
The Jew as the Other in Eliot's poems

Junichi Saito

As a race, we humans have displaced Jews from our communities, regarding them as "Others". History has shown that we have always set up some sort of psychological barriers when we have encountered people as Others. Above all, however we should not forget about our past practice of differentiating Jews from other human beings.¹⁾

The following passage, by Jean-Paul Sartre, illustrates how Christian society in particular has differentiated Jews from other human beings.

...the Jew is perfectly assimilable by modern nations, but he is to be defined as one whom these nations do not wish to assimilate. What weighed upon him originally was that he was the assassin of Christ. Have we ever stopped to consider the intolerable situation of men condemned to live in a society that adores the God they have killed? Originally, the Jew was therefore a murderer or the son of a murderer—which in the eyes of a community with a pre-logical concept of responsibility amounts inevitably to the same thing—it was as such that he was taboo.²⁾

Sartre argues that the Jews are a people who have shared a common situation: they have lived in communities where they have always been treated as Others, alienated from the natives. Sartre also argues that

modern nations have regarded the Jews as those who do not wish to be assimilated into the collectivity; the Jews have been taken as the murderers of Christ in Christian society. Sartre further develops his views :

... if the anti-Semite has chosen the Jew as the object of his hate, it is because of the religious horror that the latter has always inspired. This horror has had a curious economic effect. If the medieval church tolerated the Jews when she could have assimilated them by force or massacred them, it was because they filled a vital economic function. Assuredly, they followed a cursed but indispensable vocation; being unable to own land or serve in the army, they trafficked in money, which a Christian could not undertake without defiling himself. Thus the original curse was soon reinforced by an economic curse, and it is above all the latter that has persisted. Today we reproach the Jews for following unproductive activities, without taking into account the fact that their apparent autonomy within the nation comes from the fact that they were originally forced into these trades by being forbidden all others. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that it is the Christians who have created the Jew in putting an abrupt stop to his assimilation and in providing him, in spite of himself, with a function in which he has since prospered.³⁾

Sartre points out here that the anti-Semites hated the Jews because of the religious horror they had of them. It would be only fair to argue that the Jews had no other choice but to deal with money; however, such jobs as money lending have been regarded as demeaning for Christians since the Medieval era.

One might say that Christians held a blind eye to the money lending activities of the Jews, because it gave them a certain satisfaction to see Jews doing the mean business from which Christians preferred to stay away. This is because the Jews were set apart as Others in a European

society dominated by Christian values. The following passage in Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" would illustrate the above argument :

Burbank crossed a little bridge
Descending at a small hotel;
Princess Volupine arrived,
They were together, and he fell.
....

But this or such was Bleistein's way:
A saggy bending of the knees
And elbows, with the palms turned out,
Chicago Semite Viennese.
....

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

One might say that Eliot depicts Burbank and Bleistein with the same feeling traditional Christians have harbored since the Medieval era; the otherness of the Jew is embodied, as it were, by these depictions of Bleistein and Burbank.

It can not be said that Eliot portrays the Jews as something positively immoral in Christian society, and certainly it is farfetched to argue that he would wish to see the Jew erased as an alien body from European communities.⁴⁾ The following passage from Sartre argues that Europeans at large have differentiated the Jews from other ethnic groups :

... the Jew remains the stranger, the intruder, the unassimilated at the very heart of our society. Everything is accessible to him, and yet he possesses nothing; for, he is told, what one possesses is not to be bought. All that he touches, all that he acquires becomes devalued in his hands; the goods of the earth, the true goods, are always those which he has not. He is well aware that he has contributed as much as another to forging the future of the society that rejects him. But if the future is to be his, at least he is refused the ⁵⁾past.

Sartre points out that the Jews, whose tradition and values have been negated, remain aliens as long as they are viewed apart as Jews in the community. However, Eliot's depictions of Jews are not indicative of his own negative attitude towards Jewish tradition and culture as such. The idea that the Jew as the Other degrades the world of the Christian community might possibly be understood from the following passage :

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.

Some readers might have the impression here that the Jew is engendered in the districts devoted to business. It seems too that Eliot portrays the identity of the oppressed through the 'patched and peeled' image of the Jew. However, he can not be said to depict the Jew as the invisible Other in the Christian community. Rather, he might have added the Jewish figure as a sense of presence in his poem; the Jewish character plays a very humane role in Eliot's passage. Returning to Sartre, we find him further developing his argument as follows :

If he tries to penetrate the most exclusive circles, it is not because of that boundless ambition with which he is reproached so often—or, rather, that ambition has only one meaning: the Jew seeks to be recognized as a man by other men. If he wishes to slip in everywhere, it is because he can not be at rest so long as there remains a single place which resists him and which, by resisting him, makes him a Jew in his own eyes. . . . He wants people to receive him as “a man,” but even in the circles which he has been able to enter, he is received as a Jew. He is the rich or powerful Jew whom it is absolutely necessary to associate with, or the “good” Jew, the exceptional Jew, with whom one associates in spite of his race.⁶⁾

The deliberate reader will notice that there is little sense of alienation about Eliot’s portrayals of the Jews in his poems; he might indeed have regarded the Jews as his neighbors because Eliot did have some Jewish friends.

