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Seventy-Five Years of American Literature: A Panel Discussion

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Eleanor Clark, Peter Davison, R. W. B. Lewis, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren gathered in the White Classroom Building at the University of Kentucky the afternoon of 30 October 1980. The following record is briefer than the actual dialogue; but for ease of reading, sections of general interest have been juxtaposed to form a continuous discussion. The speakers kindly read the manuscript, and, in a few instances, amplified earlier remarks.

DAVISON: It's breathtaking to come into an academic building, where I have not been for many a year, and try to deal with American literature of the last seventy-five years, so instead of talking about it, I'm going to deal with it, since I'm a book publisher, from a negotiating point of view. I wish to negotiate with you and my colleagues here on the panel an hypothesis. In the year 1905, the year of Robert Penn Warren's birth, Thomas Hardy had finished writing fiction. He had also finished his long and remarkable and often terribly tiresome verse play, *The Dynasts*. And from 1905 to his death in 1928, he wrote poetry, which continued to be good, better, and best. I should like to compare that period of his life and writing career with what Robert Penn Warren has been doing in the last few years of his writing career. Both of these writers have absorbed a region in their fiction and their verse. Both of these writers have had a sense of history in their writing. Each at a crucial point in his career wrote what we can only describe as an epic poem dealing with one of the central issues in the history of his country. *The Dynasts* deals with the Napoleonic Wars, and *Brother to Dragons* deals with the Jeffersonian spirit. There is a shared attitude towards form between these two poets. Neither poet is afraid of rhyme, neither poet is afraid of traditional forms, neither poet is in fact afraid of excessive language, and neither poet is afraid of awkwardness, if it suits his purposes. Both poets, as Mr. Brooks was saying this morning,
relish poetry as an anecdotal and narrative art. Both poets have a tremendously developed sense of doom—especially in the middle years of their work. Both see natural phenomena in somewhat pantheistic terms. There is a particularity of landscape in both poets; phrases in Warren like “the sweet sterility of stone”—that is also Hardyesque. The use of language for each poet is intensely personal and indigenous, intensely his own. A Warren poem does not sound like anybody else’s poem; a Hardy poem does not sound like anybody else’s. In both poets a looseness of rhythm combines with the colloquial rhythm of a dialect. Also, in the dramatic poems, very often the actors are country people.

WARREN: It so happens that I have never except once for a brief period tried to imitate Hardy. I found it impossible. I could do what looked like pretty good Hardy, but not good Hardy, so I quit imitating him entirely. I said that stuff is too good for me; it’s too different. But I remember the absolute moment of transfiguration and vision and everything else, all the big words, one Sunday afternoon in Guthrie, Kentucky, when two or three younger men, my classmates (I think Andrew was there, very likely was), under a maple tree—. There were several books of poems, people reading, all interested in poetry and passing books around. And John Ransom opened a book to “Wessex Heights” by Hardy, which I had never read then. In fact, he had introduced me to Hardy earlier by referring to him in freshman class, by reading a poem. But this is probably the summer after my sophomore year. He read “Wessex Heights,” and it absolutely bowled me over. It was not like any poetry I had ever heard in my life. A whole new world of poetry! A little later on I began to try actually to imitate Hardy, to learn from Hardy by imitation. I felt it was no good; I couldn’t do it. He is a poet I’ve read all of my life, very steadily, almost daily sometimes, and I could never open a book without finding a new kind of poem in him. There is an endless variety in him. But I have never felt him as any sort of direct influence. But as I say, for one period, a very brief period, back in the thirties, I actually tried to imitate him and found how impossible it was. I still think that it is impossible. After Wordsworth, there is Hardy, and then, after that, there is a great question mark, for me, anyway. But let me change the subject from Hardy and yours truly, for just a moment, because I don’t think that I can bear that association very much longer.
There's another question of a more general sort. We can't talk about literature without having some sense of the world it came from of course. What kind of a world did we grow up in? Something happened in America with World War I that was extraordinarily dramatic. The world changed overnight. It changed the whole sense of what literature was about and what literature was like, in a strange way of both damnation and promise. There was a strange paradox in that change. On the one hand, there was the sense of a world come to an end. You can find in Pound, for instance, a few dozen battered books and broken statues and wasteland and ending, the end of a civilization, the end of a culture. At the same time there was an enormous burst of literary energy. But also other kinds of energy came out of that war. We became a world measured in finance, for instance. The war made America as the booming America. We got big money. Aside from power, the war changed the whole state of mind on account of a paradox. On the one hand there was the sense of new power, the sense of a new and independent and flourishing literature and art. I say independent because part of this was the belief in a work of art as in itself worthwhile. The rise of the aesthetic as a value in itself and not just as a way of reporting things came in by way of the French, no doubt; but it was our contact with the European world that gave it to us. But we had a way of making things our own, too. On the other hand was the sense of criticism, a fundamental criticism of American life. And this needs one more thought.

