VR: In your later plays there seems to be a marked pull away from social purposes and ideological essences towards concerns which might be described as metaphysical, centering on the irrational levels of human experience. Do you agree?

ARTHUR MILLER: Yes, I think that your question, or statement rather, is more or less correct. I would add one important thing, though, and it is that my idea of the metaphysical includes the social. I don't believe that man lives exclusively in either one or the other realm. I am firmly convinced that there is only one realm, not three or four or five, and this is all an articulated whole which the greatest drama, and even then only rarely, has been able to uncover.

There are lines of force—economic, political, mythic memories, genetic imprints—many more, and where they intersect in a human situation in which man must make choice—is drama. I have always felt this, even before I was conscious of any attempt to philosophize about it. If there is a question it is one of the degree of emphasis as to the primacy of social and other causation. My own feeling has been—in the last fifteen years anyway, perhaps even longer than that—that there are certain types and certain situations which are typical of man, and these get repeated endlessly in different societies and in different social arrangements. But there are, I believe, types of people who reproduce their own kind, apparently, through the millennia. This probably is one of the reasons why it is possible for us to read a book or a play or a poem of an entirely different age, which may be hundreds and hundreds years gone by, and still feel at home with it, to some important degree. So when you say that there is a realm which is outside society, I don't think that is the way I would put it. I would simply say that it is one of the elements of the whole social situation.

V. Rajakrishnan teaches in the Department of English at the University of Kerala. He conducted this interview with Arthur Miller on 17 May 1978 while in the United States on a Fulbright Fellowship.
VR: The silence in your dramatic career from 1955 to 1964 is generally linked with various circumstances in your private and public life. Taking a retrospective look, would you say today that these years were a period of gestation for the somber and interrogative mood which informed the plays that followed?

ARTHUR MILLER: Yes, but it was also that the social presuppositions of the pre-World War II world—the Depression, liberalism, radicalism, Marxism etc.—began to dissolve in terms of their force for me. They became emptily repetitive, no longer instructive to me in the mid-50s. This was partly because I saw—that I just referred to—that there were indeed kinds of people who made of any moment in history what it was in them to make of it, and the power of these personalities to nullify even the logic of the social circumstance was so tremendous that I began to despair of ever coming to a usable pattern of understanding of what was happening in the world around me. I saw people who, as long as I had known them, were faithful to certain concepts, and suddenly overnight seemed not even to remember what it was they had spent a whole lifetime being faithful to. It was not simply a question of opportunism on their part, I think. The atmosphere changed; the air changed. The oxygen went out of the air for these ideas. And I, I certainly went into a period which was quite long, longer than I wished, in which it was not enough for me to see man as a social being, or even as a psychological being. . . . It simply didn't satisfy me. It was like being aware of an ache for the immemorial, not only in me but in the world.

VR: That in a way accounts for the air of puzzlement that pervades your later works.

ARTHUR MILLER: Is it puzzlement, or a wish to rely upon action-in-itself, the what-happens—rather than on generalized historical conclusions?

VR: It seems to me that in your early plays evil is mainly seen as external, emanating either from the false dreams of a society or the nihilism of State ambition. But in After the Fall, Incident at Vichy, and The Price, evil emerges as an essential fact of human nature. Did this shift in focus have anything to do with the convictions born out of your emotional and intellectual encounters during the years of your absence from the theatre?

ARTHUR MILLER: I did feel and I do feel now that there is in people a tendency towards obliterating the murderousness of their own wishes. They simply go into a state of oblivion. They cannot see them and they cannot remember them, like great pain. As a consequence, these murderous episodes are endlessly repeated because the perpetrators continuously re-arrive at yet another state of innocence. It is a false innocence, of course. And still it is true in the sense that most of the time we genuinely cannot recall any other dimension of life. We simply feel that we are put upon, we are victimized, and that there is no corresponding aggression on our part to account for this at all. So we continually lapse into a state of innocence—which then brings on the next cycle of our murderousness, since the innocent are permitted to defend themselves. And so we rise up and kill whoever is handy, and the new murder seems to prove our innocence all over again, for how could we have killed except that we were driven to it from without?
VR: Despite some obvious points of contact between you and the hero of After the Fall, you have resisted the autobiographical interpretation of the play. Perhaps you may be able to tell whether, while writing the play, you shared Quentin's agonized feeling that he had lost a world consisting of easy indignations and doctrinaire certainties.

