

Modern Critical Views

ROBERT PENN
WARREN

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



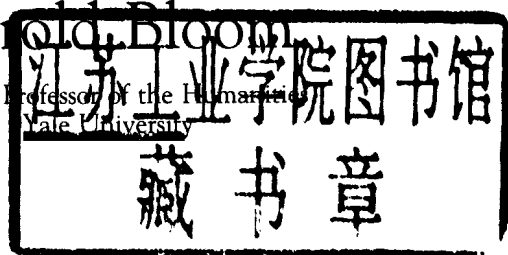
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Harold Bloom

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Modern Critical Views

ROBERT PENN WARREN

Editor's Note

This volume brings together a representative selection of the best criticism so far devoted to the varied literary achievements of Robert Penn Warren, arranged in the chronological order of publication. The "Introduction" centers upon Warren's most recent poetry, in his fifth *Selected Poems*, while reflecting also upon his demanding moral stance.

I have begun the chronological sequence by juxtaposing three very varied overviews of Warren's work. W. M. Frohock emphasizes what he considers fundamental limitations in Warren's fiction, a view totally rejected by Cleanth Brooks in his passionate analysis. In some sense, the essay by Joseph Frank can be judged to mediate between these oppositions, as Frank attempts to balance Warren's own antithetical drives towards romanticism and realism.

The next sequence centers upon Warren's major novels, starting with two contrasting readings of *All the King's Men* by Jonathan Baumbach and Arthur Mizener. These are followed by Walter Sullivan on *Band of Angels*, Allen Shepherd on *At Heaven's Gate*, and Richard Law on *Night Rider*, a touch later in the chronological sequence of published criticism. Since all of these essays consider Warren's relation to history, I have accompanied them by Daniel Aaron's sensitive account of Warren's meditations upon history.

The final sequence of essays concentrates upon Warren's major achievement, his later poetry, with some related consideration of his criticism and fiction. Richard Howard, perhaps our most prescient critical reviewer of contemporary poetry, introduces Warren's characteristic mode. This is followed by the editor's brief account of the revised *Brother to Dragons*, and by David Wyatt's overview of Warren's work, with an emphasis upon the critic as artist. After T. R. Hummer's reading of the poetic sequence *Audubon*, the main body of Warren's later poetry receives three very different analyses by Calvin Bedient, the editor and Paul Mariani. Now in 1985, Warren's poetry remains ongoing, and we can hope that our criticism of him will learn increasingly the true mode of response that his authentic aesthetic dignity deserves. John Burt's profound essay on *World Enough and Time*, which concludes this volume, can be regarded as a prelude to that criticism of the future.

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Introduction

I

Robert Penn Warren, born April 24, 1905, in Guthrie, Kentucky, at the age of eighty is our most eminent man of letters. That truism is vitalized by his extraordinary persistence of development into a great poet. A reader thinks of the handful of poets triumphant in their later or last phases: Browning, Hardy, Yeats, Stevens, Warren. Indeed, "Myth of Mountain Sunrise," the final poem among the new work in the fifth Warren *Selected Poems*, will remind some readers of Browning's marvelous "Prologue" to *Asolando*, written when the poet was seventy-seven. Thinking back fifty years to the first time he saw Asolo (a village near Venice), Browning burns through every sense of loss into a final transcendence:

How many a year, my Asolo,
Since—one step just from sea to land—
I found you, loved yet feared you so—
For natural objects seemed to stand
Palpably fire-clothed! No—

"God is it who transcends," Browning ends by asserting. Warren, older even than Browning, ruggedly remains the poet of immanence, of something indwelling and pervasive, though not necessarily sustaining, that can be sensed in a mountain sunrise:

The curdling agony of interred dark strives dayward, in stone
strives though
No light here enters, has ever entered but
In ageless age of primal flame. But look! All mountains want slowly to bulge outward extremely. The leaf, whetted on light, will cut
Air like butter. Leaf cries: "I feel my deepest filament in dark rejoice.
I know the density of basalt has a voice."

Two primal flames, Browning's and Warren's, but at the close of "Myth of Mountain Sunrise" we receive not "God is it who transcends," but: "The sun blazes over the peak. That will be the old tale told." The epigraph to the new section of this *Selected Poems* is from Warren's favorite theologian, St. Augustine: "Will ye not now after that life is descended

down to you, will not you ascend up to it and live?" One remembers another epigraph Warren took from the *Confessions*, for the book of poems *Being Here* (1980): "I thirst to know the power and nature of time." Warren now has that knowledge, and his recent poems show him ascending up to living in the present, in the real presence of time's cumulative power. Perhaps no single new poem here quite matches the extraordinary group of visions and meditations by Warren that includes "Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth," "Heart of Autumn," "Evening Hawk," "Birth of Love," "The Leaf," "Mortmain," "To a Little Girl, One Year Old, in a Ruined Fortress" and so many more. But the combined strength of the eighty-five pages of new poems that Warren aptly calls *Altitudes and Extensions* is remarkable, and indeed extends the altitudes at which our last poet of the Sublime continues to live, move and have his being.

II

Warren's first book was *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929). I have just read it, for the first time, and discovered, without surprise, that it made me very unhappy. The book purports to be history, but is Southern fiction of Allen Tate's ideology, and portrays Brown as a murderous nihilist, fit hero for Ralph Waldo Emerson. Indeed I find it difficult to decide, after suffering the book, whether the young Warren loathed Brown or Emerson more. Evidently, both Brown and his intellectual supporter seemed, to Warren, instances of an emptiness making ruthless and passionate attempts to prove itself a fullness. But *John Brown*, if read as a first fiction, does presage the Warren of *Night Rider* (1939), his first published novel, which I have just re-read with great pleasure.

Night Rider is an exciting and remorseless narrative, wholly characteristic of what were to be Warren's prime virtues as a novelist: good story-telling and intensely dramatic unfolding of the moral character of his doom-eager men and women. Mr. Munn, upon whom *Night Rider* centers, is as splendidly unsympathetic as the true Warren heroes continued to be: Jerry Calhoun and Slim Sarrett in *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), Jack Burden and Willie Stark in *All the King's Men* (1946), Jeremiah Beaumont and Cassius Fort in *World Enough and Time* (1950). When Warren's crucial personages turned more amiable, starting with poor Amanda Starr in *Band of Angels* (1955), the books alas turned much less interesting. This unfortunate phenomenon culminated in Warren's last novel (so far), *A Place to Come To* (1977), which Warren himself ranks with *All the King's Men* and *World Enough and Time*. I wish I could agree, but re-reading *A Place to*

Come To confirms an earlier impression that Warren likes his hero, Jed Tewksbury, rather too much. Without some real moral distaste to goad him, Warren tends to lose his narrative drive. I find myself wishing that Tewksbury had in him a touch of what might be called Original John Brown.

Warren's true precursor, as a novelist, was not Faulkner but Conrad, the dominant influence upon so many of the significant American novelists of Warren's generation. In one of his best critical essays, written in 1951 on Conrad's *Nostromo*, Warren gave an unknowing clue as to why all his own best work, as a novelist, already was over:

There is another discrepancy, or apparent discrepancy, that we must confront in any serious consideration of Conrad—that between his professions of skepticism and his professions of faith . . .

Cold unconcern, an "attitude of perfect indifference" is, as he says in the letter to Galsworthy, "the part of creative power." But this is the same Conrad who speaks of Fidelity and the human communion, and who makes Kurtz cry out in the last horror and Heyst come to his vision of meaning in life. And this is the same Conrad who makes Marlow of "Heart of Darkness" say that what redeems is the "idea only" . . .

It is not some, but all, men who must serve the "idea." The lowest and the most vile creature must, in some way, idealize his existence in order to exist, and must find sanctions outside himself . . .

Warren calls this a reading of Conrad's dual temperament, skepticism struggling with a last-ditch idealism, and remarks, much in T.S. Eliot's spirit:

We must sometimes force ourselves to remember that the act of creation is not simply a projection of temperament, but a criticism and a purging of temperament.

This New Critical shibboleth becomes wholly Eliotic if we substitute the word "personality" for the word "temperament." As an analysis of Conrad's dramatism in his best novels, and in *Nostromo* in particular, this has distinction, but Warren is not Conrad, and like his poetic and critical precursor, Eliot, Warren creates by projecting temperament, not by purging it. There is no "cold unconcern," no "attitude of perfect indifference," no escape from personality in Eliot, and even more nakedly Warren's novels and poems continually reveal his passions, prejudices, convictions. Conrad is majestically enigmatic, beyond ideology; Warren, like Eliot, is an ideologue, and his temperament is far more ferocious than Eliot's.

What Warren accurately praises in Conrad is not to be found in Warren's own novels, with the single exception of *All the King's Men*,

which does balance skepticism against belief just adroitly enough to ward off Warren's moralism. *World Enough and Time*, Warren's last stand as a major novelist, is an exuberant work marred finally by the author's singular fury at his own creatures. As a person who forgives himself nothing, Warren abandons the Conradian skepticism and proceeds to forgive his hero and heroine nothing. Re-reading *World Enough and Time*, I wince repeatedly at what the novelist inflicts upon Jeremiah Beaumont and Rachel Jordan. Warren, rather like the Gnostics' parody of Jehovah, punishes his Adam and Eve by denying them honorable or romantic deaths. Their joint suicide drug turns into an emetic, and every kind of degradation subsequently is heaped upon them. Warren, a superb ironist, nevertheless so loves the world that he will forgive it nothing, a stance more pragmatically available to a poet than to a novelist.

III

Warren's poetry began in the Modernist revival of the Metaphysical mode, as a kind of blend of Eliot's *The Waste Land* with the gentler ironies of Warren's own teacher at Vanderbilt, John Crowe Ransom. This phase of the poetry took Warren up to 1943, and then came to an impasse and, for a decade, an absolute stop. At *Heaven's Gate*, *All the King's Men* and *World Enough and Time* belong to that silent poetic decade, and perhaps the major sequence of his fiction usurped Warren's greater gift. But he was certainly unhappy in the later stages of his first marriage, which ended in divorce in 1950, and it cannot be accidental that his poetry fully resumed in the late summer of 1954, two years after his marriage to the writer Eleanor Clark, and a year after the birth of his daughter, the accomplished poet Rosanna Warren.

The book-length poem, *Brother to Dragons* (1953, revised version 1979), formally began Warren's return to verse, and is undoubtedly a work of considerable dramatic power. I confess to admiring it only reluctantly and dubiously, ever since 1953, because its ideological ferocity is unsurpassed even elsewhere in Warren. Much improved in revision, it remains unnerving, particularly if the reader, like myself, longs to follow Emerson in forgiving himself, if not everything, then at least as much as possible. But Warren—unlike Emerson, Nietzsche, Yeats—does not wish us to cast out remorse. Like his then master Eliot, though in a more secular way, Warren was by no means reluctant to remind us that we *are* Original Sin. *Brother to Dragons* is rendered no weaker by its extraordinary tendentiousness, but is not necessarily persuasive, if you happen not to share its moral convictions.

Warren's shorter poems, his lyrics and meditations, evolved impressively through three subsequent volumes: *Promises* (1957), *You, Emperors and Others* (1960) and a *Selected Poems* (1966), where the new work was grouped as *Tale of Time*. I recall purchasing these volumes, reading them with grudging respect, and concluding that Warren was turning into a poet rather like Melville (whom he was to edit in a *Selected Poems of Herman Melville*, in 1970) or the earlier Hardy. Warren's poems of 1934 through 1966 seemed interestingly ungainly in form, highly individual in genre and rhetoric, and not fundamentally a departure from Eliot's High Modernist mode. A poetry of belief, I would have judged, rather dismissively, and not of overwhelming concern if a reader was devoted to Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens, and to contemporary volumes such as Elizabeth Bishop's *Questions of Travel* (1965) and John Ashbery's *Rivers and Mountains* (1967). I could not foresee the astonishing breakthrough that Warren, already past the age of sixty, was about to accomplish with *Incarnations* (1968) and *Audubon: A Vision* (1969). Other critics of Warren's poetry see more continuity in its development than I do. But in 1968 I was a belated convert, transported against my will by reading *Incarnations*, and able at least to offer the testimony of a very reluctant believer in a poetic greatness now become indisputable and maintained by Warren throughout these nearly two decades since he began to write the poems of *Incarnations* in 1966.

