Arthur Miller, an American playwright

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Death puts an end to the ongoing effort that most artists consider a "work in progress" until the final moments. The body of work, like it or not, is then a finished product, vulnerable to evaluation as a whole. The commentators, for better or worse, will have their day.

American playwright Arthur Miller, author of such well-known dramas as *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953), who outlasted many of his critics, is no exception to this general rule.

However one evaluates his work, Miller—who died February 10 at the age of 89—was unquestionably a major figure in postwar artistic life in the US and his death is necessarily the occasion for a consideration not only of his plays, but the era and social environment that helped produce them.

This is a large subject, and the present piece can hardly be the final word. It is intended to raise certain vexing problems in artistic and intellectual life in the US that seem inevitably to attach themselves to Miller's life and work.

That Miller was a personally decent man ought to figure prominently in any commentary. The American liberal intelligentsia took a drastic turn for the worse in the middle of the twentieth century, making a bargain with the most dastardly elements in American society. Political and intellectual life still suffers today from the consequences of that devil's pact. In the late 1940s and early 1950s renunciation of previous ideas and denunciation of former colleagues became a fashion that hardly anyone resisted.

Miller was perhaps the most well-known figure who did. He resisted the tide of cowardice, egoism and selfishness, personified by his one-time colleague director Elia Kazan, and refused to "name names" to the congressional witch-hunters. "My conscience will not permit me to use the name of another person," he told his persecutors in 1956.

The playwright, although he did not remain untouched by the difficult political climate, maintained a critical attitude toward American society until the end of his life. He supported and participated in the civil rights struggle. He famously opposed the Vietnam War. Unlike so many others, Miller did not take the easy route, rallying to a Reagan or turning "neo-conservative." Most recently, he criticized the US invasion of Iraq. Of George W. Bush, Miller said contemptuously, "He's not a very good actor. He's too obvious most of the time, he has no confidence in his own facade, so he's constantly overemphasizing his sincerity." Whatever the fate of his dramas, Miller's reputation as an individual of genuine integrity rests secure.

Nonetheless, the present task would be a more obviously pleasant one if one were able to claim that Miller was an enormous talent, or that he possessed at least the spark of genius (like a contemporary of his, Leonard Bernstein). It would be a mistake, in my view, to make either assertion. Rather, he was a liberal-minded and well-meaning man, with severe limitations as an artist.

Death of a Salesman and *The Crucible*, his most popular works, have their strengths, but in the end seem shallow. The first, in its rather sentimental tribute to "Everyman" Willy Loman, is something of a pseudo-tragedy that does not look terribly deeply at the lower middle class "dream of success" or any other aspect of American life.

Miller perhaps should have resisted the urge, as tempting as it might have been, to create a parallel between the Salem witch trials of 1692 and the anticommunist purges of the early 1950s. Articulate and intelligent as it is, *The Crucible* does not offer much insight into the source of McCarthyism or the state of American society as a whole.

If Miller was the leading American dramatist of the 1940s, 1950s and into the 1960s, and he probably was, that speaks more than anything else to the painful ideological-artistic conditions of the time. It is questionable how long his plays will endure as living, meaningful works.

His death has been greeted with an outpouring of praise for his work, some of it quite out of proportion. Steven Winn of the *San Francisco Chronicle* termed *Death of a Salesman* an "American *King Lear*." David Thacker, the British theater director, commented that "if you put Shakespeare to one side, Arthur Miller stands comparison with any playwright writing in the English language for his contribution." This is simply foolish. And not merely because Marlowe, Congreve, Gay, Sheridan, Goldsmith, Wilde and Shaw come immediately to mind. Placing Miller second or thirteenth on a list of great playwrights in the English language takes for granted that he was a great or even a consistently good playwright.

Thacker's remark speaks to a certain divide between British and American critics and audiences in regard to Miller's work. Playwright Harold Pinter, when he learned of the latter's death, observed: "In the United States, they didn't like him very much because he was too outspoken and too critical of the way of life in the United States and certain assumptions that were made over there."

There might be something to this. Miller did indeed fall out of favor with US theater critics and audiences decades ago, and this was not entirely to his discredit. What replaced him in New York has not been an improvement; empty experimentalism and narcissistic playing at theatrical form, on the one hand, and bombastic musical revues, aimed at the tourist trade, on the other. The methodical, well-crafted dramas Miller brought forth no longer had a home, whereas in Britain the more highly-subsidized theaters and the circles around them kept such work alive.

In 2003 Miller lamented the deplorable state of New York theater, finding himself "wondering about Broadway's relevance to the life of this world now." While there had once been a "steady trickle" of "acerbic social commentary" in the American theater, it now appeared "to have dried up."

