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MIHNEA GHEORGHIU'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE RECEPTION OF EUGENE O'NEILL IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The paper deals with the influence of context on cotext, presenting the critical universe of author Mihnea Gheorghiu, with a focus on his analyses regarding the work of American dramatist Eugene O'Neill. In the historical-cultural framework of the period 1940's-1960's, Gheorghiu's literary analyses are loaded with the significance of the times, without losing their brilliance, which is the result of refined intelligence and distinguished culture. I will study the ways in which Gheorghiu negotiates the Marxist critical canon in order to make relevant commentaries regarding the works and personality of Eugene O'Neill – a world renowned author, who had been awarded the Nobel for literature in 1936, but who represented a culture condemned by the Communist authorities. The genre addressed in my paper is, obviously, the critical text, whose historicity is marked by the political context which conditions it, threatening to exclude certain texts from public scrutiny on the basis of their cultural affiliation.*

In my paper, I investigate Mihnea Gheorghiu's¹ contribution to the critical reception of American literature in Romania, by focusing on his politically biased approach to Eugene O'Neill's dramatic universe. In order to complement the views Gheorghiu expresses regarding O'Neill, I shall look at another two studies – namely, his analysis of Walt Whitman's poetic universe, published in 1955, when the ideological pressure on cultural relations was maximal, and a study on the history of drama, entitled *Dionysus*, published in a much more relaxed period, ideologically speaking – 1968. The

¹ Best known as a dedicated Shakespearean scholar and art critic, Mihnea Gheorghiu is currently president of the Association "Amicii Statelor Unite" and editor in chief of the Romanian-American Magazine since 1994. He graduated from the Faculty of Letters in Bucharest (he specialized in English, French and Art History) and started his critical career in the forties, when he published his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Conformist Modality of Drama (1948)*. After the Second World War, he contributed to various Romanian publications, writing on cultural, as well as (international) political issues. He was an English lecturer with the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest and Head of the English Department at the University of Bucharest, and between 1963-1969 professor and head of the Theater and Film Studies Department at I.A.T.C. in Bucharest. Additional to his teaching and critical career, he was an appreciated poet and renowned translator – mainly of English and American literature. He was especially dedicated to translating from Walt Whitman, but also from Robert Burns, Fenimore Cooper, Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickens, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

purpose of corroborating these critical sources is to put in some perspective Gheorghiu's commentaries about the American playwright, which otherwise might be taken as a matter of personal critical taste. While my approach obviously pertains to the field of reception studies, I do not intend to make an application of reception theory in the body of the present paper, except for resorting to the general understanding of the critic as subjective reader of the text, exposed in Jauss' *aesthetics of reception*.

As part of a larger project of tracking the conflicted history of interpretations regarding O'Neill's drama in Romania, the present contribution dwells on the dialogue between the literary work and its critic, focusing on the mechanism of interpretation and its ideological springs. In the absence of belief in the political value of an oppressive regime, the only value-generating factors remain fear/oppression and material/economic interest. Romanian society during communist times experienced tensions such as those analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu in his study, *The Field of Cultural Production*. According to Bourdieu, the field of cultural production exists as a dominated portion of the power field of economic and political capital. In Communist Romania, this theoretical model found an ideal substantiation. The strategy of the cultural bourgeoisie (those in possession of cultural competence) – such as the Romanian critics, for example – was often to cooperate with the economic bourgeoisie, in order to share in their material advantages and safeguard their positions. For a critic to be able to prosper and even exert his or her role during the communist regime in Romania, one had to endorse the leftist principles, which is what a critic like Mihnea Gheorghiu chose to do in order to preserve his cultural status. From his preferential position, he was able to participate in the dynamics of canon formation, defend and even impose on the cultural market certain works of art of definite value. One example of this would be his interest in Shakespeare, who was regarded as a “safe” writer by the communists because of his cultivation of generally human topics and characters, placed within a safe historical distance from the implications of ideology.

