“Moving inward as well as north”: The Historical Imagination in Arthur Miller’s The Crucible and Timebends.

Douglas Tallack∗

Abstract: Arthur Miller, one of the most admirable of Americans to come out of the “American century”, died in 2005, aged 89. In the UK, at least, his work has undergone a revival and the themes of his great plays remain resonant, even though, in many respects, they are historically specific. The relationship between literature and history – whether conceived as a symbolist or allegorical relationship - together with an instance of the past invading the present, are brought out in a compelling episode in Miller’s autobiography, Timebends, and offer a way of talking about those inter-connections in The Crucible.

Key words: American literature, Arthur Miller

Timebends (1987), by Arthur Miller, is a compelling autobiography, not least because it tells many stories besides Miller’s own. Of course, this is true, to some extent, of all autobiographies, and expansively so when playwrights and novelists recount their lives and, in the process, also re-tell the stories of how their characters came to be. As a public intellectual, though, Miller’s career was interwoven, more than most writers, with the times in which he lived, and with the bending back of time upon itself that, in addition, interests the historical imagination. In common, I am sure, with many readers of Timebends - a book that has probably been read or read again by many admirers of Arthur Miller, following his death earlier this year - I could not wait for Miller to say something about how he came to write The Crucible (1953). As an allegory, Miller’s play itself bends time, taking us back to the Salem witchcraft episode, only to ask us to reflect on McCarthyism, the drama of his and his country’s own “middle of the journey”, to borrow the title of Lionel Trilling’s novel about fellow-travelling with communism. The historical resonances continue, because, in Timebends, Miller returns to Salem and McCarthyism by recalling that his interest in Salem in 1692 was aroused by another allegorical use of that shocking episode in American Colonial history. Marion Starkey’s The Devil in Massachusetts was published in 1949 and is a study of Nazism that uses the Salem episode to chart the aetiology of mass hysteria:

I had known about the Salem witchcraft phenomenon since my American history class at Michigan, but it had remained in mind as one of those inexplicable mystifications of the long-dead past when people commonly believed that the spirit could leave the body, palpably and visibly. … As though it had been ordained, a copy of Marion Starkey’s book The Devil in Massachusetts fell into my hands, and the bizarre story came back as I had recalled it, but this time in remarkably well organized detail. (Timebends 330)

Miller’s account of the genesis of The Crucible tells us that he found a way to write about the very recent past of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), via a double allegory, first of the 1930s in Germany through Marion Starkey’s example, and then of the late seventeenth-century in New England:

But gradually, over weeks, a living connection between myself and Salem, and between Salem and Washington, was made in my mind – for whatever else they might be, I saw that the [HUAC] hearings in Washington were profoundly and even avowedly ritualistic. … - an act of contrition done not in solemn privacy but out in the public air. (Timebends 331)

∗ Douglas Tallack is Professor of American Studies and Pro-Vice-Chancellor at the University of Nottingham, UK. Among his publications are The Nineteenth-Century American Short Story; Twentieth-Century America; Critical Theory: A Reader; Literary Theory at Work; and City Sites: Multi-Media Essays on New York and Chicago, the last three as editor. He has twice won the Arthur Miller Prize for the best American Studies article of the year. His forthcoming monograph is New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York (Oxford: Berg, 2005), and he is editor of a series of electronic books on Internationalisation/Globalization, sponsored by Universitas 21 and to be published by Melbourne University Press.
Miller’s autobiography gives us a vital, though not a fresh, perspective on *The Crucible*. From the outset, the contemporary references have been part of the context of that play about Colonial New England. However, it is worth commenting further upon how history, but also geography, intersect to form the “living connection”, as Miller calls it. It was a connection, above all, Miller explains, between himself, insofar as he feared he was about to follow others and appear before HUAC, and “the central image” of an individual, John Proctor, who would become the hero of *The Crucible*, forming in his mind as he contemplated writing a play about the Salem witchcraft trials. In April 1952, Miller set off from Washington to Salem, to do archive work in the records of the court that convicted those accused of witchcraft. The journey would transport him back to Salem in 1692, but, on the way, he visited the house of film-director, Elia Kazan, in Connecticut. Miller paraphrases Kazan’s situation in the McCarthy “witch-hunts”, as described to him while they walked in the woods near to Kazan’s house:

