

## LETTER FROM BOSTON

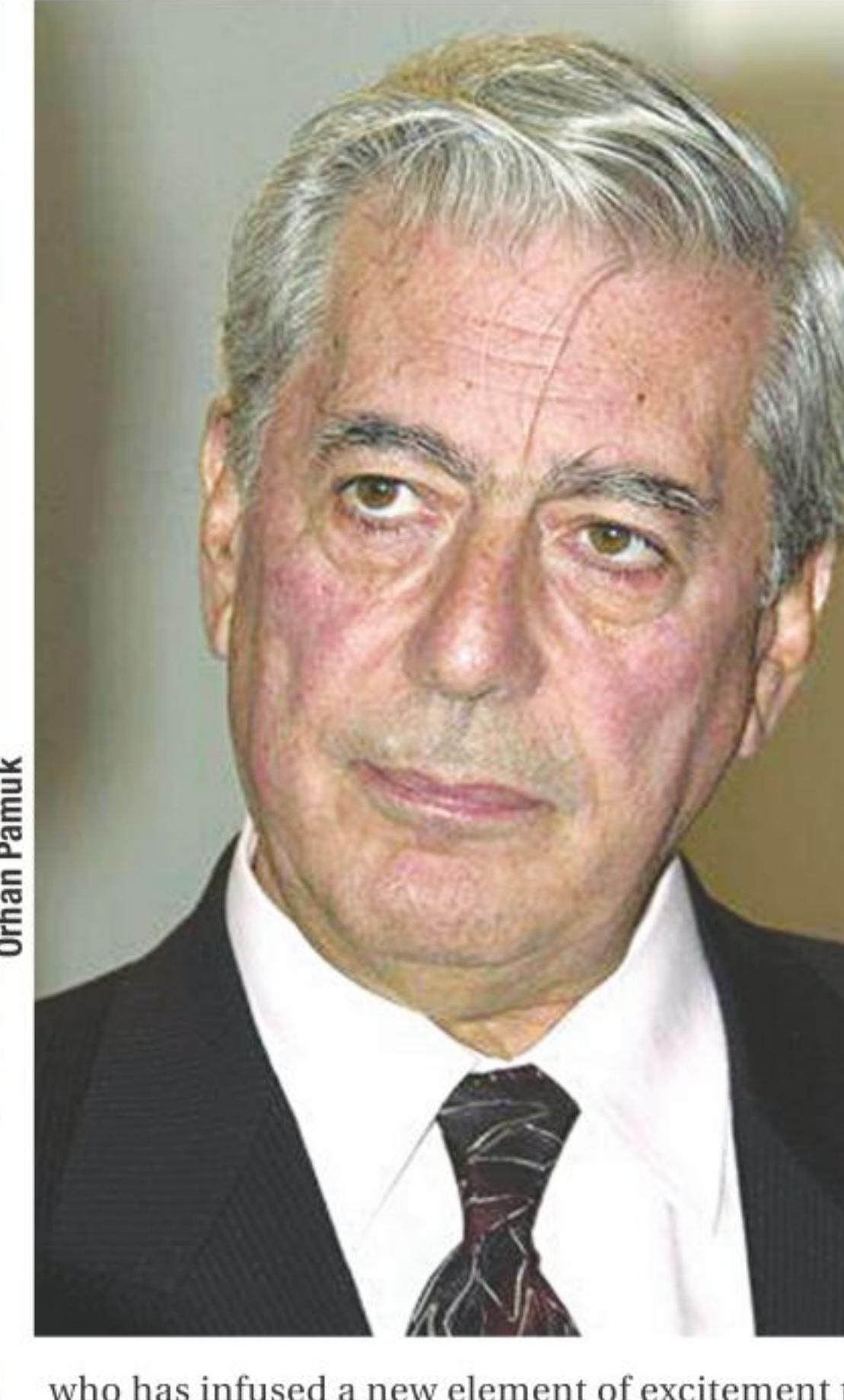
## Readings in December

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I was never particularly fascinated by historical novels or "period fictions" as they are popularly known as in the USA. But I have been read a few of late. I just recently started "Bring Up the Bodies" by Hilary Mantel, a tale of Henry VIII, King of England, Anne Boleyn, his queen, and Thomas Cromwell, his deputy. More on the book and my struggles as I plod through it later, but let me confide to my readers that I will need a few more weeks, if not months, to finish this complicated history of 16<sup>th</sup> century England and Europe! That's partly because my knowledge of the British emperors until now has been very limited, and I acquired mostly from watching movies based on Shakespeare's plays or hearsay.

My love affair with historical novels started more than a year ago when I decided to read the Nobel Laureate (2006) novelist Orhan Pamuk's acclaimed "My Name is Red", translated from Turkish, "fascinating murder mystery set against the backdrop of 16<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul". I had started reading Pamuk's novels earlier inspired by my wife, who gave me his book "The Museum of Innocence" (reviewed in "Love's Pain is Indivisible", The Daily Star, September 24, 2011) as a Christmas gift. I was aware that Pamuk's books were difficult to finish and was forewarned by bloggers who gave up on his books after struggling through a few hundred pages. However, I finally managed to finish "Museum" and then started his "Snow" while some of my fellow co-conspirators had given up and felt I was finally getting a handle on some of the ingredients needed to taste and savour these masterpieces: patience and concentration. To my readers who might be interested in taking on Pamuk, let me mention that even though "Red" was set in the social and political montage of 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire, the narrative is strong enough to carry a modern reader with very little background or interest in the medieval history of Asia Minor to keep on turning the pages.

Emboldened by my experience with Pamuk, I casually picked up another novel of this genre, "Dream of the Celt", by Mario Vargas Llosa, translated from Spanish. Llosa was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010, but the subject matter of "Dream" was pretty obscure to me. It tracks the life, adventures, and execution of the Irish revolutionary Roger Casement. One again, I found myself trying to make headway through the first fifty pages of a historical novel based on the life of Casement, who was sentenced to death by the British authorities for his role in the Dublin uprising in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I would have probably put the book down if the novel had entirely been about the history of the struggles of the Irish Republicans. However, the narrative is much more nuanced and interwoven with the international settings of the respective periods. Using



Hilary Mantel

extensive historical research, Llosa tells the tale of Casement's early life and gives a fascinating account of his travels in nineteenth century Africa in the Belgian Congo and the early twentieth century rubber plantations of South America. Without giving away too much of the storyline, I can mention that even for a casual armchair history buff and definitely for aspiring novelists and story tellers, Llosa's style, attention to details of the happenings in Africa and Amazonia, and his dedication and passion for the exploited indigenous population of the Congo basin and the Amazon basin helps to make it a page turner from start to finish.

Since finishing "The Dream of the Celt", I have switched to lighter readings by modern British writers, including Ian McEwan, a Booker Prize winner for his book "Amsterdam". I was able to finish his "Solar" in less than two weeks, which is a record for me. After that, as I was looking for the next novel to start, I searched from my list of Nobel and Booker prize winners. I soon discovered that the American media was abuzz with the latest Booker Prize winner, Hilary Mantel. Her book, "Wolf Hall", received the Booker Prize in 2009 and did so once again for the sequel, "Bring up the Bodies" in 2012. Mantel is a gifted writer

who has infused a new element of excitement to a reexamination of historical characters and the genre. But her writing is sometimes heavy and her sentences long. To take an example, in portraying her main character, Thomas Cromwell, she writes,

"He has black hair, graying now, and because of his pale impermeable skin, which seems designed to resist rain as well as sun, people sneer that his father was an Irishman, though really he was a brewer and blacksmith at Putney, a shearsman too, a man with a finger in every pie, a scrapper and brawler, a drunk and a bully, a man often hauled before the justices for punching someone, for cheating someone."

