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***THE DIALECTICS OF INTERANIMATION:
ELECTRA'S MYTH REVISITED BY O'NEILL
IN THE INTERPRETATION OF ALICE VOINESCU***

Keywords: *Universal vs. culture-specific, enduring vs. perishable values; time and culture bound interpretations; cultural dialogue.*

Abstract: *My paper uses Steiner's theory of translation from *After Babel* to discuss the time-bound and culture specific changes that *Electra's* myth has undergone in O'Neill's appropriation as well as the particular resonance of his American trilogy in the Romanian cultural space of the 1940's. Seeking to understand the stakes and tragic depth of O'Neill's achievement, we find Alice Voinescu's contribution particularly relevant in the light of her preoccupation with Aeschylus' *Oresteia* as the perfect embodiment of the tragic spirit. The Romanian critic's generosity and insight validates O'Neill's "transfer of souls" from classical to modern times, proving that there were powerful elective affinities at work between the classical Greek, American and Romanian cultural spaces at a time when European culture at large was fascinated with the literary products of antiquity - *Electra's* tragedy being one of the most frequently revisited ancient narratives. Our analysis will place Voinescu's critical contribution in relation to other Romanian critical reactions to *Mourning Becomes Electra* from the same historical period, with a view to emphasizing the cultural differences at work within Romanian borders.*

Critical opinion may trigger a transient perception of a certain literary work, that only time will decide if it endures or it gives way to significant difference. The durability of a writer's good or bad reputation in a certain cultural environment is determined by the critical opinion available at the time of initial reception, even more than by what happens after that moment. It is true, however, that what is transient in a literary work – that is, what pertains to the influence of the times on the respective literary product – is, quite often, the thing to which an enduring perception regarding that work becomes attached. It may even be the case that some critics will deliberately read a work in a key reflecting their time and taste, even though the achievement of the respective writer may be labeled as better or worse in the future. After all, fashion in literature is sometimes the thing that endures, being captured for eternity in the peculiarities of a work of art deemed sufficiently relevant to pass the test of time.

My paper uses George Steiner's concept of "internanimation" or "transfer of souls"¹ from *After Babel*, in investigating a particular case of cultural transfer or 'translation' of the concept of Ancient Destiny in the history of drama. I will dwell on how O'Neill's reworking of the tragic mode has been interpreted by his Romanian critics, at a time when the American playwright had already achieved world-wide fame as a dramatist. After presenting a few relevant counterpoising opinions, we shall focus on Alice Voinescu's critical reaction to O'Neill's *Electra*, as a particularly successful instance of the cultural translation O'Neill

¹ "The new beginning draws on precedent, canonic models so as to reduce the menacing emptiness surrounding novelty" (Steiner 477). Thus, O'Neill's criticism of contemporary culture is more biting by indirection, coated in the ample folds of the resurrected ancient myth. At the same time, it bespeaks the modernist fascination with classical antiquity, a feature which O'Neill shares with other re-writers of the same myth, such as: Hofmannsthal, Claudel, Giraudoux, T.S. Eliot, Hauptman, Sartre etc. Under the same influence of the "spirit of the times" falls Petru Dumitriu's reworking of *Electra's* myth.

benefitted from, at the time of his initial reception by our critical establishment. We shall use Comarnescu's favorable analysis as a parallel example of enduring critical empathy with the source of translation (i.e. O'Neill's dramatic endeavor). Conversely, Schileru and Gheorghiu represent the transient critical views for which the canonic model obliterates the translation – O'Neill's trilogy appearing to them as a pale imitation of the original models of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. However, such superficial and distorting views gradually gave way to more informed and favorable reactions, which pay homage to the forerunning interpretations of Voinescu and Comarnescu, here under discussion.

Eugene O'Neill's most ambitious dramatic project of the period between the two world wars, and also his most debated play, was the trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra*, staged several times in Romania (Bucharest) from 1943 through 1945. The ambition of the author had been to transfer the implacability of ancient Greek destiny to the times of the 19th century American Civil War, and present the tragic fall of New England Puritanism, as embodied in the fate of the Mannon family, the extent to which he succeeded this transposition being subject to heated discussions ever since. The playwright himself had his doubts regarding the successful transposition of ancient myth in modern times, but his purpose had been, as he confesses it, to dig at the roots of the sickness of today as he feels it – the death of the Old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new One for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to confront its fears of death with (O'Neill in Cargill 115).

