

R W P  
*An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*

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## Memories of RPW

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In the spring of 1954—a full half-century ago—I first encountered the name Robert Penn Warren via a freshman English course at Clark University. In that heyday of the New Criticism, the Brooks, Purser, and Warren text, *An Approach to Literature*, proved an eye-opener that I later supplemented in a sophomore course based on *Understanding Poetry*. Not until my first year of graduate study at Brown University, however, did I become a serious reader of his creative writing. In fact, my first awareness that he was a poet came about during his visit to Brown in February, 1958, when he, not yet the winner of a Pulitzer Prize, presented a reading of his poems, mostly from *Promises*.

Among the images that got stamped into my involuntary memory that evening was one from “Dragon Country”—“that field mist is where his great turd steams.” The strongest visual impression of the occasion was provided by a bat that flew up from the organ (in Sayles Hall, originally a chapel) and kept circling round and round perilously close to the speaker’s head. Studiously ignoring the creature, Warren maintained his recitation without a hitch, including the lines about bullbats that “dizzied the sunset” in “What Was the Promise That Smiled from the Maples at Evening?” Probably the bat proved less exasperating than some of the questions he faced from a small group who met with him after the reading, most memorably from an inordinately aggressive young man on “What is the position of the artist in American society today?” Among Warren’s comments in this setting, the one that seemed most animated was his scornful dismissal of writer’s envy: to say “I wish I had written that,” he declared, was a contemptible response to another writer’s success.

A year later, in the spring of 1959, my first serious study of Warren’s poetry came about via a class taught by the eminent critic Hyatt Waggoner. Known mainly as a major novelist at that time, Warren had been allotted only a few poems in our anthology of

American poetry (edited by Louis Untermeyer), most notably “Bearded Oaks” and “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” but they were enough to lure me into a lifelong engagement with Warren’s poetry. By the year’s end, the new poems in *Promises*, when added to *Brother to Dragons* and *Selected Poems* (1944), proved substantial enough to merit consideration as a dissertation topic, especially in light of Professor Waggoner’s observation that Warren’s poetry had occasioned very little critical study. In 1961-1962, I wrote the dissertation, which got an additional boost from the publication in 1960 of *You, Emperors, and Others*. In 1964, my chapter on *Brother to Dragons* received a young scholar’s ideal anointing: publication in *PMLA*, thanks to the approval of its expert reader, Norman Holmes Pearson—who, come to think of it, was a colleague of Warren’s at Yale at the time and may have been pleased to help publicize the poet’s achievement. (In 1965, with revisions, the dissertation was published by the University of Kentucky Press with the title *A Colder Fire*.)

In August, 1964, during my third year in the English department at the University of Vermont, I received a surprise phone call from Mr. Warren, inviting me and my wife Penny to dinner at his “shack in the country” in West Wardsboro, a tiny hamlet near Stratton, Vermont. We bantered a little on the phone, with me remarking that his directions through the backwoods maze sounded like something from *Pilgrim’s Progress* and him replying that there would be no heavenly city at the end of it, sorry to say. (It sounded heavenly enough to me.) The shack in the country turned out to be a spacious, uniquely designed three-story structure with morning sun in the kitchen (Eleanor’s requirement) and—in Warren’s phrase—“moonlight in the can” (his idea). When we arrived in the late afternoon, Warren invited my wife and me to a swim in his pond, which would be pretty cold by September in Vermont, so we took a long walk on a country trail instead. Along with the beauty of the Vermont countryside, Warren’s flow of talk—in his Tennessee/Kentucky border accent—made the occasion uniquely memorable.

As it happened, the day of our visit fell on September 1, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of World War II, and Warren, who had been in Italy at the time, recalled a conversation a week before the war when an acquaintance had ecstatically reported the news of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact. "Now we will have peace," the friend had said, whereas Warren had known at once that the pact guaranteed a terrible aftermath. His political juices stirred by the memory, Warren looked me over—a native New Englander—and apparently assumed that I was a Northern liberal who despised the racist, morally inferior South. He grilled me about my politics, which were indeed liberal, and about my attitude toward the South, which—thanks largely to my readings in Faulkner—was ambivalent.

Gradually easing away from his suspicions of New England sanctimony, Warren talked at length about his trip around the country interviewing the eminent black leaders of the time for his forthcoming book, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (Who could have foreseen the problematics of that terminal noun?) The leader he most admired, perhaps because he dared to work openly in the "shotgun state" of Mississippi despite the recent murder of Medgar Evers, was Aaron Henry. What most outraged Warren about the lynching of Emmitt Till, a fourteen-year-old boy who had by a word or gesture violated the Code of the South regarding white women, was the release of the killers by an all-white jury in full knowledge of their guiltiness, whereupon they (the murderers) boasted of their deed in a national magazine article, knowing that the double jeopardy clause in the Constitution prohibited a second trial for the offense.

