

ARTHUR MILLER WRESTLES WITH THE AMERICAN DREAM

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On condition that they can ignore the "massive twin towers, the tallest buildings in the world, rectangular blocks thrusting gracelessly into the sky, dark and hulking, beyond human scale,"! people will meet the huge lady, with her torch raised, "gracing" New York harbor. That is the "restored" Statue of Liberty, "the Mother of Exiles," who always seemed to welcome those who were willing to share in her dream:

"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest tost, to me;
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"²

Then came Willy Loman, Joe Keller, Eddie Carbone, Reverend Hale, Bert, Gus, John Proctor, Victor and Walter Franz, and many others, with their extravagant expectations or ideals like democracy, liberty, equality, fraternity, pursuit of happiness, peace and prosperity. They were searching for "freedom of thought and the right of private judgement in matters of conscience" and directed "their course to this happy country as their last asylum."³ Some were inventors and were after new institutions: Benjamin Franklin's empirical optimism took him to depict life realistically and to be scientific in approach and method, and optimistic about the world's end; some, like Emerson, fused the material world with the ideal, combined the practical and the visionary,

1 Anthony Lewis, "Notes on Being at Home and Abroad", *The Human Condition*, Ed. James E. Miller, Jr., Robert Hayden, Robert O'Neal. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1974: 511.

2 Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," *Resloring the Statue of Liberty*, Richard S. Hayden, Thierry W. Despont. New York: Mc Graw-Hill Book Co., 1986: 95.

3 Samuel Adams, *Speech*, Philadelphia, Pa., 1 August 1776.

and finally developed confidence in man, the self-reliant free individual who has the will-power to choose; and others, like Thoreau, preached tolerance, loving nature and working six hours a week. Innocent they were (so was America, the unexploited Eden), under one God they were and in Him did they trust (but soon came to believe in the Gods of America), and enthusiastic enough they were to start a mission, expanding Westward with its new opportunities: the coca-colonization of the world. They did everything "with God on their side." However, they had to adapt themselves to the "changes" and on their way from rags to riches (Alger, Carnegie), they had to put up with too many obstacles (American Indians etc.) "in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier into the complexity of city life,"⁴ which has become American history. In 1787 they issued the first coin of the newly independent United States, which has "13 linked circles and the words, 'We are one', inscribed in the center. Other side of the coin depicts a sun dial and the Latin word, *Fugio*, meaning 'time flies'."⁵

Next came Arthur Miller, born in Manhattan, the son of middle-class ladies' coat manufacturer and a schoolteacher mother, the brother of a businessman and an actress, and the would-be husband of "the" actress, Marilyn Monroe. Miller and his family were to suffer major losses before and during the years of the Depression, the haunting and daunting experience for many "tempest tost," which would later become the "mysterious underwater thing"⁶ for most of Miller's plays. He was only twenty when he wrote his first play in six days (remember, time flies) and he is still alive trying to fight against the perils of America, which he soon discovered to be a "poussa." He mainly wrote about the American myth of success because he found it a very difficult subject to write about. "Because the very people who are being swallowed up by this ethos nod in agreement when you tell them, 'You are being swallowed up by this thing'.⁷ He has investigated complex moral deci-

4 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier", *The Rise of Realism: American Literature from 1860 to 1900*, Ed. Louis Wann, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1949: 742.

5 *The Constitution of the United States of America*. United States Information Agency Publications, 1987: 2.

6 Jeffrey Helterman, "Arthur Miller," *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Vol.1: Twentieth-Century American Dramatists (Part 2: K-Z)*, Ed. John Rac Nicholas, Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Co., 1951: 87.

7 Olga Carlisle, Rosa Styron, "Arthur Miller: Interview," *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977: 216.

sions, which he hoped to be the only relief to the individual's conscience. Conscience always weighed against the laws of society and the principles of the game played in order to be admitted through the "golden door." His characters find themselves at the threshold of trying to become Whole men. Miller never gave up yearning the Whole man, who feels the responsibility for all of his fellowmen and for the whole universe. His theory of "the Whole man" is but a dream within a dream, another outgrowth of the same idealistic soul or optimism that produced Emerson's the Over Soul, and Steinbeck's the World Soul. When he cannot get out of the fight against the myth victoriously, Miller usually kills his hero because, he explains, "I can't, quite frankly, separate in my mind tragedy from death."⁸ And no sooner does he set off for some social comment than he shifts on to the individual's vindication with his past or with an intruder, usually a member of the family. This fatal confrontation is an inevitable step in the hero's search for identity or a must to get rid of the sense of guilt, which is an outcome of some past mistake or some sort of tragic flaw. "On the one hand, he wants a universal moral sanction; on the other, he considers man's potentialities and limitations to lie entirely within himself."⁹ And soon does the "We are one" ideal turn into the "I am striving to be one, but my God(s) I am all alone!"

