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## Robert Penn Warren: The Anxiety of Critical Influence

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CHARLOTTE H. BECK

Although he was the author of more than ninety-one essays, two volumes of collected essays, sixty-two reviews, and critical introductions in numerous textbook anthologies of literature, Robert Penn Warren consistently denied that he was a literary critic. As Leonard Casper and others have accurately stated, Warren "belittled" his critical persona, considering himself a poet first, fiction writer second, and a sort of critical hack last of all. Likewise, in a 1978 TV interview with Dick Cavett, Warren equivocated: "I write a lot of criticism, and I've done some teaching, which is a form of criticism, but I don't feel that is a profession. I feel that is part of my social life, talking about books I have read to somebody, or writing about them, and usually the books that I've written . . . sort of come out of talking, out of classes." From his Vanderbilt days, when he wrote poetry, but not criticism, for *The Fugitive* and later at Oxford, Warren thought of himself as a developing poet and reluctant scholar and distinguished himself from Cleanth Brooks, who was even then working out his own critical position. Warren later wrote that at Oxford, Brooks made available to him "the opening world of poetry and poetic criticism and theory," while he was "so hot at the immediate task of trying to write poems that I had missed a certain enrichment for that practical task" of critical analysis, although he had listened, at Vanderbilt, to "a lot of subtle and learned talk" from Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom.<sup>1</sup> When he was forced to produce a scholarly thesis in order to satisfy requirements for the Oxford B.Lit., Warren had a great deal of difficulty finding a subject, and when he finally decided to write on Marston's satires, he pursued the task with less than scholarly enthusiasm, although the final result was more than satisfactory from a scholar's viewpoint.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Penn Warren nevertheless wrote criticism, beginning as early as 1927 and continuing until the end of his life, for a variety of pragmatic reasons, chiefly for much-needed money. As he remarked in a 1970 interview with Ruth Fisher, writing criticism was for him, at best, a teaching strategy or, at worst, “busy-work and nothing more—and a job, sometimes with a pay check.”<sup>3</sup> From Vanderbilt on, however, Warren functioned as part of an expanding circle of writers whose nucleus was the former Fugitive group and which later became known as the New Critics. Why, then, was Robert Penn Warren so reluctant to own up to being a literary critic?

Beyond his stronger desire to make a name for himself as a poet and writer of fiction, there was also a certain humility toward the critic’s task that seemed to limit his pride in making formal pronouncements about literature. He consistently separated himself from the “real” critics, those who “are systematic, want to force the thing through to its ultimates. I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, or Ransom, they are people who must try to drive the thing through, you know, and whose way of study is in that direction.” Warren added that for him, “it’s a very different thing, whether it’s reading criticism or an essay I’d written. Because it’s usually *ad hoc*, came out of the classroom, or it’s come out of my interests.”<sup>4</sup>

Warren never maintained that he had the last word on any literary text, always insisting that he was a progressivist in regard to interpretation. Contrary to the commonly held definition of the New Critic, Warren believed that however objective the critic might try to be, how personally removed from the task of interpretation, he or she will be identified intellectually, and therefore personally, with his or her reading of a text and must take personal responsibility for it.

There is a strong possibility, also, that Warren was afflicted with a multiple case of what Harold Bloom has called the “anxiety of influence.” Although Bloom’s terminology refers specifically to poets, he has inserted into his book *The Anxiety of Influence* an

“Interchapter, A Manifesto for Antithetical Criticism,” in which he finds it possible, with but a slight adjustment, to make room for critics: “Poets’ misinterpretations of poems are more drastic than critics’ misinterpretations of criticism, but this is only a difference in degree and not at all in kind. There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations, and so all criticism is prose poetry . . . For just as a poet must be found by the opening in a precursor poet, so must the critic. The difference is that a critic has more parents . . . poets and critics.” For Warren, as a junior member of the Fugitive circle, the most formidable father-figure was John Crowe Ransom, from whose overbearing presence there was no easy escape. Although Warren attended the Fugitive meetings during his student days, his reason for doing so was to learn how to write poetry. He served for a year as editor of *The Fugitive* but published no criticism following the examples of Ransom and Tate. After publishing his essay “The Briar Patch” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, Warren, along with Brooks, began to distance himself from the Agrarian cause. A much more pervasive “father” was the same poet-critic who influenced much of Warren’s early poetry, T. S. Eliot. Harold Bloom has stated quite forcefully that Eliot was Warren’s strong precursor both “as poet and as critic.”<sup>5</sup> So strong were Ransom’s and Eliot’s influences that they may have caused Warren’s failure to accept the title of critic even as he carried out its function.