Likewise, as Henry VIII goes through his harem of women of queens and ladies-in-waiting in his pursuit of a male heir for the British throne, Mantel writes with a flourish: "All our labours, our sophistry, all our learning both acquired or pretended; the stratagems of state, the lawyers' decrees, the churchmen's curses, and the grave resolutions of judges, sacred and secular: all and each can be defeated by a woman's body, can they not?" As my readers will understand, while I will enjoy reading such flowery prose, I will also find it necessary to pause as I try to digest Mantel's offerings as I make my way through the workings and machinations of Cromwell, Henry VIII and all the king's men and women!

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON.

## REMEMBRANCE

## Eugene O'Neill and American drama

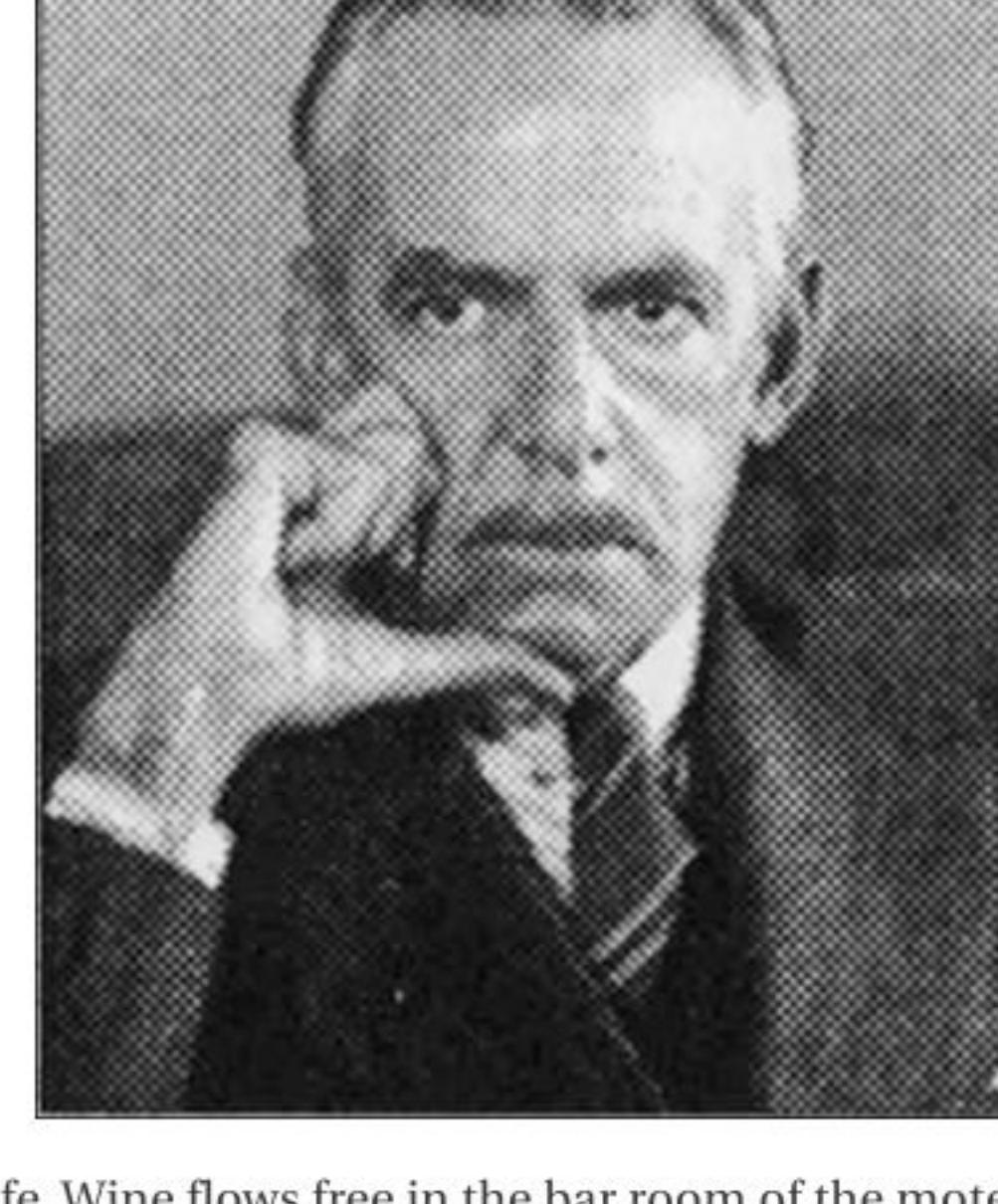
SHAHED AHMED

November 27 marked the 59<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of America's pre-eminent playwright Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill has long been a fixture of the modern American dramatic literature curriculum in colleges and universities worldwide. His plays are considered exceptional not only in plumbing the depths of human emotion, but also in presenting a disconcerting image of American cultural life. O'Neill wrote fifty one plays. He was awarded four Pulitzer and a Nobel Prize in literature in 1936 the only playwright who has achieved such a feat so far in America. As a dramatist he was highly experimental in technique, and his themes generally involved lust for power, body, land and oil; reinventing pagan depths in American complexities, racial and class problems; and his family.

Most of O'Neill's plays depict some disturbing struggles in the raced, gendered, and classed power structures. His characters are governed by the desire to own almost everything and anything, which is a very characteristically capitalistic, and hence American trait. The ownership would be revealed, in the manners of psychological strip-teases, through conflicts between a kleptocratic autocrat and his citizens as seen in *The Emperor Jones*; between black and white as seen in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*; between working and capitalist classes as seen in *The Hairy Ape*; between material possession (land, oil) and dispossession as seen in *Desire under the Elms* and *Ile*; between masked and unmasked articulations of the ever changing self as in *The Great God Brown*, only to name a few. O'Neill became a maestro in depicting on stage how desires turn simply into deceipts that take away the truth of life in two of his later autobiographical plays: *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh*.

