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FATALISM IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S "LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT"

O'Neill's life-long preoccupation with the idea of Fate and his consequent serious attempt at recreating the ancient tragedy have been acknowledged by nearly all his biographers and critics. In this respect, "Long Day's Journey", one of the dramatist's late works, appears most closely to approach the type of drama exemplified, for instance, by "Oedipus Rex". Tom F. Driver points out that the treatment of time as a structural device to bring out the underlying philosophy of fatalism bears in both plays a striking resemblance. The classical unity of time is preserved as the visible action moves through some fourteen or fifteen hours of the day. It is combined with the movement backward proceeding by recollections, so that the past is "contained", as it were, in the present, which goes forward only to a dead end with the result that there is no future¹. All the significant events have already occurred before the action starts. As it progresses, we watch the protagonists' unconscious efforts to overcome the existent disaster until they find out that they have been trapped in a hopeless predicament precipitated by the fatal influence of the past upon the present. Only then do they realize, to use Driver's words, that they have arrived at "the terminal point of action previously taken"². They cannot go further nor can they cherish any hope. What follows afterwards is suffering.

The factor of Fate is thus inherent in the structure of the play in so far as it illustrates the utter dependence of one sphere of temporality upon the other. Now I wish to consider this

¹ T. F. Driver, On the Late Plays of Eugene O'Neill, [in:] O'Neill - A Collection of Critical Essays, New York 1964, Twentieth Century Views, pp. 112-113.

² Ibid., p. 113.

problem more closely, analysing "Long Day's Journey" with special regard to the dramatic tension and dramatic irony.

When the first act begins, we see a family of parents and two grown-up sons after having just finished breakfast. Carefully dressed, "a trifle plump"³, serene and lively, Mary Tyrone, who some time before returned from a sanatorium where she stayed to cure herself from dope-addiction, appears to have entirely recovered, which makes her husband and sons discernibly happy. The following conversation is carried on in a carefree and joking tone, interrupted every now and then by the bursts of giggling and laughter as Edmund proceeds with his humorous story about Shaughnessy. James Tyrone, lavishing affection on his wife throughout the whole scene, best expresses the prevailing mood when he says in a voice trembling a little: "She's been so well in the two months since she came home. It's been heaven to me. This home has been a home again" (p. 31). The men are invested with a new hope. They wish to believe that the painfully twisted line of their family life has been at last happily straightened out. And each of them, now that security is restored, sees a chance of rebirth for himself. It is as if Mary, up to now a drug-fated human wreck, provided an example that a sheer power of will may break the spell of bad luck and spiritual degeneration afflicting them for a long time. "I'd begun to hope, if she'd beaten the game, I could, too" (p. 117) will remark Jamie later on, in Act IV.

The only cloud overshadowing the unruffled sky of the family bliss is Edmund's long-continued sickness which might be, everybody fears, a symptom of tuberculosis. The worst affected by it is the mother, the most sensitive and apprehensive member of the family. There is a danger, looming in the background, that she may prove unable to face up this formidable difficulty and eventually seek help in resorting again to her old way of pain-killing. The suspicion lurks with the sons' recalling with the habitual association in mind her having left their father last night and moved into the spare room. Conscious of it, Mary defends herself with vehemence and bitterness under which their aroused anxiety subsides for the time being. The tension, however, grows with her

³ E. O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, [in:] *Three American Plays*, Moscow, p. 14. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

subsequent withdrawal upstairs at the end of Act I and reaches its climax when at dinner time, in Act II, she returns to the living room, her appearance showing unmistakably the influence of morphine. One by one, the sons and the father's illusions are being shattered. Each, in turn, suddenly looks "hopeless" (p. 48) and "tired" (p. 50). The new chance that has been dawning so promisingly, vanishes. The old long-lived despair gradually sets in, out of which emerges the acute awareness of the inescapability of Fate.

Throughout the first and second act the three Tyrone, clinging heartily to their hope of Mary's recovery, struggle with themselves and each other to dismiss the hovering ghost of the family curse. Therefore the action, taking place on the psychological plane, is felt to be extremely dramatic. After it becomes clear that they have been deceived, the atmosphere abruptly changes - gloom and resignation, particularly pronounced after the disruption of illusion, mark a tangible downfall of tension. Jamie reflects bitterly: "The cures are no damned good except for a while. The truth is there is no cure and we've been saps to hope - (Cynically) They never come back!" (p. 56). And the father "dully resigned" (p. 57) follows: "We've lived with this before and now we must again. There's no help for it ... Only I wish she hadn't led me to hope this time. By God, I never will again" (p. 57). The son and the father thus come to a recognition that Fate, so much more powerful in comparison with man's feeble will, "has claimed with finality its inevitable prey"⁴.