In all applications of his theory, Bloom has outlined what he calls six “revisionary ratios”—*Clinamen*, *Tessera*, *Kenosis*, *Daemonization*, *Askesis*, and *Apophrades*—to describe how the anxious writer deals with the specter of his stronger precursor. Three of these—*kenosis*, *clinamen*, and *tessera*,<sup>6</sup> are applicable to Warren’s anxiety of critical influence. Warren’s criticism exhibits *kenosis* first, as he empties his criticism of his own original concepts and structures in order to give expression to those of his critical fathers, unless or until he can adopt the more fruitful strategy of *clinamen*, swerving away from his pre-

cursor in criticism in order to find an approach more particular to his temperament and genius. Finally, after the death of Eliot and the aging of Ransom left him free from their pressure, Warren could, through *tessera*, enlarge and extend the scope of his precursors' critical vision in synthesis with his own.

Over a period of more than thirty years, Warren published three essays on Ransom, his former teacher and mentor. Ransom is among the poets discussed in "A Note on Three Southern Poets," published in May 1932, while two other articles, published in 1935 and 1968, treat Ransom alone. All three of the essays have more to say about Ransom's poetry than his criticism and imply regret that in Ransom's career criticism replaced poetry. Early in his own poetic career, Warren must have feared that he would mimic Ransom, as well as Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, by mutating early from poetry, his work fueled by imagination, to criticism, fed on the dried crusts of other writers' work.

In "A Note on Three Southern Poets," Ransom comes off better than his two Agrarian brethren, John Gould Fletcher and Donald Davidson. Warren attributes to each of the three poets legitimate claim to "the debatable distinction of being a Southern poet" as opposed to "those writers who exploit, either with or without coming to the section, the local color or romantic legend presumably to be found on this side the Ohio." Warren compares Fletcher, whose "presentation of daily life in terms of highly-orchestrated and coloured words" has "defeated this intent in so far as the abstraction was complete," with Davidson and Ransom, who write more concretely and vitally of their region.<sup>7</sup> Still an Agrarian at heart, Warren proposes to defend the "true" southern poet from the local colorists, from without, and the sentimentalists, from within.

The quality which will save southern poetry from both threats, in Warren's opinion, is irony. In comparison with Davidson, who is "not an ironist," though his poetry "has some "ironical effects," Ransom's

irony is constant, based on an "objectification of this little interior drama," i.e., the conflict between thought and feeling. Both Davidson and Ransom have dealt with "the relation of the artist to the ordered, or disordered, society in which he happens to live," but Ransom's poetry "has been less local in materials." Ransom's main focus "is the disruption of sensibility," an issue that "has two aspects: man is a creature little lower than the angels and, at the same time, of the brute creation; again, there is a conflict between the scientific vision of quantity and the poetic vision concerned with quality." This disassociation brings about the tensions which produce Ransomian irony: "the poet cannot solve his problem by an act of will, but he can attempt to work out some sort of equilibrium that may permit him, even though at odds with himself, to continue the practice of his art." The similarity between Ransom's "disruption" and Eliot's "dissociation" of sensibility allows Warren to privilege Ransom and Eliot over Fletcher and Davidson, although he distinguishes Ransom's situational irony from Eliot's "irony of historical basis, the juxtaposition of a degenerate present with the noble past."<sup>8</sup> At this juncture, Warren, the fledgling critic, could safely live under the sheltering aegises of Eliot and Ransom and still develop as a poet and critic. Since Warren had yet to develop his own critical principles, however, his criticism at this point illustrates *kenosis*.

