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## After the 1950's: Looking Back at William Inge

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After the 1950's: Looking Back at William Inge

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I met William Inge once when I visited a friend who was undergoing psychoanalytic treatment at the Austin Riggs Clinic, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1962 as I was on the verge of my first teaching job at Boston University and the first stage of my interest in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic criticism (*Bus Stop* (215)).

I mention this personal anecdote because there is an “intimate” quality about Inge’s plays. His characters, though “created” and “shaped,” never lose touch with our sense that they inhabit a familiar world. His characters are not so much “larger than life” as they are extracted from life and set before us as “specimens.”

We might say that Inge’s plays have a “scientific modesty” about them in the sense that dramatic evidence is rarely exaggerated (though the “suicide” in *Dark at the Top of the Stairs* and Doc’s post-binge tirade are counter-examples as well as the contents of his bold novel, *Good Luck, Miss Wykoff*).

The evidence speaks **authentically** for itself in a certain sense: selected and placed, but not given linguistic intensity (Tennessee Williams), political import (Arthur Miller), ideological inflection (O’neils), sustained psychological nudity, a radical unmasking of the self (Albee, Shephard), or mythic resonance (O’Neill), to name some of the writers with whom he might be compared thematically.

And it may be precisely this “modesty,” **fidelity to facts and style of the period**, that has kept his plays in the wings of contemporary American theater production. In a period (post-1960’s) of Experimentalism (Postmodernism), Erotic Exhibitionism, *faux* TV therapy (Dr. Phil, Jerry Springer), William Inge’s work may seem to be a little on the “lite” side. Of the heartland, his plays speak to the heart in the “plain” terms that were

dominant during the “silent generation.” Harold Clurman speaks to some of these issues (Voss, 274.)

#### Meeting William Inge (1962)

When I visited my somewhat literary friend at the fashionable Austin Riggs Clinic, he introduced me to Inge, and we had lunch together after which he suggested that we walk around the grounds.

I told him that I just had begun to teach a Freshman Composition course as a TA at Boston University, my first year of teaching, and was quite nervous about it. He told me that he had taught English during the period 1937-43 and was confident – I wasn’t sure why – that I could do a good job.

If he had been “a desperate captive in a teaching career he never really wanted (Voss, 106),” he was generous enough to say some encouraging words to me. He probably wanted to spare me some of the pain he had experienced at Washington University in St. Louis, some of the “power to hurt” that institutions could inflict (Voss, 271).

“After all,” he said, “the most important thing is to encourage students who lack confidence and to help them bring out the best in themselves in a world that often is harsh and rejecting.”

These words didn’t seem especially profound to me at the time, but now that I have taught for almost a half-century, I understand the depth of the comment. And when I recently read *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* (the one play of his that I saw produced on Broadway), a few lines took me back to his comment. When Cora learns about Sammy’s

suicide, she says to Flirt about Mrs. Ralston's anti-Semitic remark, "She probably sounded like the voice of the world" (293).

And in a stage note after Cora – mother as strong moral realist – tries to comfort Sonny (Sammy's double to some degree) about being bullied, the author writes: "Sonny...finds himself confronted by the jeers...which sounds like the voices that have plagued mankind from the beginning of time" (295).

It's clear that Inge's sensitivity to "voices" had something to do with his development as a playwright? His work favors the aural over the visual, including many references to music: Schubert (29, 45); "That Ole Black Music" (185); Chopin nocturne (251). It occurs to me to say that there is an Aaron Copeland quality to Inge's plays – a lyrical (45) sadness (with overtones of "Moonglow"?).

Without fanfare or hyperbole, typical of his style as a man and playwright (he dressed and spoke plainly), William Inge had told me something sad, wise, and important. Sadness is never far away from Inge's psychological imagination. Millie says to Hal after she has read a "*whole*" book, "There wasn't much story. It's just the way you feel when you read it – kind of warm inside and sad and amused – all at the same time (114). This follows an earlier reference to Carson McCullers's 1950's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

{There is something Wordsworthian about Inge's sensibility. I thought of Wordsworth's phrase in "Tintern Abbey" when I read this line – "The still, sad music of humanity." And, of course, Inge took a title from Wordsworth's "Ode" ("Intimations of Immortality from Reflections of Early Childhoods") where "splendor in the grass" is linked with "the soothing thoughts that spring/out of human suffering."