The most avid upholder of O'Neill's *Electra's* right to the status of modern tragedy from the 40's onwards in Romania was Petru Comarnescu. His arguments concerning the validity of this modern tragedy are based on minute research connected to the possibility of tragedy existing in a humanistic, rationalistic era. Like Alice Voinescu, he shows a profound understanding of the inner springs of tragedy and he is extremely sensitive to the characters' psychology, seeking to motivate their belonging to the tragic category by delving into their motivation and carefully interpreting their choices. In his study, "Introduction to *Electra's* Tragedy", Petru Comarnescu draws an extensive parallel between O'Neill's trilogy and the ancient tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. He defends the playwright's achievement against attacks from other critics (such as Schileru or Gheorghiu, whose views are presented below), by demonstrating that O'Neill's style is neoclassical – in the sense of combining the classical influences with the modern spirit, and insisting on O'Neill's achievement of true catharsis through the dramatic movement of his trilogy. Comarnescu notes that the principle of action resides in the will of O'Neill's heroes, as in Sophocles's tragedies: "the human being fights and feels responsible for his deeds, even though he is frequently instigated by superior forces." (216) Comarnescu shows a deep understanding of the psychology of O'Neill's characters, especially Lavinia Mannon (the modern equivalent of the vengeful *Electra*). While Schileru notes and is disturbed by the rationality of Lavinia's options, Comarnescu interprets Lavinia's guiding principles as her hybris: "Like all the Mannons, she lacks the courage to find out her own truths, the carnal matters that possess her wholly" (217). The critic makes us see how intricate the workings of the play really are – and how under the external reasons of duty and pride, Lavinia is motivated in fact by jealousy towards her mother. The ethics of the ancient tragedy become more complex in O'Neill's *Electra*, due to the subjective relativism characteristic of the modern epoch: "His heroes are elementary forces of life, and the knowledge they arrive at, by their profound and grand experiences, does not redeem them but gives them a profound understanding of their fate" (230).

While there are common points between Voinescu's and Comarnescu's critical discourses, the former critic's views on the trilogy differ greatly from those of her contemporaries – Mihnea Gheorghiu and Eugen Schileru being our two main counterpoising sources of reference.

A surprising misinterpretation of the playwright's vision, based on a biased perception of American civilization as a lowbrow, vulgar and violent culture, is to be found in Mihnea Gheorghiu's study *The Conformist Modality of Drama* (1948). He contends that O'Neill "adds to the tragic form the psychological complex of modernity" (69) – thereby achieving an impure dramatic construct in which Lavinia suppresses

her feelings, Orin suffers from Oedipus' complex, Christine is a typically jealous mother and Brant exhibits an inferiority complex. He considers this view of the characters too narrow: "thus O'Neill tries to prove that the hand of destiny is nothing but the revenge of frustrated nature" (70). Totally convinced of the destructiveness of American civilization, he interprets Lavinia as the fruit of a negative environment, so that "denial becomes Electra...mourning suits her better than any other robe. She ceases to be a hero, and turns into the prototype of a civilization lacking all vitality" (71). Although he notices how O'Neill's beings are shaped by a powerful passion, unique resort of their actions, that will torment and explain at the same time their moral, social and physical bearings, he interprets this intensity as "their total lack of perspective, *their pathology*" (75). Inevitably, he deduces that O'Neill's message is one of despair, of cowardly flight and moral powerlessness: "it is the answer of the incurably diseased that has resigned himself to waiting for the coming of the Iceman" (78). Gheorghiu considers this to be the measure of the American dramatist's final conformism to an outdated pattern: O'Neill does not give his heroes any chance when he resurrects, from a new perspective, the tragedy of destiny, a typically conformist perspective, in which almighty destiny is, ultimately, the routine of capitalist society and of the conflicts it implicitly generates. By focusing his analysis exclusively on the pathological aspect of the characters, Gheorghiu does not believe that O'Neill's trilogy has the necessary grandeur to generate classical catharsis. He is dismayed by the evolution of O'Neill's heroes who are seen as an expression "of the tragic randomness that constitutes the condition of the American man, his permanent nostalgia for himself, in a society set up to absorb and submit him, just like the sea does with the ancient mariners" (65). From this critique of American society (which the playwright in fact had intended), Gheorghiu goes on to conclude that O'Neill leads his heroes "into death, murder or folly, since he is the interpreter of the moral impotence that suppresses them like once the tragic oppression of destiny." The conclusion of his study is therefore shocking, to say the least. He foresees "the failure of those writers whose way is not illuminated by a grand idea, whose sermon about the futility of struggle for a free society bespeaks their hatred of humanity." (82)²

