PAST AND PRESENT IN ROBERT PENN WARREN’S CHIEF JOSEPH OF THE NEZ PERCE

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Robert Penn Warren wrote three long narrative poems dealing with representative figures from American history: Thomas Jefferson in *Brother to Dragons*,\(^1\) the frontiersman and artist John James Audubon in *Audubon: A Vision*,\(^2\) and Young Joseph in *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*.\(^3\) Each poem offers a portrait of the life and times of the central character along with Warren’s reflection on that individual’s lasting significance for our understanding of America and its history. Warren provides linkages between *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*, the last of these long narratives, to both *Brother to Dragons* and *Audubon: A Vision* in the front materials preceding the poem itself.

*Chief Joseph’s* first epigraph is part of a proclamation from Thomas Jefferson to various midwestern Indian tribes. “Made by the same Great Spirit, and living in the same land with our brothers, the red men, we consider ourselves as the same family; we wish to live with them as one people, and to cherish their interests as our own” (CJ, 489).\(^4\) Thus the first voice one hears in reading *Chief Joseph* is that of the protagonist of *Brother to Dragons*. Given the story that unfolds, it is not too far-fetched to think of the terms “brother” and “one people” as ominous indicators of government policies designed to remake the natives into the image of European settlers or to cause them to die trying.\(^5\) Even if one is not willing to invest Jefferson’s words with that much weight, the realities of American policies for dealing with recalcitrant Native Peoples is made bluntly clear in the second epigraph of the poem, a statement by General William Tecumseh Sherman. “The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next year, for the more I see of these

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Indians, the more convinced I am that they will all have to be killed or be maintained as a species of paupers” (CJ, 489).

The connection between Chief Joseph and Brother to Dragons is reemphasized with a discussion of the auspicious first encounter between the Nez Perce and representatives of the United States in the “Note” Warren inserts between the poem’s epigraphs and the body of the poem itself: “The Nez Perce entered history as the friendly hosts to the explorers Lewis and Clark, and took care of their superfluous possessions when the expedition made the last push to the Pacific” (CJ, 491). Both poems recount that Twisted Hair held council with Meriwether Lewis and provided him with a map to the “Great Water Ill-Tasted” (CJ, 493, 494; BD II, 112).

The action of Chief Joseph can come as no surprise to one who has already seen the future destruction of the West prefigured in Brother to Dragons (BD II, 83–86).

Warren’s “note” characterizes the Nez Perce as a “handsome,” “vigorous,” and “not basically warlike” people. “They moved about with the offerings of the seasons, digging camas root, taking salmon at the time of their run, and making long hunts, across the Bitterroot Mountains into what is now Montana, for buffalo, which had already disappeared from their land by the time of Lewis and Clark” (CJ, 491). Perhaps, in one of the tribe’s treks across the Bitterroot in search of buffalo, members of the tribe crossed the land later to be occupied by the sheepherder’s shack of Audubon (AV, 265). Thus a bit of the action of Audubon is linked geographically to the setting of Chief Joseph and reminds the reader that in Audubon’s vision Indians in their natural state reflected the splendor of God. Within Chief Joseph, the early quotation from Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville perhaps comes as close as any to Audubon’s view: “Their honesty is immaculate and their purity of purpose and their observance of the rules of their religion are most uniform and remarkable. They are certainly more like a nation of saints than a horde of savages” (CJ, 492).

Chief Joseph opens with an image of Wallowa as the Nimipu’s pastoral Eden, a memory tracing back to time immemorial, a time long before the first appearance of the first White Men, long before the arrival of Lewis and Clark. The narrator of the poem certainly makes this land sound like “Canaan’s Grander Counterfeit” (BD II, 10).

The salmon leaps, and is the Sky-Chief’s blessing.
The Sky-Power thus blessed the Nimipu
And blessed them, too, with
The camas root, good to the tongue,
in abundance. (CJ, 492)

But this idyllic world will not last, and the future change is portrayed, strangely, in an entry from the Journals of Lewis and Clark that refers to the weather rather than to social conditions. After a violent hailstorm, “it became light for a short time, then the heavens became suddenly darkened by a black cloud” (CJ, 493).

Three major voices tell the stories contained in Chief Joseph. An apparently omniscient narrator opens the poem and provides historical information, primarily the movements of the forces chasing Chief Joseph and his band, and commentary throughout the poem (CJ, 3–4, 29–51, 53–56, and 57). Chief Joseph, or Young Joseph as he was known at the time, relates both the story of his people and his own concerns and motivations as events unfold. The final section of the poem is a first-person account of a journey to Little Bear Paw Battlefield by a contemporary traveler: “To Snake Creek, a
century later, I came” (CJ, 522). This section presents a literary version of Warren himself, so I will refer to this speaker (who refers to himself as “I”) as R. P. W. to distinguish the character from the author. Other voices are presented through the insertion of quotations throughout the poem. These voices include contemporary newspaper accounts, excerpts from treaties or executive orders, comments by soldiers on both sides involved in the combat, as well as more recent commentaries in the form of museum catalogs and historical markers. Through the use of quotations from these various sources, Warren both provides a sense of the diverse perspectives at play in shaping the Nez Perce War of 1877 and frames a dialogue between competing visions of the American West.

The action of Chief Joseph may be quickly summarized, even if the implications and significance of that action resist easy resolution. The first formal treaty between the United States and the Nez Perce tribes, the Nez Perce Cession of 1855, recognized the traditional home lands of each of the various Nez Perce bands, including the Wallowa Valley of Joseph’s tribe. Soon, however, gold was discovered in “them thar hills,” and in 1863 a new treaty was executed between the U.S. government and some of the Nez Perce leaders. The 1863 treaty shrunk the territory allotted to the Nez Perce by some 90 percent and required that the various bands relocate to and settle on reservations.

In the words of an Army report prepared by Major H. Clay Wood, “Joseph [father of the protagonist of Warren’s poem], Eagle-from-the-Light, Big-Thunder and several less prominent chiefs, and headsmen,—with their followers,—were not parties to the treaty of ’63: have never acknowledged its binding force, or accepted any of its privileges or benefits. To the treaty they have objected the want of authority in the Indians who spoke for the tribe. They have uniformly haughtily and utterly repudiated it. From the date of this treaty, there has been a radical division of the tribe into recognized treaty and non-treaty Nez-Perces.” Increasing pressure was brought to bear on the nontreaty Nez Perce to comply with the terms of the treaty they did not sign, but the nontreaty tribes continued their seminomadic ways. Finally, in 1877, General O. O. Howard issued an ultimatum to Joseph and other nontreaty leaders: relocate to designated reservations within the newly restructured Nez Perce territory voluntarily or the Army will relocate you to those lands forcibly. Hostilities broke out and a small group of Nez Perce moved eastward from Oregon, through Idaho and across southern Montana, through the newly established Yellowstone Park in Wyoming and northward through Montana, in an effort to reach Canada, where they would be able to settle and live peaceably. Their flight covered a thousand miles geographically and lasted from mid-June to early September 1877, when Chief Joseph surrendered in the Little Bear Paw Mountains, less than fifty miles from the Canadian border. Along the way the Army and Nez Perce fought numerous engagements, and the Nez Perce avoided other encounters by outmaneuvering their pursuers.

Warren’s poem is rich in historical detail—it is the most historical of the three poems—in large part because of the effective use of primary materials, but as is also the case with Brother to Dragons and Audubon, Warren’s real interest is in understanding the internal struggle of the participants. Our focus now turns to the motivations of Chief Joseph, the “philosophical framework” for American national policy, and the reflections of “R. P. W.” as he travels to the site of Joseph’s surrender.

Chief Joseph opens with a passage that
points backward into the immemorial mists to the origins of the Nez Perce and simultaneously points forward toward Joseph’s guiding principle.

The Land of the Winding Waters, Wallowa, The Land of the Nimipu, Land sacred to the band of old Joseph, Their land, the land in the far ages given By the Chief-in-the Sky. (CJ, 492)

Warren emphasizes the importance of this view for Joseph by immediately inserting part of Joseph’s statement to the Commissioners of 1876, a statement that parallels Warren’s own treatment. “The earth, my mother and nurse, is very sacred to me: too sacred to be valued, or sold for gold or for silver . . . and my bands have suffered wrong rather than done wrong” (CJ, 498). The reaction to Joseph’s plea is sadly predictable: “Howard understood not. He showed us the rifle. / The rifle is not what is spoken in peace-talk” (CJ, 498).

The Army report already quoted above noted Old Joseph’s reaction to the terms of the 1863 treaty—he “haughtily and utterly repudiated it.” His son Joseph shared his opinion. Joseph’s haughty rejection of the treaty and his disdain for those Nez Perce who signed the treaty is made clear throughout the poem. Joseph recounts that his father went to Lapwai before it was designated as a reservation and notes that neither he nor his father would sell “sacred/Bones of our fathers for white-man money,/and food scraps” (CJ, 493). Those who did sign the treaty were “false Nimipu” who then went on the reservation “To eat, like a beggar, stale bread of white men” (CJ, 494). Joseph also expresses his disdain of those who till the soil rather than depend on God to provide, as he weighs what life on the reservation would mean for his people.
We must live afar [from Wallowa]  
with a shrunk-little heart,  
And dig in the ground like a digger  
of roots—at Lapwai,  
The Place of the Butterflies—how  
pretty  
That name for a reservation to puke  
on! (CJ, 498)

Even though after capture “at Keogh they  
ate the white man’s bread” (CJ, 516), Joseph  
expresses this same disdain for those who  
chose such a shrunken life after his surrender  
and during his imprisonment.

They built me a house—me, a chief,  
Who had lifted the death-tube,  
Winchester or Sharps,  
And peered at the blue spot the sight  
leveled to  
In nameless election. I slow squeezed  
trigger.  
The blue spot was still.  
For me, a chief—as though I were  
one  
Of the white half-men who scratch  
in the ground  
And at evening slop hogs. For me,  
Who had lain on the prairie in  
starlight  
And heard the coyote-wail of the far  
scout. (CJ, 518)

Rather than sleep in the house, Joseph  
pitched his tepee.  
In Warren’s portrayal, Joseph continually  
seeks to be worthy of his father, whose eyes  
are always on him, and to live in harmony  
with God. Joseph asks,

But what is a man? An autumn-  
tossed aspen,  
Pony-fart in the wind, the melting of  
snow-slush?  
Yes, that is all. Unless—unless—  
We can learn to live the Great Spirit’s  
meaning  
As the old and wise grope for it.  
(CJ, 519)

Warren has Joseph attempt to understand why the Nez Perce and whites are so different. Perhaps it has to do with the nature of gold, which the whites so highly prize. Joseph imagines that the secret name of gold, reflecting its true nature, might be “Death-that-in-darkness-comes-smiling” (CJ, 497, italics in original). He observes the soldiers training and speculates: “The white horse-soldiers, they mount from the left. / We from the right. Can that be a difference?” (CJ, 497).

Joseph finally hit on a, if not the, key difference between the whites moving in and the Nez Perce in his statement at the council called by General Howard: the Nez Perce viewed the earth as something that was more basic than man and that could not be owned by him. The position of the white settlers and powers was reflected in Major Wood’s report on “The Status of Young Joseph . . . and the Indian Title to Land.” Among the report’s “conclusions of law” are the following:

First—Indians cannot exclusively appropriate to themselves more land than they have occasion for, or more than they are able to settle and cultivate. Their unsettled habitation throughout immense regions of the United States cannot be accounted a true and legal possession. We do not, therefore, deviate from the views of nature, in confining the Indians within narrower limits.
Second—The title of Indians to the land they occupy is a title of occupancy only. The sovereignty, the ultimate dominion is vested in the General Government. 

Fifth—The exclusive power to extinguish the Indian title to land is vested in the General Government, and either by purchase or by conquest.

Sixth—But this title can be extinguished only with their free and full consent, unless by a just and necessary war.  

As this report makes clear, the Nez Perce cannot claim ownership of land simply by living off of the largesse of the Great Spirit, who provides for their basic needs. Without the admixture of their labor to the land (dissmissively characterized by Warren’s Joseph as scratching in the ground or slopping hogs), the Nez Perce have no claim to their traditional lands recognizable under either American law or the philosophical principles of John Locke. In his nearly thirty years of captivity on various reservations, Joseph was allowed to visit his traditional tribal lands twice. With bittersweet irony Joseph reports, “The grave of my father lay in a land now tilled / By the white man who owned it, but had something human of heart” (CJ, 521).