Kazan's direction brings out a Fitzgeraldian sense of loss (which fits in with the flapper ambience of the movie and a story about a psychotic breakdown) rather than a Wordsworthian one of consolation. And Inge refers to the "great Romantic tradition" in *Bus Stop* (196).}

There is a deep connection in Inge's plays between sadness and loneliness and the ways in which small groups of lonely people with unfulfilled longings meet in a common desolate place and manage to establish bonds through a growing awareness, however unconscious, of their shared unhappiness.

*Bus Stop* captures this dynamic perfectly, and the scenic design as described by Inge (155) provides an Edward Hopper-like ambience in which in which sadness is given an aesthetic shape – a "dingy establishment" which, nonetheless, has a "cozy" feeling because of the Franklin stove that radiates "all the heat of which it is capable." Its being center-stage is important, I think, as an organizing emphasis.

That qualification – "of which it is capable" – is a hedge against the tendency towards sentimentality and sentimental resolutions in Inge's plays – including the final hook-up between Bo and Cherie. The play ends, after all, with both Grace alone and Virgil "left out in the cold" (222).

Inge's emotional and intellectual world is one defined by oscillations between anxiety/depression and "Oklahoma"-style optimism, between Dr. Lyman's evolutionary despair (191) and Cherie's embrace of Bo ("Why, I'd go anywhere in the world with ya now, Bo. Anywhere at all (217).

Inge navigates between the poles of aloneness and “togetherness” in different ratios and levels of intensities in each major play. This rhythm itself captures some essential ambivalence in American life. In an “atomic age” (42) and an age of “anxiety” (263), familial and romantic bonds become especially important (see Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety* 205).

My friend, a Princeton drop-out and heir to a railroad trust, told me that Inge was at Riggs to be treated for Depression. This surprised me since I assumed in the naiveté of young manhood that significant literary reputation made one euphoric. As we walked around the elegant grounds, themselves a punishing contradiction for anyone suffering from melancholia, I asked him how his writing was going. Not the most tactful question, to be sure.

“It’s always a struggle,” he said, “and it gets harder if you’ve had some success.” I had the good sense, even though I wasn’t a Midwesterner, not to ask him why.

I was reminded of his comment when I read his Introduction to *Four Plays by William Inge* (Random House, 1958) where he says: “Once we find the fruits of success, the taste is nothing like what we had anticipated” (vi). No degree of acceptance as a dramatist could have convinced him, it seems, of his essential worth as a person.

Rejection was a pre-existent state of mind for him.

#### *Dark: Inge and Williams*

If for Blanche in *Streetcar*, “desire” is the “opposite” of “Death” (Scene Nine) as a **core dialectic**, we might say – taking *Dark* as a whole – then the family is the opposite of loneliness and social isolation with attendant feelings of

insignificance in Inge's plays. (The importance of "home" as a theme emerges immediately in *My Son is a Splendid Driver*.)

Both Williams and Inge grasped the "tragic loneliness of individuals" in the aftermath of World War II (Brooks Atkinson, "Foreward," *New Voices in the American Theatre*, The Modern Library: New York, 1955); but each dealt with it in a different way.

Forms of aloneness have a long history in American culture and literature, but this theme surfaced dramatically and in family drama after WWII. After two decades in which collective entities took precedence over the individual -- socialism (democratic and totalitarian), national defense and militarism -- American writers put the spotlight on the "person."

We can add to this the movement to cities after the war that war-production made possible and the consequent growth of suburbs in which people felt isolated (and longed for the cohesion of pre-war "town" life, as in *Our Town*).

Linda famously expresses this shift of emphasis in *Death of a Salesman* when she says, "Attention must be finally paid to such a person" (Penguin Books, 1961, 44). Lola says something quite similar about the death of Sheba in her dream: "It made me cry, doc. No one paid any attention (70)."

Marlon Brando's t-shirt (15, 141), acting (170), and the "method" of the Actor's Studio captured the struggle of individuals trying to express themselves in a conformist period of adjustment (the 1945 *The Best Years of Our Lives*). A new era seemed to call for a somewhat new American language after the disasters of war (Hiroshima, Auschwitz) and the end of one version of humanity (George Steiner, *Language and Silence*). In France, some of these issues were formulated in Existential terms.



**More needs to be said and understood about this aspect of the post-war period.**

[Blanche's introspective, lyrical, and nostalgic soliloquies can be contrasted with the quick-silver exchanges between Millie and Madge (102-103). Inge's world never retreats very far from a social arena.

