

Foucault on Discourse: O'Neill as Discourse: *LDJN* (4: 125-154) Tyrone and Edmund

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What I wanted to know was how the subject constituted himself, in such and such a determined form, . . . I had to reject a certain *a priori* theory of the subject in order to make this analysis of the relationships which can exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power and so forth. (Foucault, *Final Foucault* 10)

I couldn't touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. (O'Neill 154)

Within the scene between Tyrone and Edmund at the beginning of Act 4 in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, two moments speak to the limitations of words from different points of view and to different ends. Tyrone says of Mary's accusations (spoken through Edmund) that these words are not hers, that what Edmund hears is not Mary but the "poison talking" (142). In other words, Mary is dumb: animated by an external force that speaks through her; constituting no more than the point of articulation, a mechanism, a model of the speaking subject that has no status as a subject, a vacancy filled by a foreign substance. Of course, Tyrone's characterization of Mary's account is itself a rhetorical strategy, but the language here presents the image of a figure more spoken than speaking.

The other moment belongs to Edmund and provides one of the play's more memorable passages. After Edmund's relatively long autobiographical

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monologue, Tyrone tells him that he has the "makings of a poet" (154). Edmund replies with the words cited at the beginning of this essay. This moment creates a sense not of being spoken through but of trying to speak and in the effort gaining an awareness of the limitations of language, of the gap between signifier and signified, between a verbal surface and a depth of experience. This consciousness of limitations distinguishes Edmund's discourse from Mary's and lends authenticity to what he has just said. We may even tend to think of these words as a kind of false modesty. We may want to say, "No, you're not stammering now. You've found your voice. You did it. You've made the language work for you at last." We may also think that we hear the voice of the author in Edmund's voice, of O'Neill himself, and we may want to say the same set of words to him. In any case, taken together the two moments make a simple statement: man speaks; woman suffers speech.

It may, however, be possible to narrow the gap between these two moments in some way. Mary's instance may not be quite so far removed from Edmund's. At the very least, this image of Mary's speech may serve as a metaphor for the space, real or potential, between a subjective consciousness and the discourse it temporarily inhabits or that, perhaps, inhabits it. If so, the result may be a reading that better understands what it means to be spoken through, not only for Mary but also for Edmund and Tyrone.

Discourse and the Subject

In an interview not long before his death, Michel Foucault answered a question concerning whether or not his "philosophical research" was "still determined by the poles, subjectivity and truth" with the following statement:

In fact, that has always been my problem, even if I have expressed in different terms the framework of this thought. I have tried to discover how the human subject entered into *games of truth*, whether they be games of truth which take on the form of science or which refer to a scientific model, or games of truth like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control. (*Final 1*)

Later in the same interview he took some pains to describe just what he meant by the word "game":

[W]hen I say 'game' I mean an ensemble of rules for the production of the truth. It is not a game in the sense of imitating or entertaining . . . it is an ensemble of procedures which lead to a certain result, which can be considered in function of its principles and its rules of procedures, as valid or not, as winner or loser. (*Final 16*)

Certainly, "games of truth" would not be a poor choice as a subtitle for the scene between Edmund and Tyrone. Foucault worked out a methodology for studying these games several years earlier in a work that came towards the middle of his career, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In an appendix, "The Discourse on Language," he explores what he perceives as an inevitable, although not necessarily negative interaction between discourse and relationships of power. From these studies I would like to borrow a number of notions that might heighten our sensitivity to the functions of discourse in this scene in which two figures seem to both affirm and deny the presence and power of this fictional spoken language.

