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Appalachian Literature and the "Red-Headed Stepchild of Publishing:" The Writings of Victor Depta and the Cultural Work of Independent Presses

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Appalachian Literature and the "Red-Headed Stepchild of Publishing:"
The Writings of Victor Depta and the Cultural Work of Independent Presses

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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

by

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ABSTRACT

Appalachian Literature and the "Red-Headed Stepchild of Publishing:"
The Writings of Victor Depta and the Cultural Work of Independent Presses

By Kristopher Clifford

Over the past couple of decades, Appalachian literature has developed a strong and close relationship with independent publishing, showing the latter to be an important medium for the expression for Appalachian voice. As the attempted consolidation of the book trade into a corporate, bottom-line oriented, high-profit industry minimizes the publication of books with mere "regional" appeal at the same time that the cultural products of Appalachia, as a region, continue to be marginalized through the continued deployment of stereotypes and attitudes of inferiority, Appalachian writers find it difficult to have their books published and distributed by major publishing houses. As a remedy to this problem, independent publishers are flourishing, and this thesis looks at the work of one prolific author/publisher in particular, Victor Depta, who exemplifies this phenomenon. The published work of Victor Depta crafts a new characterization of Appalachian, by its very defiance of the stereotypes that try to limit that characterization and prevent its voice from being heard.

DEDICATED

To my grandmother, Roberta Ann Ford Hines, and also to my parents and Ann Schoolcraft, without whose enduring patience and support I could never have finished.

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INTRODUCTION

Appalachian literature, and more specifically, Appalachian poetry, seem deceptively simple, yet are heavily connoted phrases that more often than not imply antiquated rural stereotypes, socioeconomic impoverishment, regional audience appeal, and most unfortunately, limited “literary” appeal. Certainly there’s a strong audience for Appalachian literature in the book trade, and it is represented in the market by highly visible Appalachian writers as Harriot Arnow, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Barbara Kingsolver, Denise Giardina and others who have carved a place in the mainstream literary consciousness for intelligent, authentic, and sympathetic literature from and about the region. Appalachian literature has had a widely varied past and range of appeal, from insulting, gross exaggerations of stereotype played to and written for usually more metropolitan audiences, finding humor in the ridicule of the rural nature of the Appalachian population, to depictions of the area that resulted from misattributions of the causes of Appalachian hardship, finding fault in the people of the area rather than the conditions of their circumstances, to a finally much more authentic brand of Appalachian literature that speaks from an understanding of it all, knowing both the beautiful and the ugly, and how they coexist in the region.

However, the idea of authentic representation in regional literature (which can really only be authentic so far as it is exhaustive), and the inherent exclusivity of publishing contradict each other, so while the material being published today is arguably much more “authentic” than what has preceded it, it can still only be considered a partial and limited representation of Appalachian culture and its writing. Popular works by Appalachian writers do exist, but as the editors to *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature* note "awareness of the *region itself* as a thriving center of literary creativity is not widespread" (Miller, Hatfield and Norman xiii).

Others, of course have noticed the negative spaces surrounding the more popular works produced by the major publishing houses—works like Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, Giardina's *Storming Heaven* and *Unquiet Earth*, or Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, for whom a certain degree of comparative success was assured simply by the backing of the press's name and the resources made available for marketing, promotion and distribution—and knowing that audiences existed for Appalachian literature, these others have gone on to found small, independent presses that work to satisfy a public desire for the representation of Appalachian culture in writing. For many of these small presses, goals are ideological rather than quantifiable on balance sheets, and some exist only for as long as the publisher has the time and resources to make it function. Certainly, many exist to publish works that would otherwise be shunned by major presses, and so might constitute a financially risky project, yet would at the same time fulfill their ideological needs.

One such press, already with a distinctive style and substantial catalog, is Victor Depta's Blair Mountain Press. Founded in 1999 and named for the mountain on which occurred the bloody Battle of Blair Mountain, Blair Mountain Press was created by Depta to publish new works by contemporary Appalachian writers. And although their mission indicates a dedication to publishing only volumes or collections of poetry, they also make allowances for works in other genres, most noticeably his plays and trilogy of novels. Blair Mountain Press fully develops, publishes, markets and distributes their own work, and as Depta once characterized it, it's a "one-man operation." This makes classifying Blair Mountain Press difficult as some might arguably refer to it as a vanity press operation, though I later describe how it is more accurate to describe it as an independent press, in part because in addition to Depta's work, Blair Mountain Press has also published the poetry of Edwina Pendarvis and Pamela Steed Hill.

Since 1968, Depta's poetry, short stories, and essays have been published more than 155 times in over 125 journals and collections. Additionally, Depta has written eight books of poetry, two collections of plays, a trilogy of novels and a book of essays, all but four of which were published through Blair Mountain Press. In these works Depta clearly depicts his Appalachian heritage, and what he values about it, but to look at his body of work for merely that would be to lose much of what makes the beauty of his poetry, drama, and fiction so distinctively invigorating: his works reveal an author who is not only able to authentically express and represent his Appalachian heritage, but also one who is acutely concerned with how that representation is affected by the telling, and passionate about the need for that representation to be visibly manifested in physical text. His continual strive for authenticity, in all his roles as poet, novelist and publisher is the real strength of Depta and Blair Mountain Press.

This thesis will firstly explore the problem of canonicity and issues of value as it relates to Appalachian literature. Although Appalachian writers face many obstacles to overall acceptance in terms of popularity, one of the most debilitating is the perception of Appalachian literature as a form of "low art." Such designations imply that there is less literary value in Appalachian literature in comparison with the texts that compose the traditional canons, and this even extends further in that an examination of current anthologies would seem to imply that Appalachian works also don't have much literary value in comparison with texts that make up newer reformist "canons" of literature. Appalachian literature suffers from stigmatization in literary culture, which may be the result of ignorance in the frequent misattribution of stereotypes and undervaluing of the use of common language and themes. As a remedy of this, I debate the designation of value in literary communities and argue for the importance of representation as a form of cultural work in the revaluation of Appalachian literature.

Secondly, this thesis addresses independent publishing as an alternative to corporate presses for Appalachian writers. The argument for greater accessibility and reception in academic communities notwithstanding, independent publishers provide a valuable resource to Appalachian authors, as they are often concerned with similar issues of representation and authenticity as the writers they publish. Unfortunately, the current publishing environment is hostile to small presses who often are very limited in resources, so I discuss the material problems facing independent publishers, along with some possible solutions. However, this ironically has the fortunate effect of displacing profit as a motivating factor, so most independent presses are motivated more by ideals, publishing books whose worth can't be as easily figured by a simple profit and loss statement, but on the other hand may not earn back the money invested in their creation.

After probing the questions of canonicity and the problematic issues faced by small presses, this thesis will explore Depta's body of work, grouping them primarily by style or theme. By approaching his work this way, we not only get a sense of how his work represents his culture and heritage, but can also see how his goals as a poet not only change from piece to piece, but from each through time in his maturation as a writer. His work as a whole reveals him to be a very multi-faceted artist, and his voice sounds different with each topic; at times it is capricious and light, at time cuttingly ironic, and at times angry and condemnatory, especially in discussions of mountaintop removal and the contemporary practices of coal mining.

My overall hopes for this research, and for the situation faced by Appalachian authors, is an increased visibility and appreciation for Appalachian literature. Certainly some Appalachian writers are gaining notoriety in popular culture—for example, Robert Morgan's *Gap Creek* became an Oprah Book Club bestseller, and both he and Ron Rash have won O. Henry Prize

awards—but such cases seem to be exceptions to the rule. Further, as a topic of academic study, Appalachian literature is primarily only appreciated within the region itself, and outside of the region, in more mainstream literary culture, we find that stereotypes still persist and color the perceived literary value of works. While small presses represent some problematic issues for teachers of literature in terms of "quality"—insofar as literary quality is often assumed in literary culture, a point I debate—it is exactly that idea of quality that needs to be addressed; we need to understand quality as culturally contingent and therefore need to value works based on their relation to the culture they represent. Once we do, Appalachian literature will have a chance to stand on its own within the canon of currently valued works, speaking with an authentic Appalachian voice, representing the artistry of a distinctively American, plural culture.

PART I—CANONS OF LITERATURE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL PRESS PUBLISHING

Chapter 1: Canonization and the Value of Appalachian Literature

Appalachian Literature and the Problems of Stereotype

Appalachian authors—authors dealing primarily with Appalachian themes, values, and aesthetics, as problematic as these terms may be to define, not simply authors from an area within the borders of Appalachia—face significant hurdles to the publication and popular reception of their work. Of course, this could be said of any author, insofar as publication can be a difficult goal to negotiate for anyone wishing to do so on a traditional basis,¹ but Appalachian authors in particular face challenges resulting from persistent and deeply embedded stereotypes that can hinder the reception of their work.

Of course, no one could imply that stereotypes don't exist for members of other groups or regions, but rarely are the stereotypes so blatantly encouraged and propagated as those about Appalachians and their culture. Ignoring, for the moment, that the area circumscribed by the Appalachian Regional Commission's official boundaries of Appalachia comprise widely varying geographic regions and cultures, it is mind-boggling that Appalachia is still so popularly derided in the media and general public consciousness. In the introduction to *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes*, Dwight Billings notes that "mountain people, it seems, are acceptable targets for hostility, projection, disparagement, scapegoating and contempt" (Billings 3), following which he lists several examples cited in the *Appalachia Journal* from mainstream news and media outlets including the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Washington Post*, and

¹ Traditional publishing is a term often used in opposition to self-publishing or subsidized publishing, alternatives that have become much more economically feasible given the advances in desktop publishing, transmission media, and print technology of the last fifteen years.

others, but also from popular television and major Hollywood movies, as well as popular regional attractions such as the annual "Hillbilly Days" Shriner fundraising event in Pikeville Kentucky. Indeed, the very title of a 2003 article in the (United Kingdom) Times, "Mountains Breed Reclusive Spirit," suggests an ignorance reminiscent of Jack Weller's now-infamous *Yesterday's People*, as it goes on to note that "It is an insular and conservative place, seldom visited by outsiders, where the quintessential American traits of religious fundamentalism, fierce independence and distrust of government are still manifest" (Fletcher 15).

However, Billings goes on to describe the problem of stereotyping even further: "Popular media are not the only culprits, though, when it comes to disparaging Appalachians. Academia and the arts follow right in tow" (Billings 5). He lists recent publications in history and the social sciences, as well as in the arts, before recounting numerous critiques of Robert Schenkken's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *The Kentucky Cycle*, which was the beginning of *Back Talk . . .* itself. And even as recently as 2006, such stereotyping has continued as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an excerpt of the book *Coal Hollow: Photographs & Oral Histories*, by Melanie and Ken Light, which ended a drastically oversimplified and harshly one-sided summary of the authors' handpicked problems plaguing the region with the lines "Along with mineral debris, the coal companies left behind human slag. The broken earth and the broken people await reclamation" (B19). The images of the people of Appalachia as "human slag" and "awaiting reclamation" not only disparages all Appalachians with the same generalizing brush, but encourages further exploitation as if it were the only remedy to a desperately hopeless situation.

Sometimes the ignorance behind these stereotypes is difficult to discern and criticize as they are often being voiced even in the same breaths used to praise Appalachians. James

McPherson, whose personal and touching relationship with Breece Pancake is related in his introduction to *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, suggests an almost inherent difference of class when he notes that Breece's "West Virginia origins tended to isolate him from the much more sophisticated and worldly middle-class students from the suburbs of Washington and the Northeast" (McPherson 9), ignoring the fact that much of Breece's hometown of Milton is, in appearance and structure, more like one large suburb than a small town.. Angela Freeman, in "The Origins and Fortunes of Negativity" takes McPherson to task, along with several of Pancake's reviewers; of McPherson's quote that "eyes, in that region, are trained to look either up or down: from the hollows up toward the sky or from the encircling hills down into the hollows. Horizontal vision, in that area, is rare. . . it is an environment crafted by nature for the dreamer and for the resigned" (McPherson 11), Freeman states that such a phrase "may be original and poetic, but it created a false and narrow dichotomy for the population of West Virginia" (Freeman 247).

These persistent misconceptions of Appalachian culture affect the reception of all things Appalachian, particularly literature, in the popular realm as well as the academic. That it persists even still in this latter institution, one where stereotypes are often undermined and dissected by critical thought, might arguably be more damaging to the plight of Appalachian authors than the former. Indeed, if it can be successfully argued that the literary arts are becoming more and more eclipsed in favor of visual and popular arts, then it would follow that academic institutions are increasingly responsible for reifying the place of literary arts in the culture, and so invoking a need for responsibly rigorous self-examination in its assumption of cultural values and stereotypes.

That literature has seemingly become less and less important in the popular sphere shouldn't be surprising yet it is another major factor influencing the reception of Appalachian authors. Focusing on poetry alone, John Spaulding gives a good description of the decline of interest in poetry in popular media in the article "Poetry and the Media: The Decline of Popular Poetry." While popular and widely-distributed magazines such as *American Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, and *Vanity Fair* often devoted several pages to poetry in every issue—including, for example, Appalachian poet Jesse Stuart in *Ladies Home Journal* (148)—and newspapers commonly did the same, "assur[ing] that, if published, [a poet's] poems would reach a wide, general audience," Spaulding suggests that this popularity begins to decline with the advent of television. Radio, in particular, he notes "seemed to be the ideal medium for poetry" (149), echoing Victor Depta's own assertion that, first and foremost, "poetry is an aural art form" (Depta, Person Interview 2005). However, he notes, "by the mid-fifties, only a few radio programs of poetry readings remained. . . . since the format of radio broadcasting was changing in response to the popular appeal of television," which, he goes on, "has not picked up the tradition" despite the surprising popularity of CBS's "Americans: A Portrait in Verse" in 1962 (151).

Spaulding goes on to describe the problem that although there are numerous publications which still publish poetry today their distributions are incredibly small in comparison to popular media and are primarily directed toward "poets, writers, and teachers of writing" (151). Of course, going back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we find, as Alan Golding notes, "most poetry appeared only in magazines, and those magazines had short lives" (Golding 8). Poetry has all but disappeared from the popular cultural consciousness, in general and Spaulding's conclusion that "the media do not simply reflect the direction and taste of popular

culture, they create it and form it as well" implies a prescription for the remedy of this situation. The utilization of popular media is necessary for a reified presence of poetry in the culture at large.

And while Spaulding presents his investigation of the popular reception of poetry in contrast to, among other forms of entertainment, fiction, other authors readily acknowledge a decrease in value of all literary arts in popular culture. Mark Eaton, following from John Guillery's use of Pierre Bourdieu's term "cultural capital," states of the decline in value of literature that

the most serious challenge for literary studies as a whole is the declining interest in serious literature among traditional-age college students. I am convinced that this lack of interest has more to do with the diminishing cultural capital of literature than with our students' hurried lifestyles. If there were powerful inducements to read Dante and Shakespeare—or, for that matter, Faulkner and Morrison—as a measure of one's education level and social status, then students would be drawn to these authors with greater urgency and in greater numbers. But nowadays accountants, bankers, computer programmers, doctors, lawyers, software developers, and most other professionals don't need to have any knowledge of literature whatever. (313)

If we can extrapolate from this a conclusion similar to Spaulding's, then the audience for the literary arts—poetry, fiction, nonfiction, drama, etc.—in general is likewise shrinking and becoming more concentrated as a demographic of readers academically, and professionally, pre-disposed to receive it positively. The popularity and reception, then, of individual works, is becoming more and more reliant on their acceptance and use in an academic context.

It is important to note the economy implied by the term "cultural capital," and through it the weight given to literature within the literary community. The cultural capital of a work is determined by its value to the culture, and within the literary arts Bourdieu describes a rigid hierarchy that determines the value of that capital, and how that also relates to that art's consumers. He notes that "the practices and ideologies of consumers are largely determined by the level of the goods they produce or consume in this hierarchy. The connoisseur can immediately discern . . . the order of legitimacy and the appropriate posture to be adopted in each case" (Bourdieu 129). The recognition and acceptance of literary works is more than just a reflection of taste, then, but of a certain type of hierarchical class within the literary culture. What one appreciates, and with the popularity of theory, *why* one appreciates it, determines one's place in that literary culture. So at the same time that the popular audience for literature is shrinking, we have to weigh a work's importance to the literary culture in order to recognize the value it holds overall.

Enter the Canon

The necessity of a work's acceptance in an academic context leads to a discussion of the importance of the literary canon to an author's popular reception, in general, and the place of Appalachian literature in such a canon, or canons. The term "canon," in its application in a literary context, is an elusive and slippery word, owing in part to the fact that "it is tacit rather than explicit, very loose-boundaried, and subject to changes in its inclusions; while the texts in the canon are open to, and constantly subjected to, diverse and often conflicting interpretations and evaluations" (Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 20). Abrams describes here how the use of the term canon is derived from the Greek word for "measuring rod or rule" and then to the

biblical canon as "the list of books in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament which were designated by church authorities as comprising the genuine Holy Scriptures" (19). The problems posed by the idea of a literary canon come directly from the lack of accountability and justification inherent in the formalization of such a structure by a governing body of authority. Additionally, the notion of a canon, as Abrams tracks it, has followed a process of generalization of the term, from the signifier of a specific frame of measure, to the genuine Holy Scriptures as decreed by an authoritative body, to the verifiably authentic works of a specific author—the canon of Shakespeare—to the works that represent particularly meritorious examples of literary excellence. While it's true that *A Glossary of Literary Terms* can only provide a brief explanation and superficial understanding of the notions of most of the terms it defines, the definition of canon might be considered particularly relevant in consideration of Abram's past work with W. W. Norton & Company's series of anthologies, which, he considers, are the "most likely" (20) sites of publication of canonized writers. Strangely, though, Abrams is notably reticent on the subject of canonization.

How canons come to be formed is a topic which finds considerable debate among scholars, differing usually in the nuances of why certain texts or authors become canonized. John Guillory has written extensively on the topic of canon formation and he charts the creation of a particular canon through T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks in his essay "The Ideology of Canon Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks." He argues that the value of canonical works is perhaps more complex than might be inferred from notions of excellence alone, and in order to show how such is the case, he uncovers the ideology behind T. S. Eliot's valuations of literature in his early critical essays.

While it is true that quality of the literary works or authors—judged by differing bases depending on the type of canon being represented—plays a role in their canonization, it is hardly the only factor of canon formation; and, in fact, the ultimate effect of its role, and the very meaning of the word "quality," become questionable under Guillory's examination. He notes that "For *some* reason *some* literature is worth preserving," ostensibly the essence of the claim of the canon, and that the canonical work "is assumed to be *innately* superior," a claim that "has always been suspect" (Guillory, "The Ideology of Canon Formation" 338). In fact, the canon he is charting is one claimed by Eliot of "a marginal elite standing in an apocryphal relation to the established canon." But with such a deconstruction of an initial canon to form another, Guillory finds the substance of his investigation in the ideologies of Eliot's "canon-making criticism" (Guillory 339). More important, and more accurate, than a notion of an intrinsic quality of the works themselves, Guillory finds, is their conformity. Borrowing the rhetoric of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Guillory notes that "The idealization of the very order of the monuments means that what the new poet threatens is disorder; he must present himself to his predecessors with a demeanor of conformity if he is to have any chance of altering them or of being admitted to their company" (340). Before it can be canonized, a work has to be able to provide a promise of neutrality; it can't have the appearance of the ability to unseat the canonization of other texts conferred with such authority. Conformity, though, is the very essence of hegemony, and in realizing that, we begin to see how notions of power begin to figure in the idea of a canon. Guillory notes that Eliot identified "orthodoxy" as a "fundamental evaluative norm" (348), but then he goes on to state that "Orthodoxy, as the form of ideology, must conceal its relation to hegemonic elements by incorporating a claim to universality: truth is truth for the whole society" (349).

If we understand this hegemonic element of the canon solely through the aesthetic values championed by Eliot and Brooks then we can understand how some of its deterministic elements are quite intangible. The effects of the canon on culture, however, can be measured in very real terms. John J. Doherty notes as much in "Hegemony of the Canon," as he describes the necessity of the canon to "collection building" in libraries, where the presence of the canon and its effects is never questioned—or, seemingly, questionable—and the decisions made by librarians within the framework of the canon reflect its total influence. In discussing that "canons . . . are evolutionary," he implies that, ironically, even the collection of non-canonical work is a potentially canonizing activity: "Librarians might consider themselves facilitators of *exploration* by collecting material that is currently non-canonical. By doing so they can facilitate the evolution of the canon" (Doherty 404). But, certainly, for the library sciences the canon's necessity must be assumed since the library itself represents the explicit and physical manifestation of canonical power, and as such is directly subject to the monetary economy: "In fiscally lean times, when collection development librarians have little to no discretionary monies, a standard collection of works specific to each discipline, or a canon, is a very powerful tool" (403). When decisions have to be made about what books to house, decisions that affect the accessibility of those works to the members of the institutions and community to which a library is beholden, the overall interest in those institutions and community have to be observed. It only makes sense, then, when the choice is between a conservative approach which would favor works which reflect the traditional values and aesthetics of a culture and discipline and whose place in the canon signifies a past positive evaluative judgement, or, in Doherty's terms, an "exploratory" approach which chooses a more widely-ranging sample of work but relies on

aesthetic value judgements perhaps not hitherto addressed by the community or institution, that one would choose the former.

While the supposed universality of quality that helps to determine such judgements that Guillory notes has the sense of the originally implied intrinsic quality of a work, for him it goes on to represent a notion even less concrete, if possible, and less open to criticism. Guillory identifies literary culture as representatives who labor under the ideology of an inherent quality in the "transmission of a valued tradition . . . aspir[ing] to define value for the whole of society" (Guillory 350). However, in maintaining this hegemonic conformity, a reliance on conformity also denies the value of literature as humanistic representation in that "the world we live in is a world of *difference*" and so "as many canonical principles as there are possible ideologies of literary culture," but that "literary culture has aspired to canonical consensus, an illusion reinforced by the cognitive silence of the literary work, the silencing of difference" (350).

However, Guillory identifies a revision of Eliot's canon and expansion of the ideologies of canon formation, in Cleanth Brooks. He notes that

The *incognito* clergy [literary culture] is relocated within a *visible* social structure: the pedagogical institution. The idealized reading of the lovers' withdrawal must be understood as symptomatic of the professional commitment to the preservation of value: just as the lovers institute love in their act of renunciation, so it is the marginality of value which is both deplored and established by the idealization of literature. (356)

In a move which further redeems literary culture, he notes that "It should be possible to understand the very divergence of canons and canonizers as a better ground than consensus for a defense of literary culture. The disestablishment of consensus may well have become the project of criticism" (359). Because the profession of the literary culture is explicitly the appreciation of

literature and the literary tradition, a certain degree of hegemonic conformity is inevitable. However, in the idealization of literature, marginality of value inherently finds both extremes in the practice of qualitative judgement, and the expression of true difference can be found in the establishment of alternative canons and criticism. That there is "widespread dissatisfaction with canon-formation" (Small 323) obviously indicates a place for difference and nonconformity within literary culture.

The Role of the Academy in Canon Formation

Despite the numerous debates and sides taken around this topic of canon formation, the one constant is the role of the academy—or Guillory's literary culture—inherent in the notion of a canon. Rarely, it seems, are staples of popular culture identified as canonized cultural touchstones or signifiers. Perhaps for good reason, though, as the tides of popular preference seem much less stable than those of academic favor, making a legitimization of canons even more debatable when in the popular realm.

Following from Guillory, Susan VanZanten Gallagher identifies two types of canon: imaginary, insofar as "there is no specifically defined body of works or authors that make up such a canon" (Gallagher 54) and pedagogical, composed of texts that make up the substance of university literature courses. These terms don't imply a mutual exclusivity; in fact, their very nature suggests a sense of causation, however indeterminate the vector may be. Does a work's popularity for classroom use result in its canonization, or are works chosen for classroom use because of their status in relation to the canon? Gallagher attempts to shed some light on such questions as she traces a particular work to its status of pedagogical canonicity. How such a work becomes a part of a pedagogical canon, she states, is as a combination of its "material

conditions, accidental encounters, pragmatic needs, and ethical commitments" (54). She charts the lucky circumstances that brought Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, *Nervous Condition*, to be published, notes its widely accepted "teachability" (57) in its imminent accessibility for undergraduates and applicability to a wide-range of young adult issues, and describes how the novel has become popular in relation to specific politics and trends. Importantly, however, is her description of the literary culture as transmitters and active agents of the transmission of such values. She notes that the book sales "took off very quickly, and almost all the sales were to the academic market" (58), concluding that "we can then clearly see the way in which pedagogy often begins the canonical process rather than existing only as a product of that process" (66). Indeed, Gallagher recounts her initial introduction to the book through a professor from an African university, who encouraged her to use the book in her African literature course; a sentiment that is echoed by Mark Eaton when he states that, after reading Gallagher's article, he was intrigued and has "decided to use it when [he] teach[es] a planned course on postcolonial literature" (Eaton 305).

Alan Golding, in *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry*, also notes the role of academic institutions in canonization, particularly in the poetic canon. With the increased concentration of focus on the literary arts, especially poetry, in academic institutions, Golding explicitly attributes the principles of canon formation to the New Critics, who, he says "proposed both a critical method, to counter the profession's almost exclusively historical emphasis, and a canon, that of modernist poetry, which seemed to prove not merely the method's usefulness but its necessity to the profession's survival" (Golding 72). With the introduction of new criticism came a change in the focus of literature studies, one which made the existence of a canon

necessary to the validation of its critical method and located its formation precisely, almost exclusively, within the academic institution.

In fact, the formation of the canon was also necessary to maintain the class distinctions implied by the cultural capital of literature as it competed with scientific rigor and objectivity. Lizabeth Cohen, in "The Class Experience of Mass Consumption" describes the rise of mass culture and consumerism of working and middle classes, pinpointing it in the 1920s and '30s, and while her argument applies primarily to material goods produced and bought during the Great Depression, she makes the important point that "stores, goods and other items of mass consumption [became] coded for social class" (Cohen 160). As with all goods, technological advances in printing, marketing, and distribution allowed for a much more open accessibility of literature, so as it became more and more generally accessible to a wider—and in some cases, or with some classes, less educated—population, a new standard would have been necessary to keep the academic literary community from becoming obsolete.

