

SOUTHERN COMFORT: RPW AND THE ART OF (THE CIVIL) WAR

[Presented at the Robert Penn Warren Circle Annual Meeting in Guthrie, Kentucky, 2011]

For a youth born and bred in small town Kentucky, Robert Penn Warren enjoyed a notably cosmopolitan young manhood. During his twenties and thirties, in a time when long distance travel was a privilege reserved mainly to the wealthy, he traveled frequently across the nation to live in sophisticated academic communities in Nashville, San Francisco, New Haven, Oxford, England, Baton Rouge, and Minneapolis, with extended sojourns as well in Italy and France. By middle age, his social life displayed a similar profile, featuring not only a long and happy marriage to a New England Yankee (following a shorter, unhappy one to a Californian of Italian ancestry), but also a network of connections with literary people from all across the country, notably including the faculty at Yale. His ultimate gesture of separation from his native region was his choice of a burial site in the remote back woods of Vermont, a thousand miles from kith and kin, because—his daughter told me—Vermont is where his life had been happiest.

It is an impressive story of regional deracination, yet, underneath all the wanderings, there would always reside, through the full 84 years of the artist's life, the small town Kentucky boy. And one of the most visible signs of that bedrock identity, in this writer so obsessed with the theme of identity, lay in his deep sense of grievance toward the North's assumption of moral superiority over his benighted native region. My title, "Southern Comfort," refers to Warren's use of his prodigious gifts as an artist and scholar (for he was a superb scholar) to puncture the sanctimony of the North with the lance of truth, its tip dipped deep in Warrenesque sarcasm.

That sarcasm was on display at the outset of Warren's career, in the subtitle of his first book, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr*, published in 1929. That book was Warren's contribution to the Southern Renaissance movement, for which Warren and other members of the Vanderbilt literary group planned a campaign of teaching and writing in favor of Southern cultural vindication. As counterpoint to Warren's deconstruction of the Union icon John Brown, Warren's close friend and mentor Allen Tate lionized three Confederate heroes in *Stonewall Jackson: The Good Soldier* (1928), *Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall* (1929), and a book on Robert E. Lee that Warren helped write but was never finished.

Concerning John Brown, Warren had too much integrity to perform an outright hatchet job. A note of contempt frequently recurs, however, particularly regarding John Brown's financial cupidity. For example, Brown's slaughter of five unarmed men near Pottawatomie Creek in the Kansas Territory was bad enough, but what should we think

of his petty turpitude in stealing his victims' horses? *"When daylight came the evidence was gone, for the stolen horses were well on their way north to be sold"* (166). Of Brown's subsequent looting of a store after a battle, Warren notes that *"The cause of freedom and the plunder business were thriving side by side."* And regarding Brown's solicitation of money from benefactors, Warren manages to strike down two Northern icons with one blow: *"When a letter would bring tears, it would bring money. Harriet Beecher Stowe knew the trick, for her Uncle Tom's Cabin had provided a tidy fortune"* (102).

John Brown was not alone in his ambiguity of character. As soon as the news of the Harper's Ferry fiasco came out, Warren notes, most of Brown's secret cabal of supporters scooted out of the country, most to Canada, others (including Frederick Douglass) to England. One of those supporters, according to Warren, exemplified the character of Yankee-hood in general:

"Frank B. Sanborn . . . just out of Harvard . . . was an excessively earnest young man, confident of himself, and confident that he knew God's will. . . . [He] possessed to a considerable degree that tight special brand of New England romanticism which manifested itself in stealing Guinea niggers, making money, wrestling with conscience, hunting witches, building tea-clippers, talking about Transcendentalism, or being an Abolitionist. Stealing Guinea niggers and hunting witches were out of date now . . . ; it was the period of clipper ships, money-making, Sunny Brook Farm, and Abolitionism." (226-7)

