
African-American Culture in T. S. Eliot

— making the invisible visible

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There has been little discussion up to now about incidences of African heritage in T.S. Eliot. However, if we pay attention to the biographical fact that Eliot spent his early days in St. Louis, we can take it for granted that Eliot will have had much inspiration from his early childhood surroundings in the Midwest, where, as a young member of a bourgeois family, he could easily get in touch with native Indians and blacks.

Peter Ackroyd explains that Eliot was born in a singularly fortunate family environment which had great influence on the formation of his character as a poet. Ackroyd says in *T.S. Eliot*:

His place of birth, 2635 Locust Street, was a large, two-storeyed house; there would have been several servants here — a cook, a second maid, a nurse, a laundress, a gardener, and so on. It was a quintessentially late Victorian household, at least in the American fashion, and just as Eliot was born at the end of a century still populated by grand and dying figures, so he was raised in a household of people much older than himself. He was the last child, a little boy 'rather overwhelmed' by his family. For some writers, the family is merely something from which to escape, but for Eliot it was the formative influence; no man, he was to write later, escapes from the culture which it imposes and it

became for him a model for both the private and public relationships which he felt obliged to establish.¹

Ackroyd argues that the landscape of St. Louis had much to do with the formation of the poet's imagination.

. . . St Louis, which in Henry's adolescence was still a 'frontier town' between white and Indian Americans, close to that border with the savage and primitive which was to be one of his son's own preoccupations. As a boy, Henry Ware Eliot would follow the troops of Indians to their camping places and there taunt them with renditions of their own 'war whoops'; they would endure it as long as they could, and then they would turn and 'make a dash' at him and his companions. . . ²

Ackroyd points out that the above mentioned story occurs in a memory of Eliot's father's life entitled "The Reminiscences of a Simpleton" written by Eliot himself.³ Robert Crawford argues that "the Wild West was at its end in Eliot's childhood, but it was well remembered."⁴ It can be said that Eliot always kept in his mind the original frontier landscape in St. Louis when he wrote poems. Historically speaking, native black culture in St. Louis also influenced Eliot's later poetic imagination through the blues and jazz music. In the St. Louis area, there were a certain number of Afro-Americans who were subjected to an oppressed way of life under white-dominated society. Eliot might well have absorbed the jazz-like rhythms which represented the soul of the blacks in St. Louis.⁵ The following passage in "Prufrock" could reflect the rhythm of this jazz that Eliot heard in his childhood.

I grow old. . . I grow old. . .
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.
Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

One might argue that the passage is significant because in it Eliot laments his aging state of mind through the jazz-like rhythm just as a stereotypical old black might express his sadness. One can find several other passages that also seem to be influenced by the rhythm of black music in Eliot's earlier poems. For example, in "Portrait of a Lady":

The voice returns like the insistent out-of-tune
Of a broken violin on an August afternoon:
'I am always sure that you understand
My feelings, always sure that you feel,
Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand.

With its rhymes and assonances in "-n", this passage has a very comforting sound as if it were a kind of nursery rhyme. One might argue that in passages like this the jazz-like rhythms Eliot heard in St. Louis in his childhood often reappear in his earlier poems. The colloquial way Eliot uses rhymes and assonances in such passages will have been quite challenging for the literary tradition of that time. Here is another example:

— Let us take the air, in a tobacco trance,
Admire the monuments,
Discuss the late events,

Correct our watches by the public clocks.
Then sit for half an hour and drink our bocks.

The reader might get the impression that the poet is inviting the reader to join in the dialogue; the words directly appeal to the conversational instincts of those who read the poem. This is also a prominent feature of most jazz lyrics and, for some readers at least, this colloquial tone might sound like the phrasing of jazz and blues among black Americans. Robert F. Fleissner argues in the following way for an influence of local St. Louis culture on Eliot:

As a St. Louis resident during his formative years, young Tom Eliot was subject to the influences of much local culture, the surname of Prufrock, for example, originating there, at least denotatively, even though the poet himself claimed once not to recollect that. Eliot naturally looked upon his home city as the last frontier, the beginning of the federal West, including all that that represented, such as red people. Near the central Forest Park, for example, were prehistoric Indian mounds he would have known about (see Crawford 13-14). And this frontier city naturally included also the environs of many black persons with their rhythmic ways. No doubt some readers may be prone to think immoderately only of "St. Louis Blues" and other jazz-age effects or of popular melodies which wended their way, to some rhythmic extent at least, through some of his early verses in particular, as notably evident in *The Waste Land* (also indebted of course to the musicality of *Le Sacre du Printemps*) and *Sweeney Agonistes* (also indebted, if somewhat negatively, to the drum beats of Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo").⁶

Jazz chants may also be heard, perhaps, in the following dialogue in *The Waste Land*. It is quite conceivable that Eliot unconsciously acquired the

rhythmic sense through the influence of local culture in St. Louis.⁷ It reads:

‘What is that noise?’

The wind under the door.

‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’

Nothing again nothing.

‘Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

‘Nothing?’

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

‘Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?’

But

O O O that Shakespeherian Rag —

This kind of jazz chanting style had considerable influence on the Epilogue of Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. Fleissner discusses Eliot’s impact upon *Invisible Man* in the following terms:

As for Eliot’s specific impact upon black writers, the most obvious one was on Ralph Ellison and his *Invisible Man*, a seminally surrealist work which not unexpectedly commences with an epigraph from the St. Louis poet; its close associations with *The Waste Land* have been well documented for the College Language Association by Mary Ellen Williams Walsh. (See also Steven Helmling’s more recent article.) A typical enough, if somewhat obvious, literal echo is Ellison’s word play upon the “Shakespeherian Rag,” namely “Oh, oh, oh, those multimillionaires !” (*Invisible Man* 29). Walsh writes, “Just as *The Waste Land* closes with the ancient answers for the restoration of the

Fisher King's domain, the Epilogue to *Invisible Man* contains the answers the protagonist finds for the revitalization of America and the restoration of humanity to black people" (157). According to Lloyd Brown, it was T. S. Eliot's major early poetry which "changed the direction of [Ellison's] life"; as the key black novelist himself put it, "Eliot said something to my sensibilities that I couldn't find in Negro poets who wrote of experiences I myself had gone through" (as cited by Brown 99). Whereas, admittedly, the variety of literary influences upon Ellison was considerable. . .⁸

One example of a passage in *Invisible Man* that seems to have been much influenced by Eliot's poetic diction is the following, which reminds us of the soliloquy in "A game of Chess":

"Young man, I'm in a hurry," he said, cupping a hand to his ear. "Why should I know you?" "Because I'm your destiny." "My destiny, did you say?" He gave a puzzled stare, backing away. "Young man, are you well? Which train did you say I should take?" "I didn't say," I said, shaking my head. "Now, aren't you ashamed?" "Ashamed? ASHAMED!" he said indignantly.⁹

Steven C. Tracy, too, stresses the fact that Ellison's reading of *The Waste Land* permeates *Invisible Man*:¹⁰

As Ellison read Eliot, he felt a sensibility that worked close to the same sensibility he encountered in "the culture of jazz" ("On Initiation" 39). Indeed, the "spontaneity and improvisation, rejection of middle-class values, emotional and sexual freedom, seeming primitivism, the concept of the artist as an 'outsider,' disjunction and cacophony" characteristic of some modernist works, Eliot's among them, is close to the sensibility of segments of the jazz community (Tracy 19).¹¹

In other words, if Eliot, as a modernist, had an influence on Ellison, it was because Ellison, too, was challenging the literary tradition of the epoch he belonged to. While Tracy agrees that Ellison has frequently acknowledged the general influence of Eliot on his work, he also stresses that Ellison uses this influence to make the African-American cultural tradition behind Eliot part of the mainstream of American culture at large.¹²

As a matter of fact, the Epilogue to *Invisible Man*, as Walsh writes, contains the answers the protagonist finds for the revitalization of America and the restoration of humanity to black people.¹³

“Sweeney Agonistes” can be called the ideal example of a poem in which Eliot embodies African culture through jazz rhythms. Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes in *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry* that “Sweeney Agonistes” was written in 1923-24, immediately after *The Waste Land*.¹⁴ Fleissner says that this work was first published with the “black-sounding” title of “Wanna Go Home, Baby?”¹⁵ The title sounds appropriate when one reads the passage which represents the animated rhythm of African drums:

Under the bamboo
Bamboo bamboo
Under the bamboo tree
Two live as one
One live as two
Two live as three
Under the bam
Under the boo
Under the bamboo tree.

