

*Anti-Semitism**John Xiros Cooper*

Today when people are asked what they know about T. S. Eliot, most mention three things: he was the librettist of the enormously popular Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Cats*; he wrote one of the most celebrated and difficult poems of the twentieth century, *The Waste Land*; and he was an anti-Semite. This last tag, fastened to him after the end of the Second World War, has been the focus ever since of a sometimes acrimonious debate among critics, scholars, and, occasionally, in the popular press. Although Eliot's offending works were written before the Second World War, it wasn't until after the war that anyone thought the anti-Semitism was significant enough to make it the topic of public argument. It seems that before the war, the incidental anti-Semitism of many Europeans and Americans camouflaged attitudes that after the war took on a more sinister and menacing colouring. Two things contributed to the appearance and persistence of the charge against Eliot: firstly, the new position of Jewry in the public sphere after the Holocaust and, secondly, Eliot's own fame and celebrity as a poet and cultural spokesman. After his Nobel prize in 1948, he was a leading public intellectual in the English-speaking world. It did not help that he spoke for a conservatism that some people mistook for the virulent, right-wing authoritarianism of Fascist Germany, Italy and Spain. Although his visibility as a public figure brought greater attention to his work, it also made him a target. An attack by another poet, Emanuel Litvinoff, made the whole matter of his anti-Semitism an issue that has stuck ever since.

The episode occurred at the inaugural poetry reading of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London in 1951. With Eliot in attendance, Litvinoff, an Anglo-Jewish writer, read a biting mordant poem addressed directly 'To T. S. Eliot'. There he chided the Nobel laureate for several negative references to Jews made in verse he had published three decades earlier. The poem also reminded listeners of the recent history of genocide in Europe and that anything that smacked of anti-Semitism was

no longer acceptable, even from a great poet. As soon as Litvinoff finished reading there was silence, followed by scattered applause; yet several persons jumped to Eliot's defence. Stephen Spender and Herbert Read were particularly agitated and assailed the younger man in the course of supporting the senior poet. Eliot himself, no doubt embarrassed by the stir, kept his calm but was overheard by another poet, Dannie Abse, saying the poem was 'good, very good'.¹ Litvinoff's public reading was provoked by the publication in 1948 of Eliot's *Selected Poems*, including the offending lines about Jews. Litvinoff, and others, thought it was insensitive and irresponsible of Eliot to reprint these poems only three years after the horrors visited on European Jewry had become public knowledge. Of course, he was right.

Was it to Eliot's credit that he was not about to go back and alter his early work in order to make it more palatable in new circumstances? He was not about to sanitise the past for political reasons in the way W. H. Auden, for example, removed the traces of pro-Communist bravado from 'Spain 1937' and 'A Communist to Others' to make them fit his later opinions. In the course of these editorial dexterities, Auden removed himself as a possible target during the anti-Communist witch hunts of the Cold War. Eliot's reluctance to revise the past can probably be put down to two things: one, he was not about to repudiate work that reflected the truth of his experience at the time and, second, he seemed to honestly believe that the offending passages were not anti-Semitic. After the events at the ICA, however, the matter of his alleged antipathy to Jews became, at first a minor note in Eliot criticism, rising to a higher pitch of interest in the late 1980s and 1990s. In the 1940s, J. V. Healy and Lionel Trilling confronted Eliot in correspondence over the problematic nature of his treatment of Jews. Trilling raised the issue of prejudice in his 1943 review in the *New York Nation* of Eliot's *A Choice of Kipling's Verse*; in particular, he queried the selection of 'The Waster', in which lurks an implicit but obvious anti-Semitic sentiment. Trilling politely condemned the inclusion of the poem. Eliot defended himself in an equally courteous manner and the matter was laid to rest. From the 1960s onwards, literary scholars, among them George Bornstein and Ronald Bush, probed a little more insistently into the matters of race, anti-Semitism and prejudice in Eliot's poetry and prose (although Bush remarks that he raises 'these questions with great diffidence').² However, there was no broader consideration of all the available evidence and very little effort made to read the transgressive utterances in their appropriate contexts until Christopher Ricks took on this task in his book-length study, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*

(1988). Not only does this book have the distinction of being the first major critical intervention on the issue of Eliot's anti-Semitism, it is still the most even-handed examination of the subject.

