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# Prejudice in T. S. Eliot

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Prejudice has been with human beings since the beginning of history. Everyone has some prejudice toward others, which could be called racism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, or sexism; one might say that prejudice is a most significant part of humankind's story on the globe.<sup>1</sup> However, it would be a more attractive story if we could overcome all these kinds of prejudice, which have made us draw apart and shy away from each other in ordinary life.

Why do people continue to hold the outmoded ideas of "race" or genetic superiority or inferiority that give rise to unnecessary conflict on the planet?<sup>2</sup> It is true that even great writers in the twentieth century have produced works holding some degree of prejudice in the way they depict objects. Hitherto, it would not have developed to any great extent if it had not been for the fact that prejudiced individuals have turned to discriminatory behavior in their everyday life. However, it would be very significant at the present time to know what kinds of factors can give rise to prejudice in human minds through literary works.

Although "prejudice" originally meant a forejudgement or useful precedent, the word nowadays connotes a bad and undesirable frame of mind.<sup>3</sup> One might say that human conscience has avoided discussing

prejudice, because discussing it might reveal some dark aspects of human psychology.

Eliot often proclaimed that he did not have any prejudice as a poet and a literary critic. However, Christopher Ricks points out in *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* that Eliot unconsciously reveals his prejudice toward aliens at large in *After Strange Gods*.

... my first visit to Virginia, for my re-formulation. You have here, I imagine, at least some recollection of a 'tradition' such as the influx of foreign populations has almost effaced in some parts of the North, and such as never established itself in the West: though it is hardly to be expected that a tradition here, any more than anywhere else, should be found in healthy and flourishing growth. ... but to cross into Virginia is as definite an experience as to cross from England to Wales, almost as definite as to cross the English Channel. And the differences here, with no difference of language or race to support them, have had to survive the immense pressure towards monotony exerted by the industrial expansion of the latter part of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century. The Civil War was certainly the greatest disaster in the whole of American history; it is just as certainly a disaster from which the country has never recovered, and perhaps never will: we are always too ready to assume that the good effects of wars, if any, abide permanently while the ill-effects are obliterated by time. Yet I think that the chances for the re-establishment of a native culture are perhaps better here than in New England. You are farther away from New York; you have been less industrialised and less invaded by foreign races; and you have a more opulent soil.<sup>4</sup>

The passage quoted above indicates that inflows of foreign populations are not favorable for regional communities who want to keep their traditions healthy and wholesome. Eliot also argues that people have been able to

maintain healthy traditions in the South, which was less invaded by foreign races in those days. The following often quoted passage might be called the culmination of Eliot's prejudice.

. . . 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. 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 favored 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. Stability is obviously necessary. You are hardly likely to develop tradition except where the bulk of the population is relatively so well off where it is that it has no incentive or pressure to move about. 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 urbane and rural, industrial and agricultural development. And a spirit of excessive tolerance is to be deprecated.<sup>5</sup>

Eliot indicates his yearning for a homogeneous society whose tradition "represents the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place'."<sup>6</sup> He twice argues that tradition is something in the blood in *After Strange Gods*. It is not hard to realize the reason why Eliot stopped reprinting this

work.

The idea of homogeneity of race must have been fatal for his standing as a Christian poet and critic. However, readers should not assume too easily that Eliot clings to the concept of pure race. On the contrary, the view that Eliot seems to have held such in his unconscious mind is something like the following:

Since the turn of the century, social scientists, field anthropologists, biologists, and paleontologists have abandoned the useless classification of humankind into "Mongoloid, Negroid, Caucasoid," as if each stemmed from separate entities, with individually different gestations. We know that we all crawled, fishy-tailed, from mud and that we all stem from the same gene pool. The word race need be used only to specify the human race in all its manifest cultural diversity. . . . The mixing of so-called races throughout the world has been going on since the very beginning of life on Earth. The human population everywhere is hybrid and becoming increasingly so. . . . Just as many who trace their family history back a few generations discover they are a mixture of many cultures, so nation-states have ancient multicultural tribal elements and interracial beginnings. Indeed, biological diversity is understood, in our time, to be an important and necessary quality for the survival of a given species. . . . Differences among peoples that exist in secondary physical characteristics of skin tone or variable features or shapes have nothing to do with "race". These variables of humankind are merely cultural, national, religious, linguistic, and geographic. Such cultural differences, bred by geographic location, do not necessarily coincide with so-called racial groups.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas the writer of this paper, Daniela Gioseffi stresses the fact that the survival of the entire human race depends on its blending in unity,<sup>8</sup> Eliot in his later life comes to have a vision that every human folk should be unified under the image of the fire and the rose.

