

EXORCISM
A PLAY IN ONE ACT
EUGENE O'NEILL

FOREWORD BY

EDWARD ALBEE

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Yale

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Typescript facsimile and endpapers

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FOREWORD

Exorcism—the Play O’Neill Tried to Destroy

EDWARD ALBEE

In the middle 1950s, while I was still safely in my twenties, I wrote my first play. It was called *The Zoo Story*; it involved a meeting in New York City’s Central Park of two men, one of whom had come there to read on a Sunday afternoon. By the end of the play one of the men was dead, the action of the play concerning itself much more with the why of the event than the event itself.

The play had its world premiere in West Berlin, Germany, at the Werkstatt of the Schiller Theater on September 28, 1959—in German!—on a double bill with Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*. (How fortunate can a young playwright be!)

The U.S. premiere was (in English!) on the same double bill at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York City’s Greenwich Village on January 12, 1960. The evening was well reviewed and *The Zoo Story* ran for nearly three years.

I had quit my job delivering telegrams for Western Union when I went to Berlin for the premiere, and I have spent the years since—mostly in the United States—writing plays and essays, teaching, and directing.

As I mentioned above, *The Zoo Story* was my first play—and there it sits in all definings: Edward Albee’s first play. And I think of it that way. The only possible complication here is that I wrote three or four plays *before* I wrote *The Zoo Story*—before I wrote my first play—before I wrote my Opus 1.

We all do this, of course; we commit student work—sometimes a lot of it—before we have accomplished something we feel is professional or good enough to be singled out as worthy of inclusion in a corpus.

Felix Mendelssohn, the composer, as an example, wrote fourteen string quartets—including one, the final one, I think, which contains a fugue worthy of J. S. Bach—which he listed as student work—pre-opus. Painters do it; poets do it; we all do it. We finally decide “Okay, this is good enough to list it among the pieces I’m willing to take credit for.” (Or the blame for.)

In the case of *The Zoo Story*, it *was* a lot better than the stuff I wrote before it, rather as if my talent—such as it was—had matured enough to have it examined seriously. We separate our student work from our theoretically mature work, and we’re usually right.

What do we do, however, about a playwright who decides to destroy his work, especially—as in Eugene O’Neill’s case—when the usual career designations (student; professional) are not helpful?

His play *Exorcism*, the subject here, is not a very important milestone in his development as a dramatist, and I suspect his drive to do away with it has less to do with its subject—O’Neill’s own attempted suicide—than it does with his

dissatisfaction with the play's structure and resolution—especially the fact of the play's anti-dramatic second and final scene, which takes the play nowhere and has little to do with dramatic logic. And we all know that if the facts get in the way of dramatic logic they are expendable.

What is fascinating about *Exorcism* is how much it *does* have to do with *The Iceman Cometh*, his long and ungainly and deeply involving memory play about his youthful life and hard times, more or less on the streets. *Exorcism* could be a scene from *The Iceman Cometh*—indeed, would make it a better play.

While *The Iceman Cometh* lacks the clarity and focus of O'Neill's masterpiece—*Long Day's Journey into Night*—it stands out as a worthy confrere, as one of the two plays he wrote which deal honestly and fully with the author as subject matter. They are O'Neill's two most revealing plays and are the most moving.

O'Neill has always seemed several playwrights to me—all instructive and skillful but the work made, most of it, out of whole cloth you wouldn't call finest wool. It is with *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* that O'Neill dealt most perceptively with his demons, and it is for this reason that *Exorcism* is worth examining as an essential part of that fabric.

NEW YORK CITY, 2011

INTRODUCTION

Time and the Archive

LOUISE BERNARD

There is much to be said for the relationship between Time and the Archive, each term capitalized here as befitting its symbolic function. Time—that ineffable thing which signifies the broad sweep of history—is at once deep and long and granular, an (in)finite string of fleeting moments that constitute something like duration. Although human endeavor appears to follow a teleological thrust, chronology is equally tied to happenstance and hence to a host of disjointed patterns that refuse easy coherence. Even as we break down time into digestible parts (days, years, centuries, or broad, expansive eras), such arbitrary units necessarily rub up against their opposite: the intangible stream of human consciousness as a fluid movement of thought, or elusive recollection. Thus, when we speak of time, we also speak, inevitably, of memory, of piecing together the import of events large and small, which brings us, by association, to the figure of the archive itself.

