

Eliot's Unconscious Bias in *After Strange Gods*

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Some people might have had a sense of fear toward unfamiliar people whole through the history. In other words, some people in society tend to have some prejudice towards those who look different from others.

All of us are taught that we as a member of the family of nations should not discriminate against others on the basis of their religion, skin color, language or behavior pattern. However, some Europeans might have had a deep-rooted prejudice since the Middle Ages.

When they travel around Europe, they can notice a darker side of human behavior as well as the brighter aspect of human history. T. S. Eliot was travelling through Europe to broaden his mind when he was an exchange student. There is an indissoluble connection between Eliot and European culture at large. It is true that Eliot made a great effort to learn classic literature including Homer and Dante to cultivate his spiritual backbone as a European poet. However, his biased inclination occasionally appears whenever Eliot depicts a certain character in his poems. Eliot writes:

. . . A saggy bending of the knees
And elbows, with the palms turned out,
Chicago Semite Viennese.
A lustreless protrusive eye
Stares from the protozoic slime
At a perspective of Canaletto.
The smoky candle end of time
Declines¹

There were a certain number of Jewish people in the international cities of Europe. If the inhabitants of Europe had a biased inclination toward anti-semitism at that time, the young poet when he was travelling in central Europe, was ingrained negative way of thinking or pathology that had been collectively shared by Europeans at large. After graduating Harvard, Eliot embodied some attitudes from the United States as well as those from Europe.

It is not hard to imagine that Eliot as a young poet was absorbing a collective pathology

¹ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems* 1909-1962 (London: Faber & Faber, 1936) pp.42-43.

of anti-semitism at that time. The following passage is taken from *Jewish Vienna*,

Anti-Semitism found fertile soil in which to grow in Vienna after World War I. In 1915 and 1917 there had been two massive waves of immigration of Galician and Polish Jews, who presented an additional social burden to a city that was already in dire financial straits. In spite of the enormous bureaucratic obstacles put up by the Austrian authorities, a large number of these immigrants were able to settle in Vienna. In the early 1920s, almost all political parties, including the Social Democrats, had anti-Jewish slogans in their election manifestos. ²

Eliot visited several cities of Germany and Austria when he was an exchange student in Paris. One can imagine how harsh anti-semitism had been, especially in German-speaking countries. One might say that German anti-semitism might have had some influence on Eliot's mind. The following passage sounds like a scathing satire against Jewish people at large.

The rats underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.
Money in furs. The boatman smiles . . . ³

It seems that Eliot's deep-rooted prejudice towards the Jews is manifested in the passage, even though he denied once and for all his anti-semitic inclination in his later years. The more he denies his specific inclination, the more he reveals his faults. The following passage is taken from Eliot's infamous lecture, "After Strange Gods."

. . . The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable. ⁴

Eliot gave such a lecture at the University of Virginia in 1933 when anti-semitism became harsh in Germany and Austria. It seems that Eliot was infected with the virus of anti-semitism. Steven Beller explains that anti-semitism had infected the spiritual climate of Europe.

. . . anti-semitic ideology and discourse are seen as inherently and pathologically

² *Jewish Vienna* Mandelbaum City Guide, 2004, P.28.

³ Eliot, *Ibid.*, p.43.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, 1933

irrational, a mental 'disease' that had infected the core of Western civilization, and that, while endemic for centuries, reached epidemic proportions and then pandemic proportions in the 1930s and 1940s, as the 'madness' of genocidal antisemitism spread like a 'virus' over so much of Europe. ⁵

If anti-semitism stormed over Europe at that time, didn't Eliot develop tolerance for such a malady of western civilization? His anti-semitic depictions in poetry and prose could not be tolerated even if Eliot intended to satirize a minority group at large.

One might say that Eliot was insensitive to Jewish sensibilities. His harsh depiction of the Jew would have never been produced, if the poet had realized how Jewish people would feel about those harsh depictions. Anthony Julius insisted loudly that *After Strange Gods* coincided with the beginning of the persecution ordered by Hitler. One might infer that Eliot seemed to be historically insensitive. Julius belittles the prose.

