

*Edward Mullaly*

## O'NEILL AND THE PERFECT PATTERN

Bartlett Clark records the following conversation with Eugene O'Neill:

"I did a lot of reading about [Robespierre], in English—I don't read French easily. Robespierre sums it all up: the idealist at first, the righteous man; he gets power; he uses it; he misuses it; tragedy. The perfect pattern, you see."

"Are you going to write a play about him?"

"Well, I was thinking about it for a time."<sup>1</sup>

That was in late 1946, a time when *A Moon for the Misbegotten* was almost finished and O'Neill was working on *A Touch of the Poet*, the only play in his projected cycle of "A Tale of Possessors Self-dispossessed" which he would ever complete. The idea of a cycle of plays tracing not simply the tragedy of an individual, but rather the "drama of American possessiveness and materialism" was, by this time, at least ten years old and might have been much further advanced had the playwright not been haunted by both physical sickness and the need "to face my dead at last". O'Neill did begin this theme of America's spiritual disintegration in *A Touch of the Poet* with the close similarity, pointed out by Mordecai Marcus, between Cornelius Melody and Thoreau's neighbor Hugh Quoil.<sup>2</sup> Even more to the point, there is an early discernible relationship between the young Simon Harford, convalescing in the environs of Melody's tavern, and Thoreau himself. And with the marriage between Sara and Simon, O'Neill sets up the conflict between young idealism and Sara's design for all the happiness that money can buy.

The playwright joins *A Touch of the Poet* to *More Stately Mansions* by four strong links. The first is the marriage which will take place, ("Ye seduced him", says the righteous Con Melody, "and ye'll make an honest gentleman av him if I have to march ye both by the scruff av the neck to the nearest church".) The second link is Sara, whose intense love of Simon is coupled with her desire

for a grand mansion complete with coach and footmen. Third, Deborah comes into her own in *More Stately Mansions* as an otherworldly, yet possessive, figure. And lastly, Simon, as possessor not yet self-dispossessed, continues into the new play as a Thoreauvean figure who will pass through his own Jeffersonian compromise to become the epitome of American materialism.

O'Neill's fear for the uncompleted script of *More Stately Mansions* is clear both from a note on the flyleaf of the manuscript which said that the draft was to be destroyed, and his comment to his wife just months before his death when he was burning his various unfinished manuscripts. "It isn't that I don't trust you, Carlotta, but you might drop dead or get run over and I don't want anybody else working on these plays".<sup>3</sup> But while there is no certainty that the published edition of the text, containing about half the original manuscript, is as O'Neill would have wanted it, the main flow of the action remains intact, and it is this process of self-dispossession that exemplifies O'Neill's "perfect pattern".

## I

*More Stately Mansions* opens four years after *A Touch of the Poet*. The scene is Simon's now-abandoned cabin "on a small lake near a Massachusetts village", a site which, in view of the preceding play, might be taken for Walden Pond—especially since Melody's tavern, close to the lake, is "only a few miles from Boston". With its crumbling mortar, hanging moss, and boarded windows, the cabin simply shows the effect of its owner's neglect. But to anyone aware of the significance formerly placed in the rough shack it becomes obvious that Simon has lost interest in the refuge where he once planned to "do all the work, and support himself simply, and feel one with Nature, and think great thoughts about what life means, and write a book about how the world can be changed so people won't be greedy to own money and land and get the best of each other but will be content with little and live in peace and freedom together, and it will be like heaven on earth". O'Neill pushes his symbolism further by having Sara enter dressed in a "loose dress of mourning black" in contrast to Deborah, who enters dressed "entirely in white". Thus even before the dialogue begins, the black ugliness of a dark reality is contrasted with the white dream of an escapist past, and both are set against the symbolic cabin where Simon had once planned to integrate the dream with the reality to make a better world.