By contrast to Gheorghiu, other members of the cultural elite that had been active before the onset of the communist regime – before the coming to power of the Groza government, in 1945 – chose to remain steadfast to their orientation and suffered the political consequences – arrests, interdiction from publication, social marginalization. However, a number of these cultural actors², were allowed to resume their activities after 1964, when the relations of the Communist government with the western World relaxed, an effort to communicate with other cultures was made, in the interest of the survival and renewal of Romanian cultural life. As Thomas Perry informs us, in the chapter entitled “The Marxist Eggshell” from his study, *Passage to Romania* (2001), among the intellectual collaborators of the regime, there were those moderate Socialists of the

² Those who persisted in firmly opposing the communists, like Dragoş Protopopescu, simply “disappeared”, while those whose opposition was firm but milder were sent to jail (the case of Lucian Blaga), or denied the right to practice, as in the case of Comarnescu who, besides being sent to prison, was denied the right to publish articles.

1930's, such as Mihnea Gheorghiu, Eugen Schileru or Alf Adania. Their contribution to promoting knowledge of American letters through translation and criticism is not insignificant, but greatly affected by political compromise. In fact, even under the Communist cultural blockade of the fifties, such writers as Whitman, Poe and Twain still thrived, due to their image as alienated artists, victimized by the materialistic and hostile American civilization. In the case of writers such as O'Neill, when analyzed by a critic like Gheorghiu, there was constructed an image closer to the myth of alienation, on the basis of which some of his "bourgeois" features were softened. Thus, as Perry notes, "cultural isolation never was absolute" in Romania, despite the fact that "unlike other neighboring Marxist parties, the Romanian party was more truly proletarian and anti-intellectual, [...] relegating arts to a minor role in the creation of the Socialist state" (114-115).

In this context, the work of Mihnea Gheorghiu is all the more significant as an example of cultural and political negotiation. The legitimacy of his critical interpretation thus validated by his belonging to both the intellectual and political elite, he was able to discuss and inform the Romanian public about the life and works of Eugene O'Neill, a writer whom he approached through a negative lens, as an anti-model from the ideological viewpoint, but praiseworthy in terms of artistic relevance. As such, Gheorghiu's studies represent a counterpart to Petru Comarnescu's extensive commentaries, and they are relevant as an example of how ideologically-loaded criticism can ruin a writer's reputation, even if this happens only partially, in O'Neill's case. In order to safeguard his critical reputation and equally maintain his favors with the political regime he was working in, Gheorghiu had no other alternative but to strategically acknowledge O'Neill's value as a literary and dramatic master while criticizing harshly his choice of subject matter and tone, and – ultimately – by blaming it all on the culture to which the writer belonged – the United States, the object of the communists' most intense dislike.

In the study based on his doctoral thesis, entitled *The Conformist Modality of Drama* (1948), Gheorghiu includes O'Neill in the Irish Drama Revival, with Sean O'Casey and John M. Synge. Because of his continental roots, O'Neill is presented as a continuator of the Irish dramatists mentioned above, singled out for their inspiration from the life of simple people (language and customs), their peculiar combination of humor and despair, the anti-intellectual protest, a focus on the simple tragedy of the sea folk, pointing towards ancient models, their focus on men and women lost in dreams, caught up in a web of lies about themselves and the others, while frequently exhibiting a volcanic, heroic temperament. His main point in argument is that the contradictory, melodramatic nature of O'Neill's plays is a feature of Irish drama in general, except that, transplanted on American soil, this drama "has gained promotion, while losing depths" (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 49).³ He mockingly calls O'Neill a "hero of the

³ My translation. All subsequent quotations from Gheorghiu have been translated by the author of this article.

Western World”, paraphrasing one of O’Casey’s play titles – *The Playboy of the Western World*, while attempting to convince the Romanian audience of O’Neill’s inferior status in the history of Western drama.

