

## 8. *Playwrighting*

My moral relation to truth-telling is perhaps implicated here. Even then I wanted this truth-telling, whatever shape or form it took, to be performative. But while all my trust and faith were on the side of the artist, my discursive leanings, when not overtly or overly poetic, were didactic. There was this impurity of intention then that didn't get acknowledged or didn't take the time to discover itself. Didn't operate on itself as a sort of rite of purification. And while this passage or rite may be wholly unnecessary to a philosophical work (where purity of intention is usually not an issue because it is taken to be the very essence of truth-telling), and, indeed, while it may be unnecessary to an artistic one (where the very essence of truth-telling usually involves going *beyond* intention to some determination proceeding from the work itself), it is absolutely necessary to a philosophically artistic or artistically philosophical work that is stretched and torn between both camps.

This whole notion of secretly wanting to stand on a soapbox is perhaps the best way to see where I was then in relation to where I am now. Now it is not so difficult to be standing on one for, in a sense, I have made it my whole stage. To tell the truth about truth-telling *is* this stage. This essay-play or, more properly, essayistic *play* that has its character, action, and everything else coming from a pontificating self that mocks itself. A voracious egoistic self that wants the best of both worlds: to chime like an authority and snub its nose at it. To reach for the brass ring and say it can't be reached. To claim its portion of folly and bless it as wisdom. By as much as I can carry this off without falling off this soapbox, so in those earlier years I was carting around one, unable to figure out where to put it.<sup>1</sup>

Chiefly this soapbox of earlier years got under the feet of my characters. Whatever truth they had to tell was coming not so much from them as from me. This was a false move because it was a negating or neglecting of the contextual and intentional range that should have been expressly associated with them. Whatever this or that character had to say was always being compromised by an outside intention and additional context not pertinent to his or her dramatic life. In the meantime all the secret parts and inner workings were not being evinced and, in fact, didn't exist. Having never been imagined as aspects of my own character, they remained as far from my writing as the thought that never got thought.

What great truths did I have to offer so that I should so desperately if so secretly want this soapbox in my writing? My playwrighting was so bad I'm reluctant to extract any lofty purpose or vision from it. The best that can be said is that I was struggling to bring together some objective truth with its

subjective strata. Yet it seems I had no more definite idea of this truth than that life is more complicated than any objective account of it. Such being the case, what did I want to pontificate on if not what I'm pontificating on now? And what could have been more out of my reach given that, in order to pontificate with authority, it was my very own character that had to be dramatised and sounded to the uttermost?

With this blindness to myself as both writer and wanting-to-be-written thing, I was without knowing it, in addition to being an author in search of his characters, a character in search of an author. As unripe as I was for either role, it was nonetheless the account of myself that called to me across my playwrighting. All my incompetence as a playwright stemmed from this undeclared egoism. From this inability to imaginatively let go of myself and yield to dispersion or dismemberment so that a trait, a leaning, a line of thought could have been severed from its source and worked out to become its own ego and destiny.

Complication and over-complication is the working out of this secret life and inner parts of the character. Precisely where my artistic faith and intention lay, my philosophical or pontificating self wanted to assert itself. But how was this to occur in a wholly artistic setting where, in order to affirm the extraordinary richness and complexity of life, nothing can be affirmed or denied but only revealed?<sup>2</sup>

And now it occurs to me that, unlike other playwrights who put their characters either adroitly or maladroitly on soapboxes, I left mine there with virtually nothing to say. Maladroitly they jumped from issue to issue and question to question and response to response as if their whole business was to infer that what was going on surpassed any of their accounts or any account at all. The trouble was that this was only too true. Issues that got taken up were treated thinly and incoherently not only by the characters but as part of the overall action or sequence of events. Only if the characters had been sufficiently developed would the issues themselves have been sufficiently gone into. Like the characters, they would have then been complicated and over-complicated in a contiguous and unified way.

