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THE ACHIEVEMENT
OF
ROBERT PENN WARREN

by

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Submitted for the Degree of Ph.D.
to the Department of English
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Summary

Introduction. Reasons are given for offering the present study. Existing books about Warren are described and his Southern allegiances indicated.

Chapter One. Warren's regionalism is examined in the context of his early affiliations with the Nashville Fugitives and Agrarians. His developing theory of literature is discussed and shown to be consistent with a view of the world which, while anti-Emersonian, recognises the necessity for man to live by ideals. In this, Warren's conception of man is likened to Conrad's. His prospectus for self-realisation in "Knowledge and the Image of Man" is discussed.

Chapter Two. Man's propensity for idealism is constantly challenged by the claims of naturalism. Warren's engagement with naturalism--and his sense of its attractions--is illustrated by the poetic sequence "Kentucky Mountain Farm." This provides a context in which his early development as a poet is discussed. Evidence is given to support the view that Warren had found himself as a poet by June 1925 and that by August of the same year an appreciation of the crucial differences between sarcasm and irony enabled him to write about his own "philosophy of poetry."

Chapter Three deals with Warren's shorter fiction from 1931-1947, collected in The Circus in the Attic. Themes of the novels are found in many of these stories and, while they are judged uneven in quality, other stories besides the well-known "Blackberry Winter" are shown to be of merit.

Chapter Four relates Warren's first full-length prose work, John Brown: the Making of a Martyr, to his emergence as a philosophical novelist with a particular interest in the problem of self-realisation and the need of the individual to fulfil himself in terms of an idea. Novels examined are Night Rider, At Heaven's Gate and All the King's Men. The method of the exemplum is evaluated in each of these books.

Chapter Five groups four works in which Warren has used historical materials to create "little myths" of enduring relevance: the novel, World Enough and Time, the long poem, Brother to Dragons, and the novels, Band of Angels and Wilderness.

Chapter Six. The "new sense of poetry" that enabled Warren to produce Promises: Poems, 1954-1956, and subsequent verse, is related to a revitalised awareness of what he calls "the human bond." This Chapter also assesses the poetry of You, Emperors, and Others: Poems, 1957-1960 and the sequence, "Tale of Time: New Poems, 1960-1966."

Chapter Seven. The poles of fact and idea are transposed into the flesh and the imagination with which Warren is particularly concerned in the most successful poetry of Incarnations: Poems, 1966-1968, Audubon: A Vision (1969) and Or Else--Poem/Poems 1968-1974.

Chapter Eight. Three novels--The Cave, Flood and Meet Me in the Green Glen--are considered as fables of love with a pastoral setting. An attempt is made to defend these books from hostile reviewers who do not appear to understand Warren's intentions, his techniques or his region.

Chapter Nine. Warren's most recent novel, A Place to Come To, presents his "basic ideas" more panoramically and more richly mixed than ever. Analysing the novel in terms of these ideas, this Chapter moves, in its second part, to a summing-up of Warren's qualities and achievement as a writer of verse and prose as well as of such socio-historical works as Segregation, The Legacy of the Civil War and Who Speaks for the Negro?

Appendix. An interview between Robert Penn Warren and the writer is presented with notes.

Abbreviations

Works by Robert Penn Warren:

AHG	<u>At Heaven's Gate</u> (New York, 1959)
AKM	<u>All the King's Men</u> (New York, 1953)
BOA	<u>Band of Angels</u> (New York, 1955)
BTD	<u>Brother to Dragons</u> (New York, 1953)
C	<u>The Cave</u> (New York, 1959)
CIA	<u>The Circus in the Attic</u> (New York, 1947)
F	<u>Flood</u> (New York, 1964)
GG	<u>Meet Me in the Green Glen</u> (New York, 1971)
JB	<u>John Brown: The Making of a Martyr</u> (New York, 1929)
<u>Legacy</u>	<u>The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial</u> (New York, 1964)
NR	<u>Night Rider</u> (New York, 1948)
OE	<u>Or Else--Poem/Poems 1968-1974</u> (New York, 1974)
PCT	<u>A Place to Come To</u> (New York, 1977)
<u>Promises</u>	<u>Promises: Poems, 1954-1956</u> (New York, 1957)
SE	<u>Selected Essays</u> (New York, 1966)
<u>Segregation</u>	<u>Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South</u> (London, 1957)
SP	<u>Selected Poems: 1923-1975</u> (New York, 1976)
SP: 1943	<u>Selected Poems, 1923-1943</u> (New York, 1944)
W	<u>Wilderness</u> (New York, 1961)
WEAT	<u>World Enough and Time</u> (New York, 1950)
WSN	<u>Who Speaks for the Negro?</u> (New York, 1965)
YEO	<u>You, Emperors, and Others: Poems 1957-1960</u> (New York, 1960)

Others:

- Bohner Charles H. Bohner, Robert Penn Warren (New York, 1964)
- Casper Leonard Casper, Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground (Seattle, 1960)
- DDC Donald Davidson Collection; unpublished letters and papers (Nashville, Joint University Libraries)
- GWT John Crowe Ransom, God Without Thunder (New York, 1930)
- Longley John L. Longley, Jr., Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays (New York, 1965)
- Stewart John L. Stewart, The Burden of Time: The Fugitives and Agrarians (Princeton, 1965)
- Strandberg Victor H. Strandberg, A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren (Lexington, 1965)

Introduction

A full study of a living, active writer faces special difficulties: the evidence is not all in. In the case of Robert Penn Warren, whatever evidence may be yet forthcoming, there should be no doubt about the substantialness of achievement. He is America's most distinguished living man of letters, an honnête homme involved with books and humankind and at ease in a variety of genres.

Best known in this country as author of All the King's Men, Warren has been called "the pentathlon champion of American literature."¹ In an age of specialisation he has published in America a biography, ten novels, a volume of short stories, poetry in several kinds, major criticism, socio-historical comment and a play. Yet of his more than twenty-five titles only twelve are available in Britain and there is currently no British paperback edition of any of his novels. In America attitudes towards his work have been generally lukewarm since 1957 when he won his second Pulitzer Prize with Promises: Poems, 1954-1956. In the early stages of his career he was overshadowed both by more established and by more obviously experimental novelists (Fitzgerald, Wolfe, Dos Passos, Faulkner) and the last ten or fifteen years have seen him eclipsed by the Jewish novel (Bellow, Malamud, Roth), the comic-apocalyptic novel (Heller, Barth, Pynchon), the poetry of neurosis (Lowell, Berryman) and what his wife, Eleanor Clark, terms "the Sylvia Plath virus."² Yet Warren began his several treatments of the fashionable

¹ Bohner, p. 17.

² Eleanor Clark, Eyes, Etc., A Memoir (London: Collins, 1978), p. 5.

theme of alienation with Night Rider as long ago as 1939 and by the forties his poetry had evolved one of the most remarkable and comprehensive styles of the century, able to combine the swift pace of fiction with the intensity of poetry and to compass lyric passion, nervous tension and mythic resonance through a compounding of the formal and the colloquial unmatched in American literature. It seems ironic that if Warren's name is a household word in literate America it is so largely because of his work as a teacher and co-author of the influential textbooks, Understanding Poetry, Understanding Fiction and Modern Rhetoric.

In his book, Sur Proust, Jean-François Revel defines a basic pre-requisite to the kind of study attempted in these pages:

. . . il y a une seule manière de parler d'un auteur, il y a une condition fondamentale qu'il faut remplir: il faut que ce qui lui importait vous importe. Parler d'un auteur, c'est dire en prenant appui sur lui ce qu'on pense soi-même de ce dont il a parlé.³

If this expresses what must be one's private justification for the following chapters and for much in their method, it also points a danger, for one must, equally, guard against undermining critical observation by requiring that what is important to oneself should account for everything of value in the subject. It is the whole, various achievement of Warren's work that needs to be studied in detail, with special attention to the inter-relations between poetic theory and moral vision.

In addition to a large bibliography compiled in 1968 by Mary Nance Huff,⁴ there are five books devoted entirely to Warren's work,

³ Jean-François Revel, Sur Proust: Remarques sur A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu (Paris: René Julliard, 1960), p. 244.

⁴ Mary Nance Huff, Robert Penn Warren: A Bibliography (New York: David Lewis, 1968).

one collection of essays edited by John L. Longley, Jr and a somewhat elliptical pamphlet by Paul West in the University of Minnesota series on American Writers. In Robert Penn Warren: the Dark and Bloody Ground (1960) Leonard Casper attempts to cover too much in too short a book. His chapter on Warren's poetry is little more than appreciative quotation and suggestive rather than critical prose. The chapter on Warren the novelist is sound, although burdened with lengthy semi-interpretative plot summaries, some overingenious readings and some unnecessary defences, for example of Band of Angels as preconceived Hollywood fodder, which it is not. Casper's reflections on Warren's Fugitive and Agrarian associations are little more than outlines as are his comments on the short fiction. Robert Bohner's Robert Penn Warren (1964) is a straightforward and unpretentious if sometimes over-impressionistic introduction. Both of these books are now, inevitably, incomplete as much of Warren's best work has been done since they were written.

Victor H. Strandberg's A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren (1965) covers the poetry written by 1960 very thoroughly though somewhat indiscriminatingly; but Strandberg's concern with the metaphysical quality of Warren's vision tends to instate density of thought as an absolute criterion of excellence and he has a poor eye for a poem's dynamics. A new book on Warren's poetry by Strandberg, The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren (1977),⁵ has been announced but, at the time of writing, has not yet appeared. As these chapters neared completion Barnett Guttenberg's Web of Being: The Novels of

⁵ Victor H. Strandberg, The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1977).

Robert Penn Warren (1975)⁶ became available. This book offers a reading of each of the novels except A Place to Come To. Concentrating on the characters, Guttenberg finds that they pursue "false being", whether through escape into idealism or into world and fact. The thesis is sound and it is earnestly propounded but Guttenberg's readings seldom expand beyond the narrow line of his thesis and his determination to relate Warren to Plato, Descartes, Heidegger and Buber has the effect of making Warren a much more abstract writer than he is: the reader feels cheated of flesh and blood. Reviewing Web of Being in the Nashville Tennessean, Floy W. Beatty observes: "If Warren's novels personally engage Professor Guttenberg, it is not apparent in a single sentence of this lifeless book."⁷ The aim of the present study is to interpret Warren's work, to celebrate it and "to discriminate values and methods among the individual items of the canon."⁸

The range of Warren's achievement testifies to the scope and commitment of his human sympathies. Each intellectual act, whether formally poem, novel or one of the interviews with black leaders in Who Speaks for the Negro? is of the nature of a poem, according to his own definition of the poem as a way of "getting your reality shaped a little better."⁹ Band of Angels is over-melodramatic and Wilderness is flawed by the failure of its hero's consciousness

⁶ Barnett Guttenberg, Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975).

⁷ Floy W. Beatty, "Critic Scrutinizes Critic's Work," The Tennessean, 14 Sept. 1975, p. 6F.

⁸ Robert Penn Warren, ed., Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1966), p. 21.

⁹ Rob Roy Purdy, ed., Fugitives' Reunion: Conversations at Vanderbilt, May 3 - 5, 1956 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1959), p. 142.

to develop along with the events of the novel; but there is never in Warren's work the meretricious gloss of the merely fashionable, although a popular audience might look to him for a "good story" complete with fast action, sex, violence and earthy humour. Abstracted from their novels, the mere plots of World Enough and Time, The Cave or Meet Me in the Green Glen would have little to commend themselves to the attention of the serious reader, though, to be sure, the same might be said about the mere plots of many other nineteenth and twentieth-century novelists. Warren is a popular novelist in that his novels have made money and, occasionally, films.¹⁰

Academic audiences appear to be fearful of such popularity and to suppose that commercial success must inevitably spoil the writer. Indeed, one periodically hears that in Warren's case the worst has long since happened. He is a popular writer in the further sense that in a typical Warren novel there will be something for everybody. What counts, of course, is that underlying the energy, even the violence that is part of his metaphor of the world, as well as of the world itself, is a concern to visualise the meaning of common

¹⁰ All the King's Men, copyrighted 5 January, 1950, was written and directed by Robert Rossen. Despite an adverse review in Sight and Sound, June, 1950, 163-64, 168, the film won Academy Awards for Broderick Crawford as Willie Stark and Mercedes McCambridge as Sadie Burke. Warren was pleased with the film: "Rossen did a good job with AKM . . . Crawford in the lead is perfect and several minor characters, especially Sadie Burke, are excellent. The handling of atmosphere is fine. The end is different, Willie comes off sort of black-and-white. But that is the price of movies, I guess. You can't do much with ironies and complications in the final effect." (Letter to Frank Owsley, dated 31 Jan. 1950. Papers of Frank Owsley, Tennessee State Library and Archives.) By comparison, Band of Angels, copyrighted 3 August, 1957, directed in old-school Hollywood style by Raoul Walsh, was a two-dimensional flop, remote from Warren's novel. At the time of writing, Sidney Pollack is directing a film version of A Place to Come To with Robert Redford in the leading part.

experience and, without artistic concessions, to make this meaning available in a body of work which, with astonishing success, unites metaphysical and social themes in a single vision. There is a remarkable consistency in his views of the artist's relations to his materials, the nature of the work of art and the ethical life.

Deeply a Southerner, Warren has emerged as the most versatile and vigorous of the Fugitive Group, that astonishing convention of talents who met in Nashville, Tennessee between 1915 and 1928 and included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Donald Davidson. As Tate predicted soon after Warren's poems began to appear in The Fugitive, "that boy's a wonder--has more sheer genius than any of us; watch him: his work from now on will have what none of us can achieve--power."¹¹ The power of Warren's work arises from experience that incorporates the frontier, as well as the town, the plantation and the farm. Though he has long since left the South to live in the North, where he now divides his time between Connecticut and Vermont, he has, nonetheless, remained a Southerner. So he testifies in the opening of Segregation:

"I'm glad it's you going," my friend, a Southerner, long resident in New York, said, "and not me." But I went back, for going back this time, like all the other times, was a necessary part of my life. I was going back to look at the landscapes and streets I had known--Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana--to look at the faces, to hear the voices, to hear, in fact, the voices in my own blood. A girl from Mississippi had said to me: "I feel it's all happening inside of me, every bit of it. It's all there."

I know what she meant.

(Segregation, p. 11)

¹¹ Letter to Donald Davidson, 17 April, 1924. DDC, File 10.

The eternal return has been as much a part of Warren's own life as it is of the lives of his characters. Contrary to Thomas Wolfe's dictum "You can't go home again," Warren's work persistently tells us that "You must go home again"--even if, like Jack Burden, Brad Tolliver, Jed Tewksbury or little Billie Potts, it is only:

To ask forgiveness and the patrimony of your crime;

And kneel in the untutored night as to demand
What gift--oh, father, father--from that dissevering hand?

(SP, p. 281)

At home "the father waits for the son" and only from the father can the son receive forgiveness, the patrimony of his crime and the gift of meaning--as a rule, in Warren, self-knowledge. The Dantesque scheme of At Heaven's Gate projects a group of characters who violate nature and Jerry Calhoun, in denying his true father and taking a false father, commits what is for Warren a crucial impiety. In All the King's Men Jack Burden adopts a series of false fathers, the most notable being Willie Stark himself. Invariably there is alignment of the true father and the truth of the situation. Warren concedes this himself when he says that the perfect father will act as the great reconciler of the world's chief contraries, resolving the tension between idea and fact, the Emersonian and the Hawthornian. The point where fact and idea coincide, the perfect fusion is not, Warren conjectures, in our world: "But we constantly want to have it in our world, and we only find it by finding a new father, I guess, beyond us, beyond this world."¹² Thus our human case, Southern or otherwise, remains not hopeless but interesting.

¹² Appendix, p. 346.

Warren, then, has continually gone home again, imaginatively in his poetry and fiction, and actually in the task of gathering material for Segregation (1957) and Who Speaks for the Negro? (1965). His business is with that region of which Robert Coles speculates in Farewell to the South:

I wonder where else in this country past history and present social conflict conspire to bring forth so much of the evil in people, so much of the dignity possible in people, so much of the "pity and terror" in the human condition.¹³

Like Hawthorne, Warren has lived "in the right ratio . . . between an attachment to his region and a detached assessment of it."¹⁴ His meditations on the Centennial in The Legacy of the Civil War are very much concerned with "past history and present social conflict," with evil and dignity, pity and terror--above all with the great dangers that arise from simplifying idealisms which would, catastrophically, rob the world of its complexity. He reflects:

Most Americans are ready to echo the sentiment of Woodrow Wilson that "America is the only idealist country in the world." As Reinhold Niebuhr has put it, we live in the illusions of innocence and virtue. We have not grown up enough to appreciate the difficulty of moral definition, the doubleness of experience --what he calls "the irony of history."

(Legacy, p. 71)

Here Warren precisely defines for us his own enterprise--the effort "to appreciate the difficulty of moral definition, the doubleness of experience . . . the irony of history."

¹³ Robert Coles, Farewell to the South (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1972), p. 36.

¹⁴ Robert Penn Warren, "Hawthorne Revisited: Some Remarks on Hellfiredness," Sewanee Review 81 (1973), 75.

Chapter One

Regionalism, Agrarianism and Literature

Warren began as an enlightened conservative Southerner. Like his associates, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Andrew Lytle, he was acutely aware of the gulf widening between an America that moved further into slavery to material progress and a minority of artists and intellectuals, self-appointed custodians of traditional values. His contribution to Who Owns America? shows his sense of this alienation and of the difficulties facing the responsible artist in search of a theme:

The contemporary writer . . . must first discover a theme unless he is merely to project in symbol after symbol the frustration he suffers . . . or to project his rebellion and dissatisfaction in a literature of violence and disgust. . . . He may be overwhelmed by the sense of his own separateness . . . further, he may feel that something that once bound author and audience together, some common¹ tie of values . . . some sustaining convention, is lost.

So in the general dissolution of values, Warren revealed his affiliation with those who longed for the security of a proved, meaningful tradition. Unlike his friend Allen Tate he was unable to adopt the radical solution of conversion to Roman Catholicism, although the closest bond between the "Southern Agrarians," (also ironically called the "Young Confederates") with whom Warren allied himself in 1930 by his contribution to I'll Take My Stand, was a strong inclination

¹ Robert Penn Warren, "Literature as a Symptom," in Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence, ed. Herbert Agar and Allen Tate (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1936), pp. 266ff. and 270.

towards orthodox Christianity as well as a desire for the regeneration of the traditional South largely inspired by revulsion from the moral and social character of the North.

He began, too, as a regionalist, but a cautious one. In a critical appraisal of that regionalism which had become the literary fashion in the thirties he insists that every work of art must be founded on experience and warns against the "get-rich-quick attitude that has contributed heavily to the current vogue of regionalism. . . . Literary regionalism is more than a literary manner . . . only in so far as literature springs from some reality in experience is it valuable to us."² There was no doubt about the "reality in experience" behind Warren's own writing: "It never crossed my mind when I began writing fiction that I could write about anything except life in the South. It never crossed my mind that I knew about anything else; knew, that is, well enough to write about. Nothing else ever nagged you enough to stir the imagination."³ In his essay on Hemingway (1947), however, the emphasis is not so much on regionally "experienced reality" as on the ideas which that reality may embody: "A writer may write about his special world merely because he happens to know that world, but he may also write about that special world because it best dramatizes for him the issues and questions that are his fundamental concerns--because, in other words, that special world has a kind of symbolic significance for him" (SE, p. 85). For a writer who wishes

² Robert Penn Warren, "Some Don'ts for Literary Regionalists," American Review, VIII (Dec., 1936), 142.

³ Malcolm Cowley, ed., Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), pp. 171-72.

to bring the discipline of his abstract intellectual concepts to the complexity of this "special world" of his own experience, the chief hazard lies in the possibility that the abstractions--the "issues and questions"--may then get out of control. A balance between the autonomy of the "experienced reality" and its "symbolic significance" becomes the central problem. If the writer fails to achieve this balance, his symbolic structures may become top-heavy, sink to the level of allegorical equations and so endanger the direct "regional" inspiration by undermining the concreteness of the "special world." Already Warren is alert, like Hawthorne, to the tyrannizing effect of an idea on the mind. Even a "special world" has its birthmarks, and the idea refines them out of existence at peril to itself. There is a clear analogy here between Warren's view of the artist's problem and his view of life. The abstract idea must first of all stand the test of reality before it can lay any claim to validity: "In literature, ideas leave their cloisters and descend into the dust and heat to prove their virtue anew."⁴ Tragedy in his work most frequently results from a failure to achieve a similar balance between ideals and the dust and heat of the world, "The malfeasance of nature or the filth of fate."⁵

Acknowledgement of "the malfeasance of nature" might appear strange in the context of Agrarianism. At first glance there seems an unmistakable similarity between the ideas of John Crowe Ransom in God Without Thunder (rustic virtue versus urban depravity) and those

⁴ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), p. xvii.

⁵ "The Child Next Door," in Promises, SP, p. 221.

of Thomas Jefferson as expressed, for example, in Jefferson's letter of 20 December, 1787 to James Madison:

This reliance [i.e. on the will of the majority of the people] cannot deceive us, as long as we remain virtuous; and I think we shall be so, as long as agriculture is our principal object, which will be the case, while there remains vacant lands in any part of America. When we get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, we shall become corrupt as in Europe, and go to eating one another as they do there.⁶

For Jefferson, as for Henry James, to be an American was an excellent preparation for culture! But Jefferson's optimistically close causal connection between an Agrarian form of life and the concept of virtue in any simple sense is on the whole absent from the writings of the Nashville Agrarians. Admittedly the cruel aspects of nature troubled Jefferson, but he managed to preserve his faith in its fundamental goodness. Warren's resurrected Jefferson in Brother to Dragons, however, is forbidden any optimism not based on observation of human nature and compelled by the author to acknowledge the existence of sin and suffering in the world, even in his own blood. Warren prevents his Jefferson from clinging "to the rational hope" of his reductive view of nature, for part of nature is the murder in December 1811 of a negro slave by the sons of his own sister (the first of the great Mississippi Valley earthquakes points the fact that this human convulsion is part of the natural order in its most violent aspect) and Jefferson comes to see the event as paradigmatic of an ironic world of "natural" contraries and tangled motives:

. . . and as History divulged
Itself, I saw how the episode in the meat-house
Would bloom in Time, and blooms in all characteristic
Episodes, and blooms in the lash-bite,

⁶ Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Random House, 1944), p. 441.

And blooms in the lost child's cry
Down in the quarters when the mother is sold.
Oh, yes, I've heard it, but I know, too,
How vanity and blood-lust may link obscenely
In the excuse of moral ardour, and a cause.

(BTD, pp. 135-36)

At the end of the poem R.P.W. sums up, chanting the lesson in paradox he has provided for Jefferson through this terrible piece of history:

The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence.
The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.
The recognition of the direction of fulfilment is the death
of the self,
And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood.
All else is surrogate of hope and destitution of spirit.

(BTD, pp. 214-15)

If Brother to Dragons takes us a long way from our accustomed view of Jefferson, these lines about complicity, and, in particular, about the death of the self are scarcely Emersonian. Neither was the Agrarianism with which Warren was associated. While in Emerson's vision nature usually achieved increased status as the agent of moral laws to be grasped intuitively, it was, at the same time, diminished, since it must represent a conception of God in the human mind. Nature, therefore, finally lost its own objective existence, and became a projection of the mind. From this it followed in the inevitable progress of American romanticism that increasing autonomy and power were attributed to the mind and individual being of man, and the way was open for the solipsism of an Ahab, the tawdry subjectivity hoisted into godhead of a John Brown, the tragic enterprise of a Jeremiah Beaumont. Emerson himself, on the hunt for something in the world to match his own idea, got short shrift from Warren in 1929:

Emerson possessed a set of ideas which have been given the interesting name of Transcendentalism; he spent his life trying to find something in man or nature which would correspond to the fine ideas and the big word. In John Brown, Emerson thought he had found his man . . . but Emerson was a man who lived in words, big words, and not in facts. . . . And it is only natural, that Emerson, in his extraordinary innocence, should have understood nothing, nothing in the world, about a man like John Brown . . . matters of fact, the questions of truth or falsehood, were often perfectly inconsequential to the sage of Concord. The sage of Concord so gracefully transcended such things.

(JB, pp. 245-46, 414)

The relationship between Emerson and the principles of industrial progress may not be quite as simple and immediate as F.O. Matthiessen implies when he reminds us that Emerson's Essays were declared by Henry Ford to be his favourite reading,⁷ but we can take Ford as a simplified symbol of everything that the Agrarians set themselves against. Ford, among others, is the object of Warren's irony in his essay on Ransom: "I have heard, in . . . a church once concerned with the awful mysteries of atonement and election, a sermon on the four modern 'saints,' those men who now walk hand in hand with God: i.e. Mr Pupin, Mr Millikan, Mr Ford, and Mr Rockefeller."⁸ For Ransom himself in God Without Thunder, the pseudo-scientific myths derived from the breathtaking progress of science had replaced the essentially mysterious, inaccessible God of the Old Testament by an amiable and understandable God who, as Ransom puts it, "developed popularly out of the Christ of the New Testament: the embodiment mostly of the

⁷ F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York: O.U.P., 1941), p. 368.

⁸ Robert Penn Warren, "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony," Virginia Quarterly Review, 11 (Jan., 1935), 97.

principle of social benevolence and physical welfare" (GWT, p. 5). While a headlong material progress since the time of Jefferson had led to the hope that man could ultimately make nature his slave, the Agrarians, with Ransom in the lead, were determined to re-endow nature with an element of terror and inscrutability. Thus they sought to reinstate "the awful mysteries of atonement and election" which had been usurped by modern "saints" like Henry Ford and "the principle of social benevolence." In "A Plea to the Protestant Churches" Cleanth Brooks argues against the reduction of Christian theology to a humanitarian principle, to "merely a socio-political programme."⁹ Ransom urges the need to bring back to the world a God who was author of evil as well as of good--to give God back his thunder. (John Updike's opposition of the Rev. Eccles and Kruppenbach, the Lutheran, in Rabbit, Run is a contemporary parallel.) The resulting position from the Agrarian point of view is clearly stated in the introduction to I'll Take My Stand:

Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our rôle as creatures within it. But nature industrialized, transformed into cities and artificial habitations, manufactured into commodities, is no longer nature but a highly simplified picture of nature. We receive the illusion of having power over nature as something mysterious and contingent. The God of nature under these conditions is merely an amiable expression, a superfluity, and the philosophic understanding ordinarily carried in the religious experience is not there for us to have.¹⁰

⁹ Who Owns America? p. 325.

¹⁰ Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition (New York: Harper Brothers, 1930. References are to the reprint by Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1962), p. xxiv.

Ransom, again, is thinking in such terms when he writes that: "The moral order is a wished-for order, which does not coincide with the actual order or world order . . . the mind must accept the world order" (GWT, p. 47). We are stuck with the need to recognise and accept an actual world order which includes good and evil, order and chaos. It is, of course, the problem of moral realism.

II

Although Warren has never subscribed to a religious orthodoxy, he early concerned himself with the conflict between naturalism and what he came to call "the religious sense." The Agrarians' endeavour to compile a religious, political and aesthetic programme that rejected the modern supremacy of science and of rational philosophy was based on the conviction that science and rational philosophy are not true to the empirical facts of a mixed, mysterious world. The Agrarian view favoured supernaturalism and religion while opposing naturalism and the secularisation of life precisely on the ground that rationalism was not realistic. Our limited, rational understanding issues in science or philosophy, both of which tend towards generalisation and abstraction. Typical of the Agrarian position is Allen Tate's remark: "For abstraction is the death of religion no less than the death of everything else."¹¹ Our religious understanding properly takes the form of myth

¹¹ Allen Tate, Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 166.

and the discipline of ritual is our maintenance of a mythic or religious grasp of things as they really are. Perhaps the most striking feature of the Agrarian viewpoint is the sophisticated primitivism whereby the appeal to experience is consistently held to be diametrically opposed to the appeal to reason and the scientist held in contempt for his ontological assumption that there exists an ordered world waiting to be understood and tabulated by an orderly mind. In God Without Thunder, which is the clearest exposition of the Agrarian position, John Crowe Ransom rests his case for supernaturalism on its superior realism: "The conviction under which Western science labours is naturalism: the belief that the universe is largely known and theoretically knowable, as the 'nature' which science defines; and that there exists no God or other entity beyond or above this demonstrable nature" (GWT, p. 27). The belief that the universe is "theoretically knowable" is false. Ransom continues: "The issue is one of fact. Is the actual universe amenable to the laws of science or is it not? Of course the truth is that it partly is, and partly isn't. One of the consequences of too much of the modern scientific training upon us is that we finally come to the point where we mistake the uniformity of nature, which is only the expression of a hope, for the statement of a fact" (GWT, p. 32). In other words, the world is to an unspecified extent knowable by the rational intelligence, but there is an ineffable remainder which is far more important than the data gleaned by reason.

Ransom's view of the poem as a miniature world is clearly analagous, for while the poem does--or should--possess a structure of logic or a conceptual content amenable to reason, it is the texture that remains

when the structure has been accounted for that finally earns the work the character of a poem by imaging that mysterious irradiation of unparaphrasable meaning that belongs to all the world's phenomena. The imperialist imagination of a Wallace Stevens, artificer of his own world, who can make a poem take the place of a mountain, is not for Ransom. In God Without Thunder the poetic attitude to the natural object is defined as one in which "we regard the endless mysterious fullness of this object, and respect the dignity of its objective existence after all--in spite of the ambition to mastery that has become more and more habitual with us" (GWT, p. 129). The concreteness of imagery in Warren's poetry and the realism of character and location in his fiction--however philosophical its aim--reflect a similar repudiation of abstraction. Stevens himself obviously sensed this reverence for the real in Ransom's own poems, writing in "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean":

What John Crowe Ransom does is to make a legend of reality . . . the reality of which he makes a legend is the reality of Tennessee . . . He would say that he lives in Tennessee and among the Tennesseans and it would be the same thing. I don't in the least mean anything romantic. On the contrary, I mean a real land and a real people and I mean Mr Ransom as the instinct and expression of them.¹²

It will be one of the aims of these chapters to show that Mr Warren too is "the instinct and expression" of Tennessee, Kentucky and other Southern parts and their people.

According to Ransom: "The religion of a people is that background of metaphysical doctrine which dictates its political economy" (GWT, p. 116). Thus we are asked to consider a society's economic structure

¹² Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 260.

as a reflection of its religious beliefs. Further, we are to see its social structure as determined by its economic practices. Allen Tate clearly proposes such a chain of determinations: "the social structure depends on the economic structure, and economic conviction is still, in spite of the beliefs of economists from Adam Smith to Marx, the secular image of religion."¹³ The rationalist and secular point of view dictates the forms of modern industrialisation through the practical employment of abstract and scientific knowledge. The introduction to I'll Take My Stand is largely devoted to the horrors of the industrial economy, under which, it is asserted, the processes of material production and consumption take precedence over all other human functions. Since labour is performed exclusively for its rewards, never because it is pleasant, men are willing to perform brutalising tasks; and since "the tempo of our labours communicates itself to our satisfactions . . . these also become brutal and hurried."¹⁴ Living in cities in artificial habitations which create the illusion that nature is simple and understandable, men are no longer capable of religious experience. With the decay of sensibility the arts languish and with the imposition of business standards of behaviour the amenities suffer. Thus the Agrarians present a bleak, all but hopeless picture of social imbalance; of half-knowledge parading as full knowledge; of the purely economic side of life demanding that it be regarded as all of life; of the whole man reduced to the economic man; of the tyranny of economic means over human ends.

¹³ Tate, Reactionary Essays, p. 182.

¹⁴ Twelve Southerners, I'll Take My Stand, p. xxiv.

The diagnosis the Southerners made of the South in 1930 and the remedies they proposed are summarised in an unpublished draft of a letter from Allen Tate to the Editor of The Macon Telegraph, a Georgia paper, which had printed some adverse reviews of I'll Take My Stand:

First, we should do well to re-define the South's destiny in the light of a recent display which is simply appalling--the economic ruin of Britain. Like most Southern States, Georgia was settled from the Britain of the Eighteenth Century, which was decidedly agrarian. The agrarian tradition has held out in Georgia, where it only begins today to be shaken. But something like a century ago, without any deliberation but blindly, Britain went industrial, made a vast addition to her population, and built up a trading establishment that was profitable, and very pretty indeed--until just yesterday, when it collapsed. An industrial state is always predatory, in the sense that its population cannot live except by invading and capturing foreign markets. But when these markets are lost, whether through competition, or the development of home industries within the market area, or a general consumers' strike, this population is helpless: it will have to starve, or emigrate, or be supported by doles until it uses up all the capital of that country. Now our own East is taking the same industrial road that Britain took. It is suffering from one of its periodic depressions at this moment, though of course, it does not yet lie permanently broken like Britain. But we should insist that the South does not want to take that road. The South must remain an agrarian bloc, keep down the population of her parasite cities, and seek her old-time happiness under her well-known tradition.

. . . The thing to tell the Southern farmer is, undoubtedly, that he can make much more of a living on the farm than he has lately been led to suppose. His first object should be to make the farm his home, and to provide it by his own labors with the comforts that make country life decent. He must again take to his garden, his orchard, his poultry, his home dairy, he must fix up his fences, his yard, his house. He must think much less about his money crop than he has

been doing lately. Often he has come to think only about that, and the result has been that he works in his fields as a hired laborer works in the factory, he defeats his own object by continual overproduction, and he has forgotten the meaning of a home. Will you not urge the Southern farmers to think less about money and more about the dignity that is traditional in the Southern country life?¹⁵

The Agrarian answer to the disruptions of modern life is that we ought to re-learn a way of living innocently (i.e. by the combination of heart, senses and mind that we are born with) instead of abstractly (i.e. by reason alone) and that it is our sensibility --our combined faculties operating in concert--which shall keep us innocent, setting a check on the dehumanising pressures of labour by demanding that we enjoy it. The capacity for enjoyment rather than the ability to reason, is what truly distinguishes us from the brute creation. Our capitalist, industrial society, therefore, should be replaced by a distributist, agrarian one, with farming as the paradigmatic mode of living: "The concrete nature which the farmer knows is at once inscrutable and satisfying to the senses" (GWT, p. 189). By keeping a man in contact with "concrete nature" while intimating the inscrutability of the world in an enjoyable way, farming becomes itself a kind of poetry, healing the split sensibility of modern industrial man.

What, then, of the suppressed sensibility of the modern black man? Like William Faulkner, Warren demonstrates moral realism, not only in his art but also in the socio-political sphere. The opinions of both Southerners on the racial question illustrate Ransom's split between wished-for moral order and actual order, the tension between

¹⁵ 29 Nov., 1930. DDC, File 43.

dream and fact. Faulkner says of the negro's claim to equality: "His equality is inevitable, an irresistible force, but as I see it you've got to take into consideration human nature, which at times has nothing to do with moral truths. Truth says this and the fact says that. A wise person says 'Let's use this fact. Let's obliterate this fact first.' To oppose a material fact with a moral truth is silly."¹⁶ In Segregation, Warren describes himself as a gradualist. Like Faulkner he recognises the moral justification of the negro's claims, but sees the then situation (the mid-fifties) as an interim phase in a long struggle. His final plea is for moderation: "It's a silly question, anyway, to ask if somebody is a gradualist. Gradualism is all you'll get. History, like nature, knows no jumps." Warren concludes that by overcoming the present crisis through the operation of its own communal conscience the South could become a source of moral identity and power:

If the South is really able to face up to itself and its situation, it may achieve identity. Then in a country where moral identity is hard to come by, the South, because it has had to deal concretely with a moral problem, may offer some leadership. And we need any we can get. If we are to break out of the national rhythm, the rhythm between complacency and panic.

