MORALITY AND MODERN DRAMA

ARTHUR MILLER, as interviewed by PHILLIP GELB

PHILLIP GELB: Mr. Miller, what about the apparent lack of positive moral values in modern drama?

ARTHUR MILLER: Not only modern drama, but literature in general, and this goes back a long, long distance in history, posits the idea of value, of right and wrong, good and bad, high and low, not so much by setting forth these values as such, but by showing, so to speak, the wages of sin. In other words, when, for instance, in Death of a Salesman, we are shown a man who dies for the want of some positive, viable human value, the play implies, and it could not have been written without the author’s consciousness, that the audience did believe something different. In other words, by showing what happens when there are no values, I, at least, assume that the audience will be compelled and propelled toward a more intense quest for values that are missing. I am assuming always that we have a kind of civilized sharing of what we would like to see occur within us and in the world; and I think that the drama, at least mine, is not so much an attack but an exposition, so to speak, of the want of value, and you can only do this if the audience itself is constantly trying to supply what is missing. I don’t say that’s a new thing. The Greeks did the same thing. They may have had a chorus which overtly stated that this is what happens when Zeus’ laws are abrogated or broken, but that isn’t what made their plays great.

PHILLIP GELB: Reverend John Bachman at the Union Theological Seminary said something similar. He said that the Death of a Salesman is moral to the extent that it is a negative witness. Now at the same time he felt that your play could not do any kind of a job in terms of presenting positive answers; this, of course, in his view, was the job of religion. Do you feel that that dichotomy actually—

ARTHUR MILLER: It isn’t always so. Ibsen used to present answers. Despite the fashion that claims he never presented answers, he of course did. In the Doll’s House and even in Hedda Gabler,

Last year radio station KUOM of the University of Minnesota was awarded a grant from the Educational Television and Radio Center to produce 13 half-hour taped programs entitled “Ideas and The Theatre.” The series was distributed by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. The programs were made up of excerpts from interviews recorded by Phillip Gelb, a member of the Speech Department at Hunter College, with leading authorities and personalities in the theatre. The interview with Arthur Miller seemed too full of interesting ideas to be used only in parts and parcels, and so it is printed here in its entirety. Mr. Miller, on reading the transcript, decided that, although he would wish to rephrase some of the things that he had said, on the whole it would be best to let it go as it was, for “the reader would undoubtedly know it was extemporaneous.” His decision was a happy one, for the unrehearsed talk reproduced here gives unusual immediacy to the wide ranging mind of one of America’s foremost playwrights.
we will find—and in Chekhov, too—we will find speeches toward the ends of these plays which suggest, if they don’t overtly state, what the alternative values are to those which misled the heroes or heroines of the action shown. The difference is that we are now a half century beyond that probably more hopeful time, and we’ve been through social revolution which these people hadn’t witnessed yet. We have come to a kind of belated recognition that the great faith in social change as an amelioration or a transforming force of the human soul leaves something to be wanted. In other words, we originally, in the late nineteenth century, posed the idea that science would, so to speak, cure the soul of man by the eradication of poverty. We have eradicated poverty in large parts—well, in small parts of the world, but in significant parts of the world—and we’re just as mean and ornery as we ever were. So that the social solution of the evil in man has failed—it seems so, anyway—and we are now left with a kind of bashful unwillingness to state that we still believe in life and that we still believe there is a conceivable standard of values. My feeling is, though, that we are in a transition stage between a mechanistic concept of man and an amalgam of both the rationalistic and what you could call the mystical or spiritualistic concept of him. I don’t think either that man is without will or that society is impotent to change his deepest, most private self conceptions. I think that the work of art, the great work of art, is going to be that work which finds space for the two forces to operate. So far, I will admit, the bulk of literature, not only on the stage but elsewhere, is an exposition of man’s failure: his failure to assert his sense of civilized and moral life.

PHILLIP GELB: A situation came up just the other day—I teach speech at Hunter College—in which somebody made a speech proclaiming the values of deceit: manipulative techniques, sophistry, and the rest. Most everybody went along with it to the extent that they felt that the use of techniques was automatically deceitful. Techniques were equated with trickery and the negative. I pointed out that integrity and honor, responsibility, rationality, logic—a lot of these things can be used as techniques, too.

