Chapter V
THE SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION OF A MYSTIC AND A HUMANIST IN EUGENE O’NEILL

Since mysticism is so generally misunderstood and mistrusted, some explication in this regard seems to be relevant. Metaphysics, or the attempt to conceive the world as a whole by means of thought has been developed, from the first, by the union and conflict of two very different human impulses, the one urging men towards mysticism, the other urging them towards science. Some men have achieved greatness through one of these impulses alone, others through the other alone: in David Hume, for example, the scientific impulse reigns quite unchecked, while in William Blake a strong hostility to science coexists with profound mystic insight. But the greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need both of science and of mysticism—the attempt to harmonize the two was what made their life, and what always must, for all its arduous uncertainty, make philosophy, to some minds, a greater thing than either science or religion.

The mystical traditions of the East constitute a coherent philosophical framework within which the most advanced Western theories of the physical world can be accommodated. It has not only stood the test of time but is ever more emphatically endorsed by ongoing experimentation and research. Physicists and mystics deal with different aspects of reality. Physicists explore levels of matter, mystics levels of mind. What their explorations have in common is that these levels, in both cases, lie beyond ordinary sensory perception. And if the perception is non-ordinary, then the reality is not
ordinary. We have physicists probing into matter with the help of sophisticated instruments and mystics probing into consciousness with the help of sophisticated techniques of meditation. Both reach non-ordinary levels of perception, and at these non-ordinary levels the patterns and principles of organization they observe seem to be very similar. The way in which microscopic patterns are inter-related for physicists, mirrors the way in which macroscopic patterns are inter-related for the mystics. Plato's description of the cave in *The Republic* (already quoted in the introductory chapter) is the classical statement of belief in a knowledge and reality truer and more real than that of the senses.¹

Mystical philosophy, in all ages and in all parts of the world, is characterized by certain beliefs. There is, first, the belief in insight as against discursive analytic knowledge—the belief in a way of wisdom, sudden, penetrating, coercive, which is contrasted with the slow and fallible study of outward appearance by a science relying wholly upon the senses. It is interested in intuitive wisdom rather than in rational knowledge. The first and most direct outcome of the moment of illumination is belief in the possibility of a way of knowledge which may be called revelation or insight or intuition, as contrasted with sense, reason, and analysis, which are regarded as blind guides leading to the morass of illusion. But the mystic lives in the full light of the vision—what others dimly seek he knows, with a knowledge beside which all other knowledge is ignorance.

The second mark of almost all mystical metaphysics is the denial of the reality of time. This is an outcome of the denial of division; if all is one, the distinction of past and future must be illusory. Among the modern
philosophers it is fundamental in the systems of Spinoza and Hegel. Another characteristic of mysticism is its belief in unity, and its refusal to admit opposition or division anywhere.

One of the most convincing aspects of the mystic illumination is the apparent revelation of the oneness of all things, a consciousness similar to that of pantheism in religion and that of Monism in philosophy. If we have the mystic vision, we will find the whole world worthy of love and worship, as Wordsworth could see: "The earth, and every common sight . . . Apparell'd in celestial light." If so, we shall say that there is a higher good than that of action, and that this higher good belongs to the whole world as it is in reality. The possibility of this universal love and joy in all that exists is of supreme importance for the conduct and happiness of life, and gives inestimable value to the mystic emotion, apart from any creeds which may be built upon it. However, it is certain that there is an element of wisdom to be learnt from the mystical way of feeling, which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner. If this is the truth, mysticism is to be commended as an attitude towards life, not as a creed about the world. Human beings cannot, wholly transcend human nature; something subjective, if only the interest that determines the direction of our attention, must remain in all our thought. But scientific philosophy comes nearer to objectivity than any other human pursuit, and gives us, therefore, the closest the most constant and the most intimate relation with the outer world that it is possible to achieve.

The most important characteristic of the Eastern world view—one could almost say the essence of it—is the awareness of the unity and mutual inter-relation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the
world as manifestations of a basic oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of this cosmic whole; as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. The Eastern traditions constantly refer to this ultimate, indivisible reality which manifests itself in all things and of which all things are parts. It is called *Brahman* in Hinduism, *Dharmakaya* in Buddhism, *Tao* in Taoism. Because it transcends all concepts and categories, Buddhists also call it *Tathata*, or suchness: "What is meant by the soul as suchness, is the oneness of the totality of all things, the great all-including whole."³

The basic oneness of the universe is not only the central characteristic of the mystical experience, but is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics. It becomes apparent at the atomic level and manifests itself more and more as one penetrates deeper into matter, down into the realm of subatomic particles. The unity of all things and events will be a recurring theme throughout our comparison of modern physics and Eastern philosophy. As we study the various models of subatomic physics, we shall see that they express again and again, in different ways, the same insight—that the constituents of matter and the basic phenomena involving them are all interconnected, interrelated and interdependent; that they cannot be understood as isolated entities, but only as integrated parts of the whole.

