

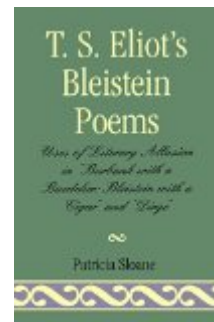
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Patricia Sloane. *T.S. Eliot's Bleistein Poems: Uses of Literary Allusion in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" and "Dirge"*. Foreword by Shyamal Bagchee. New York: International Scholars Publications, 2000. 397 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57309-331-6.

Reviewed by Richard E. Sherwin (Bar Ilan University)
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This is an interesting and very useful book, the first of three projected volumes. If the index were at least three times the present length, it would be an essential reference work for any serious student of Eliot's poetry. As is, it should find a place in every university library. It traces the sources of allusions in Eliot's poems to other literary and philosophical works, historical events, names, and images, even to the fourth remove and brings this information into a usable format. Moreover, it presents its own provocative reading of Eliot.

The projected trilogy's "thesis is that the poems form an organic sequence, and provide a comic or absurdist improvisation on Dante's *Commedia*. A protagonist, who may finally prove to be the reader, makes two consecutive journeys through hell, purgatory, and heaven, Dante's three kingdoms of death." "The absurdist or Dadaist "narrative" ... has been overlooked primarily because Eliot constructs it largely from puns and witticisms that turn on details in his "source" works (p. 11)."

This first volume does in fact treat aspects of all five of the most important earlier poems while emphasizing 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' and 'The Dirge' as the poet's "take" on the *Inferno*. The second volume will treat 'Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service' (the *Purgatorio*) and 'The Hippopotamus' (the *Paradiso*); and volume three will examine *The Waste Land* (the *Inferno*) and "The Hollow Men" (the *Purgatorio*). It would have served the reader well, I think, if at least the four shorter poems treated most extensively here could have been printed in an additional appendix.

In many respects, this book requires and deserves a review more proper to the T.S. Eliot Net than to H-Antisemitism. Its overall argument is not about Eliot's

purported antisemitism, but rather about the extensive web of references of all kinds that link his work particularly to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Joyce's *Ulysses*. The Jewish aspects are a secondary concern. Were they primary, they would require a less discontinuous treatment and a more consistent argument about their final significances than volume one provides. Perhaps, Sloane intends to tackle these thorny issues more systematically in the later volumes. Even though it is not the major subject of the author in this volume, my review will concentrate on Eliot's "Jewish Question."

[Perhaps here is a suitable place to interrupt my review of Sloane's discussion by reminding us that there are only – to my count – about twelve lines in Eliot's early poetry that provide clear grounds for discussing his poetry as antisemitic. These lines do however activate and intensify other potentially antisemitic images in their poems, and in other of Eliot's poems, thus making the discussion valid and relevant.]

Both Dante and Joyce, Sloan argues, avoided traditional Christian antisemitisms. Eliot, in the above-mentioned poems, therefore, has to be placed literarily and in terms of antisemitic discourse closer to them, certainly, than to the traditional pairing of him with the avowed antisemite, his friend, Ezra Pound. Because they were friends does not mean they believed or wrote alike about Jews. To give some idea of how the author proceeds in this difficult subject matter, I shall ignore Dante, Joyce (and Pound) in my discussion of Eliot's purported antisemitism and turn instead to Sloane's extended comparison between Eliot's attitudes to Jews and those to be found in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (pp. 262-276).

Sloane begins by making it clear that, although Eliot never mentioned Oscar Wilde, there are surprisingly interesting connections to be made between Eliot's awareness of Gautier's poetry and literary theories, Dorian's hedonist delight in Gautier's volume of poetry in Chapter 11, the seedy antisemitism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and that of Eliot's poetry. From "no mention at all," we have moved some distance to the book having possibly been read by Eliot – not an unreasonable conjecture, given how well read was Eliot. But from there we move to probable influences, similarities, analogies, and contrasts, which somehow become accepted "facts" by the end of the discussion. This slide from no evidence to interesting similarities to the connection being presumed as hard "fact" occurs often enough in the book to become worrisome. Though it works well here, it works less well elsewhere.