The issues. Incest. Slander. A hodgepodge of sexually tinged items tied up with my hyper-masculine identity and the conflicting sense of being a loser with women.

My first attempts (actually all my attempts but mostly my first attempts) were amateurish affairs. Picayune was the word one critic used. It was with

reference to my one attempt at a comedy. Plugged into this attempt was my fantasy of being overpowered by a sexually desirable female. The inspiration for this terrible piece was a newspaper article about a female high school wrestler.

Juvenile? Yes, it involved juvenile characters who were no more characters than Dick and Jane in a school primer. How could this arise if it weren't for my being less interested in these characters than my sexual fantasy? And what was this sexual fantasy if not, at bottom, pornography?

But where could this pornography be taken if it couldn't be cleaned up as comedy or never intended to be burlesque? Had I been a gifted dramatist, wouldn't I have taken it towards evil? Wouldn't I have examined the dominatrix fantasy as the obverse of rape fantasy? And wouldn't I have seen a connection at some deeper level between the one and the other? Between the worst of female domination and the worst of male domination? And wouldn't I have seen the former as the humiliation of the boy or man in his very maleness? And wouldn't I have kept in mind that this humiliation can be inadvertent? And wouldn't I have thought that, if someone like me who never experienced this humiliation to any marked degree could entertain erotic daydreams of vengeance, then so could others with much more elan and evil intent?

Something blocked me in the dramatisation of evil that pertained to my preoccupation with my own. Libidinous longings that, under certain conditions, had proven to be both underhanded and out-of-hand. Yet the whole business of isolating these longings and giving them a new direction, of turning them into something truly monstrous, of separating them from other preoccupations was met with a wholly inartistic resistance. A basic and primary desire, as I see it now, to tell the truth only about myself. A self not in any sense raised to be a monster and, if it were capable of being one, still would have required the most extreme or improbable of circumstances to be changed or taken over. The worst I had on my conscience was some relatively minor incidents of incestuous contact with my sisters. Along with climbing into my second oldest sister's bed when I was thirteen (there were some sequels to this), I felt up my youngest sister while she was sleeping. But with respect to this last incident, I no longer had the excuse of being a child.

There was this play on incest I wrote and then rewrote over and over again. I remember I was initially stimulated by the accessibility factor. It seemed to me that, if forbidden fruit were hanging high up the tree and well out of

reach, it was ignored for the most part. Many passers by who initially wouldn't think of eating it were also ones, who, consciously or otherwise, were held back merely by their unwillingness to climb the tree. But when they happened to come across it within easy arm's reach, then the fact that it hung in a private garden grew vulnerable, as a legal or moral constraint, to their reasoning. Why was the owner so careless? Why didn't he keep his fruit out of reach? See how many trees he has. Obviously he wouldn't miss this fruit hanging so close to a parched passerby. And so on.

What kept me from taking hold of this accessibility factor and examining it in depth? What prompted me to bring in other issues such that, instead of a treatment of evil, there was some watered-down version of it? For there was not only this thing in my play about a man punishing his stepdaughter in a suspicious way. There was also this other thing where she takes advantage of this to try to repel him from the home. Couldn't I see that this man, too close to my own sexual errancy, represented a feeble, timid, and almost cowardly approach to the subject? And couldn't I see that this girl, partially a victim and partially a victimizer, was too complicated not to be without her own play? And, finally, couldn't I see that rewriting the play so that it veered more and more towards being a battle of the sexes, an ultimately violent confrontation between the man and the girl's mother, was a complicating factor of the worst sort? In short, I ended up bringing in a third large-scale issue when the play already had more than it could bear.

To answer these questions by saying that, deep down, I was less interested in how any of these issues touched my characters than how all of them touched me – to answer like this is almost to think I never wanted to be a playwright! But such a thought would take me in the direction of admitting that I didn't know myself as nearly as well as I thought I did. Wanting to be a playwright seemed no less important to me at twenty-seven than wanting to be big and strong at thirteen. But even when I was in the throes of trying to succeed at it, I was conscious of having come to it with some underlying resistance. Some carry-over from a paucity of experience, exposure, training, or inspiration.

