
Professing Literature: The Example of Austin Warren

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Literary studies in America are in a late stage of decay. For nearly a century English departments have been a revolving door of influences, most of which have not been salutary. In rapid succession historical and philological scholarship of the early twentieth century gave way to the New Criticism, the critical influences of Marx and Freud, postmodernism (deconstruction), New Historicism, and the currently dominant hermeneutics of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. University English departments today are divided along these various ideological lines, with the result that literary studies have morphed into a heterogeneous set of subdisciplines with the word “studies” appended. Here I intend no polemic against or diagnosis of the chaotic state of literature as a discipline; rather, I propose considering this state of affairs from the point of view of its practitioners. The professoriate is defined by those who profess. Borrowing Gerald Graff’s phrase, one might ask who stands out as a model of “professing literature”¹ amidst this disciplinary chaos? Or, borrowing from the title of Allen Tate’s famous essay, one might ask who exemplifies “The Man of Letters in the Modern World”? Tate offers a noble portrait; he argues that the literary teacher and scholar

must do first what he has always done: he must recreate for his age the image of man, and he must propagate standards by which other men may test that image, and distinguish the false from the true. . . . He must dis-

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¹ Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987, reissued in 2007) remains an important study of the profession of teaching literature at the university level.

criminate and defend the difference between mass communication . . . and the knowledge of man which literature offers us for human participation.²

Such a figure is scarce in the modern academy, but examples remain within memory. Austin Warren, Tate's friend and correspondent, is an eminent example. This unjustly neglected teacher, critic, and theorist is a clear voice amidst the cacophony of a declining discipline. Like many great twentieth-century literary scholars, Warren was a brilliant and accomplished defender of literary tradition—he deserves mention among luminaries such as René Wellek, Allen Tate, Erich Auerbach, Northrop Frye, Cleanth Brooks, and Warren's teacher Irving Babbitt. Austin Warren's career was a constant struggle to embody and articulate the art of professing literature; he admired Tate and Tate's famous essay, and succeeded admirably in making himself a prominent example of the literature professor's noble office. Warren believed professing literature was a high calling, one that is ultimately spiritual, and at the service of individuals, culture, and religion.

Warren's Life

Austin Warren was born in Waltham, Massachusetts on July 4, 1899, and died in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1986. He attended Wesleyan University in Middleton, Connecticut, completing a B.A. in 1920, majoring in Latin and minoring in English. Warren proceeded to Harvard for an MA in English, completed in 1922. There he encountered Irving Babbitt, from whom he took a course in Romanticism. Babbitt's example and influence remained with Warren for life, and Warren became an early proponent of the New Humanism, a literary movement championed in the early twentieth century by Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and Norman Foerster. Men of Babbitt's generation were still suspicious of the doctorate, but Warren was ambitious to attain one.³ From Harvard he went to Princeton, where he completed a Ph.D. in 1926, writing a dissertation on Alexander Pope.

Warren achieved considerable eminence in his long career. After his doctorate at Princeton, he taught for forty-two years: at Boston University (1926-1939, attaining the rank of Professor), as Professor at the University of Iowa (1939-1948), and as Professor at the University of Michi-

² Allen Tate, "The Man of Letters in the Modern World," in *Allen Tate: Essays of Four Decades* (ISI Press, 1999), 3.

³ Neither Irving Babbitt nor Paul Elmer More pursued the Ph.D.; theirs was the last generation of American scholars and professors who could inhabit academia without the terminal degree.

gan (1948-1968). He was the author of eleven books, the most famous of which was *Literary Theory* (co-written with Iowa colleague and collaborator René Wellek). His output of critical essays, book chapters, critical introductions, and reviews was prodigious. Three of his books—*Rage for Order* (1948), *Connections* (1970), and *In Continuity* (published posthumously in 1996)—feature a selection of his most enduring essays. Warren ranks among the eminent literary scholars of the twentieth century in the scope of his scholarship; he was an authority in American literature and in British poetry—especially seventeenth-century, comparative literature, and literary theory. Further, Warren’s career was adorned with distinctive service and honors: he served on the editorial boards of leading scholarly journals such as *The New England Quarterly*, *American Literature*, and *Comparative Literature*; served as Berg Visiting Professor of English at New York University (1953-1954); received the Literary Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1973); and was elected member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1975).⁴

