

T.S. Eliot and Hyam Plutzik: “Hypocrite Leteur, mon Semblable, mon Frere”

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The Book of Exodus reports that the God of Moses inflicted ten plagues upon the Egyptians—calamities ranging from frogs and boils to locusts and, finally, the death of the firstborn of Pharaoh’s nation. Three and a half millennia later, during the mid-twentieth century, it must have seemed to American Jewry that the God of Modernism was trying to balance the scales by inflicting a plague of poets upon them.

The most notorious of these poetic persecutors, of course, was Ezra Pound, who railed in *Canto* and on radio against medieval usurers (in his mind, the precursors of the Jewish bankers of his day). Capitalists and communists alike came under his scorn, as in this diatribe broadcast from Rome: "Two gangs. [The] Jews' gang in London, and [the] Jews' murderous gang over in Moscow." Though bankers and revolutionaries might seem strange bedfellows, they easily snuggled under the Poundian counterpane, for they had one thing in common—their Jewishness. But if Pound's insanity can be mitigating, what leeway can be given to Eliot, who penned such blunt lines as: "The rats are underneath the piles/The jew is underneath the lot. Money in furs"? It was this poem, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," that roused Hyam Plutzik to publish, in a 1955 issue of *The American Scholar*, the poem "For T.S.E. Only," which directly confronts Eliot for his vicious stereotyping of the Jews as money-grubbing barbarians.

The context of this paper is the intellectual climate of postwar America, in which the Jewish community—in yeshiva and synagogue and dining room—spent countless hours trying to make sense of what some considered the twin plagues of Pound and Eliot. Indeed, I can imagine the more lighthearted among them assembling at a seder in the 1950s and improvising the following verse to the traditional "Dayeinu" song about the Israelites' escape from Egypt: "If He had just impounded Pound in Pisa, and had not impelled Plutzik to tell it to Eliot--Dayeinu, it would have been enough!"

In 2003, Rodger Kamenetz published "The Lower Case Jew," a poem in which he imagined T. S. Eliot hauled before a rabbinical court on charges of anti-Semitism. Eliot's

character Bleistein, here the prosecuting attorney, suggested the following sentence for his creator: "I propose you send him / to Hyam Plutzik's grandson's bar mitzvah. / For the Jews it will seem all afternoon. / For him, a hundred years. / He'll hora with Rachel nee Rabinovitch / and kazatzki with Allen Ginsberg / who will give him wet sloppy kisses...." After hearing the proposed sentence (which included joke-torture (by Yiddish comedians) and palate-torture (by schmaltzy concoctions of matzo ball soup and gefilte fish), a groaning and unrepentant Eliot pleads for mercy, claiming "O I am bound to a bagel of fire."

As part of the research for this article, I interviewed Zach Plutzik, the 19-year-old grandson of Hyam who is now a sophomore at Yale, following in the footsteps of his illustrious grandfather, who had been a student there 70 years earlier, when WASPhood was in flower.

"Did T. S. Eliot attend your bar mitzvah?" I asked.

"No," replied Zach, with a disappointed frown, followed by a quick smile.

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My paper is not an attempt to analyze the larger debate over Eliot's anti-Semitism, which is a task far beyond my limited. For those interested in this debate, I refer them to the January 2003 issue of *Modernism/Modernity*, (vol. 10, no. 1) which includes thoughtful papers by seven scholars, including James Longenbach, who succeeded Hyam Plutzik in the English department at the University of Rochester and is today director of the Plutzik Reading Series established in his memory in 1962. The issue is generally condemnatory of Eliot, but a paper by Ronald Schuchard does come to his defense. In "Burbank with a Baedeker, Eliot With a Cigar: American Intellectuals, Anti-Semitism and the Idea of Culture," Schuchard cites Eliot's correspondence with Horace M. Kallen, a noted New York Jewish intellectual and Zionist while arguing that Eliot was in fact a "philo-Semite" who was not nearly as "anti-Semitic" as received wisdom would suggest.

