BLOOM'S PERIOD STUDIES

Modern American Drama

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University

CHELSEA HOUSE
PUBLISHERS
A Haights Cross Communications Company®
Philadelphia

ROBERT A. MARTIN

Arthur Miller: Public Issues, Private Tensions

> "The American Dream is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out—the screen of the perfectibility of man. Whoever is writing in the United States is using the American Dream as an ironical pole of his story."[1]
>
> —Arthur Miller

During a prolonged period of silence between *A View From the Bridge* in 1956 and *After the Fall* in 1964, Arthur Miller's dramatic vision underwent a major transition. From a focus on the inherent conflict between the individual and society that characterizes his earlier plays, with *After the Fall* Miller began to explore themes primarily concerned with a personal search for forgiveness, salvation, and a reluctant recognition of the forces that threaten to destroy his protagonist's sense of dignity and to diminish his humanity. The transition has been nowhere more obvious than in the two volumes of his *Collected Plays*,[2] which suggest a shift from primarily social causation in Volume One to a concern with the effects of public issues but presented through the refracted tense of a disengaged private sensibility in Volume Two. Although Miller has continued to explore the social and private ramifications of the 1930's Depression as a sociological reference point in such later plays as *The Price*, *The American Clock*, and in portions of *After the Fall*, his highest ambitions, have resided dramatically in the plays dealing

From *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. 21, no.2 (Fall 1988).

with more universal themes and events as in *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, *The Creation of the World*, *Playing For Time*, and *The Archbishop's Ceiling*. Although these later plays have received the highest critical acclaim in Europe, they have never received the level of critical acceptance in the United States that one would expect for the mature work of a major playwright. To Miller, the plays of Volume Two apparently speak to a different audience that, for his purposes, has disappeared.

> When I began writing, when Tennessee Williams began writing, we shared the illusion that we were talking to everybody. Both of us wrote for the man on the street. So consequently the architecture of our plays, the embrace of our plays, their breadth, was in accordance with that conception. It was the very opposite of an elitist theatre, the very opposite of an intellectual theatre.[3]

In the earlier plays of Volume One, Miller posed a major dramatic question that reflected both the public issue and the private tension between family members that result in a betrayal of either a legal or social aspect of the American Dream. "In all my plays," he remarked in 1947, "I try to take settings and dramatic situations from life which involve real questions of right and wrong. Then I set out, rather implacably and in the most realistic situations I can find, the moral dilemma and try to point a real, though hard, path out. I don't see how you can write anything decent without using the question of right and wrong."[4] Miller has also defined the issues of his earlier plays as the dislocation of the family that results when public and private issues threaten to disrupt its essential unity, tradition, and harmony. In "The Family in Modern Drama," for one of several examples, Miller speculated on the nature of "great plays" as having a precise involvement between the public and the private spheres:

> Now I should like to make the bald statement that all plays we call great, let alone those we call serious, are ultimately involved with some aped of a single problem" It's this: How may a main make of be outside world a home? How and in what ways must he struggle, what must he strive to change and overcome within himself and outside himself if he is to find the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of sod, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family?[5]