According to Mihnea Gheorghiu, Eugene O’Neill’s main fault as a dramatist appears to be his belonging to the American culture, a society “meant to absorb and subject” the individual, “just like the sea enslaves the old mariners” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 65). The O’Neillian hero is therefore distinguished by the “tragic opportunism which constitutes the American man’s condition, his permanent nostalgia for himself” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 65). Gheorghiu builds an interesting but erroneous parallel between the tragic isolation of the O’Neillian hero and the playwright’s retreat from the world, caused by his evolving Parkinson disease: he reproaches O’Neill for his “lack of self-accomplishment” (sic!), his failure to enrich his life by meeting people. While the first assertion is obviously putting us on a false track as regards his literary career – after all O’Neill received three Pulitzer prizes and a Nobel Prize during his lifetime – his lack of connections with people is a surprising assertion, since O’Neill had a large circle of acquaintances from his youth, and he corresponded with many critics and journalists – such as Petru Comarnescu or George Jean Nathan – some also becoming close friends of his. Therefore, relying on a superficial motivational identification between author and the characters in his plays, Gheorghiu wrongly considers that the “apparently” tragic force of O’Neill’s heroes is fuelled by their fear of contact with reality – which mirrors their author’s similar feelings. While it is certainly true that some of O’Neill’s heroes reject reality altogether – the drunkards in Harry Hope’s saloon or Nina from *Strange Interlude* – others are simply defeated by fate, in spite of their dreams – characters such as Robert from *Beyond the Horizon*, Anna Christie or Yank from *The Hairy Ape*. The last category of characters is tragic because they are aware of the contrast between their desires and reality, while they allow themselves to be immersed in experience. It is true, however, that for the majority of these characters, the force of context and environment is so powerful that it can be also argued that what dooms them is not tragic destiny but the deterministic nature of existence. However, O’Neill’s instilment of the atmosphere with a mystical element – such as “that ole’ devil, sea” in *Anna Christie* – usually leaves room for the hand of fate to decide the hero’s destiny, which leads us away from determinism.

Gheorghiu himself feels this propensity of the O’Neillian heroes to detach themselves from the environment and seems to contradict himself while asserting that “O’Neill’s human being is inexhaustible in potential...his heroes are not people but attitudes of destiny, values which express a ‘transcending substantiality’” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 66). This, in fact, is how the ancient heroes of tragedy appear to us, as “attitudes of destiny” or “fortune’s fools”, as Shakespeare would say. The critic quite subtly remarks on the musical nature of the interaction between O’Neill’s characters, which makes us think of the connection between music and tragedy, the Dionysian force behind all art:

“the coincidence of the characters’ fate, an illogical one, is of a musical nature, an outer shore of the heart” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 66).

Gheorghiu singles out as a defining feature the characters’ apathy, describing them as self-destructive, “anarchic natures, devoid of culture, that usually repeat themselves and, instead of developing, of seeking new forms, they stop or go backwards” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 67). The tragic and anarchic nature of the heroes’ selves is frequently embodied in acts of individual revolt, which proves the “petit-bourgeois nature of his drama, reflected in opposition with the war machine of unforgiving capitalism and in misunderstanding the spirit and collective tactics of the proletarians” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 67). Gheorghiu explicitly accuses O’Neill of ignoring leftist politics, while at the same time giving proof of the fact that he perfectly understands (but disproves of) the reasons for their decadence:

The life of O’Neillian people can be a strange and dark interlude, in which the souls travel towards wreckage, *deaf to the voice of history*. Their dissolution is caused by the need for new gods; therefore their consummation shall be from the inside outwards. Sometimes, O’Neill’s characters seem to be saying: let us live it out heroically, to the unavoidable end. The tragic nature of this last dignity is an honor that cannot be taken away from the “Human Being”. (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 67)

Gheorghiu terms the revolt of such characters a minor one, since it disregards the transforming potential of collective action and opts for the isolation of the individual: thus, the political activism of leftist criticism condemns the moral impotence of such heroes, struggling with the absence of God in their lives. Gheorghiu, however, praises O’Neill for his “tragic capacity for seeing and feeling the crisis element in the psychology of contemporary society” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 68) and insists on the playwright’s disappointment with America, “the greatest failure in history”, because of its engulfing materialism.

