

A Most Distinguished Hungarian Scholar of Eugene O'Neill In Memoriam Péter Egri (1932-2002)

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Péter Egri (1932-2002) would have attained the age of ninety this year, had he not been, unfortunately, dead for twenty years. He became professor and chair of the English Department of Kossuth Lajos University, Debrecen, in the 1970s, then professor and for some years chair of the English Department in Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. The range of his scholarly interests was both wide and far-reaching. Shortly after Egri's untimely death Zoltán Abádi Nagy wrote "A Memorial Tribute," which says: "Péter Egri, who excelled in English, Irish and American comparative studies and aesthetics, was a man of several careers in literature alone; with musical and fine arts history and aesthetics added, a combination emerged that was unique on the Hungarian scene of the past few decades" (10). The richness of Egri's scholarly production is available in sixteen books, some edited volumes, over two hundred studies and essays, as well as shorter writings published in Hungary and in some other countries. In view of the scope of his achievement he can rightly be called a "scholar of comparative literary and cultural studies." As such, he was both an Anglicist and an Americanist, who addressed works by William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Aldous Huxley, J. M. Synge, G. B. Shaw, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Eugene O'Neill, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard and others in his publications. At the beginning of his career, Egri also researched and wrote about modern Hungarian authors including Attila József and Tibor Déry.¹

Especially from the 1980s on, Egri had started to publish studies and books on Eugene O'Neill, the great American representative of modernist drama whose oeuvre spanned from just before World War I to just after World War II, exploring issues such as identity crisis, the frustration of love and the gaps between individual desires and social obligations. His research of O'Neill, Egri must have realized, should be firmly rooted in a thorough-going study of the European modernist theatres, which he accomplished in the book *Törésvonalak: drámai irányok az európai századfordulón* (Faultlines: Dramatic Trends at the Turn of the Century in Europe, 1983). By writing this book, he actually explored potential modernist influences on O'Neill, coming from Wilde, Strindberg, Chekhov and Yeats, to mention only a few of the relevant

1 Some of the data and ideas in this article have also been published in my book *Approaches to Irish Theatre through a Hungarian's Lens: Essays and Review Articles*. Pécs: UP, Institute of English Studies, 2018. 67-83.

authors. One of Egri's essays written in the wake of the book, "Synge and O'Neill: Inspiration and Influence" (1987), joins *Törésvonalak* in mapping the experimental strategies of modern European drama by tracing echoes of Syngean motifs and dramaturgies in O'Neill's work.

Egri's essays on O'Neill written in the 1980s address a great variety of topics including questions of form, genre and psychosocial issues, over a range of O'Neill's plays from the early work to the late masterpieces.² A significant part of these essays appeared abroad, mainly in the US, for instance several of them in *The Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* including two articles about how O'Neill fared on the Hungarian stage, or in edited collections such as *Critical Essays on Eugene O'Neill* (edited by James J. Martine, Boston MA: G. K. Hall, 1984). The latter volume published Egri's analysis of the interface between alienation and form in the expressionist play *The Hairy Ape* (1922), which is cited, among others, by Robert M. Dowling's seminal biography, *Eugene O'Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (Yale University Press, 2014). A recent book, *Eugene O'Neill and the Reinvention of Theatre Aesthetics* by Thierry Dubost refers to and argues with Egri's views on the intricacies of form in O'Neill's early plays (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019). In *The Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill* Brenda Murphy refers to his comparative work on the short stories as antecedents for the plays in the case of Chekhov and O'Neill (240). Eileen Hermann-Miller's *The Misprized Modernist* (Davis: University of California, 1998) also quotes from Egri's analysis of the epic features underlying the structure of *Strange Interlude* (1932). Sampling Egri's concern with the later plays, his article presenting a comparative discussion of origins and originality in *The Iceman Cometh* (1939) can be seen cited by *The Eugene O'Neill Companion*, the work of Margaret Loftus Ranald (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982). O'Neill's debt to Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, as Egri assesses it, is commented on in *Eugene O'Neill and the Emergence of American Drama*, edited by Marc Maufort (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989). Not surprisingly, the comprehensive *Eugene O'Neill: an Annotated International bibliography 1973-1999* by Madeline C. Smith and Richard Eaton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) includes several references to Egri's essays, articles and books dealing with the playwright's works.