(Segregation, p. 86)

Here we may recall the attitude of Gavin Stevens, the lawyer, in Faulkner's Intruder in the Dust:

¹⁶ Interview with Russell Howe published in The Reporter, March 22, 1956, reprinted in James B. Meriwether and Richard Millgate, eds., Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1956 (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 260.

. . . the postulate that Sambo is a human being living in a free country and hence must be free. That's what we are really defending: the privilege of setting him free ourselves: which we will have to do for the reason that nobody else can, since going on a century ago now the North tried it and have been admitting for seventy-five years now that they failed. So it will have to be us. . . . But it won't be next Tuesday.¹⁷

In the boy, Chick Mallison, Faulkner dramatises what he sees as the autonomy of the Southern conscience:

. . . that fierce desire that they should be perfect because they were his and he was theirs, that furious intolerance of any one single jot or tittle less than absolute perfection--that furious almost instinctive leap and spring to defend them from anyone anywhere so that he might excoriate them himself without mercy since they were his own and he wanted no more save to stand with them unalterable and impregnable: one shame if shame must be, one expiation since expiation must surely be but above all one unalterable durable impregnable one: one people one heart one land.¹⁸

The final emphasis here, of course, is dangerous in its implication that it might be better to sink together in shame than be forced by someone else to keep afloat, but the moral realism of these passages is based on historical and psychological truth.

Like Faulkner, Warren realises that the ideal moral truth must make its way in the world of fact. Now we can look back to "The Briar Patch," his pro-segregation essay in I'll Take My Stand, and find moral realism there too. On the one hand there is the abstract, ideal, moral proposition that it is desirable to maintain a humane society in which maximum happiness is possible for negroes and whites alike. On the other hand there were the present habits and forms of the traditional organic structure of Southern life, and these were

¹⁷ William Faulkner, Intruder in the Dust (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1960), p. 149.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 202.

the facts in which any ideal notion had somehow to earn its living. So Warren's essay was a cogent and self-consciously humane defence of segregation, that self-consciousness indicating, Warren later remarked, "an awareness that in the real world I was trying to write about, there existed a segregation that was not humane." (WSN, p. 11). The essay conceives of segregation with full legal protection for the Negro, equal educational facilities, equal opportunities, equal pay for equal work. If this sounds today like a hand-out from the South African Information Service, it was, in 1930, for Warren, the most humane possible expression of practical sympathy for the Negro within the structure in which both he and the Negro had been raised. Little Rock was still a long way off and Stokely Carmichael had to wait eleven years to be born. So we should not dismiss the essay as mere compromise, but see it rather as an early example of Warren's moral realism, his design for a moral order within the actual world order, a plan to bring the poetry of idealism into the prose of present fact: "For we know from history that you do not achieve an ideal spiritual condition and then set up a society to express it. Ideals grow out of the act of living, out of the logic of life; and in a long dialectic, even as they grow, they modify living." (WSN, p. 413).

III

Robert Penn Warren's literary criticism shows a typically Agrarian sense of modern man's psychic dislocation and spiritual fracture.

In Warren's view, as Frederick McDowell defines it: "The integrity of poetry and the wholeness of man have both been threatened by our failure to go beyond the scientific to reassert the aesthetic and humanistic."¹⁹ Ransom, in one of his more querulous moments, declares: "Science is the order of experience in which we mutilate and prey upon nature; we seek our practical objectives at any cost" (GWT, p. 136). Part of the cost is the loss of individual dignity, for the insistence on industrial progress that results from allegiance to scientific principles denies man recognisable goals in his personal life: "Men are prepared to sacrifice their private dignity and happiness to an abstract social ideal and without asking whether the social ideal produces the welfare of any individual man whatsoever" (I'll Take My Stand, p. xxvii). Men, in short, are cheated by the appliers of science into co-operating in their own dehumanisation. Submission to an abstract social ideal turns a man into an abstraction like Auden's "Unknown Citizen," not so much consumer as consumed, at best a case and at worst a number. While the Agrarians in general seek to bring back a respect for the "multi-form, recalcitrant, seductive, and violent world," Warren in particular stresses the dignity and autonomy of the individual and refers us to nineteenth century New England for a culture in which a man's experience and behaviour "was not merely 'interesting' as a case, or type, or illustration, but was important in itself and as part of an eternal drama." Warren requires that the work of a poet

¹⁹ Frederick P.W. McDowell, "Robert Penn Warren's Criticism," Accent, 15 (Summer, 1955), 173-96.

must start from the conviction that "the human creature possesses an inalienable dignity and interest."²⁰

For Ransom, an industrial, utilitarian ideal makes its appeal in terms of "the pleasures of use," which are "self-regarding, intense and destructive of the object, while the pleasures of enjoyment are unselfish, expansive, and respectful and conservative of the object. . . . Sensuality, followed by disillusionment and remorse, typifies very well the spurious benefit of applying our science too hard" (GWT, p. 137). The dominion of reason as an instrument for rendering nature subservient instates egoism and empty sensuality as the distinguishing traits of modern man. "We freeze from above downwards," Warren writes in the poem, "Toward Rationality" (SP: 1943, p. 41). For Ransom there is only one solution: "In order to be human we have to have something which will stop action, and this something cannot possibly be reason in its narrow sense. I would call it sensibility" (GWT, p. 190). Warren, committed to breaching the dissociation of intellect from spirit and emotion, defines Ransom's "sensibility" as the "harmonious adaptation or rather the functioning together of thinking and feeling."²¹ In his essay on Coleridge (1946) Warren writes: "I cannot admit that our experience . . . is ineluctably divided into the 'magical' and the 'rational' with an abyss between" (SE, p. 272). Hemingway's greatness is attributed to his success in unifying the natural and spiritual tendencies in man by championing a code of intangible values in a style that gives

²⁰ Warren, "Literature as a Symptom," in Who Owns America? pp.265-67.

²¹ "John Crowe Ransom; A Study in Irony," Virginia Quarterly Review, 11 (Jan., 1935), 112.

these values life in concrete terms. Hemingway thus acknowledges that man has his life at once in and above nature, and although thoroughly non-theological, Hemingway is therefore a deeply "religious" artist whose work continues to voice Romantic protest against deadening institutions and the apotheosis of empiric fact by modern science. This is little short of heroic, for the myth of science may induce faithlessness even in the artist: "Perhaps we know [our myth of science] and know it too well, knowing that, as Stevenson said, 'it provides no habitable city for the soul of man.' And in the midst of our competing beliefs, one belief may be lacking: the belief that poetry is worth writing."²²

In an earlier essay Warren indicts Sidney Lanier not for faithlessness but for dangerously shallow convictions: here is one poet who might have better served his countrymen and the cause of ideal human value had he, indeed, believed that poetry was not worth writing. Lanier, in Warren's view, typified the dangers of romanticism:

. . . his theory of personality, his delusion of prophecy, his aesthetic premise, his uninformed admiration of science, his nationalism, his passion for synthesis, his theory of progress . . . He was admired because, as Tennyson in England, he spoke to America, and tardily to the South, in the accent of its dearest anticipations . . . Perhaps we should know Lanier. He may help us to assess our heritage.²³

Nearly twenty years later the essay on Faulkner (1951) diagnoses the ills of the modern world in clearly related terms, though any one of the Agrarians might have written such a passage as this:

²² Warren, "The Present State of Poetry: III. In the United States," Kenyon Review, 1 (Autumn, 1939), 389.

²³ "The Blind Poet: Sidney Lanier," American Review, 2 (Nov., 1933), 45.

The modern world is in moral confusion. It does suffer from a lack of discipline, of sanction, of community of values, of a sense of mission . . . it is a world in which self-interest, workableness, success provide the standards of conduct . . . in which the individual has lost his relation to society, the world of the power state in which man is a cipher . . . in which man is the victim of abstraction and mechanism, or, at least, at moments feels himself to be.

(SE, pp. 65-66)

In Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha the force of modernism is embodied in such perverse figures as Popeye, the gangster of Sanctuary--"a kind of dehumanised robot, a mere mechanism, an abstraction" (SE, p. 65)--and Flem Snopes whose sexual impotence signifies his exclusion from the realm of human involvement. Snopesism (i.e. all that Faulkner thinks of as modernism in a capitalistic society) has "abolished the concept, the very possibility of entertaining the idea of virtue. It is not a question of one idea and interpretation. It is simply that no idea of virtue is conceivable in the world in which practical success is the criterion" (SE, p. 67). Snopesism's chief blasphemy is against Faulkner's profound respect for "the common human bond" (SE, p. 78). Popeye and the Snopeses are the epidemic of anti-community forces, at once mechanistic and abstract, that lead to all modern alienations; and in a world which sees material progress as its main ideal the artist stands outside his social order and makes alienation his theme. Both the regional and the proletarian movements in literature strove for an organic society in which the artist might be at home: ". . . both [movements] may be said to be opposed to finance-capitalism and to resent the indignity heaped by that system of society upon the creative impulse,

indignity which has succeeded in estranging the artist from society and from the proper exercise of his function as 'a man speaking to men.' To heal that rupture, to come to accord with the self and with society, may be taken, in so far as the writers are concerned, as the underlying motivation of both movements."²⁴

If Warren, in common with his fellow Agrarians, consistently urges the need for an organic society, his theory of art has long been recognised as organicist in principle.²⁵ In Warren's opinion and that of his co-author, Cleanth Brooks, a successful work of art will be, "a unified construct, a psychological whole . . . an organism not only greater than but different from the sum of its parts . . . the poetic quality resides in a functional combination of factors rather than in the intrinsic nature of any single factor."²⁶ Brooks and Warren display their critical resilience in defence of modern poetry, insisting that organic unity can subsist even in difficult and distorted expression:

The unity which the poet has attempted to attain is not an easily won unity, but one wrested from recalcitrant and discordant materials. Consequently, such poetry has been characterized by ironical devices, wrenched rhythms, abrupt transitions, apparent discords, non-decorative metaphors, deficiency of statement, and when successful, has attained its unity only in terms of a total intention.²⁷

It is significant that "ironical devices" head the listed characteristics of "difficult poetry". Irony has for long enough been at

²⁴ Warren, "Literature as Symptom," in Who Owns America? p. 276.

²⁵ See William Elton, A Guide to the New Criticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 6.

²⁶ Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, "The Reading of Modern Poetry," American Review, 8 (Feb., 1937), 439.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 448.

a premium among practitioners and followers of what we tend, rather slackly, to call the New Criticism, as a guarantee of that complexity which we associate with the kind of writing on which this criticism has conferred most honour. The poem is seen as an organism, often as a space-wandering monad held together by its internal inter-inanimation of parts. While Warren insists on close attention to the functional relationship between the internal parts of any work of art, his organicism has never been of that ivory tower variety which would banish both author and world, leaving merely the words throbbing away on the page rejoicing in their own inter-inanimations. From the earliest Fugitive days the words on the page had a larger context. Warren clarified this point in an interview with the writer in 1969:

MW: There is a notion that the Fugitives were a group of people who went in for close reading of one another's poems and whose critical standards were what we would call objectivist. This I take to be a fallacy.

RPW: There was no theorizing that I can think of around that point. If you are going to criticize individual poems you have to talk about the actual words on the page, this line or that line, this word or that word, but as I remember the discussions, they were very far ranging and all sorts of implications might come in. It was hit or miss. There were many temperaments here, and certainly some of the people were very much concerned with history in the relation of literature to the historical materials, or how one stage of history emphasizes one kind of poetry. For instance, some of the people in the group were very deep in balladry which would be anything but biased toward formalism . . . The next phase of the group's interest--several years later--moved over to the matter of society and history. So this would, in a way, refute the notion of this being a little group of formalists working out a theory of pure, limited, objectivist poetry . . .²⁸

Indeed, the relationship between art and life is constantly stressed in Warren's writing as, for example, in the conclusion of his essay on Coleridge, where he suggests a definition of the function of poetry explicitly in terms of the inevitable discordancies of life: "If poetry does anything for us, it reconciles, by its symbolical reading of experience (for by its very nature it is in itself a myth of the unity of being), the self-devisive internecine malices which arise at the superficial level on which we conduct most of our living" (SE, p. 272).

The aesthetic theory of Ransom has varied the basic idea of organic unity by breaking the work of art into the two components of structure and texture, the former being translatable into logical terms for the welfare of the ego, while the latter caters to the needs of the id.²⁹ If this is a surprisingly scientific scheme to come from an arch-Agrarian, the important point here is that for Ransom "the poem is a loose logical structure with an irrelevant local texture."³⁰ The "not quite resolvable dualism" of his definition, the idea that art is a "strain of contraries"³¹ and that its special cognitive value resides in this "strain" is echoed in different ways by the other Fugitive and Agrarian writers.

²⁹ See Ransom's two articles, "Poetry: I. The Formal Analysis," and "Poetry: II, The Final Cause," in Kenyon Review, 9 (Spring, Summer, 1947), 436-56, 640-58.

³⁰ John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism (Norfolk, Conn: New Directions, 1941), p. 260.

³¹ John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 4.

Allen Tate's term is "tension";³² Cleanth Brooks's term is "paradox."³³
 Warren's is "impurity."³⁴

The role of irony as Warren prescribes it in "Pure and Impure Poetry" (1943) is to ensure an inter-inanimation between the pure idea and the world which we know to be rich in impurities:

Poetry wants to be pure, but poems do not. At least, most of them do not want to be too pure. The poems want to give us poetry, which is pure, and the elements of a poem, in so far as it is a good poem, will work together toward that end, but many of the elements, taken in themselves, may actually seem to contradict that end, or be neutral toward the achieving of that end . . . [Poems] mar themselves with cacophonies, jagged rhythms, ugly words and ugly thoughts, colloquialisms, clichés, sterile technical terms, headwork and argument, self-contradictions, clevernesses, irony, realism--all things which call us back to the world of prose and imperfection.

(SE, p. 4)

Warren tackles the problem by comparing three love poems: Tennyson's "Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white," Shelley's "Indian Serenade" and Romeo and Juliet. The first two, he says, aspire to purity of effect and exclude the sordid and the realistic. Romeo and Juliet, on the other hand, includes the bawdry of Mercutio. In suggesting that all poets should make their peace with Mercutio, Warren implies that Mercutio is really lurking in Shelley's would-be

³² Allen Tate, Reason In Madness, Critical Essays (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), p. 72.

³³ Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), p. 3.

³⁴ Warren may owe an unconscious debt to Louis MacNeice for his key term. In his Preface to Modern Poetry, A Personal Essay (London: O.U.P., 1938) MacNeice writes: "This book is a plea for impure poetry, that is for poetry conditioned by the poet's life and the world around him." MacNeice is especially concerned to distinguish between the poet's proper business and the "purity" of fin de siècle aestheticism.

"pure" poem all the time simply because Mercutio lurks in the world itself. Better to invite Mercutio into the poem than have him lurk. So, when Warren himself writes a love poem, as, for example, the early "Bearded Oaks" (SP, pp. 308-309) his intention is to assert the permanence of love precisely in the face of the most inward kinds of opposition--the decay of passion and the erosions of time:

I do not love you less that now
The caged heart makes iron stroke
Or less that all that light once gave
The graduate dark should now revoke.

As an invited guest Mercutio is enlisted on the poem's side and with him supplying criticism from the inside, the romantic dream is proof against external attack. The poet's dream of ideals is itself a "destructive element": Stein, in Lord Jim, might be addressing the poet in his workshop as well as Everyman in his life in the speech Warren finds so important for understanding Conrad:

A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns --nicht wahr?--No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.

(SE, p. 44)³⁵

The dream will destroy a man who attempts to deny it by living "naturally" on the dry land of the naturalistic world in recoil from the risk of full humanity. Man, as a natural creature, "is not born to swim in the dream, with gills and fins, but if he submits in his own imperfect, 'natural' way he can learn to swim and keep himself up, however painfully, in the destructive element" (SE, p. 45). Shakespeare's Mercutio, Warren's "caged" heart and "iron" stroke

³⁵ Joseph Conrad, Lord Jim (London: Dent, 1946), p. 214. .

are the necessary recognitions that man's way of submission to the destructive element of the dream is always "natural," imperfect.

At the end of the essay on Pure and Impure Poetry we move from aesthetics to morals, from literature to life:

This method, however, will scarcely satisfy the mind which is hot for certainties; . . . The new theory of pure purity would purge out all complexities and all ironies and all self-criticism. And this theory will forget that the hand-me-down faith, the hand-me-down ideals, no matter what the professed content, is in the end not only meaningless but vicious. It is vicious because, as parody, it is the enemy of all faith.

(SE, p. 31)

In the essay, "Knowledge and the Image of Man" (1955), Warren relates aesthetics to living by endowing literature with cognitive value. Poetry, that is "literature as a dimension of the creative imagination," provides a kind of knowledge, an image of man. This knowledge is knowledge of "form," and "form" which springs "from the deep engagement of spirit with the world" is the discovery of the "rhythm" of that engagement. "Form," which is known "only by experiencing it . . . gives man an image of himself, for it gives him his mode of experiencing, a paradigm of his inner life, his rhythm of destiny, his tonality of fate." By defining "our deepest life," it gives us, "in new self-awareness, a yet deeper life to live."³⁶ This "deeper life" is not merely contemplative, for the deepened awareness of self which literature provides must find expression in action.

³⁶ Longley, pp. 244-46.

Chapter Two

Early Poetry

Throughout Robert Penn Warren's work there is an effort to balance the data available to reason with the insights of intuition. Despite his association with men like Tate and Ransom with their call to re-endow the world with mystery, the young Warren's temperament drove him hard towards a morbidly naturalistic view of things. In a post-Darwinian world the young poet was inclined to believe that being "rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees" was in the end all man could reasonably hope for. The sequence of poems called "Kentucky Mountain Farm,"¹ which Warren expanded from one poem to seven between 1926 and 1935, shows the poet attempting to make stoical virtue out of such necessity. The first poem in the sequence, "Rebuke of the Rocks" (SP, p. 319), defines the moon as "obscene" and "mad" for dictating the natural cycle of birth, generation and death. The "little stubborn people of the hill" are enjoined to abandon their attempts to breed any "tender thing among the rocks" and instead to "keep the sweet sterility of stone." One is reminded of Yeats's escape from "those dying generations at their song" only to realise how at once imaginatively evasive and appealing was his other country of Byzantium by comparison with Warren's stern, all too imaginable, ultima Thule.

¹ "Kentucky Mountain Farm" includes a number of poems, one or more of which comprises the sequence at each printing. "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks" appeared first in American Caravan, edited by Van Wyck Brooks et al. (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1927) p. 803. The last part to appear was "The Jay," printed as Part V of the sequence in Thirty-Six Poems. Of the seven parts printed in SP: 1943, four appear in SP. References are to SP where possible, otherwise to SP: 1943.

If the rebuke of Warren's rocks is stern, however, it is also compassionate. If the poet is bitter about the moon's heartless dominion, there are pity and admiration in his apostrophe, "O little stubborn people of the hill," and in the magisterial cadences of the poem's rhymes may be heard the tone of lament prompted, no doubt, by Warren's personal knowledge of the very meagre rewards that often attended the efforts of mountain farmers in his home state of Kentucky. This compassion softens the austerity of the poem's injunction to naturalism and prepares us for a further softening in the second poem, "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks" (SP, p. 319), in which the very rocks themselves are borne in Eliotesque "fractured atoms,"

Down shifting waters to the tall, profound
Shadow of the absolute deeps,
Wherein the spirit moves and never sleeps
That held the foot among the rocks, that bound
The tired hand upon the stubborn plough,
Knotted the flesh unto the hungry bone,
The redbird to the charred and broken bough,
And strung the bitter tendons of the stone.

Like Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium" Warren is pulled away in the course of his meditation from the strict position with which he begins. Yeats's emigration from mortality to the Byzantium of eternal art is deeply qualified by the concluding lines of his poem which anticipate his singing "To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come." Keeping a drowsy Emperor awake is all very well, but addressing lords and ladies even of Byzantium on the subject of passing time strongly suggests a backward glance to those dying generations supposedly left behind. Warren's creation of a spirit of the deeps reminiscent of Wordsworth's impelling and pervading spirit in "Tintern Abbey" is, similarly, an important

subversion of the naturalistic point of view of the first poem. This is not to suggest that the informing spirit of Warren's poem implies the profound faith in the unity of human life, nature and the infinite that Wordsworth affirms. There might seem to be oneness in Warren's absolute deeps only in the sense that through death the individual joins in the annihilation common to all; yet the conception of a spirit that bestows characteristic life upon each thing in the world and the attribution, however ironic, of "bitter tendons" to stone indicate an unease in the strict naturalistic stance.

In Part III, "History among the Rocks" (SP, p. 320), the poet tries to console us, and perhaps himself, with the beauty, cleanliness and peace of death:

Think how a body, naked and lean
And white as the splintered sycamore, would go
Tumbling and turning, hushed in the end,
With hair afloat in waters that gently bend
To ocean where the blind tides flow.²

The rocks have a reductive way with the great ideals and issues of history:

In these autumn orchards once young men lay dead--
Gray coats, blue coats. Young men on the mountainside
Clambered, fought. Heels muddied the rocky spring.
Their reason is hard to guess, remembering
Blood on their black mustaches in moonlight.

Time, a preoccupation of Warren's throughout his work, is the crucial difference between events that make history and history itself. and time brings death. (This poem's use of "a creek in flood" as an image

² Cf. Jeremiah Beaumont's vision of the naturalistic peace for which he longs in the image of "his own body, naked and faintly gleaming in the depth, flowing on with the inner current, on and on" (WEAT, p. 452).

by which his preoccupations with time, mortality and idealism may be brought together is typical of Warren in both early and later writing in verse and prose. In Brother to Dragons R.P.W. refers to "that deep flood that is our history," exemplifying "the drowned cow, swollen" (BTD, p. 210), and "Blackberry Winter" tells of another cow "rolling and roiling down the creek" (CIA, p. 74). The novel Flood counterpoints the contrived flood whereby man changes and controls nature with the flood of determining history.) The motivations prompting young men to fight in the Civil War are no longer discernible. Time dims ideals; death is constantly present: "The apple falls, falling in the quiet night." But, again, the repeated statement, "Their reason is hard to guess," referring to the Civil War dead, makes us wonder if it is not a kind of intellectual weariness that has tossed the poet to the stony breast of naturalism, and however perplexed he may be by the fate of those long dead he cannot establish that their fall is empty of moral content as is the fall of the apple. The birds in Sections IV - VI³ are all images of life contrasting sharply with the emphasis on mutability and death in Parts I - III. The cardinal, jay and hawk of these poems amount to another kind of rebuke to the mordant poet, balancing the opening rebuke of the rocks. "The Cardinal" (SP: 1945, p. 81) represents the capacity for sheer joy in life in spite of the passage of time which is symbolised by the lizard:

What if the lizard, my cardinal,
Depart like a breath from its altar, summer southward fail?
Here is a bough where you can perch, and preen . . .

The tension between naturalistic gloom and the recoil into life is very vivid here. Indeed the naturalistic world itself contains a triumphantly life-asserting being in the form of the bird as well as

³ Omitted from SP.

the death principle embodied in the lizard. To be sure the poet punningly reveals that the lizard, "devout as an ikon," is his "cardinal" in the religious sense, but in Part V, "The Jay" (SP: 1943, pp. 81-82), another bird humbles the human observer. As it chases the autumn leaves, the jay's participation in the seasonal process underlines the poet's failure of nerve, his subservience to time and death. The hawk in Part VI, "The Watershed" (SP: 1943, p. 82), provides a further lesson in humility. Like Ted Hughes' "Hawk Roosting," this bird, from its great height, sees everything:

His gold eyes scan
The crumpled shade on gorge and crest
And streams that creep and disappear, appear.
Past fingered ridges and their shrivelling span.
Under the broken eaves men take their rest.

To see all is to know all--though perhaps the temuous logic of this proposition was partly responsible for Warren's omitting the section from his most recent selection of poems. The comprehensive vision of the hawk has instructed the poet in his own myopia at the same time as it has increased his yearning for certitude. Thus the three birds have exposed him as deficient in joy, in the capacity to live in time, and in the faculty of vision. Yet these creatures' victories over "the sweet sterility of stone" do tentatively suggest possibilities.

In the final section, "The Return" (SP, p. 321), however, Warren denies these implications, ending the sequence in what appears to be a completely negative attitude, though now replacing the first section's bitterness with resignation. The very precise central image is of a falling leaf joining its more perfect reflected counterpart:

Again the timeless gold
 Broad leaf released the tendoned bough, and slow,
 Uncertain as a casual memory,
 Wavered aslant the ripe unmoving air.
 Up from the whiter bough, the bluer sky,
 That glimmered in the water's depth below,
 A richer leaf rose to the other there.
 They touched; with the gentle clarity of dream,
 Bosom to bosom, burned on the quiet stream.

Victor H. Strandberg interprets this imagery as an account of "the dying leaf thus returning to its deeper self in time . . . time being represented here as still waters," and notes that, "By contrast with the ultimate return of self to deeper self, the return of self to a different self on a temporal level, such as the return of a son to his mother, is marked by disappointment and superficiality."⁴ The second half of the poem seems to support this reading:

. . . And he, who had loved as well as most,
 Might have foretold it thus, for well he knew
 How, glimmering, a buried world is lost
 In the water's riffle or the wind's flaw;
 How his own image, perfect and deep
 And small within loved eyes, had been forgot,
 Her face being turned, or when those eyes were shut
 Past light in that fond accident of sleep.

Strandberg's perception of the contrast between two kinds of return of self as the particular focus of this poem in the sequence would seem to be endorsed by a letter from Warren to Donald Davidson:

I feel that within the limits of its intention the
 "Letter of a Mother" is easily my most finished poem.
 "Kentucky Mountain Farm" is second because it presents
 a more specialized and perhaps more subtle if weaker
 treatment of the same attitude as that of the first
 poem named.⁵

The "attitude" of "Letter of a mother" (SP: 1943, pp. 87-88) is, certainly, like the attitude towards "the return of self to a

⁴ Strandberg, p. 21.

⁵ 19 Sept. 1926. DDC, File 2.

different self on a temporal level" in Strandberg's reading of "The Return." In "Letter of a Mother" it is part of the son's "illegal prodigality of dream" to suppose that there can be a meaningful return to the mother, for although his body is "held mortmain" of the mother's womb, he has also been "merchandised / Unto the dark" and the mother flesh cannot summon back

The tired child it would again possess
As shall a womb more tender than her own
That builds not tissue or the little bone,
But dissolves them to itself in weariness.

Both poems deal with the failure to get back to some perfect, original conception of oneself and, implicitly, with the resulting diminution of selfhood. But in 1926, when Warren wrote his letter to Davidson, "Kentucky Mountain Farm" comprised only one poem, "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks," which is much more concerned with the problem of holding a naturalistic view of things than with the important but narrower subject of the self. "Letter of a Mother" is about the displacement of a sentimental view by a naturalistic view.

In the first part of "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks" Warren salutes the resolute men of the Kentucky hills:

. . . the taciturn
Lean men that of all things alone
Were, not as water or the febrile grass,
Figured in kinship to the savage stone.

This hard kinship, however, cannot protect man from the process of time whereby, in Warren's elemental and apocalyptic imagery, "the lean men have passed," "the rocks are stricken" and borne down to the "absolute deeps" which so clearly echo the dissolving "womb more tender" than the mother's in "Letter of a Mother." As this was the section of "Kentucky Mountain Farm" which Warren wrote first, it is

reasonable to expect that the sequence of poems growing out of it should share its purpose, i.e. to contemplate man's fate in naturalistic terms in order to find out how well these terms work. This is still the purpose in Section IV, "The Return," first published in 1930, which is incidentally about the problem of the self but centrally about the adequacy of the kind of vision with which the poet has been experimenting throughout the sequence.

Repeatedly, as we have seen, the naturalistic position is assumed only to be questioned or qualified. The son in "Letter of a Mother" is in no doubt that the separation of himself from his mother that began at birth has been a continuing, irreversible process and that there can be no reunion for him except with death as the ultimate mother. Yet the very lament of the poem is so strong that it creates its own opposition to such naturalistic certainty. There is more to this than biology!

In "The Return" the depletion of self caused by the discovery that one's image has not been preserved is the note on which the poem ends. Yet, counterbalancing this naturalistic insistence on the power of time ("the water's riffle") and chance ("the wind's flaw"; "that fond accident of sleep"), we have had the beautiful intimation of a completed, enriched self in the imagery of the falling leaf and its reflection in the still water of the stream. The "backward heart" may lack a voice with which to recall the "vagrant image" of its former self but the speaker has seen an example of absolute self-fulfilment enacted in the natural world. By intensifying the poet's sense of loss, this suggests the possibility of a tragic view of life--and tragedy does not sit well with naturalism--even that things

might be otherwise in human experience. Again naturalism is questioned by nature.

The poems in "Kentucky Mountain Farm" demonstrate Warren's craving for the absolute at the same time as they foreshadow the R.P.W. of Brother to Dragons who "proves that only a synthesis of perspectives can teach us to live responsibly."⁶ In imagery scrupulously drawn from the locale Warren knew so well, the poems deal with the themes of selfhood, time, history and idealism all within the frame of an unremitting testing of the poet's terms and positions. This testing is itself the most important activity in the sequence--an act of becoming by the poet who, in 1939, felt that the question, "Can man live on the purely naturalistic level?" was the central issue for modern literature.⁷

II

It is remarkable that Warren should have achieved so early in his career the sophistication and polish evident in "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks." Three years earlier, in 1925, his first published poem, "The Golden Hills of Hell," appeared in Driftwood Flames, a booklet produced by the Poetry Guild, an undergraduate literary club at Vanderbilt University. Nearly twenty years later Allen Tate still remembered being surprised by the shy young poet and his poem:

⁶ Paul West, Robert Penn Warren, Univ. of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 44 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 20.

⁷ Robert Penn Warren, "The Present State of Poetry: III. In the United States," Kenyon Review, 1 (Autumn, 1939), 391.

I became aware of a presence at my back and turning round I saw the most remarkable looking boy I had ever laid eyes on. He was tall and thin, and when he walked across the room he made a sliding shuffle, as if his bones didn't belong to one another. He had a long quivering nose, large brown eyes, and a long chin--all topped by curly red hair. He spoke in a soft whisper, asking to see my poem; then he showed me one of his own--it was about Hell, and I remember this line:

Where lightly bloom the purple lilies . . .

He said that he was sixteen years old and a sophomore. This remarkable young man was "Red," Robert Penn Warren, the most gifted person I have ever known.⁸

It is not surprising that Warren's vivid presence made a more lasting impact on Tate than did the young poet's attitudinising lines on the subject of Hell. Nevertheless the poem deserves some attention not only because it gives an indication of what Warren did before he had come under the influence of the Fugitives, but also because it shows an early attempt to present an earned vision through the use of paradox and by way of symbolic landscape:

O, fair the Golden Hills of Hell,
Where lightly rest the purple lilies;
There, as all the saints tell
Lightly nod the lilies.

Dim beyond the scarlet river,
Slenderly and slow they nod,
Glimpsed from where the splendours quiver
On the minarets of God.

False tales the saints tell
Of the slender lilies;
For I have knelt on the Hills of Hell
Among the withered lilies.⁹

⁸ Allen Tate, "The Fugitive 1922-1925: A Personal Recollection Twenty Years After," Princeton University Library Chronicle, 3 (April, 1942), 81-82.

⁹ Driftwood Flames (Nashville: The Poetry Guild, 1923), p. 41.

The poem is obviously an attempt to communicate the pain of sin: saints attest the attractiveness of sin, but the sinner is miserable and prays for release. Already there is a characteristic element of paradox--the beauty of the lilies contrasting with the pain they signify--but little tension is developed and the affected, Decadent manner offers the reader a pose instead of an experience that can be felt as genuine. Perhaps the best effect is the implication that the saints are false because they lack experience, a hint of the mature Warren's conviction that a vision must be earned out of living.

The meeting recalled by Allen Tate was Warren's introduction to the *Fugitives*. Early in 1924 he was added to the staff of the magazine to which by this time he had contributed three dramatic monologues. The first of these, "Crusade,"¹⁰ won a place in the competition for the Nashville Poetry Prize and is superior in some respects to the two succeeding poems, although there is too much alliteration after the style of Old English and the cataloguing of melodramatic particulars soon becomes monotonous:

We have not forgot the clanking of grey armours
 Along frosty ridges against the moon,
 The agony of gasping endless columns,
 Skulls glaring white on red deserts at noon;
 Nor death in dank marshes by fever,
 Flies on bloated bodies rotting by the way,
 Naked corpses on the sluggish river,
 Sucked from the trampled rushes where they lay.

Characteristically, the poem is about a quest, being the recollections of a soldier in the service of Count Raymond of Provence on the night following the capture of Jerusalem, and Warren does succeed in presenting narrative content in verse form. The concluding lines

¹⁰ The Fugitive, 2 (June-July, 1923), 90-91.

anticipate the tension between naturalism and idealism which will eventually become a typical source of energy in his work.

Here, as one might expect, a Romantic attitude is struck:

We have now won through these to the Tomb of God;
Here is a hole where once lay sacred bones.
Red crosses have greyed on our hauberks.
Souls may be whiter for gazing on white stones.
Here is the Tomb as when our Lord had risen,
Here is the Tomb, but yonder promised peace.
Can rock and dust presage a fabled heaven?
This low malignant moon gives no surcease
Nor any opiate of forgetfulness
For the sob and choke of remembered sorrow . . .
We have no solace in this bitter stillness.
We shall be still enough tomorrow.

If T.S. Eliot is an influence in this poem¹¹ "After Teacups,"¹² the second monologue, begins as an imitation of "Gerontion" with a little help from an early Canto of Ezra Pound:

I was not on the parapets at Cretae
Dreading sails black against the red low moon,
When my ruin overthrew me.
Nor did it claim me with the plunge of Grecian spears
Surging up in dark ships from the sea
That ancient night. There rode no portent of my fears
On the long breeze sweeping in from Cyprus;
Nor later with the rank mists when I fought
Bogged in the marshes, clubbing my arquebus.

The effect here is sarcastic, the speaker evoking grand possibilities only as a preface to the mock-heroic revelation that his ruin has overthrown him in "Mme Atelie's salon," where his gestures and poses remind us all too clearly of J. Alfred Prufrock. This is too heavy for pastiche: it remains merely embarrassing.¹³ The last lines of

¹¹ The second Stanza's opening lines are clearly modelled on the beginning of "The Waste Land," Part V:

After shouting and trumpets and the crash of splintering lances,
After these and weeping . . .

¹² The Fugitive, 2 (Aug.-Sept. 1923), 106.

¹³ In his letter to Davidson of 19 Sept. 1926 Warren referred to the "obvious and wavering experimental quality" of "After Teacups" and "Midnight."

the third monologue, "Midnight,"¹⁴ are an unmistakably Eliotesque portrait of the gulf between the man and woman:

Your gaunt uncomprehending eyes
Clutch at me as I start to rise
Rattling my newspaper, saying, "It is late."
You draw the pins, release your flood of hair.
Am I doomed to stand thus ever,
Hesitating on the stair?

In spite of its over-straining the poem does convey the man's nightmarish sense of his exclusion from the turbulent inner world of his mate and his awareness of his own ineffectuality. Another poem, related to "Midnight" in theme but technically far surer, was published the following year as one of three sonnets under the general title "Portraits of Three Ladies":

Strangely her heart yet clutched a strange twilight,
One that had lured with dreams down a cypressd way
To glens where hairy-haunched and savage lay
The night. Could ever she forget that night
And one black pool, her image in the water,
Or how fat lily stalks were stirred and shifted
By terrible things beneath, and how there drifted
Through slimy trunks and fern a goatish laughter?

Sometimes at dusk before her looking glass
She thought how in that pool her limbs gleamed whitely:
She heard her husband watering the grass
Or his neat voice inquiring, "Supper dear?"
Across the table then she faced him nightly¹⁵
With harried eyes in which he read no fear.