Similarly, though in a more radical and ironic vein, Eugen Schileru seeks to cancel out the claims of the play to the tragic status in his article "Problema Tragicului la O'Neill"³ (1945). His critical rejection is obviously based on his affiliation with French culture, whose reworking of the classics he is much in awe of. One of the capital flaws of O'Neill's trilogy is that Schileru finds the Mannons' antecedents not quite as bleak as becoming for a tragedy: "these people are stupid Puritans – and we would never suspect the ancient heroes of stupidity" (131)⁴. He names Lavinia "a sort of bitter and acrid governess that moves on a level that only accidentally touches upon tragedy, while more often it borders on comedy" (131). O'Neill is therefore, in his opinion, the author of a baroque tragedy, with extrapolated heroes, while the essential character of the tragic hero should be that of a classical sculpture, which is "concise and condensed, tending towards the center" (132). Moreover, intellectual reasons cannot dictate what the tragic hero does – while with O'Neill, the characters decide when to fall in love or when to refuse themselves this right. He points out that the heroes of O'Neill's 'tragedy' are never beyond good and evil – so that we are permanently inclined to valorize them ethically. This means that the spectator preserves a margin of freedom, while true tragedy doesn't allow this – its mark being exactly the disappearance of this margin of freedom. In this respect, his view is exactly opposed to that of Voinescu, who capitalizes on this very margin of freedom allowed to the spectator, as we shall see below. Her reading or cultural translation of O'Neill's attempt gives us the full scope of her critical subtlety.

² However, in an article entitled "Moby Dick" (1945), Mihnea Gheorghiu responded better to *Mourning Becomes Electra*, naming it "the trilogy of bitterness, in which melodrama acknowledges the touch of the wing of genius." (63)

³ "O'Neill's Treatment of the Tragic".

⁴ The question here is of course, one of perspective – one could easily imagine a parody written after any of the ancient plays, in which the heroes commit the most stupid errors.

Voinescu's assessment of O'Neill's theater is made in the context of the Bucharest stage success of *Electra* in 1945. Aware that the notion might be blurred for the general public, the critic proceeds by making clear for the Romanian public what the notion of 'tragic' destiny implies:

Only the somersault of conscience which risks, for the sake of touching the absolute, to crumble into the void – only the vivid, living, and not simply theoretical, option between 'to be or not to be' – risking not only death but even 'non-being', only this is the tragic attitude which alone can generate a new Ethos (414, my translation).

Voinescu considers Aeschylus to be the greatest tragic author of antiquity and judges O'Neill's dramas, and *Mourning Becomes Electra* especially, by the standards derived from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In this, she follows the same approach as the above-presented critics. In order to better understand her critical reading of O'Neill, we shall outline below some of Voinescu's views on the nature of Greek tragedy, which is profoundly motivated by her preference for the moral and heroic universe, in which Destiny is a synonym for Justice. Her analysis of *Oresteia* is extremely useful for our purpose since O'Neill's trilogy is based on the same ancient narrative. In her opinion, what distinguishes Aeschylus' characters is their heroism, generated by a strong desire for freedom, in a deterministic universe that nevertheless acknowledges the light and strength of individual conscience – "the world of Hellenistic idealism" (Voinescu 324). As the first tragic author to use a proper dramatic style by the introduction of the second actor, Aeschylus eliminates sentimental outbursts and focuses primarily on "the movement of the rational dialectics" which generates "the pure act of conscience, the dramatic act" (Voinescu 332). The form of trilogy, with Aeschylus, is "the organic form of tragedy itself" – in the sense that the individual, ethical act of conscience takes time to fulfill itself, to shape itself for the final act of acknowledging individual moral responsibility. The individuality of Aeschylus' heroes attains the unity of Greek culture and history, in a human prototype that embodies "the living yet normative entity of the tragic Ego" (Voinescu 327). The tragic hero of Aeschylus is therefore nearly an embodiment of the Deity, which the tragic author anticipated through his poetic intuition. Voinescu insists also on the difference between the tragic and the pathetic - the last category being the dramatic form cultivated by Euripides and defined by a fatalistic belief in blind destiny, focusing on the heroes' misery and psychology. Whereas Euripides presents us the natural human being, dominated by passions, Aeschylus and Sophocles' characters transcend their earthly natures, asserting their freedom in the spiritual realm of culture. She defines real tragedy as active (non-passive) heroism, as "the life and death struggle with Destiny, with the Non-Intelligible" (Voinescu 325) against which the characters define themselves, through the power of Logos. Compared to the ancient heroes, O'Neill's characters lack the necessary tragic maturity - their titanic suffering being insufficient for making them the embodiment of a revolutionary spirit in culture. They are, rather, the expression of a decadent civilization. Here, Voinescu's views partially match those of Mihnea Gheorghiu and Eugen Schileru but she doesn't use this argument to undermine the achievement of the playwright in terms of dramatic force – quite to the contrary, she underlines his failings but equally praises the compensating achievements.

