

# Robert Penn Warren Studies

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## Editorial Preface

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## EDITORIAL PREFACE TO *RPW STUDIES*

### **Robert Penn Warren: A Model for "Ideological Evolution"?** by Co-Editor, Joan Romano Shifflett

*"Warren's social criticism, his rhetoric, certainly had the power to influence the thinking of others, but I argue that the quarrel with himself, his poetry, is a grander model for displaying the process of ideological evolution and thus even more influential; it allows us to see ourselves in the mirror of his reckoning."*

-- *Natasha Trethewey, "The World of Action and Liability': On Saying What Happens" (2014)*

Our nation is experiencing a transformational moment. In this period of pandemic-inspired heightened awareness, George Floyd's death has catalyzed many more Americans to acknowledge and begin battling the far-reaching, devastating effects of systematic racism. We are witnessing movements towards palpable change, like the July 1 retirement of the Confederate battle flag from the Mississippi statehouse into the hands of Pamela Junior, Director of the Museum of Mississippi History and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, or the University of Kentucky's head football coach, joined by the Chief of Police, leading the team in a Black Lives Matter march through downtown Lexington on what would have been Breonna Taylor's twenty-seventh birthday. In what seems to be a productive paradigm shift in our collective thinking, I can't help but pause before promoting yet another white, male voice. The voice of a writer, no less, that has inspired critics to spill gallons of ink in various attempts to alternately question, explain, condemn, and celebrate the role that race plays in the dynamic arc of his 60+ year oeuvre as poet, novelist, literary critic, and yes, social critic. And yet, reflecting on this larger question of whose voices to amplify, I drift back to a warm evening in May 2014 at the Thomas Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress where the Coolidge Auditorium was packed with poetry lovers eager to hear Pulitzer Prize winning Natasha



afterwards when I spoke with her at her book signing? Why choose Warren to share her spotlight that night?

One may argue that the trajectory of Warren's personal transformation may be reason enough. After all, there are few other such detailed written accounts of one person's ideological evolution on the concept of race. A microcosm of widespread views in America, we see the twenty-five year old who contributed "Briar Patch" to *I'll Take My Stand* transform into the public spokesman of the 1960s who participated in the Civil Rights Movement and wrote *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961) and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), among other tracts on behalf of social justice and equality. But was that transformation enough, then for Trethewey, or now for us? Isn't the world already saturated with tales of "redeemed" white men? Do we really need more of their hero stories? Trethewey gives us her answer, which is more poignant now than six years ago:

Reading Warren, I see the scaffolding of a tradition in American poetry of turning to history in order to deal with difficult knowledge, to grapple with ongoing issues of justice, to reflect upon how and what we remember, how the images of our history, that knowledge, rooted like blood in the body must be contended with again and again, to keep us ever vigilant lest we forget. ("The World of Action and Liability," U.S. Poet Laureate Address, May 14, 2014, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.)

Trethewey recognized in Warren's work, and in the larger tradition of American poetry, a methodology that could be replicated, a practice of reckoning with the past and the self--in her words, "a model of evolving in enlightenment and as an example of poetry's way of showing us the possibility of justice and equality."

So perhaps today, we can choose to follow Trethewey's lead by resisting the urge to automatically dismiss Warren's body of work in light of his early views, instead taking time to unpack and appreciate how he grappled with ongoing issues of justice. Rather than aim to erase Warren's past to justify a continued appreciation of his work or assuage any guilt (a path that would horrify Warren), we can follow Warren's example by entering an uneasy dialogue between ourselves and the world, ourselves and history. Perhaps most importantly, we can choose to acknowledge that Warren was, first and foremost, a poet, an artist who was capable of elevating the process of discernment to a universal level in his literature. As Warren argues in his essay "The Use of the Past," poetry's "function" is "bringing us face to face with our nature and our fate" (31). He is not arguing that literature should have a didactic function; nor am I. He is, however, exalting the power of poetry to raise metaphysical questions of being--a task at which his poetry excels. This is why Trethewey was willing to share her literal and figurative stage with Warren, why his work still resonates--evocative, insightful, and relevant--decades later. His prose works are meaningful and important, but the real value is how he recreates through layers of imagination and artistry the process of human reckoning, the "quarrel with himself," a universal path to more enlightened thinking.

One need look no further than Warren's *Brother to Dragons*, a long poem based on a real murder that occurred on the night of December 15, 1811, at Rocky Hill, near Smithland, Kentucky. This incident haunted Warren for over four decades, as he worked intermittently for ten years on the poem's 1953 iteration and later heavily revised and published it anew in 1979. *Brother to Dragons* tells the true story of how Lilburne Lewis, aided by his brother Isham, brutally butchered a young slave with an ax as punishment for breaking a pitcher that belonged

to their mother. The intrigue of the story is heightened, of course, because Lilburne and Isham Lewis are nephews of President Thomas Jefferson, sons of his sister, Lucy Jefferson Lewis. This is a fact that Warren emphasizes even more heavily in the revised 1979 version, a fact that caused Trethewey's audience to squirm uncomfortably in their chairs that evening of her lecture, chairs that were rooted in the *Thomas Jefferson Building*.

A pattern for Warren's later work, the 1979 revision of *Brother to Dragons* demonstrates Warren's increasing commitment to present a less abstract, less idealistic version of history; his characters acknowledge and take more responsibility for the past, demonstrating the moral awareness that Warren advocated for all Americans. As Trethewey noted, Warren sought to "create a true record of man" in his revision of *Brother to Dragons*. By introducing Meriwether Lewis earlier and allowing Thomas Jefferson to see his own involvement in the tragedy, Warren emphasizes the importance of recognizing and accepting blame instead of desperately clinging to an altered version of an idealized portrait. In Trethewey's words, "Warren saw the connection between poetry and responsibility, the world of action and liability."

Throughout this late great period in Warren's career, he consistently created narrators whose dreamlike, idealistic delusions are shattered and replaced by stark, concrete images aligned with a realistic portrayal of history. Whether a narrator is coming to terms with the frightening consequences for Native Americans from the self-righteous quest to fulfill the Manifest Destiny, or coping with the alienation and dehumanization that result from the Industrial Revolution, or realizing the profound ramifications of the atomic bomb, Warren's poetry encourages personal self-reflection for the reader. Furthermore, his poetry inspires a

self-discernment process that can result in an awareness and knowledge of how to fit into this modern world--to not only identify one's place in history, but also to actively influence history for the best. As Trethewey argued and as would be difficult to refute, this very process is crucial for moving our nation forward.

In his "Editor's Foreword: The Need for 'Deep Engagement': Robert Penn Warren, Malcolm X, and Ta-Nehisi Coates," former editor Mark Miller expresses his explicit wish that *Robert Penn Warren Studies*, in its new online format, would uphold the tradition of its predecessor, *rWp: An Annual of Robert Penn Warren Studies*, by

publishing writing whose deep engagement with the life and work of Robert Penn Warren and the issues with which he grappled will demonstrate the "deep engagement of spirit with the world" that he said was necessary for there to be even "a sort of redemption" for each individual and for humanity as a whole.

It is our sincere belief that this edition of *Robert Penn Warren Studies* does just that, whether through Mark Miller himself continuing this conversation in "Race and Son-of-a-Bitch-ism in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*"; our two Eleanor Clark Award winners, Mary Cuff and Jane Forsyth, grappling with worthwhile topics in "Melville's *Battle-Pieces* and Warren's *Wilderness*" and "'Pattern of Meaning': Symbolic Dynamism as a Formal Structure in *The Waste Land* and *The Well Wrought Urn*"; or Noah Simon Jampol contributing a thoughtful book review on 2017 Brooks-Warren Award winner Bonnie Costello's *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*. In this volume, we also take time to celebrate the lives of some of our most treasured members of the Robert Penn Warren Circle, those whose spirits live on in their contribution to Warren studies and in our memories of their friendship. Ed

Chapman, James "Bo" Grimshaw, Mary Ellen Miller, Rubye Patch, and Jeane Moore: this edition of *Robert Penn Warren Studies* is dedicated to you.