

MILLER'S MYTH- A DRAMATIC ANSWER TO EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY

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Recent articles and commentaries about the dramatic production of Arthur Miller show, in some cases, a marked bias and, in others, a highly superficial analysis. In particular, I must make special mention of the severe criticism made subsequent to the première of his last play, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, criticism which both in the U.S.A. and throughout Europe have promoted a completely undesirable reception of the play and which make manifest a lack of deep understanding and penetrating vision on the part of their authors.

It is high time critics learnt to analyse Miller's intellectual development with a degree of scientific rigour and to consider the message of his work with some technical coherence. To do otherwise would be falling into the temptation of making rash and superficial judgements.

As early as 1957, Miller wrote «My approach to playwriting and the drama itself is organic» (1) and this assertion was fulfilled throughout Arthur Miller's work from *All my Songs* (1947) to *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972), although some critics have sadly failed to comprehend this and others have been intentionally biased. Therefore, this play is not a «catastrophic comedy» (2), nor merely «a comic-strip version of Genesis» (3) and is certainly not «the author's first flop» (4); it is the missing link of an investigation, meticulously carried out by the author, with the serious intention of penetrating ever more deeply into the strange and mysterious nature of mankind.

Considered together, the playwright's dramatic production may be divided into three different stages. We might further add that Miller wanted to broach the unresolved questions about human existence from three different angles: he has analysed man as a social being, he has ventured deeply into ontological world and he has offered us a personal interpretation of the human being's natural dependence on superior forces or so called mythical powers. He has evidently chosen the soundest route of discovery. Miller's first considerations are the phenomena external to man himself, for this is the easiest to analyse, then comes the more difficult and complex task of revealing man's internal existence and lastly we have the interpretation of the mythical side of man with the inevitable risk which this implies of prejudice and subjectivity.

Thus, it may be seen that Miller's dramatic production follows a specific order

and obeys an internal organic pattern. As from *All my Sons*, chance ceases to play a part in the selection of different themes and the causes of the tragic conflict evolve according to a well-defined pattern. This evolution develops *from outside to within* and is contained in three different stages, that is to say that the tragic impulse which may initially be considered as an external force is gradually revealed as existing in the very interior of the human being, existing there so deeply that in the second stage this tragic stage, there is an attempt to find a compromise that might offer some kind of valid solution to the conclusions reached in the two previous stages.

In this fascinating journey which Miller has proposed into the most intimate part of the human being, there is only one protagonist: *the common man*, the man in the street. The professional, the worker, the head of the family and so on; these are the most common prototypes on Miller's stage, all of them fall greater or lesser victims of the external pressures of the system, of their own imperfect nature or of strange and distant forces, the nature of which they are usually ignorant but the effects of which they perfectly perceive.

All my Sons (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and *The Crucible* (1953) represent what may be called the ethical period in Miller's production. The most outstanding characteristic of these three plays is that the dramatic conflict essentially has its origins in elements external to man himself. Their protagonists acquire tragic stature as they try to know and assimilate an external world which seems to them so hostile, distant and frustrating. In summary, they constitute a three-act representation whose respective protagonists are each *the man-victim* of forces existing beyond himself. Willy Loman, Joe Keller and John Proctor symbolically express the result of a meticulous analysis of the influence the outside environment has on individual conduct. The individual's tragedy is directly related to either his negative or positive attitude when confronted by a moral duty which, from amongst the playwright's stock of coordinates, is that which emerges as almost sacred: *social responsibility*.

Each of the aforementioned protagonists occasioned his own death by the recognition and assimilation of the reality of his having no true connection with the external world. Their isolationism, be it true or figurative, decided their destiny. Their tragic end induces one to believe that the playwright is firmly convinced that man cannot live uncommitted. On the contrary, he forms an integral part of the vast human family and, as such, is obliged to face up to the responsibilities that this necessarily implies. To contravene this social duty deserves the highest penalty, and each one dies victim of his incapacity to take upon himself the irrevocable moral consequences of his acts.

Before launching the more developed themes which constitute *After the Fall* (1964), Miller suffers a period of considerable instability which undoubtedly lays the foundations for this change. It is evident that Miller's preoccupations in the '40's are very different to those he has in the '60's and the reasons provoking the change may be found when considering the following circumstances: his emotional instability (his divorce and subsequent marriage to Marilyn Monroe) and the continual political tensions between Miller and the Administration in the McCarthy era due to the playwright's supposed sympathies with the Communist Party. Consequently his dramatic production underwent a long lethargy which lasted eleven years and which was to be interrupted only by *A View from the Bridge* and *A Memory of Two Mondays*.

With *After the Fall* (1964), Miller begins his second dramatic period, the ontological, which was to culminate 4 years later in *The Price* (1968). The tragic protagonistism has been completely changed round: Quentin and Walter are not to be the victims of elements external to themselves but of their own mistakes and imperfections. There is an extremely important factor to take into account when analysing the causes of the conflicts in these plays. Seven years previous to the writing of *After the Fall*, that is to say in 1957, Miller confessed that he had reached a highly significant conclusion. To quote, he was convinced that «evil is not a mistake but a fact in itself» (5). His strong conviction of the existence of evil, considered as just another fact in our lives, is something that begins to obsess our playwright in the early '60's: *After the Fall* (1964), *Incident at Vichy* (1964) and *The Price* (1968) represent, to a certain degree, the product of this obsession. Their protagonists become tragic victims when they recognise this fact and are unable to assimilate it. Therefore, they are forced to see their internal contradictions and they rebel against their human limitations. Each one in his turn departs from the stage leaving an important question without reply: Is man the only and directly responsible entity for his complicity with evil?

The most recent work published by Miller, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, tries to symbolically reply to this question and the response is that man is not totally guilty of his imperfections and his inevitable association with evil, since the cosmic forces that intervened in his creation disposed this from the beginning. Consequently, the total responsibility for human acts cannot be directly imputed to man.

This play, performed in 1972 and published in 1973, marks the beginning of a third stage which may still be supposed unfinished: the mythical period. The existential doubts of Quentin, Leduc and Walter dangerously threatened with ending up in a new type of play very similar to the Theatre of the Absurd and Miller could not permit himself such a sharp change in attitude. Throughout his dramatic production as well as in his essays on dramatic theory he had always maintained an attitude of trust in man. His tragedies were open and always contained a hope of redemption, thus revealing a profound faith in the human condition. It is clear that Miller needed a work which could explain the formal contradictions in the protagonist of *After the Fall*, without falling into the temptation of the Absurd. What better than to seek refuge in Myth and thereby explain the almost impossible by other methods?

This challenge had remained since *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy*. Logically, if the author had to analyse the result of *the fall*, he would also feel obliged to seek the reasons of *the said fall*. After a detailed analysis of the themes of those plays, one must deduce that man either does not know how, cannot or does not want to find the roots of the evil by which he is surrounded. *The Creation of the World and Other Business* seeks these roots by fathoming deep into the origins of evil and this investigation is materialized completely within the interpretation field of allegory and symbol. The play is divided into three acts which adhere to a clear purpose of progressive distribution in accordance with the story of Genesis.

In the first act, God, who has now created Adam and the animals, eventually decides to create Eve in order to counteract the man's loneliness. Nevertheless, as Genesis tells us, the presence of woman proves only too soon to be his damnation

rather than a help. Having been tempted by Lucifer, she eats the forbidden fruit and forces Adam to do the same. God's wrath is provoked by such an act of disobedience and both are condemned to pain and death and banished from Paradise.

According to the playwright's own confession, the following proposition is explored in this first act: «Since God made everything and God is good —why did he make Lucifer?» (6).

