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## A Critical Look at Robert Penn Warren's New (and old) Criticism on Satire<sup>1</sup>

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*"I just don't think of myself as a critic."  
(Robert Penn Warren)*

He would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize—three times—and become America's first Poet Laureate, but when he was a Rhodes Scholar pursuing his B.Litt. degree at Oxford, Robert Penn Warren had trouble deciding upon a topic for his thesis. His problems might have begun with the selection of Percy Simpson as his supervisor. Warren biographer Joseph Blotner describes Oxford dons as frequently being "eccentric" and sometimes "witty and generous," but with Simpson, Warren had "no such luck." The erudite, sixty-three-year-old Simpson, whose published work included the page-turning *Shakespeare's Punctuation* and the mesmerizing *Proof-Reading in the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, and Eighteenth Centuries*, was, according to Blotner, "a stunningly incompetent thesis supervisor." One of Simpson's first questions for his southern Kentucky-born and raised pupil was "Are you Australian or American?" Upon his answer, Simpson informed the twenty-three-year-old Warren, "No American has ever distinguished himself with us."<sup>2</sup> With this start, it is perhaps not surprising that Simpson rejected Warren's first two topics for his thesis, while Warren rejected Simpson's one suggestion. After these three non-starts, both agreed upon a thesis whose focus would be an Elizabethan playwright and poet, John Marston. But it would not be Marston's plays or poems about which Warren would write; instead, his thesis would focus on Marston's satires. With this choice, Warren ostensibly

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Western Kentucky University's Jane Fife, Ted Hovet, Deborah Logan, and Dale Rigby for their help with this essay. Additionally, I would like to thank the Kentucky Library, the Russell M. and Mary Z. Yeager Scholarship Committee—Nancy Baird, Cindy Jones, Michael Ann Williams—and the College Heights Foundation for their generous underwriting of this research.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random, 1997), 88.

countermands his later involvement with the formalistic school of literary theory labeled New Criticism, which often held satire in low esteem.

Although its popularity has waned, New Criticism was the leading literary theory in American universities during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* calls New Criticism the “dominant mode of modern criticism against which much later theory typically defines itself.”<sup>3</sup> The “academic Establishment,” according to Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, so wholeheartedly embraced New Criticism that it came to seem “the most natural thing in the literary critical world; indeed it was difficult to imagine that there had ever been anything else.”<sup>4</sup> But there had been something else.<sup>5</sup> Prior to New Criticism, literary studies often focused on the history or biography of the writer, sometimes to the neglect of the writing itself. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson describes how a former professor of hers illustrated this type of class: “[S]tudents attending a lecture on Wordsworth’s ‘Elegiac Stanzas’ (1805) could expect to hear a description of the poet’s personal and intellectual life: his family, friends, enemies, lovers, habits, education, beliefs, and experiences. ‘Now you understand the meaning of “Elegiac Stanzas,”’ they would be told, without anyone in the room, including the lecturer, having opened the book to look at the poem itself.”<sup>6</sup> Begun as a countermovement against a perceived overemphasis on biographical and historical background, New Criticism demanded a new, limited focus on a work of literature as a stand-alone item with intrinsic meaning, a meaning not dependent on knowledge of the author’s life, intent, or time; this is what made New Criticism, which is now old, “new.” Reading outside the text in order to understand the

<sup>3</sup> Vincent B. Leitch and others, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 49, 50.

<sup>5</sup> And there would be something to follow. Eagleton helpfully suggests three general periods in modern literary theory up until the time of his writing (1983): “a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader in recent years” (Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 74).

<sup>6</sup> Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Garland, 1999), 118.

text violates a central tenet of New Criticism: whether it be a play, a poem, or a work of fiction, an interpreter must largely confine him- or herself to the work alone in order to discover its meaning.<sup>7</sup> And one of the early preachers of this new hermeneutics was Robert Penn Warren who, along with Cleanth Brooks, his collaborator on some of the century's most influential college textbooks, *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction*, was named by an associate from Yale as the "Castor and Pollux of the New Criticism."<sup>8</sup>