American literature, taken historically, is primarily a mythic literature. Now, take Balzac, a realist. He died the year of the writing of *The Scarlet Letter*. Isn't that odd? The great master and founder of a certain kind of realism is dead by the time that *The Scarlet Letter* is written—anything but a "realistic" novel. It is a long time before realism is discovered in America, a long, long time. Mark Twain introduced a certain kind, a very special kind, but Dreiser thought he was bringing something new. He learned that from Balzac and Zola—from American newspapermen. That is where the college was for the new literature: newspapermen who on their own, half-educated in a conventional sense, had a passion for Zola, a passion for Maupassant, a passion for Balzac. And Balzac was a model taken by Dreiser, as a young newspaperman. He saw himself as the hero of a Balzac novel, a young outsider making his way into the center of power. Really, in that sense there is a center of physical power, natural power, and sexual power which you can
break into if you are an outsider, and so the story of realism ties back into that.

The strange thing is the paradox that came with World War I, which I am getting back to. On the one hand a real criticism, a fundamental criticism of American life, even from the point of view of pure aestheticism, which is opposed to bourgeois values, successful bourgeois values. On the other hand, the very opposite, an attempt to find the nature of the old American tradition, trying to make a myth out of America. Those two things both somehow seem to me to focus at the moment of the aftermath of the First World War. Now I'm not stating that very well, but I hope that you'll be generous and try to see what I'm driving at.

DAVISON: There is a lot of it in Chicago, isn't there? You have Carl Sandburg in Chicago, you have Dreiser in Chicago, you have Jack London on the west coast writing that sort of thing. And poetry coming out of Whitman is also—.

WARREN: Excuse me, yes, that is mythic. But he is often trying to make a myth out of hullabaloo. He was a great poet—when he was not trying to do that. But after all, Dreiser is a nineteenth-century man. He published his first novel in '99 and one of his best novels. And it is the first thorough example of a new realism.

CLARK: Well, this is no time for the new realism now. I would say that if anybody wanted to learn from one of those boys now, they would do better from Stendhal, because we have not just had World War I around here. There is World War I, World War II, the Russian Revolution, TV, frozen orange juice, space travel. Our whole consciousness of what reality is has made anything like realistic prose, fiction at any rate, extraordinarily problematic. I think we have to go back to some kind of myth-maker. Stendhal in his very curious way I think you could call that. Attempt at it anyway, groping for it, and nowadays one thinks of Beckett. I would say Beckett is certainly one of the greatest writers alive in English, and it would not be too difficult to say why. He has been able to crash through an accumulation of fragmented realities that an ordinary fictional talent simply cannot very well deal with.

LEWIS: I do not think that realism, in the European meaning, really took much hold here, did it?
WARREN: Basically—even though realism took a hold here—I think that American literature has been a mythic literature rather than a realistic literature, but this came in as a kind of opposite. Also we have the whole group of realists of the late nineteenth century, and there are others we could well mention, Sinclair Lewis and a lot of others. But the basic literature—Faulkner is a myth-maker, Hemingway is a myth-maker in his own way—.

