

The Journal of Religion and Theatre

<http://www.rtjournal.org>

**Published by the Religion and Theatre Focus Group of the
Association for Theatre in Higher Education**

The Journal of Religion and Theatre is a peer-reviewed online journal. The journal aims to provide descriptive and analytical articles examining the spirituality of world cultures in all disciplines of the theatre, performance studies in sacred rituals of all cultures, themes of transcendence in text, on stage, in theatre history, the analysis of dramatic literature, and other topics relating to the relationship between religion and theatre. The journal also aims to facilitate the exchange of knowledge throughout the theatrical community concerning the relationship between theatre and religion and as an academic research resource for the benefit of all interested scholars and artists.

ISSN 1544-8762

All rights reserved. Each author retains the copyright of his or her article. Acquiring an article in this pdf format may be used for research and teaching purposes only. No other type of reproduction by any process or technique may be made without the formal, written consent of the author.

Submission Guidelines

- Submit your article in Microsoft Word 1998 format via the internet.
- Include a separate title page with the title of the article, your name, address, e-mail address, and phone number, with a 70 to 100 word abstract and a 25 to 50 word biography.
- Do not type your name on any page of the article.
- MLA style endnotes -- Appendix A.1. (Do not use parenthetical references in the body of the paper/ list of works cited.)
- E-Mail the article and title page via an attachment in Microsoft Word 1998 to Debra Bruch: dlbruch -at- mtu.edu. (Please replace the -at- with @.)
- Or send by regular post with the article on a zip disk, Mac format, in Microsoft Word to:

Debra Bruch, Ph.D.
General Editor, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*
Department of Fine Arts
Michigan Technological University
1400 Townsend Drive
Houghton, MI 49931

DEADLINE: May 1st of each year

Eugene O'Neill:

Progenitor of a New Religious Drama

By Daniel Cawthon

1988 was the “Year of O’Neill” in American theatre. To celebrate the 100th anniversary of Eugene O’Neill’s birth, an impressive number of his works were revived at professional and community playhouses across the country. American audiences have had the opportunity to take a second look at this formidable playwright who has been hailed, rightly or wrongly, a theatrical genius of the twentieth century.

There again were his haunted heroes and heroines, his tales of old sorrow. There were his attempts to translate ancient tragic myths into an American idiom. There were his descriptions of the pipe dreams we fabricate, of our vain attempts to find hope in hopelessness. And, always, there were the ghosts of his family—father, mother, brother—seeking on stage the peace not granted them in life.

For over seventy-five years, critics and scholars have debated the merits of O’Neill’s contribution to the American stage. It was, after all, O’Neill who demanded that theatre in the United States enter the modern world, that it scale the heights charted by the new theatre in Europe. It was O’Neill who dared tackle such subjects as evolution, the equality of the sexes, the domination of unconscious forces on the human personality, the feminine side of God and the bankruptcy of capitalist (and socialist) values.

The centennial retrospective of the O’Neill canon did do more, however, than merely recount the playwright’s past contributions to American theatre. Because the plays were performed for audiences whose perceptions have been shaped by forces different from his, the 100th birthday celebration shed new light on O’Neill’s dark vision. The changed consciousness of the eighties was able to detect themes in his plays that have gone virtually unnoticed.

Who would have suggested, as recently as the playwright’s death in 1953, for example, that O’Neill laid the groundwork for a new form of religious drama? Anyone who has studied O’Neill’s life and works knows that he left his Catholic faith behind at an early age and that, even in his final plays, he railed against it. He, like the protagonists of his tragedies, braced himself to live life “on the rocks,” not diluted by the “pipe dreams” of illusion or fancy. In only one of his plays, *Days Without End*, did he hypothesize a return to the faith. But in the interviews that followed the play’s opening, O’Neill put to rest any speculation that the conversion was personal.

In the thirty-nine years that have passed since Eugene O’Neill’s death, perceptions about the meaning of religious experience have been greatly altered. When O’Neill wrote for the

theatre, it was commonplace for audiences to identify religious experience with the acceptance of dogmatic tenets. To protest traditional religious forms, as the playwright did, for example, in *Dynamo* and *Strange Interlude* was tantamount to a denial of faith itself. It is no wonder that whenever O'Neill stepped over denominational boundaries, his ecclesiastical critics shouted "foul."

