Robert Penn Warren's fictional and nonfictional protagonists all struggle with their relationship to the past. In his biographical narratives, Warren redresses the problem of historical separation by conceiving of the past as present, an available rather than a separable, distant experience. Warren employs two strategies to construct this new framework for history: he returns to his own past in order to reconnect personally, and he revises what he considers to be historiographic misconceptions so that the past will reconcile with the present. Warren's strategies ultimately constitute a new historical realism that is intended to provide a more "usable past" (to borrow Van Wyck Brooks' term). While much criticism has examined Warren's uses of the past in his fictions and poetry, the biographical narratives particularly offer an examination of the processes with which historical figures have been cast into narratives by themselves and their biographers. Warren's major biographical narratives are *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (1980), and *Portrait of a Father* (1988). However, to illustrate how Warren's uses of history coalesce in his biographical narratives, there is an interesting less-known work that provides an instructive laboratory for explication.

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But Warren extends the term "world" to suggest the world that created Boone, the narratives that have situated Boone within history. Thirty years earlier Warren subtitled his biography of John Brown "The Making of a Martyr," indicating that his interest was not just in the historical figure, but in the process of "making" him a legend. Similarly, the Boone article explores how historians, novelists, and poets have transformed Boone into a literary character. Warren proposes his own narrative as a corrective to previous narrative accounts of Boone, by employing return and reconciliation, which function as conventions of realism.

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the accounts of past and present by critically examining and "correcting" the narratives of previous historians. Warren exposes the story-telling process according to which a past figure has been written into history, a strategy that implicitly attempts to certify the accuracy of his own narrative.

Return and reconciliation are evident in the opening sequence of "The World of Daniel Boone," worth quoting at length:

On U.S. 60, east out of Lexington, that is probably the way you will go--out past the great horse farms of Kentucky, the hunt club and the swelling pastuers and white paddocks and stone walls and noble groves. It is beautiful country, even now. It was once thought to be Eden.

At Winchester you turn south on U.S. 227. The country is more sugged now, the limestone breaking through but the bottoms rich. Eastward is the wall of the mountains. You find the river, the Kentucky, and the high modern bridge spanning it. There, by the highway, is a posture of eternal and unconvincing alertness, is the statue: Daniel Boone.

To the right of the bridge open a romantic gorge, to the left lie the flats. There on the low ground is where Boonesborough was. It is not there now. But on hot Sunday afternoons people still come here to a modest little resort, to cool off in the river, to strew their sandwich papers and idly read the names growing dim on an unpretentious stone--the names of the men who, on this spot, opened Eden.

You can read the names and go--back to Winchester, perhaps, and take the Stanton road, State 15, and find the side road off to Pilot Knob. If you climb it, you will be standing where Daniel Boone stood when he first saw this country. (162)

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In this opening passage, Warren addresses the reader with the second person pronoun, present tense ("You find the river"), and present-temporal adverbs ("it is not there now," "People still come here"), establishing a contemporary stance to erase the distinction between past and present. The narrative invites the reader to stand where Boone stood and see what he saw. Consequently, the opening statements invoke the presence of the past. The reader joins the historical object in the matrix of time.

In these opening paragraphs, the narrator observes a disjunction between an idealized conception of history and the modern world. He notes the lack of interest of modern tourists who "strew their sandwich papers and idly read the names". He notes "the names growing dim" on the modest monument, and he points out not that the land was Eden but that it was "once thought to be Eden," emphasizing the fictionality of the paradisiacal landscape. 2
However, there is a contradiction. Warren also refers to the earnestness of "the men who, on this spot, opened Eden," and throughout the article he relies upon references to Eden and the Promised Land. Warren is ambivalent, simultaneously disbelieving yet being drawn to what Arthur K. Moore called the eighteenth century "rumor" that "transformed" the frontier into "a fabled garden interpenetrated with myth" (3). On one hand, Warren interrogates the myth; yet, he also expresses nostalgia for it. Juxtaposing what he sees as a malaise of modernity against an idealized past, Warren sets out to "correct" the myths while implying that some myths do constitute a "usable past." Throughout his career, Warren was concerned with the role of history in the modern age. Warren's approach to history implies that previous audiences have necessitated conceiving of Boone within a romantic narrative, but a modern audience, which is uninterested at worst and skeptical at best, necessitates a new kind of narrative.

Warren tries to provide such a narrative by "correcting" past historical accounts through a modern lens. He acts as a tour guide not only through a region, but also through the process of historical reconstruction. Taking a cue from Moore, who argued that "no American writer of the nineteenth century had the gifts necessary to translate the frontier type to a large national context" (105), in "The World of Daniel Boone" Warren declares that no writer ever "got Boone down on paper" (77). He peels away the layers of myths into which Boone's biographers, particularly those biographers who write in the romantic tradition.

Warren attempts to replace the first definitive construction of Boone, John Filson's narrative, with a Boone who fits into a realistic narrative. Warren counters Filson's statements with quotations from Boone selected to present Boone's simplicity and directness. Whereas Filson's The Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boon has Boone declaring that "peace crowns the sylvan shade" (22), Warren quotes from less formal sources, such as the well-known inscription that Boone carved into the bark of a tree, to argue that Boone was much simpler than Filson makes him out to be. By contrasting Boone's versions of himself with John Filson's version, Warren criticizes Filson's narrative for inaccuracies. Particularly, Warren refers to Filson's highly stylized language, which seems unlikely to have been spoken by the less educated Boone, in passages such as the opening of Filson's narrative: "Thus we behold Kentucky, lately an howling wilderness, the habitation of savages and wild beasts, become a fruitful field . . . " (1). Warren responds to such statements in "The World of Daniel Boone": "Filson's account has come in for criticism, and certainly there was one great horse apple of a lie in it--the very language which Filson foisted on his hero . . . fancy, schoolbook language" (166).

The problem with Warren's critique is that Filson's language was not as inappropriate for writing history as Warren implies. Filson used narrative conventions for the century in which he wrote. Filson biographer John Walton observes, "That these were Boone's own words few believed; but that they expressed his philosophy was assumed by the readers who elected Boone the popular hero of the Romantic Revolution. . . . Filson was surely writing with an eye on the romantic mood of his readers" (54-55). J. Winston Coleman concurs, noting that Filson "write it [the Boone biography] up according to the contemporary literary taste" (8).

But it is that romantic literary taste that Warren writes against. Warren sets out to replace conventions of romanticism with conventions of realism. He cites romantic writers: Lord Byron, James Fenimore Cooper, and a minor poet named Daniel Bryan, who published an epic of Boone's life in 1812. He writes that Boone has the angels meeting over the Allegheny Mountains to decide who should civilize the West and electing Boone, who was, in Warren's words, "conveniently waiting on a mountaintop. . . for the revelation of his destiny" (177). With his sardonic tone, Warren ridicules historical writings such as this passage from Bryan's The Mountain Muse:
Inspire, immortal Spirits of the West! . . .
With daring sweep arouse, till lofty song
The bold sublimity of the new world
Harmoniously proclaim; and loud resound
The bloody brunts of the first Western Wars,
And brave intrepid Boone's adventurous deeds.

(V:1, 17-20)

It is, no doubt, this type of narrative that Warren refers to when he places Boone at the grave of his son and comments, "We can look back on this moment . . . beyond the cliches of romance" (169).

