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## **Language and Ritual in T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes***

T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* is one of the most important pieces in modern drama. The purpose of this study of *Sweeney Agonistes* is to explore the fertilising forces that made it possible for the play to bring new colours to the language of the theatre; another aim is to look at the background of the fragments, exploring the different elements of ritual, religion, and literary sources working in the play. Although the play is fragmentary, it can be regarded as a key to Eliot's dramatic art. The way Eliot used the language of Jazz is unique in early 20th century literature; the lack of characters, plot and settings naturally draw our attention to language, which is characterised by an unprecedented vitality and dynamism. Eliot clearly succeeded in establishing a new vehicle for dramatic expression. The rituals providing the background in *Sweeney* are closely connected with Greek drama and the religious turn in Eliot's life leading to the birth of the Ariel Poems, one of which, "The Journey of the Magi," opens up to further analysis if we approach it from the direction of *Sweeney Agonistes*.

### **Introduction**

If we say that T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* is one of the most important pieces in English poetry and drama, we commit the mistake of not answering an essential question about it. The very first thing we must clarify in connection with this short fragment is whether it is a poem or a play. Its author, T. S. Eliot, is widely considered to be one of the most inventive poets of the 20th century. His ideas are recognised to have brought new life to the genre of poetry, whereas his achievements in modern theatre are less frequently referred to. Although *Sweeney Agonistes* finally appeared in Eliot's collection of his own works as a poem (among the "unfinished poems"), we can argue that it is definitely a play as it satisfies the basic formal requirements of drama. According to its subtitle, it is a "melodrama," with characters speaking in turns, divided into two acts and several scenes. And there are lists of persons appearing in the beginning of the scenes, a phenomenon not common in poetry.

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The play is written in the traditional Greek form, and has largely been acknowledged as a forerunner to modern English drama. Its real importance, however, has not yet been fully assessed. Few critics – among them Hugh Kenner, Bernard Bergonzi, Andrew Kennedy – have examined this short piece. While they all seem to agree that in this fragment of a play there is something new in the prosody and in the musical features of the language employed, they do not go further. Ronald Hayman, in his essay “The Timid Pioneer” claimed that Eliot had invented something quite new but he then abandoned the play and “it was left for later playwrights to develop the mineral resources of the territory Eliot had pioneered.”<sup>1</sup> The “mineral resources,” apart from the new imagery, were not described in more detail. Others observed the novelty of the dramatic language in the play. Bergonzi and Kennedy speak about “good dramatic language”<sup>2</sup> and “revitalised dramatic language,”<sup>3</sup> but they fail to detail why they use these terms.

As opposed to its language, one cannot find much novelty in the basic idea and content of the play. Eliot’s traditional attraction to mysticism and rituals, to textual references and hidden meanings is well-known to anyone; what the critic can best do is to find these separate elements and put them together, thus revealing some meanings of the text. The aim of this study is to explore the language of *Sweeney Agonistes* and to provide a glimpse on the elements constituting the background of the play.

## Language and Jazz

The purpose of this study of *Sweeney Agonistes* is partly to explore the fertilising forces that made it possible for the play to bring new colours to the language of the theatre. It is widely known that one of Eliot’s major ambitions was to renew the language of the theatre and that, to achieve this, he “drew on available material, popular song, or cabaret turns, or . . . Jazz-poems, while still transmuting everything he touched.”<sup>4</sup> Eliot incorporated the Greek tradition, music hall elements, the minstrel

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1. Ronald Hayman, “The Timid Pioneer,” in *T. S. Eliot: Plays*, ed. A. Hinchliffe (London: Macmillan, 1985), 81–82, p. 82.

2. Bernard Bergonzi, “Language, Theatre, And Belief,” in *T. S. Eliot: Plays*, ed. A. Hinchliffe (London: Macmillan, 1985), 77–79, p. 79.

3. Andrew Kennedy, “Ritual And Dramatic Speech Effects,” in *T. S. Eliot: Plays*, ed. A. Hinchliffe (London: Macmillan, 1985), 79–81, p. 79.

