Sanctifying the Profane: Jim Wayne Miller's "Dialogue with a Dead Man"
by Edwina Pendarvis

There where the shattered sky floated in cattle tracks full
of water, I trailed you through pieces of a dream . . . .
<div align="right">Jim Wayne Miller</div>

Philosopher Susanne Langer says, "The poet's business is to create . . . the semblance of events lived and felt, and to organize them . . . so they constitute a piece of virtual life. . . . The piece may be great or small" (212). Jim Wayne Miller's "Dialogue with a Dead Man" collection[1] is made up of thirty-three poems that create a "piece of virtual life" in which the narrator comes to terms with the death of his grandfather[2] and with the thought of his own death and separation from the world he loves. The events described by the poems take place on a farm that once belonged to the grandfather and on which the narrator spent some of his childhood. And although they draw on nature for most of their imagery, unlike much "nature" poetry, these poems don't draw on nature for imagery by projecting human feelings directly onto rocks and trees in what is often referred to as a "pathetic fallacy." Miller's is a more humble poetry, suggesting that nature moves in and occupies *us*. Since nature is an important part of who we are, the thought of separation from nature is hard to bear. In these poems, nature, as represented by a particular place is, in effect—heaven. Miller said as much in his well-known article, "Appalachia: At Home in This World":

> Appalachian literature is . . . decidedly worldly, secular, and profane in its outlook . . . . When people in this [frontier] tradition think of heaven, not with imagery that has come down from impoverished desert nomads—pearly gates, streets of gold—but with imagery derived from their own experience, they imagine a heaven very much like the place they know and are content with. (23)

In this same article, Miller goes on to discuss the connection between James Still's characters and the natural world, but some of his description could apply to his own poems as well:

> Still's people are rooted in this world. No less than plants and animals, they are a part of the landscape, their lives shaped by natural forces, conditions, and cycles. . . . Still's people do not wish to pass permanently beyond the boundaries of their familiar, known place. (26)

In keeping with his concept of this relationship, Miller imagines his dead grandfather as longing for the farm, rather than as peacefully roaming an angel-populated paradise.

In the opening poem, the narrator walks alone, lost in melancholy thought, "following the trails / you [the grandfather] made . . . "(22). The first three poems all suggest that he's haunted by the feeling that his grandfather is there, but just out of reach. The world looks dismal to him, and he describes it as such:

> the fieldstone wall is cold under my hand (22)
> . . . .
> smoke hangs over
> the house the way smoke hangs before bad weather (23)
> . . . .
> In underwater windrows, drifted streaks
> of last year's fallen leaves (24)

Not until the fourth poem, "Meeting," does his grandfather's ghost make itself manifest, still without speaking. He only signals his presence—appearing as the narrator's shadow, raising his hoe while the narrator's hoe stays on the ground. In "Dog's Eye," the poem following "Meeting," the narrator's dog seems to sense the presence of the grandfather:

> . . . He growls, stiffens, and shies
> away. My face reflected in his eyes
> hangs smoky on a papered wall at home,
> a dead man's picture in its oval frame. (26)

And the narrator asks, "Why have you followed me through this unbroken / round of days and nights and never spoken?" (26). Finally, in the next poem, "Listening," the grandfather speaks, answering the question with a reproach: "I couldn't wedge a word into your grieving, / not as long as you whispered rhymes down dark / holes in the earth . . . / not / till you left off talking to your face in black / stumpwater . . . / For I'm not in the ground, nor the sky either" (27).

This exchange seems to be Miller's caution to himself against projecting his feelings onto nature because doing so blinds him to everything but himself. It's a warning against self-absorption, including the projections of the pathetic fallacy.

The term "pathetic fallacy" was coined by the famous nineteenth-century art and literary critic, John Ruskin, who used it to describe the human tendency to attribute human feelings and motives to other animals, to plants, and to inanimate objects. Ruskin described three kinds of pathetic fallacy in literature and art: first, "willful fancy," which involves no real expectation that the attribution will be believed; second, "unwilled fallacy" caused by an excited state of feelings, making the affected person, for the time, more or less irrational in his or her view of nature; and third, an artistic representation of that misattribution of human qualities to nonhuman entities that is arguably the result of dramatic events stirring uncontrollable emotion. The first kind of pathetic fallacy is often just an illustrative device, as in the common phrase "Nature abhors a vacuum." The second kind is a misperception, which, according to Ruskin, sees a sympathetic response in natural phenomena.

Ruskin's analysis of this common artistic metaphor has been a subject of controversy since he first put it forth, and many writers and critics have taken issue with his argument. Though there are many angles of attack against his argument, the

one that is most compelling to me is based on the view, common from ancient to contemporary times, that in a sense, humans necessarily construe the world—which may exist apart from our perceptions, but is not directly knowable to us—in human terms. In this view, *all* our perception of the world outside ourselves is a projection of our own qualities. Such a view would consider the pathetic fallacy singular only in the *personification* of clouds, stars, daffodils, and plows as sympathizing in our individual joys and sorrows.

But according to Ruskin, pathetic fallacy is an idiosyncratic overindulgence of personal feelings. It has an element of excessive self-regard, imagining a sympathetic response from nature by having birds singing soulfully or cheerily, in accord with the narrator's circumstances. Many readers respond to such metaphors as sentimental, bespeaking more emotion than the artistic context warrants. The best poets, Ruskin says, keep straight about what robins might and might not be feeling.

However, he also acknowledges that there are always events that *ought* to throw a person off balance; and in such cases, he says, the language of the highest emotion or inspiration becomes broken, obscure, and wild in metaphor. Good poets, recognizing this, may use metaphors that attribute human feelings to nature in artful imitation of the effects of overwhelming emotion on a character or narrator.

While I have no reason to believe that Miller subscribed to Ruskin's aesthetic argument, it seems to me that his "Dialogue with a Dead Man" exemplifies the principles underlying it. In most of the poems, even though the narrator is depressed, he likens his feelings to things in nature, rather than likening nature's feelings to his, only in what appear to be object lessons for the reader. In addition to pointing out the danger inherent in assigning our own emotions to nature, Miller uses the pathetic fallacy with great artistry in the closing poem, portraying the narrator's transport at finally throwing off his numbing grief.

In most of the poems, Miller does homage to nature by using it as an overt vehicle rather than imbuing it with his feelings. In "Waking" (43) the narrator talks about a realization arriving "like the knock of huge / brindled moths bumping at the screen." In "Sleepless" (45) Miller says that mental "[p]ictures swim across the mind / like watersnakes through the ring of lantern light." This use of imagery imposes nature on us, rather than the other way around. It comes out of close acquaintance with the natural world, a world Miller portrays the grandfather as missing. In "Shadow-Man" the dead man wishes he could smell the "green sawdust and crushed pennyrile" and "run [his] hand along [his] horse's flank" (33).

This love of the world is sanctioned in the poems, and the vanity of humans in projecting themselves onto the natural world so that they miss what it has to tell us is one of the themes of the collection. The dead grandfather teaches the narrator how to deal with his sadness. In "Vine" (28) the dead man tells the grandson "your life [is] the crack of light I grow toward,/ a vine with sick white leaves / unfolding in the cellar of your grief. / I'd just as lief / you left off making pictures of your grief / early and late / and hanging them between me and the light." This message, similar to his earlier one, chides the narrator for his narcissism. He implies that projection of this sort is morbid and life-defeating. In "Last Words" (39), Miller has the grandfather say, "—Well, neither of us will ever be at rest / until our separate voices speak as one," warning the narrator that he's consigning himself to loneliness if he doesn't stop shutting out the world, including his grandfather. The only way the narrator can overcome his grief over the loss of his grandfather is to stop projecting that grief onto everything around him and to recognize anew the beauty of the world his grandfather loved. He has to recognize that, in an important sense, the entity that was his grandfa-

ther is not under the ground, as the dead are portrayed in "In a Dark Place," standing like "horses in their sunless stalls" (36), but is part of him. The only way Miller can "bring his grandfather back to life" to enjoy the world again is through Miller's being in the world (and not blocking it out by projecting his grief onto it).

In "The Crossing" (40), the narrator finally accepts the grandfather's death, dreaming that he is "going / where two creeks flow together in a flat." He awakens "with the taste of copper on [his] tongue." I'm not sure what association Miller intended readers to have with that taste of copper. My daughter, who trains horses, tells me that copper is used sometimes in horses' bits to encourage acceptance of the bit. I really like that association because the poem is about acceptance of something unpleasant; but I don't know if that's what Miller had in mind. She also mentioned that when you bite your tongue, you might taste copper. That association works, too, with the idea of having to come to terms with something difficult—mortality in this case. At any rate, in this poem, the narrator becomes reconciled to the realization that he must acknowledge that the world has its own presence and destiny.

In these poems, the narrator sanctifies the profane, if beloved, world, by recognizing its awesome holiness—its set-apartness. And, implicit, too, is recognizing its residence inside him as well. The last poem, "On Native Ground" (56), portrays a kind of rapture accompanying this recognition of the world and the narrator's ability to re-enter it. In this poem, Miller employs the pathetic fallacy in the manner that Ruskin associates with great poetry. The personifying metaphors communicate the narrator's ebullient, almost ecstatic, release from grief:

> A waterbead quivers on my hand:
> There is a way to enter. Underfoot
> a mole's nightwork gives way—O doors
> are everywhere: the spring at the mountain's
> foot holds the running taste of childhood,
> the barking fox blurts the mountain's riddle.
> Transparent minnows hanging in green water:
> Windows onto sunken summer days.
>
> I enter through a fish's eye to one
> vast room glowing in cold light.
> Out of an oilspill on a rainslick road
> campfires of a hundred hunts are blazing.
> A dog's eye caught in headlights on a turn:
> rose windows warm in his cathedral skull.
> I travel everywhere on native ground. (56-57)

Appalachian poetry is famously concerned with nature and rural locales. By means of references to these rural locales, which typically have a great deal of personal meaning for the poet, Appalachian literature recreates an intimate sense of place. Writing about "sense of place," author and critic Bob Snyder says, "If Appalachians don't have a monopoly on this kind of thing, they certainly do come close to retiring the trophy" (347)—among poets in the United States anyway. He recognizes the "naturalness" or apparent artlessness of Appalachian poetry as "an easy flow of impulse" resulting from the culture's history with (wild) nature" (346). The artlessness is only apparent. In "Dialogue with a Dead Man," Miller has used nature metaphors to create a virtual piece of life, a small piece, but one that sets a problem common to most of us—the pain of separation from a beloved person and place—and it offers a partial solution:

sanctifying the profane place as distinct from our cares, rather than as utilitarian, merely a mirror for them. He suggests that our eyes should be—like the eye of the dog caught in the headlight in the last poem in this collection—rose windows casting the holy light of the world into our skull, instead of—like the dog's eye in the early poem in this collection—the eye that gives back only a reflection of our own small selves.

Endnotes

1. *Dialogue with a Dead Man* was published by the University of Georgia Press in 1974 and then again by Green River Press in 1978. Within the Green River publication are three sections. "Dialogue with a Dead Man" is the second section; the first section is entitled "Copperhead Cane" (first published in 1964 by Robert Moore Allen); and the third section is "Family Reunion," not previously published. This article refers only to the poems in the second section, not to the entire book (hence the use of quotes around the title, rather than italicizing it).

2. Though the poems do not say it, the old man is Miller's grandfather, according to John Lang, a friend of Miller's and a scholar of his work.

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