

Ulana FARYNA

THE DYNAMICS OF THE RECEPTION OF THE DRAMAS OF EUGENE O'NEILL IN POLAND

The Polish reception of Eugene Gladstone O'Neill's (1888–1953) dramas emerged quite early; barely a decade after the appearance of the author's first plays in 1920s. It then underwent a subsequent rapid development, which sharply declined in intensity in recent years. More detailed analysis of Polish critical papers and publications about the playwright shows that the perception of American classic's works was emerging from multidirectional research, a multiplicity of ideas and points of view and sometimes cardinally opposite conclusions.

This article is intended to highlight the basic landmarks of the development of the critical (and also some elements of translatory and theatrical) reception of O'Neill's dramas in Poland. We also enquired into the dynamics and character of this reception, paid attention to the main considerations of the papers, and traced the variety of Polish interpretations of O'Neill's message.

The first Polish articles about O'Neill appeared at the beginning of the XXth century, immediately after the author had won the Nobel Prize in 1936. The earliest publication about the dramatist (1937)¹ was written by the well-known Polish historian of English literature, dean of Philology (1930/1931) at the Jagiellonian University, and actual member of Polish Academy of Arts (from 1931), Roman Dyboski (1883–1945). It presents eight pages of critical review of the writer's creative biography as well as an assessment of O'Neill's value for American theatre and the development of world drama. The author emphasizes the universal scale of dramatic problems and the unique stylistic features of the playwright's dramatic poetics (1937). Dyboski marks that these first writings, although resembling the works of Conrad, do not have that splendour, *majesty* [maestria] of style or philosophical dreaminess but possess much tragic [...] and

¹ The copy of this work is now available in Warsaw National Library (*Biblioteka Narodowa*, Warsaw)

explosive force of sense in simple words [...] (1937:2). Later Polish critics would start a fierce polemic concerning the interpretation of these works.

1930s had already been marked by the appearance of the first stage productions and translations of O'Neill's works (although these translations were not mass printed, but made only as single typed manuscripts for theatres). In 1932 the premiere of the play *Czarne ghetto (All God's Chillun Got Wings, 1924)* took place at a few theatres of Lwow (*Teatr Miejski, Teatr Wielki*). The drama was translated by Polish actor Jerzy Hodecki. After 1936 (when the playwright received the Nobel Prize) O'Neill's popularity was constantly growing. In 1937 another play – *Cesarz Jones (The Emperor Jones, 1920)* – was put on stage by producer Waław Radulski in Krakow (*Teatr Miejski im. Juliusza Słowackiego*). The Polish text of the play was prepared by a famous Polish producer Ryszard Ordyński (1878–1953) (who also translated dramas by Maxwell Anderson, Howard Fast, Avery Hopwood, as well as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller).

In 1940–1950s interest in the American author sharply declined, which was the result of historical and ideological circumstances (namely the post-war political situation in the country). Changes of the dramatist's literary and life orientation, of his world outlook in the intermilitary decade and during World War II were another reason of this recession. The historical epoch forced to answer current questions on life and death, the cost of human life and the future of humanity. Despite this, O'Neill disappeared from public and literary life, and in 1934–1946 did not produce even a single new play. Even after 1946 his self-imposed alienation continued: the playwright created autobiographic *confessions*, of a pessimistic and very personal nature. Their importance and artistic value were appreciated many years after.

A few new publications appeared in magazines *Dialog* and *Twórczość* at the end of 1950s. Among them: 1) memoirs of Mary Welch, a famous American actress, who acted as Josie in *A Moon for the Misbegotten* in 1947 (Welch 1957); 2) papers by Karl-Ragnar Gierów, the director of Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (Gierów 1958); and 3) Bronisław Wiśniowski (1956) and (1958). These articles marked the beginning of a high growth of interest in O'Neill and led to the peak of his popularity in Poland.