In ordinary life, we are not aware of this unity of all things, but divide the world into separate objects and events. This division is, of course, useful and necessary to cope with our everyday environment, but it is not a fundamental feature of reality. It is an abstraction devised by our discriminating and categorizing intellect. To believe that our abstract concepts
of separate ‘things’ and ‘events’ are realities of nature is an illusion. Hindus and Buddhists tell us that this illusion is avidya, or ignorance, produced by a mind under the spell of maya. The principal aim of the Eastern mystical traditions is therefore to readjust the mind by centering and quietening it through meditation. The Sanskrit term for meditation—Samadhi—means literally ‘mental equilibrium.’ It refers to the balanced and tranquil state of mind in which the basic unity of the universe is experienced: “Entering into the samadhi of purity, one obtains all-penetrating insight that enables one to become conscious of the absolute oneness of the universe.”

In a 1932 letter to Frederic Carpenter, Eugene O’Neill indicated that years before, “the mysticism of Lao-Tse and Chuang-Tzu probably interested me more than any other Oriental writings.” The attraction of these ancient Chinese philosophers had led him in the early 1920s to read the James Legge translation of their works, the Tao Te Ching and the Chuang Tse, while undertaking research for Marco Millions. In those sacred texts of Taoism, O’Neill found confirmation of his own mystical intuition that a dynamic universal force (called Tao by Lao Tse) united man and the universe. From the beginning, O’Neill’s dramas expressed a compelling fascination with the Orient. The hero of his first full-length play to be produced—Andrew Mayo in Beyond the Horizon—emphatically proclaimed his idealization of “the Beauty of the far off and unknown, the mystery and spell of the East which lures me in the books I’ve read” (Vol. I, BH 85). And the later hero of The Fountain Ponce de Leon, also described his mythical quest for “some far country of the East—Cathay, Cipango, who knows—a spot that Nature has set apart from men and blessed with peace” (Vol. III, The Fountain 386).
In the New London house of James O’Neill, Sr., Emerson’s books had been available on the library shelves, and the young Eugene probably read them there.\textsuperscript{6}

In a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, O’Neill called himself a confirmed mystic, according to whom to see life is: to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy in seemingly the most ignoble debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic for I am always trying to interpret life in terms of lives, never just in terms of character. I am always acutely conscious of the force behind—fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—’Mystery’ certainly.\textsuperscript{7}

Doris Alexander in an essay remarks that O’Neill’s mysticism results from his reading of \textit{Light On the Path} and that we can “trace O’Neill’s mysticism, to Orient philosophy.”\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Light on the Path} may have helped O’Neill formulate his Taoist beliefs. “For within you is the light of the world, the only light that can be shed upon the path. If you are unable to perceive it within you, it is useless to look for it elsewhere. It is beyond you; because, when you reach it, you have lost yourself.”\textsuperscript{9} A similar thought is expressed by Lao Tse, who in the forty-seventh chapter of \textit{Tao Te Ching} maintains:

Without going outside his door, one understands all that takes place under the sky, without looking from his window, one sees the Tao of heaven, the father that one goes out (from himself), the less he knows. Therefore the sages got their knowledge
without travelling, gave names to things without seeing them; and accomplished their ends without any purpose of doing so.\textsuperscript{10}

The Tao within man, when seen in calm and mystical insight, is the key to understanding Tao in the world. O'Neill also believed that wisdom was to be discovered within, rather than through intellectual endeavour. In his Western primacy of reason and his acceptance of oriental intuitiveness O'Neill was close to the spirit of Tao.

Taoism, as a system of philosophy is based on an underlying principle 'the Tao,' which is the source of all being, the governing power of all life (both natural and human), the beginning and return of all existence. The way of Tao is characterised by an absence of strife and coercion leading to the peace and serenity of mind. As a guide to perfection, the Tao leads men from the material world to a kind of spiritual freedom, to a life that transcends death. Tao is a philosophy based on the power of 'weakness' and on the idea of 'return' which governs all changes. Returning to the original state is the destiny of all things, the fulfilment of the purpose of existence.

The Chinese like the Indians, believed that there is an ultimate reality which underlines and unifies the multiple things and events we observe: "There are the three terms—'complete,' 'all-embracing,' 'the whole.' The names are different, but the reality sought in them is the same: referring to the one thing."\textsuperscript{11} They called this reality the Tao, which originally meant 'the way.' It is the way, or process, of the universe, the order of nature. It differs from these Indian concepts of Brahman and Dharmakaya, however, by its intrinsically dynamic quality which, in the Chinese view, is the essence of the universe. The Tao is the cosmic process in which all things are involved; the
world is seen as a continuous flow and change. The Chinese not only believed that the flow and change were the essential features of nature, but also that there are constant patterns in the changes, to be observed by men and women. The sage recognizes these patterns and directs his actions according to them. In this way, he becomes ‘one with the Tao,’ living in harmony with nature and succeeding in everything he understands. In the words of Huai Nan Tzu, a philosopher of the second century B.C.: “He who conforms to the course of the Tao, following the natural processes of Heaven and Earth, finds it easy to manage the whole world.”

