



## O'NEILL:

### *What Next?*

By HIRAM MOTHERWELL

**Eugene O'Neill** is now forty-seven. His plays have just been enshrined in a "definitive edition," handsome, ingratiating, and expensive. They are probably more widely discussed than those of any other living playwright. They have been produced in almost every city from Moscow west to Tokio. They have been translated into more than fourteen languages. And yet it is evident that O'Neill, standing on the crest of this superb eminence, has completed a cycle; come to a momentous turning in the path his creative genius has followed.

*Where will the path lead?*

**I**n August, 1932, when he was about to finish *Days Without End* O'Neill suddenly stopped his work to write *Ah, Wilderness!* That play, a pronounced box-office success, was a kindly, sentimental, and romantic comedy (his first, by the way), lacking the depth, but retaining the craftsmanship of O'Neill's important work. And *Days Without End*, finished a little later, turned out to be a haunting cry of renewed faith in orthodox Christian dogma, an infinitely touching, sincere, and luminous human document—and an artistic failure. Since then O'Neill has been silent. And now the problem before a world which watches him is to find an explanation for the colossal difference which lies between his plays. There must inevitably be a pattern by which one can trace the development of a great spirit and a superb playwright from those first one-act dramatic sketches, *The Moon of the Caribbees* and *Bound East for Cardiff*, down through *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, to these last two oddly assorted productions; but the search for it is an obscure one. It would take a rare insight, almost a magician's rod of divination to read the future from O'Neill's strangely contradictory past. But it does make for interesting and provocative speculation to search for

## O'NEILL

reasons and promises in the somber story of those great creative years.

At the time when most of his best early work was written he was, to the casual eye, either an eccentric hermit on Cape Cod, or a penniless loafer spending his days and nights with the bums and criminals of the Greenwich Village barrooms—neurotic, discouraged, ill, apparently doomed to failure and an early death. When he did write, he wrote grotesque and gloomy plays, apparently intended for production, if at all, by earnest amateurs in converted sheds and stables. No playwright ever more brazenly told his audiences to like his plays or jump in the lake. Then, as later, he ignored every established theatrical convention that greases the way to success. He wrote his plays in one act, or two acts, or fourteen acts, whichever suited him. He was oblivious to the eight-forty to ten-fifty time limit consecrated by decades of dinner appointments and supper parties. In *The Emperor Jones* he gave his audiences only half their money's worth, measured by the clock. As time went on this characteristic became more marked. In the nine-act *Strange Interlude*, he actually dictated to them at what time they should eat, and grinned at them when they asked when they could dress. (The late Otto Kahn, horrified at the idea of appearing at the theatre in evening dress at five-thirty, when *Interlude's* curtain rose, sacrificed most of his evening's meal by going way up to Fifth Avenue and Ninetieth to change during the dinner intermission.) He asked them to accept strange and spooky things like masks and characters speaking without being heard and listening without hearing.

**B**ut that was little compared with the fare he offered for their entertainment. Drunks, dopes, prostitutes, human brutes (even a gorilla is one of O'Neill's heroes), hypochondriacs, kings, sages, saints, and maniacs. Revolt, greed, lust, despair, murder, suicide, parricide, matricide, infanticide, adultery, abortion, miscegenation, incest. Scenery becomes smaller from scene to scene. A character walks through four acts doing nothing but laugh and talk about laughing in the most uncomfortable situations imaginable. A lady takes three men to live more or less in her boudoir because she needs three kinds of husband. A gentleman and his lady love fulfil their tender yearnings snuggled close to a huge electric dynamo. An actor is requested to utter "a faint note of dying laughter that rises and is lost in the sky like the flight of his soul back into the womb of Infinity." And all, until *Ah, Wilderness!*, without a gleam of humor, save the heavy, pedestrian satire of *Marco Millions*, and an occasional cosmic jab as when the philosophical prostitute in *The Great God Brown* informs the police captain that the name of the suicide is Man, and he asks, "How d'yuh spell it?"

