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"An Abrupt Impression of Familiarity": Ethnic Projection in Arthur Miller's Work

Introduction: Perceptions of Ethnicity

The ethnic identity of white groups in the United States after the Second World War is an object of debate. Some scholars, such as Herbert Gans, Richard Alba, and Mary C. Waters, have suggested that, as a result of removal from ethnic enclaves, intermarriage and upward mobility, the ethnicity derived from groups that emigrated from Europe is reduced to symbols or tokens that are emptied of meaning, as these groups merge together and lose their fundamental characteristics. However, a different view of ethnic identity can be conceived of, like the one found in the studies of the anthropologist Michael J. Fischer. In his work, ethnicity is seen not so much as a rigidly defined identity, but rather as a fluid category, a protean notion that is deeply embedded in the individual's mind and emerges through memory: "[Ethnicity] is often something quite puzzling for the individual, something over which he or she lacks control…. It can be potent even when it is not consciously taught… something that emerges in full-often liberating-flower only through struggle" (195).

Fischer also points out that ethnicity possibly emerges from contacts and interactions between different ethnic groups perceived in a pluralistic perspective, rather than hinges on the antagonism between minority and mainstream discourses. In this way, one discovers the self through the observation of the other: "the ethnic, the ethnographer, and the cross-cultural scholar in general often begin with a personal empathetic 'dual tracking' seeking in the other clarification for processes in the self" (199). In his description, Fischer, in an interesting way, alludes to the cabalistic myth of divine sparks derived from broken vessels at the time of the origin of the world, the motif that will be explored later in greater detail.

Jews and Italians in Arthur Miller's Work

Fischer's ideas can be applied to Arthur Miller's treatment of Italians and Italian Americans. Miller's Jewish identity is an object of debate in relation to his work, since the protagonists of his plays often function as American "Everyman"-type figures or

have a Jewish identity that is implicit. In texts dealing with Italian or Italian American themes, Miller seems to be projecting his own ethnic identity onto Italian Americans, thus "seeking in the other clarification for processes in the self" (Fischer 199). Miller's work, in this context, tells about the evolution of the Italian American identity in the post-war years, when it emerged from an essentialized sphere and entered a broader American cultural context. Indeed, after the war, Italian Americans became more visible, in particular in film and in the entertainment industry. In his book *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America*, Thomas Ferraro observes that, paradoxically enough, Italian Americans, at the same time, became more Americanized and started introducing their own culture into a more general cultural realm, which can be described as a process of "intertwin[ing] and interpenetrat[ing]" (4). It is significant, from this point of view, that Miller, who in his drama concentrates on universal themes, has indeed chosen Italian Americans as a minority to address in his writing.

I shall discuss here Arthur Miller's play *A View from the Bridge* (1955), set in an Italian milieu in Brooklyn, admittedly his best-known illustration of the above-mentioned process, his short story "Monte Sant'Angelo" from the collection *I Don't Need You Anymore* (1967), and sections of his autobiography *Timebends* (1987) that focus on the Italian and Italian American life. Miller's interest in the Italian subject matter seems to have stemmed not only from his interaction with the immigrant communities in New York, but also, more specifically, from his trip to Europe in 1948, in company of his friend Vincent Longhi, a lawyer and aspiring politician. The trip is described in *Timebends*, wherein the depiction of devastated Italy in the early post-war years has a noteworthy transatlantic aspect; namely, Miller tends to play down the "high" aspects of classic Italian culture associated with ancient Rome or the Renaissance which fascinated earlier American travellers, and, instead, he emphasizes the continuity between the world of the immigrant working class in greater New York and the Southern rural areas from which Italian Americans originated. Therefore, on the one hand, he evokes an encounter with the mobster Lucky Luciano, an epitome of the gangster, and on the other, he notices the presence of returning immigrants in an Apulian town:

> [W]e saw a promenade at the seafront consisting of an unusual number of single men… not dressed like other Italians; they wore dark New York overcoats and grey New York hats with brims…. We accosted four who were having their coffee. At first they spoke Italian, but Vinny [Longhi]' s witty grin brought acknowledging smiles and they happily lapsed into Brooklynese. (164)

As an outsider both to native Italian and Italian American culture, Miller associates the immigrant identity with the old country. In his view, Southern Italy has a limited

autonomous existence beyond its connection with the communities of the American immigrant quarters. With respect to the presentation of Italy and Italian America, *Timebends* evidently echoes "Monte Sant'Angelo."

While Jewish motifs tend to be absent from Miller's major plays, the struggle to define Jewish identity features more prominently in his early work and his prose, in particular in the novel *Focus* (1945), where a WASP anti-Semite protagonist ultimately embraces a Jewish identity that the community has started to attribute to him, which suggests a subjective and self-constructed notion of ethnicity.

