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T. S. Eliot's Nightingales: A Rereading

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

Whereas the arrangements of past and present in "Burbank with a Baedeker" and *The Waste Land* are definite enough to invite discourse, nobody has made much sense out of Agamemnon and Sweeney, who resist the intelligence . . .

—W. Y. Tindall *The Literary Symbol*

I

THE nightingale's is a voice very often heard in literature. Penelope heard it long ago reminding her of her pain. Juliet heard it centuries later, or thought she heard it in the voice of the lark. One Spanish poet finds in it cause for exultation, another finds in it cause for grief. The nightingale's singing might be unwelcome to Shakespeare's Valentine if Sylvia be not with him: but it is a most welcome sound

to weary bands
Of travelers, from some shady haunt
Among Arabian sands.

To Milton it is a source of renewed courage, urging him to go on writing poetry despite his blindness:

as the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid;

but to Keats the nightingale's deathless song is a source of exquisite pain that makes him long for death.¹

Thus, the song that "found a path through the sad heart of Ruth," the song "heard in ancient days by emperor and clown" has also been heard by generation after generation of readers to whom it has become one of the most familiar of sounds. Yet, though heard often in literature, nowhere is it heard with such startling effect as in Eliot's poem *Sweeney among the Nightingales*. A line from Milton comes to mind: "And singing *startle* the dull night."² But Milton's lark does not *startle* the dull night as sharply as does the plaintive wail of Eliot's nightingales

singing near
The Convent of the Sacred Heart

while Sweeney and his friends are carousing in a nearby café.

II

Carousing is not the word: *carrying on* is better—a term sufficiently vague to cover the possibilities, for it is not entirely clear just what is going on in that café. The details are sharp, the situation obscure, and from the same data the critics have drawn contradictory conclusions. The poem in full is as follows:

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

The circles of the stormy moon
Slide westward toward the River Plate,
Death and the Raven drift above
And Sweeney guards the hornéd gate.

Gloomy Orion and the Dog
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees.

¹ The passages referred to are from the *Odyssey* xix 512-529; *Romeo and Juliet* III 5; Lope de Vega *Cantan los ruiseñores*; Garcilaso de la Vega *Cual suele el ruiseñor con triste canto*; Shakespeare *Two Gentlemen of Verona* III 1; Wordsworth *The Solitary Reaper*; Milton *Paradise Lost* III 38-40; Keats *Ode to a Nightingale*.

² *L'Allegro* 42.

Slips and pulls the table cloth
 Overturns a coffee cup,
 Reorganized upon the floor
 She yawns and draws a stocking up;

The silent man in mocha brown
 Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;
 The waiter brings in oranges
 Bananas, figs and hothouse grapes;

The silent vertebrate in brown
 Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
 Rachel *née* Rabinovitch
 Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;

She and the lady in the cape
 Are suspect, thought to be in league;
 Therefore the man with heavy eyes
 Declines the gambit, shows fatigue,

Leaves the room and reappears
 Outside the window, leaning in,
 Branches of wistaria
 Circumscribe a golden grin;

The host with someone indistinct
 Converses at the door apart,
 The nightingales are singing near
 The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood
 When Agamemnon cried aloud,
 And let their liquid siftings fall
 To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.³

From the poem we gather the following data: (a) A man with simian characteristics and a simian name (Apeneck Sweeney) sits sprawled, arms hanging down, laughter distorting his face. (b) This same man (or is it another?) is referred to in subhuman terms: he is the "silent vertebrate in brown"; "the man with heavy eyes"; who "sprawls at the window-sill and gapes." (c) A woman in a Spanish cape tries to sit

³ *Sweeney among the Nightingales* belongs to Eliot's early work, being included in his *Poems* (1919) and *Ara vos prec* (1920). It is quoted here in full from *The Complete Poems and Plays* (1952) by kind permission from the publishers, Messrs. Harcourt Brace and Company (New York).

on Sweeney's knees but falls to the floor instead, overturning a coffee cup in the process. The incident hardly troubles her:

Reorganized upon the floor
She yawns and draws a stocking up.

