

# T. S. Eliot and the Biological

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There was a book entitled *Eliot and Race* at the archives of the library of Washington University when this researcher visited St. Louis more than 20 years ago. To discuss racial matters in Eliot's literary works at that time was not the main current of English literature. However, since deconstructionism, feminism, post-colonialism, and historicism have come to the fore, racial or ethnic issues have been laid on the table for consideration even in English literature.

As Eliot is a Christian poet, it may not be a good idea to read his poems from the viewpoint of his racial or ethnic bias. Biographically, Eliot was born in a Unitarian family at St. Louis in 1888. His grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot contributed much to found Washington University as a part of his philanthropic work. Peter Ackroyd discusses how William Eliot's industrious and strict characteristics might have had an influence on his grandson even from his tombstone.

. . . . 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 and 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, and that sense of possession (or dispossession) was one which he learned early. . . . 'One feels rebuked in his presence. . . . How can one be familiar with the Day of Judgment . . . ?' . . . characteristics of this kind might indeed be inherited. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Eliot's father, Henry Ware Eliot was an energetic businessman. Henry Eliot may have dealt with various kinds of people in business matters. One might say that Eliot's father as a businessman might have had some bias toward different racial or ethnic groups because St. Louis was still a developing area at that time. The following passage is taken from Peter Ackroyd's *T. S. Eliot*:

. . . 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—Eliot feared that ‘dash’ all his life. . . It is impossible to gauge, of course, how much influence the father had upon the son . . . 2

It is clear that young Eliot was raised strictly under the care of both father and mother at home together with the indirect influence of a grandfather. The doctrine of Unitarianism might have taught a great sense of tolerance of different people in the community regardless of their skin-color, language, culture and belief. “Philanthropy” sounds beautiful to the ears of Christians and non-Christians. However, the rigid regulations of Unitarianism might have led Eliot to hold a strict view of things in daily life. Is it far-fetched to argue that young Eliot stood in constant fear of his dead grandfather’s eyes in the following passage?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin  
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?  
And how should I presume?

It seems that “the eyes” are indicative of his mother’s too. It might be natural for a young poet studying abroad in Paris to go or stay away from the strict regulations of his family religion. As Eliot was taken care of as a precious child by his family members, his character seemed to have been much influenced by his parents’ words and behaviors. Considering the atmosphere of the era, Charlotte Eliot’s advice for her son sounds a little prejudiced because of her seeming xenophobia. The following passage is from *Letters* :

. . . . I cannot bear to think of you being alone in Paris, the very words give me a chill. English speaking countries seem so different from foreign. I do not admire the French nation, and have less confidence in individuals of that race than in English. 3

This passage indicates that Charlotte Eliot worries about her son’s future as a bright student of Harvard. Judging from the content of her letter, it seems that Eliot must have been brought up on a bed of roses in St. Louis. As a Unitarian, she does not seem to have an affinity with the French since France was quite distant from their place of residence. She really wanted her son to strictly maintain Unitarianism throughout his life.

It might be said that her words reflect a solicitude akin to that of a parent for a child. However, Charlotte might have a sense of fear towards the unknown, which leads her to some racial prejudice deep inside her despite her intention. On the contrary, Eliot’s grandmother, as Robert Crawford points out, was happy to remember how an Indian had

sneaked into her kitchen and stolen a red ribbon from her hair. <sup>4</sup>

Generally speaking, the family is a cohesive unit in which people are protected and pass their values onto the future generations. Eliot later discusses this aspect in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*.

The primary channel of transmission of culture is the family; no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree, of culture which he acquired from his early environment. <sup>5</sup>

What the young poet inherited from his family as his spiritual heritage remains to be seen at this moment. However, it is a fact that Eliot led his daily life in a stifling atmosphere under the eyes of a Unitarian family.

When Eliot was a student at Harvard, anthropology deals earnestly with the topic of modern man and primitive man. Crawford says:

. . . the expansion of Darwinian thought and of modern anthropology were part of a widespread concern with the inheritance of genetic characteristics and the transmission of cultural values. For many anthropological writers, primitive man was at one end of the scale, modern western man at the other. But there was a fascination with connecting the two, not only in the work of scholars, but in popular culture and in the feats of travel and exploration common at the turn of the century when Eliot's sensibility was forming. <sup>6</sup>

"Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" are typical examples of dealing with primitive man and modern man close together for contrasting effect. Sweeney is depicted as an extremely unusual person:

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees  
Letting his arms hang down to laugh  
The zebra stripes along his jaw  
Swelling to maculate giraffe

One can imagine that Eliot has an image of Anthropeidea in mind depicted in these two poems because he was much interested in the savage in his childhood.

