

THE ART OF EUGENE O'NEILL

GILBERT NORWOOD

HOW many of us have discussed, in whimsical essays or casual talk or profound novels, the coming of the next world-teacher or consummate artist! And utterly as the imaginative prophet, the commonplace theorist and the rest of us have differed in all else, we have agreed in one particular: "Anyhow, when he *does* come, it will be in the most unlikely guise, place and conditions; all the great, the kings and awful ecclesiastics, men of deep learning, mellow wisdom and far-reaching experience, will fail to recognize him and will revile, persecute, perhaps even kill him." It was long a favourite day-dream of my own that people would *really* be taken off their guard—that the wonderful new religious reformer would be an Archbishop of Canterbury, the world-shaking philosopher a dutiful fellow who had taken metaphysics in Chicago, getting maximum credits for Hegel or Descartes and a Ph.D. on *Some Aspects of Something—or—other*. "What a delicious setback for our knowing little cynics!"

So engrossed was I in hugging this imagined triumph, this Paradise of the Embittered Professor, that quite a little time had elapsed before I realized that it had happened: the great new dramatist had emerged—and lo! he had taken Professor Baker's course in playwriting at Harvard! And he had *not* been rejected with amazed contempt by every manager and producer in Europe and America. He was, and is, acclaimed amid harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music: no sooner had Mr. O'Neill exhibited a play as good as *Still Waters Run Deep* than the heavens were rent with American hosannas, and even the ranks of Bloomsbury could scarce forbear to cheer.

All this might have been foreseen. When Ibsen began his social dramas, our mandarins poured upon him a torrent of scared abuse: "this dirty old blackguard" is the tamest that I recall. Then it appeared that they were wrong: instructed opinion at length declared (of course by the time Ibsen lay at death's door) that he was at once a great ethical teacher and a superb dramatist. Meanwhile Shaw's stage-career had opened, and again the critics met defeat: he was universally extolled

(of course by the time he was turning out deplorable senilities) as at once the finest wit and the most consummate playwright of the day. Taught at last by failure, the critics murmured: "Next time, we will not be caught napping. Let anyone bring out another play that we can't understand, or that is just the opposite of *Abie's Irish Rose*, and we shall be ready with the garlands and tomtoms." So it came about that ribbons were pinned upon threadbare melodrama, thinly disguised by Irish politics or what in Ireland passes for politics. So it is that a playwright—possessed, indeed, of the highest merit, who has nevertheless often written weakly or in falsetto, and whose variety in method and conception of his art renders him recalcitrant to every type of glib formula—so it is that Eugene O'Neill has been caparisoned by critics with all the conventional garnish of *Attitudes to Life*, *Dark Period*, *Temporary Loss of Direction* and the like, familiar to those who peruse literary manuals. In the hideous phrase of the film-papers, they have been grooming him for stardom. Most essays, known to me, dealing with O'Neill offer such neat illustration of the havoc wrought by mechanical manipulation of clichés and the worn counters of supercilious pseudo-psychology, that I am half tempted to turn aside and discourse upon it rather than upon these dramas themselves.

For I can think of no distinguished playwright on whom it is more difficult to buckle the usual harness of influences, attitudes and the rest; if we make the attempt, we must either falsify the plainest facts (as more than one has done) or pronounce him chaotic—which matters nothing, as it means only that our schemes fail to fit him. But naturally some of his works are better than others: a few so magnificent that O'Neill must be counted among the ten or twelve greatest dramatists; the others not indeed usually negligible, but seldom deserving emphatic eulogy. All that can legitimately be done by way of a scheme is to sort the plays roughly into five groups, the last of which falls into sub-divisions.