4. Robin Grove, “Pereira and After: the Cures of Eliot’s Theater,” in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 171–175, p. 173.

show, and jazz music into *Sweeney Agonistes*. He did so in order to facilitate the establishment of a new vehicle for poetic and dramatic expression.

It has been observed that jazz music is a major contribution to his efforts in renewing theatrical language. Eliot lived and wrote in a world where jazz was a most popular and widespread form of entertainment. Carol H. Smith saw jazz as the musical expression of “a modern society of materialistic automatism . . . the primitive side of man’s nature in its throbbing rhythms.”<sup>5</sup> This description clearly outlines the general features of the Jazz Age, which became the symbol of modern life, sexual freedom, and quickly deserved the adjectives “unholy,” “sinful,” “devilish.” Famous musicians like “Jelly Roll” Morton or Louis Armstrong were Eliot’s contemporaries, and he must have been aware of the social importance of jazz after the Great War. In one of his essays, “The Music of Poetry,” and in *Sweeney Agonistes* too, he gives us convincing evidence of his knowledge about the age he lived in; the “moral relativism” (an expression often used by Paul Johnson<sup>6</sup>) of a post-war society is clearly exposed in the play. Dusty and Doris, the two lower class prostitutes, meet Sam, one of their acquaintances, and his friends Krumpacker, Klipstein, and Horsfall. These men obviously want to have a good time, and the girls are ready to give them what they want. Two other characters, Swarts and Snow, who very rarely speak in the course of the play, seem to be jazz-musicians, perhaps of African origin.

In “The Music of Poetry,” Eliot states that “the rhythms of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Norman French, of Middle English and Scots, have all made their mark upon English poetry, together with the rhythms of Latin, and, at various periods, of French, Italian, and Spanish.”<sup>7</sup> It must also be noted that all popular dances and musical fashions in the Western world originated from cultures alien to the countries of Western civilisation. Dances like polka or tango came from quite different cultures but became extremely popular. Jazz, the origins of which are retraceable to black folk music, brought a very intense change because the development of the mass media and the social and moral changes in the post-war period helped unfold its influence. In *Sweeney Agonistes* we find quite a few references to music: there are jazz songs, there are technical terms connected with music (*tambo, bones, diminuendo*), all in organic unity with the texture of the play. The play itself is a melodrama, by defini-

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5. Carol Smith, “An Alliance Of Levity And Seriousness,” in *T. S. Eliot: Plays*, ed. A. Hinchliffe (London: Macmillan, 1985), 73–76, p. 75.

6. Paul Johnson, *A modern kor: A 20. század igazi arca*, trans. Gábor Berényi (Budapest: XX. Század Intézet, 2000).

7. Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), 107–114, p. 109.

tion a play combining drama and music – the latter has been integrated into *Sweeney Agonistes* in the form of complete songs.

The first step of our analysis brings us to the most obvious elements: sounds, onomatopoeia, rhyme, and rhythm. The phenomenon of “language as sound” – i.e. the use of language to create musical effects – appears frequently in the play. Sound phenomena, and also moods and feelings, are represented by onomatopoeic words (e.g. “Ting a ling ling,” “KNOCK KNOCK,” the Hoo-ha’s), but the change in the dynamics of the last song (indicated by *diminuendo*) is also very suggestive. In addition to this, the songs in the *Agon* and the final Chorus abound in references to different sounds. There are also rhymes. Rhyme is a specific form of repetition, and if we consider the sequences of rhymes spanning the whole length of the play – do, who, true, do, through, too, knew, etc. – it is easy to see how consciously Eliot manipulated language to create phonic play.