The most significant example of Warren's tension with romanticism is a passage in which he pointedly confronts romantic conventions. He recounts the death of Boone's oldest son, James, in a frantic battle against a party of Delaware, Cherokee, and Shawnee. There is no time to mourn when James is killed. Members of Boone's party quickly bury the young man, and months later Boone makes a "solitary pilgrimage" to the grave:

We can look back on this moment of lonely mourning in Powell's Valley---the most melancholy moment of Boone's life, by his own account---and see it as a moment that gives inwardness and humanity to an age. Beyond the clinches of romance of the frontier, beyond the epic record of endurance and the manipulations of land speculators and politicians, beyond the learned discussion of historical forces, there is the image of a father staring down at the patch of earth. It is like that moment in the midst of the heroic hurly-burly of the Iliad when Hector . . . takes his son in his arms. (169)

As a hero Boone stands upon a pedestal, distanced from the world below, but in this passage he is a typical father mourning his son, a realistic (rather than heroic) image with whom readers can empathize. Like the frontiersman slashing a path through the forest, Warren cuts through the "clinches of romance," the notions of epic, and the "manipulations" of the modern commercial world-all of which, according to Warren, have obscured realistic observation of the historical moment. The passage uncovers the individual who has been concealed behind a screen upon which heroic representations have been projected. Warren de-mythifies the hero, making him a character in a realistic text, thus more relevant and accessible to modern readers. Boone's life is now, to quote Warren's interview with Edwin Newman, "a human experience of infinite complication" (196), Warren's definition of historic realism.

However, throughout the article there is the contradiction: Warren does seem nostalgic for the idealized stories of Boone. After tearing away the heroic representations, Warren concludes the passage above by comparing Boone to the epic character Hector. Likewise, in the article's final paragraphs, Warren recounts the famous story of Boone "alone in the wilderness, singing to the sunset out of his joyous heart" (177), and he admits, "We can only guess what the real Boone was, but the myth of Boone, the image of a certain human possibility, feeds something in the heart" (177).
During a discussion of Sam Houston in an interview with Bill Moyers, Warren discussed how the story's romantic and Homeric qualities make Houston significant to American history (217-18). His comments demonstrate that Warren is not opposed to myth or romance; in fact, he acknowledges their necessity and usefulness. What he does object to is the oversimplification of history. Commenting to Moyers on the Sam Houston story, Warren states, "It's the complexity that is engaging" (218). Throughout his biographical narratives, Warren seems to be reaching for an informed but moving history--a kind of romantic realism.

However much Warren interrogates the making of heroes and legends, throughout the Boone article he implicitly acknowledges that to be meaningful, history must go beyond the documentation of facts; it must "feed something in the heart." Even after criticizing Filson's portrayal of Boone's wandering through the wilderness, Warren comments in "The World of Daniel Boone":

It was a heroic wandering. . . . . so Daniel was alone, free to scout "Kentucke" and taste the "sylvan pleasures" of what he, in Filson's language, regarded as a "second paradise." He wandered at will, exalted in spirit. (167)

At the end of the article, Warren expresses regret for the loss of the romanticized vision, complaining that Boone country is now "an Eden, more in rhetoric that in fact" (174). Warren describes a region losing its pioneering spirit:

In the heart of Eden the palisades were rotting down. Soon Boonesborough itself . . . was to disappear without leaving a trace . . . The classic figure of the Kentuckian . . . was about to retire into our romantic dreams and the pages of fiction . . . The legal brief had replaced the long rifle as the weapon for taking Kentucky. (174)

We can see that Warren is an ambivalent realist, trying to renegotiate romanticized notions of the past while expressing nostalgia for those very notions.

In the interview with Edwin Newman, Warren commented, "I like these romantic stories of America" (218). Warren realized that legends and heroes are still needed to make history meaningful, but he also saw this as a particularly difficult endeavor in a modern technological world that destroys the sources of myth as it exploits nature and disregards humanity. Warren's solution for historiography, then, is not the replacement of a romanticized past but a conception of the past in which legends, heroes, and ideals are tempered through a filter of realism, the product being a more usable past for a modern age.

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NOTES

1In "The New Provincialism" Allen Tate states: With the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world--but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renascence, a literature conscious of the past in the present" (546).
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