

2016

# The Poetry Of Wilmer Mills

Rachael Acheson

*University of South Carolina*

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THE POETRY OF WILMER MILLS

by

Rachael Acheson

Bachelor of Arts  
Hillsdale College, 2012

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2016

Accepted by:

Patrick Scott, Director of Thesis

Anthony Jarrells, Reader

Paul Allen Miller, Vice Provost and Interim Dean of Graduate Studies

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my mother, Kathy Sue Acheson, who never had the opportunity to attend college, but who devoted over fifteen years of her life to my education in the hope that I would. She was diagnosed with stage VI cancer the same year Mr. Mills died from it, but she continues to this day to prove a well of fathomless inspiration, support, and love. This paper, and the degree it seeks to culminate, would not exist without her.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank John N. Somerville, Jr. of Hillsdale College for introducing me to Wilmer Mills through his Visiting Writers Program, and Kathryn Oliver Mills for her correspondence. I would also like to thank Tara Powell of USC, under whose direction I began this thesis, Patrick Scott, under whose direction I completed it, as well as Anthony Jarrells, Brian Simmons, Laura Thorp, and Sara Holmes for all of their help.

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to contextualize the work of Wilmer Mills, a late, minor Southeastern American poet, within the complex and frequently misread tradition of New Formalism, as this manifested in the United States shortly after World War II. The analysis places Mills's work in conversation with the formalist philosophy of former U.S. Poet Laureate Richard Wilbur, and it suggests that both Mills's poetry and his reception amongst fellow academics who adhered to a more progressive philosophy demonstrates the continued relevance of this older, less-often discussed strain of formalism in American poetry. An appendix presents the first checklist of Mills's published writings since his initial major publication in 1998.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WILMER MILLS

Wilmer Mills's wife Kathryn wrote posthumously of him that her very first impression of the man, upon sighting him in the lobby of a conference, had been that of "a very young, very persistent, and slightly archaic Southern gentleman" (K. Mills, Afterword 123). He was indeed, as she would discover over the course of their all-too-short but luminous life together, more-or-less in character and upbringing exactly what an initial glance could have labeled him: a "very uptight and conservative Christian" (125), quite unlike herself, an academic and a "native of Berkeley" (124-25). Kathryn noted, "[a]nyone who met Wil knows that his religion was generally couched in the staunch, fundamental terms of his evangelical and agricultural background" (128). But, in conjunction with these traits, he was, apparently, in person and in his writing, imbued with "a real eagerness to learn about, if not always embrace, worlds other than his own" (125), which dual nature made him both "simple and complex" (128), so that Kathryn Mills describes the poet she fell in love with as, "so conservative that he sometimes went backwards to a point that joined the other extreme" (125). Indeed, his minimalist, anti-materialist, borderline-socialist philosophy, as well as his lifelong interest in agrarianism and the kinds of sustainable farming practices that Wendell Berry advocates, mark him as being progressive, almost prophetic, to the same extent that they underscore his traditionalism. This comfortably reconciled duality, which pervaded his entire personality and his career, then, places him in the unique position of representing, less a relic of rigid,



stereotypical attitudes from either extreme of the political spectrum, than a hopeful hint about how we as a culture might begin bridging this schism, if not in terms of compromising the principles or ideals, deeply held on either side, then at least in terms of appreciating unique individuals who earnestly and genuinely embody and speak to ideals from both sides.

Both as an artist and as a human being, Mills led a varied and interesting career. In addition to having his work published in numerous, acclaimed literary journals -- among them *The Hudson Review*, *The New Republic*, *The Southern Review*, *Poetry*, *The New Criterion*, *Shenandoah*, *Literary Imagination*, *Image*, and *Yale Review* -- he was included in two prominent anthologies, the Penguin/Longman *Contemporary American Poetry* (2004) and *The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets* (2009) (Martin). Before his early death from cancer in 2011, he had also published a stand-alone chapbook of poetry entitled *Right as Rain* (1999) and his own small volume of narrative poems entitled *Light for the Orphans* (2002), partial contents from which would re-appear in a larger, posthumous volume of *Selected Poems* (2013). Of almost equal significance, particularly to his students, colleagues, and lifelong friends at various poetry conferences, was his accompanying talent for folk music, which once, in a bizarre twist of fate, introduced him to British celebrity Stephen Fry (Vernon 6). On the recommendation of friends, Fry's producers contacted Mills about performing in a clip for a BBC documentary entitled *The Great American Oil Spill* (Ghidon666666). During the filming, Fry, a "militant atheist" (Vernon 7), and Mills, graduate of a theology master's program, became engrossed in a heated debate about religion, within the course of which they somehow uncovering one another's mutual admiration for "traditional versification" in

English literature, and then, not only parted friends, but later corresponded at some length (6). Like Fry, Mills's affinity for less-fashionable, antiquated forms was driven, not by a political agenda, but by pure personal enjoyment and delight in verse, which he describes as having an "explosive impact" and "hitting me as powerful writing should: like a truck" (W. Mills, "Farming Versus Poetry"). He writes that while "I have been associated with new formalism because I came along at a point when it was developing in the late 80s and early 90s. . . . I would rather think of myself as an old formalist. I'm writing with the same tools that Richard Wilber used all through the heyday of free verse, and he used the same tools that Robert Frost was using, and Frost used the same tools that Yeats and Keats were using. There's nothing new about formalism" (Vernon 7). It was primarily, then, a tradition of powerful poetic resonance with which he hoped to align himself, more than a particular method of achieving it, though both the consistency of his method and its promising, if short-lived, pattern of success for him can hardly be overlooked.

The nature of Mills's work clearly represents the continued, if not necessarily universally applauded, relevance of this older, less-often-discussed strain of New Formalism, which preceded the resurgence of Reagan/Bush-era neo-conservatism and, indeed, developed as a direct reaction against the often-termed elitist opacity which had characterized much twentieth century literature in the age of close reading. The more recent manifestations of the formalist movement have, of course, been widely criticized for their insistence that forms and/or conventions of metrical order are, on some level, either inherently natural or somehow an automatic blueprint towards linguistic merit -- notions which many of the stauncher advocates of freeverse hold to be archaic, imposed, and perhaps even indicative of a blatantly dishonest or politically oppressive agenda.

However, the modest, open-minded work and person of individualist poets like Wilmer Mills lend a certain amount of credence to the suggestion. Indeed, his documented lifelong affinity for, and natural facility with, form suggests that perhaps the aesthetic power of such forms lies, not so much in the universal merit of their application, but rather in their value to the revelatory process of a specific kind of individual: a person, whether poet or reader, whose temperament compels them to come into themselves, into a fuller sense of what we might call self-actualization, by means of seeking communion with a sense of order outside of themselves – that is, within externally-ordered systems and tangible patterns, like tradition, community, established methods or routines, and tenets of organized religion.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MODERN SOUTHERN WRITER

Wilmer Hastings Mills was born on October 1, 1969 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (Middleton, “Wilmer Mills”, 1), just miles away from family-owned land in “the Plains” near St. Francisville, Louisiana (K. Mills, Afterward 123), which would inhabit the soul of his poetry for the rest of his life. Wilmer states in an interview for the *Carolina Quarterly* on August 11, 2011 that this region of southern Louisiana was named “the Plains” because “it used to be like the Midwest . . . very flat, and it was all grasslands. There were actually buffalo there when the first settlers came” (Vernon 2). The family farm-land itself could be traced back multiple generations to the late eighteenth century, (Middleton, “Wilmer Mills”, 1), when Wilmer’s ancestor John Mills received a grant from the King of Spain to establish a port city called Bayou Sarah (Vernon 2). The land itself was apparently too acidic for most crops and has since been used primarily for cattle, though Wilmer’s father and grandfather had also discovered that pasture grass seed grew well on it and single-handedly introduced modern farming equipment into their area, growing seed and establishing a cleaning mill (2). The family farm itself, however, has by all accounts to this day retained an uncanny ability to transport one outside of a sense of time. Mills’s wife Kathryn describes the place as she saw it the first time Wilmer brought her to meet his family, describing, “the storybook heritage of a family,” as “like stepping into another world” (K. Mills, Afterword 123). She writes that Mills “took me to the family cemetery, where he told me he would be buried. He was related to people

everywhere we went . . . . His family's home was filled with antique furniture . . . . There was an alligator in their pond, and there was no air conditioning" (123-124). The relevant entry in *KnowLA: The Encyclopedia of Louisiana History* states that Wilmer's extended family had included other writers and artists, as well as farmers, and that figures such as Jim Bowie, Elemore Morgan Sr., and Elemore Morgan Jr. had numbered among its more distant members (Middleton, "Wilmer Mills", 1). In short, then, Wilmer had been born into a little world that in every respect perfectly encapsulated both his own ties to the past and the actual and metaphorical shape of his own future.

When Wilmer was only three years old, his parents, Wilmer and Betsy, felt a calling to join the mission field (K. Mills, Afterword 123). Sponsored by the Presbyterian Church, an organization called Land for the Landless, and another called World Vision International, Wilmer's parents took him, his brother, and his two sisters to Brazil where they subsequently served for eight years as "agricultural missionaries" (Vernon 8; Middleton, "Wilmer Mills", 1; K. Mills, Afterward 123). With the prompting of Zackery Veron, via a telephone interview, Mills had described in some detail what this mission trip involved, and, interestingly, he did so in a way which hints at the period's formative contribution towards the later, contentious valuing of community in conjunction with the material world, and the conservative/preservationist instincts, which pervade his poetry:

Half of the mission was helping with gardening and farming techniques, and the other half was spiritual and social, like building schools, churches. The bulk of our time there we were in the Amazon Basin on a tributary of the Amazon River. There was a large tract of land that had been purchased, and it was my parents [sic] responsibility to find poor Brazilians who had no land and wanted to be

colonists. . . . That was the good part of it, helping poor, disenfranchised Brazilians own their own land; the bad part of it was that all of this land was Amazon jungle that we bulldozed to give poor people their own farms; in the 1970s that was considered progress and a really good thing to do. Some of my early memories are of riding on a bulldozer and pushing over very large trees in the Amazon and then watching them burn in large rows so rice could be planted. (Vernon 8)

Complementing this more straight-forward, first-hand account, Ashley Ramsey points to these early experiences as being the basis for Mills's "affection for manual labor," through which he "developed an appreciation for hard work, as well as a slowing-down of time" (Ramsey 1). Later, his wife also remarks on his aforementioned "eagerness to learn about, if not always embrace, worlds other than his own" (K. Mills, Afterword 125). Not only, then, was young Wilmer's consciousness, his foundational and structural memories (in addition to his family legacy), deeply intertwined with both a sense of utilitarian obligation towards land as a viable resource, and a respect for land as a centripetal power around which communities and social progress could take shape, but his internal sense of these values was already fluid, complex, and open to experiential transformation or revision. This duality of instincts, a simultaneous predilection towards established structures -- what we might quantify as a kind of predictable solidness -- and also towards a transcendence of boxed-in thought patterns, established habits of thinking, is interesting, because it suggests, if only very quietly at first, that something in Mills's own nature, and not only in his work, aligned with principles espoused by formalism in general -- that is, a notion that one should be able to open oneself to encounters with

Edmund Burke's "sublime" through direct engagement with, rather than escape from, materially-imposed limitations. We might even go so far as to characterize this phenomenological, closed-but-open tendency as a kind of philosophically bilingual mindset – which is, of course, strangely fitting when we recall that Mills's childhood language, owed to both the missionary work itself and to what his wife terms his "Azorean father" (K. Mills, Afterword 125), was Portuguese (Middleton, "Wilmer Mills," 1).