LEWIS: Hemingway was a myth-maker, and Fitzgerald.

WARREN: Fitzgerald is to a degree. Fitzgerald is a strange offshoot of Dreiser.

DAVISON: Don't you think that realistic fiction has mostly taken its way to the best seller list and perhaps out of literature?

WARREN: I think that is true.

LYTLE: May I make a footnote to this conversation, Red? I do not think that any of these abstract statements like realism, classicism, romanticism—none of these help you read. They help you talk though.

CLARK: It does give you a funny feeling though to think about Babbitt and try to imagine that book being written now. One simply cannot conceive of it.

DAVISON: But if we talk about this, I want to come back to my idée fixe about a certain kind of literature that seems to be represented by very few people. In fact, I have been talking about two people who represent this, two writers who in poetry and in prose turn anecdote into myth and never leave realism behind. The novels of Hardy and the novels of Warren do not leave realism behind, and yet there is a mythic element in them which is partly a matter of style and partly a matter of poetry. This is why I think they stand together, different though they are, and why they stand apart from the rest of the writers of their respective times.

LEWIS: I was just wondering whether there has been an observable tendency of twentieth-century writers to link up with nineteenth-century writers. We know perfectly well that Ralph Ellison has a
love affair with Melville, for example, especially “Benito Cereno” and things like that, he’s very conscious—and The Confidence-Man and so on. I just wonder how much our writers in this period found nourishment in, if you will, a tradition, an ongoing—.

WARREN: Faulkner found one in Hawthorne and Mark Twain too and George Washington Harris. He is also the most modern fiction writer, the most experimental fiction writer of his period. At the same time he is a total experimental modern of the post-World War I variety, finding roots in an old, old tradition in America, a mythic tradition.

LEWIS: And if I am not mistaken, it is not only Mark Twain and Hawthorne. It is Sut Lovingood and George Washington Harris, all the way back.

WARREN: The folk background is in there.

LEWIS: And you mentioned Ellison. Ellison comes out of that, carrying on from Faulkner.

CLARK: What happens for lack of that is, I think, well illustrated in the state of the current French novel which has committed hara-kiri with absolute divorce in material from any tradition, and, in the hyper-programmatic way of the French with their theories, has really strangled itself. I just cannot think of a French novel that has come out of the whole structuralist or post-structuralist movement that one really wants to bother with.

LYTLE: I don’t know what that structuralism is. Everything that has form has structure. I have heard them talk but it doesn’t mean anything to me.

DAVISON: What will we do about the sense of place? There is a beautiful essay by Eudora Welty about the sense of place in fiction. I think that so many of the nineteenth century novelists, the novelists that we are talking about in the realistic tradition, and the two novelists that I have been harping on, are people obsessed with place. What we can loosely refer to as the Southern tradition in fiction obviously has a concern with place, but there is another younger group of writers who seem to leave place alone. Perhaps it
began with the Beat generation. When the "fun" came into existence as a method of transportation, perhaps the sense of place was left behind.

LEWIS: *On the Road.*

DAVISON: *On the Road.* But I think also of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues,* in which you will remember the champion hitchhiker of the world is a girl with giant thumbs. You also remember that part of her hitchhiking occupation is that the driver can do anything he pleases to her as long as he does not stop the car. There is a loss of place there. And Pynchon, a fascinating writer who constantly rambles about, writing a passage which takes place in one location and writing exactly the same passage and putting it in later in another location with characters of different names. Why? It is baffling to me. I am prejudiced. I cannot understand a literature which leaves behind a sense of place. I think that without a sense of place you are abandoned. And it is a strange thing—Beckett is indeed one of the great writers, but where is the sense of place?

