Essays and Essay-Reviews

FLOYD SKLOOT
Triva Tea: Baseball as Balm
377

WARREN GOLDSTEIN
Inside Baseball
410

LOUIS SIMPSON
Going Back
462

VICTOR STRANDBERG
Robert Penn Warren and the Search for Design
480

FLOYD COLLINS
The Sublime and the Quotidian
514

STEVEN G. KELLMAN
Fighting Trim
530

SANFORD PINSKER
What We Talk About When We Talk About Lit
540

Fiction

GEOFF SCHMIDT
The Man Who Saved Ted Williams from Death
392
Robert Penn Warren and the Search for Design

"The artist in me cries out for design," Robert Frost's persona (Job) tells God in A Masque of Reason. His Modern counterparts seconded the motion—Wallace Stevens by formulating "the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of [life]," Hart Crane by invoking the subliminal powers of his "higher consciousness," and T. S. Eliot by propagating a neo-classicist creed: "It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it."

Robert Penn Warren encompassed all these perspectives in his long and polymorphous career, but what makes him distinctive is the way his search for design intensified as he grew older, feeding a tremendous late-flowering creativity up through the ninth decade of his—and the twentieth-century's—existence. As his books cascaded off the press in those later years, his literary reputation grew apace, bringing not only a plethora of prizes but a burgeoning shelf of scholarship and criticism, itself of prize-winning caliber when written by such people as James Justus, James Grimshaw, and Floyd Watkins. Coming soon will be the authorized biography by Joseph Blotner, who did similar service for William Faulkner, and an updated version of James Grimshaw's bibliography.

Insofar as critics and scholars are also seekers of design, either in an artist's life and work or in the larger context that the artist contemplates, the books we have before us for review are a valuable contribution to the project of tracing

out the design of Robert Penn Warren's life, thought, and work. Talking with
Robert Penn Warren provides an indispensible collection of interviews from
1950 to the 1980s. Hugh Ruppersburg and William Bedford Clark, in books
about Warren's "American Imagination" and his "American Vision," try to
piece out the design of Warren's thought through examining the political and
social implications of his books, primarily his prose writings. And Randolph
Runyon focuses intensively on the formal design of Warren's art in two books
that trace out the interconnections of motif and image in the later volumes of
poetry and in all eleven volumes of fiction (ten novels and a book of short
stories). I shall return to these books after a general survey of Robert Penn
Warren's search for design.

Warren's last major work, "Altitudes and Extensions: 1980-1984" (the
"New" poems in his New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985), amounts to a
spiritual autobiography in which the thirst for self-knowledge is measured by
the source of the volume's epigraph, St. Augustine's Confessions. The initial
poem, "Three Darknesses," announces the intention of the entire grouping—
and of Warren's whole oeuvre—in its opening lines: "There is some logic here
to trace, and I / Will try hard to find it." But that annunciation is followed at
once by a primal image of frustration—an old memory of a great bear in the
zoo in Rome. This creature—who slugs mightily at an iron door all through
the day, "as rhythmic as / A pile-driver"—epitomizes the futility of seeking
self-knowledge, no matter how determined the effort: "The door, / Heavy,
bolted, barred, must have been / The entrance to a dark enclosure, a cave, /
Natural or artificial." Impervious to the pounding paws, the door will not open;
the cave of self remains inaccessible: "There is something / Hidden in the
dark. The bear / Was trying to enter the darkness of wisdom."

This image of the bear in Rome, apparently deriving from Warren's stay
there in 1939-40 while writing All the King's Men, also left a memorable
imprint upon that novel's portrait of Willie Stark undertaking his struggle
toward self-realization. From his next-door bedroom, Jack Burden gets a pre-
view of Willie's later self-awakening:

Knowing what you knew, you would lie there listening to him getting
ready to be Governor, and want to stuff the pillow slip in your mouth to
stop the giggles. . . . But the voice would keep on going over there beyond
the wall, and the feet would keep on tramping, back and forth like the
feet of a heavy animal prowling and swinging back and forth with a
heavy swaying head in a locked-up room, or a cage, hunting for the place
to get out, not giving up and irreconcilably and savagely sure that there
was going to be a loose board or bar or latch sometime. . . . And listening
to it, you wouldn't be so sure for a minute that the bar or board would
hold.

481
But though Willie Stark did break out of the cage at last, releasing his deepest self with the help of alcohol, he seems regretfully different from ordinary human clay, at least so far as Warren's persona, Jack Burden, can ascertain: "it is possible that fellows like Willie Stark...are what they are from the time they first kick in the womb until the end. And if that is the case, then their life history is a process of discovering what they really are, and not, as for you and me, sons of luck, a process of becoming what luck makes us."

For most of us—for Warren himself, according to one of his finest late poems, "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart"—there is only the urgent question, unanswered: "by what magnet, I demand, / Are the iron and out-flung filings of our lives, on / A sheet of paper, blind-blank as Time, snapped / Into a polarized pattern...?"