Interestingly, this concept of a dualist or "bilingual" mentality takes on even more relevance when we consider Mills's unusually eclectic, almost Renaissance-man approach to art, not only in the later stages of his career, but, indeed, from the first, adolescent inklings of talent, or even interest, he displayed in adopting an artistic career. After the family returned to Louisiana in 1980 (Middleton, "Wilmer Mills", 1), following bouts of malaria and rheumatic fever (Vernon 1), Mills attended first a public high school in Zachary and then a well-known Southern prep school, McCallie in Chattanooga (Middleton, "Wilmer Mills", 1). His mother began sensing his predilection for poetry, discovering scraps of verse in the pockets of his laundry (W. Mills, "Farming Versus Poetry" 2), and she began to take him to prestigious poetry readings (Ramsey 1). Mills writes in his essay for PoetryNet.org, "Farming Versus Poetry: The Making of a Rebel," that, after earning a BA in English from the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee (where he won numerous prizes for his creative work) (Middleton, "Wilmer Mills", 1), he communicated his career choice to his parents. The situation implied that "Farming versus poetry seemed like an either/or proposition. . . . It meant that I would not live and farm in the area where my people have been since the earliest ones received the

land as grants from the king of Spain in 1797. I knew how much I was giving up to write poetry” (W. Mills, “Farming Versus Poetry” 1). Yet, while he initially paints his progress towards this vocation as foreseeable, almost inevitable, writing, “It was almost as if language chose me” (1), he later doubles back within this same essay and clarifies that “Unknown to my mother, my dominant creative outlet at the time was not poetry but painting, and not so much what I drew or painted on my own as how I thought about art. Whatever interest I had in poetry was purely that it seemed to be a compatible medium to painting” (2). In keeping with a more varied assortment of interests, he also received his M.A. in Theology from Sewanee in 2005 (Middleton, “Wilmer Mills”, 1), Subsequently, he was a Kenan Fellow at U.N.C. Chapel Hill (2008-2010) and a Writer-in-Residence at Covenant College, Chattangooga (2011) (K. Mills, Afterword 127). However, unlike many contemporary poets, instead of devoting his non-writing career exclusively to teaching, he supported his family by working professionally, at various points in his life, as “an artisan bread baker, woodworker and a sawmill operator” (Ramsey 1). He also coupled these skills with talents in folk music and songwriting, fishing, and furniture-making, in general sustaining a lifestyle that Kathryn Mills describes as “a handmade life that was beautiful and full of meaning” (K. Mills, Afterword 125). Ashley Ramsey even mentions that “He and his family also built a bungalow from salvaged building materials, which was featured in a 2007 Southern Living issue” (Ramsey 1).

Wilmer Mills met his beloved wife, Kathryn Oliver Mills, the focal inspiration for many of his most poignant poems, at a West Chester conference in 1995. They married within the same year after courting on Dauphin Island (K. Mills, Afterword 124-125). She was, and remains to this day, a professor of French, who, while raised in Berkeley,



traces most of her immediate family back to the Deep South (Alabama). She spent a significant amount of time in France as a child, and returned there with Wilmer and her family for a year on sabbatical after they were married (125). They had two children, Benjamin and Phoebe-Agnès, whose names, activities, and lives also found their way into many of Wilmer's poems, particularly from what Kathryn terms the "middle period of our time as a family" between 2002-2008. These are collected in a section of his posthumous *Selected Poems* entitled "The Heart's Arithmetic" (W. Mills "The Heart's Arithmetic"). In short, their family life was blessed and deeply happy.

Unfortunately, it was also short-lived. Mills was diagnosed with liver cancer in May 2011, and, after some radiation treatment that proved fruitless, died at home on his family farm in Louisiana on July 25, 2011 at age forty-one (Middleton, "Wilmer Mills," 2). Characteristically, he chose to be buried in a handcrafted coffin (the work of his cousin) (K. Mills, Afterword 132), and he left a poetic final letter to the world in the form of an essay entitled "Living in Eternity", which was posted first on his CaringBridge.org donation website, and then on the Tennessee poets' Chapter16.org, and was also distributed amongst family and friends (W. Mills "Living in Eternity"). Fellow poet and friend Jeff Hardin describes this essay as "a stunning distillation of what Wil had been trying to say for years," and claims to have reassured the dying Mills that his "words will be a consolation for many, as they have been for me" (Hardin, "A Gift for Adoration", 1). His certainty of this appears to have been well-grounded, too. Despite Wilmer Mills's status as a minor, at most up-and-coming poet, he was widely mourned by those who knew both him and his work. The West Chester University Poetry Conference in 2011 held a "Wilmer Mills" panel to pay tribute to their lost friend (Reeser

“Wil Mills Panel Part 2 -- WCU Poetry Conference 2011”; rockingemma’s channel).

Hillsdale College, where Mills had delivered a two-day series of lectures and workshops mere months before his diagnosis, not only delivered a tribute to Mills, but incorporated a “Wilmer H. Mills Visiting Writers” series into the established, semesterly visiting writers program in 2013 (Wood). Robert B. Shaw published a poem entitled “On the Death of Wilmer Mills” in the *Alabama Literary Review* (Shaw 93), while X. J. Kennedy published a versified tribute entitled “The Poems of Wilmer Mills” in *The Sewanee Review* (Middleton, “Wilmer Mills”, 1). It is clear that his influence is still in effect and that his memory will linger on.

## CHAPTER 3

### WILMER MILLS AND POETIC FORMALISM

#### 3.1 What is New Formalism?

For a movement whose name suggests both linkage to historically popular modes of interpretation and also an emphasis on such fundamental and heuristic aspects of poetry, the New Formalism embraced by Wilmer Mills requires more explanation than one might expect. This has less to do with any particularly ambiguous or contentious elements in its formation than because of how it has been received by the poetic world at large. Partly because Mills's New Formalism was, and continues to be, such a niche movement – one which never fully took hold in the academy in the first place, and one which has certainly never challenged the institutional pre-dominance of New Historicism, in any of this movement's many, discursive variations, in the time elapsed since – and also partly because the term itself implies juxtaposition to the academy's cherished New Historicism, the fairest and most productive route by which to go about introducing and unpacking any of the nuances that surround New Formalism necessarily involves confronting a few of the more common criticisms leveled at this movement. Indeed, many of these criticisms themselves seem to arise either from ignorance about the movement's core vision or else from largely unfounded assumptions about the movement's tangential affiliations or ulterior motives, and so are best gotten out of the way as soon as possible. In no particular order of significance, then, we will briefly proceed to explore what New Formalism is through what it is not: namely, by defense

against its alleged congruence with the politically-charged New Criticism, against its alleged socially and creatively oppressive elitism.

It is important to note, however, that in this discussion I am concerned with explicating formalism as Mills expressed and experienced it, that is, from the viewpoint of a practicing poet. Different considerations would apply in discussion if through literary theoretical terms, and Marjorie Levinson, in particular, has mapped the interrelations between a literary-theoretical New Formalism and New Historicism in quite different terms (Levinson). But for the purpose of discussing Mills's work, a broader, less systematized approach may provide a suitable background.

In these more simplified terms, New Formalism is not, and cannot accurately be considered, merely a rebranding or continuation of American New Criticism, because it originally arose as a direct reaction against the poetic precedents set by Eliot and Pound in the early part of the twentieth century. The misunderstanding most likely stems, at least in part, from the movement's resurgence into the public eye around the 1980s and 1990s, when poets and critics like Brad Leithauser, Mary Jo Salter, Yvor Winters, and J. V. Cunningham were at large in such notable institutions as Harvard, Stanford, and Brandeis (McPhillips 77). Even then, the movement did not garner much attention on a broader scale until around the time the Bush administration, among other things, appointed Dana Gioia, a formalist poet, as Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts (DiPiero 2/14). As a consequence, the vast majority of contemporary scholarly objections to New Formalism address only Formalist thinking from these decades and end up either ranting primarily against the neo-conservative politics of the era or else against the implicit assumption that New Formalism only gained footing within this

political climate because it presented a far-too-convenient alternative route which might permit traditionally-minded scholars to ignore or discount the importance of New Historicism. As such, it represented, if not exactly a threat, at least an impudent challenge to the relevance of more liberal establishments within the academia. Nicholas Birns states candidly in his essay “The Distribution of Argument: New Formalism of/on the Contemporary” that “being formalist in Anglophone criticism [was] associated with the Right . . . the ‘Tory Formalism’ of the New Critics . . . taking an aesthetic approach to literature often seemed to embody a hostility to academic theory and its advocacy of various political agendas: feminist, post-colonial, African Americanist, queer” (Birns 7). Operating on a similarly defensive level, Peter Sinnot, Jr., writing for *Philosophy and Literature* in 2013, off-sets his own argument by describing, “a reductive strain in new formalism, which only establishes an aesthetic object by ignoring or reducing to caricature arguments rooted in other disciplines” (Sinnot 258), similar to Levinson’s “normative new formalism” (Levinson 560), while Don Hoyt’s “Interrupted Forms: The Case against the ‘New Formalism’” brushes repeatedly up against ad hominem attacks, such as when he remarks that “[d]espite their poses as revolutionaries, new formalists embody the negative results of all historical reconstructions: a nostalgia for what is believe to be lost values, an insularity from non-indigenous, hence marginal, concerns, and the cooptation of diverse ideologies” (Hoyt 8). Still other skeptics, then, avoid confronting the movement on its own terms by seeking to establish indirect or default connections back to New Criticism, usually based on complaints about what New Formalism has not succeeded in bringing to the table, rather than what it has. Dana Gioia notes that “[s]ince there was no open conflict between the older and younger generations,