The archive, as the careful assemblage and ordering of documents into discrete bodies of information that capture and record the various workings of the public sphere, provides much fodder for the ever-subjective production of history. Yet, while the archive’s origins are bureaucratic in nature, the idea of the archive as it relates to creativity acquires added resonance when we consider not only the aesthetic lure of the archive as a mode of artistic practice (the playful use of archival accoutrements—filing cabinet, typewriter, index card—in the work, for instance, of the Surrealists) but the way in which the paper trail itself presents an object lesson in the machinations of biography—the interplay of presence and absence that undergirds the telling of an individual’s life story.

The Eugene O’Neill archive at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University comprises four collections classified according to provenance: the Eugene O’Neill Papers, the Eugene O’Neill Collection, the Agnes Boulton Collection of Eugene O’Neill, and the Eugene O’Neill, Jr. Collection. The Eugene O’Neill Papers, the “organic” hub of the archive, were a gift of O’Neill and his third wife, Carlotta, and the estate of Carlotta Monterey O’Neill following her death in 1970. The Papers date from 1942, when O’Neill, fearing for his work’s safety during the war years, distributed his original manuscripts between the Museum of the City of New York and his short-lived alma mater Princeton, with work relating to his later plays sent to the Yale Library. After the war, as O’Neill came to terms with his deteriorating health and his physical inability to write, he donated his remaining unpublished writings and other materials to Yale, the only institution from which he accepted an honorary degree.

Although O’Neill’s papers and his reading library are, in keeping with the uprooted and often mobile nature of the archive, partly dispersed, the Eugene O’Neill

Papers at the Beinecke Library (stretching over ninety linear feet), along with the related O'Neill collections, provide in the fullness of O'Neill's careful keeping and collation (aided by Carlotta in the role of irrepressible helpmate), a vivid sense of the writer attached to the very materiality of his work. While we find the expected editorial process of manuscript drafts—holograph and typescript, corrected across multiple versions—or varied ephemera such as programs, clippings, and personal and production photographs, along with the obligatory correspondence, we also find those personal effects that reveal something about the man and his surrounds beyond that which can be directly discerned in his artistic output. As such, the archive extends outside the boundary of mere papers to include a host of book-related items—bookends, bookplates, various kinds of stationery, and favored writing tools (notably O'Neill's Eberhard Faber Black Wing pencils)—as well as locks of Carlotta's hair, money that O'Neill won in a craps game on the SS *Coblentz* in 1928, O'Neill and Carlotta's engraved gold rings, and their beloved Dalmatian Blemie's dog collar. The working papers, personal items, and other decorative pieces or memorabilia evoke a particular, evolving kind of picture, one that is attached, irrevocably, to the relentless passing of time—from photographs of O'Neill as a baby to his death certificate and autopsy report. The archive represents, therefore, a distillation of experience, a journey at once attached to the singular life and yet somehow disassociated from it—a wealth of experience replete with incredible highs and impossible lows, all collapsed into a series of neatly ordered boxes.

It is with the idea of Time and the Archive in mind, then, that I broach the discovery of O'Neill's famously "lost" one-act play *Exorcism* (1919)—a play, based on his suicide attempt in 1912, that saw a standard two-week run by the Province-town Players in New York City in the spring of 1920. The script, however, was one that O'Neill chose to recall and to dispose of, effectively deleting the text from his corpus of work, leaving behind only the trace of mixed reviews, including one particularly glowing notice from Alexander Woollcott writing in the *New York Times*, along with the season's playbill as witness to its relatively brief appearance on the stage. An undated early sketch and a record in his aptly, if torturously, titled workbook "List of all plays ever written by me, including those I later destroyed, giving where and when they were written" further delineate the apparently short span that existed between composition and erasure. As far as the trope of loss goes, however, the play was, of course, not so much mislaid or forgotten as willfully destroyed by the writer's own hand, and yet this decisive mark of authorial agency was, in turn, radically undercut by the unwitting design of O'Neill's second wife, Agnes Boulton, who, at the time of their divorce in 1929, failed to return to O'Neill certain manuscript materials in her possession.

