Like a Polished Arrow: Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, and the Jewish Prophetic Instinct

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He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
In the shadow of His hand He hid me;
He made me a polished arrow,
In His quiver he hid me away.

- Isaiah 49:2

When the curtain came down on the Broadway premiere of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* on 10 February, 1949, the audience was so stunned that, for several minutes, no one applauded.\(^1\) Miller’s hallmark play had penetrated both the consciousness of the audience and the “fourth wall” of the Morosco Theatre’s proscenium stage and plunged its audience into a new understanding of the terrors of the age. Arthur Miller had, through a modern work of prophetic power and impact, begun the modern confrontation between the Jewish prophetic instinct and the Cold War capitalism of 1950s America. The Jewish prophetic instinct into which Miller had tapped connected him to a line of inspired Jewish prophets – Biblical and post-Biblical – who cried out against injustice, tyranny and corruption, and who were persecuted for their self-expression. Miller, later called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to identify colleagues with Communist Party affiliations, aroused suspicion not only because he touched a nerve in

\(^1\) *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 10 February, 1999. Interviewed for a story on a production of *Death of a Salesman* opening on the 50th anniversary of the play’s original opening, playwright Arthur Miller remembered that when the curtain came down on that first opening night, no one applauded for several long moments. At first he “didn’t know what to make of it . . . then someone thought to applaud, then more applause. Soon everyone was banging away, and it never ended.” [http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1045365](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1045365) (accessed 26 January, 2009).
the American psyche, but because he had, specifically in the writing of *Death of a Salesman*, produced a work that in its inspiration, writing, message and impact, was self-alienating, disruptive and dissenting; in short, it bore the hallmark of prophecy. ‘Prophecy’ is defined here, after Heschel\(^2\) and Blenkinsopp\(^3\), as an urgent expression of mystical insight that connects the moral and ethical contents of revelation to contemporary political or societal crises. The prophetic instinct – long supposed absent from Judaism, and American Judaism in particular – finds its modern expression in works of art and inspiration, which Biblical prophecy also employed. Miller, although detached from ritual and tradition, remained, throughout his life and in his work, firmly tethered to Jewish history and memory. *Death of a Salesman* showed, with particular force, that while the book of prophecy had long since been sealed, the still, small prophetic voice had not been silenced.

*Death of a Salesman* was not just a Broadway smash. It was and is, in many well-documented respects, a Jewish play\(^4\), and it conveyed, at its inception, particularly urgent messages about the spiritual and psychological state of Americans in general and American Jews in particular. Willy Loman, after all, was not merely a marginalized traveling salesman – he was, it would appear, a Jewish American man\(^5\). Willy himself was possessed of what the psychologist William James called the “nervous instability” and “abnormal psychical visitations”\(^6\) which characterize the prophetic persona, and he served as Miller’s mouthpiece – as a kind of ecstatic doppelganger through which Miller channeled the “challenge, protest, and moral seriousness”\(^7\) of his prophetic instinct. Struggling to free himself from an incipient enslavement and alienation, the kinds of afflictions about which the prophets are often sent to warn, Willy Loman is a paradigm

for the expression of prophetic sensibility from which normative Judaism, and certainly Judaism in the West, had long since distanced itself, but from which it has never been entirely free. One of the classic characters of modern American drama, Willy is, to use the definition of the comparative religionist R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, utterly modern: “Modernity is modern because it has cut itself loose from whatever religious antecedents it may have.”

However removed from his own religious antecedents, Miller was wound into confrontation with the massive machineries of surveillance and conformity that dominated the United States in the 1950s. His prophetic instincts were grounded not in Jewish law and observance, from which he had drifted in accordance with Werblowsky’s criterion, but in two other critical respects: in tapping into the source Jewish collective memory, which persists long after the well of observance has run dry; and in achieving the kind of “intellectual overflow” with which Maimonides identified prophecy. For Arthur Miller, the theater was the venue in which to utter the prophetic cry on behalf of the marginalized – and to play the prophet’s role as the conscience of an ailing society.

Our consideration of the notion that the prophetic instinct may live beneath the surface of modern Jewish consciousness must be guided by sources that emphasize either the historical context or psychological markers of prophecy. The prophetic sensibility made known to us in the Old Testament was described most succinctly in modern terms by James. A particularly critical feature of collective Jewish prophecy – that being Jewish memory – and the role it plays in the strong undercurrent of Miller’s play (and particularly the character of its protagonist) must also be taken into account. Third, our way must be lit by a definition of the prophetic process, to determine whether and to what extent Miller’s conception and writing of the play follows a prophetic route. James Crenshaw has perhaps best articulated the phases of prophetic inspiration and expression.

