

The S(ub)lime Symptom and O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*

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There are many ways of reading O'Neill's plays and in this paper we pose the question: what is it about O'Neill's plays that convey his understanding of the modern tragedy? On analysis, they very quickly reveal a new, tragic sublime, one that is inextricably linked to the enjoyment of symptoms. In contrast to the Aristotelian paradigm, which foregrounds the tragic *jouissance* as a result of the inevitable "outbound" conflicts between human flaws and fateful mishaps, O'Neillian theatre addresses the problem of existence in the capitalistic Man. The lethal, symptomatic *jouissance* enlivens the subject, then reduces it to a state of deadly inertia, and calmly sends the subject to the realm of the living dead. In the words of Žižek, this deadly existence "is the very opposite of dying." It is a sublime but "horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain."¹

In most cases, the world of classical tragedy is about the realm of the Real: the heroes' love of the Real Thing, the confrontation of the Real chaos, the heroes' acknowledgement of the nonsymbolizable (Real) laws. According to Žižek, the "paradigmatic case of classical tragedy is that of a hero who commits an act the consequences of which are beyond the scope of his knowledge—who unwittingly commits crime by violating the sacred order of his community."² We can even generalize the development of some classical tragedies using this formula: "Master—Desire—Thing." The hero is by nature a discursive master capable of turning an existing master signifier for his own use, thus inventing his own master's discourse (e.g. Macbeth's own "power" discourse, Hamlet's "intellectual doubt"). Eventually, the subject is so much otherized by this grand signifier that he forsakes his well-being to desire the unattainable and the transgressive (the primordial "Thing"). He thereby ends up becoming a spectacular "Thing" in the eyes of the audience. In classical tragedy, the problem of "desire" becomes paramount for the hero and rules out the possibility of metonymic substitutions by turning back against the homeostatic pleasure principle. Lacan explains the relation of desire, pleasure, and metonymic substitution in this way: the child desires the mother and is punished or castrated by the father's law. Henceforth, upon its entry in the

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Symbolic order, the child learns to repress his primordial desire and remains happy with his endless metonymic substitutes in the signifying chain (e.g. cars, careers, travels). As the substitute is never as good as the original *objet a*, the child's growth involves a double refusal: the "primordial refusal" (*Versagung originelle*) of the mythical object and the "self-refusal" to consent to the substituting signifiers. However, tragedy highlights the fact that, at some point, the master wants to "act in conformity with his desire." The hero would rather brave the question of non-being than accepting a substitute. The reason why acting in conformity with one's desire means tragedy is twofold. First, Lacan points out that the human's true object of desire is always the desire for the Thing—i.e., the (m)Other. While the pleasure principle commands desire to circle round the (m)Other, if the hero acts "in conformity with his desire," he will transgress the Oedipal law and invite divine punishment. Second, Lacan has little problem in pointing out that the hero's "going beyond the pleasure principle" is also the desire for death, since the Thing is situated in the realm of the Real (i.e., confusion and chaos), anybody who dares go near it will be traumatized and consumed.

Oedipus Rex and *Antigone* are perfect examples to illustrate this formula. In the case of *Oedipus*, the love of "Truth" has enabled Oedipus to fathom the secrets of the Sphinx and become a master, but his desire for "Truth" has also led him to the fatal discovery that he has violated the incest taboo. As a result, the gouging out of his own eyes signifies not only Oedipus' abject Thing-like status, but also the Thingness of Truth for no prophecy can foretell it. Truth tends to "slip into a liminal boundary between its existence in the Real and its existence only as a (belated) representation."³ On the other hand, *Antigone* is so structured by "family ethics" that she posits herself not as a fiancée but solely as Polynices' sister at the very beginning of the play. The logic of her ethics decrees her self-mastering action, i.e., to bury her brother's corpse—a "Thing" lying out there—though she knows his very behaviour is indefensible in the eyes of the world. Although *Antigone* bemoans her state of being, her (genuine) voice is ultimately barred by this desire for the ethical signifier. *Antigone's* entombment makes her a "beautiful Thing" for it commemorates the courage of an abject woman who dares to act in conformity with her desire (which is also the ethical Other's desire). In many cases, the power of classical tragedy always lies in portraying the sublimity of the Real: the master (e.g. Romeo) recklessly pursues the barred object of desire (his love), the hero, braving the horror of transgression and his Real destiny, then becomes a Thing. The paradox is that the chaotic Real in fact leads to the audience's embrace of the Law and moral catharsis. The heroes' suffering allows the audience to have a glimpse of the shocking "Thing," and the tragic ending enables them to accept the metonymic logic in the core of the homeostatic pleasure principle.

If the Real plays a dominant role in classical tragedy, the O'Neillian theatre is a perfectly logical space devoted to the tragic facet of the Symbolic. In fact, O'Neill's

plays endorse a new formula: “*Subject—Disavowal—Symptom*.” The hero is not a master by nature; however, he is subjectified by the capitalistic discourse to become the “economic Man.” Pettigrew’s words offer a succinct explanation of this idea: “‘Your money or your life!’ exclaims Lacan (XI, 212). If you accept the signifier, you lose Being. This is why Lacan speaks quite dramatically of the lethal signifier, the ‘lethal factor’ (XI, 213). However, if you refuse the signifier, you fall into non-meaning.”⁴ In the O’Neillian context, the lethal signifier is indeed “Capital” for it opens up a new world of (false) enjoyment for the subject to recognize reality. In *Long Day*, James Tyrone valorizes his cultural capital to become a famous Actor, and he subsequently entwines himself to the capitalistic discourse and befriends McGuire—a false friend—in order to be a “a cunning real estate speculator.”⁵ He suffers many losses due to McGuire’s advice, but he chooses to remember buying Chestnut Street, McGuire’s “famous one stroke of good luck.” While the subject half-knows its misrecognition, O’Neill’s plays often lead us to see how the process of “fetishistic disavowal” can effectively forestall the subject from demystifying reality.