ARTHUR MILLER: The reason why I have resisted the autobiographical interpretation of the play, as you have put it, is that After the Fall is not an autobiography in the sense that it was not my aim to personify myself on stage as such; it is a play about a theme if ever such a play existed. All my characters in all my works are autobiographical in the sense that, for me to write them, I have to have felt what these people feel.

The autobiographical element in any work is not a question of criticism, in any case, but of gossip. Is a work better or worse because we have managed to locate the originals of the characters? This is only another aspect of reductionism, the nothing-but nonsense, a sort of revenge upon the creative by the literal. For years Willy Loman was nothing—but my own father—who happened to have been a wholly different sort of man, and I myself was the fine student next door. In fact, I failed Algebra three times! Another aspect of this kind of “interpretation” and a less personal but equally foolish one, is in Simone Signoret's current autobiography where she states that John and Elizabeth Proctor were so named for their initials, J and E which conform to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg whose story The Crucible is alleged to tell. Of course the Rosenberg case did not even become public until the play was on the stage. And John and Elizabeth were the names of my characters in history.

It is perfectly true, though, that one of the essential parts of Quentin is the collapse of the symmetry of the world as he understood it before he became aware of his own culpability in it. In other words, before the fall he was struggling, as a man in society in any case, against forces outside of himself, and that gave life a certain symmetry and coherence. When he began to feel that he was in league with what he despised, to some perceptible degree, then action became intolerable. Action of any kind became very difficult. Again, it is hardly necessary to disclaim that this is merely me; I think this is the history of our times in terms of social reforms, in terms of social philosophy, in terms of the way Americans at least have viewed the world, if you, let us say, start a hundred years ago and work yourself up to this moment. They had gone through a stage in which they fundamentally believed in the perfectibility of man and society and everything else. And to believe that, you have to place yourself to one side of all evil. Everybody knows that he tried numerous times to correct his bad habits, and probably failed most of the time. It is other people's bad habits that he is sure he can correct. So the perfectibility of man is always referring to other people and other institutions. I think Quentin represents a kind of transformation of that situation into one in which he is trying to confront and define a world in which he is culpable, in whose evil he is really involved, not merely as a corrective philosopher but as a participant in whatever is wrong in what he is looking at.

This is what that speech means in which Quentin talks about how fine it was to
face a world so wonderfully threatened by injustice. It means that he was absolved of any culpability for it.

VR: Leonard Moss has quoted you as saying that Albert Camus's novel, The Fall, provided the point of departure for After the Fall. Would it be correct to interpret this influence as the sign—or result—of your exposure to existentialist thought?

ARTHUR MILLER: I can be quite concrete about my contact with Camus's novel, The Fall. Actually I read the book for the first time in California in the early 60s when Walter Wanger, who was a producer, wanted me to make a motion picture out of it. It haunted me for one very concrete reason. The springboard of the book is the failure of the hero—or the anti-hero—to go to the rescue of a girl who he had never even laid eyes on, really. It is just the idea of a woman, of a living being who he has failed to connect with, and it symbolizes his inability really to believe in his own feelings towards people, and hence in his right to judge others' actions. This is on a psychological level. This, of course, is a common... I wouldn't call it a dilemma, it is like a hang-nail, a wound that never heals. And to anyone who professes any humanist feeling at all, this should come as a disquieting reminder. But, as Camus's protagonist passed from my mind, I changed the question posed in The Fall, probably to a more disastrous one: what if he had attempted to rescue her, and indeed managed to, and then discovered that he had failed in his mission—to overcome his own egoism which his action may even have expressed; that there were innumerable complications about rescuing somebody as a pure act of love? It was not simply a question of whether or not he had the empathic power within himself to go to the rescue of that girl. It was more difficult even than that. What it required was the sacrifice of what he thought was true; maybe, his intellectual humiliation was required. Maybe, even worse, he had really to become a passive figure in horror of his or her geography in order to save her. She wanted to turn away from life. So he would have had to give her back the will to live; but what if she disbelieved in his good faith and claimed to perceive his selfishness in saving her? Perhaps his blame surpasses his failure to go to her rescue. And supposing he had tried to do this and then discovered that this was not possible under any circumstances whatsoever—then, what is his reaction? This is some of what After the Fall was about. Needless to say, the play—rather than the gossip—remains to be reviewed.