It was Ricks's very reasonableness about a topic that increasingly arouses intemperate passions that seems to have provoked the professional lawyer and part-time man of letters, Anthony Julius, to publish *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1995). Here the case for the prosecution is put in its strongest possible form and critics were promptly divided into two hostile camps. With prosecutorial single-mindedness, Julius insisted that Eliot was an anti-Semite: his poetry was silent about the suffering of Jews. Yet, although Julius put Eliot in the dock, in an unusual manoeuvre, he claimed that Eliot had made great poetry out of this dark material. Julius's book had the effect of inciting others to disparage Eliot. The poet-critics Tom Paulin and James Fenton were particularly robust in their condemnations. Fenton, speaking with the authority of Oxford University's Professor of Poetry, publicly pronounced Eliot a 'scoundrel' in 1996, to some applause. Many others, however, leapt to Eliot's defence. It fell to Ronald Schuchard, one of the most discerning Eliot scholars, to lead a counter-attack. In his essay 'Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar: American Intellectuals, Anti-Semitism, and the Idea of Culture' and in a response to critics of this essay 'My Reply: Eliot and Foregone Conclusions' (both published in 2003), Schuchard attempted to answer Julius's indictment. In the course of that defence he brought to light new archival material detailing Eliot's contacts with Jews throughout his lifetime that he felt completely exculpated Eliot from the charge of anti-Semitism. Since the publication of Julius's book others have contributed to the debate, but the controversy remains largely dominated by partisans and there is very little hope of resolution. The divisions in the scholarly and critical community are deep and resolute.

When we consider the amount of heat that the controversy has generated, it is rather surprising to find that the offending passages in Eliot's work are, notwithstanding what his as yet unpublished post-1925 correspondence might contain, few in number. There are no sustained anti-Semitic diatribes as one finds in Ezra Pound's work. Nor is there a complete text hostile to the Jews, such as Mark Twain's 1898 essay 'Concerning the Jews'. Nor is there a fully developed Jewish caricature, such as Charles Dickens's portrait of Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1838). The case for Eliot's anti-Semitism rests, in fact, on isolated lines in a few early poems and a passing reference to Jews in one of his prose texts. Until all the projected volumes of Eliot's post-1925 correspondence are

published, discussions of his anti-Semitism will have to return again and again to these textual fragments.

And what exactly is the nature of the offending passages in the poetry? They cluster in the collection Eliot published in 1920 as *Ara Vos Prec* in London and as *Poems* in the United States. This collection heightened the satirical force of his first book, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). Indeed, these poems went much further than satire. They explored certain extremes of experience, language and emotion that readers found both shocking and disturbing. One might even think of them as the punk or grunge phase of his oeuvre. Disgust with the purely animal side of human nature, decay, depravity, delirium and adultery identify the emotional terrain covered by the first poem in the collection, the dramatic monologue 'Gerontion'. Although there are negative portraits of Iberians ('Mr Silvero'), Japanese ('Hakagawa'), Scandinavians ('Madame de Tornquist'), Germans ('Fräulein von Kulp') and others of a less determinate nationality or ethnicity, it is the character in the poem referred to as 'the Jew' (*CPP*, 37), the owner of the house in which the speaker Gerontion lives, who usually receives the greatest amount of attention. The second poem in the collection, 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar', also puts the two Jewish characters, Bleistein and Sir Ferdinand Klein, in a derogatory light, dimly suggesting that the Jews are responsible for the decline of Venice as a vital civilisation. The poem is an intricate collocation of references, allusions and echoes of other literary works, including Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Wilkie Collins, Henry James and others. Of course, the lines