Whereas Sartre’s passage indicates that the Jews at that time did not like to be taken as “the Jews as the Other race” by other peoples in European society, the Jew in Eliot’s poems is depicted as a humane citizen who carries out his own allotted duty.

Thus, it can be argued that Eliot, whether consciously or unconsciously, did not depict the Jew with the dehumanizing language of “race”. Some readers might remember the mentions of ‘race’ in *After Strange Gods*.⁷⁾ The passage says :

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. There must be a proper balance between urban and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a

spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated.⁸⁾

Of this passage, it is generally said that Eliot stresses cultural homogeneity represented by his concept of tradition or Christian orthodoxy.⁹⁾ To the extent that Eliot seeks for homogeneity in communities, he might seem to be a heterophobe. His seemingly discriminatory phrase of “free-thinking Jews” makes readers feel that Eliot picks on Jews. However, Sartre’s observation may help to explain why Eliot used such a phrase as “free-thinking Jews”.

He is distrustful on principle of those totalities which the Christian mind from time to time produces: he challenges. No doubt in this connection one can speak of destruction, but what the Jew wishes to destroy is strictly localized; it is ensemble of irrational values that present themselves to immediate cognition without proof. The Jew demands proof for everything that his adversary advances, because thus he proves himself. He distrusts intuition because it is not open to discussion and because, in consequence, it ends by separating men. If he reasons and disputes with his adversary, it is to establish the unity of intelligence. Before any debate he wishes agreement on the principles with which the disputants start; by means of this preliminary agreement he offers to construct a human order based on the universality of human nature.¹⁰⁾

It might be argued that Eliot felt a sense of estrangement towards the Jewish system of values. Historically speaking, the Jews have perpetuated an idea that everything on the earth can be scientifically explained and proved by human reasoning; such an idea does not harmonize with the Christian way of thinking that there are things which reach beyond human reason and scientific explanations.

Eliot stressed a Christian orthodoxy, that ordinary people have to follow without any critical analysis. In such a sense, the Jewish way of thinking seems to be incompatible with Eliot's idea of Christian orthodoxy. Maud Ellmann discusses this same problem :

At one level the free-thinking Jew stands for the heresy of liberal individualism, epitomized by Unitarianism, that Eliot deplors. Having been raised as a Unitarian himself, his wish to segregate the Jews conceals another wish to cordon off his own free-thinking past. The Jews, for Eliot, represent the adulteration of traditions severed from their living speech and native soil. Yet Eliot himself is doubly displaced, being exiled from a land of exiles, and thus suspiciously resembles those deracinated Jews who endanger his ideal of rootedness. His struggle to transplant himself to England, by dispossessing his American past ("History is now and England"), requires him to disavow his own affinity with the wandering Jew.¹¹⁾

Ellmann's argument that Eliot is displaced from the New Continent and that he thus resembles the wandering Jew seems persuasive. She further argues that Eliot's distrust of Jews corresponds to his distrust of writing.¹²⁾

... written words are destined to desert the place of their origination; like Jews, they refuse to remain in the place where they were born. The wandering of words, like the wandering of peoples, erodes the boundaries of the speech community; and Eliot's attempts to control the movements of nomadic Jews correspond to his desire to delimit the dissemination of the written word. Constantly disowning or revising his past writings—especially his remarks about the Jews—Eliot had reason to resent the errancy of written words, their independence from the will of their creator....Eliot, by banishing free-thinking Jews from his utopia, was attempting to banish from himself the forces of displacement exemplified in both his life and his art.¹³⁾

Ellmann's views are unique in stressing that Eliot's distrust of writing. However, it is farfetched to associate Eliot's distrust of writing with his distrust of Jews; Eliot would not have been so strongly conscious of the Jews when he wrote his poems. It might be said, rather, that Eliot uses the Jews to represent what every human being basically is. If we discuss only the forces of displacement in Eliot, we lose the significance of his poems as a whole, in which he stresses the role of Christian Orthodoxy as a force to reunite the peoples of Europe.

Notes

1. *Between 'Race' and Culture*, ed. Bryan Cheyette (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 14.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 67.
3. Becker, p. 68.
4. Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, anti-semitism and literary form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 109.
5. Becker, p. 83.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.
7. Cheyette, p. 15.
8. T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp. 19-20.
9. Cheyette, p. 88.
10. Becker, p. 114.
11. Cheyette, p. 93.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*