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*The Appalachian Nostos:
Pastoralism and Returning Home in Appalachian Poetry*

H. D. T. Kilbourne

Introduction

A few months ago, my grandfather and I took the four-hour drive into southwestern Virginia, about an hour out of the Tri-cities area, to visit the place he grew up and spent his youth subsistence farming. While he looked down into the north fork of the Holston, he told me a story. The fish of his youth, in the forties, were so plentiful, he said, they'd leap from the water and into your arms so you sometimes would not even need a net. It was only sometime later he came to realize that, by virtue of living downstream from Saltville and in extension what is presently a superfund site, the methylmercury levels along that stretch of river which they partially subsisted off was enough to impair the fish and leave them braindead. Et in Arcadia Ego.

Though I cannot confirm the validity of his story, he has always reminded me the "Kilbourne Family Motto": "Don't let the truth get in the way of a good story." This is a good story, not because its factual, but because it exemplifies the way in which returning to Appalachia, pastoralism, and politics are intertwined. These three things are the subject on which I write in this thesis. My grandfather had not reconciled before then, before returning to the ground that once fed him, the way modernity had always seeped into the pastoral subsistence of his youth.

The idea of returning home holds significant weight in Appalachian poetry. Going back to the traditional folk music of the mountains, one finds no shortage of songs about returning home. The idea of nostalgia has close links to this kind of homesickness, having etymological roots in the Ancient Greek word "*nostos*" meaning to return home ("nostalgia, n1"). Yet, the word holds more literary weight than that, as it is also a trope in Ancient Greek Literature where a hero, especially a veteran from the Trojan War and most commonly Ulysses, returns home

(“nostos, n1”). Similarly, returning to an Appalachian Ithaca from beyond the mountains has continued to be a vital part of many works of Appalachian literature: from Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* to Don Johnson’s *The Importance of Visible Scars*, the concept has found a special place within mountain writing. In referring to it as an Appalachian *Nostos*, I hope to bring attention to both the literary importance of returning home within the Appalachian and Western Canon and the undeniable place which nostalgia and pastoralism have in this process. Some scholars, namely Kristin Van Tassel, have suggested that this connection has led to the negative perception of pastoralism as “escapist” (Van Tassel 86). Such an understanding of pastoralism has led other critics to malign Appalachian poetry that appears too pastoral and nostalgic as contrary to political aims and action. Appalachian poetry has thus generally been divided between that which is pastoral, primitivist, nostalgic, and that which is political, ideological, proletarian. Many critics from the Appalachian renaissance have at one point espoused at least a preference towards one or the other: Ricky Cox, Frank Einstein, and Frank Steele to name a few. Yet, while no one expects a clear division between these two camps, it is because of and through the inclusion of the Appalachian *Nostos* that a work of art can become both. The economic and ecological condition of Appalachia necessitates that a work which deals with returning to the mountains must be both political and pastoral, and at its best will bend the pastoral as a tool for political change.

The fact nostalgia and returning home would be so integral to Appalachian literature comes as no surprise; like many others my grandfather left the family farm at seventeen to get an education and work that was not coal mining, once his father’s profession. Like in the story from his childhood, the yeoman mythos has been perpetually challenged by the encroachment of modernity; from the weapons factory which disposed of mercury in the Holston to the resource

extraction which monopolized the once agrarian economy. While the image of America as an untouched Eden has colonialist tendencies and the dream of a simple life in touch with nature is often idealistic, these metaphors, perhaps by virtue of their ubiquity within America and its founding myth, can readily be used to fight back against the social, political, and environmental problems placed before Appalachia, if done with a delicate touch.

Leo Marx, an Americanist, examines something similarly in his book *The Machine in the Garden* where he divides the simple pastoralism, Van Tassel's escapist nostalgia, and the complex pastoralism which manipulates this nostalgia towards social good. This division is an important distinction to make, as many of those who malign pastoralism think only about simple pastoralism: the stuff of daydreams and television ads. One work which clearly defines this middle ground between simple pastoralism, or primitivism, and the politics of industrialization and modernity is Jim Wayne Miller's *The Mountains Have Come Closer*. Miller, one of the most important figures in the Appalachian Renaissance of the twentieth century, wrote the collection of poems as the first of his Brier Poems, a series of poems which detail the happenings of a "Brier," a pan-Appalachian every-person, unnamed and homogenized to his mountain origin by the world outside taken from the title given to Appalachians migrated to the Midwest, as reads the epigraph to the post-humus collected volume eponymously titled *The Brier Poems*. Even in the name, "The Brier," Miller bends the dehumanizing homologation of people into stereotypes and designations into a tool for unity. The title itself leads the poetry to take on the many forms of nostos which Appalachians may undergo the various stages within it, the reconciliation of industrialization, change, and compliancy, and how these can be overcome, and the Appalachian can be—as Miller often repeats—"born again." In doing so, he never denies the past or the future, the need to modernize or the cost at which it might come if done too quickly, and the

importance of both traditional and modern forms of thinking and understanding. The work which is anything but pastoral—in the escapist sense—bends the conventions of the canonical pastorals or Virgil, the modernized pastoral of Thoreau, and everything in between for this cause.

To do this, I will be looking at his second collection *The Mountains Have Come Closer* by Jim Wayne Miller. Miller is by far one of the most canonic writer and critic within Appalachian Studies who produces works which are—as he puts it—political and pastoral and pays special attention to characters who are returning home, especially in this collection. For all these reasons, his work will allow us to do a detailed examination of the Appalachian Nostos. Miller's place, when examined from a purely dualistic standpoint, can be confusing. Miller himself has classified poems he has written into either category, but it is the case that by considering a more nuanced perspective towards pastoralism, we find that a great deal of what he writes sits in the middle, occasionally emphasizing one aspect or the other. Within this work, Miller reveals his secret as to how he can place his poetry so firmly in the middle between two seemingly disparate—and occasionally warring—camps: that is his ability to make use of each stage within the process of returning home as a tool by which he broadcast the political necessities of Appalachian, which mobilize the perineal, ancient nostalgia of homesickness toward its remedy. It is because of the Appalachians Nostos that Miller's work is both political and pastoral.

It is not the goal of this essay to use pastoralism and the Appalachian Nostos as a way to frame and interpret Miller's work. Instead, I wish to use Miller's work as a tool by which we can examine Pastoralism and the Appalachian Nostos within Appalachian Literature. Miller's work will not be the only work disused, and I will bring in other authors, and their respective scholarship when it is advantageous to our examination of Miller's work. Miller, here, is more of

a jumping off point, a place from which we can connect disparate ideas and reconcile both the complexities of each stage within the process of returning home and the inescapability of pastoralism in works which make nostos their subject. Miller seems to have divided the process of nostos within *The Mountains Have Come Closer* into five sections; many of the poems deal with at least one. The first is the initial embarkation; the second details the exodus, where one adapts to their new environment and geography which often changes them in some way; the third is reconciliation, where one must finally readapt to Appalachia, despite the new ways of being which one has learned outside; fourth is returning, the period where one begins to take those new ways of being and integrates them into Appalachia; finally, the last stage details an awakening, where one finds contentment and reaches out to others, showing them the path towards salvation. Each of these will receive their own chapter, we will begin with the embarkation.

Chapter 1: The Embarkation of the Brier

To begin examining the embarkation of the Brier, it is vital we first examine pastoralism and its relationship to modernity's effects on Appalachian ecology and culture. Jim Wayne Miller's poem "How America Came to the Mountains" answers a question which anyone driving through Appalachia might have: "why now so many old barn doors / up and down the mountains hang by one hinge / and gravel in the creek is broken glass" (*Brier Poems* p. 55). Using pastoralism as a tool in his repertoire of rhetorical techniques, he proposes that it was the effects of modernization that led to these symptoms of economic and ecological decay. On the issue of pastoralism, Jim Wayne Miller divided the Appalachian poetry of his generation between two schools, that of the pastoral and that of the political (Einstein 32). It would be naive to declare this distinction absolute, and I do not believe Miller would have either. It is also the opinion of Rita Sims Quillen that it is better to avoid such definite divisions (Quillen 5). Frank Einstein concurs in his article "The Politics of Nostalgia;" He explains that both sides seek political change and reform (Einstein 33). Einstein praises Jim Wayne Miller's collection *The Mountains Have Come Closer* for its ability to stay present when considering the past (39). Finally, in the essay "Mechanical Metaphor," Ricky Cox considers the representation of tools and machines in Miller's poetry, concluding that, like the pastoral and political, this matter seems more complex than a simple dichotomy could explain.

Cox, in particular points to the ways the image of machinery and tools within *The Mountains Have Come Closer* are given both positive and negative attributes and connotations, but believes that machinery is "wholly positive" within the collection (Cox 139). Despite this, he lays out a set of fascinating examples of the conflicted, if not contradictory, manner with which Miller approaches the ideas of tools and machines, but Cox's work, focusing exclusively on

machines, only just scratches the surface of a much greater set of paradoxical views presented by the collection which outline Miller's conception of returning home. This paradox is extended, once again, by Quillen and Don Johnson, who have described the geography of the Appalachian space and home in Miller's work as a borderland between the urban world and the wilderness (Quillen 5; Johnson 129). From this, the central conflict of "How America Came to the Mountains" can be discovered: Miller sketches an Appalachia in which the urban is encroaching onto that borderland.

