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Quest for a Story of Deep Delight: Robert Penn Warren's Poetic Genius

The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren
edited by John Burt with a foreword by Harold Bloom.
Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1998.

Recent publishing history suggests a renewed interest in the life and writings of Robert Penn Warren, three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and first Poet Laureate of the United States. Two of Warren's major works of social analysis, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict of the South* and *The Legacy of the Civil War*, have recently been reissued. LSU has republished the revised version of *Brother to Dragons* in its "voices of the south" series. The correspondence of Warren and Cleanth Brooks and Joseph Blotner's biography of Warren have also appeared in the last few years.

The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren, masterfully edited by John Burt, may serve as the capstone of this interest in Warren, as it provides an almost complete record of Warren's achievement as a poet. This volume includes all of Warren's published poems—over five hundred individual items—with the exception of the two versions of the book-length *Brother to Dragons*. In addition to the poems, printed in the form of their first appearance, John Burt provides copious notes tracing the various revisions Warren made throughout his life. This was no easy task, for Warren was a restless poet, constantly revising his earlier

work. This collection thus offers the definitive texts of Warren's poetry, leaving all interested parties in editor John Burt's debt.

Warren remains a man and a mind worth discovering, or rediscovering, for his writings touch the depths of the American experience with insight and sensitivity that few others have been able to achieve. Warren is best known as a novelist, author of *All the King's Men*, for which he won a Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1946. For some, however, Warren was preeminently a poet, and he received two Pulitzer Prizes for his poetry, in 1957 for *Promises: Poems, 1954-1956*, and in 1978 for *Now and Then: Poems, 1976-1978*. A complete portrait of Warren cannot stop with his mastery of fiction and poetry, however, for Warren was also an accomplished literary and social critic.

In an essay on Joseph Conrad, Warren wrote that the philosophical novelist or poet "is one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalization about values, for whom the image strives to rise to symbol, for whom images always fall into a dialectical configuration, for whom the urgency

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of experience, no matter how vividly and strongly experience may enchant, is the urgency to know the meaning of experience.” Warren goes on to argue that this does not make the philosophical novelist “schematic and deductive,” but that “he is willing to go naked into the pit, again and again, to make the same old struggle for his truth.”

One of the appealing aspects of Warren is that, in each of the genres of writing which he mastered, he went into the pit again and again, to make the same old struggle for truth, without undermining the integrity of the particular genre he happened to be working in at the moment. Warren never confused social criticism with fiction or with poetry. Warren knew that what one learned from a work of art was not a philosophical proposition. We gain the knowledge of imaginative enactment as we encounter the protagonist and place ourselves in his position as moral actor as the action unfolds. It is this imaginative encounter, Warren thought, that helps to shape us as individuals.

The truth that Warren constantly struggles with revolves around the relationship of past to present and future. Jack Burden, narrator of *All the King's Men*, suggests this theme in a conversation with Anne Stanton: “I tried to tell her how if you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other, and how if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future.” It is out of the struggle to come to terms with one's past that one is able to create one's own identity.

Warren's poetic career is evidence both for and against Alexis de Tocqueville's understanding of the nature of poetry in democratic societies. Tocqueville argued that democratic poetry would have no interest in the past, but would look toward the

future. Further, Tocqueville held that democratic poetry would have no interest in externals—the gods, heroes, nature—but would come to focus on man himself. Warren's poetry, however, is consumed with history—world, national, communal, and personal. But it is consumed with a concern for history because it is, ultimately, concerned with understanding, and creating, the person that is Robert Penn Warren. As Warren writes in “How to Tell a Love Story,”

*If there is no history there is no story.
And no Time, no word. (365)*

My reading of Warren's poetry began with what I have come to think of as his “Americana Trilogy”: *Brother to Dragons* (1953, revised 1979), *Audubon: A Vision* (1969), and *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (1982). In these three poems, Warren makes use of America's historical experience to search for the meaning of that experience. Coming to accept the nation's past involves not only affirming the right and good, but also accepting the burden of that past. In all three of these poems Robert Penn Warren himself appears as an actor. For Warren, the search for the past is part of the search for himself, and the creation of the past is crucial for his own self-creation. In *Brother to Dragons* the narrator, R.P.W., talks with Thomas Jefferson about the murder of a slave committed in Kentucky by his two nephews, Lilburne and Isham Lewis, and the effect this crime had on Jefferson's understanding of human nature.

