

KATALIN G. KÁLLAY

A LONG ROW OF BOOKS “READ AND REREAD”:  
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BY HEART QUOTATIONS IN  
EUGENE O’NEILL’S *LONG DAY’S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT*

From the various possibilities of taking the problem of “texts and contexts” to heart, my choice fell upon the investigation of intertextuality in one of O’Neill’s most painful and most influential autobiographical plays, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*. More precisely, I would like to examine the literary context of the characters’ individual reading experiences within the text of the drama, with a special focus on the dialogues in which other texts are quoted by heart. The title of my paper reflects on the stage directions in Act One. Before the play actually begins, a long passage describes the scenery, including the contents of two separate bookcases which indicate a division in the family with respect to literary tastes:

“Against the wall between the doorways is a small bookcase, with a picture of Shakespeare above it, containing novels by Balzac, Zola, Stendhal, philosophical and sociological works by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, Max Sterner, plays by Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, poetry by Swinburne, Rosetti, Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Kipling, etc.” [...] “Farther back is a large, glassed-in bookcase with sets of Dumas, Victor Hugo, Charles Lever, three sets of Shakespeare, The World’s Best Literature in fifty large volumes, Hume’s History of England, Thiers’ History of the Consulate and Empire and miscellaneous volumes of old plays, poetry, and several histories of Ireland.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> All references to the text are based on the following edition: *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, volume 2, Fifth Edition. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998. pp. 1289–1367.

O'Neill adds the following remark: "The astonishing thing about these sets is that all the volumes have the look of having been read and reread".<sup>2</sup> For me, reading and rereading O'Neill's play, it has always been an astonishing thing about the long lists of books and the remark that they obviously cannot be acted out in a theater-performance, since not even the keenest-eyed spectator could decipher the authors and titles of books in a bookcase on stage, not to mention their look of "having been read and reread".

What, then, is the dramatic role of these volumes, and for what purpose is the owners' habit of rereading mentioned? Can the various literary, philosophical and historical works have a special "air" which contributes to the peculiar atmosphere of the room? And does such an unseen presence of conflicting and intermingling ideas and harmonizing or discordant tones and tunes of poetry provide life in this living room, with comfort or with unease? To what extent does the authenticity of an actual performance depend on the exact following of these stage directions? O'Neill, having been brought up as a man of the theater, must have been aware of all these questions, self-reflectively directing them at his own art, the same way he directs the painful questions of family bonds and tragic home-truths at his own life. .

In any case, the presence of books clearly indicates that the Tyrones, whose summer home opens up before the audience, are a family of letters. Similarly, can the crisis and singular tragedy opening up, journeying through the single day in August, 1912 till midnight be seen as a tragedy of letters? What is the dramatic role of literature (if any) in a family crisis? Perhaps, by offering analogous parallels of fate and critical situations, literature (both in the form of the presence of books read and reread and in the form of texts of various sources quoted at random in the actual dialogues) can turn the "singular" into "plural", providing the play with a timeless human context of pain and misery. But the plurality thus achieved does not only stress the shift from the personal to the universal: it also calls attention to the uniqueness of the individual tragedy in question, since this particular constellation of books exists only in this room, on these shelves.

At first sight, it seems that the difference between the two bookcases indicates a generation gap: as opposed to the realist, naturalist, anarchist and decadent authors read by the young Tyrones, we find conformity,

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 1290.

romantic fiction, idealist conservatism and its canonical representation in the volumes on the shelves of the father. The sons prefer philosophy, the father prefers history. However, neither of the bookcases are strictly canonical in the sense of following either an Irish or an American tradition—the lists create a miscellaneous sensation of erudition in European culture. The picture of Shakespeare is decisive: on the one hand, it is clearly recognizable even for the less keen-eyed spectators; on the other hand, it is placed above the young generation's bookcase, thus indicating that they, too owe something to their father's master. Shakespeare's role in this drama is highly controversial. Whereas the "three good sets" should, in James Tyrone's view, set an example of a standard of historical, ethical and aesthetic value to the children (if Jamie, 33 and Edmund, 23 can still be regarded as such), for Tyrone himself Shakespeare's name is an ever-painful reminder of what he might have been: the three sets triply emphasize the failure of his career as a Shakespeare actor, selling his talent for money. There is a scene in Act Four when he reflects upon this, but as Péter Egri observes in *The Birth of American Tragedy*,