This same question is not new in Miller's work. It has appeared disguised in diverse forms in practically all of his works, especially *After the Fall*. Miller has for some time been convinced that evil is a fact. Until now he has analysed the consequences of its existence; now he is going to offer us his interpretation of its causes. In earlier works the desperate question of why evil should exist laid latent. When Joe and Willy ask their respective sons *why?* why had they behaved so irresponsible; hidden beneath such a question was the problem of why evil has to exist at all. They died without knowing this. When Quentin and Walter first refuse to accept their part in the guilt for the adverse destinies of those by which they are surrounded, they are also asking the same question. Indirectly, Miller has been forming this question for some years, but only now has he dared to present it in such an open way and to offer his own personal interpretation as to the origins of evil.

Unfortunately, and despite the clarity of the question, the answer continues to be obscure and it is disguised under the mist of Myth. In the first act of *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, the playwright seeks to offer a «mitho-allegorical» reply about the roots of evil. Here we glimpse that God (the genuine representation of Good) needs Lucifer (the personification of Evil) for the simple reason of substantiality or, in other words, so that God may see the extent of his own perfection he needs the contrast of an opposite force that personifies the idea of imperfection. Furthermore, Miller hints that even the conception of the human creature was born of the creator's internal necessity to be recognised as such.

The playwright has conceived an anthropomorphical creator who responds to the same necessities as the creature. According to him, subsequent to the disobedience of Lucifer, a system of balanced forces was created which prepared the life space for the creature's existence. Once human life was obtained, the struggle for influence over it began and, as man is an imperfect creature, he inclined towards and gave way to evil. *After the fall*, a triangle is formed in whose corners God, Lucifer and the creature are found; these being the three existing forces of the cosmic equilibrium: paradoxically, the vital force of the created element is born of the continual contradiction between Good and Evil and this force likewise offers a reference point for comparison so that the creator may fully appreciate his infinite goodness and Lucifer's infinite evil. In this play of forces lies the justification of the «knowledge which is forbidden» (7), that is to say, the prohibition of eating the forbidden fruit has its origins in God's continual need to remind all of his superiority and to celebrate uninterruptedly his self-fulfilment; since he could hardly feel like a superior being had he blessed the creature with total knowledge. Lucifer interprets this to mean that everything created, including himself, is the fruit of this urgency felt by God to be recognised: «you wanted full credit for everything» (8), he accuses him convincingly. Later also, he justifies the invention of the forbidden fruit as just one more whim due to the Creator's need to be recognised. It is indeed curious that when God decides to punish his creature for disobedience he does

not do this because the latter has committed a sin against his own nature but because he had to remember and praise his Maker. Evidently the author wants to imply that evil does not have its origins precisely in the imperfection of the creature but in the weakness of the Creator. In principle, Miller works basing himself on three key concepts which, in his opinion, explain the causes of the existence of evil.

In the first place, there is a conflict, voluntarily accepted by God, between himself and his creatures over the degree of their participation in the harmonious perfection of the Universe. Secondly, the author seems convinced that God is the only one responsible for the malignant tendencies of his creatures, seeing that the capricious prohibition of maintaining a portion of knowledge intact has precisely originated their vulnerability. According to his reasoning, it is totally contradictory to first gift a person with intelligence and then proceed to forbid its use in certain moments. He seems to conclude that it is the Creator himself and not the Devil who has tempted the creature by prohibiting him a knowledge for which the Creator had prepared him. Consequently, the creative power of God seems irreconcilable with the level of perfection permitted to the creature, and therein lies the punishment, the primary root of evil. Thirdly, the punishment inflicted does not have a direct relation to the guilt, it depends rather on this urgent need felt by the Creator to make his work recognised.

The obvious conclusion to these premises is that the Creator will have to resort to a force opposite to himself to effect the punishment as he himself, infinite goodness, cannot be seen to do so. Thus emerges the essential figure of Lucifer who, as has been aforementioned, plays a vital role in the system of balance. In this sense, the Creator limits himself by permitting that another should interfere in the creative process. He himself confesses to us that «where evil begins I end» (9).