While O'Neill's often-stormy relationship with Carlotta Monterey is glossed over in his many loving inscriptions to her, a final barbed reproach toward Agnes, the woman he deserted in favor of Carlotta's charms and whom Carlotta, in turn, attempted to excise from the historical record whenever possible, is documented on the title leaf of the first volume of his Work Diary (1924–1933), wherein O'Neill writes: "(1925 from memory & few records, diary of that year having been stolen and sold by former wife ...)." The parenthetical accusation seems to nod its head to that

most gothic of documents—the “purloined letter.” But, whatever her crime, Agnes had not, in actuality, sold O’Neill’s “Scribbling” diary for 1925, and as retained in her own papers, it remains the only evidence of the more detailed journaling that O’Neill readily discarded once he had copied all of the information he wished to preserve in the separate Work Diary, the latter being a simplified listing of a given day’s activities or preoccupations. Nor did Agnes sell the typescript of *Exorcism* that she had also apparently kept and, whether “stolen” or not, later gifted, probably sometime in the 1940s, to the screenwriter and producer Philip Yordan, with the now near-cryptic “something you said you’d like to have” jotted on a label, the envelope adorned—such kitsch irreverence—with Christmas stickers. That the play should emerge out of Philip Yordan’s own papers, discovered by his widow, Faith Yordan, in the process of sorting through her late husband’s archive, some ninety years after it was first written, produced, believed destroyed, and cast into the depths of O’Neillian lore, gives one pause as to the secret life of manuscripts—the means by which such wayward paperwork can seemingly take on an existence of its own. When the historian John Lewis Gaddis, in *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*, considers how time and space act upon historical methodology, he concludes that “all we can say for sure is that we’ll only in part be remembered for what we consider significant about ourselves, or from what we choose to leave behind in the documents and artifacts that will survive us.” The assertion, we might note, is one that must be couched in a certain recognition that those emblems of the past “that will survive us” do so with a volition that often operates beyond the pale of our presumed control.

As such, we might read *Exorcism* in light of what Freud termed the uncanny, here the reemergence or unintentional return of that which is purposefully “buried” or repressed. Just as O’Neill’s suicide bid was abortive, its reenactment introducing a whiff of the Beckettian absurd into his characteristically somber play, so his attempt to destroy, on paper, that which would become a forceful subject in his work, did little to thwart the manuscript’s strange buoyancy, its ability to resurface, out of the blue, after so many decades. It should perhaps come as no surprise that Freud’s essay “The Uncanny,” itself a reworking of an “old paper dug out of a drawer,” was first published in 1919 and is therefore contemporaneous with O’Neill’s lost play. The seeming foreignness of the uncanny experience, one we might align, for example, with the odd sensation of *déjà vu*, is wedded to the idea of the familiar, and it is familiarity in its absolute sense, the autobiographical thrust of O’Neill’s work from his early seafaring plays to the bared soul of *Long Day’s Journey into Night* (published posthumously by Yale University Press in 1956), that signals his compulsion to repeat, to return to the scene of those formative experiences—scenes that would stamp, so indelibly, his life as an artist. “It was a great mistake, my being born a man,” says Edmund in act 4 of *Long Day’s Journey*. “I would have been much more successful as a sea gull or a fish. As it is, I will always be a stranger who never feels at home, who does not really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death!”

If *Exorcism*, with all the terse economy of the one-act form and its close alignment to the Aristotelian unities of time, place, and action, is understood (at least in regard to its initial conception) to be a play about catharsis, a play that heralds, to

some degree, O'Neill's transition from fledgling playwright to master of his craft (he receives three of his four Pulitzer Prizes in the following decade, the first for *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920), then it also reflects the uncanny significance of time in O'Neill's work and career broadly understood. He was to some degree obsessed with the idea of the eternally deferred, that which is unreachable and, therefore, in essence, failed—the idea, in terms of temporality, of what we call tomorrow, the day that never comes. It is a trope that O'Neill grapples with in his only published fiction, the short story “Tomorrow” (written in 1916 and appearing in *Seven Arts* the following year), which tells the tale of Jimmy Byth (in the story named “Jimmy Anderson” and later “Jimmy Tomorrow” in *The Iceman Cometh*), aspiring journalist, professional ne'er-do-well, and O'Neill's close friend and fellow roomer at Jimmy “the Priest” Condon's flophouse on Fulton Street in lower Manhattan.