On the Rialto once.
The rats are underneath the piles.
The Jew is underneath the lot.
Money in furs . . . (*CPP*, 41)

have stirred a great deal of comment. To make matters worse, in the original publication, and every reprinting until 1963, the word 'Jew' in both this poem and in 'Gerontion' was not capitalised. In 'Sweeney Erect', it is the turn of the Irish, especially the Irish-American title character Sweeney, who is characterised not only as an 'orang-outang' (*CPP*, 42) but is also abused throughout the poem. In 'A Cooking Egg', the chairman of the chemical firm ICI, Sir Alfred Mond, is mentioned in a satirical light, but it is not clear whether this is because he is Jewish or due to the fact that he came to England from Germany, or because his company profited handsomely from the manufacture of armaments

during the First World War. In the years immediately following the war there was a great deal of public resentment, fuelled by the popular press, against war profiteers. Later in this poem, Eliot writes: 'The red-eyed scavengers are creeping / From Kentish Town and Golder's [*sic*] Green' (*CPP*, 45). Golders Green is a north London suburb that has a large population of Jewish residents. The four poems in French in this collection take us on a world tour that heaps scorn on Omaha and Terre Haute, Indiana, in the United States, the burning coasts of Mozambique and the Low Countries. The invective in these French poems trades in ugly images and a kind of sweaty disgust; for example, 'La sueur estivale' ['summer sweat'] (*CPP*, 48) in 'Lune de miel'. In these poems, Eliot seems to find everything about the human animal repugnant. The collection closes with 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales', which contains the lines 'Rachel *née* Rabinovitch / Tears at the grapes with murderous paws' (*CPP*, 56). By suggesting that Rachel has cast off her Jewish origins by marrying a gentile whose surname she has adopted, these lines have also been read as an insulting remark.

There are two other textual fragments that have provoked considerable discussion. One is a cancelled funeral lament from the manuscript drafts of *The Waste Land* that did not come to public notice until the appearance in 1971 of a facsimile edition of Eliot's drafts for the poem edited by his widow, Valerie Eliot. The offending lines come in a poem called 'Dirge', described by Christopher Ricks as the 'ugliest touch of anti-Semitism in Eliot's poetry'.³ The lines describe Bleistein, no longer a gawping tourist in Venice, but drowned, sunk to the bottom of the sea. The passage begins by adapting a line from a stanza in Ariel's song in *The Tempest*, 'Full fathom five thy father lies'. Eliot replaces 'thy father' with 'your Bleistein' and continues by describing the drowned man as lying 'under' a variety of sea creatures. Indeed, he is so far down, 'wharf rats' cannot reach him. The corpse is also said to suffer from a form of hyperthyroidism (Grave's Disease) and has lost his eyelids to crabs. The final lines in the passage continue reworking Ariel's song, but now evoke the ethnic stereotype of Jews as 'expensive rich and strange' (*WLF*, 121). Eliot cancelled 'Dirge' from the poem that found its way into print as *The Waste Land* in 1922. Ricks comments wisely that 'it does not become us to claim assuredly to know why' Eliot suppressed this draft.⁴

The second fragment is found in a work of cultural criticism entitled *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, published in 1934 but never reprinted. It is still out of print. It is an ill-tempered book and perhaps an ill-mannered one. The treatment of D. H. Lawrence, for example, borders

on insolence. The book was the revised text of a series of lectures Eliot gave at the University of Virginia in May 1933. In making the case that the population of a nation 'should be homogeneous' in culture, Eliot goes on to state a further point. More important, he declares, is the need to ensure what he calls 'unity of religious background'. This desired 'unity', due to 'reasons of race and religion', makes 'any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable' (*ASG*, 19–20). Eliot always insisted that the emphasis in his argument about homogeneity should be laid on 'free-thinking' rather than the 'Jews' and that he could just as easily have said free-thinking Welsh or free-thinking Eskimos (itself a terminological error, which could be interpreted as an ethnic slur by, say, the Inuit and Dene peoples).⁵ But those already convinced of his animus towards Jews will not be persuaded by this defence.