some critics have conflated the two schools. There has been a common criticism by detractors that the New Formalists are doing nothing new” (Gioia, “The Poet in an Age of Prose”, 35). However, Thomas Cable of the University of Texas at Austin reminds us, however, in his essay “Connoisseurs of Sound and the New Formalism” both that “New Formalists take pains to distinguish current developments from the older formalism of the 1940s and 1960s,” which in and of itself implies nuances of philosophy and practice amongst the various strains of the movement, and that “the history of any movement is usually less linear than its motivators see it, and the rise of the New Formalism throws a clarifying light over swings of the pendulum for the whole century” (Cable 49). Dana Gioia reiterates this notion of the complex swing of history (Gioia 32). Then, too, Alan Shapiro, in his sharp and clear-sighted essay entitled simply “The New Formalism” not only establishes the “mid-eighties” trend as “an opposite movement” (Shapiro 200) to that perpetuated by the new much-loathed New Critics, but also points out that “[i]f free-verse experimentation necessarily entailed allegiance to progressive thinking, what are we to make of Pound and Eliot, the great twentieth-century free-verse innovators, whose right-wing authoritarian politics makes Reagan seem like a wishy-washy liberal” (212). In short, the conflation of New Formalism with 1980s neo-conservative politics, while obviously not groundless, is itself simplistic, reductive.

One of the more easily-dispelled myths about New Formalism, then, revolves around its naysayers’ fear of a kind of stiff, oppressive, impersonal elitism born, or so they claim, of clinging to conventions without cause, or else of imposing arbitrary restrictions on modes of self-expression and then insisting that these are somehow “natural”; for indeed, if one can rise above implications enough to examine the actual

fall-out, there is a great deal of evidence that this was neither the original motivation of the New Formalists nor the result, as experienced in Mills's generation. For one thing, both formalist poets of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as many later adherers from outside of the academy, placed strong emphasis on the inherent artistic value of common, or what we now might even call "popular," art, which they believed that the close reading craze, and subsequent, Joycean inaccessibility of "high" and "serious" art had unjustly obscured. Paul Lake speaks to this issue when he writes in his essay "Verse that Print Bred":

Formal poetry is not elitist but a popular art form. Urban African-American rap musicians don't use couplets in their songs so often because they have read their Dryden and Pope; nor do they use an emphatic meter because they have read Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent.' Like all writers of popular songs they use those devices because they give pleasure, bound as they are to the lyricism of memory and hope. Any formal resource that can exist in the work of artist as diverse as Eliot, John Lennon, and the Fat Boys has roots that are both thick and deep. (Lake, "Verses that Print Bred", 30)

Following this same line of thinking, Lake's essay "Towards a Liberal Poetics" clarifies that "[w]hat the new formalists know that the advocates of 'projective verse' and 'open form' don't is that though the electric guitar might have replaced the lyre, lyric poetry was never meant to be strictly a spoken art, but something far more musical . . . . Song lyrics, whether of Rock or Country or Pop music, still have meter and rhyme – and millions of listeners" (Lake, "Towards liberal Poetics" 12). Then, too, in an interview from 1990, Richard Wilbur notes that he had in the past frequently begun his creative

writing classes by offering students the following piece of advice: “You probably were brought up to feel that poetry should be ennobling, that therefore streetlights should be compared to stars, rather than stars to streetlights. Try comparing stars to streetlights, or making similar comparisons between supposedly high things and things supposedly low” (Curry 7-8). These sorts of democratic alignments also serve a more self-interested purpose, insofar as they root loudly for New Formalism’s underlying philosophy that the concept, if not necessarily the manifested constructs, of form is inherent to creative endeavors, that it represents a kind of Romantic triumph of nature over nurture. The invocation of popular art as a valid tool with which to make such a serious point is an admirable and progressive salute in its own right and suggests that the sentiment of community which the movement claims to embody is truly genuine. Whereas New Criticism attempted to claim the concept of universality in theme and internal significance for the sake of its own, preferred poetry, early New Formalism, as it influenced Mills, attempted, with mixed-success, to reclaim the concept of poetry for the sake of universal access and appeal.

Perhaps precisely for this reason, the universality and pedagogical simplicity of fixed forms was often seen as unusually open to and inclusive of women and other minority writers from the 1950s and beyond, even at a time when many strongly felt – and were finally beginning to contest – the exclusion of their voices from “high” and canonically-inclined literary circles. Indeed, numerous minority, and even a few decidedly left-wing, proponents of traditional forms insist to this day that they view free-verse and the many theoretical attitudes and stances behind it to be in and of themselves symptomatic of privilege (primarily on the grounds that a lack of attention to form tends



to legitimize historical illiteracy and glorify self-absorption), rather than a means of intellectual liberation from genuinely oppressive standards. The popular British comedian and documentary narrator Stephen Fry, whose work (outside of his brief and incidental acquaintance with Wilmer Mills) has repeatedly referenced his famous obsession with literature and language, explains in his humorous (and also highly informative) beginner's guide to scansion and traditional English poetic forms, entitled *The Ode Less Travelled*, that full-on rejection of form in the name of intellectual progress is, from his perspective, insulting to the very people it claims to uplift: "It is as if we have been encouraged to believe that form is a kind of fascism and that to acquire knowledge is to drive a jackboot into the face of those poor souls who are too incurious, dull-witted or idle to find out what poetry can be. Surely better to use another word for such free-form meanderings: 'prose-therapy' about covers it, 'emotional masturbation', perhaps" (Fry 175). Echoing this sentiment in more objectively factual terms, poet Adrienne Rich notes that "'Avant-garde' has historically meant the rebellions of new groups of younger white men (and a few women) against the complacencies and sterilities of older men of their own culture. . . . [A]mong poets . . . the 'great modernists,' were privileged by gender and class and were defenders of privilege" (Rich 6-7), which statement complements Molly Peacock's observation that "New Formalism is often practiced by outsiders . . . . Pattern and predictability of sound allow for a feeling of safety that can release a variety of emotions, not the careful one-note emotion that over-control of a free verse line break can engender" (Peacock 84). Three-time National Book Award finalist Marilyn Nelson's pro-traditionalist essay "Owning the Masters", frames her own internal sense of this truth of the human experience's invocation of inherent, underlying structure in even more

theoretical terms. In the process of analyzing Phillis Wheatley's poetic argument – penned when Wheatley was only fourteen years old – against “The Atheist” by way of example, Nelson writes, “[r]emember: This child was a slave. Think about what atheism would have meant to a slave: The complete meaninglessness of creation and of existence. Nihilism. The Great Nada. How differently the slave must have felt God's hand every day than the smug, blind white atheist whom Phillis addressed” (Nelson 12). While Nelson admits that “I hesitate to become involved in the current debate between the so-called new formalists (the singers) and the organic poets (the conversationalists). I cannot in good conscience take either side. Certainly free-verse poems can sing. Yet I hear the music more clearly, more compellingly, when I write with an ear to tradition: Hearing either the music of my people, or the rhyme and meter of the master's tradition”, she goes on to clarify that she believes, “[o]ne of their [minority writer's] problems with tradition is that they believe we're born into tradition the way we're born into gender and race. . . . Maya is right: Shakespeare did write for her. Just as I write for a 51-year-old white Oklahoma farmer” (13). She then further clarifies this point by stating, “I don't believe the pleasures of poetry can be dissected and explained. But one of the pleasures of poetry must surely be its ability to give us a sense of community” (15). This sentiment she also presently defines in even more concrete, if reluctantly anti-New Historicist, terms: “I'm convinced our inclination to create race-, gender- and ethnic-specific literary enclaves is dangerous; that it disinvites us from community. The Angloamerican tradition belongs to all of us . . . . That means the metrical tradition, too” (15). Finally, she brings her point home with a very clearly-articulated rendition of the New Formalist philosophy: “[w]e must not, however; as we widen the course of the canon, make its bed shallow. Despite

the labor necessary to recognize the wisdom which made generations consider those dead white guys great, they are great. Sometimes in spite of themselves” (14). Nelson’s powerful rhetoric here resonates on purely logical levels, too. If, after all, one cannot fully acknowledge, engage with, and potentially embrace even positive aspects of a tradition with which one disagrees, then who can justifiably criticize even the most elitist proponents of this tradition for ignoring or belittling writers they personally dislike? A widening of access and appeal necessitates coming to terms with the full-range of voices to whom, and against whom, one is writing – a consciousness of the complete and complex community from which self is born.

If, then, we are to understand a writer such as Mills on his own terms, and not merely through a filter of distaste for what traditionalist poetry *seems* to represent, it is important to consider the manner in which traditionally-oriented poets and theorists themselves tend to interpret the elements of the past which they seek so ardently to resurrect. James Matthew Wilson’s 2015 essay entitled “Ancient Beauty, Modern Verse: Romanticism and Classicism from Plato to T. S. Eliot and the New Formalism” provides both an in-depth and scholarly explanation of this precise topic. The division between more recent Western schools of thought regarding the optimal way to teach or write poetry is, according to Wilson, much more complicated than a mere divide in the political orientation (so far as contemporary politics are defined) of each school’s proponents. The more relevant division, he claims, stems back to the intellectual influence of historical Romanticism and Classicism, both of which he here defines in very particular, though perhaps idiosyncratic, ways. With regard to Romanticism, Wilson writes, “this weighty theory actually refers to the origin or creation of the work rather than anything inhering in

the work itself. It is the theory of art as process and expression that stands more in reference to the psychology of the artist than to art as a particular kind of thing made” (Wilson 3). By contrast, Wilson writes that Classicism “says something other about artworks, without obvious reference to their origin. Namely, a work of art may be an organic unity that transcends the sum of its parts, but it is made up of parts nonetheless, and the difference between the better and worse work of art lies in how fully those parts have been dominated and brought under the rule of a formal logic” (3). This particular application of formal logic, which seeks to define the “parts” of Beauty itself, according to a study by Umberto Eco (whom Wilson cites extensively) situates the concept of Beauty as existing between a Plotinian property that Eco terms “Aesthetics of Light” and a Platonic/Aristotelean/Pythagorean property that Eco terms “Aesthetics of Proportion” (13-14). “Proportion” here, of course, refers to the objective, factual, formal existence or manifestation of a thing, while the more elusive “Light” seeks to quantify a comparatively subjective internal experience or response – for example, a sense of awakening or recognition, much like what Edmund Burke’s “sublime” is meant to evoke (Burke). In fact, Fordham University’s professor of theology, Richard Viladesau, clarifies that “‘light’ and ‘luminosity’ for medieval thought symbolizes the nature of being an ‘intelligible’ and – at its higher levels – self-conscious. ‘Form,’ in turn, is the intelligible quality that gives actual existence to a substance” (Viladesau 114). The traditional Western concept of Beauty, then, is not merely, or at least not exclusively, an arbitrary imposition of “things I personally like” onto “things I personally dislike or find socially unacceptable.” Rather, it conveys what Wilson terms an essential “property of being” (Wilson 15). It is a sum of parts, a whole -- an interaction or experience of a human mind,

of a human nature, with something manifested intelligibly outside of itself. It is, in part of its whole, then, an event, an action in the immediate present. And actions, even exercises in medieval Christian mysticism (*The Cloud of Unknowing*) necessarily either imitate or invent method in order to achieve this transcendent state of communion with other minds, souls, and extrapersonal experiences. Method, order, and traditions surrounding these, then, are purportedly a path towards a freedom of and from self that is something like transcendence, and not merely a shameful covering up and/or overblown glorification of one's individuality.

