
Some reflections about T. S. Eliot's anti-semitism

Junichi Saito

It has often been pointed out that the issue of anti-semitism is very hard to discuss among the scholars of a traditional circle of literary criticism. It is also very regrettable to say that many scholars in Japan have turned their backs on the issue of Eliot's anti-semitism to set him on a pedestal as one of the great Christian poets that our century has produced.

If we turn our attention to the influence that Eliot as a great poet has had on many intellectuals in the western world, it would be fair for us to say that Eliot and his poems should be reexamined from various aspects. It would also be significant to have some second thoughts about the true values of Christianity, because we are in an era when the fundamentals of Western culture at large have often come to be questioned by intellectuals such as George Steiner, Harold Bloom, and Jacques Derrida.

The history of anti-semitism has been so long bound up with Christian culture that it has come to seem as if anti-semitism were a part of Christianity, although in fact it was Christianity that originated from Judaism. At any rate, Christianity and Judaism might be called two sides of the same coin. However, the fact remains that there has been a widespread prejudice towards the Jews in Christian society since very early times.

Many people in the past have acquired various stereotypic images of the Jews through such great dramatic works as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* or Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. Shylock and Barabas are both depicted as greedy and cunning as if these were real Jewish traits. *The Jew of Malta* seems to have been one of Eliot's favorite plays; he cites a speech from it in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service." The speech "Look, look, master, here comes two religious caterpillars" seems to represent Eliot's sneer at Christian clergymen.¹⁾ There are some controversial aspects in the first stanza of Eliot's poem.

Polyphiloprogenitive
The sapient sutlers of the Lord
Drift across the window-panes.
In the beginning was the Word.

According to Grover Smith, the word "Polyphiloprogenitive" refers to the lechery of the clergy in *The Jew of Malta*.²⁾ However, the deliberate reader is also aware that "the sapient sutlers of the Lord" refers to the cunning and business-oriented Jews as a stereotypic image.

Hyam Maccoby says that "sutlers" mean "petty traders in food and drink"; this also alludes to Jewish dietary laws.³⁾ One might say that "sutlers" carries an association with Shylock as a symbol of the cunning trader. However, the word "sutler" also reminds the reader of the "subtle serpent" of the Genesis, because Adam, Eve and the serpent are the "beginning" motives in many Church windows.

Maccoby also points out that the word "sapient" and the "subtle serpent" indicates the Jewish pride in "wisdom" which Paul denounced.⁴⁾

Maccoby further argues:

. . . the stanza is saying that the Jews of the Old Testament had a materialistic religious attitude, concerned with food and drink and with worldly wisdom. They failed to appreciate the dimension of spirituality⁵⁾ expressed in John's statement, "In the beginning was the Word."

As for the spiritual dimension, it would be natural for Christians to remember the saying, "man does not live on bread alone." However, it would be hard to prove that the poem expresses anti-Judaism rather than anti-Semitism.⁶⁾ As Maccoby concludes, one might at most say that Eliot's anti-Semitism is rooted in traditional Christian anti-Judaism and is theological rather than racial.⁷⁾ If the reader pays attention to the title of the poem, he will easily perceive that the target of Eliot's scorn is the Christian Church.⁸⁾ The natural interpretation for the ordinary reader would be that the poem represents Eliot's observation of an ordinary scene in a Church which had grown decadent at that time.

One might similarly argue that other apparently anti-Semitic passages in Eliot's poems also actually convey theological meanings rather than racial ones. The following controversial passage in "Gerontion" can be discussed in much the same terms.

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.

It can be said that the words, "squats on the window-sill" recall "Drift

across the window-panes” in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service.”

Some critics point out that the word represents the debased morality of the Jew that occupied Eliot’s mind at that time. However, if Eliot was meditating on the theological state of his contemporary society, the words, “squats on the window-sill” could represent, as Maccoby argues, the eternal wanderer in Christian society.⁹⁾ Would it not follow that the object Eliot sneers at or satirizes is not a particular race like the Jews but a peculiar theological system which does not fit into the intellectual climate of Europe at that time?