Peter Ackroyd, one of Eliot's unofficial biographers, reports that he came across four instances of questionable references to Jews in Eliot's private correspondence, dating from 1917 to 1929. He terms these references 'supercilious' rather than derogatory. He then goes on to quote Leonard Woolf's remark: 'I think T. S. Eliot was slightly anti-Semitic in the sort of vague way which is not uncommon. He would have denied it quite genuinely.'⁶ And Eliot did deny it: 'I am not an anti-Semite and never have been. It is a terrible slander on a man.'⁷ Mention of Leonard Woolf might also remind us that his wife Virginia was not above making (in the words of one of her biographers) 'casual, unsystematic and apparently thoughtless' remarks about Jews, even though she was married to one.⁸

However, the anti-Semitic remarks of others, casual or otherwise, do not excuse Eliot from responsibility for his own utterances. This is the principal point of Ricks's discussion of Eliot's anti-Semitism: namely, that Eliot made these remarks and he was wrong to make them. But Ricks does not stop there. To understand his further thoughts on the matter, an awareness of appropriate contexts is necessary. The years of the First World War and the 1920s were a very difficult period in Eliot's personal life, and much of the poetry he wrote at this time seems deliberately designed to offend, provoke and disturb his readers. This has something to do with the combative, at times ranting, mood in which a new movement in literature – modernism – began. But there was also something more personal and biting about Eliot's anti-Semitism in *Poems* (1920) that can be seen as part of a larger antipathy: a ferocious misanthropy that had its roots in Eliot's adulterous marriage, physical illness and the despair occasioned by the catastrophe of a brutal war and a

dishonourable peace, and the gnawing worry about a literary career that had not yet found a secure footing in the London literary world. Ricks is right to say that these factors do not excuse Eliot's lines, but they do, however, go some way in explaining the malevolence that pulses through them. They also suggest, Ricks argues, how Eliot used 'prejudice' in a more general sense as an odd kind of literary resource when other sources of creative vigour were flagging. One might say, then, that Eliot's creative juices, unable to find more positive routes in which to run, found the path of least resistance in disgust.

In his turn, Julius's argument has certain affinities with this view. He claims that Eliot's anti-Semitic poetry manages to be art of high quality, though it is an art made from disgusting materials. The references to Jews cannot be swept under the carpet, ascribed to a general low opinion of humanity. They are specific, deeply personal and historically grounded by centuries of persecution, including the pogroms in Eastern Europe that took place at the end of the nineteenth century and led to waves of Jewish immigrants arriving in London and the United States. The 'mind of Europe' (*SE*, 16), to use Eliot's resonant phrase, has, according to Julius's cultural history, the clear impress of anti-Semitic prejudice upon it that could, and often did, take a murderous turn. Eliot's disparagement of Jews is seen as part of the pattern of abuse and terror, even a poetic extension of it, visited upon Jews after the diaspora. But Eliot was not some racist thug incapable of sufficient self-reflection to get to grips with his own deepest intellectual and emotional impulses. After all, no one doubts he was a very intelligent man, a talented man. A man, indeed, who spent a good deal of his time after 1927, the year he joined the Anglican Church, examining his conscience, reflecting on his sins and on the possibility of atonement, and hoping for redemption. So, to say that all of his work is imbued at every point by a simple animus towards the Jews, and that it can be accurately described by Julius's favourite phrase as 'anti-Semitic poetry', is to say the offence was deliberate, cunningly thought out and then, after its occasional display in the early 1920s, shrewdly camouflaged so as not to arouse animosity in the new historical circumstances; namely, the tragedy that overcame European Jewry in the late 1930s and 1940s. By this account, then, Eliot is as guilty as Ezra Pound, perhaps even more despicable, since unlike this outspoken anti-Semite he cannot be dismissed as either insane or a buffoon.

It is Julius's more serious accusation that Ronald Schuchard took it upon himself to answer. In 'Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar', Schuchard fills in the detail of the complex web of personal and domestic