Each generation has “eminent” academics, though most are not memorable. Even fewer are models of the professoriate for any goal loftier than self-advancement. Austin Warren ranks among those rare figures remembered by colleagues, students, friends, and correspondents as much for their example as their accolades, as much for their wisdom and humanity as their publications. It is Warren’s example as professor that is so instructive for the discipline today.

On teaching literature

University professors today are especially inept at answering fairly simple questions, such as “why does literature matter to undergraduates,” and “why bother teaching or producing scholarship about it?” Northrop Frye once confessed

[i]n my early days I thought very little about such questions, not because I had any answers, but because I assumed that anybody who asked them was naive. I think now the simplest questions are not only the hardest to answer, but the most important to ask.⁵

From his earliest days as a professor in Boston, Warren struggled to articulate an answer to these questions, and continued to do so into his retirement. As a rigorous theorist, Warren articulated clear parameters re-

⁴ George A. Panichas, Introduction, *The Letters of Austin Warren* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2011), xxviii.

⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), 14.

garding the nature and function of literature and criticism, primarily with his co-author René Wellek in *Theory of Literature*. This is a text to which the discipline of literary studies ought to return for the sake of its own sanity, as a stimulus to recovering a *ratio* for the teaching and study of literature.

In addition to developing a theoretically sound view of literature, Warren articulated a compelling vision of the “office” of the professor—teaching and writing. Warren was heart and soul a New Englander, and in his mature years as professor—in Iowa and then Michigan—he considered himself, in the idiom of the colonial Puritan Divines he knew and loved, the “Apostle to the Midwest.” For Warren, teaching literature was a sacred charge, the podium his pulpit, and students his “parishioners.”⁶ In contrast to the precision of his theoretical views, his vision of teaching literature was broadly humanistic, and ultimately religious. Reflecting upon his long career, Warren wrote:

From 1920 to 1968 I was a university teacher of English, or (as I preferred to say) of literature, of . . . ‘culture’ or the humanities, of whatever I knew and hoped, by verbal discourse or dialogue or sheer osmosis, I could impart to the young.⁷

Warren’s equation of literature with “culture” is a reminder to professors of literature’s purpose and relevance. Warren believed teaching the enduring texts cultured the soul, fed the young, illuminated the mind, and made social life tolerable. In a 1973 letter, Warren describes the “office” of the professoriate as a mediation between great literature and the spiritual needs of students:

[I am] a man whose concern was acting as a mediator between the sacred texts of literature and the existential needs of the individual students. That simple office still seems to me the proper concern of a teacher of literature.⁸

For Warren the professor is a “go-between,” occupying the sacred space between text and student. In his autobiography, Warren observes that the literature professor “is . . . a middle-man or mediator between books and neophyte readers, an initiator of the young into the written treasures of their culture.”⁹ Such a pedagogy has rich implications: it presupposes literature is a source of wisdom, requiring humility and docility from professor and student. Reverence for the text becomes the common

⁶ Austin Warren, *Becoming What One Is* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 157.

⁷ Austin Warren, in *In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren*, ed. George A. Panichas (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 3.

⁸ Warren, in a 1973 letter to Nathan Lyons, in *The Letters of Austin Warren*, 307.

