



Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980

Robert Penn Warren

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Mark says

Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980, by Robert Penn Warren, 1980. I read the first three quarters of this book early in 2016, and then set it aside. I had read novels of Robert Penn Warren's that I greatly appreciated, but I wasn't getting much out of this book of his poetry, and I left it. A week or so ago, I was traveling to Kentucky, where Warren is from, and as I packed to go I saw the book on the stand by my bed, and picked it up. What the heck, I figured. Let's give it another go.

Well, I'm glad I did. I read the remaining 11 poems, and then went back and read 6 or 7 of the poems earlier in the book. The poem that started to break it open for me, to shed the light that the poems had on life, was "Antinomy: Time and Identity". First I had to look up antinomy. I thought it meant something like "an unfriendly attitude" but what the dictionary told me is that in philosophy, an antinomy is a contradiction between two apparently valid statements or principles (which in many situations can lead to some unfriendliness, in my experience).

Antinomy – time and identity. Then this, from "Acquaintance with Time in Early Autumn":
The nature of time...Pure Being, that, by being, our being denies.

Warren, writing towards the end of his life, is dealing with some pretty deep ideas here. Rather than ignore them, or pass them by, he delves into it. What, really, is being, here? And when each individual is gone ...caught by the grind, bulge, and beat of
What has been? Indeed, by
The heaving ocean of pastness?

Well, what then? What has life meant?

The poems started to unfold, one after another. The human being's search for meaning and identity, the unknowingness of death; memories, dreams, and reflections. But the active life that is described in the poems, the constant questions asked, the vivid descriptions of the world – this is not a despondent woe-is-me approach, but an engaged being acting in the world, while contemplating it and his own existence at the same time.

Certainly left me with more questions than answers. Which is fine.

And when a glimpse of revelation comes? It is delicate, and unworded, a fleeting apprehension of life. Which leads back to something Warren wrote in an essay in the Saturday Review, in 1958.

The poem... is a little myth of man's capacity of making life meaningful. And in the end, the poem is not a thing we see — it is, rather, a light by which we may see — and what we see is life.

Nice job, old man. Wherever you are.