One feels that a good deal of the effusion in the wake of Miller's death is tinged by philistine self-satisfaction, the pleasure taken in eulogizing a safely deceased and relatively harmless icon. For example, this: "But beyond being a great playwright, Miller was a glorious example of what it meant to be a liberal when liberalism was in its prime. He stood up to McCarthyism in the Fifties as bravely as any American. In the mid-Sixties he stood up to communism by helping Soviet bloc authors as president of PEN, the international writers' organization. Through the early Seventies he raised one of the most urgent, resonant voices against the Vietnam War."

The *New York Times* has led the way in this effort, publishing no less than six obituaries, op-ed pieces and assorted articles on Miller in the first few days after his death, in addition to slide shows on its web site.

Marilyn Berger commented that Miller's work "exposed the flaws in the fabric of the American dream" in "dramas of guilt and betrayal and redemption that continue to be revived frequently at theaters all over the world. These dramas of social conscience were drawn from life and informed by the Great Depression."

Charles Isherwood noted that Miller's concerns "were with the moral corruption brought on by bending one's ideals to society's dictates, buying into the values of a group when they conflict with the voice of personal conscience."

The *Nation*, the liberal-left publication whose outlook perhaps most closely corresponded to Miller's own, editorialized rather pompously that when a figure like Miller dies, "his greatness swells in retrospect in a mound of accumulated tributes and memories." Further on, the journal observed oddly, "In his plays Miller made no distinction between art and politics."

The last comment was apparently intended as a compliment, but the editors may have given away more than they intended to. Art and politics cannot be identical. Art is not merely a means toward practical aims, it has an end in itself, to picture life in all its complexity. The editors' comment smacks of something didactic and utilitarian. It reminds one of the populist formula that "art is what the people want," which rejects the critical need, raised by both Trotsky and Wilde, to *educate* masses of people artistically. We would be bold enough to suggest that the *Nation*'s tepid and tired stew of national-reformist, Democratic Party politics will not under present conditions adequately nourish the genuinely creative imagination. And this leads us back to the "Miller problem."

One of the issues that needs to be addressed in any consideration of the dramatist's work is why, despite his obvious intelligence, sensitivity and ability with language, there is such an inartistic quality to much of Miller's work, even, to borrow Plekhanov's phrase, an "anti-artistic element."

A reading of Miller's plays and essays, as well as a viewing of some of his work on film, makes largely dreary work. A good many sensible things are said, a number of worthy themes introduced, a certain quantity of believable moments dramatized, but, all in all, poring through his work is drudgery. The plays lack spontaneity and inspiration, the dramatic mechanisms are rather obvious and predictable.

If he were a poor craftsman that would be one thing, but Miller obviously labored diligently over his work and it won him wide recognition, after all, as "America's leading playwright." This often inartistic dreariness was not simply his, so to speak, it was embraced and made their own by wide sections of the intelligentsia, and not only in the US.

The problem then must lie in something more than a personal failing, or a simple misunderstanding. This raises certain questions. Is it possible that there are social circumstances and milieus that are uninspiring by their very nature? Or can there be conditions under which a writer feels content or at least obliged, consciously or otherwise, to be less than artistic? Were there ideological and political stances in the twentieth century that were not conducive to true artistic expression?

One has to examine the conditions under which Miller matured as an artist to begin to answer some of these questions.

The future playwright, born in 1915, belonged to that generation deeply affected by the Wall Street Crash of 1929. In Miller's case, the event was particularly traumatic, an awful bolt from the blue. His father, a wealthy New York garment manufacturer, had been speculating heavily on the stock market and lost everything in the Crash.

The Millers moved from an elegant apartment in Manhattan to a "flimsily built" house in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn, "a sad comedown" (Martin Gottfried, *Arthur Miller: His Life and Work*). Miller would later describe the Crash as a defining experience, "A month ago you were riding around in a limousine, now you were scraping around to pay the rent."

To what extent Miller ever fully worked through this experience, either in emotional or social terms, is questionable. In *The Price*, one of Miller's later plays, a character recalls how his mother vomited when his father told the family that "it was all gone.... All over his arms. His hands. Just kept on vomiting, like thirty-five years coming up."

The image of a blow delivered from on high recurs in his plays. Critic Henry Popkin, in an unfavorable commentary in 1960, asserted that each of Miller's plays exhibits "the same basic pattern: each one matches ordinary, uncomprehending people with extraordinary demands and accusations.... From day to day they live their placid, apparently meaningless lives, and suddenly the eternal intrudes, thunder sounds, the trumpet blows, and these startled mediocrities are whisked off to the bar of justice."

It is difficult not to see the financial crisis of 1929 literally "crashing" down on the heads of the Miller family in the background of this general pattern.

As it did for many, the Depression radicalized Miller. In 1934 he began attending the University of Michigan (tuition was only $65 a semester), a school that, according to Gottfried's book, "was buzzing with left-wing political activities." As a reporter for the *Michigan Daily* he traveled to nearby Detroit and Flint to cover the unionization efforts at several General Motors plants and interviewed United Auto Workers leader Walter Reuther.

