

Eugene O’Neill and Ireland

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For James Gaul

Seaman, son and grandson of sailors, proud son of Wexford

I’m presenting these remarks not only on my own behalf but on behalf of colleagues associated with the “Performing the Region” theatre studies project at the School of Humanities at Waterford Institute of Technology.¹ That project looks to understand the relationship between the theatre that goes on in a region and that region’s identity, and the group has work going on, for instance, on the Red Kettle Theatre Group (the Waterford-based theatre group that flourished until recently from the 1980s), work on the playwright Jim Nolan, and a new project on the work of female playwrights from the region like Una Troy and Teresa Deevey. What’s clear to the group is that there is a very strong relationship between not only a country but a *region* and the drama (and perhaps also the literature) that is written by the people of that region. In some ways, the group contends, the theatre produced in a particular place is a way of declaring where you’re from and at the same time a means of understanding where you are from—and in this way is a way of “performing” the identity of that place. This is the immediate context within which are set these remarks about Eugene O’Neill.

What I want to play out in these remarks is something of the meaning of Ireland *for* Eugene O’Neill and the meaning of Ireland *in* his work. How did Ireland manifest itself in the plays of Eugene O’Neill, and why did it appear in *that* way rather than any other? We know he never visited Ireland, but I will contend that nonetheless Ireland was an important presence. The meaning of that presence, its form: this is what I want to explore in my comments.

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¹ The members of the Performing the Region Theatre Studies group at Waterford Institute of Technology are: Dr Richard Hayes, Dr Una Kealy, Kate McCarthy, Elizabeth Howard.

I want to begin, however, with the idea of family and inheritance. We're familiar with all the clichés about the "sins of the father ..." and so on, the idea that in some ways—that may be resisted, that may be accepted—families pass on their gifts and their weaknesses, their sorrow and their fear from generation to generation. When we talk about a family's roots, we mean the ways in which a family's history stretches back into the past, linking the current generation—the flowering plant—to nourishment, or otherwise, from the generations that form the soil, as it were, beneath our feet. The curmudgeonly British poet Philip Larkin puts it very succinctly in his poem, "This Be the Verse". "They fuck you up, your mam and dad," he says, "They may not mean to, but they do./They fill you with the faults they had/And add some extra, just for you." The poem concludes:

Man hands on misery to man.
It deepens like a coastal shelf.
Get out as early as you can,
And don't have any kids yourself.²

I want to dwell on the idea that somehow—according to Larkin—misery is passed from generation to generation in a particularly relentless way, so that "it deepens like a coastal shelf". I want to think a little about the notion of "man handing on misery to man" in connection with Eugene O'Neill as well as to emphasise the image drawn from the sea a little—it is important in thinking about Eugene O'Neill, that image drawn from the sea; rather than think about "roots", which is an image to do with the land, in thinking about O'Neill we can think about this deepening ocean.

We know that Eugene O'Neill was the first serious American playwright, the Shakespeare of the American theatre as it were. This is not to say that there were not plays written in American before O'Neill, nor that there were no other important playwrights before him—of course there were. O'Neill's career manifests, however, a number of things that had not been present before on the American stage. His emergence as a playwright coincides with the emergence of America as a more unified nation, I think, in the early years of the twentieth century, and also with America as a serious cultural force on the world stage—his career coincides with the development of the movie industry, for instance, one of the major forces of American cultural unity and dissemination (and hegemony) world-wide. So, in some way, O'Neill is the first genuinely *American* playwright insofar as the notion of America, at least as a genuine world culture, really had only begun to gain currency in the few decades before he came along. More than this, O'Neill assembled a considerable volume of work—the Library of American edition of his plays, for instance, is over three volumes, more than 60 plays, and that's not even complete. He was not afraid to be experimental and radical and innovative: no-one before him for instance had the bravery to write a play like *Strange Interlude*, which appeared in 1928—it is effectively a novel in the form of a play, has nine acts and, even in edited form, used to take from 5:30 to 11 o'clock to perform with an 80 minute break for dinner in between. No-one else could have written a play like *Marco Millions*, another monster—it had eight acts in the original version—where the first scene is set in Venice, the second in Syria, the fourth in India, the seventh in a throne room in Khubla Khan's palace. Or a play like *Lazarus Laughed*, where everyone in the play is wearing a mask according to a scheme of O'Neill's devising. And of course no-one before him had written a play as self-lacerating as *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the autobiographical play that is his crowning achievement and that was produced, at his own request, only after his death. We'll come

² Philip Larkin, "This Be the Verse", in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber/The Marvell Press, 1988), p.180.

back to that play later. O'Neill won the Pulitzer Prize four times (for *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920, for *Anna Christie* in 1922, for *Strange Interlude* in 1928 and for *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1957) and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936.

