

“STRANGE CATERWAULING”: SINGING IN THE WILDERNESS WITH
BOONE & AUDUBON, ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS & ROBERT PENN
WARREN

by H. R. Stoneback

I

“That light’s at the Jarvis place, ain’t it?” [Emily Roberts] said.

Robert Penn Warren “Goodbye, Jake”

This essay is concerned with influences and intertextualities in the work of Elizabeth Madox Roberts and Robert Penn Warren; given the chronology, of course, the influences flow from Roberts to Warren, and the confluence, the merging, of their streams of artistic concerns—the Matter of Kentucky, Daniel Boone, Audubon, folk life and language, narrative and poetic style, and so forth—indicates rich sources and connections that have not yet been divined.¹ All Roberts scholars—there *are* a few of us in captivity—know that the finest short critical study of her landmark 1926 novel, *The Time of Man*, was written by Warren. That essay, “Elizabeth Madox Roberts: Life Is From Within,” appeared first in the *Saturday Review*, earning cover billing together with a portrait of Miss Roberts in the March 2, 1963 issue. Shortly thereafter, with no substantive revision, the essay was reprinted as the introduction to the 1963 edition of *The Time of Man* that reintroduced Roberts to a new generation in need of, as Warren put it, “some small medicine against the special sickness and dehumanizing distortions of the 1960s” (38).

I would suggest that it is neither accidental nor incidental that Warren’s essay on Roberts appeared in March 1963, and a few months later his meditation on Kentucky history, “The World of Daniel Boone,” was published in the December, 1963 issue of *Holiday* magazine. Perhaps Warren, typically, was hoping for double-duty from his Boone essay, as an introduction to a possible reissue of Roberts’s Boone Trace saga, *The Great Meadow*. In any case, both Roberts and Warren scholars have been content—if they have noticed the matter at all—to regard his essay on *The Time of Man* as the only significant point of contact between the authors. However, I would argue that Roberts is a *seminal* influence for Warren, and thus, I hope to illuminate here the intriguing and hitherto neglected record of Roberts-Warren connections.

About that word “neglected”—it is the academic fashion to claim that every subject that we have the scholarly perseverance or critical acuity to discover has been neglected by those who came before us, so I might note that of the *twenty-four* critical studies of Warren that are in the wheelchair accessible part of my personal library not one—not one of the twenty-four books on Warren—makes any mention of Roberts. I call that *neglect*. Likewise, the sparse critical studies of Roberts have made no effort to establish a Roberts-Warren linkage; it may well seem rather curious that Roberts and Warren, widely considered to be Kentucky’s two greatest writers, have not yet received the kind of intertextual attention their work so clearly demands.

For the Nashville Fugitives and Agrarians in the 1920s and 1930s, for Warren’s teach-

ers and colleagues at Vanderbilt, Roberts was the exemplary Southern writer. As Allen Tate wrote to Donald Davidson in 1929: “Our true Southern novelist at present is Elizabeth Roberts, who does not write as a Southerner or as anything else;” she does not purvey sociological theses, she “sticks to concrete experience,” and she has “that sense of a stable world, of a total sufficiency of character, which we miss in modern life” (Fain and Young 245). Roberts continued to be held in high esteem at Vanderbilt long after she was nearly forgotten in the rest of the country; in the 1960s, when I did my doctoral work at Vanderbilt, I heard nothing but the highest praise for Roberts from the likes of Cleanth Brooks, Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, Allen Tate, and T. D. Young. I had an ongoing conversation about Roberts with Andrew Lytle, who in a 1977 letter to me proclaimed: “*The Time of Man* is one of the great books.” He added: “I know the Tates admire her. I was with them once in Kentucky when they drove by her house and went in for a short visit. I staid in the car, which means they were meeting for the first time” (Lytle-Stoneback 8 July 1977; see Stoneback, “Andrew Lytle on Roberts and Warren”). James Still and Jesse Stuart, two important Kentucky writers who did graduate work at Vanderbilt in the early 1930s (and were later friends of Roberts), also recalled the towering reputation of Roberts in Vanderbilt circles (see Stoneback, “Rivers of Earth” and “Roberts, Still, Stuart & Warren”).

