aspiration was itself an imposition should best remain unanswered.

Peter-André Alt

Traditions and the Dynamics of Change: Preliminary Thoughts on a Key Issue in Early Modern Studies[*]

This essay takes its cue from the observation that knowledge in the Early Modern period, while being organized in seemingly stable systems of transfer and transmission, is capable of taking on a dynamic quality. My objective is thus to provide an answer – necessarily a general one for the time being – to the question of how Early Modern knowledge change actually happens in spite of Early Modern knowledge's systematic embeddedness in rigid topical models. For the most part, the argument will remain a theoretical one: its goal is to formulate basic hypotheses rather than a detailed examination of specific source material. The text at hand seeks to gain a clearer insight into the paradoxical phenomenon of the particular mobile stasis that pervades the Early Modern epistemic fabric. Two theoretical approaches belonging to quite different schools of thought will provide a measure of methodological guidance: Niklas Luhmann's theory of social semantics on the one hand, and Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology on the other hand. Both approaches are interested in describing a form of organizing knowledge that is not based on cognitive concepts; they also set out to explore the operations of a premodern historiography of knowledge and aim at making visible both the societal and intellectual achievements of Early Modern knowledge change. In principle, my reflections on the category of tradition are meant to cover as wide a theoretical scope of inquiry as possible. At the same time, these reflections are particularly relevant to cases in which literary studies engage with the history of knowledge and can thus also be seen as a contribution to the recent discussions on the nexus of 'literature and knowledge'.

   Examining the emergence of traditions in the Early Modern period means encountering epistemic structures and forms of organizing knowledge that are predominantly topical in nature. In this context, both topics and tradition can be

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[*] This chapter is a revised and translated version of a text first published under the title "*Die Dynamik der Tradition. Theoretischer Exkurs über einen alten Begriff (Luhmann, Blumenberg),*" in Peter-André Alt, Imaginäres Geheimwissen: Untersuchungen zum Hermetismus in literarischen Texten der Frühen Neuzeit, Göttingen 2012, pp. 43–66.

understood as relatively stable systems. The notion of topics that is relevant to our context (namely the Ciceronian one[1]) is concerned with organizing knowledge in such a way as to achieve recognizability. As a result, topical models tend to claim universal validity;[2] in the case of tradition, the goal is to ensure the reliable passing on of topically organized knowledge, although a certain degree of variation remains possible in terms of the specific processes of transmission involved.[3] This state of affairs constitutes the main foundation of late medieval humanism's epistemic concepts as embodied by Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Thomas More, Nicholas of Cusa, Conrad Celtes and Philipp Frischlin. By and large, this epistemic system remained dominant well into the seventeenth century. It resulted in a paradox that crucially affected the whole Early Modern period, and especially the Renaissance – new knowledge was defined as an enhancing commentary on already existing knowledge, and epistemic progress was cast in terms of successive stages of historical understanding. Here, epistemic change takes place entirely on the level of deep structures: as reorganization and reconstruction, as contrafaction and rewriting; in paradoxical patterns of steadily unfolding antithetical structures; in developments in which

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1 For the purposes of this essay, the concept of topics is understood as a memory system in accordance with the Ciceronian model that was dominant in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, rather than as a system of logical categories along Aristotelian lines. Whereas Aristotle grounds his notion of topics on a logical (dialectic) rationale in a process that assigns concepts to general categories, Cicero's doctrine of the *loci communes* establishes a framework that makes it possible to subsume *termini* according to the precepts of a coherent formal structure. On this distinction, see ARISTOTLE, Topica, trans. Edward S. Forster, in Posterior Analytics / Topica, Cambridge, MA and London 1966, I, 1 100a–101a; MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, Topica, trans. Harry Mortimer Hubbell, in De Inventione / De Optimo Genere Oratorum / Topica, Cambridge, MA and London 1968, II, pp. 7ff.; MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, De Oratore, trans. Edward William Sutton, in De Oratore. Books I and II, Cambridge, MA and London 1988, II, pp. 36–38 (where Cicero distinguishes between *loci* = ethical truths and *loci communes* = ordering systems). See also WILHELM SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, Topica universalis: Eine Modellgeschichte humanistischer und barocker Wissenschaft, Hamburg 1983, pp. 7ff.

