A Few Thousand Battered Books: Eugene O'Neill's Use of Myth in *Desire Under The Elms* And *Mourning Becomes Electra*

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Ezra Pound put it this way:

> There died a myriad,
> ... For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
> For a botched civilization,
> ... For two gross of broken statues,
> For a few thousand battered books.[1]

The humblest commonplace of post World War One cultural history has it that that generation found the old creeds of the west destroyed and the old rules broken. It is somewhat more problematic, however, to identify the means by which the search for new values was conducted. The pregnant suggestion of Matthew Arnold that Hellenism and Hebraism served as the dual fundaments of western cultural values was exploited artistically by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. But neither the use of Greek and Bible myth nor myth criticism was invented in 1922. Even writers reputedly as inartistic as Fenimore Cooper had been using biblical frames for their stories nearly one hundred years before Thomas Mann wrote **Joseph and his Brothers**, before Eliot wrote "The Waste Land" and before Joyce wrote **Ulysses**. In **The Prairie**, Cooper told the story of a landless outcast and named him Ishmael, as Melville would do. But Eliot bestowed gentility on the use of myth. And,

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Riding in a plane over Brazil
C&S to pilot — How high are we?
Pilot — About 5000 meters
C&S — I knew Brazil was very large but
I didn't know it was so high.

Dos Passos and Elizabeth came to love Brazil for its culture, the vitality of its people, and its turmoils. Certainly knowing the country benefitted the North American author and broadened his perspective during his last years. I like to believe that, had he had the vitality of his younger days, he would have celebrated Brazil in literature as earlier he had the United States, its merits and its faults.

by naming Jessie Weston's book **From Ritual to Romance** in the very footnotes to "The Waste Land" as the key influence on its composition he was also bestowing his imprimatur on myth criticism the **correct** way to read his poem.[2] By making the mythic interpretation of "The Waste Land" official, he was, by implication, making other readings less adequate. Excepting Herman Melville who facetiously denied that **Moby-Dick** was a hideous and intolerable allegory or Mark Twain who warned that anyone seeking a plot in Huckleberry Finn would be shot, I know no other instance of a writer instructing his critics on how they should proceed.

Even Joyce was cagey, authorizing a book by Stuart Gilbert that made a misleading point-for-point equivalence between his **Ulysses** and **The Odyssey**. Why he did this is not our concern here. What is our concern is Joyce's example. **Ulysses** made "the modern world possible for art,"[3] said Eliot. For what Joyce did was to use his Greek story in a way that offered and altered it at once. His implied message, then, was to use the classic stories not as models but as measuring posts. Many writers of the 1920's but many more of the 1930's worked in a similar vein and actually structured their works to debate the relative merits of the myths they contained. Even Joyce's book used other myths than the Odysseus one, most notably the apocryphal story of the Wandering Jew.[4]

Eugene O'Neill, son of an actor, father of a Yale classics professor, developed uses of myths that suggests a touch of Joyce. To illustrate his transitions let us turn to **Desire Under the Elms** of 1924 and **Mourning Becomes Electra** of 1931.

Edgar Racey, Jr. has written in "Myth as Tragic Structure in **Desire Under the Elms**" that the two myths most explicitly presented in this play are the Bible and the Greek tale of Hippolytus.[5] Euripides' version of the Hippolytus story may be summarized for our purposes as follows: Hippolytus is the son of Theseus, the leader of democratic Athens. He is raised far from his father and becomes a great hunter as well as a hater of women. At maturity he is brought to Athens where he immediately forms a close bond with his father. His stepmother Phaedra, however, is hopelessly smitten with love for him. Since he does

not reciprocate, Phaedra leaves a note accusing him of trying to rape her and then kills herself. Hippolytus protests his innocence in vain and his father rashly banishes him. Driving away to exile, Hippolytus is killed by the gods in a chariot accident. He only lives long enough to be exonerated by another goddess and to be reconciled to his father whom he forgives for his rashness. Since the entire tragedy, from the passion of Phaedra to the death of Hyppolytus, is a result of the jealousy of the scheming gods, the behavior of humans within this context appears predestined and often more noble than the gods who trifle with them.