In this opening scene Simon is still somewhat the idealist. He defends himself against Deborah's charges that he has his father's "successful-merchant

look" and that his cabin is now the "corpse of a dream", by arguing that he has not abandoned his socialistic "new society" and still plans to complete his book and to create a world in which man can be protected "from his stupid possessive instincts until he can be educated to outgrow them spiritually". But as the act develops, the idealistic Simon is gradually forced into the world of finance which, on a large scale, he had once planned to redeem. The protestation that he is acting solely out of love for Sara is not fully believed by Deborah, who sees in Simon "your father's son", and who realizes that Simon's plan to retire "as soon as we have enough" is the motivation which will lead him further away from the visionary ideals symbolized by the cabin and the unwritten book. Her insights are soon confirmed in Simon's rejection of his book and his new deprecation of Rousseau as a man who "was simply hiding from himself in a superior, idealistic dream."

Inherent in the change which Simon undergoes through the course of the first act is the dichotomy which, in the final analysis, destroys him. As a tension is set up between Simon as materialist and Simon as dreamer, his early ideals are forced to retreat into his unconscious where they begin the battle to regain supremacy:

What a damned fool a man can make of himself. Keep on deliberately denying what he knows himself to be in fact, and encourage a continual conflict in his mind, so that he lives split into opposites and divided against himself. All in the name of Freedom! As if at the end of every dream of liberty one did not find the slave, oneself, to whom oneself, the master, is enslaved!<sup>4</sup>

As his idealism refuses to admit of any concourse with the world of human frailty, and the conscience of his materialism denies the value of any idealism, Deborah, as the influence in favor of escape to idealism, becomes pitted in Simon's mind against Sara, who is "simply and passionately conscious of life as it is". With his acceptance of the Harford financial holdings, Simon's dreams of power begin to take shape, and the battle is joined which will end only with the destruction of Deborah and the near-destruction of her son. For although Simon sees the two women as the contrary principles of idealism and materialism, the women themselves refuse to remain separate in their love for Simon. And Deborah's observation to Sara that "you and I in a way complement each other and each has something the other lacks and needs" has so much truth behind it that Simon will eventually feel that he must get rid of one or the other in order to preserve his own emotional stability.

## II

The financial empire which was born at the end of act one has reached maturity when act two opens four years later. Simon's new gods—Washington, Hamilton, Daniel Webster, and J. C. Calhoun—are enshrined on his office walls, and are indicative of the changed man who now bears little resemblance to Thoreau. (O'Neill says that Calhoun's picture is incongruous in such a group, but John Calhoun at one time was responsible for the Jeffersonian party's acceptance of Hamilton's financial policies.) The calm, peaceful image which he projected in act one has given way to the *habitually tense* and *curtly dictatorial* businessman who believes "the only moral law here is the strong are rewarded, the weak are punished".

But while Simon has been successful in the business world, his mother has been driving a wedge between him and Sara. Realizing that Simon's early idealistic sensibilities are too strong to be repressed successfully, Deborah has joined forces with Sara in such a way that Simon sees himself left out of the family triangle. His mother, when she has completely separated Sara from Simon, obviously plans to change sides, to make Sara the 'third party', and once more to establish the strong mother-son relationship she had enjoyed with a much younger Simon. It is a plot which Sara does not really understand, and which Simon misinterprets completely. Simon sees in his mother only the image of a bygone peace and her world of illusion as the garden of contentment, the country he might have chosen if he had never met Sara, and the refuge to which he would like to retreat as his financial situation becomes more and more entangled and less and less satisfying.

Thus act two is Simon's attempt to preserve his own identity, his own sanity, by separating what he considers to be the figures of materialism and idealism in order to choose between them. In scene one Simon attempts to make his relationship to Sara less of an ideal love and more of a purely materialistic, sexual, arrangement by giving her the opportunity to "strip yourself naked and accept yourself as you are in the greedy mind and flesh". In linking Sara with the Harford financial empire, Simon is able to degrade his love for her into the more materialistic relationship of man and whore so that she loses any higher value that she once possessed as her husband's beloved.

Having associated Sara with materialism, Simon turns, in scene two, to his mother. By breaking up the new relationship between Deborah and his children, Simon forces her to return to the older relationship of mother to son. She realizes what Simon is doing, but her love for her son conquers everything else, and she is willing to abandon her relationship with Sara. "I see, dear—

that you have gone very far away from me—and become lost in yourself and very lonely”, she accurately tells her son. However, Simon not only wants to return to the past, but he wants Deborah to come with him. Deborah, realizing that the world of the past is an escape into insanity—an escape against which she is fighting by means of her role as grandmother—pleads with her son to “leave the past in its forgotten grave!” But to regain him she agrees to resume life in the garden, the life which, according to the unstable Simon, will “restore the soul”.

