

2008

Editor's Foreword (Volume 8)

Mark D. Miller
m.miller@mcla.edu

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Mark D. (2008) "Editor's Foreword (Volume 8)," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 8 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol8/iss1/4>

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Editor's Foreword

Robert Penn Warren was acutely aware of the ironies that pervade human existence. Of course, not all of these ironies are as tragic as, say, the American Civil War, but even the smallest and most trivial of them can remind us of the stance or attitude towards life acute awareness of them should induce us to take. *Humility* is one important component of that attitude—the opposite of what the Greeks called *hubris*.

I bring this up because the “Contents” and abstracts and the “Editor’s Foreword” in the previous volume of this annual, Volume VII, contained just such an ultimately trivial irony: titles that were supposed to be italicized were not. In the “Editor’s Foreword,” this meant, ironically, that the title of this annual, *rWp*, was not italicized as it should be, and since the “Foreword” contained our new Mission Statement, this error occurred repeatedly. Moreover, ironically absent from that Mission Statement was something I suppose I took for granted as a given of *any* journal’s mission: to be as error-free as possible. When I opened the volume and saw the errors, I hurried to find the last set of proofs I had read. The errors were not there, nor was the “2” that had inexplicably leapt into the center of the word “precisely” in the abstract of Joseph Wensink’s essay. However, this did not diminish the sick feeling that had come over me. It simply told me that I should have read proof *one more time*.

I apologize to our contributors and readers alike, and while I cannot promise that this annual will be error-free from here on out, I *do* promise to be more diligent in the future—to read proof *one more time*, if I possibly can.

As ultimately trivial as it may be, this misadventure in editing does point to a deeper, more disturbing irony that has to do with technology. Thanks to computers, wholesale changes—and errors—can be made with the stroke of a key, and since the digital Web of Being is now world-wide, whatever we do can have far-reaching effects. Thus, the whisking away of italics in this instance ironically serves to emphasize the *power* of technology in our lives,

for both good *and* ill. What will we do with it? And what will it do to us?

This last question bears directly on the essay that ends this volume and indirectly not only on the rest of the essays, but also on all of Warren studies. In the concluding essay, high school teachers Kristina Rice and Angela Sloan address the question of how to incorporate the works of Robert Penn Warren into the secondary school curriculum. They do this against the backdrop of a much larger issue: how to get young people to read, period, and—when they do read—how to ensure that they are reading accurately and deeply. Two massive studies by the National Endowment for the Arts, *Reading at Risk* (2004) and *To Read or Not to Read* (2007), have indicated to educators and others the scope of the problem. Among young people today, reading must compete with a dizzying and ever-proliferating array of digital gadgets and virtual gathering places, such as online social networking sites, and reading is losing. If reading in general is in peril, then how much more imperiled is close reading, particularly when the writer being read is Robert Penn Warren?

Interestingly, even advanced readers may need the help of especially insightful critics in order to learn *how* to read the most challenging of writers. In her essay, Dana W. McMichael demonstrates how Cleanth Brooks was such a critic for readers of William Faulkner. Herman Melville is another such writer. Today, *Moby-Dick* is canonical—so much so that Angela Sloan used it with her AP literature students as a way into *All the King's Men*. However, such was not always the case. As with Faulkner, readers of Herman Melville needed the help of especially insightful critics—Robert Penn Warren among them—in order to learn *how* to read this most challenging of writers. Our hope is that this and the other volumes of *rWp* will help accomplish the same thing for Warren and his readers.

Comparative study—particularly relating the known or more familiar to the unknown or less familiar—is often an excellent way of learning about new things or of gaining new insights into old, already familiar things. Kyle Crews gives us such a comparative study in his essay on Warren and Shelby Foote. So

too—startlingly—does Marshall Walker, in his contribution on Warren and Sibelius. Professor Walker has a long familiarity with both artists. In the case of Warren, he also had a long, personal friendship. Bringing them together in his imagination yields new insights into each and new revelations about himself and the human condition. His work is the product of a lifetime’s devotion.

On the other end of the spectrum, Kristina Rice proposes *introducing* Warren to students who have never read him by comparing themes in his work to those found in contemporary music by artists such as Kelly Clarkson and Modest Mouse. In addition, she uses a song by another musical artist who also appears in the essay by H. R. Stoneback. Who might that artist be? And what is the connection to Warren? Novice or old hand, rookie or veteran, we can be prompted to thought-provoking new attention to Warren when we attempt to see his works in relation, comparatively, not only to the works of other writers, but also to other works of art and to the issues of our own time, which might just prove to be timeless human issues.

Would the gentlemen depicted in the whimsical short story by James A. Perkins *approve* of such an approach? Well, if the “squeaky wheel,” as they liked to call it, is not just an absence of what we now call “close reading,” which is what prompted Brooks and Warren to get into the business of writing textbooks, but an absence of reading, close or otherwise, they might just despair of *any* solution. On the other hand, they might also concede that comparative study is just the grease to be applied at this particular moment. As for comparative study as a sort of last refinement or ultimate application of close reading skills, if one has a passion for the works of Sibelius or Hank Williams as well as for those of Robert Penn Warren, of course one is going to try to reconcile and merge those passions, just to be whole; for, to alter slightly the famous question from Warren’s great poem *Audubon*, what are we but our passions?

I suppose *passion* is therefore the reason that much of what follows is not standard academic fare, in the standard academic style and format. Professor Walker has given us a letter. Professor Stoneback’s essay, while being traditional in some respects, is also

very personal and is certainly a fitting tribute to one of his great passions, the duo of Stoney and Sparrow. Professor Perkins has given us a hybrid form, in which the notes remain end- rather than foot-. Professor McMichael discusses two of the men in the Warren circle who appeared in one of the lists offered in the “Editor’s Foreword” to Volume VII, but the essay is not about Warren himself, and the essay by Mr. Crews adds another name to that list: Shelby Foote. Of course, Sibelius was not on any of the lists, nor was Modest Mouse.

The Mission Statement we printed in Volume VII did not *inspire* this richness and variety of submissions; it merely announced that *rWp* was open to such richness and variety. True, at Warren Center and Circle meetings over the years, Wes Berry and I had discussed the need for pedagogical materials such as those he prompted his co-authors to develop and that are being published here. However, the range of materials in this volume is not the product of a conscious, coordinated effort; it reflects what people are doing in Warren studies and so indicates, it seems to me, a general sense that we need to try all sorts of things, in the current environment, to ensure that the life and works of Robert Penn Warren continue to receive the attention they deserve.

Thanks again to Robin L. Condon for providing a bibliography of Warren studies that covers the past year, and special thanks to Marshall Walker for allowing us to publish his splendid photographs of Robert Penn Warren.

Mark D. Miller

This volume is dedicated to the memory of three remarkable women: Nancy Davis, Professor of English at Western Kentucky University, Tommie Warren Frey, Robert Penn Warren’s niece, and Jerre Fitts, long-time Warren Committee member. Three stalwart supporters of Warren studies, they are dearly missed in the Warren community and by all whose lives they touched.

~ M.D.M