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Eugene O'Neill's Quest for Greek Tragedy

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Abstract and Keywords

In "Eugene O'Neill's Quest for Greek Tragedy," Vassilis Lambropoulos considers the importance of an often overlooked play in O'Neill's canon, *The Great God Brown*. As with Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus is the hero of the drama, yet the play is not modeled on Euripides, but rather 'presupposes' the ancient Greek tragedy. Lambropoulos argues that the Nietzschean-inspired imprint on the play not only provides a key to its treatment of Dionysus (Dion) as hero, but also to its use of doubling through the convention of the mask, which, he maintains, is at the heart of O'Neill's conception of the tragic. For O'Neill however, the suffering of Dionysus is not the individuation of the will, as Nietzsche had argued, but the duality of identity.

Keywords: The Great God Brown, Friedrich Nietzsche, Dionysus, Euripides' *Bacchae*, mask, doubling, individuation

DURING the decade of the 1920s, the most productive period of his long career, Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953) systematically explored several aspects of tragedy—formal, religious, psychological, and other. Between *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), he experimented with ancient and modern tragic themes, techniques, and ideas. In the productions of his plays he collaborated with major theater people who shared his interests, such as George Cram "Jig" Cook (1873–1924), who founded the Provincetown Players in 1915 (see Hall, this volume), and Kenneth Macgowan (1888–1963) and Robert Edmond Jones (1887–1954), who transformed the Players into The Experimental Theatre. He also discussed his plays and ideas with emerging theater critics with a strong interest in tragedy, such as George Jean Nathan (1882–1958) and Joseph Wood Krutch (1893–1970). In short, in the 1920s O'Neill found himself at the center of a broad artistic and intellectual milieu that, like its contemporary European one, explored the function of tragedy on the post-Wagnerian stage.

The imaginative combination of Hippolytus, Oedipus, and Medea and their transposition to nineteenth-century New England in *Desire under the Elms* (1924) established O'Neill internationally as the leading American artistic playwright. Following this success, he turned his attention to Greek tragedy itself in an attempt to recuperate its fundamentals. The result was *The Great God Brown* (1926), one of his most experimental and little-known works. It is a play that grapples with several issues central to the question of modern tragedy, and does that in a radically *theatrical* way. Specifically, through an elaborate use of masks, O'Neill presents agonistic doubling (friends as brothers and rivals) as the basic structure of contemporary tragedy. In it, the suffering of Dionysus is not the individuation of the will, as Nietzsche had argued, but the duality of identity. But without individuation is rebellion possible?

Dionysus, the god of theater, presides over *The Great God Brown*. There are many possible reasons for his appeal to O'Neill. One is the playwright's intense reading of (p. 222) Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) at the time. Another is the distinct theatricality of the Dionysian cult, the fact that from the earliest times Greeks worshipped Dionysus through theatrical means such as masks, costumes, music, and dance. A third reason is that ancient drama was closely linked to Dionysus: it originated in his cult; in its earliest manifestations it dramatized his myth; it was performed in Athens at his theater and during his festival; and throughout antiquity retained strong associations with the god. (For example, we know that both Thespis and Aeschylus wrote plays called *Pentheus* while later playwrights also drew on themes related to the *Bacchae*). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes:

The tradition is undisputed that Greek tragedy in its earliest form had for its sole theme the sufferings of Dionysus and that for a long time the only stage hero was Dionysus himself. But it may be claimed with equal confidence that until Euripides, Dionysus never ceased to be the tragic hero; that all the celebrated figures of the Greek stage—Prometheus, Oedipus, etc.—are mere masks of this original hero, Dionysus.

(Nietzsche 1967: 73)

Drawing on the *Bacchae*, the most self-reflexive tragedy among those that have survived, O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* is another tragedy with Dionysus as its hero. Yet it is not modeled on Euripides. Instead O'Neill wrote a play that presupposes the *Bacchae*. If the *Bacchae*, as a reflection on tragedy, is metatheatrical, *The Great God Brown*, as a tragedy about the *Bacchae*'s reflection on tragedy, is metabacchic.

