MAPPING O'NEILL'S SITES OF MEMORY IN BUCHAREST: AN IMAGINARY RENEWAL OF A FORMER TRANSATLANTIC CONNECTION

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Abstract: In the present paper I will take up the challenge of renewing the transatlantic connection established in the 1940s by the Romanian critic Petru Comarnescu with O'Neill's dramatic heritage – first and foremost by activating the resources of cultural memory that have lingered on in Bucharest: architectural sites, museum artifacts, archives and diaries that still reverberate with echoes from the past, and also by emphasizing the contribution brought by several cultural agents that have been striving to preserve and excite the public interest in O'Neill's theatrical universe.

Keywords: cultural artifacts, sites of memory, transatlantic connections.

Motto: „Theater is a function of rememberance. Where memory is, theater is." (Blau 383)

My paper uses Pierre Norat's vision of the simbolic significance of certain sites and objects for a nation's history in order to dwell upon the lingering connection between various artifacts of the intellectual and urban landscape of Bucharest and the memory of Eugene O'Neill's spiritual passage through Romanian culture. As the link with the American playwright's universe remains (for the moment) merely an event of our cultural past, I am trying to take up the challenge of renewing the transatlantic connection that the Romanian critic Petru Comarnescu initiated in the 1940s, when O'Neill's trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* was first staged at the National Theater in Bucharest. I will pass from an investigation of the architectural sites and objects that still reverberate with O'Neill's memory (the reconstructed façade of the former National Theater, the National Theater Museum artefacts) to those intelectual sites where one may still encounter the vivid traces of O'Neill's Romanian presence (as in the proceedings of *The Eugene O'Neill Symposium* of 2003, held at the National Theater in Bucharest). Wherever possible, I will try to provide an imaginary link with the playwright's universe, based on the echoes and resonance of the investigated sites of memory.

In an age when history seems accelerated due to the media coverage of events that dilates historical perception, memory struggles to survive by "crystallizing and secreting itself" (Nora 7) in certain sites that preserve, symbolically at least, the link with a past from which we have been unwittingly cut loose. As in the case of a historian who is personally involved with subject of his research, the quest for memory becomes similar to the search for one's history, fuelled by a series of uncomfortable feelings that have led to the modern obsession with archives but also to the individual search for origins and identity: "Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future, to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable." (Nora 13)

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Regarding the preservation of Eugene O'Neill's cultural memory in our country, several significant steps have recently been taken through the agency of individual and collective initiative. The main locus of memory from which I consider we should start our retrospective itinerary is the old National Theater building or, better said, the site where it once stood – on the historical Victoria Road. Even though there is no commemorative plate on site to recall the catastrophe that erased the famous architectural monument in 1944, we can contemplate instead its reconstructed creamy-white façade with baroque elements, utterly incompatible in style with the steel-and-glass silhouette of the Novotel Hotel that rises behind it, exactly where the Bucharest National Theater once stood. Erected in 2007, this ultra-modern French hotel adorned with its neo-classical façade is a perfect exemplification of Nora's "sites of memory", understood as "a purely material site invested by imagination with a symbolic aura that becomes the object of a ritual" (Nora 19). In this case, the ritual is mostly private, since not many of the inhabitants of Bucharest realize the cultural significance of the old-style façade, and it involves a "will to remember" that characterizes the enterprise of the present article. The architectural project of the *new* hotel (as its name also suggests) included the reconstruction of the façade of the *old* theater building, thereby revealing a most striking incorporation of an element of the past into the present landscape. Inside the hotel lobby one can visit the stylish "Café Theatro", whose designer unfortunately opted for a minimalist style of decoration which bears almost no connection with the artistic universe that its name evokes[1]. Nevertheless, this twisted "lieu de memoire" does revive the historical location where O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* was initially staged, in the unique circumstances of the second world war, since its mere existence becomes an "illumination of discontinuity" (Nora 17) by which the past becomes a palpable presence where we might seek "the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer" (Nora 18). Stimulated by our knowledge of past performances, whose echo may reach us while looking through the stage reviews of old times, we might even find ourselves in the disposition of attending an imaginary evening at the theater to watch O'Neill's fascinating trilogy, entranced by the acting of George Vraca or Aura Buzescu. And if, consequently, the theatrical offer on display in contemporary times seems rather shallow and dismal by comparison, one should still rest content that our remembrance of the past and its vivid imaginary recreation supported by this paradoxical site of memory can help us become better judges of the standards of artistic taste.

