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BILL MOYERS' JOURNAL

"A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren"

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Transcript of "A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren"

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Executive Producer: CHARLES ROSE

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ROBERT PENN WARREN: I'm in love with America, the funny part of it is, I really am. I've been in every state in the Union except one, and I'm going there within a month.

BILL MOYERS: Which state is that?

WARREN: That's Oregon. And I've traveled in the depression in a fifty dollar car, broken-down, old, green Studebaker. I wandered all over the West. I spent time on ranches here and ranches there and been in all sorts of places. And I've had change given back to me for gas in the Depression. Some guys say oh, keep the change buddy, you look worse than I do. I really fell in love with this country.

MOYERS: He is a rarity in American letters. The only writer to win Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction and poetry. And he loves the country he often rebukes. We'll see why tonight in a conversation with Robert Penn Warren.
I'm Bill Moyers.

ANN: A Pulitzer Prize novel becomes a vital, very great motion picture.

MOYERS: The novel became a classic when Robert Penn Warren wrote it at the age of 41. Almost 3 million copies have been sold around the world...in 20 languages. The movie became a classic, too. It won three Oscars. Its subject was politics, its theme: corruption.

(Film Clip: "All The King's Men")

WARREN: It sort of grew out of circumstances. Grew out of a folklore of the moment where I was and I guess also because I was teaching Shakespeare and reading Machiavelli and William James. Everything flowed together.

That was a world of melodrama, the world of pure melodrama. Nothing like it since, well, until Watergate, as far as melodrama's concerned.

MOYERS: Oh, you think Watergate was melodrama.

WARREN: Obviously, it was melodrama, tragedy. It was tragedy too. You couldn't believe it. Well...only it happened to be true.

MOYERS: Did you think that "All The King's Men" would become a classic?

WARREN: I never gave it a thought, I just try to make an honest living.

MOYERS: It has been a prolific life since Robert Penn Warren arrived in Guthrie, Kentucky, 71 years ago this month. Since then he's been almost everywhere, and written just about everything. Nine novels, ten volumes of poetry, short stories, essays, two studies of race relations. There's hardly an award he hasn't collected. The National Book Award, the Chair of Poetry at the Library of Congress, the Bollingen Prize, the National Medal for Literature, and of course those two Pulitzers. He's still writing. Increasingly intrigued by the fate of democracy in

a world of technology. We talked at Yale University, his base for writing and teaching this past quarter century.

MOYERS: As a poet and a novelist, as opposed to being the author of "All The King's Men" how do you explain the vast disenchantment of our modern times?

WARREN: I don't know. It's touched every country in the world; we're not alone, it's part of the modern world.

MOYERS: Is there something in...

WARREN: There's something in the modern world going on and I don't profess to understand it. We can make guesses about it.

MOYERS: Make some guesses.

WARREN: Well, we are, for one thing, the whole western world is undergoing some deep change in its very nature in what it can believe in. And one of those things is clearly how democracy can function in a world of technology. That's one thing. Another thing, it just seems the massive number of people involved. Government's designed, the modern liberal democracy is designed, to function within a certain limited world.

MOYERS: How successful do you think we are in keeping some notion of democracy, and some concept of the self alive in a highly technological, scientific age of huge organizations?

WARREN: Not successful enough. I think you can see many indications of that.

MOYERS: What are some of the manifestations you see that deeply trouble you?

WARREN: Now this is a small academic matter in one sense: the death of history.

MOYERS: The death of history?

WARREN: Yes. History departments are on the decline, I'm told. I don't know the statistics. But certainly they...the sense of the past is passing out of the consciousness of the generation.

MOYERS: What do you think will be the consequence of that?

WARREN: I don't know how you can have a future without a sense of the past. A real future. And we have a book like Plumb's book, The Death of the Past which is a very impressive and disturbing book. As Plumb puts it, in the past people have tried and learned what wisdom they could from history. They have tried to learn from what has happened before. Now, he says, social science will take the place of history. And the past will die...and the machine will take over...done by social scientists. That's his prediction. He says only history keeps alive the human sense, history in the broadest sense of the word. It might be literary history or political history or any other kind of history. It's man's long effort to be human. And if a student understands this or tries to penetrate this problem he becomes human. If he once gives that up as a concern, he turns to mechanism.