As a collaborative group, the Fugitive-Agrarian movement petered out after their tract of 1930, *I'll Take My Stand*. Through the next decade and a half, Warren responded to the Great Depression by turning his attention to questions of economic justice. His first three novels featured the corporations' exploitation of tobacco farmers (*Night Rider*, 1939), the tycoon Bogan Murdock's corrupt business empire (*At Heaven's Gate*, 1943), and the plight of the poor masses in Willie Stark's Louisiana (*All the King's Men*, 1946). It is worth noting, however, that though set in the twentieth century, *All the King's Men* managed to dramatize antebellum New England hypocrisy in the person of *"a lady of position from Boston"* who, though *"nurtured in sentiments opposed to the institution of human servitude, quickly became notorious for her abominable cruelties"* after moving to slave territory in Kentucky. *"All persons of the community reprehended her floggings,"* Warren goes on to say, while sniffing out a trace of perversion in the woman's motive—*"floggings, which she performed with her own hands, uttering meanwhile little cries in her throat, according to the report."* There must have been *some* Southern comfort in this portrayal, inasmuch as Warren's published oeuvre displays no facsimile for the lady pervert from Boston in his ladies from Atlanta, Memphis, or New Orleans.

As the Centennial of the Civil War drew near, Warren published in *You, Emperors, and Others* (1960) a poem entitled *“Two Studies in Idealism,”* which features dramatic monologues by two soldiers on opposing sides of the Civil War. (See last two pages to read these poems.) I think the best way to appreciate these poems is in light of an essay by Norman Mailer titled *“Cannibals and Christians.”* Speaking of the then raging Viet Nam War, Mailer saw two contrasting motives in our fighting men. The Cannibals frankly enjoyed dishing out bullets, bombs, and napalm—or knife work in the case of Warren’s rebel soldier. *“Two things a man’s built for,”* the young man begins, *“killing and you-know-what.”* What the soldier loves is what those two things have in common: *“that look in their eyes”* when a Yankee soldier dies or when a certain moment arrives in his relationship with a female. *“When those eyelids go waggle, or maybe the eyes pop wide/. . . then you know who you are.”* You *“will maybe remember that much even after you’ve died,”* he goes on to say, proving it by narrating this poem posthumously.

Mailer’s “Christians” dealt out the same ordnance as the Cannibals but with deep regret over the necessity of this bloody slaughter. Warren’s Yankee soldier fits the bill nicely in his nuanced use of violence: *“I tried to slay without rancor, and often succeeded./I tried to keep the heart pure, though hand took stain.”* The most notable difference between the two poems lies in the portraits of the two speakers’ victims. All we know about the Yankee soldier killed by the Confederate in the first poem is that his eyes either waggled or popped wide as he died. In the second poem, by contrast, the grandfatherly Confederate soldier killed by the youthful Yankee (a Harvard graduate, class of 1861) is a species of Christ figure. His dying words extend forgiveness to his killer: *“Why, son, you done done it—I figured I skeered ye”* (referring to the Confederate battle scream); *“Said: ‘Son, you look puke-pale. Buck up! If it hadn’t been you/Some other young squirt would a-done it.’”*

Being forgiven by a pile of Confederate filth is, in turn, something the high-minded Yankee finds unforgiveable. After joining his victim among the dead (having “died for the Right, as I had a right to”), he releases a concluding blast of Yankee sanctimony: *“I was dead too. . . /And glad to be dead, and hold my residence/Beyond life’s awful illogic and the world’s stew,/Where people who haven’t the right just die, with ghastly impertinence.”*

In 1961, Warren offered a prose version of Southern comfort in his novel *Wilderness*, which features a harrowing dramatization of the anti-draft riots of July, 1863 in New York City. (See last page for the relevant passage in *Wilderness*, along with an encyclopedia version of the episode.) One of the horrifying aspects of the affair was the targeting of black people for lynch mob action; many black people, including women and children, were hanged from lamp posts, sometimes after suffering mutilation. (Many rioters blamed black people for being the major reason why the war came about.) It is unlikely that any sane American on either side would blame the South for this murderous

rampage in the North's queen city, but in *Wilderness* Warren contrives to make it happen. He does so by leading his protagonist, Adam Rosenzweig (a new immigrant just a half hour off the boat) into the midst of the riot. After stumbling upon a mutilated black man hanging from a post, Adam cannot conceive of Yankees perpetrating such atrocities. Warren's Southern comfort sardonically ensues:

Then a thought came. The Rebels—they must be here, after all. That would explain everything. They had plunged through the city. Not Lee perhaps, but their great raider of cavalry. What was his name? Stuart—that was it. He thought of the Rebel cavalry riding through. They had hanged this black man, for a warning. They had ridden on and set those fires to the northeast. Yes, that was it, the Rebels.

He felt much better. The Rebels had done it.