The play tells the story of two childhood friends, the sons of business partners whom they were supposed to succeed: Dion Anthony is an unsuccessful painter and William Brown a

successful architect and businessman. The former, always torn between paganism and asceticism, retires from the business partnership, fails to become an artist, returns to the firm as Brown's draftsman, and dies an alcoholic at the end of Act II. After his death, Brown takes his mask and his wife but is torn between his identity and his friend's identity and is killed accidentally (dismembered) by the police at the end of Act IV. They are rivals for the love of Margaret, who marries first Dion and later William, and of Cybel, a Mother Earth who has been "corrupted" to become a prostitute. O'Neill expressed the wish that Dion in the first half and Brown in the second half of the play should be played by the same actor. (See Jenkins, this volume.)

In the same passage from *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche proposes that in all tragedy Dionysus suffers individuation:

The one truly real Dionysus appears in a variety of forms, in the mask of a fighting hero, and entangled, as it were, in the net of the individual will. The god who appears, talks and acts so as to resemble an erring, striving, suffering individual. ... In truth, however, the hero is the suffering Dionysus of the Mysteries, the god experiencing in himself the agonies of individuation ... [W]e are therefore to regard the state of individuation as the origin and primal cause of all suffering, as something objectionable in itself. ... In this existence as a dismembered god, Dionysus possesses the dual nature of a cruel, barbarized demon and a mild, gentle ruler.

(Nietzsche 1967: 72)

(p. 223) O'Neill writes a tragedy not of individuation but of the god's dual nature, of dismemberment as irreconcilable duality. The entire play is fraught with agonistic doubling. The two friends are brothers and rivals, and they compete for both wife and prostitute. There is constant doubling in their views, actions, and careers. There is also much thematic doubling that refers to paganism and Christianity, the public and the private, male and female, and innocence and guilt. All this material is duplicated in the structural plan of the play. As the agonism intensifies, roles and relations become increasingly interchangeable.

In many respects the same fatal doubling connects the two protagonists of the *Bacchae*. Recall that Harmonia was the daughter of Ares and Aphrodite. Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, married Harmonia, and they had six children. One of them, Semele, had Dionysus with Zeus while another, Agave, had Pentheus with Echion. (Later, Cadmus abdicated in favor of Pentheus.) Thus Dionysus and Pentheus, the two grandchildren of Harmonia, are first cousins. The two antagonists competing for power over Thebes are doubles.

(Furthermore, the god and his sacrificial victim are ritual doubles.) O'Neill makes this relation the central issue in his play.

Classicists have noted that there is a lot of elaborate doubling throughout the *Bacchae*. This can be seen in the doubling of images (Pentheus sees two suns, two cities of Thebes, and two sets of gates—*Bacchae* 918–19) and in the chiasmus of characters (Dionysus starts as actor and ends as spectator, Pentheus starts as spectator and ends as actor). It is also there in the structural homologies: Foley has included among the doubles of the play itself the festival on the mountain (which we only hear about), as well as the opening day of the Great Dionysia, the three stages of the festival, and the genre of Old Comedy (Foley 1980). The doubling also extends to the theatrical devices: Segal proposes that, when Agave arrives with Pentheus' head, she is holding the mask that the actor of Pentheus had worn earlier (Segal 1982: 260–1). It is also more than likely that the same actor played Pentheus and Agave. O'Neill organizes his tragedy on the principle of "difference-in-identity" that Segal sees as structuring the *Bacchae* (Segal 1986: 65). However, between identity and difference O'Neill interpolates a third dimension, a strictly theatrical one, the mask: his four major characters don an array of full-face masks in a variety of masked, as it were, settings, all of them with backgrounds consisting of deliberately over-detailed painted backdrops.