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Six components seem to characterize the activity of prophets from the reception of a message to its proclamation: (1) the putative revelatory moment during which an enigmatic vision or word captures the imagination; (2) a period of reflection about the meaning of this captivating message; (3) the articulation of the message in terms of a religious tradition deemed authoritative; (4) the refining of that word or vision by means of a poetic language and/or rhetorical style; (5) the addition of supportive arguments, either threatening or comforting; and (6) the actual proclamation complete with gestures and tone of voice, and occasionally accompanied by prophetic and symbolic actions.\(^\text{10}\)

Finally, a contemporary rabbinic perspective on prophecy, as continuing to exist outside the bounds of halakhah (Jewish law), will be considered, so that a modern, normative Jewish appreciation of the phenomenology of prophecy can be applied to modern, apparently secular expressions of the prophetic instinct.

Applying these stages of activity to the conception and writing of the play itself, we see not only that Miller’s experience of the play – of the image of a central character who emerged from memory into imagination, into fruition in a dramatic setting – was in many respects a prophetic experience; we also come to understand that the notion of prophecy has become so sacrosanct, and so buried in the vaults of religious history, that its voice, though seldom recognized as such, or heard, is still present. Taking these influences together – the Jewish prophetic instinct and its particular characteristics, the role played by Jewish memory in the conception and articulation of prophecy, and these two funneled into the prophetic pattern evident in the conception, writing and production of Death of a Salesman – we see that Miller was a man of prophetic temperament, if not calling, and that Death of a Salesman was, in many respects, a prophetic play.

It is necessary, before proceeding further, to try to understand prophecy in both its historical and religious contexts. The Hebrew word for prophet, נביא, is derived from a Hebrew verb that bears a connection with the Akkadian nabû, “to call.”\(^\text{11}\) Heschel notes

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\(^\text{11}\) Heschel, The Prophets, 518.
that the verb “seems to denote a person who is the passive object of an action from without.”\textsuperscript{12} The Hebrew root letters indicating prophetic activity suggest that such activity is self-effacing, even self-negating; the apparent paradox is no paradox at all, but rather indicative of the prophet’s function as a channel or medium for energy and meaning whose impetus and origin is divine. Hebrew prophets were seers, in the broader sense (Samuel is the archetype of this class of prophets), but they were also declarers and announcers of social condition, diagnosticians and critics of the body politic. While the purpose of prophecy, according to Jewish sages, was the purposeful revelation of God’s will to humanity,\textsuperscript{13} the prophet’s functions “were not restricted to foreseeing the future; it was believed he could also shape it.”\textsuperscript{14} As prophecy evolved into an official function, it took on the task of calling out ethical and religious hypocrisy and corruption, as this was understood to have been God’s will, based on the foundational commandments and repeated admonitions contained in the Torah. The evolution of a prophetic literature was at least in part a response to Israel’s entry into regional political engagement, and with it the emergence of the belief that “God’s government and interests were not merely national, but universal, that righteousness was not merely tribal or personal or racial, but international and world-wide.”\textsuperscript{15}

Prophecy, then, in its mature phase in the history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, both received and transmitted: it received and collected the “poetical and historical collections already made under prophetic inspiration,”\textsuperscript{16} and it transmitted the revelations and visions, the criticisms and admonitions which were established aspects of the prophetic mandate. It also functioned as the conscience of formalized religion. As Werblowsky notes, “Criticism of religion is integrated into religion as part of the ongoing process of critical (‘prophetic’) purification of religion.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Aryeh Kaplan, Innerspace: Introduction to Kabbalah, Meditation and Prophecy (Brooklyn: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1990), 293n.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Werblowsky, Beyond Tradition and Modernity, 103.
The completion and sealing of prophetic books is referred to in some Biblical texts as dating to around 200 B.C.E., but there is “an unspoken assumption . . . that the age of authentic new prophecies had ended sometime at the very beginning of the second Temple period in the sixth century B.C. Then and there prophecy ceased to be an active social, public institution . . . For the same reason, normative Judaism refused to add any recent books, no matter how valuable, to the canon of sacred Scripture: ancientness was the prime principle of canonization.” Nonetheless, prophecy as a phenomenon, a condition, a fact of Jewish life, persisted. Maimonides went into considerable detail describing the qualities and steps necessary for the attainment of prophecy, and seems to have considered himself to have attained it; and in some denominations even today, contemporary sages are considered to have attained ruach haKodesh (divine inspiration), a lesser form of prophecy. Heschel’s description of the prophet as an inspired and deeply perceptive outcast is consistent with descriptions of the prophetic temperament and with James’ diagnosis of the religious genius. Heschel calls these – and Miller, the author and social conscience – distinctly to mind:

The mind of the prophet, like the mind of the psychotic, seems to live in a realm different from the world which most of us inhabit. Yet what distinguishes the two psychologically is most essential. The prophet claims to sense, to hear, and to see in a way totally removed from a normal perception, to pass from the actual world into a mysterious realm, and still be able to return properly oriented to reality and to apply the content of his perception to it. While his mode of perception may differ sharply from the perceptions of all other human beings, the ideas he brings back to reality become a source of illumination of supreme significance to all other human beings.

Prophecy and memory can be considered as neighboring links in the chain of Jewish continuity, or better, as symbiotic processes in the ongoing renewal of Jewish identity and awareness. The historian Y. H. Yerushalmi describes Jewish memory as a

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“dual movement of reception and transmission, propelling itself toward the future . . . The Jews,” he notes, “were not mnemonic virtuosos. They were, however, willing receivers and superb transmitters.” In other words, through the reception and transmission of text and tradition, the Jewish prophetic sensibility developed the ability to see each ‘present’ as merely the re-articulation of a documented ‘past,’ and therefore the promise of a future foretold. All events, recent and distant, were seen, until the advent of the Jewish Enlightenment and the first stirrings of modern Jewish historiography, as merely the circling beam of a redemptive Messianic beacon. Jewish memory was defined by and confined within this circular sweep. Quite literally, there was nothing new under the Sun. Only the prophet, however, could identify what was coming round again; only he could detect – in events, dreams, visions, in still small voices – the revealed will of God.

All this is brought to bear at key moments in Jewish history, including that critical moment in America in which the ‘old Jew’ – the new immigrant, the itinerant peddler, the believer in redemption, the rememberer and the prophet – was being sacrificed on the altar of the ‘new conformity’. The traveling salesman’s approaching extinction marked a pivotal moment for Miller’s generation and for Americans in general. It foretold of another in a series of enslavements of the individual to larger forces. It evoked the exiles and dashed Messianic hopes of Jews throughout the ages. And it intensified the tension between individual liberties and national security that has been reincarnated since, most recently on September 11, 2001.

The perceived soullessness of Cold War capitalism was to Miller permission for the commission of grave injustices against the individual; the way capitalism’s machinery was perceived to enslave and devour its workers resonated deeply not only with Miller but with other young American Jews who still upheld the ethical imperatives of Judaism, even while having turned away from its laws and rituals.

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Miller, then, in the manner of the prophetic tradition of the Jewish faith, found his prophetic voice on one of history’s seams. He both received and transmitted: he perceived injustice and inequity in the way Cold War capitalism dehumanized the human, and he was among that “significant minority of Jewish youth who looked to leftist politics for solutions.” He fled the ghetto mentality and environs of his parents, eager to forsake Jewish identity in an effort to gain admission to an America increasingly averse to immigration generally, and Jews particularly, but he still bore the inner stamp of the Jewish prophetic tradition:

The prophetic charismatic figure is legitimated not by virtue of a socially acknowledged office but solely through extraordinary personal qualities. He is not designated by a predecessor, installed or ordained in office, but called. The claims staked by him, or others on his behalf, would tend to set him in opposition to dominant elites dedicated to maintaining the status quo. Prophecy would therefore play a destabilizing rather than a corroborative role in society.

