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North of Ourselves: Identity and Place in Jim Wayne Miller's Poetry

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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May 2019

Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes, Chair

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Dr. Tess Lloyd

Keywords: Jim Wayne Miller, The Brier, Appalachian Poetry, Water Imagery, *The Mountains*

Have Come Closer

ABSTRACT

North of Ourselves; Identity and Place in Jim Wayne Miller's Poetry

by

Micah D. McCrotty

Jim Wayne Miller's poetry examines how human history and topography join to create place. His work often incorporates images of land and ecology; it deliberately questions the delineation between place and self. This thesis explores how Miller presents images of water to describe the relationship between inhabitants and their location, both with the positive image of the spring and the negative image of the flood. Additionally, this thesis examines how the Brier, Miller's most prominent persona character, grieves his separation from home and ultimately finds healing and reunification of the self through his return to the hills. In his poetry, Miller argues that an essential piece of people's identity is linked with the land, and, through recognition of the importance of topography on the development of the self, individuals can foster a deeper sense of community through appreciation of their place.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my mom, for all we have been through together and for her continued support. Thank you for taking an interest and continuing to encourage me through all walks of life. It is inspiring to have a mother who reads as much and as broadly as you, and I hope to be a lifetime learner in your example.

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I would also like to thank Dr. Don Johnson for the many talks we shared on Miller between casts on the Watauga. Our conversations informed how I conceptualized his writing and how I interpreted his poetry. I regularly returned to Miller's work with new questions; our conversations caused me to keep digging. Your scholarship and insight helped set a standard for my own work, and I know some of the quality of this thesis is directly attributed to your influence.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

*He came on feelings he could
enter again only as a stranger might
a house he'd once lived in; feelings like
places changed almost beyond recognition*

-- Jim Wayne Miller, "Down Home"

Jim Wayne Miller's poetic depictions of natural environments attempt to break down the traditional concepts of dualism between the mountainous region of the Appalachian South and the people who call those hills home. He frequently blurs the line between the self and the environment, and a disaster or restriction of the land often comes paired with grieving or constraints upon the local inhabitants. He employs the image of the house, cabin, and homeplace to investigate human location in the ecosystem and often calls his readers to reconsider the abandonment of both the cultural and environmental heritage of their region. He also rebuts these concerns in his descriptions of waterways and fishing as he attempts to explore the confluences of humankind with the surrounding natural space. His aquatic imagery often suggests a need for a conceptual reunion of people with their environment to create a more integrated whole—as two rivers converging create a mightier confluence. Miller asserts that the inhabitants of a region must resist the concept of "landscape," with its definition of place separate from its inhabitants; Miller holds that recognizing the fundamental connection between the surrounding hills and the culture of the region comes only through terminating this artificial, dualistic paradigm. Much of his work promotes the idea of "placeness," a space imbued with both local topography and

human memory, as an antidote to the disorientation of the modern world. Miller's poetry calls for a reevaluation of the separation of humans and environment; it suggests the resulting reunification will help the inhabitants of the region rediscover and find value in their own identity while laying the philosophical foundation for the important work of cultural and environmental sustainability.

Miller's character, the Brier, further embodies a unification of nature and person. An inhabitant of the Appalachian South, the Brier's grounding in the environment constructs an essential element of his identity. The term "Brier," outside of its social and political implications, metaphorizes a person who has become a brier plant, a general term for a species in the Smilax family. Miller's employment of a plant as the primary name for his most prominent voice certainly carries with it important negative inferences, but also establishes a connection between the character and the flora of the region. The character himself, representative of both an environment and a group of people, acts as a bridge between the natural domain and the human sphere and therein calls attention to the need for unification of these separate ideas in the minds of Appalachian people.

This thesis explores three essential elements of Jim Wayne Miller's poetry. First, the thesis examines the vocabulary of "place" and "landscape" and how these two words manifest through different conceptualizations of human interaction with land. In examining the history of the idea of "place," Miller's own concepts of home and house fall into an established history of rhetoric about placeness as a location which contains human significance. Placeness, for Miller, envelops a variety of scale and can mean a specific building or the entire bioregion of Appalachia. Miller's characters frequently exist in communication with their place and do not reflect the "unhousedness" found in the writings of Joyce, Shaw, and Eliot (Miller "Living Into"

60). Cabins have a physical address in the hills, and as such they become a feature and contributor to the success or failure of human attempts to dwell within the setting.

In Miller's letters to Dr. Don Johnson, Miller moves through his work *The Mountains Have Come Closer (TMHCC)* to provide an interpretive lens for the work in which Miller shows how the house as a structure is abandoned, then rebuilt, and finally expanded into a conceptual locale which incorporates the entire region (Miller to Johnson 6). Johnson also asserts that Miller's work contains an "equation of the home and the self" and positions the house as a central image in much of Miller's poetry (Johnson 127). The house is a consistent feature of Miller's poems concerning place and functions as a staging ground for discussion on the need for a more holistic view of human interactions with natural and inhabited surroundings. The term "landscape" itself carries with it an essential separation of people from their neighboring environment with the underlying idea that humans do not constitute a piece of their surroundings. Miller seems to argue that the function of terms like "landscape" insufficiently describe a proper connection between a population and its inhabited space. His attempts to mourn for his home region come with the added call for the reunification of the land with the people as well through a movement away from dualistic thinking which separates people from place. The hills of Appalachia are essential to the identity of the people who reside within them, he argues, and any attempt to separate the inhabitants from their surroundings causes disorientation and a loss of a cultural sense of belonging.

The second area of this thesis explores the identity of the Brier, a character seeking to repair the broken relationship between the land and its people. His sermon and presence in Miller's work frequently counter the internalized concepts of human separation from natural surroundings. The Brier calls for Appalachian people to retrieve lost elements of their culture,

and claims that people from other regions, “wild-eyed people, running[,]” look toward Appalachia because Appalachians’ connection to the land provides an example of a better way of living (228). The Brier typifies what John Lang describes as Miller’s “insistence on the local and regional as a corrective to an exclusively national and international focus” (Lang 11). The Brier stands as a quintessential Appalachian figure and a prophet against dualistic thinking and its accompanying belief systems which place humankind as separate and apart from the hills they inhabit.

The thesis’s third and final chapter explores how Miller’s work describes rivers and waterways as areas of confluence and cultural intermingling. He regularly invokes aquatic or halieutic images to discuss the connection of local people with their environment, to serve as a platform for the individuals to find healing, and to describe the effect of philosophies which disregard the importance of ecology on the development of regional identity. Springs and mountain streams represent locations where people and ecology interact, as sites of origin or rebirth for Miller’s characters, or where Miller expresses emotions of nostalgia or homesickness. Dammed lakes and flooded rivers, however, often come with negative implications of displacement, loss of history, and separation from home for mountain people. Miller describes rising commercialism as a natural disaster, and he emphasizes the separation between the natural surroundings and the inhabitants of the mountains through depictions of trash-strewn waterways. In “Crippled Creek Revisited,” the narrator “cut[s] his feet on broken glass,” symbolizing how a mountain stream has become polluted with the arrival of extractive industry and a lessened regard for the ecology by the local populace (2).

This thesis attempts to describe the intentional connection between land and people in Miller’s work. In his poem “Bird in the House,” he portrays the separation of people from the

land, and he describes the intrusion of duality as a death. “Fields and buildings / turned their backs on one another,” he writes, and continues to describe the Brier’s turning away from his hill country “with a heart fluttering / like a sparrow beating its wings at a window inside / the emptied house” (16-17, 19-21). The fields and buildings, representative of the duality between people and their environment, have abandoned one another, indicating a previous union and subsequent divorce. This division, symptomatic of a culture which has abandoned not only its roots but also its geographical heritage, has caused both the man and the environment to die. The Brier, like the bird, cannot exist in his new location, and the title of the poem references a colloquial saying which indicates that a death has occurred.

Additionally, several instances appear in which Miller blurs the lines between his characters and the landscape entirely. These instances suggest a desire to present his poetic characters as pieces of the surrounding geography and not as separate entities devoid of connection to their locale outside of the temporary place they inhabit. In “You’re Going to Go to Sleep Now,” Miller lays out a conversation between two unnamed characters; one seems to describe a fast-paced mentality of continual movement, and the other mourns for “another field going under asphalt” (9). By the end of the poem, however, the second speaker seems to become the field and suffocates to death by a “slow blackness spreading” (21). The voice of the character blends with that of the landscape and then grows silent with the approach of the blacktop. This convergence of voice with the regional environment is again found in the poem “Going to Sleep by a Trout Stream” where a character lies down next to a mountain brook and slowly begins to slip into sleep. As the poem progresses, however, the descriptions gradually become more ambiguous and obscure, moving from a concrete term like “a hundred yards upstream” to a conceptual description of “the light of the stars grew down / like bone-white roots” (3, 19-20). It

remains unclear if the man is falling asleep, dying, or having a nonspecific spiritual experience, but the descriptions seem to interweave him into the landscape. His body becomes lost in the description, and in the conclusion the character seems essentially absorbed into his surroundings, thus eliminating his individual identity. He has become land, and thereby he has made the distinction between man and nature moot.

Miller's depictions of the regional environment often evoke a sense of grief or loss, and he views the Appalachian people's departure from their land as a breaking of an essential element of their identity. Like the child who has wandered away from his home in the "Brier Sermon," the change of location of the Appalachian people has left them feeling lost. "We've got so far away from home, we don't know where / we are, how we got where we are, how to get home again," the Brier calls, emphasizing the importance of location in people's understanding of themselves (58-59).

A close reading of the poetic works of Miller reveals his deep concern with the cultural trajectory of the region, but also with his questioning of the underlying philosophical assumption that people are somehow separate from the places they inhabit. Miller asserts that these poetic descriptions of the region "are not just literary posture," but that they contain cultural implications of his vision for the future of Appalachia (Higgs, Manning, & Miller 735). By questioning the concept of human superiority to landscape, Miller seems to break apart the notions of hierarchy and reemphasizes the need for reconsideration of humanity's role in nature. He asserts that the removal or retreat from the hills and valleys of a home region is tantamount to a willful act of amputation. The inhabitants of a place must consider themselves related to the land and thereby eliminate conceptions of ecological duality.

CHAPTER 2

MILLER'S DEFINITION OF PLACE

Building is dwelling; dwelling is the essence of existence, the very manner by which men and women are on the earth and involves an openness to and acceptance of the earth, the sky, the gods, and our mortality.

-- Vincent Vycinas, *Earth and Gods*

The importance of place stands at the center of every creative work by Jim Wayne Miller. His novels, *His First Best Country* and *Newfound*, both address the crisis of identity when a young person leaves home. His lyrical writing found in *The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same* centers on the Appalachian region, and the setting for much of his poetry seems inseparable from the hills of his home. Emil Lerperger, whose work Miller translated from German into English, finds place as a primary motivator for his poetry as well, and much of Miller's scholarly endeavors focus on the importance of location. Though his attention primarily centers on Appalachia, Miller's work reveals a deep interest in the discussion and promotion of the importance of place and the interplay between geography and culture in any person's homeplace.

Defining Place

When examining geographic location, most maps reveal the topography of the area. Rivers, streams, mountains, and deserts come noted in a map's key, and the streets and buildings of a town center guide a viewer's navigation. Maps take no account of the mixture of memory and geography which create a place. They cannot mark each memory of those who have lived

before, and each specific site may have many different memories created by each individual. A place “as humanly bounded and constructed areas of space” defines the life of every person, and “the effects or consequences of place are so critical to virtually all our undertakings that we cannot really be human agents without it” (Sack 26). Yet places remain significant to those who have lived there, and each person’s experience differs widely from that of the next person who travels through the same space. Much of Miller’s poetic work exemplifies the concept of a specific “bounded and controlled area of space,” such as a house or school, but his work also extends the meaning of place to the entirety of the eastern mountains (Sack 27). Places describe the existence of humanity on the surface of the earth. Just as people cannot be described entirely by their locations, so too do the fields, buildings, and features of the land fail to give a full account of the memories and places latent within them.

Anthropologists Jame Windsor and Alistair McVey have argued that germane ontological understandings of place began with Martin Heidegger, “particularly his notations of sparing and preserving, which involves caring for things, animals, people and, especially, places” (Windsor & McVey 147). Vincent Vycinas emphasizes this idea by arguing that “Heidegger also finds that the word ‘dwelling’ has the character of ‘sparing’ (*schonen*), which means the tolerance of something in its own essence, letting something be the way it is in itself” (Vycinas 15). Edward Relph, noted philosopher at the University of Toronto, writes that “place has been used to mean ‘location’ in the sense of exact position, although strictly location is more specific than place,” thus showing that places are the locations in which people have dwelled, even briefly, and thus have created meaning in the locale (Relph *Place* 2). Philosopher Robert Sack echoes this sentiment, writing that “the mix of elements of nature, meaning and social relations that place helps draw together” form the foundational difference between location and place (Sack 30).

