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Editors' Forward (Volume 5)

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Editors' Foreword

Remembrance and meditation served as twin muses for Robert Penn Warren, early and late, and it is hardly surprising that he was acutely sensitive to the implications of centennial celebrations and the possibilities they provide for reflection, understanding, and renewal. In the first half of the 1960s, Americans entered upon a lengthy commemoration of the Civil War, and Warren, for whom that fratricidal conflict was the defining trauma of our collective experience, contributed significantly to the ongoing dialogue through his fiction, poetry, and social commentary – most notably in the indispensable little volume *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial*, where he managed to say more of substance than many historians offered in books of much greater length and heft. Likewise, the 100th anniversary of Theodore Dreiser's birth in 1971 found Warren paying somewhat unexpected tribute – in both poetry and prose – to a fellow American master whose life and art differed radically from his own. Indeed, Warren's book-length critical essay *Homage to Theodore Dreiser on the Centennial of His Birth* has proven quite influential over the years and even now enjoys the respect of Dreiser's most recent biographer, Jerome Loving.

This year, 2005, marks the centenary of Warren's own birth, and events honoring that occasion have been organized worldwide – April festivities at Western Kentucky University (home of the Robert Penn Warren Center) and at Guthrie, Kentucky, site of his birthplace, prime among them. A commemorative postage stamp will be issued, and (coincidentally or not) a new film version of *All the King's Men*, featuring a stellar cast, is scheduled to be released. It is a time for personal recollection and critical reassessment, an opportunity for celebrating the man and taking stock of his achievement. Those privileged to have known the author directly, in whatever capacity, will be moved to reminiscence. Those who have come to know him solely through his work will be eager to hear what they have to say.

Two good friends of this journal, the legendary Owen Laster of the William Morris Agency and Sherley Unger (wife of Warren's onetime student and later colleague at the University of Minnesota, Leonard Unger), have shared memories of their mutual friend "Red" with the editors, and we are pleased to pass them on here.

Mr. Laster writes:

Robert Penn Warren became a client of the William Morris Agency in 1947. He was very active writing novels, poetry, and many essays. I didn't become his agent until I joined the Literary Department in 1967, soon after which his agent Helen Strauss, who brought him to William Morris, left the company. I immediately got in touch with him, and he

was totally embracing and encouraging about having a productive relationship with me. I cherish the time I spent with him; and although in the later years there was less fiction and fewer essays, the poetry kept being creative.

Sherley Unger provided these recollections:

Robert Penn Warren was a presence in my life before I met him. Red had been Leonard's friend and mentor at Vanderbilt, where John Ransom was Leonard's major professor. When Leonard graduated, he went to LSU, where Brooks and Warren were teaching and editing the *Southern Review*. Cleanth became his thesis adviser, but it was Red with whom he socialized. There is a story of an evening in the country near Baton Rouge when they lost their way to a party. When they came to an imposing house they asked for directions of a man who came to the door in his tux. He invited them in and insisted that they join him in a drink. You can just hear Red's laugh as they visited. It is that laugh that first comes to mind when I think of Red. In our first years at Minnesota, there were dinner parties that Red and Cinina gave in their hotel apartment and later in a house with an elevator and a grand view of the western sky. Cinina was often not well. Sometimes she received guests in her bedroom during the party. Other times we were a foursome for dinner. Red would offer bourbon and branch water with "This will cut the phlegm." He was able to rest during a party by standing with an elbow propped on the piano and his head in his hand. Thirty minutes in that position could refresh him. Red was a strong swimmer, as was our mutual friend Joseph Warren Beach. They would swim leisurely across Lake Nakomis or Cedar Lake and back. The Beaches had a place they called "Sky Water" on the St. Croix River. Red and Beach enjoyed bucking the current there. They had plenty of energy for good talk afterward.

This centennial number of our *Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*, graced by memoirs by Rosanna and Gabriel Warren and a poetic tribute by Peter Davison, is strong on reminiscence, as it should be, but it also addresses the author's present place in American letters, revisits major works, revises old understandings, suggests new questions and lines of inquiry, and introduces Warren scholars to a particularly valuable collection of primary materials that holds considerable promise for future investigations. Warren's vibrant legacy as poet, novelist, playwright, editor, teacher, and cultural and literary critic is nothing less than a national treasure. A century after his birth, he continues to give us, scholars and lay readers alike, cause for celebration and gratitude.

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James A. Grimshaw, Jr., though retired, still teaches one philosophy class per semester and continues as general editor of the Sam Rayburn Series on Rural Life at Texas A&M University-Commerce; most recently he edited the Robert Penn Warren documentary volume for the Dictionary of Literary Biography.