Returning again to the effects on the canon by Eliot and the literary modernists, Timothy Materer and Leonard Diepeveen provide very concrete examples of how attitudes about a certain type of literature were shaped, or "marketed," to a politically and economically manufactured end. Materer primarily discusses Ezra Pound, describing him as a propagandist who advanced his view of literature and modernism by marketing it as written to a specific elite by a specific elite, such as Joyce and Eliot who, Materer notes, were "best described as avant-garde" (Materer 25). He notes that Pound considered Harriet Monroe's journal *Poetry* as "too democratic to support" (21) and had issues with the American journal *Seven Arts* for wanting "to express the spirit of community" (23). For Materer, Pound's marketing attempts began with promoting Hilda Doolittle's poetry as of the school of *les Imagistes*, a term he coined which utilized the cachet of

a French name. His implicit disdain for the American working and middle class is clear in his positing of high culture as specifically an outsider culture; he seems to say that the English language itself, let alone the general English-speaking population, is inadequate to beholding this new school of art.

Diepeveen notes a similar disdain in T. S. Eliot whom he quotes as saying "at this very moment [the middle class] enjoys the triumph, in intellectual matters, of being able to respect no other standards than its own . . . Culture is traditional, and loves novelty; the General Reading Public knows no tradition and loves staleness" (Eliot 451, qtd. in Diepeveen 47). Eliot makes a very clear distinction between "culture" and the general reading public, attacking contemporary reading habits to construct his view of modern poetry with the academy. Indeed, even his use of the word "intellectual" is suspect, since he assumes a very standard for it as well.

However, looking closer at both of these accounts—of Eliot and of Pound—we see that this formulation of taste is really more arbitrary than either proponent would have it appear. Like Pound, Eliot also encouraged "a small group of readers . . . to imagine themselves as part of a professional elite, as included in the appreciators of good writing," but by "good writing" he was referring to writing "that looks remarkably like *The Waste Land*" (Diepeveen 52). Similarly, Pound's marketing was specifically manufactured for the promotion of his friends' poetry or journals, or even his own journal, after taking over *The Little Review*, so in this sense the academic concerns of canon formation are inextricably tied to economic concerns as well.

However, going back to Gallagher, as thoroughly as she makes her argument for primarily pedagogical—at the exclusion of these other, more arbitrary factors—canon formation, the objections voiced by Jeffrey Insko stand out; specifically, that "while Gallagher adds nuance to our understanding of how canons are produced, she has less to say about what canons,

imaginary or pedagogical, *do*" (Insko 342). The accounts of Eliot and Pound imply already some of the effects that canons can have on the literary culture, but Gallagher seems to ignore this; in fact, in response to Martha Cutter's suggestion that the only way to avoid an institutionalized canon and the hegemony it represents is to constantly serve up new texts and explain why they are being valued, Gallagher states, "I don't see much point in continually changing what we teach just for the sake of contesting the notion of a canon" (Gallagher 56), a point I'll return to later.

But on the topic of what precisely what canons do in relation to literature outside of those canons, Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* makes an interesting case for the place of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction by women that could easily be equated to the argument for Appalachian literature as well. Though the aims of the two literatures are quite different, both have a history of being marginalized from the perspective of the traditional canon. Of the nineteenth-century novels that her investigation focuses upon, she states that they "have for too long been the casualties of a set of critical attitudes that equate intellectual merit with a certain kind of argumentative discourse and certain kinds of subject matter" (Tompkins 125). If we consider the exclusion of Appalachian literature from university classrooms on the same basis, we could infer the same. The use of common language, quaint settings, or characters which might easily be confused with stereotypes excludes Appalachian literature in advance as unintellectual.

The Literary Anthology and Revision of the Canon

Similarly to the institution of a library, the sites of material production that most value the process of canonization—and help to advance it—are contemporary anthologies. The anthology, it would seem, is almost synonymous with what might be considered by Gallagher as the closest

thing to resembling what an "ideal" pedagogical canon would look like. As a pedagogical tool, anthologies are used to single out individually excellent works and authors at the same time that they pool a body of literature together with an implied similarity of aesthetic value. However, unlike decisions made by a teacher about texts to be taught—the practical side of Gallagher's canon formation, which may rely on a host of contingencies unrelated to the place of a work in relation to the canon—the anthology, as an exemplar of the standards of the discipline, is created explicitly with a work's relation to the canon in mind and its "averaged" utility in the classroom. For example, works for the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed. were chosen for their ability to "stand the test of classroom use" as well as to "introduce students to the unparalleled excellence and variety of English literature" (Abrams xxxv). The anthology, then, is a site both of inclusion and exclusion, and, depending on the purpose of its editors, comments on the current constitution of the canon to which it reports.

It would be difficult to argue for exclusion of anthologies in general, and, while some critics do, that's certainly not my point, as they can be very valuable tools when used effectively. Paul Lauter, though an active critic of the canon, argues for the virtues of anthologies in "Taking Anthologies Seriously." He notes that the usual criticisms of anthologies are that they "were superficial," had "too many authors" who were "too uneven in quality," and "the multitude of options distracted students from focusing on the true aesthetic value of literary texts" (Lauter, "Taking Anthologies Seriously" 19). His first example in the usefulness of anthologies concerns the need to emphasize the dialog that texts have with their cultural contexts and create with each other, revealing the "conditions of textual production" (21) thereby encouraging students to examine how texts shape and are shaped by their own time. Using essays by Tom Paine, Alexander Hamilton and Judith Sargent Murray, he shows how discussions of moral political

rule were written through metaphors informed by gendered assumptions of feminine inequality, but then contrasts that by Murray's essay "On the Equality of the Sexes." Without an anthology, he notes "it is impossible to teach in this way" as these essays aren't widely available to the public without an anthology to house them. However, he also notes that texts can work in the other direction, speaking to the cultural context from which they derive, rather than simply from it. He uses poetry by Lydia Sigourney to show how her works were an attempt to "intervene in the deadly federal policy" (24) mandated by the Indian Removal Act. Likewise, he follows it with poetry by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to illustrate political conditions of textual production; Harper could have used intricate stylistics such as were valued by the modernists, but such subtleties might be lost to an audience that was composed largely of former slaves and others who learned to read late in their lives. So, much of her work contains a more oral element, rich in tone and inflection, to which they might be more sensitive. The anthology provides the opportunity to include authors such as these who not only come to represent the cultural groups from which they come to the literary community, but also reveal the political situations and cultural concerns that informed those groups.

On the other hand, the writing of an anthology is the (re)writing of literary history, in a sense, as it affirms a certain value for the texts it includes; however, as anthology writers create their own history, they run the risk of ironically undermining the true history of literature, and of the culture itself. Cary Nelson, in *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory*, notes that "the dynamic" of the master texts in the canon and their transcendence over their historical moment

is articulated to a series of oppositions that devalue history and elevate the works in the canon. A national project to maintain the hegemony of the dominant culture thus comes

into play, as we marginalize or suppress alternative visions of American culture, homogenizing an idealized version of American life by way of a limited notion of literary excellence. (Nelson 39)

While its true that there exist alternative canons and anthologies that attempt to resist or answer for such marginalization, this was not the case, it would seem, prior to American cultural movements of the nineteen-sixties. At that time, Paul Lauter notes, "most existing curricula, and the textbooks on which they were based, displayed and perpetuated traditional, exclusionary definitions of 'American literature'" (Lauter, "*The Heath Anthology* and Cultural Boundaries" 180). So while its true that alternative anthologies have been created to fill some of the gaps of exclusion created in the earliest anthologies, there still exists that potential for exclusion, and in fact it's important to note that no single anthology can be complete, thereby ensuring some level of exclusion. However, the problem isn't simply one of pedagogy; with the increased influence of humanism in literary critical studies, we can understand that exclusion from anthologies, and thereby from canons, translates to a lack of visibility and representation. With inherent quality judgments informing the inclusion of works in an anthology—for no matter how alternative or anti-canon an anthology tries to be, the works included have still been judged by the editors as displaying excellence in quality²—a lack of representation implies, then, a lack of value for the portion of society which certain works may represent.

Such value judgements, however, represent more than that, as such. They also contribute to what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the "symbolic production" of the work. In this view, a work of art and the value judgments placed upon it are not completely separate, but separate parts of

² See Tompkins, pg. 192: "Yet even though anthologists characterize their projects differently, and although the contents of their volumes vary drastically, the one element that, ironically, remains unchanged throughout them all is the anthologists' claim that their *main* criterion of selection has been literary excellence."

the same whole; the material work and the manifestation of value judgments come together in the symbolic object. In considering a work of art, Bourdieu points out that we must also

"consider as contributing to production not only the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.) but also the producers of the meaning and value of the work—critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such, in particular teachers." (Bourdieu 37)

The role of critics and the implicit value judgments of editors of anthologies does more than just reflect aspects of a text for the edification of readers. They actually help to create a certain manifestation of the text, which itself has to be accounted for in future critical evaluations. For example, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is not simply a text which reinforces specific negative colonial ideologies and images, but is also one which did so with a history of endorsement of academic institutions. The work as a symbolic object is one that allows critical evaluation of the institutions' own ideologies, which is a wholly different life than it had prior to its recognition as such. Yet that symbolic object can only be created after first being acknowledged, and in a work's acknowledgement one finds affirmation also of the culture the work represents. The value judgements, then, reflect an evaluation of the "field [of social agents] as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all of the determinism inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated" (37). The field of social agents includes the culture from which and for whom a work speaks.

However, once a work begins to speak for a specific culture, it inevitably must define itself in relation to the dominant culture. In the case of literature this is often translated in terms of a high/low distinction even though the value of works on either end of the spectrum is difficult

to define categorically, which makes its very application suspect. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's "Contingencies of Value" describes how the value of literary works are determined by the literary culture, and even how the problem of literary evaluation "has been evaded and explicitly exiled by the literary academy" (Smith 5). She defines the basis of this neglect as a fundamental conflict between the ideologies of "positivistic philological scholarship and humanistic pedagogy":

That is, while professors of literature have sought to claim for their activities the rigor, objectivity, cognitive substantiality, and progress associated with science and the empirical disciplines, they have also attempted to remain faithful to the essentially conservative and didactic mission of humanistic studies: to honor and preserve the culture's traditionally esteemed objects—in this case, its canonized texts—and to illuminate and transmit the traditional cultural values presumably embodied in them. (6)

Charles Daughaday, in "The Changing Poetic Canon: The Case of Jesse Stuart and Ezra Pound," locates this emergence of objectivity in the new critics of literary modernism, and attributes it to an attempt "to reclaim an epistemological respectability for poetry, in the wake of a world increasingly scientifically oriented" (Daughaday 36), shifting the emphasis of literary evaluation "from *what* to *how*" (39) and favoring poetic craft over "the 'other' American poetic, best identified as traditional, grounded in nature, a specific locale, which spoke directly to its audience, within a commonly accepted moral frame of reference in a common language" (36). The latter, following from a tradition of nineteenth century romanticism and, for Daughaday, exemplified by Jesse Stuart, he describes as becoming identified with "low" art. Tompkins notes a similar situation with the nineteenth-century sentimental novels: "Literary texts, such as the sentimental novel, that make continual and obvious appeals to the reader's emotions and use

technical devices that are distinguished by their utter conventionality, epitomize the opposite of everything that good literature is supposed to be" (Tompkins 125). And although the term "Appalachian literature" describes a wide range of genres and styles, much of what is written under that designation, coming as it does from a marginalized space, can be classified similarly to the sentimental novels that she describes as "a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time" (126).

As illustrative of the conflict, Diepeveen notes an interesting assertion of Eliot on the necessity of difficulty in good writing:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing on a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

(Eliot 65, qtd. in Diepeveen 52)

The important variable in this formulation is the "refined sensibility," alluding to an understanding of literature that would be almost impossible without a formal university education, and certainly unattainable by people for whom excessive working hours provided them no time for leisure activities, which thereby obviously would limit the accessibility of the literature to which Eliot refers. We can see then where the conflict that Barbara Smith identifies becomes tangled up in itself when we realize that the new critics are the literary culture effectively assigning new cultural values—in terms of evaluative criteria—to literary works. When they then become the "traditional" values that the culture feels responsible to illuminate and transmit, the criteria themselves seem arbitrary and self-serving. Daughaday notes that

our poetic tastes, our critical values, and our literary (poetic) canons . . . are arbitrary; they largely succeed (or enjoy the perception of success) because the proponents of the "new" are able to create a new vocabulary and invest it with their own emotional meanings, while cleverly disguising the emotion with the pretense of a more respectable intellectuality. And just as inevitably, the raising of a new canon or poetic to the status of "high" art is accompanied by a corresponding devaluing of other canons and critical views to a status of "low" art. (37)

The need for objectivity in evaluation is ultimately an artificial criterion, evoked, in a sense, by the pressure and politics of economics. If objectivity in literary evaluation was a political move to regain legitimacy in the face of a scientific paradigm, then it was very explicitly the work of academic literary cultures trying to justify their own value to an academic system showing increasing preference to the more utilitarian scientific disciplines. The New Critics needed to "establish literary language as a special mode of knowledge, so that criticism could compete on an equal basis with other disciplines, and particularly with the natural sciences for institutional support" (Tompkins 194). The use and valuation of objectivity in literary modernism, then, becomes an even more subjective criterion than the evaluative standards of the traditional poetics it replaced, their subjectivity being the main contention of the new critics. As Smith notes of the satisfactions that compel a positive evaluation of the works of literary modernists over the more traditional, value-based poetic, "preferences for those objects will appear 'subjective,' 'eccentric,' 'stubborn,' and 'capricious'" (21). The importance here is not simply a critique of the willful manipulation of arbitrary standards of evaluation into seemingly "intrinsic" aspects of poetry; the real problem lies with what is devalued as a result: value-based language that is shared by a common community or audience and an emphasis on poetry that

attempts to communicate through such language a fundamental, common bond. Such is the domain of much Appalachian poetry, including Jesse Stuart and Victor Depta, though it should also be pointed out that Depta, in effect, combines the values espoused by literary modernism and its descendents with those of more traditionalist poets. In this way, Depta reveals himself to be something of a contradiction of the traditional (often stereotypical) images of Appalachia: the literary, intellectual Appalachian.

There is also another aspect of Appalachian literature that may help to account for its marginalization in relation to the canon of American literature. Looking at Arnold Krupat's definition of "indigenous literature," in his study of Native American literature, as "literature which results from the *interaction* of local, internal, traditional, tribal, or "Indian" [or, presumably, "Appalachian"] literary modes with the dominant literary modes of the various nation-states in which it may appear" (Krupat 214), we can see the marginalization of Appalachian literature as a conflict of cultural literary values. Much of what Depta writes, particularly in his plays, reflects an appreciation for a colloquial, oral storytelling style. That style, and often the content of such stories, are at odds with the values espoused by the literary canon following in the tradition of the modernists. A good example of the juxtaposition of these elements can be found in Depta's *Azrael on the Mountain* in which the colloquial speech of the residents of Buffalo Creek is bookended by a formal, omniscient third-person speaker. In this case, though, the juxtaposition of the two very different styles highlights the authenticity of the former and lends an air of divine authority to the latter.

Understanding the inherent plurality of American literature and following from Lauter's description of literature anthologies prior to the sixties, it's easy to understand a need for basic reform. As the general editor of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Lauter has been a

major agent of anthology reform since 1968, when work on the *Heath Anthology* originally started "at least conceptually." He notes that the emphasis for reform as a major theme of the Heath anthologies came about as "an uprising of sorts within the Modern Language Association . . . to get the MLA to take political stands on a number of issues—the Vietnam War, civil rights, and so forth" (Hill 139). He notes further that

College curricula . . . played a central role in defining and maintaining what we were only beginning to call the 'literary canon.' If we not only taught differently... but also introduced different works, we believed we could change the conception of what was valuable to read and also transform students' attitudes toward reading and, it might be, their ideas about social change and their roles in it. . . . Why not try to reconstruct our everyday classrooms along lines directed at once by a radical pedagogy *and* a revisionary conception of literary value. (Lauter, "*The Heath Anthology and Cultural Boundaries*" 180-181)

Ironically, while the anthology represents a potentially exclusionary force in literary studies, it also has the potential to provide the most visible and physically manifested examples of canon revision possible, given the amount of potential force it exerts. So what better way of demonstrating what an alternative canon, or even anti-canon, comprises than in the same way that the traditional canon itself is exemplified? This, in effect, changes the very work done by the canon, allowing it to "serve a broader cultural function"; it could "be used to stake out cultural boundaries different from those previously marked by such terms as *American literature*" (181). Following from Smith's conclusion that "the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as 'reflecting' its value and therefore as being evidence of it" (Smith 34),

the very inclusion of works in an anthology, by way of reflecting the value it holds for groups of the literary culture, bestows value upon those works, thereby conferring that value indirectly to the cultural group that those works represent.

Now, another point which is problematic is brought up in Eaton's comment that "Canon revision in the United States has generally proceeded in two ways: by adding noncanonical works to the canon or by creating separate courses to deal with noncanonical works. While both efforts have effected important curricular reforms, they have not addressed the issue of access to cultural capital" (Eaton 306). This reflects the point of Guillory's that "Institutions of reproduction succeed by taking as their first object not the reproduction of social relations but the reproduction of the institution itself" such that "the very success, for example of feminist revisions of the literary canon must be read not simply as the victory of an oppositional culture but as a systemic feature of the reproduction of the sexual division of labor" (Guillory 57-58). So this then brings up the paradox that increased visibility of Appalachian literature within academic institutions would serve to further validate the othering of Appalachian culture, maintaining the distance it already has from the dominant aesthetic. However, I think Eaton skips an important point of Guillory's that "Progressive teachers must first intervene, however, at the site of reproduction, *and even as one of its agents*, in order to put into circulation any critique of the system as the whole" (58) so that Barbara Smith's work to attend to the "exile of evaluation and the confinements of modern critical theory" (Smith 15), opening them up to a sort of metacritical discourse, along with a deliberate representation of marginalized cultures in the canon—such as Appalachia—in fact allows greater access to cultural capital through recognition of value for the literatures of that culture. So while recognizing Appalachian literature as other within the canon may validate its otherness to a certain degree, a recognition of the field of social

agents as a whole, including the issues of value that determine a place for such literature, helps resolve the paradox.

As an example of the unspoken assumptions that underlie academic value judgments, consider, for example, the claim of Marjorie Perloff, professor of English at Stanford University and a board member of the Library of America's *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume 1, Henry Adams to Dorothy Parker*, that "The principles of selection [for anthologies] are thus primarily ethical and political, with a reluctant bow to the 'literary' to satisfy the traditionalists in the profession" (Perloff B7), drawing a distinction between writers of minority and other ethnic groups, and literary writers. And of the inclusion of four women and all minority writers in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. 2*, she states that "The implication is that white writers, of whatever national or ethnic background, don't write poetry worth anthologizing" (B7). While her hedged indictment of corporatization might give a reader pause, her argument as a whole, unfortunately, reeks of the all-too pervasive ethnocentrism and latent racism found in the characterization of the twentieth-century white-European victims of affirmative action, or as Lauter puts it "the canard popular in Reaganized America of federal 'overregulation'" (Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* 211). Her assumption that minority writers are not chosen for their "literary" value—that their works are an anthologizing of "low" artistic merit, rather than "high" literary—confirms the idea of the canon as a model of conformity, or in Arnold Krupat's words (as quoted by Raymond Dolle), as a "body of texts which best performs in the sphere of culture the work of legitimating the prevailing social order" (Krupat 22). She reveals that her evaluative criteria are based on the value of the previously judged "great" writers—great because they themselves were canonized and subsequently anthologized. However, of early American literature, Dolle notes that "Despite the recognition of the ethnic,

geographic, formalistic, stylistic, and thematic diversity of America's earliest literature, the major anthologies—with a couple of exceptions—continue to reinforce the traditional British-American, especially New England Puritan, bias" (Dolle 196). If the anthologies themselves represent a figurative mean of Perloff's and Dolle's arguments, then perhaps it could be argued that editors have been able to find a middle ground between a conservative view catering to the traditional canon and one that is strictly anti-canonical and representative of a possibly biased aesthetic.

Yet the inclusion of literature from previously marginalized cultures isn't simply a case of inclusion for the sake of inclusion itself; it's really about the necessity of the validation of those cultures by institutions through the inclusion of their arts. Appalachian literature serves as a voice for Appalachians and represents the idea of what is Appalachian to any who reads it. Therefore, authenticity of the representation is as important as the breadth of the readership who have access to it. However, the very idea of representation through literature can be a difficult and complex notion to navigate and it begs the question of whether an author or groups of authors can actually be said to represent an area or cultural group. This idea is even more problematic when the discussion comes to an author such as Depta, who assumes that most of the people about whom he's writing or for whom he's speaking don't necessarily share his literary taste.³ Depta understands in advance that his audience is very limited, firstly to people interested in Appalachian literature (celebrated mostly within Appalachia), and secondly those in Appalachia who are inclined to read the type of poetry he writes. Because even as he is authentic in expressing perspectives of different classes, audiences for poetry seem to be

³ On being asked if his issue over authenticity was in concern over the misrepresentation of his culture to the residents of Appalachia as characterized by the voices in *Azrael on the Mountain*, for example, Depta noted that, by and large, they "are not readers" and aren't likely to be interested in literary poetry. This seems to place his concern for authenticity on a more personal level as an ethics of his own aesthetic.

shrinking and his poetic style in particular is still very complex and subtle. Additionally, what does such a contradiction imply about Depta's own ideas of authenticity? If he is representing a part of the culture that devalues such literature, can he really be said to represent them in literature? In some ways this conflict also plays directly into the debate over "high" and "low" art forms and a favoring of the former by literary culture, which is, arguably, one of the major problems facing the canonization of Appalachian literature. The divide of "high" and "low" are symbolic reflections of a vertical hierarchy of class distinctions describing as much those who appreciate such works as they do the works themselves.

Depta's seemingly divergent interests in stylistics make the question of representation even more problematic, but at the same time it's difficult to debate the inclusion of literature of "othered" cultures or social groups based simply on a problematic idea of representation through literature. Regardless of whether any single work or author is an "accurate" example of his or her culture—and regardless of whether an "accurate" example can even be defined—the exclusion of groups from the canon makes an explicit statement about what is not valued by the society at large. Again appealing to humanism in literary critical studies, in order to understand the world—or even more simply U.S. English culture—as essentially plural, we must also recognize not only the value of literatures of other cultures, but also the standards for that value and how that value is created.

Unfortunately, as the editors of *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature* note in the preface, "Appalachia as a literary landscape is almost entirely absent from the American literary canon and that Appalachian literature is celebrated almost exclusively only in the region itself" (ix). A quick *survey* of the tables of content of several popular literary anthologies—*The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Vol. 2*, Oxford University Press's

Anthology of Modern American Poetry, the *Longman Anthology of Women's Literature*, Pearson/Prentice Hall's *Anthology of American Literature* and *The Harper American Literature*—reveals the almost total absence of Appalachian authors individually, or specifically of Appalachia as a region of literary production, although a couple notable exceptions exist. Local color writer Elizabeth Madox Roberts is included in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature, Vol. D: Modern Period (1910-1945)* under the heading "Alienation and Literary Experimentation" and Lee Smith and Bobbie Ann Mason are included in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature, Vol. E: Contemporary Period (1945 to the Present)*. We also find that Bobbie Ann Mason is included in the Pearson/Prentice Hall *Anthology of American Literature, Vol. 2* (2007). Despite their inclusion, however, in none of the brief biographies of these authors is Appalachia mentioned as a region informing their cultural heritage. They are generally referred to as southern or rural writers, and while the Pearson/Prentice Hall anthology describes Bobbie Ann Mason specifically as "a regional writer," it then goes on to undermine that regionality by appealing to a "universal" aesthetic seemingly inherent in her work, describing her as "in the tradition of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Conner, and Eudora Welty, and like them she has created characters who are recognizable anywhere in America" (McMichael 2119). Her characters may be recognizable "anywhere in America," but to what extent is that recognition an understanding of authenticity, or simply a familiarity with common stereotypes? Similarly, *A Handbook of American Literature: A Comprehensive Study from Colonial Times to the Present Day*, by Martin S. Day lists Jesse Stuart among its comprehensive review of authors, but describes his work as "homespun Americana" (558). This description generalizes Appalachian literature even more than regarding it as simply southern.

The only anthology produced outside of Appalachia, or Appalachian studies, which does include a section on Appalachia, another title published by Prentice Hall, *The South in Perspective: An Anthology of Southern Literature*, not only makes the same conflation of "Appalachian" with "Southern,"—erroneous because it thereby ignores roughly half of the region of Appalachia, which extends almost as far north as Albany, New York—but is also, unfortunately, out of print. The section is appropriately—and given the book's out-of-print status, ironically—titled "Appalachia Recognized," and actually gives a good overview of the history of Appalachian literature. However, its representation of Appalachia is thoroughly problematic in that local colorists Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Madox Roberts are given equal weight with the more accurate representations of culture in the works of Jesse Stuart, Gurney Norman, James Still, and Lee Smith. Unfortunately, this instance of anthologizing reinforces negative stereotypes of the region; indeed, the editors describe Horace Kephart's work *Our Southern Mountaineers*, which makes broad generalizations of the "primitive" mountain folk, as a "sympathetic and thorough portrayal" which "went far in correcting misinformation and in exploding cruel stereotypes" (1059), and likewise they refer to Harry M. Caudill's *Night Comes to the Cumberlands: A Biography of a Depressed Area*, as an "equally sympathetic but far less optimistic" treatment of "modern mountaineers and the communities in which they live." (1060). As important as both authors have been in shaping perspectives on the region, current Appalachian literary scholarship would identify their effect as largely negative and most responses to them as validly reactionary.