The burst of Polish publishers' and critics' interest in O'Neill, as well as the peak of theatrical reception of his works, should be designated in 1960s and at the beginning of 1970s. More than 10 publications appeared in 1960–1963, 7 of them alone in 1961. Profound reviews of O'Neill's heritage (written by Polish historian of literature, a well known researcher of William Shakespeare's poetry Stanisław Helsztyński (1891–1986) (Helsztyński 1960); Ewa Chwedeńchuk (1961); Gierów (1961); Ordyński (1961); Wojciech Natason (1961)), memoirs (Welch 1961), reviews (*Ostatnia prapremiera O'Neill'a [More Stately Mansions]* 1963), critical articles in *Dialog*, *Współczesność* (Stawiński 1961), (Krajewska

1966), (Przybylska 1968), (Przemecka 1968) were among them. In 1960s new reviews on English-language editions of the plays appeared. The monographic book *Eugene O'Neill* by F. I. Carpenter (*Eugene O'Neill / F. I. Carpenter*. – New York, 1964) was analysed by Wanda Krajewska (1965), an expert on English literature; Timo Tiusanen's work *O'Neill's scenic images (O'Neill's scenic images / Timo Tiusanen* – Princeton, 1968) was examined by Wanda Lipiec (1971), a drama and theatre researcher, and teacher of the Leon Shiller State School of Theatre and Cinema in Łódź (*Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Teatralna i Filmowa im. Leona Schillera*). These publications reveal the interest of Polish scholars in American criticism concerning O'Neill's biography and creative life. They show the desire of Polish critics to take into account the American scientific perspective while making decisions about O'Neill, their attempts to present a broad range of interpretations of O'Neill's dramas to the Polish reader.

In 1960s separate essays on O'Neill's dramas appeared. Their authors tried to trace the dramatist's place in the world drama context, some of them began examining his cultural identity. Krajewska wrote about O'Neill's Irish roots (*Irlandzkość Eugena O'Neill*) (1966); a well-known contemporary expert on American literature and theatre Irena Przemecka discussed the world scale and character of his tragedies in her English-language article under the title *The elements of tragedy in O'Neill's plays* (1968); the article by Krystyna Przybylska signalled the *condition humaine* concept in O'Neill's dramas (1968).

During 1950s–1960s it became evident, that O'Neill's works could not provoke a single adequate interpretation and assessment. Thus, Polish critics began to pay more attention to the author's conceptions of drama and theatre, studying his letters, reflections, and reviews. They also tried to examine the dramatist's biography stages and correlate the breaks in the dramas with his ideological orientation and psychological state, circumstances of his life (two unsuccessful marriages, conflicts in relationships with children, Parkinson's disease, which caused the loss of body control and made the author unable to write, etc.). Stanisław Helsztyński, noticing the dramatist's strong disappointment, quoted his own words: *The way this world is moving makes me sure that a man made the decision to destroy himself [...] (1960:120)*,² – and traced the consequences of the author's state in his autobiographic works *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *Desire under the Elms* (1960).

Growing interest in the classic's works and high resonance of his ideas in 1960s caused the first Polish publication of the play *Zmierzch długiego dnia (A Long Day's Journey into Night)* in 1967 (*Współczesny Dramat Amerykański*, 1967). The drama was (and remains today) one of the far-famed and highest valued dramas in the USA. It was translated by Waclawa Komarnicka (1912–1984) and Krystyna Tarnowska (1917–1991) (famous Polish translators of

² The Polish text is given in my translation – U.F.

American and English literature) and received an unusual Polish title – *Zmierzch długiego dnia* (*The Twilight/Gloaming of the Long Day*). The book *Współczesny Dramat Amerykański* (*Modern American Drama*) was printed in Warsaw State Publishing Institute (*Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy*) and contained also plays by Elmer Rice, Lillian Florence Hellman, Clifford Odets and Robert Emmet Sherwood. We should note the fact that the compiler of the book was literary critic and translator Adam Tarn, who later wrote a preface to the first edition of O'Neill's plays in 1973.

