



*T. S. Eliot  
anti-Semitism  
and  
literary form*

ANTHONY  
JULIUS

T. S. ELIOT,  
ANTI-SEMITISM, AND  
LITERARY FORM

ANTHONY JULIUS



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'a painstakingly researched and fiercely argued volume. . . . Julius has forced us to rethink some of our most fundamental, received ideas about art, ideas that for years protected Eliot from the sort of scrutiny found in these pages. He has made us reconsider the fences we routinely construct between aesthetic and ideological impulses, the old-fashioned belief that poetry "discloses essential truths" about the world, our eagerness to forgive artists their moral failings, and most notably our inclination (or desire) to believe that art redeems. He has written an important – and long overdue – book.'

Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

'Julius's argument about the poems in *Ara Vos Prec* seems to me unassailable: they are poetry and they are anti-Semitic, and the two qualities have a place within a very specific tradition of anti-Semitic literary thought. His claim that anti-Semitism casts a shadow on Eliot's writing after 1922 is right as well. And in the end, even his refusal to concede grounds to exculpatory arguments seems just. For indifference is not a defence.'

Louis Menand, *The New York Review of Books*

'[a] brilliant, passionately concentrated "adversarial reading" of Eliot's work . . . . By detailing the scope of Eliot's anti-Semitic remarks and images, and by examining what several critical generations have made of them, Julius breaks down the protective barriers that have been erected around Eliot's work . . . . A combination of steely fairness and evident admiration of Eliot's art makes his study read at times like a judge's summing up . . . a long overdue act of critical justice . . . . Eliot studies will never be the same post-Julius. His account must be read both for its sustained critical intelligence and scholarship, and as a means of extending one's unease about the moral basis – if there is one – of Eliot's work . . . . Julius's study is only the beginning of a long process of revisionist criticism.'

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'The originality of Julius's book lies in his willingness to raise such questions . . . . This is a refreshing analysis of recent cultural history, enlivened by a rare indignation and power of synthesis.'

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‘Anthony Julius has a new slant on the evidence . . . He proves himself at times a greater, and always a more honest, admirer of Eliot than those who habitually plaster him with saintliness . . . Julius’s book is mould-breaking without being merely an act of debunking . . . What is extremely rare, if not unique, is Julius’s assertion that Eliot’s dismissive disdain was not a dramatic device or even an ill-advised lapse on the great man’s part, but an integral and seminal aspect of his imagination . . . genuinely enlightening.’

Frederick Raphael, *The Weekly Standard*

‘Anthony Julius’s book is the most searching consideration of the whole question so far. It would be valuable if only for its thoroughness, for the tenacity with which Julius tracks down his material and pursues his arguments. But it also has the merit – an uncommon one – of attending to the claims of literature and the claims of social decency simultaneously.’

John Gross, *The Sunday Telegraph*

‘sharp, elegant, morally insistent’.

*The New Yorker*

‘T. S. Eliot, *Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* . . . has become the cause of hot debate in literary circles and lecture halls, and of many feverish Fleet Street column inches . . . The fight for the soul of T. S. Eliot, the literary icon, looks set to run and run.’

*The Independent on Sunday*

‘Other critics have been aware of Eliot’s anti-Semitism, but none has confronted it as Mr Julius does.’

*The Daily Telegraph*

‘Julius’s argument is based solely on the texts, peeling off the layers of allusion and reference to show, as he puts it, that Eliot’s was the rarest kind of racial prejudice: “One who was able to place his anti-Semitism at the service of his art.”’

*The Guardian*

It needs literary criticism to do justice to Eliot.

F. R. Leavis, 'Eliot's Classical Standing', *Lectures in America*,

52.

In Cape Town [Eliot] was entertained by Mr Justice Millin and his wife, Sarah Gertrude Millin, the novelist and biographer whose books were published by Eliot's firm ... That night before going to bed Mrs Millin was brushing up her acquaintance with Eliot's verse ... when her eye fell on 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar', and particularly these lines:

The rats are underneath the piles.

The Jew is underneath the lot.

Mrs Millin was a Jew. She went and rapped on Eliot's door, asked whether he acknowledged these lines (he did) and then asked him to leave her house next morning.

