

# Humanities

## Companion to Owls

When I was young,  
I had not given a penny for a song  
Did not the poet sing it with such airs  
That one believed he had a sword upstairs.  
—W.B. Yeats

A wintry light gathered at the great window cut into the wall of the old Connecticut farmhouse. It played in grey upon the grey of the once-red hair, shadowing with a needless austerity the strong lines of the face; the grey-blue eyes had looked on sixty-eight winters. Beneath the rumpled tweeds and a deep blue heavy turtleneck the figure was robust: old-soldierly, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, a little stooped. A disorder of books and papers spread away from the chair on all sides. At his back, on shelves he'd built when he moved here 20 years ago, were ranged some of the 6,000 books he keeps about the place.

"Yes," said Robert Penn Warren, "I was doubly blessed in my own family and in my grandfather. My father and mother were both highly intelligent people. He was, you might say, a scholar *manqué*, a very bookish man; as a young man he'd written poetry and had some of it published. I was raised in a world of books. No, they weren't churchy; we didn't say grace at meals. The Bible was one of the things around the house to read, of course. And then it was a rare thing, in the rural Kentucky of that time, for a thirteen-year-old boy—or was it fourteen?—to be given, as I was, Darwin's *Origin of Species* for a birthday present.

"I suppose today we might say it would unfit you for life never to hear your father or mother raise their voices against each other. But I never heard that once in my life. In the sense of lovingkindness, people devoted to each other and interested in your welfare, I couldn't have been luckier. Being human I've had my problems, but no quarrel with my lot in that way.

"Both my grandfathers were Confederate soldiers. I didn't know my father's father—he died about 1875—but he was a bookish man, too; he'd been what we'd now call shell-shocked, I suppose, and was rather eccentric, played the fiddle all night, I was told. But my maternal grandfather, Gabriel Thomas Penn, was alive, lived on a remote Kentucky tobacco farm."

A pause. The memory deep, and deepening.

"I spent the summers from about seven to thirteen on that farm with him. He was a man full of poetry and

history—eighteenth century poetry and romantic poetry that he recited to me from memory, and a lot of military history, especially *Napoleon and his Marshals* and of course how he fought in the Civil War. He was a cavalry captain with Forrest. He was an old man then and hadn't much to do except talk with a small boy. So we sat under his cedar tree and talked long about these things in the hot summer afternoons.

"It was all a kind of romance—his loneliness and bookishness, and this old rundown farm; he was sort of a failure in life, as a matter of fact. His daughter used to say 'Papa's a visionary.' He would explore his memory for what he'd learned in books, what he'd seen, what he'd been through. I got the benefit. There was plenty for a boy to do on the farm, but nobody else my age.

"That was the shape of my life, those three people, right through 'til I went away to senior year in high school at 15 in Tennessee, not far away. They're in my poetry, more and more as the years go on."

Robert Penn Warren published his first poem 52 years ago, in 1922. The time span for the books that followed—there are 27, not counting anthologies, chil-

Photo: Jill Krementz



ROBERT PENN WARREN. Mr. Warren will deliver the 1974 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities on April 29-30 in Washington, D.C. at the invitation of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

dren's books, textbooks—has discomfited some critics who would like to tie him down in one generation or another. Others have found his range—poetry, novels, plays, short stories, essays, criticism—unnervingly cumbrous. More generous are those who marvel at the rarity among American writers of a creative energy so long sustained, the fount still flowing. With six books already behind him, Warren was 41 when *All the King's Men* won a Pulitzer Prize (it was made into an Oscar-winning film in 1949). He was 52 when *Promises: Poems 1954-56* won another Pulitzer, making him the only writer to win this award for both fiction and poetry. A rain of other honors has fallen to him. The reputation, long in time, is also wide in the world. His books are widely published abroad, and sales of *All the King's Men* have reached 2.5 million worldwide, including 20 foreign language editions. "Bulgarian is the latest," he says. "The Bulgarian cultural attaché tells me 30,000 copies of 'King's Men' were sold in the first week. Yevtushenko has vouched for its great popularity in Russia, but I don't have any sales figures—and no royalties unless I go there. The play, too; it opened simultaneously in Cracow and Warsaw, and later ran something like two years in Moscow. I hear they've even made it into a movie. Yes, I know—Solzhenitsyn. Of course, I've joined in the protests. It's very distressing."