The bargain between mother and son, cemented in the recitation of Byron's “I have not loved the world nor the world me . . .” conjures up the image of Con Melody. While both men are dreamers, the worlds about which they dream are poles apart. Con Melody was the Romantic hero, the pure figure who would not become impure through mundane, materialistic association with life. Simon, on the other hand, is the ruthless industrial mogul, a figure of once Thoreauvean idealism who is now so powerful in his materialistic associations that he need not endure the “rank breath” of less powerful men. The poem as Con Melody recites it was written by Byron. As Simon recites it, the poem could appropriately have been written by Cornelius Vanderbilt.

Having had Sara turned against Deborah in scene one and Deborah against Sara in scene two, O'Neill in scene three brings the principals together to show that Simon's plotting has been neither completely successful nor unsuccessful. Each woman sees the love Simon is showing to the other as a threat to the new love he has promised her. But the effect does not last. Sara is too sure of her own abilities to worry about Deborah taking Simon from her. And Deborah recognizes that it has been through Sara that she has been able to break away from her illusions and to face life. The two women come together, their union made stronger, at least temporarily, by Simon's attempt to separate them.

However, the wedge has been driven, and although the two appear “as one woman” in Simon's mind, each realizes that she is in competition for him. “You know how much I love each of you—it is only when you unite to dispossess me that you compel me to defend my right to what is mine—all I ask is that each of you keep your proper place in my mind”. On the one hand, Simon is faced with Deborah, whom he cannot love physically, but yet whom he can love as a child loves his mother. On the other hand, he can, and wants to, enjoy his physical relationship with Sara, but she cannot create the peaceful illusions of childhood as can Deborah. As the act ends, while Deborah is

planning how to make Simon her little boy again, Sara plans to draw Simon back to his roles of husband and lover.

### III

With the opening of the final act, in the following year, Simon seems to have found refuge against the world of finance both at home and at work through associating Sara with the office and Deborah with the garden he can visit every morning and evening. His wife, as mistress, has 'bought' the company—which for Simon means that the burden of the company's conscience is now shared. And, more important, Simon has discovered in Sara a source of peace: "it is my greatest happiness to belong to you—to escape myself and be lost in you". But now Sara begins to realize that her own dreams were false, that happiness is not found in the financial security of a hundred thousand dollars.

Deborah, likewise, has found that her planning has not led to peace. As the final scene opens, the idealized world of illusion, objectified in the small summer house in the garden, once again threatens to engulf her. When Sara enters and tells her that Simon had forgotten about visiting his mother because of his passionate need for his wife, Deborah is prevented from entering the summer house and committing psychological suicide only by her conscience-laden daughter-in-law. Once more the women swear to bury the "dead hate of the past" through which Simon would like to see one or the other eliminated. Instead, they will "throw him in the pit—to fight it out with himself".

But when the haunted Simon tells his mother that he has chosen her over Sara, the union between the two women breaks for the last time. If his mother will open the summer house door, he will leave his wife and, with Deborah, "will go so far away from the reality that not even the memory of her can follow to haunt my mind".

I want to be free, mother!—free of one of my two selves, of one of the enemies within my mind, before their duel for possession destroys it. I have no longer any choice but to choose. Or would you prefer I should go insane—and so be rid of me again?

Faced with either losing her own grip on sanity by doing what Simon wants, or losing her son, she pleads with Simon that the door cannot lead them back to a world of childhood innocence where there will be "peace and happiness to the end of our days". But Simon is beyond reason, and Deborah is again stopped in her move toward madness only by the appearance of Sara. Simon can see in his wife only the mistress, and commands her to ply her trade on the street. Sara wildly begs Deborah not to take the final step of leading Simon

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through the door, admits defeat, and promises to take her children and leave. Her argument that "no woman could love a man more than when she gives him up to save him" reaches Deborah who then, refusing to accept Sara's sacrifice, pushes her son from the open door and quietly enters the house of dreams alone. The play ends with Sara symbolically leading the dazed Simon out of the garden with a pity and tenderness which almost allows the audience to believe that she and Simon will somehow build a true more stately mansion.

