


2005

Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and the Southern Literary Tradition

Joseph Blotner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Blotner, Joseph (2005) "Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and the Southern Literary Tradition," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 5, Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol5/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Robert Penn Warren Studies by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

*Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks,
and the Southern Literary Tradition*

JOSEPH BLOTNER

By the Southern literary tradition, I mean the works which were there, not some theoretical construct but rather aspects – models and genres – which would be prominent parts of the received tradition Warren and Brooks knew. This will be a speculative attempt, glancing in passing at the massive, two-volume textbook which they wrote and edited with R. W. B. Lewis: *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973). But it will be difficult to extract a definition from it, as their remarks on their method put us on notice. For example, “William Faulkner has clearly emerged as one of the towering figures in American literary history and would undoubtedly warrant the elaborate separate treatment accorded to Hawthorne, Melville, Mark Twain, and Dreiser; yet, in our view, Faulkner can best be understood and appreciated within the long and mixed tradition of Southern writing, and he appears accordingly as the climax of two related sections, the first of which goes back as early as 1861.”²

What should emerge here is how two young men from the South found their vocations and made their careers as men of letters – Warren chiefly as writer of fiction and poetry (but also of just about any literary mode one cares to name except travel literature) and the other, his friend and colleague Brooks, as a great scholar and critic ranging through British and American literature, major and minor, from 1500 to the day before yesterday. As George Core has put it, both men were drenched in literary and historical consciousness, especially involving the American South.

It was at Vanderbilt University in 1924 that Brooks met the precocious Warren, a year and a half older and three classes ahead of him. There as a member of The Fugitives, an informal group brought together by poetry, Warren subscribed to their aims, announced in the first issue of their magazine, *The Fugitive*. Not long afterwards he welcomed Brooks as a fellow Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, where Warren had come under the influence of I. A. Richards, just as both he and Brooks had earlier come under the influence of Allen Tate, as Tate had come under that of T. S. Eliot, shaping not only something of their critical practice but of their poetics as well.

²Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, eds, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, 2 vols. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), xvii. This essay was presented in slightly different form as a lecture at “Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and the Southern Literary Tradition,” a meeting under the auspices of the Institute of United States Studies, University of London, 24 March 1997.

Ten years later it was Brooks who was present to welcome Warren when he came to Baton Rouge to join the faculty of Louisiana State University. And a year later they became two of the three founding editors of the *Southern Review*, which grew out of their experience with the *Southwest Review*. Eliot had stopped publishing *The Criterion* in 1939. The *Southern Review* closed in 1942. In a scant seven years, Brooks and Warren moved it to a place second to none among quarterlies in English. Their enthusiastic recruitment of new authors as well as their criticism showed how their grounding in the Southern literary tradition helped form a basis for the impact their work had, as teachers and also as leaders of the “New Criticism,” a term which Warren came to detest.

We can also glance then at the ensuing years in which Brooks’s *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) led his Vanderbilt teacher, John Crowe Ransom, to call him “very likely, the most expert living ‘reader’ or interpreter of difficult verse” and in which his two major studies of the work of Faulkner, two-and-a-half decades later, crowned his achievement as a critic of modern literature. Meanwhile Warren – publishing prose capped with the prize-winning *All the King’s Men* in 1946 – broke a fourteen-year drought in his poetry in 1957 with the prize-winning *Promises*. Nor was that the beginning of a decline for either man. Productive to the ends of their long lives, they demonstrated, in the writings that followed, their indebtedness to the South as well as their espousal of modernism.

It may be useful here to try to sketch some aspects of the Southern literary tradition, remembering, however, that it was not until two hundred years after the perilous voyages that brought the first settlers that the colonials thought of themselves as other than Virginians and Carolinians, or Georgians and Marylanders, as – with sectional conflict looming – they began to think of themselves as Southerners. Certain characteristics had, of course, begun to emerge in the earliest times. In the stern and rigorous North, preachers such as William Bradford and Jonathan Edwards emphasized man’s wickedness and the need to follow God’s laws to avoid damnation in the next world after the precarious existence in the present one. In the more temperate Southern climate lived gentlemen who were also farmers and others such as William Byrd II and Thomas Jefferson who, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784), scrupulously cataloged at length “the mines and other subterraneous riches, its trees, plants, fruits, etc.” in a place George Alsop of Maryland had earlier called a “Terrestrial Paradise.” But these colonials were more likely to write politics than fiction and poetry. This remained true after the Revolution. While prose stylists such as Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper were mining the past for their stories and novels, a few professional men in the South, whose writing was something of a sideline, were using Irving and Cooper as models and laying the groundwork for the fictional image of the old plantation. Chief of these works was John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn* (1832), which describes in romantic fashion the beneficent rule of that region where lived the slaves whose transparent nature showed their happy state. Such was Kennedy’s version of pastoral.