At the beginning of 1960s the enormous burst of premieres of O'Neill's dramas took place at the theatres around various parts of Poland. The *October breakthrough* (*październikowy przełom*) allowed American culture to enter communized Poland, and as a consequence, O'Neill's works were shown freely to Polish audiences. These plays survived numerous new productions later, each of them was also presented on Polish Television Theatre (that has existed since 1953 and since that time has presented over four thousand theatrical productions):

- *Anna Christie* (Teatr Polski, Bydgoszcz, 1962; Teatr im. Adama Mickiewicza, Częstochowa, 1962; Teatr Ziemi Łódzkiej, Łódź, 1962; Teatr Objazdowy (PPIE), Warszawa, 1963; later premiere –1984, Teatr Telewizji),
- *Księżyc świeci nieszczęśliwym* (Teatr Wybrzeże, Gdańsk, 1960; Teatr im. Juliusza Osterwy, Lublin, 1960; Teatr im. Juliusza Słowackiego, Kraków, 1961; Teatr Rozmaitości, Wrocław, 1961; Teatr Narodowy, Warszawa, 1961; Teatr Nowy, Łódź, 1968; later productions – Teatr Telewizji, 1971; Teatr Dramatyczny im. Aleksandra Węgierki, Białystok, 1978; Teatr im. Wandy Siemaszkowej, Rzeszów, 1984; Teatr Telewizji, 1988; Teatr Śląski im. Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, Katowice, 1989; Teatr im. Stefana Jaracza, Olsztyn, 1994),
- *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* under the titles *Po długim dniu zapada noc* (Teatr Śląski im. Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, Katowice, 1961), *U kresu dnia* (Stary Teatr im. Heleny Modrzejewskiej, Kraków, 1961) and *Zmierzch długiego dnia* (Teatr Dramatyczny, Wałbrzych, 1968; later productions – Teatr Współczesny, Warszawa, 1972; Teatr Ziemi Pomorskiej, Grudziądz, 1973; Teatr im. Stefana Jaracza, Łódź, 1973; Teatr im. Wojciecha Bogusławskiego, Kalisz, 1975; Teatr Polski, Wrocław, 1977; Teatr Śląski im. Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, Katowice, 1978; Teatr Telewizji, 1978; Teatr im. Stefana Żeromskiego, Kielce, 1980; Teatr Dramatyczny im. Jerzego Szaniawskiego, Płock, 1984; Teatr Dramatyczny, Legnica, 1987; Teatr im. Wandy Siemaszkowej, Rzeszów, 1992; Teatr Ateneum im. Stefana Jaracza, Warszawa, 1997; Teatr Telewizji, 1997; Teatr Logos, Łódź, 1999; Teatr Scena Prezentacje, Warszawa, 2006),

- *Pożądanie w cieniu więzów* (Teatr Polski, Warszawa, 1961; Teatr Ziemi Lubuskiej, Zielona Góra, 1961; later productions – Teatr im. Juliusza Osterwy, Lublin, 1972; Teatr Powszechny, Łódź, 1974; Teatr Śląski im. Stanisława Wyspiańskiego, Katowice, 1975; Teatr Telewizji, 1983; Teatr Polski, Bydgoszcz, 1987),
- *Żaloba przystoi Elektrze* (Teatr im. Juliusza Słowackiego, Kraków, 1962; later productions – Teatr Telewizji, 1965; Teatr im. Stefana Jaracza, Łódź, 2000) (Polski Wortal Teatralny).

Translations of these works have yet to be published, but were made only for theatre performances. Nevertheless, the status and high professional level of the translators testifies to the development of high interest and *geographically broad* popularity of O'Neill's plays in Poland. Among them were such famous Polish translators as: *Kazimierz Piotrowski* (1914–1985), who was one of the most active translators of O'Neill's plays into Polish, and who has also translated Ernest Miller Hemingway, Joseph Conrad, Mario Gianluigi Puzo, etc.; a professional translator of American literature (the translator of Polish language editions of William Ford Gibson's, Harold Pinter's, Joseph Conrad's, who personally knew Hemingway, Truman Capote, John Ernst Steinbeck) *Bronisław Zieliński* (1914–1985); *Maciej Słomczyński* (1922–1998) – Polish criminal writer (whose works were translated into 13 languages), scriptwriter, author of telecasts and one of the most prominent Polish translators (the author of Polish language versions of *Ulysses* and *Gulliver's Travels* (*Podróże Guliwera*), Polish translations of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), Geoffrey Chaucer, all Shakespeare's masterpieces), vice-president of International Society *James Joyce's Foundation* (Polski Wortal Teatralny).

