

## **“Lost in the American Funhouse”: Magical Realism and Transfiguration in Jim Wayne Miller’s *The Mountains Have Come Closer***

by Marianne Worthington

The narrator in Jim Wayne Miller’s 1980 poetry collection, *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, experiences personal and cultural transformation, achieved primarily through the art of surprises. Miller uses magical realism as the principal poetic means of invading and challenging traditional notions of reality and Appalachian identity. Since one primary theme of these poems is recovering and repossessing an Appalachian heritage and culture that has dissolved into a nightmarish, postmodern landscape, Miller’s surprising technique seems a fitting strategy for remembering a lost past, forecasting a future based on ancestors, while standing in an uncertain and dream-like present.

Thinking about Miller’s poems *and* magical realism, however, does not come without impediment. Literature scholars continue to debate the meaning and function of magical realism in a text. Is magical realism a literary genre or a literary technique? Is it a passé literary trend, or just a marketing label? In an essay in *Janus Head*, editor Bainard Cowan comments on the confusion surrounding magical realism in literature:

Controversy has dogged magical realism since it first drew the attention of the world literary community through Gabriel García Márquez’ *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and other works of the Latin American “boom” in the 1960s. Recognized by some as a significant international movement in fictional style, by others rejected as an irresponsible evasion of reality and even as a conversion of third-world suffering to entertainment, magical realism has constituted a special scandal to conventional literary history . . . (5).

Notwithstanding the confusion, controversy, and scandal associated with the term, magical realism seems a viable entry point in uncovering meaning in Jim Wayne Miller’s collection even though magical realism is a literary concept concerned almost exclusively with Latin American texts—not with Appalachian texts—and is concerned almost exclusively with fiction—not with poetry. However, critic Luis Leal

notes: “Magical realism is, more than anything else, an attitude toward reality that can be expressed in popular or cultured forms, in elaborate or rustic styles, in closed or open structures” (119). Perhaps we can take that to include poetic structures. We can also perhaps take Jim Wayne Miller at his own word since he often remarked that he considered poetry a type of fiction. In a 1982 letter to the editor of the *Kentucky Poetry Review* Miller wrote: “My own experience convinces me poetry makes something happen. Freud knew that thought is action in rehearsal. And we know that fiction (and poems are fictions) can reveal what reality so often obscures. (A poem is just as good a model of one kind of reality as the atom is of another)” (59). He repeated that notion in a 1987 conversation with Parks Lanier: “As soon as you begin to remember, you are in the realm of fiction, and poems are ‘fictions’ in the same way that short stories and novels and plays are. ‘Remembering’ is beginning to fictionalize, in terms of your needs, in terms of your angle and your perspective of the experience that you remember” (5).

Some agreed-upon concepts, then, regarding the use and function of magical realism in a text can instruct and inform a journey into the bizarre, transformative poems in *The Mountains Have Come Closer*. First, magical realism is a subversive and surprising literature that violates our expectations as readers. As poet Dana Gioia notes, it mixes the “magical and mundane in an overall context of realistic narration.” Second, magical realism is one way to investigate the realities of characters or communities who are beyond the borders of mainstream culture—not just Latin Americans, perhaps, but other marginalized communities such as Appalachians. Third, most literature scholars agree that the concept of time in magical realism texts is cyclical rather than linear: “The distant past is present in every moment, and the future has already happened,” notes writer Bruce Holland Rogers. This idea of cyclical time is crucial to reading Miller’s poems. Finally, transformation of the self is inevitable. In magical realism, a character’s personal identity, the self, is always transformed, much as the narrator in Part One of *The Mountains Have Come Closer* exchanges places with, becomes, the Brier in Parts Two and Three of Miller’s collection.

“In the American Funhouse” is the first section of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, and in the opening poem titled “Saturday Morning” Miller sets a capricious tone and foreshadows the change, movement, and transformation of the narrator. This is how the book begins:

Seven hundred miles inland I wake to waves  
 crashing beneath the bedroom window. I look  
 out. Sure enough, the house is plowing  
 gently—at three knots, maybe—through  
 a moderate green sea of grass and wild onions. (3)

The house, then, is not a house at all, but a ship, moving, and the speaker awakes already on the journey. As the speaker makes his way through this house/ship, inanimate objects take on extraordinary qualities: “The palm of a catcher’s mitt / has broken into a sweat.” Dirty dishes “have grown / elegant fur linings. When I enter, the dip dish / scurries backward like a spider.” A vacuum cleaner speaks. The speaker experiences transformation as well:

I become a cat trying to back down a tree.  
 My arms retract into my body until  
 only the hands stick out, making  
 feeble burrowing motions.

In the garage I turn myself  
 into a hammer. I drive two nails into  
 the wall and hang a while between them.  
 I become a twenty dollar bill  
 and hide inside my wallet.  
 Disguised as an old overcoat, I climb  
 the folding ladder to the attic . . . .

The house plows on through waves of grass, traveling  
 somewhere. Suddenly I know  
 I am a suitcase someone else  
 will live a life out of when we arrive. (3-4)

And in the next poem, “Getting Together,” the speaker continues to experience freakish self-perceptions and compares his life to wandering “around lost in the American Funhouse.” His identity is distorted as if reflected by funhouse mirrors: “The walls are angled / mirrors multiplying us many times over. . . . I have forgotten part / of myself, my ears lie curled like lettuce leaves, / my hands grow right out of my shoulders, / no wrists or arms or elbows in between” (5). The distortions and impending changes about to overcome the speaker are met with droll resistance in the next poem, “If Your Birthday Is Today,” where the narrator advises:

This is no time for a change, keep  
 wearing those same dirty socks.  
 If opportunity knocks, say  
 you gave at the office. (6)

However, in the poem “I Share” the narrator is certain that this same old routine is stifling, static. Institutional rituals and academic life, for instance, are deadening to the spirit where convocations, weddings, and keynote addresses are equated with graveyards and undertakers. By this point in *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, not only does the speaker begin to accept the inevitability of change, he is also intent on trying to remember his past, even if it does come to him through nonsensical dreaming, wanderings, and fanciful and improbable imagery. Like most texts using magical realism, these distortions, deformed images, and bizarre perceptions are accepted by the speaker without question and integrated into the transformative process.

The poem “Certain Dreams” is a good example. The speaker begins using more and more references to specific (Appalachian) place names and to the natural world while still experiencing an unreal and illogical reality. He begins to speak in his native tongue. About this living, organic dream, he says: “It is as if / you were troutfishing back on Little Snowbird / on a fine June morning, knee-deep at the lower end / of a pool, and looked up and there—with a hide like elm bark— / lay an alligator sunning on a rock” (8). The dream is so haunting it wakes the speaker from sleep, moves him to a difference place, and this movement causes reflection. In poems such as “Living With Children,” “Fish Story,” and “A House of Readers,” Miller contemplates how personal identity is tied to family, actually naming his real children in the poems. In “Skydivers” he returns to a dreaming reverie to illustrate the dizzying transformations inherent in any family:

When we are quiet in our separate rooms at night,

I think we are all skydivers falling through our  
separate spaces. . . .

It is pleasant and so still but we are falling  
farther and farther apart through private corridors  
of air. The earth grows under us, and begins  
to be patches of ground the size of our shadows. (15)

The tension in this poem is whether the speaker and his family will deploy their parachutes, and will they arrive safely to earth or crash headlong into the ground? If family is merely a tenuous connection to reality and to identity, then what? The speaker realizes he needs to keep searching. Near the end of this first section, he says: “I mark my place. / I listen like a farmer in the rows” (14).

In the second section of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, called “You Must Be Born Again,” the speaker, referring to himself in previous poems as “I,” now becomes “he.” “He” is given a moniker, Brier, but his identity is still not fully formed or clarified. In fact, in the first poem called “Brier Riddle” he is born of magical, fairy tale circumstances and must journey on a hero’s mythical quest, a displaced wanderer in a crowd. Now awake in a “country of blind fingers,” the speaker is no longer a vagarious individual, but part of a great rush and throng, his true identity hidden among the masses. This new persona, a reborn speaker, must push against a tide of commercialization, “must swim / against a current or else panic, crowd, suffocate and die,” must search for his identity in noisy, industrial settings. “The city’s rush and roar / even poured through his dreams, boiling up like a waterfall,” the narrator tells us in “Turn Your Radio On” (21). He acknowledges his displacement “in the city that never slept.” In “Down Home” the speaker makes confession: “He had to admit it: he / didn’t live here any longer. He was / settled in a suburb, north of himself” (28).

His journey continues through an illogical reality, but the improbable images that marked the first section of poems are replaced in this middle section with more concrete emblems associated with the natural world. His body remembers that the hard labor of a mountain task like chopping wood could once stop the “[s]moke-filled meetings floating / through [his] veins” (23). In “His Hands,” “He walked in woods. / Fish hung in his veins, shadows fanning. / Birds circled his farthest green thoughts” (24). Other poems like “Winter Days” and “Going to Sleep By A Troutstream” are lyrical remembrances of a mountain past where “the river turned, / sure of where it was going, in no hurry” (25).

The Brier’s quest for identity continues in “Brier Visions” where mountain and commercial images continue to be juxtaposed. His mind, for instance, is a “plowpoint,” or “sunlight” among blooming redbud trees, or a black crow flying, but flying “across / stripmined land” where consumers throw away their gum wrappers, cigarette packs, cars, and tires and “the people / rode the receding suck of sung commercials, / floated like rafted logs toward the mainstream” (26). In the poem “Every Leaf A Mirror” the Brier looks at tree leaves and sees nothing but his own face reflected “among smokestacks, billboards, / shopping centers, mills and vacation cottages” (36). Even memories of his mother cannot help the Brier locate himself, for a darkness surrounds her, as in the poem “He Remembers His Mother”: “His mother in her black dress on Sunday morning / became a crow’s call in his ear, her hand / a crow’s foot clutching a black Bible” (31). And these dreary images are associated with how organized religion can be a negative cultural force in shaping personal identity. In this passage, Miller returns to the ship imagery that began this collection of poems:

Under the leafy tangle of his senses  
 death and religion always gliding, gliding,  
 snakes in a dark green swale of creeping kudzu.

Ridgetops and hollows rose and fell around them.  
 High overhead the churchhouse creaked,  
 an old ship's rigging. They sailed in a storm  
 of hymns, slammed to the trough, rolled to the crest  
 of sermons, the cemetery trailing always  
 in their wake, acres of heaving ringing buoys. (31)

The searching for the self is relentless in this middle section of Miller's collection as the Brier attempts to answer the central question of this book: Who Am I? At once confused or forlorn or disappointed, the Brier often finds something useful toward building his identity in each succeeding poem. For instance, the Brier is angry at his marginalization and displacement by society in the poem "Set Apart." The poet says: "Always now he carried a pearl-handled grudge, / snub-nosed, heavy, holstered close to his heart" (34). Yet, in the next poem, "On the Wings of a Dove," the Brier pulls his car onto a deserted river road to nurse his troubles which "sat / right under his breastbone, black / as a treeful of starlings, all talking at once." He smokes and drinks and listens "to bluegrass / music on the radio, watching the river, mountains and sky / run together in the coming dark." It is this mountain scene, these mountain habits, this mountain music that restores him: "The starlings under his breastbone stopped talking. / Then white doves rose out of his ribcage / and flew out over the river toward the island" (35).

With these more positive images the Brier begins his transformation from being defined by others, by the mainstream culture, to becoming his own person. In the last poem of this section, "Long View," he is moving again—this time driving toward something, toward a name for himself, toward a discovery, on his way toward a complete transformation. While the telephone poles recede quickly in the rearview mirror, the Kentucky hills follow him "like a herd of graceful beasts / still undiscovered and unnamed / they lived so deep inside the continent" (40).

Part Three of *The Mountains Have Come Closer* culminates in Miller's famous poetic street homily "Brier Sermon—'You Must Be Born Again,'" but before that poem, Miller gives us eight more poems, mostly about the collective, consumer-driven culture in which the Brier finds himself as he has traveled into the mountains. The Brier has worked hard to find his own image in the midsection of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*. Now he must deal with the images that society has placed on him. Before the "Brier Sermon" there are still unexplained and bizarre realities, like in the poem "Shapes" where the Brier's "life caught fire / and he studied shapes in the flame of his own spirit" (45). And he is still lonely, as in the poem "Abandoned" where "his life became the house / seen once in a coal camp in Tennessee: / the second story blown off in a storm / so stairs led up into the air / and stopped" (46).

And the long poem, "How America Came to the Mountains," is perhaps a near perfect example of Miller's employment of magical realism. It subverts our poetic expectations and explores how Appalachian reality and identity resist capture by the traditional logic of the waking mind's reason. "How America Came to the Mountains" reiterates the nightmarish, mesmerizing uncertainty of the self, of identity, and of what we do to one another in organized societies. In this poem, mainstream America is a great roaring, stinking storm that invades the mountains:

. . . At first, the Brier remembers,  
it sounded like a train whistle far off in the night.  
They felt it shake the ground as it came roaring.  
Then it was big trucks roaring down an interstate,  
a singing like a circle saw in oak,  
a roil of every kind of noise, factory  
whistles, cows bellowing, a caravan  
of camper trucks bearing down  
blowing their horns and playing loud tapedecks.

He recollects it followed creeks and roadbeds  
and when it hit, it blew the tops off houses,  
shook people out of bed, exposing them  
to a sudden black sky wide as eight lanes of asphalt,  
and dropped a hail of beer cans, buckets  
and bottles clattering on their sleepy heads.  
Children were sucked up and never seen again. (47)

The roaring storm of crass consumerism is a “sky full of trucks / and flying radios, bicycles and tv sets, whirling / log chains, red wagons, new shoes and tangerines” and “ditches / full of spray cans and junk cars, canned / biscuit containers, tinfoil pie plates” (47-48). These material things overwhelm the Brier, but it is the appropriation and misuse of Appalachian images by mainstream culture that is most insidious. The mountain craftsman, the midwife, the ballad singer are turned into something laughable in the harsh light of this postmodern landscape in which the Brier finds himself. In “The Brier Reviewing Novels” he contemplates his own image and the image of his ancestors through the gaze of others:

he saw himself jerked along—moonshiner, feudist,  
speaking Elizabethan English—through plots  
that, like old newsreels hurrying people here  
and there, made clowns of kings and dignitaries. (51)

At this point in Miller’s collection, readers understand that the Brier’s often painful search for the self has been rewarded. He is no hick figure stuck in the past or trapped in his own bizarre reality. As Don Johnson notes in his critical discussion of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, the Brier is a modern man, an “enlightened Appalachian who laments what is happening to the world that nurtured him” (36).

By the time we get to “Brier Sermon,” the long poem which ends the collection, the narrator’s metamorphosis is complete. No longer is magical realism needed to convey the self as unstable, mysterious, or uncertain. The Brier is fully formed and speaking in his own voice. The fanciful, the magical, the unexplained, the bizarre have been replaced with vernacular speech, familiar vocal rhythms, and metaphors that employ mountain imagery.

Miller’s Brier preaches his sermon on a Saturday morning, which reminds us of the first poem in the collection called “Saturday Morning” and emphasizes the monumental changes in poetic voice and imagery that have led to the formation of Brier. His text, “You Must Be Born Again,” is the perfect ending to this book of poems about evolution and transfiguration. The Brier’s message is mature, straightforward, uncloaked: