

DELUSION AND DISILLUSION .

The irony is that Willy believed that he failed Biff by disillusioning him with the dream of success, when in fact he failed him by successfully inculcating that dream so that even now, years later, each spring he feels a sense of inadequacy for failing to make a material success of his life. Miller has said of Willy Loman that “he cannot bear reality, and since he can’t do much to change it, he keeps changing his ideas of it.”⁶ He is “a bleeding mass of contradictions.” (184) And that fact does, indeed, provide something of the rhythm of his speeches, as though he were conducting an argument with himself about the nature of the world he inhabits. At one moment Biff is a lazy bum, at the next his redemption is that he is never lazy. A car and a refrigerator are by turns reliable and junk. He is, in his own eyes, a successful salesman and a failure. It depends what story he is telling himself at the time, what psychic need such remarks are designed to serve. Hope and disappointment coexist, and the wild oscillation between the two brings him close to breakdown. In a similar way he adjusts his memories, or “daydreams,” as Miller has called them, to serve present needs. These are not flashbacks, accurate accounts of past time, but constructions. Thus, when he recalls his sons’ school days he does so in order to insist on his and their success. His brother, Ben, by the same token, is less a substantial fact than an embodiment of that ruthless drive and achievement which Willy lacks in his own life and half believes he should want. In one sense the strain under which he finds himself erodes the boundary between the real and the imagined so that he can no longer be sure which is which. His thoughts are as much present facts as are those people he encounters but whose lives remain a mystery to him. Like many other Miller characters, he has built his life on denial. Unable or unwilling to acknowledge the

failure of his hopes, or responsibility for his actions, he embraces fantasies, elaborates excuses, develops strategies to neutralize his disappointment. Willy Loman is not, however, a pure victim. As Miller has said, “Something in him knows that if he stands still he will be overwhelmed. These lies and evasions of his are his little swords with which he wards off the devils around him. . . . There is a nobility, in fact, in Willy’s struggle. Maybe it comes from his refusal ever to relent, to give up. . . .” (Beijing, 27) And yet, of course, that energy is devoted to sustaining an illusion which is literally lethal. His nobility lies less in his struggle to uphold a dream which severs him from those who care for him than in his determination to leave his mark on the world, his desire to invest his name with substance, to make some meaning out of a life which seems to offer so little in return for his faith. Beyond that, as Miller has explained, “People who are able to accept their frustrated lives do not change conditions.” Willy is not passive: “his activist nature is what leads mankind to progress . . . you must look behind his ludicrousness to what he is actually confronting, and that is as serious a business as anyone can imagine.” (Beijing, 27) This claim is a large one.