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## A Tribute to Robert Penn Warren

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## A Tribute to Robert Penn Warren

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J. A. BRYANT, JR.

We are all here tonight for the same purpose, to honor a man who by his achievements and his stature as a human being, can come closer than anyone else I know to making Kentucky, which is after all a hodge-podge geographically, politically, and culturally, if there ever was one, speak with one voice, say yes to something in unison. It's a cause for both sadness and rejoicing that there are some occasions when more than miles separate the Purchase and the mountains, the Tennessee Ridge and the Ohio River. But Red Warren, as his friends have been calling him now for most of his seventy-five years, miraculously unites Bluegrass and Pennyrile, just as he has miraculously encompassed Tennessee, Louisiana, the Midwest, New England, to say nothing of Europe and especially Italy, and made them, transformed, inhabit a body of fiction and verse in which we detect what Donald Davison, an old friend and Tennessean, was wont to call "the Kentucky voice of Warren." It's a distinctive voice that we Kentuckians respond to, acknowledge, and tonight claim as our own. On April 4 of this year, just over six months ago, our guest of honor celebrated a birthday, which for all he knows, and for all we know, he shares with the ghost of William Shakespeare. The appropriateness of the coincidence of birthdays might understandably beguile an astrologer, who would probably object to our present dedication of it, but let it be sufficient apology to say that late October is the year's best counterpart to April, and in Mr. Warren's Kentucky and ours, whether it's snowing or blooming, they set up much the same set of vibrations. So happy birthday, Red Warren!

Some of Mr. Warren's friends would like to be heard in these proceedings and we have provided a place and time for them. First, Cleanth Brooks, one of the most influential critics of our time, a fellow Kentuckian and with Mr. Warren a fellow Vanderbilt alumnus, a colleague at L.S.U., coeditor of the *Southern Review*, coauthor with him of four of the most influential textbooks ever written, and colleague at Yale for more than two decades.

CLEANTH BROOKS

I think that I used up my proper quota of words this morning in talking about Red's poetry, and I will try to be brief, although it is a little hard to be brief in view of the fact that I think that Red and I first made our acquaintance in 1924, which is a long time ago. If I tried to tell it in detail, it would be an old story and a long story, indeed. Perhaps my best way is to try to describe how important and interesting and valuable to me my long association with Red has been. It began with myself as a freshman at Vanderbilt, meeting an august senior. The other august seniors I remember meeting in the same room at that time were Lyle Lanier and Andrew Lytle. My eyes fairly popped out to hear these people talk. The talk was already very good. Later on that talk continued with Red in his room at Oxford University, across the *Southern Review* desk at the Louisiana State University, at Yale, and many places in between. I believe it was Sir Richard Steele who said of a fine woman (his wife undoubtedly he was referring to) that to know her was a liberal education. I think that very few people these days know what a liberal education is, and so can't understand what Steele was talking about. Surely what he was talking about was this: the expansion of the mind, the refinement of the sensibilities, the development of the imagination, the education of one's whole system of reckoning values. If I may apply this to Red, the most masculine of men, it has been a liberal education for me to have enjoyed this long association with him—to watch his mind work, to exchange ideas, to chat about things serious and light—a wonderful experience for me. My deep tribute to him on this happy occasion.

J. A. BRYANT, JR.

Next, Professor R. B. Heilman, who became a Kentuckian by adoption when he let Bruce Denbo publish his second book, *Magic in the Web*, and who has had a distinguished career in far-off Washington for the past two decades, and has published several books of criticism, practically all dealing with drama, but not quite all. He told of the perils and advantages, but mostly the perils, of being a departmental chairman and a professor of English. His latest book of criticism is a Christian Gauss award winner, *The Ways of the World: Comedy and Society*.

R. B. HEILMAN

I am a person of unusual distinctions. They are all geographical. Some years ago I went to a high-school reunion in Pennsylvania, and various prizes were awarded to class members who had shown skills, merits, of one kind and another. I too won a prize. It was for the member of the class who had come the greatest distance to the reunion. I claim that as my distinction tonight. While I cannot enlarge myself into a speaker for the whole West Coast, I feel as though I have at least the credit of bringing greetings to Red Warren from a very great distance. My second distinction is also geographical. It is that by an accident of that fate which gives one a job at a certain time because a job happens to be open, I landed at Louisiana State University when Red Warren was teaching there. And though I cannot really claim to have been an intimate of his, still to have been in his neighborhood, to have seen his works appear, and certainly to have known something of him as a person has been one of the very great joys of my life. I will not attempt to define that joy by spelling out Red's qualities. His talents as a writer are manifest to everyone. But in addition to that, what one felt especially was the quality of the man, the decency, the gentlemanliness in all possible ways. My third geographical distinction, as has been announced, is that I have become at least temporarily a Kentuckian. I am very pleased to be a Kentuckian on this happy occasion. And I bring Red, then, my very best wishes, my birthday wishes and my best wishes for coming birthdays, from the West Coast in memory of Louisiana and in pleasure at the present Kentucky celebration.

