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RPW at LSU: Some Reminiscences*

Robert B. Heilman

When I began to put these notes together, I was struck by a geographical irony. Here was I, a native Pennsylvanian, writing literally on an island shore in Puget Sound, about a Kentuckian whose colleague I was forty years ago in Louisiana and who has long lived in Connecticut. What we had shared, for a few years, was a Deep South which we had both left in the 1940s, and which no longer is what it was then. Yet that past still asserts its vitality for me in our now distant present.

My glancing back, in a Kentucky scene, to that old Louisiana reality reminds me, if only faintly, of Red Warren's going back to Todd County to see again the Jefferson Davis monument, begun long before, finished much later, and then in 1979 a key point in a Davis commemoration. It should be amply clear that I am not a Warren—that most of us here are not Warrens—and that he is not a Jefferson Davis. Granted that, rough parallels between the backward looks, or the absence of them, will come to mind. I can start with no childhood images to be partly unlearned and partly confirmed later on, though I might seek a parallel by claiming that my first images of Red, forty-five years ago, were products of my professional childhood. But my early images came, of course, not through a grandfather, but directly from the subject; they were tentative rather than decisive; they were to be added to rather than revised or justified. And the native Kentuckian who is the center of our rites is happily not at the stage at which stone monuments are the required idiom. Or better still, he has been building his own monument, not quite so localized as the Davis one, a little longer in construction, and visible in all scenes and at all distances. So in our present pageantry we can see both man and monument. In 1979, Red Warren, glancing back over a century and a half, could meditate a little on the passage of things and even, in the totally dry-eyed way that marks his style, on the *lacrimae rerum*. One might be tempted to borrow that mode here, even with less than half a century to think about, and to record the sense of something gone besides the years. But that sounds like standard

septuagenarian mournfulness, which I do not feel. As to what slides away, then, better to borrow the silence that held between the Warren brothers as they looked at markers of time past.

So on to bare annals. When I arrived at LSU in September, 1935, Red seemed like some kind of old-timer there. He was well along at thirty, and I was a mere twenty-nine. To me, a new instructor with a new Ph.D. and old debts, an old-timer was almost anybody up ahead; there they all looked secure and entrenched. Red was an old-timer of a year or two, and what is more, an assistant professor. From where I stood and waited, it seemed an exalted status. I was glad to have any job at any rank; on finishing my degree, I got an offer only from LSU, and I got that only through the amiable footwork of a fellow graduate student at Harvard, Dolph Bryan, a Tennessean who headed up Freshman English at LSU. At that time one was not spotted in advance as a period man or a type man (say a medievalist or semiotician); one was just signed on to teach Freshman English and the peripheral goodies in literature, if any, that might drop into one's lap when and if the fates were kind (that is to say, unkind to someone ahead of one in the pedagogical chow line). So I had only extreme juniority, an everyman's generalized teaching role, and no record of any kind to make me an identifiable individual. Established assistant professors seemed a different breed to whom one spoke only if spoken to. Besides, this was the Deep South, and my first sight of it; all was foreign, and anything one said might be a goof. Too, this red-headed assistant professor was a strange duck who had the most extraordinary accent, not the Louisianan speech I was learning to hear, and with no trace of the Oxonian which sometimes sweetened the tongue of old Rhodes boys. For such reasons it was quite a while—perhaps a year—before I began to get acquainted with Red at all.

As seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness go, that autumn of 1935 was an unusual one, with an ironic ripeness at the core, and even fumes of poppies of a sort. Huey Long was shot on the Sunday after Labor Day and died two days later. These somewhat Shakespearian events took place during my wife's and my first nine days in Baton Rouge, and, as I have written elsewhere, we were in the visitors' gallery of the lower chamber in the state Capitol when the shots snapped out just below us. We could hardly know that, in being on hand at the spectacular cut-off of a spectacular career, we were standers-by of an ending that was also a beginning. This