Just as the word “landscape” denotes an abstract other, separate from the speaker, so too does “location” create a duality between the lived experience of a place and the possession of land as commodity. A “location” or “landscape” can be owned, while the memories and experience of a “place” cannot be transferred for profit or gain. A landscape can be surveyed, while a place cannot under the strictures of geographic examination. Miller suggests that the word “landscape” separates the ecology from the population which inhabits it, thus reinforcing a philosophical duality between people and land. The concept of place, he argues, reunites people and ecology, thus recognizing both the impact of humans upon their environment and the impact of ecology on the development of culture. Relph asserts similar notions of the recognition of people’s interaction with their environment by writing that “to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* place” (Relph *Place* 1). He points out that much of a person’s identity comes from the places of their history and says that “place and self [are] mutually constructive” (Sack 26). This “existential space,” he argues, “is not merely a passive space waiting to be experienced but is constantly being created and remade by human activities” (Relph *Place* 12). The action of creating place out of the meaningless space which surround a person transforms the topography of a location into a home, and only through the interaction of person with locale can landscape lose its otherness and become central to identity.

Relph further notes that different cultures value the “placeness” of a specific location in varying degrees, arguing that “existential space” is culturally defined; hence it remains difficult to experience the space of another culture (Relph *Place* 15). He further asserts that “when the fusion of dwelling and building . . . is total, then geographical space is essentially sacred” (Relph *Place* 18). To envision the disparity between sacred spaces and personally significant places, one

might consider the differences in value assigned to a location like Serpent Mound by a native person as opposed to the frontiersmen. Though the location remains the same, the mound carries more cultural significance to the former than might be accessible to the latter. Relph notes:

there is, in fact, a clear distinction to be drawn between the existential space of a culture like that of the aborigines and most technological and industrial cultures—the former is “sacred” and symbolic, while the latter are “geographical” and significant mainly for functional and utilitarian purposes. (Relph *Place* 15)

By noting that each culture identifies the significance of locations in a variety of ways, Relph acknowledges that a specific location can contain a multitude of places within it, limited only by the number of individuals who have interacted with the locale through anecdote or by direct experience. Chief Seattle, in his famous farewell address, further illustrates the importance of “sacred space” by highlighting how the land interacts with his people, saying that

every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. Even the rocks, which seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent seashore in solemn grandeur, thrill with memories of past events connected with the lives of my people. (quoted in Bagley 253)

Liam Campbell has noted a similar experience for the Irish people with the advent of English colonialism: “Peoples were moved and natural resources become commodities. The right to forage, fish, hunt and even own trees had been taken away as the old land tenure system of the chieftains and clans had gone” (Campbell 124). Miller recognized that marginalized peoples, as some have described Appalachian residents, regularly experience displacement from the places which define them, and extraditions often result in populations feeling lost and set adrift from their homes. “It is undeniable,” Relph writes, “that modern civilization has been a cause of

repression and destruction. Its narrative of progress and growth has suppressed ethnic voices and geographical variety, first in colonization and industrialization, then through the many devices of placelessness” (Relph “Confused Geographies” 158). The inhabitants of the hills of the mountain south have expressed similar concerns for their places, and the “sacred space” described by Relph is echoed in Miller’s poetry through its recognition of the importance of the associations a person may have with particular spaces.

Significance and Controversy

Defining the geography of a region as separate from the people who inhabit it works to further separate identity from locale. Regional or national loyalty, while sometimes creating undesirable outcomes, stems from a close connection to place. Edward Relph points out “the significance of place in human experience [...] is apparent in the actions of individuals and groups protecting *their* places against outside forces of destruction, or is known to anyone who has experienced homesickness and nostalgia for particular places” (Relph *Place* 1). Liam Campbell argues that people have economic and ethical ties to their homeland, stating:

Arguments for the protection and “saving” of nature have centered chiefly on two themes. One is economic, i.e. that nature provides many goods and services for our “economy.” The other argument is ethical, in that it maintains that nature should be respected and saved as that is the right thing to do. (Campbell 3)

In the “economic” theme, the importance of culturally and personally significant locations become obscured into considerations of market value and product. Campbell sums this idea up by showing that “[t]he colonizers paint two different pictures; one is like an Eden and the other a savage, fallen wasteland reflecting a deeply embedded European ambivalence towards the

natural world” (Campbell 118). This ambivalence ultimately fails to recognize the importance of places to the creation of identity, thus resulting in the valuation of land solely in terms of usefulness rather than considering any innate value.

Yi-Fu Tuan points out that “in antiquity, land and religion were so closely associated that a family could not renounce one without yielding the other. Exile was the worst of fates, since it deprived a man not only of his physical means of support but also of his religion and the protection of laws guaranteed by the local gods” (Tuan *Space* 154). Traditional Appalachian peoples have similarly expressed how their experience of life in close proximity to the land have shaped them. Tuan has noted that “rootedness in the soil and the growth of pious feeling toward it seem natural to sedentary agricultural peoples” (Tuan *Space* 156). Jame Windsor and Alistair McVey argue that connection to land and locale can aid in the fostering of civility. By examining one location, they suggest “[m]any authors have portrayed a world in which being rooted in place, having a strong sense of place, is seen as synonymous with stability and civilization, while being ‘placeless,’ mobile, and uprooted is seen to be uncivilized, even barbaric” (Windsor & McVey 148). Living in a meaningful place, they seem to suggest, fosters a sense of responsibility.

Unlike the place-centered cultures of more primitive civilizations, several authors have described current post-modern conditions as false places, locales which arrived from another space and artificially relocated into a different city or region. Paul Virilio notes that current life is no longer defined by places, but rather by “sudden bewildering Babel clamor of the world-city, the untimely mix of the global and local” (Virilio 56). Relph has argued that “neither the old geographical language of regions nor the newer dialect of place and placelessness has much value for describing this postmodern world” (Relph “Confused Geographies” 154). Postmodern

places, much like postmodern philosophy, exhibit a disconnection and lack of holistic consideration for the topography and the people which inhabit it. Relph argues:

current geographies and their landscapes are no less indeterminate, dislocated, and perplexing than postmodern epistemologies. *Heterotopia* seems to be an accurate word to embrace the arbitrary geography of the juxtaposed elements of Las Vegas, with its fake Egyptian pyramids, reproductions of the landmarks of world cities, suburban tracts, artificial volcano, and palm trees in the high desert. (Relph “Confused Geographies” 153)

Increases in speed of travel, Relph argues, have left communities like Toronto unable to create a lasting civic identity, and that “it made sense to describe [the] traditional world in terms of places, regions, and distinct cultures. In contrast, over the last two hundred years the force and rate of diffusion of the deliberately standardized practices of modernism have allowed little local adaptation” (Relph “Confused Geographies” 154). He continues by claiming:

postmodern landscapes consist of people, things, and bits of geographies, histories, and cultures that have been uprooted, franchised, spun around above the earth, topologically transformed, remixed, deposited elsewhere, linked by electronic networks and given distinctive facades to distinguish them from all the other equally confused places. (Relph “Confused Geographies” 154-55)

By claiming that the cultures of postmodern cities lack the exchange between ecology and the population found in agrarian or native populations, Relph warns that cities will soon cease to draw from their regional setting as their major source of cultural influence.

Yet, despite what Relph describes as “placelessness” and the huge population migrations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, people continue to develop a sense of place wherever they take root. With disregard to the apparent detachment from location felt in many large cities,

people often develop a love and connection to the places and buildings which define their space, and Relph admits that “(e)ven in [the] deepest suburbia, people put down roots and develop a concern for where they live” (Relph *Place* 18). Still, thinkers such as James Edwards continue to argue that separation from a longstanding sense of home or community creates a continued sensation of displacement for local inhabitants, and that “we should abandon the global for the local, the abstract for the concrete, the willful for the self-effacing” (Edwards 225). Jim Wayne Miller’s *Brier* seems to echo this sentiment in the “Brier Sermon” by arguing against homogenizing with the rest of America and suggesting that a person must “come home / and live in your father’s house / and step out your own front door” (210-12). Miller calls for his readers to abandon the attempts to live globally, taking the position that cultural salvation comes by reimbuing significance into the specific and local.

Miller’s Definition of Place

Land and place stand at the center of Miller’s understanding of the world. When he arrived at Vanderbilt, he claimed, “I didn’t know that my poetry was especially concerned with [sic], or preoccupied with place, yet while it was in Nashville that my first poems appeared” (Miller *Conversations With* 1987, 2:50-3:05). His definition of place aligns with Robert Sack’s view, in that it conceives of place as both specific, such as a house or barn, but also regional, such as the entirety of the Appalachian Mountains. Miller’s work displays the idea of “humanly bounded and constructed areas of space” as described by Sack, and by writing poems to reflect the specifics of a location, he reveals extra depth due to the recognition and emphasis on the specific (Sack 26).

Miller took care to reexamine the ecosystem of his own upbringing and brought his critical eye to his home region, attempting to more accurately describe his locale. Like the analysis of landscapes by Liam Campbell, Miller argues that mountains can serve people in one of two ways:

They are the settings of our nightmares, for all of our dark fears and suspicions, and that gives us *Deliverance*. Or they are a [sic] kind of pastoral, a mode of the pastoral, where everything is all right and funny things can happen. I think you get one or the other. It is either a fantasy, [sic] a revelry, or it is a nightmare. (Miller, *Our Appalachia* 14:53-15:29)

Miller's work describes the experience of the people of the Mountain South and examines their relation to the land. "[F]or a farmer," Edward Relph writes "the space of the countryside is primarily the extent of his farm, the view across his fields, the way to the market—all experienced as enduring yet seasonally changing complexes," and Miller seems to have taken this perspective when choosing his poetic rhetoric (Relph *Place* 17). Doug Powell, writing ten years after Miller's death, reflects a similar position by describing a critical regionalist perspective in which "[c]ulture, politics, economics, and environment are not [. . .] discrete spheres but they interact, overlap, and interrelate in ways that are formative of and specific to any given region" (Powell 148). Miller, like Powell, argues that resident populations are capable of internal criticism which values both regional ecology and local culture, thus resulting in a regional trajectory which considers both economic concerns and locally voiced perspectives.

Miller's work displays Relph's concern with the disenfranchisement of local populations due to modernization, and it expresses the concern that Appalachian people have become "immigrants in their own country" (Miller *Every Leaf* 198). He further echoes Relph's concern with the consequences of post-modern philosophy on the development of the concept of place,

arguing that “[t]oday, however, any particular regional identity might prove to be no more than a facile attempt to heal the “unanchored condition” of modern man, with the promise of instant community, group security, connection with the past, and a bogus sense of self-esteem (qtd in Stein and Hill 188-89)” (Miller “Anytime” 9). Like the landscape theorists before him, Miller found how a group or population viewed their local space to have great impact on their personal or cultural sense of identity.

Other writers’ disregard of the importance of region and place stood at the forefront of Miller’s concerns. Looking to the literary voices of European modernism, he saw a tradition led by Joyce, Shaw, and Eliot which ignored placeness in their writing, and he claims that they exemplified “unhousedness” and “extraterritoriality” writing (Miller “Living Into” 60). Standing in sharp contrast to the Agrarians at Vanderbilt (Miller studied directly under Donald Davidson), the works of Hemingway, Beckett, and others differed from Miller’s own interest in investigating location, and he argues that “a feature of literary modernism is the tendency of writers to locate themselves in history—in time, that is, rather than in space” (Miller “Anytime” 4). He takes this idea further when he writes that “[t]he literary modernism which has dominated critical perspectives in America in the twentieth century is biased against identification with place, and hence against particular regions” (Miller “Living Into” 60). Space, he suggests, did not matter to the major figures of modernism so much as ideas or the timeline of ideas identified as history. By arguing that the “extraterritorial” writers abandoned the specificity of a location to adopt a more global mindset, Miller asserts that they inherently lost touch with the certitude of voice that comes with fostering a sense of place. “In fact, lack of attention to the concept of region, according to economist Jane Jacobs, is one of the great intellectual failures of the modern

era” (Miller “Living Into” 68). By advocating the regionalist’s attention to place, he argues that many modernist writers lose connection to the sense of authenticity their readers crave.

But Miller tempers his own criticism by recognizing that “apart from tenets of modernism, the American national identity is essentially extraterritorial. That is, the essence of America is found not in particular places but in an idea” (Miller “Anytime” 4). “Furthermore,” Miller argues, “Americans have never been especially attached to their places” (Miller “Living Into” 60). Miller understood the tension surrounding the formation even of his own place, and many of his poems recall the displacement of the native communities to create the culture he now holds dear. Works such as “The Brier Moves to a New Place” and “The Brier’s Pictorial History of the Mountains” refer to the moccasins of those who came before his ancestors and the arrowheads natives left behind. “We got ourselves a country, politically, before we ever started having a land and a people in the old sense” (Miller, *Our Appalachia* 7:38-7:45). He recognized that his own ancestors once lived without territory and that the founding of America came before the people identified with the land and not as a reflection of the topography.

