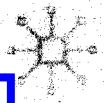

Interrogating America through Theatre and Performance

Edited by

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Jeffrey Eric Jenkins

BENEATH THE HORIZON

Although Eugene O'Neill's spiritual battles between the material and the ideal recur throughout his playwriting—particularly in plays of the mid-1920s—it is in his first Broadway play, *Beyond the Horizon* (1920), that the dualistic nature of American existence comes to theatrical fruition. A story about two brothers who become embroiled in a romantic triangle that causes each to reject the truth of his inner self, resulting in tragedy for all, the play resonated powerfully with theater critics. Despite its nearly four-hour length, Arthur and Barbara Gelb note, "it introduced the possibility . . . that the commercial theater could express dramatic literature rather than serve merely as an amusement arena."[1] It certainly did not hurt that the *New York Times*'s Alexander Woollcott chose to write that the theater season was "immeasurably richer and more substantial" with the production's opening, or that he praised the production—while suggesting substantial changes—in his Sunday column for two weeks in a row and continued to note the play's quality in the following months.[2] Other critics were similarly supportive: the *New York Post*'s J. Rankin Towse declared *Beyond the Horizon* to be a "genuine, reasonable, poignant domestic American tragedy, arising out of the conflict between circumstance and character" even if he found it to be "somewhat dreary and fatalistic," and "too long."[3]

If the critical approbation was not without its reservations—Harry Carr also noted in the *Los Angeles Times* his surprise at O'Neill's faulty "dramatic technique and crude stagecraft" given the playwright's family pedigree—the play itself tapped into an audience hungry for serious drama that reflected the dualistic nature of the burgeoning (and faltering) American dream.[4] Reviewing the published version of the play in 1921 for the *New Republic*,

Lola Ridge is one of the few early critics to gaze past the play's dramaturgical tics and into its American soul. "We Americans, master-merchants of the world, are an exceedingly sentimental people" she writes, but "Eugene O'Neill . . . takes one by the scruff of the neck and holds one's nose to reality." Ridge argues that the theme is the "old unappeasable hunger of the wandering spirit" in conflict with those who are "content to burrow in some little patch of earth." In this view, it isn't fate or God setting the situation, but a society that valorizes "financiers" who have become a "race of denatured farmers" and have vitiated creativity in favor of manipulated economic markets.[5]

Excepting Ridge, however, it was apparent to most contemporary critics, though, that the forces of "fate" influence the action of *Beyond the Horizon*. Critics who lauded the play's tragic quality alluded to these elements and O'Neill himself was often concerned with what, in human experience, might be foreordained.[6] Indeed, neither "fate" nor "destiny" appear in the spoken text, although the will of God is invoked a number of times to describe the death of a character. If one examines the story closely, though, this play may be interpreted as a caution to the reader (or the audience) against denying one's true self—a thematic that has arisen in nearly every American play of influence since *Beyond the Horizon*. Coming at the end of a tortured decade—when more than fifty million souls perished as victims of war, famine, and disease—O'Neill's first Broadway play circumvents the sentimentality to which Ridge refers and points to choices made by individuals. The answers for the individual living in modern 1920 America lay not "beyond" a horizon—which, by definition, never can be reached—but far beneath it.

For more than two generations, Eugene O'Neill's sensibility as an artist and thinker has been defined by the compelling nature of his biography intertwined with carefully crafted psychological narratives. In these explications of the demons that drove O'Neill to personal lows and artistic highs, the playwright was hardly a psychobiographical victim. He was an often-willing participant in the construction of his public identity during his lifetime, careful to note (and embellish) his romantic adventures and to define himself in contradistinction to his father—the wealthy and powerful actor James O'Neill, on whose largesse the playwright relied until he was at least thirty. Even near the end of his life, the frail O'Neill and his third wife, Carlotta Monterey, exerted control over the narratives to follow with bonfires in a Boston hotel room of "manuscripts and other papers" that had been withheld from a World War II bequest to Yale University.[7]

To a large extent, O'Neill also has been captured in amber by his masterwork, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), a modern play set in the predawn of modern America.[8] As with Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* (1938), *Long Day's Journey* looks back across decades to a time unencumbered by the cultural complexities that would evolve over the course of two world wars and the Great Depression. The two plays differ, of course, in their constructions of community—even though one might argue that each of the communities is as insular as the other. Written just before the United States's entry into World War II—between 1939 and 1941—the O'Neill play was sealed and locked in a Random House safe where it was to be held for publication twenty-five years after the playwright's death, but never to be produced.[9] Less than three years after his death, O'Neill's widow and "literary executrix," Carlotta Monterey, allowed the work to be staged by the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, Sweden, "in accordance with his death-bed request" to her.[10] The play was published by Yale University Press ten days after its Stockholm premiere.[11]

While psychology-dominated narratives of O'Neill's life and work have fascinated historians and critics, the playwright's location in the social and political culture of his moment—particularly in his early works—has been overlooked and his work often measured according to tortured relationships with his drug-addicted mother, famous-actor father, and self-destructive brother.[12] That biography may have a profound impact on creative output, though, is not the point of this study. In an essay on the history of ideas as an interdisciplinary field, Donald R. Kelley notes the reluctance of "literary artists and historians" to credit critical discussion that amounts to "attention to gossip and character." Gustav Flaubert, for instance, protested to Georges Sand, "The man is nothing . . . the work is everything."[13] Nonetheless, the context within which an artist works cannot help but have some impact on the thing created. Indeed, the French Impressionist Claude Monet once wished he had been "born blind, in order to experience sight suddenly: to see the world naively, as pure shape and color" so that he might work from beyond his developed perception.[14]