rounding out of a life made it visible as a whole, the raw material available for transmutation, a decade later, into the different life of one of the great American novels, as I can say with assurance, of our day. Was Red Warren's imagination already beginning to play tentative games with that life, brief but now complete, and to see it extending into a mythic existence beyond time and place? I wish I could report that I had spoken with Red about such matters, but I cannot. There are always large vacant spots in one's past luckiness. Still, just being a bystander when shots bloodied the state-house floor seems a little like having been a passerby where the Daulia road meets the Delphi-Thebes road—they still point the alleged spot out to tourists—when an arrogant old man ordered a young chap off the road and got hacked down. Out of such brief episodes come, in time, works you don't forget. One knows this, alas, only through hindsight and not at the hot moment.

Did Huey's death raise any qualms in the editors of the *Southern Review*, which was just aborning? This question would occur only to someone who had been shaken by the communication that our troubled department head, the well known place-name man William A. Read, made to me. He came to our apartment (as to others, I am sure) to tell me that he doubted the university would open, as scheduled, in a week. He meant, not a ceremonial delay, but a possible breakdown in state operations when the man who ran everything was suddenly gone. So the editors might well have wondered whether the budget for the *Review*, a paradoxical product of the very complex Long era, would survive in a new post-Long regime. If the question had occurred to me at the time, I would not have been up to asking it, and I never thought to bring it up later. A casual retrospective observer might see, in the coincidence of Huey's death and the *Review's* birth, a simplistic symbolism: ring out the old, ring in the new; down politics and up culture. The truth, happily, deserts such obviousness for irony: the *Review* did not meet its death until seven years later, and then during a reform administration in the state.

Well, Huey died, and a few weeks later the second issue of the *Review* came out. Assistant Professor Warren, as I have said, seemed an entrenched old-timer. He had been at LSU long enough to have engaged in the preplanning—it would take a minimum of a year—needed before the first *Review* could come out. On the literary side it seemed, I guess, a rather strange beast to the majority of us who had been brought up, in college and graduate

school, in the old historical tradition. Some of us wouldn't buy it at all—I use *buy* in the figurative sense, since purchasing anything but necessities was a slender practice in those depression days—and some of us were teased into its orbit despite ourselves. To some it was a freak, to others invisible, to others a godsend. In general the usual distrust of the new and the usual envy of growing success were in time more than matched by a sense of the class of the *Review* and hence by local pride in it. Surely no one foresaw, however, that in a brief septennium the *Review* would become memorable, would take such almost unknowns as Eudora Welty at least through the vestibule of the house of memory, would give some glory to its university, would help qualify its editors for major posts in distant states, and incidentally would send forth its first two business managers into notable editorial careers elsewhere. Again, as with Huey's death, how comforting is hindsight.

After I became acquainted with Red Warren and Cleath Brooks, I got the impression, more from chance remarks of theirs than from outright assertions, that they saw pretty much eye to eye on contributions, or could argue vigorously but peaceably; that their tastes sometimes differed sharply from that of Charles Pipkin, the political scientist who was nominal head man at the start; that some editorial agreement was necessary for acceptance of a contribution, but that two tepid yes-votes were not enough. One strong yes was essential. But still, these are impressions that may be sustained, modified, or demolished by the principals who can speak from knowledge instead of impressions.

Time-consuming as the *Review* must have been, it was only a fraction of Red's life. I do not know, as I have said, whether his imagination was already beginning to work out from the Huey Long story. His imagination had to be at work, if not in 1935 at least pretty soon after that, on the Kentucky tobacco wars, for *Night Rider* would appear in 1939. *Night Rider* began his long series of treatments of Middle-South subjects, especially those of Kentucky and Tennessee; if Nashville was not quite his Dublin, still the analogy is suggestive. Memory of where one is not is the catalyst; after all, the Louisiana story came into its transformed fictional life only after Red had moved to Minnesota. Unless my memory, with customary fidelity, is deceiving me, Red's decade in Louisiana did not generate fictional themes beyond the large one of *All the King's Men*.

