Ostensibly, their differences appear to overtop their affinities. One reached artistic maturity during the flowering of the Transcendental movement, the other during the high Modern period; one lived through the national crises of Civil War and Reconstruction; the other through the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War; one claimed his Harvard and Yale were a whaling ship, the other was a Vanderbilt-Berkeley-Yale summa cum laude and a Rhodes Scholar; one was born ten years before Andrew Jackson became President, the other lived into the Presidency of George H. W. Bush.

With respect to personal felicity, moreover, a reverse profile seems to apply. Melville’s marriage began happily but he and his wife later suffered the untimely deaths of both their sons, Malcolm’s at age twenty-two apparently by suicide and Stanwix at age thirty-five. By contrast, although Warren’s first marriage to Emma Brescia seems sadly misbegotten—Allen Tate thought she was jealous of Warren’s talent—his second marriage, to Eleanor Clark, gave him nearly four decades of exceptionally happy compatibility along with the joys of fatherhood. Perhaps most importantly, their writing careers display contrary profiles of success and failure. Whereas Melville’s early popularity as a novelist gave way to a collapsed career by age 35, and virtual oblivion through the rest of his lifetime, Warren’s early career as a little-known poet was followed by great success as a novelist in his middle life and immense prestige as a poet in his final decades, culminating in his appointment as America’s first official Poet Laureate. Their regional differences in hailing from the New York/New England culture in one instance and from the Kentucky/Tennessee border in the other would seem to complete this tally of incompatibilities.

Yet in the end most of these differences seem superficial, the affinities profound. The reason for the Melville revival of the 1920s and his huge reputation ever since then was more than random coincidence; it occurred most of all because Melville, who in Bartleby fashion accepted his annihilation (as an artist) in the 1850s, had been a century ahead of his time. Both his philosophical complexity and his quasi-Modern technique—relying crucially on myth, symbol, and paradox—made Melville a suitable comrade for Joyce, Eliot, and the other Moderns who were taking center stage at the time when Warren was taking his precocious seat among the Fugitives at Vanderbilt. Conversely, Warren throughout his lifetime focused an intense interest on the Melvillean era of American history. To some extent, this was a family affair: until he left home at age 16, Warren spent his summers listening to the tales of a grandfather who had fought in the Civil War and who had, in his boyhood, known several men who had been soldiers in the American Revolution. Perhaps that unusual family heritage helps explain Warren’s fascination with the early Republic in some of his best works, such as Brother to Dragons and World Enough and Time. But beyond sitting within the bloodstream of a man whose youth overlapped with Melville’s early career, Warren had ideological reasons for his Melville-era fixation. As a Southerner venturing into the precincts of Yale University, where the Battle Hymn of the Republic was still a popular schoolhouse song in the 1920s and every
town had its Grand Army of the Republic meeting hall, the young Warren quickly became fed up with the pretensions of Yankee sanctimony. And so his first book, published in 1929 when Warren was just 24, was a debunking biography of John Brown that carried the sardonic subtitle “The Making of a Martyr.”

But that was just the beginning of a lifelong cycle of writings on the Civil War, which would come to include the Cass Mastern episode in All the King’s Men (1946); the novels Band of Angels (1955) and Wilderness (1961); the book-length essay on The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial (1961); some very fine poems such as “Two Studies in Idealism” (1960), a pair of dramatic monologues spoken by a Union and Confederate Soldier; ancillary studies such as Segregation (1956) and WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO? (1964); and--a full half-century after the book on John Brown, its opposite counterpart called Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back (1980).

It was not until 1930, the year after his John Brown biography, that the Melville revival reached Robert Penn Warren, first through the agency of a movie version of Moby-Dick and then through his study of that landmark novel. Apparently the experience was immediately galvanizing: “Melville I was just crazy about,” Warren recollected in his interviews; “I was just fascinated by Melville” (Talking, 245). Warren’s first scholarship on Melville occurred in 1944, on the occasion of F. O. Matthiessen’s edition of a book of Melville’s poems which Warren reviewed. In the Spring, 1946 Kenyon Review, Warren’s published an essay on “Melville the Poet,” which he reprinted in both of his volumes of Selected Essays (in 1958 and 1989). Some twenty years later, in the Autumn 1967 Southern Review, Warren greatly enlarged his study of Melville with a 56-page essay entitled “Melville’s Poems,” which in turn became the prologue to his final and most important criticism of Melville, namely the commentary he wrote for the anthology he edited with his old friends Cleanth Brooks and R. W. B. Lewis, American Literature: The Makers and the Making (Book B) 1826 to 1861 (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1974).

