

WILLY LOMAN.

Willy, to Miller, is not a pathological case, and anyone who plays him as such makes a serious mistake. He is battling for his life, fighting to sustain a sense of himself that makes it worthwhile living at all in a world which seemingly offers ever less space for the individual. The irony which he fails to acknowledge is that he believes that meaning lies less in himself and his relationship to those around him than in the false promises of a society no longer structured around genuine human needs. His vulnerability comes from the fact that he is a true believer. Like any believer he has doubts but these seldom extend out into the world. America, after all, offers itself as utopia. He looks, therefore, within himself. And he is plainly flawed, but that flaw is more subtle than he supposes. He is haunted by an act of adultery which he believes deflected his son Biff from the success which would, retrospectively, have justified his father's faith in the American way. But he is unaware of the more substantial flaw implicit in his failure to recognize the love of those around him—namely, that offered by Linda, Charley, and, most crucially, Biff himself. His problem is that he has so completely internalized the values of his society that he judges himself by standards rooted in social myths rather than human necessities. That flaw is a clue to the sense of the tragic that Miller and others have seen in the play. But Miller has also said that he wanted to lay before America the corpse of a true believer. To that degree it is a social play. Tragedy/social play. For the critic Eric Bentley the two were incompatible. Either Willy Loman was a flawed individual, he argued, or he inhabited a flawed society.⁷ It is a curious opposition. In fact, both are true as, of course, they are in the Oedipus plays or Hamlet. The argument over the tragic status of *Death of a Salesman* is, finally, beside the point, but Miller's remark that "tragedy .

. . . is the consequence of man's total compulsion to evaluate himself'⁸ does convey his conviction that tragedy concerns not only the self under ultimate pressure but the necessity for the protagonist if not to justify his own existence then to accept his responsibility for his actions. This Willy cannot do. Denial becomes his mode of being. Whereas a tragic hero comes to self-knowledge, in *Death of a Salesman* Willy does not, and Miller came to feel that this might, indeed, have been a weakness: "I feel that Willy Loman lacks sufficient insight into this situation, which would have made him a greater, more significant figure. . . . A point has to arrive where man sees what has happened to him." (Conversations, 26) It is, finally, Willy's son Biff who reaches this understanding, though his own choice of a rural life perhaps smacks a little Huck Finn lighting out for the Territory, ahead of the rest. He is moving against history, that history encapsulated in a stage set which fades from rural past into urban present. Indeed in *The Misfits*, written only a few years after *Salesman*, we see what happens when the modern world catches up with such dreams, as wild horses are rounded up to be turned into dog food. It was also, of course, in such a world, as Willy remembers it, that he was abandoned by his father and brother and glimpsed for the first time the life of a salesman