Interestingly, though, Wilson's argument turns against the New Formalists in the end, accusing them of straying too far from Eliot's purer Classicist principles, and insists that it would be far more accurate to trace even the better-known "academic" formalists like Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht – those whose reputations have not been rooted exclusively in regionalism or recognizably "folk" or "popular" art – back to Robert Frost's legacy of mixed Romanticism (33). New Formalists, in the later sense of the term, although they obviously understand and admire the traditional Western conception of Beauty after a Classicist fashion, have also incorporated a distinctly Romantic awareness of self and of the internal process of composition into their overarching philosophy, in addition to a more democratic conception of audience, and a "true" traditionalist like Wilson (unlike a practitioner such as Mills) sees this as a bad thing. Another way to conceptualize it, of course, would be as an experiment (if perhaps failed) in combining the best of both of these traditions into something entirely new, while retaining ties to a more ancient claim of mystique and profundity. At the very least, they cannot, once again, rightly be understood, even by an opposing viewpoint, as mere elitist, stiff-necked

enforcers of dead, oppressive regiments. Because there is still so much controversy over this point, however, it is debatable whether, for all the ideals their rhetoric purports, they actually accomplished any of their aims, so much as touted them. And for many, of course, this is still their primary and most objectionable fault.

In a more positive light, however, what much New Formalism does seem to signal is a return to a consciousness of one's audience – a, perhaps strained, suggested means of compromising between the inseparability of self and circumstance from the product of one's pen, which both Wilson's disdained "Romanticism" and most strains of New Historicism emphasize, and the need to move objectively outside of what Nelson identifies as overly-restrictive conceptions of self, like identify and rightful heritability, in order to discover what is truly possible in and for one's work. In short, it advocates, ideally, placing less emphasis on the politics of what one is saying, or the intellectual originality of how one says it, and more on the community one intends to reach, and how this peripherally-extroverted consciousness in turn changes and deepens one's awareness of self.

### 3.2 Richard Wilbur: The Face of Old New Formalism

Because Wilmer Mills died so young, and left behind so little commentary on his work, or even his philosophy of work, it is necessary to approach analysis via a mediator whose philosophy and poetry are known to have greatly influenced Mills's work. Richard Wilbur is an excellent candidate for this, not only because he is so frequently tied to the vein of "old" New Formalism with which Mills felt his interests aligned most closely, but because nearly every interview with Mills or extensive biographical piece on his life emphasizes that Mills looked up to Wilbur himself as a major source of inspiration. Jeff

Hardin writes that “[i]n late March, Will gave the introduction when I read at Covenant College. . . . To my astonishment and embarrassment, he said that his own writing moved back and forth between two pillars of influence: Richard Wilbur and me” (Hardin, “A Gift for Adoration”). Mills states in his interview for the *Carolina Quarterly* that “I’m writing with the same tools that Richard Wilbur used” (Vernon 7). The Poetry Foundation cites Richard Wilbur beside Robert Frost as one of Mills’s two main influences (“Wilmer Mills: Biography”), and Kathryn Mills claims that “[h]is next significant move [upon meeting her] was to hand me a stack of his poems on our way to hear Richard Wilbur’s keynote reading” (K. Mills 123). Nor did the admiration flow just one way. The *Encyclopedia of Louisiana* entry on Wilmer Mills relates that “[f]ormer US Poet Laureate Richard Wilbur praised Mills’s earlier poems for their ‘emotional density’ and said of Mills’s writing, ‘There is pain and darkness in it; and there is a continual relief and gaiety as the right words are found’” (Middleton, “Wilmer Mills” 3). Footage from the West Chester Poetry conference, which paid tribute to Mills the summer he died, includes a video of Jennifer Reeser reading Mills’s poem “The Poet Playing Chess” for Richard Wilbur at his 90th birthday celebration (Reeser, “The Poet Playing Chess--Wil Mills”). An ongoing linking of an comparison between their opinions and their works seems appropriate, then.

In many respects, the work of Richard Wilbur epitomizes the early conception of New Formalism in that his work ventured openly into the then-contemptible realm of preference for traditional English forms (or even just rhyme and meter) while still ever maintaining a non-committal and decidedly Romantic rhetoric of individual preference with regards to the creative process. Many sources, in fact, cite Wilbur himself as the

primary instigator of New Formalism, particularly where the term is more casually defined, for example on open access websites (Holcombe). In some ways, this claim makes sense, as Wilbur is clearly invested in many of the later recurrent themes of formalism and also, for better or worse, personifies many of its stereotypes. Peter Harris, for example, describes the nature of his interests in terms of stiffness, as having “always been an equilibrist, up on a tightrope performing feats of association in the process of his search for an equilibrium between apparently opposed objects of desire. . . . for a formal perfection beyond the depredations of time and an equally strong impulse to harrow the pleasures of the physical world” (Harris 413). Also commenting on Wilbur’s pre-occupation with the poetic possibilities inherent in solid, discernable forms in materiality, Philip White calls Wilbur “an inveterate dualist” wherein Wilbur is “advocating a poetic of rationality, order, balance, and commitment to others and to the natural world,” though, in addition, he apparently “is not immune to the temptation to use poetry as an escape” (White 249). This staunch, perfectionistic investment in affirmation of the value – specifically, if somewhat paradoxically, the abstract, spiritual, or metaphysical value -- of the material world, in both its beauty and mundanity, traces, of course, back to Robert Frost, and so speaks to the strong elements of regionalism, which were important for Mills and which pervade New Formalism at large, even if regionalism itself is not exactly Wilbur’s defining characteristic.

In other ways, however, this claim that Wilbur’s example must have served as the primary fuel for the movement, is in and of itself a little far-fetched, given both the numerous other prominent formalist writers contemporary to Wilbur and also his own careful neutrality on the subject of free verse. Monroe K. Spears writes that “Richard



Wilbur stresses the similarities, rather than the differences, between his procedures and those of the writers of free verse” (Spears 557). Wilbur himself openly acknowledges that his personal preference for traditional forms stems, not from any intentions to make a rebellious statement about accepted standards or politics, but rather from his not having “been able to please myself in my efforts to write free verse,” and that “I agree with Ezra Pound when he says that free verse is harder to write than formal verse” (Frank and Mitchell 27). Interestingly, however, the tones in which Wilbur presents these kinds of peaceable admissions seem, at least in his interviews, to align him philosophically with James Matthew Wilson’s definition of “Classicism”; that is, it lays an emphasis on the value of an overall, measurable, final quality of the end product over any quibble about an exact method by which one could, or ought, to arrive at this level of quality. He spends a great deal more time talking about his own process, of course, and never even implicitly raises this as a model to be imitated, and yet invariably makes it felt that he himself takes for granted the need to hold oneself to a measurable internal standard, and believes other so-called “great” poets invariably do the same (Cummins 44; Hutton 46). His own more democratic conception of audience, then, seems to extend to, and perhaps even solicit the approval of, the same, elitist community of free verse writers that the nature of his work and his affiliated movement claim to be challenging – perhaps, if we stretch a bit, unearthing the very paradox that eventually led to this movement’s over-politicization, subsequent misinterpretation, and eventual dissolution of idealistic focus.

In fairness, though, it would have been difficult for Richard Wilbur to ignore, or even downplay, the relevance of the established literary climate of his day, even in the immediate wake of Eliot and Pound. This is due to widespread approval of, if occasional

bemusement with, him is one of the reasons he is, to this day, well-known enough to serve as a focal point from which to mark the early turning points towards twentieth-century formalist thinking, or even to have exercised any kind of influence over the styles or philosophies of younger poets like Wilmer Mills. The highlights of Wilbur's career included such accolades as two Pulitzer prizes, a National Book Award, the Wallace Stevens Award, the Frost Medal, and the Prix de Rome Fellowship, just to name a few. He also succeeded Robert Penn Warren as the second poet laureate of the United States and won a number of awards for his translations of classic French authors, like Voltaire, Moliere, and Racine, into English verse. ("Richard Wilbur: Biography"). Even before Wilbur had become famous, he had attended Amherst College in the early 1940s, and then, much later, Harvard University. Born in 1921 in New York City to a family of editors ("Richard Wilbur: Poet"), Wilbur had originally shown interest in entering journalism. His experiences serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, however, bent his ambitions toward a need to reconcile the chaos of the world around him into verse. On this subject, he noted, "One does not use poetry for its major purposes, as a means to organize oneself and the world, until one's world somehow gets out of hand" ("Richard Wilbur: Biography"). The career which followed stressed these principles of quantification through a rather detached rational order and consistent affirmation of life, for which qualities he was both disdained and widely imitated, and these qualities made him famous enough for an aspiring young poet like Wilmer Mills to have encountered his work in the first place. It would be far too easy to claim that Mills's work represents a mere youthful imitation of Wilbur, though, as we will see, Mills's poetry cannot be reduced quite so simply to a knock-off crowd-pleaser, for all his nods to traditionalism.

