BY ARTHUR MILLER

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DEATH OF A SALESMAN

Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem

ARTHUR MILLER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

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INTRODUCTION

The Depression of the 1930s seemed to break the promises America had made to its citizens. The stock market crash of 1929, it was assumed, ended a particular version of history: optimistic, confident. The American dream faded. And yet, not so. Myths as potent as that, illusions with such a purchase on the national psyche, are not so easily denied. In an immigrant society, which has, by definition, chosen to reject the past, faith in the future is not a matter of choice. When today fails to offer the justification for hope, tomorrow becomes the only grail worth pursuing. Arthur Miller knew this. When Charley, Willy Loman's next-door neighbor, says that "a salesman is got to dream," he sums up not only Willy's life but a central tenet of his culture.

Death of a Salesman is not set during the Depression but it bears its mark, as does Willy Loman, a sixty-three-year-old salesman, who stands baffled by his failure. Certainly in memory he returns to that period, as if personal and national fate were somehow intertwined, while in spirit, according to Miller, he also reaches back to the more expansive and confident, if empty, 1920s, when, according to a president of the United States, the business of America was business.[1] And since he inhabits "the greatest country in the world," a world of Manifest Destiny, where can the fault lie but in himself? If personal meaning, in this cheer leader society, lies in success, then failure must threaten identity itself. No wonder Willy shouts out his name. He is listening for an echo. No wonder he searches desperately back through his life for evidence of the moment he took a wrong path; no wonder he looks to the next generation to give him back

that life by achieving what had slipped so unaccountably through his own fingers.

Death of a Salesman had its origins in a short story Miller wrote at the age of seventeen (approximately the age of the young Biff Loman), when he worked, briefly, for his father's company. It told of an aging salesman who sells nothing, is abused by the buyers, and borrows his subway fare from the young narrator. In a note scrawled on the manuscript Miller records that the real salesman had thrown himself under a subway train. Years later, at the time of the play's Broadway opening, Miller's mother found the story abandoned in a drawer. But, as Miller has noted, *Death of a Salesman* also traced its roots closer to home.

Willy Loman was kin to Miller's salesman uncle, Manny Newman, a man who was "a competitor, at all times, in all things, and at every moment. My brother and I," Miller explains in his autobiography, "he saw running neck and neck with his two sons in some race that never stopped in his mind." The Newman household was one in which you "dared not lose hope, and I would later think of it as a perfection of America for that reason. . . . It was a house . . . trembling with resolutions and shouts of victories that had not yet taken place but surely would tomorrow."[2]

Manny's son, Buddy, like Biff in Miller's play, was a sports hero and, like Happy Loman, a success with the girls, but, failing to study, he never made it to college. Manny's wife, meanwhile, "bore the cross of reality for them all," supporting her husband, "keeping up her calm, enthusiastic smile lest he feel he was not being appreciated." (123) It is not hard to see this woman honored in the person of Linda Loman, Willy's loyal but sometimes bewildered wife, who is no less a victim than the husband she supports in his struggle for meaning and absolution.

Though Miller spent little time with Manny, "he was so

absurd, so completely isolated from the ordinary laws of gravity, so elaborate in his fantastic inventions . . . so lyrically in love with fame and fortune and their inevitable descent on his family, that he possessed my imagination." (123) To drop by the Newman family home, Miller explains, was "to expect some kind of insinuation of my entire life's probable failure, even before I was sixteen." (124) Bernard, son of Willy's next-door neighbor, was to find himself treated in much the same way by the Lomans.

There is, however, something more than absurdity about such people as Manny, who managed to sustain their faith in the face of evidence to the contrary. Of a salesman friend of Manny, Miller writes, "Like any traveling man he had to my mind a kind of intrepid valor that withstood the inevitable putdowns, the scoreless attempts to sell. In a sense, these men lived like artists, like actors whose product is first of all themselves, forever imagining triumphs in a world that either ignores them or denies their presence altogether. But just often enough to keep the game going one of them makes it and swings to the moon on a thread of dreams unwinding out of himself." (127) And, surely, Willy Loman himself is just such an actor, a vaudevillian, getting by "on a smile and a shoeshine," staging his life in an attempt to understand its plot and looking for the applause and success he believes to be his due. He wants, beyond anything, to be "well liked," for, without that, he fears he will be nothing at all.