First comes a series of one-act plays, nearly all sea-pieces. They have small value, though the author probably found them useful as practice. *Bound East for Cardiff* is placed in the fore-castle of a tramp steamer during fog, and centres round the death of a seaman—just a picture of rough sailor's life, regarded as powerful drama only because most of us have not worked our passage across the Atlantic, and would prefer not to try. *The*

Rope has a good moment or two, but on the whole is as squalidly vapid as *Tobacco Road*, though it has the advantage in brevity. The end, where that frightful child flings the hoarded money into the sea, has power; but consider what assemblage of uncouth machinery is needed to secure it: the foolish business of the rope swinging in full view—for years, apparently; the child's habit of playing in this particular barn; careful emphasis on the fact that the sea is deep at the cliff's foot (no use trying to get the money back!); and the uncle who, with a frolicsome abandon concealed by all uncles of my own experience, encourages the child earlier to throw a single dollar over the cliff—putting ideas into her head! Others among these one-act plays are affecting, *The Long Voyage Home* above all; concerning *Where the Cross is Made* more shall be said later.

Those were all composed before 1920, in which year O'Neill reached the age of thirty-two. The four other kinds are chronologically jumbled; more disconcerting still, it might be debated concerning some whether they belong to this kind or to that.

One group I incline to call thesis-plays, by which I mean that O'Neill, having discovered some definite dogma about some definite factor in human life, writes a play to prove the dogma: a dangerous method, almost certain to result not in art but in stiffness and more or less open propagandism. Some plays of Brieux (for instance, *Les Avariés*) suggest a useful comparison: artistically almost piteous, they achieved a feat irrelevant though valuable—compelling the public to face certain dreadful results of vice. Now, in O'Neill the moral (as it used to be named) is not only present, of course, but fairly clear, though it does not shout at us with Brieux's ghastly explicitness; on the other hand, it has usually strength enough to produce the fault surely unavoidable in a thesis-play: to wit, that the characters move with stiff joints and are obviously saying less what human beings would say than what the author's formula dictates. In *Beyond the Horizon* all has been moulded to reveal the disasters wrought by book-fed, feckless romanticism: Robert is not a full character dramatically, but weak yearning for "over there" personified; and all the other people cluster round him, not living with any complete personality of their own, but acting as foils to Robert. The idea of *Diff'rent* is that one should not look for perfection in a husband. Emma throws over honest Caleb because of what they used to call a peccadillo (now it is known as "refusing no form of experience"). As a

result, she not only misses happiness but becomes revolting: the last act is downright hideous; and she hangs herself, and so does Caleb. *Dynamo*, as I understand it, means that if we are victims of a superstitious temperament, our emancipation from one stupid religion means only subservience to a new. Reuben's life is spoiled by his parents' coarse Puritanism and crass religiosity: he ends by thinking the dynamo at which he works is a goddess—a good instance of the falsetto mentioned earlier. By far the finest of this group (if in fact it belongs thereto) is *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, which demonstrates not merely the power of love, but the sovereignty of divine patience amid dread suffering. Its theme, abstractly stated, is America's colour-problem in its acutest form, mixed marriage; in the concrete, a particular pair of living people, Jim and Ella: and the two sides, general and particular, are held in admirable balance. In this technical respect, *All God's Chillun* is among O'Neill's best plays—you see a whole mixed community: in a different focus, you see the few individuals. After a rather amateurish opening, the work grows stronger and more certain, with utter sincerity of emotion. Utter sincerity of emotion!—there is one of the O'Neill marks: he never shirks a situation, however terrible. And by facing the fact, he obtains his appropriate reward, a far more piercing beauty. Here Ella, the white girl, and Jim, the young negro lawyer, after a trying period of love and doubt, at length marry. Ella is torn horribly between genuine strong affection and the unconquerable instinct which forces her to gasp at him in agonized hysteria, "Nigger! nigger!" That is already notable art. Further, this conflict unseats her reason, and then comes really noble drama—a climax heart-breakingly simple, far too simple for some critics—but natural, indeed necessary, for a beautiful, rather feminine, soul like Jim's. At the close Ella, now childish, asks him to play the old games with her, and he replies: "Honey, honey, I'll play right up to the gates of heaven with you!" . . .