"Monte Sant'Angelo": Recuperating Jewishness through Italy

The themes of *Focus* are reiterated, in a different key, in "Monte Sant'Angelo," which also concentrates on the difficulty of defining Jewish identity. In this story, a Jewish character, struggling to define selfhood, is contrasted with a more confident Italian American. The two men: the Jewish Bernstein and the Italian American Vinnie Appello, travel together, presumably in the early post-war period, to the places in Southern Italy the latter's family originally came from. Bernstein and Vinnie Appello function, to a certain extent, as each other's doubles, being described as physically similar:

> For a fleeting moment it occurred to Appello that they resembled each other. Both were over six feet tall, both broad-shouldered and dark men. Bernstein was thinner, quite gaunt and long-armed. Appello was stronger in his arms and stooped a little, as though he had not wanted to be tall. But their eyes were not the same. Appello seemed a little Chinese around the eyes, and they glistened black, direct, and for women, passionately. Bernstein gazed rather than looked. (56)

Possibly, Bernstein is the author's alter ego, which justifies the analogy between Americans of Jewish and Italian descent, even though Appello corresponds in some way to the stereotyped seductive Latin male. At the same time, their attitudes toward their immigrant origins are diametrically different. Appello emerges as a well-established ethnic American, who draws a sense of assurance from interaction with the world of his roots in rural Southern Italy, whereas Bernstein, by contrast, is portrayed as a rootless Jew, whose disconnection from his European ancestry is aggravated by the trauma of the Holocaust, as he ponders that, unlike Appello, he has no relatives he knows of in Europe. This motif ties in with Miller's recollection in *Timebends* of an encounter in Southern Italy with Holocaust survivors attempting to immigrate to Palestine, which elicits in him the feeling of alienation and shame rather than of kinship or empathy.

Yet, at a crucial moment, Bernstein is able to overcome his dismay and feeling of inferiority to Appello through an exchange with a mysterious individual named Mauro di Benedetti, whom he recognizes as a Southern Italian Jew. Here Miller represents a perception of ethnicity analogous to Fischer's, as something that emerges in ways that can be startling for the individual. The "liberating" process of the discovery of ethnicity, as described by Fischer, is evident in this passage:

> Of what [Bernstein] should be proud he had no clear idea; perhaps it was only that beneath the brainless crush of history a Jew had secretly survived, shorn of his consciousness but forever caught by that final impudence of a Saturday Sabbath in a Catholic country; so that his very unawareness was proof, a proof as mute as stones, that a past lived. A past for me, Bernstein thought, astounded by its importance for him, when in fact he had never had a religion or even, he realized now, a history. (68)

"Monte Sant'Angelo" can be read in the light of Fischer's use of the cabalistic myth of the "divine sparks": "what thus seem to be individualistic autobiographical searchings turn out to be revelations of traditions, re-collections of disseminated identities and of the divine sparks of the breaking of the vessels" (165). The imagery Fischer alludes to derives from the creation myth elaborated by the sixteenth-century mystic Isaac Luria. In this myth, the creation of the world comes from God retreating from the universe and emanating a force that is filtered through vessels. The vessels, however, cannot withhold it and they break, releasing "divine sparks" that remain in the world from which God has been exiled. The performance of commandments or blessings enables the revealing of the divine sparks through what is considered a "healing of the world" or *tikun olem*, which is exactly what Mauro di Benedetti does by observing the Shabbat. In a less literal way, he allows Bernstein's sense of self to re-emerge on an unexpected occasion, thus liberating and healing him. Like Newman in *Focus*, the character of Mauro di Benedetti is endowed with a Jewish identity he does not acknowledge, but in "Monte Sant'Angelo" this ethnic problem has a specifically Italian context, just as the Italian American Appello functions as a kind of foil for Bernstein.

A View from the Bridge: Dealing with Masculinity

The displacement of Miller's ethnic identity onto Italian American culture is even more pronounced in *A View from the Bridge*, as this play focuses exclusively on characters of Italian descent, drawing inspiration both from Miller's interaction with the members of the Brooklyn longshoremen union and his witnessing of immigrant transatlantic

exchanges in rural Southern Italy. According to Tracy Floreani, Miller's endeavor to explore Italian American masculinity in the figure of Eddie Carbone is relevant because the play was written at the time where Miller was emerging as a public figure thanks to the success of *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* as well as to his marriage to Marilyn Monroe (49). Consequently, he started to be seen as a new emblem of Jewish masculinity, distant from the earlier, contrasting stereotypes of the Jew as a lecher or an effeminate scholar. As observed by Jonathan Freedman, this public image of Miller, in some degree distinct from the way he was perceived as a writer, is that of an intellectual aware of his roots, yet deeply immersed in the mainstream context (135-152).

