Robert Penn Warren and the Classical Tradition

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T.S. Eliot's self-proclaimed status as an Anglo-Catholic in religion and a classicist in literature bears interesting analogies to Robert Penn Warren. In a broad sense, it seems obvious that Robert Penn Warren was a Christian writer. As James Justus has shown in his discussion of Warren's Mariner, a confessional motif of sin and expiation recurs importantly in Warren's work, as witnessed in the testimonies of Willie Proudfit in Night Rider, Ashby Windham in At Heaven's Gate, and Cass Mastern in All the King's Men. Later, in the 1950s, we have the quasi-Christian transition to the next world portrayed in "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace," the most ambitious poem in Promises, and, in the 1960s, Brother Potts propagates a quasi-orthodox theme of "blessedness" in Flood, apparently with the author's own endorsement.

In so far as Warren's epigraphs display serious cultural affinities, as was often true of T.S. Eliot, the evidence additionally implies a broadly Christian sensibility. Among his novels, Flood takes its epigraph from the prophet Amos, while All the King's Men and A Place to Come To cite two devoutly Christian poets, Dante and Gerard Manley Hopkins respectively. The volumes of poetry strongly deepen this impression. The epigraphs of Being Here and Altitudes and Extensions are cited from St. Augustine, of Rumor Verified from Dante, of Or Else and Audubon from the Psalms, of Incarnations and Now and Then from the prophets Nehemiah and Isaiah. The title Brother to Dragons, moreover, is drawn directly from the book of Job, and Band of Angels comes ultimately from Biblical chronicles. Throughout his career Warren's Biblical focus is attested most of all by his fixation on the myth of the Fall, the central dilemma in most of his fiction and poetry.

Taken together, these motifs appear sufficient to verify Warren's status as an essentially Christian writer. But on closer look, that impression weakens. The Biblical references I have cited, for one thing, are almost exclusively from the Old Testament. Looking more closely at a representative book, the Selected Poems of 1944, we find surprisingly few overt Biblical references—about a dozen for this twenty-year span of
poetry-writing—and almost all of these are from the Old Testament, frequently invoking the Fall from Eden ("The Garden," "Garden Waters," "Love's Parable"), but also Jacob wrestling with the angel ("Terror"), Israel in the Sinai desert ("History"), and the Tower of Babel ("Mexico Is a Foreign Country"). From the New Testament a glancing reference to Pontius Pilate does occur in "Aged Man Surveys Past Time," and one to Lazarus and Dives in "Letter from a Coward to a Hero," but it is notable that all three references to the crucifixion in Selected Poems are laced with sarcasm. "Variation: Ode to Fear" purports that "Jesus in Gethsemane / Was simply sweating from T.B."; "Ransom" admits that "Christ bled, indeed, but after fasting and / Bad diet of the poor; wherefore thin blood came out"; and "Pondy Woods" profanes the crucifixion with a crude phrase, "The Jew-boy died."

To some extent, this impiety of tone may reflect a general reaction among early modern writers against their Christian heritage. While some major authors directly attacked Christianity, like James Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, others simply by-passed the central religion of the West—Ezra Pound through expounding pagan rather than Christian heroes, T.S. Eliot through imposing a Sanskrit rather than Hebrew accent on his divine Thunder, and Joseph Conrad through making his repository of virtue (Marlowe) a Buddha-like rather than Christlike figure. We are constrained, therefore, to reconsider Warren's status as a Christian writer, and our way of approaching that task will be to regard Warren in the light of classical as opposed to Judeo-Christian affinities. Again using Selected Poems: 1923-1943 as an index to Warren's interest, we find relatively few classical references, but they are rendered in conventionally respectful tones. In "Revelation," he compares Sulla's treason against Rome to the breach between mother and son; elsewhere he cites the barbarians invading Rome ("Pursuit"), the waters of Lethe ("End of Season"), Orpheus descending ("Aged Man Surveys Past Time"), Orpheus ascending ("Problem of Knowledge"), Xerxes at Salamis ("Toward Rationality"), Brutus and Plato ("Mexico Is a Foreign Country"), Horace's epigraph "non omnis moriar" ("not all of me is to die") ("Pondy Woods"), and Croesus and Aurelius ("Croesus in Autumn"). Concerning Warren's earliest fiction, as Joseph Millichap has discovered, the original epigraph to Prime Leaf was a Latin line from the Satires of Horace, which translates as "Nor does Nature distinguish between Justice and iniquity."1

