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A Conversation with Lewis P. Simpson

WILLIAM BEDFORD CLARK AND JAMES A. GRIMSHAW, JR.

Robert Penn Warren once called Lewis Simpson “one of the best intellectual minds in literary studies in the twentieth century.” As author of such works as The Dispossessed Garden and The Fable of the Southern Writer, and as co-editor of the second series of the Southern Review, he has made a lasting contribution to American letters. In anticipation of the centennial of Robert Penn Warren’s birth, we met with Professor Simpson in his home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on May 24, 2004. What follows is a condensed version of our conversation on that occasion. As former graduate students, we had stayed in touch with Lewis and visited him and his gracious wife Mimi whenever we returned to Baton Rouge, but this visit was to be different. In a sense, we were back in the seminar room, asking questions and getting answers, benefiting once more from the deep learning, vast experience, and characteristic insights of our mentor.

JAG: You and Donald E. Stanford were editors of the new series of the *Southern Review*,

which began publication in the mid-1960s. The story of how the *Review* began in 1935 is legendary now and preserved in Thomas W. Cutrer's *Parnassus on the Mississippi*. Was the resurrection of the magazine as dramatic? How did it begin? What were your goals?

LPS: It was in 1963. The president at that time – we still had a president on this campus, rather than a chancellor – had appointed as provost Nate Caffee, a professor of English. Both men were interested in showcasing the university. In particular, Caffee wanted to revive the *Southern Review*. That had been talked about through the years, but they never seemed to find any funds for it. This time the administration decided to provide the funds. Thus Caffee had a primary role in the resumption of the *Review*. Once we got started, it wasn't a great problem to attract contributors because the reputation of the original series was so strong, and of course we knew a number of people were still actively writing who had written for the old magazine. It was much easier to inaugurate the second series because of the reputation of the first. It took about a year or so to get everything organized.

WBC: How consciously did you work at preserving a sense of continuity between the two series?

LPS: Well, it was pretty conscious, perhaps too self-conscious. The original printer was still available, the Franklin Printing firm on Highland Road. They still had the plates for the first series, and we decided to go with them. Since we used the format and type-face of the original series, there was a strong sense of continuity right there.

WBC: I understand you did a lot of consultation with Brooks and Warren.

LPS: Yeah, a good deal, but both of them made a point pretty strongly that they did not want to be considered in any authoritative way as guides for the second series, because it should stand on its own feet, which was proper. But there was a deliberate, self-conscious attempt on our part to make the continuity as strong as possible, and it worked. The *Review* was never a commercially successful effort. Most quarterlies aren't, given the number of subscribers. Brooks and Warren used to joke that they had more subscribers in Japan than in the United States. I don't think that is quite true, but the funding of the magazine through the years had to be primarily through university money. You couldn't support it any other way, so we had some lean years and some fairly good years. It was always a struggle to keep things balanced, and sometimes we didn't really succeed in doing that. I think the *Review* made a place for itself and became an established institution of the university. Support varied, depending on the budget, though generally speaking it was always there. Now at the present time the state is really broke, and I don't know what the future of projects like the *Southern Review* is going to be. It's hard to predict at this point.

JAG: It's not going to become a choice between Mike the Tiger and the *Review* is it?

LPS: Well, I think Mike the Tiger is a lot more secure. They have funded a new cage for Mike, by the way, chiefly through alumni support. And they no longer force the poor tiger to go to football games and roar. In fact, they gave that up a long time ago, as

cruelty to animals. The tiger would be taken to the stadium during games, and his handler would punch him and prod him around until he got to roaring.

WBC: When did you first become aware of Robert Penn Warren?

LPS: Probably not until I read *All the King's Men*. I don't remember exactly, but I remember I didn't know much about him except who he was. I had seen the whole series of the *Southern Review* as an undergraduate, but picking up that book and reading it was what really attracted me to Warren. *All the King's Men* remains essential to Warren's career. Always controversial in the political sense, with the publication of the so-called "restored" edition it has become controversial in a literary sense. After reflection I have come to agree with Joyce Carol Oates that the 1946 edition is what Warren wanted, but now I am afraid it is going to be superseded by the "restored" edition. I don't know if Harcourt will even keep the 1946 version in print. I don't think Warren would have at all approved of the restored version, and certainly not as the definitive version of his novel. Warren always needed editing, and I think he understood that. *World Enough and Time* would have been a better book if he had had a really strong editor for it.

JAG: That was the first novel he did for Random House, and Albert Erskine was there.

