Another Part of a Long Story: Literary Traces of Eugene O'Neill and Agnes Boulton (review)

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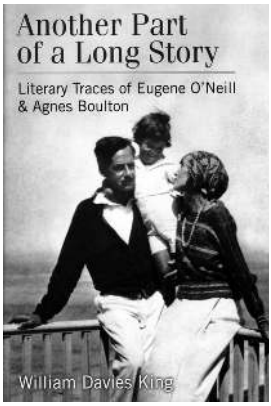
WILLIAM DAVIES KING

ANOTHER PART OF A LONG STORY: LITERARY TRACES OF EUGENE O'NEILL AND AGNES BOULTON



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In this thoroughly researched exploration of the life and work of Agnes Boulton, William Davies King affirms his claim on territory he staked out in previous work, including his volume of Boulton's and O'Neill's correspondence, *A Wind Is Rising*. Decentering the conventional scholarly narratives that feature Carlotta Monterey as the dominant partner in O'Neill's own life and work, King's intertextual approach presents Agnes not so much as a transitional figure, bridging O'Neill's traumatic early life with his stormy but artistically masterful later years while married to Carlotta Monterey, but as an essential presence throughout his writing career.

King thus challenges the prevailing narrative in O'Neill criticism regarding the relative importance of his marriages to Agnes and Carlotta as reflected in the plays, positing Agnes as central even to the later works. Though *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is dedicated to Carlotta and was written more than a decade after his divorce from Agnes, as King demonstrates, its representation of family and marital life owes more to the influence of his years with Agnes than has been previously acknowledged. King does not argue that Boulton's writings have interest for us beyond the context of O'Neill studies, but besides drawing out a compelling narrative of her life and career, he offers a fresh angle of investigation into the practices of literary commerce of the period that O'Neill's own work resisted but could not help but reflect.

As the book's title implies and King himself observes, Boulton's 1958 memoir *Part of a Long Story* serves as his "mother text" (20). However, rather than accepting her narrative of marriage to O'Neill at face value, King creates a critical framework that at times calls attention to his own quest to generate an intertextual image of their marriage from the "traces," as he calls them, to be found in such texts as O'Neill's plays and Boulton's book, but also in her much earlier fiction from the days when she was earning more money as a writer than he was, and in the many unpublished private documents he has incorporated. This method has the effect of shrinking the objective critical distance between scholar and subject, conveying almost an emotional connection between them; admirably, however, it does not blunt the edge of his valuation of their writings or frequently less than admirable behavior.

In the fascinating first chapter, King explores Boulton's early life and the roots of a distinct individual destiny that O'Neill only fitfully acknowledged and at times ruthlessly suppressed. Her artistic parents, her years on a working farm, her previous marriage (which produced a daughter), and her fledgling career as a writer of marketable magazine fiction and her connections with other writers were all part of a rich personal life that preceded her fateful first meeting with O'Neill in Greenwich Village in 1917. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this picture of Boulton's life before O'Neill is how it presents the choices facing a talented woman writer during this period, a single mother supporting herself while her future spouse was still living on a parental allowance. King speculates that Boulton was presented with two paths: continue pursuing her independent career, or hitch her wagon to a man destined for even greater things. "The bridge to high art," King writes, "might be made in several different ways, including playing wife to Eugene O'Neill" (33). Likewise, he suggests, O'Neill himself was not above the need for popular commercial success, in spite of disavowing any such tawdry aims; it was this dialectic of marketability and idealism that formed the practical basis of their marriage as fellow writers.

The next two chapters offer a valuable analysis of the stories Boulton wrote during the First World War and after, in itself a signal contribution to O'Neill studies but also to our understanding of the literary profession of the time and the opportunities it presented for women. We see Agnes as a young woman navigating the changing possibilities for women's careers, "a New Woman, of sorts" (51), whose fiction was in some respects more experimental and edgy than the other stories published in the same magazines. More important, in these chapters King develops his theory of her distinctly literary-professional marriage to O'Neill, examining how Agnes's forays into commercial fiction helped shape the writing of such early plays as *Beyond*

the Horizon and *Welded* in an intertextual weave of personal experience and literary production.

