

Southern Bookman

A blog about poetry, fiction, nonfiction, the craft of writing and Southern culture.



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Rosanna Warren: "We Have to Keep Telling Stories, and Listening to Stories..." A Conversation on Poetry



Rosanna Warren's poems draw upon a multitude of gifts. Before turning to writing, she wanted to be a painter, and she displays an artist's sensibility in her evocations of nature. Her work also shows a deep knowledge of music, history, literature and poetic techniques.

Last fall on one of those crisp, clear October days that seem full of promise, I wandered into a local bookstore after picking up necessary hardware supplies. There, in the poetry section, I discovered Rosanna's "Fables of the Self, Studies in Lyric Poetry" and excitedly took the book home. Long an admirer of her poems, I was enthralled by "Fables of the Self." Her memoir "Midi," the first chapter of the collection, paints a moving portrait of her intellectually rich childhood as the daughter of the distinguished writers Robert Penn Warren and Eleanor Clark. I found the critical essays on poetry in the rest of the book intellectually stimulating and informative. The book closes with "Coda," a revealing selection from her notebooks.

My enjoyment of "Fables of the Self" inspired me to ask her to participate in a Southern Bookman conversation, to which she graciously agreed. I e-mailed her five questions, and she replied with the answers.

Rosanna Warren teaches comparative literature at Boston University. Her most recent book of poems is "Departure" (Norton 2003). "Fables of the Self" (Norton 2008) is her most recent book of criticism.

Our conversation follows.

1.) The memoir "Midi," in "Fables of the Self" has the richness of detail and sense of place of a fine short story or novel. I loved the description of the young girl climbing to Madame Peron's home for her Latin lessons and the portrait of the teacher's apartment and its furnishings. As in a strong work of fiction, the memoir reflects a major transformation in the first-person narrator's consciousness, in her rediscovery of Thomas Hardy and her imaginative home. With these attributes in mind, and recalling fictional elements in your poems, did you ever wish to write prose fiction?

Rosanna: I wrote a lot of prose fiction in my childhood and youth. I also read a lot of it: I used to read myself to sleep, as a child, with Dickens, Mark Twain, Graham Greene, and Tolkien — anything I could find.

The summer I turned 10, I wrote prose every day, and produced a novella about our family dog, "The Joey Story." Random House eventually published this, after promising my anxious parents that there would be no publicity (they were worried about publication). I wrote stories all through my teens, and dug myself fairly deep into a novel the year

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after graduating from college. But in the middle of that story, I quite suddenly realized — after reading Gertrude Stein's "Ida"— that I had no idea what I was doing. I stopped it cold. Now I write fiction only in my dreams. I could no more write a novel than I could build a 747 in the back yard. One of my main qualms about fiction was my panicky sense that I didn't know how to move my characters through the door from one room to another. It seemed too laborious.

2.) "Fables of the Self" shows how the forms, techniques and themes of classical literature remain vital in the work of modern poets such as Mark Strand, W.H.Auden and John Hollander. How can the literature of the fallen empires of Rome and Greece continue to illuminate and guide American writers as they seek to register our times of political change, imperial wars and economic turmoil?

Rosanna: There are many ways in which the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome cast light (as well as dark) upon our own struggles, and I can't pretend to enumerate them all here. Nobody could, as they are inexhaustible. Also, Greek literature is very different from Roman, and individual authors within these traditions also vary widely, of course.

But one crucial perception that permeates the ancient Greek imagination is the sense of limits. Tragic limits. To take a well-known example, Oedipus the King is the vigorous rationalist and activist who believes in his own powers of deduction and calculation, as well as in his own authority. Only gradually, as the play advances, is his own figurative blindness revealed to him — and confronted by the horror of his past, he stabs out his own eyes, literally, to take control over his fate. In play after play, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides explore the limits of the human will, and they test the limits of the ideals of Athenian democracy and justice.

The United States is far from having any tragic awareness of our own history or of the history of others. Our blind optimism and confidence in our moral righteousness, and in our military power, would be regarded by the Greek tragedians as classic fare for drama. To turn to a Roman example, Virgil's "Aeneid" can teach us, among other things, about complexity of moral and political meanings: It's not an easy matter to tease out, in that poem, whether the high cost, in blood, of the nascent Roman empire and Pax Romana was worth it. The poem is, among other things, a meditation on the sadness of power. That, too, we could learn from.

3. On inauguration day, I read your "Fables of the Self" chapter on Herman Melville's Civil War poems. Your evocation of Melville fit well with the momentous occasion — the sense of national crisis, a new beginning, the scenes of Washington's power and glory, the journey from youth and freshness to knowledge, accomplishment and possible tragedy that Barack Obama is embarking upon. Also, his presidency at last erases another vestige of slavery. Do you believe poets and poetry can engage the present political/historic/cultural moment as Melville did?

Rosanna: Melville was a genius, in poetry and in prose, as well as in moral vision. Not many Melvilles come along in any civilization. So, no, I don't believe that we have writers now who can engage our moment "as Melville did."

But we have powerful writers who try to engage the moment in their own way, and are stimulated to do so often by the pain their country causes them. Philip Roth seems to me a master in our time who has been imagining, and re-imagining — in works like "American Pastoral" and "The Plot Against America" — the meanings of our nationhood an ideal, and an experiment.