In outlining the conflict of O'Neill's trilogy, Voinescu stresses the diverging contents of the notions employed by O'Neill from that of their ancient counterparts. The distinction revolves mainly around the crucial question of justice – revealed in the modern *Electra* as "the elemental, primitive urge for revenge" (414) – whereas in Aeschylus and Sophocles it is a feeling of duty that substitutes itself to personal conscience, it is pure justice because it doesn't allow for passion to interfere in the heroes' actions – "their moral act is an act of submission to the divine command" (415). The mystique of faith is what makes the ancient tragic hero a living embodiment of the moral law – and Voinescu insists that O'Neill was aware of this and tried to supply his heroes with a similar element of mystery and a moral horizon, by resorting to the psychological. However, as this is merely a rational explanation and not a 'super-rational' one – like the Greek belief in gods, his *Electra* remains only a masterpiece of psychic analysis and not, as intended, a

revelation of the human fate. Consequently, it mirrors its author's struggle with a material he is as yet unable to integrate dramatically – although his will to attain the tragic sphere is manifest in the “tendency towards mystery” of all extra-textual elements (413).

Another strong point of her critical discourse is the defense of O'Neill's humanism. She explains the pessimistic contents of his dramas not as “dislike for his characters” but as “the reflection of a cultural reality that he has the courage to confront” – and implicitly a proof of his love for humanity (418). In this respect, her analysis differs greatly from Gheorghiu's, who concludes that the playwright expresses his hatred for humanity by shaping the monstrous characters of the Mannons. In order to prove her point, Voinescu notes that O'Neill's trilogy also features positive characters – such as Peter and Hazel, who exhibit all the features absent in the dreaded Mannons: simplicity, balance, generosity, love and faith – thus proving that “we would be wrong to believe that O'Neill wanted to depict a robust and elementary primitive fauna, jungle people lost in a civilized world” (418). Instead, he wanted to show the extremes where the absence of humanizing features (illustrated by secondary characters) can lead. At this point, Voinescu's perceptive description of Lavinia's character is a convincing demonstration: appearing as an “earthly Aerynia,”⁵ in her negative grandeur that seems to extinguish all hope, her character represents the “exaltation of the vital” typical of contemporary times (416). For all Mannons, the search for origins, for the free ego, takes the form of an escape to the natural innocence and happiness of the Pacific Isles – representing the confused identification of innocence with the unconscious life and, simultaneously, a denial of responsibility. Lavinia's desperate attempts to enjoy life, as well as Orin and Christine's suicidal acts, are in fact illusory evasions, showing a deterministic confinement in their own natures. They are egoistic and solitary characters longing for love and freedom, who do not know how to love but only how to punish and destroy others and themselves. If O'Neill's work ultimately deviates from the ancient tragic ‘agenda,’ if his heroes lack tragic majesty and redeeming force for their community, it is because the epoch denies it to them. The purpose of the dramatist is therefore to present the Mannons' disorientation of feelings as symptomatic for the decay of Western civilization, to denounce the decadence of American culture. As Voinescu beautifully concludes, “O'Neill's *Electra* is a mournful song sprung from a poet's love for poor humanity” (419).