The next kind or group I will call the spectacular, because, although one can with greater or less pains discover a thesis for each, the thesis or moral is in any case far less obvious than the picturization, a rather elaborate pageant marshalled round one figure. The clearest instance is the earliest, belonging to 1920—*The Emperor Jones*, which I think O'Neill's first unmistakable success, interesting for this reason only, that he has produced what is in strictness not a play but a succession of scenes threaded on to the same personality and using cinema-technique. This

quality sets *The Emperor Jones* apart; nowhere else does the "legitimate" drama owe anything to the cinema, except in an experiment by Mr. Atkinson, the Australian playwright, whose *Nocturne*, however, merely combines actual film with actual stage-work. *The Hairy Ape* can best be appreciated as a lyric put into rudimentary dramatic form. Just as Browning made extremely vocal the barely human Caliban, so here the stoker Yank, hardly nearer to normal humanity, voices his sense that the only people on the liner who have meaning—who "belong," in his favourite phrase—are the stokers by whom the ship is driven, the passengers being mere baggage. We should be wrong to talk here about the dignity of labour: Yank has only feeling, not doctrine—the feeling that he is an organ in a vast animal. But of course if he is allotted speeches, they must have some degree of purely intellectual coherence—a great difficulty of elaborate lyric, in any hands. Even so, Yank is a splendid personification of what Whitman called the "barbaric yawp." Beside these great speeches are found scenes quite normal, and valueless except as breaking up, and thus emphasizing, the lyrical passages: for instance, the girl's only function is to startle and awaken Yank by the contrast of her white freshness amid the heat and glare of the furnaces.

The other three works belonging to this group, *The Fountain*, *Marco Millions*, *Lazarus Laughed*, are notable only for the variety and picturesqueness of their scenes. The first title alludes to a fabled spring in Cathay, by drinking from which a man may regain his youth. Don Leon seeks it and after many adventures (not all caused by his quest) dies without finding it. The whole plot—or, rather, story—embellished with Moorish arches and minstrels, dashing Spaniards, mantillas and moonlight, Eldorado, baking sunshine, *patios*, and of course Christopher Columbus—has for its essential thought nothing more novel or profound than an elderly soldier's painful realization that the youthful Beatriz does not even think of falling in love with him. *Marco Millions*, though utterly different on the surface, belongs to the same type of dramaturgy. In a procession of rich and exciting scenes we are shown Marco's travels as a merchant and his elevation to power under the Great Kaan, then his long voyage as he escorts the Princess Kukachin to her bridegroom; and his steady declension from an imaginative boy to a glib cunning moneygetter. The Princess falls in love with him, but he has eyes for nothing except gain. In an epilogue we learn (if we have not guessed it) that he is a satire on the contemporary

American business-man; indeed, he literally walks out of the theatre and drives off in a motor-car: how this feat of realism is supposed to be carried through, I cannot well conceive. The whole piece suggests a diluted blend of *Hassan* and *Peer Gynt*. In *Lazarus Laughed*, again, we observe the same method: theatricality rather than drama—cunningly varied and exciting scenes, vehement language that conveys only the illusion of spiritual intensity. The whole pageant proclaims with (to tell truth) a noisy insistence that the good life consists in joy: "Laugh! laugh! laugh!" Incessantly it is said and sung that there is no death—we pass, in truth, over into God's laughter. Accordingly Lazarus, having received a revelation during his three days' sojourn beyond the grave, moves up and down the world laughing. We follow him through vivid scenes in Palestine and later in Italy, at the court of Tiberius, that admirable but grumpy potentate, here presented as a disconcerting mixture of Scott's Louis XI and the Fagin of *Oliver Twist*. Whatever happens, usually something sinister, Lazarus laughs in earth-shaking yet melodious paroxysms. The most horrible part of all, however, is that the merriment proves uncannily contagious. Centurions, peasants, the Prince Caligula, everyone, burst into fits of laughter—everyone, that is, except Lazarus's wife . . . ! There is the point at which a really alert playwright would begin; but O'Neill here is not alert, only riding a theatrical hobby-horse.