Back to the late 1930s, when *Night Rider* was in gestation. These

were incredibly productive years, even in the context of a long life never exactly torpid. For Red was working on both stories and poems (his second volume of poems appeared in 1935, that wonderfully full year), coediting the *Review*, collaborating with Brooks on two textbooks, *Approach to Literature* and the more famous *Understanding Poetry*, both of which appeared in the later 1930s. And then of course there was *Understanding Fiction*, and along with it the second novel, *At Heaven's Gate*, both in 1943. All this is in the public record, though the casual reader of the record might not envisage the great gushing forth of intellectual and imaginative energy. But like most of its kind that public record is incomplete. It does not reveal, though it may imply, that Red was teaching full-time (the full-time probably included some nominal allowance for editorial work). It does not reveal that the teaching was more than providing the casual classroom semipresence which some scholars and writers think is enough. It does not reveal that he was busy in department life, first in helping shape up a new Ph.D. program (not to mention working on examination committees for M.A. and Ph.D. applicants), and then in that busyness of correspondence, caucus, and corridor which broke out when the department faced a change of chairmen and was shaken by the urgent campaigning of one candidate who to many of us seemed a walking anthology of administrative disabilities. Nor does the record reveal that Red was one of a relatively small faculty group who, when the post-Long scandals broke out in 1939 to festoon the state like the decor of a colossal musical comedy, tried to make hay by pushing for some small betterments of the university. All these doings not on the record prove a large conscience in university affairs—the kind of conscience often choked off at birth by scholars, and rarely even a gleam in the eye of writers, who are rarely seduced into institutional citizenship. Put together the doings on the record and the unrecorded doings, and they give a picture of Warren work fantastic in its variety and quantity. It was an early model of the diverse creativity—which extended of course to social criticism—of that rare being, the full-scale man of letters.

If only I could claim that, as a colleague of Red from his thirtieth to his thirty-eighth year, I foresaw the future achievement. But I can assert only that I did spot him as an unusually able figure in the English department and university. At the same time the man of talent and the non-stop worker was a very attractive human being. Let us not, however, shrink him into a standardized charm-school

midget, smiling his way into all unjudging hearts around. He had a deadpan, almost stern, mood, a sort of flat withdrawal or uncommunicativeness which could make one wonder, "What have I done?" Then there was another style that seemed to go naturally with the lined face and hardbitten look which were there early—a skeptically ironic twist of expression and of speech that could effortlessly deflate any foolish ideas, or for that matter popular ideas, that might be floating around without getting many questions. It neither reflected a suspicious nature nor fell into easy sarcasm; it was rather a natural inquiringness of one not easily convinced or converted—a sort of Kentuckian Missouriism. His critical questioningness seemed to issue from near the corner of the mouth, without drifting into what a college teacher of mine called "sidemouth philosophy." Perhaps in his close look at things there was also a touch of that strong wariness of sentiment which helps toughen up the fiction. Then finally there was the joyous and laughing Red, whose full face crinkling into merriment meant a fine display of teeth and that long little suck or hiss of breath, an inbound or outbound sibilance, that somehow doubled the sweep of delight. I thought of this aspect of Red while reading Eudora Welty's comment, in a recent interview, on a visit from Red: they just "sat around," and he, leaving, said, "I have never laughed so hard—not a serious word all evening."

And that brings us to the gregarious or social Red. "Social" is probably the better word, since "gregarious" connotes a habitual search for company, as if solitude were a kind of flu, whereas I'm talking about the basic hard worker, who has to be solitary, and then the variations on that base. Whatever his working schedule inevitably was, Red was a better-than-average social being, as a guest ready for whatever fun and games would break out, and as a host easy, amiable, and generous. He was a mean gunner in a battle of charades; it was easier to be on his side, and not to have to face his look of the unmoved mover, pitying, condescending, amused, and a little amazed at the obtuseness of the interpreters. I remember him as a host at occasional big parties, the guests a wide spread of gown and some town, making each guest feel sought after, and seeing the supplies of food and drink were located and utilized by the guests. I don't mean, of course, that Red really came up to Colonel Sanders, though within the last few days he seems almost to have made it here in Kentucky.

