

ROBERT PENN WARREN AND THE POETIC AFTERLIFE

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In the following discussion I plan to develop two meanings of the word Afterlife. First I shall consider Mr. Warren's poetic afterlife in the sense of his current reputation --that is, his status in the pantheon of American poets a decade after his death. Then, pursuant to that status, I propose to consider his approach to the afterlife within his poetry, a singular achievement of his poetic imagination that may help define his future status in American poetry. I shall take up these questions in turn.

The fickle vagaries of reputation are nowhere better illustrated than in the careers of two women who share an office at Princeton University as co-Directors of its Creative Writing Program: Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates. While still in their thirties, these two giants of our time shared one benefit in common: they were "anointed," to use Toni Morrison's term, by being pictured on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. For Toni Morrison, that was just the beginning of the laureate parade. After *Beloved* was passed over for the National Book Award in 1987, a group of 48 black intellectuals published a broadside in the *New York Times* in effect demanding that she be named the winner of the forthcoming Pulitzer Prize competition. Whether thanks to this gesture or not, Ms. Morrison did win the Pulitzer, and then went on to claim the ultimate accolade, the Nobel Prize, in 1993. Most recently, Ms. Morrison has multiplied her book sales by gaining one more anointing-- that of the ultimate popular tastemaker, Oprah Winfrey

For Ms. Morrison's colleague, Joyce Carol Oates, the whimsy of reputation has worked cruelly in the opposite direction. A decade ago, the *New York Times* reported the rumor buzzing around Stockholm that Oates had been chosen for the Nobel Prize, but in the end she somehow barely missed the brass ring. With similar perversity, her novel *American Appetites* lost out in the Pulitzer Prize competition of 1990 when one of the three judges argued that she was certain to win it the following year for her pending novel, *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* and so she should be passed over this year. The following year a different panel of judges awarded the Pulitzer Prize to

someone else. As a result, Oates's prodigious talent still awaits the anointing of her first Pulitzer Prize. Similar perversities have marked the Pulitzer anointing process in other instances, as for example when Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* was passed over in 1960 in favor of Allen Drury's pedestrian novel, *Advise and Consent*. Conversely, even winning the Nobel Prize has not permanently redeemed the careers of writers like Pearl Buck and John Steinbeck. The lesson is that a poetic afterlife cannot depend on official honors like the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes.

In the poetic career of Robert Penn Warren, that lesson has been painfully apparent. During his lifetime, there was little doubt about Robert Penn Warren's achievement. After age 40 he displayed a profile of steadily ascending prestige, with one Pulitzer Prize for fiction, two for poetry, a Bollingen Prize, and appointment as his nation's first official Poet Laureate in 1986. He thereby stands in contrast to contemporaries like William Faulkner, who in *his* forties saw the lead plates for all his great novels melted down for the war effort with only *Sanctuary* spared this act of annihilation. And Warren stands in even greater contrast to another near-contemporary, Scott Fitzgerald, whose income exceeded perhaps a third of a million (in current dollars) in 1923 but whose royalties for the year 1939 sank to a total of \$33. When *The Great Gatsby* went out of print in that year, 1939, Fitzgerald wrote to a friend, "My God, I am a forgotten man," and poor Fitzgerald, who died in 1940 at the age of 45, never lived long enough to witness a revival of his reputation as Faulkner was lucky enough to do.

The reason why Warren was never a forgotten man has rested primarily, it seems, on the excellence of *All the King's Men*, which has become an established classic of American literature on a level with *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *The Sound and the Fury*. Along with the excellence of that novel, however, we are obliged as well to acknowledge some expedient reasons for the endurance of Warren's high reputation during his long lifespan. For one thing, unlike Faulkner and Fitzgerald, Warren edited a greatly distinguished literary magazine, *The Southern Review*, which not only kept his name before the educated reading audience of his time but gave him a supportive network of relationships with other writers and scholars who might have

reciprocated some indebtedness to him. Likewise, his impact on college classrooms through textbooks like *Understanding Poetry* and *An Approach to Literature* resulted in millions of students associating their understanding of literature with his name. And finally, his collegial association with influential professors of literature at LSU, Minnesota, and Yale--academic tastemakers like Cleanth Brooks and Harold Bloom--gave Warren a bastion of academic interest and support that Faulkner and Fitzgerald might have regarded with envy during their bleak passage into oblivion.

The question before us today, nearly a decade after Mr Warren's death on September 15, 1989, is what may happen to the artist's place in literary history after that personal network of friends and admirers has given way to a new generation that knew not Joseph, as the Bible says of the Israelites in Egypt. It is indeed gratifying to consider the likelihood of permanent immortality for *All the King's Men*, but the rest of his oeuvre already reveals the winnowing imposed by time and cultural change. Some of the small presses, such as LSU and J. S. Sanders & Company (in Nashville,) have made admirable efforts by way of republishing several early books--notably *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), *Night Rider* (1939), and *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), as well as *Brother to Dragons* (1953 & 1979), but the increasingly voracious profit-hunger of the commercial presses has pushed most of Warren's work out of print.

In the 1990s, the major anthologies, likewise, have spared very few pages to represent the fifteen volumes of poetry that earned Mr. Warren those prizes of twenty, thirty, and forty years ago. The McGraw-Hill anthology of 1994, *The American Tradition in Literature*, allotted nine pages to Adrienne Rich and twelve to Elizabeth Bishop, but only three pages to Warren. The Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich anthology of 1991, *The Heritage of American Literature*, allotted 14 pages to Adrienne Rich and 23 to Elizabeth Bishop while giving four pages to Warren. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* in 1996 allotted Warren seven pages but gave Gwendolyn Brooks twice that number. And the Macmillan text of 1993, entitled the *Anthology of American Literature*, makes no mention of Robert Penn Warren at all, as either critic, novelist, or poet, in the 2377 pages it devotes to modern American literature.

Warren's own anthology of American Literature, meanwhile--*American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973), which is still the finest such anthology ever published (co-edited with Cleanth Brooks and R. W. B. Lewis)--has been supplanted by anthologies dedicated to specialized markets such as Women's Studies and African-American Studies. And Warren's pathfinding books of criticism have likewise become eclipsed in the academic marketplace by ideological approaches to literature linked to Deconstruction, Feminism, Marxism, and Critical Theory.

Were it not for *All the King's Men*, therefore, Warren's career might well have emulated the sharp turn toward oblivion we have noted concerning Faulkner and Fitzgerald. The central question about his place in literary history thus comes down to the problem of devising standards to judge what shall endure in the writer's oeuvre. As it happens, Warren himself addressed this question in a pamphlet he wrote in 1966 entitled *A Plea in Mitigation: Modern Poetry and the End of an Era*. Here, by way of discussing the end of the Modern Period--which he calls the age of Eliot, Pound, and Yeats--he described two ways of regarding poetry--as prophecy and as art. Every piece of poetry, Warren says, originates as prophecy--that is, as immediate living truth for its maker: "*The individual writer. . . must be 'committed,'*" Warren says: "*As a writer--that is, at the moment of writing--he must think of poetry only as prophecy.*" This precept holds most force, Warren says, in a time of large-scale cultural change: (19) "*When a new poetic period dawns, it always dawns with prophetic urgency: It brings with it the possibility of new experience. . . .*" (2) Eventually, however, the onset of time and change weakens the prophetic force of this poetry as the conditions that provoked the prophecy recede into history. Poetry as prophecy, Warren says, then dies into irrelevance: "*But the time always comes when the poetic force drains away. . . . It no longer answers the life-need for defining identity, for establishing equilibrium in change. . . .*" (3)

What happens next is a period of oblivion for the poetry of that period which may end, however, in its rebirth into a different kind of relevance. Warren uses the myth of Osiris

to make his point: "*At this point of the death of the poetry of an age. . . [the] body of poetry is torn apart and scattered but after this there may be a resurrection--a resurrection into 'poetry as art.'* . . . *At that moment we see, at last, what poetry of an age may survive 'the idea of poetry' fashionable in that age. What survives survives as art.*"

In our study of Warren's poetic afterlife, we shall consider how the foregoing precepts apply to Warren's own sixty-year career in letters. To begin with Warren's thesis that every poem begins as prophecy, there is no reason in Warren's case to alter the ancient concept of the prophet as one who brings judgment to bear upon his own society. Warren's most significant social criticism, however, occurred not in poetry but in his long prose volumes, first in *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), which condemns ideological fanaticism even in a good cause, and a decade later in his early novels. Here, evidently motivated by the sufferings of the Great Depression, Warren reveals a markedly proletarian standpoint in his portrayals of the victimized tobacco farmers in *Night Rider* (1939), the amoral robber baron Bogan Murdoch in *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), and the hillbilly revolution led by Willie Stark in *All the King's Men* (1946). It was about this time, in the later 1940s, that Warren identified himself in *Who's Who* as "an unreconstructed New Dealer."