T. S. Matthews, *Great Tom*, 163.

## *Acknowledgments*

This book began as a PhD thesis; that it reached a successful conclusion is due in large measure to my supervisor, Dan Jacobson. Many friends and colleagues provided help. Judith Julius made numerous valuable suggestions. Moreover, without her commitment to the project my plans for this study of Eliot's anti-Semitism would have come to nothing. My children, Max, Laura, Chloe, and Theo, helped the book along. My mother, Myrna Julius, was encouraging throughout. I have been lucky to have received such support, and I am very grateful for it.

## *Note on the text*

Where a work's original date of publication is relevant to my argument, I give that date in square brackets if it differs from the date of the edition I have used.

In certain cases, where quotations are given as instances of a particular anti-Semitic theme, and the sources for those quotations are not the works of which they are part, then those sources, and not the works themselves, will be identified. For example, Leon Poliakov's *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vols. I–IV contains numerous quotations on which I draw from time to time. In such cases, each reference will be limited to the relevant volume and page of Poliakov's work.

All quotations from Eliot's poetry and plays are taken from *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* unless otherwise stated.



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## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

#### PRELIMINARY

Anti-Semites are not all the same. Some break Jewish bones, others wound Jewish sensibilities. Eliot falls into the second category. He was civil to Jews he knew, offensive to those who merely knew him through his work. He wounded his Jewish readers, if not the Jews of his acquaintance, to whom, apparently, he was 'not disagreeable'.<sup>1</sup> Though worth noting, this is not a distinction that yields a defence to the charge of anti-Semitism. If the work, or some notable part of it, is anti-Semitic, it is the work of an anti-Semite.

No Jew reading the following is likely to doubt its anti-Semitism:

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 lines from Eliot's 'Gerontion' sting like an insult. Purportedly referring to one Jew alone, they implicate all Jews in their scorn. They are therefore lines to make a Jewish reader's face flush. Such a reader's indignation and pain would become acute if he then read:

[We must discover] ... what conditions, within our power to bring about, would foster the society that we desire. ... reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.

This is from Eliot's *After Strange Gods*. When George Boas, a friend of Eliot's, read this passage he wrote to him, 'I can rid you of the company of one.' He never received a reply,<sup>2</sup> the first snub aggravated by the second. These two extracts – part of a poem and a passage from a lecture – comprise verbal gestures of exclusion. Eliot's Jewish readers are insulted by the first passage, while they approach the second only to be turned away. When Eliot begins that second passage with 'we', he has left Jews behind. Like a propagandist, he

discriminates between his audiences. Jews comprise the targets, not the readers, of these passages. *After Strange Gods* is not *for* them (in either sense), it is *against* them. 'We' can mean 'you and I', or it can mean 'I and they but not you'. Slipping from the one meaning to the other violates the relation of trust and equality between writer and reader. In place of trust, there is hostility; in place of equality, there is the writer's contempt and the reader's dismay. 'Gerontion' similarly violates the writer's implicit bond with the reader. The poem, so to speak, does not want Jewish readers. Instead of one audience there are at least two: the one embraced by the author, and the other, Jewish, audience rejected by him. How does that second audience respond? Probably with a reciprocal gesture of rejection. We know, of course, that we should practice a certain 'ideological' restraint when reading, but there is a difference between reading a text that challenges the worth of one's ideas, and one that challenges the worth of one's person. Eliot's anti-Semitic work constitutes this latter, more radical, challenge to the Jewish reader. How else could he meet these lines from 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' (hereafter 'Burbank')?

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

'Burbank' so resonates with anti-Semitic scorn that if my hypothetical Jewish reader persisted with such a poem he would, I suggest, feel compelled to answer back in a spirit of remonstrative exegesis. He would read the poem adversarially. I am that reader, and what follows comprises my adversarial readings of Eliot's anti-Semitic poetry and prose. I hope thus to keep faith with both quotations prefacing this book. Eliot's anti-Semitic poems demand literary analysis, and that analysis must be informed by something of Sarah Millin's outrage.<sup>3</sup> Indifference to the offence given by these poems is, among other things, a failure of interpretation. They insult Jews: to ignore these insults is to misread the poems.