The story, simple and by now routine, took but a moment to tell. He had been subpoenaed [to appear in front of HUAC] and had refused to cooperate but had changed his mind and returned to testify fully in executive session, confirming some dozen names of people he had known in his months in the Party so long ago. He felt better now, clearer about everything. Actually, he wanted my advice, almost as though he had not yet done what he had done. Confirmation was what he needed; after all, he had no sympathies with the Communists, so why should he appear to be withholding his testimony? (Timebends 333)

Miller is troubled by the eeriness of what was happening in a sub-section of American society, in which information was becoming dangerous, both to have, and to be used against one. Miller considers the possibility that his friend might be a source of information on Miller’s own attendance at meetings of Communist Party writers and intellectuals. The low-point of the short visit comes as he leaves for Salem. Kazan’s wife, Molly, “instantly understood what my destination meant. … ‘You’re not going to equate witches with this [the HUAC hearings]!’ I told her I wasn’t at all sure I could write the play but I was going to look into the stuff they had up there [in the Salem archives]. We all waved rather grimly as I pulled away” (Timebends 335).

Miller drives off, “moving inward as well as north” (Timebends 332), a reference, at once, to his individual crisis of conscience and the crisis, on a much more tragic scale, of John Proctor, who was already, in Miller’s thinking, becoming the hero of *The Crucible*. In parallel, the journey being taken by his country is “into the realm of anthropology and dream, where political terms could not penetrate” (Timebends 332). Some of this quality surfaces in Miller’s account of leaving the courthouse in Salem after hours researching the records. It is an account that brings together inner turmoil, time and place, and then twists it to invoke John Proctor’s troubles in Salem. After the courthouse closes, Miller wanders round a Salem in economic decline and very different from the bustling port of the 1690s, but also of the gentrified and revitalized historical district that can now be visited. Miller writes:

In the early darkness, I came on a candy store where a crowd of teenagers was hanging out. And excited laughter went up as two girls appeared around the corner snuggled one behind the other, hopping in time with a broomstick between their legs. (Timebends 336)

Further research, this time in the Historical Society, leads him to make a direct connection: “I knew that my own life was speaking here in many disguises, not merely my time” (Timebends 338). Returning south, toward New York City, Miller hears confirmation on the car radio that Elia Kazan had, indeed, testified to HUAC, and this leads him to a conclusion that informs the writing of *The Crucible*:

The announcer’s voice seemed a violent, vulgar intrusion into a private anguish; I remember thinking that the issue was being made to sound altogether political when it was really becoming something else, something I could not name. (Timebends 338)

The allusion is to the public naming in front of HUAC in Washington and the court in Salem, and also to the climactic speech in *The Crucible*, in which John Proctor refuses to give up his good name and, as a result, is sentenced to death. The allusion may also be to the scene, so common in
seventeenth-century Puritan autobiographies, journals and diaries, in which an individual must give public testimony to inner conversion, for fear that the unknowable soul should be the entire arbiter of membership of the congregation on earth. Miller completes his account of the genesis of *The Crucible* with these words:

> I suppose I had been searching a long time for a tragic hero, and now I had him; the Salem story was not going to be abandoned. The longer I worked the more certain I felt that as improbable as it might seem, there were moments when an individual conscience was all that could keep a world from falling. (*Timebends* 342)

The corresponding speech from Miller’s own appearance before HUAC in 1956 was transcribed as follows:

> I am not protecting the Communists or the Communist Party. I am trying to … protect my sense of myself. I could not use the name of another person and bring trouble on him.” (*Pells, The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* 324)

*The Crucible* can stand on its own, with John Proctor and his heroic defiance of the Puritan hierarchy as an almost unbearable lesson to us all. And, faced by the lesser, but still formidable power of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Arthur Miller gave the testimony of his life, too. Yet, Miller’s orientation, “moving inward as well as north”, as time bends across places, history and individual destinies, deserves more consideration. His own wonderful account, in those few pages in *Timebends*, of how *The Crucible* got written during the gut-wrenching anxieties of the McCarthy era introduces important perspectives which at least suggest that the focus on the individual tragic hero is both the undimmed strength of *The Crucible*, more than fifty years after it was first performed, and a weakness. We can turn to a harsh but perceptive essay by the critic Robert Warshow, who was apparently provoked into his criticism by the spontaneous emotional reaction to *The Crucible* by the audience on Broadway in 1953.