In the words of Laplanche and Pontalis, disavowal is a “specific mode of defence which consists in the subject’s refusing to recognize the reality of a traumatic perception.”⁶ Disavowal thrives on the principle of metaphor (e.g. the miser believes that “money *is* everything,” the alcoholic says “the bottle *is* my life”). It reveals the fact that the subject is *knowingly* covering up a lack, i.e., the non-sense, the non-enjoyment of the fetish. As Žižek says, the fetishist’s “I know but nevertheless” is exactly the key to understanding this problem: the subject is “not fetishizing commodities or money, but actually the fantasy itself.”⁷ To explain this clearly, the fetish functions at two levels. The fetish is first portrayed by the Other as a sensational, mythical *objet a*, a “Real object of fullness”. After the subject’s firsthand experience of it, it empirically becomes an unfulfilling object (after all, money is a stack of coins and paper, the bottle makes one weak). The fetish is then realized to be an empty *objet a*, a “false real” (to use the words of Alain-Jacques Miller). However, the metaphoric mechanism of disavowal helps hide the authentic experience to allow the subject to (make-)believe in the power of the mythical, omnipotent fetish, so much so that the subject’s fantasmal being *qua* the fetish (e.g. capital, bottle) becomes “more to him than himself”. Here, the disavowal is essentially a *disavowal of the empirical truth* to embrace a symbolic enjoyment, a happiness that is decreed not by the self but by the Other. Through the voice of the Other, the subject also endorses a *disavowal of the Real* (chaos, accident) to (make) believe that reality can be contained by the potent signifier. The miser always speaks as if money is the be-all and end-all of life, for it “can solve all problems.” The *disavowal of the poverty of the Symbolic* enables the subject to exist, to anchor itself firmly in the sterile happy discourse of the world, to identify with the self-deluding fantasy, to deny its genuine unhappiness. Thus

Edmund exclaims, “facts don’t mean a thing, do they? What you want to believe, that’s the only truth!”⁸

The formation of symptoms (for example, depression) occurs exactly due to the simultaneity and the split between sense (truth) and fantasy in consciousness. In *Long Day*, James Tyrone uses whisky to drown his sorrows while Mary uses morphine to seek happiness. The symptom mirrors the truth of the subject’s being while it also *intercepts* truth so that “there is an internal veto, an internal no-saying.”⁹ The symptom marks the return of the repressed truth but it also intercepts this truth by allowing the subject to defend and enjoy the fetishistic distortion. Lacan calls this the “identification with the symptom.” As a result, Jacques-Alain Miller tells us, “we are used to considering that a symptom has a supplementing function, that is, we do not take the symptom as a dysfunctioning, we take it on the contrary as an apparatus which reestablishes functioning. It allows the subject to sustain himself in the world.”

The formula “subject-disavowal-symptom” can be seen in many O’Neillian classics such as *Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the grandfather Abe Mannon changes from being an ordinary person to become an economic Man when he starts one of the first “Western Ocean packet lines.”¹⁰ All the Mannons endorse a primary fetishism to see Capital as a mythical Thing. Money makes them possess a genuine sense of “fullness” even though the Mannons knowingly realize that the “Real” reality (libidinal chaos, political chaos, a warring world) cannot be solved by money. Eventually, the aloof, mask-like “Mannon face” bespeaks the triumph of the fetishistic fantasy. Hence, the servant Seth notices that the Mannons have “been top dog around here for near on two hundred years and don’t let folks forget it.”¹¹ It is in this sense that even though all the male Mannons love the beautiful French nurse, they have to disavow their feelings for she signifies a disruptive force that can destroy the Symbolic fantasy. David, the romantic, takes the leap to marry her, but he soon becomes ashamed of his connection with her and kills himself. In *Hairy Ape*, Yank, having little money, turns to an “enlightened” secondary fetishism to see the Capital as a “false Thing.” Yank represents the working subject who takes pride in his labour power and attempts to demystify the fetishistic illusion by sending people back to the Real (the dynamite and the zoo). While the worker aims at unveiling the empirical truth that the upper class/democracy is an ineffective system, little does he know that this attempt is actually a disavowal of his covert, materialistic fantasy. Hence Yank displays the classic hysterical symptom: he glorifies his work and bemoans his entrapment as a stoker, he denies the grandeur of the Capital and reiterates the impotence of his (cultural or financial) poverty, he tries to be an independent person but calls for vengeance after noticing how the wealthy lady scorns him. Yank displays honesty when he says he wants to think but he simply can’t “t’ink.” Yank asserts that he is the Capital and the master of the society: “I’m steel—steel—steel!” the “steam and oil for de engines,” “de ting in gold dat makes money;”¹² but the presence of

Mildred in white (and calling him a “filthy beast”) makes him become aware of and furiously deny his slave-like, impoverished status. As a result, O’Neill uses this play to foreground how the homeless subject, imprisoned by the Capital fixation, wants to rebel against it. The tragic fact is that, after much pretence, the enlightened worker cannot relate his life to the Marxist worldview (the glory of the Labourer and a life of hardship/productiveness) or to the views of crude capitalism (the cult of class to hide the unproductive life of the privileged). The Hairy Ape’s death in the arms of the gorilla embodies the worker’s symptomatic “disfigured *jouissance*.” The impoverished Yank is disfigured by his work in the “stokehole,” and in turn his labour empowers him to distrust the capitalists. His enlightened consciousness brings a pseudo-independence to disavow the rich and the romantic (“all dat crazy tripe about suns and winds . . . dat’s all a dope dream”¹³). However, such thoughts clash with the ways of the world and his covert identification with wealth, his hidden romantic desire to be loved by the pretty, “white-faced, skinny tarts.”¹⁴ Yank’s death does not denote the power of divine retribution but the futility of warring with his truth and symptoms.