## CHAPTER 4

### WRITING THE SOUTHERN VALUES

Mills's poetry seems on first glance to set out in his poetry to meet the tastes of a more traditional audience – one which seems to wish to feel included and comforted, rather than challenged by its encounter with literature – is that of going out of his way to create a clear, straight-forward, and natural-sounding human voice to speak each of his poems, rather than experimenting with trickier techniques that invoke imagistic narrative or fragmented internal dialog. If this were only the case with his narrative ballads, like those comprising *Light for the Orphans* or the first section of *Selected Poems*, it could be written off as a necessity of genre; however, this is not the case. Even Mills's deeply personal and contemplative poems, such as those from “Arriving on Time” (W. Mills, “Arriving on Time” 37-70) or “The World That isn't There” (“The World That isn't There” 93-122) employ an approachable storyteller's voice with its own, distinctive sound. A review by David Middleton of the posthumously-published *Selected Poems*, entitled “Tell Me a Story”, suggests of Mills's typical, overarching style that “[t]o [Robert Penn] Warren's subject matter Mills added Robert's [sic] Frost's traditional style,” and even quotes Mills as saying, “I wanted to write about characters with the uncooked energy of Warren but felt a visceral need to do so in the formal manner of Frost” (Middleton, “Tell Me A Story” xii). By contrast, however, Dick Davis, author of the introduction to the *Selected Poems*, feels that this convenient categorization of voice based on literary ancestry is not nuanced enough to be accurate, insisting that “Wil's

language is usually a more heightened affair than Frost's; it rarely has the relaxed conversational tone that Frost so often seems to aim for" (Davis, Introduction xiv). He does, though, later concede that "Will's voice is his own – honest and hard-won, tender and angry, self-questioning and affirming, always pushing for purity of observation and record" (xv), in short, that it is earnest and unaffected. Unfortunately, the few interviews that Mills gave in his lifetime do not elicit an elaborate philosophy on clarity of delivery; yet his poetry itself, coupled with these commentators' observations, suggest that he aligns very much with Richard Wilbur on this matter. Wilbur asserts that "Of course you try to be as simple as you can. You do this for the sake of making yourself clear to yourself. And so some kind of availability to the general public ought to be a by-product" (Curry 11). But Wilbur is also careful to re-state, several times, his belief that this kind of accessibility, what might in a less favorable light be thought of as selling-out to popular taste, is actually a natural result of the poet's being more deeply attuned to his or her own inner voice and scope of reference, of trusting that the audience will simply meet them half-way, as opposed to insisting that the readers do all the work themselves: "I think that when you write, as when you talk, you're not really choosing your words according to your audience – unless you're talking, say, to children. You talk the way it seems natural for you to talk. . . . I refuse to be done out of the privilege of referring to Hephaestus if I like" (11). Mills concurs, offering up his own transcendent epiphany as a listener, an experiencer of poetry, that "'Joy' is being caught in the act / Of never asking what it means" (W. Mills, "Benjamin Shooting Skeet"), though he is equally conscious of a poet's inevitable short-comings when it comes to clarifying meaning on the first try, "afraid / That I would disappoint the obvious" ("Fallen Fruit" 95). This is a recurrent

motif in his thought, and he valiantly attempts to locate regardless “what angels do, the extra- / Ordinary in the ordinary, / The supernatural made natural” (“Ice Cream Angel” 76). What this seems to imply is that, while the naturalizing of voice is certainly a conscious move on Mills’s part, and less of an accidental “by-product” than Wilbur would have it, the action of invoking it drives at the very heart of something in Mills spirituality. The very external limiting of his own creative choices and modes of expression in the interest of popular appeal, almost by default opens up another, very personal, well of meanings and possibilities within his work.

Similarly, this intentional self-restriction within the composition process in terms of New Formalism’s better-known tenets, and the subscription to elements like fixed rhyme schemes and meter may seem, on a surface level, merely to pay homage to a newly-established norm, or merely to conform to the expectations of the sorts of people, at Sewanee or elsewhere, who wished to have their expectations confirmed that these traditional forms must indeed prove superior conveyers of affect than anything more new-fangled trends; but we can see, both from Mills’s often loose and arbitrary adherence to regimens of rhyme or meter and his very personal connection to the concept of an inherently structured framework in which reality plays out that this is not the case, at least for Mills. Granted, there is some unspoken debate on this front. We can see from several of Mills’s would-be-biographers, scattered as these are across the internet, that even a few of his most ardent admirers remained too suspicious of his open affiliation with the New Formalists to see Mills or his work beyond it, except to label his poetry as a refreshing exception from what they had come to expect. An example of this comes from what appears to be a former student, named Louis T. Mayeux on a website called

*Southern Bookman: A Literary Blog for All Seasons*. This blogger condescendingly, if perhaps unwittingly, states that “Wilmer’s poems remained true to the traditional disciplines of meter and rhyme, and like many in the so called new traditionalist movement trumpeted at Sewanee, used verse for narrative,” before he amends that to say, “Wilmer’s poems give new energy to old forms, which drag some new traditionalists into shopworn metaphors and tedious language” (Mayeux). These kinds of built-in prejudices, which we have discussed at some length in the previous chapter, have, then, the unfortunate tendency to obscure rather than to clarify what scant hints Mills interjects on his own behalf through the shroud of history that is rapidly growing up around his work. What little he does say, however, strongly suggests that his own conception of formal rhyme and rhythm, and their merit and/or function within poetry, were tied more closely to a deep, internal consciousness of time, and of the inescapably recognizable patterns embedded within the passage of time, as a tangible dimension of human experience. He writes that “Prophecy is not about / The future; it isn’t fortune telling. / It’s more the ache of déjà-vu / Expanded as an open window / That lets you see the obvious” (W. Mills, “For the Unemployed Man at Forty”). In one poem, a naïve, young priest’s wife in one poem describes a retrospective comprehension of her husband’s clandestine pedophilia with the remark, “I see the pattern” (“A Young Priest’s Wife Begins to Think” 99), while Mills concludes an intimate, and very subtly erotic, love letter to his own wife with the insight that “My Dear, we sense / How poetry can smolder into prose / When life and art resist a confluence. / But love attaches passages then grows / To conjugate the parts. Our lives combine / With art, converse in prose, and fall in line” (“Fondue Analysis”). He insists, displaying the first of his later much-remarked-upon influence from Wendell

Berry (Vernon 5), that what he understands to be “[t]he art is seeing nature *as* an order. / Like farmer-artists, we give it shape and border” (“Stanzas for Kathryn” 65), so that, in response to Wallace Steven’s “Anecdote of a Jar”, he can “grow the rhyme / And reason of its nameless place and time / In every word and syllable I sing / To keep their meaning from meandering” (“The Jar Garden” 60). He exclaims in “Diary of a Piano-Tuner’s Wife” that already “everything in life is made of lines” (9). Mills’s views on the conjointly symbolic process of crafting a poem and that of cultivating a farm, distilling meaning from strategic repetition of, and the relationship of this to the application of poetic forms, are highly relevant to the discussion, and I will return to them presently. The first thing to notice, however, is that Mills clearly experiences the concept of inherent order in the natural world, and in the lives of its inhabitants, not as an academic theory or an abstract political talking point, but as a visceral fact. To him, it is a thing, like a mystic’s faith, that can be evidenced, and potentially even reproduced, if only one could learn, or be taught how to “see” “the pattern”. Perhaps, more accurately, Mills saw it as a means to center oneself in such a way that would permit experiential awareness of this measured, and measuring, inertia which is time.

Richard Wilbur actually speaks to this pedagogical nature of form as well, in relation to its guiding or suggesting influence over the reading experience of the audience with which it purports to commune, though nowhere does he even implicitly frame the purpose of formal verse as either morally or spiritually instructive; and it seems plausible that Mills, who echoes a Wilbur-esque philosophy on the function of form in his own interviews, did not intentionally set out to carry the concept so far in practice. On the contrary, far from condescending to his readers like a pre-Romantic, or perhaps

Victorian-era children's tale, as if he were the Elsie Dinsmore of Southern Agrarian/New Formalism, Mills seems to take the general view that a writer has a contractual obligation to fulfill with regard to representing reality as truthfully as possible, and that he can fulfill this duty best through listening to his own instinct and allowing the poem to grow organically. He writes about meter, then, as if it were primarily an aid to help the poet through this process of listening truthfully, and not a device meant to sucker in potential readers or to teach them how they ought to understand the world from which the poem claims to have grown. In a 2009 interview with blogger and speaker LeAnne Martin, on her blog *Christians in the Arts*, Mills describes his creative process:

Then, ironically, what writes a poem is the syntax. Once I latch onto the right syntactical pattern (a tone, a pacing of clause, subject, and verb), the poem basically writes itself, pulling the subject matter along through the meter, sometimes in rhyme. It is important not to force the language to go where you want it to go, but to listen to it and let it guide you. The word "author" is descended from the same word as "augur," meaning "seer." A poet's job is to see things, to point out the obvious that other people don't see, not to reinvent reality with some hokus-pokus romantic notion of "inspiration" or creativity. That's called disappointing the obvious. Once I have a draft of a poem, I sometimes spend years revising it. That's when the real writing takes place. (Martin)

Wilbur, while in some respects clearly the germ of this train of thought, actually takes a much more cynical, pragmatic view of meter's function as a "guide" to the poet's creative process. He writes, "It's very clear that however much one masters the formal elements in a formal poem, however much one makes them do just what one wants, they



are a little bit of a crutch and a comfort. They may not end by looking so. . . . But at any rate, they feel so during the process of composition” (Frank and Mitchell 27).

Interestingly, then, what Wilmer Mills describes as an intuitive, almost mystical, process, Richard Wilbur apologizes for as an insufficient an insufficient amount of intuition, as rules and habits taking the place of intuition: “[b]ut with free verse, you have to have a kind of intuitive assurance that what you’ve done is right. . . . because, however difficult it may be, formal verse is in some ways emotionally comfortable. It requires fewer arbitrary decisions, fewer intuitive conclusions that one is somehow mysteriously right” (27). One conclusion we could draw from this is, of course, that Mills’s understanding of his own process still bordered on naïve romanticism, partly because of the secluded life he lived, and partly because he did not live long enough to grow accustomed to being successful, or to have his motives scrutinized and mercilessly deconstructed, as Wilbur had by this point. Another way to interpret this disparity in optimism, however, might be that Mills, in his perpetual preoccupation with time, simply placed more importance on the second part of his statement, concerning the centrality of the revision process, in practice than he did the more interview-worthy-sounding declaration about insight. In this aspect, too, he is, of course, following in Wilbur’s footsteps, though Wilbur takes the time to spell it out a little more articulately: “[f]inding the right rhyme can slow you down. . . . And since you are slowed down by these technical difficulties, you are also likely to be slowed down in your choosing of words” (28). Wilbur goes on in this passage to speak in slightly more objectionable terms about employing this slowness, this embedding of repetition into the writing process so as to avoid cumbersome repetition in the finished product, as allowing one to control, not only

the precision of the poem, but of the “reader’s voice” (28). But it is unclear whether by this he means, as objectors to formalism would have it, that he wishes to exercise control over the mind and will of “the reader” themselves, or whether, by “voice”, he means he wishes to exercise control over the connection he is forging with an anticipated audience that reacts in real time inside his head while he tries on and discards phraseology in the process of writing a poem.