His characters don't retreat into "thick" soliloquies. There is a Chekhovian ordinariness to the dialogues that yield "nuggets of illumination" (Holden)]

The need for relatedness is expressed by Cora when she says to her daughter: "Daughter, when you start getting older, you'll find yourself getting lonely and you'll want someone; someone who'll hear you if you get sick and cry out in the night; and someone to give you love and let you give your love back to him in return" (289).

When Cora contemplates moving to Oklahoma City as a way to solve her marital problems, Reenie says emphatically about their "small Oklahoma town," "*This is home. This is* (250)."

When Sammy, the Jewish character, says in Act Two, "Well, I guess I don't really have a home...Mrs. Lacey" (266), Lottie says, "Well – I just never knew anyone who didn't have a home. Do you spend your whole life in military academies?" (267).

Sammy's suicide (one is reminded of Willa Cather's "Paul's Case") may seem a melodramatic response to Mrs. Ralston's anti-Semitism (though perhaps no more so than the suicide of Blanche's "boy", 70), "She didn't intend for her daughter to dance with a Jew" (293).

As painful as that would be to hear for any young person as vulnerable as Sammy (his stuttering is a clue, 265), we can moderate the sense of exaggeration, by connecting

Sammy's suicide to his homelessness and mother's cold indifference to his death: "Go on and have the funeral in Oklahoma City...she wouldn't be able to come for it because she was working."

And we need to remember as well that Sonny has recited Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" speech, and he has threatened, however childish, to kill himself because he has not been allowed to go to the movies (which echoes the Hollywood theme of escapism, including an escape from **real** family responsibilities. Cora is the antithesis of Sammy's mother.

The problem is, of course, that family life is difficult and conflicted, and it doesn't present itself as an easy counter-balance to loneliness and dislocation. Cora's marital battle registers this difficulty. For the play to work, we must feel at the end that Rubin has a reason to return and Cora has a reason to let him come back.

A strong, but subdued, sexual current connects them from the beginning of the play – erotic energies, however controlled in contrast to the vulgar hi-jinx of Jerry Springer, are always buzzing in Inge's plays. The physical bond between Cora and Rubin's physical attachment is contrasted with Cora's frigidity and inability to have an orgasm, "Nothing ever really happened to me while it was going on" (281).

[There is a version of a Freudian struggle (*Civilization and Its Discontents*) in all of Inge's plays: a strong erotic impulse, often repressed, threatens to overturn a polite and "civilized" (164) social setting; or looking at in the other direction, we might say that a highly sublimated – we might say "literary" - world-view encounters the realities of lust

which threatens to destroy it. In Inge's world the normative family can't contain "hidden sexual longings" (*My Son Is a Splendid Driver* 32).

In "Come Back, Little Sheba," Doc's attraction to a "world of ethereal beauty which he never knew existed" and to "some ideal of beauty"

(29) is in stark contrast to the "pagan spirits" and "primitive rhythm"

(22) of the radio performance of "Ta-boo" (22), a somewhat mock-version of Vachel Lindsey "Congo" or O'Neill's *Hairy Ape*. It's not surprising that Doc and Lola have a rather Oedipal relation ("daddy," "baby"). The magnetic attraction between Turk, a "sated Bacchus" (45), and Marie throws him off the wagon.

In *Bus Stop*, Dr. Lyman's love of Shakespeare – his eagerness to quote the bard and to play the role of Romeo – is undermined by his apparent propensity for "getting involved with young girls" (216). Dr. Lyman may be a Rhodes Scholar and a Harvard Ph.D., but like another Oxford don, Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, 1832-98), he lives in a world of infantile fantasies.

Like Doc, he is at war with himself as well as the conventional social world, and like Doc, he falls off the wagon when he knows that his fantasies are in stark contrast with the circumstance in which he finds himself. Both doctors cure themselves, if only momentarily, by acting out their hidden and forbidden needs and purging themselves of their failed dream-worlds. There are no Walpurgisnachts (Albee) in Inge's plays, but there are modest breakthroughs.

In Inge's plays, the rhythms of sustained ambivalences serve as the equivalent of "high drama." If asked, what happens in his plays, one is tempted to say, "tension and

momentary release.” Characters are not destroyed or reborn. They have a moment of calm and comfort and the hope that some form of domestic tranquility will continue.]

