

## INTRODUCTION

*In 1958*, Agnes Boulton published *Part of a Long Story*, a memoir of the first two years of her marriage to Eugene O'Neill, which extended from 1918 to 1929. At its beginning, he was on the verge of becoming the most important American dramatist of his generation, and some would say of all American theater history. She was a writer, too, a storyteller, then at the peak of her productivity, while he was still barely known to the world, and they fell in love, passionately, in the way that story prefers. She wrote about their partnership in its early phase, but from the perspective of forty years later, thirty years after the marriage had ended, five after O'Neill had died. Her book declares in the title its partiality and distance, but of the two people depicted on the book jacket, the storyteller, not the dramatist, had survived the drama that was the marriage. Her book is just that part of a story which a storyteller might tell at the age of sixty-six, and this book is another, from fifty years later.

The long story of O'Neill and his family was, in the late 1950s, beginning to be told as one of the talismanic tales, an American "epic," and O'Neill already figured as one of the "representative men" of American culture, an incorporation of its triumph and tragedy. In his final works, especially the posthumously published and produced *Long Day's Journey into Night*, he had laid bare the circumstances of his upbringing in the theater and his emergence from a doomed family. He astonished the world, after his death, with such an honest self-analysis. Critics had hoped to find in Agnes Boulton's book some embellishment of that great parable, but they found something else instead. Her part reflected that which could be married to O'Neill as well as that which ultimately could not. Boulton's part did not fit so well into the myth that history was making of his life because that part could not be his alone in the aloneness of the romantic artist.

Agnes Boulton figured large in this story of marriage, even though Eugene O'Neill had sought to keep her absent for the latter part of his life,

by which time she was not in any sense a romantic figure for him. Beginning in 1928 she was nothing other than trouble in the flesh—a dissatisfied, divorced woman and troublesome mother of two of his three children. She never again recaptured the self-reliance she had enjoyed as a successful commercial writer before meeting him. If anything, she was a living reminder of the days of his advanced adolescence, his thirties, when he was a boldly venturesome artist, a prolific giant, who was also vain, self-destructive, petty, and unfaithful. She reminded him of this, and in her book she informed the world. Meanwhile, another marriage had figured even larger in his life and had proven even more difficult to edit out. After his death, that other wife, Carlotta Monterey, stood in for him and assumed his grand proportions, like Electra speaking on behalf of the fallen Agamemnon. While the biographers and critics were trying to make something Sophoclean of the O'Neill saga, Boulton would, when she was represented at all, persistently reconfigure that material—the story of a great individual—into a tawdry tabloid drama, sharp with headlines. By her independence she had her side, and her side was his vulnerability.

After his death in 1953, Boulton was the only remaining storyteller of the two, and then, in that telling, she rejoined him on her own terms, reconstituting their marriage in literary form as a kind of novel. The critic Joseph Wood Krutch disparaged her book for this reason in the *Saturday Review*:

The method is novelistic and apparently based upon an effort of total recall. Though [Boulton] cannot remember various specific facts (for instance whether or not she typed her husband's manuscripts) she reads into the record crucial speeches, sometimes a page or more long, presented between quotation marks. And since she can hardly intend to suggest that these are more than re-creations made nearly forty years later, the book seems to become less biography in any conventional sense than a fiction built around certain events, as a chief actor remembers and wants to present them.<sup>1</sup>

Krutch later jokingly compares the book to Proust's remembrance of things past. Of course, O'Neill's own *Long Day's Journey into Night* also exhibits a Proustian remembrance in speeches far longer than Boulton's, but his play stands for art while her book pretends to history. In a sidebar accompanying Krutch's review, Boulton declares that though she worried it might be in bad taste for a wife to write about her ex-husband, she felt her

testimony would be important for literary historians. And then, of the details, she said: "I could just think about it and it would all come back, clearly, like a story."<sup>2</sup>

Still, as many reviewers noted, her book gives no dates, identifies certain players only by first name, and attends little to the theatrical and literary history that O'Neill and others were making in those years. All of that she takes for granted, as common knowledge. Instead, her book jacket bears the subtitle: "Eugene O'Neill as a Young Man in Love." That "in Love" shifts the book into another category of writing, more impressionistic than the usual literary history, more respectful than the usual tell-all (a genre that was just emerging at the time). There is even, in that subtitle, a hint of James Joyce's inquiry into the fragments of human character. Finally, though, Krutch's problem is that it is essentially Boulton's story told here, while the "genius" remains "a surprisingly shadowy figure."<sup>3</sup> The book might have been subtitled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife of an Artist*. As such, it was a triumph for Boulton, the most effective literary work in a life of writing, and one that represents her vividly. She rebuilds her place in this site of memory, and in the process it becomes a place of romantic fulfillment. It turns out that she, too, was a lonely artist figure standing on the precipice, but in her book the fateful meeting of O'Neill opened the possibility of transcendence through marriage. Ultimately, that effect could be achieved only by telling a portion of the story by herself, because the marriage would end, and part they would, except in the book, where they would constantly rejoin.

Boulton's claim to any part in the storytelling had been denied for years. O'Neill had died some five years earlier, and with his death one of the explicit terms of their divorce agreement—that she should publish nothing about him in any form—became null. Agnes and Gene had not communicated, except sporadically through lawyers and their children, and that rarely, for nearly a quarter of a century, and even those communications, which were often on very bad terms, had ceased about a decade before the time of his death. Suddenly, with O'Neill absent even from his absence, Boulton was free to write about him, the man who had once been present to her and all-sufficient:

I was living in the present, happy, expanded, transformed. The world was a golden haze, no longer alien but an ally: nature, too, was sharing in my love, and was more than ever beloved. There was no sense of effort or strain or anything; there was no attempt to become anything, no goal of fame or money or living differently or bet-

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ter. There was no feeling at any time that there was something that *had* to be done, no guilt at things undone, for the past and future did not exist as states of being, only as calendar marks of man's necessary measured time.<sup>4</sup>

The book re-creates and reforms the marriage in the slow undulations of these languorous sentences—also in O'Neill's bold exclamations and four-letter words, which continually escape the marriage. She reaches out to him in his abstraction in order to re-create in herself the writer in him:

For everyone there is a pattern of days, no matter what the circumstances: a waking up and a going to sleep, a time to eat and a time to go out and to stay in. . . . We had breakfast, waited for the mail, and then Gene went into the west bedroom and in that abstraction that signaled the approach of work, sharpened pencils, neatly piled up paper, put a glass of water on the table next to the bed, and, with my father's drawing board propped against his knees and a pillow behind him, looked absently at the sheet of white paper on which (in his tiny handwriting) there would soon come to life one of those *others* who shared the days with us in the Old House.<sup>5</sup>

The absence, the blank book, of a writer's life is in the dull continuity of those represented *others*, which then, reflected in the eyes of the writer's spouse's writing, become themselves cohabitants. In great curving sentences, Boulton writes the kind of marriage that was:

And in that time there was a rhythm that in itself was a delight. It came into being through the harmony of our life—night and day, morning and afternoon. We got up and ate breakfast and went to work, and in the afternoon took walks, and in the evening we talked or read. Gene was living in the creation of his characters, knowing their thoughts, and it all came out in tiny inked words, beautiful in themselves, as he sat on the bed on the balcony with the drawing board on his lap or against his propped knees, his dark eyes absorbed, seeing something that was beyond the room. If I had spoken at those times he would not have heard me.<sup>6</sup>

The literary marriage consists of such semantics, stagnant scenes in which the other is not heard but which contain everything. Boulton's book comes from the sad aftermath of a marriage to re-create its presence in prose. The experience of being Mrs. O'Neill comes clear in this hypnotic

rhythm of long days without end, strange interludes before breakfast. The O'Neill-Boulton union might seem like a blissful/tormented tedium, but out of it came such landmarks as *Strange Interlude*, and even such plays as preceded (*Before Breakfast*) and such plays as followed (*Days Without End*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*), which are not dull murmurs of the continuum. For Boulton, remaining "in the present" with O'Neill was finally impossible. O'Neill was a man who was beset by "guilt at things undone" and a feeling that "there was something that *had* to be done," because the past and future came to exist, for him, as obtrusive realities. His days never did even out into a "golden haze." Even as Gene and Agnes, the people, *were* married, O'Neill and Boulton, the authors, were not.

*Part of a Long Story*, which is her long-overdue monument, essays to make their story whole again, the sum of its multiple parts. Of course, therefore, it is a romantic flight and consistent with some of the novelettes and short stories Boulton had published early in her life. But it also matches something of O'Neill and, as romanticized (auto)biography, forms an ironic counterpart to his autobiographical dramas. Gerald Weales described her prose as "a mixture of O'Neill's bombastic brooding and the saccharine joy of the ladies' magazines for which Miss Boulton used to turn out formula fiction."<sup>7</sup> "Saccharine joy" is just as inaccurate a characterization of Boulton's literary voice (and of the magazines for which she wrote) as "bombastic brooding" is of O'Neill's, but Weales was right about the melded quality of her writing in this book. My own book attempts to resonate this marriage of self-representational styles and historical personalities, offering insight into both of their lives and the literary impulses they carried forth. This book will read a literary marriage in terms of how that marriage was inscribed through memory, reconstruction, and elaboration, and it will read those inscriptions in terms of how they inflected the marriage.

Boulton faced, as I do, a series of difficulties in writing a book about a marriage. She was reconstructing something that had long ago fractured. She was also publicizing events and experiences that had been part of private life and never meant for reading. She was trying to retain as much as possible of the image of O'Neill as a solitary artist hero without erasing her own presence in his life. This romantic figure was the man she adored, but these same qualities made it difficult and ultimately impossible to remain with him. They also posed a problem for her as an author. One reviewer said the book "reads like a parody of Victorian melodrama."<sup>8</sup> Another characterized as "ludicrous" her "attempt to inject her

Greenwich Village life with Wagnerian romanticism." The same reviewer commented: "Had this diary been written with more restraint, more in love than in personal justification, certain passages, which by the level of intimacy should give insight into the temperament of O'Neill's creative genius, would be less open to suspicion."<sup>9</sup> What the reviewer suspects is a kind of infidelity. She's a former wife who's not "in love," writing about "Eugene O'Neill as a Young Man in Love," and in that way she is screwing around with the readers by apparently bringing them into a wife's level of intimacy with her ex-husband, all for personal justification. Guardians of the tomb would of course be on the lookout for such a violation. From the O'Neill point of view, monuments must withstand ex-wives, naysayers, and the unrestrained.

From the Boulton point of view, *Part of a Long Story* is a wishful book, one that aims to make up for something missing (money, feeling, memory, fame, O'Neill himself). The moment of its appearance coincided with what was being called the O'Neill revival, when the missing "father" of American drama came to the fore once again. So pervasive had become the idea that O'Neill had single-handedly created the national drama out of a handful of dust, he might even be supposed a godly figure. And yet there had come a time when the plays of O'Neill were not produced, and all high-minded attention was fixed on Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Inge, and others. The mid-1950s was the time of O'Neill's resurrection. José Quintero and Theodore Mann had solved some of the difficulties of *The Iceman Cometh* (written in 1939, first produced in 1946) and given that masterpiece its first successful production at the Circle in the Square Theatre in 1956. Soon after that, Carlotta Monterey O'Neill, O'Neill's third wife, granted Quintero the rights to give *Long Day's Journey into Night* its American premiere, shortly following its first appearance in Sweden. This culminating masterpiece of O'Neill's career, written in 1940 but never staged or published until 1956, reestablished O'Neill's reputation as the most towering of American dramatists. In the wake of these two productions, playwrights like Miller and Williams invoked O'Neill as a pioneering analyst of the social and psychological pathology of his country, also a remarkable innovator in dramatic form. Audiences and critics alike responded to O'Neill's attempt to go back to that fateful year, 1912, his primal scene as an artist. Here was O'Neill's depiction of himself as a young man facing his own mortality and striving to find some glimmer of hope in a tragically beset family—drug-addicted and isolated mother, hollow failure of a father, sodden and self-hating brother.

