Chapter 7

Final Picture

The foregoing analysis of Eugene O'Neill's experiments directs attention to his mastery of the art of the theatre in its manifestations on the stage. In more ways than one, he can be called a pioneer who blazed new paths and struck new lines of investigation in the realm of drama. During his life-time the impact of his thought was tremendous and the connotations of reaction—both favourable and unfavourable—to his novel and unorthodox plays were varied and numerous. Yet despite his failings, he came to be ranked with the greatest master minds of the world.¹

O'Neill's influence was not only confined to his own country. His plays inspired writing in other countries also: there were two Chinese adaptations of *The Emperor Jones*—The *Yang Shao* by Yung Shen (1934-1955), and The *Vill* by T'ao Yu (pen-name of Tung Chia-pao, 1939—) written in the conventional style and a new dialect. Similarly T'ao Yu's *The Peking Man* (1942) was suggested by *The Hurricane*.

O'Neill's return to the theatre in 1946 with *The Iceman Cometh* after *Days Without End* (1934) was a historic event. As a critic noted, only Bernard Shaw and O'Neill warranted the distinction among living dramatists whose plays were produced and published simultaneously.² The posthumous production of the play beginning with *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (November 7, 1956) took the critical world by storm. Gilbert Seldes remarked:

> From the one-meter of the sea through *Somersby Inequalities* at least, with *Long Day's Journey Into Night* as a masterly example, all the plays were bad but they come to life on the stage. In *Long Day's Journey Into Night* the sense of theatre is still strong.³

This was followed by a presentation of *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (May 2, 1957), *A Touch of the Poet* (October 2, 1958), and last but not least *Ensign* (December 22, 1964). During four years (1956 through 1959) Anna Christie and Mr.ellido were presented in the musical scores *New Trial in Town* and *Take Me Along*, respectively. Besides, *The Emperor Jones* and *H moyning Becomes Electra* have also been presented in opera form.
Notwithstanding these all-too-obvious traces of O'Neill's greatness, the potent influence of his genius has continued to be felt upon succeeding theatrical artists. Sean O'Casey testifying to it remarked:

Before (O'Neill) the theatre had been the place of third-class jugglers and thimble-riggers, and it wasn't till O'Neill came in (like Christ in the Temple) with the whip of his plays and drove these traffickers out... 4

And Arthur Miller:

Who dares challenge the audience as he did? Who does use whatever form seems suitable to his life at the moment? ...

He reached, you see... here stood a man who sought prophecy, the ultimate fate, the last word. 5

 Appropriately enough Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee in America are, in so many respects, the inheritors of O'Neill's legacy in the theatre. Their *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *Camino Real* (1953) and *The American Dream* (1960) respectively share the thought and vision of O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* and *Marco Millions*. These five plays, in fact, concentrate almost exclusively upon the theme of the American success-failure (material property inversely proportioned with spiritual fecundity or loss of soul) proposed to be illustrated by O'Neill in his still-born play 'cycle' entitled *A Tale of Possessors Self-possessed* and attempt a "literary expose of the myth" in dramatic terms long after the American writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, Clyde Fitch, Edward Sheldon or Eugene Walter had made "feeble gestures at portraying the ill effects of over-indulgence in and blind acceptance of the myth". 7

Miller's *After the Fall* (1964) in its long self-revelation resembles O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

In general the basic premise of Arthur Miller's drama approximates O'Neill's conception viz. that society as an image-making and a purveyor of myths and prejudices provided the false faces and false values which modern man wears. The implication is that the individual has little choice - that he can conform and be destroyed (like Joe Keller and Willy Loman) or that he can refuse to conform and be destroyed (like John Proctor and Eddie Carbone). But the individual can retain
his integrity in the midst of this disintegration. This is a reinterpretation of the theme of 'belongingness' projected by O'Neill. A playwright, according to Miller's definition of social drama, is to be concerned with both psychological man and social man i.e. with the inevitable problem of identity. The first title for Death of a Salesman was The Inside of his Head which would suit After the Fall just as well.

