CHAPTER III

VERSE DRAMA
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The verse drama is partly a revival and partly a continuation of an older tradition. Its revival is chiefly associated with the names of Yeats and Eliot. Both of them have tried to revive verse as a medium on the stage. To do this the usual blank verse form seemed unsuitable to Eliot mainly because it would draw attention to the Elizabethan practice to the writer's inevitable disadvantage. There was also the inelasticity of blank verse because of its remoteness from the speech accents of the day. W.B. Yeats worked for the establishment of an Irish theatre.* One of his objects was to give a sense, however, temporary, to Irish exiles of being at home and among their own people by the help of the plays he wrote. Taking ideas from the Japanese Noh Plays, Yeats believed in disregarding realism for the purpose of producing the highest effects on the plane of imagination. In his plays he dramatized Irish legends and history, often resorting to symbolism. The movement he sponsored was contrary to the practice of the contemporary theatre and was intended to explore the

* Some plays of Yeats are analysed later in the "Irish Section".
possibilities of drama as an art-form. The symbols he used were a part of a technical device to convey his vision. He established the Abbey Theatre in Dublin with the cooperation of Lady Gregory and discovered the dramatic genius of Synge. Eliot aimed at bringing drama to the common man, at reviving verse on the stage, it should be a speakable verse and close to the accents of common life. He did not think that blank verse would serve this purpose. The earlier attempts at verse drama had failed according to Eliot because blank verse was used. The Romantics and the Victorians as well as later practitioners failed for the same reason. To make poetic drama successful on the stage it was necessary that the audience should not be made to feel that verse was being spoken. Eliot has elaborated his ideas on the subject in his "Theodore Spencer Lecture" and has spoken of them elsewhere from time to time. The desire to make verse an acceptable medium for the drama made Eliot resort to a verse form

2. While Yeats was on his American tour (1919-20) he elaborated his idea of the theatre he wanted to build up. Poetry for April, 1920, contained a report of his speech delivered in Chicago, describing "the aristocratic theatre in which from a dozen to fifty of the elect shall see plays worthy of spirits highly tuned and keyed, and shall pass them on authoritatively to the next age." See, also, Notes On Some Figures Behind T.S. Eliot by Herbert Howarth (Chatto & Windus, London, 1965), p.301.

T.S. Eliot's attitude and that of W.B. Yeats to Verse Drama appear to offer important points of difference. Commenting on the subject Professor Carol H. Smith wrote: "it should be noted that his (Eliot's) idea of the way to approach the problem was not like that of Yeats - a drawing-room theater
which kept very close to prose. When he wanted to write more imaginatively verse, he depended upon the occasion to justify it.

There is according to him a difference of potentiality between verse and prose as mediums. While the latter was adequate for the daily business of life, for requirements of the commercial theatre, the former was adapted to the great moments of life when a man or a woman soared above the immediate experience and caught a glimpse of a more abiding reality. Eliot has suggested what poetic drama can do - it has command over an area where prose cannot operate: "there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action". He had also a theory regarding different layers of meaning which could easily lie embedded in poetry but were beyond the range of prose. Synge used prose but his case was exceptional. The prose of Aran Islanders had similarities with the Elizabethan prose and as a medium it could, therefore, rise to heights inaccessible to the prose, for lovers of poetry - but rather by way of audiences who wanted "entertainment of a crude sort but would stand a good deal of poetry". T.S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice, (Princeton University Press, 1963), p.37.

4. "In a play of Shakespeare you get several levels of significance". T.S. Eliot: The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism. (Faber, 1933) p.153
spoken in everyday life. The dramas which Eliot wrote shifted from religious subjects to contemporary ones. He introduced choric songs and in doing this he showed a similarity with the practice of Yeats who moved away from the present and found useful suggestions for the drama he wrote in the Noh plays of Japan. Eliot in "Family Reunion", "Confidential Clerk", "Elder Statesman", etc. dealt with the contemporary world and its problems and tried to present images of good and evil which were quite close to our times and, therefore, capable of more immediate appreciation. His "Sweeney Agonistes" is the only one-act play we have considered. The deeper subject is "birth, death and copulation", though smothered by references to superstition, to card-playing and the cheap conversation in which narrow material-minded and visionless people engage. The play ends with a sense of night-marish terror, heralding a kind of fate with the threat of destruction. In presenting this play Eliot has thought of two different levels of consciousness; one able to enter into the fundamental problems suggested and the other moving only on the superficialies of life without any such power.