This serves as an accurate description of the “destabilizing” influence of Miller’s moral and ethical orientation, and provides context for *Death of a Salesman* and many of his other dramatic works. The genesis of *Salesman* is consistent with Heschel’s characterization of the prophetic mind, above, and with Blenkinsopp’s characterization of the way the prophet’s claims set him in opposition to dominant elites. In an interview about the play, Miller articulated how *Death of a Salesman* arrived on Broadway on the seam between two eras:

You see, that play was written in 1948, when we were starting the biggest boom in the history of the United States. However, a good part of the population, including me and President Truman, were prepared for another depression. We had only escaped the first depression by the advent of war. It was, I think, a year and a half into the war before we absorbed all the unemployed; therefore, what were all these young guys going to do when they came home? There had to be another crisis. We turned out to be completely cockeyed. The fact of the matter is that the Marshall Plan

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supplied the cash to Europe to consume everything we could manufacture. The boom began that way. We were the only real money in the world . . . Salesman appeared in ’49 in a country already starting to prosper, and to take a completely unforeseen path. The psychology of the audience was still that of depression people. . . The play ran a long time in New York, more than two years. Suddenly it was already 1951; and a whole new rage was blowing in the wind. You wouldn’t be writing such straightforward critical work about America after 1950.27

William James articulated the distinction between “internal” and “external,” or “personal” and “institutional” religion,28 and it is this distinction, borne out in American Jewish society in modernity, which found particularly acute expression in Miller’s work. James identifies the prophetic instinct in “individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather.”29 Can Miller be considered as an individual beset, unbeknownst to himself, by this kind of fever? A brief examination of his biography ties James’s “acute fever” to the man who conceived of Death of a Salesman in a moment of inspiration, and who brought it from inspiration to realization.

New York’s constellation of Jewish communities was undergoing explosive growth and rapid change in the first half of the twentieth century, and the boys who came of age after World War I and during the Great Depression were eagerly assimilating into American culture. In order to do so, however, they had to find a balance between competing forces.

Arthur Miller was born in Harlem on 17 October, 1915. His father owned and ran a coat factory on Seventh Avenue that folded after the crash of 1929 – an event that destroyed his father both financially and emotionally and served, in some respects, as a model for Willy Loman’s undoing.30 The family then moved to Brooklyn, where Miller was a profoundly mediocre high school student who worked menial jobs to help support

28 James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 29.
29 Ibid.
the family. One of those jobs was at an automobile parts warehouse in Manhattan that initially refused to hire him because he was Jewish – a common occurrence, considering the fact that roughly one third of New York’s daily newspaper want ads of the era explicitly sought Christian applicants only.\textsuperscript{31} Miller applied to the University of Michigan (and was only accepted after being rejected twice, then pleading his case personally with the dean\textsuperscript{32}) because he wanted to be a writer, and because the university’s Avery Hopwood Award made it possible to earn a cash prize for writing. Unlike Ivy League schools, Michigan had no quotas limiting Jewish enrollment, and its undergraduate enrollment helped build a “strong, ambitious, egalitarian and hardworking” environment in which Miller thrived.\textsuperscript{33}

Miller, then, came of age in an environment of Jewish assimilation, activism and agnosticism, and against a backdrop of economic upheaval. His young adulthood was a time of “political awakening, a time spent debating and protesting governmental and economic systems,”\textsuperscript{34} even as, in a nation in economic turmoil, Jews were suspected in some quarters of wielding financial influence disproportionate to their numbers.\textsuperscript{35}

As Jonathan Freedman notes, “assimilating Jewish men had to differentiate themselves from traditional [Jewish] models of masculinity even as they were distancing themselves from anti-Semitic ones.”\textsuperscript{36} Freedman further identifies the starkly contrasting archetypes confronting the young American Jewish man, whose parents cherished traditions, morals and ideals suddenly rendered ridiculous by the Depression’s onslaught. To first-generation American Jews like Miller, the popular archetype of the “high-culture intellectual” (represented in the play by the bookish Bernard, the Lomans’ neighbor who tries to help Willy’s son Biff pass his math exams) eroded before the “assertive,

\textsuperscript{31} Shapiro, \textit{A Time for Healing}, 6.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}, 3.
\textsuperscript{34} Wenger, \textit{New York Jews and the Great Depression}, 3.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid}, 20.
embodied Jewish masculinity” of sports figures (for which Willy groomed Biff), gangsters and “proletarianized workers” pouring off the pages of penny newspapers and out of the nickelodeons.\textsuperscript{37}