This is a long way from the parapets at Cretae: imagery is striking, precisely expressive and skilfully deployed to illuminate the different levels of experience which are so achingly out of phase with each other. The juxtaposition of the wife's repressed sexual vitality and the husband's banality is smoothly accomplished in the

¹⁴ The Fugitive, 2 (Oct. 1923), 142.

¹⁵ Double Dealer, 6 (Aug.-Sept. 1924), 192.

sestet and a vast amount of human desolation is compacted into the last line where the phrase "in which he read no fear" concludes the poem with a true, if limited, irony.

The poems Warren submitted to The Fugitive in 1924 strongly reflect the depression which overcame him in that year, and led to his attempted suicide in May. John L. Stewart tells us that "Warren was younger than his classmates, shy, and inclined to withdraw into solitude. Occasionally other students would set upon him and tease him to the point of tears."¹⁶ An impassioned letter from Tate to Davidson sheds some light, yet remains tantalizingly unspecific:

God! I wish I were there. I am sure that I am the only person who doesn't look on Red as a merely interesting monstrosity mostly to be avoided. I don't accuse you of this; I only mean that it is the temper of the environment, and this temper has probably had much to do with his breakdown. . . . Don't deceive yourself that he did it because he was "convinced he would never be a poet." It shows, finally,--that statement--his fundamental courage. He rejected the meaner way, that of telling the truth about his anguish. Red is no simpleton; it isn't a mere despair of youth, a maudlin self-pity working itself into the hysteria of suicide. It is simply that he has been beaten down so consistently and brutally, that his emotional needs have met frustration so completely, that he was driven into a blind alley. . . . There's one thing you might do, however: keep Mims away from him in any form. Mims and what he represents is a very significant factor of disturbance in Red's mind. There is no reason why Red shouldn't survive in an intelligent environment, and if he doesn't survive there it will be a tremendous indictment of our whole system of ideas; here, let me say that he isn't persecuted by persons, but by hostile ideas, and the persecution is of course a mere figment in the popular mind but very real to an intellectual mind like Red's.¹⁷

¹⁶ Stewart, p. 432.

¹⁷ 24 May, 1924. DDC, File 11.

Taunted for his physical oddity, Warren was further oppressed by the traditionalism of Dr Edwin Mims, then head of the Vanderbilt English Department. A letter from Tate to Davidson, dated 17 April, 1924, includes the following expression of concern for Warren:

"Incidentally, I hope Dr Mims won't keep nagging at him (I doubt if you know whereof I speak), for he's very sensitive, and while the Doctor's solicitude is well-meant it is wholly irrelevant; he no more understands Red than he does the fourth dimension."¹⁸ The young Warren must have felt intolerably frustrated both personally and intellectually, despite his sustaining associations with the Fugitives. Intellectually he held back from religious orthodoxy ("False tales the saints tell") while his physical unhappiness led him to expect only further misery in a life lived on the naturalistic level. He had reached an impasse: both the world of nature and the world of ideas were against him.

The poems of this period are much possessed by death. "Three Poems"¹⁹ offer, rather obscurely, three different perspectives on death and "Death Mask of a Young Man"²⁰ reads like a self-dramatisation written, probably, before the attempted suicide. In July Tate visited Warren at his family home in Guthrie, Kentucky, and wrote to Davidson: "Red is in better condition than I've seen him in over a year, strong, healthy looking, heavy with good appetite; he sleeps ten hours a night."²¹ The improvement in Warren seems to be reflected in the new objectivity with which he treats the theme of death, as in the tribute

¹⁸ DDC, File 10.

¹⁹ The Fugitive, 3 (April, 1924), 54-55.

²⁰ The Fugitive, 3 (June, 1924), 69.

²¹ 11 July, 1924. DDC, File 12.

to "Alf Burt, Tenant Farmer."²² The dead man is released from the ravages of the seasons, perhaps to a land of endless perfection --a simple farmer's heaven. If such a naive desire is not to be gratified, says the poet, death will nevertheless bring an end to sorrow. Although Warren rejects the religious view, he makes fun neither of it nor of the farmer whose hardships have been so real that they almost entitle him to the perfect escape:

It is a country where
No frost can come for Old Man Burt to fear.
Perpetual seedtime meets with summer there,
Harvest and spring together in the year.

And if not that at least for him will be
The steadfast earth of a narrow grave and deep
Beneath the fennel and the lean thorn tree,
Whose haggard roots will quickly give a sleep

Heavy as in the midnights of December.
And in that sleep where all things are the same
No dream can fall to stir him to remember
Thistle and drouth and the crops that never came.

The last line, with its dreary round of misfortune, confers on Old Burt a genuinely pathetic dignity. The poem as a whole, however, is rather flat, marred by the mechanical filling out of lines to fit the rhyme scheme. Mortality is also the subject of "Easter Morning: Crosby Junction"²³ in which the clichés of the preacher are tartly answered by the thoughts of one of his listeners:

"Rejoice, ye Righteous, Christ from the tomb is come!"
(The crocus, a christ, breaks its black bulb, the tomb.)

"Now ye that believe on Him are not to die--"
(Through the window the voice importunate and high
Rejects the confutation of the stone
That in the churchyard marks the mortal bone)--

²² The Fugitive, 3 (Dec. 1924), 154.

²³ The Fugitive, 4 (June, 1925), 33.

"But inherit life eternal--have ye no fear!"
 (Indeed there are no murderers buried here
 But godly flesh is rumoured to decay
 And if here flourish not the rank green bay

The cedar hath an hungry root and long.
 How may we sing who have no golden song,
 How may we speak who have no word to say,
 Or pray, or pray,--who would so gently pray?)

If this is a livelier, bolder effort than "Alf Burt" it is also more blatantly contrived and despite the intensifying of feeling in the last stanza technical proficiency does not quite rescue the poem from the cheapening effects of its sarcasms.

The same issue of the magazine printed "To a Face in the Crowd,"²⁴ the best poem of Warren's Fugitive period. Tate wrote to Davidson on 20 January, 1927 referring to a visit from Mark Van Doren to whom he had read material by the Fugitives. Van Doren "was astonished at the quality of the group as a whole. He was knocked cold by Red . . . You know Red is pretty close to being the greatest Fugitive poet. There are certain obstructions to this realisation, of course. He is the only one of us who has power. 'Letter of a Mother' and 'To a Face in the Crowd' are the only poems in the collection to which the description great can be applied--in spite of a few technical imperfections in both of them."²⁵ The outline of "To a Face in the Crowd" and some of its details seem to have been suggested by the passage which concludes the first section of "The Waste Land." That Warren's speaker is one of an aimless, flowing crowd, that the figure he addresses is a "brother" seen in dream, that a waste land is the alternative to meaningful action--all these

²⁴ The Fugitive, 4 (June, 1925), 36; SP, p. 324.

²⁵ DDC, File 26.

point to a source in Eliot's unreal city with its Dantesque crowd flowing over London Bridge, undone by death. What is left general in Eliot becomes more local and particular in Warren's poem and the hunger for participation in life is symbolised by the recalled tragic heroism of the old South. The speaker's failure lies in his inability to achieve in action the integrity of being of the tragic hero. While in Eliot's poem the religious nature of the malaise is emphasised, Warren's emphasis is personal, humanistic. The face seen in the crowd is that aspect of the speaker's character which drives him toward self-fulfilment in action:

My brother, brother, whither do you pass,
Unto what hill at dawn, unto what glen
Where among rocks the faint lascivious grass
Fingers in lust the arrogant bones of men?

The quest for fulfilment in action is arrogance, at least from the point of view of the insensate nature which gloatingly insists on its affinity with human flesh. The stanza thus represents a double response: a human recognition of the demand for decisive action, and a natural wish to evade the demand, surrendering to the rule of nature whereby all human effort ends in death. This opening states the problem which the remainder of the poem elaborates without solving. The next stanza expresses the frustration of heroic striving in an indifferent universe:

Beside what bitter waters will you go
Where the lean gulls of your heart along the shore
Rehearse to the cliffs the rhetoric of their woe?
In dreams perhaps I have seen your face before.

The third line suggests that it is difficult for the would-be actor to convince even himself of the significance of his effort. His

attempt is a weary rhetorical rehearsal, like the poem itself. The intention of the last line is apparently to keep the accusation of ineffectuality (i.e. mere "rhetoric") aimed at the speaker himself, linking his other or dream self with the forbears mentioned in the following stanzas. As a result the reductive implications of "rhetoric" are carried forward as a possible judgement of the "fathers'" actions too. The poem goes on to develop the idea of kinship between the speaker, his other self, and their forefathers:

A certain night has borne both you and me;
We are the children of an ancient band
Broken between the mountains and the sea.
A cromlech marks for you that ultimate strand

And dolorous you must find the place they stood.
Of old I know that shore, that dim terrain,
And know how black and turbulent the blood
Will beat through iron chambers of the brain

When at your back the taciturn tall stone,
Which is your fathers' monument and mark,
Repeats the waves' implacable monotone,
Ascends the night and propagates the dark.

Will the would-be actor, the potential, dream self of the speaker accept his heritage, the challenge of a tragic past, or will he lapse into dispirited ineffectuality? It is, after all, reasonable to be afraid: "Men there have lived who wrestled with the ocean," the speaker tells us, but "the polyp was their shroud," echoing the lustful grass of the first stanza. He is likely to choose, as he has in the past, the living death of the "lost procession."

Some of the poem's terms are imprecise, some are forced. "A certain night," "Of old I know that shore," "Men there have lived," are too obviously "poetic" and make for sentimentality; a straining for the mysterious and archaic is apparent in "cromlech." Yet the force of the poem carries the reader over these defects and it is

a new force in Warren's work, marking a crucial stage in the maturing of his art. This force derives not merely from his ideas or from his skill with image and phrase, but from his discovery of irony as a principle and a method. It is not the kind of irony which we found in the climactic phrase of the sonnet from "Portraits of Three Ladies," but a double perspective which is maintained throughout the poem from first to last as the life of heroic action is simultaneously extolled and undercut by naturalistic scepticism. The ending does not finally destroy the vision of possible heroic action; the sense of likely failure rather emphasises the majesty of the forefathers. The inclusiveness which energises Warren's poem closely answers the description of irony given by John Crowe Ransom in the same issue of The Fugitive:

Irony may be regarded as the ultimate mode of the great minds--it presupposes the others. It implies first of all an honourable and strenuous period of romantic creation; it implies then a rejection of the romantic forms and formulas; but this rejection is so unwilling, and in its statements there lingers so much of the music and colour and romantic mystery which is perhaps the absolute poetry, and this statement is attended by such a disarming rueful comic sense of the poet's own betrayal, that the fruit of it is wisdom and not bitterness, poetry and not prose, health and not suicide. Irony is the rarest of the states of mind, because it is the most inclusive; the whole mind has been active in arriving at it, both creation and criticism, both poetry and science.²⁶

The qualities of Warren's mature writing could hardly be better defined. For the first time in "To a Face in the Crowd" he achieved a poem which is "inclusive" in the sense defined here and within the following year he would embark on the "Kentucky Mountain Farm" sequence with "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks." In the late summer of 1925, after graduating from Vanderbilt, Warren went

²⁶ The Fugitive, 4 (June, 1925), 64.

west to do graduate work at the University of California. On the train for Los Angeles on 8 August, 1925 he wrote to Andrew Lytle, revealing his capacity for severe self-criticism and the extent to which he was now in possession of his own poetic, with irony replacing sarcasm as the key:

I think that my philosophy of poetry is right, at least for me, who am a relativist and who consequently would not erect it into a criterion. I feel that it is right, but I also know that my method demands discipline; it is far too romantic in essence with too much sarcasm. I have never achieved a real irony which is the true alloy. If I may pursue a metallurgical metaphor, sarcasm is a sort of plating that flakes off and is not integral, while a true irony alloys the softer ore of romanticism and makes it usable.²⁷

III

From the University of California Warren went to Yale for further graduate study. In 1928 he won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford and in the following year made his major contribution to the Agrarian cause, the critical biography, John Brown, the Making of a Martyr. While working on his dissertation for the University of Oxford he also wrote the essay, "The Briar Patch," for the symposium, "I'll Take My Stand." On his return to the United States he taught first at South Western College in Memphis, Tennessee, then at Vanderbilt University. In 1934 he took up an appointment at Louisiana State University where with Cleanth Brooks he became a founding editor of The Southern Review. In 1935 his first collection of verse,

²⁷ Andrew Lytle Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

Thirty-Six Poems, was published by the Alcestis Press in a limited edition. By this time his poetry was well enough known for the book to be reviewed by several of the most influential papers and journals. Four years later Cleanth Brooks was to quote extensively from it in Modern Poetry and the Tradition and all but two of the poems ("Genealogy" and "To One Awake") were to be reprinted in Selected Poems, 1927-1943.

One anonymous, unsympathetic reviewer, betraying his misunderstanding of Warren's intentions, nevertheless defined the principle of organisation which accounts for the successes as well as the failures not only of these early poems but of many that were yet to come:

Mr Warren shares in the difficulties of his generation; he has been forced to be both critic and poet, to the detriment of his poetry. While grateful for the light cast by his criticism, one nevertheless cannot but be sorry that the critical spirit has entered into the poet. In these poems ratiocination often hampers the free expression of poetic sensibility, and emotion is stifled by thought.²⁸

In Warren's view, of course, the smooth flow of lyrical feeling preferred by the reviewer would have been too "pure," hence vulnerable and unconvincing. The Wordsworthian poem, "Man Coming of Age" (SP: 1943, p. 69), about the death of the speaker's childhood self, fails just because it is limited by being too smoothly lyrical. It is not just lack of "ratiocination" which is to blame--there is plenty of "thought" in the poem. It is simply that the poem does not cover the case comprehensively enough to avoid the kind of soft effect which Warren finds false. "The Return: An Elegy" (SP, pp. 315-318), on the

²⁸ "'Thirty-Six Poems' by Robert Penn Warren," Nation, 142 (25 March, 1936), 391.

other hand, succeeds magnificently in covering the case by counterpointing in appropriate tones "poetic," rationalistic and primitive responses to the death of the speaker's mother. The poem is an excellent example of Warren's interest in the difficulty of achieving the direct, unqualified response, the difficulty which is caused by the conflict among warring versions of experience. Here the returning son's meditation on the image of his dead mother is broken by a discordantly irreverent fancy which reveals his incapacity for simple grief:

give me the nickels off your eyes
from your hands the violets
let me bless your obsequies
if you possessed conveniently enough three eyes
then I could buy a pack of cigarettes.

If Warren's method saves him from the sentimentality which he chiefly distrusts, Morton D. Zabel was quick to spot the associated dangers:

The method is a valuable one; dryness of irony and omniscience is combined with humour or compassion in an extremely effective way, but it is a way that easily falls into its own kind of banality. The feeling of the poem is enervated to the point of exhaustion; a serious method has declined into personal convention and victimised its author. 29

While the method may keep "purity" at bay, it is no guard against a contrary sentimentality, a forced, factitious kind of harshness reminiscent of the inverted sentimentality of some of Hemingway's writing. Sarcasm can return to cheapen the effect as in "Letter from a Coward to a Hero" (SP, pp. 291-293):

Though young, I do not like loud noise:
The sudden backfire,
The catcall of boys,
Drums beating for
The big war,

²⁹ M.D. Zabel, "Problems of Knowledge," Poetry, 48 (April, 1936), 39.

Or clocks that tick at night, and will not stop.
 If you should lose your compass and map
 Or a mouse get in the wall,
 For sleep try love or veronal,
 Though some prefer, I know, philology.
 Does the airman scream in the flaming trajectory?

The coward, unlike some, is not taken in by big words: philological grandeur (like "flaming trajectory") will not alter the fact of death or assuage its pain; but the smartness of the third and second last lines mars this otherwise fine poem in which the writer's praise for the valiant is set against his suspicion that disaster will result from the hero's simple devotion to an abstract virtue. Disaster itself is characterised in lines which beautifully illustrate Warren's flair for substantialising the abstract:

Disaster owns less speed than you have got
 But he will cut across the back lot
 To lurk and lie in wait.
 Admired of children, gathered for their games,
 Disaster, like the dandelion, blooms,
 And the delicate film is fanned
 To seed the shaven lawn.

Some of the poems in Thirty-Six Poems are flawed by vagueness: the reader finds himself irritated by a poem which makes considerable demands on him, yet gives him too few clues. In "Pacific Gazer" (SP: 1943, pp. 93-94) we are asked to marvel at the blackness of a man's mood, "His wrath who to black night / Could night oppose." Although we are told about the depth of his grief, there is no hint of its source or nature. "Eidolon" (SP, pp. 299-300) is commended by John L. Stewart³⁰ for its sensitive evocation of night in the country. For example:

³⁰ Stewart, p. 458.

All night, in May, dogs barked in the hollow woods;
 Hoarse, from secret huddles of no light,
 By moonlit hole, hoarse, the dogs gave tongue.

and more particularly:

The boy, all night, lay in the black room,
 Tick-straw, all night, harsh to the bare side.
 Staring, he heard; the clotted dark swam slow.

This unfortunately gives way to the flatulence of "unappeasable riot / Provoked, resurgent, the bosom's nocturnal disquiet," "belled their unhouselled angers" and "fanged commotion rude." Strandberg is probably right in his guess that "the 'eidolon' of the title refers to the phantom-self which escapes from the hounds" and "returns to eternity,"³¹ but the reader is likely to find the "nocturnal disquiet" as perplexingly unaccounted for as the "curse of hell-black hate" for the father of the speaker in "Genealogy" (Thirty-Six Poems, p. 28). "Toward Rationality" (SP: 1943, p. 41) is singled out by Zabel as an extreme example of enervated feeling. In order to establish a mocking attitude towards the makers of intellectual systems, Warren constructs a bewildering sequence of heterogeneous figures. The result is "unbearably elephantine in its brainy and overplotted ingenuity."³² It is difficult indeed to justify the mélange of "Xerxes' guests," the "cortex-knotty apple," Ptolemy, "the picturecard mind" and "the cedar standing close to my house wall." The theme is so violently refracted that the impulse of the poem is thwarted, the conclusion limp.

Warren's poetry is most successful when it deals concretely in particulars and when the problem of defining these arises naturally

³¹ Strandberg, pp. 25-26.

³² Zabel, p. 39.

from the presentation without melodramatic over-insistence. There is always an appeal open to taste in such matters, but among the best poems in Thirty-Six Poems are the brilliantly multi-toned "Pondy Woods," "History," "Letter from a Coward to a Hero," "The Last Metaphor," "Problem of Knowledge," "For a Friend who thinks himself Urbane," "The Garden" (after Marvell), and "Garden Waters." In all but "For a Friend who Thinks Himself Urbane," a witty comment on a man's vain attempt to violate his better self, Warren uses rural physical details. Sometimes he does so in order to objectify the emotional quality of experience and so make this quality directly available to the reader, at other times, as in "Kentucky Mountain Farm," also to contrast willed human action with the unwilled, uncontrollable processes of man's natural background. "History" (SP, pp. 294-296) considers the significance of human effort in the context of the decline in values prophesied by the speaker. It is as though Warren were pondering a world in which the naturalistic view urged in "Rebuke of the Rocks" had prevailed, robbing man of moral sense and human feeling. Before descending to their promised land, the Israelites--or the American pioneers--pause, foreseeing the future and considering their own motive in bringing it into being. What they foresee is a disturbing combination of material prosperity and moral decay:

In the new land
Our seed shall prosper, and
In those unsifted times
Our sons shall cultivate
Peculiar crimes,
Having not love, nor hate,
Nor memory.

Some, conscious of their deficiencies, will seek meaning in the actions of their ancestors, but without success because, as Cleanth Brooks puts it: "The absolutes are gone--are dissolved, indeed, by our consciousness of the past--by our consciousness of a plurality of histories and meanings."³³ Human experience is defined as a continuous, futile effort to grasp "certainty" which, in any case, is "blank" and "fanged." Their morale gone, why do the pioneers descend? Warren's answer amplifies the theme of "To a Face in the Crowd":

The act
Alone is pure.
What appetency knows the flood,
What thirst, the sword?
What name
Sustains the core of flame?
We are the blade,
But not the hand
By which the blade is swayed.
Time falls, but has no end.
Descend!

"Flood," "sword" and "flame" are presented as things of indefinable motive, yet significant, their significance depending upon their active fulfilment of their own natures. Thus the poem becomes a reply to the naturalistic view of "Rebuke of the Rocks" in which the "lean men" were commanded to renounce their humanity. If "sweet sterility" is appropriate to stone, action is appropriate to man: it is man's nature to seek a vision of himself, but he truly finds it only by creating it. For Warren poetry itself is action, like that of the saint who "proves his vision by stepping into the fires" (SE, p. 29). Equally, the pioneers must push beyond self-doubt, descend into further action and somehow keep themselves afloat in the

³³ Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 86.

"destructive element" of their dream. Such "alloy of fact" as the intellectual formulation of experience is insufficient: the vision must be lived to be earned.

IV

The first edition of the influential textbook, Understanding Poetry, by Robert Penn Warren in collaboration with Cleanth Brooks, was published in 1938 and in the next year appeared Warren's first novel, Night Rider. Warren stayed on at Louisiana State University until The Southern Review ceased publication in 1942 when he joined the staff of the University of Minnesota. In the same year New Directions published Eleven Poems on the Same Theme as a booklet in its "Poet of the Month" series.

"Monologue at Midnight" (SP, pp. 307-308), a finely controlled metaphysical treatment of love's mortality, introduces the themes of innocence, guilt, time and separateness which will be developed through the sequence. "Philosophers / Loll in their disputatious ease," says the poet whose uneasy, passionate business is to make the philosophers' abstract terms live for the reader in imagery that will animate his sensibility as in the Donne-like lines which define the true magnitude of lover for lover:

The match flame sudden in the gloom
Is lensed within each watching eye
Less intricate, less small than in
One heart the other's image is.

In "Revelation" (SP, 300-301) the boy's isolating sense of guilt looks him in a world remade by the violence within himself:

Because he had spoken harshly to his mother,
 The day became astonishingly bright,
 The enormity of distance crept to him like a dog now,
 And earth's own luminescence seemed to repel the night.

The boy is passing through a necessary stage of the maturing process, for, the poet asserts, "In separateness only does love learn definition." Such definition achieved, the individual must become reconnected to the human community. The boy of this poem is a recognisable precursor of Percy Munn, Jack Burden, Jeremiah Beaumont and other leading figures in Warren's writing, all of whom illustrate the process described in "Knowledge and the Image of Man":

. . . man's process of self-definition means that he distinguishes himself from the world and from other men. He disintegrates his primal instinctive sense of unity, he discovers separateness. In this process he discovers the pain of self-criticism and the pain of isolation. But the pain may, if he is fortunate, develop its own worth, work its own homeopathic cure. In the pain of self-criticism he may develop an ideal of excellence, and an ideal of excellence, once established, implies a depersonalized communion in that ideal. In the pain of isolation he may achieve the courage and clarity of mind to envisage the tragic pathos of life, and once he realizes that the tragic experience is universal and a corollary of man's place in nature, he may return to a communion with man and nature.³⁴

Eleven Poems on the Same Theme takes us into the "pain of self-criticism and the pain of isolation." We are trapped in a painful subjectivity within which we are disconnected from our essential selves and from the human world. Either we do what is ultimately hopeless, yearn backward to the innocent participations of youth, or we try for a solution which evades recognition and acceptance of our least admirable qualities. Dogged by our repressions, we are too

³⁴ Longley, p. 241.

stained by living to return to a fondly remembered innocence. Instead, we must renew our sense of participation in the world by achieving a mature integrity of self, and we do this by accepting our propensity for evil.

Warren's ambitious undertaking, then, is to offer psychological means for curing a metaphysical disease. The eleven poems in the sequence take him a stage further from the tempered naturalism of "Kentucky Mountain Farm." "History" gave us the categorical imperative of action; now action is set in a realm of values derived from the "ideal of excellence" learned in "the pain of self-criticism." Self-criticism prompted Warren to put naturalism to the test again in the sequence "Mexico is a Foreign Country: Five Studies in Naturalism" (SP: 1943, pp. 51-57).³⁵ In "The World Comes Galloping: A True Story" the poet appears to subscribe to the dry stoicism of the old man who regards the "street's astonishing vacancy" after a horseman has racketed through it, and refers sardonically not to the horseman but to the vacancy when he says, "Veni galopando el mundo" (SP, p. 303). A more cheerful naturalism is tried in "Small Soldiers with Drum in Large Landscape" (SP, pp. 304-305), in which "all Nature's jocund atoms bounce / In tune to keep the world intact." The soldiers are part of this activity:

And shrouded in the coats and buttons,
The atoms bounce, and under the sky,
Under the mountain's gaze, maintain
The gallant little formulae.

³⁵ Reprinted as "Mexico is a Foreign Country: Four Studies in Naturalism" in SP, pp. 302-307, omitting "Siesta Time in Village Plaza by Ruined Bandstand and Banana Tree," Part II in SP: 1943.

Naturalism defines the soldiers inhumanly as atoms contained in uniforms, but the last line reveals that the poet's attention has been caught not merely by "the composition's majesty"--the diminutive figures against the wide landscape--but by the feeling that the atoms maintain some order and purpose among the little community of marching men. If Warren's naturalism was qualified in "Kentucky Mountain Farm," the "impurity" of it here reflects the distance he had come in his thinking by way of Eleven Poems on the Same Theme.

In "Bearded Oaks" (SP, pp. 308-309) the lovers lie, in shared separateness from the world, like "twin atolls on a shelf of shade," with "hopeless" hope and "fearless" fear. Withdrawn from time, they "practice for eternity." "Crime," "Original Sin: a Short Story," "Pursuit," and "Terror," deal especially with the problem from which the lovers have temporarily escaped: how to live with the hopes and fears which history, or life in "time" imposes. The poems do not provide a direct or "pure" answer; they imply certain prerequisites for meaningful life by dramatising the problem in striking, often surrealist images. The notes Warren provided for "Terror" clarify his intention in that poem and in the others as well.³⁶

The problem of the "you" of "Terror" (SP, pp. 284-286) is that he was "born to no adequate definition of terror." Warren explains that the "you" is modern man and what he lacks is "that proper sense of the human lot, the sense of limitation and the sense of the necessity for responsible action within that limitation. I should

³⁶ Robert Penn Warren, "Notes," in Modern Poetry, American and British, ed. Kimon Friar and John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1951), pp. 541-543.

call that sense, when it is applied inclusively, the religious sense--though I don't insist on this." The poem discusses different ways in which man attempts to escape from his own limitations. He may prefer suicide to "the damp worm-tooth of compromise," or try to deny his mortality in the perpetuation of physical life--hence the allusion to Alexis Carrel in stanza 6. He may seek to lose himself in the kind of violent action described in the fourth stanza:

So some, whose passionate emptiness and tidal
Lust swayed toward the debris of Madrid,
And left New York to loll in their fierce idyll
Among the olives, where the snipers hid;
And now the North, to see that visioned face
And polarize their iron of despair,
Who praise no beauty like the boreal grace
Which greens the dead eye under the rocket's flare.
They fight old friends, for their obsession knows
Only the immaculate itch, not human friends or foes.

The Americans who fought injustice, first in Spain on the side of Russia, then in Finland "over bitter Helsingfors" against the Russians, were running from their own natures, preferring to fight abstractions than come to grips with inner realities. A solution to the problem of "adequate definition" is provided by the image of "the criminal king," Macbeth, who "kisses the terror," signifying acceptance of his own degradation. Thus Macbeth finally achieves a noble identity: he triumphs over his own weakness by referring it to a moral standard which had, after all, been his own even throughout his career of evil. The gesture implies an understanding both of limitation and of responsibility and it raises the self-defining murderer above the "you" who, lacking such understanding, sees only "an empty chair."

"Pursuit," "Original Sin: a Short Story," and "Crime" are all addressed to the "you" of "Terror." In "Crime" (SP, pp. 290-291) we are told to "Envy the mad killer" who cannot recall his own crime. He is like us in that his motive was the basic desire for happiness, but unlike us he neither reasoned himself out of guilty but decisive action nor repressed his desire. Unlike us, he acted simply and directly, achieving thereby a reality or identity which we who are guilty too--for we dream of murder--fail to achieve. The mad killer "cannot seem / To remember what it was he buried under the leaves," but our memory perpetually "drips, a pipe in the cellar-dark," reminding us of our buried identity.

"Pursuit" and "Original Sin: a Short Story" deal in converse ways with the same problem of self-definition. The "you" of "Pursuit" hungers for meaning; in "Original Sin: a Short Story" meaning pursues him in the form of a guilty sense of his own identity. The doctor in "Pursuit" (SP, pp. 286-288) can find no symptoms of physical disorder and accordingly prescribes "a change of scene"; but Florida offers neither an escape from the problem--even the flamingo's neck is "a question"--nor the solace of meaning. The "you," Warren explains, "doesn't know how to look for the answer or quite what he is looking for. If he did know, he might get an answer, or a hint of it, even from the little old widow, the past of the sufferers who seem to have some truth which the you has missed."³⁷

If meaning eludes the "you" in "Pursuit," it is an embarrassment to the "you" of "Original Sin: a Short Story" (SP, pp. 288-289). In

³⁷ Warren, "Notes," p. 542.

this poem identity is involved in the shame of improper origin which the born provincial experiences in the great world, Warren's point being that we try to slough the moral burden of our identity just as the ambitious provincial would suppress his guilty awareness of a lowly background. Warren's audacity with language here is entirely successful. The poem does not suffer from the kind of clotted obliquity that spoils "Terror," for the powerful imagery defines itself as the poem unfolds. As in "Pursuit" the rhymed lines of irregular length preserve the looseness and flow of subjective experience, yet impose themselves on the reader with urgency and persistence:

Nodding, its great head rattling like a gourd,
And looks like seaweed strung on the staring stone,
The nightmare stumbles past, and you have heard
It fumble your door before it whimpers and is gone:
It acts like the old hound that used to snuffle your
door and moan.

You thought you had lost it when you left Omaha,
For it seemed connected then with your grandpa, who
Had a wen on his forehead and sat on the veranda
To finger the precious protuberance, as was his habit to do,
Which glinted in sun like rough garnet or the rich old brain
bulging through.

But you met it in Harvard Yard as the historic steeple
Was confirming the midnight with its hideous racket,
And you wondered how it had come, for it stood so imbecile,
With empty hands, rumble, and surely nothing in pocket:
Riding the rods, perhaps--or Grandpa's will paid the ticket.

The title, then, has a double meaning: our sin is not merely our identity, the guilty responsibility which we should embrace, but, more particularly, our unwillingness to embrace it. At the end of the poem this original sin "stands like an old horse cold in the pasture," waiting for the "you" to wake up and acknowledge it; in "The Ballad of Billie Potts" it proves lethal.

"The Ballad of Billie Potts"³⁸ is Warren's first extended use of a particular historical incident in verse and introduces two motifs central to many of the novels: the trip west and the acceptance of the father. Warren explains in an introductory note that he first heard the story from an old lady who was "a relative" of his (SP, p. 271). She assumed that the events occurred in a region of Western Kentucky between the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. This section of the state is known as "Between the Rivers," hence the repetition of the phrase like a refrain throughout the ballad, connecting its locale with Mesopotamia, that other "land between the rivers," birthplace of man and scene of his original sin. Warren thus "subtly hints as early as line 2 of this poem the origin (and outcome) of the myth he is recreating in terms of New World innocence and its Fall."³⁹

By itself the ballad story establishes something like a tragic balance of attitudes: the pathos of the suddenly self-accusing parents is set against their monstrous greed. They suffer as they deserve, but their suffering, ironically, is brought about by an accidental miscarriage of justice. The burden of the interpolated argument is that Little Billie's prosperous innocence is a public denial of his private guilt, that he cleanses himself by accepting his identity, and that we are like him and so must seek with difficulty what he was fortunate enough to find. One may initially feel

³⁸ "The Ballad of Billie Potts" appeared first in Partisan Review, 11 (Winter, 1944), 56-70, then as the opening poem in SP: 1943. It is reprinted in SP, pp. 271-284.

³⁹ Strandberg, p. 115.

a disproportion between the simple story and the richly imagistic commentary. John Crowe Ransom was really complaining about the relation of story to commentary when, in a review of Selected Poems, 1923-1943, he criticised Warren's descent to characters who cannot speak for themselves.⁴⁰ The implication is that Little Billie is made to carry greater moral significance than he can bear: he suffers a reversal but without the redeeming feature of recognition. Warren's point, however, is that we must carry the burden, make a beginning of Little Billie's end. His vacuity is an accusing image of our false selves; we must recognise that the injustice to him is indeed just; our criminal innocence must be actively destroyed in order that we may achieve moral stature. We must bend to the parental spring aware of the hatchet raised in benison.

Warren presents Little Billie's attempted murder as a symbol of man's guilty nature and the flight west as a symbolic pursuit of a new, guiltless identity. In fleeing himself, Little Billie flees the universal moral stain which he shares with his parents and which is reasserted for them all when he stoops to drink at the spring. This symbolic interpretation of the details of the ballad is brought home to the reader, the "you" of "Terror" and "Pursuit," by the rendering of the action as a dream-like recreation of the reader's own experience. The interpolated passages admit what the ballad form, in a sense, declares: that speculation about the motives of the actors in a drama so historically remote cannot reach the truth expressed in their story:

There was a beginning but you cannot see it.
There will be an end but you cannot see it.
They will not turn their faces to you though you call,
Who pace a logic merciless as light,
Whose law is their long shadow on the grass,

⁴⁰ John Crowe Ransom, "The Inklings of 'Original Sin'," Saturday Review of Literature, 27 (20 May, 1944), 10-11.

Sun at the back; who pace, pass,
 And passing nod in that glacial delirium
 While the tight sky shudders like a drum
 And speculation rasps its idiot nails
 Across the dry slate where you did the sum.

(SP, p. 273)

Warren's anticipation of the reader's difficulty in interpreting the story at once earns due function for his commentary and justifies the abrupt change of tactics by which he suddenly thrusts the reader into the action as a participant, closing the gap between ballad story and choric speculation:

Think of yourself riding away from the dawn,
 Think of yourself and the unnamed ones who had gone
 Before, riding, who rode away from goodbye, goodbye,
 And toward hello, toward Time's unwinking eye;
 And like the cicada had left, at cross-roads or square,
 The old shell of self, thin, ghostly, translucent, light
 as air.

(SP, p. 274)

The illusion of identification is created by an appeal across the void of dissociation to the reader's own sense of guilt and his desire for innocence. At first he is the murderous Little Billie, crouching in ambush at the edge of the swamp, feeling the wet grass and awaiting the sound of the stranger's hooves; he is also what Billie is shortly to become, the stranger, who, shedding his real identity, sets out in search of a guiltless one. When Little Billie flees from home the reader encompasses both tendencies, and the tension between them ("Which one are you? What?") is developed by two long interpolated passages on the journey, one associating it with a continual renewal of identity ("The name and the face are always new"), with "motion," "innocence" and the limitless possibilities of "Time": the other with the urgency of time and the

painful realisation that although the self has disappeared, "the implacable thirst of self" remains. Billie therefore returns to the hatchet, the reader with him.

In the final ballad sequence Little Billie's parents are forced to accept the verdict of the birthmark, which is "shaped for luck." In the misfortune which so justly overtakes them Warren again exposes the limitations of naturalism. Billie's parents had lived naturalistically, observing only jungle law, the survival of the fittest, as they cold-bloodedly prepared death for each rich victim. The killing of their son forces them out of purely animal existence and into experience, albeit primitive, of the human realities of grief, tenderness and kinship. Discovering their true identities as murderers, they are converted from cunning brutes to vulnerable humans. They are rudimentary figures, of course, but we can see their final state as an image of basic human experience which further devalues the naturalistic view with which Warren has been recurrently concerned. Echoes of the "Rebuke of the Rocks" will continue to be heard in Warren's writing, but poems like "History," "Crime," "Pursuit," "Original Sin: a Short Story," and "The Ballad of Billie Potts" surely vindicate the "little stubborn men" of his earlier imagination in their "breeding" of human life despite the discouragements of nature.

