

EUGENE O'NEILL-THE EUROPEAN

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In the spring of 1987 there was a stunning performance of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*¹ at the National Theatre in London. It was part of an international theatre season and had been previously staged at the Schaubühne in Berlin by Peter Stein. The whole concept of the production was an Expressionist spectacle and, as in Stein's original, was in German. O'Neill's remarkable talent, in his middle period plays, was for creating unforgettable images on stage, and this was truly reflected in the production's design by Lucio Fanti². The entire proscenium was filled with a wall of steel plates, rivetted together to create the ship's side, and these rolled away in sections to reveal the upper deck, the stokers' cramped and deliberately low quarters so that none of the actors could stand upright, and, most impressively, the stokers in the furnace room, simultaneously stoking fifteen boilers that emitted flame and heat as they were rhythmically filled with shovels full of coal. The appearance of Mildred, the steel magnate's daughter, as she descended like a white-faced, white-clothed marionette into the hell of the furnace room is a theatrical image that O'Neill would have felt fulfilled all his intentions. Similarly, Yank, the "Hairy Ape" with his low brow and extended jaw line, heavily made up as were his fellow crew members with almost mask-like faces, careering his way through a Sixth Avenue constructed on a stage which tilted sideways at almost 40 degrees, with towering and tilting skyscrapers and puppet-like promenaders truly achieved O'Neill's concept of the man brutalised by twentieth-century society, seeking help and revenge through the

Industrial Workers of the World and finally forced to take solace and shelter with the gorilla in the zoo.

This production, sixty-five years after the original one in the tiny Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village which proclaimed O'Neill's continuing position at the forefront of the new American drama, could not have been more different in scale or spectacle, but it confirmed O'Neill's commitment at that time to dealing with contemporary political and social problems as well as experimentation in expressionist theatre. Although O'Neill denied any direct influence from the new expressionists, especially Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*, he was undoubtedly much influenced by his association with Kenneth MacGowan, who in his *The Theatre of Tomorrow* (1922) described expressionist drama in detail. O'Neill certainly knew much of the theatrical movements in Europe through MacGowan, with whom he worked on all his middle period plays, and through Robert Edmund Jones, the designer and co-author with MacGowan of *Continental Stagecraft* (1923), a record of a European theatrical tour undertaken in 1922 by the two men to report on new theatrical productions in France, Germany, Sweden, Austria and Czechoslovakia. As well as describing the new productions of classic plays, such as *Richard III* in Berlin, they saw Ernst Toller's *Masse-Mensch*, which dealt with the conflict of the masses against the individual and both in terms of its visual and theatrical power as well as its theme it impressed O'Neill's two collaborators greatly. The "Triumvirate," as MacGowan, Jones and O'Neill came to be called, were responsible for many of O'Neill's more experimental plays and they worked together for many years, with Jones designing *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Fountain*, *The Great God Brown*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and *The Iceman Cometh*.

However, although *The Hairy Ape* deals with political problems and their solutions, it was by no means O'Neill's first play to do so. Having enrolled at Harvard in 1914³ to attend Professor George Pierce Baker's class in playwriting, O'Neill wrote several short plays, none of them particularly memorable, including *The Personal Equation*.⁴ This play, never to be performed, deals with the plan by a beautiful anarchist to blow up a trans-Atlantic liner as a signal to the "International Workers of the Earth" to seize power and lead the world to freedom from slavery. The play contains a somewhat adolescent view of anarchism, mixed up with the ideas of Bernard Shaw, Nietzsche, and Marx, but these interests were not only to surface in this rather lifeless play. At the same time, in 1914, O'Neill had published a poem in the New York Call. *Fratricide*⁵ called upon the workers of America to stand up for their rights and resist the power of the great corporations which he, and others, saw as dominating the lives of the ordinary worker.

What cause could there be more asinine
Than yours, ye slaves of bloody toil?
Is not your bravery sublime
Beneath a tropic sun to broil
And bleed and groanæ for Guggenheim!
And give your lives foræ Standard Oil!