It is axiomatic that the pattern of being unfolds most clearly in the lives of other people. Throughout his career, Warren was both an avid consumer and a writer of biographies. From his first such publication, John Brown: The Making of a Martyr (1929), to his last, Portrait of a Father (1988), one finds an imagination repeatedly drawn to biographical materials: poems about Flaubert, Dreiser, Audubon, Thomas Jefferson, and the Roman emperors Domitian and Tiberius; novels peopled by surrogates for Huey Long, Private York (At Heaven's Gate), Floyd Collins (The Cave), and the victims of the real-life "Kentucky Tragedy" (World Enough and Time); and literary criticism strongly involving biographical research, as in his landmark pieces about Coleridge, Hemingway, Conrad, Whitman, Melville, Twain, and Dreiser. Not to mention the incisive character portraits of historical figures in his non-fiction prose: the black leaders in Who Speaks for the Negro?, most notably Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X; the Lincoln, Grant, Sherman, and Jefferson Davis of The Legacy of the Civil War and Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back; the tragic hero of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce; and the large number of writers in the magisterial anthology of American literature that Warren co-edited with Cleanth Brooks and R. W. B. Lewis in 1973. No adversary of the New Criticism ever violated more consistently its supposed allegiance to the autonomy of art.

The pattern that Warren discerned in history and biography unfailingly disclosed paradox, irony, a dialectical configuration. Here, for example, is his assessment of the two opposing Presidents in the Civil War:

Both Calhoun and Davis...saw the Constitution as equivalent to the tablets that Moses delivered from Sinai, in contrast to Lincoln... who had no compunction about brushing aside legal technicalities. Without a shadow of legal justification, he had hordes of Northern citizens seized on the merest suspicion... and held them incommunicado, ignoring the right of habeas corpus... [With] no shadow of legal authority, he
reached into the Treasury for what sums he considered requisite. Lincoln did make a sort of bow to the Constitution by implying that in violating it he was saving it. (It may be recalled that early in life he had replaced the Deity with his own notion of evolution in nature and man.)

It was characteristic of Warren to extend this sort of pattern, so that the contrast lay not merely between Davis and Lincoln, but between their respective societies—"one embracing antique values, the other in the process of developing new ones." In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, Warren defined what those values were: in the South, Legalism in defense of slavery before the War, followed by The Great Alibi blaming the North for its post-bellum defects; in the North, Higher Law making bloodshed unavoidable before the War, to be followed by the Treasury of Virtue, which blinded the victors to their own need for social reform from the Gilded Age onwards. In Lincoln, Warren located the thinking that would eventually resolve this ideological impasse—the Pragmatism that was best espoused philosophically by William James and most successfully politicized by Franklin Roosevelt.

After the Supreme Court ruled on desegregation in 1954, Warren portrayed contemporary society as dialectical on a national scale, with Malcolm X (whom he interviewed in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*) in the role of Freudian id or Jungian Shadow. Warren was specifically thinking of Malcolm's call for a Mau Mau to win freedom: "Malcolm X can evoke, even in the Negro, even in Martin Luther King, that self with which he, too, must deal, in shock and fright, or in manic elation. . . . Malcolm X is many things. He is the nightmare self. He is the secret sharer." The dichotomy between the Clean and the Dirty in these two real-life figures, the Reverend King and Malcolm X, represents a constant pattern in Warren's fiction and poetry, as his antagonists so often demonstrate: Bogan Murdock the corrupt tycoon versus Ashby Windham the proletarian evangelist in *At Heaven's Gate*; Willie Stark, the master of dirt, versus the Clean Man, Adam Stanton, in *All the King's Men*; Thomas Jefferson the idealist versus his psychopath nephew Lilburn Lewis in *Brother to Dragons*.

Even in his literary criticism, Warren underscored a similar pattern of dialectic contrast between the Clean and the Dirty, sometimes through his choice of artists representing the two extremes (as in his essays on John Greenleaf Whittier and Theodore Dreiser), but also in his essays about artists who confronted both extremes, as he himself characteristically did. His essay on Melville, for example, notes that during his crucial formative years this writer had seen and reacted deeply to two contrary models of society to which his voyages exposed him: the "primitive" but idyllically healthy societies of the South Seas versus the "civilized" but horrifying slums of industrial Liverpool. The skepticism necessary to independent thinking was born of these encoun-
ters, Warren believed, giving Melville a Warrenesque overview of the nation's perennial Clean-versus-Dirty dilemma—that is, the struggle between the noble ideals of the Founding Papers and the brutal contingencies that characterize every political era.

However disheartening the grand design of American culture might sometimes have seemed to Warren, it at least seemed relatively discernible in these specific situations. But throughout this lesson in the lives of other people, one may hear the great bear's paws go on pounding in pile-driver fashion, and the steel door does not give. The darkness of self remains unlit; the design of one's own life does not snap to the magnet in polarized fashion. The knowledge we most need, in Warren's oeuvre, remains beyond reach because we are too immersed in the pattern to see it clearly. This need is the thread that most deeply unifies Warren's total body of writing, particularly its most personal and substantial segment, his sixteen volumes of poetry. (Warren told Ruth Fisher that "the novels are much more objective for me. The poems have a much deeper and more immediate personal reference."