During the run of his first great success, *All My Sons*, Miller met Manny again. Rather than comment on the play, his uncle answered a question he had not been asked: "Buddy is doing very well." The undeclared competition was still under way, as if time had stood still. The chance meeting made Miller long to write a play that would recreate the feeling that this encounter gave him, a play that

would "cut through time like a knife through a layer of cake or a road through a mountain revealing its geologic layers, and instead of one incident in one time-frame succeeding another, display past and present concurrently, with neither one ever coming to a stop." (131) For in that one remark Manny brought together past hopes and present realities while betraying an anxiety that hinted at a countercurrent to his apparent confidence.

Miller, then, likened the structure of *Salesman* to geological strata, in which different times are present in the same instant. He has also compared it to a CAT scan, which simultaneously reveals inside and outside, and the time scale in *Death of a Salesman* is, indeed, complex. The events onstage take place over twenty-four hours, a period which begins with a timid, dispirited, and bewildered man entering a house once an expression of his hopes for the future. It is where he and his wife raised a family, that icon of the American way, and reached for the golden glitter of the dream. He is back from a journey he once saw as a version of those other journeys embedded in the national consciousness, in which the individual went forth to improve his lot and define himself in the face of a world ready to embrace him. But the world has changed. His idyllic house, set like a homestead against the natural world, is now hemmed in by others, and his epic journey is no more than a drummer's daily grind, traveling from store to store, ingratiating himself with buyers or, still more, with the secretaries who guard the buyers from him. The play ends, after a succession of further humiliations, frustrated hopes, and demeaning memories, when Willy Loman climbs back into the car, which itself is showing signs of debilitation, and attempts one last ride to glory, one last journey into the empyrean, finally, in his own eyes, rivaling his successful brother, Ben, by trading his life directly for the dream which lured him on.

But this twenty-four-hour period is only one form of time. There is also what Miller has called "social time" and "psychic time." By social time he seems to mean the unfolding truth of the public world which provides the context for Willy's life, while psychic time is evident in memories which crash into his present, creating ironies, sounding echoes, taunting him with a past which can offer him nothing but reproach. All these different notions of time blend and interact, that interaction being a key to the play's effect. But, of course, all these differing time schemes are themselves contained within and defined by the audience's experience of the play, a shared moment in which the social reality of the occasion (its performance, say, in Communist China in the 1980s) and the psychological reality of individual audience members themselves affect the meaning generated by the stage action.

The past, and its relationship to the present, has always been vital to Miller. As a character in another Miller play (*After the Fall*) remarks, the past is holy. Why? Not merely because the present contains the past, but because a moral world depends on an acceptance of the notion of causality, on an acknowledgment that we are responsible for, and a product of, our actions. This is a truth that Willy resists but which his subconscious acknowledges, presenting to him the evidence of his fallibility. For the very structure of the play reflects his anxious search for the moment his life took a wrong turn, for the moment of betrayal that undermined his relationship to his wife and destroyed his relationship with a son who was to have embodied his own faith in the American dream.

Death of a Salesman differs radically from his more traditionally constructed first Broadway success, *All My Sons*, while still focusing on father-son relationships. It is technically innovative, with its nearly instantaneous time shifts. It

is also lyrical, as Miller allows Willy's dreams to shape themselves into broken arias. And whereas the earlier work had echoes of Ibsen, this play was generated out of its own necessities as Miller discovered a form that precisely echoed its social and psychological concerns.

