

Introduction

The theatre is the most public of arts. It offers the opportunity of acting out anxieties and fears which are born in the conflict between private needs and public values. In America in the 1930s it staged the battle between capital and labour, reflected a desperate pacifism, and dramatised the diminishing space allowed the individual by the encroaching city and an increasing mechanisation. Frequently utopian or visionary in spirit, it tended to pitch love against the sheer density of social experience and the coercions of an economic system which seemed to find no place for the self. The mere placing of the individual on the stage was an assertion of priorities while the co-operative nature of theatre implied a possible social strategy. The post-war theatre, by contrast, seemed more intensely psychological, less convinced that experience could be subordinated to idea, altogether less assured. It seemed to reflect a sense of bafflement, the war having apparently drawn a line across a particular kind of historical development. And yet, of course, those who emerged as playwrights after 1945 had, in a sense, been shaped by the assumptions of the previous decade. It was there that they found their images no less than a language of liberal possibility often curiously at odds with the social reality which they chose to render as simple threat.

Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, who dominated the American theatre for nearly a decade and a half, both began their careers as political playwrights. Formed by the 1930s, they responded to the economic and social realities of the age. Though their first works appeared on Broadway in the 1940s, they had both been writing for more than a decade, and in the case of Tennessee Williams those early works were actually staged by a radical theatre company in St Louis. There seemed to be a simple coherence to the world which they dramatised then. It resolved itself into contending forces in which the necessities of justice seemed clear, and evil was an unexamined force expressing itself through a wayward capitalism or an inherent corruption. And in that they scarcely differed from those whose work dominated the public stage, people like Sidney Kingsley, Clifford Odets, Maxwell Anderson and William Saroyan. Though these all differed from one another in many ways, they seemed to share a radically simplified vision of human relations and social process.

The war changed this. For Arthur Miller, a Jew, the enormity of the events in Europe challenged equally his model of human nature and his sense of history as an account of progress. For Williams it intensified his feeling of

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society as threat; it deepened a sense of insecurity rooted in private experience but intensified by the new realities of a post-nuclear age. The pieties of pre-war America no longer seemed capable of sustaining the individual or the culture – though both writers were capable of invoking them, ironised by their own deepening sense of unease. The new materialism bred its own discontents and the word ‘alienation’ infiltrated the language of sociologist and literary critic alike. Affluence, proudly proclaimed as a value, seemed to locate the individual primarily as consumer. Babbitt was welcomed back into the clan after two decades of naive rebellion. After all, was this not the America which possessed most of the world’s consumer goods? It was a period of conspicuous consumption. It is, thus, not for nothing that Willy Loman makes his car and refrigerator criteria of value, and is dismissed from his job by a man distracted by his pride in possession of a new wire recorder (precursor of the tape recorder). For much the same reason Tennessee Williams, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, uses as a central plot and metaphor:

a monumental monstrosity peculiar to our times, a huge console combination of radio-phonograph (Hi-Fi with three speakers) TV set and liquor cabinet, bearing and containing many glasses and bottles, all in one piece, which is a composition of muted silver tones, and the opalescent tones of reflecting glass, a chromatic link, this thing, between the sepia (tawny gold) tones of the interior and the cool (white and blue) tones of the gallery and sky. This piece of furniture (?!), this monument, is a very complete and compact little shrine to virtually all the comforts and illusions behind which we hide from such things as the characters in the play are faced with.¹

In both cases the stance is more than a little informed with nostalgia for an older, gentler America, more lyrical, more in touch with the reality of human need. And if that time also had its betrayals then at least the individual had seemed more in tune with his environment. Now that environment was changing. The countryside was giving way to suburbia and suburbia to the city (though that is a world for the most part ignored by Tennessee Williams). Nor was the individual invited to assume a personal relationship to his society, to play an active role in the moral and political issues of the age. New Deal liberalism was deferring to a conservatism which, following the explosion of the Soviet bomb in 1949, sought to expose and punish those whose Americanness seemed suspect or whose loyalty might be in question. Indeed in many ways the principal victims were those who had been most closely associated with Roosevelt’s policies, and those in the arts and education unwilling to disavow values not immediately compatible with the orthodoxies of the moment. It is perhaps not altogether strange that total disaffection, a determined bohemianism, should have emerged as a principal literary stance in the decade. It was a tactic which seemed culturally subversive but which was safely apolitical.