The personal and more general impact of the devastating economic depression, the example of the struggling auto workers and the radical atmosphere in Ann Arbor combined to propel Miller to the left, and inevitably to an admiration for the USSR. He later recalled that students "connected the Soviets with socialism and socialism with man's redemption."

In drawing near to the Communist Party, Miller and others of his generation were not, as they thought, adhering to a Marxist organization. The American CP was a thoroughly Stalinized formation, in the process of moving sharply to the right.

The Depression had shattered illusions about capitalism and increased the prestige of the Soviet Union, which became quasi-respectable in liberal circles by the mid-1930s, particularly after the adoption by the Stalinists of the Popular Front policy in 1935. The Soviet regime, frightened by the Nazi threat, now oriented itself to what it termed the "democratic" bourgeoisie, i.e., the ruling classes in Britain, France and the US.

Class no longer served as a meaningful term of reference; parties and regimes were either "fascist" or "anti-fascist." The various national Communist parties, whose leaderships themselves had been Stalinized and reduced largely to slavish appendages of the Kremlin, abandoned attempts to establish the political independence of the working class or advance a socialist program. Their principal task became forming alliances with parties and movements that might show sympathy for the Soviet regime and its interests. For the CPUSA this translated into an endorsement, for all practical purposes, of Roosevelt and the New Deal.

It remains unclear whether Miller joined the Communist Party while in university or whether, in fact, he ever joined. In one of his first plays, which was never performed, a young man named "Arny" (Miller's nickname was "Arty" at the time) is a member of the CP. Norman Rosten, Miller's closest friend at university, joined the Young Communist League in Michigan. It seems likely that Miller did take that step, but he never clarified the matter.

One suspects that while the Depression and its disastrous impact rendered the Soviet Union more attractive, a sensible alternative to chaotic and destructive capitalism, Miller was less drawn to the Russian Revolution itself. That event finds little echo in his work. Nor does one find any indication that Trotsky's opposition to Stalinism made an

impression on Miller.

In this he was like many of those attracted to Stalinism in the late 1930s. Writing about a somewhat older generation, David North, in "Socialism, historical truth and the crisis of political thought in the United States," noted, "Many liberal intellectuals were flattered by the new attention that the Stalinists devoted to them, and were pleased to find that their opinions and concerns were taken so seriously. Their personal identification with the Soviet Union seemed, at least in their own eyes, to make up for the fact that they lacked any independent program for radical action in the United States.

"The admiration among liberals for Soviet accomplishments and their political support for the Soviet regime did not at all signify an endorsement of revolutionary change within the United States. Far from it. Rather, many liberal intellectuals were inclined to view an alliance with the USSR as a means of strengthening their own limited agenda for social reform in the United States, as well as keeping fascism at bay in Europe. Among many liberal intellectuals, the Stalinist regime itself was admired not because it was considered the spearhead of world revolutionary change."

Whether Miller considered himself a revolutionist or what he might have even meant by this is not entirely clear, but he would necessarily have received a great deal of political and ideological miseducation in Stalinist circles. While the party paid lip service to the ideas of Marx and Lenin, its orientation was largely crude and pragmatic, focusing on activism increasingly colored by populist and nationalist nostrums. To many liberals the Stalinist ideology seemed to dovetail rather conveniently with their own vague commitment to social progress and democratic reform.

Miller was not primarily a political activist. He determined at a relatively early age on writing as a vocation. He studied plays and playwriting in university: Ibsen in particular, but also Greek tragedy, the German expressionists, Brecht, Büchner, Frank Wedekind. Eugene O'Neill, the dominant figure in the American theater in the 1920s and 1930s, seemed too "cosmic" to Miller and unresponsive to social realities. He was more sympathetic to the efforts of Clifford Odets, author of *Waiting for Lefty* and other works, the leading left-wing playwright of the time. Shakespeare, oddly, is not mentioned in Gottfried's biography as a subject of study.

American theater

The American theater, as a serious institution, dates from the period around World War I, when groups such as the Washington Square Players and the Provincetown Players established themselves. O'Neill, associated with the latter group, poured forth a series of expressive, often insufferable works (*Desire Under the Elms* [1924] *Strange Interlude* [1928] and *Mourning Becomes Electra* [1932] and many others), influenced by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Freud (and Jung), which nonetheless transformed the American stage.

The "left" theater, which arose in the aftermath of the Crash of 1929, hardly offered an alluring alternative to O'Neill's cosmic and static fatalism. In the hands of Stalinist chief literary thug Michael Gold, subtlety and nuance were reduced to naught.

C.W. E. Bigsby, in his *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, observes that in the "proletarian" theater proposed by Gold, "The crudity of the work was in some sense to be the guarantee of its authenticity. It followed that articulateness was liable to be in some senses ambiguous, a potential class betrayal."