Another novel I read recently that moved me, and that concerned a dream of America, is Rilla Askew's story of dustbowl Oklahoma, "Harpsong." It's a lyrical, painful story of a young musician hobo and his child wife, riding the rails and suffering a country in devastation.

We have to keep telling stories, and listening to stories, so we come face to face with who we are as a country, and what we might

be. Politics, too, is a work of imagination. Without imagination, we will have moribund politics. Of course, imagination can be a force of wickedness, too, in politics. (Perhaps the word we use for the imagination of our enemies is “fantasy”; I certainly thought that the last administration in Washington D.C. lacked moral imagination, but had fantasy on overdrive.)

Our contemporary lyric poets seem to me (on the whole — there are always exceptions) less forceful, in political imagination, than certain poets from Ireland, England, the Caribbean, and Poland, to name some countries with strong poetic traditions and awareness of history. We American lyric poets have, on the whole, been most concerned with ourselves, and ourselves in nature, or ourselves in relation to God. I hope this won't always be the case. (One notable exception is Robert Pinsky, whose recent book “Gulf Music” wrestles with our polis, word by word, clause by clause, in a way as fully responsible to the political imagination as to poetic conscience.)

4. Your poems often relate vivid and intense experiences of nature: fields, forest, animals and water. “Song” especially draws upon the pastoral tradition, and “The Cormorant” pulses with nature’s vitality and wildness. While many writers today have a tragic sense of alienation from nature, your narrators achieve moments of unity with the outside world — transcendence, to use a term associated with your New England home. As natural areas suffer destruction and degradation, do you remain hopeful that humans can preserve and achieve a balance with nature and that future poets will have a natural world from which to draw metaphor and vision?

Rosanna: I am not by nature optimistic. It seems to me that as a species we, members of homo sapiens, have done extraordinary damage to our planet, and to the planet’s resources. It’s an open question, at the moment, whether or not our ingenuity will suffice to intervene adequately to slow down the trends of global warming, rising sea levels, melting polar ice caps, increased violent storms, etcetera etcetera.

Poets, like everybody else, are observing, and trying to make sense of what we observe. My brother (Gabriel Warren) is a sculptor who has made two extended trips to Antarctica and one trip to the North Pole, observing the form and behavior of ice, which he then translates into remarkable metal sculptures. He has a real, and technical knowledge of the science of ice. My sister in law, his wife, is a sculptor and painter who has concerned herself for years with forests and sea coasts, and who builds her work with materials drawn from those habitats, reflecting upon those habitats. The two of them are models for me of conscientious awareness of our surroundings — our being in nature.

A contemporary poet who is such a model is William Merwin, who has for years been making powerful alarm-songs and laments for the nature we are poisoning. His most recent book, “The Shadow of Sirius” has some of the strongest poems he has ever written, as he contemplates personal disappearance — his own death — and the ravages we have inflicted on nature. The poems are not position papers; they are extremely subtle, suggestive works of art. They honor mystery — as in this couplet: "the poems of daylight after the day/ lying open at last upon the table" (from "A Codex"). Those lines seem simple, and the more you ponder them, the more far-reaching and reverberating they turn out to be.

5. In “Fables of the Self,” your artistic credo is Mallarmé’s “the elocutory disappearance of the poet.” Yet poems such as “The Cormorant,” “Romanesque” and “Kosmos” are written in first person and deal with daily life and deep personal matters. As fully realized works, these poems rise above the personal and achieve artistic wholeness; the poet does “disappear” in language. How do you accomplish this transformation?

Rosanna: I’m afraid if I knew “how,” I’d stop writing poems. Because art is not a formula — each new poem must be a new form of risk, a new venture into failure.

But I’m grateful to know that you think these poems of mine rise above the personal, whether or not they use the first person singular pronoun. That pronoun is a mask, like any other, and personal experience is raw material. It all depends on how it’s shaped. We all know how boring other people’s dreams are, when they are recounted, and we know how dreary it is to listen to

other people's lists of their daily activities ("Then I went to the pharmacy, and I had to wait in line, and then So and So called..."), or to accounts of their therapy sessions. So what makes the difference? How do data become poetry? There can be no one answer to those questions, but those are the questions I wrestle with each day.

Poems contain information, but they are MORE than information. They are information that has started to dance its way into meaning, through rhythmical pattern, through sound-spells (vowels and consonants dallying with one another), through wordplay (the flash of multiple senses), through the dreamwork of imagery. They introduce us to modes of knowing that are pre-analytical, but that through syntax and semantics stimulate the analytical intelligence as well. At their best, they are ancient modes of divination, crossed with modern logic.

The key to it all is shapeliness. Form. Which does not mean metrics. One of the biggest misunderstandings in contemporary discourse about poetry is the association of "form" in poetry with meter and rhyme. All true poetry has form. Otherwise it has no being, no mode of meaning. And metrical verse and free verse can be equally slovenly in expression, or equally masterful.

Finally, I think, we ask for poems to surprise us — to draw us into their own shock of discovery. Today, for instance, I was wonderfully shocked by these lines (some of which I already knew well — but good poetry continues to shock):

"I am walking backward into the future like a Greek." (Michael Longley, "River and Fountain")

"I have changed places with geography," (Donald Revell, "My Trip")

"My untied shoestring writes my name in the dust." (Robert Lowell, "Eye and Tooth")

"I: I wanted to know you

M: I wanted far more" (Anne Carson, "Mimnermus: The Brainsex Paintings")