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Reminiscences of Robert Penn Warren

Reading Joseph Blotner's biography revives my memories of Mr. Warren. I was summoned to his rooms at Silliman College on September 5, 1969. I was a freckled, red-haired eighteen year-old in whom he may have seen an apparition from his past.

"Show me the poems you wrote this summer," he demanded.

I produced a sheaf of ragged verse horribly derivative of Dylan Thomas. Glancing through them he pronounced "Boy, these poems don't scan."

"Scan?" I asked, mystified.

"You don't know how to scan? What are they teaching you boys these days?" He strode to the blackboard and wrote Donne's sonnet 'If Poysonous Mineralls.' He then scanned and recited the poem, so overstressing every sibilant that he sprayed spittle on the chalk. John Donne made Red Warren salivate.

Over the course of the next hour I received the only formal training in poetics I ever got. I asked him why he didn't teach courses in poetry.

"Can't be taught. Either you've got it or you don't. You do, but you need to be immersed in verse; and the only way is memorization. Next week you'll recite me the first 109 lines of *Paradise Lost* and show me your new poems."

The second week he listened to my recitation, then leafed through the poems and said "These are good, boy, but what I really want to see are the poems you write during examination week. Next Wednesday you will recite the entirety of Book I, *Paradise Lost*."

"But that's 800 lines!" I complained.

"Metre and rhyme are powerful mnemonic devices, and I'm training your memory." Eventually I would memorize some 30,000 lines for him.

The first time he took me home to Fairfield was Thanksgiving of that year. As he drove the Range Rover down the Merritt Parkway in sloppy snow he growled "Boy, have you been reading Thomas Hardy?"

"I've been reading his *Selected Poems*."

"Boy, I've been reading his *Collected Poems*."

Lesson given, lesson taken. When we arrived at the farm Eleanor was off collecting Gabe and Rosanna from their schools. Hungry, Mr. Warren prepared a bowl of steak tartare and filled two neat glasses with sour mash. Glancing at the new poems he said "Boy, the first line of a poem has to grab you by the throat and say *Poetry* the same way this Jack Daniels grabs your throat and says *Whiskey*."

Weekends at the Warrens' home were convivial affairs where I met people named Cheever, Styron, Steegmuller, people who thought North Dakota was an Indian Reservation. The big house was perched on Redding Road atop an ample slope of pasture fringed with hardwoods where I walked the dog and smoked, no matter how cold it was outside. I asked Mr. Warren whether his hatred of the vice was due to his

having smoked himself. "Smoke, boy? Hell I invented it!"

Over breakfast I pestered him with questions: "What do you think of *Finnegans Wake*?"

"A very grave mistake by a very great artist."

"What do you think of Elizabeth Bishop?"

"No fire in the belly."

"But Mr. Warren, what about her translations of Carlos Drummond de Andrade?"

"Not her belly, boy."

Other weekends we travelled. I remember peregrinations on snowshoe around his Vermont retreat. I recall a Thanksgiving dinner at Professor Brooks' home, an eighteenth century farmhouse lovingly removed from upper New England and reassembled board by board in the hills above New Haven. The antique beams were so low that I had to stoop, and I remember William Wimsatt who was seven feet tall propping his chin on one of those beams and gazing down on the proceedings like a curious, great horned owl.

In 1972 Mr. Warren was in Europe, and his liver nearly failed. Yale flew him home by ambulance jet, and I went to see him. His color was jaundiced. I read him poems which revealed my homosexuality. He retorted "That has no place in poetry!" It was the most stinging rebuke I'd ever received from any man other than my father. Two weeks later my parents attended my graduation. One of their first dates at the University of Minnesota was the stage debut of *All The King's Men*. I took them to the hospital where they thanked Mr. Warren for fostering so wayward a boy.

For a man of such scholarly attainment, Warren held academia in contempt. Once I was sitting at Sterling Library's book return desk with twelve books about Wallace Stevens. When Warren walked up I asked which ones I should read. He said "Send those books back to the stacks, and read Wallace Stevens for yourself."

His advice was infallible. "If you're going to persist in this mad pursuit of meter and rhyme, you better get in touch with Dickie Wilbur, 'cause he's the best man we've got."

I asked him to recommend me for the post of poet-in-residence at Phillips Exeter. He flatout refused. "You've spent your life surrounded by juvenile minds, and that's the last thing you need. If I had it to do over again, I'd never be an academic. Go home boy. Buy a farm. Sink your toes in that rich soil, and grow some roots." Lesson given, lesson taken.

Those two pieces of advice set the course of my life. My struggles as a farmer animate the best of my work. Dick Wilbur proved to be as unfailingly kind and generous as Mr. Warren was. But as our master prosodist he was better able to guide me through the metrical thickets in which I entangled myself. During my tutelage Mr. Warren was finishing *Audubon*, a dark, difficult poem, for which I no longer have much affection. Did a boy's laughter in his field lighten the load he bore? Did that boy's stumbling, fumbling attempts at prosody amuse him? I hope so. These days when lads bring me

verses, I begin “Boy, this doesn’t scan.”

Teachers transmit knowledge, but a great teacher seduces and infuses young minds with passion for learning. By force of personality he manipulates pliant lives. Robert Penn Warren was a great teacher.