With his refusal to share power with the representative of evil, the Creator generates the first unbalance of forces within his own system and, indirectly, he creates the concept of evil, by refusing to make an integral part of himself a force which, paradoxically, proves to be absolutely necessary in the process of the distribution of influences. By personifying in Lucifer «the very incarnation of all I despise» (10), the Creator generates his own opposition and this force immediately acquires a negative character.

The second unbalance that breaks the equation of understanding between the concepts of Good and Evil, motivating the feeling of guilt, is the creature's disobedience of the rules of the game. If, as we have said before, these rules are *imposed arbitrarily* by the Maker, we must conclude that He alone is responsible for the existence of the concept of guilt.

It is interesting to note that this feeling of guilt first crystallizes in the consciousness of nudity and the existence of sex. Ironically, Eve becomes conscious of her nudity (and consequently of her corporal beauty) when she consummates her disobedience and Adam begins to feel sexual attraction for the woman only after tasting the forbidden fruit. In Miller's view, in this paradox lies the explanation of the internal association between sex and sin. In like manner, the author's conviction, now familiar to us, that evil forms an intimate part of human nature, is also explained. Humankind is the direct fruit of this sexual desire which in turn is the product of disobedience to the Creator and, therefore, perverse. To conclude, we are children of disobedience, which is why, *after the fall*, innocence was no longer the patrimony

of the creature once mature. As the adolescent gradually becomes aware of his own sexuality so he loses his innocence.

The second act begins by calling the spectator's attention to his very fact: Eve is pregnant but, at the same time, she is in continual communication with Lucifer. This woman who carries the first-born of the human race in her womb is particularly susceptible to what is evil; she finds Lucifer more coherent and even more intelligent than God himself. According to Miller, the fundamental question in this act revolves around the following problem: «Is there something in the way we are born which makes us want the world to be good?» (11).

The attraction which Eve feels for the Prince of Evil is perfectly explicable if we remember that one of the greatest efforts of the latter is to provoke in the human couple a certain tranquillity of conscience about the existence of evil. Lucifer claims that nothing in creation is execrable, there are only certain acts which are forbidden, therefore, if the creature reaches the internal conviction that the said prohibition is capricious and artificial, the complete liberation from the guilt complex will then be obtained. Everything is *naturally permissible* since *nothing is good or bad* but only *good or better*. This idea that everything is moral had already been introduced by some Transcendentalists into American thought but our playwright adds a «mytho-allegorical» explanation which endows it with a certain originality. According to his conclusion, the concept of good or bad only exists in the mind of the Creator and he is the direct cause of anxiety, frustration and guilt in the creature. And a new paradox emerges from such reasoning: the concepts of good and bad are not based on the differentiation between an act performed *pro* or *contra natura* but on the acceptance or refusal of some norms which, on the other hand, turn out to be totally artificial and arbitrary.

Why, then, does man tend to wish so fervently that the world in which he lives be good? Lucifer gives us the answer: simply because the Creator, by making man to his own image, has stamped the perfectionist instinct on his nature. He who succeeds in coming near to this ideal of perfection will experience a feeling of satisfaction in having fulfilled a duty, the rest will feel frustrated. Once more, the ultimate responsibility for the imperfection of the creature seems to fall upon the Creator.

In this struggle of influences, Lucifer proposes a deal which could be based on the re-distribution of power: «I (Lucifer) the God of what-they-are, and you (the Creator) in charge of their improvement» (12). In other words, Lucifer would end up as the genuine representation of the appetites, instincts, anxieties, frustrations and limitations of the creature, whilst God would reunite all the aspirations and triumphs of the latter over and above his desires and instincts. The impossibility of such a contact converts man into a victim of his own nature since his noxious part, possessed by the spirit of evil, will be condemned to struggle eternally against his noble part, possessed by the spirit of good. From this continual struggle between two adversaries there emerges the necessity of a judgement which will require a concept of justice. Those creatures whose noxious part triumphs over their noble part will have to be punished, the rest will receive an adequate prize for their ability to overcome.

