

# Some Jazzy Aspects in T. S. Eliot's Poems

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Whether there are some characteristics to attract African-Americans in Eliot poems is a profound question to answer. <sup>1</sup> Many people have agreed to recognize some jazzy lines such as “O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag” in *The Waste Land*. However, a writer, Joe Jantas points out that Eliot was not very affected by the atmosphere of the Jazz Age. He explains:

T. S. Eliot did not grow up immersed in the emergence of the Jazz Movement in America. However, his technical use of acoustic vernacular as an instrument in creating jazz-like prose certainly hints at the contrary. Within Eliot's canon of literary contributions lies a plethora of references to the increasingly popular Jazzy aesthetic. Modernist writers such as Eliot had no trouble in infusing the musical characteristics of a predominantly African-American genre into their writing. In fact, relating to the Jazz musicians of the African-American culture was unavoidably easy. <sup>2</sup>

This passage indicates that Eliot was able to adapt the Jazzy characteristics into his poems even if the poet had not been under the influence of the Jazz Age in the 1920's.

David E. Chinitz explains Eliot's ardor of introducing the jazz-banjo into the mainstream culture of England:

Eliot's instrument of choice (often spelled *banjeaurine*) was a diminutive, high-pitched member of this family. In assigning himself a jazz-banjo, Eliot was making the humblest available selections in both genre and instrument. Yet when Eliot offers to play his jazz-banjo, there is a deeper claim to power underlying his modesty. For seventy-five years, the banjo had spearheaded the “Americanization” of Europe — the infiltration of American popular culture into European life. The instrument seemed to have been present at every turn. In 1843, when the minstrel show first stormed England, the banjo (then a novelty) led the charge. <sup>3</sup>

Chinitz mentions that the banjo as a rough musical instrument became indispensable for stage performance, even though the instrument lacked sophistication. It seems that the banjo does not have a very stable tone of expression, compared with the piano. However, the low tone of the banjo might have won the heart of the audience. As a matter of fact, the tone of the banjo sounds like the groaning of oppressed people. This is understandable when we consider how the blues and jazz were born in the plantations of the South.

It is said that people in the plantations sang a refrain at first accompanied by guitars, banjos and drums outdoors. In the nineteenth century, ragtime as a playing technique came into being as a forerunner of jazz music. Chinitz states that American banjos played an important role in stage performance in England:

As ragtime reached England, American banjo virtuosos were on the scene again to facilitate its entry, so that in the early twentieth century the instrument jazz-banjo, the humble banjo had ushered in an enduring taste for the “unofficial” artistic expression of American popular culture. And so the banjo prepared the arrival of Eliot and his modernism — his own challenge to the official culture of England. For Eliot, to play the jazz-banjo was to be an agent of change.<sup>4</sup>

Chinitz further explains that for Eliot the banjo symbolized a standard-bearer of twentieth century modernism. Ezra Pound, as a mentor, was also involved in such a cultural movement. Chinitz writes:

. . . Eliot and Pound's assumption of African-American “trickster” personae (“Old Possum” and “Brer Rabbit”) in their correspondence, together with their collaboration against the London Literary establishment and the literature it produced”(Dialect77). By “blacking up” in their communications with each other, the two poets affirmed their mutual shame and pride in being American “savages” in exile. But in claiming to play the banjo . . . Eliot is not only blacking up: he is also concealing his strength from his British correspondent while pretending to weakness. This is of course, precisely the strategy of the trickster in African-American folklore . . . which functioned as the sourcebook for Eliot and Pound in what North calls their “racial masquerade.”. . . Eliot's deliberate association with the emerging American popular culture, and with its largely African-American roots, provided a way of laying claim to revolutionary cultural power while simultaneously acknowledging ambivalence about his relationship to it.<sup>5</sup>

The above-mentioned passage indicates that Eliot tried to express his inner feelings through jazzy colloquial usage in classic England. One might say that it was unimaginable for his contemporaries to write poetry in informal English. Eliot writes in *The Waste Land* :

‘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 ?’

However, these lines contain a pleasant tone for the readers who became accustomed

to hearing jazz. The jazzy phrase often wears a feeling of lament in their daily life. Such reasoning can be supported by Janter's passage.

Another technique common of both jazz and Eliot's prose is the use of incantation. Traditional jazz features repetition in the first two lines of any stanza, and Eliot makes use of the hypnotizing, almost melancholy procedure to echo the emptiness of the current landscape (Keogh). His use of incantation in lines 120-122 of *The Waste Land* ... is a quality example of incantation's effectiveness.<sup>6</sup>

According to Janter's remark, it might have been relatively easy for Eliot to inject the general desolate atmosphere into his poems. Eliot might have expressed the silent protest of those who were oppressed in society.

However, his depiction of a dismal atmosphere does not wear any ethnic connotation because of his verbal devices. Eliot writes:

No ! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
I grow old . . . I grow old . . .  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.<sup>7</sup>

Deliberate readers might notice that they could sing these repetitive lines with jazz rhythm. Eliot might have shared a sense of longing for their remote roots in Africa. Janter discusses this aspect.