VR: Perhaps one difference between After the Fall and Camus's novel is that the latter shatters all consolations while your play ends with the hero's decision, made in good faith, in favor of a positive choice in life.

ARTHUR MILLER: I would say that my play does end with the hero's decision in favor of a positive choice in life. But there is always, I think, the background of doubt to Quentin's final act of engagement which never gets eradicated. Quentin acts within what he conceives to be the possibilities given him at any moment. He decides in favor of life because he cannot deny that he finds hope rising in himself.
As he says in the play, "With all this darkness, the truth is that every morning when I awake, I'm full of hope! With everything I know— I open my eyes, I'm like a boy!" It is idiotic, and yet there is something in him that is indeed a boy, that is young every day and insists he believe. "And this is as true for me," says Quentin, "as any of the despair that surrounds me." But I don't call this consolation; total despair is more consoling. Much more so since it does not challenge one to act anymore and justifies the far less troublesome stasis and resignation.

VR: In terms of technique, however, the name that comes to mind is Sartre in that your dramatic universe, like Sartre's, is nearer to realism or traditional naturalism. Perhaps you regard innovations in form as secondary to content?

ARTHUR MILLER: Perhaps I am not the one to make comments on that. This is a question relating to literary forms. I have said so much on this subject in the past and I have written a lot about it also, some people think, too much. But I don't agree that my plays are naturalistic at all. You see, naturalism to me has a very concrete meaning. It is an attempt to bring on to the stage a picture of life uninterpreted, as far as possible, by the artist's visible hand; as though one should feel one were actually there. Well, I don't believe in that; in fact, I am thoroughly opposed to that. It is a lie in the first place. In the theatre one can't be "actually" anywhere but in the theatre. One is in the theatre facing actors. It is not the job of the theatre to reproduce life; it is to interpret life. And I have used a good number of interpretive forms, probably more than most practicing playwrights have. They are quite different. I made my first reputation with All My Sons which was a very traditional kind of a play, at least at times. But, I think there is more innovation, formally speaking, in Death of a Salesman, for example, than any other American play that I know of. This is a broad statement, but I believe it is a fact. I think there is more conscious use of the past two thousand years of formal experimentation in the theatre going into Death of a Salesman than any other American play that I could think of. In fact it has been so thoroughly imitated that it is often forgotten what an innovation it was. It's simply that for some people I made it all look perfectly "natural"—which is fine with me.

VR: Let me make myself clear. I regard you as a realist in the sense that you have created, for the most part, characters and events with traceable roots in life. There are striking differences between your approach to the drama and that of playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, which is the most anti-realistic theatre I can think of.

ARTHUR MILLER: Oh yes, that's true, yes. But if only the Absurd is... I can make a case like this. The Absurd is the modern day Naturalism. The Absurd is the most naturalistic dramatic form we have today. Why do I say that? If you stand on the corner of the street in which we are now, for an hour, you will see absurdities one after another in the formal sense of that term. You will see costumes that are absurd worn by ordinary people on their way to work or from work and hear more absurdities than you will easily bear. The streets are full of the absurd right now. The culture is absurd. What is more absurd than countries spending almost all their wealth on weapons with which to kill one another? What is more absurd than the fact of poverty in the United States? It is all absurd, and simply to report that
faithfully, you end up—if you do it superficially and just show what you see—with an immature cult of meaninglessness.

VR: When I touched on the salient differences between your theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd, I also had in mind some of those devices used by Beckett and Ionesco like poetic fantasy, black humor and the devaluation of language . . .

ARTHUR MILLER: Well, in Death of a Salesman we have the technique of fantasy and distortion of time which, again, are made to seem quite natural. But there is a violent compression in all of Willy Loman’s memories, for example. I did it so that nobody is aware that it is done, you see. All those sectors of Willy’s hallucinations are nearly hysterically compressed. Every time he remembers something there is no realistic continuity of speech, only of spiritual search and yearning. No one on God’s earth ever spoke that way. But I made it sound as though they might have. For one thing, if I had done it realistically, the play would have been seven hours long, or seventy.

