

Imagining Our Time: Recollections and Reflections on American Writing (Southern Literary Studies)

Lewis P. Simpson

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Lewis P. Simpson, who died in 2005, almost a year shy of ninety, was an intellectual historian of the South and American literary culture and a revered essayist. Imagining Our Time is his last book, a wide-ranging, erudite, and enlightening look at the culture of letters in American society. Simpson's primary subjects are various twentieth-century writers he knew intimately, through their works and often personally. His final volume offers priceless insight into the struggles and concerns unique to prominent American thinkers, literary artists, and critics contemporary to his own lifetime. Often moving from an intriguing anecdote or recollection to a rigorous discussion of ideas, Simpson's style is captivating. He begins with speculation on Eric Voegelin's interest in Julien Benda's polemic La Trahison des Clercs and follows with thoughts on the declining faith in the university as an embodiment of humanistic letters and learning, surveying the American Republic as far back as Benjamin Franklin. In successive chapters, Simpson pays tribute to Malcolm Cowley as a "hero of the literary art" and probes Robert Penn Warren's fixation with Thomas Jefferson as manifested in the writing and complete rewriting of Brother to Dragons. He ruminates on the vocation of the critic as practiced by Lionel Trilling and Diana Trilling, and the literary and cultural politics of the 1930s. Brief portraits of Andrew Lytle and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., appear, as well as a poignant argument for the autobiographical cast of Eudora Welty's writing. The volume's pièce de résistance is a lengthy, riveting consideration of Simpson's friend Walker Percy and Percy's quest for identity as a modern Christian novelist alienated from the society around him. Fred Hobson's introduction fittingly rounds out Imagining Our Time, offering an intimate appreciation of Lewis Simpson—a giant among scholars of southern literary studies—and this book that concludes his career. AUTHOR BIO: Lewis P. Simpson (1916–2005) was Boyd Professor and William A. Read Professor of English, emeritus, at Louisiana State University. Among his many books are The Man of Letters in New England and the South; The Dispossessed Garden; The Brazen Face of History: Studies in the Literary Consciousness in America; Mind and the American Civil War: A Meditation on Lost Causes; and The Fable of the Southern Writer. He was a founding member of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, president of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature, and coeditor of the Southern Review from the inauguration of the New Series in 1965 until his retirement in 1987.

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