The same argument could be applied to “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” in which some passages are castigated as anti-semitic. One of them reads:

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
The zebra stripes along his jaw
Swelling to maculate giraffe.

Although the passage describes the primitive state of Sweeney, the reader should be careful not to jump to the conclusion that Sweeney need necessarily be depicted as a Jew; the name “Apeneck” might simply bring up the image of some hateful figure.

The following passage is also controversial for the primitive image of human nature that it calls up:

The silent vertebrate in brown
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
Rachel née Rabinovitch

Tears at the grapes with murderous paws . . .

It is not quite certain here whether this “Rabinovitch” is to be taken as a Jewish woman or not, even bearing in mind the fact that Jews concealed their Jewish names to protect themselves from persecutions at that time. One might say that Eliot makes a malicious comparison between the biblical name “Rachel” and the Eastern European name “Rabinovitch.”¹⁰⁾ Melvin Wilk further develops this idea in his dissertation paper.

This is of course to be understood not only as anti-semitic, which it is, but as part of Eliot’s general tendency, clearly in evidence in “Sweeney among the Nightingales,” to glorify the Greek and Christian foundations of Western Culture at the expense of modern cultural life, which he characteristically trivializes. (Here it is interesting to recall that a similar contrast forms a structural basis of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, but the juxtaposition of ancient Greek civilization with metropolitan Dublin is not made exclusively to the disadvantage of the modern city, nor are ancient heroes glorified at the expense of the modern characters. The Jewish Bloom serves as a representative of humanity and not just as a symbol of the negative attributes of the Jewish people.) Fiedler points out that the association of Jews with animals is part of the Christian image of the Jew from Chaucer, to Shakespeare, to Pope, to T.S.Eliot. . . . it may be supposed that had Eliot written the poems after 1927 (the year of his entry into the Church of England) he would not have used Jews to embody the decline of Western European Civilization.¹¹⁾

It may be fair to say that Eliot picked by chance on the Jew as a representative symbol of human being like Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.¹²⁾ It would not make any difference if Eliot had used Scottish figures in place of Jews in his poems. The deliberate reader would still realize that Eliot was rather intending to suggest the decline of Christianity which has long

been a backbone of European culture. It was more or less by chance that it was the Jews that attracted Eliot's attention and that he chose them to depict the decadent atmosphere of European society at that time. The following passage might offer a typical example of this view.

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

Some critics argue that the Jew is intended as a symbol of debased morality in human society. It may well be said that Eliot wants his contemporaries to share a sense of crisis at a time when Europeans at large were turning their back on the Christian Church.¹³⁾ Might it be fair to say that Eliot used the Jew as the "objective correlative" to evoke in his contemporaries a sense that Christian morality is lapsing into decay?

As Stephen Spender reminisces, the fact remains that Eliot never changed the parts of his poems which later turned out to be controversial as anti-semitic.¹⁴⁾ Such a consistent attitude may come from Eliot's confidence in his position as a representative of the European intellectual class. Taken as a whole, the importance of T.S. Eliot as a Christian poet will never be reduced because of some controversial, and seemingly anti-semitic passages in his poems.

Notes

- 1) Hyam Maccoby, "T.S. Eliot and anti-Semitism" in *The Times Literary Supplement* (June 14, 1996).

- 2) *Ibid.*
- 3) *Ibid.*
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) *Ibid.*
- 6) *Ibid.*
- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) *Ibid.*
- 10) Melvin Wilk, *The Jewish Presence in Two Major Moderns: Eliot and Kafka* (Michigan: U.M.I., 1990), p.16.
- 11) *Ibid.*, pp.17-18.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p.17.
- 13) *Ibid.*, pp.18-19.
- 14) Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1975), p.60.