Miller calls for his readers to participate in intentional place creation, to dwell in a locale and allow the ecology of a region to shape and form their burgeoning culture. Through his poetry, Miller rejects dualistic notions of the division between people and landscape, and he asserts that politically-minded regionalism remains the antidote to the isolation and disunity found in the writings of the Lost Generation. He looked to regionalism as a stand against globalism:

. . . [t]here is always a cultural landscape imposed on the natural landscape—a cultural landscape that reveals something about the collective needs, tastes, predilections, values, and attitudes of people. Place as a blending of natural and cultural landscape is a topic

that belongs to any study of the role of place in literature, and certainly to any literary investigation conducted in the context of regional studies. (Miller “Anytime” 15)

Academia, he argues, suffers when it fails to recognize the impact of place on the creation of both personal and collective identities.

The term “regionalism,” Miller suggests, often negatively connotes backward thinking or excessively nostalgic writing. “Regional perspectives,” he writes “are still seen as incompatible with a universal view and are suspected of being signs of a retreat from problems of race, technological progress and necessarily national and international views” (Miller “Living Into” 64). Miller counters these arguments by asserting that global perspectives can be retained within a regional context and that good regional writing does not romanticize the past so much as provide a clear and distinct picture of the present. “The usual view has been that anything regional is incompatible with a wider view of the world. But, paradoxically, it is precisely when we take the wider view—the global view—that regions appear most authentic . . .” (Miller “Anytime” 9). Both in the sphere of literary criticism as well as politics, Miller’s basic argument for regionalism forwards the concept of place as an essential feature for life in a postmodern world.

Remaining aware of the global helps inform the local, Miller argues, and “(a)n increasingly global perspective, informed by an awareness that the whole globe is being changed, results in a different perception of particular places—one that often renders their distinctiveness all the more precious” (Miller “Anytime” 9). Appreciation of place grows among inhabitants when they begin to recognize their uniqueness and the sustained value of their way of life. Though often overlooked, he claims, “we can no longer consider regions and regional variations to be isolated survivals in a standardizing world. On the contrary, people all over the

world are rediscovering their regions and provinces” for their cultural value (Miller “Anytime” 10). He goes on to claim that “[a] concrete view of the American land and its people enhances individual self-understanding and self-esteem as well as collective stability” (Miller “Anytime” 16). “In time, it may be widely understood that our regions are not surviving a remnant of the past but part of our present—and of our future” (Miller “Living Into” 71). He coined a term for this remnant:

“[a] cosmopolitan regionalism—a regional perspective which does not exclude a knowledge of the wider world, but is concerned with and appreciative of the little traditions within the great traditions of human history, and of ways in which small and great traditions are connected—can stimulate greater interest and scholarship on the role of place in literature generally, both with respect to established classics and to those works associated with certain geographical and cultural regions.” (Miller “Anytime” 13)

For Miller, regionalism held the antidote to the disorienting modern world as described by Relp, as well as fertile ground for continued literary endeavors.

Connections to Miller’s Poetry

Miller envisions a cooperation between the local ecology and the population which inhabit the hills in the creation of his verse. His poetry reveals a fascination with place, both in his descriptions of specific locations and in how he envisions the region more broadly. Miller often equates the two, and the Brier persona seems anxious to return to both his homeplace and the entirety of the region. Don Johnson has identified the image of the house in Miller’s work as an “oneiric” location, one that contains dreamlike qualities in its ability to move between locations, and it represents both the individual and the region (Johnson 126). This tension reveals

Miller's interest in examining the traditional mountain culture as well as the intimate details of his past. The "father's house" described in "Brier Sermon" functions with dual meanings of both a specific and a regional place (61). An individual can interpret the sermon as a call to return to the farm of their parents, while a larger audience understands that Miller suggests continued celebration in the culture of the region's collective past, and the house becomes a metonym for the region.

Specific Places. Miller's work continually reveals an attraction to the details of the Appalachian region, and he calls up the specifics of a certain locale in order to place his character firmly into the region. Entitled "In the American Funhouse," Part 1 of *The Mountains Have Come Closer* describes the Brier's life suburbia away from the hills of Appalachia. The poem "I Share," reveals how unappealing the Brier's has found suburban life, and the sequence of graduations, weddings, and accolades seem menial. The poem gives a sense of confinement, as if the Brier must escape his current surroundings and return to his boyhood first love. Release does not come within the poem, but a single horse hair caught on a fence in a mountain pasture provides him with hope for the future (38). The specificity of the horse hair, the barbed wire, and the pasture allows him to think lucidly, and by grounding the image in the ecology of the Brier's past, Miller ends the poem with a sense of relief.

"Country People" further explores the importance of specificity of setting. In this work, Miller examines individual objects on a farm and seems to ignore the human inhabitants of the place altogether. He personifies the Corn Wagon, Gate, and Cistern, among other items, but the Smokehouse most pointedly discusses the impact of the creation of place by describing the history of the building. Humorously, the Smokehouse tells of its transition from storing family

meats to housing the ski and garden equipment of “folks from town” (44). The Smokehouse’s function has changed, and with that change comes a transition in the understanding of the site of the farm in its transformed placeness from one of agrarian utility to one of leisure.

“Crazy John” describes the cultural changes in the mountains as natural disasters. Similar in tone and theme to “Small Farms Disappearing in Tennessee” and “How America Came to the Mountains,” the poem claims that the loss of the clapper from the cow’s bell has caused a sequence of events which lead to John’s placement in a nursing home. The ending again reveals Miller’s ongoing discussion of the importance of place in his poetry; removed from his house, John find himself aging in a space which is not his home. The convalescent home represents a location filled with individuals without history and contains the suggestion that John’s loss of place ultimately contributes to his death.

A Regionwide Place. In the first review of any of Miller’s poetry, Maxine Kumin notes how his work tends towards the specific to gain orientation from the depth of detail (Miller *Every Leaf* 191). Miller desired his work to act like the water in deep pools of mountain streams and has said “I want to make my writing like those pools, so simple and clear its depth is deceptive” (Miller *Every Leaf* 208). His poetry reflects this interest by detailing exact moments of memory and then by transferring the sense of belonging gained from one location to an entire region.

The narrator in “On Native Ground” claims that “the spring at the mountain’s / foot holds the running taste of childhood,” thus connecting his identity with his surroundings. Once he loses his distinction from location, the narrator finds that he can “travel everywhere on native ground” and therefore becomes incapable of losing his way (16-17, 27). The narrator expresses himself as a feature of the land, intimately connected to the soil and earth of the region. Each dark road

turns him “home” and plunges him “into cool air of the mountains” (28, 29). This work, first published in *Dialogue with a Dead Man (DWDM)*, expresses a regional identity six years prior to Miller’s manifesto in *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, and thereby reveals an ongoing vein of thought which extends through the rest of his work. The poem ends with the hopeful image of a tree thriving despite the “barbed wire running through its heart,” and the unnamed narrator finds healing by returning to the region of his home (37).

In Part I of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, entitled “In the American Funhouse,” the poem “A House of Readers” follows the Brier’s reimagining of his suburban life through his history of rural agrarianism. The poem describes a gentle scene of the Brier’s children reading with their father, and the Brier stops to appreciate his surroundings. “I mark my place,” he writes, after setting down his book (14). This use of “place” references the page in his book, but also the differences between his former rural home and the suburban life the Brier now leads, and the work shares a tone of playfulness with “Living with Children” and “Fish Story.” These works all discuss the Brier’s failed attempts to return to his former location through memory, yet he finds solace by recreating his current location through the lens of his former life.

Miller continues his investigation of the changes of the Appalachian region in the poem “You’re Going to Go to Sleep Now.” The work functions almost as an inversion of “Going to Sleep by a Troutstream” where, instead of becoming one with his place, the narrator’s voice dissolves into the voice of the land. The land in this work, however, soon becomes covered by asphalt, and the speaker becomes a child breathing ether. The narrator, like the land, falls victim to the “slow blackness spreading” of industrial progress (21). Like “A House of Readers,” this work relies on an imagined dreamscape of the future rather than a literal past in its concern for

the ecology of the region, and Miller's narrator remains situated at the intersection of "Vision and Memory" instead of in a concrete location such as a barn or field (6).

In "The Brier Moves to a New Place," the Brier does not move his body but rather his "spirit" (10). As Don Johnson has asserted, the movement of the house in this poem is only conceptual, and the Brier has returned to a rural 120-acre farm in spirit, but not in reality, and his mind travels where his body cannot. This extra-physical movement exemplifies Miller's recognition of a regionwide placeness, instead of addressing only a specific locale, and extends the house metaphor established in his earlier work. The final two stanzas reveal that this return comes only through a dream, and the work ends when he slips "into sleep again" (53). The Brier continues to long for his home region, and he returns to visit it through sleep. By continuing to establish the place of his history as a broad-ranged region rather than simply the house of his upbringing, he envisions the hills of the eastern mountains as a place of rest, and he returns to many different locales which each make up a part of his place.

Descriptions found in "Small Farms Disappearing in Tennessee" positions the exodus of regional migrants as a theft of the farmland itself, thus directly identifying people with their land. The poem resembles a crime scene investigation, and the discovery of the remains of farms in bank accounts, the songs and stories of the elderly, and the diaspora of agrarian workers around the country symbolizes the separation of these individuals from their place. The features of specific locations become personified, thus discussing the movement of the people as if they are the barns and animals of the farms themselves. The poem cites a crime "syndicate" dismantling the farms, thereby suggesting that their disappearance comes as a result of outside actors (6). Keeping with the concept of the crime investigation, the discovery of farm dirt under the fingernails of factory workers suggests Appalachian people have abandoned their places to work

in factories, or (suggestive of Miller himself) live on only in the dreams of university professors. These farms cannot be found in a literal sense, but the conception and spirit formerly found have become splintered with the removal of the people from the location. Miller, of course, reveals his concern for the flight of Appalachian people from their place, and he directly links the people of the region to the features and buildings of their landscape.

Conclusion

Though Miller's use of the words "landscape" and "place" do not always follow the exactness of the philosophers Edward Relph or Roberts Sack, the content of his arguments remain close to their ideas. For Miller, the cultivation of place from unvalued space often highlights the narrative movement of his verse. As seen in the following investigation of the Brier Persona, Miller actively sought to imbue his fictional characters and personae with a deep sense of placeness. He, like his characters, reflects Heidegger's sense of dwelling through the language of his poetry and creates significance in his life by investing himself in the wellbeing of the space and people around him.

CHAPTER 3

THE BRIER IN THE LEAF'S REFLECTION

. . . we found out that it was ourselves

We were withholding from our land of living,

And forthwith found salvation in surrender.

-- Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright"

The Brier, Jim Wayne Miller's most prominent persona character, is principally concerned with reconnecting the people of Appalachia with the land they inhabit. Miller argues that the connection to place, a combination of history and geography, defines a regional people group and that "we have to feel that past under our feet because we've been raised up on it. Literally raised up on it" (Miller, *An Evening*, 1989). Nearly every instance in Miller's poetic work which involves the Brier comes with grief from his disconnection from place, attempts at revisiting the ecology and history of the home region, or examples of the persona "becoming one with place" (Miller to Johnson 4). Miller has claimed that residents of Appalachia have remained "largely unaware of how the land has changed us even as we have altered it" and has expressed his belief that many, especially rural peoples, continue a life connected to the land, though many remain unaware of the local geography's influence on their culture (Miller, Rev. of *Mapping American Culture*). Miller's Brier exemplifies the deep connection to place felt by many throughout the Mountain South and serves as a description of how cultural identity can become intertwined with location.

Miller first conceived of the Brier persona between 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. on Monday, June 16, 1975, while working on a collection of poems which ultimately became *The Mountains*

Have Come Closer (TMHCC) (Miller “New Appalachian Poems” 2). He noted the exact time along with the following brief description:

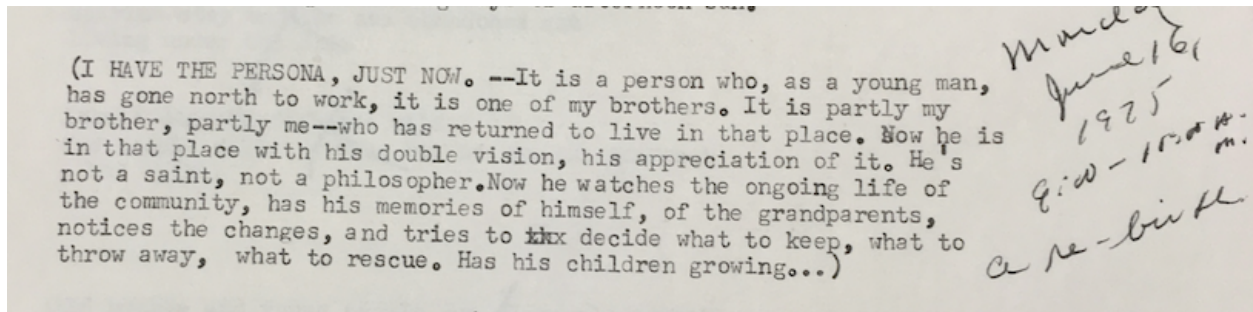


Figure 1. Brier Beginnings.