Warren certainly agreed with his Vanderbilt colleagues about Roberts. “By 1930,” Warren recalled in his 1963 *Saturday Review* essay, “with the appearance of *The Great Meadow*, the fourth novel, it was impossible to discuss American fiction without reference to Elizabeth Madox Roberts” (20). And by 1931, the twenty-six-year old Warren was teaching Roberts at Vanderbilt, not just as the quintessential *Southern* novelist but also as one of the most important *American* writers. Indeed, there is anecdotal evidence that Warren taught Roberts in almost every one of his Vanderbilt courses, regardless of period and topic. For a short-hand version of how I first discovered Warren’s passion for Roberts when I found in 1967 a well-stocked Vanderbilt library shelf with multiple copies of Roberts’s works, I will quote from my recent volume, a long poem entitled *Homage: A Letter to Robert Penn Warren*:

[This] is about Elizabeth Madox Roberts
 whose novels you were teaching then (in *all* classes
 they said)—and how I met her in the midnight
 library stacks (I had my own key;
 my duties included Vandy departmental bibliography)
 and I held and read all night that old edition I found
 with all the marginal annotations
 by the magical incantations of place, earth, and land
 scrawled in what I knew to be your eccentric hand—
 and I knew that dawn,
 walking home through Centennial Park
 past the concrete Parthenon in the West End dark,
 what we had both learned from *The Time of Man*. (31)

Warren’s first published critical commentary on Roberts appeared in his 1932 review-essay, “Not Local Color,” in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. His review deals with six recent

volumes of southern fiction, including Caroline Gordon's *Penhally*, William Faulkner's *These Thirteen*, and Roberts's *A Buried Treasure*, but his most sustained attention is focused on Roberts, who exemplifies his critical point that the best southern fiction is *not* mere local color, *not* possessed by the "abstract bad temper" of a quasi-regionalist such as Sinclair Lewis, *not* concerned with judging "a situation or society, abstractly conceived, by an abstract set of values" (154). Warren praises the "beautiful modulation and cunning grace" of Roberts's storytelling, her "flexible" poetic style "founded on, and controlled by, the sturdy idiom of the people about whom [she] writes"; and he celebrates her "rich texture of perception," her "delicate rapport" with place and community, characters and values, all of these qualities issuing naturally from the fact that she is a writer who is "comfortable within her tradition" (154-56).

Roberts, then, is Warren's textbook example of the true regionalist, the antidote for the picnic regionalism of the local colorists who clumsily destroy tradition by discovering and promulgating the merely "quaint." This bedrock principle of Vanderbilt Agrarianism remains constant for Warren, and Roberts remains his touchstone, even when her work is the unstated benchmark as it is, for example, in his important 1936 essay, "Some Don'ts for Literary Regionalists."

Moreover, Roberts serves Warren as an exemplar in the writing of his own fiction. In one of his earliest short stories, "Goodbye, Jake" (written in 1931 but published for the first time in 2006), the influence of Roberts is plainly visible, in some ways all too obvious: for example, Warren's protagonist is a country girl named Emily *Roberts*, who begs her lover Jake not to go away and leave her, to leave behind the family farm, as she points at the light in the valley at the *Jarvis* place, the farm next to Jake's place. Berk *Jarvis* is the name of one of Roberts's principal characters in *The Great Meadow*, the best-seller that came out the year before Warren wrote "Goodbye Jake." (And Roberts's Jarvis does go away, leaves his farm.) But those echoes are the tributes of apprentice fiction.

More important is the way that Roberts's use of agrarian motifs and concerns reverberates in Warren's fiction—from "Goodbye Jake" (and *Prime Leaf*) and throughout his work. Yet perhaps the most telling influence may be discerned in matters of style, and in Roberts's remarkable skill in rendering landscape that Warren echoes in "Goodbye, Jake" and perfects in his later fiction. Clearly, in "Goodbye, Jake," Warren writes as a fully engaged apprentice to Roberts's art of landscape. For Roberts, landscape is almost always symbolic, *paysage moralisé*, and the most extraordinary thing about her landscapes is the way they serve as objective correlatives for the inner states of being and feeling of her characters, usually young women with an intense sacramental sense of connection with the land. Roberts composes landscapes that become inscapes. The greatest risk Warren takes in "Goodbye, Jake," the challenge that he sets for himself, is to anchor the story in Emily's sensibility—he doesn't seem much interested in Jake—and to render her state of being in terms of the landscape. At this, he succeeds admirably, thanks to the example of Roberts.

But there are moments in Roberts where the land stands for itself, where *terra* (the earth), as Roberts inscribes it in *A Buried Treasure*, is simultaneously oracular and sufficient unto itself, beyond simile and metaphor, beyond symbol, in a perfectly modernist, post-symbolist mode of being (that Roberts probably learned from her study of Ezra Pound and his treatment of landscape, and Warren probably learned from both of them). *Terra*, the earth intensely observed and rendered with the exactitude that transforms the

“ordinary” into the “miraculous,” to *epifaneia*, the epiphany, as Czeslaw Milosz has it, of simultaneous “dread and reverence” written through the poet’s “exceptional sensitivity to the rich materiality of things” (383-87)—this is another aspect of the art of landscape that Warren learns from Roberts. As a twenty-six year old book reviewer and apprentice writer of fiction he noted Roberts’s use of “the fleeting word: *terra*” (“Not Local Color” 155) and he sought to render the Robertsean *terra* in “Goodbye, Jake.” And, still, as a novelist in his seventies, he would play variations on his Roberts-derived notions of *terra* in his last novel, *A Place to Come To* (233-34 and *passim*).

Roberts never really left Kentucky, vacations and her student years at the University of Chicago aside. (Why have we always missed the allusion to Roberts in the fact that Warren’s last fictional protagonist, Jed Tewksbury in *A Place to Come To*, is first a student, then a professor at the University of Chicago?) Warren did leave Kentucky, in his early twenties, never to live there again. Thus Warren negotiates and interrogates his agrarianism(s) and regionalism(s) from the non-Robertsean stance of exile—nearly a half-century in the North. If he sometimes seems like an undocumented alien wary of borders and identity in the terrain, the *terroir*, of his fiction and poetry written in exile from the South, he always has a place to come to in his creative imagination and spirit, the place called Kentucky, the place he had first seen truly and adequately rendered in the fiction of Elizabeth Madox Roberts.

Roberts’s agrarian themes and her Kentucky motifs, her poetic style (anchored in folk idiom) and her mode of creation echo not just in such Warren characters as Willie Proudfit (*Night Rider*) and Ashby Wyndham (*At Heaven’s Gate*) but throughout the Warren oeuvre. Early on in his exile from Kentucky, Warren planned a major southern writers conference at Louisiana State University in 1935. Writing to his friend Allen Tate (who knew Roberts personally) about his desire to have Roberts attend (as one of the few fully reimbursed conference participants), Warren repeatedly pleads with Tate: “Urge her to come” (Clark 24-25).²

II

“That I should have been the recipient, on behalf of the Library [of Congress], of the Roberts Collection, has given me greater satisfaction than any other incident of my tenure of this office.”

Allen Tate, Consultant in Poetry, Library of Congress 1944-1945

Further compelling evidence for Roberts-Warren connections and influences may be discovered in the Roberts Papers at the Library of Congress. Allen Tate was instrumental in the library’s acquisition of the Roberts Papers, which, after her death in 1941, were accessioned under the aegis of Tate as the Chair or Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress. In the Fall 1943 issue of the Library’s *Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions* Tate published a descriptive article entitled “The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Papers.” He begins by thanking the Roberts family for the gift of the “literary remains” of “one of the best novelists the South has produced and the author of a modern classic, *The Time of Man*.” The Roberts Collection, Tate asserts, is with the Whitman Collection “one of the two most important literary sources for textual and critical study” in the Library’s Division of Manuscripts. He notes that the papers are restricted, which limits his ability to give a full account in print of the treasures of the Roberts papers, although he does give a two-page synopsis of the manuscripts; they offer, he says, “material for the recreation of the imaginative process unequalled

by any other similar papers in contemporary American letters.”

Tate adds that he finds it “peculiarly moving; for to admiration of her writings I brought the affection of a friend; and along with these feelings I was aware...of the special sympathy, felt among writers everywhere, that comes of a common local history.” And Tate concludes: “That I should have been the recipient, on behalf of the Library, of the Roberts Collection, has given me greater satisfaction than any other incident of my tenure of this office” (31; see also McGuire 78-79). Then Tate takes leave of his Library of Congress office, which he turns over to Warren in July 1944, and thus another Kentuckian, another Roberts aficionado, continues oversight of the cataloguing of Roberts’s manuscripts.