Until the publication of Joseph Blotner's authorized biography, we shall not be privy to the personal perspective that Warren used so cogently in his discussions of other artists. Floyd Watkins's *Then and Now: The Personal Past in the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren* (1982) does describe Warren's life as a child in Guthrie, but for the most part we must cobble the writer's biography together from random bits and pieces. On the sunny side of his life pattern, we note his upbringing by intelligent, responsible, and fairly prosperous parents; his excellent education in the local schools and at Vanderbilt, Berkeley, Yale, and Oxford; his serendipitous life-changing college friendships with Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks; his spectacular commercial and literary success with textbooks, criticism, novels, and poetry; his long and happy second marriage to Eleanor Clark, which brought him a son and a daughter; and the plenitude of honors that graced the last half of his long life. On the darker side of his life story are things the Blotner biography should clarify. The fundamental condition was loneliness, beginning in childhood with a number of antisocial circumstances: the boy's precocity in school, placing him three grades ahead of his age peers; his practice of spending summers with only his aged grandfather for company, which he liked better than living in town; and an emotionally undemonstrative family that may explain why his younger siblings, Mary and Thomas, very rarely appear in Warren's writings, even though a large fraction of his poetry focuses on his youth in Guthrie. After age fifteen, Warren had two additional reasons for a feeling of alienation—his eye injury from a stone thrown by his brother and his physical separation from his family. Concerning the latter situation, Warren said, "I never really lived at home again [after age fifteen], at the best just making long visits." The loss of his eye, which led to an attempted suicide
at Vanderbilt, had extreme psychological effects, according to Warren's statement to Floyd Watkins:

I felt sort of alienated rather than emasculated, but alienated. That would be the word I usually would use to myself. Alienation and separation from other people, and I felt a kind of shame—shame is not the word—but disqualification for life. . . . It made you feel unattractive. . . .

As with T. S. Eliot, a first marriage did not supply the hoped-for answer to alienation. Warren's union in 1930 with Emma Cinina Brescia, whom he won from a rival graduate student at Berkeley, deteriorated with her mental health, which was serious enough to remind Allen Tate of T. S. Eliot's and Scott Fitzgerald's spouses. And finally, to complete his sense of alienation, there was Warren's self-imposed exile from the South after 1942 when the President of LSU redirected the money for Warren's *The Southern Review* toward enhancing the football stadium. Warren defended his journal with impressive endorsements from big names, including T. S. Eliot, but gave up the struggle when the President told him he had never heard of T. S. Eliot.

This last episode led to another paradox in the design of Warren's life, making him a deep-dyed Southern writer who spent his final forty-seven years living in the far North—Minnesota, Vermont, and Connecticut. Yet he did insist, in his interview with Peter Stitt, on his Southern identity: "I can't be anything else. . . . I was born and grew up in Kentucky, and I think your early images survive. Images mean a lot of things besides pictures." In fact, those early images did not only survive; they fed his work for a lifetime. "The basic images that every man has, I suppose, go back to those of his childhood," Warren told Richard Sale. "He has to live on that capital all his life." Those images, in turn, are the best key to the pattern of meaning the artist is seeking, as Jack Burden ruminated in *All the King's Men*: "the brightness of the image increases and our conviction increases that the brightness is meaning, or the legend of meaning, and without the image our lives would be nothing except an old piece of film rolled on a spool and thrown into a desk drawer among the unanswered letters."

The artist reveals his personality first by his choice of a subject, Wallace Stevens said, thereby contradicting T. S. Eliot's spurious theory about the impersonality of art. In scanning Warren's choice of a subject, whether a narrative episode or a nodule of imagery, we may observe certain recurrences that—pending the Blotner biography—provide our best chance to define the lineaments of the inner man. Like Hawthorne, Warren was much obsessed by the psychology of guilt and its evasions, even though, again like Hawthorne, there is nothing particularly worthy of guilt in the writer's own life story. In some measure it was an inherited theme, related—again as in Hawthorne's case—to ancestral rather than personal crime: Puritan sociopathy in Haw-
thorne's family tree, and maltreatment of blacks and Indians among Warren's social (if not biological) forefathers. Like other intelligent white Southerners, including Faulkner and Styron, Warren was fortunate enough to have a guilt complex for a regional heritage, thereby obviating the need for any personal exacerbation of conscience as a stimulus to creativity.

But for both Warren and Hawthorne, individual experience also played a crucial role in this ground theme, most notably with respect to the mother-son relationship. Hawthorne, misfortunate enough to have no father after age four, had no mother either in the sense that she withdrew into seclusion after her husband’s death, wearing black mourning weeds for the rest of her life and even taking her meals apart from her children. When his mother lay dying, Hawthorne brimmed with grief over this situation: “I love my mother; but there has been, ever since boyhood, a sort of coldness of intercourse between us, such as is apt to come between persons of strong feelings if they are not managed rightly.” Warren, too, seems to have suffered the first phase of Man’s Fall, a sort of Original Sin, in the form of a breach with mother. Among the clear hints that he left on this score is a handful of poems dating back to his college years. In “Letter of a Mother,” published in the New Republic in 1928, the letter makes her son “regret again / The loneliness in time’s slow mitigation.” “The Return: An Elegy,” first published in Poetry in 1934, three years after Ruth Penn Warren’s death, emanates a grief like Hawthorne’s over the mother’s death, but it also includes a startling countercurrent: “the old bitch is dead / what have I said!” And “Revelation,” published in Poetry in 1942, comprises a tour de force of filial guilt. “Because he had spoken harshly to his mother,” the poem begins, all nature remonstrates against him—

By walls, by walks, chrysanthemum and aster,
All hairy, fat-petaled species, lean, confer,
And his ears, and heart, should burn at that insidious whisper
Which concerns him so, he knows; but he cannot make out the words.