In those spring years one could eat and drink with more

abandon, and with little hint of the watchfulness that would later overtake us. I still have a clear picture of one Warren guest, an instructor in English, standing there with his back against the wall, and a little cross-eyed by now, like a happy late-nighter in a cartoon, and then suddenly starting to slide gently down the wall, his feet moving slowly forward and outward until, never losing contact with the wall, he was seated solidly on the floor, his legs making a big V, and his face coming apart in a slightly puzzled gaze. The Warren party air, though not intent upon such a fall, was comfortable with it; first aid and a comic sense were both there in suitable measure. At such a time all the king's men could reassemble the wall-fall guy.

Red was not only a ready party-man, and an apt host, but a great entertainer. In him I saw and heard, for the first time, the southern storyteller, who is what he is, I guess, because he does not live by the punchline alone but has equal zest in the spread of detail along the way, the filling-out of scene and action that have their own life, and are not to be hurried over as mere props for the finale. Not that the finale is trivial, but that it completes a structure instead of being merely the pop for which alone the popgun exists. I heard him do the great tale of the mountain folks' big family bed, the sleeping place for pappy and mammy and their large brood, the brood all equipped with coonskin caps which they kept losing at moments of crisis during the long night. Perhaps the best of Red's tales—which by the way he credited to Andrew Lytle—was the one of the city-slicker salesman who came to a southern hamlet, snatched the local belle from the arms of her less crafty village swain, and then threw a big wedding dinner. It reached a climax in prose epithalamia by the male leads. We listeners rejoice in a wonderful archetypal contrast in rhetorical styles as winner and loser work with a common image of bridal loveliness. I stole the tale and for years presented it, without demand but with by-line, once winning a large acclaim with it at a dude ranch near Kerrville, Texas. But my version was no Warren work of art; Red invested it with a fullness of body and ornament that an alien amateur narrator could never come up with.

It is surely clear by now that the rising academic man, the oncoming literary man, and the instinctive social man was a very likable human being—not a personality boy, never a gusher, rarely without some reserve, having a sharp edge when needed, capable of impatience, but never self-assertive, and always unostentatious,

decent, and courteous. He was a rare denial of the four-letter definition of literary people which, a decade or two earlier, T. S. Eliot had vented at a luncheon with Conrad Aiken, and he was a negative answer to Osip Mandelstam's inquiry, "Might there not be some inverse ratio between the moral and dynamic development of the soul?" When I first came across Thomas Mann's wrestling with the problem of bohemian and bourgeois, I felt that Red had solved it by combining the virtues of both, or, if you will, of writer and citizen, or better, artist and gentleman. From Red I learned so early in life to associate good art and good manners that over the years, when my academic job involved me in regular contact with poets and fictionists, and of course professors, I found myself impatient with those who took tantrums for talent, or boorishness for genius. When Red came to Seattle to do the Roethke memorial reading a few years ago, he was one of our best visitors, famous now, but the best of troupers, tired from travel and performance, but amiable and even jolly with scores of introducees. Early and late, he has been essentially modest—not unconfident, not muddied with mock humility, but open to the rest of the world, as good a listener as he was a talker, talking about things out there and not in here, ready to belong rather than dominate, and dominating, when he did, only by others' sense of quality in the man. There was no side, no knowing insidership, no need to go by current standards, no affectation of high-toned with-it-ness. He once told me that he couldn't read Thomas Mann. Maybe that changed later; I don't know. Anyway, it enabled me to take the risk of saying I couldn't read *Finnegans Wake*, that polymorphously perverse anagram, fitter for dissertations than for delight. He once claimed to be tone deaf and thus to shun all musical events. I heard him say this at a time when an artist friend of ours was showing especial delicacy of ear by insisting that even symphony was too noisy, and that only a quartet was fit for civilized listening. Well, Red's alleged absence of musical ear made me less cringing when, in a community of opera buffs, I finally realized that I simply did not like opera. Red would listen patiently to criticisms of points in the textbooks. He sent me the typescript of a novel—*At Heaven's Gate*, and perhaps later *World Enough and Time*, though incredibly I am unsure of this—and asked for comments. This was genuine modesty, as was his handling of my doubtless square responses. He would say, "Yes, I'll have to do something about that," or, more often, "No, I think I'll have to stick with that; you see . . ."—as usually I hadn't seen. A

