

Is Eliot's poetry worth reading for Japanese students?

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Historically, the Japanese nation generally has had few chances to have contact with foreigners, much less with Jews until Perry's fleet came to Japan in 1853. Some people are apt to have a bias against strangers whose cultures and religions are entirely different from their own. The sad fact is that humans even in the era of globalization have not been able to root out a prejudiced and discriminatory feeling towards the unknown.

However, we should no longer turn a blind eye to the issue of discrimination and prejudice. It is not convincing to discuss that Eliot, a country boy from St. Louis, might have been insensitive to such a discrimination issue since his youth.

Christopher Ricks discusses how intricate the matter of Jewishness has been:

. . . the understanding of what it is to be a Jew is something to which learned sensitive scholars have devoted lifetimes . . . if it is held that Eliot refused to recognize the intricacy of the matter, it must not then be insisted at the same time that the matter is perfectly simple and that it was crass of Eliot to get it wrong. Is the entwining of 'race and religion' in Jewishness of Eliot's making? . . . What in 1933 constituted Jewishness for Jews themselves? If Eliot's speaking of 'race and religion' is badly wrong, what is the right way to conceive of the matter, from within Judaism and Jewish tradition itself? ¹

Ricks seems to refer to Eliot's infamous statement in *After Strange Gods* to show the reader the complexity of the matter. Eliot explains this in his lecture at Virginia.

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. ²

The deliberate readers may question Eliot about what Jewishness means to him. Eliot's

¹ Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1988), p.41.

² T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1933), pp.19-20.

misunderstanding of what it is to be a Jew seems to have some relation to his naïveté since his childhood in St. Louis, where he had been infected with biased ideas about Jews. Eliot seems to associate Jews with a race in the above-quoted passage.

One might say that such a temperament refers to a naive Japanese behavior pattern towards foreigners at large in such a globalized era. It is regrettable to point out that most Japanese are apt to associate a typical Jew with Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. Common sense tells us that connecting a Jew to a race sounds strange nowadays because the relation of a Jew to a certain race is not so simple to discuss even in the academic community.

The Japanese have enjoyed maintaining an illusionary harmony in their nation under the mixture of Buddhism and Shintoism throughout history. This might be the reason why the Japanese are apt to be naïve about the intellectual climate of a heterogeneous society. One might say that the Japanese should learn how difficult it is to be unified as a nation under one culture or religion.

It is not farfetched to point out that Eliot as a Christian poet was not an isolated case concerning the idea of the unity among different religious sects at that time. Eliot's yearning for a homogeneous society in which the symbol of the unity of the nation should be Christianity is indicated in the following passage.

As we use the term *tradition* to include a good deal more than 'traditional religious beliefs', so I am here giving the term *orthodoxy* a similar inclusiveness; and though of course I believe that a right tradition for us must be also a Christian tradition, and that orthodoxy in general implies Christian orthodoxy, I do not propose to lead the present series of lectures to a theological conclusion. The relation between tradition and orthodoxy in the past is evident enough . . . ³

Maud Ellman also discusses that Eliot publicly supports cultural homogeneity that can be regarded as the tendency to the sameness in communities. ⁴ Eliot discusses respect in *After Strange Gods*.

Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs; these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all these habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place'. It involves a good deal which can be called *taboo*: that this word is used in our time in an exclusively derogatory sense is to me a curiosity of some significance. ⁵

³ Ibid., p.21.

⁴ Maud Ellmann, *The Imaginary Jew: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* in *Between 'Race' and Culture* ed. Bryan Cheyette (Stanford University Press, 1996), p.88.

⁵ Eliot, p.18.