"the ageing actor goes on complaining about the talent-ruining, soul-buying evil effect of greediness, but at the same time he gets heavily to his feet and, groping uncertainly for the lights, clicks out all the three bulbs of the chandelier one by one; 'there's no need to make the Electric Company rich', he says, repeating a habitual phrase and falling back to a customary attitude. The gradual putting out of the lights provides a conspicuous memorable picture of his niggardliness and seems to symbolize the continuous and irreversible extinction of his talent, indicating, and at the same time explaining, the process of his particular journey into night."<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, in Act Four, well under the influence of alcohol, he seems to agree stubbornly with Edmund's scornful suggestion saying that for him, Shakespeare was an Irish Catholic, and this gesture, though quite absurd, is one of self-identification, it acknowledges his intimate, almost family relationship with his favorite writer.

Here is a list of the Shakespeare plays which are referred to or from which excerpts are quoted throughout O'Neill's drama: *Othello* and *King Lear* in Act One; *King Lear* in Act Two; none in Act Three; *The Tempest*, *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, and *Hamlet*

---

<sup>3</sup> Egri, Péter. *The Birth of American Tragedy*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1988. p.160.

in Act Four. The titles show a preference for tragedy and the three sets as well as the repeated references might accentuate a tragic, irreversible destruction in this family. When, for example, Tyrone boastfully recalls the famous actor's, Edwin Booth's words of praise from the past "That young man is playing Othello better than I ever did!"<sup>4</sup>—the sentence does not only refer to past glory, it may also indicate Tyrone's tragic ability to bring ruin to the ones he loves most. Or when Edmund defensively reminds his father how well versed in Shakespeare he himself had been, bringing up the case when he earned five dollars from Tyrone by learning Macbeth's part "and recited it letter perfect", Tyrone answers approvingly "That's true. So you did." Then "[*He smiles teasingly and sighs.*] It was a terrible ordeal, I remember, hearing you murder the lines"<sup>5</sup>. "Murdering the lines", of course, refers to Edmund's mechanical way of recital, however, there is a tragic undertone in this phrase stressing the murderous nature of the text which in turn might bring out murderous inclinations in the reader. So, although in his career Tyrone had left Shakespeare for the better paying popular dramas (e.g. *The Bells*, or, strictly following autobiographical references, the title role of *Count Monte Christo*), his private life seems to be haunted by the invisible presence of Shakespearean tragedy. It remains a question whether such a presence is inevitably harmful or it may be helpful in any way in the middle of a family crisis, on the day when it turns out that Edmund has consumption (thought to be a lethal disease by the family) and Mary, the dearly loving wife and mother relapses to her drug addiction. Isn't the tragic Shakespearean undertone, so emphasized, more dangerous and destructive than the decadent, melancholic poetry with which Jamie and Edmund identify themselves? James Tyrone would religiously insist that in Shakespeare "You'll find what you are trying to say [...] as you'll find everything else worth saying."<sup>6</sup> And as an answer to Edmund's Baudelaire-quotation, he adds: "Pah! It's morbid nonsense! What little truth is in it you'll find nobly said in Shakespeare."<sup>7</sup> For Tyrone, the Shakespeare-echoes bring quality and dignity to the atmosphere of petty

---

<sup>4</sup> *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, p. 1354.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1347.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1344.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1345.

quarrels and insoluble problems. His love for Shakespeare is like his love for each member of his family, “in spite of everything”<sup>8</sup>.

