



## *Old Times: Pinter's Meditation on Sweeney Agonistes*

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# EPI-REVEL

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*Old Times: Pinter's Meditation on Sweeney Agonistes\**

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Writing on *Sweeney Agonistes* in 1970, William Spanos observed, particularly with reference to *The Birthday Party*, that the influence of that first T. S. Eliot play, 1926, on the drama of Harold Pinter, “especially on the monosyllabic diction, the primitive jazz rhythms, and, above all, the comic repetitions of its dialogue, is so clear, that, to me, it is a debt that jars.”<sup>1</sup> Pinter scholars, on the other hand, have not acknowledged this debt. Recently, Martin Regal has argued that echoes of T. S. Eliot, particularly “Four Quartets” resound throughout *No Man's Land*.<sup>2</sup> While a further relationship between Eliot's work and Pinter's has occasionally been mentioned, it has not been explored. I would like to show Pinter's debt to the ground-breaking *Sweeney Agonistes* by focusing on *Old Times*, 1971, virtually a transmutation of Eliot's play. Remarkably, this has gone unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> In the latter parts of the essay, although I focus steadfastly on *Old Times*, I call attention to aspects of *Sweeney Agonistes* that seem to have influenced Pinter's work more generally.

John Lahr reports Pinter as having said that he has “no aim in writing other than exploring the images that come into [his] mind.” “I find some of those images really shocking,” he said, “so they shock me into life and into the act of writing.”<sup>4</sup> Some of those shocking images, I argue, as well as the language, musical effects, tone, epistemology, and structure of *Sweeney Agonistes*, have freely engendered *Old Times*.<sup>5</sup> In a 1971 interview with Mel Gussow, Pinter, in the same paragraph in which he responds to a question about the impulse which led to *Old Times*, remarks that one of his most important activities is reading, specifically a lot of poetry, including that of Eliot.<sup>6</sup>

*Sweeney Agonistes* is set one evening sometime after WWI in the London flat of two young women, Dusty and Doris. In the first part of this ten-page play, “Fragment of a Prologue,” the two women discuss which men to invite over. The phone rings. It is Pereira, whom the women do not like, asking for Doris. Dusty puts him off. The women read fortune-telling cards “for tonight.” Four men, acquainted with one another from the War, arrive. Two of them, Americans, are being shown London by a native Londoner, Sam. The Americans express their enthusiasm for London. In the second part of the play, “Fragment of an Agon” Sweeney, someone the women know, appears at the party and proposes to take Doris to a

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\* I would like to thank William M. Kaplan and, most especially, Katherine H. Burkman for their help on this essay.

<sup>1</sup> William V. Spanos, “‘Wanna Go Home, Baby’: *Sweeney Agonistes* as Drama of the Absurd.” *PMLA*, 85, 1 (1970), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Martin S. Regal, *Harold Pinter: A Question of Timing* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 98–101.

<sup>3</sup> Katherine J. Worth, *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1973), pp. 46–54 and Martin S. Regal, *Harold Pinter: A Question of Timing*, pp. 82–83, convincingly point to a relationship between *Old Times* and James Joyce's *Exiles* which Pinter directed in 1970. Elin Diamond, *Pinter's Comic Play* (Lewisburg, Pa: Bucknell University Press, 1985), pp. 163–165 sees a relationship between Sartre's *No Exit* and *Old Times* and also between *Odd Man Out* and *Old Times*. The similarities between *Sweeney Agonistes* and *Old Times* are far greater.

<sup>4</sup> John Lahr, *Light Fantastic: Adventures in Theatre* (New York: Dial Press, 1996), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Pinter said in a speech to the Seventh National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, that as he writes he enters into a relationship with the characters in his works such that “image can freely engender image.” *Sunday Times, London* (4 March 1962), quoted in Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern, 1994), p. 27. “Pinter: ‘I read a great deal of poetry.’ Gussow: ‘What poets?’ Pinter: ‘Recently I rediscovered Pope. I haven't read him since school. Lines and verses are always on my mind. Donne. Gerard Manley Hopkins. “Margaret / Are you grieving / over Goldengrove / unleaving.” Modern poetry. Philip Larkin. Yeats and Eliot.’”