The names were barely changed, and no one was innocent. The detailed descriptions of the characters and setting were seemingly photographic. Over its four hours the play gave the audience an unrelenting experience of how it felt to be O'Neill at the age of twenty-three, before he had written a single play. It unlocked the mystery and misery of this Jeremiah. In addition, the play gave a long-sought sense of closure to O'Neill's life story, an intimation that the beginning and the ending of this questing artist's career were unified and profoundly meaningful. Suddenly satisfied was the biographical imperative that life should resolve into a coherent narrative of transcendent significance, an American legend, with suitable last words and will and testament.

Agnes Boulton, meanwhile, was existing just a notch or two above the poverty level. She was married to a sometime writer, sometime fisherman, Mac Kaufman, and they were living in her now-dilapidated Old House in New Jersey. She would occasionally see her daughter, Oona, who was living in Switzerland with her husband, Charlie Chaplin, and Oona would make sure that her mother was never in serious distress about money, but the fishing, evidently, was not all that good, and Boulton was soon to separate from Kaufman permanently. Her son Shane and his large family lived in the neighborhood, and she saw them frequently, but what a sad story was there. Shane was barely coping with drug addiction and various interventions of law enforcement, not to mention deep despair about his life. He and his family drew heavily upon the resources of his mother who was, herself, barely coping with her own alcoholism. She had not published much of anything since a novel in 1944, though she had never stopped pushing her pen each day. Then came the years of the "O'Neill revival," with productions of *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey*, and in their shadow she composed *Part of a Long Story*. Relatively little has been written or said about this work until now. A cheap attempt to capitalize on her past, some thought, and perhaps that is what it was, a taking of profit, though hardly cheap. She had a pitch, and she made it as real as she could. However, perhaps now, at this late remove, when market pressures no longer bear, we might consider it, too, as an unlocking work—the fateful counterpart, the destined match—of O'Neill's bold investigation of his past. At the least, it is a potent counterbalance to the portrayal of marriage in *Long Day's Journey*, where love is inextricably bound up with greed and selfish need. Ironically, *Long Day's Journey* would go on to earn millions, while *Part of a Long Story* never exceeded its first edition.

O'Neill finished *Long Day's Journey* in 1940 and gave instructions that

it was not to be performed or published until twenty-five years after his death. His widow, Carlotta, decided to override his will three years after his death because she believed his initial reasons for withholding the play (supposedly to protect the feelings of his son, Eugene Jr., who committed suicide in 1950) no longer applied. The published edition of the play, issued by Yale University Press in 1956, contains the dedicatory note O'Neill had appended to the final typescript. He had presented his "original script" to Carlotta as a wedding anniversary present. Here he acknowledges that it might seem an "inappropriate gift . . . for a day celebrating happiness," adding, "But you will understand. I mean it as a tribute to your love and tenderness which gave me the faith in love that enabled me to face my dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness for *all* the four haunted Tyrones."<sup>10</sup> The framing of this play has ever after conveyed that the play is a gift of love, a reaffirmation of his marriage to Carlotta, and by implication a token of love extended to the reader or audience member, whoever matches the "faith in love" that can overcome tragedy. Who out there could be so faithless in love, so devoid of tenderness and understanding, to withhold forgiveness for those Tyrones or honor for the author? What is more, the play is good—outstanding, even preeminent, many have thought—and so, too, must be the author and his widow.

Carlotta herself at various times made it clear that her love for Gene was not unquestioning or total, at least not in the years immediately preceding his death, and some have doubted her motives for releasing the play early against his expressed wishes. Saxe Commins, O'Neill's close friend and editor, considered the release of the play an act of greed and willful control, but others (including Carlotta herself) have suggested that she did it to rescue O'Neill from neglect.<sup>11</sup> Still others have pointed out that Carlotta might have used the play as a vindication of herself since it showed the world at last what a tragically wounded person she had had to cope with in Gene. The world knew little of their married life, since they guarded their privacy with fierce determination, but Carlotta felt increasingly tormented and cursed by her husband in life, and literally haunted after his death. It would take the persistent probing of O'Neill's biographer, Louis Sheaffer, to uncover just how horrible this marriage became, and even his portrayal seems muted, probably because Carlotta was still alive (though soon to be committed to a psychiatric ward) when the first of his volumes was published in 1968.

José Quintero, in his memoir, published after Carlotta's death, de-



scribes his many meetings with her in which she exhibited a more and more insane sense of the ghostly presence of Gene intruding into her disturbed psyche. Quintero reports that Carlotta frequently heard Gene's voice tormenting her. During one nightmarish meal with Carlotta, at the time when he was rehearsing *Long Day's Journey*, Quintero listened with astonishment as she complained about the torment of her married life in words that came directly from the lines of Mary Tyrone in the play.<sup>12</sup> Her "faith in love" had thus ironically helped to create a play that would express her own sense of resentment and doom, and she felt trapped in this text like the members of the Tyrone family. By means of this play Carlotta had become *incapable* of laying the dead O'Neill to rest "with deep pity and understanding and forgiveness," and yet the dedication page would forever remain attached to the play, its single most important page, because of Carlotta. History and myth, sentiment and cynicism, the present and the past, drama and narration, all crystallize into one brilliant and disturbing structure on this signature page, its aporia.