(d) The waiter brings in the fruit—expensive fruit: oranges, bananas, figs, hothouse grapes. Another woman in the party, with a Jewish name, “tears at the grapes with murderous paws.”

(e) The man in brown (is this Sweeney himself or is it another man?) “contracts, concentrates, withdraws.” He “declines the gambit, shows fatigue.” He leaves the room. The reason for his withdrawal is that the two women are “suspect, thought to be in league.” He

reappears
Outside the window, leaning in,
Branches of wistaria
Circumscribe a golden grin.

(f) At this point the host comes into the picture in a manner which could be described as either casual or sinister, depending upon one's interpretation of the poem.

And that is all the information we have of what goes on in that café.

III

Or rather that is all the *direct* information given, for much indirect information can be gathered from the rest of the poem. Indeed the poem consists of a tissue of suggestions—of “hints and guesses, hints followed by guesses”—which serve as a commentary on the scene in the café. These suggestions are conveyed in a curious manner: the description of the trivial scene we have just witnessed in the café is framed between two mysterious passages, the one apocalyptic, the other sinister.

The first of these framing passages takes us to the stars, the moon, the ends of the earth and to the very gateways of the nether-world; and then quite casually we are brought back to the café. The sudden transition from the apocalyptic heavens to the vulgar café jolts the reader into wondering what possible connection there could be between them: between the constellations and the shrunken seas on the one hand and a woman on Sweeney's knees on the other.

The other framing passage takes us into antiquity and is introduced with equal suddenness:

The host with someone indistinct
Converses at the door apart,

and then with only a comma to mark the transition we are lifted from the café to the world of nightingales, to the bloody wood, to Agamemnon's murder, and to the convent of the Sacret Heart.

The fact that the scene in the café is framed between these two mysterious passages has the effect of elevating a trivial incident above the level of triviality and investing it with portentous significance.

It seems obvious that we have here what is called *montage*, a term borrowed from the films. Two film-sequences placed together "inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition."⁴ Eliot's poem places in unexpected juxtaposition several incongruous elements: Sweeney, Agamemnon, the heavens, the seas, the "hornéd gate," the convent and the singing of nightingales. The question is: what does it all mean? If the juxtaposition of two incongruous things produces "a new concept, a new quality," what is this new concept and new quality produced by the juxtaposition of such incongruous elements in this poem?

IV

That the critics are baffled by Sweeney and the nightingales is obvious from the number of conflicting interpretations of the poem. Indeed there are not wanting those who say that no one has made much sense out of the poem and that no one ever will.⁵ In general however there are four interpretations given. Let us examine them briefly.

The First Interpretation

Some understand the poem as an oblique condemnation of modern culture (or lack of culture) by presenting a contrast between ancient beauty (typified by Agamemnon and

⁴ Sergei M. Eisenstein *The Film Sense*, quoted by W. Y. Tindall *The Literary Symbol* (New York 1955) p. 205.

⁵ Tindall *The Literary Symbol* p. 208.

the nightingales) and modern ugliness (typified by Sweeney and his companions in the café). According to this reading, the poem deprecates modern vulgarity and sighs for the good old days of classic beauty, viz. the golden world of Agamemnon and Philomel.

The difficulty with this interpretation is that it seems to run counter to certain elements in the poem. The legend of the nightingales in Greco-Roman mythology is (as we shall see later) a horrible, not a beautiful story. Nor is the sordid story of Agamemnon's murder particularly beautiful. The disdainful treatment of Agamemnon's shroud by the nightingales does not seem to reflect glory on him or his world. Moreover, how account for the portents in the sky or on the seas, and how account for the convent of the Sacred Heart? Consequently, despite the eminent men⁶ who have offered it, it would seem that this first interpretation must be rejected.

The Second Interpretation

Others find in the poem a murder plot: Sweeney is to be murdered as Agamemnon had been murdered, and for the same reason—"lechery."⁷ The plaintive wail of nightingales serves as a link between the two murders.