Perhaps most fundamental is Foucault's privileging of discourse itself, which he, at least provisionally, defines as a "vast field . . . made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them" (*Archaeology of Knowledge* 26-27). Foucault refuses to grant this field any kind of *pre-ordained* or *transcendental* unity, continuity, coherence, or even rationality. He insists on a radical skepticism for those ways in which scholars have turned this "vast field" into narrative structures of one sort or another. He rejects or at least suspends, a "whole mass of notions" that presume a given order, notions, for example, of "tradition" or "influence" or "development and evolution" or the "spirit" of an age (*Arch.* 22). Simultaneously, he questions the utilization of categories such as science, literature, or philosophy that we often use to trace discourses from one century to the next, refusing as well to accept the unities usually granted to "the book and the *oeuvre*," the text and the author (*Arch.* 22, 23), a refusal that, of course, applies to Foucault's *oeuvre* as clearly as it does to O'Neill's. When all of these ordering devices have been set aside, what remains is the discursive event which possesses a certain materiality of its own. The project relative to that event is essentially descriptive and, of necessity, subject to the discursive nexus in which the observer finds him--or herself.

Foucault's discussion of discourse is detailed and complex, well beyond the scope of this brief essay. Therefore, as no more than points from which to make a rough beginning, I would like to extract the following notions. In order to maintain his focus on discourse as a "limited system of presences," as opposed to a pathway to some higher, more authentic reality, Foucault advocates the implementation of three principles in its treatment. The first of these, the principle of *rarity*, opposes processes of interpretation that attempt to discover beneath a plethora of utterances some "totality of meaning" (*Arch.* 125). Instead, *rarity* accepts a "distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions;" it respects, perhaps even celebrates, the "incomplete, fragmented figure" (*Arch.* 119, 125). The second principle, *accumulation*, opposes processes bent on finding and describing a "moment" or "trace" of origin prior to discourse itself, prior to that moment when speech was "caught up in any form of materiality" (*Arch.* 125). Instead, this principle focuses on

the specific ways statements come to us over periods of time. The third principle, that of *exteriority*, opposes the tendency to regard statements as little more than reflections of some non-discursive interior of intentionality, as translations of "operations or processes that take place elsewhere (in men's thought, in their consciousness or unconscious, in the sphere of transcendental constitutions)" (*Arch.* 121). Instead, Foucault directs our focus to the statements themselves in an effort to "rediscover their occurrence as an event" (*Arch.* 121).

While these terms focus our attention on what Foucault has privileged (discourse itself), they also de-emphasize the role of the autonomous subject; s/he is not seen as a source of totality (the principle of *rarity*) or as a source of origin (the principle of *accumulation*) or even as a source of intentionality (the principle of *exteriority*):

He is not in fact the cause, origin, or starting-point of the phenomenon of the written or spoken articulation of a sentence; nor is it that meaningful intention which, silently anticipating words, orders them like the visible body of its intuition; it is not the constant, motionless, unchanging focus of a series of operations that are manifested, in turn, on the surface of discourse through the statements. It is a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals. . . . (*Arch.* 95)

This statement details a concept of *subject* as *vacancy*. Towards the end of his career, Foucault began to explore a more *active* image of the subject as a complement to this more *passive* notion, further clarifying his project: "What I wanted to know was how the subject constituted himself, in such and such a determined form, . . . through a certain number of practices which were games of truth, applications of power, etc." (*Final* 11). While de-centering the subject, Foucault simultaneously emphasizes the *materiality* and persistence of discourse itself:

. . . the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes a theme of appropriation and rivalry. (*Arch.* 105)

If it is not readily apparent, the relevance of these words to the Tyrone/Edmund scene will, I hope, be clear in the discussion that follows. With the concept of *vacancy*, Foucault presents the enunciation of discourse as something like the performance of a role, the filling up of an empty speaking place. With the concept of *materiality*, he underscores the persistence and potentiality of various discourses as fields of inquiry. These notions of *rarity*, *accumulation*, *exteriority*, *materiality*, and *vacancy* provide a way in

which to see how subjects constitute themselves within a world of discourse. In this case, these subjects are images of character found within a dramatic text, liable to embodiment in performance. I want to consider ways in which these dramatic figures create roles for themselves as speaking subjects, particularly in terms of three discursive strategies: quotation, accusation, and autobiography.