Even if Mr. Lewis had not confirmed Warren’s authorship of this latter commentary, its style and focus would be a dead giveaway when compared with Warren’s earlier literary criticism. The importance of Melville to Warren stands out immediately in the proportions of this study. Concerning just Melville’s fiction, which Warren had not previously addressed, the 24 large double-column pages of analysis would equate with about a hundred pages of typescript, to which Warren added another twenty pages of double columns about Melville’s poetry, making Melville by far the most extensively criticized writer in the anthology. (The next most generous allotment of criticism--30 pages--goes to Hawthorne, while Emerson gets 19 and Thoreau 17 pages.)

In all three of these essays, dated 1946, 1967, and 1974, Warren’s criticism of Melville reveals the two artists’ affinities on literally every page. What first attracted Warren’s attention, it appears, is Melville’s focus on one of Warren’s own obsessive interests, the Civil War. In fact, Warren says, speaking of Melville’s Battle-Pieces, “in a very profound way. . . the Civil War made Melville a poet. It gave him the right ‘subject’; and for him the right subject. . . was absolutely essential.” It must have pleased
Warren to find that Melville’s “right subject” included a Warrenesque judgment on the hero of Harper’s Ferry, whom Melville described in “The Portent” as “Weird John Brown”--precisely Warren’s own take on this man. Warren also praised the precision and power of Melville’s concluding metaphor in this poem, dated in 1859, where the “streaming beard” of the hanged man portentously becomes “the meteor of the war.”

Another point of interest for Warren in the 1946 essay was the rough, disjunctive character of Melville’s poetic style--a notable feature of Warren’s own recently published Eleven Poems on the Same Theme (1942) and “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943). Speaking, for example, of “In a Bye-Canal,” Warren notes how the “conventionally competent” beginning lines yield suddenly to a verse whose “metrical pattern is sorely tried and wrenched. . . . The poem breaks up. The central section simply does not go with the rest.” He goes on to note “the same fusion of disparate elements” in what he calls “one of Melville’s best poems,” “The March into Virginia,” whose eager boy-soldiers go to their first battle like a “berrying party” [spelled “berrying”] but by evening the affair turns into a “burying” party [spelled “burying”], as the soldiers perish “enlightened by the volleyed glare.” Warren especially relished the pun on that word “enlightened.” Ultimately what Warren found most striking in Melville’s style was what he termed its “interpenetration” of prose and poetry--a feature that, as it happens, precisely describes Warren’s own practice in novels like All the King’s Men and World Enough and Time, and in poems like Audubon, Brother to Dragons, and Chief Joseph. Moby-Dick, Warren says, “is conceived ‘poetically,’ and in execution the prose often strains toward verse. On the other hand, Melville’s best poems. . . are. . . anecdotal or dramatic; they have, in other words, a ‘prose’ base” (SR 841). The result, Warren says in what could again be a description of his own practice, is “a style rich and yet shot through with realism and prosaism, sometimes casual and open and sometimes dense and intellectually weighted. . . .” (SR 807)

As fellow craftsmen, then, Warren and Melville had a lot in common, but none of these technical affinities would matter were it not for their close kinship in point of view and temperament. Throughout his commentaries on Melville, Warren again and again presents formulations that apply exactly to his own dialectical mode of thinking. In the 1946 essay he speaks of “Melville’s concern with the fundamental ironical dualities of existence: will against necessity, action against ideas, youth against age, the changelessness of man’s heart against the concept of moral progress. . . .” (SE 190). One could easily line up a whole army of Warren’s characters behind that statement, including Willie Stark and Jeremiah Beaumont, along with the Robert Penn Warren of the prose essays. Most strikingly, Warren finds at the end of Melville’s oeuvre the same sacramental vision of “the One Life we all live” that animated Warren’s hundred-page essay on Coleridge (published in that same annus mirabilis, 1946), not to mention his many other expressions of pantheistic insight that he called “the Osmosis of Being.” Citing the critic William Ellery Sedgwick, Warren endorses the idea that Melville “renounced all the prerogatives of individuality in order to enter into the destiny that binds all human beings in one great spiritual and emotional organism” (SE 197).
For neither Melville nor Warren, however, was this movement into the “One Life” insight an easy one. Correlating with Warren’s ubiquitous sense of a Fall from innocence—which is, after all, what the title All the King’s Men refers to—is what Melville referred to as the trip around Cape Horn, whose gigantic storms make it a sailor’s most dreaded seascape. “Sailor or landsman,” Warren quotes Melville as saying in White Jacket, “there is some sort of Cape Horn for all” (SR 800). What made the experience so difficult for both writers was its prelapsarian foreground. For Warren the Eden period comprehended his boyhood summers in the Kentucky countryside, so nostalgically recreated in his lyric poetry. The equivalent experience for Melville was the South Seas voyages that enabled the young sailor, Warren says, to flee from the corrupted Western world “into a land of savage and innocent beauty, an Eden lost in the misty time before civilization” (SR 801). Conversely, the trip around Cape Horn for the two writers, marking the end of their Eden period, is epitomized in Warren’s tragic loss of an eye at age fifteen, which impelled him to attempt suicide a couple of years later at Vanderbilt, and in Melville’s disastrous trip to the Holy Land in the mid-1850s, which (Warren remarks) extinguished the few dying embers of religious faith Melville had hoped to rekindle there.

