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Parodic Epiphany of Dionysus in T. S. Eliot's *Sweeney among the Nightingales*

Like most of T. S. earlier poems, *Sweeney among the Nightingales* attracts attention by references to mythological plots and the contrast of modern situation with the mythological past. However, as F. R. Leavis has pointed out, "The contrast is clearly something more than a sordid incident in a modern brothel and the murder of Agamemnon" (Leavis, 1932, 69) Eliot placed the epigraph from Aeschylus's play in its original Greek wording. In modern English, the quotation says, "Alas, I am struck deep with a mortal blow."

The situation of the poem represents a scene of specially accentuated schematic and mechanical actions, which, considering the relevant implications, might equally take place in a European restaurant or a Southern-American cantina, or in a brothel just anywhere in the world. As a matter of fact, nothing "happens" in the poem; there is neither a consistent action nor a coherent plot to be found in it; nevertheless, the artistic space is densely populated by the characters. From the point of view of the "contents", the whole scene resembles defective fragments of a film discarded during the montage process: it is open on both sides having neither a logical start nor an end asserting any possible outcome. The images as though torn out of the context, as well as particular associative details are intensifying the feeling of fragmentary perception. But for the general schematic structure, nothing is uniting the characters – their actions are brought down to a minimum and are limited to the physical gestures, bodily movements, and mimicry. Yet the poem is "emanating" internal tension, irony and grotesque: it shows that a very important

meaning is veiled beyond the external expression, whereas the outer picture remains dry and schematic, with the personages being involved in trivial, insignificant and hollow actions. The “apeneck” Sweeney, with his legs widely spread apart and the arms hanging down, is roaring in wild laughter; the waiter brings in oranges, figs, bananas and the hothouse grapes; “The vertebrate” – a man in brown – “contracts and concentrates”; a woman “in the Spanish cape tries to sit in Sweeney’s knees /Slips and pulls the table cloth /Overturns a coffee-cup”; “Rachel nee Rabinovitch, /Tears at the grapes with murderous paws”; “The host with someone indistinct /Converses at the door apart”; “the man with heavy eyes.../Leaves the room and reappears/Outside the window, leaning in”. The constellations are watching all these from above... “Gloomy Orion and the Dog” and the Raven together with Death “drift above”. All this irrelevant and absurd picture has an epigraph, containing the words of dying Agamemnon, declaring of his being fatally wounded.

Despite the grotesque characters of Sweeney and others (or perhaps, at the very expense of this grotesque), the poem creates a rather gloomy atmosphere. It seems that the author, as well as all the characters perceives everything what is happening around, as a day-to-day routine. The poem starts and ends with the gloomy associations of Agamemnon’s murder by Clytemnestra: betrayal, lechery, murder and blood constitute the direct components of the poem’s design, which, in the form of three constellations, is being looked upon by heavens in cold blood.

Sweeney among the Nightingales is of paramount interest because it is for the first time that in this poem Eliot employs the archaic mythology of the mortal Gods of vegetation. The system of artistic expression in this poem is based on the mythical pattern of death and rebirth, which according to Eliot’s contemporary anthropologist, James G. Frazer, constitutes the ritualistic basis of the archaic mythology of fertility. The association to Agamemnon’s death refers to the ritual of murdering a king, deified by the primitive community, in the course of which he should be removed by a young heir, thus introducing renovation in the life of the tribe, in order to affect the fertility of the earth and revive the reproduction potential of the nature. Echoing Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, 20th century comparative religion also maintained that murder of the kings, so frequently occurring in the imaginative thinking of different nations remotely derives from the ritual murder of the *Primal Father*, identified with a fertility god,

committed by a "horde of brothers" (Roheim, 2005, 328). In primitive consciousness, the ritual murder of the deified king is mystically associated with the natural cycle of revival or the rhythmic sequence of the seasons and consequently, is connected with the death of the deities of fertility, as well as with their consequent resurrection.

