

Was the Unabomber a Eugene O'Neill Fan?

A biographer untangles the FBI's 20-year-old theories about links between the Unabomber and the American playwright Eugene O'Neill.

Robert M. Dowling

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My mailman, David, is the sunny-faced sort who brightens my block each afternoon, no matter the weather, with a glowing smile. But one day in the spring of 2012, I couldn't help wonder, when he took a singular letter from my outgoing mail slot, whether he might report me to the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, or worse, the Federal Bureau of Investigation. My envelope was addressed to a supermax prison in Colorado, the addressee a man once feared and reviled, especially among David's kind: Theodore "Ted" Kaczynski—a.k.a. "the Unabomber."

That spring I was nearing the end of the research stage of my biography on the playwright Eugene O'Neill when my theater director neighbor, Derron, casually mentioned an obscure and only briefly reported connection that federal investigators had made between Ted Kaczynski, a notorious domestic terrorist, and O'Neill, the nation's foremost playwright.

"When the Unabomber wanted to kill his victims, he used O'Neill stamps on his package bombs," Derron told me. "Didn't you know?" Stumbling across such arcana this way is one of the great pleasures in the life of a literary historian, and a quick Google search turned up a couple of brief news items from the summer of 1996: The Unabomber had in fact applied \$1 Eugene O'Neill commemorative stamps, from the "Prominent American" series, to package bombs designed to kill the addressee. If Kaczynski merely wanted to injure or maim his targets, the FBI had surmised, he made do with stamps from the same series of the former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the cowboy performer Will Rogers, or the seminal feminist Lucy Stone.

Between 1978 and 1995, Ted Kaczynski terrorized the United States with a horrific series of package bombs so cleverly designed as to waylay any trace back to their source; by the time he was captured, he'd killed three people and injured 23. Over those years, he'd been targeting sources of technological "progress," specifically universities and airlines. (His designation by the FBI was the "UNABOM subject," short for University and Airline Bomber). Given the length of time he'd eluded his would-be captors, nearly 18 years, the investigation had swelled into one of the most expensive manhunts in FBI history. By the time of Kaczynski's arrest, the federal government had spent more than \$50 million on his investigation. The agents in charge were under immense pressure to make headway in the case.

Thus through the stage door, so to speak, appears the specter of Eugene O'Neill.

Ted Kaczynski "was a well-read guy, a genius," a federal agent directly involved in the case told *The Day* newspaper of New London, Connecticut (the paper of record in O'Neill's hometown, and now mine). "He would not have developed a pattern like this by accident," he said, after Kaczynski's capture in 1995. "He placed a lot of symbolic value on the stamps."

Straightaway I filed a Freedom of Information Act request for the FBI file on any connection they'd made between O'Neill and the Unabomber, and my mounting curiosity incited me to write directly to Kaczynski in prison. A little more than a year later, returning from a trip to O'Neill's home on Sea Island, Georgia, I arrived at my front porch and there it was: a heavy package from the FBI. And then, the very next

day, an email arrived from my English department: “Rob, were you expecting a letter from the Unabomber?!” As a matter of fact I was.

The FBI’s package of material, though incomplete and partially redacted, confirmed that the agency had discovered remnants of O’Neill’s commemorative stamps at five crime scenes over his years-long rampage, including ten of them for his first attack in 1978 at Northwestern University. So in early January 1995, they opened a file titled “Eugene O’Neill,” and another on the Eugene O’Neill Society (for which I currently serve as a member of the board) with directories of its members—now considered potential suspects—from 1979 to 1992. They also diligently investigated, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2001, “everyone who signed the visitors’ list” at O’Neill’s childhood home, Monte Cristo Cottage in New London.

Once Kaczynski’s stamp pattern was identified, the FBI’s Investigative Support Unit (ISU) submitted this criminal profile, on January 17, 1995, to the UNABOM Task Force (UTF) based on consultations with a clinical psychologist: “Eugene O’Neill, a playwright who drew upon the tragedy of his own life, is said to have functioned as a social critic and moral guide for American society. The UNABOM subject may view himself in a parallel role. O’Neill is quoted as saying, ‘In all my plays sin is punished and redemption takes place.’ ... There are several interesting points about O’Neill, his personality, his works, etc., which *might* play some role in the UNABOM subject’s behavior. For example, [improvised explosive] device #4 was concealed in the book *Ice Brothers*; one of O’Neill’s most noted plays was *The Iceman Cometh* ... O’Neill was responsible for introducing innovative uses of symbolism to the American theater in the early 1900’s. Some critics complained that his symbolism was obscure and was lost on the audience. There is little question that the UNABOM subject also engages in much symbolism. Unfortunately, unlike most serial violent offenders with a message, the UNABOM subject has not communicated his message and the meaning of his symbolism is lost.”

