EUGENE O'NEILL CONTEMPLATES MORTALITY

BY BRYLLION FAGIN

THE drama has never been regarded in America with the same seriousness with which it has been accepted in Europe. Here it has always stood primarily for amusement, a contrivance to while away a few leisure hours. It has reflected neither the problems of American life nor the movements in American art. It started as a transplanted product, rootless, arising neither in the mythology of a people nor in the rites of its worship. It has developed along the lines of popular amusement.

Until the insurgent theatre crossed the Atlantic in the second decade of this century, our drama raised but few problems, and, with one exception, none of fundamental import until O'Neill came along. Theatre and life were viewed by both playwright and audience as separate entities. To be sure, drama often resembled life, but the two parted company as soon as the construction of a play began. For one thing, drama was much more pleasant. Things happened in a play as they ought to happen in life and did not. The playwright made them happen. The playwright was an engineer, said Bronson Howard, the Dean of American Playwrights until 1908. Howard is also remembered as the man who could not understand the somberness of Ibsen.

The problems that American playwrights exploited were of the obvious, newspaper variety. During the Revolution Mrs. Mercy Warren in "The Blockheads" countered General Burgoyne's thrust in "The Blockade of Boston." The War of 1812 and the Civil War supplied the playwrights with topical themes. The influence of foreign manners upon certain susceptible Americans produced Tyler's "The Contrast" in 1787 and Mrs. Mowatt's "Fashion" in 1845. But whatever the problem, it was usually shoved aside as soon as the play began to assume its conventional structure. The dramatist became more interested in producing a "well-made" play than in his subject matter. The theme merely supplied a starting point but it did not determine the form of the play. Dion Boucicault was not interested in the problem of slavery in his "Octoroon," any more than Howard in "Shenandoah" and William Gillette in "Secret Service" were interested in the Civil War. They were all interested in telling a love story and in complicating it sufficiently to keep the audience in the theatre for the major portion of an evening. Their plays were as remote from the subjects they purported to deal with as Belasco's frankly romantic "Madame Butterfly."

When the so-called "problem play" definitely reached America, the effect upon our playwrights was merely to increase their supply of themes. Such dangerous or unpleasant subjects as Wall Street ethics, tenement life, capital and labor, infidelity, divorce, prostitution, politics, came to be regarded as fit subjects upon which to hang theatrical entertainment. The treatment, however, that was accorded these subjects was almost always either melodramatic and sentimental or naive. The author, even such pioneers of realism as Steele Mackaye and James A. Herne, overplotted and artificialized his material. He either raved and surrendered or solved all difficulties by a sweet dénouement.

But even had the American dramatist agreed to forsake the tradition of the "well-made" play and to take his problems seriously, it is doubtful that he would have succeeded in producing more lasting drama. For the problems themselves were not fundamental ones; at best they often suggested fundamental implications, which the dramatists failed to see. Ibsen does not live today because he discussed woman's position in the home or the actualities of a father's sins being visited upon his offspring. Ibsen lives because besides seeing that there were certain definite problems in his age demanding a solution, he saw also that life entails the joy of growth and the tragedy of decay; the poetry of man's wanderings in the world and the essential tragedy of his weary return. Even in his simple problem plays, such as "Ghosts," Ibsen often transcended the problem and saw with the eyes of a poet beyond the merely ephemeral topic. And this can be said for every great drama that has survived time and fashion; it has had poetic overtones of far greater importance than the fable it told.

The ephemeral nature of American drama before O'Neill is due to its lack of just such overtones. It is not merely a lack of intellectual content; it is more profoundly an absense of warm sensitivity and "high seriousness." The American dramatist has not been first of all a man, who, having lived life, brings his results in understanding and comment to his chosen artistic medium. Instead he has been first of all a dramatist, who goes to the pot of life in hopeful search of a juicy bit that might feed his craft. It did not often occur to him that life itself is drama, and that his own reaction to it as a being caught in time and space, his own joy and sorrow and perplexity, constitutes his art. "Drama" was something detached and technical. It followed a certain formula. It consisted of a theme and a plot, which in turn consisted of certain divisions and complications. The vogue of the "problem play" did freshen the theme of the American drama, but it left the drama itself just as bare of all brooding overtones as it had been from the beginning. The problems did not spring from the dramatists' intensity—and they did not affect the essential vision of their engineering design.

The one exception before O'Neill was Percy Mackaye. Early realizing that drama had greater value than merely to take care of the leisure hours of the tired stenographer and her employer, he preached the civic dignity of the theater. A poet himself, he was not afraid to model his early plays upon the poetic drama of Shakespeare's England and Sappho's Greece. Once, in its Golden Age, the drama soared into imaginative spheres beyond the transitory problems of man's daily grubbing; it had poetry and music; it had escstasy. Mackaye sought to return to the Golden Age. His work as a whole is of great value, but it does not concern us here, except one play, his "Scarecrow."

The importance of "The Scarecrow," in connection with this article—which is concerned with the work of O'Neill—lies in the fact that it was the first American drama dealing with a profoundly fundamental problem. This "tragedy of the ludicrous" does not present a mere topic of the day, a problem arising from the outer form of American existence. Taking a suggestion from one of Hawthorne's short stories, Mackaye created a drama whose essential theme is the insignificance of universal man. The Scarecrow—"a flail and broomstick! a cob, a gourd and pumpkin"—becomes a symbol of that sublime "inanity"—Man. The tragedy comes when through the power of love the scarecrow gains a vision of himself as he is. More compassionate than Dean Swift, Mackaye holds forth self-contempt as the one redeeming trait man possesses. But Mackaye solves no problems and answers no questions. Like the great dramatists of old he is content to voice the passionate yearning of the race for understanding and the despair of the old consciousness of relentless futility. "Is it Thou," the scarecrow, contemplating himself in the mirror, demands of God, "that peerest forth *at* me—*from* me? Why, hark then; Thou shalt listen, and answer—if Thou canst. Between the rise and setting of a sun, I have walked in this world of Thine. I have been thrilled with wonder; I have been calmed with knowledge; I have trembled with joy and passion. Power, beauty, love have ravished me. Infinity itself, like a dream, has blazed before me with the certitude of prophecy; and I have cried, 'This world, the heavens, time itself, are mine to conquer,' and I have thrust forth mine arm to wear Thy shield forever—and lo! for my shield Thou reachest me—a mirror, and whisperest: 'Know thyself! Thou art—a scarecrow: a tinkling clod, a rigmarole of dust, a lump of ordure, contemptible, superfluous, inane!' Haha! Hahaha! And with such scarecrows Thou dost people a planet!"

II

Eugene O'Neill has been very prolific. He has utilized old themes and new ones. He has written good plays and merely fair ones. He has received enthusiastic acclaim and bitter condemnation. This is not another attempt to evaluate his contribution to American drama. A complete appraisal of O'Neill's dramatic activity would require much more space and a wider perspective. The aim of this article is to focus attention upon one theme that has stimulated O'Neill to creative work, one problem with which O'Neill has wrestled as a man and as an artist. It is a fundamental, a universal problem, never before exploited by American dramatists—excepting Makaye. It is the problem of man's insignificance, of man's mortality.

O'Neill, too, has written about temporal problems. He has written about the conflict of the sexes, the conflict of races, about capital and labor, about prostitution. Yet even these plays have lived on long after they were first presented in a theatre. They have proved disturbing, as previous plays on the same subjects by American playwrights never did prove. They have proved disturbing as plays on the stage and as great literature is disturbing, in book form. They have not shared the fate of nearly all American plays—that of drawing huge crowds to a certain theatre on Broadway for a number of weeks or months or years and then lapsing into oblivion. They have displayed a disturbing vitality—in New York and in Berlin, in Moscow and in Tokyo.

The explanation of this phenomenon lies in the fact that O'Neill's plays are more than problem plays. He never takes a subject containing a momentary problem and builds it into a play which has nothing more to offer than this basic theme and possibly a naive solution. Even his topical plays are rich with overtones that transcend the topic and the play and the characters in the play. The limited unity of the little drama becomes merged into the greater unity of a larger drama. The characters X, Y, Z,—Anna, Yank, Jones—acquire the symbolic significance of Man and Woman. The Moment recedes and the problem is enacted in Time. Emotions and thoughts do not come separate and isolated but drag along other emotions and thoughts. The background of the eternal flux of human existence looks down upon the petty immediacies displayed to an audience; it broods, glows, frowns, and is audible with overtones more disturbing than the play of the evening.

In at least five plays, O'Neill contemplates man's mortality, not merely by implication, but deliberately and boldly. Again other thoughts and other emotions obtrude. Complete isolation of an emotion, for microscopic inspection, is impossible. Nerve fibers hang on; memories, hopes, fears run in and out of the brain and complicate every attempt to separate consciousness. But the motif of birth and decay dominates the action and the thought in these five plays. From the beginning of his playwrighting career O'Neill showed an inclination to ask fundamental questions. The sea—so important in his early plays—became a symbol of inscrutable life; powerful, magnetic, it calls to man, lures him on, and destroys. What is the purpose of the sea? And what is the purpose of the magnet of sex? To what purpose is the call to live and multiply, so long as death is certain and inevitable? To what purpose are man's aspirations and heartbreak and mistakes and atavistic bars and the futile gesture of combat with destiny? Who is man and why?

The first play upon this theme was "The Fountain." It was not as successful as O'Neill's other plays of the same period, "Beyond the Horizon" and "Anna Christie." It was not as "realistic." Already then, in 1920, O'Neill realized that if he would treat of unlimited subjects he would have to abandon the cramped realism of the popular theatre. The action in "Beyond the Horizon" and "Anna Christie" is definitely localized and the characters carefully individualized; in "The Fountain" the element of symbolism and personification becomes apparent. The later development of O'Neill has been in the same direction. He has striven to tell not individual story of Robert or Anna, but the story of the human race, the conflicts that have raged from time immemorial and the perplexity that must forever remain a perplexity. Hence he has been driven into unfolding his stories by means of numerous scenes, way-stations in the wanderings of a mortal. Hence he has been driven into a generalized diction and into poetry, for only the poet can express the exalted moments of man's triumph and frustration in universal cadences. Hence he has been driven even to the employment of masks and choruses, expedients of ancient Greek drama. Hence his symbolic successes, such as "The Great God Brown," and failures, such as "Dynamo," in which the literal fable completely fails to merge into the symbolic tragedy and approaches the limits of absurdity.

"The Fountain" tells the story of Juan Ponce de Leon's search for the spring of youth. Juan is an adventurer, strong, active, arrogant. Youth and love are but glittering commonplaces to him—until youth passes and he is "sick with years." Then it is that he asks bitterly "Why have I lived?" and prays: "O Son of God . . . Show me Thy miracle—a sign—a word—a second's vision of what I am that I should have lived and died! I have striven for what the hand can grasp. What is left when Death makes the hand powerless? . . . O Mighty Relaxer of hands, have you no vision for the graspers of earth?" His words carry the tragedy of man's decay and the pathos of his helplessness. He calls pitifully: "What are you, Fountain? That from which all life springs and to which it must return—God! Are all dreams of you but the one dream?

(*Bowing his head miserably*) I do not know. Come back, Youth. Tell me this secret!"

"What are you, Fountain?" O'Neill repeats this question in "The Great God Brown," in "Marco Millions," in "Strange Interlude," in "Lazarus Laughed." He changes his words, modulates his voice, restrains or yields to his intensity, but the question remains essentially the same. Like Everyman, in the medieval Morality by that name, and before and after that Morality, confronted with the termination of his brief span of burning activity, O'Neill fumes and frets, cowers and trembles, rants and curses and whines and pleads, and broods brokenly upon the great enigma. He fumbles amid the welter of symbols he has constructed and gropes in the chaos of their emotions toward some sort of clarification, only, in the next play, to repeat his question over again.

"The Great God Brown" is a dramatization of the ancient conflict between Puritanism and Hellenism, between asceticism and hedonism. It contains eleven scenes and a prologue and an epilogue. Some of the characters are masked to indicate the duality of their natures. Even their names are symbolic. Margaret—the Eternal Feminine; Cybel—Mother Earth. But the play centers about Dion Anthony, who, it is easy to see, is Mr. Eugene O'Neill, of New York and New England, masked. Weary with the conflict between Dionysus the playboy and Antoninus the austere, O'Neill comes once more to Mother Cybel to be comforted. And Cybel strokes his hair maternally and laughs at his weakness. "You were born with ghosts in your eyes," she tells him, "and you were brave enough to go looking into your own dark—and you got afraid." A good diagnosis of the case of the artist in our midst. Yet he remains afraid before the dark curtain hiding the endless void. "Into thy hands, O Lord," he prays *with ascetic fervor*. (*Then suddenly, with a look of horror*) "Nothing. To feel one's life blown out like the flame of a cheap match . . . ! To fall asleep and know you'll never, never be called to get on the job of existence again!" And Cybel *pats his head maternally*: "There, don't be scared. It's in the blood. When the time comes, you'll find it's easy." But evidently he does not find it easy, for when she kisses him good-by he begins to sob. Even her admonition, "Remember, it's all a game, and after you're asleep I'll tuck you in," does not help. His last word is a *choking, heart-broken cry*: "Mother!"

And Cybel remains murmuring the old riddle: "What's the good of bearing children? What's the use of giving birth to death?"

And not only Dion Anthony trembles like a little child as he faces dissolution, but even the more practical William Brown himself. He too comes to Cybel battered and weary and snuggles gratefully against her, finding that "The earth is warm." Cybel tucks him in, and whispers soothingly, "Ssshh! Go to sleep, Billy." "Yes, Mother," Brown responds. (*Then explainingly*) "It was dark and I couldn't see where I was going and they all picked on me." "I know," says Cybel.

In "Marco Millions" O'Neill started out to write a satire of our modern commercial civilization and its representative "wise man," Marco Polo, but the play ends as a poignant tragedy of man's quest for happiness and understanding and his ultimate defeat. Marco is convinced that he is immortal. He will not confess that his soul is but a stupid invention of his fear and that when he dies he will be "dead as a dead dog is dead," yet he trembles at the prospect of having his head cut off, for he cannot imagine his death. But Marco is too insignificant to make the contemplation of his mortality dramatic. Death becomes tragic only when it affects the existence of a sentient personality. It is only when O'Neill begins to contrast the ancient wisdom and the sadness and resignation of the East with the brashness and purposeless activity of the West that his play acquires the deep overtones of great drama. The death of the beautiful princess Kukachin, the Little Flower, "the golden bird singing beside a black river," and the unavailing lament of Kublai Kaan transmute the sordid history of Polo's acquisitiveness into a play full of exquisite poetry. The last scene reverberates with the intolerable burden of the unanswerable question. The priests of the East—Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist, Islamic—can answer Kublai only with the assertion of the chorus: "Death is." And the Chronicler intones resignedly:

> We lament the shortness of life. Life at its longest is brief enough:
> Too brief for the wisdom of joy, too long for the knowledge of sorrow.
>
> . . . .
>
> Our sobs stifle us, our tears wet the ground, our lamentations sadden the wind from the West.

Yet we must bow humbly before the Omnipotent.

The same sadness of resignation marks the end of O'Neill's "Strange Interlude." After nine acts crowded with human events —a "tangled mess of love and hate and pain and birth"—Nina settles down to "rot in peace." Ned Darrell leaves, praying to God to teach him to be resigned to be an atom, and Nina remains with the conviction that life is only a Strange Interlude. All "lives are merely strange dark interludes in the electrical display of God the Father!"

"Lazarus Laughed" chronologically came before "Marco Millions" and "Strange Interlude." It is, of all O'Neill's plays the most rigidly concerned with the problem of mortality. Lazarus has risen from the dead and all that behold him seek to know: "What did you find beyond there, Lazarus?" He gently rebukes them: "O Curious Greedy Ones, is not one world in which you know not how to live enough for you?" But man's quest for the secret goes on. "What is beyond?" comes the refrain of the chorus. It is echoed in one form or another by the ragged multitude and the powerful Roman legions, by the lecherous Tiberius and the cowardly Caligula, who knows, even before Lazarus tells him, that he is but "a bubble pricked by death into a void and mocking silence." Lazarus has been beyond and he has brought back a strange laughter. His compassion embraces the entire race of men, "whose lives are long dyings! They evade their fear of death by becoming so sick of life that by the time death comes they are too lifeless to fear it. Their disease triumphs over death—a noble victory called resignation!" Most men, however, are not resigned; they cling to the few certainties they possess and, like Tiberius, they do not wish to die. Unlike Tiberius they might not even admit that "If I were sure of eternal sleep beyond there, deep rest and forgetfulness of all I have ever seen or heard or hated or loved on earth, I would gladly die!" Only Lazarus is sure, and he laughs a joyous laughter. He knows the secret. And O'Neill knows.

