SARAH TRYPHENA PHILLIPS LECTURE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Arthur Miller: Realism, Language, Poetry

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ARTHUR MILLER, you might have good reason to think, was not only celebrated around the world but also in his own country. Curiously, this was not the fact, and certainly not in the last thirty years of his life, though in truth the hostility was born much earlier. Writing in *Partisan Review*, Phillip Rahv headed his essay, 'The myth of Arthur Miller's profundity'. In the same magazine, Susan Sontag commented on his 'intellectual weak mindedness'.[1] In *Commentary*, Delmore Schwartz spoke of 'the retarded conscience of Arthur Miller, the ballplayer for whom Marilyn Monroe consented to be circumcised',[2] seemingly confusing Miller with Joe Dimaggio. *The New Republic* greeted his autobiography with a grotesque caricature on the front cover and described it as 'unwieldy and blockish', composed, as it was, of 'glutinous sentences' which failed even to show a proper respect for logical order since 'the reader of an artist's autobiography naturally expects chronological order'. He was the kind of writer, it added, admired by assistant professors of drama for whom the stupidity of his moral assertions 'will never go out of fashion in the classroom'.[3]

According to the American critic Stanley Kauffmann, who has taught at the Yale School of Drama, Arthur Miller's plays 'suffer from fuzzy

Read at the Academy as part of British Academy Literature Week, 19–22 October 2009.
[1] Susan Sontag, 'Going to the theater and the movies', *Partisan Review*, 33 (Spring, 1964), 285.
[2] James Atlas, *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet* (New York, 1977), p. 361.
[3] David Denby, 'Arthur Miller, America's connoisseur of Guilt: All My Sins', *The New Republic*, 8 Feb. 1988, pp. 30–4.

Proceedings of the British Academy, **167**, 499–513.

concepts, transparent mechanics, superficial probes, and pedestrian diction'. *Death of a Salesman* he thought a 'flabby, occasionally false work'.[4] Writing in *The New Republic* in 1971 he described Miller as 'all munched out', and the following year said that going to a Miller play was like going to the funeral of a man you wish you could have liked more. Struggling to account for Miller's international success, he suggested that it might be because his language 'improves in translation', which, of course, puts the British in a strange position.

The American academic and director Robert Brustein, regular reviewer for the *New Republic*, saw Miller as evidence of 'consumer theatre'. When the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven embraced his work, it was opting for 'domestic realism—plays in which people discuss their problems over hot meals', the kind of theatre likely to appeal to New Haven's middle class who wished to be 'lulled by the sight of familiar lives on stage'.[5] This came, incidentally, from an admirer of Chekhov, a writer who once remarked that, 'A play should be written in which people arrive, go away, have dinner . . . just eat their dinner, and all the time their happiness is being established or their lives being broken up.'[6] For Brustein, Miller's talent was 'minor'. *After the Fall* was scandalous, *Incident at Vichy* 'an old dray horse about to be melted down for glue'.[7] The two plays were 'moribund in their style, ideas, and language'.[8] In retrospect, even *Death of a Salesman* seemed no more than 'a realistic problem play'.[9] He described Miller's 1994 play, *Broken Glass*, as another spiral in a stumbling career. In Britain, it won the Olivier Award as Best Play of the Year.

For American critic Richard Gilman, drama reviewer for *Commonweal* and *Newsweek*, and, like Brustein, once a professor of drama at Yale, Miller was 'a narrow realist, with a hopeless aspiration to poetry, and a moralist with greatly inadequate equipment for the projection of moral complexity'.[10] Only once, in *Death of a Salesman*, did his powers prove commensurate with his theme, so that he was able to compose 'a flawed but representative image of an aspect of our experience. One other time,