This lapse into a ruined world was by no means the worst effect of the Fall, however. That category was reserved for the sense of inner degradation that is summed up in the phrase “Original Sin.” In “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), Melville famously declared his belief in “that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free” (M-D 540). And Melville confirmed this view throughout his subsequent career, not only in Ahab’s thirst for vengeance against an animal and Claggart’s spontaneous malice toward Billy Budd but in actual history as well. As Warren noted in his 1967 essay, Melville’s poem “The House-Top” described the bloody New York riots of 1863 as “corroborating Calvin’s creed” by turning men into “rats” and leaving “a grimy slur on the Republic’s faith... /Which holds that man is naturally good.” Warren’s essay adds the appalling information (not mentioned by Melville) that the mob in New York City had engaged in “the widespread lynching of Negroes.” (Even more appalling is the fact, not mentioned by either Melville or Warren, that some of these hanged Negroes were children.) Warren’s own version of “Original Sin,” which he defined as “original with the sinner and of his will,” can be found everywhere in his fiction and poetry—indeed, one of his finest poems is entitled “Original Sin”—but it is most memorably on display in the novel he published the same year as his essay on “Melville the Poet.” I refer of course to Willie Stark’s sustained discourse about the ubiquity of dirt, as in the following specimen addressed to Judge Irwin:

“Dirt’s a funny thing. . . . Come to think of it, there ain’t a thing but dirt on this green God’s globe except what’s under water, and that’s dirt too. It’s dirt makes the grass grow. A diamond ain’t a thing in the world but a piece of dirt that got awful hot. And God-a-Mighty picked up a handful of dirt and blew on it and made you and me and George Washington and mankind blessed in faculty and apprehension. It all depends on what you do with the dirt.”4
What Willie does with the dirt is to dig it up and use it on “Clean” people like the Judge, about whom he reassures Jack: “Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passes from the stink of the didi to the stench of the shroud. There is always something” (AKM 49).

Because of this skeptical view of human nature, both writers developed an aversion to ideological excess of any kind. In his “Supplement” to *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* 1866, Melville warned against triumphalism and vindictiveness among his Northern comppeers.

“There has been an upheaval affecting the basis of things,” he said, but yet “the glory of war falls short of its pathos--a pathos which now at last should disarm all animosity. . . . May we all have moderation; may we all show candor.”

Exemplifying that moderation and candor, Melville goes on to say,

“let us own. . . that our triumph was won not more by bravery and skill than by superior resources and crushing numbers; that it was a triumph, too, over a people who. . . though, indeed, they sought to perpetuate the curse of slavery, and even extend it, were not the authors of it, but (less fortunate, not less righteous than we) were the fated inheritors.”

In a Warrenesque synthesis of opposites, Melville concludes that “Benevolence and policy--Christianity and Machiavelli--dissuade from penal severities toward the subdued” (BP 266, 267).

This attitude--for which William James would later coin the term Pragmatism--is best paralleled in Robert Penn Warren’s *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial*. Published in 1961 to mark the centennial of the Civil War, this book defined the perverse ideologies that initially pushed North and South into the War, and later rendered the victory of the North largely meaningless. Before the War, Warren said, the South took refuge in Legalism—the notion that because the Constitution permitted slavery, that settled the issue once and for all. In the North, meanwhile, abolitionists appealed to Higher Law—the idea, as Thoreau put it, of every man privately seceding from the Union in the name of individual conscience. Ironically, the subsequent slaughter of a half-million men failed to resolve the issue, producing instead the South’s adherence to the Great Alibi—that all the evils of the region derived from Yankee oppression; and the North’s Treasury of Merit, the conviction that winning the War had freed the North from any further social reforms, such as economic justice vis-a-vis exploitation of immigrants and child labor. Only the advent of Pragmatist leaders like Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt finally broke the impasse, in Warren’s formulation.