As the critic Herbert Foltinek points out, "the tragedy of Agamemnon, from which the epigraph of the poem is taken, deals with a subject which modern research has tried to explain as the reflection of an ancient sacred rite. The Greek tragic hero is said to derive from human representatives of Dionysus, god of vegetation and fecundity; the Agamemnon myth itself may have originated in the ritual of a local form of the god. As the divine king or man-god he had to die in his prime to rise again in his young successor" (Foltinek, 1958, 28). In fact, Eliot undertakes the synthesis of the Dionysus myth with the story of Agamemnon. He seems to be exploring the ritual roots of myth, as though 'checking' its viability, by way of which he accomplishes the task of ultimate generalization of the modern situations depicted in his work. The poem seems to be saturated with myth: apart from its traditional metaphorical meaning, every one of its characters contains an associative detail indicating a number of mythological plots, as well as a complex mythological structure. By way of constructing the joint scene with participation of Sweeney and the unknown men and women of unseemly behavior, mythical universality is achieved – all the characters of the poem are involved in the parodied ritual activities, these actions being the embodiment of the tragicomic theatricals of the primal mythical structure.

At a first blush, the mythological allusions of *Sweeney among the Nightingales* are deprived of any specific associative connotation. The fact that Rachel "Tears the grapes with murderous paws", within the framework of quite extravagant but traditional poetics, can be perceived as a quite rational poetic image. It is true, that it proves hardly possible to find another character similar to this in any other poetic text, but its perception in terms of an image creating certain emotional background, is quite feasible and justified. This is how an unprepared reader would comprehend the poem, for whom the direct metaphoric connotation is of decisive importance. On the other hand, portrayal of the behavior of the same Rachel would by no means be an impressionistic sketch, designed for creating only a concrete mood or disposition. Its main function is

profoundly symbolic being rationally prone to disclosure at the same time:

Rachel nee Rbinovitch
Tears the grapes with murderous paws.

The key-word in these lines is “tears”: in normative English its usage with the word “grapes” is unimaginable and even in Eliot’s text, this kind of word-combination sounds almost ridiculous, being absolutely improperly adopted. Actually, the grapes, as if casually used in the context of the poem, represent a symbolic image of the formidable god Dionysus, as of one of the major deities of fertility and wine drinking. Bringing together several associative plots by means of one single image is a rather characteristic method for Eliot and here as well, “tearing of the grapes” simultaneously implies a number of mythological motifs: first of all, Dionysus is a “dithyrambos”, or “he who entered the door twice”, i.e. a twice born god. Once dead and then brought to life, this mortal and resurrective god of fertility closely resembles Osiris: as Herodotus puts it in his *Histories*, “Osiris is he who is called Dionysus in the Greek tongue” (Johnson, 1978, 148). In his first life he was torn apart and devoured by the Titans, when in order to escape from them, he was trying to change into a lion, a goat and a bull. It is notable that it was in the image of a bull, that the Titans caught hold of him; therefore, the fact that it is Rachel who is tearing the grapes, is an association related with the Maenads, the ecstatic admirers of Dionysus, by way of which Sweeney’s “nightingales” are turned into the women-escorts of Dionysus. According to the myth, Dionysus was regularly seen in the company of those incredibly vigorous and hyperactive ladies as they, plunged in the ritual ecstasies, would tear the bulls alive and devour their flesh raw. As Frazer points out, “The rending and devouring of live bulls and calves appear to have been a regular feature at Dionysiac rites” (Frazer, 1994, 399). The fact that Rachel is tearing the grapes with “murderous paws” is a clear indication of the rise of animal instincts in the modern “Maenad” or “Bacchant”. After the tearing of zomorphic Dionysus, the Maenads devoured his flesh the same way as, Rachel, apparently is tearing and gobbling the grapes in Eliot’s poem.

It is not by chance, that the Maenad Rachel is mentioned as having “murderous paws”, for violence used to be an organic constituent of the Dionysia. Actually, adoration of the orgiastic cult of Dionysus did not at all imply innocent revels and merry pass-time. In the course of the entire history of ancient world, adoration of Dionysus’ cult was notorious for its

rather stern and bloodthirsty rituals. The surviving annals of the ancient scripts describe the overwhelmingly unleashed behavior, collective ecstatic libertinism, murders committed in a state of alcoholic intoxication and the ultimate aggressiveness of the participating mob. At the close of ancient times, the Dionysias terrified even the Roman Senate, although Rome itself had never been renowned for any particular virtue or genteel behavior either. Titus Livy indicates in *History of Rome*, that "from the time when the rites were held promiscuously, with men and women mixed together, and when the license offered by darkness had been added, no sort of crime, no kind of immorality, was left unattempted ... Anyone refusing to submit to outrage or reluctant to commit crimes was slaughtered as a sacrificial victim. To regard nothing as forbidden was among these people the summit of religious achievement" (Meyer, 1987, 86).

