Southern Novelists on Stage and Screen

Guest Editors: George Garrett, David Madden, Irving Malin
Like Henry James, Scott Fitzgerald (The Vegetable), Hemingway (The Fifth Column) and Faulkner (Requiem for a Nun), Robert Penn Warren was obsessed by his failure in the one genre he could not master. In 1939, at Bennington College, Francis Fergusson tactfully maneuvered Warren toward turning his failed play, Proud Flesh, into a novel, All the King's Men. That dramaturgical defeat in turn became a bitter-sweet victory when Hollywood turned the novel back into an Oscar-winning script in 1949. The ideological crudity of this latter transformation, however—the movie reduces the dying Willie Stark to a fascist egomaniac raving about world conquest—may have strengthened Warren’s resolve to try his hand at the genre again, this time doing it his way. Presumably heightening such a resolve was Warren’s acceptance, in 1951, of the position of professor in the School of Drama at Yale. Later in the 1950s Hollywood again turned a Warren novel, Band of Angels, into a farcically simple-minded love story; and in the 1970s Warren was negotiating a deal that, had it succeeded, would have turned his last novel, A Place to Come To, into a movie starring Robert Redford. There is little doubt, in these transformations from novel to movie, that commercial values come first, and aesthetic-philosophical values second.

The great advantage, for Warren, of turning Brother to Dragons into a play/movie was that it had no chance of commercial profitability, and so the work could retain its full artistic integrity to the extent that its creator was capable to embodying its lineaments in a visual spectacle. According to Warren’s own reckoning, as stated in his Foreword to Brother to Dragons: A Play in Two Acts (1976), the BBC produced the first dramatic reading (with no input from Warren) in 1955, just two years after the poem was published. Then Warren wrote a play version that appeared briefly at Harvard, in Seattle and on Broadway. Reworked, it appeared in New York in 1964 and in Providence in 1968. Mindful of these versions, Warren wrote a script in 1974 that was adapted by Adrian Hall and Ken Campbell for television and presented to a national audience via PBS on 19 February 1975. Unfortunately, copyright problems have made the videotape of that performance unavailable; from memory I chiefly recall the cameo appearance of Robert Penn Warren in the role of his own father. Fortunately, the script was published a year later, in the Spring 1976 number of the Georgia Review. It is this text that serves as the basis of the following comparative analysis of the poem of 1953, the play/film of 1975-76 and the rewritten poem of 1979.

As always in these conversions from a reading experience to a visual-auditory one, the question of loss assumes an entropic profile: must the literary values of the original always lose ground to the production values of its successor? With first-rate literature the answer appears to be yes (e.g., the novel versus movie versions of The Sound and the Fury and The Great Gatsby); with second-rate literature, probably not
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(Gone With the Wind and The Godfather). So perhaps the status of Brother to Dragons as first- or second-rate work of literature needs some clarification at the outset. To some degree, the reviews of the poem in 1953 indicated a mixed judgment. Babette Deutsch, while acknowledging that "everywhere the poet shows his mastery of his craft," objected to the super-cynical misanthropy of Jefferson, whose "voice is singularly like the voice of Robert Penn Warren" (Grimshaw 156, 157). Typical of such protests on behalf of Jefferson was Parker Tyler's remark that just as Lilburn wielded the meat-axe on George, "Warren has wielded an axe on the author of The Declaration of Independence." In the end, "the poem is not a masterpiece" in Tyler's judgment, because "the air is full . . . of ideological axes" (171, 173). But the preponderance of critical voices came down in Warren's favor, with Robert Lowell (after reading it three times "from cover to cover without stopping") declaring it Warren's "best book" (163, 164), and Randall Jarrell calling it not only "Warren's best book" but "an event, a great one" (160, 161). Soon thereafter, William Van O'Connor considered the poem proof that "of all English and American poets now writing [in 1954], Warren has the greatest gift for the long poem" (177); and in the 1960s Hyatt Waggoner in American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present declared Brother to Dragons "certainly a major document in American poetry" (Waggoner's emphasis). Despite some complaints about overblown rhetoric and hatchet work on Thomas Jefferson, the critical consensus appears strongly in favor of designating Brother to Dragons a first-rate work of literature.

