

## Interview with Eleanor Clark and Robert Penn Warren

*The directions to their summer home in West Wardsboro were typical for this part of the country, involving not streets and numbers but landmarks. We looked for a sign: "Road Washed Out at Times" and proceeded seven miles and some tenths of another. We turned right between the white church and the town hall. More miles and tenths, then, we passed "The Tidies" — a tidy house familiar to readers of Eleanor Clark's recent memoir, *Eyes, Etc.* Then, the primary landmark appeared: Gabriel Warren's seagoing boat, looking like Noah's ark washed up, inexplicably, in Vermont. The sign for the house was scarcely legible, handpainted: "Warren." We drove our jeep up the dirt drive to their large, open home. Eleanor (Mrs. Warren) leaned over the porch railing, overhead: "Want a swim? Red's down at the pond and just got wet. You might as well join him." Delighted, we abandoned tape recorder and notebooks and followed her down the path to a cold pond, locked in trees. "Red" Warren waved, mid-stroke, not wanting to break his pace. Half an hour later, not wishing to conduct the first aquatic literary interview, we returned to the broad, screened-in porch overlooking an expanse of Vermont hills. There was a light breeze. Mrs. Warren gave us iced tea in metal goblets, and the Warrens joshed each other constantly. One sensed an enormous fondness between them, a sane, deeply felt stability of affection. "Red" Warren settled into a deep chair, sunbrowned, whimsical. He was lean and flexible. Eleanor Warren, in spite of poor eyesight, moved gracefully. She spoke with obvious wit and fire, sitting next to us on a couch, smoking. We slipped into the interview naturally: the water there was the same temperature as the air before.*

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*NER:* What is the degree to which you influence one another? When you're working on a piece of writing, is it something that you like to do, so to speak, in a private space, or is it something that you take to your husband from time to time for criticism, and vice-versa?

*Eleanor Clark:* I'm sure that we agree on that: we don't influence each other at all.

*Robert Penn Warren:* Never. I don't even know what she's doing now. I hear a remote rumor that she's in the middle of a novel. I have to get my information from other people, or overhear what she says on the telephone. That's about the extent of our cooperation.

*NER:* Is that true with respect to your own work?

*RPW:* Almost always.

*NER:* How about in the penultimate phase . . . ?

*RPW:* She likes to tell me what she does and does not like when it's finished. I hardly ever show her anything beforehand.

*NER:* You would see a draft before it went off to the publisher, or not?

*EC:* He usually has seen drafts of my things, more than the other way around, because as you know he's an extremely prolific fellow, and if I read everything he does in drafts, well, to begin with, I'd get much too involved in it, and get upset and agitated as if it were my own, and secondly, there's such a lot of it that I never would do anything of my own if I . . .

*RPW:* . . . started to improve things.

*NER:* So you do need private space?

*EC:* Oh absolutely, we don't work in the house at all, either here or in Connecticut: you just passed his little coop down there by the swimming pond, and my work cabin is way across the road over there, in an old hunters' camp.

*NER:* So when a book is just beginning, you also need psychological space, because to talk about it would be to ruin the spell.

*EC:* We're the opposite that way. Red has always liked to talk about his ideas. To me, that's really appalling. If I talk anything out, I feel it's gone, and I think I'm usually right.

*RPW:* I wouldn't dare start telling a novel to you though, darling . . .

*EC:* Oh Red, that sounds so unfriendly.

*RPW:* Oh no, it's not unfriendly at all. It's just not in the cards.

We could talk about *Oedipus Rex* or Shakespeare, but not about each other's work — at least, not in that way.

NER: Won't you ever talk, say, about a novel you're working on?

RPW: To taxi drivers, and anybody else, I'll tell stories over and over again. It's a way of developing an idea. But never discuss them with my wife. And in late years I find myself talking less and less to anybody, or showing things. That belongs to youth. Eleanor and I have too much to talk about outside of literature anyway.

EC: Outside of our *own* literature. Other people's we talk about quite a lot; we talk shop in that sense.

NER: Still, no matter how divergent your individual writings may be from one another, there do seem to be common concerns. One thing that seems to me directly shown in Mr. Warren's work, and implied, at least obliquely, in your work, is a concern — sometimes a dismay — that *historical* awareness seems to be fading from current culture, perhaps especially among young people, even well educated ones.

EC: That's a concern yes, but one, I would say, that is shared by a lot of people, *including* young people. People talk about these jaded times, as opposed to the active sixties, but we see a lot of young people, our childrens' friends, ex-students of Red's that we're very close to — we see loads of young people all the time, and most seem extraordinarily concerned with social developments, and so with what could be called historical development. Not perhaps in sixties fashion, but the concern still goes very deep.

There is one odd similarity between us. Red is, as you know, a Southerner, and I am absolutely a Yankee, but both of us come from backgrounds with a very strong sense of community, he in the rural south and I in a village in Connecticut, a place of small farms at that time. This gives us a highly similar view of a world of non-community, to put it grossly.

NER: I guess that may be what I was getting at. At one point in *Eyes, Etc.*, you write: "Poor doped-up wandering young, who must spit on pity, else would give up altogether, for the first time I think I begin to feel for you in your stinking jeans and sleeping bags. Wild animals have their lairs and rigorous routes to travel. You don't even care if it was Denmark or Afghanistan or the Long Trail you slept on last night, You don't read, so it makes no

difference; anywhere is nowhere." And your husband's latest novel is, of course, *A Place to Come To*. You seem to see connections among place, self and society that those in an a-communal context may miss.

RPW: I think that's just as Eleanor said — that's based on a quest for an old-fashioned American community and a sense of firmly fixed family. By firmly fixed, I mean families that are real families. That makes a vast difference.

EC: Also we both came from families with an extraordinarily perceptive sense of the American past. His grandfathers and my grandfathers — for all their great differences of place — had a similar sense of what the whole American experience was, and would talk about it in similar ways, as we have found out from each other over the years. His were involved in the Civil War, of course, in a way that mine weren't. . .

RPW: They were bounty-jumpers!

EC: They were *not*! That's so unfair! They were too young to be involved. Isn't he mean? This is what we call healing the wounds of fratricidal strife . . .

NER: Does that make you have a certain distaste for mass migrations to the cities here in the last fifty years?

EC: I'd say that whatever distaste I have is very mild compared to that of people like Henry Adams and his brother in their time.

RPW: But their time was what it had to be. You don't keep people starving on the farm when factory jobs are waiting somewhere else. In their time, for economic and technological reasons, the growth of the great city was inevitable. Read Hamlin Garland, read Dreiser. You can't change the way the world goes. You can observe both its benefits and disasters. My grandfather said there were only two good things about the modern world — fly screens and painless dentistry. I admit a few more, but we're caught, the whole western world, in the same picture. What Europeans refer to as "Americanization," and detest so, is simply part of *their* world, the whole world of modern technology.

Jacques Ellul, the French philosopher and sociologist, has said what many people — from Kierkegaard at least on — have been saying for a long time, that you find more and more a death of *responsible personality*. Ellul says that it's not a matter of a single massive thing, in a world of technology; if you go to a dentist, you're a tooth; if you work in a factory, you are number so-and-so; and in all your relations you are taken out of human context

and put into a mechanical one. The President's advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, said, in an essay some time ago, that the main question is whether or not democracy can exist in a world of technology. His point is that democracy depends upon individual decision, and that technology works at odds with such individualism. Of course, he's a big bureaucrat now, involved in the very mechanism he worried about in the essay . . .

NER: Is there a way in which art — we're talking mostly about literature — can mute this development or forestall it without becoming merely wistful? Isn't that a danger?

EC: Nostalgia *is* a great sickness now.

NER: Or is art drifting, alternatively, off in the direction of being the possession of a small adversary clique which merely decries dehumanization and technology?

EC: That would be more or less the end of art, wouldn't it? I mean, art just can't be in that negative a position and continue to be art. I had to make a speech at my old school recently, and I said that we should be optimistic about American education because it's become so absurdly terrible there's no way to go but up. When you raise a couple of generations of ignoramuses, by and by you're going to get one or two people who want something better, and the same is true in the arts: art cannot get mechanized and contentless beyond a certain point without a reaction setting in. This is partly an interruption of what you're asking, but one of the things that we love about this part of the world, here in Vermont, is that there are still *characters* who are very much that, and we're very devoted to them, to their strong sense of personality.

RPW: It's interesting to me that Eleanor's European attachments, which constitute such a large part of her writing, correspond so thoroughly with her American being. I don't think I've ever said this to her, but if she writes a book about *The Oysters of Locmariacquer* she's writing about a village world, the one that intrigues her here, an old-fashioned world — one with "characteristics."

EC: Nothing irks me more than to hear anybody refer to what they call my "travel books," because I don't write any such thing. My Rome book and my oyster book are both, in one deep aspect, mirror images of America, village or otherwise. I think one who has any pretensions to writing literary work and not merely journalism is always writing out of his own sense of place

and his own country. In falling in love, to choose one example, with the notion of *métier* in the oyster business in France, one was really talking about the lack of a sense of *métier* at home, and how do we live without it, how does any society live without it? And when we fall in love with Rome, we are obviously in love with the past, with history.

NER: To call them other than travel books is, then, to see them as meditations on place and all that that implies . . . I was curious about how the oyster book got started.

EC: That was like falling off a log. We were in Brittany, and I was way into the novel that became *Baldur's Gate*. We arrived at Locmariaquer in late May when all those wonderful tiles were stacked along the shores, waiting to be put out. I had never given an oyster a serious thought in my life, outside a restaurant, and I wondered what those tiles were all about, so I just got curious. And I went inquiring around.

RPW: You were going back to a place, though, where you'd been as a little girl . . .

EC: Well, a different part of Brittany. But I just got more and more drawn into it. Everybody, it turned out, was involved in the oyster business, so of course the talk was continual about it. But it was more or less a plastic thing, too, just the beauty of those white masses . . .

NER: It began with an esthetic response to the tiles. You write so well about the *seen*, so much better than many so-called art critics. I think of your evocations of Cavallini in *Rome and A Villa*, some of the most vivid writing on art objects that I've read.

EC: I'm so glad you mentioned him; I adore those ice-pink wings.