While she was not author of this framing device, the effect of its inclusion is to reflect on Carlotta's authorial presence in the play and her dramatic role in his life. Forever to vex those readers who prefer that a work of literature should stand beyond its worker, this page opens and necessitates a reading of the play in terms of O'Neill himself, permanently threading questions of biography among questions of art, and incidentally weaving in a little of Carlotta. Most critics have interpreted this as an incidental matter, as in Jean Chothia's statement, "It is remarkable that, apart from the dedication itself, there is no sense for the reader or the theatre audience, of voyeurism, of encountering experience too personal or too raw. It takes unusual personal courage to kick away the ladders and supports of fictional disguise and lie down, as W. B. Yeats has it, 'where all the ladders start, / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.'"<sup>13</sup> Still, the effect of the dedication is to solicit the reader or audience member in a sympathetic yet critical union (itself a kind of love-hate marriage), and the play generally receives and deserves this desired wedding of intents. But the evidence of what happened to Carlotta makes one wonder whether that union might also reveal some element of what proved torturous in being married to Gene—an element she unmistakably shared with Agnes. His all-absorbing self-pity, his need to be loved without obligation on his part, and in particular his confusion of mother and wife figures made him a difficult man to love. A close reading of *Long Day's Journey* would drive any woman, any person, to the spare room for a few hours. Then again,

O'Neill was hard to abandon, and sooner or later the reader or audience member is drawn into that front room again, dragging a wedding dress behind. Among the ghostly bodies inhabiting that dress, the shroud of marriage, Agnes Boulton figures large, though she herself was slight. The bond of marriage would always incorporate Agnes, and Carlotta would eventually become a trope of Agnes, just as Agnes was a trope of Ella O'Neill.

Matthew Wikander argues that the play is the key element in what he calls the "cult of sincerity" surrounding O'Neill. The repeated gesture of the cult followers, according to him, is to excuse all the inadequacies of O'Neill's work (his awkward and exaggerated dialogue, his inflated ideas, and so on) because of the overwhelming *sincerity* of it all, and nowhere is there a clearer example of O'Neill's drive to come to grips sincerely with the forces driving him than in *Long Day's Journey*. Wikander concludes in extreme terms, calling O'Neill's work, especially his late plays, a "testament of rage." In this profoundly unsentimental analysis, Wikander paints an appalling picture of the marriage of writer and reader, possible grounds for a divorce:

O'Neill's failure to recognize his last works as acts of aggression and revenge rather than of forgiveness and understanding is less disturbing than the endorsement by the majority of critics of his own self-delusion about these works. The cult of sincerity presents O'Neill as an artist who is wholly sincere and who has worked out his compulsions in great art; this mingles esthetic and ethical concerns. O'Neill's late plays are not better than his middle plays because they are more honest: they are better because they are structurally more economical, because their characters interact more believably, and because they trumpet their great themes less loudly. But they are not humane, not generous, not humble.<sup>14</sup>

These criticisms are harsh but also difficult to dismiss entirely. Still, those late plays loudly demand our "faith in love," and it seems we would be callow to refuse.

In interviews with Louis Sheaffer, Agnes several times expressed sympathy for Carlotta, convinced that she knew something of the ordeal of being married to Gene during his final years. At the same time, her analysis of Carlotta was that she "wanted to be all sufficient to a man of genius, cut him off from everybody, minister to his genius, and shine herself as wife of a genius."<sup>15</sup> Biographers, too, have found themselves yoked

to the subject of O'Neill in that sort of bond, and *Long Day's Journey* is the single most solemn and enticing document to address. It evokes pity, of course, because it is such a masterfully constructed and yet "natural" representation of a grievous situation, but it also evokes fear because its construction relies on "truth" unrelated to or even contrary to the historical (the Edmund of the play differs markedly from what the biographer learns about Eugene), and because it has become the unavoidable eye-piece for all views of O'Neill.<sup>16</sup> Members of the Eugene O'Neill Society have often celebrated and occasionally bemoaned the "good bad luck," as James Tyrone says of his acquisition of the play that consumed his career (*The Count of Monte Cristo*), which gave them such a predominant play, a nearly overwhelming masterpiece to address. There have been times at those meetings when it seems like *Long Day's Journey* is the inescapable end of all discussions of O'Neill, his black hole.

Critics have analyzed it endlessly, and artists have performed it in many different ways, but few have given any attention at all to the glaring fact that it is, as published, an anniversary gift. This gift apparently came with strings attached, if the testimony of the recipient is to be trusted. In a 1955 letter to Dudley Nichols, Carlotta wrote: "Gene insisted that if I published 'Long Day's Journey Into Night' I must *insist* that the 'inscription' be published also,—& no other 'foreword' or 'introduction' be used *in place of it* or *with it*. I did just that. He claimed that the 'inscription' showed what his mood was when writing it—& what hell he went through!"<sup>17</sup>

That "part" of the play, its tribute, makes the whole work an ironic reflector of Boulton's *Part of a Long Story*. Both works are what I call inscriptions of marriage, historical documents that can be read as tropes of coexistence or collaborative relationship. In both, there is a subordination of the woman's story to the man's, accompanied by an implication that the woman's part was of ultimate importance, though it might seem that the man predominates. The final image of *Part of a Long Story* is of Gene accepting and naming his son ("Shane the Loud!") just after birth, and so a major transition point in life is marked. The book ends with beginning, with a scene of entitlement and first word. However, the stronger plot of the book is of Agnes transforming from lover to wife to mother and from aimless writer to destined creator—destined to write *this* book, just as Edmund Tyrone is destined to write *this* play. Though the men dominate the stage during the second half of *Long Day's Journey*, the lurking presence of the wife carries great weight. O'Neill called the final appearance of Mary

Tyrone, and especially the moment when she recalls meeting James Tyrone for the first time, the greatest scene he had ever written.<sup>18</sup> Edmund, who has made various stumbling efforts to interrupt his mother's drugged reverie, can only keep silent when she gets to this point of tragic recognition. Of course, Edmund would become, by the metamorphic process that transforms the good young man into the melodramatic hero, the "hero" who would grow up to write this play, as Eugene. Edmund is thus figured as the supremely sincere and passive bearer of testimony from this tragic scene. True, he bore his wounds, but the substance of his heroism is not a rescue but a telling predicated upon a sympathetic listening. The play implies that his sense of the tragic came from the spectacle of this "heroine" who could not be rescued, who could not be either an artist or happy wife to an artist, but who could become the substance of tragic art. Speaking with his friend Sophus Winther in 1944, O'Neill identified with the mother he could not rescue, using words that might have stung Carlotta, who had worked so hard to provide a home for him: "I have never had a home, never had a chance to establish roots, I grew up in hotels. My mother never had a home. *Long Day's Journey* is her story and my autobiography."<sup>19</sup> O'Neill's home was his homelessness, and Agnes Boulton was the first to show him that, and *Part of a Long Story* was the book to show how hard it was to be at home with him. She listens to him, representing a version of what he might have heard of himself, though not what he would like to have heard. Faced with a wife, O'Neill, like Edmund, could only stutter.