While sound-repetition is a prominent feature in *Sweeney Agonistes*, it is not only sounds that are repeated. Repetition is clearly a central phenomenon in the drama (it is important to note that rhythmic patterns are the result of the repetition of certain elements). From the multitude of examples I have picked “*Birth, and copulation, and death,*” which is repeated five times, “*that don’t apply,*” repeated three times, and there are short, frequently recurring repetitions in the dialogues (names, questions, greetings) or in Sweeney’s monologues. It is necessary to note a fact that will prove very important later on in this analysis: these repetitions – while creating coherence in the text – remind us of something which has already been heard. They are recurring themes, elements of the rhythm-of-thoughts in the drama. A similar kind of rhythm is observable in the following extract:

DUSTY How about Pereira?  
 DORIS What about Pereira?  
 DUSTY I don’t care.  
 DORIS You don’t care!  
 DUSTY Who pays the rent?  
 DORIS Yes he pays the rent  
 DUSTY Well some men don’t and some men do. . . (115)<sup>8</sup>

The repetitions form part of a dialogue made up of short question-answer sequences (resembling the call-answer structure of jazz), displaying an uncommon

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8. All parenthesised references are to this edition: Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 1969).

vitality and a gripping flow of language. Rhythm becomes an overall governing feature of the play – just like in jazz music, where the drums and the double bass provide the beat for the soloists. In this excerpt, there are unusual broken lines that add an atmosphere of uneasiness and incompleteness.

Rhythm does not only appear in the form of recurring linguistic elements in *Sweeney Agonistes*. Audible rhythm, “beat,” the alternation of accented and unaccented syllables, which is closest to rhythm in music, can be heard in most of the lines. Eliot turns language into rhythmic sound effects:

X x x Xx X x x X  
 nothing to me and nothing to you  
 x x xX x x X x x x X  
 When you're alone in the middle of the night. . . (125)

This phenomenon can be clearly seen in the final Chorus (2nd example). There, the abundance of rhythmic patterns and their variations remind us of drum-taps and the steady monotonous rhythms of the African tribal musicians, the origins of jazz. Another feature of jazz can be found in the accentuation of speech used by the characters in the play. The word and sentence stress of the characters sometimes remind us of the rhythmic patterns of jazz; their accents correspond to the unpredictable, short but loud peaks we often hear in jazz music. These peaks, or accents, are put on stressed notes in jazz music, and on stressed syllables in speech, where they make it more dynamic, expressive, and unusual. They cause the rhythm to halt for a fragment of a second, then let it carry on:

DUSTY *I* like Sam  
 Yes and Sam's a nice boy too.  
 He's a funny fellow  
 DORIS He *is* a funny fellow  
 He's like a fellow once I knew.  
*He* could make you laugh.  
 DUSTY Sam can make you laugh. . . (115–116)

It is obvious by now that *Sweeney Agonistes* is a play full of musical elements, onomatopoeia, and rhythm. As jazz is considered to have acted as an important “fertiliser” in the development of the dramatic language of the play, it is useful to refer briefly to the philosophy of jazz. Jazz is a form of expression that is based upon traditional themes, tunes and individual improvisation. Improvisation is such an organic part of jazz that it becomes a natural idiom, a mode of existence for it: jazz involves

the improvisative use of sounds based on the laws of music, confined by traditional regulations. The phenomenon behind the name “improvisation” is different in consecutive stages of jazz. In early jazz, improvisation means “improvised variations on a tune.”<sup>9</sup> Later, improvisation became “ad hoc creation of music.”<sup>10</sup>

Language has a lot in common with music in this sense. Language is, according to linguists, the combination of a finite number of elements to produce an infinite number of utterances – the ad hoc creation of language. As Noam Chomsky put it: language consists of “a set . . . of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements.”<sup>11</sup> The use of language, therefore, can be seen as an improvisative combination of linguistic elements based on linguistic rules. But there is a significant difference that cannot be ignored: in language it is a general rule not to mention something more often than necessary – speakers usually strive to achieve economy and reduce redundancy. If the question is “Where are you going?” an elliptical answer suffices: “To the shop,” and we can omit “I am going” without any consequences because the mental processes at work during conversation can fill the gap.