1. "A Phoenix Too Frequent" by Christopher Fry. The author informs us that the story was taken from Jeremy Taylor who had it from Petronius. In the details of

the source we shall not enter. The play is in verse of an irregular and mixed kind. The motive, in general, is satirical but certain passages in the play testify to an unmixed emotion of love, not to be decried in spite of the peculiar situation in which it is seen.

The title "A Phoenix Too Frequent" seems to be intended as criticism of Dynamene's behaviour. She is a widow. Her husband died two days before and she brought the body to an underground tomb, accompanied by her maid Doto, resolved to fast unto death. Doto also desired to follow her example, although she had no cause. A young man comes there in the uniform of a soldier. The time was about 2 A.M. Dynamene falls in love with him as he with her and consents to her husband's body being hung up because the young man who had six bodies to watch over found one of them missing. The penalty for negligence was death. The significance of the title becomes clear. A Phoenix is reborn and we are also reborn, so to speak, after every grief which seems to quench the life out of us. This rebirth which is perfectly justified may in a given situation, cease to be so. The point in the words "too frequent" is that Dynamene by parting with the corpse of her husband to save the life
of her lover has overstepped the limits of this normal desire to live. She has committed an outrage on the sacred rites to the dead and has, thereby, deserved condemnation. On the moral plane her conduct is inexcusable.

She came to the tomb to die as a grief-stricken widow; her admiration and love for her husband, Virilius, seems to have been perfectly sincere. Her husband's chief virtue was the strength of will, the capacity to steer the course of their lives, with an unwavering purpose, "his brain was an ironing-board/ For all crumpled indecision." When Tegeus met her they fell to talking about their early life. It seemed that for a while they were neighbours, yet they certainly did not meet. Tegeus thinks of all sorts of possibilities; his speculations are charged with a sincere passion and an imagination, delightfully suggestive:

I may
Have seen something like an early flower
Something like a girl. If I only could remember how I must
Have seen you. Were you after the short white violets?
Maybe I blundered past you, taking your look,
And scarcely acknowledged how a star
Ran through me, to live in the brooks of my blood forever.

6. Ibid., p. 79
7. Ibid., p. 87.
Dynamene replies:

I wish I could remember you.
I'm envious of the days and children who saw you
Then. It is curiously a little painful
Not to share your past. 8

These exchanges of sentiment rise to a poetical
elegance which seems entirely free from any element of satire.
Tegeus's name is changed to 'Chromis' by the young lady. The word means something definite, a reassurance of colour and life. She declares:

Chromis, love is the only discipline
And we're the disciples of love. 9

As regards the disposal of her husband's body it seemed to her that it was far better that he should hang and save a life "surely better/Than idling into corruption?" 10 The further explanation she offers is very convincingly worded even though it may not convince anyone except the moon-struck pair.

I loved.
His life not his death. And now we can give his death
The power of life. Not horrible: wonderful.
Isn't it so? That I should be able to feel
He moves again in the world, accomplishing
Our welfare? It's more than my grief could do. 11

8. Ibid., p.88.
9. Ibid., p.100.
The argument perhaps shows that no cause need go defenceless. Whatever we do we can always find an excuse for doing it, yet one may well wonder if due deference were paid to the Lares and the Penates. On the other hand, if Tegeus was hanged as penalty, would the cause of morals and religion have been better served?