[4] Stanley Kaufmann, *Persons of the Drama* (New York, 1976), p. 144.
[5] Robert Brustein, *Making Scenes* (New York, 1981), p. 220.
[6] Ronald Hingley, *Chekhov* (London, 1950), p. 233.
[7] Robert Brustein, *Seasons of Discontent* (London, 1966), p. 259.
[8] Ibid., p. 19.
[9] Ibid., p. 242.
[10] Richard Gilman, *Common and Uncommon Masks: Writings on Theatre 1961–1970* (New York, 1971), p. 152.

in *The Crucible*, his deficient language achieved a transcendence through its borrowing from history. And that is all, literally everything.'[11]

The distinguished American drama reviewer John Lahr, in speaking of Miller's *The Price*, referred to his 'turgid naturalism', a phrase also used by American critic Leslie Fiedler, who thought Miller 'an over-rated playwright whose dramas were as devious as his public life',[12] while Mary McCarthy referred to what she called his long practice as a realist. So, I suppose that is clear, then. Arthur Miller, apparently, at least from a certain American perspective, was a writer of irredeemably realist works, a minor talent who had a problem with language and a preference for plays with hot meals.

Miller was stung by such critics, to the point sometimes of depression. As he remarked, 'they kill you. They can really destroy you . . . I remember Chekhov writing somebody a letter saying that if he had listened to the critics he would have died drunk in the gutter . . . I was just reading a biography of Ibsen, in which he was inveighing against the critics in the same way . . . I don't think twelve people in this country could name the Norwegian critics at the time of Ibsen, and yet they were the real bane of his life.'[13]

I am going to leave aside just why so many American critics responded as they did. I have tried to deal with that elsewhere. I will leave aside, too, the difficulty of reconciling Miller's supposed realism with such plays as *After the Fall*, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, *The American Clock*, *Elegy for a Lady*, *Clara*, *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, *Mr. Peters' Connections*, and *Resurrection Blues*. Instead I am going to concentrate on his earlier work, especially on *Death of a Salesman* and the question of realism, of language, of poetry.

> Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
> Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
> The City's fiery parcels all undone,
> Already snow submerges an iron year
>
> O Sleepless as the river under thee,
> Vaulting the sea, the prairie's dreaming sod,
> Unto us lowliest sometimes sweep, descend
> And of the curveship lend a myth to God.[14]

[11] Ibid., p. 153.
[12] Nathan David Abrams, *Struggling For Freedom: Arthur Miller, the Commentary Community and the Cultural Cold War* (Birmingham, 1998).
[13] Matthew Roudané, *Conversations with Arthur Miller* (Jackson, 1987), p. 208.
[14] Hart Crane, *Complete Poems* (New York, 2000), p. 44.

Hart Crane on Brooklyn Bridge of which Arthur Miller once remarked, 'To walk the bridge . . . without thinking of Hart Crane's poem was an impiety, and it came to one's lips the way grace does to the devout at dinner. But unlike grace at dinner, it somehow defined the object being blessed more vividly than even one's own eyes could.'[15] There, it seems to me, apart from an unforgivable reference to dinner, he is celebrating the bridge, Hart Crane's poem and the ability of art and language to capture and elevate the real.

This was the bridge from which he looked out on the Red Hook district of Brooklyn that would become the location for his play *A View From the Bridge* which opens with a lawyer and a speech in which American prose embraces American poetry:

> This is the slum that faces the bay on the seaward side of New York swallowing the tonnage of the world . . . every few years . . . the flat air in my office suddenly washes in with the green scent of the sea, the dust in this air is blown away and the thought comes that in some Caesar's year, in Calabria perhaps or on the cliff at Syracuse, another lawyer, quite differently dressed, heard the same complaint and sat there as powerless as I, and watched it run its bloody course.'[16]

The original one-act version of that play was in fact a verse drama which he subsequently transcribed into prose and expanded for the two-act version, but the poetry is still there. And it is a poetry that is even to be heard in the inarticulate forays into language by Eddie Carbone.