### *No Sign of Slackening*

Warren's literary zest, or compulsion, shows no sign of slackening. Three new books have appeared in just over four years: *Audubon: A Vision* (poems, 1969), *Homage to Theodore Dreiser* (a critical appreciation, 1971), and *Meet Me in the Green Glen* (novel, 1971). A new book of poems is to be published next October, and the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities will also become a book. ("I've got a draft here that runs over 40,000 words, far too much for the lecture. Maybe the Harvard Press can use 15,000 when they do the book. The cutting is always a terrible struggle.") Such a pace makes demands; bowing to them he has given up his classes at Yale, ending 40 years of teaching there and elsewhere. He needs a place to hide—from biographers, doctoral candidates, critics, symposium directors—but must be content with outings in Vermont and sojourns abroad. This year it will be back to Italy where his wife, Eleanor Clark, will be revising her best-known book, *Rome and a Villa*. His work-place, in the barn, is a mare's nest of jumbled manuscripts, books and correspondence. "The amount of mail he gets is horrendous," says Albert Erskine, an old friend and Warren's editor at Random House where a lot of the mail comes. For Erskine, as for others who know him well, Warren still goes by the old nickname, "Red."

Warren's debt to his family embraces a powerful sense of place—the village of Guthrie in southwestern Kentucky that was home, and especially the wild country around the Penn farm. In *The Burden of Time*, John L. Stewart has written: "It was rough land with caves, gorges, limestone shelves, and many a hiding place. There was a spring from which Warren drank

on hot days. Its waters flowed away to a pool full of quicksand in which it was said a man and his team of oxen had disappeared. At night Warren lay on a scratchy mattress filled with new straw and listened to the sound of his grandfather's breathing or an owl's hoot . . . The hail storms, the grass made rich by lime, the bright swiftness of the streams and torpor of the rivers, the great age of the trees, the sweetness of the morning air, the variety of the horizon—take all this, and Warren's Kentucky had about it a beauty and violence and sadness remarkable even for the South . . . He has lived many places, but when he seeks for radical symbols of the human condition, his mind reaches back to the land he knew as a boy."

### *Nature—Concrete and Particular*

Nature—including human nature—in Warren's writing is usually concrete and particular, vivid, palpable. But not in his earliest writing. "At home I read a great deal," Warren says, "but didn't try to write anything" before going off as a shy 16-year old to Vanderbilt. Besides, he arrived there expecting to study science. But he was quickly caught up in a literary education made exciting by two young teachers who were also practicing poets—Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom. They, joined by Allen Tate, Merrill Moore, and later by Warren, were to become the most famous members of a group which, in 1922, began an outpouring of poetry in *The Fugitive*, a magazine whose six-year existence was something of a prelude to the "Southern Renaissance" in American literature. Warren's first poems were bookish—"my taste ran to the grand and romantic, to resounding lines and sweeping gestures"—but Davidson quickly came to regard this "freckled, angular, gawky boy" as "a prodigy whom at birth the Muse had apparently vested with a complete literary equipment."

It was only a question of time before the old man with a Yeatsian "sword upstairs" would step from memory to become the demiurge in much of Warren's best work. A transfiguring event in that memory is recalled in the poem "Court-martial," which begins

*Under the cedar tree  
He would sit, all summer, with me:  
An old man and a small grandson  
Withdrawn from the heat of the sun.  
Captain, cavalry, C.S.A.,  
An old man, now shrunken, gray,  
Pointed beard clipped the classic way,  
Tendons long gone crank and wry,  
And long shrunken the cavalryman's thigh  
Under the pale-washed blue jean.  
His pipe smoke lifts, serene  
Beneath boughs of evergreen,  
With sunlight dappling between.  
I see him now, as once seen.*

Then it happens: as the boy dreams of repairing "the mistakes of his old war," the old man suddenly bursts forth with a terrifying tale of guerrillas plundering the countryside during that War. He'd been charged with rounding up the villains—and with hanging them, after

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## NEH Grant Profiles



### The Young Trekkers

They were a party of "hard-gutted" early Mormon pioneers preparing to trek through desert country in southern Nevada. They'd studied the reports of earlier travelers: where to find water, what to expect from the Indians. The oxen were ready, the wagon train nearly so.

They knew there'd be setbacks. But the worst blow was in losing a third of their number before the journey began. Not from Indian raids, disease, or starvation. The reason was utterly mundane: the high school term was over and the defectors had gone off to summer jobs pumping gas or tending lunch counters—or had simply gone off, period.

These were the Muddy Mission Pioneers of June 1973, a group of 4-H Club members and students at the Moapa Valley High School in Overton (pop. 900), Nevada. The 22 "surviving" members of the party went on to re-enact a portion of an 1865 wagon-train journey by Mormon settlers, roughing it in period costumes and recording their experiences on film. The original trekkers had come down from Utah on the Old Spanish Trail to make new lives in the Moapa Valley, where the Muddy River flows. There had been real losses then: of 183 in the party, only 23 survived the 500-mile epic.