1Joseph Millichap, in a talk at the Robert Penn Warren Circle's annual meeting at Western Kentucky University, April 25, 1992.
By way of valorizing classical literature Warren had still more powerful models to learn from. As a Renaissance man in his early teaching career at Louisiana State University, Warren had constant reason to consider the innate meaning of the word Renaissance: the rebirth of the classical tradition as the West awakened from its medieval slumber. Chief among the treasures before him was the example of Shakespeare, who so frequently turned to classical antiquity for his sources: Venus and Adonis, The Rape of Lucrece, Troilus and Cressida, Anthony and Cleopatra, Pericles, Coriolanus, Timon of Athens, and Julius Caesar. Warren happened to be teaching Julius Caesar at the time Huey Long was assassinated, and he has stated that the connection was so striking as to be the genesis of what, a decade later, would be his greatest novel.

Admittedly, Warren was also influenced as a Renaissance man by the militantly Christian poet John Milton. In his earlier career Warren paid tribute to Milton in the grand style and Edenic theme of poems like “Picnic Remembered,” a motif that recurred importantly in the youthful romance of Jack Burden and Anne Stanton in All the King's Men. Warren's admiration for Milton held strong into old age, manifested in “Milton: A Sonnet” and “Folly on Royal Street Before the Raw Face of God”—a poem in which the speaker and his drunken friends publicly “Mouthed out our Milton for magnificence. / For what is man without magnificence?” For the purpose of our discussion, however, we should remember that not only was Milton a Christian poet; he was importantly one of the great classical scholars of all time, who not only expropriated all the old classical forms—the Ode, the Pastoral Elegy, Greek drama, the Epic—but held in memory through the decades of his blindness thousands of precise details from classical poetry for their allusionary value.

Warren's more modern models likewise turned largely to the classics for instruction and inspiration. Thomas Hardy, for example, whom Warren called "the greatest poet after Wordsworth"—and of greater merit than T.S. Eliot—drew upon ancient Greek writings for his sense of tragic irony ². In addition, Nietzsche's revival of Apollo and Dionysus, correlated with his contempt for Christianity, pervaded the air during Warren's student years, abetted by the magisterial force of Nietzsche's American popularizer, H.L. Mencken. Equally prominent at the time

was Freud's rethinking of the Oedipus and Electra legends, first popularized in English in the 1920s. Warren's debt to Freud may be inferred from the family pathology that suffuses his long narratives, as exemplified, for example, in the mother-son relationship of Lilburn and Lucy Lewis in *Brother to Dragons* as well as the father-son relationship in all ten novels—a motif brilliantly elucidated in Randolph Runyon's *The Taciturn Text*.

The two towering models of modernist-classical influence during Warren's formative period would have been James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* exemplified how the classics could be reconceptualized for our own time, and T.S. Eliot, who evoked an antique Waste Land from fragments of Sophocles (whose Tiresias is Eliot's narrator), Virgil (whose Dido was a victim of the Fire Sermon), and Petronius (whose *Satyricon* gave Eliot's poem its epigraph). *(Warren, we may remember, memorized *The Waste Land* as a sophomore at Vanderbilt).* Additional revivals of classical material would have come before the young Warren via Ezra Pound's poems in the vein of *Homage to Sextus Propertius* and Eugene O'Neill's renewals of Greek drama in such plays as *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Desire Under the Elms*.