But for contemporary audiences in the 1980's, organized religion no longer has an exclusive hold on the life of the spirit. Individuals in great numbers have turned away from traditional religious teachings and have sought a spiritual path unassisted by the faith of their fathers.

In the 1990's, O'Neill's protest against religion is more likely perceived as an act of spiritual heroism than an aberrant mockery of the gods. From this changed perspective, O'Neill paved the way for a new understanding of "religious" theatre.

O'Neill and the Plight of the Modern

No American playwright was more aware than O'Neill of the need for theatre to re-discover its spiritual roots. As he saw it, the theatre at the turn of the century bore only a pale resemblance to the ennobling drama of the Greeks. It had sold its birthright for the porridge of commercial success. No longer did it challenge its audiences to confront the tragic rhythms of their natures. The works of Nietzsche, Ibsen, Strindberg and other writers of his day planted the seeds of a new theatrical vision.

Like his counterparts in Europe, O'Neill saw what his audiences only dimly intuited: the secure world view of the nineteenth century had been shattered. As Yeats put it: "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." The discoveries of Darwin, Freud, Marx, Troeltsch and other modern thinkers, coupled with the moral and political collapse of civilized nations during World War I, had led to the jolting shock of modernity. The religious myths which sustained western civilization had been undermined.

It was precisely the "plight of the modern" which inspired O'Neill to write. He would turn to the tragic themes of the Greek theatre and re-state them for the modern American theatre. His plays would fill the vacuum created by the dissolution of traditional religion:

Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God.

The playwright today must dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it—the death of the Old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying New One for the surviving primitive instincts to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with. It seems to me that anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this big subject behind all the little subject of his plays or novels, or he is simply

scribbling around on the surface of things and has no more real status than a parlour entertainer.¹

Every play O'Neill wrote was an attempt to give shape to that "big subject behind all the little subjects." He proposed that behind the mask of the American Dream could still be discerned those primitive human instincts which identify modern man with his ancestral past. Human actions, the relations between man and man, attract him because they point to a central action that lies behind them all: the action of life itself, coming and going, building and destroying. He struggled with the task of putting that action on the American stage:

I'm always, always, trying to interpret Life in terms of lives....I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind—fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery certainly— and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Forces express him....And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible—or can be—to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage.²

O'Neill's theatre, from beginning to end, documents his attempt to create a new symbol-system, a new mythology, for expressing the Force behind—Fate, God, our biological past, Mystery certainly. Aware that the religious myths of western civilization had been shattered, that the emerging scientific, materialistic world view could not satisfy modern man's thirst for transcendence, O'Neill strove to create a theatre as mythic as the theatre of early Greece. It is for this reason that O'Neill can be viewed as the founder of a new religious theatre in America.

Fundamental to O'Neill's brand of theatre is its attempt to stage the cosmic action which underlies, intersects, shapes and controls all human action. While O'Neill may have eschewed the Irish Catholicism of his father, in no way did he deny the reality of life sub specie aeternitatis. His plays, without exception, are experiments in mythmaking, of discovering a new set of religious symbols to replace the one which had been destroyed.

He descends into the darkness of his soul in hopes of discovering both the experience of and images for transcendence. He is driven by a single objective: to portray, at one and the same time, authentic human action and the primal action of Life itself.

The Poet's Vision of Beatitude

Nowhere is his purpose more vividly described than in his autobiographical *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The young O'Neill, returning home from a walk in the fog along the eastern

¹ Eugene O'Neill, "On Man and God." *O'Neill and his Plays*. Eds. Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William J. Fisher. New York: NYU Press, 1961. 115.

² Eugene O'Neill, "Neglected Poet, A Letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn," *O'Neill and his Plays*. 125-126.

seaboard, reveals to his father the nature of his innermost experiences:

When I was on the Squarehead square rigger, bound for Buenos Aires. Full moon in the trades. The old hooker driving fourteen knots. I lay on the bowsprit facing astern with the water foaming into spume under me, the masts with every sail white in the moonlight, towering high above me. 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 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.³

He describes other experiences of the same nature:

Then another time, on the American line, when I was lookout on the crow's nest in the dawn watch. A calm sea that time....Dreaming, not keeping lookout, feeling alone, and apart, watching the dawn creep like a painted dream over the sky and sea which slept together. Then the moment of ecstatic freedom came. The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbor, the joy of belonging to a fulfillment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams! And several other times in my life, when I was swimming far out, or lying alone on a beach, I have had the same experience. Became the sun, the hot sand, green seaweed anchored to a rock, swaying in the tide.⁴

And, finally O'Neill resorts to religious language to describe his experiences:

Like a saint's vision of beatitude. Like the veil of things as they seem drawn back by an unseen hand. For a second you see—and seeing the secret, are the secret. 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 on toward nowhere, for no good reason!

It was a great mistake, my being born 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.⁵

His father, moved by the utterances of his son, remarks that he has the “makings of a poet.”

No, I'm afraid I'm like the guy who is always panhandling for a smoke. He hasn't even got the makings. He's only got the habit. I couldn't touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. That's the best I'll ever do, I mean, if I live. Well, let it be faithful

³ Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956. 153.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

realism, at least. Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people.⁶

In these descriptions of the experiences which compelled him to write, O'Neill provides the main lines of a new "religious" theatre.

Realism vs. Faithful Realism

First of all, O'Neill is aware that, amid the everyday actions of our lives, can be discerned a second level of experience—a transcending action which informs and unifies them all. The dynamic implied in his description is most important: The ordinary actions of our lives give way to the experience of a primary dimension. Situating his audience within the context of the natural—the sky, sea, wind, sand, sun, moon and stars—he points to another realm, another action which is primary, though perceived indirectly. The experience of the transcendent dimension is not one among the other experiences of our lives, it is at their heart; it is their pulse beat.

This dynamic informs, without exception, the plays in O'Neill's canon. On the one hand, no playwright has been so meticulously "naturalistic," taking pains to describe the situations and characters of his plays in great detail. On the other hand, as his plays move toward their (mostly) tragic ends, the cosmos in which they are placed takes a quality of transcendence, revealing a deeper, inner secret. O'Neill's "realism" is transformed, as he puts it, into a "faithful realism."

O'Neill perceives the numerous elements of nature as images of a "divinity which shapes our end, rough-hew them how we will." The sea—bearer of life and stern taskmaster to all her children; the fog—maya, obscuring the paths of his characters, blinding them from their true selves and from each other; the moon—mothering and devouring the children of the earth, filling them with poetry driving them mad; the sun—like the eye of an angry god, parching the earth, unrelenting, severe. O'Neill strives to harness the "big subject behind all the little subjects," to discern the sound of its pulse beat, awakening modern man to the memory of his primitive past and accompanying him on his long day's journey into night.

Because of his desire to "figure" the "ground" for existence, O'Neill was the first American playwright to include the setting of his plays as part of the central action: the primitive chants and drums in *The Emperor Jones*, and *Moon of the Caribbees*; the sea in *Thirst*, *Fog*, *Anna Christie*, *Beyond the Horizon*, and the plays in the Glencairn cycle; the slum tenements in *The Web*, *All God's Chillun*, and *Dreamy Kid*; the parched earth of *Wife for a Life*, and *Moon for the Misbegotten*.

The Poet as Priest

As preceptor of the "inner secret," O'Neill takes on the mantle of the priesthood. It has fallen to him to "lift back the veil," to reveal to his audiences, his congregation, the true nature of

⁶ Ibid. 153-154.

“Life itself—God, if you want to put it that way.” For a second you see—and seeing the secret—are the secret. For a second there is meaning. Every O’Neill play presses toward that evanescent second of transubstantiation. A primary figure in O’Neill’s cast of characters is the Poet—the priest—who stands amid the rubble of fallen humanity and sees “Behind Life”: the autobiographical Edmond Tyrone of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* has a long lineage in the O’Neill canon. He first appeared as the Poet in *Fog*, then as John Brown in *Bread and Butter*, Robert Mayo in *Beyond the Horizon*, Dion Anthony in *The Great God Brown*, Richard Light in *Dynamo* and Richard Miller in *Ah! Wilderness*.