Frequently and erroneously characterised as a social realist Miller was always drawn to the poetic, sometimes quite literally, drafting parts of *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* in verse, but he also remarked of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* that he was not a real person but a 'figure in a poem'. What is that poem? It is the play but in a sense, surely, it is also America, the America, at least, that Willy Loman imagines himself to inhabit as he sets out, like a pioneer, to conquer not the west, where his father had ventured on a wagon, but the buyers in Macys, Gimbels and Filene's department stores. This is not simply, though, a play about a family and a man's last day on earth. It reaches out beyond the walls of a small Brooklyn frame house and in doing so, Miller insisted, required something more than a realist's touch. Prose, he declared, is the language

[15] Arthur Miller, *Echoes Down the Corridor: Collected Essays, 1944–2000*, ed. Steven R. Centola (New York, 2000), p. 186.
[16] Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge and All My Sons* (Harmondsworth, 1961), p. 12.

of family relations; it is the inclusion of the larger world beyond that naturally opens a play to the poetic.

Death of a Salesman, which opens with a flute 'telling of grass and trees and the horizon', is the story of something more than a salesman whose dream of America is fading, as that horizon shrinks to a Brooklyn backyard. It is the story of the poem that is America the perfection of whose form is no longer easy to sustain, a poem fast turning into prose. As Miller once remarked, 'what we do privately has consequences. But since trying to trace that in concrete terms is almost impossible we are backed up into metaphor and analogy and poetry, which is the only way you handle it anyway.'[17]

Robert Lowell, in an essay on 'Poets and the Theatre', invoked, not altogether without sympathy, the poet and critic Yvor Winters's observation that, 'In general I think the world would be well enough off without actors. They appear capable of any of three feats—of making the grossly vulgar appear acceptably mediocre; of making the acceptably mediocre appear what it is; and of making the distinguished appear acceptably mediocre.'[18] For his part, Lowell confessed to unease in the presence of drama insisting, somewhat oddly, that 'No two arts are more opposed than poetry and our theatre.' Since in origin poetry and drama were joined at the hip perhaps the clue is in the word 'our'. He was talking primarily about the American theatre, acknowledging the greatness of two playwrights—O'Neill and Williams—but suggesting that they were 'more on the fringe of our high culture than part of it'.

And there the key phrase is 'high culture'. In other words, drama might be invited to the party but for preference should use the tradesman's entrance. Poetry, however, was undeniably literature even, he confessed, 'if it may not be considered American, or even involved with the human race',[19] that last remark, admittedly, being somewhat gnomic.

For his part, he admitted, he had 'always felt splenetic about the stage, known very little of it, and shivered at the suggestion that I write for it'. Many American plays struck him as 'fun' but not to be compared with the work of Faulkner or Eliot. Then, as he says, 'I found I had written a play of my own', clearly a piece of inadvertance that left him astonished and not a little embarrassed. Helpfully, he explained, 'I now feel double-faced,

[17] Ron Rifkin, 'Arthur Miller', *Bomb Magazine*, 49 (Fall 1994), <http://bomsite.com/issues/49/articles/1827> accessed 11 March 2010.
[18] Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose* (London, 1987), p. 176.
[19] Ibid., p. 177.

looking on plays as some barbarian Gaul or Goth might have first looked on Rome, his shaggy head full of moral disgust, plunder and adaptation.'[20]

In a way his position is understandable. Certainly poets have frequently made a pig's ear of writing for the theatre. The last great English play in verse, Lowell explained in 1963, was Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, published in 1671, not much of a hit rate for poets in the theatre as far as Lowell was concerned. It was also, though, he thought, the only great English play that cannot be acted, which, given his view of actors, might be thought to be a recommendation. In the twentieth century he thought *Sweeney Agonistes* and the last short plays of Yeats had something going for them and that Brecht was a poet even if he wrote in prose. But there things, as far as Lowell was concerned, rather stopped. Arthur Miller, you will note, did not even make it into the tradesman's entrance though he and Lowell would be partners when it came to protesting against the Vietnam war, at one meeting, called Poets for Peace, held in New York's Town Hall in 1967, Miller even reading out an extended poem. And Miller wrote poems throughout his life, though seldom published them.