Before I went to Europe, I had never so much as seen a play. And what I did see on the stage in Europe was, while memorable and sometimes enthralling, no epiphany. It didn't make me walk away from it in a drunken daze thinking now I had finally seen the whole course of my life set out. As with others, it touched me for the time it was there and then left me. When I took time off in England to write, my first instinct wasn't to mimic what I had seen on the stage. I wasn't beset by a mania to bring characters to life. To

have them speak like real people or to develop a plot or story suitable for the stage. For at the time what was this wooden O to me compared to the vasty fields of England and Ireland? To the characters and settings I saw every day on this European stage still rolling out before me?

Right from the beginning then it seems that my writerly ambitions were cut out for a very large and personal stage. The kind that a novel would have likely provided better than a drama. The lengthy letters I sent home that, along with the writing I did in England, took the place of the travel journal I started but didn't keep up testify to my desire to increase my powers of observation and to describe things as well as I could. But even while I was engaged in such writing, I was haunted by the difficulties I encountered as well as the niggling thought that I didn't truly enjoy writing long descriptive passages. This was in keeping with my reading where I tended to become impatient with them while delighting in finely drawn characters, precipitous actions, and strong verbal or non-verbal exchanges. So much so that, as I see it now, there was this unresolved tension between the lure of the one and the lure of the other. Between the immediacy of the dramatic and the spaciousness of the epic. Between the emotionally charged action and conflict that rules more easily in the first and the adventurous or quietly contemplative that rules in the second.

But be it novel or play, what was required was an interesting story to be told or scene to be developed. When I looked into myself, however, I saw nothing but my own story and some interesting scenes from it. At the same time I knew that a bare telling of this or that was fine as anecdote but poor as art. Poor as the most carefully circumscribed and thorough investigation of imaginative, emotional, and intellectual life. Poor as the most scrupulously defined part taken towards the undefined whole. And poor as the submersion of the ego in the greater forces, circumstances, and conditions that play kaleidoscopically with all aspects of human awareness.

I think now that my hypertrophied concern for preserving my integrity was a sort of blockage that, had I been willing to compromise it in the imaginative sense (or had I known how to), would have been a spur to creativity. To take this hypertrophied concern and plant it in a less strong or enfeebled character and then to imagine this same character falling down, suffering, struggling, and then finally winning or losing out in this area – this is something I think would have been ideal for me as a writer of novels.

But I only can say this in retrospect. Nothing at the time came close to stirring me in this direction. Had I been more sensitive to the possibilities of

exploiting this formula, I might have seized upon the model or type that came my way in Belfast. She was a woman in her late twenties from Australia and, as I remember, a professional person. Two of the most striking things about her – at least on a first reckoning – were that, first, she was quite ugly and, second, she had been travelling around the world for two years. She had already trekked across Asia and Africa and only begun Europe some months before.

In addition to being impressed by this travelling feat (she was still holding to her original plan of spending three years abroad), I was impressed by her mature bearing, her cultural interests, and her hospitable manner. In fact, it was mostly due to her that I ended up seeing my first stage plays. One of these was at a professional theatre and the other was at the university. It so happened that, at the very time we met in the Belfast youth hostel, there was a week-long film and theatre festival at the university. If it hadn't been for her, I quite likely would have left the city without going to it.

During the several days that I stayed at the hostel and attended this festival, I spent a good deal of time with her and her travelling companion. The latter was a Canadian about my own age whom she had hooked up with only a month or two before. It was somewhere in County Clare that their paths had crossed. He himself told me he had been working on a farm at the time and that, although he was paid very poorly, he had been driven to this expedience when he ran out of money.

It didn't take me long to suspect that she had been paying his way ever since. Discreet as they both were, some of his remarks betrayed a certain shallowness. But be that as it may, it is her character and not his that would have served me creatively.

