

“ A Decade of O’Neill Criticism : 1960–1969 ”

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Since Eugene O’Neill’s death in 1953, a great number of books and articles on the dramatist have been published. Especially remarkable are those that appeared in the 1960’s from the viewpoint of the development of O’Neill criticism. This requires only a glance at the following list even limited to books written in English, solely devoted to the study of O’Neill.

(I) Critical study

(1) Monograph

Sophus K. Winther, *Eugene O’Neill: A Critical Study*.

Original edition, New York : Random House, 1934 ; Revised and enlarged edition, New York : Russell & Russell, 1961.

Clifford Leech, *O’Neill*. New York : Groves Press, 1963 ;
Edinburgh & London : Oliver & Boyd, 1963.

Frederic Carpenter, *Eugene O’Neill*. New Haven, Conn. :
College & University Press, Twayne Publishers, 1964.

John Gassner, *Eugene O’Neill*. Minneapolis, Minn. : Univer-
sity of Minnesota Press, 1965.

John H. Raleigh, *The Plays of Eugene O’Neill*. Carbondale,
Ill. : Southern Illinois University Press, 1965.

Olivia Coolidge, *Eugene O'Neill*. New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966.

Winifred D. Frazer, *Love as Death in The Iceman Cometh*. Gainesville, Fla. : University of Florida Monographs (Humanities No. 27), 1967.

Timo Tiusanen, *O'Neill's Scenic Image*. Princeton, N. J. : Princeton University Press, 1968.

Egil Törnqvist, *A Drama of Souls*. Uppsala, Sweden : Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri, 1968.

Chester C. Long, *The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill*. The Hague, The Netherlands : Mouton, 1968.

(2) Collection

Oscar Cargill *et al.* (eds.), *O'Neill and His Plays*. New York : New York University Press, 1961 ; London : Peter Owen, 1962.

John Gassner (ed.), *O'Neill : A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice-Hall, 1964.

Jordan Y. Miller (ed.), *Playwright's Progress : O'Neill and the Critics*. Chicago, Ill. : Scott, Foresman & Co., 1965.

John H. Raleigh (ed.), *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Iceman Cometh*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. : Prentice-Hall, 1968.

(II) Biography

Doris Alexander, *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill*. New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962.

Arthur & Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill*. New York : Harpers & Brothers, 1962. The abridged edition, New York : Dell Publishing Co., 1965.

Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill : Son and Playwright*. Boston : Little, Brown & Co., 1968.

(III) Bibliography

Ralph Sanborn & Barrett Clark (eds.), *A Bibliography of the Works of Eugene O'Neill*. Original edition, New York : Random House, 1931 ; Reissued edition, Benjamin Blom, 1965.

Jordan Y. Miller, *Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic : A Summary and Bibliographical Checklist*. Hamden, Conn. : Shoe String, 1962.

(IV) Plays of Eugene O'Neill

More Stately Mansions (Shortened from the author's partly revised script by Karl Gierow and edited by Donald Gallup). New Haven, Conn. : Yale University Press, 1964.

Ten "Lost" Plays of Eugene O'Neill. New York : Random House, 1964.

The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill (Edited by Travis Bogard). New York : Random House, 1967.

(V) Lexicon

J. Russell Reaver (Comp.), *An O'Neill Concordance*. Detroit, Mich. : Gale Research, 1969.

The present paper is intended to follow up the progress of O'Neill criticism in the decade : 1960-69. Regrettably articles in periodicals and discussions in book sections had to be excluded, for a treatment of those works, however noteworthy, would have been beyond the capacity of a review of this length.