The fact is that Miller, who is thought of as a writer of prose realism, in fact wrote verse dramas and resisted descriptions of himself as a realistic writer. As he remarked, 'when I came to writing *All My Sons*, which was, indeed, avowedly a very realistic play in its structure, using very realistic speech . . . that stuck for the rest of my work in some minds . . . [in fact] I've been writing a kind of poem all these years, but I tried not to let the audience in on it because, once they hear that word, they go to the exit'.[21] It was Richard Eyre, though, who remarked that 'no theatrical naturalism—if taken seriously, as opposed to being half-hearted convention—is without poetry'.[22] He also said that 'Theatre is intrinsically poetic, it thrives on metaphor',[23] and Miller once remarked that he did not write plays, he wrote metaphors. His problem with the critics was that they took his theatrical poems and reduced them to prose. They took his metaphors and reduced them to their component parts. Presented with a butterfly, they saw only an artfully concealed caterpillar.

For Miller, 'the word "poetry" wasn't enough if a play's underlying structure was a fractured one, a concept not fully realized. A real play was

[20] Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose* (London, 1987), p. 177.
[21] Arthur Miller, *Arthur Miller in Conversation with Murray Biggs* (New Haven, CT, 2000), p. 8.
[22] Richard Eyre, *National Service: Diary of a Decade at the National Theatre* (London, 2003), p. 77.
[23] Richard Eyre, *Talking Theatre: Interviews with Theatre People* (London, 2009), p. xiii.

the discovery of the unity of its contradictions, and the essential poetry, the first poetry, was the synthesis of even the least of its parts to form a symbolic meaning.'[24] What he learned from Sean O'Casey was that 'the significantly poetic sprang from the raw and real experience of ordinary people'. Noting that J. M. Synge had rebelled against what he had called 'the joyless and pallid words' of Ibsen's realism, in search of a heightened language he recalled that James Joyce, having learned Norwegian expressly to read Ibsen, had understood the poetic structure of the plays and their sense of 'the spiritual failure of the modern world'.[25] Of his own work he noted that the speeches 'sound like real, almost reported talk when in fact they are intensely composed, compressed into a sequential inevitability that seems nature but isn't'. There is, anyway, he insisted, 'no such thing as "reality" in any theatrical exhibition that can properly be called a play'.[26] The very act of condensing time means 'that the artificial enters even as the first of its lines is being written'.[27]

When he left university in 1938, Miller expected to conquer Broadway. He submitted a play which had won a prize at the University of Michigan. It was rejected by Jewish producers as 'too Jewish'. He then worked briefly for the Federal Theatre, established as part of Roosevelt's New Deal, writing a play called *The Golden Years* about Montezuma and Cortes, not a verse drama but stained with poetry. It was to be over half a century before Miller's play was performed, and then not in America but in the UK when the BBC produced it as a radio play. So, for much of his career it remained unknown. But he had a taste for verse. When he began to write he would copy out speeches from Shakespeare's plays, the act of writing, it seemed to him, teaching him concision, what he called 'that intense inner connection of sound and meaning'.[28] He now set himself to write a verse drama for radio, and radio drama would become his chief source of income for several years before he broke through into theatre.

You may have some difficulty imagining American radio broadcasting drama, let alone verse drama, but we are talking about the late 1930s and early 1940s when radio had a mass audience and, as Miller recalled, it was possible to walk down the street in summer and hear the same programme

[24] Arthur Miller, 'On Broadway: notes on the past and future of American theatre', *Harper's Magazine* (March, 1999), 43.
[25] Ibid. 45.
[26] Ibid. 47.
[27] Ibid. 38.
[28] *Talking Theatre*, p. 127.

coming from every house. Nor was Miller, of course, the only one to write verse plays for radio. Archibald McLeish's *The Fall of the City*, in 1937, had convinced Miller that, in his words, 'radio was made for poetry'.