But alongside this tone of sympathy, Warren displayed an ongoing skepticism toward the virtue of those oppressed classes. Mobocracy poses a threat in all three novels, whether in the tactics of terrorism in *Night Rider*, the corruption of Willie Stark's political machine, or what Duckfoot Blake in *At Heaven's Gate* calls "the instrument of the sovereign people--the length of lead pipe or the half-brick." During this period of tempered proletarian sympathy, Warren's prophetic eye was fixed as well on the international scene. As early as 1935, in a poem titled "Letter from a Coward to a Hero," Warren could foresee the violent end of that low, dishonest decade: "Empires collide with a bang/That shakes the pictures where they hang/And democracy shows signs of dry rot/And Dives has and Lazarus not/. . . . Does the airman scream in the flaming trajectory?"

When war did arrive, Warren's voice of prophetic judgment made a sharp contrast to the war propaganda that characterized the early 1940s. "Terror," published in *Poetry* magazine in February 1941, duly castigates fascist barbarism "When the brute crowd roars or the blunt boot-heels resound/In the Piazza or the Wilhemplatz," but our own side meanwhile displays a decidedly speckled virtue. The poem observes that while some Americans joined with Stalin's minions fighting fascism in Spain, their American compatriots were fighting with equal fury against the Soviet invasion of Finland. In both instances, Warren says, "They fight old friends, for their obsession knows/Only the immaculate itch, not human friends or foes." This skepticism toward political ideology was to mark Warren as a man out of synch with his time on the eve of World War II.

Other poems in *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* likewise go against the grain of public interest in 1942. The great war in these poems occurs not in North Africa or the South Seas but within the individual psyche. In "Original Sin: A Short Story" the narrator tries to escape a tainted doppelganger that will not leave him alone: "you have heard/It fumble your door before it whimpers and is gone:/It acts like the old hound that used to snuffle your door and moan." In "Crime," this figure from the past assumes an even lower life form: "Still memory drips, a pipe in the cellar-dark,/And in its hutch and hole. . ./The cold heart heaves like a toad, and lifts its brow." And in "Revelation," the narrator's guilt towards his mother roils the entire animal kingdom:

*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.*

In the 1950s, Warren's focus on innate guilt expanded from personal to national dimensions. Innate depravity stains the early American Republic in books like *World Enough and Time* (1950) and *Brother to Dragons* (1953), and the moral ambiguities of the Civil War and its aftermath play out their contradictions in *Band of Angels* (1955) and *Segregation* (1956). The decade of the 1960s carried forward this critique of

America's racial crisis in *Wilderness* (1961), *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961) and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1964).

Tragically, as we know, in the 1960s Warren's prophecy regarding political fanaticism (dating back to John Brown in 1929) soon became realized, first in the murder of Malcolm X and later in the murderous violence unleashed by the Black Panthers, the Weatherman faction of student radicals, and the assassins of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Meanwhile, government-sponsored violence came in for equally withering criticism: his 1965 poem, "Shoes in the Rain Jungle," was among the earliest literary protests against the war in Vietnam, and "New Dawn" (in his final volume, 1985) portrays those who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima as largely dehumanized by the experience.

In addition to the New Deal, anti-war protest, and the Civil Rights movement, Robert Penn Warren enlisted his talent for prophecy on behalf of one other major social revolution, and that is the environmental movement. In 1946, he began *All the King's Men* with a portrait of environmental devastation in Mason City:

"There were pine forests here a long time ago but they are gone. The bastards got in here and set up the mills and laid the narrow-gauge tracks and paid a dollar a day and folks swarmed out of the brush for the dollar and. . . the saws sang soprano and the clerk in the commissary. . . wrote in his big book. . . and all was merry as a marriage bell. Till, all of a sudden, there weren't any more pine trees. They stripped the mills. The narrow-gauge tracks got covered with grass. . . . There wasn't any more dollar a day. The big boys were gone, with diamond rings on their fingers. . . but a good many of the folks stayed right on, watched the gullies eat deeper into the red clay." (2)

In so far as prophecy is concerned, then, Robert Penn Warren displayed a lifelong propensity to pronounce judgment on the shortcomings of his society, whether in terms of economic inequity, civil rights for people of color, antiwar protest, or environmental concern. Despite the prophetic importance of these issues, however, they form a shaky

platform for the immortality of art. A decade after Warren's death, for example, the New Deal's thrust toward economic justice has been offset by widespread prosperity; antiwar sentiment by an era of peacemaking; and the civil rights movement by disputes about affirmative action. The major issue that remains, environmental degradation, retains its force but not at the apocalyptic level of concern that followed the publication, for example, of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the early 1960s. (One can imagine the effect of that book on so ardent a bird-lover as Robert Penn Warren.)