That is, as I see it now, she was well aware that she was paying for his company. She knew the situation was bad and unwholesome. That it wasn't much different from hiring a gigolo. That it wouldn't last and she would be hurt. That buying the illusion of having a Prince Charming at her side was to falsify and make a mockery of her heart's desire.

I would venture to say that whatever story I could have wrought from this perception of her would have put all my playwriting efforts to shame. Even if I hadn't been able to pull it off altogether or even if I had written some terrible parts, it still would have been better than anything I attempted dramatically. The main difference between what I could have done with such a character for a novel and what I didn't do with my dramatic characters or,

more properly, caricatures of dramatic characters is that I would have been able to invest her with large pieces of myself. And if I had somehow managed to rise to the occasion and be reasonably competent, I would have been able to do so while maintaining the integrity of her character in its very slide or slippage. As much as I cared about myself then, I would have been able to care about her. As much as I had known what it is to maintain an illusion in spite of all contrary reasoning and opposed judgements, I would have been able to see into her nature. And where the primary difference lay, namely, that I had never tied my highest hope to my greatest weakness, there would have been the task of imagining myself a little less secure. So that I would have been able to say of her: *There but for the grace of God, go I.*

But if I didn't tie my highest hope to my greatest weakness, surely I tied it for a long time to artistic incompetence. And it seems to me now that this happened because I didn't recognize my best artistic impulses as stemming from this concern for personal integrity. It would have been necessary to tap into this vein of psychical ore, to mine and purify it and then work it out in combination with and even as a covering for baser metal before I could have claimed to have been an artist. As it was, I forewent this hard apprenticeship and took up a much longer and more indeterminate one. Obviously I didn't feel the pressure of time or circumstance as some do. Such as the proverbial consumptive poet or tortured soul. Rather I was much more the passionate observer of myself as a series of experiences, experiments, confrontations, and the like. And infused in all this was a sense of carving out for myself a quest or mission that would at least allow me to be a hero in my own eyes.

That I drifted towards playwrighting was in some sense in accordance with my natural inclinations and in some sense against them. In accordance with them as new experience and adventure and against them as the binding of myself to the interests and activities of others. The institution, the organization, and the group had always been for me partly intimidating and overshadowing affairs. Complex whirls forever spinning out new projects and strategically binding people together. Centrifugally and centripetally directed interests, excitement, and activity circling around some barely discernable vacuity. Their collective means and ends seemed to weigh greatly in the scheme of things but also to have less comprehension of this scheme including their own place in it. Such were my thoughts at least at some level. They were more or less representative of the intellectual side of me whereas the emotional and imaginative sides were mixed up with the usual earthly desires and pursuits. Once the playwrighting (I won't say the theatre) bug bit me, I imagined myself being swept along to glory as the result of one

supreme effort arising out of the narrow provincialism that often stalks the artistic community. It would rank me with the likes of a Tennessee Williams or an Arthur Miller. Already then I secretly condescended to people who, in truth, were much more theatre-competent and theatre-impassioned than I was.

My illusion then was this: there was some pure force in me that would overcome all obstacles and deliver me to the Promised Land of a dramatic masterpiece. But the latter never did happen and so incessantly stood as a kind of placeholder for the thing so out of reach it couldn't even be seen. And the consequence of all this, namely, that I fell so short for so long, has always brought to me a strange mix of being both humiliated and gratified. The first because I was so far from the great or extraordinary in playwrighting that I was even less than the mediocre. The second because I was at least persisting and at the same time holding on to a kind of backup notion. To a kind of hope in reserve that seemed to go beyond illusion. A utilitarian belief with respect to illusions, namely, that they could be ridden on until they were ridden out. Until all errancy and uncertainty suddenly became the highest hope redeemed.

What other way for me to go is there than this teleological talk that cleans up all past messiness and reorders it as the means to the present?

