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Mark D. Miller
m.miller@mcla.edu

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Editor's Foreword

The Need for "Deep Engagement":

Robert Penn Warren, Malcolm X, and Ta-Nehisi Coates

Mark D. Miller

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts

(A version of this essay was delivered at the 26th annual meeting of the Robert Penn Warren Circle, on Saturday, April 23, 2016, at the Robert Penn Warren Birthplace in Guthrie, Kentucky.)

On September 5, 2015, Nicolette Bruner-Olson, Scholar-in-Residence and Robert Penn Warren Fellow at the Center for Robert Penn Warren Studies at Western Kentucky University, sent a link in an e-mail to the Warren Circle membership alerting us to the fact that Ta-Nehisi Coates had posted a piece on August 28, 2015, in the *Notes* section of *The Atlantic* online (www.theatlantic.com), entitled "When Malcolm X Met Robert Penn Warren." In the piece, Coates calls Warren "one of the giants of 20th century literature" and urges his readers to "check out" Warren's interview with Malcolm X in Vanderbilt's remarkable online archive of interview tapes, transcripts, and other materials for Warren's 1965 volume *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/malcolm-x). Initially, I was thankful that a contemporary figure as important and well-known as Ta-Nehisi Coates was using a platform as influential as *The Atlantic* to urge people to "check out" Warren's interview with Malcolm X, perhaps to go on from there to examine the rest of Vanderbilt's incredible archive of materials

from Warren's research for *Who Speaks for the Negro?* and perhaps even to read some of Warren's own poetry and fiction.

However, something about the breezy informality of that phrase, "check out," was discouraging to me. Ideally, our excavations of literary and other sites ought to be as painstaking and thoroughgoing as the archeological dig conducted in the spring of 2016 at the Roxbury home where Malcolm X, then Malcolm Little, lived with his sister's family in the 1940s during his life-changing time in Boston. I thought to myself, "If people 'check out' those archival materials in the way too many people experience things today, particularly on the Internet—that is, quickly and superficially—how much will they actually learn about this 'giant' of 20th century literature, or for that matter, about any of the giant or not-so-giant figures whom he interviews?"

Moreover, when I read what Coates had to say in his note about Warren and his interactions with Malcolm X, it seemed to me that he had misinterpreted the interview and so misrepresented Warren. Coates focuses on a part of the interview where Warren is, in turn, focusing on the question of guilt and innocence. Coates says that "Warren is searching for the possibility of white innocence . . . but Malcolm won't give it to him." Those of us who know his work well know that Warren, in fact, agrees with Malcolm X on this point: nobody, not even a child, can escape what Malcolm X calls "the stigma of discrimination and segregation."

Coates goes on to say, near the end of the piece, that "most of us" are "born under societal guilt," at which point, we are "then faced with a choice—sit with it or try to get clean." To illustrate the broad applicability of this idea, Coates points to the example of "all Americans" and the "actions across the world" resulting from American foreign policy. "I did not order the drone strike on a wedding," Coates writes. "But it was done in my name. To deny this is to slip into the same desire for innocence that Warren sought."

In fact, Warren's work abundantly illustrates the *horrors* that can come from a desire for innocence and from the effort to "get clean." He understood and repeatedly dramatized in his art how the desire to "get clean" can devolve into bloodthirsty madness. Warren knew as well as Malcolm X, James Baldwin, and Edith Wharton, to repeat Coates's list, that "The things we revile can't be merely wished away"—or washed away. No baptism or conversion or absolution cleanses us once and for all—least of all a bloodbath. The propensity to use others remains with us. Even if we just sit around doing and saying nothing—perhaps *especially* if we just sit around doing and saying nothing—we get dirty. Warren knew this and expressed it as well as anyone, and better than most.

At the time that I read Coates's note on Warren, I was on sabbatical leave for the Fall 2015 semester. As it happened, I was myself in the midst of re-reading Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?* as well as a book by Anthony Szczesniul entitled *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren's Poetry* (Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 2002; the last name is pronounced SESH-ial, like "special" without the "p"). On Juneteenth, two days after the shocking murders at the historic Emanuel AME Church—"Mother Emanuel," as it is commonly called—in Charleston, South Carolina, I attended a showing of the newly-restored documentary film, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, written and directed by Karen Thorsen, who was in attendance that night and who spoke afterward. This was the opening event of the annual Lift Ev'ry Voice Festival of the Berkshires, was held at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, Massachusetts, and was part of a nationwide series of community forums, "Conversations with Jimmy," to celebrate Baldwin's life and work on the occasion of his 90th birthday, August 2, 2014. Each forum included a screening of the digitally restored film, which first aired on PBS on August 14, 1989, less than two years after the author's death in France on December 1, 1987.

This experience had prompted me to write an essay in which I attempted to see if I could gain any perspective on the most recent racial turmoil in America, including this most recent atrocity, by examining Warren's interview with Baldwin in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* as well as all of the archival materials at Vanderbilt. These two men—one born in Guthrie, Kentucky, on the border with Tennessee, in 1905, and with two grandfathers who rode with Nathan Bedford Forrest, the other born in 1924, in Harlem, New York, and an important figure in the Civil Rights Movement in the mid 20th century and beyond—could not be, on the surface, more different from one another. Where, I wondered, do they find common ground? Upon what do they agree? If they misunderstand one another or disagree with one another, why, and on what grounds? The answers *might* provide some important insights into the subject of social justice, and even into this most recent horrific injustice.

The result was an essay entitled “Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*)” that appeared in *The Mind's Eye: A Liberal Arts Journal* (2015, pp. 70-94), published by the institution where I teach, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams, Massachusetts (www.mcla.edu/Academics/academicaffairs/mindseye/). During my sabbatical, I was working on material for *Life Birds*, a work-in-progress consisting of poems and essays, each with a title that names a bird on my life-list, the list a birder keeps of all the species of birds seen during his or her lifetime. I was continuing that work when I read the *Atlantic* note by Coates and decided to proceed with Warren and Malcolm X as I had done with Warren and Baldwin: to read the section on Malcolm X in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* as well as the original transcripts of the interview on the Vanderbilt Website, so that I could compare the raw, unedited material with the material as it was edited, contextualized, and interpreted by Warren in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* I could then more clearly determine if the glimpse of Warren that we get in the *Atlantic*

note by Ta-Nehisi Coates struck me as partial *because* it is partial—a mere note—or whether Coates had actually misread Warren and the interview with Malcolm X. The glimpse of Malcolm X that we get in Coates’s note is also partial, and since each of these men is a “giant” of the 20th century, our view of each man remains partial even if we read the entire transcript of the interview Warren conducted with Malcolm X on June 2, 1964. Nevertheless, Coates’s *Atlantic* note contains other partialities, I found.

Coates confesses that he has trouble being “objective about Malcolm X,” but in fact, he is not “really . . . so objective” about Warren, either. After defining him as “a reformed white supremacist who came to regret his views,” Coates introduces a segment from the interview transcript by saying, “Warren is searching for the possibility of white innocence . . . but Malcolm won’t give it to him.” Between a brief quotation from the interview that begins with Warren asking, “Can a person, an American of white blood, be guiltless?” and another brief quotation from the same exchange, Coates writes, “Warren pushes harder,” as if Warren is driven by a “desire for innocence,” as Coates puts it later, and “pushes” Malcolm X to “give it to him.” After the second quotation, Coates characterizes Malcolm X’s response as an argument against “thin and disposable innocence.” If Coates thinks that Warren’s line of questioning is an attempt to “deny” what Coates calls “societal guilt” and “to seek, as Oscar Wilde put it, ‘the luxury of an emotion without paying for it,’” then he has completely misread both the transcript and his man.

In the brief section of the interview quoted by Coates, Warren is presenting the first of a series of problems in situational ethics. The first is an “extreme case”: “a white child of three or four, something like that, who is outside of conscious decisions or valuations . . .”—but Coates leaves something out here. In the transcript, the child “is facing accidental death, you see” (Tape #1, p. 6). Later in this line of questioning, Warren makes the cause of accidental death “an

oncoming truck,” and that is the phrase he uses in the question as it appears in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965; hereafter *WSN?*). He then puts a black child in front of the truck and “a white man there who leaps—risks his own life—to save the child,” asking Malcolm X, “What is your attitude toward him?” Warren then says, “Let’s say the white man is willing to go to jail to break segregation. Some white men have. What about him then?” Warren is trying to get Malcolm X to say something about the “moral nature” of the individuals in these scenarios, particularly the man in the last. Malcolm X says, “I’m not even interested in his moral nature. Until the problem is solved, we’re not interested in anybody’s moral nature” (*WSN?* 256-257). Coates makes reference to this last statement when he says, “At his best, Malcolm was the ultimate anti-sentimentalist. He was uninterested in the ‘moral nature’ of white liberals, and unconcerned with unknowable matters of the ‘heart.’”

For Warren, this is an example of Malcolm X’s “expert illogic,” behind which there is “a frightful, and frightfully compelling, clarity of feeling—one is tempted to say logic. Certainly a logic of history. Of history conceived of as doom” (*WSN?* 257). Warren does not say it at this point, but he certainly says elsewhere, repeatedly, that this logic of history as doom is precisely the sort of “innocence” in which many people seek refuge. “Yes, the system is evil,” such people say, “but I did not create it; I only inherited it, and I am a victim of it, too!” Implicit in this line of illogic is the tacit assumption that neither the individual nor the system can change, can be reformed. If neither individual nor systemic reform is possible, what is the alternative?

The answer to which this last question seems to point—redemption through repudiation and destruction—“may be found in the Black Muslim promise of Armageddon,” Warren says, but it may also be found in an answering repudiation that is as “hard, aggressive, assertive, uncompromising and . . . murderous” as that which Malcolm X, “in his symbolic function,” came

to represent. It is this “wild elation in ourselves” of absolutism that Warren says each of us must “confront,” and he relates an anecdote in which Martin Luther King himself confessed to the seductive power of that impulse, concluding, “. . . Malcolm X can evoke, in the Negro, even in Martin Luther King, that self with which he, too, must deal, in shock and fright, or in manic elation” (WSN? 254, 266).

Clearly Warren felt that individual reform and systemic reform are not only both possible, they are interdependent. At times, Malcolm X seems to have believed this, too. For instance, in an exchange concerning the Black Muslim attitude toward “self-improvement,” Malcolm X says, “. . . the only real solution to the race problem is a solution that involves individual self-improvement and collective self-improvement.” However, as Warren goes on to observe, the self-improvement to which Malcolm X refers here does not have integration as its purpose. Rather, it is “to become worthy of the newly discovered self [brought out by Islam], as well as of a glorious past and a more glorious future,” but that future involves “a repudiation, and a transcendence, of white values” (WSN? 253-254).

Warren suggests that, despite his split with Elijah Muhammad, the “effective founder of the Black Muslims,” Malcolm X continued to believe with Muhammad that, “By his nature the ‘white devil’ cannot repent and do good” (WSN? 246-247). When Warren asks him directly about the Black Muslim message of “black superiority and the doom of the white race,” Malcolm X attempts “to separate the actions—to separate the criminal exploitation and criminal oppression of the American Negro from the color of the skin of the oppressor,” but he admits that it is “almost impossible.” Here is what he says:

The white race is doomed not *because* it’s white but because of its misdeeds. If people listen to what Muslims declare they will find that, even as Moses told

Pharoah [sic], you are doomed if you don't do so-and-so. Always the *if* is there.

Well, it's the same way in America. When the Muslims deliver the indictment of the American system, it is not the white man per se that is being doomed.

It is this attempt to judge people by their *deeds*, while at the same time regarding those deeds collectively as "the American system," that prompts Warren to ask, "Can any person of white blood—even one—be guiltless?" (*WSN?* 255-256), the question that begins the passages quoted by Ta-Nehisi Coates from the transcript of Warren's interview with Malcolm X for *Who Speaks for the Negro?*

It is clear that Malcolm X understands almost immediately where Warren is going with this line of questioning when he says as part of his response, "As individuals it is impossible to escape the collective crime." In *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren ends the response there, omitting from the printed version the rest of what Malcolm X says in the transcript:

"... impossible for them to escape the collective crime committed against the Negroes in this country collectively" (Tape #1, p.5). The omission reinforces the further implication of what Malcolm X goes on to argue: that there is no escape for *anybody*—black or white, child or adult. He argues this by taking Warren's question and "turning it around. Can any Negro who is the victim of the system escape the collective stigma that is placed upon all Negroes in this country? And the answer is 'No.'" This includes the black child "who is only four years old—can he escape, though he's only four years old, can he escape the stigma of segregation? He's only four years old." Again, the answer is "No." Not even the black child saved from the oncoming truck by the white man in Warren's scenario can escape: "That same white man would have to toss that child back into discrimination, segregation." Whether he faces death before an oncoming truck to save a black child or "is willing to go to jail to break segregation," the white man of

Warren's different scenarios "has done nothing to solve the problem" of the system, according to Malcolm X (*WSN?* 255-256).

We are back to the logic of history as doom and the position that seems to point to repudiation and destruction as the only solution, the position Warren says Malcolm X maintains: "that the white man, and the white man's system, can't change from the iniquity which he attributes to him. . . ." Warren asks a question that can apply to both the system and the individual within the system:

WARREN: You don't see in the American system the possibility of self-regeneration?

MALCOLM X: No. (*WSN?* 258-259)

Warren does say that, in addition to this "heels-dug-in and grim-jawed intransigence," Malcolm X "also presents himself, in one avatar, as a seeker, a quester, he is 'going somewhere,' toward some great truth. This fact, this role, has a fundamental appeal, too; we are all 'seekers.' Therefore his appeal is double." However, Warren insists that Malcolm X finds his primary appeal in "the stance of total intransigence, the gospel of total repudiation, the promise of hate, the promise of vengeance" (*WSN?* 264-265). This is an "emotional appeal" to that "masculine," "nightmare self" lurking in all of us, Warren says, even in Martin Luther King, Jr.—that "secret sharer" with whom each of us "must deal." In his "symbolic function," Malcolm X is that self, Warren contends, "the face not seen in the mirror" (*WSN?* 265-266).

It should be obvious that Warren's treatment of Malcolm X in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* is not impartial. To anyone who knows Warren's work well, that is not surprising. Warren clearly sees Malcolm X as a dangerous absolutist. Even Warren's physical description of the man indicates as much:

The most striking thing, at first, about that face is a sort of stoniness, a rigidity, as though beyond all feeling. When the lips move to speak you experience a faint hint of surprise. When—as I discover later—he scores a point and the face suddenly breaks into his characteristic wide, leering, merciless smile, with the powerful even teeth gleaming beyond the very pale pink lips, the effect is, to say the least, startling. But behind the horn-rimmed glasses always the eyes are watching, pale brown or hazel, some tint of yellow. You cannot well imagine them closed in sleep. (*WSN?* 245)

Warren goes from saying that Malcolm X “is, merely, himself”—in part because, having broken with Elijah Muhammad, he is “no longer the heir apparent” to Muhammad’s organization and is “without a real organization” of his own—to saying that Malcolm X “is merely himself. But that fact . . . is not to be ignored,” Warren elaborates; “. . . He has the air of a man who can be himself with many eyes on him” (*WSN?* 251-252). By the end of the section on Malcolm X, however, Warren comes to regard him not as “merely himself,” but “in his symbolic function.”

Warren’s reading of Malcolm X in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* is one man’s interpretation of another at a particular moment in history and for a particular purpose. To get a fuller, truer sense of either man, we would obviously have to read, watch, and listen to many other sources of information, and even then, of course, we would not be able to know either man in his fullness of being. Warren violates Malcolm X’s fullness of being by taking him primarily “in his symbolic function,” though that is the function Malcolm X is primarily assuming, and though Warren does acknowledge the infinite richness even of that function. He ends the section on Malcolm X—before an appended note on his assassination, which occurred on February 20, 1965, when *Who Speaks for the Negro?* was about to go to press—with the following statement:

“. . . we may recall that once, in explaining the ‘X’ in the Muslim name, he said it stands for ‘the mystery confronting the white man as to what the Negro has become’” (*WSN?* 266). Still, the abstraction of the man that appears in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* when Warren reads him “in his symbolic function” is the sort of dehumanization that *can* lead to racism, or to sexism.

Before he describes the “hard, aggressive, uncompromising and masculine self” in each of us, even Martin Luther King, that Malcolm X evokes “in his symbolic function” and that each of us must “confront” and with which each of us “must deal,” Warren relates a story told to him by Dr. Anna Hedgeman of the National Council of Churches about “a serious-minded and idealistic young girl” who asked Malcolm X at a seminar

if there wasn’t anything she could do—not anything—to be acceptable. “Not anything,” he said. At that she burst into tears. Later Dr. Hedgeman said to her: “My dear, don’t you think it strange that you couldn’t stand for one minute to be repudiated by that Negro man, when I, like all other Negroes, have had to spend my whole life being repudiated by the white race?”

There is something of that little girl in all of us. Everybody wants to be loved. . . . That stony face breaks into the merciless, glittering leer, and there is not anything, not a thing you—if you are white—can do, and somewhere deep down in you that little girl is ready to burst into tears. Malcolm X makes you face the absoluteness of the situation. (*WSN?* 265-266)

Why, though, are the poles of that absoluteness gendered? Granted, in Dr. Hedgeman’s experience, it might actually have been a young girl who asked the question of Malcolm X, but the “hard, aggressive, uncompromising” self in Warren’s formulation is “masculine,” while the self that “wants to be loved” is feminine, the “young girl” of Dr. Hedgeman’s story becoming, in

her “symbolic function” in Warren’s reformulation, a “little girl . . . ready to burst into tears.” Warren may be a literary “giant,” but he is also a flawed human being who is not always clear and not always consistent. As he himself might say, he is, after all, only human.

Do readers mercilessly hold this against him? In particular, having once defended segregation, is Robert Penn Warren forever unacceptable, no matter what he said or did during his life after that time? At the end of *Racial Politics and Robert Penn Warren’s Poetry*, Anthony Szczesiul quotes from *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Warren’s description of James Baldwin’s “utterances” concerning race and applies it to Warren himself:

Whatever is vague, blurred, or self-contradictory in his utterances somehow testifies to the magisterial authenticity of the utterance—it is the dramatic image of a man struggling to make sense of the relation of personal tensions to the tensions of the race issue. In his various shiftings of ground in treating the race issue he merely dramatizes the fact that the race issue does permeate all things, all levels; and in the constantly presented drama of the interpenetration of his personal story with the race issue he gives the issue a frightening—and fascinating—immediacy. It is *his* story we finally listen to, in all its complexity of precise and shocking image, and shadowy allusiveness. (*WSN?* 296; *Racial Politics* 216)

From this point of view, Warren’s defects, as he himself might put it, can be regarded as virtues.

In fact, though, Szczesiul and others sometimes seem as merciless towards Warren as Warren says Malcolm X was towards whites. In particular, Szczesiul constantly suspects the sincerity of Warren’s representations of “the most controversial aspect of his career as a writer: his early association with the Agrarian group and the racist, pro-segregation argument of his

1930 essay “The Briar Patch” (155). Of “The Briar Patch,” Warren says in *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: “I never read that essay after it was published, and the reason was, I presume, that reading it would, I dimly sensed, make me uncomfortable. In fact, while writing it, I had experienced some vague discomfort, like the discomfort you feel when your poem doesn’t quite come off, when you’ve had to fake, or twist, or pad it, when you haven’t really explored the impulse” (WSN? 10-11). Warren describes the essay as “a cogent and humane defense of segregation,” but says that “. . . the humaneness was self-conscious because even then . . . I uncomfortably suspected, despite the then prevailing attitude of the Supreme Court and of the overwhelming majority of the United States, that no segregation was, in the end, humane. But it never crossed my mind that anyone could do anything about it” (WSN? 11-12). That last confession—to an acceptance of what Warren would call in Malcolm X the “doom” of history—is as damning as the racism at the heart of segregation.

At this point in the essay I was writing in September of 2015, I went on to develop a new close reading of Warren’s early poem “Pondy Woods,” a reading in which I take issue with Tony Szczeciul’s interpretation of that poem, particularly its infamous talking buzzard. The resulting essay in *Life Birds*—the essay from which most of the preceding words have been extracted—is entitled “Turkey Vulture 2 (*Cathartes aura*).” Here, though, I will just make a few final remarks before directing the reader to Clare Byrne’s superb essay on “The Briar Patch,” which considers some of the same issues raised here.

In “Knowledge and the Image of Man” (in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Lewis Longley, Jr. [New York: New York UP, 1965]), Warren makes clear that, after the individual “eats of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and falls,” all that is possible is “a sort of redemption” through further experience and new knowledge: “another bite” of the apple,

as he puts it (242). This new knowledge, he says, “is not a thing detached from the world but a thing springing from the deep engagement of spirit with the world. This engagement may involve not only love for the world,” Warren says, “but also fear and disgust . . .” (245), in part because deep engagement with the world and with others presupposes deep engagement with ourselves—a deep engagement by each one of us with the “uncompromising,” “nightmare,” absolutist self within us whose sense of fullness regards other human beings and the natural world as there for its own convenience. As Robert Penn Warren makes abundantly clear, that engagement—that combat—with the nightmare self is difficult and never-ending. Two words that I would rarely, if ever, use to describe Warren’s work are “easy” and “sentimental.”

Among the materials on the Vanderbilt Website in addition to Warren’s interview with Malcolm X for *Who Speaks for the Negro?* are some “Remembrances by Rosanna Warren,” Warren’s daughter. She remembers her father being away for long periods of time and hearing stories about the dangerous conditions in which he conducted some of the interviews. Rosanna says the “fearsome” nature of the project “came home to [her] quite directly” one day when she found in the mailbox of their Fairfield, Connecticut, home a KKK pamphlet containing vile insults and threats.

She also remembers her father’s “thrill, the evening he returned from spending hours talking with Malcolm X in his office in New York”:

He described the difficulty of penetrating past the guards to Malcolm’s inner office, and how he had been warned he would only be granted a fifteen minute talk, and how the two ended talking for several passionate hours. The two had become so deeply engaged in their conversation that Malcolm invited Pa to return to the city and go on his “rounds” with him one afternoon, to see how his

organization worked. Pa was all set to do it. And then—only months later, before they made their appointment—Malcolm was shot.

Perhaps if Warren had gone his rounds with Malcolm X on that later day that never came, he could have penetrated past the wall of the public figure “in his symbolic function” and seen Malcolm X again as “merely himself.” That deep engagement was not to be, however. It might not have happened, either, for it is frightening to be seen deeply and truly, as one really is, and we often—perhaps usually—guard against it.

Such vulnerability is frightening, but the alternative is often horrific. One day, during the time I was writing the words above, I heard NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell, on the NBC *Nightly News*, seem to drop for a moment her reporter’s impartiality and say that the war and bloodshed in Syria have gone on as long as they have because U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin do not get along and cannot agree on a solution. Neither the situation nor the solution was then or is now that simple, of course, but this moment of candor—one could almost hear the anger and frustration in Mitchell’s voice—reminds us that there is no sabbatical from the need for deep engagement.

My hope is that, in its new, online incarnation, this journal, now named *Robert Penn Warren Studies*, will carry on 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. As a thorough, even-handed, well-researched examination of “The Briar Patch”—that troubling text from Warren’s early years—Clare Byrne’s contribution is just such a model of deep engagement. Noah Simon Jampol’s essay on

Warren's last novel, *A Place To Come To*, is another such model of deep engagement. Together, as treatments of two works some fifty years apart in Warren's career, they suggest a man who, in his life and art, struggled always to reject "thin and disposable innocence" and the "easy," "sentimental," ultimately deadly so-called solutions to life's problems, seeking instead to live life with the sort of deep engagement that he felt was our only hope.

Mark D. Miller, Editor

Robert Penn Warren Studies