NER: Did you ever consider painting, or writing exclusively about art?

EC: Heavens, no! I never could draw at all. We do have a daughter who does, and our son is a sculptor.

NER: You're an *amateur* in that sense?

EC: If you like. But as a young girl I was mainly engrossed in music. And my pony and field hockey and climbing trees, of course. I'm an outdoors creature. We both are.

NER: I'd like to go back to Mrs. Warren's comment that art couldn't continue to be in a merely adversary posture toward the dominant culture.

EC: Adversary it always is; I meant it couldn't continue to be merely negative. And I can't see it, either, as merely an exploration of the artist's own innards. There has got to be some interplay with all the rest of the show.

NER: Is this in any way at odds with Mr. Warren's thesis in *Democracy and Poetry*?

EC: Red, would you say that it was?

RPW: My point was that there was a real danger that the "public" could become a great Black Hole, a Nothing which is Everything, the individual dying out. What I would like to see, what I hope for, is enough resistance in the human spirit to maintain the world of personality and the world of art: I equate these two things. But that doesn't mean that I advocate an art of pure self-involvement, any more than I advocate fixity of place or subject matter. You have to try to remain human — that's all — and try to carry your humanity with you. No place has a mystical virtue.

NER: And yet the antidote to dehumanization is not, as Mrs. Warren makes clear, a kind of constant inward exploration. As she says in *Eyes, Etc.*, "Verbally we're allowed two forms of discourse, reporting and arguing. In written fiction the rules are narrowing down to plain and fancy — no brains or nothing but. In the latter it's a point of honor for the reader to pretend to be all agog over the author's next cerebral pinwheel or sparkler: for sustaining interest it's that or nothing."

EC: One can think of examples. But let's not.

NER: What then will return a *healthy* sense of self to us? When I asked whether or not there was conflict between you two on the question of self, I had in mind the phrase from *Democracy and Poetry*: "What poetry most significantly celebrates is the capacity of man to face the deep, dark inwardness of his nature and his fate." How is that capacity to face a dark inwardness to be distinguished from "mere" inwardness and the attendant intellectual pyrotechnics you both may find distasteful?

RPW: Well, I'm talking about *tragic* sense, the sense of human complication and paradox. And a sense not only that the individual faces tragedy but also that the public does. Take the Iphigenia story, which is a tragedy both personal and social; or in English literature, isn't it odd that the age at which England became a world power is also the age of its greatest tragic sense? So Shakespeare lived in a world of mass power, but he didn't

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retreat into mere solipsism, didn't forget that there were other people in England, too.

NER: So that, as you both imply, the self depends on a sense of community, and what you object to is the self that is purely decommunalized and becomes self-reflexive to a fault.

EC: Yes, and a self that is in flight. It's a very curious historical fact that the great Greek plays, Euripides, Sophocles, and so on, came at a moment of tragic ending of power in Athens — there couldn't have been a worse time, defeat, plague, the navy at Syracuse and all that; but drama was at its great height.

RPW: Yes, but Aeschylus was also great, and was a man of the period of the great stand against Persia, and the great *rise* of Athenian power, and Greek power in general.

NER: Well, it is interesting, this relation among place, time, and art. Do you, Mr. Warren, still consider yourself a southerner, for instance?

RPW: I can't help it; it's just the way it is, with its vices and virtues, limitations and assets — if any. I've been modified by a thousand things in places I've lived, but I can't conceive of writing a novel, say, which didn't have its southern reference. I've written one or two short stories that didn't, and they were terrible. I've forgotten them. It's not a question of theory; it's a question of what you are. I'm intensely interested in southern history, was raised on it, because my maternal grandfather, with whom I spent a great deal of time when I was a child, was a Civil War veteran, in Forrest's Cavalry. His passion was the Napoleonic campaigns; he knew them all by heart — he'd draw them on the ground with a stick, make me move things around, acorns or shotgun shells, to show the tactics of the battles. He'd do the same thing for the battles he's been in himself. Same thing with history: I read Breasted on Egypt, for instance, with him. One year I'd build a pyramid, put stuff in it, and then the next year I'd excavate it. You can't change such things; they're part of you. Shiloh or pyramids or an old man quoting poetry to you.

NER: So you don't have to live in the South to be a southerner?

RPW: No, I do not.

EC: He does live there, he carries it with him.

RPW: I left the South originally because I lost my jobs. Who knows? I might have left eventually anyway. But then I thought a farm in Middle Tennessee would be heaven. I didn't have any intention of leaving. But I lost my job first at Vanderbilt. Then



in Louisiana when I was at LSU, the university balked \$200 short of an outside raise. Then Minnesota — that was one of the times I quit teaching for good, even though I was already on part-time. But then I drifted to Yale part-time, and then I resigned. Didn't teach at all. Several times, you see, I've quit. But I loved the actual process of teaching, knowing the young for one thing, and I love to talk about books I've read; nobody else is going to listen to you except students.

NER: You never found teaching incompatible with writing?

RPW: I had quite a lot of self-discipline. I shut my door on Friday at noon, fixed a gallon of iced tea, and went to work.

EC: And all along at Yale, he was only teaching one semester a year.

NER: Teaching full-time was pretty demanding?