Warshow’s article, “The Liberal Conscience in *The Crucible*”, was published in *Commentary Magazine* in March 1953, and was reprinted in his *The Immediate Experience* (1962). He has this to say about the individuals at the centre of Miller’s play:

> The character and motives of all the actors in this drama are for [Miller] both simple and clear. The girls who raised the accusation of witchcraft were merely trying to cover up their own misbehavior. The Reverend Samuel Parris found in the investigation of witchcraft a convenient means of consolidating his shaky position in a parish that was murmuring against his “undemocratic” conduct of the church. …

> As for the victims themselves, the most significant fact is Miller’s choice of John Proctor for his leading character: Proctor can be seen as one of the more “modern” figures in the trials, hardheaded, skeptical, a voice of common sense… . It is all too easy to make Proctor into the “common man” – and then, of course, we know where we are. (*The Immediate Experience* 192 and 193)

“[W]here we are” for an American cultural critic such as Robert Warshow had much to do with the long-running debate over mass culture in the United States. This debate is most authoritatively presented in Alexis de Tocqueville’s critique, in volume two of *Democracy in America* (1840), of the rapidly crystallizing relationship between trade and culture in the 1830s. The tension was evident, in a distorted manifestation at the end of the seventeenth-century in Salem, as we shall see, but the argument Warshow pursues had more recent sources, being re-cast as a struggle between middle- and highbrow by Van Wyck Brooks’ in *America’s Coming of Age* (1915), and then, more urgently in the confused cultural battle-lines over the Popular Front in the 1930s. Although the mass culture debate had been theoretically reinvigorated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s essay, “The Culture Industry”, in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the catalysts in post-war America were very domestic. In Warshow’s *The Immediate Experience*, the essay on *The Crucible* appeared alongside essays attacking the mass culture of American comics and genre films. These were easier targets for Warshow. However, his case against a political culture that encouraged a liberal audience to respond so enthusiastically to Miller’s attack on the
bigotry of the Puritans and the McCarthyites, is more subtle, and has its sources in the anti-Stalinist Left then clustered around Partisan Review.

Almost perversely, Warshow fastens on to the common humanity of John Proctor, as Miller presents him, the very quality that connects, across the centuries, someone standing up to the Massachusetts theocracy with someone faced with the undeviating orthodoxy of HUAC. It is the lack of historical complexity that worries Warshow, the finding — in the character of Proctor that Miller had re-fashioned on his journey to New England — of a common denominator that would allow us to see through the prejudices of the age, the terrible prejudices on a long scale running from the atrocities of twentieth-century dictators to the persecutions of Puritan judges to the closed-minds who presided over or directed the HUAC hearings. These are the perspectives that crowd in upon Miller in the 1980s as he looks back in Timebends. The immediate pre-history of The Crucible and his own appearance before HUAC in the 1950s; the 1690s, and even the 1930s in Germany, along with geographical coordinates, Washington, Connecticut, and Salem, are drawn together in the figure of John Proctor/Arthur Miller. The centuries and decades are perhaps too easily crossed, even if Warshow over-states his case:

Mr. Miller’s steadfast, one might almost say selfless, refusal of complexity, the assured simplicity of his view of human behaviour, may be the chief source of his ability to captivate the educated audience. … He is the playwright of an audience that believes the frightening complexities of history and experiences are to be met with a few ideas. (Warshow 194)

Warshow’s ideological position in the early fifties cannot be precisely located, and he died (aged 37) in 1955. Broadly, though, it was an amalgam of anti-Stalinism and the European, modernist orientations of the New York Intellectuals. This amalgam fostered a trenchant critical position that was both political – an opposition to the Moscow Trials – and cultural – an opposition to the Popular Front’s sometimes dishonest appeals to American myths and heroes for potential electoral gain in the mid-1930s, and its refusal of the complexities of modernism from the 1930s to the 1950s. Warshow’s contribution is to identify, in an audience’s response to The Crucible, an “educated” cultural Popular Front, some years after its pre-War heyday. Miller, admittedly, is a surprising target for Warshow if one looks at his life and career as whole: immensely well-read in European thought and culture, including its modernist canon; and one of the most admirable of Americans to come out of the “American century”, and never slow to come forward in public life and in his drama: against bigotry and persecution, in The Crucible, and against capitalism, or at least the psychological impact of an ideology of individua success, in Death of a Salesman (1949). Yet Warshow makes an important criticism of a lack of historical complexity that is also to be levelled at the reconstruction of The Crucible’s pre-history in Timebends.