remote cannibal island where there's "Nothing to hear but the sound of the surf." There, he says, he will make her into a stew and eat her. At first, the proposal seems lighthearted, as if he means to possess her as a juicy morsel, for Doris first plays along and then blithely asserts that she would be bored on the island and would just as soon be dead. Sweeney counters that life is death. And his proposal takes on darker meaning as he tells a grisly story about a man, with whom he seems to identify, who "did a girl in" and then kept her in a bath with a gallon of Lysol. The man, then, "didn't know if he was alive and the girl was dead/He didn't know if the girl was alive and he was dead/He didn't know if they both were alive or both were dead [...]. When you're alone like he was alone/You're either or neither." The other men at the party, now including two minstrels and serving as a chorus, recite a patter song: "You've had a cream of a nightmare dream and you've got the hoo-ha's [terror, dread] coming to you." *Old Times* is a full-length two-act play set one evening in the converted farmhouse of a married couple, Deeley and Kate. Twenty years ago, Kate married Deeley and moved with him from a London flat to this remote and silent part of Britain by the sea. Anna, who lived with Kate in the flat when they were both secretaries, has come for the first time for a visit. Deeley and Anna proceed to engage in a competition for Kate, an agon. Both she and Deeley surprisingly conflate Kate with a casserole, perhaps the one she served them for dinner. Kate remarks that, indeed, they both speak of her as if she were dead. Anna recalls their youth, poverty, and enthusiasm for London. The women relive old times there and, as if in the present time, they discuss men they might phone to invite over. In Act Two, while Kate takes a long bath, Deeley tells Anna he knew her earlier. In a *coup de theatre* at the end, Kate divests herself of them both, or makes clear that she did so twenty years ago, as in one of *Sweeney Agonistes*'s two unexplained epigrams, "the soul [...] has divested itself of the love of created beings."<sup>7</sup> She speaks of seeing Anna dead in the room they shared, her face scrawled with dirt, her bones breaking through her face. "By dying alone and dirty you had acted with proper decorum. It was time for my bath"<sup>8</sup> (68). Then Deeley took Anna's place. When he was hoping that she had profited from his (sexual) instruction and would be sexually forthcoming, Kate says, she attempted to plaster his face with dirt, as if he also were dead. He resisted, she comments, and suggested a wedding instead, and a change of environment. To her, she asserts, neither mattered. Deeley, devastated by this revelation of her indifference or hostility, is left isolated, broken, and sobbing.

It is as if *Old Times* were the sequel to *Sweeney Agonistes*, twenty years having passed. *Old Times* is set on the cannibal isle Sweeney (Deeley) proposes to Doris (Kate), where he turns her into a stew (domesticates, possesses, kills her). Or perhaps she him. And Dusty (Anna) comes to visit.<sup>9</sup>

The parallels are not exact, of course. In *Sweeney Agonistes* the women may be prostitutes rather than secretaries. Sweeney is lower class; Deeley, like the other men with whom the women in *Old Times* associated, is well-educated and, now, well-to-do. While Anna and Deeley seem to have dominant roles in their relationship with Kate, as do Dusty and Sweeney in their relationship with Doris, Kate in the end, dominates. Deeley and Kate have moved, not to a tropical island, but to a remote and silent part of Britain by the sea. Anna states that she lives on a volcanic island. Kate says she would like to go "somewhere very hot, where you can lie under a mosquito net and breathe quite slowly" (55). Both plays are set as if

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<sup>7</sup> "Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings." St John of the Cross.

<sup>8</sup> Numbers in text refer to pages in Harold Pinter, *Complete Works: Four* (New York: Grove, 1981). Given the brevity of the play, no page references are provided for *Sweeney Agonistes*.

<sup>9</sup> Pinter uses the unusual character name "Dusty" in *Party Time*, 1991.

contemporary with the dates of their writing. The scenes between Anna and Kate are set some time after WWII.<sup>10</sup>

## Language

In the interview with Pinter referred to above, Mel Gussow asked Pinter what initiated his writing of *Old Times*. “What was the thought?” Pinter replied, “I think it was the first couple lines of the play. I don’t know if they were actually the *first* lines. Two people talking about someone else.”<sup>11</sup> Both *Sweeney Agonistes* and *Old Times* begin with a series of terse questions about a third person:

Sweeney Agonistes:  
DUSTY How about Pereira?  
DORIS What about Pereira?  
I don’t care.  
DUSTY You don’t care!  
Who pays the rent?  
DORIS Yes, he pays the rent.  
Old Times:  
DEELEY Fat or thin?  
KATE Fuller than me. I think.  
Pause  
DEELEY She was then?  
KATE I think so.  
DEELEY She may not be now.  
Pause  
Was she your best friend?  
KATE Oh, what does that mean?  
DEELEY What? (3–4)

The discussion between the two women in *Old Times* about whom they might phone up to invite over echoes the discussion of men in *Sweeney*.

Sweeney Agonistes  
DUSTY How about Pereira?  
Old Times  
KATE What about McCabe? (58)

The women don’t like either. Sam and Christy are another matter:

Sweeney Agonistes  
DUSTY Now Sam’s a gentleman through and through.  
DORIS I like Sam.  
DUSTY I like Sam.  
Yes and Sam’s a nice boy too.  
He’s a funny fellow.  
DORIS He is a funny fellow.  
He’s like a fellow once I knew.  
He could make you laugh.  
DUSTY Sam can make you laugh.  
Old Times  
KATE But you know who I like best?  
ANNA Who?  
KATE Christy.  
ANNA He’s lovely.  
KATE He’s so gentle, isn’t he? And his humour. Hasn’t he got a lovely sense of humour? Why don’t you ask him round?  
DEELEY He can’t make it. He’s out of town. (59)

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<sup>10</sup> The play seems to be set at the time of its writing, about 1971, and twenty years earlier. “How we explored London and all the old churches and all the old buildings, I mean those that were left from the bombing,” says Anna (34).