So, O'Neill's presence within the landscape of American theatre and literature is significant and substantial—and arguably unrivalled since. Less well known, at least to people outside this part of Ireland, is that this Shakespeare of the American theatre traces his roots back to Rosbercon, a few miles away from this town, and that the O'Neill story is inextricably linked with New Ross, County Wexford. O'Neill's story rivals John F Kennedy's in fact in this respect—both went on to have an enormous influence on America and American culture and history, though there is one great difference: O'Neill never came back to Wexford, and Ireland, as Kennedy did.

Let me rehearse something of the story of the O'Neill family. A lot has changed in the last 150 years, but you can still imagine the ragged family coming down from Rosbercon in the 1850s with their little entourage of children and their few possessions to what was then a busy trading port, there to board a ship called the "India". Edmond O'Neill, the father, has his wife and five children with him when they pitched up on the quayside below, bound for America, in answer to the cannon that used to sound to summon passengers and advise that it was time to embark. Amongst the children was James O'Neill, who was about ten at the time—he was Eugene's father. They boarded the "India", bound for Buffalo, with I expect both a sense of hope and foreboding.

I imagine the journey across the Atlantic for the young boy as being at once terrifying and exhilarating. It is impossible now for us to imagine such voyages, though we have some first-hand accounts of the journeys across on these emigrant ships similar to the "India":

When I came on deck this morning I found that we were sailing upon the bosom of the broad Atlantic, no object being visible to relieve the vast expanse of water and sky, except the glorious sun and as I turned my eyes from the survey of the distant horizon and fixed them upon the little bark that wafted us, a sensation akin to that of the 'Ancient Mariner' possessed my mind.

Alone, alone, all, all alone/ Alone on a wide, wide sea.³

So wrote Robert Whyte in 1847 in his *Journey of an Irish Coffin Ship*. We know that the ships out of New Ross tended *not* to be the "coffin" ships often referred to in Famine accounts; nonetheless, the experience of the journey, its wonders and terrors, would have been shared by all. For instance, Whyte writes of sharks following the boat and Portugese-men-of-war being sighted, of the sickness of the passengers and the efforts of the first-class ticket-holders to tend to them, of "gliding through a sea of liquid fire", so luminous is the phosphorescence. In July 1847 he writes:

We were enveloped in a dense fog and had a horn sounding constantly. [...]The gloom spread around by the impenetrable fog was heightened by the dismal tone of the foghorn, between each sound of which might be heard the cries and ravings of the delirious patients and occasionally the tolling of a bell, warning us of the

³ Robert Whyte, *The Journey of an Irish Coffin Ship, 1847* [1848] (Cork: Mercier Press, 1994), p.19.

vicinity of some fishing-boat, numbers of which were scattered over the banks.⁴

Whyte records the arrival of the ship—the “Ajax”, which sailed from Dublin to Gross Ille—in the mouth of the St Lawrence river on 18 July 1847:

I was enchanted with the extraordinary beauty of the scenery I beheld this morning when I came on deck. The early beams of the sun played upon the placid surface of the river, here 40 miles wide, the banks on either hand being moderately elevated and covered with firs. [...] An unbroken stillness reigned around as if nature were at rest after the storm of the previous day and our brig lay almost motionless upon the water. I occupied myself again and again noting, so as to impress upon my mind, the peerless beauty I am unable to portray.⁵

One can imagine the impression a voyage such as this had on the mind of ten year old James O’Neill: the misery of the voyage, coupled with the spectacular scenes he witnessed, the monotony of the food, the toilet conditions—and the arrival in the New World. Particularly harrowing, of course, were any events the afflicted children. You can imagine James’s reactions to the following type of scene, recorded by Whyte (25 June 1847):

A little child who was playing with its companions, suddenly fell down and for some time was sunk in a death like torpor from which, when she awoke, she commenced to scream violently and writhed in convulsive agony. A poor woman, who was warming a drink at the fire for her husband, also dropped down quite senseless and was borne to her berth. [...] the first symptom [of their disease] was generally a reeling in the head, followed by swelling pain, as if the head were going to burst. Next came excruciating pains in the bones and then swelling of the limbs commencing with the feet, in some cases ascending the body and again descending before it reached the head, stopping at the throat. The period of each stage varied in different patients, some of whom were covered with yellow, watery pimples and others with red and purple spots that turned into putrid sores.⁶

It is interesting to compare these accounts to some other accounts of crossing the ocean to a new life:

The boy next to me fell to the floor and for a moment I didn’t know if he had fainted or was dead – then I saw that he was covering his eyes so he didn’t have to see the waves any more. A pregnant woman vomited and started screaming. Below deck, people were shouting that they couldn’t breathe, so the men in charge of the boat went down and started beating them.⁷

⁴ Ibid., p.38.

⁵ Ibid., p.50.

⁶ Ibid., pp.34-5.

⁷ “I was a Lampedusa refugee. Here’s my story of fleeing Libya – and surviving.” *The Guardian*, 15 April 2015.

Why do people put up with this on such voyages? We know the hope of a new life drove many people to board the ships and endure the suffering of the journey. Here is how one emigrant described the feeling on arrival:

I didn't know where my fellow travellers were heading, but I knew one thing: my dream of making it to [a new world], no matter the cost and risk involved, had been achieved. It was worth it.⁸

These last two quotations are from more recent accounts of emigration, in this case from Syria to Europe on our generation's "coffin ships".

I've no doubt James O'Neill carried that journey with him all his life; Edward Shaughnessy suggests that "James always refused to describe the trans-Atlantic crossing with his parents and siblings; he claimed (no doubt, with justification) that it was too terrible to speak about."⁹ Not long after the family got themselves settled in America, his father, Edmond, deserted the family and made his way back to Ireland and to his death. This is recounted in *Long Day's Journey into Night* on several occasions. The play renames O'Neill's family as the Tyrone family, the characters standing in for his own parents are Mary and James Tyrone. At one point, Mary tries to justify her husband's behaviour to her son, Edmund (the recycling of family names of course is significant):

Your father is a strange man, Edmund. It took many years before I understood him. You must try to understand and forgive him, too, and not feel contempt because he's close-fisted. His father deserted his mother and their six children a year or so after they came to America. He told them he had a premonition he would die soon, and he was homesick for Ireland, and wanted to go back there to die. So he went and he did die. He must have been a peculiar man, too.¹⁰

Later on, Tyrone tells the story himself:

When I was ten my father deserted my mother and went back to Ireland to die. Which he did soon enough, and deserved to, and I hope he's roasting in hell. He mistook rat poison for flour, or sugar, or something. There was gossip it wasn't a mistake but that's a lie.¹¹

It would seem to be the case that Edmond O'Neill did make his way back to New Ross and that he was poisoned, accidentally or on purpose, and died here. I suppose he is buried in a graveyard somewhere near.¹²

Back in America, the family struggled to make ends meet. Two of the older brothers left (one was killed in the Civil War). The burden fell on a younger son, James, to become the mainstay of the family. Again, the story is told in *Long Day's Journey into Night*:

⁸ "How I was smuggled into Europe." CNN World, 23 April 2015. (<http://edition.cnn.com/>).

⁹ See Edward Shaughnessy, "Ella, James and Jamie O'Neill: 'My Name is Might-have-been'", in the *Eugene O'Neill Review* (1991), published online at http://www.eoneill.com/library/on/shaughnessy/review91f_3.htm.

¹⁰ Eugene O'Neill, *Long Day's Journey into Night* [1956] in *Complete Plays, 1932-1943* (New York: Library of America, 1988), pp.786-7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.807.

¹² Mary Mallet gives a useful, brief account of the O'Neill family history, including of this incident, in "O'Neill Family Genealogy—Frank A Knuckl's Letter" in the *Eugene O'Neill Newsletter*, published electronically at <http://www.eoneill.com/library/essays/mallett.htm>.

My mother was left, a stranger in a strange land, with four small children, me and a sister a little older and two younger than me. My two older brothers had moved to other parts. They couldn't help. They were hard put to it to keep themselves alive. There was no damned romance in poverty. Twice we were evicted from the miserable hovel we called home, my mother's few sticks of furniture thrown out in the street, and my mother and sisters crying. I cried, too, though I tried hard not to, because I was the man of the family. At ten years old!¹³

Long Day's Journey into Night is, as I've said, a self-lacerating autobiographical play. It was a play, said O'Neill, "written in tears and blood", a play, in his own words again, that "enabled me to face my dead".¹⁴ The portrait of his father that emerges here, in the shape of James Tyrone, is not sympathetic but we know it is accurate, at least insofar as the detail of his life in the US after the father left the family is concerned.

James drifted (in his own words) into the theatre, a fondness for attending "the playhouse" as it was known leading him to appear in a walk-on part in the melodrama, *The Coleen Bawn*, in Cincinnati in October 1867. This was to be the beginning of a career in the theatre. Within a few years he was playing in productions of Shakespeare, down in Chicago; his Iago in *Othello* garnered good critical attention, but his big role had yet to come. This came in 1883 in the form of an offer to play the lead in an adaptation of the Dumas novel, *The Count of Monte Christo*. Arthur and Barbara Gelb, biographers of Eugene, write the following about James's first performance in the role of Edward Dantes (a promising merchant sailor in the story):

It was a significant night in the history of the American theatre—not so much because it launched James on a new phase of his career but because its effect on the career and personality of the actor colored the life and helped to foster the strange genius of his son, Eugene. *The Count of Monte Christo*, which was to bring James the popularity and wealth for which he had yearned, simultaneously put a strict limitation on his career. It became a trap from which he never escaped and into which Eugene O'Neill was born.¹⁵

It was a trap because, so successful was James O'Neill in the role, that he became typecast. He ended up playing the role over six thousand times and earned \$800,000 for doing so over the following quarter of a century—he was extremely famous in his day, but always, and only, in association with that role. He could never escape it, and it embittered him.

But it did create the environment where someone like Eugene O'Neill could flourish and there is no doubt that his interest in the theatre derives from his father's career. In one sense, his future was prescribed for him: he followed his father's profession, or at least followed him into the theatre business. In other ways, he sought to rebel against his father—writing experimental plays rather than melodramatic ones, like *Monte Christo*. Intriguingly, in 1920 the opportunity was presented to

¹³ Op cit., p.807.

¹⁴ These phrases appear in O'Neill dedication of the play to his wife Carlotta. See op cit., p.714.

¹⁵ Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p.48.

the now successful O'Neill to write a new version of the Dumas novel. "I have," he said, "a sort of grudge against that play" and went on:

I suppose if one accepts the song and dance complete of the psychoanalysts, it is perfectly natural that having been brought up around the old conventional theatre, and having identified it with my father, I should rebel and go in a new direction.¹⁶

Certainly whether he went along with it or reacted against it, the fact that his family life was saturated in the practice of theatre meant in ways Eugene O'Neill was fated to end up where he did.

This story of the O'Neill family, as I've indicated already, forms the backdrop to *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the story of a family at war with itself really—there are no two characters in this four-person play who can be accused of "getting along". Part of their complaints about one another is the refusal of people to let go of the mistakes of the past and the events of the past—talk is all the time of blame and of "ancient history". So, Jamie, the younger son, complains to his father about having been forced into acting:

JAMIE: I never wanted to be an actor. You forced me on the stage.

TYRONE: That's a lie! You made no effort to find anything else to do. [...] You'd have been content to sit back like a lazy lunk and sponge on me for the rest of your life! After all the money I wasted on your education, and all you did was get fired in disgrace from every college you went to.

JAMIE: Oh, for God's sake, don't drag up that ancient history.¹⁷

In some ways this is the theme of the play: the ways in which "ancient history", the mistakes and sins of the past, come back to haunt you. There is talk at one point in the play of a curse, particularly directed at Mary Tyrone, the drug-addicted mother in the play who struggles to cope with the loss of a child years before and the sickness afflicting Edmond who has TB—she is terrified he will be taken from her also. Eugene O'Neill's mother too was a morphine addict; she attempted to kill herself (as he did) on at least one occasion. We recall Tyrone's vehement reaction in *Long Day's Journey into Night* when he comments on his own father's death by poison: "There was gossip it wasn't by mistake but that's a lie. No one in my family ever ...", to which Edmund replies, "My bet is, it wasn't by mistake."¹⁸

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Herman Melville's great novel, *Moby-Dick*, one of the world's great books (published in 1851), begins as follows:

¹⁶ See *ibid*, pp.451ff.

