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ROBERT PENN WARREN'S WESTERN EXPOSURE

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In his Preface to *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography*, Joseph Blotner portrays the eighty-year-old writer recalling his personal geography, "so that, in Connecticut and Vermont, he called up Kentucky and Tennessee and California, then New Haven and Oxford, Memphis and Nashville, Baton Rouge and Minneapolis." (viii) Notably missing from that list of meaningful American places is the Great American West, the portion of national landscape that lies between the Great Plains and the Western slope of the Rocky Mountains. Obviously the omission may have been inadvertent, a minor slip of memory on the part of either Warren or his biographer. It seems equally possible, however, that the omission may indicate accurately the slight weight of this region in the author's ruminations of that moment. Either way, it suffices to evoke the question of what the West meant to Mr. Warren, how it fit into his larger view of life and literary oeuvre, and why he responded to it the way he did.

Across much of Robert Penn Warren's writing career, his American West was that of antebellum America--the swath of land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Great Plains. In such major works *World Enough and Time*, *Brother to Dragons*, "The Ballad of Billie Potts," and *Audubon: A Vision*, Warren's West featured criminal acts performed in what was then a wild frontier bordering upon the Mississippi River. When the Rocky Mountain/Pacific West came into play (a region which we shall call the Great West), it was likely to appear fallaciously as the idyllic land of Thomas Jefferson's romantic imagination or as a place where Little Billie Potts and Jack Burden could escape from a tainted past and assume a new identity.

One could argue that Warren's experience of the Great West was too thin to permit a stronger treatment, yet his personal encounters with the Great West occurred earlier and much more frequently than was common for most Americans in an age when few automobiles and airplanes crossed the continent, and few people East of the Mississippi took that 2,000- or 3,000-mile train journey. Warren's first trip West occurred in 1925, soon after his twentieth birthday, on a train taking him across New Mexico and Arizona to Los Angeles and Berkeley. Writing to his Vanderbilt classmate Andrew Lytle from Tucson on August 8, 1925, he made no pronouncement about the majestic Southwest landscape, instead complaining about the swaying of the train and the rain and wind that

left him “spending my time sitting out in the middle of Texas and New Mexico deserts.” (*Selected Letters*, ed. Bedford Clark, 70-71)

Two similar trips followed before he was twenty five, and the pattern continued through subsequent decades, including some leisurely automobile journeys. In 1935 he taught summer session at the University of Montana in Missoula; in 1936, he taught at the University of Colorado; and in 1937 he and his wife Cinina traveled to the lake country of Northern California. In 1940, he went back to teach again at the University of Colorado, and intermittently as the years passed he chose to spend considerable time at Western ranches. In 1976 Warren told Bill Moyers how he “*traveled in the Depression in a fifty-dollar car, [a] broken-down, old green Studebaker. I wandered all over the West. I spent time on ranches here and ranches there and have been in all sorts of places. . . . I really fell in love with this country.*” (*Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, 205)

A major clue to explain the absence of these experiences from Warren’s early writing may be inferred from a letter he wrote on June 13, 1935, on the occasion of his first trip to Montana. During that Depression-era trip, Warren reached the Rocky Mountain West, where he enjoyed the gorgeous landscape in the relatively prosperous community of Missoula, Montana, only after traveling through horrifying scenes in the Dust Bowl.

By way of historical background, Timothy Egan’s recent book about the Dust Bowl (*The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*) fills in some pertinent details. In March and April, 1935, barely a month before the Warrens’ westward journey, storms dumped nearly five tons of dust per acre on western Kansas, with the wind at one point blowing at forty miles per hour for one hundred hours. Other storms dumped thousands of tons of airborne dirt on cities such as Chicago, New York, and Washington, causing semi-darkness in those cities as the sun disappeared. One collection of storms a year earlier, in May, 1934, grew to 1800 miles wide, carrying 350 million tons of dust across the Great Plains.

Concerning his own encounter with this disaster, Warren wrote as follows to his friend Frank Lawrence Owsley:

“When we struck Colorado both Cinina and I almost felt like running into the nearest house of God to offer up a little prayer that we were safely out of Kansas. . . . The people in the western half of the state are like survivors of a shipwreck. The drouths [sic] and the dust storms have really done them in. . . . There are abandoned houses along the road. . . . We met old cars on the road with six or seven people in them, chairs tied on the back, and a mattress on top. It rained the day we passed through (for

which thank God), but even then you could see a man plowing or harrowing ten miles off from the cloud of dust raised . . . There had been a bad dust storm three days before we passed through.”