<sup>11</sup> Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*, p. 27.

In writing *Sweeney Agonistes*, Eliot said that he wanted to write a drama of modern life in rhythmic prose, convinced that the language of poetry must be related to everyday speech. In fact, *Sweeney Agonistes* became poetry in everyday speech. Pinter felt that *Old Times*, because of its economy, was his most structurally satisfying play to date.<sup>12</sup> Each word and silence is as carefully crafted as poetry. The characters themselves call attention to the words they speak making us very conscious of the play's language. The two plays share verbal economy, short sentences, stichomythia, and the ordinary monosyllabic language and word repetitions Spanos observed.

## Images

The distinctive images of stew/casserole, eggs, and the bath strongly relate *Old Times* to *Sweeney Agonistes*. Sweeney proposes to Doris that he carry her off to a cannibal isle where he will convert her into a stew and eat her “in a nice little, white little, soft little, tender little, / Juicy little, right little, missionary stew.”<sup>13</sup> Deeley's comment to Kate in *Old Times*, “It's too late. You've cooked your casserole” (8) is suggestive of the expression “It's too late. You've cooked your goose” — done yourself in. And indeed, Anna proceeds to identify Kate in her present domestic life with a casserole: “You have a wonderful casserole. [...] I mean wife. So sorry. A wonderful wife” (16). Subsequently, when Deeley says to Anna, “Well, any time your husband finds himself in this direction my little wife will be only too glad to put the old pot on the old gas stove and dish him up something luscious if not voluptuous” (37), he seems to be offering his wife to Anna's husband. Deeley still further envisions Kate as his disembodied possession: “Sometimes I take her face in my hands and look at it. [...] Yes, I look at it, holding it in my hands. Then I kind of let it go, take my hands away, leave it floating” (20).

In *Sweeney Agonistes* the men's chorus sings “My little island girl / I'm going to stay with you / And we won't worry what to do.” When he found Kate, Deeley says, she was, “a slip of a girl not long out of her swaddling clothes [...] who lacked any sense of fixedness, any sense of decisiveness, but was compliant only to the shifting winds, with which she went [...] I suppose winds that only she understood, and that of course with no understanding whatsoever [...]. A classic female figure” (31–32). He sees her then, as his nice little, white little, soft little, tender little, juicy little morsel, objectified, infantilized, a *tabula rasa* — his island girl — as Kate says, “dead.” In contrast to his own carnivorous appetite, Deeley supposes that Anna and her husband are vegetarians (8, 36).

Like the cannibal stew, the egg figures prominently in *Sweeney Agonistes*. While Sweeney, who in Eliot's directions to Hallie Flanagan, the play's first director, is center stage scrambling eggs in a chafing dish, he says, “You see this egg / Well that's life on a cannibal isle. [...] / Nothing to hear but the sound of the surf. Nothing at all but three things. [...] / Birth, and copulation, and death. / That's all [...]”<sup>14</sup> In response to Sweeney's offer of life like an egg, Doris replies, “I don't like eggs; I never did like eggs; / And I don't like life on your crocodile isle.” Anna recalls what she and Kate ate in the London flat. “We weren't terribly elaborate in cooking, didn't have the time, but every so often dished up an incredibly enormous stew, guzzled the lot” (18). Anna also supposes that in the flat they ate eggs, “I suppose scrambled eggs, or did we?” (13) Wishing Anna would leave, Deeley says, “What

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<sup>12</sup> Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Eliot instructed Hallie Flanagan, who directed the first production of *Sweeney Agonistes*, that, in preparation, it was important for her to read F. M. Cornford, *Origins of Attic Comedy*. Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 135. The stew thus seems to be part of a ritual of death and rebirth.

<sup>14</sup> Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 135.

worries me is the thought of your husband rumbling about alone in his enormous villa living hand to mouth on a few hardboiled eggs” (63).

Sweeney’s story of a man who did a girl in and then kept her embalmed in a Lysol bath while he went about his daily routine as “Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in” together with his proposal to Doris to go to a tropical isle where she will be his girl, conjoins sex, death, and baths. The same remarkable conjunction is effected in *Old Times*. Kate, too, seems virtually embalmed in her habitual long baths while Deeley goes about his daily routine. In an erotically charged discussion between Deeley and Anna about Kate’s baths, Deeley comments on the thoroughness with which Kate washes herself, “really soaps herself all over” (49). One must wonder, however, whether these baths don’t have the same disinfectant effect as Lysol, for after Kate’s at least symbolic murder of Anna, which Kate describes at the end, she says, “I remember you lying dead. [...] Your pupils weren’t in your eyes. Your bones were breaking through your face. [...] It was time for my bath. I had quite a lengthy bath”<sup>15</sup> (67–68).