Still, it is worth examining what exactly is quoted “nobly” from these dramas in the conversations. Before doing so, it must be noted that taking any text out of context and bringing it into everyday dialogue inevitably has a humorous effect. The source of the comic is the presupposition that every participant of the conversation is familiar with the original text and applies it to the situation. This type of humour may be “inclusive”, self-ironical, creating a bond between the participants or “exclusive”, directed at one of the members of the company, hurting that person’s feelings. In O’Neill’s drama we find humor at work in both ways, for example when in Act One, referring to Tyrone’s snoring, Jamie quotes from *Othello*: “The Moor, I know his trumpet”.<sup>9</sup> In Tyrone’s answer both the release and the tightening of the tension can be felt: “If it takes my snoring to make you remember Shakespeare instead of the dope sheet on the ponies, I hope I’ll keep on with it.” Mary intervenes with the remark: “Now, James, you mustn’t be so touchy”, but she herself might also have been sensitive to Tyrone’s sentence, since this is the first time in the drama when the later so significant word “dope” is uttered, although in a completely different context.

Interestingly enough, the Shakespeare-quotations throughout *Long Day’s Journey* are not taken from the most famous, dramatically decisive parts of the plays, they seem to be accidentally picked to become aphoristic, well-known phrases in the family conversations. Still in Act One, according to the stage directions, Tyrone stares at Jamie, then “quotes mechanically” from *King Lear*: “Ingratitude, the vilest weed that grows”<sup>10</sup>. These excerpts seem to have become proverb-like but communicatively empty wise sayings which are habitually repeated without any particular evocation of the spirit of tragedy. In Act Two, Tyrone addresses Edmund with a similar quotation, also from *King Lear*, which Edmund finishes, indicating that he has heard it innumerable times: T.: “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is...” E.: “to have a thankless child”.<sup>11</sup> This quotation is almost automatic – especially because in this scene Edmund is far from being ungrateful, he is simply too surprised by

---

<sup>8</sup> Mary says these words twice in a conversation in Act Three, *Ibid.*, p. 1336.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1295.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1300.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1325.

his father's generous gift (the ten-dollar bill) to say "thank you". However, this reflex-like recital of Shakespeare might again show a more intimate relationship with the text and with each other: the lines may work as secret family passwords, strengthening the bond between the speakers.

The rest of the Shakespeare-excerpts also seem to be quite trivial but, in Act Four, it can be observed that there is a tendency in them to become more and more relevant and connected to the fate of the Tyrones as the hours pass. James Tyrone's quotation from *The Tempest* is immediately subverted by Edmund—perhaps because the words reflect upon a dangerous distraction from reality, too painfully applicable to the situation. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep."<sup>12</sup> But Edmund's ironical reply, "We are such stuff as manure is made on, so let's drink up and forget it", is not only subversive, it also stresses the necessity of distraction. A long debate follows over Edmund's taste in literature, during which Tyrone desperately cries out:

"Where you get your taste in authors—that damned library of yours! [*He indicates the small bookcase at rear*] Voltaire, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Ibsen! Atheists, fools and madmen! And your poets! This Dowson and this Baudelaire, and Swinburne, and Oscar Wilde, and Whitman and Poe! Whoremongers and degenerates! Pah! When I have three good sets of Shakespeare there [*he nods at the large bookcase*] you could read."<sup>13</sup>

After the literary debate, followed by mutual accusations, it is again a Shakespeare line that reconciles father and son, now from *As You Like It*: "E.: I didn't mean it, Papa. [*He suddenly smiles, kidding a bit drunkenly*] I'm like Mama, I can't help liking you, in spite of everything. T.: [*grins a bit drunkenly in return*] I might say the same of you. You're no great shakes as a son. It's a case of 'A poor thing but mine own.' [*They both chuckle with real, if alcoholic, affection. ...*]<sup>14</sup> I can't help remembering Prospero's somewhat weightier but similar words about Caliban from *The Tempest*, "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." However, at this point in O'Neill's drama, the real darkness is not yet acknowledged. What is faced in the next Shakespeare-quotation, from *Julius Caesar*, during the