VR: Incident at Vichy seems to correspond to Sartre’s description of the Theatre of Situation: “Dramas which are short and violent, sometimes reduced to the dimensions of a single long act, dramas entirely centered on an event, written in a sparse, extremely terse style.” Did the “extreme situation” at the heart of Incident at Vichy call for a dramatic style of this kind?

ARTHUR MILLER: I did not know about Sartre’s description of the Theatre of Situations. The quotation you have given does seem to fit my play. See, I proceed from the inside out. I don’t think, I will now write a play in the style of Vichy. Here in this play I was not trying to find the situation and characters which exemplify that or any other style. What happens is that I am obsessed, for one reason or another, with some situation or character or idea. And when I start to work at it, it cries out for a certain kind of formal treatment, it literally forms itself, and I help it along. In the situation of Incident at Vichy, the fact of the matter is that the victims are collected into a police room and they are not permitted to move. This happened before any playwright thought about them—even Sartre. The play is indeed one long act. It is basically a verbal play because, as much as any other reasons, the cops forbid people to physically move very much. But I wanted to write such a play. I enjoyed writing it, a verbal play that would have minimal movement.

VR: Many critics who have taken Leduc to be the dramatist’s mouthpiece tend to view Von Berg’s last act of nobleness as arbitrary. Do you look upon Von Berg’s act as an implied answer to the ethical nihilism that threatened to overtake Europe during the Nazi era, or as a beautiful private gesture valid within its own realm?

ARTHUR MILLER: I regard Von Berg’s act . . . yes, it is an implied answer to the transvaluation of values that took place under Hitler. But to me as a dramatist, its prime importance lies in the irony of the purely private action which manages to have tremendous public significance. I have always been fascinated by the transformations of human personality under the stress of certain extreme situations in life—the crazy changes that occurred in the course of a person’s life at any one moment which made him look absolutely different not only from everybody else but from his
former self. In *Incident at Vichy*, Von Berg defines himself through the act which in a way sets him apart from the rest of mankind. And that a saving act should come from what is normally regarded as a decadent personality (he represents a social class which, if not totally vanished, is certainly in decay) might sound strange. And, yet, there he is—for some ironical reasons, he is the one who can make this kind of a gesture. What it says, I feel, is that humanity can not be programmed finally. The unexpected could happen. Who knows but that the world will be saved by a most unlikely personality . . . at the last moment. And if this happens we shall see that the reasons for it were unpredictable and obvious.

VR: In writing *The Price* were you primarily concerned with the interrelationship of past and present? Or is *The Price* primarily about incommunicability and absence of love in human relations? The play seems to have two movements, one looking back to the Depression and the tragedy of middle class life, and the other pointing in the direction of the metaphysical despair characteristic of the post-War drama.

ARTHUR MILLER: I am trying to recall what I felt when I was writing the play. Primarily, I suppose, it is a conflict which is unresolvable between dutifulness and self-sacrifice on the one hand, as against the more aggressive nature. Both contribute enormously to the world, ironically enough. The more selfish man may turn out to be contributing more than the self-effacing idealist. And that irony moved me very much because it leads in all directions. It upsets the ordinary symmetry that I spoke of earlier. But I have to say also that one of the delights in writing *The Price* was the character of Gregory Solomon. And to me he is the force of life with all its madness and its poetry.

I would add one more thing about *The Price*: there is an aspect of the cruelty of human existence in it, which is accepted by the play itself as well as by the character of Solomon. And, in effect, there is no solution to this problem which stands there finally like a fact of nature and not a problem at all. The play is a cul-de-sac for me; it simply lays out the forces that exist, and probably must exist. I don't know the solution excepting that Solomon takes joy in the dilemma, a joy that is not at all cynical, and there is life in him.

VR: Don't you think that Solomon embodies some kind of transcendence, though not a solution . . .

ARTHUR MILLER: Exactly, exactly.