If these writers influenced Warren's formative years, the fruition of this influence appeared during Warren's mid-career, focusing on the 1950s. Probably the classical strain in Warren's work culminated in *Brother to Dragons* in 1953. Arguably Warren's finest achievement—Hyatt Waggoner called it “certainly a central *document* in American poetry” (emphasis his)—*Brother to Dragons* flaunts a Biblical title, taken from Job's bitter complaint that “I am a brother to dragons and a companion to owls”; but within the text Warren developed his critique of American culture mainly in classical terms. The critique begins with the book's epigraph from Lucretius, whose *De Rerum Natura* confidently declares the triumph of reason over the powers of darkness:

*For as children tremble and fear everything in the blind darkness, so we in the light sometimes fear what is no more to be feared than the things that children in the dark hold in terror and imagine will come true. This terror, therefore, and darkness of the mind must be dispersed, not by the rays of the sun nor the bright shaft of daylight, but by the aspect and law of nature.*

The opposition that Lucretius here poses between “we in the light” and “children in the dark” enables Warren to frame in classicist terms a judgment usually rendered in a Judeo-Christian vocabulary. The chief
deformations of the American Republic derived, in Warren's judgment, not so much from Puritan delusion in trying to establish a New Israel as from Enlightenment vainglory in trying to re-create the Greek polis or Roman Republic. As the leading exponent of Enlightenment rationality, Thomas Jefferson is the prime voice of Lucretius's philosophy in this work. Visiting the Roman temple at Nîmes in March of 1787, Jefferson by his own account stood "gazing whole hours at [it], like a lover at his mistress." In Warren's poem Jefferson associates the edifice with "the law of Rome and the eternal / Light of just proportion and the heart's harmony" (pp. 40, 218—1953 version).

According to documents on deposit in Yale's Beinecke Library, *Brother to Dragons* began with Prefatory Notes about the *Aeneid* of Virgil. In these half-legible scribblings, what especially takes Warren's interest is not the obvious secular parallel between the founding of Rome and that of America, but rather the Roman writer's theological attitude, which Warren marked "N.B." and circled for emphasis: "At end—realization of Aeneas in Virgil at fall of Troy that it was not a matter of the struggle of men—that Gods strive above the battlements." This juxtaposition of America against classical rather than Biblical myth extends, in these Prefatory Notes, to what Warren calls the "light carrier" theme, concerning which the Puritan errand into the wilderness is forsaken in favor of Aeneas as Warren's anointed missionary. Relating Aeneas to the theme that "all men must 'found Rome,'" Warren cites the Anchises image in place of what the Bible would call Original Sin, imposing the burdens of the fathers upon new generations:

Always we must carry Anchises (the "father") from the ruin of the human establishment—he is . . . the necessary burden of "piety"—one cannot flee to the "new land" without him. . . Cf. Billie Potts . . . N.B. Jefferson—the "Founding Fathers" in the strip of wilderness. . . .

(Twenty years later, in "Homage to Theodore Dreiser," Warren compared that gloomy American naturalist to "Anchises' son.")

Warren's most striking transposition of "Original Sin" from a Biblical to a classical frame is his portrayal of the Minotaur, the composite of humanity and bestiality that Jefferson finds lurking in the

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3 The Quarterly expresses its appreciation to the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for permission to quote from unpublished Warren documents.
labyrinth of the American psyche—"hulked / In the blind dark, hock-deep in ordure, its beard / And shag foul-scabbed, and when the hoof heaves— / Listen!—the foulness sucks like mire" (p. 9). In pointing to classical surrogates for Biblical themes—Rome rather than Israel as America's prototype, Anchises rather than Adam as the ruined father figure, the Minotaur rather than Cain as the fruit of Original Sin—I do not mean to ascribe only tragic connotations to Warren's classical sources. *Brother to Dragons* also uses Homer—"that vagrant liar from Ithaca" (p. 18)—to exemplify what R.P.W. calls "the single lesson left / To learn worth learning. . . . And that lesson is that the only / Thing in life is glory" (p. 20). The glory in this instance is drawn engagingly out of a comparison of Homeric splendor with Warren's home town of Guthrie, Kentucky, which lacks, the poet admits, "the Ionian grandeur / When once Poseidon reared from his crystal courts / And corridors of glaucous pearl," but—he says—"a river will do when you are twelve . . . and a ruined mill / And millpond, wood lot, and a fox's den / Can serve . . ."(p. 19).