Chapter Three

The Circus in the Attic

Leonard Casper calls "The Circus in the Attic" (1947) a "sprawling story" and finds it "hobbled" by its method.¹ Charles H. Bohner says it is "rambling and diffuse."² Certainly the story is ambitious: Warren attempts not only to outline the tragedy of one man's wasted life, but to comment on the meaning of history and to chronicle one hundred and fifty years of a Southern town's existence, thereby implying an assessment of his region. Many critics have judged the story a failure because it reads like an underdeveloped novel. The reader is prompted to consider the stories in relation to Warren's novels because the "chronicles"--of Bolton Lovehart, of Goodwood, of the Nabbs in "A Christian Education", of Professor Roy Millen--closely resemble the exempla of the novels which are themselves virtually short stories, readily separable from the novels in which they appear.³ Bohner

¹ Casper, pp. 98-99.

² Bohner, p. 105.

³ These exempla, or versions of them, have often been published separately in advance of the complete novels, e.g. "How Willie Proudfit Came Home" (Night Rider), Southern Review, 4 (1938-39), 299-321; "Statement of Ashby Wyndham" (At Heaven's Gate), Sewanee Review, 51 (Spring, 1943), 183-236; "Cass Mastern's Wedding Ring" (All the King's Men), Partisan Review, 11 (Fall, 1944), 375-407; "Portrait of La Grand' Bosse" (World Enough and Time), Kenyon Review, 12 (Winter, 1950), 41-50; "Love and Death in Johntown, Tenn." (The Cave), Partisan Review, 26 (Summer, 1959), 392-419; "The Fiddlersburg Preacher" (Flood), Esquire, 60 (July, 1963), 55-56.

reminds us of Warren's farewell to the genre of the short story in the autobiographical note on "Blackberry Winter"⁴ and says that "The Circus in the Attic . . . points to a weakness in many of the stories included in this collection. The prodigality of Warren's talent, his gift for sustained narrative and invention seems cramped within the confines of the short story."⁵

In possession of Warren's extended fictions, we can see readily enough the grounds for this sort of response to his stories. Undoubtedly "The Circus in the Attic" contains in abundance the stuff of a novel. Equally we might complain that the author of Eleven Poems on the Same Theme and "The Ballad of Billie Potts" could have produced a sheaf of characteristic poems from the material squandered in this apparently loose-jointed tale. Warren's valediction to the short story indeed suggests that poetry must take the responsibility for his giving us no further short fictions: "poems are great devourers of stories."⁶ The dog that follows Bolton Lovehart along the creek bank on the Sunday afternoon of his baptism "like an image of medieval hunger and scabrous, slack-dugged humility and mournful, infinite forgiveness" (CIA, p. 20) clearly belongs to the same iconography as the "old hound" and "old horse" of "Original Sin: A Short Story" (SP, pp. 288-289). We might have had yet another poem on the same theme instead of this

⁴ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Fiction, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1959), p. 643.

⁵ Bohner, p. 105.

⁶ Understanding Fiction, p. 643.

arresting prose representation of Bolton's guilt. The story of Cassius Perkins and Seth Sykes might have made a Civil War ballad complete with commentary on the ironies of history. But it is a niggardly, perverse criticism which neglects the particular excellencies of a work simply because the work might have taken another form. We may agree that Warren is a better novelist and poet than he is a writer of short stories: his stories are not uniform in quality and "Blackberry Winter" is the best of them. Some are weak, some slight; several--including "The Circus in the Attic"--have much to say and are valuable contributions to an art in which rules are only made to be broken.

The opening of "The Circus in the Attic" places the reader in the modern age of the highway which is "like a ribbon of celluloid film carelessly unspooled across green baize" (CIA, p. 3). The highway in Warren's work is often a symbol of modern man's confident and careless superficiality, his substitution of motion for meaning and his preference for illusion. Thus All the King's Men opens with Jack Burden travelling along Highway 58: "Way off ahead of you, at the horizon where the cotton fields are blurred into the light, the slab will glitter and gleam like water, as though the road were flooded. You'll go whipping toward it, but it will always be ahead of you, that bright, flooded place, like a mirage" (AKM, pp. 3-4). The narrator of "The Circus in the Attic" realises that "you" will not penetrate beneath the surface of what Bardsville has become in the age of the highway--merely a place to stop for gas, oil and lunch before "you . . . whirl southward through

the afternoon into the heart of Dixie" (CIA, p. 13). The ironic use of the cliché, "heart of Dixie", implies the inability of the highway traveller to see into the heart of anything and the buttonholing, accusatory "you" draws the reader from his headlong pursuit of the glittering "mirage", inviting him to deny his own superficiality by pausing long enough to notice the details which are only a blur for the unthinking traveller.

The first page of the story describes the approach to Bardsville in realistic details which typify the wasting of the rural South by the modern age considered from an Agrarian point of view, but the picture goes beyond regional concern and Agrarian bias. The disfigurements of the landscape brought about by wartime industrialisation reflect the peculiar derelictions and distresses of the mid-twentieth century. The image of the negroes' washing "hanging abjectly on crazy lines like improvised flags of surrender among ruins" (CIA, p. 3) is at once a reminder of the South's defeat in the Civil War and a symbol of its further decline under the impact of the modern world. If Bardsville itself seems aloof from the valley of chaos, the truth about its monument reveals the extent to which its citizens are out of touch with reality: aristocratic tradition has hardened into lifeless convention.

Bolton Lovehart's leisurely manner of life without economic stress outwardly conforms to a traditional pattern of gentility in the Old South. Inwardly, his pitiful career is seen to be, in the existential sense, absurd. History too is grimly absurd, but its impurities are suppressed by man's need for illusions to live by. History's data are accidents: one of Bardsville's Civil War heroes

was carried, drunk, on a plunging horse into the midst of the enemy, while the other, a turncoat, was shot down by the Union Cavalry to whom he offered aid. Jake Velie knows the truth about Cassius Perkins's heroism well enough to remark sardonically, "Mought as well put up that moniment with a jug of cawn whisky carved on top lak hit wuz a angel on a tombstone" (CIA, p. 8); but nobody hears him. Even if the people of Bardsville had heard him, "They would not have believed him or his truth, for people always believe what truth they have to believe to go on being the way they are" (CIA, p. 8). (Many years later in The Legacy of the Civil War Warren was to review the American national identity in terms of the same human failing.) History is commemorated by the ignorant or complacent. Money for Bardsville's monument is raised by "The United Daughters of the Confederacy, the defenders of ancient pieties and the repositories of ignorance of history" (CIA, p. 5), and it is Bolton Lovehart, prisoner of unreality, who undertakes a history of the town.

Simon Lovehart, Bolton's father, is a representative Southerner in that he perverts his private history into an alibi for inertia. His simple, satisfyingly physical one-answer system is provided by the minnie ball which knocked him off his horse at the Battle of Franklin: with a little help from the prayer book he can explain everything in terms of that fortuitous piece of metal. He thus exemplifies the Southern talent for explaining and excusing everything by reference to the War: "By the Great Alibi the Southerner makes his Big Medicine. He turns defeat into victory, defects

into virtues" (Legacy, p. 55). If Simon Lovehart is dead to the world before his time, death is not for him as it is for others, a practical joker. Bolton's mother has sought to determine events in his history but is finally betrayed by the heart whose alleged weakness has been the source of more than half a century of absolute power over her son. Bolton's wife is killed in circumstances that proclaim the falsity of the respectable image she had been at such pains to build. The death of her son in Italy further illustrates the caprice of history. The action in which Jasper dies is called "an effective surprise" (CIA, p. 56): it is so in a double sense, for Jasper Parton dies much better than he had lived.

The rhythm of Bolton's life is a series of unsuccessful attempts to gain freedom in the real world, each attempt being followed by return to bondage and retreat into fantasy. In an instinctive bid to define himself away from his claustrophobic Episcopalian home, Bolton receives an alien baptism. Escaping the punishment which might have confirmed his act and granted him definition, he recovers from the fever that follows his immersion, savouring his detachment from the world.⁷ Bolton finds reality and fantasy mingled in the circus, but is soon recovered and reprimanded. His mother's feigned or induced heart attack summons him back from Sewanee and threat of a recurrence thwarts both his marriage to Sara Darter and his predictable pleasure in selling tickets for the illusions screened at the local theatre. He becomes the town's authority on the progress of the second World War, but the end of the War deprives him of an audience. He delights in his second-hand

⁷ Baptism, symbolising a change of state is used to similar purpose, though in a larger context, in World Enough and Time, pp. 27-34. The dog which follows Bolton appears again in Brother to Dragons, pp. 103-104.

fatherhood, but both his wife and step-son are killed. When his marriage had seemed to connect him to the real world he had sold his circus, but now, abandoned by his mother, by Sara, by his wife, by Jasper and by the people of Bardsville who no longer listen to him, he inevitably returns to the attic. "Finally he had found his way back" (CIA, p. 60), although we are not told whether he had found the strength to carve and paint another surrogate world for his wounded sensibility to hide in.

By its unifying focus on the story's central symbol, the epilogue effectively summarizes the points Warren has made about the meaning of history. His selection of personal histories has reduced history itself to a common denominator of unreality. The survivor is Janie Murphy Parton, the hope and maker of the future. Hers is the desirable attitude towards the past. She will relinquish her illusory guilt and her illusory love: holding the "big, coarse hand of Murray James" (CIA, p. 61), she will go on with the business of living in the real world, consigning the unknowable past to its proper place, with the circus in the attic. Warren's treatment of illusion in this story may seem unduly critical in the context of his Conradian belief in "the dream"⁸ but the dream or the idea must be made to work in the world, and that is what the illusions of Bardsville fail to do. The Civil War monument is practically forgotten, almost "concealed in a riot of purple-tufted ironweed, flame-tufted milkweed, and sassafras growth" (CIA, p. 4). Simon Lovehart's "truth" detaches him from his own family; his wife's idea of

⁸ See above, p.

motherhood, a perversion of her true rôle, isolates herself and her son from communion with others. Bolton's protective fantasy of the circus seals him off from the real world. Only Janie Parton follows the line laid down in "Knowledge and the Image of Man." Within her limits she achieves "in the pain of isolation . . . the courage and clarity of mind to envisage the tragic pathos of life" and thus, in her new marriage, she is able to "return to a communion with man and nature."⁹

The time known as blackberry winter is a spell of unseasonable weather which interrupts summer when blackberries are ripe. It is a climatic incongruity, like T.S. Eliot's "Midwinter spring" in "Little Gidding." Warren's most famous short story began as "a way of indulging nostalgia" for the childhood freedom of being allowed to go barefoot in summer and for the strange "feeling of betrayal when early summer gets turned upside-down and all its promises are revoked by the cold-spell, the gully-washer."¹⁰ "Blackberry Winter" (1946), therefore, developed out of familiar rural materials which could smoothly extend into a representation of Paradise and Fall without any forcing of basic realism. The story perfectly succeeds in fusing "experienced reality" and "symbolic significance" without violating what Warren calls "marginal sensibility", that is the "locating of the poetic, the pathetic, or the tragic in the unpromising person or situation" (SE, pp. 98-99). The basic strategy is to create and maintain a tension between the point of view of the nine year old boy and that of the man he has become thirty-five years later, while suggesting,

⁹ See above, p. 63.

¹⁰ Understanding Fiction, p. 640.

through symbolic representation and occasional observations of the middle-aged man, the differences which the years have made in his evaluation of this spot of time. The signatures of things are there for the young Seth to feel and wonder at--the flood, the trash washed out from beneath Dellie's cabin, the tramp--and the mature Seth is able to read them.

Much of the story's excellence consists in the mature Seth's ability to articulate meanings without falsifying the feelings actually experienced by the boy. It is June, time for going barefoot, but Seth's mother has told him to put on his shoes because it is blackberry winter. The boy's response is precisely given although the language belongs to the man: "You do not understand that voice from back in the kitchen which says that you cannot go barefoot outdoors and run to see what has happened and rub your feet over the shivery wet grass and make the perfect mark of your foot in the smooth, creamy red mud and then muse upon it as though you had suddenly come upon that single mark on the glistening auroral beach of the world" (CIA, p. 64). Seth is both Crusoe and Adam in a closed familiar world of initial perfection where time is the spece in which something that has happened "stands solid." He might muse safely over that perfect footprint, for it would betoken no sinister intruder. But a mysterious stranger enters on this day of disruptions, natural and human, leaving an imprint on the boy's sensibility that alters him irrevocably, marking his Fall from childhood innocence and his introduction to a mortal, complex world of ambiguity, insecurity and change.

Seth is still secure in the intimate safety of his father's saddle when he watches the cow, "dead as a chunk", in the swollen creek, but his composure is shaken when he finds Dellie's model yard fouled by rubbish: "It was not anything against Dellie that the stuff had been under the cabin. Trash will get under any house. But I did not think of that when I saw the foulness which had washed out on the ground which Dellie sometimes used to sweep with a twig broom to make nice and clean" (CIA, p. 79). The mature Seth does not blame Dellie, but the boy knows only that something ordered and clean is now inexplicably confused and besmirched. Inside the cabin there is darkness and separation: Dellie has been changed by the mystery of the "woman-mizry" which Old Jebb will not explain but which somehow causes the disproportionate "awful slap" that reduces Little Jebb to tears and sends Seth running from such sudden ugliness and misunderstanding.

It is the tramp, the mysterious stranger with his shabby city clothes, sinister knife and vicious language, who finally deprives the boy of his childhood certainties. The tramp does not merely symbolise evil: Seth's "Where did you come from?" and "Where are you going?" (CIA, pp. 85-86) are questions that spring from an instinctive recognition of "this lost, mean, defeated, cowardly, worthless, bitter being as somehow a man."¹¹ The tramp has no personal identity: his face is "perfectly unmemorable" (CIA, p. 69) and he enters the story simply as "the man" (CIA, p. 64). Like some primordial creature of unknown origin he comes "up from the

¹¹ Understanding Fiction, p. 642.

river and had come up through the woods" (CIA, p. 65). He moves "like a man who has come a long way and has a long way to go" (CIA, p. 66). He is an Ancient Mariner, fixing the young Seth with his intimation of human possibilities beyond anything the boy has known, or a Leech Gatherer from a far region, come to admonish the boy for his simple view of the world.

Only Old Jebb, prophetic and doomed to be practically immortal, has a comprehensive view of life. Seth asks him to explain Dellie's "woman-mizry":

"Hit is the change," he said, "Hit is the change of life and time."

"What changes?"

"You too young to know."

"Tell me."

"Time come and you find out everything."

(CIA, p. 82)

The mature Seth of the epilogue has learned that time is not space after all, but movement through change. He realises now that his own "change of life and time" began on that day thirty-five years ago, when he followed the mysterious stranger out of Eden and into the greater, doubtful world.

In "Original Sin: A Short Story" the identity from which the "you" of the poem has fled includes guilty feelings towards "your grandpa, who / Had a wen on his forehead and sat on the veranda / To finger the precious protuberance, as was his habit to do" (SP, p. 288). "When the Light Gets Green" (1936) foreshadows this poem as well as the later "Court-Martial" (SP, pp. 228-232), though on the surface it is little more than a portrait of the narrator's grandfather who closely resembles Warren's own.¹² The real subject of

¹² See Appendix, p. 335.

the story, however, is the conflict in the boy's feelings towards Grandfather Barden, which recalls the painful incapacity for simple emotion in the narrator of "The Return: An Elegy." Warren begins the story with an engaging example of purity and impurity, the split between real and ideal:

My grandfather had a long white beard and sat under the cedar tree. The beard, as a matter of fact, was not very long and not white, only gray, but when I was a child and was away from him at school during the winter, I would think of him in my mind's eye, and say: He has a long white beard.

(CIA, p. 88)

By employing a double perspective similar to that of "Blackberry Winter," Warren infuses the account of the old man with a self-condemnatory ambivalence which makes the brief narrative an act of atonement. There is no easy warmth in the narrator's recollection, but its precision of detail conveys the importance of his grandfather to him, hence the delicate pain of his oscillation between respect for the old man's Civil War past and still straight carriage and revulsion from his shrunken body and nicotine-stained moustache. The use of green--"the wavy green mirror" (CIA, p. 88), the "dark green" cedars (CIA, p. 90), the light that "gets green" before the storm (CIA, p. 94)--to represent the ominous ambiguity of experience is a forced device, but the image of the hen "trying to peck up a piece of hail" (CIA, p. 95) echoes exactly the boy's feeling of bafflement by his initiation in the doubleness of the heart. The story is slight, but effective within its limits.

"Christmas Gift" (1937), another modest piece, demonstrates that "our human communion"¹³ may survive even the unlikeliest

¹³ Understanding Fiction, p. 642.

circumstances. The story is a good example of Warren's skill in creating a mood and developing his theme through the use of natural background. The grayness of the raw winter weather suggests the character of Seth Alley's hard sharecropping life, while, despite Bill Stover's crudities, the warmth of the general store and the doctor's office express a low-keyed but genuine human kindness missing from the boy's life. It is after the boy's exposure to human warmth that he and the doctor, drawn together by the desolation of the landscape, exchange their Christmas gifts. Perhaps this could not have happened if the meanness of Bill Stover's remarks had not prompted the storekeeper to give the boy candy. Warren's view of cause and effect in human relations developed from instances like this--and like the lives of the Partons in "The Circus in the Attic"--into Jack Burden's theory of the spider web in All The King's Men: "I eat a persimmon and the teeth of a tinker in Tibet are put on edge" (AKM, p. 234).

The next four stories in the collection illustrate "the malfeasance of nature or the filth of fate" in the defeat of personal ideals of living. The narrator's position in these stories is closer to the detachment of "Christmas Gift" than to the involvement of "Blackberry Winter" or "When the Light Gets Green", and Warren does not always provide adequate materials for interpretation to work on. This is especially true of "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle" (1946) which is too long for its content and fails to define its focus. The point, presumably, is that Elsie's ideal of clean routine and circumspection, unaccompanied

by any real knowledge of herself, is too feeble to withstand life's elemental pull towards disorder, although she does apparently profit enough from experience to send her daughter away from home and the possibility of a fate like her own. Even without the evidence of the earlier "Testament of Flood" (1935) the reader can guess that this is a misjudgement of Helen who looks like her father and has doubtless inherited more of his character than of her mother's. Apart from some interest in the skilful treatment of Beaumont's feelings for Elsie, the story fails to engage the reader because there is nothing to fasten on to in the form of a point of view or a character with whom the reader may identify.

"Goodwood Comes Back" (1941) ends in obvious irony: the country boy comes home, but his ambition to own a piece of ground in the country is realised by the corrupt method of marrying a girl with a half-interest in some land. He has prostituted himself in the city and brought the habit back with him. The city made a drunkard of him but the country kills him through the agency of his brother-in-law. The story fails to satisfy chiefly because the narrator himself is an unsatisfactory combination of participant and onlooker. He gives the impression of telling a story in which he cannot quite muster enough interest to stir himself to real feeling or to the effort of interpretation. Perhaps he is just too dull. Luke Goodwood resembles Jasper Harrick of The Cave in his love of hunting, his drinking and his desire to escape from the world; but his story seems little more than an indistinctly enunciated Agrarian protest against the urban waste land and the poisoning ideal of material success.

In John M. Bradbury's opinion "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger" (1947) is another case of narrow understanding in the narrator and "extruded" Agrarian message.¹⁴ But although the narrator is again detached from the action, he is clearly qualified to view it comprehendingly. He is apparently a local boy ("I had seen Jeff York a thousand times . . ." [CIA, p. 121]) but the quality of his response is indicated by his language which ranges from the rural ("a pinch of salt to brighten it on the tongue" [CIA, p. 126]) to the literary ("he stands there in that silence which is his gift" [CIA, p. 121]). Warren carefully establishes the patented gate and the hamburger stall as credible symbols of the ambitions of the two main characters, so that the ending, though shocking in the manner of Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, is tragic rather than melodramatic. Jeff York's heritage of centuries of sturdy endurance had equipped him for a life of hard rural striving, but not for the insight that would have prevented him from sacrificing the dream he had made real to the obsession of a wife who is essentially a parody of the Southern female. There is a suggestive irony in the fact that it is a contrivance of the modern age which represents escape from his ancestors' lives of toil and loss: "The gate was the seal Jeff York had put on all the years of sweat and rejection. He could sit on his porch on a Sunday afternoon in summer, before milking time, and look down the rise, down the winding dirt track, to the white gate beyond the clover, and know what he needed to know about

¹⁴ John M. Bradbury, The Fugitives: A Critical Account (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), pp. 197-198.

all the years passed" (CIA, p. 124). The wonder of modernism in the mechanical patented gate is a step towards the denial of those past years which is expressed in the sleazy modernism of the hamburger stand.

"A Christian Education" (1945) is superficially about the failure of Mr Nabb's ideal to work in the world but the real subject of the story is the education of the narrator concerning his own nature. He does not seem to have learned very much: the ages given for Alec Nabb in the last paragraph establish that the narrator is recalling events of at least nineteen years earlier, yet the tone of his narrative is more appropriate to the boy he was at the time of Silas's death. There is a quality of the faux naif about this which invests the story with an archness that undermines credibility. It is not clear whether his sense of guilt is responsible for his clipped, ironic presentation of the Nabbs, but there are two things about Silas's death which he would doubtless like to forget: his failure to rescue Silas and his own almost imperceptible death-wish:

The bottom of a pond is the softest place in the world and dark deep down, not water and not mud, just like velvet in the dark, only softer, and when my hand touched bottom that time, just for a split second I thought how nice it would be to lie there, it was so soft, and look up trying to see where the light made the water green. Then I got scared, and I swam for the top and popped out of the water with my ears roaring and the light sudden like an explosion.

(CIA, p. 141)

This reminds us of the lovers' retreat from the world to rest "Upon the floor of light, and time" in "Bearded Oaks" (SP, p. 308), but the narrator's experience, even in retrospect, has resulted in no

explosion of awareness. The concluding twist of the story--the summarised career of Alec Nabb--seems an unconscious attempt by the narrator to vindicate his low opinion of the Nabbs and to diminish his own sense of responsibility for contributing to their misfortunes by stressing Mr and Mrs Nabb's incompetence as parents. Unfortunately, the reader cannot be sure if this is the intended effect: the story peters out without defining its focus clearly enough.

"Testament of Flood" (1935), another variation on the theme of initiation, re-introduces us to Mrs Beaumont, the Elsie Barton of "The Love of Elsie Barton: A Chronicle," and her daughter, Helen. This brief story is a finely controlled development of the opening image in which the boy's imagination catches the meaning of Elsie Beaumont's life: "So dry, she was like those bits of straw and trash lodged innocently in the branches of creek-bottom sycamores as testament of long-subsided spring flood--a sort of high water mark of passion in the community" (CIA, p. 163). It is Steve's growing perception of the flood's rising again in Helen that so discomfits and compels him in his adolescent movement out of innocence to a sense of "the strict and inaccessible province" which the girl precociously seems to have entered. A poet's precision records Steve's fascination and pang of exclusion as he watches Helen posting her letter:

So long as the letter remained between the fingers, it was intimate and part of herself. When the letter plunged into the black cavity and the lid clicked, the inscribed sentiments were abstracted, only connected with her being by a signature which he might recognise in precise backhand like the "Helen Beaumont" on her school papers. The letter with the signature "Helen" would no longer belong to her; it would belong to the world, to almost anybody, to that person he would never know. But it never belonged to him.

(CIA, p. 164)

Helen's detachment from the "straight lines and cold angles" of geometry suggests her intimacy with "another world whose lines all curved voluptuously toward some fulfillment he could not possibly understand" (CIA, p. 165). Prompted by the girl's "mild and satirical gaze" the boy does understand enough to know that when she cannot answer the teacher's question he must not supply the answer: to associate himself with the teacher's world would be to proclaim himself a dullard in the richer lore possessed by the girl. The story is a testament of the flood of feeling in Steve too, and it works beautifully because the boy's point of view, clear and sustained, is so sensitively rendered in the language of the author and thereby interpreted.

Sarcasm, which Warren had come to abjure in his poetry, is cleverly employed in the black humour of "The Confession of Brother Grimes" (1947) which reads like a burlesque of Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil." The narrator's flippancy is itself a judgement of Brother Grimes's crime. His real crime, of course, is the monstrous egoism of believing that his use of hair dye for twenty years is fittingly punished by the deaths of five people. This is not a parody of Warren's "cosmic web philosophy" as Casper suggests¹⁵ but rather of the fundamentalist's paranoid association of ideas. Both preachers and teachers come off rather badly in Warren's fiction.

"Her Own People" (1935) is a perceptive, low-keyed study in race relations, a subject with which Warren became more explicitly

¹⁵ Casper, p. 95.

concerned in the fifties and sixties. The negro girl Viola seems to admit to her lie (she wanted a coat so she got money from the Allens, her employers, under false pretences), but resists passively, taking to her bed in the home of the negro family with whom she lodges. Her repeated "Yassum" to all charges and exhortations resembles the "I should prefer not to" of Melville's *Bartleby*. Rejected by the world, by "her own people", she begins a withdrawal which may lead her to *Bartleby's* fate. The Allens, if they are rather weak and not particularly sympathetic, are not bad people and naturally enough feel put upon. The irony of the story is that they are the only people Viola has. That she has no others is borne out by Mr Allen ("The trouble is that Viola is a white-folks' nigger" [CIA, p. 178].), by Mrs Allen ("She was so clean that when she was a little girl, she says she wouldn't sit on the ground with the other little niggers, she sat on a plate" [CIA, p. 178].) and by the negro, Jake ("We ain't never wanted her" [CIA, p. 181].) We can only speculate about her future but we may recall the fate of another "white-folks' nigger," Little Jebb of "Blackberry Winter," who "grew up to be a mean and ficey Negro," and who ended up in the penitentiary from "just being picked on so much by the children of the other tenants, who were jealous of Jebb and Dellie for being thrifty and clever and being white-folks' niggers" (CIA, p. 86). Viola is thus a victim of the ultimate dispossession; culturally she has no people.

Warren's two "Professor" stories, "The Life and Work of Professor Roy Millen" (1943) and "The Unvexed Isles" (1947) are both rather slight pieces whose themes (the achievement of identity through self-understanding) and whose point of view (uneasy retrospection) are better handled in other stories, e.g. "When the Light Gets Green."

The self which Professor Roy Millen comes to understand is not a particularly admirable one, but Warren displays compassion in his account of the man's process of discovery. Irony is, of course, at the centre of both tales as in the mock-heroic title with its "life and work." Although Professor Millen's has not been a distinguished career, his life, before the "small job teaching freshmen at the University," had been a long, arduous one, a dedicated attempt to gain an education. He had found his career "better than what he had hoped for. For he had scarcely known that there could be such a life as this" (CIA, p. 191). His career, his very self had, however, been defined by his wife, recently dead. His act of pettiness is a long withheld rebellion against his wife's shaping domination, against years of gratitude, and against his wife's humbling patience in suffering. The testimonial he is asked for by a patently advantaged student comes to seem--especially after the trivial lie which the interview elicits from him--yet another sacrifice, another demand that he give up something rightfully his by helping to create for the student an opportunity which he never had himself. Although Warren's psychological insight is considerable, the story's conclusion suggests that he is uncertain about the effectiveness of his account of the Professor. The ending of the story is over-stated: once the interview itself has been recorded we know, given the preceding chronicle of Millen's life, how and why he will act.

"The Unvexed Isles" gives an even stronger impression of the author's uncertainty about the effectiveness of the Professor's point of view. The basic irony is that the student's smugness

destroys the Professor's. Although the point of view of the story itself derives from Albur's general air and conversation which engender Dalrymple's response and the consequent evolution of his self-understanding, and although Dalrymple, suspecting his wife of an infidelity, is naturally very conscious of his young rival, Warren is too insistent in his characterisation of the young man. Dalrymple does, however, achieve a new understanding of himself, of his wife and of what their life has been and may in future be. Where Dalrymple, though humbled, really grows in stature as his story moves to its close, Millen is inevitably diminished by his use of the student as an emotional scapegoat. The two Professors do have much in common: a hard, unhappy early life, a wife who inspires guilt, frustration, self-pity and rebellion, a sustaining if illusory prop in the hope of some academic distinction (the production of a book or an article), and a youthful antagonist prompting each of them to self-destruction. Both stories are clever, but somewhat clumsy.

Although "Prime Leaf" (1931) is printed last in The Circus in the Attic it was Warren's first published story and is an obvious precursor of Night Rider, his first novel. Parallels between story and novel readily suggest themselves. Both works have the same foundation in historical fact, the Kentucky tobacco wars of the first decade of the twentieth century, both present the same sort of characters, both deal with the same kind of problems. Mr Sullivan, the young farmer-attorney in "Prime Leaf", is apparently under the influence of Mr Hopkins and is active in the Association. To this

extent he foreshadows Mr Munn of Night Rider. Mr Hopkins, old Mr Hardin's friend and contemporary, is a shrewd, vigorous, uncomplicated man, an active and effective leader who anticipates Bill Christian in Night Rider. Old Mr Hardin is obviously a prototype of Captain Todd in age, occupation and background but chiefly in that they are both men of unbending moral integrity. For some of the characters in Night Rider, then, there are hints or sketches in the story, the characters of "Prime Leaf" being miniatures which Warren enlarges for the broader canvas of the novel.

Leonard Casper's brief analysis of "Prime Leaf" includes the following remarks:

Its whole first section of dialogue is ballast better overboard. Once under way . . . "Prime Leaf" explores with powerful intimacy the divisions and alliances of its inhabitants.

What makes "Prime Leaf" an exceptional story in the Warren canon is that none of its characters wonders who he is, or what the nature is of man, God, or society.¹⁶

Casper is quite mistaken in his first point. In the first section of the story Warren introduces the central characters, father and son, and several less important figures, all of whom come alive in dialogue which is completely functional. The Hardin family, grandfather, father, mother and son are presented at the dinner table with Mr Wiedenmeyer, a tobacco buyer who has purchased the Hardin crop in years past. Here, then, is a representative of the enemy--the tobacco buyer--as a puffing fat man whose discomfort in the heat marks him an alien in this traditional, rural world whose special qualities are particularised in descriptions of landscape, in the episode of the shooting of a marauding hawk and in the

¹⁶ Casper, p. 99.

atmosphere of the "Utopia" saloon. Sparring with Big Thomas and old Mr Hardin about tobacco prices makes Mr Wiedenmeyer distinctly uneasy: "Ve all gotta do business. Some gotta sell, some gotta buy. Ve all gotta live, ain't ve?" (CIA, p. 214). Later, after Mr Wiedenmeyer has left, old Mr Hardin says of him, "He's just a German. A German who feels sorter sorry for himself" (CIA, p. 225). Although Mr Wiedenmeyer represents the power of the buyers, he is not in himself a threatening figure; but the fact that he is neither particularly sympathetic nor commanding allows Warren to do two things at once. While the supposed enemy is standing at the side of the stage, Warren places his two principal characters, father and son, in the centre and gradually reveals the story's chief concern, which is not to be the struggle between grower and buyer but the relationship between the Hardin men, between idealism and pragmatism.

Almost immediately we begin to feel something of the complexity of this relationship. Old Mr Hardin remarks that although he is sixty-nine, he had two years ago stayed out hunting until four-thirty in the morning, whereupon his daughter-in-law says, "Yes, and kept me up all night waiting for you men to come in . . . And you, Papa, almost had a chill the next night and I had to sit up with that" (CIA, p. 212). The old man is not offended but the son says, "Edith," and there is "a note of rebuke in the young Mr Hardin's voice." Edith Hardin's indulgent reprimand of the old man is a show of tenderness towards him and it is this affection for his father that Big Thomas, an outsider in his own home, rebukes in his wife. The old man's domination--even over Edith's affections--undermines Big Thomas's

status as husband and father and causes the younger man to insist on his being thoroughly different from his father. This is openly expressed in part III in the conversation between Big Thomas and Edith:

"You and Papa are mighty different. I don't know which one of you I like the best."

"I know which one. It's him."

"Maybe so, maybe you're right." And then she caught sight of her husband's face. "Why, Thomas! You crazy old goose. I do believe you're jealous of your own father. You ought to be spanked like Tommy."

(CIA, p. 247)

Edith's making light of the feeling she senses in her husband indicates that she has not yet measured it accurately, even that she is incapable of understanding him. Startled by the look in his eyes, she then attributes his state of excitement to a fever, the implication being that if he disagrees with his father he must be sick. The moment of intimacy that follows (CIA, pp. 248-49) is broken by the entrance of old Mr Hardin and young Thomas. All this deepens the sense of division among members of the Hardin family and grows out of the intimations given in the opening pages. Perhaps by "ballast" Leonard Casper means specifically to criticise the length of the opening section; but "Prime Leaf" is of novella length and, therefore, given its function, the proportion of the opening section seems right.

Although Big Thomas does at last decide that he cannot remain in the Association and although this decision is in part caused by discussion with his father and by the force of his father's example, communication between the two is never easy. Mrs Hardin must act as an occasionally effective mediator between the two men. As Big Thomas

says, "Papa and I ain't a damned bit alike" (CIA, p. 248). It is important for him to establish this as fact in order to fix his own separateness and to achieve a sense of his own identity. In this context it is, no doubt, to Big Thomas's credit that he can come to agree with his father and resign from the Association, putting morality before personal rebellion.

Casper is also in error when he suggests that "Prime Leaf" is exceptional because "none of its characters wonders who he is or what the nature is of man, God, or society," although, certainly, the wondering is far less explicit than in Band of Angels or All The King's Men. It is clear that Big Thomas does wonder who he is, and that he attempts to determine the nature of his individuality as man, husband, father, son and Association member. Concern with society, what it is and how it became so, is evident in both the ends-means dilemma and the tension between the ideal and the real which are of fundamental importance in the story. The end desired by all growers of tobacco, by those who are and those who are not members of the Association, is that they be paid a fair price for their product. The existence of a diversity of mutually exclusive means taken to this end by a number of men, no one of whom could be called evil, comments upon the nature of the society composed by these men.

Much of the effectiveness and some of the problems of "Prime Leaf" arise from Warren's presentation of old Mr Hardin. He is clearly intended to be a sympathetic figure, but is so stolidly fixed in his position that the conflict of the story never quite develops the complexity which is the fruit of both external and internal struggle. His coldness is initially shown in the opening

pages: "Little Thomas looked up promptly, just as the last word of the grace was uttered, and then seemed abashed when he met the incurious glance of his grandfather" (CIA, p. 211). A little later we are told that, "Old Mr Hardin glanced at his son in the same incurious fashion, not quite a reproof, which had met Little Thomas after the blessing" (CIA, p. 214). While the Hardins discuss problems relating to membership of the Association, "Mr Hardin regarded the proceeding with no apparent interest; he looked like one finally detached from it, a spectator who had no concern with its outcome" (CIA, p. 253). The divisions in the family seem to arise precisely from this detachment in its eldest member: "There was silence in the room. Each of the three seemed to be completely unaware of the others, and lost in thought" (CIA, p. 253). He is a kind, morally upright man, yet his detached, absolute allegiance to principle makes him a dangerous idealist. Despite the fact that his barn has been burned by armed night riders and despite the fact that Big Thomas has seriously wounded one of them, old Mr Hardin, the man of idea, does not apprehend his son's danger. Ironically, if Big Thomas, now converted from action to idea at least partly through his father's influence, had done what he originally intended to do and waited at home for the sheriff, he would not have been killed by the men he had formerly defended. Perhaps the tragedy of the story lies in the fact that only in this way, by the murder of his son, can old Mr Hardin learn that an idea is meaningful only when successfully translated into appropriate action.