The next group can be given no more arresting label than "the more or less normal;" they reveal no marked peculiarity of underlying idea, characterization or plot-structure. They are *Anna Christie*, *The Straw*, *The First Man*, *Ah! Wilderness*: the last alone of these need be discussed here. In this drama O'Neill's stage-technique is defter than anywhere else, even than in the masterpieces to which we shall come later.

The topic is adolescent love, which asks of the dramatist (as of ourselves in everyday life) beyond perhaps all other forms that love assumes, boundless caution, patience, understanding. One of the few real advances that we have made in the last generation or two concerns this delicate bloom that so often tinges the hesitant beginnings of maturity. At one time the fashion was to deride it, to dub it "calf-love" and try to ignore it, merely because so often short-lived—as if anything that stirs and opens the soul were less lovely, less vital, because it faded soon. We think and feel differently now. But it has scarcely ever been well handled in literature, because those

upon whom its spell descends are too young to command the skill in words, the insight of brain and heart alike, from which literature springs. It was revealed, though not quite directly, in Keats's *Endymion*; Edgar Allan Poe gave it more explicit and poignant expression, but by the very nature of the case in boyish manner. *Ah! Wilderness*, written when O'Neill was in the middle forties, offers us a direct treatment, not glorious, not noble, yet instinct with charm, sincerity and perfect understanding. The hero, Richard Miller, is one of his two or three most completely projected characters: deeply in love, gawky, full of fits and starts, tinged with priggishness, crudely defiant, crudely weak, sound and generous at heart, inspired by poetry and all great ideas as well as by his own insurgent maturity, responsive on the instant to intelligent sympathy. His love takes on strength and direction—and, on the artistic side, dramatic effectiveness—from a squalid but in the upshot ennobling encounter with an entirely different kind of girl. The picture is (as it were) framed—given clearer meaning, still livelier attractiveness—by two other love-interests, excellently depicted in themselves and adroitly subordinated to the main theme: one of them is the relation between the lad's parents, which provides a most beautiful close to the whole play. Moreover, the modelling and the focussing of details show delightful mastery. For example, at the opening we have to meet no fewer than seven members of the family, plus a friend: they are introduced with notable skill, not in a bunch, but at neatly arranged yet brief and natural intervals.

There remains a final group, containing (among other works) those masterpieces to which have alluded more than once. In the works already discussed we have often noted talent, sometimes marked excellence; but no reason has yet been shown for assigning to O'Neill a place among the world's greatest playwrights. In one kind of power, to be next described, he attains a height never surpassed by any other dramatist, ancient or modern: power to depict the naked soul, its nature, its activities recondite and hitherto unguessed, to trace the finest quivering tendrils of thought, emotion, barely incipient tendency or strain. Here lies O'Neill's root interest, here rises his towering achievement.

It is no doubt true that all imaginative writers are concerned with apprehending and vividly portraying human nature; above all, the novelists and the playwrights. But it must further and

in particular be observed, that however the English writers (let us say) may have differed, or however closely they may have equalled one another, in depth and clarity of their own insight, there has been an unmistakable increase of the psychological revelation that they offer their public. We see it most plainly in the novel, only less clearly in the drama. From the reader's or spectator's standpoint, earlier work deals more with the surface: we are shown what people do, say and suffer, but see comparatively little of action's hidden causes. As time goes on, artists render stratum transparent below stratum—not merely permitting us to guess, but displaying, and with ever more conscious elaboration, the shape and entanglement of the soul's very roots. The progression from Smollett through Thackeray and Meredith to Joyce is in this respect startling. It is hardly less so in dramatic art.