Searching these anthologies, then, reveals that Appalachia, as a literary landscape, is almost completely absent from literary culture. And, unfortunately, where it is present, it is misrepresented by the continued persistence of stereotypes, perhaps because of its representation

by others outside of the Appalachian community—or at least by others whose stated purpose is to represent the literature of a region distinctly other than Appalachia. The need for canonization and anthologizing of Appalachian literature, then, is to provide an accurate representation of Appalachian literary culture, in contrast to what has been presented, and to begin to build cultural capital for the literature itself, refuting the designation of its art as less than "high" as a manufactured and cultural distinction, rather than a valid aesthetic distinction. And in noting the necessity of the presence of the academic institution in canon formation, it's important to note the claim by Gregory Jay that, in turn, "separate attention to silenced or previously ignored voices—through affirmative actions in the library, school, department, syllabus, and critical study—is a prerequisite to any 'worldliness' in which the formerly excluded can attain representation *in their own terms*" (Jay 21).

Acceptance of, and responses to, the presence of a canon

Returning, finally, to Gallagher's statement that "I don't see much point in continually changing what we teach just for the sake of contesting the notion of a canon" (Gallagher 56), we can infer that, in fact, a truly multicultural and accurately plural representation of literature requires constantly changing subject matter to reflect the constantly changing content of the literary field.

Jeffrey Insko brings up an interesting point by shifting the topic from Gallagher's focus on the content of the canon to the work that the canon actually does, but even Insko's assumptions are problematic, insisting that "by focusing on what a canon *is*, we remain locked in

an internecine battle whose time has passed" and that "that battle has largely been won" (Insko 343). It's not that I disagree with him, generally, when he states that

To treat the canon as a problem in itself is to engage in debates that avoid the more important challenge of articulating to the public, to our students, and to one another how the canons we produce—no matter how we produce them—serve what we believe is our primary mission as teachers of literature (343),

it's that part of the value of having an awareness of canon formation—the "how we produce them" part—is an essential awareness of the meta-cognitive ideologies that shape literary studies. Of course we should focus on how we're using canons in teaching literature, but we have the responsibility not to forget that we're always engaged in the process of an evolutionary canon formation. The difficulty with Insko's interpretation is, seemingly, that he interprets canon criticism too narrowly, as "a problem to solve" (351). The problematic aspects of canon formation imply by their very nature that there can be no solution. One of the fundamental problems of the canon is the persistence of revision of the values and norms associated with representation.

Some of the more radical propositions for canon reform involve discarding the canon altogether, encouraging professors to "substitute, rather, the authority of various individual or ethnic group experiences freed from the constraints of any official discipline" (Lauter, *Canons and Contexts* 158). However, this isn't a viable solution, because to effectively erase all traces of the traditional canon—if that were even possible—is, again, virtually to rewrite literary history; students need to be taught the literatures of marginalized ethnic or cultural groups, but they must also be versed in the traditional canon, even the exclusionary canon of the early twentieth century, in order to remain aware of that history of exclusion and its effects.

Additionally, Lauter notes that "It can be extremely important for students from marginalized backgrounds to know that the domain named 'literature' belongs to them as well as to others (160). With the opening up of college admissions following World War II, the passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights, and the subsequent increase in enrollment of diverse ethnicities, the elitist modernist conception of the canon would have become less and less able to represent the views and perspectives of an increasingly multicultural student population. In recognizing the validity of these previously marginalized cultures, and in helping them attain their own power through their distinctive voices, it is important that they feel their perspectives are being validated by the institution. For their part, then, it is important for academic literary culture to "present American culture as constituted by differing literary traditions, at once overlapping, in part, and significantly distinct, in part" (Lauter, *The Heath Anthology and Cultural Boundaries* 188). But also, Lauter notes, "it is necessary to read noncanonical texts" because "they *teach us* how to view experience through the prisms of gender, race nationality, and other forms of marginalization" (*Canons and Contexts*, 161). Additionally, as James Banks points out, "Western traditionalists hold the balance of power, financial resources, and the top positions in the mass media, in schools, colleges and universities, government, and in the publishing industry," positions that those in power are not likely to cede; Yet "Genuine discussion between the traditionalists and the multiculturalists can take place only when power is placed on the table, negotiated, and shared" (Banks 33). Noncanonical texts, then, help by reaching out to students of cultures previously marginalized by the institution, and mediating the cultural divides that stand between teachers and students, but also by providing a medium through which to negotiate power relations between dominant and marginalized cultures.

Of course, of all broadly-defined cultural groups, Appalachia still has far to go, it would seem, to gain acceptance in the academic field as a proper field of study. Generally speaking, there is no debate about the importance of teaching multicultural and ethnic literatures; the controversy usually seems to arise in response to suggestions of how to integrate them with the traditional canon. And making that integration more difficult, the "other" American poetic, as Daughaday refers to it, is still consistently devalued in the academy. Further, as W. H. Ward, in his essay "The Rush to Find an Appalachian Literature," notes, "The main obstacle" to accurately portraying the mountain culture and its people "is an abiding one in a great deal of regional writing still deeply tinged with local color: the tendency of characterization to run to stereotypes" (Ward 625). To such an assertion, though, I think a valid argument is the power—or cultural capital, even, in a different sense—in the use of the stereotype. Its signification is much different when wielded by the owner of that stereotype rather than by an outsider trying to paint a culture or region broadly with demeaning characteristics. Looking, for example, at Depta's plays which express the theme of an outsider intruding on an Appalachian family, the families themselves, for the most part, are nothing but a composite of some of the most exaggerated stereotypes one could find in contemporary Appalachian literature. However, when he uses them to show the shortcomings of the outsider, and thereby of outside opinions of Appalachia, they become a kind of inside joke—empowering for those against whom those stereotypes have been leveled, without being demeaning toward the outsider. Ward goes on to say that "The writer's supreme challenge is to search out and treat human universals in terms of the limited area with which he is intimately familiar" (627), and in the case of a culture such as Appalachia which is still openly derided and stereotyped in contemporary media, one of the things that is possibly most intimately familiar, and emotionally reactive, are those stereotypes.

Of course, none of this is to suggest that there hasn't been work to develop canons of Appalachian literature. However, as the editors of *An American Vein* stated of the celebration of Appalachian literature in general, they too are almost exclusively read and taught within the Appalachian community. *Voices from the Hills* (originally published in 1975) and its sequel, the two-volume *Appalachia Inside Out* (1995) are two anthologies that attempt to "identify writing that both represents and reveals the culture of the Appalachian region" (xv); *Appalachia Inside Out* validates Depta's place as an Appalachian author as it includes his poem "Juke Boxes" from *A Doorkeeper in the House* in the chapter titled "Family and Community" in volume two. Similarly, the aforementioned *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature* (2005) attempts to account for the body of criticism that has been developed in response to the growing popularity of Appalachian literature.

All of these anthologies speak to the issue of representation and visibility of Appalachian culture, both as a region and as an academic field of study. But their combined effort has another effect, economic in nature, and also tied to the idea of cultural capital. Lauter briefly summarizes the effects of canon criticism on the institution:

Consequently, canon criticism first influenced curriculum and thus gradually the margins of publishing and scholarship. Somewhat later, it came to affect the selection of texts about which graduate students and critics write; more slowly still, which works became sufficiently revered to find their way into footnotes, indices or other measures of academic weight. More recently, it has begun altering the "mainstream" of publishing as well as generating wide public debate. (*Canons and Contexts* 155)

That last issue is an important point to the issue of canonization and Appalachian literature, because a lack of popular reception of Appalachian literature further validates an academic

rejection of it and hinders the ability of deserving Appalachian writers to gain credibility in literary studies. While independent publishing provides an amazing resource to Appalachian writers in expressing their voice, it will be true in almost every case that an independent publisher has less resources than any of the popular corporate publishers. The lack of resources, then, reflects the size of an author's printing and the range of their distribution, becoming a very limiting factor in their accessibility. However, as these anthologies themselves gain more and more recognition, it increases recognition of the existence of Appalachian literature, encouraging the acceptance of Appalachian writers by larger publishers and their dissemination to a wider, national audience. It is a slow process, to be sure, but its gradual success can be seen in the unflagging determination of proponents of Appalachian literary studies and the increase in popularity of analysis on the subject, which in turn feed the publication of more of the same anthologies and criticisms. The development of popularity for the subject has a snowball effect, in a sense, as an increased visibility leads to greater recognition and popularity, leading to even more increased visibility, thereby altering its reception in not only the general reading public, but the publishing world as well, as a market for such literature is realized.

CHAPTER 2: INDEPENDENT PUBLISHERS: REESTABLISHING PASSION AND PRIDE IN LITERATURE

Problems faced by Independent Publishers/the Limitations of Technology

As an example of the opportunity that small press publishing can provide for Appalachian authors, it's important to note that most of Victor Depta's work has been published through his own Blair Mountain Press; these works include *The Silence of Blackberries*, *Preparing a Room*, *Azrael on the Mountain*, *The Little Henry Poems*, *A West Virginia Trilogy*, *Plays from Blair Mountain: Four Comedies*, *Mountains and Clouds: Four Comedies*, *The Simultaneous Mountain*, and his most recent collection of poetry *An Afterthought of Light*.⁴

In addition to the mountain's relative proximity to Depta's birthplace, it also holds figurative significance for the press as it is caught up in the political tides of culture and community—it is currently at the center of a debate about mountain-top removal. Blair Mountain, in Logan Country, was the site of the Battle of Blair Mountain in which ten to fifteen thousand coal miners fought state and federal troops in a violent clash over attempts to unionize the southern West Virginia coal fields. Now the mountain stands to be impacted by a nearby mountain top removal coal extraction site and environmental activists and historians both are protesting the permitting as the destruction of a significant landmark in West Virginia's history. Blair Mountain represents the struggle of Appalachia on many levels, both by the cold indifference to the aesthetic and environmental concerns of the destruction of the state's natural beauty through the extraction of coal and timber, as well as a history of erasure—both figurative and literal—or denial of past misdeeds committed by corporations and government. As such, the

⁴ Publication date of April, 2007.

use of Blair Mountain to signify the entity through which these bodies of art come to life represents a certain irony, both cutting in its critique, and comforting in its self-awareness.

Blair Mountain Press represents a problematic view of publishing because it's difficult to make a distinction between his works having been self-published, or published by an independent press. Both have distinct connotations and certainly, anyone who does self-publish will have to face the same problems an independent publisher faces, and more. However, the implications for a self-published book are even more negative than for one published by a successful independent press.

While it's obviously not a scholarly or academic resource regarding publishing, Pat Walsh's book *78 Reasons Why Your Book May Never Be Published & 14 Why It Just Might* contains very direct advice and insight into the decisions that successful publishing houses make when choosing books. In fact, it may even be a more honest representation of the process, coming from an insider who is approaching the topic from the perspective one might expect of the major, corporate, publishing houses. However, in his cautions about self-publishing, he makes the mistake of characterizing all self-publishing in the same way: "someone who thinks they can beat the odds is ripe for the plucking, which is where the red-headed stepchild of publishing, self-publishing—formerly known as the vanity press—comes in . . . The vanity press industry is extremely good at marketing and constantly reinvents itself. It is no longer vanity publishing . . . Now it is self-publishing" (83). His characterization is a generalizing move which is appropriate from his perspective, logically, insofar as the very principle of self-publishing is a threat to (essentially, all) publishing houses, but obviously it's misleading to depict all self-publishers as authors that couldn't get published otherwise and just want to buy their way into the market. Depta himself has been published by several presses over the years, including Ohio

University Press, New Rivers Press, and Ion Books, but it was his frustration with the publishing industry and the process of having a manuscript reviewed, along with a self-awareness in the quality of his own works and the resources to do so that prompted Depta to begin publishing on his own.

Additionally, self-publishing poses a more fundamental threat to the major publishers who represent the dominant culture of the publishing industry in that it allows books onto the market without the filter of an editing mechanism or gate-keeping feature; while ostensibly this would suggest that the only danger is that a larger amount of books showcasing substandard writing are released to the market, the real danger is the threat to the publishing industry's control of a cultural aesthetic. Being published implies, on the part of the publisher, a measure of judgement, so for the ability to publish to be in the hands of the general public means that the judgements of "quality" reserved by publishers can be ignored and bypassed, along with their sense of aesthetic standards.

So, while most of Depta's work may be characterized as self-published, we have to recognize that while that characterization may be a more accurate description to how the work was created—in terms of the author having done all of the work himself to prepare it for printing, and then taking on the job of marketing and distribution as well—it actually does the works of Blair Mountain Press a disservice to refer to them as such, rather than to refer to them as independently published. It may seem like a semantic difference that doesn't matter in the end product, but marketing is, in part, semantic and many independent bookstores, and most of the chain bookstores, prefer not to stock books that even look self-published, even if they're available through a distributor at all, let alone one that might have been reviewed or described in marketing materials as such.

On the other hand, a good independent publisher can be an amazing, even if somewhat less visible, source of literature. A prime example of the power of independent publishing is the Gnomon Press publication, *Kinfolks* by Gurney Norman. Jonathan Greene, founder of Gnomon Press, referred to it as his "best-selling book, long term" (Ballard 450) and it's easy to see the book's influence specifically in Depta's trilogy, even if that influence isn't direct but rather a subtle reverberation through time and the texts that have been born in response to it. *Kinfolks* is a series of stories held together by a thread of community and family, told through the life of Wilgus, the protagonist of each. As Depta's novels do to Keith, Norman's stories depict Wilgus's maturation into adulthood through the complicated tensions of that community and family in the context of the oppressive economic environment of Appalachia in the 1950s and '60s.

More than specific details, however, Depta's trilogy shares with Norman's book the cadence of the region, as explained by Dennis Lee in "Writing in Colonial Space." By way of definition, he offers a sort of non-description: "I speak of 'hearing' cadence, but in fact I am baffled by how to describe it. There is no auditory sensation—I don't hallucinate; yet it is like sensing a continuous, changing tremor with one's ear and one's whole body at the same time. It seems very matter-of-fact, yet I do not know the name of the sense with which I perceive it" (397). Lee's cadence is a cultural aesthetic, in a sense, so while I can understand his statement that "the colonial writer does not have words of his own" (399), I don't think it's applicable to all colonial situations—and he does localize his discussion somewhat to Canada. In fact, I think that colonial writers can very precisely have words of their own, even if their very existence marks them as dissenting against the dominant structures of power and control. However, if those words don't have cultural capital to give them weight with the dominant culture, then they often can't even be heard. Regardless, Lee's cadence can be interpreted as echoed themes,

structures, tones, perspectives, and broader cultural narratives, the cumulative effect of which is, perhaps, the answer to the question "what is it about Appalachian literature that makes it Appalachian?" This can be illustrated in the way that Danny Miller, for example, in "Kin and Kindness in Gurney Norman's *Kinfolks*" points out particular characteristics of Wilgus that are culturally relevant, and characteristic of Keith as well: "the stories follow Wilgus's growth and maturation from age eight through his early twenties. Throughout these stories the main role that Wilgus plays with his family is that of caregiver—defender, consoler, helper. It is a role that I sum up in the title of this essay as 'kindness.' It is Wilgus's kindness that defines him as a character . . ." (147). It's not simply that the characteristics are shared, it's that they are shared and also recognized by the reader as cultural signifiers.

However, part of that cadence, or the particular way in which specific books take it up, are not only the efforts of the author, but, if possible, the editor and publisher as well. A publisher needs to be able to recognize and emphasize that cadence to its full effect, and independent publishers may be in the best position to do so. Greene notes, of *Kinfolks*: "It fell in my lap. In my view it was obviously two books: what became *Kinfolks*, and then a compilation of his Jack tales. I separated out the Wilgus stories and the rest is history" (Ballard 450). Greene's influence over *Kinfolks* was more than just stylistic advice for troublesome parts—he helped create the final form the book would take before it made its way to the reading public. Some readers might wish for an outside editorial presence in some of Depta's work as well. Without previous experience of the author's interest in mysticism, for example, there are moments in *Feasting with Strife* where the organization or the language might obfuscate the point the author is making. In some moments when Keith is contemplative, one might confuse the poet-author with the poet-character, such as in the description of the time Keith fell,

temporarily, into a psychosis: "Bludgeons of the sun struck at those children, forcing them into the earth, into a tarpit of light. How pitiful their faces were. At the center of their being was nothingness, a void without a shrine or radiant source, an emptiness of water-surface after the pebble vanished, its energy rippling outward into space like a supernova" (*Feasting with Strife*, 349). Additionally, the reverse is also true: editors can be a limiting factor of a work's publication rather than simply improving what is written. Despite having shopped it around to other publishers, Depta feels the graphic sexuality, particularly prominent in *The Gate of Paradise* but present in both other novels as well, is one reason it was never taken up. The sexuality in these novels is at times disturbing and at others touching, and as it also comments on the issues of homosexuality, rape, and incest, it's easy to speculate that so many taboo subjects in a regional novel could prevent its publication by a major publisher.

However, when balancing an equation of "quality versus value," speculating on the mindset of the consumer, the considerations of authenticity that go into a book such as *A West Virginia Trilogy*, would be restricting factors for publishers trying to market to a mainstream audience. I've focused primarily on *A West Virginia Trilogy* at the moment because poetry has so many of its own obstacles in the way of popular reception and novels represent the primary mode of popular literature. In many ways though, this element of bookselling, focusing on popularity and acceptance of a mainstream audience, is paradoxical to Depta's implicit critique of materialism and objectification, or to any work that addresses a similar notion, which is what gives independent publishers a distinct advantage over larger, corporate publishing houses; when profit isn't the sole issue affecting publishability, there is less of a chance that the content will be compromised.

Likewise, other bibliographical codes also weigh in on the reception of a given work, and help to influence that reception and its readership, and although it may seem superfluous to criticize such material elements as the cover and binding, these factors also help determine how and where a book might be sold, or what audience might be more inclined to receive it favorably. As Jerome McGann states, "textual and editorial theory has heretofore concerned itself almost exclusively with the linguistic codes. The time has come, however, when we have to take greater theoretical account of the other coding network which operates at the documentary and bibliographical level of literary works" (78). And although McGann compares works with earlier versions of the same, the problem for many independently published books is that their material conditions are part of what prevents them from becoming popular to a degree that will allow newer versions to emerge. But before looking at the bibliographic details of independently published books, I'll briefly describe the technological advances that have allowed for self-publishing to become a more viable option for the public in general, because, as Lee Erickson notes in *The Economy of Literary Form*, "economic pressures on literature are particularly acute at moments of technological " (10).

There is often a distinction made between traditional printing methods and print-on-demand, or short-run, printing methods. What is referred to as traditional printing is a process which uses "plate, impact, or pressure printing," primarily offset lithography, while print-on-demand processes utilize "plateless, non-impact, or pressureless printing" (International Paper 132). With the emergence of the plateless printing processes, which are digital and allow for a direct transfer from digital file to the press—commonly utilized for print-on-demand technologies—the methods of pre-press production are simplified, and because there's not a physical plate to actually change, it is easier and more efficient for a digital printer to

accommodate small- to medium-sized print runs (International Paper 147). The accommodation of the size of the print run is inclusive to the field of publishing in that it allows authors to be published who may not be able to hope for distribution or sales of upwards of a certain amount, and it can allow for print run quantities of even 50 or less. The ability to do a small print run allows an author or publisher to direct the printing of the book to a specific audience without being stuck with an excess that won't sell. Also, because digital processes are a direct transfer from the file to the press, changes made to the document after the proof has been printed can be much cheaper. For example, while an offset printer such as Transcontinental or Quebecor, Inc might charge \$10 per change made to a text after the proof (including individual changes of punctuation marks, typos, etc), with a print-on-demand company one can often make changes throughout an entire document and update the complete digital file. The benefits of print-on-demand to small and independent publishers are numerous, then: it allows for a text to be prepared without necessarily requiring professional design help (however, some familiarity with desktop publishing is required, though it's certainly less specialized knowledge), and it can accommodate smaller print runs and more substantial changes to the document.

In contrast, offset printing can often be much more complicated when it comes to the types of files the printer can work with, the size of the print runs, and the changes that need to be made to the plates after proofing. In addition, the turn-around time (the amount of time from when the printer gets the materials to when they ship the completed book) from an offset press will often be at least three to four times greater than that of a print-on-demand company. Given the benefits of print-on-demand to independent publishers, it's not a surprise then to look at

books by Gnomon Press such as *Hell and Ohio* by Chris Holbrook, or Jim Wayne Miller's *The Brier Poems* and realize that they, too take advantage of digital press technology.⁵

The problems associated with Pat Walsh's observations become apparent, though, when considering that often in actual bookstores, print-on-demand is viewed synonymously with self-publishing, and so again publishers are faced with the problem that many bookstores, particularly corporate, chain bookstores, are going to see a print-on-demand book and refuse it based on the principal that it might be self-published—their assumption being that reputable, serious publishers would be able to afford the extra resources needed to do offset printing, or, at least, have higher expectations for sales. One of the downsides of print-on-demand is that while the technology is open and convenient in many ways, it also has to sacrifice some flexibility in format in order to make it so. For example, print-on-demand companies often have limitations to the color and weight of the paper stock and binding stock that they can use, and often require that the books printed through them retain a stamp or iconic mark of some sort, signaling that their print services were used—a condition not typically employed by traditional printers.

Additionally, the standard for print-on-demand books seems to be that they all come with a laminate or gloss-finish cover with a weak crease next to the spine where the perfect binding is pressed (these are also characteristics of some offset printers, and not in any way determining characteristics on their own).⁶ All of these bibliographic signifiers can add up to make a print-on-demand book immediately recognizable to a book buyer at a bookstore or distributor, who then has the option of rejecting it based solely on the fact that it is perceived to be a self-

⁵ An interesting detail about two of the books published by Gnomon is the inclusion of an extensive, detailed colophon, which lists the printer of both *The Brier Poems* and *Hell and Ohio* as Thomson-Shore, Inc (<http://www.tshore.com>), a short- to medium-sized print run press.

⁶ As do all four of the P.O.D. books mentioned.

published book. In this way, then, the physical appearance of a book is a very real, if unfortunate, determinant in whether the book will find its way into bookstores at all.

Indeed, many of these same signifiers are apparent in the books of Blair Mountain Press, though Depta seems to use the limitations of physical appearance to his advantage. While it's impossible to determine from the books alone exactly who printed them, the visual, material signifiers would seem to indicate that they are printed using digital printing process, but where that becomes apparent in most books, through the homogeneity in cover styles and paper weight, Depta has turned those signifiers into a trademark of Blair Mountain Presses books. All of the books Depta has published are cut to the same trim size and are designed with a spare white cover, with a single, simple illustration or photograph on the front and jacket copy and endorsements on the back. In many ways, his use of a simple design is a rejection of the book aesthetic created by corporate enterprises for marketing and ad campaigns. The focus, by default, is the content of the book rather than its appearance on a shelf, and while a single book alone may easily be passed over as unimpressive in appearance, when several are gathered together, their effect is aesthetically pleasing in a minimalistic way. Their homogeneity to each other, and nonconformity to the everything else around them makes them stand out visibly from their surroundings in a way that should be intriguing to a reader. If the purpose of a flashy cover design is to influence a reader to pick a book up and begin reading, then Blair Mountain Presses books do the same by looking so much different than the other books around them.

In addition to this is the problem that Greene identifies when he notes that "you still have a distribution system for bookstores that's almost a monopoly. If Ingram [a major book distributor] doesn't carry a book, a lot of bookstores will say they can't get it" (Ballard 452). Ingram has recently introduced a policy whereby they reserve the right to drop any publisher

from their catalogs if their yearly net sales falls below \$20,000 (Carlson). Ironically, this new initiative has been developed with the assistance of the Publishers Marketing Association (PMA) in order to "help the many small presses that don't have large enough lists to sign with Ingram directly" (Rosen 8). Obviously, the amount in sales is directly related to the number of books printed, so part of the determining factor for if a book will be initially distributed by Ingram is the size of its print run (which ostensibly reveals a publisher's ability or confidence in the book's sales). Major bookstores and distributors stand to make more off of larger print runs from books that turn a profit, so the policy of either dropping books that don't sell enough, or refusing to carry books that come from smaller presses, is exclusionary toward smaller publishers. Depta has largely avoided the problems of distribution by advertising and processing all sales through Blair Mountain Press, but this has the obvious disadvantage of limited accessibility. Though he attends trade fairs and submits newsletters to solicit sales, his promotion of the press's books is limited by the coverage that can he can supply on his own. Certainly, some trade outlets also sell Blair Mountain Press books, but they're mostly local. Additionally, the problem of distribution and stocking by bookstores presents another problem for Blair Mountain Presses books; the impact of their minimal design can be lost if only one or two books' spines are visible on a shelf. For their minimal design to work to attract readers they need to be either face out, or grouped with several together. However, a publisher that isn't carried by a major distributor probably won't have books bought by a bookstore in any real quantity, and with single copy sales, the design of the books may cause them to be ignored. Regardless, Depta's rejection of marketing/advertising design standards is important in that it reveals what about the book is most important to him, and it seems to reveal what he feels his readership should be focused on as well.

Distribution is such a problem for independent publishers that Jan Nathan, executive directory of the Publishers marketing Association (PMA), made it the focus of several articles in the PMA newsletter. Besides simply outright exclusion from distribution, other problems that she observes are delinquent payments, backdating checks for payments on books, bad bookkeeping, which results in lost invoices, and the widely-practiced policy of deducting returns from current invoices. Since wholesalers generally reserve payment on invoices for thirty to sixty days, Ingram will return books and then immediately reorder them in order to avoid payment on the original order.⁷ Since the publisher pays for freight both ways, the result can be a net loss for the publisher if there aren't enough copies of the book selling through that distributor. When all of the practices above are combined, it can be enough to drive a small publisher with very limited resources either out of business altogether, or at least out of the general book trade.

However, the problem becomes further complicated when one realizes that three other books used for this research were also printed using print-on-demand technology. Erickson's *The Economy of Literary Form*, from Johns Hopkins University Press, Lauter's *Canons and Contexts*, from Oxford University Press and McGann's *The Textual Condition*, Princeton University Press, all bear the symbol for Lightning Source, Inc, a print-on-demand company especially popular for its convenient internet-accessible resources and utilities (everything other than the actual design of the book can be negotiated through their website, including document upload, proof corrections, and ordering). It's apparent then that the conveniences that print-on-demand technology offers are also sought out by bigger presses from time to time. For example, these books may have been part of a print run intended for review or library copies, in which case the book may be printed in smaller quantities, with minor changes to the design to

⁷ This has been standard practice in the years that I've worked at Publishers Place, Inc. in Huntington, West Virginia.

accommodate the special market they're being printed for. These presses, though, don't have to worry about the stigma of print-on-demand, simply because of the weight of the publisher's name on the cover.

