



PROJECT MUSE®

Six Poets from the Mountain South by John Lang (review)

Jim Clark

Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 66, Number 1, Winter 2013, pp. 161-163 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2013.0042>

Mississippi
Quarterly

The Journal
Of Southern Culture

Editors: Wyatt, Kirby,
Pugh, Lee Smith, Capote,
Brewer, Gillian Smith

Vol. 66, No. 1 Winter 2013

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/740916/summary>

BOOK REVIEWS

Six Poets from the Mountain South. John Lang. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. 224 pp. \$24.95 paper.

IT IS FITTING THAT JOHN LANG USES A QUOTATION FROM THE LATE JIM Wayne Miller to establish the thesis of his study *Six Poets from the Mountain South*. As Lang is at pains to point out in the beginning of his chapter on Miller, utilizing quotations from Loyal Jones, Fred Chappell, and Robert Morgan, “Miller is widely considered to be the progenitor of the ongoing renaissance in Appalachian literature” (9). If Miller is the progenitor of the Appalachian literature renaissance, then Lang has long been, and continues to be, its best critical popularizer, serving for many years as the coordinator of the Emory & Henry Literary Festival, focusing each year on a major literary figure with ties to Appalachia, and editing the handsome and indispensable *Iron Mountain Review*, which publishes the festival’s proceedings. In addition, Lang has published *Understanding Fred Chappell* (U of South Carolina Press, 2000) and *Appalachia and Beyond: Conversations with Writers from the Mountain South* (U of Tennessee Press, 2006). Now, *Six Poets from the Mountain South* provides a much needed update to Rita Sims Quillen’s seminal but brief *Looking for Native Ground: Contemporary Appalachian Poetry* (Appalachian Consortium Press, 1989), which focuses on the earlier careers of four of Lang’s six poets.

Lang employs the quotation from Miller’s essay “Appalachian Literature at Home in this World” to explore the oppositional impulse of much Appalachian poetry to “the excessive otherworldliness and the harsh judgmentalism of much mountain religion”(1). Miller states:

While the varieties of Protestantism found in the Appalachian region often differ sharply with regard to certain theological points, denominations share a decidedly otherworldly outlook. . . . Yet Appalachian literature is—and always has been—as decidedly worldly, secular, and profane in its outlook as the traditional religion appears to be spiritual and otherworldly. (1)

While obviously finding Miller’s statement intriguing and provocative, Lang finds that his “assessment does not do justice to the pervasive role that religious and spiritual concerns play in the work of many of the region’s finest writers.” Nevertheless, the “crucial tension” (1) between traditional mountain religion and the majority of the region’s major

writers is what Lang intends to explore by focusing on these six influential poets: Miller himself, Fred Chappell, Robert Morgan, Jeff Daniel Marion, Kathryn Stripling Byer, and Charles Wright. At first glance, this might seem to be an excessively narrow, limited focus for a major study of contemporary Appalachian poetry. However, in Lang's hands, this lens turns out to be a sufficiently wide-angled one. Lang's concern, ultimately, is the perennial issue of immanence vs. transcendence, and since all these poets skew pretty decisively, in one way or another, toward immanence—the spiritual inhering and manifested in the material—there is plenty of room for discussion of the material world, or, in the case of these particular poets, Nature.

Lang's introduction is a marvel of economy and elegance. He first sketches the broad outlines of traditional mountain religion, relying primarily on Deborah Vansau McCauley's *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* and Loyal Jones's *Faith and Meaning in the Upland South*. Having established mountain religion as predominantly "otherworldly"—"a viewpoint that tends to denigrate the physical world," as Lang contends (2)—he then deploys a finely wrought critique of Christianity's historical tendency of being "insufficiently incarnational" (3), utilizing an array of ecologically oriented critics and theologians such as Lynn White, Jr., Wendell Berry, Larry L. Rasmussen, and Lawrence Buell. With asides to Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Vanderbilt Agrarians along the way, Lang concludes that these six poets, in their varied efforts to reconcile the dualism of body and soul, matter and spirit, attempt "to revivify the natural world," and that Appalachian poetry generally speaking "rooted in both American Romanticism and agrarianism achieves a new level of interest and 'relevance'" (6).

Lang then proceeds to devote a chapter apiece to each of his six poets, briefly sketching their biographies, especially with respect to their religious upbringing and orientation, and then working through their respective publications chronologically, focusing especially on poems that highlight the issues of dualism, immanence, transcendence, spirit, matter, body, and soul. It should be acknowledged here that Lang is a past master of close reading and practical criticism. What Robert Morgan says of his former professor Fred Chappell is equally true of Lang: "I remember thinking that this man knew exactly how these poems were made. I had never encountered that kind of practical critical intelligence before" (74).

Of course, poets as varied and individualistic as these resist easy classification. As Lang points out in various contexts, some of them fit well into his thesis and some less well. For this reason, it is wise for Lang to bookend his six poets with the two who are the most obvious exceptions: Jim Wayne Miller, from whom he derives his thesis, and Charles Wright, who seems destined to remain the eternal outlier in any discussion of Appalachian poetry. Of Miller, Lang observes in his introduction: "Miller alone among these poets appears to lack a strong religious consciousness in his poetry, though he certainly makes significant use of religious subject matter and adapts religious metaphors for his own purposes" (7). He elucidates this point later in the chapter on Miller: "Yet unlike the other poets treated in this book, Miller does not appear to find within nature the presence of spiritual realities that transcend the physical world while also being immanent in it" (27). Similarly, "Charles Wright is something of an exception here, for the diction of his poems is steeped in dualistic terminology" (6). Later, in the chapter on Wright, Lang observes that

among the six poets treated in this book, Wright is the one who seems to have the greatest difficulty "coming out from under Calvinism," in Robert Morgan's phrase. Wright is more concerned about sin and guilt than the other five authors, and he is also the poet most tormented by the loss of transcendence. (192-93)

It is especially gratifying to see poets like Kathryn Stripling Byer and Jeff Daniel Marion, who typically receive less critical attention than the others here, given full attention and accorded rightful prominence. And one must appreciate the effort Lang has made to bring Charles Wright into the fold of Appalachian poets and poetry; indeed, his discussion of Wright is one of the most lucid and helpful this reviewer has encountered. This is an important book, thoughtfully composed and carefully crafted. It should certainly be read by anyone interested in contemporary Appalachian literature and American nature writing, but also by anyone interested in religion, theology, and ecocriticism.

Barton College

Jim Clark