ARTHUR MILLER: That reminds me of a book by Thomas Mann about Moses, in which, with his tongue in his cheek probably, but certainly with high seriousness, he portrays Moses as being a man bedeviled by the barbaric backwardness of a stubborn people and trying to improve them and raise up their sights. He disappears into the wilderness, up on the mountain, and comes down after a considerable period of time with the Ten Commandments. Now the Ten Commandments, from the point of view that you’ve just been speaking about, is a technique. It is purely and simply a way of putting into capsule form what probably the most sensitive parts of the society were wishing could be stated so that people could memorize it and people could live by it. I am sure that there must have been a number of people that said it was a kind of deceit or dishonesty to try to pinpoint things that way, things that were otherwise amorphous and without form and which probably some old Jews felt were even irreligious to carve into stone—but it is a technique. The whole Bible is a technique; it has got a form. If you read the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke you will see the tremendous effort being made to dramatize, to make vivid, an experience which probably
none of them really saw—except possibly one. It was a job almost of spiritual propaganda. Why would they have to write this down? Why would they strive for the mot juste, for the perfect paragraph, for the most vivid image, which quite evidently they do? Technique is like anything else; it is deceitful only when it is used for deceitful purposes.

Phillip Gelb: Mr. John Beaufort, the critic for the Christian Science Monitor, attacked Willie Loman as a sad character, a vicious character, who couldn’t figure in dramatic tragedy because he never starts with any ideals to begin with.

Arthur Miller: The trouble with Willie Loman is that he has tremendously powerful ideals. We are not accustomed to speaking of ideals in his terms, but if Willie Loman, for instance, had not had a very profound sense that his life as lived had left him hollow, he would have died contentedly polishing his car on some Sunday afternoon at a ripe old age. The fact is that he has values. The fact that they cannot be realized is what is driving him mad, just as, unfortunately, it is driving a lot of other people mad. The truly valueless man, the man without ideals, is always perfectly at home anywhere because there cannot be conflict between nothing and something. Whatever negatives qualities there are in the society or in the environment don’t bother him because they are not in conflict with any positive sense that he may have. I think Willie Loman is seeking for a kind of ecstasy in life which the machine civilization deprives people of. He is looking for his selfhood, for his immortal soul, so to speak, and people who don’t know the intensity of that quest think he is odd, but a lot of salesmen, in a line of work where ingenuity and individualism are acquired by the nature of the work, have a very intimate understanding of his problem; more so, I think, than literary critics who probably need strive less, after a certain point. A salesman is a kind of creative person. It is possibly idiotic to say so in a literary program, but they are; they have to get up in the morning and conceive a plan of attack and use all kinds of ingenuity all day long just like a writer does.

Phillip Gelb: I think this idea of “a plan of attack” comes back to what we were talking about before, about techniques that become deceitful. The whole concept of present advertising is involved. By techniques the public is sold things they don’t really need. Your plan of attack therefore becomes vicious; only the technique makes them buy.

Arthur Miller: Well, that’s true. I see the point now. But compared to, let’s say, the normal viciousness, if you want to use that term, of standard advertising techniques, Willie is a baby. I mean, Willie is naive enough to believe in the goodness of his mission. There are highly paid advertising people who are utterly cynical about this business, and probably a lot of people call Willie vicious who would think of themselves as simply the pillars of society. Willie is a victim; he didn’t originate this thing. He believes that selling is the greatest thing anybody can do.

Phillip Gelb: This would seem to imply that Willie Loman, at least in terms of his problems and his anxieties, could be a lot of people. Now, Beaufort makes the statement, “If Willie Loman represented the whole mass of American civilization today, I think the country would be in a terrible state. I just can’t accept Willie Loman as the average American citizen.”
Arthur Miller: It is obvious that Willie can’t be an average American man, at least from one point of view; he kills himself. That’s a rare thing in society, although it is more common than one could wish, and it’s beside the point. As a matter of fact, that standard of “averageness” is not valid. It neither tells whether the character is a truthful character as a character, or a valid one. I can’t help adding that that is the standard of socialist realism—which of course wasn’t invented by socialists. It is the idea that a character in a play or in a book cannot be taken seriously unless he reflects some statistical average, plus his ability to announce the official aims of the society; and it is ridiculous. Hamlet isn’t a typical Elizabethan, either. Horatio probably is. What is the difference? It has no point unless you are talking about, not literature, but patriotism. I didn’t write Death of a Salesman to announce some new American man, or an old American man. Willie Loman is, I think, a person who embodies in himself some of the most terrible conflicts running through the streets of America today. A Gallup poll might indicate that they are not the majority conflicts; I think they are. But what’s the difference?