2 See WILHELM SCHMIDT-BIGGEMANN, "Topik als Methode historischer Wissensordnungen," in Apokalypse und Philologie: Wissensgeschichten und Weltentwürfe der Frühen Neuzeit, ed. Anja Hallacker and Boris Bayer, Göttingen 2007, pp. 229–46.

3 On the Early Modern concept of tradition as 'free disposal' over older bodies of knowledge, see WILHELM KÜHLMANN, Gelehrtenrepublik und Fürstenstaat: Entwicklung und Kritik des deutschen Späthumanismus in der Literatur des Barockzeitalters, Munich 1982, pp. 185ff.; on the normative character of the concept of 'tradition', see WILFRIED BARNER, "Einleitung," in Tradition, Norm, Innovation: Soziales und literarisches Traditionsverhalten in der Frühzeit der deutschen Aufklärung, ed. Wilfried Barner, Munich 1989, pp. IX–XIV and, following in Barner's footsteps, DIRK NIEFANGER, "Sfumato: Traditionsverhalten in Paratexten zwischen 'Barock' und 'Aufklärung'," Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik 98 (1995) (Themenheft 'Barock'): pp. 94–118. For observations concerning this issue from the vantage point of history, see the contributions in ERIC HOBSBAWM and TERENCE RANGER, ed., The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge etc. 1983.

the power of old models and authorities fades away, while new ones gradually come into being; and in uncontrolled and unpremeditated shifts of epistemic foci and central ideas.

Wilfried Barner already pointed out that the term 'tradition' needs to be cleansed of the taste of static substantialism, arguing that researchers ought to focus more on developing models for describing what he called 'tradition management' ('Traditionsverhalten') and 'tradition choice' ('Traditionswahl').[4] What Barner had in mind, was to establish a typology of patterns of reception that would allow the development of a 'differential diagnostics of period-specific forms of tradition management' ('Differentialdiagnostik epochalen Traditionsverhaltens').[5] His objective was to integrate the various, and at times widely divergent, attitudes towards historical sources, topoi, interpretative patterns and authorities into an overarching phenomenology of epistemic processing. The key role in Barner's approach is played by the author, whose 'stance' ('Haltung') in relation to processes of transfer and to available guiding perspectives is to be grasped and systematically examined – an approach remarkably compatible with Bourdieu's social-psychological theory of the habitus, inasmuch as Bourdieu seeks to explain types of intellectual self-fashioning, and the attitudes and approaches they entail, on the basis of their social and historical conditions.[6] In contrast to Barner's theoretical agenda, the present essay will be concerned with the structural character of processes of transfer that fall under the rubric of 'tradition-building'. The focus of inquiry thus shifts from the people who transmit or absorb knowledge, who quote and refer to learned topoi and textual traditions, to the actual processes in which all these activities take place. The category of 'intentionality' becomes detached from individuals insofar as it highlights a teleological dimension within knowledge transfer itself: a dynamic

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4 Wilfried Barner, "Einleitung," in Tradition, Norm, Innovation (see n. 3), p. XV; id., "Wirkungsgeschichte und Tradition: Ein Beitrag zur Methodologie der Rezeptionsforschung," in Literatur und Leser: Theorien und Modelle zur Rezeption literarischer Werke, Stuttgart 1975, pp. 85–100; id., "Über das Negieren von Tradition: Zur Typologie literaturprogrammatischer Epochenwenden in Deutschland," in Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewußtsein (= Poetik und Hermeneutik XII), ed. Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck, Munich 1987, pp. 3–51. See also Peter-André Alt, Begriffsbilder: Studien zur literarischen Allegorie zwischen Opitz und Schiller, Tübingen 1995, pp. 28 ff. The notion of tradition as being essentially static is exemplified by Ernst Robert Curtius, Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter, 10th ed., Munich 1984 [1948], especially pp. 261 ff., 395 ff. For a discussion of the concept in the context of German scholarship on Baroque literature in the 1960ies, see Hans-Jürgen Schings, Die patristische und stoische Tradition bei Andreas Gryphius: Untersuchungen zu den Dissertationes funebres und Trauerspielen, Cologne and Graz 1966, pp. 3 ff.