Marvin Carlson's influential 1985 essay, in which he describes theoretical perspectives on text and performance dating from the Romantic period, reconstructs a dialectic that demonstrates the interaction between internal and external forces:

> Genius being individual, the actor of genius would inevitably differ in artistic vision from the genius Shakespeare, and historical and cultural changes would cause further separation. [Hippolyte] Taine's *race*, *moment*, and *milieu* guaranteed that even Shakespeare himself in changed circumstances would have expressed his genius in very different ways.[15]

Kelley understandably finds Taine's "contextualist trinity" limited due to its overdetermining emphasis on the "external dispositions of national character,

pressures of the natural environment, and periods of cultural development" (160). Yet O'Neill's work demonstrates a tension between internal impulses—those well-chronicled demons—and external cultural forces that are reflected in his early poems and plays. Indeed, the dualistic nature of this cultural binary is one that has been revisited again and again, as Kelley notes, in literature, religion, and philosophy.[16] In O'Neill, duality is a central force not only in the construction of fictional identities—which may or may not be doppelgängers for the writer—but also in its reflections of the burgeoning American zeitgeist in the early twentieth century.[17]

Patrick Chura notes that O'Neill first arrived to meet with the Provincetown Players in 1916 dressed at least partly in the uniform he wore as a sailor. This was five years after he had given up his seafaring life. Chura argues that O'Neill was "drawing on a somewhat remote seagoing experience to lend credibility to his current dramatic efforts. The decision to present himself as a worker to the Provincetowners was shrewd; the Players themselves wore flannel shirts to identify with the working class." For Chura, O'Neill's sailor attire symbolized a "determined if conflicted rejection of middle-class canons."[18] A little more than a year later—a few days after the opening of the 1917 wartime sea drama *In the Zone*—a profile of the playwright in the *New York Times* reified O'Neill's proletarian narrative even as it identified him as a son of theatrical royalty.[19] As O'Neill's career developed, he never escaped this dual public identity that demonstrates what John Gassner referred to, in another context, as his "dividedness": that is, experienced man of the people *and* privileged son of a famous actor. Gassner called it "the acute sense of human contradiction and division expressed . . . in most of the plays . . . for more than two decades."[20] It is precisely this division, this dual nature, that appealed not only to most major critics but, more importantly, to audiences who kept his first Broadway play, *Beyond the Horizon*, running on Broadway for 111 performances—a respectable run in its day.

In an essay on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, subtitled "The Nowhere Hero," Richard Lehan discusses a tradition of dualism among early twentieth century American writers that he calls "a kind of schizophrenia":

> Over and over, [American writers have] tried to reconcile a materialism which [they] could not accept with an idealism [they] could not realize. Henry James is a case in point. His Christopher Newman in *The American* turns his back on a greedy America and goes to Europe in search of vague cultural ideals. What he finds in Europe is that such ideals do not exist—that if America has money without tradition, Europe has tradition without the means to finance it.[21]

Citing also the example of Henry Adams, Lehan goes on to note Fitzgerald's concern with competing forces of old world hierarchies and new world possibilities. The essayist describes the sources of "Gatsby's dream and Nick Carraway's nightmare, for Gatsby never learns that the dream is dead, and Nick's discovery of this fact leaves him . . . hopeless, . . . culturally displaced" (107).

"HORIZON SYNDROME"

Recounting a tale that purports to describe how O'Neill decided on the title of *Beyond the Horizon*, Travis Bogard notes that "any reader of the literature of the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century will recognize in the title's imagery what might be called the 'Horizon Syndrome.' "[22] In this literary syndrome, by Bogard's estimation, there were "countless inspirational poems, stories, and short plays" that suggested in ways similar to O'Neill's play "boundless aspiration for a somewhat vaguely defined freedom of spirit" (125). Bogard insists that although O'Neill seemed to draw inspiration from Edward Sheldon's 1912 play, *The High Road*, with its use of inspirational images of nature, that *Horizon* was "rightfully received as a compelling original."[23] Although Bogard hints that O'Neill's play was successful due to a confluence of events that included, essentially, good timing and public relations, he goes on to argue that its "theme established a major tragic motif of American drama" (127). For Bogard—as well as for O'Neill himself, during the play's run—it is the playwright's location of man in nature (in addition to man's alienation from it) that breathes life into *Beyond the Horizon* when most of its contemporaries have been forgotten.[24]

There is more to O'Neill's first Broadway play, though, than merely "holding the family kodak up to ill-nature," as the playwright himself later disparaged naturalism in a 1924 program note for Strindberg's *The Spook Sonata*.[25] By the time *Horizon* premiered in 1920, there was a long critical tradition of despair over the state of American drama, and the debt owed to English and continental drama—it is a tradition that seems likely, even now, to continue indefinitely. As early as 1832, William Dunlap complained that the state of dramatic works found "much vile trash which has disgraced the stage."[26] In 1902, Boston critic Henry A. Clapp bemoaned the "prevailing flimsiness and triviality" in American playwriting, arguing that "something is needed . . . if we aspire to any great achievements" in American theatre.[27] Even the popular English playwright Henry Arthur Jones exhorted dramatists in 1906 to "dare to paint American life sanely, truthfully, searchingly" in a speech at Harvard.[28]