According to Pierre Nora, every site of memory has an original intention and "a return in the cycles of memory", being thus a "mise-en-abîme" of the significance of the past (Nora 20). We can never know where the imaginary reconstruction of history as remembered may lead us. But, as we become aware of the full significance of the original event which we are contemplating from our distant future, we should consider this risk worth taking. Besides the reconstructed National Theater façade of Novotel Hotel, there are other "collections" of memories which can be traced and some of these evoke, for the conscientious spectator, a continuing significance of Eugene O'Neill cultural persona. Foremost among these, there should be revisited the luminous traces of great artistic performances harbored by the National Theater Museum.

The museum is located in the *new* building of the National Theater of Bucharest from University Square and contains artifacts dating back to 1834 - when the first generation of professional actors appeared - and up to 1944, the year when the National Theater walls

[1] The walls are sparsely decorated with posters showing blurred sections of a dance performance. Instead, one may have opted for full-size pictures of the former glories of our stage: Aura Buzescu, Dina Cocea, George Vraca, Agepsina Macri-Eftimiu etc.

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crumbled under the charges of the German bombers. That fatally significant theater season equally saw the premiere of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Thus, in the museum we can trace - through photos, artistic props and personal objects - the lingering memory of the great artists that once embodied the Mannon dynasty: George Vraca, Marioara Voiculescu, Aura Buzescu, Agepsina Macri-Eftimiu…Stepping inside the museum, we become acutely aware of the paradoxical divergence and convergence of memory and history, of the double nature of the exhibits - at once material traces of historical presence and imaginary objects of memory whose restrictive play is freely allowed in the realm of individual sensibility. And, as it happened with the architectural mix represented by the design of Novotel Hotel, the old is juxtaposed with the new – the past thus informing and creating an aura for the present that is incorporated into the cultural unconscious of our capital, adding to its indefinable charm.

From an initiative of the DIALLOG Cultural Association, *The Romanian-American Artists' Theater* re-opened its activities in November 2003, on the occasion of the *Eugene O'Neill* Symposium, an event commemorating fifty years from O'Neill's death in 1953. The symposium was a premiere for the South-Eastern Europe and it resulted from the cooperation of three cultural institutions: the National Theatre of Bucharest, the *Eugene O'Neill* Artists' Theatre and the Romanian Cultural Centre of New York, while it also benefitted from the joint support of the Romanian Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs and of the US Embassy in Romania. Therefore, this unique public event can and should be considered a landmark in the Romanian-American cultural dialogue.

The symposium tried to answer several questions that equally constituted themselves into starting points for my PhD dissertation[2]: "Why isn't O'Neill staged anymore by the American and European theaters? Is his work relevant or not as literature of the world? What happens to the posterity of an author who won two Pulitzers and a Nobel for literature?" During the three days of the symposium, leading figures of Romanian and American culture paid homage to O'Neill, talking about his works and life. Below, I am offering an overview of the discussions that ensued during the reunion, while equally commenting upon the significance of this transatlantic encounter hosted by the National Theater Building - one of our most precious "sites of memory" fortunately (re)visited by O'Neill's spirit on this above-mentioned occasion.

As customary with commemorative events, the meeting was attended by several personalities representative for the transatlantic connections between Romania and the United States. Once the opening speech was held by writer Dinu Săraru, Head of the National Theatre in Bucharest at the time, the first to speak among the foreign guests was Dan Sullivan, Director of The Critics' Institute at the *Eugene O'Neill* Theater Centre in Waterford (Connecticut), who delivered a commentary on "Trying to Hate O'Neill" – an ironic revision of the well-known article by Eric Bentley, "Trying to Like O'Neill" (1952). Sullivan elaborated on Bentley's famous assertion that O'Neill was frequently a very bad writer, especially when he was trying to be profound, the example proposed being *The Strange Interlude*. Sullivan claimed that the interior monologues in this "telenovellistic" play are a terrible strain on the actors and continued by acknowledging that, historically at least, one can't ignore O'Neill's contribution to the field of drama – he *is* America's first playwright after all. Moreover, he acknowledged that O'Neill has a perpetually modern appeal. This is the reason why, he explained, every premiere of O'Neill's in the last 50 years has been an event, no matter where it was staged. Sullivan also

[2] *Transatlantic Connections: Eugene O'Neill's Reception in Romania* (defended in 2012)