Quotation

In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault mentions the case of "an actor speaking his part" as a clear instance of a gap between the enunciation and initiation of a text, a gap that to some extent recalls our earlier example of Mary and the "poison talking" (*Arch.* 92). This gap is one which Tyrone and Edmund both acknowledge. Both know what it is to speak another's words; both acknowledge the art or practice of quotation. In a sense, this is where the scene begins: Tyrone and his Shakespeare; Edmund and his *fin de siecle* poets. Even though each might reject the other's texts, they both speak from within a structure that values the appropriation of an author's words as a means of establishing one's own sense of self, a strategy that is not unusual given the father's profession.

The danger here, of course, is that instead of appropriating a text one might be appropriated by it. Tyrone tells Edmund how he became trapped in a "great romantic part" that he "could play better than anyone" (150). He realizes that he had become subject to a particular role, a particular *vacancy*. Of Shakespeare he says, "I would have acted in any of his plays for nothing, for the joy of being alive in his great poetry" (150). But the *materiality* of another discourse (the "God-damned play") restricted his ability to move, publicly anyway, from one set of quotations to another. In that clear sense, Tyrone acknowledges the power of a text to displace a subject.

Perhaps in response to his father's experience, Edmund wants to be a maker of discourse, a writer: a subject, not an object. Nevertheless, in the early portion of the scene, he enters into the game of quotation again and again. He also articulates his own awareness of *materiality* and *vacancy*, most particularly in his comments on Dowson's "Cynara" in which he calls attention to three different speakers--Dowson, Jamie, and himself--all speaking the same lines. In doing so, he, like Tyrone, focuses on the liveliness not of the subject but of a text that travels from one speaker and situation to another and yet another. He illustrates that process by which a "statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire," and so forth. Indeed, in this instance the author himself (Dowson) becomes little more than one in a series of speakers.

Despite this articulated awareness of quoted discourse as a presence that extends beyond and displaces the subject, even though in quotation we find a metaphor for an interaction between subject and discourse similar to that

which Foucault has proposed, the fundamental tenor of quotation within this scene implies a superiority to the text. To quote is to choose displacement, but choice itself underscores the perceived autonomy of the subject. In this context, Tyrone is not only saddened but also somewhat surprised that words that he had chosen have now, in a sense, chosen him. Furthermore, despite the Dowson example, quotation privileges the author as a creator of distinctive discourse, so distinctive that it must carry his or her name as an acknowledgment of innovation.

Accusation

One way in which Edmund and Tyrone perceive themselves is as quoting subjects, as individuals who appropriate the texts of others in order to create images of the self that will help them cope with the painful, guilt-ridden realities of the moment. These strategies also, of course, enter into the relationships of power between father and son: to prohibit or reject the other's text or to maintain one's text in the face of prohibition and rejection is a way of establishing control. Quotation, however, eventually gives way to another form of discourse that father and son share: the discourse of accusation. Here again, the central function of this process is the constitution of the self, particularly as innocent or guilty.

In this scene, accusation focuses on two related topics: Tyrone's response to Edmund's tuberculosis that, in turn, leads to questions concerning who is to blame for Mary's addiction. These topics are, however, less important than the processes that order them. Accusation is a game of truth inescapably connected to relationships of power. Its "ensemble of rules" includes a reliance on temporality, causality, and textuality combined with what Foucault refers to as a process of "division and rejection" whereby certain statements are accepted or rejected on the basis of verity, rationality, or some other factor (*Arch.* 216).

Temporality and causality imply that one can find in the past the causes for certain effects that manifest themselves in the present. These assumptions, of course, also inhere in the conventions of dramatic realism, the dramatic form within which *Journey* operates. In both cases (the game of accusation and the conventions of dramatic realism), they are in a sense hidden (assumed, not questioned) at least until they exhaust themselves in a flurry of statement, counter-statement, and overdetermination.

Textuality links this process with that of quotation. Edmund and Tyrone quote various sources from the past, particularly Jamie and Mary, in an effort to shift blame from one individual to another. As with quotation, power relations manifest themselves in efforts to qualify or disqualify one statement or another. With quotation the standard was often the truth or rationality of the other's text with a particular emphasis on the latter, as in whether or not Edmund's authors represented anything more than a collection of "morbid

nonsense" (133). With accusation, the notion of verity often becomes the central concern, although these two standards for the "division and rejection" of statements often seem to merge. In the emotional battle of accusation and blame, statements that either assert or deny the truth or rationality of a quoted text occur again and again:

TYRONE: Will you stop repeating your mother's crazy accusations, which she never makes unless it's the poison talking? (142)

or

EDMUND: Jamie suspected you'd cry poorhouse to Hardy and he wormed the truth out of him. . . . You can't deny it's the truth about the state farm, can you?