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There is, of course, something entirely familiar in this role of alienated intellectual (Irving Howe discusses precisely this in his essay, 'The Age of Conformity'), while the romantic stance of the poet in a prosaic age is a comfortable one, springing from a natural sense of superiority. But in the 1940s and 1950s these positions were not without a certain subversive *frisson*. The moral and spiritual charge to be derived from a stance of alienation (in Miller's case still with vague Marxist overtones, in Williams's with equally vague Freudian ones) was not without its attraction. Unsurprisingly, neither Miller nor Williams had much time for the new model citizen: an organisation man (in the words of William Whyte); a member of the lonely crowd (according to David Reisman), who made a virtue of submerging his identity in the team: a consumer, a realist, a conformist, prepared to trade independence of mind and spirit for immunity from social pressure. It was, indeed, a period which distrusted the idealist (had he not turned traitor?), the artist (on the one hand a hopeless dreamer; on the other perversely critical of the society which protected him), and the non-conformist (by definition un-American). Writing in the 1950s, James Thurber became convinced that McCarthyism had turned the word 'security' into a term to be 'employed exclusively in a connotation of fear, uncertainty and suspicion'. He felt that the world was faced with 'the smokescreen phrases of the political terminologists' which left it threatened with a 'menacing Alice in Wonderland meaninglessness'.² And not the least of Miller's concerns was the necessity of rescuing language from its debasement: to make his characters responsible for the words they uttered no less than the deeds they committed. Not the least of Williams's obsessions was the need to restore a sense of poetry to lives rendered void by the banality of the world in which they were nurtured.

For a time it seemed that the only legitimate stance for an intellectual to take was one of resolute rejection of public values. But, denied a retreat to the radical ideology of the 1930s, they had relatively little purchase on those values. Miller did adopt a forthright stance, denouncing informers, refusing to be infected by hysteria, and forcibly expressing a distrust of materialism, but he was rather less sure of what could replace it, beyond a kind of instinctively felt existentialism allied to a sense of natural decency. At the heart of his work was an insistence that the individual had to acknowledge responsibility for his actions and that the past could make legitimate demands on the present. But that present seemed to leave remarkably little space for the social conscience to operate. For Williams the past was more problematic, involving, as it did, racial guilt and corruption. His response to the crude coercions of the social world was to see them as evidence of other determinisms and seek to transmute them into tragedy.

To Erich Fromm, writing in the 1950s, modern capitalist society was an assault equally on the integrity of the individual and the social contract which

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sustains that individual in his relations with others. It had eroded a sense of the self and hence the notion of society as a group of autonomous selves subscribing to shared values: 'That is the way he experiences himself, not as a man, with love, fear, convictions, doubts, but as that abstraction, alienated from his real nature, which fulfils a certain function in the social system. His sense of value depends upon his success: on whether he can sell himself favourably... If the individual fails in a profitable investment of himself, he feels that *he* is a failure; if he succeeds, *he* is a success.³ No wonder he regarded Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as an exemplary text. For Willy Loman's problem is precisely that he has internalised these values. Much the same is true of the figures in the early plays of Edward Albee – the third of the triumvirate who dominated the post-war American theatre. And Tennessee Williams's characters are so often destroyed because they offer love in a world characterised by impotence and sterility. And both Miller and Albee would also have agreed with Fromm's contention that 'man can fulfil himself only if he remains in touch with the fundamental facts of his existence, if he can experience the exaltation of love and solidarity, as well as the tragic facts of his aloneness and of the fragmentary character of his existence' – as they would with his conviction that drama is itself a primary attempt to 'get in touch with the essence of reality by artistic creation'.⁴

But if alienation erodes a sense of the real and breeds a mode of conformity as an apparent solution to the problems of isolation, it also creates a sense of guilt, nebulous, unrelated, as Fromm again has pointed out, to any sense of a religious sanction but prompted by a sense of inadequacy, an acknowledgement of that very failure of community and organic relationship which is itself the essence of alienation. And it would be hard to think of a writer who has made this theme more central to his work than Arthur Miller, though the notion of a private betrayal to be expiated by art is also clearly visible in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Albee, on the other hand, is less interested in guilt than responsibility (though Miller has claimed much the same about his own work). In the early part of his career he seemed concerned with identifying the means whereby the individual can terminate his self-imposed exclusion and resist the process which otherwise erodes will, identity and imagination, and thereby destroys the basis for moral action. But both Miller and Albee unite in their assumption that alienation is a product of decisions taken, action deferred, myths endorsed, a freedom denied, rather than a simple consequence of capitalism.