MOYERS: The machine.

WARREN: The machine.

MOYERS: Process?

WARREN: Some process to take charge. Now he may have...there are many kinds of machines, there're many kinds of processes he can turn to. But the...the sense of a human being's effort to be human and to somehow develop his humanity, that is what history's about.

MOYERS: Do you sense among the students you teach, and among the young people you know, this loss of the past, this disconnection from history?

WARREN: Yes, I have. I have, indeed.

MOYERS: What is the effect of it?

WARREN: It's a certain kind of blankness. A certain kind of blankness. But the past is dead for a great number of young people, it just doesn't exist.

MOYERS: I know you once wrote that Americans felt liberated from time, and that it gave them a sense of being, gave us a sense of being on a great gravy-train with a first class ticket.

WARREN: Well, we had the country of the future, the party of the future...we had the future ahead of us, and we had this vast space behind us on this continent. We had time and space. We could change the limitations of the European world. Such a simple thing as a man's hands becoming valuable. A man on the American continent in the 18th century was valuable, neighbors were valuable, hands were valuable, there were things for hands to do. And so the whole sense of the human value changed...right...beginning with the value of hands, what they could do. Or the value of a neighbor down the road a mile away instead of twenty miles away. These things made a whole difference in the sense of life. And it's a fundamental stimulus to our sense of our own destiny.

MOYERS: They also were a power incentive, were they not, to human dignity?

WARREN: To human dignity because the hands mean something. They're not just things owned by somebody else. They belong to that man. And then all of the rest of the factors that enter into the creation of American...the American spirit. All of those things are involved.

MOYERS: You said once...

WARREN: We could always move and the sense of time being time-bound and space-bound disappeared, but mitigated anyway. A whole psychology was born, it'd never been in the world before.

MOYERS: A very optimistic philosophy of progress.

WARREN: That's right. As Jefferson said, in writing to his daughter, Martha, he said, Americans -- I think it was his daughter Martha, anyway -- Americans fear nothing, you see, cannot be overcome by earnest application, you see, and what's the other word? Ingenuity.

MOYERS: Ingenuity.

WARREN: Americans assume that there are no insoluble problems.

MOYERS: We've really been, we've really been trapped, in a sense, by Thomas Jefferson's definitions of America in those terms, haven't we?

WARREN: That's right, we assume that we can solve anything rather easily. And we're always right. We think we're usually right about it. Since we can solve things, we're the ones who are right.

MOYERS: I remember you wrote once that America was defined by one man in an upstairs room. Thomas Jefferson writing "all men are created equal," giving this great metaphysical boost to the American self-image.

WARREN: Yes, he gave more than any one person, gave us our self image. I think he was wrong about human nature in his emphasis on it. He wasn't a fool, of course, he knew that there were bad people. He knew there were stupid people because of six, I think, siblings in his outfit. Four had something wrong with them in the head. And the other one died young. Jefferson's genius was the only one of this brood of children who was even -- I think this is right now -- who was not in some way deficient. And so he was probably aware of the fact that all men are not born equal, right there at his own fireside.

MOYERS: How do people who still live with that mystique of democracy, that mystique of the self, how do they come to terms with the world you have described as being large, impersonal, driven by science and technology?

WARREN: They say that's the way to solve it, by and large. They say somebody will fix it up, the expert will fix it up some way. The magic cancer cure, there'll be this, there'll be that. The expert will come along and fix it up. And our faith has gone from God to experts. And sometimes experts don't work out.

MOYERS: Well, you've written a lot about how to hold onto the sense of self, when the world is changing this way. What do you say when the world enforces a beating upon us from many directions, forces we can't understand, forces we can't change, forces we can't even define? How do you...

WARREN: Some forces we don't know even want to change, we want our technology and we should have it, should want it. It's how we use it, that's important. It's the attitude toward it, it seems to me is important, not its presence. From scientific speculation to the applications in technology represents a great human achievement. It's how we approach this and how we wish to use it.