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praised O'Neill's tenacity that despised the artistic limitations of the stage, and finally expressed his admiration for this playwright who, while writing "in his own blood", had returned to the simplicity of plays about people towards the end of his career. This is perhaps one more proof of O'Neill's humanism (in the sense of love for humanity), since he was able to transform his own painful experiences into subject matter for the public – in a noble act of communion that reached out to the hearts of people all around the world. In his closing remarks, Sullivan added a few relevant anecdotes – among which, he mentioned the fact that many of his friends can swear that phantoms really haunt the O'Neill's memorial house in New London, which was turned into the premises of the *Eugene O'Neill* Theater Centre. It is here that, under Sullivan's guidance, summer courses for young critics are being held every year and opportunities are available for furthering the transatlantic dialogue.

The next to take the floor was Professor Odette Caufman-Blumenfeld from the University of Iaşi, with a lecture on "Stereotypes in O'Neill's Plays". During her presentation, professor Blumenfeld emphasized the fact that O'Neill was constantly obsessed with the feeling of death, due to the unfortunate circumstances in his biography, and therefore the tragic sense of life is present in all his plays, in which the characters are longing for the unattainable. Caufman-Blumenfeld's remarks were extremely useful for the general public, who was less acquainted the playwright's life and works. Her speech was followed by that of theatre historian Ionuţ Niculescu[3] who referred to the existence of a letter through which Liviu Rebreanu, former Head of the National Theater, had informed O'Neill about the staging of *Mourning Becomes Electra* in the difficult historical circumstances of the year 1944. Following in the same vein, theater critic Irina Coroiu talked about the reception of O'Neill in Romania, evoking memorable performances from the last three decades, with a special focus on Liviu Ciulei's work, while Dan Grigorescu – Head of the *George Călinescu* Institute of the Romanian Academia - talked about a mysterious collaborator of O'Neill: a Romanian stage designer working in the United States in the 1940s. Other Romanian contributors to the event were the most recent PhD graduates who had approached O'Neill's drama in their dissertations at the Romanian Theatre Academy in Bucharest (UNATC): Aurelian Burtea and Mihaela Dumitriu[4].

Another insightful addition to the transatlantic cultural dialogue generated by the symposium was the intervention of British dramatist and theater critic John Elsom[5], who recalled the cultural shock of seeing an O'Neill play for the first time, in 1956, when the English theatre was dull, contained, and emotionless. He frankly confessed that seeing O'Neill and Williams' plays had made his parents' generation draw the conclusion that the characters in these dramas were merely irrational savages but the young generation of the 1950s felt relieved by the freedom of expression encountered in the plays. Concluding his argument, Elsom declared himself lucky to be living in a culture based on interdependencies and appreciated that the essence of O'Neill's dramatic expression was the courage to communicate the essence of true passion.

On the last day of the symposium, actor and theatre professor Mircea Albulescu talked about the National Television version of *Desire under the Elms*. He also debated authoritatively

[3] At present, he is custodian of the National Theater Museum and had the kindness of inviting me to see the exhibits. He is also remarkably prolific in publishing studies on the cultural memory of our theater.
[4] The former discussed about the sense of existence in O'Neill's plays, while the latter placed O'Neill's drama in the context of the moral crisis of modern individualism, both communications defending the relevance of O'Neill's dramatic contribution for our present era.
[5] Founder of the Bush Theatre in London and Director of Arts Interlink, editor at "US Magazine" and "The World and I" from 1986.

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with the detractors of the playwright, comparing the destinies of O'Neill's heroes to those of Chekov's characters, whose 'success' consists in their powers of endurance. Yet another significant contribution to the debate was brought by American actress Salome Jens[6], who talked about the rediscovery of O'Neill in the U.S.A. after the staging of *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), in which she had performed. She confessed that her artistic destiny stood under the sign of O'Neill's heroines and emphasized the importance of her meeting with director and producer Theodore Mann[7], also present at the symposium with a presentation of his life-long dedication to staging O'Neill's plays. Besides her participation in the National Theater symposium, Salome Jens also starred in two plays by Eugene Ionesco and declared herself happy about visiting Romania, a country that loves the theater and respects O'Neill's cultural memory.