Both writers, we may assume, were ruefully aware that popular taste tended to favor a more simplified vision of things. We can imagine Melville’s chagrin in 1852 at seeing *Moby-Dick* sink into oblivion even while *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* ascended into literary immortality, a pattern that was repeated in 1939 by Warren’s *Night Rider* vis-a-vis *The
Grapes of Wrath--two novels about farmers experiencing economic desperation. But if both writers favored truth-telling over propaganda fiction, what Warren particularly admired was Melville’s willingness to extend his doctrine of Original Sin to his Negro characters. Melville’s rejection of what we now call political correctness was evident, Warren observes, in the ambiguities of “Benito Cereno”; it culminated in The Confidence-Man, concerning which Warren says: “Melville’s presentation of his archetypal hustler as a crippled black beggar adds a kind of final ferocious irony to his treatment over the years of the issue of race in American society” (860). “For Melville,” Warren concludes, “black men--like white men, like any men--were, as human beings, not notably less prone than other human beings to the vices, and even the evils, of humanity. The injustice of slavery had not made black men immune to the nature of man” even though “a writer eager for popularity with liberal readers might have tried to make them so” (AL 830).

Warren’s equivalent violation of political correctness on this subject, we might say in passing, was sufficient to evoke Allen Shepherd’s speculation that had Band of Angels appeared ten years later than 1955, it might well have evoked its own version of Ten Black Intellectuals Respond to ‘The Confessions of Nat Turner’--the pamphlet that vilified William Styron in 1968. It would appear, therefore, that what Warren finds in Melville’s writings is a checklist of his own most recurrent themes, and as we have seen, these affinities helped Warren produce the many splendid insights that characterize his Melville criticism. But that tendency to focus on his own themes also fostered several serious misjudgments on Warren’s part, the most outstanding of which relates to his lifelong obsession with the father-son relationship. In his enthusiasm for this theme, Warren uncharacteristically subjects Melville to the indignity of psychoanalysis. In his American Literature anthology he finds the key to Melville’s thought in the failure of Melville’s father--a merchant who lapsed first into bankruptcy and soon thereafter into insanity when the son was thirteen:

“Certainly one of the major themes of Melville’s fiction is the child’s search for his father--most prominently in Moby-Dick. . . , but also in Redburn and . . . in Billy Budd. In those stories Melville may be seen as making an intense imaginative effort to re-ally himself symbolically with the father he had adored. At the same time, Melville the boy seems to have felt . . . that he had been incomprehensibly betrayed and abandoned by his father; and from this feeling there later issued the counter-theme of defiance” (AL 812-813).

The culmination of this approach is Warren’s analysis of Billy Budd, where Melville, Warren says, has come to regard the family drama from a father’s point of view:

“ . . . we can make out in the unfolding drama [of Billy Budd] Melville’s recognition of his own deeply ambiguous relation with his two unfortunate sons--his recognition, moreover, that he as a father and Malcolm and Stanwix as sons were equally doomed; and that, in that very recognition, there was the basis of a final and permanent reconciliation. Melville’s filial defiance, so resonantly declared by Ahab
in *Moby-Dick*, was thus converted at the end into a paternal embrace. . . .” (AL 832, emphasis Warren’s)

Although there is enough plausibility in this account to earn Warren some credit for originality, his obsession with the father-son motif prevented Warren from seeing the more significant issues in Melville’s most important fiction. Perhaps because of his innate aversion to Emerson, and to Transcendentalism in general, Warren failed to note Ahab’s role as a negative Transcendentalist—that is, as a man who enacts Emerson’s two key precepts: first, his belief in “the infinitude of the private man,” and second, his belief that “Behind nature, throughout nature, Spirit is present.” What makes Ahab a negative Transcendentalist is his certainty that the Spirit behind nature is evil, having perpetrated the sufferings afflicting the human race from Adam on down to Ahab’s own mutilation by the white whale. And Warren likewise fails to observe the grid of competing beliefs assigned to Ahab’s subordinates: Starbuck’s high-minded Christianity, Stubb’s cheerful fatalism, Flask’s hedonism, and Ishmael’s role as an open-minded seeker of truth who samples and discards each of these ideologies in turn.