Phillip Gelbf: Maybe I should have read this statement first. This was made by the critic for Progressive magazine, Martin Dworkin, and he considers that Death of a Salesman makes a strong message for an average American man because “Willie Loman is such a particular Willie Loman. He is not simply a slogan out of the 1950’s; he is not a banner to be waved to liberate people; he is not a criticism of society.” And then Dworkin points out that because Willie is so particular, therefore he does these other universal things. What about the theory of art and drama here that the best way to present a universal is in terms of a really specific story?

Arthur Miller: It is the best. It is the hardest way, too, and it isn’t given to many authors or to any single author many times to be able to do it. Namely, to create the universal from the particular. You have to know the particular in your bones to do that. As the few plays that are repeatedly done over generations and centuries show, they are generally, in our western culture anyway, those plays which are full of the most particular information about people. We don’t do many Greek plays anymore, in my opinion not because they lack wonderful stories—they have wonderful stories—but in our terms, in terms of particularization of characters, they are deficient. It doesn’t mean the Greeks were bad playwrights. It means their aims were different. But we do do Hamlet, we do do Macbeth, we do a number of more mediocre plays as well; but the ones that last are the ones that we recognize most immediately in terms of the details of real human behavior in specific situations.

Phillip Gelbf: How do you apply that to T. S. Eliot and George Bernard Shaw? Do you feel that their people are very real or specific?

Arthur Miller: I don’t think T. S. Eliot would even claim that he is creating characters, in the realistic sense of the word. It is a different aim. It doesn’t mean that he can’t do it; I don’t think he can, but I don’t think he is trying to do it. I think he is trying to dramatize quite simply a moral, a religious dilemma. The same is true of Bernard Shaw excepting for occasional characters, usually women, in his plays. They are more psychologically real than anything, of course. T. S. Eliot has done to my knowledge, excepting perhaps
for Murder in the Cathedral. But the aim in these plays is not the aim of Salesman or most American work. It is the setting forth of an irony, a dilemma, more or less in its own terms. I think all the characters in Shaw can be reduced to two or three, really, and nobody would mind particularly. You always know that it's Shaw speaking no matter what side of the argument is being set forth, and that is part of the charm. I think his great success is due to the fact that he made no pretense to do otherwise; he was observing the issues in the dilemma of life rather than the psychology of human beings.

PHILLIP GELB: I'd like to take issue with that and simply say that Shaw might be writing real people but they speak more eloquently, more intellectually than real people. Essentially, I am not sure that in Pygmalion the father isn't real. I don't think anybody would talk like that, but I think his motives are real. I think Higgins is a real person. I think Shaw simply is not happy with the inability of people to express themselves and so he says I will do it for them; but I never really felt that Shaw's people were not people.

ARTHUR MILLER: I would put it this way. Shaw is impatient with the insignificance of most human speech, most human thought, and most human preconceptions. It's not that his characters are not people, it is that they aren't insignificant people the way people usually are. When you strip from the human being everything that is not of significance, you may get a valid moment out of him, a valid set of speeches, a valid set of attitudes, but in the normal, naturalistic concept, they aren't real because the bulk of reality is, of course, its utter boredom, and its insignificance, and its irrelevancy, and Shaw is absolutely uninterested in that. Consequently, if you just take the significant part of the character, it will be true but if this is lifted out of the rest of the character's psychology, you can no longer speak in terms of normal psychological writing. I happen to like this sort of thing; I am not criticizing it. I think it is a great thing to be able to do. But it isn't the tapestry work, let us say, of a Hamlet where you are carried through moment to moment, from one thought to the next, including the boredom, including the irrelevancy, including the contradictions within him which are not thematic. That is to say, they have very little to do with his conflict with the king or his mother, but they have much to do with creating a background for the major preconceptions of the play. Shaw is always eliminating the insignificant background, and it's possibly because he had so much to say and there was so little time to say it. But you mentioned one of the minor characters in Pygmalion, like the father. I think, in general, aside from the women, it is the minor characters who are most realistically drawn. The major characters are too completely obsessed with the issues that are being set forth. One of the signs of an abrogation of regular psychology is that people stay on the theme. You know and I know, even in this little interview, that is is very difficult, if not impossible, to spontaneously stay on the subject. You read Shaw's plays and see how rarely people get off the subject; and that's what I mean when I say that it isn't psychology he is following, it is the theme.

