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Nostalgia for the Future

Jim Wayne Miller

Our ignorance of the future does not prevent us from being keenly interested in it. For the future, as someone with a gift for the obvious observed, is where we will spend the rest of our lives. I once passed this bit of wisdom along to a young man in Carter County. I was talking to him about his future. The future, I said, is where you will spend the rest of your life. No, he allowed, he was going to stay in Carter County. Does the choice have to be so cruel—either the future, or Carter County? Can't this man spend the rest of his life in a future in Carter County?

Being reluctant to prophecy—especially about the future—but knowing I wanted to say something about the future of Appalachian Kentucky, I looked into the work of futurologists. Maybe they knew something we should know. But I discovered that futurologists did not know anything about Appalachian Kentucky. Moreover, I did not find "Appalachia" in the index of a single book by a futurologist. Not even *The Book of Predictions* includes "Appalachia" or "Appalachian Kentucky" in the index. I discovered there are few predictions about specific groups of people in specific places such as Appalachia. In the world of predictions, regions tend to disappear as the visionary eye of the futurologist dilates to accommodate either global catastrophe, universal paradise, or television sets with 300 channels.¹

I looked under other subjects to find anything that had a bearing on Appalachian Kentucky. I looked up predictions on coal and found them frustratingly contradictory. I found a prediction that increased coal production would ease the energy shortage—and a prediction that legislation would reduce the future use of coal. Under the related subject of mining, I found one other prediction, by George Lucas, who made the films *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*. Lucas foresees—predictably—mining and farming on marginal planets. He ventures no prediction as to the future of these activities in Appalachian Kentucky.

In the minds of many Americans, Appalachia is associated with poverty. But I am struck by the poverty of prediction. When I

began to see that futurologists, in their concern for the big picture, had no time for places like Appalachian Kentucky, I was at first disappointed. Now, though, I am thankful—thankful that we can go on from here and think about the future of the region, confident that whatever the future brings, it will be either more wonderful or more terrible than anything “science fiction with a Ph.D.”² can foresee.

But in thinking about the future of Appalachian Kentucky, we are not without resources. People in the area have thought about the future, often more intelligently than some of the futurologists I have been reading. I like the words of Brother Sim Moberly, the mountain preacher in James Still’s *River of Earth*. Speaking from a text chosen at random, Brother Moberly asks his congregation:

Oh, my children, where air we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, a-dying—the living and the dead riding the waters? Where air it sweeping us?³

Some of the futurologists arrogantly suggest that we are in a position to “choose” a future from a number of alternatives, much as we would select items in a supermarket. Brother Moberly knows better. His words suggest his humility, and a proper awe. We do not get the impression that he is thinking about a future of video games and paper underwear.

Other writers concerned with our region stress that the future is inextricably bound up with the past, and this is a more thoughtful view than one finds in some of the pop futurologists. Wendell Berry, for instance, says:

We owe the future
the past, the long knowledge
that is the potency of time to come.⁴

The future derives its strength, its potency, from the past.

The imaginative writing of our region suggests to me that the past has a future, and that the best route to the future, in Appalachian Kentucky, or anywhere else, is through the past. I want to explore here the future of Appalachian Kentucky, and of the entire Appalachian region. I want to look at one way in which our Appalachian past haunts and afflicts us. I shall look at a development of the recent past. Finally, using the writing of the

region as a resource, I want to suggest how the very past, which in some ways is our chief burden, can be turned into what Wendell Berry calls "long knowledge / that is the potency of time to come."

A great affliction throughout Appalachia's history, and a problem at the present time, is a lack of a sense of community. People who have passed through the region, and people who came and stayed, have commented on the lack of community in southern Appalachia—in marked contrast to what they had known in other parts of the country, in New England or in the Midwest, for instance. Emma Bell Miles, who came and stayed, and who in 1905 published a book called *The Spirit of the Mountains*, writes:

There is no such thing as a community of mountaineers. They are knit together, man to man, as friends, but not as a body of men.

Miles speaks of an incapacity for "concerted action." She refers to Appalachians as "a people asleep . . . without knowledge of its own existence."⁵ Writing a few years later, Horace Kephart, author of *Our Southern Highlanders*, was even more emphatic about the lack of community. Kephart based his book on his experience in western North Carolina. Not knowing whether his impressions of the people there, in the Smoky Mountains, applied to other people in the mountain South, Kephart says he

traveled in other parts of the Appalachians, in eastern Kentucky and Tennessee, in northern Georgia and found the southern mountaineers everywhere one people.