It is common knowledge that O'Neill acquainted himself with oriental religions during the 1920s. The climax of *The Fountain* (completed in 1922) dramatizes a mystic vision involving Buddhist and Moslem priests. *The Great God Brown* (1925) alludes to nirvana and transmigration; the protagonist of *Lazarus Laughed* (1926) resembles Buddha in his serenity and non-egotism.

It was at the dawn of his life, in his early formative, most impressionable years, that Eugene O'Neill discovered Taoism. His youth interest in Lao Tzu was strengthened in later years by reading the works of and about the Chinese sage, and his Tao Te Ching, ‘Tao’ meaning the path or “the way of all life,” ‘te,’ the fit use of life by men, and Ching, a text or classic.

In one sense O'Neill was more of an Orientalist than Ralph Waldo Emerson or David Henry Thoreau had ever been. Towards the American transcendentalists, O'Neill’s feelings were often ambivalent. The mixture of admiration and irony with which, he regarded them suggests one of the many paradoxes of his nature. We cannot ascertain whether O'Neill could become
a mystic only in his old age or whether his mystic experiences were similar to those of St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckart or whether he was familiar with the mysticism in the Advaita philosophy. Nevertheless, O'Neill might have realized the mystic experiences one can have in almost all the religions.

It is probable that he derived most of this "transcendentalism" from his favourite author Nietzsche, whose Zarathustra had earlier been inspired by Emerson. O'Neill later put some of the mysticism of Emerson's Brahma into the mouth of his own Lazarus, who proclaimed: "We are the Giver and the Gift!" (Vol. III, LL 324)

It is understandable why O'Neill like Walt Whitman and the Henry Thoreau became one of the Chinese philosopher's disciples, attracted particularly to Lao Tzu's creative quietism; which Bynner calls: "the fundamental sense commonly inherent in mankind, a common sense so profound in its simplicity that it has come to be called mysticism." O'Neill, too, used a similar term, one he coined for this concept that he discovered in Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata calling it a "behind-life-force."

By the very fact that he considered the origin of life, Lao Tzu "was a mystic as anyone must be who ventures either a positive or negative guess concerning what is," Bynner stresses, "beyond the minds of men to know." O'Neill, too, used a similar term, one he coined for this concept that he discovered in Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata calling it a "behind-life-force."

In O'Neill's early apprenticeship period, 1913-20, where he makes his first attempts to use mysticism to signify a "behind-life force," personal happenings in his life, such as his sea-experiences become the focus of his one-acts. In 1920s he looked beyond the self and responded to an inner
impulse for social justice, focusing on two serious problems. First, he was outraged by the indifferent, cruel consequences of capitalism, the economic system that exploits, dehumanizes, and impoverishes the workers, and by those in Government who ignored the needs of the poor. He was against socialism since it demands the sacrifice of the ideals of liberty for the sake of justice and equality and he hated capitalism for its necessitates the sacrifice of the ideals of justice and equality for the sake of liberty. He expressed his indignation in a number of plays from *The Hairy Ape* to *Long Day's Journey into Night*. It is possible that he compared this capitalist system to the political doctrine of Taoists, which maintains that the duty of the ruler is to protect his people from experiencing material wants, i.e., greed and luxuries, and to impose a minimum of Government without interfering in their freedom.

O'Neill believed ardently in charity, equality, and universal brotherhood of man and in the need for a world Government for the equal distribution of natural resources and comforts to the whole humanity. He vehemently denounced the racial discrimination, wars between countries and the unnecessary expenditure for defence etc. He was distressed by his countrymen's total disregard of the humanity, dignity, and the rights of those they considered inferior.

In Taoism, in contrast, no laws govern correct behaviour. "Men's conduct depends on instinct and conscience. Their own gentle, kind way of life suggests to neighbours how natural, easy and happy a condition it is for men to be members of one another."17

O'Neill had perhaps a personal as well as a social motivation for attacking any type of discrimination. He himself had been forced to endure
prejudice, for his own Irish family suffered cruel ostracism because of their celtic nationality and Irish Catholic religion and were disdained by wealthy Yankee New Englanders in his hometown of New London.

O'Neill was aware that the discrimination problem had broad ethnic dimensions, cutting across cultural, social, religious, racial, and geographical lines. Invariably, he depicts non-whites, non-Christians, and non-Europeans as spiritually, morally, and or physically superior.

It is difficult to analyse how far O'Neill has been able to balance humanism and mysticism in his personal life experiences. His mysticism, his fascination with the mystery of life is found even in his first one-acts such as The Web (1913) and Bound East for Cardiff (1914). In the latter, the dying Yank has a vision of a mysterious "pretty lady dressed in black." O'Neill however aims at something more through the use of mysticism for a supernaturalism in his plays, enabling viewers to identify also the qualities of soul, of the inner being of characters, perceiving them so deeply on so many levels of meaning that they seem to take a universal and, at times, mythic dimensions.