PHILLIP GELB: Let's assume that Shaw is concerned with the intellectual or social significances and chooses his material accordingly. The statement has been made by anthropologist Solon Kimball that Tennessee Williams chooses materials by their psychological signif-
icances. Dr. Kimball says that while Williams' picture of a Southern community in part may be true, that this psychological orientation gives a distorted picture of the whole. Evidently even some truth to the community and to the psychology of characters is not enough. Do you feel that is true of Williams, or what do you think of the general idea?

**Arthur Miller:** Williams is a realistic writer; realistic in the sense that I was just referring to—that is to say, realistic in the way that Shaw is not. I think Williams is primarily interested in passion, in ecstasy, in creating a synthesis of his conflicting feelings. It is perfectly all right, of course, for an anthropologist to make an observation that Williams' picture of the South is unrepresentative. It probably is, but at the same time, the intensity with which he feels whatever he does feel is so deep, is so great, that we do end up with a glimpse of another kind of reality; that is, the reality in the spirit rather than in the society. I think, as I said before, that the truly great work is that work which will show at one and the same time the power and force of the human will working with and against the force of society upon it. Probably Williams is less capable of delivering the second than he might be. Everybody has some blind spot. But, again, as with Willie Loman, I'm not ready to criticize a writer because he isn't delivering a typical picture. The most typical pictures of society I know are probably in the Saturday Evening Post or on the soap operas. It is more likely to be typical of people to be humdrum and indifferent and without superb conflicts. When a writer sets out to create high climaxes, he automatically is going to depart from the typical, the ordinary, and the representative. The pity is, of course, that Williams works out of Southern material, I work out of big city material, so instantly our characters are compared in a journalistic sense to some statistical norm. Truly, I have no interest in the selling profession, and I am reasonably sure that Williams' interest in the sociology of the South is only from the point of view of a man who doesn't like to see brutality, unfairness, a kind of victory of the Philistine, etc. He is looking at it emotionally, and essentially I am, too. Inevitably, people are going to say that Willie Loman is not a typical salesman, or that Blanche Dubois is not a typical something else, but to tell you the truth, the writer himself couldn't be less interested.

**Phillip Geer:** You point out Shaw as dealing with the intellectual, the social, the moral; Eliot with the moral, the religious; Williams with the psychological. Eric Bentley made the statement that he thought, perhaps, Arthur Miller was the one writer today who had the most possibility of combining all of these things, and yet he also thought that this was impossible. Can it be done?

**Arthur Miller:** Well, whether it can be done remains for me or somebody else to prove. But let me put it this way: we are living, or I'm living anyway, with a great consciousness of the incredible force of objective thought. As we speak, there is an object flying around in the sky, passing over this point, I think it is every hundred and some minutes, which was put up there by thinking men who willed it to go up there. The implications of this are as enormous as any statement by or on the part of Zeus, or Moses, or Shakespeare, or any feeling man. Now it may be a great bite to take, but I think the only thing worth doing—whether one can do it or not is an entirely different story,
but aims are important—the only thing worth doing today in the theatre, from my point of view, is to synthesize the subjective drives of the human being with what is now demonstrably the case, namely, that by an act of will man can and has changed the world. Now it is said that nothing is new under the sun: this is. It is right under the sun and it is new. And it is only one of the things that are new. I have seen communities transformed by the act of a committee. I have seen the interior lives of people transformed by the decision of a company, or of a man, or of a school. In other words, it is old fashioned, so to speak, and it is not most simply to go on asserting the helplessness of the individual. The great weight of evidence is upon the helplessness of man. This is true, I think, with variations: the great bulk of the weight of evidence is that we are not in command. And we’re not, I’m not saying we are. But we surely have much more command than anybody, including Macbeth’s Witches, could ever dream of, and somehow a form has to be devised which will account for this. Otherwise the drama is doomed to repeating and repeating ad nauseum the same pattern of striving, disillusion, and defeat. And I don’t think it is a modern day phenomenon.