### IV

Simon's drive for possession, which floundered between the illusory world of childish peace and the demands of a real universe, was not made any easier by his mother's insistence that illusions, or ideals, without reality were insane, and Sara's pleas that her love was more important than either physical sex or the whole materialistic empire enclosed by the Harford Company. In this union of the two figures O'Neill is saying that man must learn to synthesize his own ideals with the reality which surrounds him. And it is Simon's inability to do so, shown in his consuming drive to keep the two women separate despite their attraction for each other, which leads him along the garden path to both physical and spiritual collapse.

The extent which O'Neill felt this spiritual collapse to mirror the American condition is readily evident. In 1946 the playwright explained that he was going on the theory that the United States instead of being the most successful country in the world, is the greatest failure . . . because it was given everything, more than any other country. Through moving as rapidly as it has, it hasn't acquired any real roots. Its main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside of it, too. America is the prime example of this because it happened so quickly and with such immense resources. This was really said in the Bible much better. We are the greatest example of 'For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?' We had so much and could have gone either way . . .<sup>5</sup>

Seen against this background O'Neill's last plays are all spiritual. His main characters are all searching for the peace which surpasses understanding. Some do not find what they are looking for. Others refuse to admit that they are really lacking anything. But when peace is found, especially in the autobiographical plays, it is found largely in the simple acceptance of reality. And in this regard the young Simon begins with more freedom than most of O'Neill's characters. Con Melody's pride is not evident in his young son-in-law. Simon is not controlled by the pipe-dreams which have led to general inertia in Harry Hope's saloon. Free of O'Neill's own background, he is not being torn apart by the ghosts of the autobiographical plays. And, as well as

being free of these inhibiting influences, Simon has his positive Thoreauvean goals. The tragedy of this play, as in all tragedy, is, as O'Neill points out in the title of his play circle, that the protagonist is responsible for his own dis-possession.

The importance of man's search of spiritual peace has been highly valued by O'Neill. And although this point should not be overemphasized, there are in Simon's agony in the final scene echoes even of Gethsemane. Simon faces his crisis in the garden. Deborah uses a curse similar to that used by the Jews before Pilate, "so on his head—". Simon speaks of "kissing death". Deborah refers to Simon as "my beloved son". Simon speaks of attaining the "kingdom of peace". There is also the anguish over death which is present throughout the scene. There is Simon's temptation to turn away from reality, to let the cup of life pass from his lips. Sara's speech that the giving up of a man in order to save his life is the greatest love echoes the Biblical "greater love than this no man has". O'Neill is by no means saying that Simon is another Christ. But such Biblical phrases tend to underscore the importance of the struggle which is being fought.

From this spiritual viewpoint *More Stately Mansions* stands as the head-stone over the grave of those Thoreauvean figures who gave the American Adam a vision of himself beyond the bounds of material existence. Lamenting both the lost dream and the materialism which supplanted it, this play becomes the pivot for those segments of the cycle which would remain unwritten. It is as though O'Neill, realizing that his time was running out, had compacted the entire philosophical content of the proposed cycle into this single example of man's decline and fall. Later plays which were to have followed the Harford's degeneration through the years between 1857 and 1932, *The Calms of Capricorn*, *The Earth's the Limit*, *Nothing Lost Save Honor*, *The Man on Iron Horseback*, and *The Hair of the Dog*, would have been but variations on the 'fall' which had transpired in *More Stately Mansions*. For, in Simon Harford, O'Neill had finally compressed his dark parable of the American decline into the perfect tragic pattern.

#### NOTES

1. Bartlett Clark, *Eugene O'Neill, The Man and his Plays*, New York: Dover Publications, 1947, p. 161.
2. Mordecai Marcus, "Eugene O'Neill's debt to Thoreau in A Touch of the Poet", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 62 (April 1963), 270-279.
3. Barbara and Arthur Gelb, *O'Neill*, New York: Dell, 1964, p. 938.
4. *More Stately Mansions*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964, p. 49.
5. Clark, pp. 152-153.