Seven months later, on August 24, 1995, the ISU affirmed their previous report to the UTF, but with a caveat: “The Eugene O’Neill stamp has importance and meaning to the UNABOM subject,” the subsequent report noted, but “within the realm of possibilities, no one can say with certainty, what this significance or specific behavior might be.”

“Without any forensic evidence or specific behavior on which to base an analysis, drawing a specific connection between Eugene O’Neill’s anarchist views and the UNABOM subject’s goals would be speculative at this point. The only person who knows the reason or reasons these stamps are important is the UNABOM subject himself.”

This wasn’t the first time the playwright’s name had crossed a federal agent’s desk. During the aftermath of the Red Scare of the ’20s, by which time O’Neill had publicly declared the United States to be “the most reactionary country in the world,” an agent from what was then the Bureau of Investigation had dispatched another internal memorandum on the playwright.

Dated April 22, 1924, and submitted a month before J. Edgar Hoover took over as acting director, the memo was filed under Classification 61: Treason. His play *The Hairy Ape*, the agent noted, “could easily lend itself to radical propaganda.” Along with this play’s potential effect on America’s “radical fraternity,” the bureau took particular note of O’Neill’s preoccupation with racial inequality, “a favorite theme of O’Neil’s [sic],” according to the memorandum. (I obtained a copy of the original through the same FOIA request as the Unabomber file).

Indeed, one of the more stunning moments in O’Neill’s career was a near-treasonous anti-American declaration he made much later, in 1946, at a press conference to promote *The Iceman Cometh*. It was his first public appearance in more than a decade, at the height of the patriotic triumphalism then gripping postwar America, and O’Neill stunned reporters with a statement lambasting “the American Dream” and hinting darkly about a coming reckoning:

“Some day this country is going to get it—really get it,” he declared. “We had everything to start with—everything—but there’s bound to be a retribution. We’ve followed the same selfish, greedy path as every other country in the world. We talk about the American Dream and want to tell the world about the American Dream, but what is that dream, in most cases, but the dream of material things? I sometimes think that the United States, for this reason, is the greatest failure the world has ever seen. We’ve been able to get a very good price for our souls in this country—the greatest price perhaps that has ever been paid.”

Throughout his adult life, O’Neill was, like Kaczynski, a self-identified anarchist. But unlike Kaczynski’s conviction that only violence was capable of dismantling technological power and reverting our species back to its primitive state, O’Neill’s “philosophical anarchism” advocated nonviolent protest against all institutional power, mostly by ignoring it. “I am a philosophical anarchist,” he said in 1946, “which means, ‘Go to it, but leave me out of it.’”

Had Kaczynski actually read O’Neill’s 1928 play *Dynamo*, as the FBI also presumed and reported to the press, he would’ve discovered that O’Neill shared his revolutionary outrage against the societal effects of technology, but no more. O’Neill rejected terrorism as well as state-sponsored violence. “True anarchism,” he wrote in 1940, “never justifies bloodshed.”

Still, the FBI’s bogus theories would surely have furnished the “Black Irish” dramatist with a dose of ironic amusement. Nearly all of O’Neill’s representations of law enforcement are satirically drawn, and many of his plays—*The Web*, *The Dreamy Kid*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Great God Brown*, *A Touch of the Poet*, and *The Iceman Cometh*—end with policemen awkwardly confronted with depths of tragic humanity only O’Neill could conjure.

Sure enough Kaczynski, in his reply to my letter inquiring about his political connection to the playwright, claimed the FBI’s link of him to O’Neill was “bull manure.” “I’ve never had the faintest interest in Eugene O’Neill,” he wrote in a carefully printed hand, “and I’ve never read anything by him, unless perhaps I was required to read

something of his in a high-school English course, in which case I promptly forgot it.” He thanked me for the coorespondence, but warned me not to “believe anything you’ve read or heard about me in the media or on the Internet ... I simply bought stamps of a specified denomination, and I took whatever stamps of that denomination were handed to me over the counter or came out of the vending machine.”

My mailman David assured me recently that he only inspects outgoing envelopes enough to make sure there’s sufficient postage. In our post-Edward Snowden America, the notion of being wary of a mailman’s inspection seems laughably quaint, I know. Had the initial FBI investigation taken place in our current age, who knows to what extent they might have gone to peruse my and my fellow O’Neill Society members’ private computer files?

In the end, though, it was Kaczynski’s parting advice that offered the last laugh.

“I suggest you read my book *Technological Slavery*,” his letter concludes, “which you can probably get from amazon.com.”

Robert M. Dowling is professor of English at Central Connecticut State University. He has written extensively on Eugene O’Neill, including, along with several other books on the playwright, the newly released *Eugene O’Neill: A Life in Four Acts* (Yale University Press, October 2014). He serves on the editorial board of *The Eugene O’Neill Review* and the board of directors of the Eugene O’Neill Society.

The Ted K Archive

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