We have spoken of a general satirical purpose as the key-note to the drama. Yet the seriousness of the action seems to be a contrast to the absurdity of the fable and the peculiar circumstances in which the plot is developed. Dynamene comes to the tomb to die and she did not take any food by way of fasting unto death. The meeting with Tegeus quickly changed the atmosphere, smelling of death and intensely desolate. He awakened in her the desire to live. This came with a taste of a drop of wine she accepted at the hands of the young visitor. He pulled her back from death, gave her the promise of a new life, gave her the warmth of his glowing passion which took a romantic colouring from memories of young days recalled with the fervour of a deep emotion. She in her turn pulled him back from death and showed that after all a corpse had no life to lose, that if it could save a life, its value would be enhanced. Instead of a mass of decaying matter it is transformed into an
energy beneficial to life. Her arguments may sound as a piece of sophistry, but they contain a measure of truth which cannot be denied. Her situation, in fact, is tragic. The alternatives that lay before her are like those of Sophocles's Antigone who had to choose between loyalty to the state and her duty to her brother Polyneices, killed in battle and forbidden burial. In the case of Antigone the situation contained a problem which could not be solved satisfactorily, whatever she did. Her behaviour as a good citizen would make her a bad sister. For Dynamene the rites to the dead and the duty to love placed her in a similar quandary. Whatever she did there would be a failing somewhere. Would she fail in the cause of death, or in that of life? Finally, she chose to uphold life rather than sacrifice it in honour of the dead. There is scope for criticism of her conduct but if she had acted differently the feeling that she was unnecessarily tied to convention would be difficult to overcome. Whether the act by which she saved the life of her lover is permitted by her situation is a question of ethical propriety on which different opinions are possible, even legitimate ones. Life's demands are conceded by Jesus even
at the cost of the Sabbath.

The role of Doto is that of a chorus. Sympathizing with her mistress she was prepared to face the same fate. But when daylight broke in upon the scene, she welcomed it and saw in it the means of escape from the doom which her mistress had chosen for herself. She is also a kind of witness. The ritual of living requires a witness as also the ritual of dying.

2. In "The Cloak" Clifford Bax does not wholly give up the blank verse medium nor does he maintain it consistently. It is not written with any theoretical bias and is devoid of an experimental character such as we associate with the works of some writers of our time.

The play is a fantasy with three characters, - an angel, an unborn spirit and one newly dead. The angel who is the first speaker in a rocky world seemingly defining a region consecrated to spirits, says:

We do not purpose now to bring you mirth
But rather, if we can,
To show how strange is Man
And what it is that cankers life on earth

13. Ibid., p.33. 
From the same speaker we learn that the place where he is, is a place of spirits. The unborn intends to visit the earth and the newly dead is first condemned to the middle state of purgatory because she is unwilling to part with her personality. The unborn, however, is anxious to acquire personality.

Rule, not to be ruled, give burdens and not bear, And all the world shall know that I am I!  

The play considers the problem of personality as an obstacle to admission to heaven but it is a factor serving a world where the universal element prevails and gives rise to a unity in which the differences that divide and keep people apart are finally resolved. Although, this is an excursion into a purely imaginary world, it is, nevertheless, dominated by the Christian ideal, seen in the emphasis laid upon the conception of love.

3. "The Poetasters of Ispahan" by Clifford Bax. In this entertaining little play the dramatist chooses an exotic scene and exotic characters. The plot is whimsical but is rounded off with a well turned compliment to poets at the end. A jeweller Ibn-Hassim announces that he will

give away his daughter and all his immense wealth to the man who writes the best verses in her honour and submits them along with ten pieces of silver. Hallaj, the public letter-writer is a true poet and has a capacity for a detached enjoyment of beauty. In writing verse he fears no competitors. In fact, when the play opens the verses were already written but how was he to find the money? The problem seemed to be without a prospect of solution. But an unexpected event promises easy access to the money. Four competitors for the hand of the rich heiress arrive bringing money for writing verses to aid their pretensions. They are a pastry-cook, a perfumer-seller, a barber and a silk-mercer, all requesting Hallaj to help them with the verses. There was no want of zeal for the business, because the gains were great and attractive. Suliman, the barber comes to Hallaj dangling a pair of scissors in his hands and announcing his intention to compete. Guleesh, the silk mercer follows close on his heels, thoroughly upset because the barber left without fully shaving his beard. But when he knew the business which had brought the barber to the letter-writer he also was anxious to try his luck with a poem. They paid him a silver piece each and left him after the first round of
visits. A comical situation arose when they started stealing from each other words and ideas and afterwards fighting over them. They came secretly and separately a little later, each demanding a more particular attention to ensure success for himself. They also paid more silver and Hallaj had now the silver pieces to go with his verses. As the hour of final announcement comes, the wealthy jeweller and his beautiful daughter Silvermoon appear on the stage. The jeweller addresses the citizens of Ispahan and explains why he proposes to sell his daughter for a song. Every body would think that a soldier’s role would better prove his worth but the jeweller’s ideal was different:

If a man love not poetry, the bloom
And fragrance of all life, nor have no shame,
I count him so unnatural from the womb,
So brutish, that he is but man in name.

The poems were read but the competitors were surprised that they were not what was originally written for them. Instead, the verses contained reflections on their trade which made them appear ridiculous. For example, Nejrihal, the pastry cook’s poem ran as follows:

“If you but wed with me, bright Silvermoon,
Think how the whole year through from June to June,
You shall eat raisins, candy, and sugar-cakes,
And lick the honey from my cooking-spoon.”

At the request of Silvermoon Hallaj reads his own verses. His superiority demolishes all his competitors who, however, applaud him with sincerity for even if they were competitors their love for poetry is perfectly sincere and enabled them to overcome the chagrin of defeat. Hallaj's verses are a tribute to the bride he weds, who enthusiastically approves:

"Tender and sweet like placid water strewn With fluttering moonflakes on a night of June, Are all her thoughts and all her words, for lo! There in mid-heaven the soul of Silvermoon!"

The jeweller thinks that he has really succeeded in his plans and has selected the right man for his daughter and his wealth.

Hallaj apologises for the trick he had played on the four men who came to him for help and returns to them more than the money they had paid. All ends in a mood of rejoicing.

The play gives an idea of the poetry-loving soul of the Isphahan citizens and shows that the element of imagination had for them a pleasure and an appeal exceeding all material objects. The verses are smooth and flowing and sometimes show a lively fancy, which delights. A theory is indirectly suggested which favours the writing of poetry in a highly ornamental style.

18. Ibid., p.177.
4. "Paid On Both Sides" by W.H. Auden. The play is partly in prose and partly in verse. It has a chorus, which according to the stage direction should consist of more than three persons. There are two hostile parties which engaged in conflict leading to a series of deaths with an attempt at reconciliation by matrimony and out-break of further hostilities immediately thereafter. Among the various scenes one shows a boy fooling about, distorting into nonsense the words spoken by a doctor; another is the trial of a spy, a third is a betrothal. The speech by the Man-woman in the course of the trial has implications which need to be commented upon. Some passages describe the characters drinking wine or discussing a rugger-match. These facts are important for determining the category in which the play should be placed. It ends with a death as it begins with one. Roughly speaking, an unhappy ending may be described as the characteristic of a tragedy. But this name will not fit the present case. A different classification suggested by Aldous Huxley in his "Tragedy and the Whole Truth" will perhaps be more helpful in interpreting the play-wright's intentions. Aldous Huxley takes Homer's Odyssey as an example of a statement of what he calls "the Whole Truth". In a tragedy the purpose to intensify the tragic appeal leads to an exclusion of all details not in accord with it and,

therefore, the chemically pure tragedy is opposed to the whole truth. In this play Auden seems to be concerned with the whole truth and not with giving an orthodox kind of tragedy with its concentration on selected incidents so as to present a tragic view. The plot centres round hostilities raging between two parties. Hunter was killed in an ambush led by Red Shaw on the other side. His wife had a premature delivery as a result of shock and the child and the corpse are both seen together. The squealing baby's cry makes the mother observe:

\[... he is impatient
To pass beyond this pretty lisping time:
There'll be some crying out when he's come there.\]

This pessimism sets the note for the whole play. The chorus emphasizes it as a part of the pervasive atmosphere, prophesying frustration and death as man's share in this world:

That prize held out of reach
Guides the unwilling tread,
The asking breath,
Till on attended bed
Or in untracked dishonour comes to each
His natural death.