Ethnic confrontation appears again in two historical dramas of the early 1920s. In The Fountain (1921), among the Spanish about to sail with Christopher Columbus in 1492 is Juan Ponce de Leon, desiring to conquer for Spain that immense realm of the Great Kaan which Marco saw. In the New World that's discovered, Juan is horrified when the Spanish "Knights of the True Cross" beat and enslave innocent Indians and monks torture the natives to convert them to Catholicism. Rather than riches, Juan seeks and finds the mysterious "Spring of Life," the "Fountain of Beauty," from which
four religious figures spring, one of whom is the Chinese poet who described the tale of *The Fountain's* healing power. The four priests, represent that all faiths are equal, demonstrate that all dreams of God are one dream. Juan experiences the ecumenical, mystical experiencing, akin to the Cosmic religion of Albert Einstein—feeling unity with all creation only after undergoing suffering and a personal inner regeneration.

The idea of return is basic to Tao; all other ideas revolve round it. Taoist thought perceives the cyclical movement that characterizes life and shows that contraries and polarities are constantly exchanging places. Returning to the original state is the destiny of all things, the fulfilment of the purpose of existence. For O'Neill, as for Tao, with these cyclic changes, there is always a sense of return. In Taoism, one returns to the simplicity of nature or the innocence of infancy; in O'Neill, one returns home. Thus Kukachin in *Marco Millions* returns to her grandfather, Marco returns to Venice, Nina to Marsden and her father's garden in *Strange Interlude*, Miriam to her vision of Bethany in *Lazarus Laughed*, Lavinia to the Mannon home, in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Mary Tyrone to her childhood dreams in *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

In the theme and structure of *Marco Millions* also, the Taoist thought is inherent. Dramatically, the Eastern philosophy of calm intuition and mysticism is contrasted with Western assertive action and rational practicality or some pragmaticism. Symbolized by the antithesis between the insensitive Marco and the fragile Kukachin, materialism and mysticism are shown to be incompatible.
Structurally, *Marco Millions* exhibits the Taoist motif of return. “Death is a return. There are harbours at every voyage-end where we rest from the sorrows of the sea (of life).”\(^{18}\) The sea-voyage coincides with the Taoist image of life. Human life is a phenomenon in the natural cycle, and death is the end of life’s voyage. Marco also in *Marco Millions* speaks of death as “the close confinement of a long voyage” (Vol. III, MM 420).

It is hardly surprising that Taoism appealed to the tormented O’Neill, who longed to transcend his Western, dualistic worldview and attain a vision of a larger, flowing unity that promised peace and harmony. O’Neill’s interest in Eastern philosophy peaked in the 1920s, in such plays as *Marco Millions*, *The Great God Brown* and *Lazarus Laughed*. As John Henry Raleigh first pointed out, O’Neill viewed reality dualistically, “as a series of unreconciled polar conflicts—between land and sea, night and day, man and woman, past and present, life and death.”\(^{19}\) According to Taoism, the ‘yin’ is dark, receptive, female, intuitive, and still; the Yang is light, aggressive, male, rational, and active.

In the second historical, *Marco Millions* (1925), set in the thirteenth century, Marco Polo, an ignoble old world representative of the Pope is sent to Cathay to the Great Kaan when no wise man could be found in the West. With his spiritual hump, Marco, who is perhaps the most amoral, insensitive character in O’Neill’s vast gallery of materialists, symbolizes the rapacious American capitalist. According to O’Neill Polo Brothers and son were the American pillars of society.

*Marco Millions* seems to have given O’Neill the idea for a drama on the “career of Shih Huang Ti, Emperor of China, whose rule ended in 201 B. C.”
As *The Fountain*, *Marco Millions* also reveals O'Neill’s interest in the merits of Taoism versus Confucianism and the rule of despots, men like Marco and Shih Huang Ti, as opposed to that of enlightened, benevolent emperors like Kublai Kaan. In the final version of the play Confucian, Taoist, Buddhist, and Moslem priests accompany the bier bearing the Kaan’s beloved grand daughter. The Kaan in the final version speaks: “Priests of Tao, will you conquer death by your mystic way?” (Vol. II, MM 434). The priest replies: “Which is the greater evil, to possess or to be without?” Death is “after urging all in his court to pray, the Kaan prays, too, saying, “rest in peace”” (Vol. II, MM 436). We can observe O’Neill’s three-fold attack on *Marco Millions*. First, what is berated here is not a vague Christianity but a Catholicism that is corrupted and reduced to opportunism, hypocrisy, and exploitation against Eastern religions. Second, the deeply flawed Marco is, to the Kaan, the living symbol of the arrested development of Western civilization. Third, in early notes the Kaan sees the East as partially redeemed by its hard-won culture but the West seems to have no culture or to have destroyed it.