## Fortune telling cards

Dusty’s and Doris’s reading of the fortune telling cards is reflected in *Old Times*. Dusty and Doris read the King of Clubs as “Pereira” or “It might *just* as well be Sweeney.” Thus Pereira and Sweeney are identified with one another. Like Pereira, Deeley pays the rent; Kate is kept. Deeley’s action at the end, identical to that of the man in the girl’s London flat Anna describes, identifies him with that man. In the same way, Pereira, about whom we learn no more than we do about the unidentified man in Anna and Kate’s flat, is identified with Sweeney.

The four of diamonds, says Dusty is “A small sum of money, or a present / Of wearing apparel, or a party.” In London, Anna borrowed or stole Kate’s underwear to wear to a party. Deeley claims to have looked up Anna’s skirt, perhaps at the same party.

The Queen of Hearts, the women agree, is either Mrs Porter, not further mentioned or identified,<sup>16</sup> or Doris or Dusty: “We’re all hearts. [...] / It just depends on what comes next.” Kate can be regarded as the Queen of Hearts in that both Anna and Deeley spend the play competing for her affections. Or, as Deeley fears, was Anna, in effect, Kate’s queen of hearts in a lesbian relationship between them?

The fourth card, a six, signifies “A quarrel. An estrangement. Separation of friends.” The plot of *Old Times* is the meeting of long separated friends that leads to a suppressed quarrel, a sexual combat, resulting in an estrangement.

The fifth card is “The *two* of *spades*! / THAT’S THE COFFIN!!”<sup>17</sup> Doris takes it to be hers because, she says, she dreamt of weddings all last night. Thus Doris, like Kate, conflates death and a wedding.

The last two cards, the Knave of Spades and the Knave of Hearts, the women say, refer respectively to Swarts and Snow, the minstrel figures who later appear in *Sweeney Agonistes*, and to one of the other men who appears at the party. These figures have no correlatives in *Old Times*.

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<sup>15</sup> In Eliot’s poem, “Sweeney Erect,” another, or perhaps the same Doris comes toweled from the bath carrying brandy and smelling salts. Anna and Deeley have a long discussion about toweling Kate after her bath. The characters in *Old Times* drink brandy.

<sup>16</sup> T. H. Thompson, “The Bloody Wood,” in *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique*, ed. by Leonard Unger (New York: Rinehart, 1948), pp. 161–169, argues that in *Sweeney Agonistes*, Sweeney indirectly confesses to the murder of Mrs Porter from “The Waste Land.” And Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot’s New Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 60, confirms that, in the typescript scenario of *Sweeney Agonistes*, Sweeney does appear to shoot Mrs Porter.

<sup>17</sup> Capitals in original.

## Music Hall

Eliot's subtitle for *Sweeney Agonistes* is *Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama*. A melodrama was originally a sentimental or romantic stage play with interspersed songs. In the second fragment of *Sweeney Agonistes*, the men divide into two half-choruses each of which sings a song about idyllic island life and love, one chorus as if in response to the other, both songs based on popular songs of the period. The play concludes with the full chorus reciting the nightmare dream piece adapted from Gilbert and Sullivan.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Pinter uses popular songs of George Gershwin and Jerome Kern. The difference between *Sweeney Agonistes* and *Old Times* is that in *Old Times* the songs are integrated into the action, consistent with the development of the musical between Eliot's and Pinter's writing.<sup>19</sup> The conflict between Deeley and Anna for Kate's affection continues and is intensified through song.

Sweeney proposes to take Doris to a crocodile isle where he will make her into a stew and consume her. The songs the men sing about island life, however, are idyllic:

My little island girl  
My little island girl  
I'm going to stay with you  
And we won't worry what to do  
We won't have to catch any trains  
And we won't go home when it rains  
We'll gather hibiscus flowers  
For it won't be minutes but hours  
For it won't be hours but years

In *Old Times*, too, while the actual words from the songs like "knife," "ghost," "dies" take on new intensity and significance in the context of the play, the tuneful reminiscence tends to mask the inherent violence of the conflict: "Ah, those songs. [...] lovely old things" (22). "They don't make them like that any more" (25).

Grover Smith points to Eliot's use of music hall sources in the style of the spoken parts as well as in the songs themselves. He observes that the repetition in the "fatuous" dialogue between Klipstein and Krumpacker, "Do we like London!! [...]" might owe something to the "bouncing" of a line from one speaker to another in the comic turns of the music-halls.<sup>20</sup> This kind of line exchange is even more obvious in the opening of the agon between Sweeney and Doris:

SWEENEY I'll carry you off  
To a cannibal isle.  
DORIS You'll be the cannibal!  
SWEENEY You'll be the missionary!  
You'll be my little seven stone missionary!  
I'll gobble you up. I'll be the cannibal.  
DORIS You'll carry me off? To a cannibal isle?  
SWEENEY I'll be the cannibal.  
DORIS I'll be the missionary.  
I'll convert you!  
SWEENEY I'll convert you!  
Into a stew.

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<sup>18</sup> The first song "Under the Bamboo Tree" paraphrases a song of that title by Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson first published in London in 1905. The diminuendo in the second, "the morning [...] evening [...]" is adapted from "Ain't We Got Fun." The nightmare song, "When you're alone in the middle of the night and you wake in a sweat and a hell of a fright" is based on the Lord Chancellor's patter in *Iolanthe*, "When you're lying awake with a dismal headache, and repose is taboo'd by anxiety." Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), p. 223.

<sup>19</sup> *Carousel*, 1945, was the first musical to carry the action in song.

<sup>20</sup> Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study of Sources and Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 115.

A nice little, white little, missionary stew.  
DORIS You wouldn't eat me!  
SWEENEY Yes I'd eat you!

Both the repetition, which tends to provide a musical effect, and bouncing are present in Pinter.

DEELEY Did you *think* of her as your best friend?  
KATE She was my only friend.  
DEELEY Your best and only.  
KATE My one and only. (5)

In their competition for Kate, Deeley and Anna exchange song titles and then later alternate the singing of the lines of a single song.

## Aristophanic melodrama

The idyllic island songs reassure us at first that what Sweeney is proposing is pleasurable — merely sexual possession of Doris in an idyllic setting. The music hall bouncing, jazz rhythms, songs and repetitions, even, perhaps the play's very ghoulishness support the idea of its being comic. On the other hand, immediately after the subtitle, Eliot provides an epigram from *The Choephoroi* consisting of Orestes' words when he is hunted by the Furies. Andrew Kennedy feels that "the spirit of the Hoo-ha's pervades this work." Similarly, Christopher Edwards, reviewing a 1988 production refers to *Sweeney Agonistes*'s "stylish nightmare quality" and Nevill Coghill reports that *Sweeney Agonistes* was performed "with an exquisite blend of violence and restraint."<sup>21</sup> Carol Smith sees the play as Aristophanic in that it combines a comic surface of social satire with the ritualistic death and rebirth that classicist F. M. Cornford thought was the origin of ancient Greek comedy and that Eliot thought of as underlying *Sweeney Agonistes*. She finds the mingling of the comic and the serious a distinctive characteristic of Eliot's drama.<sup>22</sup> M. C. Bradbrook, without reference to Pinter, dubs *Sweeney Agonistes* "a comedy of menace," a term, of course, regularly applied to Pinter's work.<sup>23</sup>

In Eliot's comments about Shakespeare, there is indication that he deliberately sought to violate genre distinctions:

For to those who have experienced the full horror of life, tragedy is still inadequate. [...] In the end, horror and laughter may be one — only when horror and laughter have become as horrible and laughable as they can be; and [...] you may laugh or shudder over *Oedipus* or *Hamlet* or *King Lear*--or both at once: then only do you perceive that the aim of the comic and the tragic dramatist is the same: they are equally serious. [...] There is potential comedy in Sophocles and potential tragedy in

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<sup>21</sup> Andrew Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 101. Christopher Edwards, "Review," *Spectator* 13, (August 1988), reprint in *London Theatre Record*, 8.16 (July 29–August 11, 1988: 1042 [Old Red Lion]), quoted in Randy Malamud, *T. S. Eliot's Drama: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), p. 39. Nevill Coghill, "Sweeney Agonistes (An Anecdote or Two)" in *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, ed. by Kinley E. Roby (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985), p. 117.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice: from Sweeney Agonistes to The Elder Statesman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 58 and 56.

<sup>23</sup> M. C. Bradbrook, *English Dramatic Form: A History of Its Development* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), p. 165. According to Martin Esslin, the term was first applied to Pinter by Irving Wardel in a 1958 article in *Encore*. Esslin's comment on the term as applied to Pinter might also serve to apply to *Sweeney Agonistes*: "The real menace which lies behind the struggles for expression and communication, behind the closed doors which might swing open to reveal a frightening intruder, [...] behind the violence, the menace behind all these menacing images is the opaqueness, the uncertainty and precariousness of the human condition itself. How can we know who we are, how can we verify what is real and what is fantasy, how can we know what we are saying, what is being said to us?" Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, pp. 55–56.

Aristophanes, and otherwise they would not be such good tragedians or comedians as they are.<sup>24</sup>

With *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual*, 1971, Katherine H. Burkman argues, preceding the publication of *Old Times*, that all of Pinter's work can be analyzed on the basis of the work of the "myth critics" following the Cambridge School of Classical Anthropology and James Frazer.<sup>25</sup> She does not mention Cornford, but he is the most notable early follower of the Cambridge School. Certainly like *Sweeney Agonistes*, *Old Times* violates genre distinctions. While Elin Diamond can effectively analyze the play as comic,<sup>26</sup> its suppressed violence and destruction are breathtaking. Martin Regal observes how much death is a figure throughout the piece long before Kate's final speech: "Many of these references are unobtrusive, but cumulatively they give the 'death scene' at the close powerful resonances."<sup>27</sup> The references are not only to death but to violence. The increasing menace in both plays provokes us to look back to reconsider the significance of all that has preceded. A distinctive feature of both plays is that they induce us to read them retrospectively.

## Epistemology

### 1. No hard distinctions

Not only are the plays ambiguous in tone but distinctions between death and life, dream and reality, and one character and another are unclear, thus making conventional interpretation problematic. The distinguished critic Nevill Coghill was going to publish his interpretation of *Sweeney Agonistes* but, following an interview with T. S. Eliot, decided he could not. The interview proceeded as follows:

COGHILL But... but... can the play mean something you didn't intend it to mean, you didn't know it meant?

ELIOT *Obviously it does.*  
[...]

COGHILL But if the two meanings are contradictory, is not one right and the other wrong? [...].

ELIOT Not necessarily, do you think. Why is either wrong?<sup>28</sup>

This interview with Eliot calls to mind Pinter's well-known observation that the desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. "There are no hard distinctions between [...] what is true and what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. The assumption that to verify what has happened and what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate."<sup>29</sup> Consistent with this statement is Kate's often quoted speech in *Old Times* in which she says that she prefers the country to London because there are no hard edges here: "You can't say where it [the sea] begins or ends." Similarly, she likes the city when it rains because the rain blurs one thing into another (55). In Pinter's play, there are no hard distinctions between past and present, dream and reality, life and death, one person and another.

Sweeney also expresses the idea that there are no hard distinctions: When Doris claims that she would "just as soon be dead" as on the island to which Sweeney proposes to take her,

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<sup>24</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Shakespearian Criticism: From Dryden to Coleridge," in *A Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. by H. Granville-Barker and G. B. Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 295–296.

<sup>25</sup> Katherine H. Burkman, *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1971).

<sup>26</sup> Elin Diamond, *Pinter's Comic Play*, pp. 162–178.

<sup>27</sup> Martin S. Regal, *Harold Pinter: A Question of Timing*, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> Nevill Coghill, "Sweeney Agonistes (An Anecdote or Two)" in *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Esslin, *Pinter The Playwright*, p. 44.

Sweeney, not taken aback, responds that “Life is death.” And he reiterates the confusion between life and death in his story of the murdered girl in the bath:

For when you're alone  
When you're alone like he was alone  
You're either or neither  
I tell you again it dont apply  
Death or life or life or death  
Death is life and life is death

In *Old Times*, Kate observes that both Deeley and Anna objectify her and talk about her as if she were not there: “You talk about me as if I *am* dead. Now” (31). Deeley sings, “Oh, how the ghost of you clings” (25). Regal remarks that “whether Deeley has inadvertently referred to Anna or to Kate as a ghost is not clear; the term might equally be applied to both of them, for while Deeley is trying to expel Anna as an influence he is also trying to reclaim Kate’s former self.”<sup>30</sup> Kate suggests that for her a marriage to Deeley and his death are synonymous. Her account asserts, minimally, an indifference to his proposal comparable to Doris’s to Sweeney’s. More than that, at least symbolically, she kills both Anna and Deeley.

Or perhaps the action of both plays takes place in dreams. “You’ve had a cream of a nightmare dream and you’ve got the hoo-ha’s coming to you,” the chorus in *Sweeney Agonistes* recites. The first epilogue from *Sweeney Agonistes* reads: “Orestes: ‘You don’t see them, you don’t — but *I* see them; they are hunting me down, I must move on.’” This is Orestes’ exit line in *The Choephoroi* when he first becomes aware of the Furies, who haunt and pursue him after his murder of his mother and her lover. Thus Carol Smith describes *Sweeney Agonistes* as “the private anguish and rage of the man trapped in a world of demanding relationships with women [...] [...] human isolation, [...] anxiety and isolation.”<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the knocks on the door at the end of the play may be actual rather than merely a part of the chorus’s recitation about the nightmare dream. Martin Esslin plausibly suggests that the whole of *Old Times* is Deeley’s dream, a nightmare.<sup>32</sup> Then again, Pinter assures us: “I’ll tell you one thing about *Old Times*. It happens. It all happens.”<sup>33</sup>

In *Sweeney Agonistes*, the first choral song begins as follows: “Under the bamboo/Bamboo bamboo/Under the bamboo tree/Two live as one/One live as two/Two live as three.” The original 1905 song “Under the Bamboo Tree” goes no further than to suggest the commonplace of happy matrimony: “Two live as one/One live as two” — the idyllic life Sweeney may at first seem to be proposing to Doris. The play also suggests other twosomes: the King of Clubs: Pereira/Sweeney and the Queen of Hearts: Dusty/Doris. Katherine Worth observes that “the unsentimental, matter-of-fact relationship between Doris and Dusty projects a real sense of human closeness, a closing of the ranks against Pereira and the other menacing facts of their existence.”<sup>34</sup> Nothing in the play suggests what Eliot might have intended by adding to the original song the more disturbing and puzzling phrase “Two live as three.”