With reference to the Dionysus rituals, Rachel with the "murderous paws" as well as "the lady in the Spanish cape" trying to sit in Sweeney's knees, turn into the parodic Maenads. Consequently, the dull men mentioned in the poem, are portrayed as the Satires, accompanying Dionysus whereas the entire "ritual" gathering of these men and women represents a parodied Dionysian revel in the interior of a restaurant or a brothel. It is obvious that the interior, equally resembling a restaurant and a brothel is accentuating the symbolic motifs of eating and libertinism, more closely related to the theme of the Dionysian orgies. The Maenads – Rachel and the lady in the cape are pursuing the same goals (She and the lady in the cape/ Are suspect, seem to be in the league); besides lechery, these ladies are preparing themselves for the sacrifice – they are plotting to kill Sweeney or "the man with heavy eyes", who in his turn, tries to keep himself away from them and "declines the gambit" with the lady in the cape. Yet, symbolically the act of sacrifice is in operation, for Rachel already "tears at the grapes with murderous paws"; meanwhile, Sweeney, who, simultaneously, is a parodied Agamemnon, a deified king ready for the sacrifice and a deity of fertility, turns into a torn cluster of grapes or a parodied Dionysus.

As far as Sweeney is just a parody, his possible murder or his assumed death is by no way a pre-condition of his resurrection. Sweeney, a "sacrifice" to be, is also a grotesque caricature, just like a Sweeney identified with the fatally wounded Agamemnon. The ritual, even in case of fulfillment, will never bring about a positive outcome, because the act of

sacrifice has turned to a mere murder in this context. In general, Sweeney acts as a dominant figure through the entire situation of the poem being a parodied sovereign on one hand and an expected sacrifice of a parodied ritual on the other. Actually, Sweeney is portrayed in three imaginary faces: in the beginning he is associated with an ape, a zebra and a giraffe, while in the epigraph and the finale of the poem he is presented as the dying Agamemnon and in the middle of the poem he is identified with a cluster of grapes. Within the symbolic framework this means the three eternal forms of divine manifestation – zoological, biological and botanical, this one more time, adding mythical dimension to the poem. Likewise, in the archaic mythology, the deities of fertility appeared before the mortals in the disguise of botanical, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic creatures. In Sweeney's case, their similarity is accomplished by means of parodic adaptation of the mythical patterns of death and rebirth. The poem full of gloomy irony, together with the murders expected or already committed, is extending to the reader a message on resurrection, yet not destined for future fulfillment. The theme of fertility is often mentioned in the poem but the ritual of fertility itself, extremely "degraded" and devoid of any pathos is also turned into a sheer parody. There is no place left for resurrection there, because a ritual turned into grotesque will never bear any positive result.

The associative structure of the poem is arranged in such a way that the process of eating at the restaurant (the ritual "nibbling" at the flesh of the killed God) occurs as a parodied act of Communion, associated with the murder and lechery taking place at the brothel: the victim should be killed in order to be eaten afterwards. Of course, no act of murder is being committed on the realistic or 'narrative' level of the poem – Rachel simply reaches for the grapes, yet on the level of symbolic associations, the Maenads 'with murderous paws' tear apart and devour the zoomorphic Dionysus. The moment of parodic Communion is emphasized here because in fact, Rachel is consuming consecrated flesh and blood of the deity (according to Fraser, the participants of Dionysian revels believed that by eating the sacrificial flesh of the victim, they, like Dionysus, would also become gods). Following this pattern, the lady in the Spanish cape really sits on Sweeney's lap and later on – sitting in a pool of coffee split on the floor, she "draws a stocking up". Yet, considering the whole set of symbolic associations, this extremely laconic obscenity is nothing more

than a parodied "ritual adultery", committed while drinking wine (or drinking coffee in Eliot's poem):

The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees
Slips and pulls the table cloth
Overturns a coffee-cup,
Reorganized upon the floor
She yawns and draws a stocking up.