It is one of those esoteric and fragile raptures of scholarship: to sit in the Library of Congress manuscript room and handle Roberts’s deteriorating manuscripts (they have *not* made copies)—the very originals handled by Tate, then Warren. What did Warren see there? My list here must be brief, although I suggest that anyone looking for a book-or-dissertation project could expand these hints for several hundred pages. Consider these items:

(1) Extensive notes and files on the history of Kentucky, the opening and settling of the Kentucky frontier, the character of the settlers, their language and lore—some of this material, but not all of it, being notes toward the making of *The Great Meadow*;

(2) Manuscript materials for Roberts’s unfinished epic on Daniel Boone, with indications that the title would be either “Daniel Boone and the Long Hunters,” or simply “The Long Hunters.” The material includes unpublished poems that stress such themes and images as Boone the “apostle to chaos” and Boone singing alone in the wilderness. There are scraps and notes linking Boone and Jefferson, Boone and Audubon, all against the Kentucky background. These poetic meditations on Boone, together with Roberts’s extensive outline of the historical incidents, read like an outline for Warren’s essay “The World of Daniel Boone” and everything he needed to write that essay is in Roberts’s Boone file;

(3) Manuscript and related materials for her unfinished novel about the Ohio River flood of 1937, left unfinished at her death and bearing a title familiar to Warren aficionados—*Flood*. (Warren’s 1964 novel *Flood* deals with a different river, but reverberates in many ways with Roberts’s unfinished *Flood*.)

Among a host of omens and avatars of Warren’s later productions, I will mention just one more: Roberts’s five-page typed portrait entitled “Audubon.” If these facts have not yet convinced the reader of the crucial importance of the Roberts-Warren influences and connections, then I recommend a pilgrimage to the Library of Congress where the unconvinced reader might sift through the Roberts Collection, handle her papers, those touchstones of intertextuality first studied by Tate and Warren.

The reader who cannot get to the Library of Congress might cheerfully settle for and study carefully Roberts-Warren resonances discernible in *The Time of Man* (1926), especially its Kentucky sense of place and folk-speech and the identity-quest of the hero, Ellen Chesser, who comes very close to saying (like Amantha Starr in *Band of Angels*): “Oh who am I?” Or study Roberts’s next novel, *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927) with its ur-Faulknerian and Warrenesque themes of miscegenation, identity and the tangled burden of southern and

family history; or her next novel *Jingling in the Wind* (1928), her satire on 1920s pseudo-sophistication, which, though widely regarded as her most flawed work, leaves the reader with a powerful core image, the haunting metaphor of the Spider Web that pervades her tale from the first to the last page, and is tellingly echoed years later in *All the King's Men*.

Roberts's next novel, *The Great Meadow* (1930), is certainly an important source for much of Warren's southern-history-infused writing, his treatment of the Matter of Kentucky-Tennessee, in novels ranging from *Night Rider* through *At Heaven's Gate* and on beyond *The Cave* and *Flood*. Even if Warren's 1932 essay "Not Local Color," which delivers brief judgments on four Roberts novels, does note in passing the weakness of *The Great Meadow*, because its tenuous sense of reality is almost "lost in a pervasive lyricism," that very observation may be a key to Warren's later demythicizing approach to the same subjects that were dealt with in a more conventional myth-making mode by Roberts (154).

And even Roberts's last novel, her pastoral love-song with a contemporary setting, *Black is My Truelove's Hair* (1938), somehow reverberates in Warren's late fiction. In ways that have thus far shimmered only in fleeting glimpses, intuitions sensed most when I leaf through Warren's personal copy of *Black is My Truelove's Hair* (a much dog-eared copy that is in my possession), this most contemporaneous of Roberts novels seems to be the buried subtext for Warren's penultimate novel, *Meet Me in the Green Glen*. And for those who prefer concrete details and subscribe to the notion that the best writers must steal from the most obscure sources, consider Roberts's 1931 publication of what she called a children's poem, "The Legend of Munn", about the mythical Land of Munn ruled by Choo, his son Choo Choo, and grandson Choo Choo Choo, and the perilous sea-threatened existence and identity of *Munn*—and then think of the opening of *Night Rider*, with Percy *Munn* and his perilous lack of identity in that sea of humanity on that—dare I say choochoo train? (*Wings* 11).