RPW: Yes, but you were younger then.

NER: Yet you still wrote those novels. You wrote *Night Rider* and *All The King's Men*.

RPW: Yes, and I wrote two novels that were never published when I was teaching. But in '46 I quit full-time academic work.

NER: Were you able by then to be self-sufficient as a writer?

RPW: Well, yes, I guess so. I *always* thought of myself, though, as a writer and not a teacher. I was supposed to leave Oxford and come back to Yale to finish my doctorate on a fellowship there, and I couldn't make up my mind. But in the end it was clear I wanted to write, so I took a vow never to write an article for one of the professional journals. I sent a telegram to New Haven saying I couldn't come back. But I did get to teaching. In those days I was teaching Elizabethan literature, and I could happily have kept on with that. When I got to Minnesota, the Shakespeare spot was filled, though.

NER: Had you done your Oxford B. Litt. on an Elizabethan topic?

RPW: Yes. Elizabethan verse satire. But I spent most of my time reading poetry of that period and the seventeenth century in general.

NER: Tell us about these unpublished early novels.

RPW: To hell with them! I'll speak of a published novel. Far in the background of *All the King's Men* was Jacobean drama — plus Macchiavelli and other Italians. In the beginning I never had intended to write novels at all: it was always poetry. My friends — Ransom, Tate, and others, all older than I — they

were all full of poetry, and of poetic theory. I had only a very mild interest in fiction. I read it, but wasn't passionately fond of it. But later I spent a good deal of time in Greenwich Village, and I knew the people who were running *The American Caravan* — Paul Rosenfeld, chiefly, scarcely at all Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford. Rosenfeld heard my stories, my anecdotes, and cabled me in England: "Why don't you do a novelette for us?" I was in the middle of my satire dissertation, and was so bored with it that I said, "Why not?" So I'd work all day on the dissertation, and at night I'd do the novelette.

NER: Were the stories he meant the ones that became *Night Rider*?

RPW: Yes. The novelette got good notices, and publishers began to write letters asking me to write novels for them. I wrote two novels, and then the publishers didn't want them. And they were quite right.

EC: We've all written novels that we've thrown away.

NER: Did you always set out, Mrs. Warren, to be a writer, too?

EC: Well, as I've said there was a period when my first interest was music, but it became obvious, when I was about seventeen, that I was no musician — I could put it more strongly — and that writing was a lot more necessary to me . . . and I'd been writing something all along anyway. You *could* say "always," I suppose. I did eventually have a couple of children though, and that's rather time-consuming, and brings up those pesky questions that are all over the place now, people writing books about how they resent their children and their husbands . . . As you know, that's quite fashionable in some quarters just now. A lot of people are going to town on that line, which I must say I find rather appalling. Sure, there are days, weeks, months with small children — when writing suffers or stops; it was a tussle all right, but so is not having children, not having a husband. That's worse, that's very time-consuming.

I'm very different from Red in a way, professionally. I would never teach, never wanted to. I supported myself with a million jobs — ghost writing, publishing, translating and so on — but I wouldn't take a job with more or less regular hours.

NER: Do you mean that you literally threw away a couple of novels?

EC: Oh, I threw away one very long one, and I guess if I've got a world record in anything it's throwing away pages. I've certainly

thrown away more incipient short stories than anybody alive.

*NER*: There was a time when it was preferable for an author to write for the movies than to be an academic. No more. Is the kind of self-reflexiveness and virtuoso intellectualism that you've mentioned the result?

*EC*: It's just not a question that I, as a non-teacher, find very interesting. I've got enough problems of my own to worry about. My problem is what happens in my head in that little cabin across the road. Anyway, it's not academe. I've been around that very little.

*RPW*: I don't know if it's relevant, but I know that I never had any interest in teaching writing as such. The most satisfying courses — for me to give, I mean — were a graduate course in non-dramatic Elizabethan literature, Renaissance, and Shakespeare. I always taught one writing course, but that was not the main thing, that side of it.

*EC*: Certainly none of us ever *took* a course in writing.

*RPW*: Except for the fact that the best writing course is a good one in Shakespeare.

*NER*: It's interesting that while the Humanities seem to be facing problems of under-enrollment and of morale, the so-called Creative Writing programs are growing.

*EC*: Yes, but there are so many peculiar courses now. No one would ever, a while back, have taken a course in Business Administration. Why would they? I just don't get it. Or a course in journalism, getting a degree in it, before going out to work on a small town newspaper. I find that perfectly ludicrous.

*RPW*: Yes, I've known stacks of journalists. By and large they wouldn't hire a man from journalism school.

*EC*: There are, after all, only two requirements for being a decent writer: one is to have a total passion — meaning a readiness to give up anything for it, rather than expecting to get anything out of it; the other is to spend your life at it, working like hell. I don't know any other way. Of course, behind the passion I'm assuming some native talent, and that's not always so.

*NER*: How did you manage to write books and raise children, and do all the other things you've done? Did you keep a certain time and place sacrosanct?

*EC*: Nothing is "sacrosanct" around small children. You try, but . . .

*RPW*: You said to me a long while back, "I'm going to enjoy

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my children; that's what we've got them for. I won't fight them to write."