In 1959 Warren dedicated *The Gods of Mount Olympus* to his five-year-old daughter Rosana. While the children's book format limits Warren's intellectual range in this text, it is worth noting that its design moves from the vanity, cruelty, and frivolousness of the earlier gods—Cronos, the Titans, Zeus and Hera—to the discipline and sacrifice of Apollo and Prometheus. Like Edith Hamilton in her seminal *The Greek Way to Western Civilization*, Warren evidently saw the great achievement of Greek theology as the humanizing of the gods, progressing from the primitive image of brute power to a status appropriate to human ideals of righteous conduct. In his conclusion, Warren remarks that "the better and wiser men did not think of their gods as merely giving favors in exchange for sacrifices and vows. They came to think of them, too, as giving justice and mercy, and as wishing to lead men to goodness."  

For whatever reason, Warren never composed a similar children's book about Biblical mythology, but he did include a "Holy Writ" section in his *Tale of Time* sequence, and it is probably the grimmest part of his collected works. The first of its two poems, "Elijah on Mount Carmel," shows the great prophet to be (like John Brown) a murderous fanatic, "Screaming in glory / Like / A bursting blood blister" after slaughtering the priests of Baal. The other poem, "Saul at Gilboa," ends

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with Saul's severed head eaten by ants while his body, "a stake / Thrust upward to twist the gut-tangle," is hung from the city walls by the Philistines. The fact that these two poems were the only writings by Warren centered on Biblical material further strengthens the case for Warren as more centrally a classical than a Christian writer.

After *Brother to Dragons* in 1953, *You, Emperors, and Others* was Warren's major work to be affected by his classicist enthusiasm. Warren's two emperors, Domitian and Tiberius, carry the theme of Original Sin squarely into the center of Latin civilization by acting out Lilburne-like roles of cruelty and perverse sexual indulgence. The subtitle of this section, "Two Pieces After Suetonius," recalls in addition the infamous catalogue of vices perpetrated by the other emperors, including Caligula and Nero, in the Roman historian's scandalous narrative. It is useful to remember that about the same time as he wrote these poems about Roman history, Warren was formulating his theories of American history in *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial*, in which the aftermath of the War resembled somewhat the decadence of Roman antiquity. If anything, the Romans get the better of the comparison by the open candor of their cruelty and corruption, in contrast to the North's Treasury of Virtue for winning the War, which dulled its conscience toward the financial/political corruption of the Gilded Age; the great betrayal of the Southern Negro in the election of 1876 (won by Democrats but given to Republicans in return for an end to Reconstruction); and the mass slaughter of American Indians that resembles in some ways Caesar's brutal conquest of Gaul.