But I trust that the reader is well aware of the many academic debates about the issue of Eliot's anti-Semitism. The paper that I am presenting is far more limited in its scope: it is merely an attempt to present the story of how one Jewish American poet of the mid-20th century, in the relative calm of an upstate university far from the epicenters of literary controversy, came to terms with his tormentor.

In this context, it is helpful to give a little biographical information about Plutzik. He was born in the Brooklyn shtetl in 1911, a few years after his parents had arrived from Belarus. For

most of the 1920s, he lived with his family on a farm near Bristol, Connecticut, in Yankee country, whence they had fled to escape the unhealthy, overcrowded conditions of New York City. Plutzik did his undergraduate work at Trinity College, whose very name symbolizes the Anglo-Christian culture that Eliot so fervently embraced. At Trinity, Plutzik served as one of the editors of the college's literary magazine and came under the influence of Odell Shepard, who wrote him a recommendation for Yale with the disclaimer that Plutzik displayed none of the unpleasant characteristics often seen in students of Jewish heritage. At Yale, Plutzik won the Cooke prize (precursor to today's Yale Poetry Prize) twice, the only poet to have been so honored. After service in World War II in England, Plutzik became the first Jewish faculty member at the University of Rochester. In 1961, his long poem *Horatio* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. I have argued elsewhere that this poem, ostensibly about the character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, was a kind of coded prototype for a poem Plutzik planned to write on the Holocaust, a project that never came to fruition because Plutzik died a year later at the age of 50.

Like T. S. Eliot, Plutzik was especially captivated by the metaphysical and religious poetry of the seventeenth century, counting Donne, Herrick and Milton among his intellectual forebears. Like many of his compatriots in midcentury America, he often submitted work to literary magazines under pen names that did not reveal his Jewishness. For example, some of his science-fiction articles were published under the name "Anaximander Powell." But never did Plutzik disdain or deny his connectedness to his Jewish heritage: he was a deep thinker who used many references to Jewish history and mysticism in his works. In the 2007 film, *Hyam Plutzik: American Poet*, his daughter Deborah Plutzik Briggs spoke of her father as a "humanist" who would go to his synagogue every weekend to discuss the great ethical issues with the rabbi and educational director. Two of his closest friends in Rochester were the late Rabbi Abraham Karp and his wife Deborah. Rabbi Karp later became a consultant in Judaica for the Library of Congress and was a consultant to a new translation for the Jewish prayer book being done by a Conservative rabbinical group in the 1950s. Plutzik was asked to contribute his own poetic translations for many of the poems, though they were never published.

Plutzik's decision to confront Eliot in his poem "For T.S.E. Only"—and the style in which he did it—serves to illuminate a strategy followed by many Jewish intellectuals of the era, a "duplicitous" one that helped them navigate the shoals of American universities during the immediate postwar years when they were still often unwelcome in the groves of academe. As

will be explained later, I use the term "duplicitous" not in the sense of "devious" or "deceptive" but as a term to describe the "multifaceted" stance that Plutzik and his colleagues crafted in order to reconcile their hyphenated identities and maintain their Jewish roots within the pluralistic ethos of American university life.

It should be remembered that this pluralistic ethos was forged during the Cold War, when it was expected that Americans were to shed their hyphenated, ethnic identities in favor of a bland, suburban-esque conformity exuding "truth, justice, and the American way." This was also the McCarthy era, in which Jewish voices were especially suspect, like those of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the "Hollywood Ten." In his excellent monograph, *Cold War Poetry* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), Edward Brunner singles out Hyam Plutzik as one of the poets of that decade who "refused to turn inward" (i.e., refrain from addressing the larger issues of society, like the Bomb, or conformity, or anti-Semitism). By confronting these larger issues, Brunner writes, they "emerge from this era with a dignity that they did not win easily (and they still lack the reputations they deserve)." Brunner juxtaposes Plutzik and other "refuseniks" with mainstream poets (like Eliot, of course) who were "placed in a position to understand from their own writings that they were as much on the outside as others they had been quick to dismiss...."