The work of Leo Marx, which we discussed in the preceding chapter, parallels the theories of Quillen, Einstein, Johnson, and Cox who, unlike Marx, specifically examine Appalachia and Jim Wayne Miller. Without having fully incorporated the understanding of complex pastoralism and post-pastoral into their frameworks, Quillen, Einstein, Johnson, and Cox have yet to bring about its full breadth in application to the work of Jim Wayne Miller. Marx and Gifford have already provided a useful critical framework from which to analyze the conflicted, recently industrialized, and ecologically exploited Appalachia of "How the Mountains Came to America." Through their work, we can understand not only what previous critics have noted in Appalachian poetry, but also the importance of pastoralism in Miller's work.

In *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, as I have pointed out, Cox has shown the machine-loving gearhead inside of the semi-autobiographical main character, "the Brier." This is shown clearly in "Brier Sermon" where the Brier preaches by, around, and about a broken-down car next to a hardware store (Cox 138; Miller p. 65-66), and in "On the Wings of a Dove" where his mind "hummed / Like pistons under the hood of a good truck," two poems we will return to later (Cox 137; Miller p. 39). There are other examples where the Miller appears opposed to machinery, and this is not something Cox denies. Returning to "How America Came to the

Mountains,” the poem begins with a more natural, agrarian landscape which is eventually overcome by the machinery of industrialization and its resulting harmful effects on the Appalachian landscape. But yet, within the poem, the machinery of the past Appalachia is as much machine as the modern industrial machinery that comes after both pollute and destroy the current landscape of their respective times. That is to say this poem could be read to approve of, or at least tolerate, certain machinery. Despite this, the poem scorns the modern machines of industry while praising—but never elaborating upon—the mechanical tools of the bygone Appalachia, the tools which a traditional Jeffersonian pastoral would idealize.

Viewing this contradiction, one might consider the work conflicted. The contradiction that sits at the heart of pastoralism proves the work pastoral. For instance, the bucolic landscape of crowing hens is shattered in the opening lines of the poem by the storm of modernity which overwhelms the pastoral landscape of pre-industrial Appalachia. It approaches with a very familiar sound to anyone who has read American pastoral literature; the Brier recalls “it sounded like a train whistle far off in the night” (*Brier Poems* p. 54). The image of a train whistle breaking up a serene natural landscape is a long-lasting motif of American pastoral literature dating back to the 1800s. So pervasive was this image that Leo Marx points out in the opening chapter of *The Machine in the Garden*: “One suspects indeed that if we had access to all the notebooks kept by aspiring American writers of the 1840’s we would find [a train whistle interrupting nature] recorded again and again” (Marx 17). Many canonically pastoral writers from the recently industrialized New England like Emerson, Hawthorne, and most famously Thoreau would all recount such events in their own work. Marx points to an example found in Thoreau, which features both a train whistle and a simile likening the train whistle to a hawk (Marx 15). Compare this to the way that the Brier recounts the sound as being “like a train

whistle,” and the resemblance becomes uncanny (*Brier Poems* p.54). Miller, then, draws an undeniable connection between his own work and that of the classic American pastoral. Some might disagree with this connection by affirming the large amount of time between Miller’s writing and the writing of Emerson, Hawthorn, and Thoreau, undermining the connection between them. However, the sound is not a train whistle, but rather “like a train whistle,” recalling this trope but simultaneously rejecting it with simile, as Thoreau compared the train whistle to a hawk (p. 54). The sounds’ similarity exists not only in its sonic properties but also in its historical literary significance, beckoning backward to the period when other parts of America had first begun the process of modernizing that finally overtakes Appalachia in the poem. Marx has also specifically pointed out that the image of a train is more or less timeless and still retains the same connotations that it did for Thoreau and Emerson (Marx 24).

Further, one can still see this moment as metaphor: the train whistle representing the railroads that were constructed into Appalachia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to make the extraction of natural resources like coal, quartz, timber, and mica more economically efficient. The economics of extraction are already a significant theme in *The Brier Poems* more generally. Because of Appalachia’s later development, the attribute of being like a train whistle recalls a time where the train was still a recent arrival in Appalachia much like it was for writers in 1840’s New England. The comparison between this period’s literature and Miller’s writing becomes particularly apt when looking at Miller’s essays. In “Appalachian Literature: A Region Awakens,” Miller compares the work of the Appalachian Renaissance—of which Miller was a founding figure—to the work of both the first generation of canonically accepted Southern writers who began after the South’s industrialization as well as the first generation of canonically accepted American writers whose genesis was likewise found in the

dawn of America's industrialization ("Appalachian Literature" 146-147). One may also point to the way Brier describes Appalachia in the day prior—the air “smelled of blasting powder, carbide, diesel fumes”—as evidence against this pastoral interpretation of the poem. However, again turning to Marx's understanding we find that, on the contrary, it allows it to ascend to another, literary, level of pastoral (*Brier Poems* p. 54). The pastoral, Marx says, sits between the industrial and the natural, and a part of the literary pastoral genre is the encroachment of one or the other into the pastures (Marx 25). These elements preempt the resource extraction which is soon to come, as carbide lamps and blasting powder are used in the coal mining process while the smell of diesel fumes alludes to the coming trucks, trains, and tools required to remove natural resources from the land. This scene sits on the borderland between the urban modernization and the wilderness, what Marx previously defined as the “pastoral borderlands.” Rita Quillen brought forth the same idea when she described the poetry of Miller and other Appalachian poets: “On the left is civilization; a small area in the middle represents the frontier, where civilization and nature meet and mingle; to the far right is nature. All four poets have roots in the frontier experience” (Quillen 63). Her comparison is so nearly identical to the pastoral described by Marx which suggests the conclusion is intuitive in its application to Appalachian literature. One need only exchange the word “frontier” with “pasture” to create a perfect match. The inclusion of “blasting powder, carbide, diesel fumes” does, however, prevent the poem from being what Marx has termed “sentimental pastoral,” while allowing it to become “complex pastoralism,” in which the defining characteristic is a willingness to deny the idealistic an unquestioned place in the work (Marx 25).

The world that follows the rude awakening of the storm of modernity is dystopian in comparison, with trash and pollution disrupting the previously bucolic landscape. The barn doors

were half blown off their hinges and beer cans littered the roadside. The pristine pastoral landscape has been turned into a dilapidated nowhere on the edge of acceptable modernity. Whereas older generations were self-reliant and frugally reused resources out of necessity, the current Appalachia of the poem has, like the rest of America, come into an overabundance of waste which has become detrimental to the environment in its pastoral state. While most of the poem provided amazingly detailed and energetic images of industrialization, Miller discards it for limpness in description, correlating with the Brier family's decision to return to the mountains despite their home's apparent decline—which had previously driven them out. Their return is an act of concession and is only given a concise abbreviated reference in two prosaic lines of empty platitude. Thus, when considering the ending we see another aspect of this form of pastoralism in the resignation of the closing lines; the outside is “dull country” and the changed mountains, while not the Arcadia of a bygone era, at least continue to provide some amount of solace to them (p. 55). Such bittersweet attachment to a changed home is a longstanding theme in literature. Consider the often-cited episode in Virgil's first *Eclogue* where Meliboeus, having been forcefully removed from his pastoral paradise by the Roman government (ie., civilization) is allowed a night's stay in Tityrus' house before leaving the pastoral paradise he had called home for so long. Marx defines the insufficient relief that bookends the narrative of both poems as fundamental to their genre (Marx 31).

All of this shows that what Cox has found in this collection, the conflict and mixing of the natural and the mechanical, with the occasional concession to the former, is a part of a much larger conflict found in Miller's work. This conflict is the basis of the pastoral: the conflict of the borderlands between wilderness and civilization. While it is true that many, including Leo Marx himself, would argue that pastoral work of this variety is dated in America at large, this critical

framework still has importance in the modern day. Appalachia's more recent modernization means that these poems are much closer to pre-industrial Appalachia, justifying the comparisons to the examples of pastoralism found in the works of Thoreau and his contemporaries. However, there is a better justification that allows a further expansion of the pastoral interpretation of the poem. While conceding that Marx's complex pastoralism is indeed dead, Terry Gifford says that if the complex pastorals of today are not the post-pastoral, it is all but a continuation thereof (*Pastoral* 174; "Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral" 24-25). Gifford's concept of the post-pastoral is similar to Marx's complex pastoral but yet is "reaching beyond' the limitations of pastoral while being recognizably in the pastoral tradition." As shown above, the poem is undeniably a part of the pastoral tradition and the tradition of the complex pastoral ("Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral" 26). Likewise, because of the text's awareness of that tradition's limitations, the poem is also in rebellion against the genre's oft-cited failings.