This interpretation has more to commend it than the first, for on the one hand it is intrinsically plausible, and on the other it is widely held by responsible critics.⁸

Those who accept this interpretation will find much support in the text. The very atmosphere of the poem is one of foreboding. There is death in the sky and death in the bloody

⁶ This is substantially Matthiessen's explanation in *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (New York and London 1947) p. 34, though on p. 129 of that same work he seems also to accept the second interpretation. Jacques Barzun *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* (Boston 1947) appears also to accept this interpretation (e.g. pp. 266, 311 and elsewhere *passim*).

⁷ George Williamson *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (New York 1953) p. 98.

⁸ Among them Professor Maynard Mack of Yale who with Leonard Dean and William Frost edited *Modern Poetry* (New York 1950 pp. 116-118). See also Williamson *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* pp. 97-99. Likewise F. O. Matthiessen *op. cit.* p. 129.

wood, and it is but natural to conclude by analogy that there must also be death in the café. It is possible to read (as critics do) a suggestion of death in the nightingales' wail at Agamemnon's murder, and a sinister import may be read into such words as "murderous paws," "suspect," "thought to be in league." One critic finds a suggestion of death in the mention of "Gloomy Orion" and of the "hornéd gate."⁹ The same critic finds a suggestion of bloody death in three red-colored objects: grapes, wistaria, and the Sacred Heart. The phrase "declines the gambit" has likewise been taken to contain connotations of blood, for "gambit," we are told, involves a "sacrificial pawn."¹⁰ The host's conversation at the door "with someone indistinct" has also been understood in a sinister sense. Finally, there is the epigraph from Aeschylus:

(Alas, I have been struck a mortal blow).

The evidence in favor of the murder-of-Sweeney theory would thus seem to be overwhelming.

For all its apparent cogency, however, this interpretation leaves much to be desired: for on the one hand it assumes too much and on the other it leaves several elements of the poem unexplained.

It assumes too much: for it is based on the inference that, because murder is definitely in the air, therefore it must be Sweeney who is going to be murdered—an obvious *non sequitur*.

It leaves several elements unexplained: for instance, *who* is Sweeney and *why* should he be murdered? He is surely an insignificant character: why then should his death be mentioned in the same breath as Agamemnon's, King of Men and Shepherd of the People? "When beggars die, there are no comets seen; the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes": but Sweeney's impending death (if the poem *is* about his impending death) is blazed forth by all the starry constel-

⁹ "The constellations have ominous mythological associations, particularly disaster at the hands of women. Sweeney keeps watch at the horned gate of death through lechery, the fate of the hunter Orion."—Williamson *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

lations. If this is the poem's intent, would not the poem seem to be a piece of disproportionate rhetoric?

Then there are details that seem incompatible with a sinister plot. How explain the lady's nonchalance on finding herself upon the floor? Or how explain Sweeney's own conduct which shows boredom, not dread? It is true that Sweeney is said to "decline the gambit" (which may or may not contain suggestions of "sacrificial pawns"): but he does nothing more vigorous than show fatigue and leave the room. He reappears later at the window where his "golden grin" is framed against the wistaria. But golden grins are surely inappropriate preludes to murder!

Then there is the convent of the Sacred Heart. The word *heart*, it is true, might contain suggestions of blood: but why the *Sacred Heart*? And what have convents to do with such men as Sweeney?

There is also the line "And Sweeney guards the hornéd gate." It seems gratuitous to take this line as an indication that Sweeney is about to die. At first sight indeed this explanation would seem to be valid, for the "hornéd gate" is one of the two gates of Hades—the gate of ivory and the gate of horn. But a little reflection will remind us that these gates are both *exits* from Hades, not entrances thereto. Vergil is witness to this point:

Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,
altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia manes.¹¹

The words to be noted are *exitus* in the second line and *mittunt* in the fourth. The gates are exits—the horn for real, the ivory for false apparitions. If then Sweeney "guards the hornéd gate," his watching would seem to be involved with some ema-

¹¹ *Aeneid* vi 893-6. Mr. C. D. Lewis thus translates the passage (*The Aeneid of Vergil* New York 1953 p. 155):

There are two Gates of Sleep: the one is made of horn,
They say, and affords the outlet for genuine apparitions;
The other's a gate of brightly shining ivory; this way
The Shades send up to earth false dreams that impose upon us.

nations coming *from* Hades, not with his imminent propulsion thither.