Where stands O'Neill? First, as to his status or merit, his work is at its best sublime, unsurpassed by Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Racine, Goethe or Ibsen—in this particular effect of exhibiting a naked soul with terrific power while maintaining a recognizable human individual. At times, indeed, he achieves the acme of psychological revelation: where he does *that*, he is far less excellent, just because the balance between outside and inside vanishes: and when that happens, plays or novels resemble those horrible clocks with no faces, which allow a full view of the brass intestines at their intricate but unlovely work. In brief, he sometimes "lets himself go", and becomes too exclusively the vivisector. This final group of O'Neill's works may therefore be divided into at least four different sub-species, different both in technique and in success.

The first intimation of his concern with such study occurs as early as the one-act play, *Where the Cross is Made* (1918), a not particularly striking tale of a sea-captain who goes mad through his obsession with hidden treasure. Now, three years later O'Neill took this story up again and treated it with far more fulness and power in *Gold*, a play excellent both in adventure and in psychology. The last act is simply a revision of *Where the Cross is Made*, and Capt. Bartlett's madness, with gleams of sanity, is magnificently done, pointing forward to the greatest scenes of the Electra dramas. Three years later again, in 1924, came *Welded*, concerning which the most conflicting opinions are possible: to dismiss it as crazy balderdash would be pardonable; to acclaim it as brilliantly acute and fearless, not less intelligible. The explanation is that O'Neill has made an

unflinching attempt to state in full the spiritual, moral and intellectual quality of sexual love. This he has put into words—already a great enterprize. But far more, being a playwright, he has given those words to be spoken as dialogue between two married lovers, with another man and woman to extend and deepen the presentation. It is a play to read: to witness it would be horrible. There are things which may be said, but which should not be overheard; candid love-making is among them. Our earlier dramatists, above all in *Romeo and Juliet*, triumphantly avoid this fault by endowing their lovers with poetry. The real dialogue of such encounters it is indecency to record—a mistake committed by a very few novelists, by too many film-writers, and here by O'Neill . . . unless . . . unless we take his play as a deliberate endeavour to extend the bounds of art, to force his *dramatis personae* upon an inhuman explicitness. On that view, he is not committing a vulgarity, but making a pardonable artistic error. He has not written thus again, but evolves new and very odd technique for such utterances. And even here we observe with interest that he is groping forward: in one place, he tells us, "they speak each ostensibly to the other, but showing by their tone it is a thinking aloud to oneself, and neither appears to hear what the other has said."

The method tentatively employed for a moment here, and much more fully in *Dynamo*, attains more complete function and far greater import in *Strange Interlude* (1928), where each person says not only what is meant to be heard by their companions, but also (in an aside, for the audience only) his private thoughts, or half-articulate feeling, on the same topic. A device familiar enough! But O'Neill has enlarged its use almost beyond recognition. Here for instance is a scrap of conversation between two jealous men.

- Marsden. (Now I know! . . . absolutely! his face! . . . her voice! . . . they did love each other . . . they do now . . .) When did you get back from Europe?
- Darrell. This morning on the *Olympia*.
(Look out for this fellow . . . always had it in for me . . . like woman . . . smells out love . . . he suspected before . . . well, who gives a damn now? . . .)
- Marsden. (What has brought him back? What a devilish cowardly trick to play on poor unsuspecting Sam! . . . But I'm not unsuspecting . . .)
What brought you back so soon?

Darrell. My father died three weeks ago.
 I've had to come back about his estate.
 (Lie . . . Father's death just gave me an excuse to
 myself . . .)

