

TOWARD EDEN'S TREES

David Middleton

Selected Poems: Wilmer Mills

Edited by Kathryn Oliver Mills

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The death of poet Wilmer Mills in 2011 at the age of forty-one was the occasion of my memorial commentary in *Modern Age*: “Singing the Pieces Back in Place: The Life and Verse of Wilmer Hastings Mills (1969–2011).”¹ In that essay I discussed the course of Mills’s all too brief life, his family background, his poetics, and some of the best poems from his remarkable and highly praised book *Light for the Orphans* (2002). Now, in *Selected Poems*, Dr. Kathryn Mills has brought together in four sections a number of poems from that first book (here, section 1), along with later poems from three possible new collections, each one titled and sequenced by Wilmer Mills, and overlapping in part. Poems chosen from these proposed books—*Arriving on Time*, *The Heart’s Arithmetic*, and *The World That Isn’t There*—make up sections 2, 3, and 4 of *Selected Poems*.

There is both continuity and difference in Mills’s earlier and later poems. Among the later poems are character studies similar to those of the orphans of modernity sympathetically portrayed in the earlier verse. There are also poems on family members, but in place of honoring his mother, father, or a grandfather Mills now celebrates domestic life with his wife, son, and daughter.

Most noticeably, though, Mills in the

later poems engages more directly, more often, and at greater length with interrelated philosophical questions that are certainly present in the earlier poems yet not as dominant or as explicitly and fully treated. These concerns include the mysterious relationship between memory, time, and eternity; the kinship of words and things; the meaning and consequences of Eden and the Fall; the role of the poet as “linker”; and the ways in which metaphor and etymology trace roots and branches of human and natural history back to, yet also onward toward, a primal place faintly discerned as a wind on the verge of articulation, whispering in Eden’s trees.

Since my memorial essay dealt at length with the earlier orphan poems, I will comment on only two of the poems included here from *Light for the Orphans*. These are poems that preliminarily explore major themes of the later poems.

In “Mockingbird Boy,” the boy of the title hears the songs of mockingbirds and picks out notes from their songs on the piano. Both birds and boy are artists who imitate what they remember:

His music comes from listening
To mockingbirds reciting songs
That on his ears might well have been
The fossil calls of ancient birds
That only mockingbirds remember.

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The boy may be seen as a figure of the poet listening back through time toward time's beginnings.

In "The Basket Weaver's Dream," Mills enters the mind of a young boy weaving baskets in an orphanage. The sound of the boy's departed or dead mother brushing tangles from her hair blends with the woven "basket splinters" and these in turn with his dream of "the trees / Of Paradise," trees on which hanging moss reminds him of his mother's hair. And through these trees a breeze blows, an elemental wind—perhaps the *ruach*—the source of the ancient fossil music another boy long afterward would hear in mockingbirds' songs. The poem closes with the weaving together of these various strands of metaphor as the boy, now a man, attends carefully to his work:

We've seen him often, crouching over,
Almost listening to the grain.
And if you ask him what he hears,
He'll stroke his beard and talk about
A lost significance of wood;
He'll lean and whisper in your ear
About a breeze in the trees of Eden.

Section 2, from *Arriving on Time*, is the first of three sections taken from various selections and orderings of Mills's later poems. Some of these poems are set on the Gulf coast, including Grand Isle, Louisiana, where the Mills family had a house.

One of the best of Mills's Gulf poems, "The Flower Beds of War," considers both nature and history with their many conflicting yet balancing opposites. Visiting Fort Gaines, an old fort on Dauphin Island, Alabama, Mills is taken with both the distinctions and the correlations between the long-abandoned guns and the new spring flowers growing around them. The flowery fort becomes a symbol of contrasting things in life that can-

not exist apart from one another—the conflict between North and South, the natural and the man-made, peace and war:

Can we distinguish flower from the weed
When each is uniformed in blue or dun,
On battlefields, or in the human seed,
Where life and death are waging to be won?

We rage and kill and also love and bless,
One grows around the other, truce and
bruise,
And can't be separated, not unless
We silence one and lose them both, and lose

This relic of antique belligerence
That nature calls a garden, we a fort,
Where spring, in its sublime indifference,
Has flanked the guns with clumps of
spiderwort.