In 1948, Miller, fresh from the achievement of *All My Sons*, built himself a shed on land he had bought in Connecticut. It took him six weeks. He then sat down to write *Death of a Salesman*. He completed the first half in a single night and the whole work in a further six weeks. He began the play knowing only the first two lines and the fact that it would end with a death, the death of the man who became Willy Loman and whose last name came not from any desire to link his fate with that of the common man, but from Miller's memory of that name being called out in a scene from the film *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*: "What the name really meant to me was a terror-stricken man calling into the void for help that will never come." (179) The name was fine with the producers; the title was not. They were convinced that the word "death" would keep audiences away. And, indeed, Miller himself considered other titles, including *The Inside of His Head* and *A Period of Grace*, the latter a reference to the practice of insurance companies that allow a policy to stay active beyond its effective termination date, as Willy had lived on beyond the death of his hopes. But the title remained, and far from audiences staying away they sustained it for 742 performances.

Death of a Salesman begins with the sound of a flute (and there were some twenty-two minutes of music in the original production), a sound which takes Willy back to his childhood when he had traveled with his father and brother in a wagon. His father made and sold flutes. He was, in other words, a salesman, though one who, unlike Willy, made

what he sold. It is a tainted memory, however. The distant past is not as innocent as, in memory, he would wish it to be. It represents betrayal, for his father had deserted the boys, as his brother, Ben, had deserted Willy, going in search first of his father and then of success at any price. Betrayal is thus as much part of his inheritance as is his drive for success, his belief in salesmanship as a kind of frontier adventure whose virtues should be passed on to his sons.

In the notebook that Miller kept while writing the play, he saw Willy as waiting for his father's return, living a temporary life until the time when meaning would arrive along with the person who abandoned him, as Vladimir and Estragon would await the arrival of Godot. That idea is no longer explicit in the text, but the notion of Willy leading a temporary life is. Meaning is deferred until some indefinite future. Meanwhile he is a salesman, traveling but never arriving.

When the stage designer Jo Mielziner received the script, in September 1948, it called for three bare platforms and the minimum of furniture. The original stage direction at the beginning of the play spoke of a travel spot which would light "a small area stage left. The Salesman is revealed. He takes out his keys and opens an invisible door." (385) It said of Willy Loman's house, that "it had once been surrounded by open country, but it was now hemmed in with apartment houses. Trees that used to shade the house against the open sky and hot summer sun now were for the most part dead or dying."[3] Mielziner's job was to realize this in practical terms, but it is already clear from Miller's description that the set is offered as a metaphor, a visual marker of social and psychological change. It is not only the house that has lost its protection, witnessed the closing down of space, not only the trees that are withering away with the passage of time.

In Mielziner's hands the house itself became the key.

What was needed was a solution, in terms of lighting and design, to the problem of a play that presented time as fluid. The solution fed back into the play, since the elimination of the need for scene changes (an achievement of Mielziner's design), or even breaks between scenes, meant that Miller could rewrite some sections. As a result, rehearsals were delayed, out of town bookings canceled, and the opening moved on, but the play now flowed with the speed of Willy's mind, as Miller had wished, past and present coexisting without the blackouts he had presumed would be required.

Mielziner solved one problem—that of Biff and Happy's near instantaneous move from upstairs bedroom in the present to backyard in the past—by building an elevator and using an element of theater trickery: "the heads of the beds in the attic room were to face the audience; the pillows, in full view since there were to be no solid headboards, would be made of papier-mâché. A depression in each pillow would permit the heads of the boys to be concealed from the audience and they would lie under the blankets that had been stiffened to stay in place. We could then lower them and still retain the illusion of their being in bed." (Mielziner, 33)

The collapsing of the gap between youthful hope and present bewilderment, which this stage illusion made possible, generates precisely the irony of which Willy is vaguely aware but which he is powerless to address, as it underscores the moral logic implicit in the connection between cause and effect as past actions are brought into immediate juxtaposition with present fact. Other designers and directors have found different solutions, as they have to Mielziner's use of back-lit unbleached muslin, on which the surrounding tenement buildings were painted and which could therefore be made to appear and disappear at will, and his use of projection units which could surround the Loman house with trees

whose spring leaves would stand as a reminder of the springtime of Willy's life, at least as recalled by a man determined to romanticize a past when, he likes to believe, all was well with the world. Fran Thompson, for example, designer of London's National Theatre production in 1996, chose to create an open space with a tree at center stage, but a tree whose trunk had been sawn through, leaving a section missing, the tree being no more literal and no less substantial than Willy's memories.

With comparatively little in the way of an unfolding narrative (its conclusion is, in its essence, known from the beginning), *Death of a Salesman* becomes concerned with relationships. As Miller has said, he "wanted plenty of space in the play for people to confront each other with their feelings, rather than for people to advance the plot."[4] This led to the open form of a play in which the stage operates in part as a field of distorted memories. In the 1996 National Theatre production, all characters remained onstage throughout, being animated when they moved into the forefront of Willy's troubled mind, or swung into view on a turntable. The space, in other words, was literal and charged with a kinetic energy. Elia Kazan, the play's first director, observed that "The play takes place in an Arena of people watching the events, sometimes internal and invisible, other times external and visible and sometimes *both*."[5] The National Theatre production sought an expression for this conviction, finding, thereby, a correlative for that sense of a "dream" which Miller had also specified in his stage directions. It is the essence of a dream that space and time are plastic and so they are here. Past and present interact, generating meaning rather as a metaphor strikes sparks by bringing together discrete ideas. The jump from reconstructed past to anxious present serves to underscore the extent to which hopes have been frustrated and ambitions blunted.

The resulting gap breeds irony, regret, guilt, disillusionment.

In part Willy taunts himself by invoking an idyllic past, in which he had the respect of his sons, who were themselves carried forward by the promise of success, or by recalling betrayals which he believes destroyed that respect and blighted that promise. The irony is that Willy believed that he failed Biff by disillusioning him with the dream of success, when in fact he failed him by successfully inculcating that dream so that even now, years later, each spring he feels a sense of inadequacy for failing to make a material success of his life.

Miller has said of Willy Loman that "he cannot bear reality, and since he can't do much to change it, he keeps changing his ideas of it."[6] He is "a bleeding mass of contradictions." (184) And that fact does, indeed, provide something of the rhythm of his speeches, as though he were conducting an argument with himself about the nature of the world he inhabits. At one moment Biff is a lazy bum, at the next his redemption is that he is never lazy. A car and a refrigerator are by turns reliable and junk. He is, in his own eyes, a successful salesman and a failure. It depends what story he is telling himself at the time, what psychic need such remarks are designed to serve. Hope and disappointment coexist, and the wild oscillation between the two brings him close to breakdown. In a similar way he adjusts his memories, or "daydreams," as Miller has called them, to serve present needs. These are not flashbacks, accurate accounts of past time, but constructions. Thus, when he recalls his sons' school days he does so in order to insist on his and their success. His brother, Ben, by the same token, is less a substantial fact than an embodiment of that ruthless drive and achievement which Willy lacks in his own life and half believes he should want. In one sense the strain under which he finds himself erodes the boundary between the real and

the imagined so that he can no longer be sure which is which. His thoughts are as much present facts as are those people he encounters but whose lives remain a mystery to him. Like many other Miller characters, he has built his life on denial. Unable or unwilling to acknowledge the failure of his hopes, or responsibility for his actions, he embraces fantasies, elaborates excuses, develops strategies to neutralize his disappointment.

Willy Loman is not, however, a pure victim. As Miller has said, "Something in him knows that if he stands still he will be overwhelmed. These lies and evasions of his are his little swords with which he wards off the devils around him. . . . There is a nobility, in fact, in Willy's struggle. Maybe it comes from his refusal ever to relent, to give up. . . ." (*Beijing*, 27) And yet, of course, that energy is devoted to sustaining an illusion which is literally lethal. His nobility lies less in his struggle to uphold a dream which severs him from those who care for him than in his determination to leave his mark on the world, his desire to invest his name with substance, to make some meaning out of a life which seems to offer so little in return for his faith. Beyond that, as Miller has explained, "People who are able to accept their frustrated lives do not change conditions." Willy is not passive: "his activist nature is what leads mankind to progress . . . you must look behind his ludicrousness to what he is actually confronting, and that is as serious a business as anyone can imagine." (*Beijing*, 27)

