SOME INTERPRETAIONS OF DION ANTHONY'S EARLY EXPERIENCE IN *THE GREAT GOD BROWN*

By Hiroo Tagawa

Dion Anthony is a recurrent type of O'Neill hero-shy, lonely and misunderstood. He is unhappy in his relationship with his parents-with his father in particular-and with his wife. Because of unfulfilled love and a frustrated yearning for religious faith, he is forced into the state of a habitual drunkard, and seeks a solution in pagan naturalism. [1]

In the prologue of the play, Dion and Billy are both courting Margaret. Billy is a simple, apparently "adjusted" boy who wears no mask. Dion, however, is already conscious of the strife between the divided self in him. "His face is masked. While his real face is dark, spiritual, poetc, passionately supersensitive, helplessly unprotected in its child-like, religious faith in life, his mask bears the expression of mocking reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing and sensual young Pan." [2]

Dion once explains how he became a mask wearer.

> Listen! One day when I was four years old, a boy sneaked up behind when I was drawing a picutre in the sand. He coudn't draw and hit me with a stick and kicked out my picture and laughed when I cried. It wasn't what he'd done that made me cry, but him! I had loved and trusted him and suddenly the good God was disproved in his person and the evil and injustice of Man was born! Everyone called me cry-baby, so I became silent for life and designed a mask of the Bad Boy Pan in which to live and rebel against the other boy's God and pro-

tect myself from His cruelty. And that other boy, secretly he felt ashamed but he couldn't acknowledge it; so from that day he instinctively developed into the good boy, the good friend, the good man, William Brown![3]

This remark of Dion is so full of implication that many different interpretations can be made from various points of view:

1. Dion's early awareness of a Merciless God.
2. Dion's first ordeal as an artist.
3. Dion's first realization of his divided self.

O'Neill may claim that this type of analysis is a meaningless effort' because mystery - a meaning felt but not completely understood-was what he wanted to realize in *The Great God Brown.*[4]

But it may be worth while trying to find the meaning hidden underneath the mystery. So I would like to study Dion's remark from the three standpoints mentioned above, especially in relation to O'Neill's persona history.

Dion's Early Awareness of A Merciless God

At the sensitive age of four, Dion experienced the sudden shocking awareness that God is to be neither loved nor trusted. Dion's awareness of a merciless God may represent the current religious feeling of the people of those days. The rapid progress of industrial civilization widened the gap between the spiritual and material life of the people. The emphasis on materialistic values distrubed the spiritual tranquility of men and shook their religious faith.

Fritz Pappenheim wrote, "The individual, who until then had considered himself integrated into a universal order of God embracing his physical

and spiritual existence, found himself uprooted and banished (from that) which had sheltered him in the days of his unshaken certainty."[5] Christianity could not help people in their spiritual poverty. Edwin A. Engel summed up this betrayal of God in the following fashion. "Christianity not only betrays the devote and those who most require its comfort and protection; it becomes a compulsive obsession which distorts and destroys one's life."[6]

This episode of Dion's religious awareness also reflects O'Neill's own religious experience. O'Neill's revolt against God also began in his childhood. His concept of God was formed at a boarding school in New York founded by the Sisters of Charity. According to the Gelbs, Eugene did not receive his first Holy Communion until he was twelve, and by that time he was steeped in the Creed, the Commandments and the Sacraments. And yet, even though Catholicism was an integral part of his daily being, and though he was to feel himself pursued for the rest of his life by the "Hound of Heaven," the seed of rebellion against the rigid demands of the Church was already planted. His roommate was startled by a comment Eugene once made and never forgot it. "Religion is so cold," O'Neill said.[7] In this sense, Dion represents O'Neill's religious ordeal and his divided consciousness toward God. While the mask changes from Pan to Mephistopheles, and to Satan, his real face comes to be lighted by a spiritual calm and human kindness. While his outward reaction to God increases in bitterness, his inner self is constantly seeking for God. He is both attracted and repelled by the Gospels. Though Dion has avowed that he prefers Satyr, he is continually tempted by the saint. The gradual transmutation of Dion's face and mask in reverse from each other symbolizes O'Neill's spiritual pilgrimage, which is demonstrated in his plays. From his first