In both "Prime Leaf" and Night Rider one of the central characters strives to realise himself. Neither succeeds. Big Thomas does not

anticipate the fate which he, as a man of fact rather than of idea, should know is likely. Percy Munn's search brings only further numbness and isolation. Between fathers and sons (old Mr Hardin and Big Thomas, Captain Todd and Benton Todd) the same kind of opposition, that between idea and fact, holds the relationships in vivid tension. Neither father is able to save his son, and each is in a sense responsible for his son's death. Communication between characters is rare and always imperfect. The Hardins agree on an end, but neither has an adequate view of the necessary means. Firing at the night riders until his rifle jams, Big Thomas has no answer, nor does old Mr Hardin in his reliance on the law. As a result, Little Thomas is initiated in the tragic realities of the world beyond the farm, so concluding Warren's book of innocence and experience.

Several critics have attempted to characterise these stories by analogy. The list of writers whom Warren is thought to resemble is comprehensive, if nothing else, including Chekhov, Sherwood Anderson, Lardner, Joyce, Faulkner and Caldwell.¹⁷ The moral is that while influences may be detected, definition of them is likely to be variable, subjective and critically not very useful. Warren's stories are plainly uneven: some are provokingly slight in subject matter, others clearly philosophical in intention. The story of initiation predominates and the pervasive idea is that our figuring of innocence as a permanent if not dominant feature in human relations is destined to contradiction by the life in which we must act to have our being.

¹⁷ John M. Bradbury in The Fugitives: A Critical Account, p. 197 refers us to Chekhov and Anderson.

John Fareilly, in a review of The Circus in the Attic in New Republic, 118 (Jan. 26, 1948), 32 compares Lardner.

William Van O'Connor in another review in Western Review, 12 (Summer, 1948), 251-53 is reminded of Joyce.

Orville Prescott in Yale Review, 37 (Spring, 1948), 575-76 finds similarities in Faulkner and Caldwell.

Chapter Four

Identities and Dreams

Warren's first full length prose work, John Brown, the Making of a Martyr, is a carefully researched study of an exploiter of hand-me-down ideals whose impurities had been purged away by a nation hot for certainties. "I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to excite or incite slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection" (JB, p. 40). Thus John Brown at his trial. He only intended to liberate slaves without bloodshed, as he falsely declared he had done in Missouri the year before. C. Vann Woodward, following Warren, comments: "How these statements can be reconciled with the hundreds of pikes, revolvers, and rifles, the capture of an armoury, the taking of hostages, the killing of unarmed civilians, the destruction of government property, and the arming of slaves is difficult to see. Nor is it possible to believe that Brown thought he could seize a Federal arsenal, shoot down United States Marines, and overthrow a government without committing treason."¹ Warren observes of the trial speech: "It was all so thin, that it should not have deceived a child, but it deceived a generation" (JB, p. 40). The Transcendentalists rushed to canonize Brown; the North had its martyr and an idea. Warren's biography examines that idea in the context of the prosaic facts and the ironies implicit in the characters of John Brown and those who helped and applauded him.

¹ C. Vann Woodward, The Burden of Southern History (New York, Random House, Vintage Books Edition) p. 53.

The book is a study of one of the dreams by which America maintained her identity for much longer than a generation. At times, no doubt, the book pulls too far towards the condition of the novel to satisfy the scholarly historian and sometimes its revelation of ironies is sarcastically toned as in this account of a night during Brown's spell in Hudson, Ohio:

One night the quiet routine of the cabin occupied by the two young men was broken into by a run-away slave, who appealed to them for aid in his flight toward the "North Star." They took him in, as almost any Northern citizen would have done if the pursuit were not too hot or no scrupulous sheriff near. Levi Blakesly went into the settlement for provisions, leaving the renegade in the keeping of his friend. Suddenly, the pair in the cabin heard the noise of horses' hoofs; John Brown helped the negro through a window and told him to hide in the underbrush near the house, while he himself prepared to defend his charge. But the noise was only caused by some neighbours riding past on their way home, and John Brown went outside to find the frightened black fellow. He found him lying behind a log. "I heard his heart thumping before I reached him," said John Brown. Incidentally, he seized on the opportunity to again swear eternal enmity against slavery.

Later John Brown had a son named John Brown Jr. Strangely enough, this son once related this same story with a few circumstantial embellishments, making himself an eyewitness as well. Again John Brown concealed the fugitives in the dark woods at the noise of approaching horses; and again he was able to find and fetch them in by the guiding sound of startled heartbeats. Again John Brown swore eternal enmity to slavery. Some people have professed surprise at the coincidence; others have professed surprise only at the acoustics of Hudson township, Ohio.

(JB, pp. 21-22)

Warren might have repudiated the use of sarcasm in his verse, but he is not above using it to point an implausibility in the John Brown story. The sarcasm here may remind us that this is an Agrarian's attempt to demythologise a Northern martyr, but the idea of the martyr is fairly melted back into the impure elements of

history and of Brown's own nature. "After all," Warren writes, "one cannot afford to read the motives that took John Brown to Kansas as being pure and simple. He merely went there with his eyes open. One of his daughters once made a candid remark on the subject: 'Father said his object in going to Kansas was to see if something would not turn up to his advantage'" (JB, p. 106). The irony, of course, is that the only pure thing about Brown was precisely his faith that something would eventually turn up to his advantage, as, in the event, it did. This was the abstraction he pursued with such fanaticism and energy to the end when he realised that death on the scaffold would provide him with the inestimable advantage of becoming a myth.

A substantial contribution to the interpretation of American history, John Brown, the Making of a Martyr is engaged with questions to which Warren would return in his fictions and in much of his poetry: the discrepancies between myth and reality, idea and fact; the problem of identity; the interaction between society and the individual. His essay in philosophical biography was a prelude to becoming what he calls in his discussion of Conrad's Nostromo a "philosophical novelist." The passage in which he defines the term makes it a partner to his other central notion of impurity in poetry:

The philosophical novelist, or poet, is one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalisation about values, for whom the image strives to rise to symbol, for whom images always fall into a dialectical configuration, for whom the urgency of experience, no matter how vividly and strongly experience may enchant, is the urgency to know the meaning of experience. This is not to say that the philosophical novelist is schematic and deductive. It is to say quite the contrary, that he is willing to go naked into the pit, again and again, to make the same old struggle for his truth.

(SE, p. 58)

This may be read as an extension of Warren's earlier idea that the poet earns his vision by subjecting it to elements of experience which are hostile to it. The novelist fails either if his treatment is too abstract--"schematic and deductive"--or if his "generalisation about values" is swamped by a meaningless proliferation of detail. In Warren's criticism the narrowly conceptual kind of failure is represented by T.S. Stribling, a writer whose values are insufficiently embedded in the texture of his novels² and a similar objection is implied by Warren's general dislike of the literature of social protest in the 1930s, a dislike which he expressed while approving the protest itself.³ The other kind of failure, that is a merely perceptual kind of richness without any controlling idea, is represented by the work of Thomas Wolfe. Warren finds "an enormous talent" and great subjective intensity in Wolfe's fiction, but it is an intensity naively generated because it is unrelated to a coherent philosophical point of view (SE, pp. 170-83). Warren believes that Nostromo is "one of the few mastering visions of our historical moment and our human lot" because it so successfully unifies percept and concept. He says that the "central fact" in Conrad is "the fable as symbol for exfoliating theme" (SE, p. 39). Arguing against the position that Conrad's work intentionally lacks "meaning", he shows that meanings which other critics fail to see are defined clearly but artistically. Of Conrad's famous assertion that he wanted above all to make the reader "see", Warren says: "All of this seems to me, however, to mean nothing more than that Conrad was an artist, that he wanted, in

² Robert Penn Warren, "T.S. Stribling: a Paragraph in the History of Critical Realism," American Review, 2 (Feb., 1934), 463-86.

³ Robert Penn Warren, "The Situation in American Writing," Partisan Review, 6 (Fall, 1939), 112-13.

other words, to arrive at his meanings immediately, through the sensuous renderings of passionate experience, and not merely to define meanings in abstraction, as didacticism or moralizing" (SE, p. 57). This is precisely the kind of artist Warren seeks to be.

John Brown, the Making of a Martyr is a philosophical enquiry which is rooted in the rich circumstantiality of history. Warren's first two philosophical novels, Night Rider and At Heaven's Gate, are both remarkable performances which fail to achieve the best of which he is capable chiefly because they are too schematic. It is in All the King's Men that, with the creation of Jack Burden as narrator, Warren first finds a method for expressing in fiction his philosophical concerns through "the sensuous renderings of passionate experience." Indeed, the powerful coincidence of thought and feeling in Jack Burden--reflected in the often coarse energy of his language with its profusion of concretising images--makes him more Meta-physical than Romantic if we invoke Eliot's criterion of unified sensibility. The immediacy of meanings in All the King's Men is never quite equalled until A Place to Come To, in which first person narrative is also employed, with Jed Tewksbury a clear descendant of Jack Burden.

It is appropriate to refer here to the consistency in Warren's view of the nature of the work of art and his view of the ethical life which we have already mentioned in the Introduction (See above p. 6) and in Chapter One (See above pp. 33-34). It is the artist's task to express his idea concretely, and it is the typical problem of Warren's characters to make the dream, the "idea" by which they live, work in the temporal world. Only thus is true selfhood or identity achieved. Warren's emphasis on risk, his contempt for the

untested vision, for the concept offered without risk and at the expense of exclusion, springs from more than just a sense of literary necessity. It implies a philosophical view-point which we have already seen emerging in his poetry and which is further developed in his essays on fiction, particularly in those on Conrad and Hemingway. For Warren it is not belief in the transcendent ideal which confers dignity and importance, but the effort to realise it--the "agony and sweat of the human spirit" in particular situations. Since he sees the effort to achieve the ideal as in some sense doomed to fail, since triumph always involves defeat, he is a tragic writer.

The conception of man's moral rôle on which Warren's tragic view is based is what he would define as "religious" in the particular sense in which he uses that term in describing Hemingway. For Warren the "religious" nature of Hemingway's work resides in "the quest for meaning and certitude in a world which seems to offer nothing of the sort" (SE, p. 107). A Farewell to Arms is, he says, "a religious book; if it does not offer a religious solution it is nevertheless conditioned by the religious problem" (Ibid.). Warren shares Hemingway's sense of nada, of "the world with nothing at its centre" and all his novels are marked by what he calls "the trauma inflicted by nineteenth-century science, a 'mystic wound' that Conrad suffered from in company with Hardy, Tennyson, Housman, Stevenson, and most men since their date" (SE, p. 43). This painful sense of the meaninglessness of the natural realm which lies at the root of Warren's work corresponds to the vision which he says "inflamed" Hawthorne, "the spectacle of evil, of conscience struggling

to bridge the flaw in nature."⁴

Warren finds Hemingway and Conrad bridging this flaw. For Hemingway redemption is to be sought through fidelity to a code: "It is the discipline of the code that makes man human, a sense of style or good form" (SE, p. 87). For Conrad, and for Warren himself, there is the "idea": the "Platonic vision is what makes life possible in its ruck and confusion" (SE, p. 54). For both writers this is a universal necessity: "It is not some, but all, men who must serve the 'idea'. The lowest and the most vile creature must, in some way idealize his existence in order to exist, and must find sanctions outside himself." (SE, p. 43).

Accordingly, Warren proposes that triumph over the meaninglessness of nature is to be found in "the Platonic vision," but this idealism is modified by a pragmatism which gives the philosophical ground of his literary scorn for the untested ideal, making triumphs defeats and giving his novels their tragic elements. In Nostromo he finds the "irony of success," the "contamination of the vision in the very effort to realise the vision" (SE, p. 53). For Warren this contamination is the inevitable result of action in the name of an ideal; but he insists that an understanding of inevitable defeat does not free man from responsibility, either merely to rest in the pure "idea" or to abandon it. The universal human condition is one of responsibility to give the "idea" life in the real world. "Wisdom" is the recognition of this condition and "redemption" the identification of one's own life with it. It is the predicament which is fully described for Warren by the passage already quoted in Chapter

⁴ Robert Penn Warren, "Hawthorne, Anderson and Frost," *New Republic*, 54 (May, 16, 1928), 399-401.

One (p. 33) from Lord Jim about "the destructive element."

In his essay on Hemingway, Warren offers two important criteria for assessing a writer, namely, "intensity" and "area" (SE, p. 117). In proposing the first he would have us judge the intensity with which the writer feels or realises his ideas; in proposing the second, the breadth of experience in which ideas are seen to function. Hemingway's excellence derives chiefly from his intensity; the area of experience in his work is relatively small. Warren himself is sensitive to both requirements, for his effort has been not only to document a particular view of man's fate as richly as possible, but to do so with an intensity that compels the reader to identify his own condition with it. In other words, Warren seeks to provide not only "wisdom" but "inwardness", a deepened awareness of self which makes "redemption" possible (SE, p. 54).

II

Guthrie, Kentucky is a small defunctive town near the Tennessee border, left high, dry and depressed by the tide of progress. When Warren was born there on 24th April, 1905 it thrived as a tobacco market town, a railway junction serving the Black Patch region whose era of economic and political turmoil provided Warren with some of his earliest impressions and the material for his first published novel. Warren's first novel is more coherent but simpler, less ambitious and less interesting than his second. Night Rider is primarily the story of one man's failure to live simultaneously

in the real and the ideal world; in Jamesian fashion the reader's attention is continually focused upon a single central figure and the other characters are more or less clearly defined by their relation to him. In the more ambitious At Heaven's Gate Warren attempts what he will do successfully in All the King's Men: to depict with greater multiplicity of detail the interaction between his characters and a complex situation. In Night Rider a single human problem is presented and the novel's themes arise naturally from its presentation. In At Heaven's Gate Warren sets a number of warring elements in motion, hoping to dramatise his counter-pointed themes more vividly and to achieve greater "area" than in the earlier book. At Heaven's Gate is philosophically richer than Night Rider, but only a few of its many characters are really convincing; as a result one feels that shape has been forcibly imposed on the material. These two novels are much more than mere precursors of Warren's maturer fictions, but, despite their considerable merits, both are afflicted by an over-all coldness. The chill of Night Rider arises largely from the central character himself, while in At Heaven's Gate the feeling that he is being manipulated into acceptance of an intellectually conceived design prevents the reader from becoming fully involved in the life of the novel. All the King's Men combines the thematic clarity of Night Rider with the intended richness and breadth of subject of At Heaven's Gate.

Night Rider is the story of Percy Munn and his failure to define himself, or to survive in the Conradian sea. He is ordinarily referred to as "Mr Munn," the impersonality of the name emphasising his lack of an inward identity, for his integrity of

being is only an appearance. Some early readers of the novel were taken in by the appearance: Mina Curtiss, reviewing for The Nation, saw Munn's story as "the inevitable tragedy of the liberal,"⁵ and Christopher Isherwood agreed: "Percy Munn is conceived as a figure of tremendous significance: he is the noble liberal gone astray in a world of power politics."⁶ But there is nothing particularly noble or liberal about Mr Munn. As the story develops he is educated into a capacity for some of the other-directed feelings we would associate with a liberal disposition, but he is not much ennobled by his own suffering. Initially he has little interest in the Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco and his goal in life has no reference beyond himself: "if he desired anything of life, that thing was to be free, and himself" (NR, p. 13). Drawn into the Association against his will and in his search for self-definition through action, Munn, neither free nor in possession of a coherent self, becomes a hunted animal whose final desire is simply not to be nothing. The "natural attitude" of Lawyer Munn's mind, we are told early in the first chapter, is one of "logical, sceptical scrutiny" (NR, p. 13), yet time and again the dictates of reason give way to pressure. He dislikes politics and politicians but he goes to the Association meeting. He does not want to become a board member, yet external pressure and "Munn's common sense, his logic" (NR, p. 32) conspire against him. He knows that the aims of the Free Farmers' Brotherhood for Protection and Control are both unethical and impractical,

⁵ Mina Curtiss, "Tragedy of a Liberal," Nation, 148 (April 29, 1939), 507.

⁶ Christopher Isherwood, "Tragic Liberal," New Republic, 99 (May 31, 1939), 108.

but the Roman analogies of Professor Ball, the big hand of Mr Christian and the successes of Dr MacDonald help him believe what he must: that meaning can only be found in action. The principle is commendable, but Munn is neither free nor sceptical enough to see that the particular action proposed fundamentally corrupts the principle. A weak, internally divided man, Munn becomes the violent and lawless instrument of an ideal which is contaminated in the attempt to realise it, and his split self is symbolised by his double rôle, that is by his membership of both organisations. Angus Wilson sees Munn much more clearly than Curtiss or Isherwood when he discovers in him an "essentially contemporary horror: the little, empty, unfulfilled person who finds in the Party not so much an ideal, or a means to material ambition, but a realisation of himself in action and violence."⁷

The process of Percy Munn's destruction derives from a continuing internal imbalance between the world and the idea. Once he has been drawn into the world by the speech he finds himself making to the crowd gathered to hear of the Association and its aims, he believes that the idea must save the world. This is exactly what he tells the people: "There is nothing here but an idea" (NR, p. 26). When Munn discovers that neither idealism nor enlightened self-interest is sufficient to assure the success of the Association in its battle with the buyers, he is ready to join the Brotherhood. If the idea will not redeem the world, then the world must redeem the idea--a fair price for tobacco must justify destruction of crops, intimidation, barn burning, murder. Munn

⁷ Angus Wilson, "The Fires of Violence," Encounter, 4 (May, 1955), 75-78.

has long desired to simplify and unify the complexity of life: "If everything could just be brought together at one time, one place, just so you could fight it and have it over" (NR, p. 131). It is this desire which attracts him to Dr MacDonald's plan to dynamite the buyers' warehouses: "This'll be clear. Clear as day. Them or us" (NR, p. 263). Although the Brotherhood's march on the warehouses is relatively successful, it serves only to complicate matters further and Munn, less and less equal to events, enters the final stage of his decline in which the world is all and he descends into nature. Although this is Munn's final stage it has promised almost from the beginning in his perception that his own history is a series of accidents. As his life is a sequence of essentially meaningless occurrences, and since there is increasingly little hope for the future, he attempts to live exclusively in and for the present, a blasphemous condition in the framework of Warren's moral economy. The process is similar to that which Munn had observed in his remote and faded cousin, Ianthe Sprague, who rejected the past, reducing the present to a series of meaninglessly discrete incidents, so escaping from time itself. In his own turn Munn "sank when possible into a blank absorption with the fact of the moment . . . more and more he felt the need to protect himself by denying memory . . . And his mind closed like a valve against all thoughts of the future" (NR, pp. 218-19). Shortly before he dies he learns that his wife has given birth to a son whom he will never see. This epitomises in Night Rider the disjunction of past, present and future which Warren suggests in many of his novels through the father-son relationship. Captain Todd's son is killed, Mr Christian's son is

long dead, Senator Tolliver is childless as is Willie Proudfit, and Bunk Trevelyan's children have died. What is lost in this disjunction is a sense of continuity, tradition, family, indeed of history as the flow of related facts out of which meanings are generated.

Even during the early days of his success and happiness Munn has a sense of his own emptiness. Angus Wilson says: "Though he seems content at the beginning his life is really a husk in which rattles something bigger, which he does not understand."⁸ It is his craving for self-definition which rattles, but it is a sign of his incapacity for such self-definition that he cannot feel he has won at least a measure of it during the period of his achievement when he has the public respect arising from his speech, a loving marriage, legal success in his defense of Trevelyan and the paternal affection of Senator Tolliver. Even during this time Munn regards his history as a sequence of accidents, often feeling himself "in the grip of an impersonal fatalism" (NR, p. 113). He thinks of his life as a chemical experiment, the constituents of which only briefly remain stable. His actions are "as unaimed and meaningless as the blows of a blind man" (NR, p. 114). The progress of his destruction, one feels, is inevitable for Fate controls him as completely as it had controlled the life of Mordecai Munn, the uncle whom he scarcely remembers. Mordecai Munn had fought through four years of the Civil War bearing a "charmed life" (NR, p. 139); but, the War over, he came home and one peaceful Sunday morning, while lighting his pipe, fell off the front steps of his porch and broke his neck.

⁸ Wilson, p. 76.

Percy Munn and Lucille Christian are, ironically, drawn to one another for the same reason: each mistakenly thinks the other self-defined and therefore warm. Their liaison is inevitably unfulfilling and their last meeting--at night, as usual, and still secretive--is meaningless because they have nothing to give one another. Warren's development of the two women in Munn's life--May, his innocent and ineffectual blonde wife and Lucille, his sensual and active dark mistress--emphasises both the obvious symbolic pattern of darkness and light and the deep-seated self-division of Munn. Munn's failure to establish continuity between his inner and outer selves and to bridge the moral gap in his own nature as well as in the world about him is clarified further by the contrasts Warren makes between Munn and other characters in the novel, many of whom are early prototypes for the dramatis personae of subsequent fictions. Three other men especially represent the forces which create Munn's dilemma.

On one side is Captain Todd, a dignified and confident Civil War hero who is sustained by his dedication to the ideal. Todd is a leader of the Association, but he resigns as soon as its domination by the Brotherhood becomes apparent; in the growing violence he sees the blurring of moral distinctions. We are not, however, to understand Todd's choice as unequivocally correct. Benton, his son, an ingenuous projection of the old man's heroic idealism, does join the night riders. He resembles his father physically, and his hand, uplifted to take the oath of violence, reminds Munn of Captain Todd's hand raised in a plea for calm and consideration (NR, p. 180). Benton is killed after an attack on the warehouses, and in a poignant dawn

scene his corpse is brought home to his father (NR, p. 296).

Thus, at the symbolic meeting of night and day the two notions of justice pathetically confront each other. The gap which has developed between father and son reflects the gap which Munn fails to bridge within himself.

The idealistic Captain Todd is offset by two other characters, both night riders and Association directors, who are sustained by the natural, the real. Mr Christian is sustained by his own animal energy; Mr Sills, by the impersonal facts of political action recorded in his ledger and recited in his dry voice at Association meetings. Since their willingness to commit acts of violence is responsible for the contamination of the ideal, their "naturalness" is condemned even more than Captain Todd's idealism. The faith Mr Sills maintains in cold statistics is belied by the destructive violence of events and when Christian is rejected by Lucille he suffers a fatal stroke, his natural warmth and energy suddenly insufficient to sustain him. Neither man has the Platonic vision: Sills is dedicated in his bloodless, pragmatic way to the means whereby the desires of the Association may be realised and Christian clings to the objects of natural human desire.

Warren thus successfully embodies many of the themes of his novel in its characters and in such images as we find in the opening scene, where the pressure on Munn of the crowd on the train foreshadows the pressures that lie ahead for him. Natural detail is tellingly employed as an extension of meaning. Flocks of grackles "always spoke to him [i.e. Munn] of an inevitability, a surety, a completeness beyond his grasp, or even, definition" (NR, p. 208).

To Munn the birds symbolise natural order--a perfect blend of the natural and the ideal--inspiring wonder and the stirring of hope even while exacerbating the loneliness of his own incompleteness and alienation. His fall from the ideal and absorption into mere unordered nature is precisely caught by the drawing, enveloping sound of insects in the dark: "It was as though it was in him, finally, in his head, the essence of his consciousness, reducing whatever word came to him to that undifferentiated and unmeaning insistence" (NR, p. 431).

Yet the weakness of Night Rider is a certain flatness, a lack of convincing inwardness, which is a serious flaw in a book whose concern is, above all, with an inward state. There is plenty of excitement--the scenes of the tobacco war are vivid and compelling --but when Percy Munn is in the foreground, as he so frequently is, there is a lack of tension and we are left to accept the bleak reality of his struggle on faith. Since it is precisely Munn's lack of inwardness that Warren is concerned to expose we may blame his failure on what Yvor Winters calls "the fallacy of imitative form":⁹ the writing is flat because the author is imitating the flatness of his subject, "surrendering to the matter instead of mastering it." Further, we never know why Mr Munn is quite so empty: his nature is simply a donnée of the novel. We are given to understand that he is emotionally cold but we never experience this coldness directly; as a result we find his story not only painful, but also frustrating.

This lack of immediacy is to some extent countered by the book's

⁹ Yvor Winters, In Defense of Reason, (Denver, Alan Swallow, 1947), p. 64.

mythic passage, Willie Proudfit's account of his own life. While Munn is hiding at Proudfit's his sense of isolation from the human community grows painfully intense and he achieves in some measure the wisdom of self-recognition. The Proudfit exemplum may be artificial, but the spirit of his story had been forecast much earlier by Mr Grimes, one of Munn's tenants, who, like Proudfit, had gone West but had come home, his sense of the dignity of labour and the relatedness of past to present strengthened in the process. With the coming of the night riders he had decided to leave again (NR, pp. 256-57). This is, implicitly, a good man's judgement on Munn who is, by now, too deeply into his own fate to receive it. Proudfit does not judge Munn but we are presumably meant to believe that Munn is affected by the story of violence, alienation and final redemption which Proudfit tells with the colloquial grace and flow of an unlettered Kentucky farmer. Proudfit had discovered the inadequacy of a life lived in naturalistic terms and had come to believe that wisdom is largely instinctive and religious in origin. Thus, like the Indians with whom he was living, his enlightenment came to him in a vision, the understanding of which made his redemption possible.

Munn's failure to move from wisdom to redemption, his inability to kill Senator Tolliver and thus realise himself, is underlined by Proudfit's tale which includes many of Warren's recurrent motifs: the son's rejection of the father; the trip west and its result, a decline to murderous innocence; regeneration begun in isolation and necessitating a sense of the historical integrity of the self; the return home signifying self-fulfilment. The story is clearly a

mythic projection of Warren's concept of the human predicament. In Night Rider it operates as the myth that could be Percy Munn's and much of the point of the book is that the hollow Munn, whose self is irretrievably lost, cannot follow its lines in his own life.

III

The Proudfit exemplum is an intrusive, over-explicit statement of an alternative to Percy Munn's empty life and meaningless death. In At Heaven's Gate the mythic element plays a more ambitious rôle in determining the over-all meaning of the novel. At Heaven's Gate is contrapuntal in method, its narrative centre alternating between a main action involving the lives of a number of people in a Southern town and a contrasting mythic accompaniment, the testimony of Ashby Wyndham, a Cain-like backwoods farmer-turned-preacher. Warren integrates the intercalary chapters of Wyndham's statement with the main plot from the beginning and the relation of the sub-plot to the main narrative begins to be clear as early as the fourth chapter. The converging of the two plots, completed in chapter twenty-three, is unforced and convincing.

While the Ashby Wyndham story is a compellingly original tour de force, Warren has said that there is in the novel "a good deal of the shadow not only of the events of that period but of the fiction of that period."¹⁰ Not only is the novel involved in the spirit of the twenties and thirties but Warren's evocation of the South of that era is enriched by hints of literary figures and images particularly

¹⁰ Malcolm Cowley, ed., Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), p. 171.

symptomatic of the time. The transformation of the South which Warren depicts in At Heaven's Gate is a process of deracination, a loss of the sense of the past and its relation to the present. We are reminded of Faulkner's treatment of the same theme in Sartoris (1929) and the abundance of characters and situations in Warren's book recalls Faulkner's Mosquitoes (1927). Sue Murdock carries echoes of Hemingway's Brett Ashley in The Sun Also Rises (1926) and Jerry Calhoun is kin to Scott Fitzgerald's bond man, Nick Carraway. Warren's analysis of the emptiness of modern life and the vampirism of the rich reminds us at once of Fitzgerald's treatment of monied society in The Great Gatsby (1925) and Tender is the Night (1934) and of T.S. Eliot's vision of a disintegrating world.

Malcolm Cowley interprets At Heaven's Gate as almost a roman à clef, identifying Warren's "unreal" city as a combination of Nashville and Memphis, the unnamed university as Vanderbilt and Bogan Murdock as Senator (Colonel) Luke Lea of Tennessee who served a term in jail for his part in the seventeen million dollar failure of the Asheville Bank and Trust Company.¹¹ The scope of the book is much wider than this, however, for Warren is dealing with a fairly advanced stage of the transformation of the agrarian South to a money economy. This is not a case of moonlight and magnolia nostalgia, but a felt and considered expression of alarm at the effects of the new industrialism and the new metropolitanism which stifle human personality and cut men off from the nourishment of the past.

The title of the book is ironic. Warren says that while writing

¹¹ Malcolm Cowley, "Luke Lea's Empire," New Republic, 109 (August 23, 1943), 258. The combination of military rank and civic disgrace in Senator Lea's career makes him a more likely model for Bogan Murdock's father, ex-Confederate Major Lem Murdock. Bogan Murdock would then be the fictional counterpart of the Senator's son, Luke Lea Jr.

At Heaven's Gate he was deep in Dante and that the Seventh Circle of Hell "provided, with some liberties of interpretation and extension, the basic scheme and metaphor for the whole novel. All of the main characters are violators of nature."¹² While the Dantesque parallel no doubt helped Warren in the development of his book, it adds little for the reader. In Canto XI of the Inferno we learn that violence may have three objects: God, oneself, and one's neighbour. The succeeding Cantos devoted to the Seventh Circle name specific kinds of violators: the usurer, the suicide, the spend-thrift and the sexual aberrant. The intended associations are made readily enough: Bogan Murdock as usurer, Slim Sarrett as sexual aberrant, Ashby Wyndham, before his conversion, as violent against God. But Bogan Murdock as usurer is not more fully explained by the Dantesque scheme. Sue, if promiscuous, is not bestial; Jerry Calhoun does not fit into any category, although his impiety in taking Murdock as his false father is another crime against nature. It is always interesting to know how a work has evolved in an artist's mind, but Warren's basic metaphor here is entirely unobtrusive.

The novel's thematic richness is defined by James H. Justus in one of the best pieces of critical writing on Warren's fiction.¹³ Justus sees that the novel concerns a world in which Agrarian values--the integration of personality, a sense of mutual responsibility, and a harmony between man and nature--are conspicuously absent. As a result the world of At Heaven's Gate is one in which the self has to attempt its entire recreation, a process which is usually self-destructive in spiritual terms. Some of the novel's characters are

¹² AKM, Introduction, p. VII. See also below, Appendix, pp. 344-45.

¹³ James H. Justus, "On the Politics of the Self-Created: At Heaven's Gate," Sewanee Review, 82 (1974), 284-99.

insufficiently imagined, thereby weakening the impact of the book, but Warren's juxtaposition of the two narratives points clearly to the central idea: the separation in modern life between an anti-Agrarian pragmatism that recognises no moral limitation and a traditional, religious acceptance of supernatural standards and thus of human imperfection, sin and guilt. Warren does not mean that man's full humanity can be achieved in either realm: as a natural creature man must operate within the natural while actively cherishing and celebrating the ideal. The pathos of the situation arises from the remoteness, the lack of comprehension with which each of the extremes regards the other. The failure of each of the characters is measured by his or her inability to bridge the gap.

At one extreme stands Bogan Murdock, the politically powerful financier who dominates the life of the town and who repeats many of the characteristics of Night Rider's Senator Tolliver: moral shiftiness, an abstract interest in power, material success at the cost of moral distinctions. Democracy is corrupted, the novel suggests, by the evolution of the business-state, by the influence of Bogan Murdock on the state government. The people surrounding Murdock are defined by their relation to his self-justifying desires, like the characters in Willie Stark's retinue. Dorothy Murdock has come to recognise her husband's inability to love, but she is too weak to rebel, reduced to what he has made her, "a drunken, sodden, self-abusing, middle-aged bitch" (AHG, p. 347). Murdock's son, Ham, is a vacuous tool of his father's will while his daughter, Sue, tries to escape and is simultaneously drawn to him. Jerry Calhoun aspires to the status of carbon copy: his is the American dream to learn the business and marry the boss's daughter. Private Porsum, used by Murdock to calm the mountain

men and to preside over one of his banks, is vaguely aware that Murdock's ethics might not stand close scrutiny but tries not to know his responsibility. Duckfoot Blake, the Wemmick to Jerry's Pip, is the exception and the only character in the Murdock world who achieves the goal that was Percy Munn's, "to be free, and himself" (NR, p. 13). He foreshadows Jack Burden not only in his intelligence, the vitality of his language and his breezy cynicism, but also in his self-redeeming conversion from detachment to a belief that "everything matters" (AHG, p. 372).

Warren indicates the humanity of his characters, or their lack of it, largely through their attitude towards the past and their sense of connection between past and present. Murdock calculatedly distorts the past in order to use it, casting his decrepit father as the embodiment of personal honour and making a careful show of revering the old man. The fact that Major Murdock had murdered a political opponent who had reminded voters of his father's collaboration with the carpetbaggers (AHG, p. 87) is conveniently forgotten. The recreated Major's reflected glory facilitates Bogan Murdock's plan to defraud the state by selling it a piece of land which, as a State Park, will commemorate his father. In her search for a separate identity Sue Murdock throws herself into a series of love affairs which eventually lead to her murder. We have seen something of each of her lovers in such poems as "The Return: An Elegy," "Original Sin: A Short Story," and "Pursuit." Each lover fails to achieve selfhood to the extent that he repudiates the definition of himself implied in his origin. (This foreshadows the identity crises faced by Isaac Sumpter in The Cave, Brad Tolliver in Flood, Cy Grinder in Meet Me in

the Green Glen, and Jed Tewksbury in A Place to Come To.)

Murdock's piano-playing after dinner prompts Jerry to think of his boyhood: "That was strange, for ordinarily he shut his mind resolutely to any thought of that past" (AHG, p. 22). Sue herself, Jerry observes, lives "like the minute was all there was, like there wasn't any yesterday and there wasn't any tomorrow . . ." (AHG, p. 117). Slim Sarrett, the homosexual son of middle-class parents, finds his parentage and early history inappropriate to the artist he is determined to be, and accordingly invents a dazzling proletarian family background in keeping with his bohemian style of life. Jason Sweetwater's Marxist certainties about the future enable him to live comfortably but narrowly in the present. Other perversions of a proper feeling for time are exemplified both by Jerry's Uncle Lew who lives in terms of the hatred he constantly refuels in himself by recalling injustices of the past, and by old Major Murdock for whom time stopped with his killing of Moxby Goodpasture.

The novel is also the record of a number of fathers and sons and of the rejection of the former by the latter. Bogan Murdock rejects the reality of his father in order to use him; Slim Sarrett creates both mother and father, a New Orleans whore and a barge captain; Jerry Calhoun rejects his father, attempting to find a substitute in Murdock; Duckfoot Blake treats his parents like witless pets. Thus, with the exception of Ashby Wyndham, the past as personal history, as family history, as the repository of traditional values has virtually no relevance to the present.

The novel describes two worlds presided over by Bogan Murdock

and Slim Sarrett respectively. It is the terrible division of our age that passage from one world to the other is so difficult. In At Heaven's Gate it is virtually impossible: Sue Murdock makes the attempt and dies. Just before her death she discovers that the two men are quite similar: both are cold manipulators of other people and Sarrett's art is as abstract, sterile and ruthless as Murdock's finance. Sarrett's artistic creed is based on honesty: the artist "finds in facts ample occupation and he can afford to face them. He doesn't have to 'make up' himself or his own life or 'make up' a sweetheart or wife or friends or children. He can accept people and things without reinterpreting them to flatter his needs. The artist is the enemy of blur" (AHG, p. 150). Yet Sarrett's life is itself a lie. The need for the lie derives from his internal division, that of the sexually ambivalent boxer-poet whose lust for power equals Bogan Murdock's but who has turned inward to a private dream-world for fulfilment, attempting to manipulate reality into the terms of his dream. Thus, if Bogan Murdock represents the realm of fact unredeemed by the idea, Sarrett represents the opposite condition, an excess of idea which can never be embodied successfully in reality. It has been argued that Sarrett's control at the end of At Heaven's Gate makes it an amoral novel because vice is not properly punished.¹⁴ This is to miss the subtler implications of the last glimpses we are given of both Sarrett and Murdock. Sarrett's expertise as boxer, critic, murderer, New York littérateur is, like Murdock's association of himself with the Jacksonian tradition, a travesty of success. Bogan Murdock beneath the portrait of Andrew

¹⁴ Norman Kelvin, "The Failure of Robert Penn Warren," College English, 18 (April, 1957), 355-64.

Jackson (AHG, p. 391) is balanced by Slim Sarrett in his New York hotel room, "trying to think of nothing, nothing, nothing at all, while life stirred and swarmed and uncoiled in its dim, undulant, rhythmic, fulfilling roar far below, where the lights were, and while the great towers of New York heaved massively into the black sky and hedged him about" (AHG, p. 379). Both Sarrett and Murdock have exercised great destructive force on others, but as men both are, like Isaac Sumpter in The Cave, essentially nothing, mere figments of their own corrupt imaginations. This is what Duckfoot Blake realises of Murdock when he tells Jerry: "Bogan Murdock ain't real . . . Bogan Murdock is just a dream Bogan Murdock had" (AHG, p. 373).¹⁵

Literally and figuratively a self-made man, Bogan Murdock presents the same kind of difficulty for the reader as Percy Munn in Night Rider. He is perhaps too much the Agrarian's stereotype of abstract capitalist manipulation to be fully credible; his inner emptiness, like Munn's, is simply a donnée of the novel. He is viewed from several perspectives by different characters and we speculate about him as did Warren's friend, Frank Owsley, the Vanderbilt historian whose comments on the early novels Warren especially appreciated:

Bogan Murdock leaves the reader in some doubt until his final statement at the end of the book cinches the conclusion that he was just what his daughter

¹⁵ Perhaps Bogan Murdock would have been able to survive his disgrace and the failure of his firm, capitalising on the public sympathy gained over Sue's death. The material fortunes of the Leas did not finally crash until 1967, when a Mrs J. Mauerman ordered the sale of Mr and Mrs Luke Lea Jr's personal property to satisfy in part a judgement of \$137,735 against the Leas for default in payment of a \$110,000 note. The sale was reported in The Nashville Banner, Dec. 21, 1967.

thought him to be--no different fundamentally from Slim. Still, like Sue, one has a persistent feeling that Bogan, despite his dominating passion for power, had a real love for his children. Sue never could get away from the feeling and neither can the reader.¹⁶

Yet we are never taken into Murdock's mind or given enough information to know the inner reality of the man as he conceives it himself. We can infer a good deal about the methods by which he has risen and we see something of the process of his decline. What we miss is any hint of a change in him--like Willie Stark's--or a brief chronicle of his early life, like that given of Senator Tolliver's.

If Duckfoot Blake¹⁷ is the most appealing of the novel's characters, Jason Sweetwater and Ashby Wyndham are the most interesting. Together they carry Warren's discussion of the fact-idea dilemma into its subtlest reaches. Both men make their bid for identity in terms of an idea, one political, the other religious, which they attempt to make work in the world and both are well delineated, substantial characters in whom we can believe. Like Night Rider, At Heaven's Gate is, as Warren has said, about "social justice."¹⁸ The character one most readily associates with the term is, of course, Jason Sweetwater, Sue Murdock's last lover and final hope. The reason for Sweetwater's failing Sue is precisely Warren's conception of the inadequacy of Marxist philosophy. Neither a despot like Murdock, nor a dupe like Calhoun, nor a poseur like Sarrett, Sweetwater has found a goal beyond himself in union organisation.

¹⁶ Letter dated 16th Oct., 1943 from Frank Owsley to Robert Penn Warren, Papers of Frank Owsley, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

¹⁷ In a book full of "sons-of-bitches," Duckfoot Blake was one of the "mountain peaks" of integrity for Owsley, the other being Ashby Wyndham. Letter from Owsley to Warren, 16th Oct., 1943.

¹⁸ Malcolm Cowley, Writers at Work, p. 171.

Life has become for him "an objective problem, complicated in its detail, but susceptible to solution in terms of a single principle" (AHG, p. 293). Although he lives in the present, he has learned that although his father had proposed a cloying mixture of Southern patriotism and Episcopalianism, he was partly right: "A man could not believe in himself unless he believed in something else" (AHG, p. 292). Sweetwater believes in the purposes of the union, in improved wages and working conditions, but Warren is not simply proposing economic justice as the standard by which human effort is to be judged. The insufficiency of such a standard is exemplified by Sweetwater's moral rigidity: he cannot marry Sue because he has decided that marriage necessarily involves exploitation, making it little better than legalised prostitution: "he honestly believed that if he and Sue Murdock got married he would be making a concession to something to which he could no longer afford to make any concession" (AHG, p. 312). Sweetwater has what Warren, speaking of the Marxists of the thirties, has called "the one-answer system" possessed by those who think they have "one key to the universe."¹⁹ For Sue Murdock, Sweetwater's sense of self-definition is therapeutic after her disappointments in her father, Calhoun and Sarrett; but Sweetwater fails her because his sense of himself is static, his philosophy inflexible and he cannot adjust his general thesis to meet the particular instance of need in another person.

The book's mythic element, "The Statement of Ashby Wyndham," contributes to the philosophical action without involving the flatness associated with the characterisation of Bogan Murdock or the

¹⁹ Cowley, p. 168. See also below, Appendix, p. 362.

feeling that a philosophical rather than a human necessity is determining the story. The question arises, however, whether or not Ashby Wyndham's hard-won fundamentalist faith constitutes a real alternative to the cynicism and violence of the main plot. Ashby's progress from man of nature to man of God, called to bear witness wherever he goes, indirectly brings about a disclosure of Murdock's high-handed methods, but at the end of the novel Ashby is still in jail, unable to pray, sincerely confused by the idea that his conversion of Pearl had led to murder and passively waiting directions from the god who seems to have abandoned him. In contrast to Ashby's innocent guilt is the guilty innocence of Murdock who has emerged from public shame a triumphant object of the town's pity. Warren must intend the irony to provoke us to a concentration on the inward state of each man. Murdock is an inhuman void. Ashby's final state anticipates the necessary interim condition Warren describes in "Knowledge and the Image of Man":²⁰ his feeling of emptiness and the terms of his confusion "in the pain of isolation" are themselves the proof of his humanity and the best hope for his redemption.

IV

Shortly after the publication of All the King's Men Frank Owsley wrote to Warren: "Your mastery of the use of prose seems about complete; the manner and ease with which you change your levels

²⁰ Longley, p. 241. The relevant passage from the essay is quoted above, p. 63.

of writing always puts me in mind of an automobile term or terms, 'free wheeling' and 'liquid drive.'²¹ The key to the novel's fluency is Jack Burden whose language, tough yet intellectual, casual yet precise, swings from minutely observed detail to philosophical abstraction without ever breaking its stride. More than any other character in Warren's novels (Jed Tewksbury runs second in A Place to Come To) Jack Burden exemplifies what Eric Bentley sees as Warren's double endowment: "There is Warren the critic, the cosmopolitan, the scholar, the philosopher, and there is Warren the raconteur, the Kentuckyan, the humourist, the ballad maker."²² Either as philosopher or story-teller Warren is rich and fluent, but he does not always succeed in bridging the artistic gap between philosophy and story. In the doubly endowed character of Jack Burden, Warren found a method of unifying the elements of his most famous book. It is part of the purpose of this study to show that in Warren's work the best is not an enemy of the good, but the creation of Jack Burden is largely responsible for making All the King's Men not only Warren's best work of fiction but also one of the 'great and enduring American novels.

Jack Burden's linguistic "liquid drive" takes him from Sadie Burke's face, "a plaster-of-Paris mask of Medusa which some kid had been using as a target for a BB gun" (AKM, p. 50), to the dignified prose of the Cass Mastern story (AKM, pp. 170-200); or from Willie Stark pacing machine-like in his two-dollar hotel room, his legs

²¹ Letter dated 25th Aug., 1946. Papers of Frank Owsley, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

²² Eric Bentley, "The Meaning of Robert Penn Warren's Novels," *Kenyon Review*, 10 (Summer, 1948), 423.

"plungers in a big vat and you were the thing in the vat, the thing that just happened to be there" (AKM, pp. 75-76), to the lyricism of the novel's last paragraph. Reflecting Jack's belief that "Life is Motion" (AKM, p. 160), his language is itself constantly in motion as he experiments with ways of saying what he feels or has seen. The effect is often deliberately comic, as when he reflects on Tiny Duffy's misjudgement of Willie Stark:

Not that I much blame Duffy. Duffy was face to face with the margin of the mystery where all our calculations collapse, where the stream of time dwindles into the sands of eternity, where the formula fails in the test tube, where chaos and old night hold sway and we hear the laughter in the ether dream. But he didn't know he was, and so he said, "Yeah."

(AKM, p. 22)

The mock-heroic inflation is pointed by Duffy's cynical, demotic "Yeah", but the quick-fire exaggerations of the passage are felt as attempts to catch the truth of the moment as Jack retrospectively assesses it: history, he has come to realise, is shaped by such moments. Years after failing to read the future in the unimpressive figure of "Cousin Willie from the country" (AKM, p. 21) Duffy tries to offer the Boss an unacceptable opinion:

The Boss whipped his head around to look at Mr Duffy so fast all of a sudden there wasn't anything but a blur. It was as though his big brown pop eyes were looking out the back of his head through the hair, everything blurred up together. That is slightly hyperbolic, but you get what I mean.

(AKM, p. 24)

While shaping his image Jack concedes the experimental element in the description, involving us in the fundamental process of the book which is the record of his experiment in becoming.

Both character and chorus, Jack is embroiled in yet detached from the life of the book, participating in the event and then glossing its meaning. This squares with Warren's formulation of the philosophical novelist, "for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalisation about values" (SE, p. 58. See above, p. 102). Jack's progress in All the King's Men is through the "sensuous renderings of passionate experience" (SE, p. 57) towards the "generalisation about values" of the novel's closing pages in which he reaches an understanding of the fact-idea dilemma and a sense of his own identity defined in terms of relationships.

As a novel of ideas All the King's Men possesses a complexity lacking in Night Rider and At Heaven's Gate, without being philosophically over-insistent. Philosophical control is maintained throughout and images "fall into a dialectical configuration" (SE, p. 58), but the novel is not felt to be as schematic as some of Warren's other books, partly because the scheme itself is so richly populated both by ideas and by characters. Artistically All the King's Men succeeds on Warren's own critical terms. The characters are all embodiments of ideas: Willie Stark, the man of fact--with Lucy his wife-mother, Sadie Burke and Anne Stanton his carnal and ideal mistresses---is contrasted to Adam Stanton, the man of idea, and the conflict is finally resolved by Jack, the narrator, whose burden is to learn the meaning of Willie Stark, his rise and fall. These are not simply cardboard figures with allegorical labels because Warren, chiefly through the agency of Jack Burden's language, gives them such life that they are both credible in themselves and as the expression of moral states.

In Joyce Cary's To Be a Pilgrim Edward Wilcher tells his brother:

No-one has written a real political novel--giving the real feel of politics . . . of people feeling the way: of moles digging frantically about to dodge some unknown noise of walking on a slack wire over an unseen gulf by a succession of lightning flashes.²³

By this definition All the King's Men is a political novel, whatever else it may be. It is, indeed, a veritable handbook of politics: we are given "the real feel" of building a corrupt political machine which invites its own destruction and in addition to the study of political psychology we are shown techniques for coercing legislators, quashing impeachment proceedings and mustering support for candidates while chipping away at the opposition. All the King's Men is a political novel in that it deals continually with political processes and actions along the lines suggested to Warren by the career of Huey P. Long, Governor of the State of Louisiana from 1928 until his assassination in 1935. The novel began as a play called Proud Flesh²⁴ and the name of the Huey Long figure in the play was Talos, "the name of the brutal, blank-eyed 'iron groom' of Spenser's Faerie Queene, the pitiless servant of the knight of justice." This element, Warren tells us, remained in the change from play to novel, and Willie Stark remained in one way, Willie Talos: "Talos is the kind of doom that democracy may invite upon itself" (AKM, p. X). This is, of course, a thoroughly political subject; but Warren cautions us about limiting his book to a merely political interpretation: "The book, however,

²³ Joyce Cary, To Be a Pilgrim, (London, Michael Joseph: 1942), p. 198.

²⁴ For comment on Warren's dramatic versions see Casper, pp. 116-21, and William M. Schutte, "The Dramatic Versions of the Willie Stark Story," All the King's Men: A Symposium (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute of Technology, 1957), pp. 75-90. See also below, Appendix, pp. 339-40.

was not intended to be a book about politics. Politics merely provided the framework story in which the deeper concerns, whatever their final significance, might work themselves out" (AKM, p. X). The fact that some critics have focused on "the framework" attests to Warren's mastery of the material he was able to gather between 1934 and 1942 while teaching at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Some critics view the novel as a proto-fascist apology for Long, while others find it has no essential political bias, but that it should have been a sermon on the evils of Long and his kind. Such critics would prefer the two other Huey Long novels, Adria Locke Langley's A Lion is in the Streets (1945) and John Dos Passos' Number One (1943), both of which contain more superficially obvious lessons in political attitudes, although it must be added that Miss Langley's book is very badly written.²⁵ By Edward Wilcher's definition, All the King's Men is a much better political novel than either of these, whatever Warren's intentions.

The resemblance of Willie Stark to Huey Long had a good deal to do with the immediate success of Warren's book, but Warren is at pains to forestall thoughts of a roman à clef: "I do not mean to imply that there was no connection between Governor Stark and Senator Long. Certainly, it was the career of Long and the atmosphere of Louisiana that suggested the play that was to become the novel. But suggestion does not mean identity, and even if I had wanted to make Stark a projection of Long, I should not have known how to go about it" (AKM, p. IX). The danger of identifying Willie

²⁵ For comment on these novels and surveys of the critical response to All the King's Men see Louis D. Rubin Jr., "All the King's Meanings," Georgia Review, 8 (Winter, 1954), 422-34, and Robert B. Heilman, "Melpomene as Wallflower; or, The Reading of Tragedy," Sewanee Review, 55 (1947), 154-66, reprinted in Longley, pp. 82-95.

Stark with Huey Long is illustrated by a comment made by Long's biographer, T. Harry Williams, on what he takes to be the thesis of Warren's novel:

. . . that the politician who wishes to do good may have to do some evil to achieve his goal. This was the course that was forced on the hero of Warren's novel Willie Stark, who was a politician much like Long. It is also the course that Long, faced with a relentless opposition, felt he had to follow. Stark was in the end possessed by the evil or the method and was destroyed.²⁶

Williams is clearly right that Stark is possessed by the evil or the method and that he is destroyed, but the causes of his destruction include something else: a craving for virtue.

John Brown, the Making of a Martyr is a study of a man much like Stark. During the interview appended to this study Warren says of Brown:

. . . the man had some kind of constant obsessive interest for me. On the one hand he's so heroic, on the other he's so vile, pathologically vile. Some fifteen years ago, when Edmund Wilson was working on Patriotic Gore, we'd meet at parties and he would say, "Red, let's go and sit in the corner and talk about the Civil War," and we always did. And the subject of Brown once or twice came up, and he once said, "But he's trivial, he's merely a homicidal maniac--forget him!" Now this is half of Brown. In a strange way the homicidal maniac lives in terms of grand gestures and heroic stances, and is a carrier of high values, but is a homicidal maniac! This is a strange situation; and the split of feeling around Brown makes the split of feeling in a thing like my character Stark almost trivial.²⁷

We would agree that John Brown's impact on history has been much greater than that of Huey Long, Kingfish of Louisiana, but there is nothing trivial about the split in Willie Stark or in the nature of his fate. Willie is doubly split. His apparently benevolent des-

²⁶ T. Harry Williams, Huey Long (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1969), p. X.

²⁷ Appendix, p. 343.

potism brings material improvement to the state but is conducted in the interest of Willie's vengeful lust for power and in a spirit of contempt for the people: "Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud" (AKM, p. 54). This is the only fact for Willie, and his dynamic celebration of it brings him a perversely heroic dimension. But he remains, in Warren's sense, "pure," monovalent, and so is further split because his one naturalistic fact becomes itself an inflexible abstraction that fails to account for the "dream," the element of virtue which is also an object of fact in a complex world.

Willie's career is perfectly imaged in Jack Burden's description of the highway to Mason City:

You look up the highway and it is straight for miles, coming at you, with the black line down the centre coming at you and at you, black and slick and tarry-shining against the white of the slab, and the heat dazzles up from the white slab so that only the black line is clear, coming at you with the whine of the tires, and if you don't quit staring at that line and don't take a few deep breaths and slap yourself hard on the back of the neck you'll hypnotise yourself and you'll come to just at the moment when the right front wheel hooks over into the black dirt shoulder off the slab, and you'll try to jerk her back on but you can't because the slab is high like a curb, and maybe you'll try to reach to turn off the ignition just as she starts the dive. But you won't make it, of course.

(AKM, p. 3)

Willie is a follower of the black line, acting according to his interpretation of life in terms of corruption. He cannot see the white ground on which the black line is imposed, symbolic here of other human categories, other possibilities. Mesmerised by his own black abstraction, Willie finally loses control. He tries, we may say, to "turn off the ignition" but he has already started his dive to destruction. There is, of course, a meretricious motive behind the free hospital and health centre in that the building and its

facilities will commemorate the greatness of Willie Stark and he protests too much against the imputation of cynics that the hospital is a vote-garnering device. He is, nevertheless, making his bid for virtue, refusing to allow the hospital to be engulfed in the graft typical of his administration and assuring Adam Stanton that "I'll keep you clean all over." (AKA, p. 275). Willie discovers that man cannot successfully navigate his way through life if he takes his bearings from the black line alone, for man cannot escape virtue. So virtue lies in wait for Willie because:

. . . despite all naturalistic considerations,
Or in the end because of naturalistic considerations,
We must believe in virtue. There is no
Escape. No inland path around that rocky
And spume-nagged promontory. There is no
Escape: dead-fall on trail, noose on track, bear-trap
Under the carefully rearranged twigs. There is no
Escape, for virtue is
More dogged than Pinkerton, more scientific than the F.B.I.,
And that is why you wake sweating toward dawn.

(BTD, p. 29)

At the end Willie senses his own incompleteness and "with the potentials of indivisibility within his grasp, gives way to a fatal yearning for absolute good, in violation of his intrinsic character and beliefs."²⁸ Thus he is shot and killed by Adam Stanton, the man of absolute virtue who will not allow his moral preserve to be infected by the man of fact. Stanton too is killed: Beauty and the Beast both drown in the same dream.

Warren's politician "was to be a man whose power was based on the fact that somehow he could vicariously fulfill some secret needs of the people around him."²⁹ Willie Stark fills this rôle for all

²⁸ Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 215.

²⁹ Robert Penn Warren, "A note to All the King's Men," Sewanee Review 61 (1953), p. 479. On these terms, Murray Guilford, the corrupted lawyer in Meet Me in the Green Glen, is an inverted Willie Stark. See below, p. 297.

the members of his retinue, but most of all for Jack Burden whom Warren created to answer "the necessity for a character of a higher degree of self-consciousness than my politician, a character to serve as a kind of commentator and raisonneur and chorus" (AKM, p. VII). Deciding what attitude to take towards Jack Burden is, for a good deal of the novel's length, the reader's principal job, particularly as his personality is displayed in his ambiguous response to Willie Stark. At times Jack seems mesmerised by the Boss, at other times he keeps his critical distance. He is not a consistently likeable character, being something of a bully, rather self-consciously and condescendingly if genuinely intellectual, and he has a history of betrayals, both of himself and of others. The parallel structure of the first chapter (Willie and Jack both going home) dramatises the complexity of the relation between Warren's politician and his raisonneur and prompts us to wonder why Jack works for Stark. Despite the Boss's defining himself through the reiteration of certain principles--there is always something disreputable in a man's life, good must be made from bad, the law is always too short and too tight --his motivation remains unclear to Jack. Without agreeing with E.R. Steinberg's view that Willie does not "develop understandably"³⁰ we can accept that it is the enigma of the man of purposive action that fascinates Jack whose intellectualism has not helped him to stop drifting. When he meets Willie he is a man without purpose or direction, still suffering from the aftermath of a broken marriage and an unfinished Ph.D. thesis. He witnesses the first stage in Willie's transformation from dupe to demagogue and is drawn to a figure who, like his lost love, Anne Stanton, seems to possess "a

³⁰ Erwin R. Steinberg, "The Enigma of Willie Stark," in All the King's Men: A Symposium, p. 25.

deep inner certitude of self" (AKM, p. 220). Working for Willie Stark becomes Jack's method of conducting his investigations into the nature of selfhood.

The artistic integration of All the King's Men benefits from the further step Warren takes in relating the mythic element to the main plot. We are simply left to wonder what effect Willie Proudfit's story has on Mr Munn. In At Heaven's Gate the exemplum is related to the main plot by a minor character when Ashby Wyndham's statement awakens Private Porsum's moral sense and Porsum goes on to discredit Bogan Murdock. The story of Cass Mastern, however, works directly on Jack Burden and thus becomes an organic part of the book. With Warren's consent the story was omitted from the first British edition of All the King's Men, published by Eyre and Spottiswoode in 1948. In the Introduction to the first unabridged British edition in 1974 Warren says that he nevertheless "always felt that the section is central to the novel"³¹ and that it was devised as a method of giving his story "moral" and his narrator "psychological" dimension.

As a student of history Jack can grasp the facts of the Cass Mastern story, but he evades the truth contained in the facts. In abandoning his research he is simply fleeing "from the reproach implicit in the materials of the dissertation."³² Like a recurrent dream which could reveal but which jealously conceals Jack's identity, the Cass Mastern material follows him around, a parcel which bears his name but which lies unopened. The story of Cass Mastern's life is a reproach to Jack's inability to recognise his own moral rôle in life as involving an unavoidable relation to the human community. Most of his life

³¹ All the King's Men (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974), p. XIV.

³² All the King's Men (London, 1974), p. XV.

he has avoided responsibility, retreating into the Great Sleep (innocent unconsciousness), idealism (nothing is real so nothing matters), or the naturalistic philosophy of the Great Twitch which reduces people to amoral mechanisms. Jack's failure to relate the realm of events to the realm of ideas is his failure to stay afloat in the Conradian sea: he attempts either to immerse himself in the fluidity of idealism or to withdraw to the dry land of naturalism. As long as he accepts either realm singly he escapes self-accusation because he escapes all opportunity for guilt. As an idealist he can do the Governor's bidding without qualm since all action is unreal; as a devotee of the Great Twitch he can discount even his own criterion of himself since what he thinks of what he does is merely a part of what he does. In either case moral distinctions disappear. Jack cannot open the inescapable parcel until the action of the novel has taught him the claims of both realms, by which time he has unwittingly helped to destroy three people: Willie Stark, Adam Stanton, and his father, Judge Irwin. It is the realisation that he has been involved in a web of morally ambiguous relationships that enables him at last to interpret the Cass Mastern story and to find in the lesson learned by Mastern the key to his own experience. The image of the spider web implies a tragic theory of human life as universal involvement and responsibility in shared complicity:

Cass Mastern lived for a few years and in that time he learned that the world is all of one piece. He learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you who have touched the web and then injects the black, numbing poison under your hide. It does not matter whether or not you

meant to brush the web of things. Your happy foot or your gay wing may have brushed it ever so lightly, but what happens always happens and there is the spider, bearded black and with his great faceted eyes glittering like mirrors in the sun, or like God's eye, and the fangs dripping.

(AKM, p. 200)

The idea that the world is all of a piece, a web in which man inevitably becomes entangled, is an unexceptionable proposition earned by the events of the novel and succinctly echoed by "the flower-in-the-crannied-wall theory" a few pages later: "I eat a persimmon and the teeth of a tinker in Tibet are put on edge" (AKM, p. 234). The suggestion that the entanglement is fatal makes the passage more complex and the image of the spider invests the account of man's situation with a horror that anticipates Corinthian McClardy's Campbellite picture of God as a great bear lunging at the tender throat of the lost fawn (WEAT, pp. 30-31). In Jack Burden's picture the chief fatality is presumably man's uninstructed sense of himself as innocent, the "black, numbing poison" being a knowledge of evil, the spider itself ambiguously imaging God. The spider's eyes glitter "like mirrors in the sun" which suggests sheets of light cruelly blinding to the viewer who had expected to see himself reflected in the mirrors. There is an Agrarian insistence on mystery here, an implicit criticism of the belief that a god can be solipsistically made or that the secrets of the world can ever be despoiled of their inscrutability. The eyes of the spider cheat man of the god he would make in his own image, burning into him instead a sense of his own radical imperfection.

Life teaches Jack how to face up to the truth contained in the Cass Mastern story which, in turn, helps him to interpret the

pattern of events through which he has lived and to understand the moral meaning of history. The suicide of Judge Irwin especially carries the meaning of the story into his personal history. Before Cass Mastern dies in the hospital outside Atlanta he is released from the captivity of his guilty self-preoccupation by recognising the virtue of the suffering soldiers around him: the parallel in Jack's progress involves the father-son relation. Jack's search for a spiritual father began when he was six with the departure of Ellis Burden, and ends only with the deaths of his biological father (Judge Irwin), his surrogate father (Willie Stark), and the acceptance of his supposed father (Ellis Burden). This represents an interesting variation of the pattern of At Heaven's Gate in which Jerry Calhoun is led back from his surrogate father (Bogan Murdock) to his "real" --and biological--father. Throughout most of the novel Jack has little but contempt for his supposed father, believing that he was not man enough either to control his mother or give her what she wanted. He resents his mother's possessiveness and scorns her series of apparently loveless liaisons. His regeneration is signalled by his acceptance of both mother and supposed father in his perception of the tragedy of their lives. His mother could not have the man she loved and Ellis Burden could not accept his wife's adultery with his best friend. All three now command pity and respect. If none of them is admirable as a model, they had, nevertheless, lived their lives in the only way they could. Jack's acceptance of both biological and spiritual fathers signifies his ability now to reconcile the realm of fact with the realm of idea.

Jack's two essays in historical research enable him to understand

himself, to appreciate the nature of the present and to entertain a disciplined hopefulness for the future. At the end of the novel Jack and Anne Stanton, now Mr and Mrs Burden, make a Miltonic departure from an Eden of false hopes: they have both suffered a fortunate fall, to be redeemed by a life together lived by the knowledge that is now theirs. The conflict between idealist and materialist attitudes--thus between Adam Stanton and Willie Stark--is resolved: it is true, Jack says, that these men were "doomed" but this fact does not deny man a moral rôle, for they "lived in the agony of will" (AKM, p. 462). The novel's main ideas--the interdependence of good and evil, human freedom and human worth--are finally encompassed within a single theological formulation by Ellis Burden who proposes that the creation of evil is a sign of God's glory and power, the creation of good a sign of man's. That Ellis Burden at least shares the status of Jack's "real" father with Judge Irwin is pointed by Jack's reflection on the "scholarly attorney's" theologising: "I was not certain but that in my own way I did not agree with him" (AKM, p. 463). Presumably "in my own way" implies a secular transcription of Ellis Burden's formulation, for if Warren finds the Christian scheme of things close to the facts of experience, and if it is the distinctly anti-Christian attitudes of popular materialism that he attacks, he remains uncommitted to anything but the facts of existence and the necessity of human effort.³³ His severe yet sustaining view of the facts and the necessity, exemplified by this novel and maintained throughout his career, is accurately

³³ For an unsuccessful attempt to Christianise Warren see Nicholas Joost, "Was All for Naught?": Robert Penn Warren and New Directions in the Novel," in Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal, edited by Harold C. Gardiner, S.J. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), pp. 273-91.

expressed in the quotation from the Confessions of Saint Augustine with which he concludes Democracy and Poetry: "There is a dim glimmering of light unput-out in men; let them walk, let them walk that the darkness overtake them not."³⁴

³⁴ Robert Penn Warren, Democracy and Poetry, The 1974 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 94.

Chapter Five

Uses of History

Warren's first-hand experiences of the events forming the background for Night Rider helped him early to a sense of the vitality of Southern history and to feel that history as a continuum in which he was himself involved. There were the reminiscences of his grandfather about the battle of Shiloh: "One hundred and sixty men we took in the first morning, son. Muster the next night and it was sixteen answered" (Segregation, p. 14). There was at the same time something almost on the same scale in the young Warren's present itself--martial law in Kentucky and an encampment of State Guards in Guthrie--so that Warren could tell Ralph Ellison in 1957:

I remember the troops coming in when martial law was declared in that part of Kentucky. When I wrote Night Rider I wasn't thinking of it as history. For one thing, the world it treated still, in a way, survived. You could still talk to the old men who had been involved. In the 1930's I remember going to see a judge down in Kentucky--he was an elderly man then, a man of the highest integrity and reputation--who had lived through that period and who by common repute had been mixed up in it--his father had been a tobacco grower. He got to talking about that period in Kentucky. He said, "Well, I won't say who was and who wasn't mixed up in some of those things, but I will make one observation: I have noticed that the sons of those who were opposed to getting a fair price for tobacco ended up as either bootleggers or brokers." But he was an old-fashioned kind of guy, for whom bootlegging and brokerage looked very much alike. Such a man didn't look "historical" thirty years ago. Now he looks like the thigh bone of a mastodon.¹

¹ Malcolm Cowley, Writers at Work, p. 169.

History is never "the thigh bone of a mastodon" for Warren. Essentially, the "historical" lives of Jeremiah Beaumont, the Lewis brothers, Amantha Starr, Adam Rosenzweig--even of John Brown--are as vividly present and as relevant to our own efforts to be human as the "modern" life of Jack Burden or the various personal entrapments of The Cave. In his first three novels, Warren's feeling for history is part of his equipment for exploring the meanings of events in worlds he had known. World Enough and Time, set in early nineteenth-century Kentucky, is his first truly historical novel, although Warren does not care to use the term, referring to the book as simply "a kind of historical job."² In the long poem, Brother to Dragons, and the novels, Band of Angels and Wilderness, he turns again to nineteenth-century history for "stories that seem to have issues in purer forms than they come to me ordinarily."³

In a review of Band of Angels Leslie Fiedler tried to define the direction Warren's fiction seemed to be taking:

I have been convinced for a long time that Warren was feeling his way toward a form which would be neither prose nor poetry, but I have never been able to find a metaphor to define it. Since reading Band of Angels I have become aware that what he has been approaching for so long is something not very different from nineteenth-century Italian opera: a genre full of conventional absurdities, lapses of good taste, strained and hectic plots--all aimed at becoming myth and melody.⁴

² Letter to Frank Owsley, dated 31 January 1950. Papers of Frank Owsley, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

³ Cowley, p. 169.

⁴ Leslie Fiedler, "Romance in the Operatic Manner," New Republic, 26 Sept. 1955, pp. 28-29.

Fiedler's use of the word "myth" and his musical analogy are suggestive and useful. Warren's earliest novels are generally naturalistic in style, but their exempla--Willie Proudfit's narrative, the Statement of Ashby Wyndham and the Cass Mastern episode--all strike a single paradigmatic note for each novel. The Cass Mastern episode, for example, may be said to include the action of All the King's Men within a single narrative phrase which harmonises the meanings of the book. It is, as we have seen, Jack Burden's myth. In the works under consideration in this chapter Warren uses historical materials to create a more public kind of mythology. His principal use of history--"the big myth we live" (BTD, p. xii)--is to mine it for representative and reverberant mythic patterns.

World Enough and Time is our myth--especially so if we are American Southerners--as Warren makes plain by the homily on duelling and modern warfare (WEAT, p. 128) and the survey of twentieth-century Kentucky in the style of Dos Passos (WEAT, pp. 510-11). The novel offers us our own past for inspection and constitutes a reproach and a challenge to us much as the life of Cass Mastern did to Jack Burden. Like the evading Jack, however, we can decline to acknowledge the connection between Warren's dark and bloody ground and our own lives. If we respond only to the superficial implications of the sub-title, "A Romantic Novel," with its suggestion of grand theatricalities and colourful emotions, we may enjoy the journey into a melodramatic past, pity the hero and congratulate ourselves on the good fortune of our own modernity, remote from such fury and mire and Grand Guignol futility. In an

early review of the novel Brendan Gill wondered "why a writer of Mr Warren's stature had stooped to what is, in our time, the showiest and least serious form of fiction."⁵ Leslie Fiedler, after castigating Mr Gill's insecure middle class culture, asserted that "it is Mr Warren's tour de force to have achieved this critique [of the American myth of the West] inside a form universally assumed to be based on the naive acceptance of all he subtly challenges."⁶ The two critics agree that Warren looked upon the form and found it good for his purpose, but they disagree both about the definition of the form and the nature of the purpose. Brendan Gill sees the book as costume melodrama designed to sell well, eventually to Hollywood, while Fiedler sees it as a philosophical-historical novel which calls in question certain basic American assumptions about law, justice, individualism and the limitless opportunities of the West.

Jack Burden defines himself in relation to Adam Stanton, "the man of idea," and Willie Stark, "the man of fact." In World Enough and Time the poles in relation to which Jeremiah Beaumont attempts to define himself are "the world" and "the idea." Like Adam Stanton and Willie Stark, Jeremiah is destroyed by the separation between these poles, brought low by the "terrible division" that Warren sees as characteristic of our age (AKM, p. 462; SE, p. 43). If Warren's sub-title fairly suggests romantic action in the manner of Scott, it also accords with Jeremiah's Byronism and with what he comes to regard as his "crime of self" (WEAT, p. 505). If this points to the work's essential romanticism we must side with Fiedler and see the book as a philosophical novel much like Warren's others. While it is full of

⁵ Brendan Gill, "One Bourbon on the Rocks, One Gin and Tonic," New Yorker, 26 (24 June 1950), 89.

⁶ Leslie Fiedler, "On Two Frontiers," Partisan Review, 17 (Sept.-Oct., 1950), 742.

violent, often brutal action, the novel is primarily devoted to a relentlessly complex exposition of the familiar themes of identity, freedom, responsibility, man's relation to nature and to the community of men. It is in the last movement of the book that one is most struck by the force of Warren's philosophical intentions, partly because one had imagined all along, at least from page 70, that one knew how the story would go, that Jeremiah would marry Rachel Jordan, kill Colonel Fort and be hanged. A simple costume melodrama would involve such a sequence, with Jeremiah's death on the gallows as its natural climax, but Warren's philosophical design necessitates the further stage of Jeremiah's attempted expiation. The end of the novel makes plain what should have been clear all along, even to Mr Gill, that Warren's ultimate interest lies not merely in character and action but in their philosophical implications. This is borne out by the differences between Warren's story and the historical material from which it derives.

In 1944 when Warren was a Fellow of the Library of Congress, Katherine Anne Porter, also a Fellow, "came in one day with an old pamphlet, the trial of Beauchamp for killing Colonel Sharp⁷. . . I read it in five minutes. But I was six years making the book."⁸ During those years Warren read the other documents of the "Kentucky Tragedy,"⁹ the famous murder of 1825 which had already provided the

⁷ Beauchamp's Trial, A Report of the Trial of Jereboam O. Beauchamp, before the Franklin Circuit Court, in May 1826, upon an Indictment for the Murder of Col. Solomon P. Sharp, a Member of the House of Representatives, and late Attorney General of Kentucky (Albert G. Hodges: Frankfort, Ky, 1826).

⁸ Cowley, Writers at Work, p. 176.

⁹ These are: The Confession of Jereboam O. Beauchamp (Bloomfield, Ky, 1826); Letters of Ann Cook, Late Mrs Beauchamp, to her Friend in Maryland (Washington, 1826); L.J. Sharp, Vindication of the Character of the Late Col. Solomon P. Sharp, From the Calumnies Published against Him since his Murder, by Patrick Darby and Jereboam O. Beauchamp (Frankfort, Ky, 1827). The documents are collected in Loren J. Kallsen, ed., The Kentucky Tragedy, A Problem in Romantic Attitudes (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1963).

basis for drama and fiction by, among others, Thomas Holley Chivers, Edgar Allan Poe and William Gilmore Simms. It is easy to see why the story appealed to a writer of Warren's philosophical and historical interests, but if the Beauchamp-Sharp case presented him with an issue in purer form than usual, he expanded and altered the story to develop what he took to be its essential significance.