There is one final objection to the murder-of-Sweeney interpretation of Eliot's poem. Such an interpretation does not sufficiently explain the nightingales. As the title indicates, the nightingales occupy a pivotal position in the poem. What is their function? Why do they sing now as they sang at Agamemnon's murder? Why do they sing near the convent of the Sacred Heart? Why did they stain Agamemnon's shroud? There must be something more to this poem than the suggestion that Sweeney is about to be murdered.

The Third Interpretation

The third interpretation is similar to the first. It rejects the murder-of-Sweeney theory but accepts the thesis that the main intent of the poem is to put Sweeney and Agamemnon in juxtaposition. The basis, however, for this comparison is not similarity of action (or rather of *passion*: Sweeney is to be killed as Agamemnon had been) but symbolic contrast, and the contrast is between the values of Agamemnon's world and the lack of values of Sweeney's.

Miss Elizabeth Drew, who proposes this interpretation, explains it thus:

In Burbank the opposition is a clear-cut one between the values of the past and of the present, but in *Sweeney among the Nightingales* the emphasis is rather upon the distinction between two atmospheres, two attitudes towards reality. On the one hand there is human life conceived in a religious and moral framework, surrounded by spiritual forces of which it is a living part; on the other, there is the disintegrated, rootless, unstable isolated position of the individual in the midst of the futility and anarchy of pure materialism.¹²

In other words, "everything that Agamemnon and his story . . . stands for . . . has been killed by Sweeney and his like. The basic ironic contrasts of the poem" (continues Miss Drew) "are those between the suggestions of the significance of life seen in such terms of value and order and the complete insignifi-

¹² Elizabeth Drew *T. S. Eliot, the Design of His Poetry* (New York 1953) pp. 42-46.

cance of the modern scene. These people have not even the vitality to have violent passions of any sort."¹³

That last sentence is undoubtedly a clue to the meaning of the poem for it expresses a thought which is a commonplace in Eliot.¹⁴ Yet it seems odd that the Agamemnon story, with its tale of brutality and infidelity, should be taken as a symbol "for life conceived in a religious and moral framework" or for the "significance of life seen in such terms of value and order." Is that not like using the red crescent or the red sickle as a symbol for Christendom?

Furthermore, Miss Drew's explanation for the allusion to the Sacred Heart does not seem completely satisfactory. She finds justification for the allusion in the fact that the Sacred Heart symbolizes mercy—the opposite of the spirit of revenge in the story of the nightingales and of Agamemnon. But, while this is indeed true, what connection is there between Sweeney or his café and the convent of the Sacred Heart? Unless such a connection can be shown, the poem would seem to be loosely knit.

There is, however, one capital point in Miss Drew's favor: it is her explanation of the nightingales. They are (in her interpretation) the link between the world of myth (Agamemnon) and the world of actuality (Sweeney). Their significance consists in the fact that Sweeney and his like do not hear them. They are deaf to the nightingale's song, as to the story behind that song—a story of cruelty and revenge. It seems to us that Miss Drew could have gone much further: for Agamemnon and Sweeney are *both* deaf to many other things which the nightingales say.

The Fourth Interpretation

At this point we might be permitted to note in passing a fourth interpretation—a highly ludicrous construction of the entire sequence of Sweeney poems offered in mock-seriousness by Mr. T. H. Thompson. Where most critics take Eliot (and themselves) too seriously, Mr. Thompson refuses to take him

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ See below, note 24.

seriously at all. The trouble with Eliot, he says, is that he tries to write in three centuries at once: he adopts the mind of a seventeenth-century metaphysical poet to write twentieth century detective fiction with a nineteenth century romantic pen. The result is confusing. But (says Thompson) if one studies the clues attentively, Sweeney ceases to be baffling. He then proceeds to solve the mystery of Sweeney. It is splendid fun and it is a pity to have to omit detailed mention of it.¹⁵

But we must seek a deeper explanation.