EC: We always had a great time with them, never had any inclination, say, to travel to Europe without them. We don't really "travel," anyway. We go to one spot for six months or a year, and stay.

NER: You said that it was becoming fashionable to complain about children and husband. How do you regard yourself with respect to the Women's Movement?

EC: I suppose that all these things are necessary up to a point, Susan B. Anthony and all the rest. And there have been a lot of situations when women were not getting equal pay for equal work, for instance. If I worked in a factory, or a university, where some male was getting more than I was for the same job with the same or less capacity, I'd be sore as hell. But all this business of just, in principle, wanting to get out of the home I find "parlous," to use a nice old-fashioned word. I wouldn't have wanted to be out of the home. You can, of course, say that I was lucky: I was a fairly established writer when I began to have children, I had work that didn't require me to be off the premises. However, I do know plenty of younger people who have managed without all the squawks and wails and recriminations. We know a lot of them, young women who've gotten their PhD.'s, had children, done their work whatever it was, all at the same time. Sure, it takes character . . . There's a whole side to this Women's Movement that's neurotic (I don't see why we can't call things what they are). There are certain kinds of suburbs where you'll find droves of women who haven't had the character to do anything, and they are of course delighted to have someone to blame it on.

Unfortunately, any time you get a big movement going, you'll get the lousy with the respectable, and the terms will get confused. God knows they are now. Several of my good friends are women who are real artists; they simply haven't time to be squawking about rights. One's a well-known musician, another's a painter, and so on. If you're really busy doing something, you don't have time to go around complaining about who prevented you from doing it.

NER: I guess it gets back to that business that Mr. Warren mentions in *Democracy and Poetry*, that cant phrase he objects to: "taking time out to find yourself."

RPW: Oh, my God!

NER: A self is not something that you go out and find?

RPW: Of course not.

NER: In order to be a writer, you have to have a self, but that's something, you say, that is made, not found?

EC: It's not something you have time to worry about. If you're a writer and people come ask you — if you're a woman they do, especially living with someone like Red . . . "How's your self-image?" It's like a question in the loony-bin. As if you spent hours in front of the mirror, trying to see what developments were taking place. Self is a valid notion, as Red discussed it in *Democracy and Poetry*, but the way it's thrown around in the Women's Movement, it seems more like a term of belligerence.

NER: It's not something that's simply determined for you.

EC: It's unmeaningful matter for discussion.

RPW: It's not something you go find under a leaf. The self is what you *do*. What you want to do, and what you do do.

NER: I think of the Great Twitch view of history in *All The King's Men*. Are we to dismiss Jack's reverie about history as something that just leaps up at you? Or, say, Dr. Stahlmann in *A Place to Come To*, other figures for whom so much of history — both personal and cultural — seems to be something that comes from without, and that you can't foresee or prevent . . . seems to be a Great Twitch, something determined for you. How does that tally with your sense of self as being what you do, and hence of history as something in which the individual has a hand? Stahlmann, to use a word that has come up a lot, is a man dealing with, or trying to deal with, placelessness. He ends by saying that the *imperium intellectus*, the sum total of all he has accomplished, is bunk. Are we to take him seriously, or is he merely suffering from the placelessness?

RPW: To speak of Stahlmann is one thing . . . To speak of that book alone, all the people in it, who are concerned with their relation (or non-relation) to a place — or community — and their relation to self — the book is built around them. The germ is an incident from years ago. I usually carry a book around for eight or ten years before I start it. I know many southerners who, from babyhood on, hated the South, or felt inferior because of it, and so wanted out. Some are my contemporaries. I know some who have made great successes — heads of corporations,

bankers, and so on. And at the same time, they never found a world to live in; they're people without place. They're cut off from one world and never really entered another one. I don't mean a man like Tucker Brook, who was head of the English department when I was at graduate school at Yale. He said, "You know what I'm doing here? I'm 'spoiling the Egyptians!'" He wasn't suffering a bit from inferiority. But what I'm getting at is this: the people who have no sense of human continuity, or community. For example, a man who had been in my freshman class at Vanderbilt — older, or rather much more mature than the rest of us — didn't come back the next year. He said, "I want to get out of this place. I want to go where the big things are happening." And he went to Chicago. And next thing — more than 25 years later — he was on the telephone to me in my hotel, saying "Can I come up?"

I was there alone, and in comes a big wreck of a man. A big powerful fellow, but all bloated with too much food and drink. Richly dressed, a briefcase in his hand. I got him a drink, and we sat down and started old-timing. He said, "I was right to leave college and come up here." Let it be clear that he had made a fortune. Very soon. Then he said, "I want to show you my house." There in his briefcase were photographs of his house, a great rich mansion. "And there's my country place." He showed a sloop moored at a slip, a 70-footer or so. And "These are my daughters," he said, and showed me his beautiful daughters. "And look at their debutante parties." He had photographs. He wanted to prove his success. He said, "I was right to leave, I knew what I was up to." And then — in the middle of this self-congratulation — he suddenly said: "I'm lonelier than God." People like that were the seed of *A Place to Come To*. But neither in that book nor anywhere else do I attach a mystical significance to a particular place. But I do attach a significance to the way a man deals with the place God drops him in. His reasons for going or staying. And his piety or impiety.