The peacock screamed, and his feathered fury made
Legend shake, all day, while the sky ran pale as milk;
That night, all night, the buck rabbit stamped in the moonlit
glade,
And the owl’s brain glowed like a coal in the grove’s combustible
dark.

Not until the “Tale of Time” sequence in Tale of Time: New Poems—1960–1966 were these feelings resolved in a poem. Beginning with his mother’s funeral, “Tale of Time” moves through a renewed sense of guilt—
"Death is only the fulfillment of a wish. // Whose wish?"—toward what appears to be a concluding filial eucharist: "the solution: You / Must eat the dead. / You must eat them completely, bone, blood, flesh, gristle, even / Such hair as can be forced." If there are sacramental overtones in this scene, it is plausible that they evoke the eucharistic purpose of forgiveness of sins. It is hard to see what else would be the motive for this poetic episode.

But mother was not the only problematic woman in Warren's life or writing. By the early 1940s, the time of Eleven Poems on the Same Theme, the mental illness of Warren's first wife had left its scars on both marital partners. Although Warren was much too discreet to use any such material directly, as did Scott Fitzgerald in Tender Is the Night and T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land, one can surmise an effect of Emma Brescia Warren, to whom he dedicated the Selected Poems of 1943, on the major poems of that volume, most notably the Eleven Poems, which are gathered there in their entirety. This is where the theme of guilt culminates in Warren's work, in such poems as "Terror," "Pursuit," "Crime," "Original Sin," and "Revelation." The fiction of this time also carries a dense tangle of guilt—in the monologues of Cass Mastern and Ashby Windham, as well as in the solipsism of The Circus in the Attic. Even Warren's major critical enterprise of that period, the one-hundred-page essay on The Ancient Mariner, comprises a significant instance of Wallace Stevens's principle of selection, grounding Warren's affinity with Romanticism not in the pantheism of Wordsworth, the aestheticism of Keats, or the millennialism of Blake and Shelley, but in the only locus of Original Sin to be found among the major Romantic writers, Coleridge's parable of sin and expiation.

The resolution of this guilt syndrome began with "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (1943), as its protagonist ("you, wanderer") joins the world's creatures moving homeward toward a renewed innocence: "Brother to pinion and the pious fin that cleave / The innocence of air and the disinfectant flood." Seventeen years later a conclusion of sorts put a period to this motif of guilt and expiation with the appearance in You, Emperors, and Others (1960) of "The Letter about Money, Love, or Other Comfort, If Any." In this poem the speaker follows a beastly doppelganger—his emblem of Original Sin—across a geography that recapitulates many of Robert Penn Warren's wanderings, from his boyhood home (here called "Dadston, Tenn.") to Nashville, San Francisco, Dubuque (the poem's Midwest surrogate for Minneapolis), France, and Italy, where Warren with his last and fullest family often summered. Freed at last of his beastly shadow, the speaker vows to "seek / the way, and my peace with God" as the poem closes. Although Warren called himself a man "who hasn't got any religion," his poetry after this point is filled with images of the world's immanent though indefinable meanings, which
accumulated toward a quasi-religious terminus for his search for design.

The crucial point of change in Warren's outlook seems to be related to a new design of his life in the early 1950s. Thanks largely to his new family life after he turned forty-seven, a celebratory mode gradually overrode Warren's guilt syndrome in the later volumes. His marriage to Eleanor Clark, after all, allotted him not only his two children, but also the first completely satisfying intimate relationship since the weakening of the bond between him and his mother. This revitalization of the poet's life and temper became manifest in lines addressed to Eleanor Clark in *Brother to Dragons* ("I think how her mouth and mine together / Were cold on the first kiss"), gathered strength in the lyrics addressed to his children in *Promises* (1957), and carried through the "Delight" sequence of *Tale of Time* (1966) and the "Enclaves" epiphanies in *Incarnations* (1968). *Audubon: A Vision* (1969) completes the pattern of psychic redemption with its portrayal of a man, as Helen Vendler described him, "questionlessly happy in his environment."

But no one with an active mind can remain questionless. In his last healthy decade, between ages seventy and eighty, Warren reconsidered biography and history in the light of renewed reflection and scholarship. *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (1980) rebalanced somewhat the portions of shame and honor traditionally assigned the winners and losers of the Civil War; *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (1980) did something similar regarding the victorious North and its major post-Confederate adversary, the American Indians; and *Democracy and Poetry* (1975) cast an anxious eye on contemporary American cultural deficiencies, to which poetry—he argued—is likely to prove the most effective antidote.

