The Realism of Arthur Miller

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I

The most important single fact about the plays of Arthur Miller is that he has brought back into the theatre, in an important way, the drama of social questions. It has been fashionable, certainly in England, to reject such drama as necessarily superficial. In part, this rejection is in itself social, for it has shown itself in the context of a particular phase of consciousness: that widespread withdrawal from social thinking which came to its peak in the late nineteen-forties, at just the time when we were first getting to know Arthur Miller as a dramatist. Yet the rejection can be seen, also, as critically necessary, for there is little doubt that the dramatic forms in which social questions were ordinarily raised had become, in general, inadequate: a declined, low-pressure naturalism, or else the angularity of the self-conscious problem play, the knowinglyness of the post-expressionist social revue. To break out from this deadlock needed three things, in any order: a critical perception of why the forms were inadequate; effective particular experiment; a revival, at depth and with passion, of the social thinking itself. Arthur Miller is unquestionably the most important agent of this break-out, which as yet, however, is still scattered and uncertain.

His five plays to date show a wide and fascinating range of experiment, and the introduction he has written to the collected edition of them shows an exceptionally involved and perceptive critical mind, both self-conscious and self-critical of the directions of his creative effort. Yet, while he could not have written his plays without these qualities, it is probably true that the decisive factor, in his whole achievement, is a particular kind and intensity of social thinking, which in his case seems both to underlie and to determine the critical scrutiny/ and the restless experimentation. In seeking to define the magnificent realism of the great tradition of nineteenth-century fiction, I wrote of that kind of work which "seeks to create and judge the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons":

Neither element, neither the society nor the individual, is there as a priority. The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms.

I argued that this "social" tradition had broken down, in fiction, into the separate forms of the "personal" and the "sociological", and I would make the same analysis, with certain changes of detail, in the case of twentieth-century drama. The key to social realism, in these terms, lies in a particular conception of the relationship of the individual to society, in which neither is the individual seen as a unit nor the society as an aggregate, but both are seen as belonging to a continuous and in real terms inseparable process. My interest in the work of Arthur Miller is that he seems to have come nearer than any other post-war writer (with the possible exceptions of Albert Camus and Albrecht Goes) to this substantial conception. Looking at it from one point of view, he has restored active social criticism to the drama, and has written on such contemporary themes as the social accountability of business, the forms of the success-ethnic, intolerance and thought-control, the nature of modern work-relations. Yet he has written "about" these in such a way as to distinguish his work quite clearly from the ordinary sociological problem-play, for at his best he has seen these problems as living tissue, and his most successful characters are not merely "aspects of the way of life", but individuals who are ends and values in themselves:

He's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid . . . Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person.

(Death of a Salesman, Coll. Edn., p. 162)

It is from this centre—a new or newly-recovered way of social thinking, which is also powerfully available as direct experience—that any estimate of Arthur Miller as a dramatist must begin.

II

Miller's first two published plays—he had written seven or eight others before this success—are All My Sons (1947) and Death of a Salesman (1949). It is extremely interesting to compare these two, because while they are very different in method they are also quite obviously very deeply linked, in experience. All My Sons has been described as an Ibsenite play, and certainly, if we restrict Ibsen to the kind of play he wrote between The League of Youth (1869) and Rosmersholm (1886), it is a relevant description. The similarities are indeed so striking that we could call All My Sons pastiche if the force of its conception were not so evident. It is perhaps that much rarer case, of a writer who temporarily discovers in an existing form an exact way of realising his own experience. At the centre of the play is the kind of situation which was Ibsen's development of the device of the "fatal secret". Joe Keller, a small manufacturer, has (in a similar way to Consul Bernick in Pillars of Society) committed a social crime for which he has escaped responsibility. He acquiesced in the sending of defective parts to the American Air Force in war-time, and yet allowed another man to take the consequences and imprisonment. The action begins after the war, and is basically on the lines of what has been called Ibsen's retrospective method (it was always much more than a device of exposition; it is a thematic forcing of past into present). The Ibsen method of showing first an ordinary domestic scene, into which, by gradual infiltration, the crime and the guilt enter and build up to the critical eruption, is exactly followed. The process of this destructive infiltration is carefully worked out in terms of the needs of the other characters—Keller's wife and surviving son, the girl the son is to marry, the neighbours, the son of the convict—so that the demonstration of social consequence, and therefore of Keller's guilt, is not in terms of any
abstract principle, but in terms of personal needs and relationships, which compose a reality that directly enforces the truth. If Keller's son had not wanted to marry the convicted man's daughter (and they had been childhood friends; it was, that neighbourhood which Keller's act disrupted); if his wife, partly in reaction to her knowledge of his guilt, had not maintained the superstition that their son killed in the war was still alive; if the action had been between strangers or business acquaintances, rather than between neighbours and neighbouring families, the truth would never have come out. Thus we see a true social reality, which includes both social relationships and absolute personal needs, enforcing a social fact—that of responsibility and consequence. This is still the method of Ibsen in the period named, and the device of climax—a concealed letter from Keller's dead son, who had known of his father's guilt—is again directly in Ibsen's terms.