EC: I think we can get a little too self-congratulatory, though, if we're not careful. We can't help remembering that masses and masses of the world's population don't have the luxury of a place in that sense . . . not only Vietnamese refugees right now; there have been swarms of refugees. People our age knew many, many from Hitler's Germany and Franco's Spain, for example. The world's politics are not always so peaceful . . .

RPW: I'm being perfectly provincial about this. It's all I can be. I just record what I saw and what I knew. I'm not trying to generalize.

EC: We can't simply say that a man ripped away from homeland

...

RPW: I'm not saying that.

EC: I know *you* aren't, Red. I'm just saying that we are perfectly aware that great things can be done, great thoughts thought, and great art made by people who can't live in their own native place.

RPW: I'm not arguing for regional literature. Not that literature, and fine literature, isn't often provincial; but it's not self-consciously that way. Not *deliberately* — theoretically — provincial.

EC: Literature suffers more than any other art from displacement; there's no doubt about that. The painters in Paris in the great Fauve and Cubist and Surrealist years, for instance — they were hardly any of them French. They were Spaniards and Germans and everything else.

RPW: But they're not painting in traditional ways. They weren't painting out of nature. Picasso is not so much painting a land as an idea, finally. Modern painting had been moving toward abstraction — denial of nature and place.

EC: The time and the fact of their immigration coincided happily for that moment. Literature doesn't usually fare that well in displacement. I knew Richard Wright somewhat in Paris in the forties, and it was sad to see him away from his place, because really France was not material that he could use. He'd been taken up by Sartre and company, and was walking around with great volumes of Heidegger under his arm. Well, I don't think that nourished him in the way that he most needed to be nourished as a writer.

NER: And yet we have the self-conscious exiles of the twenties.

EC: Well, if you mean the Americans; they weren't, in many cases, exiles for all that long. For some, it was a fling. It wasn't imposed, and they could come back whenever they liked. Of course the fabulous *Irish* literary picture in the last century, those who stayed home and those who didn't — Shaw, Joyce, Beckett and so forth — would upset all generalizations. The Irish are like that.

RPW: Let's take Faulkner, with his "postage stamp-sized country." He had a look at Paris and said, "Nothing here for me," and came on back to the U.S. and worked in a bookstore in New

York, and Stark Young, who was a very good friend of his, a Fellow Mississippian, told me: "You know why Bill came back to Mississippi?" I said, "No." "They charged too much for tail in New York," he said. The point is simple. He was *himself*, carried his world in his being, and knew who he was.

EC: You know, we all four — our children, of course they're grown — went down to Kentucky recently. We visited Red's brother and his family; they're still there. The children had never been to Papa's home state — a terrific lapse. It had more of an effect on them than many other trips, to Greece or France or whatever. And on me. This relates in perhaps an oblique way to the sense of place, but it also relates to the writer's thoughts — "images" is perhaps a better word — and how they're formed. The three of us got a great wallop out of it, partly from the association with Red: that is, a lot became clear to us about his early life that was crucial and dramatic. But along with that, it was quite a chunk of history, because we stopped a lot along the way, at Harrodsburg and Cassius M. Clay's house and so on (not Muhammad Ali, but the great abolitionist, a friend of Lincoln's, and a very dashing figure). It was exciting to get under the earth, too, as our daughter Rosanna said: part of the excitement to her (of course, it was exciting to be in the place of many of her father's stories and poems) was to go down into Mammoth Cave or a deep coal mine, to feel the earth that exists under this country. Not to mention the insides of the planet we happen to be on. But there's a matter of what density — and accuracy — of intimate association one brings to this or that piece of it. The same with religion: all these little light-weight, skindeep Buddhists mouthing around these days — what will they ever know of it? To know a God you need a thousand years of nursery rhymes that went with it. I'm only talking about where one's images and excitements come from, and why I'd rather not have to be an expatriate.

RPW: It seems to me that all your vital images are ones you get before you're seven, eight, nine years old. That's true for my life anyway. What you learn to look at. I've lived in cities a lot, but I can't work very long in cities. Oh, perhaps in city libraries. I just have to be able to walk in the woods, to be outdoors, to be alone.

NER: Is the landscape, then, in the poems and elsewhere, the landscape of the South?

EC: A lot of his finest poems are set in the Mediterranean . . . and here — Vermont.



RPW: The things I look for even there, though, are conditioned very early. You carry some place with you in your head. For example, even a lot of those late poems are really autobiographical — things that really happened. That one about the old black man on the mule cart on the wrong side of the road — well, that happened to me in Louisiana, when I was driving back from a party, kind of boozy. That belongs to a world I knew very well. I lived there. A great deal of . . . well, poetry is different from fiction. It's much more inside: you're reliving your life. For me, anyway. When I quit writing short stories I felt a great relief, because I had been killing poems to write short stories. The small anecdote — the suggestion behind the anecdote — was a poem. And when you start telling a story, making the suggestion into a story, you start mucking the poem up. As the germ of a poem, it can grow. It's also personal in another way. You can absorb a piece of the Mediterranean, or a piece of Vermont, and *combine* them. My book — *Promises* — primarily about the Mediterranean is really half about the Mediterranean and half about the South. Our small children — babies then — were living with us in a ruined 16th-century fortress in Italy. This tied up in my mind quite specifically with a recollected Kentucky . . . and my grandfather. They're all one package — contrast and identity in one package — change and continuity — the human story.

