David Lynch's Visualizations and Greek poetry, Part One: "James's song" and Song 31 of Sappho

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:
David Lynch’s Visualizations and Greek poetry, Part One: “James’s song” and Song 31 of Sappho

September 21, 2017  By Gregory Nagy

2017.09.21 | By Gregory Nagy

Compared here are two songs that are historically unrelated to each other. Still, there are parallelisms between the two songs that are worth comparing. Such an exercise, in considering two historically unrelated structures, is known in linguistics as typological comparison.

[Essay continues here...]

First, “James’s Song”

"James’s Song" happens in Twin Peaks, season 2 (1990–1991), "Episode 9," directed by David Lynch and written by Harley Peyton: this "episode" was first shown 1990.10.08 via the American Broadcasting Company (ABC).

In terms of the plot of the overall narrative for Twin Peaks, the character of James Hurley (James Marshall) is accompanied (or echoed?) by the characters of Maddie Ferguson (Sherilyn Fenn) and Donna Hayward (Lara Flynn Boyle) in performing a song entitled "Just You," composed by Angelo Badalamenti, with lyrics by David Lynch.

To view the video/audio sequence of "James’s Song," it is important to find a YouTube version that includes the part (toward the end) where Donna breaks away from the singing, thus interrupting the song, and where James follows her, leaving Maddie all alone. The version I am using here has this URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ji_K99FF5TE

For background on the original recording, see the article by Pieter Dom, 2017.08.13, "How David Lynch, Angelo Badalamenti, and James Marshall wrote James Hurley’s ‘Just You’": http://welcometotwinpeaks.com/music/james-hurley-just-you/

There has been a reprise of James’s Song, 25 years later, using the original track, in Twin Peaks "season 3," "The Return Part/Episode 13," directed by David Lynch and written by Mark Frost and David Lynch, which was first shown 2017.08.06: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vxzGGABAE5o
To make things as comprehensible as possible, I will start by assuming that the reader knows nothing about the overall Twin Peaks project as masterminded by David Lynch and Mark Frost. It is not even necessary, for starters, to be familiar with the work of the filmmaker or “auteur” or director who is primarily involved in Twin Peaks, David Lynch. Suffice it to note here that Lynch is also responsible for such films as Eraserhead (1977), Wild at Heart (1990), Lost Highway (1997), and Mulholland Drive (2001).

In what follows, I will “read” some of the details in this scene featuring “James’s Song,” trying to make sense of how it all fits together. My goal is not to “read into” the video/audio of the scene but to “read out of it.” My reading of this scene, I find, helps me make comparable connections when I read Song 31 of Sappho, even though that song is historically unrelated to “James’s Song.” I am fairly certain that the creators of “James’s Song” were not at all influenced by Song 31 of Sappho.

We see in this scene three characters, or, classically speaking, three dramatis personae: a young man, M, and two young women, F1 on the right of the screen and F2 on the left. At first, we notice only that M is singing to F1 and F2. But then we notice that all three are singing, though F1 and F2 simply repeat, echo-style, key phrases sung by M.

The more we hear the words of what M sings, the more repetitive the words become. Is the repetitiveness putting a trance on F1 and F2? Or only on F2? Is there something entrancing about the song? I invite my readers to be the judge—as they follow what happens in the video and audio.

In what I have just said, I am deliberately using the word “entrancing” in two ways. Objectively, I mean that the song is perhaps putting a trance on one person or persons. Subjectively, I mean that we the listeners might perhaps start to like the song and thus be taken in by the song.

Or is there some other reason (internal? external?) for the entrancement of F1 and F2 (or of F2 only)? Again, I invite my readers to be the judge.

Let us take a close look at the wording at the beginning of the song:

“Just you and I, just you and I, together, forever, in love.”

The wording would work differently if there were only two characters involved in the scene, but there are three characters. Does the wording exclude one of the three? How can we tell for sure? Let’s look for other signs, like body-language—especially eye-contact.

In considering the work of David Lynch, I find it most interesting to look for such signs, which remind me of the signs emanating from the ancient Greek visual and verbal arts, as in the case of Song 31 of Sappho. I also find it interesting to look for motives. What is the logic that drives the scene featuring “James’s Song”? Why should three people sing something that announces the union—the eternal union, no less—of only two people?

We might be saying to ourselves: but after all this is just a song, and these three characters are merely performing a song. Granted. Still, can we really say that there is no identification between (1) the characters and (2) the words of their songs? Could there be an identification of the situation in the scene with the situation in the song? This is an important question for me, since I notice a great deal of interweaving that happens here between (1) the song and (2) the song’s dramatized situation. In “real life,” the singing of a song can be simply the singing of a song. But what we see here is not “real life”: the act of singing a song is just as much a representation (Aristotle has a word for it: mimesis), distanced from “real life,” as is the subject of the song. David Lynch’s fiction about a boy singing with two girls is just as much a fiction as the subject of the song that the fictional characters are singing.