A neglected and ephemeral item, to be sure, this children's poem that appeared in a monthly pamphlet of the Literary Guild in 1931—that year in which Warren wrote his first Robertsean fiction "Goodbye, Jake," and also the year of his first critical essay on Roberts's work. The little booklet mailed to Literary Guild members was an essentially throwaway item of popular culture that nevertheless devoted much of its space to a striking portrait and biographical sketch of Roberts, of Kentucky frontier scenes, and a review of her new novel, *A Buried Treasure*, by the well-known literary figure, Carl Van Doren—a review that Warren probably echoed in a contrarian fashion a few months later in his review of *A Buried Treasure*. Holding my grandmother's copy of this pamphlet in my hand reminds me that in 1931 nearly everyone knew who Roberts was, even if most of us have forgotten now. My grandmother knew. Robert Penn Warren knew (See Stoneback, "Time's Wingèd Chariot").

In the 1960s when I first heard of Roberts and discovered her work on my own, having never heard her name mentioned in all the coursework in American literature taken for a BA, MA, and Ph.D.—even though at Vanderbilt her name and work were held in informal esteem, once somebody thought to recollect her name in conversation—I sometimes argued with my colleagues and teachers that Roberts must have been a seminal influence on Faulkner. I praised the *terroir* of her fiction, her profoundly organic sense of place and community, and cleverly explained—with little supporting evidence—the force of her effect on Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha chronicle. Just look at Lena Grove in *Light in*

August, I proclaimed repeatedly: without Ellen Chesser of *The Time of Man* there would be no Lena Grove. And yet, though the evidence was all around me, I never suspected that Roberts was a far greater influence on Warren, I never fully recognized her most devout disciple until years later.

III

“Toward sunset they were struck by a strange caterwauling...”

Robert Penn Warren, “The World of Daniel Boone”

Yet it is not influence that concerns me most, but the profound intertextuality, the meditative and poetic reverberations that echo from Roberts to Warren when they write of the same subjects. Take Boone, for example. Although he is not a major character in *The Great Meadow*, Boone is the novel’s presiding eminence, the *Deus Loci*, the Spirit of Place in the Edenic Kentucky wilderness. From the opening pages, characters talk about Boone, they follow Boone’s Trace into Kentucky, they pass the place where Boone mourned the death of his son murdered by the Indians—the “red white-trash” as one character calls them. Before he makes his cameo appearance well past the halfway mark of the novel, his mythic identity is well-established. As Roberts put it in her manuscript notes to the novel: “In Boone alone we had a symbol of man leaping apart from men, thrusting forward to a lonely and hazardous freedom among the natural and chaotic things of the unmapped earth.” Or this, also from her manuscript notes: Diony, the novel’s central character, “represents ordered life...the mind life. She is not of the Boone kind. She feels lost in an indefinite universe. She wants ordered ways. She wants beauty and dignity and ceremony and the reasons of all things. Berk represents art. Boone represents the indefinite earth, the outside of chaos, but he is an apostle to chaos to prepare it for man’s order” (Roberts Papers Box 3:1). In the novel this translates into the *insistance poétique*, the repeated assertions that Boone is “never lost” (186 and *passim*); he is utterly at home in the world, in nature, in the wilderness. Diony knows, as she repeatedly says: “I’m not the Boone kind” (187); and she knows that Boone was “a messenger to the chaotic part, a herald, an envoy there, to prepare it for civil men” (338), to make possible her epiphanic vision of “the wearying infinitives of the wilderness come to an end” (209).

When Boone comes onstage, he enters the novel singing. *The Great Meadow* resounds with song; on nearly two dozen pages we find recurrent images of singing and song lyrics, of Bangum and the wild boar, traditional folksongs that reiterate communal history, evoke the dangers of the wilderness and simultaneously project an image of singing as the act that might keep at bay the terror of the wilderness. Boone appears out of the forest, “singing to make his presence known,” and pronounces his most famous lines: “I never was lost. I was bewildered right bad once for as much as a week, but not lost. I never felt lost the whole enduren time” (184-186).

And then there’s Warren’s Boone. In his *Holiday* magazine piece, “The World of Daniel Boone,” Warren ends six of his first nine paragraphs with Kentucky-as-Eden images. He recapitulates the Robertsean touchstones of the mythic Boone, the presiding Spirit of Place who was never lost, always at home in the wilderness. He sketches the same incidents in Boone’s life: mourning the death of his son at the hands of the Indians, crying at his grave years later; resisting the Indian assault on the fort at Boonesborough, dwelling in