The overturned coffee cup also attracts attention as a ritual wine chalice, expressing the orgiastic contents of the cult of Dionysus who, being a deity of drunken revels can often be observed in many portraits and sculptures with the cup in his hand. Instead of wine, it is coffee that plays the role of a ritual drink, causing exaltation. The association related to coffee also pops out in the portrayal of a "silent man" standing at the windowsill, dressed in the "mocha brown" (mocha is a sort of coffee) clothes. The reader gets another message about this man in the sixth line as well, where he is qualified as a "vertebrate", this word implying sharp irony and grotesque. A part of this associative background is River Plate or Rio de La Plata, which together with its estuaries flows in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, its basin even nowadays being one of the most important centers of coffee production. If, in the days of yore or in the mythological past, Communion with the divine initial was conducted through wine, among Eliot's contemporary society the similar procedure is accomplished by coffee and the connotation that apparently, nothing will be changed by this, fills the whole verse with infinite irony. The only discernable difference is that the past was full of burning passions and aggressiveness, whereas the present is rather inert and apathetic. The main mythopoeic device for Eliot is reshuffling time-realities and not the ironic confrontation with the mythological glory of the past. Eventually, irony is being shared evenly between the past and the present and Eliot's Sweeney contains the parody on Dionysus the same way as Eliot's Dionysus holds Sweeney in himself. It is not only today that wine has turned into coffee, but starting from the mythical past, notorious for its violence and lechery, it has always been a surrogate.

The parodic set of associations is complemented by the exotic fruit mentioned in the fifth line – bananas, figs, oranges and hothouse grapes, served by the waiter for the pleasure of the customers. Correct reading of

these images within the symbolic context of the poem commands serious observation: the grapes being necessarily from a greenhouse comprises one more parodied epithet to Dionysus, expressing the “taming” and civilized “conversion” of this ecstatic deity in the post-Victorian society. Mentioning another parodied hypostasis of the fertility god – bananas would cause almost a shocking impact on the comprehension of the readers of that period. Dionysus, whose traditional epithets are “the phallic one”, “the erect”, “the bi-testicled” etc., in this poem is parodied through the traditionally vulgar and obscene associations related to the phallic shape of bananas. The abundance of the fruit in Eliot’s poem facilitates the general mythological background of fertility: apart from grapes, Dionysus was considered the god of all kinds of fruit. Together with bananas, figs, served by the waiter also represent one of Dionysus’ avatars; according to Frazer, the Greeks considered him the creator of all fruits existing, yet he was mostly associated with figs. In some of Greek towns he even was mentioned as “Fig Dionysus” and they would curve his sculptures exclusively from fig trees.

Universalization of the specifically banal background in *Sweeney among the Nightingales* is provided by means of associative recollection of other mythological plots as well: Sweeney’s nightingales are not only the Maenads of Dionysus or the sweetly singing birds from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem: Eros and Tanatos in Eliot’s poetry, as in poetic art in general, are inseparable, but in the grim and ironic artistic realm of his poems death turns into murder and love – into lechery. The main associative image of the nightingales, apart from Eliot’s contemporary slangy meaning of the word (‘harlot’ or ‘prostitute’), is also associated with the ancient Greek myth of the rape of Philomel, accentuating more strongly the dominant theme of the poem – the motif of violence, lechery and murder. In the sixth book of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid writes, that Philomel was raped by her brother-in-law, the barbaric king of Thrace, Tereus, and in order to conceal his crime, he cut out his victim’s tongue. Procne, infuriated by her husband’s deed and inspired for revenge, committed even graver a crime and having killed her infant son Itylus, let her husband eat his own son’s flesh. When Tereus learned that he was given his dead son’s flesh for dinner, he drew out the sword and started after the sisters for death. But the gods turned Procne into a swallow and Philomel into a nightingale. According to another version of the myth,

both sisters were converted into nightingales. Since then, following the ancient tradition, the nightingales only sing at the time when violence, murder, lechery or other crimes are being committed.

Infinitely gloomy and tragic sound of this myth, in which only the evil fights the evil and not even the slightest chance of salvation is hinted upon, surprisingly well echoes the spirit of the situation given in *Sweeney among the Nightingales*. The poetic interpretation of the myth told by Ovid is very close to Eliot's parodic Bacchanalia: according to the Roman poet, Procne murders her son during the Dionysian celebrations (Bacchanalia in Rome). Procne herself, when preparing to take revenge upon Tereus, put on a costume of a Maenad or Bacchant: "By night the queen left her palace, prepared herself for the rites of the god, and took up the weapons of that frenzied religion. Tendrils of vine wreathed her head; a deerskin was draped over her left side; a light javelin rested on her shoulder. Hurling through the woods with a crowd of her companions, terrifying, driven by maddening grief, ... she dresses Philomel too in the Bacchant fashion, and surrounded by the accompanying hoard of other Bacchants rushes forward into the woods, "...as if pushed forward by you, Bacchus" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI). It is noteworthy that the associative image of the nightingales relates Eliot's poem to Cassandra's loud mourning from the relevant tragedy by Aeschylus. The chorus of *Agamemnon* compares her prophecies, concerning her own future and Agamemnon's upcoming murder, with the symbolic lamentations of the nightingales, in which Procne is mourning her dead son Itylus and on the other hand, is calling him up.

A tragicomic scene taking place in a banal cafe reaches cosmic significance and universality, for it is mirrored in the circulation of the constellations and in the drift of stars. The private situation in *Sweeney among the Nightingales* turns no more a private one, but like all other individual dramas considered on the level of mythical generalization. Eternity, revealing itself in the rotation of the moon and the twinkling of the stars contains the same type of synthesis of Eros and Tanatos as a single vulgar scene described in a restaurant, which also represents a brothel. Gloomy Orion and the Dog are veiled by the clouds; the "stormy" moon "slides westward", "Death and the Raven drift above", etc. In English speech of the beginning of the 20th century "sliding westward" or "going westward" used to be euphemistic expressions of death or dying, something like

Georgian – “taking a letter (to the ancestors)”. James Joyce is using it in a symbolic meaning in the end of “The Dead” (*Dubliners*, 1919), where the snow of decline is falling upon the whole country of Ireland, to make Gabriel Conroy contemplate on “setting out on his journey westward.” In such a context, a huge, muddy Rio de la Plata, towards which the moon is sliding, is presented as the “western river” or the Styx.

In Eliot’s poems, just like in the tragedy of Aeschylus, murders are never directly portrayed, not counting the roaring cry of fatally wounded Agamemnon, being heard beyond the closed gates of the palace. It is only the chorus, which discusses the murder together with Cassandra uttering mourning cries, all followed by Clytemnestra’s commentary on the deeds she had committed. It is obvious, that the murder is really taking place in the tragedy, and so it does in Eliot’s poem, although in the latter it is committed in the parodic manner – by tearing the grapes with the “murderous paws”. In this poem, Agamemnon as well as Sweeney is personifying manifold masques of Dionysus and so is the waiter, emerging out of the blue with the fruit, coffee, grapes and partly the man dressed in “mocha brown”, being the symbols of the same scale. The nightingales are singing ominous songs over Agamemnon’s dead body in the “bloody wood”, for the victims of lechery will never rise from dead. The rite related to his death is a false ritual, Communion being an immoral parody of serving God: for all actions are accompanied by coffee drinking and lechery during the modern “Dionysia”, held in an indecent place. Therefore

The nightingales are singing near
The convent of the Sacred Heart.
And sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud...

It is notable, that the nightingales are singing near the Convent of the Sacred Heart, this being an association of Christ as the resurrected God of fertility. On the other hand, the symbolic images related to Dionysus become apparent here as well, for Athena saves the heart of infant Dionysus, torn apart by the Titans. Immediately afterwards, Zeus puts Dionysus’ heart in his thigh and later on, gives him birth anew or delivers him back to being. The finale of the poem is deliberately open, and by no means simple – the possibility of rebirth is manifested through the associations of Christ and the heart of Dionysus, but the entire associative system is imbued by the somber irony: the resurrection was possible but it

could not be realized, because the sacrifice itself turned to be a parody. An imaginary tragedy of this kind will by all means turn into a farce at all times and in all circumstances: God is dead and only the nightingales are letting "their liquid siftings" to stain Agamemnon's shroud.

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Abstract

Universalization of the specifically banal background in *Sweeney among the Nightingales* is provided by means of associative recollection of a variety of mythological plots. The associative structure of the poem is arranged in such a way that the process of eating at the restaurant (the ritual "nibbling" at the flesh of the killed God) occurs as a parodied act of Communion, associated with the murder and lechery taking place at the brothel: the victim should be killed in order to be eaten afterwards. Of course, no act of murder is being committed on the realistic or 'narrative' level of the poem – Rachel simply reaches for the grapes, yet on the level of symbolic associations, the Maenads 'with murderous paws' tear apart and devour the zoomorphic Dionysus. The moment of parodic Communion is emphasized here because in fact, Rachel is consuming consecrated flesh and blood of the deity (according to Fraser, the participants of Dionysian revels believed that by eating the sacrificial flesh of the victim, they, like Dionysus, would also become gods). Following this pattern, the lady in the Spanish cape really sits on Sweeney's lap and later on – sitting in a pool of coffee split on the floor, she "draws a stocking up". Yet, considering the whole set of symbolic associations, this extremely laconic obscenity is nothing more than a parodied "ritual adultery", committed while drinking wine (or drinking coffee in Eliot's poem).