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 1344.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 1346.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 1350., cf. *As You Like It*, V.4. 57–61

same conversation, is Tyrone's inferiority and weakness: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings."<sup>15</sup>

Jamie is the next person to quote from *Othello* to Edmund, in his drunken travesty of the Last Judgement: "Slip a piece of change to the Judge and be saved, but if you're broke, you can go to hell! [*He grins at this blasphemy and Edmund has to laugh. Jamie goes on.*] 'Therefore put money in thy purse.' That's the only dope. [*mockingly*] The secret of my success! Look what it's got me!"<sup>16</sup> The seriousness in the sarcastic tone recalling a dialogue between Iago and Roderigo might not come directly from Shakespeare's text, but again from the word "dope" (now in the sense of 'advance information for prediction'). It is questionable whether the word "that" in "That's the only dope" refers to money or to Shakespeare (or literature in general). If "dope" can in any way be connected to literature, it will be worth examining the possible correspondances in the role of whiskey, drugs, the symbolic fog and readings throughout the play.

Before asking the question to what extent literature might be regarded as a special narcotic, I would like to pay attention to the two remaining references to Shakespeare, both made by Jamie. When he recovers from his drunken knock-out, Jamie "*suddenly points a finger at*" Tyrone and "*recites with dramatic emphasis*" from *Richard III.*: "Clarence is come, false, fleeting, perjured Clarence, / That stabbed me in the field by Tewksbury. / Seize on him, Furies, take him into torment."<sup>17</sup> And he immediately lapses into the role of the Furies he had conjured up, tormenting his father with a quotation from Rossetti, thus reconciling the contents of the two bookcases: "Look in my face. My name is Might-Have-Been; / I am also called No More, Too Late, Farewell." Tyrone's answer, "I am well aware of that, and God knows I don't want to look at it."<sup>18</sup>, clearly shows that he is stung both by Shakespeare and by Rossetti speaking through Jamie, and that these quotations are no longer mechanically repeated aphorisms or secret family passwords: they carry home-truths, so painful that some kind of anaesthetic would be in need to bear them. Instead of his usual whisky, Tyrone now turns to the

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 1354.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 1361.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 1363.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 1363.

possibility of sleep: “I think I’ll catch a few winks”<sup>19</sup>, but in this final scene of the drama it is impossible to hide from home truths: the torments have to continue, first in the form of Mary coming down from the spare room, carrying her wedding dress, playing the piano in the parlor, and entering the living room, then in the form of Jamie, sardonically and disrespectfully referring to *Hamlet*: “The Mad Scene. Enter Ophelia!”<sup>20</sup> And from now on, like the slap across the mouth which Jamie gets from Edmund, flashes of alternating passions of anger, love and sorrow will create constant tension, constant high voltage till the end of the play. In the present paper, I intend to return to this last scene, from the point of view of the role of the Swinburne poem Jamie recites while his mother desperately and distractedly keeps searching for something missing, but before that, a couple of disturbing questions need to be discussed.

The first of these questions has already been mentioned: whether literature can fit in the line of the various distracting and pain-killing narcotics that have a decisive role in the drama, from the concrete drug (morphine) taken by Mary, through the almost equally harmful whisky drunk by Tyrone and the boys, to the more abstract and symbolic fog surrounding the house, all of which separate the family members from each other, embracing them at the same time with a sensation of protection. Literature, to some extent, is one of these: reading can take the reader out of the everyday context, it can also evoke the past and provide one with a virtual world—and even if the works read are tragic or shocking, the consciousness of the virtuality keeps the reader safe from harm. The embarrassing or disturbing moment only comes when the correspondances between the virtual world and the everyday context become all too evident to deny, when the text surprises the reader with a sudden home truth. This can happen when books are not only read, but reread, when texts become, so to say, “intimate friends”, when parts of them are even known by heart, when they gain a new life and a new meaning by being quoted in different situations. In O’Neill’s play, in fact, nobody is *reading* on stage: what is displayed is only the magic presence of the volumes and the equally magic new life of well-known texts, kept exclusively in the protagonists’ mortal memories, and quoted, mechanically or on purpose, for the sake of staying alive. When in Act Four, Edmund recites Baudelaire’s prose poem, for example, the text carries