It seems that, for Voinescu, the need to ‘rescue’ the idealism of the plot is a constant of her dramatic criticism. By viewing the action and characters in the light of a poetic indulgence for humanity, she constructs a desirable effect of enlightenment and catharsis, even if the drama itself may be found lacking in this respect. Accordingly, she finds that the saving force of O'Neill's dramas resides “in a poetic breadth that liberates the spectator from the barren despair of nihilism” (419) – rising our perception above the cold logic of the dramatic plot and instilling in us “a fertile uncertainty” – “the unrest that forces the conscience to emerge from its commodious security, awaking it to its responsibility towards truth” (413).

Thus, the enduring challenge that O'Neill's trilogy poses to the conscience of the audience is that of reading correctly the ‘open’ end of the modern *Electra* – namely of imagining a tragic development instead of a pathetic one for Lavinia's character. This particular suggestion of Voinescu's is extremely ‘fertile’ in itself – proving the humanistic depth of her critical enterprise. She suggests that, beyond O'Neill's own struggle with the disheartening material provided by his culture and times, the validity of his modern attempt at tragedy lies equally in the minds and hearts of the audience. Due to O'Neill's “creative generosity,” the spectator's conscience is allowed to rescue the tragic integrity of the action by imagining that Lavinia Mannon might come to terms with the ghosts of her dead, ultimately succeeding in forgiving and loving them despite their common sins – and thus “redeeming in her own conscience the conscience of her entire kin” (417). At this point, a critic like Schileru lacks the intuitive capacity of Voinescu, criticizing the end of

⁵ While their appraisal of Lavinia's character has different motivations, all the Romanian critics mentioned above seem fascinated by the ominous persona of this modern *Electra*, which denotes the powerful dramatic impact of O'Neill's theatrical constructs.

the trilogy for its very open-endedness: he sees Lavinia's catharsis as imperfect since she does not end in catastrophe but continues to torment herself indefinitely.

Indeed, the pathetic alternative - Lavinia's self-punishment seen as the ultimate act of sterile hatred turned on itself - belongs to an implacable deterministic view, that does not redeem the heroine or purify her negative emotions. Voinescu's critical contribution thereby sheds a significant light on the conflicted nature of O'Neill's tragedies, insisting that through the drama's open-ended interrogation of the character's destiny, the "response" of the individual spectator "would have the chance of attaining the proportions of modern tragedy" (417).

While from the point of view of Schileru and Gheorghiu, O'Neill's "dialectics of interanimation" achieves an imperfect transfer of the tragic spirit at the level of the dramatic text, Voinescu's analysis hints at the fact that, with the cooperation of the (Romanian) public, Electra's reincarnation as Lavinia Mannon (played by Tanți Cocea) might have been a truly cathartic experience.

In supporting the favorable reception of America's foremost playwright in Romania, both Voinescu and Comarnescu become cultural ambassadors in a transatlantic exchange of values that benefits both cultures. They proved to be open to the "insurgent newness" (Steiner's term) of the text, which was meant by its author as both a resurrection of the old myth and as the birth of a new one, strategically embedded in the old.⁶ We could say that what endures, in O'Neill's vision, from ancient times, is the overflowing human passion and the need of a higher authority to bring justice where murder was committed: the ancient Erynii are turned into the modern Furies of psychopathology, but the revolving axis stays the same - that is, the human being, Fortune's perpetual Fool, whose will is never free but who can redeem itself through its actions. While with the ancients this was external - setting things right by a blood sacrifice - , O'Neill's characters require an inner transformation, passing, through trauma, towards enlightenment.

In her interpretation, Alice Voinescu convinces us that, despite dramatic imperfections, O'Neill's trilogy is a valid reincarnation of the original spirit of tragedy. And if, according to Steiner, "meaning is a function of historical antecedent and shared response" (489), while translations are in fact metaphors,⁷ carrying over the meaning across cultural borders, then we could regard the Romanian criticism of O'Neill's theater in the 40's as a temporally and spatially limited enactment of his plays for a specific audience. Such imaginative instances of criticism are original, despite being (inter)animated by the spirit of the contemporary or ancient playwrights and, in their specificity, they nevertheless transgress the borders of time and space.

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⁶ O'Neill wanted to prove that the materialistic tendency of capitalist society, based on the old Puritanical tenets, was doomed to fall from within.

⁷ Professor Young's association.