Comrades awaken to new birth!
New values on the tables write!
What is your vaunted courage worth
Unless you rise up in your might
And cry: "All workers on the earth
Are brothers and WE WILL NOT FIGHT!"

O'Neill's own experiences on board ship as a young man, working with many seamen who, like Paddy in *The Hairy Ape* and Chris in *Anna Christie* had made a transition from old sailing ships to sweat in the stokeholes and engine rooms of the new steam ships, intensified his belief in the de-humanisation of man. It also appears to have made him aware of the exploitation of the working man in other areas, and he felt that socialism was the obvious answer. During the period immediately after the First World War, the disparity between rich and poor in America was becoming increasingly apparent and there was a great deal of social unrest in the USA, especially among the workers who had returned from fighting only to discover that their fate was to be exploitation by wealthy business concerns, or, alternatively, no job at all. During the post-war period and into the 1920s the Industrial Workers of the World were responsible for much union activity and clashes between workers, their employers, and the police were common in the big cities and in the agricultural areas of America. It was the world described so brilliantly by John Dos Passos in *The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen* and *The Big Money*, all published in the early thirties but dealing with the period from 1918 onwards. The young O'Neill had seen socialism as a possible salvation form America before the war and his reading of Marx was supported by the friends he made in Greenwich Village, many of whom were involved in the Provincetown Players. The group of radical thinkers and critics included Jack Reed, the war correspondent who organized a rally of workers in Madison Square Garden, wrote *Ten Days that Shook the World*, distinguished by a foreword by Lenin himself, and who was ultimately buried in the Kremlin. O'Neill's affair with his wife, Louise Bryant, brought him especially close to these individuals who were intimately connected with events in Russia in 1917, but since the 1880s there had been a strong, if often schismatic, anarchist movement in the United States. The most striking figure in the public's opinion

was Emma Goldman, the Russian immigrant who was arrested and imprisoned on a number of occasions during the early years of the century for her editorship of the magazine *Mother Barth* and her widespread lecturing and supporting of strikes and workers' action and implication in bombings and assassinations, especially that of President McKinley in 1901. The activities of the International Workers of the World or "Wobblies" were widely reported and their trials were relished by the public at large as evidence of Bolshevik infiltration of the USA. Senator Queen's speech in *The Hairy Ape* reveals this:

There is a menace existing in this country today which threatens the vitals of the fair Republic . . . I refer to that devil's brew of rascals, jailbirds, murderers and cut-throats who libel all honest working men by calling themselves the Industrial Workers of the world . . . For they represent an ever-present dagger pointed at the heart of the greatest nation the world has known, where all men are born free and equal, with equal opportunities to all . . . (Scene VI)

O'Neill's friends and associates in Greenwich Village were directly involved in this "devil's brew of rascals," particularly Terry Carlin, the drunken old man whom O'Neill recreated as Larry in *The Iceman Cometh* and Hippolyte Havel, the Czech anarchist whom Emma Goldman had brought back on her European trip in 1900 and who was celebrated as Hugo Kalmar in *Iceman*.

This play, written in 1946, harks back to the time when O'Neill was actively involved with the socialists and anarchists, not in an active political sense but both intellectually and emotionally. The adoption of new European revolutionary ideals and the intense immigrants who brought them to the USA meant that "The Movement" continued to be infiltrated and developed, with all the associated jealousies and betrayals that feature in the play. These characters are very different from the early socialists in O'Neill's plays: Parritt, who is trapped and conditioned by the Movement until he commits the crime of betraying his mother to the police; Hugo, the revolutionary who has suffered in solitary confinement for his beliefs; and Larry, who claims to have "given up the Movement" because of his inability to be totally committed to seeing things in black and white, being forced to seeing both sides of the question. Hugo sings revolutionary songs, dreams of a revolution, but is shown to be false when he displays a desire for power when he complains that his champagne is not properly iced. He is a rather pathetic character, a man whose dream has been destroyed, like the others in Harry Hope's saloon. Parritt is based on Don Vose, a participant in the case in 1910 when the anarchists bombed the Los Angeles *Times* and the protesters were finally apprehended through an informer in the Movement, the son of a leading anarchist woman. He is, in the course of the play,

forced to suicide to cope with his betrayal of his mother. Larry's conflict between his Irish Catholicism and his Socialist principles is very much that experienced by the young O'Neill, but Larry's complexity as a character, his disillusionment and his desire for death which comes with self-recognition indicates just how far O'Neill has progressed from the textbook Socialism which he swallowed along with many other doctrines as a young man, the most important of which was the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

