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A LECTURE RECITAL ILLUSTRATING THE SOUTHERN  
INFLUENCE ON THE POETRY OF  
ROBERT PENN WARREN

THESIS

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By

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This study explores the profound influence of the South on the poetry of Robert Penn Warren and creates an oral interpretation lecture-recital script illustrating this influences.

The study shows Warren's poetry to be worthy of consideration. The study also defines oral interpretation, lecture recital, and poet-centered programs. Included with a biographical sketch of Warren is a chronological listing of works and events in his life. There are discussions of several poems which illustrate the influence of the Southern landscape and several which show the influence of the Southern people. The forty-five minute lecture-recital script is included as an appendix.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Were Robert Penn Warren to write no more, his place in American literature would be secure. Few twentieth-century American authors are more versatile. As critic, poet, historian, novelist, Warren has a unique position in American literature: he is "the only living American author who is unquestionably of the first rank in poetry and literary criticism and the novel."<sup>1</sup> He is also the only Southern writer to have received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and poetry. In 1958, he won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, the National Book Award, and the Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize of the American Poetry Society for his book Promises: Poems 1954-1956. "He is a very American writer. In spite of repeated exposure to England and Continental Europe, beginning as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford in the late 1920's, his subject matter and outlook are peculiarly American."<sup>2</sup> Warren, "one whose life rooted him deeply in the South,"<sup>3</sup> embodies a love for Southern locale, the close ties of family, and a love of the Southern people. Charles Bohner in his book Robert Penn Warren confirms Warren's interest in the past: "Many things have conspired to create in Warren an abiding interest in the past, especially

the American and in particular the Southern past. First, he is a Southerner, and for him the past seems to be more alive in the South than in other regions: then, too, because of a love of tradition, which Warrens calls 'piety', the past in the South reaches vitally into the present."<sup>4</sup>

The quantity of Warren's production is in itself quite outstanding. George P. Garrett states that Warren's productivity is in itself a criterion for judging the poet's greatness. Warren's achievement is rare when one considers that his volumes of fiction and poetry span a great number of years.<sup>5</sup> Throughout this mass of varied creations, Warren maintains a consistently high level of craftsmanship along with his work as an editor, critic, and teacher. Warren is one of the most accomplished and productive authors in American literature.<sup>6</sup>

Eric Bentley, well-known critic, once said that Warren very nearly fulfills our idea of the romantic genius.<sup>7</sup> Warren's language is robust and rhetorical. It reflects his heritage of the Southern tradition of fine rhetoric, which is defined by George Garrett as having a unique quality:

The southern writer comes from a race of talkers of another kind. He loves rhetoric for its own sake and without embarrassment. He has a fine, given, tradition of it; pulpit rhetoric, grave or comic, calm or evangelical; political oratory, the sounds, not always empty for being stentorian, of a rip-roaring, stumping, and stomping political campaign, a firing-off of rockets, roman candles, catherine wheels, and sparklers in a dazzling display of truth and falsehood; and the long, honored tradition of courthouse rhetoric, great speakers and great men who first voiced this nation's

aspirations and follies, our ideals and vices, who come for the pure joy and hell of it would battle as fiercely over ownership of a hog as the rights of man, seeing no incongruity there. Stump or pulpit, bench and bar, they loved the English language, and they taught it to perform, to turn somersaults and to jump through hoops of fire. This love of language long since found its place in southern prose; including the prose of Warren. But until Promises it was strictly segregated, separate and utterly unequal, from the world of poetry. In Promises Warren achieved a graceful integration.<sup>8</sup>

Warren likes his adjectives and nouns to go in pairs, reinforcing one another, begetting rhythm and resonance. When a comparison catches his fancy, his first metaphor is likely to suggest another, and he piles image on image. As a result, he is led by his own ingenuity into the excesses of language which mar many otherwise fine passages. In "Bearded Oaks," Warren compares two lovers to twin atolls and then to dim architecture, not making clear whether the atolls or the lovers are similar to dim architecture. Warren's way with language distinguishes him from other writers with Northern influence. In his article "The Recent Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," Garrett states that a Southern writer's use of language distinguishes him from writers whose background is not so rich in influence of rhetoric: "In literature, it is this quality [a way with language] which most clearly distinguishes the southern writer from any other. It is a legitimate child of the tradition of southern rhetoric in life--religious rhetoric, and more specifically political and legal speech."<sup>9</sup> There is a gusto and masculine force about all of Warren's work reminiscent of Shakespeare, who Warren has said had the greatest

influence on him.<sup>10</sup> Warren's writing possesses vitality and versatility which is evident in viewing his expanse of work. His poetry is written primarily in free verse. That style, combined with his frequent use of the narrative mode, gives his poetry a very prose-like quality, a quality which makes Warren's poetry particularly effective for oral presentation. In his latest poetry, his desire to seek new solutions to artistic problems comes through. He has always seemed driven to explore the boundaries of his art, to push the possibilities of his form to its outer limits. It is this desire to excel that has brought Warren to prominence in American literary society.

Poetry can be inspired and influenced by people and by experiences within and without the poet. The emotional experiences of a lifetime can often provide great stimulation for an author. Charlotte Lee expresses the opinion that the more one knows about a poet the better able one is to understand his works that stem from his personal experiences: "Poetry is probably most often inspired by an emotional urge on the part of the writer. A man's emotions are closely tied up with his philosophy of life, his set of values about himself and the people with whom he associates, and the things with which he is surrounded. It is therefore, helpful to know as much about a poet as possible if one is to understand what he considers worth saying. Information about the poet does not mean knowing mere biological facts. It means, rather, realizing

what effect the time in which he lived and the circumstances of his life had on his attitude and interest."<sup>11</sup> For years critics have overlooked the influence of the South on Warren's work, which forms a history from the early nineteenth century to the present.<sup>12</sup> Warren shares the love of the Southern landscape, the Southern feeling for family, the sense of continuity of generations; for his own roots in Southern history and experience are deep. The interest appears in his fiction and poetry in the attention he devotes to the family trees of his characters and their ties to the history and locale of the South. To understand Warren, one must understand the influence the South has had on his life and his work. L. Hugh Moore, Jr. points out the importance of recognizing the historical influences that are present in Warren's poetry: "No one can adequately understand Warren without carefully considering the influence of history upon him and his use of it in his works . . ."<sup>13</sup> Moore continues by saying that critics are gradually coming to focus on this aspect of Warren's work, a topic which deserves close attention and study.<sup>14</sup> Due to the fact that the South has "seized possession of the American literary scene,"<sup>15</sup> Robert Penn Warren deserves to be studied as a spokesman of the South whose Southern background and influence is actively reflected in his poetry.

It is recognized at the outset that Warren wrote much poetry which is not Southern, either in its general influence or specific references. He is a nature poet who has lived



not only in the South, but also in the Far West and the Northern regions of the United States, as well as abroad. This thesis, however, focuses on that poetry which bears the influence of his Southern heritage.

#### Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the influence of the South--its history, people, and locale--on the poetry of Robert Penn Warren, and to prepare a script for a full-length lecture recital illustrating the Southern influence on his work.

#### Procedure

This thesis consists of five chapters, including an introductory chapter justifying Robert Penn Warren as a credible source for study and formulating the criteria for selecting the poems to be included in the lecture recital. This thesis also sets forth definitions of the lecture recital and the interpretation program, distinguishing between the two.

Also included is a biography of Robert Penn Warren. Warren's experiences, family, and Southern background have directly influenced his writing. Therefore, some pertinent facts about Warren are necessary if one is to understand the influence of the South on his poetry. A detailed biography of Warren has not been written, although several books contain sections dealing with varied aspects of his life. A chronological listing of the important dates in Warren's life is included at the end of the second chapter to enable the

reader to see at a glance a brief picture of Warren's life and works.

A discussion dealing with the influence of Southern locale on Warren's poetry is illustrated with excerpts from his works. The poems used to illustrate this influence in Warren's work are "Walk By Moonlight in Small Town," "Bearded Oaks," "Country Burying," and "Nocturne: Traveling Salesman in Hotel Bedroom."

The discussion continues with the influence of family background and childhood experiences, and is again illustrated with excerpts from selected poems. The poems used to illustrate this influence are "Genealogy," "Go It, Granny--Go It, Hog!," "Keepsakes," "Courtmartial," "The Ballad of Billie Potts," "School Lesson," and "Summer Storm."

A summary is included which draws conclusions regarding the importance of the Southern influence on the poetry of Warren.

The script for a full-length lecture recital on the Southern influences on the poetry of Robert Penn Warren is included as an appendix.

### Conclusion

Oral interpretation is a study of literature that endeavors to bring together the acts of reading the poem and reading about the poem. By incorporating both activities into a lecture recital, one is able to enlighten an audience

with the background of the poem as well as to entertain them by reading the poem itself. Lowrey and Johnson have stated the need for explanation of the poems to be presented: "In the lecture portion the reader may give information and explanation which clarify the selections of literature he chooses to read."<sup>16</sup>

A lecture recital is based upon a basic theme with the emphasis on the expository material, whereas a poetry program may be presented without a strong central idea to tie the poems together. The poetry becomes the center of attention. Charlotte Lee describes the difference between a lecture recital and a poetry program as follows: "The difference between a program and a lecture recital is primarily one of proportion and degree. A program uses a minimum of transitional material and focuses almost entirely on the literature itself. A lecture recital, by contrast, has a strong central unity, uses the critic's opinions and historical data as transitions, and arranges the selections to illustrate whatever technical or thematic development the speaker has chosen. It emphasizes evaluation more than appreciation per se."<sup>17</sup> The importance of using a unifying theme in a lecture recital is expressed by Armstrong and Brandes: "There is much to be said for establishing a unifying element to which a series of selections may be related . . . The oral interpreter can make a contribution toward clarifying perspectives for his audience if he adopts

a theme for his selections and thus allows each selection to contribute to the other."<sup>18</sup> This feeling is further substantiated by Lowrey and Johnson when they state that "it is usually advisable for the speaker to state the theme clearly, evoking audience interest in its development through explanation and illustrations."<sup>19</sup> The theme of this lecture recital is the influence of the South on the poetry of Robert Penn Warren.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Charles H. Bohner, Robert Penn Warren (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>John Lewis Longley, Jr., Robert Penn Warren (Austin: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Longley, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Bohner, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>George P. Garrett, "The Recent Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 223.

<sup>6</sup>Garrett, p. 223.

<sup>7</sup>Bohner, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup>Garrett, p. 229.

<sup>9</sup>Garrett, p. 228.

<sup>10</sup>Bohner, p. 160.

<sup>11</sup>Charlotte I. Lee, Oral Interpretation (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955), p. 369.

<sup>12</sup>Bohner, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup>Hugh L. Moore, Jr., Robert Penn Warren and History: "The Big Myth We Live" (Paris: Mouton and Company, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup>Moore, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>Bohner, p. 18.

<sup>16</sup>Sara Lowrey and Gertrude Johnson, Interpretative Reading (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1953), p. 251.

<sup>17</sup>Lee, p. 485.

<sup>18</sup>Chloe Armstrong and Paul D. Brandes, The Oral Interpretation of Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>Lowrey, p. 251.

## CHAPTER II

### BIOGRAPHY

The South of Robert Penn Warren is the lush hill country of Kentucky near the Tennessee border. This section has been called the Black Patch area because of the fire-cured tobacco that is the main crop grown there. This is a land of moderate-sized farms, varying from gently rolling fields, ripe with green tobacco to hills covered with sycamore and cedar forests. The area was settled by pioneers who, in the eighteenth century, crossed the Alleghenies and settled in the Cumberland country. In Guthrie, Kentucky, on April 24, 1905, Robert Penn Warren was born to Robert Franklin Warren and Anna Ruth Penn. His father's house stood on the edge of the village of Guthrie, not far from the open country. The rough land was filled with caves, gorges, and limestone shelves, and the hiding places were plentiful. Very little is known about Warren as a child except for those incidents that are reflected in his poems. Warren, as was true of most boys from the country, romped through the hillside all day long exploring the caves and other hiding places that are the natural habitats of young boys. Warren recounts his boyhood experiences in his poetry as has been noted by John L. Stewart: "There is a landscape full of boyhood's grief and glory known to those

who grew up before the war --the last one, or the one before-- on farms or in small towns of the Mississippi Valley. Though lost in the heart's homely deep, it may be found in the works of Robert Penn Warren."<sup>1</sup> These boyhood experiences form the basis for Warren's later work. "Robert Penn Warren knew some version of that boyhood, knew the longings, knew the terms by which one must discover and redeem the self. All of his mature knowledge is established upon that knowledge."<sup>2</sup> His summers were spent sleeping on straw mattresses at his grandfather's farm. He spent a great deal of time listening to the stories of the Civil War from his grandfathers, who fought in the Confederate army, and from other men who had had first-hand experiences in the battles.<sup>3</sup> The descriptions of these experiences, people, and stories appear in such poems as "Court Martial" and "Genealogy." Other works paint pictures of the Kentucky Warren knew so well, as is pointed out by John L. Stewart: ". . . Warren's Kentucky had about it a beauty and violence and sadness remarkable even for the South and it forever shaped his imagination, his style, his vision of man."<sup>4</sup>

As a boy, Warren's family was dependent on the varying market price of tobacco because the area where he grew up was dependent on one crop for its economic stability.<sup>5</sup> When tobacco prices were arbitrarily fixed, the tobacco farmers organized associations of their own in an attempt to fight back. This protest and the ensuing violence led to martial law in Kentucky. Bohner reports that Paul Rosenfeld "had

heard Warren reminiscing about his boyhood memories of the night riders in Kentucky and had suggested that the stories would make excellent material . . ."<sup>6</sup> for publication. These experiences with the night riders provided the material for Warren's first published fiction "Prime Leaf" and his first novel, Night Rider.

Warren's formal schooling took place in the Guthrie school during the winter months. During the summers Warren spent his time on his grandfather's farm in Trigg County. Warren entered high school in Clarksville, Tennessee, in the fall of 1920, and was graduated the following spring. He was sixteen. During his high school years, Warren admits to having no interest in writing, only in reading.<sup>7</sup> He read many authors and began to develop a deep interest in history which continued through his life. He read Gibbon and Macaulay, Prescott and Parkman, and H. T. Buckle.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his love of history, when Warren entered Vanderbilt in 1921, he intended to study science. However, his English teacher, John Crowe Ransom, exerted a great influence over Warren, and American literature will be eternally grateful to Ransom, who as a famous poet, former Rhodes' scholar, teacher, and leader of the Fugitive movement, taught Warren in freshman English. Ransom invited Warren to take an advanced English course the following semester. While enrolled in the advanced class, Warren left his plans for a scientific career behind and became engrossed in the study of literature.<sup>9</sup> During his



stay at Vanderbilt, Warren was exposed to a group of young writers who became known as the Fugitives. Stewart describes the relationship of Warren and his roommates: "While in college, Warren roomed with Ridley Wiles, Tate, and William Cobb, a graduate student. It would be pleasant to report that the young writers spent their time communing about the art of poetry, but such was not the case. Like all college boys they talked a lot about sex, liquor, assignments, and campus politics. Only once in a while did they talk about writing."<sup>10</sup> Warren was younger and shyer than his classmates, and at times he would withdraw to be completely alone. Sometimes fellow students would tease him to the point of tears. Despite their collegiate antics, the Fugitives established themselves as a great influence on twentieth century American literature. Any discussion of the Southern Renaissance eventually returns to the Fugitive group. Warren has called the influence of the group very important to his career.<sup>11</sup>

Ransom was not the only influential member of this literary group to associate with Warren. Donald Davidson taught Warren in the first quarter of sophomore English, a survey course of English literature. Davidson recognized Warren's ability and "encouraged Warren to develop his talent for writing, excusing him from the required term papers for the course and allowing him to write imitations of Chaucer and Beowulf."<sup>12</sup> These opportunities gave Warren the chance to practice his writing in the patterns of the masters.

"Equally significant for Warren's personal literary development during these years was the friendship of another undergraduate and fellow Kentuckian, Allen Tate."<sup>13</sup> Tate was a twenty-one year old senior who had just been invited by Donald Davidson to join the Fugitives. Tate was an enthusiastic young author whose contributions to the Fugitives "brought to the group the boldness of youth, a taste for the avant garde in literature, and a total commitment to poetry."<sup>14</sup> Tate has recalled one of his first encounters with Warren: "He said he was sixteen years old and a sophomore. This remarkable young man was 'Red,' Robert Penn Warren, the most gifted person I have ever known."<sup>15</sup> Tate saw Warren's first attempts at writing and was impressed to the point that he insisted they be shown to the editors of The Fugitive and of The Double Dealer. Warren's work soon appeared in print, and the young author was only seventeen. Thus Warren's genius was evident even at an early age and would develop to greater heights as his career progressed: "For his part, Tate never doubted Warren's genius. Speaking of some verses Warren had written for the book page of the Nashville Tennessean, Tate wrote Davidson: 'That boy's a wonder--has more sheer genius than any of us; watch him: his work from now on will have what none of us can achieve--power!'"<sup>16</sup>

The members of the influential Fugitive group met and read their poetry aloud to the group. The poems were then discussed frankly and with skepticism. Any weakness in rhyme,

rhythm, or imagery was exposed to inexhaustible scrutiny. Ransom used this technique in his advanced writing classes, where Warren was a student. Warren was taken to the group meetings while he was still a sophomore but he did not become a member until the spring of his junior year. The discussion of poetry in such open terms helped Warren to develop a philosophy about poetry that he expressed in a later publication: ". . . this method of close textual analysis, broadened and systematized, provided the methods of Warren's Understanding Poetry (1938), written in collaboration with Cleanth Brooks, a work which profoundly altered the teaching of poetry in college classrooms."<sup>17</sup> Warren's association with the Fugitives offered a stimulus, a discipline, and above all, an outlet for publication.<sup>18</sup> Warren's early poetry did not totally reveal the potential talent possessed by the young author. The Fugitive influence was not obvious in the poems, but the discussions of poetic technique helped Warren in refining his work. Only a few indications in his early poetry point to his membership in the Fugitives.<sup>19</sup> Warren felt that his experiences within the group were both valuable and helpful in the development of his career. He was appreciative for the association with the group, although he was not completely sympathetic to their methods. In the spring of 1924, Warren wrote to Tate: "I value your criticism a good deal more than any other I receive, for you know the sort that comes out in a Fugitive meeting."<sup>20</sup> Warren has commented on his

involvement with the group and about the feeling of outsiders about the Fugitives. In 1956 Warren, in looking back on the Fugitive years, was amazed that the fellowship should have seemed to others a unified movement. "A few years after I left Vanderbilt, people began to refer to those people (the Fugitives) as a unit, as if there were a church or orthodoxy. I was so shocked by that . . . because I was so aware of the differences of opinions . . . but the notion of a unity had just never occurred to me, except that the unity was just purely a unity of friendship and common background."<sup>21</sup>

After graduating from Vanderbilt in 1925, Warren spent the summer polishing and revising his early poems for publication. He did not, however, publish these poems. In 1935, Warren published Thirty-Six Poems, his first volume of verse. "To a Face in a Crowd" is the only poem in the volume that remains from his early college days. It was during this time that he began to acknowledge his bond with the South and the influence that his background was having on his literary achievement. John Stewart confirms that Warren felt his Southern ties more strongly at this time than at any previous point in his career: "Feeling more independent than he ever had at Vanderbilt he could acknowledge the strength of his ties to his home and people by writing poems about the country around his grandfather's farm and about a son's mixed feelings toward his parents."<sup>22</sup> Warren was experiencing the frustrations that are common to young people

who are attempting to break the bonds of the apron strings and become a self-sufficient individual. Warren felt guilty about rejecting his parents, and at the same time he was both enjoying his independence and feeling lonely for the security of his family ties. Stewart affirms Warren's feelings in his book The Burden of Time: "His loneliness was making Warren aware of the comfort of the very dependency he had struggled against, and he put into his poems the fears and guilts engendered by his both loving and rejecting his parents."<sup>23</sup>

In the fall of 1927, Warren went to Yale. While he was there, Allen Tate helped him to obtain a contract for a biography of John Brown. The completed work was published in 1929. Regarding the publication, John Stewart states: "It is a good book for a young man, for it has vividness, dramatic presence, and a strong feeling for country life and the grain of the land, but it is not really a good study of Brown."<sup>24</sup> Working on the book aided in restoring Warren's interest in fiction. Allen Tate introduced him to Katherine Anne Porter. Warren read her stories very carefully and "he began to see in them some of the functions of technique such as he had long known in poetry."<sup>25</sup> This insight helped Warren gain an appreciation for fictional writing that he had not known before. His interest in fiction grew, but he later returned to writing poetry and abandoned fiction writing completely.

In 1928, after completing his M.A. at the University of California, Warren went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, following in the footsteps of Ransom. During his second year as a Rhodes Scholar (1929-1930), and with the biography of John Brown behind him, his thoughts again turned to his Southern heritage. Warren began work on "Prime Leaf" which is based on his past experiences. He used experiences of his boyhood and stories he had heard from local residents.<sup>26</sup> This story was not the only publication that was influenced by his boyhood experiences; the stories he produced during the 1930's are concerned with the Kentucky and Tennessee he knew as a boy.<sup>27</sup> Two of these stories appeared in the Virginia Quarterly and exploited the Southern themes and settings that are so predominant in Warren's poetry.

September, 1930, brought the wedding of Robert Penn Warren to Miss Emma Brescia. The newlyweds settled in Memphis, Tennessee, where Warren had a teaching position in the English Department at Southwestern University. Although he was not a member of the inner group of Agrarians, he saw his friends occasionally. In 1931, Warren went to Vanderbilt to replace John Crowe Ransom, who was taking a leave of absence. Ransom returned to Vanderbilt after a year and Warren remained as a member of the faculty. Although Ransom was seventeen years Warren's senior, they became close friends. Warren later left Vanderbilt to accept a position at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. The importance of Warren's brief reunion with

Ransom is stressed by John Stewart: "His stay among the Agrarians and the interval of close companionship with Ransom were surprisingly brief. This needs to be remembered when one thinks of the intellectual communion among the three principal Fugitive-Agrarian writers."<sup>28</sup> From 1931 to 1933, Warren devoted as much time as he could spare from his classroom duties to work on his novel God's Own Time which dealt with farm life in Kentucky before the first world war. Bohner states: "The idea for the work which eventually developed into All the King's Men came to Robert Penn Warren during the winter of 1937-38 while he was teaching at Louisiana State University. As his starkly prophetic poems of that period 'Ransom' and 'Letter From A Coward to A Hero' reveal, Warren was meditating on the principles of decency and democracy and their capacity to survive in the face of deepening economic crisis at home and rampant nationalism abroad."<sup>29</sup> This novel is based upon the career of Senator Huey P. Long, a dictatorial Southern politician who was corrupted by his abuse of power. Warren had originally planned a verse play which was entitled "Proud Flesh." This first version was written in Rome in 1939 while Warren was there on a Guggenheim grant. He was involved in writing the final draft of All the King's Men from the spring of 1943 until the fall of 1945, ". . ." but his work was frequently interrupted, first by his teaching responsibilities at the University of Minnesota and then, in 1944, by his appointment to the post of Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress."<sup>30</sup>

In 1943, Warren had published At Heaven's Gate. Some say that the city depicted is Nashville, Tennessee, and that the university is Vanderbilt. The group of intellectuals cited is said to be the Fugitives, and Bogan Murdock is Colonel Luke Lee. The winter of 1944 saw the publication of Warren's Selected Poems, 1923-1943. Warren was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1946 for All the King's Men. "After the success of All the King's Men, Warren devoted a decade to exploring the historical materials of his native Kentucky."<sup>31</sup> In 1955, Warren published Band of Angels. This novel was set in nineteenth century Kentucky. In 1957, Promises, Poems 1954-1956 was published. It was the first book of lyric poetry that he had published since Selected Poems (1944). This warmly received book won for him the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize of the American Poetry Society. Warren became the only living American author to receive the Pulitzer Prize for both fiction and poetry. Warren has continued to write and publish poetry, and so his career broadens daily, reflecting the Southern heritage, which was for Warren, very deep. Charles Bohner's comment on Promises is an adequate statement to describe Warren's vast career: "The search for the meaning of the past is nothing new in Warren, but the renewed urgency of his quest springs from the need to define the world of his youth not only to his own satisfaction but to that of his son. Ranging backward to encompass Warren's parents, as well as the Southern



heritage in its broader reaches, these poems, in their personal aspects, constitute a legacy to Gabriel Warren's son from all who have gone before."<sup>32</sup>

The following chronological listing of the events of Warren's life, as supplied by Bohner, helps to give a clear picture of the greatness of the American author.

- 1905 Robert Penn Warren, born in Guthrie, Kentucky, April 14; parents Robert Franklin and Anna Ruth Penn Warren.
- 1921 Graduated from Clarksville, Tennessee, high school; enrolled in Vanderbilt University.
- 1923 Active in Nashville "Fugitive Group".
- 1925 Graduated from Vanderbilt.
- 1925-27 Graduate student at University of California (M.A., 1927).
- 1927-28 Graduate student at Yale University.
- 1928-30 Rhodes Scholar, Oxford (B. Lit., 1930).
- 1929 John Brown: The Making of a Martyr.
- 1930 Assistant Professor of English, Southwestern College, Memphis; married Emma Brescia.
- 1931-34 Assistant Professor of English, Vanderbilt University.
- 1934 Assistant Professor of English, Louisiana State University.
- 1935 Thirty-Six Poems; founded with Charles W. Pipkin and Cleanth Brooks the Southern Review.
- 1939 Night Rider; Guggenheim Fellow (second fellowship awarded 1947-48)
- 1942 Eleven Poems on the Same Theme; Professor of English, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- 1943 At Heaven's Gate.

- 1944 Selected Poems, 1923-1943; Counsultant of Poetry, Library of Congress.
- 1946 All the King's Men (Pulitzer Prize).
- 1950 World Enough and Time; Professor of Play-writing, Yale University (resigned, 1956).
- 1951 Divorced Emma Brescia Warren.
- 1952 Married Eleanor Clark.
- 1953 Brother to Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices.
- 1955 Band of Angels.
- 1957 Promises: Poems 1954-1956 (Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize of American Poetry Society); Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South.
- 1958 Selected Essays.
- 1959 The Cave; elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters
- 1960 You, Emperors, and Others: Poems 1957-1960; All the King's Men (drama).
- 1961 Wilderness; The Legacy of the Civil War; Professor of English at Yale University.
- 1964 Flood: A Romance of Our Time.
- 1965 Who Speaks for the Negro?
- 1966 Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays.
- 1967 Selected Poems: New and Old, 1923-1966.<sup>33</sup>

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time, The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 427.

<sup>2</sup>Stewart, p. 429.

<sup>3</sup>Charles H. Bohner, Robert Penn Warren (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup>Stewart, p. 430.

<sup>5</sup>Bohner, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Bohner, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>Bohner, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup>Bohner, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup>Bohner, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>Stewart, p. 433.

<sup>11</sup>Bohner, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup>Bohner, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup>Bohner, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup>Bohner, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup>Bohner, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup>Bohner, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup>Bohner, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup>Bohner, p. 280.

<sup>19</sup>Stewart, p. 437.

<sup>20</sup>Bohner, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup>Bohner, p. 28.

- <sup>22</sup>Stewart, p. 439.  
<sup>23</sup>Stewart, p. 440.  
<sup>24</sup>Stewart, p. 447.  
<sup>25</sup>Stewart, p. 449.  
<sup>26</sup>Stewart, p. 449.  
<sup>27</sup>Bohner, p. 60.  
<sup>28</sup>Stewart, p. 450.  
<sup>29</sup>Bohner, p. 83.  
<sup>30</sup>Bohner, p. 100.  
<sup>31</sup>Bohner, p. 135.  
<sup>32</sup>Bohner, p. 139.  
<sup>33</sup>Bohner, p. 13.

## CHAPTER III

### WARREN'S SOUTHERN SETTING

Robert Penn Warren, product of the Southern landscape, has painted unforgettable pictures of that country through his poetry. Warren has been recognized as one of the South's most illustrious poets and members of a literary group called the Fugitives. "Among the most articulate literary men America has produced, these four have published almost a hundred volumes, and Louise Cowan credits them with being the inaugurators of this Southern literary renaissance."<sup>1</sup> Mary Nance Huff in her compiled bibliography continues her praise of Warren: "The most versatile of this distinguished group, Robert Penn Warren, has made significant contributions to almost every literary genre: biography, fiction, drama, poetry, and criticism."<sup>2</sup>

This artistic poet manages to create vivid images which depict the countryside of his boyhood. The reader has little trouble visualizing the scenes in his mind, as Warren paints pictures of the scenery and people he knew as a boy in the foothills of Kentucky, and "one becomes aware of the measure of lived-through experience in that so solid realm that Warren has put before the reader."<sup>3</sup> The scenery depicted in Warren's poetry was a real part of the poet's life, and that, perhaps,

is the reason he is able to describe that lush landscape in such believable form. Warren's commitment to the South of his youth can be better understood when one realizes that "Warren has been, and is, a Southerner. He is, however, a kind of Southerner we have grown accustomed to since the twenties and thirties--one whose origin and early life rooted him deeply in the South, but also one who was able to travel in different cultures in his young maturity, and, in the rubbing of his old assumption against new surroundings, bring his own awareness into sharper focus. With very minor exceptions the setting of all Warren's work is the South."<sup>4</sup> Although Warren delights in giving the reader visual excitement, he depends basically on his memory to provide the basis for his poetry, for "he can give us the exact feeling of a day's work in the harvest fields in the Tennessee of 1916, with the shuffling of the steam-tractor, the way the fieldhands moved their bodies and handled their implements, and exactly how the light changed when a storm was coming. As a skilled and experienced writer, in prose or verse, Mr. Warren can write effectively on any subject. But what really excites him is memory."<sup>5</sup>

Warren addresses the reader in the poem "Country Burying (1919)," and asks that the memory of the scene depicted in the poem be recalled. Warren reminds his reader that the scene is a quiet one of a church in an oak-grove that is an every-day sight.

A thousand times you've seen that scene:  
 Oak grove, bare ground, little white church there,  
 Bone-white in that light, and through dust-pale green  
 of oak leaf, the steeple pokes up in the bright air.

Warren paints a very descriptive picture of a scene that has, here-to-fore, seemed common-place to an untrained viewer.

Warren continues in the next two stanzas to add details to his painting by revealing that this burial took place in a short but precious summer. The cars are said to be patiently waiting, just as mules patiently wait in the shade for their masters to return. The young boy is also waiting, but he is not so patient, since summer is, for him, so short. The speaker continues to explain that he does not understand why his mother attends the funeral of an old woman whom she scarcely knew. The boy becomes the man of the first stanza and describes what he would find if he were to return to the country church. ("Country Burying (1919)," Appendix, p. 52)

Just as the speaker in "Country Burying (1919)" has returned in his mind to a scene of his boyhood, the speaker in "Walk By Moonlight in Small Town" has returned to the town of his youth. Charles H. Bohner describes this return: "Warren's theme of the evanescence of the past is restated in one of the loveliest lyrics in Promises, 'Walk By Moonlight in Small Town.' The speaker of the poem, like so many of Warren's characters, has come back to his home town--'every tickets' round trip.' The little town, smaller even than remembered, stands pitiful and ugly; but the moonlight transforms it into a place of eerie beauty. Each street and building holds

some memory, some scrap of the past; and the poet yearns to know their meaning, to realize an ideal forever beyond the human world of imperfection."<sup>6</sup> ("Walk By Moonlight," Appendix, p.61)

Although the South of Warren's childhood is gone forever, its beauty is recaptured in Warren's poetry where readers can learn about or remember the picturesque South. The Southern memories must be carefully packaged and handed down from generation to generation if this dimension of Southern history is to be preserved for future generations.<sup>7</sup>

In "Bearded Oaks" Warren presents a scene involving two lovers in the quiet setting of the old South where time, like the lovers, seems to be suspended, as "two lovers recline in a grove of oaks. To the narrator the scene appears submerged in water with light filtering down through layers of liquid darkness. All motion is slowed by the denser medium, and, in this retardation of movement, the speaker feels time itself suspended."<sup>8</sup> Warren's description of the scenery is as detailed as his description of the relationship of the lovers which he compares to "Dim architecture." The oaks are a part of the architectural structure of the South. The slow, quiet life of the old South is symbolized by the oaks which grow slowly, quietly, as they exist for what seems to be an eternity. ("Bearded Oaks," Appendix, pp. 63-64)

Warren's Southern setting does not merely consist of grasses, flowers, trees, and churches, but also includes a satire on people in these settings. The quiet of a small



Southern town provides the setting for "Nocturne: Traveling Salesman in Hotel Bedroom." The loneliness experienced by the salesman is accentuated by Warren's delicate descriptions of the 'predawn drizzle,' the striking of the clock, the sloshing of the car's tires, and the melting of the soap in the dish. Warren believes that as man progresses in life, he also triumphs over life. Even the drabest, grisliest circumstances may not withhold the possibility of glory, according to Warren's outlook. "Nocturne" provides one of the most unpromising scenes in his volume of poetry, but even in this setting, Warren insists on man's glory in life. The dismal setting provides a background for Warren's outlook. ("Nocturne: Traveling Salesman in Hotel Bedroom," Appendix, p. 65)

In summary, Warren utilized the South as the setting for the majority of his works. The people of the South that Warren loved also contribute to the greatness of his poetry. Paul West points out the importance of the Southern setting in Warren's poetry: "It is not surprising that Warren incorporates a great deal of landscape into his poems: the land holds all ancestors; it is the composite that lies down whereas the society of men, ever changing, is the compost that moves about."<sup>9</sup>

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mary Nance Huff, Robert Penn Warren: A Bibliography (New York: David Lewis, 1968), p. v.

<sup>2</sup>Huff, p. vi.

<sup>3</sup>John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 529.

<sup>4</sup>John Lewis Longley, Jr., Robert Penn Warren (Austin: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1966), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>John Wain, "Robert Penn Warren: The Drama of the Past," New Republic, 155 (November 26, 1966), 16.

<sup>6</sup>Charles H. Bohner, Robert Penn Warren (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 141.

<sup>7</sup>Wain, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Bohner, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup>Paul West, Robert Penn Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 11.

## CHAPTER IV

### WARREN'S SOUTHERNERS

Warren's concern with the South he grew to know and to love does not just include the landscape, it encompasses the people who came before Warren, the people with whom Warren lived, and the people who are to come. Warren shares his memories with his readers because, "It never crossed my mind when I began writing fiction that I could write about anything [people] else; knew, that is, well enough to write about. Nothing else ever nagged you enough to stir the imagination."<sup>1</sup> One must not be misled to believe that Warren had seen no land but that of the South or that he knew no other people but Southerners. The poet is well traveled and has been exposed to relationships with people all over the world. According to John L. Stewart, this traveling and exchanging of ideas has helped to make Warren even more aware of the value of his childhood experiences: "He has lived many places, but when he seeks for radical symbols of the human condition, his mind reaches back to the land he knew as a boy, for such is his vision that many of the moments in man's search for himself and the meaning of his fate are rooted in childhood experiences and can be represented by his sense of and reaction to the country."<sup>2</sup>

Warren's childhood experiences in Kentucky helped to shape his vision of the meaning of history and of man.<sup>3</sup> Warren, perhaps more than any of his Fugitive friends, was rooted in the Southern tradition and he expresses his belief that man is both happy and sad while encompassed by a sense of guilt, feeling ashamed of the weaknesses while being proud of the stamina of the people. "The glimpse of Southern landscape, swept by rain squalls and low-hanging mists, merge with childhood memories, speculations on the pioneers who first made the journey westward, and sudden and uncontrollable spasms of guilt."<sup>4</sup>

Warren's ability to be a great storyteller is an asset to the fiction writer, but this ability in a poet is the mark of technical genius. Warren paints pictures of the South and its people as no one before him has done, because ". . . he is gifted as a superb storyteller and he is also more deeply related to the living heart and guts of the southern tradition than any of his mentors."<sup>5</sup> Warren's stories reveal a diminution of the history of the South that would, otherwise, be lost forever to the generation of today and the generations yet to come. While Warren shows a definite interest in the past, ". . . his work nevertheless forms a panorama of a visible past covering more than one hundred and fifty years of Southern history."<sup>6</sup> Paul West uses a comment on a foreward to one of Warren's books to express his views: "As Warren explains in his foreward, 'historical sense and poetic

sense' complement each other, the one a reminder of 'the big myth we live,' the other 'the little myth we make.'"<sup>7</sup>

Warren utilizes personal experience to the fullest in his poetry as he recalls childhood experiences to provide the basis for the story and the philosophy behind the story. Elliott Coleman says about Warren: "Besides being a poet, a novelist, a critic, a dramatist, a cultural recorder of North as well as South, Mr. Warren is a philosopher. He is a philosopher of the unfair darkness of the childhood out of which light will spring. He continually goes back to his own childhood even in his latest poems, trying to find the child that is father of the man who must become a child to be a father."<sup>8</sup> To fully understand Warren's poetry one must understand his use of history in his poems, for "a consideration of Warren's use of historical detail leads one to his definition of history and his philosophy of history. First, he frequently uses the term 'history' in relation to the individual's personal past and his family heritage, both of which one must accept and come to terms with."<sup>9</sup> Warren is so deeply rooted in his Southern heritage that his poems are both autobiographical and biographical of the South and its people. John Wain states: "This realization [that the first twenty years had the deepest influence on Warren] is sharply pointed up by the fact that Mr. Warren's gift, in poetry, is mainly autobiographical and descriptive. He is an excellent craftsman, and his craft shows to best advantage when he is bringing a

scene before our eyes with sure, deft touches of detail. And the scenes he paints best of all are from memory."<sup>10</sup> Wain continues, being more specific: "At all events, the album is there and the pages are turned; the memories are handed over intact from one generation to another. And, partly no doubt because of the nature of life in the South, the memories are idyllic and terrifying in about equal proportion. The South is beautiful but also cruel and reckless. So, in 'Promises,' we have a child's terror at his grandfather's memory of stringing up bushwhackers during the Civil War; and, a little later, a dreadful story of a large family of poor children murdered by their father with an icepick."<sup>11</sup>

The poem "School Lesson Based on Word of Tragic Death of Entire Gillum Family" reads as a short story in verse form. This poem is one of the most memorable poems in Pro-mises. In 1959, Warren declared that he would write no more fiction. "Poems," he said at that time, "are great devourers of short stories."<sup>12</sup> Both "School Lesson" and "Country Burying (1919)" are poems which would, in earlier years, have been short stories. The reader can see the children as their characteristics are described by the poet. Their "Tow hair was thick as a cornshuck mat./They had milky blue eyes in matching pairs." One has no trouble in visualizing these children who "weren't so bright, or clean, or clever, " as they come to school every day with their "old lard pail full of fried pie, smoked ham, and corn pone." Likewise, the children who receive

the message of their friends' deaths are easily pictured in the reader's mind as they try to decide "Which shoe, oh, which was Brother putting on?" The panorama of the horrible event is presented in a realistic manner by a poet who understands the details of the life of country people in the South. ("School Lesson," Appendix, pp. 53-55)

Warren's Southern heritage goes back to the days of the Civil War, when both his grandfathers fought in the Confederate Army. As a boy, Warren spent his summers visiting with his grandfathers and listening to their stories and the stories of others who had been a part of Southern history. Warren's poem "Court-martial" is concerned with his grandfather Gabriel Telemachus Penn.<sup>13</sup> Bohner comments on the grandfather who is reminiscing about the Battle of Shiloh:

Court-martial delineates the relationship of a boy and his grandfather that is not unlike the one Warren explored in his story 'When the Light Gets Green.' The poem is concerned with the boy's efforts to 'untie/The know of History.' Under the eyes of the old captain of cavalry, the child with his toy soldiers fights against the campaigns of the Civil War, certain that 'death is only the glory.' A chance question elicits from the old man a brutal tale of court-martialing guerillas. 'Two lieutenants talk law,' and then, without mercy or compunction, the guerillas were taken to the woods and hanged. The rapt, horrified stare of the little boy at the disclosure wrings from the old man an involuntary cry of conscience. In the 'darkening air' the child's unblemished image of his grandfather is shattered, and the boy realizes that he, in his innocence, has passed judgement on his grandfather's guilt.<sup>14</sup>

The reader has little trouble in picturing a cedar tree with "An old man and small grandson/Withdrawn from the heat of the sun" sitting in the shade while sharing a story. Warren

describes the old man in intimate detail, but he adds that "I see him now, as once seen." Childhood experiences has provided Warren with the background for a beautifully descriptive poem. ("Court-martial," Appendix, pp. 48-51)

One section of Warren's book Promises entitled "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace" contains two poems about older women who could, possibly, be Warren's grandmothers. Warren feels a guilt, reflected in the poems, about the rejection of the older members of Southern society. "Go It, Granny--Go It, Hog!" has practically been ignored by critics. Within the structure of the "Ballad," two men are talking; one is a stupid, insensitive person, and the other is an intelligent guide who explains the events of the poems. The guide's words are in plain print while the observer's lines are in italics. The stupid questioner represents the new South which has not been exposed to the old South, represented by the guide who is trying to explain Granny's movements to the young, ignorant man. The hogs represent Time which watches and waits for the old woman and finally overcomes her as she tries to scream "with no shred of a tongue in her head." ("Go It, Granny--Go It, Hog!," Appendix, pp. 59-60)

The second grandmother poem in "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace" which deserves attention is entitled "Keepsakes." Once again there are two speakers in the poem, one is the knowledgeable guide and the other is the ignorant questioner. The questioner does not understand granny's movements and the



knowledgeable person is trying to explain them to him. Victor H. Strandberg explains granny's search by stating:

Lyric 2, "Keepsakes," for example weaves some incisive thrusts at modern mores into granny's search for identity through the bureau:

Well, what is the old fool hunting for?  
 Oh, nothing, oh, nothing, that's in the top drawer,  
 For that's left by late owners who had their own  
     grief to withstand,  
 And she tries to squinch and frown  
 As she peers at the Prayer Book upside down,  
 And the contraceptives are something she can't  
     understand,

Although this passage does not readily yield up its meaning, . . . the 'Prayer Book upside down' represents formal religion, with its somewhat ossified mode of worship, and the contraceptives might well suggest something about sterility in contemporary culture. Granny's search for her mislaid identity is hardly assisted by such trifles.<sup>15</sup>

The grandmother removes her clothing and begins to polish an antique bureau which symbolizes the secrets of a respectable family.<sup>16</sup> ("Keepsakes," Appendix, pp. 60-61)

Warren's poem "The Ballad of Billie Potts" is "a sustained narrative poem which is particular and concrete, exactly local, and riddled with homely imagery, some of it part of the folk tradition, some designed and contrived as a close approximation of it."<sup>17</sup>

Little Billie was full of piss & vinegar,  
 And full of sap as a maple tree,  
 And full of tricks as a lop-eared pup.

The poem tells a story of: "the prodigal son who returns home and is murdered by parents who fail to recognize him. Warren handles this folktale from Western Kentucky through

alternating narrative and commentary, the one rich and awkward with doggerel sound and Kentucky speech mannerisms, the other lofty, meditative, and often diffuse."<sup>18</sup> ("The Ballad of Billie Potts," Appendix, pp. 57-58)

John Wain makes a general comment about the book Promises which applies to many of Warren's poems: "The others deal with scenes of the poet's boyhood in Tennessee, musings on forbears whose faces stare at him from daguerreotypes, etc., etc. It is as if the father and son were looking together through a photograph album; the old head and the young head come together, pages are turned, a few comments are made, a few questions asked and answered."<sup>19</sup> "Summer Storm and God's Grace (Circa 1916)" is a poem that asks questions and the speaker finds his only answer in prayer. The poem describes the reactions of the farmhands, the animals, the farmers, and a young boy to a fierce storm that destroys henhouses and crops and leaves behind a dismal scene. ("Summer Storm . . .," Appendix, pp. 55-56)

Robert Penn Warren writes about the people he knew and loved as they lived and died in the Southern tradition which holds such a strong influence over his work. One can truly say that Warren is a Southern poet.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Charles H. Bohner, Robert Penn Warren (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), p. 430.

<sup>3</sup>Stewart, p. 430.

<sup>4</sup>Bohner, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup>George P. Garrett, "The Recent Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 226.

<sup>6</sup>Bohner, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>Paul West, Robert Penn Warren (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup>Elliott Coleman, "A Line of Light," Poetry, 110 (September, 1967), 19.

<sup>9</sup>L. Hugh Moore, Jr., Robert Penn Warren and History: "The Big Myth We Live" (Paris: Mouton and Company, 1970), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup>John Wain, "Robert Penn Warren: The Drama of the Past," New Republic, 155 (November 26, 1966), 17.

<sup>11</sup>Wain, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup>Bohner, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup>Bohner, p. 221.

<sup>14</sup>Bohner, p. 140.

<sup>15</sup>Victor H. Strandberg, A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 244.

<sup>16</sup>Wain, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup>Garrett, p. 226.

<sup>18</sup>West, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup>Wain, p. 18.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Robert Penn Warren, poet, critic, novelist, historian, dramatist, is a Southern writer who brings the Southern past to life in his works as he draws on his personal experiences to create his scenes, situations, and characters. John Lewis Longley, Jr., comments: "Thus 'content' in Warren's work is always a re-creation of some urgent, compelling, timeless reality. The ambiguities, polarities, and tensions of human existence are given shape and form. The conflict between brute fact and abstract idealism is given universal expression, whatever the historical frame of reference."<sup>1</sup>

Warren has been greatly influenced by his Southern heritage for, as Warren has said, he could not imagine writing about anything other than the South. For years critics have ignored the influence of the South on Warren's works, but as L. Hugh Moore states: "Although critics are increasingly coming to focus on this aspect of Warren's work after almost completely neglecting it for many years, there is no topic in Warren that is more deserving of study, that better repays close attention, or that seems as inexhaustible in its ramifications."<sup>2</sup>

Warren is the only living American author to receive the Pulitzer Prize for both fiction and poetry. This accomplishment

is easy to understand when one views his vast amount of literary publications of high quality. Warren is recognized as one of the most accomplished authors in the world as is supported by Charles Bohner who says Warren is, "the only living American author who is unquestionably of the first rank in poetry and literary criticism and the novel."<sup>3</sup>

Warren has a secure place in literature in general and specifically in American literature. His contribution to Southern history is through the literature that preserves forever the dimension of the South that has so nearly been lost.

The influence of the South on the writing of Robert Penn Warren is immeasurable. He makes use of the people, experiences, and scenery that surrounded him from his earliest years. Those years added a large frame of reference to Warren's memory, a memory which has provided the influence for one of the world's most creative poets.

The lecture recital script, found in the Appendix, is a basic script that may be varied according to the whims of the director. The material may be presented by a single reader or by a group of readers. The poems provide a great deal of variety in mood, wording, and type of poem. The director may choose to change the arrangement of the poems within the script if it is felt that a shift would better suit the reader and audience. The material as presented will take from forty minutes to one hour to present depending on

the pace of the presentation, the number of readers, and the amount of movement used in the presentation.

Warren's work, both poetry and fiction, are well suited for oral presentation, as they are filled with a variety of dialects, settings, moods, characters, and situations. The included script does not contain director's instructions on blocking or dividing the material because these decisions must be made by each director as best suited for each group. The included poems are well suited to a group presentation where at least one reader serves as a narrator giving the background information with other readers presenting the poetry. The variation of speakers and moods within the poems lends itself to use of creative ideas on the part of the director.

The poetry used in the lecture recital script includes some of Warren's best-known works, "Bearded Oaks" and "Court-martial," and some of his most obscure poems, "Go It, Granny--Go It, Hog!" and "School . . . ." The readers are not tied to preconceived ideas about the oral interpretation of the poems, since Warren's work is seldom used by oral interpreters. Warren's work in a lecture recital can open new doors for experiences to both readers and audience members.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Lewis Longley, Jr., Robert Penn Warren (Austin: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>L. Hugh Moore, Jr., Robert Penn Warren and History: "The Big Myth We Live" (Paris: Mouton and Company, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Charles H. Bohner, Robert Penn Warren (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 1.



## APPENDIX

### A LECTURE RECITAL ILLUSTRATING THE SOUTHERN INFLUENCE ON THE POETRY OF ROBERT PENN WARREN

#### Kentucky Poetry

The South of Robert Penn Warren is the hill country of Kentucky near the Tennessee border, a section known as the Black Patch because of the "dark fire-cured" tobacco grown there. It is a land of moderate-sized farms, varying from gently rolling fields, ripe with tobacco, to scarps and rocky hillsides forested with cedar and sycamore. The land was settled by pioneers from the Southern uplands who crossed the Alleghenies toward the close of the eighteenth century and settled the Cumberland country.

Charles Bohner, noted critic, comments that "It has not been sufficiently noted that Warren's work forms a history from the early nineteenth century to the present of the South he has known best." Warren fully shares the Southern feeling for family, the sense of the continuity of generations; for his own roots in Southern history and experience are deep. The interest appears in his fiction in the attention he devotes to the family trees of his characters.

Were Robert Penn Warren to write no more, his place in our literature would be secure. The quantity of his production

is in itself impressive. Throughout this mass of varied creations, he has maintained a consistently high level of craftsmanship. Eric Bentley once said that Warren very nearly fulfills our idea of the romantic genius. Warren's language is robust and rhetorical. He likes his adjectives and nouns to go in pairs, reinforcing one another, begetting rhythm and resonance. When a comparison catches his fancy, his first metaphor is likely to suggest another, and he piles image on image. As a result, he is sometimes led by his own ingenuity into the excesses of language which mar many otherwise fine passages. Nevertheless, there is a gusto and masculine force about all of Warren's work, reminiscent of Shakespeare, who Warren has said had the greatest influence on his work.

Warren's writing possesses vitality and versatility. In his latest poetry, he seeks new solutions to artistic problems. He has always seemed driven to explore the boundaries of his art, to push the possibilities of his form to its outer limits. Warren uses his abilities to use materials that formerly would have been an excellent short story to create a poem which is unforgettable such as "The Ballad of Billie Potts" and "School Lesson. . . ." After four decades on the American literary scene, Robert Penn Warren is one of the rarest of all literary figures--a writer who remains unpredictable.

Characteristically, one of his early poems is entitled "Genealogy" and is concerned with his grandfather, Gabriel Telemachus Penn. Both of Warren's grandfathers fought with the Confederacy in the Civil War, and throughout his childhood he heard stories of the war told by people who had witnessed it. He can remember his grandfather reminiscing about the Battle of Shiloh. One scene is evoked, affectionately, in a section of "Genealogy" entitled "Court-martial."

Under the cedar tree,  
He would sit, all summer, with me:  
An old man and a small grandson  
Withdrawn from the heat of the sun.

Captain, cavalry, C.S.A.,  
An old man, now shrunken, gray,  
Pointed beard clipped the classic way,  
Tendons long gone crank and wry,  
And long shrunken the cavalryman's thigh  
Under the pale-washed blue jean.  
His pipe smoke lifts, serene  
Beneath boughs of the evergreen,  
With sunlight dappling between.  
I see him now, as once seen.

Light throbs the far hill.  
The boughs of the cedar are still.

His years like landscape lie  
Spread to the backward eye  
In life's long irony.  
All the old hoofbeats fade  
In the calm of the cedar shade,  
Where only the murmur and hum  
Of the far farm, and summer, now come.  
He can forget all--forget  
Even mortgage and lien and debt,  
Cutworm and hail and drouth,  
Bang's disease, hoof-and-mouth,  
Barn sagging and broken house--  
For now in the shade, adrowse,  
At last he can sit, or rouse  
To light pipe, or say to me  
Some scrap of old poetry--

Byron or Burns--and idly  
 The words glimmer and fade  
 Like sparks in the dark of his head.

In the dust by his chair  
 I undertook to repair  
 The mistakes of his old war.  
 Hunched on that toy terrain,  
 Campaign by campaign,  
 I sought, somehow, to untie  
 The knot of History,  
 For in our shade I knew  
 That only the Truth is true,  
 That life is only the act  
 To transfigure all fact,  
 And life is only a story  
 And death is only the glory  
 Of the telling of the story,  
 And the done and the to-be-done  
 In that timelessness were one,  
 Beyond the poor being done.  
 The afternoon stood still.  
 Sun dazzled the far hill.

It was only a chance word  
 That a chance recollection had stirred.  
 "Guerilla--what's that?" I said.  
 "Bushwhackers, we called 'em," he said.  
 "Were they on the Yankee side?"  
 "Son, they didn't have any side,  
 Just out to plunder and ride  
 And hell-rake the pore countryside.  
 Just out for themselves, so, son,  
 If you happened to run across one,  
 Or better, laid hand to a passel,  
 No need to be squeamish, or wrestle  
 Too long with your conscience. But if--"  
 He paused, raised his pipe, took a whiff--  
 "If your stomach or conscience was queasy,  
 You could make it all regular, easy."

"By the road, find some shade, a nice patch.  
 Even hackberry does, at a scratch.  
 Find a spring with some cress fresh beside it,  
 Growing rank enough to nigh hide it.  
 Lord, a man can sure thirst when you ride.  
 Order halt, let heat-daze subside.  
 Put your pickets, vedettes out, dismount.  
 Water horses, grease gall, take count,  
 And while the men rest and jaw,

You and two lieutenants talk law.  
Brevitatem justitia amat.  
 Time is short--hell, a rope is--that's that."

That was that, and the old eyes were closed.  
 On a knee one old hand reposed,  
 Fingers crooked on the cob pipe, where  
 Last smoke raveled blue up the air.  
 Every tale has an end, has an end.  
 But smoke rose, did not waver or bend.  
 It unspooled, wouldn't stop, wouldn't end.

"By God--" and he jerked up his head.  
 "By God, they deserved it," he said.  
 "Don't look at me that way," he said.  
 "By God--" and the old eyes glared red.  
 Then shut in the cedar shade.

The head slept in that dusk the boughs made.  
 The world's silence made me afraid.  
 Then a July-fly, somewhere,  
 Like silk ripping, ripped the bright air.  
 Then stopped, Sweat broke in my hair.

I snatched my gaze away.  
 I swung to the blazing day.  
 Ruined lawn, raw house swam in light.  
 The far woods swam in my sight.  
 Throbbing, the fields fell away  
 Under the blaze of day.

Calmly then, out of the sky,  
 Blotting the sun's blazing eye,  
 He rode. He was large in the sky.  
 Behind, shadow massed, slow, and grew  
 Like cloud on the sky's summer blue.  
 Out of that shade-mass he drew.  
 To the great saddle's sway he swung,  
 Not old now, not old now, but young,  
 Great cavalry boots to the thigh,  
 No speculation in eye.  
 Then clotting behind him, and dim,  
 Clot by clot, from the shadow behind him,  
 They took shape, enormous in air.  
 Behind him, enormous, they hung there:

Ornaments of the old rope,  
 Each face outraged, agape,  
 Not yet believing it true.  
 Each hairy jaw is askew,

Tongue out, out-staring eye,  
And the spittle not yet dry  
That was uttered with the last cry.

The horseman does not look back.  
Blank-eyed, he continues his track,  
Riding toward me there,  
Through the darkening air.

The world is real. It is there.

Warren's own experiences during adolescence are common subjects in many of his poems. Warren addresses the reader in the poem "Country Burying (1919)," and asks that the memory of the scene depicted in the poem be recalled by the reader. The poet reminds his reader that the scene is a quiet one of a church in an oak-grove, an every-day sight. Warren paints a very descriptive picture of a scene that has, here-to-fore, seemed commonplace to an untrained viewer. Warren continues in the next two stanzas to add details to the picture by revealing that this burial took place in the precious but short summer. The cars are said to be patiently waiting, just as mules patiently wait in the shade for their masters to return. The young boy is also waiting but he is not so patient since summer is, for him, so short. The speaker continues to explain that he does not understand why his mother attends the funeral of an old woman whom she scarcely knew. The boy again becomes the man of the first stanza and describes what he would find if he were to return to the country church. Some critics feel that the speaker of the poem is Warren looking back on an

experience of his youth, describing the situation which he did not fully understand when he was a young boy.

For it is summer, and once I sat  
 At grove-edge beyond the disarray  
 Of cars in the shade-patch, this way and that.  
 They stood patient as mules now in the heat of  
 the day.

Chevrolet, T-Model, a Hudson or two,  
 They are waiting like me, and the afternoon  
 flares.  
 Waiting is all they have come to do.  
 What goes on inside is no concern of theirs,

Nor of mine, who have lost a boy's afternoon,  
 When summer's so short, oh, so short, just to bring  
 My mother to bury someone she's scarce known.  
 "I respect her," she'd said, but was that enough  
 of a thing?

Who was she? Who knows? I'd not thought to ask it.  
 That kind came to town, in buggy or Ford,  
 Some butter to swap, clutch of eggs in a basket,  
 Gnarled hands in black mittens, old face yellow  
 as a gourd.

It's no matter now who lies in the church,  
 Where heads bend in duty in sparse rows.  
 Green miles of tobacco, sun-dazzled, stretch  
 Away, Red clay, the road winds, goes on where  
 it goes.

And we, too, now go, down the road, where it goes,  
 My mother and I, the hole now filled.  
 Light levels in fields now, dusk crouches in headgerows.  
 As we pass from what is, toward what will be,  
 fulfilled.

And I passed toward voices and the foreign faces,  
 Knew dawn in strange rooms, and the heart gropes  
 for center,  
 But should I come back, and come back where that place is,  
 Oak grove, white church, in day-glare a-daze, I  
 might enter.

For what? But enter, and find what I'd guess:  
 The odor of varnish, hymnals stacked on a chair,  
 Light religiously dim by painted paper on window glass,  
 And the insistent buzz of a fly lost in shadow,  
 somewhere.

Why doesn't that fly stop buzzing--stop buzzing up there!

Warren draws on another experience of his childhood in the poem "School Lesson Based on Word of Tragic Death of Entire Gillum Family" which tells the story of a large family of poor children who were murdered by their father with an icepick. The poem is a short story in verse form. The reader can see the children as their pictures are painted by this skillful poet. Likewise, the children who receive the message of their friends' deaths are easily present to the reader's mind as they try to decide which shoe one of the children was putting on as he was killed. The horrible event is recounted in a realistic manner by a poet who could understand the details of country life in the South.

They weren't so bright, or clean, or clever,  
 And their noses were sometimes imperfectly blown,  
 But they always got to school the weather whatever,  
 With old lard pail full of fried pie, smoked ham,  
 and corn pone.

It was good six miles to the Gillum place,  
 Back where the cedar and hoot owl consorted  
 And snapping turtle snoozed in his carapace  
 And the whang-doodle whooped and the dang-whoodle  
 snorted.

Tow hair was thick as corn-shuck mat.  
 They had milky blueeyes in matching pairs.  
 And barefoot or brogan, when they sat,  
 Their toes were the kind that hook round the legs  
 of chairs.

They had adenoids to make you choke,  
 And buttermilk breath, and their flannel asteam,  
 And sat right mannerly while teacher spoke,  
 But when book-time came their eyes were glazed and  
 adream.

There was Dollie-May, Susie-May, Forrest, Sam, Brother--  
 Thirteen down to eight the airsteps ran.



They had popped right natural from their big fat mother,  
 The clabber kind that can catch just by honing  
 after a man.

She must have honed hard, and maybe had to,  
 For Old Slat Gillum was the kind of a one  
 Who wasn't designed to cast much shadow  
 If set a little sideways and not in good strong sun.

But she had her brood, and that was that,  
 Though you wondered how she had relished her reaming,  
 For from yellow toenail to old black felt hat,  
 Gillum was scarcely the type to set a lady dreaming.

In town he'd stop, and say: "Say, mister,  
 I'll name you what's true fer folks, ever-one.  
 Human-man ain't much more'n a big blood blister,  
 All red and proud-swole, but one good squeeze and  
 he's gone.

"Take me, ain't wuth lead and powder to persih,  
 Just some spindle bone stuck in a pair of pants,  
 But a man's got his chaps to love and to cherish,  
 And raise up and larn 'em so they kin git they  
 chance."

So mud to the hub, or dust to the hock,  
 God his helper, wet or dry,  
 Old Gillum swore by God and by cock,  
 He'd git 'em larned before his own time came to die.

That morning blew up cold and wet,  
 All the red-clay road was curdled as curd,  
 And no Gillums there for the first time yet.  
 The morning drones on. Stove spits, Recess, Then  
 the word.

Dollie-May was combing Susie-May's head,  
 Sam was feeding, Forrest milking, got nigh through.  
 Little Brother just sat on the edge of his bed.  
 Somebody must have said: "Pappy, what now you  
 aimin' to do?"

An ice pick is a subtle thing.  
 The puncture's small, blood only a wisp.  
 It hurts no more than a bad bee sting.  
 When the sheriff got there the school-bread was  
 long burned to a crisp.

In the afternoon silence the shalk would scrape.  
 We sat and watched the windowpanes steam,  
 Blur the old corn field and accustomed landscape.  
 Voices came now faint in our intellectual dream.

Which shoe, oh, which was Brother putting on?  
 That was something, it seemed, you just had to  
 know.  
 But nobody knew, all afternoon.  
 Though we studied and studied, as hard as we could,  
 to know.

Studying the arithmetic of losses,  
 To be prepared when the next one,  
 By fire, flood, foe, cancer, thrombosis,  
 Or Time's slow malediction, came to be undone.

We studied all afternoon, til getting on to sun.  
There was another lesson, but we were too young to  
take up that one.

Warren draws on his experience with the weather and its effect on the land and people of the South in his poem "Summer Storm and God's Grace (Circa 1916)." This is a poem that suggests questions and the speaker finds his only answer in prayer. The speaker wonders why the storms come year after year with so little warning destroying houses, crops, and livestock. He wonders why the people cannot have just one summer without the devastating weather. The poem describes the reactions of the farmhands, the animals, the farmers, and a young boy to a fierce storm, probably the tornado common in the Mississippi Valley, that destroys henhouses and crops and leaves behind a dismal scene.

Toward sun, the sun flared suddenly red.  
 The green of woods was doused to black.  
 The cattle bellowed by the haystack.  
 Redder than ever, red clay was red.  
 Up the lane the plowhands came pelting back.

Astride and no saddle, and they didn't care  
 If a razor-back mule at break-tooth trot  
 Was not the best comfort a man ever got,  
 But came huddling on, with jangling gear,  
 And the hat that jounced off stayed off, like  
 as not.

In that strange light all distance died.  
 You know the world's intensity.  
 Field-far, you can read the aphid's eye.  
 The mole, in his sod, can no more hide,  
 And weeps beneath the naked sky.

Past silence, sound insinuates  
 Past ear into the inner brain.  
 The toad's asthamatic breath is pain,  
 The cutworm's tooth grinds and grates,  
 And the root, in earth, screams, screams again.

But no cloud yet. No wind, though you,  
 A half a county off, now spy  
 The crow that, laboring zenith-high,  
 Is suddenly, with wings askew,  
 Snatched, and tumbled down the sky.

And so you waited. You couldn't talk.  
 The creek-slide willows shuddered gray.  
 The oak leaf turned the other way,  
 Gray as fish-belly. Then, with a squawk,  
 The henhouse heaved, and flew away,

And darkness rode in on the wind.  
 The pitchfork lightning tossed the trees,  
 And God got down on hands and knees  
 To peer and cackle and commend  
 His own sadistic idiocies.

Next morning you stood where the bridge had washed out.  
 A drowned cow bobbed down the creek.  
 Raw-eyed, men watched. They did not speak.  
 Till one shrugged, said he thought he'd make out.  
 Then turned, took the woods-path up the creek.

Oh, send them summer, one summer just right,  
 With rain well spaced, no wind or hail.  
 Let cutworm tooth falter, locust jaw fail,  
 And if a man wake at roof-roar at night,  
 Let that roar be the roar of God's awful Grace  
 and not of his flail.

Warren's poem "The Ballad of Billie Potts" is described by George Garrett as "a sustained narrative poem which is particular and concrete, exactly local, and riddled with homely imagery, some of it part of the folk tradition, some designed

and contrived as a close approximation of it." The poem tells a story of the prodigal son who returns home and is murdered by parents who fail to recognize him. John Wain in an article about Warren says: "Warren handles this folk tale from Western Kentucky through alternating narrative and commentary, the one rich and awkward with doggerel sound and Kentucky speech mannerisms, the other lofty, meditative, and often diffuse," as is seen in the words of the narrator. The following is an excerpt from this intriguing poem.

Big Billie Potts was big and stout  
In the land between the rivers.  
His shoulders were wide and his gut stuck out  
Like a croker of hubbins and his holler and shout  
Made the bob-cat shiver and the black-jack leaves shake  
In the section between the rivers.  
He would slap you on your back and laugh.

Big Billie had a wife, she was dark and little  
In the land between the rivers,  
And clever with her wheel and clever with her kettle,  
But she never said a word and when she sat  
By the fire her eyes worked slow and narrow like a cat.  
Nobody knew what was in her head.

They had a big boy with fuzz on his chin  
So tall he ducked the door when he came in,  
A clabber-headed bastard with snot in his nose  
And big red wrists hanging out of his clothes  
And a whicker when he laughed where his father had a bellow  
In the section between the rivers.  
They called him Little Billie.  
He was their darling.

Big Billie made his fortune by providing lodging for the travelers along the land between the rivers. If the guests appeared to have money, Big Billie murdered and robbed them and then buried them in the nearby woods. His plans for becoming wealthy were ruined when his son returned after an absence of ten years.

Little Billie decided to have some fun and conceal his identity from his parents for a while, but he kept silent too long. Mrs. Potts signaled to her husband who took the stranger down to the creek. There he put an axe through the guest's head. A neighbor comes by to see Little Billie and it is then that reality slaps the family in the face.

"Ain't Billie, ain't Billie," the old woman cries,  
 "Oh, it ain't my Billie, fer he wuz little  
 And helt to my skirt while I stirred the kittle  
 And called me Mammy and hugged me tight  
 But the old man leans down with the flickering flame  
 and croaks: "But tell me his name."

"Oh, he ain't got none, he just come riden  
 From som fer place whar he'd ben biden,  
 Ain't got a name and never had none--  
 But Billie, my Billie, he had one,  
 And it was Billie, it was his name."  
 But the old man croaked: "Tell me his name."  
 "Oh, he ain't got none and it's all the same,  
 But Billie had one, and he was little  
 And offen his chin I would wipe the spittle  
 And wiped the drool and kissed him thar  
 And counted his toes and kissed him whar  
 The little black mark was under his tit,  
 Shaped lak a clover under his left tit,  
 With a shape fer luck and I'd kiss it--"

The old man blinks in the pine-knot flare  
 And his mouth comes open like a fish for air,  
 Then he says right low, "I had nigh fergot."  
 "Oh, I kissed him on his little luck-spot  
 And I kissed and he'd laugh as lak as not--"  
 The old man said: "Git his shirt open."  
 The old woman opened the shirt and there was the birth-  
 mark under the left tit.  
 It was shaped for luck.

Robert Penn Warren progressed from childhood stories of the Civil War to the tragedies of adolescence, and he became a famous writer of poetry and fiction. In 1957, he won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, the National Book Award, and

the Edna St. Vincent Millay Prize of the American Poetry Society for his book Promises: Poems 1954-1956. Two interesting poems, "Keepsakes" and "Go It, Granny--Go It, Hog!" come from this book. They are segments of "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace." Both of these poems show a contrast of the modern South with the older days.

"Go It, Granny--Go It, Hog!" has practically been ignored by critics. Within the structure of the "Ballad," two men are talking; one is a stupid, insensitive person, and the other is an intelligent guide who explains the events of the poems. The stupid questioner represents the new South which has not been exposed to the old South, represented by the guide who is trying to explain Granny's movements to the young, ignorant man. The hogs represent Time which watches and waits for the old woman and finally overtakes her as she tries to scream.

Out there in the dark, what's that horrible chomping?  
 Oh, nothing, just hogs that forage for mast,  
 And if you call, "hoo-pig!" they'll squeal and come  
     romping,  
 For they'll know from your voice you're the boy who  
     slopped them in dear, dead days long past.

Any hogs that I slopped are long years dead,  
And eaten by somebody and evacuated,  
So it's simply absurd, what you said.  
 You fool, poor fool, all Time is a dream, and we're all  
     one Flesh, at last,  
 And the hogs know that, and that's why they wait,  
 Though tonight the old thing is a little bit late,  
 But they're mannered, these hogs, as they wait for her  
     creaky old tread.

Polite, they will sit in a ring,  
 Till she finishes work, the poor old thing:

Then old bones get knocked down with a clatter to wake  
 up the dead,  
 And it's simply absurd how loud she can scream with no  
 shred of a tongue in her head.

The second grandmother poem in "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace" which deserves attention is entitled "Keepsakes." Once again there are two speakers in the poems, one is the knowledgeable guide and the other is the ignorant questioner. The questioner does not understand granny's movements and the knowledgeable person is trying to explain them to him. The granny is searching through the bureau for her identity. She finds things which she does not understand until she finds the doll which is her identity.

Oh, what brings her out in the dark and night?  
 She has mislaid something, just what she can't say,  
 But something to do with the bureau, all right.  
Then why, in God's name, does she polish so much, and  
not look in a drawer right away?

Every night, in God's name, she does look there,  
 But finds only a Book of Common Prayer,  
 A ribbon-tied lock of gold hair,  
 A bundle of letters, some contraceptives, and an  
 orris-root sachet.

Well, what is the old fool hunting for?

Oh, nothing, oh, nothing that's in the top drawer,  
 For that's left by late owners who had their own grief  
 to withstand,  
 And she tries to squinch and frown  
 As she peers at the Prayer Book upside down,  
 And the contraceptives are something she can't understand,  
 And oh, how bitter the tears she sheds, with some  
 stranger's old letters in hand!

You're lying, you're lying, she can't shed a tear!  
Not with eyeballs gone, and the tear ducts, too.

You are trapped in a vulgar error, I fear,  
 For asleep in the bottom drawer is a thing that may  
 prove instructive to you:

Just an old-fashioned doll with a china head,  
 And a cloth body naked and violated  
 By a hole through which sawdust once bled,  
 But drop now by drop, on a summer night, from her heart  
     it is treacle bleeds through.

In God's name, what!--Do I see her eyes move?

Of course, and she whispers, "I died for love"  
 And your grandmother whines like a dog in the dark  
     and shade,

For she's hunting somebody to give  
 Her the life they had promised her she would live,  
 And I shudder to think what a stink and stir will be made  
 When some summer night she opens the drawer and finds  
     that poor self she'd mislaid.

Just as the speaker in "Country Burying (1919)" has re-  
 turned in his mind to a scene of his boyhood, the speaker in  
 "Walk By Moonlight in Small Town" has returned to the town of  
 his youth. Charles Bohner comments on "Country Burying (1919)"  
 by saying: "The speaker of the poem, like so many Warren  
 characters, has come back to his home town. The little town,  
 smaller even than remembered, stands pitiful and ugly; but the  
 moonlight transforms it into a place of eerie beauty. Each  
 street and building holds some memory, some scrap of the past;  
 and the poet yearns to know their meaning, to realize an ideal  
 forever beyond the human world of imperfection."

Through the western window full fell moonlight.  
 It must have waked me where I lay.  
 Room objects swam in the spooky day.  
 I rose, dressed, walked the summer night,  
 As long years back I had moved in that compulsive light.

Lawns green by day now shimmered like frost.  
 Shadow, beast-black, in porches lurked.  
 On house fronts, windowpanes moon-smirked.  
 Past supper, paper read, lawn hosed,  
 How white, in the depth of dark rooms now, faces reposed.

Down Main Street, the window dummies blessed,  
 With lifted hand and empty stare,



The glimmering emptiness of air,  
 As though lunatically to attest  
 What hope the daylight heart might reasonably have  
 possessed.

Three boxcars slept, as quiet as cows.  
 They were so tired, they'd been so far.  
SP and Katy, L&NRR--  
 After bumble and bang, and where God Knows,  
 They'd cracked the rust of a weed-rank spur, for this  
 pale repose.

How long ago, at night, up that track  
 I had watched the Pullmans flash and fade,  
 Then heard, in new quiet, the beat my heart made.  
 But every ticket's round trip; now back,  
 I stood and again watched night-distance flee up that  
 empty track.

I crossed the track, walked up the rise.  
 The school building hulked, ugly as day.  
 Beyond, the night fields fell away.  
 Building and grounds had shrunk in size,  
 And that predictable fact seemed pitiful to my eyes.

And pitiful was the moon-bare ground.  
 Dead grass, the gravel, earth ruined and raw--  
 It had not changed. And then I saw  
 That children were playing, with no sound,  
 They ceased their play, then quiet as moonlight, drew,  
 slow, around.

Their eyes were fixed on me, and I  
 Now tried, face by pale face, to find  
 The names that haunted in my mind.  
 Each small, upgazing face would lie  
 Sweet as a puddle, and silver-calm, to the night sky.

But something grew in their pale stare:  
 Not reprobation or surprise,  
 Nor even forgiveness in their eyes,  
 But a humble question dawning there,  
 From face to face, like beseechment dawning on empty air.

Might a man but know his Truth, and might  
 He live so that life, by moon or sun,  
 In dusk or dawn, would be all one,  
 Then never on a summer night  
 Need he stand and shake in that cold blaze of Platonic  
 light.

Although the South of Warren's childhood is gone forever, its beauty is recaptured in Warren's poetry where readers can learn about or remember the picturesque South. But, in general, the Southern memories must be packaged and carefully handed on to the generation that will now see the South only as visitors and will never have the red clay on its heels. In "Bearded Oaks" Warren presents a scene involving two lovers, which seems to be suspended. Two lovers recline in a grove of oaks. To the narrator, the scene appears submerged in water with light filtering down through layers of liquid darkness. All motion is slowed by the denser medium, and, in this retardation of movement, the speaker feels time itself suspended. Warren's description of the scenery is as detailed as his description of the relationship of the lovers. The oaks are a part of the architectural structure of the South. The slow, quiet life of the old South is symbolized by the oaks which grow slowly, quietly, as they exist for what seems to be an eternity.

The oaks, how subtle and marine,  
Bearded, and all the layered light  
Above them swims; and thus the scene,  
Recessed, awaits the positive night.

So, waiting, we in the grass now lie  
Beneath the languorous tread of light:  
The grasses, kelp-like, satisfy  
the nameless motions of the air.

Upon the floor of light, and time,  
Unmurmuring of polyp made,  
We rest; we are, as light withdraws,  
Twin atolls on a shelf of shade.

Ages to our construction went,  
 Dim architecture, hour by hour:  
 And violence, forgot now, lent  
 The present stillness all its power.

The storm of noon above us rolled,  
 Of light the fury, furious gold,  
 The long drag troubling us, the depth:  
 Dark is unrocking, unrippling, still.

Passion and slaughter, ruth, decay  
 Descend, minutely whispering down,  
 Silted down swaying streams, to lay  
 Foundation for our voicelessness.

All our debate is voiceless here,  
 As all our rage, the rage of stone;  
 If hope is hopeless, then fearless is fear,  
 And history is thus undone.

Our feet once wrought the hollow street  
 With echo when the lamps were dead  
 At windows, once our headlight glare  
 Disturbed the doe that, leaping, fled.

I do not love you less that now  
 The caged heart makes iron stroke,  
 Or less that all that light once gave  
 The graduate dark should now revoke.

We live in time so little time  
 And we learn all so painfully,  
 That we may spare this hour's term  
 To practice for eternity.

Warren's Southern setting does not merely consist of grasses, flowers, trees, and churches, but also includes a satire on people in these settings. The quiet of a small Southern town provides the setting for "Nocturne: Traveling Salesman in Hotel Bedroom." The loneliness experienced by the salesman is accentuated by Warren's delicate descriptions of the 'predawn drizzle,' the striking of the clock, the sloshing of the car's tires, and the melting of the soap

in the dish. Warren believes that as man progresses in life, he also triumphs over life. Even the drabest, grisliest circumstances may not withhold the possibility of glory, according to Warren's outlook. "Nocturne" provides one of the most unpromising scenes in his volume of poetry, but even in this setting, Warren insists on man's glory in life. The dismal setting contrasts effectively with Warren's outlook.

The toothbrush lies in its case,  
 Like you in your coffin when  
 The mourners come to stare  
 And the bristles grow on your chin.

Oh, the soap lies in the dish,  
 Dissolving from every pore,  
 Like your poor heart in the breast  
 When the clock strikes once, and once more.

The toilet gurgles and whines,  
 Like History absorbing event,  
 For process is all, and who cares  
 What any particular has meant?

Far off, in the predawn drizzle,  
 A car's tires slosh the street mess,  
 And you think, in an access of anguish,  
 It bears someone to happiness,

Or at least to a destination  
 Where duty is clear, and sleep deep,  
 And the image of self, in dark standing,  
 Does not pluck at the hangnail, and weep,

But you're practical, and know  
 That wherever that place lies  
 You would find new customers there  
 For your line of merchandise,

And there's nothing, in fact, really wrong here:  
 Take a slug of Old Jack next,  
 Try a chapter in the Gideon,  
 Then work on the sales sheet,

And vision is possible, and  
 Man's need of glory not  
 Impossible--oh remember,  
 Remember--in life's upshot.

Warren utilized the South as the setting for the majority of his works. The people of the South that Warren loved also contribute to the greatness of his poetry. It is not surprising that Warren incorporates a great deal of landscape into his poems: the land holds all ancestors; it is the composite that lies down, whereas the society of men, ever changing, is the compost that moves about.

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