captivity with the Indians in the North. (In Roberts this action is transferred to her character, Berk Jarvis, a Boone-avatar, named after both Bishop Berkeley *and* Berks County, Pennsylvania, where Boone was born and raised.) Warren also has Boone speak his most famous one-liner, in a slightly different version from Roberts: “I can’t say as ever I was lost, but I was *bewildered* once for three days” (176). And he ends his essay with a striking image of Boone singing in the wilderness, echoing Roberts’s repeated images in fiction (and in her poetry) of Boone the wilderness–singer. But there are differences of detail and emphasis. One detail Warren includes that is not found in Roberts’s published work on Boone (although it *is* in her manuscripts) is a brief reference to Boone’s meeting with Audubon. (More on that in a moment.) And the overall design of Warren’s portrait of Boone is both more complex and realistic than is Roberts’s straightforward presentation of the mythic Boone. Warren, characteristically, demythicizes Boone in order to reclaim the historical figure and in some sense remythicize him. We recall Warren’s complaint (cited above) about the “pervasive lyricism” of Roberts’s Boone-world, and the attenuated “sense of reality” he detected in *The Great Meadow* (“Not Local Color” 154). Making his alignments to bring the mythic Boone closer to reality Warren points out, for example, that Boone the wilderness mystic was also “a prosperous innkeeper, fur buyer, occasional slave dealer, merchant and supplier of the militia”; and a land speculator, even if his claims to 100,000 acres of Kentucky’s Eden were carelessly filed and ended in bankruptcy and debt (174). The best detailed discussion of this unfortunately neglected essay is in Jonathan Cullick’s *Making History*, where he stresses that, for Warren, the “killing of myths permits the survival of history, a more ‘usable past’”; and Cullick clarifies Warren’s stance as “an ambivalent realist, trying to renegotiate romanticized notions of the past while expressing nostalgia for those very notions” (19, 74).

This point is perfectly illustrated by the closing paragraph of Warren’s essay, the “tale”—as Warren calls it—of how Boone was once discovered alone, singing in the wilderness. I first read this essay in the lobby of a hotel in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1963, when the magazine came out—a hotel, incidentally, where I was paid to sing (or caterwaul) in the nightclub, a wilderness of sorts. Until recently, I had not reread Warren’s hard-to-find Boone essay, but the main thing I remembered all these decades was Warren’s powerful closing image of Boone singing. It goes like this: Some “Long Hunters” are in the Kentucky wilderness; “One day,” Warren writes, “toward sunset they were struck by a strange caterwauling... [a] scout went to investigate this new beast. Warily he made his way to the source of the hideous sound. It was only Daniel Boone—never famous for good voice or delicate ear—lying on a deerskin, alone in the wilderness, singing to the sunset out of his joyous heart” (177).

Like Roberts, Warren stresses Boone’s joyous singing; Roberts, however, offers no qualitative description of how Boone sings, or why he sings, while Warren evokes the strange hideous sound, the joyous caterwauling of “this new beast.” Boone’s song is the objective correlative for everything Warren wants us to feel about Boone. It is that song, and only that song, that I remembered and was haunted by for the forty years that elapsed between my first and second reading of this essay. And it is that song that stays with Warren, too, until he revisits Boone in one of his last published poems: “Was It One of the Long Hunters of Kentucky Who Discovered Boone at Sunset?” The speaker of the poem feels the “ambiguity” of the “great wheel” of the seasons as he feels his age, but he still

feels the “mystic reality/ In loam’s cool touch.” When he loses himself in the woods (unlike Boone who was “never lost”) he feels his “heart swell to a new delight.” In spite of the “years that grow grimly older,” he finds in the poem’s final quatrain the consolation and joy of Boone’s old song:

But I think how once in his long, lone wilderness walk
 Across Kentucky—alone, sun low, arms crossed to prop his
 Face up, they found Boone singing in his tuneless crow-squawk,
 In joy just because the world is the way it is. (*Collected Poems* 611)

The title of the poem asks a question—*was* it one of the Long Hunters who found Boone in joyous song—and it leaves the historical question unanswered; the real answer to the question is that Warren, the poet as Long Hunter, has discovered Boone’s joy, the “mystic reality” that takes Boone *and* Warren ever deeper *into* nature, the strange and hideous beastlike caterwauling squawking joy of walking in the world that *is*.

IV

The world declares itself. That voice
 Is vaulted in—oh, arch on arch—redundancy of joy...