As we will discuss, again, presently, both Wilbur and Mills held complicated philosophies about the relationship between concepts of “community” and “self”, with which background, it becomes clear that slowing down enough to acquire such control might more accurately be construed as an act of perfectionism – the desire to perfectly actualize or manifest an internally-held ideal in the real world in such a way that it is completely recognizable to and worthy of affirmation from another human being – as opposed to a kind of under-handed manipulation. Again, it is not clear precisely where Wilbur stands on this issue, but it is obvious from Mills’s commentary that he places a weighty responsibility on the “augur” author, both as a craftsman and as a person, and that, in his eyes, adherence to form is a means to fulfill this ideal of being, of living, and teaching how to live, in a slowed-down time, both for the sake of his community of readers and for himself.

Another area in which Mills’s more casual critics seem to assume he is merely pandering to a worn cliché, but from which it is evident that he is, in fact, writing earnestly and authentically, affirming and transforming awareness of self through the externalization of self, is in his subject-matter – his perennial fascination with rural Southern environments, farming metaphors, and recollections in contemporary literature

or media of the kinds of idyllic and old-fashioned boyhood activities that one scarcely ever finds outside re-runs of *The Waltons*. His wife Kathryn seems to have anticipated this highly understandable assumption, because she was quick to defend him in her afterword to *Selected Poems*: “[t]he worlds he invoked – the rural Old South, the lives of the marginalized, the realm of faith – are foreign to most people, but not quaint or irrelevant because Wil lived, breathed, and grew them from the ground up” (K. Mills, Afterword, 129). Wilmer himself confirms that “[u]p until the eleventh grade in high school, my life, other than going to church and going to school, consisted largely of baling hay, de-horning and castrating young bulls, mowing pasture, harvesting grass seed, and a lot of hunting and fishing” (Mills, “Farming Versus Poetry” 1). One could therefore certainly, in this particular instance, even imagine Mills delivering Richard Wilbur’s exact response to a query about why, literary ancestry and “tradition” of Robert Frost and older, British Romantics aside, this subject-matter appealed to him so much: “I use natural imagery because I was raised on a farm. . . . I attribute my own natural imagery to simple affection and long acquaintance” (Curry 13).

Despite the readily apparent fact that Wilbur devotes so much of his interview and non-fiction essay time to discussion of his personal history, emphasizing each and every time the centrality of this personal history to his work, thought and very being, however, his reasons for so consistently employing these sorts of metaphors runs deeper than a mere making-do with following the even more clichéd advice to “write what you know.” By the account of his close friend and fellow poet Jeff Hardin, Mills seems to have had a natural tendency to process objects and activities in the world around him in terms of their histories. Hardin writes about a time he helped Mills make his famous artesian bread

that “I had no clue what I was doing, but Wil loved to teach me how to do such things, all the while explaining elaborate histories about wheat, yeast, and ancient processes long forgotten in today’s fast-paced world. Sometimes I thought he was just making stuff up, but it all sounded so interesting that I didn’t challenge him” (Hardin, “A Gift for Adoration,” 2).

These past-oriented metaphors, derived from etymology, were apparently something that lived very much at the core of Mills’s writing, as they crop up often, and are indeed part of what fueled his attraction to formal verses. In his essay “Farming Versus Poetry”, he writes that “[t]he world ‘Verse’ comes from the Latin, versus, as it was used to describe how the hors-drawn plow was turned at the end of each furrow to begin a new one. Writing stories in verse . . . keeps me aware of the arbitrary margins of my field, so that I know where to turn, not leaving any ground untilled, and not crossing over into my neighbor’s trees or through his fence” (W. Mills, “Farming Versus Poetry” 6). He elaborates on this further in his interview for the *Carolina Quarterly*, stating that “[t]he word Boustrophedon means ‘bull turning,’ so the idea was that the lines of a poem turned in the same way that a bull does at it pulls a plow through a field, the same way I used to pull my grandfather through his garden even,” and then picking up these same threads a little further on by explaining:

That agriculture metaphor informed our idea of lines on the page which, for the poet and farmer, have arbitrary breaks, arbitrary because when the poet or farmer gets to the end of a furrow he has no choice but to turn. . . . [H]e wouldn’t stop half way across his own field and sniff the wind and say that he had some kind of

hocus pocusy feeling that he was going to be an artistic farmer and start plowing a new row right there. (Vernon 7)

Even with just a casual reading of these passages, we can easily note his repeated use of “neighbors” (obviously recalling Frost’s “Mending Fences”) and a strong, ingrained concern for or consciousness of a kind of social norm, a desire not to encroach on someone else’s property (of time?), as a significant part of his rationalization for the inherent necessity of lines, of borders and limitations, in one’s life and one’s poetry. In short, his social consciousness, while not necessarily the primary governing force, is once again inextricably intertwined with the choices he makes, and which in turn shape him as a poet. A quote from his short story, “Thoughts from Port Royal, Kentucky,” published in *Image* magazine in 2009, sums up this concept aptly: “Each word is like a story in itself with histories and meanings. I love to see what words still mean and what they used to mean. It’s like a family tree of all the people on the earth and how the tribes have trickled down to nothing but a word or two in someone else’s speech” (W. Mills, “Thoughts from Port Royal, Kentucky” 18). Farming, then, may be part of Wilmer Mills’s fabric, his “story with histories and meanings,” but its invocation in his thought, the way he shapes his poetry, is an avenue by which to reach out to the world around him, to have “brought a gift for adoration to everything he did” (Hardin, “A Gift for Adoration,” 2) as well as a simply to look back on the cosmically insignificant wealth of personal experience.

The material, concrete world from which he gained this experience – experience which led him to the level of religious devotedness upon which all of his commentators remark – held a unique fascination for Mills, however, and his poetry made a point of remarking upon the significance of insignificant detail, and demonstrating how the

observation of it became an opportunity, an avenue, for the deeper stillness and awareness that afforded him spiritual insight – in short, how one came to transcend materialism through awareness and appreciation of the material. While it is, once again, entirely plausible that he borrowed some of this interest from the often seemingly cookie-cutter, rural pre-occupations of his New Formalist predecessors, including Robert Frost, Robert Penn Warren, and, of course, Richard Wilbur. Jeff Hardin also makes the case that this intense awe of material existence upon which his dualism rests was an inborn and entirely authentic personality trait, rather than a theoretical affectation. He writes, “Wil cut a loaf open for us to ‘sample,’ and there in the middle of the night we ate it as though it were manna. When Wil liked something – the taste of figs, for instance, or a resonating, rich line in a poem – he would shiver his whole body with visible delight” (Hardin, “A Gift for Adoration” 2). This delight is visible, too, in his poetry, in the rich expanse of detail he provides when speaking of the natural world. It allows him to describe how, “[b]right filaments of dust well up, then fall / Below the shadowed sil, until twilight / Consumes the room like water on a shore” (W. Mills, “A Dirge for Leaving” 20), or how “[t]he running road above the curve / In violet flows of wet asphalt. / Rain is writhing on the grass” (“A Codex for Killing” 21). Taking a cue, quite possibly, from frequently-taught interpretations of the Anglo-Saxon elegiac poetry, he declares, “[t]he pleasures of this world are hints / Of deeper feelings in the next / . . . Take aim and fire. Delight in that. / Each gaffe you make can turn to good. / Remember how it feels to be, / And not yet know that you’ve become, / An artist of hamartia / And heart” (“Benjamin Shooting Skeet” 91). It is equally clear, however, that while his work advocates a sense of full presence in the moment, and the transcendent joy of “being” without fretting over

“becoming,” and that this brand of joy came quite naturally to him as a person outside of his art, he was, it seems, also intelligent enough to appreciate the metaphorical weight of this preference for the concrete, and he explores it in his *Carolina Quarterly* interview:

while I have little patience for all the New Agey stuff, I can’t deny that those people are really in tune with spiritual matters and with the realness of spiritual things . . . . I’m reading a book . . . with a very sophisticated, intellectual perspective on how a human being interacts with the natural world in a meaningful way, how to be fully sentient. (Vernon 4)

And lest one confuse what he means by “the realness of spiritual things” with any element of New Age psychic practices or so-called spiritual goings on, he follows this up with a remark that “I just wish everyone else would slow down and look at the tree, the rock, the bird, and stop staring at the cell phone in his or her palm. People today are constantly trying to check their ‘fortunes’ in every sense of the world, but how we live now, racing into the future, has broken our stories and also degraded our sense of words, of text, of language” (5), though he does not go on to specify what exactly he means by “degradation” of language, or how lack of present-moment focus stunts this ability.

Richard Wilbur, however, frames the emphasis of concrete materiality less as one of elusive redemption from an equally elusive futility of lifestyle and presents it instead more as a kind of iconographic aid or guide to the formation of a personal understanding of the concepts one is trying to portray. Of his famous poem “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World,” Wilbur writes, “[w]ell, I can believe in angels by way of and in the laundry. I find laundry a great help to the conception of angels, and I suppose one thing I’m saying in that poem is that I don’t really want to have much truck with angels

who aren't in the laundry, who aren't involved in the everyday world. It's a poem against dissociated and abstracted spirituality" (Frank and Mitchell 25). Unlike Mills, however, he admits that this might indicate a weakness in his own character and/or capacity for conceptualizing non-physical elements of the world, rather than a heroic model on display: "I don't know what inclination of mine is corrected by a passion for the concrete, but there is an inclination I keep correcting. I'm sure of that" (26). Another possibility is that by "sense of language," here, at least in this particular instance, what Mills is actually referring to is his own, somewhat broader conception of "art," and/or Burkeian sensibility of what is sublime in art. For, indeed, Mills's own first steps into a creative field, as noted in his biographical sketch, involved intimate interaction with non-verbal physical objects through painting, and, later in life his carpentry and bread-making.