produced play, *Bound East for Cardiff*, to his last plays, *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Nights*, he seems to have been concerned with the same religious problem. Yank, in *Bound East for Cardiff*, on his death-bed, remembers his having killed a man after a quarrel in Cape Town, and he is afraid of the punisnment of God. Yank, who has never given ear to the preaching of the sky-pilots, feels fear of God at the moment of death. In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill makes a satirical comment on the rigid ethics of puritanism by describing a life of a greedy puritan farmer. O'Neill points out that the defects of puritanism are a result of its departure from the original creed. In spite of his harsh criticism, the play betrays O'Neill's deep belief in God. While he was writing in revolt, he was also proving the ineradicability of the religious feeling which he had acquired unconsciously as a spiritual inheritance. The problem of God is also the main theme of plays such as *Lazarus Laughed*, *Dynamo* and *Days Without End*. And in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, puritanism, which is symbolized by the white meeting house, haunts the Mannons all through the play, and Ezra Mannon, a puritanic protagonist, is killed by his paganish wife. At the end of *The Iceman Cometh*, a long forgotten faith returns to Larry, and he prays God for the peace of Hicky, and he no longer fears death. Did faith come back to O'Neill in his later years in a simple, pure form as it comes back to Larry? Dion's mask falls off at the moment of his death, and his Christian Martyr's face appears, but he has lost the intense faith which once was a necessary attribute of a heroic martyr, and he even kisses Brown's feet and pleads him weakly for the prayer. Dion dies without finishing his last prayer. Faith does not come back to Dion. Neither did it to O'Neill himself.

Dion's First Ordeal as an Artist

The name of Dion Anthony suggests Dionysus and St. Anthony. So the mask is used to bring out the divided conscionsness of the artist. While his real face represents the nature of St. Anthony, the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity, the mask symbolizes the nature of Dionysus and creative joy in life for life's sake. In this sense, Dion Anthony represents the predicament of the American creative artist. Edwin A. Engel explains the current conception of the artist's predicament by quoting Van Wyck Brook's remark on Mark Twain.

> Mark Twain was the personificacion of the artist destroyed by the Puritan, extraverted, acquisitive society in which he lived.. His unconscious desire was to be an artist, but this implied an assertion of individuality that was a sin in the eyes of his mother (who was a Calvinist) and a shame in the eyes of society... The eternal dilemma of every American writer is (exemplified). It was the dilemma which··· Mark Twain solved by becoming a humorist.[8]

If this is a predicament of the American artist, O'Neill must have shared it. In addition to this current conception, O'Neill had a personal experience which made him realize the artistic predicament symbolically. Eugene was to receive the Holy Communion when he was twelve years old. Just then his father's company was having a performance in New York City. So young O'Neill went to the theatre to see the play with three of his friends. The Sisters at the boarding school were startled by the theatre going of their students and the "wicked" boys were not allowed to receive Communion. O'Neill could not understand why he was punished so severely for going to see his father's prfomance. The little boy asked himself why the theatre was "an evil place" from the standpoint of the Sisters and why his father was called a villain only because he was an actor. [9]

But his father's world was itself repulsive to Eugene because of its conventionalism. His father had both a reputation and financial success. Eugene also felt repulsion to the world which his father acted in. He said, "My early experience with the theatre through my father made me revolt against it···As a boy I saw so much of the old, ranting, artificial, romantic stuff that I always had a sort of contempt of the theatre."[10] So he joined in the innovation movement of the American Theatre with his friends of the Provincetown Players. But as is suggested by the fact that Dion's picture in the sand was kicked out, O'Neill must have experienced some unpleasant counter-reactions from the traditional theatre world. Even the sympathetic audience found it difficult to understand his serious attempt to present the true aspect of human minds. Even his father (who was proud of his son's success in *Beyond the Horizon*) said, "It's all right, if that's what you want to do, but people come to the theatre to forget their troubles, not to be reminded of them. What are you trying to do-send them home to commit suicide?"[11] And Doris V. Falk generalized this father's feeling in her remark on the same play, "It was a play with a serious, true, significant message, appearing at a time when the stage was cluttered with trivialities and platitudes. But the very fact that it does illustrate a definite philosophical concept, that the concept is O'Neill's own and must be understood by the audience, and the dual nature of the concept itself, all help account for the neglect of *Beyond the Horizon* at the present time."[12]

O'Neill, urged by his artistic zeal to write serious plays, might have felt impatient with his lack of power in communicating his philosophical or emotional problems to the audience. Though he was doing far more than others could do, he might have felt ashamed of his inability to present

the universal problems of modern man. Thus, Margaret's remark on Dion's attitude toward his art may suggest O'Neill's feelings.

> He's painting wonderfully! But he's just like a child, he's so impractical. He doesn't try to have an exhibition anywhere or anything···He doesn't want anyone to look at his things, imagine! He keeps saying they're rotten when they are really too beautiful.[13]

But O'Neill, as a dramatist, had to make his work public though he was not satisfied with it. So he tried desperately to find a better way to express his problems. He made all sorts of experiments in using new dramatic techniques. But his too serious attempts made his plays more incomprehensible to the audience.