That assumption evokes in turn the question posed earlier: whether the literary values of the original poem decline into production values for the staged version. Inasmuch as the stage/film version contains less than half the word count of the poem, it appears evident that some literary value has been sacrificed, reducing the scope of the work from that of a national epic of more than 5,000 lines and 233 pages to a two-act play of about 2,200 lines and 66 pages (requiring 56 minutes of television time). To be sure, some desirable pruning thereby occurred, answering to Robert Lowell's dry comment in 1953 that "nothing limits the length of [the characters'] speeches except the not very importunate necessity of eventually completing the story" (Grimshaw 164). But while this draconian cutting removed some self-indulgent digressions and rhetorical overkill, it also took overboard many of the poem's most substantial and memorable effects. For example, Warren's closing synthesis, a lyric-philosophical discourse taking up a full thirteen pages of the 1953 poem, gets shrunk to less than a page in the stage/film script. (As though mediating between the two earlier versions, the 1979 poem cuts Warren's closing monologue to about seven pages.)

In addition to losing the poetic power of many such passages, the stage/film version further diffuses the effect of the best poetry that remains by giving up the intensity of the monologue delivery in favor of a polyvocal style more suited to dramatic conventions. Originally, for example, Warren announces the coming of the annus mirabilis with a three-page invocation of heightened lyric intensity. A generous sample of this passage is required to illustrate its verbal gravity and grandeur (1953: 94-95):

[Sample text from the poem is not transcribed here.]
And the year drove on. Winter. And from the Dakotas
The wind veers, gathers itself in ice-glitter
And star-gleam of dark, and finds the long sweep of the valley.
A thousand miles and the fabulous river is ice in the starlight.
The ice is a foot thick, and beneath, the water slides black
like a dream.
And in the interior of that unpulsing blackness and
thrilled zero
The big channel-cat sleeps with eye lidless. . . .
But far north the great conifers darkly bend and unburden
The cope and dignity of snow, and the stridor
Rises to anguish. What does the oak say?

The oak is Jacob, and all night in anguish wrestles the
incessant
And pitiless angel of air. The stars are arctic and
Their gleam comes earthward down uncounted light-years
of disdain,
And on the exposed headland the oak heaves,
And in radius of more than a thousand miles the continent
Glitters whitely in starlight like a great dead eye of ice.
The wind is unceasing, and the stars likewise.

We feel that the force now driving Lilburn on
Is but part of the unleashed and unhoused force of Nature,
Mindless, irreconcilable, absolute:
The swing of the year, the thrust of time, the wind.

In the play/film, it is not permissible for one voice to declaim at this length, and so
the gathering intensity of such a passage is scattered among a random colloquy of
voices. This is how the greatly abbreviated passage in the play/film finds utterance.

JEFFERSON: . . . but listen!—the wind gathers. (Sound of wind)
FIRST FRONTIERSMAN: And from the Dakotas,
    Wind veers in ice-glitter and star-gleam of darkness—
FIRST FRONTIERSWOMAN: And finds the long sweep of the valley,
    And the fabulous river is ice in starlight—
FOURTH FRONTIERSMAN: And under that unpulsing blackness and thrilled zero,
    The big channel-catfish sleeps with eye lidless. . . . (1975: 104-05)

(Once again, as though mediating between the two earlier versions, the 1979 poem
trims the original passage by about half.)
In some instances change occurred for reasons other than economy. The actual
name of Lilburn’s victim, George, was correctly designated in 1953 but changed for
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no apparent reason to John in 1975. Hugh Holman's argument seems persuasive—that the name change was "a quiet but emphatic declaration to Clio, in the guise of Boynton Merrill, of 'non serviam'"—but in fact Warren changed the name a year before Merrill's historical study (Jefferson's Nephews) appeared (Grimshaw 196). It also seems odd that Warren demoted his own identity from "R.P.W." to "Writer" even though the quarter-century between 1953 and 1975 marked the transition to the postmodern period, when writers like Allen Ginsburg, Robert Lowell and Philip Roth openly infused their personal lives into their imaginative work. It is with a touch of regret that we mark the loss of Warren's modest 1953 self-portrait:

I blocked his [Jack Boyle's] doorway, and he stared at me,
A fellow of forty, a stranger, and a fool,
Red-headed, freckled, lean, a little stooped,
Who yearned to be understood, to make communication,
To touch the ironic immensity of afternoon with meaning,
To find and know my name and make it heard... (1953: 26)

In other instances we might judge that a fair exchange transpired between the poem and play/film versions. With Billy Rutter, for example (Laetitia's brother), we lose the Mark Twain-like color of frontier bragging, which originally included these lines:

You give me a reason—you know, to provoke a man—
And I'd step right up and pull Jesus Christ off the cross
And make Him talk turkey, even if folks did say
His Pappy was a big man in the home section.
Lewises, hell. A Lewis ain't got but two balls
And hung in the same place like anybody else. (1953: 65)

In the play/film a sense of decorum may have abbreviated these lines, but in exchange we gain a clearer idea of the "awful thing" left undefined in 1953; thus, in 1975: "Buggar my sister! / Ain't no man alive, Lewis or not, gonna do that!" (87). In addition, the play/film gains—if it is a gain—the dramatic effect of Billy's gesture concerning the piece of anatomy in question:

(Drawing knife)
What is hung can be cut—
(Gesture of seizing and cutting, as Laetitia appears with hand raised in protest).

One of the excisions that doubtless improved the work is that of Jefferson's nickname for his nephew Meriwether Lewis, "Crack-head," a reference to the latter's suicide with a pistol after returning from the great Western expedition. The excision of Meriwether's entire role, however, weighs heavily, since its function in 1953 had been to extend the theme of lost innocence to the vast virgin land—the site of
Manifest Destiny—that Jefferson had acquired with the Louisiana Purchase. (Regrettably, when Meriwether's role is restored in the 1979 poem, "Crack-head" reappears with it [108].) Also ranking high in the catalog of losses are the three epigraphs of 1953, two of which pit the moral wisdom of an old Indian ("Kentucky he said was filled with the ghosts of its slaughtered inhabitants: how could the white man make it his home?") against the Jeffersonian rationalism of the Roman philosopher Lucretius: "darkness of the mind must be dispersed, not by the rays of the sun . . . but by the aspect and law of nature."

At times the pruning process unbalanced the image patterns of the original poem. In 1953, for example, Warren correlated the acorn imagery of his opening lines—Jefferson's analogy between his heart and an "old, earth-fallen acorn, dry, but postulating / Green germ and joy and the summer shade" (6)—with Warren's gesture that bonds him with Jefferson in the final lines:

> From an undifferentiated impulse I leaned Above the ruin [of the Lewis home] and in my hand picked up Some two or three pig-nuts, with the husk yet on. I put them in my pocket. I went down. (1953: 215)

In the play/film, that concluding gesture appears supererogatory minus the corresponding imagery of the beginning. (In the poem of 1979, Jefferson's acorn is restored; however, it now refers not to his heart but to "Hope, a dry acorn" [5]).

Other changes reflected the development between the 1953 and the 1970s of heightened respect for ethnic/racial sensitivities. Something more than economy of style seems likely to have motivated the excision of Jefferson's comment about Indians, for example, which describes

> How the savage man wallowed in the horror of the hogan, And lust was communal ceremony in the murk-filled lodge, And such the reek of sour bodies and the contortion and pathos of the bestial face That nausea was in your gut even as, for sympathy, your parts twitched. (1953: 37)

(In 1979, on page 27, Warren restored this passage for his reading audience, but he knew his Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce—published in 1983—would soon anneal any rancor on the subject of the American Indian.) Nor was this the only instance of Warren's discretion regarding a live television audience in the 1970s. Another sign of changing times is the bowdlerization of the following passage of 1953:

> What the hell did you say Me, Boss? You mean me? Who the hell you think I mean, you black bastard? (110)
In 1975, presumably as a concession to the post-1954 civil rights movement and the subsequent rise of ethnic sensitivity, that familiar racial epithet is discreetly removed (and it stays removed from the 1979 poem):