The sense of foreboding for O'Neill's first-person narrator in “Tomorrow” is palpable—“my phantoms, however foolish, refused to be laid. I got dressed in a hurry, anxious to escape from this room, bright with sunlight, dark with uncanny threat”—an air of dour anticipation that the playwright knew only too well from his own decision to overdose on Veronal tablets just a few years earlier. That it is Jimmy Byth (called simply “Jimmy” in *Exorcism*) who helped to save O'Neill in 1912 but who would himself commit suicide in the very same rooming house the following year (the painful memory of which is summoned afresh in Parritt's fatal fall at the end of *The Iceman Cometh*) illuminates the extent to which death and despair marked O'Neill as he struggled to find himself in the world, leaving behind his life at sea and his weak attempts at poetry, reaching as it were for a modern, dramatic sensibility previously unseen in the American theater.

The writing of “Tomorrow” as a veiled prelude to *Exorcism* becomes all the more poignant when we consider that O'Neill's morphine-addicted mother, Ella Quinlan O'Neill, had also attempted suicide, that it was rumored that his paternal grandfather, Edward O'Neil [sic], had possibly been a suicide, and that both of his sons, Eugene, Jr., and Shane, would, in later years, take their own lives. (Carlotta's third husband, Ralph Barton, committed suicide not long after she married O'Neill.) As such, *Exorcism* becomes something more than the embellished story of O'Neill's brush with death that he first conveyed to Agnes and to his friend the theater critic George Jean Nathan. Rather, as a preparatory sketch for the epic works that will come toward the end of his career, the play signifies his first attempt to commit to paper and to the stage (the most intimate and visceral of spaces) a crucial moment not only in his literal biography but in the overarching trajectory of his writing life. Writing, for O'Neill, was indeed tantamount to salvation. He kept writing, he said, because he had “such a love of it. I was highly introspective, intensely nervous and self-conscious. . . . When I was writing I was alive.” The underlying sentiment of this assertion, seemingly of the moment and yet tied simultaneously to the past tense, is in accord with the mandate of the archive itself, with the purpose not only of safekeeping—often of the most fragile and ephemeral of things—but of rendering in a tangible way the artistic imprints of longevity and legacy; the archive as a vestige of immortal presence.

And so we come to the crux of the matter, why the autobiographical subject of *Exorcism* might inform the play's reclamation and publication above and beyond

O'Neill's express wish that it be struck from the authorial record, his insistence, as he wrote to Provincetown Player Frank Shay in 1922, that "the sooner all memory of it dies the better pleased I'll be." While O'Neill was utterly decisive in his wish to destroy the play (whether for personal or creative reasons, or a combination of both), we might turn in this instance to Albert Camus, who proposes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "if the only significant history of human thought were to be written, it would have to be the history of its successive regrets and impotences." There is a certain existential insight to be gained by that which is otherwise deemed failed or flawed, but, more important, it is the connection between O'Neill's "early" attempt to harness the autobiographical impulse and the "late" work of his magnum opus *Long Day's Journey into Night* (set in the summer of 1912 and reflective of his earlier suicide attempt) that enriches our understanding of the playwright's development over time. Such reclamation, however, must be appreciated with the nuance of biographical context, for needless to say, it was Carlotta who willfully overturned O'Neill's equally explicit direction to restrict publication of *Long Day's Journey* until twenty-five years after his death. As executrix of the O'Neill estate and steward of her husband's memory, Carlotta understood only too well that the posthumous work, for all of its intimate grief, was the crowning achievement of her husband's career.