This critical hunger for an "American" drama intensified as the art theatre movement grew: Edith J. R. Isaacs, who later became an editor of the influential quarterly *Theatre Arts*, wrote passionately in 1916 of the need for a national theatre, by which she meant a native theatre:

> The American theater is a transplanted, and not a native institution. It was brought over [from England] . . . at a time when the Puritan opposition was too

> violent and too powerful to permit a native drama to survive. . . . [We] can help to breed that high-sounding but exceedingly simple thing, a "national consciousness" toward the drama as an art and the theater as an institution, which is taken for granted in every other civilized country.[29]

Isaacs's words were somewhat at odds with those of the renowned Columbia University professor of dramatic literature, Brander Matthews, who insisted in a talk at New York's Republican Club earlier that year that although "he couldn't name a great American dramatist" there was at that time a "vital, living American drama."[30] When Matthews spoke, the art-theater pioneers of the Washington Square Players had been operating for nearly two years and the Provincetown Players—early interpreters of O'Neill's work—were about to begin presenting plays in New York.

If, from the literary perspective of critics, the early twentieth century was ripe for American drama to focus on a distinct thematic arising from the particular experience of living in this country, the challenging social and political climate of the day certainly enhanced the possibilities. On the day of *Beyond the Horizon*'s first matinee tryout, February 3, 1920, New York City was gripped by an epidemic of flu and pneumonia that had claimed more than 2,900 lives in the city since the beginning of the year.[31] Just days before the show's opening matinee, in fact, officials passed regulations that staggered evening show times in forty-eight legitimate theatres to alleviate congestion on public transportation and to reduce the possibility of exacerbating infection rates.[32] O'Neill fretted over the change in hours and what it was "doing to attendance," complaining in a letter to his second wife, Agnes Boulton, about the "curse" that "always smites the O'Neills at the wrong moment" (*Selected Letters* 108). The playwright's self-dramatizing anxiety aside, 1920 served as a capstone to a decade drenched in blood and human sacrifice exacted through war, famine, and pestilence. Yet beneath the carnage there lay some immutable "hope against hope," that drove Americans from the farms to the cities, immigrants from their homelands to these shores, and African Americans from the repressive South to the less-repressive North. Robert Mayo's dream of a better life beyond the hills of his family farm in *Beyond the Horizon*, echoed the cultural shifts that were changing the face (and faces) of America.

PIPE DREAMS

The appearance of *Beyond the Horizon* on Broadway coincided with the recording of a population shift in the United States as reported by the 1920 census. For the first time since the census began in 1790, there were more persons living in urban than rural areas.[33] Some of this change is caused by

the opportunity created in industrial work and some of it was due to the flood of immigrants who had pushed beyond their own horizons in search of a more secure life. Between 1910 and 1920 the American work force grew a shade more than five million workers, but the number of workers on farms declined by nearly 150,000 pushing the increase among non-farm workers to more than 5.2 million.[34]

The decade passing into history in 1920 had also seen the rise of two significant movements in American culture that worked together, oddly, to foreground issues of race. In 1915, the front page of the *Atlanta Constitution* marked the reforming of the Ku Klux Klan under W. J. Simmons, calling the Thanksgiving night ceremony "impressive" and noting that the organization would take "an active part in the betterment of mankind."[35] Although this may today seem a cultural aberration, the newspaper on the same date hailed the incipient presentation of *Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith's racist celebration of Southern manhood during Reconstruction.[36] In 1920, the *Washington Post* published an interview with Klan "wizard" Simmons in which he claimed that his group was a "peaceful, fraternal organization" that aimed to "prevent mob violence and lynchings." Membership, he said, was not limited to Southern men:

> Any American may belong. He must be a real American, however, with absolutely no foreign connections, either politically or religiously. He must believe in the Christian religion, white supremacy, the separation of church and State, the limiting of immigration, and the prevention of the causes of mob violence.[37]

This quote denotes a Klan attempting to disassociate itself from the night-riding terrorists of African Americans in the post-Civil War South. Here Simmons reifies the Klan's opposition to immigration and immigrants, Jews, nonwhites, and Catholics—it was a common anti-Catholic canard that Catholics favored a government run by the Pope, hence the separation-of-church-and-state qualifier. As for nonviolence, reported lynchings of African Americans increased slightly in the five years after the Klan was re-formed as compared with the five-year period before the Klan's 1915 ceremony on Stone Mountain.[38]

The other racial factor that had a sharp impact concurrent with the rise of the "new" Klan was the emigration of African Americans from rural areas—largely in the South—to urban areas. Charles Luther Fry notes that the African American population in northern and western states increased by 480,000 between 1910 and 1920. Fry also cautions, though, against reading this migration in terms of purely north-south travel as he also points to an increase of nearly 400,000 persons in the African American population in cities of the South.[39] This urban shift caused a near-panic among cotton growers and others who relied on African Americans as an inexpensive pool of labor.[40] According to W. E. B. Du Bois, the sharp decline of immigrant

labor during the war years created a strong demand for "common labor." Du Bois notes that a "curious industrial war ensued" with "wholesale arrests" and extortionate fees of $2,500 that labor recruiters were required to pay, but the exodus continued as African Americans searched for better, freer lives.[41]

In the years leading to World War I (1910–1914), more than five million immigrants came to America in search of new horizons, new frontiers of freedom and plenty.[42] In his 1912 study, *The New Immigration*, Peter Roberts optimistically argued in favor of the "new immigrants" then coming to this country from southeastern Europe. Many of these immigrants arrived from what we now think of as central and eastern Europe—Italy, Poland, Russia, the Balkans, and the like—with cultural baggage strange to Americans of the day. Roberts, though, believed there was room for them:

> We are a young nation; no prophet has dared to predict the possibilities of the future; but the past industrial development of America points unerringly to Europe as the source whence our future unskilled labor supply is to be drawn. The gates will not be closed; the wheels of industry will not retard; America is in the race for the markets of the world; its call for workers will not cease.[43]

In the five years after the beginning of the world war, a little more than one million immigrants were admitted in total—a precipitous decline from the prewar period—which created thousands of industrial employment opportunities for migrating African Americans. ("Immigrants," 110).