Warren's own poetry in this last good decade showed that the paths of sophistication led back in the end to Guthrie, Kentucky, which continued to outweigh the other significant places in the poet's artistic life. Like that other Connecticut-dwelling, world-traveling Southern boy, Mark Twain, Warren rarely visited his hometown after college, but its meaning glowed all the more brightly at a distance. Functioning as a main character in his last novel, *A Place to Come To*, the hometown figured crucially also in his last prose essay, "Portrait of a Father," and throughout the supernova burst of poetic creativity that distinguished Warren's last years: *Now and Then, Rumor Verified, Being Here*, and *Altitudes and Extensions*. By returning obsessively to the town of his boyhood memory, Warren attempts over and over to penetrate the brightness of the image. In these poem-clusters, as in "Three Darknesses," those bear paws keep on sluging at the cave door, still grasping for self-knowledge sixty and seventy years after the event, in such reminiscences as "Amazing Grace in the Back Country," "Wandering in Simms' Valley," "American Portrait: Old Style," "Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth," "Old-Time Childhood in Kentucky," and "Re-interment: Recollection of a Grandfather."
Recent scholarship has been more attentive to the public voice of Warren's prose than to the private voice of his poetry. Hugh Ruppersburg's *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination* is a smoothly written, thoughtful exposition of Warren's role as a prophet and analyst of public affairs. While discussing *Democracy and Poetry*, Ruppersburg notes the appropriateness of its epigraph, from St.-John Perse, to Warren's larger purpose: "And it is enough for the poet / to be the guilty conscience of his time." Warren's motif of guilt, that is to say, is by no means limited to his private life and art—the poems about mother or the individual psychology of the Clean and the Dirty. Rather, the design of these works reaches out to the larger public weal, to become manifest in Warren's historical studies and prophetic utterances concerning the past, present, and future of American society. In his opening pages Ruppersburg defines the writer as:

- deeply scornful that the founders in their blindness fashioned a nation unprepared for its own frailties, a nation which stumbled too easily into the pits of Civil War, racism, the extermination of the Indians, over-industrialization, commercialism, modern technology, and extravagant national pride. Not surprisingly, Warren's characters are often disturbed and disillusioned at what they find in America. Yet in their conversion from idealism to disillusionment he finds the archetypal pattern of American experience, made no less significant by its being also the pattern of human experience.

Calling "the oxymoronic fusion of idealism and pragmatism ... the heart of Warren's American vision," Ruppersburg considers Warren a subscriber to the Great Man theory of history—a view anathematized by today's New Historicists—and centers his book largely on the historical figures who populate much of Warren's writing. "By a man's hero ye shall know him," Warren had written in an essay titled "A Dearth of Heroes," and Ruppersburg writes with admirable astuteness about Warren's Great Men, including such political figures as Lincoln, John Brown, Jefferson Davis, Chief Joseph, and the civil rights leaders of *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, along with such artist figures as Audubon, Dreiser, Melville, Whittier, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. Some of these men, of course, are heroes in the ironic sense of facilitating historic catastrophe, but even in their blindness and folly, they often embody a willfulness and idealism that is characteristically American.

Ruppersburg's initial focus is Warren's essay "The Briar Patch," from the Agrarian volume, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Despite its obvious limitations, this essay affected Warren's later work right through *Chief Joseph* and "New Dawn" (about Hiroshima), Ruppersburg argues, in that the late works portray the dehumanizing effects of modern technology and science, ranging from an exploitative factory system to new forms of military destruction. So
Ruppersburg concludes that "Warren's transformation from regional agrarian to agrarian of the Western world is one of the most significant events of his career."

In his discussion of *Brother to Dragons*, Ruppersburg observes some striking parallels to the essay on Joseph Conrad that Warren published at about the same time. *Heart of Darkness* particularly evokes comparisons, with the schizoid role of Kurtz parcelled out to both Jefferson (Kurtz the light-bearer to the savages) and Lilburn (Kurtz wanting to "exterminate all the brutes"). Warren himself serves plausibly as Marlow in this analogy. Going west, for Warren, is analogous to going up the Congo River, for Conrad, where a purported Edenic state is exposed as replete with what Warren calls "Original Sin." The Lewis family (including Lilburn and Meriwether, of Lewis and Clark), Audubon, and Chief Joseph all encountered murderous violence in the Great West, on a genocidal scale in the latter case. Ruppersburg astutely reads Warren's poem "Going West" (in *Rumor Verified*) in light of that outcome of Manifest Destiny. As it leads Warren west in that poem, the windshield of his car strikes and kills a large bird, whose blood blots out the gleaming vision, up ahead, of snow-capped mountains, leaving instead "The whole land forward, forever, / All washed in blood..." Here Ruppersburg cites Warren's own reading of the poem, noting that the same generals who excessively bloodied the South—most notably General Sherman—annihilated Indians in the 1870s: "It's the bloody story of the West... the poem is really about the bloody history of the conquest of the West. It's not a charming romance. One of the most murderous stories we can think of."

