

habits, their hunting and gathering, the longevity of this mode of living, and its relative comfort. (Disgruntled city dwellers will be rueful to hear once again just how much less onerous primitive economic life was than its twentieth-century urban counterpart.) Otherwise, not much has changed, Schmookler rightly says, since the first hunter-gatherers abandoned their shy ways and started on the grisly path to empire building.

In addition, Schmookler's criticism of Karl Marx, though brief, effectively weaves together a number of strands from other critics. Without falling into a fatuous neo-conservatism, he parses the labor theory of value, as well as other mainstays of Marxism, and finds them wanting. His own parable, he claims, accounts for revolutions and empires better than does Marxist theory—which is not saying much, given Marxism's failings on this score. He also finds his parable applicable to the market system, which "cannot be relied upon to serve human welfare."

Nevertheless, the pleasing parts of *The Parable of the Tribes* do not add up to a convincing whole. The most noticeable weakness of the book is the discrepancy between the optimistic goals of the author and the bleak determinism of his parable. In his personal commitment, he is doggedly hopeful. He is "currently working on a project with the Public Agenda Foundation to clarify the nuclear defense issue for public debate and judgment." And the present book does indeed apply to defense issues: No one is free to choose peace, he says, but anyone can impose upon all the necessity for power. As he puts it: "In the post-World War II world, the achievement of far greater global peace and relaxation has required not the improbable ten out of ten [tribes to choose peace], or a hundred out of a hundred, but a more reasonable two out of two. That is, if the United States and the Soviet Union were truly devoted to leading the world beyond the chronic struggle for power, inhumane forces described in this work might have been (still might be) significantly weakened."

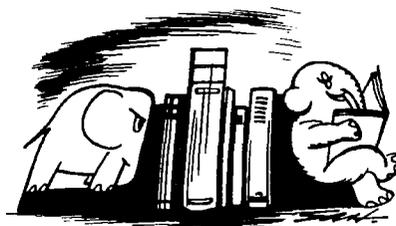
So Schmookler is not what Thomas Love Peacock called a deteriorationist, one who believes that life is steadily getting worse. Paradoxically, he sees his parable, and this book, as a means of liberation from the predetermined rigors of power. The parable can lead beyond guilt and misplaced enmity and drive a wedge between us and our systems. Schmookler has done his work too well, though. The parable as he presents it has no escape hatch.

Too often the parable is simply a truism:

If only the superpowers were not so bent on being superpowers, life would be different. Thus Schmookler calls to mind the apocryphal epidendrologist who first diagnosed dutch elm disease. A cure exists, he said, but it would cost ten thousand dollars per tree, and it would not work unless it is applied to every single dutch elm in existence. Don't hold your breath.

A more damaging flaw in *The Parable of the Tribes* is Schmookler's rhetoric. He was wise to call his insight a parable, for he undertakes no effort to test it, to come up with a refuting instance. He simply dredges the literature for corroborating instances. He pleads rather than argues.

A recent counterexample is not hard to find. Take Gandhi. A plausible argument can be made that noncooperation transcends force and makes the realm described by Schmookler's parable irrelevant. Naturally I don't want to digress into an assessment of the Mahatma and his limitations; nevertheless, the strategy of *satyagraha* undermines the parable's pretensions to explanatory power.



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The parable turns out to be a bulging suitcase of a concept, roomy enough to hold anything, yet too bulky to carry anywhere. As the old Yiddish adage goes: "For instance is not proof." **WV**

SALESMAN IN BEIJING
by Arthur Miller
(Viking Press; 254 pp.; \$16.95)

Anthony Scully

Arthur Miller's *Salesman in Beijing* is a first-person account of his seven-week sojourn in Beijing, where he directed a Chinese cast in his landmark play *Death of a Salesman*. Miller was, in effect, the first foreign director to mount a Western drama in China with Chinese actors.

Death of a Salesman won the then thirty-four-year-old Miller the Pulitzer prize in 1949; it has played somewhere every night since its opening. Like any powerful literary work, it is hard to sum up in a paragraph. With respect to its current successful Broadway reincarnation with Dustin Hoffman as Willy, the *New Yorker* describes the play as "a sentimental and yet oddly moving account of Willy Loman, a man who thinks success consists of being liked and who is dismayed to discover that this goal is, as a goal, unachievable." Miller himself describes his play as being "about the love of father for son and son for father." On stage, *Death of a Salesman* recounts the last days of Willy Loman, the archetypal salesman who has lived for the American dream of making it and, in the process, loses his soul. *Salesman in Beijing* raises the question of Arthur Miller as Willy Loman.