(I HAVE THE PERSONA, JUST NOW. – It is a person who, as a young man, has gone north to work, it is one of my brothers. It is partly my brother, partly me – who has returned to live in that place. Now he is in that place with his double vision, his appreciation of it. He’s not a saint, not a philosopher. Now he watches the ongoing life of the community, has his memories of himself, of the grandparents, notices the changes, and tries to decide what to keep, what to throw away, what to rescue. He has his children growing . . .)

As Figure 1 shows, Miller developed the Brier as a decidedly Appalachian character, and this note confirms Jeff Daniel Marion’s suspicions that the Brier is essentially “an insider” (Marion Interview 2018): “I think Jim Wayne found a way to unify, if you will, a sense of a voice that he could use to expound, explore, speak to issues, situations in the region” (Marion Interview 2018). Miller writes of the Brier’s life within the temporal, raising children and traveling for work, while pondering questions regarding the trajectory of his cultural heritage. By returning his character to the hills from northern industrial cities, Miller accesses the “double vision” necessary to see value in the old ways while attempting to decide “what to keep [and] what to throw away.” He lives the dual life of a migrant worker and long-rooted local, of sojourner and landholder, of both preacher and congregation. Miller constructed him to live in the duality of contemporary life while seeking to preserve his roots which define his identity.

Miller has argued that *The Mountains Have Come Closer* is essentially a single poem divided into parts with “the whole book being one long poem” (Miller to Johnson 6). The Brier

persona grew out of a collection of ideas concerning the movement of people from their place, how some “people migrated north” but “their spirits stayed home,” while others “migrate inwardly, change their orientation and never le[ave] physically,” often leaving “their spirits for a time” (Miller “New Appalachian Poems” 1). In an interview with Loyal Jones, Miller noted that jokes told about Appalachian people living in the north also informed how he constructed the Brier, saying “a kind of sub-literature consisting of Brier jokes developed about these people—jokes told at the expense of these recent arrivals from south of the Ohio River” (Bingham 16). Miller has cited the 1910 *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE) as inspirational of his figure as well, noting that he found a description of “brier-hopper” which meant “a specific sort of rustic, an immigrant of southern Ohio from backwoods Kentucky” (Miller *Every Leaf* 200). Furthermore, the Brier typifies the “diaspora” of Southerners moving north for work (Jones 16). These concerns culminate in an argument that a group of people apart from their place become like “children without grandparents,” living as if history does not exist (Miller “New Appalachian Poems” 2).

While editing *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, Jerry Williamson warned Miller against creating a figure simply from a sense of “hillbilly nationalism,” and the Brier avoids this limitation by concerning himself with both regional identity and a personal connection to the ecosystems of the mountains (Williamson to Miller 1). Williamson commented on the friction between worlds inherent in the Brier, writing to Miller that

. . . [t]he Brier preacher is suspended on a sharp dilemma: he knows the truth/the truth he knows will sound like madness to his listeners. Of course you must be born again / but we are dammed every minute! That perfect duality is what Brier Sermon is all about. That’s what all religion and guilt is about. I didn’t spend all those years as a holy roller

without learning the paradoxical dilemma of the prophet with eyes afire facing a people who have got to get hay in. (Williamson to Miller 2)

To avoid “hillbilly nationalism,” Miller constructed the Brier to reflect the environment found in the Appalachian Mountains.

A scholar of the works of James Still, Miller notes similar attitudes in *River of Earth* and has claimed that “[p]eople and place are rendered as parts of one subtly interdependent whole” (Miller, *Appalachian Lit. at Home* 20). The word “Brier” itself refers to any number of plants and vines in the Smilax family. Covered in thorns and known for creating dense hedges, local residents often view these plants as a nuisance. Migrants from the southern mountains often bore the moniker of “brier” as an insult, with implications that the traveling workers, like the plant, had little value to offer their new locations; by naming his persona character the Brier, Miller directly connects the character to the local flora and fauna of his home region. This connection informs the reader of Miller’s attitude when developing his persona and thus positions the Brier as partly of the land and partly of the people, thereby bridging the gap across dualistic thinking regarding people’s connection to place. The Brier’s identity becomes indivisible from the ecosystem of his place and Miller describes his return to Appalachia after working in the north as someone “trying to achieve oneness with place” (Miller to Johnson 4).

Even from the earliest conception, Miller envisioned the Brier’s loss of place as a central tenet of the character, and the Brier frequently finds himself settling for mobile locations instead of a permanent home. Found in the same document as Figure 1, Miller drafted perhaps the first poem directly linked to the Brier:

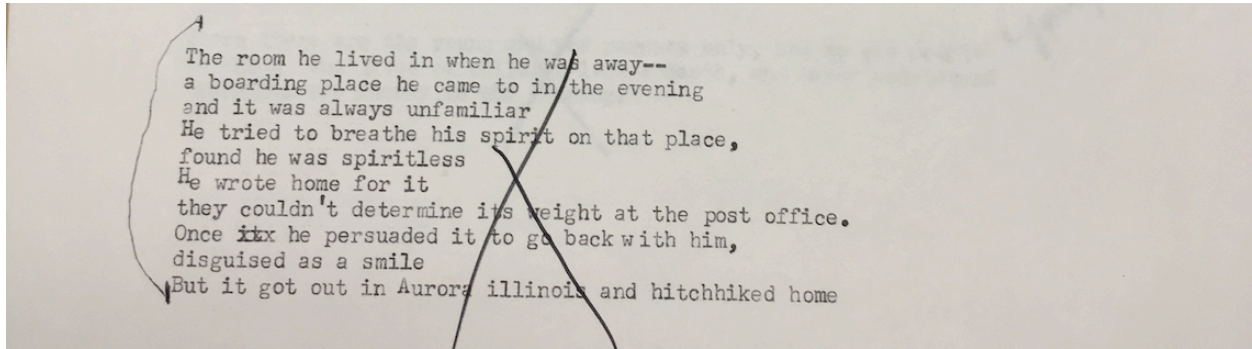


Figure 2. The Spiritless Brier.

(The room he lived in when he was away— / a boarding place he came to in the evening / and it was as always unfamiliar / he tried to breathe his spirit on that place, / he found he was spiritless / He wrote home for it / they couldn't determine its weight at the post office. / Once he persuaded it to go back with him, / disguised as a smile / But it got out in Aurora Illinois and hitchhiked home)

It begins with: “the room he lived in when he was away— / a boarding place he came to in the evening / and it was unfamiliar,” thus showing that from the inception of the Brier, the first image was one of undesirable impermanence (Miller “New Appalachian Poems” 2). This placelessness comes with the added suggestion that his divided self has left him “spiritless” and he cannot reunite himself while part of his identity remains in the South (5).

Grief of Separation

As the “Appalachian version of the archetypal wayfaring stranger,” the Brier often comes marked with the sorrow of separation (Hall 29). Miller examines the effects of extractive industry and seems to suggest “that in order to survive cultural domination and colonization, including its violence and uprooting of people from their place, people must relinquish their identity and participate in their own subjugation” (Campbell 139). Rita Quillen has noted the irony found at the ending of “Brier Sermon,” where the Brier preaches reunification with place, then disappears behind the “mobile, transient dwelling” of a motorhome rather than returning to

his “father’s house” (Quillen 20, Miller 61). Such ironies feature frequently in *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, wherein the Brier visits home almost exclusively in thought or dream.

In Part I of *TMHCC*, Miller seeks to argue that a lack of personal history in a fixed location leaves inhabitants feeling lost or displaced. The Brier recognizes that he does not live on a new frontier like his ancestors, but with modernity comes an “era of re-exploration or re-discovery” of culturally valuable places (Campbell 4). Entitled “The American Funhouse,” the opening section of *TMHCC* attempts to describe the Brier’s sense of loss when removed from his home region, displaced in a suburban environment, where technology and consumerism highlight much of his existence, effectively separating him from the hills, barns, and people of his home. By entitling the first part of the book after a feature commonly found at circuses or local fairs, Miller critiques the consumerism of modern America and likens it to a spectacle, performance, or loud and colorful event. Materialistic culture works as a hall of mirrors, which warps a visitor’s vision of reality and offers only impermanence and entertainment. The Brier’s experience in the funhouse offers little sense of lasting placeness or stability. He, like the Appalachian people, stands “at the periphery of the American experience” before deciding to return to the Southern mountains (Miller, “American Periphery” 1).

The opening poem of *TMHCC*, “Saturday Morning,” establishes the Brier as living in suburbia. Descriptions of the house come with common items and scenes such as “books, bats, balls, dolls and teddy bears / with idiot smiles” (7-8). The Brier conceives of his house as a ship or machine, a location in transition, and he claims the laundry room repeats the words “engine room, engine room” to him as he passes (30). The house, like the Brier, remains mobile and unrooted, and the final two lines reveal that the Brier himself carries the baggage of another place inside which “someone else / will live a life out of when we arrive” (47-48). Further

evidence of the Brier's condition comes in the poem "If Your Birthday Is Today," where he lives in his seventh house, "which is mortgaged / to the Daylight Savings & Loan Associates" (5-6). This poem, coupled with "A Plague of Telephones," describes life apart from friends and community as "full of bad news," and telephones recall images of Pharaoh's plagues (8). Even laughing with old friends in "Getting Together" creates "a surreal, absurdist image" of false reunions (Williamson to Miller 2). News of the old community brings grief and only further accentuates the separation the Brier feels from his homeplace.

To further underscore his detachment from his homeplace while living in the Funhouse, the Brier compares the impact of his current place to the powerful memories from his former home. Demonstrated by memories in the work "I Share," the Brier does not value prestige, as exemplified by commencements or convocations, and he retains little memory of seemingly important events. Accolades are not foundational to his identity, and they soon fade, replaced by the vivid memory of finding a horsehair on barbed wire. The Brier desires to return to a location which influences him as deeply as the "lucid memories of the home place" found in the "mountain pasture" (Miller to Johnson 2, 40). While the memory of his past remains sharp and clear, his current life and experiences in the Funhouse fade from memory and make little positive impact on his psyche.

In "A House of Readers," the Brier seems to cope with his life in the Funhouse by performing his everyday responsibilities in suburbia as if he continues life as a farmer. In a letter to Dr. Don Johnson, Miller describes this poem as when the Brier "interprets this moment in suburbia with the imagery from the former life, an agrarian life. The displaced speaker is still farming; growing kids instead of corn" (Miller to Johnson 2). The Brier reads a book and stops to watch his children, saying, "I mark my place. / I listen like a farmer in the rows" (14-15). These

images reveal that he lives a dual life, one that pines for his former home while dealing with the complexities of his current reality. Unable to raise cattle, he instead compares his son to “a Black Angus belly-deep” in the pond of playing make believe, and his daughter reads a book “like a butterfly” (8, 5). Though the Brier lives in the Funhouse apart from his place, he sees the influence of his former agrarian life all around him.

The American Funhouse section closes with the poem “Going South,” a work which suggests that death is the ultimate cost of living apart from place, and in this work the Brier suggests that he might “die / in a long line of traffic” (4-5). Miller has asserted that the road is “antithetical” to the home, and this poem falls in line with this statement (Miller to Johnson 6). Trapped on a highway, the Brier cannot live as a divided person, and the work contains elements of suicide and death as the result of life apart from the “father’s house” described in “The Brier Sermon” (61). Technology invades the private moment of his death, and news crews circle over his car to record his demise among the cars in traffic. The lines “a black river / of birds turned slowly and flowed south” suggest that the Brier’s spirit will return to the South upon his death (30-31). This image completes the Funhouse and sets the stage for the Part II of *TMHCC*, in which the Brier begins the process of his return to his homeplace in Appalachia.

“Turn Your Radio On” demonstrates the Brier’s anticipation of returning home as Miller examines the specifics of how separation from place has affected the Brier. Radio waves cloud the Brier’s thoughts, making it difficult for him to reorient his memory back home, and Miller writes:

He couldn’t hear his own thoughts in the city that never slept.

Like a voice on a far-off radio station, his thoughts rose

and fell in a storm of static. The city’s rush and roar

even poured through his dreams, boiling up like a waterfall.

Asleep or waking, he tried to keep a sense of direction south. (1-5)

Radio waves cause him confusion, and, though he remains distant from home, the Brier attempts to keep in touch with his homeplace. Part II of the poem begins with further evidence that his separation from the mountains functions as a loss to the Brier and, by looking through boxes of photographs, he grieves his home like the death of a friend. Though his grandparents are mentioned, the Brier grieves for them only as a part of his former way of life, and his bereavement seems directed to the entirety of the location. He remembers their talk on the front porch sounding natural as “treefrogs in the poplars” and the grandparents function as a metonym for the wholeness of his former home (28).

Upon returning to the hills, the Brier finds that his place has changed; many of the locations from his memory have experienced a deep alteration. “Down Home” describes his continued emotional distance from the place he once has known as home even after his return. Though he has physically arrived, he finds that the location has changed and comes upon feelings “he could / enter again only as a stranger might / a house he once lived in” (4-6). The home he has hoped to find upon return has transformed, and he realizes the horror of longing for a location which no longer exists. By the end of the poem, the Brier “had to admit it: he / didn’t live here any longer. He was / living in a suburb, north of himself” (17-19). He has defined himself by the placeness of a specific time and location, and, once he has left his place, he becomes divided. In claiming that he settled “north of himself,” the Brier reveals that a piece of his own identity remains attached to the land and, once the two become separated, he is diminished.