Part of the complex and post-pastoralism of "How America Came to the Mountains" can be found in certain anti-pastoral aspects of it. Einstein's appraisal of the poem provides good evidence of anti-pastoralism here (that was one of his primary theses): "In Miller's poetry the past is no timeless structure, but rather an unsettling memory, causing the Brier to be ill at ease in the present" and that "[a] poetry which embraces the past fuels [the destruction of the past as tool against the status quo] by giving legitimacy to the romanticizing of the past" (Einstein 38). Nostalgic daydreaming will not remove the glass from the creeks nor the trucks from the holler, but yet the poems long-winded, detailed descriptions of these temporally present ecological dangers which form the main focus of much of the poem, providing a call to action. The poem provides few descriptions of the previous, pastoral Appalachia and thus gives very little to idealize, leaving the reader with only the undeniably un-idyllic industrialized Appalachia which

the poem describes in vivid details. The poem's reliance on this depastoralized landscape may appear to make pastoral understanding of the poem impossible. However, in spite of the poem's reliance on human-made materials and human action, the images always contain these modern items superimposed over what was once nature. The cars sit in fields and hollers, the glass sits on stream beds, and tin foil pie plates rest in the dirt from which the flora grows (*The Brier Poems* pp. 54-5). Furthermore, Miller's poem clearly dictates the systemic, but still human, causes of these problems. As the Brier's childhood is recounted through what is clearly his own memory—with words like “recalls” and “remembers” prefacing several sentences in the poem. We come to understand the quote which Einstein used as proof of the poem's politicality: “[Miller's] remembered past is not a rural paradise. When the Brier remembers home, his thoughts do not stop at the family photographs in the show box. Instead, he sees “strip-mined land where muddy water heaving rose and fell” (p.26)” (Einstein 36). But yet we find that this quote does not negate the collection's pastoralism, but rather only serves to show the way the poem derives a pastoralism of a different kind than Einstein would recognize. Because of this, Miller has managed to transcend the flowery images of Arcadia—which have plagued the sentimental pastoral—and in his reluctance to describe such an image, allowed the environmental degradation to push the text away from nostalgia towards the grotesque reality of Appalachia. All this is to say, the politics, both economic and ecological, seem to be the primary source of the work's anti-pastoral aspect. The dichotomy so often maligned and mocked appears to have been transcended through the essence of the post-pastoral; that is here: both accepting the nostalgia of the pastoral and the reality of the anti-pastoral. Yet to relegate the anti-pastoral solely to the realm of politics oversimplifies the text into cultural isolation.

Another aspect of this text's anti-pastoralism is based in the region and the author's own experience. Industrialization entering the mountains gave Miller not just the ability to write and publish this poem, but also his livelihood as an academic (Quillen 3). This is not to discredit Miller's work, and he does not deny this fact about himself, but it is fundamental in understanding the paradox which underlines the Appalachian nostos. Despite this, Miller is not like the city-bound author who writes piningly about a wilderness they have never seen nor ever will. Instead, he is a poet of the place and time in which he lived. This cannot be forgotten when considering his poems. Regardless, the feeling of guilt and cultural estrangement is found in several other of his poems, especially those we will look at in the next chapter, but here it remains only as subtext. Miller, in an essay, imagined modernization to be the reason for Appalachia's literary renaissance: "Change has awakened people all over the vast Appalachian region and made us conscious of ourselves as a group" (Appalachian Literature 149). Beyond Miller's writings and biography, there are a number of poems from this collection where a person leaves Appalachia for the outside world. In "The Brier Losing Touch With his Traditions," for instance, when the Brier was outside of Appalachia, "He found out he was a Brier" (p.50). We will examine that poem more thoroughly later. This does not necessarily speak to the Brier in "How America Came to the Mountains," not because someone who believes the Brier is a singular person with a connected, if disjointed, narrative whose discovery of his own identity as an adult would mean that he could not have that same insight as a child. Instead, due to several contradictions between these two poems, these are certainly two different Briers. In ours, he returns from Illinois, not Ohio, and "[t]he Brier has lived in As If, Kentucky, ever since." (p. 55) Despite this, the experience of Miller and the other Brier still have some weight in describing a generic Appalachian experience and can provide guidance for those parts of the text

which have been left unwritten. In the final moments of the poem, we find the Brier leaving and returning to the mountains over the space of several lines. The return is not well explained but understanding the cultural context within which the poem occurs, we can safely assume that the identity formation that takes place in so many of Miller's other poems—and the geographic connection that would come from that—would be the cause for their return of Brier and his kin. In this moment, as with the entire poem, we find the soil from which Appalachian identity had grown: that is the factors of modernization and cross-cultural interaction. These factors only serve, however, to make the poem more pastoral, in the non-diminutive sense. That is to say that the poem, and Miller's work more broadly, has the makings of a post-pastoral interpretation.

One may point, in response, back to the work of Ricky Cox—who believes Miller's collection was pro-machine—as an attribute of the inherently anti-pastoral tendency of the text. It could even be argued that Miller's work, at least somewhat, supports the fruits of industry at nature's expense. While the former claim does hold some truth in the text, the latter does not. One needs not question the political orientation of this poem on that basis; the fact that critics like Einstein have celebrated it as a skillful work of political persuasion, class consciousness, and awareness of the ecological reality of Appalachia's resource-driven economy should sufficiently prove the work's political inclinations. Barring this, it is undeniable that Miller, within this poem, is only somewhat partial toward machinery, and then only machinery of a certain type. Yet it is completely certain that, to Miller, modernization has not only drastically damaged the ecological and economic spheres of Appalachia, but also the machinery within it. Looking towards the middle of page 55, we see what effect this storm of modernity has had on the machines of old when he describes the storm dropping “beat-up cars / all up and down the hollers, out in field” (*Brier Poems* p.55). This leaves the cars in an apparent state of disfunction,

having been pulled through barn doors and having had their windows shattered (the apparent cause of that transmutation mentioned earlier which turned river gravel into glass). The car pulled from the barns, which at one point served to provide self-sufficiency, now stands rotting in a holler or field somewhere. Earlier in the poem, Brier described America coming to the mountains as being composed of “big trucks roaring down an interstate, / a singing like a circle saw in oak” (p. 54). Unlike those forsaken cars, the big trucks are not a tool of self-sufficiency, and this demonstrates the apparent contrast between the machines of old and the machines of modernity. The new Appalachia is no longer self-sufficient; with trucks that ship goods into the mountains and the cars that would enable transportation breaking down or left to rot, there is a clear contrast being made here. The self-sufficiency of the pastoral Appalachia allowed it to be more ecologically friendly to the mountain ecosystem, free from discarded beer cans and empty biscuit containers, and is able to do so by virtue of its status as borderland, neither fully connected to the urban nor the wilderness.

It is fair to say that to Miller, the pastures are imperfect in their stewardship towards the environment; the use of automobiles and other aspects of the industrial world that resided in Appalachia before modernization all had a harmful effect on the wilderness. But, it is the wilderness that must be fought off, like the urban, to preserve the middle ground of the pastoral (though it does so without the indiscriminate greed of urban expansionism). Like the marshes and the influences of Rome encroaching on Arcadia in Virgil’s first *Eclogue*, as Marx points out, the pastoral is always, within literature, being dually threatened by the forces of nature and humanity (Marx 22-23).

Don Johnson provides a perfect example of this in another of Miller’s poems from the same collection. In “Abandoned,” one of the aforementioned beaten-up cars, overtaken with

honeysuckles, finds itself to be home to a “half-wild” dog (Johnson 129). Here, Johnson suggests this is a moment of contention where the wilderness has begun to retake what was once “tamed.” Similarly, Marx posits that the idea of “nature partially tamed” goes back to Virgil’s, though Johnson points to the *Georgics* instead of the *Eclogue* (Johnson 129; Marx 22). Evidently, within the collection as a whole, there is a battle between the pasture and the wilderness as well as between the pastures and the urban.

This understanding of the pastoral, held by the text, would not disavow the more ecocritical aspects of the poem. Such an argument would disregard the fact that in many ways, the localized subsistent yeomen lifestyle of the old Appalachia was a significantly more ecologically friendly approach compared to the highways, global shipping, and large-scale logging operations that supply and support those trucks and provide them a reason to drive through Appalachia in the first place. The machinery is only a part of the pastoral borderlands, the tools of the past contrasting the new, modern way of doing things. The text’s acceptance of these things allows for criticism where otherwise it might go unnoticed and implicate the reader in the environmental destruction, a factor that holds significant importance to Terry Gifford’s Divergent idea of post-pastoralism.

Gifford makes this apparent in a series of six questions that a post-pastoral text might be expected to ask. No text is expected to fulfill all six to be considered post-pastoral, though some do. Instead, these questions function more as a litmus test than a divining rod for post-pastoralism. It would seem, then, that we should look to those questions to make the final determination. Because it is the most apparent one in Miller’s writing, we will begin with question five.

This question asks “How... can our distinctively human consciousness, which gives us a conscience, be used as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home?” (“Pastoralism, Anti-Pastoralism, and Post-Pastoralism” 27) Miller’s “How America Came to the Mountains” addresses this question in its support for the more self-sufficient lifestyle he has implicitly contrasted with his negative descriptions of the modern, globalized Appalachia. The act of extracting resources in the mountains is hidden within this poem; it is found through the truck that brings this storm, the highways built around it, and the log chains falling from the sky. The poem scorns these practices, which have all been driven by external forces. Such an argument leads one’s conscious to reflect on the ways in which this process has come about and how it has impacted the pastures and the wilderness, and, finally, how it has affected the people who have rapidly undergone modernization for the economic gain of others.