Philip Rieff provides a cogent description of this new priesthood of the artist:

Outside art, the numinous experience is not ordinarily available to modern men of culture....Myth, and an art which expresses the mythic, permits a second level of experience; this time indirectly, the experience of the divine comes to the reader through the imagination of the writer, and is endowed with the form of his own life and special concerns.⁷

It is a demanding calling. The gift of “seeing” is experienced as a curse. To see the secret is to be forever in its service: its charge charges him! All other cares, enterprises, clearly defined purposes, grow pale in its light. The secret grasps the heart of the beholder and urges him on towards articulation. O’Neill’s description of this mandate echoes the strains of Dante’s *Purgatorio*: “I am one who, when Love inspires me, take note, and go setting it forth after the fashion which he dictates within me.”

But like his priestly predecessor, Aaron, O’Neill can only stammer. He compares himself to the panhandler in need of a smoke: he’s got the habit, but not the makings. He has looked in the face of the divine and cannot speak. Yet, he remains under the command to give form to the formless, to make intelligible the unknown, to body-forth the mysterious action of life itself without in any way exhausting it of its meaning. He provides an insight into the pain of this stance in *The Iceman Cometh*: “I was born condemned to be one of those who has to see all sides of a question. When you’re damned like that, the questions multiply for you until in the end it’s all question and no answer.”⁸

The Communion of Lost Souls

To be condemned to see all sides of a question is to stand in wait, like Didi and Gogo in *Waiting for Godot*, for intimations of transcendence. It is on the boundary between life and death, between question and answer, that O’Neill finds kinship with the playwrights of early Greece. It is there that he builds his church.

⁷ Philip Rieff, “A Modern Mythmaker.” *Myth and Mythmaking*. Ed. Henry A. Murray. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960. 268.

⁸ Eugene O’Neill, *The Iceman Cometh*. New York: Random House, 1946. 30.

Authentic human relationships on O'Neill's stage can be achieved only after the characters have been purged of all pretensions. Ego-centered absolutes must be stripped from their souls. Mutual confession of false selves is followed by a dawning awareness, through a glass darkly, of a tragic grandeur. The bond of lost souls is traced first in *The Web*, then explored in *Welded*. It reaches full expression in the late plays, particularly *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. O'Neill's haunted heroes suffer the contradiction of "not really wanting, and not being wanted." They must always be strangers who can never belong.

For O'Neill takes seriously the existential plight of being a part of nature on the one hand, tied to the instinctual, animal life that leads, finally, to death. Yet, man is also apart from nature. He is cursed to see. His portrait of *The Hairy Ape*, lured from his animal cave to the outside world of pretensions is a vivid image of human plight.

"A Little in Love with Death"

Each O'Neill play is a confrontation with mortality. "I've always been a little in love with death," the playwright tells his father. For O'Neill, human life cannot be authentic unless it reckons with the darkness out of which it is born and into which it returns.

Death, as O'Neill figures it in his plays, does not lie in wait for man outside of life. Rather, it is part of the very fabric of life. Life and death are two sides of the same action—the primary action which informs every breath we take, every task we accomplish. O'Neill was repulsed by the notion inherent in the American Dream, that the human heart could find ultimate fulfillment through financial success, romantic bliss, or political status. The theatre of his father's day to which he was exposed had become an instrument of an ideology which failed to reckon with mortality. "My early experience with the theatre through my father," he observed, "really made me revolt against it. . . . I saw so much of the old, ranting, artificial romantic stuff that I always had a sort of contempt for the theatre."⁹ It was marketed for commercial gain, offered false promises of success, and illusory satisfaction to the thirsting spirit.

The contrast between the theatres of the senior and junior O'Neill, a major tension in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, is great. Death, the young playwright saw, is not separate from life. The unbridled enthusiasm of those following the promise of the American Dream could not tolerate the awareness of mortal strictures: to speak of death was to cast a shadow on the unlimited possibilities of modernity. O'Neill, religious visionary that he was, thought otherwise. It was his perception that the action of life/death pulsates through the lives of all humans without exception. He viewed his American contemporaries as pathetic figures who failed to realize that their frenetic attempts to attain the promises of the Dream were futile, that success is never ultimate. They had become blind to the fact that life and the American way of life were not the same. Thus, they lived out in their individual existences a myth uprooted from the sobering reality that life and death are inseparable, that the drama of every human life, in each of its

⁹ Quoted by Robert Brustein without reference, *The Theatre of Revolt*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1962. 333-334.

actions, is shadowed by finitude.