V

The late Professor Matthiessen informs us that Eliot once remarked that all he consciously set out to create in *Sweeney among the Nightingales* was a sense of foreboding.¹⁶ If so, the poet has achieved his intention with signal success. This avowed intention of the author, however, should not prevent us from seeking a deeper meaning in the poem, whether or not intended by the poet. "Critics have long been allowed to say," says Mr. Empson, "that a poem may be something inspired which meant more than the poet knew."¹⁷ And Professor Wimsatt of Yale, in a well-known passage (though in another connection), specifically warns us against writing to Eliot to inquire about his meaning: "Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle."¹⁸ Indeed, T. S. Eliot himself has affirmed the same thing: "But what a poem means is as much

¹⁵ The whole piece is found in Leonard Unger's *T. S. Eliot, a Selected Critique* (New York 1948) pp. 161-169. It had originally appeared in *The London Mercury* 29 (Jan. 1934) 233-239 under the title "The Bloody Wood."

¹⁶ *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* p. 129.

¹⁷ *Seven Types of Ambiguity* preface to the second edition (London 1953) p. xiv.

¹⁸ W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley "The Intentional Fallacy" *Sewanee Review* (Summer 1946). The essay has been reprinted in compressed form in Professor Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (University of Kentucky Press 1954) p. 18. I hope Mr. Wimsatt will permit me to say in passing that it was he, during a stroll that we had together through the streets of New Haven, who first interested me in Eliot's poetry, an interest deepened by Mr. Cleanth Brooks of Yale and Father Joseph Slattery S.J. of Loyola Seminary, New York.

what it means to others as what it means to the author; and indeed, in the course of time a poet may become merely a reader in respect of his own works, forgetting his original meaning—or without forgetting, merely changing.”¹⁹

How then may we interpret *Sweeney among the Nightingales*?

The Heavens

There are five major elements in the poem: a) the heavens; b) Sweeney and the café; c) Agamemnon and the bloody wood; d) the convent; e) the nightingales. Of these, the nightingales may be said to hold a central position, acting as a bridge (so to speak) that connects Sweeney with Agamemnon, the café with the convent, and both with the wood. But first, the heavens.

From the astronomical allusions a number of things might be deduced. The moon slides westward, the silent seas are hushed: therefore it is a silent night and it is late. It is also an ominous night with a hint of storm: the moon is “stormy,” Orion and the Dog are “veiled.” There is, furthermore, an expectation of disaster in the air: “Death and the Raven drift above.” The Raven, incidentally, might refer to the constellation corvus as Williamson suggests,²⁰ or it might simply mean the bird of that name. In either case, an omen.

There are other points to be noted about the night. There is a suggestion of vastness: we are taken to the stars, the moon, the seas, the ends of the earth. There is also a suggestion of cosmic order: the sliding circles of the moon, the revolutions of the vast constellations, the ebb and flow of the

¹⁹ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London 1953) p. 130.

²⁰ *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* p. 99 note 5.

tides—it is a dynamic order of cosmic proportions, tremendous in compass, ominous in significance.²¹

Late, silent, ominous, a night of mysterious foreboding, of impending storm and disaster; it is withal a night in which one senses the vastness of the universe and the constancy and magnitude of that cosmic order that makes the heavenly bodies revolve at staggering speed without crashing into one another.

And here, at this point, is the first great contrast of the poem: not between the nightingales' "beauty" and Sweeney's sordidness, nor between the "values" of Agamemnon's world and the lack of values of Sweeney's, but between the ordered grandeur of the circling heavens and the petty, disordered insignificance of Sweeney's midnight life. The stars and planets might revolve and the rivers might flow and the seas might shrink—but Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees and lets his arms hang down to laugh, while some woman tries to sit on his knees and another tears savagely at the grapes.