Warren's own politics in that year's presidential campaign clearly sided with Lyndon Johnson, as against the then ultra-conservative Barry Goldwater, but he displayed strong misgivings about Johnson's military actions in the Caribbean and Viet Nam. Regarding the international scene, he remarked on the prescience of an essay by Joseph Conrad that, extrapolating from the Russian defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1905, predicted a revolution

in Russia. Most interesting to Warren was Conrad's assertion that because these were Russians, it would make no difference whether it was a leftist or right-wing revolution.

Turning to literature, the only discordant note of the evening—but it was an important one—lay in our disagreement about the value of Walt Whitman. "I have come late to Whitman," Warren confessed (he was 59 at the time)—so late, it transpired, that "Come Up From the Fields, Father" was the only poem that Warren cited as worthwhile. More pleasingly, Warren's literary focus that evening opened widely enough to encompass two faculty members at my school, Brown University. First, he remarked that my mentor Hyatt Waggoner's book on Hawthorne (which had won the *Explicator* prize in 1955) was a superb work of criticism, especially regarding Hawthorne's short stories. (In a characteristically generous gesture, he sent Waggoner a note to that effect.) And he praised John Hawkes, whose work I had not read at the time, as a first-rate writer. When I, in New Critical fashion, asked what he liked in particular about Hawkes' fiction—the characters? the plot? the style? the play of irony?—he replied that he liked all of it and did not separate out its component elements.

Concerning his own work, I asked whether his references to speaking in tongues (as in the Willie Proudfit episode in *Night Rider* and in *Brother to Dragons*, where he describes "the Pentecostal intuition" as a "Truth-dazzled hour when the heart shall burst / In gouts of glory—hallelujah!") indicated his belief in this (back then) little-known religious experience. He affirmed his belief that the tongues are "the real thing," no doubt about it, but he also related a painful anecdote from his boyhood years. One of the men in the neighborhood who was known to be a devout believer had a wife whom Warren called a "truly godless woman." When the man, out of religious conviction, gave up farming tobacco, she made his life supremely miserable, yet for all his piety and sacrifice, he never got the tongues, whereas the wife, after a surprise late-life conversion, did. Warren's reluctant agnosticism—both his yearning for belief and inability to achieve it—may be encapsulated in this remnant of boyhood memory.

As darkness settled in, Eleanor Clark sent RPW and me down to the outdoors grill to keep tabs on a steak we were cooking, while she conversed with her special guest of the evening, the poet Barbara Howes. Four or five times we repeated the operation, with me holding the flashlight while Warren inserted a finger into a slice in the steak to test its temperature. The final upshot of our efforts was Eleanor's cry of pain and humiliation, "Oh Red, the steak is ruined! It's ruined!"—to which Warren replied, "Well, if it's ruined, it's ruined, and that's the end of it." I had no problem with the steak or the booze (I was surprised how much RPW could put away with no effect) or any other aspect of the occasion, including Barbara Howes' flat tire, which RPW and I discovered and fixed as the party ended toward midnight.

In the following July (1965), the Warrens made a reverse visit, when Eleanor gave a talk to the Vermont Writers League at the University of Vermont. She chose to read from *The Oysters of Lacmariaquer*, which earned her a National Book Award during the same year that Warren's *Flood* had evoked a decidedly lukewarm critical reception. (He remained convinced to the end that it equaled his two previous best—*All the King's Men* and *World Enough and Time*.) After the reading, they came to my home for a bite to eat, where Eleanor spoke of being ravenously hungry but had to be cajoled into consuming a single cheeseburger. Although she had done a fine job with the reading—which she had agreed to do, she said, because she "owed something to Vermont"—she expressed chagrin about her performance, which was mere "jabbering" at her audience, in her phrasing. Warren tried to buck her up by insisting that all any speaker does is to "jabber" at an audience, a thought she appeared to find comforting.

The following year, 1966, I moved to Duke University, where I tracked Warren's career at a distance—through *Tale of Time* (in *Selected Poems, 1923-1966*), the Bollingen Prize (1967), *Incarnations* (1968), and *Audubon: A Vision* (1969). Then, in February, 1974, he came to Duke as the featured artist in the annual Blackburn Literary Festival, for which he read from his forthcoming volume *Or Else*. During these subsequent thirty years, my

involuntary memory has relished certain details from those readings—his portrait of Dreiser, for example, as a compulsive masturbator, thief, and ingrate who “will write a great novel someday,” and most of all the depictions of characters in “Rattlesnake County”: the cowboys uttering ecstatic cries down the mountainside; the wealthy middle-aged adulteress who maintained her youth and beauty through her “essential incapacity for experience”; the Indian with a cleft palate called Laughing Boy, who taught RPW how to kill snakes on the lawn at night by dropping gasoline and a lit match on their tails; and RPW himself eating vanilla ice cream on the terrace with black flecks dropping into it from a forest fire in the distance. The next day, Warren presented himself for random discussion with a sizeable audience of students, faculty, and townspeople. Maintaining anonymity by sitting far in the rear, I exploited his comment that Dreiser “made a fortune” on *An American Tragedy* by asking how many copies of *All the King’s Men* had been sold up to now. Apparently embarrassed by the question, he declined to answer; when pressed by another member of the audience, he declared (drawing his hand across his mouth at the crucial moment), “It has sold approximately mumble-mumble copies.”

Two after-effects of my talking with him in that spring of 1974 were a correction of my pronunciation (it surprised me to learn that the *s* in Louisville, Kentucky is mute) and my decision to write a new book on Warren’s poetry. Since publication of *A Colder Fire*, which studied Warren’s verse through the 1960 volume *You, Emperors, and Others*, four new volumes of verse had appeared, and these new signs of burgeoning creativity as Warren approached his seventieth year called for a reconceptualization of the whole oeuvre. In fact, by the time my new book, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*, actually came out in 1977, the poet’s surge of late creativity had placed two more collections under my purview—the superb *Can I See Arcturus from Where I Stand?* (in *Selected Poems, 1923-1975*) and several pages of poems which Warren sent me in manuscript form from the forthcoming Pulitzer Prize winner *Now and Then* (1977).

While giving credit for my book to Warren's visit of 1974 and his oncoming rush of creativity, I must acknowledge one other germinating factor—a benign visitation from that essential friend of the scholar, serendipity. Back when I wrote the dissertation that turned into *A Colder Fire*, the serendipitous happenstance was my passing glimpse, in a drug store, of a paperback copy of Carl Gustav Jung's book, *The Undiscovered Self*, which, with no forethought on my part, became the backbone of my poetic analysis. For this new book, the serendipitous contribution was a passing reference by a colleague, during a doctoral oral exam, to William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I had heard of it vaguely, but now I decided to read it, and it—abetted by James's books on psychology, philosophy, and pragmatism—became the dominant influence on *The Poetic Vision*.

Having sent him a courtesy copy of *The Poetic Vision*, I was deeply surprised and touched to receive in return a long letter—about a thousand words—in which Warren expressed strong satisfaction with my handiwork: “Very often you have opened my own eyes to implications—or even ideas—which I had been working with in a quite blundering and unconscious way.” Both Jung and William James figured into this statement. Though “I am very ignorant of Jung,” in fact “rather afraid to read Jung,” he wrote (September 24, 1977), a connection may still be postulated: “Often what seems Jungian is simply something I arrived at by a different route.” As for William James, “I do know James much better [than Jung], but I'm sure that the relationship there, when it comes to poems, has always been very dark and devious and unconscious. One more thing, I am struck by the way you spot key psychological moments in my own life, changes which I couldn't well have documented from my own poems, in many cases.” After discussing his just-completed rewriting of *Brother to Dragons*—“vastly improved,” he hoped, after working on it “for more than fifteen years”—he scribbled a typically generous postscript: “I regard your book as a most impressive feat of literary analysis. I am very grateful.”

Only twice again did I have contact with Robert Penn Warren in person. The first instance occurred in August, 1983, when I phoned his place in Vermont from the Beinecke Library at Yale to solicit his permission to research his manuscripts. Eleanor Clark intercepted the call, and, explaining that he had just returned from a Boston hospital, seemed reluctant to pass me through to her husband. (I had no idea how terribly ill he was, just home from a bone marrow transplant.) Belying his ordeal, his voice was strong and gracious as always, and he seemed ready for extended conversation, but mindful of Eleanor's misgivings, I felt obliged to keep the phone call brief. The other encounter was a matter of a few seconds in New York City in May, 1984. On my way from North Carolina to New England, I stopped (nominally representing Duke University) at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine to see the dedication of its Poet's Corner. I had not realized that Robert Penn Warren was to be one of the speakers, and was a little stunned when he not only showed up on the Program but chanced to choose my row of seats to cross through on his way to the center aisle. We exchanged a few words as he stepped over my feet, and a little later he proceeded to recite Section 5 of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," concluding poignantly, I thought, with "Night and day journeys a coffin." Though he had come late to Whitman, as he had said back in 1964, it was happily not too late to appreciate in due course the tremendous power and solace of "Lilacs."

Though I never saw or heard Robert Penn Warren again (televised snippets excepted), we did exchange some written correspondence. In October 1987, the good people at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee, where Warren had attended high school, staged a wonderful Robert Penn Warren Celebration. Over a hundred scholars and aficionados gathered to get acquainted with one another, present their papers, and tour significant places, including his birth house in nearby Guthrie, Kentucky. Here I had the intense pleasure of meeting Floyd Watkins, R. W. B. Lewis, James Justus, and many other Warren scholars who had hitherto been just names on a page, along with others

such as Randolph Runyan and William Bedford Clark who were already becoming their prolific successors.

The high point of the three day program was a stage performance of Warren's novella, "The Circus in the Attic," in a downtown theater. So stunning was this performance that I sent Warren a note calling it, in my opinion, a more powerful dramatization of a small town community than Thornton Wilder's celebrated classic, "Our Town." At the same time, it seemed appropriate to send him the Program for the whole Celebration, complete with an incidental assurance that my own presentation, "Warren's 'Worst' Book," was actually a strong defense of the badly underrated *You, Emperors, and Others*. His note in reply expressed deep gratification at the whole event, particularly including "The Circus in the Attic," and indicated a surprising eagerness for my vindication of *You, Emperors* to be published. (It did appear in a 1990 number of *The South Carolina Review*.) Two years later, a few months after Warren's death on September 15, 1989, the precedent of the Austin Peay Celebration prompted me to undertake the founding of the Robert Penn Warren Circle. After vetting the idea of a Circle with other Warren aficionados such as James Justus and Allen Shepherd, I wrote to Austin Peay, obtained the list of names and addresses from their Celebration of 1987, and sent an invitation to one and all to join this organization dedicated to a better understanding and appreciation of the writer's life, works, and wider literary network.

The founding of the Robert Penn Warren Circle did not occur without incident. Thinking to recruit members at the 1989 MLA meeting in Washington, a five-hour drive from Durham, I took my Volvo to a name-brand lubricating shop for an oil change. A hundred miles out of town, the oil light kept flashing, but repeated checks indicated that the oil well was full, so I assumed that the problem was a malfunction in the warning light. (Even so, if this incident had happened near home, I would have taken it at once to the shop.) Near Petersburg, Virginia, a horrible clunking sound commenced, then gave way to silence, and the Volvo rolled into the breakdown

lane. (I was told afterward that my famous brand lubricating shop often used oil with paraffin in it, which can plug up the oil lines without revealing a problem on the dipstick.) I thumbed a ride to a garage and called a wrecker.

In today's currency, the Volvo's replacement engine cost about \$6,000, to which one might add the cost of the rental car, hotel room, and incidentals to make up a fairly expensive adventure in Circle-building. After all that, my harvest at MLA totaled one recruit. But she—a first-rate Warren scholar from Tennessee named Charlotte Beck—was worth every penny, as was the Circle itself. Since 1990, it has met every year about the time of Warren's birthday (April 24) at Western Kentucky University, home of the Robert Penn Warren Center, with a side trip to the artist's native ground in nearby Guthrie and its vicinity. (One year—1996—the group met jointly with the Herman Melville Society in North Adams, Massachusetts, making visits to Melville's home in the Berkshires and to Warren's Vermont hideaway, which Warren's daughter Rosanna graciously opened for us.) The Circle has also sponsored panels at the annual meetings of the MLA, SAMLA, and ALA organizations.

As an older man verging upon my three score years and ten, what I find most gratifying after a long career in Warren studies is the generation of young scholars carrying on the good work, some of whom I meet at every annual Circle meeting. Their energy and insight, abetted by the superb scholarship of old hands such as Joseph Blotner (*Robert Penn Warren: A Biography*) and John Burt (editor of *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*), figure to carry forward the work of understanding and appreciating this good man and great artist. None of these younger people will ever enjoy the privilege of seeing the man recite poetry with a bat circling his head, or hear his wife wail "Red, the steak is ruined!," or hear his voice expounding in a rural Kentucky drawl about Joseph Conrad, or exchange notes in the mail about one's own scholarship in the Warren oeuvre. Perhaps these reminiscences will join those of others

to help fill the space between the man and his work, a space that “the turpitude of time” (as a Warren poem puts it) is otherwise bound to widen as the decades roll by.