In this act, the playwright seems to imply that the human creature is half the child of God and half the child of Lucifer, since if God did indeed create the first couple giving it the possibility of multiplying itself, the said couple did this only after having

been made aware by Lucifer. We are, therefore, the product of a double paternity and the consequent duality is to be perceived continually throughout our existence. On the one hand, we shall feel an irresistible attraction for perfection personified by God, yet, on the other hand, we shall be victims of all the weaknesses represented by Lucifer.

In the third act, witness the progressive development of the first human family. From the very beginning, we are made conscious of the differences which separate them: Adam is pacific, god-fearing, dutiful and sensitive; Eve is beautiful, vain, proud and vulnerable; Cain is strong, industrious and analytical; Abel is weak, trusting and naive. These differences will immediately give rise to the struggle which will be based on obtaining a fair distribution of the available elements; that is to say, that each one might receive in accordance to the work he does. Consequently, the fundamental problem in this act revolves around the following question: «When every man wants justice, why does he go on creating injustice?» (13). And once more Lucifer comes up with the reply: «nobody can be Number One and good at the same time» (14). In other words, nobody can be just kind and happy without arousing the wrath, hate and envy of those who are not. Therefore, he who is good will have to organize a defence system if he wants to be good and, simultaneously, successful; and he will have to be prepared on occasion to annihilate his adversary in order to survive himself. Otherwise, he will only become the martyr of his own goodness.

This is precisely Abel's case. He is killed by his brother for having become Number One and for wanting to continue to be good at the same time. Once more, the playwright's conclusion seems to point in the same direction: no member of the human family is directly responsible for the death of Abel. The only responsible figure is the Creator for having promoted a situation of preferences when accepting the gifts offered by both brothers. Logically, the homicide committed by Cain is easily explained within the framework of an unjust and unequal world, since, making use of the only possible schemes of his intelligence (the human ones), he attempts to seek justice from the discrimination exercised by the superior power.

Furthermore, the creator also generates the sense of guilt after the crime. Having summoned Cain to account for his action, he then condemns him to wander perpetually throughout the land with a sign upon his face to be easily recognised by others: a smile. Whenever Cain smiles before another human being he will be reminded of his crime and his own conscience will force him time and again to face up to his guilt.

The final conclusion is that man has been created out of dust and love: «for I made them not of dust alone, but dust and love» (15), and therefore that this man will be capable of performing the most evident and hateful acts as well as the most unselfish and praiseworthy.

Thus *The Creation of the World and Other Business* represents a tentative solution to the problem of the existence of evil and an explanation of the conflictive and contradictory nature of the creature, a nature with which we are condemned to live until our own destruction. It is likewise representative of a compromise, it searches for the middle road between truth and myth, for the reconciliation between reality and fantasy. In order to achieve such a reconciliation it is essential to accept evil as both inevitable and irrevocable and to somehow justify it even though this may lead to recourse to the hazardous terrain of myth.

Throughout the history of tragedy a multitude of solutions have been tried in order to fathom the mystery of the inability of man to know *the entire human truth*. Amongst these solutions, and probably those which are most familiar, are the following: tragic despair which ends in suicide, cynical indifference symptomatic of the Existential Absurd and the search for a compromise which inevitably concludes with a refuge in myth. In this latter reply, there is an attempt to find a position of understanding which reconciles the aspirations and limitations of human nature and this is precisely what Miller has done in his last drama.