⁹ Warren, *Becoming What One Is*, 160.

ground upon which community is built between master and disciple. Yet this pedagogy is, to borrow a fashionable educationist phrase, “student-centered.” For Warren, teaching literature is not primarily for the professor’s enrichment: he does not lecture for his own aesthetic or intellectual stimulation. Connection was a word dear to Warren, a metaphor for his work. Perhaps his finest book of essays is *Connections* (late in his career, 1970), an echo of E. M. Forster’s famous phrase “Only connect.” Warren as teacher sought to connect his students to a body of texts which effectively met their intellectual, psychological, and spiritual needs. The young, to borrow Tate’s idiom, need adequate images of human life against which to gauge their own struggles. Warren knew great literature provides such images. He believed literature “meets the needs” of human beings because it is, in his words, “an art which, through myth or fable, offers an interpretation of life.”¹⁰ Encountering great literature, and mustering the courage to render a judgment of it, is the path to wisdom. Texts as diverse as Augustine’s *Confessions* and Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* teach that reading transforms the individual. Warren believed teaching literature creates such encounters. It is the professor’s sacred duty to mediate between the young in his charge and the literary tradition he professes to study.

Warren believed the professoriate engaged in a personal search for integrity and wisdom, and he felt keenly the power of example the professor wielded. For Warren, the professor as teacher primarily imparts his own example, his very self, much more than information. He derives this noble ideal, of course, from the example of his own teachers. Recalling them, he writes:

The only kind of teaching which I cared for was the kind I saw illustrated in the work of a few really great teachers under whom I sat: this involved less the impartation of knowledge than the constant search for wisdom and the constant attempt to be oneself such a man of integrity—the same outside the classroom as in—as could in some measure exemplify the ideal of the humanities.¹¹

The “ideal of the humanities,” in Warren’s own life, was primarily embodied in Irving Babbitt, with whom he studied at Harvard and whom he calls his “one great ‘official’ teacher.”¹² For Warren, Babbitt represented in his person the humanizing power of literary study. He writes of Babbitt:

¹⁰ Warren, “Literary Criticism,” in *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods*, Norman Foerster, John C. McGalliard, René Wellek, Austin Warren, & Wilbur Schramm (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 138.

¹¹ Warren, *Becoming What One Is*, xxi-xxii.

¹² Austin Warren, “Autobiographical Notes,” in *Teacher & Critic: Essays by and about Austin Warren*, eds. Myron Simon and Harvey Gross (Los Angeles: Platin Press, 1976), xiii.

“I saw in Babbitt a philosopher, a life philosopher, who did what most of the academic philosophers of the time did not—concerned himself with the whole spectrum of central human values, most notably religion, ethics, and politics.”¹³ To immerse students in “the whole spectrum of central human values” is precisely the reason professors teach literature, and Babbitt modeled for Warren that teaching literature draws students into serious confrontation with humanity’s central existential concerns. Babbitt has been unjustly neglected, but to Warren he was a powerful and constant influence as to what it means to profess literature.

Critic and scholar

After Princeton, Warren set out to produce the sort of precise scholarship typical of early twentieth-century academics (e.g. literary history, erudite surveying of current scholarship, manuscript analysis, etc.). His early publications were such scholarly exercises, produced mostly during his early years at Boston University. Such work is essential to literary study, but Warren began to feel that he was called to be more than an “erudite.” He became dissatisfied with mere scholarship—the marshaling of facts and cataloguing the learned discoveries of his peers. He described this kind of scholarly work, valuable as it may be, as

a kind of academic busywork; it is detective work; it is the creation of single bricks for a hypothetical building which neither the brickmaker himself nor anyone else may ever have occasion to use.¹⁴

Warren felt a moral imperative, a call, to go beyond scholarship of this kind. This higher task he called criticism, and it became his life’s work. In his view, the critic’s role is distinct from that of the narrowly focused scholar.