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 1364.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 1364.

both the encouragement to turn away from everyday problems (in its content) and the commandment to turn towards a conflict between himself and his father (in the actual conversational situation).

“Be always drunken. Nothing else matters: that is the only question. If you would not feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and crushing you to the earth, be drunken continually. Drunken with what? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you will. But be drunken.”<sup>21</sup>

Baudelaire’s advice, ironically, is followed by all the three male Tyrones: they certainly are drunken, especially through Act Four. But doesn’t Baudelaire’s text in itself refer to something more than to the mere distraction from everyday life? Doesn’t it offer a new way of perception, in which drunkenness not only dulls but also sharpens one’s sensitivity to existential questions? It is in this sense that poetry fits in line with wine. As the phrase “a touch of the poet” (itself the title of another play by O’Neill) might refer to a drink. The Tyrones “drink hearty”, and when they recite, they also “quote hearty”, i.e. *by heart*, at the risk of the throbbing, delicate balance of their vulnerable hearts. Unlike James Tyrone who says “I wouldn’t worry about the virtue part of it, if I were you”<sup>22</sup>, I also intend to search in this paper for a possible ethical dimension in the gesture of keeping such an intensive and intimate relationship with literature.

But before examining possible manifestations of virtue, let me put my second disturbing question: to what extent does it alter the status of the quoted texts that two of the protagonists (Tyrone and Jamie) are actors by profession, and Edmund, too can be regarded as a talented amateur? When memorizing and quoting texts is part of one’s job, who can tell to what extent the words recited by heart are taken to heart? What if all the quoted texts are parts of some show, what if the Tyrones are actually engaged in a never-ending rehearsal for some great performance? This suggestion is not so much justified in the actual quotations as in the repeated stories told from the family’s past. When, for example Edmund is touched by his father’s story of his miserable childhood, Jamie cynically asks: “He’s been putting on the old sob act for you, eh? He can always kid you. But not me. Never again.”<sup>23</sup> If the confessions

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 1345.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 1345.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 1357.

themselves are not more than texts recited, life and literature become hopelessly—or, in an aesthetic sense, blissfully—entangled. It would be so reassuring to suppose that such an experience of aesthetic delight might make life more livable. If a hope like this exists, then the “grand performance” they keep rehearsing would be the artistic staging of something very simple, i.e. ordinary, everyday life in a habitable home, which Mary so much longs for. However, it is precisely this artistic simplicity which is unattainable for the Tyrones.

Now, that Mary’s name has been mentioned, I must put my third disturbing question: how come, that Mary never quotes from any of the works mentioned, although she is obviously familiar with them, since she understands the humor in the allusions? How come, that in Act Three, dominated by Mary, there is a complete lack of recitals? Of course, if recitals are not taken so strictly, she, too, keeps repeating stories from the past, what’s more, she even starts “quoting” a very well-known text: “Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with Thee; blessed art Thou among women.” She gets so far, but then, abruptly, self-critically and “*sneeringly*” adds: “You expect the Blessed Virgin to be fooled by a lying dope fiend reciting words! You can’t hide from her!”<sup>24</sup> What is the status of this special quotation? In what way is the prayer different from Tyrone’s Shakespeare or Jamie’s and Edmund’s Rosetti and Baudelaire? First of all, Mary recites alone, without the purpose of human communication. She either wants to establish a contact with her lost “real” self (the coincidence of names might even allow that she in fact addresses her ideal self, the happy “Mary” she had once been or might have been, with whom the Lord is), or she wants to get through to the eternal ideal, trying to find her way back to both childish and motherly innocence. Her self-critical sensitivity does not allow her to finish the whole prayer, she thinks reciting words is a way of hiding, she does not seem to believe in the magic power of “quoting hearty”. Or can her case prove that she believes in this power with even more vehemence than the men of the family? Can she be the one who truly, “religiously” takes the words to heart and simply cannot bear any false or mechanical undertones? It is she from “all the four haunted Tyrones”<sup>25</sup> who submerges the most deeply in

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 1333.