The elements of theatrical contrivance in Ibsen's plays of this kind, and in All My Sons, are now sufficiently clear. Yet the total effect of such a play is undoubtedly powerful if its experience truly corresponds to its conventions. In historical terms, this is a bourgeois form, with that curious combination of a demonstrated public morality and an intervening fate, evident in the early 18th-century domestic drama, and reaching its maturity in Ibsen. To a considerable extent, All My Sons is a successful late example of this form, but a point is reached, in Miller's handling of the experience, where its limits are touched. For, as he rightly sees it, the social reality is more than a mechanism of honesty and right dealing, more than Ibsen's definition—

The spirits of Truth and Freedom, these are the pillars of Society.

Miller reaches out to a deeper conception of relationships which he emphasises in his title. This is something more than honesty and upright: it is the quite different social conception of human brotherhood—

I think to him they were all my sons. And I guess they were, I guess they were.

Moreover, Miller sees this in a social context, as he explains in the Introduction:

Joe Keller's trouble . . . is not that he cannot tell right from wrong but that his cast of mind cannot admit that he, personally, has any viable connection with his world, his universe, or his society. He is not a partner in society, but an incorporated member, so to speak, and you cannot sue personally the officers of a corporation. I hasten to make clear that I am not merely speaking of a literal corporation but the concept of a man's becoming a function of production or distribution to the point where his personality becomes divorced from the actions it propels. (19)

This concept, though Miller does not use the term, is the classical Marxist concept of alienation, and it is with alienation embodied both in a social action and in a personality that Miller is ultimately concerned. The true social reality—the needs and destinies of other persons—is meant to break down this alienated consciousness, and restore the fact of consequence, of significant and continuing relationships, in this man and in his society. But then it is at this point, as I see it, that the limits of the form are damaging. The words I have quoted, expressing Keller's realisation of a different kind of consciousness, have to stand on their own, because, unlike the demonstration of ordinary social responsibility, they have no action to support them. Moreover, as words they are limited to the conversational resources so adequate elsewhere in the play, but wholly inadequate here—to express so deep and substantial a personal discovery (and if it is not this it is little more than a maxmum, a "sentiment"). It is at this point that we see the naturalist form—even a principled naturalism, as in Ibsen and Miller and so rarely in others, even when substantially and powerfully done—breaking down as it has so often broken down: partly for the reasons I argued in Dramas from Ibsen to Eliot (the inadequacy of conversational writing in any deep crisis); partly, I would now add, because the consciousness which the form was designed to express is in any serious terms obsolete, and was already being reached beyond by Miller himself.

**Father & Son**

There is an interesting account, in Miller's Introduction, of the genesis of All My Sons, relating it to a previous play and the discovery that two of the characters, who had been friends in the previous drafts, were logically brothers and had the same father . . .

The overt story was only tangential to the secret drama which its author was quite unconsciously trying to write . . . In writing of the father-son relationship and of the son's search for his relatedness there was a fullness of feeling I had never known before. The crux of All My Sons was formed; and the roots of Death of a Salesman were sprouted. (15)

This is extremely important, not only as a clue to the plays named, but as indicating the way in which Miller, personally, came to the experience expressible as that of human brotherhood. In any sense that matters, this concept is always personally known and lived; as a slogan it is nothing. And the complicated experience of inheritance from a father is perhaps one of the permanent approaches to this transforming consciousness. There is the creative complexity of the fact that a son, in many senses, replaces his father. There is dependence and the growth to independence, and both are necessary, in a high and moving tension. In both father and son there are the roots of guilt, and yet, ultimately they stand together as men—the father both a model and a rejected ideal; the son both an idea and a relative failure. But the model, the rejection, the idea and the failure are all terms of growth, and the balance that can be struck is a very deep understanding of relatedness and brotherhood. One way of looking at All My Sons is in these universal terms: the father, in effect, destroys one of his sons, and that son, in his turn, gives sentence of death on him, while at the same time, to the other son, the father offers a future, and the son, in rejecting it, destroys his father, in pain and love. Similarly, in Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman, like Joe Keller, has lived for his sons, will die for the son who was to extend his life, yet the sons, in their different ways, reject him, in one case for good reasons, and in effect destroy him. Yet the failure on both sides is rooted in love and dependence: the death and the love are both deeply related aspects of the same relationship. This complex, undoubtedly, is the "secret drama" of which Miller writes, and if it is never wholly expressed it is clearly the real source of the extraordinary dramatic energy.