At the time I was writing bad dialogue with badly conceived characters and situations, I had enough of a life apart from all of this to ward off any feelings of being a failure. Not succeeding at what I wanted to succeed at most was, although surely a thorn in my side, mitigated not only by the constant hope I had that one day I would astound the world with a great play, but also by the contradictory feeling that I still hadn't found my proper path. Of course the first took up all the foreground in the beginning whereas the second found room as a psychological buffer or safety net. In the beginning I was quite active in the organization whose mission was to promote Manitoba plays and playwrights. I frequented meetings, took on some low-key responsibilities, attended workshops, and made an effort to learn as much as I could about the theatre. The niggling thought that I was handicapped in this by not being, in addition to my involvement in the playwrights association, an active working member of the theatre itself (how much better the prospects seemed for those who were actors or directors!) was counterbalanced by the thought that my overall strategy was one of not only developing myself artistically but also intellectually (and, if I daresay so, morally). Besides, as far as I was concerned, the play was the thing and the play, the great play would surely usher me into the heart of the theatrical



world once it had seen the light of day.

Such was the mixture of naivety and grandiose thoughts that both afflicted and uplifted me as a playwright. At the same time it was nothing so pathological that I wasn't aware – and sometimes almost depressingly so – of what ran counterpoint to it. This was the modest, low-key work of the playwrights association. The principal character of this work, as far as I could see, was a combination of everyone having their heads squarely on their shoulders and no one writing their dreams too large. Talk was largely confined to the politics and policies of government-sponsored art and, in relation to these, carving out a place for Manitoba playwrights. All in all these verbal forays and exchanges translated into a modest raising of funds, a modest raising of the profile of Manitoba plays and playwrights, and a modest obtaining and offering of various services. No higher aim or expectation was there than to make Manitoba theatres, and particularly the smaller ones, more receptive to Manitoba plays.

Somewhere in the heart of me I was dissatisfied with all this and wanted to grow large before anything else. Anything that seemed to move me in this direction took priority over practical concerns about increasing the overall chances of getting a play produced. Besides taking courses at university then, I busied myself with writing and what I thought would be a whole process of developing my skills as a playwright. As much as I may want to scoff at this now, I was deadly serious about it at the time.

So it was that I soon availed myself of a reading service that the playwrights association set up. A service mainly of benefit to its members in that it consisted of a pool of competent people who were hired to read and critique scripts. But what did this ultimately avail me as a playwright (and not simply as a member) when I was incompetent from beginning to end? Who was so bold or perspicacious or, for that matter, cruel as to tell me that not only this or that was wrong with my play but the length and breadth of it? Who would have been able to say to me then, as I have only been able to say to myself recently, that I wasn't sufficiently courageous as a playwright? That one doesn't deal effectively on the stage with a subject like incest by picking it up with tongs?

Others less artistically ambitious at least fulfilled what they set out to do. Their plays were put on stage but, truth to tell, I can't remember much that was great about them. No characters were created of the order of a Hamlet or an Oedipus or a Willy Loman. Nothing was so moving that it filled me with the feeling of a vast gulf between what they had accomplished and what I

was doing. And if all of this is unfair to them and their efforts, it is only to the degree that I now believe there was a gulf between what they had accomplished and what I hadn't. In truth, there was one writer who, coming on the scene at a time when I was no longer so involved with the playwrights association, struck me as brilliant. He wrote and performed one-man plays that were bawdy, funny, searching, sweeping, and even philosophical. If I had been less the sort of person who covets not only the high road but his own proper path, I surely would have gravitated towards him as my one chance of learning first-hand how to write for the theatre.

Thirteen years! How is it possible I could have spent so much time at what I did so badly? Over and over again the report card came in and there was a big F. Damned by faint praise or else given clear note that I had written nothing of merit. Actors and actresses taking their only delight in showing me how bad my characters were. Never moving one inch closer to the realization that my wide-ranging thoughts, however bounteous and potentially serviceable, should have never been introduced into the sanctuary of creativity except by a careful screening process and only by appointment. How much of the artist's self-discipline was lacking in me even in the midst of my most disciplined ways. How much I was missing that sense of perfecting the part so that it moves towards the whole and demands no more of it than what can be provided for this perfection.