The final section of Chief Joseph is a first-person account by R. P. W. of his journey to the Little Bear Paw Battlefield. He first documents the details of his flights: “LaGuardia to O’Hare, American Airlines, October 9, 1981, / Ticket 704 982 1454 4, Chicago. By Northwest to Great Falls. Met by two friends, Stuart Wright and David Quammen” (CJ, 522). He then outlines the drive from Great Falls northeast to the Little Bear Paw Mountains.

At the battlefield, R. P. W. surveys the “modest monuments” (CJ, 523), and notes that “Snake Creek is near-dry, only / A string of mossy-green puddles where Joseph, / In the same season, / Had once found water fresh for people and horse herd” (CJ, 524).

While his friends roamed above the site of surrender, R. P. W. “in fanatic imagination” saw Joseph.

I see him who in how many midnights
Had stood—what seasons?—while
the susurrus
Of tribal sleep dies toward what
stars,
While he, eyes fixed on what strange
stars, knew
That eyes were fixed on him, eyes of
Those fathers that incessantly, with-
The accuracy of that old Winchester, rifled
Through all, through darkness, distance, Time,
To know if he had proved a man, and being
A man, would make all those
Who now there slept know
Their own manhood.
He knew—could see afar, beyond all
night—
Those ancient eyes, in which love
and judgment
Hold equal glitter, and, with no
blink,
Strove always toward him. And he—
He strove to think of things outside
Of Time, in some
Great whirling sphere, like truth
unnamable. Thus—
Standing there, he might well,
Already in such midnight, have fore-
known
The end. (CJ, 525)

Thus Joseph, in R. P. W.’s mind, has become a standard by which to measure manhood. This seems to provide an answer
to the question the unnamed narrator asks near the end of the poem: “Back at Nespelem, by the campfire, / Did Joseph wonder if the gaze of Old Joseph / Yet fixed on him? / At least, no sacred land had he ever sold” (CJ, 521). Joseph did not wonder if Old Joseph still watched, because he knew in his faithful heart that the eyes of his father were still on him.13

R. P. W.’s thoughts then turn from the “vastness of plains” where he is standing to “the squirming myriads far at / My back. Then thought of the mayor / Of Spokane—whoever the hell he may have been” (CJ, 525). This cavalier dismissal of the mayor of Spokane may be Warren’s normal reaction to those he thinks think more highly of themselves than they should and parallels his comment on the founder of Smithland in Brother to Dragons:

| It never came to much,       |
| Sure not the vainglory the man |
| Named Smith— whoever the hell he was—had |
| In mind that morning when he laid the log, |
| Squared sill, mixed clay for chink, and split the shakes |
| For the first cabin, back in the seventeen-nineties. (BD II, 13) |

A good part of the telling of the story of Chief Joseph, from the point of view of the cavalry officers chasing him down, is the pursuit of glory (CJ, 509, 510, 517). Perhaps easy glory, in Warren’s mind, is always one of the goals of the politically ambitious. These ironic or cynical thoughts are cut short for R. P. W.:

| But suddenly knew that for those sound |

Of heart there is no ultimate irony. There is only Process, which is one name for history. Often Pitiful. But sometimes, under The scrutinizing prism of Time, Triumphant. (CJ, 525)

For the sound of heart there is no ultimate irony, but for the unsound of heart ultimate irony is perhaps all there is. Warren slaughtered heroes as relentlessly as Audubon slaughtered birds,14 the better to lay them out naturally for our observation. The catalog of potential heroes from Chief Joseph alone is extensive, and includes Generals Sherman and Howard, President Grant, Colonel Miles, Captain Hale, and Buffalo Bill among those named. Warren provides an anonymous account of the westward movement of civilization, and expands the list of slaughtered heroes, in the narrator’s sardonic voice:

| Frontiersmen, land-grabbers, gold-panners were dead. |
| Veterans of the long chase skull-grinned in darkness. |
| A more soft-handed ilk now swayed the West. They founded Dynasties, universities, libraries, shuffled Stocks, and occasionally milked The Treasury of the United States, Not to mention each other. They slick-fucked a land. (CJ, 520) |

Perhaps the ultimate irony of Chief Joseph’s story is that in defeat he achieves fame he never sought (CJ, 520–22). But Warren’s Joseph thought “a true chief no self has” (CJ, 502), and he remains sound of heart.