From a detailed analysis of some of the most important plays – with an in-depth focus on *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *The Iceman Cometh* – Gheorghiu reaches the forced conclusion that the Nobel Prize was awarded to O’Neill for a defeatist, “dehumanized” literature bearing “a message of despair, of headlong flight, of moral impotence” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 78).⁴ Finally, but not surprisingly, Gheorghiu accuses O’Neill of hating humanity, of lacking a guiding light, of abandoning the fight for a free society – the final conformism of this “non-conformist” playwright consisting, in the Romanian critic’s opinion, of his replacing the category of destiny by

⁴ Such assertions are in stark contrast with the 1936 Nobel Prize message regarding O’Neill’s merits as a playwright – for “dramatic works of vital energy, sincerity, and intensity of feeling, stamped with an original conception of tragedy”. At this point one could accuse Gheorghiu of misinforming the audience.

“the routine of capitalist society” – thereby turning the potential for tragedy into blind, futile revolt, or even worse – “a disgusting and lowly farce” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 82).

Quite surprisingly, the critic contradicts himself by these assertions which are obviously far-fetched and merely the expression of bitterness and frustration towards O’Neill’s disregard for the leftist literary agenda: towards its beginning, the very same study mentions O’Neill’s “comprehensive love” for humanity, in discussing his soul-searching dramas of the sea, his sympathy for and empathy with the dispossessed, among which he had lived in his youth. This attitude could also be explained by an initial common ground that O’Neill shared with Marxist literature: his genuine interest for the lowly and outcast. In a similar way, American leftist criticism had also been disenchanted with the playwright’s modernist, “bourgeois” dramas, so different from his youthful socialist concerns.

Being aware of the positive critical reception in the States and abroad, Gheorghiu does not deny the playwright’s merits, he simply criticizes his choice of subject matter, finding the final fault with the civilization to which the writer belongs. A very plastic comparison comes to round up the critical portrait of O’Neill as drawn by Gheorghiu: “Always on deck, O’Neill’s standing close to his “cases” is ultimately certain, like that of a long voyage captain” (*Modalitatea conformistă* 78).⁵

By contrast with the frequently derogative and unfair treatment of the American playwright, Gheorghiu’s analysis dedicated to America’s “good gray poet” is an encapsulation of the workings of Marxist ideology in the literary field – and a good illustration of the inclusion of the literary field in the dominated area of the economic and political field of power⁶. A brief analysis of Gheorghiu’s study on *Walt Whitman* (1955), demonstrates how far from personal the critical analyses made during communist times actually were, and that every published study was in fact a forced affirmation of the justice and grandeur of the Communist cause, being perceived as a tool in the exercise of dictatorship.

By comparison to the studies dedicated to the American playwright, Gheorghiu’s approach to the work and life of America’s national poet is extremely positive. At first sight, one may be tempted to attribute the intense like/dislike of an author as pertaining to the critic’s individual taste. Therefore, in the following lines, I will explain the ideological workings behind this appreciative critical response, in order to fully demonstrate the effects of propaganda in the field of literature. Hopefully, this will help us to better contextualize and understand Gheorghiu’s virulent attacks on O’Neill.

⁵ The critic had previously written an article entitled “Eugene O’Neill or Looking for Moby Dick” (1943) in which he dwells more explicitly on the sea-captain metaphor: the need to find a better life beyond the horizon, the search for an impossible dream makes his theater, as well as the parts the actors play, as difficult to grasp and elusive as Moby Dick’s foam trace.

⁶ See Bourdieu’s *Field of Cultural Production*.