Is it enough to say that for a long time I could view no other course for myself? No other writerly course or main direction in life? I don't know how else to explain my willingness to be such a poor student for so long at this school. To be the very inverse of a high school dropout almost to the point of parodying it. And yet even now it comes as a kind of balm to think that all those years of attending this school of hard knocks (harder than any I received in the proverbial school) have paid out at least some educational dividends. By integrating it with all the other courses I have taken, I'm able to think it was a long drawn-out lesson in humility, in patience, and in the rough honesty of the stage and its people at their best.

*Why then, you princes,  
Do you with cheeks abash'd behold our works,  
And call them shames? which are indeed nought else  
But the protractive trials of great Jove  
To find persistive constancy in men:  
The fineness of which metal is not found  
In fortune's love; for then the bold and coward,  
The wise and fool, the artist and unread,*

*The hard and soft, seemed all affined and kin.  
But in the wind and tempest of her frown,  
Distinction, with a broad and powerful fan,  
Puffing at all, winnows the light away;  
And what hath mass or matter, by itself  
Lies rich in virtue and unmingled.*

Often I thought that others were able to think in clear images while I could only think in broken images. Always there were others who understood better how things were organized. How the Manitoba Arts Council functioned or how to set up a constitution for the playwrights association or how to pull the various levers to get funding, office space, and recognition in other sectors. Always there were others who seemed to know better what they were about. For example, those who were fully oriented towards being entertainers so that they treated playwrighting as but one more arrow in their quiver. Or, from the other end, those who came from the outside like me but with sufficient talent to pass on to the playing field while I continued to watch from the sidelines.

How difficult it is to get the measure of the situation that one is fully in. Impossible, in fact, and this is the full measure of my present situation. When I look back at my playwrighting self, I think I know it better now than I knew it then because I know what followed it and I take this later development to be revealing of this self as not only what was intimately bound up with it but with all my other past selves.

Which is to say that, before the drive to write and, specifically, the drive to write plays came along, there were other drives that the first one failed to take in and transform. Such as the desire to be heroic or the desire to be a sort of universal man. Drives or desires that, were they to be dramatically sublimated in the most thorough and successful way, would have required that I had been nothing less than a modern-day Shakespeare. But I was so far from a masterly guidance coming from either within or without that I didn't even choose the material that probably would have worked best for me. Rather than a round of characters whom I didn't particularly care about (but imbedded in issues that I did), I needed one central character whom I admired. I needed the impetus and wherewithal to provide this character with all he needed in terms of action, setting, situation, and other characters to be what he properly should have been.

It is difficult to diagnose my mistake and even more difficult to diagnose it as a mistake. Had I been moderately successful as a playwright – and what

more could I have been? – I would have been held up even longer from cutting away from it as the once bright star now grown pale.

A case could be made that I was struck by a sort of wilful blindness that kept me on track as a writer even when it was the wrong track. During the time I was devoted to writing plays and even bad plays (though I didn't recognize them as such with quite the same zeal I do now), the usual bourgeois temptations never arose as an issue or as a reason to give up on my highest aims and aspirations. In fact they had about as much influence on me as the TV commercials I didn't watch. For neither did I ever purchase a TV nor accept one when it was offered me. TV-watching, commercials, and other such things symbolized for me a limited reach whereas I wanted to aim high. At the same time it would have been very hard to maintain this way of thinking, feeling, and going on in life if I hadn't been able to keep alive the hope that one day my efforts would pay off.

About halfway through my thirteen years of non-accomplishment as a playwright, I did totter in my hopes. I did entertain the idea of throwing in the towel and taking up teaching. But this potential drift away from my innate errancy and towards professionalism was cut short when I was no longer able to suspend the question of what the consequences of this move would be. The thought that I would be stricken for the rest of my life with a bad conscience was enough to make me see less evil in battering my head against the wall of playwrighting than in trying to live with a fractious and contrary one while teaching.