5 Barner, "Einleitung," in Tradition, Norm, Innovation (see n. 3), p. XVI.

6 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Social Space and its Transformations," in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA 1984, pp. 99–168.

element in the very act of epistemic transmission, which effects change in the object that is passed on.[7] What is to be investigated is not so much the individual who ingests or communicates knowledge; rather, the very mechanisms of tradition themselves, and the way they are organized, become the object of research – the structures of transformation, and the attempts to negotiate change so that it does not endanger an epistemic community dependent on stability.

Against this backdrop, Sigrid Weigel distinguishes between 'tradition' as a term that refers to the inventory of a given culture, and 'transmission' for the act of passing on these inventories.[8] This makes it possible to concentrate on the structures behind the system of tradition, and on the organization of knowledge taking place within it. At the same time, Weigel's distinction does create the impression that the framework of tradition is essentially understood to be static, with the actual processes of knowledge transfer taking place subcutaneously, as it were. In contrast, the following reflections seek to demonstrate that 'tradition' in general serves as a system and vehicle of transfer which has a stabilizing effect, but which, in conjunction with topical regimes, can also put into effect a reconfiguration of epistemic structures – particularly in cases where the discursive models within which knowledge is perpetuated undergo change themselves (e.g. in the transition from religious to literary systems of representation). If this holds true, 'tradition' would exhibit the dynamic component that Weigel primarily attributes to 'transmission'. These unpremeditated, structurally internal processes of reconfiguration tend to be slow in unfolding, and frequently follow patterns different from the epistemic paradigm shifts and transformations typical of modernity. The patterns these processes develop are marked by palimpsestic layering and overwriting, by depletion and oblivion, as they became manifest from the later Middle Ages onwards in firmly established practices of compilation, translation, commentary and critique.

Whenever texts – and this explicitly includes literary ones – draw on traditions, they tend to appropriate the desired bits and pieces in the shape of individual topoi; this process is perhaps best described as an act of fragmentation. Simultaneously, however, this process is complemented by the reorganization of knowledge from late antique sources, which, in the process of literary reception, can be linked and recombined with elements from other sources.[9] It is evident

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7 This is precisely the point that Adorno negates in his famous polemic against the established notion of tradition: "Thesen über Tradition," in Ohne Leitbild: Parva Aesthetica, Frankfurt am Main 1967, pp. 29–41.

8 See Sigrid Weigel, Genea-Logie: Generation, Tradition und Evolution zwischen Kultur- und Naturwissenschaften, Munich 2006, p. 82. See, however, Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, Philosophia perennis, pp. 49 ff.

9 See Thomas Leinkauf, "Interpretation und Analogie: Rationale Strukturen im Hermetismus der Frühen Neuzeit," in Antike Weisheit und kulturelle Praxis: Hermetismus in der Frühen

that the interplay of topics and tradition outlined above is absolutely crucial in this context: it makes possible the handling, transmission and modification of knowledge by establishing a nexus between processes of fragmentation and recombination. Thus, contrary to what is commonly assumed, neither 'topics' nor 'tradition' are terms denoting a static state of affairs based exclusively on the recognizability of knowledge.[10] In fact, the opposite is the case: in Early Modern epistemology, recognizability is the precondition for changes to the epistemic system itself, changes that are made possible when hierarchies shift, but also by intermedial processes of transfer.[11] According to Jan-Dirk Müller and Jörg Robert, the whole period between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century experienced dissent and difference in a specific way, an experience that resulted from a competition between various textual resources, theoretical approaches and authorities.[12] The Early Modern lack of uniformity in processes of knowledge selection and transmission is hardly surprising: due to the period's technological limitations in the distribution process alone, the totality of potential sources could never be available for the determination of any given epistemic context. Buttressed as it was by its authoritative nature, by its familiarity and by its dominance, the authority of tradition was complemented by a multi-layered history of divergent variants and ruptures.