Lilburn: What the hell did you say?
Headman: Me, Massa, you mean me?
Lilburn: Who do you think I meant, you—you—
Headman: Me, Massa?
Lilburn: Yes, you, and what were you saying? Say it out loud! (101)

In fact the play/film abounds with evidence of a quarter-century of change in America’s historical-cultural landscape. Politically speaking, the 1953 poem emerged from a witches’ brew of world crisis, with Stalin recently entombed alongside Lenin; his Cold War still a bloodbath in Korea; McCarthyism still meteorically on the rise; the Holocaust and the World War a recent trauma; school desegregation and the civil rights struggle coming over the horizon; and lynchings still a feature of American civilization in the South. Both Jefferson and Warren had plenty of reason for their initial tone of bitter disillusion with American history, as Jefferson runs off his melancholy checklist, including “Haymarket, and Detroit, and Henry’s goons,” and Sacco-Vanzetti (“the Dagoes died”) (1953: 137).

By 1975, the political atmosphere included the aftermath of assassinations, Vietnam, two presidents (and a vice-president) being driven from office and a civil rights movement that had flaked off Black Panthers, the Weathermen and other progenitors of ideological and physical violence. Neither Jefferson or Warren had any reason to lighten their original mood; in fact, despite the drastic cutback of the poem’s overall length, Jefferson’s catalog of American shames actually expands in 1975 so as to include Hiroshima—“That towering toadstool when the Japs got fried” (113). (Not until “New Dawn,” Warren’s long poem about Hiroshima in Selected Poems, 1923-1985, did the poet’s tortured conscience finally exorcise that atrocity.)

Culturally, in 1953 the postmodern movement in literature was barely becoming visible in poetry by Ginsberg and Charles Olson, and in fiction by the likes of Kerouac and Mailer. For Warren, naturally enough, T.S. Eliot still held dominion over the literary scene, as evident in some rhyming quatrains whose diction (invoking the night of abominations) could have come from Murder in the Cathedral or Four Quartets as easily as from Brother to Dragons:

R.P.W. Let now the night descend
With all it graduated terrors,
And in its yearning toward absoluteness now amend
The impudent daylight’s velleities, and errors. . . . (121)

(In 1953 The Hollow Men too still held the power to compel imitation, as on page 97: “Wind, force without body, word without / Meaning, accident without essence.”)
By the 1970s, Warren’s cultural sensibility had attained substantial new understandings. One reason for this change was his experience of compiling, with Cleanth Brooks and R.W.B. Lewis, the huge and brilliant anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, which was published in 1973. It includes slave songs, speeches by Indian chiefs and generous samples of popular literature that would once have been called low-brow (e.g. “The Battle Hymn of the Republic). In the literary culture at large, by 1975 the moderns had been contemptuously dismissed in favor of postmodern theory, propagated most notably by Warren’s colleagues at Yale—Paul de Man, Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and even Jacques Derrida (who taught at Yale for a time). In academe, Marxism, deconstruction and radical feminism were strongly in vogue. In fact, Warren himself assisted at the funeral of his modernist mentors—Yeats, Eliot, Pound—with prose tracts such as *A Plea in Mitigation: Modern Poetry and the End of an Era* (1966) and *Democracy and Poetry* (1975).

Two empowering factors should be considered as helping make possible the transition from poem to play/film. First and most crucial was the nearly universal prevalence of color television in 1975—a huge technological advance from the small, crude, black-and-white idiot box of 1953. We might surmise that this circumstance provided the lure for a production aimed at a national audience. The other factor was the brightening of Warren’s personal life by 1975, garlanded now with a shower of major honors (the Bollingen prize and a second Pulitzer among them) along with the pleasures of fatherhood and a very happy marriage. It seems reasonable that the artist’s confidence was strengthened by this emotional and professional support as he tried once again to tackle the genre he had failed at for so long before, during and after his stint as a teacher in the Yale Drama Program.