scenarios and relationships that make up Eliot's experience of misery in the late 1910s and early 1920s. He also sketches the intellectual background of the idealising liberal pluralism in the American academy that Eliot found abhorrent as a young man. Reluctant immersion in 'Emersonian-Unitarian philosophy' set him on a path of fierce opposition to what he considered the corrosive sublimate of latter-day Puritan thought in America – 'religious liberalism, individualism, optimism, sentimentalism'.⁹ But none of this material appeared convincingly exculpatory to Julius, who was determined not to dismiss Eliot's anti-Semitism. Schuchard believed that his trump card was the record of Eliot's convivial relationships with a number of Jews in the immediate social and intellectual circles in which he moved. These included Leonard Woolf, John Rodker, Sydney Schiff, Jacob Isaacs, Mark Gertler, Ada Levenson and others. It may be convenient for Eliot's opponents to deride the 'some of his best friends are' argument as nugatory, but in this heated debate, where a man's convictions are the subject of intense and sometimes unsympathetic scrutiny, his friendships with people he is supposed to have despised do have some relevance. Schuchard is right in bringing these relationships to scholarly attention. Even more importantly, he brings forward research done by Ranen Omer-Sherman in the American Jewish Archives at Cincinnati, Ohio. In these archives, Omer-Sherman discovered a hitherto unknown correspondence between Eliot and an American Zionist intellectual, Horace M. Kallen, a founder of the New School for Social Research in New York. Eliot's friendship with Kallen stretches from the 1920s to the 1960s, with the possibility that there was intimate contact between the two going back as far as 1906, when they first met as students at Harvard University.

Kallen was a leading intellectual figure in the American-Jewish community and a champion of a secular humanist theory of society that diverged radically from Eliot's own idealised conception of a Christian society. Yet, in spite of their differences, the two men kept up a cordial relationship for decades. Because the Atlantic Ocean divided them, their relationship is recorded in their correspondence. Omer-Sherman suggests that there is 'compelling' evidence of 'Eliot's compassionate humanism', especially in his 'concern for Jewish refugees' fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany. Although Eliot and Kallen had deep philosophical differences in their assessments of culture, their friendship never wavered and Eliot's 'activism' on behalf of European Jews, which Omer-Sherman points out 'included meetings with Jewish philanthropists'¹⁰ during the Second World War, underlined Eliot's freely offered efforts to find ways to help

German Jews and 'thousands of teachers and men of science in concentration camps'.¹¹ Their correspondence also reveals that Eliot was more zealous in upholding Judaism as a religion than Kallen, for whom a secular liberal humanism was the greater social good. Omer-Sherman comments: 'Kallen had spent so many years advocating a secular Zionism that he grew to be callously dismissive of both Reform and Orthodox [Jewish] belief'.¹² It turns out that Eliot defended this Orthodox Jewish belief against his friend. It may surprise many to learn that after the Second World War, Eliot's thinking underwent important changes. His approval of cultural homogeneity gave way to other convictions. He came to recognise 'diversity and disagreement' as providing 'a more satisfying variety and richness of experience' than the narrower cultural orthodoxy he had championed in the past.¹³

Many voices have contributed to this ongoing debate and many more will no doubt intervene in the years to come. But given the evidence we have so far, the baldly stated indictment of Eliot as an anti-Semite seems difficult to sustain without qualification. Yes, there is some evidence to suggest that he was, but there is plenty on the other side as well. Perhaps the collected editions of Eliot's prose and letters will yield further ammunition for the battles ahead and cast new light on this controversy.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Dannie Abse, *A Poet in the Family* (London: Hutchinson, 1974), p. 132.
2. Ronald Bush, *T. S. Eliot: A Study in Character and Style* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 226.
3. Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 38.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
5. 'I am no more anti-semitic than I am anti-Welsh or anti-Eskimo.' T. S. Eliot to Edward Field, 17 March 1947. Quoted in Ronald Schuchard, 'Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar', *Modernism/Modernity* (January 2003), 17.
6. Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp. 303-4.
7. Quoted in William Turner Levy and Victor Scherle, *Affectionately T. S. Eliot: The Story of a Friendship, 1947-1965* (London: J. M. Dent, 1968), p. 81.
8. Victoria Glendinning, 'Features and Reviews', *Guardian* (9 April 2005), 12. In this review, Glendinning finds Julia Briggs's *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* is a little disingenuous in its treatment of Woolf's casual anti-Semitism.
9. Schuchard, 'Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar', 2-3.
10. Ranen Omer-Sherman, 'Rethinking Eliot, Jewish Identity, and Cultural Pluralism', *Modernism/Modernity* (September 2003), 441.

11. Schuchard, 'Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot with a Cigar', 16.
12. Omer-Sherman, 'Rethinking Eliot, Jewish Identity, and Cultural Pluralism', 443.
13. Richard Shusterman, *T. S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 74.