<sup>25</sup> “O’Neill claims in his dedication of the play to Carlotta Monterey that he wrote it ‘with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for all the four haunted Tyrones’.”

narcotic, so both the above discussed conflicting consequences of distraction and sharpened sensitivity are at work in her case with the highest intensity. If her recited words can in any way be taken as parts of a rehearsal, then surely hers is the grandest performance, the most authentic and artistic role-play in the closing scene of the drama.

Let me now return to the painful final situation with Mary looking for something and Jamie reciting from Swinburne's "A Leave-taking". The poem here is far from being background music to the action, it is part of a careful choreography. Each stanza comes right after a futile attempt at getting through to Mary on the part of Tyrone, Jamie and Edmund, respectively, each stanza heartbrakingly emphasizes Mary's indifference, while she almost ritually passes behind the chairs of each man in the family. I would like to quote this complicated and absurd dance and music in full length.

MARY: [...] What is it I'm looking for? I know it's something I lost.  
[*She moves back from TYRONE, aware of him now only as some obstacle in her path.*]

TYRONE: [*in hopeless appeal*] Mary!

[*But it cannot penetrate her preoccupation. She doesn't seem to hear him. He gives up helplessly, shrinking into himself, even his defensive drunkenness taken from him, leaving him sick and sober. He sinks back on his chair, holding the wedding gown in his arms with an unconscious clumsy, protective gentleness.*]

JAMIE: [*drops his hand from his face, his eyes on the table top. He has suddenly sobered up, too—dully*] It's no good, Papa. [*He recites from Swinburne's "A Leave-taking" and does it well, simply but with a bitter sadness.*]

"Let us rise up and part; she will not know.

Let us go seaward as the great winds go,

Full of blown sand and foam; what help is here?

There's no help, for all these things are so,

And all the world is bitter as a tear.

And how these things are, though ye strove to show,

She would not know."

MARY: [*looking around her*] Something I miss terribly. It can't be altogether lost. [*She starts to move around in back of JAMIE's chair.*]

JAMIE: [*turns to look up into her face—and cannot help appealing pleadingly in his turn*] Mama! [*She does not seem to hear. He looks away hopelessly.*]

---

Quoted by Péter Egri, in: *The Birth of American Tragedy*. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1988. p. 161.

Hell! What's the use? It's no good. [*He recites from "A Leave-taking" again with increased bitterness.*]

"Let us go hence, my songs; she will not hear.

Let us go hence together without fear;

Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,

And over all old things and all things dear.

She loves not you nor me as all we love her.

Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,

She would not hear."

MARY: [*looking around her*] Something I need terribly. I remember when I had it I was never lonely nor afraid. I can't have lost it forever, I would die if I thought that. Because then there would be no hope. [*She moves like a sleepwalker, around the back of JAMIE's chair, then forward toward left front, passing behind EDMUND.*]

EDMUND: [*turns impulsively and grabs her arm. As he pleads he has the quality of a bewilderedly hurt little boy.*] Mama! It isn't a summer cold! I've got consumption!

MARY: [*For a second he seems to have broken through to her. She trembles and her expression becomes terrified. She calls distractedly, as if giving a command to herself.*] No! [*And instantly she is far away again. She murmurs gently but impersonally*] You must not try to touch me. You must not try to hold me. It isn't right, when I am hoping to be a nun. [*He lets his hand drop from her arm. She moves left to the front end of the sofa beneath the windows and sits down, facing front, her hands folded in her lap, in a demure school-girlish pose.*]

JAMIE: [*gives Edmund a strange look of mingled pity and jealous gloating*] You damned fool. It's no good. [*He recites again from the Swinburne poem.*]

"Let us go hence, go hence; she will not see.