20. "Tragedy is something that is separated out from the Whole Truth, distilled from it, so it speak, as an essence, is distilled from the living flower," Music At Night (Chatto & Windus London, 1949) p.13.


22. Ibid., p. 201.
The chorus appeals to the watcher in the dark, a God substitute, to wake up:

Your sudden hand
Shall humble great
Pride break it etc.

Next there is an attempt to take revenge on Shaw who is spending a day at Brandon Walls. Ultimately, he is killed and it is from this source that the implacable spirit of revenge arises, completely destroying the peace-move taken by the more sensible elements in the two parties.

Shaw’s brother is caught as a spy and there is a trial in which Father Christmas figures as President, the Jury wearing school caps. Joan the widowed wife of Hunter appears with a gigantic feeding bottle. There is perhaps an element of surrealism in the scene which has features in common with the absurdities that follow upon the death of the mountaineers in Ascent of F6. The evidence given in an opening speech by John Nower only mentions that those killed cannot be forgotten, "can we be deaf to the simple eloquence of their inscriptions"; Bo, a witness points out that,

"By loss of memory we are reborn,/ For memory is death" etc.

This idea is in a sense true enough; a long memory and a

23. Ibid., p.202
24. Ibid., p.209
25. Ibid., p.209
spirit of forgiveness do not go together.

Mr-W-Man woman's speech is delivered as a prisoner of war behind barbed wire. The character may be interpreted as the spirit of humanity, for no other possible explanation seems to be available for elucidation of what is said. The speech may be briefly summarized. There is no question of an anniversary being celebrated, this compound character announces. There has been no healing, no recovery and the losses and destructions are still like so many scars on the landscape. Love for these men filled with animosity is an occasional episode, a matter of oaths taken and observed by a limited few and not extended to the human race. It was their duty in the interest of humanity to disband their forces. But they were all concerned with selfish ends, with the motive of profit they made. Humanity therefore was of no use to them and if it came and tried to keep their company they only indulged in activities unworthy of human dignity. They were bored, pride for them meant overwork and in art which could elevate the mind they discovered little or no appeal for them.

Trudy is one of the characters who voices a sentiment of pity for the unhappy men who die because of the feud and asks: "What do we want to go on killing each other for?" 26.

26. Ibid., p.205.
And he describes the vicious chain of events of murder and reprisal:

A Nower dragged out in the night, a Shaw
Ambushed behind the wall. Blood on the ground.
Would welcome fighters. 27

He declares that being old he would die before the next winter comes round and yet in the interval there will be cries of the dying which will be unheeded. Walter, another character, belonging to the same side observes that death spares neither the just nor the unjust. They are all swept away by the fire whose consuming power remains unexhausted. This is the fire of mutual hatred. What about the future? Will it be just as dark, as fraught with disaster?
The chorus believes that this wanton destruction of life will not continue because men are likely to develop resistance against the environment which finds them so ill-equipped and liable to misery.

Aaron Shaw on the other side takes the initiative in proposing that the feud should be brought to an end. Because the spirit of revenge will only be intensified by cruel acts:

... too often we
Have gone on cold marches, have taken life,
Till wrongs are bred like flies; 28

27. Ibid., p. 205
28. Ibid., p. 217
And his proposal is that the two parties should be united by marriage. Anne Shaw and George Nower should be married and the move will establish the cause of peace. Apparently, the remedy is attractive and there is reasonable hope that it will be effective. For most voices acclaim the decision and see in it a way out of the impasse. The marriage, accordingly, takes place, the guests rejoice, yet the chorus does not look upon the solemn ceremony as a fulfilment of the hope of peace and cryptically comments upon the secret blow that still may be dealt, causing the collapse of all hopes.