This had come about as a result of a visit to Benjamin Tucker's bookshop in New York when O'Neill was eighteen years old. The bookshop specialised in "advanced" literature and was full of works by Shaw, Ibsen, Strindberg, Tolstoi, and Nietzsche—all considered to be irreverent and unacceptable by the America of the time but part of the European culture and literature which emerged around the turn of the century and which found its way, often in dubious translation, to the USA. O'Neill claimed that Shaw had introduced him to "Marx, Engels, Kropotkin" (Alexander 1962) and he is said to have read Marx's analysis of capitalism while working as a reporter in New London. O'Neill eagerly read *Thus Spake Zarathustra*⁶ and his discovery meant the beginning of many years of thought, argument, experimentation and confusion, both personally and dramatically. When asked, some twenty years later, in 1928, if he had a literary idol he replied that the answer was "in one word—Nietzsche."⁷ *Zarathustra* attacked all that society considered to be true and respectable. It denounced the Christian religion, it put forward a completely new concept of good and evil, and it was written in such a dramatic, poetic style with overtones of Old Testament prophecy that it fulfilled the need in O'Neill for a "religion" to replace the Roman Catholicism of his childhood that had been shattered by its inability to solve the problems of his mother's morphine addiction, his brother's alcoholism and his father's unreasonable behaviour—all dramatically and heart-rendingly portrayed in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Nietzsche had died, after ten years of insanity, in 1900, but by the time of his death his work had spread to other European countries and the USA, influencing Shaw, Ibsen, Jack London among many others. Nietzsche was written about in articles, particularly those by the great journalist H. L. Mencken and in the *Smart Set* periodical, so O'Neill's discovery in the bookshop was of a writer who was highly regarded throughout the literary and theatrical world of Europe, and whose philosophy had not yet been tarnished by the upheavals of Germany in the 1930s and Elisabeth Forster Nietzsche's proclamation of Hitler as a reincarnation of her brother's Superman.

O'Neill read at least three of Nietzsche's works, *Zarathustra*, *The Birth of Tragedy*,⁸ and *The Joyful Wisdom*. He said in 1917, while writing his socialist

plays, that "*Zarathustra* has influenced me more than any book I've ever read. I ran into it when I was eighteen and I've always possessed a copy since then and every year I reread it and am never disappointed, which is more than I can say of almost any other book. (That is, never disappointed in it as a work of art. Spots of its teaching I no longer concede.)"⁹ It is difficult to determine when he first read the other works, but he certainly re-read them in Bermuda in 1925, commenting that *The Birth of Tragedy* was "the most stimulating work on drama ever written" (Shaeffer 1973b). His second wife, Agnes Boulton, recalls that *Zarathustra* was a sort of Bible to him which he kept by his bed, and she states that he often discussed Nietzsche with his friends in Greenwich Village (Boulton 1958). In June 1913 the newspaper *The Nation* stated that those most drawn to Nietzsche were "socialistically inclined."¹⁰ This was certainly true of the Hell Hole habitués, and there is evidence of much discussion of the political and theatrical aspects of Nietzsche's work as well as his philosophy. A fellow student of O'Neill's at Harvard claims that he and O'Neill discussed politics which wavered between extreme Marxian (sic) socialism on the one hand and extreme Nietzschean individualism on the other, although O'Neill is said to have leaned strongly towards Nietzsche (Alexander 1962).