And yet. The net result of this and other extended comparisons and allusion huntings is that one however skeptical at first realizes that Sloane is in fact bringing to our attention some important insights concerning Eliot's work and Wilde's upper-class protagonist's antisemitism; the differences are as important as the similarities. This conflictive technique forces the reader to be continually on guard against the empirically weak argumentation, and at the same time to remain alert to the creative perception of the author, who seems not to have found a discursive framework capacious enough to hold all her diverse perceptions.

At the end of this discussion of Dorian Gray's antisemitism, Sloane queries (much less unwarrantedly than it would have seemed at the beginning): "Is Eliot, in any case, distancing himself from Dorian Gray's disdainful distate for Sibyl Vane's cigar-smoking manager? This depends on what he intends to do with Wilde's "hideous Jew," transported from *Dorian Gray* along with the Shakespeare plays that he loved." "Given that repulsive but good-hearted Mr. Isaacs is not as bad as one might have thought, it will be fitting if Bleistein, too, surprises us by unnoticed redeeming qualities (p. 276)."

It might be "fitting," but I haven't found any "unnoticed redeeming qualities" in Bleistein by the end of the book, let alone by page 276. Sloane has certainly noticed and developed every conceivable such quality in the sources and the connections to other Eliot poems. But they seem to derive more from her own evaluation based on the goals and conclusions stated in her Author's Preface, than from evidence that can be extracted from the poems themselves. Sloane finds many suggestive con-

nections between Dante's "Semite" (David, the Psalmist) and Eliot's own evocations of the Semite. Additional similarities between Bleistein and Joyce's Bloom lack persuasiveness for me.

After reading this book, I find I still read the two stanzas on Bleistein in "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" and the four lines in "Gerontion" as both gratuitously and nastily antisemitic. The simple test for gratuitousness is to take the lines out of the poem and see if anything left in the poem demands their return.

Here are stanzas four and six from "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar"; they represent two quatrains out of eight, 25 percent of the lyric:

But this or such was Bleistein's way: / A saggy bending of the knees / And elbows, with the palms turned out, / Chicago Semite Viennese.

'On the Rialto once. / The rats are underneath the piles. / The jew is underneath the lot. / Money in furs. The boatman smiles,

I leave aside Sloane's discussion of the intervening images of the "lustreless protrusive eye, 'protozoic slime,' not because they are not antisemitic in context, but because without the above two stanzas, which contain the poem's kinetic antisemitism (jews and slime and rats), the images" reinforcement of antisemitism disappears, and the poem sinks into its own confusions and deserved obscurities. Readers have only the problem of finding some relevance of the eye and slime to the characters remaining. And they're slimy enough not to cause much problem, even were Bleistein as theoretically absent as Sloane suggests he might be.

What we're left with in 'Burbank' without these two stanzas is an ornate and dull poem I doubt anyone would give a second reading to without the antisemitic stanzas, were not Eliot also the poet of 'Prufrock' and *The Waste Land* (let alone the later religious meditations, the *Four Quartets*). Sloane's method of following out each word's sources and connections helps to dilute the nastiness of both stanzas and of the three lines from 'Gerontion,' perhaps. But taken as printed, the overall effect is antisemitic, whatever the intentions, sources, or allusions of the parts may suggest.

Sloane's discussion of the 'Jewishness' of the name Bleistein records fairly the existence of non-Jewish Bleisteins, as well as non-Jewish Kleins (another possibly 'Jewish' name in the poem). I find this as irrelevant to the question of kinetic antisemitism here as is the probably

accurate connection of 'saggy knees' and 'palms turned out' to a lesser artistic tradition of depicting the crucifixion (thus making the picture of Bleistein more sympathetic, perhaps, for those knowledgeable about painting).

Together, even outside the poem, let alone inside it, each image does its part to construct the traditional antisemitic picture of Jewish males with ugly deformed bodies, as rootless cosmopolitans, usurious, corrupt businessmen allied to Shylock, akin to vermin. Much, oddly enough, like Joyce's picture of Bloom. This depiction had its secure place in the traditional antisemitic caricatures of the time, that were – as Sloane points out – sneered at as gross by non-Jews, who nevertheless felt and thought and said equivalent things, only in a more refined manner.

