A Vision of Change: Appalachia in James Still’s River of Earth

by Martha Billips Turner

James Still’s earliest short stories and his first volume of poetry, *Hounds on the Mountain* (1937), established his reputation as a serious, talented writer of the Appalachian region of Kentucky, a reputation confirmed by the publication in 1940 of his best-known work, the novel *River of Earth*. Like his early fiction and poetry, Still’s subsequent literary endeavors have continued to deal almost exclusively with life in the mountain area of eastern Kentucky—a fact suggested by many of their titles. Since 1940 Still has published three collections of short stories, *On Troublesome Creek* (1941), *Pattern of a Man* (1976), and *The Run for the Elberetas* (1980); a novel for adolescent readers, *Sporty Creek: A Novel about an Appalachian Boyhood* (1977); two collections of Appalachian riddles and rusties (playful tricks involving the formulaic use of language), *Way Down Yonder on Troublesome Creek* (1974) and *The Wolfpen Rusties* (1975); a book for children, *Jack and the Wonder Beans* (1977); and a volume of collected poetry, *The Wolfpen Poems* (1986).\(^1\) In addition, the University Press of Kentucky published *The Wolfpen Notebooks* in the Spring of 1991. This collection, records of remarks Still overheard or incidents he

\(^1\) In 1989, the University Press of Kentucky also released a one-volume combined edition of *Way Down Yonder on Troublesome Creek* and *The Wolfpen Rusties* (both of which had been out of print for several years). The new volume is entitled *Rusties and Riddles & Gee-Haw Whimmy-Diddles*; it includes the full texts of the original books, including Still’s explanatory notes, and Janet McCaffery’s original illustrations.
observed in the mountains roughly between 1932 and 1965, offers, in his words, "a picture of the region not otherwise provided" ("Interview," Foxfire 140).2

Still's interest in eastern Kentucky comes as no surprise to those familiar with his biography. A native of Alabama, Still earned an A.B. degree from Lincoln Memorial University, a B.S. from the University of Illinois, and an M.A. from Vanderbilt before moving to Hindman, Kentucky, in the early 1930s. In Kentucky, Still began his life-long relationship with the Hindman Settlement School, serving as the institute's librarian from 1932 until 1939. (During those Depression years, Still estimates that the school paid him about six cents a day but adds that the "publication of a few poems and short stories . . . kept me in razorblades and socks" ("Interview," Foxfire 137).) In June, 1939, Still moved on to an isolated, century-old log house between Dead Mare Branch and Wolfpen Creek in rural Knott County, where he completed River of Earth. He still owns the house and frequently goes there to write, but for the last several years he has lived in the town of Hindman. Despite his career as a writer, his journeys outside the area, and his teaching at Morehead State University, then, James Still remains very much a part of the mountain community; or, as he puts it in his poem "Heritage," "[b]eing of these hills I cannot pass beyond" (Wolfpen Poems 82).

At this time of increased interest in Appalachia and Appalachian literature, it seems particularly important to have a full understanding of Still's vision of the area to which he has dedicated his life and his life's work, yet his literary treatment of the mountain region he so clearly loves has received relatively little sustained critical attention—probably for two major reasons.3 First, Still

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2 For a discussion of The Wolfpen Notebooks, see Foxfire 22 (Fall 1988). The entire issue is devoted to Still and the publication of his notebooks.

3 Dean Cade comments briefly but perceptively on Still's treatment of Appalachia and its residents: "More than twenty years before the region was labeled a 'poverty pocket' and prior to the surprised reactions of experts and government officials to the problems of destitution, as though they had encountered some recent wonder, James Still had presented the heartbreaking account of what it means for a human being to live out his life hungry and cold. His is not a sociological collection of figures, causes, and possible cures, but the dramatized plight of human beings accepting poverty without accusations or judgments or rantings against outside institutions." (Foreword viii–ix). In an insightful article on Still's connection to the Nashville agrarian movement and his relationship to regional literature, H. R. Stoneback notes the author's "rich, unsentimental depiction of eastern Kentucky: "In Still's Appalachia, man and woman find the plenitude of nature, a rich and living folk tradition, a sustaining sense of place, and a vivifying sense of identity through place. We find also hunger, desperation, mechanization, deracination, violence, tragedy, and death" (22). The fullest discus-
is a master stylist, and the craft of his art has tended to occupy the few critics writing about him; secondly, Still's portrait of pre-World War II Kentucky seems, on the surface, fairly straightforward; poverty and the escalation of coal mining have scarred the region, but it remains rich in folklore, humor, and basic human dignity. As critics such as Randolph Paul Runyon, Joe Glazer, Dean Cadle, and Jim Wayne Miller have pointed out, however, Still's apparent straightforwardness often proves deceptive; in fact, the most notable characteristics of his writing—the lack of allusiveness, the employment of child narrators with their restricted point of view, and the severely economical use of language (an editor once accused Still of trying to eliminate "all the words" [Miller, "Jim Dandy" 18])—may initially mask rather than reveal his deeper meaning.\(^4\) Such proves the case, undoubtedly, with Still's treatment of Appalachia, especially as it occurs in River of Earth. In this deceptively simple text, Still not only presents a traditional folk society poised on the brink of change—the accomplishment with which critics most frequently credit him—but also creates a complex, strangely fluid portrait of the region, one in which the geographic area itself becomes subject to alteration and to literal physical destruction. Within this world of actual and potential motion, Still's characters—and perhaps the author himself—cling tenaciously to a sense of place, to a sense of permanence in a world of subtle but constant flux.

Still's central image, the river of earth, powerfully conveys this sense of change, of motion underlying the seemingly fixed. Drawn from Psalms 114, the concept of a River of Earth receives its fullest expression in the novel during Brother Sim Mobberly's sermon.\(^3\) In this key passage, Mobberly tells his congregation:

\(^4\) See, for example, Runyon 56–64, Glazer 4–9; Miller 14–16; and Cadle, "A Man on Troublesome" 246–51.

\(^3\) Stoneback offers a full analysis of the sermon and the ways in which it reverberates throughout the rest of the novel (16–19). As Stoneback correctly notes, "the sermon is both source and confluence of meaning, image, symbol" (19). In his introduction to Still's The Weepers' Poesy, Jim Wayne Miller also recognizes the centrality of Mobberly's sermon, not only to River of Earth, but
"I was born in a ridge-pocket...I never seed the sun-ball without my heel being my chin. My eyes were set upon the hills from the beginning. Till I come on the Word in this good Book, I used to think a mountain was the strongest object in the sight of God. Hit says here they go skipping and hopping like sheep, a-rising and a-falling. These hills are just dirt waves, washing through eternity. My brethren, they ain't a valley so low but what hit'll rise again. They ain't a hill standing so proud but hit'll sink to the low ground of sorrow. Oh, my children, where are we going on this mighty river of earth, a-borning, begetting, and a-dying—the living and the dead riding the waters? Where art it sweeping us?..." (76; final ellipsis Still's)

At first glance, Mobberly's vision may seem peculiarly his own; the other characters do not see the hills as fluid or mutable, and the mountains dominate the physical landscape. A careful examination of the novel's tripartite structure and its major themes—the relationship of birth and death, the search for continuity, the desire for permanence—suggests, however, that the work as a whole affirms a position consistent with the one implicit in Mobberly's sermon. Permanence in River of Earth does not lie in the physical haven seemingly offered by the Appalachian mountains; instead it lies in human endurance, in the unchanging cycles of human life, and in the annual passage and renewal of the seasons.

Still explores these issues in River of Earth through the story of the Baldridges, a Kentucky hill family of six. During the novel's three-year span, the family moves from farm to coal-camp; the youngest child, one-year-old Green, dies; brother Fletch loses part of his hand in an accident with a

also to much of Still's other work, both poetry and fiction. As Miller accurately observes, "Details, imagery and syntax of this important passage are anticipated in early poems, and later poems and stories are variations and further elaborations of it" (xi). Perhaps the most striking example of a "further elaboration" is the poem "River of Earth" (first collected in The Wofford Poems). The poem alludes to the same Biblical text as Mobberly's sermon, and its closing stanzas again evoke the sense of motion underlying the apparently permanent mountains:

He can but stand
A stranger on familiar slopes and drink the restless air,
Knowing that beneath his feet, beneath his probing eyes
A river of earth flows down the strident centuries.
Hills are but waves cast up to fall again, to rise
Still further down the years.
Men are held here
Within a mighty tide swept onward to a final sea. (21)
dynamite cap; the maternal grandmother passes away; and the mother, Alpha, gives birth. Still presents these and other events in the narrative entirely from the viewpoint of the oldest Baldridge son, an unnamed boy whose seventh birthday occurs in the novel’s opening pages. We learn, therefore, of the novel’s central conflict from the boy; when he recounts his parents’ conversations, he reveals, almost without comment, the tension between Brack Baldridge’s desire to give up farming and “follow the mines” and his wife’s longing “to set... down in a lone spot, a place certain and enduring... and raise my chaps proper” (51–52).

Still devotes much of the novel’s first and longest section to the exploration of the conflict between farming and coal mining, between establishing an “enduring” home and accepting constant migration; the section as a whole, however, does not clearly resolve the issue. Instead, it juxtaposes Alpha Baldridge’s poignant and convincing longing and her brother Jolly’s refusal to be “buried” in a coal mine (35) to the fact that the family is nearly starving on their farm; at one point, the narrator comments that “[w]e had come through to spring, but Mother was the leanest of all and the baby cried in the night when there was no milk” (13). With the advent of summer, the family’s garden promises to help alleviate their hunger, but necessity often forces them to harvest its produce too soon; thus, Alpha peels “knotty and small” potatoes, “lifting paper-thin [skins], wasting none of the flesh” (55–56). Even when fully grown, the garden cannot satisfy the family’s craving for meat (58); the money Brack earns in the mines provides this “luxury.” Alpha herself recognizes, somewhat reluctantly, the advantages of steady wages. “When your pap sets to work,” she tells the narrator, “I can buy a tonic. The baby will fatten then. I’ve been drinking ’sang [ginseng] tea, but it does no good” (68–69).

Still’s early handling of the opposition between Alpha and Brack Baldridge has important ramifications for his treatment of Appalachian Kentucky; or, to put it more specifically, his refusal to clearly resolve the conflict in Alpha’s favor proves subtly consistent with the conception of the mountains as part of “a mighty river of earth” (76). Because he stops short of unqualifiedly affirming Alpha’s dream of an isolated, inviolate haven “on a hill” (51), Still seems to admit—albeit unwillingly—the possibility that such a dream of permanence may remain unattainable in an area characterized by motion. And although the first section of River of Earth depicts a seemingly static environment, it repeatedly suggests—through both Mobberly’s sermon and Still’s handling of the conflict between Brack and Alpha—that the underlying characteristics of the area are change and movement. Moreover, this sense of
motion can be quite logically expressed through both a literal migration to the coal camps and a cosmic vision of the mountains as dirt waves, for in Still's multi-layered, masterfully crafted novel, the literal nearly always reinforces the visionary.

Still's treatment of the tension between permanence and change within the context of a marital conflict links him to another important Southern novelist, his friend Harriette Simpson Arnow. In her masterpiece, The Dollmaker (1954), Arnow also chronicles the destruction of a family's agrarian existence; despite the mother's protests, the Nevells family leaves Kentucky so that the father can pursue the "big money" in the factories of wartime Detroit. Even more clearly than does the tension between Brack and Alpha Baldridge, the conflict between Gertie and Clovis Nevells comes to represent the conflict between a traditional, almost Jeffersonian, farm life and the growing preference for a rootless, wage-oriented existence. And while Arnow clearly sympathizes with Gertie, she too acknowledges that the dream of a self-sustaining life on the land may be unattainable for many people. After fifteen years of harsh economizing, Gertie has barely half the amount she needs to buy her own farm; only her brother's death and unexpected bequest provide her with the funds she needs to complete the purchase. Even with cash in hand, however, Arnow's heroine cannot resist the forces—social, religious, economic—pressuring her to join Clovis in Detroit, and, like Alpha Baldridge, she succumbs to her husband's need for change and movement, and allows her family to be uprooted in an illusory search for economic security and a "better" life.

Both River of Earth and The Dollmaker contain, then, many of the tensions Leo Marx has described as characteristic of American literary pastoral. According to Marx, the pastoral or garden world in American literature is constantly threatened by a "real world" counterforce; thus, its permanence remains illusory. Texts such as Thoreau's Walden, Twain's Huckleberry Finn,


7 Marx points out, for instance, that most early American writers tended to employ "a variation upon the contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication, which had been used by writers working in the pastoral mode since the time of Virgil" (19). By 1854 (Thoreau's Walden), however, "a new, distinctly American, post-romantic industrial version of the pastoral design" had emerged (32). The intrusion of the sound of the train into the Concord woods, Marx argues, "implies a radical change in the conventional pattern [of pastoral]. Now the great world is invading the land, transforming the sensory texture of rural life—the way it looks and sounds—and threatening, in fact, to impose a
or Norris’s *The Octopus* depict this counterforce as the machine which intrudes into, and destroys, the pastoral landscape. Still and Arnow go a step further. In their novels the conflict between the pastoral or agrarian existence is threatened not only by the intrusion of the machine but also by acquiescence to a spouse.  

In the second section of *River of Earth*, Still continues to explore the tension between motion and stability, although he does so in a much less overt manner than in the novel’s earlier chapters. In this section Brack and Alpha Baldridge virtually disappear from the novel, for Still’s narrator goes on to live with his seventy-eight-year-old Grandmother Middleton while his Uncle Jolly serves time in the state prison at Frankfort. Jolly returns earlier than expected—he receives a parole for putting out a fire in the prison workshop, a fire prison officials do not realize he also started), but the narrator nonetheless remains with his relatives for a full year. As readers of Still’s fiction know, this long interlude with the grandmother occupies a rather unique position in his canon, for although he often tells the story of a family similar to the Baldridges and frequently includes events from *River of Earth* in his other work, only in this instance does he develop a sustained relationship between a child and a member of the grandmother’s generation. By depicting this relationship, Still manages to convey—to both the narrator and the reader—a sense of the boy’s familial past: or, as the seven-year-old puts it, Grandma’s “hair trunk was peopled with keepsakes and recollections. She held up things for me to see, naming, giving them meaning” (122). The grandmother also endows the past with meaning through her stories, and from her conversation we learn of

...new and more complete dominion over it” (32–33). Stoneback also discusses *River of Earth* in terms of *The Machine in the Garden* but focuses his discussion primarily on Still’s depiction of the coal camps (20–21).

Both *River of Earth* and *The Dollmaker* might also be considered in terms of Wendell Berry’s argument that the history of America has been largely the history of two opposed attitudes toward life and the land, the dominant being the relatively rootless pursuit of “our ideas of affluence, comfort, mobility, and leisure,” and the other the “until now subordinate tendency of settlement, of domestic permanence” (13).

Arnow had treated this theme in a similar manner in her earlier fiction as well. Her unpublished novel, *Between the Flowers* (1936–1939), deals with the marriage of Marsh and Delphine Costello Gregory, a young farm couple whose conflicting desires create a growing estrangement between them. *Between the Flowers*, however, reverses the situation found in *The Dollmaker*, for in this novel the husband wishes to stay on the land, while the wife longs for a life away from the farm and the small community.

The most noticeable repeated event is that of Fletch losing his fingers. This event recurs in *Our Troublesome Creek* with the younger brother Lark and in *Sparky Creek* with brother Dan, although this time the boy loses his fingers in an accident at a saw mill, not by playing with a dynamite cap.
Alpha's childhood and early womanhood; of the grandfather's operation on his infant son's deformed hand (an incident which strongly anticipates Fletch's accident); of the death of another son in childhood; and of the grandfather's murder by an angry neighbor, Aus Coggins. To Still, as this section makes clear, the oral tradition (the "naming") functions as a vital means of passing knowledge from one generation to another; it is, in essence, the only means available to Grandma, as she can neither read nor write (109).

In addition to conveying this sense of family history and continuity, however, the second section of River of Earth also allows Still to depict the lives of people who share Alpha Baldridge's commitment to tradition and stability. In fact, Still goes to some lengths to attribute a philosophy of life quite similar to Alpha's to both the grandmother and Jolly. Grandma admits, for instance, not only that she wanted her daughter to choose a husband "who lived on the land, growing his own victuals, raising sheep and cattle, beholden to nobody," but also that she wishes Brack would "settle some place and grow roots" (130). For his part, Jolly Middleton emerges as almost the direct opposite of his brother-in-law; he remains, despite his mischief making, a serious, deeply-rooted "natural" man, one closely attuned to the needs of the land and vitally aware of the processes of nature—witness the fact that he goes to prison for blowing up a dam which keeps the fish from spawning (109). But perhaps most important for Still's purposes, this section demonstrates that Grandma and Jolly—unlike Alpha—manage to live in a manner consistent with their vision of a good life. Mother and son work hard for meager rewards, yet they maintain their self-sufficiency, their independence, and, above all, their allegiance to a particular place.

In many senses, then, the second section of River of Earth presents an alternative to the Baldridge's migratory way of life. This alternative seems, moreover, a relatively secure one; despite the Middleton's poverty, no overt tensions between characters exist to mar their traditional, agriculturally based existence and no external pressures (like the need for cash) force them to move. Even during the interlude on the farm, however, cracks appear in the facade of permanence, for Still introduces an element of doubt about the stability of both the place he depicts and the way of life it sustains. He repeatedly points out, for instance, that although the grandmother imbues one grandchild with a sense of family history and continuity, she cannot do the same for other family members; lamenting her lack of contact with her descendants, Grandma tells the narrator "I'd give a year o' my life to see all my children and all their chaps . . . A year's breathing I'd give. Never they come to see their mommy. Old, and thrown away now" (131). And although Grandma may overstate the
case against her absent children, they do visit infrequently or not at all. Their absence, coupled with the fact that only Jolly lives much as his parents did (his brothers, like Alpha and Brack, adopt a relatively rootless existence of day labor and sporadic farming), strongly suggests the breakdown of family continuity and of a way of life.

Somewhat ironically, however, the most powerful suggestion of change in this section comes from the character most firmly committed to maintaining his roots in a particular place—Uncle Jolly. When the narrator asks Jolly to teach him to plow, his uncle replies in language highly reminiscent of Mobberly's: "Hain't many folks know how to tend dirt proper," he tells the boy. "Land a-wasting and a-washing. Up and down Troublesome Creek, it's the same. Timber cut off and hills eating down... What's folks going to live on when these hills wear down to a nub?" (134). Jolly's ecological concerns remain, of course, far removed from Mobberly's spiritual ones, yet the words of both men create strikingly similar images of the potential alteration or destruction of the apparently immovable mountains.

In much the same way that Jolly's dramatic statements echo Mobberly, certain apparently minor details from River of Earth's second section also recall the sense of motion inherent in the minister's sermon. In keeping with the idea of a river of earth, Still often uses verbs and employs expressions which indicate fluidity: thus, Grandpa Middleton's "life's blood flowed a river" (121); the narrator feels "the earth flowing, steady as time" beneath the plow handles (135); and Walking John Gay—a compulsive journeyer whose migratory life stands as the antithesis of Alpha's dream of permanence—comments that "[i]t's a world o' dirt flowed under my feet" (140; all italics mine). Granted, Still might have chosen these means of expression under any circumstances, but given his frequent comments on the importance of precise word choice—and the overwhelming evidence that he adheres to his own personal dictum—

10 Perhaps Still also underscores this break in continuity through an apparent error in the text. At one point, Jolly tells Grandma that one of her other sons, Luke, has named his infant daughter Cordia after Grandma (113). Later, we find out that the baby's name is actually Fanny (178).

11 Although Still often uses a-prefixed verbs (a common feature of Appalachian speech) in River of Earth, he seldom uses them in sequence as he does in Mobberly's sermon ("a-rising and a-falling" and "a-borning, begetting, and a-dying") and in Jolly's comments about the hills ("a-wasting and a-washing"). By using these forms, I think, Still intends to strengthen the connection between the two passages.

12 Dean Cadle quite accurately notes, however, in the Foreword to River of Earth that "[t]he novel is the strip-mined region as a map—the scalped hills and gashed mountainsides, the ruined farmlands, the dead streams, the flash water the earth can't contain—even the title of the novel assumes a prophecy of doom undreamed of by Brother Mobberly." (x).
they more likely reflect the conscious effort of the careful artist to recall, once again, the sense of movement vital to his novel’s central passage.\(^{13}\)

If the first two sections of *River of Earth* subtly underscore the conception of the Kentucky mountains—and a way of life traditionally associated with them—as part of a fluctuating, ever-flowing river of earth, the novel’s final portion stands as Still’s clearest acknowledgment of change and movement. This section actually breaks down into two diametrically opposed parts, one taking place on a farm, the other in a coal camp. The much shorter agrarian portion opens with the narrator’s return to his family and his dispassionate assessment of their situation: the mines have closed, the family has moved to a rented farm, and the baby has died of croup (169). In spite of the losses and hardships the Baldridges experience on the farm, however, Still presents their existence there as a largely satisfying one: relatives and friends gather for Green’s funeral; Alpha and the children feel at home (Alpha, in fact, describes the farm as “the highest heaven I’ve been on this earth”)[176]; and a bountiful harvest ensures sufficient food for the winter. Against this benign backdrop, the coal camp emerges as a harsh, almost hostile environment, and the narrator’s description of the arrival at Blackjack indicates both the desolation of the place and Still’s ability to convey the child’s sense of wonder at anything new:

We reached Blackjack in middle afternoon. The slag pile towering over the camp burned with an acre of oily flames. A sooty mist hung over the creek bottom. Our house sat close against a bare hill. It was cold and gloomy, smelling sourly of paint, but there were glass windows, and Euly, Fletch, and I ran into every room to look out. (184)

Subsequent events do little to alter the initial impression of Blackjack, and in the novel’s final pages, we learn, without surprise, that the mines have shut down once again and that Brack plans yet another move—this time to Grundy, a coal town “three days’ travel” from his present location, but one where work may be available (241). By projecting this trip, Still leaves little doubt that the Baldridges will continue to “follow the mines” even after the narrative’s close (52).

Still has commented that when he re-reads parts of *River of Earth* he finds them “sad,” primarily because of “the bleakness, the hopelessness” of the

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\(^{13}\) See, for instance, Still’s comments throughout Caudle’s “Pattern of a Writer: Attitudes of James Still.”
characters’ futures ("Interview," Appalachian Journal 140). Although Still does not identify the portions of the book to which these remarks refer, they most aptly apply to its final section; not insignificantly, much of the section’s bleakness results from the characters’ inability—both in the novel and in the projected future—to establish a permanent haven in the mountains. The outward events of the narrative indicate this failure, of course, but Still underscores it in the novel’s closing section with a complex—and highly appropriate—symbol of dislocation and transience. In the weeks following Green’s death, Alpha and Euly decorate a small willow tree with eggshells, hoping to cover all the branches before the funeral. (In order not to violate Alpha’s character, Still points out that decorating the egg tree does not involve the waste of family resources; as Alpha explains, “[e]ggshells ain’t a grain of good except to prettify with" [173]). When Brack begins to talk of moving to the coal camps, the egg tree becomes the composite symbol of all the things Alpha hates to leave—the baby’s grave, the land, the security of remaining in one place. “Nigh we get our roots planted, we keep pulling them up and planting in furrin ground,” she tells Brack. “Moving is an abomination. That’s a sight of things I hate to have here. I hate to leave my egg tree I set so much time and patience on. Reckon it’s my egg tree holding me” (182).

Brack replies that, unfortunately, “that hain’t a seed so it can be planted again” (182), but Still makes clear that the exchange between husband and wife involves more than the impossibility of planting an egg tree. Within the context of the section, Alpha’s tree represents, quite literally, her efforts to put down roots, to make a rented farm her own, to create a lasting reminder of her child’s funeral, and to establish the “certain and enduring” home she desires for her family (51). These efforts, according to Still, cannot be successfully transplanted; when Brack attempts to move the egg tree to Blackjack, it arrives with cracked shells, exposed willow branches, and shallowly buried roots. Alpha’s comment on the undertaking—“It takes a man-person to be a puore fool” (185)—could be Still’s. Both character and author recognize that establishing roots and traditions necessitates staying in one place; reader and author recognize, however, the difficulty of doing so in a world characterized as part of a "mighty river of earth" (76).

As the novel draws to a conclusion, the narrator himself gains an insight into the difficulty of controlling one’s own existence, of putting down roots where and when one chooses. Throughout the narrative, the boy insists that, as an adult, he will be a horse doctor, not a miner, yet when a Blackjack resident tells him “[y]ou can’t get above your raising. . . . [w]hate’er you’re aiming to be, you’ll end up snagging jackrock” (227), the words reverberate in his mind
“like truth” (228). His own future, the boy gradually realizes, may well be as bleak—and as migratory—as his parents’ past.

This reading of River of Earth’s final section should not suggest that the novel ends on a note of despair or that Still views the attempts of Kentucky hill residents to establish firm roots as hopeless; after all, the evidence indicates that Uncle Jolly will continue to live on his farm, in Still’s words, until “the day of his death, without apparent change” (“Interview,” Appalchian Journal 140). The entire analysis of the novel thus far should suggest, however, that Still goes to some lengths in River of Earth to associate the eastern Kentucky mountains—and the way of life they have traditionally sustained—with the fluid and the mutable. On one level, this pervasive sense of change and motion acknowledges shifts in local socioeconomic factors, such as the decline of agriculture and the rise of coal mining.14 But on another, more universal level, the apparent instability of the Appalachian mountains reflects the difficulty, in a modern world, of finding any place that remains certain, enduring, and unchanging; or, as Jim Wayne Miller puts it, “Still’s people, swept along on the ‘mighty river of earth,’ constitute a metaphor of the essential human experience” (“Jim Dandy” 20).

Still does, however, view certain aspects of this experience as changeless, and although he hesitates to affirm the permanence of a place, he does affirm in River of Earth the timelessness of the seasons and of the on-going cycles of human life. Still implies this first affirmation through the structure of the three parts of his novel. Each section begins in either a time of planting (one and three) or of harvest (two); sections one and two also end in harvest times, and three concludes with the coming of Spring (the final chapter opens “on a windy March evening” [235]). By tying the sections of his narrative to the periods of the earth’s production and by enclosing his characters’ actions within these seasonal boundaries, Still seems to suggest that wherever human beings travel on the “river of earth” certain fundamental natural cycles will remain unaltered. And by ending his novel in Spring—the traditional time of rebirth and renewal—Still suggests an element of hope in the Baldrige’s apparently bleak future.

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14 For a thorough analysis of this change, see Ronald D. Eller’s Miners, Millhands, and Mountainmen: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880–1930. Chapters 4–7 in particular deal with the rise of coal mining in eastern Kentucky and the surrounding area, as well as the effect of this industrialization on the mountaineer. According to Eller, by the 1930s (the time of River of Earth) mountaineers “[s]uspended halfway between the old society and the new... had lost the independence and self-determination of their ancestors, without becoming full participants in the benefits of the modern world” (242).
River of Earth also ends with a literal birth; or, more accurately, with the juxtaposition of birth and death, as the most recent Baldridge child arrives on the same night Uncle Jolly brings Grandma’s corpse to Blackjack. In a characteristic display of Still’s artistry, nearly every major narrative incident up to this point prepares reader and narrator for just this combination of events. Throughout the novel, Still consistently exposes the narrator to what Harriette Arnow called the realities of a life experienced without the barriers of “institutional walls.” As both Still and Arnow recognize, children in the Kentucky hills witnessed births, deaths, amputations, and other operations, all carried out, as Arnow put it, “with no help from that man so seldom found in impoverished communities—the physician.” Still’s novel also depicts, however, the horror involved—especially for the sensitive individual—in confronting first-hand the more painful realities of existence. Without fail, therefore, his boy narrator reacts strongly to or turns away from experiences which reveal these realities, whether they assume the form of the birth of a colt (“I knew then the pain of flesh coming into life, and I turned and ran with this sight burning before my eyes” [27]); a primitive operation to remove a cob from a calf’s throat (“It was the horror of it ran through my limbs. It shook me as a wind shakes a tree” [64]); or the severing of his brother’s fingers (“I felt bound to see this thing happen. Fletch would want me to see. But I chilled and backed away” [221]).

As a hill child, living free of “institutional walls,” the narrator also encounters death quite frequently, yet early in the narrative he understandably resists exposure to this reality as well: where an angry parent murders the local schoolmaster at the end of part one, the narrator turns and runs “down the creek road, sick with loss” (97); when Uncle Jolly’s mare, Popper, dies, the boy locks the stall door and does “not go back to the barn… that winter” (110). But by the novel’s final section, the narrator’s reaction to death has subtly altered. At Green’s funeral he can acknowledge that “there had been death in our house” without turning from the fact (181); when Grandma’s body arrives at Blackjack, he can view the corpse and comment that “[h]er face was like a mold of tallow, quiet, and unbreathing” (237). During the night watch over her body, however, the boy’s reaction to death undergoes its most powerful transformation, and he recognizes the mystery involved in the end of life: “My eyes dwelt on Grandma. Now that we were alone I longed to speak a word to her, a word to endure, a word to go with her to the burying-ground. What word? I could not think” (238); ultimately, he asks, “Grandma… where have you gone?” (245). At the moment he articulates this question, the boy hears—almost in answer—the cry of his newborn sister or brother.
Highly effective in itself, this ending also reveals the fine structural and thematic unity of River of Earth. Structurally, the ending recalls many earlier incidents in the narrative, particularly the previous juxtaposition of birth and death involving the colt, an incident which leaves the narrator with little real knowledge, but only the "cruel wisdom that the colt had been spared Oates's [a neighbor boy's] rusty hand" (32). In the final scene, however, Still suggests that the cycles of human birth and death, like the cycles of the earth, continue even when actual places alter. His boy narrator reacts to this unchanging reality of human existence; his adult reader recognizes its affirmation as one of the most important thematic conclusions of a masterfully-crafted novel.

In the final analysis, then, Still's treatment of Appalachian Kentucky in River of Earth proves much more complex than is usually recognized. On the one hand, Still clearly loves the place he depicts and wants—with characters like Alpha and Jolly—to affirm its permanence; on the other hand, however, he undermines any sense of real permanence with poetic visions of change—like Mobberly's "river of earth"—which the novel consistently reinforces in very conscious and artistically sophisticated ways. As someone coming to the mountains from outside, Still can, it seems, recognize and express the gradual but inevitable alteration of the region's way of life. As a modern American artist, he can also recognize the forces working against the permanence of any tradition or any place—no matter how firmly rooted and secure they appear. In River of Earth Still's masterful treatment of the eastern Kentucky mountains—the seemingly permanent—reflects this multi-leveled recognition of change.

In much of his work since River of Earth, Still has chosen to continue writing about a folk culture which has largely disappeared; in fact, many of his more recent endeavors—particularly the collections of riddles and rustic art and The Wolfpen Notebooks—are in large part attempts to preserve something of that

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1 Several of Still's more recent stories do, however, deal with post-World War II Kentucky. Important examples include "A Ride on the Short Dog" and "Pattern of a Man" in the 1976 volume Pattern of a Man and Other Stories, and the title story of the 1980 collection The Run for the Elbertas. Like River of Earth, each of these narratives also involves a journey: "A Ride on the Short Dog," the bus trip to the mountain town of Roscoe (and perhaps the death of Godey Spurluck); "Pattern of a Man," the return to the Appalachian Kentucky community of a World War II veteran, whose stories about the Middle East upset the erroneous notions of a local preacher; "The Run for the Elbertas," the journey from Kentucky to North Carolina to pick apples, and the drive back with the quickly rotting load. Although Still clearly values the traditions, folklore, and way of life of Appalachian Kentucky, and although he actively seeks to preserve them in much of his work, these stories—like River of Earth—demonstrate his steady awareness of alterations within the region; likewise, they indicate the frequent evocation of a "vision of change" in his fiction.
culture. Although Still acknowledges certain alterations in his world, then, he neither embraces them nor ceases to value the manner of living they destroy; instead, like Alpha Baldrige, he treasures the old ways. Still's preferences should not surprise us; after all, even *River of Earth*—with its subtle and poetic suggestion of change—remains, to its author, a "sad" book.

### Works Cited


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15 Still addresses the issue of the "new" Kentucky directly in the *Foxfire* interview: "Roads, telephones, shopping malls. This would appear to be all good. It's opened up the world and broken down barriers... There are losses. A sense of community is lost" (141).