Robert Penn Warren, *Audubon: A Vision*

Before concluding, I want to say a few words about Audubon. In her unpublished manuscript notes on Audubon, Roberts says he was “an ornithologist who was...an artist, an artist who was incidentally an ornithologist.” Then she brings in Audubon’s hero: “Boone said of himself that he was never lost, that he was bewildered once...but never lost. Audubon knew Boone and admired him very much...visited him in the backwoods of Missouri and is thought to have painted one of the Boone portraits. Like Boone he delighted to spy out the panorama of the wilderness, to find new ways and fresh vistas.” Roberts stresses Audubon’s “passion to know the birds, to represent and interpret the wing in its relation to the sky and the bough,” his need to follow the “insistence of design;” he is, for Roberts, the woodsman-pioneer as artist, the artist as pioneer-woodsman. She also notes Audubon’s musical talents (Roberts Papers Box 8:6).

Although his *Audubon: A Vision* did not appear until 1969, Warren had written about Audubon as early as the summer of 1944, and perhaps he took a cue from Roberts’s unpublished portrait of Audubon when he saw it at the Library of Congress in 1944. In any case, what matters most about Warren’s *Audubon* is that it was, for many in my generation of poets, the great poem of its day and time. When it first came out in late November 1969, a poet-friend called me after midnight and read the whole poem to me over the phone. It was one of the great poetry readings, just the three of us—Jack Daniels, and the rapt disembodied voice chanting through the telephone.

It is somehow very much to the point that we shared a passion not just for Warren’s work, but for the myth of Boone and the frontier, for neo-agrarian dreams of building cabins in the wilderness, and we were both working our way through our Vanderbilt PhDs by *singing* in Nashville nightclubs. And we both detested the horrific Daniel Boone television series that was so popular in the 1960s; and, as fellow songwriters, we could even

sing or caterwaul with withering ironic contempt (and unprintable lyric variations), the hideous unsingable theme song of the Dan'l Boone show:

Daniel Boone was a man!
Yes, a big man!
With a dream of a country that'd
Always forever be free!
What a Boone! what a do-er!
What a dream-come-er-true-er was he!

Possibly the worst song ever written. Indeed pop culture in the 1960s was busy relentlessly sucking the soul out of the Boone myth. Aside from the TV show, there were the popular outdoor dramas dealing with Boone, including the Fort Harrod production of "Daniel Boone—The Man and the Legend" that I almost auditioned for long ago in Harrodsburg, Kentucky. There were Daniel Boone Days and Festivals all over Kentucky (*and* Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Missouri). And it's not over yet—google Daniel Boone now and you'll get 125,152 hits, including the current "Boone My Hero Project" whose motto is: "I have never been lost, but I will admit to being confused for several weeks." And one of the first listed items will be about the winner of the Louisville regional Hooters bikini competition, described as a "mesmerizing migrant" who demonstrates that beauty queens are like Boone, for she was headed west to make a new life in Hollywood. Of course, Hollywood has been making a mockery of Boone at least since the disastrous movie of the early 1930s based on Roberts's *The Great Meadow*. But Boone had been an American pop-culture icon long before that, since before the United States existed.

In fact, one of the early great players in the Boone outdoor drama school of entertainment was John James Audubon. By all accounts, Audubon was something of a dandy when he moved from France to the United States at the age of eighteen in 1803. At his father's southeastern Pennsylvania farm, hunting, fishing, drawing, and music were his preoccupations. Living not far from the Daniel Boone Homestead in Berks County, Audubon fell in love with the same countryside Boone had known, the woods and caves and animals; he became a passionate and skilled hunter, learning his sharpshooting skills on the same Lancaster County long rifles that Boone had used. At first, it is said, Audubon went into the woods wearing satin breeches and silk stockings. But this would not last long. After his residence in the Pennsylvania countryside and in Kentucky settlements, and his travels the length and breadth of the country in passionate pursuit of birds and art, he went to the art and publishing capital of Philadelphia in 1824 to promote his bird book, dressed in buckskins, his shoulder-length hair slicked with bear grease, calling himself the "American Woodsman." It didn't work in Philly, but they bought it in London.