The poem “Bird in the House” most clearly identifies the Brier’s grief due to his separation from the land. The first line situates his experience in a timeline of loss, and Miller writes “[i]n a dogwood winter of grief he always / turned from fresh graves into another country” (1-2). A “dogwood winter” is a cold spell after a false spring near the end of winter. This dogwood winter depicts the Brier’s grief upon returning from the north only to find himself isolated and unable to recognize the places of his former home. The familiar has become “another country” (2). He becomes “a sudden stranger to himself,” thus noting that he no longer recognizes the land he viewed as a piece of his identity and consequently he no longer recognizes himself (7). The poem suggests that with the “altered fields, changed weather” and “shortened / seasons,” the Brier has experienced a division between himself and the place of his memory. Once confronted with the alteration of his former home, he now feels like a stranger to “the country he had known” and he realizes that he has become separated from his place both physically and spiritually (4-5, 11).

The third stanza of “Bird in the House” offers greater insight into the depth of separation between the Brier and the land by noting the disappearance of manmade markers on the ecosystem. Footpaths “got lost / in weeds and never came home,” and familiar landmarks begin to diminish. Miller then infers the process of natural reclamation in his next description, writing “[f]ields and buildings / turned their backs on one another” (16-17). This division insinuates that the union between the natural environment and the houses and barns of the traditional way of life have divorced. Miller describes their separation in terms of death, noting that “(a) hill / eroded down to white limestone: flesh fallen from bones” (17-18). Harriette Arnow has described similar images when discussing the devastation of her home region in Kentucky after strip mining and logging devastated the local hills, describing the ecosystem as becoming “ugly with

rotting limbs of trees and broken underbrush, and ruined saplings” (Eckely 46). These images exhibit elements of what Joyelle McSweeney calls the “necropastoral,” and work to transpose the texture of a corpse or wound onto the land (McSweeney 4). Once the fields and buildings have turned away from one another, the wholeness the Brier has anticipated upon return to the ecosystem has vanished, and, with it, part of his own feelings of personal unity.

Descriptions of separation between people and land are central to understanding the Brier’s internal division from his place and Miller’s understanding of the interaction between landscape and identity. The Brier views the hills of his home region as an essential part of himself, and his “dogwood winter of grief” comes when he returns home to find that he has lost his place. Furthermore, this separation suggests a cultural shift in the region; where once people and ecosystem have integrated, the Brier now feels that the relationship has waned. The final stanza evokes the image of a bird trapped within an abandoned house and suggests the connection to old folk wisdom concerning death. The empty house acts as a symbolic place of the Brier’s past, leaving him unable to reach the “cedars, fenced fields, light, air, / country he came from” (22-23). The Brier grieves his inability to access the environment of the hills and buildings of his past, thus showing that he does not grieve for only human connections to the land, but also the ecosystem which makes up part of his personal history as well.

The images of separation and neglect found in “Bird in the House” repeat in poems such as “Abandoned,” “How America Came to the Mountains,” and “The Brier Moves to a New Place.” Divorce from a sense of home highlights much of the second and third parts of *The Mountains Have Come Closer* until “The Brier Sermon” wherein he preaches a reunion of people with place by means of living in a conceptual “father’s house” (61). The necropastoral images return in *Brier, His Book (BHB)* where poems such as “Little Lives” highlight the negative

effects of growing urbanization and outmigration of the local population by critiquing local residences as well as outside forces. *BHB* comes after the timeline of *TMHCC*, and a reader can assume that the poems sequentially follow that work. In “Little Lives,” Miller picks up the imagery of division between land and humanity in the final stanza:

Broken-backed barns dragged themselves
down off their foundations and collapsed,
lying like the carcasses of cows
whose hide and flesh had knitted with the earth.
Springs that had known the faces of thirsty men
choked on the silt and leaves of thirty autumns. (26-31)

Rather than simply exploring negative effects on the population, however, this section highlights Miller’s unspoken view that the land has somehow experienced a loss with the exit of the traditional population’s mountain agrarianism. The barn has “knitted with the earth,” reflecting the union of people with the land. Not only has the Brier lost a piece of his identity, Miller asserts that the land’s impact on Appalachian society has diminished with the cultural changes in the region as well. “Full of little lives,” he writes, “the countryside / couldn’t remember yesterday, or see tomorrow” (32-33). This change in perspective reveals a marked difference from the humanistic focus of *TMHCC* and signals a transition in Miller’s work towards a more careful joint consideration of both land and inhabitants.

“Top of the Hill” culminates Miller’s description of the process of separation between people and land. Though *Brier, His Book* does not sustain the narrative arc found in *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, this poem certainly describes Miller’s sense of division between people and place by examining an abused mountaintop “(a) mile from any house / where the road

cuts through the hill” (1-2). The opening lines “red / gash between rounding thighs—scrub pines thick as pubic hair” establish the imagery of rape and therefore asserts that extractive industry and contemporary residents have abused the surrounding ecosystems for self-gratification without regard for the consequences on the land (3-4). The hill has transformed into possession or commodity and becomes a habitat for stray animals and a wasteland of trash instead of representing a piece of their personhood. By failing to recognize the environment’s value as a significant contributor to personal heritage and identity, the hill becomes an abandoned space which garners no regard or respect from its inhabitants. Radio waves take on an ominous presence in the last line as Miller attempts to connect the rise in technology to a decline of appreciation for natural spaces.

Joining With Place

In *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, the Brier’s principle motive is to reunify with place. His journey back to the significant locations of his past reflects a process Liam Campbell describes as the movement “from a sense of loss to one of hope on both a personal and communal level” which “requires a new way of seeing oneself and each other in a connected life-giving relationship with all of Creation” (Campbell 4). The Brier himself echoes the surroundings of his home while learning from them, suggesting that the character remains in communication with the ecology and culture which has defined him. In examining James Still’s *River of Earth*, Miller notes that many of the “physical features, characteristics, the qualities of people mirror their environment,” and reiterates this point by claiming that Still’s “people are like the hills; the hills resemble the people (Miller, *Appalachian Lit. at Home* 20). Miller points out similar features in the writings of Jesse Stuart’s creative work, claiming that “the people of

Jesse Stuart's poems, stories, and novels have been seen as so closely attuned to their surroundings as to seem virtual extensions or outcroppings of their terrain" (Miller Anytime 14). Like Stuart and Still, Miller's Brier reflects his surroundings and the delineation between person and place obfuscates and becomes indistinguishable from one another.

Miller has identified "No Name," the second poem in Part II of *TMHCC*, as the moment when the Brier "begins the process of being re-born" (Miller to Johnson 3). The work contains dark overtones of death and loss at the beginning, and Miller describes how the Brier's face has become frozen due to a stroke or similar medical issue. Surrounded by meaningless conversations, the Brier feels that he is inundated by the bubbles of "pretty goldfish in a glass aquarium" (8). The first stanza explores how the Brier rejects the surrounding industrial culture, inferred from adjacent poems, as the steel mills and industry of large northern cities and becomes like a fish swimming against the current. If "space is claimed for man by naming it," as Relph has argued, then the Brier can no longer claim himself or the space around him has his own (Relph *Place* 16). Out of his place, his thoughts "sought out / a deep invisible flow," indicative of the Brier's lost connection to his environment, thereby causing him to desire a return to his home (12-13). He decides to return to the hills and live "among dangerous / slow-moving shapes that had no name" (14-15). As features outside the controlled named space, these nameless figures also reflect the Brier's desire for the mystery of his former home, as seen in "The Faith of Fishermen," and he seeks to rejoin the "deep invisible flow" of his mountain culture (12). This undescribed flow, a conceptualizing of mountain culture as a river emitting from the mountains, reveals Miller's intention to unite his character with the environment of his past. Miller outlines the concept for this idea in "No Name" and then provides a fuller explanation in the next poem in the collection, "Turn Your Radio On."

“Turn Your Radio On” connects the Brier’s family and personal history with the environment of the Appalachian Mountains. The poem begins with the Brier unable to “hear his thoughts in the city that never slept,” and he remains separate and at odds with his surroundings, while “(t)he city’s rush and roar / even poured through his dreams” (1-2, 3-4). But by the end of the poem, the Brier remembers his grandparents’ connection to their place, who claim that “this place / belongs to us, [...] and we belong to it.” (25-26). This sense of connection to place and location stands in opposition to the Brier’s experience in the north. His grandparents’ connection to place exemplifies the “deep invisible flow” from “No Name,” and the elderly couple’s conversations come “as naturally as treefrogs in the poplars” (13, 28). Miller has commented that “Turn Your Radio On” comes from a gospel line, “turn your radio on and listen to the music of the air” (Miller to Johnson 3). This usage underscores the connection between this work and “No Name,” as the name directs the Brier to pay attention to the atmosphere around him, a task made impossible while living in a place filled with other radio voices and “a storm of static” (3). By the end of the work, the excess radio waves have quieted, thus allowing the sound of frogs in the trees to reach him. “No Name” and “Turn Your Radio On” come in sequence to one another, and the end of “Turn Your Radio On” offers a more tangible example of the concept first described in “No Name.”

The poems immediately following “No Name” and “Turn Your Radio On” offer greater explanation of Miller’s attempt to link geography with the Brier. “Chopping Wood,” “His Hands,” “Going to Sleep by a Troutstream,” and “Light Leaving” all address the connection between people and place. Each of these works emphasizes how the interactions between location and population create place and identity for both the ecosystem and the inhabitants. In “Chopping Wood,” the Brier transforms from a single individual into the identity of an entire

farm. The poem begins with descriptions of his life in the suburban Funhouse from Part I of *TMHCC*, complete with traffic, fumes, coffee and the “sting of nicotine / laid like a lash on a horse’s rump” (7-8). These images suggest both physical and cultural malady, as the “babble and grunt” of suburban life work their way through the veins of the Brier. He falls asleep and transforms into a “small farm of flesh” to experience the “resurrection and miracles of rest” (16, 17). Upon his awakening, the Brier becomes one of the numerous “tingling lights lit along the creek and ridges” (19). Miller asserts that this transition exemplifies “the identity between body and place,” with the Brier reawakening a region with his work, thus showing that he represents more than just himself and has begun to speak for the region (Miller to Johnson 3). He codifies this role at the end of the book when he preaches “Brier Sermon.”

Similar in theme to “Chopping Wood,” “His Hands” also shows how the Brier continues to struggle with his identity despite his reunion with place. His thoughts retain the “storm of static” from “Turn Your Radio On,” and he still exhibits the “busy intersection of nerves” from the previous poem (3, 2). Miller claimed that “this poem deals with the struggle of the speaker from Part I, the suburban, contemporary man in the Appalachian [F]unhouse, in transforming himself” (Miller to Johnson 3). Though he desires to live “as naturally as treefrogs in the poplars,” he cannot yet quiet his spirit enough to live peaceably in the surrounding environment after so long departed from his place, and even while walking in the woods “(b)irds circled his farthest green thoughts” (28). While he seeks reunification with place, the culture of the northern cities has made an impact on his mind and left him unable to quiet his thoughts or hands.

Working from the perspective that *TMHCC* functions as a long narrative poem, a reader finds the that two poems following “His Hands” demonstrate the Brier’s failed attempts to join with his environment. While he desires to return to his place, the physical and mental distance

between him and the mountains of his home provide obstacles to his process of returning to his original place. “Winter Days” describes the calming effect he experiences returning home, and “Brier Visions” demonstrates his panoramic view of the region. Nevertheless, in each, though he has returned to his desired locale, he fails to complete his union.

The joining occurs in “Going to Sleep by a Troutstream” where the Brier falls asleep beside a rushing mountain stream only to let go to join with the ecosystem of his home. The poem begins with specific indicators of a geographic location, noting that he has laid down “a hundred yards upstream” from a waterfall (3). As the poem progresses, his precise location dwindles until his body becomes obscured into the stream, then the hills and region ultimately dissipate into the “light of stars” (18). Miller has claimed that this work details the Brier’s attempt “to achieve oneness with place,” and the movement in scale from the particular towards the cosmic forwards the idea that the Brier has joined with his surroundings (Miller to Johnson 4). Like “Light Leaving” which soon follows it, the Brier is “inseparable from place” (Miller to Johnson 4). Though his reunion does not activate a sudden wholeness for the entire region, it signals a turning point for the Brier, an experience similar to baptism, and thus sets him on the course towards the “Brier Sermon.”

In “Every Leaf a Mirror,” the Brier looks into a leaf for his own reflection because he finds no semblance of himself in the “smokestacks, billboards, / shopping centers, mills and vacation homes” which once surround him (14-15). Since he has reunified with both the ecosystem and the place of his home, he can no longer identify with the commercialist culture of the urban centers in the industrial north. As seen in the next poem in the collection, “Born Again,” the Brier chooses to live in the memory of his past, a past which allows him a “re-birth

restoring him to himself, saying: / you must be born again” (22-23). He chooses rebirth rather than continuing to remain isolated from his place.