#### ELIOT'S LITERARY CAREER

Eliot's major poetry begins with 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (hereafter 'Prufrock') and ends with 'Little Gidding', the last of the *Four Quartets*. Though the former was published just before the end of World War I and the latter just before the end of World

War II, neither most usefully may be read as a war poem. In each, Eliot explores the limits of the dramatic monologue as a poetic form. In each he thereby resists self-revelation. Most of his other poetry emerges likewise from this tension between the dramatic and the confessional: 'Gerontion', *The Waste Land*, 'Ash Wednesday', the first three of the *Four Quartets*. There are exceptions. 'His poems are all dramatic monologues', said Edmund Wilson,<sup>4</sup> overlooking the bulk of Eliot's anti-Semitic poetry, written between 1917 and 1922. These poems dominate *Ara Vos Prec* (1920), Eliot's second collection. 'Gerontion' transgresses the formal boundaries of the dramatic monologue; the poems composed in quatrains subordinate monologic revelations to impersonal ironies.<sup>5</sup>

As a playwright, Eliot wrote nothing so interesting as *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926-7) or so dull as *The Rock* (1934) again. In *The Family Reunion* (1939) and his three post-war plays, he crossed the comedy of manners with Greek tragedy in a number of unhappy combinations. *Sweeney Agonistes* is elliptical, experimental in idiom, and resists stage performance. *The Rock* is prolix, employs Biblical cadences, and was written as a pageant. *Sweeney Agonistes* defies audiences, challenging their understanding; *The Rock* seeks to convert its audience into a congregation. *Sweeney Agonistes* was itself never completed, while Eliot described another experiment, *Murder in the Cathedral*, as a 'dead end'.<sup>6</sup> It is a dead end in another sense – it ends in a death. Death, or more precisely murder, is a theme that runs through several of the plays. In *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Family Reunion*, it is the fantasy of 'doing a woman in'. In *The Cocktail Party*, it is the martyrdom of a woman who is dying in protracted and ugly pain. In the milder *The Confidential Clerk*, it is a pregnant woman dying before term. Atonement is a related theme in this drama, though *The Rock* is too pious and *Sweeney Agonistes* too impious to find room for it. It is a Christian drama. *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* directly engage their audiences as Christians, and the final four plays meditate upon sin and expiation, common themes that make of each of the last three a family reunion with the first of the group.

At the outset of his career, Eliot's criticism comprised short notices, longer review articles, and reports back to America on English literary life. Essays, and lectures subsequently published in book form, followed later. He wrote 'Commentaries' in the *Criterion* (1922-39). The bulk of his literary criticism is to be found in *The Sacred Wood* (1920; 1928), *Selected Essays* (1932; 1951), *The Use of*

*Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) (hereafter 'The Use of Poetry'), *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), and *To Criticise the Critic* (1965). Eliot's cultural criticism was given book form in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) (hereafter 'Notes'), though topics of cultural concern are also addressed extensively elsewhere in his published work. Indeed, *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) and *After Strange Gods* (1934) each make questionable the distinction between the 'cultural' and the 'literary' in this classification of Eliot's criticism. This criticism was at first of decisive importance, and later was nothing less than authoritative. It was always influential, and established a 'school'.<sup>7</sup> At its best, it enlarged a particular tradition. In the context of his poetic achievement, however, Denis Donoghue's remark that its 'flaws...or even its merits – are hardly worth talking about'<sup>8</sup> is just, and in accord with the tendency of my book. While he had the instincts of the controversialist, Eliot couched his provocations in conventional courtesies. At times, the courtesies so muffled the provocations that Ezra Pound, reflecting on his own tendency to magnify his provocations by discourtesies, was led to ask: 'Has Eliot or have I wasted the greater number of hours, he by attending to fools and/or humouring them, and I by alienating imbeciles suddenly?'<sup>9</sup>