Phillip Gelb: Gore Vidal made a statement similar to yours with almost an exact opposite conclusion. His point was that he felt the only influence he could be was in terms of man’s ability to destroy and despair, and so he wrote a play in which he is going to destroy the world. He said this facetiously, but since he didn’t present any positive point of view, this led to the general topic of “the artist as the enemy”—perhaps the thing behind it is that many artists like to see the world destroyed.

This isn’t just a reporting; this is their own feeling.

Arthur Miller: The enemy is the wrong word to me, although I would concede it. The artist is the outcast; he always will be. He is an outcast in the sense that he is to one side of the stream of life and absorbs it and is, in some part of himself, reserved from its implications; that is to say, a man like Vidal says we’re out to destroy everything. I think that you can’t see a thing when you are in the middle of it. To some extent, an artist has to step to one side of what is happening, divorce himself from his role as a citizen, and in that sense he becomes the enemy because he does not carry forth in himself and believe what is being believed around him. He is the enemy usually, I suppose, of the way things are, whatever way they are.

Phillip Gelb: Does that mean, though, that he is always an inadequate reporter, too, because he is not a part? Is the artist perhaps in the least likely position to tell what might be true to most people?

Arthur Miller: The trouble with literature is that writer’s have to be the ones who write it. It’s always partial; it’s always partisan, and it’s always incomplete. When I say that writer’s have to be the ones to write it, I mean that in order to generate the energy to create a big novel, a big play, an involved poem, one has to be a specie of fanatic. You have to think that that is really the only thing worth doing. Otherwise, you can’t generate the intensity to do it well. And to that degree, by generating that intensity, you are blinding yourself to what does not fit into some preconceived pattern in your own mind. There’s no doubt about that to me, and I think that probably lay behind Plato’s
prohibition of the artist in society. He was right in the sense that the artist doesn’t know what he is doing, to some extent. That is, we pretend, or like to believe, that we are depicting the whole truth of some situation, when as a matter of fact, the whole truth is, by definition, made impossible by the fact that we are obsessed people. I don’t know of a first class piece of work written by what I would call, or a psychologist would call, a balanced, adjusted fellow who could easily be, let us say, a good administrator for a complicated social mechanism of some sort. It doesn’t work that way. We are not constituted that way; so consequently, to be sure, it will have to be partial. The impulse to do it is obsessive; it always is. One of the fairest, most just writers was Tolstoi, who was, to make it short, quite mad. I mean, you can’t pretend that as a person he was judicious, balanced: he wasn’t. Neither was Dostoevski. Neither, certainly, was Ibser. Probably the most generously balanced man I know of was Chekhov. And I suspect that half of his psychological life we will never know. He was very reticent, and in those days there were no interviews of this sort, and if he didn’t choose to write some essays describing his methods and personal life, you’d just know nothing about him.

Phillip Gelb: I can get obsessive once or twice a year and maybe write a one-act play or something. The students have asked me this, “How do you take this obsessiveness and channel it into a discipline whereby you sit down and write regularly? Or is this always an individual problem?

Arthur Miller: I don’t know how to write regularly. I wish I did. It’s not possible to me. I suppose if one were totally dependent upon one’s writing for a living and one’s writing was of a kind that could be sold, like Dostoevski’s was—he seems about the only big writer I know that wrote regularly, but he wrote regularly because he had to pay his gambling debts half the time and the sheriff was on his tail. I don’t know what would have happened if he had been given a stipend of $10,000 a year. Well, he probably would have gambled it away and been in debt again, I guess. So he would have written regularly.

Phillip Gelb: Now you’re very well established. You don’t have to look for a theatre, I imagine, just to see a play done. But do you feel that you might write more, or at least more regularly, if you were part of a group? I am thinking of the tradition of the writer as part of a theatre group—as it was with Shakespeare, the Greeks, Molière, even Shaw usually worked for some kind of company.