The change of tension resulting from the discrepancy between the men's former expectation and their ensuing disenchantment gives rise to the manifestation of dramatic irony. When Mary reappears in Act II, we notice a change in the expression of her face and behaviour. Our suspicion turns into certainty as we watch Jamie's instant reaction, for the elder brother, most tortured by doubts in the previous act, is the first to realize what is going on. Edmund's and Tyrone's discovery is, however, postponed until a long while later. Their ignorance contrasted with the audience's knowledge evokes an intensely ironic effect.

⁴ D.V. Falk, Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension, New Brunswick-New Jersey 1958, p. 136.

The above analysis reveals how O'Neill introduces and develops the theme of fatalism in drama by a skillful manipulation with the elements of tension and dramatic irony. It is carried on by the subsequent rearrangement in the play's temporal structure, the stress being shifted from the present to the parallel backward movement of action. The scenes from the beginning of Act III onward dramatize the psychological plight of the Fate-stricken people conscious that "nothing can be done". They indulge in the memories from the past into which they escape from the hell of reality; in which they, too, seek explanation of the present desperate state of being, and relieve themselves from seething frustrations and hatreds. As one confession follows another along with the atmosphere growing more and more funereal, the nature of Fate pursuing the protagonists is being gradually unravelled.

It is, as in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, again 'fate springing out of the family'⁵ and not limited to one generation. Each Tyrone appears to be largely a victim of the destructive family relationships. Mary, susceptible to neurosis owing to her extreme sensitivity, could have succeeded in liberating herself from drug-addiction if only there had been no serious danger to cope with. Unfortunately, at the initial phase of her convalescence she learns that her beloved son confronts a possible death. Her terror increases as she sees in it a sign of hereditary consumption, which brought to an end the life of her father. Moreover, a realisation that she should not have brought him into the world after her second baby had died due to her neglect, adds to her suffering. "I knew from experience by then", she reminisces, "that children should have homes to be born in, if they are to be good children, and women need homes, if they are to be good mothers. I was afraid all the time I carried Edmund. I knew something terrible would happen. I knew I'd proved by the way I'd left Eugene that I wasn't worthy to have another baby, and that God would punish me if I did" (p. 64). The concluding part of her utterance implies that she feels responsible for her son's present illness which she takes to be God's punishment for having then disregarded His warning. Edmund's birth, in turn, remains in direct connection with the beginning of her drugtaking. But since it was also the

⁵ Ibid., p. 129.

result of James Tyrone's fateful penuriousness, we have to come now to the tantalising history of Mary's marriage.

Her decision made in the distant past to marry an actor by profession and a miser by nature set once and for all the course of her life in the years to come. The need of constant travelling while accompanying her husband "on the road" - "with week after week of one-night stands, in trains without Pullmans, in dirty rooms of filthy hotels, eating bad food, bearing children in hotel rooms" (p. 63) - excluded the chance for a stable home which Mary had enjoyed as a girl and which she has always so desperately wanted. Alienated in the new theatrical environment, unable to provide a sufficient care for her children, she went through an agonised experience, her will-to-live sustained on the bare loving attachment to her husband. But when the type of living resulting from Tyrone's particular occupation denied her what every woman expects to be given in marriage, his pathological penuriousness brought about a genuine tragedy. When she was in pain after Edmund had been born, he called a cheap doctor who took the easiest way of cure starting her on dope from which, it turned out later, there was no return.

Tracing back the series of causes that have brought about Mary's peculiar fate, we can define it as a combination of her initial wrong choice to select an actor for a husband and the following involvement in the affairs foreign to her nature and felt as deprivation extended almost to criminal proportions by Tyrone's native avarice. O'Neill's understanding of Fate in this case does not seem to coincide with the ancient conception of Nemesis preordaining every step that man takes. Perhaps it bears greater resemblance to the karma law according to which man cannot get away with anything⁶. On the other hand, as in earlier O'Neill's plays, the mother's tragedy may be that of betraying a vocation. As we learn from her confession, she swore allegiance to the Virgin Mary in her old convent days, which she then failed to observe becoming Tyrone's wife. Such an interpretation implica-

⁶ S. Winter in his article "The Iceman Cometh: A Study in Technique", [in:] *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Iceman Comes*, New York 1968, p. 77, claims that O'Neill was for many years steeped in the philosophy of the religions of the East.

tes a transcendent character of Fate equated with severe Divinity of the Old Testament. However, the maid's raising doubts when listening to those reminiscences if Mary was cut out for a nun puts this interpretation in question.