In "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," Warren took upon himself a difficult task, to reconcile Ransom's poetry with his Agrarian polemics. In a letter to Seward Collins of the *American Review*, Warren stated that "the main point of the essay is to establish the relationship between Ransom's poetry, his aesthetic, and his agrarianism, that is, to define the core of his work." When Warren wrote the article, sometime in 1933, Ransom was better known for his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* than for either his poetry or his small output of literary criticism; therefore, Warren makes almost no mention of literary criticism but devotes more than half of the essay

to a discussion of Ransom's agrarianism. Once again, he connects Ransom's socio-political theory to Eliot's famous pronouncement, in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets," that "in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered." By locating a similar disruption between thought and feeling in a modern world dominated by science, and by declaring their political conservatism, Ransom and Eliot have appropriately set themselves apart and at odds with their *Zeitgeist* in order to function as artists. While Eliot has expressed his discontent by declaring his conservatism in politics, literature, and religion, Ransom has, in his agrarian argument, defended "man against a revolution which, by a dogma of unadulterated reason, has endangered his sensibility; which has, in fact, promoted its dissociation." Both Ransom and Eliot have regarded the dissociation as a threat to poetic creativity; both have employed irony as a weapon in its defense, although in a contrasting manner, Eliot's "historical" and Ransom's "psychological," and in different modes of expression: "The literary nature of Eliot's ironical devices is consistent with the fact that his principles have, in most cases, emerged through essays which took the apparent form of literary analysis; Ransom, on the other hand, has written a very small amount of specific literary criticism, having chosen to be more general and to use literature, if at all, as illustration."

When Warren finally discusses Ransom's poetry, however, he takes up where he left off in "Three Southern Poets." Neither attacking nor defending Ransom's criticism, social or literary, Warren chooses, rather, to praise Ransom's poetry as the ideal vehicle for expressing his ideas indirectly. Accordingly, Warren traces the evolution of Ransom's poetic irony through several stages, climaxing with an extended discussion of "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," wherein his ironic vision achieves maturity. In such poems, irony results when "the pure emotional cry is only a fragmentary expression of the experience of which the complete sensibility is capable."

Warren emphasizes how Ransom achieves "manly" understatement in the poem through his employment of the words "astonishes" and "vexed":

First, simple grief is not the content of the primary statement. We are astonished at this event, which though common to nature, has upset our human calculation. Second, it is not a poem whose aim is unvarnished pathos of recollection. Third, the resolution of the grief is not on a compensatory basis, as is common in the elegy formula. It is something more modest. The word *vexed* indicates its nature: the astonishment, the pathos, are absorbed into the total body of the mourner's experiences and given perspective so that the manly understatement is all that is to be allowed.<sup>10</sup>

Warren would revisit this poem, and these crucial words, in his first important essay, "Pure and Impure Poetry."

Six years later, Warren published the essay which James Justus believes to be Warren's only contribution to the critical canon:

Warren has no single volume that can stand as a major document in the triumph of formalistic criticism, no *Well-Wrought Urn*, no *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Indeed he has no single essay that can stand as an exemplary landmark in the development of a methodology, as I think we can so designate "A Poem Nearly Anonymous" and "Tension in Poetry." If we compare the most celebrated essay by Ransom, Tate, or Brooks with a comparable one of Warren's, Warren's would have to be "Pure and Impure Poetry."

Marking Warren's coming-of-age as a critic, the essay in fact owes much to both Ransom and Eliot. At its core is Eliot's observation, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," that in particular poetic passages, "an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it" results in a "balance of contrasted emotion." Accordingly, Warren begins by observing that "the poems want to give us poetry, which is pure, and the elements of a poem, in so far as it is a good poem, will work together toward that end, but many of the

elements, taken in themselves, may actually seem to contradict that end, or be neutral toward the achieving of that end." Directly from "Ransom: A Study in Irony," Warren draws the conclusion that Ransomian irony is one type of "impurity" which strengthens poetry by undercutting sentimentality.<sup>11</sup>

Ransom's poem "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" once again serves as one of Warren's primary examples. He begins his lengthy discussion of the poem by calling "Bells. . ." a "poem of grief," a "soft subject" which threatens to become too "pure," i.e., too sentimental. Ransom solves this "problem" by counterpoising two clichés: "She was such an active, healthy-looking child, who would've ever though she would just up and die?" and "Heavens, won't that child ever be still. . . ?," the one stale, the other "savagely ironic," and allowing them to counteract one another. Warren contends that "the poem is concerned with modifications and modulations of this brute, basic irony, modulations and modifications contingent upon an attitude taken toward it by the speaker of the poem. The savagery is masked, or ameliorated." As in the earlier essay on Ransom, Warren brings his discussion to a close by emphasizing the word "vexed," calling it "the ritualistic, the summarizing word" that brings both stale and savage reactions into an uneasy harmony.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1940s, when Warren published both "Pure and Impure Poetry" and his essay on Coleridge, "A Poem of Pure Imagination," his fusion of Eliot with Ransom, though brilliant, had still failed to arrive at any theory particularly his own. As Lesa Corrigan has observed, Warren's "emphases on 'irony,' 'metrical variation,' and 'shifts in tone or mood' [in "Pure and Impure Poetry"] signal [his] concurrent involvement with the New Critics," while his Coleridgean critical theory "foreshadows the central issue of 'A Poem of Pure Imagination.'" By focusing on an English Romantic poem, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, that essay constitutes an act of separation from both Ransom and Eliot, both of whom tend-

ed to deprecate Romantic poets and poetry. Corrigan believes that "at this crucial point in his career, Warren's study of the English Romantics helped him to recover his poetic voice" during the ten years, 1943-1953, when he published no poetry.<sup>13</sup> It might also be said that the writing of substantial pieces of literary criticism also contributed to his poetic renaissance. Warren's anxiety of influence was therefore moving from *kenosis*, with Eliot and Ransom filling his own theoretical void, to *clinamen*, the avoidance of Ransomian and Eliotic influences.

Warren's *clinamen* must have been helped along by the fact that his two critical "fathers" could not easily be fused, partly because, as Warren was painfully aware, Ransom would not be comfortable in that fusion. In his 1968 essay on Ransom, Warren records that upon reading "Three Southern Poets," Ransom mildly objected to having his cast of mind compared to Eliot's, preferring the term "oscillating mechanism" to "dissociation of sensibility." Warren would come to favor Ransom's back-and-forth terminology to Eliot's schismatic one as the guiding principle of his poetry and criticism.<sup>14</sup> It must be remembered, however, that although Ransom's criticism was coming into prominence by the late 1930s, it is Ransom's *poetry*, not his criticism, that Warren praises in his first two Ransom essays. The ability to balance the roles of poet and critic may have been Ransom's ideal, but in reality, criticism was in the process of overbalancing poetry. For Warren, the implications for his own career were inescapable. To assert himself as critic, he would be forced to deny Ransom's growing importance in that genre.

Comment on Ransom's criticism, not so favorable, finally appears in the third essay, "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at his Eightieth Birthday." When Warren was asked to contribute to the *Kenyon Review's* celebratory issue, his resistance to Ransom's influence rose to the surface. In conversation with Richard B. Sale, shortly after his publication of the essay, Warren remarked

that he had "trapped himself" into writing the article, that he had "wanted to say certain things about him to clarify my own mind about certain things as best I could. I wanted to do the piece, but I hated the process."<sup>15</sup> The essay still focuses on Ransom's poetry, but Warren responds openly this time to Ransom's criticism.

Even as he presents the criticism as a complement to the poetry, Warren begins on a jarring note, calling Ransom "a hard theorist and critic of poetry." Warren faults the criticism for being essentially theoretical, "concerned with philosophical groundings, with technical formulations, with structural definitions and analyses":

. . . it has drawn back from the contours and colors of whatever poetic object was under discussion. It is, if you will, "abstract" in the extreme. And this would seem peculiar, even paradoxical; for one theme of the criticism, as of the poetry itself, is the need to assert the contours and colors of the "world's body" against "abstraction," against the violation of the world by the intellect. It would seem, however, that the critic who early saw "abstraction" as the enemy has, as is so often the case in all sorts of crucial struggle, . . . taken on the qualities of the evil adversary.

Warren subsequently calls Ransom's criticism an "art, with all the concreteness and specificity implied by the fact," and "far better written than most" (a backhanded compliment at best) and concludes, in unmistakable Warrenesque idiom, that "the style itself is merely an indication that the critical effort, which objectively considered seems devoted to salting the tail of an abstraction, is, when subjectively considered, an effort made by a whole man. Passion, wit, and sensuous delight are involved along with the cold intellection." That Ransom's theoretical criticism—indeed, theoretical criticism in general—still struck a negative note for Warren is conveyed by words like "cold intellection," "effort," and, most charming of all, "salting the tail of an abstraction." For Warren, the purpose of criticism was "to deliver the reader back to the work. . . to prepare the reader to confront the work with innocence, with simplicity, with directness."<sup>16</sup> Indeed,

hatred of abstraction in all its manifestations remained constant in Warren's criticism as testimony to his hidden antagonism to Ransom. By 1968, Warren thus exhibits *clinamen* in his avoidance of Ransomian abstraction.