This remarkable cultural event was hosted and coordinated by Romanian director Alexa Visarion, who managed to bring an exquisite touch for his foreign and Romanian guests by presiding as host. In his own turn, he talked about the cultural goals of the *Romanian- American Artists' Theater* and its future projects[8], including an adaptation after O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet*. As a proof of his intent to bring O'Neill up-to-date, director Alexa Visarion stated that he was planning to change the title of this historical play into *Vote for Andy Jackson*! and to turn it into a reflection of the contemporary political realities in Romania. Thus, through the enterprise of the *Romanian-American Theatre*, the cultural dialogue between the two countries was going to be strengthened, with O'Neill's plays providing a relevant connection. Finally, Alexa Visarion expressed his hope that this spiritual dialogue would be extended to include other cultures, like the Russian or the Japanese one, because, he insisted, only in this way can one truly speak about multiculturalism in an allegedly free and unprejudiced world.

Last but not least, the audience was entranced upon hearing a recording of O'Neill reciting a monologue, in which the stage skills of the author were revealed, as well as his unique accent and pronunciation. In this way, one could speculate that Eugene O'Neill's spirit was equally present at this reunion of his admirers, illuminating the atmosphere, and so was that of Romania's national playwright - Ion Luca Caragiale - who lent his name to the premises that hosted the event. But perhaps the truly important achievement of the symposium, in terms of cultural dialogue, was the staging - for the first time in the Bucharest of the new millennium - of two O'Neill's plays in a coupé show. Entitled *O'Neill's First Time*, the event included O'Neill's first and last plays: *Before Breakfast* (directed by Crenguța Țolea, starring Paula Maria Frunzetti) and *Hughie* (directed by Aurel Palade, starring Adrian Anghel and Virgil Aioanei). Both directors were young graduates of the Theatre Academy in Bucharest, as were the young actors appearing in their plays. These youthful teams managed to stage O'Neill's plays in an original manner that communicated to the Romanian public the values of American culture, in an attempt at maintaining the cultural connections which benefit both civilizations[9].

[6] She is also teacher of dramatic art at the famous theatre school from UCLA and she commented on acting out the parts of O'Neill's heroines in front of Romanian theatre students from our Arts Academy.

[7] Founder of the *Circle in the Square Theatre* in New York, he received the Tao House Award from the O'Neill Foundation for his exceptional involvement in staging O'Neill's plays. Among his productions, there are to be mentioned *Mourning Becomes Electra* with Coleen Dewhurst, *The Iceman Cometh* with James Earl Jones, and *The Moon for the Misbegotten* with Salome Jens.

[8] Other projects: *The Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Williams, never staged in Romania to this date, an adaptation after the novel *They Also Shoot Horses, Don't They* by Horace McCoy, a play by Saviana Stănescu, Fulbright scholar in New York, and the staging of *Oleanna* by D. Mamet and *True West* by S. Shepard.

[9] The symposium also occasioned the national premiere of *Blues for a Dead Man* by Caridad Svich, one of the leading representatives of the new American theatre. The direction belonged to Radu Grigore.

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Through the activity of the *"Eugene O'Neill" Romanian-American Artists' Theatre*, director Alexa Visarion intended to familiarize the Romanian public with the American way of life: "The *O'Neill* Theatre talks openly and clearly about the real problems of American society – about pragmatism, compromise, the American dream and the diversity of opinions in a vital world" (Visarion in Budeanu 14). This enterprise can be appreciated as similar in intention to what Comarnescu's generation had been trying to do by initiating the cultural dialogue with the United States and editing publications such as *The Criterion* or *The Romanian-American Magazine*. According to its founder, this *new* theatre was conceived as a creativity lab that would try to counteract the mystifying influence of the times, an institution that was going inform its public on such maters as capitalism, life, and capitalist democracy – without demagogy, by exploring and exposing the truth. The team intended to start their enterprise by familiarizing the public with the classical American playwrights – O'Neill, Williams, Shepard, Mamet and then turn towards the more recent generation of dramaturgs – Tony Kushner, Wendy Kesselman, William Massrosimone, Eric Bogasian, D. H. Hwang, Ken Jenkins and other acknowledged dramatic authors: "I am preoccupied by people who represent the diversity and complexity of the American voice" declared director Alexa Visarion (Budeanu 14, my transl.).