Perhaps Ruppersburg's best achievement in this work is his chapter on "Warren and the Crisis in Civil Rights," which traces out a unifying design among a variety of neglected writings on America's black-white relationships: *Segregation* (1956), *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), *Wilderness* (a novel, 1961), *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), and *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (1980). In these works Ruppersburg observes a contrarian tendency or habit of paradox that enables Warren to sustain "an apparent faith in human goodness" in the face of the racist injustice that persists through these writings. The following citation from Warren has even greater application today, vis-a-vis our embattled Western cultural heritage, than it did when Warren applied it to America's racial crisis. Although guilt seems an inexpungeable element of Robert Penn Warren's personal and public ethos, this consolation for it appears maximally efficacious:

> The white man must grant, of course, that Western civilization, white culture, has "failed." We—the white race—have failed to respect the worth of the individual soul and person, to respect the rights of man,... to realize justice, to practice Christian charity. But how do we know we
have failed? We know it only by applying to actuality those very stan-
dards which are the central fact of Western civilization. Those standards
are, paradoxically enough, the major creation of that civilization which
stands condemned by them.

In his Preface to The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren, William
Bedford Clark calls his book complementary to Hugh Ruppersburg's book,
which he read in manuscript, and to John Burt's Robert Penn Warren and
American Idealism. Whereas Ruppersburg focuses on Warren's last three
decades, however, Clark looks mainly at the writings of the first three decades,
1925–1955. Calling Warren "perhaps the most self-consciously historical of
modern American writers" (emphasis his), Clark relates the pattern of War-
ren's thought to an "assumption running throughout his work," namely "the
essentially Platonic notion that the polis is the individual writ large." Going
back to the first of Warren's Fugitive poems, "Crusade" (written when the
poet was an undergraduate), Clark finds a grand archetype already achieving
formation:

"Crusade," despite its medievalism, presents a grandiose historical undertak-
ing in terms of an archetypal quest that ends in dissolution and dis-
appointment. In time, in works like "The Ballad of Billie Potts," World
Enough and Time, and Brother to Dragons, this same quest would be
specifically identified with America's westering impulse.

Clark goes on to consider one obsessive American crusader, the subject
of Warren's first book, John Brown: The Making of a Martyr, who left his
Connecticut homeland to forge his fate in the violent crucible of the Kansas
territory, where bloodshed over the slavery issue proved a rehearsal for the
Civil War. While Warren "may indeed have begun with notions of debunk-
ing a martyred abolitionist hero," Clark says, "in the end he presents a portrait
of Brown that stubbornly resists facile schematization." And because he was
able to admit the complexity of the man, this book in turn became a template
for Warren's larger oeuvre: "Implicit in his handling of his subject and his
approach to it are many of the novels, poems, stories, and essays of the next
five decades." Capable, like Adam Stanton or Jeremiah Beaumont, of summary
murder in the name of a noble ideal, Brown was also a forerunner of Bogan
Murdock and Willie Stark as a manipulator of the media. And finally, in the
dignity of his death—which he could have staved off by pleading insanity—
Brown also enacted the vital principle of Warren's historicism that "men, not
fate or the Zeitgeist, shape history; as Jack Burden comes to realize, 'History
is blind, but man is not.' "

For his chapter "Out of the Thirties," Clark culled through Warren's
journal, The Southern Review, and found unarguable evidence that this pur-
veyor of the New Criticism was very much committed to the social efficacy of art. This magazine born from a Fugitive-Agrarian matrix regularly published such leftwing thinkers as Sidney Hook (on Trotsky), James T. Farrell, Malcolm Cowley, Max Eastman, Philip Rahv, and Mary McCarthy, and as those names imply, it "fostered an ongoing dialogue on questions involving the New Deal, the failure of the League of Nations, ... trade unionism, and the future of American neutrality." Most significantly, Warren's deeply rooted empathy for the victims of the Depression extends through the three major novels of the subsequent decade, *Night Rider*, *At Heaven's Gate*, and *All the King's Men* (whose title, Clark observes, may relate to an essay in *The Southern Review* [1938] on Humpty-Dumpty and the Dictators*).

Clark's chapter on these three novels, "Democracy and Soulcraft" (a term borrowed from George Will), comprises this book's most masterly achievement. Despite Warren's clear empathy with the victims of the tobacco monopoly in *Night Rider*, this book "may be said to begin where so much of the protest literature of the 1930s left off," Clark says. "Warren emphatically suggests that radical action, with its tendency to proliferate rather than curb suffering, is only to be pursued at our own peril." But "if *Night Rider* is properly understood as Warren's response to the literature of social protest, his second novel, *At Heaven's Gate*, clearly belongs in the company of those works that radically challenge the American ethic of success and, in doing so, call into question the beneficent claims of corporate and finance capitalism." Built upon Dante's Seventh Circle of Hell, the area reserved for those who have sinned against Nature, this novel focuses primarily upon the medieval sin of usury, with Ashby Windham's statement a running commentary on the evils visited upon the American republic by the awesome power of usurious capitalism. I would judge Clark's cogent, penetrating analysis of this novel to be the best aspect of his book; Warren's meaning is enhanced by its relevance to the ongoing crisis of corruption in American capitalism.