In music, the notion of redundancy is unknown. We cannot leave a tune just because it is already known. As improvisation is always based “on” something, that “something” – a theme or a set of harmonies – has to reappear several times in it, just as the same sound segments recur in speech. The base theme must always be there in a tune – variations are allowed, but omission is not. If the theme were simply omitted by a player, music would become chaotic and incoherent. (This means that one musician would not know what the other is doing. By analogy, we could say that they would be speaking different languages.) In music, the key terms are, therefore, repetition and variation. Here is an example from the play where Doris and Dusty are talking:

DORIS There’s a lot in the way you pick them up  
 DUSTY There’s an awful lot in the way you feel  
 DORIS Sometimes they’ll tell you nothing at all  
 DUSTY You’ve got to know what you want to ask them  
 DORIS You’ve got to know what you want to know  
 DUSTY It’s no use asking them too much  
 DORIS It’s no use asking more than once  
 DUSTY Sometimes they’re no use at all. (118)

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9. János Gonda, *Jazz: Történet, elmélet, gyakorlat* (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1979), p. 511.

10. Gonda, p. 400.

11. Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957), p. 13.

In this extract, we can see the exceptionally high proportion of repetitions. Words that are not in bold print are repeated at least once. Repetition gives coherence, an unprecedented vitality, and dramatic flow to the dialogue. The fact that elements already known have not been omitted is important. The pairs of similar sentences (lines) are structured as follows: A A B C C D D B. We must be aware, however, that repetition here is the repetition of lines from which something is taken and to which something is added. If we assume that the first line of each pair is an “original,” a theme, the second can be regarded as a “variation” on that theme: A A<sup>v</sup> B C C<sup>v</sup> D D<sup>v</sup> B<sup>v</sup>. If we compare it with a typical jazz-song structure: A A<sup>v</sup> B, C C<sup>v</sup> D D<sup>v</sup>, we immediately recognise the striking similarity. This makes it clear that Eliot – consciously or unconsciously – incorporated structures typical of early jazz (variations on lines) into the text of *Sweeney Agonistes*. The dialogue cited is quite like that of a pair of jazz musicians playing their instruments and answering to, improvising on each other’s themes. Of course, it is difficult to speak about “improvisation” in the case of a written play, but on the stage the whole can be seen and heard in real time thus creating the illusion of improvised or natural language. And this is a feature that makes *Sweeney Agonistes* similar to a jazz composition that incorporates jazz music in its language and uses the Jazz Age as its background.

## Characters and Action

From what has been said to this point, we can justly conclude that in *Sweeney Agonistes*, the primary focus is on language. In traditional plays, character, action, and language are usually of the same importance, although some deviations might occur. *Sweeney* does not fit in this line. Put squarely, we can say that there is no action in the play; what is more, the characters do not seem to be characters – in the old sense of the word – at all. Neither can we speak about a visible and realistic setting.

The characters of the play can be divided into two main groups. One “group” is Sweeney, and all the other persons belong to the other. Doris and Dusty are two common lower-class prostitutes: they are flat characters, types without individuality. The same can be said about Swarts and Snow, who almost never speak in the course of the play. They are in fact two characters from the traditional minstrel show (*Tambo* and *Bones*). The former soldiers, Wauchope, Horsfall, Klipstein, and Krum-packer are also types, with funny speaking names. At the end, these four characters are integrated to make up the Chorus, which justifies the supposition that they are no more than “tokens,” symbolic characters; they are easily identified with the corpora-

tive Greek Chorus. Eliot himself, in his 1976 Ben Johnson essay, stated that characters of such plays “are flat to fit the world they move in.”<sup>12</sup>

The other side of the coin is Sweeney himself, who is the only character who can be considered round in the play. This Sweeney is radically different from Eliot’s early Sweeney in *Sweeney Erect*, or *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*, not to mention the Sweeney seen in *The Waste Land*. This Sweeney has something to say, he knows something the others do not; his tragedy arises from not being able to convey his message. His complaint that he “gotta use words” is one foreshadowing Beckett’s complaints.

But in a drama there must be characters who are speaking and acting in a confined space. (Here, and throughout this essay, we speak about the “play” as we know it; it would be impossible to analyse the unwritten parts.) A basic problem with *Sweeney Agonistes* is that – as it has been referred to – there is no action or setting in the drama, which makes it impossible for characters to unfold. The play, in the strict sense of the word, does not have a plot. Relationships between characters do not change. And even if we consider that the play is a fragment, it is conspicuous that there is a lack of action in the play.<sup>13</sup> Critics have also noted that Eliot could not project an appropriate action to accompany the language of the play, that is why it remained a static one.<sup>14</sup> The characters do not *act* in the traditional sense of the word – the sole example of movement is when the girls cut the cards or when Dusty leans out of the window – they stick to speaking instead. In fact, characters in the play seem to be *voices*, not persons. Voices can only act through speaking. But at least, they are present. At this point, we cannot avoid the question: where? Are they coming from a realistic background, or are they suspended in timeless space?