MOYERS: Well, I wouldn't want to abandon, would you, this material progress we've made, the things that make life so much more amenable.

WARREN: God, no, I don't want to abandon it. My grandfather said, he took a very dim view of the modern world, he was born in '38.

MOYERS: 1838...

WARREN: 1838, and fought the Civil War and wound up life as...he died in 1919, 1920, something like that -- '21. He looked around the modern world and found it not all to his taste. But he said, they have got two things that make it worthwhile. Fly screens and painless dentistry. Well, I'm for fly screens and painless dentistry too. I want that and I want some other things to boot.

MOYERS: What is the proper posture or attitude from all the years you've lived?

WARREN: The problem is finally a human problem, and not a technical problem. And we're back to the history again. The sense of the human as being the key sense. As we talk about education this means the so-called humanities is the only place for students to find the point of reference for the application of their science and their technology. That is the sense of the struggle to define values.

MOYERS: What are the values that are most important to you now?

WARREN: Well, I can tell you what my pleasures are.

MOYERS: What are your pleasures?

WARREN: Put it this way. Because I'm selfish and want to fill my days in a way that pleases me. Well, it so happens that my chief interest in life, aside from my friendly affections and family affections which is another thing...though they're related...is the fact I like novels and poems, as I want to read them and I want to write them...as I have an occupation which to me, I can go beyond that, now why that occupation? It's the only way that I can try to make sense to myself of my own experience...is this way. Otherwise I feel rather lost...in the ruck of my experience and the experience I observe around me. If you write a poem or read the poem -- somebody else has written one that suits you, that pleases you, this is a way of making your own life make sense to you. It's your way of trying to give shape to experience. And the satisfaction of living is feeling that you're living significantly.

MOYERS: Does it...

WARREN: That doesn't mean grandly, that means it has a meaning, it has a shape, that your life is not being wasted, it isn't just being from this to that.

MOYERS: It also means imposing...

WARREN: And understanding.

MOYERS: ...and imposing order, doesn't it?

WARREN: Order.

MOYERS: Some sense of order.

WARREN: Some sense of order on it, yes.

MOYERS: What does poetry and literature offer people in an age of technology and science?

WARREN: I say it offers an inward landscape. Now I've been talking about outer landscape, but it offers an inner landscape...it offers a sense of what man is like inside. What experience is like, he can see perspectives of experience. This may be in poetry or it may be in history or it may be in political science it may be taken in historical perspective. Man's view of how he should govern himself over a period of time has changed.

MOYERS: But how does it help us to see ways to deal with technology, with organization, with size?

WARREN: It makes us ask the question how that light or this object or this automobile or this plane will serve our deepest human needs. Or whether it's a gadget, whether it's a toy. Now when Coleridge has the Ancient Mariner shoot the albatross for no reason except he has a crossbow to shoot the albatross he's dealing with that problem. The problem was already there, you see. A machine defines the act. The man shoots the bird only because he has a crossbow. Why should he shoot the bird? He has no reason to shoot the bird. It's a gratuitous act. The machine defines the act. Because the machine will do so-and-so therefore it must be done. See what I'm getting at there? Coleridge's poem is a criticism... man as victim of technology.

MOYERS: How do we get control?

WARREN: It's a constant struggle. It means trying to inspect the things that shape us, that make us. Once we understand it we can sometimes do something about it. Now I'm not talking of psychoanalysis, I'm talking much broader than psychoanalysis which is one, is a special kind of application of a principle that's always been functioning in the world. People look at what made their world tick or made them tick, and they achieve, may achieve some sense of freedom from mechanical forces. I mean forces of machines, of mechanisms, but forces that have them into machines and give them habits of doing this thing this way and that way. Religious conversion is one of the most obvious examples of this.

MOYERS: Reconversion?

WARREN: Religious conversion.

MOYERS: Religious conversion.

WARREN: ...is an old fashioned way of looking at it. A man's been one kind of man, he suddenly understands life differently...

MOYERS: Do you believe that's still possible?

WARREN: I think so. I think it can exist, it exists for certain people.

MOYERS: Well, give us some help. How do we do it?