Bigsby, interestingly, cites Trotsky against Gold, pointing to the former's admonitions against "formless talk about proletarian culture," and notes further Trotsky's comment in *Literature and Revolution* that "weak and, what is more, illiterate poems do not make up proletarian poetry, because they do not make up poetry at all." This was not Marxism, but "reactionary populism.... Proletarian art should not be second-rate art."

Indeed the "second-rate" or worse "left" theater promoted by Gold has not endured; Odets remains, to a certain extent, but he was a cut above the rest. The American theater remained rather provincial and limited throughout the first half of the twentieth century and beyond. There is nothing to compare with developments in Germany (Brecht, Weill, Piscator and others) or the Soviet Union (Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Mayakovsky's comedies, Babel's foray into playwriting). The hostile and ignorant reception received by Brecht, whatever his personal and artistic shortcomings, in 1935 in the New York theater world is some measure of that.

Miller's first success

Upon graduating from the University of Michigan in 1938, Miller returned to Brooklyn, working briefly for the Federal Theater program. He married Mary Slattery, a Catholic from Ohio, in 1940. A few months after the US entered World War II, in the spring of 1942, Miller went to work at the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

His first produced play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, opened and closed quickly in New York in 1944. He was to have considerably more success with his next effort, three years later.

All My Sons concerns two families in Ohio (the play was inspired by an anecdote related by his mother-in-law), the Kellers and the Deevers. Joe Keller is a vulgar, successful small-town businessman whose company manufactures aircraft parts. As the play unfolds, in Ibsen-like fashion, we learn that his oldest son, Larry, a flyer, has been missing in action for three years. His fiancée, Ann Deever, has given up waiting for him and intends to marry his brother, Chris, contrary to the wishes of Larry's mother. We also discover that Ann's father, Joe Keller's former partner, has been sent to the penitentiary for providing the military with defective parts that cost the lives of 21 airmen.

George Deever, Ann's brother, arrives at the Kellers' suburban home convinced that Joe actually authorized the fatal shipment. This proves, in fact, to be the case. To Chris's horror, Joe's crime is unmasked (as well, it turns out that Larry guessed his father's guilt and deliberately crashed his airplane). "I'm in business, a man is in business," Keller tells his son. "You lay forty years into a business and they knock you out in five minutes, what could I do, let them take forty years, let them take my life away?" Keller agrees to turn himself in, "Sure he was my son. But I think they were all my sons." He goes into the house and shoots himself.

More than its obvious social statement, about war profiteering and one's larger responsibility to society, the play's enduring impact, such as it is, emerges from the anger of the younger men against Keller and his generation. Something of Miller's own background and feelings makes itself felt in the seething fury of George Deever in particular. Other than that, *All My Sons* is largely patriotic, pat and contrived. Nonetheless, the drama clearly struck a chord with audiences still hopeful, like Miller himself, that a more populist, vaguely anti-capitalist New Dealism would flourish in postwar America.

Death of a Salesman

By the time *Death of a Salesman* opened in February 1949 that particular illusion had surely been crushed, with the onset of the Cold War and the anticommunist crusade, and Miller's new play no doubt reflects that reality.

The political situation in the US had transformed itself within a matter of months in 1947-48. Whereas the prospects for third-party candidate and former vice president Henry Wallace, who received the support of the American Stalinists, seemed relatively propitious when he began considering running for president in 1947, his campaign had virtually collapsed by the following summer. The American political and media establishment's anticommunist campaign had shifted into full gear.

The House Un-American Activities Committee hearings into "Communist influence" in Hollywood grabbed headlines day after day in the autumn of 1947; ultimately, the "Hollywood Ten" were convicted and sentenced in April 1948; throughout that year the Communist Party leadership in New York City faced prosecution under the Smith Act, which outlawed conspiring to advocate forcible overthrow of the government; in August 1948 congressional hearings (presided over by Richard Nixon) began into accusations that former State Department official Alger Hiss had spied for the Soviet Union; the following summer, indicating the general climate, a right-wing mob broke up a Paul Robeson concert in Peekskill, New York.

Even while drawing fairly sharp conclusions about *Death of a Salesman*'s failings, one always has to bear in mind the conditions in the teeth of which Miller wrote the play; the unfavorable atmosphere goes a considerable distance toward explaining some of its more obvious weaknesses.

The piece, Miller's best-known work, treats the final hours in the life of an aging salesman, Willy Loman. In the course of one day Loman quarrels repeatedly with his older son, Biff, an idler, who has returned home after spending time out West; gets fired by his firm after more than 30 years of backbreaking effort on its behalf; continues to borrow money from an old friend to cover up the fact that he has not been earning anything from his sales work; conjures up the presence of his dead brother and other memories of a happier past; recalls as well the traumatic moment when Biff, a teenager, discovered him in a hotel room with another woman; and, finally, because he is worth more dead than alive (thanks to an insurance policy), kills himself at the wheel of his automobile. In an epilogue, his neighbor defends Willy's memory, "Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

Death of a Salesman was an instant success, provoking rapturous praise from the New York press, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* being the most prominent at the time, and guaranteed Miller's stature as an important American writer.