Despite two Pulitzer prizes, O'Neill remained for years, to the general theatregoing public, something special and arty, considerably on the loony side. Some of his plays had fair, even good, runs. But the measure of their success was regarded as the utmost measure of the potential audience which could be persuaded to support Art and New Ideas in the theatre. Then came *Strange Interlude*. The Guild, accepting O'Neill's ruling that the audience could either come to the play at five-thirty in the afternoon or stay where they belonged, scheduled it for its subscription season and wrote off on its books some twenty thousand dollars as its contribution to Encouraging Experiment. To everybody's surprise, including the author's, *Strange Inter-*

## O'NEILL

*lude* turned out to be a popular smash. The women, especially, were fascinated. They went in hen parties: they dragged their husbands and brothers and even their best boy friends right from the office to see it. They became shameless repeaters. The play ran for more than a year in New York and then took another year on tour. In the number of performances played and the amount of money grossed it is one of the high marks in the history of the American theatre.

Before the production of *Strange Interlude* O'Neill's plays, or many of them, sounded to many like the ravings of a maniac. The success of *Interlude* proved that if O'Neill was seeing spirits he was seeing them in common with a respectable portion of contemporary humanity. When Nina Leeds, having gathered about her her three admirers, "triumphantly" remarked: "My three men! . . . I feel their desires converge in me! . . . to form one complete beautiful male desire which I absorb . . . and am whole . . . they dissolve in me, their life is my life . . . I am pregnant with the three! . . . husband! . . . lover! . . . father! . . ." it was either something absurd, or something somehow profoundly true. No one ever laughed at that line in the theatre. The scene clinched the entire play—and O'Neill's reputation as an important and successful playwright.

It supplied the cue to what O'Neill had been driving at all those years. His plays were filled not with what men and women would say and do in everyday life, but with what they subconsciously would like to say and do. That explains how his plays could be at once absurd and deeply true. To O'Neill man's speech and behavior among his fellows was not normal and real, but calculated and artificial, a mask devised to suit occasions and to conceal his real being. The real man was hidden from society and generally from himself. The greater part of his emotional life was concealed in the subconscious or the unconscious, as six-sevenths of the iceberg is submerged beneath the surface of the water. O'Neill had dragged this hidden emotional life to the surface by the scruff of the neck, as Hercules dragged howling Cerberus up out of Hell.



It was impossible that O'Neill should have faked all this. No playwright can ever fake that sort of thing; the audience instantly spots him for a charlatan and loses interest. If O'Neill filled his plays with life's rebels, misfits, and failures, it is because he lived with them in intuition, and in some sense identified himself with them. Psychiatrists agree that his intuition of his characters is psychologically flawless (though he has little academic knowledge of psychology): "Imagination" by itself could never have achieved that.

## O'NEILL

O'Neill himself was already a rebel in early adolescence. He was born in the theatre, so to speak (to be exact, he was born on the corner of Broadway and Forty-third Street). His father, James O'Neill, now legendary as the strutting, grandiloquent Count of Monte Cristo, must have personified at times the grease-paint and rodomontade of the old star actor's art—the kind of theatre which his son has violently veered away from. Young O'Neill went through a Roman Catholic primary school, a boys' prep school in Connecticut, and a year in Princeton, then escaped. He escaped in the most flamboyant and geographical way, going prospecting for gold to Central America, or putting half a world between him and his background when he shipped to South Africa as able seaman, a part for which he was physically not at all the type. He tended mules on a cattle steamer, did odd jobs and faced starvation in Buenos Aires, contracted tropical fever and tuberculosis. He spent a year in Professor Baker's playwriting course at Harvard, and then wrote one-acters for the amateur Provincetown Players. But back in New York he was again, as Jack Reed put it, brother to him who wears the brand, the hopeless, sightless drift of misery, companion to the writers and radicals of Greenwich Village, but equally to the souses, gangsters, and prostitutes in the back-room of the Hell Hole on Sixth Avenue.