In the field of critical studies one will perceive a startling variety of viewpoints and approaches treating the same subject. Sophus Winter focuses his effort on the clarification of the causes of the dramatic characters' tragic fates and the meaning of the plays from the social, as well as philosophical, points of view, which reflect the current thought of the age when this work was first done, a lively interest in man versus society in the 1930's. Clifford Leech's *O'Neill*, a compact booklet, and John Gassner's *Eugene O'Neill*, too, a pamphlet of handy size, present vivid portrayals of O'Neill and the world of his plays, thus meeting the demand of those who are particularly interested in the up-to-date survey of the dramatist. Although it is beyond the reach of these two books to make minute examinations of the plays, they are a helpful guide to O'Neill study just as Olivia Coolidge's *Eugene O'Neill* may be counted as the kindest introduction to young students of O'Neill. In Frederic Carpenter's *Eugene O'Neill* which is of less than 200 pages, one may find a sound, impartial appraisal of the plays, which will prove to be a very illuminating presentation for general students of the dramatist. Every explanation is closely related with the dramatist's personal life into which the author seems to have an unusually deep and proper insight. This has made his work all the more interesting to those who are

fairly well acquainted with O'Neill as a man as well as with his plays. On the other hand one who is not satisfied with his final chapter "Greatness and Limitations," which sketches as, according to the author himself, "the major figure of American literature" or "one of the major dramatists of the modern world," would duly fulfill his needs but perhaps with the result of increasing questions in John H. Raleigh's *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. This work requires a still more minute observation. The author's primary interest seems to be in an approach to O'Neill as the *American* writer. Throughout five chapters included in the book he attempts to bring light to characteristic qualities of O'Neill's plays in the context of American culture. Particularly noteworthy is his comparison of O'Neill with the 19th-century American writers, especially Henry Adams, Herman Melville and Ralph Emerson. His general attempt is undoubtedly rewarding because it tries to prove that the universal concerns shared by O'Neill, Adams, Melville, and Emerson are unmistakably "American" belonging to the main strand of the national thoughts. At the same time, however, the author should have assured us that O'Neill is too complicated, too "unorthodox" a writer to be neatly set into the clear-cut frame-work of the literary tradition of America. In his final chapter the author presents synthetic evaluation of O'Neill. Especially notable is his idea of the four patterns of general American consciousness : (1) chance (2) mutability (3) pantheism (4) determinism. He tries to correlate these four elements with the four leading characters in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Throughout the book this final assumption may be the most critical judgment. Except for the combination of pantheism--Edmund (O'Neill himself), the author's

efforts in correlating determinism—Mary (his mother), luck—Tyrone, Sr. (his father), mutability—Tyrone, Jr. (his brother) will be exceedingly illuminating to us. The author's viewpoint and approach to his subject are unmistakably sound ones. Here lies the final value of this unique book.

In the later period of the decade some specific studies on O'Neill's plays appear one after another. Winifred Dusenbury Frazer's *Love as Death in The Iceman Cometh* published as one of the series of University of Florida Monographs deals with the limited subject which is generally considered a central theme of this play. The author's attempt is to clarify O'Neill's recurrent motif: "Belief in love is the greatest of man's illusions." She discusses O'Neill's love-death theme in terms of setting, characters and action, in reference to other plays such as *Welded*, *Dynamo*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *Days Without End*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, etc. As far as she confines her argument to *The Iceman* she seems to stand safe, because she treats love in O'Neill's plays solely as a negative function, leading his protagonists to final destruction, which properly fits in the central theme in *The Iceman*. Hence her conclusion, "Woman to [O'Neill's characters] is contaminated and contagious with the virulent disease of death" (p. 61. "Conclusion"). We can only say that it might not always be appropriate to try to apply her fixed idea of O'Neill's "love" to the treatment of the other plays.

Twentieth Century Interpretation of The Iceman Cometh edited by John H. Raleigh is one of the series of criticisms on major works of American and English literature. This collection attracts our special attention for its concentrating on O'Neill's single play. It

comprises two parts : one including letters, interviews, reviews and O'Neill's own comment ; the other, examinations and evaluations of the various aspects of the play. These are contributed by nearly twenty persons with different ideas, from varied viewpoints. In spite of such a variety of contributors, the collection has a remarkable balance of the contents to make O'Neill's sense of modern man's tragedy effectively revealed. This leads to an exposition of the failure of man "who lives in the most successful country in the world." The editor, it seems, has a sure sense of the world we live in.