WARREN: Try to see how you came to be the way you are. The poem of Randall Jarrell's "change" ends, "change me, change me."

MOYERS: And you think it's still...is part of the creative process.

WARREN: I still believe in things as religious conversion...though I'm a non-believer, I'm a non-churchgoer, put it this way. I'm rather a common type, I think now, of a yearner.

MOYERS: The yearner?

WARREN: The yearner. I would say that I have religious temperament you see, with a scientific background.

MOYERS: Pilgrims sought God and looked for a promised land in the hereafter. What do you yearn for?

WARREN: I yearn for significance for life as significance. Now if I'm feeling with a poem or a novel I'm in a small way, trying to do the same thing. I'm trying to make it make sense to me. That's all. That's one reason why I like teaching...I have a real passion for teaching.

MOYERS: How's that?

WARREN: I think there's nothing more exciting than seeing a young person moving toward the moment of recognizing significance in something. The inner significance of something.

MOYERS: And it happens under what occasions?

WARREN: It can happen under, in a classroom, it can happen in any classroom any time and very often. And very often, indeed. And I'm a parent and I've seen it happen to my children.

MOYERS: How does it happen in an urban, complicated, interdependent city where life is crowded and services are poor, and a feeling that one is being acted upon by men and events over which he has no control? How does this yearning to signify find the creative satisfaction?

WARREN: It means a whole regeneration of the feeling of our society. And it's not going to be done by just making a few appropriations. I knew one man whom I rarely see now. He used to live in this neighborhood, whose job was to explain the background of the national merit scholarship winners. What could he find in common among these boys and girls who were spectacular intellectually, you see, and had great drive. And he said he had worked on it for years. He had found one thing only, was in common, there was always a person behind that child. It might be a friend or a teacher or an old grandmother who's illiterate. It has nothing to do with education. With some sense of recognition by an older person of this child's worth, this child felt valuable, felt valued. And some one person or maybe, maybe more than one had made him feel this was worth sitting at night reading, studying his book.

MOYERS: And you're saying somehow we have to get that personal touch back into...

WARREN: Some sense, something that will correspond to that. To humanize education, or to...maybe you can't create the home life again, maybe it's gone. I don't know. Now I don't...I hesitate to be optimistic. But he said at least if they do anything they know there was always one person or more than one behind that child...who suddenly seems like a miracle. He might be coming out of some lowly, illiterate, starving ranch in Wyoming and suddenly this child appears and it looks like a miracle. But, no, the old grandpa was there, talking to the child or some...or some teacher spotted him. Now Dreiser was the most unpromising boy you can imagine. He was just the most totally unpromising. He was a ferocious masturbator, he tried to get a wealthy girl, got money and...and sex tied up...tangled all his life. He was a poor student he scarcely read a book, but some school teacher, a Miss Field, spotted him and said, that boy has something. And she let him go on and graduate from high school. He got a job in Chicago as a clerk in the basement of a...of a hardware store as a stockboy. And she hunted him up a year or so later...said, I'm going to send you to college. This old maid school teacher, said I've saved my money and I'm going to send you to college, you've got something. She sent him to college for a year. He wouldn't go back, said I'm not getting anything here, said I'm just not learning anything here at all. So he...he wouldn't take her money anymore, said I'm wasting your money. But that's the one person that put the finger on him though and says, you've got something. Anything that will cultivate the sense of the value of a human being is the hope that'll make that man feel valuable, and that'll make...make it easier for someone else to feel valuable.

MOYERS: Well, we've been for 200 years a country that grooved on more and better progress, and that hasn't been all bad. It's had a big price. But the question, it seems to me now is, how do you hold on to the material abundance, spread it around so that more people share in it, but at the same time keep what you've written about so often, that sense of self and dignity and individual responsibility?

WARREN: Also we've got to quit lying to ourselves all the time. Now the Civil War was the biggest lie any nation ever told itself. It freed the slaves. Then what did it do with them? And the big lie was told and also we're full of virtue, we did it, we freed the slaves and it came home to roost a hundred years later. But we lie to ourselves all the time.