Arthur Miller: I think that in the early life of a writer, in his beginning work, and this would go for Shaw, O’Neill, and anybody you wanted to mention—a connection with a group of actors could be very valuable. But I think you will find that as he grows older a playwright dreads the prospect of his play being produced. I mean that seriously. There are so many stupid things that happen which destroy the most valuable, the most sensitive parts of a manuscript that, truthfully, if I seriously contemplated the production of a play as I was writing it, I don’t know that I could write it. It is too dreadful a risk, and I don’t care how well established you are; it is always the same risk. Your work can go down the drain because you have happened to hire an actor who simply does not have the sensitivity for that role and you didn’t know it until the night before
you opened. Think of that when you put in two, three, four years on a play, and you pick up a team of actors, so to speak, and put one guy in to pitch and another in to catch, and the catcher can't catch and the pitcher can't pitch, and there's your manuscript. And there's no critic alive who can tell the difference between a bad production and a bad script unless they are extremely bad in either direction. But where there is some reasonable excellence, nobody knows the difference. I have had plays that have failed in New York—View from the Bridge was one of them. I am sure that anybody who saw View from the Bridge in New York would not have recognized it in London. I had a great deal to do with the production there; it was a different mood, a different key, a different production, and I am sure anybody would have said it was a different play.

Phillip Gelb: In your case, your plays are going to be done for years and years, and you just can't be around, you don't know what kind of actors are going to do them. Any good playwright is at the mercy of a hundred and one different kinds of people, and personalities, and places. Why does one write for the theatre then?

Arthur Miller: It is one of the minor curses of mankind, I suppose. I have a feeling that it is a way of seeing existence in terms of audible scenes. I was always a playwright. I was a playwright before I'd ever been in the theatre. I wrote my first play, which was produced in various places and was a play, after having seen only two.

Phillip Gelb: From viewing current plays, one might conclude that maybe what makes most people write is antagonism, negative qualities: despair, getting even, spite.

Arthur Miller: For myself, I can't write anything if I am sufficiently unhappy. A lot of writers write best when they are most miserable. I suppose my sense of form comes from a positive need to organize life and not from a desire to demonstrate the inevitability of defeat and death. If I feel miserable enough, I can't work. A lot of writers, I am aware, then are spurred on to express their disillusion. All I know about that really comes down to this—that we are doomed to live, and I suppose one had better make the best of it. I imagine that Vidal shares that fate with me and will continue to. He is probably taking some perverse pleasure in posing the destruction of the world, but I suspect he wouldn't enjoy it as much as he says he would.

Phillip Gelb: You feel your need is to organize life and not to present the case for death and despair?

Arthur Miller: It is a basic commitment for me, sitting here now in America. For another writer who is, let's say, a French writer, an Italian writer, and who has been through a sufficiently profound social cataclysm, such as two world wars and a depression in-between in Europe, where he was faced with the ultimate disaster, it might seem foolish. My experience, though, is as valid as theirs. In other words, I can't pretend things are worse than they are, any more than they can pretend things are better. It is a commitment on my part that I don't see the point in proving again that we must be defeated. I didn't intend that—since you have mentioned Salesman so much in this interview—I didn't intend it in Salesman. I was trying in Salesman, in this respect, to set forth what happens when a man does not have a grip on the forces of life and has no sense of values which will lead him to that kind of a grip; but the im-
plication was that there must be such a grasp of those forces, or else we're doomed. I was not, in other words, Willie Loman, I was the writer, and Willie Loman is there because I could see beyond him.

Phillip Gelb: Mr. Miller, in an interview I had with George Freedley of the New York Drama Critics Circle, Mr. Freedley stated that he thought some Broadway producers and investors shied away from your plays because they were too liberal, that perhaps some of your plays had difficulty in getting productions. Now has anything like that ever occurred?

Arthur Miller: Soon after Salesman I tried to do a new version of An Enemy of the People, which is a play by Ibsen, and which I had felt was never properly put on, and it was very difficult to raise the money. The reason was quite openly stated, at that time—this was back in 1951—that it was too evidently a counterstatement to McCarthy and at that time he was looking like he might be president of the United States and people were wary about supporting such a play. There's no question about that. It exists today, I have never had a play that was not produced for that reason, but I know that the pressure exists. I don't want to appear as somebody who is carrying the firebrand, but there's no question about it, the climate of opinion over the past ten years has been opposed to what we call an openly liberal approach. I suppose a demonstration could be made, however, that the bulk of the plays, rather than being reactionary, are liberal. There's a contradiction there, but it simply means that it is a small minority who do lead an attack on liberal things. The bulk of the people in the theatre, and in my opinion, the bulk of the audience, are liberals. I think it is sad from many points of view to have to say that, because it means the enemy is almost non-existent, but that is the case, I think. I would be happier if there were more reactionary playwrights who were willing to put in the theatre what they really feel about mankind and about the state of the world.