The mid- and late 1980s saw the publication of three books on O'Neill by Egri, concerned primarily with the role of form and drama poetics in articulating the American experience. His book-length comparative analysis, *Chekhov and O'Neill: The Uses of the Short Story in Chekhov's and O'Neill's Plays* (1986), addresses the generic interface between short story and drama in respective works of the two playwrights. By looking at several of the two writers' short stories Egri inquires into the use of narrative in drama, characteristic of several plays in both dramatic oeuvres. The enthusiastic reception and informed appreciation of *Chekhov and O'Neill* in both Hungary and abroad made it Egri's probably most acclaimed book, attested also by the number of reviews appearing about it, for instance by Joyce Flynn, reviewer for the *Irish Literary Supplement*, who celebrates the analytical powers and achievement of the Hungarian scholar's study. Flynn emphasizes that

2 For Egri's whole scholarly output see Lehel Vadon: "Péter Egri's Scholarly Achievements: His Bibliography." *Eger Journal of American Studies* VIII (2002): 39-68.

“the resemblances [between Chekhov and O’Neill] Egri highlights are persuasive: the most useful to teachers of O’Neill’s drama being the allusions to Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, and the insight into Edmund’s self-concept as an artist in his speeches late in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*” (30).

Egri’s next book, *The Birth of American Tragedy* was published in 1988, the year of the O’Neill centenary, with a considerable part of it focusing on O’Neill, who made modern American drama truly international. A critical summary of theories is also inserted in this work about why the genre had come of age so relatively late in the USA. The last chapter discusses *Long Day’s Journey into Night* as a seminal play in which the epic, lyric and tragic modes are fused, and thus achieve stylistic variations in the text, while dramatizing four types of conflict among the characters (Egri, *The Birth* 154-81). *The Birth of American Tragedy* also generated appreciative reviews. In *Comparative Drama* Michael Hinden introduces the book as an informed study and his summary is absolutely in favor of its analytical power: “Students of O’Neill will be impressed with the book’s thorough scholarship and intellectual sweep. *The Birth of American Tragedy* is a formidable resource whose gifts may be extracted by judicious skimming” (402-03). Frederick C. Wilkins, in *The Eugene O’Neill Review*, also acknowledges the merits of Egri’s detailed and contextualized discussion of *Long Day’s Journey*, claiming that his “analysis of the family dynamics and his delineation of the playwright’s ‘concept of relative determinism’ rank with the best” (86).

Egri’s third book devoted to O’Neill, *Elidegenedés és drámaforma: Az amerikai álom társadalomtörténete és lélekrajza O’Neill drámaciklusában* (Alienation and the Dramatic Form: The Social History and Psychological Portrait of the American Dream in O’Neill’s Cycle of Plays) was published in 1988 also. Focusing on *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*, the playwright’s monumental but incomplete cycle, Egri highlights O’Neill’s experimental techniques with which he dramatizes the tension between the American dream and American reality. The introduction to the book describes the experience of social and psychological alienation in the playwright’s life, which Egri sees as an impetus for O’Neill to conceive the writing of the cycle. However, Egri argues, the spatial, temporal, and complex dimensions of the concept defied being squared to fit the conventions of the dramatic form (7-50). The book discusses the three surviving plays of the cycle, originally planned to contain eleven parts. Egri regards *A Touch of the Poet* (1942) as a play in which the integrated short story elements suggest affinity with the oral traditions of Irish drama on the one hand, and with the structure of Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* on the other (115-16). Moreover, Egri contends that both O’Neill and Chekhov presented a double view of their respective “heroes,” Melody and Vanya, resulting in the conspicuous tragicomic effects of the plays (106-07). *More Stately Mansions* (date of publication: 1964) features in Egri’s book under the title “Novel in the Drama,” which assesses the epic features of representing a family’s self-dispossession by O’Neill. The analysis highlights that the three main characters develop split selves and wish to regain their personal autonomy by merging themselves with another individual (130-39). An unfinished drama, *The Calms of Capricorn* (date of publication: 1982), closes the incomplete cycle of O’Neill. Egri’s book analyzes it in a chapter referring to various modern drama models which may have been sources of the heterogeneity in the style of the play (176-81). Although

left incomplete, the cycle, Egri argues, is worthy of attention because it reflects the author's struggle with form at a stage of his career from which he stepped on toward creating the stylistic synthesis to be observed in *Long Day's Journey* primarily (200-04).

Undoubtedly, Péter Egri contributed a whole lot to international O'Neill scholarship, probably leading the line among the countries behind the Iron Curtain. A not at all insignificant aspect of his scholarly heritage is his unique methodology of presenting research findings, new ideas, and thoughtful comments, always ready to pinpoint artistic cross-fertilization. The prose style of his critical works is idiosyncratic because of its subtle, witty and precise use of language and sharp logic of argumentation, revealing the immensity of his erudition, untiringly inquisitive spirit, and thorough understanding of the manifold complexities and values of the arts. For some reason, O'Neill's drama attracts very few ardent researchers, and does not intrigue theatre people to produce the plays in Hungary these days. However, once this situation changes, and it probably will, Péter Egri's critical works on the playwright are a must to read, study and engage with.

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