A kind of translation mechanism is at stake in *A View from the Bridge* because the play concentrates on an ethnic male unable to resolve the tension between the longing for assimilation and the atavistic impulses and traditions. Floreani suggests that "[u]ltimately, the story comes down to an examination of self and masculinity, and that Miller delineates this struggle within the Italian American male seems telling" (49). In the play, Miller unites the two different strands of Italian "high" culture associated with the classical world and that of the immigrants. As noted by Christopher Bigsby: "There is a past in this play but it is not Eddie's. It's a mythical past, a past of elemental feelings and ancient taboos carried forward by the subconscious as much as by traditions, forged in a distant Italy" (179-180). This is reflected in the conception of the play as a version of a modern Greek tragedy. It is worth remembering that, in his description of the trip to Italy, Miller evokes his visit to the amphitheatre of Syracuse and his fascination with classical drama. Indeed, the character of the lawyer Alfieri functions as a kind of chorus and his name possibly echoes that of the nineteenth-century Italian poet and playwright Vittorio Alfieri, who also drew heavily from the tradition of the classical tragedy. In the opening of *A View from the Bridge,* Alfieri expresses the idea of an ineluctable fate, establishing a link between the milieu of Italian American longshoremen and the reminiscence of the Greek-Roman past of Southern Italy: "[T]he thought comes that in some Caesar's year, in Calabria perhaps or on the cliff at Syracuse, another lawyer, quite differently dressed, heard the same complaint and sat as powerless as I, and watched it run its bloody course" (12). The references to the Greek tragedy do not concern only the play's form, but also its plot, since Eddie Carbone resembles a classical tragic hero, a fundamentally good man who is destroyed by his flaw, which is, most obviously, his morbid attraction for his niece Catherine, but at a deeper level his incapacity to reconcile the Italian and American aspects of life.

The protagonist of *A View from the Bridge* is distant from the self-assured Appello in "Monte Sant'Angelo" and closer to the conventional images of working-class Italian

American men. The main theme of the play has a strong connection to the Italian American literary tradition: the adaptation of the immigrant familial structure to the alien environment of the New World. However, as Albert Wertheim points out, Eddie expresses two forms of repressed sexual deviancy, his incestuous attraction for Catherine and his possible subconscious homoerotic interest in Rodolpho, since "[t]he two successive kisses are partially meant to destroy Catherine and Rodolpho's union, but they also bespeak Eddie's incestuous and perhaps homosexual passions" (111). He disrupts more directly the immigrant family unit by denouncing the presence of the "submarines," causing a dramatic friction between the culture of his origins and that of the United States, which culminates in the tragic dénouement of the play. At the same time, Eddie's denunciation gives *A View from the Bridge* a more universal aspect by implying the idea of "telling names," important to Miller especially in the light of his concern with McCarthyism and his refusal to cooperate with the House of Un-American Activities. *A View from the Bridge* brings forth some recurring clichés associated with Italian ethnicity, such as arrogant masculinity, ubiquitous syndicate presence and the restriction of female agency and independence. Nevertheless, it can be interpreted as a broader reflection of the personal conflict experienced by ethnics, in particular in relation to Miller's ambivalent attitude toward his own Jewishness.

Conclusion

Jewish identity occupies a marginal space in Miller's dramatic oeuvre, which concentrates on a more general presentation of American society. However, when describing his creative processes in *Timebends*, Miller refers to the surfacing of his own ethnic and religious heritage as a source of inspiration for his writing. Thus, for instance, he claims that, while doing preliminary research for *The Crucible*, he gained a deeper understanding of the Salem Trials through an unexpected mental association with a childhood memory of a synagogue scene:

> I noticed hanging on a wall several framed etchings of the witchcraft trials, made apparently at the time by an artist who must have witnessed them…. Suddenly [an etching] became my memory of the dancing men in the synagogue on 114th Street as I had glimpsed them between my shielding fingers, the same chaos of bodily motion… both scenes frighteningly attached to the long reins of God. I knew instantly what the connection was. Yes I understood Salem in that flash, it was suddenly my own inheritance… it belonged to me now. (338)

In a similar vein, Miller's interest in Italian American themes can be linked to his Jewish ethnic identity.

From a more specific Italian American standpoint, Miller represents an illustration of the process that Ferraro describes in *Feeling Italian*. He observes that just as Italian Americans partly lost their original values, which stemmed from a particularly vivid brand of Catholicism, and assumed a more standard Americanized outlook, America was influenced by an Italian-derived Catholic sensibility, not in sense of religion but as a kind of outlook and mentality. The intermingling of these two elements has generated new, more ambivalent representations of Italian American identity:

> The two sides of the dialectic—the secularizing of Catholicism versus the Italian Catholicizing of secular America—come together not as a righteous xenophobia, the guido-style parochialism of which we've had more than enough, but as a demanding, even consequential mode of culture-based cohesion: *acting* Italian, finally as an art *for* America. (7; emphasis in the original)

In this context, Miller's example is significant because it reflects a specific form of cultural dialogue between two ethnic groups in America that have a history of occasional frictions and of cohabitation in metropolitan immigrant quarters. They also share similar reasons for immigration prompted not only by poverty but also by oppression and brutalization (the post-unification Italian government undertook viciously repressive campaigns on Southern peasantry) as well as similar positions in the ethnic hierarchy on arrival and partly analogous values rooted in the family and the community. The kind of process we see in Miller's representation of Italian Americans is thus highly significant for the literary construction of Jewish American and Italian American identities alike.

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