The lying about Vietnam was appalling. There was an awful lot of lying about Vietnam. There've been all kinds of lying. Now there's the lying about our dealing

with Mexico from the very start. I'm not saying give California back to Mexico, if you have to give 'em somethin' give 'em California, is my motto...which I used to know very well. But the point is you cannot keep lying to yourself indefinitely. And my daughter studying her history lesson in American history several years ago when she was a little girl in school -- not now; she's a senior at Yale -- but I was hearing her lesson for the examination. And she said something that was so appallingly wrong, I must have flushed...she said, don't say anything Daddy (Poppy, she called me), don't say anything Poppy, don't say anything, I know it's a lie but it's what you have to tell the teacher.

MOYERS: Well, that was...

WARREN: And this is the way half of our life is led in America. We have the right lies to tell ourselves.

MOYERS: But haven't we stripped ourselves now of that pretence? I mean we were never innocent, but now the pretence is gone.

WARREN: The pretence is...is going, anyway.

MOYERS: You don't think it's all...

WARREN: I don't think it's all gone, no. You're going to hear more lies the next six months than you ever heard in your life before.

MOYERS: The stuff of another novel.

WARREN: Well, the lies are going to be told. But see...I'm in love with America...the funny part is, I really am.

MOYERS: What do you like about it? What...what does America say to you? Affirmatively.

WARREN: Well, the story is just so goddamn wonderful. I mean the whole thing from the...the little handful of men, you know, who pledged their lives and sacred honor and set off the world. It's a great story. And it's the plain sweat and pain that went into this country...and integrity, the incredible integrity.

MOYERS: Integrity.

WARREN: There's just lots of it. The people...history's full of it.

MOYERS: This is the man I'm talking to who wrote that piracy and go-getterism are part of this country.

WARREN: They are. But at the same time you find the other thing is there too. But even the evil is part of the story.

MOYERS: It's the story you love.

WARREN: I love the story but also you can't have a story like for the...you know, from babes and sucklings, all life is evil against good. And American history is interesting because that's the way it is.

MOYERS: And often the evil and the good reside in the same personality.

WARREN: In the same personality. On the one hand you have a man like Houston who is a...is a pirate and a brigand but...but a boy who will read Homer by the fireside of the Cherokee chief when he's...when he's 13, 14 years old and say that's pretty good. As he ran away from home and was living with the Cherokees in east

Tennessee when he was a boy in his teens and reading Homer. And he turned out to be great.

MOYERS: Well, he was very lucky because when he headed west he stopped in Texas.

WARREN: He stopped in Texas, he stopped at the right...in the right place at the right time. But he started out...he and the same old Indian chief he met later on after he had been governor of Kentucky...I mean of Tennessee...and had this trouble with a woman there...with his wife...his wife had left. But he lived with the Indians again. Now he and the Indian chief plotted to conquer the whole west including Mexican west. And Jackson stopped him. Well, this is almost verifiable, there's some doubt about it, but it's almost certainly true. And when he crossed the river, when he plunged across the river into Texas his friend rode with him to the river and gave him a new razor as a parting present. Razors were hard to come by in those days. And he turned around and said this razor'll shave the President. Well, now, this is...this is America. I mean...I like these romantic stories of America. And the incredible energy and the incredible humor of America.

MOYERS: Humor?

WARREN: Humor. The whole tale of the...the folk tales, incredible number of folk tales, just an incredible number of folk tales. The whole sense of the...the whole southwest...it's incredible. But it's the complexity that is...is engaging. But what I hate is they destroy the complexity, to wipe out all that past and see us outside the past like that. I know we've had heroic ages, that it's Homeric.

MOYERS: Is it over?

WARREN: Well, that's up to us. Now, I...I felt a thrill with the moon shots. I know that's not very sophisticated. But I think that's not the whole story though. Moon shots and poems are not very different. They're both totally irrelevant to the ordinary business of life. The guy that devotes his life to fiddling in a laboratory or fiddling with a poem, they're both outside the ordinary common sense world. And they're both a little crazy.

MOYERS: And yet you value them.

WARREN: I value them, indeed. I...I think if you once get rid of the craziness in the world you haven't got anything left.

