

The Habit of Making

by Loxley F. Nichols

"Nature I loved, and next to nature, art."

—W.S. Landor



Robert Penn Warren: A Biography
by Joseph Blotner
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In October 1986, I heard Robert Penn Warren read a selection of his poems at an LSU conference marking the 50th anniversary of the *Southern Review*. He was 81 years old, exceeding frail, and suffering from cancer. About halfway through the reading, his wispy bark of a voice failed and James Olney had to finish for him. Despite his fragile state, one could not help but feel the power of Warren's presence—even at some distance from the small figure, and even smaller voice, on stage. In addition to an aura of intellect and imagination exceeding mere fame, presence was reinforced by tenacity of will (he was obviously too

ill to be there in the first place) and by the graciousness with which he greeted admirers afterward. His wife finally stepped in to rescue him.

Dogged determination characterized Warren throughout his life; precedent to rapid decline in his last years, he also possessed unbounded energy and iron-clad discipline. Born in 1905 in Guthrie, Tennessee, Warren grew up an omnivorous reader and precocious student whose aptitude and interests included not only literature but science and history, military history especially. When his plans to attend the Naval Academy were spoiled by a fluke accident that cost him sight in his left eye, Warren ended up at Vanderbilt where he immediately fell in with a group of avant-garde intellectuals known as the Fugitives. He was then 16. By 18, he was a full-fledged member of this literary cliche. It was at Vanderbilt that Warren met Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, and Cleanth Brooks. Warren's college years were tumultuous. Depression brought on by physical and emotional

exhaustion from study, carousing, and his unrequited love for a Nashville socialite culminated in an awkward attempt at suicide. Nevertheless, it was during this time that Warren discovered T.S. Eliot, and he and his fellow Fugitives embarked on a path that revolutionized the approach to literary analysis and the teaching of literature in the classroom—what came to be known as the New Criticism.

Upon graduating from Vanderbilt with highest honors and multiple awards, Warren attended Berkeley, a period he described as his "sojourn among the barbarians" (modernism having yet to reach the West Coast). Since Warren's life in California was fully as turbulent as his Nashville existence, it is perhaps not coincidental that during this time he met the volatile Cinina Brescia, who became his first wife. From Berkeley, Warren went to study at Yale, and then as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. After Oxford, Warren, now married, went on to teach at several Southern schools—first at Southwestern College

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in Memphis, next at Vanderbilt (where he hoped to settle permanently), and finally at LSU, where, with Cleanth Brooks, he helped found the *Southern Review*. Warren's association with Brooks turned into a long-term collaboration that resulted in the classic texts *Understanding Poetry*, *Understanding Fiction*, and *Understanding American Literature*.

Cleanth Brooks once referred to Warren writing textbooks as "Pegasus at the plow." While his contributions to classroom instruction as a professor and as an innovator are considerable, Warren's writing life began and ended with poetry. He placed his first poem at 16 and by his mid-20's was publishing poetry, fiction, biography, and essays. His last two poems appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1985, four years before his death.

Although Robert Penn Warren's life was punctuated by "crisis" (a word Mr. Blotner finds useful), even in the direst of circumstances he continued to write, voluminously—through the escalating hardships of his first marriage and the persistent professional and financial difficulties that culminated in what he painfully regarded as his "exile from the South." With the advent of World War II, LSU shifted its support from the arts and literature to a greater investment in athletics. The transfer of funding from the *Southern Review* to an enlarged budget for the team mascot, Mike the Bengal Tiger, was a bitter betrayal Warren never forgot. In consideration of both his salary and his dignity, he accepted a teaching position at the University of Minnesota.

The year 1947 brought a kind of vindication for Warren when he received not only a Guggenheim Fellowship but also the first of two Pulitzer Prizes for his single most enduring achievement, *All the King's Men*. (His second came in 1979 for a volume of poems, *Now and Then*.) Two years later he resigned his position at Minnesota and went to Yale to teach, the move cast coinciding with a long overdue divorce from the now uncontrollable Cinina. But just as the publication of *All the King's Men* had marked a change in his professional and financial fortunes, Warren's second marriage—at age 47—signaled a dramatic turning point in his personal life. Eleanor Clark, a writer herself, gave Warren the children he had long wanted, while offering a degree of domestic tranquillity, companionship, and love he had not hitherto enjoyed. Warren delighted

in travel, especially enjoying long sojourns abroad, but the Connecticut and Vermont homes he acquired with his second wife remained constants, as did his allegiance to the region of his birth.

While Warren spent most of his adult life in the North and elsewhere, he never considered himself anything but a Southerner, and he had the accent, courtliness, and dispositions of thought to prove it. Blotner's account of Warren reading *Uncle Remus* in Italy to his godchild, the daughter of R.W.B. Lewis, is a small but revealing detail. Similarly, his love of recitation is distinctly Southern. One of the most memorable scenes in the book describes long summer afternoons in which Warren, his father, and various Vanderbilt friends (including Tate, Lytle, and Ransom) recited and read aloud poems on the lawn under the trees at the Warren home in Guthrie. As Ransom read Thomas Hardy's "Wessex Heights," Warren experienced an "absolute moment of transfiguration and vision" that altered him for life. Later, as an Oxford student visiting friends in Paris, Warren was heard reciting verse as he fell asleep at night and again in the morning, beginning his recitation where he had left off the night before. Many years afterward, on a trip to Mexico City, he recalled waking at 3:00 A.M. to the murmured drone of his sleeping father, now an old man, reciting "The Burial of Sir John Moore" in the next bed. It can be argued that Warren's love of (and belief in) memorization eventually caused him to fall out of favor at Yale, where he taught for a number of years. His habit of beginning a course by asking each member of the class to recite a poem or give the plot of a story drew greater and greater silences as the years passed, but he never yielded to fashion. The South lay deep in him, and even in old age his wife's epithet of exasperation for him was "You old Agrarian!" Shortly before his 75th birthday he remarked, "I love [the South]. My house in the North is really just a big hotel to me. A place I stay. The South will always be my home."

The Agrarians, a group comprised mostly of Vanderbilt fugitives, had rejected New South industrialization in favor of the rural values of the Old South. Though Warren returned from Oxford with an altered perspective that evolved by degrees into a full-fledged support for

integration, the "separate-but-equal" stance of "The Briar Patch" (his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*) earned him the label of "racist." Writing about the race issue at various junctures in his life, Warren remained sensitive to the particular complexities of the racial dilemma in the South. Ultimately, he said, his region was best positioned to set a moral example for the entire country.

In "To the One-Eyed Poets," X.J. Kennedy writes:

Creeley, Penn Warren, and
James Seay,
Did sight hold sway, and mind,
The likes of you might well
be kings
In this country of the blind.

Naturally, vision and the visual were of primary concern to Warren, who loved to read and write, draw and paint. After the accident that left him one-eyed, sight became at times an obsession. Warren continued to have problems with the blind eye, which eventually had to be removed altogether, and there was always worry that he would lose sight in his other eye as well. Described as a "yearner," Warren was a spiritual man, but not a religious one. Growing up in a household that eschewed formal religion, his religious temperament never overcame a stubborn skepticism. Ultimately, he sought consolation in the physical—especially the visual—beauty of the world around him.

The central theme of *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* is gargantuanism. Warren was a prodigious intellectual and vigorous athlete who astounds with the sheer quantity of his achievement. By the time he was 14, he had read the Bible three times. As an undergraduate, he memorized 3,000 lines of poetry to fulfill an assignment requiring 800. As an adult, he used to swim so far out in the ocean as to alarm spectators on the beach. Such physical and intellectual pyrotechnics were habitual with him. Throughout his career, Warren would have multiple projects going simultaneously—poems, a novel or biography, and often critical or pedagogical articles or books. In addition to drawing and painting, he also loved gardening and wood-working.

"Red" Warren was part of an entire culture based on volume. Gregarious as well as intellectual, his generation of writers loved socializing. They not only

read and wrote a lot (one Fugitive, Merrill Moore, wrote 50,000 sonnets in his lifetime!), but talked a lot, smoked a lot, drank a lot, and, when not brought together for parties or extended visits, corresponded by letter often and at length. In letters that connected a wide circle of friends over a span of years (sometimes a lifetime), they discussed books, explored ideas, critiqued each other's work, and gossiped—with incalculable benefits to Joseph Blotner, as the biographer himself acknowledges.

Owing to colorful anecdotes that produce an animated picture of a precocious youth, Robert Penn Warren's early life makes for more enjoyable reading than his later years. Later chapters of

Blotner's biography occasionally meld into lists of books, awards, and itineraries. The reader senses the accuracy of Allen Tate's assessment that Warren was somewhat tainted by commercial success: in the years following *All the King's Men*, he focused increasingly on the volume of his publications. In fact, he seems to have lived almost in a fervor of publishing excitement. While his accomplishments are staggering, his range broad and his penetration deep, he was not generally concise in his writing, nor careful in his editing.

