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MODERNIST DRAMA AND REFERENTIALITY:  
T.S. ELIOT'S *SWEENEY AGONISTES* AND WALTER  
BENJAMIN'S *TRAUERSPIEL*

**Abstract:** “Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, ... will not stay in place, / Will not stay still!” (*Burnt Norton* V). Using words and not being used by them is rare to Eliot’s thought tormented figures, from his drama *Sweeney Agonistes* to *Four Quartets*. The struggle with words is a constant trait of Eliot’s poetry, besides being common among modernists all over Europe. His drama’s broken syntax mirrors the clashing mixture of Aeschylean tragedy, Aristophanic comedy, and the popular culture of music-hall, cabaret, and jazz, which make up the play. As a result, the play brings forth a modernistic defamiliarizing, and metatheatrical effect, by breaking up the linear rapport between action and word, actor and gesture, sign and signified. Poetic drama or unfinished poem, *Sweeney Agonistes* has been recently revalued (Chinitz, Buttram, Daniel, Cuda), but in its daring avant-garde experimentalism (de Villiers), still eludes interpretations, mainly because of the far from clear reason why Eliot neither finished it nor included it in his theatrical production. If, however, we place the play in the context of various dramatic theories and plays of the time, we may read its incongruities, and disjunctions between words and things, as a one of the modernistic traits that were widely discussed at the time, among others, by Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Benjamin’s new way of looking at allegory, stressing its self-referential import, may help us find one more key to the revolutionary direction Eliot had envisaged in his non-dramatic tragedy. As Eliot himself said of Seneca: “the drama is all in the word and the word has no further reality behind it”. Although a link between Eliot’s conservative modernism and Benjamin’s messianism would seem unlikely, recent studies have highlighted some of their common ground (Neilson, Lehman). In order to account for the play’s disjunctions and metatheatrical language, I will dwell on Eliot’s notion of the dissociation of sensibility (1920–1927) comparing it to Benjamin’s allegorical perception, or “the falling apart of modern man”.

**Keywords:** Eliot, *Sweeney Agonistes*, Benjamin, Modernism, drama, referentiality.

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knowledgeable conversation.

Джулиана ФЕРРЕЧЧО

## МОДЕРНИСТСКАЯ ДРАМА И РЕФЕРЕНЦИАЛЬНОСТЬ: «СУИНИ-АГОНИСТ» Т.С. ЭЛИОТА И «ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЕ НЕМЕЦКОЙ БАРОЧНОЙ ДРАМЫ» ВАЛЬТЕРА БЕНЬЯМИНА

**Аннотация:** «Слова искажаются, / Трещат и ломаются от перегрузки ... им не застыть неподвижно, / Незыблемо» (Бернт Нортон V, пер. с англ. С. Степанова). Когда поэт использует слова, а не наоборот, — это редкий случай для поэзии Т.С. Элиота, от драмы «Суини-агонист» до «Четырех квартетов». Борьба со словами — постоянная черта творчества Элиота, характерная и для европейского модернизма в целом. Ломаный синтаксис его драмы отражает противоречивую смесь разных элементов — эсхиловской трагедии, аристофановой комедии, популярной культуры мюзик-холла, кабаре и джаза, составляющих пьесу. В результате пьеса производит модернистский острабяющий и метатеатральный эффект, разрушая линейную связь между действием и словом, актером и жестом, знаком и означаемым. Поэтическая драма — или неоконченная поэма «Суини-агонист» в последнее время подверглась переоценке (Чиниц, Бэттрэм, Дэниэл, Кьюда), но в своем смелом авангардном экспериментаторстве (де Вилье) все еще ускользает от интерпретаций, главным образом из-за неясности тех причин, по которым Элиот не закончил это произведение и не стал включать его в число своих пьес. Однако если мы поместим «Суини-агониста» в контекст различных драматических теорий и пьес того времени, несостыковки, расхождения между словами и действием могут быть поняты как модернистские черты, которые широко обсуждались в то время, в том числе и Вальтером Беньямином в «Происхождении немецкой барочной драмы». Новый взгляд Беньямина на аллегорию, подчеркивающий ее самореференциальный смысл, может помочь найти еще один ключ к новаторству, которое Элиот демонстрирует в своей недраматической трагедии. Как сам Элиот сказал о Сенеке, «вся драма в слове, и слово не имеет за собой никакой другой реальности». Хотя связь между консервативным модернизмом Элиота и мессианством Беньямина кажется маловероятной, недавние исследования (Нилсон, Леман) выявили некоторые общие черты. Чтобы объяснить дизъюнкцию и метатеатральный язык пьесы, я остановлюсь на элиотовском концепте «расщепления мироучувствования» (1920–1927), сопоставив его с беньяминовскими концептами аллегории и «распада современного человека».

**Ключевые слова:** Элиот, «Суини-агонист», Беньямин, модернизм, драма, референциальность.

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Eliot's speakers either can't speak or can't be heard.  
Louise Glück

The satisfaction, when you analyse it, is due  
to the disparity between the idea and the image:  
... there is the same yoking together of the dissimilar.  
T.S. Eliot

“Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, ... will not stay in place, / Will not stay still” (*Burnt Norton* V). Using words and not being used by them is rare to Eliot's thought-tormented figures, from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” to the *Waste Land*, to his verse drama *Sweeney Agonistes*. A ceaseless struggle with words and meanings is a constant trait of Eliot's poetry [Brooker 2018: 11], besides being common among modernists all over Europe. Indeed, it comes as no surprise to find a great modernist poet struggling with words, especially with their referentiality<sup>1</sup>.

The struggle with words, otherwise called language crisis, is at the core of Eliot's unfinished play or poem, *Sweeney Agonistes*, whose protagonist is impelled to verbalize a cryptic experience, which language cannot convey: “I've gotta use words when I talk to you”, where it is doubtful whether “you” is to indicate his female antagonist, or the audience, in a metatheatrical gesture. What does this “unfinished” drama use, other than words, when talking to the audience?

Like many playwrights of his time, Eliot thought that modern drama and contemporary theatre were dead and the only way to renew it was to move away from naturalistic theatre, in the direction of anti-realism<sup>2</sup>. Drama was to find a new form which could supplant mimesis in favour of restoring its ancient theatricality in general and its original ritual function in particular<sup>3</sup>. Eliot insists that the new form has nothing to do with plot, it

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<sup>1</sup> In his *Chandos Brief* (*The Letter of Lord Chandos*) Hugo von Hoffmanstahl wrote a famous essay / novel on the refusal of words to cross over to things.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, T.S. *Selected Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952: 91.