The other classical entry in *You, Emperors, and Others* is "Fatal Interview: Penthesilea and Achilles." This poem, about the spear-throwing combat in which Achilles kills the Queen of the Amazons, is splendidly Homeric in its style but quintessentially Warrenesque in its psychology. Achilles realizes that the warrior queen would have been his perfect mate only after his spear hurts through her horse, "knocks it down; and thus on that pincushion sticks her." Thus Achilles becomes the victim of what Hugh Moore, years ago, called "The Terror of Answered Prayer"—that is, the idea that human nature is so perverse that we risk being ruined by getting what we most wish for. Achilles makes a similarly melancholy though tacit appearance in "Paradox," one of the *Arcturus* poems, in which a runner tries to catch the image of his lost sweetheart but cannot do so by reason of Zeno's paradox about Achilles trying but failing to catch the hare (or the tortoise, in some versions).
Beyond these overt allusions to classical antiquity, Warren also employed Greek and Roman analogies in a more subtle and pervasive fashion. Percy Munn’s hideout at Willie Proudfit’s place is near the town of Thebes, for example; and as Randolph Runyon’s *The Taciturn Text* shows, that name not only evokes the Oedipal theme of Munn vis-à-vis Senator Tolliver but also Munn’s role as a Morpheus figure, a purveyor of Sophoclean/Freudian dreams. Runyon also points out the Oedipal tangle in the confession of Cass Master, who is considerably younger than both Duncan and Annabelle Trice. Bedford Clark points out Professor Ball’s affinity with Cincinnatus and the Roman Republic in *Night Rider*, and Bogan Murdock’s correlation with the emperor Tiberius in *At Heaven’s Gate*. And it is unlikely that any sophisticated modern reader would miss the central Oedipal myth of *All the King’s Men*, with Jack the detective setting out to locate corruption in the Boss’s adversaries only to find that he himself is the actual transgressor he has been seeking, ignorant of his true filial identity until he is charged by his mother with patricide: “You killed him! . . . Your father . . . and oh! you killed him.” *Wilderness*, the novel of 1961, also revives the Oedipus story with its clubfooted hero, who assumes parricidal guilt over the death of his putative father-figure, Aaron Blaustein—just as Rau-Ru had done vis-à-vis Hamish Bond in *Band of Angels*. *The Cave*, published in 1959, projects its theme through its epigraph drawn from Plato’s parable of the cave of consciousness in *The Republic*, Book VII, e.g. “they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite side of the cave.” (One of Warren’s first poems, “A Way to Love God” in the *Arcturus* sequence, begins with this Platonic parable: “Here is the shadow of truth, for only the shadow is true.”) And in Warren’s last novel, *A Place to Come To*, the Warren persona, Jediah Tewksbury, escapes his small-town backwater by becoming a first-rate student in Greek and Latin. As Randolph Runyon has shown, this book not only makes overt references to the *Aeneid* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, but it also re-enacts in a crucial way the myths of Perseus and Danae. Warren’s interviews, in *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, bear out this ongoing classicist interest with mention of *Oedipus Rex*, of Aeschylus,

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of the Iphigenia story, and of being influenced by “the Greeks” when he was writing *The Cave.*

Literary models aside, it is arguable that Warren’s affinity for the Classical tradition stemmed from personal as well as cultural influences. The most intimate influence would have been his father, who is described as teaching his son some Greek in “A Dead Language: Circa 1885,” and who teaches Latin to his grandchild in *Brother to Dragons* (p. 30—1953 ed.). (In addition, Warren’s foremost literary father-figure—John Crowe Ransom—was a trained classicist, who immediately hit it off with Warren’s father for that reason.) Although the following citation is from *Brother to Dragons,* Warren additionally confirmed these memories in his reminiscence “Portrait of a Father” (*Southern Review,* 23 [Winter 1987], 47, 62):

> I saw him sit and with grave patience teach  
> Some small last Latin to a little child  
>  
> There’s worse, I guess, than in the end to offer  
> Your last bright keepsake, some fragment of the vase  
> That held your hopes, to offer it to a child.

Among Warren’s earliest memories, he says in “Portrait of a Father,” were the family reading sessions in which, “our mother read to the smaller children [a sister and a brother] while our father read to me. The first prose book I remember was *A Child’s History of Greece*” (p. 56). That history was followed in sequence, he remembered, by the history of Rome. By contrast, Warren’s father, who called himself “an old-fashioned freethinker,” took no personal hand in his son’s religious education. Like T. S. Eliot, who stated that he had never experienced Christianity before his conversion at age thirty-eight, Warren apparently was brought up in a morally upright but non-Christian home. It is true that Warren’s father did offer his son a gold coin to read the Bible, which Warren did; but in making the offer the father pronounced this exercise a cultural rather than religious necessity, saying that “the Bible was necessary to understand ‘our civilization’” (p. 59). His father did join the local Methodist church “under some sort of social pressure,” Warren says—probably it would have been unseemly for a prominent local businessman in a small town to do otherwise—but according to War-

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<sup>8</sup>*Talking with Robert Penn Warren* pp. 262, 319, 323, 324.
ren's reminiscence, "At home there was never any formal observance of any kind. . . . prayer was never mentioned. There was never a grace at any meal. My father sent the children to Sunday School because, as he had once said, you could learn certain things there" (p. 59).