While Williams retained his central theme of the romantic in an unromantic world, a theme derived in part from D. H. Lawrence whom he greatly admired, he largely turned away from a direct concern with social structures, seeing them simply as images of the facticity which threatened the necessary fictions of his characters. Increasingly he described those

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desperate attempts to hold the world at bay with alcohol, illusion, and fragile sexuality which, as he indicates in his *Memoirs*, came to characterise his own life. Miller, on the other hand, after writing two plays which seemed to admit of no wholly satisfactory response to public and private betrayals – *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* – was stung into a defence of liberal values by the political persecutions of the 1950s. Both *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge* were responses to what Miller saw as the collapse of individual integrity and life under the assaults of the social system; they were assertions of the need to play socially responsible roles. Willy Loman never knew who he was or what the connection between himself and his society could be. John Proctor, in *The Crucible*, takes on total responsibility for himself and for his world. But more profound questions lie behind the immediate issues of political coercion and moral instability.

At the heart of Miller's work, partly concealed and only inadequately expressed in the early plays but fully articulated in the later ones, is a concern with guilt, a guilt directly related to his experience as a Jew who had survived the Holocaust, and as an individual who had discovered his own potential for betrayal. The apparent clarity of the clash between the free individual and a politically malevolent system had merely served to conceal the subtlety of a problem which had become increasingly central to his work, and which he perceived as having metaphysical rather than social origins. Now he tended to see the pieties of his 1930s plays as a form of sentimentality.

Tennessee Williams is hardly immune to charges of sentimentality. But in his best work the note of self-pity, which is never entirely absent, is contained by a rigorous honesty about the desperate self-deceptions practised by his characters and the fundamental evasions which may be implied by art. His broken figures appeal, partly because they are victims of history – the lies of the old South no longer being able to sustain the individual in a world whose pragmatics have no place for the fragile spirit – and partly because they hint at a spiritual yearning which Williams sees as being extinguished by the processes of life no less than by those of society. In other words, the social and the metaphysical meet in Williams's work as they do in Miller's.

His protagonists in the major plays are close kin to those other 1950s romantics, the Beats, restlessly moving on, afraid of stasis and extolling a love which is curiously androgynous. His plays are highly charged. They deal in violence, in sexual tensions, in violations of the body and spirit. His South is another country, elemental, crudely manichean, suggestive, in a sense, of a kind of Freudian war between body and mind. On occasion he was capable of a genuine poetry, and if he was equally capable of a reduction of experience to simplistic symbol he could also, in a play like *The Glass Menagerie*, demonstrate a fine control of language and image, a precisely sustained

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tension between the poetic sensibility and a prosaic setting which still makes that deceptively simple play one of the best works to have come out of the American theatre.

Though he, too, often failed to maintain the tension in his work, and was capable of permitting a destructive slide into sentimentality – the simplistic ironies of *The Rose Tattoo* doing nothing to prevent this – Williams at his best was from the beginning a genuinely original voice in a way that Miller, so heavily dominated by Ibsen, seemed at first not to be. Yet both remained desperately committed to the idea of an identifiable and functioning moral self, and as a consequence their doubts about individual and social coherences tended to be deflected into style. For Beckett the public and private are mutually interpenetrated with absurdity; for Miller and Williams the erosion of private space and the consequent social collapse are born out of a failure of courage and imagination on a private and public level. Needing to believe in the integrity of a resistant self they shift the threat of collapse onto the form of the play (*Death of a Salesman* and *Camino Real*) or onto a dramatic symbol which must stand for that collapse (the unicorn in *The Glass Menagerie*, the dried-up fountain in *Camino Real*, the concentration camp in *After the Fall*). But both men at times recognised the ambiguous nature of their own craft, late in their career acknowledging the potentially hermetic and deceptive nature of art – Miller with *The Archbishop's Ceiling* and Williams with *Out Cry*.

The American theatre is eclectic. It lacks stylistic consistency. And in a way its energy derives precisely from its refusal to accept conventional restraints. O'Neill writes, on occasion, interminable and, indeed, unstageable works in a wide variety of styles; Williams, in *Camino Real*, invades the audience and deliberately projects experience to extremes, exposing the generative power of sexuality and elaborating images to the point at which they assume a threatening literalness (as in *Suddenly Last Summer*). Miller opens up the mind, allowing a neurotically deluded self to recreate the past, to flow with a freedom which potentially denies stylistic unity as it does temporal logic. To Williams, indeed, there was a special virtue in the theatre's capacity to sustain conflicting pressures, to dissolve the literal in search of animating principles. And he saw the stylistic tension of many of his plays as expressive of the moral and even spiritual tension which is their subject. As he said in the note to *The Glass Menagerie*:

The straight realistic play with its genuine frigidaire and authentic ice cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art; that truth, life, or reality, is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest in essence only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which merely present appearances.