The result, then, is that print-on-demand technology, which is appealing and offers possibilities to independent and smaller publishers, because it means that books can be printed with a maximum of efficiency and in smaller numbers, is being shunned by the book industry, which is dominated by major corporate publishing houses and chain booksellers, by conflating it as a technology with the industry of self-publishing, even at the same time that major presses utilize such technologies themselves. As mentioned before, though, the major threat to the book industry is that the ability to publish in smaller quantities effectively destabilizes the industry's control over a powerful aesthetics of representation. So because the means of creation have become more accessible due to the emergence of new technologies, other ways of limiting access to the market have appeared. Certainly, we've experienced the ways in which the novel and other literary forms have been used throughout Appalachia's history to transmit the values of the dominant culture to the colonial culture. By limiting a publisher's accessibility to book sellers through the technologies used to print the book, the dominant ideology of the industry can attempt to control the "decentralization of culture" (Erickson 13) that new publishing technologies allow.

The Advantages of Independent Publishing and the Challenge to the Dominant Culture

The reverse of that assertion is that these new technologies, then, can be used by independent publishers to actually challenge the dominant perspective. Although Erickson notes

the "decentralization of culture" as a disadvantage to literary studies, it is important that such a decentralization is inevitable given its correlation to advances in publishing technology.

Erickson notes that "the advances in printing technology led to both a democratization and stratification of literary culture in England as books and periodicals became available to all classes of readers and an economy of scale came into being" (19). Similarly, further technological advances have opened publishing itself (as opposed to just accessibility to the books for purchase) to almost any writer dedicated to being published. This egalitarian approach denies the authority of the dominant culture's aesthetic judgement, allowing, theoretically, communities themselves to set their own standards for what they value.

The issue of quality and control of the standards of judgment is as much a political issue as it is an issue of cultural aesthetic. As we've seen of the accounts of the new literary modernists such as Eliot and Pound, quality in literary terms became proportional to the difficulty and progressiveness of *avant-garde* literature, and this use of quality was used to actively devalue and push away mass-consumed literature to establish a literary elite, a literary culture that possessed authority over all other literature. Such power is the cultural capital of the canon and "quality" as it is used to judge literature in the field of publishing. The democratization of publishing through the accessibility offered by vanity presses and small publishers directly threatens that power traditionally held by publishers; it puts aesthetic control of the printed works in the hands of the community and stresses individuals' convictions that the people's voices and messages are valid, giving the issue of what constitutes good literature over to the community by or for whom it is written.

This is not to necessarily say that any literature with an audience is worthy of canonization or acceptance by literary culture. As Tompkins puts it, "the notion of good

literature . . . is precisely what we are arguing about. That tacit sense of what is 'good' cannot be used to determine the value of [the literature] because literary value *is* the point at issue" (Tompkins 187). As we've seen, literary value is radically contingent on a constellation of political goals and cultural ideals, though it often masquerades as universal so as to be beyond reproach; it is determined by the culture for which literary works are composed and produced. An increase in accessibility to the methods of production, then, allow the values of more and smaller communities to be represented in material texts.

An extremely informative, though anecdotal, account of the some of the major changes that have befallen the questions of what is valued in the publishing industry is given in *The Business of Books*, by André Schiffrin, former head of Pantheon books, which was bought by Random House. While his father had initially founded Pantheon, he died when André was fifteen and the younger Schiffrin lost all contact with Pantheon, following his own interests in publishing with the New American Library. Regardless, André's interests in publishing were founded on some of the same principles his father instilled in Pantheon; as Shiffrin himself never expresses explicitly what publishing ideals they followed, it's important to repeat in full his quote of Helmut Lehmann-Haupt from *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States* that

The very significant thing about Pantheon Books is the fact that it has not issued a single trivial or merely popular title, not a book chosen primarily because of its profit-making possibilities. Every book on the list is of unquestionable cultural value or of decided artistic significance, or a genuine attempt to contribute to the solution of the intellectual and spiritual dilemma of these difficult years. (Qtd. in Shriffrin 21)

They published books that "seemed to [the editors] to matter the most" (37), and this is perhaps the best way to summarize the reasons that many independent presses continue to exist. Simon Michel Bessie describes such values in plainer terms in his essay "Small Publishing-Is it Beautiful?": ". . . I suggest that we would not be publishing books—any of us—if we didn't want to play a role in the development of the ideas and insights which aim to make life more intelligible and more beautiful as well as more enjoyable" (Bessie 107). Of course, published in 1980, his statement precedes the developments that Shiffrin describes, explained below. However, the argument still stands for independent publishers: without profit to show for the effort, the motivation for many independent publishers is simply a passion for the works they help bring to a reading public.

Even for Pantheon, success wasn't an easy thing by any measure; Shiffrin describes how they first brought Foucault to an American public, and how they published Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, but for both authors, popular reception of their work took years to mature, a luxury that independent publishers might not have the resources to sustain. Regardless of the popularity and importance of some of their books, attitudes in publishing began to shift as bookkeeping expectations changed with major corporate mergers. Shiffrin describes how he became more and more disillusioned with the changes in the industry as the company switched hands: Pantheon was bought by Random House, which was then sold to RCA, and then sold by RCA to S. I. Newhouse, "one of a handful of multibillionaire media owners" (77). It has since been acquired by Bertelsmann Media Worldwide, the vast media group which has holdings in television, music and publishing. Hayden Carruth echoes the problems that Shiffrin describes in his essay "Some Personal Notations," resulting in the situation that "big houses are publishing less poetry , or serious writing of any kind, than ever" (Carruth 52).

The problem with such corporate mergers, particularly with media companies, is that such large scale acquisitions drive an "increasing demand for higher stock prices" (120) which translates at the single unit level to every book being "expected to make a sufficient contribution both to overhead and to profit" (73). Most material products' popularity can be easily judged and is often insensitive to time. However most media, especially books, face a double-bind: as an intellectual property of ideas and aesthetics, they are often dependent on time in terms of cultural moods or trends, or even as a book's complex themes and ideas mature in the cultural context in which they are situated; however as products they are time-sensitive insofar as they are physically dated and distributors and booksellers can only let an unprofitable title take up potentially valuable shelf space for so long before they give it up for another. So with an increased focus on profitability, controversial titles that immediately appeal only to the fringes of the reading public, and therefore potentially fewer consumers, are the least likely to be published. Schiffrin notes that Marty Asher, now with Vintage Press, said of his former publisher that a title wasn't worth publishing if it didn't sell at least 50,000 copies. Factoring such unreasonable expectations into the other difficulties faced by Appalachian authors as writers of a regional identity and battling national stereotypes and prejudice, it becomes clear why it is difficult for such authors to challenge the dominant aesthetic.

However, even worse for independent publishers, Schiffrin also notes that "The changes that have taken place in publishing are increasingly mirrored in the bookselling business as well" (121). Major, national—worldwide, even—chains dominate the bookselling market, and their greater amount of resources allow them to strike deals with distributors and publishers that independent publishers can't afford. Shelf space and other areas of increased visibility are

bought and sold like ads,⁸ but since the bookstore chains are so large, micromanagement of such precise distribution is impossible and the space is sold on a region-wide level, making it cost-prohibitive for any but the major corporate publishers.

On the other hand, small presses hold distinct advantages for authors. John Baker notes some of the advantages small presses hold for over larger publishing houses: they are "more approachable," "they react more swiftly and on a more personal basis," "the author gets to have more say in the whole publication process and will probably find his book kept in print much longer than at a big publisher," and "there's often a pleasing collegial sense between *small* publisher and author of 'us against them,' a feeling of working together to bring something real and hopeful into a hard-hearted commercial arena" (Baker 47), which shows that an awareness of corporate publishing influences even the independent presses. However, he also points out that these advantages are tempered by the fact that many independent publishers can't afford to pay advances, and often don't make much in the way of royalties for their authors. Additionally, there are limited resources for marketing, including ads and reviewer copies of books, and even those that do get sent out for review will probably get relegated a lower priority than books from larger publishers.

Bessie notes similar advantages of small presses as Baker. He sees the relative success of the small-press industry as a factor of "two fundamentals of creative activity" that are more difficult for larger corporations because of their sheer size: "Specialization and Doing Your Own Thing . . . For some it lies in subject, for some in regions, for some in ways of doing something better" (Bessie 114). Such a focus requires direct contact with the community that the small press serves, and that type of contact gets lost in massive marketing schemes drawn up by profit-driven aesthetics. This type of community contact also necessitates a break-up of the traditional

⁸ A common practice during my employment with Borders Books and Music.

center of publishing, placing the houses within smaller communities where their work can be felt more immediately; he notes that "It is no accident that most small houses are not located in New York or Boston or Chicago or even San Francisco. Most are in smaller places . . . which allow a small publisher to focus on doing his thing and—important—playing a part in a community which is small enough to be intelligible" (114-115).

Of course, now it is probably just as relevant that traditionally canonical texts, or texts that might be deemed "literary" have just as much difficulty in finding publication today as the standards of publishing have shifted from "quality" to profitability, though the effects on Appalachian literature have remained the same. Whether judged from either standard, Appalachian literature is marginalized in terms of its reception, which has the overall negative effect of limiting its accessibility.

Another solution is available, however. Certainly it's true that the traditional canon is still being published for the university market, because the university is where the literary culture still survives. Though literature may have less cultural capital in relation to its place in the general order of other culturally valued expressions, it still retains much capital within the literary culture itself. Furthermore, the university is the site of the most substantive dialog on literature and culture; however misguided we may think the standards of literary evaluation are, at least they give insight into the standards of culture, rather than just as arbitrary measures of profitability. In this regard, it is imperative for literary culture and the academy to take up and canonize Appalachian literature as a regional literature worthy of study and discourse. As noted previously, Appalachian literature is primarily celebrated only within Appalachia itself; the literary culture in general has mostly ignored it, and nowhere is it currently canonized.

Appalachian authors are making claims to this literary space already, but their claims are being ignored, or else go unheard by the literary community.

But again problematizing the matter, many of the traditional concerns regarding the loss of standards with independent and subsidy publishing are arguably true. Hayden Carruth levels damning indictments of the industry with regards to the "danger of subsidization," noting

It means the indirect support of a more and more marginal artistic endeavor by a society that doesn't want it and doesn't even know it exists. It means greater and greater inbreeding among artists, remoteness, imitativeness, and specialization, i.e. dullness. It means cultural exhaustion, artificially prolonged. . . . what I see emerging is a huge bureaucracy which supports a huge publishing mechanism, operating without standards, promoting nepotism, favoritism, and failure. (Carruth 52).

However, while his overall outlook of the publishing industry and the place of serious writing is explicitly pessimistic, he nonetheless further validates the role that small publishers of any kind play in the industry. While he incorrectly extends the borders of Appalachia further north than they should be, he notes "I became angry because no one would pay attention to David Budbill's poems about life in northern Appalachia, meaning Vermont, and so I published them myself" (54). Such publishing decisions are made out of the need to express values important to the publisher, whether tied to "quality" or specific content. These decisions are subjective, so of course some works will be judged to be inferior in quality, but deciding on their value given their literary context simply requires a more discerning reading public. But then again, before a public can read the works to interpret their value, they must first have access to them. The opportunities that independent publishers provide is precisely that of increased accessibility of

Appalachian texts to the reading public, and through that increased accessibility, an increased valuation of the culture itself.

But ignoring the problems of contemporary publishing won't make them go away; it will only make the values that interpret those problems less and less valid as the values of contemporary culture become more and more pronounced. And while it may be true that the publishing industry as a whole may need to seek a new business model—which is certainly true in the case of distribution and sales systems—literary culture also needs to find a new way to exist and remain relevant in a world of more access to the mechanisms of publishing. If we want to demonstrate why some texts are more or less important than others, more or less valid examples of our culture and lives, or even simply more or less worthy of our time given the limited duration of university periods of study, then we need to put those works in dialogue with the works against whom they are competing. If we value seriousness or accuracy of representation we need to actively set them against works that cater to generic cliché or stereotype, and explicitly show why one is better than the other.

Of course, the problem then is exactly that of what constitutes standards of quality, and the solution is to demonstrate those standards and how they work. While it's not wrong to hold a text up as exemplary, we always have to be aware of the canons in which we're operating and the cultural ideologies which create them. It's important to return to Jane Tompkins, and her overriding assertion that, when broken down, questions regarding whether a text is "good" or "bad" don't really mean much when their contingencies are revealed; the important questions regard the work that given texts do for their culture—what they say to or for a culture over time.

However, the canons of literature still set standards for the ideal of the traditional publishing world, and those standards have kept much of Depta's work from being published

outside of his own operations; and even if more of his books had been accepted by a publisher, it's difficult to say how the content may have been compromised by an outside editor or considerations of marketability. Only outside of the control of corporate publishing can much of what is currently referred to as Appalachian literature exist. Just as Keith, in Depta's *A West Virginia Trilogy*, needs the perspective granted by his university education and his mysticism to properly render the landscape around him, so too does Depta need a space outside of the industry of publishing to render completely and honestly his thoughts on that West Virginia landscape and its inhabitants.

Solutions to the Problems of the Independent Press

Of course, for independent presses to be able to challenge the dominant cultural aesthetic, they must first overcome the material problems outlined above. While one can't deny that those problems exist, the advantages that these technological advances have brought to publishing can't be denied either. In a sense, these advantages have brought independent publishing around full-circle. Erickson notes that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "art and literature were imagined as being produced by those who have no monetary interest in them . . . as if art and literature could be produced only by gentlemen who got pleasure solely from their production" (Erickson 105). But the divide between literature and the economy has been collapsed, not only with the changes in print technology, but especially with the takeover of the industry by an ideology of corporate profitability, as described by Schiffrin. Erickson quotes Thomas Carlyle's opinion of the mechanization of book production that "books are not only printed, but, in great measure, written and sold, by machinery" (Carlyle 62, qtd. in Erickson

106), which seems to lament not only the mechanization of the process of printing, but of the ideology of book production and sales as well.

However, the limitations on small publishers in the book trade imposed by the massive size and resources of corporate publishing houses has had an interesting and paradoxical effect on the independent book business: a sub-industry which exists and even flourishes despite a lack of profits.⁹ In a way, Independent publishing has become the industry that was represented by the older houses in which the only guaranteed return on the product is the pleasure and importance of its production.

A quick survey of the West Virginia University Libraries Appalachian Studies Bibliography reveals some interesting figures. The bibliography, maintained by Jo B. Brown, and published and updated annually in the *Journal of Appalachian Studies* is a vast resource of current literature on all aspects of Appalachian studies. Their section on "Literature, Language and Dialect" contains 380 entries of fiction, literary nonfiction, and poetry (usually in the form of collections).¹⁰ Of these entries, 173, or 46 percent, have been published through 115 different independent presses.¹¹ Another 18 percent (70 titles) were published by university presses, another major source of Appalachian literature, leaving only 36 percent to have been published by major publishing houses. Given that almost half of the Appalachian literature listed in a

⁹ Jan Nathan of PMA has been quoted as saying that despite the fact "distributors can only handle about 300 publishers," approximately "10,000 publishers are entering the market each year" (Rosen, 8). This number applies to all types of publishers including magazines, children's and business books, and, presumably, imprints under corporate entities as well.

¹⁰ Excluded here were books classified as children's, juvenile, or young adult literature. This is not to suggest that such books are not appropriate for consideration as Appalachian literature, but that just by studying them listed on an unannotated bibliography it is difficult to determine whether they might represent photograph and picture books, as well as whether the publisher is independent; many children's book presses are imprints which don't explicitly indicate their ties to the corporate presses that still determine an imprints overall publishing standards.

¹¹ It's also interesting to note that fifty-six, or 49 percent, of these presses are located in states outside of Appalachia. For the purposes of this survey, presses in states that had counties inside the boundaries of Appalachia were included with presses inside Appalachia themselves, except for presses in New York, New York and Washington D.C. The reason for this was simply that considerations of relative proximity should be more lenient when considering business access than when considering cultural influence. Of those fifty-six, twenty-one are located in New York City.

comprehensive bibliography of Appalachian studies is published through independent presses, including most of Depta's own work, it is safe to infer that indeed, contrary to what might be expressed by considering the publishing trends of major houses, there does exist a market for Appalachian literature and that it is being pursued by publishers who realize and acknowledge a value for regional literature.

Given the domination of the bookselling trade by corporate stores such as Borders, Books-A-Million, or Barnes & Noble, it is more important than ever for a small publisher to know the regions for and about which their books are being published. While my original argument is that Appalachian literature should find popularity beyond the borders of the region itself, until that happens publishers need to make the most of the opportunities they have and utilize their familiarity with the region. Since the large booksellers often buy on a large scale for large geographic regions, a publisher may get many returns when books are stocked in stores outside of regions where they'll find popularity. In the Publishers Weekly article "Alone or in Numbers?" Bridget Kinsella notes that "the drive to have its books in every store across the country is a mistake often made by the small and medium-sized publisher" (Kinsella 45). This brings up the concept of niche marketing, and while it may seem marginalizing to refer to Appalachian literature in such a way, it is unfortunately a reality of bookselling. Increasingly, small publishers have begun looking outside of the book trade to sell their books, and knowing the niche that their books fill is an important aspect to their success. When utilizing the small print runs that current print technology allows, even small geographical areas are relatively large in population, and the concept of a niche implies a high demand for that particular product relative to the population of the area. Kinsella quotes Don Tubesing, publisher of Pfeifer-Hamilton, who states "We haven't tried to sell everywhere, because I am limited . . . but it doesn't

matter because the markets are so big. If you get your corner really saturated and get people talking about it, you can sell as many books in a small segment and in a small geographical area as you could trying to sell all over" (44).

Some argue that the key to success in knowing one's niche is to market books outside of the book trade (while not neglecting book stores at the same time). Jim Milliot, in *Publishers Weekly* articles "Bucking the Odds" and "Finding their Way," gives several examples of success in markets outside of bookstores including *What is Goth?*, published by Red Wheel/Weiser. Looking at the demographic market of the "hip" chain teenage clothing store Hot Topic, the publishers took a gamble by striking a deal to place the book in retail clothing stores and the book's eventual success there caught the attention of the traditional bookstores. "Independent publishers," Milliot notes, "renowned for their ability to ferret out new sales channels, will surely continue to do so" (Milliot 37). Examples of such opportunities for Appalachian literature can be seen in locations such as Beckley, West Virginia's Tamarack, which draws visitors specifically for its focus on regional craftsmanship. Likewise, museums, arts centers, or regional fairs also provide focused bookselling opportunities.

Perhaps one of the best options for independent publishers, however, is one that allows them to stay within the book trade while avoiding the pitfalls of marketing to national, chain bookstores using large-scale distributors by teaming up with independent bookstores. A small piece in *Publishers Weekly* by Bridget Kinsella recognizes a group called Underground California, created by Small Press Distribution, Poets & Writers, and the California Arts Council, which works as an intermediary to bring together independent booksellers with independent publishers. Besides helping bring recognition to the publishers within the bookstores themselves, it also helps organize regional events to showcase the work done by

independent sellers. On a more high-profile level, it was interesting to see late last year the opening of Common Good Books, owned by Garrison Keillor, which focuses on "literature, poetry, local authors and regional favorites" (No author 19). While this store will undoubtedly benefit from Keillor's resources and popularity, it is still the case of the business of books being propelled more from passion than from profit.

While none of these strategies carry any guarantee of success, it shows the inventiveness that must be displayed to survive in a business of incredibly thin profit margin. Publishers in the small press industry have to be compelled by a sense of pride and community, with a passion for their work, and have to then transfer that enthusiasm for their community to their marketing and sales practices. This is not to suggest capitalistic exploitation of a given market, necessarily, rather a respect for the people for whom a given text has been created, and an appeal to their desires to read or experience their own culture in writing. For both Appalachian writers and readers, independent and small press publishers represent an invaluable resource for the expression and visibility of their culture and are, in fact, necessary for the continued representation of noncanonical literature in a market of continually narrowed tastes and styles in pursuit of profitability.

PART II—THE WORK OF VICTOR DEPTA

Chapter 3: Poetic Style and the Creation of an Appalachian Voice

As an Appalachian author coming from the coalfields of Logan county, the question of authenticity in his writing has been one of Victor Depta's primary struggles in shaping his poetic style over the years. Receiving his B.A. from Marshall University, an M.A. from San Francisco State University and his Ph.D. from Ohio State, Depta finally settled to teach at the University of Tennessee, Martin. Writing for and about his home, Depta knows what will be accepted as authentic representation and what won't: "I'm from Logan County. I was raised a coal miner's son, you know, and however educated I might or might not be, there is no way I can be pretentious. If you're a coal miner, I mean, forget it. If you're from Logan County there's just no way" (Depta, personal interview 2006). Depta recognizes that there are appropriate times to use the language of academics or high literary tradition, but that he must also be carefully selective of those moments to avoid misrepresenting his culture and heritage. He couldn't be disingenuous about his poetic impulses such that his style or perspective feels forced, or worse, condescending, but he couldn't deny his own training or aesthetic either. His idea of authenticity is complex and dynamic in that the voices of his speaker must carefully match their respective classes and situations while not being insulting or misrepresentative, and at the same time he as poet has to exhibit an authenticity of his own as an insider of the culture, to remain reliable. And although Depta is "not so sentimental as to think that slim volumes of poetry grace the mantels and kitchen cabinets of miners' homes and are taken down and read by firelight or a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling" (Depta, *Simultaneous Mountain* 30), that authenticity of voice is ethical imperative deeply rooted in his cultural heritage.

Authenticity, of course, is relative to one's culture, and is a problem for every poet conscious about how they represent their culture. Depta's authenticity, then, is a way of being faithful to his heritage and values. In maintaining this authenticity, he has been able to fulfill his need to communicate with or for the people of his culture; anything less (or more) and they'd stop reading.

To mitigate what he sees as a pretentiousness of style, Depta has utilized several stylistic techniques of voice to avoid compromising his poetic sensibilities. Essentially, he has created characters to speak in a multiplicity of distinct voices in order to capture different perspectives on a particular theme or issue—including perspectives that might seem pretentious to the point of turning off the reader, if addressed from the writer *and* speaker—while being able to distance himself, as writer and ultimate source of poetic “reliability” (interpolated from that of the speaker).

Additionally, the issue of creating multiple voices to keep from betraying his Appalachian sensibilities about what's valued in terms of poetry and story, seems to be closely tied to a personal divide that Depta feels about his own culture and land. The division seems to be somewhat common among people who live in societies that are highly stratified along class boundaries, in which the people in the lower classes are made to feel inferior because of their position in the social hierarchy. Such indoctrination begins in school, at a young age, and involves, to some degree, the same elitism that results in canonization of literature. Depta summarizes it by saying “I despised school, that boojie fortress where a miner's son was taught by contempt, trained into ignorance, and graduated into labor” (Depta, *The Simultaneous Mountain* 25) and that

nearly twenty-five years after that Hell and that wilderness, after stumbling through an education system which has made me, I suppose, as civilized as possible for Appalachian America, I realize that it is all still with me, that I am a hybrid, the proletarian hillbilly, a country boy shot through with the industrial grit of a Pittsburgh miniaturized in a hollow. (Depta, *The Simultaneous Mountain* 36-7)

Despite that most of their families and neighbors would have been working class, students were taught that such a life was not a worthwhile aspiration and that an education would provide them the means to rise above their current social station and culture. William Goodell Frost, one of the most influential presidents in Berea College's history and an instrumental policy-maker regarding the school's orientation to Appalachian education, in *Our Contemporary Ancestors*, even implies such stratification was somewhat natural, that there was something fundamentally different about Appalachians from "our forefathers" (also expressing his distance culturally and genetically) and that

he is not a degraded being, although, to tell the truth, he has not yet been graded up! . . . The mountain folk . . . are consciously stranded. They are behind relatively as well as absolutely, and their pride is all the more vehement because conscious of an insecure foundation. Shy, sensitive, undemonstrative, the mountain man and woman are pathetically belated. The generations of scorn from the surrounding lowlands have almost convinced them, inwardly, that 'what is, must be,' and they are but feebly struggling with destiny. (102-104)

Frost is summarizing and endorsing many commonly held assumptions about the region. Because he views the social position of the Appalachian people piteously, and would find a certain amount of shame in such a position, relative, of course, only to the cultural that he knew,

he assumes that the people themselves must do the same. The remnants of such an attitude toward education may perhaps be at least partially responsible for Depta's own awareness of authenticity and consciousness of "pretension." While it's tacitly accepted that an education offers more possibilities for employment, and thereby a greater chance of a more financially secure life, for some it wasn't an option, and the suggestion that an education makes one *fundamentally* better than one's neighbors creates a divide between the people and their own culture.

This is not to suggest, however, that the division felt by many Appalachians, Depta included, is merely psychological; it also exists in the land itself. The southern West Virginia coalfields consist of beautiful green rolling hills which hide communities of abject poverty, stripped mountaintops, ravaged forests, dumps of coal waste, and polluted creeks, streams and rivers. "I can . . . be astounded at how extravagantly beautiful a mountain is, then round a curve and come upon a squalid, precarious settlement of ex-coal camp houses, house trailers and a jakey store. Or I can be walking in the mountains . . . then come out upon a ridge and see the gashes of strip mines" (Depta, *The Simultaneous Mountain* 31). At times there's both an attraction and a revulsion to the place and culture, and this duality is reflected in Depta's many speakers and the broad range of perspectives they represent, some of which are explicitly opposed to Depta's own views of the land and culture.

However, it is important to explain first a fundamental aspect of Depta's style—one that is essential to the aesthetics that underly all of his poetry—that poetry, as an art, is aural: "with poetry, the aesthetic effect is completely and absolutely dependent on its aural quality" (Depta, *The Simultaneous Mountain* 68). Depta's view of a reader's response to the art of a poem is to a non-discursive harmony of words, sounds and meanings, derived from the discursive portrayal of

a “complex emotional condition” (Depta, *The Simultaneous Mountain* 68). But those sounds have to accurately fit a preconceived aesthetic sense of beauty, and combining this perspective with Depta’s responsibility to cultural authenticity, we can understand his need to meticulously craft these voices, for his sense of aesthetic beauty is as complex and sometimes self-contradictory as his observations of the Appalachian landscape.

It’s important to note here Depta’s awareness of the social stratification of classes in the coalfields where he grew up. “The social organization of that society,” he notes “was as rigidly class structured as an aristocracy in parody, with the miners, of course, at the bottom, especially if the miners happened to be from an immigrant family as mine were” (Depta, *The Simultaneous Mountain* 24). The class structure he depicts is a strict hierarchy, with the working classes on the bottom (including classes of management) with absentee owners and bosses at the top. That social organization comes through in the voices he creates to represent that society, in that each voice is heavily laden with socio-politico-economic connotations and associations. Each voice carries with it a host of assumptions about that speaker’s place in society, purposefully, so that their words form a portrait of a speaker that natives of Appalachia would be likely to associate with, and would believe.

The most common voice, the one a casual reader is most likely to distinguish, is what he considers a “truly colloquial voice” (Depta, personal interview 2006). A speaker with this voice seems to be the most reminiscent of modern rural West Virginia speech—not hyperbolically distorted ungrammatical constructs, but real speech, sometimes carelessly ungrammatical and with no punctuation, literal or implied, except for the assumption of pauses in the scansion and natural flow of the words in a conversational tone. The force of this style of dialect, and its

prevalence in his culture, works through him, as a poet, in opposite directions. For one, it has shaped his poetry as a fundamental aspect of his aesthetic rendering of style:

Punctuation marks were little bricks in the lines to stumble over, so I did away with punctuation, leaving only white spaces to indicate shifts of wing, doing away with those tiny anchors and hooks which snared the lyric and moored it to mere grammar. . . . I thought of Allen Ginsberg's statement, that he needed to take a very deep breath to read his lines . . . and so designed my lines typographically like his, in which a line was often a stanza in itself, hoping to give readers a sense of exhilaration but not asphyxiate or hyperventilate them. (Depta, *The Simultaneous Mountain* 27)

While his observations here are generalizations about his creation of a poetic style, punctuation, obviously, is a tool for the written word, and while poetry is written down, his essential understanding of poetry is as an aural art, and so represented in written form only by the necessity of transmission. His choice of omission of punctuation in his poetic style, then, is recourse to a dialectical style that is perhaps more conversational in tone than formal written prose, and arguably a product of the heavily oral culture from which he comes. It should be no surprise, then, that he has refined this sparsely punctuated style and utilized it to heighten or reinforce the conversational, informal tone of his colloquial voice. Take, for example, a speaker from *Azrael on the Mountain*, in the poem "Uncle Frank":

You can wipe the kitchen table and an hour later write a store list on it
with your finger, and the sulfur stink gets in your nose. I go
around like a distempered cat, sneezing and scraping my
tongue, trying to get the smell out of my mouth
and uncle Frank—look at him—a stooped-over skeleton on the

porch—and regardless what anybody says it’s not for the
black lung money he’s staying here—his face all ashy and
hollow-eyed—mercy god, the gray moons under them would
scare a ghost, him sitting there still as a stump hoarding his
breath (21)

This is an example of Depta’s colloquial voice, which comprises a large part of *Azrael*, and while sparse punctuation isn’t an absolute rule, its use in passages like this one lend them a sense of breathless desperation or frustration. This voice has the authority of a native in the way it describes the images that Depta has taken straight from his knowledge of coal mining communities in a casual, informal, but knowing tone; one that a reader can trust not to slip into pretentious academic or formal lingo or flowery, poetic description, as, “using a lyric voice like T.S. Eliot or W.B. Yeats does not sound real enough to [him], coming from where [he does], being extremely proletariat” (Depta, personal interview 2006).

Instead, he leaves that role to the voice of an educated, intelligent, “genteel” Appalachian family, set opposite his colloquial voice. So at times when he feels it’s appropriate to render things in a voice that speaks in “high poetry with real prosodic elements” (Depta, personal interview 2006), he gives the lines to this type of speaker—speakers who may represent a higher socio-economic class than the coal mining family he was born into, and so allowed to speak in a manner that he, as an Appalachian, feels is somewhat pretentious, perhaps, but allowably anachronistic in certain ways. The family that speaks in *Doorkeeper in the House* uses this voice solely:

Grandfather shouted: My god!
that nephew aggravates me, that damned Paul

going on has he does about the Serpent.

I told him to remember that, beyond any mythic tongue,
are the ferns and mayapple, the towering gum and hickory and oak.
they, too, can whisper us into consciousness,
to eternities of expostulation all delicate
and to salvation, also, of course,
though yoked to Being like a winged mule. (“The Winged Mule” 77)

With this voice the speakers can contemplate being and spirituality in a lyric voice, regardless of how pretentious such subjects and delivery may be to a working-class culture, while allowing their validity as members of a different class. As a poet, such stylistic turns give him a distance from a subject matter that might otherwise be difficult to express.

While it’s true that much of what Depta writes is spoken by these two conceivably native Appalachian voices, both of which seem to express different sides of the poet or represent different perspectives he holds while at the same time being wholly constructed, he also reserves a voice to which he can claim a much closer relationship. A distinctive first-person voice speaks the poems he refers to as his “ragged poems” (Depta, personal interview 2006). These poems tend to stand out as the voice of the poet, especially when compared to the poetic style he describes having cultivated in his essay “Prosody in Revolt.” While he truly enjoyed the “glory of English prosody,” he felt that his poetic doctrine had to consist of “a set of rebellious principles both in terms of style and attitude towards my subject.” In part, this consideration led to his style of sparse punctuation, and also to a rejection of classic parallelism, or at least, the predictability it engendered: “so I shifted gerunds, infinitives, and prepositional phrases around to scatter the effect” (26-27). Depta uses this first-person voice frequently in *The Helen Poems*:

You were reading
homework-child on the couch
and I
it was gaze-nothing, stare-thought
yet I was face-fraught
I must have been
so frown-wrung
for you to have come to me
and ask
Did I do something wrong, Daddy?

(“Guilt-Forgot” 24)

Besides a straight-forward, “realistic” use of language—language that a father could be heard using with his daughter—another characteristic of this voice is occasional use of rhyme, usually internal, sometimes exact, and sometimes slanted. All three are utilized here with “stare-thought/face-fraught,” and “frown-wrung/to have come,” which lends to the sense of realism in the sing-song yet quietly subdued rhythm of a father consoling his daughter. Other characteristics of this voice are numerous ellipses and allusions, and, as in the poem above, the staccato lines creating a “ragged” effect that can jar the reader somewhat, from one to the next. This effect gives the poems a feeling of spontaneity, in both creation and performance, and so also a somewhat unstructured or unbalanced quality.

Finally, characterized by Depta as “taking a big chance” (Depta, personal interview 12/4/2006), a third voice he created to help convey his poetry is that of the omniscient, but not necessarily third-person, character. Often his densest material, in terms of both style and subject,

is reserved for this voice to speak “from the heavens” or “out of the blue” (Depta, personal interview 12/4/2006):

and the self sees reality narrow its breadth
as a gorge which torments a river
whitens it violently through the narrow senses
the ego a man clinging to a rock
the torrent tearing at his limbs
to drag him down, bruised and torn
and to drown him

so on that rock
from which he will be swept into oblivion
he dreams of a past where a garden was
beside a placid, wide river glittering
and dreams of a future where his father is
and mother, and he is healed by ascension into paradise
as a wounded child. (“The Eternal Present” 26; lines 18-31)

This poem is a meditation on the relationship of the self to the ego and of the moment of enlightenment in the realization that past and future are illusory concepts created by the ego and that only the present is real. In the stanzas above, Depta retains much of the nature imagery that we might hear from any of the other voices he has created, when spoken in admiration of their Appalachian environment, but in this poem the imagery—for example, the river as the constant stream of an “eternal present” that, when realized, washes away the clinging ego, the part of us

that lives in the past and future and diverts attention from the present underfoot—is standing in for a concept which, even were it not at odds with the religiously conservative (traditionally) culture’s understanding of being and place, is still an obscure concept, parts of which are only hinted about. This voice is often used for his spiritual, mystical or transcendental meditations which even heightens the contrast between it and the religious culture it attempts to speak to. He considers it as taking a chance because he runs the risk of sounding pretentious to the culture that might find it foreign. However, at the same time it's also a very valid voice to express as it represents, if nothing else, an "educated" Appalachian persona, of which he, as a writer, is truly a part. Coming as a voice from “the heavens” as it often seems to do, the poems we hear from it, at times, are almost blasphemous, yet at the same time also retain a tremendous authority. At times it comes as the voice of a different god, writing its own doctrine of being and reality. And stylistically, these poems are some of the most complex as well. Just in those stanzas Depta uses metonymy in casting the ego for man, caught in the metaphorical river of the eternal present. Dreaming “of a past where a garden was/beside a placid, wide river” is an allusion to the Garden of Eden and humankind’s being cast from it—leaving the speaker in a state of conflict, confusion of sorts, with the ego being washed away—which is then reinforced by the allusion to Christ’s ascension into heaven, which for the self is the moment of enlightenment. Using such a wide variety of literary effects, then, allows Depta to create a considerably denser poem while giving him a certain amount of distance from the subject matter.

Chapter 4: Meditation, Contemplation and Family

In many of his collections of poetry, some of the primary issues that concern Depta's speakers are those of family and how they fit their role in that family or in their community. We begin to see these issues as early as his first published collection of poetry, *The Creek*, put out in 1973 by Ohio University Press. Most of the poems in this collection belong to those he refers to as his "ragged" poems in style with a poetic first-person voice that seems to allow a certain amount of playful poesy as opposed to serious contemplation. As a collection, *The Creek* details a "glorious summer dealing with family" (Depta, personal interview 2005) as the speaker, in the first three poems, moves from a bus stop in California to his family in West Virginia. The themes expressed in *The Creek* are somewhat carefree while still being somewhat meditative of the landscape and the speaker's family and culture. In the second poem, "The wind blew and the coat I had on," the speaker introduces the reader to his mother and father, though their relationship to him seems vaguely troubled. It's difficult to decipher as the poem is told through the lens of a delusional fever from complications of pneumonia: I'm recovering from pneumonia or something like that / and rest in the back room losing weight with / fever delirious while the wind blows and the / leaves lie on their backs and howl at the sun" (14; lines 17-20). His mother and father appear in two stanzas in this poem, but react to him inexplicably: "She ran out screaming that I was naked and that my / pecker was lying across my thigh like a gila / monster with his tongue flicking" (15; lines 44-46) and "When my father came in there was a sycamore / standing above the swamp who was my father / saying Well son, we've got to go now and / the kid who nearly drowned in the swamp / a long time ago cried *father*" (16; lines 48-52). In a review of this collection, Donald Askins noted that "the clarity of reality as reproduced in a

sharply focused photograph is suddenly and deliberately blurred by the introduction of the unreal, of things as not normally perceived by the senses" (Askins, "The Creek" 37), echoed by another reviewer's description of *The Creek* as "a blend of the surreal, real, and natural" (Halla, "The Creek" 34); perhaps one thing characteristic of much of Depta's poetry is his frequent juxtaposition of highly detailed observations about nature, family, and culture with surreal, metaphysical, or transcendental imagery and revelations.

Despite this conflation of the father with the image of a grown, sturdy tree, the speaker gives few other references to his father and mother throughout this collection, and only really hints at a fractured relationship. One clue he gives early on is found in the poem "But I can't disappear:" "But I can't disappear and go anywhere like my / father did so I dreamed you from California" (23; lines 1-2). There's a specificity in the speaker's word choice that at first glance appears to be hidden in vagueness. For one, the indictment of his father is hidden in a larger phrase that leads into a different conversation altogether; the speaker is sitting by a creek idly talking to and dreaming of his lover as he's conjured her from his imagination, from California. However, the speaker clearly wants the reader to know that his father "left" and not only that, but "disappeared." And given the locations that he describes for the characters here—him home in the hills and his lover in California—we can see that he clearly isn't suggesting that he disappear from her, like his father did, but that he disappear from his *family* like his father did. The next poem in the collection, "It's raining," provides a little more detail into the emotional affect on the family of the estrangement between his father and mother:

My fifty-two year old mother who isn't here
when we're all sitting around the kitchen
table drinking and the conversation runs

down and everybody's tired she's still
waiting while we want something to eat.

She's waiting for a crow to fly through the
window with the news *he's here! he's here!*
and she sits smiling with a hope of ribbons
around her orange sagegrass. (25; lines 9-17).

The cumulative effect of these references to his mother and father suggest the tragedy of a father who has deserted his family, disappearing from, at least, moments of his son's and wife's lives.

On the other hand, he portrays his grandmother and grandfather very warmly and lovingly, demonstrating an understanding of family which extends familial intimacy to his extended family:

My grandmother's walking around the yard my
grandfather alongside showing me the flowers
until my eyes blossom even the whites my
teeth my finger nails and my toe nails.

She goes on and on and suddenly in all those flower
names I hear a gift a welcome of roses and

look my dahlias

....

I hope it rains suddenly I hoped it would rain
because I wanted to take my grandfather an
old man who's palsied and very shy I want
to take him trout finishing maybe it would

make him smile. (19; lines 1-7, 15-19)

The speaker acknowledges what seems to be an empty ritual (“she goes on and on”) until he realizes that she’s given him a gift of a warm, welcoming comfort in the recollection of these different flowers, remembering as he does these habitual walks. These memories lead naturally to his grandfather and the simple pleasures he knew with him. Through these poems spoken directly about his family members, we can read a speaker who enjoys still the company of a family he loves, even if he’s acutely aware of certain gaps in the continuity of familial love.

Although this collection focuses primarily on the speaker’s summer spent with family, one poem in particular stands out as coming almost directly from the poet, as he’s beginning to articulate his stylistic choices and realize the problems of representation which later necessitate his deliberate constructions of voice. In “Disguising poems,” the speaker explains the problem: “Disguising poems so the family doesn’t think / I’m a freak sure is hard I took up / photography guitar and botany / but they didn’t work / so now I put shells around the poems” (44; lines 1-5). The speaker is realizing and commenting on what Depta has since explained, that he had to find ways to get his family to *read* his poems first, if he wanted them to see the beauty in them. If he just gave them the poems as he saw them, and first thought to render them, they might be regarded as pretentious and disregarded. However, “disguised” or rendered in voices less formally poetic than he can pass them to his “cousins” who “say my / my my . . . while the lizards / break out of their shells” (44; lines 12-17). It would seem that this is the reason *The Creek* attempts to exhibit such a playfulness while still contemplating somewhat serious issues; Depta succeeds in disguising, to a degree, his actually serious poetic attempts by undermining that seriousness with his somewhat care-free, ragged, style.

Knowing that these “ragged” poems may frame a voice most easily related to the poet himself, Depta’s motives begin to show through. The complex relationship between his love of the sublimely beautiful in the poetic, the result of an education offered in contempt of the culture in which it was situated, and his love of his proletarian, working-class culture and heritage, which he’s noted as being suspicious of literature and the arts, shows itself in this emergent problem of authenticity in representation. We begin to see, also, where that real authenticity lies. Depta, as a poet, is loyal to the non-discursive beauty of a poetic work, and to the Appalachian sensibilities of his family and neighbors. The discursive part of the poetic work is the shell that he “polishes,” “pushing the dyes into the small / pits” (6-7), made into believable voices, likable to those to whom he’s speaking.

Depta’s third volume of poetry, which similarly contemplates family and acceptance, is one of two of his collections published by Ion Press, a small independent publisher that also operated, at least partially, as a subsidy press. Depta paid part of the costs of development and publishing for *A Doorkeeper in the House* (1993), and his next book, *The Helen Poems* (1994). *Doorkeeper* is also notable because fifteen years had elapsed between his second book and it. During this time, Depta taught at the University of Tennessee, Martin, and published more than ninety poems, essays and short stories in at least sixty-six different publications. *Doorkeeper* is the first of Depta’s collections to rely heavily on the voice of his “genteel” mountain family and it sets itself apart from *The Creek* and *The House* with its formal lyric structure, even, deliberate stanzas, and occasional use of parallelism. The book is divided into five sections, each named for a family member: “Aunt Thelma,” “Sister Charlene,” “Uncle Walter,” “Cousin Michael” and “Grandfather.” The poems in this collection ostensibly deal with spiritual issues or issues of love, focused around individual members of the family, but eventually it becomes clear that they

all share a desire for some sort of transcendence. Whether it's an inquiry into the meaning of love, God, or a fundamental aesthetics, each family member is trying to connect with their own sense of beauty and give it meaning in their world. Using the voice of the genteel mountain family allows the speakers to contemplate issues in terms that others of his speakers might eschew. They can speak more formally about issues of aesthetics or spirituality in ways that ties their speech to their class, without undermining Depta's authority as author and insider.

Of course, the divisions aren't meant to suggest that they're the only family members who figure into this collection; they aren't always the speakers of the poems comprising each section. There is an always-present speaker from whose perspective each of the family members is defined: nephew to Aunt Thelma and Uncle Walter, brother to sister Charlene. His somewhat ambivalent relationship with his family is described at the outset:

I boo greetings and see that look in their eyes saying *so this*
is how he turned out, the dope head. I figured this
would happen. I wonder if he's got herpes yet, the
drunk. And I hug my relations and kiss them on the
cheek. (13; lines 20-24)

Though situated as the first poem in the first section, "Aunt Thelma," "The Foyer" acts as a figurative gathering place for the rest of the book. As a poem it mirrors the utility of its namesake as it collects not only the characters the reader encounters in more detail later in the collection, but also the themes. When the speaker states "I think people have glue on them, or explode. They put on / clothes and hair and eyes like wearing furniture . . ." (1-2), it reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of his own family's motives. He regards their appearance as artificial and constructed, and knows his own reaction to them is visible: ". . . and I've got a

trigger on my face. I worry about people seeing / my left cheek rise and fall back like it was shooting at / them” (3-5). His disdain for them is clear, if only mild, describing the crowded foyer as “messy” (6). But then he gives an interesting counter-point to relations gathered there when he notes that his mother is missing: “illiterates my / Grandfather says about people like her, trash the soul / struggles out of a ditch from like honeysuckle” (9-11).

The speaker continues:

I don't like that. He doesn't understand what makes her and
the relatives on her side dull-shiny and smooth like
an old quarter, and makes them know a vending machine
for sure when they see one coming.

In voicing this divide between the two sides of the family, the speaker describes a somewhat common divide in extended mountain families. With the word “illiterate” grandfather is remarking that the difference in class between the two sides of the family comes down to education, despite the speaker's attribution of a different kind of knowledge on his mother's side. However, “The Foyer” provides only an initial glance at these characters and divisions, and we come to find through the rest of the collection, as in life, the relationships are much more complex than what can be surmised from a first encounter.

While it's true that each character featured in the sections of this collection expresses a “quest for purpose and reason in what can become a meaningless world,” (Copeland, “A Review of Victor Depta's *A Doorkeeper in the House*” 47), or a search for some sort of transcendence, it would be easy to miss that theme and think of this simply as a collection orbiting around the gathering of a family, with each poem only loosely related. This collection, I think, marks a turning point in Depta's published writings in that a reader can easily discern a maturation of

style and settled ease in highly complex voices and characterizations. His use of allusion throughout the collection belies the Grandfather's description of the mother's side of the family as "illiterate," as it reveals a highly literate persona behind the speaker's voice—identified first with the fictionalized speaker, but ultimately with Depta himself. Several reviewers have noted his explicit references to Donne¹²—interestingly not through the voice of Uncle Walter, the character arguably most concerned with a literary beauty and aesthetic, but through Cousin Michael ("Cousin Michael and the Hognose Snake" 69) and Grandfather ("The Egotism of Death" 83)—and Lewis Overaker notes insightfully that "Depta's facility with allusion is impressive. The historical and cultural breadth of his characters is expressed with a naturalness that stirs the reader's moribund belief in western culture" (3). For although his allusions reveal a highly literate poet behind the lines, whether the fictionalized "I" or Depta himself, it's the "cultural breadth" of the characters that help keep this collection grounded and true to Depta's own need for authenticity and rejection of pretension. Though he makes allusions to such high-culture touchstones as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*,¹³ Rudolf Nureyev, Federico Fellini, Guiseppe Verde, Chaucer and John Keats, Depta also carefully situates them in a world with Steven Spielberg, Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix, "PCP, Coke, Ecstasy" ("Something Else" 80; line 27), and the ubiquity of Wal-Mart and McDonalds.

In employing such a broad range of cultural references, Depta creates for himself a believable context in which he allows the speaker to question some of the fundamental desires of life and how they conflict with the specific culture in which he is situated. Donne is an appropriate allusion for Depta in that not only are the general questions being asked pointedly

¹² See Overaker, Copeland, and uncredited review in *The Ogalala Review*.

¹³ C.f. "The Club and the Harley," I ask myself: what misery, and whose defeat / as he watches us, silly as ostriches . . ." (44, lines 12-13) with *The Odyssey*, book XX, line 351; the former precedes the thirty-part "Cousin Michael's Trip" (48-68).

metaphysical in nature, the conceits he uses are even more specifically so. For example, in Sister Charlene and Aunt Thelma, we see a similar tendency to conflate the physical world with the spiritual, often sexualizing normally neutral phenomena while undermining the sensualized cultural assumptions that have, in part at least, informed their own identities. Aunt Charlene says to the speaker,

. . . I was all spring the mad whore
of Peach Tree. God exposed himself everywhere.
He talked from the twigs of trees with his green mouth
and uncovered his sex the first time to me in the bean sprouts.
He was showing off the tip of his first leaves
like an adolescent boy, how innocent! Who unsheathes
it on his stem with unbearable tenderness.

(“The Mad Whore of Peach Tree” 14; lines 17-23)

While it may be unconscionable for many Christians to describe God in terms of a sexualized nature, Aunt Thelma sees no blasphemy in it and in fact it seems to be the only way she can comprehend and express her spirituality:

But I learned this, child, about God:
my heart so pumps with need, that if I throbbed
with Him, we’d hurl, one being, groom and bride,
like stones, and crash amid the stirring of birds,
to join the colloquy of sunrise astir with wings.
We’d cause a flap of havoc; dawn would fling
itself into the air and reel in panic at so much joy.

(15; lines 31-37)

Sister Charlene, on the other hand, desexualizes the female body in the context of a religious paranoia and oppression in an address to the speaker, who then relates to us,

Think of the Pentateuch, she said, and the crazy law
which doubled the number of days unclean for daughters,¹⁴
and priests so jealous of their pile of rocks,
and so fanatic, as they flapped and squawked over sacrifice,
that I'm still afraid . . .
Is righteousness, in any case, so bloodless an affair
that I should cringe and pull the towel across my thighs
in this month's ripening crescent of my little moon?

(“Sacrifice the Moon” 23; lines 3-7, 10-12)

In many Christian cultures such as those found in parts of Appalachia, conservative religious values often dictate marginalized roles for the women in the community. It would be understandable that Aunt Thelma probably wouldn't refer to herself as the mad whore of Peach Tree to just anyone, nor would Sister Charlene talk about the overzealous sexual paranoia inherent in Christianity, let alone referring to menstruation, in mixed company. And often, conflicts such as those above can't be validated by the culture if posed by someone from outside it. It's necessary, then, for Depta's speaker to be both inside of—close enough to this Appalachian family that they share thoughts that they might otherwise keep hidden from strangers—as well as outside of—literarily educated enough to be a mouthpiece for Depta's own poetical aesthetic—the culture at the same time. Such a wide array of allusions, then, helps to

¹⁴ Leviticus 12:1-5, "A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days. . . . If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean. . ."

reveal the complexity of Depta's sense of authenticity, showing the knowledge of an educated mountain family, with voices appropriate to their socioeconomic class.

Two other characters, Uncle Walter and Grandfather, are interesting in that they are unapologetic aesthetes. Grandfather says to the speaker “What troubles you? That I teach, that I value literature, / that I’m towered in that yellowed, ivory cliché?” (“The Fever of Every House” 88). Such an attitude seems to immediately put him in contrast to a typical working class background, but because of Depta's need for authenticity of voice, we can see how his speech matches that of his profession, and likewise his class. Similarly, it also implies a sense of elitism when recollecting the first poem in which he called the speaker's mother "uneducated." Uncle Walter, however, expresses his longing very differently:

if I could see to the antiquity of desire made whole again
in my imagination, and not such a desperate hope
that children cry to see, where they thought wisdom was,
a grotesque, painted bird afire,
then I would know the law of esthetic longing to the last clause.

(“The Antiquity of the Muse” 36; lines 22-26)

There are hints of a fatalistic interpretation of beauty in Uncle Walter’s remarks, and we see him as a character who has tired of looking for truth in the beauty of art and literature, and at the same times is tortured by the search. The speaker identifies a hypocrisy in the attitude of Uncle Walter, and eventually in himself, when he states

but when it comes to real beauty, real poetry, well, that’s
different, that’s heavy. . . .
You have to suffer for it, which is all right, really,

since logos is the wound on the mouth, but what gets me,
I guess, is the hypocrisy
as if the heavy poets, uncle Walter included—who's got a
thing for Charlene, *all my dear*—us Americans, anyway,
who've heard of Kampuchea, maybe, and Belsen,
suffering and wailing, who stab ourselves with our pens—
we're flagellants with a paradise we refuse to die in.

(“Hypocrites of Redemption, 37; lines 16-29)

While he references Kampuchea and Belsen to make his point, he could have just as easily said Monongah or Buffalo Creek. Depta reveals here that to be regarded as pretentious is not just an artificial label applied by those who may not understand the references Uncle Walter, or the speaker, are making, but that to consider such a struggle for aesthetic beauty and understanding while in the midst of real day-to-day suffering and a struggle simply for life itself is the ultimate act of pretension and hypocrisy. In identifying this, Depta addresses the real need for the Appalachian writer in maintaining authenticity. To working-class families, writing is often considered a luxury or leisure activity, secondary to the activities that provide for a family.

Grandfather, however, is much different than Uncle Walter, and while he identifies in himself a similar pursuit of literary truth and beauty, he's really more interested in a distilled sense of spirituality, one which commingles with nature, and finds meaning in mortality, not completely unlike Aunt Thelma's, but not quite the same either. Grandfather's spirituality isn't specifically Christian, as he relates an ongoing argument with his nephew, Paul. In fact, a belief centered in natural mysticism shows through:

Grandfather shouted: My god!

That nephew aggravates me, that damned Paul
going on as he does about the Serpent.
I told him to remember that, beyond any mythic tongue,
are the ferns and mayapple, the towering gum and hickory
and oak.

They, too, can whisper us into consciousness,
to eternities of expostulation all delicate
and to salvation, also, of course,
though yoked to Being like a winged mule.

(“The Winged Mule” 77; lines 1-9)

Grandfather finds his spirituality centered in the phenomena of Being, a subtle difference from Aunt Thelma’s beliefs in that while he considers all of nature to be part of the beauty associated with Being, Thelma sees its beauty as a manifestation of God. We’re tempted to view Grandfather as the wisest of the characters, perhaps in part due to his place as patriarch, emphasized by the placement of this section as last in the book, but also because of the manner of his relationship to the speaker. The title of the poem “We Lapse into Wisdom” implies as much, as the speaker describes a conversation between them: “As if explaining to me, the idiot, / Grandfather said that rapture is unconditional / and isn’t bound to a Brahman or a Hebrew caste, / a lotus flower, a minaret or a cross” (84; lines 1-4). The conversations between the speaker and his Grandfather are more directly concerned with the metaphysics that the speaker has been showing us of everyone else all along. In this regard, the Grandfather acts somewhat as a mentor to the speaker assisting him in his spiritual and metaphysical inquiry of the values of his own family.

The authenticity of voice is especially important to give validity to a particularly contentious topic in the section of the last character, Cousin Michael, who seems to look for meaning or transcendence in his coming to terms with his own sexuality. Another Appalachian author, Jeff Mann, has written extensively on his experiences and understanding of being gay in Appalachia. He notes: “In a town of thirty-five hundred in southern West Virginia, [realizing I was gay] was an unfortunate and dangerous discovery. Lesbian friends and I were mocked, threatened, even physically attacked” (“Stonewall and Matewan...” 207). In response to such threats, he notes that “being gay in Appalachia has encouraged in me a kind of self-protective paranoia. Throughout high school and college in West Virginia, surrounded by a potentially dangerous majority, I veiled my outcast status, becoming a master of peripheral vision and protective coloration” (“Risk” 97). While it may be argued that tolerance toward homosexuality in parts of Appalachia has grown considerably in the last decade alone, whether as the result of religious or simply conservative cultural values it still remains a taboo particularly in smaller, more rural communities. It’s easy to understand, then, that a member of such a community who realizes their own homosexual urges might feel the need to hide or repress those urges, thereby creating a conflict such as expressed by the speaker of *Doorkeeper*’s brother:

His motorcycle’s high. He screams juke boxes at night
down the road, flaking purple and red scars, hoping
for a man to love him but hating cocks. He screams
and screams like a shredded face in a windshield. (“Juke Boxes” 43; lines 15-18)

It’s also interesting that this section on Cousin Michael begins with a poem about the speaker’s brother, suggesting already elements of Michael’s own identity and his relationship to the brother, foregrounding as it does the brother’s sexuality. Indeed, not only is the taboo of sexuality being

addressed in this section, but also that of an incestuous relationship between cousins. Michael and the brother come to represent two sides of the divide that Mann talks about when he notes that

for gays and lesbians in Appalachia who want to live full lives, who want to embrace both their gay and their mountain identities, who refuse to dismember themselves in order to assimilate, it can be very difficult to find some compromise between love of the same sex and love of home. If a gay man flees to the city, he is often encouraged to drop “that funny accent” and “those country ways,” to feel ashamed of his mountain culture. If a lesbian stays in the mountains, she might face bigotry and abuse, especially from intolerant fundamentalist Christians; she might feel obliged to stay in the closet; she might suffer from the relative lack of social and romantic opportunities. (*Loving Mountains, Loving Men* xi-xii)

Each character has made a choice; the brother can't seem to admit his sexuality and it shows itself as a kind of nervousness: “He stays behind at the table / . . . twisting his hands in his lap. / He gulps at beers and swaggers / the frightened bully” (“The Club and the Harley” 44; lines 3-7). Michael, on the other hand, tells the speaker, “I’m envious of you from out here / where I seem to be a stranger in a passionate land. / I’ve so obscured my origins / that the cautered ends of memory hiss and flare” (“The Confusions of Eros” 47; lines 43-46). Both characters feel a sense of shame toward the compromise they’ve had to make. Michael’s longing, it seems is for a reconciliation of both parts of his identity—his mountain heritage with his sexual identity: “The finest of the poems, I think, are those about our Grandmother / . . . I wish / since she loved me, that she might rise, a god / all gaudy gorgeous blurred with sunlight / . . . You see! Your poems have left me maundering and nostalgic.” (47; lines 30-38). But it’s a desire he senses will never

be realized: “I can’t, like you, give substance to my longing. / However sweet its object is to touch / it feels like bronze and marble, which are cold / and have a hollow ring” (46; lines 23-26). He wants to come back to his family and be comfortable, but in order to do so he would have to hide his sexuality and display a false, “hollow,” identity.

In the end, *Doorkeeper in the House*—a title given to Cousin Michael in “When Your Ego Bloats” (39), and perhaps applicable also to the speaker, “a ghost in the foyer” who “drift[s] to the door for Grandfather when / the doorbell rings” (“The Foyer” 13; lines 16-19), invisible and ignored—is an incredibly complex collection of poetry that struggles with the themes of Christian faith and nature, gender, sexuality, aesthetics, and spirituality, all in the context of an Appalachian family firmly situated in a mountain culture. Depta himself struggled with his own style in order to find a suitably authentic frame for these themes: “I had [*Doorkeeper*...] for fifteen years . . . because I couldn’t get it in my mind how I wanted it to sound “ (Depta, personal interview 2006). Without this “genteel mountain family,” however, these poems, as they try to speak for Appalachian culture about such issues, would be like the object of Michaels longing; they would be “cold / and have a hollow ring” (“The Confusion of Eros” 46; lines 25-26).

While *The Creek* and *A Doorkeeper in the House*, contemplate issues of acceptance and family, Depta takes a much more personal look at family in his collection *The House*, *The Helen Poems*, and *The Little Henry Poems*. While I don’t discuss the last of these here, its themes echo those of *The Helen Poems*, with the difference that the speaker meditates now on his role as grandfather rather than as father. However, *The House* was published in 1978 by New Rivers Press, an independent literary non-profit that relocated from New York to Minnesota, now under

the direction of Minneapolis State University at Moorhead.¹⁵ Again using primarily Depta's "ragged" format, the speaker's meditations in this collection focus on the birth of a child and simultaneous disintegration of a marriage. I refer to these collections as more intimate portrayals of family because of how closely the poet and speaker seem to be related. While the connection may remain vague in this collection, it becomes explicit in *The Helen Poems*.

From the beginning of *The House* the reader is somewhat jarred, thrown into a complex emotional tapestry of sexual desire and love, separately, while facing the concerns and responsibilities of familial commitment and care. The sexual desire that the speaker feels in the first poem, "When she was huge"— . . . "I couldn't hold off any more and went / to the bathroom and did it you know to myself" (11; lines 1-2)—is represented by an image in the speaker's mind of an ocean and its beach rising to a "wavy climax" (5), but is then cut short, when the image transforms into an image of a beach with "[people] showing up with blankets . . . and children with sand buckets" (6-7). This normally serene image of a family vacationing together, spending time with each other, is here set in contrast to the speaker's selfish desires. That the speaker can't refer to his wife as pregnant, describing her instead as "huge," shows his hesitation in admitting to himself the responsibilities he's going to have, that his life will change with the birth of his child. And further, that he acts on his sexual desire through masturbation shows him still clinging to immature, selfish instincts. Indeed, the collection can also be characterized generally as a rapid period of maturation for the speaker, suffering the tragedies of a failing relationship at the same time that he's rejoicing over the birth of a child.

Throughout the collection, the speaker wrestles with this newly realized conflict between self and other, as he discovers that the reality of taking care of a child is so much different than

¹⁵ See Jodie Ahern's 2001, "New Rivers Press Suffers Great Loss," *Poets & Writers* 29(3). online: <http://www.pw.org/mag/newsahern0501.htm>, and Mary Gannon's 2001, "Update: New Rivers Press Saved," *Poets & Writers*, 29(4).

how he has dreamt it: “but it’s no good / like bathing a wound or ugly suburn / no neck / bald / wieners with elbows and hands and feet / your navel like a blood spot in an egg. / I dreamed how it would be / cleaning your little ass and pinning diapers . . . and a woman I / sit beside while she clucks roses and gold light / and strawberry pancakes forever” (“My Pink Prune” lines 10-20).

The nervousness with which he bathes her infuses every moment he’s watching her and seems to begin to turn to frustration as he slowly submits his life over to the responsibilities of child rearing. Interestingly, we know that the speaker is watching his daughter in the poem “Don’t let the baby fall” because of the first stanza, which is also the most direct evidence of his disintegrating marriage. We realize that the lines “Don’t let the baby fall in the creek. / She won’t fall in the creek dammit. / Goodbye” is really a terse conversation between the speaker and his wife, one in which a growing frustration or hostility is apparent, signaled by the haste of “goodbye” on the heels of a rare curse. However, as the speaker is watching her in the creek, he is momentarily distracted by his surroundings as he seems to slip off into poetic reverie, but catching himself suddenly: “hey what’s that happening? / *nothing* / god” (18-20). That last word, a line or even a stanza in itself, carries the weight of his frustration at not even having the time or opportunity to turn away and let his mind wander. This is reinforced by a similar sentiment in the poem “And you in the grass white” when he addresses the child rhetorically: “your helplessness is indecent / why do I have to watch you all the time / always *down*” (25; 3-5). However, this time the speaker ultimately appears motivated from more altruistic desires than selfish ones as he goes on to say “look at the leaves / that glistening river of birds” (7-8). With this poem, the speaker seems to compromise his frustration at not being able to be simply a poet by enlarging his desire to witness poetic beauty as including his child.

That “compromise” of sorts is a stage the speaker passes through as he matures, resulting in the realization contained in the poem “My little girl” who, he states “makes me happy like a trap door where my / senses fall in and slide down . . . when she’s grown I’ll curl up in an octopus and write labyrinthine estuaries of Being and when I really and finally get there my poems will crinkle / in an old man’s shirt pocket when she hugs / me during a visit” (38). The speaker seems to finally realize that his most complex meditations aren’t anything more substantial than crinkling paper when compared to the warmth and love of his daughter.

Depta’s next published collection of poetry, *The Helen Poems*, published in 1994, a year after the publication of *Doorkeeper...*, was also published by Ion Books. Depta composed this collection of poems over the course of nine months while serving as visiting professor at Marshall University and on sabbatical with the University of Tennessee, Martin from 1987-88 (Depta, personal interview 2005).

This collection of poetry stands out as the first of Depta’s to clearly feature his own voice. While the speaker of *The House* could arguably be interpreted as the poet, there is still an element of distance that prevents such an association from being fully realized. That distance, however, isn’t present in *The Helen Poems*. This collection chronicles the end of a marriage and him coming to terms with the responsibilities of being a single father, not only assuming a somewhat unconventional gender role—though possibly less unconventional now than when the events were being lived—but doing so as a male parent trying to relate to his daughter. The intimacy of such a portrait is important for this collection, because it very clearly informs the style of the poetry. In terms of style, the composition of this collection was more straightforward than most because as the speaker, Depta was free to render the poems however he wanted them, without having to fear being regarded as a pretentious outsider, disconnected from the reality he

was trying to describe. He wrote these poems for and about his daughter and, in a sense, wasn't concerned with how they would be received by others.

Though he usually prefers to shun subjectively rendering personal emotions in favor of interpretation of such emotions in terms of their mystical or spiritual significance, in this volume we get a glimpse of those feelings and emotions, and he's able to relate these things because "this is specifically my daughter down in rural Tennessee. . . . there is an objectivity to the emotional condition, the emotional responses between these two people which has an air of reality about them which you might not ordinarily get in a book of poems" (Depta, personal interview 2005). So despite his confidence in his own voice and its appropriateness to the subject matter, once again the issue of authenticity still informs his sense of style, however indirectly. In this case, however, being authentic means being true to both his aesthetic sensibilities as well as the accuracy he can obtain in rendering that period of his life.

We first notice how the speaker clearly delineates the timeline for these poems as Helen, the subject of the collection, is introduced slowly, eased into the book as the central subject. The first two poems, in fact, are ostensibly addressed to her mother as the relationship between her and the speaker is coming to an end. It seems, though, that their relationship had emotionally ended some time before, and all that was left was the physical act of separation: "I sighed as the train came, and yet why," (15; line 1) the speaker asks, followed by "we had wrung all grief long ago / and parting was a dry afterthought" (lines 5-6). And following this poem, we find that it was specifically a marriage that had disintegrated in the poem "The Litigation." The cold legal language of the title heightens the emotional subjectivity of the lines though irony as "Like a white chastisement / your small letters come / . . . parcels of accusation, rebuke and blame / . . . and in the smallest boxes, carefully wrapped / is the grief I open last" (16; lines 1-2, 5-8). And

although the speaker's grief is great enough to cast suspicion on his claim from "Amtrak Song" that "we had wrung all grief long ago," it's interesting that his daughter figures only slightly as a character in these first two, with the somewhat indirect epithet "the child" to note that she was there as her mother boarded the train.

However, with the next poem, "Daughter Flower," the first in the collection to directly address the speaker's child as a prominent figure in his life, we can see a symmetry that Depta has set up in the movement of the poems into this collection as a whole. "I would never have believed / the child could ease me out of myself / no longer young, divorced and aimlessly bereaved" (17; lines 1-3) he states, which also mimics the way the child has moved in to fill the gap of the poetic subject left by her mother in the first two poems. Whereas the speaker's wife, and her connection to his wife was the sole concern of the first two poems, as his child eases him out of "himself"—the life centered around a relationship between him and his wife—he eases her into this collection, to become the primary subject and to demonstrate the shift in his own attentions. But this poem does more than simply introduce a major character in the speaker's life; it also reveals his own sudden understanding of the responsibilities he was soon to face, and as might be regarded as characteristic of Depta's poetic revelations, it shows itself as an ecstatic epiphany, almost enlightenment:

I saw that perseverance in the coming years
like the flowers which she knelt to
the leaves and blossoms in her small, white fist
would be enough, and a gentleness came upon me
which was my duty, and resembled bliss.

(12-16)

While each of Depta's books is composed around a theme—in fact, the major themes are directly a part of the composition process, as many of his poems are only composed after the general theme of the collection is first determined—this book, like *A Doorkeeper in the House*, is divided into smaller sections. However, unlike *Doorkeeper . . .*, the sub-themes are much clearer in *The Helen Poems*, as each not only describes the speaker's relationship to his daughter, but does so as an implicit reflection of her age and a period of her life. In this first section, for example, the speaker is most explicitly coming to terms with the responsibilities of parenthood, the unexpected wonders and surprises that come with it, the same moments of guilt as well, and the awkward moments of a single father raising a daughter—an awkwardness at times represented by an ironic depiction of gender role reversal, such as in the image he gives of "a ponderous goose / and a trailing fuzzball line of chicks / we in our glory go / honking and waddle-slow / to the city pool" ("Chauffer" 18; lines 12-16). These types of moments follow naturally from the revelation quoted from "Daughter Flower," as this first section really defines an existential learning experience for the speaker.

In the second section, however, the speaker seems to have settled, somewhat, into a routine, the language of which is juxtaposed with recurring moments of awe at seemingly simple wonders that come up as he becomes accustomed to his role as a father. In "Worrywart" for example, the speaker "trudge[s] to the hill to drag her home / but no, she needs a push, just one more / and one more, and one more" (34; lines 6-8). But then in that repetitious, everyday action, the speaker again experiences something more profound as he "think[s], how literary, how symbolic / but, as a matter of fact, the night was starry / brilliant-hard, dark-glittering / and she slid away from me, many times" (34; lines 16-19).

Along with this sense of wonder for his child, the speaker's attitude toward his role as a parent has changed profoundly as well. Whereas in the first section the seemingly inherent irony of gender role reversal was used to represent an awkwardness in his acceptance of the responsibilities of a parent, in "The Movement" the speaker expresses explicitly a desire, at times, for a woman's body to fit what are traditionally feminine roles. He begins the poem with a feminine image through the use of "Women" (36; line 1) as the first word and first line. Here we can see the effectiveness of Depta's "ragged" style, which can allow for the word to stand as an address or as invocation. The speaker goes on: "I have heard you cry out / sympathetically / because I nursed an infant / a daughter" (36; lines 3-6) placing himself within a community of women and equating his own responsibilities with theirs, though acknowledging his inability to fill that role as completely. However, just as he completely reverses the traditional gender expectations connoted of a father figure by admitting ironically "and I had wished for breasts" (36; line 9), he undercuts his own irony with the grotesque image "flat ones / like those of a cat or a dog / and small nipples" (36; lines 10-12), but then qualifies it by saying, in the end "but I had dreamed of breasts, of milk / nevertheless" (36; lines 13-14).

Besides these deeper conflicts that Depta describes as unique to his situation as a single father, many of these poems also still relate the more common, almost banal experiences of parenthood. "Rescue Her" describes most parents' essential desires to keep their children from the tragedies of existence that threaten not only physical or mental harm—"save her from wind shear / malfunctions / derailment . . . rescue her from the sex plague / rape" (45; lines 7-11)—but also their naiveté and innocence—"from a sac breath like L.A. / Chernobyls in every room / dead radio / light / heat / wind" (45; lines 12-17). And at the same time that he does so, with the hyperbole of those last three words/lines he also implicitly admits to the futility in such fears.

Then also, in "Band Supper" he explicitly describes a seemingly common moment that usually goes completely unspoken as his daughter's band plays for a fall dinner with all of the parents gathered. The speaker admits to the band's inabilities as he notes

It's understandable why we wince
why we squirm on the portable bleacher

why we gaze over their plumed box-hats
why we wish for concerts, symphonies
and that all squealing clarinets turned to lead. (50; lines 10-14)

Yet, despite his immediate reaction, he gets "lost, momentarily in what [my mind] saw" (line 17) while "Wal-Mart and Highway 45 / vanished while the band / pathetic and absurd, became a requiem" (50; lines 22-24). He implies that just his daughter's participation is what makes the performance great, rather than greatness being used to signify a measure of their ability in playing the tune.

With part three, we see Helen share the narrative space of many of the poems with the speaker much more prominently, reflecting the concurrent growth of her own emotional and sexual identity. One reviewer refers to the Depta's "increasing awareness of her separate selfhood, her otherness" (*Appalachian Journal*, 415) which is precisely why she needs this more independent voice to speak for her in the space of the poems. The issues facing the speaker now aren't purely matters of existence and responsibility, but of relationships and constant flux of human interaction.

Perhaps the densest of his collections of poetry, *The Silence of Blackberries*, was published in 1999. It is reminiscent of *The Creek* in many ways, and might appropriately be grouped with it and *Doorkeeper in the House*, except for the absence of an explicit family; otherwise it combines meditations on his personal aesthetic and style with contemplations on the spirit while still firmly grounded in the Appalachian landscape. However, it is somewhat difficult to reconcile this collection with the characterizations of his style that he has given before. While probably closer to his ragged poems than any other style, these poems seem to demand a formality of tone, perhaps because of the austerity of their subject matter, yet the voice of the poem invites comparison with the author himself. With *The Silence of Blackberries* we come to realize how closely that spirituality is integrated with the landscape, particularly, but also with other traditionally Appalachian elements for Depta.

We can see this clearly in several of the poems in the first section of the collection. In "A Still Beatitude" the speaker reveals that "Mortise and brick and book / in a poem, is not enough" (10; lines 1-2); that only by what they are not can the speaker find "a still beatitude of the mind" (12): "not lush / not limpid / tendrilled or rooted / . . . and is not enough / lacking petals / stamens and pistil / and sweet nectar / and bees" (3-11). In a way this first poem implies what we are to find through the rest of the book, defining its contents ironically, by stating what its opposite is not. In a way it creates a negative space that the following poems will fill.

In "Interstate 40" the speaker's imagery literally fills spaces in his narrative and thoughts, as the road to Nashville is described by way of the wildflowers along the sides of the road. The speaker is traveling to "meet [his] daughter and her friends" (11; line 8) and the images of wildflowers are juxtaposed with drive itself as they "ease the tedium" (10). More than that,

though, they evoke a "peaceableness" (14), which recalls the "still beatitude of the mind" of the previous poem.

Likewise in the third poem, "The Canoeing Trip," the speaker refers to "the placid emptiness of what I am" (12; line 7), which reverberates in the second stanza with "the gentle blankness" (12), and again in the third stanza as "emptiness" (25). The poem figuratively mirrors a lush summer landscape, as these characterizations are almost lost in piled imagery. Turning from the chattering "young people" (2), the speaker is filled "with asters, their tall slender stems / their blossoms flung in ragtag purple along the road / and joe-pye weed, the evening primrose and partridge peas" (8-10). The second and third stanzas are similarly structured, allowing the presence of the speaker to be lost in the flora along the river.

These themes recur through the collection, shifting from time to time to other focal points. In the second section of the book, the speaker seems to pair the meditations on spirit with images of family and home, phenomena of community, even if they are only tools for the speaker's meditations. Both "An Orange and a Rose" and "The White Bowl" take place around the image of a table on which sits fruit. A seemingly simple image, in the former it is explicitly placed in the kitchen, while in the latter it's only implied; however, in those placements it recalls imagery familiar to Depta's writing, particularly moments in *A Doorkeeper in the House*, in the section of "Sister Charlene." Such moments in *Doorkeeper* . . . evoke a sense of familial comfort and acceptance, even if that feeling is then put off by a conflict between the speaker and his sister. Similarly, these two poems present what at first may appear a conflict with their contemplation on being, but in actuality they reveal a profound accordance, grounded in a traditionally eastern spirituality that seems, at times, counter-intuitive to a Christian mindset. The woman at the center of "An Orange . . ." peels the orange, and the sibilant consonance in the

imagery of the first section seems to recreate the tactile sensations of pulling apart the fruit: "She separates the sections / each moist and slippery, and pale orange. / She breaks the thin, translucent skin / and plucks away the seeds / and the juice of the luscious, sweet cells / wets her fingers" (33; lines 5-10). However, seemingly in denial of the physicality of the experience, the woman "rises and walks away / disregarding the taste, as if to oppose all life" (11-12). For the woman, we find, the awareness of her being doesn't lie in the physical aspects of her life, but in the "emptying of phenomenal content" (17) of her mind. Similarly, as the man in "The White Bowl" meditates on the fruit in front of him, "*the oranges no longer exist in my consciousness / I am aware of the non-existence / the apples no longer exist in my consciousness / I am aware of the non-existence*" (35; lines 11-14), he comes to a paradoxical realization of self: "he cannot say, then / *I am aware that the self is non-existent / because there is no self*" (19-20). While such realizations, when situated in an Appalachian context, as is evidenced by the recurring imagery of the landscape or familiar familial settings, seem self-contradictory, they actually express an affirmation and acceptance of being. When realized by a mind seeking that type of enlightenment, they are the essence of comfort in acceptance of one's surroundings.

This collection of poetry is notable particularly for the departure it makes from traditional Appalachian themes. While throughout Depta's works we can see a highly sophisticated literary style and voice having to negotiate the pitfalls of representation and authenticity, here the poet, through his speaker, seems to bring two seemingly conflicting elements of his personal philosophy together to find that they complement each other perfectly. Depta finds no conflict in representing a nontraditional spirituality in an area that is traditionally predominantly Christian, and his exploration of such themes through such unconventional mediation ironically reveals a connection between him and his environment that is almost hyperbolically intimate in

comparison to the usual associations of an Appalachian closeness to the landscape. To "be one" with the landscape goes beyond an affinity for it, no matter how strong, and to be able demonstrate such a relationship through the poetry by constantly conflating the environment with "being" reveals the extent to which it has been established in the consciousness of the poet.

Overall, it would be difficult to characterize these collections of Depta's poetry under a single description, ranging as they do over thirty years of writing and publishing. But taken altogether, it shows an Appalachian poet struggling with issues of authenticity and style, employing a literary awareness at times in conflict with his Appalachian community, expressing a passion for specifically Appalachian issues and non-Appalachian spirituality, negotiating taboos of a traditionally conservative culture, and appealing to the values of family and place that are deeply a part of his Appalachian heritage.

Chapter 5: Criticism and Satire

Much of Depta's work take a critical look back at his culture, community, and heritage, or at the attitudes that others hold toward Appalachia. While individual poems in some of his collections may express critical attitudes, *Azrael on the Mountain* and his collections of poetry do so throughout. *Azrael* voices the concerns of community members about contentious issues regarding the impact of coal mining on the communities they populate, while his plays take a more light-hearted, satirical look at the stereotypes that continue to flourish about the region.

Depta published *Azrael on the Mountain* in 2002, and in terms of the cultural work it does for Appalachia, it is arguably his most important and impressive collection of poems to date. Overall it is a protest of mountain top removal, a tragedy of current coal mining techniques that embodies the ironic relationship that many Appalachians have with their environment. Published in 2000, this book seems to come as a direct response to the Martin County Coal slurry impoundment break, which released 306 million gallons of toxic coal slurry down Coldwater Fork and Wolf Creek.¹⁶ Except for the loss of life involved—luckily, in Martin County no one died as the creeks diverted the flow of the sludge—this event mirrored that of the Buffalo Creek disaster in 1972, in which 125 people, including an uncle and five cousins of Depta's, died. Depta uses the poetry in this book to bring the horrific effects of current mining techniques to light. While the coal fields of southern West Virginia can be beautiful and majestic, they're currently being ripped apart in an incredibly destructive mining practice that

¹⁶ For an account of the effects the spill had on the immediate communities and an analysis of the follow-up actions taken, see the articles "Post Disaster Interviews with Martin County Citizens: 'Gray Clouds' of Blame and Distrust" by Shaunna L. Scott et al. (7-29) and "EPA Actions in Post Disaster Martin County, Kentucky: An Analysis of Bureaucratic Slippage and Agency Recreancy" by Stephanie McSpirit et al. (30-63) in the *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, 12(1-2), 2005.

also destroys the communities around them. Families who have lived in such areas for generations, and even those who have depended on mining as an occupation, are being displaced, and the destructive effects of this type of mining seem to be increasingly lost in national and international debate frequently centered solely on the need for cheaper and cheaper sources of energy, regardless of how they are obtained.

This book is an intimate account of the conflicts that coal represents to a community that depends on it for livelihood and even survival. It is also very complexly composed, bringing together his colloquial Appalachian voice, in thirty-three poems from the mouths of fictional residents of the area, with his omniscient third-person voice that narrates the nine framing poems beginning and ending each section. The radically different voices serve as counterpoint to one another; the colloquial voice grounds the experience in a specific time, place and community, conveying each speaker's story almost as a prose-poem, while the omniscient voice serves to mythologize the event in a more formal poetic style.

A speaker from the community makes clear the effects of mining on their Uncle Frank, in a poem of the same name (21): "and uncle Frank—look at him—a stooped-over skeleton on the / porch . . . his face all ashy and / hollow-eyed . . . sitting there still as a stump hoarding his breath / which there can't be much of what with the dust billowing up" (9-15). The speaker indicates that they are unable to leave—"it's not for the / black lung money he's staying here" (10-11) and the brutal nature of poverty and need in the community is expressed in the last stanza: "he won't last months . . . He's dying for sure and there won't be his ch[eck] . . . well, there won't be, and there's the funeral expenses coming up" (23-28). Dependent upon uncle Frank's disability check for black lung, they're as tied to him as the community is tied to the dying mountains, and when he dies, they'll have no way to pay for his funeral services.

The invisibility of the debate over mining practices is an issue for the speaker of "Reverend Bledsoe" (24) who states, "It's America throwing us mountain people to the lions for the sake of / an electric bill, coke plants, coal tar, gasification and / god knows what else" (lines 26-28). And though the speaker goes on to state "and we're dumb enough to let them do it" (28), the speaker of "If There's Dirt" (39-40) echoes the same problem, but recognizes that even if the mountain communities refused to do the work, it "won't stop the operators—they'll import Mexicans and them bohunks from Ukrania to do the work. American needs it's / energy . . . " (lines 11-13). Both of these poems help to contextualize the debate over mountain top removal by placing it in a national dialogue about energy, denying its invalidation as a strictly local concern.

The poetry in this collection also articulates other sides of the debate over mountain-top removal that often go unheard. Of course, the author's ideal feelings on the issue might be summarized in "Well Somebody on Buffalo Creek" (10-11) when the speaker says "Fuck coal. It ought to stay underground where nature buried it to start / with" adding the unfortunate foil to this idea that "but of course that won't happen" (48-49). While coal has been a livelihood for many communities, mountain top removal drastically reduces the number of workers needed to operate a mine; the speaker of "The Hearse" (25-26) is a former miner who is now "driving a hearse for / the Whitesville Funeral Home" (lines 1-2), but notes that "I got really mad . . . I could take more coal in an hour than a man used to / in a week—could, that is, the strip mines stole our livelihood" (17-20). "When I was a kid" says the speaker of "Gob Pile" (37), "we had shaft mines, not / strip mines or mountaintop stripping like today" (lines 7-8) and the speaker of "Cleveland" (35-36) notes that in the time of deep mines "The mountains were / here. That's all,

they were here. You could walk up a ridge / and leave your troubles behind in the coal camp"
(lines 45-47)

But faced with the inevitability of the mining company's control over the area, and their future, some residents accept the coming course of events. Returning to "The Hearse" the speaker states "My old lady tells me to calm down. Think of the children . . . Tommy is working for Elk Run Coal and Margaret is teaching elementary in Madison . . . Just let things be, she says. We're making do" (lines 26-30) to which he replies "Sure we are. I'm hauling dead people and she's cleaning toilets" (31-32).

Even the argument in support of the coal industry voiced by the speaker of "The Mountain Party" is fraught with ambivalence, even though, ironically, he doesn't recognize it. This is arguably the weakest part of this collection; though Depta brings an insight to these issues that only an insider to Appalachian culture and mining communities can have, while the voices of the victims of mountaintop removal seem authentic in their naturalism, the voices of the supporters—who are many in the coal mining communities—seem to be subtly self-parodying. The irony is effective, but somewhat dissonant against the realistic naturalism displayed by those who the poetry seems to speak for. However, this is a very minor issue with the book overall which doesn't really affect the weight of the argument Depta is making. The speaker of "The Mountain Party" evokes common Appalachian stereotypes when he notes that "if you took coal away, what would there be? Nothing but mountains and welfare cases" (lines 2-3) and that "coal makes a man a man . . . When he looks at a heaped-up coal car, what's in his mind . . . is *that's me, I did that, that's who I am, that makes me a man*" (lines 5-9). But with the recognition of that masculine identity, the speaker also admits that the coal company officials "understand the fact better than anybody—they use his body to take from him what he oughtn't be dumb enough

to lose, especially / considering that he ain't got a job since it only takes twenty- / five hundred men to mountaintop strip the whole of southern / West Virginia" (lines 16-21). However, after this realization he goes on to say that the problem with the Mountain Party's platform, and "Denise . . . whoever . . . I forgot her name"¹⁷ (line 22) is that "*They'd take our livelihood*" (line 25), the irony of that statement seeming lost to him as he forgets the problem that mountaintop removing poses to employment.

Along this trajectory, Depta also takes his criticism to the furthest extreme, of despair masquerading as apathy. In "The Purchase of Blair" (62-63) the speaker declares "Who gives a rat's ass, anyhow. I don't. . . . All of us are selling. I'm moving to North Carolina" (lines 1-4). He briefly laments the time of deep mines, when "Us miners did all right for ourselves, finally. The pay wasn't bad, or / the working hours, except it's dangerous" (lines 13-14), but eventually admits "I'm taking my money and moving to where there ain't no coal. It / pisses me off, to tell you the truth, being pretty much forced off my place, but you can't fight coal. The mountains will die because of it no matter what anybody says so it's best just to get the hell out. I know I am, to somewhere or another" (lines 52-56). The range of attitudes toward the effects on the environment of the mining of coal is a testament to Depta's accuracy of voice and representation as a result of his own Appalachian heritage. Through acceptance, ambivalence, and disgust he is able to capture the conflicting emotions that stir debate about effects of mining in Appalachia.

But as well as he is able to portray community voices in this collection, some of the poetic moments that really stand out come in the framing poems in each section. These poems conflate the Appalachian landscape with traditional mythological or religious imagery, ironically juxtaposed, seemingly to appeal to higher sense of literary ideal. In an allusion to Ovid, in the

¹⁷ The Mountain Party was founded by novelist Denise Giardina., who also grew up in a coal camp in McDowell county (www.mtparty.org).

poem of the same name (30), the speaker refers to the Appalachian landscape as "that despoiled Arcadia" (line 1) and of the communities says "how the Faunus languished in his exile far to the west / how Flora to the north, banished there / without bright poppies for her wanton hair, wept in April" (lines 17-19). In such imagery, the mining companies become Pluto,

the deep-delving god, Dis of the mineral earth
of blackness and death
and he, in a metamorphosis of which such deities are capable
became, as the locals aptly express themselves
lord god!
it's the dozers up there
it's the coal trucks
it's the dragline machine. (lines 23-30)

Similarly, in the last poem, "Azrael on the Mountain" we find that Azrael is a metaphor for the dragline machine itself. Azrael, the angel of death, having descended from heaven to transport souls to God, has lost a wing and falls "skeletal and gigantic / a shambling scandal to the glory of God" (lines 16-17). He cries out "Majesty, where am I? / What is Thy will?" (lines 22-23), but since God, following from Christian theology, "cannot abide a fault or a flaw," the speaker tells us, he "shuddered and turned away" (lines 24-25). The final image is of the dragline machine deified, as

Azrael, bereft of duty
one-winged, plucked, absurd, ignored by God
drags himself in his gradeur
grotesque, insanely on the mountain top

back and forth. (lines 41-45)

The image recalls the physical size of these massive machines, perched ominously on the mountaintops where they are employed, casting their shadow over the surrounding communities. *Azrael on the Mountain* brings such ominous imagery to the front of the debate over mining communities in a way that a straightforward criticism can not. Such debate is often denied through the use of generic abstracts that are meant to stifle discussion—criticisms of mountaintop removal are often erroneously equated with criticisms of coal in general which is then rebutted on the basis of the jobs that coal brings to the area—but *Azrael* places the images of the effects of mountaintop removal directly in the community.

In 2000, and then again in 2003, Depta made interesting additions to his works, as well as to Blair Mountain Presses catalogue of publications. In *Plays from Blair Mountain: Four Comedies*, and then again in *Mountains and Clouds: Four Comedies*, Depta has published eight short plays, all set in rural Appalachia. These plays reveal Depta's range as a writer, as the predominance of dialogue and even the genre itself somewhat disallows the complex and dense poetic style of multiple voices shared by his poetry collections and, to an extent, the trilogy of novels. In these plays, he turns his observations toward humor and satire, and the often-underestimated "hillbilly" of popular culture turns out to be the agent of inspiring contemplation and cultural commentary.

On first reading through these two collections, one is drawn to a homogeneity in the plays' styles and settings. They are all relatively short—four one-act plays, and four two-act plays—and in all but one ("The Egg of the World") the action is staged on a minimal set consisting of a front or back porch with simple furniture and a few feet of yard. An exit is provided by a door going into the house, as well as around to the left and right of the stage.

While this repetitive simplicity may serve as a point of criticism for some, in keeping with his egalitarian and democratic attitude toward writing, publishing, and representation in and of Appalachia, these plays were written specifically to be performed by regional production companies for regional audiences:

I was sending these plays out to regional theaters, and they want a small simple set and a few characters, not more than six. So I set all the plays on a porch and five people. . . It's for the benefit of a small, one-hundred-seat regional theater, with the simplest possible stage. . . and besides, when I was young, when I was a kid, everyone was on the front porch all the time—after breakfast, after lunch, after dinner, up till dark—just babbling...

Depta's focus on small audiences seems to signify an awareness and appreciation for the sensibilities that drive small communities in general. While teaching in Martin, he and his friends regularly performed these plays as "reading plays" in Depta's own basement, at one time bringing a crowd of around sixty people (Depta, personal interview 2006). Two of the plays ("Egg of the World" and "Everyone Who Thirsts") were produced by the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia, and directed by John Hardy under a collective name of "Tales from Blair Mountain." Even the title alone suggests the sense of community and the author's regional identity, with the subtle word play on Blair Mountain alternately referring to the place in which Depta grew up, and the press through which they were published, both of which serve as origins for their characters and themes. In his note from the play's program, Hardy notes that "'Tales from Blair Mountain' don't attempt to de-mystify Appalachia but instead they accomplish something I have yet to see elsewhere: they bring together the myth and the reality of Appalachia. It's not folklore and its not documentary." Depta is able, in these plays, to bring the beauty, myths, stereotypes, and reality of Appalachia all together to co-mingle among the

characters in a way that's ultimately light-hearted, but still reveals the author's diligence in representation of the culture.

For example, "The Egg of the World" (*Plays from Blair Mountain: Four Comedies* 63-118) portrays, in three scenes, a director and stage manager who have come to Grandcoal, "a god-forsaken hole in West Virginia" to "sucker grant money from the NEA" (66). Four of Depta's plays are centered around this theme of an outsider intruding into the lives of Appalachians, though this one is notable because of the outsiders' active exploitation of Appalachians for their own ends. They've come to survey the local community to create "original plays rising from improvisational encounters between the people in the community" (67). So not only are they looking for a drama that they think is inherent in the lives of Appalachians, but they are also preying on this small community's inexperience with theater production and dramatic improvisation in order to caricature that drama.

Depta's way of dismantling the attack of these outsiders, however, isn't as straightforward as actively fighting it. He notes that in writing these plays, he threw "every hillbilly stereotype [he] could think of" into the play (Depta, personal interview 2006) and the effect is ultimately overwhelming, bordering on absurdity. The three native Appalachian characters featured in the play are all siblings, a sister and two brothers, Irene, Boyd, and Wendell Haws, who come late to the auditions, but immediately captivate Gerald, the stage manager, and Paula, the director. It's important to note what we learn of these two characters, as Paula's Cleveland origins (67) put her outside of the designated borders of Appalachia while still in a state whose southern portion falls within those borders, and Gerald is presumably from New York City, indicated by his references to Broadway (66), which is far removed from Appalachia in spirit and culture. From their different backgrounds, these two characters act from different depths of

misunderstanding of Appalachian culture, and their effect on the people. Paula can be interpreted as exploitative but sympathetic, and so perhaps redeemable, while Gerald is wholly indifferent to everything including the art of theater, and constantly mocks the native culture.

Also interestingly, as a play about a play, *Depta* is also able to critique a more cosmopolitan conception of the arts. Paula describes their goal to bring theater to "the indigenous people of the mountains whose isolation has limited their experience of theater to television and the local movie house" (66), which was already hinted at being merely a pretext for getting grant money from the NEA. Indeed, Gerald's next line, "horse shit piled high" (67), properly describes how they themselves feel about that goal. Their inauthentic motives betray their own dedication to theater, devaluing the staged, more cosmopolitan play as being lesser in importance than the frame play.

It's tempting, then, to say that the native characters represent a more genuine interpretation of dramatic art in that they aren't acting under any pretenses, however *Depta's* use of stereotypes undoes such a simple explanation. We are first introduced to the three siblings with Irene's line, "Are you all them theater people?" (68), giving them a pronounced dialect. She then tells us that "The welfare woman said to come" (69) so that with the first two lines spoken by the native characters we're given the indication that they are uneducated, based on the standard of written English as an indicator of education— regardless of how erroneous an indicator this really is¹⁸—and also that they are poor, both of which are typical stereotypes of Appalachia's residents. Once they start telling about their lives growing up, it quickly escalates to Paula's later summary of "elopement, death, desertion, rape, [and] guns," and all from just a superficial description of their family history.

¹⁸ An interesting discussion of the problems of making assumptions on the preferential treatment, or "correctness," of one dialect over another is given by R. Chelsea Sharp's essay "Teaching Correctness in Appalachia," in *Appalachia Inside Out*, Vol. 2, 520-528.

Paula and Gerald acknowledge that the three are "genuine stereotypes," however, toward the end of the first scene, but then those stereotypes just seem to get more and more absurdly exaggerated through the last two scenes of the play. In scenes two and three, Irene, Boyd, and Wendell describe their life with increasing detail such that scene two tempts one to question Depta's use of stereotypes. The stereotypes are acted out rather neutrally, so that they seem naturally adopted, rather than exaggerated for effect.. The characters essentially play caricatures of their own family at different times; Irene plays the role of a poor mother of several children, trying to survive on subsistence farming, and Boyd at one point takes on the same role as a father figure. Wendell, also, plays an exaggeration of himself, dancing with a scarecrow prop and describing his incredible loneliness after having been deserted by his real mother. Also in this section, we learn that their father died in a coal mining accident, and was drunk or hungover at the time, following which the children also express stereotypes of cultural ignorance, playing out an enactment of a hostile encounter with a Native American. So while the stereotypes presented in this act are numerous, it isn't compellingly obvious that the author is using them to discredit the typical use of stereotypes in any way.

However, with the third scene, repetition of the stereotypes, this time combined with exaggeration in the costuming—given in the stage directions—overwhelms any valid interpretation of them and reveals them as absurd to the extent that we're tempted to consider Gerald's contention that "they faked it" (117). In the third scene, truths about their lives are expressed through their fictional narratives, taking everyone by surprise. Irene, playing the part of a woman giving a church devotional, admits to harboring an inappropriate, and partly sexual, love for Wendell. Boyd, when given the stage, comes to the defense of his abusive father and reveals the burden he's carried, or that he felt was transferred to him from his father after his

death. He gives an incredibly emotional and moving analogy of the plight of coal miners in the southern West Virginia coal fields, and then reveals his own romantic feelings toward his sister, seeing the two of them as husband and wife, feelings that have developed, seemingly, to counter the worthlessness he adopted as a result of his father's death. Likewise, Wendell admits to having a sexual love for Boyd and suffering a deep confusion from a lack of guidance or help, or, as Paula puts it, "no one told Wendell that what he felt for Boyd is typical of any boy his age" (117).

In contrast to scene two, the stereotypes in this third scene are layered so heavily and combined so thoroughly with archetypal Freudian desires and complexes that it becomes impossible to see them as anything but absurd, revealing the humor in what would otherwise be deeply tragic. At the same time, however, the play still elicits a sympathy for the three siblings that can only come from a general familiarity with the subject matter. In this, Depta's writing reveals its intended audience, because only one familiar with the stereotypes can laugh at them and be moved to sympathy at the same time. Likewise, a bond is formed between the audience and the three conflicted siblings, ironically elevating their morality, conflicted as it may appear to be, above that of the outsiders. The genuine concern for family and community that the siblings show is given higher moral value than Paula's and Gerald's perhaps more far-reaching, but disingenuous, motives of bringing theater to the community.

The other play performed by the Barter Theater, "Every One Who Thirsts," also published in *Plays from Blair Mountain* (5-62), is another that utilizes a theme of an outsider intruding on the lives of Appalachians. More so than "The Egg of the World," this play also relies on elements that could be described as partially absurd, or elements of magical realism, to deploy its humor. However, the outsider of this play isn't malevolent as in "The Egg of the

World," rather he is naïve and ignorant of the culture, and, in fact, embodies a set of stereotypes himself, reflecting a sort of parallelism in the inability to see past the insider/outsider divide.

As with all of the plays other than "The Egg of the World," the action of this one takes place on the main family's porch and in a few feet of the yard. There are only five characters throughout the play, three of whom are family—Lila and Jerome, in their forties and fifties, and their daughter Beryl, twenty-two. The remaining characters are Beryl's boyfriend Duane and the stranger, Albin, who enters very early in the play.

Lila and Beryl occupy the stage prior to his entrance, and the scant dialogue gives an interesting impression of their relationship. Lila appears to speak by quoting only scripture—which we find out later only started happening after "she fell down the church steps" (13)—while Beryl seems to understand and interpret it literally: in response to Lila's comment "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers; for thereby some have entertained angels unawares," Beryl responds "Well, I'll be damned. You're right. Somebody is coming" (8). At this point, Albin enters, soaking wet. Besides being remarkable for entering in such a notably curious way, his manner of dress, given in the stage notes, visibly marks him as an outsider. In contrast to Lila's long-sleeve white blouse and ankle-length black skirt, and Beryl's tank top and short denim cut-offs, Albin is wearing white cotton shirt and slacks, a pair of sandals, with shoulder-length hair gathered in a ponytail. These visual markers are important because, especially given Lila's inclination to scripture, we're led to certain assumptions about this family's Appalachian cultural values. In areas that emphasize traditional conservative religious values, as might be indicated by Lila's speech, traditional gender roles are also expected, so Albin's hair already marks him as different. Besides that, the stage directions set the play in "South central West Virginia" (6), in a seemingly rural area, which one might assume is dominated by mostly blue-collar work,

particularly coal mining. In fact, though we haven't met him yet, Jerome is "dressed in poplin work clothes" and is "employed in a machine shop" (6). So Albin's all-white outfit and hair labels him as not a member of the working class of that region, even before he begins speaking.

He goes on to identify himself as a former medical student from Berkeley, California, lost after his "Isuzu" stalled in the creek. It's important that throughout the play, almost every detail he drops is from a world outside of this rural West Virginia community. There's confusion over the word "Isuzu," until he compares it to a Jeep (9), and when Beryl says his name for the first time she misunderstands it as "Alvin" (12), as does Jerome (17). In fact, even the name becomes a signifier of his difference, as we find out later in the play that his real name is "Albin Silverman" because his father is "a Jew who understands a pun" (47). Additionally, when they offer him food, he reveals that he's a vegetarian (14), and in the beginning of the second scene of the play, he states his wonder at the country sky: "My god, the sky is blue! I've never seen it so clear," to which Jerome replies "Maybe that's because of the smog where you come from" (23-24). So with this play, Depta is again piling stereotypes thickly into the narrative, but to a much different effect. In this play, the stereotypes aren't absurdly hyperbolic, but rather believable despite being incredibly numerous. Albin comes to embody the many stereotypes of a Californian intellectual that might believably be held by a rural Appalachian family, just as the Miltons embody the latter for anyone from the outside. In these conflicts of insider/outsider, it's the level of ignorance that's portrayed which Depta exaggerates to a high degree. And yet, despite both sides being completely foreign to each other, no conflicts arise between their misunderstandings, at least not between the family and Albin.

A unique element of this play is Depta's use of what might be described as magical realism, except that its incongruity with the rest of events makes it seem to borrow more from

absurdist conventions instead. After learning that Albin had studied medicine, Beryl asks him to "feel that lump on Mommy's head" (15), and when he does, Lila raises up out of her chair, apparently healed, saying "Almighty Lord! You touched me in the head. It was the light. It almost blinded me" (16). Jerome enters for the first time immediately afterwards, and while he questions Albin's presence briefly and amicably, appears to take it all in stride, his only response being "My god, the woman *is* talking!" (18).

A similar scene occurs after a conversation between Albin and Beryl in which we learn that Albin came to West Virginia with his girlfriend, who was "into Eastern religion" to visit the Hare Krishna temple, in reality located just outside of Moundsville. They have retrieved his girlfriend's suitcase from his swamped car and go through her traditional Indian clothing; Albin then helps Lila and Beryl dress up in saris and put on the jewelry. As this costuming goes on, Albin suggests that they enact a "ceremony, a ritual. [They'll] call on the gods" (39), and he steps offstage to don a breechcloth. When he comes back, they engage in *bhakti-yoga*, with Beryl swaying and rhythmically clapping a pair of finger cymbals as Albin repeats *om*. The stage directions then call for "Ravi Shankar's *Raga Bairaga* or *Nata Bhariravi*" (41) and as it is playing, Lila raises her arms and begins to rise off the surface of the stage, commenting "I feel so lightheaded. So airy" (41). They all stop at this point, Beryl and Albin incredulous and desperate to know what's going on. Lila begins to sing the traditional Christian hymn "I'll Fly Away" while Beryl irreverently exclaims "Mommy, dammit! Get down here! Stop flapping your arms" (42). At this point, Jerome enters this incredibly constructed and humorous scene that Lila has just floated out of, with Beryl in a sari and Albin in a loincloth, but again takes it all in stride. The resolution of the situation occurs between scenes, as in the beginning of scene three we learn

that Jerome was "in a tree with a calf rope" and Lila woke up "with a rope knotted around [her] ankle" (46).

That both of these events, which Beryl refers to as miracles, occur without conflict, that the characters eventually take them as a matter of course despite initially questioning what happens seem to lampoon, in a way, the nature of religious faith. Though Albin denies the designation "miracle," none of the characters really provide much in the way of an alternative explanation, and just simply accept that it happened. However, in terms of the play itself, both events are actually the result of the clash between their two worlds, in a mediating space of mutual ignorance. Though Albin has studied medicine briefly, he admits "I'm not a doctor" (15), and though he knows the steps of the ritual, he doesn't have any real belief in it, as indicated when he refers to it as "silliness" (41). Yet when these people from contrasting cultures come together to take on such foreign roles, they create these widely absurd scenes.

While the differences between the native Appalachian family and the outsider don't result in any character conflicts, they are actually expressed through the character Duane and his relation to Albin. When Duane first enters, he's immediately suspicious of Albin, questioning his presence and refusing to shake hands (27). To Duane, everything that he can perceive of Albin is suspect, which isn't much but includes his speech and clothes, and in his aggression we can see the effects of the visual signifiers of difference that Depta has Albin wear. Duane's aggression is amplified in their second encounter, where he suspects Albin of being "a thief, a murderer or rapist or something" (52) and their conflict almost ends in physical violence. In the end, however, they reasonably settle the dispute after Beryl admits to caring more for Albin than she does for Duane, and he leaves, shaking hands with Albin first.

While it's tempting to level criticism at this play based on the fact that these conflicts—including the two "miracles"—are so quickly dissolved, in actuality it reveals a very discriminating choice of stereotypes to exaggerate. In a sense, conflict between the characters along the lines of insider/outsider difference builds a sort of latent tension into the play, which we expect to find released violently through Duane. To undermine that release, then, by having him behave more reasonably than we actually expect is to undermine perhaps the more destructive Appalachian stereotypes of violence and a feuding temperament in that it denies a potentially violent outburst in favor of reasoned understanding; the destructive point of that stereotype being that someone who shares the same culture as Duane doesn't have the ability or understanding to accept someone as foreign, or "freaky" (57), as Albin.

Depta also has two other plays which center on the idea of an outsider intruding into an Appalachian family's life. "The Quaker Man and the Jewel" in *Mountains and Clouds* bears a striking similarity in its themes to "Everyone Who Thirsts" in that the outsider is an academic who is introducing slightly alternative views of religion to the family, and is taken in, although finds conflict with the boyfriend of the maternal character. In the play, Depta explores many themes similar to those that he's expressed before in his plays and poetry, some with general cultural significance, and some with specific historical significance.

One such example of a general cultural theme he explores is that of a tangle of relations with confused vectors of desire. From the context of the play, we can understand the characters' community as limited in resources, so too their opportunities for love. The main native characters in this play are Opal, her daughter Hyacinth, Hyacinth's (male) friend Shannon, and Opal's boyfriend Rufus; the outsider's character is Abram. The fairly simple plot is that Hyacinth, in college, invites Abram to visit; while her actions are based on desire for Abram,

Abram takes up the offer as a chance to proselytize to Opal. Rufus appears in a couple scenes acting out the stereotype of the drunk and violent hillbilly¹⁹—Horace Kephart's "primitive" mountain man who will go to drastic "lengths of hostility," "unblushingly 'above the law,'" to protect his pride—but unlike Duane from "Every One Who Thirsts," he actually attempts acts of violence against the family. On both occasions, however, he is humorously incapacitated by Hyacinth, and the effect, when looking at the play from a cultural insider's vantage point, seems to be that Depta is essentially making that stereotype impotent in that none of the other native characters, the ones who are believably, rather than hyperbolically, Appalachian, legitimize Rufus's threats or even his presence.

Depta seems to use this play, and this generally believable cultural context, as a setting to frame commentary about specific socio-historical conditions and events. We can see this specifically in one scene after Abram has admitted that his "agreeing to [come to Opal's home] is part of community service . . . [his] duty as a Christian" (28), in response to which Opal suggests to him that he only came out to "find what us ignorant people are like back here in the hills, the kind the newspapers wrote up when families around here complained about their children's schoolbooks being too evolutionary" (28-29). Their discussion in this section recalls a disgust for the motives of the early Appalachian missionaries, though it also contains the added element of hindsight. Opal reveals herself to be extremely capable of articulating past injustices against her culture and community, though she invites underestimation of herself. In this scene she undermines the inherently demeaning connotations of pity contained in such outsiders' attitudes.

¹⁹ For popularization of such stereotypes, see, for example, Mary Murfree's "Star in the Valley," or John Fox, Jr.'s "A Cumberland Vendetta": "The [Civil] war armed them, and brought back an ancestral contempt for human life; it left them a heritage of lawlessness that for mutual protection made necessary the very means used by their feudal forefathers; personal hatred supplanted its dead issues, and with them the war went on" (Fox, "A Cumberland Vendetta," 117). And for legitimization of the stereotypes, see, for example, Louis Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders*.

Once again, Depta reveals a point of deep insider/outsider conflict as such attitudes were often considered altruistic by those in it's practice. The sense that we get from Opal, then, is one of deep, and long-harbored resentment, but one that's diffused quickly in Abram's realization that Opal isn't quite as "ignorant" as he may have once believed.

A similar commentary is made through Hyacinth and Shannon, who both espouse different levels of criticism against contemporary academics. Hyacinth says, of Abram, that he "never talks about what good his courses are for, how they'll help a person along in life, how a student will reap the benefits out there in the practical world," explaining further that "A professor in freshman comp tells you that his course will hone your communication skills, which are vital in the contemporary climate of economic competition . . . A biology prof tells you that his course is absolutely essential because the very Principle of the Modern World is Science!" to which Opal replies that "them profs sound like a tent revival" (35-36). The criticism here is of the self-importance of academic learning, especially in the context of a working-class community. While Hyacinth doesn't go so far as to imply that such learning has no value, her expressions, when in context, suggest a sense of unrealized hyperbole in them that might be overlooked in an academic context.

Likewise, Shannon expresses a similar view, though more vehemently, after they find a suitcase full of money, apparently stolen from the United Mine Workers. He poignantly notes that "The further money gets from those who earned it the likelier it is to get lost. . . . I took an economics class, the asshole teacher going on about Keynes and Ricardo²⁰ and such, never once mentioning Regan, HUD or the Savings & Loans. Education is mostly bullshit. High enough up, nobody's responsible for nothing, including where this money come from" (51). Not only does Shannon's knowledge of contemporary economic events effectively dismantle the

²⁰ John Maynard Keynes and David Ricardo, economic theorists.

stereotype of the ignorant Appalachian, but also perhaps undermines the image the reader has had of him up to this point. More specifically, however, his comparison of Keynes and Ricardo, two economic theorists concerned primarily with the principles governing economic situations, to the HUD and Savings & Loans scandals during the Regan Administration—both of which, either directly or indirectly, defrauded low-income residents of opportunities for affordable housing, a situation that would conceivably impact working-class communities greatly—puts into sharper contrast the point Hyacinth made earlier. Essentially, the further removed from real-world situations and communities the ideals of academic learning become, the less useful they seem to become to the residents of working class communities.

However, in the end of this play, Depta seems to show these native Appalachian characters' insight with a figurative wink of the eye, as Opal tells Abram "You're from the outside. Us crazy hillbillies are liable to tell a stranger anything" (64). In a sense this could be construed as a cultural valuation of underestimation. Opal has an "upper hand" of sorts because Abram had previously underestimated her understanding and awareness of her own situation. To Abram, then, her comment casts all that he's learned about her in slight shadow, not allowing him to be completely confident of the lessons he has learned. Similarly, having her say those lines, Depta does the same to any outsiders in the audience, using ambiguity to cast doubt on any who may have shared in the assumptions of stereotypes similar to those that Abram holds.

His fourth play to center on the insider/outsider theme, "The Boat of Light," once again in *Plays from Blair Mountain*, takes a completely different tack from those before. The outsider in this play is a commercial helicopter pilot, Stuart Bloodwell, who once flew during the Vietnam War and has wandered into the family's yard after crashing on the mountain above their home. He apparently suffers from a concussion and thinks he's back in the war, and that Naomi,

the matriarch of this play, is his commander, while Naomi, who as the stage directions describe, is a "spry but sometimes mentally-confused seventy-five year old widow" (20) dresses him in a robe and halo and refers to him as "Seraph," thinking that he's an angel that has descended from Heaven. The role of the outsider comes across so much differently in this play primarily because his character isn't one from whom any real criticisms come, and any stereotypes or judgments he makes are necessarily suspicious because of his impaired mental state. Depta uses him, therefore, as a prop to direct the humor of the play. Of all his play, perhaps, this one has some of the most direct and obvious, but effective, humor, especially in Stuart's misinterpretations of his surroundings (e.g., at one point, mistaking Naomi's daughters for "brass," or high-ranking military officials, he asks "You want me to off these two, Naomi? Out here in the jungle, no one will ever know. I can do it with my bare hands" (146).

But such a categorization of the humor is not to imply that Depta still doesn't use this play to explore themes that are important to his Appalachian heritage and culture. For example, when Alice, Naomi's granddaughter, tries to tell Stuart who he is, and that "This is West Virginia, not a country at war," Stuart responds "You haven't seen it from overhead like God does. The mountains are bombed, scorched black by napalm, and defoliated. There's a war in these mountains. I know what war is. I've been there. I *am* there" (137), and in this statement Stuart's very unreliability is brought back into question, an ironic reversal by Depta of the usual use of unreliability in a character. More specifically, he becomes even more reliable to an Appalachian audience, his words are even more true, because he's apparently out of touch with reality; while in the context of the play he thinks that the coal fields are a war zone because his mental faculties are temporarily disabled, in fact he is more direct about the statement the author is making about the area than anyone else in the play. We're given the idea that he might be

seeing more than he knows in these lines by comments made by Wayne later in the play, such as when he notes that "No wonder [Naomi] thinks the world's collapsing around her ears. Look how close the strip mines are" (139) and then later that "The strip mines are overhead—they're getting close" (156). Depta gives the accurate and depressing metaphor of the West Virginia strip mines being a country at war to the least reliable character in the play, one who has been bestowed angelic status by the native Appalachian to whom the strip mines matter the most. In this odd reversal of unreliability, Stuart's comments seem even more reliable than anyone else; indeed, to Naomi, they are a proclamation from God.

Of Depta's eight plays, these four are important to focus on because, in a sense, they're the plays around which the energy of his focus on drama was centered, and their themes were the motivating factor, in a way, to publish the plays. Depta has stated "I think maybe one of the reasons I stopped writing plays is because that technique of an outsider intruding on a hillbilly family was wearing thin . . . I got to the end of it" (Depta, personal interview 2006). Of course, this is not to suggest that there aren't other themes worth exploring in the four additional plays contained in these two collections. For example, it's interesting that in all but two plays—"The Egg of the World" and "The Sorrows of Vernon Lee"—the principle characters are women and multiple generations of the same family. Motherhood and family are essential, prominent characteristics of Depta's portrait of Appalachian heritage and culture. Nor is it to say that these plays signify the limits of representation of Appalachia in dramatic form. But Depta, as an author, had taken them as far as he wanted to go. He wrote them for pleasure, and used them to poke fun at the assumptions people hold about Appalachians, while weaving in elements that can stand as accurate portrayals of the culture.

Chapter 6: The Novels of Victor Depta

In a lot of ways, Depta's trilogy of novels, *A West Virginia Trilogy* (2004) succeeds where many fail in painting a detailed picture of specific aspects—particularly related to socio-economic and familial values—of Appalachian culture, and at the same time it disallows any opportunity for the reader to rely on stereotypes in conjuring an image of the scene that Depta is painting. Depta gives us characters with real problems, without the traditional stereotypical signifiers of cultural or economic impoverishment. He also utilizes the different voices he has made through his poetry to present a wide range of perspectives about the culture and community. His approach in rendering the culture is almost naturalistic in style, and because of that sometimes seems somewhat exaggerated, but he does so without sentimentalizing the difficulties the novels present. But within that naturalism is a critique of the destructive elements—physical, mental and spiritual—of Depta's Appalachian culture, and so the novel itself emerges almost as a result of that destruction.

The trilogy, comprised of the novels *The Gate of Paradise*, *Idol and Sanctuary*, and *Feasting with Strife*, altogether illuminates three summers in the life of Keith Brousek, the protagonist of all three novels. *The Gate of Paradise* takes place in 1946 when Keith is six years old, growing up with his mother's family and his best friend Franklin, an epileptic, quiet man who has been mistaken all of his life (by the family) as mentally disabled. The novel illustrates the tensions created by the crossing of raw sexual desire and fundamental Christianity in an isolated mountain family. It's difficult to identify Keith solely as the protagonist of this novel, as he seems more to share the role with his mother, Ruby. Depta represents the fabric of their family life, all his mother's family, as disrupted by a series of tears that are never fully mended

completely. Fights between family members are never fully resolved, and personal tensions between the characters' actions drag the reader around somewhat violently, ending in a revelation about the nature of those things Keith's mother Ruby truly valued and the realization that they would never be available to her. This first novel can be difficult for the reader at times; we want to decry the stereotype of the fatalistic mountaineer when the narrator, speaking of Keith's grandmother, states "Deborah listened to the squeals and giggles from Franklin's room. Laughter and death, she thought, laughter and death. . . She was amazed, though, by how little she felt, for George or Franklin or anyone" (*Gate* . . . 71), but there's something about her character that's too real to write off as a simple stereotype. She does express genuine care for the other characters around her, her primary transgression being against Franklin, but during reflective moments, she often invokes similar fatalistic sentiments. Likewise, though in most situations she cares for Franklin as part of the family, on her death bed she laments (of Franklin) "I let him live, but only to let him suffer. I should have killed him in his baby clothes, but I was a coward and then a disciple of the devil. I hated him with my whole heart" (*Gate* . . . 124). Depta gives us no way to reconcile the familiarity and respect with which he imbues her character with her apparent lack of compassion for one of her own family. And while, in this novel, Depta occasionally uses the traditional signs of impoverishment that might suggest stereotype, his complex characterization defuses such stereotypes as fragmentary components of a much more complete picture.

The second novel revisits Keith in the summer of 1957, at the age of 17. Now living with his Father's sister, Keith wrestles with many of the same formative tensions that he only observed in the last novel. He navigates the pleasures and disappointments of sexual desire, and those personal relationships that desire brings him into contact with. Though reasonably

explained by his age in the first book, in *Idol and Sanctuary* we're struck by Keith's non-confrontational manner in the moments when he finds himself face-to-face with family or personal conflicts. While the amount of conflict in both novels is somewhat hyperbolic, that Keith always chooses avoidance of the conflicts seems to imply an acceptance of their necessity, as prefigured by his experiences as a child. Unlike the first novel, though, which ends solely in death and loss, *Idol and Sanctuary* provides respite to the reader in many moments. Primarily, we find Keith now enjoys a much more stable family life, not nearly as desperate and vitriolic, though certainly with its share of tragedies. We begin to see the real motives of Keith's desires, though only as vaguely as he realizes them himself, when the narrator echoes Ruby's realization at the end of *The Gate of Paradise*: "His interest in the girl was not romantic, though he had noticed her ample breasts and hips. He was attracted to her house, or more precisely, he was attracted to the genteel atmosphere which Mrs. MacDonald had created for herself and her daughter, a calm, safe haven..." (*Idol* . . . 172). Keith's desire for a life free from the kinds of self-destructive activity he sees enacted all around him, including family, friends, and their coal-mining community, is otherwise channeled through other desires seemingly more tangible to a teenage boy struggling with the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Those desires begin to concretize at the moment of his first sexual encounter with Lucy Caudill. His sexual desire for her becomes wound up in her fantasy of fleeing and assuming a new identity: "'I'm going to call myself Lace. Lace Caudill.' 'Going to? When?' 'When I get to New York'" (*Idol* . . . 283). By the end of the novel, he seems unconsciously to recognize his desires in hers, as he stumbles sleepily out of the church in which he spent the night, thinking "of the Navy and faraway places. He saw his future as a golden haze. He saw it blindly on the horizon" (*Idol* . . . 335).

Throughout the first two novels, the destruction of the environment is evident all around the characters and brought into conversation as the source of much of the chaotic enmity that Keith feels around him. However, as mentioned previously, *Feasting and Strife* sets itself apart from the first two in that the environmental devastation is implied, rather than being revealed explicitly. In this way, the third novel can be characterized by a fundamental irony: though the characters and their setting are surrounded by the destruction produced by the devastating practices associated with strip-mining, the effect of such destruction is rarely revealed in the text. Its effects on Keith's family life are similar, in that the ideology that drives technological progress through the mountains causes his family to again turn in on themselves, against each other. The novel illustrates those destructive forces through their impact on the people of the area, their family relations, and community in the way the characters react to one another and deal with conflict. The year is 1968 and Keith is at his wife's Esther's place on Plum Tree Creek, back home in West Virginia. Keith is twenty-seven at this point, and we learn that after the Navy, he enrolled at Berkeley where he finished a dissertation in literature, and then came back to West Virginia, to his wife's family's home, for a brief rest before moving on.

The absence of explicit descriptions of the environmental destruction going on around them is ironic, then, considering that Keith learns that "a new method had been adopted for the retrieval of coal—strip mining" (*Feasting* . . . 342). While the environmental destruction is more severe and visible—"the results were long, yellow scars high on the mountain ridges" (342)—than in the previous two novels, *Feasting* . . . attempts to show the carnage left by the coal industry in the behaviors and cultural perspective of the people affected by it.

Besides having served in the military, and being college-educated, Keith's character in this novel, we find, is much more complexly drawn than before. He is an essentially divided

character, torn between two smoldering desires that are fundamental opposites: his desire to leave and his desire for home. Such ambivalence is a common theme in Appalachian characters, and indeed Keith even comes to represent a new type of character that Depta has been crafting through his poetry; Keith is the educated, poetic, spiritual hillbilly²¹ that represents the part of Appalachia that Depta himself has become. We're told that "he wanted the happiness he had felt some twenty-odd years ago when he was six and living with his great-grandmother Deborah and his great-uncle Franklin" (344), but shortly thereafter we're threatened with a more sinister sense in which Keith's need for avoidance might manifest itself: "there was a pensive note at the end of [Esther's] remark. She recalled his recent bout with craziness and, although it had happened only once, the episode reminded her of the fear and revulsion she had once known as a child when her mother went vacant-eyed and let herself be possessed by god knows what, Beelzebub, probably" (345). Compounding this inner ambivalence, Keith has also physically and culturally situated himself "outside" of what's familiar to him in many ways: besides an advanced university education, which already sets him apart from the community he finds himself in on Plum Tree Creek, he also picked up the practice of a mystical spiritualism which involves transcendental meditation—another method of distancing himself from the environment around him. Periodically throughout the novel his character makes trips down to the stream to write and meditate, removing himself from the proximity of the family, entirely. While Depta is careful to situate the narrator of these novels at a distance from himself, the more we learn of Keith, the more we can see the poet of *The Creek*, *The Silence of Blackberries*, or *Azrael on the Mountain* in his character.

²¹ And not the hillbilly of the common stereotype, but the hillbilly as owner of that stereotype; one who controls it with the power to change it.

Whereas the tensions of the previous two novels were somewhat unpredictable and chaotic, in *Feasting with Strife* the entire family's difficulty comes almost entirely from a single source, Esther's mother, Darla. Darla is materialistic, petty, blindly self-centered, and represents everything about his home from which Keith wants to flee, even if he doesn't realize it, yet: "He did not know that his mother-in-law was the dark shape in the double negative, the overlaid shadow, the horror and hallucination fused with the idyll of the homeplace, the wraith which pursued him with the question: can you hide away, can you hide away for long in your peaceableness" (364)? She lives in a delusion which revolves around herself, with the attitude that unceasing consumerism can lift her out of her environment to a higher class.

In Darla's character the novel is commenting on the value of economic attainment, and the illusion of consumption as a class indicator. This perverted manifestation of desire is the result of the malevolent force at the heart of this novel's conflict. It reflects an objectification, or a conflation of the people with the objects of their environment that they might be associated with. It's the same attitudes at the foundation of Ann Pancake's observation in "Similar Outcroppings from the Same Strata: The Synonymous 'Development' Imagery of Appalachian Natives and Natural Resources," that one of the development narratives that promotes the myth of "economic development"—as a nebulous, undefined, but somehow universally positive concept—in Appalachia "directly conflates the Appalachian people with Appalachian land and advocates the development of both from a state of nature into a natural resource and finally into a commodity" (102). Just as that conflation can be read as a cause of the exploitation of the region's people, likewise a conflation of higher class with the objects associated with that class is at the root of Darla's obsession with those products of consumption that signify a level of consumerism which is ultimately self-destructive.

Certainly, this idea is larger than an explanation of the association of class with the objects that signify it, and Pancake implies as much when she notes that “to see class difference as a temporal difference is to ignore systemic problems in capitalism that require that certain segments of the population stay, permanently, in a disempowered class position” (101). Undoubtedly, that objectification of the world is one of those systemic problems, and at the root of poverty in many different ways. However I think it’s important to recognize her point and get to the heart of the ideology which conflates nature with the native in Appalachia, from the perspective of the dominant class, and elite culture with objects of luxury from the opposite direction, because that total objectification of the world, in the novel, is then countered with Keith’s total “subjectification” of the world through his vaguely Buddhist/Hindu spirituality: “his study of Asian religions and philosophies, however, was an intellectual pursuit, a subject far too exalted to be related to his own experiences which, in fact, were mystical, though of a homey kind and, to him, not to be compared to the vast importance of Hinduism and Buddhism” (*Feasting* . . . 352). He takes everything in and expresses a natural empathy with the world, finally admitting that “he had had intimations of a vaster reality than either [Christ or Buddha], a light which is darkness, a darkness which is light, a vast indifference of being which lacked consciousness and compassion, those values which he existentially chose to live by” (*Feasting* . . . 474), while Darla is left to implode, presumably, as her obsessions and egotism kill or alienate everyone who provides her with the physical luxury, in terms of resources and enablement, to pursue her obsession with herself.

In all, the trilogy is interesting in its ability to bring together many of the different voices and themes that Depta has used throughout his body of work while revealing a representation that may be difficult for him to achieve with poetry alone. Perhaps it can attributed to the fact

that Keith exists in a fictional world, but his character stands out as the best representation of a conflicted and dynamic Appalachian character that is otherwise absent from Depta's poetry and plays. Keith is different because he is educated and appreciative of aesthetics without being elitist or judgemental, spiritual without being dogmatic or obfuscating, and able to communicate alternately in the language of his culture, or the language of academics, as he sees fit. Such people might be rare in the southern West Virginia coal fields, but I think Depta clearly makes the point that they exist.

CONCLUSION

Despite that Appalachian literature seems to be remarkably absent from literary culture and dialogue, in reality the term itself signifies a widely diverse range of literatures exhibiting perspectives and styles worthy of inclusion within the literary canon. In an academic culture where one side of a debate about pedagogy highly values the representation and accessibility of the literatures of marginalized cultures, showing the concept of American literature to be fundamentally plural, the mere fact that the above statement needs asserting attests to the virtual invisibility of Appalachian literature in the literary landscape.

Victor Depta has proven himself to be highly prolific and talented writer and publisher of Appalachian literature and has cleared his own place for visible representation of the culture with a through an ethically grounded sense of style. Although he has found himself published by a university press and two other independent presses, he also chose to become a publisher himself, to create books by fellow Appalachian writers. Such a move can hardly be seen as a business maneuver as there is little hope for profit in small press publishing—rather he did so out of a passion for literature and a desire for representation of the culture from which he has come.

Unfortunately, mere publication alone carries no guarantee of visibility, even for writers as talented as Depta. Appalachian literature is still often devalued within the literary community and popular culture. Charles Daughaday attributes this to a frequent utilization of common language, themes and values, while Tompkins also cites the consistent devaluation of any literature that concerns itself with morality and historical cultural issues. Such themes in literature that stand in contrast to the assumed "universal" issues presented by the great works of the literary canon become a stumbling block for academic acceptance of works by Appalachian authors. Further, the concept of regionalism is sometimes confused with parochialism in

literature and equated to local color writing, denying a more authentic representation and celebration of one's region by voices originating in the perspective of the insider of the culture. Here Depta speaks from such a position, presenting a representation of his regional literature that is also grounded in canonical experience. His poetry denies the stereotypes attributed to Appalachian literature and culture through its use of classical allusions throughout. However, it often uses such allusions to foreground the Appalachian experience, whether it's describing the beauty of the Appalachian landscape or leveling criticism at the elitism of academics.

However, before all else—perhaps arguably—Appalachia is a region, defined perhaps more easily by its arbitrarily drawn boundary than by a description of the people who call it their home. It spans 410 counties in thirteen states from as far south as southern Alabama to as far north as central New York. It would be difficult to draw any generalization about so wide an area, yet stereotypes remarkably still persist both in popular media and academic culture. As a region, then, many of its authors write regionally, situating their work in specific times and places and with specific communities, to authentically represent these areas in defiance of stereotypes.

But in the persistence of those stereotypes, such authors will find difficulty in reception and acceptance of their work. As a result, Appalachian literature is largely absent from larger bookstores and marketing campaigns. Popular and academic publishers alike tend to shun Appalachian literature for work that is more palatable or more serious, respectively. Yet there is an audience for Appalachian literature, even if only within the field of Appalachian studies, and to fill the vacuum of demand, Appalachian authors often publish with small, independent presses instead, if they don't create their own small presses themselves. These presses have come to fill a specific niche both in terms of the book trade and a wider view of literary culture, despite the

difficulties they face trying to survive. As noted before, Blair Mountain Press isn't a venture to make money, and it would probably be rare for a book to make back the money expended on its publication. Blair Mountain Press provides an example of the opportunities that modern changes in technology have afforded to those wanting to publish from positions outside of the dominant culture, yet running such an operation is difficult and costly which will always be a limiting factor that determines how many are willing to engage in it.

However, despite the disadvantages that small presses face, it is also true that changes may be in store for the current business of books. The increasing quantity of independent publishers has given small presses an added weight, as can be seen by the increasing prominence of PMA and the criticisms they are leveling against the publishing industry. On the other hand, with the domination of both book selling and publishing by major corporations with a tightly focused interest in profitability and mass consumerism, they might also soon find themselves the target of criticism by literary culture and the creators of new canons of literature. As implied by André Schiffrin's disillusionment with the book industry, less literature worthy of being studied seems to be being published, in favor of works that appeal to a mass market. The homogenization required for such an appeal eliminates regional and cultural difference—not to mention controversy of ideas—and results in a literature bereft of true diversity.

If true reform can be enacted within the publishing world, and this seems to be on the verge of happening, given the general displeasure with the current state of affairs expressed by many publishers, then independent publishers stand to gain tremendously. Otherwise, if alternative outlets for distribution to markets that share an interest in a publisher's content can be developed, they likewise can capitalize on the unique niche they fill. Appalachian authors stand

to gain in either arrangement, if the fate of independent publishers across the board is extended to those that publish regional, generally, or Appalachian, specifically, literature.

Regardless, Appalachian literature still also needs wider recognition in the literary culture in general: which would serve as both a catalyst for and an effect of an increased visibility to publishers, both small and large. Recognition and representation of Appalachia as a previously marginalized cultural group is an ethical imperative as, in the words of Ronald D. Eller in *Backtalk from Appalachia*, "no other region of the United States today plays the role of the 'other America' quite so persistently as Appalachia" (ix). Through an increased focus on Appalachian literature, we validate the previously silenced or ignored Appalachian voices, encouraging others, with other experiences and perspectives, to raise their voice as well. At this task, Depta is truly talented, as his development of styles in the pursuit of many differing yet ultimately authentic voices has show Appalachian characters that would appear foreign to most Appalachian literature. His generalized uses of a common colloquial voice, of a genteel mountain family, of a highly prosodic omniscient narrator, or the ragged style that is most often used by his own poetic voice, gives him the elements to create entire dynamic communities with the ability to comment on one another, voicing multiple perspectives at once.

In a sense, Depta has done all he can, as an Appalachian author, firstly, and as a publisher second. Not only has he contributed authentic representations of his culture to the body of literature that has come from it, he has also taken a role in the industry that brings that literature in a physical form to the reading public. Unfortunately, access to his literature, and to Appalachian literature in general, will continue to be limited by the marginalizing attitudes and stereotypes by the dominant culture both in popular and academic circles. Unfortunately, the problem is circular: until attitudes toward Appalachian literature experience a shift to favor the

Appalachian experience, many won't bother to read worthwhile authors such as Depta, but then it may require reading such authors to effect that shift in the first place. On the other hand, I believe that such change is occurring, even if very slowly. Appalachian literature is gaining recognition in some circles and the opposite circular effect may well be the beginning of a slow growth in popularity for representation of the Appalachian experience. If so, and if the publishing industry can see the need for change to favor small publishers and effect it, and if the literary culture can realize the value of Appalachian literature and work toward an increased visibility in the classroom, then more voices from Appalachia will find their perspectives, experiences, and values reflected in society as a denial of the broad brush of stereotype and generalization.

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