reader of my present memoir wondered whether Red's work might have been influenced by the comments of such manuscript-readers as myself. I doubt it very strongly. Perhaps an occasional point made by a reader led to some local modifications, but spurring local modifications is not quite exerting influence. Anyway, most of Red's career has been in the years since I was in close touch with him, so I am an incompetent witness on this point.

Perhaps his ultimate modesty is the willingness and ability to write the lucid and unaffected prose that has always dominated his critical work—a prose often imaged and allusive, yes, but with no touch of the Byzantinely opaque mode that now and then rampages in academe, unhousebroken. He took the risk implicit in an Oscar Wilde character's observation: "Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out." And then there is that comment in a recent interview: "I am trying to be a good poet"—this by a senior writer a little later to be called, in *Newsweek*, "America's Dean of Letters."

But I must stick to my role as recording non-angel of an earlier phase in the three ages of American man—minority, middle age, and Medicare. (I do not include "maturity," which may happen in minority but may not happen in middle age.) Most of my memories are miscellaneous, but three of them naturally fall together to show Red in combat. I take them in anticlimactic order. The scene of the first is a conference on southern affairs hosted at LSU. The only aspect of this event that I remember is Red's rising in the middle of the audience and rebuking the conference. The conference was on the wrong track, it had no idea of the true South, and no decent picture of its future. Though this occurred during general discussion, Red was reading his remarks from the back of what looked like a large manila envelope—a great comfort to us who can extemporize only from a prepared text. Well, this injection of an alien view seemed very brave to me; alas, I cannot recall what followed. In the second episode, the main character was a student caught in, or at least charged with, some kind of theft. Authorities were about to throw the book at him, and he was a likely target, for he was not a very lovable lad—perhaps a 1968 type born too soon. But he was evidently a good student, and that is probably what brought Red into a sturdy defense that was not altogether easy. A scholarly youth should not be treated with a severity unlikely if the culprit were a football player. Anyway, it took some conviction and guts to be on the boy's side. But with my unusual faculty for forgetting the next chapter, I cannot report who won.

The scene of the third episode is again a bar, not of justice this time, but of a convention hotel. A number of us were sitting around a table, the boy brought the drinks, and Red exclaimed quickly, "But they forgot to put the whiskey in mine." I didn't know whether that was a literal statement of an accidental omission, or a metaphor for a slick barman's cheating half-jigger. Whatever it was, Red spoke firmly to the Ganymede of the place. Though I said that I would use anti-climactic order, I am now hedging, for this was the only one of the three episodes of bold dissidence that could invite the attentions of a bouncer. But there was no bouncing; bourbon was brought; and whether the bill grew, I don't know.

A medley of images is scattered about in the frail storage room of memory. If only they were ordered in an assiduous diary; if only one had had the wits to be a Boswell when there was much Boswellizing to be done. But my images are random and chancy, relics tumbling from a messy attic room when one opens the door in search of old gold. The real gold is one's memory of an association, which isn't kept in the attic. But the attic has the purse trimmings, those signs that the real thing is there. One trimming: the time when Red was first teaching a course in Shakespeare. For some reason this involved the splitting of a class assigned to senior Professor John Earle Uhler. Maybe it was just that the class suffered from overpopulation, since Dr. Uhler was quite a drawing card on the classroom stage. Be that as it may, Dr. Read, the department head—in those days having a head was not considered a piece of gratuitous tyranny—told Dr. Uhler to divide his class equally and send one half to Mr. Warren, who would be waiting in another room in Allen Hall (the arts and sciences building named after Governor O. K. Allen). Dr. Uhler went back to Dr. Read and reported that alas he could not split the class because no one would leave. Though Dr. Read was aged and fragile, his Virginian eyes sparkled, he grasped his cane, he snapped, "Well, if you can't split the class, I can," and he limped off to do battle. Thus began Warren's career in teaching Shakespeare, a subject in which he has never known a shortage of students.