TYRONE: It's not true the way you look at it! (144)

or

EDMUND: We met McGuire in the hotel bar after he left you. Jamie kidded him about hooking you, and he winked and laughed.

TYRONE: (Lying feebly.) He's a liar if he said--

EDMUND: Don't lie about it! (145)

Segments of texts within the play of accusation are not, however, identical to segments within the play of quotation. Quotation makes the text opaque: it acknowledges its status as a text, a legitimate end in and of itself. Accusation, however, tries to make the text transparent: its primary function is its referentiality, its status as a means to an end. The focus here shifts from an awareness of one's interaction with discourse towards a denial of manipulation: revelation (supposedly) replaces enunciation. In opposition to Foucault's principles of *accumulation* (the trace of statements through time) and *exteriority* (a focus on statements at the level of 'it is said,') the characters search for a prediscursive, root cause for Mary's addiction, to determine Mary's ongoing motivation in taking morphine or the intentions of the father in his treatment of both Mary's and Edmund's illnesses. In both searches (one for origins, the other for motives), an unspoken reality exists beyond words and once that reality has been located, words will be found to reflect it. Discourse itself becomes secondary, little more than a "'translation' of operations or processes that take place elsewhere. . ." (*Arch.* 121). A primary

strategy within this game is to portray the other as no more than an enunciator of false texts (a quoter), while one maintains one's own position as a simple teller of the truth, as one who knows who is innocent and who is to blame. For the spectator/reader, the implication is that the scene has moved from one process of authentication to another with an increase in the degree of authenticity.

Autobiography

Ultimately, however, this flurry of accusation and counter-accusation exhausts itself, spending its energy in so much flaying about. Although father and son have both accepted the rubrics of quotation and accusation, they arrive at an impasse and so they make a final move from accusation to autobiography. Within the game of quotation, both participants acknowledge discourse as a presence and willingly perceive themselves as filling certain vacancies that it has created. Neither the son nor the father, however, is able to accept the texts with which the other would create an image of himself. Within the game of accusation, both participants tend to deny the presence of discourse, even as they use texts from the past in an effort to establish images of innocence or guilt. Neither the son nor the father, however, is able to agree on the verity or rationality of those texts cited by the other. Autobiography, like accusation, also tends to deny the presence of discourse by attempting to make it a transparent surface through which the speaker and his listener can glimpse the true self. Edmund and Tyrone both admit to this possibility and for the first time within the scene, neither challenges the validity of the other's text, of the self that the other creates.

The rhetorical effect of this movement from quotation through accusation to autobiography is a valorization of the autobiographical project itself, which, of course, supports the play as a whole to whatever extent we perceive it as O'Neill's personal narrative, as his movement from quotation to accusation to autobiography. In this sense, *Journey* is both self-reflexive and self-validating. Critically we often shape (and validate) O'Neill's *oeuvre* in this way, as a movement from the perhaps awkward quotation of styles not his own and the advocacy of one philosophical position or another (a parallel to the process of accusation) to a final finding of the self in autobiography. In *The Theatre of Revolt*, Robert Brustein demonstrates this reading:

Like Strindberg, therefore, O'Neill develops from messianic rebellion into existential rebellion, thus demonstrating that beneath his Nietzschean yea-saying and affirmation of life was a profound, discontent with the very nature of existence. O'Neill's experiments with form, his flirtations with various philosophies and religions, his attitudinizing and fake poeticizing represent the means by which he tried to smother this perception; but it would not be smothered, and

when he finally found the courage to face it through realistic probes of his own past experience, he discovered the only artistic role that really fit him. (359)

What I would emphasize in Brustein's summary is the use of the word "role." It suggests the filling of a vacancy, of some opening within a discourse or a discursive strategy. Brustein places the assumption of this role within an opposition of the false with the genuine. In calling our attention to this opposition and the *role that fits*, the critic participates in a process of authentication that privileges autobiographical discourse: that realistic probing of one's "own past experience."