MOYERS: I remember in one poem you once asked yourself, have I learned how to live. Have you answered that question?

WARREN: I haven't answered the question, no...no, of course I haven't answered the question. How would I? I know certain things about myself that I didn't know one time. Some things I don't like, too, I've learned. But don't ask me which ones.

MOYERS: I was just about to.

WARREN: But I do know that I have to have a certain amount of time a day for myself...they're kept for special occasions, I mean I...I want to be alone with my scribbling, my writing...my swimming or something. And I don't know why. I...but I guess it's a lonely boyhood, I attribute it to that, anyway.

MOYERS: But filled with the presence of ideas and people from the books you read.

WARREN: That's right. I had a very happy...very happy boyhood actually. My summers were very happy, anyway. On an old run-down farm where old grandfather was very bookish and quoted poems all the time when he wasn't reading the Napoleon and his marshalls...or drawing the maps of Civil War battles with his stick in the dust. And reading military history.

MOYERS: Most people don't know that about that part of the South. They still think of the violence and the terror of the South, and the racism. They don't realize that in the world, even when I grew up, it was filled with writing and reading and...and presences beyond the known and seen.

WARREN: There was a lot of reading, it has declined a great deal too. It was declining already in the...my boyhood. But you can tell by the books in the house, the kind of books in the house, you know. Or the...or the correspondence of a family. I'd get hold of the correspondence of a family for a hundred years. And an old house being torn down, several times I got the papers...the contractor tearing it down said, got some papers for you. And I said I'd read them. But one thing that's impressive, at least in middle Tennessee and Kentucky, was the will toward well, education or bookishness in the strangest communities. Well, even "Kidnapped"...a school teacher went to another at gunpoint to get one, you know. And a certain man named Allener I think had a big revolutionary grant near Bowling Green, Kentucky. He was a wealthy man with a vast estate he...he had built himself a fine house, but he couldn't get a school teacher. So he...a man who had commanded a regiment, you see, of regulars in the Revolution, and a man of great wealth...said, well, I can do something useful, I can teach school. So he taught school for no pay for the rest of his life. Any child that would come, could come. He was a school teacher. Now that is a kind of heroism.

MOYERS: Time to be alone you say is essential to answering that question, how to live. Do you have a television set?

WARREN: No, I don't. I apologize. There's just not enough time in the day you see...there's not enough time in the day...so much to do. And if it's television or books...what it would come down to be.

MOYERS: And you've made your choice.

WARREN: I made my choice. Also I didn't want my children having passive enjoyments.

MOYERS: Passive enjoy...

WARREN: Passive enjoyments.

MOYERS: Explain that.

WARREN: I'll be honest with you, I didn't want TV around small children. Have the problem of discipline, you know...in monitoring it. And they took it, they'd never ask for one. They'd rush to one in any other house, but they would say to the teacher if he said to you, use this program for your course. But our family's not like that, my father won't let me. And there it was. But I...this is eccentric, I know.

MOYERS: I remember now that you wrote somewhere about the danger of our becoming consumers, not only of products but of time not wisely used. Is that what you mean?

WARREN: That's part of it, yes. And children are very vulnerable.

MOYERS: Well, that provokes me to think that most people aren't poets and writers, most people can't flee, and most people live in systems and institutions that give them very little time to themselves. And yet, as I travel the country and listen to people, they're saying, how can I create myself, how can I signify? Do you have any thoughts.

WARREN: I think part of it is will...to look into something that opens the inside, that books or, oh, I could say perfectly well...I could see it perfectly well being done by TV you see. I'll be arbitrary about that. But...I don't know, I'm not trying to remake the human race, I'm reporting myself as best I can to you...and what I find necessary to me.

MOYERS: And pleasureable, you said.

WARREN: And pleasureable, uhuh. And pleasureable, yes.

MOYERS: What about the process of writing, of creating poems and novels? Was it painful?

WARREN: It's a kind of pain I can't do without. I can't say I like it but I can't do without it. It's the old thing of scratching where you itch. We're trying to find out what the meaning of your experience is. I phrase it that way to myself now. I already done it to you early today. I've been trying to find out some meaning of your own experience. Now I often write about other people of course this is part of you too. I find...I find I can't do without it so far.