James Tyrone offers another example of fate springing out of the past; it is, however, of a different kind. His case reflects the typical 19th century naturalistic concept of the inevitable influence of biological and environmental forces shaping the course of individual existence. Born in poverty amidst the ignorant Irish peasants, he underwent precarious vicissitudes from the start of his life. Compelled to begin work at the age of ten, he learned the value of a dollar sweating twelve hours a day in a machine shop where he earned fifty cents a week. Hunger, cold and squalor made up his everyday experience. Out of that he has developed the poorhouse obsession the fear of which urges him to buy irrelevant land and property at the family's disadvantage. The same complex thwarted his prospects to become a renowned Shakespearean actor as he fell victim to the temptation of an easy profit by engaging himself in an unambitious cheap melodrama, which has brought about the atrophy of his talent. His avarice again was the cause of his wife's drug-addiction and at present makes him economise on Edmund's treatment.

The father appears virtually to function as Fate's agent, having precipitated a big share of the family misfortunes and worked out his own decline through the betrayal of his histrionic vocation. Ironically though, he expresses his point of view quoting from Shakespeare: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves that we are underlings" (p. 109). Tyrone seems to believe that there was a chance for him to transcend the psychological limitations of his ancestral heritage and childhood trauma in following the impulse of his calling. But he proved unequal to the task. This kind of awareness accounts for the father's putting the blame rather on himself than on any outer forces.

Both Tyrone brothers are persecuted by the same family curse of unstable mode of living, hereditary diseases and perpetual exposition to the father's alcoholism and the mother's dope-addiction. Jamie, at one time a promising young man, did not take life

seriously wasting his talents in liquor and dissipation. Now we see him as a cynical, good-for-nothing "loafer". Mary believes that he would have been different if "he'd been brought up in a real home" (p. 60). Then addressing her husband with accusing hostility, she announces:

"You brought him up to be a boozier. Since he first opened his eyes, he's seen you drinking. Always a bottle on the bureau in the cheap hotel rooms! And if he had a nightmare when he was little, or a stomach-ache, your remedy was to give him a teaspoonful of whiskey to quiet him". (p. 80)

The momentary hope of the mother's victory over morphine provided a chance for Jamie's own spiritual regeneration but vanished along with the frustrated illusion. The environment again, in particular the parents' bad example, and the essential weakness of character have thus preordained his pitiable fall.

The younger brother, taking after his mother, oblivious of his fragile constitution and the danger of hereditary tuberculosis, followed his adventurous spirit going to sea where he suffered from hardships and mental breakdown which have undermined his health and released the latent illness.

James Tyrone provides his own explanation of his sons' present impasse. In Act II he storms indignantly: "You've both flouted the faith you were born and brought up in - the one true faith of the Catholic Church - and your denial has brought nothing but self-destruction" (p. 57). The Fate-problem seems to be given here a naive turn as the orthodoxically-minded father identifies it with God who sees to it that the infidels are punished most severely.

Man's responsibility for the decisions he makes implied to a greater or lesser degree in the history of the Tyrone's past affairs, reveals O'Neill's anticipation of the existentialist movement with its major spokesman, Jean P. Sartre, who stresses man's constant need to make a choice, although there is no sign on earth or in heaven to tell him whether what he does is right. Eugene O'Neill suggests the same by the symbol of fog which stands for the impenetrability of life. Edmund, recollecting his experience of transcendence at sea, concludes: "[...] for a second there is

meaning! Then the hand lets the veil fall and you are alone, lost in the fog again, and you stumble toward nowhere, for no good reason!" (p. 110). Toward the end of Act I the prophetically-minded mother urges Jamie and her husband to take advantage of sunshine and start work in the garden "before the fog comes back (Strangely as if talking aloud to herself) Because I know it will" (p. 33). Her remark bears a metaphorical significance echoing Edmund's words. Man sees clearly at rare moments, while most of the time he gropes about ignorant of his destiny, unable to know himself or others. Therefore Mary, who has regained her mental powers for a short while, expects the confusion to return and torment her as ever before. The leitmotif of blindness comes back again with Tyrone's racking his brain in a vain attempt to recollect "what the hell was it I wanted to buy ... that was worth..." (p. 108). In his fear-conditioned rapacity he, ironically, missed the object he wanted to attain.