J. A. BRYANT, JR.

That was a beautiful tribute indeed from a gentleman who said he had nothing to say. Next, we have Professor R. W. B. Lewis, Dick Lewis to all those who call Mr. Warren "Red," who's told us all about the American Adam, Hart Crane, and most recently about Edith Wharton (for doing which he won a Pulitzer Prize) and who will soon give us his insights into the significance of Henry James. Professor Lewis is also coauthor with Professors Brooks and Warren of *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*.

R. W. B. LEWIS

It is very exciting for me to be here tonight, and happy birthday,

Uncle Red. I should like to briefly add a couple of reminiscences to those that Professor Heilman so adroitly gave us this morning and then perhaps a brief word about Robert Penn Warren on the literary scene.

I feel that I have known him much less than most people. I have only known Red about twenty-three years, and most people have known him apparently fifty and sixty. But we have been close neighbors in Connecticut and colleagues at Yale for some years and saw a good deal of each other in New England and New York, in southern France, where the Warrens were spending a winter and I came to visit them, and in a very memorable, for me, autumn in Tuscany, when we were a stone's throw of each other and Mr. Warren was then writing his most recent novel about place, *A Place to Come To*. So anyhow, after knowing Red seven or eight years, I had the gall to ask him if he would become the godfather of our soon-to-be born third child. He kindly agreed to do that. It was a baby girl, named Emma and baptized in the Branford Chapel at Yale, Red gallantly holding this squirming baby—I think the only time I have ever seen him look a little nervous. But the point is not that. It is that now, thirteen years later, Uncle Red and Emma have become pen pals. They write to each other; they send each other presents and memoirs and one thing and another; and it has been, I might say, Uncle Red and Aunt Eleanor in the Lewis family. It has meant a great deal to all of us, and it is typical of this extraordinarily busy man that he is always prepared to greet the young, the very young, the somewhat younger, the younger, all the way down the line—a remarkable quality.

There is a literary component in this ongoing thing that Emma and Red have, but I want to move on, closer to the literary scene. The year that Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren and I prepared this anthological history of American literature, we spent all kinds of time together, in each others' houses and for two and three days at a time, and once indeed virtually locked up in a New Haven downtown hotel. And, to quote Cleanth Brooks, this was for me "a liberal education," talking and listening to both these remarkable critics and literary historians. We talked and our concern, of course, was to decide which writers would get prominence, which texts would be selected, who would write the introductions, and so on. Part of my liberal education was noticing that as we got towards the mid-nineteenth century, it seemed to me that Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks grew more and more Southern,

and I grew more and more Northern. Indeed, amid perfect amity and a good deal of laughter, we had a kind of literary re-enactment of the Civil War. It came partly to a head when we were selecting which Civil War poems of Melville we would include. Now, Robert Penn Warren is the leading authority on Melville's poetry, so this was his responsibility, but we were collaborators and we were consultants. I looked at the list and it seemed to me that Red had selected only those poems which either described Southern victories or by the same token Northern disasters. I felt that this would give a wrong idea about the outcome of that oppressed struggle. So we compromised a little bit, and balanced the picture. But it was also a liberal education.

More gravely, nothing new or surprising, but about Robert Penn Warren as a man of letters in the English and European or French notion or concept of that phrase, that is, someone who is gifted or accomplished in various modes of imaginative writing—it seems to me that Robert Penn Warren is the most distinguished man of letters in our literary history. I was saying this not long ago to a very able and literate young woman who was writing an article about Robert Penn Warren. In fact, it was the article that appeared in *Newsweek*. In fact, I think Professor Heilman referred to it this morning. I said to her that he was the most distinguished man of letters in our literary history, and she said he is the only one. I knew what she meant. I think that unless my historical memory fails me, the only possible rival would be Henry James, for being gifted and accomplished in many varieties of imaginative and literary writing. But Robert Penn Warren, if you think of it—fiction, long and short and varied; poetry, lyric, meditative, epic; a literary critic, needless to say, of the very highest order; a literary essayist of the highest order, very influential; a playwright; the author of books that it might be a little harder to give a name to. I am thinking of *Who Speaks for the Negro?* on the one hand and *Poetry and Democracy* on the other. Henry James, whom I am fonder of than I think perhaps Mr. Warren, was extraordinary in many, many areas, but to my knowledge, he never wrote a poem in his life. So that is why I think this person I spoke to said he is the only one, and I think he is the only one. Happy birthday, Red.

J. A. BRYANT, JR.

Next to speak is Mr. Peter Davison, who has been at the Atlantic Monthly Press since 1956 and is poetry editor of *The Atlantic*

*Monthly*, whose first book of poems *The Breaking of the Day* was selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1964 and who has since published six volumes of verse. As a friend of Mr. Warren and as a fellow poet he speaks with a special authority, for, since he was twelve years old he has known Mr. Warren, and he has known him, I believe, as a swimmer.

PETER DAVISON

It's true that not long after my seventh birthday Red Warren took me swimming for the first time—not the first time I had been swimming, but the first time that he took me. It was in Colorado where my parents, who were his friends, were the directors of a writers' conference where he and others like John Crowe Ransom and Thomas Wolfe and John Peale Bishop and Robert Frost came each summer for two or three weeks. We must not forget that one of the criteria for the Rhodes Scholarship that Robert Penn Warren once held was, at least in those days, athletic ability. Red's athletic ability was one which, to a young Colorado boy, was little less than legendary. He would drive me to a pond called Base Line, which was, as it happens, on the fortieth parallel of latitude, east of Boulder on the plain, a yellow and muddy lake. He would let me dabble in the shallows (there was usually more than one of us) and then he would prepare for the ritual. There was the dark bathing cap pulled down carefully over the ears, there were the earplugs inserted with some care, there was the noseplug, and then he would set off and swim—out there, across the lake, which was, as far as I knew, approximately the same dimension as the Atlantic Ocean—and he would swim until you could see him no longer. He swam across the lake, he swam to the other side of it (nobody else did this), and when he got to the other side of the lake, he rose and got his ears clear, and he turned around and swam back again. It took me some years to learn to swim across the lake—swimming lessons, assistance, rowboats at my side to make sure that all would go well—but it was Red who made it possible.

That was not the last swimming lesson. In later years he would often come to visit our house. I remember especially the great blizzard of 1948 when he visited us in western Pennsylvania. Then it snowed for three days and as far as I could tell he laughed for three days and so did the rest of us. When I wanted to go to college in England and asked him if he would testify on the form for the Fulbright Commission that I was acquainted with the foreign

language of the country to which I was going, he was kind enough to say that he would, yes, say that I knew English. In later years when I began to feel the need to write poetry—I had never had the luck or ill luck to enroll in a writing class, so I took my copy of *Understanding Poetry* and tried to teach myself the rudiments from that lifesaving manual. Years later, when I began actually to write it, it was he who would occasionally read it and would encourage it. But more than all these other kinds of swimming lessons what seems to me most moving in my long friendship with Red has been the sense, as has been testified by others here and especially by Cleanth Brooks earlier this morning, of that underground stream in which we all swim through his work. Happy birthday.

J. A. BRYANT, JR.

There's another poet here who speaks with a somewhat different kind of authority. Wendell Berry is one of us in a very special way. Although he no longer teaches in the University of Kentucky classrooms, I always have the hope that he will come back, and he does come to our halls from time to time. He's a Kentuckian who still really inhabits the land, who loves it as the land, who respects it, who understands that it can be as unpredictably savage as it can be gracious, and who would come to terms with it. Therefore, as an honest Kentuckian, Wendell Berry welcomes Mr. Warren with almost more authority than anyone else I know, or at least, with a very special kind, and we welcome him next to our podium.