<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing the notion of theatricality from Hans-Thies Lehmann's classic study [Lehmann 1999]. However, in my essay the terms drama and theatre will be employed more loosely, in a less theoretical way than they are in theatre studies.

should rather be a framework “given to (the playwright) as the condition of his time” [Eliot 2014, II: 241]. Besides retrieving verse drama in a new form, Eliot favoured the steady exchange between actors and audiences, namely, classical parabasis, which he admired in various forms of direct address to what lies outside the drama, fondly relishing the quick-witted exchange between actor and audience typical of music hall performers such as Marie Lloyd<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, he was impressed by Léonide Massine, whose mechanical, stylized gestures emphasized a kind of “in-human” quality, similar to the use of puppetry in the theatre. Eliot termed Massine’s acting as belonging to the future stage [Schuchard 1999: 105].

Although some critics maintain that without *Sweeney Agonistes* the works of Beckett and Pinter are unthinkable [Grove 1994: 173; De Villiers 2012; Schmitt 1997], and though Eliot had no doubts about its innovative potential, referring to it in 1924 as “a revolutionary thing I am experimenting on” [Eliot 2009, II: 546], comparatively little attention has been given to what kind of revolution the *Sweeney* drama may represent and what connections tie it to contemporary avant-garde experiments, except for revaluing Eliot’s massive use of music hall and minstrel show performances, in what he defined his “jazz oratorio” (“I expect it will be a jazz drama” [Eliot 2009, II: 192])<sup>5</sup>. Recently, a valuable contribution has extensively analysed the play as metatheatre, or a drama about drama, thus giving a name to what had hitherto been criticized as a failure in dramatic structure [Daniel 2011].

However, if we place the play within the context of the various dramatic theories and plays Eliot was familiar with, and to a certain extent admired, from Maeterlinck to Gordon Craig to Noh drama [Eliot 2014, I: 566], we may read its incongruities and disjunctions, feeble plot, and weak motivation, as one of the modernistic traits that were widely practiced and discussed at the time, among others, by Walter Benjamin in his *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1928)<sup>6</sup>. Benjamin’s new way of looking at modern allegory, stressing the tendency to fragmentation and decentering of

<sup>4</sup> Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 207.

<sup>5</sup> David Chinitz was the first to underline Eliot’s engagement with popular forms from the earliest poetry to his later plays, devoting a long chapter to *Sweeney Agonistes*. See: [Chinitz 1995].

<sup>6</sup> *Der Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* was first translated by George Osborne as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998), with an introduction by George Steiner. I am using Howard Eiland’s recent translation, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* [Benjamin 2019], unless otherwise stated.

allegorical perception, its self-referential import, whereby signs and ideas remain at a distance, may help us find one more key to the revolutionary direction Eliot had envisaged in his non-dramatic tragedy. A brief comparison between the final play and its preparatory material will also shed light on the play's experimental traits. Finally, I will try to show that Eliot's famous notion of the dissociation of sensibility (1921–1927), seen in its theoretical import, can be fruitfully compared to Benjamin's "allegorising tendency", or the disintegration of modern man.

Although a link between Eliot's eventual turn to a conservative modernism and Benjamin's blend of marxism and messianism would sound unlikely, quite a few scholars have suggested relevant analogies and highlighted some of their common ground, dealing mainly with *The Waste Land* and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, comparing their own, anti-linear, a-chronological conceptions of history, examining their citational strategies, the montage of disparate fragments, the theoretical dictum of showing instead of telling<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, both authors' works stretch the conventions of poetry and the essay form, introducing obscurities, discontinuities, and contradictions. They have been rightly seen as "the most critically astute of all modernist poets and the most hauntingly poetic of all modernist critics" [Neilson 2007: 201]. Like *The Waste Land*, *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* is deemed a main source for the study of high modernism and an excellent example of high-modern prose, akin to Joyce, Schoenberg, and Picasso [Benjamin 2019: xiv]. However, in spite of Benjamin's widespread influence on recent criticism, his *Trauerspiel* work has not been considered much by English and American scholars, nor, as far as I know, has much attention been given to comparing their common work on drama in the early '20s. If it goes without saying that no kind of influence could possibly be posited, nevertheless, they produced literature and criticism that significantly overlap by offering two separate approaches to the common problem of representing the experience of a dissociated modernity. They both revalue the Baroque period and find significant elements connecting its productions to contemporary poetry and drama, concentrating on the

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<sup>7</sup> Jens Martin Gurr mentions a few scholars such as Bowen, Martindale, Perloff, and Yang who have suggested analogies between *The Waste Land* and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. On the one hand, there is their common concern with urban modernity in the metropolis, both having taken fundamental cues from Baudelaire's urban poetry, and on the other, they were similarly concerned with representing history in a non-linear fashion, preferring historical collage-forms, and relying on citation and montage techniques, as Pound did in *The Cantos*, overlaying "ply over ply". See: [Gurr 2015: 21–37]. See also: [Lehman 2016].

errancies of language referentiality. As Eliot said of Laforgue, the modern poet, just like the metaphysical poets, has to “force language into his meaning”<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Sweeney Agonistes* and the avant-garde**

A poetic drama or unfinished poem, *Sweeney Agonistes* has recently been revalued<sup>9</sup>, but, in its daring avant-garde experimentalism, it still eludes interpretations, mainly because of the unknown reason why Eliot neither finished it nor included it in his theatrical production. Did Eliot mean to leave it as a fragment? Or did the work itself somehow escape the author’s intentions? In his usual tongue-in-cheek way, in 1948 Eliot declared, “Most readers by now will have acquired some idea of what *Sweeney Agonistes* forms a fragment of, and I wouldn’t like to disturb that idea” [Eliot 2015, I: 800]. We have scant and sporadic information about its composition. The play was first published in two instalments titled *Fragment of a Prologue* and *Fragment of an Agon*, plus the unidentified reference to a previous drama, *Wanna Go Home Baby?* in *The Criterion* in 1926–1927, which then came out in book form in 1932 as *Sweeney Agonistes. Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama*, until Eliot decided to publish it as an unfinished poem in his *Collected Poems* of 1936.