O'Neill's Scenic Images discusses, noteworthy, a special realm of stage technique. No other attempt of the same sort has so far appeared at least in book length. The author begins with a careful definition of the term "scenic images" by referring to many O'Neill scholars and drama critics, and then goes on to treat O'Neill's dramatic usage of "foghorn" and "mask" and many other devices, thus exploring the plays as a synthetic art. It follows that this does not make his study a mere quest for the dramatist's visual crafts. This may well be called one of the most ambitious studies of significant qualities of O'Neill's drama, though not a perfect approach. There seems to be some room for reconsideration in his argument. The author, discussing psychological application to the O'Neill play, asserts "when the theories of psychoanalysis are used to explain art, what is explained by them is not art." (p. 25). In another place, however, he argues in regard to an analysis of O'Neill's works : "the basic paradox in Eugene O'Neill : he was a divided monomaniac." (p. 343). The contradiction is obvious. Why and how can the latter judgment be validated without psychological analysis involved?

Nevertheless this sort of question may not discount to any great extent the unique value of this work. All in all, Timo Tiusanen, a foreign student of the American theatre, has succeeded in breaking through many difficult barriers ; language, experience, culture, etc. The most noticeable merit of his attempt may be found not in his approach to the stage devices, but in his affirmative synthetic review of the plays, especially his penetrative interpretation of the relationship of dramatic media to thematic ideas.

In contrast with Tiusanen's approach, Egil Törnquist in *A Drama of Souls* starts off with examination of O'Neill's fundamental ideas or "tragic vision." Then he looks into theatrical aspects: audible devices, characters' visual quality, sound effects and dialogue, etc., all of which are realizations of O'Neill's dramatic thoughts. As for the latter, the author owes not a little to a number of previous studies on O'Neill, philosophical or psychological. He seems to have made as effective use of them as possible in order to see O'Neill's inner world. Thus he clarifies O'Neill's struggle to embody his vital idea of "behind life" through "super-naturalistic" stage technique. It is obvious that the author tries to discover the secret elements of O'Neill's drama, and his efforts could have been much more successful if he had worked out his own views of the dramatist's thoughts for his specific purpose.

The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill takes up an appropriate theme for the clarification of many important plays of O'Neill. Even those who know very little about O'Neill's plays would be able to understand what the author tries to say, for in this book each play selected is summarized in

preparation for the development of what the author defines as Nemesis. For the final purpose he analyzes "Nemesis" into four categories: the *lex talionis*, social or reasoned justice, divine justice, and tragic justice. This classification seems effective in a limited degree, his argument being clear in the framework of this formula. On the other hand, however, this division results in somewhat stereotyped pictures of O'Neill's plays rather than a freehand appreciation of them. About his selection of the plays the author should have been a little more comprehensive, for one may quite naturally wonder why such plays as *The Rope*, *Anna Christie*, *The Emperor Jones* and some other proper works are not being discussed while *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* have been picked up for his particular discussion. At least the author's reasons for the omission of these plays should have been duly given. Even so this work does not only deal with the very important element of O'Neill's plays but attempts to evaluate each one from the viewpoint of modern tragedy however difficult the approach is. It is this very angle of observation that has made the author's effort deserve considerable attention, even if the author's conclusion hardly goes beyond what his predecessors have already attained.

The collections of various memoirs and criticisms on O'Neill and his own letters are really helpful contributions to a possible synthetic review of O'Neill. Although most of the harvests in those collections seem to have already been published in other materials, they are very precious guides especially to those who have been heavily handicapped in getting access to the rare papers once published. Among

these collections what attracts our particular attention is, as we have observed, the volume devoted to *The Iceman Cometh*. This may be a signal for a coming compilation of criticisms on O'Neill along the same line and in more detached perspectives.