In this his final word on Ransom, moreover, Warren was prepared to confront his critical anxiety of influence directly. Warren describes his own initial "resentment against the cast of the author's mind, a mind which made such graceful gestures, enunciated such deep truths and exercised such fascinating *authority* for me, even as I knew, in despair, that I could never emulate that grace, live by those truths, nor accept such authority."<sup>17</sup> As Ransom moved into the sunset of his career, Warren, already a winner of many accolades for his own poetry and fiction, had found his own critical method, practical and non-theoretical, and seemed no longer fearful of duplicating Ransom's career evolution from poet to critic. Writing this last essay on Ransom was for Warren an attempt to exorcize, once and for all, his negative emotions toward Ransom, the authoritarian critic, even as he still resisted following in his footsteps.

## II

Warren's Eliotic anxieties are subtler and more deeply imbedded in his criticism than are his anxieties toward Ransom. Despite his lifelong interest in T. S. Eliot, Warren never published an essay on either his poetry or criticism. The closest he ever came was to draft an introductory speech in which he called Eliot "the dearest enemy of this age."<sup>18</sup> Even without such clear evidence of Eliotic anxiety, however, it goes without saying that Warren was in awe of T. S. Eliot. Not only does much of the poetry in his first selected poems, published in 1943, bear the Eliotic imprint; but strong similarities in tone and point-of-view suggest that Warren formed his own critical persona in imitation of Eliot. Warren's willingness to speak in the first person, sometimes singular, sometimes plural, for example, makes his essays

and reviews like Eliot's, while different from either Ransom's or Cleanth Brooks's. To measure Eliot's formidable influence on Warren's criticism, it is useful to examine two of Warren's essays, one early, one late, alongside Eliot's; to compare "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1943) with Eliot's "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" (1933) and Warren's "The Use of the Past" (1976/77) with Eliot's most famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919).

In "Pure and Impure Poetry," Warren asserts that "poetry wants to be pure, but poems do not," and that through the admixture of such "impurities" as irony and abstract ideas, the best poetry is composed. After illustrating his theory by concrete reference to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," Warren confronts a battery of critical "purists," from Edgar Allan Poe to Frederick Pottle. Warren then turns to "Mr. Eliot," who, he points out, only *seems* to be espousing a doctrine of pure poetry in "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" when he archly remarks that the "chief use of the 'meaning' of a poem . . . may be . . . to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him." Eliot, says Warren, may either mean that "ideas do not participate in the poetic effect, or [he] may mean that, though they do participate in the poetic effect, they need not appear in the poem in an explicit and argued form." At this point, Warren surprisingly draws his support, not from Eliot's essay, so germane to his argument, but from Eliot's poetry: "And Mr. Eliot's own practice implies that he believes that ideas do participate in the poetic effect. Otherwise, why did he put the clues to his ideas in the notes at the end of *The Waste Land* after so carefully excluding any explicit statement of them from the body of the poem? If he is regarding ideas as mere bait—the 'bit of nice meat for the house-dog'—he has put the ideas in a peculiar place, in the back of the book." Warren conjectures that Eliot and Andrew Marvell have "purged

away statements of ideas from their poems" by "cutting away of frame," in order to "emphasize the participation of ideas in the poetic process."<sup>19</sup>

Warren, who would add a gloss to his own poem "The Ballad of Billie Potts" and a frame to the first (1953) version of his verse play *Brother to Dragons*, is obliquely questioning whether a poet's ideas, as expressed in his criticism, can ever inform his poetry. As evidenced here as well as in his Ransom essays, Warren apparently had decided that they cannot. And when Eliot gracefully bows out of his essay with fears that "it may be that poets only talk when they cannot sing," and with "the sad ghost of Coleridge beckon[ing] to me from the wings,"<sup>20</sup> Warren's double anxiety, both of poetic and critical influence, becomes crystal clear. The ghost of Coleridge obviously beckoned to Warren as well, prompting him to write the essay "A Poem of Pure Imagination" in an effort to defend *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* from all reductive impressionistic readings. In his best critical writings, Warren seems to fear most that his own poetic and critical practices may be in disequilibrium.

Between the 1940s, when Warren emerged as a critic in his own right, and the 1970s, he had achieved such renown in three genres—poetry, fiction, and criticism—that the Eliotic influences must have seemed to pose no further threat. Eliot was still on Warren's mind, however, when he composed his 1977 essay, "The Use of the Past." Eliot's "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" may have suggested the title, but "Tradition and the Individual Talent" helped, indirectly, to shape the content. Arguably Eliot's most famous and influential critical performance, "Tradition" challenges the notion, strongly held since the Romantic movement, that the best poets are those who are most original: "We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; . . . whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individ-



ual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." The essay, which anticipates indirectly Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, also advances Eliot's theory of impersonality, that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." In keeping with his theory of impersonality, Eliot also declaims that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon poets but on poetry," further effacing the poet from any criticism of the poetry.<sup>21</sup>

This extreme and austere notion of impersonality finally provoked Warren, in "The Use of the Past," to oppose Eliot openly. Warren's essay was first delivered as a speech commemorating the United States' two-hundredth anniversary. It begins as a political statement, but once Warren has had his say on the perils of forgetting or denying history, to which he owes much to R. W. B. Lewis's *American Adam*, he turns rather abruptly "to another human interest—the arts, and specifically literature." Thereafter, Warren follows Eliot closely only to contradict him. "Why bother with the literature of the past," Warren asks, then answers in a version of Eliot's plea for authorial impersonality, "because the literature of our own time is not different enough from ourselves." But later Warren echoes Eliot's phrasing even more closely. Eliot writes: "Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know," emphasizing the need for self-effacing humility on the writer's part. Warren reverses Eliot's comment with a movement to radical subjectivity: "Should we therefore abandon the reading of contemporary works? No, for it is true that we can know neither ourselves nor the literature of our time without some sense of the literature, it is equally true that without some sense of the literature of the present—that is, of how our own experience relates to our literature—we cannot know the literature of the past."<sup>22</sup> Here, in an exhibition of Bloom's revisionary ratio

*tessera*, Warren opposes the value of self-knowledge to Eliot's concept of impersonality. By 1977, Warren had placed subjectivity at the center of his own critical praxis, making thereby a place for his own critical enterprise in the discussion of American literature. Not only did he continue to interject personal reactions into his criticism, as he had always done, but he routinely prefaced his essays—on Hawthorne, Whittier, Twain, Hemingway, and Faulkner—with extensive biographical sketches, interjecting into his close analysis of literature the personal element of biography.

Also by 1977, Warren had become better acquainted with Harold Bloom, his Yale colleague, and had become aware of Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence. Bloom writes in his foreword to *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren* that Warren had surprised him, in January of 1973, by reacting positively to his new book *The Anxiety of Influence*: "I had scarcely expected Warren to like it, but I was mistaken, the book, which cost me some old friends, gave me a new one. Warren emphasized his uncanny sense of recognizing his own relation to his precursor, Eliot, in my descriptions of the agonistic relationship between strong poets and their inheritors." Accordingly, in "The Use of the Past," Warren echoes both Eliot and Bloom: "A vital and continuing process—that would be one way, in fact, of describing a literary tradition. The more [a writer] knows about the past, and the more he reveres the great creators of the past, the more he must struggle against them." Warren then credits Bloom with describing "this struggle of a poet with the past as the dynamic of literary tradition" but adds that "the self, by such a view, can be discovered only in the attempt to assert it against a powerful opponent from the past. Tradition in the sense of formula, bars the future. In the senses of a dynamic, it unbars the future."<sup>23</sup>

For Warren, the "use of the past," in relation to American history and literary tradition, is "a way of discovering the self," a far cry from Eliot's theory of impersonality. Eliot's statements about the use of an

essentially European past then became a catalyst for Warren's evolving critique of American literature. Citing Hawthorne and Faulkner, Warren finds in the old American struggle with the literary and personal past, whether Hawthorne's New England or Faulkner's South, a paradigm for the modern writer's, and his own, struggle to express the "new self" so much needed in modern times. And yet Warren, essentially agreeing with Eliot's implied promotion of critical objectivity, reminds his audience that knowledge of the past, in history and literature, is also useful as "the sovereign tonic for self-pity; and self-pity, as the obverse of our arrogance, is the endemic disease of our time and place." Becoming aware of his own anxiety of influence, Warren finds in it a useful way of authenticating his own natural bent toward subjectivity, long apparent in both his criticism and poetry. William Bedford Clark comments that Warren's criticism is more than "a parasitic feeding on the text," but rather "a way of life and a way of confronting life and ourselves," as well as "testimony to the potential for authenticity inherent in the critical vocation."<sup>24</sup>