If we apply these pragmatically theoretical precepts to the plays of Volume One in terms of the major dramatic question and philosophical questions of the protagonists in each play, we find miller's philosophical intent parallels almost exactly what his audiences have found in watching the plays; that is, that Miller has built into each play an unavoidable recognition that the issues of public and private conflicts are socially and legally intertwined and irreducible beyond the point of free will and moral choice. Thus stated in many essays on drama and theatre, Miller asks a question of each play to which the audience already knows the sociologically correct and morally imperative answer. The major dramatic question in *All My Sons* becomes "Is Joe Keller guilty of shipping out defective engine heads that resulted in the deaths of twenty pilots?" *Resolution*: He is guilty and chooses suicide rather than to face his guilt and lose his son. In *Salesman* the question becomes "Will Willy Loman kill himself has Linda, Biff, and Happy suspect) because he is a failure in the eyes of his family?" *Resolution*: He does kill himself, not because he has failed to achieve his own dreams, but because he wants to put Biff ahead of Bernard again. In both *All My Sons* and *Salesman*, the issues of materialistic success versus the success of fatherhood are constructed so that nothing but death can result from the tensions that result since they are, philosophically at least, irreconcilable. In *The Crucible* the question is presented without the complication of the father–son relation, but with the complication of a historical precedent arising from the 1950's parallel between McCarthyism and witchcraft. The question now becomes one of conscience: "Will John Proctor hang rather than confess publicly to witchcraft and adultery?" *Resolution*: He will and does to preserve his name and identity as a man of conscience. *A View From the Bridge* is a more complicated play than critics have generally acknowledged, but follows structurally and philosophically upon the themes of betrayal through a violation of the Sicilian code of death to informers. "Will Eddie Carbone turn in Marco to the immigration authorities to save his name and to save Catherine for himself? *Resolution*: He does and is willing to die to vindicate his "honor" in front of the entire neighborhood for *polis* in the Greek sense of the community—the entire society). In brief, the four plays I have been discussing here illustrate Miller's dramatic strategy of combining public and private issues to arrest the audience's attention on the fundamental moral issue of the plays.

Never one to write plays, as an exercise in craftsmanship, Miller has consistently avoided issues that are entirely "social" or that result in "problem plays" of the contemporary moment. He has, in fact, made clear his case against critics and for his merger of public and private conflicts as

thematically coherent paradigms. In "The shadows of the Gods" (1958) Miller had come to the point where he believed that the theatre in America was "narrowing its vision year by year, it is repeating well what it has done well before." As if to emphasize the point further by expanding his role as writer-critic-intellectual, Miller clarified his view of the relationship between man and society. Interestingly, Miller's idea differs radically from that of Eugene O'Neill, who stated that he was not interested in the relation between man and man, but only in "the relation between man and God."[6] For Miller, however, the social relationship is critical to the kind of theatre he is writing for.

> I can hear already my critics complaining that I am asking for a return to what they call problem plays. That criticism is important only because it tells something important about the critic. It means that he can only conceive of man as a private entity, and his social relations as something thrown at him, something "affecting" him only when he is conscious of society. I hope I have made one thing clear to this point—and it is that society is inside man and man is inside society, and you cannot even create a truthfully drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not. The fish is in the water and the water is in the fish.[7]

With the exception of *A Memory of Two Mondays*, all of Miller's early plays end with the death of the protagonists in situations of the crisis that results from a total commitment to one's chosen image of oneself, of who and what they are I the world they live in, whether that world is in Brooklyn or Salem. "There's nothing like death," Miller stated in a *Paris Review* interview in 1966. "Dying isn't like it, you know. There's no substitute for the impact on the mind of the spectacle of death. And there's no possibility, it seems to me, of speaking of tragedy without it."[8] As a playwright, then, whose reputation has rested firmly on the bedrock of realism and as a private citizen who has always been involved in liberal causes, Miller's shift away from death as a resolution and toward a more abstract, contemplative, and retrospective viewpoint in his later plays has led him into new territories of his dramatic imagination that am unfamiliar to audiences and critics alike. He has, perhaps unwittingly, strayed into territories that are essentially European in attitude and intellect—a territory unbiased by American audiences who are still groping for a connection between themselves, their society, and their

fragmented culture. Even the most casual reading of Miller's later plays in Volume Two reveal that his vision has darkened, his philosophical disquietude has deepened, and his belief in the possibility of social redemption through an act of individual commitment has progressively diminished. In the early plays, Miller attempted to answer specific questions of who is guilty and why, what circumstances might have misled a character such as Joe Keller to commit a crime against his society, or why Willy Loman feels compelled to commit suicide in order to be a success. In the later plays the law is either corrupt, as in *Incident at Vichy* and *The Archbishop's Ceiling*, or the protagonist such as Quentin in *After the Fall* is no longer able to see the value of personal or social commitment. "It is that Law," Miller has said, "which, we believe, defines us as men,"[9] in his Introduction to Volume One. And as if to define the new direction his plays after 1956 will take, he has Quentin tell the Listener in the first few lines of *After the Fall*, "I think now my disaster really began. when I looked up one day—and the bench was empty. No judge in sight."[10]

