

either for or against these. In a world full of nebulous faith and selfish love, it is rewarding today to return to a world in which nothing is gray. Or is it? The conclusion of *Act of Contrition* is both satisfying and terrifying, but it also implies something else again.

**Nelda Rachels**  
**Palmersville, Tennessee**

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**Still, James. *From the Mountain From the Valley*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001.**

Reading James Still's collected poetry *From the Mountain From the Valley* is like taking a poetic excursion from the past into the present. Still was publishing poetry before I was born and continues to publish poetry into the twenty-first century. I was born in 1930. From the late 'twenties to the present is a remarkable period of creativity, and I do not know of many living poets who can match that record. Wordsworth and Yeats are notable poets who wrote poetry until the last days, or perhaps, the last day of their long lives.

More important than the long period of successful poetic creativity is the poetry itself and what that poetry has said and will continue to say. That poetry has enriched and will continue to enrich the lives of its readers. In Still's poetry there is much from which readers will benefit. Most, but not all, of the poetry in this volume is about the people and environment of Appalachia, the mountains and streams, the woodlands, the people and their triumphs and tragedies and daily lives, their mores, customs and habits. I find much that is familiar in Still's presentation of the people of Appalachia and the landscape. My father was an East Texan. I spent much of my youth in East Texas, and it has always seemed to me that the cultures of East Texas and Appalachia have much in common. My paternal grandfather was a farmer of cotton and corn and a fiddler--see "Fiddlers' Convention on Troublesome Creek"--at dances and festive occasions. Today when I visit relatives in East Texas, I see and hear the people of Still's Appalachia. As did Still, we lived in company towns, and I, like Still, have kept bees all my life. East Texas is forested by many of the same trees--pines, sweetgums, oaks, and maples. Although East Texas is not so mountainous as Appalachia and there are no coal mines in San Augustine County where my father was born and reared, I hear in

"County" Still's poetic reflections on the same kind of difficult work and hardship, the same poverty, the kinds of skills needed to survive at farming in poor communities everywhere. His poetry reflects the same closeness to the land--the feeling sometimes ambivalent--and I hear the same harmonics of speech that reflect an Irish, Scottish, and English heritage. It seems that the ancestors of almost everyone in East Texas came from Kentucky and Tennessee. When Still speaks eloquently of the people of Appalachia, it seems to me he is also speaking of the people in East Texas.

My first impression of this volume was that Still had written a collection of beautiful and nostalgic poems about the scenery and people of Appalachia, but as I read and reread the poems, I began to see the universality of his poetry. He seems to have followed Wordsworth's dictum that the poet write in "the real language of men," and Still does so with a poetic intensity and skill that provide a deep and profound understanding of the lives and people of Appalachia. In "Fallow Years," Still uses meter and rime with a Wordsworthian ease and naturalness. Note the simplicity and beauty of the following lines: "*But Mother Earth is far more faithful still/Than man who in old age has fallow years/To rest his hands, to ruminare on fears/Of ending death....*" Still uses the run-on line, as does Wordsworth, Still uses contrast and comparison to provide the reader with insight into the relationships that he shares with nature. Still has not forgotten, to use Wordsworth's words, that "Poetry is the image of man and nature" and that "poets do not write for poets alone, but for man."

Still has a deep sympathy and understanding for the people about whom he writes, and in this I am reminded of Shelley's concept of the sympathetic imagination. Shelley thought that the sympathetic imagination led the poet "to see into the life of things," to paraphrase Wordsworth, in a way that transcends our ordinary seeing of the world, and that it is the poet who is best able to express this insight in his poetry to a needy mankind, an insight that Still demonstrates throughout his poetry. In "On Buckhorn Creek," a poetical description of seasonal farming which is beautiful in every line, Still transforms acres of farm land into the "*dark acres of the mind where no bird's throat cries/the winter's growing, the germinal leaf that dies.*" This closing couplet illustrates Still's insight into and sympathy for the difficult life of a farmer whose "*acres are served with love and plow/through drought and thaw and rain's re-ordering.*"

In Still's "Coal Town," his miners become any man who works at a job that is brutalizing to the human body, mind, and spirit, anyone for whom "*These stark houses hung upon the hills,/The ragged steps and interstices of the barren rock / are haven for miners in an upper world.*" However humble the home, however draining the work, the miner's homes are an escape from "the gutted cave," and it is from those homes that the miners can at least hear "the long clear whistle of the cardinal singing."

Still's poetry anchors the reader's sympathies to the places of Appalachia and transports him into the world of suffering mankind as the cardinal's song temporarily transports the miserable coal miner out of the dark mines.

Another of Still's impressive poetic abilities is his sense of place and his ability to convey that sense of place to the reader. The titles of many of Still's poems—"Hunt on Defeated Creek," "On Troublesome Creek," "On Redbird Creek," "On Buckhorn Creek," "Coal Town," "Abandoned House," "Morning: Dead Mare Branch," and "Death on the Mountain"—suggest his strong sense of place, a sense grounded in Appalachia. The poet's careful eye removes the reader from his own environment into the world of the poet's youth, adulthood, and old age; we see that world as if we had lived there, as if it were ours.

Still has an advantage over many of the people of contemporary society who are increasingly migratory, moving from one place to another, never establishing real roots in a particular place, a place where one knows the landscape, the people, the weather, the flora and fauna. He comments in "A Man Singing to Himself" that he has lived in Appalachia "More than half a century." The soil, the rock structure, the birds, the animals both wild and domestic, the creeks, the trees and flowers, the weather, and the people of Appalachia are what Still knows and writes about with a loving intimacy and not uncritical eye.

Still has a strong and unerring sense of how people are an essential part of the landscape in which they live and how that landscape can be both confining and liberating, both terrifying and beautiful. The people of his poems are mostly rural people, farmers, sheriffs, coal miners, hunters, fiddlers, housewives, who are not unaware of the beauty and hardship that is a part of their lives. Still's hardworking poor know that their isolation in the mountains may also be limiting, and they know—a point Still makes frequently—they are on a journey to death. In "Fiddlers' Convention on Troublesome Creek," "the men are lean, and their nags are leaner still." When fiddlers play, they "play life's hardscrabble." "*O slow the hand and fleet the hoof upon the mountainside/where men within prisoning hills have stayed*" and, of course, died. "Swift are their hearts upon this journey never made." There is an elegiac sadness, a sense of life as tragic in these lines as Still juxtaposes the beauty of the landscape with the hard work and often narrow lives of the mountain people. This is true also of the coal miners for whom coal is food as they "dig this earth-bread...in the eight-hour death" and suffer a "*daily burial / In a dark harvest lost as any dead.*" In the same poem, "Earth-Bread," coal is food, "stone-meat" and "fruited bones." To make coal a metaphor for food may seem illogical, but as Still does it, the imagery becomes a powerful statement about the hardship and depredation of coal miners.

Still's sympathy is always with the hardworking poor who work in the "guttled caves" and lead a "hardscrabble" life, "men within their prisoning hills." On the other hand, Still retains his love of the Appalachian mountains, and he maintains an optimism about life throughout his poems. In "Mountain Men Are Free" the last four lines of the poem are almost a credo for Still:

*Mountain man, what do you need of life beyond  
your hills?  
What need of strength beyond your calloused hand,  
Your thick muscled shoulders, your arm's firm  
steadiness?  
Here you may eat untainted bread, here a free  
man stand.*

I see no irony in these lines, only love and admiration for the mountains and their people. Do these lines trump the last lines of "Death in the Hills?" "What creaking hand/Can dam the flood of marching swing-paced days?" None can, but one does--facing the inevitable--love life, the land, and one's people, hoping for a better life for the isolated and hard-working poor.

Only a poet of considerable ability can speak so clearly and eloquently, reminding one of what one already knows, has--perhaps--experienced and half forgotten, adding new insights to one's experience of the world. Still has done that for me, as I am certain he has for many other readers. Poetry is so often a kind of remembering and learning.

**Dr. Wallace Hooker**  
**Professor Emeritus of English**  
**Houston Baptist University**

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