Introduction

Jack Burden Goes on the Road and Learns His History

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Knowing is, Maybe, a kind of being, and if you know, Can really know,
a thing in all its fullness, Then you are different, and if you are different,
Then everything is different, somehow too.

—Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*, 1953

The will to power, grisly as it appears in certain lights, can mate, if uneasily, with love of justice and dedicated self-interest.

—Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, 1965

Robert Penn Warren loved the philosophy and practice of pragmatism, considered imagination perhaps the greatest human capacity, hated sentimentality and piety, breathed irony in and out as though it were air itself, believed human nature to be a largely dark and evil realm, and contended that no human could live effectively without a deep and abiding sense of history. And he thought history itself an essentially tragic story, with humans constantly struggling against their fate however they could know it. Still, in 1965 at a triumphal juncture of the Civil Rights Movement in America, a time when irony and circumspection about race were not in vogue, Warren, at age sixty, published an extraordinarily

unusual and hopeful book about race relations, leadership, power, and ultimately, about himself.

There is no other book quite like *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Published on May 27, 1965, by Random House, *Who Speaks* is a very personal and hugely ambitious creation by a then mature and accomplished white, Southern, American man of letters. Warren is the only American writer to receive the Pulitzer Prize in both fiction and poetry (twice in poetry). Few American writers of the mid-twentieth century worked in so many genres with such distinction as did Warren. A novelist, poet, critic, and nonfiction essayist, he was also in his own way a self-styled historian, deeply committed in all forms of writing to probing the very nature of the past, the ways it is known, narrated, and felt across time and in daily life. Few American writers have written with such imagination about the relationship of past and present, about the ancient connections of myth and history. That Warren would set out in 1964 on such a remarkable journey, tape recorder in his arms, to interview every major “leader” of the civil rights “revolution,” as well as many students and unknown activists, is both astonishing and an unsurprising piece of this writer’s long personal trajectory. From the grandson of a Confederate veteran steeped in the mores of the Jim Crow South to a world-class writer and white racial liberal (although he disliked such labels) of the 1960s, Warren traveled great ideological and imaginative distances. But he was always, in part, where he was from, and in *Who Speaks*, as he strove to uncover the thoughts and emotions of his subjects, he sought equally to know his own. This is no mere oral history; it is a personal testament. At times he simply lets his subjects speak, but often Warren imposes his own voice and personality onto the text, with results that some have admired and others have not.¹

Warren was a prodigy. Born in 1905 and raised in Guthrie, Kentucky, a small railroad junction town, he skipped two grades and graduated from high school at sixteen, just across the border in Clarksville, Tennessee. His boyhood dream was to go to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, and he was already accepted when, in a freak accident, his younger brother, Thomas, threw a baseball-size piece of coal over a hedge, hit Robert Penn in the face, and blinded him in his left eye. The injury badly affected the young Warren psychologically for a while, but he soon entered Vanderbilt University as a mere teenager. There he came

under the influence of, and joined, the group of Southern writers known as the Fugitives. With the tutelage and admiration of some of its members—Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom—Warren became a poet. The seminars and discussions of this group of post-New South white poets and writers became what Warren called his “real university.” They were modernists determined to overturn the Lost Cause tradition, as they also held firm to segregation and their own brands of racism.²

Warren majored in English, minored in philosophy, studied Greek and German, and graduated from Vanderbilt at age twenty in 1925. Ventures into graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley, and Yale University ended quickly and unsuccessfully; Warren felt like a fish out of water. Then he went to Oxford University in England on a Rhodes Scholarship, where he wrote his first two works of nonfiction. *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* and “Briar Patch,” Warren’s contribution to the Fugitives’ manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand*, were both published in 1929. Warren’s *John Brown* is primarily an overwrought diatribe against the abolitionist beliefs and the radical ideology Brown represented in 1920s America. The book was well researched, a window into a young white Southerner’s worldview, and ironically, signaled several enduring elements of his vision that survive in *Who Speaks* and other works, even as Warren’s racial attitudes greatly changed over the decades: his lifelong absorption in the legacies of slavery and race in America; his contempt for absolutes; his deep interest in the drama of the Civil War as a mirror of any American present; his sense of how mythic figures are both irresistible and dangerous; his fascination with an irrepressible, tragic innocence in American consciousness; his attraction to the leader (sometimes heroic) who exposes the human condition by risking his humanity; and his desire to understand the violence in the human heart. The essay, “Briar Patch,” however, written with ambivalence and at the behest of Ransom and Davidson, was a lean, poorly argued defense of segregation, contending that the “Southern negro” should remain a “creature of the small town and farm” that properly fit his “temperament and capacity.” The short piece haunted Warren for the rest of his life; it cropped up in some reviews of *Who Speaks*. Some commentators still cannot uncouple Warren from that essay well after his death; it is likely the only writing he ever lived to regret, and he said so endlessly.³

When Warren returned to the United States, he rejected a fellowship to study for a Ph.D. in English at Yale. Instead he took teaching jobs, first at Southwestern College in Memphis, then at Vanderbilt, and he moved to Louisiana State University in 1934. In 1942 he moved north to the University of Minnesota and finally in 1950 on to Yale, where he resided and taught for the rest of his career until he died in 1989. Thus, for nearly half a century, Warren lived and worked in Northern climes, while the South remained the bone and marrow source of his imagination.

In the 1930s and 1940s Warren emerged as a prominent poet and the coeditor with Cleanth Brooks of two books, *An Approach to Literature* and *Understanding Poetry*, through which he left a lasting mark as a critic and especially on the teaching of literature. He also began to write and publish novels, and in his third, *All the King's Men* (1946), he produced his masterpiece. Warren lived in Louisiana during the years of the Huey Long dictatorship in that state, where he taught at LSU and helped to found and edit the *Southern Review*. The book, one of the greatest probings in fiction of the dark arts of politics, especially Southern class politics in America, is also a profound reflection on the meaning of history, on human nature, and on humanity's individual and collective complicity with evil. In the character of Jack Burden, Warren gave to modern literature a kind of brooding Hamlet, and although the book is laced with bitter and fated tragedies, the author allows Jack a path to redemption out of guilt and the layered abyss he had fallen into, first as a directionless drifter and graduate school dropout who could never quite finish his dissertation on his Confederate ancestor, and finally as the political operative doing the dirtiest work for Governor Willie Stark.⁴ Warren's perfect pitch with voices and scenes in *All the King's Men* may come to his loyal readers' minds as they encounter his detailed physical and character descriptions of some of the interviewees in *Who Speaks*. Such was a writerly technique Warren could never resist, sometimes exquisitely and sometimes to excess.

Race, and the intertwined relationships between white and black Southerners especially, had always been at the heart of Warren's fictional and historical imagination. But, from the passage of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court desegregation decision of 1954 until he assembled *Who Speaks* in 1965, his writing became preoccupied with America's greatest unfinished crisis. In all genres, Warren stepped into

this fray with great energy. His African American literary counterparts in the 1950s and 1960s were primarily Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. And as we shall see, both play prominent roles in *Who Speaks*, as interviewees and characters, but also as sources of ideas and provocative questions for other characters.

The issues were old in Warren's writing, but if *Who Speaks* provides one bookend for this period, his book *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1956) stands as the other. A thin volume of only sixty-six pages, *Segregation* is based on travels and conversations Warren conducted in Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, the states he knew best and in which he had previously lived. He allowed his subjects, white and black, to remain anonymous, but in the course of his travel he seemed to encounter the full spectrum of racial views, from hard-line virulent racists, leaders of White Citizens Councils and other pro-segregationist organizations, to moderate whites who expected integration to come even as they imagined it with anxiety. Among blacks he spoke with were the guardedly optimistic and the sullen and downtrodden; from them he also heard a great deal about the stunted opportunity and utter humiliation of Jim Crow. On both sides of the color line he met the educated and uneducated, those who could simply not abide any social change and those who could not wait for it. Everywhere, he asked people, the sharecropper and the rich businessman, the taxi driver and the young student, "what's coming" in the wake of the *Brown* decision. And although Warren may have found in part what he sought, he heard a huge variety of personal struggles and psychological divisions within the souls of individual people, as well as a catalogue of ideas about the relationships of law and morality, of time and human change.⁵ *Segregation* was a limited first effort, his prototype for what he set out to do in *Who Speaks* a decade later in a profoundly different historical context.

As the Civil War Centennial years arrived (1961–65), Warren entered that commercialized, sentimentalized, and often neo-Confederate commemoration with a distinctive, critical, and highly imaginative voice. His *Legacy of the Civil War* (1961), a brilliant 109-page meditation on the meaning and memory of the epoch of the war, first published in an early form in *Life* magazine, still stands as one of the most important pieces of writing ever attempted on such a vast topic. And in his novel *Wilderness* (also 1961), Warren crafted a fascinating, tragic tale, modeled in part

on Homer's *Odyssey*, of a young German Jewish immigrant hell-bent to participate in the American Civil War—the war for “Die Freiheit”—only to discover in entangled and brutal ways just how much that bloodletting was indeed about slavery, as well as the even deeper terrors of racism and hatred in the human spirit. By the time Warren decided in 1963 to pursue an oral history of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, he had been thinking deeply about how and why race had torn Americans apart from one another, and from themselves, for a long time. As is also clear from a reading of *Who Speaks*, Warren had spent the years of the late 1950s and early 1960s reading widely in social science about race relations, the history of slavery, and black protest movements, as well as a good deal of African American literary culture itself. He did not go on the road in 1964 unprepared.⁶

By letter, by telephone, and by personal references and introductions from others, Warren connected with and formally interviewed approximately fifty people for his oral history project. Usually with tape recorder, he went to their offices, organization headquarters, churches, or homes, or to rendezvous in bars or restaurants. Wherever someone would agree to meet, Warren would show up, hoping for a good piece of a stressed or preoccupied activist's time. Some interviews lasted many hours and multiple sessions, and others only a short time. Most of his subjects gave him cordial, if guarded, attention as the aging white Kentucky poet and professor from a famous Ivy League university, with thinning red hair, distinctive large nose, and thick Southern drawl, sat down and began asking very direct questions. Some of his interviewees were very experienced at talking to journalists, and some were not. Few had encountered personal conversations across the color line quite this forthrightly, as the white Southern writer probed for their innermost ideas, struggles, and aspirations. Those from the artistic or academic worlds (a minority of the whole) often seemed to enjoy the give-and-take, while the wide variety of leaders of the Movement were much more politically circumspect. A few, especially Malcolm X, responded with contempt, all but defying the legitimacy of Warren's attempt to interview them. In his Foreword, Warren recalls a friend asking, “What makes you think that Negroes will tell you the truth?” Undeterred, he answered: “Even a lie is a kind of truth.”⁷ In the end, he believed he uncovered many kinds of truths.