Of the biographies published in this decade the Gelbs' *O'Neill* is the most exhaustive study almost overshadowing the other ones. It has proven that no substantial study of O'Neill can be made without referring to, or making use of, the details of information supplied by it. But Doris Alexander's attempt is not in the least negligible. Her *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill* brings light to the inside aspects of O'Neill, a failure of him as a son, husband, and father. The author probes into his personality in a great measure in terms of Freudian theories. Thus she has proven to be the first biographer to try for a study of O'Neill's personality on a book scale from the psychological point of view, just as Doris Falk made the first psychoanalytic criticism on O'Neill's works in book size in her *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension* (Rutgers University Press, 1958). Putting our points simply, neither of those works, however laborious, can claim to be a "definitive" work or "absolute" case history of the dramatist. There are many questions about the contents of each biography. Among them particularly noteworthy is one put forth by Mr. Murray Hartman at Long Island University, who has pointed out in *The Modern Drama* (May, 1963 ; Vol. VI, No. 1, p.91) a crucial difference existing between the Gelbs and Alexander as to the time of the beginning of Ella's addiction to dope ; the former puts it some time after O'Neill's birth while the latter as early as in 1887

just a year before his birth. Which is true is not the question to be easily answered in view of O'Neill's later physical sufferings (somehow attributed to heredity) as well as of his agony resulting from what is thought to be his guilt consciousness. Another remark, which seems more radical, has been offered by Dr. Toshio Kimura, who pointed out concerning the Gelbs' work in *The Doshisha American Studies* (in Japanese : March, 1965 ; No. 2, p.79 & p.80.) that the most part of the description is devoted not to the clarification of the central 'core' of the dramatist O'Neill but rather to the accumulation of external affairs surrounding and reflecting the 'core' itself, with a suggestion that "there should be another biography to come out with a different approach."

Just as expected, a large volume of biography appeared after a time : Louis Sheaffer's *O'Neill : Son and Playwright* in 1968. As with the Gelbs, the author met a number of people who knew O'Neill and devoted about seven years to the collection, examination and compilation of the vast materials he found. In the present volume he deals with O'Neill's life from his birth through 1920 when his first full-length play *Beyond the Horizon* was produced on Broadway. The period after that is expected to be dealt with in the forthcoming second volume which is to accomplish his biography. The author gives acute situations of the life of Eugene and his wife Agnes in terms of the series of correspondence between them. It is a vivid presentation in the author's arrangement, telling us how painstakingly O'Neill was making his way in the critical period just before his first production in the commercial theatre. One of the most remarkable phases of this work is a persistent attempt to relate everything in

O'Neill's plays with his actual life. In this attempt, however, there occurs a difficult problem. Can we find any reasonable basis here on which fictional truth in art and actuality in biographical fact are integrated? In the author's treatment, it seems, the two elements on different levels are forced to fuse without adequate validity. However, the great merit of this book cannot be discounted by this weak point. It may safely be called one of the most ambitious attempts ever made on O'Neill. Obviously this has brought the enigmatic life of the dark man to proper light. In his process the author never tries to make a simple effort to compile "facts about O'Neill." On the other hand he carefully avoids such psychological biases as seem to have entrapped so many ardent O'Neillians. Thus the author has succeeded in following a middle, but very narrow, course to the complicated world of the dramatist both as a man and an artist throughout this unique biography.

Even so, putting our observations together, we may safely say that none could surpass the monumental work by the Gelbs at least by now. The established value of the Gelbs' *O'Neill*, we must add, produced the abridged edition by the authors themselves. For the purpose of emphasizing the points in the original volume they cut out quoted passages and too detailed narrations here and there, thus making it a compact history of the playwright's life. They precisely followed up the original way of description, leaving the five major sections as they were, while they boldly rearranged the chapters throughout the original edition, which is considered necessary for this size of book, and this does not seem to debase the main value of the original.

As to bibliography we have had two works published. One of them is the reissued edition of the original by R. Sanborn and B. Clark. This contains some reference materials on O'Neill's first produced plays and scarcely known poems. Those poems will enable us to see some inner aspects of young O'Neill, his tormented soul and yearning for the "horizon," highly suggestive of his poetic touch expressed in his later plays and of the negative inarticulateness characteristic of many of the dramatic personae he was to create.