(Let me interject that in one of these asides occurs perhaps the only passage of notable wit that O'Neill has hitherto given us. The rather finicking novelist Marsden mutters: "That is true! . . . I've never married the word to life! . . . I've been a timid bachelor of arts, not an artist!") This astonishing device is by no means the whole point of *Strange Interlude*, which could be performed without the vast array of asides and would be a first-rate piece, so given. But what shall we think of the device itself? Of course we must not condemn it out of hand as "unlike real life:" every kind of dramatic presentation is that, in one particular or another; not least our own convention of a room with the fourth wall removed. The only test is: does this device help to convey the dramatist's intention more completely? Very well: these asides are a genuine and useful, though cumbrous, addition to stage-craft: any playwright who aims above knockabout farce or sword-and-cape stuff must henceforth ask himself whether he had not better adopt this method. If he does decide for it, he must beware of two mistakes from which its originator has shown himself not completely immune. Firstly, it seems unwise to make the official dialogue as long as a normal play, and insert also a huge mass of surreptitious talk: the audience must have its meals! Secondly, this development raises in its most urgent form a question that concerns the very basis of all art. In any artistic creation two parties, not one, are concerned: the creator and . . . let us say "the public," to include the person who examines statuary, listens to music and so forth. The public is not extraneous, but (in a sense important yet sometimes hard to define) actually contributes to the work of art. Now! Here is the problem: how great is the public's contribution to be, of filling in gaps, leaping to meet the artist half-way? The deepest difference between classical and non-classical literature is that the former leaves much more for the public to supply than does the latter. Nevertheless, all schools of all arts that ever existed leave a good deal for us to supply for ourselves: it is out of the question for them to do otherwise, else they would not be creating art-work at all. What would happen can be learnt from those cinema-films so common formerly, where, if one man telephones to another, you are shown the bell ringing in the other man's office.

There lies the peril of the *Strange Interlude* method, that the public may have nothing to do save wait till it is over, if ever.

A play both vigorous and subtle is this, depicting the history of a woman's heart with utter sincerity—and by "sincerity" I mean sincerity, not that exclusive attention to the squalid which is all that the noble word "realism" is nowadays permitted to suggest. Nina is superbly portrayed as she gains strength, richness and elasticity of soul from her experience of youthful love, later marriage and the destruction of her unborn child, her amour, her second marriage. Her expansion offers an impressive contrast with the progressive hardening and stiffening of Lavinia in the *Electra* trilogy. Nowhere, perhaps, is O'Neill's realism so fine as in the scene where Nina reveals that she has at last reached full happiness by having three men attached to her—her husband, her lover and the fatherly friend who at the close marries her. She even insists that the baby belongs to all four of them. Candour indeed! I wish O'Neill had found space to show what Nina would feel if each of her three husbands took two other wives . . .

The innumerable asides, then, of *Strange Interlude* are one expedient plainly engendered by our author's passion to reveal the soul: another is even more celebrated, even more audacious—the use of masks. This technique has no resemblance to that of *Marco Millions* and *Lazarus Laughed*, where masks are employed for quite another purpose: namely, as in the ancient Greek drama, and especially the choruses thereof, where for the accidental and irrelevant variations of humanity is substituted a set of faces indicating qualities shared by a group. In *The Great God Brown* and *Days Without End* their function is just the opposite: not to conceal individuality, but to display its depths, not by the mere wearing of masks but (at least in the former play) by their manipulation. *Days Without End* uses a comparatively simple technique. The main character, John Loving, is presented by two beings: one—called John—the better self, wearing no mask; the other—called Loving—the evil self, who wears a sneering mask. Loving, though of course in physical fact present and visible as well as audible, is supposed invisible to the other people on the stage. Whenever John talks with anyone, especially his uncle, the sympathetic priest, his amiable remarks are interrupted or continued by Loving, much to the dismay of the other characters, who are puzzled by the sudden eruption of black-hearted and blasphemous utterances from the innocent John. Finally, the bad self is

slain in a church through John's attainment of utter belief in Christ.

In *The Great God Brown* the four chief persons all have masks—or rather, when Dion Anthony dies, Billy Brown takes his mask and for a time pretends to be both men by rapidly running in and out of rooms, changing clothes and the like. When these people are alone and really themselves, they wear no masks; when confronting others, they usually present the mask which indicates the character wherewith society credits them. One result is that when any of these is alone, but is suddenly visited by someone, he must dive for the mask and put it on. Occasionally he is caught unawares. There occurs a gruesome scene where Margaret (maskless) faints in the presence of Dion (maskless). As their sons rush in, he puts on his mask hastily. They stare at the unrecognized woman on the bench:

Eldest. We heard someone yell. It sounded like Mother.