The careers of the few Southern professional writers give a bleak picture of the market available to the native artist. William Gilmore Simms, the author of a novel called *The Yemassee* (1835) – and who wrote seven other historical romances plus plays, biographies, and poems – barely managed to support his family. In 1865 his home was burned by General Sherman’s troops, and Simms died five years later.

Edgar Allan Poe made his living as a magazine editor, producing major works of poetry, fiction, and criticism which made him an important theorist, despite the burden of poverty and the vicissitudes of this tragic life. To the French Symbolists America's most influential poet, one of the earliest practitioners of Southern Gothic, maligned in legend as a hopeless drunkard and drug addict, he died in Baltimore, aged forty, rather like a character from one of his stories of death or poems of grief.

The political impulse that had produced the prose of Jefferson and Madison also produced the writings of Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun at a time when the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were helping to lay the groundwork in the North for what would be called "the irrepressible conflict." There were other voices in the Southern medley, one of them speaking for a race as well as an individual. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) spanned the years from his birth in slavery in Maryland to his editorship of his own newspaper in Massachusetts. *My Bondage and My Freedom* continued his story.

There was another mode in Southern writing which grew and flourished. It produced the tales of the so-called "Frontier Humorists" of the old Southwest – Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. They were writing as if to cultivate readers beyond their region who would be amused by the outlandish dialect as well as the actions of people in a frontier society coping with life on a catch-as-catch-can basis: hunting, fighting, swapping horses, and telling tall tales. Some of these authors celebrated their own exploits, as in *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett* (1834), including one year in which he reported killing 105 bears. The classic example is Thomas Bangs Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas," in which the author induces the "Big Bar" himself, hunter Jim Doggett, to amuse fellow riverboat passengers with the story of the time he met his match in "the d___ bar that was ever grown." Struck in the middle of its forehead by a musket ball, "The bar shook his head as the ball struck it, and then walked down from the tree as gently as any lady would from a carriage." When Doggett finally kills the bear, he refuses any credit. "My private opinion," he says, "is that that bar was an *unhunnable bar, and died when his time come.*"

These lines may suggest William Faulkner's climactic story of the pursuit of Old Ben in *Go Down, Moses* (1942). At the heart of each fiction is a tall tale written in the vein of romance. (Early in his career Warren wrote his own version of frontier humor in a long narrative poem entitled "The Ballad of Billie Potts." Playing an unnatural joke on his parents and concealing his identity, Little Billie is killed by them in their own monstrous joke.)

In the years after Reconstruction, when Northern readers had had enough of political candidates waving "the bloody shirt," they wanted romance and reconciliation. The old plantation still had its wide appeal, as when Joel Chandler Harris's lovable old Uncle Remus told the folk tales of Brer Rabbit to the little white children on the plantation. There was, as well, a largely unperceived level of these strategies: lessons for survival by a subject population.

The local color school flourished thanks to editors who knew their readers wanted the exotic and romantic. In books such as *Old Creole Days* (1879), George Washington Cable wrote Creole dialect phonetically so thick that readers might have to speak lines aloud to understand them. Broadly drawn local color studies abounded even as the model of John Pendleton Kennedy's old plantation produced collections such as Thomas Nelson

Page's *In Ole Virginia* (1887), where the stereotype of the kindly master and the faithful slave persisted even after the tragedy of the war and its lingering effects.

But now a stronger voice than all of the earlier ones came out of the South. Ernest Hemingway would write, "All modern literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called 'Huckleberry Finn.'" William Faulkner put it sweepingly when he said, "Mark Twain was all our grandfather." He made his name writing humor in Nevada and California newspapers with tall tales such as "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." By 1876, readers' nostalgia for the simpler world before the war in the face of growing industrialism helped make *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* a success. Returning to the scenes of childhood a half-dozen years later for *Life on the Mississippi*, he felt a nostalgia that helped him complete his masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Modest farms called plantations figured in this novel, but here was no idealized Swallow Barn. Instead it was a world of danger and cruelty where the slave Jim fled from bondage and Huckleberry from "sivilization" – which seems to him only a different kind of slavery – to the precarious and temporary freedom of the Mississippi River of *Huckleberry Finn*. Robert Penn Warren wrote that the novel "involves various dimensions – the relation of the real and the ideal, the nature of maturity, the fate of the lone individual in society." Applauding Twain's genius in recognizing the riches of American scenes and folklore and making available the native vernacular as no predecessor had done, Warren wrote, "Lincoln freed the slave, and Mark Twain freed the writer." Twain freed writers such as Warren himself to write subtle burlesques of existing literary forms such as the plantation novel.

There were broad and deep resources which nourished the writer. Besides the religious orthodoxy of the Southern region's towns and villages, the land was pervaded by an essentially sacramental attitude toward nature. As Cleanth Brooks wrote in *The Hidden God* (1963), such writers drew upon the Christian synthesis of nature and history. Much of the rural quality of the Old South persisted, and most Southerners knew it intimately from childhood: "[God] had created them," Ike McCaslin reflects in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, "upon this land this South for which He had done so much with woods for game and streams for fish and deep rich soil for seed and lush springs to sprout it and long summers to mature it and serene falls to harvest it and short mild winters for men and animals" This is a kind of richness which few urban writers inherit, one which recalls those early agricultural reports sent back to the old world to lure more settlers to the new. Defending Southern writers' penchant for the grotesque, for freaks as she calls them, Flannery O'Connor said it was "because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological."

Another factor provided a paradoxical kind of historical advantage. C. Vann Woodward wrote that the South had gone through the very un-American experience of losing a war. Faulkner added another un-American experience: being occupied by an invading army that spoke your own language. And Woodward added still another factor: the memory of slavery, a burden on the conscience unshared in other parts of the country. There has been a measure of tradition and coherence in the South (lessening now) which provides a rich social fabric and tapestry of memory. What the English, Scottish, and Irish writers had, Southerners would continue to nurture as well. Over the years probably

more white Southerners have stayed put than most other groups of Americans. Reverence for the past takes many forms, as in the legal action by the Sons of Confederate Veterans to force the restoration of the Confederate battle flag to South Carolina's automobile license plates.

Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks were inheritors of this tradition. How did they absorb it, we may ask, and then, how did they use it? Both had educational advantages. They came from cultivated families in houses plentifully supplied with books. Robert Franklin Warren and his school teacher wife, Anna Ruth Penn, taught their three young children at home. Father loved poetry, and his older son asked him over and over again to recite "Horatius at the Bridge" until Robert Franklin Warren called a moratorium and told the boy to learn to read himself by reciting the poem while he looked at the words. From his first classes in the Guthrie, Kentucky, public school, he was a straight-A student whose grades outraged ruffians among his classmates and moved them to violence against him. By the time Cleanth Brooks was only thirteen, his father, a Methodist parson, was urging him to point towards a Rhodes Scholarship. They managed to send the boy to the McTyeire Institute, a Methodist preparatory school in McKenzie, Tennessee, whose curriculum included Latin and Greek. Both boys compiled brilliant records. Brooks headed for Vanderbilt University in Nashville. Warren was there ahead of him, foiled in his ambition to go to the United States Naval Academy by an injury that would eventually cost him the sight of his left eye. Despite academic problems brought on by carelessness, romance, carousing, and illness, Warren was graduated from Vanderbilt Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude with the Founder's Medal as well. Brooks too made an outstanding record.

Both were fortunate in their friends and teachers. One was John Crowe Ransom. When Warren learned that Ransom was also a poet, it was exciting for him, he said, to see a real live poet. It was a marvel, seeing something completely out of his experience, something strange and wonderful, like "looking at a camel or something." Yet Ransom used a vocabulary familiar but quaint and scenes from everyday life, so that Warren saw how the materials of the everyday experiences he had known in Kentucky were the stuff of poetry. Allen Tate, a brilliant poet, in summer school as a senior because he could not pass algebra and chemistry, encouraged Warren in writing poetry. Tate had already come strongly under the influence of T. S. Eliot, and modernism. The same excitement affected others such as Donald Davidson, a young Vanderbilt English teacher, and other would-be poets on the faculty and in the student body. Under the leadership of Ransom, a group of teachers and students who met often to read and discuss their poetry had decided to publish *The Fugitive*, a magazine devoted chiefly to poetry. H. L. Mencken – coiner of terms such as "the Bible Belt" and the "booboisee" – satirized the cultural poverty of the South in a notorious essay he called "The Sahara of the Bozart." His voice was soon joined by others.

In 1921 a group in New Orleans wanted to show that what Mencken had charged need not necessarily remain so, that their part of the country, far from being a desert, could support a magazine like Mencken's *The Smart Set* in New York, namely the *Double Dealer*, aimed at providing a national magazine from the South and publishing young modernist poets. Then, in April of 1922, out of Nashville, with more modest aims, came the first issue of *The Fugitive*. The anonymous editor who provided its Foreword, John Crowe Ransom, wrote:

Official exception having been taken by the sovereign people to the mint julep, a literary phase has expired, like any other stream whose source is stopped. The demise was not untimely: among other advantages, THE FUGITIVE is able to come to birth in Nashville, Tennessee, under a star not entirely unsympathetic. THE FUGITIVE flees from nothing faster than from the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South.

In the first year of the four years the magazine survived, Donald Davidson and Allen Tate joined Ransom as associate editors. By April of 1924 Warren was added to the board of editors, contributing poems such as “Death Mask of a Young Man.” By 1925 there were thirteen Fugitives listed on the masthead, and below them, as editors serving for 1925, were just two names: Ransom and Warren. They were there when publication was suspended in December, 1925. “It has been a pleasant adventure,” ran the final announcement. “No Fugitive dreamed in the beginning that our magazine would meet with the success that it has.” It may have been the only literary magazine in history that failed for lack of an editor – a real irony since Ransom, Tate, Warren, and Brooks went on to edit distinguished quarterlies.

Warren and Brooks were united again as Rhodes Scholars. Warren had gone to Oxford in 1928 after graduate work at Berkeley and Yale. When Brooks arrived there the next year, the two pursued their studies at different colleges – Warren at New College and Brooks at Exeter – but often spent time together. Brooks followed a rigorous curriculum, but Warren also wrote stories and much poetry. Through Tate’s help, Warren had been offered a contract, while still a scholarship student at Yale, for a biography of the abolitionist John Brown. Accepting it was “in a way a question of homesickness,” he would later say. “As long as I was *living* in Tennessee and Kentucky and knew a great deal about various kinds of life from the way Negro field hands talked or mountaineers talked ... I had no romantic notions about it.” He had read widely in the region’s past, and he had the vivid oral history provided over the years by his maternal grandfather, Gabriel Thomas Penn, a captain in Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry, a tobacco farmer, and lover of literature. “But this didn’t seem to apply to the other half of my life, in which my sole passion was John Donne, John Ford, Webster’s plays, Baudelaire. Then as soon as I *left* the world of Tennessee ... I began to rethink the meaning.” He did an enormous amount of work, with a long scholarly bibliography to show for it. Some reviewers called the book a partisan view by a Southerner, even while Allan Nevins, a distinguished northern historian, praised his use of evidence and his impartiality, concluding that “Mr. Warren’s book is notable for its interpretation of the last act in the grim fanatic’s life.”

Habitually busy at several projects, at Oxford Warren was completing the requirements for the B.Litt. degree. He had finished *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929) while writing a thesis entitled “A Study of the Satires of John Marston,” which had been for him the least unattractive topic of several among those his supervisor would accept. Two projects have seldom had less in common. When a New York publisher asked Warren for a story like one of the Kentucky tales he had heard him tell, he was able to reproduce the farm life he knew, and the independence of its people. Warren would say that in the South violence is always just under the surface. It erupted onto the surface in his novella, *Prime Leaf* (1931), as it had done in *John Brown*. The series of incidents from the so-called tobacco wars of Kentucky, putting the small growers and their tenants against the big buyers, had bloodshed enough. The beauty of

the farmland was there, but nothing of The Old Plantation. This was realism, not romance. Like *Band of Angels* (1955) that would follow it, *Night Rider* (1939) is a nightmarish version of the idealized world of the plantation novel.

One other assignment, which he had taken on reluctantly, had been pressed on him by Andrew Lytle and Tate. He was to write one of twelve essays, entitled only after much controversy among the contributors *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930). It was intended to show that the Agrarian values of the Old South were still the South's best hope and that of the rest of America as well. Warren's title, "The Briar Patch," recalled the stratagems for survival of Joel Chandler Harris's Br'er Rabbit as in his piteous – "'Skin me, Br'er Fox,' sez Br'er Rabbit sezee, 'snatch out my eyeballs, t'ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs,' sezee, 'but do please, Br'er Fox, don't fling me in dat brier-patch,' sezee." Warren clearly favored justice for the Negro, but within the doctrine called "Separate but Equal." (Even so, one of his fellow contributors and teachers could hardly believe that these radical sentiments had been written by the Red Warren he knew.) Later Warren would renounce those segregationist views, but for years they would still be charged to him. On one occasion he would also say that the primary fact for the white man in the South was the presence of the Negro. In his own case this is borne out amply in poetry, fiction, and prose throughout most of his career.