Miller's approach to writing a play—at least up to *After the Fall*—has always; been to ask, "What do I mean? What am I trying to say?" This analytical self-probing has paid off handsomely when Miller was dealing with subjects with which his audience could identify. The specific moral gravity of his early plays lend themselves precisely to these questions because they lead to conclusions both dramatic and thematic that are based on reasonable alternatives. Joe Keller knows exactly what he has to conceal; Willy Loman knows exactly what is troubling Biff; and John Proctor knows exactly why Abigail would like nothing better than to see his wife, Elizabeth, hanged for a witch. Eddie Carbone may not have the same degree of insight into his mixed motives as do his dramatic predecessors, but, he knows exactly what he must do to remove Rodolpho from his home and neighborhood. And he does it.

Miller's thematic shift in his later plays derives from a change in the nature of the questions he is now asking himself. Instead of "What do I mean? What am I trying to say?" Miller now asks himself, "What is real? What is reality? On what basis does one dare make a commitment to another person?"[11] Clues to such a shift lie scattered about everywhere in Miller's work even before *After the Fall*. As early as 1960 with *The Misfits*, the absoluteness of Miller's social and moral imperatives may have started to dissolve. As Roslyn asks Gay Langland, "Oh, Gay, what is there? Do you know? What A there that stays?" we see for the first time in Miller's work a major character who, although uncertain, clearly poses the alternative of a compromise rather than a confrontation. "God knows," Gay replies,

"Everything I ever see was comin' or goin' away. Same as you. Maybe the only thing is ... the knowin'. Cause I do know you now, Roslyn, I do know you. Maybe that's, all the peace there is or can be."[12] Such a statement of reconciliation by any of Miller's earlier protagonists would have been literally impossible only four years previously. And the setting of the film—the American West—is finally itself an illusion. The remote canyons full of wild mustangs, new hopes, and old dreams that day, Guido, and Pence are searching for turn out to be merely empty. What is real for these misfit cowboys is only a memory from the American past that cannot possibly be fulfilled or sustained in the reality of the present.

The most visible hint of Miller's changing vision of man and his society, however, occurs in the closing moments of *After the Fall*. Quentin ("struck" as Miller's acting cue suggests) by the force of his accumulated experience, suddenly turns away from Holga and proclaims, "Is the knowing all? To know, and even happily, that we meet unblessed; not in some garden of wax fruit and painted trees, that lie of Eden, but after, after the Fall, after many, many deaths. Is the knowing all?"[13] For Gay Langland, knowing was enough; but for Quentin it poses a dilemma: even as he discovers some particle of truth to live by, he can't believe that the betrayal—by friends, parents, wives, himself—is real. "God," he exclaims, "why is betrayal the only truth that sticks?"[14] By the end of the play, Quentin can only ask the ultimate question—does he dare commit himself to Holga after all his past commitments have turned into disasters? Miller's answer is a qualified "yes," but implies by indirection that all relationships are impermanent at best, and that the commitment made in the name of love may be the greatest illusion of all. Quentin, therefore—unlike Miller's earlier protagonists—can walk away from a conflict, but only with the precarious piece of knowledge that for him there is no innocence left and we truly meet each other "unblessed."

In many ways, *Incident at Vichy* is a continuation of *After the Fall* in its theme of universal guilt and responsibility. Like *The Crucible* historically, Vichy has a certain amount of authentic and existential angst attached to it because of its origins in the Holocaust and with World War II to background, but with the reverberations of those events dramatized more directly. In this play, Miller's public issues and private tensions are represented on a much wider scale through the psychiatrist, LeDuc—representative of reason and sanity—who (contrary to Miller's approach in *Fall*) convinces Von Berg, a prince, that the nature of man is inherently evil, Von Berg hands his pass to freedom to LeDuc, who accepts it, and walks away, but who does so only with an excruciating awareness of his own guilt and complicity. "I wasn't asking you to do this," LeDuc tells Von Berg. "You

don't owe me this."[15] The situation is pure Sartrean and asks the question, "What is reality in the face of the absurd?" Von Berg is Miller's true existential hero, an extension of Chris Keller's idealism ("Once and for all you can know there's a universe of people outside and you're responsible to it, and unless you know that, you threw away your son because that's why he died"[16]) and John Proctor's mighty conscience ("How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name"[17]). Von Berg is also the one character in the later plays who fits Miller's definition in the *Collected Plays* Introduction of 1956:

> For I understand the symbolic meaning of a character and his career to consist of the kind of commitment he makes to life or refuses to make, the kind of challenge he accepts and the kind he can pass by. I take it that if one could know enough about a human being one could discover some conflict, some value, some challenge, however major or minor, which he cannot find it in himself to walk away from or turn his back on.[18]

And even here, Von Bug's aristocratic status will most likely save him From death in a prison. Miller's point in *Vichy*, however, is not that the Holocaust could have happened so easily, but that it could so easily happen again.

The Price (1968), although seemingly a return to the conventions of realism, contains elements of a questionable reality. As the central issue of a son's betrayal by his father emerges to constitute the private, tension as well as the major issue of the play, the moment of recognition between the boundaries of public issues and private outrage (the family again) emerges in a new construction. The moment unites past and present as Victor Franz, a policeman, learns from his brother Walter, a wealthy surgeon, that their father had lied to him about the family's finances. While Victor had committed himself to supporting his father for the remainder of his life, and in the process sacrificed his own family's economic welfare, he, now learns that his father actually had $4000 all during the time Victor says "we were eating garbage here."

VICTOR: Why didn't you tell me he had that kind of money?
WALTER: But I did when you came: to me for the loan.
VICTOR: To "Ask Dad?"
WALTER: Yes!
VICTOR: But would I have come to you if I had the faintest idea

> he had four thousand dollars under his ass? It was meaningless to say that to me."[19]

The price that Victor pays is a lifetime of diminishment, disillusionment, and economic deprivation. For Walter, who did not help his father at all, the unreality of Victor's life compared with his own simply reflects the inner hollowness of the family relationships. To Victor's claim that he kept the family from "falling apart," Walter replies, "what fell apart? What was here to fall apart? Was there ever any love here? When he needed her, she vomited. And when you needed him, he laughed. What was unbearable is not that it all fell apart, it was that there was never anything here."[20] At the end of *The Price* both brothers walk away from their past and each other with little more than a fragmentary awareness of the failed reality of their lives. Such is the real price, Miller asserts, socially and personally, of misplaced commitments; such is the price of failing to distinguish between what is real and what is reality. What is real in the play for Miller is his dramatic retelling of the effect of the 1930's Depression on the lives of Americans caught between the dream of Gatsby's mythical "fresh green breast of the new world," as viewed by the generation of the 1920's, and the reality of the nightmare that ushered in the 1930's. For Miller, the water is still in the fish and the fish in the water.

The final play I would like to discuss here is *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (1977), a play that Miller at one time believed was "the best thing I ever wrote."[21] For Miller, the play was "a dramatic meditation on the impact of immense state power upon human identity and the common concept of what is real and illusory in a group of writers living in a small European capitol today."[22] The setting is an apartment in a former Archbishop's palace in which, under an ornate ceiling that may or may not contain hidden microphones, four acquaintances gather to discuss the political problems faced by one of the group, a dissident writer, who is trying to decide whether he should attempt to emigrate to the West. They not only suspect that the ceiling is bugged, but that one of their number—Marcus—may in some way be involved with the authorities and is about to betray them. As Christopher Bigsby has noted in the Methuen edition's *Afterword*, "They meet in the conviction—never fully confirmed—that they are being overheard. In other words, they are turned into actors and their lives into theatre; but there is, finally, no evidence for the existence of the audience before whom they take themselves to be performing."[23] The level of unrelieved anxiety and private tensions that Miller creates in the play, along with the apparent lack of a perceivable reality, leads the audience to Kafka's castle, in which neither God