The literary historian may content himself with tracing the rise and fall of reputations, with interpreting authors, groups, and movements in their own contexts, allowing them wraith-like existence in the Hades of the Past. But the critic cannot remain satisfied with an estimate of ‘historical importance.’ It is his hazardous function to assay the past with this criterion: What still matters? What is still relevant? What still lives?¹⁵

If teaching literature represents culture in general, it is of first importance that professors pose and answer fundamental questions: which texts matter, which remain relevant, which speak to people beyond their

¹³ Warren, *Becoming What One Is*, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁵ Austin Warren, “The Scholar and the Critic,” in *Teacher and Critic: Essays By and About Austin Warren*, 41.

own age? Scholars and literary historians provide a wealth of valuable knowledge, necessary knowledge even, but before such questions they usually stand silent—their methods and tools provide no answers. In fact, enshrining “scholarship,” as Warren normally uses the term, as the paramount virtue of literary study is a sort of moral error. Warren calls it a vice. “The academic vice is the substitution of ‘research’ for existential thinking; to preserve records without selection, to multiply discriminations until one is incapable of singleness of mind and simplicity of action.”¹⁶ Scholarly research provides the baseline of knowledge with which the literary critic must be conversant, but determining what we should teach and read, and why, is uniquely the task, the burden, of the critic. Put succinctly, Warren observes that “[t]he scholar has been assigned the fact, the critic the value.”¹⁷

Warren’s view of “the scholar” runs parallel to Babbitt’s view of the kind of detail-oriented investigations that rob disciplines of their humane relevance, as when Babbitt criticizes the “philological syndicate” in the study of the ancient classics and other fields. We shall here not take up the question whether Warren’s distinction between scholarship and criticism in effect sharpens their separation.

In the 1930s, Warren took the professional risk of turning from scholarship to criticism. Reflecting upon this period, he wrote “There was . . . [a] choice I had to make, that between scholarly writing and criticism The 1930s was the decade during which I turned from being a scholar to being a critic.”¹⁸ Such a decision then carried with it the same professional hazards it would today—that one may appear unscientific, unsophisticated, merely popular, without rigor. Yet Warren believed criticism was both a necessity and a duty for the professoriate. Criticism is the uncomfortable responsibility of rendering judgment, taking an intellectual stand on the value and relevance of a text to one’s own era. The following two passages reveal the seriousness with which Warren took the responsibility of the critic:

Criticism is first of all interpretation, but it must finally complete itself in evaluation, either implicit, like the very selection of an author on whom to write, or a topic—or explicit, an estimate on principles aesthetic or other, clearly stated—an act of comprehensive judgment which is the act of a responsible self.¹⁹

¹⁶ Warren, *Rage For Order: Essays in Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 109-110.

¹⁷ Warren, “The Scholar and the Critic,” 41.

¹⁸ Warren, *Becoming What One Is*, 165, 167.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

From [Irving] Babbitt I derived something . . . which has stayed with me, steadying and nerving me: the sense that a professor need not, indeed should not, be a mere historian or compiler of opinions and views of other men; that he should be a man as well as a scholar, which means that he must judge and evaluate and take positions, and not only in his specialty. He must have the 'courage to be.' Whenever I have weakly abnegated this responsibility, I have felt the example of Babbitt, both in his person and in his books, as a censure and a spur.²⁰

George Panichas, Warren's friend and long-time correspondent, observes that "for Warren criticism was . . . an exercise in self-courage and self-discipline."²¹ Being a critic is a test of the self, of intellectual power and personal integrity. Perhaps the failure of literature professors today is a failure of nerve—few exhibit the "courage to be." What does Warren mean by such courage? Even casual observers know that literary scholarship of the last few decades lacks compulsion at a human level. It favors multiplicity of perspective, complexity, and political relevance; literary critics are forever seeking to "contest" other readings, "problematize" a text, or "expose" the hidden biases of the author. Such critics often openly acknowledge that their task is social engineering, decoding the ideological assumptions behind a text and praising or denouncing what they uncover. This sociological approach treats literature as a tool whereby the professor advances or opposes socio-political views for the putative purpose of properly forming the young. For Warren, exercising the "courage to be" is the opposite of the dual tendencies of endless complexity or social engineering. The critic, of necessity a generalist engaging a tradition broader than his specialization, must make the difficult judgment that *this author* and *this work matters* to readers today, and in a way that compels what Dr. Johnson famously called "the common reader." Such a task is difficult, even agonizing, but should literature professors refuse it, can society be blamed for finding them irrelevant? Professors in English departments purveying byzantine analyses or sheer propaganda give little to culture. As it turns out, the court of public opinion has become resentful, and English departments find themselves losing students and being underfunded. When people want propaganda, they know where to find it, and they tend to resent it being mediated through Shakespeare, Hawthorne, or lesser writers. Warren argues civilization looks to literature professors for vision, for a bolster to our humanity, for sound judgment. Culture depends upon the professoriate for genuine critics, those exhibiting "the courage to be" in a fashion compelling and encouraging.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