Robert Penn Warren was to develop as a critic, though reluctantly, in part by reacting against the influence of his two strong precursor critics, Ransom and Eliot. Lacking theoretical originality, Warren ultimately staked out for himself an area in which neither Ransom nor Eliot were interested, the criticism of American literature, primarily fiction. Not only did he depart early from Ransom's and Eliot's aversion to the Romantic poets, but his essays on American writers, as well as his introductions in *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, which originated in class notes, thus became his most original contribution to literary criticism. Asked if criticism can be creative, Warren answered, "Criticism when it really functions in the full sense of the word leads to a creative act in the sense of appreciating the work of art, whatever it is. You have to redo the work. You repaint the picture, rewrite the book, recompose the music, by going inside."<sup>25</sup> Neither objectively new critical, like Ransom, nor imper-

sonal, like Eliot, Warren emerges in these distinctive essays as the same Robert Penn Warren, frankly subjective and definitively American, who triumphs in his later poetry and fiction. Warren's anxiety of critical influence may therefore be said to have been a powerful force, both negative and positive, in his evolution as a literary critic.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Leonard Casper, *The Blood Marriage of Earth and Sky: Robert Penn Warren's Later Novels* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 74; Dick Cavett, "An Interview with Robert Penn Warren," in *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews 1950-1978*, ed. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 277-278; Robert Penn Warren, "Brooks and Warren," *Humanities* 6 (April 1985), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Rhodes scholars in Warren's day were expected to produce theses based on historical or philological research, toward which Warren was not inclined. Criticism, as such, was written by amateurs for quarterlies, magazines, and newspapers. William Bedford Clark states that Warren finally chose his topic "after much casting about," although he later became interested enough in his thesis to consider getting up an edition of Marston's satires (*Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000], I: 177, 184).

<sup>3</sup>Ruth Fisher, "A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren," in *Robert Penn Warren Talking*, 140.

<sup>4</sup>Richard B. Sale, "An Interview in New Haven with Robert Penn Warren," in *Robert Penn Warren Talking*, 130.

<sup>5</sup>Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 94-95. In 1984, Warren informed the author of this paper that he should be identified, not as an Agrarian, but as a "contributor to *I'll Take My Stand*" (annotations to author's manuscript, 1984). Bloom, "Foreword," *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), xxiv.

<sup>6</sup>Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 14-16. Warren's "ratios" did not occur in Bloom's order.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "A Note on Three Southern Poets," *Poetry* 40 (May 1932): 104-105.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 109-112.

<sup>9</sup>Clark, *Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren*, I: 239; T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 64; Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 11 (Jan. 1935): 95, 100, 110-111.

<sup>10</sup>Warren, "Ransom: A Study in Irony," 105-106.

<sup>11</sup>James Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 119; Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 42; Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 4.

<sup>12</sup>Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," 13, 15.

<sup>13</sup>Leslie Cames Corrigan, *Poems of Pure Imagination: Robert Penn Warren and the Romantic Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 14, 62.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "Notes on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday," in *New and Selected Essays*, 303-332; Warren, *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 93.

<sup>15</sup>Sale, "An Interview in New Haven with Robert Penn Warren," 122.

<sup>16</sup>Warren, "Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday," 328-329; Fisher, "A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren," 140.

<sup>17</sup>Warren, "Ransom at His Eightieth Birthday," 304.

<sup>18</sup>Warren, "Homage to T. S. Eliot" (Dec. 1938), Robert Penn Warren Papers, YCAL MSS 51, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, 3-4.

<sup>19</sup>Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," 4, 22-23; Eliot, "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism," in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 93.

<sup>20</sup>Eliot, "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism," 96.

<sup>21</sup>Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 38, 40.

<sup>22</sup>Warren, "The Use of the Past," in *New and Selected Essays*, 46-47; Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 40.

<sup>23</sup>Harold Bloom, Foreword to *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, xxiv; Warren, "The Use of the Past," 47.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 51; William Bedford Clark, "Warren's Criticism and the Evolving Self," *Kenyon Review*, 7 (winter 1985), 53.

<sup>25</sup>Fisher, "A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren," 145.