Dion' First Realization of his Divided Self

Billy Brown is Dion's divided self, in a sense. Just as Jamie Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and Andy Mayo in *Beyond the Horizon*, Billy is an antagonist who is hated and loved by a protagonist. This type of conflict between two chracters began in O'Neill's early one-act play, *Fog*. The characters are unnamed but labeled "the poet" and "the businessman". The poet is sensitive, idealistic, capable of suffering and sacrifice; the businessman is selfish, narrow, complacent, superficlal. With variations these two continue to struggle in O'Neill's plays and also in his mind throughout his life. These two characters appear also in *Marco's Millions*, *Dynamo* and *Days Without End*. And in *Long Day's Journey into Night* they unmask themselves as O'Neill himself and his brother Jamie. But in *The Great God Brown*, Dion's experience overlaps Billy's. Both love Margares; both patronize Cybel; both are architects, and both work in the same office. At the end of ACT II, Billy steals Dion's mask and wears

it, and becomes Dion himself. As Eugene M. Waith put it, "Eilly and Dion are complementary halves of one personality, for each in some way wishes to be the other."[14] At the end of the play, the protagonist and antagonist are fused into one, Dion Brown. This protagonist obviously stands for Jamie, his brother. And in this play, more than in any other play, O'Neill revealed his unconscious confusion about his identity; he often seemed to slip into the delusion that he was Jamie. Jamie died on November 8, 1923, just before O'Neill started writing this play. O'Neill wrote about his brother, "Booze got Jamie in the end. It was a shame. He and I were terribly close each other. He had never belonged. I hope like my 'Hairy Ape' he does now."[15] So O'Neill felt his brother as part of himself. Therefore he wanted to achieve the amalgamation of Jamie and himself in this play. This personal need urged him to the bewildering use of the "transfered mask." If he play's chief obscurity lies in the fact that in the latter scenes Brown impersonates both himself and Dion (who is already dead), this obscurity is caused by his attachment to his brother.

These are the problems which both Dion and the playwright shared in the early shocking experience of the sensitive boy.

If the *Great God Brown* should be called a failure because of its obscurity and complexity, the blame must go to the author's too greedy zeal to reflect his inner conflicts on this play. This play is a presentation of O'Neill's personal ordeal and, at the same time, this is the epitaph of the O'Neills, for he had lost his father, mother and only brother within the past four years, and when he wrote this play, he was still inwardly mouring for his family. and in this play, with greater insight and deeper

sensitivity than in any proceeding play, O'Neill examined his relationship not only with Jamie but also with Father and Mother as well. In this sense, as the Gelbs put it, *the Great God Brown* was a prelude to the Crucifixion of *Long Day's Journey Into Night.*[16]

Footnotes

1 I should confess that I am greatly indebted to Mr. Edwin A. Engel in writing this paper. His book *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* is the main source of the idea of the paper.

2 Eugene O'Neill, *The Great God Brown,* compiled in *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill* (New York, 1954), p. 310.

3 O'Neill, p. 346.

4 Eugene O'Neill, "A letter to New York Evening Post," (February 13, 1926).

5 Fritz Pappenheim, *The Alienation of Modern Man* (New York, 1959), p. 37.

6 Edwin A. Engel, *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953) p. 157.

7 Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York, 1962), p. 68.

8 Engel, p. 154.

9 Croswell Bowen, *The Curse of the Misbegotten* (NewYork, 1959), p. 18.

10 A. Gelb, p. 64.

11 Bowen, p. 114.

12 Doris V. Falk, *Eugene O'Neill and The Tragic Tension* (New Jersey, 1958), p. 42.

13 O'Neill, *The Great God Brown,* p. 327.

14 Eugene M. Waith, "Eugene O'Neill: An Exercise in Unmasking" in *O'Neill,* ed. by John Gassner (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1964) p. 37.

15 A. Gelb, p. 533.

16 A. Gelb, p. 579.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1 Primary source

O'Neill, Eugene, *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill*. New York, Random House, 1954.

2 Secondary source

Bowen, Croswell. *The Course of the Misbegotten*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959.

Engel, Edwin A. *The Haunted Heroes of Eugene O'Neill*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1953.

Falk, Doris V. *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension*, New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers University Press, 1958.

Gassner, John, editor. *O'Neill*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1964.

Gelb, Arthur and Barbara, *O'Neill*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962.

Pappenheim, Fritz. *The Alienation of Modern Man*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959.