Clark's other major achievement is his extended discussion of the impact of the media in Warren's work. This writer, who refused to allow a television set in his home, foresaw with great prescience the corrosive effect of image manipulation in modern American life, another bequest of the rise of modern technology. Just as Bogan Murdock ends *At Heaven's Gate* with a media event—a totally mendacious news conference—Willie Stark begins *All the King's Men* with a totally phony photo op at his father's house. Clark goes on to discuss in like fashion the media circus that Ikey Sumpter perpetrates for profit in *The Cave*, the phony trial staged for political power in *Meet Me in the Green Glen*, and the general replacement of myths of the past by images of the present in modern American culture. *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* provides an admirable and intelligent analysis of the writer's thought with regard to public issues as it clarifies his search for design.

492
Whereas Ruppersburg and Clark address Warren’s role as a public man, Randolph Runyon’s two books go into the private dimensions of artistic creativity. Because he focuses on the subliminal contents of Warren’s huge oeuvre, Runyon bypasses the usual focal points of Warren criticism—alienation, the search for identity, the need for community, “Original Sin,” the political imagination, and so forth. Instead, his search for design fastens upon what he calls “the buried narrative” in Warren’s fiction and what Warren called “caverned enchainment” in his poetry. In this latter term, from “Fear and Trembling” (the final poem in Rumor Verified), Runyon takes the word “caverned” to describe the subliminal processes that have produced the motifs and images of Warren’s work, while the word “enchainment” implies the way such motifs and images unify Warren’s art, binding poem to poem and book to book in an extended design of evolving creativity.

Runyon displays a remarkable mastery not only of the huge corpus of Warren’s fiction, poetry, and criticism, but also of postmodern theory in general and Warren scholarship in particular. A professor of French at Miami of Ohio, Runyon studied in Paris with Derrida, absorbing his concepts of signs, texts, and deferred meanings. Unlike his master, however, Runyon writes clearly and cogently, using compelling evidence to sustain his analysis of the subliminal interrelatedness of all Warren’s fiction (in The Taciturn Text) and of the later poetry (in The Braided Dream). The presiding figure of Runyon’s analysis is Freud, whose contribution to Runyon’s work is an amalgam of Oedipal theory and the interpretation of dreams. (Dreams, Runyon shows, figure very importantly into Warren’s fiction and poetry.)

Any combination of Freud and Derrida is likely to raise the antennae of skepticism these days among literary scholars who are fed up with the turgid style and preposterous reasoning that has characterized too much contemporary critical discussion. Runyon differs sharply from such practitioners, however, in grounding his study in the solid detail of Warren’s writing. The result is a tour de force of critical acumen, the details piling up with an irresistible force to shed an altogether new and illuminating light on the whole range of Robert Penn Warren’s literary production. Because it is so richly detailed and elaborately reasoned, I cannot effectively represent Runyon’s achievement in this review: it would be like trying to extrapolate from one bar of a Beethoven symphony the design of the whole. But to give some inkling of Runyon’s work, let me cite one instance of what he calls “the unconscious agenda of [Warren’s] novelistic agenda”:

Like the Circus stories, the novels make a somewhat different, and perhaps larger, sense when considered together rather than separately; together, they constitute, I think, a text of their own, something like a buried narrative. We have seen, for example, how Night Rider’s inter-
woven handbills, handkerchiefs, and fragmented newsprint reappear in *At Heaven's Gate* and how the fetus in Percy Munn's dream reappears not only there [in *At Heaven's Gate*] but in *All the King's Men*. So it is not surprising that handkerchiefs and handbills should play so significant a role as they do in Warren's next novel, *World Enough and Time*.

Runyon's point in tracing out such recurring patterns of imagery is to link them to an ongoing Oedipal theme, relating a son to a set of father figures in most cases, but to a mother figure occasionally. In his chapter on *All the King's Men*, entitled "Willie's Wink," Runyon explains the issue as "the text a father may or may not have left a son. The textuality of Willie's eye movement [in a number of scenes], . . . the handbill that Jeremiah Beaufort thinks came from Colonel Fort, the poem in *Wilderness* written by Adam Rosenzweig's father whose worth Adam will spend his life searching for"—such motifs comprise "a sign in the symbolic network of Warren's novels of the father's power to produce an indecipherable text." Runyon's analysis becomes most penetrating—and at the same time most discomfiting, as though your phone accidentally tapped into a psychiatric session at its trauma-revealing moment—when he applies this approach to Warren's nonfiction writings, especially such a memoir as "Portrait of a Father" and such a poem as "I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas," where the poet dreams of his mummified father sitting in the old familiar living room, having left a present under the tree that the son never quite gets to unwrap.

In small snippets, like the above, Runyon's argument may not be convincing; carried through a massive amount of confirming detail, however, it is compelling. Thus these two books may be said to comprise the most elaborate, subtle, and substantial search for design yet undertaken by any scholar of Robert Penn Warren. As such, they un hinge somewhat the door to the cave the great bear was trying to enter; they loosen the wrapping of the present under the tree. For this reason, as tenuous as any such study must be, Runyon's work must be considered an indispensable contribution to our understanding of this great artist.