Eliot was held in a measure of public and critical esteem unrivalled by any other poet or man of letters in modern times. Person and work were equally revered: Harold Nicolson said Eliot was 'selfless and saintly'.<sup>10</sup> His work was often read, or misread, for its 'therapeutic, cathartic appeal';<sup>11</sup> it was also appropriated to an Anglo-Catholic orthodoxy. He received the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize in 1948. Later, he was awarded the Hanseatic Goethe Award, the Dante Gold Medal, and the American Medal of Freedom. Eliot was a celebrity. A crowd stood at the dock to greet him when he arrived in South Africa; in America, police had to control the crowds who came to hear him lecture; when he went to Rome to receive an honorary degree, students shouting 'Viva Eliot!' lined the route to the university.<sup>12</sup> The authority of his literary judgments amounted for Delmore Schwartz to a 'dictatorship'.<sup>13</sup> By 1934 Wyndham Lewis could assert that '[t]here is no person today who has had more influence upon the art of literature in England and America than Mr T. S. Eliot'.<sup>14</sup> Almost from the first, dissenting voices were rarely heard, and lacked influence. Arthur Waugh's description of Eliot as a 'drunken helot' helped to mark the poet's arrival on the literary

scene;<sup>15</sup> Richard Aldington's 'Stepping Heavenward' (1931) confirmed his early eminence in the person of the 'recently beatified' Father Cibber;<sup>16</sup> in *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), Yvor Winters condemned Eliot's critical inconsistencies, censuring both master and 'disciples';<sup>17</sup> R. H. Robbins attempted in *The T. S. Eliot Myth* (1951) to unmask the poet as a fraud; Kathleen Nott's *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1958) sought to expose the sham in the religious revival in modern letters led by Eliot and others; William Carlos Williams attacked Eliot for his 'subtle conformis[m]';<sup>18</sup> there were other attacks, and there was some sniping. Early hostilities made his reputation; subsequent attacks failed to diminish it.

Eliot's anti-Semitic literary work comprises the following. First, there is the *Ara Vos Prec* group: 'Burbank', 'A Cooking Egg', 'Sweeney Among the Nightingales', and 'Gerontion'. Next, there is a deleted poem ('Dirge'), and some other lines, from the pre-Pound version of *The Waste Land*, unpublished in Eliot's lifetime. 'Death by Water', the fourth part of *The Waste Land*, and 'A Song for Simeon', published in 1928, are related to this poetry but are not themselves anti-Semitic. Then there is the drama: *Sweeney Agonistes* sets some vulgar Jews against the visionary Sweeney. Krumpacker and Klipstein are oblivious to the play's darker themes; their glib bonhomie is rooted in banality. They are among the 'material, literal-minded and visionless' figures of which Eliot wrote in his account of the play.<sup>19</sup> Eliot's anti-Semitic prose, and related prose, principally comprise: a passage in *After Strange Gods*, initiating a theme later taken up in *The Idea of a Christian Society* and revisited in a footnote in the first edition of *Notes*, then revised in the second edition and the revision in turn discussed in the preface to that edition; a review of Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*, and certain remarks concerning psychoanalysis; a review of, and passing references to, Julien Benda; certain remarks concerning Spinoza; an exchange with Trilling on a Kipling poem; a reference to Isaac Rosenberg; an article on Vichy persecution of the Jews. These texts, and other miscellaneous scraps, can be organised around three themes: antagonism to the figure of the Jewish sceptic, or free-thinker; indifference to Jewish pain, and relatedly, indifference to the anti-Semitism of others; Eliot's inability to confront his own anti-Semitism. Some say, however, that he abandoned it later in his life, though others propose that he merely took pains to conceal it.<sup>20</sup> One critic believes that Eliot should be given credit for the suppression of

the hating and hateful 'Dirge';<sup>21</sup> another praises Eliot precisely for *not* suppressing his anti-Semitic poetry: 'I respect Eliot for not having tried to edit out of his earlier poems views which he himself later came to regard as reprehensible'.<sup>22</sup> It has also been suggested that Eliot suffered remorse over his anti-Semitism: 'the awareness / Of things ill done and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue' ('Little Gidding').

