



In his last visit to Nashville in 1984, Robert Penn Warren signs an autograph at Mills Book Store.

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the non-dogmatic mysticism that permeates his work and seems to have afforded him some peace in this chaotic world. I'm still working on that one.

**W**arren has been much misunderstood. For starters, he was not primarily a fiction writer. In 1947, he vowed never again to write short stories, resolving to devote more energy to poetry. I suspect that after 1950 he would have sworn off writing novels, too, if his books had not been so popular. A generation knows his name from the presence of *All the King's Men* on high school summer reading lists. That 1946 novel, modeled on the saga of Huey Long, deserves its status as a classic in American fiction; several of Warren's other novels and stories are also excellent. But they're not his life's work.

Completely overlooked in the obituaries I've seen have been Warren's writings connected to the civil rights movement. Race is as central a concern in all of Warren's work as it is in Faulkner's, and Warren devoted considerable energy to the issue in the '50s and '60s. *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1955), *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961) and *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965) each seem to have been targeted to prick the consciences of white readers.

His social efforts notwithstanding, he wanted to be remembered for his poetry. And since it addresses issues more timeless than any political struggle, the best of his verse probably will outlast his other work. His perseverance and versatility as a poet are remarkable. He produced good poetry for fully 65 years, in contrast to such renowned writers as Wordsworth, Robert Graves and Warren's friend John Crowe Ransom, all of whom died as poets long before they died in person. And he managed to change his poetic voice, quite suddenly, from a lyric to a more narrative style in the early 1950s.

Like most modern poetry, Warren's work

is difficult, and its complexity can turn off many readers. He knew this, and put a lot of effort into explaining what he was trying to accomplish as a poet. During our interview, I became the beneficiary of this effort when I asked him if there was any connection between a 1956 poem called "Rumor Unverified" and the 1981 poem "Rumor Verified."

He didn't remember the earlier poem. I showed him a copy of it, which he eyed studiously, then began to read aloud. His voice, weakened by a recent stroke, was a gravelly slur as he spoke, pausing after every few words to explicate the text: "'There's a rumor astir'—This is the rumor that Christ has come. There's a rumor astir that this brutal cycle is broken—'That the words'—this dark world—'are sold, and the purchaser soon comes'—That's Jesus!' And so on.

He never explained what the connection between the two poems was; he didn't need to. The rumor is a spiritual possibility. I could see that, and I could feel a kinship with the man sitting next to me, an agnostic raised in a Christian culture and tortured by the possibility of faith. I was not alone in that kinship, and I think it defines much of Warren's legacy.

In the later poem, "Rumor Verified," Warren again gazes into the abyss of agnosticism, and poses what is surely the central question of our time. "What can you do," the speaker of the poem asks, to "survive the terror of knowledge?" He answers his own query: "Perhaps pray to God for strength to face the verification/That you are simply a man, with a man's dead reckoning, nothing more."

Warren's work is fraught with this kind of ambiguity. He asked questions that most people bury in their subconscious minds, and what few answers he found were neither sure nor final. Still, I'm tempted to believe that his willingness to continue the search, to confront "the terror of knowledge," brought him as close as one can come, in the 20th century, to heroism. ■

## Turning the Page

By Tom Wood

**T**he final fugitive is fled. It's true that Robert Penn Warren's death represents a cultural benchmark. Of the Fugitive poets who made Nashville the hot spot of the poetic world in the early 1920s, he was the last to die. Among the Agrarian thinkers of the 1930s, he is survived only by Andrew Lytle. But I find it hard to think of the man in such academic terms.

I was fortunate enough to encounter Robert Penn Warren personally, if only in passing. I've spent a lot more time getting to know his voluminous body of work—poetry, fiction, literary criticism, meditations on history, analysis of the Southern psyche. My encounters with Warren, in print and in person, have enriched me in a way that surpasses mere book-learning.

One summer afternoon in the mid-1970s I discovered a copy of *Flood*, Warren's worst novel and among his most salacious, on an absent grandparent's bookshelf. Being a curious and sedentary child, enchanted by sex scenes I only vaguely understood, I abandoned a promising afternoon of tree-climbing to read the book in its entirety. You never forget your first novel.

I didn't know then that the author was from these parts (born in Guthrie, Ky., on the border north of Clarksville), but I made up that deficit when I enrolled at Vanderbilt in 1982. Intrigued by a seminar on the Fugitive and Agrarian movements, I began reading everything Robert Penn Warren had written. I found his address and unleashed an onslaught of letters, seeking his guidance as I wrote term papers on his works. Unfailingly generous, Warren responded to each puerile missive with a nice note.

In April, 1984, Warren came to town. I was determined to get an interview with him, and I made such a nuisance of myself that I was finally allowed to ride with him and his wife as they went to visit friends in Smyrna. He discussed various influences on his work, reminisced about the community of writers that developed at Vanderbilt while he was there and talked about the people he had known, ranging from Allen Tate to Malcolm X.

I corresponded and spoke with Warren on a couple of later occasions, but those "formative" encounters stuck in my mind. I was a blank slate, and, at an age when some people fall under the influence of Marx or Confucius, I took Warren as a role model. I wanted to make a living as a poet; I wanted to be part of a community of writers; I wanted to be a Renaissance Man. However unrealistic my aspirations were, I'm grateful to him for encouraging them.

More than any of that, I wanted to understand his peculiarly American spirituality,

*From an interview with Tom Wood, first published in the Spring, 1984 Mississippi Quarterly.*

### ...About Vanderbilt

(After being apprised of the sorry state of the football program:) When I was there, we had some fine teams. There was Alf Sharp—he was an All-Southern center. He looked like a badly formed pirate; he was really a menacing-looking man. He was two years ahead of me, and then I taught his younger brother (Walter Sharp, later a Vanderbilt professor) when I came back to Vanderbilt in the '30s. And his younger brother came up one day and said, "You're not going to believe this, but I have documentation: my big brother was writing poems secretly the whole time he was here." So I saw the poems years later when his brother betrayed him.

As a matter of fact, they were skillful. They were close imitations of Housman. Very skillfully done, totally unoriginal. But the man had this need, hidden under that murderous exterior, to write poems.

### ...About Malcom X

That Muslim man—he was assassinated—what was his name? Yes, Malcolm X. He was one of the most fascinating persons I ever knew.

We got along fine. At first he said he would see me for ten minutes, that's all. "Newspapermen are all liars," he said.

But we talked until four o'clock. He said, "Come back and spend all day with me tomorrow. It's my day to make the rounds of Harlem. I'll show you people and things you could never imagine." But I couldn't; I was set to fly to Italy the next day. Missing that was really hard. He was murdered the next February.

### ...About All the King's Men:

I'd written a verse play, based roughly on the Huey Long theory, the American version of Fascism. I finished the play in Rome, in December of '39, with Mussolini's troops marching outside the window, and I laid it aside. I wasn't satisfied with it. I took it out in Minnesota in '43, and I saw what was wrong with it: it was too much focused on one character. The real problem, not just in politics but always, is the question of what are the forces operating around a man, and how does he deal with them.

That's where Jack Burden came in—the character of the historian, cynically out of the picture but loving manipulation. He moves into history as a nameless character-force. Then I saw—that should be a novel!

I didn't do any research on the novel at all, didn't even read the papers. I was trying to make an imaginative creation, not a history. I was trying to make the world that Long's strange doubleness suggested. ■