In the period when O’Neill sought a replacement for his lost faith, he turned to and found a meaning for existence in Lao Tzu. The Chinese mystic and his ‘Way of Life’ continued to influence the author in the early 1920s, while he was recording notes for plays made prior to the period of his early research in 1925 for the projected work on Shih Huang Ti. Recording new information on Taoism, O’Neill became fascinated by the female and male forces, the ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ principles, as they related to Taoism and by the way Lao Tzu fused mysticism and pragmatism into a philosophy through which he believed all men could discover their lives to be peaceful, useful, and happy.
In the year 1937, O’Neill and his wife built a new home in California and called it Tao House, not only because of the special influence Lao Tzu and Taoism exerted on the author’s mind and work and because of the profound and lasting effect of Taoism on O’Neill’s inner being but also, as he was in the late 1930s entering his last and greatest creative period, because of his hope to continue and deepen the mystical “Way of Life” conducive to the spirit of Lao Tzu. The O’Neill’s placed four wrought-iron symbols from Chinese calligraphy that spelled Tao the house that “twisted and wound-in observance of the Chinese proverb that evil moves only in a straight line.”

Years later when the O’Neill’s moved east to New York, the dramatist’s good friend, Hamilton Basso, visited their Penthouse in the east eighties in 1948 and described it in a subsequent article:

> It is furnished with things O’Neill has gathered all over the world. The dominant note is Chinese. A small, heavy, vaguely cat-like stone animal, turned out by a Chinese sculptor a few centuries before Christ, greets visitors as they enter, and these are ancient Chinese prints on the walls of the living room.”

These furnishings are merely trappings, but through them O’Neill may possibly have externalized the feelings of inner peace that Taoism gave him, the quietism that brought him patience, forbearance, and fortitude, particularly later in life in his last lonely suffering years.

As we see in *Days Without End*, O’Neill himself had enough of the “universal” passions, but he could not stop thinking of these emotions as the basic sources of human life, he was not able to break with them. That is why the protagonist of *Days Without End* is looking for refuge in Christian
mysticism. It is difficult today to relive O’Neill’s feelings for the determinism of psychological drives, but we must not forget the atmosphere in which the American dramatist’s plays were conceived. The crisis of capitalism and the sudden advance of fascism between the two wars confused the other major artists as well. O’Neill considered increasing barbarism the necessary outcome of modern civilization and explained it on the basis of psycho-analysis. He opposed the bourgeois world, but his thinking was determined by the ideals of that world. It was only in the last period of his life that he reached the heights of the great writers of his age and nation—Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck. It was only then he was able to face life without prejudice and illusion, indeed with a cruel sincerity. O’Neill the poet no longer makes his confessions in the mask of abstract man. No longer does he seem to be interested in the world, but is absorbed only in his past, his family, and his ruined and tragic life. In the depths of his personal life and the memories of his youth, in this seemingly private theme—although he cannot find the way out—he can at last discover the causes of the world’s and of his own corruption and other problems.

Finally, the play Long Day’s Journey into Night tells O’Neill’s memorable mystic experience, when he had been bound for Buenos Aires on a super-head square-rigger, he became drunk on the beauty of the sea, lost in the rhythmic harmony of the flow of life and perhaps for the only time in his life, he says, he belonged to something greater than his own life, perhaps even to God. Later he describes a veil being drawn back by an unseen hand that provides a vision of beatitude that allows him for a brief second to see the secret and its meaning.
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 the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and 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. . . . Then the moment of ecstatic freedom came. The peace, the end of the quest, the last harbour, the joy of belonging to a fulfilment beyond men's lousy, pitiful, greedy fears and hopes and dreams! . . . 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! (LDJN 134-135).

Here stands the real O'Neill, sharing perhaps the great climactic mystic experience of his life—the consolation of a benign “behind-life” mystic force in life. It is here at last we discover O'Neill’s mystical evolution—the fusion point of humanism and mysticism.

The facts of O'Neill’s life-long interest in the Orient point toward some important conclusions. His orientalism was much less literary than was Emerson’s. It was more personal in origin and more temperamental in expression. Moreover, it was much less concerned with facts and with actions,
and it was more concerned with internal feelings and attitudes. But for this very reason, O’Neill’s orientalism seems more genuinely “oriental” than Emerson’s. For the orient has always been less concerned with facts, and more concerned with internal feelings, than has the occident. O’Neill’s lack of concern with the external realities of science and social action, and, indeed, his very hostility toward “material things,” seems to set him apart from the mainstream of American literature and thought. Although Emerson and Thoreau believed that “things are in the saddle, and ride mankind,” they never scorned material things. Rather, they sought to ameliorate the actual situation, and they appealed to the future. O’Neill considered tragedy to be essential to the nature of things. Yet this belief made him, in a sense, even more “transcendental” than Emerson. Early in his career, O’Neill had explained the general principles which were to guide his whole theory and practice of playwriting. “Our emotions are a better guide than our thoughts,” he asserted in 1922: “Our emotions are instinctive. They are the result not only of our individual experiences but of the experiences of the whole human race, back through all the ages.”