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'These remarks', he added,

are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.⁵

Clearly in making such a statement he was ignoring a number of developments in the American and European theatre over the previous thirty years. But his main point of reference was the Broadway play which clung to realism for reasons only partly to do with a consistent social and aesthetic position. Both Miller and Williams regarded themselves as experimenters. It is true that their fundamental impulse was mimetic; the 'continuous present' of *Death of a Salesman* being designed to present a mind in a state of collapse, and the expressionistic devices of *Camino Real* the distorting power of a prosaic world. But they were concerned to develop a theatrical style which reflected their desire to dissolve a confident realism and to trace the social and psychological origins of cultural anxiety. And his notion of a plastic theatre was not without its value, for the American theatre, at its best, has proved remarkably malleable. In particular, it has charged the apparently naturalistic setting with a metaphysical rather than simply a social significance. Writers like Wilder, O'Neill, Eliot, Miller and Albee have not merely stretched the surface fabric until opacity becomes translucence, revealing thereby a social and psychological mechanism; they have attempted to forge powerful dramatic metaphors out of a setting which stands both as a threat to fragile identity and the defining boundary of the world in which their characters must move. O'Neill's strictures against a naturalism which simply held the family Kodak up to ill nature reflected his desire to penetrate behind the private and public masks, but it was equally an assertion about the nature of reality and the role of art. The world which their characters inhabit is not simply given; it is also in large part invented by them, as memory redesigns their lives and the imagination resists the pressures of the real. From the very beginning, then, their work has in part been reflexive; it has been concerned with the tension between the apparently substantial nature of historical, economic and social realities, and the individual's necessity to transform those supposed realities.

At times O'Neill, Miller, Williams and even Albee all seem to have believed that this process of transformation was a literal one, involving political action, reform, the restoration of a natural and manifest justice. They have all written plays which either directly or indirectly insist on the need to change the world in such a way as to accommodate the needs of the individual or the mass. But by degrees they shifted their ground and saw this process as a continuing effort by the imagination to resist the apparently implacable. Thus their work becomes reflexive to the degree that their subject

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becomes the process of imaginative reshaping which is in essence the one in which they are themselves engaged. The inhabitants of Harry Hope's bar (in *The Iceman Cometh*), Blanche Dubois (in *A Streetcar Named Desire*), Willy Loman (in *Death of a Salesman*), George and Martha (in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*) are all engaged in recreating the world. They all confront, consciously or unconsciously, the paradox that while this process is possibly a necessary act of rebellion, a resistance which is perhaps not without its heroism, it is also potentially destructive. The cost of indulging the imagination may be the loss of a grasp on the moral world. The act of rebellion may also be an act of betrayal and desertion. The need to project a world in which the self plays a central role, and there is a natural consonance between that self and its setting, may ultimately be the source of irony. For Beckett it was wholly so. For the American playwright the issue was never that clear. Beckett simply accepted the paradox which made his own work further evidence of a reductive irony. The coherences of his own plays were inevitably self-mocking. For O'Neill, as for Miller and Williams, and, to some degree, Albee, the tension is sustained. For the most part the self-doubt of the writer is implicit, though real enough. But in the later works it tends to surface more directly. It is there to some degree in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*; it is there very clearly in Tennessee Williams's *Out Cry* and in Edward Albee's *Box*. And it is there in Miller's confessional *After the Fall* and *The Archbishop's Ceiling*. These are all writers who have chosen to foreground style because they are all writers whose plays concern characters who display the writer's defence against the world. Their work is in some fundamental sense about the ambiguous battle of the imagination to sustain the self. It was not for nothing that Williams's favourite Chekhov play was *The Seagull*. But it was Albee, whose first works were staged just at the moment when Miller's and Williams's careers seemed to be faltering, who made this concern with the nature of the real most central to his work.

Albee's real achievement has always lain in his control of, and sensitivity to, language, particularly at a time when Off-Broadway was in flight from the spoken word, seeing it as a tool of power and a rational restraint on the intuitive and the spontaneous. The moral fervour of the early plays and the simple distinction between illusion and the real gave way first to a complex, if not always dramatically satisfying, debate about the nature of reality, and subsequently to intelligent if at times arcane experiments with form and language. His plays no longer tend to be confidently located in time and space; the world he presents is theatrically, socially, and morally reified, as voices, detached from personal and public histories, test emotional propositions, conduct experiments in dissonance and harmony, and reveal something of the mechanisms of control which Albee seems to imply are the real source of the ethical questions with which he had begun his career. Despite his

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Broadway productions Albee has remained committed to experiment, to the values and objectives of the Off-Broadway theatre from which he sprang. The very nature of these experiments implies a refusal to accept the crown as successor to Miller and Williams so eagerly thrust upon him in the early 1960s, and now as precipitately withdrawn by those anxious for the emergence of a writer who can satisfactorily bridge the gulf between Broadway and Off-Broadway. But he remains one of the most intelligent and fascinating of America's playwrights.