Warren devised a method for doing this oral history that, more or

less, he adhered to with all of his subjects, except young, often unnamed students. He tended to ask all of his primary subjects about their backgrounds, although he did his own research into their personal biographies. Large parts of the book consist of verbatim transcriptions of questions and answers, but there are also a great deal of Warren's own descriptions of settings, people, and historical context, as well as many pages of personal commentary. Warren insisted that *Who Speaks* was not intended as "a history, a sociological analysis, an anthropological study, or a *Who's Who* of the Negro Revolution." In reality, however, it is a little bit of all of those things. Warren said he merely wanted his reader to "see, hear, and feel as immediately as possible what I saw, heard and felt."⁸ A novelist with Warren's eye and ear for detail and skill with narrative could hardly have done otherwise, and the result is a feast of images and expressions from within the Civil Rights Movement, which when read sensitively today is both a historical artifact and a living document.

His method also included asking virtually every interviewee a similar set of questions, often derived from quotations from at least four key writers—W. E. B. Du Bois, Kenneth Clark, Gunnar Myrdal, and James Baldwin. From Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) he drew on the famous metaphor of "double consciousness," the "sense" that as a black American, "one ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." In one way or another Warren asked each interviewee his or her (although they are almost all men) own understanding of what he constantly called the "split psyche" of African Americans.⁹ As readers will see, the responses to this question in the hothouse of race relations in the mid-1960s are many and varied.

From Kenneth Clark, the prominent African American psychologist whose work about the detrimental effects of segregation on children had been famously used by the Warren Court in its *Brown v. Board* decision outlawing Jim Crow schools, Warren borrowed a critique of the philosophy of nonviolence advocated by Martin Luther King, Jr. From a Clark essay, "The New Negro in the North," Warren plucked a passage where the Columbia University professor argued that "King's doctrine" was "unrealistic" in the face of the "oppression and humiliation" and the "corrosion of the human spirit" caused by segregation. Asking the

“victims” of such a system “to love those who oppress them places an additional and probably intolerable psychological burden upon those victims,” argued Clark.¹⁰ Warren pushed this idea into the conversations with virtually all of his subjects, including King himself. The character, power, and strategic value of nonviolence became one of Warren’s particular preoccupations in *Who Speaks*. And it was surely on the minds of most of his subjects before they ever met the Kentucky poet.

In Gunnar Myrdal’s vast sociological study of race in America, *The American Dilemma* (1940), with its countless observations and interpretations, Warren found one historical point that he could not get out of his craw. He queried many of his subjects about whether they agreed with Myrdal’s suggestion that “there should have been compensation for the slaves emancipated, that an adequate amount of land should have been expropriated to accommodate the freedmen, but with compensation to the Southern owners.” This idea that slaveholders should have been paid for their loss of slaves in 1865, while blacks were securely provided with land, solicited a surprising number of positive responses, as well as many that were at least conditional and ambivalent, if not hostile. Such a prescription about Reconstruction seems odd and out of time from the perspective of the twenty-first century, but many black leaders of the mid-1960s took Myrdal’s compensation idea seriously.¹¹ It was as if on all sides of the color and ideological lines, there was still a yearning in historical consciousness that the “failure” of Reconstruction might have somehow been prevented.

In various interviews, Warren used passages or ideas from James Baldwin’s writings to provoke his interviewees. He was especially fond of Baldwin’s statement in his 1960 collection of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name*, that “the Southern mobs are not an expression of the Southern majority will. . . . These mobs fill, so to speak, a moral vacuum, and . . . the people who form these mobs would be very happy to be released from their pain, their ignorance, if somebody would show them the way.” Some witnesses disagreed with Baldwin’s idea, while others thought it relatively accurate depending on region. Warren seemed to love the provocative, often aggressive rhetoric of Baldwin, and he used the New York-born writer’s extraordinary fame and literary militancy, built especially on his 1963 bestseller *The Fire Next Time*, to prompt his subjects. He would sometimes ask if they agreed with Baldwin’s

contention that the South could not change racially until the North did. Baldwin's ideas on "white guilt" as both a useful tool and a stultifying problem also provided grist for the mill. Or, even more bluntly, he would ask their opinions of Baldwin's notion that the only real difference between North and South in America is that they have "different ways of castrating you."¹² At times in reading *Who Speaks*, it may seem as though Warren is carrying Baldwin's essays around in his pocket, as a kind of perverse as well as respectful ammunition.

Warren's papers at the Beinecke Library at Yale contain a long box of 3×5 index cards (at least 300) with which Warren prepared for his interviews. Almost all are in red ink, and most are quotations from Du Bois, Clark, Myrdal, Baldwin, Ellison, and numerous historians and social scientists. Some are simply lists of questions he had prepared for individual subjects. Warren also consulted with and read works by numerous psychiatrists, including Dr. Albert Rothenberg of the Yale Psychiatric Institute; a Bridgeport, Connecticut, psychiatrist, Dr. Earl Biassey; and a Howard University psychiatry instructor, Dr. Frederic Solomon. In that era of the ascendancy of psychology and the influence of the social sciences on the humanities, Warren employed ideas not only from Myrdal and Clark but from the many spin-offs of their work. Readers familiar with the early post-World War II scholarship on slavery, especially the controversial book by Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (1959), will see these elements all over Warren's extended discussion of what he called the "the funeral service for Sambo" (the old stereotypical racist image of the obsequious, loyal, childlike slave).¹³

To some, Warren's take on this sensitive topic may seem awkwardly out of date, and in most ways it is, but in 1965 it was at the center of a broadening academic and public debate over slavery, race, and history. His own rendering of that debate is a serious summary, based on deep reading, and anticipatory of a richer, greater explosion of scholarship on slavery's legacies, black culture, and black personality in the decade to follow. He did not swallow Elkins whole, although he certainly got caught up in the web of social and personality psychology swirling around discussions of race. To openly address the potential "emotional maiming" that slavery had left in African American life was hardly out of line in the mid-1960s, at least in print. Warren sought the complexity

of this issue. For those with their eyes open, he maintained, the Movement was killing any imagined remnants of “Sambo.” As Americans “stare into history,” he wrote, “or about them now,” they “see millions of Nat Turners and Frederick Douglasses.” But he also could add that reasonable observers knew there had been “many shadings along the psychological spectrum in between . . . Nat Turner and Sambo.”¹⁴

Yet another, and somewhat odd or less successful, element of Warren’s method was to ask most of his subjects their quick personal opinions about a short list of great American figures—especially Abraham Lincoln, but also Thomas Jefferson, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, and Robert E. Lee, among others. It was one of Warren’s ways of probing for the historical sensibilities and perhaps even notions of American *identity* (a term frequently used in the book) in his interviewees. These questions about historical reputations did not often solicit very substantive replies, however, with one great exception. Warren and Kenneth Clark enjoyed an extended debate about the meaning and memory of John Brown that, paired with any of the many recent volumes on the radical abolitionist martyr, would make a good starting point for understanding Brown’s primary legacies in our post-9/11 society. The Clark-Warren exchange on Brown became a fascinating, even testy, give-and-take about ambivalence over myth and history, over violence and morality, and over heroes. Clark admitted that he deplored Brown’s violence and would never have supported or joined him but, in retrospect, was very glad he had lived and acted in history. How many students, teachers, and scholars have lived or spoken that paradox about their views on John Brown? And Warren turned his commentary into an updating of his very old book on Brown from back in the 1920s, admitting that “mythic Brown figures” had recurred “again and again in my fiction.” Warren still did not like people who strove for absolutes, but he did use the moment to ask a very hard question that the 1960s increasingly had to face: “What do we make of a poet who, out of the ruck of a confused and obsessed life, creates the beautiful poem?”¹⁵ Some of the interviews clearly fomented deep and mutual stimulation.

The range of people Warren visited on his journey through the Civil Rights Movement is at first glance very impressive. There were, however, very few women and some notable missing figures, at least in retrospect. Among King’s famous lieutenants in the Southern Christian

Leadership Conference (SCLC), Ralph Abernathy, Andrew Young, and Fred Shuttlesworth were not interviewed, although they are at times part of the narrative. Among the young leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, what Warren calls Snick), John Lewis, Diane Nash, and Julian Bond, among others, were also not interviewed, although Lewis and Nash (from her published writings) are parts of the story. A seemingly glaring absence is Fanny Lou Hamer, the former Mississippi sharecropper, inspiration for SNCC, and heroic leader of the voting rights crusade in her state. For close students of the Civil Rights era, there are other conspicuously missing persons; Warren could not visit everyone, time and resources may have been a factor, and when the author set out on his travels in early 1964, Hamer may indeed have been either in jail or consumed by her work for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Among the women actually interviewed was Mrs. Clarie Harvey, a black businesswoman in Jackson, Mississippi, daughter of the man who founded the NAACP in her state, and founder herself of Woman Power Unlimited. Harvey gave Warren a poignant conversation about black religion in the deep South, about the potential of violence, and about the place of deep “love” in the practice of nonviolence. Another woman Warren sat down with was Ruth Turner, a highly educated (Oberlin, Harvard) activist in Cleveland for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). With Turner, Warren had a wide-ranging, out-on-the-table exchange about many issues—urban segregation in the North, police violence, whether King’s leadership could ever transfer to big cities, idealism and practical strategies, black female beauty, and her view that slaves should never have been treated as “property” in any compensation plans. Warren sought out Gloria Richardson, a Cambridge, Maryland, activist with whom he had a brief, tense, and moving discussion of how to control demonstrations. He also interviewed Septima Clark in Atlanta, although he did not write about her in the book. Among the students with whom he held conversations at both Tougaloo College and Jackson State College were several young women who are named and quoted at length about their ideas on revolution, taking risks, going to jail, and the meaning of violence. These young activists included Lucy Thornton, Jean Wheeler, Sylvia Davis, and Betty Ann Poole.¹⁶