Sloane argues Eliot is a satirist (I agree, he often is) and is not espousing but rather belittling the antisemitic caricature of Jews found among the antisemites of his own class; he is, in fact, mocking them by constructing it of non-antisemitic parts. If this is true, he failed in the first duty of the satirist – making certain that his target audience gets his message. I have heard no reports that upper-class individuals complained of Eliot's unfair attack on them or his too friendly view of the Jews. The 'satire' was either too subtle or, in my view, no satire at all.

But, perhaps, I am mistaken. Eliot may have intended what Sloane suggests. Yet the inclusion of antisemitic stereotypes in the Bleistein poem suggests at the very least Eliot's careless indifference as to how this writing might feed common or 'refined' prejudices. Granted, he wrote before the Holocaust and so at least, unlike Pound, is not guilty of anything more than lending his art to yet another expression of Christian contempt for Jews. A conservative, not a Fascist, and certainly not a Nazi, producer of rather tame stuff compared to the vicious caricatures and comments of the period, Eliot is still not as guiltless as Sloane makes him out to be. True, he might have been worse, but his little did harm enough.

These four lines from "Gerontion" will serve to make my point. They paint a picture all the nastier because it is even more gratuitous than the example cited above from "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar":

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. (lines 7-10, of some 76 lines)

The speaker of the poem is an wizened old man, living in seedy poverty, unheroic, reflecting on the emptiness of his life, mind, soul – a familiar character in many Eliot poems. There are other potentially antisemitic words that the presence of these four lines calls into activity, and Sloane deals extensively with them. I ignore them since without these particular lines, those words or phrases remain unactivated as antisemitic allusions.

Sloane treats this passage very thoroughly, pointing up its contradictions, its non-antisemitic references, and I mostly agree with her demonstration. My point, however, is their gratuitousness: take them out of the poem, and there is no antisemitism; leave them in, and there is active antisemitism, no matter how contradictory to historical fact or to the sources of the passage's subtle allusions. Eliot left them in.

These lines ally Eliot with the antisemites who depict Jews as oppressive slumlords, subhuman animals, seedy and destructive of – in this case – old men and relatively innocent helpless ones at that. That Eliot's sources may be comic or positive could be considered perhaps on some aesthetic principle or other to mitigate the charge. Perhaps. It could equally however be argued as evidence that he took unantisemitic materials and for no decent reason refashioned them into antisemitic products. Minimally, I read them as part of a monstrous strand in Christendom's relationship to Jews. Eliot, the educated Bostonian, Harvard man, and omnivorous reader knew where such pictures of Jews came from and what they had wrought.

After detailing the antisemitic implications of Eliot's antisemitic references, Sloane tends to lessen their force by submerging them in a bath of non-antisemitic sources, puns, and learned allusions. I find this makes confusing reading. Here, the book's discontinuous argumentation add to the problem. Sloane devotes pages of treatment to putatively antisemitic elements in Eliot's poetry, one of the important themes of her book, and then the subject vanishes, reemerging later in different, sometimes unrecognizable forms. My second reservation is a bit less literary.

It's not only Eliot's poems under discussion, but also Eliot's public image as the symbol of Christian probity. Satire by its nature is a mixed genre. It like its creators – depends on its implied or stated moral principles to escape the charge of bad temper, gratuitous nastiness, malicious political or social agendas. It has both consciousness of – and intention to effect some change in – public behavior or attitudes. These poems appeared in real life, a time of virulent antisemitism. They were taught in uni-

versities after the Holocaust had become a known fact, and often without any felt need to discuss their contribution to maintaining the respectability of a particularly vicious American, English, and Western behavior. My old Portuguese New England First Sergeant once said you don't have to be an intellectual to know when you're being put down. Pure sources only aggravate the impure insult; they don't lessen the effect. Once the *merde* – to use a favorite Eliot term – falls on you, you never forget the smell.

That said, I take part of Sloane's admonition to heart.

Even though I read 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' and 'Gerontion' differently, it is only fair to repeat, and insist, that these are rareties in the opus of one of the twentieth century's greatest poets. They are not what he will be remembered for, nor would I have it any other way.

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