The concept of the *O'Neill* Theatre was, at the same time, of an institution for the forthcoming generations who, while not forgetting about their own culture, would be able to communicate on a professional footing, through ample projects, with their American counterparts – just as Petru Comarnescu and Eugene O'Neill once used to communicate in their letter exchange. Unfortunately, this theater project was not meant to be an enduring one. The latest event organized by Alexa Visarion's DIALLOG Cultural Association that once again involved Eugene O'Neill and his cultural legacy took place in November 2007, at the Palatul Copiilor Hall. On this occasion, there was an introductory speech on O'Neill's life and work[10] and a performance of his short play, *Before Breakfast*[11]. The event was part of the activity of the *"Eugene O'Neill" Romanian-American Artist's Theater* and was intended to contribute to the knowledge of the American theater in Romania and to stimulate the interest of the young generation regarding the possibilities and benefits of intercultural dialogue. However, neither the American Embassy nor the Romanian Ministry of Culture further supported the development of similar projects, indicating that the interest in transatlantic cultural dialogue was not a central point on the political agenda of the times.

According to Pierre Nora "we speak of memory because there is so little of it left" (7). My interest in investigating O'Neill's Romanian sites of memory in the present paper has been twofold – on the one hand, their relevance for the history of O'Neill's reception in our country is obvious; on the other hand, my brief personal involvement with the project of the *Eugene O'Neill* Theater initially gave rise to hopes that the 2003 Symposium would engender an interest in O'Neill's drama that would be actualized on the Romanian stage. When this actualization proved to be indefinitely postponed, I turned towards researching O'Neill's Romanian antecedents so as to explain the reason for his latter-day absence from our theaters

[10] Delivered by PhD candidate Adriana Bulz and entitled: "Eugene O'Neill – The Son of Monte Cristo". A documentary presenting O'Neill's birthplace, New Haven, was also shown to the audience on this occasion.

[11] The performance, a work-in-progress directed by Iris Spiridon, 4th year student in the Directing Program at the National Academy of Theater in Bucharest, was highly appreciated by a young and enthusiastic audience of students and teachers. The parts were performed with great accuracy and dedication by professional actors Cristina Şerbu and Richard Bovnogzki.

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and culture. Thus, in seeking to assess the significance of past performances and Romanian critical reactions in my PhD thesis, I delved into the particulars of cultural memory and discussed the historical circumstances that contributed to the transatlantic dialogue between O'Neill's theater and our intellectual environment.

The sites we have just visited may have occasioned a lyrical state of mind since, as Pierre Nora explains, memory provides the link between history and literature so that O'Neill's Romanian "lieux de memoire" will definitely remain for us "moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded" (Nora 12). While the affective and magical work of memory is still strong, we must not forget that it was the "commemorative vigilance" of such cultural agents as Petru Comarnescu, Dan Grigorescu, Ion Şahighian[12], Alexa Visarion and many others that occasioned the periodical revival of interest in the American playwright's work in Romania and kept his dramatic intentions up to date and relevant for contemporary readers and (potential) theater-goers. If Pierre Nora compared the traces of memory to "shells" on the sea-shore of history, there is yet another interesting comparison that could be made: these traces may also "work" like pebbles thrown into the water, whose ever-widening circles are waves of hope connected to the possibility of future prospects[13].

Referring to the intellectual abilities of the American artist as a leader of his own people, Comarnescu noted that O'Neill was "the type of artist who guides the spirit of culture solely through works of art." (Comarnescu in Bărbat 466, my transl.) The Romanian critic asserted his belief that, in contemporary American culture, the artists and the intellectuals were no longer marginalized but respected, since "the suffering and the crisis made the Americans renew their belief in the freedom of the spirit and in the superiority of one's reasoning and imagination" (Comarnescu in Bărbat 466, my transl.). Comarnescu's intuition that the American pragmatists would ultimately acknowledge and even praise spiritual achievements is still valid today, when the material security of the United States has been so severely shaken by the terrorists' attacks. And, while Eugene O'Neill's works remain a fundamental point of reference for the field of American Studies, we have every reason to hope that interest in the playwright's heritage will be renewed in Romania, since a more direct knowledge of his plays would be equally beneficial and stimulating for the development of our national spirit. It is also to be hoped that the radically renovated building of the "new" National Theater in Bucharest, to be reopened in 2014, will preserve the link with the past riches of this theatrical institution and that the visible architectural differences will not impede the resurfacing and activation of the resources of cultural value and memory.

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[12] O'Neill's most dedicated Romanian director in the 1940s; his staging of O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon, Desire under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* met with immense public success.

[13] Regarding future prospects, current repertory choices in the theaters around the country seem to indicate a favorable context for renewing O'Neill's connection to Romanian culture: the National Theater in Timişoara has staged Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, while the Nottara Theater in Bucharest recently included William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life* on its agenda. These and other similar "shells" and "pebbles" may amount to something yet.

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