

THE PRODIGAL SON, MR. DEMILLE, NORMA  
DESMOND, BILLY WILDER, CLAUDE MONET, ET AL.

He runs into Billy Wilder, the director, at the Paramount lot, and they start to chat about the state of American cinema and how life on the big screen has grown dangerously accustomed to itself. It's like putting on weight over the years, one says, and not noticing what a burden the body has become. Both men are intrigued by the notion of coming back from the dead to recount one's ordinary life. They assume that there are captive ears for this out there, anonymous listeners with equally ordinary lives. The relevance of any one thing is relative. Only relativity is *always* relevant. Both men have an ear to the ground, as they say even now that the expression has lost its luster. The ground will do although other surfaces are safer and more reliable. What they need is a hook, another expression that now and again finds its way to the surface of our vocabulary. Billy suggests a shot from the bottom of the pool, looking up. On the surface, like one of these dormant expressions of our vernacular, a body floats. Beyond it, the usual characters one would expect at the scene of any suspicious death. They appear a bit more distorted than the floating body, and the mansion in the background is as hazy as those Houses of Parliament Monet painted over and over. In some variations, fog dominates the composition. This should not be an impediment. The key to understanding the paintings is to know that they are all *about* buildings, that the presence of buildings is not particularly crucial.