Despite early uses like Goethe's in 1801–2, the modern mask is post-Nietzschean: it presupposes *The Birth of Tragedy* and the philosopher's subsequent reflections on its idea. Writing about ancient life, Nietzsche exclaimed: "What can we understand of that as long as we do not understand the delight in masks and the good conscience in using any kind of mask! Here is the bath and the recreation of ancient spirit" (Nietzsche 1974: 132). The immediate use of the mask is to question the conventions of naturalism, such as the identification of actor and character. It is also experimental as it operates at the limits of theatricality: the modern mask is neither representational nor anti-representational—it is masked representation. Furthermore, as a device, it is often integrated in the total artwork that collectives of creators pursue. For the moderns, the mask is idololatrous: (p. 224)

Masks are almost ubiquitous in non-western cultures. The western and Islamic worlds are unusual in regarding the mask as a mode of concealment, not a mode of revelation and transformation. It seems to be a correlative of monotheistic religions that they want human nature to be single, not multiple. The one god who sees and knows everything is naturally hostile to the idea of disguises.

(Wiles 2004: 245–6)

It has the capacity to open up Greek drama to any culture in the world and any historical period: it becomes a dramatic universal that retains its cultural specificity. Last, it functions as the internal other of performance, encouraging self-reflexivity. In his "Memoranda on Masks" (1932) O'Neill says:

Looked at from even the most practical standpoint of the practicing playwright, the mask *is* dramatic in itself, *has always* been dramatic in itself, *is* a proven weapon of attack.

(Krasner 2008: 186)

The mask returned to western theater with Symbolism and flourished with Modernism. Its earliest advocates included Maurice Maeterlinck (1890), Alfred Jarry (1896), Vyacheslav Ivanov (1904), Edward Gordon Craig (1910), Vsevolod Meyerhold (1912), Yeats (1916), and Ivan Goll (1920). It was of intense interest to playwrights, directors, designers, costume makers, actors, dancers, choreographers, philosophers, and many others.

In every significant and influential experimental artistic movement in the early decades of the century—futurism, Dadaism, surrealism, symbolism, and expressionism—the mask figured as a seminal device.

(Smith 1984: 6)

To O'Neill and other Modernists the mask offered contradictory possibilities: a symbolist one whereby it hides and protects the inner person, and a ritualist one whereby it depersonalizes acting. Ultimately, however, the mask works against both (realist or symbolist) interiority and (ritualist or nudist) exteriority. The mask is by definition performative: it cannot but involve performance. O'Neill, who had already experimented with masks, drew heavily on this Modernist tradition for *The Great God Brown*. This time, however, he developed a far more direct connection with the Greek mask.

Recall the opening of the *Bacchae*, where Dionysus returns to his native Thebes to assert his true identity and appears first disguised as a priest. Here we see on the stage an actor who is wearing a mask of Dionysus (a god) who is wearing a mask of his priest (a man). This scene is the epiphany of the masked god, a god who was worshipped in cult as a mask; that is, a mask worked as an idol of Dionysus. At the same time, it is the epiphany of the frontally facing god with whom humans can make contact only face to face. Writing on ancient drama, Claude Calame has argued that, when it comes to the public's confrontation with theater, the mask has a function central to tragic representation because

It is only the mask that allows direct confrontation simultaneously with dissimulation. This double function can be traced to the etymology of the Greek term for mask: *prosopon* can be understood both as "that which is close to the eyes" and "that (p. 225) which faces the eyes" (of another). On its own terms, the word for mask appears to imply the ideas both of appearance and of confrontation through the gaze. Analyzing the actual use of these tragic and comic masks during dramatic representations for the Great Dionysia, we find that the function of the classical Athenian mask is first to dissimulate, and only secondly to identify. Thus the individual and social identity of the real face of the actor is hidden, without, on the other hand, precisely representing the identity of the character on stage. ... The mask creates a confrontation between the dramatic action and the public, while, by the same token, mediating this confrontation.

(Calame 1996: 27-8)

The mask is not confrontation with otherness but what Derrida would call "*différance*," the tension between two dialectical terms. It captures the tension between audience and stage, identity and dissimulation. The Greek word *prosopon* means both face and person, both mask and character in a play. Therefore the face is a mask (operating between identity and dissimulation), and the person a dramatic part (like that of a chorus member acting between audience and stage). *The Great God Brown* is a four-act elaboration of this theatrical insight, using it to explore the fundamentals of tragedy.

