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# The Jews in T. S. Eliot's work

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Graham Martin once wrote that “anti-Semitism is not a marginal issue in Eliot's work.” George Steiner has also argued that Eliot's “uglier touches” tend to occur at the heart of very good poetry.<sup>1)</sup> Steiner discusses Eliot's anti-Semitism in a letter to the *Listener* :

The obstinate puzzle is that Eliot's uglier touches tend to occur at the heart of very good poetry (which is not the case of Pound). One thinks of the notorious ‘the Jew squats on the window-sill... Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp’ in ‘Gerontion’...<sup>2)</sup>

The deliberate reader might say that Eliot's ugly descriptions of Jews can hardly be criticized as anti-Semitic, compared to Pound's fanatic racism. In this respect, Christopher Ricks points out that Eliot's uglier touches are not only continuous with his greatness as a poet but are sometimes intimate with it.<sup>3)</sup> Ricks further maintains that even if the reader omitted the anti-Semitic passages from Pound's *Cantos* he would not lose any significant part of the poetry.<sup>4)</sup> Both George Steiner and Christopher Ricks try to show the reader how the anti-Semitism revealed in both poets exists in varying intensities.

From another perspective, it might be said that recent discussions about Eliot's anti-Semitism take place in the shadow of the death camps; anti-Semitic remarks can hardly be severed from the strong image of gas chambers.<sup>5)</sup>

If the reader has this image of the death camps in mind, he may run the risk of misinterpreting the following passage :

...the man with heavy eyes  
Declines the gambit, shows fatigue,  
Leaves the room and reappears  
Outside the window, leaving in,  
Branches of wistaria  
Circumscribe a golden grin...

Some well-meaning readers might read the passage as if "a golden grin" meant the gold teeth of the corpses in the death camps. This reminds us of the historical fact that the Jews as a wandering people often carried diamonds, jewels and gold articles with them to be able to survive everywhere in the world. General readers should keep it in mind that one is not to judge a few verbal irresponsibilities of sixty years ago by the later scorching light of the concentration camps.<sup>6)</sup> It is sometimes pointed out that anti-Semitism was typical in Europe sixty years ago ; it might have been a universal sickness.<sup>7)</sup>

T. S. Matthews discusses that Eliot's anti-Semitism should be forgiven, because Eliot's times were themselves anti-Semitic.<sup>8)</sup> Common sense tells us that the poet would be influenced by the prejudices of his times. Ricks is correct in saying that it is wrong to make the anti-Semitism of systematic murder synonymous with prejudice.<sup>9)</sup>

Many critics have discussed how Eliot is a poet who laments the spiritual malaises (anti-Semitism would be one of them) of his times. The following passage can be called a typical example in which Eliot seems to reflect the anti-Semitism of his external circumstances.

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

Can we really argue that Eliot is hostile to Jews in the passage quoted here? Anthony Julius seems to give the reader the impression that the depictions of the Jews in Eliot's work "enlarged" the anti-Semitism of his times. Julius says :

...Anti-Semitism is a social prejudice. As a group phenomenon it is not an appropriate case in which to plead moral safety in numbers. Widespread wickedness does not make individual evil less reprehensible. Writing an anti-Semitic poem does not reflect the anti-Semitism of the times; it enlarges it, adding to the sum of its instances.<sup>10)</sup>

Many general readers would sympathize more with Eliot ; he is a poet who merely reflects the anti-Semitism of his days, so he should not be severely criticized from a rigid moral viewpoint. Julius rejects this lenient standpoint altogether. He takes it for granted that Eliot was anti-Semite, and assumes that the poet was insulting the Jews at large. Julius even charges that "Eliot wounded Jewish sensibilities, while Nazi Germany broke Jewish bones."<sup>11)</sup>

The following passage of "Gerontion", from Julius' viewpoint, looks

like a slander against the Jews all over Europe in Eliot's time :

My house is a decayed house,  
And the Jews squats on the window sill, the owner,  
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,  
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

We should remember that "Gerontion" was written long before the Holocaust. In my view, Julius may be trying to judge Eliot's mental posture in the light of the concentration camps of the Nazi regime.

The following passage is a typical case in which misinterpretation will take place if one reads it with a presentiment of Auschwitz, Treblinka or Dachau :

The red-eyed scavengers are creeping  
From Kentish Town and Golder's Green...

Maud Ellmann regards this passage in "A Cooking Egg" as notoriously referring to a popular mythology that Jews were susceptible to eye disease :

...trachoma, a disease of the eyes, was "very largely a disease of the race...the Jewish people are peculiarly prone to trachoma." From this standpoint, he was anxious about admitting them into British society. However, other doctors disagreed, arguing that the disease was prevalent in overcrowded districts, "whether occupied by aliens or Christians," being particularly "common among the poor Irish." Either way, eye disease was perceived as an effect of overcrowding and therefore as a malady of urban life. In this respect the English myth of Jewish eye

disease resembles the German myth of Jewish flatfootedness, an ailment likewise attributed to “citification.” Since the nineteenth century, as Sander Gilman has observed, Jews had been regarded as the embodiments of urban civilization, and their supposed flatfootedness imputed to their sinister work as merchants.<sup>12)</sup>

This suggests that the myth of trachoma as a Jewish eye disease originates from a social prejudice dating back to Middle Ages in Europe ; therefore, it would not be appropriate in the poem to associate Jews with the image of the “red-eyed scavengers,” merely as a poet’s insult. Rather, would it be more proper to say that Eliot, as a representative voice of his times, is here presenting the reader with a so-called “objective correlative” to show a universal sickness of human society by using the uglier images?

It is not a genuine literary approach to read anti-Semitic elements as intentional provocations in Eliot’s work, as if they were an attempt to extend the injurious effects of anti-Semitism itself in European history. As it is generally accepted that a disease of the eyes or flatfootedness are not in fact peculiar to the Jew, it would not make any difference if Eliot were to pick the Irish or the Dutch as the bearers of such a disease.

To sum up, one might argue that any critical approach based narrowly on the idea of anti-Semitism unnecessary enlarges what is a marginal issue in Eliot’s work. Of course it is true that any poet can be influenced by any social prejudice of his time. The point is that the reader should place a certain distance between himself and the poetry in order to fully appreciate it, putting to one side such social prejudices as anti-Semitism.

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## Notes

- 1) Steiner's passage is cited in Christopher Ricks *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London : Faber and Faber Limited, 1988), p. 28.
- 2) *Ibid.*
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 4) *Ibid.*
- 5) Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, anti-Semitism, and literary form* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 36.
- 6) *Ibid.*
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 12) Maud Ellmann, "The Imaginary Jew : T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound" in *Between 'Race' and Culture*, edited by Bryan Cheyette (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 85-86.