MOYERS: Can you teach it? Can you teach a young person to write?

WARREN: I don't think so. In one sense you can. I think you can teach short-cuts and what to look for. I think you can teach certain things which are peripheral to the actual process, and you can't create the kind of person that will be a writer. But you can help a little bit. You can open eyes to certain things and you can show how certain pieces of...of literature work a little bit... can be helpful. What to look for...you can modify a taste to a degree.

MOYERS: In more than 30 years of teaching, have you noticed any significant changes in the ability of young people whom you teach to write and express themselves?

WARREN: I find increasing illiteracy.

MOYERS: Illiteracy?

WARREN: Illiteracy. Yes, I do...right in Yale University.

MOYERS: Kingman Brewster's not going to be very happy with that.

WARREN: Well, I'm sorry. That's just true.

MOYERS: Well, all of this: increasing illiteracy, discontinuity with the past, size, complexion, technology, even television, how does it all make you feel about the fate of democracy?

WARREN: I'm an optimist. And I think God loves Americans and drunkards... keeps them out of the way of passing cars...

MOYERS: But not of themselves.

WARREN: Not of themselves, yeah. We're part of a whole great process, we're part of the whole western world, we're part of the whole drive of technology and we have a very tenuous...a very tenuous hold on our...our goods and our chattels right now in this world. It's a very dangerous world we're living in. And I wish to God I had some wisdom about it. But I think there is a streak of contempt in the American life...of things that are very valuable and...not only are valuable, are essential to our survival. We're driving fairly straight for a purely technological society, and with technological controls. And our government is in the hands, in the control of technologists who are not concerned about any value except mere workability...immediate workability.

MOYERS: Utility.

WARREN: Utility. And I'm not...not by any sense sneering at the...at the useful things of the world. Even the pleasant things of the world, I like 'em a lot. I met a young man a few years ago...a few years out of Princeton, such a nice young man, the nicest kind of a young American. He said we were introduced...he said, "I'm Xerox." Now he has given up his identity already, he says, "I'm Xerox." He's not Mr. Jim Jones anymore even in his own mind, he has no self.

MOYERS: He's the organization of which he's a part.

WARREN: He's the organization of which he's a part. I'm Xerox. And this is a symbol to me of the whole state of mind of the self ceasing to exist...it's part of a machine.

MOYERS: Is there an antidote?

WARREN: I think there is. I don't know whether anybody's gonna use it or not.

MOYERS: What?

WARREN: Well, I think the proper kind of education. I mean education that has something of the humanistic about it.

MOYERS: That says you matter.

WARREN: That says you matter. And the human being is this kind of a creature.

MOYERS: You're talking about a rebel. What is it that makes a rebel? Aren't you?

WARREN: I guess I am...I guess I am. Well, let me read you a little poem about the perfect citizen. I love this one by Auden, the man who is the perfect citizen. He was not a poet and not a scientist and not anything else, he's just simply a good citizen. "To the unknown citizen:" This marble monument is erected by the state...he was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be one against whom there was no official complaint...and all the reports on his conduct agree that in the modern sense of the old-fashioned word, he was a saint. For in everything he did he served the greater community...except for the war 'til the day he retired he worked in his factory and never got fired, but satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors, Inc. Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views, his union reports showed he paid his dues. Our report on his union shows it was sound. Now social psychology workers found he was popular with his mates and liked to drink. The press was convinced that he bought a paper every day that his reactions to the advertisements were normal in every way. Policies taken out in his name prove he was fully insured and in his health card it shows he was in the hospital but left well cured. Both producer's research and high grade living declare he was

fully as sensible to the advantage of the installment plan and had everything necessary for a modern man. A phonograph, a radio, a car and a Frigidaire.

Our researches into the public opinion are content that he held the proper opinion for the time of the year. When there was peace he was for peace, when there was war he went. He was married, added five children to the population which our eugenists say was the right number for a parent of his generation. And our teachers' report that he had never interfered with the education. Was he free? Was he happy? The question's absurd...had anything been wrong we would surely have heard.

