学人论丛

郭 勤 著

依存与超越

——尤金·奥尼尔隐秘世界后的广袤天空

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Reliance and Transcendence: Cosmic Significance of Eugene O'Neill's Exclusive Demesne

郭勤 著

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序

一般批评家认为,在美国文学中,尤金·奥尼尔(Eugene O'Neil 1888—1953)是最伟大的剧作家。他四次获得普利策奖,并获得诺贝尔奖(1936),被赞誉为"美国戏剧之父"。说到奥尼尔,我曾经用"在生活中创造更多的可能性"为题目,写了一篇随感。我说:奥尼尔有一个观点:生活是一个里面具有各种可能性的封闭圆圈,一个没有人可以逃脱的圆圈(Life is a closed circle of possibilities from which it is impossible to escape.)。说到生活是一个圆圈的比喻,我想到了在哪里读到一位古希腊哲学家所做的一个比喻:若把知识画一个圆圈,圆圈里面是已知世界,圆圈外面是未知世界,一个人知识越丰富,他那已知世界的圆圈就越大,他接触的外界世界的点就越多,越感到还有许多东西要学习。因此,越是有学问的人,越是谦虚。我想,若生活是一个里面具有各种可能性的封闭圆圈,已知世界也是一个圆圈,我们的知识积累多了,那么圆圈就大了,圆圈大了,里面所具有的生活可能性就多了。这里,又多了一条证明"知识就是力量"的理由:知识可以扩大里面具有可能性的生活圆圈。换言之,我

们知识丰富了，我们的生活就丰富了，享受生活的各种可能性机会就增加了。

读了郭勤的专著《依存与超越——尤金·奥尼尔隐秘世界后的广袤天空》，顿时感到自己的观点偏颇、肤浅，同时想到罗素说过的一个比喻：说到下雨，某一地区长大的孩子，看到的只是毛毛细雨，而在另一地区长大的孩子，看到的只是瓢泼大雨，于是，雨在一个人眼中仅是毛毛细雨，而在另一个人眼中则是瓢泼大雨，他们只说其中一项，不会说两者，更不能说更多的可能性。我的观点还是比较感性，比较窄。摆在我们面前的专著不一样，它将细雨、阴雨、阵雨、淫雨、黄梅雨等各种各样的雨提炼、总结，说雨是从天上下来的水，甚至还用 H_2O 的化学成分来指出其本质。具体地说，作者试图从奥尼尔戏剧所呈现的客厅、酒吧、船舱等一个一个的“隐秘世界”入手，探讨与其紧密联系的各种元素，并加以提炼、总结，看到精神、社会、文化等要素构成的“广袤天空”，我感到人常常是一个具有局限性又有无限潜力的矛盾体。人有时很有局限性，从体力上讲，他可以不断有新的突破，但不能真正战胜自然。比如，当一个人克服重重困难，攀到珠穆朗玛峰的顶端，这是一件了不起的事，然而，如果他因此而认为自己战胜了自然，那就不一定对了，因为珠穆朗玛峰并没有因为他攀到顶端而降低高度。应该说，人真正强大的地方在于思考力和想象力，他可以凭仗自己的思考力知道远古时期发生的事，也可以推测遥远将来可能发生的事，他也可以凭仗自己

的想象力，上天揽月，下洋捉鳖。或许你会感到纳闷：我为何要说这一番感叹的话呢？因为我想到专著的作者郭勤老师。从外表看，她丝毫没有咄咄逼人的气势，但她却有“柔弱者”的力量，一种厚实的知识和很强的思考力所赋予喜爱读书人的力量。我相信，凡是熟悉郭老师本人并读了这本专著的读者，多少会有相似的感觉。

是为序。

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Introduction

As the first important playwright of his nation, with his lifelong commitment to the establishment of the modes of American modern theatre, Eugene O'Neill is unanimously acknowledged as the Father of American drama. With him American drama developed into a form of literature and took its place with the best in American fiction, painting and music. It is in him that American drama came of age. In view of his great achievements in the theatrical arena, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama four times and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936. His plays have been mainstays of the American theatre and classics preserved in libraries and taught in literature classes. Not surprisingly, *Time* magazine once declared in 1953, "Before O'Neill, the US had theatre; after O'Neill, it had drama." Actually his contribution to American drama is as pre-eminent as Shakespeare's to British, Ibsen's to Norwegian, Strindburg's to Swedish, Brecht's to German, not only sweeping the then American stage with gales of

innovation, but also firmly establishing himself in the pantheon of those dramatic giants he once admired and tried to emulate. So it is of no exaggeration to say that it is O'Neill who introduces the American national drama into the world's vision, enabling people throughout the world to gain another access to various aspects of the American society. Different from the majority of the research works about O'Neill that follow a chronological order, this thesis intends, however, to focus on the thematic significance of his plays and trace out a parallel between O'Neill's microcosmic world on the stage and the macrocosmic real life, thus refuting the once pervading argument that O'Neill was, by and large, a playwright too obsessed with personal tragedies and detached from the world of affairs.