WENDELL BERRY

My own understanding of Mr. Warren and my appreciation of him have to do necessarily with his membership in my parents' generation, which I used to perceive as a great deal older, and have become constrained to see as always less older, than I am, which is a mathematical wonder. And the less older I have perceived them to be, the more filial and respectful and grateful I have become toward the best of them—and Mr. Warren is one of the best of them—because I have come to know better, as I have been catching up with them, what it costs to keep alive essential memories and patterns and standards. Mr. Warren's has not been a voice disposed to compromise or to speak unintelligently or with unintelligent feeling. And it is such voices that are the great preventers of loneliness and estrangement for those who come after. Therefore, I



am here to read a little poem. (There is always a therefore, and I did not want to leave this one implicit.)

### THE WHEEL

*for Robert Penn Warren*

At the first strokes of the fiddle bow  
the dancers rise from their seats.  
The dance begins to shape itself  
in the crowd, as couples join,  
and couples join couples, their movement  
together lightening their feet.  
They move into the ancient circle  
of the dance. The dance and the song  
call each other into being. Soon  
they are one—rapt in a single  
rapture, so that even the night  
has its clarity, and time  
is the wheel that brings it round.

In this rapture the dead return.  
Sorrow is gone from them.  
They are light. They step  
into the steps of the living  
and turn with them in the dance  
in the sweet enclosure  
of the song, and timeless  
is the wheel that brings it round.

J. A. BRYANT, JR.

Finally, one other voice, that of Andrew Lytle, who is a Tennessean by birth but a Kentuckian briefly by his choice, a fellow novelist, sometime farmer, citizen of the civilized world from Homer's day to this, who has loved Mr. Warren longer than any of us, known his youth and known his maturing, felt his admiration and his love. I think that Andrew speaks best of all and speaks for all of us.

ANDREW LYTLE

Red's my oldest friend. We were freshmen together at Vanderbilt under the distinguished professors John Crowe Ransom and Dr.

Sanborn, who gave four "A's" and never gave a woman over a "C." I was a dancing man for my first two years there, but Red needed somebody to talk to occasionally so he would call me down from Kissam Hall. I had the second story room, which had not had the most delicate of histories. Allen Tate's older brother Ben lived there at one time. There had been a poker game going on for ten days, day and night, and the students would occasionally come out and go to class and come back. Allen Tate's mother, with little Allen, a little boy in late May, with an overcoat on and with his big head (it was said he had water on the brain) came and knocked on the door. And a voice said, "If you're a cat, scratch under; if you're a dog, jump over." Well, that was the room that I occupied, and Red would rescue me from it and its ghosts. He did not look then like he looks now. His hair stood on top of his head, red as a fireball. And he would come and walk high, his head in the air. Being a dancing man, I could keep up. He recited verse which I listened to, and some of which I understood, I thought. I'm afraid finally it was a germ that really kept me from being a good farmer.

I remember once that both he and Cleanth gave me, without knowing it, two crucial manners of instruction for a writer or a craftsman. John Ransom had given me Hardy to do. I had read all of his verse and had to do a piece on him. I was trying to do what I thought the scholars would require. I really worked on it. He gave me an "A," but Red kindly told me later that John told him that it was like a man playing on a fiddle with one string. You can see how valuable that was. When they were editors of the *Southern Review*—I don't know whether it was Red or Cleanth, but I did the review of Freeman's *Lee* and too hastily and it was set back. I discovered then that no matter what you do you give your total and entire attention to that.

Well, this is my reminiscence, but I want to add something that has been left out here. In the first place, when we first met, we were adolescent, and at that moment you instantaneously like or dislike each other. You get the picture of one another that you never again lose. Fifty-nine years, it's a morning favor. Nothing changes in fifty-nine years, because you have that first image which never passes. No matter if you never see each other, which you do not except occasionally, it never changes, you see. It's a kind of spiritual immortality in a sense. As it is, he has never quite given up Kentucky. He's always on the run back here, but he doesn't stay long. He comes and goes.

Of course, I'm the only person alive who really knows why and how that is. You remember, Kentucky and Tennessee were the Old West, and they are pretty close together. Guthrie is not far from the line. Red told me (if he didn't, I don't know who else could have) that before he was born, his father and mother were riding out in a buggy—taking a buggy ride to while away the time—and they were benighted at Trenton, Kentucky. And Red told me he was terrified lest he be born away from home. Well, obviously that kind of prescience indicated that he was to be a poet, a poet supreme, and also it indicated his absolute integrity of loyalty. I know many Kentuckians wake up in the deep of the night and wonder why they were not born in Tennessee. And at that moment he realized that whereas he would visit Tennessee and participate in all of its gifts, he was truly a Kentuckian. And then in those deep reaches of his anticipation of life, in the womb, there was a rumor going around which proved to be true later. That a doctor from an English warship landed and brought a sack of seed with him, which was planted in Sumner County, Tennessee. Well, that was bluegrass, and the birds and the wind blew it towards Kentucky, so he could not possibly have been disloyal to this state.