The following passage is important to think about the historical background during Eliot's youth:

What constituted anthropology . . . was uncertain. Yet this also had the effect of involving anthropological material in some of the most controversial issues of the day, such as Mendelian biology, eugenics, sociological investigation, and the development of the study of religion. <sup>7</sup>

It is not certain how much Mendelian biology, eugenics and sociology influenced on Eliot's composition of poems. One might say that Eliot had read through these genres of books in his youth out of curiosity to add objectivity to his poetry. The following Crawford passage points this out:

Eliot knew how important Mendel's work was, and he did not forget about it. In 1916 he was reading about 'the theorists of biological adaptation: Lamarck, Darwin, Weismann, De Vries, Mendel'. In 1918 . . . Eliot wrote that there was a close analogy between poetry and science. Poets, like scientists, were contributing to the organic development of culture and poets had to know their predecessors' work, just as modern scientists had to know the work of Mendel and De Vries. <sup>8</sup>

One can easily imagine why Eliot depicts a character in his poems to behave as if he were a savage man. Eliot writes in "Sweeney Erect":

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

Eliot's propensity to depict humans like lower animals may derive from a year's study in Paris where he came into contact with various intellectuals of the day. The following passage testifies to that influence:

. . . Eliot was well aware of interests in evolutionary theory. In Paris in 1910-1911 he had been momentarily converted to Bergsonism and discussed avidly with Aiken *L'Évolution créatrice*. . . . Bergson's ideas of 'prenatal dispositions' and unconscious memories smuggled through 'the half-open door' would be with Eliot until at least *Four Quartets*. <sup>9</sup>

The contrast between a savage man and a modern man is permissible as long as the poet intends to create innovative literary content. However, if he depicts a certain category or race or ethnic group with the purpose of satirizing them, he would be blamed for that intention. The following passage is from "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar":

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

. . . .

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

The other controversial passage is taken from "Gerontion".

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.

These two poems are taken from *Poems-1920*. Judging from a historical context, one might say that Eliot intends to describe the general atmosphere of the era in Europe. However, why the poet had to pick up a certain kind of people remains cloaked in mystery for the reader. To represent the whole atmosphere of society he might have picked up the Jew. Even if his unconscious feeling toward the strangers that had been inherited from his parents came up in the corner of his mind, such an excuse may have sounded plausible to defend himself.

After citing George Steiner's harsh remark about Eliot's uglier touches at the heart of very good poetry, Christopher Ricks discusses that "Steiner shows courage in this insistence that the uglier touches are not only continuous with Eliot's greatness as a poet but are sometimes intimate with it. . ." <sup>10</sup> Ricks points out that the passages taken from Eliot's poems are manifold and hard to figure out. <sup>11</sup> He also discusses that Eliot complains about his father's words and behaviors in the past through his controversial passages. <sup>12</sup> It is still uncertain whether Eliot criticizes his Unitarian father through the Jewish characters in his poems.

However, why does the poet continue to commit a gaffe until the infamous lecture at Virginia university of 1933 ? Eliot might have been insensitive about the Jewish religion and culture, because, as Ricks indicates, "the understanding of what it is to be a Jew is something to which learned sensitive scholars have devoted lifetimes." <sup>13</sup>

The controversial passage in *After Strange Gods* is "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." <sup>14</sup> As for "free thinking Jews," Maud Ellmann states that Eliot wanted to be separated from his grandfather and father's Unitarianism which was derailed from orthodox Christianity. <sup>15</sup> Eliot might have crossed out his image of a free thinking Unitarian in his childhood, <sup>16</sup> while tracing his genealogy.

In addition to various negative opinions about his poems, Eliot's own words should also be considered: "I am not an anti-Semite and never have been . . . It is a terrible slander on a man." <sup>17</sup> These words reflect his true feeling as a Christian poet who severed himself from Unitarianism.

This paper is based on my presentation for a peer seminar at the 38th Annual Meeting of the T.S. Eliot Society in 2017.

## Notes

- 1 Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp.16-17.
- 2 Ibid., p.19
- 3 Ed. Valerie Eliot, *The Letters of T. S. Eliot* Volume I (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p.13.
- 4 Robert Crawford, *The savage and the city in the work of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 13.
- 5 T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace & Company), p.172.
- 6 Crawford, Ibid., p. 62.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p.65.
- 9 Ibid., p.67.
- 10 Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 29.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., pp.46-47.
- 13 Ibid., p.41.
- 14 T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp.19-20.
- 15 Ed. Bryan Cheyette, *Between 'Race' and Culture* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 93.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ricks, Ibid., p.61.