Carlotta deeply identified with that final moment in *Long Day's Journey*, when Mary recalls the moment her "faith in love" was sparked and then flickered out. Way back when, Gene had given Carlotta an initial faith in love and himself as the artist hero, and she was so happy—for a time. But soon she, too, succumbed to the masculine forces—the egocentrism, the will to power—which proved her doom, and, when she looked at Gene, the figure she saw was neither so heroic nor so passive as in the fable. To José Quintero, in 1956, Carlotta recalled, using words virtually quoted from the play: "Do you know how many homes I made for O'Neill? Oh, they were such beautiful homes. I selected everything myself, to the last piece of furniture. He didn't help me, wouldn't put himself out the least bit. *He didn't know how to act in a home. He never really wanted one . . . never, since the day we were married.*"<sup>20</sup> Her identification with Mary Tyrone gave her a sense of shared responsibility for the play, but the words she was quoting were as much Agnes Boulton's as Ella O'Neill's.

Martha Gilman Bower has argued that Carlotta (who often called O'Neill "the Master") was indispensable to the creation of all of O'Neill's late plays. In a comparison of Gene's marriages to Agnes and to Carlotta, she proposes a Lacanian argument to account for the difference in their roles as other, namely that Agnes asserted herself as subject, while Carlotta provided the appropriately blank mirroring surface, "that complementary part of himself that he was compelled to both love and hate with an intensity great enough to sustain and nourish his creative powers."<sup>21</sup> Bower argues that Gene was unable to view Carlotta in any role other than the maternal one, citing the words he spoke shortly before his death, when Gene said, "You're my Mama now."<sup>22</sup> Although Carlotta denied it at the time and attempted to assert her name, her role as the nurturing "all other" leads Bower to consider her a specific collaborator in the creation of such a reflective, self-generative play as *Long Day's Journey*.

Judith Barlow proposes Carlotta as a model for Mary Tyrone, noting many parallels, while Carlotta herself admitted no parallels, instead seeing herself as the mother figure O'Neill had *never* had. In Barlow's view, *Long Day's Journey* became Carlotta's play, too, because it seemed like the vindication of all measures she had taken to rescue O'Neill from such a hostile background and to protect and nurture him as he needed: "To her the play represented a 'hell' from which she alone had rescued him."<sup>23</sup> Carlotta seems to have developed an opinion of herself as an instrumental, co-creative figure in Gene's writing as early as the first year of their relationship, at the time when he was completing *Dynamo*, a play that failed badly in its time (1929) but has subsequently been interpreted as an important precursor to *Long Day's Journey*. In a 1928 letter that was possibly not available to either Bower or Barlow at the time when they were writing, Carlotta wrote to Saxe Commins:

I—too—am alive with "Dynamo"—but Gene [is] at the stage of wondering if it is *rotten* or *what not!* A perfectly healthy reaction at this stage for the Creator! I understand & soothe—! This Lover of mine is also my child—& living beside him thro' Fire & Beauty has greatly developed & enriched the inner me—so that he will get back—thro' *that*—greater love & understanding *from* me—thro' *our* love!"<sup>24</sup>

It turns out that what O'Neill was writing was "*rotten* or *what not!*" but the romantic miracle nevertheless seemed to take place, which was the replacement of the limited, earthly Agnes by the infinite, eternal Carlotta.

By 1932 O'Neill would inscribe *Mourning Becomes Electra* to her as "mother, and wife and mistress and friend!—/ And collaborator! Collaborator, I love you!"<sup>25</sup>

Except in a few instances, Gene did not see in Agnes a collaborator. Instead, they sought what was soon to be called a "companionate marriage," a nonhierarchical marriage of partners who looked for emotional and sexual compatibility and fulfillment from each other in ways not in conflict with individual self-fulfillment. Both perceived from the start that this ideal would prove impossible to obtain. Both had strong egoistic demands to make of the other partner, due to residual problems from their birth families. Both had competing demands on their time and energy. For Gene, his developing dramatic career dominated his attention, all the more so because a sense of spiritual quest often took precedence over the more usual aspirations: fame, money, power. For Agnes, there was initially her writing to attend to, which meant working the commercial publishing mechanism, but soon the birth of Shane led her to fix on the creation of a home as her mission. Agnes evidently did not maintain a fixed sense of purpose during the years of the marriage, but she was partly to blame for the fact that the marriage was not centered on emotional intercourse with Gene, as the ideal of the companionate marriage would have it. Both coped with the distracting power of alcohol. They also struggled to make sense of the liberating social trends of the period, many of which were openly individualistic and not conducive to the founding of marriage on an emotional bond. Then, too, however progressive the period might have been in certain respects, the break with Victorian values was hardly complete in terms of the expectations placed on wives. In short, the historical context was just about as hostile to the reality of the companionate marriage as it was encouraging to the ideal, and finally neither Agnes nor Gene could make the wish come true.

*Part of a Long Story* is a book that effectively begins with a rhetorical pause of about thirty years before it begins to speak of the thing that made it possible. Distant in time and space from the home that might have been, dragging an old wedding dress behind her (though Boulton never actually wore one), she creates the marriage, or rather re-creates the creating of the marriage. They too were so happy—for a time. Just as Edmund Tyrone became the playwright Eugene O'Neill, who could, thirty years later, write "the play of old sorrow," so the Boulton of *Part of a Long Story* transfigured into the person who could assemble just which factual material from the past would suit her myth. Of course, just like O'Neill, she left out

facts and altered others. Her book takes the form of a period of gestation, from a moment of conception in the first chapter (inauguration of her relationship with Gene) to a moment of birth in the last, with all that comes between retracing the coming-into-being of a true marriage, something like what Norah postulates at the end of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, though Norah knows it to be barely credible, a piece of science fiction, more fabulous than *Frankenstein*. Boulton's is also a far-fetched ending, consistent with romance, but transformed by modernism into something like a D. H. Lawrence epiphany. Agnes assumes an aspect of the Eternal Feminine here, and the emergence of Shane (improbably) operates as a trope of creation removed from all pathology—freed from drinking, Oedipal trauma, and the shame of operating in the marketplace. In Agnes's inscription of the past, both she and Gene become purified and elevated as creators in this birth. The final pages of her book depict a union of labors, transcendence of individuality, and fulfillment of all that marriage might represent. That is the myth she generates to create the happy ending, but there is already evident in Agnes' reexperiencing of that quest romance much that intimates the misery to come—that Shane the Loud would become Shane the Suicidal, that bootleg liquor would continue to wash up on the pristine beach, that the union of Gene and Agnes would be chaos, that the end of the book would foreshadow the end of the marriage, a part-ing of the ways.