If one examines virtually all of O'Neill's plays, there is evidence of his absorption of Nietzsche's ideas and significant adaptations of Nietzsche's philosophy as well as direct quotation, especially from *Zarathustra* and *The Joyful Wisdom*. The Nietzschean concept of Eternal Recurrence, exact repetition of situation and existence, is demonstrated in the structure of *The Great God Brown*, in the Prologue and Epilogue. In its scientific explanation it is explored by O'Neill in *Dynamo*. In *The Fountain* O'Neill experiments with natural recurrence, as he does in *Strange Interlude*, a play which also adapts the Nietzschean concept of the death of God. Many of the images of life and death which occur in *More Stately Mansions* and *A Touch of the Poet* are directly from *Zarathustra* and O'Neill's great spectacular with a cast of over 200, *Lazarus Laughed*, is almost a dramatisation of this work. Even the early realistic sea plays and the last plays such as *The Iceman Cometh* have strongly Nietzschean elements. Among O'Neill's papers are pages of quotations copied from Nietzsche, and many of these are used without alteration in the plays¹¹.

The theatrical influence of Nietzsche came in an indirect but extremely practical sense through O'Neill's association with George Cram (Jig) Cook, who, with Susan Glaspell¹², his wife and a playwright and novelist in her own right, were responsible for creating the theatre on the wharf where O'Neill's first play was performed. Cook wrote plays, poetry, and felt that the American theatre was ripe for some new "ethical ideas." O'Neill became the playwright who was going to bring this about, but he could not have done it without Cook's help in

practical terms. Cook was a devoted follower of Greek history and theatre, particularly in his belief in Dionysus as a creative force in the universe. He maintained that the American theatre was lacking in the true spirit, as experienced by the Greeks, and, like O'Neill, was against the commercialism of Broadway and the passion of the tired businessman for the Follies. Cook wanted to form a group that would work together in the spirit of Dionysus, as expressed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to form a new type of theatre that would relate to twentieth-century America but at the same time would create a feeling of the religious, mystical responses that were believed to be part of the festivals of Athens. The audience was to be a part of a "spirit shared by all," a new and vital dramatic experience. The Provincetown Players, under Cook's leadership, were responsible for producing all of O'Neill's early plays, as well as others dealing with new themes, such as Freud's theories, the imported and highly fashionable psychoanalysis, and socialist politics. In all, seventeen of O'Neill's early plays were produced under Cook's inspiration, including the group of sea plays which include *Bound East for Cardiff*, *The Long Voyage Home*, and *The Moon and the Caribees*. In 1920, when O'Neill won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beyond the Horizon*, he also wrote and had performed under Cook's imaginative direction *The Emperor Jones*, which is perhaps O'Neill's first real attempt at a new form of staging with its drums, sustained monologue, rapidly shifting settings all of which convey the fear experienced by the black Pullman porter who becomes a self-styled Emperor and who is gradually reduced to primitive terror as his veneer of sophistication and power is stripped away. Not only was it experimental in form, but O'Neill used a black actor, Charles Gilpin, to play Brutus Jones. It is in this play, which is considered to have changed the face of American theatre, only to be followed by O'Neill's further experimental work with MacGowan and Jones.

In *The Theatre of Tomorrow* MacGowan states that the new drama "will attempt to transfer to dramatic art the illumination of those deep and vigorous and eternal processes of the human soul which the psychology of Freud and Jung has given us through study of the unconscious," and it is through MacGowan's vision and Jones's ability to transfer it onto the stage that O'Neill was encouraged and inspired to write plays that hitherto would have been unperformable. Although the prevailing mood in Europe at the time was towards Expressionism, the Triumvirate achieved something much more in that the American theatre as a whole was still bound by rigid nineteenth century conventions of subject matter and staging. O'Neill's own father, James O'Neill, had, as he states in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, played in *The Count of Monte Cristo* for twenty-five years, touring with stock companies renowned for their melodramatic and outdated productions. *The Hairy Ape* may have been O'Neill's first