IV

Incarnations opens with a closely connected sequence of fifteen poems called *Island of Summer*, which is the volume's glory. Unfortunately, Warren has included only five of these in his new *Selected Poems*, but they are the best of a strong group, and I will discuss only those five here, since Warren subtly has created a new sequence or a condensed *Island of Summer*. Like the original work, the sequence is a drama of poetic incarnation, or the death and rebirth of Warren's poethood. In what is now the opening meditation, "Where the Slow Fig's Purple Sloth," Warren associates the fig with fallen human consciousness and so with an awareness of mortality:

When you
Split the fig, you will see
Lifting from the coarse and purple seed, its
Flesh like flame, purer
Than blood.

It fills
The darkening room with light.

This hard, substantive riddling style is now pure Warren, and has very little in common with the Eliotic evocations of his earlier verse. "Riddle in the Garden" even more oddly associates fruits, peach and plum, with negative human yearnings, suicidal and painful, and with a horror of inwardness. A violent confrontation, "The Red Mullet," juxtaposes the swimming poet and the great fish, eye to eye, in a scene where "vision is armor, he sees and does not/Forgive." In a subsequent vision of "Masts of Dawn," the optical effect of how "The masts go white slow, as light, like dew, from darkness/Condensed on them" leads to what in some other poet might be an epiphany, but here becomes a rather desperate self-admonition, less ironic than it sounds: "We must try/To love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, in God." This reversed Augustinianism precludes an overwhelming conflagration of Warren's poetic powers in the most ambitious poem he has yet written, "The Leaf."

When he was fifteen, Warren was blinded in one eye by a sharp stone playfully thrown by a younger brother, who did not see that Warren was lying down on the other side of a hedge. Only after graduating from Vanderbilt, did Warren get round to having the ruined eye removed and replaced by a glass eye. Until then, the young poet suffered the constant fear of sympathetic blindness in his good eye. There may be some complex relation between that past fear and Warren's most remarkable and prevalent metaphor of redemption, which is to associate poetic vision both with a hawk's vision and with a sunset hawk's flight. This trope has appeared with increasing frequency in Warren's poetry for more than half a century and even invades the novels. So, in *A Place to Come To*, Jed Tewksbury endures the same vision as he loses consciousness after being stabbed:

I remember thinking how beautiful, how redemptive, all seemed. It was as though I loved him. I thought how beautifully he had moved, like Ephraim, like a hawk in sunset flight. I thought how all the world was justified in that moment.

"The Leaf" centers itself upon the image of a hawk's redemptive flight, with the difference from earlier Warren being in the nature of the redemption. Opening with a renewed vision of the fig as emblem of human mortality and guilt, and of "the flaming mullet" as an encounter in the depths, the poem proceeds to an episode of shamanistic force:

Near the nesting place of the hawk, among
Snag-rock, high on the cliff, I have seen
The clutter of annual bones, of hare, vole, bird, white

As chalk from sun and season, frail
As the dry grass stem. On that

High place of stone I have lain down, the sun
Beat, the small exacerbation
Of dry bones was what my back, shirtless and bare, knew. I saw

The hawk shudder in the high sky, he shudders
To hold position in the blazing wind, in relation to
The firmament, he shudders and the world is a metaphor, his eye
Sees, white, the flicker of hare-scut, the movement of vole.

Distance is nothing, there is no solution, I
Have opened my mouth to the wind of the world like wine, I wanted
To taste what the world is, wind dried up

The live saliva of my tongue, my tongue
Was like a dry leaf in my mouth.

Nothing in Warren's earlier poetry matches this in dramatic intensity, or in the accents of inevitability, as the poetic character is reincarnated in him by his sacrificial self-offering "near the nesting place of the hawk." Much of Warren's earlier guilt and sorrow comes together here, with beautiful implicitness: the fear of blindness, the decade of poetic silence, the failure of the first marriage, and most mysteriously, a personal guilt at poetic origins. The mystery is partly clarified in the poem's next movement:

The world is fruitful, In this heat
The plum, black yet bough-bound, bursts, and the gold ooze is,
Of bees, joy, the gold ooze has striven
Outward, it wants again to be of
The goldness of air and—blessedly—innocent. The grape
Weakens at the juncture of the stem. The world

Is fruitful, and I, too,
In that I am the father
Of my father's father's father. I,
Of my father, have set the teeth on edge. But
By what grape? I have cried out in the night.