O'Neill has told essentially the same story in an 1850 New England farm setting in "Desire Under the Elms." The issue of the inheritance of the father's farm is moved to the center of the play from the periphery it occupied in the Greek original and other characters are introduced, most notably two older brothers for Eben, but the core story is still the relationship between the son and his stepmother. O'Neill's most important deviations from the Greek story are when the son Eben responds to his stepmother, when he not only does not flee into exile but schemes to retain the farm and when he not only is not forgiving and conciliatory to his father but cuckolds and taunts him. Finally, in an O'Neill signature invention wholly absent from the Greek original, a baby is produced by the incestuous lovers and then is killed — in order to preserve the relationship! The sum of O'Neill's changes is to make his young man a willful adult, in contradistinction to Hippolytus who was tricked by his stepmother and killed by the gods — a passive, tormented dupe. In fact, in the horrifying ending of O'Neill's play, Eben only unconsciously orders the death of the baby but immediately acknowledges the intention behind his words and takes responsibility for it. This is similar to Theseus accepting responsibility for his son's death once he realized he had been deceived by his wife. The point is that O'Neill's young man behaves like the Greek father, not like the son at all.

O'Neill has also made the mother more self-willed if more negative. Phaedra lies but the stepmother Abbie murders. These characters are considerably more self-propelled than their Greek

predecessors. And the strongest bonds in the O'Neill play are those between adults of opposite sexes. Philip Weissman in an essay entitled "Conscious and Unconscious Autobiographical Dramas of Eugene O'Neill"[6] has argued that the baby's murder can be explained best by considering O'Neill's relationships with his own family: O'Neill blamed himself for the death of an infant brother who he infected with measles, and O'Neill himself abandoned his own first child. However, contrary to Weissman's description of Eben as an unconsciously revealing portrait of O'Neill himself, Eben actively loves his stepmother and claims both the baby and the murder as his own, responsibilities which he might have avoided. Surely an unconscious portrait would not have had a character with such acute self-awareness when he might have hewn nearer to the Greek model. Rather than being an unconscious replication of O'Neill's life, this play shows his conscious and deliberate effort to face the commitments he felt he had abandoned. The play is an attempt to purge these sins and half-sins through examination and dramatization, the strategies of the most conscious artists. It is conceivable that the Greek authors were not entirely aware of the meanings of the dark urges they dramatized in their plays; it is inconceivable that the American playwright 23 centuries later was unaware of them. Weissman's argument is persuasive if you compare the play only to O'Neill's life; if the departures from the Greek model are also considered, his interpretation loses much of its force. Weissmann judges O'Neill as well as his characters to be as passive as the Greeks, only they are ruled by invisible psychological forces rather than by offstage deities.

O'Neill's play is significantly different from the Greek version but it is also significantly different from the Bible story that Edgard Racey tells us is announced by the names of the father and his two eldest sons. Racey writes that Peter is "associated with rocks and stones," Simeon is violent and Ephraim is "Progenitor of the Tribes of Israel."[7] However, Peter is from the New Testament while Simeon and Ephraim are from the Old where Ephraim is progenitor of one of the twelve tribes of Israel but not all of them. That role is reserved for Jacob, renamed Israel. So why Ephraim? He only appears in three places in Genesis and

once again in Joshua, at the head of his family. Since there is no particularized description of Ephraim or his tribe in the Old Testament I see no reason why O'Neill assigned him this name beyond the suggestiveness of Biblical pre-history. However, there are other names which carry the main Biblical allusion in **Desire Under the Elms** and Lacey does not discuss them. As the lovers defiantly challenge the father, as they hark back to a simpler psychological state motivated by uncomplicated love and lust, Abbie and Eben both aurally and in their acts remind us of Adam and Eden and the original transgression against obedience in Eden.

But it is neither the story of Adam and Eve nor the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus that suggests the shocking denouement. The characters of Euripides did not mate; the characters in Genesis did not murder; but Oedipus did both. With his unerring eye for sensational action, O'Neill resorts to a psychological scheme formalized in his generation by Freud and based on the myth of King Oedipus. Although the story of Hippolytus is more visible, it is the subliminal Oedipal framework implicit in the story that takes over when O'Neill must convince his 1920's audience that these events could occur.

There is nothing subtle in the seduction. The lovers meet in Maw's parlor. As Eben says, "it hain't been opened since Maw died and was laid out thar."[8] He says this twice and pointedly refrains from saying it a third time, attracting even more attention to the ironic linking of sex and death in Euripides' play. Abbie pleads with Eben with "a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love."[9] She says "I'll take yer maw's place. I'll be everythin' she was t' ye.... I'll kiss ye pure Eben — same's if I was a Maw t' ye — an' ye kin kiss me back's if yew was my son — my boy — sayin' good-night t' me! Kiss me Eben."[10]

And so the myths in combination are finally not really Hippolytus and the story of Ephraim at all but the Oedipus and Eden stories. O'Neill seems to be saying that given these simple passionate characters and this fundamental situation they will behave as the Oedipus and the Eden stories have described. But do these myths agree? The Oedipus story — at least the Freudian reading of the Oedipus story — seemed to say that we were doomed

to commit — or, more commonly, to want to commit — parricide and incest, and to try to avoid them was futile. Youth was to be occupied in dealing with these urges and old age was to be occupied in repenting. With the benefit of psychoanalysis we might divert the energy from these murderous and incestuous ambitions into other ambitions — like psychoanalysis! — and begin repenting sooner, but once we were born of woman and sired by man and raised in that laboratory of behavior called the western nuclear family, avoid the primal obsessions we could not.

The Genesis story is also about the transgression of a taboo. The difference from the Oedipal transgression is that the offense is not narrowly sexual and murderous but something more abstract like obedience. In **Desire Under the Elms** O'Neill mingles the two myths and finds a measure of truth in both of them. His characters sin like Greeks and are punished like Hebrews. Unsurprisingly for the decade that also produced Jay Gatsby and Brett Ashley, they seem to have a measure of free will. Only later, in **Mourning Becomes Electra**, when he again contrasts the Hebraic and Hellenic strands does O'Neill choose between the two. But by 1931 there is a Depression in full career. It should not be surprising to find that an author in 1931 would conclude that free will is illusory and that circumstances determine one's fate.

In **Mourning Becomes Electra** we seem to have the same formula: a Greek model, this time the **Orestia** of Aeschylus, with the story of Adam and Eve again acting as either an alternative or as reconfirmation. The Greek play begins when Agamemnon returns from the Trojan War, only to be killed by his queen Clytemnestra. Agamemnon's daughter, Electra, convinces her brother Orestes to revenge their father's death and he does so after gaining assurances from Apollo. He flees from the terrible conscience pangs of matricide but, after a period of penance, he confidently presents himself for judgment before the Areopagud of Athens. There is a tie vote and Athena casts the deciding vote in his favor, ruling that mercy must prevail in such ambivalent situations. Surely a hymn to moderation, even an anticipation of Christian forgiveness among these machisto and murderous Greeks.

But what does O'Neill do with the same story? **Mourning Becomes Electra** seems to stand considerably closer to its Greek

model than **Desire Under the Elms** does to **Hippolytus**. The Civil War stands in for the Trojan War, the proud house of Mannon bears the fate of Agamemnon and the house of Atreus. In both plays while the lovers hover in the background, husbands are dispatched by vengeful wives the day they return from their wars. But there are significant differences as well: the Greek avenger is the fierce Orestes; O'Neill's avenger is the unstrung, war-wounded Orin, a typical figure of American World War One literature. At the finish of the Greek play, Orestes, convinced of his innocence, claims and is granted exoneration by the gods and returns to a kind of paradise regained. At the end of **Mourning Becomes Electra** the guilt-struck Orin has killed himself and only Lavinia remains. "There's noone left to punish me," she says. "I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have the shutters mailed closed so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead and keep their secrets and let them hound me until the curse is paid out and the last Mannon is let die!"[11]

A crime precedes the action of both plays and the activities in the present result from the inertia from this original sin. However, the sins are vastly different in moral weight: the Greek sins were the unwitting cannibalism by Agamemnon's uncle of his own children a generation earlier and Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter so that he could sail off to war. In O'Neill's version, the sin was an uncle's sex with the servant girl. Clymemnestra has hated Agamemnon since the sacrifice of their daughter, Christine Manon has no specific complaint beyond being forced to perform what she conceives of as her marital duty. The Greeks have blood to avenge; O'Neill's characters have bitterness to palliate. In the **Orestia** three murders are the result; in O'Neill's play there are two murders and two suicides. The punishments in O'Neill are more severe, the original provocations less. We can understand the wrath of the Greek mother who has seen her child murdered; it is harder to understand an equally murderous retaliation from a wife who has endured sex with her husband. The explicit psychological level of the play is announced in O'Neill's title, the clash between daughter and

mother which is linked to the attraction between daughter and father. O'Neill superimposes on this an Oedipal attraction between son and mother which is not present in the Greek play. But O'Neill has always doggedly insisted on the primacy of the heterosexual love relationship. We saw the same concern in **Desire Under the Elms** when the Euripides original was mainly concerned with preserving the relationship between the males. Indeed Phaedra considers love a curse and she seeks a medicine to remove it. At one point Hippolytus says, unambiguously, "I hate a clever woman."[12] But this aspect of classic Greek culture should be no surprise to students of recent gay and feminist history.[13] O'Neill has learned lessons from Freud which Freud has supposedly learned from the Greeks: children are loyal to parents of the opposite sex. But Hippolytus felt no attraction to his stepmother as Eben did and Orestes feels no loyalty to his mother as Orin does to his. Athena herself provides the reason when she delivers her judgment on Orestes:

> Mother is none that gave my godhead life;
> I am the males... my Father's child thrice o'er
> Therefore I rate not high a woman's death
> That slew her lord the master of her house.[14]

The exoneration of Orestes is pronounced in sexual terms. No wonder the Furies were described as women with snakelike hair and eyes dripping blood. No extenuating circumstances are introduced to forgive a woman who has killed a man, because none are sufficient; women's lives are worth less than men's. One wonders which Greek plays Freud had been reading.

The Bible story too seems to have changed its emphasis in **Mourning Becomes Electra.** Eden is now called "The Blessed Isles" and their first admirer in the play is the lover, named Adam. The islands are perceived more clearly as a psychological state, once left forever regretted. Since they are identified more strictly with the mother's womb they seem to be more a goal for men than for women. All three males — husband, lover and son — croon about the Blessed Isles in passages that can be joined without a seam:

"We'd leave the children and go off on a voyage together to

the other side of the world — find some island where we could be alone for awhile."[15]

"The warm earth in the moonlight, the trade winds rustling the coco palms, the surf on the barrier reef singing a croon in your ears like a lullabye!"[16]

"... Those island came to mean everything that... was peace and warmth and security.... There was no one there but you and me. And yet I never saw you, that's the funny part, I only felt you all around me. The breaking of the waves was your voice. The sky was the same color as your eyes. The warm sand was like your skin. The whole island was you."[17]

"The... fires at night and the drum throbbing in my heart, the natives dancing naked and innocent without any knowledge of sin!"[18]

But this mythic place is dismissed as the fantasy of a shell-shocked mind (Orin) or irrecoverable due to the oppressiveness of past sins (Ezra and Adam). By the end of **Mourning Becomes Electra** all these male paradise-seekers are dead. It is writing such as this that Nathanael West punctures in **Miss Lonelyhearts** with Shrike's peaen to Tahiti.[19] But notions of a lost paradise, prior to Original Sin, are no joke to Eugene O'Neill, raised by a mother who had hoped to be a nun. For him Greek doom has unhappily supplanted the Christian promise of rebirth. Even the dubious peace in a purgatorial jail cell which was offered in the ending of **Desire Under the Elms** is no longer possible. The final image of **Mourning Becomes Electra** is of Lavinia entering her house to repent the family sins and to mull on the meanings of history in the ways laid out to this generation by writers on the Puritans like Van Wyck Brooks, Vernon Parrington and H.L. Mencken. In fact the figure Lavinia most resembles is that poetess of the New England mentality who was also perceived by this generation as a brilliant repressed spinster locked up in her Puritan house, paying penance for being alive, Emily Dickinson.

O'Neill is not the only twentieth century writer using mythologies in this way. In **All My Sons** and **Miss Lonelihearts**, Arthur Miller and Nathanael West pit Christian values against an Oedipal reality; In **Henderson the Rain King**, the legends of Moses,

Faust and Odysseus alternate as models for the protagonist. In Faulkner's **Light in August**, both Faust and Christ provide optional ways to explain the protagonist and in **The Sun Also Rises**, the stories of Jacob, Job, Tiresias and Circe enlighten the story of Jake Barnes. There are others, requiring more extended explications than I can provide here. But the use of these mythic framing devices is widespread and reveals an underground debate about the value systems which the authors are conducting. To be sure, one can find instances before the twentieth century of authors using more than one myth in the same work. Hadn't **Moby Dick** housed both the Ishmael and the Ahab stories? But, at least in my reading, and with the possible exception of the extraordinarily adventurous Melville, it was not until the twentieth century that authors contrasted whole value systems in such a systematic way.

By his final plays like **Long Day's Journey Into Night**, O'Neill no longer uses Bible myth; neither does he consciously follow a Greek pattern. But Greek-like motivations as interpreted by Freud are still present. Nathanael West wrote, some fifteen years before O'Neill's last play:

> "Psychology has nothing to do with reality nor should it be used as motivation. The novelist is no longer a psychiatrist. Psychology can become much more important. The great body of case histories can be used in the way the ancient writers use their myths. Freud is your Bulfinch; you can not learn from him."[20]

Perhaps in our day the very interpretations of psychoanalysis have assumed a position similar to the myths of the earlier writers.

NOTES

[1]Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1926; New York: New Directions, 1957), p.64.

[2]"Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it... to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble." T.S. Eliot, **The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950** (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), p.50.

[3]T.S. Eliot, **"Ulysses**, Order and Myth," **The Norton Anthology of English Literature**, Vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1968), p.1825.

[4]See especially the "Scylla and Charybdis" episode; also, the Citizen refers to Bloom as Ahasuerus.

[5]Edgar F. Racey, Jr., "Myth as Tragic Structure in **Desire Under the Elms**, **O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays**, ed. John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp.57-61.

[6]Philip Weissmann, "Conscious and Unconscious Autobiographical Dramas of Eugene O'Neill," **Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association** (July, 1957), pp.432-457.

[7]Weissman, 457.

[8]Eugene O'Neill, **Desire Under the Elms**, **Three Plays of Eugene O'Neill** (1924; New York: Random House, Inc., 1952), p.34.

[9]O'Neill, **Desire**, 36.

[10]O'Neill, **Desire**, 36.

[11]O'Neill, **Mourning**, 376.

[12]Euripides, **Hippolytus**, Trans. Edward P. Coleridge, **Great Books of the Western World** (Chicago: Enclopedia Britannica, Inc.1952), p.23.

[13]See two recent polemics: **Greek Homosexuality** by K.J. Dover (Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1978); **The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens** by Eva C. Keuls (Harper & Row, 1985).

[14]Aeschylus, **Eumenides**, Trans. G.M. Cookson, in **Great Books**, etc., p.88.

[15]O'Neill, **Mourning**, 270.

[16]**Mourning**, 319.

[17]**Mourning**, 300.

[18]**Mourning**, 348.

[19]"You live in a thatch hut with the daughter of the king, a slim young maiden in whose eyes is an ancient wisdom. Her breasts are golden speckled pears, her belly a melon, and her odor is like nothing so much as a jungle fern. In the evening, on the blue lagoon, under the silvery moon, to your love you croon in the soft sylabelew and vocabelew of her langorour tongorour. Your body is golden brown like hers, and tourists have need of the indignant finger of the missionary to point you out." Nathaniel West, **Miss Lonelyhearts** (1933; New York: Avon Books, 1967), p.59.

[20]West, "Some Notes on Miss Lonelyhearts", cited in Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Afterword" to Avon Edition, p.123.