And *there*, we think, is the significance of the line: "And Sweeney guards the hornéd gate." Its force is in its sudden juxtaposition with astronomical portents. For while stars revolve and seas are hushed and the moon slides westward and Death and the Raven drift above, the gate of horn is guarded not by titan nor by giant nor by demiurge—but by Sweeney, he of the heavy eyes and simian neck, the silent vertebrate in brown, who sprawls at the window-sill and gapes.

²¹ This thought has engaged Eliot's attention elsewhere, for instance in *Choruses from the Rock* (*The Complete Poems and Plays* p. 96):

The Eagle soars in the summit of Heaven,
 The Hunter with his dog pursues his circuit.
 O perpetual revolution of configured stars,
 O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,
 O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
 The endless cycle of idea and action,
 Endless invention, endless experiment,
 Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
 Knowledge of speech but not of silence;
 Knowledge of words and ignorance of the Word.

See also the *Four Quartets: Burnt Norton II* (*Complete Poems and Plays* pp. 118-9).

There is no need to suppose that Sweeney is about to be killed. Neither he nor any of his companions seems worth the trouble of killing. "Sweeney guards the hornéd gate" seems to have a more prosaic meaning: it is late at night and it is time for apparitions to emerge from Hades through the gate of horn, but they cannot emerge for Sweeney is at the gate. He is not asleep nor does he allow others to sleep, but neither is he awake. He is never really awake. His eyes are heavy, his intellect brutish. He exists in perpetual moral torpor.

At a deeper level this could mean that he is *always* at the hornéd gate, a citizen of "death's other kingdom,"²² one of the many who are never really alive and therefore can never really die. They are the "dead" whose burial forms the first movement of *The Waste Land*. They are the inhabitants of the vestibule of Dante's *Inferno*, not good enough for heaven, not bad enough for hell's more spectacular torments.²³

By all means (as the critics would have us) let us take into account "Gloomy Orion's" mythological associations: how the giant Boeotian hunter bragged about his prowess and was therefore blinded by Dionysus, stung by scorpions, killed by Artemis. Or perhaps (according to Horne's allegorical epic) it was not for bragging but for love that he met his end. By all means. But all this mythological lore is really not needed. Eliot's astronomical machinery seems to serve a simpler purpose: to show the contrast between the grandeur, significance and cosmic order of the heavens and the insignificance, the sordidness, the disorder of Sweeney's world.

The Café

What then is happening in the café? Nothing is happening. Nothing sinister is afoot. There is no plot to murder anyone. There seems no need to see blood in the wistaria or the grapes or in the "murderous" paws tearing at them (—except perhaps the blood of unborn infants?). There is no need

²² *The Hollow Men* (*Complete Poems and Plays* p. 56).

²³ *Inferno* III. Cf. *The Waste Land* I (*Complete Poems and Plays* p. 39). The present writer has tried to explain this passage in his article "Poetry by Allusion" PHILIPPINE STUDIES I (1953) 223-235.

to read allusions to sacrificial pawns in such current phrases as to "refuse the gambit." The host converses apart with "someone indistinct": but there need not be anything sinister in that. These things are of nightly occurrence. They are trivial things—and *therein* is their significance in the poem.

The scene speaks for itself: a boring party of bored and boring people. The fruit served is exotic: these are not financially impoverished people, but morally they are bankrupt. They are not good people, but neither have they the fascinating qualities of the diabolically evil. "So far as we do evil or good, we are human":²⁴ but these people seem less than human. They are not so much immoral as amoral. They resemble brute animals but without the energy of brutes. Even their love-making is colorless. *Hollow men, stuffed men, leaning together, headpiece filled with straw . . .*²⁵

Agamemnon and the Wood

The contrast between the café and the bloody wood (i.e. between Sweeney's world and Agamemnon's) does not seem to consist in the fact that one is ugly and the other beautiful, or that one has religious and moral values of which the other is devoid. It seems to us that the contrast is precisely in the fact that Sweeney's world is *merely sordid* while Agamemnon's was *profoundly evil*.