As a result, O'Neill saw it as his mission to expose the false idols of 20th century America: romantic love, male superiority, white supremacy, free enterprise—even the masculine deity. In every instance, he called his audiences to sobriety, to awaken from their pipe dreams and face, with courage, the heart of darkness.

Not surprisingly, he was criticized for his pessimism:

I have been accused of unmitigated gloom. Is this a pessimistic view of life? I do not think so. There is a skin deep optimism and another higher optimism which is usually confounded with pessimism. To me, the tragic alone has that significant beauty which is truth. It is the meaning of life—and the hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic. The people who succeed and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middle classers. Their stopping at success is the proof of their compromising insignificance. How pretty their dreams must have been! The man who pursues the mere attainable should be sentenced to get it—and keep it. Let him rest on his laurels and enthrone him in a Morris chair, in which laurels and hero may wither away together. Only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth living and dying for—and so attain himself. He with the spiritual guerdon of a hope in hopelessness is nearest to the stars and the rainbow's foot. ...One must state one's religion first in order not to be misunderstood, even if one makes no rash boast of always having the strength to live up to it.¹⁰

O'Neill refers to his task as “an exercise in unmasking.” He tears away at the pretensions of twentieth century optimism in order to reveal the tragic nature of American lives. As he, and we, glimpse the images of our own mortality, we are granted the experience of “higher optimism”: authentic hope can only emerge when we face the hopelessness of our existential situation; reality can be perceived only when we have cast off our illusions; the meaning of life is revealed only when we stand face to face with death.

Centennial audiences, then, were provided a new vantage point for examining the life and works of Eugene O'Neill. He forged a religious theatre for modern times, creating a unique way of perceiving the relation of man to God. He fought the prevailing world view of science and materialism, insisting that the path to an authentic human self requires a submission to the mysterious action of Life which shapes our destinies.

Like an Old Testament prophet, O'Neill hurled warnings of disaster to all who would follow the promises of false gods—for him, the lure of financial comfort, romantic fulfillment, or political power. Lost in the fog of their own appetites, they become, as he puts it, “the spiritual middle-classers.”

Salvation comes from the artist, the poet, the playwright. Science has severed the

¹⁰ Eugene O'Neill, “Damn the Optimists.” *O'Neill and His Plays*. 104-105.

connection with transcendence. O'Neill and his colleague-artists are there to mediate, to unveil the inner secret of existence. Their priesthood is a burdensome calling: they are challenged to speak the unspeakable. Their stories, their images, their symbols are "stammerings," pointing to the experience they attempt to share with their audiences.

But the path toward an authentic humanity is arduous. Only by facing death can life discover its tragic nobility. What to the materialistic appears pessimistic is, for O'Neill, a higher optimism. "Only through the unattainable does man achieve a hope worth living and dying for—and so attain himself."

O'Neill's heroes and heroines, like the playwright himself, can only glimpse the course ahead of them. They, too, long to hear the sound of the foghorn, guiding them one step at a time into the unknown, unseen future.

However, there are a few moments in American theatre to compare with those which reveal the tragic grandeur of the human soul, stripped of illusion, facing the future with full awareness of finitude. They are filled with compassion, forgiveness and acceptance of mortality. As his critic George Jean Nathan describes O'Neill's accomplishments, O'Neill "waded through the dismal swamplands of American drama, bleak, squashy, and oozy stick goo, and alone and singlehanded bore out the water lily that no American had found before him."¹¹

Works Cited

- Brustein, Robert. *The Theatre of Revolt*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1962.
O'Neill, Eugene. *The Iceman Cometh*. New York: Random House, 1946.
---. *Long Day's Journey into Night*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956.
---. *O'Neill and his Plays*. Ed by Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin and William Fisher. New York: New York University Press, 1961.
Murray, Henry A., Ed. *Myth and Mythmaking*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1960.

¹¹ Brustein 322.