Like modern depth psychology, O’Neill’s dramas always probed man’s emotions, rather than his thoughts and actions. Historic transcendentalism has, in fact, divided into two streams. The first has become active, scientific and pragmatic. The second has become passive, mystical, and psychological. Emerson’s thought flowed largely in the first stream, toward modern pragmatism. O’Neill’s thought tended towards modern non-rational psychology. In another statement made in 1922, O’Neill explained:
It seems to me that . . . man is much the same creature, with the same primal emotions and ambitions and motives, the same powers and the same weaknesses, as in the time when the Aryan race started toward Europe from the slopes of the Himalayas. He has become better acquainted with those powers and those weaknesses, and he is learning ever so slowly how to control them.23

O'Neill's tragic dramas were directed toward the understanding of man's "primal emotions," rather than his pragmatic actions. This resembled that of the oriental religion which originated on "the slopes of the Himalayas." We hoped that man, by means of the insight into human emotions suggested by tragic drama, might ultimately learn to "know himself," and through knowledge, "ever so slowly," control.

The epoch-making accomplishment of O'Neill, who devoted his life to drama and the theatre, consists in the fact that he was serious about the doctrine of metaphysical justice, but without ever subjecting his theatre to the confessional and to traditional religion. But O'Neill's portrayal of man or humanity as a whole has nothing much to do with the agitated zeal of Ibsen, who is trying to give shape to certain problems of his time, to bring about an improvement in human institutions. Nor can we discover, in O'Neill's portrayal, Bernard Shaw's well-meaning proposal to improve the world by presenting matters with exaggerated sharpness. But O'Neill's image of man draws its authenticity from his insight into deep level of human psychology which have not been touched upon by any other dramatist.
O'Neill's life was full of horrors, his biographers chronicle his endless miseries. The greatest tragedy, however, was not the agony of his personal life but his failure to find an acceptable explanation for the problems with which his life and milieu presented him. This might sound surprising in view of the fact that O'Neill's dramas are interwoven with biographical elements and unexpected personal confessions. But at the same time he is inclined toward metaphysical abstractions, and it is useless trying to trace the organic connection between his life and his ideas, confessions and philosophy, prior to the final posthumous dramas. O'Neill has the unquenchable thirst of the first generation—the thirst of Jack London and Theodore Dreiser for knowledge and beauty. He has the spirit of obstinate rebellion against capitalism; he has the desire to roam free; he has the longings of the outlaw and the parvenu for a brighter, more colourful, more harmonious life. At the same time, there is in him also the corruption and hopelessness of a later period: the notion of complete futility, the thought that fate is not working outside of us, but inside; that it is working in our very instincts to promote our own destiny and is thus impossible to overcome. As an American writer, he devours everything; romantic idealism, the techniques of Ibsen, expressionism, the mystique of heredity, Nietzsche, Freud and religion—almost every school of thought of his time.

O'Neill as a humanist reaffirms the classical proposition that man's condition precludes forever the full realization of his ideals. There is no evidence that O'Neill was influenced directly by the writings of the New Humanists. But it is clear that he shared many of their primary concerns. Thus it is that Days Without End (1931-34) interprets a humanism which is
Christian in tone. Its resolution conforms to the notion of “true humanism” espoused by Americans such as Paul Elmer More and Europeans such as Jacques Maritain. In this play John Loving finds his humanity in willing submission to God. On other occasions, O’Neill’s perspective paralleled those of rationalistic humanists. Like Irving Babbitt, he attempted to translate essentially religious concepts into a secular language. While *Dynamo* attempts to translate the notion of temptation into a technological symbolism; while the late work *A Moon for the Misbegotten* offers a secular variation on the theme of divine grace.

Plays such as *Strange Interlude* treat what New Humanists such as Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More interpreted as the essential dilemma of modern man—a crisis of faith. Others of O’Neill’s dramas explore the range of New Humanist themes. The affirmation of man’s humanity as the primary motive in history is a theme in both *The Fountain* and *Marco Millions*. *The Hairy Ape* examines the role of nature in the determination of human identity; while *Dynamo* is concerned with the need to humanize science and technology, *Ah, Wilderness!* celebrates an enlightened rationalism as the primary instrument of decision in a human society; while the “cycle plays” are concerned with the individual America’s responsibility to make ethical use of his political, social, and moral freedom. At least two plays treat major variations in the attitudes of the New Humanists toward religion. *Days Without End* reflects a rather conventional view of salvation, while *Lazarus Laughed* translates what the New Humanists regarded as man’s constant yearning for the assurance of eternal life into a secular symbolism.
Like the New Humanists, O'Neill appears to have regarded American democracy as the expression of a new theological situation, one which requires not only a reconsideration of the nature of man’s responsibility for man but also a reappraisal of the role of God in human affairs. Perhaps the principal factor distinguishing the brand of humanism which emerged in this dramas from those varieties which had appeared in the works of European playwrights of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the extent of the moral freedom he attributed to man. O'Neill conceived such freedom in terms which were virtually absolute. Moreover, he attributed this freedom to men and women of differing races, classes, ages, regions, and occupations.