Is this praise deserved?

The play has achieved a reputation as a critique of American capitalist society or at least its moral and social standards, and audiences and readers have seen it in that light for decades. In one of his essays, the playwright notes that a right-wing periodical called the play "a time bomb expertly placed under the edifice of Americanism." Nor has this merely been some fraud perpetrated on the public. Miller's legitimate hostility to aspects of American life comes through in *Death of a Salesman*, in places quite eloquently.

His antagonism in particular toward the get-rich-quick, glad-handing salesman's dream of success, a valueless, pointless, soul-destroying dream, retains its validity. Echoing Dale Carnegie (*How to Win Friends and Influence People*, the salesman's bible), Loman tells his sons, "Be liked and you'll never want."

The play opens at a moment, however, when he is beset by misgivings. Willy senses he has been on the wrong path all his life, and searches throughout the play for the right one. Biff comes to the conclusion that the pursuit of success itself is the source of the problem. "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!" he tells his father. "I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that?" Whether this is a satisfying alternative to delusions of grandeur remains an open question.

In any event, some of the play's most effective scenes, in my view, are those that take place outside the family, between Willy and Charley, his neighbor, for example, or Willy and his boss, Howard. (In the Dustin Hoffman-Volker Schlöndorff 1985 version, Charles Durning as Charley and Jon Polito as Howard turn in two of the strongest performances.)

Here Miller seems on firm, objective ground. Particularly in the latter scene something of the cruelty of American business life comes across. As his boss casually dismisses his request to be relieved of going out on the road any longer and transferred to the New York office, Loman bursts out, "You mustn't tell me you've got people to see—I put thirty-four years into this firm, Howard, and now I can't pay my insurance! You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit." These are moments that have enduring value.

In the end, however, wasn't the American traveling salesman—shallow, crude and philistine—something of an easy target? (Weren't *many* of Miller's subjects somewhat undemanding targets?) After Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis (*Babbitt*, *Main Street* and *Elmer Gantry*—whose protagonist spends time on the road as a traveling salesman), Sherwood Anderson and others, was Miller breaking any terribly new ground in this general area?

The genuinely telling moments in *Death of a Salesman* are all too infrequent. The spectator is meant to sympathize with Loman without looking too deeply at his life. Loman's relationship to Biff is the play's weakest feature, with Miller at his least convincing and most schematic. The notion that Biff's adult life has been derailed by the discovery that his father had a girlfriend in Boston is simply puerile. How is this discovery connected to the play's principal theme, that Loman has imbibed and made his own a false view of success and failure in life? This critical scene seems entirely to lack what Lukács called "dramatic necessity."

If, as the play suggests, Loman has deluded himself and his family about every aspect of life, including marital fidelity, then this one lesson in reality should have set Biff on the *right course*, not sent him off the deep end. His son should have thanked him for at least one honest experience! Something of Miller's own rather conventional, petty bourgeois outlook comes across here.

Despite the undeniable moments of truth, at the center of *Death of a Salesman* is a profound ambiguity, which must reflect, in the end, the playwright's own ambiguous feelings about American society and the American dream. What precisely is the playwright's attitude toward Loman and what should ours be? Tom Driver, writing in the *Tulane Drama Review* in 1957, argued that in the play "at one moment [Loman is] the pathetic object of our pity and the next is being defended as a hero of tragic dimensions."

Loman is a rather unpleasant figure throughout much of the play, a boastful blowhard, a bully, a coward. He gains our sympathy in his boss's office and again when his sons desert him in a Manhattan restaurant, only to lose it once more by his foolish ranting in the play's final moments. "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!"

Miller wants it both ways. He makes Loman hateful, but he can't resist having him touch the spectator's heartstrings too. So we have his wife Linda famously declare, "I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person." This is one of the play's most oft-quoted speeches and taken to reflect one of its central themes.

It is a speech, however, that needs to be criticized and rejected. Attention mustn't be paid to *Loman*, in this sentimental fashion, but to *the circumstances* that made him into such a largely detestable, self-deluded

figure. His tragedy is not that he can't make money as a salesman any longer, or that his eldest son thinks he's a fake, but that he has thoroughly accepted, even in his dreams, the ideology of a way of life that is killing him and the rest of his family. His tragedy is that he lies to himself until the end of his life. Why should we celebrate and honor him? We should remain angry at his behavior, not "forgiving." The maudlin final scene, in the graveyard, the "Requiem," is a capitulation by Miller, despite Biff's half-hearted comments. What one takes away from the scene is Charley's eulogizing the salesman as a quasi-heroic figure, a dreamer.

In the end, Miller's analysis of American society falls far short. Loman's tragedy is that he listened to those who "inhabit the peaks of broadcasting and advertising offices," Miller wrote in one essay, and their "thundering command to succeed," and within that framework considered himself "a failure."