²¹ George A. Panichas, Introduction, *In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren*, xvi.

Without such courage, the professoriate can hardly justify itself vis-a-vis the society it purports to serve.

What the academy currently lacks is the sort of professor Warren believed he must be. Such a literature professor serves culture by posing the most fundamental questions about literature—what to read and why. Warren describes the critic as a

... man who possesses and combines a knowledge of ancient and modern literature, sensibility, judicial acuteness and balance, a comprehensive and sustained attitude. We stand in perpetual need of general ideas, discriminating surveys and syntheses, coherent estimates of art-history such as have ... been given us by Johnson, Arnold, and Mr. Eliot. We need definitions of ends and standards. We need to have literature correlated with the other arts, and with metaphysics, and with life. And in needing these, we are but avowing our need of the critic.²²

Thus conceived, the critic is a generalist rather than a specialist. For Warren, critics like Dr. Johnson, Matthew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot are sure guides to the professoriate for guidance in its critical responsibility. They were men of broad erudition who articulated standards and made literary judgments to guide the culture of their day. Yet Johnson, Arnold, and Eliot were not college professors, and Warren knew well the perils of being a serious generalist in the academy.

The history of thought and art is one of ever increasing specialization; the generalist, who seeks to reclaim the ancient, the primitive freedom of scope, is a suspect and endangered species. And, accompanying the specialization of subject matter and form, has come an ever-increasing specialization of audiences. Where, now, is the famous 'general reader,' to whom Dr. Johnson could appeal as a final arbiter? He has become as mythical as the general writer, the 'man of letters.'²³

Warren here echoes the famous title of Tate's essay, and articulates a great insight. It is the generalist, rather than the narrow specialist, who is most free, most capable of rendering judgment. The literature professor, because it is his job, has the responsibility, exercised over years, to internalize the great tradition. The competent generalist, not the specialist, has the "freedom of scope" to render a judgment of a text that is compelling and forceful, a judgment that can influence his peers, students, and common readers.

²² Warren, "The Scholar and the Critic," 44.

²³ Austin Warren, "The Poetry of Auden," *In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren*, 86.

Writing

For nearly a century the cliché “publish or perish” has haunted the professoriate. This gloomy refrain lingers on in faculty lounges and doctoral programs, even as English departments become increasingly marginalized. Why must the professor write, and for what purpose? To get tenure, to establish reputation, to be promoted—such rank high on the list of motives. Warren was hardly a man insensitive to the opinions of his peers or his status in the profession. Yet such were not his primary motives to publish. Warren wrote out of a sense of vocation; he felt it a necessary labor emerging from the spiritual center of his being.

Warren always considered writing, even more than teaching, his vocation, well into his retirement and to the last months of his life. Warren always reflected upon the distinction between his profession as a university instructor and his vocation as a writer. As a professor, he discharged his duties with competence, attention, and diligence. Yet his vocation was something more particular, something beyond the discharge of his professional duties. From his earliest days as an academic, Warren felt he “had need of a vocation in addition to my profession: of something I could do from [the] center and engaging the whole of me.”²⁴ Such a vocation was writing, specifically criticism. Warren reflected frequently on the significance of writing; below are two such reflections.