The lopsided and arbitrary comment on O'Neill's fascination with his own exclusive demesne arises, in large part, from the omnipresent episodes fraught with apparently discernible autobiographical elements in his drama. Undeniably, O'Neill's plays, on the whole, are written from an intensely personal point of view. In the thirty years of his creative career, he completed drafts of sixty-two plays among which eleven were destroyed, and of those remaining, over half are more or less interspersed with private matters. Especially

the works written after 1922 become increasingly self-revealing, taking him inward and downward toward himself. This gives the fullest expression to his need to find a pattern of explanation by which his life could be understood and analyzed. His literary efforts are in essence a quest for identity, which can be best summed up in his own words, "You were born with ghosts in your eyes and you were brave enough to go looking into your own dark." (*The Great God Brown*, Act Two, Scene One). Throughout his career, O'Neill, in his peculiar way of representing tragedy and pathos, attempts to exorcise his own demons through writing. However, he does not simply depict or illustrate such redundant themes as alcoholism, family dysfunction, down and outers, but lives through them and delves into the deepest mind of his family members, friends and his own. It is said that O'Neill has the habit of continually looking at himself in mirrors, just to make sure of his own existence. Always suffering physical and mental torture and lacking confidence in life, he manages to seek for an appropriate explanation for the miserable life. For such a sensitive person raised in the wings, no means of vent is more instrumental than the stage which could serve as a mirror both securing his sense of self and keeping the reflection at an aesthetic distance from the subject. Therefore, O'Neill wields

his personal experience and gives rein to his imagination, for the purpose of reproducing on stage the stories of his family, his friends and himself. Keeping autobiographical records in theatrical art, O'Neill succeeds in keeping himself informed of his belonging, and at the same time concealing the dark corners of his heart from others, or at least presenting them in a more subtle and ambiguous way.

The abundant autobiographical elements in O'Neill's plays, either explicit or implicit, coincidentally associated with his relatively unproductive years of the 1930s, seem to suggest that O'Neill pays little attention to things other than those involving personal experience. However, a near look at O'Neill's canon unfolds an intangible but definitely convincing truth that O'Neill's struggle to know himself and his family and friends reflects the country's efforts, in the twentieth century, to know itself and come into its own as a world power. On the occasion of the Broadway production of *The Iceman Cometh* in 1946, he told a press conference, "I'm going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure."① And he continued, in remarks that identify America with his own art, "Its main idea

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① Eugene O'Neill, quoted in Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), p. 577.

is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside it, thereby losing your own soul and the thing outside it too."① Consequently, greatness and failure are intertwined in O'Neill's sense of America and in O'Neill's sense of his family. In his dramatic scroll, a series of individual life episodes form a wide landscape of universal and abstract life, providing a broad vision of the world. His complicated feelings toward his characters are, in fact, allusions to his contradictory attitude toward various perspectives of the American society. Thus, the American stage, through O'Neill's efforts, has transformed into a literary and cultural medium, a valid forum for the presentation of serious ideas, forming a tit-for-tat challenge against the then dominant theatrical fare that apart from musicals and an occasional European import of qualities, consisted largely of contrived melodrama and farce.

On the surface level, O'Neill's characters are haunted by family agonies or inflicted by loss of self. They either come from dysfunctional families, isolated from the rest of the community, or are misfits, emotionally damaged, and so doomed to wander or to find temporary solace in alcohol.

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① Eugene O'Neill, quoted in Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973), p. 577.

