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MICHAEL MANHEIM

Introduction

Not many today question the pre-eminence of Eugene O'Neill as America's leading playwright. The playwrights who followed him – Williams, Miller, and Albee, and, more recently, dramatists like Sam Shepard, David Mamet, and Tony Kushner – all have acknowledged their profound debt to him, as have younger playwrights in countries as remote from one another as Sweden and China. He is internationally recognized as the quintessential American dramatist of the twentieth-century world stage. Some are uncomfortable with what occasionally seems the melodramatic excess of even his most successful plays. There have been and continue to be vociferous nay-sayers about the playwright's work. But they are a relatively small minority, and many of those who express reservations about the excesses of earlier plays acknowledge that he "forged" those excesses (to use Jean Chothia's word) into a uniquely powerful medium that culminated in America's greatest tragedy, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

O'Neill has long been a fixture of the American educational curriculum. Before the Second World War, plays such as *Beyond the Horizon*, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *Ah, Wilderness!* were regularly assigned in high school and college literature courses; and if the emphasis on such plays faded in the post-war era, O'Neill's reputation was explosively revived with *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* – in the context of which many of those earlier plays are now studied. Not insignificant in that revival have been productions of those late plays by director José Quintero working with actors Jason Robards and Colleen Dewhurst, and on-screen treatments by Sidney Lumet and Laurence Olivier.

What the future holds for that reputation no one can tell, but it may be significant that, as reported in the *New York Times* for 10 February 1997 (Section C, p. 11), "a series on performances of the entire O'Neill canon, 50 plays in all," is currently being contemplated at New York University,

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Yale University, the Provincetown Playhouse, and Monte Cristo Cottage (O'Neill's boyhood home in New London, Connecticut and the setting of *Long Day's Journey*).

The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill, like the others in the Companion series, attempts to be comprehensive without ignoring more specialized approaches to the playwright. Three background discussions constitute the opening section. Stephen A. Black deals first with the subject which has probably been the most important in O'Neill study over the past thirty years, O'Neill's biography as it relates to his childhood home life – the subject first brought into prominence, of course, with the appearance of *Long Day's Journey*. This is followed by Egil Törnqvist's discussion of the several European philosophers and playwrights – notably Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Strindberg – who had the greatest influence on O'Neill's intellectual and artistic development. And third in this group is Daniel J. Watermeier's discussion of the theatrical world in which O'Neill and his father before him were such important figures.

The second section deals with the canon itself. The early and early-middle periods plays – plays such as the *S.S. Glencairn* series, *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *Desire Under the Elms* that brought him his initial fame – are looked at in some detail by Margaret Loftus Ranald (who organizes her essay more around themes than strict chronology). Her essay is followed by James A. Robinson's probing discussion of the plays of O'Neill's middle period – plays such as *The Great God Brown*, *Strange Interlude*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra* – that solidified the playwright's reputation. The last-named won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936. Finally, Normand Berlin discusses O'Neill's all-important late plays, including the two extant plays of his unfinished "Cycle" (which is discussed at length by Donald Gallup later in the volume). Berlin, one of the best-known assessors of O'Neill's later career, focuses chiefly, of course, on *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey*, *Moon for the Misbegotten*, and the one-act *Hughie*.

The third section of this Companion will be for some its most interesting in that it focuses on O'Neill's plays in performance. While space limitations prohibit a detailed history of the great number of productions of O'Neill's plays world-wide, Ronald Wainscott focuses on the best-known professional productions in America. Wainscott's discussion is particularly useful in juxtaposing discussions of initial productions of individual plays with important revivals of those plays. And Kurt Eisen follows up with an insightful look at the rapidly expanding production history of O'Neill plays in cinema and television – suggesting, among other things, which plays have worked best in which medium.

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The last section is the longest and most varied – encompassing subjects as far-ranging as O'Neill's fascination with America's racial and religious minorities in his plays to a forthright questioning of the playwright's claim to greatness. Brenda Murphy leads off with a discussion of how the cultural mores of the period between the two world wars worked to shape O'Neill's plays of that period – notably *Strange Interlude*. She is followed by Edward L. Shaughnessy's look at O'Neill's treatment of African–Americans and Irish–Americans, the two most frequently included minority groups in his plays. And following this is Judith E. Barlow's feminist consideration of O'Neill's women characters.

Donald Gallup's essay on O'Neill's vast unfinished Cycle "A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed," which comes next, is unique to this collection in its consideration of material from O'Neill's unpublished *Work Diary* at the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Gallup here summarizes plots and scenarios of unfinished and, in some cases, unwritten plays to give us a sense of the overall dimensions of the projected work.

The next two essays look from different perspectives at O'Neill's brilliance as a dramatist. Jean Chothia looks first at how O'Neill forged theatrical techniques suited to the writing of autobiographical drama throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. Following this, the editor of this collection examines aspects of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* which further certify its greatness.

The essay on *Long Day's Journey* just referred to is intentionally juxtaposed with the final essay in this section. My comments on that play seek unequivocally to place O'Neill in the pantheon of great world dramatists, while Matthew Wikander seeks equally unequivocally to undermine the playwright's pre-eminence. Wikander's essay will infuriate some O'Neill enthusiasts, but he effectively articulates attitudes of a vocal minority that need to be patiently considered in any final assessment of O'Neill's work.

The Companion concludes with a discussion and selected bibliography of O'Neill criticism.

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1

STEPHEN A. BLACK

"Celebrant of loss"
Eugene O'Neill 1888–1953

On 2 February 1920 Eugene O'Neill saw his first major play, *Beyond the Horizon*, open at the Morosco. It was his first opening and first performance in a mainstream theatre. *Beyond* was about the thirtieth play he had finished since he began writing plays in 1913; he wrote it early in 1918 when he was twenty-nine. When it opened two years later, New York was in the throes of a lethal influenza epidemic, and the opening was an unpublicized "special matinee." Late in rehearsals, O'Neill took over direction from the lead actor, but despite all efforts, despaired of the production. Nevertheless, an audience came and accepted the play as a serious and absorbing work, and reviewers admired it. Though it is no great compliment, *Beyond* was clearly the best play yet written by an American and would win O'Neill the first of four Pulitzer Prizes. The production ran 144 performances and brought O'Neill over $6,000 which made him, at thirty-one, finally independent of his father's purse-strings. James O'Neill, the author's father, a celebrated heroic actor whose career went back more than fifty years, attended the performance and was seen to leave the theatre wiping tears of pride from his cheeks.

As with several events in the author's life, there was heavy irony in the occasion. Within a month, James O'Neill suffered a stroke and while he was recovering, intestinal cancer was diagnosed. Until adolescence, Eugene had worshipped his father as a hero – such are his words in a private autobiographical document. Then for many years Eugene seemed nearly as often to hate his father as to love him, although his father supported him in and out of trouble, and tolerated the youth's contempt. In 1912 a detente developed and in the last years of the aging actor's life, father and son became close in an increasingly collegial way. From March to August 1920 Eugene grieved deeply while watching his father die slowly and painfully, spending many hours and days at his father's bedside when James was unconscious or barely lucid.

As with many artists, bereavement set off in Eugene a spate of creative

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effort. For two years he had struggled with a promising, unwieldy play he called "Chris Christophersen." Almost immediately after James O'Neill's death on 10 August, Eugene began sweeping revisions, conceiving new characters for Chris's daughter and her lover, and a new setting and plot for Acts 2 and 3. He finished "*Anna Christie*" in less than six weeks. A day or so later he began another new play, *The Emperor Jones*, which he finished in about two weeks. When he was done, almost without pausing, he began and finished still another play, the undervalued *Diff'rent*.

In ordinary circumstances, O'Neill's mourning for his father would surely have been intense, but it would have run a normal course, such as is described by the psychoanalyst John Bowlby and others, and would have resolved itself in three or four years. (See, e.g. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* [New York: Basic Books, 1969.]) But O'Neill's life had never been ordinary, and his grief was to be greatly compounded. A year and a half after James died, Ella O'Neill, thirteen years younger than her husband and seemingly in good health, died suddenly from a brain tumor. Twenty months later, her first son, James Jr., ten years older than Eugene and idolized by him since childhood, succeeded in an oft-declared intent to drink himself to death. Within thirty-nine months, O'Neill lost all the members of his parental family.

The cluster of losses overwhelmed the playwright and put him in a state of mourning that lasted two decades and determined the qualities, themes and characters of everything he wrote from then on. After 1920, nearly every O'Neill play is either directly or indirectly about death, loss and mourning, and most have bereaved characters (such as Eben Cabot in *Desire Under the Elms* or Nina Leeds in *Strange Interlude*) who struggle unsuccessfully to let their dead be dead and to live their own lives without feeling haunted. Over the next two decades writing was the vehicle for O'Neill's mourning.

Finally he reached the point where, in privately dedicating the manuscript of the late autobiographical masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1941), he could tell himself and his wife that he had faced his dead "at last" and written of them "with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness." O'Neill felt that he had finally come to terms with his dead by understanding the spirits that haunted them, and how they haunted him. How he reached that point of insight is as remarkable a story as how he came to be so haunted in the first place.

The most important event in O'Neill's early life, a youth marked by large events, was the discovery when he was not quite fourteen that his mother had become a morphine addict at his birth, he himself being the unwitting

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cause of her addiction. It was a discovery not unlike the discovery by one Oedipus that is celebrated in two plays by Sophocles; in one play Sophocles imagined the process of discovery, and in the other, the consequences of the discovery.

The young Eugene did not discover that he had killed his father and wed and begot children with his mother, but he learned that the birth of his eleven-pound natal self had caused his mother prolonged pain and depression for which morphine was prescribed. Ella O'Neill rapidly became addicted. The addiction plagued her and her family for the next quarter-century. Eugene grew up sharing the family assumption that they would all have been better off had he not been born. Guilt and responsibility preceding the possibility of deliberate choice, an old-fashioned idea even in Periclean Athens, became a topic of reflection and self-scrutiny for the future playwright. Given his birth into a theatrical family and his remarkable creative drive, Eugene had little more choice in the matter of becoming a tragic playwright than he had in causing his mother's affliction.

Before the discovery, life had been less difficult, though far from ordinary. Eugene was born on 17 October 1888 in a Manhattan hotel. He was nursed in the wings of theatres as his father travelled North America in an adaptation of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a play he performed thousands of times during thirty years of almost constant touring. James O'Neill (1844–1920) and his wife Ella (Mary Ellen Quinlan 1857–1922) were deeply dependent on one another and although she hated the uncomfortable travelling, she almost always accompanied him. The first son, Jamie (1878–1923), travelled with his parents until he was seven when he was sent to school in South Bend, Indiana, where his mother had also been educated. A second son, Edmund Burke O'Neill, born in 1884, died a year and a half later of measles, caught from Jamie. Jamie was blamed for deliberately infecting his brother and carried the guilt all his life.

Despite a first-rate education and top marks at prep school and at St. John's College (later, Fordham University), Jamie could never settle into a career, and in fact, got himself expelled from St. John's for a prank a few months before he would have graduated. A sport and an athlete, a bon vivant, a heavy drinker from adolescence, Jamie seldom worked and was dependent on his father throughout his life. He acted sometimes in his father's company, but never fulfilled the talent his father thought he had. Eugene grew up idolizing his brother; later, when he rebelled against his father Eugene took his father's exasperation with Jamie as evidence of his brother's perfection. Eugene's idealization of his brother continued almost unchanged until shortly before Jamie died.

Like Jamie, Eugene travelled with his parents until he was seven; but

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unlike Jamie he was cared for by a nanny, hired to help his mother who was not recovering from her addition to morphine. Insatiably curious herself, the nanny took young Eugene to see the sights wherever they travelled. At seven he had a wider acquaintance with the natural wonders and oddities of America than most Americans ever acquire. All the while Eugene absorbed the grammar of theatrical artifice, a native language.

At seven everything changed. He was sent to a Catholic boarding school which he loathed in suburban New York. There, and at a Catholic prep school in Manhattan, he drew into himself and counted the weeks and days until he would rejoin his parents and brother for summers in New London, Connecticut, where the family had a seaside cottage. He earned good marks, but virtually ignored school life; he read voraciously, and wrote a stream of letters and poems. Until sent to school, he had known almost no children; he had been the only child, the boss's son, in a world of actors. Throughout his life he remembered hating school for immersing him in the dogma of Sin, pervasive and original – this before he knew of his own primal crime. Although his father was deeply devout, family Catholicism was relaxed. At school, nuns and priests ruled their boys with severe hands. Eugene, an obedient, cooperative child, had probably never been punished before going to school, and he never forgot or forgave injuries and injustices. He remained in Catholic schools until he was thirteen.

In late summer, 1902, Ella O'Neill ran out of morphine and tried to drown herself. James and Jamie decided Eugene had to be told about her addiction, and they could not conceal that they held his birth to be its cause. The shameful secret and blame gave Eugene leverage in an old argument with his father, to let him escape Catholic school. Eugene transferred to the secular Betts Academy in Stamford, Connecticut. At Betts he made a good academic record and acquired a solid education, which he amplified by constant wide reading, by writing poems, by writing daily letters to parents, brother, nanny, and others. He had learned as early as primary school that through letter writing he could escape the immediate and create a world more pleasant than the world of nuns surrounding him. Fellow students remembered him at Betts, as at his previous schools, a loner, even tempered, very determined, somewhat more decadent in rebellion than was typical for the time.

The discovery of his mother's addiction caused his adolescence to abort and set off a decade-long binge of self-destructive behavior. He started drinking heavily and was probably a full-blown alcoholic before he was fifteen. His father's fame made it easy for Eugene, guided by Jamie, to wander casually through New York theatre dressing rooms. Tall and lean, exceptionally handsome, the son of a prominent father, Eugene fell easily

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into carousing with show girls, prostitutes, married women, women of affairs. He enrolled at Princeton in the fall of 1906 to take a science program, but attended so few classes that he was dropped for excessive cuts before the end of the spring term.

For the next two years Eugene drank and carried on with his brother and other wild friends, having numerous casual affairs. In 1909 he became involved with Kathleen Jenkins, daughter of a prominent, troubled family, who soon became pregnant. Fearing he would be sued by Kathleen's family, James arranged for Eugene to leave the country on a gold-prospecting expedition to Honduras. Before he left, however, Eugene secretly married Kathleen, apparently out of a sense of guilt or honor, a sense which did not extend to attempting to be husband or father. He saw Kathleen and his son only once more before the boy was eleven. The trip to Honduras gave Eugene a taste for adventure and over the next two years he made at least three more voyages as a sailor, attaining on his last the rating "able-bodied." His "A-B" certificate, which he cherished all his life, was the first sign that he might ever become self-supporting.

Although Eugene never lived with Kathleen, the marriage had an important consequence beside the birth of Eugene Jr. Late in 1911 Kathleen filed for divorce asking for neither support nor alimony. The petition seemed to bring home to Eugene the reality of the marriage and touched the enormous guilt he carried for his mother's addiction. His guilt led him to procure from several druggists enough of the opiate veronal to kill himself. In a Fulton Street flophouse where he was staying, he went to his room, hooked the door and ingested the lot. By chance a friend found him several hours later and, unable to rouse him, got help. The proprietor, afraid of having a death on the premises, called for a cab. Eugene was taken to Bellevue Hospital where his stomach was pumped and he was held several days for observation.

The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once wrote that certain wayward young people need to "touch rock-bottom" before they can begin to find themselves. The nearly successful suicide attempt had such an effect on Eugene. He made a partial detente with his father (who had thanklessly supported Eugene since he left Princeton), and got a job writing features and occasional reportage for a New London newspaper. (His father secretly underwrote his salary.) He also fell romantically in love with a local girl whom he tried to educate by foisting on her his favorite authors: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Wilde, Whitman, Swinburne, Baudelaire, Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam, Dowson and the like. His adolescence having in effect aborted in 1902, he now returned to it for another try. He would have other such

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romantic affairs over the next five years, each time begging his beloved to marry him, addressing letters to "own little wife" whether or not she would entertain his proposals.