In 1932 Cleanth Brooks joined the faculty of the English Department at Louisiana State University, as an underpaid assistant professor. He was totally responsible for the welfare of his parents and their adopted nephew and for some years forced to postpone his marriage out of economic necessity. The year before, Warren had taken a stopgap job at Southwestern University in Memphis, then accepted a temporary position at Vanderbilt in 1931. Regarded as a radical by the department head, Edwin Mims, he had to look for a new job in 1934, and with some assistance from Cleanth obtained an interview and was appointed an assistant professor at LSU. It was the beginning of a fruitful partnership. Appalled at how little their students knew and finding no resource which would teach them how to approach literature, especially poetry, they began work which would lead to a landmark textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), that would translate sophisticated poetic theory into practical application and help to educate generations of students and professors. Glancing ahead for a moment, there would be many other collaborative works, so many that some of Warren's friends felt that Brooks was seducing him from the higher path of poetry. Actually, as Brooks said, the impetus for this kind of work usually came from Warren, and their correspondence bears him out. The fact was that, like Poe and Simms and other Southern writers, they wrote much because they needed money, and for a long time their teaching jobs did not provide enough.

Another project intervened before Brooks and Warren could write their first collaborative text, *An Approach to Literature* (1936), called by some of the department's starchy traditionalists *A Reproach to Literature*. (Warren would later describe them as types who were as sluggish as alligators in the cold mud of January.) At the insistence of Governor Huey P. Long, who was assiduously building the university, his appointee, President James Monroe Smith, arrived at the Warrens' house with his wife one day ostensibly to show the Warrens something of their new surroundings. What Smith really wanted was to find out if Warren thought he could build a good quarterly review. Warren responded quickly and enthusiastically. He could, and he said he had the other managing editor right there, Cleanth Brooks, and as business manager, his friend, a student from

Vanderbilt, Albert Erskine. Located in a university basement, *The Southern Review* was a busy shop and a generally happy one. One of the editors' best students, joining the staff as an assistant, saw these two managing editors as a natural combination.

Face to face across their abutting desks, they would thrash things out: the thirty-one-year-old Brooks, short and compact, then chubby yet firm-jawed, with a direct gaze from behind wire-rimmed spectacles; Warren, a year older, taller and rawboned. John Palmer, another assistant, would later see them as complementary: "Warren rather grand and expansive and somewhat roughneck, and Brooks always sort of contained, the prototype of the scholar-gentleman, but did they strike sparks one upon the other.... Brooks's criticism is very orderly, logical, persuasive.... Warren's is more intuitive, more gusty, more dramatic." An editorial session with Erskine joining in was for Palmer not just an intellectual exercise but also "a wonderful sort of social event." They solicited submissions and subscriptions energetically. (On one occasion, Warren took scores of copies of a new issue with him to a conference and sold most of them.) In the magazine's first volume they published stories by Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty, who were then almost unknown. They also included poems by Wallace Stevens, John Peale Bishop, and Mark Van Doren as well as essays and reviews by R. P. Blackmur and Herbert Read, with poems and essays by Tate, Ransom, and Davidson. The roll of illustrious names would grow with each volume to include Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and other talented young poets.

The demise of *The Southern Review* led to Warren's departure from Baton Rouge, and, more wrenchingly, his departure from the South. In December of 1940, with the entry of the United States into World War II, the LSU administration decided that harsh economies would be necessary. Three journals were marked for extinction. The case of *The Southern Review* was not strengthened by the perception among some that its two managing editors were recalcitrant and rebellious. And to those English professors who felt that *Understanding Poetry* was inimical to their traditional historical-philological approach to literature, the modest subvention afforded the magazine amounted to aid and comfort to the enemy. (Ironically, like many American educational institutions, LSU would earn millions of dollars from wartime training programs and would not be threatened by wartime economies.) When the issue came to a vote, only two of the president's nine deans voted against killing what had become probably the most admired and influential literary magazine in the English-speaking world.

In the spring Warren received an offer from the University of Minnesota of a full professorship at a salary of four thousand dollars a year. There were delays in LSU's response; and when it came, it was for \$3,800. Warren would later say, "I left out of pride." Brooks understood. "The truth of the matter," he said, "is that they wanted him out." Brooks in turn would leave for Yale six years later. Despite wartime constraints there had been one thing the university could afford. As the Bulldog was to Yale and Longhorn to Texas, so the Bengal tiger was to LSU. In more than one avatar, Mike the Tiger had prowled the football field on his leash. Now he needed a new cage – and he got one. According to one report, it cost twenty-five hundred dollars, which, if accurate, would have paid for the raises for Warren and Brooks together – four times over.

So the artist, who had wanted to live out his life in the beautiful country of middle Tennessee, prepared now to leave this second refuge he had found in the grove of live oaks by his bayou and his windmill not far from Baton Rouge. Warren would call the

protagonist of his last novel an “original, gold-plated, thirty-third degree loneliness artist . . .” In modern literature the figure of the deracinated writer, often self-exiled, is a familiar one. So Warren’s own life, his own story, would become in part “that of an exile telling stories about his homeland.” So there was for others too a nostalgia for the South, like the grieving for decades after the war, for The Lost Cause. Donald Davidson, who never forsook the Agrarian cause or moved from the South, tried to imagine in his “Lee in the Mountains,” the thoughts of the old man, now the president of a small college: “. . . soldiers’ faces under their tossing flags / Lift no more by any road or field, / And I am spent with old wars and new sorrow.” Allen Tate, who did leave the South on occasion when financially pressed, recited a litany of names in his “Ode to the Confederate Dead”: “Stonewall, Stonewall, and the sunken fields of hemp, / Shiloh, Antietam, Malvern Hill, Bull Run.” In four novels, two books of nonfiction, and numerous poems, Warren drew upon his Southern inheritance.

Brooks’s use of his inheritance was seldom in verse, which he employed chiefly in his wooing of his wife, Edith Amy Blanchard, nicknamed “Tinkum,” and only glancingly in his criticism. Looking back for models, he could, if he chose, have taken some sort of inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe’s interest in literary craftsmanship, and in one of his sections of *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, Brooks provided a penetrating yet sympathetic eleven-thousand word essay to introduce the selections from Poe. Borrowing from his admired friend and colleague, René Wellek, some reasons for the esteem in which French literary theorists have held Poe, Brooks concluded that though a pioneer he is an “essentially conservative American provincial and, in spite of the stimulus he gave to later developments, still a man of the eighteenth century.” What of his own criticism then? He was quick to acknowledge what he learned from Eliot, I. A. Richards, and Allen Tate. His reputation rests in large part on major works such as *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947), and the earlier *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939). His history of the major works and critical issues in English verse is notable for its particular attention to the Romantics and the modernists, together with the clear and brilliant explications for which he became famous. But a far larger number of readers, perhaps, have come to know him through *Understanding Poetry*, through another of his collaborations with Warren, *Understanding Fiction* (1943), and his collaboration with Robert B. Heilman, *Understanding Drama* (1945).

Before glancing at what is for many scholars Brooks’s most useful critical achievement, I cannot resist pausing to quote a few brief comments on his stature. For his and Warren’s admired teacher and friend, John Crowe Ransom, he was “unquestionably the foremost apologist for the new criticism.” In his biography of Brooks, Mark Royden Winchell calls him “the most important literary critic in the second third of the twentieth century.” For René Wellek he was a “critic of critics,” and for Allen Tate, simply, “the most versatile and the most resourceful American critic.” Warren’s fourth novel, *World Enough and Time* (1950), was a major effort based in Kentucky history, a long, bloody, and complex narrative which disturbed Ransom profoundly. It was the Grand Guignol violence as well as the debauchery that Ransom found most abhorrent. The judgment Ransom confided to Allen Tate was moralistic as well as aesthetic. In collaboration with Brooks, he wrote, “Red supplied the ideas; but now it becomes clear, I think, that Cleanth supplied good stern moral principles, and that both of them suffer now that their close

relation has been broken up.” Though Warren facetiously called Brooks “the theologian,” Ransom’s view would probably have surprised Brooks as well as Warren.

Brooks’s most useful critical work has been in his two volumes, *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (1963) and *William Faulkner: Toward Yoknapatawpha and Beyond* (1978), the best single body of Faulkner criticism I know. He brought to this work his years of study of the novels and stories plus his knowledge of the South upon which Faulkner drew in creating his apocryphal county. Brooks called the first of the two books “essentially a study of Faulkner’s world.” His naming of its components gives some sense of its scope: “the special heritage of the South, with the presence of the Negro, the powerful pressure of family and community, and the past experienced not only as a precious heritage but as a crippling burden.” The topics and themes he treats are many, among them, in his words, “the role of the community, the theme of isolation and alienation, Puritanism under the hot Southern sun, the tension between the masculine and the feminine principles, and the relation of the characters to the past.” And he explored processes in Faulkner: “The contrast between the old order and the new, and the pressures exerted upon various individuals by the crumbling of the old and the shift from the past to the present.” His analyses of Faulkner’s major works are unequalled for comprehensiveness and clarity. The *explication de texte* that Brooks performed so brilliantly on poems such as “The Waste Land” carries the reader through the intricacies of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*. Cleanth Brooks’s critical acumen alone made it possible for him to enrich the reader with these insights. His resources as an inheritor of the Southern literary tradition helped to provide the depth and breadth to frame and encompass the brilliant treatments of the many aspects of Faulkner’s works.

The next question then is how did the major works of Robert Penn Warren, over the long span of his extraordinarily productive life, resonate with aspects of the Southern literary tradition he inherited? All ten of his novels are set primarily in the South. *World Enough and Time* is an excursion into the troubled and violent history of Kentucky in the early and middle nineteenth century. *Wilderness* (1961) reaches its climax in that crucial and horrifying American Civil War battle. *At Heaven’s Gate* (1943), set in the 1920s, draws on factual antecedents from a spectacular financial debacle in Tennessee to the figure of a legendary hero based on Sgt. Alvin York of World War I fame. The story of the novel’s protagonist, a hero corrupted in a financial scheme, is counterpointed with that of a fanatically religious man from the Tennessee hills who falls into sin and then struggles for expiation. It is a long tour de force in the hill country dialect Warren loved to employ. Although he did not follow Twain’s example with tall tales and frontier humor, he constantly employed native materials out of common knowledge and experience.

Behind his most successful novel, and the finest American political novel, *All the King’s Men*, stood his years at the State University and those other years when he had pondered the phenomena of power and pragmatism in the Rome of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Mussolini’s Italy, and Huey Long’s Louisiana. Of the latter connection he would say, “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 Warren’s Willie Stark was not merely a disguised Huey Long. “Politics merely provided the framework story,” he wrote, “in which the deeper concerns, whatever their final significance, might work themselves out.” Originally, the Willie Stark figure was meant to embody the kind of

doom that democracy could invite upon itself. And, he added, “Long was but one of the figures that stood in the shadows of imagination behind Willie Stark. Another one of the company was the scholarly and benign figure of William James.” Willie was, in short, a pragmatist, but he was also a man with a talent and a drive for power, a man who became entrapped in his ends-means dilemma.

There was a tradition of Southern political novels, from Albion W. Tourgeé’s *Bricks without Straw* (1880), written out of disillusionment with the failure of the Reconstruction, to Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s *The Clansman* (1905), which provided the story for the incendiary film *The Birth of a Nation*, to Ellen Glasgow’s *One Man in His Time* (1922), one of the first of the twentieth-century demagogues, a populist wresting power from the weakened aristocratic Southern Bourbons. Again, Warren was writing his version of an established literary mode. He knew such works as a part of his Southern literary inheritance, but with his unique talent he was able to produce a novel which can stand comparison with the great political novels of other literatures.

A master of genres, he produced contemporary history informed by his knowledge of the past. In *Segregation: The Inner Conflict of the South* (1956), he assessed the impact of the Civil Rights crisis of the 1950s with many interviews carried out through four Southern states. Concluding by interviewing himself, he was still a Southerner, he said, living in the North; and if the pace of reform he favored was that of a gradualist, he was still for desegregation. A decade later he traveled thousands of miles, sometimes in actual danger, to investigate and report on the complex development of the civil rights movement in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965). Conversing with leaders as disparate as Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X, he concluded: “It would be sentimentality to think that our society can be changed easily and without pain. It would be worse sentimentality to think that it can be changed without some pain to our particular selves – black and white. It would be realism to think that that pain would be a reasonable price to pay for what we all, selfishly, might get out of it.” Warren in this case was writing high journalism – and dealing with history as it was made.

A few years before, he had trained his lens backward, to produce, for the occasion of the Centennial, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961). It was, he said, “for the American imagination the great single event of our history.” In this work of brilliance, insight, and beauty, he had achieved a distance unavailable to other Southerners he honored such as Andrew Lytle, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate. He traced the old, prewar romantic Unionism and delved into Abolitionism and the assertion of the “higher law” that disregarded the Constitution and prepared the way for the “irrepressible conflict.” He assessed the war’s dreadful costs and its far-reaching effects. He wrote, it “gave the South the Great Alibi and gave the North the Treasury of Virtue By the Great Alibi pellagra, hookworm, and illiteracy are all explained” By it the Southerner “turns defeat into victory, defects into virtues.” For the Northerner, “the War appears, according to the doctrine of the Treasury of Virtue, as a consciously undertaken crusade so full of righteousness that there is enough overplus stored in Heaven” to constitute “a plenary indulgence, for all sins past, present, and future, freely given by the hand of history.” If at the War’s end there was reconciliation and catharsis, there was not instruction derived from that catharsis, but rather “an image of the powerful, grinding process by which an

ideal emerges out of history.” Here Warren was not only historian but philosopher of history as well.