F1 and F2 repeat after M: “Just you.” Then they repeat after M: “and I.” Like a mantra, the musical pairing happens over and over again. I look here for relevant signals in body-language, especially in eye-contact, that go together with the signals in the song’s wording, especially when the words reach the trance-inducing symmetry of “just you” on one side with “and I” on the other side.

There are many other points of interest that could be brought into our “reading” here. I signal only some of them, in the form of questions.

—Why does M sing with a female voice? In the interview with the actor James Marshall, as cited above, he comments on the difficulties he had in singing “falsetto.”

—What point have we (= the audience) reached in the wording of the song when the song gets interrupted? (This kind of storytelling device is a common occurrence in ancient Greek poetics.)

—What are M and F1 and F2 thinking while they are singing? —I mean, what besides the obvious?

—What emotions are being played out by the characters during the performance of the song? Alternatives to choose from:

—pity [in Greek traditions, pity is an attraction you feel toward someone because of their suffering]

—fear [in Greek traditions, fear is a repulsion you feel from someone because of their suffering]
—anger
—hate
—love
—confusion [this is a genuine emotion in Greek epic and tragedy; also in Renaissance and post-Renaissance opera!]

—What do these emotions have to do with the wording of the song?

At this point, I turn to more specific details, which are relevant to (1) the overall plot of the Twin Peaks project as created by David Lynch and Mark Frost and/or (2) David Lynch’s filmmaking techniques and his artistic agenda per se.

In what follows, I have to put on record my own “spoiler alert”...

It turns out that the overall plot of the Twin Peaks narrative is preoccupied with the shamanistic theme of two sides to every person and two sides to everything in the world. There are many folkloristic elements embedded in the video/audio narrative, drawn mostly from Native American cultures in the NW of North America.

Each character, it turns out, has two selves: evil and good, dead and alive, and so on.

—Character F2 = Maddie: she is the surviving cousin and body double of Laura Palmer, who had been horrifically killed at an earlier point in the overall story.

—Character M = James: he is the former lover of Laura Palmer. Throughout the plot of Twin Peaks, other characters refer to him consistently as “The Secret Boyfriend.” He will never get over the grief of losing Laura and will love her forever even in death.

—Character F1 = Donna: she is the current lover of James and the former best friend of Laura and the current best friend of Maddie. She will never win the total love of James.

The role of Maddie is played by the same actor who plays the role of Laura Palmer in the flashbacks that lead up to the infernal killing. The killer turns out to be one of Laura’s nearest and dearest: a lover? a friend? a relative? —the plot keeps his identity still unrevealed at this point. This killer had been possessed—not by “a” devil but by “the” Devil, that is, by a demon who is the incarnation of absolute evil. The Demon, in a series of flashbacks showing the gruesome killing of Laura, appears in human shape as “Bob.” The name “Bob” is banal, but his demonic looks and the infernal sounds that envelop him whenever he appears—and there exist verbal cues for his epiphanies—are viscerally shocking and disturbing. I speak here from my own grim viewing experience. Bob’s name is of course a palindrome, sounding the same way both forward and backward: at various predictable points in his visual storytelling, the filmmaker dramatizes the anagrammatism by running in reverse some of the flash-forward scenes showing prophetic figures uttering BOB’s name. There is a dwarf who intones: “Wow, Bob, Wow!” So, here we have another palindrome—a more expanded one. Needless to say, Twin Peaks shows at different moments both forward- and backward-versions of the same dramatic sequence. Either forward or backward, by foresight or by hindsight, the speakers get the name right. BOB is BOB. Speak of the Devil, and he appears. His appearance is always a horrific version of an epiphany.

Immediately after the scene featuring “James’s Song,” BOB appears to Maddie in a most evil epiphany. She is doomed to die the same death that Laura died. A horrifying scene.

M is singing to F2 along with F1, and as F1 along with F2 sing back to M his words proclaiming an eternal union linking the first grammatical person “I” with the second grammatical person “you” who is forever in love, what results is the permanent exclusion of the third grammatical person, who will become “her.” As the song progresses, the camera catches—just for an instant—a demonic glance in the eyes of F2.

For F2 this becomes a flash-forward to a death that replicates the primal death of her body-double, which had caused the grief which now drives the love of M—
which in turn now drives the pity and fear of F1.

But for F1 there is also, above all else, love (unrequited) and grief over permanent loss.

The song says it all, repeating it over and over again in its language of sex, death, and confusion.