Phillip Gelb: It was Eric Bentley's statement that what he thought was lacking in Arthur Miller's plays was a character who could present the McCarthy point of view. Do you feel that it is the job of the playwright himself to introduce such a reasonable case?

Arthur Miller: I never attempted to do that because there was never any point in it, excepting in one play, and that is in The Crucible and through the judge who condemned the victims of the witch hunt. The trouble with doing that, though, was as follows: In all truth, the real backward, knuckleheaded reactionary is ridiculous. Now you can say this is merely Miller's viewpoint, but if I showed you the record of the Salem witch hunt and reproduced verbatim from the court record taken in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts, what the judge said and what he did, you would simply not believe it. You would burst into laughter. I was charged, if not openly then by implication, with not giving the judge his due. The truth of the matter is that I was at my wit's end to give him some respectable viewpoint which one could listen to without simply throwing it out the window. I made a statement in the introduction to my play that we no longer believe in the positiveness of evil, that is to say that people will, with malice aforesaid, go about creating bad situations for other people. It's a failure, perhaps, in our point of view, but it's true what Bentley says in that respect. That is to say, I wish there were a way of showing
the conqueror, who is usually the bad
one, in his own justifications. Think of
writing a play about Hitler.

PHILIP GELB: I am sure the inquisi-
tor in Shaw’s Saint Joan is much more
understanding and human than the
real human.

ARTHUR MILLER: We don’t dare set
forth evil in its full bloom in a person;
we don’t quite believe it. I go back
again to The Crucible. Believe me, I
think now my mistake in The Crucible
was that I didn’t make the judge evil
enough. I think I should have gone the
whole hog. I should have shown him
conspiring with the witnesses to take evi-
dence, which he did, still being a
deeply religious man, a man who could
quote any part of the Bible at will, who
prayed at every opportunity, and met, as
is known, with the girls who were hys-
terical and fed them cues as to what
they should testify to an hour hence. He
did that; there were others who did that.
It was cooked up from their point of
view. The hysteria, however, was not
cooked up from the point of view of
the average person in Salem. He be-
lieved it. And the judge was a great
actor; he could get himself into a froth
and a frenzy knowing, at the same time,
that he had manufactured the whole
thing. And one of the judges ended a
drunk and probably insane as a result
of the conflicts aroused in his mind by
the behaviour of this other judge and by
his own behaviour. I am trying to deal
with that now, to tell you the truth. I
am trying to deal with it because I
can’t see the problem of will evolving
fruitfully unless the existence of evil is
taken into account.

PHILIP GELB: So far you’ve been talk-
ing about this immensity of evil, its
potential, within an individual. But
something even worse and more im-
mense occurs when this evil becomes
social, when everybody says, “Well, I
was obeying orders,” or “I did what
others did.” Is this a problem that we
should do nothing about; but simply
mention that it exists, in terms of the
theatre? Well, I suppose what I am
really asking is, can this kind of evil be
understood dramatically in any way,
the Nazi evil, for example?

ARTHUR MILLER: It can be understood
in one way. I’m not saying that this is
the way to understand it, of course. A
point arrives in the evolution of a
society when a goodly number of peo-
ple take a position knowingly in op-
position to what we would call civilized
values. I think it has been an old story
with us. After all, Lincoln Steffens’ au-
tobiography is filled with the observa-
tion that the evil-doers in his day, the early
20th century, the political bosses in the
big city, with absolute consciousness and
awareness of what they were doing, faked elections, bought votes, engaged in
evety conceivable kind of corruption.
And Steffens was probably one of the
few reporters who ever confronted them
with the facts of their deeds because he
was philosophically interested in it.
Their answer was that they were no
more dishonest than the reformers who
refused to understand what they were
doing. The reformers had a stake in the
graft and refused to see it; refused to
see that, in many cases, reformers were
professionals, or businessmen, or what-
ever, and their very professions and
businesses were in some way dependent
upon the favors that could be gotten
from money.

PHILIP GELB: Think of Major Bar-
bara.