So the circumstance has evolved for his own verse that Warren in 1966 applied to the great Modern poets, when "the poetic force drains away" and "[the] body of poetry is torn apart and scattered." But as we recall, he also said that "after this there may be a resurrection--a resurrection into 'poetry as art.'" And beyond that prospect, there persist further possibilities regarding poetry's future life cycle. Citing the examples of Blake and Donne, Warren remarks that after prophecy becomes art, *"any piece of art may again become prophecy. It may be drawn back into the world of direct action to validate a new revolution, and the dead poet may become. . . recalled from the dead."* The categories of art and prophecy are further muddled, Warren says, by the subjectivity of the judging process: *"there is always seepage and osmosis between the categories, and. . .the same poem may be for one reader 'poetry as prophecy' and for another 'poetry as art,' or for the same reader may change. . . from one category to the other"* (2). And finally, there remains the permanent duality of needs that poetry addresses.

"We need art, and we need prophecy" (19), Warren concludes. Poetry that aspires to an afterlife, we may infer, must therefore comprise both art and prophecy, but at a higher level of prophecy. Accordingly, in Robert Penn Warren's work, we find a gradual transmutation of the issues. Instead of World War II or Vietnam, it portrays the heart in conflict with itself, which Faulkner famously said was the only thing worth writing about. Instead of environmentalism it propagates what Wordsworth called "natural piety," or a spiritual affinity with nature. Instead of ideology it promotes a search for truth. And above all, it does these things committed at every step to a consummate mastery of craft: coining new metaphors, orchestrating sound texture, deploying subtle tones of voice, and

fashioning such structures of narrative as the materials require. Based on these precepts, and on my forty years of study of Mr. Warren's poetry, I should like now to indulge my own judgment as to what may survive as art, or be reborn as prophecy, in the poetic afterlife of Robert Penn Warren. From his fifteen volumes of poetry, an occasion such as this permits only a very selective choice of citations for advancing my argument, but as Robert Frost says, Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length. The pleasure of sharing these choice specimens will, for me, outweigh the pain of a miserly selection process.

PART II: THE HANDOUT: A BIRTHDAY MISCELLANY OF POEMS

PART III: CONCLUSION

In his sonnet about Shakespeare's funeral monument, John Milton said of Shakespeare that "Thou dost marble us"--which is to say, we readers are Shakespeare's living funeral monuments, transmitting his verses in shared memory down through the generations. For each new generation of readers, the poet's oeuvre remains as fresh and new as when it first sprang from the artist's hand. For Shakespeare, without question, this process of marbling his readers is guaranteed to continue throughout the future of human life on earth. For lesser artists, however, there is one other prerequisite for a poetic afterlife besides excellent achievement, and this is what Warren calls a "hard core" of true believers. To quote his *Modern Poetry and the End of an Era* one more time:

"The hard core is composed of the serious readers of poetry--readers with enough historical sense and candor of spirit to read poetry at some level a little deeper than that of bare doctrine. . . . The hard core is what counts. It is what gives continuity. It is what determines the climate in which a poem can survive after the headlines and reviews are forgotten, after promotion, journalism, and fashion have had their day" (17).

In this instance, the people in this room represent the hard core, the people who as much as anyone in the world have taken custody of Robert Penn Warren's poetic afterlife.

By way of clarifying our role in conclusion, I would like to cite one other telling reference, to the eminent musicologist Charles Rosen. According to Rosen, Mozart, Beethoven, and Richard Wagner all suffered major setbacks in their reputation during the decades after their death. What ushered them through these periods of neglect into final immortality was the willfulness of a small but devoted following. Richard Wagner, Rosen says, "became popular only because his admirers obstinately insisted on performing his operas against the prevailing distaste." "Taste and understanding," he goes on to say, "are formed by acts of faith and will," and in the end *"those who idolize a composer are the only ones whose opinion counts: the musical canon is not decided by majority opinion but by enthusiasm and passion, and a work that ten people love passionately is more important than one that ten thousand people do not mind hearing. Sometimes it is only a small audience. . . . but [because of] the fanatical loyalty of performers, those who hated Beethoven listened again, persuaded by those who admired him."* ("Classical Music in Twilight," *Harper's Magazine* for March 1998, p. 58)

There is hope in these words for us, the hard core audience of the poet's desiring. And generous help is on the way: Adding to the impact of Joseph Blotner's recent definitive biography will be the *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, to be published this September as edited by John Burt, and James Grimshaw's forthcoming edition of the Brooks and Warren correspondence. On this 93rd birthday of Robert Penn Warren, I have been privileged to share with you my 40-year process of being marbled by the poetic genius of this man. Each occasion of this sort is a segment of his poetic afterlife, and I thank my audience for having created this segment with me.