The word “bamboo” reminds the reader of the lively rhythm of human life in the African continent. Together with “bamboo,” the word “Hoo” sounds very exotic to the ears of westerners at large.

And perhaps you're alive
And perhaps you're dead
Hoo ha ha
Hoo ha ha
Hoo
Hoo
Hoo

The reader might wonder why Eliot used such an exotic word as “Hoo” at the end of the poem. DuPlessis argues that the word “Hoo” makes the white audience feel a sense of horror:¹⁶

In this work, Eliot is experimenting with a moment of confrontation that deploys Africanist materials both as the horror and to frame the horror—a use both racist and sympathetic. The end of this work scares the [white] audience with an ominous “HOO HOO HOO.” This scare word alludes to blacks and to a primitive character who is a proto-black person; the word is sung in a style designed to allude to blackface minstrelsy. Citing African-American song writers (Cole and Johnson), deploying white Africanist representations (minstrelsy, the cannibal trope), and using metonymic equivalences for blacks (Sweeney), Eliot has resourcefully bricolaged a packet of racialized materials to jolt, amuse, and sober up a white audience. He is, at bottom, scaring whites with “blacks,” with their own dark impulses, cross-coded as African, and with all that “Africa” implies, all succinctly evoked in the phoneme “Hoo.”¹⁷

DuPlessis further discusses the role of this horror which lies in Africa in making the whites feel ambiguous about their social position.

The horror is in us, says Eliot ; we are Africa, just as Conrad said ; this is an incorporative , haunted confrontation making whiteness an ambiguous social position filled with powerless superiority because flooded with the energies and demands of the dark instinctual. Eliot's melodrama mingles the racial positions of black and white, producing multiple ironies. These may seem to be different opinions. Yet in both writers, Africa is left as horror, the immobilized site of pejorative meanings for these Euro-American modernists, made so by their construction of whiteness as a political and cultural position. Layers of white conjure, of primitivist discourses, and of contradictions on racial matters all constitutive of whiteness as a position have been revealed by this social philology of "Hoo" : racial superiority versus equality; identification with and warding off of blacks; desire for and fear of pleasure; noble sentiments and stigmatizing attitudes; white rights in black materials and white guilt for appropriation; denial and covert acknowledgement of black agency; the desire to extirpate racial prejudice, and to revel in its cultural connotations and the social power it offers whites.¹⁸

One might argue that reading these racial binary values into the passage is quite farfetched. However, if such an approach to Eliot's works serves to make the marginal or the invisible in human society more clearly visible to the reader, it is challenging and significant for those who live in a multiethnic society.

In general, Eliot did not refer to specific black writers in his poems, however, he from time to time made use of African-American themes in his works.¹⁹ If the reader is sensitive enough to acknowledge this kind of invisible theme, he/she will be able to enjoy a more profound reading of

Eliot's poetic works.

Notes

- 1) Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp.15-16.
- 2) Ibid., p.19.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Robert Crawford, *The Savage and the City in the work of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.13.
- 5) Robert F. Fleissner, *T.S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1992), p.142.
- 6) Ibid., pp.138-139.
- 7) Ibid., p.137.
- 8) Ibid., p.157.
- 9) Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (USA: Random House Inc., 1952), p.578.
- 10) Fleissner, op.cit., p.177.
- 11) Ibid., p.176.
- 12) Ibid., p.177.
- 13) Ibid., p.157.
- 14) Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Genders, Races and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.97.
- 15) Fleissner, op.cit., p.139.
- 16) DuPlessis, op. cit., p.105.
- 17) Ibid., pp.104-105.
- 18) Ibid., p.105.
- 19) Fleissner, op. cit., p.105.