[*Picnic* provides another example in which eros breaks through – “The dance has something of the nature of a primitive rite” (120) – but I think we are apprehensive about Madge’s impulsive (132) decision to join Hal in Tulsa. We understand that the lure of the “train whistle in the distance” (101) is more powerful than the promise of a Howard-Rosemary type marriage ‘in a small Kansas town.’”

But we fear, I think, that her happiness, or rapture, will be short-lived and give way, doubtless, to a rupture. Our heart tells us that she should go; but wisdom, however conventional, would urge her to stay and marry the rich boy. One way or other, Inge puts familial and social coherence at the center of his plays.]

And of equal, if not greater importance, Rubin has no place to go. He is a “harness” salesman (229) in the age of the automobile. “Raised on a ranch,” he is a son of the West. A son of pioneers, he is “a stranger in the very land I was born in” (299). When he loses his job, he has to admit that “harness salesmen are...things of the past” (297). He has to admit, an augury of Bob Dylan, that “Times are changin’” (297). Only Cora understands what this means to and for him. His need for her now and her understanding yields to mutual compassion and a renewal of love.

7.

My only vivid memory of *Dark* (which I saw produced on Broadway) after a half-century were these lines, and rereading the play a few weeks ago, I was puzzled that I hadn’t recalled more painfully the fate of Sammy Goldenbaum.

I can attribute this to a few factors: still lingering suppression of (and amnesia about) the Holocaust (*The Diary of Anne Frank* inaugurated a shift of cultural response to the Shoah – first published, 1947; Broadway production, ; movie version, 1959); the highly assimilationist ethos of the 1950's; and my awareness, perhaps, that my own “silent” **generation** (the 1950's) would be short lived -- as it was, giving way to the Beats and the counter-culture of the 1960's.

For Inge, like other writers of the 1950's, the family was the primary institution of human development. The emphasis shifted in the 1960's towards communal and political forms of social organization, to say nothing of the denial of the possibility of any form of social coherence (Theatre of the Absurd). In the light of the Viet Nam war protest movement, Inge's work seemed to be of minor importance.

Conclusion: Critical History and Possibilities of Revival

Quaint words: There are many “corny” words in Inge's plays: “a peck of fun”; “Howdy”; “darn”; “Hot damn”; “raise Ned” (?), etc. If these words seemed a part of a limited cultural universe in the 1960's, enough time has passed for them now to be heard as historical echoes – markers of an earlier, but not less complex, period.

Mega-drama: As outsize techno-violence and fantasy fill the large and small screens, modesty of scale may become increasingly attractive to a discriminating audience.

Otherness: At a critical moment when marginality and otherness have become central to academic and intellectual life, William Inge's plays may find new audiences of young people searching for unique identities. Sit-coms confront young viewers today

with images not unlike the “togetherness ads” of Madison Avenue was for the “rebels without a cause in the 1950’s.

Science and cooperation: Now that literary criticism is turning away from various forms of non-essentialism and the arbitrary (a world only of signification without signifieds; see Pierre Bayard, *How To Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*) towards an age of empathy (see **note**), Inge’s emphasis on the need for the coherence of family and town, to put it simply, may be viewed at with greater sympathy.

As neuro-science, developmental psychology, and evolutionary anthropology begin to explore the roots of altruism (see **note**), Robert Brustein’s 1958 indictment of Inge – “a gross oversimplification of life: everything is tidily resolved in the matriarchal bosom of marriage and family values” (Voss, 182) – may lose its power to hurt Inge’s reputation.

Our transition from an age of Cold War technology to the innovations of the Information epoch (from Television to Twitter et al.) may provide analogies to the shift from “harness” to “automobile” (*Dark* 297)

and thus make Inge’s plays relevant at a symbolic level.

An advocate of *The Theatre of Revolt* (1964), Brustein was more interested in the “alienation effect” than he was in the healing powers of deep relationships – however much an emotional price Inge’s characters pay for sustaining those relationships – when he savaged Inge’s plays (Voss, 181-182).

We may be, one hopes, at the the beginning of the end of the age of alienation.

**Note:** see Natalie Angier, “The Biology Behind the Milk of Human Kindness,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2009, D2; Nicholas Wade, “We May Be Born With an

Urge to Help,” *The New York Times* Dec. 1, 2009, D1, D6; Patricia Cohen, “Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know That You Know” (“Literary scholars explore the brain as it processes fiction”), *The New York Times*, April 1, 2010, C1, C7.)

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