CLARK: I don't go for those Pynchon tricks at all, but how are you going to preserve a sense of place in a world that has lost a sense of place? When people are going to Rome for the weekend and around the world for two weeks, one's sense of place is certainly drastically altered, and the sense of community for a huge proportion of the population of this country depends on the automobile and the telephone. Travel is an urge, an itch, and everybody does it, and some do it out of necessity for their business and so forth, but it certainly does not leave one with a nice old fashioned sense of place to write novels out of.

WARREN: But I don't think it is an either/or proposition. I think it is the spirit with which things are undertaken that makes the difference. New comforts, new faces, new experiences—part of our natural endowment is to have this desire. But also we want continuity and base and home place at the same time. There is a paradox in our needs it seems to me.

CLARK: Yes, but one of our other needs is to have great sympathy with our fellow men around the world, and too many hundreds of thousands of them are expelled from their homes. We live with the
thought of them and the sense of them—how can we not? If we have any decent human sympathies whatsoever, our imagination is impinged on constantly by knowing that too many people in the world are homeless out of necessity. So our little sense of place becomes a very great luxury and one which we are not quite sure that we are entitled to, if we have any left.

WARREN: I think that you have a very fundamental point there, and that point of view raises another question. Now it is very strange that in the 1930's, say, "regionalism" was a word of condemnation. "Merely a regionalist novel" was a favorite reviewer cant phrase. Eudora Welty now says, "I am a regional writer," and the way she says this of herself is perfectly natural, as if she said, "I have this color hair," nothing more. One time a word can be of praise and other times blame. I should like to take the work of Faulkner. The worst word you could say about him in the 1930s was "Gothic." To be Gothic was to be awful, just terrible. It was crypto-fascism and total depravity and you had no shoes anyway. All of that was tied into Faulkner. All the reviewers—I have read all of the reviews, I mean all of them, on Faulkner—. I sat down and read them—for penance. And now, on the last best seller, Gothic is one of the best and loveliest words in the language. "It's one of the finest Gothic novels of the month."

LEWIS: Everybody's doing it. Joyce Carol Oates—.

WARREN: Joyce Carol Oates is Gothic in hell. She makes Faulkner look like Sinclair Lewis.

LYTLE: Let me interject something. Referring to Eleanor's discussion of these people, lost in the world. They do not stop long enough anywhere to live. Movement is a kind of thing that keeps you in a state of suspension. Now it may be very sad for them, but it is not the first time that that has happened in the world. Let's take just before Christ, when that whole world was in shambles.

CLARK: Yes, well there were no great novels written about the barbarian invasions that I know of—at that time.

LEWIS: But your point was rather the effect on our consciousness, our awareness of the homeless hundreds of thousands.
LYTLE: You take the hobos now. They had a whole set of conventions. It was after the Civil War, but you had a railroad train they could catch and they went from place to place. Now the people are just adrift in the world, and I think it is an entirely different thing.

LEWIS: Let me ask two questions on regionalism and sense of place. Remembering Eudora Welty's superb essay, my impression is that for her, place is either country or small town. Is that right? A city can't be a place? Is there urban regional writing?

DAVISON: Ralph Ellison?

LEWIS: Well, I think so. The other question is really Eleanor's and it's about a kind of regionalism of spirit. I'm thinking of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who would write about Long Island but with a midwestern, Minnesotan point of view. Is that still possible? We've said realism isn't possible any more.

WARREN: What is the young man trying to break into now? You have these novels of the young man on the make from Balzac on, trying to break into some sacred precinct.

CLARK: Now he's trying to break out of it.

WARREN: Now he's trying to break out of it and go on the road. That's the reverse of the thing. But what's the man trying to do now, get in or get out? But I want to go back for a moment to the question of place. Novels are not about place; they are about people. Poems are not about place; they are about people. Now place conditions the way people live and think and feel, and it's a very important part of their response to the world and therefore becomes a part of literature. I don't want to underrate its importance in that respect, or underrate the importance of the relationship of man to nature, which is susceptible of a thousand variations and is an extraordinarily important thing. But in a world where man has already lost place—that is already gone—he is about to lose other people too. That is a possibility now. I'm not saying that it is going to be true. It is worth a thought, maybe.