Such being the case, it was only by slow degrees that I came to the realization that, if I persisted further in this area of little reward and much punishment, I would be wasting my time irremediably.

It was a combination of three factors – giving up on the play I had been rewriting for many years, not being able to do anything with the abundance of notes I had for another one, and finding myself devoid of ideas for a third – that finally made me throw in the towel. In all human history I doubt whether anyone has spent so much time and energy on a piece of work so little deserving. What research didn't I undertake that had no proper bearing on what should have mattered most to me, namely, the internal and external life of my characters? All the wonder of the theatre is in this and particularly as the internal manifested solely through the external. Having no fixed story or plot, I should have started with one of my characters – the man or woman or girl – and built up everything else in order to reveal this character in all its facets. Then I would have been guaranteed a dramatic core guiding

how everything else should have been arranged. Oh, then I would have seen that everything that mattered about my male character was bound up in his subterfuge. Everything that had to do with where it could lead and what the short or long-term consequences of it might be. But instead of taking on this task and exposing a heart of darkness in its movements and effects, I brought in other intentions and manoeuvres that, while moving the play forward, scattered and scanted everything. This left only skeletons and scarecrows as characters and gibberish as dialogue.

My principal mistake was that, in order to generate conflict, I made both the mother and girl hardy resistant types. Such a move foreclosed on the possibility of having evil enter the picture in the way that a small weed, when left alone and unhindered, grows large. As a consequence, the lure and enticement of spanking the girl never went much further than mere prurience. Both for me as the writer and the character called Victor. Once again I stayed at the soft-porn level and didn't push on to sadistic possession and repeated violations of the most ruthless sort.

As opposed to the evil I knew was in me at least potentially and yet I shied away from imaginatively, there was what I tried to capture in a second play that never got off the ground. Something of the order of the cosmic wanted to be registered here and, although I made an attempt at this, it was so amateurish that I'm ashamed to think I was nearly forty at the time. What prompted me to resort to a stage devil and thereby jump outside the particular manifestation of evil I had in my sights? What made me so unthinkingly reach for an artifice like this when, despite whatever technical advantages or theatrical effects it offered, it took the demonic out of the psychotic where it properly belonged? What kept me from once again digging into the principal character and seeing that everything had to be seen through his eyes, heard through his ears, and thought through his head if the devil were to have any proper business onstage?

What kept me from doing the study of a charming young man, full of high hopes and high spirits, who at bottom was a coward? What? What? Did it have something to do with secretly envying him? His popularity? His success with women? Was this secret envy of mine somehow a stumbling block? A psychological distraction? A thing ultimately more interesting and more of a concern to me than his moral and physical cowardice? For there was little of this cowardice I could relate to. Even now, when I think that I was rather cowardly as a playwright, I still can't get anywhere near to this character's pusillanimity. Yet I was certainly aware that this double-whammy weakness, mental and physical, a far cry from my own petty concerns, could fuel a

powerful drama. By watching myself too closely, did I make it impossible to block out things that had no pertinence to the work at hand? Or to second-rate them such that they could have at least been taken up as elements subordinate to the main action or theme? Otherwise I might have transferred my personal preoccupations to a character who would have been envious or admiring of the hero even to the point of emulating him. Indeed, it seems to me now that to have such a character doubling as the one who tells the story of the psychotic ride through hell would have been the right move. At least this friend would have had a reason to tell the story whereas my stage devil had no rhyme or reason for doing so.

### **Hooked on Hell in the Land of Golden Promises**

*[Darkness with spotlight on the stage. The devil enters in a stylishly cut business suit. He limps forward a few paces, betraying a congenital deformity of his left foot.]*

*Devil:* I am both imposter and impersonator, real and unreal, depending upon who you are and how you look at it – evil, that is. Myth, magic, miracle: it would seem that for the vast majority nowadays my name sounds an equivalent note of unreality.