A junior colleague told me once that Red had wanted to swim—a bit of a problem in Louisiana, where the thick brown waters are generous hosts to moccasins and alligators. The young man provided the swim spot at a country place, either a pool of sorts or a river eddy relatively safe from unseen currents and water wild

beasts. He reported to me, "Red put plugs in both ears, waded in, and swam madly in a little circle for five minutes, and that was it." Not much hot-tub indulgence there. I do not know if this whirlpool style was altered in later years and other climes. I move on from warm water to ice tea. In Deep-South summer most of us got addicted to coke or ice tea; I swilled both, but especially ice tea, and the habit clung even in the off season. It seemed a bit of a secret vice, like sherry in the office-desk drawer. I confessed it to Red, the kind of man who would understand weaknesses. He said, "Live on ice tea? I work on it—and all year round. I couldn't write without a pitcher of ice tea." Saved again; one no longer had to justify guzzling ice tea in winter. In the hot and humid months I would drink about a quart and a pint at the evening meal, an intake made simpler when my wife found some ice-tea glasses that actually held a pint. I told Red once, "At supper we have only two things—ice tea and salad." "Good God," said Red, "if I came to the table and found only salad to eat, I'd just sit down and cry." I don't know whether forty subsequent years have either reduced the tears or removed all such occasions for them. I move on to a third liquid, and it happens also to be my third drawing on it—whiskey. This time Red is narrator. He was good not only as tale-teller but as reporter on persons, places, and things. The person in this story was Tom Wolfe—the Eugene Gant one, that is. The place, I think, was a writers' conference somewhere in Colorado. The time—an after-work-hours party. Wolfe arrived in a capacious jacket—or maybe topcoat, but jacket makes a better story—with large side-pockets, each one stuffed with a fifth. He was costumed with the ammunition for a bull-shooting that was to last most of the night. Wolfe was evidently a Gargantua in monologue. Red, as I have said, was a good listener, and this time his listening system must have got an extraordinary workout. No complaints, though; only lively details of the roaring boy on stage.

From fluids to drygoods. As dresser, Red could be equally colorful and constant, occasionally shiny but more generally old shoe, never one to turn out an old faithful. Any other Louisiana relics who are here today will probably remember as well as I do an old reliable jacket, a jacket that went on and on. It was of a reddish-brickish-orange-ish hue, with touches of the two geranium shades, and maybe a dash of horsechestnut. At first it riveted the eye in those precolor days of haberdashery, and then it stuck with one like a mistress dwindling into a wife. One noted it invariably,

but inattentively, as one does a spectacle, like hijacking, that has become daily news. Maybe it was an indestructible tweed of Oxford provenience. It gained a special bouquet from Red's habit—I report this secondhand—of sticking a not-yet-dead pipe into a pocket and thus setting up a double smoke. John Palmer once said that the beast had seen its best days and, like the horse in *Animal Farm*, was ready for the knacker. Only a good friend could be so inhumane.