Just as the resumed adolescence was getting under way, Eugene developed tuberculosis. The case was diagnosed in November 1912 and he entered a sanatorium where he cooperated fully with his treatment and was discharged the following June. While in the "san" he began thinking about writing plays. Within a year he had finished at least ten, one of them "Bound East for Cardiff," a play still frequently revived. He persuaded his father to send him to Harvard where he attended George Pierce Baker's play-writing course. From Baker he learned to write detailed scenarios before beginning composition and to work methodically. He intended to take a second year with Baker, but some dispute led his father to cancel the plan. Eugene returned to New York where he lived on a dollar a day from his father and whatever he could beg from drinking friends or earn for a few days' work on the docks. When he was sober he wrote. Once again he was living rough, hanging out with artists, philosophers, journalists and radicals. In six years at least five close friends died, three by suicide.

In 1916 a friend introduced him to people who had begun an anti-commercial theatre group the previous summer, The Provincetown Players. O'Neill became intimate with the journalists John Reed and Louise Bryant, members of the group who were living together and would soon marry. O'Neill had met them the previous winter, and during the summer he and Bryant became lovers. The affair continued off and on for over a year, before and after Bryant married Reed.

On 28 July 1916 the first performance of an O'Neill play took place. "Bound East for Cardiff" was produced by the Players in a makeshift theatre on the end of a pier in Provincetown. For the next ten years O'Neill worked with the Players in their several forms; they would produce several of his best-known early plays including *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. In fall, when the Players and O'Neill returned to New York, "Cardiff" opened the group's first New York bill in Greenwich Village. Over the next two seasons the players produced several more O'Neill plays, including "Before Breakfast," "In the Zone" and "The Long Voyage Home." Reed and Bryant went to Russia to witness the Revolution, which ended her affair with O'Neill.

Late in 1917 Eugene met Agnes Boulton and two months later, the two eloped to Provincetown where they married on 12 April. As a wedding gift, James O'Neill bought for Eugene and Agnes a former life-saving station near the outer tip of Cape Cod, elegantly remodelled by Mabel Dodge. The couple used it as a summer home for the next several years. On 30 October

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1919, their son Shane was born. Shortly after came the premiere of *Beyond the Horizon*. Then his father died.

James's death changed everything among the O'Neills. After his father stopped touring about 1914, Jamie always lived near his parents in a different hotel, drinking and carrying on with women at night but spending an hour or two with his mother most mornings. If James was present, Jamie would irritate and provoke his father, drink James's whiskey, and win his mother's sly approval for small victories over the family tyrant. After he married, Eugene grew particularly close to his father, tended to side with him in quarrels, and was uncomfortable with his mother. Ella, for her part, never got over feeling guilty toward Eugene, partly for being unable to care for him in his childhood, partly for blaming him for her affliction, and partly because simply seeing him reminded her of the addiction which she had escaped in 1914 and hated to remember.

With James dead, Ella and Jamie began spending much of every day with each other. For the first time since adolescence, simply because Ella asked him to, Jamie stopped drinking. He developed a successful system for betting on horses, and he and his mother often went to watch them run. In her memoir, Agnes recounted an anecdote Jamie had told her and Eugene. Ella would take her bath in the late morning after she and Jamie had breakfasted in her hotel room, then would retire to dress. While her bath water drained, Jamie would go to the tub, dabble his fingers in the water; immersing himself in her odor gave him a kind of bliss. He seemed happy and contented for the first time in his life, having his mother to himself. He became her secretary as she tried to straighten out James's complicated real estate and other holdings, writing lawyers, brokers and agents, evicting delinquent tenants, and the like.

Jamie and Ella went to Los Angeles where a property in Glendale had become valuable. While they arranged to sell it, Ella had a stroke caused by a brain tumor. All Jamie's reformation was instantly undone. Urged by a woman he knew, and again drinking heavily, Jamie tried to persuade his mother to give him the most valuable property in the estate rather than sharing it with Eugene. After wavering, Ella resisted the pressure. An old friend who was present during Ella's last days and who witnessed her will, described all the sordid events in a letter which was passed on to Eugene. When his mother died, Eugene lost both her and his idealization of his brother. With both he had much unfinished business.

Under any circumstances Eugene's mourning for his mother would have been difficult. On both sides their relations had always been overburdened with irrational guilt. Bowlby and others have shown that the more complex one's relations with the dead, the more difficult and slow the work of

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