The O’Neillian romantic outlook is, at times, curiously akin to the logic of capitalism. In the first place, the capitalist’s fetishistic consciousness always turns differences into a metaphoric convergence. For example, in the eyes of businessmen, all goods are in a way “alike” for they lead to the same thing—more Capital. Second, the concept of “exchange control” favours the occasional restriction of business deals with undesirable members in the particular area. Its function is to bar the conversion of valuable (home) assets into other (foreign) assets, thereby reducing the inflow of unwanted assets from abroad and keeping the money in one place. It is in this light that we can understand why O’Neill’s plays often dramatize the links between the primacy of Capital and the immoral, “inbound” (incestuous) romance. Most of his plays feature the presence of a potent patriarch around whom everybody revolves in the hope of capturing the paternal phallus. While the patriarch is excessively strict and invites the hatred of his wife, somehow the women all fall in love with the paternal privileges and the *same* masculine phallic face. Meanwhile, all the sons love-hate the father figure, end up longing to be rich and then going after the *same* phallic mother-figure. If Christine hates Ezra Mannon in *Mourning*, she loves Brant and Orin—who look exactly like Ezra. In *Desire Under the Elms*, all the males in the Cabot family go after the phallic Minnie, who alone possesses the potency to remain “purty” after all these years. Preposterous as these duplicated relationships may seem (Abe’s face is Ezra’s face is David’s face is Brant’s face is Orin’s face), the O’Neillian romance dramatizes the primitive functionings of capitalism: everybody loves the same thing (or the same face, the paternal Capital), and good resources must be kept in one place (or one family, one society) for the sake of affective or financial conglomeration. In *Long Day*, all sons fail to have substantial relations with women other than

Mary. To Christine and Vinnie in *Mourning*, no male faces can get their attention and only Abe-Ezra-Brant-Orin can capture their hearts. Orin also fails to see the loveliness of other women—only the maternal Christine and Vinnie seem to be the most lovable of women. The O’Neillian incestuous romance is structured like a financial layout to forestall the outflow of wealth/emotions to other families and thereby safeguard the hegemonic enterprise. However, the irony is that it also leads to the family’s confusion and disintegration along blood/emotive lines. Instead of growth, it results in a drying up of wealth and emotions.

If the Greek incest taboo is wrought with mythical impulse and fixation, O’Neill’s plays have none of these characteristics for the incestuous logic is, in fact, a rational choice, an obsession for people who are too interested in “family property.” In *Mourning*, Captain Brant is back to claim his rights, Vinnie is envious of the mother’s rightful ownership of her husband, the mother is eager to keep the son’s affection for herself, and Orin is jealous of his sister’s suitors. Given the fact that the family portrayed by O’Neill is usually the wealthiest one in the area, following the notion of exchange control, the members deem that any inbound alliance can be profitable to the self, while the outbound alliance is viewed in a hostile light. For example, the Cabot sons never want their father to remarry in *Desire Under the Elms*. Orin never likes the idea that Vinnie or Christine loves Brant in *Mourning*. As the obsessional organizes her enjoyment by protecting her “property” through envy, gossiping, feuding and defamation, Vinnie loses no time in being the informer to destroy her mother (just as Jamie loses no time to use his “vile tongue” to corrupt/attack his brother). If Electra kills her mother out of “Justice” (in Hegelian terms, the noble consciousness), what Vinnie displays is a pure ignoble consciousness as she uses the name of “Justice” to secure her paternal interests, to claim her idea of “rightful properties” (i.e., her father and her brother).

To Lacan, the obsessional features a distinctive type of “self-disgusting” enjoyment that is centred on the question of Being and death. The obsessional’s wish is to justify its Being, to fight lack/death by positing its Being to the quest of the “full,” phallic Thing. As this Thing is exactly *not* the “full,” joyful, mythical Thing in the Real, hence the obsessional tends to attach herself to a set of recurrent ideas, or rituals to reassure herself of her fullness, of having no disappointment or fear of death. However, the obsessional subject also feels a special burden of guilt, for example, Jamie Tyrone’s or Vinnie Mannon both know that their quests have violated the laws of ethics. In the O’Neillian context, the end of *Mourning* is not surprising as Vinnie savours her full Being (she owns the house, the capital, the men in the family) and the full, symptomatic force of guilt and lack. Her behaviour manifests the typical obsessional’s symptom when she chooses not suicide but perpetual procrastination to wait “for death.”¹⁵ On the one hand, this signifies a gesture of self-punishment; on the other hand, this self-punishment is also turned by the subject to be the source of a new, self-disgusting *jouissance*. It marks the

obsessional's classical choice of remaining with something that makes her suffer, of recognizing herself in the (joyful) suffering. It demonstrates the process of what Lacan calls the "identification with the symptom, the reabsorption of the symptom in pleasure" (c.p. Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*). The guilty obsession and the joy of self-ruin all lead to a fantasmal enjoyment that works this way: while mourning signifies a state of being in pain, the obsessional disavows lack and turns this into a state of self-fulfilment. The obsessional makes two simultaneous statements: being in lack, "I am the most dead person in the world"; however, being dead, "I am now happy and immortal." Thus, the obsessional celebrates the fantasmal joy of living a life beyond suffering as she is both the slave and the master of her traumatic experience.

O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* is another classic example that illustrates how the lacunary subjects choose to disavow reality and embrace their s(ub)lime symptoms—in the form of madness, miserliness, alcoholism and drug addiction. The sublimity of symptoms lies in the subject's welcoming a life decreed by a horrible union between nonsense and truth, a life that is self-wasting and "between the two deaths." The Tyrones take refuge in their symptoms and thereby reproduce a recurring form of death and become the undead, the very emblem of pain, and the hallmark of a walking disaster.