For the most part Miller's radio plays were journeyman work. For a series called *Cavalcade of America*, sponsored by Du Pont, whose slogan was 'Making better things for better living through chemistry', he would adapt books for broadcast a few days later performed by major actors. In amongst them, though, were some impressive works, including verse dramas, one of them about Sacajewea, the Native American who led Lewis and Clarke across America and in doing so doomed her people to destruction:

> I was young then; I saw them between the trees;
> I saw them with the West at my back. Over my shoulder
> lay the West, and their blue eyes gazed at the hills
> When they questioned me. I am very old but the memory
> Is like a pickerel shining in a pool, and I reach under
> Holding it bright and living across my palm.[29]

Later he wrote a play about Juarez and the last Emperor of Mexico. It was presented by Orson Welles and members of the Mercury Theatre whom he credited with its success. Welles, he said, could 'wrap himself around that microphone . . . So if it was in verse or not you never knew. They understood language.'[30]

> . . . They came from Tehuantepec,
> Durango and the river there, from the bay of Banderas,
> The fishermen of Marblehead came
> In their boats to crash the heights of Washington!
> The sowers of corn and the makers of bread,
> The black-eyed and the fair, the forest men
> Whose backs were bent like the trees they cut—
> They came, they came, sweetening with blood
> The deserts of long-dead centuries,
> And they scrawled new names on Mexico's face!
> *Dios y Libertad*! For God and Liberty!
> And the stones rang like bells from Guadalajara
> To the Gulf.[31]

These verse dramas were important to him not only in themselves but for what they taught him about writing. As he explained, 'I made the discovery that in verse you are forced to be brief and to the point. Verse

[29] Quoted in Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller* (London, 2008), p. 199.
[30] Ibid., p. 201.
[31] Ibid., p. 202.

squeezes out fat and you're left with the real meaning of the language. I wanted to use language so that people thought I was using regular language. What I was slipping over was a hidden pattern, which permitted me to say much more in fewer words than I could otherwise.'[32] It is that hidden pattern that is woven into so many of his plays.

When Miller speaks of *Death of a Salesman* as a poem, though, it is not primarily its language he has in mind, though here, and elsewhere in his work, he looked for something more than authenticity. Consider Charley's speech at Willy Loman's funeral, a speech originally written in verse.

> Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine . . . Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory.

Another American critic, Morris Dickstein, complained that the sentence, 'Nobody dast blame this man' was 'risible . . . pseudo poetry' and that nobody would actually say, 'I'm a dime a dozen', as Biff does to his father. This, Dickstein suggests, is an unreality as if Miller were reaching for and failing to achieve a realistic language. But the same critic rejected the play's Requiem even as he had to account for the fact that audiences for sixty years had judged otherwise. His explanation is that Miller's plays 'are ultimately performance pieces that play better than they read'.[33] Precisely. They are what we call plays.

Mary McCarthy objected to Linda's cry of 'Attention, attention must be paid to such a man,' suggesting that it was inadvertent evidence that Willy Loman was a Jew and that Miller was intent to suppress the fact. Miller had something else in mind. The construction enforces the thought, as in John Donne's poem 'Satire 3' in which we are told 'On a huge hill | Cragged, and steep, Truth stands and he that will | Reach her, about must, and about must go.'[34] 'Even the Jews have their Jews', a character observes in Miller's *Incident at Vichy*, the very echo generating a sense of the ironic and the tragic, as in Shakespeare's iterations ('to be or not to be;' 'If it were done when 'tis done.').