And all shall be well and  
All manner of things shall be well  
When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

The above quoted passage is the point at which Eliot expresses his faith as a Christian poet. It has been argued that the mission of a poet is to indicate his faith in the form of poetry. One might say that Eliot was practicing a soul searching journey all through his life; he was indicating what the poet should do to save the world from spiritual degradation. It has further been argued that if a poet has successfully expressed his thought or faith, it does not matter at all what kind of thought or faith he has. However, Eliot has a public persona not only as a poet but also as a literary critic; his critical views have had much influence on readers and writers all over the world. It is widely felt that men of today do well to scrutinize the thought behind his works.

If someone tries to understand Eliot in this way, he has to become seriously involved with the task of identifying the real outlook behind his poetry. Christopher Ricks argues:

Once you think about prejudice you are taken into a great deal of and about Eliot—into the nature and boundaries of his imagination. Reciprocally, once you think about Eliot, you are taken into a great deal of and prejudice, including how inadequately so momentous a matter has been thought about and argued about. Eliot's work. . . is designed to incite its audience at once to strict judgements upon the world which it presents and to strict thought about the exact grounds on which anyone may validly pass such judgements.<sup>9</sup>

The following passages are quoted from *Poems*. Readers have often read in them Eliot's prejudicial feelings to depict the characters.

A lustreless protrusive eye  
    Stares from the protozoic slime  
At a perspective of Canaletto.  
    The smoky candle end of time

Declines. On the Rialto once.  
    The rats are underneath the piles.  
The Jew is underneath the lot.  
                                    (Burbank with a Baedeker; Bleistein with a Cigar)

Morning stirs the feet and hands  
    (Nausicaa and Polypheme).  
Gesture of orang-outang  
    Rises from the sheets in steam.  
                                    (Sweeney Erect)

Grishkin is nice: her Russian eye  
Is underlined for emphasis;  
Uncorseted, her friendly bust  
Gives promise of pneumatic bliss.

The couched Brazilian jaguar  
Complete the scampering marmoset  
With subtle effluence of cat;  
Grishkin has a maisonnette. . .  
                                    (Whispers of Immortality)

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

(Mr.Eliot's Sunday Morning Service)

The silent vertebrate in brown  
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;  
Rachel *née* Rabinovitch  
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws. . .

(Sweeney Among the Nightingales)

Christopher Ricks points out that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prejudice as a feeling, favourable or unfavourable, towards any person or thing, prior to or not based on actual experience.<sup>10</sup> It might also be added that prejudice comes out when self-confidence is challenged by other's presence.<sup>11</sup> However, readers would then wish to ask what Eliot's self-confidence was challenged. One might say, for one thing, that Eliot's whole belief system was being challenged by Godless humanism and mass-consumerism.

"The sapient sutlers of the Lord" and "The silent vertebrate in brown" satirizes characters in his contemporary society. Some might argue that such prejudicious depictions might be caused by Eliot's malicious prejudices; Eliot's satirical postures are not permissible, in this way of viewing things, even if Christian values really are being threatened in Europe.

Ricks points out that Eliot is from the beginning preoccupied with prejudice because it constitutes an intersection of philosophy, psychology, politics and art.<sup>12</sup> It might be true that exploitation of prejudice is a

shorthand means of thinking concentratedly. However, as Eliot had a vast store of cultural knowledge,<sup>13</sup> this supposition would not hold true with him.

Readers should consider the fact that the vocation of a poet consists in presenting his poetic beliefs to them successfully.

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### Notes

- 1) Daniela Gioseffi, *On Prejudice* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), p.xii.
- 2) Ibid., p.xviii.
- 3) Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.82.
- 4) T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp.15-16.
- 5) Ibid., pp.19-20.
- 6) Ibid., p.18.
- 7) Daniela, op.cit., pp.xii-xiii.
- 8) Ibid., p.xxv.
- 9) Ricks, op.cit., p.78
- 10) Ibid., p.84.
- 11) Ibid., p.119.
- 12) Ibid., p.110.
- 13) Ibid., p.111.