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A few months ago Channel 13, our educational television channel, finished broadcasting the complete cycle of Shakespeare's plays.

At about the same time, the station offered a special tribute to American theater by broadcasting Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, which it described as our culture's greatest achievement in dramatic art.

The station did not seem to notice this interesting juxtaposition of its celebration of Death of a Salesman and its completion of the plays of William Shakespeare, nor to offer any reflection upon the coincidence.

Why, I have asked myself, was this coincidence so troubling? Why were the accolades afforded to Death of a Salesman so hollow when given in the shadow of William Shakespeare? What, if anything, did this comparison say about our own culture as compared with that of Elizabethan England?

Obviously, it can seem unfair to compare any playwright to William Shakespeare. But what is truly significant is not the nobility of Shakespeare's diction as compared to Willy Loman's; nor is it the fact that in Shakespeare we find hundreds of passages each of which are worth a lifetime's pondering.

Arthur Miller is a playwright with impeccable liberal credentials, and his play is full of truth and compassion. The condition of despair of its characters is certainly no more extreme than are the many degrees of degredation, madness and violence which occur in Shakespeare.

The key difference between Shakespeare and the great American playwrights--we could discuss equally well Tennessee Williams or Eugene O'Neil--is that in Shakespeare one always has the sense that the playwright views what is transpiring from an independent vantage point, from an awareness of a larger truth. This knowledge or perspective which establishes a context in which the events of the play are viewed is sometimes explicitly stated; at other times it is merely implied. But always it guides the audience in a sense of how the unfolding events can be viewed in terms of what human life is really all about, in terms of what true human behavior really should be.

In contrast, in contemporary American theater, the writers, while often reflecting an attitude of compassion or sympathy, and certainly while giving evidence of a fine virtuosity in their ability to portray the details and nuances of the psychological and objective events which they depict, seem not to have a perspective or insight different from that of their characters. It is as if the playwright him/herself were a creature, a child, of the very conditions he describes.

Even the great Homeric poems are not simply mirror images of the societies they profess to portray. For it is clear that the anonymous writer claims for himself a kind of understanding which is not evidenced in the characters about whom he writes. The poet does not suffer from the limitations which define the essential condition of his characters.

This contrast between contemporary and classical drama came most vividly to mind when I recently saw Woody Allen's new movie Hannah and Her Sisters. It was brought to mind because here the scriptwriter actually appears in the production, playing one of the most archetypically "modern" characters. Here in a vivid and tangible way was symbolized the "imprisonment" of the perspective of the writer in the very psychological and spiritual states he is portraying. Now, Woody Allen's movie is very perceptive on one level. And his capacity for wit is a marvel. But there is not a shred of salvation in this movie; there is neither explicit nor implied a "way out" for his characters.

I am told that literary historians speak of a phenomenon they call the disappearance of the omniscient narrator. I do not know what sort of omniscience it is of which they speak. But here I am referring not merely to the absence of a literary device wherein a narrator would know, and tell, what is happening behind the scenes, or within the heads, of the characters, but to the absence of a sense of point and purpose, of a final meaning and end, a telos, to human life which might provide both a context and a solution to whatever maladies of spirit may be depicted in the work.

Surely the chief aim and goal of the spiritual life of an individual is to find a way to stand outside of oneself, and to see the conditions and situations one is in, and especially to see the movements of the mind and of the emotions impartially, from a vantage point rooted in eternal things, rooted in an understanding of what it means to be truly human. Why is it so difficult to do this?

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, in his Oratory on the Dignity of Man, offers an interesting variation on the Genesis myth which relates to this. He suggests that when his work was finished the Creator longed for someone to reflect on the plan of so great a work, to love its beauty, and to share with Him the joy of its accomplishment. The Creator thus began to consider the fashioning of human beings.

But it was clear that if the new creature was to share with the Creator the vision and the love of the cosmos, such a creature could not merely be one of the members of the already created families of beings, could not be limited by the properties peculiar to the other species. The Creator established human beings, therefore, as creatures of undetermined nature, placing them in the middle of the universe and saying to them:

"Neither an established place, nor any special function have We given to you, and for this reason, that you may have and possess, according to your desires and judgment, whatever place, whatever form, and whatever functions you shall desire . . . We have set you at the center of the world, so that from there you may more easily survey whatever is in it. We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, freely and honourably your own moulder and maker, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you shall prefer . . . To you it is granted to be whatever you will."

In terms of this parable, the telos of human nature cannot be found by searching. It is determined by being. Through proper discernment we can make the God-like choices and gradually establish our divine nature, realizing the magnificent potential within us.

No amount of rational philosophy can convince us of the right course to take. It is one to which we can only be drawn by love, by enthusiasm. The plays of Shakespeare, and the great classical epics, as well as Scripture, hold up for us the good possibilities, showing us their nobility and attractiveness, drawing us to them. It is the blindness to these possibilities, the vagueness and uncertainty about them, which gives our own time the characteristic of a dark age, with all its disorders.

Those who come to a place of centeredness and discernment, who come eventually to transcend the darkness of our age, shall, in the words of Kahil Gibran, not deplore having known blindness, nor regret having been deaf. For having come to know the hidden purposes of all things, they shall bless the darkness just as they would bless the light.