The wagon-train re-enactment culminated three months of frenetic extra-curricular activity by the young Muddy Mission project members. Having won a grant from the NEH Youthgrants in the Humanities program in spite of the stiffest competition, the young people had done their own research in local and state libraries, hunted through church records and tattered diaries, interviewed oldtimers, and produced a manuscript describing the 1865 events. They had made their own costumes from authentic designs, charted the cross-country trek to an overnight campsite, built a replica of an early mud-and-wattles house. Project Director Diana Newman, a high school senior and 4-H Club veteran, had valuable support from Roy Purcell, Director of the Southern Nevada Museum, and from Charles Spradling and Arabelle Hafner (Mrs. Hafner's book, *100 Years on the Muddy*, was a prime historical source). But she and her fellow-students had to warm up local interest and cooperation. They needed wagons, oxen, horses, a milk cow and supplies for the adventure. Initially dubious, the valley citizenry—challenged by finding themselves outdone in knowledge of local history—rallied 'round and all necessary help was forthcoming. In the end, forty of them joined the youthful company on the day of the trek.

The media loved it. Several newspapers and four TV stations carried reports and showed the wagons rolling across the desert, the pioneers camping, cooking (beans, cornbread and milk), and at morning prayers. The project produced a photographic record, fully documented, which went on exhibit at the State Fair in the Las Vegas Convention Center as well as at the Southern Nevada Museum.

In their reports to the Youthgrants office Diana Newman and her Deputy, Marie Birch, wrote of their initial discouragement (those early losses!) and final sense of a mission well done, reflecting credit on all who participated. They had—as they set out to do—developed an appreciation for the cultural and historical heritage of their community ("a town so small there isn't much to do") and made it the subject of interest far beyond the desert oasis of the Moapa Valley.

### Facades: Logic and Lyric

Need a winner for your next turn in the family auto-trip game of Twenty Questions? You begin with "Who am I?" and await the howls of protest when you turn out to be Charles Édouard Jeanneret.

Charles Édouard *who?* "Well", you respond, "he's been called the most important architect of the twentieth century, maybe the greatest since Michelangelo. Born in Switzerland in 1887; died in France in 1965. He's famous also as a city planner, painter, sculptor and author. Perhaps you know him by his pseudonym, Le Corbusier?"

If it should just so happen that you're driving through Cambridge, Mass., you can double the educational effect of this ploy by stopping to take a look at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, on the Harvard University campus. It is typical of Charles Édouard's—all right, Le Corbusier's—late style, you point out, a bold structure of glass and reinforced concrete built partly on stilts or columns, visually exciting both from the outside and within. It is the only building in the U.S. designed by Le Corbusier, although his influence is everywhere—for example, right across the river, in the Boston City Hall. Suppose, now, you are driving down to New York: the elevated highways, pedestrian malls, vertical villages, roof gardens and urban parks of megalopolis all owe something to Le Corbusier's pioneering views of forty and fifty years ago. Manhattan is full of monuments to his thinking (often mis-applied) including the UN headquarters, for whose design he is partly responsible. With your interest in modern architecture now thoroughly stimu-



The Centre Le Corbusier, Zurich—the architect's last building.

lated, pay a visit to the Guggenheim Museum before leaving town. The great coil of this building is the bold vision of Frank Lloyd Wright, the American genius whose reputation rivals Le Corbusier's. File this mental picture away until you can get to France and compare it with the very different masterpiece of Le Corbusier's imagination, the chapel of Notre Dame du Haut, at Ronchamp in the Vosges mountains. Like the Guggenheim it was built in the 1950's, and has been called "the greatest building of our time" (G. E. Kidder Smith), a noble creation in which "lyric and logic become one in the service of mankind" (Maurice Besset).

Remarkably—despite his own voluminous writings and the extensive literature about him—Le Corbusier's work and thought have yet to receive adequate scholarly assessment. Among those now working to fill that breach is Peter Serenyi, a Hungarian refugee whose art history Ph.D. was delayed by his having to support his brothers and sisters when they all immigrated to the U.S. After three years as an office boy and bank clerk, and a stretch in the Army, he finally made it, by way of Dartmouth, Yale and Washington University in St. Louis. The title of his dissertation: "Le Corbusier's Art and Thought, 1918-1935." Now teaching at Northeastern University in Boston, Serenyi credits an NEH Summer Stipend with enriching his course in modern architecture and his own scholarly work-in-progress, an anthology of critical writings on Le Corbusier plus an original monograph.

Serenyi's stipend took him to Corbusier's birthplace,

La Chaux-de-Fonds, where he discovered three unpublished manuscripts (one on the Parthenon) by the master and—using his fluent French and German—interviewed surviving artist friends. He called on Le Corbusier's brother, Albert Jeanneret, in Vevey, obtaining photographs of rare family pictures; delved into the archives of the Centre Le Corbusier at Zurich and the Fondation Le Corbusier in Paris; and spoke with veterans of the architect's Paris atelier and office, taking time also to visit buildings of his design.

What fascinates Serenyi is Le Corbusier's enigmatic personality. How did this artist of coolly classical instincts—this mathematical genius who devised his own laws of proportion—come to design such innovative individual buildings, such revolutionary cities? Use of a pseudonym is in the French artistic tradition (his was adapted from an uncle's family name), but Le Corbusier is only one of several he used. A man of façades, he refers to himself in his books in the third person, and his early buildings are marked by shielding outer structures, concealing the complex composition within. What changed outlook led him to drop the shield, to turn increasingly to warmer, more openly imaginative conceptions? Already in 1929 the pangs of fame had caused him to exclaim, "Today I am called a rebel, but I have had only one teacher: the past." Serenyi thinks Le Corbusier turned back increasingly not only to historical sources, but to his own roots—to the environment of La Chaux-de-Fonds, the influence of his mother (she was an accomplished

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pianist), his father (a designer of clock faces, but also a mountaineer), and the local École d'Art where his teacher, Charles L'Eplattenier, "first opened the gates of art to me."

Although his theoretical writings and designs came to dominate architectural thinking, Le Corbusier created less than 50 individual buildings. Those in Europe and "the West," despite some controversy, are generally admired, often extravagantly. His contributions to city planning are harder to evaluate; planners almost never get their way, having to satisfy landowners, bankers, government officials, law, custom—and confronted with what's still standing from earlier construction. Le Corbusier's hand, it's true, can be seen in parts of such cities as Algiers, Buenos Aires, Stockholm and Moscow. The new city of Chandigarh in India, however, was built to his plan and includes several buildings he designed. Its heroic structures are widely spaced, quite foreign to Indian experience—"a Western city imposed on an Eastern culture," in the view of critics.

Peter Serenyi hopes to go to India, on sabbatical next year, to make his own appraisal.

## Ritual Art of the Mende

Most literature on the West African Mende, the largest tribal culture in Sierra Leone, has been written by anthropologists who through the first half of this century seemed to regard the territory as their exclusive domain. Artifacts they brought to the United States from Africa often wound up in ethnological museums as objects for scholarly study, rather than in art galleries as educational materials for the broad public. This situation is changing.

William Hommel, associate director of the Art Gallery at the University of Maryland, admits that until the last several decades, Africa has been so little understood that its art has been lumped together as if sprung from the needs and aesthetics of a single cultural group. African exhibitions often featured a bewildering hodgepodge of objects, but as art historians now apply greater research to individual cultures, the diversity of art styles becomes apparent. And shows can be planned with greater focus and depth.

"Art of the Mende," an exhibition which opened at the University's College Park campus in mid-March, was designed by Hommel and Gallery Director Eleanor Green to do just that. The show concentrates on Mende cultural forms—Gongoli masks, fetishes, Nomoli soapstone figures—but it also enhances the viewer's understanding by complementing the objects with audio-visual material filmed in Sierra Leone this past summer (1973).

No static exhibition can completely recreate the aesthetic experience of Mende ceremony; "the sculpture," says Hommel, "must be seen in motion." And so, with some helpful advice and funds from the NEH Interpretive Exhibition Program, Hommel went out to Sierra Leone with a documentary film maker from

College Park, Joe O'Connor, to record in 16 millimeter color the festive and religious ceremonies. He also recorded over a four day stretch (it usually takes only one) a native, Moisi of Nganyahun, carving a mask. Four masks, to be worn and handled by visitors, were especially prepared for the exhibition.

O'Connor came away with a healthy respect for the practical aspects of film making—and a rather good sense of reaction to emergency. Stashed in the rear of a Volkswagen camper, his two Bolex cameras were subjected to intense heat and continual jolts from ruts in the washboard roads. One camera gave out after three weeks. Heat melted the lubricants in the zoom lens of the alternate; it sometimes stuck. The iris of the lens began to bind. A tripod lost *en route* to Sierra Leone magically reappeared in the U. S. months after the filming had been completed. Fortunately, however, O'Connor's subjects were extremely cooperative. *That* part of his task was much easier.

O'Connor's contribution, four cassettes condensed to 8 millimeter film, faithfully document Mende ceremony and artisan techniques. Mounted in small projectors, they run continuously while visitors view objects gathered from a number of U. S. art museums and from private collections. The exhibition also will be seen at the University of Iowa and Texas, as well as The Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach, California.

Warren Robbins, director of the Museum of African Art in Washington, remarked at the show's opening that this was the only exhibition of exclusively Mende art in the United States. Green and Hommel, looking on with Sierra Leone Ambassador Philip Palmer, appreciated this recognition of their unique achievement



Ceremonial dance of the Mende.

## All the King's Men: *The Matrix of Experience*

Robert Penn Warren

WHEN I AM ASKED how much *All the King's Men* owes to the actual politics of Louisiana in the '30's, I can only be sure that if I had never gone to live in Louisiana and if Huey Long had not existed, the novel would never have been written. But this is far from saying that my "state" in *All the King's Men* is Louisiana (or any of the other forty-nine stars in our flag), or that my Willie Stark is the late Senator. What Louisiana and Senator Long gave me was a line of thinking and feeling that did eventuate in the novel. . . .

There were a thousand tales, over the years, and some of them were, no doubt, literally and factually true. But they were all true in the world of "Huey"—that world of myth, folklore, poetry, deprivation, rancor, and dimly envisaged hopes. That world had a strange, shifting, often ironical and sometimes irrelevant relation to the factual world of Senator Huey P. Long and his cold manipulation of the calculus of power. The two worlds, we may hazard, merged only at the moment when in September, 1935, in the corridor of the Capitol, the little .32 slug bit meanly into the senatorial vitals.

There was another world—this a factual world—made possible by the factual Long, though not inhabited by him. It was a world that I, as an assistant professor, was to catch fleeting glimpses of, and ponder. It was the world of the parasites of power, a world that Long was, apparently, contemptuous of, but knew how to use, as he knew how to use other things of which he was, perhaps, contemptuous. This was a world of a sick yearning for elegance and the sight of one's name on the society page of a New Orleans paper; it was the world of the electric moon devised, it was alleged, to cast a romantic glow over the garden when the president of the university and his wife entertained their politicians and pseudosocialites; it was a world of pretentiousness, of bloodcurdling struggles for academic preferment, of drool-jawed grab and arrogant criminality. It was a world all too suggestive, in its small-bore, provincial way, of the airs and aspirations that the newspapers attributed to that ex-champagne salesman Von Ribbentrop and to the inner circle of Edda Ciano's friends. . . .

But this is getting ahead of the story. Meanwhile, there was, besides the lurid worlds, the world of ordinary life to look at. There were the people who ran stores or sold insurance or had a farm and tried to survive and pay their debts. There were—visible even from the new concrete speedway that Huey had slashed through the cypress swamps toward New Orleans—the palmetto-leaf and sheet-iron hovels of the moss pickers, rising like some fungoid growth from a hummock under the great cypress knees, surrounded by scum-green water that never felt sunlight, back in that Freudianly contorted cypress gloom of cottonmouth moccasins big as the biceps of a prizefighter, and owl calls, and the murderous metallic grind of insect

life, and the smudge fire at the hovel door, that door being nothing but a hole in a hovel wall, with a piece of croker sack hung over it. There were, a few miles off at the university, your colleagues, some as torpid as a gorged alligator in the cold mud of January and some avid to lick the spit of an indifferent or corrupt administration, but many able and gifted and fired by a will to create, out of the seething stew and heaving magma, a distinguished university. . . .

Conversation in Louisiana always came back to the tales, to the myth, to politics; and to talk politics is to talk about power. So conversation turned, by implication at least, on the question of power and ethics, of power and justification, of means and ends, of "historical costs." The big words were not often used, certainly not by the tellers of tales, but the concepts lurked even behind the most ungrammatical folktale. The tales were shot through with philosophy. The tales were shot through, too, with folk humor, and . . . with violence—or rather, with hints of the possibility of violence. . . .

Melodrama was the breath of life. There had been melodrama in the life I had known in Tennessee, but with a difference: in Tennessee the melodrama seemed to be different from the stuff of life, something superimposed upon life, but in Louisiana people lived melodrama, seemed to live, in fact, for it, for this strange combination of philosophy, humor, and violence. Life was a tale that you happened to be living—and that "Huey" happened to be living before your eyes. And all the while I was reading Elizabethan tragedy, Machiavelli, William James, and American history—and all that I was reading seemed to come alive, in shadowy distortions and sudden clarities, in what I saw around me.

How directly did I try to transpose into fiction Huey P. Long and the tone of that world? The question answers itself in a single fact. The first version of my story was a verse drama; and the actual writing began, in 1938, in the shade of an olive tree by a wheat field near Perugia. In other words, if you are sitting under an olive tree in Umbria and are writing a verse drama, the chances are that you are concerned more with the myth than with the fact, more with the symbolic than with the actual. And so it was. It could not, after all, have been otherwise, for in the strict, literal sense, I had no idea what the now deceased Huey P. Long had been. What I knew was the "Huey" of the myth, and that was what I had taken with me to Mussolini's Italy, where the bully boys wore black shirts and gave a funny salute. . . . When in 1943 I began the version that is more realistic, discursive, and documentary in method (though not in spirit) than the play, I was doing so after I had definitely left Louisiana and the world in which the story had its roots. By now the literal, factual world was only a memory, and therefore was ready to be absorbed freely into the act of imagination. . . . □

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a summary roadside court-martial. The boy's imagination swells with images of the terrible events, the grandfather young then and "large in the sky" while "Behind him, enormous, they hung there/ Ornaments of the old rope,/ Each face outraged, agape . . ."

Here in microcosm is the demonic force that runs through Warren's novels, and appears in much of his poetry. As he has written of Faulkner's work, the strain of violence "is not of the South, but of the soul." The theme finds its potent counterpoints in protagonists flawed by original sin, driven by pride, corrupted by worthy ends into evil means, brought down at last to face the final terms on which they may—if it's not already too late—earn redemption.

### "John Brown: The Making of a Martyr"

It seems fated that Warren's first book was to be *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), a biographical study that was also a tale of violence and ambivalent passions. He finished the book while a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and there began work on his first fiction, a long short story called *Prime Leaf*, published in 1931. It is based on the sanguinary struggle between Kentucky tobacco farmers and company buyers in the early 1900's, which Warren developed further in his first novel, *Night Rider* (1939). Story and novel both teem with violence and catastrophe, and in the novel Warren largely reaches his characteristic command of human motivations and dramatic action played out in settings of the most realistic detail.

He spoke of *Night Rider* as coming from "the world of my youth." He finished it after entering a new world—Huey Long's Louisiana—which was to challenge him to work of much larger scope.

Back from Oxford, Warren had begun his teaching career at Southwestern College in Memphis and at Vanderbilt, moving in 1934 to Louisiana State University. Here he joined in founding and editing the *Southern Review*, for some years America's finest literary journal, its pages glittering with contributions from the likes of Eudora Welty, Nelson Algren, Katherine Anne Porter, Delmore Schwartz, Wallace Stevens, Aldous Huxley, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. Warren's 36 *Poems* was published in 1935, and *Understanding Poetry*, written with Cleanth Brooks, in 1938. But it was Huey Long's assassination (in 1935), and the sheer melodrama of life in Louisiana, that took hold of Warren's imagination. On a Guggenheim Fellowship he went to Italy in 1939, read Dante five hours a day, and Machiavelli, and felt the shadow of Mussolini impinging on his own images of the Huey Long era. There he wrote the play *Proud Flesh*, which a few years later (now in Minnesota) he transformed into the novel *All the King's Men*. With its publication in 1946, Warren had "arrived." Today, the merits of his nine novels, along with his poetry and other work, are the subject of at least five books of biography or critical appraisal.

If Time began for Warren in a kind of Eden, the brute identities of History have been the subject of his learning—the history of the South and America, of antiquity and botched civilizations, and of the great sub-

jective universe called literature. For all his narrative power and immediacy, his works are parables that draw on the legacy of the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Conrad, Hawthorne, Melville, Proust and a host of other precursors.

The title page of *All the King's Men* carries an epigraph from Dante's *Purgatorio*: "Mentre che la speranza ha fior del verde." Warren explains: "'While hope has any bit (or flower) of green'—that's spoken by the spirit of Manfredi, a nobleman who'd been killed fighting the Pope. His body'd been thrown out with a curse, denied a Christian burial. He explains to Dante that he is in purgatory (rather than hell) by saying he'd sought and received forgiveness for his sins from God, whose goodness will receive all who turn to him 'while hope has any bit of green.' You can see why Dante got in trouble with the Pope! It's very Protestant. Now, Willie Stark and Jack Burden in my book are akin to Manfredi. Willie seeks to undo his evil, although too late; and Jack is another lost soul who turns to seek redemption. Meanwhile of course Willie talks Calvinist, sees the world fore-ordained with little margin for the human will, and so I've been called a Calvinist. I'm really not. Of course, if the world was divided and I had to choose, then I might be."

### "Brother to Dragons"

Another of Warren's books, *Brother to Dragons*, takes its title from the Book of Job, where Job in humiliation complains bitterly, "I am a brother to dragons and a companion to owls." This long dramatic poem, often ranked as Warren's masterpiece, is based on a true story—the brutal murder in 1811 of a Negro slave by a nephew of Thomas Jefferson, in Kentucky. Jefferson is the protagonist, meeting "in no time and no place" with his sister, Lucy Lewis, with Meriwether Lewis (a cousin), and with "R.P.W." The philosopher of liberty and prophet of human perfectibility, Jefferson is brought despairingly, but finally with acceptance, to acknowledge his complicity in the evil men do, as in the murder—that he, too, shares in original sin, and is a brother to dragons. Thus an irony attends Warren's delivery of the Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities—the more so in that one of his forebears, John Penn of North Carolina, was among the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

"Well, it's worth reflecting that man is a fallen creature," he will say now, apropos of present-day identity crises. "I think the greatest curse of American society has been the idea of an easy millennialism—that some new drug, or the next election, or the latest in social engineering will solve everything. We are a country of promises, true enough, but we constantly neglect that man is a very, very complex phenomenon. This belief in easy solutions has given us the power of optimism—look at the billboards, all French without tears—but also I think it's the biggest damn foolishness in history. When the solutions don't work we're outraged, we become cynical, despairing, violent. No, there are no easy solutions, no automatic redemptions."