But is that Loman's tragedy, that he fails, or thinks he has? Miller, of course, stacks the deck. Loman no longer can make a living as a salesman and ultimately loses his position altogether, he alienates his eldest son, his mind and his body may be going. His defeats and deterioration sadden us, we confuse them with what ought to be the tragic essence of his life.

How much more profound is Welles' *Citizen Kane*, in which the protagonist succeeds *brilliantly* and, as his reward, endures only moral and mental anguish. More than that, Welles' film exposes the spiritual emptiness in America, the waste of talent and energy and the essential meaninglessness of a life like Kane's, devoted to the accumulation of wealth and celebrity. Hardly anything is more punishing than success in America, a social process Miller was to witness first-hand less than a decade later when he married the most famous film actress in the world.

The popularity of Miller's drama with audiences was due in part to the fact that it did not demand that they look closely at the lives of the successful. Spectators could return home comforted to a certain extent by a life that was "tragic" in the light of abject failure. This helps make *Death of a Salesman* something of an ersatz tragedy. The drama was perhaps already an anachronism by the time it was written and staged. It refers to moods more bound up with the Depression, or Miller's conception of it. America was about to "take off" in 1949, the American salesman was entering a golden age. The play hardly speaks to the "success story," with all its devastating moral and social consequences, that was about to unfold in the economic boom.

After all, if Willy Loman had simply hung on a few more years perhaps he could have made a bundle selling Chevrolets or kitchen appliances. Even within the framework of the play, one might reasonably ask: what if Loman's sales figures remained as high as ever? What if he were a younger, healthier man? What if one of his sons struck it rich in some line of work or other? How much of the play's tragic core would then remain?

The playwright is simply not on to the more troubling undercurrents in American life; he remains largely on the surface. And, inevitably, half-attached to the world he depicts. Noel Coward, a creator of drawing room comedies for the most part, was unsurprisingly hostile to *Death of a Salesman*, but his remark that the play "is a glorification of mediocrity" was not entirely off the mark.

This, it seems to me, provides a further and related hint as to Miller's success in postwar America. On the one hand, he criticized certain tendencies in American society (selfishness, mediocrity, cowardice), sometimes sharply; on the other, he offered "understanding" that amounted, in the end, to a form of approval or at least acquiescence. With unerring instinct the critics and the cultural establishment responded with enthusiasm.

There is a marked regression from Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (and perhaps Fitzgerald and Richard Wright in the first half of *Native Son*) to *Death of a Salesman*. The best American artistic work did not hold itself back from the terrible social reality. Dreiser would burst into tears walking down the street, looking at the faces of people he met. Where is that quality in Miller, of bottomless compassion and implacable, unanswerable analysis? Nowhere to be found.

Again, this cannot be simply a personal failing. What was it in the social environment that precluded the element of "getting to the bottom of things"? One feels the lack of inspiration, the compromise with mediocrity. Miller writes about the "the heart and spirit of the average man," but Henry Popkin argues persuasively that his characters, who "possess as little imagination" as any ever presented on stage, "inhabit the dead center of dullness as they sit and wait for the voice of doom."

By 1949 the general shape of the postwar world had begun to emerge. The pressures on left-wing writers were vast and intense, and Miller, it must be said, stood up to them far better than most. But he could not go unscathed. One always senses, even as he takes a principled stand, that the playwright is well aware of the ideological and social limits beyond which he cannot go. The right-wing, patriotic policies pursued by the American Stalinists without a doubt played a role in this.

Only a relative handful of artists and intellectuals, probing beneath the surface of postwar life, recognized that the unresolved contradictions of capitalism would reemerge with explosive force.

Arthur Miller did not belong, in any event, to that species. He was a much more moderate individual. The dreariness of postwar America did not frighten him, he had known dreariness. He accepted it with good grace.

One might make the case that, in the final analysis, Miller's special role was to become the registrar and chronicler of drab social and political prospects—all the while holding out for maintaining a good conscience, doing good works, not cheating on one's wife, etc.

The horror of Hiroshima, the Cold War, McCarthyism could not be treated fully within the left-liberal framework, it would have led to despair. The only way within this framework not to give in to despair was to hold back, *to censor oneself*.

Of course the painters, the Abstract Expressionists (Pollock, Rothko, etc.), gave vent to their revulsion and horror, but as mutes, screaming on canvas. One cannot place pure pain and mental dissolution on a stage. What was a dramatist to do? This very difficult situation, a tightrope walk, called for someone with intelligence, but not overly penetrating; with left-wing views, but not too far to the left; with talent as a writer, but not gifted with genius; with sympathy for the "common man," i.e., above all, the lower middle class, the more mediocre social layers. Arthur Miller found himself fulfilling these requirements.