Gradually, the challenge of freedom in the universe of O'Neill's description seems to have developed beyond the possibility of solution by means of personal morality. Rather, the playwright seems to have come to the conclusion that the appropriate exercise of moral freedom in a democratic society requires a pattern of shared belief. In his search for a basis for a community of belief, O'Neill again reflected a major preoccupation of American humanists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Walt Whitman, recognizing the need for such a sense of community in a multicultural society, had in the nineteenth century called for the formation of an ecumenical faith, accessible, open, and usable by all members of the society which seems to be similar to the idea of cosmic religion which Albert Einstein envisaged. Whitman wrote of this “democratic religion” in his preface of 1872:

As there can be, in my opinion, no same and complete personality—nor any grand and electric Nationality, without the
stock element of religion imbuing all the other elements . . . The people, especially the young men and women of America, must begin to learn that religion, (like poetry,) is something far, far different from what they supposed. It is, indeed, too important to the power and perpetuity of the New World to be consigned any longer to the churches, old or new, Catholic or Protestant—Saint this, or Saint that . . . It must be consigned henceforth to Democracy ‘in masse’ and to Literature. It must enter into the Poems of the Nation. It must make the Nation.24

One way of interpreting O’Neill’s experimental works is to make an attempt to follow Whitman’s mandate to let religion enter into a “new literature.” In plays such as Marco Millions (1923-25), All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1923), Strange Interlude (1926-27), and Dynamo (1928), he engaged upon the creation of a new iconography—a system of signs, images, and symbols expressive of the relationship between man and God in the New World. These works are, however, more than linguistic in their interests. For in them O’Neill attempted both to reveal the theological challenge embodied in modern American life and to formulate a tentative mode of response. There emerges in plays such as Lazarus Laughed (1925-26), a secularized theology, which synthesizes perspectives drawn not only from Greek, Judaic, and Christian religions, but also from tenets of belief codified by science and social sciences.

It was the American philosopher William James who described “religion as man’s total reaction upon life.” “Such total reactions,” he observed, differ from casual responses, for to get at them, “we must go behind
the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence. Thus, James believed, religion to be the completest of all answers to the question as to the character of this universe in which we define the nature of the religious motive in the dramas of Eugene O'Neill. For O'Neill's dramas, from early plays such as *Thirst* (1913-14) to late works such as *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1940-41) record stages in the evolution of the playwright's vision of the theological universe in which modern man lives.

O'Neill acknowledged this religious motive as the organizing theme of his work, observing that while other modern playwrights appeared to be absorbed in the relationship between man and man, he was interested only in the relationship between man and God. But if the primary motive of O'Neill's career as a dramatist was indeed theological in nature, the playwright's treatment of religious themes remained unorthodox. The unorthodoxy, which Robert Brunstein styles "revolt," seems not so much to have signified O'Neill's rejection of religion as it mirrored his anguish at his own inability to confirm or deny the existence of God. Actually, it can be claimed that O'Neill was throughout his life, engaged in a search for a way of verifying the existence of an external principle in human experience. His approach to the problem had significant correspondences to those of modern humanists, both religious and secular. Like the "New Humanists" of his time, the playwright saw the rise of faith in science as a challenge, not only to traditional systems of value, but to the very humanity of man.

If *Ah Wilderness!* marks the high point of O'Neill's optimism about the potential for the achievement of humanistic goals in modern American
experience, *The Iceman Cometh*, like *The Long Day's Journey into Night*, is an American interpretation of what critics such as Joseph Wood Krutch have described as a “tragic humanism.” Although these late plays did succeed in revealing the contour of the universe in which modern man lives, they also exposed the failures of their protagonists to achieve humanistic goals. Through Hickey, Larry, and Parrit of *The Iceman Cometh* and the tragic Tyrones of *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, O'Neill interpreted what he was finally to concede as humanism’s limitation as a religion. They do not however, seem to indicate his total rejection of a humanism as a social philosophy. Rather, these late plays suggest O'Neill’s final acceptance of a tragic view of experience.

From his early years of early adulthood the dramatist sought to expand his mental horizons by signing on as seaman to sail beyond his country’s boundaries and its narrow provincialism. In the process he was exposed to the many nationalities and ethnic distinctions of his fellow crewman and learned among these rough, uneducated seamen, lessons about the value of friendship, sacrifice, and integrity. Later, when he wrote the early one-act sea plays in Glencarn series, he was able accurately to depict his ethnic gallery of characters with compassion and understanding. In the two decades that followed, the nineteen twenties and nineteen thirties, in the plays he actually wrote and in the ideas he conceived for others, O'Neill sought intently to improve the lot of suffering humanity as he explored numerous social issues: discrimination against non-whites by whites as in *All God’s Chillun Got Wings*, the dehumanization and exploitation of the working class by indifferent capitalists as in *The Hairy Ape*, the Faust-like nature of the American
character, as O'Neill perceived it, as having sold its life and soul for material objects. The apotheosis of O'Neill's crusade for universal brotherhood is found in *The Iceman Cometh* which depicts a wide social spectrum: people from many walks of life and of different nationalities. Harry Hope's saloon symbolizes a universal melting pot where all men are equal and the word "brother" is used frequently. O'Neill sought in the play to capture, the humour and friendship and human warmth and deep inner contentment of the characters. The greatest harm, as Hickey was to discover, is to break the link that binds. When all the diverse characters gather for Harry Hope's birthday party in a banquet-like setting, Harry assures them: "Bejees, you know you're all as welcome here as the flowers in May" (Vol. I, IC 660).

