

Trees, Woods and Literature – 31

For three days we went out and climbed the hillside, planting the hundreds of seedlings out of the pail, and finally, with some help, six thousand of them. Inge, ... carefully set roots in the slits I was cutting with a flat spade. From the middle of Europe she has brought this reverence for the consecration of such moments in life when the consciousness of time's flow is supreme. And twenty-five years later our ankle-high seedlings are dense sixty-foot trees with stems thicker than telegraph poles...

I have lived more than half my life in the Connecticut countryside, all the time expecting to get some play or book finished so I can spend more time in the city, where everything is happening. There is something about his forty-year temporary residence that strikes me funny now. If only we could stop murdering one another we could be a wonderfully humorous species. My contentment discontents me when I know that little happens here that I don't make happen, except the sun coming up and going down and the leaves emerging and dropping off and an occasional surprise like the recent appearance of coyotes in the woods. There is more unbroken forest from Canada down to here than there was even in Lincoln's youth, the farms having gradually vanished, and here is even the odd bear, they say, a wanderer down from the north, and now those coyotes. I have seen them. They have a fixed smug grin, as though they just stole something. And they cannot be mistaken for dogs, whom they otherwise resemble, because of their eyes, which look at you with a blue guilt but no conscience, a mixture of calculation and defensive distrust that domestication cured in dogs thousands of years ago.

And so the coyotes are out here earnestly trying to arrange their lives to make more coyotes possible, not knowing that it is my forest, of course. And I am in this room from which I can sometimes look out at dusk and see them warily moving through the barren winter trees, and I am, I suppose, doing what they are doing, making myself possible and those who come after me. At such moments I do not know whose land this is that I own, or whose bed I sleep in. In the darkness out there they see my light and pause, muzzles lifted, wondering who I am and what I am doing here in this cabin under my light. I am mystery to them until they tire of it and move on, but the truth, the first truth probably, is that we are all connected, watching one another. Even the trees.

From the autobiography *TIMEBENDS A Life* by Arthur Miller (pp 598-599), Grove Press New York, 1987.

Arthur Miller was born in Manhattan in 1915. He came of age during the Great Depression and had to work his way through college at the University of Michigan, from whence he graduated in 1938 with a bachelor's degree in English. He worked at a variety of writing and other jobs, before building a studio in Roxbury, Connecticut, in 1948. It was there he wrote his famous play *Death of a Salesman*,

which premiered on Broadway in early 1949. It was acclaimed by the critics, became a huge commercial success (running for 742 performances) and won many awards.

Miller's next play - *The Crucible* - subsequently to become his most famous - was first performed in early 1953 on Broadway. It is based on the 1692 Salem witch trials in the US, and was influenced by the blacklisting of colleagues by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) during the McCarthy era. Miller was himself questioned by HUAC in 1956 and was convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to name names. He was fined \$500, sentenced to thirty days in prison, blacklisted, and disallowed a US passport. The conviction was lifted shortly afterwards by the court of appeals.

In 1965 Miller was elected the first American president of International PEN, a position he held for four years. He continued writing plays and other work, up his death at Roxbury, beside the plantation he describes in the extract, in early 2005.

Arthur Miller is widely considered to be one of the greatest dramatists of the twentieth century, among the likes of Eugene O'Neill, Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, and Tennessee Williams.

His interest in trees and forestry is evident from the extract, as well as in the caption to a photograph in *TIMEBENDS: Preparing to plant six thousand pines and firs on a barren Connecticut hillside*, which sees him seated atop a John Deere tractor, ready for action. Apparently Miller received advice on the planting from a state forester and explained in an interview: *There is a hillside within sight of the house, a swampy area with hummocks and a lot of stone. It's not very handsome to look at. The farmer who owned the land before me and the farmer's forebears turned their backs on this impossible land, which was not even good enough for grazing. We decided to plant the trees, basically for aesthetic reasons. We got the seedlings from a state nursery and planted them on 8- to 10-foot centers.*

(Selection and note by Lia Coille)