[William Bedford Clark, *Selected Letters*, II, 43]

Warren’s personal encounter with this natural catastrophe could not help but affect his social conscience, which may have been exacerbated rather than assuaged by his escape to the Western mountains. In the same letter that describes his trip through the Dust Bowl, Warren contrasted his horrible Dust Bowl experience with his subsequent visit to a land that seems to resemble the escapist dream of Happy Valley that Warren satirized in *At Heaven’s Gate*:

“The northern section of Wyoming where we crossed is lovely, especially the Wind River district: a very deep, winding canyon with the road running beside a very vigorous mountain river for miles. . . . Missoula is a pretty, prosperous town of about 12,000. . . . Flathead [Lake, a hundred miles north of Missoula] really is a splendid place. All around this thirty-mile long lake there are tight pleasant little cottages with sheep ranges in the hills behind them, and gardens and orchards, chiefly cherry, in front. We had supper up there with a mining engineer. . . [who told us] that the cherry crop, even in the worst years, has made enough to keep everybody comfortably, educate the children, and improve the houses and land. All the places are tight, comfortable, well-painted, and attractive. They have brought in a power line lately. There seems to be a real community life there, too.”

[Clark, *Selected Letters*, II, 43-44]

Four years later, Warren rendered a similar geographical contrast in his first novel, *Night Rider* (1939). Here Willie Proudfit first recounts his memories of the parched Western Plains while participating in the buffalo-killing enterprise of the 1880s:

“a man don’t know how hit is in the dry country, and the thirsten. I been two days without water and my tongue swole in my mouth. I shot me a buffalo, figgerin on the blood, and I see they was mud-caked on her legs. . . and they was new-caked. I cut open her stomach, and thar was the water she’d drunk. And I supped every drop. . . . A man don’t know how the dry country is.”

[*Night Rider*. J. Sanders & Co reprint, 1992, 376]

Once again, in this novel as in Warren’s trip to Missoula, the Rocky Mountains offered an idyllic contrast to the parched low country:

“I come into the mountains. . . lak no mountains you e’er seen. . . . That-air country was open and high. Hit was June when I come in the high country, and they was flowers ever whar. I ne’er seen such. Greasewood with blooms plumb gold, and little flowers on the ground. . . . Summer come, and. . . I started up to the high mountains. I seen Indians a-moven too. They made me signs, and I taken up with them. They had ‘em sheep and ponies, and was goen whar the grass was good. . . . Hit come cold, and they was a-moven down low, and I went with ‘em. They helped me build a winter hogan. . . . and we set on the floor, on sheep skins, and taken sop, side by side. . . . Five year, and hit was that a-way. . . . I was easy in my heart and mind, like ne’er a-fore in my time of doen and striv-en. I’d a-been thar yit, I reckon, if I had’n a-took sick, and hit bad. . . . [After] My strength come, I told them Indians good-bye, and they taken my hand. I come to Santa Fe, and up Oklahoma, and . . . on to Arkansas.”

[420-425]

After *Night Rider* in 1939, the Great West next appeared, briefly, in “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943), as “the new country” and “the new place,” where Billie can assume “a new name. . . [and] The name and the face are you.” (c. line 240) Warren assigns some lyric power to “the great plateau/Where the sky heeled in the unsagging wind and the cheek burned,/ . . . beneath the white peak that glimmered like a dream” (c. line 300), but the Great West is a minor presence in this major poem.

Three years later, in *All the King’s Men*, Warren’s West has declined still further into a sardonic motif, a place where Jack Burden can flee after learning of his boss’s affair with Ann Stanton:

“I was driving west. . . . For West is . . . where you go when you get the letter saying: Flee, all is discovered. It is where you go when you look down at the blade in your hand and see the blood on it. . . . It is where you go to spend your old age. Or it is just where you go. . . . I had got into my car and headed west, because when you don’t like it where you are you always go west.... That is why I drowned in West and relived my life as a home movie.”