LPS: Yes, but Erskine apparently didn't press Warren to edit his novel. I don't know, of course, what happened, but in the case of *All the King's Men* Lambert Davis sort of took control, and I think Warren recognized that he needed that editing. The so-called "restored" edition shows that Warren was right. I don't know if you read Oates's article

on this edition or not; I think it came out in the *New York Review of Books*.

JAG: It was a blistering review.

LPS: Yes, I think essentially Oates is right. She is a novelist who has done all kinds of unorthodox things, but she is also a very good critic. She also is one who writes constantly, day after day after day, and turns out reams of stuff. A little bit like Warren in that respect. Somebody once said Warren was a decathlon champion in American literature, since he worked in so many different forms. Oates is somewhat like that. At any rate, she responded to the new edition with dismay and wrote that blistering article about it.

WBC: When did you first meet Warren?

LPS: I don't think I met him personally until around 1963, when he came back for a visit to Louisiana. He left Louisiana with, I suppose, a good deal of bitterness. The way I got the story, when I was trying to run down a complete file of the *Southern Review* for our office, they simply refused to up Warren's salary a small amount and he took an offer from Minnesota and left. He probably would have stayed because at that time he had just bought a house in the Prairieville area. He loved it down there, and he didn't want to leave. I think he was sincere when he said later that he had found his dream house and wanted to make his whole life there. But it didn't work out, so he left and felt he had been rejected by the South. Perhaps he was romanticizing the whole thing a little bit. But from then on he took the attitude that he was in exile from the South and wasn't welcome

there.

WBC: You met him on a trip he made back to Baton Rouge?

LPS: He was asked to give a lecture, but I think part of the idea was to promote the renewal of the magazine, so he came down. He spoke to a very large audience over in the Union – on T.S. Eliot. He prefaced his remarks with the statement “After Louisiana, nothing has been real.” That brought the house down.

JAG: Charles East has done some research on the houses that Warren lived in while he was at LSU, and you mention that in your wonderful essay “The Loneliness Artist.”

LPS: Yes, Charles is an authority on Baton Rouge. Early on, Warren lived near where we are now. That house is still standing, but it’s been repainted, refurbished a bit, so it doesn’t look the same anymore. But when I first saw it, it was about the same as when Warren lived in it. This area wasn’t yet built up, and it was sort of out in the country. I think that appealed to Warren; he always wanted to be out of town – as he had been when he taught at Vanderbilt. Cinina and Red lived in this rented house for about two years before Warren got a little money and moved out on the Old Hammond Highway, on what is now the McMains estate. He built a little house there with the help of an out-of-work carpenter. He even built the fireplace himself. It’s a very tiny house, but now preserved by the McMains as part of their family compound. Warren lived in this house for some time until he managed to get enough money to buy a place at Prairieville. He lived down there just a few months before he finally decided to leave. I don’t think it

was a year before he left.

JAG: You write about the irony of his love of the South and his leaving it. How do you think his experiences at LSU impacted his writing?

LPS: Well, some of his poems reflect his time in Louisiana, but the primary thing of course was simply the fact that he was here during the time the Second World War was coming on. Hitler and Mussolini were threatening to run the world, and the Great Depression was still in force. That whole time was a very complicated and exciting period, and I think Warren's sense of what was going on in Louisiana during the Huey Long era connected with his sense of what was happening in Italy, where he also lived for a time. In fact, he barely got out of Italy before the Second World War caught him. Before he turned to writing *All the King's Men*, he tried to write a play called *Proud Flesh*. The play never seemed to work for him. Eventually, he turned the story of Long over to a character who resembled himself, Jack Burden. I suppose Burden was the single most important character he had yet created. *All the King's Men* finally appeared about ten years after Huey Long's assassination. Things had changed a lot, but the novel vividly reflected what had happened during the 1930s.

WBC: You came to know Warren and Brooks very well, didn't you?

