
Representation of the Holocaust in T. S. Eliot

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Theodor Adorno once asserted that it is not possible to write poetry after Auschwitz. Adorno's remark has been a cornerstone for those who study European literature and history of ideas in general. One might say that any literary representation of the Holocaust would numb the aesthetic sense of poets, and that what took place in Auschwitz is beyond human imagination ; Nazi atrocities and the killing of 6 million Jews have surely made it impossible to write anything about Auschwitz.

It sounds reasonable to say that Auschwitz is not only about Germany but about humanity as a whole, because it must be seen as a unique event of history. However, the question is often discussed of why major poets turned a blind eye to Nazi atrocities in Auschwitz and similar camps. The major poets of the English language have not dealt with the specifics of the Nazi final solution, rather they have kept silence, avoiding any direct statement concerning the Holocaust. T. S. Eliot was not an isolated case in this respect.

It can be said that the main thrust of George Steiner's arguments about the Holocaust is aimed at Eliot's idea of "culture". The following passage in *In Bluebeard's Castle* well illustrates Steiner's position.

Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture : my subtitle is, of course, intended in memoration of Eliot's Notes of 1948. Not an attractive book. One that is gray with the shock of recent barbarism, but a barbarism whose actual sources and forms the argument leaves fastidiously vague.³⁾

The sensitive reader might notice that a scene of mass murder in Auschwitz is imprinted on Steiner's memory. It is proper to say that images of the past rules us, in place of the literal past itself.⁴⁾ Steiner further develops the argument :

····· In turning to the question of genocide, I must try and be as scrupulous, as skeptical as I am able to be, regarding my own motives. Much of my work has concerned itself, directly or indirectly, with trying to understand, to articulate, causal and teleological aspects of the holocaust. My own feelings are patently implicated. But so is the conviction that an analysis of the idea and ideal of culture demands the fullest possible understanding of the phenomenology of mass murder as it took place in Europe, from the Spanish south to the frontiers of Russian Asia between 1936 and 1945.

The failure of Eliot's *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* to face the issue, indeed to allude to it in anything but an oddly condescending footnote, is acutely disturbing. How, only three years after the event, after the publication to the world of facts and pictures that have, surely, altered our sense of the limits of human behavior, was it possible to detail and plead for a Christian order when the holocaust had put in question the very nature of Christianity and of its role in European history ? Longstanding ambiguities on the theme of the Jew in Eliot's poetry and thought provide an explanation.⁵⁾ But one is not left the less uncomfortable.

As Steiner says, Eliot's *Notes* is a long critical work in which the poet referred to the Jews with a small footnote. It is also true that the reader

can not find any direct statement about the holocaust in the work. Admitting Eliot's *Notes* as the product of a mind of exceptional acuteness, Steiner attacks Eliot's Christian oriented views of culture. Steiner develops his argument as follows :

..... the trust in culture was itself hubristic and blind to the countercurrents and nostalgias for destruction it carried within. It may be that the incapacity of reason and of political will to impede the massacres of 1915-17 ought to have proved a final warning as to the fragility and mutually isolated condition of the fabric of culture.⁶⁾

Steiner reiterates the charge that the harsh visions of the massacres of the Nazi regime are strangely absent from Eliot's *Notes*. It is indeed arguable that Eliot does not mention the massacres in his small footnote. Eliot says :

It seems to me highly desirable that there should be close culture-contact between devout and practising Christians and devout and practising Jews. Much culture-contact in the past has been within those neutral zones of culture in which religion can be ignored, and between Jews and Gentiles both more or less emancipated from their religious traditions. The effect may have been to strengthen the illusion that there can be culture without religion.⁷⁾

One might get the impression from this that the Jews had developed the climate of neutrality without religious traditions in Europe. The following passage is often quoted to illustrate Eliot's sense of the decadent spirit of European civilization.

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought.
My house is a decayed house,
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

Many scholars come to a consensus that Eliot did not write “Gerontion” in 1920 with the idea of a decayed Europe in mind. It can be said that poetry may reflect a poet’s personal experiences and thoughts, but it is risky to interpret the poem on a superficial view of the words. As far as Eliot’s poems are concerned, the reader should resist the easy temptation to read racism from his words. Common sense tells us that the general atmosphere of the age in which literary works are produced tends to be reflected through literature.

Anthony Julius in his recent *T. S. Eliot, anti-semitism and literary form* states that Eliot wounded Jewish sensibilities because he disparaged all Jews referring to one Jew alone.⁸⁾ These lines from “Burbank with a Baedeker : Bleistein with a Cigar” would illustrate Anthony’s remark.

The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.
Money in furs.

Anthony denounces Eliot’s indifference to the offence given by his

anti-semitic poems. He dares to say that ignoring the insults given by Eliot's poems is tantamount to misreading the poems. However, the acute reader would observe the fact that these seemingly anti-semitic lines make up only a small part of the whole. If the reader were to pay so much attention to the local wording of poems, he could not see the wood for the trees.

The same argument could be applied to *After Strange Gods*; the seemingly insulting phrase, "free-thinking Jews" has been a main target of this kind of criticism. If the reader read through the whole paragraph about "free-thinking Jews", he will realize that Eliot is reasserting the role of Christianity in the living tradition.