MOYERS: Chilling.

WARREN: It's chilling.

MOYERS: Shades of George Orwell. What about the role of writers in our history? The writers who have shaped or questioned, contributed to these 200 years. What can you say about...about writers in American history?

WARREN: Well, I'll say this, anyway. If we start pretty early...let's start with Cooper. You find a man who creates the first great myth of America.

MOYERS: James Fennimore Cooper.

WARREN: James Fenimore Cooper. Now he's on one hand he says, you see, you have the rape of a natural land...the destruction of a natural land. On the other hand, you have the destruction of man and brutality that he's aware of and talks about. And also the paradox, which he has no solution for...between the values of nature and those of civilization. He has no easy solution for them. Let's take a case or two and look at right quickly. In Deer Slayer you have two characters named Hurry Harry...that's the go-getter, that's his name for the go-getter, the guy who's out to exploit anything...and Hunter, an ex-pirate who's been driven off the seas...hidden away on Lake Riverglass. Now these two guys are partners in the American story. The ex-pirate and the go-getter. Now this is too pat, it sounds almost too pat. And then this deer slayer, the young deer slayer, he has never killed a man, there's a camp of Indians, women and children at some point on the lake. There's a bounty on Indian scalps. So Go-getter and Hurry Harry and Hunter set out to go into the camp...it's abandoned by all the braves...and kill all the women and children and sell their scalps. Now this is Cooper's view of...of a myth of America. And...or another case in running back to his first novel, that series of pioneers with people bringing cannon out to kill...to kill passenger pigeons...no reason except the killing of pigeons...with a cannon. They're not going to eat them, they let them rot. At the same time they lock up in jail the now very old Leatherstocking because he's killed a deer out of season to live on. That episode appears in the first one of the books. But over and over again you have this. He's attacking, he's going at the things in the American society that he sees as incipient and with the same problems we're dealing with now.

MOYERS: Well, other writers forged those myths.

WARREN: It started with Cooper. You can go right ahead with William Faulkner and Cooper agreeing right down the line. And Frost not far off that line. And then you have another approach which is represented by...well, I mean most recently, most famously, Pound who was concerned with American philistinism of another sort. And lack of a spirituality, if you want to call it that. You have a whole series of the major writers who are violently critical of America. Melville, for instance, violently critical, and they simply are not ordinarily read straight in school. They're just not read straight in school. What they

say is not being...is not being told to the student. Over and over again you find it's true. And what the implications are of our American literature. It's an extremely critical literature, critical of America and constantly rebuking America and trying to remake it.

MOYERS: And yet that's so American...to be critical, to take to task, to challenge.

WARREN: That's right, that's American too, you see...the fact that they've produced the writers who could take this violent attitude toward their own people or to their own society. Let me tell you something...just an anecdote. A man I used to know in Italy...still know...he was a lieutenant in the Italian army when Italy got in the war in the summer of '40. He took to the hills with two friends. A rifle each and a few grenades and some pistols. And finally joined the partisans, finally found some other discontented people to join with. And as a major with an armored train and an air fleet of his own. But he said that what got him off -- his father had fled Italy earlier as anti-Fascist (his father being a musician... concert conductor). This young man said, I left because such a stupid Fascist government allowed them to translate American novels. And all the novels were translated because they attack America, these American novels attacking America, you see. The Faulkners and God knows who. And he said to himself...a country that strong that could afford to attack itself and criticize itself must be very strong so I think I'll leave the Italian Army. He did.

MOYERS: We're right back to that fundamental division again.

WARREN: Right...right back.

MOYERS: Now...we've always seen ourselves, if we read the novels, as we are. And we know now that the masks have been stripped off in the last few years, and yet I still find, Mr. Warren, hosts of people out there who want to believe...and want to affirm.

WARREN: Well, I'm in love with America. I...I want to believe and want to affirm, too. And I just literally...I don't know any other way to describe it, I just fell in love with the American continent.

MOYERS: From Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, this has been a conversation with Robert Penn Warren. I'm Bill Moyers.

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