It is clear from his non-fiction essays, too, that this background in more hands-on art-forms greatly influenced the manner in which he shaped his poetry, and that he saw poetry as an extension of, a complement to, his painting and other creative endeavors, rather than something new which detracted from or replaced the artistic experiences he had enjoyed previously. He writes, "[t]he 19<sup>th</sup> century art critic, John Ruskin, in his book, *Modern Painters*, stated that painting is a specialized kind of visual language, and I believe that in a comparable way narrative poetry, as a distinct art form, is also a language until itself" (W. Mills, "Farming Versus Poetry" 5). For Mills, then, it seems that language, like spirituality, owns an inherently concrete form, to the extent that he takes the validity of such comparisons completely for granted, to the point where he describes his writing process itself as beginning with non-verbal image gathering, calling himself "a linguistic bower bird . . . [who collects] words, bits of conversation, road



signs, etymologies, etc. . . . and these bits and pieces germinate in my mind . . . . Whole poems grow out of certain images on their own” (Martin), and he manifests his philosophy of duality in seemingly effortless poems about waitresses at Waffle House, whose “broken pencil left a double line / On my tab, both legible as one design” (“Double Vision”). Far from employing these kinds of visually-strong narratives in poems about almost intentionally mundane characters by way of copying the community of his forebearers, or by way of attempting to generate a kind of platitudinous ethos in order to win the approval of a certain, pre-defined readership, both Mills and those who knew him seem to claim that this subject-matter, and the very personal experiences he attaches to them, were the sort of thing that genuinely inspired him to turn to poetry as a means of artistic expression in the first place.

Even more tellingly, Mills’s fascination with the concrete bears no stamp of Naturalist objectivity whatsoever, as, even outside of his narrative poems, he has an interesting tendency to superimpose a thinking self onto whatever scene is being described – occasionally even interrupting the set-up of a scene to interject an “I” or “my,” at points when he has not yet made it clear whether he himself is the speaker or whether he is placing us inside another character’s head. As we noted earlier, part of this repeated use of a natural, consistently-human-sounding, storyteller’s voice is a conscious, genre-specific technique Mills is employing to signal the fictional, narrative element of his poems, particularly in *Light for the Orphans*. In these poems, details about the identity of the self-conscious/self-aware speaker are often front-loaded in the titles, while the poem itself wastes no time burrowing into the psyche of the individual at hand with the intentionality, if, perhaps, not always, the poignant subtlety of an Anton Chekhov

short story. However, throughout the poems, the very descriptions and images themselves are almost invariably filtered through the light of an experience, whether present or past, in a way that borders on synesthesia, so that objectivity is clearly being seen through the mind of a thinking, comparing, remembering, and recording self. For instance, he aptly describes the tent-delivery woman in one poem as “tangled” (W. Mills, “The Tent-Delivery Woman’s Ride” 30), notes, presumably as himself, that “Some churches still preserve a sense of trees” (“Chapel of the Cross”), and again speculates, while describing the process of making his daughter’s cradle, about whether it is possible to hear the stars: “I’ve heard it planning knots in oak where scenes / Of grain in radiating lines abound. / Their patterns look like solar systems drawn / In books, elliptical by how they’re sawn” (“Making the Cradle”). Frequently, as ever, his parallel reminiscences are fraught with a complicated array of etymologies, educational factoids, and a personal psychology attentive to its own history. Consider the following:

And I have heard that rain stays underground

For twenty years or more before

It filters upward from the earth, unbound

And formless on the skyline’s shore.

But I cannot remember being told

When my grandfather’s well was drilled

Or where the piping rose to bend elbows

Of water in the house, and now I’m filled

With questions. Rain when I was five years old

Could still be drinkable and cold.

Childhood gurgles up and overflows. (“Rain” 13)

Every image, then, ultimately serves to direct attention back to the character, life, and breadth of knowledge of the person looking at it – constantly acknowledging and exploring, as it were the insurmountable material existence of the very consciousness which is seeking transcendence through engagement. We are given to understand, therefore, that Mills’s conception of spirituality, however fixed in rational order, and however avowedly Presbyterian, is not in any way invested in the debasement, shaming, or “getting past” of oneself, any more than his, at first seemingly paradoxical, fixation on concrete reality, framed in old-fashioned scenes, has anything to do with mere sentimentality or conformance to genre regionalism.

The only exceptions to his first-person-heavy poems are, in fact, those in which he is affirming and instilling this same sense of fully-engaged self in some other, very specific “you” – that is, an individual whom he is addressing within the poem, usually either his wife or one of his children. This happens frequently in the poems from the more intimate middle section of the book, for example in “Love Time, My Daughter!” (89), “My Queen of Hearts” (82), or “Benjamin Shooting Skeet” (90). Jeff Hardin speaks of an instance in which he observed the creation of such a moment in real life, while Mills was showing his daughter how to lay bricks: “[b]ound by clocks, adults often want only to get a task done as quickly as possible. In such a context, children are rarely brought into learning and shared responsibility. . . . What is time, if not this space we

share together? What is time, if not our own creativity finding a space to flourish?”  
(Hardin, “A Gift for Adoration,” 2). The act of seeing, touching, experiencing, and remembering the “objective”, outside world becomes, then, in and of itself, an introspective act – an act of discovering the components of self, and of building this into a thing to be shared.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: POETIC SELF-AWARENESS FROM COMMUNAL CONSCIOUSNESS

This framing of self as a thing with components to be discovered is central to much of Mills's poetry, and presents itself as especially interesting when viewed in light of Mills's tendency to loan his voice to the myriad of fictional outliers his poems portray. This is also true of the communal-based historical references he sometimes draws on. Austin MacRae, who reviews Wilmer Mills's *Light for the Orphans*, the collection of narrative poems, for *EP&M Online Review*, seems especially fascinated by the sheer openness of attitude and the subsequent variety of voices which find their way into Mills's work, and he opens his review with this as the focal point: "[w]ith far too much of modern poetry indulging in openly autobiographical experience, it's always refreshing to read a collection of poetry that gives a voice to others. Whereas many modern poets limit themselves to themselves . . . the true test of any poet is the breadth of his vision" (MacRae 1). He follows this up later with the remark that "[t]his collection boldly speaks to universal human experience (an overused yet apt phrase) when most first collections only stutter. Or, as mentioned before, many poets are too fascinated by their own lives and minds to think about creating a piece of unselfish art. For, in the end, unselfish works of art stand the test of time" (MacRae 3). However, both MacRae and David Middleton, in his review "Tell Me A Story" of *Selected Poems* for the *Sewanee Review*, remark upon

the pronounced loneliness and isolation of each narrator, pinning this on their out-dated careers, lifestyles, and predilections towards religious faith having rendered them “marginalized from society (MacRae 1) or the “orphans of modernity” (Middleton, “Tell Me a Story” xiii). This interpretation certainly does make sense in light of Mills’s prominently-outspoken resistance to all things technological, and in light of his and his support of Wendell Berry – whom, anecdotally, he once claimed to have written into a ballot for an election (Vernon 5) However, this interpretation does not correlate at all with accounts of Mills’s real life relationships with progressivism in the academy or with progressives as individuals. When asked about whether he felt out-of-place as a conservative in contemporary academia, Mills joked that “I really don’t think the academy is that secular. Many professors don’t go to church, but I’ve found that there is a certain type of personality that . . . still have a kind of evangelical fervor for ideas. . . . a lot of teachers who think their mission in life is to ‘reach’ students instead of teach them” (5). Mills himself, of course, adhered, both in philosophy in practice to an old-fashioned, perhaps occasionally naïve, lifestyle, writing that he once thought of himself as continuing the tradition of the Southern Agrarians (3).

Even though he self-identified as staunchly conservative within academic creative writing circles – consequently permitting his many admirers there to brand him, with tempered suspicion, as just another one of those quaint-minded New Formalists, if one who was talented enough to break the mold with regard to quality – Mills never seems to have felt himself particularly lonely or isolated, as Middleton and MacRae’s readings of his work would have him painted. He wrote that “[m]ost of my friends are very liberal and yet they seem to appreciate me. People who are truly liberal are more open to my

weirdness than conservative people are” (5). If anything, his bent towards an old-fashioned, naturalistic world of limited technology seems to indicate a longing for a kind of solitude and capacity for focused, uncluttered communion which his childhood in Brazil allowed him to glimpse, but which he felt notably lacking in his American adult life. He writes, “I see in some Christian group that the social causes supplant the spiritual ones. . . . Like I was saying, we should all live more like the Amish, and that means being less prosperous. In other words, trying to eradicate poverty only creates the goal of being prosperous, which is killing us. . . . All these things are bandwagons that distract people too much from the message of loving one’s neighbor” (Vernon 4). A better way to read this, then, might involve not simply assuming that Mills’s community of characters are a mere extrapolation of his own, personal inner experience, a canvas for his own emotions, and observe instead how similar Mills’s understanding of an exterior community’s impact on one’s sense of self, expressed in his short story “Thoughts from Port Royal, Kentucky,” recalls Richard Wilbur’s philosophy on the composition of the self. Mills, in the voice of his narrator, a boy adopted into an interracial family, writes, “[t]hey say the greatest thing God gives us is the freedom of the will to choose which way we are to go, to heaven or to hell. But I have chosen nothing in my life. I didn’t choose these people, and I certainly didn’t choose this Candy woman. . . . I’m certainly not in control of anything” (W. Mills, “Thoughts from Port Royal, Kentucky” 20). Richard Wilbur, then, writes, “whatever the Self is, any proper definition of it is going to include the idea that the Self is constituted of other people – of the influences of other people” (Frank and Mitchell 23), and he writes of these people, whom he identifies simply as “other people

I'd like to be understood by and would like to please," as "the witnesses in my head" (22).