The next three chapters focus on the homes that Gene and Agnes created and shared, from the converted lifesaving station in Provincetown near the start of their marriage to the home in Bermuda, called Spithead, where it reached its bitter end. The Provincetown chapter emphasizes the question of "selling out" and identifies the Gelbs' biography as establishing the notion that Agnes was a constant source of temptation for O'Neill to abandon his purer artistic ambitions. The writing of "*Anna Christie*" during this period is presented as emblematic of this struggle, especially the transformation of that play from its failed original version, *Chris Christophersen*, featuring a typist daughter possibly modeled on Agnes, to its later, highly successful version with the daughter as a prostitute. By contrast, the earlier creation of *Beyond the Horizon*, his first full-length Broadway, which Agnes called "our play" (81), represents for King a happier collaborative outcome of a literary marriage that blends the two writers' respective sensibilities rather than setting them against each other.

In the chapter on Ridgefield, their home in Connecticut in the early 1920s, King's discussion of the fate of Agnes's unproduced play *The Guilty One* offers a tantalizing glimpse into an actual though failed dramatic collaboration between husband and wife. His analysis of the strange archival document that Agnes wrote (as transcribed by Max Wylie) during this period titled "Agnes: Thoughts on Her Marriage" dramatizes his own challenges as a biographer trying to understand the peculiarly textual underpinnings of their bond. The chapter also features a valuable portrait of Harold DePolo, friend to Agnes and Gene and a prolific writer of pulp fiction otherwise ignored in O'Neill criticism.

The discussion in the Spithead chapter of their dealings with Dr. Gilbert Hamilton and, more broadly, with the contemporary psychiatric discourse on modern marriage is particularly absorbing and does as much to displace the absolute centrality of O'Neill's personal psyche as any section of the book. King adds Agnes's own experience with Dr. Hamilton to previous accounts of O'Neill's, portraying this as a joint enterprise rather than Gene's solo journey to self-understanding. If her emotional life still revolves around her husband's, it is nonetheless Agnes whom King represents as more continually in motion, countering the previous biographical narratives that present her as a fixed milepost in O'Neill's tumultuous life arc.

Chapters 7 and 8, examining the long and painful process of their separation and divorce, seem more conventionally biographical than the rest of the book, though even here King is careful to keep his focus on the traces

of the past, the available documents, rather than the otherwise compelling melodramatic details. However, in the final chapter, "The Great Hush of Non-Being," and the personal and even elegiac "Epilogue," King returns to form as the chronicler imbricated in the text, describing the fate after O'Neill's death in 1953 not only of Agnes, but also her children with O'Neill, Oona and Shane. He sympathetically presents his own precursor, Louis Sheaffer, as an indefatigable scholar and humane protector of Agnes and her legacy, though King also reports his rebuff of any effort to reopen and extend her *Part of a Long Story* in a testy reply to a query that King sent him in 1990 at the start of his own research.

In the epilogue King permits himself some reflections on his own aims and methods, implicitly informed by a Derridean notion of texts as "traces" of his subject, knowable only indirectly but perhaps more truly through the reconstructed textual record found in libraries and archives. His bibliography provides a complete list of Boulton's published stories, articles, and books (along with "lost works" cited elsewhere but unfound), and various collections of unpublished writings; there is also a sequence of photographs featuring Boulton's parents and portraying her from maidenhood to old age. All of this goes to support his general assertion that O'Neill was not so much "influenced by her mode of writing . . . as he was oriented to himself by the fact of her being on the page with him—as writer, as reader, as lover" (237). Anyone who reads this sensitive and deeply informed account of Agnes Boulton's crucial role in the life and work of Eugene O'Neill would have to agree.

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