In *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* Warren recreates, through narrative, inner dialogue, and quotation, the running battle between Chief Joseph's band of Nez Perce as they seek Canada and freedom and the U. S. Cavalry committed to bring them to life on the reservation. Joseph had promised his dying father never to sell their land, and Joseph knows that his father's eyes watch

his struggle toward freedom. Warren and two friends trek to the Little Bear Paw Mountains to see the site of Joseph's surrender. He observes the "vastness of plains lifting in twilight" while thinking of "the squirming myriads far at my back."

*But suddenly knew that for those sound
Of heart there is no ultimate
Irony. There is only
Process, which is one name for history. (525)*

But this analytic insight of modern science rests in uneasy tension with the final image of human responsibility contained in the poem.

*But wondered,
Even so, if when the traffic light
Rings green, some stranger may pause and
thus miss
His own mob's rush to go where the light
Says go, and pausing, may look,
Not into a deepening shade of canyon,
Nor, head now up, toward ice peak in
moonlight white,
But, standing paralyzed in his momentary
eternity, into
His own heart look while he asks
From what undefinable distance, years, and
direction,
Eyes of fathers are suddenly fixed on him.
(526)*

Was Joseph simply driven by forces greater than he to act in a certain way, or was Joseph a moral actor, accountable to his father, his tribe, his god, and himself, for his actions? The same can be asked of the various generals engaged in tracking down Joseph and his tribe. The same can be asked, Warren suggests, of us as we go about our daily tasks in a world far removed from the vast emptiness of northern Montana.

In *Audubon: A Vision* Warren creates a series of vignettes designed to portray the spirit of Jean Jacques Audubon and the life he lived. In "The Dream He Never Knew the End Of," Warren sketches Audubon's encounter with a cold-hearted mother and

her two sons in the wilderness, a place where he sought solitude and peace. Audubon seeks shelter in their cabin, but realizes that the old woman intends to murder him during the night for his gold watch. Audubon is saved by the timely entrance of other travelers, and the mother and sons are hanged.

*The affair was not tidy: bough low, no drop,
with the clients
Simply hung up, feet not much clear of the
ground, but not
Quite close enough to permit any dancing.
The affair was not quick: both sons long
jerking and farting, but she,
From the first, without motion, frozen
In a rage of will, an ecstasy of iron, as though
This was the dream that, lifelong, she had
dreamed toward.
The face,
Eyes a-glare, jaws clenched, now glowing
black with congestion
Like a plum, had achieved,
It seemed to him, a new dimension of
beauty. (260)*

It is not surprising that Audubon should find beauty in the dead face of his potential murderer. Audubon is known to us today because of his ability to bring out the beauty in dead creatures. As Warren puts it in the section of the poem entitled "Love and Knowledge,"

*He slew them, at surprising distances, with
his gun.
Over a body held in his hand, his head was
bowed low,
But not in grief.

He put them where they are, and there we see
them:
In our imagination.

What is love?*

One name for it is knowledge. (266)

Audubon "continued to walk in the world," but his relationship with his wife was troubled:

*He tries to remember his wife.
He can remember nothing.* (260)

Warren's Audubon walked in the world as he would, not as others would have him, for, as Warren quotes from Audubon himself, he loved " 'indepenn and piece more than humbug and money.' " Could what appeared to be irresponsibility to some actually be love? In "The Sign Whereby He Knew" Warren provides a picture of Audubon's alternatives:

*Keep store, dandle babies, and at night
nuzzle
The hazelnut-shaped sweet tits of Lucy, and
With the piratical mark-up of the frontier,
get rich.*

But you did not, being of weak character.

*You saw, from the forest pond, already dark,
the great trumpeter swan
Rise, in clangor, and light up the steep air
where,
In the height of last light, it glimmered, like
white flame.*

*The definition of love being, as we know,
complex,
We may say that he, after all, loved his wife.*

*The letter, from campfire, keelboat, or slum
room in New Orleans,
Always ended, "God bless you, dear Lucy."
After sunset,*

Alone, he played his flute in the forest. (262)

After having established his reputation, Audubon finally returns home to live with Lucy. But civilized life was not for him.

*But the fiddle
Soon lay on the shelf untouched, the
mouthpiece
Of the flute was dry, and his brushes.* (264)

Warren inserts himself into each of the "Americana" poems. In *Audubon* he appears as a child in the poem's final segment:

*Long ago, in Kentucky, I, a boy, stood
By a dirt road, in a first dark, and heard
The great geese hoot northward.*

*I could not see them, there being no moon
And the stars sparse. I heard them.*

*I did not know what was happening in my
heart.* (266)

For Warren, coming to terms with Audubon—whether the historical Audubon or Warren's own mythic recreation of Audubon—is crucial in coming to terms with and understanding himself. In seeking the heart of Audubon, Warren was coming to understand his own heart. To walk in the world with passion ("what is man but his passion?" Warren asks early in the poem) is, finally, one way to establish one's identity in the world. Another way to establish one's identity is to create stories about the world. *Audubon* ends with a plea for a story:

Tell me a story.

*In this century, and moment, of mania,
Tell me a story.*

*Make it a story of great distances, and
starlight.*

*The name of the story will be Time,
But you must not pronounce its name.*

Tell me a story of deep delight. (267)

One of the great virtues of this collection is that it allows the reader to tie Warren's work together as a whole. In *Incarnations*, which precedes *Audubon*, and in *Or Else*, which follows it, Warren documents "this century, and moment, of mania." "Internal Injuries," the center section of *Incarnations*, offers frenetic accounts of a white man dying of cancer in a southern prison and of a black woman being run over by a truck. *Or Else* provides images of race ("Ballad of

Mister Dutcher and the Last Lynching in Gupton" and "News Photo") and a reflection on the war in Vietnam ("Bad Year, Bad War: A New Year's Card, 1969").

Perhaps Warren spent his life searching for a story of deep delight; throughout his poetry we catch brief glimpses of delight. But any sense of human delight is tempered by Warren's understanding of human nature. In the foreword, Harold Bloom writes of Warren's "Augustinian convictions as to sin, error, guilt, and history." One of Warren's later poems, "A Few Axioms for a Young Man," offers an image that is emblematic of his understanding of man's fallen nature.

*A friendly and able warden once told me,
after one fag con
Had murdered another at recreation hour,
that
He demanded of the towerman nearest
Why he had not fired. The towerman,
Though expert enough, replied that he
Had been afraid of killing an innocent man.
My warden friend stared at him a full
minute,
Then exploded: "Jesus Christ!
There ain't no innocent man. Draw yore
pay." (600)*

No innocent man is to be found in Warren's world, unless by "innocent" we mean ignorant of the ways of the world, for there are a few of these. But most often, they are innocent, or ignorant, by choice, avoiding the reality confronting them. Is a story of "deep delight" possible in such a world?

In the collection *Or Else* Warren reflects on God with a painful longing. In "Stargazing," Warren writes,

*The stars
Love me. I love them. I wish they
Loved God, too. I truly wish that. (302)*

"Stargazing" is followed by "What You Sometimes Feel on Your Face at Night:"

*Out of mist, God's
Blind hand gropes to find
Your face. The fingers
Want to memorize your face. The fingers
Will be wet with the tears of your eyes. God
Wants only to love you, perhaps. (302)*

In reading Warren, one comes away with the sense that sin is real, but that God is merely a hypothesis that occasionally flits through one's imagination. Whether a story of deep delight is possible in a world of Augustinian sinfulness without an Augustinian sense of grace is problematic. That, however, is the world within which Robert Penn Warren's poetry and fiction operates. This constructed world is, to use a phrase of Warren's own making, his "ultimate gamble." It is a gamble that he makes honestly, courageously, and consistently. This integrity—honesty and courage—is what makes Warren an author worth wrestling with, and what makes this volume such a valuable collection of poetry.