This claim is a large one. Willy, to Miller, is not a pathological case, and anyone who plays him as such makes a serious mistake. He is battling for his life, fighting to sustain a sense of himself that makes it worthwhile living at all in a world which seemingly offers ever less space for the individual. The irony which he fails to acknowledge is that he believes that meaning lies less in himself and his relationship

to those around him than in the false promises of a society no longer structured around genuine human needs. His vulnerability comes from the fact that he is a true believer. Like any believer he has doubts but these seldom extend out into the world. America, after all, offers itself as utopia. He looks, therefore, within himself. And he is plainly flawed, but that flaw is more subtle than he supposes. He is haunted by an act of adultery which he believes deflected his son Biff from the success which would, retrospectively, have justified his father's faith in the American way. But he is unaware of the more substantial flaw implicit in his failure to recognize the love of those around him—namely, that offered by Linda, Charley, and, most crucially, Biff himself. His problem is that he has so completely internalized the values of his society that he judges himself by standards rooted in social myths rather than human necessities.

That flaw is a clue to the sense of the tragic that Miller and others have seen in the play. But Miller has also said that he wanted to lay before America the corpse of a true believer. To that degree it is a social play. Tragedy/social play. For the critic Eric Bentley the two were incompatible. Either Willy Loman was a flawed individual, he argued, or he inhabited a flawed society.[7] It is a curious opposition. In fact, both are true as, of course, they are in the *Oedipus* plays or *Hamlet*. The argument over the tragic status of *Death of a Salesman* is, finally, beside the point, but Miller's remark that "tragedy . . . is the consequence of man's total compulsion to evaluate himself"[8] does convey his conviction that tragedy concerns not only the self under ultimate pressure but the necessity for the protagonist if not to justify his own existence then to accept his responsibility for his actions. This Willy cannot do. Denial becomes his mode of being. Whereas a tragic hero comes to self-knowledge, in *Death of a Salesman* Willy does not, and Miller came to feel that this

might, indeed, have been a weakness: "I feel that Willy Loman lacks sufficient insight into this situation, which would have made him a greater, more significant figure. . . . A point has to arrive where man sees what has happened to him." (*Conversations*, 26) It is, finally, Willy's son Biff who reaches this understanding, though his own choice of a rural life perhaps smacks a little of Huck Finn lighting out for the Territory, ahead of the rest. He is moving against history, that history encapsulated in a stage set which fades from rural past into urban present. Indeed in *The Misfits*, written only a few years after *Salesman*, we see what happens when the modern world catches up with such dreams, as wild horses are rounded up to be turned into dog food. It was also, of course, in such a world, as Willy remembers it, that he was abandoned by his father and brother and glimpsed for the first time the life of a salesman.

If Willy is not a pure victim, then neither is his wife, Linda. The critic Rhoda Koenig objects to Miller's treatment of women, "of whom he knows two types. One is the wicked slut. . . . The other . . . is a combination of good waitress and a slipper-bearing retriever." Linda, in particular, is "a dumb and useful doormat."[9] It would be difficult to imagine a comment wider of the mark. As Miller is apt to remind actresses in rehearsal, Linda is tough. She is a fighter. Willy is prone to bully her, cut off her sentences, reconstruct her in memory to serve present purposes, but this is a woman who has sustained the family when Willy has allowed fantasy to replace truth, who has lived with the knowledge of his suicidal intent, who sees through her sons' bluster and demands their support.

In part a product of Willy's disordered mind, in part autonomous, Linda defines herself through him because she inhabits a world which offers her little but a supporting role; she is a committed observer incapable, finally, of arresting

his march toward oblivion, but determined to grant him the dignity which he has conspired in surrendering. That she fails to understand the true nature and depth of his illusions or to acknowledge the extent of her own implication in his human failings is a sign that she, too, is flawed, baffled by the conflicting demands of a society which speaks of spiritual satisfaction but celebrates the material. Despite her practical common sense she, too, is persuaded that life begins when all debts are paid. It is she who uses the word "free" at the end of a play in which most of the central characters have surrendered their freedom. Linda's strength—her love and her determination—is not enough, finally, to hold Willy back from the grave. Yet this does not make her a "useful doormat," but a victim of Willy's desperate egotism and of a society which sees his restless search as fully justified and her tensile devotion and love as an irrelevance in the grand scheme of national enterprise.