There is much of Eliot’s play that derives from *The Waste Land*, starting with Sweeney, its agonistic protagonist, figuring as the brothel-keeper’s, Mrs. Porter’s, client (“the sound of horns and motors... shall bring, Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring” [Eliot 2015, I: 197–198]). Using words in order to get meaning across is as arduous in the play as it was in the poem, most famously, when the neurotic woman addresses her companion in “A Game of Chess”: “Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.” As Louise Glück comments: “Eliot’s speakers either can’t speak or can’t be heard” [Glück 1999: 22]. Or, rather, in their struggle to speak, their dialogues end up in monologues [Levenson 2015: 94]. Still, the most relevant similarity occurs at the level of form the texture of which, in *Sweeney*, as in *The Waste Land*, is unsettling and defamiliarizing enough to leave interpretation open, all the way to its indeterminate ending. Though allowing for their different levels of quality, the *Sweeney* play resembles *The*

<sup>8</sup> Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 248.

<sup>9</sup> In a groundbreaking research, Christine Buttram investigated Eliot’s manuscripts in King’s College Library, leading to the first complete survey of the Sweeney play preparatory materials [Buttram 2014: 179–190]. Antony Cuda analyzed Eliot’s verse Drama [Cuda 2017].

*Waste Land* in that even the best criticism has not been able to encompass these elusive works within a settled interpretation. Like *The Waste Land*, this is a work where “the most meaningful things happen on the level of form” [Coyle 2014: 163].

The one indisputable trait, however, is its composite nature. The play is based on a contamination of genres, from classical drama — Aristophanic comedy and Aeschilean tragedy — to the popular culture of music-hall, jazz and minstrel show, a mixture which was not uncommon in Europe at the time. Just to name a few, one can think of Cocteau's *Parade* (1917) which Eliot knew well, and his *Oedipus Rex* (1922), and, later on, Brecht's epic theatre. Nevertheless, the mixture of high and low brow may lead to various interpretations, from the purely comic or dada, to satire, to a defamiliarizing kind of tragicomedy. In *Sweeney Agonistes*, the mingling of the comic and serious, popular and classical, the blending of violence and restraint, may be read in various ways, but the high and the low hardly seem to harmonize. On the one hand, while retrieving Aristophanes's Attic Comedy matches Eliot's interest in primitive fertility ritual and adds to the play's strong satiric slant, *Oresteia* shifts the focus onto tragedy and mainly concerns the title character. On the other, the clashing mixture of tragedy and comedy with popular culture reflects on, and adds to the drama's broken syntax. In fact, its fragmentary character and its rhetoric of directly addressing the audience rupture the mimetic structure of the play thereby producing a modernistic defamiliarizing effect which breaks up the linear rapport between action and word, actor and gesture, sign and signified.

To underline the idea of a “modern tragedy”, when the play was first performed at Vassar in 1933, all the actors wore masks and moved mechanically, almost like marionettes, emphasizing both its classical imprint and its abstract, modernistic quality<sup>10</sup>. Soon after, the play was staged by the avant-garde Group Theatre in London (1934), where the audience sat on the stage and mingled with the actors. However, the director, Rupert Doone, in spite of thus choosing to underline the play's non-mimetic quality, did invent an ending that moved in the direction of closure along the lines of a murder / mystery story by having Sweeney, knife in hand, chase Doris around a table [Sidnell 1984: 106]. On the contrary, the play's avant-garde traits were forcefully brought out when *The Living Theatre*

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<sup>10</sup> In his letters to Alfred Kreymborg, Eliot repeatedly expressed his keen interest in puppet theatre and marionettes. In his early lyrics, posthumously collected in *The Inventions of the March Hare*, the marionette is a recurring figure. See, in particular: [Eliot 2009, II: 42].

performed it along with works by Gertrude Stein and Pablo Picasso in 1952 [The Living Theatre 1952]. Strangely enough, as opposed to the play's various avant-garde productions, up to about the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of subsequent criticism, tended to view it in terms of a traditional drama, probably in the wake of Eliot's ensuing production. The few exceptions saw the play as anticipating absurdist theatre [Spanos 1970, cited in: De Villiers 2012: 23].

### **Sweeney from Poem to Drama**

So, what happened to the ape-necked Sweeney character Eliot shaped in the Quatrain poems of 1918 when he unexpectedly turned up as the haunted, possible murderer, in *Fragment of an Agon* in 1927? A clue may come from Eliot himself, when years later, around 1933, describing *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*, he was reported as saying something that applies to the play as well: "It is not an obscure poem, simply a series of images. ... It is like a piece of still life the meaning of which one does not formulate; one merely estimates the way the painter has used planes and angles."<sup>11</sup> If Sweeney radically changed as the poem turned into a play, one could argue that what survived was the juxtaposition of "planes and angles", which grew into an unfamiliar juxtaposition of genres, and, like an abstract painting, drew more attention to its construction than to its contents, creating a polyphony of different genres, not dissimilar from the juxtaposition of fragmentary citations we find in *The Waste Land*.

To be sure, in the various *Sweeney* drafts and the published *Fragment*s, Eliot was both anticipating and following modernist theatrical experiments in the direction of defamiliarization, i. e., preventing the audience from identifying with the events on stage, deforming and overdoing characters, so that any kind of realistic representation would be withheld, and a dissociation would set in between what was represented and the way it was represented. European avant-garde theatre had elaborated around such issues at least since Maeterlinck's and Strindberg's productions, and was still in various ways experimenting on it. Defamiliarization, or *ostranene*, according to the Russian Formalists who invented the term, is what differentiates discursive language from poetic language, directing the reader's or audience's attention to the artificial nature of the fictional world, and has long been deemed as a distinctive character of experimental modern literature, which can also be seen as a dialogical relationship

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<sup>11</sup> *Vassar Miscellany News*, vol. XVII, no. 46, 1933, 10 May.

between artistic forms, as Michail Bakhtin would put it<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, besides language experiments, defamiliarization is often obtained by a clash of genres and a mixture of the comic and tragic modes, as Joyce's *Ulysses* demonstrates. If the mythic method was to dispose of linear narrative as a worn-out way to shape the telling of personal and historical experience, a non-dramatic verse drama would replace the traditional way drama had used to present experience through human action, by breaking up the linear rapport between action and word, actor and gesture, form and content, thus averting the audience's attention from immersion in the fictional world, and stimulating a novel, detached perception.