The Birth of the Father

In a capitalistic society, a man is not a "Man" until he is subjectified by the monetary discourse. O'Neill has no hesitation in demystifying the "ugliness of American reality" behind the innocent discourse of the "American dream". Unlike Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, O'Neill chooses not to romanticize the castrating effect of Money with a dreamy outlook, but to foreground how this unconscious language can regulate the living body. In the play, Mr Tyrone's rise to prosperity represents the birth of the modern, masculine Subject—the economic Man. If the American society grants the status of a "master" to a wealthy man, Eugene O'Neill leads us to see that he is but a "victim" who has surrendered to the logic of the Other. O'Neill forces the reader to see that a man like Tyrone is "caught as a whole, but like a pawn" in the play of the capitalistic signifier, "and this even before the rules are transmitted to him. . . . Such an order of priorities has to be understood as a logical order, that is, as an always actualized order."¹⁶ While pleasure in itself may not be a linguistic phenomenon, the idea that Money can give pleasure is certainly related to "the ordering function of the culture, a culture that separates man from nature, by inscribing him from the start in language, in the founding law whose primordial interdiction" is that of the law of the father.¹⁷ The fear of lack on the ontological level is translated by the capitalistic discourse to become Tyrone's fear of poverty, the "fear of poorhouse." In O'Neill's play, Mr Tyrone has no hesitation in forgoing what he truly likes in order to accommodate

to the desire of the Other. With all his money, he ends up saying “I don’t know what the hell it was I wanted to buy.”¹⁸

O’Neill wants his reader to understand the importance of history; however, Tyrone’s confession narrative also leads us to see the boundary between history and story can be very thin. Old Mrs. Tyrone’s suffering may have a direct impact on James Tyrone, but it is *not* from Old Mrs. Tyrone that he learns how to be a “stinking miser.” The moment Mr. Tyrone gets an extra-dollar, she spends it “*all* on food” to ensure the well-being of her family.¹⁹ It is in this sense that we see a person can disavow the past to explain away his self-disgusting *jouissance*. The “fear of poorhouse” is an excuse to justify his love of “second hand bargains in everything,”²⁰ to accumulate wealth, to “memorize the level in the bottle after every drink.”²¹ It forgets the fact that the subject is not searching for a(n attainable) mode of existence to compensate his past, but actively seeking an insatiable symbolic enjoyment constructed by the Other. In the heat of pursuing what he (or the Other) wants, the subject can use all kinds of reasons to turn anything into the quest for more money. Hence, Tyrone’s mother pushes him to see “the value of a dollar,” his love for Mary is “an added incentive to ambition.”²²

The disavowal of all substantial relations for a symbolic happiness means that the Subject can effectively cut off the link between the self and its body, the self and the needs of the people around him. In Marini’s words, the subject favours “the submission to the imperious command of a terrible superego: ‘*Jouis!*’ Both the other and the self are being put to death in the name of the Other.”²³ Eventually, Mr. Tyrone’s master discourse valorises the word “expenditure” to “quilt” and totalize all his family relations into a readable set of figures. “Expenditure” is his dominant signifier (S_1) that can enslave everything (S_2) so that all human relations or investment can be neatly arranged, thereby becoming easily measurable according to the notion of “growth” or “use value.” In Mr. Tyrone’s eyes, Jamie is an “evil minded loafer”²⁴ because he is depraved and unproductive. Edmund is disappointing for he is weak in terms of his health or financial well-being. As the master discourse allows the master to read reality lucidly, Mr. Tyrone is the only character in the play that is exempt from despair and confusion of values. Thus Mary notes, “Ten foghorns couldn’t disturb” Tyrone.²⁵ To a miser like Tyrone, the world is a very stable, easily readable zone: his enemy is the one who wants to “have the house ablaze with electricity at [night], burning up money!”²⁶

For all his “fake pride and pretence,” James Tyrone recognizes the truth of his being a “stinking old miser.”²⁷ He sells his talents for money, spends his money on many “bum piece[s] of property,” and ends up celebrating his life by drowning regrets with alcohol. The paradox of success and non-being, happiness and unhappiness eventually leads Tyrone to utter—with clear-headed sincerity—something that he really desires to do and never desires to put it into action: “On my solemn oath, Edmund, . . . I’d be willing to have no home but the poorhouse in my old age if I

could look back now on having been the fine artist I might have been.”²⁸ It is in this sense that we know, in spite of John H. Raleigh’s interesting article, that Tyrone’s honest duplicity has nothing to do with the Irish “national concern with betrayal” or “Judas Complex.”²⁹ On the contrary, the crux of Tyrone’s problems lies in the diseased enjoyment in the symbolic register. Wealth or success may bring a lot of pain, but the fetishistic illusion is “in himself more than himself.”

O’Neill gives us a masterly character whose words are characterized by “empty speeches”—for his entire being is oriented toward the discourse of the Other. To Lacan, the empty speech speaks mostly to the (phallic) Other, instead of voicing the self’s authentic needs or minding other people’s being. In the play, Mr. Tyrone is constantly talking in vain about someone who can never be at one with “his” wish: his sons are good for nothing, merely trying to use up all his money. At times, Mr. Tyrone talks to his wife, but he can only do so using the language of an actor: “If I’ve watched you it was to admire how fat and beautiful you looked;” Mary has “the most beautiful hair in the world.” Her white hair only makes her “prettier than ever.”³⁰ This quasi-romantic role-playing “dialogue” helps him disavow Mary’s suffering and deny his responsibility for her decline. While it allows readers to feel a momentarily tenderness toward Tyrone, we can feel that this romantic voice cannot be endearing for it bespeaks a “double bind performance” instead of genuineness.³¹ Mary knows that Tyrone “isn’t a great actor for nothing”—for he can say one beautiful thing though he intends to do another. The moment his bottom line resurfaces, it is about the importance of frugality: “the glare from those extra lights hurts my eyes,” “there’s no use making the Electric Company rich.”³² In that light, any communicative words that affect the relational context can only be refuted by the unspoken communicative exchanges. Tyrone’s love for Edmund is genuine, but Tyrone *cannot* control his addictive miserliness. Hence, love means that he will still send Edmund to a doctor like Hardy because he “only charges a dollar.” James Tyrone disgusts himself, but no degree of self-disgust can change his love of bargains. His excuse is simple: “[i]t is a late day for regrets.”³³