Death of a Salesman is Miller's first play to deal with the American myth of success powerfully and directly. It is with this play that Miller reached psychological consistency and creation of an interesting character. The curtain rises to a painful contrast between what is implied by the melody played on a flute and the Loman house which is boxed in between bricks and windows. The Loman's dream of a beautiful house has not materialized. Immediately after the curtain rises, the father Willy Loman (or Lowman?) comes in "tired to death": "I couldn't make it. I just couldn't make it, Linda."¹⁰ He is a failure but he never gives up. He never admits that the way he is going leads nowhere. He is, to the very last, blindly faithful to the myth of success, which finally causes his ruin. His sons, Biff and Happy are also victims of his dream. Biff is tired of participating in the rat-race in a competitive society; Happy has no ideals and to him the others are all bars, and therefore

8 Interview: 204.

9 Tom F. Driver, "Strength and Weakness in Arthur Miller," *Discussions of Modern American Drama*. Ed. Walter Meserve, Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1965: 113.

10 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967: 8.

he is determined to compete but he refuses Biff's offer to go to the West. Willy had received the same offer for Alaska from his successful brother Ben, who "made" it by joining the race in the jungle at a very early age.

In *Death of a Salesman*, there is a slight social criticism of the fact that nothing really works in America. This may be the only sign of the end of America's quest for earthly dominion and material wellbeing. Marvin Harris, in his survey *America Now*, has spared a chapter titled "Nothing Works", in which he claims that America is in deep trouble, but soon he argues that the new prophets of gloom and despair "insist that the American dream of universal prosperity will never come true," and suggests that "we must not permit ourselves to surrender to this vision of the future without a struggle."¹¹ Willy Loman does not surrender until he learns that Biff has surrendered. For him America does not produce any new dreams to hold on to as it does for other people like Howard Wagner, who has now left his camera aside and found another miraculous machine, a tape-recorder. The achievement of human contentment through machines in a non-stop process that is ensured by the capitalistic system. It is the dream of the new, the impulse to change the present.

Now Willy is, until the end, a monument of American optimism. Although he is a man of dignity and therefore refuses the job Charley offers him, he does not turn down the money he gives. This may seem contradictory. It is. However, when we think of another facet of the American dream, optimism and faith, it is not. Loman is still hoping that he will succeed and return his debts. He is the tragic common man who has become an outsider in the course of a self-deceptive ideal of success. At the end of the play Willy Loman hears Ben reminding him of "time" (fugio) and of the boat which they are going to miss if they do not hurry. Willy gets on that boat, after years, by suicide; this is reminiscent of Whitman's "Brooklyn Ferry" and his ideal that every race, every person is united, in Willy's case, united in death. Thus, we can say that Willy is equal to and united with the successful ones by getting rid of his anxieties first by his escape mechanism like withdrawal into the past while he is alive, and then by suicide.

Death of a Salesman is a successful character drama of a pathetic ordinary man. In a discussion, Miller stated that "unlike the law against

¹¹ Marvin Harris, *America Now: The Anthropology of a Changing Culture*, New York Simon and Schuster, 1981: 175.

incest, the law of success is not administered by statute of church, but it is very nearly as powerful in its grip upon men. The confusion increases because, while it is a law, it is by no means a wholly agreeable one even as it is slavishly obeyed, for to fail is no longer to belong to society, in (Loman's) estimate."¹² I agree with Tom F. Driver in that Miller is confused as there is no such law of success. It is only a delusion. Besides, in contrast to Loman, there is Uncle Ben, and in contrast to Biff there is Bernard who have fulfilled the dream. Therefore, who is to blame: the whole myth of success or Miller's delusion or a character-in a play who acts as if it were a law? "It is in fact not a law but a false *credo*, which Willy shares with many persons, and the result of the attempt to make a false *credo* into a law results only in pathetic irony."¹³ Miller seems not to have made up his mind as to whether the trouble is Willy, the individual, or society and/or the myth. However, since there are others who have made it, then either Willy did not know the "how" of making it or was not ambitious enough like Charley or Howard or Ben. Miller wants to say that it is always the strongest, the most ambitious, the most pragmatic and the most opportunistic that wins, and being so, that Willy fails. His message is that the dream is alive, legal and institutionalized, but that men are not equal (or perhaps some are more equal) in the race to fulfill it.