Community then, for Mills, is both source and circumstance, and encounters with the various, perhaps involuntary "parts" of oneself, shaped through the ongoing influence of these circumstances, are sometimes merely patterns of exploration, rather than necessarily some deep-rooted form of self-expression. Mills is conscious of speaking to an audience of internally lost and isolated individuals from the perspective of an individual who understands both these feelings and their universality from his own life experience, and consequently feels no special claim to them. Jeff Hardin writes on his blog, in the process of analyzing Mills's "The Last Castrato" that "[l]ike the castrato, we have become 'orphans' of ourselves and move deeper into a society that values not art but imitation" (Hardin, "Wilmer Mills: 'The Last Castrato'"). Perhaps his lonely, isolated speakers, then, are meant to constitute a form of affirmation, a common point of connection and empathy, drawn from his reluctant engagement with, and subsequent inculcation into, a non-agricultural, technology-saturated world, more than it stems from any personal complaint about estrangement from this world. In short, it may be meant to mirror an internal sense of a pre-existing, external phenomenon, a quality originating, or so Mills feels, from the world into which he proposes to sing his poems, rather than from some inherent phenomenon self of which could paradoxically precede this type of engagement.

The solution Mills proposes to this pervasive sense of brokenness and isolation, even if his proposal is never stated explicitly so much as implemented organically, has to do with the well-ordered structure and tangible impact of sound as a vessel of



communication. In this, once again, his philosophy mirrors that of Richard Wilbur. Wilbur insists repeatedly that he places high emphasis on the centrality of sound to his own work, both in consideration of a finished product and as a significant factor in the creation process itself. He writes, “I think I probably read everything aloud, and over and over. . . . I notice how, quite often in them [his early poems], there are clots of consonants that make some lines unpronounceable. It’s clear that when I began I was a lot less concerned with the ear than I am now” (Frank and Mitchell 29). He also later remarks, “If you have some experience as a Broadway lyricist and then do a lot of running around the country reading your poems aloud to people, it’s going to modify your sense of words and of poetry” (29). Without necessarily saying so, the implication is that Wilbur’s concern with sound as a distinct element revolves mainly around a desire to increase accessibility – though there is, of course, also a marked inclination towards self-improvement, for which consciousness and consequent use of sound provides a measurement. Mills’s view of this matter, on the other hand, while loosely similar, is somewhat less pragmatic than it is introspective. Sound, employed as speech, after all, is a measurable, concrete manifestation of thought, and thus belongs to the physical reality through and in which Mills proposes to locate spiritual awareness. Interestingly, while it might seem more intuitive to assume that Mills depicts sound as an element which grounds one in the immediacy of the moment, Mills’s relationship with sound is far more often linked to a state of retrospection, within which his goal seems to be open-hearted perception, rather than retroactive criticism, as Wilbur’s was. Mills’s poem “Time Capsule”, for example, recalls a Thanksgiving Day from his own past within which sound functions as the focal access point for memory, “[a] wax recording of the sing-

along” within which a clock informs “[t]hat time is soft of hearing; like a rock, / It listens in the ground” (“Time Capsule”). Both of his collections, *Light for the Orphans* and *Selected Poems*, also begin with two poems that paint a memory of sound – specifically music, though, and not speech patterns – as possessing on-going formative powers. In “Morning Song,” Mills describes a scene in which “we listen for the household sounds / Of home: ice pouring from a jar, / Forks, knives, the flour sifter’s rhythmic rounds. / Each tone recalls our childhood’s symphony / Of clanks and bangs that softened into notes / We later learned to read” (3-4). “Mockingbird Boy,” then, speaks about a “quiet child” who plays with birds in the garden and then picks out “[t]he untaught music of his listening” on his mother’s piano. The poem ends thus:

He holds his tiger lily tongue  
And glides his hands across his arms  
And chest, as if to show that music  
Sounds like water being poured  
All over him, as if to say  
His music comes from listening  
To mockingbirds reciting songs  
That on his ears might well have been  
The fossil calls of ancient birds  
That only mockingbirds remember. (5-6)

In addition to the clear baptismal image, then, Mills returns us to the strong impression of structured, ordered sound as being, not only organic and self-evident to an open-hearted listener, but heritable – the wisdom of the past shaping, clarifying, and transcending the present and all its chatter in order to transform the listener. The few times that Mills does invoke the act of “listening” as something which points towards the present, it functions more as a response to what he sees as an unhealthy desire to cast around anxiously for knowledge of the future: “I’m writing now because you’re listening, / Entirely present, empty of desire / That gnaws you. . . . / You feel the sluggish cadences of life, / And try to race ahead, impatiently, / To find the future and its holiday. / But then it keeps elapsing into past, / Behind your back” (“A Letter to Myself as a Young Man” 42). The call of the past, the all-consuming nature of ordered sound, and the intricate, demanding process of constructing this order, then, all function for Mills as a kind of protective barricade against the unfiltered junk noise of a society obsessed, to its own detriment, with technology, “progress”, and consumerism, and thus isolated from an internal sense of well-being. In the course of reminiscing about his childhood in Brazil, Mills states that “[w]henver there is a storm and the power goes off in the states, I just love it because the air gets so clear and quiet. We don’t realize how much the electricity all around us is throbbing like a big electric blanket that is humming with the frequency of 110 voltage. . . . I miss that kind of staticless experience of the world” (Vernon 1). Conscientiously ordered patterns of sound, and the process of ordering them, provide a means of communicating, of connecting, with others in a way that this thoughtless, pervasive noise tends to inhibit, rather than assist. But this tangibly controlled order also provides a means of protecting oneself in a healthy way from an onslaught of external

information, and so enables one to see more fully, to process better, and perhaps to understand anew, the layers of time that comprise one's identity. They create an avenue from the external community of tradition directly towards a reclaiming of self.

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- . "The Heart's Arithmetic". *Selected Poems*. Ed. Kathryn Oliver Mills. Evansville, Indiana: The University of Evansville Press, 2013. 125-126. Print.
- . "Ice Cream Angel". *Selected Poems*. Ed. Kathryn Oliver Mills. Evansville, Indiana: The University of Evansville Press, 2013. 75-76. Print.
- . "The Jar Garden". *Selected Poems*. Ed. Kathryn Oliver Mills. Evansville, Indiana: The University of Evansville Press, 2013. 59-60. Print.
- . "A Letter to Myself as a Young Man". *Selected Poems*. Ed. Kathryn Oliver Mills. Evansville, Indiana: The University of Evansville Press, 2013. 41-43. Print.
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APPENDIX A –CHECKLIST OF PUBLICATIONS BY WILMER  
MILLS, 1998-2016

**Books**

*Light for the Orphans: Poems by Wilmer Mills.* Ashland, Oregon: Story Line Press, 2002.

Print.

*Right as Rain.* Richland, Washington: Aurelia Press, 1999. Print.

*Selected Poems.* Ed. Kathryn Oliver Mills. Evansville, Indiana: The University of  
Evansville Press, 2013. Print.

**Anthologies**

*Contemporary American Poetry (Penguin Academics Series).* Ed. R. S. Gwynn and April  
Linder. Pearson Longman, 2004. Print.

“Ghost Story.”

*The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets.* Ed. David Yezzi. Athens, Ohio:  
Swallow Press, 2009. Print.

“Berkeley Café,” p. 216-218

“The Dowser’s Ear,” p. 218-219

“Morning Song,” p. 222-223

“Rain,” p. 220-222

“Rest Stop, Alabama,” p. 215-216

## **Periodicals**

1998

*The Hudson Review*, Volume LI, Issue 3

“The Shoeshine Man’s Romance”

“The Tent Delivery Woman’s Ride”

2001

*The New Criterion*, Volume 20, Issue 4

“Remembering Grand Isle,” p. 52

*New Republic*, Volume 225, Issue 9/10

"Rest Stop, Alabama," p. 55

2002

*Critical Quarterly*, Volume 44, Issue 1

"The Old Goat Breakfast Club," p. 78

*The New Criterion*, Volume 20, Issue 6

“Black Skimmers on the Gulf Coast,” p. 34

*The Hudson Review*, Volume LV. Issue 3

“Stanzas for Kathryn,” p. 403-407

*Literary Imagination*, Volume 4, Issue 2

"Treow: An Etymology," p. 263

2003

*Louisiana Literature*, Volume 20, Issue 2

"Déjà-Vu In New Orleans," p. 46-49

*Poetry*, Volume 182, Issue 3

"An Equation For My Children," p. 154

*Tar River Poetry*, Volume 43, Issue 1

"Making The Cradle (Poem)," p. 33

2005

*Poetry*, Volume 187, Issue 1

"At Dauphin Island, 1997," p. 16

2007

*Anglican Theological Review*, Volume 89, Issue 2

"Carol and Apology," p. 289-290

2008

*Carolina Quarterly*, Volume 59, Issue 1

"Nascar Poster Boy," p. 44-45

"A Young Priest's Wife Begins To Think," 41-43

*Modern Age*, Volume 50, Issue 4

"Monteagle Farmer," p. 355-356

*Shenandoah*, Volume 58, Issue 3

"Walter Anderson On The Chandelleurs," p. 5-6

*Southern Review*, Volume 44, Issue 4

"The Genius Of Hardin County," p. 764-765

2009

*Image: A Journal of the Arts & Religion*, Volume 61

"Thoughts from Port Royal, Kentucky," p. 17-28

*Literary Imagination*, Volume 11, Issue 1

"After The Fact," p. 50-51

2010

*First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, Volume 208

"Near Starbucks," p. 38

*Modern Age*, Volume 52, Issue 3

"Pop's Happy Land and Truck Stop," p. 219-220

*Poetry*, Volume 196, Issue 4

"Nigella," p. 276

*Sewanee Review*, Volume 118, Issue 2

"The Flower Beds Of War," p. 191

2011

*Carolina Quarterly*, Volume 61. Issue 1

"Contingo," p. 36



"Tangere," p. 40

"Telos," p. 39

*The New Criterion*, Volume 30, Issue 1

"From Odi Barbare," p. 81-82

"Snowman Argument," p. 84

*First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, Volume 219

"Dream Vocation," p. 7

2012

*Alabama Literary Review*

"Buying Your Perfume," p. 79

"Ice Cream Angel," p. 77-78

"Light For The Laundromat," p. 74-75

"Monorhyme For My Wife At Forty," p. 76

*The Hudson Review*, Volume LXV, Issue 2

"Fallen Fruit," p. 245-246

"From Lookout Mountain at Night," p. 243-245

*Yale Review*, Volume 100, Issue 1

"A Letter To Myself As A Young Man," p. 87-89

2013

*The New Criterion*, Volume 31, Issue 7

"Ruach," p. 23

*First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, Volume 230

“Crosswalk,” p. 52

**Other**

“Farming Versus Poetry: The Making of a Rebel”. *Poetry Net*. PoetryNet.org, July 2006.

1-6. Web. 2 March 2016.

“Living in Eternity”. *Chapter 16: A Community of Tennessee Writers, Readers, and*

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