I wrote books, not as means of professional advancement, or even, primarily, as part of my professional obligation . . . I wrote . . . subjectively, because I found it for me an indispensable instrument of self-definition and intellectual clarification, a method of therapy and salvation, and objectively, on the relation of religion . . . to the arts . . . and to culture.²⁵

Writing . . . was the best method I knew for finding my way . . . to what I really believed—not only about literature, my professed discipline, but about ‘first and last things,’ about principles—political, social, ethical, and religious. . . . I must and I could and I would set my own intellectual house in order; and writing was my indispensable means of doing it.²⁶

For Warren, writing meant “self-confrontation,” coming to terms first with his own mind and his own beliefs. Writing was also the exercise of his responsibility to render a judgment, a contending with himself until he reached a judgment about a text worthy of submission to peers and general readers. He wrote to his friend Hyatt Waggoner, “I

²⁴ Austin Warren, “In Search of A Vocation,” in *Teacher and Critic: Essays By and About Austin Warren*, 21.

²⁵ Austin Warren, “A Spiritual Chronicle,” in *In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren*, 3.

²⁶ Warren, “In Search of a Vocation,” 26.

think you know that the word *writing* carries for me an intense and serious freight: it means nothing less than self-confrontation and reality-confrontation.”²⁷ In his peculiar New England idiom, Warren reflected, “I am a thrifty New Englander, and am disposed to think of writing . . . in terms of eventual publication,—*i.e.*, sharing with like-minded others of what I have first learned in order to satisfy myself.”²⁸ He wrote from his own intellectual poverty, his own lack. He wrote to learn, and, through rendering a judgment, to help others learn with him. Warren’s vision of writing is best summarized in the extraordinary phrase “self-confrontation and reality-confrontation.” The dual components of this phrase identify the grave responsibility of the critic. The critic writes to confront the chaos of his own thoughts and the reality of the text before him. The result of this confrontation is not merely therapeutic; writing criticism opens the path, for author and reader, to wisdom.

One hears often of the division between those who teach and those who publish. Warren was also uncomfortable with this division and considered it artificial. The struggle to write for publication was a type of internal wellspring that nurtured his teaching. He observed that “[m]y chief resource is my steady conviction that I can’t be an honest teacher without managing time for writing.”²⁹ Warren believed a vibrant intellectual life is the central driving force of teaching. Few academics are admired and remembered by students and colleagues more than Austin Warren was, and he remained connected to many of his students long after they left his classroom. He cherished those connections, but for Warren the teacher’s reward must not be merely the adulation of students: “the relation to students has much to give the teacher; but sad is his lot if he is dependent on the admiration of his students, if he has no life except this vicarious life, if he has no work of his own, no continually and intellectually sustaining work in progress.”³⁰ For Austin Warren, writing criticism was the “sustaining work” that inspires the professor to teach, think, act, and be.

Literature and Religion

Warren once wrote that “[w]ith all its uncertainties and intellectual inadequacies, religion probes deeper, aims higher, and offers more hope than any purely secular scheme.”³¹ If Warren understood the study of

²⁷ Warren, in a 1973 letter to Hyatt Waggoner, in *The Letters of Austin Warren*, 317.

²⁸ Warren, “In Search of a Vocation,” 25.

²⁹ Austin Warren, “Autobiographical Notes,” in *In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren*, xiv.

³⁰ Warren, *Becoming What One Is*, 171-172.

³¹ Austin Warren, “The Poetry of Auden,” 78.

literature as culture, literature must of necessity intersect with culture's highest expression—religion. Warren referred to himself as a “Catholic-minded Episcopalian.”³² His ecclesial home, to the extent that he had one, was the Episcopal Church, though he had deep sympathies with Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Yet Warren was troubled throughout his life by spiritual doubts, and from his early adulthood to his last days had bouts of scepticism and disbelief. He wrote as early as 1933 to Kenneth Burke

I am no longer any sort of literal believer in Christian dogma, but . . . I am an *anima naturaliter Christiana theologicaque*. . . Like Hawthorne . . . I am a modernist in the superficial sense but in the deeper & truer sense a reactionary against modernism.³³

This sentiment is echoed in retirement in a letter to his friend Hyatt Waggoner in 1972, which is quoted first below, and one to former student Myron Simon in 1976, which follows it:

You must understand me as an *anima naturaliter religiosa*, but one whose mind is speculative and sceptical. I have long periods of disbelief—more or less total.³⁴

[I]n the last two years or so I have ‘lost my Faith.’ I have not formally withdrawn from the Episcopal Church, but I no longer go to Mass or make my communion: I have told our Rector that till further notice I am ‘excommunicating myself,’ because I no longer believe in the Nicene Creed—or indeed even in God. My Orthodoxy has, throughout my life, involved so much ‘intellectual tightrope walking’ that it has been to me partly a relief to cease to struggle at the strain. It is probably unnecessary to say that I remain incurably religious (an *anima naturaliter religiosa*); so of course I am again, or still, in ‘search of the sacred.’³⁵

Religion, Christianity in particular, was no mere personal hobby for Warren. It informed his approach to the professoriate and his vocation to writing. In his autobiography, Warren writes:

My prime interest is in understanding the literary work of art to the fullest possible degree. . . . I am interested in studying the role which art, especially the literary art, plays in life, and in the relation of that art, both in general and in particular, to the other chief disciplines and modes of interpretation, philosophy and religion.³⁶

There is a powerful insight to be gained here. Warren refers to philosophy and theology as humanity's “chief . . . modes of interpretation,” which is what they are. Through philosophy and theology, humanity

³² Warren, *Becoming What One Is*, 119.

³³ Warren, 1933 letter to Kenneth Burke, in *The Letters of Austin Warren*, 28.

³⁴ Warren, 1972 letter to Hyatt Waggoner, in *ibid.*, 299-300.

³⁵ Warren, 1976 letter to Myron Simon, in *ibid.*, 345.

³⁶ Warren, *Becoming What One Is*, 165.

struggles to conceptualize the totality of existence, and the source of all creation—God himself. Following Babbitt, Warren adds to these two perennial modes of interpretation a third—literature. Literature, for Warren, explores in concrete images what philosophy and theology explore conceptually. The interconnection between these three modes of insight inspired Warren to refer to himself as a “Christian Humanist,” a position he defined as “the combination of religion and culture, of learning and spirituality.”³⁷

For Austin Warren, the connection between literature and humanity’s moral and spiritual life was organic and entirely self-evident. While he never presumed to speak as a philosopher or theologian, he always saw the literary as conversing with the ethical and the spiritual. Warren’s integration of literature with religion had nothing to do with proselytizing and everything to do with intellectual openness and honesty: literature, like philosophy and theology, is part of the human effort to understand the mystery of existence. Literature explores this mystery through the power of imagery, representation, and linguistic tropes, while philosophy and theology explore it through reason and dialectic. Yet in the soundly cultured person they all work in tandem, and to profess literature, for Warren, was part of pursuing what he called “Ultimate Reality.”

Why does society need professors of literature? Must there be a place for them in the university of the future? If humanity cares for the health of its imagination and the state of its soul, the answer must be yes. The current models of the literary professoriate have proven inadequate at many levels. The literature professor as social engineer, sociologist of identity, and champion of progressive politics has proven at best unengaging. At worst, such professors have done much to marginalize wholly literary studies. Culture requires of the literature professor in every generation a critical reappraisal of what Matthew Arnold famously termed “the best which has been thought and said.” Such a daunting task requires largeness of mind and greatness of soul. In every facet of his life and work—teaching, writing, defending literary standards, mentoring the young—Warren was a model literature professor worth remembering. Panichas wrote of him: “Few modern critics were to excel Warren in his open celebration of great ideas, great writers, great souls. Literary greatness for him meant spiritual greatness . . . the kind of greatness that gives us guidance and helps to orient us toward the good.”³⁸ Warren is an example of what professing literature was in its glory and still can be.

³⁷ Warren, “A Spiritual Chronicle,” 12.

³⁸ George A. Panichas, Introduction, *In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren*, xiv.