The long list of people Warren did interview is what gives this book staying power. In his opening chapter, “The Cleft Stick,” Warren found

five men in New Orleans—three lawyers, a black college president, and one down-home preacher—who helped him develop a profound vision of the sacred significance of the right to vote for people who had never known it. Fifty years on from the Voting Rights Act of 1965, all those Americans who may not be troubled by, or who indeed may support, the Republican Party's efforts in many states (especially in the South) to require voter IDs or otherwise restrict access to registration and polls, should just listen to the voice of Rev. Joe Carter. Perhaps his recitation of his arrest, jailing, and brutal humiliation for attempting to “red-ish” to vote in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, a mere fifty years ago should be required reading for all U.S. Supreme Court justices, all members of Congress, and any state legislators who believe that restricting access to voting, rather than expanding it, is good for democracy. Better yet, perhaps those legislators might be put through a role-playing exercise, where they too are handcuffed, clamped in chains, and stripped naked in a solitary jail cell for asking if they could sign up to vote. *Who Speaks* is full of these moments when readers can realize that history is never over. And Warren avoids no opportunity to explore the “cleft sticks” in the lives of activists—their crosses to bear, their “tragic dilemma of opposing goods,” the horrible and dangerous choices faced in overcoming fear and police power as they try to crack open and destroy the evils of Jim Crow.¹⁷

In the “Mississippi Journal” chapter Warren achieved especially effective interviews with Charles Evers, Mississippi NAACP leader and brother of the just recently assassinated Medgar Evers; Robert Moses, the young Harvard philosophy graduate student who was leading the voting crusade for SNCC in the same state; and Aaron Henry, the veteran NAACP operative in Clarksdale in the Delta. Like his martyred younger brother, Evers was a combat veteran of World War II and had come back to build the democracy at home that he had risked his life for in the Pacific. Apart from Evers's riveting remembrance of a lynching from his youth, Warren found many of his answers too “officialized.” With the brilliant Moses, on the other hand, Warren seems to have really connected. They discussed everything from Moses's reading of Albert Camus while in jail, to the character of human hatreds, to why poor rural blacks experience social fear due to lack of education as they seek to vote, to one of the most thoughtful responses Warren received to the question

about identity and double consciousness. With the older Henry, Warren had a frank conversation and a forthright response about the legacies of Reconstruction. To a direct question about what the “Negro wants,” Henry simply replied, “what you got.”¹⁸

At the heart of the book is a chapter entitled “The Big Brass,” which includes extensive talks with and commentaries about eight of the most prominent leaders of the Movement and one politician, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The eight include Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, James Forman, James L. Farmer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Wyatt Tee Walker, Bayard Rustin, and Malcolm X. Some interviews are more penetrating or lengthy than others, but all are memorable, and each on its own serves as a document in the historical understanding of these men who, from quite differing and competing organizations and strategies, changed America forever. Among the most valuable moments are Wilkins’s deep sense of historical consciousness and his take on the problem of just how much the “Negro history movement” ought to instill “pride.” Wilkins’s brief description of the white South’s tradition of the Lost Cause is priceless: “I don’t believe that Negro history, as it’s taught, is on a par with the playhouse that the Southern white people have constructed for themselves in order to rationalize their position in American life after 1865.”¹⁹

With Whitney Young, Warren addressed the Urban League president’s idea of a “Marshall Plan” for blacks, especially in the cities, as they also conversed widely about the nature of Baldwin’s rhetoric and militancy itself among all the leaders. From the brooding James Forman, Warren received an education on the roots and goals of SNCC. The author was critical of Forman but deeply intrigued, as though he had met one of his own fictional characters, who struggled with his ulcers with a “mixture of pessimism and grim humor” and a “streak of tragic absoluteness.” At James Farmer’s office in New York, the founder and head of CORE gave Warren some nuanced opinions about the real nature of integration whenever it arrives, as well as about just who were real “leaders” in the streets, and who managed to merely “verbalize” or “chirp” as orators (Malcolm X and Baldwin, in his view).²⁰

The King interview, among the longest in the book, provides a thoughtful biographical background and certainly gives one a sense of just how the minister’s “charisma” played so powerfully on people, even in a sterile office in Atlanta. Some of King’s responses are a bit vague,

or at least careful and controlled. The man had learned how to be circumspect with the press (the FBI might be anywhere and in any tape recorder) and even with sympathetic writers. But Warren and King had a remarkable conversation about the nature of revolution, and the white author believed he had met a deeply reflective man, even a genuine pragmatist, one who, when asked interesting questions, could be seen “withdrawing inward” with “a slight veiling of the face,” in order to “test the truth that has already been tested.” King might have been exhausted the day he sat with Warren, but the author was so impressed that the sixty-year-old thought he had met a character in his mid-thirties determined to “affirm and absorb the polarities of life.”²¹ Those interested in finding mere dichotomies of heroes versus scoundrels or only good or evil in their civil rights leaders will find *Who Speaks* disappointing.