Implicit in these lines is the power of metaphor to link together—perhaps, in a way, even *back* together—things that have been separate yet still akin ever since the end of that prelapsarian state where *like* and *as* once lay as dormant seeds within the *is*.

Two other poems from section 2 show Mills's increasing tendency in the later work to address more comprehensively those philosophical questions noted above.

"*Treowe*: An Etymology" was discussed at length in my memorial essay on Mills.² The poem is a brilliantly interwoven history of the connections, both physical and metaphorical, among wood, words, and truth by way of a common origin for *Tree* and *Truth* in an Indo-European root word. The final stanza—here, in a slightly revised version—gets close to the heart of Mills's poetics:

But long before the folio and poem
Had been pressed together in a tome,
Before the logs were kept on tablets hewn

Of oak or elm, before the druid's rune,
There grew a seedling noun that ramified
The names of *Tree* and *Truth* and then it
died.

Its sound was solid, finely grained and
grooved,
As was its meaning: "That which cannot
be moved."

Even more comprehensively, "Making the Cradle" finds deep correspondences between the heavenly constellations and the music of the spheres—and in the case of this poet's own family life—the making of a cradle for one of his children:

I've heard it planing knots in oak where
scenes
Of grain in radiating lines abound.
Their patterns look like solar systems drawn
In books, elliptical by how they're sawn.

Such profound likenesses in things—
"...Orion keeping time / With Leo in a pattern like a rhyme"—lead to the conclusion about the craft of a cradle maker: "The walnut whispers and the starlight croons. / I'll make this cradle by the sky and swing / Our child to what the constellations sing."

This skill in woodworking shows, as do so many of his poems, Wilmer Mills's deep roots in the Southern Agrarian tradition. In "Rest Stop, Alabama," Mills takes a break at a truck stop. Automatically flushing urinals, the "sticky sentiments / Of country music," "You Are Here!" marked on a map, and a button-activated weather news device leave the farmer-poet thinking how neither he nor migrating birds need such things:

Back in my truck I hang my head out,
looking
More at the constellations than the road
As if to follow my nose and navigate

From star to star, as the crow flies, like geese
And all the hordes of fowl that need no sign
To beat the shortest course from A to Z.

This poem is a worthy addition to the Southern Agrarian writers' analysis and criticism of modernity.

Section 3, from *The Heart's Arithmetic*, and section 4, from *The World That Isn't There*, complete *Selected Poems* with a further generous sampling of some of the best of the later verse.

"From Lookout Mountain at Night," in section 3, is one of Mills's most impressive poems. Descending by car with his family from the mountain into Chattanooga, Mills hears his son compare the city lights below to Christmas lights while he himself thinks of the bright lines as similar to lines on a person's palm but "enlarged / Like a traffic map, each intersection lit / In different colors." These multiple comparisons lead to what are perhaps Mills's deepest reflections on the relationships between metaphor, memory, and time:

Is metaphor a memory, two things
Remembering when they were both the
same?
Consider the stars, no, all things far apart;
By a common trait or someone's turn of
phrase,
They leap together in the linker's mind,
A backwards bang that reunites the light
That shines as various and sundry suns.

The word "linker" describes a poet by way of what for Mills may be the poet's most essential task: to demonstrate that *likeness implies a oneness from which all likenesses descend*.

This understanding of the poet's role in a post-Edenic human condition is apparent in "Fallen Fruit." There the poet's children ask those difficult questions children are given to asking: "How are shadows made?" (daughter)

and “What if time could slip?” (son). Mills sees these questions as indicating that his children’s “...minds and garden-hearts could already lisp / In metaphors,” could sense the existence of a world beyond this fallen one we live in, and “Could see the world that isn’t there, could smell / The sweetly fecal scent of fallen fruit / That issues out of symbols like a spell.” Paradoxically, “The Fall was knowing what it meant ‘to stand,’” a statement reflecting the poet’s belief that all things like and unlike are deeply interconnected. Mills sees himself, as poet and painter, trying to understand these matters as if he were blind Helen Keller learning to communicate: “...like Helen when she knew / The beauty of the world, what liquefied / Across her hands that felt and wrote and drew.”