Death of a Salesman takes the moment of crisis in which Joe Keller could only feebly express himself, and makes of it the action of the whole play. Miller's first image was of an enormous face . . . which would appear and then open up, and we would see the inside of a man's head. In fact, The Inside of Its Head was the first title. This, in dramatic terms, is expressionism, and correspondingly the guilt of Willy Loman is not in the same world as that of Joe Keller: it is not a single act, subject to public progress, needing complicated grouping and plotting to make it emerge; it is, rather, the consciousness of a whole life. Thus the expressionist method, in the final
form of the play, is not a casual experiment, but rooted in the experience. It is the drama of a single hand, and moreover, it would be false to a more integrated—or less disintegrating—personality.

It is historically true that expressionism is attuned to the experience of disintegration. In general dramatic history, as in Miller's own development, it arises at that point where the limits of naturalism are touched and a hitherto stable form begins to break to pieces. Yet *Death of a Salesman* is actually a development of expressionism, of an interesting kind. As Miller puts it:

I had always been attracted and repelled by the brilliance of German expressionism after World War I, and one aim in *Salesman* was to employ its quite marvellous shorthand for humane "felt" characterisations rather than for purposes of demonstration for which the Germans had used it. (39) This is a fair comment on the "social expressionism" of, say, Toller. The split of expressionism into "personal" and "social" kinds is related to the general dissociation which I earlier discussed. *Death of a Salesman* is an expressionist reconstruction of naturalist substance, and the result is not hybrid but a powerful particular form. The continuity from social expressionism remains clear, however, for I think in the end it is not Willy Loman as a man, but the image of the Salesman, that predominates. The social figure sums up the theme referred to as alienation, for this is a man who from selling things has passed to selling himself, and has become, in effect, a commodity which like other commodities will at a certain point be economically discarded. The persuasive atmosphere of the play (which the slang embodies so perfectly, for it is a social result of this way of living) is one of false consciousness—the conditioned attitudes in which Loman trains his sons—being broken into by real consciousness, in actual life and relationships. The expressionist method embodies this false consciousness much more powerfully than naturalism could do. In *All My Sons* it had to rest on a particular crime, which could then be seen as in a limiting way personal—Keller the black sheep in a white flock—although the fundamental criticism was of a common way of living and thinking. The "marvellous shorthand" is perfectly adapted to exposing this kind of illusion and failure. At the same time the structure of personal relationships, within this method, must be seen as in a sense arbitrary; it has nothing of the rooted detail which the naturalism of *All My Sons* in this respect achieved. The golden football hero, the giggling woman in the hotel, the rich brother, and similar figures seem to me to be cliches from the thimner world of a work like *Babbitt*, which at times the play uncomfortably resembles. The final figure of a man killing himself for the insurance money caps the whole process of the life that has been demonstrated. But "demonstrated", in spite of Miller's comment on the Germans, is the word that occurs to one to describe it. The emotional power of the demonstration is considerable, and is markedly increased by the brilliant expressionist staging. Yet, by the high standards which Miller insists on, and in terms of the essential realism to which he seems to be reaching, the contrast of success and failure within both *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* points finally to the radical and still unsolved difficulties of form.

**III**

*The Crucible* (1952) is a powerful and successful dramatisation of the notorious witch-trials of Salem, but it is technically less interesting than its predecessors just because it is based on a historical event which at the level of action and principled statement is explicit enough to solve, or not to raise, the difficult dramatic problems which Miller had previously set himself. The importance of the witch-trials is that in them, in a clear and exciting way, the moral crisis of a society is explicit, directly enacted and stated, in such a way that the quality of the whole way of life is organically present and evident in the qualities of persons. Through this action Miller brilliantly expresses a particular crisis—the modern witch-hunt—in his own society, but it is not often, in our own world, that the issues and statements so clearly emerge in a naturally dramatic form. The methods explored in the earlier plays are not necessary here, but the problems they offered to solve return immediately, outside the context of this particular historical event. *The Crucible* is a fine play, but it is also a quite special case.