¹⁷ *Op cit.*, pp.730-1.

¹⁸ *Op cit.*, p.807.

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, sometime or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.¹⁹

At one crucial time in his life, as he turned 21, Eugene O'Neill set off to sea. He set off first of all as part of a plan by his father to disrupt a serious romance Eugene was engaged in—in fact, his first marriage; his father organised his heading off to prospect for gold in Honduras. Then, in 1910, he sailed on a Norwegian trade vessel called *Charles Racine* from Boston to Buenos Aires. From there, in 1911, he sailed on the British freighter *Ikala* to New York and then, as an ordinary seaman, on the liner *New York* to Southampton; he returned a month later on the ship called the *Philadelphia*. There is no doubt that his days as a sailor were amongst the most important in his life. He submitted a poem called “Ballad of the Seamy Side” to a local newspaper in New London, Connecticut. Part of it reads as follows:

What is the lure of the life you sing?
 Let us consider the seamy side:
 The fo'c'stle bunks and the bed bugs' sting,
 The food that no stomach can abide,
 The crawling “sea horse” flung overside
 And the biscuits hard as a cannon ball;
 What fascination can such things hide?
 “They're part of the game and I loved it all”

[...]

“I grant you the food is passing bad,
 And the labour great, and the wages small,
 That the ways of a sailor on shore are mad
 But they're part of the game and I loved it all.”²⁰

His experiences at sea inform many of his plays, many of them drawing directly on his own experience. He has always, though, a sailor's respect for and wariness of the sea, as comes across in references at the end of his play, *Anna Christie*, to the ways in which the sea can trick you: “it's

¹⁹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* [1851] (New York/London: Norton, 1967), p.12.

²⁰ The poem in full is in Gelb and Gelb, pp.168-9.

funny,” says the character Chris to another man, Matt, “it’s funny vay ole davil sea do her vorst dirty tricks, yes”. That play ends, “fog, fog, fog, all bloody time. You can’t see where you vas going, no. Only dat ole davil sea—she knows!” (*From the harbour comes the muffled, mournful wail of steamers’ whistles.*)²¹ This image is repeated throughout his work, including in *Long Day’s Journey into Night* where the lighthouse light sweeps the windows and the foghorn sounds mournfully in the distance.

Eugene O’Neill came closest during these years to his family in Ireland: the ship *New York* moored off Cobh but the men were not allowed ashore. Do we imagine him looking longingly to shore from the boat? Or did he care about Ireland? Was his rejection of his father also a rejection of his father’s homeland, or was his relationship with Ireland more complex than this?

Irish characters appear frequently in his plays, particularly in the plays set at sea where they are frequently part of the raggle-taggle band of sailors on various merchant ships. James’s Irishness is emphasised in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, as is the Irishness of some of the characters in *The Iceman Cometh*: Larry Slade has a “gaunt Irish face with a big nose”; Pat McGloin is a former policeman; and we also have Hickey and other characters with some Irish ancestry.²² In some ways, O’Neill had to present the Irish in his plays; the America he depicted was the so-called “melting pot” and he had to present characters from all nations and none whenever he presented it. He is not shy of presenting Irish characters entirely as stereotypes. So, Carmody, a character in *The Straw* (a play from 1919), says things like “Close the door, ye little divil! There’s a freezin’ draught comin’ in. [...] I’d not have sent for this bucko if Eileen didn’t scare me by faintin’.”²³ Or Driscoll, in the early play *Bound East for Cardiff*, says things like, “Tis lucky for both av ye ye escaped; for the quane av the cannibal isles wad ‘a died av the belly ache the day afther Christmas, divil a doubt av ut!”²⁴

Of greater importance to O’Neill were his experiences of Irish theatre. In November 1911 he went to see a series of plays from the touring Abbey Theatre, plays by Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory, and others—plays like Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, for instance. The experience was instrumental: “It was seeing the Irish players,” he said later, “that gave me a glimpse of my opportunity [because] they demonstrated the possibilities of naturalistic acting better than any other company.”²⁵ In a letter he wrote later (1926), it was “the work of the Irish players on their first trip over here [... that] first opened my eyes to the existence of a real theatre as opposed to the unreal—and to me then hateful—theatre of my father, in whose atmosphere I had been brought up.”²⁶ A particularly important play for O’Neill was the play *Birchright* by Irish playwright TC Murray; he recycled the play in his first great success, *Beyond the Horizon*.