Some critics have wrongly assessed this play as a *catastrophic comedy* and there could be nothing further from the truth. In fact, one might say that it is a *mytho-cosmological tragedy* in which the playwright explores the possible balance between the apparent absurdity of human reality and the guarantee of explanation offered by myth; he seeks the equilibrium between the cosmogonic dependence and the legitimate rebellion of the individual and, finally, he tries to find the correlation between the natural subordination of man to universal, superior entities and the feeling of self-sufficiency generated by his capacity of self-reproduction *ad infinitum*.

The play, far from being extravagant or absurd, seeks solutions in accordance with our human limitations; it admits that man has a specific mythical origin and he moves towards the eternal communion with those same forces that bestowed life upon him. There is nothing savouring of the absurd in a conception which confers on our existence a specific origin, an end and a clear purpose. We are the legitimate product of the struggle between two opposing cosmogonic forces (Good and Evil), our existence is regulated by physical laws imposed upon us by the aforementioned forces and we move towards death, the eternal communion with these forces. Thus, it may be seen that the play is of a «mytho-allegorical» type and tries to discover a justifiable solution to the eternal conflict between the aspirations and limitations imposed by our human nature.

After a close look at Miller's dramatic production, one may come to the conclusion that the essential concern of the playwright has been to fathom human reality as a whole ever more deeply, following the general scheme to which we have referred: the ethical, the ontological and the mythical. After a thorough investigation of the problem, the author arrives at an interesting conclusion: human nature is neither absurd nor unintelligible but simply imperfect. So that even the most demanding scholar might be satisfied, he offers us a mythical explanation of the origin and nature of that imperfection: *after the fall* (clear allusion to the loss of Paradise), our human nature was contaminated by the forces of evil and this contamination brought imperfection and evil in its wake.

The evolution of Miller's theatre might be represented by a circle. In his youth, he began his dramatic career with a series of highly significant questions to which he attempts to give logical replies in his maturity. Faced with the impossibility of finding these replies by the ordinary means within his reach, he analyses the ultimate root of the questions once again and links them with the ultimate essence of myth.

Therefore, Miller's theatre is structured like an organic entity, with a beginning, a clear end and an evolution in which all the parts integrate with each other harmoniously. This does not necessarily mean that the author has finished his commitment, he has merely begun the third period and we should not grow impatient because of this long absence of practically eight years outside of the world of theatre pre-

mières; the lapse between *A View from the Bridge* and *After the Fall* was even longer and there is no reason to doubt that Miller will make a come-back. Besides, even if the author of *Death of a Salesman* writes nothing new, his dramatic production will be sufficiently complete and polished to consider it satisfactory enough to justify a life-time of great dedication to the theatre.

NOTES

(1) Arthur Miller, «Introduction to the *Collected Plays*», *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller*, edited and with an Introduction by Robert A. Martin, Penguin Books, p. 114.

(2) M. Gussow, «Arthur Miller Returns to Genesis for the First Musical», *The New York Times*, April 17, 1974, p. 37.

(3) Clive Barnes, «Arthur Miller's Creation of World», *The New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1972, p. 28.

(4) Martin Gottfried, «Our Sometime Intellectual Superman», *Saturday Review*, September 29, 1979, p. 40.

(5) Arthur Miller, «Introduction to the *Collected Plays*», ed. cit., p. 158.

(6) Clive Barnes, «Arthur Miller's Creation of World», art. cit., p. 28.

(7) Sheila Huftel, *Arthur Miller: The Burning Glass*, The Citadel Press (New York, 1965), p. 113.

(8) Arthur Miller, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, The Viking Press (New York, 1973), p. 16.

(9) Ibidem, p. 41.

(10) Ibidem, p. 40.

(11) Clive Barnes, «Arthur Miller's Creation of World», art. cit., p. 28.

(12) Arthur Miller, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, ed. cit., p. 85.

(13) Clive Barnes, «Arthur Miller's Creation of World», art. cit., p. 28.

(14) Arthur Miller, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, ed. cit., p. 85.

(15) Ibidem, p. 103.