LEWIS: Let me ask again a seemingly simple-minded question. Is
peoples’ relation to each other an American theme? Or is it peoples’ failure of relation or alienation?

WARREN: It is failure. I think we can see it failing.

LEWIS: D. H. Lawrence once said that “the thing that interests me most is the relation between men and women.”

DAVISON: Well, that sounds awfully banal, but I do not think that is true of American fiction, is it?

LEWIS: I’m not just talking about sex. I mean genuine human close relations.

WARREN: Any kind of human relations I think of are badly at stake right now.

LEWIS: But they were badly at stake in Henry James were they not? Isn’t the otherness of people—?

WARREN: But not as badly as they are now. I agree that this is a question, not a statement, but it seems to me that there is a real risk there. Then what happens to novels or poems or about other things including standing armies?

DAVISON: I get the feeling that perhaps contemporary American poetry retains a little more of the sense of intimacy between people than American fiction does.

WARREN: I will say one more thing on this general point. We can, I think, make some sense, I do not know how much sense, of the fact that American poetry after the First World War was concerned with a world problem. But after World War II it came down to be concerned with confessional problems. That’s a mighty big shrinkage. The end of culture as the subject of poetry and fiction is basically of the First World War period, while at the Second World War it is why did I leave this wife and go to that one, why did I take a boy to a girl, or why this, that, or the other. It is confessional poetry. It is basically formless on the whole. This is a mighty shrinkage.
DAVISON: And a further shrinkage perhaps is going on now. It is unclear. Poetry is even to some extent abandoning grammar and syntax and trying to reach for immediacy at all other costs, which is a kind of perversion of the old imagistic notion. Immediacy at all costs! The characteristic poem by the poet under forty is written in the present indicative tense and usually in the first person.

LEWIS: A sort of Whitman in the last form of deterioration. I shall add one thing there. I think this is true of novelists, novels too. It’s not only why did I leave my first wife. It is why did I, a novelist, leave my first wife. In other words, watch me writing a novel about why I left my first wife or watch me writing a poem. It is a double narcissism, I think, Red, don’t you?

WARREN: Yes, yes, I could give some cases too.

LEWIS: We’re open for questions, emendations.

AUDIENCE: Mr. Warren, your fiction quite frequently seems to have realism come to bear harshly upon romanticism. Would you comment on how you see this in relation to myth?

WARREN: One thing I’ll say is that I can’t help being what I am. I don’t mean that as a joke. I mean it’s true, as far as I can tell, about how a novel gets started with me. Usually a novel with me will start with an episode, an event, in a few cases a place, the aura of a place; and I don’t know why it catches in my fur like a cocklebur on a dog’s belly. It’s caught on me, and I worry—Why am I interested in that? I know plenty of stories that sound more interesting, that have more natural drama. Why this thing sticks, I don’t know, so that the writing of the book begins with the question of why am I interested in it. Trying to tell it to myself over and over in different ways, to try to find the key of interest—for me. Then I find a provisional focus for it, a provisional reason. I’ve got to try it in that direction. It may fail on me, so I try it again. And the actual process of composition is a stack of pages on one side that I’m going to do later, and on this other side a collection of things I’ve already done, so I’m between two big stacks of paper. I get on one stack of paper just to be done. Then I start over again. I want there to be a growth toward the answering of my question. It’s bound to turn at some point into a thematic
generalization, for me at least. I struggle for it—though that may never be in the books—and may finally find it purely in concrete terms. That's it! Writing a story is an attempt at self-exploration in the ultimate sense. The fundamental satisfaction in writing, it seems to me, is trying to answer that question: Why do I have to do it? Half the time it does not work out. You don't find out or you fake it. In either case, you ought to just throw it away.