While ancient knowledge frequently assumes the guise of authority in the Early Modern period, it is also restructured in the very process of transfer. This generates the emergence of paradoxical patterns of covert reorganization, supplementation and displacement – patterns that showcase epistemic change not as a controlled and purposefully triggered teleological movement, but rather as a process on the deep structural level involving complex and multiple layers of epistemic interference, a process in which literary forms play a crucial part. At

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Neuzeit, ed. Anne-Charlott Trepp, Göttingen 2001, pp. 41–62 (pp. 45 ff.) (where Hermeticism is described as a concept that focuses and subsumes various texts and traditions ['ein fokussierender, verschiedene Texte und Traditionen […] versammelnder Begriff']). See also my own contribution: "Fragmentierung und Reorganisation arkanen Wissens: Techniken der Verarbeitung hermetischer Topoi in der barocken Bukolik," in Scientia Poetica 12 (2008): pp. 1–43 (pp. 34 ff.).

10 See Schmidt-Biggemann, Topica universalis (see n. 1), pp. 7 ff.

11 The same argument is made in one of the most important theories of Early Modern epistemology: Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences [= Les Mots et les choses, 1966], London and New York 2004, pp. 19 ff.; id., The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language [= L'archéologie du savoir, 1969], trans. Alan Mark Sheridan Smith, New York 1972, pp. 149 ff. Foucault's discourse analysis will not play a central role in the following discussion, because it scarcely provides any answers as to the actual causes of transformations within epistemic systems.

12 Jan-Dirk Müller and Jörg Robert, "Poetik und Pluralisierung in der Frühen Neuzeit," in Maske und Mosaik: Poetik, Sprache, Wissen im 16. Jahrhundert, Münster 2007, pp. 7–46 (p. 10).

first, the newly emerging cultures of observation and representation that develop within relatively static systems remain bound to concepts such as tradition and heritage, canon formation and preservation. They develop a mixture of stable and dynamic properties that is characteristic for tradition-building in general. In this context, Niklas Luhmann suggested that a distinction should be drawn between 'structure' and 'process', a distinction he describes as a key property of systems capable of resolving 'problems of time'.[13] In this sense, 'tradition' operates as a system that allows for stability and dynamics at the same time. While the structures of transmission lend epistemic configurations a certain degree of permanence, they are also conjoined with a processual logic that results from the temporal dimension of knowledge transfer. The twin formula of 'stability and dynamics' or 'structure and process' makes it possible to grasp the specific paradox at the heart of a particular form of knowledge transfer: a transfer that does not, as has sometimes been assumed, simply preserve the substance of what is transferred, but rather facilitates its twofold passage through a systematic structure of fixed and mobile components.

Particularly in regard to processes of reception which do not merely serve the purpose of stabilizing pre-existing bodies of knowledge, it is important to avoid the misconception that 'tradition' equals stasis and hostility towards innovation. Supplementation and pluralization are just as integral to the concept of 'tradition' as are uniformity and predictability. Ironically, when it comes to the problem of tradition, Luhmann himself denies the applicability of his notion of a systemic logic that governs the negotiation of temporality within contexts generating stability, while equally being capable of bringing forth processes of change. A typical example of this stance is a definition proffered almost in passing in his posthumous study *Die Religion der Gesellschaft* [*A Systems Theory of Religion*], where he argues that tradition represents a concept that 'could be used in creating dogmas and thus destroying information. It was then handled as a preference for what had already been handed down.'[14] Even if we take seriously the caveat that Luhmann's theory claims to be primarily descriptive in nature, and that statements like the one just quoted are not meant to imply a value judgement but are merely intended to portray the operations of a certain mechanism,[15] we are nonetheless entitled to raise a few objections. These ob-

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13 Niklas Luhmann, "Temporalization of Complexity," in Sociocybernetics: An Actor-Oriented Social Systems Approach, vol. 2, ed. Rudolf Felix Geyer and Johannes van der Zouwen, Leiden etc. 1978, pp. 95–111 (p. 95).

14 Niklas Luhmann, A Systems Theory of Religion, trans. David A. Brenner with Adrian Hermann, Stanford 2013, p. 188. See also Luhmann's older study Funktion der Religion, Frankfurt am Main 1982 [1977], pp. 227 ff.