Does Warren mean to suggest that history is simply a mechanical process independent
of human actors? Such a view would seem to be incompatible with Joseph’s concern for living rightly: “I prayed/That my father, whose eyes see all, and judge,/Might find some worth in an act of mine,/However slight” (CJ, 519). Such a view seems akin to “the Great Twitch,” a version of determinism that Jack Burden for a time accepted but ultimately rejected in *All the King’s Men*. Burden set aside his easy determinism for a more complex view of “the agony of [human] will.” Warren’s tempered view is neither an acceptance of inevitable historical forces beyond man’s control or an embrace of man’s will as the ultimate controller of events. Rather, Warren understands the necessity of man’s engagement with his world if he is to be a man—that is, Warren understands that ultimately there are questions far more important than the question of who won and who lost in a simple calculus of success.16

R. P. W.’s trek to Little Bear Paw Battlefield, and his reflections on Chief Joseph and Joseph’s career, at last leads R. P. W. to reflect on himself and his place in the world.

Now soon they would go back. I too,
Into the squirming throng, faceless
to facelessness,
And under a lower sky. But
wondered,
Even so, if when the traffic light
Rings green, some stranger may
pause and thus miss
His own mob’s rush to go where the
light
Says go, and pausing, may look,
Not into a deepening shade of
canyon,
Nor, head now up, toward ice peak
in moonlight white,
But, standing paralyzed in his
momentary eternity, into

His own heart look while he asks
From what undefinable distance,
years, and direction,
Eyes of fathers are suddenly fixed on
him. To know. (CJ, 525–26).

These final reflections point back to the third epigraph Warren places at the head of the poem, Chief Sealth’s vision of the world without the “Red Man.”

At night when the streets of your cities are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone. (CJ, 489)

We are not alone, and it is a mistake to think that the only concerns we have are with our contemporaries. This returns us to the relationship of past to present and future, which is of perennial interest for Warren. Just as the writer of the book of Hebrews suggests, we are all surrounded by great clouds of witnesses, and it is to our great disadvantage to ignore them and a prime example of hubris and ignorance to believe that they ultimately can be ignored. A complete life involves the conversation through time, which is essential for real action in our own time.

Jack Burden, narrator of Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, perhaps gives voice to Warren’s basic conclusion from the investigation of American history contained in his narrative epics: “If you could not accept the past and its burden there was no future, for without one there cannot be the other, and . . . if you could accept the past you might hope for the future, for only out of the past can you make the future.”19
ROBERT PENN WARREN'S CHIEF JOSEPH OF THE NEZ PERCE


5. Jefferson's message to the Miamis, Powhatanamites, and Wecauki foreshadows some of the issues that will be of critical importance for the settlers in their argument against the Nez Percé: "We shall, with great pleasure, see your people become disposed to cultivate the earth, to raise herds of the useful animals, and to spin and weave, for their food and clothing. These resources are certain; they will never disappoint you: while those of hunting may fail, and expose your women and children to the miseries of hunger and cold. We will with pleasure furnish you with implements for the necessary arts, and with persons who may instruct you how to make and use them" (The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 333). "Brother" is reminiscent of one of the examples of black humor that circulated within the satellite nations of the Soviet Bloc during the later stages of the Cold War, involving whether the Russians were friends or brothers of the occupied peoples. The punch line was, "Why, Comrade, we get to choose our friends." On Jefferson's Indian policy, see Bernard Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974).

6. Alvin Josephy emphasizes the importance of this first meeting between the Nez Percé and representatives of the United States, and the way in which the later thinking of the tribe was shaped by a belief that all such representatives were as trustworthy as the first. See Alvin M. Josephy Jr., *The Nez Percé and the Opening of the Northwest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 228, 325.