### From Scenario to Play

In order to have a fuller picture of how the drama works, attention should be paid to the large amount of material that accompanies, and probably preceded the actual play. Although the recent edition of Eliot's collected poems places the various manuscripts and typescripts as preparatory drafts, there is no certainty as to when Eliot was engaged on each of them<sup>13</sup>. Some previous critics thought that the Synopsis — literally based on Aristophanes's fixed form — and the Scenario, were composed after the play [Sidnell 1984: 100; Malamud 1992: 31–37], which may be justified by Eliot's insisting on Cornford's *Origin of Attic Comedy* as late as 1933 when he recommended that Hallie Flanagan read the book before staging the play at Vassar. The main bulk includes a scenario, a synopsis, various titles and epigraphs, and a surrealist / nonsensical coda<sup>14</sup>, which indicate how uncertain Eliot was as to its final structure and goal. What seems to be certain, however, is that Eliot first envisaged a play based on the dramatic structure of an Aristophanic comedy, with its ritualistic pattern; afterwards, probably following Pound's advice, he dropped the strict Aristophanic scheme<sup>15</sup> and, remembering his earlier prose *Eeldrop*

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<sup>12</sup> I am aware that this opposition has recently been challenged by Miranda Anderson and Stefan Iversen [Anderson, Iversen 2018]. However, in this essay, I stick to its traditional meaning.

<sup>13</sup> In *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, the editors tend to think that the draft materials were composed before the actual play [Eliot 2015: 790–791].

<sup>14</sup> The draft material is held in the Hayward Bequest, King's College Library, and was published in: [Eliot 2015: 791–801]. The coda was printed in: [Smith 1963].

<sup>15</sup> In his usual joking way, early in 1922, Pound advised him to drop the “depressing” Aristophanic model and turn to the “native negro phoque melodies of Dixie”: “Aeschylus not so good as I had hoped, ... Aristophanes probably depressing, and the native negro phoque melodies of Dixie more calculated to lift the ball-encumbered phallus” [Eliot 2009, I: 630].

and *Appleplex* (1917) with its murder story, he may have turned to the play as we have it now<sup>16</sup>.

Hard as it is to establish a date for the first inklings of the *Sweeney* project, it is likely that he started thinking about it around 1920–1922, before he wrote both his essay on the mythical method and the memorial essay for Marie Lloyd. In 1920, in her diary, Virginia Woolf notes Eliot's intention to write a verse play in which the “four characters of Sweeney” act the parts, and reports his referring to it as “caricature” [Woolf 1999: 68]. The four characters may refer to the play's main characters but they could also suggest that the Sweeney figure encompasses all of them. He probably began drafting the first Synopsis and a Scenario, along with various tentative titles and epigraphs, between 1922 and 1924. However, since a full examination of the drafts is outside the scope of my argument, I will just mention a few traits which connect the preparatory work to contemporary European theatrical experiments.

The Synopsis and Scenario drafts contain much more material than the final version. The titles and epigraphs were changed or deleted; the Aristophanic scheme would be faintly alluded to; in the Scenario the crime fiction traits permeating *Fragments of an Agon*, are anticipated by Mrs. Porter's ritual murder; sundry characters from metropolitan lower classes, called Intruders (the Dustman may be reminiscent of Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*), as well as a “tenant below”, interrupt the action; various characters and segments will be left out, including Mrs. Porter and the series of Intruders, and there is an Interlude with a girl-couple waltzing “like automatic dolls” — which may be an avatar of the Doris / Dusty couple. The one interesting figure is the Old Clothes Man, also of Dickensian origin, but much more central to Baudelaire's poetry of metropolitan life, as *marchand d'habits* or, at times, *chifonnier*, a rag-picker. Baudelaire and his essay on the “absolute comic” are central to Eliot's discussion of the grotesque and caricature which are at the core of his article “The Romantic Englishman, The Comic Spirit, and the Function of Criticism” and his “London Letters” for *The Dial* of 1921 [Eliot 2014, II: 303, 343]. Preceding the Scenario, on the front page, there are various tentative titles. The original one was *Pereira / Or / The Marriage of Life and Death / A Dream*, later altered by adding *The Superior Landlord* and crossing out the rest. Here the tenant below, “a small insignificant man in spectacles, a mackintosh over pink striped pyjamas, red slippers and a walking stick”, is

<sup>16</sup> “Do you think ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’ worth continuing?.” [Eliot 2009, II: 215].

the protagonist because in the end he is the one who has dreamt the whole story: "the tenant is discovered in bed, 8 am, the knock is the servant's. He looks dazedly about him. It has been his dream." The knock upon the door will come back in the play at the ominous ending, melding with drum beats. The tenant may also recall Joyce's mysterious mackintosh character in *Ulysses*. The "dream" can be recognized as an overtly Expressionist trait, from Strindberg on. Although Eliot struck out this closed ending, he kept the idea of the dream in the published finale turning it into Sweeney's tormented nightmare.

In the type-written Scenario the original ritual design is highlighted by a list of the dramatis personae, almost a graphic poem, which forms a triangle with Sweeney at the top, overtly alluding to the Last Supper or the Trinity. In juxtaposing a pagan ritual, its Christian counterpart and a parody of the eucharist, the effect is not only parodic but even blasphemous, in turn suggesting an allusion to *Ulysses*' opening scene in the Martello Tower. The caricature was obtained by superimposing various contrasting levels: Mrs. Porter, who will be killed and resurrected, is both the symbol of life in the fertility ritual and the brothel keeper from *The Waste Land*, who approaches the ritual scene singing off-stage "in a soprano voice" a lewd, parodic version of the popular "Ballad of Casey Jones", about a well-known American folk hero who gave his life to save others: "Casey Jones was a fireman's name, / In the red-light district he won his fame ... And the neighbours knew by the shrieks and groans / That the man at the throttle was Casey Jones ... Said Casey Jones before he died: / There's two more women I wish I'd tried". The grotesque and nonsensical effect is of the same kind as what we will find in the hyperbolically contrasting epigraphs to *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* where a conflation of high poetry and low-brow entertainment connects a few lines from Dante's *La vita nuova* with "I want someone to treat me rough / Give me a cabman. Popular song". Besides the inevitable changes due to passing from text to performance, among the many differences, the Scenario shows an explicit juxtaposition of bawdy and sacred, vulgar and mystic.