VR: The chaos of old furniture which fills the Manhattan attic evokes the memory of the concrete stage images in the dramas of Ionesco and Beckett, like the chairs in Ionesco and the tape recorder and dust bins in Beckett. Did you, at this point in your dramatic career, feel drawn towards the devices of the Theatre of the Absurd?

ARTHUR MILLER: I have always felt a kind of attraction for the so-called Theatre of the Absurd in the form of Ionesco's plays. But—I don't know why—I set myself in an entirely different task. I felt that, as far as I was concerned, it would not be sufficient for me or desirable even to draw parodies of life. For the plays of Ionesco and Beckett are parodistic in nature. They parody tragedy, they parody feelings, they
parody plots. And I wanted to convey the emotions as I felt them. I do feel the funny urge for parody or farce from time to time; everybody does, I think. But I have always assumed that the real job for me was not parody at all. It was to try to create empathy in the theatre, and not the kind of distancing, achieved through comic and grotesque means, which the anti-theatre of Ionesco and Beckett creates in the audience. I felt that there was enough dissociation in life, without my adding to it in the theatre. I wanted the spectators to associate rather than dissociate. The measure of it all is death, and that can't be parodied, at least not by the participant.

Now, coming to your question about the piled-up old furniture in The Price, I am not at all sure that that isn't... you see, from my point of view it is perfectly real to have an attic full of furniture which is set there because, in effect, there is no decision yet as to where life wants to put it. Of course I sense the condensation of meaning in this content. But I prefer not to look at it theatrically when I am writing. I don't invent this as another absurdist imagery. I deal with the piled up junk in The Price as though it was real furniture in a real place and people were really involved with this situation. That is partly the difference between my approach and that of, say, Pinter or Ionesco.

VR: The Price seems to me the only play of yours in which a pervasive stage metaphor is employed to define action and theme.

ARTHUR MILLER: Well, that seems to be so... Death of a Salesman has it, in a way. It is not physical. You can play Death of a Salesman the way I first wrote it, without any setting at all. On the other hand I have used physical metaphor in All My Sons, which is extremely important to the texture of the play. In fact, the set designer for All My Sons, who was one of the most sophisticated theorists of all set designers, Mordecai Gorelik, worried endlessly over the tree in that play. He indeed designed the set, which served the play very well, with the idea that the whole play was taking place in a graveyard. And on the floor of the set there was a kind of hump where the grave was. Now I had no such description in my text. This was actually the backyard of a house, but I did certainly conceive of the apple tree, the young apple tree which falls down in the storm. I had never thought of it in the way we are discussing it now, you see. I prefer not to think in those terms. I think that such symbols finally get to be extremely arbitrary and dried out of any real human connection. They don't move people. See, I believe people are not all brains and need their instincts moved.

VR: During the 60s and the early 70s you actively championed various liberal or progressive causes, but I am unable to see that your radical politics affected the tone and temper of your plays written during this period, including Creation of the World and Other Business. Is it possible that the issues which agitated you as an intelligent citizen failed to stir your creative self?

ARTHUR MILLER: The truth of the matter is that I was not as involved in political activism during this period as the generation just behind me, let us say, people who
were involved with all sorts of protest. I was agitated by going to bed every night in a perfectly comfortable house when we were destroying a country overseas. It was as simple as that. I simply couldn't get it out of my mind. But it is true that I protested as a citizen rather than as a writer primarily.

VR: Have you been particularly impressed by any play, American or Continental, that you have seen in recent years?

ARTHUR MILLER: Well, I will have to think a long time. First of all I should tell you that I don't go to the theatre very often. I don't know why that is . . . . I have read a lot of stuff.

VR: What do you think of some of those East European playwrights who very effectively communicate the nightmarish sense of living under a totalitarian system?

ARTHUR MILLER: Do you mean Czechoslovakian? Well, I know several of them, Vaclav Havel is one, Pavel Kohout is another . . . . These playwrights have handled the absurd not in resignation and despair but in a spirit of social and moral resistance. To reach back to the earlier point of our interview, they both register the repetitiveness of evil and yet speak as though it can and must be cured; they maintain the essential living tension with the unattainable. Underneath their joke is what I regard as an amiable kind of viciousness, which arms a noble self-defense. Yes, I appreciate some of them very much.

VR: Thank you, Mr. Miller.