Vein of Words (review)

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Miller, Jim Wayne. *Vein of Words.* Big Timber, Montana: Seven Buffaloes Press, 1985.

Readers of *Appalachian Heritage* are likely to be familiar with the work of Jim Wayne Miller. As teacher (Miller is Professor of German at Western Kentucky University), poet, and scholar he has distinguished himself and contributed significantly to Appalachian region studies. *Vein of Words* is an intelligent and effective exploration of the creative process through a series of poems. The implicit subject (and central metaphor) of the collection is the poet as *Scop,* the shaper, through whom life seeps downward by "underground routes .../seeking some place to come to rest and know/a shape—a quiet pool" ("Shapes").

The thirty-seven pieces (narratives, dramatic monologues, lyrics) are arranged into three sections. The poems in "Learning To Talk" are about just that—*learning to talk,* in a poetic sense at least. They are a reminder that humans learn to talk by perceiving and arranging patterns from arbitrary sounds. Poets learn to talk by perceiving and arranging poems ("Flirtation") from arbitrary images: "the blue vein/on the back of her right hand. Toadstools. Thighs./Diapers and soapsuds tumbling in her eyes." However, "Learning To Talk" is also about learning to see, in the sense Wordsworth must have had in mind when he phrased it as, "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in moments of tranquility." Seeing, in "East Toward Cumberland, Early," is perceiving that the flash of an image across the mind's eye might, like the inky mass of a barn lit up by a lightning bolt, stand in the morning "dark ... dripping" and "Tin-topped."

The selections in "Poetry Workshop" are good-natured and insightful. The teacher and poet at play addresses typical workshop questions: What is poetry? How does a poet get his ideas? In "Comments To Be Returned With a Sheaf of Papers," he suggests that the function of the poet is not to produce a postcard image of nature, but to see that nature is composed, like a printed image, of countless microdots from which countless patterns can be perceived and expressed. In "Somebody Asked, 'How Do You Get Your Ideas for Poems?'" Miller says that "The hardest part is finding/something to do with your hands," then plunges his fingers into "Warm soapy water," where "they dive/and dive again like naked boys/into a swimming hole."

The poems grouped in "Living With Words" are penetrations into the relationship between the poet, experience, and language shaped into poetic form. In "Sitting in a Sunny Spot, He Studies the Grain of Weathered Wood," Miller suggests that the poet can take the world of experience ("the flotsam/of past life") and "show it off somehow in a frame of words/displaying it in just the right light, as if/it were a blue-green Mason jar." In turn, the world of experience ("common, ordinary things, grown useless") can draw "us out of our narrow selves, the cage of our cramped present."

This is an impressive gathering of poems. Admirers of Miller's earlier collections *(Copperhead Cane, The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same, Dialogue With A Dead Man, The Mountains Have Come Closer)* will be pleased to see the continuing growth of a fine poet. Teachers, poets, scholars—people who live with words—will be particularly interested in his metaphorical discussion of the poetic process and of the shaper, the poet, whose life is, "traced like a fossil fern/in a vein of words/black as a seam of coal."

James Gage