Warren knows all this, even if he puts very little of it in his vision of Audubon. It is there, explicitly, once when Warren writes of Audubon: "He dreamed of hunting with Boone, from imagination painted his portrait" (*Collected Poems* 263). Implicitly, however, Boone is everywhere in the poem, the great shadowy presence, the subtext of Audubon's quest. The poem *is* a portrait, a *vision*, not a history. Its subtitle could be: "Warren dreams Audubon's dream of Boone and paints Audubon's portrait from imagination." Consider the great lines about joy, about walking in the world, about love as knowledge, and think

of Boone. Consider Warren's core image of Audubon: "After sunset, / Alone, he played his flute in the forest" (262) and think of Boone's strange lonesome caterwauling in the forest. Consider these great lines:

The world declares itself. That voice
is vaulted in—oh, arch on arch—redundancy of joy (263)

And then hear "That voice" as not just Audubon's (and Boone's) song in the forest, but the boar grumbling in his ivy-slick, the great geese hooting northward, all the bird-calls and Audubon's whistling of them in stately halls of Europe, and hear all the voices as a song of meditation on the mystic osmosis of being. Hugh Ruppersburg has it right when he points to the "untranslatable phenomena" and the "religious exaltation" of nature, and the triumph of art and imagination in *Audubon* (93-94, 98). But Warren's "joy", his "mystic reality" is more than that.

From the American wilderness, then, Warren seizes first as a token the audible Boone, his strange caterwauling, then later extends the metaphor and song into some deeper magic of art and more passionate realms of the imagination when he creates a curious composite figure, a kind of *Auduboone*, the American Woodsman-as-Artist who, in Warren's Audubon, frames a new definition of joy, of the love that is knowledge. In Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *Idea of Order in Kentucky*, Boone and Audubon sing beyond the genius of the wilderness, as heralds to chaos. In Warren's *Idea of Order in Kentucky*, Boone and Audubon sing the joy and love and knowledge of how things are, and how the birds make ambiguous undulations as they *sing*, downward to darkness, on extended wings.

One final word: I think of Boone in Pennsylvania, next door to where my ancestors lived, and Kentucky where I lived in Boone's shadow; I think of Audubon in Pennsylvania, near Boone's homestead and my family's 1700 roots; I see Audubon in Kentucky, New Orleans, France, in Camden and on the Jersey Shore, and contemplate his last days on the Hudson River. There he knew my Hudson Valley neighbor James K. Paulding, who taught James Fenimore Cooper how to write about Boone and asked his friend Audubon to paint the famous portrait of Boone; and I remember how I wrote about Paulding while I lived in a pioneer dogtrot log cabin tilted above Boone's Cumberland River twenty miles outside Nashville, to end up living now across the Hudson River from where Audubon's portrait of Boone hung for years in the Paulding home; and how a distant relative of Paulding's told me some years ago that the ultimate American Artist was Audubon, whose first edition of *Birds of America* had just sold on the auction block at Christies for more than three million dollars; I think of how this *Auduboone* presence followed me long, long ago to the Alabama wilderness where I built a log-cabin after dropping out of college and getting out of the Marine Corps at age twenty-one.

Or maybe it was just Warren who followed me there, the Warren who worked on his *Audubon* by chanting, shouting it out loud as he drove to New Haven in his Land Rover—what a strange crow-squawking caterwauling that must have been. And I remember when I drove my battered '58 Chevy to the end of the rutted red-clay road and walked every morning at birdcall sunrise the two miles into the forest where my clearing and my cabin were, how I sang at the top of my voice, maybe intended in part to ward off lonesomeness or rattlesnakes. Yet it was a Boone-song that drew a great black snake to rise to

meet me at the same point in the trail every morning, to lead the way sliding as I went singing down to the creek that ran through my clearing under the hawk-slanting sky. I now know, because Roberts and Warren sang their songs, that my strange caterwauling was an incarnational song of joy in the beingness of the world's body. And once we truly sing that song, we are never lost—maybe bewildered for a few days, but never lost.

Notes

1. This essay is a conflation of a paper presented at the 2005 Conference of the Robert Penn Warren Circle and a keynote address delivered at the 2005 Conference of the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society.
2. Clark notes that *The Great Meadow* is Roberts's "best-known book" (25). This misleading observation may be taken as a sign of the general neglect of Roberts and disregard of Roberts-Warren connections among even the best of Warren scholars. *The Time of Man*, of course, is her "best-known book," a landmark work of the southern literary renaissance and American literature, celebrated since its 1926 publication by everyone from Sherwood Anderson to Ford Madox Ford, William Faulkner to Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, and Allen Tate. And from all available evidence, especially since he was still writing about it in 1963, *The Time of Man* was Warren's favorite Roberts work. In the early 1930s, at least, Warren regarded *The Great Meadow* as "a much weaker piece of work" than *The Time of Man* and other Roberts novels ("Not Local Color" 154).

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