It was T. S. Eliot who remarked that 'What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns

[32] Interview with the author, May, 2002.
[33] Morris Dickstein, 'False to life', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 July, 2009, p. 3.
[34] A. J. Smith (ed.), *John Donne: the Complete English Poems* (London, 1971), p. 163.

when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own.' [35] He wrote in the context of a discussion of his own poetic dramas though Peter Hall suggested that he was trying to put poetry back into theatre by scattering it into ordinary dialogue like sequins. Miller, though, suggested that 'in the theatre the poetic does not depend, at least not wholly, on poetic language'.[36]

Tennessee Williams set his face against 'the straight realist play with its genuine frigidaire and authentic ice cubes, its characters that speak exactly as the audience speaks'.[37] There is a frigidaire in *Death of a Salesman* but it is located in a house which has, we are told, 'an air of the dream' about it. As Miller says, it 'seems actual enough', but there are no other fixtures. The roofline is one dimensional, the set partially transparent.

Miller's first successful play, *All My Sons*, was realistic. An earlier play, a fable called *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, had failed spectacularly, so he turned to Ibsen as a model. So close was *All My Sons* to Ibsen's work, indeed, that in early drafts the characters are given Norwegian names. But it was not the kind of play he wanted to write. Things changed when he attended the New Haven try-out of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Listening to Williams's language, he now felt he had permission, as he said, to speak out with full voice.

In his own mind, Miller was a restless experimenter, for whom language was not to be the transcribed speech of the streets. He was interested in the unconscious poetry of those struggling to express their needs and hopes, the shifting rhythms of personal encounters. Indeed, for him the poetry of a play was constituted from all the aspects of theatre which lift words from the page onto the stage. As he remarked, 'I recall thinking that all the important things were between the lines, in the silences, the gestures, the stuff above or below the level of speech. For a while I even thought to study music, which is the art of silences hedged about by sound. Music begins *Salesman*, and not by accident; we are to hear Willy before we see him and before he speaks. He was there in the hollow of the flute, the wind, the air announcing his arrival and his doom.'[38]

The opening of *Death of a Salesman* offers a series of metaphors, from the flute music which sounds out before the curtain has even been raised, to the scene which greets the audience as the lights come up and

[35] T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957), p. 82.
[36] Christopher Bigsby, 'The poet: chronicler of the age', *Humanities* (March/April, 2001), p. 13.
[37] Christopher Bigsby, *Modern American Drama* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 35.
[38] Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller: a Critical Study* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 116.

they become aware of 'towering angular shapes' and 'an angry glow of orange'. The Loman house we see is described as 'fragile-seeming', enclosed as it is by apartment buildings. The flute plays on, even as its tonalities, its lyricism, are in discord with what we see. Something is happening to time as past and present are brought together, in the same way as a metaphor brings discrete experiences together to generate meaning. It was a play, he said, in which he wished to explode the watch and the calendar. The setting, Miller explains, 'is wholly or, in some places, partially transparent'. The house will fade in and out as Willy's mind roams back and forth, bending time.

And when Willy appears he carries two large suitcases. Mary McCarthy and Robert Brustein would both complain that the weakness of the play lay in the fact that we never know what is in them, precisely the kind of literalism that so dismayed Miller for whom the suitcases contained Willy's life, his dreams, for what he primarily sold, what all salesmen primarily sell, was himself and as the play unfolds we will discover that he no longer has any confidence in this product even as he remains loyal to the profession the suitcases symbolise. Today, it is a rare production whose poster does not, as did the original, feature a man, shoulders rounded, carrying two heavy suitcases, that image containing the essence of a dispirited man who still struggles to achieve a dream, locked in his own necessities, bearing the burden of a national myth of possibility as Vladimir and Estragon await the epiphany of Godot's arrival. Willy, we are told, hears the flute but is not aware of it. It is an expression of the past that is a part of him, that has shaped him, but which exists as an irony.