Jordan Miller's *Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic* is not only an exhaustive attempt in this field but obviously one of the most comprehensive guides for students of O'Neill to make a scholarly approach to the dramatist or his plays. This contains bibliographical studies made about the dramatist's career on the basis of the vast materials theretofore available. While it does not provide at large any novel approach to, or ingenious study of, the dramatist, nor leads us into any further depth of his world (neither is its purpose), it undoubtedly gives us helpful resources with which it may be possible for us to make a much more rigorous study or better-founded research on O'Neill. In a sense this useful guide has made O'Neill study much more laborious than ever, as the students now must look through, or refer to, the detailed information supplied here before he can be satisfied of the validity of what he has done.

The recent publications of O'Neill's plays have exposed the earliest works kept in privacy as "lost" and some of the later plays. *More Stately Mansions*, one of the latter, a shortened version rewritten by Karl Gierow who first produced the play, reveals a facet of

O'Neill's picture of the "Cycle" plays as it is a sequel to *A Touch of the Poet* in a series of *A Tale of the Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, scarcely known to the general reader. Therefore it will help students of O'Neill take a whole view of the playwright's canon. *The Later Plays of Eugene O'Neill* includes four plays: *Ah, Wilderness!*, *A Touch of the Poet*, *Hughie*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, all of which were written after *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931). This collection will help us know O'Neill's later view of life as well as maturity in his technique. But even if we read the lengthy introduction by the editor, we may still wonder why these four particular plays have been selected out of more than half a dozen ones written during the same period. It leads us to doubt that the editor had a principle on which he made his collection. But at least this publication, too, confirms the relative importance of O'Neill's later works.

The compilation of *An O'Neill Concordance* seems to be based on the needs of a systematic approach to O'Neill. This is the first compilation of O'Neill's words by the use of computer. The massive work, consisting of three volumes, includes about 280,000 index words in 1846 pages in all. It will not only help a methodic approach to O'Neill's style and the structure of his plays but contribute to the clarification of some personal disposition of his. We may make an effective use of it by seeing frequencies, for example, of significant words enlisted. However, the laborious publication gives us two fundamental questions at least. One is about the listing of the plays. Why are some of the earliest ones called "lost" plays left out? What

about the omission of such notable plays as *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, *The First Man*, *The Fountain*, and *Gold*, all of which are more or less significant products of the playwright's middle period? If *More Stately Mansions*, which was rewritten by another hand, can be listed, why can those works not have a claim for it? The other question is about the mechanical treatment of the listed words. The bulky material arranged alphabetically is enough to puzzle us, as we will miss the point of the word since its meaning could be grasped only in the context of the play in which it appears. For example, the index word FORCE (Vol. II, p. 167) contains 56 phrases where it is used, and FORCED, likewise 131, FORCES, 107, all with varied grammatical uses and different connotations. No reasonable answer for both questions can be found in any part of the Concordance. Even though *An O'Neill Concordance* could be a "helpful source of information to all who are concerned about the values found in O'Neill's plays," as it proclaims, it all depends on how to use it.

All in all this prolific decade of O'Neill criticism has given us such complicated elements and phases as we have observed that it is almost beyond our simple definition or conclusive estimation. Even so, having surveyed the hitherto published criticisms in book form since 1960, we may safely single out some interesting features in this decade of O'Neill criticism in comparison with the previous period. Among them the following are considered most significant: the biographical approach to O'Neill's plays has been much more emphasized; discussion of each play has been more synthetic in view of the results other critics have so far accomplished; the general agreement has

been reached that it is O'Neill's later plays that deserve our greatest attention.

It is particularly noteworthy that since about the middle of the decade we begin to observe two predominant inclinations in the criticism. One is a trend of daring attempt to view O'Neill's plays in long-range, historical and cultural perspectives, as represented by J. H. Raleigh's *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*; the other is a trend of specific study of O'Neill from particular viewpoint or in terms of special theme or individual work, as exemplified by T. Tiusanen's *O'Neill's Scenic Images*, C. C. Long's *The Role of Nemesis in the Structure of Selected Plays by Eugene O'Neill* or W. D. Frazer's *Love as Death in The Iceman Cometh*.

Apparently these two trends are mutually independent, but virtually they share the same basic interest in this enigmatic dramatist, and it is most important to the development of our O'Neill criticism that both of them be effective in helping one another.

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