Jereboam Beauchamp hears about Sharp's seduction of Ann Cook from his "acquaintances of the bar at Glasgow [Kentucky], and those attending the courts there from Bowlinggreen."¹⁰ He receives a glowing account of Ann Cook from "a room mate and bosom friend of mine, who had been intimately acquainted with Miss Cooke, and much devoted to her."¹¹ By combining these two sources of information in the person of Wilkie Barron, Warren establishes him as the manipulator of Jeremiah and ironically undercuts Jeremiah's belief that he himself serves the "pure idea" (WEAT, p. 62).

According to Ann Cook's letters, it is Colonel Sharp himself who introduces Beauchamp to her: "In one of his visits, he brought with him, and introduced to me, a young man of an agreeable person, named B-----p. He begged me to regard him as his friend, and to show him every attention in my power. I, who loved whatever he loved, and hated whatever he disliked, soon looked upon B-----p with feelings of kindness and friendship."¹² Warren's Jeremiah severs his connection with Colonel Fort before he meets Rachel Jordan. He suddenly apprehends his own destiny as he tells Fort, in his letter

¹⁰ Kallsen, p. 6.

¹¹ Kallsen, p. 7.

¹² Kallsen, p. 148.

of rejection, that he is determined to "turn from the face of the betrayer, and seek truth in the face of the betrayed" (WEAT, p. 68). Jeremiah arrives at the Jordan house a complete stranger, professing to be "an intimate of a friend of Miss Jordan," by whom he means, presumably, Wilkie Barron. The historical documents conflict on this point: Ann Cook's account of her first meeting with Beauchamp is very different from Beauchamp's own. He writes: ". . . I resolved to intrude a visit upon her, however unwelcomely I anticipated she would receive it;--the more especially, if unaccompanied by an introduction from any friend, or acquaintance of hers . . . I introduced myself to her, and told her, that notwithstanding I had learned she was disinclined to make any acquaintances, or to receive the visits of any one, I had been impelled to obtrude a visit upon her."¹³ This clearly accords with Warren's fictional version. There is no corroborative evidence for either Beauchamp's or Ann Cook's account of their first meeting, but Warren's choice of Beauchamp's emphasises his focus on Jeremiah's abstract conception of Rachel Jordan and the force of will by which he creates "the drama in which he played" (WEAT, p. 7) in terms of "the deep truth of himself" (WEAT, p. 68).

The historical villain, Sharp, from being pro-Relief "turned completely round in politics"¹⁴ and the likelihood of the pro-Relief Beauchamp's guilt is grist to the political mill of the Anti-Relief party in their campaign for the success of the Old Court faction, but Jeremiah's involvement in the fight at Lumton and his standing for election as Relief candidate are of Warren's invention. Thus

¹³ Kallsen, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ Kallsen, p. 21.

Jeremiah's character is fleshed out realistically while it is being drawn further into the tangle of world and idea, the philosophical issue with which Warren is chiefly concerned. Unlike Jeremiah, Beauchamp has no regrets about killing Sharp; there is no escape, no Grand' Bosse, no calculated return to the world in the story as Warren found it. These are some of the additions whereby he transforms a piece of historical blood-and-thunder into "myth and melody."

At the beginning of the novel we meet the narrator in his rôle of objective historian, thus the opening sentence: "I can show you what is left." On the last page, however, the narrator's view seems to coincide with his hero's as he leaves us with the question, "Was all for naught?" Throughout the novel Warren refers to the life of Jeremiah Beaumont as a drama. We are early told that "it was a drama that he had prepared;" two pages later we read that "perhaps the land and the history of the land devised Jeremiah Beaumont and the drama in which he played, and the scene is the action and speaks through the mouth of Jeremiah Beaumont as through a mask" (WEAT, pp. 5 and 7). Later we are told that "Jeremiah Beaumont had to create his world or be the victim of a world he did not create" (WEAT, p. 125), but as we watch him planning to kill Fort we learn that "the obligation to kill Fort sprang from the depths of his nature" (WEAT, p. 132). Such superficially conflicting statements lead Harry M. Campbell to a view of Jeremiah as devised by his place and time rather than as the deviser of his own drama and to conclude that the drift of Warren's philosophical speculations is towards a "determinism not unlike that of Theodore Dreiser, although Warren is much more

sophisticated and intellectual in considering all the angles than Dreiser."¹⁵ This suggests not only an inadequate understanding of Dreiser, but also an inability to see that the two kinds of statement made about Jeremiah's relation to his own drama are not mutually exclusive, and that the outcome of Warren's "considering all the angles" is not conflict but harmony, a view of Jeremiah's life as the joint product of his heritage and environment on the one hand and, on the other, his capacity for self-creation in terms of an idea. The representative tragic doubleness of his condition is already implicit in the frontier background described in the opening pages: "The dirk (of Spanish steel or made from a hunting knife or Revolutionary sword) and the Bible might lie side by side on the table, or Plato and the duelling pistols on the mantel shelf" (WEAT, pp. 6-7). The world imposes the need for dirk and pistols while man's nature as a follower of the idea may be said to impose the Bible and Plato. But this is far removed from Dreiser's determining "chemisms" which are entirely at odds with the self-determining power of idea typically displayed by Warren's characters. Ironically, Warren's own reading of the Frank Cowperwood trilogy further invalidates Harry M. Campbell's recourse to Dreiser's "determinism" for a likely parallel to the philosophy of World Enough and Time: "Dreiser, though seeing man caught in the great machine of nature, does allow him the dignity of the 'terror and wonder of individuality' . . . Dreiser is not quite ready to say with Margoth, the brutal geologist in Melville's Clarel, that, 'All is Chymistry'" (Homage to Theodore Dreiser, pp. 153-54).

¹⁵ Harry Modcan Campbell, "Warren as Philosopher in World Enough and Time," Hopkins Review, 6 (Winter, 1953), 114. Reprinted in Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South, ed. Louis D. Rubin Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 253.

Naturalism, as we have seen, had much appeal for Warren in his earlier years and never ceases to be an issue in his work; but by the time of World Enough and Time he was far from a simple view of man as "caught in the great machine of nature." The success of any life, in Warren's mature view, depends as much on a right regard for nature as it does on the conception and maintenance of an idea: there must be a proper balance between dirk and Bible. In many of Warren's novels there are characters who represent a good relation to nature. In World Enough and Time there is Thomas Barron, Wilkie's uncle, whose aim is "to make me one more crop. It may be the best I ever made. Under God's hand" (WEAT, p. 153). Barron's wisdom is much like Willie Proudfit's or Jerry Calhoun's father's, a combination of agrarian realism and simple piety. Nature is by turns benign and destructive. Man cannot control it, but it is, in a sense, what he makes it: it has whatever meaning he attached to it. Nature, like time, is morally neutral, savage. To define himself as human, man must strive to be a moral being and to this extent he is unnatural.

Unconsciously resisting the Campbellite harshness of Corinthian McClardy's sermon, Jeremiah is so pantheistically drawn to a shining, ice-covered tree that his "substance seemed to pass beyond the tree and into all the land around that spread in the sunlight, and into the sunlight itself (WEAT, pp. 31-32). Although this Wordsworthian naturalism seems hardly pernicious, it marks Jeremiah's propensity for the descent into nature which begins with his murder of Fort and leads to the depravities of La Grand' Bosse's diseased kingdom. One of his more learned brethren cautions Jeremiah about the naturalistic pleasure he has experienced through the tree, warning him that though

he might be "at peace with nature, were he righteous enough, he should not enter into nature, for the Kingdom is not of this world" (WEAT, p. 32). Jeremiah's joyful participation in the tree and its context is later converted into an insidious partnership with nature as he waits in the night to kill Colonel Fort:

He had the fancy that he was growing into the ground, was setting root like the plants of the thicket, was one of them groping deeper and deeper into the cold, damp earth with fingers of root and tentacles like hair. He let his cheek rest against a thick, dry stalk of lilac, but the silk of the mask came between. So he raised the silk to give his cheek that companionship. And he remembered how, on the morning of the great and glittering frost years before, when he had been but a boy, the morning when all the world was covered with brilliant ice in the sun, he had touched the bough of the ice-ridden beech and had felt his being flow out into the shining tree, as though the bough were a conduit, and into the sunlight from every lifted twig, and down the trunk into the secret earth so that he was part of everything.

(WEAT, p. 259)

Jeremiah's memory of the glittering beech tree seems to purify the murder he is about to commit and to endorse it as a logical consequence of all he has been and done. Thus nature, perversely strengthening him in the performance of his crime, is revealed as a corrupting influence which further clouds his vision and carries him deeper into his tragically contaminating idea. He remembers the beech again as he lies in the dark of his cell (WEAT, p. 343), where his final stage of error begins in lustful couplings with Rachel as he strives naturalistically to affirm his will to live and his denial of death. Before and during his trial he is moved almost to the point of confession by two complementary desires: to justify himself in the disproof of lying witnesses, and to escape from the moral confusion which threatens to undermine his own belief in himself as a latter-day Artegall. In

his final plunge into nature, after the escape, idea, motivation and justice all become meaningless. In the nightmare country of La Grand' Bosse he seeks "communion only in the blank cup of nature, and innocence there" (WEAT, p. 506). The innocence he finds, however, is not the moral neutrality of nature but the animality of man dehumanised and the temporary abnegation of his own humanity coincides with the shattering of his dream of the West. From his youth he conceives of the West as a place to which he may escape; ironically, it is in the West that he is ambushed and killed. In the West he hopes to become independent through land speculation; it is in the West that he loses everything. The West, in Warren's iconology, is at best a place of withdrawal from which one must return, at worst a place of avoidance that holds out chimerical promises to men in flight from themselves.

Jeremiah's final decision is to give up the false peace of animal innocence and to return East to history, to human time so that he may suffer in the terms of civilisation for "the crime of self, the crime of life" (WEAT, p. 505). Like Jack Burden he comes to realise that man cannot live wholly either in the realm of the ideal or in the realm of nature, that to be human and responsible involves living in both. "Innocence," Jeremiah says, "is what man cannot endure and be man" (WEAT, p. 506); thus he flees from the naturalistic realm of La Grand' Bosse toward both his guilt and his own humanity. There is a close parallel between Jeremiah's ending and that of Joe Christmas in Faulkner's Light in August. During his flight after the murder of Joanna Burden, Christmas feels himself beyond time and achieves a transcendent state in which he finds himself at last. Although he knows he will be put to death for Miss

Burden's murder, he deliberately re-enters human time and community because only within their framework will his life have meaning. "Man," Warren observes in his essay on Conrad, "is precariously balanced in his humanity between the black abyss of himself and the black outward abyss of nature" (SE, p. 55). The difficulty of maintaining this balance is suggested by what Jeremiah and, presumably, the narrator, see as the logic of his progression. The first three stages--the idea must redeem the world, the world must redeem the idea, the world is all--are different forms of alienation; only the fourth stage--return to certain death in the human community--is evidence that Jeremiah is able to maintain, however precariously, the balance of his humanity. Compared to the importance of this balance, "body-dyin'," as Munn Short tells Jeremiah, "hit ain't nuthin'" (WEAT, p. 425).

In the prologue to the fifth book of The Faerie Queene from which Warren took stanzas 1, 3 and 11 as epigraph for his novel, Spenser evokes the chivalry of "Saturne's ancient raigne," when "justice sate high ador'd with solemne feasts" (stanza 9). Jeremiah Beaumont's is no such golden age: as the self-appointed instrument of justice he skulks in the dark to murder his benefactor and surrogate father. The legal process represented by his trial is subject to all manner of corruptions, yet Jeremiah is justly convicted. After determining that the world (law) must redeem the idea (justice), Jeremiah attempts, by destroying evidence, suborning a witness and perjuring himself, to strike through the law for justice. Justice, therefore, is either a blindfold goddess with scales in her hand or Jeremiah, masked, a dagger in his; either timeless and immutable or

as earthbound and fallible as the law which man makes and breaks. The best hope of union between the world and the idea in this context is exemplified by the two lawyers, Madison and Hawgood, who, despite their being opposites politically and temperamentally, work together in Jeremiah's defence. Drawn with almost allegorical precision, Madison represents worldly decency, Hawgood unworldly truth. Madison explains that he is offering his services for two reasons: because he believes Jeremiah to be innocent and because the Anti-Relief party, to which Fort had changed his allegiance, has asserted that the assassination was political. Hawgood's motive is more transcendental: "We did not do it for accidental innocence. No--we did it--for truth . . . That's all there is, and nothing can hurt it" (WEAT, p. 409). Hawgood works as a device whereby Jeremiah's ruinous pursuit of his idea is prevented from discrediting idealism itself--he has his Hecuba, as Warren insists we all must: ". . . we can never leave Hecuba. She is what we must carry in the breast, though we can never know her. She is our folly and our glory and despair. And if we do not adore her, we can adore nothing or only Silly Sal" (WEAT, p. 129).

Before Jeremiah murders him, Fort speaks of a plan to "reconcile all in justice," by "all" meaning, in the narrator's words, "the world and . . . the idea, the flesh and . . . the word, the Old Court . . . and the New" (WEAT, p. 510); but the plan dies unspoken with him. In his letter to Rachel Jordan, Fort describes his own effort to achieve a redemptive pattern of life which echoes the sequence required for self-definition given in Warren's essay on "Knowledge and the Image of Man."¹⁶ After his idyll "outside the world" with

¹⁶ See above, p. 63.

Rachel, he says he "came back into the world, and hope to do my duty still, whatever it may be and bear with fortitude the ills and losses" (WEAT, p. 147). This is not simply a reflection of Fort's stoicism but of his attempt to reconcile the dream of his private world with the demands of the public world. The movement of his life is eventually mirrored by Jeremiah's: like surrogate father, spiritual son.¹⁷

Jeremiah is attracted to Fort as many of Warren's young men are drawn to substitute fathers. "Men have laid low their fathers only because they were their fathers" (WEAT, p. 504), but Jeremiah must kill Fort because as a representative of the world he has defiled Rachel, the ideal. Jeremiah refers to the difficulty of resolving the antitheses which plague him as "more than a problem of doubleness;" the real problem is that "the two worlds impinged, overlay and lapped, blurred and absorbed, twisted together and dissolved like mist" (WEAT, pp. 333-34). He longs for a clean separation between his private and public lives, but the world is always there: it is his worldly friend Wilkie Barron who loves and destroys him. Both Wilkie Barron and his sickly associate, Percival Skrogg, further develop the themes of the novel. Barron is the confidently amoral man of action, yet he too is finally destroyed by idea, for through all the years of his success he preserves Jeremiah's narrative. Whatever the particular reason--remorse, fear of disclosure--it is, we infer, the element of idea in the narrative that prompts him to suicide. The coldly fanatical Skrogg discovers that the steady hand with which he holds his duelling pistol enables him to destroy those who would oppose his justice; but in the end

¹⁷ See below, Appendix, p. 345.

the world destroys him, because he comes to value his life, and the link vest he wears cannot save him.

The poem by Marvell from which Warren took his title suggests the nature of Jeremiah's final perception. He has, literally, little time since he is only twenty-five at the time of his trial. Yet he finally achieves the double vision represented in "To His Coy Mistress," a perspective in which the eternal is now. His final vantage point is a sense of the intersection of time past and time present. In his exaltation of the ideal, his commission of the purely gratuitous, disinterested act, Jeremiah attempts to destroy the past and to escape from time itself by raising it to the timelessness of the ideal. His problem is how to implement timeless truth "in the detail and flux of time" (WEAT, p. 504). It is, of course, perpetually our problem too.

It is a danger, in a discussion of such a novel, that Warren the philosopher will be over-emphasised at the expense of Warren the artist. One must be struck by the felicity of detail with which Warren concretises his historical period and his themes. We are given a meticulous account of Jeremiah's Kentucky background, of his parentage and of influences that prove formative, from the apocalyptic austerities of Corinthian McClardy's preaching and the crude arrogance of grandfather Marcher to the books in which the young Jeremiah searches "for what truth might be beyond the bustle of the hour and the empty lusts of time" (WEAT, p. 26), the "book of the Martyrs" chief among them. There are the shabby, bitter figures of Timothy and Maria Jordan, Munn Short's tale of conversion--a brief exemplum reminiscent of Ashby Wyndham's story--and the bizarre career of La Grand' Bosse, personification of original sin. There is the vivid

account of the election-day brawl at Lumton in chapter 3. Richmond C. Beatty refers to the conversation between Jeremiah and the vigilantes at the beginning of chapter 7 (WEAT, pp. 276-78) as an illustration of the book's "convincing particularity."¹⁸

The nature-motif of the beech tree illustrates Warren's use of imagery to substantialise his argument. There are many other examples, like the keelboat with its fiddler and bugle-call which come back to Jeremiah "as an image for whatever had summoned him to plunge into a stream stained darker than the Kentucky River ever was at flood" (WEAT, pp. 21, and 453). A benign nature pulls Jeremiah back from his pursuit of the idea in the figure of Rachel on her knees, begging him not to go to Fort because she is to have a child; but the force of this appeal is challenged by a nature of different aspect as the image of Rachel "somehow merged with the foul dark-faced female creature in the woods beyond McClardy's Meadow clutching at his knees and whimpering before he struck her to snatch free and plunge toward the sound of healing waters" (WEAT, p. 227). The theme of historical continuity is ironically pointed by the comfortable ignorance of the "most respectable descendants" of La Grand' Bosse, "who did not know him and would have denied him with shame," but who "still carried under their pink scrubbed hides and double-breasted sack suits (cunningly cut to redeem the sagging paunch) the mire-thick blood of his veins and the old coiling darkness of his heart" (WEAT, p. 476). The cut of the sack suits recalls La Grand' Bosse's tattered British officer's jacket, slashed down

¹⁸ Richmond C. Beatty, "The Poetry and Novels of Robert Penn Warren," in Vanderbilt Studies in the Humanities, Vol. 1, ed. R.C. Beatty, J.P. Hyatt and Monroe K. Spears (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1951), p. 157.

the back to accommodate his monstrous hump. After despatching Jeremiah in the wilderness, One-eye Jenkins brings his head back to Frankfort with the neck encased in clay (WEAT, p. 508). Death has brought the resolution that eluded Jeremiah while he lived: he is now both head (idea) and clay (the dust of the world). Stated baldly, this may seem what Melville would have called "hideous and intolerable allegory," but it is perfectly acceptable and effective here not merely because it fits Warren's argument, but because One-eye Jenkins's action is credible in terms of the need for proof if he is to claim the reward offered for Jeremiah and because the use of clay as sealant and preservative is practical before it is symbolic. World Enough and Time succeeds as a philosophical novel of high distinction because of Warren's ability to flesh out his argument, amplifying his image of man through the media of a dazzling plot, richly imagined characters and vivid scenes.

II

In 1811, which came to be known as the Annus Mirabilis of the West (RTD, p. 218), a great comet appeared in the northern sky and there were violent floods throughout the Ohio River bottom lands. On September 17 there was an almost total eclipse of the sun and on the night of December 15 came the New Madrid earthquake, first of a series of earthquakes that shook the Mississippi Valley for months. Against this background two nephews of former President Thomas

Jefferson murdered a young slave named George on their plantation in Livingston County, Kentucky. The Lewis brothers, probably drunk, herded their workers into a kitchen cabin and bolted the door. Lilburn, enraged because George had broken a pitcher, sank an axe into the slave's neck and forced another slave to dismember the body. While Lilburn lectured his terrified slaves on obedience, George's limbs were thrown on a fire to destroy the evidence. The crime appears to have been discovered accidentally. An earthquake destroyed the kitchen chimney before the body was totally cremated. A neighbour happened to see a dog gnawing at a strange object: George's skull was enough to signal a corpus delicti. Indicted for the murder, Lilburn and Isham Lewis formed a suicide pact; but as they undertook to shoot each other in the family graveyard, Lilburn's rifle went off and killed him. Isham was jailed, escaped before trial and disappeared, although, as Warren's Foreword tells us: "when the local militiamen, after service with Andrew Jackson at New Orleans, returned to Livingston County, they reported that they had seen and talked with Isham at the battle and that he had been killed there by a British musket-ball" (BTD, p. x).

As reconstructed by Boynton Merrill Jr.¹⁹ the murder seems to have had no real motive, only a violent plausibility: the brothers' alcoholic rage, the isolation of the frontier, the humiliating failure that the Lewis family had suffered after moving from Virginia to Kentucky and, of course, the convenient victim that slavery provided. Warren, however, probes through the lurid surface of events to discover in the Lewis case another illustration of "the disparity in

¹⁹ Boynton Merrill Jr, Jefferson's Nephews: A Frontier Tragedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

man between beatific vision and the ubiquitous evil which blights it."²⁰ The crime and its implications are revealed as the night side of Jefferson's bright rationalism.

The raisonneur in Brother to Dragons is R.P.W., the author himself. Early in the poem he tells us that he once intended to make a ballad out of the Lewis story:

. . . but the form
Was not adequate: the facile imitation
Of a folk simplicity would never serve,
For the beauty of such simplicity is only
That the action is always and perfectly self-contained,
And is an image that comes as its own perfect explanation
In shock or sweetness to the innocent heart.

(BTD, p. 43)

The story of Billie Potts had precisely the beauty of such folk simplicity, being "perfectly self-contained," complete and rounded in its primitive logic of sin and guilt. It could, therefore, be appropriately contained in ballad form to give the coherent basis for the meditative commentary with which it is interwoven. The story of Brother to Dragons does not have this instant self-sufficiency, but evolves as the characters speak, often contradicting each other, and as R.P.W., a visitor to their Inferno, fills in gaps in the motivation. Thus R.P.W. appears not as abstract chorus but as a specified voice, taking a personally involved philosophical interest in the action conveyed to him and to us through the voices of the characters. This unusual frankness in openly rendering his own thought together with the immediacy of the melodrama makes Brother to Dragons one of Warren's most impressive achievements. For Randall Jarrell, reviewing the work in 1953, it was "an event, a great one," and "Robert Penn

²⁰ Frederick P.W. McDowell, "Psychology and Theme in Brother to Dragons," PMLA, 70 (Sept. 1955), 565. Reprinted in Longley, p. 197.

Warren's best book."²¹ The blatantly artificial form succeeds through Warren's willingness not only to declare but to take advantage of it.

The blank verse, often Eliotesque in its rhythm and cadences, is regular enough to heighten and sustain the flow of feeling, but loose enough to preserve the spontaneity of narrative action and energetic debate, accommodating the colloquial speech of Aunt Cat, the Brother and Isham Lewis as well as the tense brooding of Thomas Jefferson. "Warren has managed to convey," as Charles H. Bohner puts it, "the unique flavour and slant of each character's speech while maintaining the unity of tone of the poem as a whole."²² There are some strained passages and some bad lines, like Jefferson's over-alliterative description of the men who attended the First Continental Congress as "Marmosets in mantles, beasts in boots, parrots in pantaloons" (BTD, p. 6), which echoes the early mannered verse of "Crusade." There are moments of over-insistence and sudden false notes:

. . . And there's always and forever
Enough of guilt to rise and coil like miasma
From the fat sump and cess of common consciousness
To make any particular hour seem most appropriate
For Gabriel's big tootle.

(BTD, p. 64)

Such lapses hardly matter in "a work which is most remarkable as a sustained whole"²³ and in which the narrative carries the reader swiftly past brief infelicities. The fact that it possesses a clear

²¹ Randall Jarrell, "On the Underside of the Stone," New York Times Book Review, 23 Aug. 1953, p. 6.

²² Bohner, p. 127.

²³ Delmore Schwartz, "The Dragon of Guilt," New Republic, 14 Sept. 1953, p. 15.

narrative line fundamentally distinguishes Brother to Dragons from other contemporary long poems such as "The Waste Land," Crane's "The Bridge," Pound's "Cantos" or William Carlos Williams's "Paterson," in which the network of themes has to be deduced from a bewildering variety of images, broken fragments, hints, allusions and set pieces. Warren's poem, in its form, is as ancient as it is modern.

Warren's verse exemplifies to a remarkable degree in so long a poem the ideal language described by Eliot in the fifth movement of "Little Gidding:"

The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together.

If there is a kind of ostentation in the mock-heroic of "Marmosets in mantles" and "Gabriel's big tootle," it is Warren's mastery of "the complete consort" that most impresses us in the language of Brother to Dragons. The aptly common word sharpens our sense of the tale's contemporary relevance in R.P.W.'s account of his journey to Smithland:

Up Highway 109 from Hopkinsville,
To Dawson Springs, then west on 62,
Across Kentucky at the narrow neck,
Two hours now, not more, for the road's fair.
We ripped the July dazzle on the slab--
July of '46--ripped through the sun-bit land.

(BTD, p. 15)

The formal word appears not only in the soul-searchings of Thomas Jefferson and the speculative probings of R.P.W. but, for example, in the invocation to a ritual analogous to Wovoka's Indian Ghost Dance by which Jefferson expresses his spiritual rehabilitation.

Through the enlightenment provided by Meriwether Lewis's tragic exemplum and Lucy Lewis's intuitive sense of truth, he has passed from a restrictive idealism through complete despair to acceptance of human nature and a new faith in man's effort to create, after all, the "gleaming West anew:"

Dance back the buffalo, the shining land!
 Our grander Ghost Dance dance now, and shake the feather.
 Dance back the morning and the eagle's cry.
 Dance back the Shining Mountains, let them shine!
 Dance into morning and the lifted eye.
 Dance into morning past the morning star,
 And dance the heart by which we have lived and died.
 My Louisiana, I would dance you, though afar!

(BTD, p. 195)

Warren has described Brother to Dragons as "a communal nightmare. People from the past are caught in a terrible dream that must be re-enacted, over and over, for ever--or until they can resolve it, by coming to an understanding that will let them 'die' into peace. Sometimes they relive the past, sometimes they speak bits of narrative, sometimes they probe at some fragment of meaning discovered for the first time. Always they are struggling for the escape."²⁴ The issue which Warren's tormented characters are compelled to discuss and from which they long to escape arises when the American liberal tradition represented by Thomas Jefferson faces the fact of human evil represented by the crime of his nephew, Lilburn Lewis. Warren is careful to protect the character of Jefferson from facile accusations of basic naivety. Although he admits that he once thought man, the "master-monster," was "innocent," Jefferson is allowed to put the notion of innocence into a defining context:

²⁴ "Notes on Action and Stage" for a projected dramatic version of the poem, in an unpublished MS. given to the writer by Mr Warren.

. . . even then I was no fool,
 And knew that if you open the door of the cupboard
 There are wood-violet and shanker, merd and magnolia,
 side by side.
 And if I thought the housekeeping of Great Nature
 Was wasteless and took all to beneficent use,
 And decomposition and recomposition are but twin syllables
 on the same sweet tongue
 And two vibrations of the same string stung to joy,
 I scarcely held that meditation on the nurture of roses
 Is much comfort to a man who had just stepped in dung,
 And philosophy has never raised a crop of hair
 Where the scalping knife has once done the scythe-work.

(BTD, p. 37)

Realising that not all men are innocent, Jefferson nevertheless resolutely clung to a belief in the innocence of "Man" and in man's duty to redeem nature according to the values of forthrightness, order and harmony symbolised by the Maison Quarré at Nîmes which stood in such contrast to the depraved carvings of the Gothic imagination (BTD, pp. 38-39). Reminding us of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," Jefferson's initial reaction to the bestiality of his nephew is to reject Lilburn and to lapse into a moral torpor, a cynical view of all human ideals. The purpose of the main body of the book, a detailed examination of the murder and the events surrounding it, is to force Jefferson to recognise his spiritual as well as his blood kinship to Lilburn, thereby enabling him to reassert the old ideal in the new light of human imperfection. This reconciliation is finally brought about through the mediating influence of Lucy Lewis, Jefferson's sister and Lilburn's mother, and therefore a natural symbol of the moral bond which joins the lofty idealist and the sentimental butcher, ideal social vision and recalcitrant individual reality.

At the beginning of Warren's tale Jefferson is presented as the bitterly disillusioned idealist, his absolute and abstract vision of the new society radically violated by Lilburn's murder of his Negro

manservant, George, for breaking a pitcher which had belonged to Lucy Lewis. Since Warren's purpose is to implicate the father of American liberalism in the apparently senseless destruction of the defenceless Negro, we are given a vivid recreation of the events which led to the murder and made to feel that, however indefensible the crime, it was nevertheless "but the sum of all the defensible hours / We have lived through" (BTD, p. 111). This paradox is developed and explained by the career of the murderous Lilburn who is presented as devoted to his mother. She genuinely loved him but deprived him of love by willing her own death in a recoil from human involvement. Neurotically attached to his mother's memory, Lilburn drives his wife into withholding her love from him. When the slaves become careless with his mother's belongings they seem to be desecrating a unique and holy image. A scapegoat must be found and George is manipulated into the rôle. Now Lilburn has provided himself with a pretext for the act whereby he may conclusively define himself in terms of the sanctity of his mother's memory. He is an Ahabian figure, craving "fulfilment in the singleness of definition" (BTD, p. 121).

Lilburn cannot be defined in the simple terms used in the warrant for his arrest:

We know that Lilburn's not the Devil's son,
 Even if the warrant that they swore for him
 Does say in its old-fashioned formula
 That Lilburn Lewis, named a gentleman,
 Not having fear of God before his eyes,
 But being moved and seduced by the instigation
 Of the Devil, thus did his so-and-so and such.
 No, Lilburn had no truck with the Evil One,
 But knew that all he did was done for good,
 For his mother and the sweetness of the heart,
 And that's the instructive fact of history,
 That evil's done for good, and in good's name.

(BTD, p. 143)

Morally, the Lewis family's early nineteenth-century Kentucky is clearly an extension of Percy Munn's Tennessee, Willie Stark's Louisiana and the "dark and bloody ground" of World Enough and Time. By presenting the murder to Jefferson and to the reader as an evil act but one performed in the name of an ideal Warren implicates us all in Lilburn's criminality which he then proceeds to relate to Jefferson's proud ideal of innocence. The title of the book establishes Jefferson as Job-like in his bitterness and hurt pride. Job complains that he has become "a brother to dragons and a companion to owls" (Job, 30:29). Not only is Jefferson made to face the fact that he is an uncle to dragons, but he must also learn how treacherously the dragon-seed of his ideas sprouted in the life of Meriwether Lewis who experiences such savagery both in the idealised West and among civilised men during his Governorship of Louisiana that he commits suicide in despair. The ghostly Meriwether accuses Jefferson of making his "sweet lie" out of vanity:

. . . I would honour more the axe in the meat-house,
 As more honest at least, than your special lie
 Concocted, though cut of nobleness--oh, yes,
 It was noble, but was concocted for your comfort
 To prove yourself nobler in man's nobleness.
 Yes, in man's nobleness, you'd be the noble Jefferson.

(BTD, p. 186)

Whereas the murder of George is presented as a function of Lilburn's virtue, Jefferson's ideal conception of man is shown to be a function of his own guilt. His sister, Lucy, provides what Warren calls "the intrinsic mediation of the heart" (BTD, p. 212). She endorses Meriwether's perception that Jefferson believed in natural innocence because it served his vanity to do so: the belief allowed him to assert his own nobility, denying his natural capacity for evil.

Jefferson is made to realise that he can resuscitate the old ideal but only in the context of this newly revealed truth of the universal human failure. In the last passage which he speaks he invokes disinterested reason not "as a given condition of man," not as natural, but without his former self-righteousness, as something to be created out of severe imperfections:

. . . if there is to be reason, we must
 Create the possibility
 Of reason, and we can create it only
 From the circumstances of our most evil despair.
 We must strike the steel of wrath on the stone of guilt,
 And hope to provoke, thus, in the midst of our coiling
 darkness
 The incandescence of the heart's great flare.

(BTD, pp. 194-95)

At this point Jefferson finally breaks out of the vanity of alienation and is reconciled to the evil of Lilburn in which the lesser evils of the other characters are involved.

Brother to Dragons is as thoroughly philosophical a poem as any in the language, but as in all Warren's best work, "the abstract, the general, the universal is always related forcibly, even violently to the concrete, the particular, the local."²⁵ Warren keeps the reader in the company of flesh and blood through his own participation in the poem--"Red-headed, freckled, lean, a little stooped" (BTD, p. 26) ---and by embodying philosophical points in sharply appropriate imagery. The central tale of guilt and self-discovery is framed by R.P.W.'s two visits to the scene of the crime. On the first of these the poet's difficulty in penetrating the undergrowth of history and the ambiguities of the human heart is symbolised by the difficulty of his ascent to the ruin of the Lewis place and the present owner, Mr Boyle's

²⁵ Frederick P.W. McDowell, "Psychology and Theme in Brother to Dragons," Longley, p. 197.

scepticism about the sanity of attempting the climb:

. . . I did it too,
 And just like Boyle had said, I was a fool,
 A god-damned fool, and all that brush to fight.
 Saw-vine and sassafras, love-vine, wild rose,
 But the roses gone, and the tangled passion-vine,
 And blackberry man-high and tangled like a dream,
 And up the bluff, where cedar clambered rock,
 The tall, hot gloom of oak and ironwood,
 Canted and crazed but tall, and from their boughs
 The great grapevine, a century old, hung in its jungle horror,
 Swayed in its shagged and visceral delight,
 Convolved from bough to bough, hawser and halyard,
 Like rotten rigging of that foundered hill.

(BTD; p. 31)

R.P.W.'s account of this first visit is dominated by the striking vision of a huge black snake, an early instance of what Victor H. Strandberg regards as "the poem's master metaphor---the beast image."²⁶ At first terrified as by a sight of the very spirit of evil, R.P.W. goes on to insist that "the manifestation was only natural" (BTD, p. 34) and after the initial shock has worn off the snake seems:

. . . benevolent and sad and sage,
 As though it understood our human pitifulness
 And forgave all, and asked forgiveness, too.

(BTD, p. 35)

Thus in a short paradigmatic episode Warren not only prepares us for the moral shock and subsequent acceptance of human nature, but assimilates the action of the poem to his own experience as Milton assimilates the cosmic matter of Paradise Lost to his, "standing upon earth." As R.P.W. goes on to explain:

. . . the action is not self-contained, but contains
 Us too, and is contained by us, and is
 Only an image of the issue of our most distressful self-
 definition.

(BTD, p. 43)

²⁶ Strandberg, p. 140. In his determination to stress the theme of the unconscious self Strandberg stops short of noticing what the various beast images in the poem imply about the nature of that self as revealed in particular acts of perception.

R.P.W.'s initial reaction to "old obsoleta" establishes the snake also as an image that defines the human self. Morally neutral, a purely "natural" creature, the snake evokes at first a response from R.P.W. in terms of the capacity for evil that is part of his moral nature as a man, but later it reflects the opposite human potentialities for benevolence, wisdom, pity. Equally, the catfish sleeps in its element of Mississippi water, "at one with God"; it only shows "the brute face . . . of the last torturer" (BTD, p. 94) to the subjectively creating eye of man who sees reflected in the catfish merely that aspect of his mixed being which the early Jefferson chose to ignore.

R.P.W.'s second visit to the Lewis house bids farewell to the events which have now receded into the past with the redeemed Jefferson's modified hope for man as a being part beastly, part angelic. The issue is resolved, the communal nightmare over and the ghostly characters of the tale may now "die" into peace. At the end of the book R.P.W. returns to the waiting car to rejoin his old father--an affecting symbol of his involvement in all the noble failures of the past.