Eliot discusses that tradition does not necessarily mean to hold on to old customs and habits.⁶ He further discusses that associating tradition with the opposite to change or making it something new runs the risk of discussion.⁷

It is not of advantage to us to indulge a sentimental attitude towards the past. For one thing, in even the very best living tradition there is always a mixture of good and bad, and much that deserves criticism; and for another, tradition is not a matter of feeling alone. . . . for what is a healthy belief at one time may . . . be a pernicious prejudice at another. Nor should we cling to traditions as a way of asserting our superiority over less favoured peoples. . . . a tradition without intelligence is not worth having, to discover what is the best life for us not as a political abstraction, but as a particular people in a particular place; what in the past is worth preserving and what should be rejected; and what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire. Stability is obviously necessary.⁸

For Eliot, stability and unity are necessary to maintain a healthy society based on a Christian tradition. However, there was a significant obstacle for the poet to maintain the homogeneity of a Christian society at that time. The target of Eliot's criticism was what he calls "liberalism," which splits a Christian society into units. Eliot says:

In our time, controversy seems to me, on really fundamental matters, to be futile. It can only usefully be practised where there is common understanding. It requires common assumptions; and perhaps the assumptions that are only felt are more important than those that can be formulated. The acrimony which accompanies much debate is a symptom of differences so large that there is nothing to argue about. We experience such profound differences with some of our contemporaries, that the nearest parallel is the difference between the mentality of one epoch and another. In a society like ours, worm-eaten with Liberalism, the only thing possible for a person with strong convictions is to state a point of view and leave it at that.⁹

Eliot refers to "Liberalism" to indicate an unfavorable factor that disturbs the stability of a Christian society and goes against the traditions of human society at large. Anthony Julius presses the point further:

Historically, liberalism meant . . . the primacy of conscience, which in turn entailed

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p.19.

⁹ Ibid., p.13.

the separation of church and state, the right of religious freedom, the right of civil disobedience, and a skepticism about the benefits of universal suffrage. . . . In America, it was experimenting with the New Deal; in Europe, it was on the defensive against Fascism. Eliot's repudiation of liberalism is necessarily a repudiation of all this . . . ¹⁰

Eliot seems to dislike the liberal atmosphere of urban cities such as New York and Chicago. It is natural for him to yearn for the Agrarian South as the nostalgic utopia he wrote about in *After Strange Gods*.

Some factors which collapsed the existing order of a Christian society might have been intolerable for the poet because Christian tradition for him was alive, not only in human history, but also in the sphere of the eternal.

Julius points out that Eliot did not care for urban areas because of an influx of foreign people and liberal thinkers who would disturb the homogeneity and stable tradition of a society. ¹¹ The following passage might illustrate Eliot's ironical depiction of a liberal Jew in Vienna.

But this or such was Bleistein's way :

A saggy bending of the knees

And elbows, with the palms turned out,

Chicago Semite Viennese.

(Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar)

Average Japanese readers may think that Eliot as a pious Christian poet depicts a bohemian Jew as a symbol of the epoch in which he spent his adolescent days. However, Julius argues that reducing Eliot's anti-Semitic character into a larger category of prejudice trivializes the heart of the matter. ¹² One might argue that Eliot inherited his grandfather's and father's narrow frame of religious belief concerning Unitarianism at that time.

Rick cites William Empson's passage to illustrate the source of family culture as the origin of Eliot's biased idea.

. . . . Eliot wanted to grouse about his father, and lambasted some imaginary Jews instead Eliot's grandfather went to St. Louis as a missionary preaching Unitarianism, and incidentally founded a university there Unitarians describe themselves as Christians but deny that Jesus was God, whereas Eliot was beginning to feel a strong drag towards a return to the worship of the tortured victim. Now if you are hating a purse-proud business man who denies that Jesus is God, into what stereotype does he

¹⁰ Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, anti-Semitism, and literary form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.155.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.154.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.10.

best fit for? ¹³

Eliot might have created the figure of imaginary Jews as a symbol of liberal thinking at that time. ¹⁴ In other words, Eliot might have depicted the Jewish figure as a contemporaneous symbol of his Unitarian father to sever himself from the Unitarian preachings.

It is very hard for Japanese students to understand the controversy about Eliot's anti-Semitic poetry and prose because the Japanese have been living with the mixture of Buddhism and Shintoism since ancient times.

However, if students make efforts to understand literary works written in a Judeo-Christian culture, they will find out how diverse global society is. The Japanese should learn about diverse cultures through the controversy about Eliot's anti-Semitic poetry in order to understand the dynamic atmosphere of Judeo-Christian society.

¹³ Ricks, *Ibid.*, p.47.

¹⁴ Ellmann *Ibid.*, p.93.