LPS: Well, I knew Cleanth better in the sense that I was with him a good deal in person. I think both men were inveterate conversationalists. Both of them loved to talk. Cleanth,

who had a very articulate, very cultivated, voice, was the better talker. I never saw anybody who loved to talk more than Cleanth. His nephew told me that not long before Cleanth died some people there at Yale wanted to come by and see him. The nephew arranged for Cleanth to be brought downstairs to his living room, and he sat there and talked as if he were not ill at all. No one was so revived by conversation as he was. He died a few days later, not long after that. I remember being with Cleanth once up in New England, in Portland, Maine, where the Southern Renaissance was discussed. A lot of people came and went, and for three or four days an awful lot of talking went on. When I rode back with Cleanth on a plane to Boston, he urged me to go home with him, to change my ticket and go with him to New Haven. He said we could sit and talk. We'd been talking for days, and I had to get back to Baton Rouge. That was typical of him. He thought it would be a great opportunity to just sit and talk. I think conversation had a primary meaning for him. Something that was as much a part of him as his writing, perhaps even more a part of him than his writing. I think that is one reason his writing is so informal, so very clear and direct for a critic. He doesn't go in for jargon. There is a kind of colloquialism that was as much a part of his make-up as his cultivated voice and manner. Warren was different, of course. I suppose he wasn't what I'd call a great conversationalist, but he did love to talk. He at times used to dominate the conversation; he had a magnetic kind of quality.

JAG: Warren maintained his Southern accent, and some people had difficulty understanding him.

LPS: He was hard to understand.

JAG: Was that ever difficult for you?

LPS: I didn't notice it in particular. I did notice it at times when I heard him on the platform and the audience wasn't getting what he said. He didn't articulate clearly for a general audience.

WBC: What do you suppose it was about the chemistry between those two people that made for such a fruitful collaboration over such a long period of time?

LPS: I don't know. When I did *The Possibilities of Order*, a tribute to Cleanth, I asked Warren to write something. He said he couldn't; he felt too close to Cleanth. But he suggested the idea of a conversation with Cleanth, and I published that – a kind of continuation of the “long conversation” he and Cleanth had maintained over so many years. Warren would pursue a subject as a way of pursuing his own relationship with Cleanth. Now Cleanth was a very religious man, and Warren was an agnostic at best. You sort of wonder how they got along together, but agnosticism never seemed to interfere with their friendship. Really amazing. I have never solved that puzzle. You would have thought they would have had some bitter disputes, but they didn't.

WBC: What was Warren like as a contributor to the *Southern Review*? You published quite a bit of his work, both prose and poetry. Was he an ideal contributor or was he a difficult person to work with?

LPS: No, he was never difficult to work with. A lot of my relationship with Warren was on the telephone. His handwriting was difficult to read, and his postcards were even more difficult at times, though he liked to communicate with postcards. So we talked on the phone a good deal. He was difficult in the sense that at times he did not know where he had sent manuscripts. He'd send things out without keeping a record of where he sent them. He phoned once and said he wanted to apologize because a poem that we had just published had appeared at the same time in the *New Republic*. He had forgotten he had sent it both places. I said, "If the *New Republic* doesn't care, we don't care." It wasn't a real problem. He said, "My wife is giving me hell about this." An editor just couldn't keep up with him. When he gave the Jefferson Lectures at the Library of Congress, he sent me the whole thing. I agreed to print the first part, and wrote him to that effect. A few days after the magazine was already in press, I got a frantic call from his agent, Owen Laster, who said according to the contract with Harvard Warren wasn't supposed to publish any of his lecture separately. I said I was sorry, but nothing could be done about it, and he said he would do the best he could to straighten it out. He sounded resigned, like he had done this before. Sort of amusing. Nothing really became of this. Warren would forget where he had sent things, I think, because he was writing so much.

JAG: Can you elaborate on the view of Warren as "exile" that you present in your essay "The Loneliness Artist"?

LPS: I think in times past I have tried to deal with that theme in a broader way, the modern writer as exile. A common theme, and of course James Joyce is the prime

example. The sense of exile, of being out of place, not having a place to come to, is a common theme in modern writers, and you can find it in one way or the other in so many of them that it almost seems to be their chief subject. I think it has to do with the whole question of the self and the artist and the intense emphasis placed on the self. Warren was finally obsessed with that subject. The self isolated by the fact that it has nothing to do but seek its own identity. We might put it that way. Of course, you can always contrast this situation with that of the artist of the Middle Ages working all his life on the great cathedral, never associating his name with that work at all. Pretty anonymous sort of work. Perhaps in that sense Dante was the first modern writer as “artist.” The writer is an exile, as Dante literally was. The theme appears more strongly when you get to the writers of a later period, including Marlowe and Shakespeare. I think of *Hamlet*, for example. By the time you get to John Donne, it becomes codified in his poetry.

WBC: It’s interesting that you couple Warren and Dante’s names there. Would you like to speculate a little more on the relationship between those two? Because Dante was a figure, like Shakespeare, that seems to have shaped Warren’s career from the beginning.