The cultural chauvinism Miller displays here is matched only by his strict adherence to a theatrical aesthetic that consecrates both the text of the play and the original New York production as an absolute code by which everything that happens in Beijing is measured and judged. Not only does Miller block out the play with precise reference to the first production directed by Elia Kazan; it is inconceivable to him that his Chinese experience might occasion new ideas about the playing, the set, or the music, or that it might suggest changes in the text itself. Miller has been known over the years for his crisp powers of observation, his brainy political "take," his classical sense of tragedy in the everyday. When face to face with a culture representing a quarter of the world's people, a massive population shaped in recent generations by a series of natural dis-

asters and human upheavals, he veers close to being a curmudgeon.

As Miller would have it, until he came along to show them the light with *Death of a Salesman*, Chinese audiences had been kept in a kind of Dark Ages, where they were exposed only to Chekov, Gorky, Tolstoi, and Ibsen. According to Miller, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, allowed only "eight permissible plays" in the Chinese canon, plays with clear divisions of good and bad. These plays were reportedly more like political demonstrations than imaginative works about the realities of human beings.

Miller claims that one of his main motives in going to China was "to show that there is only one humanity." What he succeeds in showing, almost unwittingly, is that the Chinese, unlike most other cultural groups and despite their severe societal problems, are capable of introducing and mastering outside texts and textual styles. The Chinese, in effect, and not Arthur Miller, were the authors of their own change. They not only initiated the cultural event but brought it off to their own relative enlightenment. One wonders to what extent American actors are capable of mustering the same enthusiasm for a Chinese play.

Throughout *Salesman in Beijing* Miller does not let up on his criticism of Chinese theatrical tradition: "[T]he Chinese actor [was] trained in an unrealistic style that was at its worst melodramatic and intolerably overemphatic compared to understated Western acting." Assuming he is correct in his assessment—one thinks of the plethora of "understated" and spiritually comatose actors on television soaps—the Chinese actors, to their credit, believe that the play will help free them from the conventions that have held them back.

Miller seems to misunderstand what Bertolt Brecht got out of Chinese opera. It was not so much for the sake of the story that Brecht was interested in distancing emotion. He wanted to find ways to activate the emotion found in the arguments of the issue-oriented mind. Brecht was really at war with what he considered sentimentality. There is a real distinction here.

Miller mentions that the Maoists sneered at the plays of Lao She, China's best and most prolific playwright, who saw them "as contemptably bourgeois"; out of shame, presumably, Lao She drowned himself. A similar reception awaited such popular playwrights as O'Neill and Tennessee Williams at the hands of Western intellectuals. Was society ever different?

Miller complains of China's "stupifying ideology" and then proceeds to solve the seemingly insoluble problems in the meet-



ing of the two cultures. He has, in effect, arrived in town with a new game and has gotten the townspeople, who invited him in the first place, to agree to learn the game. After a week, when the townspeople are still having problems playing the game, he launches into a lengthy discourse on the failures of the town itself and of its underlying ideology.

Miller remains baffled as to how the Cultural Revolution could have swept the country and how tens of thousands of people would assemble in stadiums "to witness and enjoy painful humiliation of some of their brightest intellectual and political stars." Ba Gin, one of China's hitherto praised novelists, for example, was forced to wear a dunce cap and kneel on broken glass before a howling mob. Somehow Miller equates this with the American Legion having asked him, Miller, to sign an anti-Communist pledge before the film *Death of a Salesman* was released, a pledge he never actually signed.

Miller's negative interpretations are so pervasive in the present book that he forces the reader to demand statistics, which he does not provide. To what extent, for example, was the old Chinese academic and intellectual world tied in with a hierarchical class system? How closed was that system?

To what extent did the intellectuals and the artists work to bring about social change under the pre-Communist order? What was the infant mortality rate in those days? The average life span? What percentage of the population was literate? What was the role of women and to what extent did the intellectuals underwrite this role? How many people starved or were imprisoned without trial? To what extent was the country controlled by the West? In passing, Miller mentions that his wife, the photographer Inge Morath, had studied Chinese daily for eight years to reach a level of fluency. One wishes that she had also put her hand to the present account.

One of Miller's most interesting reflections is on the character of Mao: "He wasn't merely a leader. He was a poet, a real one. He played China like a line of dialogue." Afterward, Miller comments that Mao failed in his last few years. The inference is clear: Miller feels that where Mao failed, he has succeeded.

Salesman in Beijing is the account of an admirable man who, in his youth, wrote a superior work of theatre about the tragedy of an ordinary human being. One wishes he had grown in his sense of tragedy and in his powers of revelation. In China, Arthur Miller overreaches himself. **WV**