So the project of translation from genre to genre went forward. Apart from the comparative lengths of poem and play/film, a different kind of foreshortening in the latter version results from the physical limitations of the stage. Where the poem of 1953 relies on its lush poetry to evoke moods and settings—the *annus mirabilis* of 1811, the Lewis home at Rocky Hill, the Great West of the Lewis and Clark expedition—the 1975 version produces its effects largely through the visual motifs of Warren’s stage directions. The earthquake, for example, is indicated “when actors mounted on the shoulders of others swing the big slit-sides lanterns to make shadows leap and sway, while others do somersaults and cartwheels”; Laetitia’s flight from home calls for actors to “make the horse that gallops around the stage with her clinging to their backs”; and a forest scene comes about “when actors become trees.” These appeals to the eye are complemented by actors helping with sound effects, “cranking wind machines, or imitating natural sounds, such as bird calls or the barking of a dog in the distance” (69).

Whether such visual and auditory cues of 1975 measure up to the imaginative impact of the 1953 poem is a question best left to each reader/spectator to judge, but it can be said that the shorter version does, through its pruning of verbiage, heighten the narrative thrust of the work. The added starkness of the play/film also gains strength from
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the symbolism of the set, through which Warren highlights “three dominant images”—a stage floor that “opens up in the shape of a coffin lid,” a meat block (with axe stuck in it) “that is brought forward for the butchery of John” and, at center stage, “a hung curtain painted with the nearly life-size bound figure of a stark-eyed ‘nigger’ dangling from a hook.” These eye-catching props are supported by the more subtly rendered “rhythm of contrasts” that Warren’s “Production Values” call for, playing off lighted versus shaded areas of the stage, open space against constriction, fast-paced versus slow-paced scenes and “realistic elements against fantastic, symbolic, and poetic elements.” The characters too are designated in terms of contrasting speech styles and costumes, which “should clearly indicate the three classes represented here—the gent-try [Jefferson, Lilburn], the frontier people [Isham, the chorus], and the black slaves” (both house servants and, distinguished by “rough garb,” field hands) (1975: 68-70, 77).

The immediate appeals to eye and ear in these production values come to life in the very first words of the play, which take the form of a stage direction: “(An agonized scream is heard).” Fully six more times the scream of the immolated slave recurs at random points in the play (109, 110, 114, 135, 137), directly penetrating the ears of the audience in a way that the poem of 1953 can only approximate through verbal suggestion. Thus, in the play, Laetitia needs only four lines to recall the scream:

But I heard it, I heard it, it came in the dark where I lay,
And every dead leaf in the woods just screamed like a tongue,
And my poor head swirled, and I reckon I tried to scream too
But I— (She falls to the floor.) (1975: 114)

But the poem of 1953, not having an actual human voice at its disposal, needed a whole page to render the effect it needed. Although it may be problematic as to whether this rhetoric or an actual human scream is finally more effective, it must be admitted that the following lines are more distinctive—more of an artistic challenge in the creation—than a vocal scream:

But soon as I heard it, it was like the world
Just started screaming by itself, and like I
Had just been waiting years for it to start,
And all my life had been waiting for it, and every
Dead leaf in the woods just screamed just like a tongue,
A little tongue, not loud, and maybe you couldn’t
Hear one alone, it was so weak, but together
All screaming they made a big scream filling
Up all the world, and filled my head, and my poor head
Was one big hollow echo full of dark,
Big as the world, and the whole world, all the mountains,
The rivers, creeks, and fields and hills and woods and every
Leaf screaming in the dark, and all the stars,
Was in my head and lost, and my poor head
Kept whirling bigger. And I tried to scream. (50-51)

The enhanced narrative coherence of the play/film and its single-minded starkness of mood and image undoubtedly contribute to the unity of effect that theorists from Aristotle to Poe have called for, and it is indeed an unforgettable graphic visual spectacle to see a boy vivisected chop by chop, with the living pieces flung audibly to the hissing flames. Warren did what he was supposed to do in rendering this spectacle as the climatic centerpiece of dramatic action in act 1, and the secondary drama of Lilburn’s arrest and punishment makes for a riveting act 2. From beginning to end, the supporting cast—Isham, Aunt Cat, Laetitia and the chorus characters—sustain these central actions with absorbing efficacy. Meanwhile the intellectual principals—Jefferson, Lucy Lewis and Warren—prove generally efficacious in extrapolating from Lilburn’s deed a debate about America’s historic guilt and innocence.

