

# Long day's journey from Rome

## Down the Nights and Down the Days

Eugene O'Neill's Catholic Sensibility

Edward L. Shaughnessy

University of Notre Dame Press, \$28.95, 220 pp.

### Peter Quinn

**I**n the last act of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, James Tyrone and his son, Edmund, go another round in their endless verbal sparring. Edmund mocks the old man's Irish-Catholic chauvinism: "Yes, facts don't mean a thing, do they? What you want to believe, that's the only truth! [Derisively] Shakespeare was an Irish Catholic, for example." Tyrone stands his ground. "So he was," he tells his son. "The proof is in his plays."

In *Down the Nights and Down the Days: Eugene O'Neill's Catholic Sensibility*, Edward Shaughnessy doesn't try to do to O'Neill what Tyrone did to Shakespeare. The intent of this probing and incisive book isn't to claim that the greatest American playwright was a closet Catholic whose faith is encrypted in his plays. Yet, while Shaughnessy doesn't revise the standard accounts of O'Neill's loss of faith, he does far more than pay lip service to O'Neill's religious upbringing. Shaughnessy faces the harder, deeper questions: What is there in O'Neill's work that is specifically Catholic? How important was Catholicism to his vision? What is its significance in his plays?

For Shaughnessy, the key word is sensibility, which he defines as "a cultural imprint on memory...an individual's own psychological experience in receiving the world view and the estab-

lished values of the group." O'Neill's mind and imagination—his sensibility—were formed in the crucible of postfamine Irish Catholicism of the nineteenth century.

The famine was the defining event of modern Irish history, a period of suffering and humiliation in which millions either died or were scattered to Britain, Canada, and the United States. Many found themselves, as James Tyrone says of his family, without "clothes enough to wear, or food enough to eat."

In the wake of this trauma, the Catholic church was confirmed as the repository of Irish identity. The postfamine church was the antidote to the disorder, disruption, and dislocation that marked the Irish passage from rural serfdom to the capitalist metropolises of England and North America. Educator, disciplinarian, companion, comforter, and organizer of the Irish wherever they were, the church was an instrument of ethnic survival as well as a guarantor of personal salvation.

The church in America was shaped by the Irish and reflected their experience. The nativist hostility that the church faced reinforced its emphasis on discipline, loyalty, and obedience. Although, as Shaughnessy points out, this "created a climate unpropitious to the free expression of opinion," it was "not against the will of the faithful."

O'Neill was among those who rebelled. His discovery of his mother's morphine addiction was a shattering experience, and he found little solace in the harsh, unyielding regime of the Christian Brothers, his teachers at the time. He set out on his own path, despairing of any God-given answer to humanity's broken, corrupted condition.

Describing another famous artist-apostate possessed of a Catholic sensibility, the literary scholar Beryl Schloss-

man writes of James Joyce that his "Catholicism, often dismissed as an artifact, is at the source of his symbolic vision and its imaginative constructs; it led him to read the writings of the great mystics and perhaps to conceive of his own experience of language in their terms."

As Shaughnessy makes clear, O'Neill's Catholicism was also more than "an artifact." Follower of Freud and Nietzsche though he was, O'Neill didn't regard sin as a historical curiosity. Even in a world without God, the old religious definitions held true. Sin separated us from one another. We suffered because of it, and we inflicted that suffering on others. "In all my plays," O'Neill said, "sin is punished and redemption takes place."

Shaughnessy carefully examines the impact of O'Neill's enduring Catholic mindset on specific plays and, in so doing, enriches our understanding of these works. Beyond that, Shaughnessy puts in perspective as never before the tension between O'Neill's despair and his desire to believe.

Unlike Joyce, O'Neill felt more bereft than liberated by his loss of faith. He wrote to Sister Mary Leo Tierney, in 1928, of the blend of emptiness and longing that had replaced his belief in God: "Perhaps they also serve who only search in vain! That they search—and not without knowing a black despair that believers never know—that is their justification and pride as they stare blindly at the blind sky! The Jesus who said, 'Why hast Thou forsaken me?' must surely understand them—and love them a little, I think, and forgive them if no Savior comes today to make these blind to see who may not cure themselves."

It is either a great irony or a mark of God's own taste for strange interludes that, though O'Neill remained an unbeliever, he was instrumental in the con-



version of a saint. Dorothy Day traveled in the same radical circles as O'Neill in Greenwich Village during World War I. It was there in a saloon appropriately named "The Hellhole" that he recited for her Francis Thompson's poem, "The Hound of Heaven."

Never a cynic in the purest sense—a critic who sees self-interest lurking behind every human act—O'Neill played, in the case of Dorothy Day, a cynic in the original meaning of its Greek root: *kyón*, or hound. Shaughnessy recounts that, along with reciting Thompson's poem, O'Neill urged her to read Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. Acting as God's mastiff perhaps, the playwright nudged the pilgrim forward on her journey to Rome.

He chose a different road for himself. He searched the labyrinthine ways of his family's past—addiction, guilt, unspoken love, articulated disdain, the buried wound of Irish dispossession and defeat, the war of fathers and sons, and husbands and wives, black legacies of greed and desire, long day's agony turning into barren, bitter years. Dorothy Day continued to pray for him. "There is no time with God," she wrote after his death, "and I would be sinning against hope, faith, and charity if I did not believe that my prayers, and whoever else is praying for the soul of Gene, are heard."

In the end, they both found fame and immortality of the human sort. Who knows what he found beyond? In the "Father's house are many mansions," and could it be, thanks to her prayers, there was a place for him, a stage beside the great banquet hall in which the gifted and the ordinary have equal place?

Edward Shaughnessy's achievement is to give us an eloquent, insightful, sympathetic perspective on O'Neill's relationship to the Catholic faith that is utterly free of academic polemicizing or sectarian axe-grinding. This is a book that will be of enduring interest to readers and scholars of O'Neill, to students of the theater, and to pilgrim souls of every kind. □

Peter Quinn is the author of *The Banished Children of Eve*.

## PHILOSOPHER PRESIDENT

### **The Art of the Impossible** Politics as Morality in Practice Václav Havel

Knopf, \$24, 373 pp.

Jean Bethke Elshtain

**P**resident Václav Havel of the Czech Republic is one of the great spokesmen for the "return to Europe" of countries formerly compelled to inhabit that political nowhere called "Eastern Europe." He is an urbane intellectual, a playwright, and a moralist. That he is also the president of a nation-state is for him one of life's great ironies, even miracles, and he claims that he can scarcely believe it most of the time: one day an infamous dissident slated for harassment and incarceration; the next a famous dissident addressing hundreds of thousands gathered in Wenceslaus Square in defiance of a corrupt, authoritarian regime; and then a bit further on,

the president of (then) Czechoslovakia proclaiming, on January 1, 1990: "People, your government has returned to you!"

It has not been an easy return. Havel knew it would not be. In October 1992, in a conversation with a small group gathered in Prague, Havel was sober to the point of being somber. The two republics were breaking up. The process of crafting a new constitution was then frustrated—so much so that Havel declared that he felt rather like locking up a group of clever constitutional lawyers and not permitting them to leave the building until they had forged a draft constitution. And, as well, Europe, his part of Europe, had "entered the long tunnel at the end of the light." This was a brilliant reversal of a standard metaphor. Havel has never been a utopian; indeed, much of his life has been dedicated to defeating all utopian politics, all ends-of-histories and overarching world views that promote ugly social engineering and destroy human freedom, mutual self-help, and even minimal decency.

And yet the title of this book is *The Art*

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