We are reminded that even as the archive is associated ostensibly with the past, it is not fixed or static but a fluid, shifting entity—a literal, if metaphoric, concept endlessly reshaped by the vagaries of the rare book marketplace, by scholarly engagement and imagination, by new technologies that endeavor to open up the repository to the broader contours of an increasingly digitized world. And so it is in the spirit of the archive's reinvigoration (attuned to the interplay of time and chance and the unexpected ways in which the hidden comes to light) that we embrace the reemergence of this one-act play by Eugene O'Neill, a play that offers us a new portrait of the artist as a young man.

LOUISE BERNARD

CURATOR OF PROSE AND DRAMA

YALE COLLECTION OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

Exorcism

Characters

Ned Malloy

Jimmy, his roommate

Major Andrews

Edward Malloy, Ned's father

Nordstrum

Scene

A small bedroom on the top story of a squalid rooming house occupying the three upper floors of a building on a side street near the downtown waterfront, New York City—the ground floor being a saloon of the lowest type of grog shop. On the left of the room, forward, a rickety chest of drawers. Farther back, a window looking out on a fire escape. To the rear of the window, a washstand with bowl and pitcher, and then another window. A pile of books, stacked up against the wall, lies on the floor in the left corner. In the rear, left, a door opening on the hallway. To the right of door, a cot with a thin straw mattress, dirty blanket, and a lumpy pillow without a case placed at the end nearest the door. Against the right wall, another cot with the same meagre equipment. The pillow of this cot is set at the end toward the rear. Two chairs are in the room—one left center, the other by the head of the cot on the right. On the latter are placed a small lighted lamp with a smudgy chimney, a package of cheap tobacco, matches, cigarette papers, etc.

The room is filthy. The walls and low ceiling, white-washed in some remote past, are spotted with the greasy imprints of groping hands and fingers. The plaster has scaled off in places showing the lathes beneath. The floor is carpeted with an accumulation of old newspapers, cigarette butts, ashes, burnt matches, etc.

It is just after dark of a miserable foggy day in the middle of March some years ago. The windows, stained by the sediment of old rains, glimmer grayly with a fresh layer of moisture.

At the rise of the curtain Jimmy is discovered lying on the cot at right reading a newspaper by the light of the lamp on the chair. It is cold in the room, so although he is fully dressed, he has the blanket drawn up well over his shoulders. After a moment

he throws this off with a grunt of annoyance at having to disturb himself, puts his newspaper aside, and swings his feet to the floor. Sitting on the side of the cot, he fills his corncob pipe and lights it, shivering in the chill air. He is an undersized stout little man of forty dressed in a worn and shiny black suit. His face is that of a fat but anemic baby—round, flabby-cheeked, pasty-complected, loose-lipped. His eyes of a faded blue stare mildly from their wrinkled pouches. His untrimmed hair, thin and graying, sticks limply to his skull. There is an air about him of a meticulous neatness gone to seed. His high wing collar is soiled, the white shirt front beneath the cheap bow tie is crumpled and grimy. He speaks with a careful precision but the tone of the voice itself is vague. His pudgy little hands tremble as he lights his pipe.

Steps are heard from the hallway stairs and Jimmy turns his face expectantly. The door in the rear is opened and Ned Malloy enters. He is a tall slender young fellow of twenty-four dressed in a shabby brown raincoat over a frayed, gray sack suit. His face is oval, lean, the cheek bones prominent, lines of sleeplessness and dissipation deep about the eyes and mouth. His mouth is wide, the lips twisted by a bitter, self-mocking irony. His eyes are large and blue, with the peculiar possessed expression of the inveterate dreamer's. His forehead, under a thick mass of black hair, is broad and wide; but his chin reveals weakness, indecision. The upper section of his face seems at war with the lower, giving the whole an appearance of conflict, of inner disharmony. Just now this is intensified, for he is evidently in an abnormal state of strain.

JIMMY

*Suddenly brightening up and beaming with friendliness as he sees his roommate.
Hello, Ned.*

NED

*Putting his black slouch hat on the washstand and throwing his raincoat in a heap on the floor—shortly.
Hello, Jimmy.*

JIMMY

*Contentedly puffing at his pipe, ready to engage in endless conversation.
It's a rotten night out, isn't it? I thought for a while of going over to Brooklyn—you know, to see that party I was telling you about. I'd catch him in at night, I think, and I'm sure I could make a touch on him for a ten spot—
Hopefully,
maybe a twenty. We used to be pals in the old days—years ago—when I was on easy street and he wasn't. I've helped him many a time and never reminded him of it.*

NED

*With sudden savagery.
Then it's hopeless, you fool, don't you see, dammit!*

JIMMY

Taken aback.

Eh?

NED

If you really helped him that other time, I mean. You won't get a nickel from him. Why, you poor nut, he'll only take delight in seeing you down and out—and helping to keep you there. The best you can hope for will be a snivelling moral lecture on the evils of drink—and his advice to mend your ways, which he'll hope you won't take.

JIMMY

In a hurt tone.

Oh, I don't know. People aren't all as bad as you'd like to make out.

NED

Caustically.

Aren't they? Well, I haven't seen them all.

He has the air of being excited by a false interest in this conversation as if he were trying to distract his thoughts.

JIMMY

Anyway, I'm glad I didn't go. I waited around in the bar downstairs to see if it wouldn't clear. Tom Henderson was in. He blew me to a couple of whiskies.

NED

Hmm! I was wondering where your optimism came from.

JIMMY

But the beastly drizzle kept right on. It hadn't let up when you came in, had it?

NED

No. Muck under foot and muck overhead—and in between. God's giving us the naked truth today.

JIMMY

A bit shocked.

You shouldn't say that.

Then in a consoling tone.

You've got the blue devils today, haven't you?

NED

I haven't had two whiskies.

JIMMY

Henderson slipped me a dollar when he was going. We can go downstairs and—

NED

Gruffly.

No.

Then more kindly.

Thanks just the same.

JIMMY

With a grin.

You *must* be feeling queer. Later, then?

NED

With a grim smile.

Later? Supposing there wasn't any—

JIMMY

You mean I'll spend it before? No, Ned, I promise.

NED

Don't be a fool. I wasn't talking of that. I was speaking of— later.

JIMMY

You *have* got the blues all right. I don't blame you. It's this devilish weather. It's enough to— Well, cheer up! It's the middle of March now. Spring will soon be here.

NED

Sardonically.

That'll be a blessing!

JIMMY

Taking this at its face value.

Yes, won't it? Do you know, Ned, spring is my favorite season of the year.

NED

Suddenly.

How long have you been living here?

JIMMY

Six years, more or less. Why?

NED

I should think all the seasons would be alike in this rotten dump.

JIMMY

A bit huffily.

Come now, Ned, this place isn't so bad. Where else could we get a room on such long credit as Old John allows us?

NED

Yes, I suppose I ought to be grateful that, thanks to knowing you, I had this place to land in when the Old Man kicked me from the family fireside. Well, I was grateful then; but that was six months ago.

Excitedly.

Anyway, I'm leaving it now.

JIMMY

Astonished.

You're leaving? For good?

NED

With a harsh laugh.

You're damn right—for good!

JIMMY

Are you going home? Has your father—

NED

Welcomed me back to his bosom? No.

JIMMY

Then where are you going?

NED

If I knew that—

He pauses—then adds quietly.

I'd be a wise guy indeed.

Then excitedly.

But I'm talking rot. What was it you were holding forth about?

Sardonically.

Oh, yes—the beautiful spring!

JIMMY

Defensively.

Well, it is beautiful. Of course, you don't get much chance to see it here in the city, but still I walk down to Battery Park every morning as soon as it gets warm enough.

NED

Somberly.

It wasn't very beautiful down at the Battery today—a miserable, soaking strip of mud, the trees dead, and the bay as filthy as an overgrown sewer.

JIMMY

Surprised.

You were down there today?

NED

For six hours—till it got dark.

JIMMY

But what were you doing—

NED

Sitting on a bench—with the rest of the flotsam.

JIMMY

In the rain? Why, you must be soaked! You'll catch a cold sure.

NED

What's the difference?

Irritably.