The first thing that drew my attention is that, throughout the above-mentioned study, the revolutionary nature of “the good gray poet” is deliberately presented in opposition to the “stifling” American regime. Moreover, the few existing connections between Whitman and Russian culture are among the first things Gheorghiu speaks about: mention is made of Whitman’s Russian correspondence, as well as of a reference to him that Stalin himself makes in a letter in which the poet is appreciated for his optimism, democratic force and vitality – in opposition with the agonizing bourgeoisie, whose days are numbered. What makes Whitman a favorite of Marxist literary criticism, alongside Mark Twain, is the stress found in his work on “peace, freedom and friendship between people” (a very common phrase in the communist discourse and a topmost issue on the Marxist agenda).

In parallel with the competent critical appraisal of the poet’s work, Gheorghiu interprets American historical events – more or less connected to Whitman’s life – using every opportunity to accuse the US of imperialism⁷. The critical essay thus quickly turns into an outspoken indictment of American society and culture, through the “selected words” of the poet. In the concluding chapter, Whitman is called “a poet of the working class” (Gheorghiu, *Walt Whitman* 76), who lives among the outcast, befriending the simple workers on the quay. Presented as a hero of the people, he is “old, sick and poor” but remains “cheery and self-possessed”. Gheorghiu quotes extensively (and selectively) from Whitman’s virulent attacks on American literature – which is found to be artificial, unhealthy and morbid, while “the reckless and immoral accumulation of wealth” turns America into a “lifeless body” and “a historical mistake” (Gheorghiu, *Walt Whitman* 79). It is interesting to mention that Gheorghiu selects the same negative commentary when quoting from Eugene O’Neill, who was expressing his disappointment with American civilization⁸.

In order to balance the over-congratulatory tone of his criticism, Gheorghiu brings in the Marxist critic M. Mendelsohn who finds fault with Whitman for not following more closely the Marxists tenets – a fact which, in their opinion, represents a decrease in value, the limits of his art. However, Whitman is to be highly praised for his novel, simple form of classicism, his foregoing of “art” (a pretentious, bourgeois whim) by rejecting metaphor and artifice (Gheorghiu, *Walt Whitman* 93). He is equally praised for his “cosmic passion”, which implies the adaptation of man to the grand dimensions of the new life preached in communism. By contrast, a writer like O’Neill, whose conflict and characters illustrate terminal states of humanity, is seen as sick and retrograde.

I will next take a look at M. Gheorghiu’s *Dionysus* (1969), in order to illustrate the cultural sensibility of a critic whose engagement with the left was rather

⁷ For instance, he mentions the US invasion of the Philippines that happened “just after Whitman’s death” (93).

⁸ In his study, *Modalitatea conformista*, Gheorghiu mentions O’Neill’s quotation from the Bible – “what shall it profit a man if in gaining the world, he loses his soul?”

circumstantial. This collection of “lyrical essays” regarding the history of culture, with a focus on theater, approached both as drama and performance, pays a tribute to the dialogue between cultures, with a comparative vision of universality. *Dionysos* is written in a more ideologically-free vein, the span of the book justifying the approach: the study covers subjects from the ancient times, the Renaissance, and up to the present. Besides, the year of publication, 1969, speaks of a more relaxed period, from the point of view of ideological control of the artistic field. Thus, we could say that the publication of the formerly-discussed study on Whitman, however ideologically loaded, was an act of cultural courage back in 1955 – a time when American theater, for instance, was totally banned from the cultural market.