In Brooklyn, the Millers lived in the roiling midst of this transformation. Among the characters that populated this scene were Miller’s cousins, the Newmans, who lived across the street. Manny and Annie Newman, Miller’s aunt and uncle, had two boys, Buddy and Abby, who were frequent companions – and competitors – of Arthur Miller and his older brother Kermit. Arthur Miller would not forget them. “In spring 1948 this modest little family, hardly apt figures for high drama, would move to the center of Miller’s imagination.”\textsuperscript{38} Manny Newman, a salesman with a New England territory and vicarious ambitions for his sons, became the center of an idea that came to Miller about “a salesman and it’s his last day on earth.”\textsuperscript{39} As the character became more vivid in his mind, Miller retreated to his cottage in Roxbury, Connecticut. On the way, he bought tools and lumber, then worked for six weeks building a shed in which the play would be written. Miller (like his character, Willy Loman) enjoyed working with his hands; the erection of the writing shed served as a kind of “artistic calisthenic”\textsuperscript{40} – or pre-prophetic ritual. Miller finished and furnished the shed and sat down at his typewriter. It was January of 1948. Some months later, in August 1948, he gathered a few friends together with his wife Mary, and read the completed draft of \textit{Death of a Salesman} aloud. To his consternation – and in a foreshadowing of the play’s opening-night impact – the reading was followed with a stunned silence.\textsuperscript{41}

Here, the first stages of Crenshaw’s depiction of the prophetic process unfurl. The “enigmatic vision” that begins the prophet’s utterance comes to Miller in the form of his uncle Manny; it spools out into a period of reflection during which Miller literally erects the structure inside which he will write the play, as its internal structure takes shape within him. The articulation, refinement, production design and rehearsal, and the

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\item[37] Freedman, “Miller, Monroe and the Remaking of Jewish Masculinity,” 138, 139.
\item[38] Martin Gottfried: \textit{Arthur Miller: His Life and Work} (New York: Da Capo Press, 2003), 117.
\item[39] \textit{Ibid}.
\item[40] \textit{Ibid}, 120.
\item[41] \textit{Ibid}, 122.
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thunderous impact of the opening night would complete this modern iteration of the realization and articulation of prophetic vision.

Miller’s prophecy trumpeted the ethical and moral concerns of the age. Injustices at home resonated with more immediacy for him than the destruction of European Jewry that had only recently concluded, although he would eventually write four plays that treated the Holocaust and its aftermath as a central theme. His overriding concern, however, revolved around the larger questions of guilt and complicity\(^\text{42}\) that would surface in the early 1950s, when he, his leading man Lee J. Cobb, and numerous other artist colleagues were pressured to testify before HUAC. What occupied Miller as a young author and a prototype of the new American Jew was the common prophetic theme of freeing the weak and disenfranchised from the yoke of oppression – an oppression born of a political and economic system which, in Miller’s view, had a propensity for consuming the very individuals who sustained it.

“Death of a Salesman questioned the ethos of the business civilization,” Miller remembered,

which the play intimates has no real respect for individual human beings, whereas the going mythology was quite the opposite: in that nobody of any competence ever fails and that everything was pretty sound and terrific for everybody. So to put a play on where somebody who believes in the system, as Willy Loman does to his dying minutes, ends up a suicide, it was rather a shock.\(^\text{43}\)

The suppression of dissent that mushroomed in the U.S. in the early 1950s, threatening to flatten all particularity, had its harshest effects on those who spoke out; both Miller and Cobb were compelled to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and this had a resounding effect on their careers, lives and legacies.


In his testimony before HUAC, Miller carefully articulated views that defended freedom of speech while seeming to take an apologist stance for radical leanings and refusing to name names.\textsuperscript{44} Cobb resisted talking to the committee for more than two years, but relentless pressure caused him to become something of a pariah, and he eventually relented, giving his testimony in an executive statement and naming more than 20 members of the American Communist party. Shortly thereafter, Cobb suffered a massive coronary, followed by the institutionalization of his wife due to alcoholism, permanent impairment of his own health, a scarred reputation and a stunted acting career.\textsuperscript{45} To Miller, “Cobb, my first Willy Loman, [w]as more a pathetic victim than a villain . . . simply one more dust speck swept up in the thirties idealization of the Soviets, which the Depression's disillusionment had brought on all over the West.”\textsuperscript{46}

Willy, another such speck, transforms before our eyes into someone who is thoroughly consistent with James’ description of the religious genius.

