“Sweeney Among the Nightingales”

Apeneck Sweeney spread his knees
Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
The zebra stripes along his jaw* his sideburns
Swelling to maculate* giraffe. defile and/or dishonor

The circles of the stormy moon
Slide westward toward the River Plate,¹
Death and the Raven drift above
And Sweeney guards the hornèd gate.²

Gloomy Orion and the Dog* constellations
Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas;
The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney’s knees

Slips and pulls the table cloth
Overturns a coffee-cup,
Reorganized upon the floor
She yawns and draws a stocking up;

The silent man in mocha brown
Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;
The waiter brings in oranges
Bananas figs and hothouse grapes;

The silent vertebrate in brown
Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
Rachel née Rabinovitch
Tears at the grapes with murderous paws;

She and the lady in the cape
Are suspect, thought to be in league,³
Therefore the man with heavy eyes
Declines the gambit, shows fatigue,

Leaves the room and reappears
Outside the window, leaning in, (continued)
Branches of wistaria
Circumscribe a golden grin;

The host with someone indistinct
Converses at the door apart,
The nightingales are singing near
The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

And sang within the bloody wood
When Agamemnon cried aloud
And let their liquid siftings fall
To stain the stiff dishonored shroud.

1918, 1919

1 English name for Río de la Plata (River of Silver), between Uruguay and Argentina. The poem is presumably set in southern Uruguay.

2 The exit gate from Hades is one made of horn. Through it pass “images of truth... with visions manifest of future fate” (Odyssey, Book XIX).

3 Presumably against the brute Sweeney, who is implied to have mistreated them.

4 Another name for a nightingale is philomel, a term derived from the name Philomela, who in Greek mythology plotted with her sister to expose the brutality of Tereus, who lusted after Philomela, one day raped her, then cut out her tongue to prevent her from revealing his crime. The gods then turned Philomela into a nightingale to preserve her from further harm. Traditionally, the song of the nightingale became associated with tattling on promiscuous behavior.

5 Alludes to the fact that nightingales sang on the day Agamemnon cried out that he had suffered a fatal wound.

6 Agamemnon was the commander-in-chief of the Greek armies during the Trojan War. Before departing for the War, he offends the goddess Artemis by killing a stag sacred to her. To appease the deities, he sacrifices his own daughter, Iphigenia, gagging her to
prevent her from cursing him at the moment of her death. Her mother Clytemnestra later murders Agamemnon in his bath.