The whole of *Old Times* can be seen as a meditation on the refrain as modified by Eliot. We wonder whether Anna and Kate are distinct persons or facets of the same person at one time or at different times. We wonder whether Kate and Anna had a lesbian relationship: “Sounds a perfect marriage,” Deeley observes of their life in the flat (62). For Kate, are Anna and Deeley substitutes for one another? Her monolog at the end would suggest so. Has Anna, as

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<sup>30</sup> Martin S. Regal, *Harold Pinter: A Question of Timing*, p. 81.

<sup>31</sup> Carol H. Smith, “*Sweeney Agonistes* (An Anecdote or Two)” in *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 192.

<sup>33</sup> Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Katherine Worth, from “Eliot and the Living Theatre” in *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, pp. 127–128.

Deeley fears, been an ongoing aspect of his marriage, haunting it all along? That Anna does not make an entrance but is on the scene in dim light at the onset of the play strongly supports this possibility of two living as three. Anna, as Pinter comments, “is there, but not there.”<sup>35</sup>

## 2. What’s communicated

Having tried to explain that “Death is life and life is death,” Sweeney resorts to saying, “I gotta use words when I talk to you/But if you understand or if you dont/That’s nothing to me and nothing to you.” M. C. Bradbrook observes that *Sweeney Agonistes* is full of gaps in communication.<sup>36</sup> Of course, the same thing is frequently said of Pinter’s plays, including *Old Times*. Although Sweeney is ostensibly addressing the other characters in the play, the significant gap in communication in each play is between the spectators and the play.<sup>37</sup> Is Anna present at the onset? Is Sweeney the murderer of whom he speaks? Hugh Kenner believes that Eliot’s evasiveness on this matter is inappropriate to drama and “constitutes an embarrassment.” Indeed, Kenner refuses to consider *Sweeney Agonistes* as a play at all because the dramatist unlike the poet “must commit himself to something: to the presence of certain people in a located place, to their interaction, to the speaking under defined circumstances of intelligible words.” One of the two reasons Eliot could not complete *Sweeney Agonistes*, he believes, was because of his “bias toward a poetry that exteriorizes but does not explicate the locked world of the self.”<sup>38</sup> That there is such a locked world — that the self has or had a single fixed identity that spectator or self can know — is an idea that *Old Times*, a play, is precisely set out to deny. Famously, Pinter does not see why drama must deceptively communicate information unavailable to us in life.

## Structure

In many analyses of Eliot’s plays, *Sweeney Agonistes* does not appear at all, in some it is regarded as an unfinished play. Eliot himself, although he originally referred to *Sweeney Agonistes* as a play,<sup>39</sup> included it in his *Collected Poems* as an unfinished poem. The piece must be regarded as two poems rather than as a play, Kenner reasons, not only because of its failure to explicate the locked world of the self, but also because of Eliot’s reluctance to conceive of drama as primarily an orchestrated action.<sup>40</sup> Yet Katherine Worth points to the play’s stage inventiveness scarcely given credit until a 1965 production.<sup>41</sup> And William Spanos argues, and I am persuaded, that *Sweeney Agonistes* is “a devastatingly finished ‘unfinished’ play”; that like Sweeney, Eliot “projects his ‘story’ in such a way as to make dialogic participants of passive spectators” and that “by shattering the Aristotelian form and providing a fragmented one instead, Eliot influenced the absurdists.”<sup>42</sup>

One can see the structure of both plays, at one and the same time, as linear, as presenting two times at once, and as fragmented and inconclusive. In both *Sweeney Agonistes* and *Old Times* something awful overtakes the party scenes. Katherine Worth remarks that “the jovial

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<sup>35</sup> Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*, p. 18.

<sup>36</sup> M. C. Bradbrook, *English Dramatic Form: A History of Its Development*, p. 166.

<sup>37</sup> Eliot explains that Sweeney’s “speeches should be addressed to them [the audience] as much as to the other personages in the play — or rather, should be addressed to the latter who were to be material, literal-minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former.” T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p. 147.

<sup>38</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*, pp. 230, 231 and 234.

<sup>39</sup> Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the Theatre*, p. 135.

<sup>40</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot*, pp. 221 and 234.

<sup>41</sup> Katherine Worth, from “Eliot and the Living Theatre” in *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, pp. 126.