To the fact that there is no action, we can add the observation that there is no setting in the play. What we know is that they are in some kind of a flat (because it has a window); we know that it is a kind of a house because there is a reference to the street by Sam (“Wait till I put the car round the corner”); but this is all. There is no door in its physical reality; it is only indicated by “KNOCK KNOCK” that there is one.

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12. Thomas Stearns Eliot, “Ben Johnson,” in *T. S. Eliot: Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), 147–160, p. 159.

13. In one of his essays, David Galef argues that *Sweeney Agonistes* does have a plot and “the play’s fragments cohere in what amounts to a progression . . . to a journey that, as with most of Eliot’s religious rites, must be performed in isolation.” Galef presents a convincing description of the plot of the unfinished play. See David Galef, “Fragments of a Journey,” *English Studies* 69.6 (1988) 497–508, p. 497.

14. Bergonzi, p. 77.

This lack of action and place makes the reader feel that the characters are present in an empty space, suspended between being and non-being – just as later in *The Family Reunion*. The Jazz Age – which the superficial observer might consider as a topic of the play – does not in fact solidify into an adequate setting, it only remains the background to what is going on. We can think of Swarts and Snow here, two prototypical representatives of the Jazz Age, who contribute to the play of forms giving us a parody as background characters, but, apart from that, add nothing substantial to the setting of the play.

### Rituals in the Play

If – as we have seen – there is virtually nothing in a play, only voices and language, it seems obvious that it is they (not the persons or actions) whom the reader focuses on as a subject with which communication is possible. And after the “how’s,” it is the “what’s” the readers’ attention is naturally drawn to. T. S. Eliot is famous for his abundant use of “the tradition” – as he understands it – in his poetry and drama. We know that from his very first poems on, Eliot frequently drew on his predecessors for material and he – as he described his poetic method in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” – considered familiarity with poetic tradition and a historical sense necessary for being able to write good poetry. As he was familiar with the importance of rituals and myths in human culture, Eliot frequently turned to them in his work.

*Sweeney Agonistes* is no exception. The very title is one full of meaning. “*Sweeney*” previously represented the natural man, the man driven by his instincts; in this sense, the play is closely connected to Eliot’s previous work. “*Agonistes*” refers to Milton’s famous poem and Samson’s spiritual dilemma. The putting together of the two gives “a comic-ironic impression of the incongruities of Sweeney in Samson’s place and the meaning of such a possibility.”<sup>15</sup> Samson feels compelled by divine will to pull down an alien world. Sweeney is a spiritual exile who must destroy a part of himself if he wants to break with his old life.

The subtitle “*Aristophanic Melodrama*” gives us another context for the interpretation of the text. “*Aristophanic*” implies a combination of a comic surface of social satire with the ritualistic celebration of death and rebirth. “*Melodrama*” in its original sense puts an emphasis on plot and situation; flat characters, coincidences and surprises of life are utilised for emotional effect, and it also involves a post-

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15. Smith, p. 73.

ponement of a conclusion which is inevitable and wholly foreseen.<sup>16</sup> *Melos* also implies music, which, in this case, is jazz.