From a further garden, from the shade of another tree,
My father's voice, in the moment when the cicada ceases, has called to me.

Warren's father had died in 1955, at the age of eighty-six. Robert Franklin Warren, who wanted above everything to be a poet, became a banker instead, solely to support not only his own children, but also a family of young children bequeathed to him by his own father, who had married again and then died. Reflecting upon all this, Warren has said:

"It's as if I've stolen my father's life," somberly adding: "If he had had the opportunity I did, with his intelligence and energy, he'd have done a lot better than I did."

This is probably part of the sorrow heard in: "I,/Of my father, have set the teeth on edge." Experientially, it would be the larger part, but imaginatively it may yield to the burden of a more strictly poetic inheritance, the Eliotic influence, which Warren almost involuntarily here disavows and surmounts. Eliot's "not the cicada" from *The Waste Land* becomes here the moment when Eliot's presence in Warren's voice ceases, to be replaced by the poetic voice that Robert Franklin Warren had to abandon. The return of the father's voice becomes the blessing of Warren's new style, the gift given by Warren in his father's name. By reversing the Biblical trope from Jeremiah 31: 29–30, in which the children's teeth are set on edge, Warren ironically celebrates the harshness of his new style:

The voice blesses me for the only
Gift I have given: *teeth set on edge*.

In the momentary silence of the cicada,
I can hear the appalling speed,
In space beyond stars, of
Light. It is

A sound like wind.

From this poem on, Warren rarely falters, whether in *Audubon: A Vision* or in the half dozen books of shorter poems (or new sections in selected volumes) that have followed. The achievement throughout these books necessarily is mixed, but there are several scores of poems that manifest all the stigmata of permanence.

V

I want to look at just one of these poems, because it raises again, for me and for others, the ancient problem of poetry and belief. The poem is "A Way to Love God" from *Can I See Arcturus From Where I Stand?*, the sheaf of new poems in the *Selected Poems* before the one under review. I quote only the poem's final vision, which is no grislier than the ones preceding it:

But I had forgotten to mention an upland
Of wind-tortured stone white in darkness, and tall, but when
No wind, mist gathers, and once on the Sarré at midnight,
I watched the sheep huddling. Their eyes

Stared into nothingness. In that mist-diffused light their eyes
Were stupid and round like the eyes of fat fish in muddy water,
Or of a scholar who has lost faith in his calling.

Their jaws did not move. Shreds
Of dry grass, gray in gray mist-light, hung
From the side of a jaw, unmoving.

You would think that nothing would ever again happen.

That may be a way to love God.

By loving God, Warren always appears to mean loving the truth, in all its dreadfulness. This is an ancient polemic in all his work, poetry and prose, and does not beg the questions of truth but rather asserts a necessarily personal conviction as to the truth. Warren, despite the critical efforts of his more pious exegetes, is a skeptic and not a believer, but a Bible-soaked skeptic. His way of loving God is to forgive himself nothing, and to forgive God nothing. The aesthetic consequences of this stance, in a poetry written since 1966, seem to me wholly admirable, while the spiritual grimness involved remains a formidable challenge for many readers, myself among them. Missing from this new *Selected Poems* is a notorious sequence, "Homage to Emerson, On Night Flight to New York," to be found in the *Tale of Time* section of *Selected Poems: 1923-1975*. I don't regret its deletion, but it has a cognitive value in clarifying Warren's lifelong distaste for Emerson. Here is its first part, "His Smile":

Over Peoria we lost the sun:
The earth, by snow like sputum smeared, slides
Westward. Those fields in the last light gleam. Emerson—

The essays, on my lap, lie. A finger
Of light, in our pressurized gloom, strikes down,
Like God, to poke the page, the page glows. There is
No sin. Not even error. Night,

On the glass at my right shoulder, hisses
Like sand from a sand-blast, but
The hiss is a sound that only a dog's
Ear could catch, or the human heart. My heart

Is as abstract as an empty
Coca-Cola bottle. It whistles with speed.
It whines in that ammoniac blast caused by
The passages of stars, for
At 38,000 feet Emerson

Is dead right. His smile
Was sweet as he walked in the greenwood.