Expressionist play, but he was concerned with Yank's individuality to a greater extent than many other playwrights in term of the portrayal of character. He said in 1924: "I personally do not believe that an idea can be readily put over to an audience except through characters. When it sees 'A Man' and 'A Woman' as just abstractions, it loses the human contact by which it identifies itself to the protagonist... the character Yank remains a man and everyone recognises him as such."¹³ In this O'Neill departed from many of his contemporaries in Europe in that he always created strongly memorable characters rather than representative types, but he was constantly aware of what he called "the Force behind,"¹⁴ whether one called it God, Fate, biological past. He stated that he wanted to interpret "Life in terms of lives"¹⁵ and many of his plays show that the characters have to assert their individuality, their right to free will, in opposition to circumstances, Fate or God. This is particularly true in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where O'Neill takes as his model the *Oresteia* and transfers it to New England with the Mannon family trapped by their hypocrisy, past misdeeds and denial of truth and life, cloaked in a strong Puritan tradition of repression. Similar themes emerge in the earlier *Desire Under the Elms* with its mixture of Puritanism and Dionysus, and *Strange Interlude* with the life force continuing through the persona of Nina Leeds. The inspiration for this comes partly from Strindberg, one of the earliest influences on O'Neill.

In 1936, in his Nobel Prize speech which was read for him in Stockholm, O'Neill made reference to Strindberg, the dramatist who had inspired him at the very beginning. He said, "For me he remains, as Nietzsche remains, in his sphere, the master, still to this day more modern than any of us, still our leader" (Shaeffer 1973b). Having seen a production of *The Ghost Sonata* in 1924 O'Neill related it to other Strindberg plays and claimed that Strindberg interpreted the spiritual conflicts in the most modern way. He states that the form of "super-naturalism" employed by Strindberg, the "behind life" aspects of his plays are the root of all Expressionist theatre (O'Neill 1924). There is evidence of a Strindbergian influence in O'Neill's very early play, *Before Breakfast*, and it is easy to see how the complexity of relationships in Strindberg's plays would relate to O'Neill's own family. However, by comparison with the bland fare of the American theatre, Strindberg's subject matter of sexuality, psychological force, sharply focussed conflict seemed to O'Neill a revelation of truth in dramatic form. In later plays, O'Neill's characters are welded together in Strindbergian power struggles, but he truly developed his own unique playwriting style which worked on a far larger and more wide-ranging scale than Strindberg had ever done.

Perhaps a simple indication of the European influences on O'Neill can be observed in the contents of the bookcase in his most realistic and autobiograp-

hical play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Marx, Ibsen, Shaw, Strindberg, Swinburne, Rossetti, Wilde, Dowson, all of whom, to a greater or lesser extent, formed America's first great dramatist.

NOTES

1. *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* in 16 volumes published by Jonathan Cape, London. This series contains all the published plays except "*The Children of the Sea*" and *Three Other Unpublished Plays*, ed. J. M. Atkinson (Washington: NCR Microcard Editions, 1972). All references in this article are to the Cape edition.
2. The revised text, in German, and Fanti's designs for this production in *The Hairy Ape* (*Der haarige Affe*, 1921/22), Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz, Berlin.
3. The most detailed and comprehensive biography of O'Neill is the two volume work of Louis Shaeffer (1973).
4. *The Personal Equation*. Manuscript (Houghton Library, Harvard University).
5. In O'Neill 1980.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. with an introduction by Alexander Tille (London: H. Henry and Co., 1896). This was the original translation read by O'Neill.
7. "A Eugene O'Neill Miscellany" (unsigned), *New York Sun* 1 Dec. 1928. Rpt. in Shaeffer 1973a.
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. A. Haussmann; *The Joyful Wisdom*, trans. Thomas Common. Published as part of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 18 vols., ed. Oscar Levy (London: T. N. Foulis, 1909-1913). These are the translations read by O'Neill.
9. Letter to Benjamin de Casseres, 22 June 1927. Rpt. in "Nietzsche and O'Neill: A Study in Affinity," *Orbis Litterarum* 23 (1968).
10. *The Nation* 12 June 1913.
11. Beinecke Library, Yale University.
12. Glaspell (1927) gives an account of the relationship between Cook, herself and O'Neill.
13. Interview for the *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 March 1924. Rpt. in Cargill, Fagin and Fisher 1961.
14. Letter to A. H. Quinn, published in Quinn 1945.
15. Ibid.

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