In *A Memory of Two Mondays* (1955), Miller returns to the direct dramatisation of modern living, and as if to underline the point made about *The Crucible* (of which, as the Introduction shows, he was completely aware) seeks to make a new form out of the very facts of inconstuence, discontinuity and the deep frustrations of inarticulacy, which is at once a failure of speech and the wider inability of men to express themselves in certain kinds of work and working relationships. Instead of concentrating these themes in a particular history, pointed by plot or single crisis, he deploys them in the scattered form of a series of impressions, with the dramatic centre in memory rather than in action or crisis. The work atmosphere is in some ways significantly caught, and there is always the mark of Miller's insight into the importance and passion of what many others dismiss as "ordinary" lives. There is an occasional flare of dramatic feeling, as in the last speech of Gus, but in general the tension is much lower than in the earlier plays, and the dramatic methods seem often mere devices. The Irish singer and reciter; the insets of flat sub-Auden verse; the lighting and scenic devices of the passing of time; these, at this tension, seem mechanical. And a central image of the play—when the workers clean the windows to let in a sight of sun and trees, and let in actually a view of a cat-house (brothel)—seems to me contrived. Miller's fertility of experiment is important, but experiment, as here, involves failure.

**View from the Bridge**

*View from the Bridge* (1955; revised 1957) brings back the intensity. The capacity to touch and stir deep human feeling was marked in the earlier plays, but Miller has said, interestingly, (it is his essential difference from Tennessee Williams, with whom he is often linked):

> The end of drama is the creation of a higher consciousness and not merely a subjective attack upon the audience's nerves and feelings.

The material of *View from the Bridge* is to most people deeply disturbing, and Miller's first impulse was to keep it abstract and distant, to hold back.

> the empathic flood which a realistic portrayal of the same tale and characters might unloose.

But, in his own view, he went too far in this direction, and subsequently revised the play towards a more intense realism. The distancing element remains, however, in the use of a commentator, or *raisonneur*, and, though there are false notes in the writing of this part, it is an important reason for the play's success.

*View from the Bridge* follows from the earlier works
in that it shows a man being broken and destroyed by guilt. Its emphasis is personal, though the crisis is related to the intense primary relationships of an insecure and partly illegal group—a Brooklyn waterfront slum, with ties back to Italy, receiving unauthorised immigrants and hiding them within its own fierce loyalties. Eddie Carbone's breakdown is sexual, and the guilt, as earlier, is deeply related to love. And the personal breakdown leads to a sin against this community, when in the terror of his complicated jealously Eddie betrays immigrants of his wife's kin to the external law.

At the centre of the drama again is the form of relationship between parent and child, but here essentially displaced so that the vital relationship is between a man and the niece to whom he has been as a father. The girl's coming to adolescence provokes a crisis which is no more soluble than if they had really been father and child, yet to a degree perhaps is more admissible into consciousness. Eddie is shown being destroyed by forces which he cannot control, and the complex of love and guilt has the effect of literal disintegration, in that the known sexual rhythms break down into their perverse variations: the rejection of his wife, as his vital energy transfers to the girl, and then the shattering crisis in which within the same rush of feeling he moves into the demonstration of both incestuous and homosexual desires. The crisis burns out his directions and meanings, and he provokes his death shouting "I want my name". This establishment of significance, after breakdown, through death, was the pattern of Joe Keller and Willy Loman; of John Proctor, in heroic stance, in The Crucible; of Gus, in a minor key, in A Memory of Two Mondays. We are at the heart, here, of Miller's dramatic pattern, and his work, in this precise sense, is tragedy—the loss of meaning in life turns to the struggle for meaning by death. The loss of meaning is always personal history, though in Willy Loman it comes near to being generalised. Equally, it is always set in the context of a loss of social meaning, a loss of meaning in relationships. The point is made, and is ratifying, in the commentary in A View from the Bridge:

Now we are quite civilised, quite American. Now we settle for half . . .

and again, at the end:

. . . Something perversely pure calls to me from his memory—not purely good, but himself purely, for he allowed himself to be wholly known and for that I think I will love him more than all my sensible clients. And yet, it is better to settle for half, it must be! And so I mourn him—I admit it—with a certain alarm.

Tempted always to settle for half—for the loss of meaning and the loss of consequence endemic in the whole complex of personal and social relationships, the American way of living as Miller sees it—the heroes of these plays, no matter how perversely, are still attached to life, still moved by irresistible desires for a name, a significance, a meaning. They break out and destroy themselves, leaving their own comment on the half-life they have experienced. Miller's drama, as he has claimed, is a drama of consciousness. In reaching out for this new social consciousness—in which "every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms"—Miller, for all the marks of difficulty, uncertainty and weakness that stand within the intensity of his effort, seems clearly a central figure in the drama and consciousness of our time.