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One of the oddest moments in O'Neill, certainly for city dwellers, occurs in Part II, scene 2 of *Desire Under the Elms*, when the patriarchal Ephraim Cabot poignantly tries to explain himself to his wife Abbie, whose mind and desire are concentrated on her stepson Eben in the adjacent bedroom. Ephraim, who desperately desires a son worthy of the farm he has built up by his "sweat 'n blood," turns to Abbie in a vain effort to be understood, to explain his "hardness," his following God's will in building a flourishing farm out of rocky soil by sheer persistence and strength that rejected the "easy" way and built a stone wall of misunderstanding between him, his wives and sons. And all the time he "growd hard" and "kept gittin' lonesomer." To overcome his lonesomeness he took a wife, then another. Both died and neither "knowed" him nor understood his God-driven hardness and what the farm meant. Nor did his covetous, "soft" sons, who hated him. And in his bitterness, he set out that spring to heed the voice of God "cryin' in my wilderness, in my lonesomeness," to seek and find. The result was his marriage to Abbie to whom he "clove ... in my lonesomeness" and his joyous dream of a son who will grow up to be like him. "Will ye ever know me – 'r will any man 'r woman?" asks Cabot as he begins his long "confession" to Abbie. But she isn't listening. In bitter anger, commanding Abbie to pray "fur understandin'," he pulls on his pants and boots, complaining that "It's cold in this house. It's oneasy. They's thin's pokin' about in the dark – in the corners." He goes "Down whar it's restful – whar it's warm – down t' the barn. (*Bitterly*) I kin talk t' the cows. They know. They know the farm an' me. They'll give me peace."[1]

In the previous scene, Ephraim, who had, since Abbie's arrival on the farm, "softened, mellowed," and "taken on a strange, incongruous, dreamy quality," stares at the "purty" sky and, feeling his age, remarks: "It's allus lonesome cold in the house" whereas "It's wa'm down t' the barn – nice smellin' an' wa'm – with the cows. (*A pause*) Cows is queer." And when he fantasizes burning the

farm to the ground rather than surrender it to others at death, he adds "*with a queer affection*": " 'Ceptin' the cows. Them I'd turn free." Later, in Part III, scene 1, after dancing wildly at the celebration of his new son's birth, Ephraim leaves the kitchen and reverts to his uneasiness: "Even the music can't drive it out – somethin'. Ye kin feel it droppin' off the elums, climbin' up the roof, sneakin' down the chimney, pokin' in the corners! They's no peace in houses, they's no rest livin' with folks. ... I'll go t' the barn an' rest a spell" (p. 189). And when he learns of the betrayal by Abbie and Eben, he identifies it with his feelings about something poking in the corners. "An' mebbe I suspicioned it all along. I felt they was somethin' onnateral – somewhars – the house got so lonesome – an' cold – drivin' me down t' the barn – t' the beasts o' the field." And in momentary despair, he sets the cows loose while determining to burn down the farm.

The Gelbs inform us in *O'Neill* that Cabot's sense of unease in the house parallels O'Neill's own discomfort in his rural farm home in Ridgefield, Connecticut, where O'Neill sensed presences within and outside his house and took to sleeping, like Cabot, in the barn.[2] Louis Sheaffer, in *O'Neill, Son and Playwright*, describes the Academy of St. Vincent, which O'Neill entered when he was seven, as situated on a large farm that included animals and where the young O'Neill apparently absorbed the quiet, placid strength of the cows, which in the adult playwright figured as images of solid, accepting, maternal women. The "cow"-like woman appears in *Dynamo* in the massive Mrs. Fife. More famously, Cybel, the Earth Mother in *The Great God Brown*, with her intuitive, compassionate understanding is full-breasted; her movements, "slow and solidly langourous like an animal's," and she chews gum like a "sacred cow."[3] (The huge Josie, large-breasted, "warm and strong and kind," in *The Moon for the Misbegotten* is another example.) But it is Ephraim Cabot we're concerned with: his "lonesomeness," his mysterious, premonitory suspicion of something malevolent lurking about the house, something "cold," which in the absence of conscious knowledge appears strange, even paranoid, and his escape to the barn where "it's restful – whar it's warm," where he can talk to the cows: "They know. They know the farm an' me. They'll give me peace."

O'Neill's childhood and later experiences with farms aside, there is a striking analogy between the experience of Cabot and that of Friedrich Nietzsche, the most influential and lasting of O'Neill's mentors. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, available in an English edition since 1896, was published in New York in 1905, one year before the eighteen-year-old O'Neill encountered it in the anarchist bookshop of Benjamin Tucker. *Zarathustra* "influenced me more than any book I've ever read," O'Neill confided to Benjamin de Casseres years later.[4] And he added that he reread the book every year or so. The impact of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* on O'Neill's ideas about tragedy – "most stimulating book on drama ever written"[5] – and his practice in *The Great God Brown*, for example, are patent and widely discussed.[6] He possessed as well a copy of *The Joyful*

Wisdom, which was available in a London imprint since 1910 and published in New York in 1912. And no doubt he read other works by Nietzsche, among them presumably *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche's fascinating, megalomanic overview of his life and works, published in translation in London and New York in 1911.

In the chapter on "Thus Spake Zarathustra," Nietzsche writes of the misery he endured during the years when he composed *Zarathustra* and especially thereafter. We know that in 1882, the year before he began *Zarathustra*, he was deeply attracted to a remarkable young woman, Lou Salomé, who later was Rainer Maria Rilke's mistress and a member of the Vienna psychoanalytic circle. Salomé was not yet twenty-one and Nietzsche thirty-seven. His meeting with the bright young woman through his colleague Paul Rée, who also loved Salomé, stirred deep feelings and a poignant yearning to escape from the loneliness which had become his life. In Salomé, he thought he found his ideal disciple and successor, and with her he shared his deepest thoughts. Salomé at first interpreted Nietzsche's attentions as courtship and prepared to rebuff him gently. But later, in an angry outburst, she accused him – to his horror – of intending to exploit her sexually. Their differences in age, temperament, and experience precluded any mutual romance, and the jealous intervention of Nietzsche's sister and of Rée led to a violent breach. Their friendship ended that winter, leaving Nietzsche bitter and disturbed. To Salomé he wrote in late November 1882: "I want nothing but pure, clear sky … . Otherwise I shall scrape through, hard as this may prove – but, being so lonesome, I suffer frightfully from any suspicion about the few people I love … ."[7] The effects lingered and deepened his loneliness. He also suffered severely from insomnia and contemplated suicide. The following year (1883) in a spurt of creativity he launched *Zarathustra*, each of whose first three parts was written in a matter of days or weeks. (Part IV was added in 1885.) Reflecting on his work in *Ecce Homo* (1889), Nietzsche wrote of the "rancor of greatness," the dear price one pays for creating a great work or deed, the "silence" and "solitude" which overcome the greatly creative person, the distance between him and others, and the blank faces he encounters. He writes also of his suffering from absurd hypersensitivity, of his digestive upsets, inertia, and his subjection to "cold and suspicion, suspicion that in many cases is merely a blunder in etiology." And there follows this startling passage: "On one such occasion I became conscious of the proximity of a herd of cows, some time before I could possibly have seen it with my eyes, simply owing to a return to me of milder and more benevolent sentiments: *they* communicated warmth to me. …" (italics and ellipsis in the original).[8]

Nietzsche, suffering from "silence" and "solitude," subject to "cold and suspicion" is calmed and softened by the mere apprehension of cows who "communicated warmth" to him. This mysterious experience underlies "The Voluntary Beggar," section 68 in Part IV of *Zarathustra*, composed, as

mentioned, a year after the first three parts were completed with astonishing rapidity. The section begins: "When Zarathustra had left the ugliest man [subject of previous section], he was chilled and felt lonesome: for much coldness and lonesomeness came over his spirit, so that even his limbs became colder thereby." But as he wandered on, he turned "warmer and heartier": "something warm and living quickeneth me; it must be in the neighborhood. Already am I less alone; unconscious companions and brethren rove around me; their warm breath toucheth my soul." And looking about for the "comforters of his lonesomeness" Zarathustra spies "kine ... whose proximity had warmed his heart." And in their midst, on the ground, trying to persuade the cows not to fear him, the "voluntary beggar," who, in response to Zarathustra's query, declares that he seeks happiness on earth: "To that end, however, I would fain learn of these kine," who were about to answer when Zarathustra intruded. "Except we be converted and become as kine," the beggar continues, "we shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven. For we ought to learn from them one thing: ruminating," without which man will not lose his great affliction: disgust.