Miller is also obsessed with the theme of good and evil in man. He believes that "from whatever cause, a dedication to evil and loving it as evil, is possible in human beings who appear agreeable and normal," and he continues taking Iago as an example, "the evil in him represents but a perversion of his frustrated love." He posits, "no metaphysical force of evil which totally possesses certain individuals," nor denies "that given infinite wisdom and patience and knowledge any human being can be saved from himself."¹⁴ However, we must wonder: Can Abigail, in *The Crucible*, who does everything out of frustrated love, all the judges of the Inquisition, even Senator McCarthy (remember the allusion) be saved from themselves by Miller's three miraculous pills-wisdom, patience, and knowledge? We must wonder: does Miller kill John Proctor at the end of *The Crucible* to compensate for his own ambiguous attitude toward evil, and cop out by use of the search for

12 Driver: 110.

13 Driver: 111.

14 Arthur Miller, "Introduction", *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, New York: The Viking Press, 1981.

identity? If so, Loman is then punished accordingly. Why do Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge* and John Proctor in *The Crucible*, and Willy Loman want their name at the cost of their lives? Miller's answer to these questions is that these people break taboos and thus prove that taboos exist or that there is a moral world, and that by breaking, they throw "some sharp light upon the hidden scheme of existence." That the individual achieves this at the cost of his life, Miller claims, "is the victory.... That crime is a civilizing crime."¹⁵ Does this justify Joe Keller's irresponsibility by causing twenty-one pilots' death? What about Miller's theory of the Whole man? Why does Joe "put a bullet" in his head? If the crime is a civilizing one, is Joe Keller civilized when he proves his irresponsibility or when he commits suicide? How about the others who never think of suicide? For instance, Parris, Judge Hathorne, Deputy Governor Danforth and all the rest of the team of fraud in *The Crucible*? Do all the tragic deaths in his plays show the existence of a moral order? The new sun pouring in upon Elizabeth's face, while for Proctor the drums rattle, means that Miller's "hidden scheme of existence" is but his delusion that the stronger, the more powerful or the evil survives. The poor, bewildered, guilt-ridden but innocent ordinary people suffer and die. And not so easily either. They have to encounter their foils as it is impossible to pass away without getting rid of the sense of guilt. Eddie confronts Rudolfo's brother Marco, Joe Keller confronts Ann's brother George and his son Chris, and in *The Price* Victor confronts* his brother Walter to accuse him of becoming a doctor at the expense of his own education although he, in fact, knows that his life was not ruined because of Walter. In short, the individual's failure, his inability to accomplish what the myth of success promises, is partially a result of the evil of which the individual cannot be cured except in death. In the end, Miller does not adequately criticize the myth of success - he ends up with social melodrama.

While attempting for "a theatre given to objective knowledge, to heightened self-awareness" Miller exaggerates the passions to feel and to know, which are, to him, necessary assets to reach the theatre he is in search of. There is no individual moral sanction and yet there is a moral order in society that condemns and punishes the hero who merely relies on his conscience. This reliance is impossible because his scheme of existence is out of his control. The individual is left alone to pay the price of making a choice, which is in fact no choice at all.

15 Interview: 206.

Thus, Miller's ultimate vision - that he ends his plays with whether killing his heroes or not - resembles Tony Harrison's message in his poem "The Murderer and Sarapis":

Don't think the Gods have let you go
and connive at homicide.
We have spared you that quick crushing, so
So we can get you crucified¹⁶.

Deep underneath - if we do not look at his basic inability to establish a consistent morality - we can sense what really disturbs Miller: not the system, or the myth, but its failure which is responsible for the failure of the individual. However ironic the end of *The Price* may be, with Solomon howling helplessly at the tragic human condition reminiscent of Peter's howling at the end of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* when we realize that it is Walter, the embodiment of all American characteristics, who walks out of the door victorious and safe in all respects, without any illusions or delusions, we come to the conclusion that in fact Victor is not the real victor, the winner. The winner is the American myth of success disguised as Walter, the Whole man. Therefore, the heroes are merely objects of the readers' pity. Miller defends them as heroes of some tragic size. My feeling is that Miller himself gains some tragic dimension as he "wills his own defeat," in O'Neill's terms, "when he pursues the unattainable. ... But the struggle is his success." O'Neill finds such a figure tragic but exhilarating. Miller's heroes dream of realizing the dream and when they get lost in their confusion, their dreams turn into nightmares.

Arthur Miller, as he ends up with a moral comment in most of his plays and as he has not got much to offer to the problem he defines, is another writer who tells us that what we need is a stronger and more encompassing faith, the sense to belong - if not the need to a wider universe. In his plays the individual is trying to accommodate his identity, to avoid the daunting idea that it is a totally alien universe. Feeling responsible for the situation and the Whole, or the Universe, is a must in order to be. Miller emphasizes the need for regenerative love, as a result of which one gains his intergrity and becomes the Whole man. Miller helped Americans encounter the images or illusions that they replaced reality with. In the end, however, Miller has not been success-

¹⁶ Tony Harrison, "Palladas: Poems/70," *Selected Poems*, London: King Penguin, 1986: 93-94.

ful at criticizing the American dream of success because he himself has melted into the American melting pot thoroughly. He has ironically contributed to the institutionalization of the American dream.

While wrestling with the American dream, Miller tries to pin it to the floor, to win, but when he realizes that he and the Dream are not of the same weight, he is bewildered. And as he, every now and then, tries getting out of the wrestling ring, the curtain falls on the common man in despair, but the American dream rises.