And still no one has delivered a line. We do not enter this play as we do a realist drama. We step in part into the world created by Willy Loman's mind, a blend of memory and hope, a golden dream lost somewhere in the journey from an invented past to an imagined future. There is a rhythm to Willy's contradictions which is that of a society always looking for the spiritual in the material. For Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan became the embodiment of a romantic myth, of the happiness Americans are instructed to pursue but which they must never possess because there can be no end to their journey. For Willy Loman, the dream of possibility becomes no more than the sale he seeks to close. And yet there is something more. Beyond anything, he wishes to bring into alignment his sense of himself and the life he leads. He wants to be acknowledged, for people to notice that he has passed this way. But, as Miller remarked, he was signing his name on a block of ice on a summer's day.

But what else does the writer, the artist, do, hoping, though, that their names will be inscribed on something more permanent. Miller signed his name on his plays but also on the furniture he fashioned in the great barn where he transformed fallen trees into a table or a desk, cutting through time as he did in *Death of a Salesman*. What his characters mainly fear is death unmaking their lives, wiping out their significance.

In a sense a function of art is simultaneously to make a claim on immortality and admit to the impossibility of this in the face of what George Steiner calls 'the affront of death'. The religion that Miller eschewed offered to resolve this tension. Religion abandoned, art stands alone. The poem that is a human life has to be composed anew each time. In a poem read out at his memorial service Miller spoke of living on through his art, 'vanishing' as he said, 'into what I made'.

As George Steiner has said,

> The central conceit of the artist that the work shall outlast his own death, the existential truth that great literature, painting, architecture, music have survived their creators, are not accidental or self-regarding. It is the lucid intensity of its meeting with death that generates in aesthetic forms that statement of vitality, of life-presence, which distinguishes serious thought and feeling from the trivial and opportunistic.

It is, he says, 'within the compass of the arts that the metaphor of resurrection is given the edge of felt conjecture'.[39] It is through his death that Willy hopes to keep his name alive, in that that alone will give a perfect shape to his life which in its completion will become a poem whose rhythm and rhyme will be sustained by his sons.

At the end of the play the stage direction indicates that as Willy drives off to kill himself, leaving as his inheritance a tainted dream, 'the music crashes down in a frenzy of sound, which becomes the soft pulsation of a single cello string'.[40] The characters then break the convention established in the opening stage direction which indicates that only in the scenes set in the past do the characters breach the imaginary wall-lines. They do so now because past and present are one and they are stepping into myth. The flute now sounds out again as Willy Loman is buried and Linda cries out 'We're free', when freedom is what she and her husband have laid aside in order to take up the American burden of becoming. But the man with whom she has lived since they first settled in a once rural, now urban setting, the man whom she loves and whose illusions she has supported,

[39] George Steiner, *The Grammars of Creation* (London, 2001), p. 141.
[40] Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York, 1998), p. 109.

has gone, leaving behind a tainted dream for which he had laid down his life. She is now to be alone, in a world whose modernity has become a threat.

Perhaps there is an echo of another play in which a character is left alone, as nature gives way to houses. Just as in *Salesman* we hear the sound of a single cello string so in another play, 'A sound is heard in the distance, as if from the sky'. Chekhov, in *The Cherry Orchard*, calls for 'the sound of a breaking string, dying away, sad'. The only other sound is that of the cherry orchard being cut down. In *Death of a Salesman* 'Only the music of the flute is left on the darkening stage as over the house the hard towers of the apartment building rise into sharp focus.'[41] We tend to think of Tennessee Williams as America's Chekhov but I think there is a case for thinking it might be Miller. And was Chekhov not a poet as he wrote of a daily life beneath which a current was exerting its pull towards dissolution.

Death of a S*alesman* has been and continues to be produced around the world not because it is a realistic account of an American salesman. It is embraced in part because it is a play about fathers and sons, about brothers, about husbands and wives, but also because at its heart is a man who struggles to make sense of himself and his life, who knows on some level that he has failed himself and others, that time is running out, that his name will soon no longer be spoken aloud. The same stunned silence which followed the lowering of the curtain after its first performance sixty years ago was repeated in China, a country in which at the time the salesman was an alien figure and the insurance policy with which he hoped to redeem himself an unknown phenomenon.