Of course, by the time *Part of a Long Story* was published, the tragic story of O'Neill was well established in the public mind by *Long Day's Journey*. Who even remembered that he had been married to a pulp story writer way back when? So reviewers found Boulton's book puzzling. What an odd angle she had taken on this man of art since she barely mentioned his playwriting, and then only plays long forgotten.<sup>26</sup> How inconsistent that O'Neill, the austere figure of self-laceration, spiritual isolation, and morbid reflection should now be shown as "a young man in love." How troubling also to hear of the moments when he was not so stellar—when he was violent, vain, morbidly shy, someone who read the *Saturday Evening Post* to sober up. These details did not match the critic's image of him, and the literary gimmickry of Boulton's book gave them every opportunity to cast it down. The "story" of O'Neill would necessarily always begin with *Long Day's Journey*, which was immediately acknowledged as a pinnacle achievement in the art. For it, O'Neill received his fourth Pulitzer Prize, posthumously. Soon would follow major revivals of other plays, and with each came a new appraisal of his importance. Not

all admired O'Neill's craft; some plays, even several that had been successful in their day, had come to seem pretentious in their conception, awkward in dialogue, too long, too gloomy, or just dated. Most critics, however, had to acknowledge that O'Neill's plays were as substantial, original, and profound as the work of the world's leading modern playwrights and far beyond all but a few contemporary American plays.

O'Neill was a topic again, and so, with biographers and journalists probing the story, the world began to see each play as a window into his life. To an age fascinated with confessional poetry, psychobiography, and the fifty-minute hour as a literary genre, O'Neill was a hero of epic magnitude whose life might sustain any amount of Homeric expansion. *Long Day's Journey* obtruded the facts of his "tragic" childhood so insistently upon the audience that it has ever since been taken as *the* primary document of O'Neill biography. The play's greatness as drama complicates its use as a historical document, but in an age when truth-telling and the naming of names troubled the front page of nearly every day's newspaper, the example of O'Neill's frankness stood clear. Biographers ever since have striven to get as close to the "searing" or "shocking" story as O'Neill did, while quietly setting the record straight in those instances when O'Neill's dramatic or even melodramatic conceptions of his own life differed from such facts as a biographer requires.

Those biographers sought interviews with anyone who had known O'Neill, and it was not long before Agnes Boulton had to decide how to tell her story and to whom it should be told. She had spent eleven years with Gene, key years during which he metamorphosed from America's foremost one-act playwright to the first American playwright of international reputation and the Emersonian great man of American theater. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that she had little to offer to the hagiographer. She could offer more insight into the problems in his character than his great achievements as an artist. Boulton helped open a view onto O'Neill's wounded soul, encouraging a pathologized, diagnostic reading of the plays.

Inevitably, she became a character in the biographies, and her portrayal varied from book to book according to which sources the writers favored. The very first authorized biography of O'Neill, written by Barrett Clark in 1926, declares that O'Neill's "marriage has been happy and successful. . . . To Mrs. O'Neill the dramatist owes a great deal more than can be properly set down in these pages."<sup>27</sup> That's all it says. Most journalistic profiles remained similarly quiet about Boulton's role in O'Neill's life,



which typically unfolds as a tale of a famous actor's son stricken with the manly impulse to run wild as a merchant seaman, an anarchistic drifter in the underworld of New York, a lost soul who found himself at the bottom, and a fiercely independent genius who rose to the top on his own terms. The moment of his marriage closely enough coincided with the moment of his success (first critical recognition, first Broadway production, first Pulitzer Prize, first large royalty check) that his bride simply blended into the happy ending as the loving cup. Agnes photographed well by his side, with or without the children, looking fashionable in clothing that perfectly suited her slender frame. But she rarely drew attention as a topic in herself until the time of the divorce, and even then she mostly cooperated with him in thwarting scandal sheet scrutiny. Then came long years of obscurity, interrupted only briefly when their daughter Oona drew attention as a sparkling débutante and later as the bride of Charlie Chaplin. Mostly, though, Agnes led a quiet existence, and twenty-five years later some presumed she was dead.

Boulton gave some time to Crosswell Bowen, whose undocumented biography was the first to come out during this period, in 1959, a year after *Part of a Long Story*. Oddly focused for a biography of a major literary figure, it gives much emphasis to the catastrophic fate of the extended O'Neill family, especially the sad story of Shane. The plays are mentioned only to the degree they assist in the effort to bring forth every wrenching detail of family history. Agnes is portrayed sympathetically, as yet another victim of tragic destiny, but not a lineal bearer of that fate. Ultimately Agnes came to scorn Bowen for what she regarded as the cheap sensationalism of his book, and perhaps even more for his manipulation of Shane. Critics tended to agree that Bowen's was a distorted portrayal of O'Neill, though whether distorted by unwanted fact or inevitable fiction no one could say for sure. Certainly the book was unflattering to O'Neill. Still, Bowen's depiction of Boulton is the first to give some dimension to her. Of course, all biographies up to the time of his death had been under the scrutiny of O'Neill and Carlotta, and they strictly controlled which sources should be interviewed, what documents would be available, what stories might be told.