Preparing for the Jefferson Lecture, Warren has  
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gone back over what American writers have said about the workability and nature of democracy. "It's a subversive kind of record," he says. "The books of conservative and radical writers both, right down to yesterday morning, have been profoundly critical. Yet the great thing about democracy here is that it keeps these books alive, teaches them in the schools. The earlier writers were warning against the de-naturing and dwindling of the self; today's writers—Heller, Pynchon, Bellow—are saying it's already happening. I'll be talking about that, about the irrationality of life under a totally rationalized 'system.' What *really* happens is Catch-22.

"Santayana feared that the old springs of poetry—not just the thing on paper, but the feeling—would dry up under the winds of abstractions in modern thought. Of course we can't think without abstractions, but neither can we live without particularity, accepting our own separateness. Look at this notion that we can recreate the personality, the self of man, to be totally good and totally competent—Fred Skinner is the extreme example—this notion's all over the place. But what price glory, and who's going to control whom? It's another illusion of easy millennialism."

Had his strong early roots been proof against personal identity problems?

"Alas, no. Everyone's affected, to a degree. I found out about it by writing about it. Southerners have had

Photo: Jill Krementz



Robert Penn Warren at his workplace in the barn of his Connecticut farmhouse, August 1971.

a long-standing identity problem, or problems—not just over race questions. And minority psychology, Southern whites and blacks both being minorities, is a very tricky thing." Many Southerners, Warren says, felt the 1954 Court decision as a threat to their identity, an abstraction pitted against the particularity of their lives. At Yale since 1950, he felt he had to revisit the South, to listen to "the voices in my blood."

From the trip came the book *Segregation: The Inner Conflict of the South* (1956). In sum, he found Southern whites (and many blacks) torn by self-division, and wrote that the whites' problem was not learning to live with the Negro: "It is to learn to live with ourselves. . . . I don't think you can live with yourself when you are humiliating the man next to you." Later, in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), he warned white Southerners against fear of irresponsible fellow-whites seeking to block full acceptance of Negroes.

Recalling the black leaders he interviewed for that book, Warren says he found Malcolm X the most striking. "He had an extraordinary vigor of mind, a real debater's mind; he was like a welter-weight coming out of his corner. I admired him. He had depth and magnetism, he was very impressive humanly. I'm not trying to say he was more admirable than Martin Luther King or Farmer. They were impressive, too, but in a very different way." He thinks the black movement has many parallels with white attitudes at the time of the American Revolution—"all the myth-making, the chauvinisms, the desire to re-make history overnight. These are impulses of growth."

At the window the sky darkens, and he leads the way to make tea, apologizing for the tea bags. "Some brandy in it? No, not for me either. I love it but it's tough on me. I get along with Jack Daniels, and wine." He speaks warmly of his children, Rosanna at Yale and Gabriel at Amherst (his first marriage had been childless), and of his own Yale students—"the level's the best I've seen, intellectually and personally. Some got waylaid into drugs and casual sex—another millennium—but the ones who've kept their balance are spectacularly good."

### A Long-Range Optimist

An optimist? "Well, temperamentally I guess I'm a long-range optimist. But we're in for some tough sledding. I'm concerned about our institutions going under—the church, and now the family. It may be that literature, whether or not you can call it an institution, will have an increasingly important role to play. We're at a new moment in history, where it won't do just to follow William James in hating bigness. Bigness does give us certain things; we'll have to try to remain civilized in bigness, despite its corruptions. We simply have to cling to the concept of a responsible self, to whatever can give a chance of growth to humane values. I say simply, but it's not simple. Human beings are tough, though, capable of courage and decency."

For more than a quarter-century, critics have remarked on Robert Penn Warren's extraordinary combination of critical and creative power. As Eric Bentley



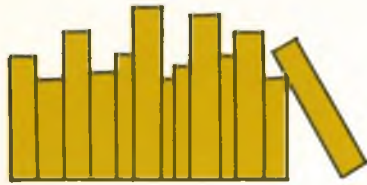
wrote in 1948, "There is Warren the critic, the cosmopolitan, the scholar, the philosopher; and there is Warren the raconteur, the Kentuckyan, the humorist, the ballad maker." Although uncertain whether such variables were mutually reinforcing, Bentley appraised Warren as a deeply American writer and a man whose philosophy, somewhere short of pure Christian orthodoxy, nevertheless "finds the Christian scheme of things close to the facts of experience." He saw him as a poet loyal to the concrete and human, standing apart from movements and doctrinal conformities