It should be noted, too, that Warren exploits well his secondary opportunities for stage/film spectacle. The “Frontier People and the Slaves” frequently break into song and dance numbers, for example, ranging in style from “a stately minuet” (performed to the music of Lucy’s harpsichord) to lullabies and slave ditties. The specific weight of vocal tones, expressions and gestures also provides an exact definition not available to a poem, giving the actors a chance to expropriate a role so strongly as to preempt later versions, like Humphrey Bogart or Clint Eastwood in their classic movies. Certainly stylized effects sometimes help define the play’s characters, as for example the blood-red mask worn by the soon-to-be immolated John and the two gobs of spit that Lilburn hawks up (one in each act) to show contempt for his “niggers”—a gesture that motivates Aunt Cat to betray him after the second gob. (Stage direction for gob number one: “He spits on the floor, various Frontiersmen and Women move toward Cat and repeat the act” [97]). The poem cannot match the immediate impact of these play/film gambits.

On the other hand, the play sometimes displays a desperate need for the powers reserved exclusively to the printed word. The lamest gambit in the play occurs midway through act 2 when, having no other way to propound a discourse he thinks indispensable, Warren inscribes the following stage direction:

(A huge banner drops, well above head-height, drops from the second girder. On it are the words: The last phase: the threshold of recognition. The last phase: the kiss of necessity. The last phase: the self fades into fate. The words are repeated by an off-stage voice. Jefferson strides to the banner and stands on tiptoe to rip it down, crumpling it in both hands. Then he stands staring down at it, in a tangle of confused emotion.) (124-25)

It seems likely that Jefferson’s stance in that last sentence must be shared by more than a few of Jefferson’s spectators in this scene, unless the audience were well versed in Warren’s poem of 1953 before seeing the play. Not even T.S. Eliot in his weakest
moments of message-laden dramaturgy descended to this level of semiotic despera-
tion.

With that mention of Eliot, perhaps we should admit in the end that Eliot and War-
ren shared the condition of being much better poets than playwrights. Both achieved
distinguished levels of performance within their dramaturgical productions, but apart
from the poetry within their plays, both fell far short in drama of their respective Nobel
and Poet Laureate achievements in poetry. If we recall Eliot’s rationale for going to
the stage—namely, to propagate the Christian faith to a far larger audience than that
afforded by poetry readers—we may justify Warren’s play/film productions on a simi-
lar basis. Yes, Warren’s poetry was better than his drama, but over the airwaves his
play/film of *Brother to Dragons* reached an audience hugely beyond his poetry read-
ership. However large his audience was in 1975, the television play can reach yet
further to an audience of millions if we postulate future airings of the television spec-
tacle. That is grounds enough to justify the play/film production completely. Then as
in the past the more culturally active spectators of the play will be moved to read the
poem(s) as well, and so enjoy the treasures of the two genres’ mutual amplification.
The others in his audience will in any event have the benefit of the play/film, which
even absent the poem(s) will offer riches sufficient to those spectators’ level of absorp-
tion.

Note

1The reviews cited here are all reprinted in James A. Grimshaw, Jr.’s encyclopedic *Brother to
Dragons: A Discussion*, which also reprints ten of the “classic” essays on Warren’s 1953 poem.
In addition, seven essays on the 1979 poem are published here for the first time, and three use-
ful appendices are provided—the murder scene as recounted in Boynton Merrill, Jr.’s
*Jefferson’s Nephews: A Frontier Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976), the Jefferson fam-
ily genealogy (from the same book) and Warren’s Foreword to *Brother to Dragons: A Play in
Two Acts* from the *Georgia Review*. For economy of style, I shall refer to these items in my
main text by using the name of Grimshaw with page numbers in parentheses.

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