For Mary McCarthy, always suspicious of American playwrights, a disturbing aspect of *Death of a Salesman* was that Linda and Willy Loman seemed to be Jewish, to judge by their speech cadences, but that no mention was made of this in the text. "He could not be Jewish because he had to be 'America.' . . . [meanwhile the] mother's voice [is] raised in the old Jewish rhythms. . . . 'Attention, attention must finally be paid to such a person.' . . . ('Attention must be paid' is not a normal American locution; nor is 'finally,' placed where it is; nor is 'such a person,' used as she uses it.)"[10] Forty years later Rhoda Koenig objected that "although the characters are never identified as Jewish, their speech patterns constantly proclaim them to be so. Willy answers a question with another question; his wife reverses normal sentence structure ('To fix the hot water it cost $97.50')." She adds, somewhat curiously, that "as a result, Jews can enjoyably weep buckets of empathy without worrying that Gentile

spectators will consider Willy's money-grubbing a specifically Jewish failing." Speaking on behalf of what she calls "my people," by which she seems to mean Americans in general and New York Jews in particular, she associates money-grubbing with Jews and identifies a characteristic of Willy Loman that is invisible in the play since it is not money he pursues but success. Indeed, Miller has said that "built into him is—distrust, even contempt, for relationships based only on money." (*Beijing* 135) Insisting that Miller's "coded ethnicity" was a product of the more anti-Semitic climate of the 1940s and '50s, she is seemingly unaware that in 1945 Miller had published a highly successful novel, *Focus*, which directly and powerfully addressed the subject of American anti-Semitism. In other words, when he wished to create Jewish characters, he did and without hesitation, and at precisely the moment she supposed he was least willing to do so.

Ironically, a road production of the play, which opened in Boston starring Mary McCarthy's brother, Kevin, and a number of other Irish-American actors, was hailed as an Irish play. The fact is that Miller was not concerned with writing an ethnically specific play, while the speech patterns noted by McCarthy and Koenig were an expression of his desire to avoid naturalistic dialogue. Indeed he wrote part of the play first in verse, as he was to do with *The Crucible*, in an effort to create a lyrical language which would draw attention to itself. He wished, he explained, not to write in a Jewish idiom, or even a naturalistic prose, but "to lift the experience into emergency speech of an unashamedly open kind rather than to proceed by the crabbed dramatic hints and pretexts of the 'natural.' " (182)

Over the years Miller has offered a number of intriguing interpretations of his own play. It is about "the paradoxes of

being alive in a technological civilization." (*Theater Essays*, 419) It is "a story about violence within the family," about "the suppression of the individual by placing him below the imperious needs of . . . society." (*Theater Essays*, 420) It is "a play about a man who kills himself because he isn't liked." (*Conversations*, 17) It expresses "all those feelings of a society falling to pieces which I had" (*Theater Essays*, 423), feelings which, to him, are one of the reasons for the play's continuing popularity. But the observation which goes most directly to the heart of the play is contained in a comment made in relation to the production that he directed in China in 1983: "*Death of a Salesman*, really, is a love story between a man and his son, and in a crazy way between both of them and America." (*Beijing*, 49) Turn to the notebooks that he kept when writing the play, and you find the extent to which the relationship between Willy and his son is central.

They wrestle each other for their existence. Biff is Willy's ace in the hole, his last desperate throw, the proof that he was right, after all, that tomorrow things will change for the better and thus offer a retrospective grace to the past. Willy, meanwhile, is Biff's flawed model, the man who seemed to sanction his hunger for success and popularity, a hunger suddenly stilled by a moment of revelation. Over the years, neither has been able to let go of the other because to do so would be to let go of a dream which, however tainted, still has the glitter of possibility, except that now Biff has begun to understand that there is something wrong, something profoundly inadequate about a vision so at odds with his instincts.