Arguably, the relationship between McCarthyism in the middle of the twentieth century and what went on in Salem near the end of the seventeenth century has been brought into too direct a relationship. Although we frequently refer to The Crucible as an allegory of McCarthyism, the language that Miller uses in Timebends, and also some aspects of the play itself, call up the power of a symbolic relationship. Symbols have an instantaneous power – if they work – in which a surface image and a deeper meaning coincide, as in a hieroglyph or in onomatopoeia. The journey is described by Miller as “inward”; as a journey into “the realm of anthropology and dream”; and as evoking a “living connection”. The journey is only incidentally to the “north” and to Salem. “How, I wondered, had they known I was here?” Miller asks when he encounters the young girls playing witches on the streets of Salem (Timebends 336). Allegory, in contrast, posits a more arbitrary relationship between different historical narratives, rather than instantaneous moments of insight or uncanny coincidences of feeling and emotion, such as that linking Miller and John Proctor. Arbitrariness can be overcome by an exercise of unwarranted power, by the Salem judges and the HUAC Congressional Committee, and, in such circumstances, as Miller says, “an individual conscience was all that could keep a world from falling” (Timebends 342). However, arbitrariness is also there to be reinterpreted in other ways that may, at least, contribute to our historical understanding. For all his apparent mean-mindedness, Robert Warshow’s point is that we should at least pause over these historical coincidences, however, “right” they feel.

In the Timebends account, at least, Arthur Miller assumes that the destination of his northward journey is where the events of 1692 took place. Salem is the witch town. Yet, Miller,
himself, gives a cue to draw on other historical researches besides his own when he describes the town:

Salem then [in 1952] was a town dribbling away, half-forsaken. It was originally the salt lick of the mother colony of Plymouth to the south and had been bypassed by the modernization of industry a generation before. Lapped by the steely bay, it was dripping this afternoon in the cold black drizzle like some abandoned dog. I liked it, liked its morose and secret air. (Timebends 335)

History and place shift around quite subtly in Miller’s description. At the time of the witchcraft outbreak, as Miller colloquially notes, Salem had been an important port, a thriving commercial outpost of British mercantile capitalism. However, his atmospheric description of the Salem he found after driving from Washington, a declining backwater overlooked by the industrial revolution that concentrated on Boston and its environs, evokes not the busy port of Salem Town but, rather, the actual location of the witch town, Salem Village, as it was in the years leading up to the persecutions. Salem Village had been a parish of Salem Town and, following the witchcraft trials, had its name changed to Danvers, which is situated miles inland from Salem Town or, as it is now, simply Salem.

In 1974 – and partly in reaction to Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, and also one of Miller’s sources, Salem Witchcraft (1867) by Charles W. Upham – two social historians, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum published Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft. Like Miller, they consulted the well-known court records, in which accusers and accused could be identified, but they cross-checked against the socio-economic data in the records of the First Church of Danvers. Such data was the staple of the new social history – or history from the bottom up – which flourished in the 1970s. One outcome was a set of demographic maps, which confirmed that the inhabitants of Salem Village were slipping behind their more enterprising neighbours in Salem Town. But more than this. There was a striking correlation between the pattern of economic and social success and failure, on the one hand, and that of accusers and accused. The initial group of accused, Boyer and Nissenbaum propose, should be discounted because they were the obvious targets: Tituba, a Caribbean slave, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne. Thereafter, with hardly an exception, the accused were people on the move economically and associated in some way with the influence of Salem Town. The accusers were invariably those associated with the failing agricultural and backward Salem Village. So much was the Village in the shadow of the Town that it did not get its own church and minister until 1689, when Samuel Parris was appointed minister. This snapshot of local history is relevant insofar as Miller equates the Puritan hierarchy in Salem with the McCarthyite hegemony in Washington D.C. Yet, the fact that Salem Village was in an anomalous position, and had been for over fifty years by 1692, is an explanation both for the amount of local factionalism, compared with similar sized communities in New England, and the failure to control the outbreak of witch-hunting. Miller’s characteristically detailed scene-setting for the opening of The Crucible presents Salem as a typical, isolated and embattled Puritan community:

[Reverend Parris’] house stood in the “town” – but we today would hardly call it a village. The meeting house was near by, and from this point outward – toward the bay or inland – there were a few small-windowed, dark houses snuggling against the raw Massachusetts winter. …

They believed … that they held in their steady hands the candle that would light the world. (Miller, The Crucible 14 and 15).

This community turned on innocent individuals. However, while the victims were innocent, this was not a typical Puritan community, one in which appearing in public to explain the secrets of the soul may be understood as an important structural check on irrationalism. By the time Salem Village obtained the communal structures it was too late. One conclusion to be drawn from Boyer and Nissenbaum’s still ground-breaking research is that had Salem Village been more Puritan it would have had more hope of stopping the persecution. A related historical perspective is provided by a better understanding of the geography of Salem Village and Town, and of the accusations. As we have seen, Miller’s scene-setting creates the impression of a community surrounded by a wilderness. Yet it was not the isolation of the Village but its proximity to the thriving mercantile centre of Salem Town that turned out to be the telling factor. The great
majority of the accused had connections with the Town. Many, including John Proctor, lived on the Salem Town side of the Village, some on the Ipswich Road, which divided the two places. Here is an extract from Boyer and Nissenbaum’s mini-biography of John Proctor:

We have already encountered John Proctor as an Ipswich Road tavern keeper, but this was only one of his economic interests. In 1692, at sixty years of age, Proctor was coming to the conclusion of a successful career shrewdly built on the varied economic opportunities available in the fluid Essex County situation. (Boyer and Nissenbaum, Salem Possessed 200)

Proctor exemplifies this telling characteristic of the accused, that they were invariably on the move in the socio-economic order. Not all were upwardly mobile, though Proctor was, but they signified change in Salem Village, a community that did not know what capitalism was. Boyer and Nissenbaum conclude as follows:

[T]o many New Englanders of the seventeenth century, the stability of the social order rested on the willingness of everyone to accept his given station in life. Refusal to do so was more than a personal weakness; it represented a tangible threat to the social fabric itself. When Cotton Mather preached a sermon in 1689 in response to a Boston witchcraft case of that year, he chose a Biblical text which made this very point: “Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.” The feeling that Mather articulated in this 1689 sermon was one shared by many people in Salem Village three years later: the social order was being profoundly shaken by a superhuman force which had lured all too many into active complicity with it. We have chosen to construe this force as emergent mercantile capitalism. Mather, and Salem Village, called it witchcraft. (Salem Possessed 209)

Boyer and Nissenbaum’s thesis may seem a step too far; after all, the beginnings of the outbreak were with children and with Tituba’s voodoo. And the community believed in witchcraft. However, the central question posed by these two social historians, the one that seeks to amend the individual malice, Puritan zeal and even mass hysteria which Miller so compellingly presents as the driving force of the outbreak, is Why didn’t the adults stop the girls’ antics and their accusations? Children, and especially female children, held no power in a Puritan community. The answer sends us back to the community, its (lack of) institutional structure and its socio-economic make-up, with the underlying struggle with Salem Town and the, as yet unknown future which it represented to Salem Village.

Arthur Miller’s play and the few pages on its pre-history in Timebends are a remarkable and moving meditation on what literature can bring to history, both recent and long-past events. “The Salem story was not going to be abandoned”, Miller writes (Timebends 342). In questioning Miller’s relentless focus on individual actions, the aim, here, has not been to correct any lack of historical accuracy but, instead, to embed individual agency in the larger forces that complicate, rather than diminish, what individuals do. In 1692, the future may have been unknown to those who lived and died at that time, but this does not mean we cannot subsequently name it. To quote Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum again:

[i]he social order was being profoundly shaken by a superhuman force which had lured all too many into active complicity with it. We have chosen to construe this force as emergent mercantile capitalism. Mather, and Salem Village, called it witchcraft. (Salem Possessed 209)

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