It is interesting to note that when he was talking about the genesis of *Beyond the Horizon* O’Neill traced it back to an encounter at sea:

I think the real life experience from which the idea of *Beyond the Horizon* sprang was this: On the British tramp steamer on which I made a voyage as an ordinary seaman . . . there was a Norwegian A.B. and we became quite

²¹ Eugene O’Neill, *Complete Plays, 1913-1920* (New York: Library of America, 1988), pp.1026, 1027.

²² See *Complete Plays, 1932-1943*, pp.566ff.

²³ *Complete Plays, 1913-1920*, p.718.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.188.

²⁵ Quoted in Gelb and Gelb, p.172.

²⁶ Quoted in Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: the plays of Eugene O’Neill* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.119.

good friends. The great sorrow and mistake of his life, he used to grumble, was that as a boy he had left the small paternal farm to run away to sea. He had been at sea twenty years and had never gone home once in that time. I don't imagine he had written home or received a letter from there in years.

He was a bred-in-the-bone child of the sea if there ever was one. With his feet on the plunging deck, he was planted like a natural growth in what was "good clean earth" to him. If ever man was in perfect harmony with his environment, a real part of it, this Norwegian was.

Yet he cursed the sea and the life it had led him—affectionately. He loved to hold forth on what a fool he had been to leave the farm. There was the life for you, he used to tell the grumblers in the fo'c'stle. A man on his own farm was his own boss. He didn't have to eat rotten grub, and battle bedbugs, and risk his life in storms on a rotten old "Limejuice" tramp. He didn't have to wait for the end of a long voyage for a pay day and a good drunk.²⁷

This Norweigan sailor, O'Neill explained, was the seed for Robert Mayo, the central character in *Beyond the Horizon*.

O'Neill described the character of Robert Mayo as a development of the Norwegian sailor and in a manner that suggests he was a sketch of the playwright himself: Mayo is "a man who would have my Norwegian's inborn cravings for the sea's unrest, only in him it would be conscious, too conscious, intellectually diluted into a vague intangible romantic wanderlust. His powers of resistance, both moral and physical, would also probably be correspondingly watered. He would throw away his instinctive dream and accept the thralldom of the farm for—why, for almost any nice little poetical craving". The character "touched by poetry" is very familiar in O'Neill's plays and is effectively a self-portrait; in Robert Mayo, and in so many other of his characters, O'Neill engaged in what one of his most important critics, Travis Bogard, calls the exploration of his own truth.²⁸

Andrew Mayo, Robert's brother, is described by Robert early on in *Beyond the Horizon* as being a man of the soil, and therefore a man entirely the opposite of himself:

You're a Mayo through and through. You're wedded to the soil. You're as much a product of it as an ear of corn is, or a tree. Father is the same. This farm is his life-work, and he's happy in knowing that another Mayo, inspired by the same love, will take up the work where he leaves off. I can understand your attitude, and Pa's; and I think it's wonderful and sincere. But I—well, I'm not made that way.²⁹

Robert is motivated by other things:

ROBERT: (*Pointing to the horizon—dreamily.*) Supposing I was to tell you that it's just Beauty 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've read, the need of the freedom of

²⁷ Quoted in Bogard, p.123.

²⁸ See Bogard, pp.124-5.

²⁹ Eugene O'Neill, *Complete Plays 1913-1920*, p.576.

great wide spaces, the joy of wandering on and on—in quest of the secret which is hidden just over there, beyond the horizon? Suppose I told you that was the one and only reason for my going?

ANDREW: I should say you were nutty.³⁰

Later on he describes his wanderlust; in his sickness, and despite it, he was always drawn to the sea:

Those were the only happy moments of my life then, dreaming there at the window. I liked to be all alone—those times. I got to know all the different kinds of sunsets by heart—the clear ones and the cloudy ones, and all the color schemes of their countless variations—although I could hardly name more than three or four colors correctly. And all those sunsets took place over there—(*He points*) beyond the horizon. So gradually I came to believe that all the wonders of the world happened on the other side of those hills. There was the home of the good fairies who performed beautiful miracles. (*He smiles.*) I believed in fairies then, although I suppose I ought to have been ashamed of it from a boy's standpoint.³¹