Turn westward back from your alone success,
Under a dwindling Alp to see your friends
Cut down the wheat. 29

Seth Shaw's mother encourages her surviving son to take revenge. The young man does not want to betray the cause of peace. The mother charges him with cowardice and finally he agrees to take revenge. Shots are fired and John Nower and his son are killed. The chorus ends the scene promising no hope for the present but expressing an expectation that the future will not be as dark as the present:

No life to touch, though later there be
Big fruit, eagles above the stream. 30

29. Ibid., p.220
30. Ibid., p.223
The comic element is introduced in the scene where the doctor and the boy talk to each other:

B. You need a pill, sir.
D. What's that?
B. You'll need your skill, sir etc. 31.

The clownish behaviour of the boy provides a comic interlude. But the fun has a sort of academic manner, the puns possess this flavour and attest a cultivated adult mind rather than that of a boy without education.

The play has a political background. It is obviously written to help the cause of peace. The recipe for the purpose is a change of heart and not a social act, however, solemnly performed. As long as profits are concealed under hypocritical excuses, as long as the spirit of revenge walks abroad and pride and pretension preside over human affairs, there is little hope that peace will ever prevail. The harmony that may ensure its cause is inner, and when it is properly strengthened by outward acts, life will grow full in its power to bless and make happy. But if the present is hopelessly confused and full of bitterness, the future is likely to offer a promise of a better state of things.

There are about thirty characters and there is no attempt to make any one alive with a personal quality. They

31. Ibid., p.212
are intended to share and express two contrasting attitudes which provide the basis for the opposite parties. The trial scene, with monster feeding-bottle has obviously comic elements. Father Christmas, the Jury with school caps, all these seem to bring together the church, the home and the school without any demarcation of spheres but suggesting, nevertheless, an interdependence and co-operation of all for the solution of the major problems of life. The attitude, however, is far from solemn. The lesson regarding the co-operation of diverse factors is not clearly enforced because the tone throughout seems to suggest an absurdity of attitude rather than a serious consideration and an earnest desire to reach a solution.

5. "Sweeney Agonistes"\textsuperscript{32} is a verse play and its origin may perhaps be associated with a conversation between T. S. Eliot and Arnold Bennett in 1924. The former is reported to have said that he wanted to write a drama of modern life in a rhythmic prose.

David E Jones points out a similarity between Samson and Sweeney, which he finds limited to the use of "a figure

of speech." The following example quoted by him illustrates this:

To live a life half dead, a living death.

(Samson Agonistes, 1.100)

Death is life and life is death.

(Sweeney Agonistes, p.131)

But Jones holds that there is no further likeness between the two plays. "His wrestling is a far cry from that of Milton's Samson."

F.O. Mathiessen raises a point which must have occurred to many readers: "The hero (of Sweeney Agonistes) is so different a character from the 'apeneck Sweeney' of the poems that Eliot might better have given him a different name." We have discussed the points and have recorded our dissent from them.

The play is described by the author as "Fragment of a Prologue." This does not seem necessary, for its character is not that of a fragment. It is complete as far as it goes. Perhaps this account given by the poet has a doctrinaire basis. In "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" (1928) Eliot has said:

"A continuous hour and a half of intense interest is what we need. No intervals, no chocolate-sellers or ignoble trays."

The acting-time of "Sweeney Agonistes" would be half this
time, it may even be shorter. For it consists only of 2349
words. The poet may have felt that departure from his own
theory needed an explanation. 36

Sweeney appears twice in "Poems" published in 1920,
"Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney among the Nightingales"; also
in "The Waste Land" and in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service."
The question which naturally arises is whether Sweeney of the
play is also the Sweeney of the poems. To answer the question
we have to look at the title and study its implications.

36. As regards Eliot's views on drama, an adequate statement,
although facetiously written, occurs in A letter to Ezra
Pound, printed in Townsman, I (July 1938). They are
usually known as "Five Points on Dramatic Writing":-

"1. You got to keep the audience's attention all the time.
"2. If you lose it you got to get it back QUICK.
"3. Everything about plot and character and all else
what Aristotle and others say is secondary to the
forgoin.
"4. But IF you can keep the bloody audience's attention
engaged, then you can perform any monkey tricks
you like when they ain't looking, and it's what
you do behind the audience's back so to speak that
makes your play IMMORTAL for a while.
If the audience gets its strip tease it will swallow
the poetry.
"5. If you write a play in verse, then the verse ought
to be a medium to look THROUGH and not a pretty
decoration to look AT." Also see T.S.Eliot's
Dramatic Theory and Practice by Carol H. Smith
The parallel to Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is obvious. In fact, Sweeney is a new version of Samson. In "Sweeney Erect" the references in the following passage could have applied to Samson as well:

Sweeney addressed full length to shave
Broadbottomed, pink from nape to base,
Knows the female temperament
And wipes the suds around his face.