From dry goods to dry statements. The subject was the Civil War. Red said of a southern general (I'm too uncertain of his identity to mention the name that comes to mind), "Lee should have had him shot." It was my first experience of so uncompromising a judgment of a member of a class that somehow seemed exempt from stern censure, though in this matter, times are much changed. And for me, in my parochial naiveté, it was also very early evidence that southern loyalty did not mean unqualified admiration of everyone in southern ranks. I insert a more trivial moment, this one after Red had moved to Minnesota. It was a meeting early in the fall, maybe in Chicago. As we were breaking up, Red said, "Well, nothing to do now but go back to Minneapolis and wait for the first blizzard." It was his only comment on the locale that I remember. Another dry statement later on, in a probably less trivial moment: "Some of my friends want me to become a Catholic, but I haven't the vocation." What his vocation was had long become clear. As for the products of that vocation, I have written about one or two of them. One of my happiest assignments was reviewing the reviews of *All the King's Men*, for rarely did one find so many big guns, commingled with various small side arms, cannonading such downright nonsense. I found that nonsense appetizing in two ways. One, it relieved any fears one might have that criticism was getting too rational. Second, it was the kind of nonsense that positively made one salivate epithets; abuse came flowing out like automatic writing. These victims were fun, however little fun their victim might have got out of that extraordinary flux of astigmatic holier-than-thou judgments.

Once I planned to write something about a poem of Red's—"The Ballad of Billie Potts." When I first read the "Ballad," probably some time after it came out, I recognized the plot as very much like that of two plays, George Lillo's *The Fatal Curiosity* (1731) and Camus's *Le Malentendu* (1944). Obviously the story that Red had picked up from an elderly relative in Kentucky was one branch of a

mythic family that had migrated widely. This kind of parallel or relationship interests me, and I mentally outlined an article on the literary history of unwitting filicide; I think I was going to call it, "Laius Acts First." I mentioned the plan to Cleanth Brooks, who said, "Go ahead. Red will be glad to play dead." Somehow this chance phrase made the historian of filicide seem like an unwitting homicide, and I let almost three decades pass before outlining the world-wide travels of the Billie Potts myth. Meanwhile others had got into the act. My sketch of the myth, and of its other sketchers, is now embalmed in a long footnote on page 346 of a book I published in 1973.

It seemed like filicide and homicide when a misunderstanding—this is my guess—resulted in Red's departure to Minnesota in 1943. Maybe departmental suicide would be the better term. We felt the loss in many ways. Doubtless Cleanth would leave next. Fortunately he stayed another four years. My own departure, a few months after Cleanth's, is a small footnote to this memoir. The University of Washington was looking for a chairman of English. One of the people they asked for nominations was a man who had been a visiting professor there—Joseph Warren Beach. Beach, of course, was at Minnesota. Maybe he couldn't think of anyone; maybe he just wanted more names. Anyway, he met Red Warren in the hall one day and casually asked him if he could think of anyone. How many names Red gave him I don't know, but one of them was mine—a gutsy gamble by him, and then by Washington. And so off to Puget Sound, about as far away as possible from New Haven.

A final word on the subject from which I have slid off into parentheses—Red's vocation. Two products of it, in some ways alike but both different enough from the expectable elements of a literary career to prove an extraordinary creative range, are beautifully spaced just about fifty years apart. One might call them the alpha and omega of the writer's life, except that the omega time is not yet. The study of John Brown in 1929 is surely the alpha, but the study of Jefferson Davis in 1980 is hardly a terminus. How nicely these studies balance out—the history of the northerner who hoped to start a revolution but died before the war he helped precipitate, and the history of the southerner who, unfitted though he was for the task, had to "manage what was, in one sense, a revolution," and a war; and to survive it, with little happiness, for a quarter of a century. And how nicely, too, the characters balance

out—the fanatic and the logician. Ironically enough, the logician survives better in memory; the fanatic, who knows no law but his own will, exhausts his imaginative impact in his own time. Red's work on Brown might be called "The Unmaking of a Martyr." In a quite other way Red reversed his first subject: the Browns came from Connecticut, and John got to the South via the Midwest. I wish I had read the Warren *John Brown* when it first appeared—just a year after Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body*. It just might have added something to my presentation of the Benet work, which in the early thirties was required reading in our freshman course at the University of Maine.