Miller depicts the degree of the Brier’s reunification with place in the poem “The Brier Breathing.” By using images common in the Appalachian south, Miller describes the Brier’s arrival at the deep rest of rebirth. His breath begins rapid “like the swallows in a chimney,” then slows to the rhythm of “a crosscut saw in timber” (10, 13). When he reaches the deepest part of sleep, his breathing reflects still water standing in “sunlit pools / where ripples spread // wider and wider,” thus showing that his anxiety from displacement has ceased due to his reunification with place. Like “Going to Sleep by a Troutstream,” this poem begins with the specific moment of an evening walk, then finishes by obscuring the delineation between earth and sky. The ending positions the Brier as part of the environment, and his breathing reflects natural elements such as pools in a stream and quiet fish below the surface. These descriptions come in contrast to “No Name” at the beginning of Part II of *TMHCC*, and the contrast of emotions, from panic to rest and peace, allows Miller to conclude the section with a reunified Brier identity reminiscent of its state prior to his flight north from the region.

Conclusion

By describing the Brier as a feature of the land, Miller has firmly placed his persona into the hills and valleys of the Appalachian south. By moving his persona from disillusion with suburbia, through his struggle to regain a sense of unity with place, Miller argues for more than simply a “back to the land” approach to the problem of modernity. Miller argues that maintaining family traditions, cultivating a sense of closeness and familiarity with the ecosystems of the region, and intentionally reviving what is valuable in traditional cultures will foster a sense of

belonging among peoples often pushed to the “periphery” of modern society (Miller, “American Periphery” 1). The Brier stands as Miller’s example of the importance of nearness to local environment, and his character takes strength and meaning from his communications with the hills of his home.

CHAPTER 4
IMAGES OF WATER

*What bond have I made with the earth,
having worn myself against it?*

-- Wendell Berry, "The Stones"

The aquatic imagery in Jim Wayne Miller's verse often falls within the scope of traditional pastoral poetry. Even from his earliest work, *Copperhead Cane*, mountain streams carry the inference of idealism and unity between man and his ecosystem, while flooding and larger rivers often come paired with negative descriptions of pollution or excess. The spring or mountain stream function as the site where Miller's characters find relief from everyday stresses, return to their place of origin, and become one with their surroundings. Flooded lakes and rivers function as a liminal state between cultures, helping to highlight his characters' need for a return to their native ground. Miller's aquatic language allows poetic access to the concept of cultural movement, and he frequently portrays the entire Appalachian region as a place of transition through the image of the river.

Springs and Mountains Streams

Mountain springs regularly appear in Miller's work to present the world of the ideal and to show Miller's view of traditional living between people and their surrounding habitat. Often reflective of Heidegger's concept of "dwelling," the spring is the source of the river. Springs are depicted as emitting from the mountains themselves and therefore signal the presence of

important locations or interactions of unity between people and local ecology. Miller's use of the spring seems to reflect this concept by calling the reader to view the spring as an almost sacred space. In "The Country of Conscience," Miller's image of the stream asserts that traditional cultures are unwritten histories of "water flowing quietly / for centuries over rock" (16-17). Miller positions pre-industrialized Appalachia as a valuable yet largely ignored region in the United States. At the 1980 Highland Summer Conference, Miller quoted Wallace Stevens's poem "Anecdote of Men by the Thousands," placing emphasis on the lines "There are men of a province / who are that province. / There are men of a valley / Who are that valley. / There are men whose words / Are as natural sounds / Of their places" (5-10). Wallace's poem outlines Miller's own vision of how place shapes "who we are, and what we are," a theme which underlies every collection of Miller's work (Miller, *An Evening* 1989 1:31-1:49).

Springs and streams function as symbols of origin, as locations where characters find grounding and personal significance, and where people become one with their surroundings. The spring or mountain stream connects Miller's narrators and, eventually, the persona of the Brier, to their family land and geographical roots. The image most closely tied to the mountain spring is the character of the Dead Man. He functions as Miller's cultural connection to a traditional Appalachian mountain lifestyle, both in his poetry and in his personal biography. Jeff Daniel Marion and Rita Quillen have both noted that the Dead Man came out of Miller's relationship with his grandfather. Marion has said that

He [Miller] talked about his grandfather who was the Dead Man that he was having the dialogue with in his book *Dialogue with a Dead Man*. I do remember one of the stories he told me about the grandfather was that they loved to hunt, they loved to be out in the

woods, and as Jim was talking about that I could just feel his own sense of how much he loved that world, the power of the natural world. (Marion Interview 2018)

Rita Quillen has asserted that

In *Dialogue with a Dead Man*, we look through Jim Wayne Miller's struggle with grief at the loss of his grandfather. The recurring images in the poems reflect the loss of something precious, of ensuing grief, then healing and rejuvenation. He sees that in the death of this person he has lost a part of himself—a part that was more closely tied to family and home and mountains than he had previously realized. (Quillen 10)

Quillen pushes the idea further to stress that the forfeiture is not simply the loss of an interpersonal relationship and carries significant implications of the fading of an entire lifestyle of communion with the land (Quillen 10). The connection of family roots, cultural heritage, and physical place all impregnate Miller's image of the spring as the history of his personal timeline. Just as the spring is the headwaters of a river, the Dead Man is the spring of both the Brier and Miller himself. With the death of the Dead Man, Miller seems to assert that the region has lost a generation which maintained respect for the natural world and demonstrated a worldview of sustainable treatment of cohabitating wildlife. Though the character of the Dead Man is found only in *Dialogue with a Dead Man*, he informs the creation of the Brier and gives rise to the concept of the "father's house" found throughout the remainder of Miller's works. The Dead Man represents Miller's vision of the quintessential Appalachian figure, an idealism of connection between man and ecosystem.

Similar to Miller's use of the image of the house, the common spring takes on great significance in his work and becomes the site of revelation for those grieving or culturally lost in the search for personal wholeness. Though Miller certainly maintains one vision of the

traditional agrarian Appalachian culture as unsullied by the outside world and often depicts the changes in the region as a flood or blown-out stream, he has noted that he does not hold a view of Appalachian culture as inherently superior to others, nor that the region's best days are behind it. Miller frequently defends the rise of modernity as an opportunity for the culture of the region to continue to revive itself, claiming that an essential element of the mountain folklore and history is in its songs. In the preface to his book *The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same*, Miller argues that television and mass media are simply new elements to the region, and "the media didn't kill the songs. The media became the rivers the songs could sail on" (Miller *More Things Change* 1). Each named creek or spring in Miller's poetic work, such as the French Broad, the Big Snowbird, and Trammel Creek, are actual streams or rivers in the Appalachian region. By specifically naming them, Miller seeks to ground his images in the subject region, thus allowing the place names and songs to situate further the Brier's experience in the specifics of Miller's intended location of the southern mountains.

Miller's use of the spring as a location of connection to personal native ground is present in his earliest work, *Copperhead Cane*, and carries on throughout his canon. "On Sandy Mush Creek" tells the story of a stream haunted by a Native American's ghost, and the narrator finds artifacts left over from the Cherokee's past. Cast in the tone of an American Gothic piece, this poem sets a precedent for Miller's later work and establishes the mountain stream as a place of connection to the region's past. By repeating the line "another other than I," the reader is left to wonder if the narrator is alone or joined by a true ghost (8, 11). Miller uses the water's movement as an unsettling of the foundation for reality within the piece, thus leaving the reader to question the validity of the experience while probing the distance between the living and the dead. This altered reality features frequently in Miller's work, and the stream often serves as the

setting for the experience of dreams and visions because it links the residual heritage left by the Dead Man to the narrator's vision of his own future.

In the poem "Fencepost," first published in 1964 but republished in *Dialogue with a Dead Man*, Miller describes a fencepost the Dead Man plants near a mountain spring. Beside a spring, the two men have set the post into the ground, and it sprouts roots and begins to regrow. Possibly a reference to a similar scene in James Still's *River of Earth*, this spring is situated "below the mountain field," suggesting that the water comes from the mountain itself, and therefore links the water to the most iconic feature of the region (Still 55, 2). The narrator compares his grief due to the loss of the Dead Man to the planting of the fencepost, yet he remains hopeful that he will survive his loss by noting that the post has grown roots and lived past its initial felling. The narrator draws a comparison between himself and the "stake here by the spring drain," as both he and the fencepost have rerooted and will grow again (3). Though the poem most directly discusses healing from a loss, the spring as the location for restoration is foundational to the setting of the poem.

The image returns later in *Dialogue with a Dead Man* when the narrator describes the Dead Man as a trout or fish in the poems "Stalking" and "The Hungry Dead" and claims that he can see only a few surface rings but cannot spot the Dead Man directly. The narrator grieves the rise of philosophies which view the hills, pastures, and wildlife of his home as mere commodity and which fail to recognize inherent value in the ecosystem so impactful on the culture of the region. In this way, Miller mourns the loss of traditional culture while lamenting how the rise of modernity diminishes agrarian space. In "On Native Ground," the "spring at the mountain's foot" gives the narrator the ability to see past the "oilspill on a rainslick road" to the "cool air of the mountains" (16, 23, 29). As in "On Sandy Mush Creek," this spring functions as a visionary

location, providing an opportunity to revisit the native ground of the Dead Man, and then to see a way forward into the future of “a new house” rising from the pain of loss and death (35). As in “Fencepost,” Miller continues to draw from the spring image as a location typifying traditional culture as well as the site of renewal for future growth.

In *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, Miller uses the image of the spring to develop sites of heritage and sustainable interaction between man and local ecology. In the earliest conceptions of the book’s themes, he mentions that when the Appalachian (the name for the Brier persona in the earliest manuscripts of *TMHCC*) removes his soul from the region, “the spring drain doesn’t sing anymore,” thus symbolizing that the land is diminished through the absence of the population (Miller “New Appalachian Poems” 1). As in “Fencepost,” the Brier views the spring as the source for the river of his own life, and more broadly for the life of the mountain culture exemplified by the Dead Man. In the earliest draft of *TMHCC*, Miller pairs the image of the silenced spring with “a clapper fall[ing] from a cowbell,” the sun failing to “strike the hill in the evening” and “a barn sinking in on itself” (Miller “New Appalachian Poems” 1). These images all contain tones of grief, silence, and loss, and the absence of the spring further underscores the Brier’s loss of connection to the headwaters of his own familial and geographical history.

Miller has defended his view that the people and the place are inextricably linked, and both form the identity of the other. He claims that his work seeks what he has described as “invisible baggage [...] Folklore. Beliefs. Attitudes. Values. The immaterial part of the culture, not the material part of it. And so I’m after signs of that invisible baggage” (Miller, *An Evening* 1989 3:15-3:45). These invisible yet identifying features of a person and culture, he claims, came with the original settlers from Europe as historical providence from their travels to the New

World. But the stories and beliefs became naturalized to the new location, and over time the culture aligned itself with the new region. “[W]e are a relic area as far as the English language is concerned. There are forms of the English language that people speak in our part of the country that to other people are sort of like arrowheads that you’d go out in the bottoms and pick up. They come from the past” (Miller, *An Evening* 5:15-5:29 1989). These artifacts make up the theoretical spring in Miller’s work, and he seeks to promote a revaluing of these origins in the “Brier Sermon” by calling his readers to remember that “[o]ur foreparents left us a very fine inheritance” (66).

To present this connection in his poetry, Miller sought to link the Brier with the land itself, and not simply with the culture. “Winter Days,” like the poems “Turn Your Radio On” and “Chopping Wood” which surround it, describe a desire for the reunification of the Brier with his homeland, and the image of the mountain river expressed in this work provides the reader with a deeply pastoral view of the region. The final lines “Between white sycamores the river turned, / sure of where it was going, in no hurry” portray a connection between place and self by personifying the ecosystem as confident and at ease (12). Miller has noted that these works “assert the identity between body and place” (Miller to Johnson 3). The mountain river, in stark contrast to the chaos of the northern road found in “Going South,” is surrounded by peaceful bucolic images, and the poem centers on rurality as theme. The two contrast one another, with the road representing the American Funhouse, and the mountain stream a return to the Brier’s mountain heritage.

Once the Brier has returned home to his native ground, he becomes one with his surroundings in the poem “Going to Sleep by a Troutstream.” As described in the previous chapter, the stream functions as the meeting place between the environment and the Brier

himself. The work begins with the Brier distinct from the stream, and he lies down beside the “steady crash of water / down over rocks” (1). By the end of the poem, his body has become obscured within the surroundings, and Miller has commented that this poem is the moment when the Brier “is trying to achieve oneness with his place” (Miller to Johnson 4). The work contains language indicative of sleep or death, thus symbolizing the drowning of the Brier in his region. The poem also contains baptismal imagery, indicative of the Brier’s death to his individuality in order to become a single part of the larger environment. This baptism into the water of the region is the moment of conversion as the Brier transforms to eventually become a spokesman preacher for the region. The mountain stream is the place of unification between what Miller describes as the “quintessential Appalachian” in the opening of *Brier, His Book* and the streams and ridges of his home region (Miller, Intro to *Brier, His Book*).

Near the end of “The Brier Breathing,” Miller positions the spring as the centermost part of the Brier’s dreams. “Here,” Miller writes, “he recaptures the homeplace in thoughts before going to sleep” (Miller to Johnson 5). The poem lays out several different emotions or feelings portrayed by breathing, but the image of the deepest breath, the one closest to the oneiric house, is the image of the spring. It comes from a breath

[...] so far back
it trickled
transparent over rocks
and stood in sunlit pools[.] (37-40)

The quiet spring is the deepest point of sleep in the poem and describes the Brier’s dreams of connection to his homeplace. Situated at the end of Part II of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, between the poems “Born Again” and “Long View,” “The Brier Breathing” functions as a piece

of Miller's description of the Brier's newfound wholeness. "Born Again" contains the image of the "muddy spring" which soon clears as the Brier dreams of the return to his native ground and home region (14).

A more tangible example of Miller's conceptualization of the Brier's reunification with the mountains comes in the poem "On the Wings of a Dove." Miller switches from the imagistic approach in "Going to Sleep on a Troutstream" for a more narrative style by telling a story of the Brier's return from employment in Ohio. The title refers to a gospel song, and contains references to "*Wait a Little Longer, Jesus or Blue Moon / of Kentucky*," while alluding to the flight of the dove at the end of Noah's flood (22-23). He parks beside the French Broad to drink moonshine and listen to local gospel music and both acts develop a sense of revival of his person through emersion in the religious and regional culture of his place. Miller describes the location as a place where the "river, mountains and sky / run together," which indicates the mountain river functions as a location of geographical wholeness to the Brier (14-15). As the poem proceeds, the Brier's anxiety slowly eases until "white doves [rise] out of his ribcage" (30) and the description seems to indicate the Brier's regrounding in his home. Instead of his individuality becoming conceptually obscured as is found in "Going to Sleep by a Troutstream," this poem more clearly articulates the Brier's transition as a man back into his home. He encounters the people, music, and drink of his home region, and the experience allows him to find restful satisfaction in his return.

Similar in theme and form to "On the Wings of a Dove," the poem "On Trammel Creek" demonstrates Miller's desire for political formation to reflect and respect regional differences as well. He does not align the Brier with the doctrines of the church or the statutes of the state and seems instead to infer greater community between the local populace and Trammel Creek itself.

The Brier understands that “customs were stronger than laws” (53). He is separate from the church and from the government, and as an unattached third he becomes grouped together with Trammel Creek, which is “no respecter of state lines” (1). The creek and the Brier are positioned as unified in their defiance or deliberate detachment from both the state and the church. Trammel Creek functions as the location where the local populace can still share moonshine despite prohibition, and the interaction between the Brier and the other “feller” reflects the culture mourned in *Dialogue with a Dead Man* (31).

Lakes and Floods

The image of the flood aggravates the spring. Where the spring often comes with images of clear water and purity, floods have an obfuscating effect as a descriptor of the region. Miller employs the image of the flood as a negative representation of the result of intruding destructive philosophies which disregard the importance of the natural environment. Lakes and overflowing rivers describe cultural exchanges as a “border-line surface between such an inside and outside,” and the violent images reveal how this “surface is painful on both sides” (Bachelard 218). Flooding frequently comes connected with cultural trauma and the subsequent “dislocation” of Appalachian communities (Johnson 126).

Ecologically destructive mining practices, the construction of large infrastructure, and the gradual modernization of the region are all described negatively in Miller’s work, often shown forcing local people to move to new locations for work or to sell their farms for development. The flood stands as the foil of the spring, and cultural alteration often comes paired with blown-out creeks, flooded farms, and trash-strewn roadways. In “Cripple Creek Revisited,” from *The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same*, Miller describes how creeks have become

unwholesome in the aftermath of this new cultural flood. Though it draws inspiration from the traditional love song “Crippled Creek,” Miller’s poem differs in tone by expressing a darker reality, and the content focuses more directly on the growing ecological changes rather than on two young lovers. The unnamed narrator wades out into the creek and “cut[s] his feet on broken glass,” then describes how “little fish floa[t] on their backs” (2, 24). The streams of the region have changed with the advent of strip-mining and resulting pollution, and the song demonstrates how the flood represents the result of deep alterations in how local society relates to the ecosystems which surround them.

The poem “Night Storms” directly links Miller’s vision of flooded waters with the concept of grief. The narrator describes his loss of the Dead Man as nighttime flooding, and the painful memories become “like trees uprooted in a flash flood” (9). The narrator awakens in the morning only to experience a “cold shower of remembering” that his loved one remains deceased (12). Miller further explores grief through the theme of high water by continuing with the image in the next poem, “The Hungry Dead,” wherein the narrator fishes from his jonboat in a lake of “drowned trees” (4). The image recalls the crossing of the river Styx, and fish emerge from the depths to “devour the living and sink back again” (14). The world of the Dead Man, a place the narrator connects to pre-industrialized Appalachia, has experienced a flood of outside philosophical influences and left the region covered over and drowning. As mentioned in the discussion of the image of the spring, the Dead Man symbolizes Miller’s view that the traditional hill culture continues to deplete over time. With the loss of traditional culture comes a gradual loss of a paradigm of close association with the land. The narrator floats over top of downed trees and murky water, emphasizing the separation he feels from the worldview of the Dead Man.

Miller connects the rise of commercialist culture to the image of the road by using flood language in the final section of *Nostalgia for 70*. A book he envisioned as “a metaphor for a certain speed in life, [sic] or an intensity of experience,” Miller sought to describe his desire for the experience of the road prior to the lowering of the interstate speed limits from 70 to 65 (Miller *Conversations With* 1987 18:12-18:26). In “Buffalo,” the narrator describes the road as a place in opposition to the mountain river, where police officers wash off oil- and blood-covered roads while ordering all people into a “single lane” (9). Buffalo roam away from the highway, near “bottomland along the river,” but not near the road itself, symbolizing the separation between the world of the ideal cordoned off by the blood-covered highway (16). Miller further examines the impact of the road in the poem entitled “A Legal 55” by likening radio commercials to “trash swept down a / flooding creek” (10-11). By suggesting a connection between the road and a rise in product-centered thinking, Miller suggests that the people of the region were unprepared for the sudden influx of advertisements and commercialism in their everyday life. Core elements of Appalachian culture become linked with product, such as gospel music which introduces headache powder advertisements, and the narrator notes that “a moneygrubbing / motive sits in every pitch, like the billboard / in that clump of trees” (26-28). With the arrival of roads, Miller suggests, the region has become flooded with commercialist philosophy.

In *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, Miller continues his description of the process of cultural change with the poem “How America Came to the Mountains.” He does not specify the nature of what “comes” to the mountains, but rather leaves his meaning ambiguous and open to speculation while giving clues of increasing mechanization. He again connects the concept of the road to the region’s change, noting that “the air felt strange, / and smelled of blasting powder,

carbide, diesel fumes” (2-3). Miller notes his belief that “the road is the anthesis of home” in a letter to Dr. Don Johnson, and this home, the same “new house” first mentioned in “On Native Ground,” is the location most closely connected to his forefathers, the metaphorical house of the Dead Man (Miller to Johnson 2, 35). Miller connects flooding to the development of roads, strengthening radio waves, and the increased light pollution, even noting that a hen prophesied “eight lanes of fogged-in asphalt filled with headlights” (5). By refusing to specify what has “come” to the mountains, Miller allows the descriptions of flooding to cross-reference negative descriptions of growing infrastructure and the building of the interstates throughout the region. Liam Campbell has noted that “[l]ines of imperial power have always flowed along rivers,” and when America arrives in the mountains, the Brier describes the movement as following “creeks and roadbeds,” much like the movement of any flooded river or stream (Campbell 118, 17). As the Brier continues to describe his memory of America’s arrival, he notes:

when it hit, it blew the tops off houses,
shook people out of bed, exposing them
to sudden black sky wide as eight lanes of asphalt,
and dropped a hail of beer cans, buckets,
and bottles clattering on their sleepy heads.
Children were sucked up and never seen again. (18-23)
[...]
Some told him it fell like a flooding creek
that leaves ribbons of polyethylene
hanging from willow trees along the bank
and rusty cardoors half-silted over on sandbars. (34-37)

The road and the flood have become one, leaving a natural disaster in their wake. Miller finishes the poem by describing the flight of the Brier from the region, who claims his family has moved to “Is, Illinois,” before ultimately moving back to live in “As If, Kentucky” (54, 56). The final stanza underscores a choice between two alternative futures for the Brier. He can live displaced from his home region or return to Appalachia to live in nostalgia. It is not until the revelations come in “Brier Sermon–You Must Be Born Again” that he can envision the third possibility of living in his “father’s house” (61).

Displacement imagery returns in “Brier Visions,” and the Brier notes how commercialism has taken root through advertisements on radio waves, drawing the mountain people towards mainline conceptualizations of how to use their land and money, ultimately drawing the Appalachian people away from their home. The Brier claims the following in Part IV of “Brier Visions:”

like floodwaters rising in the night,
radio waves moved up the mountain valleys.
Coves and hollers rocked with the city’s flotsam:
Wrigley’s and Lucky Strike, Ford and Goodyear.
Lifted off the land by a rising music,
trees cut loose by singing saws, the people
rode the receding suck of sung commercials,
floated like rafted logs toward the mainstream. (15-22)

Though the poem begins with the traditional “gee and haw” of a mountaineer, flooding marks the beginning of the Brier’s story of displacement and his family’s disenfranchisement from their home and ultimately resulting in their flight from home. Like “How America Came to the

Mountains,” this poem draws a clear connection between the rise in materialistic thinking and Miller’s flood imagery.

In the poem “Crazy John,” the Brier links the growing influence of the road to the image of flooding. First envisioned as a piece of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, the opening stanzas describe rising infertility in the region (Miller New Appalachian Poems 1). Images of infertility begin the work, with the Brier noting that “[g]irls went on the pill, / his fields went barren, / and the spring drain stopped talking to itself” (5-7). Immediately following these lines come a single-line stanza which reemphasizes the cessation of growth: “Then it was winter” (8). Not only has the spring stopped flowing, his “ninety-year-old father” finds that a gasoline pump “sprang up like a toadstool / in the woods back of his barn” (9, 16-17). At the end of the piece, the “creek rose in the night, got up to the house, / and washed his old father out the door” (19, 20). The old father is found three days later “face down out in a pasture field / in a sinkhole with a stranded duckbill catfish / supposed to be extinct,” seemingly linking the elderly man with a disappearing species of fish (22-25).

The theme of displacement described in terms of flooding returns in *Brier, His Book* as Miller seeks to further articulate his “complex pastoralism” which “acknowledges the reality of history” by turning his attention to the flooding of farmland to create dammed lakes (Marx 363). Tennessee has thirty-three Tennessee Valley Authority reservoirs within its borders, and the creation of new dams often meant the flooding of valley hamlets and river systems (TVA). As seen with the flooding of towns like Fontana and Butler, the growth of infrastructure and hydroelectric power altered the land by converting entire river valleys into deep lakes.

In the work “Written on the Land,” the Brier describes a change in the language of the populace as a result of the flooding of valleys by the Army Corps of Engineers. He asserts that

prior to the creation of new impoundments, the region spoke “the language of smokehouse, / barn, garden palings, cistern and windlass,” but that this language has become unintelligible (6-8). With the introduction of the lake systems and the rise of “brash outlander[s],” the cliffs and fields which once held the language of the people deeply connected to the region have become altered into counterfeits of themselves. The original occupants of the house are gone, and in their place comes a new owner; carvings on gravestones grow faint, largely ignored by partiers on boats who write “laughter and happy endings on blue water” (33).

The alteration of the land and the resulting change in how humans interact with their surroundings cause the Brier to experience a reshaping of his own relationship with the region. The poem “No Name” describes the silencing of the Brier’s individuality and identity, which triggers his existential crisis that carries throughout both *The Mountains Have Come Closer* and *Brier, His Book*. Miller has noted that “No Name” is the beginning of when the Brier “begins the process of being reborn” (Miller to Johnson 3). The Brier feels that he must move against the current which seeks to silence him by forcing him into line with all the other minnows, thus muting his individual voice. Instead, Brier chooses to move against the flow of the cultural flood waters in his region and live among “dangerous / slow moving shapes” that have no name (13-14).

In “The Faith of Fishermen,” Brier describes other dangerous shapes in catfish that huddle around the base of TVA and Army Corps of Engineer dams, growing to monstrous sizes like creatures from a book of lore. “The divers are our priests,” the Brier says, and the catfishermen look to the divers for “any authoritative word” (11, 12). The fish take on a mythical presence in the poem, and Miller seems to place them outside of the subjugated nature of a dammed river. The fish live in “the dark around the gates that regulate the rivers of / our lives”

and retain a sense of mystery within the region (17-18). Characterized as knights or warriors, the divers bring back stories of Grendel, and the fishermen rely on these stories of the unknown to maintain a sense of awe. Miller seems to ask how people can retain wonder in a world bound by devices and controlled by machines. The fishermen search for rumors of the untamed, and the divers' stories of continued wildness gives them hope. The mountain river has become a lake by flooding over small farms and communities, yet the Brier has not given up the search for a sense of wonder within the region and describes fishermen as seeking a way forward after the flooding of their valley homes.