But this emphasis on the intrinsic form of the poem, play, or novel, and the corresponding de-emphasis on its extrinsic world, caused tension for New Critics trying to be true to their principles while also facing the often unavoidable historical nature of satires; New Criticism's dominant approach was not good news for historical satires. According to Brian A. Connery and Kirke Combe, the conflict facing proponents of the (then) new school of literary interpretation, of choosing between following or breaking their literary code, led to satire being "generally ignored"; there was, in effect, a "malign neglect" by mid-twentieth century New Critics of satire.<sup>9</sup> What caused satire's ill fortunes under New Criticism's reign? According to Connery and Combe, both satire's intention and historicity cause problems for those who wish to remain just with the words in black and white: "satire's insistence upon its historical specificity, its torrential references to the peculiarities of the particular individuals in the society that it represents [. . .] worked to exclude it from consideration of those who insisted on the self-containment of literary texts"; "satire more than other

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<sup>7</sup> New Critical methods worked best with poetry, which, according to Eagleton, "is of all literary genres the one most apparently sealed from history." He adds, "It would be difficult to see *Tristram Shandy* or *War and Peace* as tightly organized structures of symbolic ambivalence" (*Literary Theory*, 51).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in James A. Grimshaw, Jr., *Understanding Robert Penn Warren* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2001), 8. Grimshaw explains this allusion: "In Greek mythology Castor and Polydeuces (Pollus) were twin brothers whose sister was Helen and whose father was Zeus. They were . . . deified for their heroism in battle." He adds that "[b]ecause of their textbooks, Brooks and Warren were considered leaders in the New Critical approach to literature" (205).

<sup>9</sup> Brian A. Connery and Kirke Combe, "Theorizing Satire: A Retrospective and Introduction," in *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirke Combe (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 4.

genres emphasizes—indeed, is defined by—its intention (attack), an intention that again refers the reader to matter outside the text.” Satire has a difficult time staying limited to just what is on a page—it tends to leave the text in search of something outside it that needs ridiculing or reforming, and it tends to connect the text to someone outside it in order to hit its target. As a result, satire “suffered at the hands of critics who wished to exclude history from literature,” as well as critics who would label the desire to know the author’s intentions a “fallacy.”<sup>10</sup>

If New Critics tended to ignore satire, almost all critics of Warren have tended to ignore his thesis on Marston’s satires.<sup>11</sup> In “‘A Critical Sense Worthy of Respect’: John Marston and the Early Poetics of Robert Penn Warren,” John C. Van Dyke calls the work in Oxford “one of the most obscure moments in Warren’s career,” describing Blotner’s very limited references to the thesis as “[t]o my knowledge, [. . .] the first published mention of Warren’s thesis” (and Charlotte Beck describes Van Dyke’s *Style* article as “the only paper yet published on Marston’s thesis”).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, it is not only critics who overlook it; as Van Dyke observes, Warren also, “[f]or all practical purposes, [. . .] seems to have forgotten about John Marston.” During a lifetime of interviews in which he would be asked about his growth as a critic, “Warren never referred to the thesis nor to Marston and his satires,” this in spite of the fact that he retained an “interest in Elizabethan poetry and metaphysical poetics.” He does not anthologize Marston in his and Brooks’s *Understanding Poetry*, and according to Van Dyke, Warren “never returned to the subject in any of his subsequent critical writing.”<sup>13</sup> When

<sup>10</sup> Connery and Combe, 4-5, 11. Ross Murfin and Supryia Ray define “intentional fallacy” as an expression created by two prominent New Critics, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “to refer to the practice of basing interpretations on the expressed or implied intentions of authors, a practice they judged to be erroneous” (*The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003], 218).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Penn Warren, “A Study of John Marston’s Satires,” B.Litt. Thesis (Oxford University, 1930), photocopy found in Joseph Leo Blotner Collection (MSS 200, Box 12, Folder 12b), Robert Penn Warren Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

<sup>12</sup> John C. Van Dyke, “‘A Critical Sense Worthy of Respect’: John Marston and the Early Poetics of Robert Penn Warren,” *Style* 36, no. 2 (summer 2002): 203, 219 (*Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost, accessed January 26, 2012); Charlotte Beck, *Robert Penn Warren, Critic* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2006), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Van Dyke, “A Critical Sense,” 203.

Warren left Oxford, he appears to have left Marston behind.<sup>14</sup> And yet Warren's treatment of Marston's satires is intriguing for what it reveals about Warren's development as a New Critic—satire's twentieth-century opponent through neglect.