In his analysis of Greek antiquity, the Romanian critic gives a concise and convincing interpretation of the tragic spirit embodied by the ancient Electra:

determined not to end her grief or find her peace until the guilty have paid for their crimes...that influx of pure vitality, the tragic feeling, meant to raise the spectator to the heights of awareness, where evil has lost the vantage position and where individual awareness fuses with the collective consciousness, to guarantee the victory of the classical ideal of humanity. (Gheorghiu, *Dionysos* 74)

Even more relevant for his opinion on tragedy, however, is the praise and admiration he expresses for Sophocles’ *Antigone* – the epitome of the tragic heroine, both classical and modern. Gheorghiu insists upon Antigone’s Promethean stance, the progressive and humane nature of her heroism: Antigone is the heroine par excellence, “who chooses death as an affirmation of the freedom of human thought” (Gheorghiu, *Dionysos* 79). Even if she is an instrument of destiny in her confrontation with the inevitable, there is a tragic flaw that makes her human and complex: she longs to love and be loved – and her “cosmic eroticism” (a phrase which recalls the formulation “cosmic passion” used to characterize Whitman’s worldview) turns her tragedy into “a human drama of frustrated love” (Gheorghiu, *Dionysos* 79). Thus, Gheorghiu concludes, Sophocles’ Antigone is an authentically modern character, more humane and pure than “the American Electra, consumed by various complexes” (Gheorghiu, *Dionysos* 79). Her heart is warm and therefore her sacrifice is truly tragic, whereas, we could infer, Lavinia Mannon’s actions are both selfish and cold, and therefore not really tragic.

In *The Conformist Modality*, Gheorghiu does not readily condemn O’Neill’s use of psychology in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, reminding us that Shakespeare too had enhanced the ancient tragic structure in ways characteristic of his culture and age. After presenting the tragic weaknesses of the main characters, the critic draws our attention to the fact that their necessity for escaping becomes an illusion which masks their wallowing in the depths of egotism, hatred or apathy. Once again, he links the existential failure of the characters to O’Neill’s failure as a writer, without failing to mention his achievements, in a surprising juxtaposition. Lavinia Mannon is thus suggestively likened

to an “Erynia rejected from the rich feast of the gods” (Gheorghiu, *Modalitatea conformistă* 70), her self-inflicted punishment being found equal to Oedipus’ self-conviction to eternal darkness. At the same time, we are told that her “barren” passion displays a “graceless virtue”, embodying the “prototype of an energy-lacking society”. Despite the fact that her plight arouses our pity and fear, her negativity and strictly clinical motivation (she represses her feelings) make her inferior to a tragic heroine. Gheorghiu seems to accuse O’Neill of giving up the mysticism of tragedy (by replacing the ancient revenge of destiny with the surge of denied natural instincts) and of overusing the elements of psychoanalysis, together with atmospheric suggestions from French symbolism and German expressionism, in order to recreate the ancient fateful frame of action. He is quick in pointing out that such elements as the mask-like façade of the Mannon mansion, Lavinia’s spectral apparitions, the family garden in moonlight or the mirage of the sea that haunts the characters are not enough to impart poetry to the play. If we recall the fact that he had found O’Neill’s early plays quite poetic and rich in suggestions, it may be that the change of subject matter makes the critic blind to once familiar associations. On the other hand, we believe the Romanian critic right in stressing the overt literariness of O’Neill’s experimental dramas, his attempt to replicate ancient or contemporary models by faithful imitation, in the detriment of the presence of real feelings. However, and despite such failings, Gheorghiu concedes that *Mourning Becomes Electra* is “a modern tragedy”, illustrative of modern American life. In this assertion, the Romanian critic subscribes to the general opinion of Romanian critics and theater chroniclers, who were in consensus with the international opinion on the subject.

In *Orientări în Literatură Străină* (1958), Gheorghiu dwells less on the plays he had already discussed in *Modalitatea conformistă* – such as *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *The Iceman Cometh*, and dedicates himself more to the analysis of O’Neill’s last plays – *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *The Moon for the Misbegotten*, that hadn’t been available for his first study. He employs a clever mechanism of obscuring the playwright’s latter-day merits by using elements from his (earlier) works, which are closer to the Marxist principles. The chapter entitled “An Antology from Beyond the Horizon” opens with the shocking image of a family in ruins, that of the Tyrones in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, contrasting sharply with the expected glamour of an evening’s social and cultural event – the representation of the play at the Nations’ Theater.