And recognizing Zarathustra, the beggar leaps up in reverence before the man who has surmounted disgust. The "voluntary beggar" (also named the Preacher-on-the-Mount), having given his wealth and heart to the poor only to be spurned by them, had turned to animals and "those kine." Neither the poor nor the rich are blessed: "The kingdom of heaven ... is with the kine." But rebuked by Zarathustra for his severity and rage, the beggar acknowledges his softer nature and his seeking labor fit for "gentle idlers and sluggards." Hence the kine: "They have devised ruminating and lying in the sun. They also abstain from all heavy thoughts which inflate the heart." But Zarathustra, inviting the beggar to his cave, to talk to his eagle and serpent of the "happiness of animals," urges the "strange one" to leave his kine although that is hard: "For they are thy warmest friends and preceptors." "One excepted," answers the beggar: "Thou thyself art good, O Zarathustra, and better even than a cow!"[9]

Nietzsche's hypersensitivity to his natural surroundings – to landscape, climate and time of day – his finding solace in nature for his terrible loneliness and absence of communication with human beings, permeates his work. Yet he seeks transcendence beyond mute nature towards superhumanity.

Now Cabot is no voluntary beggar who has distributed his wealth to the poor. Nor is he the dithyrambic philosopher, climbing mountains in pursuit of the superman. His God's will in fructifying the rocky soil rather than pursuing "easy gold" is hard and narrow. But like Nietzsche and his beggar he suffers bitter lonesomeness, lack of understanding, and chilling coldness. And his driven effort to communicate his deepest feelings and passionate longing for warmth, understanding, and acceptance is spurned by the uncomprehending, icily indifferent woman, whose maternal presence and love, identified with the farm, he "clove t' ... in my lonesomeness," under whose influence he softened, only to find blankness and an uneasy foreboding coldness from which he bitterly

escapes by seeking communion again with the cows: "I kin talk t' the cows. ... they'll give me peace."[10]

NOTES

1 Eugene O'Neill, *Nine Plays* (New York, 1921), pp. 170–74.

2 Arthur and Barbara Gelb, *O'Neill* (New York, 1973), p. 541.

3 Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (Boston, Toronto, 1968), pp. 66–67.

4 Letter of 22 June 1927, in *Selected Letters of Eugene O'Neill*, ed. Travis Bogard and Jackson R. Bryer (New Haven, 1988), p. 246.

5 Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Artist* (Boston, Toronto, 1973), p. 174.

6 See, e.g., Michael Hinden, "*The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Great God Brown*," *Modern Drama*, 16 (1973), 129–40, and Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (New York, 1988), pp. 199–225.

7 Quoted in Rudolph Binion, *Frau Lou* (Princeton, 1968), p. 96.

8 *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York, 1927), pp. 103–104. The translation of *Ecce Homo* is by C.P. Fadiman. O'Neill would have read the earlier 1911 translation by A.M. Ludovici, which is virtually the same in this passage.

9 *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, pp. 268–71 in the translation by Thomas Common, which O'Neill read. The idea of ruminating recurs at the end of Nietzsche's "Preface" to *The Geneology of Morals*, where Nietzsche alludes to modern man's loss of the quality needed in the art of reading: "a quality for the exercise of which it is necessary to be a cow and under *no circumstances* a modern man! – *rumination*."

10 The dark underside of O'Neill's (and *Desire*'s) idealization of the maternal is symbolized in the elms, which brood "oppressively" over the Cabot home with a "sinister maternity," a "crushing, jealous absorption." Abbie, despite her sacrificial adoration of her "son"-lover, brings about his destruction as well as that of her baby. And Eben's obsession with the maternal is a morbid distortion of love of mother. O'Neill's deep ambivalence towards women-mothers, endemic to his works, is traceable of course to his love-resentment towards his drug-addicted mother, Ella. For an excellent summation, see Sheaffer, *Son and Artist*, pp. 499–501.