To be kind, Warren's "A Study of John Marston's Satires" is not his most compelling read. Blotner states that a "sympathetic reader [. . .] would understand why, after five years of graduate study, its author did not relish two more years and another scholarly treatise."<sup>15</sup> In *Robert Penn Warren, Critic*, Charlotte H. Beck, who praises Warren's work as a sign of "an erudite scholar who could manipulate sources and painstakingly document them as well as any of his professors," admits that "[c]learly Warren [. . .] would have preferred to study Marston's drama rather than his satires," and while "he pursued the task competently," he did so "with less than scholarly enthusiasm."<sup>16</sup> The thesis has three chapters, stretching over seventy-three pages, and six appendices, covering another thirty-five pages; throughout, it is heavily annotated, with footnotes sometimes taking up over half of the page.<sup>17</sup> Chapter One situates Marston's satires in the context of both ancient satiric models and then-current didactic pamphlets. Chapter Two goes into the quarrelsome relationship between Marston and Anglican bishop and fellow satirist, Joseph Hall. Chapter Three closes out the main body of the text by describing Marston's view on literature. Warren's own view on Marston's role in the history of literature is one of qualified, cautious, and at times almost-minimal praise. For instance, he allows that Marston's "awkward use of the decasyllabic couplet may have had some slight weight in fixing it as the conventional form for verse satire."<sup>18</sup> When he writes of Marston's depiction of the

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<sup>14</sup> Although Yale offered him a fellowship, after completing his studies at Oxford, Warren decided to become a writer rather than "spending all of his 'time trying to put salt on the tail of the academic albatross'" (Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren*, 107).

<sup>15</sup> Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren*, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Beck, *Robert Penn Warren, Critic*, 5, 22, 2. While at Yale, prior to sailing for Oxford, he wrote to a friend, "Of course what I really wanted was to get in an environment where men were actually doing creative writing, but Yale is not the place for that, I learn too late" (Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren*, 82).

<sup>17</sup> Chapter One has 130 footnotes over 27 pages; Chapter Two has 29 footnotes over 16 pages; and Chapter Three has 57 footnotes over 27 pages.

<sup>18</sup> Warren, "A Study of John Marston's Satires," 27; hereafter cited by page number in the

“Elizabethan street scene,” he admits that while it is “blurred and distorted,” it “has a few striking portraits which can still engage the attention” (27). The last sentence of his first chapter perhaps captures this near damning-with-faint-praise approach: “Marston’s relation to Hall and other contemporaries and his critical opinions have some slight bearing on literary history” (27). While Warren will conclude his thesis by arguing that “Marston brought to these matters, as well as to the more specific items of discussion, a real enthusiasm for literature and a critical sense worthy of respect” (72), he admits that Marston’s place in English satire is “not a very important one” (27).

Although Warren might not see Marston’s satires as truly significant, Van Dyke argues for a new importance to be given Warren’s thesis: “What saves Warren’s thesis from insignificance is its engagement with the critical and theoretical issues raised by Marston’s satires and its indication of the nature and shape of Warren’s own poetics.” In his forgotten thesis, we get a taste of what will become “new”: “It contains in nascent form the central concerns of what became Warren’s own theory of poetry, that is, the preference for the psychological rather than the formal difference.”<sup>19</sup> But for my purposes, what is striking about his thesis is that at the dawn of New Criticism, Warren does not fit the stereotypical image of a New Critic.

As has already been noted, the fact that he examines instead of ignoring satire is itself contrary to typical formalistic concerns. But more than that, throughout his thesis, Warren veers away from what will become key emphases of New Critical thought. For instance, on occasion, Warren comes close to committing the intentional fallacy, referring to the author’s intention, speaking of how, in the pamphlets of the day, “[t]he reformatory impulse had discovered [. . .] another and probably more effective expression”; additionally, he closes his first chapter with a defense of Marston’s motives: “after making certain allowances for the violent exaggeration, there appears to be little reason to

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text. Concerning Marston’s foe, Joseph Hall, Warren adds, “Hall’s more expert handling of the form and his greater popularity would seem to indicate him as the most considerable contemporary influence in that direction” (27).

<sup>19</sup> Van Dyke, “A Critical Sense,” 203, 218.

doubt the fundamental earnestness of his intention, or to define him as an affected opportunist” (11, 27). In addition to speaking of the author’s intentions, Warren also focuses on the satirist’s world. While there is very little biographical material—to borrow from Lois Tyson’s former professor, we know next to nothing about Marston’s “family, friends, enemies, lovers, habits, education, beliefs, and experiences”—the thesis very much leaves the intrinsic text for the external world of historical events, in particular, the Elizabethan world: “the source of his material lay largely in the pamphlet literature” (16). At one point, like any good historian, he locates, with “some degree of certainty,” one of the pamphlets used by Marston.<sup>20</sup> And while Warren may deal with a formalist’s typical concern for theme (pages five through ten), he relates the satire’s inner world to one outside the text: “Classical satire provided a method and in some cases the themes for Marston, but it was the realistic pamphlet literature of the time which chiefly influenced him, as well as the other satirists, in his characters. In a sense it was through this medium that the older satire touched the new” (11).<sup>21</sup> The entire second chapter uses the satires as a means of sifting through Marston’s impolite attack on Hall, attacks that Warren labels “personal” (30, 37-38), “insulting” (38), “disgraceful” (39), and “obscene,” (39).<sup>22</sup> Extrinsic history so permeates the work that Marston scholar Ejner Jensen, in an unpublished letter to Blotner, calls Warren, a soon-to-be founder of a movement that supposedly disallows the mixing of history and literary interpretation, someone who “does all the necessary work of a bibliographer and literary historian.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Lodge’s *Wits Miserie and the Worlds Madnesse; Discovering the Devils Incarnat of this Age*, which was published in 1596” (18).

<sup>21</sup> Actually, the unmarried Warren was not impressed by one of Marston’s themes: “As has already been said, he usually worked out the theme for a satire by a rather mechanical use of the illustrative method, which lost much of the dramatic effect found in Juvenal’s or Persius’ more expert handling. The resulting impression of monotony of theme is emphasized by Marston’s preoccupation with the subject of lust: whether the theme of a satire is hypocrisy, procrastination, or advancement by slight, the illustrations are chiefly drawn from that subject” (10).

<sup>22</sup> Although here Warren admits that this judgment might not be aimed “at Hall himself but at the general class to which he belongs” (39).

<sup>23</sup> Ejner Jensen to Joseph Leo Blotner, undated, Joseph Leo Blotner Collection (MSS 200, Box 12, Folder 12b), Robert Penn Warren Library, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY. Warren’s thesis, says Jensen, “surveys some of the chief problems and issues surrounding the satires without being directed by an overriding thesis or by a sense of Marston as someone who



Warren does not fit my image of a new critic; but perhaps my image is wrong. Beck argues that Warren's critical views cannot be narrowly pigeonholed into the stereotypical image of a dogmatic Formalist critic. The historical emphasis of his thesis is not an aberration or a quality that he drops once he is an accomplished professor and no longer a struggling student: throughout his career, Warren "was bent toward a permanent and persistent historicism in everything that he wrote." And charges that he treated texts as "verbal icons" simply do not agree with the Warren corpus. Any effort to pin down Warren as one who rigidly follows a canon of literary laws will fail, for he "was an eclectic critic who subscribed to no orthodoxy but his own."<sup>24</sup> Additionally, Warren's unorthodoxy is not peculiar to him. In defining New Criticism, C. Hugh Holman describes it in terms of diversity: "Not even the group to which the term can be applied in its strictest sense has formed a school subscribing to a fixed dogma; [. . . it] is really a cluster of attitudes toward literature rather than an organized critical system."<sup>25</sup> Warren himself cautioned the categorizers: "Even the 'New Critics,' who are so often referred to as a group, and at least are corralled together with the barbed wire of a label, are more remarkable for differences in fundamental principles than for anything they have in common."<sup>26</sup> Concerning their stance on satire, New Critics should not be categorized as marching lockstep to a singular, exclusive tune—not even with satire. It is interesting to note that some satire does make it into Brooks and Warren's anthologies: their *Understanding Poetry* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) contains an appendix of thirteen parodies, while Brooks, Purser, and Warren's *An Approach to Literature* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) anthologizes at least one, brief satire.<sup>27</sup> But while this shows the presence of satire in New

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deserves to be rescued from undeserving neglect. At times, this seems like the work of a literary historian rather than a critic."

<sup>24</sup> Beck, *Robert Penn Warren*, 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1981), 295.

<sup>26</sup> Qtd. in John Hicks, "Exploration of Value: Warren's Criticism," in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Gray (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 176.

<sup>27</sup> Cleanth Brooks, John Thibaut Purser, and Robert Penn Warren, eds., *An Approach to Literature* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967). In "Let's See Who Salutes," Art Buchwald satirizes "the people in charge in television today," imagining them in 1776 Philadelphia, meeting

Critical work, the fact that it is such a small portion of the whole illustrates the tension that New Critics, including Warren, would face as they worked with a genre that steadfastly resisted being kept just to the page.

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with Thomas Jefferson over their concerns about the possible offensiveness of the Declaration of Independence (443).