The 'Doris' of the play also appears here. But we need not go so far as to seek her identification with Dalila. But underground resemblances may be discovered if we look for them. In "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" we have a further picture of the man's sensual association:

The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees ...

The presence of the sensual element does not cause any difficulty. Eliot however, does not think sensuality as the worst evil in human nature. There are worse degradations still to which he refers in his essay on Baudelaire: "the sexual act as evil is more dignified, less boring, than as the natural, 'life-giving,' cheery automatism of the modern world."37

37. Eliot's "Baudelaire" *Selected Essays* (Faber, 1951) p.429.
In "Sweeney Agonistes" the champion is encircled by Philistines. Their talk is full of cliches like "he's no gentleman if you can't trust him". They go a-whoring after false gods. They do duty for Dagon worship among the Philistines. In place of the festival of the Sea-Idol, we have here "a party" for which apparently the characters are making preparations. Sweeney's devotion to the true God reveals itself in his concern with the fundamental realities of life, with "Birth, and copulation, and death", which calls forth a feeling of being bored in Doris, "I'd be bored." Sweeney tells her that he will carry her off to a cannibal island. Against such savage background indeed can the hollow men achieve some sense of reality? Eliot has stated his views on the subject with great force:

"And without sentimentalizing the life of the savage, we might practise the humility to observe, in some of the societies upon which we look down as primitive or backward, the operation of a social-religious artistic complex which we should emulate upon a higher plane." 38

In cutting the cards Doris turns up the "two of spades" and is thence seized with the horror of death, her mind

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superstitiously running on the coffin. At this point we have the first of the two sets of nine knocks, as premonition of impending disaster. The second set comes at the end after the chorus, describing a nightmare, which oppresses the characters, and wake them in the middle of the night "in a sweat and hell of a fright."

What happens to the Philistines was their mass destruction by the falling of the roof over the heads. Here in "Sweeney" there is only the fear, the anticipation. The word "knock" arranged in a broad series of three for the first line ends with one only in the last, suggesting an intensification of horror, the moment of the dreaded blow, when speech is lost in agony. There are certain other points, worth noticing in the play. One is the use of the word "rent". "Who pays the rent?" is asked by Dusty and draws the explanation that Pereira makes the periodical payment for Doris's flat to the landlord. The word occurs five times, once entering into a compound formation as "rent-collector" but its final use by Sweeney acquires a new significance:

We're gonna stay and we're gonna go
And somebody's gotta pay the rent.
Here the idea of being called to account seems to be the implication. It is not the money-payment that is meant but the situation after death when our life is scrutinized for rewards and punishments. The view is thus eschatological.

In Milton's "Samson" the disaster of the Philistines and the messenger's account of it bring the play to a conclusion, the Chorus recording the Cathartic effect in the words: "And calm of mind all passion spent." In "Sweeney" nothing comparable is found except that the Philistines are threatened suggesting that the end cannot be far off. Thus when we arrive at this point, we do not see in it the limitations implied by the word "a fragment".

The expression "an Aristophanic Melodrama" used by Eliot as a descriptive label for the play may be briefly examined with the help of a quotation from his essay, "Wilkie Collins and Dickens". The dictionary meaning of melodrama, "a sensational dramatic piece with violent appeals to emotions and happy ending" seems naturally to create the impression that artistically it lacks a good pedigree. Eliot's own view is different: He states "the frontier of drama and melodrama is vague; the difference is largely a matter of emphasis; perhaps no drama has ever been greatly and permanently successful without a large melodramatic element." 39 His own work, therefore, cannot suffer loss of dignity by the description he chooses for it.