The exploitation of people is within the domain of the sixth question: “How should we address the ecofeminist insight that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mindset as our exploitation of each other, the less powerful?” (“Pastoralism, Anti-Pastoralism, and Post-Pastoralism” 27) In all examples of pollution referenced by Miller, there has been an implicit understanding that there are people suffering these effects along with the flora and fauna which would traditionally be included in a colloquial understanding of nature. These actions and motivations have exploited both the land and the people who live on it. Though plenty of recent and historic examples can be found in the history of Appalachia, looking at the text we can understand that the transportation of extracted commodities, and therefore the ownership and control of this extraction, has been external. I do not wish to absolve Appalachians of their part in this process, though coercion has often been a tool used to force them into this system. The people of Appalachia willingly participated in its depastoralization, cutting down the trees and

mining the coal for the benefit of industry. The empty biscuit can among the trash implies they have adopted the new, less environmentally friendly lifestyle of the modern world (Miller 55). There is a clear parallel in their actions against the environment and those taken by the logging and mining company owners. Jim Wayne Miller exemplifies this parallel in the use of sensory perspectives. The narrator describes the smells and sounds of the industrial storm, the force of exploitation, by comparing it to the smells and sounds of environmental exploitation: the smell of carbide lights and blasting powder, and the sound of a circle saw in oak come from various forms of resource extraction (Miller 54).

That both Appalachians and others are a part of this system allows both groups to consider themselves within the poem. This is a part of the second question: “What are the implications of recognizing that we are part of that creative-destructive process?” (“Pastoralism, Anti-Pastoralism, and Post-Pastoralism” 27) The Brier mainly explores aspects of this question in a later poem, “The Brier Sermon,” where he imagines Appalachian people should remedy this great disconnection with the past by reconnecting to their roots, which are both pastoral and ecological in nature (Miller 61). However, within “How America Came to the Mountains” the implications are somewhat less explicit, presenting the problems of modernization, and one’s complacency toward its effects. We are left to our own devices in search of an answer. By asking many of Gifford’s six questions, it becomes apparent that “How America Came to the Mountains is not just a work of complex pastoralism, but also post-pastoral.

It is important to note the importance politics plays in post-pastoralism. The way Miller has written against the image of nostalgic pastoral Appalachia provides the same politics found in the works of other writers considered complex or post-pastoral. These politics are not a matter of ideology but rather those of ecological concern. In contrast, Jim Wayne Miller’s “How

America Came to the Mountains,” regardless of its politicality, is a work of pastoral poetry. The idea of a work being both pastoral and political is not, in itself, controversial within Appalachian poetry. In the opening of her book *Looking for Native Ground*, Rita Quillen cites a review of Jeff Daniel Marion—widely regarded as an Appalachian pastoral poet—by Guy Owen who says “These are a different variety of ‘pasture poets.’” Continuing, Owen says the work of Appalachian pastoral poets is not romantic or idyllic like the “simplistic nature poems and rhymed effusions of poetry societies” (qtd. in Quillen 5). And if someone so widely regarded as “pastoral” is creating works that go beyond the sentimental pastoral, it would be hard to imagine Miller unable to do the same. Similarly, Quillen references a correspondence with George Lyon who questions the pastoral/political dichotomy. Citing Laska—whom Einstein had cited as being as fundamental to, if not more, the political side of Appalachian poetry as Robert Morgan and Jeff Daniel Marion are to the pastoral—who described Appalachian poets as breaking down “the wall that separates literature from life,” Lyon asks “don’t [Appalachian poets] also break down the categories that separate political from pastoral?” (qtd. In Quillen 5) Lyon argues the separation between political and pastoral poetry is quite similar to the separation between life and literature. Complex and post-pastoral’s political tendencies, as tools, both use and subvert the hegemonic weapons of nostalgia that would be apparent in any example of Appalachian poetry, regardless of the category past generations had considered it to be. It is undeniable that sentimental pastoralism has always been a tool against social change (see *Pastoral* 23-24), but Miller’s pastoral has transcended this inert pastoralism and brings forth an apparent call for ecological and societal change. We understand today those are often one and the same. The ecological damage of Appalachia and its economic devastation are interlinked clearly in his

poem. These aren't just that which leads the Brier to exodus, they also serve an important purpose in affecting the Brier while they are away.

Chapter 2: The Exodus of the Brier

J. W. Williamson describes a group of Appalachians who run away from their culture and identity in his 1981 article “Appalachian Poetry: The Politics of Coming Home.” He describes the group as “ashamed of being associated in any way with ‘mountain’ or ‘hillbilly’” (70). Yet the follies of such a position and view of self are not made explicitly clear—beyond the political sphere—within Williamson’s article. Irene McKinney, however, has, in her own autobiographical work, made the problems of trying to “pass” abundantly clear:

At the beginning of my conscious life I wanted to pass in the mainstream culture. Some natives of Appalachia do that, but it’s never quite right: the accent slips out at crucial moments; there’s a tendency to guffaw when something ridiculous is said; there’s a tendency to be blunt or joyous or anguish in polite company...When I write, the voice in my head has an accent and a distinctive vocabulary and diction. If I truly learned to pass, I would be a different person (“Irene McKinney” 136).

Crucially there is a major distinction to be made between the account of McKinney and Williamson: that of class. To McKinney, her avoidance of Appalachian culture began as a reaction to her association of “Appalachian-ness” with poverty and “doing without” (“Irene McKinney” 136). On the other hand, Williamson describes the desire to pass in broader American culture as a “middle-class enticement” (Williamson 70). One might err in thinking this process completely apolitical in hearing how it appears across class boundaries and the admittedly notwithstanding arguments to the contrary made by Williamson. However, Williamson is not entirely wrong in his examination of Appalachia; it is only lacking the idea which will divine from life—as with Miller’s poetry—the actual root of the politics, and its inseparability from the pastoral mode and the pastoral dichotomy. While the perspectives of

McKinney and Williamson may seem radically different, they are both tied into the prevailing understandings of Appalachia. It is incorrect to fully disagree with the Williamson's admittedly extreme notion that those who hide their roots are traitors, yet neither would it be right to say they are intentional or completely unjustified in doing so. The American perspective of Appalachia is radically divergent from reality, yet entirely pervasive. As James Eric Ensley points out in his article "Subalterns in the Holler: Postcolonial Appalachia in Ron Rash's *Serena* and *The World Made Straight*," "The persistent, infiltrative image of the mountaineer is perhaps best embodied in the long running show *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Many of the show's plots center... on society impinging on them in... culturally foreign activities." The fun of it, he continues, is in watching them, unable to "translate the modern world" (222). The character displays the general image of the mountains; one of backwardness, stupidity, and as a foreign other in need of cultural adaptation to the hegemonic American society. The desire of a person or character to disassociate themselves from Appalachian culture, especially when outside the Appalachian space, is understandable, as it is necessary to avoid discrimination, but implicitly supports the notions of "Appalachian reeducation" by providing examples of success tied to one's ability to "pass" as non-Appalachian while—in being perceived as more intelligent by a standardized speech or a way of living that forgoes unacceptable, unscientific superstitions—unconsciously reasserting that mountain people who do not align with mainstream ways of being, on the other hand, are less developed.

Of course, many of these stereotypes sprung out of the large-scale urban migration of Appalachians that occurred over much of the twentieth century. People in search of a better life were met with headlines like "The Hillbillies Invade Chicago," detailing the "small army of white Protestant, Early American migrants from the south" who were "proud, poor, and fast with

a knife” (Guy 96). Such depictions of Appalachia remain to this day in works like J. D. Vance’s so called *Hillbilly Elegy* which claims to be, according to the subtitle, “A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis.” There is no shortage, among Appalachian Studies scholars of criticism for this book on a level which nearly rivals deliverance. Despite Vance’s claims of direct experience with a monolithic Appalachian culture, I must agree with Rodger Guy who wrote in “Will the Real Hillbilly Please Stand Up? Urban Appalachian Migration and Culture seen through the Lens of *Hillbilly Elegy*”: “*Hillbilly Elegy* reinforces distorting stereotypes of violent and depraved hillbillies dating back to at least the turn of the twentieth century” (100). In the process of debunking the stereotypes, Guy offers a fascinating, occasionally quantitative, review of the effects which Appalachian outward migration has had on those who have left the mountains. Most perennate to our discussion is his conception of the life away from home as a perpetually temporary exodus from the Appalachian space, as he says, the migrants had an “intense attachment to home” and a “conception that migration was somehow temporary, that they eventually return home permanently” (Guy 92). However, in the cities they “found the economic opportunity and financial stability for which they were searching” (Guy 91). This is the state we find many of Miller’s characters, lulled into a suburban daydream, perpetuating their lives on city living, yet most seemingly with an intense—almost pastoral—idealization of and desire to return to home. One such Brier can be found in the aptly titled: “Down Home,” having returned to the mountains yet psychologically torn with a sense of abandon.