When he first appeared, he was seen as and, indeed, was a liberal voice recalling the individual to his moral and even spiritual responsibility. Fundamentally that remains his stance but his confidence has slowly been eroded, his sense of human potential qualified by the evidence of further decline. The verbal oratorios of the early plays, the splendid articulateness, has given way to fragmented speeches, brief snatches of language located in lengthening silences, dialogue which is little more than a series of statements, the ironies and oblique references of which mirror his sense of a loss which he sees as the central fact of modern existence. His, like Beckett's, has become an entropic art, a reflection and ironic presentation of the world which he observes and which, in *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, he still believed could be saved with compassion, a liberal respect for reality, and a language which, if wilfully deceptive, could still offer hints for the restoration of harmony. That presumption has gradually been displaced by a more reified vision. And character too has collapsed. In *Tiny Alice* the characters have already become baroque creations, figures moved around with an eye to the arabesques of language and symbolic function rather than moral enquiry. Albee is here more interested in defining the contours of the real than with identifying the moral content of an assured if threatened social structure. But the allegorical dimension of that play did imply the persistence of a sense of structure, an underlying confidence in the pattern-forming power of art, though reality has already begun to dislocate, to shatter into a disturbing flux of shifting roles and competing fictions.

Even that surviving confidence has since been leached away. *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, *Listening* and *Counting the Ways* show evidence of his interest in words detached from their social function, in the movement of minds no longer confidently located in time and space. *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* mixes time-scales as it blends the apparently fictive with the ostensibly real until the two become simply alternative fictions – systems of words and images which offer an explanation for a sense of apocalypse. Indeed the reality which he had urged on his characters with such assurance in the early plays has now splintered until the Chinese box, the interleaving of different levels and kinds of experience, the simple fact of the simultaneity and experiential equivalence of events, becomes the only model

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which he can sustain. And so the dramatist becomes a sculptor of language, a collagist, a creator of images, a choreographer, a composer for whom character and words are found objects and the process of interaction as interesting and authentic as the ostensible but probably delusory object of that interaction. Mao exists on the same plane and at the same time as avowedly fictional characters. There is apparently no more than a simple correspondence between these experiences which are not linked by causal process but merely coexist. Albee's use of Mao is in fact a gesture of refusal. And by that I don't mean a rejection of Mao's message but a refusal to be coerced by public fictions. Albee struggles to fictionalise the public world as it attempts to fictionalise him, reducing him to number, function and role. Much the same, of course, could be said of *Slaughterhouse 5*, *V*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Painted Bird* which equally imply an exact equivalence between various fictions, including the fiction which is the novel, and the society in which it exists.

But who, after all, is a greater manipulator of others, a greater plotter, than the novelist or the dramatist? Implicit in Albee's later work, as in the work of Coover, Pynchon and others, is a suspicion of art. In a sense, of course, that is a central quality of literature, certainly of American literature. What, after all, are *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Moby Dick*, *The Confidence Man*, *Tender is the Night*, *The Day of the Locust*, if not confessions of the cruelly deceptive coherences implied in the act of writing? It is a dilemma which can perhaps only be adequately expressed by silence (sometimes even suicide), by the deployment of a self-destructing language whose assurances will crumble even as the book or play proceeds, or, as with Albee in *Quotations*, by the surrender of some small element of his control as author – letting the arbitrary seep into his work through spaces deliberately left open.

So, if all of Albee's characters are struggling to retain possession of a world, to imprint their own meaning on it, they are in a sense mimicking the activity of the artist as he mimics that of life. The precision with which they and he use words – they frequently correct one another's usage, try for precisely the right nuance – parody of the writer's conviction that language is indeed a net which can successfully trap experience and hence reality (though at times, it remains 'an unconscious attempt to make people aware that they must listen more carefully').

In *Counting the Ways* and *Listening*, rather as in Pinter's and Beckett's most recent work, the word 'reality' has lost all meaning. We are left with a present which is no more than the recalling of a past which may never have happened. Even the substance of the physical surroundings has shrunk to a space which offers no clue as to meaning or time. There is a chilling moral detachment in *Listening* and, to a lesser extent, in *Counting the Ways* which