LPS: Yes, I recall he was reading Dante in the original when he made his first trip to Italy. Wasn’t he?

WBC: And I think he and Robert Lowell would shut themselves up in the *Southern Review* offices and read Dante together here at LSU. Dante was very conscious of the role of the poet and how he fits into a tradition, and he also had a firm sense of the poet as a

public man, as someone who had a role to play in gauging the health and charting the direction of the larger society.

LPS: Warren certainly made a big try at this subject in the Jefferson Lectures, which reflected the whole business of the Vietnam conflict and the sense of a loss of direction in American democracy in the Nixon and Johnson eras and so on. The central figure in the American experience for Warren, to be sure, was Jefferson. In an interview, I think it was with Ralph Ellison back in the 1950s, Warren says that America was invented overnight by one man in an upper room in a hotel in Philadelphia. That man was Thomas Jefferson, writing the Declaration of Independence. Of course, that's just a mythical way of going about it, but he attributed to Jefferson the elevation of the sense of self to a point where the realization of the democratic self became the key to the future. But had the "Great Experiment" worked? I think Warren began to feel that the Great Experiment hadn't worked. I have the feeling that for Warren his sense of this failure became more and more personal, that indeed he began to identify his own failures with the failure of the Great Experiment. I'm trying to write a book now called "Imagining Our Time." Though it deals with writers from the 1920s through the 1950s, it begins with Thomas Jefferson and comes down to Walker Percy. The whole issue of the authority of the written word came into question with Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration to be read aloud and not necessarily to be printed. But what *made* the Declaration, of course, was the fact that it was printed over and over. And as time went on the authority of the written word in America became even more primary because the Constitution of the United States has to be read and reread and interpreted and reinterpreted forever. Thus the authority of the

printed word in America has been decisive. After all, the interpretation and reinterpretation of the Constitution is a daily affair. Its meaning depends on its “wording,” how you interpret this.

WBC: Sometimes it comes down to a vote of 5 to 4. But I’d like to shift gears just a little bit, Lewis. I know you knew Warren and Allen Tate both on a personal basis. Would you like to speculate on the relationship between those two people, those two strong personalities? Did you ever see them together?

LPS: I can’t recall if I ever saw them together. Tate was a very difficult person. I think in the old Fugitive days Tate was a dominating figure, along with John Crowe Ransom. Tate was older than Warren, and he was very precocious, and I think Warren probably both admired and feared him in a way. But through the years Warren’s sense of the writer and the writer’s responsibility was in some ways pretty close to Tate’s.

WBC: Tate in a sense railroaded the awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound, and Robert Penn Warren was on the jury that awarded the prize. I have always thought that might have had something to do with the fact that Warren never got the Nobel. What is your take on that controversy? Do you remember when it was exploding in the pages of the *Saturday Review*?

LPS: I don’t think I took sides. I remember it, but not vividly. Pound, of course, was

another example of the alienated artist in an extreme way. His dedication to literature was profound, but his sense of politics got him into a real mess when he tried to identify with Mussolini. I don't know. It's hard to say whether he was as cranky a "fool head" as they called him, that is, to say where his genius began and his foolishness started. But Pound's sense of poetry, I think, was highly respected by a good many people. That led to the awarding of the prize and all that controversy.

WBC: Why do you suppose Warren never received the Nobel? It seems to me he would have been a natural throughout the 1970s and 80s. Do you have any theory as to why he was passed over?

LPS: I think for one thing his Agrarianism probably stuck in the craw of some people. Although he had long since repudiated his early support for segregation, it might have been just enough to keep a good many of those Nobel judges from awarding him the prize. The Nobel Prize has become very political.

JAG: As a reader, especially as a critical reader with a very deep sense of history, what do you see as the weaknesses of Warren's work and what do you see as his strengths?

LPS: Well, he did so many different kinds of writing that it's hard to make a generalization. His weaknesses as a novelist, I think, simply come from the fact that he often had no firm sense of the structure of what he was doing, and he was not a very good judge at times of his own efforts.

WBC: You think the novels grew weaker as his career progressed? Was it possible he

was simply moving into a different mode?

LPS: He told me once that *Meet Me in the Green Glen* was one of his strongest novels. Well, it isn't. It just isn't. I don't know how much critical sense he had of his own work. He could write a wonderful essay on Joseph Conrad, but he couldn't do the same thing for his own work. I don't know. Perhaps most novelists couldn't.

JAG: He thought *Flood* was a good novel too.