In his article “Jim Wayne Miller’s Brier Poems: The Appalachian in Exile”, Wade Hall opens up his discussion of *The Brier Poems* with a summary of Elizabeth Maddox Roberts’ “On the Mountainside.” It describes a young man journeying out of the mountains who meets an older gentleman on his way home. Having gone through the same process as a young adult, the

elder relays to him the work with which it took to be able to return home: “he says he’s spent many nights awake to ‘study about the way back [home]’” (29). The act of returning home, evidently, is not as simple as driving a few hours, but is clearly—in the story as well as, we will see shortly, in Miller’s poetry—an intense psychological process of reconciliation and recreation of the self. The young man, however, disregards his elder’s learned advice. But, if that advice is anything to go off of, it seems that the Appalachia the boy will return to is not like the one which he left (29). Indeed, in most examples of returning home, we find a similar complication. As with the Brier in “Down Home”:

He kept meeting feelings like
 old schoolmates, faces whose names he’d
 forgot. He came on feelings he could
 enter again only as a stranger might
 a house he’d lived in;” (Miller 32)

The Brier, like the old man, must rediscover the part of him he had hidden for so long. The image of a house, once lived in, being compared to emotions, is, as Don Johnson points out while examining this passage, “The equation of home and self,” and in doing so divides the Appalachian Brier and the suburban Brier into two different people (127). Furthering this comparison, the poem tells us “feelings like / places change almost beyond recognition: a / once green pasture field grown up in pines too thick ever to enter again.” (Miller 32) This image returns us to the pastoral dialectic of wilderness and city. The pastures, the battleground between the urban and natural spheres, has been totally consumed by the wilderness within the metaphor. Yet, this metaphor is almost completely counter to the events which Miller describes. The Brier has not gone back into the wilderness, on the contrary he has become suburbanized, which is, if

anything, a push away from the natural sphere. Furthermore, as Johnson points out earlier in the essay on the Appalachia homeplace: “More often than not only a foundation or decaying chimney remains to mark a homeplace.” Like the train whistle in “How America Came to the Mountains”, this scene the urbanized world encountering the wilderness, the only difference is that here it is the Brier who has become the train in the woods, the familiar of modernity, crossing the parts of himself that never relocated and his own identity. Noting that the Brier’s feelings—once depicted as a home; the central image which the desire to return calls the Brier to—have not been consumed by the wilderness, but instead have become wilderness, we find a suggestion that it is not the Brier, but the perspective from which the Brier views the world around himself which has shifted.

Robert Guy notices that the descendants of Urban Appalachians occasionally feel “conflicted about Appalachian culture and their southern identity” and identify as southern, having internalized the hillbilly stereotypes whereas those who stayed consider a hillbilly identity to be a “source of pride” (Guy 92-3). Certainly, the Brier of our poem exists in both spaces at once; he is separated from mountain culture by urban adaptation and welfare yet drawn back to it by the hope that his perpetually temporary exodus can end. This is reenforced as the poem ends: “He was / settled in a suburb north of himself,” and we are reminded that the Brier has been internally consumed by both the urban and suburban (32). The feelings tied so closely with the idea of self are now an impenetrable wilderness whereas the self, detached from those rediscovered feelings are settled in suburbia. His self has not changed in its constituency—only geographically—so he is evidently drawn back home towards the mountains, yet like that old man, he must work to do so because those mountains are not as he had left him. Miller is not alone in his use of the homestead imagery, in fact, with some analysis of the multitude of

similitudes of these examples, we can see the important role it plays in conceptualizing the beginning stages of returning home within the poem.

The image of an abandoned mountain home is also the central focus of Jeff Daniel Marion's poem "Remains." More clearly here are the effects of modernizing Appalachia made apparent in the gutted cabin. This house without inhabitants—as was the case for the Brier's metaphorical house of feelings—finds itself literally devoured by both urban forces and the wilderness. Thus, once again the politics of modernization are made clear, as Frank Steele suggests in his article "Two Kinds of Commitment: Some Directions in Current Appalachian Poetry": done so through the poem's commentary on "the common practice of the wealthy to procure quality lumber from old buildings to put into their new mansions" (Steele 231). As the poem begins: "The oak beams were the last to go. / Snaked across the states / into the decorator's charm." (qtd. In Steele 231) We are given a very dramatic and desolate sight, long after the extraction has begun and completely disconnected from the time in which the house was lived in. "Although the poem does not carry a flag or wear a uniform," Steele says, "its motive is certainly political" (Steele 231). The poem's politics are hidden in pastoral, yet it gives so little of the past which could be idealized, that it avoids the draw towards an idealized halcyon age against progress and improvement, which pastoralism is so often chided, in the same manner by which "How America Came to the Mountains" had. The comparison between these two poems continues in the following lines where the scene is given "Broken mason jars / glinting." (qtd. In Steel 231) Broken glass is in both poems a symbol of the past-capitalist Appalachia, a danger to anyone who would, like the stereotypical hillbilly, go without shoes. Yet the specificity of a Mason jar references canning, a necessary procedure in an agrarian society where a food's shelf life was a vital consideration for survival. The Mason jars, having been broken and abandoned,

calls back the abandoned traditions but, once again, without idealization. The remains of the house, with its broken and forgotten relics, in Marion's poem, shares similarities to Miller's metaphorical house in more ways, however. Even though the house is apparently consumed by "vines with leaves like dollars / seal the scar," it is in another way also consumed by urbanization, though done so through geographic relocation, leaving the rest, on reaped, to dissolve into the wilderness (qtd. In Steele 231). This geographic relocation is, like the Brier's suburban settlement, beyond the bounds of Appalachian, being brought "across states." So, while the vines consume it, it is consumed by the extractive urban forces around it.

This exact process is addressed directly in Ron Rash's *Serena*, however from the perspective of those interested in harvesting from the mountains. Like the previous examples, *Serena* almost never shows the Appalachian homeplace as inhabited, preferring the image of an abandoned, both recently and historically, homestead consumed with overgrowth from its time in disrepair. Upon seeing one of these, Serena, a woman born in Colorado and a wealthy elite who has lived much of her life in Boston's first reaction is to imagine how she might best repurpose the wood towards the growth of capital (Rash 167). Many critics have already illuminated this general sense of outsider/insider perspective shifts within the novel. Whether the outsider perspective appears in the form of a romanticized infantile image of the simple Appalachian—one not unlike the simple pastoralism of Marx—who are found speaking in an Elizabethan tongue and living, to quote James Eric Ensley, "in an anachronistic Arcadian space" or as backwards and in need of modernization leading to "an insertion of the Mountaineer into industrialized modernity" (Ensley 221; 221); within the novel, both are readily depicted and often oppose one another, the former mainly embodied by Horace Kephart while the latter by Mr. Pemberton. In his essay, "Subalterns in the Holler: Postcolonial Appalachia in Ron Rash's

Serena and *The World Made Straight*,” Ensley proposes that within this dialectic, there is a colonial aspect to the exploitation from both sides (220-221). The postcolonial understanding of the text which Ensley puts forward, while potentially seeming in opposition to the idea of a pastoral politic in Appalachian literature by providing a separate narrative of understating Appalachian experience, on the contrary, tells the same story, but from a different angle. The goals of the two forces which outline co-antagonism of the Appalachian people in varying amounts throughout *Serena* provide similar modus operandi to the pastoral conflict of wilderness and urbanization. Kephart, throughout the novel, works towards the creation of national forests, a goal which seems at least more noble than Pemberton’s but had “run two thousand farmers off their land,” as Serena points out (137). Yet Pemberton’s Boston Logging Company is no different, often inspecting lands which feature abandoned homes, he looks to both the land and homes as a source of income, inspecting the trees and mineral deposits alike in hopes of further enriching himself. For instance, when he comes across a foreclosed homestead with a “sense of recent habitation,” Serena first notices the wood and how they might repurpose it towards their aims: “‘It looks like solid oak all the way through’ she said approvingly. ‘If we knock down some walls this could be used for a dining hall’” (167). While Pemberton encroaches on the pastures for the purpose of wealth and extraction—as America had done in Miller’s work, Kephart’s object is to over the take the pastures and return them to wilderness. As in the previous poems by Miller and Marion, it is due to the conflicting forces of wilderness and nature that the image of the previously inhabited home comes represents both wilderness and urbanization. For this reason, I think Ensley’s perspective is particularly useful in our analysis of both *Serena*, Miller’s poetry, and an Appalachian’s desire to blend into the culture of outside and leave the mountains; for the later, Ensley has examined how the “inauthentic experience” of Appalachians

results in attempts to “seek validation in either conforming to the mandates of the dominate culture”—that is to try an pass as an outsider—“or in isolation from the hegemonic system” is, in effect, a result of the “geographic liminality” of Appalachians faced against these two conflicting stereotypes and “opposing forces that both threaten destruction” (Ensley 221, 229).