Warren's most crucial book for the purpose of this discussion duly appeared in 1961 with the usefully explanatory title *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial*. Here Warren laid out the ideological design behind the conflict. Before the War, he said, the North followed the ideal of Higher Law, proclaiming the supremacy of the individual conscience over society's legal strictures as in Henry David Thoreau's "*Civil Disobedience*," while the South countered with the doctrine of Legalism: the insistence that because slavery was permitted in the original Constitution, it must continue.

After the slaughter of over 600,000 young men in four years and the ruination of the South's economy, two new ideologies replaced the old ones. Having won the war for freedom, truth, and justice, the North lapsed into a Treasury of Virtue, meaning that it could afford to ignore such social iniquities as child labor and the exploitation of immigrants as the industrial revolution brought on the Gilded Age. The South, meanwhile, retreated into the Great Alibi, blaming its poverty, backwardness, and racial injustice on the damn Yankees instead of confronting such issues.

Although Warren is admirably even-handed in the main thrust of this book, some degree of Southern comfort may be extracted from random snippets of Northern hypocrisy scattered among these pages. The fiery abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, for example, makes an appearance after the War "*accusing labor leaders of trying to inflame the minds of the working class against the more opulent*" (28). Garrison's fellow Abolitionist Samuel Gridley Howe likewise objected that limiting the working day to ten hours would "emasculate" the workers. And Warren demonstrates in detail the flagrant racism of Abraham Lincoln, whose opposition to slavery co-existed with his opposition to racial equality and integration.

It would be interesting to know how old Robert Penn Warren was when he first heard The Battle Hymn of the Union army, but it could have been when he attended graduate

school at Yale, where it would have been part of the North's Memorial Day ceremonies. In 1973, he chose to include its stirring cadences in the anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, which Warren co-edited with Cleanth Brooks and R. W. B. Lewis. Here Yankee sanctimony was on glorious display, trumpeting its call to arms in the sacred name of God's righteousness:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.*

In this anthology, Warren did not miss the opportunity to settle accounts with the Battle Hymn's author, Julia Ward Howe. First (in *Volume B 1826-1861*, 1158-1162), he notes that "*as late as the summer of 1859, Mrs. Howe . . . could write [after visiting relatives in South Carolina] that the slaves were as 'lazy as the laziest of brutes, chiefly ambitious to be of no use to anybody.'*" After the war started, inspiring her to write the lines assigning God to the Union side, she collected—Warren notes a bit sourly—her reward: "*As for Mrs. Howe, she lived on until 1910. . . . She had long since fulfilled her wildest dreams of ambition: she was a public figure, a successful lecturer, a voluminous, if trivial, writer, the friend of the great, rich, and well-born. . . .*"

Our final source of Southern comfort is a product of Warren's sunset years. *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back*, published in 1980 when Warren was seventy-five years old, comprises a perfect bookend with his earliest volume, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr*, published when Warren was twenty-four. Looking back almost to his infancy, Warren declares in this late memoir that "*I can't say how my early brand of Southernism soaked into me,*" because Guthrie was "*anything but an old Southern town*" (15). (Guthrie was formed by the advent of a railroad crossing, he says, decades after the Civil War.)

However it came about, Warren's Southernism sufficed in this late volume to not only vindicate Jefferson Davis but to correct some Northern misconceptions of history. He highlights, for example, the little known facts that before the Civil War secession had been "*a popular sentiment in New England,*" and that, conversely, Emancipation had "*barely missed in the Virginia Legislature in 1830-31*" before events such as the slave rebellion led by Nat Turner quashed that possibility (39). He speculates that Lincoln's "*avowed racism . . . may have contributed to his popularity*" (55), and he lays out a case for Generals Sherman and Grant as perpetrators of what we now would call war crimes. (A lover of paradox, Warren notes of General Grant that "*Though he flinched from the sight of blood and could eat only overdone meat. . . , he learned to become 'Grant the butcher'*"--67-68). On the capture of Jefferson Davis himself, Warren debunks the slanderous story that Davis tried to escape in women's clothing (he merely bore the shawl

his wife had thrown over his shoulders) and he adds the minor but telling spectacle of *“troopers in blue gobbling the meager breakfast prepared for the Davis children”* (71).

After the capture, the aging and sickly Jefferson Davis was subjected to brutal maltreatment, being constricted by shackles for five days in his cell, denied access to books or newspapers, and held incommunicado with family members. By contrast, Warren says, *“the will of Davis, his self-control, piety, generosity of spirit, and refusal to blame others”* won the praise of his prison doctor, who declared that *“Mr Davis impressed me more than any professor of Christianity I had ever heard”* (78). In 1976, four score and seven years after Jefferson Davis died (1889), Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon introduced a Senate Joint Resolution to restore his citizenship, thereby correcting *“a glaring injustice”* inflicted on *“an outstanding American”* (94-95). Warren goes on to say that *“The resolution passed unanimously, by voice vote, and, on October 17, 1978, was signed into law by President Carter.”*

It is reasonable to infer that Robert Penn Warren derived some Southern comfort from this belated vindication of the Confederate President. We can infer additional comfort, I think, from his final laceration of Northern hypocrisy. For this purpose Warren quotes a statement by Gerrit Smith, a fiery abolitionist and secret sponsor of John Brown, who declared after the war that *“we should not punish the conquered South”* because *“the North was quite as responsible as the South for the chief cause of the war. . . the mercenary North coolly reckoned the political, commercial, and ecclesiastical profits of slavery, and held to it”* (84).

In this late book on Jefferson Davis, Robert Penn Warren pretty much completed his lifelong discourse on the Civil War. It may be worth noting, however, that three years later, in 1983, his long poem *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* turns the tables on Northern sanctimony by portraying Chief Joseph as an icon of American Indian virtue pitted against a Federal government guilty of committing rampant treacheries and atrocities. Several victorious Union generals reappear in this poem as warriors not at all averse to advancing this wretched handiwork.

By way of conclusion, it is time to confess that the writer of this essay is a New England Yankee, born in New Hampshire, raised in Massachusetts, educated in Rhode Island, and pleased to have begun his teaching career at the University of Vermont. It is possible, therefore, that a reader may sometimes detect a slight tone of irony in this talk about Southern comfort. But if it exists at all, that tone is a very minor element in this discourse, for I am now and have been since graduate school days an inveterate admirer of RPW and all his works. And, Yankee or not, I have to admit one paramount fact about RPW and his Art of (the Civil) War: that everything he has asserted in the foregoing commentary is true and valid. The North has been and is now hypocritical, its sanctimony toward the South has been and is now unfounded, and whatever Southern

comfort Warren derived from his studies in regional history has been justified. Let this concluding confession of a New England Yankee add whatever comfort it may.

Two Studies in Idealism: Short Survey of American, and Human, History

For Allan Nevins

I. Bear Track Plantation: Shortly after Shiloh

Two things a man's built for, killing and you-know-what.
As for you-know-what, I reckon I taken my share,
Bed-ease or bush-whack, but killing—hell, three's all I got,
And he promised me ten, Jeff Davis, the bastard. 'Taint fair.

'Taint fair, a man rides and knows he won't live forever,
And a man needs something to take with him when he dies.
Ain't much worth taking, but what happens under the cover
Or at the steel-point—yeah, that look in their eyes.

That same look, it comes in their eyes when you give 'em the business.
10 It's something a man can hang on to, come black-frost or sun.
Come hell or high water, it's something to save from the mess,
No matter whatever else you never got done.

For a second it seems like a man can know what he lives for,
When those eyelids go waggle, or maybe the eyes pop wide,
And that look comes there. Yeah, Christ, then you know who you are—
And will maybe remember that much even after you've died.

But now I lie worrying what look my own eyes got
When that Blue-Belly caught me off balance. Did that look mean then
That I'd honed for something not killing or you-know-what?
20 Hell, no. I'd lie easy if Jeff had just give me that ten.

II. Harvard '61: Battle Fatigue

I didn't mind dying—it wasn't that at all.
It behooves a man to prove manhood by dying for Right.
If you die for Right that fact is your dearest requital,
But you find it disturbing when others die who simply haven't the right.

Why should they die with that obscene insouciance?
They seem to insult the principle of your own death.
Touch pitch, be defiled: it was hard to keep proper distance
From such unprincipled wastrels of blood and profligates of breath.

I tried to slay without rancor, and often succeeded.
10 I tried to keep the heart pure, though hand took stain.
But they made it so hard for me, the way they proceeded
To parody with their own dying that Death which only Right should sustain.