It is worth noting that even in the first papers about O'Neill, numerous Polish critics paid special attention to the author's experiments in dramatic technique. As early as in 1960 Helsztyński argued in favour of the fact, that in *Lazarus Laughed* and *Strange Interlude* O'Neill revealed himself as an extraordinarily risky dramatist and experimenter in the sphere of expressionism (1960:117–118). In 1970s when some new fundamental tendencies and methods of expression appeared in world theatre, interest in this theme grew even more. O'Neill's expressionistic play *The Hairy Ape* became an eloquent example for many authors. Ewa Aumer marked that this play was *an extraordinary blend of the naturalistic, expressionistic and symbolic styles* (1972:40). The researcher noted that the word *technique* did not suit the description of O'Neill's profundity of expression, as he had always been in opposition to any dramatic and creative limitations. She called his every drama a skilful combination of different techniques and expression facilities, elements of different styles, which arose during the XXth century (1972:39). Przemiecka traced the symbolic signs of the plays (1970), Catherine Mounier revealed the expressionistic features of the dramas (1968), Przybylska

analyzed O'Neill as a naturalistic dramatist (1970). The rising popularity of Sigmund Freud's and Carl Gustav Jung's ideas of psycho-analysis and analytical psychology in Europe in 1970s caused the appearance of a series of articles written by Halina Filipowicz. The author has explored the influence of those prominent psychologists on the ideological direction and shades of meaning of O'Neill's plays (1970, 1972, 1974).

The critical papers about O'Neill at the beginning of 1970s show the burst of an active discussion about the division of his heritage into periods. It was provoked by the ambiguousness of his style, large scale of his stylistic amplitude, challenging character of the plays and the author's innovative modernistic dramatic manner. As a rule, his heritage is divided into 3 stages in Polish criticism: 1) 1916–1920; 2) 1920–1934; 3) from 1946 (taking into account the fact that during 1934–1946 the author did not write a single work). Although Filipowicz (1972) and Tarn (*Współczesny Dramat Amerykański* 1967) did not place the first one-act plays separately. Thus the main criterions for them were not the stylistic features of the plays but the change in O'Neill's way of thinking and treatment of life, which happened in the middle of 1930s. Tarn has also underestimated the works of the second period, stating that they *have the meaning only for history* (*Współczesny Dramat Amerykański* 1967:7). It looks surprisingly that such prominent researchers of O'Neill's dramas did not pay attention to the stylistic values of the first dramas, to the roots of dramatist's innovative talent and the ability to deepen into the human tragedy portrayed in them. However most of the latest Polish researchers paid special attention not only to the ideological direction and philosophical maintenance of the dramas, but also to their stylistic features, presence of naturalistic, symbolic, impressionistic and psycho-analytic elements together with the realistic background. The titles of the periods as well as the character of their analysis are vivid arguments for this. For example, Helsztyński called O'Neill's first dramatic attempts (one-act plays *Bound East for Cardiff, Ile, The Moon of the Caribbees, Anna Christie*, written under the impressions of the dramatist's voyages), created between the years 1916–1920 *a generous fruit* (1960:113). He claimed that they are the “talented combination of naturalism and realism”, which shows the specific features of O'Neill's dramatic writing: special mood and brightness, which stem from the exotic notions of a nautical theme, the absence of fallacy and moralization (*Anna Christie*), thrift of words, and exact use of expression facilities (1960:113). Aumer marked that already in these first works it was possible to find the embryos of the force and talent, which would fully appear in later works (1972:38–39).

O'Neill's works of the second period (1920–1939) have caused an extremely active polemic in Poland. Although all critics were unanimous in the fact that in 1920 (namely after he had created *The Emperor Jones*) the new phase of

O'Neill's dramatic development appeared, the assessments of the plays belonging to the 2nd stage were very ambiguous. For example, Helsingforski called the works written during 1920–1931 (published in *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill*, 1936) *the author's Folio*, comparing the value of these plays for the American theatre with the influence of Shakespeare on English drama (1960:115). On the contrary, in the preface to Polish edition of American dramas Tarn noticed that we would not have talked about the author at all, if he had not written his late plays, such as *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* (*Współczesny Dramat Amerykański* 1967:7).

All researchers have noticed O'Neill's tendency to deepen the theme of man-God relations, concepts of fate and unknown. The names of the second period – *mystical* (Tarn), *messianic and philosophical* (Przybylska), *fatalistic* (Filipowicz) – speak for this. Helsingforski has also noticed that the dramatist's works of this period became *speculative treatises*. He came to the conclusion that the author has changed his *role* from an artist into a thinker and prophet, who was trying to read all the life riddles (1960:119). Critics directed their attention to one of the dramatist's leading motives: the impossibility to attain harmony between a dream and reality, blindness of a person, who lives in the world of own fantasies without the awareness of their unreality.

The third (the last) period of the writer's work (1946–1953) is mainly called *deterministic*. The critics took into account the change, which took place in the author's views and outlook and which has been reflected in all his subsequent plays. They marked that the dramatist's attention passed from the sphere of man-God relations to the relations between people. Przybylska has made correlations between the change in the author's way of thinking and the changes in the ideological direction of the works of this period: *The writer has thrown away theology, and began to search the sources of life tragedy in everyday psychological and biological circumstances* (1970:114).

In 1970s (two decades after O'Neill's death) numerous conclusions and general surveys about the playwright's whole dramatic message appeared. Some scholars claimed that his last works had no intellectual value (Przybylska 1968:62), that characters were forgotten and doomed to tragic impossibility to change (Przybylska 1970:117). Others (Przemecka, Filipowicz) *justified* the dramatist and stated that [...] *in spite of deterministic elements in several of O'Neill's plays most of their protagonists make their own choices [...], achieve a degree of self-knowledge [...]* (Przemecka 1968:68). Filipowicz argued against the notion that O'Neill was a pessimistic dramatist. She advanced the thesis of *unique O'Neill's optimism*, giving his own words as the best argument: *There is a skin deep optimism and another higher optimism, not skin deep, which is usually confounded with pessimism... The noblest is eternally the most tragic. The people who succeed and do not push on to a greater failure are the spiritual middleclassers* (Filipowicz 1972:60). Stating the dramatist's value as that of a

real tragedian, the researcher claimed that Eugene O'Neill has given the answers to the fundamental questions of life and human fate, has created the real tragedies which have a value for all mankind. Her final conclusion was that O'Neill's message should be stated in the following way: *Man must realize that life is a hopeless hope, but still a hope* (1972:60).

In 1973 the first edition of several of O'Neill's plays appeared in Poland. The title of the book was *Eugene O'Neill. Teatr*. In it Polish readers could find 9 translations of the plays, chosen by Kazimierz Piotrowski from the three volume New York edition *The Nine Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (1936). The titles of the works testify that a compiler has made a very careful selection of those plays. As a consequence, Polish recipients could see the genre and stylish variety of O'Neill's dramatic writing and appreciate the range of his dramatic innovations only on the basis of this single volume. Piotrowski has chosen the philosophical meditative plays of the second period (1920–1939). He did not include the last, large scale autobiographic works, but presented for the Polish reader those plays which were the most interesting in consideration to the stylistic experiments of the author. He also added the works, which caused cardinaly opposite reviews and critical polemic. Consequently, the following plays were included into the book *Eugene O'Neill. Teatr*: the play, which caused large critical resonance and marked the beginning of the author's literary career – *Cesarz Jones* (*The Emperor Jones*, 1920); the play, which is now considered one of the classics of American drama, *Pożądanie w cieniu wiązów* (*Desire under the Elms*, 1924), and together with the trilogy *Żaloba przystoi Elektrze* (*Mourning Becomes Electra*, 1931) presents O'Neill's successful attempts in applying the elements of ancient tragedies while showing the current problems; a unique comedy (*Ah, Wilderness!*, 1933) under the unusual Polish title *Daleko od Sodomy*; the first large autobiographic work, one of the dramatist's most well-known masterpieces – *Przyjdzie na pewno* (*The Iceman Cometh*, written in 1939, printed in 1940, first staged in 1946), that was received numerous awards (1956 – Vernon Rice Award for Best Production; 1999 – Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Revival of a Play; 1999 – Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play); experimental expressionistic works *Włochata małpa* (*The Hairy Ape*, 1922), *Wielki Bóg Brown* (*The Great God Brown*, 1926) and *I śmiał się Łazarz* (*Lazarus Laughed*, 1925–26), the last being one of the most challenging in breaking the usual conventions of drama and presentation; an antiracist play about the black-skinned population in America *Wszystkie Boże dzieci są skrzydlate* (*All God's Chillun Got Wings*, 1924). The author's extraordinary technical experiments (the enormous duration of the play etc.) presented in the well-known play which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1928– *Strange Interlude*, 1923 – could be a reason for not including it to the book.

Polish texts were prepared by prominent translators Piotrowski (*Cesarz Jones*, *Pożądanie w cieniu wiązów*, *Żaloba przystoi Elektrze*, *Daleko od Sodomy*,

Przyjdzie na pewno), Słomczyński (*Włochata małpa, Wielki Bóg Brown, I śmiał się Łazarz, Wszystkie Boże dzieci są skrzydlate*) and Bronisław Zieliński (the co-author of the *Przyjdzie na pewno* translation).

In 1970s one of the most profound pieces of research on O'Neill appeared. The book *Eugeniusz O'Neill* was written by a world-famous literary critic Halina Filipowicz-Findlay (1975), who was born in Poland and is now a professor of the Slavic Languages and Literature Department in Wisconsin-Madison University (The USA). The book presented a detailed analysis of Eugene O'Neill's evolution as a dramatist, given together with the deep study and interpretation of his most prominent works. After the edition of the plays in 1973 and Filipowicz-Findlay's book the growth of dramatist's popularity in Polish theatrical world began, provoking two new premieres of his works – *Przyjdzie na pewno* (*Teatr Dramatyczny*, Warsaw, 1976) and *Daleko od Sodomy* (*Teatr Telewizji*, 1976).

From the beginning of 1980s and till today the whole extend and problematic range of the articles about the author has been narrowing. The authors wrote about single plays and specified the functions of particular expression facilities. They either deepened into the analysis of certain elements (for example, use of musical and sound effects, masks as innovative dramatic techniques (Wobożil 1981), (Przemecka 2000) or touched upon a wide comparative context (Michael J. Mikoś, David Mulroy *Wpływ „Chłopów” Reymonta na „Pożądanie w cieniu więzów”* O'Neill'a 1984; Lesław Eustachiewicz *Od O'Neill'a do Bondy* 1985). Since 2000 the heritage of O'Neill has been completely ignored by Polish critics. The last paper about the author is presumably the article by Przemecka *W.B.Yeats's and Eugene O'Neill's use of masks* (2000).

In general, the interest of Polish readers, critics, researchers and spectators to Eugene O'Neill's works was not so broad and active, as, for example, that of the British audience. It might be caused by: more distant geographical, cultural and ideological differences, remoteness of literary and theatrical traditions of Polish and American people, as compared to the same Anglo-Saxon factors in Anglo-American relations. However O'Neill's plays have provoked a strong and rather stable reception taking into account the numerous translations of his dramas and publications about the author, and also because of the extraordinary large number of performances (also modern challenging interpretations) of the classic's plays. O'Neill's dramatic writing and his ideas have often caused numerous and quite contrary interpretations in Poland. It is also evident that the most adequate assessment of his technical experiments and role in the world literature was made by those Polish critics who took into account the author's own observations about his works, his own explanations and judgments about drama and theatre.

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