Invariably they have been creatures of exalted emotional sensibility. Often they have led a discordant inner life, and had melancholy during a part of their career. They have known no measure, been liable to obsessions and fixed ideas; and frequently they have fallen into trances, heard voices, seen visions, and presented all sorts of peculiarities which are often classed as pathological. Often, moreover, these pathological features in their career have helped to give them their religious authority and influence.\textsuperscript{47}

This is remarkably consistent with Heschel’s more contemporary description of the prophetic temperament:

The prophet is a person who suffers from a profound maladjustment to the spirit of society, with its conventional lies, with its concessions to man’s weakness. Compromise is an attitude the prophet abhors. This seems to be the implication of his thinking: Compromise has corrupted the human

\textsuperscript{44} Victor Navasky, \textit{Naming Names} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 61 n.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid}, 269-272. In 1957 Miller was convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to name names, but the Supreme Court reversed his conviction the following year.
\textsuperscript{47} James, \textit{The Varieties of Religious Experience}, 6-7.
species. All elements within his soul are insurgent against indifference to aberrations. The prophet’s maladaptation to his environment may be characterized as a moral madness (as distinguished from madness in the psychological sense).\textsuperscript{48}

In this way, Willy serves as a kind of proxy for Miller’s prophetic insight.

More recent research reinforces and updates James’s theories and brings Willy’s growing madness into clear focus: Willy’s increasing incoherence can be seen as a kind of mystical experience, complete with “time distortion, synaesthesias, hallucinations (auditory and visual), loss of self-object boundaries, social withdrawal, and the transition from a state of conflict and anxiety to one of sudden understanding.”\textsuperscript{49} In this context, Willy can be seen as a figure that distills and represents Miller’s prophetic persona: a man at the mercy of the overwhelming forces he can identify but not overcome.

In the filmed version of the play, Cobb – by this time a seasoned film and television actor – appears never to look directly at anyone who is actually physically present. His haunted gaze is reserved for the ghosts, the imagined presences, the scenes from the past that swallow him whole. This is a physical manifestation of both William James’s diagnosis of the religious neurotic and of Yerushalmi’s analysis of Jewish memory: for Willy, not only is the present suffused with the past, but it is the past, in that it is “not a series of facts to be contemplated at a distance, but a series of situations into which one could somehow be existentially drawn.”\textsuperscript{50} What is achieved through the use of scrims and lighting is accentuated by Cobb’s performance: the entire play takes place inside Willy’s mind, where – in the particularly Jewish way discussed earlier – past and present are intertwined. Other characters are embodiments of Willy’s aspirations, either back from the dead or still tantalizingly present but unfulfilled and unfulfilling. In these respects – and in the force of his character upon the play and upon the imagination – he bears the stamp of James’s religious genius, and the indelible scars of the Jewish prophet.

\textsuperscript{48} Heschel, \textit{The Prophets}, 521.
\textsuperscript{49} Charles P. Heriot-Maitland, “Mysticism and madness: Different aspects of the same human experience?” \textit{Mental Health, Religion and Culture} (vol. 1, 2008), 304.
\textsuperscript{50} Yerushalmi, \textit{Zakhor}, 44.
This is to say neither that all mystical madmen are prophets nor that prophecy is the special province of the Jews; it is rather that memory plays a critical role in Jewish prophecy, as it does in Jewish history and identity: for the Jew, to remember is not merely a concern but a commandment: various forms of the Hebrew word for “remember” are used no less than 169 times in the Bible.\(^{51}\) The commandment carries a concomitant burden: “As Israel is enjoined to remember, so it is adjured not to forget.”\(^{52}\) Willy’s memory is particularly Jewish, and prophetic, because it sees all current events as features already drawn onto the map of the past. He is bound to them; even Werblowsky’s modern, who has cut himself adrift from tribe and practice, cannot sever the mnemonic tie. Miller, while not characterizing this outlook as either Jewish or prophetic, describes it in terms entirely consistent with Yerushalmi’s view of Jewish memory:

The *Salesman* image was from the beginning absorbed with the concept that nothing in life comes “next,” but that everything exists together and at the same time within us; that there is no past to be “brought forward” in a human being, but that he is his past at every moment and that the present is merely that which his past is capable of noticing and smelling and reacting to.\(^{53}\)

The madness and the blindness to temporal boundaries which Willy displays are signal symptoms of the prophetic mind at work\(^{54}\), or, as James puts it, the “human ontological imagination.”\(^{55}\) It is consistent with the extensively researched (but not conclusively proven) correlation between “mystical and psychotic experience,” and the notion that “similar psychological processes may be involved in their occurrence.”\(^{56}\) In just the way that virtually all Jews, from the prophetic era until the advent of the Jewish Enlightenment, saw events both large and small as harbingers of Messianic redemption, so Willy, conversing with ghosts and tilting at memories, sees events in his life as

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\(^{51}\) *Ibid*, 5.