In his early one-act plays of the sea, his people are all, like Smitty in *The Moon of the Caribbees*, poor little lambs that have lost their way; damned from here to eternity, haunted by memories of shame, awake or asleep. Smitty's girl threw him over because he drank, and he took to the sea to flee from his sense of guilt. Yank, in *Bound East for Cardiff*, died with but a single tender memory from an entire life—the barmaid who had once tried to lend him half a crown. Olsen, in *The Long Voyage Home*, had finally reformed and saved money to buy his mother and himself a farm when he was crimped, robbed, and shanghaied in a London pub. Throughout all his earlier plays, whether his characters are discontented farm boys, or Harlem Negroes trying to rise in life, or brute laborers sweating in the bowels of industry, or New England farm folk torn between lust and greed of property, or run-of-the-mill professional people, they all confess failure and pity themselves egregiously. Like Yank, in *The Hairy Ape*, they don't belong. The playwright suffers with them; but he does not pity them; he is not yet above the battle.

One type of temperament can say airily that such people should brace up, take a wholesome view of life, and be men. But to O'Neill's people the prison of frustration, inadequacy, and shame which held them was nothing imaginary; its bars had the indestructibility of that which has been done and can never be undone. At least if O'Neill had not felt that way about it he could never have had the drive to write these plays. It took courage to write those hundreds upon hundreds of pages of unmitigated gloom—the courage to be ridiculous, the courage to lack a sense of humor. Humor, too, is an escape from painful realities, but O'Neill's integrity would not permit him to pretend that things seemed funny to him when in reality they looked hopelessly tragic. The story goes that he was told of a remark made by Otto Kahn to the effect that he would go far as a dramatist if only he would stop being neurotic and write a comedy, and that he thereupon wrote *Marco Millions* satirizing the go-getter merchant and banker, and saw to it that Mr. Kahn received first-night seats. Almost uninterruptedly, for

## O'NEILL

the first fifteen years of his creative life, his frenzied intuition persisted in fishing up grotesque and repellent things from the underworld of the soul—a Negro dying from the sound of a tom-tom (*The Emperor Jones*); a prostitute striving to get back to decency in an honest marriage, only to be balked by the world's morality (*Anna Christie*); a woman taking a carving-knife to her husband one moment and making passionate love to him the next (*All God's Chillun Got Wings*); a woman strangling her baby that she might live happily with her lover (*Desire Under the Elms*); a man impersonating a husband with the latter's wife (*The Great God Brown*); a man discussing religion while he burned on the cross (*Lazarus Laughed*).

All this, however extravagant, was psychologically valid because he permitted it to follow the stream of the subconscious—one might almost say, permitted his subconscious to write his plays for him. For that reason, some of his most obscure and least satisfying plays are among his most valuable. In *The Great God Brown* the subconscious goes on a four-act binge. In *Lazarus Laughed* a man rises from the tomb to announce that there is no death and everyone must affirm Life by laughing—and proceeds to laugh his way from Palestine to Rome and make the villagers (though certainly not the audience) like it.

Then a year later comes *Strange Interlude*: serene, clear, symmetrical. Nina's split personality due to the sudden death of the lover whom she had possessed in spirit but not in body, her patient piecing together of her existence as woman and mother, her gathering around her of the three men whom she needed, each in his way, to make the fourth, her son, her gradual aging and relinquishing of her demands on life—all seemed to the audience not absurd, not neurotic in quality, but part of the everyday truth of modern psychology, absorbingly told.

O'Neill was even more thoroughly master, instead of victim, of his unruly subject-matter in his next play, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. A fourteen-act play (in the published version two acts are regarded as scenes of one) on the Greek myth of the Atreidae but containing pretty nearly everything in family life that Freud ever thought of, and all balanced and sculptured like some splendid cathedral! It is difficult enough to write one good tight act, and ten times as difficult to write three which add up to one good tight play. But here are three good tight plays which add up to one good tight trilogy, lasting from five to eleven (with dinner time out) and never a dull moment. As a structural feat there is nothing in modern dramaturgy to approach it.