The fog symbol expresses more than a single idea. It also serves to indicate the protagonists' escapist flight from the Fate-bound ugly reality of their actual life which intrudes as a moaning sound of the fog-horn. Both Mary and Edmund love fog in this sense of obliterating reality. "It hides you" says the mother dreamily "from the world and the world from you ... No one can find or touch you any more" (p. 71). Man, reflects Edmund, enters "another world where truth is untrue and life can hide from itself" (p. 94). Mary's narcotic trance assumes in this respect a fog-like quality. Much like her son's lapsing into "dream, drunkenness and death", it frees her from participation in the family's crisis with all its anxieties and unbearable nervous strain.

Different aspects of fog in "Long Day's Journey" recall its similar treatment in O'Neill's earlier play, "Anna Christie". Chris's recurring phrase: "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can't see where you was going, no"⁷ points to the idea of man's blindness. In Act II, the stage image of fog shrouding the barge and stillness broken only by the 'doleful tolling of bells'⁸

⁷ E. O'Neill, *Anna Christie*, [in:] *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, 3 vols., New York 1954-1955, p. 78.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

evokes the same atmosphere of mystery and gloom. To Anna, however, the fog appears "funny"⁹, it takes her "out of things altogether"¹⁰. Sick of life, she welcomes - as Mary and Edmund - the separation from it that fog allows her to experience.

The Tyrones' journey into their memories reveals that "in every case the past had potentiality which the present has lost"¹¹. Each of them has turned out a failure and come to the recognition of it. But this is followed by no redemption from the characters' protracted agony. It is in this sense of bringing the protagonists down to their knees by Fate and portraying them in the inert, paralysed state of mind that O'Neill's oppressive pessimism is most acutely felt. Some scholars raise objections against his neurotic, quasi-pathological presentation of reality, leaving no hope to cling to, infesting the spectator with morbidity and nihilism. But by way of defence it must be said that he takes great pains to justify his position by providing crushing evidence why he thinks as he does. In "Long Day's Journey" as well as in his earlier plays he commits himself to probing the mysterious nature of Fate, dramatizing its various forms and aspects.

In my opinion, however, the claim that O'Neill sees no redemption for man is not necessarily right. As we learn from his biography, he had been involved from the start of his career in a soul-tearing search for the absolute - some Archimedean point providing a basis for the individual existence or something to which man could aspire. Likewise he craved for transcendence through belonging to something larger than his own limited self. As a descendant of the painfully disturbed family, denied the advantage of a stable home, a neurotic compelled to turn in upon himself - he personally experienced spiritual rootlessness and long-continued anguish arising and deepening as every value he tried turned out to be relative.

If he insists of Fate being the controlling principle of human existence, as "Long Day's Journey" plainly illustrates, he

⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹ Driver, op. cit., p. 113.

also implies that there is yet a power above it - God it seems to be - to which man confronting inexorable Fate appeals. In the last scene Mary, who by now has travelled deep into the past prior to the moment of her crucial decision symbolised by her wedding dress, recalls her piety of old:

"I went to the shrine and prayed to the Blessed Virgin and found peace again because I knew she heard my prayer and would always love me and see no harm ever came to me so long as I never lost my faith in her". (p. 127)

The mother's religiosity is simple and naive but as such even more convincing. It reflects a life postulated on God's protective love and mercy. James Tyrone, sharing his wife's unflinching attachment to Divinity, says with profound conviction: "When you deny God, you deny hope" (p. 96), "When you deny God, you deny sanity" (p. 97). Viewing the family's tragic predicament from the parents' perspective, it seems that the protagonists have to submit in their struggle with Fate because no sufficient faith is left in any of them to pray for salvation. "If I could only find the faith I lost, so I could pray again!" (p. 77) cries Mary in Act III. "If your mother had prayed too - She hasn't denied her faith, but she's forgotten it until now there's no strength of the spirit left in her to fight against her curse" (p. 57) observes her husband. Edmund, while describing in Act IV his ecstasies evoked by his communion with nature at sea, brings out man's innermost desire to dissolve and merge in the cosmic vastness of Divine Being:

"I became drunk with the beauty and singing rhythm of it, and for a moment I lost myself - actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way". (p. 110)

Edmund expresses here, in a soaring poetic vision, man's unconscious drive for the annihilation of the self which liberates him from temporality - the factor determining the human fated condition. It may be suspended for a brief moment through the power of an ecstatic rapture and a glimpse is offered of supraterrrestrial tranquility.

The above considerations indicate that unlike the Greek dramatists, O'Neill goes beyond the narrow ancient concept of Fate with its inevitable foreclosure of future, and along with the Christian existentialists sees the possibility of man's salvation in his spiritual communion with the absolute. This assumption is further supported by the dramatist's own remark to Joseph Wood Krutch that he was interested only in the relation of man to God¹². Tom F. Driver states that "O'Neill was anti-religious only in so far as the object of the quest is concerned: he was always extremely religious in terms of the quest itself". Then he adds: "O'Neill affords us a clear example of the close, if usually unacknowledged connection, between art and religion or philosophical assertion"¹³.