We know that Hyam Plutzik read Eliot carefully and took pains to give him his due as a significant Modernist poet and critic. I have examined all of Plutzik's lecture notes (more than 50 handwritten pages) at his archives in the University of Rochester and found nothing referring to Eliot an anti-Semite. All of these lecture notes testify to Plutzik's admiration for Eliot's reputation as a gifted poet and writer, a position shared by many of his academic colleagues of that period. If Plutzik harbored personal animosity toward Eliot for his putative anti-Semitism, he certainly did not let that color his presentation in the classroom. For example, there is this passage from the introduction to one of Plutzik's courses: "Says only Eliot most important influence in English poetry at this time, that more [than] anyone he helped change the course ... " Among the "difficulties" Plutzik presented to his students were the following: "a classicist/an aristocratic poet in democratic/TS not an escapist, makes you think/TS too cosmopolitan/TS a highly-skilled workman." Not a word about Burbank or Bleistein.

Other critics were certainly harsher toward Eliot. As Anthony Julius wrote in his 1998 essay, "Reflections on T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form, [American Notes and Queries, vol 11], "Anti-Semitism was a muse for Eliot. It was on occasion his inspiration. And

his exploitation of its literary potential—mining an ugly, thin seam was virtuous. It yielded remarkable, disturbing results: chiefly, the poetry collected in the volume entitled *Ara Vos Prec* (1920)." One of the poems in this collection, "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" is, of course, the poem that inspired Hyam Plutzik to respond with a poem of his own that is at once biting and conciliatory, passionate and compassionate.

"For T.S.E. Only" appeared in *The American Scholar*, the publication of the Phi Beta Kappa society, in the spring of 1955, and was included in his second collection, *Apples from Shinar*, published by Wesleyan University Press in 1959 (and reprinted in 2011 for the hundredth anniversary of Hyam Plutzik's birth). The poem, though, almost never saw publication because it had been misplaced by the editors of *The American Scholar*. In a letter to Plutzik dated March 18, 1954, an embarrassed Hiram Hayden tried to explain the circumstances:

Several months passed and amidst scurrying about here and there doing a hundred other things we lost track of this. Also during that period my secretary left and a new one came, hence no one reminded me 'in the usual fashion to which I had become accustomed' ... time has come and time has gone and we still haven't found it. My great concern, of course, is whether you have a copy.

There is no excuse at all for the way we have handled this, and I have no choice but to throw myself on your mercy and hope that you will find it possible to forgive ... " Hayden added as a p.s. that "I should think this [poem] warranted \$15 on the strength of its length.

I quote these passages because "For T.S.E. Only" is certainly a poem in which the quality of mercy is not as strained as the *Scholar's* editorial budget. Although, as we have heard in the recording I just played, Plutzik begins his recitation with a confrontational tone, his harsh-sounding attitude quickly melts into a plea for commonality and mutual understanding. Indeed, Plutzik seems quite eager to establish common ground with Eliot, whom he addresses as a fellow sufferer in exile.

The language of Plutzik's plea connotes reconciliation; indeed, it is apparent that Plutzik is quite comfortable addressing Eliot in the very language of Christian discourse, with its emphasis on "Word made flesh" through the agency of the Virgin Mary. "O you may enwomb yourself in words or the Word," Plutzik writes, adding parenthetically, "(The Word is a good refuge for people too proud / To swallow the milk of the mild Jesus' teaching)." Plutzik's choice of the word "enwomb" is quite evocative of the breadth of his religious awareness. Several

verses later, he writes "In the time of sweet sighing you wept bitterly / And now in the time of weeping you cannot weep." Here, Plutzik displays a deep sensitivity to the cultural markers and the language of Christian redemption, reproving Eliot only in the gentlest of tones for taking refuge in the Word to justify his slurs on the Jewish people. Eliot may have prided himself on his admiration for Anglo-Catholic church and culture, but Plutzik's choice of imagery here indicates that Eliot is not the only one who is conversant with many of the details of Christian liturgy and prayer. Plutzik here is making an obvious allusion to the "Salve Regina" prayer ("Hail, Holy Queen") especially beloved of Roman Catholics, a prayer that includes the familiar phrase "to thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears." Was this again Plutzik's subtle way of provoking the Anglo-Catholic Eliot as gently as he could?