It may seem a combination of excessive pernicketyness and sheer banality to say that the *John Brown* is not as good as the *Jefferson Davis*. Yet even in the earlier work there is much of the echt Warren—the dominantly direct narrative style, with nothing purple or pretentious; the concretely imaged scenes and looks of people and things; the occasional magnificent description, as that of Brown's prosecutor; the dry observations; the ironic perceptions; the snatches of wit, with now and then, cliché though the combination is, the wisdom that one wants to feel is beyond the writer's years. (And speaking of years, I was delighted to see Red calling Brown, then in his 50s, an "old man.") There is always the penetrating moral sense that never announces itself with a fanfaronade, and the grasp of the convoluted self-deceiver in Brown which restrains what might be pure polemic. Good as this first work is, we miss a steady control of style and form: the writing is not always graceful, the focus slips, the historical narrative is not always clear, the structural lines are at times more bulgy than crisp.

It is by the control of form that the Davis piece achieves excellence and I believe distinction. It is not merely that it comes fifty years after *John Brown*; that is too simple. Its virtue—any work's virtue—is not an automatic product of half a century, a fiftieth-anniversary gift of the gods. Time does not guarantee grace. Red might have peaked at twenty-four, as many do. In the Davis narrative there is rather an achieved quality, the spontaneous imagination nurtured by experiences, yes, but, more than that, governed by disciplined striving. Well, these words may be a more than usually futile effort to describe quality. In brief, Davis, a very complex man, is portrayed by an equally complex art. Warren multiplies perspectives or context or framework; there are more points of view than in *Wuthering Heights*, but they all belong to

one narrator. They are all on leash. There is the frame of the young boy listening to a grandfather who is seen in his local context. There is the frame of the second Jeff Davis, the sad hometown ne'er-do-well. There is the frame of Guthrie and its ways of creating the narrator's "uninstructed southernism." There is the frame of the monument story, which began when the narrator was ten or eleven and went on for many years. There is the meditative frame: what are monuments for? There is the frame of World War I. Take away these frames, of which the reader is periodically reminded, and the direct portrait of Davis is a different thing, perhaps a lesser thing. And then within the portrait itself there are other framings, improbable as my imagery may sound: the sketches of Lincoln, of Lee; the ironic linkages with Simon Buckner, Zachary Taylor, John Brown, Gerrit Smith, and others; the national context, the minglings of attitude in both South and North; the frame of the twentieth-century line of vision, of political principles and war-time practice, of conflicting theories of war; and finally back to the first personal frame of the narrator, now merged with the new frame of the modern celebrations which only thinly echo the celebrated; and then the new personal frame, that of the family graves. I sink into catalogue, I fear; I do not try to show how these diverse perspectives work; I omit much that is important; I only assert the unity. Well, if I am lucky, this sketch of what I take to be the *unum e pluribus* may suggest something of the combined substance and elegance of the Davis study.

But I must return, for a closer, to my assigned subject, which is not so much the work as the man, and indeed the man in that distant no man's land, or everyman's growing land, between minority and middle age. In my recollections of the man I fear I have been mostly knee-deep in trivia. But when the trivia concern a big man, they lose, I hope, something of their triviality. And I hope that, however peripherally, they may help evoke the image of a young man who at the time seemed a little more than the common man celebrated in modern myth. In retrospect we can see clearly what we did not all spot at the time—the creative energy that would still be surging long beyond threescore and ten. He was, and is, the gentleman who has an uncommon sense of the ungentleness of the human tribe. Know what he may, he still remains among the artists that, in Elizabeth Bowen's words, "were intended to be an ornament to society." But not through not seeing through it when it needed seeing through. And not only society, since it is for all of us

that he can ask, in that summer-afternoon hypnotic state that brings certain truths to the surface, "Was this / The life that all those years I lived, and did not know?" So one remembers John Stuart Mill's claiming for himself a "large tolerance for one-eyed men, provided their one eye is a penetrating one: if they saw more, they would probably not see so keenly." Red saw, and sees, not only keenly, but more.

*Robert B. Heilman delivered this talk on the morning of 29 October 1980 in the Department of Special Collections, King Library North, at the University of Kentucky's Robert Penn Warren 75th Birthday Symposium.