Hamilton Basso's three-part *New Yorker* profile of O'Neill, published in 1948, is the most insightful O'Neill biography up to the time of his death. Basso encapsulates Boulton's role in O'Neill's life in just two sentences, mostly to do with child-bearing. O'Neill himself comes off as having lived those years in romantic isolation. By the time of Basso's inter-

views of O'Neill, the playwright had stopped writing and seemed "terribly alone." Basso had the sense that O'Neill had become like one of his own characters, "a figure waiting in the wings for his cue in a play by Eugene O'Neill—the tragic life thrice compounded." O'Neill also asserted to Basso that nearly everything written about him is "all wrong."<sup>28</sup> Bowen was the first to have access to Basso's extensive notes of his interviews of O'Neill, and they help give the sense that he had direct access to his subject. However, other than a brief interview of O'Neill after a rehearsal of *The Iceman Cometh* in 1946, which resulted in a magazine profile (published as "The Black Irishman"), Bowen did not know O'Neill personally and was forced to rely on his contacts with other family members, including Agnes.<sup>29</sup>

Barbara and Arthur Gelb received some cooperation from Agnes, at least initially, but their volume, published in 1962, the first really comprehensive biography, draws more heavily on the plays, criticisms, and other documents of literary history. They also had direct access to Carlotta, who cannily chose to cooperate with them. They relied heavily on interviews with those who knew O'Neill, outside the family. The Gelbs organized the testimony skillfully, in a way that seems reliable, indeed authoritative, but the book lacks citations and therefore is difficult to use or assess.<sup>30</sup> Their biography was the first to capture wide attention, and their ongoing association with the *New York Times* helped keep their point of view, and their book, in focus for the next generation. In their portrayal, Agnes comes off in a much less sympathetic light, as a self-interested minor figure in a great playwright's life, an impediment more than anything else. They solicited the cooperation of Agnes, and she complied up to a certain point but ultimately saw them as exploiters.

Louis Sheaffer's carefully researched and composed two-volume biography has stood as the definitive statement, though it surely has its oversights and weaknesses. He began interviewing Agnes in the mid-1950s and kept up an extensive correspondence with her up to the point of her death in 1968. Indeed, he several times gave her direct financial assistance or other forms of aid. His books came out in 1968 and 1973 and clearly showed in their precision and depth what twelve to seventeen years of intensive work might accomplish. His characterization of Boulton addresses her flaws as precisely as her virtues, and she acquires more dimension here than in any other O'Neill biography, but still stands in the background of a biography zeroed on a tragic artist figure, romantically conceived. Sheaffer's personal papers, including many interviews of the

principal figures in O'Neill's life, open the possibility of a more dimensional portrayal of Agnes, and I have used them extensively in this book.

Doris Alexander and Travis Bogard stand out among a number of critics who have read O'Neill's plays with a keen sense of how they inflect elements of his life story, and Boulton has played a part in several of those analyses. Still, even the sum total of all these representations of Agnes Boulton can do no more than trace an outline of a distant, tangential figure in O'Neill's life and writings.

This book attempts a reversal of that figure/ground pattern, analyzing the historical documents of Boulton for their own sake. Sheaffer was the last and best hope she had for an intimate biographer, someone who had known her well, who had heard most of her story and could place it in a context of documented facts. But he devoted all his literary energy to O'Neill and made room for her obtrusive personality mainly to further his project.

At one point, Oona told an editor that she had contemplated writing a book about her mother, who, she felt, deserved commemoration.<sup>31</sup> Instead, Oona lived through a marriage with Charlie Chaplin that might itself be read as a reinscription of the O'Neill-Boulton and O'Neill-Monterey marriages, combined. Agnes persisted as an icon of the freely married woman bound together with the domineering artistic male, and from time to time Oona acknowledged to others the importance of this example to her, but in a deeper sense she inscribed her mother in the way she lived her life, so that her biography becomes another text of Agnes—a sorry, shiny (or slimy) tale to tell, as Jane Scovell made clear.<sup>32</sup>

One day I drove slowly down Herbertsville Road in West Point Pleasant, checking street numbers in search of "Old House," Agnes's home for most of the years before and after her marriage to O'Neill, only to find that aluminum-sided townhouses now occupy the property. Old House had been redeveloped. I looked at the shrubbery and trees and thought about which of them might have been alive when Agnes was. I took a photograph. I ate a meal in the old inn just a stone's throw away, where surely she (and Gene, too, one winter) must have gone for a meal or a drink. I saved the paper placemat. One of the streets in the neighborhood is now called Boulton Street. But Boulton Street goes nowhere for me. There is no obvious place to go for Agnes.

I have met several people who knew Agnes, as a grandchild, as a neighbor, as a friend, but these scattered and fragmentary connections have emphasized that it is not possible to assemble Agnes Boulton as a

person who was known. At this point she can only be the sum total of a series of stories, each of which rests upon documents (stories, anecdotes, fragments of history, of biography, of memoir, and the textual detritus of a literate life). The process of knitting such pieces into a whole has been done over and over for O'Neill, though not for Boulton, but this book will refrain from making the same Frankensteinian leap from fragments to a "life." This book is not exactly a biography. Neither is it a novel or drama. It entails history, spins out ambiguous fictions, unravels and weaves in the same Penelopean motion.

It would be silly to pretend that her life demands a telling in the way his does. And yet it is somehow because she did not accumulate that mantle of literary history herself, because she has never been a topic of biographical interest except in relation to O'Neill, and because it seems dubious, that it ought to be done. The special opportunity opened by this situation comes from the fact that she was married to such a reflective, autobiographical dramatist, one who tested many of the suppositions of what it was to be American, modern, white, heterosexual, and male. Boulton, too, self-consciously manipulated the cultural material in her writings, probing it and questioning it for clues to the puzzle of identity. A good deal of his writing, and most of hers, centers on the problems of modern marriage in a way that reflects the marriage they had. In a problematic dialogue, they discussed the literary concept of what it was to be married, even as they wrestled with the practical task. Marriage is the theme and metaphor and substance of this book, which attempts to know a marriage in its time and place, its agents and agencies, its betweenness and apartitude.