The play opens with a scene that is chiasmatic to the opening of the *Bacchae*: an actor is playing a modern-day Dionysus (a man) who is wearing a mask of Pan (a god). What follows is a complex study of agonistic doubling mediated by the mask. As the circulation of masks shows, agonism doubles and dramatic parts become interchangeable:

Dion wears four masks in the play, each marking a stage in his external transformation from Pan to demon. ... The mask grows increasingly cruel, from Pan to Mephistopheles, to a "diabolical Mephistopheles," until, in its last manifestation, it is so cruelly malignant that it has the appearance of a real "demon". As Dion's mask undergoes transformations, so does his face, changing finally into the ascetic, pure, radiant visage of a Christian martyr. As Dion's suffering and isolation increase, the gap between the mask and the face widens.

(Smith 1984: 132-3)

One night, sensing that his end is near and "in a wild state," a disheveled Dion visits Brown at home. He tells him that throughout his life he has rebelled against God, injustice, and society. He has turned into the Bad Boy Pan and Bacchus, the Prince of

Darkness and the devil, embracing blasphemy and defiance until his last moments. At this point, the actor playing Dion, who has the "appearance" of a demon, takes off the mask of Pan and is left with the face of a "martyr" which is still not his real face. He then dies, leaving himself to his friend and antagonist. Brown is ready to free himself from his fear of the Pan's mask by putting it on. It is going to be his first mask. Margaret arrives, looking for Dion, her husband, and wearing her mask. When Brown appears wearing Dion's mask, that is, the mask of Pan, she takes hers off, freeing herself from it. End of Act II.

Masks remain equally important in the second half of the play, as Susan Smith has discussed:

Billy Brown's masks and faces are no less complex than Dion's and even more difficult for an audience to understand because O'Neill does not follow the pattern he established with Dion.

(p. 226) The mask, which on Dion was the opposite of his face, on Brown possesses him, transforming his face. ... At Dion's death Brown dons the Mephistophelean mask. Lacking Dion's divine inner strength, Brown submits to the evil mask; his face becomes "ravaged and haggard ... tortured and distorted" by the demon. When he needs to be Brown, he must now wear a mask that duplicates his old features.

Through the masking Brown relives Dion's martyrdom and emotional life with two women, Cybel and Margaret. Cybel is to Dion as Margaret is to Brown.

(Smith 1984: 133)

What Foley says about the end of Pentheus applies to both Dion and Brown:

The conventional identification between the tragic figure and his mask formally corresponds to his dramatic situation. He cannot completely step outside of or internally withdraw from and control his character or his fate; he is strictly human. As Euripides' staging brilliantly demonstrates, the tragic character *is* his mask, and is ultimately limited in the action to what his mask represents.

(Foley 1980: 131)

Scholars have discussed the so-called play-within-the-play effects in the *Bacchae*. Dionysus reveals his divinity to the Thebans by staging a play, the destruction of Pentheus. Set, costume, design, sound, even a chorus (of his followers) is deployed to create a spectacle. "That is, theatrical illusion demonstrates the reality of the god and illusion and symbol are our only mode of access to a god who can take whatever form he

wishes" (Foley 1980: 110). Dionysus introduces his worship by directing a play, and expects that worship to take a similar form. His divinity and his disguise are the same thing. He may be apprehended only through theatrical means, such as a mask or the *deus ex machina* of the play's conclusion. Cadmus and Teiresias show that responding properly to Dionysus' revelation and honoring the god entails theatrical self-transformation. In the end of the play, Pentheus, who resisted the god's challenge, survives only as a mask impaled on his mother's maenadic thyrsus.

The *Bacchae* shows why Dionysian ritual and theater had always been closely connected:

The invention of theatre ... could only make its impact within the framework of the cult of Dionysus, the god of illusions, confusion, and the constant muddling of reality and appearances, truth and fiction.

(Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 205)

This god turns the world into an elaborate play:

Wherever he appears on the stage of the world, the god sets up a theater of fantasies to take the place of the familiar everyday setting. Not only is he the great hunter but also the great illusionist, the master conjuror, the author and chorus leader of a sophisticated performance in which nothing and no one ever remain what they seem.

(Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1990: 398)

While in the *Bacchae* Dionysus entraps Pentheus in a series of scenes that he directs, in *The Great God Brown* both heroes get entrapped in several scenes of their own making, scenes they attempt to direct. We might say that *The Great God Brown* consists of a series of plays within a play where Dionysus stages confrontations between him and Pentheus. O'Neill's god is obsessed with staging his own dual nature. Here (p. 227) agonism is trapped in an inescapable doubling. If, as Vernant proposed, a central theme of the *Bacchae* is to become other than oneself, in *The Great God Brown* the theme is being double. While Nietzsche claims that the hero of all tragedy is Dionysus experiencing the agonies of individuation, O'Neill proposes that the god's true suffering is his doubling, that is, his constitutive agonism with Pentheus. Nietzsche hoped for an "end of individuation," "rebirth of Dionysus," and a restoration of "the oneness of everything existent" (Nietzsche 1967: 74). O'Neill sees no such escape from the play of masks. In his "Memoranda on Masks" (1932) he says that theater needs "a new form of drama ... a drama of souls, and the adventures of 'free wills,' with the masks that govern them and constitute their fates" (Krasner 2008: 186). In *The Great God Brown* masks

govern free wills by doubling them. At the end the play affirms the eternal recurrence of birth and dismemberment, the eternal doubling of the cycle.

The Great God Brown is a tragedy of rebellion written as a study of agonistic doubling, and based on the device of the mask. The two sides of Dionysus are constantly rehearsing their individuation, their liberation from one another, family ties, moral norms, profession, artistic conventions, and the divine. They want to be autonomous but remain caught between multiple doubles like Dionysus and Anthony (Dion) or Dionysus and Apollo (Brown) and of course between themselves. Dion is "tortured into torturing others" (O'Neill 1988b: 506) while Brown is Dion's "murderer" and "murdered" (O'Neill 1988b: 530). Through the use of masks they discover that individuation doubles, duality is agonistic, and rebellion cancels itself. Dionysus cannot design "the Temple of Man's Soul" (O'Neill 1988b: 510). When asked to design a capitol or a cathedral, all he can do is to question the authority of such edifices by including images of Silenus, his companion. His nature is similar to that of the rebel Prometheus, one of Dionysus' masks, as defined by Nietzsche: "All that exists is just and unjust and equally justified in both" (Nietzsche 1967: 72).

O'Neill did not write a treatise on drama. He experimented with a *theatrical* study of tragedy to explore the future of this genre. Like so many of his contemporaries, he had taken Nietzsche's challenge to heart. In Section 11 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the philosopher alludes to Pan's death to describe the death of tragedy and also to issue a warning to epigones about their life in the shadow of past masters. He writes:

When Greek tragedy died, there rose everywhere the deep sense of an immense void. Just as Greek sailors in the time of Tiberius once heard on a lonesome island the soul-shaking cry, "Great Pan is dead", so the Hellenic world was now pierced by the grievous lament: "Tragedy is dead! Poetry itself has perished with her! Away with you, pale, meager epigones! Away to Hades, that you may for once eat your fill of the crumbs of our former masters!"

(Nietzsche 1967: 76)

Was Pan, the goat god, really dead? Was tragedy exhausted? The question was important to O'Neill. For example, referring to "Aristotle's purging," he noted in 1931:

It is about time we purged his purging out of modern criticism, candidly speaking! What modern audience was ever purged by pity and terror by witnessing a Greek tragedy or what modern mind by reading one? It can't be done! We are too far away, (p. 228) we are in a world of different values! ... What we need is a definition of Modern and not Classical Tragedy by which to guide our judgments.