Ensley does not, however, examine the importance of forsaken buildings as a motif of this geographic liminality. A farm not lived in is clearly pulled between those two forces, as we have discussed thus far. But if these forces, as Ensley suggests, are an important factor in the desire to distance oneself from Appalachian culture, it follows that the act of returning home becomes one of rebellion against hegemony and a push towards reentrance into Appalachia life. This explains the prevalence of the motif, as it implicitly symbolized an important early step in returning home: abandoning the internalized sense of Appalachian as inferior or something that must be hidden from polite society as a method to undo the out-of-joint conception of self that tears the brier, as with others, between an abounded homestead and “a suburb, north of himself” (Miller 32). The Brier of “Down Home” is clearly much earlier on his journey towards reintegration than his contemporaries in “On the Wings of a Dove” or “Brier Sermon”—and he might never make it that far; he is not unlike how we might imagine the elderly man from “On the Mountainside” when he first decided to leave the flatland settlement, uncertain of his path. Yet he comes to realize that in abandoning the mountains he had become a “plumb traitor to my God” (Hall 29). It is like Williamson says:

The embracing of a despised past is more than a declaration of identity; it is a dawning of political consciousness... Achieving awareness means, first of all, *seeing yourself*—how you may have been manipulated; how you have played someone else’s game, complete with someone else’s rules; how you have been fooled, tricked, sent on this gull’s errand

or that; how you have been duped. It drives some mad, some blind. It has put out the eyes of many a would-be revolutionary who cannot contain the paradox of his or her own complicity in victimization. (Williamson 69)

This step is, as much as the last, a political one in the process of the Appalachian nostos. It is equally marred by paradox and complication. Its roots are as much in the internalization of and assessor to the perpetuation of serotypes as they are in the hegemony which begets such memes. But like in the last chapter, this particular politic of paradox does not make itself too explicit within Miller's poetry.

Chapter 3: The Reconciliation of the Brier

While extraction and exploitation underly the political underbelly of the initial stages of returning home, as we progress further towards an absolute reconciliation between our suburban Brier and our Mountain Brier, we discover an increased attention towards cultural modes of extraction and exploitation over natural and human exploitation. The former, however, does not ever lose any ground, only seeing itself accompanied more and more by the disconnected stereotyping used to justify said exploitation. As we have previously discussed, there are many images of Appalachia that hold both positive and negative connotation, and which serve as fuel for either tourism or destruction, yet so far, we have not analyzed any method of praxis by which the Brier's might oppose the causes that led to their exodus in the first place. Slowly, over the next few chapters, we will see the Brier less as the young boy leaving for the lowland city and more as the old man of Roberts' "On the Mountain Side" beckoning the boy to stay. This all begins, however, not with political fervor, but instead the dissolution of guilt over past things and a glance forward. Going forward, the process of returning home in Appalachian literature continues with resistance against both the ecological and sociocultural factors which have necessitated migration in the first place.

In his essay "Commemorating vs. Commodifying: Ron Rash and the Search for an Appalachian Literary Identity," Zackary Vernon examines the commodification of Appalachian culture for the external market. He repeats the theory of "EPCOT Syndrome" as proposed by Fredrick Jameson, a syndrome which occurs when region identifies "are reduced to an artificially "authentic" version and put on display for profit" (Vernon 111). In Rash's writing, Vernon finds one such character who has profited off his overly exaggerated, stereotypical, and artificial Appalachian appearance. Billy Watson, from Rash's novel *Saints at the River* owns a general

store decorated with an old creaky porch with rocking chair to boot and in which fishing and hunting gear dots the walls; his work attire features a long beard, overalls partially covered by a hunting jacket, and a brown Labrador lying by his side (Vernon 113). It is not that he embodies these stereotypes unintentionally; on the contrary, he is well educated, “well spoken, and well read,” having discovered an economic advantage in conforming to the expectations of tourists (Vernon 113).

Something similar occurs in Miller’s poem “The Brier Losing Touch with his Tradition.” This poem details an entire process of exodus and nostos, however, the cause of this is not explicitly a matter of ecology, but instead of cultural reification. The opening line “he once was a chair maker” begins the poem yet its use of the past tense leads one to ask, “why is he not anymore,” a question which while never being directly answered within the poem, and one which we should return to later (50). This Brier, and his traditional craft, are commodified by the outside world, calling him ““an authentic mountain craftsman”” (50). This line echoes the line from Vernon about attributes; here the Brier’s chairmaking is declared as a signifier of Appalachian “authenticity” and all other forms of cultural expression become inauthentic (Vernon 111). The other side of this coin is displaced shortly thereafter when, in response to increasing demands, the Brier moves the Ohio and begins to use power tools (50). Evidently, this is inauthentic—at least according to his customer who, because of his reliance on them, have quite the say in the methods and modes of his production; as the poem echoes its title, “they said he was losing touch with his traditions,” a tradition, mind you, that his buyers had very little connection to or regard for beyond an arbitrary EPCOT “authenticity.” The Brier is forced to become like Billy Watson in Rash’s *Saints at the River*, after he returns to the mountains at the whim of the market and begins donning a pair of faded overalls and a bearded, shoeless persona

(51). The fact that both Rash and Miller share the phrase “faded overalls” expresses just how standardized this image of the commodified Appalachian experience has become, certainly far too standardized to mirror reality (qtd. in Vernon 113; Miller 51). Similarly, both characters hold a more divergent, and hidden, side to themselves; in the case of Miller, the Brier is said to remove his overalls and beard once all the photographers are gone and watch national news in a “flowered sport shirt” and “double-knitted pants” while, as we previously discussed, Billy Watson’s mildly erudite personality clashes against the cultural archetype from which the persona he takes draws its attributes (Miller 51; Vernon 113).

Matthew Ferrence examines the ideological praxis of refusing simple classification as “Appalachian” against the antagonists of self-determination and individuality in his essay “You Are and You Ain’t: Story and Literature as Redneck Resistance.” He examines two authors, Fred Chappell and Silas House, along with “the potential of being both Appalachian and modern.” (121) Like the Miller, Chappell features a character in his book *Look Back at the Green Valley* who, having returned from the West Coast and taken on the clothing, aesthetic, and mannerisms of that region, appears to be an outsider through the constrictive lens of stereotype (Ferrence 121-2). In fact, the narrator of the novel, a professor of the region who had left first for education and later for his career, considers her an outsider because she does not conform to the very stereotypes which incensed him at the start of the novel (Ferrence 121-2, 114-5). The matter of authenticity appears here in Ferrence’s writing. Similar to an idea of C. Vann Woodward’s which Vernon relays, he is concerned with the methods by which “‘real’ hillbilly writers” must assert authenticity or face becoming a “tourist” in their own home; whereas for the southern writers of Woodward’s inspection “feel the compulsion to don an ‘old hunting jacket,’” the Appalachian authenticity is tied up in political discourses of labor and the continuation of ecological

destruction and colonial extraction for the sake of job security which are antithetical to the prosperity of the mountains and its inhabitants (Ferrence 122; Vernon 111). Ferrence, however, goes a step beyond Vernon in this regard, equating the exploitation of the environment with the exploitation of culture (Ferrence 125). In imagining culture as a part of nature—an opinion given credence, I think, by the fact that traditions are often derived from the geography and ecology that surround them—and breaking down the anthropocentric and colonialist conception of nature (and its inhabitants) as something which must be tamed. That very conception of nature has clear parallels to the conception of solving Appalachian poverty through abandoning backwardness which was mentioned in Ensley's writing (Ensley 221). The unexpected shock of seeing this push against the stereotype, be it the Appalachian dressed like a Californian or the old farmer fighting mountain top removal, is not unlike the train whistle in the forest, breaking up the simple pastoral understanding we take for granted with a hint of modernity, be that for good or bad. As Ferrence puts it: "Rednecks aren't supposed to care about these environmental issues, and that is really the significance of these unexpected voices: they can and do make claims for themselves as a culture, as potent, as mattering at all." (Ferrence 128)

We can still find this type of resistance adapted in the modern day, as suggested by Jordan Lovejoy in her essay "Redneck Memes as an Appalachian Reclamation of Vernacular Authority, Language, and Identity" which examines an area of both political discourse and identity formation in the twenty-first century that is as understudied as it is important to modern society. Those same stereotypes and the systems of boxing in political opinions to the bounds of archetypal ideologies which Ferrence examined appears here as well, but their mode of resistance is exceedingly humorous where previous literary works left only tragedy and the necessitate of change. I would be remiss if I failed to discuss the initial aversion one may feel

towards the study of something so exceedingly informal: we must remember that these texts serve the same purpose—and are likely have at least as much of an ability to persuade, educate, and inspire resistance as any traditional literary work while, according to Lovejoy, by virtue of them being folklore, “helping us understand how a group sees itself, defines itself, and responds to the world around it” (118). Lovejoy defines two meanings for the word “redneck” which will be helpful in differentiating characters of resistance from the mainstream which they resist. The first is the popular conception of the word, tied up in conceptions of nationalism and social conservatism while the second is variety which Ferrence certainly meant in naming his essay: those who “use the term *redneck* as a positive self-identification that is reclaimed as an identity feature defined from within Appalachia and born from historical leftism in the region” (Lovejoy 120). If it is the case, as Allen Batteau suggests in the opening chapter of his book *The Invention of Appalachia*, that “an entire shop floor [of Appalachian Studies] is dedicated to the labor-intensive task of debunking these stereotypes” then we would best begin by analyzing the former variety of redneck rather than the latter (Batteau 7).

According to Lovejoy, this former category is—in terms of dialect—a response to the recent trend of dialectic homogeny between the United States and Appalachia, refusing to give up accent, an important marker of identity, and instead embracing it—as least within certain social spaces (Lovejoy 124). Such a feeling is epitomized in Miller’s poem “Harvest,” which tells of a person who “spoke drafty pole barns and garden plots” compared to others who have “words that made pictures / with gleaming surfaces and metal trim.” (49) In fact, on the following line Miller equates this dialect with culture, saying “His customs had a mustiness, a smokehouse mold / about them; his shriveled wisdom hung like peppers / and shuckybeans from cabin rafters (49). Undeniably, the similarities of images which equate the two descriptions, and

their distinctively agrarian tint, provide a perfect example of the ways in which the cultural complex pastoral we have largely discussed only in theory is depicted in Miller's work. His own resistance is not a protest or revolution, instead, like the type 2 rednecks, his own existence, his pride of who he is, and his refusal to homogenize provides ample fuel for subversion.