*Part of a Long Story* functions as the mother text of this book. From its terms and anecdotes I have generated a series of perspectives on Agnes Boulton, each controlled by another set of documents that represent her life: the accounts of O'Neill biographers, her interviews and correspondence with various O'Neill investigators, her published and unpublished writings, her correspondence with O'Neill, her appearance as a fictional character in his plays, and her reflection in a variety of contemporary portrayals of married women, including popular and scientific studies of marriage. Most of this material pertains to the topic of marriage, but along the way various other impressions of her arise, and ultimately the reader should get a sense of a composite portrait. Still, biography is only indirectly the business of my book, as autobiography is only indirectly or secondarily the business of *Part of a Long Story*. What that book seeks to do is

engage the reader as a novel does, building a relationship with its unreliable narrator that reflects ironically on the author's relationship with O'Neill, a marriage of opposed but consistent motives. What my book seeks to do is examine the discontinuities among the various documents and disrupt easy assumptions about how the story of this marriage should be told. History is bound inextricably with myth in this record, and my intention is to represent this bond in all its tension, occasionally even effecting a divorce of the two. I expect that for the reader, too, there will be, in the stories I relate, a vivid sense of intermingled good and bad relations between Agnes and Gene, their facts and fictions.

Agnes's book begins with the inspiring story of how she met Gene, which happens to coincide in a remarkable way, as if in a romance novel, with the moment when the deep connection between them began. She was in her midtwenties, a single mother arriving in New York in search of a steady job, something to give her the security that her work as a writer of pulp fiction could never guarantee. Not that she had failed in that line of work. But the strain of running a dairy farm, supporting a toddler, perhaps even providing for her aging parents, was enough to remind her of a factory job she'd heard about the year before from an old friend, Christine Ell, who ran a restaurant in Greenwich Village. The job had flexible hours, including a night shift, and it might complement or even feed her work as a writer: "Some sort of place where one sat with other girls and occupied oneself with a monotonous job, doing it over and over, requiring, once one had learned it, no more than the constant surface attention of one's mind. And there was, also, as she told me about it, a strange, barren spirit among the girls, something that in some way, at some time, people should know about."<sup>33</sup>

She had sold enough stories and novelettes by that time so she could look respectable, even fashionable, and she was beautiful—slender, with long hair and entrancing eyes. She arrived one evening, with no advance word, at Christine's restaurant, 139 Macdougall Street, upstairs from the offices of the Provincetown Players. The date of this event was probably in mid-November of 1917, around the time of the second bill of one-acts produced by the Players, which included O'Neill's *Ile*, which Boulton later recalled having seen.<sup>34</sup> Of this group of young artists she had heard some exciting rumors from Harry Kemp and Mary Pyne, but she had never seen any of their plays. The restaurant was a bare, dusty room. Her friend was not around. No one was around except a rude man who turned out to be Christine's husband. He supposed Christine must be in a

bar somewhere, evading him. With that glimpse of modern married life, Agnes returned to her room at the Hotel Brevoort. Later she reached Christine by telephone, and they arranged to meet late that evening at a place called the Hell Hole, back room of the Golden Swan saloon. Christine was again absent when Agnes arrived at that dingy, noisy place, so she sat down to wait.

From across the room a dark-eyed man stared at her: "There was something startling in his gaze, something at the same time both sad and cruel. I longed for Christine, for I felt that here was something that I did not understand." Suddenly, in came Christine's husband, blustering, hunting for his wife. He greeted the dark-eyed man as Gene, and just as suddenly departed. Finally Christine came in, tall, voluptuous, magnetic, the soubrette of a comedy: "She, it seems, knew Louis was after *her* now, when before she had been after *him*. She told us about it—the barkeeper, me, and the young man in the corner. Me and my job were forgotten too. Existence was in the moment and living was now and her husband didn't exist, not being there." Gene was waiting for his brother Jamie, intending to borrow some money, but he kept his eyes fixed on Agnes, as did Jamie when he came in—boisterous, bawdy, giving the glad hand. Christine explained that "she loved her husband, he was really just the man for her, but she was fond of Jamie too, and he was such a relief after those leonine embraces! *He makes love to every woman he meets, look out, darling, God, what a character. He's obscene too, but you don't mind.*" Gene scowled as he listened to his brother flirt with Agnes. When the men stepped into the front room to get a drink, Christine surprised Agnes by saying, "Well, he's fallen for you, darling, I can see that." Only then did she inquire and find that he was a playwright and considered a genius.<sup>35</sup>

As the evening wore on, Agnes got caught up in the comical vitality of Jamie, the earthy desires of Christine, and the brooding silence of Gene, and the irony seeped out of her, as well as any trace of social strictures. She absorbed the sorrow of this man whose eyes "were dramatic." Sensing that here was not that "strange, barren spirit" that "people should know about," but rather something profound or sublime, a remnant of Byronic romanticism, she felt attraction: "I felt myself drawn toward him and I was aware of a curious and yet simple sensation—I must and I would see a lot of this man. Just why, I didn't know: it had never happened to me before. I remember that I also was very silent during the last of this evening." Still, she felt "quite gay and happy and young" as she left the saloon, accompanied by Gene, to return to her hotel room. Gene

said nothing. (To say nothing was to say much.) At last, at the front door of her hotel, in the numbing cold, he turned his dark eyes directly to her and said in a low but sure voice, "I want to spend every night of my life from now on with *you*. I mean this. *Every night of my life.*"<sup>36</sup>

This passage occurs on the twelfth page, just about as many words into the book as one of the short stories Boulton was selling to the pulp magazines at this time. At this point in the story she would have to introduce some refreshing twist, some mild surprise or minor catastrophe to put this romantic flight into modern irony. Instead, over three hundred pages remain in the volume, which describe the working out of this mystic bond into a marriage of substance, practicality, and real consequence. The end of the book—the delivery of the baby—represents her confirmation of O'Neill's pledge of permanence, and so the two soaring expressions bookend the dual romantic quest. Of course, in the aftermath, they would both encounter the end of the marriage, each on their own. But the irony is that he did continue to occupy her night thoughts till this late point in her life when she gave birth to her book. Another *Part of a Long Story* remains to be told.