As with accusation, the autobiographical role requires the subject to make use of the past as if it were one long text. From that text, s/he must choose one or more representative moments. The selection and articulation of those moments is a process (with quotation and accusation) by which the subject creates a self: first of all, as an other from the past possessing a certain reassuring solidity; secondly, as one uniquely capable of telling his or her own story. If the sign of quotation is literally a pair of quotation marks and the sign of accusation a dialogue filled with charges of lies and claims of truth, then the sign of autobiography is the extended speech or the monologue, first for Tyrone, then for Edmund. What the monologue suggests is unbroken discourse: the chance to create oneself without the interruption of another. As a character, the speaker purchases that space by moving away from accusation, by choosing a moment from the past that is essentially outside the experience of the other: for Tyrone, experiences before Edmund was born; for Edmund, experiences at sea, away from Tyrone's field of observation. Each chooses moments to which he has privileged access.

Perhaps most importantly, autobiographical discourse rests on a paradox: the disavowal of a performance from which it can never quite be free. Quotation, of course, acknowledges performance: "It's morbid nonsense! What little truth is in it you'll find nobly said in Shakespeare. (Then appreciatively.) But you recited it well, lad" (133). Early in the scene, performance is also acknowledged apart from quotation as potentially resident within speech itself. Edmund takes this point of view when, in response to a particularly impassioned speech by his father, he replies, "That's a grand curtain" (128). Tyrone does not, however, resist this interpretation. Instead, he extends it: "That's right, laugh at the old fool! The poor old ham! But the final curtain will be in the poorhouse just the same, and that's not a comedy!" (128). However with the move into autobiography later in the scene, Tyrone does set his narrative apart from fiction and performance. Before beginning the story of his childhood years, he tells Edmund that there "was no damned romance" in his poverty (147). What follows seems intended as an honest, open, unperformed, confessional narrative. Yet the shape of the story, its subject matter, the closing quotation of his mother's words ("Glory be to God, for once in our

lives we'll have enough for each of us"), the wiping away of tears from the eyes--all indicate the excellent performance of a Victorian melodrama (148). Tyrone's attempt at separating his story from "discourse" or "performance" first of all indicates the father's awareness of these elements in everyday life, an awareness that Tyrone would himself find in the Shakespearean metaphor of man as a player on a stage. Nevertheless, Tyrone wants Edmund to believe that this moment is different, that for a moment the "acting" has stopped. This desire remains central to autobiography as a discursive strategy, whether the audience is a dramatic figure within the world of the play or the reader/spectator who stands apart. (Indeed, the relationship between Tyrone and Edmund at this moment mirrors the relationship between O'Neill and his audience with respect to the work as a whole. As suggested by the Brustein quote, with *Journey* we tend to feel that in a sense the process of composition has stopped, that in the autobiographical text we encounter not writing but the writer.)

If Tyrone appropriates the role of a protagonist in a Victorian melodrama, then to some extent Edmund assumes the role of the sensitive, wandering, romantic rebel found in the *fin de siècle* literature he admires. Tyrone puts Edmund's adventure in this context when he describes them as a "game of romance and adventure," as "play" (147). Edmund, however, is quick to deny this characterization of his narrative and once the scene moves into its autobiographical mode, this view is not again expressed. Following Edmund's long speech of the sea, Tyrone, in a more respectful tone, tells Edmund that he has the "makings of a poet," which, of course, elicits the words about stammering. As noted at the beginning of this essay, Edmund's disavowal of Tyrone's commendation has an authenticating function. That function is part of the autobiographical game of truth, a move that separates autobiography from literature, from rhetoric, from performance: a project, finally, made not of words, but, as O'Neill himself would say, of "tears and blood" (7). Indeed, tears themselves, particularly when shed by men, are sure indicators of a truth that goes beyond the limits of performance or manipulation, perhaps because in American culture, no man ever cries if he can help it.