The devil as pedagogue. Apparently the soapbox syndrome was afflicting me even at this stage. How is it possible I didn't ask myself why the devil he was casting himself in this role? Couldn't I see that, if he were truly turning away from his traditional one of imposter and impersonator, it would have to be because he was planning something new? Yet so far was I from envisioning an earth-shaking event of demonic proportions that the play begins to falter almost immediately.

*[He pulls a cigar out of his inside breast pocket and lights it. He puffs at it until it is going satisfactorily.]*

*Devil:* And yet I stand before you, imposing my presence, my personality, my reality as it were on this lame actor who — uh, but perhaps you think the only way of viewing the matter is from the other side. The rational side. Well, so be it. I leave the rational world well enough alone these days. And rational people for that matter.

All the mistake of the play is caught here because almost immediately the devil holds back on a presumed bid to equate himself with the real and the

rational. The opening lines therefore lose all weight and significance except as a broad suggestion that he is much more operative in the world than is commonly thought. But this itself is hardly new and so, when all is said and done, he proves to be a lame devil. He starts to bore rather than to intrigue. What other way could it be given that he is not supposed to be a clown or comedian and therefore cannot even take advantage of the crass symbolism of his onstage presence? Why did I keep to this devil character so long if not that I was blind to what I knew perfectly well, namely, that spectacle ranks well below plot and character? Blind then not as a thinker but as an artist following his bent as a non-artist. All the psychotic hallucinations that had tormented my brother in Los Angeles and Palm Springs filled up my thoughts and intrigued me to no end. Transferring them to the stage seemed a marvellous thing and, if handled properly, no doubt would have been. Yet the very fragility of his psyche, so outwardly robust, somehow didn't register as what should have been my primary concern. It was as if my curiosity in this area came to an end as soon I could conceptualize it. As soon as I had puzzled it out very much as a psychologist would have. But to go the way of recreating my brother's character and experiences in a drama required some level of commitment that I couldn't reach.

Too eager to tell the story rather than to show it was the problem here as well as elsewhere. Instead of revealing the inside of my characters as a movement outwards that both influenced and was influenced by events, I had these same characters simply turned to and fro, buffeted back and forth by external forces. As a consequence, they acted not as autonomous beings but as mere pawns of the playwright who set them up in their world. Rather than being committed to their personal destinies, they gave every sign of being merely his hirelings. From what second or third-rate agency of my mind they came I'm not sure. All I only know is I made a cardinal mistake by trying to fabricate them of a piece rather than draw them from characters that already existed either in literature or in life. So it was that I ended up caring little for them and, as a further consequence, for the story that these imaginative starvelings could only render trite, nondescript, and not infrequently obscure. This was the devil that had been confounding me right from the beginning. And when I finally hit upon a good story, one drawn from real life, I couldn't resist sending myself to the devil by sending this devil right up on stage to tell it.

It afflicts me now to think that I botched up a play that deserved to see the light of day. Certainly this wasn't the case with my other botched-up plays. The main difference is that I finally had interesting characters who simply needed to be set down in a dramatic context that itself was already

provided. Not that this would have made the main action – the delayed reaction of one character to the marital infidelity of another – any less problematic. Evil, psychosis, demonic hallucinations, the breakdown of personal identity – all these elements were caught up in it.

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1 And even studying Bertolt Brecht didn't help. For I was didactic not in any strictly political or moral sense but, as I realize now, in the vague, heterogeneous, and errant way of truth-telling.

2 But what about those dramatists who claim otherwise? Who speak of having a message in their play? Then it must surely be admitted that, for those who wish to regulate or limit this complexity, there is no strict opposition between saying and showing. For it can always be the case that, among the things said that are highly revealing of various characters and situations, there is the *one* observation or remark or speech or even series of speeches that, from an interpretative standpoint, puts things into perspective most tellingly.