Though heavy in detail, Blotner's *Robert Penn Warren* is lacking in long views. The facts by themselves are impressive, but because Mr. Blotner makes

little effort to sift and weigh the evidence, a sense of perspective is missing from his book. With the exception of a bizarre (and unsubstantiated) suggestion of homosexual attraction in Warren's early friendship with Allen Tate, Mr. Blotner generally refrains from excessive psychologizing. Thus, while this biography is not as revealing or analytical as it might have been, it does offer a thorough chronicle of a prodigious craftsman's busy life. Rosanna Warren once recalled helping her father make a table: "It seemed emblematic to me of what he gave us—the sense of making." Indeed, Robert Penn Warren lived a life that dramatically embodies, as well as illustrates, this continuous "sense of making."

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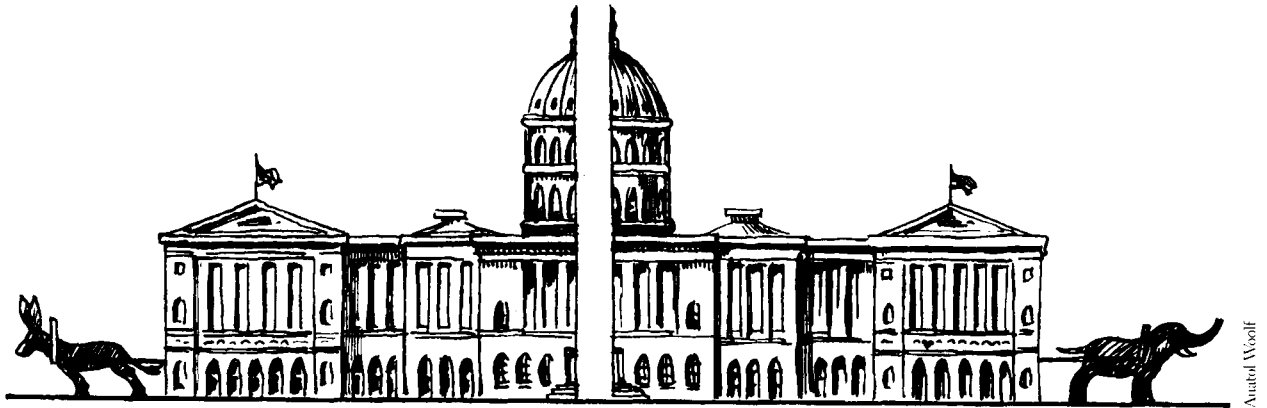
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—Edmund Burke



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For some time now it has been the opinion of European political theorists that right and left have become antiquated points of reference. Allegedly, these terms, archaic by the time of the

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Cold War, were kept in use to distinguish the pro- and anticommunist sides—friends and enemies of the United States and Soviet Union. The same labels were given further lease on life by socialists and capitalists and, later, by social democrats and democratic capitalists seeking to demarcate their overlapping camps. In a frank recognition of this overlap, “conservative” and “liberal” are made complimentary terms, each referring to a moderate position on the political spectrum. These are the positions of nonextremists, as opposed to rightists and leftists, who scornfully reject consensus politics.

Such talk of consensus fits with the “end of ideology” interpretation of contemporary political life, which has been periodically reprised for almost 40 years: from the mainstream liberalism of the 50’s culminating in the book by S.M. Lipset and Daniel Bell in 1962 to recent pronouncements on the “end of history.” In this view, ideologies have been “exhausted,” or overtaken by historical progress. By now, we are led to believe, everyone but fools and idiots agrees on the same political principles—chiefly human rights, a mixed economy, and evolving constitutional government. What is left to be resolved are mere details, like the size of the payroll deduction or the best mix of state economic control and the free market. This supposed avoidance of ideology, as the late

Christopher Lasch was wont to observe, is itself ideological. It is a form of intolerance that demonizes those who ask unseemly questions or appeal to “exhausted” worldviews.

But equally intriguing have been the attempts to make sharp doctrinal distinctions where none exists—and where none is even intended to be present. Why should American Democrats pretend to be the party of Jefferson and Jackson, or English Tories the aficionados of Disraeli and Salisbury, when their present character and programs are unrelated to the circumstances of past centuries? One possible answer is that political parties desire to be part of a continuum, even a contrived one, rather than to be viewed as something wholly contemporary: even innovators invoke a tradition of innovation. Another, perhaps more relevant answer is that, by tracing the present differences between largely indistinguishable parties and factions to some noteworthy split safely in the past, it is possible for partisans to participate in high drama without being disruptive. To take sides in electoral contests is to engage imaginatively in political reenactment—politics presented as virtual reality.

In Jerry Z. Muller’s account of conservatism since the 18th century, one finds an ideology that closely fits this description. Muller’s conservatism is expansive enough to include Edmund Burke,