... in even the very best living tradition there is always a mixture of good and bad, and much that deserves criticism. ... Nor can we safely, without very critical examination, dig ourselves in stubbornly to a few dogmatic notions, for what is a healthy belief at one time may, unless it is one of the few fundamental things, be a pernicious prejudice at another. Nor should we cling to traditions as a way of asserting our superiority over less favoured peoples. What we can do is to use our minds, remembering that 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. ... 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.⁹⁾

Anthony points out that Eliot's *After Strange Gods* coincided with the birth of Hitler's regime that inaugurated the persecution towards the Jews. If we keep Anthony's remark in mind, we might say that Eliot¹⁰⁾ would have warned against Hitler's rise, though with unforceful words. The following passage would illustrate the point: "Nor can we safely, without very critical examination, dig ourselves in stubbornly to a few dogmatic notions".

Referring to Eliot's *Notes*, Anthony argues that the footnote in his *Notes* follows the anti-semitic pattern of *After Strange Gods*; he goes so far as to say that Eliot did not learn anything in 15 years. Anthony interprets Eliot's words as insulting, as if Eliot wanted to say that "too many free-thinking Jews are undesirable; contact between Jews and Christians is undesirable because it fosters a damaging illusion."¹¹⁾

He denounces Eliot's wording "culture contact between Jews and Christians" as if the phrase meant that the contact between the two disparages Christian sensibilities; the secularized Jews contributed to European civilization by helping to produce the "neutral zone of culture" in which both Jews and Christians could stand aside from religious traditions. However, it is clear that Eliot's intention in his *Notes* is not to discuss the Jewish influence in Europe. Eliot's small footnote would reflect general thoughts of intellectuals without malicious intentions who sought for the unity of European civilization.¹³⁾

Both Steiner and Julius denounce Eliot's *Notes* in that Eliot did not try to discuss the massacre in the death camps, although this work was published just three years after the liberation of the death camps. Steiner's denouncement is very harsh in this respect:

· · · · there have been few attempts to relate the dominant phenomenon of twentieth-century barbarism to a more general theory of culture. Not very many have asked, or pressed home the question, as to the internal relations between the structures of the inhuman and the surrounding, contemporary matrix of high civilization. Yet the barbarism which we have undergone reflects, at numerous and precise points, the culture which it sprang from and set out to desecrate. Art, intellectual pursuits, the development of the natural sciences, many branches of scholarship flourished in close spatial, temporal proximity to massacre and the death camps. It is the structure and meaning of that proximity which must be looked at. · · · I fail to see how any argument on the definition of culture, on the viability of the concept of moral values, can avoid these questions. A theory of culture, an analysis of our present circumstance, which do not have at their pivot a consideration of the modes of terror that brought on the death, through war, starvation, and deliberate massacre, of some seventy million human beings in Europe and Russia, between the start of the first World War and the end of the second, seem to me irresponsible.¹⁴⁾

Steiner seems to raise the problem of language and its relationship to imagination and creativity. In other words, the issue of how to represent the Holocaust becomes the essential question in contemporary literature. Julius also questions the validity of Eliot's *Notes* :

Though the footnote does *not* propose 'that the Jews had some historical responsibility for the Holocaust' (Steiner 1988), it makes it impossible to assert 'the doom of the Jews under the Nazis transformed Eliot's literary suspicion into horror and compassion' (Kirk 1971, 211). Just after the war, Emilio Cecchi discussed with Eliot the death camps: 'Eliot wondered whether the gates of such hells · · · can really be considered to be closed for ever. Or whether mankind, now capable of reaching such extremes of frightfulness, has a weaker resistance to new and infernal suggestions'

(Cecchi 1948, 76). These musings derive from a generalised sense of human sinfulness and are appropriate to the poet of the *Four Quartets*. Eliot did not understand the Holocaust as an event in the history of anti-semitism. Steiner wonders of *Notes*: 'How was it possible to ... plead for a Christian order when the Holocaust had put in question the very nature of Christianity and of its role in European history?' (Steiner 1978, 34). Yet Eliot would not have accepted the premiss of Steiner's question.¹⁵⁾

Steiner's argument that the holocaust was not the result of Hitler's pathology or of the neuroses of Germany as a nation-state sounds persuasive to some readers. Yet, the holocaust defies our imagination and perception, and it is accessible only to our memory.¹⁶⁾ It can be said that the Holocaust has transformed the spirit of man; it has made us revise our expectations for the future of human beings.¹⁷⁾

As Steiner criticizes, Eliot does not cite the specifics of the Nazi final solution when he discusses the issue of culture in Europe. However, can it truly be said that silence itself is a failure to confront the issue of the Holocaust?¹⁸⁾ As the Holocaust is beyond our reason and imagination, Eliot's silence can itself be a statement. In other words, it may be that Eliot tries to wait upon God's directions based on his apocalyptic outlook on life in order to confront the Holocaust. As Eliot did not talk very much about the Holocaust, it is possible that his very silence might represent a matured stage such as only great poets can attain to through hardships and labors.

Notes

- 1) David H. Hirsh, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Au-*

- schwitz* (New Hampshire : Brown University Press, 1991), p. 158.
- 2) Enzo Traverso, *The Jews & Germany* (Lincoln and London : University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 133.
 - 3) George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 3.
 - 4) *Ibid.*
 - 5) *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
 - 6) *Ibid.*, p. 79.
 - 7) T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London : Faber & Faber, 1948).
 - 8) Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, anti-semitism and literary form* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 1.
 - 9) T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London : Faber & Faber, 1934), pp. 19-20.
 - 10) Anthony, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
 - 11) *Ibid.*
 - 12) *Ibid.*
 - 13) *Ibid.*
 - 14) Steiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
 - 15) Anthony, *op. cit.*, p. 257.
 - 16) Traverso, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
 - 17) R. Barbara Gitenstein, *Apocalyptic Messianism and Contemporary Jewish-American Poetry* (Albany : State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 111.
 - 18) *Ibid.*