(what Warren himself has called "the fashionable cut in wings and haloes"). Such testimony stands up well today. The man remains independent, magnanimous, biblically unresting, looking upon his worldly honors with something like a divine discontent. "If poetry is the little myth we make," he has written, "history is the big myth we live, and in our living constantly remake." □

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*Patrick O'Sheel, author of the above article, is a consultant to the Endowment.*

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## Principal Works of Robert Penn Warren

*The list below is confined to books, and includes all those of which Mr. Warren is sole author. Current paperback editions are noted.*

### POETRY

**Thirty-six Poems.** Alcestis Press, 1935.  
**Eleven Poems on the Same Theme.** New Directions, 1942.  
**Selected Poems, 1923-1943.** Harcourt, Brace, 1944.  
**Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices.** Random House, 1953.  
**Promises: Poems 1954-1956.** Random House, 1957.  
**You, Emperors, and Others: Poems 1957-1960.** Random House, 1960.  
**Selected Poems: New and Old 1923-66.** Random House, 1966.  
**Incarnations: Poems 1966-68.** Random House, 1968.  
**Audubon: A Vision.** Random House, 1969.

### FICTION

**Night Rider.** Houghton Mifflin, 1939.  
**At Heaven's Gate.** Harcourt, Brace, 1943.  
**All the King's Men.** Harcourt, Brace, 1946. In paperback by Bantam.  
**Blackberry Winter.** Cummington Press, 1946.  
**The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories.** Harcourt, Brace, 1948. Paperback edition by Harbrace.  
**World Enough and Time: A Romantic Novel.** Random House, 1950.  
**Band of Angels.** Random House, 1955. In paperback by Signet.  
**The Cave.** Random House, 1959.  
**Wilderness.** Random House, 1961.  
**Flood.** Random House, 1964.  
**Meet Me in the Green Glen.** Random House, 1971.

### NONFICTION

**John Brown: The Making of a Martyr.** Payson and Clarke, 1929.  
**"The Briar Patch,"** in *I'll Take My Stand*, by Twelve Southerners. Harper, 1930.  
**Understanding Poetry,** edited by Cleanth Brooks and R.P. Warren, 3rd ed., Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960.

**Understanding Fiction,** edited by Cleanth Brooks and R. P. Warren, 2nd ed., Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959.  
**Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South.** Random House, 1956.  
**Selected Essays.** Random House, 1958. In paperback by Vintage.  
**The Legacy of the Civil War.** Random House, 1961. Paperback edition by Vintage.  
**Who Speaks for the Negro?** Random House, 1965. In paperback by Vintage.  
**Homage to Theodore Dreiser.** Random House, 1971.  
**PLAYS**  
**Proud Flesh.** Unpublished, 1939. (First performed, 1946.)  
**All the King's Men.** Unpublished, 1947.  
**All the King's Men.** Random House, 1960.

### FOR CHILDREN

**Remember the Alamo!** Random House, 1958.  
**The Gods of Mount Olympus.** Random House, 1959.

### SOME BIOGRAPHICAL/CRITICAL SOURCES

**Bohner, Charles H.** Robert Penn Warren. Twayne Publishers, 1964 (Biography.)  
**Brooks, Cleanth.** *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot, and Warren.* Yale University Press, 1963.  
**Casper, Leonard.** Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground. University of Washington Press, 1960. (A critical analysis with extensive bibliography.)  
**Cowan, Louise.** *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History.* Louisiana State University Press, 1959.  
**Davidson, Donald.** *Southern Writers in the Modern World.* University of Georgia Press, 1958.  
**Longley, John L., Jr.,** editor. Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays. New York University Press, 1965. (Extensive bibliography.)  
**Stewart, John L.** *The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians.* Princeton University Press, 1965.  
**Strandberg, Victor.** *A Colder Fire: the Poetry of Robert Penn Warren.* University of Kentucky Press, 1965.



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NEH Notes

In the fiscal 1975 budget recently sent to the Congress, President Nixon has requested increased funding for the National Endowment for the Humanities. According to the budget NEH would receive \$72 million in regular funds (an increase of \$27.5 million above the appropriations available for the current fiscal year) plus \$10 million to match private gifts.

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE HUMANITIES at its February meeting reviewed 3637 applications for Endowment support and recommended 651 for fellowships and grants amounting to \$20.8 million in either outright or gift and matching funds.

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DIVISION OF RESEARCH GRANTS	January 1, 1975	May 6, 1974
DIVISION OF FELLOWSHIPS AND STIPENDS Independent Research/Study Fellowships	January 1975	June 17, 1974
YOUTHGRANTS IN THE HUMANITIES	December 1, 1974	August 1, 1974

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