It is interesting that he uses the language of sentimental Ireland in talking about his longing. As he lies dying, he speaks of the future to his beloved, Ruth:

Do you know Ruth, what I've been dreaming back there in the dark? (*With a short laugh.*) It may sound silly of me but—I was planning our future when I get well. (*He looks at her with appealing eyes as if afraid she will sneer at him. Her expression does not change. She stares at the stove. His voice takes on a note of eagerness.*) After all, why shouldn't we have a future? We're young yet. If we can only shake off the curse of this farm! It's the farm that's ruined our lives, damn it! And now that Andy's coming back—I'm going to sink my foolish pride, Ruth! I'll borrow the money from him to give us a good start in the city. We'll go where people live instead of stagnating, and start all over again. (*Confidently.*) I won't be the failure there that I've been here, Ruth. You won't need to be ashamed of me there. I'll prove to you the reading I've done can be put to some use. (*Vaguely.*) I'll write, or something of that sort. I've always wanted to write.³²

We have here a sickly writer, drawn by poetry, a man of the land (according to his family) with a lust for what lies “beyond the horizon”, across the sea, somewhere identified as home. One cannot help but think of this as a self-portrait.

³⁰ Ibid., p.577.

³¹ Ibid., p.581.

³² Ibid., p.635.

It is interesting to me, in connection with our theme—O'Neill and Ireland—that it is this kind of character that holds his attention, this character plagued by wanderlust and poetic imaginings of distant lands. Particularly interesting is this idea of the Norwegian who gave up the farm for the sea at the heart of the character of Robert Mayo. I imagine James O'Neill, Eugene's father, having something to say about this kind of character. Was Eugene unconsciously revisiting his own family trauma, and his own roots, in focussing his vision on this character who had lost the land and taken off across the sea? And was he also bringing into his own consciousness not just his own experiences of life on the sea for the few years he worked there but also his father's memory of the journey from Ireland, deepening their mutual miseries "like a coastal shelf"? And was he, in dreaming of a land "beyond the horizon", unconsciously engaging in an act of imaginative repossession of the land he lost when his family emigrated from Rosbercon on the "India" out of New Ross? Do we see the emigrant experience finding its way into the work of America's greatest playwright in this manner?

It is hard to say. We can say this though. Amongst O'Neill's early plays are a series of plays set aboard a merchant ship called the "Glencairn"—the series is made up of four one-act plays and the series was filmed as *The Long Voyage Home* by John Ford in the 1940s (with John Wayne in the lead). One of the plays in the series is actually called "The Long Voyage Home" and has the sailors in London, in a bar, talking amongst themselves, cribbing about their lives. An Irishman is amongst them, Driscoll, along with a Norwegian (Olson) and an Englishman (Cocky). The men talk about their families. Interesting that the Norwegian here is a man longing to return to his farm:

JOE—(*bringing the drinks—looks at Olson*) An' you, matey?

OLSON—(*shaking his head*) Noting dis time, thank you.

COCKY—(*mockingly*) A-saivin' of 'is money, 'e is! Goin' back to 'ome an' mother. Goin' to buy a bloomin' farm an' punch the blarsted dirt, that's wot 'e is! (*spitting disgustedly*) There's a funny bird of a sailor man for yet, Gawd blimey!

OLSON—(*wearing the same good-natured grin*) Yust what I like, Cocky. I wus on farm long time when I wus kid.

DRISCOLL—Lave him alone, ye bloody insect! 'Tis a foine sight to see a man wid some sense in his head instead av a damn fool the loike av us. I only wisht I'd a mother alive to call me own. I'd not be dhrunk in this divil's hole this minute, maybe.

COCKY—(*commencing to weep dolorously*) Ow, down't talk, Disc! I can't bear to 'ear you. I ain't never 'ad no mother, I ain't—

DRISCOLL—Shut up, ye ape, an' don't be makin' that squealin'. If ye cud see your ugly face, wid the big red nose av ye all screwed up in a knot, ye'd never shed a tear the rist av your loife.

At which point, Driscoll "roars into song". And what is the song he sings?

We ar-re the byes av We-e-exford who fought wid hearrt an' hand!³³

Of all the songs he could have sung, of all those available to him, he chose this one. I cannot help but think it a subtle, unconscious reference to New Ross and his very distant ancestral past where a farm was lost to his family and himself and the “roots” that might have given his life stability were severed forever.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.513-4.