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Robert Penn Warren and the South

LEWIS P. SIMPSON

Robert Penn Warren's association with Louisiana State University from 1934 to 1942 is always remembered in connection with two aspects of his career: his editorial role in the first series of the *Southern Review* (1935-1942), and his classic novel *All the King's Men* (1946), which bears a substantial relation to Warren's experience of the Louisiana of Huey Long. Less well remembered is that Warren left LSU following the cancellation of the budget for the *Review* and the refusal of the University administration to go more than half-way in meeting an offer he had received from a Northern university involving a four-hundred-dollar salary increase. Somehow the LSU administration of that day thought it made sense to put an end to a literary quarterly that had created not only national but international attention and to quibble about a small salary adjustment with a stimulating teacher, poet, novelist, and critic whose career was clearly in the ascendancy. It did not make sense to Warren, who thereupon, responding, as he was to put it later, to his sense of pride, "fled" from Louisiana and the South. He became a lustrous addition to the University of Minnesota faculty, and later one of the most distinguished members of the Yale University faculty.

It would have been somewhat different if Warren had not truly wanted to remain at LSU, having decided – to play on the title of his last novel *A Place to Come To* (1977) – that he had found here the place he wanted to come to. Indeed Warren's coming to Baton Rouge marked the beginning of the final phase of a struggle to return to the South that he had carried on since 1930, when, following what he looked back on as "years of wandering," he had returned to Tennessee, to teach at the school of his undergraduate years, Vanderbilt University.

The wandering years had removed Warren well beyond the South of the Confederate heritage he had known as a boy in rural Kentucky. These years had also distanced Warren from the South he had known as a precocious undergraduate at Vanderbilt, where he had been a member of the circle of Fugitive poets and shared with John Crowe Ransom and others a subtle but pervasive fear of becoming a displaced person in the modernizing post-First World War South – of becoming rootless, or placeless, in short, of becoming an exile in his own land. But Warren's

hope to counter this fear by making Tennessee his place to come to was frustrated by Vanderbilt's decision not to renew a three-year contract.

I had not quite realized the pathos of the final frustration of Warren's quest for a place to come to in the South until one day – in the knowledgeable company of Charles East – I followed the still tangible trail of the last phase of this quest in Baton Rouge and the surrounding countryside. Beginning with the oldest dwelling in the Southdowns area of the city, a cottage on Hyacinth Street Warren rented in 1934, the trail leads to a tiny house, with a tin roof and attractive chimney, on the Old Hammond Highway that Warren himself (with, he said, the assistance of “an out-of-work carpenter”) built in 1937. Warren, however, regarded his exotic little cabin in the woods only as a stop-over haven in his search for a place to come to. He found the real place in 1942, when he discovered at Prairieville – about eighteen miles from the LSU campus – twelve acres of woods and pasture featuring a substantial story-and-a-half bungalow situated on a typical South Louisiana bayou in a moss-shrouded stand of ancient live oaks. Yet at this very point Warren found himself accepting what he regarded as the fate of permanent exile.

William Styron once told Warren that he had left the South to live in New England simply because he chose to do so. Warren responded that in his own case he felt that he had been forced out of the South. “Perhaps,” Warren suggested to Styron, their differing motives constituted a “generational matter.” He meant a matter of whether or not one has experienced a tangible, living relationship with the mystery of the historical identity of the Confederacy, the defeat, and the Reconstruction as embodied in the identities of flesh and blood grandfathers and grandmothers, great aunts and great uncles, and cousins twice or thrice or four times removed. By the time Styron's generation of writers arrived on the scene this experience had become attenuated. But Warren came along in time to reexperience – to reembody – in the power of his imagination and the skill of his art a distillation of the yet living experience of memory and history available to a gifted grandchild of the Civil War.

Yet a prime source of Warren's art was paradoxically a self-conscious and painful estrangement from the South, providing as it did, to use Allen Tate's famous phrase, a knowledge “carried to the heart.” Fundamentally – to interpret Tate rather broadly – this is a knowledge that, under the terms of our citizenship in a nation invented by history, is the heritage of all Americans. But it is a knowledge never more plainly manifest than in the experience of the old Southerners – the experience of the irrevocable consequence of the vanquishment of the society based on land by the society of science and history: the isolation of the individual in history and the isolation of history in the individual. Warren's powerful awareness of this experience unfolds in the life of Jed Tewksbury in *A Place to Come To*. A poor white boy from Alabama who becomes a famous Dante scholar and teaches for a time at Vanderbilt, Jed is, along with Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* and Brad Tolliver in *Flood*, one of three novelistic personae of Warren, all of whom have a painful awareness of the intense quality the American sense of isolation has assumed in the South: a loneliness that is, Jed says, “a bleeding inward of the self, away from all the world around, into an internal infinitude, like a pit.” Having been bred up to this kind of loneliness, Jed says, he has taken “full advantage of the opportunities it offered.” “I was,” he declares, “the original, gold-plated, thirty-third degree loneliness artist, the champion of Alabama.”

The smart-alecky cynicism of Jed Tewksbury imposes a comic mask on the tragic mask of a persona who, as Warren himself increasingly recognized, haunts all his writings – poetical, fictional, historical, biographical, and critical – and ultimately transforms his achievement into, employing Warren’s own term, a “shadowy autobiography”: the autobiography of a man, a Southerner, that is to say, who for all his love of family and his legion of friends was, at the essential core a “loneliness artist.”

The last evocative moment in the story of this artist took place on Sunday, 8 October 1989, when in a private ceremony an urn containing his ashes was buried in a lonely country cemetery not far from his beloved summer home at West Wardsboro, Vermont. I had some account of the last rites for Warren in a telephone conversation with my friend and former student, and Warren’s friend and bibliographer, James, or, as we know him at LSU, “Bo” Grimshaw. When, in accordance with his wish, the earth of a New England burying ground that had not been disturbed for a hundred years was opened for Warren, this act expressed the last vision of a place to come by a poet for whom the mystery of personal identity was deeply fused with the mystery of place; for a poet who was an unmoveable nonbeliever yet always knew the yearning to believe; for a poet who was Southern to the bone – who knew that he could never be at home save in the South – yet knew that he could never come home again. Listening to Bo Grimshaw’s quietly eloquent description of the farewell to Warren in distant Vermont – including one particularly graphic detail: a reading of Warren’s Louisiana poem “Bearded Oaks” amid the burgeoning color of the New England autumn – a thought I have had before came to mind with singular force. I refer to the idea that between New England and the South there has been a fateful symbiotic relation, this subsisting in the ironic mystery that all Southerners are spiritual New Englanders, and New Englanders are spiritual Southerners. This mystery – recognized, one recalls, by Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in their famous reconciliation in their old age – is fraught with tragic historical implications, but in this moment of our remembrance of Red Warren I take comfort in it.

Lewis P. Simpson is Boyd Professor Emeritus at Louisiana State University and a celebrated authority on the American mind and imagination. He was co-editor of the second series of the *Southern Review*