Section 4 brings *Selected Poems* to a close with “Ruach,” a poem written by Mills in anticipation of death, its one-word title being Hebrew for spirit, mind, breath, wind, and God. With both courage and hope, the poet looks toward his end:

When I die and breathe my last
It won’t be in or out.
I’ll *take* my final breath,
Hailing the silence of glass,
Glass that isn’t a solid,
But slowing cooling back
From molten silica,
The unheld breath of time.

The best commentary on this poem so far are passages from the draft of an essay sent by Mills to his close poet friend Jeff Hardin and in an e-letter essay that Mills posted on the Web in June 2011, just a few weeks before he died:

The simplest way to enter the fullness of time is by breathing our words aloud to each other, and often, with love and

hope. The miracle of spoken language is that it insists on face-to-face contact, or, in the case of a letter, it brings the speaker’s spirit into the room in a real sense and in real time at the right velocity, the speed of breathing. It has the tempo of people eating a meal together. In this sense, *Kairos* Time and spoken language are two sides of the same *Koinonia*.

Time is not a cold finality but a fullness, a place in which to abide and to breathe deeply without respect to calendars and deadlines. It is where we are simultaneously most human and most divine. Too often we live only for the clock and fail to notice how in the absence of incremental time we would ironically be more able to see the pattern in the rug, how the stained glass windows of our lives make sense as wholes and not as mere pieces.³

and

...being face-to-face with mortality shows me more clearly who I am. It reminds me of something the Southern writer, Andrew Lytle, told me once when I was a student. When he turned ninety-five, I asked him how that felt, and he said that the years didn’t mean anything because he had already begun to live in the sense of eternity. I now know what he meant.⁴

Selected Poems gathers together many, but by no means all, of Wilmer Mills’s best poems. When the time is right, a volume of collected poems should most certainly be published. Until then, readers will need copies of both *Light for the Orphans* (2002) and *Selected Poems* (2013) to take as full a measure as is now possible of his stature as an important contemporary poet.

A basket weaver himself, like the weaver in his poem “The Basket Weaver’s Dream,” Wilmer Mills has written poems whose words and music take the reader forward,

yet also back, along time’s mysterious road through many of the joys and sorrows and unanswered questions of this life toward “a breeze in the trees of Eden.” †

- 1 David Middleton, “Singing the Pieces Back in Place: The Life and Verse of Wilmer Hastings Mills (1969–2011),” *Modern Age* 55, nos. 1 and 2, Winter/Spring 2013, 111–19.
- 2 Ibid., 118–19.
- 3 Jeff Hardin, “A Gift for Adoration: Celebrating the Life and Words of Poet Wilmer Mills,” <http://www.chapter16.org/print/1630>.
- 4 Wilmer Mills, “Living in Eternity,” June 8, 2011, <http://www.chapter16.org/print/1516>.

LENIN’S FAITHFUL HEIR

Daniel J. Mahoney

Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator

By Oleg V. Khlevniuk

Translated by Nora Seligman Favorov

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This is not the first biography of Stalin, nor will it be the last. Stalin fascinates not least because he embodied that moment when ideological fanaticism came together seamlessly with despotism of a personal sort. He was a dictator, a Leader or *Vozhd*, but his dictatorship is unthinkable without the underlying Marxist-Leninist project to create a new man in a new society. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski argued in an impressive series of writings, Stalinism is best understood not as a betrayal of Marxist-Leninism but as one of its possible outcomes. Lenin built the infrastructure of

a totalitarian society and declared war on enemies real and imagined. He employed political repression on a massive scale and ruthlessly repressed peasant uprisings and any independent display of religious sentiment or observance. He built a political order rooted in mendacity and dedicated to an ideological Manicheism that excoriated opponents of Bolshevism (the vast majority of the Russian people) as enemies of the human race. Is it so surprising that his successor parlayed this legacy into full-scale totalitarianism, that Marxist-Leninism became Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism?

The distinguished Russian historian Oleg V. Khlevniuk fully appreciates the Leninist or ideological dimensions of Stalin’s dictatorship. He shows that “ideological doctrines and prejudices were often decisive in Stalin’s life and actions.” This indisputable

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