O'Neill has identified this group of pitiful misfits in *The Iceman Cometh* as his "blood brothers," friends he had known during the period when he was a homeless misfit plunged in a personal shipwreck of alcoholic dissolution. Yet it was precisely through his association with these outcasts that O'Neill discovered truths about human nature and human condition. Other world dramatists may excel O'Neill in lofty lyric power or philosophical discourse. None, however, surpasses him in the sheer magnitude of the men and women who people his plays. O'Neill understood the human psyche, its baseness and its greatness, as few other writers have.

One other tale, besides the friendship saga, obsessed O'Neill: his own tortured, convoluted life story. His relationship to his mother, father, brother, wives, and children is dramatized in endless variations in the canon. Because all human lives pivot around the same types of family ties, O'Neill's work assumes universal dimensions. He speaks the common language of the heart,
expressing the longing of all mankind to love and be loved, to belong, to determine the why of existence. Because this language is readily understood by people of all classes and races, O'Neill has become an international playwright, respected and produced in countries throughout the world.

As Pirandello states in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, "He who was fortunate enough to be born a character" is immortal; "he cannot die." O'Neill has bequeathed us a vast gallery of immortal, unforgettable mythic figures: the bewildered Yank crushed by an indifferent society, mourned only by whimpering monkeys; the pathetic Dion Anthony, forced to wear the mask of diabolic cynicism to protect his sensitive, ascetic, vulnerable face; the craggy-faced Ephraim Cabot, condemned at play's end to his life of loneliness, caught in the palm of the hand of his harsh puritan God, made to his image; the iron-willed maiden, Lavinia, turning her back on the world to immure herself in the Mannon home in self-afflicted punishment for her sin; O'Neill's prototype for all mother-as-betrayer figures, Mary Tyrone, in the play's final scene, perhaps the most memorable moment in modern drama aimlessly adrift, forever lost to husband and sons in her selfish narcotic stupor; the vanishing figure of Jim Tyrone, leaving his safe refuge in the Hogan household, doomed to end his life in blindness and a strait jacket.

As O'Neill himself has defined, the theatre for today's world should be "a source of inspiration that lifts us to a plane beyond ourselves and drives us deep into the unknown within and behind ourselves. The theatre should reveal to us what we are." He adds: "Holding the mirror of a soul up to a nation; it is time we returned to this." The theatre, as O'Neill views it, has a two-fold purpose: to act as a moral force, making us aware of our ignoble lives
when they are lived on the lower plane of reality or revealing our true mystic natures in lives lived on a higher moral level, and to mirror the image of the state of its citizens, gauging the collective moral well-being of a nation. For example, the sickness of soul, found in the four Tyrones in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is merely indicative of the sickness of the American character, the microcosm of the family reflecting the macrocosm of society.

O'Neill had, as he said, come “to China seeking peace and quiet.” The concept of the self long abroad scattered could, on the creative level, refer to the profusion of his plays; on the personal level, it could mean the outpouring of his being, his thoughts and spirit. In another sense, O'Neill cannot be said to belong to mentally solely to any one country but to the world. He had scattered his inquiring spirit afar, that part of him that ever sought truth and wisdom—turning for religious and philosophical inspiration to China and the East, to Lao Tzu, Confucius, and Buddha, as well as Vishnu and Mohammed, and to Europe, to Nietzsche, Freud, Schopenhauer, and Marx, and for theatrical inspiration to Strindberg, Chekhov, Ibsen, Kaiser, and Toller.

What O'Neill had absorbed in his heart and soul in the noble life he had lived, harming no man, doing good for all, would comfort him in his last lucid moments, whether it was the simple “Our Father” he once put on the mouth of the dying Dion Anthony and William Brown in *The Great God Brown* or whether it was the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu’s mystic way of life. There was no fear in this soul’s mystic meeting with the Absolute—the infinite—neither in life nor in death. “He who comes to understand the Tao at dawn can die peacefully at dusk.”27 Such a mind will be able to be immersed in the bliss of the merging of the heaven and the earth together into one.
NOTES

1 Plato, The Republic Trans. B. Jowett (New York: Classics Club, 1942) 398. In the famous parable of the cave, the contrast is made between the material world of everyday existence and the spiritual world of pure thought and truth.


4 Ibid. 93.


9 Ibid. 265.


16 Ibid. 20.

17 Ibid. 28.

18 Ibid. 47.


William James. *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, 1902) 378. He was the American Philosopher and the exponent of radical empiricism and pragmatism (instrumentalism). He was interested in religion as a human phenomenon, but showed little interest in the objects which religion contemplated. He wanted people to be happy and held that if belief in God makes them happy, let them believe in Him.