The analysis of the above mentioned play excels in the choice of strong words that makes the critical commentary sound more like an indictment of the society that could shape such fantasies: “the unveiling of the truth that his heroes seek in alcohol” (368), “an inferno of old and unforgotten sorrows over which blood tears flow continuously” (369), “little by little the Tyrones reveal the wild inhumanity that consumes them” (374), “they all get drunk continually and live among illusions” (idem). The critic is particularly gifted for expressing the “wild inhumanity” of O’Neill’s last masterpiece (which he acknowledges as such) through shockingly dark imagery, of striking, terrifying beauty:

what follows is an accumulation of black and grey tones, the colors of solitude, ripped by rare flashes of lightning called upon to lit up only the peaks of despair where the souls of those present onstage keep unraveling themselves. (Gheorghiu, *Orientări* 374)

Gheorghiu is also amazingly perceptive in his observations regarding the style and content of the play:

In this 'long journey' nothing happens, on the outside. The drama is one of broken hearts. The action progresses by unperceivable leaps, in the O'Neillian manner of the 'soul-physician' playwright, who adds successive touches meant to render the 'climate' evident. (*Orientări* 369)

I cannot agree with the critic who suggests that in the end that characters and the public are locked together in an everlasting inferno represented by "the others" with which we live. I also have to contradict his assertion that his heroes seek the truth in alcohol, this being a vulgarizing perspective on the action of drinking which points to the psychological need for forgetting and may also suggest the Dionysian delirium of poetic action.

The Romanian critic attributes the bleak atmosphere of the plays to O'Neill's confessed disappointment with American civilization as "the greatest failure in history". This is proved by an analysis of his last play – *The Moon for the Misbegotten*. Far from seeing a redemptive, elevated attitude in its dramatic conflict, Gheorghiu appreciates that it is the last expression of its author's exhaustion and of his having reached his limits, a state reflected in "the prolixity and mannerist repetitiveness of the O'Neillian genre" (*Orientări* 386). The conclusion his study reaches is that Eugene O'Neill, "the American god of dramatic despair", had "died" long before he released his last, "sunset" play (Gheorghiu, *Orientări* 386).⁹

It is hard to make up one's mind regarding the value of O'Neill's drama based on a politically biased critical commentary. One can even detect a strong vein of irony in many of Gheorghiu's comments that is obviously intended to further alienate the reader. However, since O'Neill holds a place equal to that of other writers in his above mentioned studies – such as Arthur Miller, for instance – this is enough evidence to support the idea that Gheorghiu's aim was double in criticizing the American playwright: on the one hand, he appears as loyal to the party line in singling out an artist who is

⁹ By contrast to O'Neill, his young successor Arthur Miller is presented by Gheorghiu in the same study as a hero engaged in combat with "the anti-humanistic trend" in literature promoted by "the ideological cold war", and dedicated to "the struggle for human dignity and peace between peoples" (Gheorghiu, *Orientări* 362). His style is an embodiment of liveliness resulting from a "progressive" engagement in art that foregrounds the criticism of prejudice and intolerance, while condemning the "abuse of progressive minds" (the play under discussion here is, obviously, Miller's *The Crucible*.)

ideologically flawed by his belonging to the corrupt capitalist society and should be treaded with caution by the conscientious communist audience; on the other hand, the Romanian critic safeguards his reputation by discussing a literary figure of international fame in terms that are fairly just in other respects. To quote Bourdieu, even though, theoretically, criticism should offer a disinterested and elevated commentary, there is “an interest in disinterestedness”. And, as I hope my analysis of Gheorghiu’s critical response to O’Neill’s drama has proved, “every critical affirmation contains, on the one hand, a recognition of the value of the work which occasions it and on the other hand an affirmation of its own legitimacy” (Bourdieu, *The Field* 19).

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