His family's detachment from the Christian faith helps to explain the emotional trauma that Warren describes in "Amazing Grace in the Back Country." Here Warren's persona, while attending a late-summer camp meeting, rejects an old woman's tearful appeal to "kneel / and save my pore twelve-year-old soul / Before too late." Instead, "I knew I was damned," the speaker says, and "the Pore Little Lamb" (as the woman called him) "he hardened his heart" and rushed into the night to vomit against a tree. In a letter to Floyd Watkins, Warren wrote that he hated to go to church as a youth, despite trying to soften his skepticism during his college years: "I tried to talk myself into some religion in my freshman year at college, but no dice / Vice won."

Warren's lack of a Christian upbringing may help to explain his answer to the question that Floyd Watkins put to him, "Red, what is your belief about God?" To this question, Watkins says, "He replied directly that he cannot believe but that he has a great yearning." It is notable that Watkins received a subsequent request from Warren that Watkins pray for his soul, but it seems likely that Warren proved to be a T. S. Eliot who was intellectually incapable of Eliot's conversion to orthodoxy—that is, a skeptic who could not get beyond what he himself called the "yearning" stage.

To the extent that the example of the father influenced the son, another scene from Warren's poetry once again favors the classical rather than Hebraic tradition. One of the lyrics in MORTMAIN, the moving eulogy to his father, is "A Dead Language: Circa 1885." The dead language in this poem turns out to be Greek, which his father learned on his own from a grammar book and cited to his young son while shaving, quoting from the Greek for "In the beginning was the Word" so that "now you know how it sounds." But it was not only the language of antiquity that Warren senior propagated in his son. The actual values that his father embodied displayed more of a Stoic than a Christian

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character. If in the Warren household there was no talk about orthodox salvation of one's soul, there was a stoically independent sense of virtue centering on absolute self-discipline. "Self-control is a single quality that for my father seemed to underlie everything," Warren has written, and though the man virtually always embodied that creed in behavior rather than words, he did as an old man frame the idea to his son in a sentence: "The first thing a man should do is to learn to deny himself" ("Portrait" pp. 62, 63). Warren's father went so far as to deny himself a dentist's services on several occasions, proceeding instead to pull his own teeth, and he also denied himself a doctor's care when fatally ill with the prostate cancer that finally killed him at age eighty-five. But despite a later life of poverty and loneliness, compounded by a quarter-century of being a widower; despite his failure either to have the academic life he wanted or to avoid bankruptcy in the business life he was compelled to enter; despite the ills and frustrations of old age, he nonetheless composed what in effect was his epitaph, which his son appeared to convert into many fine poems from Tale of Time and Audubon onwards: "I have lived a very happy life." If a father's central impact on a son is to illustrate what one must do to be a man, Warren's father provided for the poet's future life at least a classic and possibly a classical standard.

From this wide range of personal and literary sources, we may conclude that Warren derived what we may call a quasi-classicist ethos. Over Warren's work as much as that of Sophocles we may place the Delphic imperative, "Know thyself." The classic Golden Mean, "nothing to excess," also rises to prominence from Warren's overall philosophy of pragmatism and from his recurring revulsion against political-religious fanatics such as John Brown and the prophet Elijah. In "Brightness of Distance," one of the poems addressed to his infant son in Promises, Warren turned to a favorite Roman historian to frame a legacy of virtue. "Even in such stew and stink as Tacitus / Once wrote of," Warren says, "He found persons of private virtue," including "Praetorian brutes, blank of love, as of hate," who "Proud in their craftsman's pride only, held a last gate, / And died, each back unmarred..." In his increasing turn to the mystery and majesty of Nature for religious meanings—in Audubon, for example, or in his final published poem, "Myth of Mountain Sunrise"—Warren also evokes a pantheism suggestive of classical times when the gods were wholly immersed in nature, every grove of trees having its demigod, every pool its naiad. At bottom, Robert Penn Warren's ethics were stoic, his metaphysics pantheistic, and his aesthetics
informed by a motive of service to the Republic, as evidenced in books like *Segregation* and *Democracy and Poetry*. Certainly he was also deeply affected by the other main pillar of modern civilization, its Judeo-Christian heritage, but in the end it may be fair to say that he reversed the proportions of the Christian classicist formulation adopted by T. S. Eliot.