In conclusion I wish to return to the point of departure. As in "Oedipus Rex", the American playwright dramatizes the final stage of the protagonists' confrontation with Fate. The tragedy consists in their coming to awareness about the hopeless predicament in which they are trapped. Long Day's Journey into Night might as well be a fitting title for the Sophoclean drama in so far as Oedipus nears his own night of symbolic blinding by seemingly escaping from Fate, every step he takes being, ironically, a realisation of his prophesied destiny. Likewise Fate itself in both cases springs out of the interaction within a family, and in disguise of the past - embracing in O'Neill's work the combined factors of inheritance, environmental influences, individual traumatic experience and betrayal of vocation - gives final shape to the present. Mary describes it best when she says:

"None of us can help the things life has done to us. They're done before you realise it, and once they are done they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self for ever" (p. 46)

From this point of view another statement of hers provides an inevitable conclusion: "The past is the present, isn't it? It's the future, too. We all try to lie out of that but life won't let us" (p. 63).

¹² Ibid., p. 119.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

The theme of fatalism is, furthermore, developed dramatically into a vast vision of universal significance by the plays' temporal structure and imagery.

O'Neill's manifest affinity with the Greek drama ends here as he, unlike the ancients, implies man's triumph over Fate in his liberating aspiration to the absolute. This is the only thing, the artist seems to say, that invests man's life with a sense in the absurdity of existence. The latter point is again brought by the mother, an archetypal figure of a human being mutilated and cornered by Fate who stubbornly denies her defeat:

"Some day ... the Blessed Virgin Mary forgives me and gives me back the faith in her love and pity I used to have in my convent days, and I can pray to Her again - when She sees no one in the world can believe in me even for a moment any more, then She will believe in me, and with Her help it will be so easy. I will hear myself scream with agony, and at the same time I will laugh because I will be so sure of myself". (p. 68)

Man's chance for the ultimate victory is inherent in his primordial, indestructible capacity for "hopeless hope"¹⁴.

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FATALIZM W „ZMIERZCHU DŁUGIEGO DNIA” EUGENE O'NEILLA

Zainteresowanie Eugene O'Neill'a tematem fatalizmu, widoczne w wielu jego wcześniejszych sztukach, znajduje również swój wyraz w jednym z ostatnich dzieł, „Zmierzchu długiego dnia”. Struktura tego utworu, oparta na zachowaniu trzech jedności, przypomina dramat antyczny. Podobnie jak w „Królu Edypie”, rozwojowi akcji towarzyszy równoległe zagłębianie się w czasy minione. Zabieg ten odsłania mechanizm działania fatum, doprowadzającego do upadku rodziny, który polega na tym, że przeszłość kształtuje teraźniejszość i przesądza o przyszłości. Koleje życia bohaterów wskazują na złożoną naturę fatum. Tragedia Mary jest konsekwencją niefortunnej decyzji poślubienia aktora z zawodu i skąpca z natury. Przypadek jej małżonka, pozostający w ścisłym związku z założeniami dziewiętnastowiecznego naturalizmu, obrazuje negatywny wpływ

¹⁴ O'Neill's words to be found in E. T o r n q v i s t, A Drama of Souls, Uppsala 1968, p. 13.

ędzy i trudów, jakich doświadczał Tyrone w dzieciństwie i młodości, na charakter jego losu. Niestety spadające na rodzinę można także interpretować w kategoriach kary za zdradę powołania. Mary, wybierając małżeństwo, złała ślub złożony Matce Boskiej w latach panieńskich. James przez swą chciwość doprowadził do uwiadu talentu, występując przez większość kariery w nieambitnym melodramacie. Zły przykład rodziców - alkoholizm ojca oraz narkomania matki - jak również brak stabilizacji i swoboda obyczajów typowe dla środowiska teatralnego tkwią u źródeł impasu, w jakim znajdują się obaj synowie. Determinizm genetyczny powoduje, że Edmund zapada na gruźlicę. Degeneracja i towarzysząca jej świadomość beznadziejności, w którą pogrążają się wszyscy Tyronowie, świadczą o nieuchronności przeznaczenia. Jednakże głęboka wiara religijna Mary oraz transcendentne przeżycia Edmunda pozwalają przypuszczać, że O'Neill, wykraczając poza wąską koncepcję antycznej Nemezis, widzi dla człowieka prześladowanego przez los nadzieję w jego niezniszczalnym dążeniu do absolutu.