

DEATH OF A SALESMAN

The Depression of the 1930s seemed to break the promises America had made to its citizens. The stock market crash of 1929, it was assumed, ended a particular version of history: optimistic, confident. The American dream faded. And yet, not so. Myths as potent as that, illusions with such a purchase on the national psyche, are not so easily denied. In an immigrant society, which has, by definition, chosen to reject the past, faith in the future is not a matter of choice. When today fails to offer the justification for hope, tomorrow becomes the only grail worth pursuing. Arthur Miller knew this. When Charley, Willy Loman's next-door neighbor, says that "a salesman is got to dream," he sums up not only Willy's life but a central tenet of his culture. *Death of a Salesman* is not set during the Depression but it bears its mark, as does Willy Loman, a sixty-three-year-old salesman, who stands baffled by his failure. Certainly in memory he returns to that period, as if personal and national fate were somehow intertwined, while in spirit, according to Miller, he also reaches back to the more expansive and confident, if empty, 1920s, when, according to a president of the United States, the business of America was business.¹ And since he inhabits "the greatest country in the world," a world of Manifest Destiny, where can the fault lie but in himself? If personal meaning, in this cheer leader society, lies in success, then failure must threaten identity itself. No wonder Willy shouts out his name. He is listening for an echo. No wonder he searches desperately back through his life for evidence of the moment he took a wrong path; no wonder he looks to the next generation to give him back that life by achieving what had slipped so unaccountably through his own fingers. *Death of a Salesman* had its origins in a short story Miller wrote at the age of seventeen (approximately the age of the young Biff Loman), when he

worked, briefly, for his father's company. It told of an aging salesman who sells nothing, is abused by the buyers, and borrows his subway fare from the young narrator. In a note scrawled on the manuscript Miller records that the real salesman had thrown himself under a subway train. Years later, at the time of the play's Broadway opening, Miller's mother found the story abandoned in a drawer. But, as Miller has noted, *Death of a Salesman* also traced its roots closer to home. Willy Loman was kin to Miller's salesman uncle, Manny Newman, a man who was "a competitor, at all times, in all things, and at every moment. My brother and I," Miller explains in his autobiography, "he saw running neck and neck with his two sons in some race that never stopped in his mind."