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“Eliot and Huxley Among the Nightingales”

Eliot and Huxley's "Frightful Jewess"

T. S. Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" was first published by the Hogarth Press in June 1919 in a volume entitled Poems and reprinted in Ara Vos Prec in 1920. In letters to Mary Hutchinson and his brother Eliot spoke of "Sweeney" as "very serious" and "intensely serious" and thought it one of his best poems (Letters 311, 363). Aldous Huxley's "Permutations Among the Nightingales" was reprinted in Mortal Coils (1922), after having been previously submitted to H. L. Mencken's Smart Set in 1920 (Hidden Huxley 19).¹ Eliot's quatrain poem has been and still is the subject of many scholarly examinations, but despite a tentative resurgence of Huxley scholarship in recent years, no comprehensive study of "Permutations" has appeared as yet. This is probably due to the fact that this curious one-act play has little apparent literary merit and, as the stage directions prove, was not intended to be staged. Its interest must be found in its connection to Eliot's poem and especially in the use of anti-Semitic stereotypes employed by both writers. I feel that the temporal proximity in which "Sweeney" was published and "Permutations" conceived hints at an intellectual cross-fertilisation which goes beyond coincidence and the accidental naming of two pieces of writing which seem, at first glance, so utterly dissimilar.

Eliot first met Huxley at Oxford but the friendship developed through mutual visits to Garsington.² Both also met regularly in London, attending the same functions and inviting each other for dinner. Eliot applauded Huxley's talent as a literary journalist, whereas he was somewhat more muted on the Englishman's abilities as a writer of fiction and poetry.³ He regarded Huxley as a dear friend and 'charming' personality, though gradually, particularly during the 1930s, he would begin to think of him as an antagonist in philosophical matters (Childs 134).⁴ Nevertheless, a friendship between the two writers would survive until Huxley's death in 1963.⁵

Both writers were obviously aware of and interested in each other's work. Unfortunately, no evidence is available which could corroborate a claim that Eliot knew Huxley's play. That Huxley on the other hand was very familiar with Eliot's poem is evident in his discussion of it in Literature and Science, published in 1963.⁶ In this contribution to the Snow-Leavis debate, Huxley charts the challenges faced by modern poets at a time when scientific knowledge about the natural world has de-poetised many archetypal poetic images; and he specifically alludes to the nightingale as a cogent example of this. He

quotes “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” and “The Waste Land” and shows how Eliot uses the old mythical stories of jealousy, sexuality and death and projects them onto the modern world: “Modern squalor, ancient barbarism, and baroque religiosity—it is with these mythological upper partials, these cultural harmonics and satirical undertones that the song of the immortal bird comes to a great contemporary poet” (150).

Huxley’s acute insight into Eliot’s poetry comes from the end of his life, though it is not unreasonable to argue that he knew “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” prior to his own composition of “Permutations”. Huxley shared the modernists’ interest in dislocating myths as a useful philosophical and artistic tool.⁷ A case could therefore be made that his play is simply another modern take on the traditional nightingale myth, alongside examples by Eliot, Ovid, Sidney and especially Keats’s “Ode to the Nightingale” and Matthew Arnold’s “Philomela”. Keats’s “Ode” finds its repercussion in Huxley’s other play “Now More Than Ever” (Sexton 63).⁸ “Philomela” had a particular poignancy for this great-nephew of the Victorian thinker. The last two lines of Arnold’s poem, “Eternal passion / Eternal pain” are spoken by Gumbriel junior at the danse macabre in Antic Hay (1923), where they suggest a satiric reaction to the false sentiments of the Jazz tune (Super 433).

Huxley’s discussion of Eliot’s poetry in Literature and Science and the instances of commentary and allusion mentioned above show that he was responsive to the trope of the nightingale beyond its use in “Sweeney”. I would therefore argue that in this particular case it was not the tragic archetype of passion itself which interested him, but the conflation of the myth with a particular contemporary prejudice he found in “Sweeney”. I propose it was the figure of “Rachel née Rabinovitch”, the Jewish seductress, which prompted Huxley to pen his play in imitation of or reaction to Eliot’s poem. In what follows I will first indicate the various points of contact between the play and the poem, and then I will show how Huxley critically assesses Eliot’s imagery. The basis for this assessment is formed by Eliot’s and Huxley’s different readings of Baudelaire’s Fleurs du Mal.

Eliot creates in “Sweeney”, as a critic pronounced, a “comically sordid poetic landscape” of brothels and miscreants (Schuchard 88). Huxley’s play is set in Italy, at the Hotel Cimarosa, on a June evening. It is a balmy night, the “great stars palpitate in the sky” and the “moon ris[es] over the hills” (95, 107).⁹

An old village lies in the valley below, its church bells chiming the hours intermittently. The action takes place on the terrace of the hotel, the balconies above it and among the “dark foliage” of the ilex and cypress trees in the grounds (65). This stereotypical romantic setting reverses Eliot’s dark and menacing atmosphere in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”, by which I mean that the encoded baneful tryst in Eliot’s poem has been translated by Huxley back into formulaic amorous symbolism. The analogous components on which the association between the two works hangs are evident in the setting and throughout the character development of Huxley’s play.

If we look closer at the “setting” of Eliot’s poem, we find many parallels on which Huxley constructed his literary allusion. The “palpitating stars” in “Permutations” refer to Eliot’s constellations “Raven” (Corvus), “Orion” and “Dog” (Canis Major) (ll. 7, 9).¹⁰ The “great moon has swum imperceptibly to the height of the heaven” (107) in “Permutations”, whereas “The circles of the stormy moon / Slide westwards toward the River Plate” (ll. 5 – 6) in “Sweeney”. The church bells of the unseen village mirror the image of “The Convent of the Sacred Heart” (l. 36) in order to imbue the piece with some of the religious tension between human passion and divine purpose that Aeschylus intended in Agamemnon. At the same time, this symbol of chastity stands in stark contrast to the brothel-like place in which Sweeney is accosted (Schuchard 95) and the shaded grounds where the hotel guests perform their sexual round dance. The eponymous nightingale predictably adds her backing vocal to the plot. In “Sweeney” she sings in “the bloody wood” (l. 37), an allusion to the rape of Philomela, or, as Eliot himself stated, the wood of the Furies at Colonus (Schuchard 96).¹¹ In “Permutations” the trees in the garden with their resident immortal bird are the omnipresent backdrop to the petty intrigues of the lovers and remind the reader of Frazer’s description of murderous ritual in the undergrowth at Nemi. There are many references in “Permutations” to windows, doorsteps and balustrades, architectural spaces of liminality which also feature in “Sweeney”. There, characters sprawl at the window sill (l. 18), lean through the window (l. 30) or converse at the door (l. 34). We can add the “hornèd gate” (l. 8) to these thresholds, since it marks the egress of the underworld from which true dreams emerge,¹² and for which we may conceivably substitute Huxley’s bedroom doors—doors which are slammed in the lover’s face (66), approached with mercenary pluck (102) or beaten at for hours (106), as a satiric symbol of the “silent house of Sleep”.¹³

At the centre of “Permutations” as well as “Sweeney” is a sextet¹⁴ of predatory and sinister characters, though Huxley chose to portray his cast satirically as a collection of verbose and scheming types. They are therefore not quite so dark and ominous as Eliot’s silent and hostile players. In addition, we find a waiter, who is an observer and not an actor in the unfolding plot. The waiter in “Sweeney” brings in the fruit wordlessly (ll. 19 – 20) whereas Huxley’s waiter Giuseppe serves good advice with his cups of coffee and glasses of brandy (67).

The “permutations” of Huxley’s play are based upon the varying constellations of three courting couples. Count Alberto Tiretta¹⁵ is hopelessly in love with a French woman, though by the end of the play he will have bedded the passionate Lucrezia Grattarol. She in turn desires Sidney Dolphin, a poet, who has cast an eye on the American heiress Amy Toomis. In order to gain Sidney’s attention, Lucrezia manages to drive a wedge between the two would-be lovers, which subsequently leaves the path free for the advances on Amy of Paul de Barbazange. This descendant of “the preux chevaliers” (85) plays on his charm and aristocratic breeding to enamour rich women. Having previously seduced Baroness Simone Koch de Worms and secured a gift of two hundred thousand francs from her (in exchange for amorous duties yet to be performed), he seizes the opportunity to convince Amy to marry him and thereby gain access to her two hundred million dollars. All six characters are well-established Huxleyan types. Alberto seeks sexual satisfaction in the guise of an abjectly pathetic child yearning for its mother (76). Lucrezia needs to scratch her itch, but her objective of securing Sidney’s affection must fail. He is Huxley’s typical shy young man of letters who is only theoretically interested in life. The uncomprehending admiration of the American heiress contains enough passion for him to satisfy his meagre animal instincts (103). Paul is the consummate materialist. He prostitutes himself to rich women he abhors, so he cannot believe his luck when he happens upon Amy, who is at least young and can be made love to without any feelings of disgust.

The supplementary intricacies of the plot and development of ideas play no further role in this context. As a satire on the sexual mores of post-War society alone, “Permutations” is rather bland and obvious. Only the connection to Eliot’s acclaimed poem can rescue it from insipidness. It is, of course, impossible to translate Huxley’s characters one-to-one to Eliot’s. There is, however, a similarity in their interaction on the basis of jealousy, greed and sexual attraction.

Eliot's congregation of gesturing malefactors under the murky and veiled skies of the South American territory is everything but insipid. Sweeney himself is a dangerously reticent character, a homme moyen sensuel, who blocks the advances of the "person in the Spanish cape" (ll. 11 – 12). He is a recurring persona in Eliot's work, haunted by death and aware of the impossibility of transcending his base human existence which contains of nothing else but birth, copulation and death (Bergonzi 108).¹⁶ He is vulgar, "apenecked", an embodiment of the debased present, and thus in startling contrast to the hero Agamemnon, whose sordid murder is indicated in the epigraph of "Sweeney" (Ellis 22). A foil to Aeschylus' tragedy, he nonetheless assumes the same role as a casualty to betrayal and cruelty (Feder 127). The clash of the Greek myth and the low mock-rituals of modern life, as Spender called it, discloses Eliot's jaded view of modern man set against the eternal mysteries of life (Spender 58).¹⁷

The characters in Eliot's poem are presented through isolated body parts, thereby appearing fragmented and anonymous, and reduced to attributes derived from a modern bestiary (Svarny 139 – 140, 147).¹⁸ Their dehumanised physiognomy represents a satiric hommage to modern consciousness. The "silent man in mocha brown" who lingers at the window (ll. 17 – 18) is inert, as is the "man with heavy eyes" (l. 27). Both withdraw from the conflict in the room and leave Sweeney alone with the two women. The host talks with "someone indistinct" at the door (l. 33), who is possibly instrumental to Sweeney's fate. This constellation of characters heightens the atmosphere of foreboding (Matthiessen 129). The women are the only active characters, though their advances are routine: 'Rachel née Rabinovitch' in particular impacts on the plot with a directed gesture of solicitation (l. 24). The distortion of the characters due to their reduction to a single attribute is extended also to her, although it is her name rather than her body which confines and convicts her.

It is for the character of Rachel that "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" has been scrutinised in surveys of Eliot's perceived anti-Semitism. Bryan Cheyette sees in her a depiction of bestial sexuality that was frequently equated with Jews (Cheyette 250 – 1). Lyndall Gordon stresses that there exists a link between Eliot's putative anti-Semitism and misogyny which is made plain in "Sweeney" (Gordon, Imperfect Life 104 – 5). Christopher Ricks points out that Rachel's adjunct "née Rabinovitch" gives ground to the suspicion that changing her name will disguise her Jewishness, but that in this case we do

not know that Rachel is not currently married to a Jew (Ricks 30). Anthony Julius is less restrained. For him it is obvious that with this line Eliot refers to the common practice among English Jews of anglicising their names in order to hide their ancestry (Julius 91). Julius finds “Sweeney” “the most poised of Eliot’s anti-Semitic poems”, in which he portrays Jews as repellent and untrustworthy (Julius 83). The theme of plotting and sense of danger in the poem is transmuted into the anti-Semitic image of the threatening Jew—threatening to the health and the culture of the English nation (Julius 47). The portentous atmosphere is further informed by ominous silences and lewd gestures. A woman’s intrigue in *Agamemnon* is transposed into a Jewish intrigue (Julius 82). Julius sees her as a multi-dimensional character. On the one hand, he claims, she is based on Arnold’s ‘Rachel’, who attempts to escape the mean inn. (Julius 87). She is also a Salome or a Judith, biblical heroines of *fin-de siècle* misogyny (Julius 88). Rachel is, of course, a whore as well, the nightingale of the title. Associating Jewish women with prostitution is routine anti-Semitic practice. Julius’s condemnation of Eliot’s anti-Semitism has recently been refuted by Jewel Spears Brooker and David M. Thompson, though both acknowledge that Eliot was prone to a general cultural anti-Semitism which is seen as habitual and commonplace in British society in the 1920s.¹⁹ The latest issue of *Modernism/modernity* contains a special section on “T. S. Eliot and anti-Semitism” in which Ronald Schuchard also qualifies Julius’s condemnations.²⁰ Huxley, however, found an angle of attack in his “Permutations”.

Huxley’s Rachel, Simone Koch de Worms, is herself a colourful Jewish stereotype, “cushioned” and “steatopygous” (82)—in short, she is a “ripe Semitic beauty” (82). In addition she is overly emotional and a little stupid (84). She easily falls prey to Paul de Barbazange, a gigolo and “ardent anti-Semite” (82). Her name is reminiscent of Baron Henry de Worms, Lord Pirbright, a member of parliament in the 1880s and president of the Anglo-Jewish Association for several years. Huxley’s position in the theatre of literary anti-Semitism is ambiguous. On the one hand, he harboured definite anti-Semitic feelings, particularly in relation to what he termed “Hebrew Music”.²¹ On the other hand, he did not promote the loathing of Jews in his writings but disclosed aspects of contemporary prejudice in his portrayals of anti-Semites and emulation of common anti-Semitic stereotypes in his fiction. He was also an insightful analyst of German anti-Semitism after 1933, which he identified as an entrenched linguistic problem.²² Instead of looking at Baroness de Worms as a literary stereotype which Huxley employed for comic effect or in order to express his personal attitude towards Jews, I propose that he

created this figure principally in response to Eliot's Rachel, as an indictment of a general cultural understanding of post-War prejudice and bigotry. This bigotry is particularly directed towards the association of a degenerate sexuality with Jewish women, an association which received literary articulation in Charles Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal.

If we take "Sweeney" as a satire on sexuality and violence and "Permutations" as a satire on the sexual fashions of post-War England, we can discern that both Eliot and Huxley are concerned about the plight of modern man, namely his inability to engage meaningfully with his fellow beings, feelings which have been formulated by Baudelaire as "le gouffre infranchissable qui fait l'incommunicabilité". (41).²³ Both Eliot and Huxley opine that Baudelaire describes sexual activity as insincere, mercenary or disgusting. He expresses the range of defiled human emotions, including love, in a ruthlessly uncompromising manner. Whereas Eliot feels that Baudelaire's insistence on the evilness of physical love lies in its distance from an idealised divine love, a gap which is insurmountable, (429)²⁴ Huxley thinks that Baudelaire was simply an "emotional onanist" who indulged in fleshly sin with the fervour of a determined debauchee (36).²⁵ "When he saw that there was no prospect of his getting what he yearned for, he renounced love altogether in favour of self-tormenting debauchery on the one hand, and long-range adoration on the other." (41) This is particularly evident in the lines about his "cadaver" languishing besides the "paid-for body" of a frightful Jewess in Fleurs du Mal.²⁶ Huxley comments: "Appalling Lines! Reading them, one seems to sink through layer after darkening, thickening layer of slimy horror." He continues: "Between him and the "frightful Jewess" there was not even the possibility of reciprocal desire—there was nothing but disgust. His tortures were mostly those of defilement." (38)

Eliot identifies Baudelaire's prostitutes, mulattos and Jewesses as belonging to a stock imagery tainted by their theatrical inverted satanic Romanticism (424). This, Eliot feels, was disingenuous, even though he endowed Sweeney with the same kind of misogyny as Baudelaire's. His estimation of what Baudelaire has brought to poetry, however, differs from Huxley's. He states that the Frenchman "introduces something new, and something universal in modern life" in that he elevates the "imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis". In other words, he has "created a mode of release and expression for other men" (426). Ennuï, which predominates the attitude of the "moderns" to life,

became a particular point of interest in Eliot's assessment of Baudelaire. "His ennui may of course be explained, as everything can be explained in psychological or pathological terms; but it is also from the opposite point of view, a true form of acedia, arising from the unsuccessful struggle towards the spiritual life." Because, in Eliot's view, "he could not escape suffering and could not transcend it, so he attracted pain to himself" (423).

Huxley agreed that Baudelaire suffered from ennui which he made the subject matter of his poetry; this in turn deserves the attribute, in Paul Valéry's words, of "la poésie même de la modernité" (45).²⁷ Like Eliot he refers to Mon cœur mis à nu: journal intime where it says "la volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît dans certitude de faire le mal"²⁸ and he contends that everyone instinctively knows what pleasure can be found in doing evil (Huxley 36 and Eliot 428). Unlike Eliot, who sees in this line an affirmation of Baudelaire's belief that if humanity means the capability for damnation, it ipso facto also includes the possibility for redemption, Huxley is cynical about the bored licentiousness Baudelaire represented especially for the moderns. "The joylessness of modern pleasures and modern love [...] is even completer than the joylessness of Baudelaire's debauchery" (46). This new form of ennui is the foundation of Huxley's criticism of this modern form of pleasureless gratification in 'Permutations'.

Whereas Eliot contends that, for Baudelaire, "Woman" had become a symbol of sin (430), he himself, in an echo of Baudelaire, utilises the "frightful Jewess" Rachel as a symbol of modern degenerate sexuality. Huxley, on the other hand, does not put forward Baroness de Worms as the embodiment of post-War materialism and sexual degeneration, even though she is not a sympathetic character. Instead this role is played by Paul de Barbazange, the aristocratic anti-Semite and male 'nightingale', the Baudelairean hater of Jewish women. Although it would be too grand a statement to declare that Huxley took Eliot to task for his alleged anti-Semitic beliefs, it is nevertheless not unreasonable to argue that this was one of Huxley's intentions in writing "Permutations Among the Nightingales". Huxley was inspired by Eliot's forceful evocation of post-War ennui, but decided to impose his own twist on the cultural suggestion of racial prejudice.

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Notes:

¹ Bradshaw gives as the bibliographical reference *Smart Set*, lxiii, November 1920, 71 – 88. See 26, n20.

² Eliot spoke of his meetings with Huxley in detail in letters to his mother, e.g. 23 June 1918, Letters 235; 22 February 1920, Letters 268 and 2 December 1920, Letters 424. Huxley first mentions Eliot in a letter to Naomi Mitchison in May 1917. In it he referred to him as a “very nice creature”. Letters 123.

³ See T. S. Eliot’s contribution to the Memorial Volume as well as in a letter to his mother, 3 July 1920. “I do not accept the interpretation of me which the *Times Literary Supplement* is accustomed to make, elsewhere as well as in the review of Huxley’s book [Leda] which you read. I have a very low opinion of this book. Huxley has, of course, like a number of other young men, borrowed a good deal from my poetry.” Letters 391.

⁴ Childs quotes Eliot’s review of Son of Woman: The Story of D. H. Lawrence by John Middleton Murray in Criterion 10 (1931), in which Eliot sees Huxley as Lawrence’s disciple in applying Christian terminology to his own brand of spirituality. See furthermore Schuchard’s comment in his edition of Eliot’s Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry, 233, 276 n26.

⁵ Huxley wrote in 1947 that Eliot was someone for whom “I have always had a great affection, (though I have never been very intimate with him, in spite of nearly thirty years of acquaintance) as well as a profound admiration.” Letter to E. McKnight Kauffer, 19 January 1947, Letters 565.

⁶ *Aldous Huxley Complete Essays*, Vol. 6, 90 – 152. Further references in the text.

⁷ After reading Morley’s *Trojan Horse*: “It made me realize, yet again, how useful, artistically and philosophically, it is to have a known and accepted mythology at one’s disposal.” Letter to Christopher Morley, 4 August 1938, Letters 436.

⁸ Cf. “Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain, / While though art pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy! / Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain – / To thy high requiem become a sod.”

⁹ All references to “Permutations” come from Mortal Coils and will be cited by page number.

¹⁰ All references to “Sweeney” come from Collected Poems and will be cited by line number.

¹¹ T. S. Eliot. ‘The Silver Bough’, Letter in Times (London, 6 April 1958, 4).

¹² Statius, Silvae 5. 3. ll. 288 – 90.

¹³ Virgil, Aeneid, VI. Schuchard mentions ‘the hornèd gates of pleasure’ as a debunked image from Dryden’s Aeneid. Dark Angel, 95.

¹⁴ I will argue that Sweeney, the “silent man in brown” and the “man with the heavy eyes” are three different characters.

¹⁵ Count Tiretta de Trevisa was a companion of Casanova. See “The Eternal Quest: Paris and Holland” in Casanova’s Memoirs.

¹⁶ See also Gordon, Eliot’s New Life, 60. Svarny argues that the Sweeney in the quatrain poems is different from the Sweeney in subsequent works. Svarny 141.

¹⁷ See also Shapiro 272.

¹⁸ Lockerd understands them as evolutionary Darwinian characters. Lockerd 132.

¹⁹ Both are published in T. S. Eliot and Our Turning World. Their criticism of Julius’s theses is convincing in rebutting his statement that there is an authorial proposition of anti-Semitic hatred and contempt in Eliot’s writing.

²⁰ See “Special Section: Eliot and Anti-Semitism: The Ongoing Debate.” Modernism/modernity, 10.1 (January 2003).

²¹ See e.g. Complete Essays Vol. 2 21, 23.

²² See e.g. Complete Essays Vol. 4 57 – 8.

²³ “The insurmountable gulf which thwarts communication”. [My translation] All references to “Baudelaire” by Aldous Huxley come from Complete Essays, Vol. 2, 31 – 47 and will be cited parenthetically.

²⁴ All references to “Baudelaire” by T. S. Eliot come from Selected Essays, 419 – 30 and will be cited parenthetically.

²⁵ The term ‘emotional onanist’ is applied to Dostoevsky’s characters which, Huxley thinks, are characters that could have been modelled on Baudelaire, who was “a dark figure, tragical and terrific, but at the same time ludicrous in being too imposing, insufficiently supple”. Complete Essays 35.

²⁶ “Une nuit que j’étais près d’une affreuse Juive, / Comme au long d’un cadavre un cadavre étendu, / Je me pris à songer près de ce corps vendu / A la triste beauté dont mon désir se prive”. “One night as I lay beside a frightful Jewess, / Like an extended cadaver, an unfolding cadaver, / I began to ponder beside this purchased body / The sad beauty of which my desires deprive me” [My translation].

²⁷ “Poetry akin to modernity” [My translation].

²⁸ “The extraordinary and paramount pleasure of love lies in the assurance of doing evil” [My translation].