For Agamemnon's world *was* evil. He was evil, having killed his daughter and betrayed his wife; so was the wife, who betrayed and murdered him; so was their son, who murdered his mother to avenge his father. Adultery, conjugicide, parricide: it was an evil world, full of brutal people—but people who were *conscious* of their guilt. They knew evil for what it was. They sinned, knowing they were sinners. And they knew that sin brought with it terrible retribution. They

²⁴ "...it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation."—T. S. Eliot *Baudelaire (Selected Essays 1917-1932)* New York p. 344). On this passage see Cleanth Brooks *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill 1939) pp. 137-8; 144.

²⁵ *The Hollow Men (Complete Poems and Plays* p. 56).

could not murder their mothers without being pursued by furies, nor could they murder their husbands without being murdered by their sons; they could not murder their sons without being turned (as in the legend of the nightingales) into something subhuman—into birds.

But Sweeney and his friends are evil *without* a sense of evil. They are guilty without an awareness of guilt. No furies pursue them. They are sinners but not great sinners. Agamemnon and Clytemnaestra and Orestes and Tereus and Procne and Philomela and others in their world were sinners indeed but might have become great saints; but by no stretch of the imagination (though of course all things are possible by grace) can one imagine Sweeney or the person in the Spanish cape or Rachel *née* Rabinovitch as towering saints!

Eliot is no romanticist who condemns the present merely because it is modern and extols the past because it is imagined as beautiful. He condemns the modern vulgar world because on the one hand it is evil and on the other it is not evil enough. In a paradoxical way (the poem seems to say) the trouble with apeline Sweeney is that he is merely brutish and not really brutal.

The Nightingales

While Sweeney and his crowd are holding their boring party in the café, the voices of nightingales are heard singing near a convent. The suddenness with which the nightingales are introduced in the poem is a clue to their function. This function seems twofold. First, they are a rhetorical device to bridge together two places and two worlds: Sweeney's and Agamemnon's, the café and the wood. But besides acting as a bridge between these two worlds, the nightingales are also a symbolic device that *condemns* both worlds.

The nightingale in Greco-Roman legend stood for violated chastity, for broken conjugal vows and for infanticide. There are several versions of the legend. Homer relates one version of it, Apollodorus another; Sophocles appears to have written

a tragedy on the subject; Ovid tells the story in detail, as does Achilles Tatius.²⁶ The story has become a commonplace, alluded to by many authors, among them Dante in two cantos of the *Purgatorio*.²⁷

In substance the story is as follows: Tereus, King of Thrace, marries Procne, daughter of the King of Athens, and has by her a son, Itys, whom he loves; but Tereus falls in love with his wife's sister Philomela whom he violates, and to prevent her from telling her sister of the deed he cuts off her tongue and imprisons her in a hut in a wood. She manages however to acquaint Procne of the facts by weaving the story into a piece of tapestry. Procne rescues Philomela and together they plot a horrible revenge upon Tereus. Procne kills her own son Itys and serves up his flesh as food to his father Tereus. When the latter finds out what has happened he becomes demented, as does everyone else. He runs after the women with an axe but pursuer and pursued are turned into birds—he to a hoopoe, they into a swallow and a nightingale. The Greeks and earlier Latin writers turned Philomela into the swallow, Procne to the nightingale, but the later Latin writers reversed the roles, making Procne the swallow and Philomela the nightingale. There is something incongruous in this reversal of roles²⁸ but it is apparently this later tradition which Eliot is following in both the poem under study and in *The Waste Land*.

²⁶ Homer *Odyssey* xix 512 ss; Apollodorus *Bibliotheca* III 14.8; Ovid *Metamorphoses* vi 412-676; Achilles Tatius *Leucippe and Clitophon* v 3, 5.

²⁷ *Purgatorio* ix 13-15 and xvii 19-21.