15 See also Luhmann's earlier works, e.g. the preface (written in 1975) to Niklas Luhmann,

jections are not so much directed against the general methodological premises of Luhmann's approach, which the present essay actually shares. Rather, they are aimed at the conclusions Luhmann draws from his functional analysis.[16] There can be no doubt that tradition fulfils the function of selecting information, thus achieving a stabilization of knowledge transfers by safeguarding the availability of knowledge within processes of reception. Here, the focus is clearly on knowledge being stabilized and not on knowledge being newly created; as Luhmann suspects, information indeed informs the process of transfer primarily as a mode of negotiation that governs communication via the principle of recognizability. Drawing on the work of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann has called this task the 'canonical, commemorative substance'[17] of tradition.

In light of this differentiation, making recourse to traditional semantic patterns is by no means synonymous with a self-referential insistence on 'how it always was, and always has been'. Heidegger's remark that tradition ultimately obscures what it 'transmits'[18] does not imply an irreversible constellation, but a programme that does not exclude an analysis of the objects transmitted. Regardless of their precise form, traditions are always founded on the epistemic or cultural fields of reference in which the process of tradition-building takes place and involve the adaptation of highly diverse arguments and authorities. These can originate in scholarly, pedagogical or religious discourses, but they never operate on the purely formal level that Luhmann's definition suggests. By providing patterns for selection and decision-making via their recourse to the authoritative roles of wisdom, faith, learning and temporality, they produce meaning through hierarchization in a process of differentiation that goes beyond a mere referencing of the legitimacy and authoritative nature of ancient

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Legitimation als Verfahren, Frankfurt am Main 1983 [1969], as well as id., Zweckbegriff und Systemrationalität, Frankfurt am Main 1973 [1968], pp. 24ff.

16 On this type of methodological criticism, see JÜRGEN HABERMAS and NIKLAS LUHMANN, Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie: Was leistet die Systemforschung?, Frankfurt am Main 1971; JÜRGEN HABERMAS, The Theory of Communicative Action, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge 1987, pp. 306ff.; JÜRGEN HABERMAS, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge 1987, pp. 368–85. Habermas's notion of communicative reason is of secondary importance for this discussion because it does not provide a convincing explanation for the social function of knowledge-specific processes of transfer.

17 JAN ASSMANN, Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination, Cambridge 2011, p. 48 (on the relationship between memory and tradition). See MAURICE HALBWACHS, On Collective Memory [= Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire, 1925], ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser, Chicago and London 1992, pp. 94ff.

18 MARTIN HEIDEGGER, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford 2001, § 6, p. 41.

knowledge.[19] Concepts of tradition do not imply an 'obliteration of information', but rather a process of selection that seeks to declare one thing as more relevant than another.[20] This function also enables bodies of knowledge to undergo internal changes, a potential that ensures that the appeal to tradition does not exclude transformation, but rather makes it possible in full accordance with Luhmann's own model of stability and dynamics.[21]

In his last completed works, published from the middle of the 1990ies onwards, Luhmann's concept of tradition lost some of the one-sidedness it had still possessed in his earlier writings on religion. Using a more careful turn of phrase in a passage from *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (1998) [*Theory of Society*], Luhmann argues that tradition is 'a form of observing culture'[22] which is not restricted to purveying collective memories, but is capable of reconnoitring spaces of opportunity. In a similar vein, Luhmann's essay 'Kultur als historischer Begriff' from the fourth volume of *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (1995) describes tradition as the result of critically surveying processes of cultural observation in conditions of a consciousness of temporality.[23] If, according to

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19 For a different, earlier perspective, see HANS-GEORG GADAMER, Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London and New York 2013 [1960], pp. 289ff., as well as id., "The Historicity of Understanding," in Critical Sociology, ed. Paul Connerton, Harmondsworth 1976, pp. 117–33 (especially pp. 122f., where the concept of authority is resolutely posited and tradition defined as a precondition of historical awareness through distance). See, however, SUSAN STEWART, "The Pickpocket: A Study in Tradition and Allusion," in Modern Language Notes 95.5 (1980): pp. 1127–54.