The two epigraphs – one from *Choephoroi* and the other by St. John of the Cross – which put the play in a broad literary context (the basic literary precedent to the play is the *Oresteia*, a history of sin and expiation), are also organically connected to the content of the play. They both deal with rituals of death and rebirth; sin, pursuit, and purgation. The link between the two epigraphs is the penitent (in *Sweeney* exemplified by the man who “did a girl in”), who – after committing a sin – has to achieve purgation, which can lead him to rebirth – either a rebirth in society, as in comedies, or spiritual rebirth. Birth–death–rebirth: the cycle the penitent has to run through. There have been guesses that Sweeney might have been the sinner, but my reading excludes such an explanation: “I’ve been born and once is enough. / You don’t remember, but I remember, / Once is enough.” He does not want another birth as it would involve death. This suggests that Sweeney is a moral person, who does not have to – or at least does not want to – be born again. Sweeney is the one in the play who has discovered morality and who knows that someone who kills a woman, “for the brief space he has to live, he is already dead. He is already in a different world from ours. He has crossed the frontier.”<sup>17</sup> In the re-written version of *Sweeney Agonistes*, *The Family Reunion*, Harry can be identified as the penitent: “Harry has crossed the frontier / Beyond which safety and danger have a different meaning. / And he cannot return.” (342). Harry can, of course, by no means be identified with Sweeney, as we cannot prove that Sweeney has killed anyone. The important thing is that he possesses the knowledge, no matter how he obtained it: “Sweeney has passed through some fire on the other side of which telephones, gramophones, and motor cars, the enduring things of life, have become as shadows.”<sup>18</sup>

This, interestingly, leads us to religion as a possible source of knowledge. According to most religious teachings, we do not have to experience everything directly; the Word is always there for us as a source to rely upon. Sweeney, who has become a moral person, can to some extent be identified with Eliot, who – during the very period he wrote *Sweeney Agonistes* (around 1927–28) – performed a volte-face and became a member of the Church. Eliot thus once again acknowledged the importance of tradition in his life and work. This is best represented in the re-written version of *Sweeney Agonistes*, which contains explicit references to religion and church, sin

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16. Smith, p. 73.

17. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (London: W. H. Allen, 1960), p. 197.

18. Kenner, p. 195.

and expiation, while the “sinful” jazz-elements are omitted. Some of them survive, though:

IVY	I have always told Amy she should go south in the winter.	A
	Were I in Amy’s position, I would go south in the winter.	B A
	I would follow the sun, not wait for the sun to come here.	C
	I would go south in the winter, if I could afford it. . .	A B <sup>v</sup>
		(285)

1928 is traditionally considered the year Eliot abandoned his ironic-satiric style and began to write more philosophical literature. The first part of *Sweeney Agonistes* is closely connected to his *Poems* (1920) and *The Waste Land* (1922), whereas the *Agon* is a direct forerunner to *Journey of the Magi* (1928), the first piece of the famous Ariel Poems.

The first epigraph describes an episode from the pursuit of the penitent, Orestes: “*You don’t see them, you don’t – – – but I see them: they are hunting me down, I must move on.*” The final Chorus is also a reference to this. In *Choephoroi*, The Furies hunt Orestes after he killed his mother and her lover until he has achieved purgation. Eliot uses almost the same words in *The Family Reunion*:

HARRY	Look there, look there: do you see them?
GERALD	No, I don’t see anyone about.
HARRY	No, no, not there. Look there!
	Can’t you see them? <i>You</i> don’t see them, but I see them,
	And they see me. This is the first time that I have seen them. (291–292)

The penitent is haunted by powers that ordinary mortals cannot perceive. The Furies are the ones who help the penitent achieve purgation (hence the name Eumenides, benevolent goddesses). In *Sweeney Agonistes*, however, Eliot does not deal with the process of purgation. What he concentrates on is the state of the sinner, his existence, his being neither alive, nor dead (“Life is death”); the compunction he feels, the spectres he sees. The basic problem in Sweeney is not a religious or moral one, but the impossibility of communicating the personal concept of metaphysical purity that Sweeney wants to achieve by suggesting a move to a cannibal isle. On this island, there is “nothing at all” that could remind us of “created beings.” Purity for Sweeney, who is aware of the cyclical hopelessness of a life lived wholly in biological terms without the possibility of transcendence (“Birth, and copulation, and death”), can be achieved by getting away from his life of automatic mechanisms represented

by Doris, Dusty, and the others. Ironically, birth, copulation and death are the three major events in the jaded lives of Sweeney's listeners.<sup>19</sup>

Transcendence means leaving the body and the needs of the body behind, "killing desire in order to bring birth to the spirit."<sup>20</sup> This also involves Stoicism, i.e. the pursuit of virtue and the disregard for worldly goods and mundane pleasures. The extreme example of losing physical substance is dissolution in a Lysol bath: a violent murder of human desire and a dissolution of old life.