O'Neill professed to attempt in *Mourning Becomes Electra* a "retelling in modern terms of the ancient Greek legend," but he did better. He wrote, in substance, an original and a very modern play. His characters do what they do not for political, dynastic, or religious reasons, as the characters in the Greek story did, but for strictly modern Freudian reasons. O'Neill couldn't bring his Orestes to murder his mother (though he had him assume the guilt of her death); that would violate the Freudian scheme. But he turns his Electra loose to avenge the killing of her beloved father, the more readily because her mother had been her rival for her father's affections. The fourteen acts are filled with the tireless drive of this modern Fate. But the author no longer identifies himself with his characters, no longer pities himself. Instead, he observes them with intense but impartial penetration

## O'NEILL

and understanding. To the Greeks, Fate involved a clash of moral imperatives, arising from conflicting family and tribal obligations. O'Neill, on the other hand, posits and defines a modern concept of Fate—one which conditions and tyrannizes over men's actions in the conflict between filial and sexual love. The wild horses of the subconscious rage throughout the fourteen acts, but there is no clash or confusion within the playwright's soul.

**R**evolt against home and parental authority had been a recurrent theme in O'Neill's plays to this point. At times it was expressed with a bluntness which must have been painful even to the author. Marsden in *Strange Interlude* says of his father: "I couldn't understand him . . . what son can ever understand? . . . always too near, too soon, too distant or too late!" And Orin in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, addressing his murdered father's corpse, says, "You never cared to know me in life—but I really think we might be friends now you are dead." Then O'Neill essayed, in *Days Without End*, the search for forgiveness by the father projected as God, to transform the stern father into a loving, understanding one. The play came hard. In the midst of its composition he awoke in the middle of the night with an "idea for a comedy," *Ab, Wilderness!* Here, for the first time in all O'Neill's plays, the father is a genial and kindly person, perplexed and at times lovably ridiculous, but never harsh, never arbitrary. There is little plot or action. The son gets into a minor scrape; the father tries to understand. Throughout the play father and son are affectionately at odds, but the playwright devotes line after line to underscoring their mutual loyalty. Explain as you will the inconsistency of this motivation with that of the earlier ones. You still can read into *Ab, Wilderness!* the attainment in O'Neill of a new serenity.

**A**nd so O'Neill quite obviously has come to the parting of the ways. The crossroads carry not merely two signposts, *Comedy* and *Tragedy*, but markers for all the intermediate paths which are open to a dramatist of O'Neill's scope. It would be easy to believe that the kindness and the benignity which he has displayed in *Ab, Wilderness!* will be a sufficient outlet for his dramatic craftsmanship; that he will write a succession of simple, humorous, understanding, and endearing comedies not because he knows that he still has something of import to say, but because he must write plays. It is also possible, if far fetched, to feel sure that his present contentment will be a passing and evanescent thing, that his imagination will again strike into the ills and burdens of suffering and oppressed mankind. Who can say that *Mourning Becomes Electra* will be the finality of his accomplishment with tragedy?

It is between these two extremes of artistic expression, however, that the more interesting speculations lie.

O'Neill wrote to a friend some years ago that he was not interested, as other dramatists are, in the relation of man to man, but solely in the relation of man to God. And here one must pause for a moment for an added speculation. Does O'Neill mean by God an anthropomorphic God? Does he mean the laws of the universe? Or the man-made laws by which man regulates himself as an individual to the world he lives in? Granted that O'Neill has a deep and glowing reverence, it is hard to conceive of his writing a successful religious play, either ritualistic or theological. It is harder still to conceive of his writing

# O'NEILL

about the physical or the chemical and scientific laws of the universe as they impose themselves on man.

He might, however, write about the laws of man as, outdated, they impose themselves on the proud will of the individual. O'Neill's keen sense of social maladjustment and understanding of the play of forces in the human mind and soul are apt to prompt him to explore the situation of the individual face to face with a democracy that is ineffectual, or a socialism that is unrealistic, a fascism that is tyrannical, or a communism that is intellectually stifling. In such a struggle, will it be the individual who is the protagonist in conflict with the social order? Or will the individual, a stupid reactionary or irresponsible radical, be the antagonist, and will it be the laws of a new and idealized social order which will be the protagonist? Provided his indignation at the fate of the under dog, the down-and-outs of these early plays can be transferred into a universal social fury at the fate of mortals in the play of forces beyond control, we might find O'Neill's genius flowering again with all the power it held ten years ago—and with infinitely more light.

O'Neill has been the ruthless pathologist of individualism. Is he perhaps to become its diagnostician and prophet?