8. The journey related in *CJ* parallels that made by Warren in October 1981, and he was accompanied by the two friends mentioned in the poem (*CJ*, 522). See Joseph Blotner, Robert Penn Warren: A Biography (New York: Random House, 1997), 461–64. In placing himself in *Chief Joseph*, Warren follows the premise he established in the earlier longer narrative poems. Warren inserted himself into *Brother to Dragons* as "R. P. W.," who is identified as "the writer of this poem" (*BD II*, 2). The final section of *Audubon* is a first-person account told by a man who grew up in Kentucky, as did Warren, and in an interview statement that the final section is "about Audubon and me" ("An Interview with Robert Penn Warren," in Floyd C. Watkins et al., eds., *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990], 244).

9. Major H. C. Clayb Wood, assistant adjutant general for the Army's Department of the Columbia, "The Status of Young Joseph and His Band of Nez-Perce Indians under the Treaties between the United States and the Nez-Perce Tribe of Indians and the Indian Title to Land" (Portland, OR: Assistant Adjutant General's Office, Department of the Columbia, 1876), 42–43.


11. Joseph expressed the position Socrates articulated in Plato's *Gorgias* (474c, 509d, and 527b), that it is better to suffer evil than to commit evil.


13. Warren's Joseph seeks to "think things/Outside of time," much as Audubon finds action and meaning that "is not a dimension of Time" (see *AV*, 261). Also note the parallel comments Warren made about Audubon and Joseph. Audubon "was only / Himself, Jean Jacques, and his passion" (*AV*, 254). Of Joseph, "He/ was only himself, and the distances / He stared into were only himself" (*CJ*, 521). Also note that there is a soundless dimension to Warren's visions ("The Status of Young Joseph," 38–41).


15. Major H. C. Clayb Wood, assistant adjutant general for the Army's Department of the Columbia, "The Status of Young Joseph and His Band of Nez-Perce Indians under the Treaties between the United States and the Nez-Perce Tribe of Indians and the Indian Title to Land" (Portland, OR: Assistant Adjutant General's Office, Department of the Columbia, 1876), 42–43.

16. In a letter to Cleanth Brooks dated December 6, 1943, Warren distinguished between personal struggle and metaphysical struggle in a discussion of characters in Shakespeare: "I think that you might underscore a little more heavily, the very excel-

17. In placing a fictional version of himself in *Chief Joseph*, Warren follows the practice he established in the other long poems (474c, 509d, and 527b), that it is better to suffer evil than

18. Cassius, an Epicurean, who by definition believes in the efficacy of will and reason in relation to the "future," lures Brutus into action. In the end Cassius says 'you know I once held Epicurus strong' but a struggle


21. In a letter to Cleanth Brooks dated December 6, 1943, Warren distinguished between personal struggle and metaphysical struggle in a discussion of characters in Shakespeare: "I think that you might underscore a little more heavily, the very excellent point made on 11 about the added dignity achieved by M [Macbeth] if we regard him in the light of his metaphysical attempt as contrasted with his personal attempt at a throne. He has undertaken a more than mortal struggle but a struggle which man must as man forever undertake. Man must try to predict and plan and control, as his destiny. But he can never be sure that he has arrived at the right premise for the effort. M is trying to follow man's destiny. Man has to try to break the bank of the future. The fact that he cannot do not mean that he must not try. The question is on what terms can he try and with what attitude. Something along that line. I feel that this can be developed. On this general point, I would suggest a comparison with the play Julius Caesar. We have a somewhat parallel philosophical issue. Brutus is a Stoic, therefore a determinist. He does not act because for him action is futile. But Cassius, an Epicurean, who by definition believes in the efficacy of will and reason in relation to the "future," lures Brutus into action. In the end Cassius says 'you know I once held Epicurus strong' but has lost his philosophy and now begins to 'credit things that do presage'—[in] other words has begun to doubt man's role in relation to the future. Here the set-up is different in that the Fate is not a moral order, shall we say, but a political and historical situation, which has not been adequately analyzed. Etc. But the same basic issue seems to be raised here. Or am I wrong?" (*Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence*, edited by James A. Grimshaw Jr. [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998], 80; cf. Warren's letter on Cleopatra, 50).