It is obvious that if "old life" is ended, something new should come in its place; and new begins with some kind of rebirth as a starting point. This is where the second epigraph comes into our interpretation. St. John of the Cross (or San Juan de la Cruz) is the patron saint of Spanish poets and a master of mystical literature. In "*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*" he describes the mystical path to union with God: "the soul cannot be possessed by the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings." This means that the distance between the creator and the creature is irrecoverable (and spiritual rebirth is impossible) unless the creature is purged of all human affectations and desires; this is what Sweeney refers to. Cannibal isle is a place where purgation can go on its way and the pious soul (in our case, a missionary) can find his way to rebirth. Eliot's famous poem, *Journey of the Magi*, refers to a similar situation: the magi have seen something after which they are "no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, / with alien people clutching their gods" (104).

And they have lost desire for "The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, / and the silken girls bringing sherbet." They "had seen birth and death," but "this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony" for them, like their own *death*, as they say. They have died once. Death and (re)birth, in their case, are basically the same: this death is the birth of morality, the beginning of a new age in the experiencer's life. They are willing to kill desire in order to bring birth to the spirit. That is one possible explanation of why they would be "glad of another death."

In *Sweeney Agonistes*, this experience is only known to Sweeney. As he tries to share it with the other characters, he finds a wall that he cannot get through. First of all, he cannot really convey the message and meaning of being neither alive, nor dead. Those who have never looked beyond an ordinary world can understand nothing of what he speaks about. Harry in *The Family Reunion* has the same problem when he says

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19. Galef, p. 502.

20. Smith, p. 75.

But how can I explain, how can I explain it to *you*?  
 You will understand less after I have explained it.  
 .....  
 You have gone through life in sleep,  
 Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be unen-  
 durable  
 If you were wide awake. (293)

This implies that once the subject has seen reality, he wants to escape from it. This can either be done by striving for spiritual rebirth (divesting themselves of the love of created beings), or by trying to play down and evade its urging imperative. But "Sweeney . . . articulates an experience which falls within his own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, his sphere is opaque to the others which surround it."<sup>21</sup> As Eliot puts it in *The Family Reunion*, "the circle of our understanding / Is a very restricted area. . . . What is happening outside of the circle?" (348). And what is happening inside another circle? This is a question no one can answer. Sweeney tries to give a sort of explication

He didn't know if he was alive  
 and the girl was dead  
 He didn't know if the girl was alive  
 and he was dead  
 He didn't know if they were both alive  
 or both were dead. . .  
 When you're alone like he was alone  
 You're either or neither. (125)

This, Galef says, means that Sweeney is struggling with words to express how he feels trapped in modern damnation.<sup>22</sup> He says "I gotta use words when I talk to you," but he knows his efforts are futile: his speech abounds in utterances that make uncertain everything he says: "That's nothing to me and nothing to you," "it don't apply," etc. He cannot reach the others, who might think "we must insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be," as they say in *The Family Reunion*. The missionary does not achieve his goal, although he already knows what he has to do is "not to run away, but to pursue, / Not to avoid being found, but to seek." The others are still trying to run away.

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21. Kenner, p. 199.

22. Galef, p. 498.

Sweeney, by forcing his message, impinges on the territory of the others. As they cannot understand him, they follow their own ways: “nothing is strange to them, nothing appals, because everything drops into familiar categories, and forms the substance of familiar songs” and newspaper articles.<sup>23</sup> They do not want confrontation with reality. The most important event of the Great War is a poker-game; murderers can only be found in newspapers and “always get pinched in the end.” Sweeney’s first-hand experience shocks them. As an escape, they interpret the cannibal isle as a Gauguinesque paradise and the “birth, copulation, and death” ritual as irresponsible flirting.