In the early 1900's, slavery had long been an issue of the past, but racism and discrimination had not yet begun to dissipate throughout society. Rejected by White America, urban Blacks began to long for a sense of identification within century. Writers were beginning to express their current state of destitution, and experimenting with jazz poetics allowed Eliot to separate himself from literary mediocrity (Keogh). Eliot used jazz to not only express himself, but to finally separate race from writing. Using techniques such as linguistic mimicry and racial masquerade made the language new and absent of racial connotation, thus resisting institutional forces of standardization, such as racism, and eliminating any preconceived standards expected from writers belonging to multicultural ethnicities (Patterson 673-4).<sup>8</sup>

One might wonder what made young Eliot be concerned with the jazz of African-American culture. Robert F. Fleissner stresses Eliot's ancestral heritage had a deep impact on the young man.<sup>9</sup> This can be supported by the following passage of Ackroyd:

The pervasive and dominant presence in the household, however, was that of his

grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, who had died the year before Eliot was born. Eliot, even in old age, remembered his influence as that of one who ‘rules his son's sons from the grave’, a Moses upon whose tablets were engraved the laws of public service. Eliot was always much possessed by the dead . . . <sup>10</sup>

Herbert Howarth states that Eliot's grandfather took an uncompromising stance on slavery. The following passage illustrates what a dedicated clergyman his grandfather was.

Missouri was a slave state. Dr. Eliot had arrived disposed by nature and training against the system. He regarded it as harmful to all parties concerned: to the whites, whose decencies it jeopardized and whose will to work and improve it sapped, as well as to the people it exploited . . . . Early in his residence he looked out of his study window: a mulatto girl was hanging from a joist by her thumbs, and a man flogging her. He opened the casement and stopped him by a protest; then entered a complaint.’. . . Through two decades, during which the problem increasingly agitated the country, he considered whether it was his business as a minister to take a public stand against slavery. In private conversation he spoke freely as an opponent of it. . . <sup>11</sup>

It can be said that William Eliot's uncompromising strong will had had a great influence on young Eliot's spiritual growth, which would later bear fruit in birthing one of his masterpieces *Four Quartets*. The readers might notice that Eliot strives to convey some unspoken message of the oppressed in society by the colloquial words that remind him of his contemporary jazzmen.

Fleissner discusses that Eliot was deeply influenced by the spiritual climate of St. Louis.

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 . . . Eliot naturally looked upon his home city as the last frontier, the beginning of the feral 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. <sup>12</sup>

One might say that Eliot was absorbing the soul of jazz or jazz rhythm in St. Louis because there were some distinguished jazz musicians there at that time. It might be said that the young poet listened to jazz as a lullaby.

When we read the following lines in *The Waste Land*, we feel a breath of jazz rhythms, rhymes and syncopations in the back of our mind.

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

But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag –  
It's so elegant  
So intelligent  
'What shall I do now ? What shall I do ?

Such spellbinding lines remain in our mind as if they were the spontaneous expression of a poet who was under the influence of the colloquial English of the jazz and blues in St. Louis. One might say that Eliot tries to spoil the sublimity of Shakespearian poetry and sonnet in his use of colloquial conversation.<sup>13</sup>

Is it far-fetched to discuss that Eliot as a forerunner intended to compose poems in plain or oral English against the established western canons ?<sup>14</sup> Chinitz discusses:

. . . "That Shakespearian Rag" attempts to undermine exactly the position taken by Eliot's explicators on the value of contemporary popular culture in relation to canonized high culture – the position then blithely attributed to Eliot himself. . . . Shakespeare's poetry . . . is exceedingly "high-browed" and outdated; fortunately, however, ragtime has come along to give "that old classical drag" new life in a syncopated setting. . . . The lyrics seem altogether too self-conscious about their own culturally inferior relation to Shakespeare. They protest too much that times have changed and that a rag – "yes, a rag," the song insists – can now be grand."<sup>15</sup>

The driving force behind Eliot's innovative trial of composing poetry lies in his ambiguous stance in a civilized society of London. At that time, he came from a wilder district of America. One might say that the inferiority complex feeling of the poet urged him to write poems in colloquial words that were commonly used in St. Louis. In other words, the colloquial words of jazz and blues give Eliot's poems a bold dynamism as a part of modernist culture.

## Notes

1. Robert F. Fleissner, *T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992) p.135
2. Joe Jantas, "T. S. Eliot and The Jazz Aesthetics" 05 March 2009
3. David E. Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) p.22.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.23.
6. Jantas, Ibid.
7. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1954) p.7.
8. Jantas, Ibid.
9. Fleissner, op. cit., p.138.
10. Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton Limited, 1984) p.16.
11. Herbert Howarth, *Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1964) pp.4-5.
12. Fleissner, Ibid.
13. Chinitz, op.cit., p.47.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.