Sing all once more together; surely she,

She too, remembering days and words that were,

Will turn a little toward us, sighing; but we,

We are hence, we are gone, as though we had not been there.

Nay, and though all men seeing had pity on me,

She would not see."

TYRONE: [*trying to shake off his hopeless stupor*] Oh, we're fools to pay any attention. It's the damned poison. But I've never known her to drown herself in it as deep as this. [*gruffly*] Pass me that bottle, Jamie. And stop reciting that damned morbid poetry. I won't have it in my house!

Throughout the scene, Jamie, the most cynical, but also the most sensitive member of the family recites bitterly and self-defensively. At the same time, he exposes himself the most to the painful experience of literature corresponding to reality. Mary's ghost-like figure circulating around the three men, acting out her own absence, calls attention to the

intensity of the need of a good mother. And it may be noted that the difference between the appearance of an ideal mother and the actual Mary is frightfully slight: perhaps I do not go too far by suggesting that the most caring mother one could imagine is similarly circulating around the beloved members of her family, herself like air, a presence unseen, unnoticed but essential for life. The slight difference, however, is essential and depends on the mode of perception. It is not all the same whether one experiences a visible absence or an invisible presence. But what is the sensory organ that would perceive such a difference? In Swinburne's poem, the words "know", "hear" and "see" are stressed, corresponding to the brain, the ear and the eye, respectively. These organs are no longer quite reliable for the four tired and tortured Tyrone's. Perhaps, quoting by heart enables Jamie to set his heart into motion, and in the indifferent, miserable figure recognize a throbbing similar to that of the ideal as well as to that of his own, Tyrone's and Edmund's. It is also significant that although Swinburne's poem is entitled "A Leave-taking", all the three men remain seated, arranged like an audience for Mary's upcoming "grand performance". Maybe it is not only "hopeless stupor" but also the above mentioned throbbing that keeps them there. To me, it seems that the ethical dimension (if there is any) of the habit of quoting and rereading texts (as well as each other) lies in this gesture: instead of springing up, slamming the door and fleeing aghast from this intolerable scene, each in their own isolation, they remain together. Tyrone tells Jamie to stop quoting. Is it because he thinks it is a bad text and a futile gesture, or because he thinks it is all too unbearably relevant? Does the sentence "I will not have it in my house" refer only to the "morbid" kind or to any poetry? Supposing that he and the two boys still believe in the power of poetry, is it possible that in Mary's closing monologue, in spite of the absurdity, "in spite of everything", they are able to find some professional and aesthetic delight, highly appreciating the masterful performance of a quality actress? And if so, can this play be regarded as a tragedy of letters?

Mary, "facing front" throughout her monologue turns her back on both bookcases if the stage directions are strictly followed. The text she says, however, in which three mother-figures are mentioned (her own mother, Mother Elizabeth and the Blessed Virgin), is high quality literature. What does this tell about the dramatic role of literature in a family crisis? Perhaps that books read and even reread do not have the power to solve insoluble problems, to prevent the family from disintegration, to make

everyday life livable. At the same time, these texts may create a triple bond which does not disintegrate: a bond of belonging to each other, a bond of familiar intimacy with texts and a bond to a special notion of value. The whole text of O'Neill's play testifies to this value.

Is it possible to imagine a family (not necessarily of actors, but of letters) in which sentences like "There's no use making the Electric Company rich"<sup>26</sup> or phrases like "books read and reread" are quoted almost mechanically as secret family passwords, or may even carry the surprise of sudden home-truths, "in spite of everything?" This, I think, is the challenge of the significance of by-heart quotations.

---

<sup>26</sup> *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, p. 1354.