There are other telling examples of evasion; first of all, the episodes from the girls’ life. In the beginning, they try to evade Pereira; the telephone seems to be the messenger of the Greek legend bringing bad news who must be executed: “Well can’t you stop that horrible noise? / Pick up the receiver.” They can evade the actual menace by telling lies. And they can also evade the future by manipulating the meaning of the cards they pick. It is important to remember that if cards can predict the future, future must be preordained. The girls want to know about the future but they want to avoid future events at the same time. The two girls, therefore, feel panic when they pick the King of Clubs – “That’s Pereira” – but they immediately change to “It might be Sweeney.” When they pick the Coffin, they soften it to “it needn’t be yours, it may mean a friend.” Is it possible that the cards *really* tell the future? Or do they ordain it? “Well I’m not going to draw any more, / You cut for luck. You cut for luck. / It might break the spell. . .” The two girls are in their own quasi-closed world, which does not bear incertitude.<sup>24</sup> They need the retentive force of civilisation to be able to function: “I don’t like life on your crocodile isle.” “That’s not life, that’s no life / Why I’d just as soon be dead.” The girls, who are spiritually “dead” according to Sweeney’s Christian view of life, do not want spiritual rebirth. That is part of why Sweeney – the missionary – cannot make himself understood. Sweeney – just as the other persons in the play – remains in a closed circle. There can be no direct spiritual osmosis through language, as Galef summarises.<sup>25</sup>

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23. Kenner, p. 191.

24. In Galef’s essay, the card-sequence “comes across as clear prophecy regarding the events to come,” which were unwritten by Eliot, and are only referred to in his letters (Galef, p. 499).

25. Galef, p. 498.

## Conclusions

The failure of Sweeney to communicate his ideas does not diminish the importance of his knowledge. And Eliot's failure to finish the play does not lessen his achievements. "The growth of *Sweeney Agonistes* into a completed play appears to have been inhibited by Eliot's two interrelated difficulties with the drama, his reluctance to conceive drama as primarily an orchestrated action, and his bias toward a poetry that exteriorises but does not explicate the locked world of the self."<sup>26</sup> The language that Sweeney was unable to use for conveying messages might have proven similarly inadequate for Eliot to be a vehicle for his thoughts. Its strong points: the new dramatic language, and what critics call "jerky energy and effervescence"<sup>27</sup> is still there in the play. What is more, *Sweeney Agonistes* was a forerunner to modern drama. The ideas of being and non-being, of nothing happening were later fully developed by Beckett and Pinter, who, nevertheless, could not avoid using flesh and blood actors. The brilliance which enables *Sweeney Agonistes* to rise beyond the need for flesh and blood performers,<sup>28</sup> is at the same time a sort of death: it annuls actors, the body of actors, of whom only the voice remains. If we accept the supposition that *Sweeney Agonistes* is a play, and we realise that there is no real action or plot, no real characters, no realistic setting in the play, we might well ask: what remains then? The answer to this question is "language." It is language that carries and embodies the action, and carries the characters and the setting.

In *Sweeney Agonistes*, therefore, the primary focus is on language itself: playing with it, exploiting its musical, onomatopoeic, rhythmical, improvisative capacities, while heavily relying on the possibilities of jazz. Eliot and his modernist contemporaries tried to ignore old traditions, and find new ways in poetry. They managed to eliminate poetic and dramatic forms and conventions – the only "tradition" they could not ignore was language itself. (Beckett, Mrozek and the others later tried to eliminate it completely.) Eliot, in his search for new ways, gave the main role to language, leaving action, character, and plot in the background. This fact might explain why Eliot himself later put *Sweeney* among his "unfinished poems" instead of insisting on its being a play.<sup>29</sup> *Sweeney Agonistes* became a jazz-song out of the Jazz Age.

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26. Kenner, p. 201.

27. Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 535.

28. Grove, p. 173.

29. I am suggesting here that Eliot surely knew the piece he had written was good, and he consciously decided to leave it a fragment and categorise and also canonise it as a poem.

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Eliot incorporated the whole play into its own language, exposing what language alone is capable of. He also broadened the musical capacities, which only belong to language itself, and are not dependent on any other dramatic component. Thus he gave language a new, marked, separate form of existence, and made it a means of complete dramatic expression. That is why we can speak about the rebirth of dramatic language in the unfinished *Sweeney Agonistes*.