He returns to resolve his conflict with his father, to announce that he has finally broken with the false values offered to him as his inheritance. Two people are fighting for survival, in the sense of sustaining a sense of themselves. Willy desperately needs Biff to embrace him and his dream;

Biff desperately needs to cut the link between himself and Willy. There can be only one winner and whoever wins will also have lost. As Miller explained to the actor playing the role of Biff in the Beijing production, "your love for him binds you; but you want it to free you to be your own man." Willy, however, is unable to offer such grace because "he would have to turn away from his own values." (*Beijing*, 79)

Once returned, though, Biff is enrolled in the conspiracy to save Willy's life. The question which confronts him now is whether that life will be saved by making Willy confront the reality of his life or by substantiating his illusions. To do the latter, however, would be to work against his own needs. The price of saving Willy may thus, potentially, be the loss of his own freedom and autonomy. Meanwhile the tension underlying this central conflict derives from the fact that, as Miller has said, "the story of *Salesman* is absurdly simple! It is about a salesman and it's his last day on the earth." (*Theater Essays*, 423)

Miller may, in his own words, be "a confirmed and deliberate radical" (*Conversations*, 17), but *Death of a Salesman* is not an attack on American values. It is, however, an exploration of the betrayal of those values and the cost of this in human terms. Willy Loman's American dream is drained of transcendence. It is a faith in the supremacy of the material over the spiritual. There is, though, another side to Willy, a side represented by the sense of insufficiency which sends him searching through his memories, hunting for the origin of failure, looking for expiation. It is a side, too, represented by his son Biff, who has inherited this aspect of his sensibility, as Happy has inherited the other. Biff is drawn to nature, to working with his hands. He has a sense of poetry, an awareness that life means more than the dollars he earns.

Willy has that too. The problem is that he thinks it is irrelevant to the imperatives of his society and hence of his life, which, to him, derives its meaning from that society.

Next door, however, in the form of Charley and Bernard, is another version of the dream, a version turning not on self-delusion and an amoral drive for success, but hard work and charity. What Miller attacks, then, is not the American dream of Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, but the dream as interpreted and pursued by those for whom ambition replaces human need, and for whom the trinkets of what Miller called the "new American Empire in the making" were taken as tokens of true value. When, on the play's opening night, a woman called *Death of a Salesman* a "time bomb under American capitalism," Miller's response was to hope that it was, "or at least under the bullshit of capitalism, this pseudo life that thought to touch the clouds by standing on top of a refigerator, waving a paid-up mortgage at the moon, victorious at last." (184) The play, of course, goes beyond such particularities. If it did not it would not be played as often as it is around the world. At the same time it has a distinctly American accent and places at its heart a distinctly American figure—the salesman.

In choosing a salesman for his central character Miller was identifying an icon of his society seized on equally by other writers before and since, not least because a salesman always trades in hope, a brighter future. In *The Guilded Age* Mark Twain sees the salesman as a trickster, literally selling America to the gullible. Sinclair Lewis chose a car salesman as the key to his satire of American values, as, decades later, John Updike was to do in his Rabbit Angstrom books. The central figure in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* is a salesman, as is Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Rubin Flood in William Inge's *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. David Mamet's *Glengarry,*

Glen Ross once again featured real estate salesmen, the symbolism of which is obvious. But what did Hickey sell, in *The Iceman Cometh*? He sold the same thing as Willy Loman, a dream of tomorrow, a world transformed, only to discover that meaning resides somewhere closer to home.