ARTHUR MILLER: Yes, it’s Shaw’s irony
again, and so the admission of evil oc-
curs. We blanked it out in this last
generation, I think, as a result of the
90's. The depression taught us that we were all equally victims. Suddenly we were all the victims of something unseen and unknowable, and none of us was any worse than the other guy. We were all primarily in a situation; we were no longer individuals. And then along came psychology to tell us that we were again the victim of drives that we weren't even conscious of, so that the idea of a man being willfully good or willfully bad evaporated. We are nothing but what we were born and what we were taught to be up to the age of six, and we are essentially irresponsible. I think that's the situation we're in now.

PHILLIP GELB: What about Germany?

ARTHUR MILLER: Well, the Germans have been notoriously irresponsible since they formed the first states in Germany because of the fact that they never had a social revolution. The people of Germany never rose up, as the people of America did, and asserted a form of Government; the form of government was always given them from above. They were essentially in the position of a servant; they were essentially in the position of a son, you might say, and consequently, the father idea, the idea of a strong leader, from Bismark through Hitler, was a given quality. It was always there, and consequently they are irresponsible from that point of view. They tell the truth when they say they only did what they were told. They've always been doing what they were told. Every nation that does not establish its own government, by its own efforts, like France, like England, like America, creates that kind of irresponsibility below because the individual has had no say in the way things are.

PHILLIP GELB: What are the possible alternatives? Is there a necessity of maintaining very consciously the importance of democratic institutions? I am thinking, for example, of people who object to Gov. Faubus of Arkansas. Their reaction is, "Shut him up." It strikes me, "Let him hang himself," would be better. The one who is shut up, if I'm not mistaken, in the South today is the integrationist.

ARTHUR MILLER: We have Faubus because the Civil War wasn't completed. Lincoln was shot about two years too early. The victory was given away in many respects, the victory of education that should have followed, and which undoubtedly would have followed, had Lincoln lived. In a sense, in a wider sense, it is good that Faubus exists because a lot of people will have to examine their own attitudes toward Negroes. People who disapprove of them in the north, for example, and are at heart, or in part of their hearts, not ready to give the Negro his rights, either. But of course, the field of action must be maintained: that is to say, the democratic situation, where this battle can be fought out through the educational process.

PHILLIP GELB: I think that last statement's very important because I think you are implying here that the only alternative to the use of the democratic processes is violence. Now maybe that's too extreme a conclusion; but, in addition to Little Rock forcing people to clarify in their own hearts how they feel about Negroes, maybe it might force some people to clarify how they feel about democratic institutions, and maybe it's the system that's continually being tested.

ARTHUR MILLER: I suppose what the lesson is, if there is one, of the current struggle in the South is that an edict
was given which reaffirmed the rights of all men to be equal and that for a very long time, not only in the South but in the North, all men have not been equal. What this has done creates no new situation, it simply is a firecracker under an old, old situation. I think it is being well worked out. I think that the suffering involved there is less than would be the case if this were being treated in a dictatorial way. It isn’t being treated in a dictatorial way. The use of troops down there was the enforcement of a law, democratically arrived at, and democratically asserted in a normal democratic way. The reaction to it, in my opinion, is the dictatorial reaction. That is, there’s no question any more that the threat of violence came not from the United States government but from probably a small minority of people who are fanatically interested in the subject. I’m not in Arkansas, but from up here it would seem that the solution to a deficiency in democracy is—I think Lord Bryce said it—is more democracy. I think that struggle, the struggle to raise up men, is part of the given situation of man. It will never end.

Literature and the Theatre

Writing for the stage is an art by itself, and he who does not understand it thoroughly had better leave it alone. Everyone thinks that an interesting fact will appear interesting in the theatre—nothing of the kind! Things may be very pretty to read, and very pretty to think about, but as soon as they are put upon the stage the effect is quite different, and what has charmed us in the closet will probably fall flat on the boards. . . . Writing for the stage is a trade that one must understand, and requires a talent that one must possess. Both are uncommon, and where they are not combined, we shall scarcely have any good results.—Goethe, Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann.

Note for a Congressional Committee

And then, what is meant by love of one’s country? What is meant by patriotic deeds? If the poet has employed a life in battling with pernicious prejudices, in setting aside narrow views, in enlightening the minds, purifying the tastes, ennobling the feelings and thoughts of his countrymen, what better could he have done? How could he have acted more patriotically?—Goethe, Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann.