

12 CRITICS DISCUSS

Robert Penn Warren

(1905-)

"Trite as it is nowadays to stigmatize an author as a dual personality, I cannot help pointing to a duality in Warren that may well constitute his major problem: it is his combination of critical and creative power. I am far from suggesting that the critical and the creative are of their nature antipathetic and I am fully ready to grant that what makes Warren remarkable among American writers is his double endowment. The problem lies precisely in his being so two-sidedly gifted; he evidently finds it difficult to combine his two sorts of awareness. There is Warren, the critic, the cosmopolitan, the scholar, the philosopher; and there is Warren, the raconteur, the Kentuckian, the humorist, the ballad maker...Warren is a faulty writer, but he is worth a dozen petty perfectionists. Though commonly associated with 'formalists' and 'classicists' in criticism, he is close to the type of romantic genius: robust, fluent, versatile, at his worst clever and clumsy, at his best brilliant and profound."

Eric Bentley
Kenyon Review
(Summer 1948) 424

"Mr. Warren draws the themes for his books from historical incidents in the South....His novels are crammed with blood and thunder in the tradition of historical fiction, but his stories take on the depth and universality of a parable, because the characters seek to learn the causes of their plight, the reasons for the rules of society, and the philosophical ideas which seem tenable in a morally, politically, and economically confused world."

Harry R. Warfel
American Novelists of Today
(American 1951) 442

"The wide range of his subjects, the treatment of problems that touch upon the fundamentals of human existence, the vitality of his characters, the skill with which he creates suspense and atmosphere, and the richness of his language, are characteristics that one does not often find together in a modern writer....Like Hemingway and Steinbeck, he believes in the principle of solidarity as an essential value, but different from them, he stresses its inevitable clash with other elements of human behavior, above all with those of ambition, love of power, physical desire. He stands for the fundamental honesty that is so vital an issue for the generation between the two wars, but he realizes that the process of arriving at some truth may have devastating effects on the seeker."

Heinrich Straumann
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Hutchinson 1951) 114-15

"I find all of the novels of Robert Penn Warren to be variations on a single theme, symbolized in the polarities of violence and order. He could not have chosen two concepts more arresting to the modern reader or more deeply imbedded in the history of his country and his region....Robert Penn Warren has uncovered the historical sources of American violence and made them available for literary purposes, all four novels taking off from violent episodes in history that are used to illuminate modern meanings. But in writing tragedy, though the downward plunge into action takes up the most space and provides the greatest interest, violence alone is not enough. The tragic note cannot be struck without a positive world view....For Warren murder, rape, and arson are simply the most effective dramatic means of developing one half of his theme: that *violence is life without principle*. Nor, to illustrate the other half, does he use orderliness for its own sake (there are no police chiefs or private detectives among his heroes); to him *order is living by principles*, even when the particular effort to do so falls far short of perfection."

Charles R. Anderson
Southern Renaissance
eds. Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs

(Johns Hopkins 1953) 207-09

"Both the rhetoric and the 'smart-aleck' commentary of *All the King's Men* have been roundly condemned by critics, usually without reference to their functional significance...The cynical smart-aleck pose is Jack's defense against an alien world, the 'fancy writer' the smothered and hence exaggerated ideal of himself. The two continually warring elements are further overlaid by the retrospective reflections of the mature philosophic Jack of the book's end....Warren's ear is uncommonly acute, but the most valuable faculty he possesses is human insight, a shrewd and at the same time sympathetic ability to penetrate imaginatively into the inner life of his characters. In the most caustic vignette offered through Jack Burden's squinted eyes, the pity of human wastage is never lost. Warren's sense of 'irreducible evil' and of human frailty permits an extremely wide range to a natural sympathy that is completely devoid of sentimentalism--ironic in the Richards sense that it is immune to irony."

John M. Bradbury
Accent
(Spring 1953) 87-89

"Beneath the dulled-rust-red, short-clipped hair his face was astonishingly compact: slits of eyes almost lashless, taut skin over hard cheekbones, spare modeled nose, straight line of mouth--the 'entire consort' a sculpture in granite. The hard-knit, barrel-chested torso added more if that were possible, to the impression. But when Mr. Warren talked, the shock was the discovery in each subsequent moment of how much warmth and wit and wisdom, of how much humanity, there issued from that stony image."

Harvey Breit
The Writer Observed
(World 1956) 131

"What he managed to create (in *All the King's Men*) is a work of literature that is a fully realized 'concrete universal,' a work which presents particulars everywhere concretely imaged yet having together a kind of universal relevance or reference--a work of the order of *Crime and Punishment* or Pope's satires or the *Oedipus Tyrannus*....Such creation always depends upon a unified, integral imaginative grasp which apprehends reality in many dimensions or on many levels simultaneously. A concrete-universal cannot be schemed into existence; it issues from a sensibility aware of the implication of the universal in the concrete and a narrative skill or felicity which is able to exhibit, not merely assert or weakly suggest, their fusion. It is Warren's particular distinction to have created such a work in these times of fragmented sensibility."

Neal Woodruff, Jr.
All the King's Men: A Symposium
(Carnegie Institute of Technology 1957) 62

"The need to accept the consequences of eternity's terrible intrusion on time has always been Warren's major theme, just as the place he has always seen it with the fullest particularity is the South, at some point where the contemporary life of football games and state cops, political manipulation and television exploitation tangles with the older life of the red-necks and the hunters, the Baptist ministers and the ballad singers. With this novel (*The Cave*) he has come back to the life of *Night Rider* and *All the King's Men*, where there is never world enough and time to love in but God's plenty of both to die in."

Arthur Mizener
New York Times
(23 August 1959) 1

POETRY

"The poetry of Robert Penn Warren can best be studied as the esthetic expression of a mind in which tradition and the forces destroying tradition work in strong opposition to each other--ritual and indifference to ritual; self-knowledge and indifference to or inability to achieve self-knowledge; an inherited 'theological' understanding, illustrated perhaps in the religious concept of evil and the liberal belief in man's ultimate power to control 'evil' forces. There are two major pulls at work in shaping his idiom, the older belief in a morally integrated human being and the naturalist belief in a being formed by ill-understanding forces. The former pull expresses itself in a body of poems, and in some of his prose, as a provincial,

homogeneous and consistent view that in another age might have achieved the epic proportions we associate with poetry as vision, the latter pull expresses itself in fictional characters of a low order and in a poetic idiom of a considerably less imaginative vitality."

William Van O'Connor
A Southern Vanguard
ed. Allen Tate
(Prentice-Hall 1947) 92

"Warren, as he is in the pristine sense a religious and moral writer, has worked directly towards the centre of the 'modern' problem, the fundamental nature of our guilt. The probing of that cancerous tissue is done solely in terms of imagery and dramatic situation. Even Warren's attitude to the craft of poetry reflects one facet--the deathly divorce between metaphor and statement--of the disintegration theme; for his poetry is dedicated to the wedding of concept and image. Shying from abstract analysis of the conflicts within the world, he has approached his material in the structural terms of tragedy....Warren's form is the tragedy and the vision which informs and bloods the drama (for his method is invariably dramatic rather than discursive) is a stark but sympathetic one of the 'divided man.'...Many of the poems, one might say, are explorations of the problem of knowledge. They receive much of their force from the ironic contrast between the purity of experience and man's commentary upon it. Man is consistently relating himself to Nature, but man's peculiar position is that, if only from his ability to suffer regret and attempt definition, he is over and above Nature."

Frederick Brantley
Modern American Poetry
ed. B. Rajan
(Dobson 1950) 66, 75

"(Warren's poems) use an aristocratic and slightly archaic diction comparable to Ransom's, and they may have learned from him some of their suave irony. But, more essentially, they show how much a poet can still profit from Marvell. They are as different as possible from Cummings. Despite Cummings's distaste for abstractions, his lyrics hardly more than name the wonders of love and beauty, and thus, except for their eccentric syntax, are little thicker in texture than the songs of tin-pan alley. Warren, on the contrary, has devoted his whole attention to crowding his lines with the greatest specific gravity they will bear, so that they will not merely assert the uniqueness of an experience but will convey the actual burden of that experience, both as it has been felt and as it has been thought about."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Responsibility of the Critic
(Oxford 1952) 121-22

"I think highly of Mr. Warren's poetry. There is a subtlety about it that is not readily apparent. I said earlier...that his rhythms resembled those of Mr. Ransom with the graciousness squeezed out of them. That is not literally true. The oftener one reads the poems--not all of them to be sure--the more aware he becomes of a new music. There is graciousness in the rhythms, but it is less obvious. The reader who has not freed himself from a subservience to the music of the iambic foot will find some of his rhythms strange. He, however, who joys in the fact that English and American poetry is returning to the rhythms natural to English, before the leaden-eared nineteenth century critics uttered inanities about the dominance of the iambic line, particularly the iambic pentameter, will delight in the subtle music of Mr. Warren's verse."

James G. Southworth
More Modern American Poets
(Blackford 1954) 118-19

Michael Hollister (2018)