LPS: I think it is in some ways a very interesting novel, whereas *Meet Me in the Green Glen* is not really very interesting.

WBC: Do you think he will be remembered mostly as a poet or a novelist?

LPS: Well, I'm pretty sure it will be as a poet. There will always be a place for *All the King's Men*, of course, but then again I'm not so sure anymore, because I believe with Joyce Carol Oates that they made a big mistake when they decided that the restored version, with all the flaws it has in it, was the stronger work. I don't think it is. As I say, the whole question of Warren as self-editor comes up, and he probably was a better judge of his poetry than he was of his novels. In this connection, I am reminded of the time Warren expressed great interest in my remark that when Warren's persona, Jack Burden, says at the end of his story of Willie Stark that he going to assume responsibility for history, he is in effect doing what Willie Stark did. Believing that he is acting for the good of his fellow citizens, Willie allows his means to corrupt his ends, and in doing so is

guilty of the greatest of sins, intellectual pride. That is to say, in the Enlightenment version of this sin, pride in the perfectibility of man. In contrast, Warren's long poem *Brother to Dragons* – in which the story of Thomas Jefferson is told by another Warren persona, RPW – embodies more explicitly and more forcefully Warren's distrust of the Enlightenment dogma about the perfectibility of man. Unlike the unsophisticated Willie Stark, Jefferson is depicted as the highly self-conscious author of the Declaration of Independence. In his act of writing this document, in this act of mind, Jefferson is portrayed as taking on himself the responsibility for inventing a nation. The nature and the meaning of this act preoccupied Warren for the rest of his life, as, never satisfied with his poem, he revised it over and over. When he finally published a completely revised or “new” version of his Jefferson poem, he was not satisfied with that either. It was as though Warren was continually haunted by the author of the Declaration of Independence. More than his sense of relation to Jack Burden, Warren's sense of his intimate relation to RPW may be viewed, I think, as a major key to his multifaceted career as poet, novelist, dramatist, and essayist – that is as a major twentieth-century American man of letters.

WBC: One of the things that faces every writer after his death is the problem of canonicity; the writer is now no longer producing, not a visible presence on the literary scene. Where do you see Warren today in terms of American literature and can you predict where he is likely to be?

LPS: That whole business of canonicity has become a political football. I have never paid

much attention to it. How do you establish it? Simply through textbooks? It is true, you know, that writers tend to come and go in popularity and that some periods at times seem more important than others. Henry James was not always recognized as the great genius in American fiction. William Dean Howells was recognized, canonized you might say. He was at one time an indisputable part of the American canon. Now, it is hard to find anybody to defend that estimate. Actually, many of Howells's novels, if you go back and read them, are really remarkable and very subtle, as subtle as James in some ways. I don't know. It's a matter of taste. Howells was always criticized for writing about the smiling aspects of life. But he wrote about many dark things too.

JAG: Authors do get their entree by being taught in the classroom.

LPS: Yes, through their presence in the textbooks. You notice the changes. Who puts Longfellow in the American canon anymore? He is a very interesting poet, a very interesting writer, but he is generally not admitted to the canon anymore. He's part of the history, but not part of the canon.

JAG: So many teachers rely on the textbooks, and then authors are dropped out or, in Warren's case, not included.

LPS: Yes, they dropped Warren. Victor Strandberg gave an eloquent speech about that at a Warren conference here in Baton Rouge. Of course, there were a bunch of Warren fans there, and the speech went over great, but I don't know if Strandberg's attitude exists

to any extent in the larger world or not.

JAG: Random House doesn't seem to keep his books in print anymore. University presses are picking them up in part. It's not fair to ask you for a prediction, but I guess I'll do it anyway. How do you see Warren's future as it looks right now?

LPS: Well, it wouldn't seem too promising, but I always wonder what's the future of literature in this world anyway, the world we live in now. It may become a peripheral activity, in spite of the fact that people apparently read more fiction than they ever did before. If you look at the *New York Times Book Review*, you see that a lot of fiction is just trash, books that are promoted or not promoted because they will make money. No, what gets promoted is sort of accidental.

JAG: The Library of America contracted recently with Philip Roth to do eight volumes for the series, and Roth, of course, is still a living author. It strikes me odd that Warren does not have a single volume there.

LPS: I haven't heard that. I never was much of a Roth reader myself; he seems pretty thin. He certainly has an enthusiastic following. But you get strange things with a book like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It still sells. A single work like that sometimes lasts over the years. Do they belong in the canon or not? It all becomes a matter of defining what the canon means. It's almost a metaphysical question, it seems to me.