There is nothing more to say, except that, you have seen him, in a country expression, "There's not a pound of him that ain't sound, and there's not a skipper in him."

J. A. BRYANT, JR.

"There's not a skipper in him." That's the nicest compliment that anyone could get. It's a tribute to you, Mr. Warren, by your friends on Kentucky soil. And if this were a conventional party with cake and candles, we'd ask you to stand and blow them out. We can't do that, but would you please stand and be here for the clapping of hands. Happy birthday!

ROBERT PENN WARREN

I'd like to say a word, if I may. Thank you all very much. Thank you. This is a lot better than candles, a lot better. I feel a little bit like the man who was not given to the undertaker for the ritual murder now required before a body is put into the ground. He woke up in the middle of the funeral and sat up straight and said, "For God's sake is it me they're talking about?" So I feel like that. Is it me they're talking about? And the surprise still lingers, and I

can't quite find the answer. The only real lie I can lay my hand on immediately is from Andrew, of course. Other lies are more elusive, but I am quite sure they are there. It wasn't Trenton. It was Frankfort. It was a long way from home.

I've obviously had great luck in my life. I recall my grandfather saying once, "Luck's not everything." Then he thought (he was a man of no humor; he thought about things he said) and said, "But without that there isn't anything." Well, luck's not everything, but it's been a great part of my life, and the greatest part of my luck has been the people who have appeared at the right time in my life. From Andrew and Jesse Wills and Allen Tate and the passion for poetry early generated by those people when I was contemptuous of poetry—. I wanted to be admiral of the Pacific fleet, of course, but I couldn't go to Annapolis because of an accident. Poetry was a very poor second choice, and they filled my life. They gave me some reason, some direction.

I have a special debt to Andrew, as an old, old friend. I was thoroughly acquainted with country ways, with country speech, with country humor, but I never thought of it except as part of the atmosphere you breathe. Andrew had developed it into an art. He was also the only freshman in my class who had gone to school in France before coming to Vanderbilt, so his great worldliness combined with his great artistry of back country humor. ("Brother Micajah"—he should tell you it now. It would take only half an hour. It would be worth every minute of it.) "Brother Micajah" and a thousand other such stories which have delighted millions of people in millions of drawing rooms and on roadsides. And they're never the same story. He always makes up a new version for the occasion. He woke me up to the fact of the poetry, the humor, in the common speech, in the commonest things of life, the things I knew as well as I knew the way to my own bedroom. He became a whole new world of awareness. That—one friend gave me, among other things, many other things. And he was the most sophisticated of all my fellow freshmen.

Well, that's an example, but there are so many examples. We'd be here a long night if I told you all about them. But this much—always when the times were blackest, always when there seemed to be nothing at the end of the road, and no trust in my own capacities, always, sometimes by a mere gesture, sometimes by a word, sometimes by a deed, sometimes by a smile, sometimes by the slightest touch of some kind, somebody's appeared. And all the

best things in my life have come out of such relationships, such moments of a free gift, freely given, and from our friends. And I don't worry about deserts, and why worry about God's grace. It comes or it doesn't come. Otherwise, without luck, there's not anything, and friends have been my great luck, friends of all sorts and kinds. And one present I am grateful for is Emma Lewis, and still am grateful for, and enjoy.

One thing—it's very easy in the rapture of assuaged vanity, as this occasion is for me, to feel that somehow you're worthy of it, in some small way at least. But I'm enough of a scholar, or at least a reader of literature and literary history, to know that fashions change. What's good one day is bad another except in very remarkable cases, and the score is never in. But why not enjoy what you can while you can anyway, though the score is not in? If the score isn't the score you wanted, there's a very great piece of wisdom in a little poem by Yeats (and I'll quote the last few lines of it) which is a last refuge of poets and other artists:

Bred to a harder thing  
Than Triumph, turn away  
And like a laughing string  
Whereon mad fingers play  
Amid a place of stone,  
Be secret and exult,  
Because of all things known  
That is most difficult.

In other words, to ruin the poetry and moralize it, the joy is in the doing, and not the end of the doing.

Thank you. Thank you all.