Although O'Neill popularized the term "pipe dream" in *The Iceman Cometh* (1946), he first used the expression in *The Straw* (1921) as a way of describing the illusions tuberculosis patients employ to keep hope alive.[44] By the time O'Neill used the term, it had attained fairly common status as slang for a fantasy or an illusion—possibly induced by smoking opium. An early usage of note was the 1890 contention by controversial inventor and pitchman Edward J. Pennington that aerial navigation had been "regarded as a pipe-dream for a good many years" while raising money to make real just such a dream.[45] After several failures to make his aircraft fly, the *Chicago Tribune* turned Pennington's figure of speech on him when the paper referred to his "discovery" as the sort men make after "Ah Lung twists the 'hop' above the lamp and the air is filled with black smoke."[46] Whatever the genesis of the term, its illusory connotation aptly describes the desperation experienced by migrants from the old world or within the new who longed for the possibility offered by new frontiers.

The unseemly Kenneth L. Roberts knew of this lure when he wrote in his repugnant, anti-immigrant book, *Why Europe Leaves Home*:

> Any lot was preferable to their own; and the most preferable lot, of course, was the one which carried with it the most money. The Jews of Poland have long believed that any energetic person could become wealthy in America by the delightfully simple method of running around the streets and prying the gold coins from between the paving-stones with a nut-pick.[47]

That Roberts also notes these fantasies were constructed by steamship agents paid commissions for every person who booked passage does little to diminish the vile and patronizing tone he employs while trafficking in stereotypes of various immigrant groups. Still, Kenneth Roberts's 1922 perspective is the sort that allowed the Klan's anti-Other ideology to gain control of state legislatures and/or governor's mansions in five states—including Indiana and Oregon—in the 1920s.[48] By 1924, anti-immigrant sentiment was intense enough to force the U.S. government into enactment of a quota law that tightened immigration to a trickle. In the decade before 1920, immigration had averaged more than 600,000 persons per year. The 1924 quota law restricted the influx to approximately 160,000—nearly a 75 percent reduction.[49] For many prospective immigrants in 1924, as well as those who experienced similar restrictions in 1921, pipe dreams of life in America went up in smoke.

IDENTITY AND CAPITAL

Not long after *Beyond the Horizon* opened on Broadway, James S. Metcalfe wrote in *Life* magazine that the play "is not calculated to encourage the back-to-the-farm movement."[50] In fact, of course, we have seen that whatever agrarian movements may have been advocated, the continuing trend in American culture has been increasingly urban and consumerist. Andrew Mayo—who once kept his feet planted in good clean dirt, his hands tilling the soil, nurturing the cycle of life—becomes in *Horizon* a rootless speculator gambling on the possible success (or failure) of those who continue to create life on the land:

> I made money hand over fist as long as I stuck to legitimate trading; but I wasn't content with that. I wanted it to come easier, so like all the rest of the idiots, I tried speculation. Oh, I won all right! Several times I've been almost a millionaire—on paper—and then come down to earth again with a bump.[51]

But it isn't destiny or fate that presses the former farmer into the service of mammon. O'Neill signals Andrew's materialist underpinnings early in the play, even before the brothers have their falling out over Ruth, the girl from the next farm.

As the brothers unfold dramatic exposition in the first scene, O'Neill offers glimpses into Andrew's true self as the boys fantasize about the trip Robert is about to take. Andrew imagines, with some enthusiasm, the good pay Robert

will receive along with free room, board, and travel expenses. He almost sounds envious of the "great opportunities for a young fellow with his eyes open in some of those new countries that are just being opened up" and ponders the possibility of Robert becoming a millionaire (576–577). Robert could not be less interested in Andrew's talk about opportunity and money. For him, the upcoming voyage to sea is an opportunity to break free of the hills and horizon that have seemed always to mock him as a sickly child. Robert tells his brother that it is just "[b]eauty that's calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown, the mystery and spell of the East which lures me in the books I read" (577). Although the brothers are meant to seem close friends in the author's romanticized exposition, they also represent a dualistic expression of one well-integrated personality: someone concerned with practical matters but also able to appreciate the adventures we encounter on our journeys through life.

Contrary to those who interpret the brothers' circumstances as reflective of fate, Edwin A. Engel argues that their situations are due to "qualities inherent in the characters themselves":

> With opportunities to speculate in wheat as accessible in America as in the Argentine [where Andrew has traveled] there is no reason why an acquisitive farm boy should have found them any less irresistible than a world traveler. That Robert was as ill-fitted to be a sailor as he was to be a farmer was evident from the outset.[52]

Engel, though, also makes the common critical error of relying on the playwright's detailed descriptions of his characters. In his discussion of O'Neill's delineation of the characters' physical traits, Engel emphasizes the playwright's typical employment of physiognomy to make dramatic points (15–18). Ultimately, however, it is what a character actually does in a play that determines how a particular audience member may judge the character's action. Whatever the character says about himself or herself, whatever other characters say about him or her, character is revealed to the audience through choices made and actions taken. The absence of authorial narrative dictated to a reader or an audience is a key distinction between the novel and most plays—it is also a reason why O'Neill's works often perform better than they read. The extra baggage of detailed physical descriptions and layers of authorial intent employed by O'Neill as he notes parenthetically the emotional responses of his characters tend to over determine the theatrical perspective of the reader.

What made *Beyond the Horizon* compelling in its 1920 cultural moment was not, as Robert Brustein argues in *The Theatre of Revolt*, merely a reflection of an "American culture craze" that tapped into a hunger among "critics and cultural consumers" for something "Big" (321–332). From Brustein's

perspective of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the "culture craze" notion made sense in a time when serious Broadway drama was on the decline and popular culture revolved around emerging totems in music and electronic media. But from the vantage point of less than two years after the end of the calamitous World War I—it is worth noting that the play was actually written in 1918, a few months before the war's end—even some 1920 cultural arbiters were puzzled by the demand for tickets to O'Neill's play. Robert Benchley wrote in a seasonal review that *Beyond the Horizon* was one of the "world's gloomiest plays" and noted ironically that "the reaction to the strain of war naturally drove the theatergoers to those plays in which life was treated humorously and superficially."[53]

In fact, though, the taste for drama that treated life seriously, if gloomily, surely arose—at least in part—from a desire to better understand a social model in which the developing norm seemed to be a maelstrom of war, disease, and dislocation. Within that chaotic and increasingly urban milieu, the American ideal of frontier and the opportunity it represented seemed no longer valid. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner had noted the closing of the American frontier in 1893, when he quoted directly from the 1890 census report:

> Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.[54]

For Turner, as for Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1830s, "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier" and this "fluidity of American life" was what drove the "forces dominating American character" (n.p.).

When Robert feels trapped by the hills surrounding the farm—despite, as Andrew notes, the proximity of the farm to the beach and the sea—his longing is not unlike frontiersmen pushing past old boundaries of the West, in search of the new. But Robert's restless hope for a better life "beyond" even more closely mirrors impoverished immigrants and African-American migrants—they as "ill-fitted" for the experience, perhaps, as Engel argues Robert is for the sea—crossing borders to construct new identities and new dreams. This New World longing in *Beyond the Horizon*, as in the culture at large, is counterpointed by an equally powerful Old World longing. Manifest through Andrew's early ties to the farm and its produce in *Beyond the Horizon*—Robert says his brother is "wedded to the soil"—this Old World longing also occurs in American culture: David M. Kennedy reports that a

reverse migration sent "nearly a third of the Poles, Slovaks, and Croatians . . . almost half the Italians; more than half the Greeks, Russians, Rumanians, and Bulgarians" back to Europe.[55] Although immigration figures show an influx of more than 6.7 million persons between 1910 and 1920, 3.6 million aliens also left the country during that same period—this does not include aliens deported or excluded from entry to the United States.[56] As Kennedy aptly puts it, "many immigrants wondered if the fabled promise of American life was a vagrant and perhaps impossible dream" (15).

Even Andrew dreams of returning to his Old World, the farm, as he tells Ruth, "the strain [of trading] was too much. I got disgusted with myself and made up my mind to get out and come home and forget it and really live again." He is disappointed, though, to have made such a "poor showing for five years' hard work" and resolves, only somewhat reluctantly, to go back. "I can make it up in a year or so down there—and I don't need a shoestring to start with" (642). When Robert discovers that his brother has speculated—gambled—on the creative prospects of other farmers' toil, he declares that Andrew is the "deepest-dyed failure" of the three of them (647). As Robert nears death, he charges Andrew with care of his wife and the family farm, but it is clear that Andrew's Old World has become as illusory as the New; the one where he tried to amass capital and become what Lola Ridge calls a "master-merchant" (170). His dogged pursuit of easy capital will be curtailed as he faces a reconstructed material relationship with his family farm and his brother's widow. Andrew's horizon shrinks to a wasted piece of earth and a woman who has abandoned all hope of happiness.

The twin longings of old and new, desires that conflict and conflate, are in keeping with the dualistic nature of American identity as expressed earlier in Lehan's study of *Gatsby* as well as in John Henry Raleigh's location of O'Neill among American writers in *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*.[57] For Raleigh, though, there is a mystical element to this cultural doubling that evokes "both a Job and a Prometheus; [man] is simultaneously a tiny speck amidst the giant forces of the tumult in the skies and . . . a participant . . . , almost an orchestrator of the divine dissonances" (250). In this approach, Raleigh follows O'Neill's middle period, which is beyond the scope of this study, in which the playwright's thematics deal increasingly with crises of the spirit, but Raleigh also finds within O'Neill a duality that marks his work as filled with "banalities and profundities, ineptitude and brilliance, . . . side by side" (254). These doubled elements and Andrew's reducing circumstances also point to another polarity that resonates throughout the play: presence and absence.