The Aristophanic Scenario, which relies on modernized, but overtly allegorical and mythical subject-matter, was radically supplanted by a two-part play set in the demi-monde of the jazz age, immersed in the jazzy and semiotically empty parlance of a second-rate smart set, where two lower-class girls / prostitutes throw a party for their "fashionable" visitors. Sweeney appears only in the second fragment, allures one of the girls in a quick-witted banter about missionaries and cannibals, with eerily playful

sexual innuendos, and then attracts the guests with a gruesome mystery story about a murderer (who may be Sweeney himself). Sweeney is mostly role-playing, almost suspending his connection to the plot in a long *aparte* (“Birth, copulation and, death. / That’s all the facts when you come to brass tacks: / Birth, copulation, and death” [Eliot 2015: 34–36]) and suddenly the comedy veers into potential tragedy whose flawed would-be hero is Sweeney himself. Sweeney arrived as “the expected guest”, with echoes from the “Fire Sermon”, but his desire “to do a girl in” has no ostensible motivation. To add to the mingling of comic and tragic, histrionic playfulness and dramatic plot, one could remember Eliot’s painful and strained relationship with his wife, he jokingly mentioned in a letter to Dorothy Pound [Eliot 2009, II: 264].

Contrary to tragic mimesis, or imitation of an action, the main motif revolves around inaction, waiting, and procrastination. Nothing much happens in the actual play, there is no plot: Pereira, the landlord whose arrival the two girls / prostitutes fearfully await, never shows up, Sweeney’s desire to “do a girl in” (“Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in” [Eliot 2015: 105–106]) is never fulfilled. A Beckettian dialogue opens the play when the two girls are waiting for the ominous Pereira, the absent landlord, where every repetition, modeled on a stichomythic rhythm, is reminiscent of a ritual drama:

Dusty: How about Pereira?

Doris: What about Pereira?

I don’t care

Dusty: You don’t care!

Who pays the rent?

Doris: He pays the rent

Although he never turns up, Pereira is a central character, the absent/ absentee Landlord, who could be anything from a pimp to God, or death, to a mere airy name: Per / air. Even more striking however, are the similarities between Pereira, the “Superior Landlord” in the original drafts, and Beckett’s absent awaited being, or nothing, in *Waiting for Godot*<sup>17</sup>. Although

<sup>17</sup> We know that Beckett must have been familiar with, albeit not enthusiastic about, Eliot’s production, mainly because of his friend Thomas McGreevy’s well-known essay on Eliot. See: [Beckett 2009: 88]. In a 1935 letter Beckett mentions *Sweeney Agonistes* as one notable production running at the Westminster Theatre (284) but we do not know whether he ever saw it. Rick De Villiers analyzed the parallel between the two

Pereira was supposed to play a central role in the ritual structure of the play, it is difficult to interpret his presence / absence. As in Beckett's play, everything is double, the whole play is built on doubles; the two prostitutes act as a duo of Beckett's characters. The potentialities of the double level, a surface and an uncertain symbolic level, are underlined by the guests' ironically tautological names (Wauchup is a walk-up, the girls' small, dingy flat; Horsefall, ironically the war hero) but predictably, the figurative meaning remains obscure. Conflicting modes occur simultaneously, thus preventing closure by deferring meaning, as in *The Waste Land*, and inviting "contradictory interpretations" [Coyle 2014: 161]. Is the wished for murder to be read as an objective correlative [De Villiers 2012: 21] or, on the contrary, as "the inexpressibly horrible" of "Hamlet and His Problems"? Clearly, Sweeney's role displays a disparity or dissociation between image and idea, foregrounding the self-reflexive literary practice in which the poet is "able to think his own thoughts behind a tragic or a comic mask"<sup>18</sup>. The emphasis falls on the ways in which language fails to signify, caught in the odd juxtaposition of contrasting semantic levels. At the girls' deadpan, down-to earth questions: "Doris: a woman runs a terrible risk." Sweeney retorts: "Well here again that don't apply / But I've gotta use words when I talk to you" [Eliot 2015: 131–132]. A chorus from a minstrel show accompanies the dialogues, warning, in the open-ended conclusion, about the coming of the "hoo-ha's" a modernized, apparently comic, version of the Furies. The Fragment ends with a repeated capitalized KNOCK, probably re-enacting *Macbeth's* knocking on the gate of "hell" or recalling *The Waste Land's* "waiting for a knock upon the door" [Eliot 2015: 138]. While the Scenario's ritual is traditionally allegorical, pointing to a predetermined meaning, the play supplants conventional allegory with a self-sufficient and unrelated "under-pattern" of guilt and retribution, derived from Aeschylus's *Choephoroi*, that is, Orestes's tragedy, which opens the text as an epigraph "You don't see them, you don't-but I see them."

When he jotted down the final *Fragments*, "in two nights ... with the aid of a bottle of gin", [Crawford 2022: 48] an entirely new work ensued, in spite of the lingering Aristophanic ritual design. Sweeney's agon changed from an overt contest with various antagonists to an inner conflict with his

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plays stressing Eliot's and Beckett's common emphasis on original sin [De Villiers 2012: 18–28]. De Villiers developed his study in a recent book [De Villiers 2021].

<sup>18</sup> Eliot, T.S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. London: Faber and Faber, 1933: 154.

own Furies. The whole of the second fragment, in fact, is all played within Sweeney's mournful consciousness, harking back to a passage from "Eel-drop and Appleplex"'s murder story, although Sweeney himself has not committed any murder: "The important fact is that for the man the act is eternal ... something is done which cannot be undone" [Eliot 2014, I: 527]. As a consequence, Sweeney's role in the play has become thoroughly passive, the agon has turned into an agony, that is hardly perceptible beneath the framework of modernity. His agon against Doris's and Dusty's trite, contemporary world turns inward, in a parallel underplot nobody sees nor understands. Incidentally, Rupert Doone's murder-story finale is certainly fun, but it does not render Sweeney's inert suffering.

As Eliot put it in his essay on Marston (1934): "what distinguishes poetic from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once. In this it is different from allegory, to which the abstraction is something conceived, not something differently felt, ... the drama has an under-pattern, less manifest than the theatrical one" [Eliot 2017: 120]. The two planes of the action, the vapid, contemporary London scene and Sweeney's desire "to do a girl in", ironically replaying the mythic past of Orestes's tragedy, cannot easily be connected by an encompassing narrative, nor could a dramatic motivation explain them away. Rather, the "abstraction", whether it be satire of contemporary mores or ritual murder, belongs to two dimensions at once, it is "differently felt". His notion of a "new" allegory privileges doubleness and contemporaneity over logical succession. A forgotten past and a mindless modern present are presented through a doubleness of perception, in which the unconcealed, discernable reality of the historical present almost blurs a concealed and ruined past<sup>19</sup>. Sweeney's monologue functions in different directions. He introduces tragedy into the comedy, suddenly disrupting the comic dimension, thereby unsettling expectations. Yet, neither of the two modes prevails, their opposed forces are presented in their irreconcilability, so that neither the uncertain dramatic plot nor the under-pattern can be said to hold sway. Sweeney is not so much a full character as a figuration, or, like its poetic avatar, a combination of "planes and angles", as in an abstract painting. Instead of acting, he performs the play's gap between words and things. The under-pattern, then, does not present a hidden, or

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Cermatori stresses doubleness as a trait of an allegorical way of perceiving the modernisms of the past, which seems to fit Eliot's relationship with the metaphysical poets' period [Cermatori 2021: 7].

preconceived meaning but rather a patently opposite relationship between content and mode of expression. In this play, the “under-pattern” creates a disjunction, which prevents the audience from identifying with the events on stage, and a dissociation sets in between what is represented and the way it is represented, between action and word, sign and referent.