\(^{52}\) *Ibid*.


\(^{55}\) James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 72.

\(^{56}\) Heriot-Maitland, “Mysticism and madness: Different aspects of the same human experience?” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* (vol. 11, 2008), 301.
tantalizing clues to the fulfillment of a larger promise of success. But as Miller himself says, “there are no flashbacks in this play but only a mobile currency of past and present, and this, again, because in his desperation to justify his life Willy Loman has destroyed the boundaries between then and now.”

Willy is ground down by the relentless changes in the salesman’s profession, along with the advancement of his age and his penury. He has tried to be something he fundamentally is not. As his neighbor Charley, Bernard’s father, notes, “He was a happy man with a batch of cement . . . He was always wonderful with his hands – he just had the wrong dreams. He didn’t know who he was . . .” Unlike the bookish Bernard, Cobb’s Willy seeks to belong to a society that will not have him, by seeking to be valuable in ways he cannot. And unlike Bernard, Cobb looks more Rabbinic, more ancient, more burdened by history with each passing scene. As Bernard moves into the unattainable sphere of professional achievement, he is impeccably dressed, well groomed, carrying a tennis racket. Cobb’s Willy looks as though he is preparing to trudge back to the shtetl.

As a vehicle of Miller’s prophetic insight, one wonders if Cobb saw the parallels with Willy Loman, his singular co-creation; or if he ever read the Book of Jeremiah:

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I heard the whispers of the crowd –
Terror all around:
Inform! Let us inform against him!”
All of my supposed friends
Are waiting for me to stumble;
“Perhaps he can be entrapped,
And we can prevail against him
And take our vengeance against him.”
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His career eroded, his idealism pulverized, Cobb ironically regained a measure of thorny pride. His awareness of the irony therein had a ring of Jewish particularity to it:

57 Schroeder, *The Presence of the Past in American Drama*, 90n.
“Some people,” he said, “need me so I can be anathema to them.” In this, he shared with his singular creation, Willy Loman, a need to be needed, to at last appear to be welcomed into belonging, and the knowledge that he never would know that redemptive pleasure. Cobb infused this trait into the character he brought to life; they were both victims of a kind envisioned by the prophet Jeremiah – the Jew who lives in exile, in a perpetual state of hopeful semi-belonging, and who waits for the chance to redeem and be redeemed, even as he is surrounded by plotters and collaborators:

For even your kinsman and your father’s house,
Even they are treacherous toward you,
They cry after you as a mob.
Do not believe them
When they speak cordially to you.  

The genealogy of the Jewish prophetic instinct – its submersion, its liberation from “sectarian-apocalyptic consciousness,” its multivalent influences and expressions, and its reemergence – began, after the 1950s, to be recognized and has been the subject of considerable recent scholarly research. Even educators at major rabbinic seminaries have begun to reapproach the issue of prophecy. In a lecture at the Jewish Theological Seminary in January of 2008, Rabbi Gordon Tucker openly posed the question of whether adherence to Halakhah occludes Jewish sensitivity to authentic mystical experience – including prophecy. He quoted Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of the British Mandate of Palestine, who decades earlier advocated a way to overcome “the religious incompleteness that comes with a self imposed eclipse of the divine will:”

. . . the radiance of prophecy will reemerge from its hiding and reveal itself not as an unripe fruit, but as the first fruits full of vitality and life, and prophecy itself will acknowledge the great efficacy in the work of the sages, and in righteous humility exclaim: ‘The sage is more important than

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60 Navasky, Naming Names, 273.
63 Rabbi Gordon Tucker, “Can a People of the Book also be a People of God?”, Conservative Judaism, (vol. 60, 2007-2008), 19.
the prophet.’ This transcending of one-sidedness will vindicate the vision of unity . . . [and] The soul of Moses will then reappear in the world.64

Rabbi Tucker notes that Rav Kook’s description of prophecy is “a vision of a collective, intersubjective prophecy . . . that both opens a door to a more complete religious life and avoids the unstable and idiosyncratic irruptions into religious discipline that forced ancient prophecy to die.”65

The inspiration and the insight that prompted Arthur Miller to write Death of a Salesman, while not religious, was born of both personal and collective history and memory; it came from a well of awareness fed by the current of the Jewish prophetic instinct, and it pierced the conscience of its age. In this particular play, produced on the historic seam between ‘hot’ and Cold War, between Depression and recovery, we have evidence of something both immanent and transcendent: while not the prophecy of the Bible, it may be an instance of the spiritually conscious and visionary commentary to which Rabbi Tucker alludes. While not a mystical glimpse of the divine, as in Ezekiel, or the apocalyptic vision of an Isaiah or an Amos, it may be the root of which such prophecy is the flower: an instinct, a quality, an awareness of the divine that has not faded and that still burrows into the rock of Jewish consciousness and Jewish memory.

Between 1949, when Lee J. Cobb first stepped onstage as Willy Loman, and 1953, when he relented and provided his testimony to HUAC investigators, a seam of history was traversed. Cobb experienced the withering heat of the spotlight of surveillance, and the ruthless discipline of the surveilled society. He was nearly hounded to death by a sophisticated and omnipresent government trying to preserve fragile economic growth while quashing social and political dissent. Miller, the more determined and egotistical of the two, refused to name names before HUAC, and soon after wrote The Crucible, an enduring parable about the hysteria of the Red Scare and the perils of nonconformity. “The resurgent American right of the early fifties,” Miller later wrote,

65 Ibid.
“the assault led by Senator McCarthy on the etiquette of liberal society, was among other things, a hunt for the alienated, and with remarkable speed conformity became the new style of the hour.”

The books of prophecy have long been sealed, but Jewish text, and text by Jewish authors, continues to be fed by visions of conscience and consequence that tap into the Jewish prophetic instinct. Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* was such a work. In its conception and production, it reflected the mnemonic, historical, moral and ethical orientation of its author and, like Isaiah’s polished arrow, pierced the conscience of a troubled age. Miller the prophet, by reaching within, reached beyond. In being inspired with a vision that was born of memory and history, he realigned the conscience and the consciousness of his age. His self-expression transcended the self:

Prophecy, like art, is not an outburst of neurosis, but involves the ability to transcend it when present. It is not simply self-expression, but rather the expression of an ability to rise far above the self or personal needs. Transcendence is its essence. The significance, therefore, is not in the presence of the neurosis, but what a person does with it . . . It was not Isaiah who produced prophecy; it was prophecy which produced Isaiah.

It can be said, then, that Arthur Miller did not produce *Death of a Salesman*, but rather *Death of a Salesman* produced Arthur Miller, the modern prophet of the perils of conformity.

In 1999, London’s Royal National Theater commissioned a poll in which 800 English theater professionals said Arthur Miller was the greatest American playwright; ironically, in America, as the critic John Lahr noted, Miller has not been held in such high esteem: he is seen instead as “a kind of Jeremiah,” a prophet of moral and ethical doom, continually foretelling societal and personal enslavement.

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Prophecy is not a phenomenon exclusive to Judaism. It can be considered, however, as an essential and formative aspect of the Jewish consciousness as it concerns itself with the Biblical mandate to govern according to the moral and ethical laws traced to the Revelation at Sinai. Further consideration of prophecy as an historical fact and as a means of realignment of political and moral imperatives must include analysis of works of art and discoveries of science as instantiations of prophecy. To analyze such works in this way would serve to reorient positivist and historicist conclusions about the history of prophetic traditions, and to reopen such traditions to an awareness of the undying presence of prophetic energy. Such analyses would not, however, safeguard the prophet, or the prophet’s messengers, from the sometimes harsh consequences of prophecy. Just as “Israel is constantly called to bear witness,” so its prophets, and the prophets’ messengers, are sent like Isaiah’s polished arrow to pierce the shields of fear, corruption and conformism with which Judaism has always struggled. The prophetic warning voiced in Death of a Salesman put Arthur Miller under the harsh spotlight of interrogation and ignominy; his prophetic instinct, however, was unwavering. It placed him in opposition to his government, but it eventually saw him through to absolution and redemption.

Prophecy was ever a dangerous business, however; it still is. The ones who carry its uncomfortable truths forward into a troubled world cannot assume safe passage. As Lee J. Cobb said, echoing the prophet Ezekiel: “On the tortured road to that conclusion lie many bleached bones of others.”

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69 Funkenstein, Perceptions of Jewish History, 152.
70 Navasky, Naming Names, 273. See also Ezekiel 37:1-14.
Bibliography


