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EUGENE O'NEILL AND FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The paper deals with the decisive influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on the American playwright Eugene O'Neill in shaping his entire conception of the tragic. The focus is on O'Neill's plays *The Hairy Ape* and *The Great God Brown*.

Key words: tragedy, mask, metaphor, Dionysus, dismemberment, rebirth, the unconscious.

O'Neill's chief concern was possibility of tragedy in modern times, American tragedy in particular. As early as 1925, O'Neill spoke of "the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives" (Chabrowe, xv). He also spoke of the Force behind - (Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it - Mystery certainly)". It was his profound belief that tragedy is the only subject worth writing about. O'Neill read Nietzsche early in his writing career, and consequently united the Greek and the Nietzschean in his theatre. The Greek sense of tragedy put emphasis on man struggling against something greater than him; in the Nietzschean sense of the tragic the emphasis was on dismemberment and rebirth, and on metaphysical solace. Added to these influences were Freud and Jung and their theories of the unconscious emphasizing determinism and ambivalence. Although frequently neglected by critics, O'Neill's social conscience never left him. Under an intricate set of circumstances, character in O'Neill's play is placed under extreme pressure. O'Neill's work, says Christopher Bigsby, "is a celebration of the resistant spirit, whose acts of transformation, like his own art, are offered as means of survival" (Bigsby, 107).

O'Neill frequently used the mask "as a device to illuminate the human condition" (Shaughnessy, 1). He saw human nature as fundamentally divided, between "unconscious wish and conscious repression; false surface and true depth" (Bigsby, 111). The use of mask is Greek in its emphasis on the universality of suffering; modern in symbolizing the divided self. Jung wrote that man often deceives others, and sometimes himself, as to his real

character. “He puts on a mask, which he knows corresponds with his conscious intentions, while it also meets with the requirements and opinions of his environment...The mask...I have called the *persona*, which was the designation given to the mask worn by the actors of antiquity,” said Jung (quotes Bigsby, 112). The characters of O’Neill’s early plays who wear masks are usually types defined by profession, class, nationality, social role. But it is his final plays that come closer to tragedy than his earlier plays in which he tried to recreate the structure” but not the spirit of the Greek theatre, to paraphrase Bigsby (Bigsby, 95).

In the two plays of the 1920s, *The Hairy Ape* and *The Great God Brown*, O Neill put emphasis on the struggle and the dream, the features that according to him expressed tragedy in the Greek sense: “The point is that life in itself is nothing. It is the *dream* that keeps us fighting, willing - living! Achievement, in the narrow sense of possession, is a stale finale. The dreams that can be completely realized are not worth dreaming....A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable. But his struggle is his success! ... Such a figure is necessarily tragic. But to me he is not depressing; he is exhilarating! He may be a failure in the materialistic sense. His treasures are in other kingdoms. Yet isn’t he the most inspiring of all successes” (quotes Bigsby, 43-4). To O’Neill, like Nietzsche, tragedy is life-affirming.

O’Neill’s early plays make an ample use of metaphors. In this respect he followed Nietzsche and his belief that art alone bridges the contest of opposites in its metaphors - representative images in place of ideas. Myth is the metaphor of life, while its central character, Dionysus, is the metaphor of man. In the myth of Dionysus, he was dismembered, eaten and reborn into a new being. Thus Dionysus stands for the instinctive knowledge which is his unconscious remembrance of the dismemberment and rebirth.

O’Neill’s stage metaphors are both universal and rooted in modern life. In the spirit of modernism, they are charged with both intellectual force and imaginative power. O’Neill had a difficult task before him: how to create the tragedy of an ordinary modern man in America, to transform an everyday American into a tragic protagonist. In *The Hairy Ape* he had to invest a semi-articulate working man with the ‘nobility’ of tragedy’. By naming his protagonist Yank, O’Neill obviously saw him as an American Everyman. How can a working class man be a tragic protagonist? In this play O’Neill puts emphasis on the dream and the struggle: every human being who becomes aware of his condition and struggles to overcome it is tragic in the Greek sense, for “It is the dream that keeps us going, not the achievement”. For Leonard Chabrowe Yank is clearly a Dionysus whose

drama lies in the dismemberment he undergoes, first psychological, then physical - he is virtually crushed by a gorilla in the Zoo. For Chabrowe, a champion of Greek and Nietzschean tragedy, O'Neill represents both. According to this author, *The Hairy Ape* deals directly with man's struggle against his fate, this point being underlined by O'Neill's extensive use of a chorus. He both "built up the primitive identity of the men (on the ship) then tore it down again." Chabrowe especially focuses on the fourth scene, after the hero's feeling of belonging has been shattered, "the isolation of the primitive from the civilized is heard in echoes of harsh, roaring laughter." Yank's shipmates become one huge chorus - ALL, who react with cynical mockery to his attempt "to think". The word, when repeated by them has "a brazen, metallic quality as if their throats were phonograph horns." And the play is ironically subtitled "A Comedy of Ancient and Modern Life" (Chabrowe).

For Christopher Bigsby, the play is modernist, approaching absurdist. It is a play about alienation, and one of the central symbols of this condition is the replacement of the human by the machine. In the scene with Yank and his fellow stokers, sexuality is represented as displaced. Masculinity goes into the service of the machine which becomes the substitute for a life-giving feminine principle. "The image of misplaced sexuality", says Bigsby, "becomes a dominant image of the 1920s in the work of Pound, Eliot, Lewis, Fitzgerald and Hemingway" (Bigsby, 61). According to Bigsby, "Yank is in effect an absurdist figure, suddenly dimly aware of the unbridgeable gulf between his simply conceived aspirations for harmony and order and the refusal of the world to manifest it/ He is stranded in a world to which he cannot relate" (Bigsby, 620).

In his study *After Dionysus, A Theory of the Tragic*, William Storm does not specifically deal with O'Neill's tragedies, but his book is significant as a theoretical background to explain some of O'Neill's plays. Storm is a post-Nietzschean theorist who discusses the theory of the tragic after Dionysus, as the title suggests. His study undertakes to deepen the knowledge of Greek tragedy more than to relate it to modern times. He bases his definition of the tragic on the dismemberment of character, not the death, insisting on the tragic that 'forbids such ideals as union, wholeness, oneness,' and focuses on the metaphysical terror instead, the utter solitude that results from the separation trauma. This author argues that there is an extremely intricate set of relationships between character and background in tragic drama.

O'Neill's plays are frequently reduced to their ritual and religious aspect. However, O'Neill always pointed out his concern for moral and social issues, so evident in his plays, even in his more explicitly religious

plays such as the two “plays about god”, of his unfinished trilogy, *Dynamo* and *Days Without End*, which dealt with “the death of the old god and the failure of the new”. O’Neill once suggested that the trilogy’s overall title might be “God is dead! Long Live-What?” *Dynamo*, the first written play was one suggestion of the answer to this question. Machine or money are modern gods in O’Neill’s plays.

The tragic quality of *The Great God Brown* is different in its metaphors, especially its definition of ‘god’ or ‘fate’, which tends to be more psychological, but not without social and political implications, either. It dramatizes loss of faith in modern man and, consequently, his inability to develop into a complete person. O’Neill uses the mask to denote a split self produced by modern culture. All the heroes, who possess a complex and sensitive nature, wear masks. Those who have conformed do not need wear a mask. Despite its flaws, *The Great God Brown* is “among O’Neill’s most intriguing plays, especially for biographical critics”, to quote James A. Robinson (Robinson, 72). Dion’s Dionysian mask “distorted by morality”, “from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive”, suggests O’Neill’s feeling of the threat to his talent posed by his recent fame and success; he did not want to follow his father whose popularity made him sacrifice his talent for wealth. The masking in the play, observes Robinson, is presumably inspired by ancient Greek theatre, but its implications are modern, revealing the playwright’s interest in contemporary depth psychology. The theme of the play, suffering of the souls beneath the mask, is part of the central theme of O’Neill’s work and of his life: “the anguish of human loneliness” (Robinson, 72-3).

Christopher Bigsby is also of the opinion that O’Neill’s experiment with masks in *The Great God Brown*, “is ancient in origin but modern in concept”, and that both were “an expression of his dissatisfaction with the theatre which he inherited” (Bigsby, 67). “For what, at bottom, is the new psychological insight into human cause and effect,” asked O’Neill, “but a study in masks, an exercise in unmasking?” (Bigsby, 68). Bigsby quotes O’Neill’s disappointment that in this play he did not succeed in making the masks “symbolize more definitely the abstract theme of the play”, but stressed “the more superficial meaning that people wear masks before other people and are mistaken by them for their masks” (Bigsby, 68).

The continuous relevance of O’Neill’s plays can perhaps be better appreciated through some recent theoretical considerations of tragedy, especially in the case of *The Hairy Ape* and its central metaphor of alienated man in a hostile universe. In his study *Sweet Violence, The Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton argues that tragedy is very relevant in modern

age. His view is that theory of tragedy is not only an aesthetic but a political question too. His central preoccupation is that tragedy is primarily a matter of value: tragedy must embody value, and it is rooted in real life. The loss of ability to discover meaning in suffering is a failure of vision, not the death of tragedy. The absurdists in their depiction of apparently meaningless suffering have located human tragedy in modern times in this very failure of vision; it is similar to a collective dismemberment and death which cannot lead to rebirth. Loss of meaning and the resulting fragmentation of man and society itself are characteristics of modern tragedy. The human failure to bring meaning to suffering is tragic in itself. Further focusing on the 'value of agony' as the main feature of tragedy, Eagleton writes that 'tragedy needs meaning and value if only to violate them'. In this sense it is a negative Utopia: we preserve a measure of human value as long as we describe human suffering as tragic. The gloom of *The Hairy Ape* is that of a negative Utopia, resulting from the nostalgia for the lost sense of belonging or meaning.