In a contemporary series of critical lectures, now collected as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* [Eliot 1993], the drama's disjunctions may find a theoretical parallel. In the Clark Lectures, Eliot resumed, enlarged, and specified his earlier revaluation of metaphysical poetry by identifying its distinctive mark in the poets' ability to join together what was at the time severed by a discrepancy between what he defined “the idea and the image”. These two terms may be seen as pertaining to poetry alone, but they are better understood if enlarged to encompass a wider realm, extending from the domain of poetry to a psychological, intellectual, and spiritual disposition, or what Foucault would later term a change in a period's underlying epistemic assumptions, otherwise called a paradigm shift. Eliot's earlier notion of the dissociation of sensibility, which, in his view, set in at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was now heightened into the “disintegration of the intellect”, an “inevitable” process of “dissolution” which Donne's metaphysical mind resists in his poetry: “I have tried to show that the chaos of the seventeenth century ... achieves a kind of unity in the strange ability of Donne to unite disparate thought in a continuity of feeling” [Eliot 1993: 222]. “Metaphysicality”, like Benjamin's allegory, as we will see, becomes an a-historical notion when Eliot asserts that Baudelaire, Laforgue and Corbière are the modern inheritors of the metaphysicals: “The satisfaction, when you analyse it, is due to the disparity between the idea and the image, ... there is the same yoking together of the dissimilar, with the effect of irony instead of (metaphysical) wit” [Eliot 1993: 219]. And he adds: “Real irony is an expression of suffering”. Passing from dissociation of sensibility to disintegration of the intellect, Eliot moves from an aesthetic to a cultural-historical level, which was supposed to grow into a “trilogy under the general Title of the Disintegration of the Intellect”, which he had planned to write, but never did [Eliot 1993: 41]. Seen in this light, Eliot's mythopoetic notion<sup>20</sup> of the dissociation of sensibility will prove less a declinist theory of modernity

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<sup>20</sup> Although, for several reasons, the various shades of deconstructive criticism from the late twentieth-century one-sidedly undervalued Eliot's theoretical acumen, Patricia Waugh has recently revalued his contribution to almost every school of twentieth-century poetics [Waugh 2011: 381–394].

than a distinctive trait of modernist and avant-garde art, showing a strong tie to contemporary theatrical experiments. Eliot's dissociation theory has often been read without considering the wider context of European culture where such a notion is often touched upon, albeit in different terms. Although he may not have been familiar with such instances at the time, their common ground was a widespread anti-metaphysical stance represented by philosophy at the turn of the century.

### Benjamin's Allegorical Perception

If Sweeney reluctantly "has gotta use words" when talking to Doris, what does the play rely on in order to talk to the audience? As usual in a drama, words are just a part of what is conveyed through theatrical representation. But in this case, words are particularly inapt in their signifying function: something in the play cannot be expressed in words, and is expressible only in representation. Yet, the kind of representation Eliot uses in the final play leaves us in doubt as to its interpretation, however tentative it may be. As in the various kinds of post-dramatic theatre performances, "the comprehension finds hardly any support in overarching sequential connections of action / plot" [Lehmann 2006: 88]. The under-pattern, the two levels on which the play develops, introduced by Sweeney's anguished monologue, result in the failure of the classical aesthetic ideal of an organic connection of the elements in the play (the organic connection Eliot thought that *Hamlet* lacked). Perhaps the "inexpressibly horrible" that Shakespeare failed to represent, cannot be told in words, and the *Sweeney* drama may perform this impossibility through a sudden change of referentiality. Among the earliest theories of theatre accounting for modernism's penchant for deconstruction, self-referentiality, and juxtaposition, Benjamin's distinguishing between an allegorical aesthetic, characterising modern drama, and an organic classical ideal, seems particularly apt in order to account for Eliot's play's "revolutionary" disjunctions. If we consider *Sweeney Agonistes*'s mingling of genres, the protagonist's static inaction, and the doubleness of the "under-pattern", Benjamin's *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, or play of mourning, may help us add one more cue to the experimental significance of Eliot's "Aristophanic Melodrama".

Both Eliot's play and Benjamin's study of Baroque drama deal with overlapping concerns, addressing, in the same years, what could be described as the height of a dissociated modernity and its artistic expressions in the early twentieth century, after WWI. Although Eliot insisted that when "speaking of disintegration, decay, decline, (he) was concerned primarily

with poetry, and unconcerned with the emotional or moral co-efficient of these terms" [Eliot 1993: 158], the "disintegration of the intellect", does have a wider cultural connotation. Assuredly, though they approached the same phenomenon, they actually started from slightly different premises and evaluated the consequences and possible outcomes in divergent ways, in keeping with the paths they would later follow. Though presenting universal tokens of disintegration in *The Waste Land*, in his critical prose, Eliot deplored its effects on English poetry and culture, in the period that followed the metaphysical poets. On the contrary, Benjamin saw the fragmentation of Baroque dramas as anticipating new contemporary poetics, pitching what he termed the demystifying disjunctions of modern allegory against the "false" unity and organic wholeness of the Romantic symbol. Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism and Benjamin's inventing a quite unorthodox brand of Marxism mark their divergent paths. Yet, their respective non-dramatic tragedy and theory of obsolete Baroque plays, surprisingly show several common concerns.

As Eliot did in revaluing the metaphysical poets, and reinterpreting Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, Benjamin found a long neglected area of culture to investigate, reviving a formerly disregarded art form. Although interest for Baroque drama was current at the time, Benjamin reinterpreted it in a quite new way by pointing out its a-historical, comprehensive character. The book on *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, for various reasons, is at the heart of Benjamin's career and represents his first historically centered critical encounter with modernity, according to which *Trauerspiel* is not just a dramatic form from a past age but gives way to an allegorising tendency, a dormant tradition, which has survived in modern culture. Baroque and modern allegory, are no longer conventional figures of speech, but constitutive figures of modernity. In this study, his primary concern was to recover the idea of allegory. His new way of looking at allegory has much in common with Eliot's dissociation theory and his notion of the under-pattern. As Eliot maintains in 1933, allegory is not merely an illustration of predetermined concepts, but "something differently felt". Benjamin turns the traditional conception of allegory from its seventeenth-century usage, into a modernist mode of distancing and defamiliarising: what allegory displays is not a dissembled meaning, but an open difference between content and mode of expression, idea and image, the yoking together of the dissimilar, directing the viewer's attention to the artificial nature of the fictional world. The disjunctive logic of allegory Benjamin perceives in Baroque drama is, in his view, what

survives in modernist and avant-garde art. In Benjamin's analysis, allegory is chiefly a kind of experience, a sudden apprehension of the world as enigmatic and fractured, as no longer permanent, an intimation of mortality (in Sweeney's words "Life is death") and the inner experience itself of the gap between words and things. Allegorical perception transforms things into signs, words no longer cross over to reality. The allegorising tendency points up the inadequacy between human language and the objects it seeks to designate. Despite Benjamin's at times cryptic and aphoristic style, one can safely say that, in his view, allegory is both an experience and a way of looking upon things, an allegorical attitude or intuition, as well as a corresponding artistic expression [Benjamin 2019: 168, 173, 175].

In the third section of the book, "Allegory and *Trauerspiel*", Benjamin lays down far-reaching analogies between the language and form of the *Trauerspiel* and that of contemporary avant-garde drama [Benjamin 2019: 36]. In its fragmentary disjunctions, the art forms of the present age, mainly drama, mirror certain facets of the mental configuration of the Baroque, including certain aspects of its artistic practice. If the histrionic genre of *Trauerspiel* includes gory, ferocious, and high-flown history plays which usually deal with court intrigues, political maneuverings, seductions, and treasons, insisting on decay and death, nevertheless, their lack of coherence, fragmentation, and weak motivation, showing a grotesque mixture of the tragic and the playful, find a parallel in modern Expressionist theatre, right down to their acting technique which relies on automatic, rigid gestures and theatrical exaggerations. The series of Baroque dramas he analysed are marked more by the inconsistency of their formal and stylistic means than by their artistic value. Yet, in Benjamin's view, it is precisely in such shattered works from an almost forgotten past that the features of modernity can come to light. This coming to light is what Benjamin later called "the now of recognisability" [Benjamin 1999: 867], developing the notion of allegory into the more complex one of "constellation", which highlights the coupling of co-presence and historical dynamism in the new notion of dialectical image [Benjamin 1999: 462]. In this emphasis on fragmentation and disruption, Benjamin's own grasp of early modernity takes its clue not only from modern Expressionism, but also from Baudelaire's emblematic notion of "modern beauty", the aesthetics of the grotesque and ugly that pervades his oeuvre and recurs in Eliot's 1921 articles on the absolute comic.

There is a strong similarity in Eliot's and Benjamin's individual ways of dealing with the course of tradition and in their view of histo-

ry's causal temporal structure. They both rejected the idea of an ordered progressive, historical continuity: Eliot famously voiced his position in praising Joyce's *Ulysses* for "giving shape and significance" to history's "panorama of futility and anarchy", what Stephen Dedalus had called "the nightmare of history", or in Gerontion's words: "History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors / And issues". In his most radical presentation of the discontinuity of history, in the ninth thesis of "On the Concept of History", Benjamin deems progress a deceit that conceals the devastations of history. His famous representation of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, as the angel of history, his face turned toward the past facing a "heap of broken images", in Pound's words, would like to stay and "make whole" the ruins that have been "smashed", but a storm drives him toward the future. The storm is "what we call progress" [Benjamin 2004–2006, IV: 392]. This representation exemplifies his method of not saying anything, merely showing, and tells us, among other things, that allegorical aesthetic will be based on the simultaneous juxtaposition of opposites, creating a doubleness of perception that complicates the relationship between image and thought. If traditional allegory indicates the fact that language can mean two things at once, stating one thing and yet meaning something different, Baroque and modern allegory place the two sides on different but equal planes, drawing attention to the co-presence of separate semantic levels of a work of art. There is no longer a common set of coded meanings to be unraveled, but a dissociation between the form and meaning of an idea, in Eliot's words, the image and the idea, which directs attention away from mental content to the way that meaning is constructed<sup>21</sup>. Allegory does not offer consolation, like catharsis in tragedy, but gathers fragments which cannot be symbolically reassembled in a flash of artistic transfiguration.

### Tragedy versus *Trauerspiel*

What I find most remarkable however, are the analogies one can draw between Benjamin's theory of the *Trauerspiel*'s dramatic genre with its constitutive allegorical trope, and *Sweeney Agonistes*'s mingling of tragedy and comedy, with its figurative "under-pattern". Benjamin's distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* is fundamental to his book and may shed light on the non-dramatic, or post-dramatic drama *Sweeney Agonistes* may represent. First of all, according to Benjamin, *Trauerspiel*

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<sup>21</sup> Howard Caygill insists on the irreconcilability of the two levels in allegorical representation [Caygill 2004: 87].

is not an inferior version of classical tragedy, as it was deemed at the time, but a different kind of drama, in which the tragic hero's active role has turned into the martyr's suffering and where action has been replaced by self-reflection, dialogue by meta-theatrical monologues and parabasis, plus gestures and music, and the final catharsis supplanted by an indeterminate ending forbidding reconciliation. Characterizing the whole Baroque period, including the Elizabethans and Jacobean, with a special focus on *Hamlet*, the *Trauerspiel* represents a world of melancholy, which is mirrored by its very name: *Trauer* means sorrow or lamentation, and *Spiel* a game, play or pageant: staging grief and mourning, a ritual of mourning which can never find its conclusion. Benjamin must have been familiar with Freud's renowned opposition of mourning and melancholia (1917), stating that the latter ensues when one grieves for a loss one cannot comprehend, therefore preventing the course of mourning from reaching its conclusion, whether actual or symbolic.

As seen above, Eliot thought that ritual was essential to the new verse drama. However, when he moved from Scenario to actual play, the mythical ritual ceremony of death and rebirth was left behind. It was supplanted by obsessive repetitions, enhanced by drum beats and ragtime rhythms which mirror the protagonist's reenacting of an original guilt, or tragic fate, which nothing and no one can atone for. What Sweeney performs seems to be a frustrated longing for redemption: he sympathizes with the murderer's "agony" (a parallel to Sweeney's own Furies) and tries to "cheer him up"<sup>22</sup>. This longing brings with it the sudden realization of the limitations of human language, of the distance between words and meanings, which, according to Benjamin, "is the dramatic in the strictest sense". "The mystery is, on the dramatic level, that moment in which it juts out of the domain of language proper to it into a higher one unattainable for it" [Benjamin 2004–2006, I: 355]. The higher level belongs to an original, lost, unfallen language [Lehmann 2006: 47]. The original creaturely guilt Sweeney's lament evokes is presented as a sudden change of referentiality: from the realistic set of the play, we enter both Sweeney's consciousness with his own Furies and the realm of dream, "the cream of a nightmare dream" (Chorus), both detached from the play's ostensible plot.

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<sup>22</sup> The murderer kept the body of his dead wife in a lysol bath for days. The image of the corpse haunts the play, figuratively recalling the Freudian analysis of melancholy as one's inability to elaborate one's loss by bringing mourning to completion. The dead, dismembered body recalls the insistence on death typical of both Baroque drama and Elizabethan theatre.

As Eliot knew from his Harvard lectures in anthropology, it was common knowledge that theatre originally grew out of ritual. It seems that early forms of theatre were actually rituals, representing rites of passage, such as fertility rites, including the use of masks, and combining music and role-play. The connection of text with a musicalised form of speech was still there in Baroque theatre [Lehmann 2006: 46] as they again are in the jazzy, stichomythic exchanges of the Sweeney play. The verses, the jazzy rhythms, the contemporary popular songs, all point to the autonomy of non literary elements of theatre, Eliot's "jazz oratorio", which is a far cry from any realistic aesthetic. Moreover, the basic element of ritual, and of ancient theatre, was the event of transformation, death being the last transformation and theatre always having to do with symbolic death [Lehmann 2006: 47], as the *Sweeney* chorus repeats "And perhaps you're alive / And perhaps you're dead" [Eliot 2015: 162–163]. However, what Sweeney performs is the impossibility for modern drama to retrieve ritual's sacred function, in which words were the enactment of the sacred transformation, from death into rebirth. A further parallel, however, concerns Benjamin's analysis of the tragic hero's transformations. In these obscure dramas, which are the farthest thing from naturalistic representation, the characters are stiff and inept; the actors are depersonalized, cipher-like human figures. As in Expressionist drama, stage figures become types and the actor's role is turned into an unmotivated construct of movements, indicating a dissociated psyche. In the *Trauerspiel*, the main hero and sovereign is a double-faced tyrant and martyr, gathering up within himself the figures of both the rightly murdered tyrant and the martyr who suffers his own passion. Like Sweeney, he is at the same time murderer and victim, executioner and executed. Like Doris, Dusty and their guests, Baroque characters are abstract figurations, they can easily exchange roles.

From Scenario to the actual play, the ritual mythical structure was not only left behind, but transformed into its negation, in Benjamin's terms, the "non-existence of what it presents" [Benjamin 1998: 233], as Benjamin defines allegorical perception. If the contemporary world into which Sweeney suddenly bursts, is completely unaware not only of its inner emptiness but also of re-enacting a ritual mythical past, by now devoid of its sacredness, Sweeney's deeper perception does not seem so alien to it. Far from offering an alternative, it can only produce, along with a paralysing inaction, a sudden awareness, a new way to look upon things, which, however, reveals a world hollowed out of meaning, and the inadequacy between human language and the objects it designates. In El-

iot's words, a dissociation of sensibility set in, a severance of thought and feeling, an allegorising attitude which characterizes Sweeney's language, stripped as it is of its ordinary semblance of immediate meaning. *Trauerspiel* is an essentially anti-tragic and anti-agonistic drama, a post-dramatic play demonstrating that ancient tragedy is impossible in modern times. Similarly, when describing a rough draft of *Sweeney Agonistes*, Eliot asserted: "our tragic feelings are best expressed not through 'tragedy' but through farce ... For those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate ... in the end, horror and laughter may be one" [Eliot 2015: 816].

In the course of time, the *Sweeney* play with its daring experiments was abandoned and published as an unfinished poem. However, the notion of the under-pattern remained, especially in *The Family Reunion* (1939), as Eliot drastically turned to the more traditional mode of his later plays, where mimesis predominates again. Yet, his lifelong struggle with words and meanings resurfaces in *Four Quartets*, with a difference. The juxtaposition of opposites, later turned into a conjunction of opposites, has alternatively been interpreted as suggesting that the oppositions have led to reconciliation or as demonstrating that gaps cannot be filled [Brooker 2018: 180], nor do I think that a choice gives us a better comprehension of Eliot's work. The play of contraries is one great feature of our involvement in his works. The different voices jarring and clashing in *The Waste Land* and conflicting in *Sweeney Agonistes* turned to dialogue in the later plays and, in *Four Quartets*, became a "complete consort, dancing together". Here, referentiality is neither negated nor rescued, it is no longer an issue.

Curiously enough, in his *Trauerspiel* work, Benjamin too effected an "about-turn", of a different kind. Measuring the distance between words and meanings, in the face of the ephemeral quality of earthly life, the disjunctions of allegorical perception, as in a flash, turn into their opposite, into a movement toward reconciliation. The fragmentariness of the allegorical perception of a fragmented world implies the possibility of reconciliation, which springs dialectically from the world's internal inconsistency. When "all earthly things collapse into a heap of ruins" suddenly, what is revealed is "the limit set upon allegorical contemplation" [Benjamin 1998: 232], rather than its lasting persistence. Allegorical perception turns onto itself, allegorising itself, showing that the necessity of its disjunctive logic is nothing but "self-delusion." The metatheatrical self-reflexivity of the plays turns into the actors' gaze of self-reflection, the dissociated world allegories fully represent is itself turned into an allegory, suggesting the possibility

that the world might be saved from its ruinous fate. In this sudden leap, there is no causality or motivation, rather a gleam of messianic hope. In the words of one great Eliot scholar, the *Quartets* show “the potential of the arts for taking us to the frontier beyond which words fail, but meanings still exist” [Brooker 2018: 182].

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