Willy's real creative energy goes into work on his house ("He was a happy man with a batch of cement"). But that is not something he can sell. What, then, does he sell? There were those who thought that a vital question, including Mary McCarthy and Rhoda Koenig (for whom his failure to offer this answer was a certain sign of the play's insignificance). But as Miller himself replied, he sells what a salesman always has to sell, himself. As Charley insists, "The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell." As a salesman he has got to get by on a smile and a shoeshine. He has to charm. He is a performer, a confidence man who must never lack confidence. His error is to confuse the role he plays with the person he wishes to be. The irony is that he, a salesman, has bought the pitch made to him by his society. He believes that advertisements tell the truth and is baffled when reality fails to match their claims. He believes the promises that America made to itself—that in this greatest country on earth success is an inevitability.

Willy Loman is a man who never finds out who he is. He believes that the image he sees reflected in the eyes of those before whom he performs is real. As a salesman he stages a performance for buyers, for his sons, for the father who deserted him, the brother he admired. Gradually, he loses his audience. First the buyers, then his son, then his boss. He walks onto the stage no longer confident he can perform the role which he believes is synonymous with his self, no longer sure that anyone will care.

Death of a Salesman, Miller has said, is a play with "more pity and less judgment" than *All My Sons*. There is no crime

and hence no ultimate culpability (beyond guilt for sexual betrayal), only a baffled man and his sons trying to find their way through a world of images—dazzling dreams and fantasies—in the knowledge that they have failed by the standards they have chosen to believe are fundamental. Willy has, as Biff alone understands, all the wrong dreams but, as Charley observes, they go with the territory. They are the dreams of a salesman reaching for the clouds, smiling desperately in the hope that people will smile back. He is "kind of temporary" because he has placed his faith in the future while being haunted by the past. Needing love and respect he is blind to those who offer it, dedicated as he is to the eternal American quest of a transformed tomorrow. What else can he do, then, but climb back into his car and drive off to a death which at last will bring the reward he has chased so determinedly, a reward which will expiate his sense of guilt, justify his life, and hand on to another generation the burden of belief which has corroded his soul but to which he has clung until the end.

When a film version was made, Columbia Pictures insisted (until a threatened lawsuit persuaded them otherwise) on releasing it with a short film stressing the wonderful lifestyle and social utility of the salesman. They might be said to have missed the point somewhat. However, in one respect they recognized the force of the salesman as a potent image of the society they evidently wished to defend. He sells hope. And to do that he must first sell himself. However, the success of the play throughout the world, over a period of nearly fifty years, shows that if Willy's is an American dream, it is also a dream shared by all those who are aware of the gap between what they might have been and what they are, who need to believe that their children will reach out for a prize that eluded them, and who feel that the demands of reality are too peremptory and relentless to be sustained without hope of a transformed tomorrow.

Notes to the Introduction

1. If the play were set at the time of its composition the scenes from the past would date back to 1931, but we have Miller's assurance that "For Willy it meant the American 1920s, the time when it all seemed to be coasting, expanding opportunity everywhere, the dream in full bloom" (*Salesman in Beijing* [New York and London, 1984], p. 108).
2. Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York and London, 1987), p. 122. All future references are incorporated in the text.
3. Jo Mielziner, *Designing for the Theater: A Memoir and a Portfolio* (New York, 1965), p. 25.
4. Robert A. Martin and Steven R. Centola, eds., *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York, 1996), p. 423.
5. Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, *A Theater in Your Head* (New York, 1960), pp. 48–49.
6. *Salesman in Beijing*, p. 27.
7. Eric Bentley, *In Search of Theater* (London, 1954), p. 85. Interestingly, in another book, *What Is Theatre?*, he argues that there is a confusion between the political and the sexual realm, with the key scene being that with the tape recorder, if it is a political play, or that set in the Boston hotel room, if it is a sexual play, quite as though the two acts of betrayal and denial were wholly separate. In fact, for Miller, the private and the public are intimately connected and betrayal all of a piece.
8. Matthew C. Roudane, *Conversations with Arthur Miller* (Jackson, Mississippi, 1987), p. 15.
9. Rhoda Koenig, "Seduced by *Salesman*'s Patter," *The Sunday Times*, London, October 20, 1996, 10.4.
10. Mary McCarthy, *Sights and Spectacles: 1937–1958* (London, 1959), pp. xxiii, xv.