In Tennessee Williams we meet with a dramatist who dramatises the political events, philosophical perceptions, and social conditions of an age in the language of the common man. He borrows elements of the symbolic structure from Christian theology, Greek mythology, Freudian psychology, and from the cultural history of the United States, particularly that of the rural South. His distinction, in fact, lies in developing a theatrical language, a system of communication with its own themes, types of character, modes of speech, styles of acting, and patterns of staging. This poetic language had a parallel in an emerging art of the mise-en-scène - an art of production which had been given impetus in the twenties by O'Neill and the members of the Province-town Group. His dramatic conception was to deal with a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of the realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture. 8

Williams is, thus, significant as a dramatists for acquiring skill in the use of a conventional language common to the entire range of activities which characterised the developing American theatre. Like O'Neill he acquired a practical understanding of the drama in the theatre itself (by his apprenticeship with The Mummer of St. Louis, Missouri) and by establishing new relationships with the professional world of designers and actors. Between 1947 and 1960 Elia Kazan staged four plays of Williams' major period: A Street-Car Named Desire, Camino Real, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Sweet Bird of Youth. Above all, the cinematic structure of his plays is the greatest novel feature.

Stylistically, however, Edward Albee and the Theatre of the Absurd emerge as the greatest experimenters. Devaluation of language is a major characteristic, a distinguishing mark of the Theatre of the Absurd, and Albee...
(like August Strindberg) is most brilliant when he places two characters, boiling with hate, in a face-to-face confrontation. With his talent for invective, he makes his characters claw at one another fascinatingly. In writing an incandescent fight he is only a little short of Eugene O'Neill of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. In *The Zoo Story* (1959), Peter, the complacent citizen, and Jerry, the tortured young outcast, fail to reach one another because they are unable to engage in meaningful dialogue. This is identical with and reminiscent of the two characters in O'Neill's *Hughie*. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is a marathon quarrel conducted as sustained, bitter invective. Between them, the two plays - *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* (1961) - are savage attacks on the American way of life and debunk modern myths and concepts. His feverish dissatisfaction with the world and with the society in which we now live is an assertion which makes Albee of fantastic value to our stage.

On the whole, in common with Absurd drama, the characteristic feature of Albee's dramaturgy is the contradiction between the language and the action. He plays dazzling word-games and flirts with European Absurdism.

Among the recent contemporaries Paddy Chayefsky (*Gideon, The Passion of Joseph D*) swings to experimentation with Expressionism and many of the devices of Brecht kind of Epic Theatre. Frank D. Gilroy (*The Subject was Roses*), in trying to show love by the nature of the vacuum left when it dies, is, like Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, attempting to "show the shape of God by the size of His Footprints".

In sum, we may remark that as for content, virtually all of the American playwrights today seem obsessed with the problems of human communication. This has probably worked at cross-purposes with their dramas of eloquence, because most seem far more absorbed with the process of communication than with the development of any philosophical burden of thought to be communicated. The problem is the same which confronted O'Neill's heroes of a primitive nature. And this aspect of their plays finds its most vivid demonstration on the stage. Unfortunately, today's dramatists for the most part lack Companies with which to work,
stages upon which to flounder. History proves that the successful playwright is always the product of a working theatre.

O'Neill's example is to be constantly kept in view for all time to come if we have to save our theatre from being atrophied.
References

1. According to Mr. Brooks Atkinson O'Neill "firmly secures his position not only as the first of American dramatists, but with Shaw and O'Casey, one of the three really distinguished, among the world's living". Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times Theatre Critical Reviews*, 7 (1946), 318.


5. "I'd...


7. Ibid. "From O'Neill's tortured Dream to Albee's gain stereotype, the lighting in the scene. However, stunted our way bound by the mechanics of Oh's mask, on Williams' overt expressionism, or Albee's almost pure surrealism, the indication of a basic ill in our society cannot be mistaken". (Jordan Y. Miller).