In Walker, the executive director of SCLC, Warren discovered a smart, “voluble and eloquent” man who talked candidly about the nature of demonstrations, about the need for “self-scrutiny” among Movement leaders, about the future possibility of black-white reconciliation in the South, and about the special meaning of King’s leadership. In Rustin, Warren found a unique figure, a man devoted to universal reform and rooted in pacifism, a thoughtful and creative organizer of people. Rustin’s conversation has the character of a personal history of the Movement, being written by a man who also plots and strategizes it. And Warren’s talks with Malcolm X in a suite at the Theresa Hotel in Harlem are as captivating as they are contentious. The author did not hide his disdain for Malcolm’s alleged contention that consequence outweighed morality in human affairs, nor for his apparent claim of a kind of universal white guilt. But Warren was deeply intrigued by what he believed was Malcolm’s sense of “a logic of history . . . of history conceived of as doom.” Warren got nowhere with some of his questions for Malcolm X, especially about whether America had any redemptive qualities, or about whether the activist believed in assassinations. Malcolm’s recent biographer, Manning Marable, captures how the host toyed with, while rebuking, his guest.²² The interview ended in dismissive short answers and competing parables, but it does demonstrate Warren’s quest to understand his subjects as thinkers before they were organizers.

The final nearly 180 pages of *Who Speaks* consists of three robust chapters. “Leadership from the Periphery” involves interviews with six

men Warren considers success stories, including especially important sittings with both James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. A chapter on "The Young" includes numerous students from Jackson State College and Tougaloo College in Mississippi, as well as Izell Blair, Ruth Turner, and especially Stokely Carmichael of SNCC. And finally, in "Conversation Piece," Warren leaves us with his own quite personal interpretations and sense of meaning he drew from his many months of conducting such an oral history.²³

Warren's conversations with the two writers, Ellison and Baldwin, are in many ways the most penetrating in the volume. This is hardly surprising; these were writers testing each other's wits and assumptions. In Ellison, Warren seems to have met an ideological and imaginative soul mate. Their discussion of Du Bois's notion of double consciousness and identity is the best in the book. Their conversations turned on the fundamentals about the "basic unity of the human experience," about the nature of history and why Americans evade it, about cultural pluralism, and of course, about the character and uses of tragedy. Warren found Baldwin captivating in their interview in a New York restaurant. But Baldwin, twenty years younger than the Yale professor, bothered Warren with his self-absorption, with his quest to boil all stories down to his own "interior life," standing in as the "voice" for the whole of black experience. But Warren also greatly admired that writerly voice, Baldwin's all-but-unparalleled genius for finding the meanings in America's racial condition. With Baldwin, Warren put all the psychologists aside for the moment and celebrated the black writer's rhetorical power, even as he found contradictions. With Baldwin, Warren wrote, "we are to think of the blaze of light that rends the roof and knocks us all—all America and all American institutions—flat on the floor." Warren had carefully read Ellison and Baldwin, their fiction and their nonfiction essays; he wrote about them and his interviews as a respectful literary critic. In this sense, his long sections on the two great writers are lasting pieces of art as well as reporting.²⁴

Who Speaks was widely reviewed, with some notices stiffly critical and some quite favorable. But the book was not a commercial success, much to Warren's personal disappointment. "I am stung by the irony of such a press winding up so grimly," Warren wrote to his editor in July 1965 after receiving a batch of reviews. "I guess we were just about eight

or ten months late, God damn it.”²⁵ News about the Civil Rights Movement, according to Warren, had mostly vanished from the front pages in the wake of the spring success of the Selma-to-Montgomery march. A flood of books had hit the literary markets on the broad subject of civil rights, and *Who Speaks* washed ashore among too many other titles, or so it seemed at the time.

Warren received a “fan letter” from the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who thought the interviews “masterpieces of fair journalism,” especially as the author managed to usher his subjects through “various shades of hope, despair, self-pity or self-knowledge.” Niebuhr was very taken by the overall spirit of the book. “You know the human heart in all its variations,” he told Warren. At the other end of the spectrum, Warren received vicious hate mail about the book. A Mrs. A. Russell wrote accusing the author of Communist “PROPAGANDA,” advocacy of “RACIAL MIXING,” and “A NATION RULED BY NIGGERS AND POPULATED SOLELY BY THEM.”²⁶

The book received very positive reviews in the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, and a psychiatry journal, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. But in *Dissent*, the historian August Meier rather detested the book, finding it “repetitive and distracting.” Writing for fellow scholars or Movement activists, Meier claimed, rather unfairly, that “knowledgeable readers” would find “nothing new.” *Newsweek* gave *Who Speaks* a particularly harsh treatment, complaining about Warren’s “pervasive presence” and calling him a “troubled moderate whose basic attitude is still paternalistic.” Warren responded with great anger in a letter to the editor of *Newsweek*. He resented being called either “moderate” or “paternalistic” and reminded *Newsweek*’s staff that he had made the achievement of “power” by black leaders and organizations, not “philanthropy” handed down, a central theme of the book. He accused *Newsweek*’s reviewer of not actually reading the book.²⁷

The most thorough and thoughtful review was written by the black cultural historian and critic Albert Murray. Murray captured the book’s flaws and its brilliance. Acknowledging Warren’s segregationist past, Murray nevertheless called *Who Speaks* the “very best inside report on the Negro civil rights movement by anyone so far.” He appreciated the author’s “frankness” as well as a “unique lack of condescension.” Mur-

ray was a big fan of *All the King's Men*, and he tellingly remarked that "it is as if Jack Burden, the self-searching Southern reporter-press agent . . . had finally gone back into the newspaper business." Murray more than implied that Warren had always been, in part, Jack Burden himself, with a "very special urge to come to terms with the past." Warren, like his most famous character, learned that "his destiny had always been inextricably entangled with that of the Negroes all around him." With keen precision, Murray observed that *Who Speaks* possessed many qualities of "good fiction," especially the "enigmatic complexity of human motives" and the "texture of human life itself." The major problem, Murray contended with good reason, was that Warren allowed himself to be "sucked in by the all too neat theories of this or that social science," and therefore at times sounded "like a reading room intellectual" or "cocktail party theorists." Murray really liked the interview with Ellison, and he commended Warren, "still the professional Southerner," for the "great distance" he had traveled in his racial and historical views. This big oral history, Murray concluded, "is . . . another installment of his [Warren's] report on the progress of one noteworthy Southerner toward reconstruction 100 years after Appomattox." He thought the Kentuckian "still had a long way to go," but saw him as "much farther along than many damn-yankees, including some black ones who think they are there already."²⁸ Warren could only have been pleased with the depth of Murray's reading, and his sympathetic sense of irony.

The final chapter of *Who Speaks* is a tour de force of personal reflection, a writer's bluntly honest suggestions to his country, whites and blacks alike, about how to face their history, their current crisis, and themselves. It is vintage Warren, untrammelled by doubt, even as he demands change of his society and of himself. Above all, based on his many interviews as well as his lifetime of traveling behind, across, and through the color lines, Warren attacked *sentimentality* and pleaded for a serious, open-eyed sense of *history*. He had uncovered great hope, indeed inspiration, in his encounters with the leaders of the Movement, a crusade he believed had the potential to change everyone. He discovered the obvious—that there was no single "Negro leader," and that neither black nor white people were an undifferentiated "lump."²⁹

Warren's claims that the struggle in the South was everyone's dilemma together, a common challenge and fate, did not sit well with some

black readers and critics. But he insisted that they were all undergoing a historical “shock” out of which they would be changed, maybe even redeemed. In his view, however, such an outcome was possible only if achieved without sentimentality. He wanted a change of minds, of intellect, of understanding, and not of “feeling.” White guilt could never be enough; indeed, it stood in the way. “A deeply disturbing awareness of one’s sins,” Warren asserted, “does not have to be the same thing as the masochistic self-indulgence not infrequently associated with the white man’s . . . sense of a communal white guilt.” Blacks benefited nothing, he maintained, when whites indulged themselves “in a nice warm bubble bath of emotion, no matter how sweet [a white man] feels while in the suds.” Real change would come from knowledge, self-awareness, and choices to take “action.”³⁰

And neither awareness nor action was possible, in Warren’s universe, without historical understanding. He especially lectured white Southerners on how to overcome all their “alibis,” how to face their past and thereby reject their own bigotry as well as “Yankee Phariseism.” And above all, from a “short course in history” they might learn that to know and defend their “identity,” they did not “have to humiliate Negroes—nor have to condone such humiliation.” In *Who Speaks*, Warren recorded, as he also made and wrote some history. And to him history was always “tragic,” if also sometimes “noble.”³¹ He learned as he then also preached. This book more than deserves a reprinting—as a window into the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1960s, as well as into our own souls as Americans still struggling with a history that both defeats and revives racism.

NOTES

1. Suzanne Baskin to Warren, March 24, 1965, Robert Penn Warren Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, box 213, folder 3720. Baskin was the assistant for Albert Erskine, Warren’s longtime, distinguished editor at Random House in New York. Warren employs the word “revolution” throughout the book, and sometimes debates its meaning with his subjects. See Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965; reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 151–52, 273. A fascinating, recent, and quite critical treatment of

Who Speaks is in Michael Kreyling, "Robert Penn Warren: The Real Southerner and the 'Hypothetical Negro,'" in Kreyling, *The South That Wasn't There: Post-southern Memory and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 49–75. Kreyling is especially effective at showing how much W. E. B. Du Bois's ideas about identity hover over and lace through *Who Speaks*, as well as how Warren imposes himself onto the interviews and therefore onto the analysis in the book. Other works of similar form (oral history) that *Who Speaks* may be compared to, among others, are Harold R. Isaacs, *The New World of Negro Americans* (London: Phoenix House, 1964); Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Putnam, 1977); and Juan Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* (New York: AARP/Sterling, 2004).

2. Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 11–15, 29–30, 40–43; John Burt, "Robert Penn Warren," in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, vol. 7, *Prose Writing, 1940–1990* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 320–22.

3. Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929); Warren, "Briar Patch," in *Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930; reprint, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 246–64. On the influence of Ransom and Davidson and the Agrarians, see Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 57–88.

4. See Cleanth Brooks, John Thibout Purser, and Robert Penn Warren, *An Approach to Literature: A Collection of Prose and Verse, with Analyses and Discussions* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1939); Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: H. Holt, 1939); Warren, *All the King's Men* (1946; reprint, New York: Harcourt, 2001). On *All the King's Men*, much is written, but see John Burt, *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 150–90; Burt, "Robert Penn Warren," *Cambridge History of American Literature*, 329–36; and David W. Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 41–46.

5. Robert Penn Warren, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (New York: Random House, 1956), 44–52.

6. Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961; reprint, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983); Warren, *Wilderness: A Tale of*

the Civil War (New York: Random House, 1961). See Blight, *American Oracle*, 46–51, 59–78.

7. Warren, *Who Speaks*, Foreword, 249–67.

8. *Ibid.*, Foreword.

9. Warren first uses the passage in *Who Speaks*, 19, and many times thereafter, often in much shorter versions and often just by referring to the “split psyche,” as though he expected the term to be commonly understood.

10. Warren first uses the Clark passage in *Who Speaks*, 23. The quote comes from Kenneth Clark, “The New Negro in the North,” *The New Negro*, ed. M. H. Ahmann (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, 1961).

11. See Warren’s first use of the Myrdal idea in *Who Speaks*, 86–87, and then many times thereafter. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., for example, called it “very sound.” *Who Speaks*, 168.

12. *Ibid.*, 30, 58, 285, 423. The passage about Southern mobs is in James Baldwin, “In Search of a Majority: An Address,” in *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1960), in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 215.

13. Albert Rothenberg, MD, to Warren, Jan. 16, 1964. Rothenberg was assistant medical director at the Yale Psychiatric Institute, and he put Warren in touch with Dr. Earl Biassey. Dr. Frederic Solomon, MD, Howard University, to Warren, Nov. 18, 1963, Warren Papers, box 213, folder 3720. For note cards, see Warren Papers, box 207. Warren, *Who Speaks*, 52; and see Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

14. Warren, *Who Speaks*, 52–59. Among the works of social psychology Warren quotes or cites in his text and footnotes are Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, *The Mark of Oppression: A Psychosocial Study of the American Negro* (New York: Norton, 1951); Thomas F. Pettigrew, *A Profile of the Negro American* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1964); and the various works of Gordon Allport on prejudice and bigotry. He also makes repeated references to Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965).

15. Warren, *Who Speaks*, 317–22.

16. *Ibid.*, 59–66, 136, 139, 336, 369–71, 378–90, 404, 414–15. On Nash, see 58, 248.

17. *Ibid.*, 3–43. Quote about “tragic dilemma,” 27. The other people interviewed here are Lolis Elie, Robert Collins, Niles Douglas, and Felton Clark, president of Southern University in Baton Rouge, La.

18. *Ibid.*, 102–9, 89–100, 74–87.

19. Ibid., 149–51.

20. Ibid., 160–70, 188–89, 196–97.

21. Ibid., 206–21.

22. Ibid., 222–32, 235–44, 245–62; Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 352–53. On the Malcolm X interview, see Kreyling, “Robert Penn Warren,” 70–72. Kreyling calls the interview a “wrestling match.” Indeed it was.

23. The other subjects in “Leadership on the Periphery” are William Hastie, John Harvey Wheeler, Carl Rowen, and Kenneth Clark. The chapter on “The Young” also includes an interview with Stephen A. Wright, president of Fisk University in Nashville.

24. Warren, *Who Speaks*, 277–98, 326–53.

25. Warren to Albert Erskine, July 29, 1965, and Erskine to Warren, July 27, Warren Papers, box 213, folder 3720.

26. Reinhold Niebuhr to Warren, July 10, 1965, and Mrs. A. Russell to Warren, n.d., Warren Papers, box 213, folder 3720.

27. Review by Maurice Dolbier, *New York Herald Tribune*, May 28, 1965; Charles Poore, *New York Times*, June 1, 1965; *Atlantic Monthly*, July 1965; Francis Coughlin, *Chicago Tribune*, June 4, 1965; Lawrence Kubie, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, vol. 141, no. 2, 1965; *Newsweek*, June 7, 1965; Warren to editor of *Newsweek*, June 12, 1965; Joseph Nicholson, *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 13, 1965; August Meier, “The Question Is Not Answered,” *Dissent*, Autumn, 1965, in Warren Papers, box 213, folder 3720. It is in Nicholson’s review that I first encountered the quotation from *Brother to Dragons* that I use in the epigraph. And I thank John Burt, in his email of September 19, 2013, for helping to enhance my understanding of the literary context of the quotation.

28. Albert Murray, *New Leader*, June 21, 1965, Warren Papers, box 213, folder 3720.

29. Warren, *Who Speaks*, 405, 423.

30. Ibid., 423–24, 431–34.

31. Ibid., 428, 441–42.

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