CLARK: I think we would probably all agree with one of André Gide's remarks, made in one of his really better moments, to my mind. He was talking about the ingredients in a work you get involved in. Sure one can plan and plot and think out to a certain extent, but then he referred to all the rest as "la part de Dieu." And I go along very strongly with this. I think the best things that come into our best works are things we did not have in our plan and did not fully know about or even about at all, at the time. One must learn to trust that and not try to overanalyze it or explicate it either.

WARREN: If you knew it all, you wouldn't do it.

CLARK: Yes. Also, you can lose the habit of being open to it another time.

WARREN: The whole process of having a stack of papers is a way of keeping you fluid, keeping you going, back and forth. The past and the future of the thing is going on together. This is just a trick you play on yourself.

AUDIENCE: Eudora Welty's Jackson, Mississippi, I think at the last census had a couple of hundred thousand people, and you were raising the theoretical question of whether you could write about a city. I think we've been led astray by aphorisms like Gertrude Stein's put-down of her home town Oakland, "There's no there there." I just happen to have returned from Oakland. I think the sense of place is in the mind of the beholder.

CLARK: In relation to literature what we are talking about is the density of visible reality in a place. That involves memory, a degree of inherited memory along with every other kind of exercise of reverberation in a place. Now I can walk around Lexington and say
it's a lovely place. I'm delighted to be here, but I have no association with it. My grandmother wasn't here. It has no myth for me, whereas there are places where I have simply accumulated from babyhood on a lot more reverberation. Without that kind of density I think a place comes out pretty thin.

DAVISON: And falling back on ego, as a writer like Henry Miller must, when he moves from place to place to place to place and has to transform all those places by the force of his own character, his own language, his own fantasy, sometimes effectively and sometimes not well at all.

WARREN: But how wonderful he can be about his boyhood. His growing up is quite wonderful. It's a magical writing. In the great passages he is a great writer anyway. He is awfully mixed and confused, but who isn't. Some of the greatest writing that has ever been done in America has been done by Henry Miller.

DAVISON: But then he also has that gift of the travel writer, which is a different thing—to capture a place he is not familiar with, as in *The Colossus of Maroussi*, a wonderful book.

WARREN: Some people can steep themselves in the history of a place, recreate the place in terms of what they know of the history of the place plus their observations of the place.

Seeing other places may sharpen your own sense of the virtues—and all qualities—of the places you know best. I didn't read Southern history, until I was away from the South. I heard about it a lot. I was raised on it. But as far as turning my mind on it and getting deeply involved that way—it was only after I had gotten out and was a long way off and looked back at it.

DAVISON: Do you think that you would have written as deeply about the South if you had lived in the South all your life?

WARREN: No, you have to get away. Everybody does.

LEWIS: That complicates the whole question of place.

WARREN: Eudora had to go to the Columbia School of Journalism before she discovered Mississippi. She was, unless my memory (or
hers) fails, segregated in a certain dormitory section, so her speech would not impair the education of other young females.

AUDIENCE: I wonder what you might say about narrative fiction, especially the telling of a good story as contrasted with the working out of a thesis.

WARREN: It seems to me that you cannot possibly write a story without its meaning something. The question is whether you can control the meaning and know the meaning or not. You can't start telling any narrative without the human mind that you are telling it to groping for What is he telling me that for? What is that thing about? What does it mean? We are just built that way. Whether you meant a story to mean something or not somebody's going to put meaning into it. I don't think the question can exist really except in psychological terms.

LEWIS: I think it's why one rereads, isn't it, Red? You reread because the first time you were gripped and interested but you didn't quite understand.

WARREN: You never get the same meaning from it either. You enrich it or something. Sometimes you deny a meaning you've gotten.

DAVISON: It's also why, despite Mr. Lytle, we go on talking about it. I remember reading an essay by Cleanth Brooks recently in which he says, "Literature is immune from time, which is why we go on discussing it."