Time passed. It got worse. It seemed like a plot against me.
I said they had made their own evil bed and lay on it,
But they grinned in the dark—they grinned—and I yet see
That last one. At woods-edge we held, and over the stubble they came with
bayonet.

He uttered his yell, he was there!—teeth yellow, some missing.
Why, *he's old as my father*, I thought, finger frozen on trigger.
I saw the ambeer on his whiskers, heard the old breath hissing.
20 The puncture came small on his chest. 'Twas nothing. The stain then got
bigger.

And he said: "Why, son, you done done it—I figgered I'd skeered ye."
Said: "Son, you look puke-pale. Buck up! If it hadn't been you,
Some other young squirt would a-done it." I stood, and weirdly
The tumult of battle went soundless, like gesture in dream. And I was dead,
too.

Dead, and had died for the Right, as I had a right to,
And glad to be dead, and hold my residence
Beyond life's awful illogic, and the world's stew,
Where people who haven't the right just die, with ghastly impertinence.

From the *Encyclopedia Americana*, (1961 Edition: Volume 20, p. 232)

"...the necessity of drafting men for army service resulted in one of the most sanguinary riots New York had ever known. On Saturday, July 11, 1863, a mob of thousands of frenzied laborers and idlers attacked and destroyed one of the enrollment centers. . . . Drunk with their first success, they attacked other buildings. For three days and nights, the rioters raged through the town, robbing stores and sacking and burning buildings, including the Colored Orphan Asylum. . . . Negroes were the special object of their savagery. Many unfortunate Negroes, including women and children, were caught and hanged on the nearest lamp posts. . . . Meanwhile, the vastly outnumbered police and the few military units in the city fought heroically. Not until Thursday did the 7th Regiment, followed by other troops also summoned from the front, enter the city. . . . The veteran guardsmen gave the rioters short shrift. That day saw the end of the worst phase."

WILDERNESS

He hurried up the street.

At the next corner, he saw it.

It hung from a lamp post, and when he first saw it, he could not imagine, as he approached, what it might be.

It hung there irrelevantly. It hung there like an empty sack, with the top tied together and the loose part of the top fluffing out and falling to one side, over the tight cord. That was what it first reminded him of. His mind clung to that image as long as possible. Then he knew that it was a human form. It was the form of a man, and the loose part of the top of the sack that fluffed out and fell to one side, over the constriction of the cord, was the head, hanging pensive, quizzical, abashed.

He stared up into the face, and in the sympathy of blood beating in his head and the stoppage of his own breath, he felt the agony that had popped those eyes and darkened that face. Then, in the waning light, still staring into the face, he gradually became aware that the focus of his attention was widening from that face, like the circular ripples from the point of contact where a stone has been dropped into the water. In that widening of focus, he realized that a gull was passing over the roofs, uttering its cry. But he also realized that the clothing on the body had been more than half stripped away, slashed perhaps, and wherever the flesh was exposed it was dark. At first he thought it was the color of dried blood. But he looked downward. The drooping feet, naked, were dark brown. He looked back up at the dark face. Then he knew.

It was the face of a black man, a Negro. It was the first black man he had ever seen.

And in that moment of recognition, he realized that the sympathetic pain, felt at first when he had thought the darkness of flesh to be a mark of the agony of strangulation, was now gone. With a gush of shame, even of desperation, he thought that as soon as he recognized the man as black, the deepest, instinctive blood-sympathy had begun to ebb. *Can I be that vile?* he demanded of himself. *Oh, can I be?*

To recover something, he studied the face again, he looked down at the body. He saw that the clothing had, in fact, been slashed, and that the flesh was scored with gashes. In the bad light he had not at first realized the fact. *Blood drying looks dark*, he thought, *like dark skin*.

The blood had dried, dark blood on dark skin. Then he saw that one last, slow, tumescent drop was falling from one foot. He looked at the foot. The toes had been cut off. His gaze wandered back up to the hands, tied primly before the body. He had thought—if he had thought anything—that the fingers were curled inward. Now he saw the truth. There were no fingers.

Then a thought came. The Rebels—they must be here, after all. That would explain everything. They had plunged through the city. Not Lee perhaps, but their great raider of cavalry. What was his name? Stuart—that was it. He thought of the Rebel cavalry riding through. They had hanged this lone black man, for a warning. They had ridden on and set those fires to the northeast. Yes, that was it, the Rebels.

He felt much better. Yes, the Rebels had done it.