But, Kephart added, "the strange thing is that they do not know it."⁶

Both Miles and Kephart explained the lack of group identity, or sense of community, as the result of physical isolation and political boundaries. Kephart writes:

In the aggregate the Appalachian people are nearly twice as numerous and cover twice as much territory as any one of the States among which they have been distributed; but in each of these States they occupy only a backyard [there Kephart failed to take into account West Virginia], and

generally take back seats in the councils of the commonwealth. They have been fenced off from each other by political boundaries, and have no such coherence among themselves as would come from common leadership or a sense of common origin and mutual dependence.⁷

Echoing Miles, Kephart says:

Except as kinsmen or partisans they [Appalachians] cannot pull together. Speak to them of community of interests, try to show them the advantages of cooperation, and you might as well be proffering advice to the North Star. They will not work together zealously, even to improve their neighborhood roads, each mistrusting that the other may gain some trifling advantage over himself. . . .

When Kephart wrote, in the second decade of this century, he believed that neighborliness and cooperation and a sense of community was at a lower ebb that it had once been.

Neighborliness has not grown in the mountains—it is on the wane. There are today fewer log-rollings and house-raising, fewer husking bees and quilting parties than in former times; *and no new social gatherings have taken their place.* [Italics Kephart's]

More recently, Harry Caudill has identified this lack of community, this incapacity for concerted action, as a continuing problem for Appalachian Kentucky specifically and for Appalachia generally.⁹

There now exists, I believe, an opportunity to address this long-standing problem, this lack of a sense of community in Appalachia. For during the past fifteen or twenty years something new has come into being in the region. For a long time there have been outstanding individuals concerned with understanding Appalachia and with working for solutions to the region's problems. Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Center; the late Cratis Williams, the Lawrence County, Kentucky native and student of the region's literature; James Brown, the rural sociologist at the University of Kentucky—in addition to Kephart, Miles, Caudill and others—are such individuals. And they have

not worked in total isolation. But they did not have what we have today, and that is a network of individuals and organizations informed about Appalachia, concerned about the region's future, and committed to working for that future.

Over fifty years ago, when the Vanderbilt University Agrarians were trying to work up a regional program for the South, Allen Tate, a member of the group, saw the need to create "an intellectual situation interior to the South."¹⁰ The Agrarians failed in this effort, partly because they were too academic and literary and bound to the campus; partly because, as they admitted, they were unable to reach young people, either on the university campus or in the secondary schools.

Where the Agrarians failed, it appears that people interested in mounting some similar program for Appalachia have succeeded—or at least have made a start. We now have created—through the Appalachian Studies Association Conference, the Appalachian Consortium Press, Appalachian development centers throughout the region, and through the involvement of students on college and university campuses and in secondary schools—an intellectual situation interior to the region that has never previously existed.

In the past Appalachia has experienced change largely as the result of outside intervention—on the part of entrepreneurs, missionaries, planners, developers, and assorted "change agents" and advocates of regional uplift. David Whisnant has recently written about these efforts in *Modernizing the Mountaineer*.¹¹ But the new thing we are experiencing is an effort on the part of Appalachians to intervene in the life and culture of the region *from the inside*. This effort is beginning to look like a program of action as well as of ideas, carried on by two groups in Appalachian Studies referred to by Lawrence Thompson as "the action folk and the creative people."¹²

The terms "action folk" and "creative people" describe, on the one hand, people in Appalachian Studies interested in economic and political change and, on the other, those interested in art, music, poetry, history, philosophy, ideas. Within the field of Appalachian Studies the differences between these two camps are significant. I have been concerned that the potential effectiveness of Appalachian Studies would be dissipated by the failure of these two groups to understand their usefulness to one another.¹³ But I suspect that when either action folk or creative people get off their campuses and come into contact with non-academics, in

Appalachian Kentucky or anywhere in the region, members of both groups are perceived to be precisely what they are: professors, academics, experts of one kind or another; that is, a variety of intellectual. It makes no difference whether we are interested in land reform, community action, or in doing something about the pollution of Yellow Creek in Bell County; whether we think of ourselves as one of the action folk, or one of the creative people. The fact remains: we are "perfessors." We are going to have to deal with amused standoffishness, skepticism, indifference, or outright contempt on the part of some people. We are associated with and represent learning. If we have made a start in creating an intellectual situation inside the region, we have done so in a place with a long and strong anti-intellectual tradition based on Appalachia's frontier experience and character.

If we are going to address the long-standing problem of lack of community in Appalachia, we have to begin by establishing some sort of working relationship, some sort of community between the scholar, the academic, the man or woman of learning and ideas, and the people we exist to serve, in whose future we are interested. We delude ourselves if we think this community already exists simply because many of us are natives of the region. The Agrarians were Southerners, but their fellow Southerners remained either serenely ignorant of *I'll Take My Stand*,¹⁴ or dozed off reading it, or thought the twelve academics and literary men who wrote the book were ridiculously out of touch with reality. What I want to do now is to examine some encounters between learning (and representatives of learning) and that anti-intellectual tradition which is in robust good health in Appalachia.

Sut Lovingood, the central character in George Washington Harris's *Sut Lovingood Yarns*, embodies the anti-intellectual attitude rooted deep in Appalachia's history. Sut is suspicious of and contemptuous toward all forms of intellect, any kind of certified expertise or authority that sets one man apart from or above another. He has no use for sheriffs, circuit-riding preachers, and men associated with learning in any way. In one of the stories, Sut is telling a tale about a fellow named Wat Mastin, who is so infatuated with a certain Widder McKildrin that—in Sut's exaggerated way of putting it—Wat behaves like a horse foaming at the mouth. This is how Sut tells it:

"Well, las' year—no, hit were the year afore las—in

struttin and gobblin time, Wat set into bellerin an pawin up
dus in the neighborhood roun the ole widder
McKildrin's . . . his back roach'd roun, an a-chompin his teef
ontil he splotched his whiskers wif foam. Oh! he were
yearnis hot, an es restless es a cockroach in a hot skillit."

At this point Sut is interrupted:

"What was the matter with this Mr. Mastin? I cannot understand you, Mr. Lovingwood; had he hydrophobia?" remarked a man in a square-tail coat, and cloth gaiters, who was obtaining subscribers for some forthcoming Encyclopedia of Useful Knowledge, who had quartered at our camp, uninvited, and really unwanted.

"What do you mean by high-dry-foby?" and Sut looked puzzled.

"A madness produced by being bit by some rabid animal," explained Square-tail, in a pompous manner.

"Yas, hoss, he had high-dry-foby orful, and Mary McKildrin, the widder McKildrin's only darter—"

Now Sut continues his story, telling how Wat Mastin got married. Sut quotes from the marriage vows—only to be interrupted by the man in the square-tail coat, the pompous encyclopedia salesman who talks like a dictionary.

"Allow me to interrupt you," said our guest; "you do not quote the marriage ceremony correctly."

Here Sut's patience runs out. He turns to the encyclopedia salesman and says: "You go to hell, mistofer; you bothers me." The man sits down. Later Sut, who can not or will not say the word "encyclopedia," refers to the fellow as Onsightly Peter.¹⁵

The anti-intellectualism of Sut Lovingood lives in Saul Hignight, a character in James Still's "Journey to the Forks," a story about two boys who left home to attend a settlement school. It is getting late in the afternoon, and although the boys have only been away from home a few hours, they are already beginning to feel homesick, already missing their mother and father, their sister Holly, and the baby. Dan, the younger boy, says:

"I ought not a-dreamt to go to the Settlement School." But the older brother, the narrator, argues: "There never was a pure scholar amongst all of our kin. . . . Not a one who went clear through the books and come out on yon side. I'm of an opinion we ought to do it."

At this point they encounter Saul Hignight, a 1930s version of Sut Lovingood:

"Appears your pappy is sending you to the boarding school at the forks for an education," Saul guessed. "Aiming for you to soak up a lot of fool notions."

Saul goes on in this vein, expressing his doubts about the value of education—a litany all too familiar. Hignight's view is narrowly utilitarian:

"I don't put much store in these brought-on teachings, burdening the flesh with unnatural things, not a speck of profit to anybody."

There is a conflict between education and religion:

"I've heard they teach the earth is round . . . and such a claim goes against Scripture. The Book says plime-blank it has four corners. Who ever saw a ball with a corner?"

. . . .

"There's a powerful mess of tomfoolery taught children nowadays, a-pouring in till they've got no more judgment than a granny-hatchet. Allus I've held a little learning is a blessing, sharpening the mind like a saw blade. Too much knocks the edge off, injures the body's reckoning."

. . . .

"Cain't everbody understand what to swallow and what to cull. . . . Was I you, young and tender-minded, I'd play hard-headed at the school and let only the truth sink past the

skull. I believe the Almighty put our brains in a bone box to keep the devilment strained out."¹⁶

Harris's *Sut Lovingood Yarns* are from the 1860s. Still's story is based on an Appalachian Kentucky of the 1930s or 1940s. But over a century after Sut told Onsightly Peter to butt out, the relationship between the man of learning and the local folk still leaves a lot to be desired. The man of learning still talks too much and listens too little. And he is not thought to have the same kind of relationship to place as the local people. Like the encyclopedia salesman, he is often encamped uninvited and unwanted. During the War on Poverty in the 1960s some spiritual descendant of Sut Lovingood or Saul Hignight observed of the soft-handed experts, the poverty warriors coming and going: "They just pop in, pop off, and pop out."¹⁷

Another kind of relationship between the man of learning, or the man of thought and ideas, and local people is suggested by Robert Frost's well-known poem "Mending Wall." It's a poem about two neighbors who, every spring, walk the rock wall that serves as a fence between their properties—to repair it. They replace rocks that have fallen down during the winter, or that have been displaced by hunters whose dogs have chased rabbits into the wall. As they work, one of the men says, every time he replaces a stone, "Good fences make good neighbors,"—repeating an old saying. He says this again and again, without really knowing why. The other man in the poem speculates on this saying and tries, as Frost says, "to put a notion" into his neighbor's head. "Why do they make good neighbors?" he asks. He can see that the saying would make good sense if the two of them had cows, but they have none. They don't have anything to fence in or out, no animals that might get on the other's property, do damage, and cause hard feelings. But the speaker in the poem can't get a satisfactory answer out of his neighbor, who, Frost says:

. . . will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well,
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."¹⁸

The scholars or experts might yearn for a relationship with local people such as is described by Myles Horton, founder of the

Highlander Center. Horton tells how, during a workshop at the Highlander Center held for striking cotton-mill workers, one of the workers drew a pistol, pointed it at Horton, and shouted: "You S.O.B.! You're going to tell us what to do!"¹⁹

What do we learn from these scenes and incidents? In every one of them there's something wrong with the relationship between the man of learning, intellect, and ideas, and the others involved. Attitudes vary. And blame can be placed now on the one, now on the other side. Sut has contempt for the man associated with learning. In Frost's poem the man of thought is, if not contemptuous, then condescending toward his rather dense neighbor. Sut has no use at all for learning. The cotton-mill worker stands in desperate need of an idea, but proposes to take one at gunpoint! In between there are varying degrees of distrust, suspicion, qualified approval, and amused disdain.

The attitudes and perceptions found in these episodes are still very much present in our region today. Thomas Wolfe, in the opening of *Look Homeward, Angel*, writing about how the past is constantly informing the present, says: "Our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung."²⁰ Our lives are haunted by our frontier experience, with its deeply-rooted tradition of anti-intellectualism and the mincingly genteel and alienated kind of learning that always goes with such a tradition. We are afflicted by a historical split across our cultural brow into highbrow and lowbrow traditions which, while they are characteristic of the whole country, result in a deeper cleft in Appalachia, where the frontier character of our experience has been more pronounced and sustained than in, say, Frost's New England. And caught between the Sut Lovingoods and Onslaught Peters, and the views and attitudes they represent, are the parents and children of the region, with every degree of uncertainty and ambivalence, just as the little boys in Still's story are caught between the views of Saul Hignight, on the one hand, and those of their Uncle Jolly, on the other, who urged them to go to school in the first place.

If Appalachia is to have a real future, and not just a past happening over and over again, we have to have a better relationship between the people of learning and the general population of the region. And a better relationship is possible. As Frost's "Mending Wall" suggests, scholar and non-scholar can meet as neighbors and work on something of mutual interest and

concern. And for every utterly dense person like the neighbors in "Mending Wall" there is somebody like Gertie Nevels, in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, who is perfectly capable of thinking about serious matters—such as the danger of her son's "adjusting" too much. There is someone like Uncle Jolly, who made sure his nephews went to school; someone like the man who watched the poverty warriors come and go and commented insightfully on them. We see, in other words, that ordinary folks aren't dumb. They aren't inert lumps. Plain people are, on the contrary, lumpy with intellectual capacity. And they have culture—in a more profound sense than the Onslaught Peters of the world. There are people who can see the far-reaching implications of forces that affect their lives, and who can express themselves succinctly—like the mother from Blackey, Kentucky, who spoke for many parents when she talked about how our schools so often separate children from their people and place: "We lose our purpose when we lose our children. . . . [T]hey become citizens of nowhere."²¹ Finally, we are reminded by Myles Horton's story that plain people, ordinary working people, do need the man of ideas, the scholar, and the man of learning.

How can those of us in Appalachian Studies, how can Appalachian development centers respond to the concerns of parents like the mother from Blackey? To the needs of the Highlander Center worker? What we must work toward is community between scholars and people such as these—community that is somewhere between hostility, suspicion, disdain, or indifference, and the intemperate demand that the scholar come up with all the answers and make the decisions. What is needed is ground where the scholar and the people come together, where scholars help by generating and disseminating useful information, suggesting new solutions based on old principles (progress that goes somewhere); by providing occasions where issues are analyzed, by giving people the tools and materials to make their own decisions and, most important, by helping people believe they have the capacity to do so.

The Myles Horton story illustrates what we definitely do not need: somebody telling everybody else what they ought to do. This is precisely what people despise and resent. Ordinary folks have a legitimate complaint against the experts, the academics, the idea people and planners, those people who "pop in, pop off, and pop out" again. Their resentment was expressed recently by a woman

named Vicki Williams, a factory worker in Huntington, Indiana, who said, "I'm tired of people putting their words in my mouth and their thoughts in my head."²²

In this connection we need to remind ourselves of what it is Sut Lovingood is doing when he is repeatedly interrupted by the big-mouthed encyclopedia salesman. Sut is telling a story. Sut's tale-telling reminds us that, however problematic other aspects of traditional Appalalchian culture may be, Appalachia has a literary tradition, a tradition of story and song, of tale and ballad, that is older than the anti-intellectualism of the frontier, for it was brought in by the first settlers, an "invisible part of the baggage,"²³ an oral tradition brought along with a print tradition represented by the Bible and Shakespeare. I want to suggest how this literary tradition may serve as a basis for community between local people and the men and women of learning, whether they be "action folk" or "creative people."

In making my point, I'll tell a little story myself. A fellow from Ohio told me that in West Virginia he came around a curve and found a car stopped in the road. Two good old boys in slacks and white shirts with the cuffs turned back off their wrists had started somewhere on a Saturday evening and their car had stopped on them. The fellow from Ohio, knowledgeable about cars, asked them what seemed to be the trouble. The boys told him, and he diagnosed the problem as the ignition, or maybe the points. Sure enough, the points were in bad shape. Had the boys ever changed the points in the car, he asked? Nope. So the fellow from Ohio cleaned the points a little, re-set them, and got the car started. The boys were amazed, he said, and asked, "What's them points good for, anyhow?"

Now I don't believe this story. It's a variety of Brier joke that makes somebody feel smart because somebody else is dumb. And if there is anything two boys in West Virginia with an old car are apt to know about, it's cars—points, plugs, etc.

But the ways in which literature makes culture go may be just as obscure to most of us as the way points operate in the nervous system of an automobile to make it go. So, briefly, I want to sketch an answer to the question: "What's that literature good for, anyhow?"

Individually and collectively, people have a story to tell. Literature consists of different parts of that story, or different versions of it. When people tell their story, a peculiar thing

happens. People present themselves—to themselves and to others—as they know themselves to be, as they want to be. Literature helps people write their own script rather than be actors in somebody else's play; helps people define themselves. Literature helps people make up another self if they don't like the one they have. Literature helps people get control over their own image. People have always needed to tell their own story. T. E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia, in his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, speaks of "the unnamed rank and file who miss their share of credit, as they must do, until they can write the dispatches."²⁴

Literature gives people a way to begin writing their own dispatches, and thus to begin to take control of their own lives. We have all experienced resentment at stereotypical images of Appalachia and Appalachian people. And rightly so. But finally it is the image we have of ourselves that is crucial. Thoreau says: "Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate."²⁵

The connection between our words and our identity, our words and our actions, is not sufficiently appreciated. But the stories we tell, the poems we make, are significant. As Robert Penn Warren points out, the story one tells is always something one hasn't quite understood yet, and which one sees into only by telling it.²⁶ Telling creates a thrilling sense of discovery by giving shape and order to experience. What we discover when we tell is what we really think and feel. Even when we are telling about something that is passing or already past, about what we have suffered and how we have changed—as Appalachian writers often are—what we discover is who we really are. Contemporary Appalachian writers illustrate the truth of George Brown Tindall's observation about change and self-discovery:

. . . we learn time and again from the southern past and [from] the history of others that to change is not necessarily to disappear. And we learn from modern psychology that to change is not necessarily to lose one's identity; to change, sometimes, is to find out.²⁷

Our literature can awaken us to a knowledge of ourselves as a people—precisely what Kephart, Miles, and others have said we

lacked—a knowledge of ourselves with a common future. Our literature is a tool for inspecting our lives, individually and collectively. Our literature is a way into knowledge of who we have been, how we got to be the way we are. It is a means of empowering ourselves for our common future.

Robert Penn Warren reminds us that “literary regionalism is more than a literary matter.”²⁸ If we treat our literature as “just literature” it loses much of its value for us. Genuine literature is valuable to us because it springs from reality and experience. It is valuable not only to the individual, for private reasons, but also because it has its public uses and speaks to people collectively.

Much of our past and future—who we were and who we will be—can be found in our language. And future events and actions are often prefigured in language. “Quite often in history,” Eric Hoffer says, “action has been the echo of words. An era of talk was followed by an era of events.”²⁹

Those of us involved in Appalachian Studies, whether as action folk or creative people, need to listen to those voices in the region that are legitimate expressions of it—of the region’s history and its collective experience. Both the past and the future—the past condensed and distilled, the future intimated—can be found in the language of the region’s imaginative writers. Listen with me to some of these voices for evidence of the past life that is lost forever if it is not somehow caught in language, and for that “long knowledge,” as Wendell Berry called it, “that is the potency of time to come.”

Here is James Still, in a poem called “Heritage,” expressing a determined attachment to place, something found in so much of the region’s writing:

I shall not leave these prisoning hills
Though they topple their barren heads to level earth
And the forests slide uprooted out of the sky.³⁰

In strip-mined areas of Appalachia, the hills *have* toppled their heads to level earth; the forests *have* slid uprooted out of the sky. But many people feel what James Still has here expressed: an attachment to place in spite of what has happened.

I think I am right in maintaining that this attachment to place is not just a literary posture. I think it is a genuine feeling widely held. People who have never thought of themselves as poets, and

who have no connection with literature, when they express their feelings, say something quite similar to what Still says. The young poets repeatedly confront the devastation and damage, the scars and the blight which belong to the region's history. In "Affliction" Robert Morgan condenses much of the region's history into a poem which finds a symbol in the chestnut blight:

On the slopes where the old
blighted years ago
new
chestnuts sprout and
thrive until the age of saplings, then
blossom and die.

.....
after decades still trying to break through
and establish hold. . . .

.....
Like us straining to ascend,
immortal
only in dirt.³¹

Robert Morgan sees the people of the region as trees rooted in the earth, blighted but still trying to be well.

The effort to break through, to ascend, is central to Mike Henson's lyrical novel, *Ransack*. The novel's central character is a young man whose people come from Appalachian Kentucky to Cincinnati, where they now live in the Over-the-Rhine area. The young man looks out over houses at night, past the radio tower with its red blinking light, and thinks of all the people in the houses, behind their white squares of light. And he remembers:

Back home they were digging a well and they turned up in the red clay, one, then another, then a handful: the white sleeping locusts. And he thought of how they lay all through the fields, waiting for their year. Deep in the ground each whitely waiting to drill upward together all through the fields and hills at once . . . and sing.³²

Here again we see the close identification with earth—the locusts are buried in the earth—and the determination to work up from the ground, much like the chestnut saplings in Morgan's poem.

Mary Joan Coleman writes of a past and a way of life which, though it blighted her life in a way, she nevertheless prefers to what she finds in a drug-addicted representative of affluent America. Coleman writes of deprivation and irreparable harm done, in a poem called "Survivor":

when i was ten, my skin waxed yellow
we had meat once a month, drank canned milk
no one sent a Care package, but on Halloween
when i lay parched with scarlet fever
town children knocked, "trick or treat for UNICEF"³³

Cruel and harsh as this background was, Coleman can suggest strengths and benefits derived from it, and pit these, in a critique of a more affluent America, against the "heritage" of a drug-addicted student, a "Sweet Child of Hunger":

a dying child
who rubbed the needlepoint work on his gaunt arms,

* * *

the petulant student of thirty-one
mother and father send personal checks from miami

* * *

desperate face of a boy lost at the fair

* * *

i heard the whisper of death seep
out of the wasp wounds in his flesh
knowing that for all the real hungers of my past
i never starved from a denial as cruel as his.³⁴

Thus she affirms what she calls elsewhere her "deep-shafted heritage," takes a stand in that heritage, knowing her strength is in it, as the life of the chestnuts, though they are blighted, is in the earth. And like Henson's white sleeping locusts, she breaks through to a kind of song.

Richard Hague does not look at the region's past through rose-colored glasses, either. He does not try to soften or paint over the blight and affliction of the region. He knows the past, and confronts it, but he does not dwell on it. There is no

sentimentality or nostalgia for the past in "Finished With the Poetry of Coal":

Too long, now,
the trail of ashes
from my grandfather's grave
I will not wander back
among the broken ties and ballast
leading to the Mingo Roundhouse
where he stoked his locomotives

I will not think of coal train brakemen
weeping in the chemical dark
of Weirton,
nor of Hambone McCarthy,
who came to my grandmother's funeral
almost crazy

I will not think of the deep connections with fire
that scarred me
even before I'd grown into pain.

I will climb into light
that shines on the earth before me,
my body shedding its grit
of anger and cinders.

Even death has its ending.
Let me vine like a new brier
tough over blackened land.³⁵

Here again is the connection with the earth—Hague thinks of himself as a brier—found in Still, in Robert Morgan's chestnut tree image. Here, too, the depiction of devastation, blight, affliction, scarring—of land and people—found in the poems examined here. Here again the coming to terms with the past, but certainly no nostalgia for it. If there is nostalgia for anything, it is (as Chicago's Mayor Daley once put it in one of his famous lapses) a nostalgia for the future.

The past is present in this writing, in condensed, interpreted form. In Morgan's blighted chestnuts, in Mary Joan Coleman's

"Survivor," in Henson's novel, which deals symbolically with the ransacking of a place and a people, I find symbols of the historical affliction and blight and ransacking of the Appalachian region. But what I hear in this writing also is an attachment to and identification with the earth—in this case, Appalachian earth—no matter what. I hear an affirmation of what is positive and good in traditional Appalachian life. I sense movement from sickness to health, from darkness to light; a refusal to dwell on the scars and afflictions of the past; a determination to grow and change. I think, in connection with this writing, of Wolfe's line: "The alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock."³⁶

What's that literature good for? Appalachia's literature and its literary tradition—the love of telling, the love of a good story—can be a common meeting place for scholar and non-scholar, and, beyond that, the literature can be useful in revealing and building that sense of community that can be cultivated in the ground of the region's history. Our literature can help reveal the common life, history, and culture of the region. Appalachians have been deprived of a knowledge of their history by a complicated set of circumstances. For the most part, Appalachians have only suffered their history, the way we endure a dull pain whose cause we do not know. Our literature is full of doors and entrances into what the historian Degler has called Appalachia's "triple history"—our history as Americans, as Southerners, and the history that is peculiarly ours in this region.³⁷ Our literature is a common ground where the scholar, the man or woman of learning, can stand with the people of the region and begin to learn and understand our complicated and interesting triple history; and in a place and among people the historian Wertenbaker called a "test laboratory of American civilization,"³⁸ both scholar and non-scholar can begin to participate in and influence that history, instead of simply suffering it.

Our region's literature is useful in getting on with those tasks Cratis Williams outlined when he said we need to

learn and write our history . . . define our identity, write our own books . . . solve our own social problems . . . manage our own institutions, and build our own economy.³⁹

Over two hundred years ago Boone stood in the Cumberland Gap. And soon the people followed and settled the country

beyond the Gap. The people involved in Appalachian Studies, whether action folk or creative people, are trying to find the gap to Appalachia's future so people can pass through and settle that country. The Appalachian people, Cratis Williams tells us, have migrated at least four times. Many moved to the border country between England and Scotland during the time of the Roman Empire. Many migrated to northern Ireland in the seventeenth century, to the American colonies and into Appalachia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth. Several millions migrated from the region to urban industrial centers in the midwest in this century.⁴⁰

We have moved many times, and I believe we can find the gap and migrate to the future as a people with a common history and heritage. Our history, which is our burden and our affliction, is also a source of strength. Our past has a future. In his history of the Scotch-Irish, James Leyburn tells how the Scots reacted to Calvinistic theology. Protestantism, Leyburn says, "for the first time in their history" had given these people "something to think about, seriously and deeply. Calvinistic theology invested the individual with primary importance. . . . Such attention the people had never known, and they responded warmly to it."⁴¹ I believe a knowledge of our history and heritage, of our common interest and problems, is capable of giving the Appalachian people—many of whom are descended from these Scots who later came to be known as Scotch-Irish—something to think about, seriously and deeply. And I believe people will respond warmly to it. They are already doing so.

Our literature is one of the resources we have in providing something to think about. The nostalgia for the future found in it can be used as a means of possessing the future. Our imaginative literature can be used to enable people in Appalachian Kentucky and all over the region to say "I have a place"; to think of themselves not as "citizens of nowhere," but rather as "citizens of somewhere"; to think of the region as a place (as Wendell Berry puts it) "whose possibilities I am one of."⁴²

In working toward that goal, our relationship, as representatives of intellect, learning, and thought, to the region and its people ought to resemble what we find at the end of James Still's "Journey to the Forks." The sun is setting, it is getting dark. Dan, the younger brother, who has fingers missing—who like his region has been mangled and bears the scar—is acting as if he might turn back.

"I ought never thought to be a scholar," Dan said. His voice was small and tight, and the words trembled on his tongue. He caught my hand [the older brother, the narrator, says] and I felt the blunt edge of his palm where the fingers were gone. We started down the ridge, picking our way through stony dark.⁴³

We have thought to be scholars. As we move to the future of Appalachian Kentucky, we have to take people by the hand. Think of that young man I mentioned at the outset—the one from over in Carter County, who said he wasn't going to live in the future, he was going to stay in Carter County. We've got to be able to take him by the hand, as a brother. Right now he's not so sure people like us are his brothers. But we've got to take his hand, and go on, and admit that for both of us the journey will be like picking our way through stony dark.

NOTES

¹David Wallechinsky, Amy Wallace, and Irving Wallace, *The Book of Predictions* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), 396ff et passim.

²Gerald Nachman, "Future Shuck," *Newsweek*, 29 March 1982, p. 9.

³James Still, *River of Earth* (New York: The Viking Press, 1940), 76.

⁴Wendell Berry, *The Country of Marriage* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), 28.

⁵Emma Bell Miles, *The Spirit of the Mountains*, a facsimile edition with a foreword by Roger D. Abrahams and introduction by David E. Whisnant (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 71-72, 200-201.

⁶Horace Kephart, *Our Southern Highlanders*, introduction by George Ellison (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1976), xxxvii.

⁷*Ibid.*, 428.

⁸*Ibid.*, 382-83.

⁹Harry Caudill, *Darkness at Dawn* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 38-61.

¹⁰John Tyree Fain and Thomas Daniel Young, eds., *The Literary Correspondence of Donald Davidson and Allen Tate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1974), 229.

¹¹David Whisnant, *Modernizing the Mountaineer* (Boone, North Carolina: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1980).

¹²Lawrence Thompson, "An Academy of Appalachian Studies," *Appalachian Journal* 4 (Autumn 1976): 38-39.

¹³Jim Wayne Miller, "Appalachian Studies Hard and Soft: The Action Folk and the Creative People," *Appalachian Journal*, 9 (Winter-Spring 1982): 105-14.

¹⁴*I'll Take My Stand*, introduction by Louis Rubin, Jr., with biographical essays by Virginia Rock (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930; rpt. Harper Torchbooks, 1962).

¹⁵See the story "Rare Ripe Garden Seed" in George Washington Harris, *Sut Lovingood Yarns*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (New Haven: College and University Press, 1966); the story is also included in *The Literature of the South*, Richard Croon Beatty, Floyd C. Watkins, and Thomas Daniel Young, eds. (New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1952), 404-11.

¹⁶James Still, *Sporty Creek* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 121-23.

¹⁷Laurel Shackelford and Bill Weinberg, eds., *Our Appalachia* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 12.

¹⁸Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward C. Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 33-34.

¹⁹Bill Osinski, "Highlander Center: A Half-Century on the Cutting Edge of Change," Louisville, Kentucky *Courier-Journal Magazine*, 17 January 1982, p. 4ff.

²⁰Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*, introduction by Maxwell C. Perkins (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 3.

²¹Una Mae Reck and Gregory G. Reck, "Living is More Important than Schooling: Schools and Self-Concept in Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal*, 8 (Autumn 1980): 24.

²²Vicki Williams, "The View From \$204 a Week," *Newsweek*, 18 January 1982, p. 15.

²³Donald Davidson, *The Tennessee*, introduction by Thomas Daniel Young (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press), 310.

²⁴T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), vi.

²⁵Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, introduction by Willard Thorp (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Pub. Co. 1969), 10.

²⁶Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers, eds., *Robert Penn Warren Talking* (New York: Random House, 1980), 254.

²⁷George Brown Tindall, *The Ethnic Southerners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 21.

²⁸Robert Penn Warren, "Some Don'ts for Literary Regionalists," in *Voices From the Hills*, Robert J. Higgs and Ambrose N. Manning, eds. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Co-published with Appalachian Consortium Press, Boone N. C., 1975), 364.

²⁹Eric Hoffer, *The Passionate State of Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955), 48.

³⁰James Still, *Hounds on the Mountain* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), 55.

³¹Robert Morgan, *Land Diving* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 4.

³²Mike Henson, *Ransack* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: West End Press, 1980), 66-67.

³³Mary Joan Coleman, *Take One Blood Red Rose* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: West End Press, 1978), [5].

³⁴*Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵Unpublished poem by Richard Hague.

³⁶Wolfe, *Look Homeward Angel*, 3.

³⁷Carl Degler, *The Other South* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc. 1963), 219.

³⁸Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *The Old South* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1963), 219.

³⁹Cratis Williams, "Appalachia," in *An Encyclopedia of East Tennessee*, Jim Stokely and Jeff D. Johnson, eds. (Oak Ridge, Tennessee: Children's Museum of Oak Ridge, 1981), 14.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, lecture, Appalachian Studies Workshop, Berea College, 1976.

⁴¹James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 57-61.

⁴²Wendell Berry, *Openings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 21.

⁴³James Still, *Sporty Creek*, 125.