Plutzik, as a Jew, could have here reminded Eliot of specifically Jewish tropes of exile: the Babylonian captivity, or of the sojourn in Egypt, or of the exilic diaspora in Europe after the destruction of the Temple, but instead he chooses the conciliatory language of a prayer addressing the sorrowful Mother, the Virgin Mary. The prayer continues, "To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve... after this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of Thy womb, Jesus." And it should be noted that another of Plutzik's phrases reveals his familiarity with Christian scriptures. "Come, do so quickly" seems an obvious reference to the closing phrases of John's Book of Revelation (a.k.a. The Apocalypse), the last book in the Christian New Testament, where John longs for the Second Coming, imploring Jesus to "come quickly."

In his very choice of imagery, Plutzik thus seeks communion with Eliot and Eliot's religious tradition despite the fact that "T.S.E." is so unfairly dismissive about Plutzik's tradition. The conciliatory Plutzik does not resort to name-calling or the hurling of invective; he merely warns his brother poet against enwombing himself in the Word too deeply lest the Word stick a needle in his balloon (the original draft used the word "cocoon"). Even Dante, the inventor of so much of the imagery that decorated the literature of Western Christendom, is invoked in the last stanza of "For T.S.E. Only."

Yet, the long-suffering Plutzik does not invoke Dante in order to consign Eliot to one of his nine hells but only to implore him to meditate on his lack of fraternal compassion, and invite him to pray together for their mutual exile.

A search in Plutzik's archives at the University of Rochester reveals little correspondence about the genesis or reception of "For T.S.E. Only," almost as though he considered the poem a

private matter between him and Eliot—although ultimately destined for a public forum (though *The American Scholar* can hardly be considered a mass audience). The only document in which Plutzik alludes to the poem comes in an April 20, 1955 letter to Fred D. Wieck, director of the University of Michigan Press, who had congratulated Plutzik on its publication. Plutzik replies, "To tell you the truth, I was expecting some brickbats, if anything, for I was treading upon what (in some quarters) is holy ground." Later in the letter, Plutzik tells Wieck that he'd been thinking of writing a book entitled "'Five (or six, or seven) Holy Blasphemers' ... involving chapters of Shelley, Blake, Melville, Baudelaire, Kafka (and a few others maybe). Each of these mixes up God and the Devil in odd ways. And then of course there are the Holy Men (like T.S.) who hate the Devil, but bring a raft of Miltonic demons into their stuff anyway... Yes, it's a revealing subject, in a time that has had as much devilish skullduggery in it as any age of the world." Thus, even in his private correspondence, Plutzik refused to engage in namecalling or vituperation toward Eliot. If his anointing of T.S. as one of the "Holy Men" is tongue-in-cheek, it is couched in a more general discussion about plans for literary works—a far cry from Eliot quite publicly proclaiming that "The rats are underneath the piles, / The jew is underneath the lot."

Interestingly, Plutzik was drafting "For T.S.E. Only" in exactly the same period of time he was contemplating several projects of a decidedly "Jewish" nature. In addition to the long poem on the Holocaust alluded to earlier, in the spring of 1955, he was also engaged in frequent correspondence with fellow members of the Jewish Prayer Book Committee on his new translations. This must have made Plutzik especially sensitive to the Eliot issue. Indeed, some of the letters from the editors of *The American Scholar* appeared in his mailbox the same week as did letters from the Prayer Book Committee. One of the prayers being discussed, "EI Anon Al Kol," might have resonated particularly with Eliot and his interest in Aryan mythology. In this prayer, Plutzik offers this translation: "The spirits, instruments of God, named after fire--/The spirits named for a whirling wheel.... " T. S. Eliot, "bound to a bagel of fire" in Rodger Kamenetz's poem, might have seen the allusion, if only through a glass, darkly. The final phrase of "For T.S.E. Only," "hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère" is an affirmation of human and intellectual solidarity by Plutzik. In the intellectual wasteland of the Cold War, with marginalized groups such as Jews serving as easy targets for brahmins and demagogues, the voice of Hyam Plutzik seems almost unique in its almost-naive plea for brotherhood even in the midst of fire and plague.