Accordingly, two kinds of settings, seemingly opposed but, in fact, only opposite sides of the same coin, alternatively reappear. They are sheer private spaces — the center, usually the living room, of a family home; or they are notably public spaces — the hold of a ship, a bar, a flop-house, where disparate people are gathered randomly. But in these exclusive demesnes where a few people are shut in darkness, clear cosmic significance is condensed. The capsulized human communities act as nucleuses through which the main characteristics of society can be revealed. Such phenomena as affection never given, ambition never realized, pains never assuaged that O'Neill looks deep into himself to explore, are recurrent in the development history of any country. In this sense, O'Neill is by no means a snail-like playwright. His works embody the wide scope and profundity of his thought. The guiding principle of his creative work is definitely though imperceptibly based on his concern for the turbulent world situation and is strictly defined by certain cultural and social environments. He capitalizes on what he discovers from his immediate family and partisans, and combines it with what his insightful observation captures from the larger background, thus providing an objective evaluation on a young country prospering in material wealth but deteriorating in spiritual pursuit. This paper is a preliminary

attempt to magnify O'Neill's world on the stage and recast it against the backdrop of a broader universe so as to bring to light O'Neill's subtle instinctive reaction to the ebb and flow of the social force.

The body of the paper consists of three parts, each concentrating on an indispensable aspect of historical progression. As a whole, they roughly run through the general course of social development, covering the overall sphere of social life. What first tends to be shaken by the external changes is man's spiritual world. Social upheavals should inevitably influence people's sense of value and lead to the vicissitudes of their belief along the way. This phenomenon O'Neill has found and recorded. In his description of the corruption of puritanical ethics, people are disorientated in striving for the accumulation of wealth, even at the cost of the integrated personality. Ephraim Cabot, Yank and Marco Polo are typical representatives of American values in the country's different development stages. Like a country that sometimes has to sacrifice its national conscience for its progress, people often can not help violating their inheritance for the fulfillment of temporary desire. O'Neill's plays are rich in reference to betrayal, such as betrayal of ideal, love, fate, human nature, race and fraternity. The ultimate result of betrayal can be

nothing but total destruction, which reinforces O'Neill's comment that America "instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure" and conveys O'Neill's pessimistic prophecy for the course of American destiny. But no matter how suffocating the world is, people have to live. For those failures and misfits, hope sustains them and the lie of the pipe dream, despite its falsehood, comforts and nurtures the dispossessed. This is undoubtedly the way O'Neill deems most safe and appropriate for people's survival in a hostile world. A number of plays, from the earlier amateurish one-acters to the later masterpieces, make it explicit that men must accept some kind of delusion, force themselves to believe what is presented to them if they are to live through the courses of their lives, no matter how grim, painful, even frightening they are.

The external surges not only pound at people's internal world, but also bring about a series of astonishing social changes. These alterations are, at the beginning, almost invisible. But casting a serene backward glance, one can easily see striking disparities. The once patriarchal society is increasingly challenged by the uprising of feminism; the class gap is gradually broadened by the so-called development and progress; the racial conflict is unceasingly intensified by the

flooding of immigrants and the anti-war feeling is rising to an unprecedented height. All these great events as well as their cosmic significance are incredibly condensed in the exclusive territory created by O'Neill.

The national cultural concept is another element subject to the overall environment. One of O'Neill's greatest accomplishments lies in his successful interpretation of modern people's life tragedy based on ancient Greek mythology. Cases in point are *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire under the Elms* that also demonstrate the dour and acquisitive quality of the great American myth. The applicability of ancient truth to modern phenomena seems to suggest that some cultural connotative appeal sustains throughout the history and that there exists shared cultural aestheticism between different countries and different ages. This, however, does not mean that cultural trend is free of any external force. From opposing individual values evolve different cultural powers, the unbalance of which constitutes the permanent conflict in the multi-cultural society. Waging an unending war, the various cultural forces are forever in ebb and flow before disappearing into the history. Thus, the touch of the poet is corrupted by the stately mansions, the sensual desire is oppressed by the life-denying Puritanism and a strange interlude is composed between the wars. Particularly in

Strange Interlude, O'Neill uses Nina as a figuration of the United States in the twentieth century, the central figure in his mythicizing of American culture between the world wars. The men around her are virtually incarnations of the then American cultural concepts. The level of their domination of Nina's life just corresponds to the alternative emergence, expansion and withering of the cultural forces they respectively represent in the multi-cultural shock. The coordination between O'Neill's fictive exclusive territory and the cosmic cultural significance is, undoubtedly, another fact consolidating O'Neill's position as a searcher after universal truth.

O'Neill's greatness lies in the fact that he finds intuitively in his personal experience the embodiment of that of the nation and creates a myth out of American life. Although what he depicts is often the protagonist's own personal tragedy, he exemplifies in the tragic conflict all the victims of social injustice. Hence this thesis pivots on O'Neill's individualized characters and the exclusive territory they inhabit and dissects their cosmic significance in spiritual, social and cultural spheres, making evident O'Neill's reliance on as well as transcendence of his personal experience and his exploration to the extreme depth and horizon of the world.

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