After Strange Gods has a certain notoriety. It is known as the book that was offensive about Jews, the one that Eliot would not allow to be republished. The book is studied not so much for what it says about its subject but for what it discloses about its author. It is regarded as a resource for the biographer, not a text for the critic. Certainly, it is an inferior work. The cultural argument lacks cogency; the literary criticism is often perverse; the anti-Semitism is glib. The book contrives to be both pedantic and mystic, displaying a tension between a surface reasonableness and an underlying, disturbing unreason. ⁶

It seems that Eliot revealed his personality as a conservative Christian poet in *After Strange Gods*; he does not like heterogeneous elements in a society. He really wants a society to be culturally homogeneous with people who think and act based on Christianity because Christianity has laid the cornerstone of western society at large.

When Eliot deals with the topic of cultural unity, he does not seem to have such a racial bias. However, Julius lambastes Eliot's eurocentric belief.

When not writing about Jews, Eliot's use of 'race' was slack: 'the Christian religion is an essential part of the history of our race. . . It is quite irrelevant to conjecture the possible development of the European races without Christianity.' The missing term is 'culture'; 'race' substitutes. Eliot could also be dismissive of the political uses of 'race' . . . in both 'Burbank' and *After Strange Gods* he adopted a racist anti-Semitism. This postulates conflicting and mutually exclusive elements, an Aryan racial community and an opposing Jewish race. . . The poem postulates a Jewish race; the book postulates the

⁵ Steven Beller, *Antisemitism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.5.

⁶ Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, anti-Semitism, and literary form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.150.

threat to racial purity posed by Jewish free-thinkers. . . ⁷

One might infer that Eliot does not like “free-thinking Jews,” or liberal thinkers. Eliot might have hoped that Jewish influence would be reduced in a society to maintain a homogeneous Christian society.

However, given the benefit of the doubt by readers, Eliot might have criticized some free-thinkers or pseudo-Christians at large. As Eliot and some critics have pointed out, there were some pseudo-Christians who did not attend any church services, even at that time. As Eliot had already converted to Anglicanism in 1927, he might have lamented the decline of the true Christian faith among common people in England. In other words, the controversial phrase “free-thinking Jews” can be replaced with “free-thinking fellows” at large.

One might say that some do not agree to such a far-fetched view as mentioned above because Eliot continued to make a bluff in his comments; it may be natural for them to ask if the poet really reflected on his inappropriate words about the Jews in the past. As a matter of fact, in a book review of the *Criterion* in July, 1936 an anonymous commentator said that “. . . no English man or woman would wish to be a German Jew in Germany today.”⁸ As Eliot allowed such a review for *The Yellow Spot* to be printed as the chief editor, he might be blamed for printing such a book review in the magazine even if he did not write such a commentary himself.

It may be very optimistic to say that Eliot might have had some compassion for people who sacrificed themselves in German concentration camps. Given the benefit of the doubt, he might not have been able to express his honest feelings regarding the tragic incident that was beyond human experience.

What Eliot could do at that time was only to pray for the victims’ peace of mind as an Anglican poet. It is very difficult for the readers to understand that Eliot could not imagine putting himself in the shoes of the Jewish minority citizens.

However, as Julius harshly criticizes, the argument remains the same; what is Eliot’s true intention of his using “any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.” The sensitive readers may pay attention to Julius’s following passage.

Eliot’s remark hints at the old complaint that ‘the Jews. . . turned our people away from Christ’. Anti-Semites argue for the exclusion of Jews. They propose limiting their number only when more radical arguments have failed: A recovery of the health of our popular life. . . are possible only if Jewish influence is either excluded completely or driven back to an extent that makes it safe and tolerable.’⁹

When we put ourselves in the victim’s position, we could understand why Julius made

⁷ Ibid., p.158.

⁸ Ibid., p.168.

⁹ Ibid., p.160.

a harsh criticism of Eliot. One might say that there can be no perfect poet or critic in human society. Eliot might have been the target of criticism because of his great achievements in literary history. General readers should sit and watch how Eliot's works will be critically judged from a non-Christian viewpoint. It is very exciting and challenging for general readers to imagine that the canon of great literary works might be modified with such a viewpoint.