Necessity in events

One never derives any sense of a necessary historical and social process from Miller's plays. Again, it is tempting to seek at least a partial explanation in his own family's experience in the financial crash. Social events arrive in his plays inexplicably and rather arbitrarily. *The Crucible* was intended at least in part as a response to the anticommunist witch-hunting of the 1950s, and, in the mechanisms and mentality it exposes, it has a certain value. One would find it nearly impossible to argue, however, that the piece illuminates in any way the set of conditions in America that made the "red scare" possible. The sanctimoniousness and self-aggrandizement of its central character, John Proctor, stands in direct proportion to the play's historical or social abstractness.

Considerations of concrete historical problems, bound up with the dynamics of conflicting social interests, barely make themselves felt in Miller's work, except in the vaguest sense (a tendency that was no doubt encouraged as well by the Stalinist Popular Frontism). Vagueness seems to be the operative word. Writing of Miller's essay, "On Social Plays,"

critic Gerald Weales, in a generally sympathetic essay, pointed out that "there is a kind of vagueness about the essay, as there is about so much of Miller's critical writing."

It is remarkable, and speaks to the difficulties of the times, that in the aforementioned essay—published in 1955—the playwright makes virtually no analysis of contemporary "social life," presumably the subject of the "social plays" whose writing and staging he seeks to defend. Miller confines himself to generalities about a general state of human "frustration" at the inability "to live a human life," the individual's failure to discover "a means of connecting himself to society except in the form of a truce with it" and certain rather clichéd observations about the nature of the modern industrial state, capitalist or "communist," in the age of the nuclear bomb and automation.

The vagueness extends to his dramatic writing as well. Mary McCarthy complained that "Willy [Loman] is a capitalized Human Being without being anyone, a suffering animal who commands a helpless pity." And Popkin argued that as Miller's characterizations "reach for universality, they run the risk of being so general that they are, in some respects, nebulous." What is the Lomans' ethnicity, for example? Various indicators suggest a lower middle class Jewish family. Then why does his brother remember being driven in a wagon across "all the Western states"? How did Loman end up in Brooklyn? Miller, for his own reasons, preferred not to make the family Jewish, but their "Every Family" status further weakens the piece.

This nebulousness only deepened within the stagnant, conformist atmosphere of the 1950s. Miller too experienced the general "rush inward" that bedeviled American artistic work. One aspect of America's official ideology that Miller had hardly challenged in any of his pieces, its intense individualism, comes more and more to the fore. His pieces become little more than a series of individual morality plays.

A View From the Bridge is a poor work from nearly any point of view. The story of a Brooklyn longshoreman, driven by jealousy and possible repressed homosexual longing, to turn in a pair of illegal immigrants, is unconvincing as a picture of working class life and unserious as a moral-social critique. The knowledge that this misbegotten play was intended as a reply both to Kazan's infamous act of "naming names" and the latter's defense of his informing in *On the Waterfront* merely reveals how little Miller understood, or allowed himself to understand, of postwar American society.

Eddie Carbone's suppressed feelings for his niece and rage at (and perhaps desire for) the newcomer who seems to have won her heart have little or nothing to do with the complex political situation existing in the US in the early 1950s.

It is extraordinary, in fact, that neither *The Crucible*, *A View From the Bridge* nor *On the Waterfront*—the first two, of course, morally far superior to the last—shed the slightest light on the concrete-historical situation in the US, the driving forces of the anticommunist witch-hunt or the roles played by the various social actors.

HUAC

While the height of the McCarthyite period had passed, Miller was still to face threats and harassment from the red-baiters in Washington. In 1954 he was refused a passport he needed to attend a performance of *The Crucible* in Belgium on the grounds that his presence abroad "would not be in the national interest."

The playwright was summoned to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in June 1956 on entirely spurious grounds, "The Unauthorized Use of United States Passports." Singer Paul Robeson was obliged to appear in the same round of hearings. When asked whether he had suggested that black Americans would never go to war against the Soviet Union, Robeson replied, "Listen to me, I said it was unthinkable that my people would take arms in the name of an Eastland [the racist senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi] to go against anybody, and gentlemen, I still say that."

Miller acquitted himself honorably before the six-man House committee, if not with the same defiance as Robeson exhibited. In response to a question about the Smith Act, the playwright expressed his opposition to "anyone being penalized for advocating anything." In the same vein, asked if a Communist who was a poet should be able to advocate the overthrow of the government, he replied, "I would say that a man should have the right to write a poem on just about anything.... I am opposed to the laying down of any limits upon the freedom of literature."

When committee counsel Richard Arens demanded that Miller reveal who had attended "Communist Party meetings" with him, the dramatist refused with dignity. Finally, one of the congressmen on the panel inquired as to whether Miller considered himself "more or less a dupe" for having joined Communist-influenced organizations. Something essential about Miller comes across in his honest, straightforward reply: "I wouldn't say so because I was an adult, I wasn't a child. I was looking for the world that would be perfect. I think it necessary that I do that, if I were to develop myself as a writer. I am not ashamed of this. I accept my life. That is what I have done. I have learned a great deal."

Miller was eventually convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to name names and handed a suspended sentence. The conviction was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1956.