Second, Song 31 of Sappho

Here is the song, followed by my own translation:

Hour 5 Text E

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1: He appears [phainetai] to me, that one, equal to the gods [isos theoisin], 2: that man who, facing you 3: is seated and, up close, that sweet voice of yours 4: he listens to, 5: and how you laugh a laugh that brings desire. Why, it just 6: makes my heart flutter within my breast. 7: You see, the moment I look at you, right then, for me 8: to make any sound at all won't work anymore. 9: My tongue has a breakdown and a delicate 10:—all of a sudden—fire rushes under my skin. 11: With my eyes I see not a thing, and there is a roar 12: my ears make. 13: Sweat pours down me and a trembling 14: seizes all of me; paler than grass 15: am I, and a little short of death 16: do I appear [phainomai] to myself.

To use the terminology that I used for "James's Song," we have here a situation where F1, who is a female 'I', speaks to F2, who is a female 'you', about M, who is the 'he' in this situation.

What follows is an epitome of my analysis of this song in H24H §§38–48, 82–87:

§38. The form phainetai, 'he appears', at line 1 of this song and the form phainomai, 'I appear', at line 16 are the third and the first persons of a verb related to the noun phantasiā, a derivative form that means 'fantasy' in later Greek prose. Or, to put it more accurately, phantasiā means 'imagined vision' or 'imagination'. The English word fantasy, derived from phantasiā, is actually misleading as a translation, since this word implies a vision that is unreal. In ancient Greek song culture, however, there is no 'fantasy' about the kind of vision that is seen here in Song 31 of Sappho. This kind of vision is an epiphany, and I am now using here another word that actually derives from the same verb phainetai, 'he appears', / phainomai, 'I appear', as we have just seen it at lines 1 / 16. An epiphany is a vision that is felt to be real, not unreal. It is the appearance of something divine, something that is understood to be absolutely real.
§39. The 'he' in line 1 of this song refers to a bridegroom, and he is figured as a god at the moment of singing this song. It is as if a god has appeared at a wedding. In the words of line 1 of the song, the bridegroom phainetai, 'appears', to be isos theoisin, 'equal [isos] to the gods' at line 1 of the song, the bride is figured as a goddess at the same moment in the song. The ritual occasion of a wedding, as formalized in a wedding song, collapses the distinction between 'bride' and 'goddess'. Here I note that the word nymphē means both 'bride' (as in Iliad 18.492) and 'goddess', that is, 'nymph' (as in Iliad 24.616).

§40. As for the 'you' who is being addressed by the speaker, this 'you' is a she. She is the bride. And, just as the bridegroom phainetai, 'appears', to be isos theoisin, 'equal [isos] to the gods' at line 1 of the song, the bride is figured as a goddess at the same moment in the song. The ritual occasion of a wedding, as formalized in a wedding song, collapses the distinction between 'bride' and 'goddess'. Here I note that the word nymphē means both 'bride' (as in Iliad 18.492) and 'goddess', that is, 'nymph' (as in Iliad 24.616).

§41. And the 'I' who is speaking is also a she. She is the lead singer who sings the song, and she is 'Sappho'. This woman who speaks in the first person here is vicariously speaking for the whole group that is notionally participating in the ritual of the wedding. Such a female lead singer is a prima donna, to borrow an Italian term used in the world of opera. And this lead singer, this female speaker, experiences an attraction to both the bridegroom and the bride. Or, we might say, she experiences an attraction to the attraction between the two. The attraction is both esthetic and erotic. It is a totalizing attraction, creating feelings of total connectedness. And this totalizing connectedness activates all the senses of the speaker, who experiences an "erotic meltdown."

§42. The feelings come to a climax described as just one moment away from death. Here is the way it is expressed in line 16 of the song: tethnakēn doligō 'pideus[phainom] emautai, 'and a little short of death | do I appear [phainomai] to myself'. The wording here matches what is expressed in line 1 of the song: phainetai moi kēnōs isos theoisin, 'that man appears [phainetai] to me (to be) equal to the gods'. In both line 1 and line 16, what is 'appearing' or 'seeming' on one level is an epiphany on a deeper level. To translate phainomai emautai at line 16 on such a deeper level proves to be difficult: 'I am manifested to myself in an epiphany'.

§43. The wording in line 16 of Song 31 of Sappho, however we translate it, expresses the idea that the speaker is personally experiencing an epiphany. She undergoes a fusion with divinity, and this fusion is not only esthetic but also erotic. But I think it would be too simple to say that such an experience is auto-erotic. Rather, it is an experiencing of auto-epiphany. And such an experience is not only erotic. It is also mortally dangerous.