To CONCLUDE THIS REVIEW, I would like to return to the words—originally spoken, not written—of Robert Penn Warren himself. Edited by Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks, *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* is an expanded, updated version of *Robert Penn Warren Talking*, the collection of interviews published by Watkins and Hiers in 1980. Ranging from 1950 to 1987 in their publication dates, the twenty-four interviews gathered here make a persuasive case for the editors' claim that "Warren may be known personally and more fully in his interviews than in anything else he has presented for the public view." By way of concluding this overview of
VICTOR STRANDBERG

Warren's search for design, I propose to permit Warren to speak for himself in selected citations from this splendid cornucopia of self-disclosures. For the convenience of my readers I shall cite the interviewer and date for each reference:

**Self-Interview (1953):** I like to write in the morning. I try never to depend on later review: don't leave a page until you have it as near what you want as you can make it that day. I like to write in foreign countries, where the language is not your own, and you are forced into yourself in a special way.

**Fugitives' Reunion Conversation (1956):** The process of writing is an exploration. You may dimly envisage what a poem will be when you start it, but only as you wrangle through the process do you know your own meanings.

**Ralph Ellison (1956):** The old notion of a shock, a cultural shock, to a more or less closed society—you know, what happened in the Italian Renaissance or Elizabethan England. After 1918 the modern industrial world . . . hit the South and all sorts of ferments began. . . . There isn't much vital imagination, it seems to me, that doesn't come from some sort of shock, imbalance, need to "relive," redefine life.

**RPW and Flannery O'Connor (1959):** Huey Long and Julius Caesar both got killed in the capitol, and there you are. It's as simple as that. It's a germ, an anecdote. And teaching Shakespeare in Louisiana in 1935, you couldn't avoid this speculation.

**Frank Gado (1966):** What we want, I think, is . . . a sense of moving from disorder to order, to a moment of poise. . . . Most of life is a hodgepodge in which it's very hard to feel meaningful. Seeing life in some way reflected in a guise that implies order gives a heightening of energy, of relief. It's a liberation.

**Roy Newquist (1967):** [In college] I madly admired Dreiser, and still do; he's a great writer, but I didn't look to him for guidance. . . . The writers, the Southern writers, of my generation, had a European orientation; Pound, Eliot, Crane, Stevens. Yeats and Joyce and the French novelists were our world. . . . Every Southern freshman, literarily inclined, knew *The Waste Land* by heart in 1922. We sat up all night reading Baudelaire, but Marx and Freud were only ugly rumors.

**C. Vann Woodward (1968):** Historians are concerned with the truth about, with knowledge about; the fiction writer, with the knowledge of. . . . This is a fundamental difference, it seems to me.
Richard B. Sale (1969): As far as writing is concerned, the basic images that every man has, I suppose, go back to those of his childhood. He has to live on that capital all his life.

Marshall Walker (1969): I think good criticism usually is almost inevitably ad hoc in some deep sense; it's trying to make sense of some particular things before it, in terms of values that are much broader than that.

Ruth Fisher (1970): Criticism . . . leads to a creative act in the sense of appreciating the work of art . . . . You have to redo the work. You repaint the picture, rewrite the book, recompose the music, by going inside. . . . This is . . . a very difficult creative act.

Edwin Newman (1971): Dreiser was the first immigrant writer in America. In the long time since American literature was established. And a whole new vein of feeling came from American literature with Theodore Dreiser.

Bill Moyers (1976): I still believe in such things as religious conversion . . . though I am a non-believer. . . . I would say that I have a religious temperament, with a scientific background. . . . I yearn for significance, for life as significance.

Peter Stitt (1977): The best parts of a poem always come in bursts or in a flash. . . . You can work at your technique, but you cannot labor the poem into being. . . . If I had to choose between my novels and my Selected Poems, I would keep the Selected Poems as representing me more fully, my vision and my self.

John Baker (1977): Usually it takes me ten or twenty years to write a novel. I carry it around with me . . .

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (1977): It seems to me that the whole problem of modernity, of all modernity, is that of how can the person hang on to the fact that he's a person, and not become simply a thing being shoved here and shoved there, caught in a vast complicated machine, and depersonalized in the process.

David Farrell (1977): What I do is get the basic novel in my mind and think of it in terms of movements. Now these are not chapters, they are movements . . . . In the musical sense, almost. . . . Finding these movements is the big thing that takes two or three years, sometimes twenty years, as in the case of The Cave.
Forrest and Novelli (1977): The great battle of the poem is won or lost in the first line, or the first five lines anyway. If you don’t get into motion by then, it’s probably going to be dead.


Floyd C. Watkins (1979): [The second Brother to Dragons] is very different technically—in rhythm (the important thing) and in organization. . . . The change of weight of one syllable in a line can make a vast difference.

David Farrell (1981): John Ransom read some Hardy to some other guests and me one afternoon, and I was never the same. I thought, this is the real thing, and I still think it is. He’s the greatest poet after Wordsworth up to . . . I used to say Eliot, and I still think Eliot’s a very great poet. But somehow I like Hardy more; he was somehow a writer I felt closer to.


Tom Vitale (1985): You can say this of all poetry, probably: any poet’s work is a long attempt to define himself.