20 See the introductory chapter in SANFORD BUDICK, The Western Theory of Tradition: Terms and Paradigms of the Cultural Sublime, New Haven and London 2000, pp. XVII f.

21 Despite the criticism voiced in this essay, Luhmann's oeuvre can nonetheless serve as a major point of reference for research concerning the Early Modern history of knowledge and its cultural semantics. This holds true not so much for his studies focusing on processes of modernization from the perspective of systems theory in the narrower sense of the term, but rather for his works on the history of knowledge that examine specific constellations between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, such as the ones presented in the four volumes of *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (Frankfurt am Main 1980–1994). With regard to the premodern epistemology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Luhmann pursues the question of why changes to stable systems are possible in the first place, given that these changes are precisely what the agenda of these systems means to prevent. See NIKLAS LUHMANN, "Gesellschaftliche Struktur und semantische Tradition," in Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik, vol. 1, pp. 9–72; id., "Frühneuzeitliche Anthropologie: Theorietechnische Lösungen für ein Evolutionsproblem der Gesellschaft," in Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik, vol. 1, pp. 162–235; id., Theory of Society, 2 vols, trans. Rhodes Barrett, Stanford 2012, vol. 2, pp. 183ff.

22 LUHMANN, Theory of Society (see n. 21), vol. 1, p. 356.

23 NIKLAS LUHMANN, "Kultur als historischer Begriff," in Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft, vol. 4, Frankfurt am Main 1995, pp. 31–54 (pp. 53f.). This extraordinarily dense essay conceptualizes culture as a 'memory system' ('Gedächtnisordnung') which endows social systems with an awareness of their own contingency. In this context, 'tradition' also constitutes a form of managing the achievements

Luhmann, culture is a means by which modern societies recognize variants that provide a complement to a given society's dominant modes of making social sense, culture must necessarily also possess an awareness of its own historicity, historicity thus being understood as a realization of specific semantic possibilities or options. Hence, the cultural observation of society seeks to demonstrate that things could have been completely different from what they are, because meaning is always contingent. The notion of temporality that informs this stance is an awareness of the selective nature of meaning in historical processes of transfer. Like the world of knowledge, the identity of the observer is the product of differentiating decisions which gather together the objects to be transferred. Within the Early Modern epistemic order, tradition thus operates as a precursor of modernity's characteristic way of generating cultural meaning. However, in the Early Modern period this operation takes place unacknowledged – the reason being the powerful presence of the arcane in the epistemic systems of medieval and Early Modern Europe.[24] Ever since the later Middle Ages, tradition has presented itself as the result of a process of ordering and classification that stores knowledge via selection. Tradition thereby performs acts of differentiation that, according to Luhmann, become possible in a systematic fashion only in the fully-fledged, functionally differentiated modern societies from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. Tradition's operations are enabled by processes of encoding, information transfer and conscious acts of reaching back to earlier models.[25]

Remarkably, Luhmann's chapter 'Temporalization of Complexity', first published in Volume I of *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik* (1980), already describes mechanisms that are characteristic for the concept of tradition, albeit without drawing any connection to the Early Modern context. Structuring, remembering and hierarchizing knowledge are listed as the characteristic elements of a social system that seeks to reduce the effects of temporal dynamics with the aim of limiting temporal contingency.[26] All of these functions can also be claimed for Early Modern processes of tradition-building. The applicability of Luhmann's notion of a 'system' to the operations of tradition reaches its limits when it comes to making forecasts based on past experience – an intellectual activity indispensable for generating historical, ideological and philosophical

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of memory; traditions, however, can either be affirmed or rejected – a freedom of choice, it has to be pointed out, which in turn leads to further changes to epistemic systems.

24 Niklas Luhmann, Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft, 3rd ed., Frankfurt am Main 1998 [1990], pp. 628 f.

25 For this differentiation, see already Luhmann, Legitimation als Verfahren (see n. 15), pp. 59 ff. See id., Social Systems, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. with Dirk Baecker, Stanford 1995, pp. 137 ff., 176 ff.

26 Luhmann, "Temporalization of Complexity" (see n. 13), p. 98.