NER: You've recently written, though, a novel. I've often wondered what the effect of being a novelist has been on your poetry, and vice-versa.

RPW: I've often stopped novels and written poems in between. I may never start another novel. I had one around for about ten years, and when lately I sat down to write it, this year, I couldn't get off the ground. I ended up writing a poem every time. I'd write a new poem before the day was over. A poem's a different thing: it's shorter after all. And it's a closer thing, a more intimate thing.

NER: There is a kind of speculative language, which I would associate rightly or wrongly with the novel, in much of your poetry — and there seems more of it as you go along in your poetic career. I'm thinking of lines like "That is a way to love God," or whatever. Some might be construed as prosey — although I think they work marvelously, as poetry. Is that a borrowing from your training as a novelist, or something independent?

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RPW: There's been some kind of cross-fertilization. And more and more since I quit writing stories. Even in poems as old as those in *Promises*, the germ is mostly anecdotal. The other way around, the influence of poetry on prose, is less available . . .

EC: Nobody wants to write poetic prose.

RPW: The construction of a novel, though, and the construction of a poem are very close. Even behind a realistic narrative, there is — for me — a shadow poem. Every novel is probably one big metaphor. Not just mine: anybody's.

NER: Do you like to read novels?

RPW: I read fiction. I'm reading *Dombey and Son* right now. Haven't looked at it for twenty years. But I just finished one of the worst novels ever written . . .

EC: Oh, don't mention that!

RPW: I won't mention it.

EC: They come in here, you know. In the mail.

NER: Is there, Mrs. Warren, for *you* a real difference in feeling when you set out to write a short story, or a novel, from when you start a piece of non-fiction?

EC: There is, on one level. My non-fiction books — I've published three of them, and three fiction, I suppose I'm neatly schizophrenic . . . The three non-fiction books, though, wouldn't be what they are if I hadn't spent a fierce amount of time doing fiction. I seem to have pleased more people with non-fiction than with fiction. I don't know that that matters, but . . .

NER: Does that surprise you, or irritate you, or is it irrelevant?

EC: I don't worry about it. I know that the three non-fiction works *do* show a person who has been greatly concerned with fiction, which doesn't say anything about the quality of the fiction. They are all full of living figures, and I couldn't have sustained interest in the books if it hadn't been that way.

NER: One almost senses a novel in the oyster book, particularly.

RPW: The oyster book is very close . . .

EC: Though its general structure is more that of a poem. I'm not presenting myself as a poet, mind you, though I served a lot of hard apprenticeship in my college years. The poetry was lousy, but I learned a lot. I think the oyster book was done because the basic trend of mind was for some overall "poetic" pattern, which I trust worked out. It's certainly not a fictional pattern. In any case, although I've lived altogether a good many years in Europe, I wouldn't dream of doing a novel set there except through the

consciousness of an American — as I did in *Dr. Heart*. For that I need Mother Goose and the covered wagon. The people in the oyster book are done in quite a different way.

NER: Would you care to say what way? Can you describe it?

EC: Oh, a kind of classy reportage; something like that. You know, we've often written about the same things, without knowing it or talking about it, but after all we've seen a lot of things together, and it's almost inevitable that that should happen once in a while. "Poem" and "novel" can mix. And other modes. The same scene with all its vibrations can make for a variety of products. We had a scene here two years ago in the summer that I rushed out to get down the next morning: it's a section of the *Eyes* book, and our daughter was writing a poem about the same event just at that moment. I changed a lot about it for various reasons. Her poem and my prose were extraordinarily alike, not in the final product, but in their impulse — we'd been blown by the same breezes.

RPW: Some impulses . . . When I was a young poet, it was hard for me to tell when an impulse was over. That is, when a book was over. Now I know just when a volume of poems should end — because I've lost the impulse that binds it together. It's time to turn to something else. A thing like *Audubon* was easy. That started in the forties — it took twenty years. It started because in that period I was reading a whole range of subliterate genres — journals, memoirs, and things like that. And it led actually to two other things. One was *World Enough and Time*, a novel, and the other was *Brother to Dragons*. But there was a lot of stuff behind all that besides formal history.

I started a poem on Audubon, but I got stuck in a trap, a narrative trap. There's no narrative there, as such, to work from. You can't carry him that way, because the narrative doesn't have enough bite to it. I wrote a lot about him. I always have a lot of stuff I put in a folder and let lie, then come back to it. I knew when I came back to the Audubon thing that there was something there, a germ. In the sixties, I was writing a history of American literature with R.W.B. Lewis and Cleanth [Brooks], and I again read a lot of that stuff, not only my own notes, but the texts themselves, and Audubon was included. One morning I was helping to make the bed — which was a moment very rare, something I don't usually do, because I'm not housebroken very well — and one line of that poem came to me: "Was not the lost

Dauphin.” That line came into my head from twenty years back. It was not a first line of anything, but it stuck. That’s when I started composing, by writing at night, going to sleep, and waking up in the morning early — revising by shouting it all out loud in a Land Rover going to Yale. I saw a new way in. Each element in the poem would be a “shot” on Audubon rather than a narrative. It took about six or eight months, but you can see it as a unit. But any poem or book of poems — you can learn to see where a certain kind of emotional motivation is winding up, its curve is coming back.