Still, the principle of leaning into the stereotypes as a form of resistance to homogenization and cultural appropriation has a direct parallel in the modernization of tradition. Whereas the meme pages which Lovejoy examines take on the tools of modern—revolutionary or otherwise—organizing: social media, to use for reappropriating traditional cultural practices, so too does a Brier in “Restoring an Old Farm House”: “building up again / from what was salvaged” (Miller 33) In this poem, we see the implication of an abandoned farmhouse, an image we examined in the proceeding chapter, yet unlike the range of general apathy to actionless fervor which many of the writers took towards the image, now we see the spark of ideology begin to fall into the embers of practice; that is to say, this poem finally shows us someone doing something about it. While I quoted Williamson as saying, “The embracing of a despised past is more than a declaration of identity; it is a dawning of political consciousness,” we are only now beginning to see that fully take shape within the poetry of Miller on this step of the nostos and within the works examined by Vernon, Ferrence, and Lovejoy (Williamson 69). Whereas in “Down Home” the Brier discovers his feelings as an old house, the Brier of “Restoring an Old Farm House” can be found “Dismantling country feelings” on the facing page (32; 33). Between these two pages we see most clearly the growth of the process of nostos. One may question that the latter poem of the two is in fact about nostos, and while it is certainly not explicit like it is in on the verso page, it is still made abundantly clear with subtext. An image in “Restoring an Old Farmhouse” which shows this is a reoccurring metaphor which helps tie the poem together.

While near the beginning we are told he is like “a deer drawn again and again. To a *salt* lick” near the end we find that “he read his past like a *salt*-caked sheet of newsprint / used once to paper a smokehouse shelf.” (33 emphasis added) This heavily implies that a connection to the past antiquities to which he is connected is what draws him there; whether it is because the farmhouse was “a house he’d once lived in,” as Miller says in the proceeding poem or simply a farmhouse which resembles past, agrarian lifestyle, this cannot be said but I lean towards the former (32). The fact that he only reads his past in that farmhouse and not his present disproves any notion he has not been affected by industrialization or modernity—the things which an abandoned farmhouse often represents in Appalachian literature. Fascinatingly then, Miller provides a simple narrative of these two stages along the nostos between these two facing pages of poetry, a panorama of ideological metamorphosis.

A similar structure where Appalachia is progressed through both modernization and traditionalism is examined in Rhonda Jenkins Armstrong’s “Cross-Pollinating Appalachian Communities: Insider/Outsider Knowledge in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Prodigal Summer*.” Armstrong illuminates the important ways by which Barbara Kingsolver has embodied both the acceptance of Appalachian culture without abandonment of environmental ideals that is often pictured along with it. Kingsolver’s career has very much imitated the process of nostos in its subject matter; as Armstrong points out, her career began with writing about leaving eastern Kentucky only to come “full circle” and “write about women returning from urban centers,” “bringing with them the knowledge that has come from living in urban centers or from an education” (Armstrong 71). Armstrong shows how Kingsolver directly exemplifies the anti-anthropocentric intercedence of culture and nature through the metaphor of crosspollinations; in returning, they, like bees who flew in another corn field, bring diversity to the cultural genetics—

memes, in the technical sense of the word—of Appalachian and allow the agrarian community to survive (71-2). In fact, Kingsolver goes so far as to suggest that this is the only way by which the yeoman farmer can survive (Armstrong 72). Within her novel, *Prodigal Summer*, Kingsolver begins in the transition between modes of productions, and ends with a path towards what some, namely Kristin van Tassel, would call a utopian vision for the future (75; 72). The transition into capitalist structures of creation from the communal, family centric—what some have called familialism—self-sufficient lifestyle is examined thoroughly over the course of the twentieth century by Dwight Billings et al. in the article “Culture, Family, and Community in Preindustrial Appalachia.” Their finding that “capitalist domination of the mountains changed... the very patterns of daily life and social cooperation”—beginning first with occasional ventures into town for want of money and ending with the necessity of a factory job and the complete absolution of self-sufficient subsistence agriculture is given a memetic crucible in the writing of Kingsolver (Billings 157). In fact, one of *Prodigal Summer*'s main characters, Lusa, lost her husband after he had taken a job to make ends meet while many other characters work at the nearby Toyota factory or have another source of income beyond farming (Armstrong 75, 86). As for the future, Kingfisher's work imagines in her characters the blending of both tradition and ideal, to quote Kristin van Tassel's essay “Ecofeminism and a New Agrarianism,” “the relearning of forgotten skills, the reinvigoration of lost traditions, the reconciling of an urban education with an agrarian lifestyle” (Tassel 85). As she continues: *The Prodigal Summer* “suggests that integral to redefining the American pastoral is a rehabilitated understanding of literato nostalgia, a nostalgia that harks back to its original meaning. Nostalgia comes from the Greek ‘nostros,’ [sic] which means... a return home” (85). In fact, in this Tassel finds the Appalachian nostos within the book, calling it “marked by nostalgia in its more literal meaning—a longing for home” (86).

Tassel argues that it is farming and nature which is to blame for the deep underlying nostalgia of the narrative while Armstrong points out the way that urban influences which pull people away from the non-human world, things like Gameboys and TVs, harm this very connection and agricultural traditions (Tassel 88; Armstrong 86). This is especially important when we notice that the Brier chose to renovate a farmhouse and feels that is what he is most drawn to by nostalgia. His yearning for both cultural and ecological return—which are nearly one in the same—follow a similarly political path much like that which Kingsolver proposes in her novel.

One may point out the discord between the Brier returning to nature in “Restoring an Old Farmhouse” and the Brier watching cable news in “The Brier Losing Touch with his Traditions;” they may choose to consider the eco-primitivist yeoman Brier as exceedingly more “developed” on the path of returning home, but in doing so, miss the fact that are two sides of the same coin. Both are resisting a separate artifice, that which we first encountered at the start of this chapter. As pointed out by Ensley:

“This system creates a dual imperative for the mountaineer, the double blind. Thus there is the command to grow up and join modern society while at the same time there exists a contradictory command to remain childlike in a romanticized past.” (221)

Of those we’ve encountered so far, their resistance has been towards one direction or the other, though never fully, either partially rejecting capitalist hegemony or rejecting notions of backwardness with markers of social and physical capital. This returns us to Miller’s Brier of “The Brier Losing Touch with his Tradition” and Ron Rash’s Billy Watson in *Saints on the River*. These two examples perfectly display Ensley’s paradox which has necessitated resistance. The Brier’s experience in this poem is, in fact, the most succinct description of this interaction and “dual imperative.” His business is only able to survive in so far as it perpetuates the myths

surrounding Appalachia in the larger American consciousness. Likewise, Watson's profit has been greatly increased by his apparel and pandering. Both men are aware of this fact, made evident in hiding the cosmopolitan bent which would dare to shatter the hollow simulacrum on which they have perched their livelihoods, and can we really fault them?

Chapter 4: The Returning of the Brier's

Finally, as the Brier comes to accept themselves, we find them embodying both elements of idyllic pastoralism and mechanic modernity. Recalling Cox's writing on the Miller's poem "On the Wings of the Dove," he points out the tendency of Miller to elaborate in metaphors which are not entirely industrial or pastoral (Cox 137). While in some poems, the Brier holds a deep disdain for the accessories of industrial capitalism, like those which we examined in the previous chapter, this Brier is no more partial to one or the other insofar as he is not overly destructive or a part of a larger apparent colonial process. Nowhere is this aspect and stage of nostos making more apparent than in that same poem, "On the Wings of the Dove." While Cox has established a powerful and effective analysis of the "mechanical metaphor" in the poem, its interspersion of ecological imagery between industrial simile establishes the necessity of integration and adaptation over unconditional remembrance of a—possibly nostalgic—pastoral ideal.

As the poem begins, we find its Brier in the process of returning home from Ohio to Western North Carolina, working a job in road construction. The Brier sits on the edge between the traditional geography of the earth and the modern artifice of human development: his job in road construction exemplifies the Brier's willingness to accept the industrial, yet the poem's geography bounds his construction to the areas around the "Laurel and Ivy Rivers" (Miller 39). A river, a natural feature historically important for transportation, is used as a valid way to conceptualize geography and is not completely substituted with human asphalt (like people often do when they describe their home as being on or off a particular road). Instead, both are accepted as a tool by which one charts out and examines the geography of Appalachia. In doing so, tradition and modernity are skillfully intertwined, like in the agricultural practices of Kingfisher's

characters in the preceding chapter. Going forward, he continues interweaving lines which focus on geographic features created by humanity and lines which focus on natural geography; lines which refer to towns like “Madison,” “Asheville,” and “Marshall”—features important in anthropocentric geography—precede lines about “The French Broad River” and “willows and sycamores” (Miller 39). The Redmon Dam centers all of this within the content of the poem; the Brier, pulling into a sandy road whose foliage consumes his vehicle, sits below the Redmon Dam, an object which consumes the water of the French Broad. Both the Brier’s car and the damn before him exemplify the borderland relationship of pastoralism, an intermingled combination of subjugation and conflict. Entering the sandy road, the Brier’s job in road construction, and his clothes, soaked in the scent of tar and asphalt, begs one to compare the roads over which the Brier has labored and the roads of which he makes use. Finally, the poem pivots, going from examining humans and nature in conflict to humans and nature interacting and intersecting with one another in the second stanza.

As it begins, there is an obvious break. While the previous line described the landscape of the mountains in less definite terms, making heavy use of “would,” suddenly, Miller begins to make more definitive statements about the Brier and the landscape he inhabits: “Catfisherman built fires along the bank, / and over on the island, and hung their lanterns / out over the water” (39). The line is a clear continuation of that which preceded it, where the landscape faded away from twilight into night; here we see lamps and fires being lit in response to the “coming dark” (39). The stanza enables images and metaphors which combine human and not human animals both linguistically and imagistic; While the stanza begins with “catfishermen”—a combination of catfish and men—a more direct association is found three lines later when “His Troubles sat / right under his breastbone, black / as a tree full of starlings, all talking at once.” (39) The brier’s

ambiguous woes, given a comparison which appears natural, find themselves remedied by radio, liquor, cultural contentment which is antiparallel to the discontent of the Brier from “Down Home” or the young boy of Roberts’ “On the Mountain Side”. Indeed, Miller fully embraces this within the coming lines, which mingle the preceding metaphor with new ones, which are the focus of Cox’s inquiry.

With our now more thorough examination of Miller’s poetry, than we had when we first looked at Cox, we can realize something fascinating about the pattern of qualitative assessment which he makes towards the “mechanical metaphors” within *The Mountains Have Come Closer*: those which he brings up and which he considers chiefly associated with negative imagery occur in poems where one has yet to fully return home. Those which deal with the Brier in the early stages of returning home—poems which we discussed in the first two chapters—are classified by Cox as holding more negative conceptions of machinery. “Every Leaf a Mirror” and “How America Came to the Mountains,” both of which focus on a Brier geographically or psychologically deposed from the Appalachia of the present, find themselves among this list (Cox 137-8). Meanwhile, “On the Wings of a Dove” and “The Brier Losing Touch With his Traditions” Cox places among those with positive associations towards machinery (Cox 137-8). While Cox identifies that there is a trend towards acceptance of machinery, saying they “become increasingly stronger and more personalized as the poetry moves through three parts, becoming... more tightly focused on Appalachian concerns”, he errs in not noticing the chronological correlation between the imagery and the act of returning and reintegrating into Appalachia, instead choosing only to examine the images against the order of the poems themselves (Cox 135).

Returning to the animal imagery of “On the Wings of a Dove,” we see the growing middle ground on which both pleasing industrial metaphors and pastoral images can make themselves bedfellows. The ending of the poem describes a transformation that would not be out of place in Ovid, as suddenly from the Brier’s chest emerges a pack of white doves, who suddenly begin flying “out over the river toward the island.” (Miller 40) The religious connotations of this scene are undeniable. Like the dove which signaled to Noah a new post-diluvial world, the Brier has only just found peace; the doves only emerge once “The starlings under his breastbone [stop] talking” (Miller 40). Furthermore, this all takes place below a dam, an object which often is created to mitigate flooding, or induce it for the sake of industry. This intertangles the closing moment of the poem, which on first blush appears completely luddite, with a hint of modern integration. Floods and Dams have a special place in Appalachian literature, many farmers have been removed from their land in the mountains to make way for a dammed lake to power large cities, and, according to Zackary Vernon, often result in those affected leaving agriculture (Vernon 118). Yet here, the Redmon Dam has a different place, becoming the place where the Brier is able to develop a connection to nature. Thus, the poem necessitates the abandonment of radical primitivism. As the Doves fly off to the island where the Catfishermen fish, we are left to imagine the result of this poem being a remedy for the woes of modernity, the loud starlings and anxiety under his and our breastbone, found only in proper integration between the outstretched fingers of the modern world and the edge of the wilderness.

The Brier of this poem has clearly returned home and come to terms both with himself and his culture. The genesis of his deep contentment is in engaging in stereotypical Appalachian activities—drinking illicit liquor and listening to bluegrass music—on his own terms (Miller 39). Whereas previously we have seen both some who go against embodying pervasive and pastoral

notions of Appalachia as a form of resistance and others who adhere to those stereotypes as a necessitated by survival or profit, here we find something far more powerful: the Brier who has taken up his own culture, not for the outsiders who wish to gawk or admire his noble primitivity, but instead because he is himself. No longer is this Brier torn away to the “suburb north of himself” or lost in a need to hide himself, instead he has taken on the mantle of modernity on one shoulder and tradition on the other, weighing them out himself. Unlike “How America Came to the Mountains”, we are not made to see the truck inching into the willows and sycamores as an invader; nor are we to understand the Brier as geographically divided in his mind from the starlings or doves that live in his chest; not even his radio can be compared to the “loud tapedecks” whose cacophony welcomed the machine into the mountains and frightens hens when it, itself, manages to calm the starlings in Brier’s chest (54).

Chapter 5: The Awakening of a Brier

Religious imagery becomes even more pervasive in *The Mountains Have Comes Closer's* longest—and perhaps most disused—poem: “The Brier Sermon.” Within its seventeen pages, the entire process of the Appalachian Nostos charted by many of the other poems comes to an end, and the Brier fully returns home, becoming like the old man of Roberts’ story: warning the inattentive and disinterested.

It seems no other poem within this collection has been given so much attention by critics; in 1981, Williamson calls it “the most ambitious distillation of Appalachian politics yet to appear in this Appalachian renaissance” (73). But Miller is not only writing a work which is political. Here, more so than any other poem, he clearly defines the combination of political and pastoral, industrial and natural, proletarian and ecocritical. In fact, Johnson and Quillen both agree very definitively that Miller is no “primitivist,” and writes against those who romanticize an imagined, halcyon holler (Johnson 132-3; Quillen 17-8). In doing so, they may appear to discount the fact that Miller has not fully abandoned tradition, on the contrary, they both accept that Miller’s is a middle path, in his own words: “It’s going back to where you were before / without losing what you’ve since become” (Miller 73). This is most condensed cure for returning home in Miller’s work, asking the Brier tentative audience, and by extension the reader of the poem, to take on the traditional, pastoral return without accepting its paradigm unquestioningly, or refusing the amities which modernity has brought. As Quillen puts it, “He encourages acceptance of past, present, and future and the integration of all three into the self” (18). Indeed, though more subtle in this poem than others, Miller does not hesitate to criticize modernity: “We’re ashamed to live in our father’s house. / We think it too old fashion,” and in doing so, criticizes the impulse of some Appalachians to modernize and abandon tradition for the sake of

progress in the same way he criticizes primitivists who want to abandon modernity and, as Johnson puts it, live off “well water and organically grown corn” (Miller 61; Johnson 132-3). He later says, “We’ve moved to the cities / moved to the town / and left our spirits in the mountains / to live like half wild dogs around the homeplace” (70). In doing so, the Brier directs us back to “Down Home,” where we see the corrosive effect of being torn between “the suburb north of yourself” and the home left behind. In the context of a dialog, however, we come to understand that the interlocutors are like the characters of those previous poems who have yet to truly return home. In that line, he makes it apparent that the Brier who has returned home has become not only like the old man from Richards’ story, but a prophet, who like one emerging from the platonic cave to see the sun, returns and shouts towards those who watch shadows on the walls of Appalachia.

As Johnson points out, Miller bases the idea behind his “Brier’s Sermon” around a quote from the Gospel of John: “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (King James Bible, John 14.2; Johnson 130). But, as the Brier say himself, “I didn’t bring my Bible for a purpose,” he uses the words of Christ not to establish the supremacy of eternal life in heaven, as it had originally been intended, but instead to express the way one may be “born again,” as the subtitle of the poem reads. (Miller 59) His intentions are not idealistic or otherworldly; instead, he cares about how one may find sanctuary on this earth, because “We can be lost, sitting right in the church house.” (Miller 61)

The Brier stresses the issues which face Appalachia, both ecological and cultural, and describes Appalachian’s complicity in the process of exploitation: “We were too busy anyways/ giving our timber away / giving our coal away / to worry about love songs /to worry about ballads / to worry about old stories.” In the process, though, he intertwines the cultural

exploitation of Appalachia with the ecological exploitation of Appalachia (62). This has long been one of the tenants within Miller's poetry, but here, it is once again expressed with such a fluency, that I agree it was, for its time, not only "The most ambitious distillation of Appalachian Politics", but also the most ambitious distillation of Appalachian Pastorals (Williamson 73). Juggling politics, nostalgia, and returning home, the finale of the Brier's journey closes off his return home, the Brier changed because of it. The process has forced him to reconcile new ways of being with traditions and identity, technology and history, politics and pastoralism; now, the Brier is left alone for it, as mobile homes speed off, out of the mountain Ithaca and into the lowland Troys of geographic liminality in search of a nostos all their own.

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