²⁸ "It is said that, after being turned into birds, Procne and Tereus continued to utter the same cries which they had emitted at the moment of their transformation; the nightingale still fled warbling plaintively the name of her dead son, Itu! Itu! while the hoopoe still pursued his cruel wife crying, Poo? Poo? (Where? Where?). The later Roman mythographers somewhat absurdly inverted the transformation of the two sisters making Procne the swallow and the tongueless Philomela the songstress nightingale."—Sir James G. Frazer ed. *Apollodorus* II in the Loeb classics (Harvard 1946) pp. 99-101 note.

Whichever version is followed, the nightingale story cannot be called beautiful—which may account for the curious fact that, despite its notoriety, it finds no mention in Bullfinch's *Mythology*. It is a story of brutality in which every natural bond is broken. Thus, the nightingale's song becomes an apt symbol of disorder: of violated virginity, of marital infidelity, of infanticide, cannibalism and intended conjugicide.

Consequently, the singing of nightingales while Sweeney's party is going on is an indictment of Sweeney's world. But it is also an indictment of Agamemnon's, whose shroud the birds treated so contemptuously. It is an oblique way of saying that in Sweeney's world, as in Agamemnon's, every natural bond is broken, every natural loyalty betrayed.

The Nightingales and the Convent

There is however one thing symbolized by the nightingales which is found neither in Sweeney's café nor in the bloody wood. The nightingale, after all, is a beautiful bird and its song is beautiful. Whatever the sordidness of its mythological antecedents, it has achieved a beauty inviolable and enduring.

Above the antique mantel was displayed
The change of Philomela, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
"Jug Jug" to dirty ears.²⁹

It is a beauty achieved through pain, a serenity obtained after much tribulation. Neither in the café³⁰ nor in the bloody wood, neither in Sweeney's world nor in Agamemnon's, may one find such beauty or such serenity. Nor does anyone listen to the nightingale's voice. It is "jug jug" to dirty ears.

²⁹ *The Waste Land* II (*The Complete Poems and Plays* p. 40).

³⁰ Nowhere of course does Eliot say that Sweeney is in a café. Some would call it by a less elegant name. But the word does not matter: the sordid character of Sweeney and company is obvious.

But it is different in the convent of the Sacred Heart. There, one may find order, peace, serenity. There one may find devotion and consecration in contrast to the disloyalty and the selfishness found in the world of Agamemnon or of the nightingales or of Sweeney. The nuns in the convent are consecrated not only to God's service but also to His love; the Sacred Heart is the symbol of His love. Virtues grow in the convent: chastity, charity, humility, loyalty, piety. The convent is almost the absolute contrast to Sweeney's world and Agamemnon's. The singing of nightingales, a symbol at once of moral disorder and moral beauty, holds these three places in tension.

Barzun in a book already quoted refers to the "principle of Sweeney and the Nightingales" as

the principle of dropping the bottom from under any mood by the sudden juxtaposition of another. If we start with the disgusting Sweeney, we end with the nightingales singing near a convent; if we start with anything resembling beauty, we are catapulted into the mire. The legislator of the surrealist school, M. André Breton, has said: "To compare two objects as remote in characteristic as possible, or by any other method to put them together in a striking fashion, remains the highest task to which poetry can aspire."³¹

That may be accurate as a description of Eliot's technique, but it does not go far enough to explore the poem's meaning. The contrasts in this poem do not exist for the sake of mere contrast. They are contrasts made with a purpose, and the key to this purpose is the nightingales.

We have called them both a bridge and a symbol. Perhaps (at the risk of greater impropriety) we should call them a revolving searchlight, illuminating now the café, now the bloody wood, now the convent, drawing attention at one time to the nightingale legend, at another to the beauty of its song, at another to the place where it is singing.

³¹ *Romanticism and the Modern Ego* p. 166.

That is of course a manner of speaking. Searchlights and floodlights are strong and powerful: these are not qualities of the nightingale. Its song is delicate. Its voice sweet and soft. And it sings "darkling." Yet it is a powerful voice, piercing and penetrating.

In a poem of contrasts, this is perhaps the greatest contrast.