EC: I often think of André Gide’s phrase, *la part de Dieu*, in this process.

NER: Did that reading in subliterate genres account for the Cass Mastern story in *All The King’s Men*?

RPW: Cass Mastern’s story had a germ. A lot of the details are historical — it’s based on the Jefferson Davis story. His father Sam came to Kentucky, to our county, where Jeff was born. Old Sam Davis was so feckless! In our county there’s a river valley and rich land to raise horses in. But Sam went up to the northern part of the county, to the Knob section, and tried to raise race horses where the soil is two inches thick over the limestone cap! Instead of five feet thick down our way.

NER: A last question. Time is the great anthologist. When you’re a young writer, you may look around and wonder at the shape of things to come. Have you had any surprises?

EC: There’s a fallacy in your question. I don’t think, personally, that when you’re a young writer you really look ahead in that way. I was looking ahead to see if I had enough in my purse for that night’s dinner. Somebody once asked me what I thought about when I was skiing. I told the simple truth: I think about the next turn. And that’s what a young writer does. I wasn’t thinking about the shape of things to come when I was a young writer . . .

RPW: You were a young skier then, too!

EC: I was thinking whether this review was going to get me the \$7.50 from *The New Republic* that was absolutely necessary to me. I wasn’t worried about whether, say, *The New Republic* itself would survive. You don’t worry about the shape of things to come; you worry about the shape of *things*, in the sense that you’re functioning, and you have to have some sort of outlet, and so on. One does not live in a vague, amorphous, questioning,

puzzling Future. There are plenty of questions right now. Of course one has social convictions too, and they may be passionate ones. I was in the Trotskyite periphery in the late '30's, and I suppose that's reflected in my first novel. In some residual way, it still figures. But I believe that's outside the sense of your question, about the "young writer."

RPW: I'll tell you one thing right now. The people who talked about the future of the world all the time never became writers.

NER: But how about looking around and seeing who the admired people are, not in a competitive sense, but just as a fact of life? What reputations had vanished? What reputations had been restored? That kind of thing.

EC: Well, those things are common in literary history, as anybody knows who's a reader. But there is one thing, one that I don't think affected Red as much — I don't know why; it's always puzzled me. When I got out of college and started writing, doing it full time, I was very discombobulated by the enormous influence of two people, Joyce and Kafka, who dominated the scene. I'd been greatly affected earlier by the poetry of Eliot and the young Auden, among others, but not in the same way. Kafka and Joyce brought realistic fiction to an end, as far as I was concerned. I lost a lot of time — I don't know whether it was lost, really — pushing around to find a tone, to find a way in. As a matter of fact, *The Bitter Box*, my first novel, which I hope may be re-issued soon, came out of a terrific struggle with the presence of Gertrude Stein, whom I don't particularly like at all, who had also contributed to the end of a certain kind of natural narrative. Narrative had become unnatural. It has now become unnatural in a different way, as I said earlier. Then, it was unnatural, technically. It was hard to find a tone to say what you wanted to say, and at the same time avoid being old hat, out of tune. It wasn't so much that anyone was striving for anything radically innovative, but certain kinds of approach had been made untrue by Joyce, Kafka, and others. That was their business, and they did it. I wonder if the marvelous story-telling sense that seems to be innate in the south wasn't a chief saving grace for fiction writers there. Think of Katherine Anne, Eudora, Flannery O'Connor — along with their own great gifts, you feel you're hearing a thousand voices telling stories that they grew up with.

RPW: That may be so. Faulkner, of course, was the most ex-

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perimental American writer of fiction in this century, and yet at the same time never lost the sense of the naturally told tale.

Poetry is another matter, and most of my friends were primarily poets, or interested in poetry rather than fiction. Vanderbilt was a peculiar little university. Boys lined up to buy *The New Republic* to get the newest poem by Yeats or Hart Crane. You wouldn't have believed it. An All-Southern center wrote poems like Housman. It was extraordinary. By the time *The Waste Land* came out in book form, a third of the Freshman class that I knew could quote the whole thing!

EC: I bet he's exaggerating. I don't think it was a third.

RPW: Well, maybe a fourth . . . Anyway, literature was an excitement, life for many people. No need for creative writing courses. It was all clubs and gangs. People don't have to have courses.

EC: That's true. When I was an undergraduate, no one would have dreamed of credit for either writing poetry or reading it. Or writing essays, for that matter. I spent many a night writing essays on Eliot, Auden, and so on, for college journals. And I didn't mean I was anything special that way, certainly not; Elizabeth Bishop was in my class and writing some beautiful things. It wouldn't have entered our heads to expect credit.

RPW: I'm going to fix a drink for people, including myself.

EC: If we think of anything great to say, we'll turn this thing on again.

RPW: Go ahead: say that Warren left on a "useful errand." Somehow connected with saving the world.