When discussing the heroes of tragedy, Eagleton maintains that tragic aristocratism is not absolute (Eagleton, 87). There is also democratic tragedy, because tragedy is not one thing and ordinary life another. In Raymond Williams' socialist humanism, tragedy is an ordinary affair. Woyzeck is perhaps the first proletarian tragic hero. Everyone can be a tragic subject, but not all tragedy is equally poignant. We can view *The Hairy Ape* and its hero as tragic in the modern sense. Eagleton questions the traditional view that tragedy and fate go hand in hand. It is closer to truth to say that tragedy is a strike against destiny, not a submission to it. The idea of a free will against fate is a relatively modern one. To be free is to desire necessary conditions for freedom, and we have no choice in this matter: thus liberty and necessity go together, it is in this sense that Yank is free while at the same time he is forced to action leading to his own death. Eagleton does not discuss O'Neill's early plays, but occasionally refers to *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the play that to the present day remained a paradigm of O'Neill's tragedy, together with *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

In his *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy and the Modern World*, Rush Rehm's insistence on the relevance of Greek tragedy in the modern world is based on its radical and revolutionary character. Resistance offered by human will whether to the fates, or gods, the unconscious, society or even a political situation, remains an enduring feature of all tragedy, ancient or modern. For the Greeks it was deeply rooted in real life, and its stage metaphor was reality. It is in this context that Rehm views some contemporary productions measuring them against the greatness of Greek tragedy. Thus he says that Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* is a successful adapta-

tion of a Greek myth by a major modern playwright, but its metaphors are not deeply rooted in modern life: it avoids the challenges that its model, Euripides' *Hippolytus*, might have posed for the same audience. When speaking of O'Neill and the modern sense of tragedy, Rehm refers to what Storm calls the 'psychological disjuncture'. Rehm quotes O'Neill saying that "Greek tragedy plot idea - no matter in what period... (it) is laid, must remain a modern psychological drama." Thus for O'Neill, claims Rehm, the unconscious - - as the source of uncontrollable drives and heroic resistance - offers a modern equivalent of fate (Rehm, 60). Fear in such modern drama tends towards the private and the inner, the kind of angst that carries little political significance or public impact, thinks Rehm. Psychological motivation lacks the political and moral imperatives that sustained Greek tragedy, he further maintains.

As far as O'Neill is concerned, however, psychological drives in his characters are not just deeply unconscious. In *The Great God Brown* we can see that the 'god' in modern sense is money. In *The Hairy Ape* it is money and hypocrisy of the high classes embodied in the rich Mildred Douglas and the false Christians of the 5th Avenue that are one of the principal causes of Yank's tragedy. As Rehm himself says in another context, 'the gods in Greek tragedy appear weak by comparison to the gods of modern time' (Rehm, 81). O'Neill implicitly and explicitly says the same in his plays.

Rehm praises the political theatre which does not narrow the scope of the tragic, by remaining rooted in historical, social, and economic circumstances. "The(se) political artists acknowledge the world as made, with cultural and material forces dictating patterns of thought and behaviour. Like Greek tragedy, their work does not shrink the world down to the consciousness of the unique individual" (Rehm, 61). I think we may conclude this consideration of O'Neill's plays in the context of modernist vies of tragedy with the statement that the above can be applied to O'Neill's plays that are explicitly or implicitly also political, as the case of *The Hairy Ape* and *The Great God Brown* prove.

All O'Neill biographies witness to his lifelong obsession with Friedrich Nietzsche. In his biography *Eugene O'Neill, Beyond Mourning and Tragedy*, Stephen A. Black writes that O'Neill's early discovery of Nietzsche helped him develop an alternative to the Christian view that plagued him with the constant feeling of guilt (Black, 89). After he had read *The Birth of Tragedy*, O'Neill wrote: "Most stimulating book on

drama ever written.” (*Ibid.*, 322) Almost all his plays are fashioned after the Greek and the Nietzschean idea of the tragic. Egil Tornquist considers Nietzsche to be O’Neill’s most important philosophical and literary paragon. O’Neill fully subscribed to Nietzsche’s ‘pessimism of strength’, declaring that tragedy ‘is the meaning of life – and the hope. The noblest is eternally the most tragic. The people who succeed and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middle classers.” (Tornquist quotes *The New York Tribune*, 13 February 1921, CC, 19) In many of O’Neill’s protagonists we find Nietzschean struggle to turn oneself into a superman embodied in O’Neill himself. “A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable. But the struggle is his success!” (*Ibid.*), was O’Neill’s life dictum.

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Радмила Насић

ФРИДРИХ НИЧЕ И ЈУЏИН О'НИЛ

Резиме

У овом раду се разматра пресудни утицај који је Фридрих Ниче имао на најзначајнијег америчког драмског писца Јуџина О'Нила. Од када је у младости прочитао Ничеовог *Заратустру* и *Рођење трагедије*, О'Нил је константно био заокупљен Ничеовим идејама што се огледа у већини његових драма. Овај рад се осврће на Ничеов утицај на О'Нилово поимање трагедије у драмама *Космати мајмун* и *Велики боџ Браун*.