With Foucault and, of course, Samuel Beckett, we can perceive the autobiographical moment not as the ultimate example of a subject's ability to assert its autonomy independent of language, but as a discursive strategy at work within a language, culture, and system of values in which various figures participate: characters, authors, readers, spectators, critics. We often value this strategy, it seems to me, not for its ability to provide images of the self that help us get through the night but for its movement out of language and into pure truth, a move that, for Foucault anyway, is an illusion. Tyrone and Edmund need not, after all, belong to a world so different from that of Vladimir and Estragon.

Perhaps then we read the final moments of the play with additional understanding for the ways in which language frustrates attempts at finding a

pure self apart from its domain, perceiving not only Mary but also Edmund, Tyrone, O'Neill, and our own selves, as both speaking and spoken through. Ironically or not, the play ends with Mary's assumption of a discursive strategy that the men have already enjoyed. Perhaps after all her autobiographical moment is not in some ways so different from those that preceded it: "Yes, I remember. I fell in love with James Tyrone and was so happy for a time" (176).

In conclusion, we might briefly think of ways in which each of these discursive strategies often inform our sense of the play as a whole: as quotation, as accusation, as autobiography. We might, for example, imagine the author recalling the words of his family members, shaping and structuring them into a dramatic form. Sheaffer, for example, in his O'Neill biography refers to father and son playing cards together with the elder "looking back and lamenting the years he wasted on *Monte Cristo*." He then adds, "The son would remember these confessional nights when he wrote of Edmund and Tyrone baring their souls while playing cards in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*" (5). This sense of quotation also works when, as spectators or readers, our focus shifts from the enunciation of the dramatic text to whatever sense we have of an earlier enunciation, as we speculate on how much or how little of what may have been once said has been altered in the retelling, when we wonder how accurate the quotations are. In another sense, *Journey* also seems to quote earlier works of domestic drama that function, more or less, within the conventions of dramatic realism, such as Strindberg's family dramas. From these resonances this play also draws authority. Accusation, of course, also functions as a way in which we approach this text. Perhaps one of the most persistent interpretive strategies for reading the play is to see the playwright working through a series of accusations against mother, father, and elder brother to a role of understanding and forgiveness. This interpretation often surfaces in discussions of the relationship between *Journey* and *Moon for the Misbegotten*. Biographers and scholars frequently cite the latter as a corrective to the harshness of the former (e.g.--Sheaffer 528). As with quotation, this note of accusation also works on another level, in the ways in which *Journey* accuses American drama of commercialism and superficiality. Melodrama in recent years has won its share of respect, and critics such as John Henry Raleigh have shown O'Neill's indebtedness to the form. But a more persistent position uses *Journey* and one or two plays like it to castigate American drama in general (melodramatic and sentimental) and the middle class that consumes it. Here also is an implied accusation against the romanticization of the family in which, ironically, O'Neill's own *Ah Wilderness!* is occasionally an object of scorn. Most evident of all is, of course, our fascination with the play as an autobiographical project. The presence of two major biographies (the Gelbs' and Sheaffer's) must to some extent be a function of the autobiographical discourse surrounding this play and others that bear a similar mark, particularly *Moon* and *The Iceman Cometh*. These biographies have, in turn, informed

O'Neill criticism, particularly Travis Bogard's excellent study, appropriately titled *Contour in Time*. In these and other ways, the play's autobiographical strategy has exercised control over those who would write of it. As another example, the *Monte Cristo* cottage has itself become a kind of shrine to the man and the play, now linked to the O'Neill Center and even featured in a recent televised production of the play. Finally, few plays have inscriptions as well-known, at least among theatre students and scholars, as the one that marks the beginning of this play, reserved for a page of its own, almost unavoidable, the sign of the real, of a discourse, an autobiographical discourse, on which one can count:

For Carlotta, on our 12th Wedding Anniversary

Dearest: I give you the original script of this play of old sorrow,
written in tears and blood. A sadly inappropriate gift. . . .

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