§44. The epiphany in line 16 of Song 31 induces a near-death experience for the speaker: tethnakēn doligō 'pideus[phainom] emautai, 'and a little short of death | do I appear [phainomai] to myself'. This figurative personal death, in the ritualized context of a wedding, is modeled on a realized mythical death. As I argue, death in myth is a prototype for the vicarious experience of the first-person speaker in her interaction with the second-person bride and with the third-person bridegroom. And such an experience of death can be described as an initiation. The likening of a bridegroom and a bride to a god and a goddess leads to a figurative death in rituals of initiation such as weddings.

§45. In Song 31 of Sappho, as I argue at H24H in the fuller version of this paragraph, the bridegroom and the bride are likened indirectly to Arēs and Aphrodite. In the logic of myth, a hero's identity at the moment of death merges with a god's identity, and, at that moment, the hero can be likened to a god. In the logic of ritual, as in Song 31 of Sappho, such a merger of identity leads only to a figurative death, a near-death, as expressed in the words that tell about the near-death experience of the woman who is speaking in the first person.

§46. Such a moment, when the bridegroom is the god and the bride is the goddess, is signaled by the epithet isos theoisin, 'equal [isos] to the gods', which is applied to the bridegroom in line 1 of Song 31.

§47. Elsewhere, in Song 44 of Sappho, which celebrates Andromache and Hector as bride and bridegroom at their wedding, the two of them were described as theoeikēlōi, 'looking just like the gods' (line 34). The two of them were looking like gods at their wedding, that is, at the ritual moment when they got married to each other.

§48. In the songs of Sappho, we see also other variations in the merging of human and divine identities. In Song 165, for example, we find the wording phainetai woī kēnōs isos theoisin, 'he appears [phainetai] to her, that one, equal [isos] to the gods'. In that song, the third-person woī, 'to her', seems to be referring to the bride, in contrast with the wording we find in line 1 of Song 31, phainetai moi kēnōs isos theoisin, 'he appears [phainetai] to me, that one, (to be) equal [isos] to the gods', where the first-person moi, 'to me', refers to the speaker, who is 'Sappho'. In Song 31, the subjectivity is linked to the first-person speaker, who is the vicarious participant; in Song 165, on the other hand, the subjectivity is linked to the third person, who is the immediate participant. There is a shifting of referents that accompanies the shifting of pronouns from 'I' to 'she'.

§82. Here is what I have argued so far:

—In Song 31, the erotic experience shared by the 'he' who is the bridegroom and by the 'you' who is the bride is communalized in the reaction of the 'I' who figures as the vicarious participant in the experience. And this reaction is an epiphany in and of itself.

—The subjective feelings in this moment of epiphany are linked to the first-person speaker who is Sappho. When we hear phainetai moi kēnōs isos theoisin, 'he appears [phainetai] to me, that one, (to be) equal
[isos] to the gods', at line 1, it is the first-person speaker who is feeling the erotic sensations experienced by the bride in the second-person and by the bridegroom in the third person.

—At the climax of the erotic experience as spoken by the first-person speaker, she says about her feelings: têthnakê̂n d’olîgō ‘pideûês | phainom’ emautâi, 'and a little short of death | do I appear [phainomai] to myself', at line 16. The verb phainomai, 'I appear', here signals again an epiphany – an epiphany that manifests itself to the self, to the speaking 'I'.

§83. This appearance of the self to the self, as an epiphany, signals the divine presence of Aphrodite.

§84. In one sense, what is shown in Song 31 is the epiphany of Aphrodite, since she is a most appropriate goddess for the occasion of a wedding. In another sense, however, what is shown in Song 31 is the epiphany of the bride, whose identity fuses with that of Aphrodite at the moment of her wedding. And, in still another sense, what is shown in Song 31 is the epiphany of the speaking 'I’ who identifies with Aphrodite by virtue of vicariously identifying with the ‘you’ of the bride who is Aphrodite at this very moment. For Sappho, then, as I have been arguing, what is seen is an auto-epiphany.

§85. Just as the vicariousness of Sappho in Song 31 fuses the ‘I’ who is the singer with the 'you' who is the bride, so also the ‘I’ of Sappho in Song 1, not shown here, fuses the ‘I’ who is the singer with the 'you' who is Aphrodite.

§86. In Song 31 of Sappho, the projection of identity that we see going on in this song makes it possible for the singer of the song to become the bride herself and even Aphrodite herself, at least for a moment, just as the singer of Song 1 of Sappho, not shown here, becomes Aphrodite herself for the brief moment when Aphrodite is being quoted by the singer. In the logic of Song 31, seeing Sappho as Aphrodite for a moment is just as real as seeing the bride as Aphrodite and just as real as seeing the bridegroom as Arês.

§87. Then, when the song comes to an end, everyone can revert to their human selves—though they may have been upgraded in human status because they had been part of the song. I find it relevant to compare the words of T. S. Eliot (The Dry Salvages, 1941), “you are the music | While the music lasts.”

Tags: David Lynch, Sappho, Twin Peaks

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