Conclusion

In a lecture at Radford University, Miller said "I'm interested in the question of whether or not where we are has anything to do with who we are. And the related question, [does] who you are have anything to do with who you have been?" (Miller, *An Evening* 1989 2:44-2:55). Set in the Appalachian Mountains, much of his poetry draws from local ecology for inspiration and to raise existential questions. The mountain spring most readily connects his reader to what Miller considers the headwaters of the local mountaineer culture. Like "On Sandy Creek," many of his poems recognize that Native American culture existed prior to the arrival of European settlers. In the first section of "The Brier Moves to A New Place," the Brier finds "left arrowheads" alongside a "family cemetery," and each site represents a different culture which previously inhabited the region (4, 5).

Miller's main concern, however, stems not from the change and modernization of the region, but rather with a gradual loss of connection between the mountain ecology and the local population resulting from the influx of roads and commercialization. The spring becomes the symbol of proper living with the land, as it is the location where a local inhabitant can access

potable water. The Brier and the unnamed narrator in *Dialogue with a Dead Man* both return to potable mountain springs to find personal grounding and rejuvenation. For those two characters, their culture's mountain heritage certainly had a deep impact on their personal development, and the spring is a metonym for their cultural mountain heritage.

The image of the flood counteracts the spring, and Miller uses it as both the cause and result of abandonment of the local ecology and cultural heritage. The flood often takes on overtones of denouncing excessive commercialist thinking, and Miller depicts old family members being washed downstream with torrents of newspaper advertisements and plastic bags. Other natural disasters, such as tornados, come paired with similar cultural implications. In the poem "Abandoned," the house's stairs "led up into the air / and stopped," seeming to indicate that the structure has committed suicide (21-22). Violence is latent in Miller's images of flooding. It is only a return to the condition of the spring, a symbolic reacceptance of the ecological responsibility by the local inhabitants, which will allow the Brier to find peace in his location. Miller's image of the flood is in reaction to the spring, and only by recognizing the importance of maintaining a tradition of sustainable living can the Brier and the Appalachian people he represents recoup their connection to the hills they call home.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

You say, Preacher, you must be touched, that's foolishness

How can anybody run off and leave himself?

-- Jim Wayne Miller, Brier Sermon

In addressing questions of identity, Jim Wayne Miller regularly calls upon his readers to reconsider the importance of place. In “Every Leaf a Mirror,” Miller argues that location affects how people experience the world around them. Miller’s imagery echoes the hills and ecology of the mountain south, and his work often draws from the topography of his home region. His use of water images and his presentation of the Brier persona reveal his concern for place and identity; each forwards the idea that cultures reflects the lands around them.

Miller’s aquatic images demonstrate connection to place by associating traditional mountain culture with images of the spring or mountain creek. In his work, springs connect people to the mountain topography and demonstrate a certain level of dependency between the inhabitants and the ecology of the region. In the poem “Country of Conscience,” Miller describes how some cultures exist in closer connection to their geography than others, comparing them to “a country felt and known, / a native ground and tongue” (4-5). He describes these native tongues as “water flowing quietly / for centuries over rock,” asserting that traditional peoples grow out of the ground like springs.

Springs or mountain creeks also function as a location of origin for specific characters in Miller’s work. As seen in “Going to Sleep by a Troutstream,” the Brier finds that he can reunite with his location by “letting go” and becoming one with his place. This image of reunion occurs

beside a small stream, thus marking a shift in the trajectory of *The Mountains Have Come Closer* from grief to wholeness. Miller suggests similar healing in “On the Wings of a Dove,” when the Brier eases his anxiety by parking his car beside a mountain river to drink moonshine and watch fishermen. He reunites with both his culture and the ecology of his home beside the mountain water, thus experiencing a rebirth into his place and further illustrating Miller’s pattern of connecting water with locations of birth and rebirth.

In opposition to the image of the clear spring, images of flooding rivers and dammed lakes often come paired with rising materialism, disregard for the environment, and loss of identity. In “The Faith of Fishermen,” men sit beside a dammed river in search of catfish described as “yellow-eyed whiskered wildness” (15). Miller writes that they “need to know wonders are still alive at the base / of the steel and concrete world,” thus recognizing their search for mystery in a world regulated by human technology (13-14). Though the men are not directly in conflict with rising modernism in their region, they continue to look for significance in a space altered by large-scale industrial projects and flooded river valleys. The fishermen, Miller suggests, must find new ways to interact with their place and continue to live meaningfully “around the gates that regulate the rivers” of their lives (17). Instead of living in communication with the land as seen in the image of the spring, divers act as arbiters between the people and the environment they inhabit.

The Brier struggles with meaning and change as well, exemplifying someone who searches after fulfillment while living outside his place. The Brier suffers from grief when separated from his home, then preaches on a street corner for others to return to their “father’s house” in the “Brier Sermon” (61). The Brier’s grief due to his separation from place reoccurs throughout *The Mountains Have Come Closer* and *Brier, His Book*. “Abandon” examines his

grief by describing a landscape of isolation from the place he has left. Images of desertion echo throughout the verses, and the “half-wild dog” reflects the “abandoned house” (14, 6). Not only does the Brier feel apart from this place, the house no longer reflects the interaction between humans and land once the “people were swept / out like rafted logs” (3-4). The interaction between land and inhabitants is crucial for the development of place in this poem, and the Brier grieves for his former community.

When the Brier ultimately “achieves oneness with place” in “Going to Sleep by a Troutstream,” he can rejoin a habitat that represents the ecology of the region (Miller to Johnson 4). “The Brier Breathing” and “Born Again” reflect this language, and “Chopping Wood” describes the reintroduction of the Brier to his place as a gradual “miracle of rest” for his spirit (16). Miller seeks to describe how nearness to place provides the Brier with a sense of meaning and significance, and the Brier argues in “Brier Sermon” that remaining close to a person’s cultural roots aids in his development and ability to create place around him. Not only does the Brier himself move through his own grief by deliberately embracing a new placeness in his region, he calls his listeners to do the same in whatever location they find themselves.

Further Considerations

Dialogue with a Dead Man. Further consideration should be given to Miller’s work *Dialogue with a Dead Man*. Edwina Pendarvis has addressed the work directly in her article “Sanctifying the Profane: Jim Wayne Miller’s *Dialogue with a Dead Man*” by exploring Miller’s use of the pathetic fallacy when describing his interactions with the Dead Man. Other authors, such as Rita Quillen and John Lang, have mentioned *Dialogue with a Dead Man* in passing, but most critics have focused their attention on *The Mountains Have Come Closer* and the Brier persona. The work seems to sustain the narrative arch found in *TMHCC* but deals with the subject of grief and

loss of the Appalachian culture and, like the book which follows it, calls the reader to return to native ground. Furthermore, an examination of the Dead Man as a persona character could prove fruitful for future studies, as Miller seems to set up the Dead Man as a representative of all traditional mountain agrarianism. I assert that the Brier and the Dead Man may share more interaction across the two books than previously recognized. By analyzing how the two works reflect one another, one might provide greater insight into Miller's view of how the Dead Man may live on through the Brier into the modern industrialized world. The interplay between *DWDM* and *TMHCC* seems evident both in their theme and form, inviting a reading the two works as directly interconnected.

Image of the Road. Investigation of *Dialogue with a Dead Man* would also shed light on how Miller uses road and automobile imagery to critique rising modernism. Highways and interstates become increasingly more prominent through Miller's canon and, much like the image of the flood, the road functions as an antagonist in much of Miller's poetry. Ricky Cox comments on the mechanical metaphor in *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, but his interpretation falls short of an appreciation of the connection between the road and the rising industrialization in the Appalachian South. He writes that Miller employs machine images but fails to comment on whether Miller intended these images to draw up positive or negative implications (Cox 53). Yet nearly every occurrence of the road comes paired with the same destruction, isolation, or foreboding as the image of the flood. The road appears in "I Share," as the Brier is "afraid I may be found sitting in someone's care / trying to start it with my office key;" the car implies a failed retreat from the Funhouse (33-35). The image returns in "Going South," where the Brier claims, "I think I will probably die / in a long line of traffic," and by the end of the poem he imagines

how news cameras will video his death (4-5). “On the Wings of a Dove” tells of how the Brier returns from working in the north via the road, and finds placeness and rest only when he stops his car and listens “to bluegrass / on the radio” beside a mountain stream (13-14).

Miller regularly references radio waves in his work as well, and these images often come paired with roads and automobiles. As seen in “Every Leaf a Mirror,” the radios in junked cars sing distraction into his world like sirens to Odysseus, and he soon looks at his reflection in a leaf but sees only “smokestacks, billboards, / shopping centers” of an industrialized world (14-15). This world then roars by him “like a tractor-trailer, / leaving him hatless in a wake of fumes” (17-18). This poem demonstrates the connection between the radio image and the road, and the rising commercialism leaves the Brier in a state of bewilderment. Though he occasionally turns on the radio to listen to the music of his homeplace, most references to the radio and road leave the Brier with only a sense of displacement and loss.

The road continues to incite negative connotations throughout Miller’s work. “Long View” begins with the fast pace of the road and leaves the countryside “gone / like falling screams” (5-6). In *Vein of Words*, “You’re Going to Go to Sleep Now” positions the narrator as slowly suffocating under the “slow blackness spreading” of asphalt, and “Commuter” highlights the detachment of isolation by saying “[w]e keep to our lanes and know each other / only as headlights passing in the dark” (21, 4-5). Additionally, the “Brier Sermon” regularly calls for a return to placeness, but the preacher himself disappears in the final stanza “behind a motor home,” a symbol of a house which has neither foundation nor permanent address. Concerning this ending, Miller has said, “(t)hat ironic ending, by the way, is another reason, I hope, why the Brier Sermon can’t be construed as straightforward polemic” (Miller to Johnson 5). “[T]he road is the opposite of home,” Miller writes, and future investigations into how this image has shaped

his work could find new insight into how rising modernization will continue to reshape the future of Appalachia.

Link Between Still, Stuart, and Miller. Where *Dialogue with a Dead Man* and the image of the road both primarily focus on the loss of the pastoral, many of Miller's adjectives and characters reflect agrarian settings of Appalachian farms. In his article "Appalachian Literature at Home in This World," Miller argues that "[James] Still's people are rooted in this world. [. . .] Their lives are dusty with the land" (18). Edwina Pendarvis has echoed this same type of description in Miller's own work, noting that nature in Miller's poetry "moves in and occupies *us*" (Pendarvis 139). A scholar of James Still and Jesse Stuart, Miller's descriptions seem to mirror some of their images stylistically. Miller cites instances in Still's work where "identification of people with their natural environment serves to root people in this world now less than trees," and similar statements could be made for characters in his work as well (Miller "At Home" 19).

Future investigation into the literary lineage of description from Still to Miller could provide insight into how both fictional and poetic depictions of people and places have changed over time. Miller regularly describes the people in his poems with organic language. Examples of this usage can be seen in "Bird in the House," where the Brier experiences a "dogwood winter of grief" then becomes compared to "a sparrow beating its wings" (1, 20). In "A Turning," Miller describes the Brier's spirit as "the shriveled arm of the lake" (6). Similar language emerges in "Going South" where "birds turned slowly and flowed south," and suggests the moment of the Brier's spirit after death (31). These instances connect his work with Still and Stuart, and by examining similarities between his verse and the verse of those who came before him, future critical work could possibly track Still's literary influence on Miller's poetry.

Closing

Both the image of water and the Brier work to undermine dualistic notions of separation between “place” and “landscape,” thus arguing that people cannot be totally identified apart from their location. Land is not separate from history, and conceptualizations of land only in terms of monetary gain, Miller seems to suggest, ultimately result in alienation. As seen when the Brier returns home to find his home deserted in “Abandoned,” Miller asserts that people play an essential role in maintaining the placeness of specific locations. Without a relationship with land and the creation of placeness, the Brier warns his listeners against living an unhoused life which rejects both the cultural history of their community and the intimate connection to the topography of their local area.

Miller sought to articulate his view of the importance of place and home throughout his poetry. His poems reveal a deep concern for the environment and the interplay between people and the land. Not only does his verse describe his own grief, it also describes the grief of many other mountain people forced to leave Appalachia in search of meaningful employment. His Brier persona speaks to the experience of entire communities displaced or broken apart, and Miller hoped to provide a voice which was strong enough withstand critical inspection by scholars, yet authentic enough to connect to the very people he describes. His work holds the ecology of the region as valuable for how it interacts and shapes culture as well as for its natural beauty. As seen in “Restoring an Old Farmhouse,” Miller argues that the process of “(t)earing down, building up again / from what was salvaged” is essential for the continued rejuvenation of any culture, and Miller ultimately asks his readers to look at the environment which has shaped

them when considering what parts of their past remain valuable enough material for use in the creation of the future.

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