nor man nor the state can absolutely be known to reside. Beyond the political and public issues of freedom of speech, thought, and action (which the critics took to be the central issue of the play), resides Miller's unstated but nevertheless underlying assumption that the nature of political reality is, in fact, the unreal, a world in which not only anything can probably happen, but probably will. At the end of the play, a knock is heard at the door. Sigmund, the dissident novelist, is presumably about to be arrested. He turns to Maya, an actress and his former mistress, to ask forgiveness, and then to Adrian, an American writer, to whom he says, "Is quite simple. We are ridiculous people now. And when we try to escape it, we are ridiculous too."[24]

In Miller's later plays commitment is not something one dies for, it is something that one survives for. If in the early plays public issues and private tensions were closely joined, in the later plays they are overshadowed with an introspective, philosophical, and existential angst that the earlier protagonists did not have to contend with. If we do indeed, as Miller seems to be saying in play after play, "meet unblessed," it becomes a point of new departure in his plays in which contemporary mankind—socially and individually—stands poised on the edge of an abyss in which everything and nothing exist simultaneously. And if Miller has taken a dramatic and philosophical leap—as I believe he has—beyond "real questions of right and wrong" into questions of "what is real, what is reality," the critics and audiences in the American theatre seem unable or unwilling to follow. Neither of which possibilities has lessened his ideals of truth and social justice, nor the optimism that Miller feels for the future. In his recently published autobiography, *Timebends*, he has noted once again his affection and respect for the American political guarantees in the Bill of Rights following an encounter with Alexei Surkov, head of the Soviet Writer's Union, concerning the possibility of Soviet writers joining PEN and changing the organization's constitution and voting procedures. "The miraculous rationalism of the American Bill of Rights suddenly seemed incredible, coming as it did from man's mendacious mind. America moved me all over again—it was an amazing place, the idea of it astounding."[25]

NOTES

1. Matthew C. Roudané, "An Interview with Arthur Miller," in *Conversations with Arthur Miller*, Matthew C. Roudané, ed. (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), p. 361.

2. Arthur Miller, *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, Vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Viking, 1957, 1981).

3. Mark Lamas, "An Afternoon with Arthur Miller," in *Conversations with Arthur Miller*, Matthew C. Roudané, ed., pp. 382–83.

4. *A Treasury of the Theatre*, John Gassner, ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), p. 1061.

5. "The Family in American Drama" in *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, Robert A. Martin, ed. (New York: Viking, 1978), p. 73, Hereafter noted as *Theatre Essays*.

6. Eugene O'Neill, "On Man and God," in *O'Neill and His Plays*, Oscar Cargill, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1961), p, 115.

7. "The Shadows of the Gods" in *Theatre Essays*, p. 185.

8. Olga Carlisle and Rose Styron, "Arthur Miller: An Interview" in *Theatre Essays*, pp. 266–67.

9. Introduction to *The Collected Plays of Arthur Miller*, Vol. I in *Theatre Essays*, p. 149.

10. *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, Vol, 2, p. 129.

11. Arthur Miller to Robert A. Martin in conversation, October 1985 at Miller's home in Connecticut.

12. *Collected Plays*, Vol. 2, p. 123.

13. *After the Fall*, *Collected Plays*, Vol. 2, p. 24.

14. *Ibid*., p. 202.

15. *Incident at Vichy* in *Collected Plays*, Vol. 2, p. 290.

16. *All My Sons* in *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, p. 127.

17. *The Crucible* in *Collected Plays*, Vol. 1, p. 328.

18. Introduction to *Collected Plays* in *Theater Essays*, p. 118.

19. *The Price* in *Collected Plays*, Vol. 2, p. 364.

20. *Ibid*., p. 368.

21. Arthur Miller to Robert A. Martin in conversation, June 1983 at Miller's home in Connecticut.

22. *New York Times*, May 11, 1977, p. 8.

23. Christopher Bigsby, "Afterword" to *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (London: Methuen London Ltd., 1984), p. 92.

24. *Ibid*., p. 90.

25. *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 583.