Although *Beyond the Horizon* is ostensibly Robert's tragedy, it is Andrew's absence and the possibility of his incipient presence that fuels much of the play's action. In scene after scene, the wistful, poetic quality that marks the play's beginning unwinds in a material dissipation that emphasizes the crisis

of spirit experienced by Robert—and by everyone connected with the farm under his management. In a sense, the character of Andrew in *Beyond the Horizon* prefigures *Waiting for Lefty* or *Waiting for Godot*, two disparate examples of "present absences" that drive dramatic actions and very nearly exemplify O'Neill's sense of "hopeless hope," as the Gelbs refer to the playwright's "philosophy" (334). Even the supporting characters, the mothers of Robert and Ruth, hope for Andrew's return. Noting the farm's growing decrepitude early in the second act, Ruth's mother says of Andrew, "We can give praise to God then that he'll be back in the nick o' time" to turn things around before it's too late (605). But it is already too late, as Robert learns when he asks his recently returned brother, in the second act, if he will stay on the farm. Andrew has been offered an opportunity in a Buenos Aires grain business and he sees it as a "big chance" because he wants to "get in on something big before I die" (621). He leaves the farm again, but Robert and Ruth do not completely abandon their "hopeless hope" that he will return and set things right. When Robert dies at the end of the play, bequeathing his brother a withered farm and his by-now vacuous wife, Robert becomes the "absent presence," and "hopeless hope" turns to empty, tragic desperation. It is a poignant example of Christopher Bigsby's description of O'Neill as the "poet of stasis. The world which he describes is static in the sense in which a ball, thrown into the air, is static at its apogee. The past was promise; the future can only be entropic."[58]

BEYOND "BENEATH"

In the introduction to his 1980 study on the generation of identity in the sixteenth century, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Stephen Greenblatt argues:

> If interpretation limits itself to the behavior of the author, it becomes literary biography (in either a conventionally historical or psychoanalytic mode) and risks losing a sense of the larger networks of meaning in which both the author and his works participate.[59]

Although Eugene O'Neill does not fit neatly into Greenblatt's Renaissance-oriented models for creating a "poetics of culture," O'Neill's "networks of meanings" for too long have been linked almost solely to his biography: son of the stage, seafaring adventurer, arrested adolescent with parental issues, tortured artist driven by a deep sense of mourning. While each of these pieces of the puzzle that comprise O'Neill carries a certain validity, they all help paradoxically to obscure the playwright's existence as a sentient being in a particularly unsettled historical moment.

Stephen A. Black notes that while America "drank, danced, and prospered, O'Neill became famous for dark, serious, tragic plays" (xiii). That prosperity, though, is a mirage constructed through the nostalgic perspective of Depression-era writers such as Frederick Lewis Allen. According to historian David M. Kennedy, the "immense popularity" of Allen's *Only Yesterday* (1931) helped to foster the impression that there were twenty million Americans playing the stock market in the 1920s when, in fact, the Treasury Department calculated the number of securities holders nearer to three million in 1928—with brokerage firms reporting a much lower total of 1.5 million customers in 1929 (40–41). Kennedy is also surprised to discover, "given the decade's reputation," that the annual rate of unemployment in mass-production industries "exceeded 10 percent at the height of 'Coolidge prosperity' from 1923 to 1928" (22–23).

In *America in the Twenties*, a social history that covers the Armistice in 1918 to the beginning of the New Deal in 1933, Geoffrey Perrett writes that

> in the spring of 1920 the money had begun to run out. Savings were gone, loans were cut back, [military] demobilization pay had been spent, but most of all government spending was vigorously slashed. Its momentum [from a postwar lift] broken, the economy fell back. Unemployment rose sharply. A sense of gloom spread quickly.[60]

Bewildered critics such as Benchley, pondering *Beyond the Horizon*'s popularity while sipping bathtub gin at the Algonquin "round table," may have found audiences' taste for darker themes to be the height of ironic interest. But for those who flocked to O'Neill's first Broadway play, however, and who continued to support his work through the 1920s even as younger critics cut their teeth (almost literally) on his reputation, it may well have been that the audience's American dreams, aspirations, and lives were not only reflected by but etched into the mirror of the drama. It is the difference between the nostalgia-manufactured "myth" and the reconstructed "truth" of a cultural epoch.

If we cannot more accurately locate O'Neill's work within its cultural moment, how can we truly understand the forces that shaped his work? How can we know why his work resonated so powerfully with its audiences and with many of its critics? Despite the obsessive focus on O'Neill's biography and psychology in recent decades, his work consistently interrogates ideas of "America" and "American-ness." If we look beyond "beneath," O'Neill's questions may help to shape our own.

NOTES

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1. Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 409.
2. Alexander Woollcott, "The Play," *New York Times* (February 4, 1920), 12; Woollcott, "Second Thoughts on First Nights," *New York Times* (February 8, 1920), XX2; Woollcott, "Second Thoughts on First Nights," *New York Times* (February 15, 1920), XX2; Woollcott, "Second Thoughts on First Nights," *New York Times* (February 22, 1920), X6; Woollcott, "The Play," *New York Times* (March 10, 1920), 9; Woollcott, "Second Thoughts on First Nights," *New York Times* (March 14, 1920), BR5.
3. J. Rankin Towse, "The Drama: *Beyond the Horizon*," *New York Post* (February 4, 1920), n.p., rpt. in John H. Houchin, ed., *The Critical Response to Eugene O'Neill* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993), 15–16.
4. Harry Carr, "Real Drama Hits Gotham," *Los Angeles Times* (February 8, 1920), III1.
5. Lola Ridge, "*Beyond the Horizon*," *New Republic* (January 5, 1921), 173.
6. Burns Mantle described the play as a "tragedy of the dreamer forced by fate into a misfit existence that he could not foresee nor command the strength to combat" (Mantle, "Beyond the Horizon," *Chicago Daily Tribune* [February 15, 1920], E1); Ludwig Lewisohn discusses the "reiterated blows of fate" in his review (Ludwig Lewisohn, "Drama: An American Tragedy," *Nation* [February 21, 1920], 242); an anonymous reviewer for the *Christian Science Monitor* also addressed the "suffering inflicted by the dramatist's inexorable idea of 'fate' " ("*Beyond the Horizon* by Eugene O'Neill," *Christian Science Monitor* [February 10, 1920], 14).
7. For biographical treatments that conflate O'Neill's life experience and psychology with his writing, see the Gelbs, *O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo*; Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (London: J. M. Dent, 1969); and Stephen A. Black, *Eugene O'Neill: Beyond Mourning and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). Sheaffer notes in *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* that O'Neill, "an instinctive dramatist, . . . could not resist touching up and revising his past," (xi). Each of O'Neill's first two adventures as a man-of-the-world were underwritten by his father, who was an indirect investor in the 1909–1910 mining expedition to Honduras and who paid the incipient writer's fare on his first trip to sea as a "sailor" (Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright*, 148, 160–161). The publication of *Thirst and Other One-Act Plays* by Gorham Press in Boston, O'Neill's first play publication, was underwritten by his father in 1914. O'Neill's second wife, Agnes Boulton, wrote in her 1958 memoir that the playwright and his brother Jamie were each "on an allowance of fifteen dollars a week" in 1917, when O'Neill was twenty-nine (Agnes Boulton, *Part of a Long Story* [New York: Doubleday, 1958], 17). For a supporting perspective on O'Neill's personal narrative and "truth," see Jean Chothia, "Trying to Write the Family Play: Autobiography and the Dramatic Imagination," in Michael Manheim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998),

192. For details of the Yale bequest and the manuscript burning, see Sheaffer, *Son and Artist*, 540, 666–667.
8. The play was begun in 1939 and completed in 1941. See Virginia Floyd, *Eugene O'Neill at Work: Newly Released Ideas for Plays* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), 281–297.
9. Eugene O'Neill, "To Random House," in Travis Bogard and Jackson Bryer, eds., *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 575; O'Neill, "To Bennett Cerf," in Bogard and Bryer, *Selected Letters*, 589.
10. Felix Belair Jr., "Stockholm Hails World Premiere of Autobiographical O'Neill Play," *New York Times* (February 11, 1956), 12.
11. Sam Zolotow, "Robinson Back After 25 Years," *New York Times* (February 8, 1956), 38. The Yale publication of the play caused the *New York Times*'s book columnist Harvey Breit to inquire at Random House why it—O'Neill's long-time publisher—did not have the book. Breit recounted in Random House's response that O'Neill's widow had "requested them to read the [sealed] play and publish it." The publisher stated its reluctance to do so but decided that, as executrix, Mrs. O'Neill was acting within her legal right. After reading the play, Random House "chose to relinquish [its] rights to the play" rather than abandon its commitment to the playwright (Harvey Breit, "In and Out of Books," *New York Times* [February 15, 1956], BR5).
12. A notable exception is Brenda Murphy's study of *Strange Interlude* (1928) as a reflection of the interbellum era in the twentieth century. See Brenda Murphy, "O'Neill's America: The Strange Interlude Between the Wars," in Michael Manheim, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 135–147.
13. Donald R. Kelley, "Intellectual History in a Global Age," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66.2 (2005): 160. Letter from Gustav Flaubert to Georges Sand (quoted in Kelley, "Intellectual History in a Global Age," 160).
14. William Seitz, "Monet and Abstract Painting," *College Art Journal* 16.1 (1956): 35.
15. Marvin Carlson, "Theatrical Performance: Illustration, Translation, Fulfillment, or Supplement?" *Theatre Journal* 35.1 (1985): 6.
16. Kelley, "Intellectual History in a Global Age," 158, 164, 165. Kelley also posits, felicitously, given the subject of this chapter, the notion of a "horizon structure of experience," which locates at its center the "historical subject . . . creation, or conceptualization—a pure phenomenological moment that becomes a target of historical examination. The surrounding space encompasses contexts of the subject of study—preconditions, possibilities, resonances, influences, interconnections, and effects involving other fields of cultural activity, states of disciplinary questions, and 'climate of opinion.' And beyond the edge of the circle we may imagine the transition from intellectual and cultural history to future ideals, and so to cultural criticism and action" (165).
17. Robert Brustein has suggested that there is "some possibility that O'Neill assumed his brother's identity when he appeared as the sneering, sardonic hero of the earlier plays" (Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to Modern Drama* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1964], 356n). Boulton very nearly

makes a similar point in her memoir when she recalls meeting James O'Neill Jr. for the first time. Her description of "the face that had helped [Jamie] make a success in *The Traveling Salesman* . . . gave exactly the idea of the traveling man, 'the drummer' " (18) offers a conceivable model for Hickey in *The Iceman Cometh*. Although neither Brustein nor Boulton make the particular connection between Jamie and Hickey, the Gelbs note that Hickey "contains elements of several other people, including O'Neill's brother" (285). Boulton's imagery, however, is especially arresting, even if it carries the filter of a forty-year-old memory.
18. Patrick J. Chura, " 'Vital Contact': Eugene O'Neill and the Working Class," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 49.4 (2003): 521.
19. "Who Is Eugene O'Neill?," *New York Times* (November 4, 1917), X7.
20. John Gassner, "The Nature of O'Neill's Achievement: A Summary and Appraisal," in *O'Neill: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 171.
21. Richard Lehan, "Focus on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: The Nowhere Hero," in David Madden, ed., *American Dreams, American Nightmares* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 106.
22. Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 125.
23. Bogard, *Contour in Time*, 126. This is an assertion somewhat at odds with Bogard spending several previous pages (119–123) describing O'Neill's supposed indebtedness to T. C. Murray's 1910 play *Birthright*, which O'Neill apparently saw during the Irish Players's 1911 visit to New York (Gelbs, *O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo*,172). Despite Lennox Robinson's 1924 claim, and those by subsequent others that *Beyond the Horizon* is "really an American peasant play" recalling "quite vividly at times Mr. T.C. Murray's *Birthright*," a close reading of the latter reveals a simplistic plot of sibling rivalry akin to that of Cain and Abel ((Lennox Robinson, "Mr. Eugene O'Neill," *Observer* [June 1, 1924]. n.p., rpt. as "*Beyond the Horizon* Versus *Gold*," in Horst Frenz and Susan Tuck, eds., *Eugene O'Neill's Critics: Voices From Abroad* [Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984], 13); T. C. Murray, *Birthright, Selected Plays of T. C. Murray*, ed. Richard Allen Cave, [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998], 27–57).
24. Bogard, *Contour in Time*, 127; O'Neill, "To Barrett H. Clark," in Bogard and Bryer, *Selected Letters*, 119.
25. O'Neill, "Strindberg and Our Theatre," *The Provincetown* (January 3, 1924), n.p., rpt. in Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher, eds., *O'Neill and His Plays: Four Decades of Criticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 108.
26. William Dunlap, *A History of the American Stage* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1832), 404.
27. Henry Austin Clapp, *Reminiscences of a Dramatic Critic* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902), 191.
28. Henry Arthur Jones, "The Cornerstones of Modern Drama," *New York Times* (November 4, 1906), X1.

29. Edith J. R. Isaacs, "The Very Hazy Past of Our Native Drama," *New York Times* (December 10, 1916), X7.
30. "Calls 'Highbrows' Drama's Enemies," *New York Times* (February 27, 1916), 17.
31. "Copeland Acts to Keep City Warm," *New York Times* (February 3, 1920), 21. The regulations were eased a little more than two weeks later ("Epidemic Schedule Ends," *New York Times* [February 17, 1920], 26).
32. "Changes in Opening and Closing Hours Ordered in City's Fight Against Influenza," *New York Times* (January 25, 1920), 1.
33. "Population in Urban and Rural Territory," *The Statistical History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 11.
34. "Gainful Workers," *The Statistical History of the United States*, 134. This is a 25 percent increase in the urban workforce over the previous decade.
35. "Klan is Established with Impressiveness," *Atlanta Constitution* (November 28, 1915), 1.
36. " 'Birth of a Nation' Coming to Atlanta," *Atlanta Constitution* (November 28, 1915), C13.
37. "Ku Klux to Seek Members in the North," *Washington Post* (November 29, 1920), 10.
38. "Persons Lynched," *The Statistical History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 422. Between 1916 and 1920 there were 275 lynchings of African Americans. The number for the previous five-year period was 269. Were it not for a concerted Southern effort to reverse African American migration to the cities of the industrial North during the war years, the number for 1916–1920 might well have been twenty or so persons more. In 1917, one of the biggest years of the exodus from the South, lynchings dropped from an annual average of approximately 54 to 38—the lowest annual total since records began in 1882. Despite that steep one-year decline, the five-year average still increased.
39. Charles Luther Fry, "The Negro in the United States: A Statistical Statement," *The Annals* 140 (1928): 31–33.
40. "Concerted Move to Stop Exodus of Georgia Negroes," *Atlanta Constitution* (November 23, 1916), 11.
41. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Passing of 'Jim Crow,' " *Independent* (July 14,1917), 53.
42. "Immigrants," *The Statistical History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 110.
43. Peter Roberts, *The New Immigration*, (New York: Macmillan, 1920), viii.
44. O'Neill, *The Straw, Complete Plays: 1913–1920* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 733.
45. "Building Airships of Aluminum," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (December 11, 1890), 9.
46. "Only a Yellow Balloon," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 26, 1891), 9.
47. Kenneth L. Roberts, *Why Europe Leaves Home* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1922), 11.
48. L. C. Speers, "Klan Shadow Falls on Nation's Politics," *New York Times* (November 18, 1923), XX3.
49. "Exclusion Law Is Scored," *New York Times* (May 27, 1924), 1.
50. James S. Metcalfe, "Drama: Gladness and Gloom," *Life* (February 19, 1920), 322.

51. O'Neill, *Beyond the Horizon*, in *Complete Plays: 1913–1920*, 642.
52. Edwin A. Engel, *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 18.
53. Robert C. Benchley, "A Scholarly Review of the Season," *Life* (June 17, 1920), 1132.
54. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," American Historical Association, Art Institute, Chicago (July 12, 1893).
55. O'Neill, *Beyond the Horizon*, 576; David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.
56. "Immigration," *The Statistical History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 110; and "Passenger Arrivals and Departures," 119.
57. John Henry Raleigh, *The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), 239–285.
58. C. W. E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama: 1900–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 50.
59. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.
60. Geoffrey Perrett, *America in the Twenties: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 31–32.