[*All the King’s Men*, HBJ pbk reprint, 1984, 270, 309]

By the time Warren wrote *Brother to Dragons*, published in 1953, his portrayal of the Great West reached its least appealing profile. Early on, Thomas Jefferson, proud of his Louisiana Purchase, speaks hopefully of

*. . . my West, the West I bought and gave and never
Saw, or but like the Israelite,
From some high pass or crazy crag of mind, saw—
I saw all,*

*Hawthorne and haw,
 Valleys extended and prairies idle and the land's
 Long westward languor lifting toward the flaming escarpment
 at the end of day.
 Saw the sad bison lick the outstretched hand,
 And on the western rock, wracked in the clang and smother,
 The black seal barks, and loves us, knowing we will come.
 For wind is steady, and the moon rides gold. . . .*
 [*Brother to Dragons*, 1953 version, p. 11]

But all this is an illusion. Not even the Lewis and Clark expedition can overcome Jefferson's later sense that the West is merely "great Canaan's grander counterfeit." Even the native inhabitants of this counterfeit Canaan, portrayed as greatly admirable in the Willie Proudfit story, have here declined into decidedly ignoble savages. Jefferson cites his nephew Meriwether's account as follows:

*. . . philosophy has never raised a crop of hair
 Where the scalping knife has once done the scythe-work,

 My near-son Meriwether, wrote in his papers
 How the savage man wallowed in the horror of the hogan,
 And lust was a communal ceremony in the murk-filled lodge,
 And such the reek of sour bodies and the contortion and pathos
 of the bestial face
 That nausea was in your gut even as, for sympathy, your parts
 twitched.*

[p. 37]

Looking back over this nearly three-decade stretch of time, from Warren's first ride to California in the mid-1920s to the appearance of *Brother to Dragons*, one is struck by the contrast between these dubious artistic renderings of the West and the author's assertion that "I wandered all over the West... [and] I fell in love with this country."

The main explanation for this discrepancy, I would suggest, lies in the author's political ideology of this period. From early in the Great Depression—a period when his own father lapsed into bankruptcy—until after World War II the problem of poverty was a central focus of Warren's social conscience. That ride to Missoula, Montana through the Dust Bowl in 1935 would have sufficed to magnify the theme, if it needed such reinforcement, and as late as 1947, Warren described himself, in the *Who's Who* of that year, as "an unreconstructed New Dealer." Appropriately, the three novels he published during the previous decade—*Night*

Rider, At Heaven's Gate, and All the King's Men—all display proletarian sympathy with working people who are victimized by a plutocratic upper class.

It was only after the prosperity of the post war years came into play that Warren felt able to change the subject. In the affluent 1950s, Warren's social conscience turned its focus from poverty to racial justice, in books like *Segregation, Band of Angels, Wilderness, Who Speaks for the Negro?*, and, in later years, *Chief Joseph*. That change of focus also apparently allowed his aesthetic sensibility to encompass a wider grasp of the world's beauty. The last page of Warren's fourth novel, *World Enough and Time: A Romantic Novel* (1950), mentions, in the same extended sentence, both his changed moral focus and his enhanced aestheticism. The new moral focus, on race instead of poverty, comes first:

"[the Negro] is free and can die of tuberculosis in a Louisville slum if he wants to and nobody can stop him (for it is his legal right and is damned near the only right the white folks will let him have)."

The new aesthetic focus immediately follows:

"from the white-columned portico you look across the gracious sweep of meadow to the sunset below the blue knobs and your heart almost breaks because it is so beautiful (and you love beauty)."

It was the writer's newly asserted love of beauty that would rescue the Great West from its trivial role as an escapist paradise. During and after the 1950s, his aesthetic imagination emerged with full force in a surge of poetic creativity that filled his remaining lifespan. His record of falling in love with the country, which would appear mostly in the poems from the 1950s onward, increasingly featured an affinity with the Great American West. The West, in turn, displayed an affinity with him, at least in the view of some of its favorite sons. David Quammen, a superb nature writer living in Montana, quotes Warren's "Tell Me a Story" segment from *Audubon: A Vision*—the segment about hearing the geese flying north in his adolescence ("The Miracle of the Geese," in a book called *The Flight of the Iguana* (Delacorte Press, 1988, pp. 233-234). Here, in addition, Quammen goes on to call Warren "America's wisest poet." It is a tribute that is all the more deserved for his final inclusion of the Great West in his oeuvre of lyric poetry.