III

For himself at least, Eugene O'Neill has found an answer to the question of mortality. In these five plays in which O'Neill views the transience of human existence, he not only poses dark riddles, but he presumes to point a way, to strike a heartening harmony. Out of the depths of fear and doubt and despair into which he has imaginatively gone down he returns, like Lazarus, with a joyous laughter in his heart, and exultation not the less triumphant because it encloses the vast sadness of the world. He could not remain passively whining at the inevitable doom of extinction; out of his fearful intimations of mortality he has forged a shining armor for man, a bold consciousness of survival with which to meet the devouring riddle of time.

Like Lazarus, O'Neill has found the answer to death. It is: "There is no death!" Only fools and madmen, cowards like Coligula, who kill out of a terrible fear of death, believe in death. In reality

There is only life!
There is only laughter!

Lazarus who died returns with an affirmation, a thundering Yes, of the indestructibility, the endlessness of life. Man as dust is "eternal change, and everlasting growth, and a high note of laughter soaring through the chaos from the deep heart of God! Be proud, O Dust!" Lazarus calls. "Then you may love the stars as equals!" Because man thinks only in terms of his temporary form rather than of the agelessness of his dust he walks this earth in aching loneliness and dies of self-pity. If he would but say with Lazarus: "Millions of laughing stars there are around me! And laughing dust, born once of woman on this earth, now freed to dance! New stars are born of dust eternally. The old, grown mellow with God, burst into flaming seed! The fields of infinite space are sown—and grass for sheep springs up on the hills of earth! But there is no death, nor fear, nor loneliness! There is only God's Eternal Laughter!" Alas, that man forgets the laughter of Lazarus, the eternal rhythm of rotating dust, the deep, soft laughter of being and becoming!

O'Neill's conception of immortality can be termed biological. Birth and death, growth and decay, are the unending cycles of existence. "Always spring comes again bearing life!" Mother Earth, Cybel, speaks over the body of Billy Brown. "Always again! Always, always forever again!—Spring again—life again!—summer and fall and death and peace again!—but always, always, love and conception and birth and pain again—spring bearing the intolerable chalice of life again!—bearing the glorious, blazing crown of life again!" And O'Neill's use of the term God is biological, naturalistic. God is, as Time is, as Dust is. And man's pain and travail are normal phases in the unchanging changes of being. Billy's last words are not words of lamentation. As he approaches his earthly habitation his words rise with the wisdom of Lazarus: "The laughter of Heaven sows earth with a rain of tears, and out of Earth's transfigured birth-pain the laughter of Man returns to bless and play again in innumerable gales of flame upon the knees of God!"

There is a good deal of Eastern philosophy in O'Neill's attitude toward life and death. If he has not been able to acquire the serenity of the East, he has at least accepted inevitability and resignation. He has accepted the Eastern view of life as "an interlude, of trial and preparation, say, in which our souls have been scraped clean of impure flesh and made worthy to bleach in peace." In fact, Charlie Marsden, who speaks these lines, has been more victorious by standing aloof and waiting with Buddha-like patience, than either Nina or Darrell by yielding to the fever and fury of their passions. In the end all three realize the inevitability of bleaching, except that Charlie comes to the anodyne of peace much earlier. The cycle is now continued by young Gordon, who flies "away into another life."

O'Neill's discovery of the endless continuity of life and of its perpetual metamorphosis in external form tempers the tragic brooding of his plays. A poetic flame lights up the rebellious futilities of his heroes. Their efforts become ennobled and their defeats become victories in the march of eternity. Everywhere the voice of the Fountain bursts into song:

> Life is a field
> Forever growing
> Beauty a fountain
> forever flowing
> Upward beyond the source of sunshine
> Upward beyond the azure heaven,
> Born of God but
> Ever returning
> To merge with earth that the field may live.

Ponce de Leon dying hears "the rhythm of eternal life." He sees the "Fountain everlasting, time without end! Soaring flame of the spirit transfiguring Death! All is within! All things dissolve, flow on eternally!" He prays to the "aspiring fire of life" to sweep the dark soul of man, and that he might burn in its unity. Ponce de Leon, the bold adventurer, dies exulting that "God is a Fountain of Eternity, that He is the All in One, the One in All—the Eternal Becoming which is Beauty." He dies hearing the earth and youth and love and the Fountain sing *"an all-comprehending hymn of the mystery of life as the curtain falls."*

And the beautiful princess Kukachin, hearing the chorus of women chanting her earthly career:

> The lover comes,
> Who becomes a husband,
> Who becomes a son,
> Who becomes a father—
> In this contemplation lives the woman,

responds with the terse summary of O'Neill's answer:

> I am not.
> Life is.