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Looking Into the Pile of Books

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EDITOR'S

FOREWORD

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LOOKING INTO THE PILE OF BOOKS

From one end of the telescope, an O'Neill conference seems like an inconsistency. After all, his late plays, written in near-total isolation and preceding (and anticipating?) an even lonelier death a decade later, end with images of solitude—Larry Slade listening for that thud, Edmund Tyrone thunderstruck among the ghosts, Josie Hogan laughing bitterly at “the silly mug of the moon, grinning down.” The last thing that O'Neill seems to be inviting is a crowd of eager scholars, clutching books and papers, primed to analyze him to a tee, works and life, from morning to midnight. The way he delivered—or intended to deliver—*Long Day's Journey Into Night* to the world even tells us that he was uncomfortable having a theater audience around.

But the O'Neill Society's Eighth International Conference on “O'Neill in Bohemia” took place in Greenwich Village, at the other end of that telescope, when, even in his unhappiness, he found kindred spirits, Ash Can artists and Hudson Dusters, fellow travelers in search of a burning cause or a drink on the house, and a thriving literary and intellectual scene to find his place in. As Agnes Boulton's *Part of a Long Story* shows, when a door opened in a crowded room, heads turned to see if Gene O'Neill had at last arrived. The conference repeatedly demonstrated how integrated O'Neill's work was with the bohemian culture in New York, quite in contrast to the myth often told that he created the (important) American drama *ex nihilo*.

John Lahr is only the most recent to spout that line in his brief introduction to the newly rediscovered O'Neill one-act from 1920, *Exorcism*: “Before Eugene O'Neill, America had entertainment; after him, it had drama.” What nonsense! And *Exorcism* shows how close he came to being a failure at putting

seriousness on the American stage, even though that was the encompassing project of his era. He tried to destroy all copies of it, out of some embarrassment about its shortcomings, but he kept his original, and later his wife held onto it through their divorce, only to make a gift of it some years later to a friend, the screenwriter Philip Yordan. By that accident, we come to read this document of the early O'Neill only now, years after all the other manuscripts kept by Agnes wound up at Harvard or Yale. Evidently, the play did not seem to Boulton or Yordan like much of a treasure to share with the world, but it opens a window on the moment in 1912 when O'Neill bottomed out after terminating a careless marriage, only to descend, drinking, into self-loathing and despair.

The play shows a young man reduced to misery by his own failures and self-degradations, spurning the companionship of a "Jimmy Tomorrow," who is also haunted by his failure but who truly cares for his roommate. The young man has to scheme to be left alone in his dismal flophouse room so that he can take a deadly dose of sleeping tablets. In this, too, he is a failure, and the second half of the play, after he has revived, shows him discovering that the world is a far more forgiving and welcome environment than he had thought. Even his father gets it that his son needs care and understanding, not a firm hand.

The scene description mentions a pile of books on the floor in the corner of the room, and the reader might assume they belong to the young man, who is the persona of O'Neill. But another obscure O'Neill writing from those early years, a 1917 short story called "Tomorrow," takes place in and around this same room, and Jimmy is its central character. The narrator, who is the young man of *Exorcism*, now an accomplished playwright, adopts the manner of Conrad's Marlow to tell the story of Jimmy's descent into hopelessness and suicide. From the short story, we learn that the books piled on the floor are Jimmy's, as is the disused typewriter.

Even at his lowest point, O'Neill had the company of a man who loved books, and it is no wonder, then, that his early writings are filled with intertextual references. The freshness and originality of his early work was consistent with the larger trend of modernist literature—deeply embedded in a world of reused words. In later works, written in those increasingly lonely rooms upstairs, he inserted the quotation marks so that his reading could be discerned from his writing, but in the early works, his voice weaves in and out of the general palaver of the literary world. The heart of darkness is a place where people talk, and O'Neill is just one of the discussants.

Those early works also feature companionship, many voices with many accents talking against the night, as in *Moon of the Caribbees*. So a conference on the early O'Neill, in the location of that urgent discourse, made a lot of sense, and it generated several of the essays featured in this issue and

the next. Robert Combs takes a look at the library of the 1912 O'Neill, as catalogued by the 1940 *Long Day's Journey*, and finds an uneasy bohemian with a pile of books he's uncertain how to own. Eric Levin takes up the book O'Neill kept on his bedside table, Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and at last makes it clear why he'd have need of it. Patrick Chura and Annalisa Brugnoli bring us new aspects of the wider context, literary and artistic, in which *The Hairy Ape* "belongs." Andrew Lee makes it clear that O'Neill never lost touch with the Gothic mode of storytelling he first encountered as a child from his nanny, Sarah Sandy. And John Curry finds that even Fireside Chats figure in the O'Neillian intertext.

If the lesson always seems to be that every writing is a rewriting, then Katie Johnson's review essay on "*Anna Christie*" gives us a play that continues to emerge out of itself, and all the reviews in this issue evoke an O'Neill who regenerates continually. Conference participants were thrilled to hear from Robert Falls tantalizing hints of what we now know to be a projected revival of *The Iceman Cometh* in the spring, taking us back to the place which no "Exorcism" could ever relieve of its ghosts. Tony Kushner gave us a taste of O'Neill on the rocks, and John Douglas Thompson brought Brutus Jones to the rebuilt Provincetown Playhouse for another undressing. In that same session Robert Eienkel discerned an intertextual trace of another early visitant to the Playhouse in those Bohemian days, James O'Neill (via James Tyrone), which gave us a wonderful "note" to close volume 33.

It has been thrilling for me to assume the editorship of the *Eugene O'Neill Review* at this time, when the talk about O'Neill is so plentiful and fresh, with performances near and far, the pile of books towering higher, and so many scholars and enthusiasts putting their words into play. After decades of steady support from Suffolk University and the distinguished founding editor, Fred Wilkins, followed by Zander Brietzke, Pennsylvania State University Press has stepped in as publisher on behalf of the Eugene O'Neill Society. Society president Laurin Porter has guided this transition with marvelous tact, and Kurt Eisen, who stands on the horizon as the next president, and all the editorial staff and board also deserve thanks for doing their part. The University of California Santa Barbara, courtesy of its executive dean, David Marshall, has given the journal a new home and invaluable support for highly employable doctoral student assistants. Now a biannual, with an eye on discovering the global reach of O'Neill and his associates, on the stage and in the study, the *EOR* is looking for you.

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