WBC: One of the things, I suppose, that many people hold against Warren's work,

especially his fiction, though it often applies to his poetry, is his sense of melodrama. It seems to be over the top for a lot of people. Do you think this is a legitimate criticism or do you think maybe he was working at a tradition where melodrama is not just legitimate, but necessary?

LPS: I think he regarded melodrama as a legitimate way of doing things, seeing things. After all, there is a lot of melodrama in Shakespeare. I know that's a pretty common charge against Warren, that he is too melodramatic, but that's one of those questions that depends on how you define melodrama, whether it is simply regarded as a kind of sorry theater. The American stage is full of melodrama.

WBC: Well, reality is melodramatic.

LPS: Yes, very much so.

JAG: I think Warren made that point in the Introduction to the Modern Library edition of *All the King's Men*.

WBC: He certainly said living in Louisiana was melodrama.

JAG: When we were here at LSU, Bedford, I remember a noonday radio broadcast where someone was mad at the governor and challenged him to a duel on the steps of the capitol. That was in the early 1970s, and I don't think things have changed.

LPS: Earl Long was just as melodramatic a figure on his own as his brother was. His

shenanigans at times were amusing and at times a pretty sorry spectacle. Like Huey, he had the sense of politics as melodrama, and he could captivate an audience, not with the same kind of eloquence as Huey, but he could do it.

WBC: I'm struck by what Bo said awhile back about the Library of America bringing out eight volumes of Philip Roth, which seems like eight volumes too many to me. There is certainly a preoccupation with sexuality in Warren. It is very pervasive, and his last novel, *A Place to Come To*, was criticized because Warren seemed almost obsessed with his protagonist's sexual conquests. Yet Warren's treatment of sexuality is much more serious and he understands sexuality to be a matter of consequence, as opposed to Roth, who sees it as recreational and almost a way of indulging himself. Walker Percy talks about that kind of fornication as a way to prove to yourself that you're still here. Want to dive into those waters?

LPS: Not especially. I think you're right.

WBC: The adulteries in Warren matter. The adulteries in Roth don't matter.

LPS: Yes, I see what you mean. It is true that in Warren the depiction of sex always seems to border on the question of sin. I'm thinking of that business in *Flood*, where the protagonist is attracted to the blind gal and discovers that's she not as pure as he thought she was, which greatly disturbs him. He had a sense of being betrayed, though he should have known better. I don't know how much the novel turns on that, but it seems to play an important part in the latter part of the novel.

WBC: Well, betrayal is certainly a big theme in Warren: the betrayal of friendship, children betraying parents, husbands betraying wives, politicians betraying the public trust.

LPS: Yes, it's always there.

WBC: Warren is an interesting writer because he was from a border state and also a state that not only evolved a Southern identity, but retained a sense of its pioneer past, its frontier past. That's also true of Texas, your home state.

LPS: Very much so.

WBC: Is there perhaps an affinity between your own thinking and writing and Warren's, in the sense that you are Southerners, but also Westerners?

LPS: I think you feel that. I was having a conversation with Walter Sullivan and his wife Jane when I was up in Nashville once. Jane is quite a student of the history of Nashville. She was telling me something about it. I sensed I felt an affinity with Tennessee because a good many Tennesseans became Texans through migration. There is that affinity, and not just because of Davy Crockett.

WBC: I am thinking about what Allen Tate said about a literary renaissance as a phenomenon, how the artist, especially the writer, in a period of great turmoil is like the Roman god Janus, with one face that looks forward and another that looks backward.

I'm wondering if Kentuckians and Tennesseans and Texans, as Southerners, have a backward glance, but at the same time, as Westerners, are always envisioning the future, which means they have a certain skeptical attitude toward both utopianism and nostalgia. That seems to be a characteristic your work shares with Warren's.

LPS: I don't know. At times I probably have been given to nostalgia.

WBC: Not like some people I can mention.

JAG: Affinity or not, Warren certainly gave you credit for being one of the best critical thinkers he knew.

LPS: He was very kind to me.

JAG: He did not pass out compliments lightly.

William Bedford Clark is Professor of English at Texas A&M University and general editor of the Robert Penn Warren Correspondence Project.

James A. Grimshaw, Jr., though retired, still teaches one philosophy class per semester and continues as general editor of the Sam Rayburn Series on Rural Life at Texas A&M University-Commerce; most recently he edited the Robert Penn Warren documentary volume for the Dictionary of Literary Biography.