There is no consensus on the number of references to Jews in Eliot's work. Sometimes it is the absence of any reference to Jews in an essay, or the refusal to acknowledge the anti-Semitism of a favoured writer, which may be anti-Semitic. There is even disagreement about how many anti-Semitic poems Eliot wrote. The inclusion of 'A Cooking Egg' has been doubted; the exclusion both of 'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service' and 'the Burial of the Dead', the first part of *The Waste Land*, has been questioned.<sup>23</sup>

'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service' is an *Ara Vos Prec* poem. According to one Eliot critic, Hyam Maccoby, it is anti-Semitic. In his summary of the poem, it opens with three accounts of God. The first two are disfigured by complementary errors – the Jewish account is too materialistic, the Pagan, too spiritual. The third, Christian, account is the correct one. Then, simplicity replaces obscurity, theology is exchanged for art, and 'doctrine' becomes 'vision'. The ellipses dividing the poem mark a true break. God is above the line, man below it. The stanzas that follow concern the Church's constituent parts – clergy and laity. The poem returns in the last stanza to the Jews. Sweeney's indifference to the Church is linked to that of 'the masters of the subtle schools', whom Maccoby identifies as modern scientists. They are the Jews of the present, 'because of their materialism, their over-subtlety and pride of intellect, and their adherence to the Many rather than the One'.<sup>24</sup>

Maccoby's case depends on whether he is right to gloss 'sapient sutlers' in the first stanza as referring to Jews. Jews are sapient, he proposes, 'because of their pride in the wisdom of the Law'. They are like sutlers because they are 'petty traders in food and drink'. Maccoby argues that for Eliot, Jews were traders, and their religion is one of food and drink because of their dietary rules, and their sacrifices. This gloss is misconceived. 'Sutlers' are camp followers who sell provisions. They are petty traders in food and drink, true, but of a certain kind; the wider meaning Maccoby advances is obsolete. Sutlers keep an army on the road. If the soldiers of that



army are taken to be the members of the Christian communion, then their sutlers are the clergy. 'Sapient' can mean either wise or would-be wise, aping sagacity. It is therefore suitable for a poem that places an ironic distance between itself and its subject. The poem is not about Jews. Maccoby seeks offence where none is given.

In his elucidation of 'The Burial of the Dead',<sup>25</sup> David Trotter identifies the voice in the second stanza as belonging to Ecclesiastes: 'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?' The answer is: nothing grows. The prophet's dismal revelation is of 'fear in a handful of dust'. The Judean landscape is evoked, 'the prevailing impression [of which]... is of stone... the heaps and heaps of stones gathered from the fields, the fields as stony still'. What could a people formed in such a place create? Nothing. The Jews, a nomadic people, and therefore rootless, 'originate nothing'. Hence Ecclesiastes' 'extreme scepticism towards all religious speculation'. Among other works, Trotter relies for these characterisations on W. Robertson Smith's *The Religion of the Semites* (1889). The hopeless barrenness of the prophet's vision is to be related to the 'images of aridity' in 'Gerontion'. These images are associated with the 'jew' who 'squats on the window sill'. Trotter thus makes a connection between *The Waste Land* and the anti-Semitism of 'Gerontion'. Though he does not state expressly that the former is anti-Semitic, this conclusion is a necessary implication of his argument.

It is open to a number of objections. Eliot does not associate Jews with the sterile. On the contrary, they possess a reptilian fecundity ('spawn'), and the 'protozoic slime' is their element. Smith does not attribute Ecclesiastes' scepticism to a nomadic, desert people's aridity of imagination. This scepticism toward religious speculation rather displays 'the proper attitude of piety, for no amount of discussion can carry a man beyond the plain rule to "fear God and keep His commandments"'.<sup>26</sup> In any event, Ecclesiastes is not the only source of the stanza: Eliot draws from Isaiah and Ezekiel as well, and also from St Matthew. The voice in this part of the poem is 'prophetic' only in the most generalised sense; it is not a Jew who speaks in the second stanza of 'The Burial of the Dead'. Though the stanza is 'full of the Bible',<sup>27</sup> it is not about Jews.

The anti-Semitic poems reappeared, and continue to appear, in the collected editions of Eliot's poetry, as well as in *Selected Poems* (1954, and subsequent editions). They have therefore been in