Dion. No. It was this lady—my wife.

Eldest. But hasn't Mother come yet?

Dion. Yes. Your Mother is here.

He then puts Margaret's mask on her face and stands back, whereupon the boys exclaim "Mother!" and run to her. The inner meaning of this drama as a nexus of symbolism has been described at some length by O'Neill himself in a letter to the press; but into that explanation I do not propose to enter, as it seems to me hopelessly confused and impossible to render lucidly by any such action and device as we find in the play itself. The employment of masks—and, further, a change of masks to indicate the ravages of experience—is a failure because unbearably grotesque. Nevertheless, O'Neill should be honoured as a splendidly original "man of the theatre" who labours to expand the resources of his art. He may yet, for he is little past fifty, evolve a great new technique of production.

At length we reach the two plays which are at once the finest ever composed in America and the finest composed anywhere since Ibsen, even that reservation being by no means beyond dispute.

Desire Under the Elms unfortunately lay for some time under a censorial ban, which warps public opinion by arousing irrelevant condemnation or irrelevant praise. The marital complications result in no tinge of pornography: as in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, they are vital to the ideas and emotions that inspire and drive the three chief persons. Old Ephraim Cabot wishes at all costs to have a son who—unlike the three long ago born

to him—shall prove a worthy heir to his monomania, a grim half-religious love for the farm. His third son, Eben, is determined to avenge his own mother upon his father—the mother whose life was crushed out by her husband's crabbed cruelty. Between them stands Abbie Putnam, the newly wedded third wife of Ephraim, and presently her child, supposed Ephraim's, but really the child of young Eben. This situation O'Neill handles with a subtle and magnificent mastery our sense of which will be deepened if we set beside this play another work which at least one critic (with whatever justification) has compared to it: *Les Fossiles*, by Francois de Curel. The French play is open to the reproach that I brought against several works of O'Neill, though its manner may rather suggest Pinero—unnatural, doctrinaire, simplification of psychology. The woman who corresponds to Abbie has, indeed, no particular character at all: at one point she actually uses as an argument *mon caractère indécis!* Such comparison brings out effectively the daemonic power wherewith O'Neill has projected his own heroine. But his artistic triumph lies mainly herein, that each of the three persons is ridden by a complication of emotions, which again cross and recross those cherished by the others. Old Ephraim passionately desires that the farm may find a master like himself; *but he also* longs for a son whom he can at last approve. Abbie rejoices to have the child, by whatever father, that so, after her years of wretchedness, she may root herself securely in the new-found home; *but she also* loves Eben for himself. Eben thirsts to injure his father through the new wife precisely because Eben's ill-used mother was the former wife; *but he also* adores Abbie in her own person. That is how great drama comes to birth: first in the conception of people vividly human, then in the orchestration of their conflicting passions, nobilities and sins.

It would be cumbrous, and therefore misleading, to work out on paper the marvellously deft and keen-sighted interlacement of character, the juxtaposition—nay, the interpenetration—of the basest and the noblest instincts. Let me rather add two notes. Many have been repelled by what they feel as a gritty, even squalid, realism: the work lacks any touch of soul-quieting beauty—a touch of lyrical quality, shall we say? That is not without truth, or relevance; but the dramatist has in fact given a hint of this: more than once the characters, cloddish as they mostly are, remark baldly yet poignantly on the fairness of the landscape; and at the very close Eben and Abbie, as they

walk forth hand-in-hand to their fate, pause to gaze with devout rapture at the sunrise. The other point concerns what has been so often discussed, the revelation of naked souls. Here the balance is beautifully preserved between the external and the internal: we are shown not merely the appearance and talk, not only the actions and purposes, but moreover (so far as seems possible) the complete soul of three human beings—agonized and terrible, yet in their hour, and by virtue of their humanity, sublime.

Mourning Becomes Electra, however, marks beyond question the greatest height to which O'Neill has yet risen; some will, indeed, find it difficult to believe, perhaps even to imagine, that he or anyone could produce work of more stupendous power. It is a trilogy, a sequence of plays closely related—*Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, *The Haunted*—based on the Greek tragedies which treat the story of Agamemnon's murder by his wife and her lover, and the consequent vengeance exacted by her children, Orestes and Electra. This affiliation is quite openly acknowledged, if only by the title, for no woman called Electra appears among O'Neill's *dramatis personae*. He has naturally used his materials with complete freedom, in external details great and small, and in psychology. For Agamemnon home from Troy he substitutes Brigadier-General Ezra Mannon back from the American Civil War; Aegisthus, the murderous lover, is modernized with fascinating skill. To Electra and Orestes—here Lavinia and her brother Orin—are added a subsidiary pair who contribute powerfully to the plot, Hazel and her brother Peter, who are to marry Orin and Lavinia, but who after dreadful encounters are forced to withdraw in perplexity and horror. The Greek chorus is practically expunged, and rightly. Though to the Aeschylean plays it makes contributions of immense value, such an element would be felt as hopelessly alien in a twentieth-century domestic drama; and O'Neill shrewdly contents himself with mere remnants of this form—at one point a group of half-drunken villagers, at another a few friends of the Mannon family, but (most interestingly of all) the old gardener Seth Backwith, by whose brief but timely entrances the tragedy is enriched and deepened.

In the whole range of dramatic literature there is perhaps no study more instructive and to certain temperaments more profoundly attractive than the changes which O'Neill has imposed on the characters of Aeschylus, their emotions and consequent acts. Orestes slays Aegisthus almost as a matter

of course, with no misgiving at any time; but the causes that impel Orin to kill Brant are complex. His experience of bloodshed in the Civil War has given him a strange sense that he is fated to continue such deeds. His love for his mother, portrayed with a remorseless insight into depths concealed and by him unguessed, leads him to kill not less through jealousy than in his father's quarrel. Only less frightful, if less at all, is this, that his mother uses his morbid loyalty and love in hopes to sunder him from Lavinia, with whom she rightly fears that he may form a league of vengeance. Again, this league is in Aeschylus simple and natural enough; in the modern work it leads, after the vengeance, to hideous intimacy of guilt made more unbearable yet by morbid entanglements of tortured love and mutual dread.

In Aeschylus, the central physical fact is that Orestes slays his mother with his own hand. Here the brother and sister, after Brant has been killed, announce the deed to their mother, and she kills herself. But the spiritual outcome is none the lighter: indeed her children's remorse brings an appalling climax. For the most impressive difference between the ancient and the modern work lies here. In Aeschylus, the matricide, having engendered an open quarrel between the deities of Heaven and of Hades, at length finds justification or solution in scenes which for religious profundity, wisdom and poetry may well be thought the noblest masterpiece even of Greek genius. O'Neill has conceived a finale utterly different. Orin, reeling through more and more dread agonies of frenzy, ferocity and remorse, at length destroys himself. Lavinia on her emotional side changes horribly into the semblance of her mother, while spiritually she hardens and stiffens into a creature whose very being is irremediable guilt, till at last she condemns herself to a lifelong imprisonment in the ancestral home, alone with the ghosts of her family. O'Neill has succeeded in depicting the very lineaments of damnation. Here, parting company with Aeschylus, he rises to the height of another supreme artist: Goethe, in *Iphigenie*, has essayed the same awful task; yet even he has not shown a loftier, more unflinching mastery.

But Goethe was a poet; so was Aeschylus. O'Neill is not. That difference places him far below them in power to exalt as well as to illumine. Nevertheless, he remains one of the world's finest playwrights, in the strictest sense of that word; of realists he is perhaps the very greatest.