If we had Gods or a God, if we had a Faith, if we had some healing subterfuge by which to conquer Death, then the Aristotelian criterion might apply in part to our Tragedy. But our tragedy is just that we have only ourselves, that there is nothing to be purged into except a belief in the guts of man, good or evil, who faces unflinchingly the black mystery of his own soul.

(O'Neill 1988a: 390-1)

In *The Great God Brown* O'Neill brings Pan back to the stage to see how he might function in a tragedy without the consolation of catharsis.

Pan was important to the Modernists for two major reasons. First, because of his dual nature: as a hybrid creature (with human torso and arms but legs, ears, and horns of a goat), he defies unity and harmony. Part human, part animal; part benevolent, part sinister; part inspiring, part alarming—the Arcadian divinity personifies in one and the same powerful creature several contrasting qualities that haunted the fin-de-siècle: Dionysus vs. Christ, Paganism vs. Christianity, profane vs. sacred, sensual vs. spiritual, hedonism vs. morality, Arcadia vs. modernity, nature vs. society, primitive vs. civilized. In contrast to the opposition between Apollo and Dionysus, which is seeking a fusion of the two forces, in the case of Pan we have a dialectical tension beyond transcendence, a coexistence of two irreconcilable forces. The second reason for Pan's importance during the period concerns the question of Hellenism in modern times. If Pan was a deity who died, did that mean that the Greek gods are not immortal? Over the centuries, various writers (most recently, Romantic poets) had suspected that the gods of Greece had departed or withdrawn. But now, in the wake of Nietzsche's call for a rebirth of tragedy, from which divinities might the new drama draw inspiration? Thus the enigmatic, self-contradictory figure of this half-man, half-goat became a paradigmatic cipher for Modernists as artists and intellectuals appealed to his powers to find out whether the oracles are silent (a concern that was of importance to the Greek historian Plutarch at the dawn of another millennium 19 centuries earlier).

Not coincidentally, the widespread interest in Pan overlaps with a tremendous exploration of the idea of the tragic across the western world, from Russia to the U.S.A. While artists like Mallarmé, Debussy, Diaghilev, and Nijinsky were putting the faun on the stage in order to bring back the archetypal goat of theater, thinkers were taking the goat's song (i.e., tragedy) away from the stage and placing it in metaphysics (Lukács, Unamuno, Scheler, Heidegger), society (Simmel, Benjamin, Spengler), prehistory (Harrison, Cornford), or the individual (Freud, Sologub, Berdyaev). Both artists and thinkers were raising questions about the place of oracles in a world where, while the gods seemed long gone, panic could strike again.

O'Neill's dual Dionysus wears Pan's mask both at the opening and the closing scene. Is the "Great God Brown," the title of the play, affirmative or sarcastic? A question or a lament? What is certain is that it operates like a mask and renews the philosophical issue of tragedy in radical theatrical terms. Olga Taxidou has rightly expressed reservations (p. 229) about a view of tragedy as speculative philosophy. Her approach to the *Bacchae* refuses to reduce theater to theory:

The speculation that Dionysus represents is enacted through tragic form itself ... The Euripidean Dionysus is both ritualistic and critical, both spectacular and speculative. This approach changes both tragic form and philosophy in the process.

(Taxidou 2004: 109)

O'Neill achieves something similar by writing a post-Nietzschean tragedy, the metabacchic *The Great God Brown*, where tragic form becomes philosophical and philosophy spectacularized. Gradually his contemporaries recognized this achievement. Joseph Wood Krutch, O'Neill's admirer and friend, first denied the possibility of modern tragedy. In the famous chapter "The Tragic Fallacy" of his book *The Modern Temper: A Study and a Confession* (1929), he argued that the faiths and convictions that sustained it are extinct. Ten years later, in *The American Drama since 1918* (1939), he acknowledged that American tragedy was possible in a chapter simply called "Tragedy: Eugene O'Neill." Since O'Neill's plays from the 1920s, the claim remains valid. Suffice to note Edward Albee's 2002 take on the *Bacchae*: the title of the play is *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?* and its subtitle, *Notes towards a Definition of Tragedy*.

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