After the Fall

A period of nine years separates *A View From the Bridge* from the staging of *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* in 1964. During that time, in addition to his difficulties with HUAC, Miller was divorced from his first wife, married movie star Marilyn Monroe and then divorced her. Monroe committed suicide one year later in 1962. Miller's depiction of Monroe in *After the Fall*, for the most part a travesty of a play, was poorly received by critics and the public at large. Its unflattering portrait was viewed as uncharitable, an instance of speaking ill of the dead.

After the Fall is a pretentious and cheaply despairing work. Its overall straining for significance can be gauged by the fact that the set of the play, which was directed by none other than Elia Kazan (Miller and he had more or less made up), was dominated by the presence of a concentration camp tower.

The play takes place in the mind of Quentin, a New York lawyer, who recalls various experiences with his three wives in particular. Monroe appears as Maggie, a self-destructive and "ingenuous whore," in Martin Gottfried's words. The play, as Gottfried writes, "begins and ends ... with the imperative to take care, not only about everyone but about someone. In short, oneness." It's all rather banal. Quentin doubts whether he can love. Miller attempts to link this individual coldness and failing with the world-historical catastrophe of the Holocaust. Quentin cannot mourn for his dead parents, he attempts to strangle Maggie in one scene. The play rejects the "fantasy of innocence." Quentin feels like "an accomplice" in the shadow of the concentration camp.

Gerald Weales explains, "The guilt that Quentin assumes is something very like original sin: an acceptance that he—and all men—are evil. Or that they have evil in them—the capacity to kill." Holga, Quentin's third wife, says that "no one they didn't kill can be innocent again."

In 1947 Miller told an interviewer that his writing evolved from settings

and dramatic situations "which involve real questions of right and wrong." He meant it sincerely, but this type of conventional moralizing inevitably proves a very limited and inadequate guide to the complexities of modern life. Miller's failure to make any serious analysis of social life and history brought him to this unattractive and untenable position in *After the Fall*. *Incident at Vichy* raises similar concerns. One confronts here the demoralization of the liberal intelligentsia, its "overwhelmedness," in the face of the traumas of the mid-twentieth century.

After the Fall also suffers from a type of false self-criticism that abounds in the modern theater. The character, generally rooted in autobiography, beats his breast and proclaims, "I'm a swine! I'm a swine!" precisely as a means of avoiding the most troubling questions posed by his life situation. The problem with Miller's characterization of Monroe is not chiefly that he is unkind to her. He had the right, after all, to portray her as he thought she was. But the "self-criticism" Quentin/Miller offers—that he fooled himself into thinking he could be her savior ("this cheap benefactor") and then abandoned her in the end—misses the point, at least in relation to Miller's own life and condition.

The Miller-Monroe coupling, in real life, was not a long-lived or happy affair, although it began idyllically enough. Monroe, Miller discovered, was a deeply unhappy and insecure woman; in addition, she was addicted to barbiturates. Her film roles, as a "dumb blonde," a "joke," in her own words, deeply frustrated and depressed her.

Things went from bad to worse. In the last phase of their relationship, during the 1960 filming of *The Misfits* (which Gottfried describes as being about three men trying to get into bed with Marilyn Monroe ... each one of them Arthur Miller), Miller "could only watch as she swallowed her pills, and, if she became anxious, keep her company through the night, carefully avoiding, he said, anything that might irritate her. When he ventured into the bedroom, she would scream at him to get out. Oftentimes she wouldn't fall asleep until six o'clock in the morning, shortly before she was supposed to be ready for work."

In *After the Fall*, Quentin/Miller is appalled by Maggie/Monroe's neurotic behavior (the character is a popular singer in the play) and the extent of her self-destructive tendencies. One is tempted to ask: what did Miller expect? That he had so little insight into what the fearsome machinery of the entertainment business could do to the vulnerable human personality is a measure of Miller's own limited grasp of American reality. Moreover, why did this supposed critic of the American dream fail to shine a light on his own obvious fascination with celebrity? To have truly subjected his own fantasies about movie stars, "sex symbols" and the rest to a critical analysis, that might have made a promising starting-point for a drama.

Miller's last play to receive significant attention, *The Price*, was staged in 1968. The drama centers on the relationship of two brothers, one of whom stayed at home with his depressed father after the latter's business went bankrupt and the other who became a glamorous and successful doctor. The play, less pompous and more genuinely self-critical than his previous effort, is not without interest. It resonates with the experience of Miller and his brother Kermit and their father, who went into a deep depression after the collapse of his enterprise. It is, nonetheless, a slight piece.

Miller's later pieces, such as *The American Clock* (1980), *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991) and *Broken Glass* (1994), reveal that the playwright maintained his limited artistic virtues to the end of his life.

Arthur Miller will be remembered as a serious figure, but the rebirth of the American theater will have to take place on a far more audacious basis, socially and artistically, than that provided by his work.

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