Even more regrettably, Warren’s focus on the father-son motif in *Billy Budd* leads him to overlook entirely the true theme of the novel, which is captured in Captain Vere’s observation, “With mankind, forms, measured forms, are everything.” As Melville portrays it, the two fundamental forms necessary for a society to exist are the external force of law, embodied in Captain Vere, and the internal restraints of religion, invested in the Christlike role of Billy. Because of its setting in the year 1797, what forces Vere to uphold the measured forms is the militant anarchy of the French Revolution, which expressly renounced both law and religion, and which has already infected the British navy. To measure Warren’s deflection of this focus, it is worth citing in some detail how urgently the narrator of *Billy Budd* (presumably Melville himself) considers this historical background. In Chapter 3 of the Hayford-Sealts “definitive” edition of *Billy Budd*, we read the following:

“It was the summer of 1797. In the April of that year had occurred the commotion at Spithead followed by a second and yet more serious outbreak in the fleet at the Nore. The latter is known, and without exaggeration in the epithet, as ‘the Great Mutiny.’ It was indeed a demonstration more menacing to England than the. . . proselytizing armies of the French Directory. To the British Empire the Nore mutiny was what a strike in the fire brigade would be to London threatened by general arson. . . . *That* was the time when. . . the bluejackets, to be numbered by the thousands, ran up with huzzas the British colors with the union and cross wiped out [NOTE THE TWO MEASURED FORMS HERE--THE UNION AND CROSS]; by that cancellation transforming the flag of founded law and freedom defined into the enemy’s red meteor of unbridled and unbounded revolt. Reasonable discontent growing out of practical grievances in the fleet had been ignited into irrational combustion as by live cinders blown across the Channel by France in flames.” (AL 878--emphasis Melville’s)
This passage, with its echoes of Edmund Burke (who is mentioned in *Billy Budd*), clearly describes a political manifestation of what Melville meant by “Original Sin.” As such, one might expect it to have powerfully attracted the attention of Robert Penn Warren, who expressed a similar revulsion against political fanaticism in writings such as *John Brown, Band of Angels*, and *Wilderness*. But in what for him was an unusual lapse, Warren failed to grasp Melville’s historical perspective. He failed to recognize that Melville’s Civil War, as an immediate lived experience, was not Warren’s Civil War, studied at a remove of nearly a century. Instead, what the Civil War was for Warren, the French Revolution was for Melville, a crisis of ruptured nationhood seen from the perspective (in *Billy Budd*) of a century after it happened.

Strange, this oversight went so far as to affect Warren’s editing of “The House-Top,” Melville’s aforementioned poem about the riots in New York in 1863. To his original version of “The House-Top,” Melville attached the following footnote: “Note: ‘I dare not write the horrible and inconceivable atrocities committed,’ says Froissart, alluding to the remarkable sedition in France during his time. The like may be hinted of some proceedings of the draft-rioters.” That was Melville’s note, but Warren found this correlation between the New York rioters and the French Revolution so insignificant that he simply omitted Melville’s footnote from his anthology while reprinting the poem proper. We should observe in passing that in “The House-Top,” the same two measured forms that prevail in *Billy Budd*, law and religion, fail to function in New York City, thereby precipitating bloody anarchy. “The town is taken by its rats,” Melville writes,

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. . . All civil charms
    And priestly speels, which late held hearts in awe--
    Fear-bound, subjected to a better sway
    Than sway of self, these like a dream dissolve,
    And man rebounds whole aeons back in nature.
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These misreadings of Melville would appear to bear out Harold Bloom’s theory of the Anxiety of Influence, which postulates that strong writers misread their predecessors to serve their own artistic objectives. But though it is true that Warren’s attachment to the father-son theme distracted him in the instances that I have noted, the larger truth of the Warren-Melville connection contradicts Bloom’s thesis. When we sift out the three essays which represent three decades of deepening engagement with Melville, Warren’s treatment of his predecessor’s ouevre is altogether praiseworthy for its sympathetic insight, its comprehensiveness, and its generosity. Indeed, Warren may have been too generous in calling Melville “America’s greatest writer of fiction” (AL 872); partisans of Twain, James, Faulkner, or even Warren himself, with regard to *All the King’s Men*, might well contest that designation.

In any case, Warren’s major contribution to Melville studies involved not the fiction but the poetry. In what finally added up to a book-length study, Warren applied his formidable powers of exegesis, together with his long practice as a poet-novelist, to shed a brilliant new light on this neglected area of Melville’s achievement, most notably regarding *Battle-Pieces, Clarel*, “Billy in the Darbies,” and other assorted entries. By
doing so, in the end Robert Penn Warren bore out not Harold Bloom’s thesis about the anxiety of influence, but rather the theory of artistic kinship that Herman Melville famously proclaimed in “Hawthorne and His Mosses”: “For genius, all over the world, stands hand in hand, and one shock of recognition runs the whole circle round.”6 Only rarely does the literary record offer so clear an example of this statement as in Robert Penn Warren’s critique of Herman Melville.