*Long Day's Journey into Night* is a rags-to-riches story of an Irish migrant, James Tyrone, who sacrifices art to avarice to accumulate wealth. Arriving in America as a kid right after potato famine struck Ireland, it does not take long for a streetwise Tyrone to learn that money is the benchmark for human excellence. Although he reaches the pinnacle of the American dream of success, drugs, alcohol, and disease now run havoc in Tyrone's family for which money can't be a balm. The play ends with all its members appearing as haunted figures on stage trying to

build a smokescreen with illusion through drug and booze. The plotline is based on the playwright's family, and hence the characters are replicas of O'Neill's: his cheapskate, matinee idol father, drug addict mother, wastrel elder brother, and O'Neill himself the tubercular son. While O'Neill just cherry-picked a day's incident from his life for the play, eventually it became a telescoped event in the life of Americans where Tyrone is Everyman in a country of immigrants. In the saloon play *The Iceman Cometh*, the playwright again revisits his memory lane. It involves some down-and-out friends who have run out of luck in



life. Wine flows free in the bar room of the motel, and everyone here is either talking rubbish or fighting among themselves. They are all waiting for the arrival of the charismatic salesman Hickey who visits this place once in a year on the birthday of the bar owner, Larry.

O'Neill here presents the American cultural-political archetype of the traveling salesman in the post-World War II era, exactly on the eve of America's emergence as the richest and most powerful country on the planet. A uniquely American mythic figure, Hickey's portrait presages two of America's most famous salespersons seen on stage during the 1940s: flinty Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and awful Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Hickey, however, is the first American

sales agent of the capitalistic era who leaves a stage-legacy for Stanley and Willy by never apprising the audience of his selling product. This particular cult of salesmanship, germinated as a derivative of the American brand of capitalism, which O'Neill uses as an *abstraction* and Miller and Williams sincerely follow him, perhaps means to carry a point of view. All three salesmen-protagonists are actually selling the product called *death*, traveling and covering distances and thus conforming to an American worldview that later will suit Anthony Giddens' famous explanation of globalization in the latter's *The Consequences of Modernity*. Hickey sells it to his wife, one bar member, and finally to himself; Stanley to Blanche, and to some extent, Mitch; and Willy to himself and to his sons.

Edward Albee wrote a moving foreword to O'Neill's long lost play *Exorcism*, published for the first time in February 2012 by Yale University. Albee, whose *Zoo Story* was the booster rocket that launched American absurdist genre into the world literature orbit in 1959, was branded over the last half of the twentieth century as the flag bearer of Beckett and Pinter in America. Albee broke the fifty-year silence by binnning such a long-held scholarly premise when he declared that it was not any European dramatist but his compatriot O'Neill whose plays, like *The Iceman Cometh*, served as the launching pad for his entire canon of absurdist drama.

By any objective criterion, therefore, Eugene O'Neill stands as the virtuoso dramatist that the American theatre has ever produced. Broadway success, originality, international acclaim, foundational contributions and theatrical innovations for which he is credited all attest to his pre-eminence as America's leading playwright. Williams, Miller, and Albee followed him; Sam Shepard, David Mamet, August Wilson, and Tony Kushner acknowledged their profound debt to him. Tennessee Williams once remarked, "O'Neill gave birth to American theatre and died for it." The appeal of O'Neill is universal simply because like great writers, he reveals the truth about human conditions, shows understanding of the human individual that rises above time and place. That is what makes the playwright very much contemporary to us.

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## POETRY

## FAITH

## The pilgrimage

FARIDA SHAIKH

After their expulsion  
From the Garden of Eden.

For Aadam forgot the covenant

To Allah

Aadam was seduced.

Iblis whispered:

'O Aadam shall I lead you to

The Tree of Eternity...

...and to a kingdom that

never decays?'

On the mount of Arafah

Aadam recognized Bibi

Hawa

(Arafah means recognition)

... Seeks Allah's forgiveness

Allah forgives anything...

and whom He pleases: 4:48

Allah is Oft-forgiving Most

Merciful. 4:110

The Prophet said:

'The best dua is

The dua made on the day of

Arafat.'

The Prophet gave his last

sermon

On ninth day of Dhul Hajj,

10 A.H

From Urana valley of

Mount Arafat,

The Prophet said:

That this is a sacred day

Makkah, Mecca is a sacred

city

Every Muslim man's

Life and property is a sacred

trust

Then the Prophet said:

That Allah has forbidden

usury.

And Beware of Iblis, Satan.

Men, be kind to your wives

For they are

Like their partners and helpers.

Let them befriend  
Whom the men approve of  
Unchaste is forbidden.Further the Prophet said:  
To worship Allah alone  
To say five salat daily  
To fast during Ramadan  
To give of one's wealth in

zakat

And to perform Hajj if that is

affordable.

The Prophet said:  
No race, no colour  
Is superior over the other  
All Muslims constitute one  
brotherhood.The Mount of Mercy  
Is the 70 meter granite  
Rising out of the plain  
Is Jubel Arafah,  
Jabal-r-Rahman.Wuquf at Arafah  
Every year  
On this very day is renewal  
For prayer and repentance  
The whole day

The pilgrims stand in earnest supplication

And devotion

Praying for Allah's abundant

forgiveness.

Tears are shed  
By those who make repen-  
tance

And seek Allah's mercy

For their sins.

'It is most grievous sin

To stand in Arafat

And to imagine

That Allah, Exalted is He

Does not forgive one.'

(al- Ghazali)

Converted to Islam

American poet-writer\* said:

'In Arafat, the Hajj goes on

Inside the hearts and

thoughts of each of us.

This is a rehearsal for the

Day of Judgment.

How will we account for our

acts?

Have I injured anyone?

Have I been grateful enough

For the simple gifts of life,

Water, food, friends, family

And the air I breath.'

\*Michael Wolfe

FARIDA SHAIKH, A SOCIOLOGIST AND WRITER,  
RETURNED FROM HAJJ RECENTLY