The identifications that were to lead so many to claim Willy Loman as a relative were an acknowledgement that Miller had succeeded in bridging the gap between the real and its fictive representation. There is a will on the part of the audience to reverse the flow from fiction back to its origins, as if themselves to authenticate characters presented as mere fictions. As George Steiner elegantly puts it, 'The dramatist, the novelist instigates. He or she initiates the paradox of fertile innovative echo, resounding in every recipient and across time. This echo substantiates and reciprocates, enabling the work of art, of literature, of music to realize and multiply its intentions, enriching it (ideally) with significations, with a continuum of relevance and renewal of which the author, artist and

[41] Ibid., p. 112.

composer may not have been aware.'[42] The audience, in other words, extends the text, detects resonances, translates it, becomes confederate in transforming fact into metaphor, prose into poetry.

That active bargain had always been part of Miller's appeal. Steiner contemplates the mystery whereby fictive creations can 'make ghostly so many of the women and men and empirical facts we come across "out there".'[43] That was surely what Miller had detected in Hart Crane's poem. It is an uneasy truth. Perhaps it is not really a truth at all. After all, those characters may be as vivid as they are precisely because they are forever locked inside a single narrative, no matter how we extend and gloss that story with our own. We see Joe Keller and Willy Loman in the last days of their lives. Nonetheless, Willy Loman, John Proctor, and Eddie Carbone have that transcendent truth that makes them both themselves and exemplary. They patently exist in the world but have become part of the broader story that we choose to tell ourselves about the struggle to be in the world, and to leave it with what we choose to see as our integrity intact.

In *Resurrection Blues*, a character remarks that

> I am convinced now, apart from getting fed, most human activity—sports, opera, TV, movies, dressing up, dressing down—or just going for a walk—has no other purpose than to deliver us into the realm of the imagination. The imagination is a great hall where death, for example, turns into a painting, and a scream of pain becomes a song. The hall of the imagination is really where we usually live; and this is all right except for one thing—to enter that hall one must leave one's real sorrow at the door and in its stead surround oneself with images and words and music that mimic anguish but are really drained of it.[44]

It is a speech that is something more than a regret at a world in retreat from itself. It is also, surely, a confession of art's inadequacy, or rather of the gap which of necessity opens up between the truth of art and the truth of life, between the rhythm, rhyme, the ordered integrity of a poem and the sharp and sometimes incommunicable immediacy of lived experience.

Yet language is what we have. It has to bear the burden of expressing the inexpressible, felt equally by Eugene O'Neill, a man accused by Robert Brustein of being a charter member of the cult of inarticulacy:

[42] *The Grammars of Creation*, p. 141.
[43] Ibid., p. 142.
[44] Arthur Miller, *Plays Six* (London, 2009), p. 175.

. . . I have tried to scream!
Give pain a voice!
Make it a street singer
Acting a pantomime of tragic song . . .

But something was born wrong.
The voice strains toward a sob.
Begins and ends in silence . . .

All this,
As I have said before,
Happens where silence is;
Where I,
A quiet man,
In love with quiet,

Live quietly
Among the visions of my drowned,
Deep in my silent sea.[45]

It was Tennessee Williams who said that 'poetry doesn't have to be words . . . In the theatre it can be situations, it can be silence.'[46] A play is a poem which, in the words of the American director Harold Clurman, tells lies like truth. The degree to which this is true depends in part on those who body forth that play, inhabit its language, and in part on those who listen and watch as a woman calls out for the man she has loved but never fully understood. Willy Loman lived and died the life of a salesman. On some level his was an un-inspected life and he a person of no significance. No one came to his funeral except his family and a friendly neighbour. No one, that is, except the audience who for sixty years have sat in the dark, listening to the fading sound of a flute until, in silence, the word and the pain become one.

[45] Ibid., p. 30.
[46] Ibid., p. 34.