<sup>42</sup> William V. Spanos, “‘Wanna Go Home, Baby?’ *Sweeney Agonistes* as Drama of the Absurd,” pp. 19 and 20.

nightmare song from Gilbert and Sullivan takes a sickening lurch into real nightmare, conveying in musical terms the experience Sweeney cannot find words for, the swallowing up of the known by an unknown world.”<sup>43</sup> The two-act dinner party of *Old Times* turns out to be an intensifying largely unspoken competition between Deeley and Anna for the affections of Kate that ends with the world Deeley thought he knew swallowed up by what he is told at the end. Thus, one can see the form of both plays as linear.

Or two times can be seen as simultaneous: In *Sweeney Agonistes*, Sweeney’s proposed future life for him and Doris converges with his narration of what happened in the past to a man he knew who did a girl in. The two times are interwoven, as in *No*,<sup>44</sup> the stylization of which Eliot thought his play should approach.<sup>45</sup> In *Old Times*, although Pinter too relies on long narrations comparable to the past and future Sweeney describes, present and past are simultaneously both enacted in the same space.

Then too, the form of *Old Times* may be usefully understood, as Regal understands it, as circular, suggesting the possibility of endless reenactment,<sup>46</sup> reminding us of the ritual reenactment in *Cornford*. Or it can be seen as static, the last mimed moments identical to those in the description Anna provides of something that happened twenty years ago. The play, then, may be regarded as an expansion of only one moment, that described in the stage directions at the end. The play’s permutations and repetitions support the perception of its structure as static, spatial. Pinter calls attention to this possibility with the stage directions for Act Two which read: “The divans and armchair are disposed in precisely the same relation to each other as the furniture in the first act, but in reversed positions,” and by having Deeley remark that “the great thing about these beds is that they are susceptible to any amount of permutation” (44) — the character relationships also can be seen as permutations of one another: Anna/Kate, Anna/Deeley. Thus the Aristotelian form is shattered.

*Sweeney Agonistes* is two scenes, the sole difference between them is that the second is the first disturbed because Sweeney has entered. Pinter’s program note to *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* (1960) effectively makes clear the comparable structure of *Old Times*. Pinter explains that when a visitor enters into a room in which there are two people, each will respond differently to the visitor. The visit, he says, can be either illuminating or horrifying (or both). The situation will then have been subjected to alterations. However much the visit has been expected, the entrance will be unexpected and probably unwelcome.<sup>47</sup> Thus Anna’s visit. And twenty years ago Deeley entered the scene.

The endings of both plays are inconclusive. Sweeney concludes, “We’re gona sit here and drink this booze./We’re gona sit here and have a tune./We’re gona stay and we’re gona go./And somebody’s gotta pay the rent.” Similarly at the end of *Old Times*, Deeley moves towards the door as if to go and then returns. We do not know if the social evening or marriage are now terminated or if Deeley, Anna, and Kate continue to sit there and drink and Deeley continues to support Kate.

In sum, *Old Times* is imbued with *Sweeney Agonistes*. Settings — the London flat and the remote silent place by the sea — and characters and their relationships are comparable to

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<sup>43</sup> Katherine Worth, from “Eliot and the Living Theatre” in *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, pp. 128.

<sup>44</sup> “The plots of *No* are often compared to those of lyric drama. There is no linear succession of time; a synchrony of different recollections intervene simultaneously, crossing from one line to another. In the second part of the *No*, the shite represents the ghost of a dead warrior or of a dead woman; he plays a character from the past. The past in the *No* plays is resurrected in the present. The resurgence of the past is one of the most striking features of the *No* theatre.” Jan Kott, “*No* and the Aesthetics of the Post-Modern Theatre,” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 1, 2 (1994), pp. 23–27.

<sup>45</sup> Joanne Bentley, *Hallie Flanagan: A Life in the American Theatre*, p. 135.

<sup>46</sup> Martin S Regal, *Harold Pinter: A Question of Timing*, p. 86.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 44.

those in *Sweeney Agonistes*. Some of the smallest details including the telephone, the enthusiasm for London, and the present of wearing apparel are the same in both plays. Spanos noted that in general Pinter was profoundly influenced by *Sweeney's* language. In *Old Times*, where some of the dialogue is virtually identical to that in *Sweeney Agonistes*, the language debt is very specific. Pinter shows himself no less influenced by the plays's striking conjunction of sex, death, eating, and the bath, hearkening back, perhaps, to Cornford's ancient comic rituals of marriage, ritual death, and sacrificial feasts, and to rites of purification. Pinter's play, like Eliot's, is a comedy of menace, using popular songs. Pinter provides the agon Eliot does not clearly provide but otherwise there are strong parallels in the plays' dramatic structures and in their omissions of absolute distinctions of information long assumed that plays, unlike life, must provide. Perhaps some things about the structure of *Sweeney Agonistes* or some of its *lacunae* result only accidentally from its unfinished state; they have become hallmarks of Pinter's deliberate postmodernism.