# *Shaking Up the Insides of the Word* (review)

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dropped on the streets each day by the "engines" of their transportation. How to dispose of so malodorous a mountain? And in earlier times, how to dissuade citizens from throwing the contents of their chamber pots out their windows and into the streets? At one time the city fathers of Cincinnati struggled with what to do about hogs running free in the streets. But nobody writes as though horse droppings or slopjars or unrestrained brood sows are major problems for big cities today. Other messy things, perhaps, but not those.

So how about bringing us up to date in your mind, doing a little factual research before you write about us? Don't rely on stereotypes from fifty to seventy-five or a hundred years ago if you want to portray us honestly in fiction with anything like a contemporary setting. It might require a little more work to create credible characters and places, but it might be worth it. Just try, if you will, to keep in mind that we are people, living as you are in the here and now, not a century ago (when we were also portrayed falsely), and we certainly would appreciate it if you could see your way clear to writing about us as truly as you can in your works of art.

Gurney Norman is right on target in commenting on *The Kentucky Cycle* when he asks whether this kind of stuff is not "cultural strip mining." And so is Jim Wayne Miller when he compares our reactions to "newspaper corrections which never catch up with the original report."

I didn't expect to write this much when I began, yet now that I'm into it, I feel like writing more. But I won't. Except to repeat this plea to those who could create artistic works in which mountain life and mountain people play some part:

Write about us all you want to. But give us a break, will you?
Do your homework first.
Is that too much to ask?

—Frank C. Strunk

Rudy Thomas. *Shaking Up the Insides of the Word.* Mellen Poetry Press, Box 450, Lewiston, N.Y., 14092. 52 pages.

The title of Rudy Thomas's book of poetry is derived from his poem "The Dreamer and the Poet." It is a fit title for the collection since Thomas seems to adore all words; he lovingly delivers each word.

This love for the written word shows itself in Thomas's imagery and in the subtlety of the rhythm and rhyme in the work. For example in the short poem "Man at the Blast Furnace Wheeling Steel #7" the repetition of "r" and "ah"

sounds throughout the poem lends itself to a softly rhythmic experience of language:

. . . . .
he pours molten ore
into the slag

at night he shakes
& hears the roar
he heard before at Pearl
. . . . .
the molten ore he pours
leaps up like bombs bursting

There is an essentially masculine principle in Thomas's poetry, not the least of which exhibits itself in his imagery. In "Ginseng Man," the hunter "finds an eight prong,/the root shaped like a man." Not all of the images are this overtly phallic and symbolic, but most of the characters about whom Thomas writes are the men with whom he has worked and played; obviously then the images will be similarly geared to the male psyche. There are old men whittling on the courthouse steps, hunters and their hunting dogs, auto-body mechanics, and various others.

Despite the imagery and the characters, there is yet a strong feminine principle running through Thomas's work as well—the original one: nature and creativity, for centuries the oldest and most recognized feminine principle. In myths from societies old and young the poet creates via the feminine forces of the universe. Nature is, and always has been, Mother Earth. For Thomas the word is "alluring as a naked woman," and "like a woman, bathing."

Thomas's "poet centers/his focus like a bird of night/upon the prey." The poet, the hunter, the male—each a predator in some way of the word, the bird, the female. Thomas seems unaware of the strength of the semiotics in his work, a feminine principle in that it is pre-order and pre-symbolic, a primal link with the mother.

Thomas's poetry differs from the works of Robert Bly and from Thomas's mentor, Jim Wayne Miller—both of whom are also writers of Appalachian poetry—in that Thomas wants to "block the moonlight from [his] eyes," i.e., to block the feminine, something neither Bly nor Miller would dream of doing. They know too well its value. This by no means makes Thomas a sexist poet; it simply makes him a poet who is more comfortable with those things that are traditionally masculine.

If there is a real weakness in Thomas's poetry, he describes it better than I

could in his poem "A Closer Look." Three females in his life type their names on the paper in his typewriter, below which he adds, "they did not know/that I would react by making them look/like a poem." That's the thing, you see, looking like a poem and sounding like and being a poem are quite different things.

Thomas's true strength comes from those things he loves: words and mountains. His love for the land on which he lives and thrives is as evident as his love for poetry. As I mentioned above, Thomas is highly influenced by the poetry of Jim Wayne Miller, and he dedicates one of the poems in this volume to Miller. The poem houses one of the best images in the volume:

> When I was too close
> to my heritage
> to recognize it
>
> & use the material of generations
> that I carried around with me
> like circles within a tree,
>
> you cut the tree
> & raked my fingers across the stump.

Now that's an image! There are other such morsels in Thomas's book which are well worth sampling. Thomas is at his best when he writes about the complexities of the simple. Miller once wrote about the "knowledge you fondle like loose skin on a dog's neck." The simile and its meaning are inextricably and inexpressibly linked by something greater than the words which are used. When Thomas, too, gets hold of these connections, he gets hold of the reader, and as he says in "Intimate," "There is a quickening,/a thrill that runs through the insides/like water down a mountain slope."

—B. Ann Qualls

William E. Ellis. *River Bends and Meanders.* Burnsville, North Carolina: Celo Valley Books, 1992. 150 pages. $11.95.

With the intention of writing a history of the Kentucky River basin, Ellis's research involved interviewing over 150 people who lived and/or worked on the river. The history book will have to wait. What has developed from his