Galatean Femininity

Mary Tyrone represents another stout defender of the empty speech. In the play, Mary cannot talk to her family without using the girlish speech of the Other and she cannot appear in front of people without making a fuss about her hair. In other words, Mary represents the prototype of some women who cannot see themselves without first having their images mediated through the judgmental eye of the Other. If Tyrone’s problem originates from his desire to fill up the lacuna in the centre of being by having a Subject-identity, for Mary it is her relationality to people. It certainly dooms her project of becoming a nun—for a nun has to die to the worldly self constructed by and through the voices of the Other. Though alone in the house, Mary Tyrone is forever people-oriented for she always places/imagines

herself in the “object” position for others to admire. In the play, Mary’s love of being under the Other’s eye cannot be further away from the masculine notion of being a Subject. Mary says she loves playing piano, but the only thing she can remember is the nun’s opinion of her performance. What “Mother Elizabeth says” becomes an “acoustic mirror” (to use the words of Kaja Silverman) for Mary to construct her Being and mirror her fullness. The ultimate issue is—though it is inevitable that a person will be reduced to become a linguistic “object” in another person’s statement (the moment other people talk about “me,” the “I” enters into other’s conversation), O’Neill tells us that it is certainly unwise to put the Other in the Subject-position, thereby turning the self into a Galatean object (as in the myth of Pygmalion) who can only come into Being if the Other admires her. It can do no one any good if the self has to constantly seek unity through the eyes/language of the Other, or by asking questions such as “what do you think of me?” or “do you like my hair?”

Given the relational nature of this objectified self, we can understand why the hysteric always appears to us in the form of a question poser. Gérard Wajcman says the “hysteric’s enunciation is injunctive: ‘Tell me!’”³⁴ By letting the Other occupy the Subject-position, the self not only intensifies its docile dependence on the Other, but also heightens its discontent—for the self knows very well that the “me” in the Other’s eye (as a linguistic construct) can neither represent the “I,” nor portray the asymbolic facet of the self. As the libidinal body cannot be the body in the Other’s statement, the questions come back again and again—much to the annoyance of the Tyrones.³⁵ O’Neill’s representation of Mary certainly mirrors a woman’s ontological dilemma: a woman is constantly forced to learn a male-centred language that is not her own. At school, she is under the eyes of the nuns. In a patriarchal family, she has to let her father, brother, and husband occupy the Subject-position, while she herself valorises the voice of the Other for the affirmation of her being. If the master admires her, the little girl/wife—like Galatea in the Pygmalion story—will feel revived immediately. In this light, it is no wonder that Mary will fall for Tyrone at once—for he is exactly the eloquent master who can verbally construct her state of being, and give her a sense of fullness. He is handsome and vocal, so Mary is happy to let Tyrone speak, and let the stereotypical, coquettish, girlish speech speak for her. The opening scene gives a wonderful illustration of the function of the Galatean teasing speech: Mary lures Tyrone to inform her of her looks, to pay compliments to her, to become his object of desire, to let him become her master, and to playfully defy his master status/authority (what I am is not what you say), hereby giving her a pedestal status (as an object) and an imaginary defiance (as a subject).

Things soon turn sour for Mary. Tyrone—like most husbands—is the absent master in the domestic sphere. Mary is left alone in shabby hotels without knowledge of her status as no one bothers to put her in a body of statements. Meanwhile, Mary’s

body suffers much as James Tyrone knowingly puts her under the care of a “cheap old quack.” In *Long Day*, we can see how the double bind behavioural pattern keeps doubling itself: Mary learns from James Tyrone that his input is always contradictory (i.e., loving words will not lead to caring investment, or taking her for a night out). And Mary’s conflicting feelings towards her family owe much to her prolonged exposure to people who say one thing while they mean another.

James leans over and kisses her cheek impulsively—then turning back adds with a constrained air:

So keep up the good work, Mary.

MARY

Has turned her head away.

I will, dear.³⁶

It reenacts the classic situation: the wife says she loves her husband when she instinctively turns away from him—because his words of trust actually belie a deep distrust of her. Mary says Tyrone “has made [her] very happy” so she can “forgive so many other things,” then she accuses herself for being a “sentimental fool” because she “was much happier before [she] knew he existed.”³⁷ Mary senses that Edmund is dying, but she speaks with a “strange obstinate” expression that she knows he is only having “summer colds.” The gap between the enunciated content and the nonverbal message is further shown in Mary’s reaction to Jamie. Jamie tries to reach for his mother, but she draws away from him, as she does from Edmund and James. To understand why Mary *cannot* speak her mind, we have to turn not only to Mary’s relationality with the Other but also to the mechanics of a Galatean communication. On the one hand, words transmit information on the communicative level; on the other hand, the Galatean discourse decrees a self-regulated deference to the presence of the Other. The self has to heed the wish of her “creator” so that she can play out a role expected of her. It is in this sense that we can understand why she hates Tyrone and her wedding dress, and yet, she cannot let them go. In the play, Tyrone’s ways of conveying conflicting messages more or less simultaneously can only teach Mary to do her share of contradictory behaviour. The moment she hears her family is back, her face shows “defensive stubbornness” and resentment, but she bids them welcome with these words: “I am so happy you’ve come. . . . I’m all the more grateful to you for coming home. I was sitting here so lonely and blue.”³⁸ In short, she says what is expected from her in order to make her family love her and make her relational self happy. Her genuine feelings and voice are disavowed.

To forget this painful bond, Mary chooses the morphine discourse for it can give her a symptomatic enjoyment while the hallucination can treacherously restore and preclude relationality. Under the influence of the drug, Mary can keep thinking

about the Other while shutting out all interactions with the outside world. Her foggy speeches are like dreamy soliloquies as she further otherizes herself, refuses to hear words spoken by her family, but imaginatively hunts down the Other's view of her, and explains to those imaginary Pygmalions why she is as she is, and why she fails their expectations. At the end of the play, Edmund tells her that it is not a summer cold that he has, but consumption. Mary says "No" to stop further communication. Her words are devoted to the imaginary Other: "I play so badly now. I'm all out of practice, Sister Theresa will give me a dreadful scolding." "I'll practice every day from now on. But something horrible has happened to my hands. The fingers have gotten so stiff—"39 It is easy for readers to realize that the morphine narrative is a fully fledged false history in the hope of re-presenting herself as a lovely object to the judging eyes of the paternal Other, of winning their sympathy/admiration, of explaining away her present failures. In the play, the significance of Mary's "hands" and "wedding dress" can carry several functions: in reality, they are but mundane, functional objects. However, in Mary's imaginary discourse, they stand for two romantic dreams that now end in disappointment and self-pity (i.e., "You know that I could have been . . . but now I am . . ."). Talking to the imaginary Other, she invites the Other to side with her and hate the Tyrones as she visualizes showing her ugly, swollen knuckles to Sister Martha in the Infirmary. Talking to herself, these two objects contribute to her self-defeating stance ("I can't . . . for my fingers are useless now . . . Sister Theresa will blame me"). Here, the imaginary Other changes sides and is now against her. As a result, Mary hates herself. Eventually, her bipolar love-hate, for-against attitude towards her self and the Other leads her to a stubborn insistence on self-loss: she wants to become "absent-minded": "I am always dreaming and forgetting."⁴⁰

Mary's morphine language reinforces her love of a disfigured *jouissance*. She first takes up an "innocent" position, demands to be recognized as an effect of the nun's pedagogic discourse or Tyrone's romantic language; then she disavows this self-objectifying position, reveals that a religious vocation never fulfils her longing ("a waste of time"), Tyrone's patriarchal discourse cannot satisfy her (she was only happy "for a time").⁴¹ However, Tyrone is also responsible for her suffering and her disfigured fingers. Behind the masks of an innocent tone, it marks a victim's bitter accusation of her love and need of the Other, and of her lost opportunities. Eventually, morphine leads her to ask a typical hysteric's question: "What is it I'm looking for?" The dreamy soliloquy tricks the lonely wife into becoming the ideal reader of her (falsified) history, pushes others to fall in with her perspective instead of interpreting them (even though Mr. Tyrone painfully contradicts her version and says Mary is "never made to renounce the world" for she "was a bit of a rogue and a coquette"⁴²). However, this self-interpreting language can only heighten the disjunction between the subject and the object-position—for no answer can satisfy her. She is barred from feeling like a docile object and from being contented with

her sons' reassuring answers. She cannot find any joy in the self-subjectifying (false) explanation of her past and present. As Mary is so used to setting her face "in an expression of blank, stubborn denial,"⁴³ She finds pleasure in a life full of fog and self-disfigurement.

Post-Oedipal Envy

Castrated by Tyrone's (financial) Law, Jamie struggles to stage his ineffective "guerrilla warfare" against the paternal power.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Oedipal complex and sibling rivalry join forces to produce a self-destructive *parasite* who quarrels incessantly with his father, wastes away his life, and corrupts the well being of his brother. Jamie's position bespeaks the dilemma of an elder son: on the one hand, the elder son hates his father, but he cannot ignore the phallic signifier (Money) which forces him to become a Subject. On the other hand, even though the brothers join hands to fight the father, Jamie cannot forget his hatred of Edmund—for his parents favour the young one over himself. James M. Mellard has long pointed out how, in modern times, family conflicts can change from a father-son confrontation to a brother against brother situation.⁴⁵ As the sons can no longer afford to kill the rich father, rivalry breaks out among the brothers owing to their competing desire to become *the* Man and inherit the family property.

At first, the relationship between brothers is constructed along fraternal lines. However, Mellard notes that one of them will gradually rise to a quasi-paternal position to provide guidance and insight to the younger one. Finally, the new father-brother destroys or corrupts his peers by seeking a surplus *jouissance* for himself—while offering no cultural, financial protection to the young. In *Long Day*, James and Edmund's relationship mirrors how the brotherly conflict can be as bad as paternal oppression. Jamie represents the "brotherly" desire to establish an egalitarian "play-oriented" discourse to replace Mr. Tyrone's paternal doctrines. To a certain extent, the love of "play" is not unlike Lacan's idea of the "university discourse" for "play" is by nature carnivalesque: it cuts across class boundaries, subverts the authority of the father, allows the self to adopt the multiple roles of being a father-figure to the young, a truth-seeker to analyze his family's situations. Jamie can be a hedonist who throws his "salary away every week on whores and whiskey,"⁴⁶ he is also an enlightened man who challenges his father's decision of sending Edmund to another "cheap quack" like Hardy. Jamie can also be a bitter ironist: adores "Broadway" and the pinnacle of success means that he will "be the lover of the fat woman in Barnum and Bailey's circus."⁴⁷ Through abusive critique and truthful analysis, this playful discourse gives the self a new freedom to mingle noble and ignoble values, blend the Shakespearean high culture with lowbrow curses, repudiate the corruptive values of the father—while engaging with these selfish practices to corrupt the brother.

Jamie's "play" is in fact an equivocal game that refutes his father's influence while the play discourse is necessarily tied to the world of Money and to the master discourse ("the winner"). For all his liberating gestures, Jamie looks down on Edmund, considers him "still wet behind the ears."⁴⁸ Jamie hates his father, but he has to count on Mr. Tyrone for help in sorting out all his financial troubles. The playful discourse allows Jamie to pose himself as an imaginary Hero to Mamie Burns, a mentor to Edmund, a rebellious figure who knows how to heal himself with the comfort of wine and sex. This "self-fathering" role is so well disguised that, unless he is in need of money, Jamie can cynically worship himself, and leads Edmund to worship him. However, the father knows very well that the elder son is no hero for Jamie has not "the guts to go off on his own," Jamie always came "whining to [him] the minute he was broke."⁴⁹ In fact, the interdependent closeness between the father and son is witnessed by their abusive communication: a descriptive remark is immediately followed by a hostile remark, but it will always gravitate towards a resigned conversation. For example, Jamie hates his father for digging up the fact of his being expelled from every college he attended, Jamie ends in admitting that "he is a bum" to end the quarrel. Then they will go out and work together on the front hedge.

O'Neill tells us that, despite the liberal facet of "play," Jamie actually shares the paternal love of competition and dominance—yet he does it without the father's love of honour and labour. Michael Manheim notes that, at first, there was a healthy "brotherly camaraderie and competitiveness" for the young Tyrone's share "the time-honoured cynicism of educated youth."⁵⁰ However, Jamie's fear of non-dominance gets the better of him and his jealousy shows in the form of wanting his family's love all for himself. Hence he constantly represses his brother, wants him "to fail" and accuses Edmund of being "Mama's baby! Papa's pet!" His evil intention ("I did it on purpose")⁵¹ cannot be further away from the egalitarian assumption of "play." For whatever Jamie does, he moralizes his (decadent) behaviour with a cynical, equivocal guise so that whatever good things his father wills him to do, he does it not; and whatever bad things he wills himself to do, he moralizes it till he feels he has a good conscience. Tyrone tells Jamie to get a decent job, Jamie chooses to gamble his money away as a playful gesture of "resistance." And the moment Jamie hears that Edmund is now a decent writer, he feels threatened and says Edmund is only "a pretty bum reporter."⁵² The father-brother always disguises his malice with a defiant, nonchalant gesture; however, Jamie cannot hide it from the judgemental eye of Mr. Tyrone—though he has successfully attracted his brother's gaze. Jamie knows that Edmund looks up to him as a "hero," and he deliberately corrupts him with all his cynical mottos: "every man was a knave with his soul for sale, and every woman who wasn't a whore was a fool."⁵³ In turn, this playfulness becomes a game to hide his self-disgust, his will to dominance and envy. Jamie

actually will do his “damnedest to make [Edmund] fail,” to make Edmund “look even worse by comparison.”⁵⁴

The confession of Jamie is a touching scene, but it can only horrify us for the post-Oedipal tie can be more oppressive than the patriarch’s regime. In the words of Mellard, the post-Oedipal “regime reconstitutes the thanatic *jouissance* of the totemic father.” We can interpret this statement in the following way: if the ancient totemic father dominates every woman, suppresses all his enemies to guarantee the lifecycle/productivity of the society, “the new father-brother offers no advantages to children, cultural others or women—for example, it disavows or denies entirely female desire, if not female existence as the sister.”⁵⁵ What the father-brother aims at is an anti-social enjoyment that is on the side of murder or theft. Whoever he loves, he has to possess/kill it, with no thought of responsibility or social conscience. In the play, Jamie murders his career, says he feels like a “corpse” in the house. However, like a “dead man,” he has “to kill the thing he loved.” As a result, he is secretly happy that Mary and Edmund are heading for a fall—because a dead person “wants company.”⁵⁶ This envious, (self-)disgusting, symptomatic *jouissance* can only alert us to the dangers of the post-Oedipal subject. The subject simply endorses the ruthless way to arrogate all desire to himself—even though he loves those people that he is corrupting, and hates those objects that he desires. Instead of welcoming the father’s superego, the brother uses the “id” to form the basis of thanatic *jouissance*. Tyrone tortures everybody (including himself) to follow his true love (Money); however, for the sake of his id, the post-Oedipal subject has no fixed object of love or hatred. Jamie loves Edmund, but he will also “give [Edmund] the glad hand, and at the first good chance [he] will stab [Edmund] in the back.”⁵⁷

The Failure of Poetic Sublimation

In *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Edmund represents the ultimate hope of countering the fetishistic illusion. However, this hope has no future, as symbolized by Edmund’s having tuberculosis, and his journey to a cheap sanatorium. With a strong feeling of alienation and anxiety, Edmund represents the rise of a poetic subject who is capable of producing *his own* language to formulate a new identity. Unlike Jamie and Tyrone’s habitual quoting of words from Kipling, Swinburne or Shakespeare, Edmund invents his own speech to give voice to his feelings. In the words of Frederic Carpenter, “Edmund Tyrone, seemingly passive, develops steadily, although unobtrusively, during the play until at the end he achieves what O’Neill had prophesied for his autobiographical hero: “the birth of a soul.”⁵⁸ His independent lifestyle constitutes a radical break with the Tyrones’ way of saying one thing while meaning another, or their addictive blaming of each other for their present suffering. With the sun, the sand and the hot seaweed, Edmund puts aside the lethal *jouissance* of money, envy or drugs. He is portrayed to be the only character who can savor the world in the Real fullness: nature gives him an “ecstatic

freedom,” the “saint’s vision of beatitude.” However, while this full speech marks his authentic existence, Edmund’s voice is death-bent:

It was a great mistake, my being born as a man, I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death.⁵⁹

If Jamie’s joy lies in the destruction of the Other for the capture of the empty fetish (more money, more sex, intense competition), Edmund’s notion of enjoyment is far more destructive in the sense that it is truly anarchic. The fullness of being is closely linked to the thanatic *jouissance* of death. It marks a total disavowal of resistance, for the “flight” discourse foregrounds a pseudo-solution that is at best, anti-reality, and at worst, anti-life. With Edmund’s radical ‘stammering,’ he unveils the ennui of a life trapped between sense and non-sense, truth and foggy dishonesty. However, such poetic vision only pushes Edmund to further disavow or reinvent the painful life with the erasure of all boundaries between the surface and the latent meanings, truth and falsehood. Thus Edmund says,

I want to be alone with myself in another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself. . . . The fog and the sea seemed part of each other . . . As if I was a ghost belonging to the fog, and the fog was the ghost of the sea..⁶⁰

While these poetic signifiers allow a moment of pseudo-transcendence or liberation, this vision can only prompt readers to realize a diseased, self-mutilating *jouissance*—the self is to be a ghost in a fog, which in turn is the ghost of the sea. It welcomes a collapse of identity, a confusion of being in non-being, an infinite regress (regrets) in the great chain of life, an elation of death/loss in the cosmic union. Instead of fighting for life, Edmund identifies with his symptomatic illness and aestheticizes the beauty of flight and death (to be “in another world”). The lack of health and hope is turned around to become a celebratory event, an anticipation of fullness in ex-istence. This language is genuinely problematic for it aims not at validating critical confrontation but at affirming deformation as transformation—thereby uniting the fog with the joy of amnesia, dreams with “ecstatic freedom.” It is no wonder that Mr. Tyrone calls it “morbid filth.”⁶¹

O’Neill said he wrote *Long Day’s Journey* “with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for *all* the four haunted Tyrones.” However, pity and understanding do not lead to a Freudian sublimation or “fatal balance” (to use the words of Doris Falk⁶²). The ending of the play mirrors the tragic subjects’ simultaneous

recognition of their truth and the insistence on their lethal, symptomatic *jouissance*. No accusation can wake Mr. Tyrone up from his desperate miserliness, no acoustic mirror or reassuring words can rouse Mary to return to reality. Meanwhile, no honest confession from Jamie can ever change his self-corrupting game of envy, and no poetic discourse can push Edmund to restore his faith in life. The dying Edmund wills himself to “always be a little in love with death.”⁶³ With the Tyrones’ total commitment to the enjoyment of miserliness, dominance, drugs, wine, sex and morbid thoughts, O’Neill’s play shows how the modern subjects’ slime symptoms erupt in the form of a sublime downward spiral. The “faithful realism” of *Long Day* is not about “stammering” being the “native eloquence” of “fog people,”⁶⁴ but about the all too human choice—the decision of enjoying the night and coping with denials and symptoms instead of braving the dawn of *metanoia*.

Notes

1. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (New York: Verso, 1999) 292.
2. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody say Totalitarianism?* (New York: Verso, 2001) 22.
3. Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, “Othello’s Lost Handkerchief: When Psychoanalysis Finds Itself,” *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Willy Apollon (Albany: State U of New York P, 1996) 153.
4. David Pettigrew, “Lacan: The Poetic Unconscious,” *Disseminating Lacan*, ed. Pettigrew and François Raffoul (Albany: State U of New York P, 1996) 194.
5. Eugene O’Neill, *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955) 15.
6. Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 1973) 118.
7. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989) 28.
8. O’Neill, *Long Day’s Journey* 127.
9. Jacques-Alain Miller, “The Seminar of Barcelona on *Die Wege der Symptombildun*.” *The London Society of the New Lacanian School* (2003), accessed 25 April, 2005, <<http://www.londonsociety-nls.org.uk/>>.
10. O’Neill, *Mourning Become Electra, Nine Plays by Eugene O’Neill* (New York: Modern Library, 1959) 689.
11. 600.
12. O’Neill, *Hairy Ape, Nine Plays by Eugene O’Neill* 48.
13. 47.
14. 86.
15. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 99.
16. Marcelle Marini, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. Anne Tomiche (New York: Rutgers UP, 1993) 45.
17. 45.
18. O’Neill, *Long Day’s Journey* 151.

19. 148, emphasis added.
20. 84.
21. 54.
22. 148, 150.
23. Marini, *Jacques Lacan* 59.
24. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 39.
25. 17.
26. 126.
27. 149, 146.
28. 151.
29. See John Henry Raleigh, "O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* and New England Irish-Catholicism," *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Gassner (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964) 125-41.
30. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 17 and 28.
31. If Freud predicts that the unquestioning internalization of the Other's (fantasmal) law will produce a pathological subject, Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland claim that unresolved contradictions in the self can generate a *double bind* situation that leads to the onset of schizophrenia. They point out that such a subject will eventually reproduce a double bind behavioral pattern: the mother will tell her boy that she loves him while she turns away her head in disgust. "In this example, the mother conveys two messages to the son: one of love, conveyed verbally, and one of disgust, conveyed non-verbally." See Gregory Bateson, et al., "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia," *Behavioral Science* 1.4 (1956), reprinted in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972) 201-227.
32. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 151.
33. 150.
34. Gérard Wajcman, "The Hysteric Discourse," *The Symptom* 4 (Spring 2003), accessed 25 April 2005, <<http://www.lacan.com/hystericdiscf.htm>>.
35. In the words of Gérard Wajcman, the "hysteric starts out with her 'I am what you say,' and ends with her 'All of what I am you cannot say,' bringing about *objet petit a* // S2, the disjunction between knowledge and object."
36. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 17.
37. 105, 107.
38. 107, 108.
39. 171.
40. 171.
41. 176, 170.
42. 138.
43. 63.
44. Frederic Carpenter, *Eugene O'Neill*, rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne, 1979) 160.
45. James M. Mellard, "Lacan and New Lacanians, Josephine Hart's *Damage*, Lacanian Tragedy, and the Ethics of *Jouissance*" *PMLA* 113.3 (May 1998) 395-407.
46. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 31.
47. 160.

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48. 156.
49. 35.
50. Michael Manheim, "The Stature of *Long Day's Journey into Night*," *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Michael Manheim (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 213.
51. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 165.
52. 35-6.
53. 34.
54. 166, 165.
55. Mellard, "Lacan and New Lacanians" 396.
56. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 166.
57. 166.
58. Carpenter, *Eugene O'Neill* 60.
59. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 153-4.
60. 131.
61. 134.
62. Doris Falk, *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1958)
- 180.
63. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey* 154.
64. 154.