For all these achievements in other genres, Warren thought of himself primarily as a poet, and the fruits for him of the Southern literary tradition – the sense of history, the presence of the land, the idiom of its people – are there fully in his poems, long and short. He was almost alone in his persistence in writing the long narrative poem with historical and philosophical implications. In 1953 he published *Brother to Dragons* and then a new version in 1979. In the historical account, on the night of 15 December 1811, when the cataclysmic New Madrid earthquake hit the Mississippi Valley, Lilburne Lewis and his brother, Isham, murdered a slave in a particularly gruesome manner. Increasingly absorbed, Warren visited the ruins of the Lewis home twice. What caught his fancy was the philosophical point of entry into this horror story that made it more than simply Grand Guignol: Lilburne and Isham Lewis were nephews of Thomas Jefferson, sons of his sister, Lucy, and kinsmen of Meriwether Lewis, sent by Jefferson with William Clark to open the Louisiana Territory and plot the path to the Pacific. How did the author of the Declaration of Independence, the “architect of our country and the prophet of human perfectibility,” react to this atrocity by blood kinsmen?

There was no historical evidence to guide Warren, and so he had to search, reason, and intuit it out. It became, as he subtitled the work, “*A Tale in Verse and Voices*,” with both Jefferson and himself (RPW) among the speakers. There is resolution for both men at the end. After Lucy Lewis’s disquisition on human complicity in evil, she tells her brother that his dream was noble, but “there’s a nobler yet to dream.” And Jefferson responds, “Without the fact of the past we cannot dream the future.” The resolution for “R.P.W.,” as the poet designates himself, is extended and personal, with a final affirmation that reinforces that of Jefferson. “The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence. The recognition of Necessity is the beginning of freedom.” In his revision Warren had brought the poem more into line with the historical record, though there were still many discrepancies. Jefferson’s anguish is more protracted as he looks back on his early idealism, comes to terms with man’s fallen nature – as exemplified in his nephews’ crime – and consequent purgation. Meriwether Lewis appears earlier and to greater effect later, when Jefferson sees his own complicity in this surrogate son’s tragic suicide, a part of the process of acknowledgment of man’s burden of original sin and the awareness of human culpability rather than perfectibility.

Four years later in 1983 he published *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*, another long narrative poem whose matter he had had in mind for almost fifty years. As with another long poem, *Audubon: A Vision* (1969), he had taken the material of legend and history to deal with the complexities of human personality, exploring them against the background of a particular culture while infusing the whole with his perennial concerns with original sin against the ongoing processes of history. The method of this recounting of treachery and near genocide is signaled by three epigraphs: Jefferson’s pledge to three tribes of peaceful intentions, Sherman’s avowal that they would have to be exterminated or beggared, and Chief Sealth’s assertion that the Red Man’s spirit will live on in that land. The poem is a bitter and passionate recounting of betrayal and destruction, and though it is set in the Northwest, it is imbued with something of the tragic sense of the Civil War’s depredations.

Over the range of Warren's shorter poems from 1923 to 1984 are some of the same elements we have been observing. In one of the earliest, a segment of "Kentucky Mountain Farm," which he reprinted in all his collections, he wrote:

In these autumn orchards once young men lay dead—
Gray coats, blue coats. Young men on the mountainside
Clambered, fought. Heels muddied the rocky spring.
Their reason is hard to guess, remembering
Blood on their black moustaches in moonlight
Their reason is hard to guess and a long time past:
The apple falls, falling in the quiet night.

This is not the same strain as that of Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" or Davidson's "Lee in the Mountains," but it draws upon the same tradition. Even though Warren went farther from the South than both these friends and teachers, he still shared with them these common elements of time, place, and history – nurtured by the Southern literary tradition, and has long since been an integral part of it.

Joseph Blotner, Warren's biographer, is Professor Emeritus at the University of Michigan. Twice a Guggenheim Fellow and Fulbright Lecturer, he has spoken widely on American literature in the United States and abroad. He now lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, with his wife, Marnie.