III

"Fiction," Warren says in his essay on Eudora Welty, "may be said to have two poles, history and idea, and the emphasis may be shifted very far in either direction" (SE, p. 168). Warren's failure to combine story and thematic implication in Band of Angels is partly due to his shifting the emphasis too far towards the pole of history

and partly to the inadequacies of his heroine-narrator. The problem is not merely that, as Charles H. Bohner puts it, so much "attention has been lavished on the novel's interior decoration,"²⁷ but that fast-paced action, bizarre characters and vivid settings all tend to overshadow Amantha, largely passive as she is. The novel offers an extensive, crowded panorama, from Starrwood, a small backwoods Kentucky plantation, to abolitionist Oberlin, to New Orleans under attack and occupation, to Pointe du Loup, Hamish Bond's plantation north of New Orleans, to the Africa of Alex Haley, to Halesburg, Kansas in the 1880's. "At times," says Bohner, "there is such a clutter of detail, such an insistence on background authenticity, that the reader may feel--as does the visitor to some widely heralded Historical Restoration--that the scene has everything but the breath of life."²⁸

The life of the novel is conveyed by Amantha Starr who, like Jack Burden in All the King's Men, is at once actor and raisonneur. On the first page Manty voices the two principal themes of the book: "Oh, who am I? . . . If I could only be free" (BOA, p. 3). Not only Manty but nearly all the main characters are involved in the effort to achieve identity and freedom during a period of American history which made these matters crucial for the generality of men. Manty's peristaltic journey ends in the low-keyed comedy of the novel's closing pages in which, after all the operatic clangour has died away, she and Tobias Sears truly meet at last and enter into the awful responsibilities of ordinary, prosaic living.

²⁷ Bohner, p. 128.

²⁸ Bohner, p. 128

Manty's reflections on herself and her circumstances are too readily separable from her character as revealed in action.²⁹ One critic calls her "incredibly articulate,"³⁰ in the first few pages we are given a bird calling in "melancholy iteration," family portraits "limned by the brush of a maestro," and a confession of "infantile ineptitudes." Manty's observations and her vocabulary are, indeed, Warren's, and would be more effective if they were frankly offered as his. Deriving her being from the men with whom she is involved, she has little substance of her own. Her pseudo-female voice seldom rises above a monotone and one has little evidence of her maturing, until the great leap forward of the book's final section.

The overabundance of its history and insubstantiality of its heroine do not, however, prevent Band of Angels from being an extremely interesting novel with a worthy purpose. The book holds our attention and as we are drawn into its action we find ourselves, like Ishmael confronting the "boggy, soggy, squitchy picture" in the Spouter-Inn, taking an oath with ourselves to find out what it means.

Central to Manty's problem is her half-caste status, a radical division which makes her a symbol of the human condition itself. The Civil War is fought within as well as round about her and her symptomatic question is, "Oh, whose side am I on?" (BOA, p. 276). She cannot define herself by identifying with either side for, as Leslie Fiedler points out, the abolitionist clichés of Oberlin are "as useless to her in understanding the realities of slavery and being a Negro as are the opposite clichés of the Southern slave-holders."³¹

²⁹ See below, Appendix, p. 352.

³⁰ Terence Martin, "Band of Angels: The Definition of Self-Definition," Folio, 21 (Winter, 1956), 31.

³¹ Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, Second Edition (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 411.

She can never bring herself to say, "I am a Negro," and she knows she is not white: thus, like Faulkner's Joe Christmas she is nothing in a category-oriented world.³² Trapped in her own invisibility like the hero of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Manty evades the obligation to define herself, using a mechanistic view of history to the same purpose as Jack Burden uses his Great Twitch. As long as she believes that ". . . what you are is an expression of History, and you do not live your life, but, somehow, your life lives you, and you are, therefore, only what History does to you" (BOA, p. 134), she can reject all responsibility for her own actions and for those of others since "everything in the world is just something that happens" (BOA, p. 309).

Manty is never quite secure in her abrogation of responsibility: she tries to withdraw from the world of the War, the Freedman's Bureau and the Constitutional Convention, but "the world was there, creeping in like cold air under a door" (BOA, p. 257). Like Jeremiah Beaumont, locked in his dream, she persists in her efforts to keep the world out. Although Tobias, after his first visit, leaves her feeling "weak and pure . . . and ready for life," Manty in a subsequent evasion, learns "the trick of sinking into the day's occupation," which she calls "the human commitment" (BOA, pp. 250-51), but which is just a sanctified retreat from involvement like Sue Murdock's immersion in a continuous present. She uses a version of the spider web philosophy Jack Burden learns from Cass Mastern to justify her own helplessness, reflecting on the complexities of cause and effect, on Flag-Officer Farragut's fine gold braid bringing her Tobias (BOA, p. 204)

³² Fiedler says that Manty is incapable of declaring herself white (Fiedler, p. 411). This is not strictly true, see BOA, p. 332 where she says, "I'm white," in order to dissociate herself from Rau-Ru. In this context, however, whiteness is asserted as disguise rather than as self-definition.

and John Brown's "blood-drenched fantasy" being responsible for her rape by Hamish Bond (BOA, p. 135). For most of the book her father is her chief scapegoat, a dumping ground for all responsibility, and as "poor little Manty" she proclaims her hatred for each of the men in her life. Fastening the blame for her condition on her father or on her series of lovers--Seth Parton, Hamish Bond, Tobias Sears--is even easier than admitting that the relation between cause and effect is never precisely definable, and distinctly preferable to the belief that she is involved in and at least partly responsible for what happens to herself and to others.

Throughout her evasions Manty is plagued by feelings of guilt which are exacerbated by the uncomfortable presence of another self, "that cold-eyed not-you" (BOA, p. 161), which rejoices in the avoidance of responsibility that derives from her power over others. These others--in particular her father, Hamish Bond and Tobias Sears--are all made to feel that they have wronged her and are, therefore, responsible for what she is. It is Manty's pious attack on her father as slave-holder which leads to the scene in the Cincinnati restaurant, but her father, out of his general guilt towards her, apologises for the embarrassment she feels when he defends her from "the mean snicker of the unredeemed world" (BOA, p. 30) and the resulting sense of her own failure. Manty remembers seizing the opportunity to transfer all responsibility to her father: ". . . there came to me some hard sense of an advantage just gained, not to be exploited yet but held in reserve, some possibility of self-justification and of revenge" (BOA, p. 32). Manty herself, looking back, recognises the similarity between this incident and the position in which she finds herself after Prieur-Denis's attempt at seduction, her rescue by Rau-Ru and Hamish Bond's apology for virtually stage-managing the event. Again she makes the

most of her opportunity, seeking to "confirm my own sweet advantage of having been little and precious and wronged" (BOA, p. 162). During Tobias's first visit her heart leaps as she realises that she "had touched some secret spring that gave me power over him" (BOA, p. 224). With each accession of power Manty seeks a new focus of responsibility: with perverse ingenuity she turns every admission of weakness by others into an excuse for self-evasion by deflecting away from herself all responsibility for being what she is. Thus while she is capable of positive emotional action in making the most of such opportunities, she is, basically, a negative character, most often in flight. Her inability to accept the legal freedom offered by Bond points her unwillingness to be spiritually free: she is bound to her New Orleans master by the self-pity which his kindness and her father's supposed cruelty seem to justify.

Repeatedly Manty makes the mistake of seeking freedom in flight from the past, to be "free from everything in the world, all the past, all my old self, free to create my new self" (BOA, p. 234). She is fundamentally in flight from the problem indicated by the two questioning lines of A.E. Housman which face the opening page of the novel:

When shall I be dead and rid
Of the wrong my father did? 33

Warren's answer is that one begins to live when one accepts the past and the "wrong" one's father did. In Manty's past lies not only the obvious cause of her bondage, her father's bankruptcy and untimely death, but also the fact which denies the rationale of her own life of evasions, that her father, loving her, had been unable to bring

³³ From the last stanza of poem 28 in A Shropshire Lad, "High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam," a bitter lament by a girl forcibly begotten on her "slave" mother by a conquering Saxon.

himself to draw up manumission papers and thereby to risk alienating and losing her. Her father had thus left her essentially undefined, free to create herself. In refusing to accept responsibility for defining herself in terms of her past as well as her present circumstances, Manty's sin is comparable to that of the "you" of "Original Sin: A Short Story." Only when she accepts her guilt, when she feels implicated in the world, can she be defined and truly free. In their final conversation Miss Idell begins to tell Manty the truth about her father, but she cannot at this stage accept it because it demands not only acceptance of responsibility for her own situation but also forgiveness of her father. Finally Manty realises that freedom does not inhere in the possession of manumission papers. "Nobody," she concludes, "can set you free . . . except yourself" (BOA, pp. 363-64). Her freedom is signalled by her final acceptance of the father who, she comes to realise, acted cruelly out of love. Forgiveness of her father entails acceptance of responsibility, acknowledgement of the purposes of her own actions, achievement of that limited freedom which is the human condition, and recognition of her own identity.

The problem of most of the other characters, both major and minor, complement and illuminate Manty's. Miss Idell and Tobias's father, old Mr Sears, possess a clear sense of identity; Manty hates the one and fears the other. For many men, Manty thinks, the War is less a matter of fighting for principles than an opportunity for self-fulfilment: "Perhaps this was the deepest and dearest promise, the most secret--the brute, communal roar, the dancing, the flames leaping in darkness" (BOA, p. 174). The War offers fulfilment to communal emptiness, commitment to a cause, however vaguely defined, self-realisation in action much like that sought by Percy Munn in Night Rider. Kindness

is like a disease to Hamish Bond (BOA, p. 110) who seeks freedom in expiation by benevolence to individual victims of the situation from which he has profited. Rau-Ru, Bond's k'la or bound brother, seeks freedom in political action, redefining himself as Lt. Oliver Cromwell Jones. Seth Parton and Tobias Sears, both idealists, seek freedom from their human limitations by imposing pure idea on the world.

None of these characters succeeds in finding either the envisaged freedom or the desired identity. At his death, Hamish Bond ironically finds himself "ass-deep in niggers" (BOA, p. 324), as he had bitterly promised his mother he one day would. Throughout his life he is haunted by his denial of his parents, blaming them and others for his career as a slave-trader, thinking "I didn't make myself and I can't help what I am doing. They drove me to it" (BOA, p. 189). It is those to whom he most particularly extends his kindness and protection, Rau-Ru and Manty, who preside at his hanging, each blaming the other for his death. It is most of all "old Bond being good" that makes Rau-Ru hate him (BOA, p. 271). It is not Mr Lincoln's Proclamation that releases the k'la from bondage, but his hatred for Hamish Bond together with the beating he receives for defending Manty from Prieur-Denis. Rau-Ru's freedom, however, leads nowhere. He is merely free to return, a hunted outlaw with his time running out, to hang Bond, or to feel that he could if he wished. Seth Parton seeks absolute purity, but with theology abandoned for the stock market and married to the fleshy Miss Idell, ends up closer to absolute impurity.

Tobias Sears, philosophically the most interesting of the supporting characters does, surprisingly, achieve redemption, though not in a way he could have foreseen. A student of Emerson, Tobias is one

of the "higher-law" men to whom the attraction of a total solution is very strong. This predilection, together with the challenge embodied in the corrupt Colonel Morton, explains Tobias's embracing the Negro's cause and his joining the Freedman's Bureau. He is one of those who, as Warren observes in The Legacy of the Civil War, have "lost what they took to be their natural and deserved rôle;" he is one of "an élite without function, a displaced class" (Legacy, p. 26). Bereft by the War of his traditional class identity and frustrated in the attempt to achieve personal freedom, Tobias commits himself to the political implementation of the principles contained in the Fourteenth Amendment, only to conclude in despair that ". . . we undertook to do good in the world, but we had not purged our own soul" (BOA, p. 294). A prototype for Tobias in Warren's mind would appear to be the abolitionist Theodore Weld who, Warren records, found that "he himself needed reforming," and that "he had been labouring to destroy evil in the same spirit as his antagonists" (Legacy, p. 23). Tobias's literary activities reveal the essence of his character. In The Great Betrayal he denounces the Gilded Age for corrupting the ideals for which he had fought, but in his poetry, published occasionally in the Atlantic, he is himself the recurrent protagonist, "dying always into the beauty of Idea, into the nobility of Truth, dying into the undefiled whiteness of some self-image" (BOA, p. 346). Manty recognises a fellow escape artist. This is Warren's higher-law man, who "had withdrawn, and all that was left was 'the infinitude of the individual'---with no 'connections', with no relation to 'dirty institutions'" (Legacy, p. 30).

Tobias and Manty's "failing westward" replaces Frederick Jackson Turner's ideal land of opportunity with a place of unregenerate

materialism. Tobias is converted to the Thingism which he had condemned in The Great Betrayal, but his fervent materialism is undercut by a sardonic realisation of the depths to which he has fallen. It is this protective self-satire which largely defines him until the end of the novel when he is retained by Josh Lounberry.

Some readers may flinch from the comedy of the Lounberry story.

John M. Bradbury, for example, has reservations:

The epilogue of rehabilitation, however, like that of Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, seems forced and gratuitous. Perhaps this is the inevitable fate of "resolved" fiction in an unresolved world. Logically we may accept the resolution, but humanly we cannot. ³⁴

This is hardly a matter susceptible to critical proof, and Bradbury's distinction between "logical" and "human" is obscure. The novel's scaling down from an operatic to a domestic level may lead the reader to feel that the last phase of the story is loosely tacked on to complete Warren's philosophical design. Yet, whatever Manty's deficiencies as narrator, there is no reason why we should question her selection of significant detail or the pace with which she conveys us from New Orleans westward to Halesburg for the display of final meanings. The closing movement of Band of Angels is not only its most audacious section artistically, but the one part of the novel in which Warren closes the gap between image and idea.

After the melodrama that has gone before, we see Manty and Tobias in the "commonness of the world" (WEAT, p. 355) fumbling towards a routine life together, unstimulated and unsupported by the grand pains and postures which they have both known and practised. Warren is not devaluing their past struggles, but his shift to a minor key for the redemptive phase of their experience is a striking way of saying that

³⁴ John M. Bradbury, The Fugitives, A Critical Account, p. 228.

it is in the quotidian world of prose and imperfection that ideas must live to prove their value. Conversations between Manty and Tobias seem real for the first time in these closing pages: we are in the presence of two human beings relating openly to one another in credible direct speech. They are both done with evasions. If Tobias "had been, long ago, the liberator, the bearer of freedom, and had risked his very life in heroism," Manty realises that "he had not been involved in that community of weakness and rejection, he had merely leaned down from his height, had inclined his white hieratic head that glimmered like a statue" (BOA, p. 372). Drawn into involvement with Josh Lounberry and his father, Uncle Slop, Tobias's sensibility expands to accommodate both the sheer human values in the case and the comic irony of his being "a Jehu to coons" (BOA, p. 369). As he joins with Mr Lounberry in "the application of suds, the scrubbing of the scaly, smelly old black hide, the dousing with eau de Cologne, the honouring of Father," Tobias achieves "the redeeming of the past and all the vanity of heroism." The image is of idealism joyfully soiling itself with the dirt of earthly reality, of the word becoming flesh. Manty in her turn is freed from false images of herself through the agency of Mr Lounberry whose ability to honour the father who had rejected him brings it home to her "all at once, like catching the glint of a piece of thistledown drifting in high sunlight," that her father had loved her (BOA, p. 373). Accident certainly plays a considerable part in the development of Manty and Tobias, but they do, at last, earn the reality of themselves. Band of Angels is, no doubt, a flawed work of fiction, but it ends magnificently.

IV

In Wilderness Warren considers the problem of human freedom in the context of the Civil War. The book is short and compact, closer to the compressions of Brother to Dragons or Audubon than to the abundance of World Enough and Time or Band of Angels. Unfortunately it is three-dimensional life itself which is compressed out of Wilderness by Warren's subjecting both character and action to extremely tight philosophical control. Meaning in the novel is conveyed explicitly by direct statement and implicitly through Bunyanesque allegory and occasionally successful symbolism. Adam Rosenzweig's problem is essentially relevant to the individual in any historical period but he is only intermittently a credible, psychologically complex young man. The richness and vitality of life which sustain the philosophy of World Enough and Time and, albeit less successfully, Band of Angels is largely absent from this novel in which each character is plainly conscripted into the development of theme and the emphasis is shifted so far towards the pole of idea that the character and actions of the hero are eclipsed by the lessons he learns. These lessons themselves mark the stages of Adam's moral progress but are seldom satisfactorily connected to the events that give rise to them: they are felt by the reader as detachable from what Henry James would have called "the concrete terms" of the novel. This major fault in the book results from Warren's confessed failure to create a fully realised central character: "You have the strange effect of a central hollowness with a rich context, with the central character as an observer that is a mere observer. He's involved intellectually, but only intellectually.

The story is never fleshed out in enough depth so that the world of context is related to his experience in the right way."³⁵

Wilderness is a generally unhappy combination of blatantly philosophical design and sketchily portrayed reality. The over-all effect is of an attenuated Warren exemplum which has mutinied in an attempt to become the novel of which it was intended to be only a part.³⁶

In Band of Angels the inadequacies of his heroine do not prevent Warren from projecting his fictional world into credible orbit. In Wilderness, despite the given reality of its historical framework, the distance between Adam Rosenzweig and the events in which he is involved imparts an abstract quality to many of the narrative and descriptive passages. There is an appropriate element of the surreal in Chapter Four, in which Adam is swept into the New York draft riots of July, 1863. At this point Adam is suffering from a sense of devaluation: no-one from the Elmyra has even tried to catch him and his brief sense of exaltation has faded, leaving him lost and lonely in a very foreign country. He had looked across the water from the ship and seen the new land welcoming, fertile, seemingly peaceful, benignly offering the comfortable image of a small boy in blue trousers and a white shirt, his big brown dog sitting on the bluff beside him, barking like a Bavarian toy (W, pp. 25-26, 29). Adam finds that this picturesque tableau is an illusion: the shifting grey sprawl of New York is, therefore, apposite in making vivid the contrasting reality which the innocent Adam finds awaiting him on landing. In terms of his psychological condition and in terms of

³⁵ See below, Appendix, p. 351.

³⁶ Charles Thomas Samuels has characterised the book along similar lines in "In the Wilderness," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 5 (Fall, 1962), 46-57.

theme--that is, of Adam's education in the real and illusory aspects of America--the drab, violent reality of New York is clearly functional. Yet as narrative, as a telling of what Adam does, thinks, sees, the chapter does not succeed. The derelict children, the old man at the Bavarian wayside shrine, the Negro hanging--a black Christ--from the lamp post and the crowd that almost absorbs Adam into its mass fury are all too obviously contrived: they obtrude from the lean narrative as calculated points of meaningfulness, symbolic dots demanding to be joined together by the reader. The unreality is heightened by the short declarative sentences in which most of the chapter--and much of the book--is narrated.

Adam's alternating doubt and elation are mirrored in his response to nature: joy in his freedom leads him to wonder at the beauty of the natural world, while deterministic fears at the fatedness and futility of man's efforts lead him to identify with black ants laboriously struggling with crumbs of food in the grass (W, pp. 286-88).³⁷ The moral collapse and near animality of Monmorancy Pugh, the Christian pacifist-turned-bushwhacker, are reflected in his decaying shack in the midst of overgrown fields, and it is the wilderness itself which suggests the nature of man's life, his history and the challenges of the world.

If symbolism like this is unobtrusively effective, there are some painfully over-significant images and conversations. The impediment of Adam's foot becomes a wearisome symbol, although it can occasion affecting moments like the shrewd Mose Talbutt's half

³⁷ Warren's model for this passage was, presumably, Frederic Henry's description of the ants in the last chapter of A Farewell to Arms.

affectionate, half disparaging refusal to grant Adam the dignity of his archetypal name, calling him "Slew-foot" instead (W, p. 92). The exchanges between Adam and Aaron Blaustein in Chapter Five are impossibly stiff. Blaustein suffers from almost total self-understanding, apprehending with a kind of intellectual ostentation "the logic of the world" (W, p. 66). We meet him in the throes of self-tormenting pride, understandable bitterness, and acute loss, yet we shrink from the insistence with which he is made to instruct Adam. Adam rejects adoption by Blaustein so that he can continue his quest "für die Freiheit" and so that he can discover and protect his own identity, thus expiating the guilt which he has already assumed. He flees from the attraction-repulsion which the man of idea always feels for the man of fact, proving his independence and justifying his pride, escaping his past and the limitations of his tradition. These are important ideas, familiar to the reader of Warren, but they are delivered here as if from a lecture platform.

Warren's method in Wilderness is to forsake the operatic fullness Leslie Fiedler found in Band of Angels in favour of an uneasy fusion of Bunyanesque allegory and realistic representation of people and events. Meaning is realised in the book not only through direct statement and symbol but also through the fashioning of a traditional frame within which seemingly unrelated events assume ordered significance. As in The Pilgrim's Progress all the secondary characters take their importance from their relation to the hero and his journey: they draw him from the right way, arouse his scorn, encourage his despair, or reveal, through contrast, the fate which he must avoid. There is a rough correlation between Bunyan's Mr Legality and Adam's uncle, both of whom preach adherence to the Law. There is an obvious

parallel between Adam's faith in man and Bunyan's in Christ. Adam, like Christian, sees terrible sights whose meaning he does not understand, but which are later explained to him by Aaron Blaustein in his rôle as commentator and guide. In the course of his journey Adam meets various characters whose errors are made clear and who are eventually lost. He is repeatedly tempted. After he has resisted the appeal of Aaron Blaustein, he is tempted by Maran Meyerhof. She tempts his pride--for she approves and admires his quest--as well as his flesh and, more subtly, his typically human disposition to live naturally in the satisfactions of agrarian employment. For Adam to end his journey here would mean a loss of his defining humanness, reminiscent of Jeremiah Beaumont's "blank cup of nature" (WEAT, p. 506). The temptations of pride and hypocrisy are central to Adam's evolving relation with Mose Talbutt. In a development of his early response to the dead Negro hanging from the lamp post in Chapter Four, Adam is repelled by Mose, by the very race he has sworn to defend, and thus is tempted to do the right thing for the wrong reason, teaching Mose to read and write not because of kindness or fellow feeling, but from pride in his own superiority. Morally as well as physically he is still "Slew-foot." Monmorancy Pugh is Adam's false guide and Mrs Pugh, as Stanley Edgar Hyman remarks, is the ogre's wife or king's daughter of fairy-tale, warning the young man of her husband's murderous intent and arming and instructing him.³⁸ As in The Pilgrim's Progress a river crossing is used to point the hero's entrance into a new state of being and his final enlightenment. Towards the end of the book Warren's summary of Adam's journey directly establishes the

³⁸ Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Coming Out of the Wilderness," New Leader, 44 (13 Nov. 1961), 25.

allegorical nature of the quest: "Everything in the world had tried to stop him, temptations, disillusion, fear, the blankness of the world and time, all the betrayals of his dream. But he had come. By God, he had come here" (W, p. 299).

Unfortunately, Warren's allegorical method accentuates the synopsis-like quality of his tale. Occasionally he does succeed in infusing an imagined historical moment with resonant meaning. Walking out of the Union camp at the beginning of Chapter Ten, Adam sees a body of horsemen approaching from the North. Warren's description brilliantly selects the most evocative details: the silence of the horses' hooves on the earth, the soft creaking of leather, the blank veiled eyes of the horsemen in whom the only sign of life is "the faint motion of hips absorbing the motion of the mount into the portentous immobility of the human torso" (W, p. 198). Adam sees a captain sitting in a pose of "heroic solitude, or indifference." As the troop rides away he recalls seeing at their head a "smallish, lumpish, bearded man between two gold-gleaming warriors . . . with a hat pulled low on his brow, no insignia on his coat" (W, pp. 198-99). What Adam has seen is at once a Union Cavalry Troop back from reconnaissance and a visionary company of warriors in whose mien may be read much of the meaning of war. The yellow-haired captain's is one face of the hero; the roistering, brutalised Simms Purdew's is another. Grant, the undistinguished man at the head of the company, is one example of the leader; Lee, likened to a bear in a cave (W, p. 202), is another. The figures in this scene achieve their visionary quality without strain and event rises smoothly to a symbolic plane. A similar success occurs in Chapter Fifteen in which

Adam is drawn into the tawdry violence of the War and shoots a man not in the abstract name of his dream of freedom, but because of a "sharp access of moral repugnance" (W, p. 297) towards dirty fighting. The reader is still aware of the author's philosophical designs upon him, but the vicious ballet of the "eight maniacal scarecrows" and the men in blue is so credibly rendered from the dazed and wondering Adam's point of view that meanings are firmly supported by the realism of the presentation.

Charles T. Samuels takes a poor view of what he calls Warren's final "gratuitous leap of faith,"³⁹ severely criticising the author's inability to face the implications of Adam's quest. Samuels finds the restrained meliorism of the novel's conclusion sentimental and inconsistent with everything that has come before: Adam's struggle has been for nothing, and Warren should admit it. Certainly Warren represents Adam in the closing pages as tacking wildly from one extreme to another, from deciding that all his life has been a betrayal, that everything he has ever known is false, to concluding that the truth about the world which he has been slowly and painfully learning from the beginning is, after all, unbetrayable. This anti-romantic truth gives cause not for ecstasy but for sober hope and it is to the definition of this hard-won hope that Warren addresses himself in the closing pages. What Adam learns is that freedom depends on the recognition of man's condition, of the possibilities inherent in his nature. Man must hold to the possibility of virtue while accepting his own potentiality for evil and recognising the deterministic elements in his existence. Freedom is a state of mind or spirit maintained as

³⁹ Charles Thomas Samuels, "In the Wilderness," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, 5, 56.

much in spite of the world as because of its promise. At the last Adam, in his sadness and his hope, is freed from the beguiling but treacherously simple categories symbolised by the glittering white of the Zelzsteinberg and the blue-black of the Bavarian forest (W, p. 3). The problem of the novel's conclusion is not one of inconsistency or sentimentality but of following closely the final turnings and reversals of a mind with whose workings the reader should have become familiar but which is never realised fully enough to promote the necessary intimacy.

It is surprising to find as astute a reader as Charles H. Bohner praising Wilderness for its "economy of means."⁴⁰ As is generally true of the short story form, the method of the book does not cater to Warren's need for a broad, well populated canvas, for richly imagined characters, for complexly inter-related events. The language is not that "special brand of brightened language, intermediate between verse and mannered prose,"⁴¹ which Leslie Fiedler found in Brother to Dragons and Band of Angels. Too much of the book is either thin, colourless narrative or booming rhetoric. Occasionally the sharply edged image, the telling scene, or a feeling for the time, the land and the people allays the reader's disappointment in Warren's failure to make yet another "little myth" out of "the big myth we live."

⁴⁰ Bohner, p. 158.

⁴¹ Leslie Fiedler, No! In Thunder (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 133.

Chapter Six

The Human Bond and a New Sense of Poetry

All the King's Men gained Warren his first Pulitzer Prize in 1947. He won his second in 1958 with Promises: Poems, 1954-1956, his first book of poems since Selected Poems, 1923-1943. Promises was also awarded the Edna St Vincent Millay Prize of the Poetry Society of America and the National Book Award. James Dickey reviewed the book enthusiastically for the Sewanee Review: "When he is good, and often when he is bad, you had as soon read Warren as live."¹ Warren says that during the years between the first Selected Poems and the new book he found himself unable to finish a short poem: "I wrote, started many over that period of years. I never finished one . . . I'd write five lines, ten lines, twenty lines--it would die on me."² The personal quality of the poems in Promises suggests that the "whole new sense of poetry" that came to Warren some time after he had finished Brother to Dragons was directly connected with his divorce from Emma Brescia in 1951, his marriage to Eleanor Clark in 1952 and the birth of their two children, Rosanna and Gabriel. In 1954, when Rosanna was one year old, the Warrens spent the summer at Porto Ercole on the Italian coast about a hundred miles north of Rome. The experience revitalised Warren's lyric gift: "the place and the events all tie together in the sense of a new way into

¹ James Dickey, "In the Presence of Anthologies," Sewanee Review, 66 (1958), 307.

² Appendix, p. 353.

poetry."³ As the title indicates, the poems in Promises envision greater possibilities for the achievement of happiness than previous Warren verse had done.

"To a Little Girl, One Year Old, in a Ruined Fortress" consists of five poems centred on Rosanna with her parents at Porto Ercole. The old fortification--"Rocca: fortress, hawk-heel, lion paw, clamped on a hill"--and the nearby hunchback with his deformed child symbolise the spent civilisation of the Old World, "the malfeasance of nature" and "the filth of fate." Juxtaposed with these images is the innocent, golden-haired Rosanna, emblem of renewal and promise. In "Sirocco" (SP, p. 219) the poet contemplates the mixture of images which he has himself created by introducing his daughter to such a place, registering the incongruous elements in the scene and discovering that they evoke in him a powerful emotional response. The opening lines' tone of wonder at the juxtaposition he has made--"To a place of ruined stone we brought you, and sea-reaches"--is sustained throughout the poem, pointed by "We have brought you" in line eleven. Like the poet himself, the reader will look beneath the surface of the images to find their inner relations, but the poem's keynote is its wonder and the heart-ache which the imagery evokes and which reminds us of the impact of natural beauty on the yearning heart of Adam Rosenzweig in the opening pages of Wilderness. In this first of the five poems Warren is content to allow his scene to vibrate in his imagination without intellectually probing his apprehension of it. His feelings deepen in the second and third poems while at the same time intellect gradually takes hold of the data brought to it by

³ Appendix, p. 353.

intuitive perception. In the fourth and fifth poems of the sequence the poet achieves understanding of his experience through the revelation of meaning in his daughter's pleasure in her flower and, finally, as he surveys the landscape from a shaded enclave of rock high on the mountain.

Animated by the sirocco, the images of the first poem do, of course, suggest a typically Warrenesque world of oppositions and ironies. The innocent girl is a foil to the world of experience symbolised by the fortress with its implications of vanished power and of the enduring realities of a world in which might is right and ideals must be defended by calculated force. The realistic principle endures just as the "geometry of a military rigour" survives "as a reminder of the Spaniard's most fastidious mathematic and skill," although Philip's world is now ruined. Ironically, although he loved God, espousing the right dream for his epoch, he did not prosper while living and now, like Ozymandias' shattered visage, his scutcheon lies broken and derelict. Are we to look on Philip's works and despair? Is the innocent laughter of the little girl mocked by this tale of time? We can see that these are the questions posed by the poem, although the poet is so struck by the objects of his apprehension that he does not himself move from contemplation to deliberate analysis until later in the sequence. It is the intensity of feeling conveyed by the poem's imagery that makes the answers to these questions moving and substantial instead of merely banal. The garbage under which the arrogance of "Philipus me fecit" has for so long lain buried is countered by the beauty of "rosemary with blue, thistle with gold bloom." It is human to desire perfection--a world

without garbage: "Far hangs Giannutri in blue air. Far to that blueness the heart aches" in yearning for the absolute image that transcends the opposed poles of ruin and natural beauty. The pleasure in natural beauty and the heart-ache itself are alternatives to despair. The sun's regilding of the girl's hair aligns her with the natural gold of the thistle in line eight and her beautiful innocence is therefore included in the sic transit gloria of the last line: "And on the exposed approaches the last gold of gorse bloom, in the sirocco, shakes." Here the sirocco symbolises time, to whose operation bloom and girl are as subject as the works of the anguished Philip. Yet the bloom will return with the next season, the girl will survive this sirocco, it is still remembered that Philip loved God and his ruin endures as a token of his earthly effort.

In the second and third poems of the sequence the poet finds that a view of the world based on his joy in his daughter is severely threatened by the dark side of life. If the sirocco represents time in the first poem, it also imparts the breath of life to the scene, but in "Gull's Cry" (SP, p. 220) a static scene is dominated by the goat droppings that await the prospecting beetle, the motionless gull, and the gobbo's wife, mother of the defective child, sunk in her suffering. The immobility of most of the elements in the scene suggests a world fixed on a plane of unmeaning naturalism, like the gull stuck on its shelf of air. There is activity beneath the surface of things, but it is only the "molecular dance". Victor H. Strandberg explains the meaning of the gull image by referring to the description of another gull in the ninth poem of "Promises," the volume's second

sequence: "And a gleam in imperial ease, at sky-height, / One gull hangs white in contempt of our human heart, and the night" (SP, p. 244).⁴ Freedom of flight and "outcry" against the night, if not contempt for it, do partly characterise the gull in the closing lines of "The Flower" (SP, p. 224), but Strandberg's determination to find consistent patterns of imagery in Promises leads him into the error of confining this image to a single meaning. In "Gull's Cry" the bird is merely seen as another creature subject to naturalistic limitations. "The gull, at an eye-blink, will, into the astonishing statement of sun, pass," but this deprives the gull of expected grace, converting its flight into the mechanistic behaviour of the human eye which one moment sees the bird and the next does not. The gull's struggle to achieve freedom of flight symbolises the poet's desire to rise above the naturalistic level, but its efforts in the "anguish of air"---by which phrase Warren implies that the bird's very element of existence is its torment---are "irrelevant" because they are futile.⁵ It is the quality of life under the sun which makes its "statement" appear "astonishing." Strandberg is reminded of the "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun" attributed by Yeats to his "vast image" in "The Second Coming": "This seems to be a naturalistic sun, which carelessly brought forth life--such as the beetle, the goat, the hunchback and the defective child--and which presides with mechanical indifference over the dissolution under its reign."⁶ Warren's

⁴ Strandberg, p. 208.

⁵ John L. Stewart misses the point entirely, dismissing "the irrelevant anguish of air" as an inflated way of saying "small gusts." (Stewart, p. 529).

⁶ Strandberg, p. 181.

point, however, is that the sun presides with mechanical impartiality over everything, from goat, beetle, gull and defective child to the poet and his daughter. Natural creatures and oppressed humans toil and suffer, but the girl's laughter and the poet's joy in her are real too, implying possibilities unrealised by the other constituents of the scene. Awareness of such possibilities carries the obligation to assert a view of life as meaningful after all, and the girl's laughter becomes an affirming cry answering the frustrated cry of the gull and bringing "all" into unity:

But at your laughter let the molecular dance of the stone-
dark glimmer like joy in the stone's dream,
And in that moment of possibility, let gobbo, gobbo's wife,
and us, and all, take hands and sing: redeem, redeem!

If the reader is inclined to judge the concluding affirmation of "Gull's Cry" facile, that is precisely the charge the poet himself levels at it by focussing on the most recalcitrant example of nature's "malfeasance" in "The Child Next Door" (SP, pp. 220-21). His seizure of something close to hatred⁷ towards the defective child's sister is a momentary recoil from her inadequate perspective:

. . . Fool, doesn't she know that the process
Is not that joyous or simple, to bless, or unbless,
The malfeasance of nature or the filth of fate?

⁷ The poet expresses a similar impulse in the second last stanza of "The Dogwood," Part Two of "Dark Woods." Here the sudden whiteness of the dogwood bloom is felt as an affront in a world in which there is so much darkness:

. . . then you felt a strange wrath burn
To strike it, and strike, had a stick been handy in the dark there.

(SP, p. 235)

If the sister's "pure love, calm eyes" and saintly patience strike him as offensively innocent in a world that includes such monstrosity, must he not abandon the affirmation of "Gull's Cry" as an even more culpable instance of wilful and artificial innocence in himself? It is at this point in the sequence that the poet consciously brings his intellect to bear on the matters which have been working so powerfully on his feelings. His questions, however, instruct him in the need for faith:

Can it bind or loose, that beauty in that kind,
Beauty of benediction? We must trust our hope to prevail
That heart-joy in beauty be wisdom, before beauty fail
And be gathered like air in the ruck of the world's wind!

The poet's question here is somewhat obscure--a slight blemish on an almost perfect poem. He appears to ask whether the sister's "beauty of benediction" can hold us all together in joy--as the "all" of "Gull's Cry" are imagined holding hands and singing--or whether such beauty can "loose" or liberate us from a mordant view of life based on the tragedy of the defective child. His answer is that "our hope to prevail," as much a fact of human experience as "this monstrous other," demands that we believe in the cognitive value of the joy which underlies the sister's attitude to life and which the poet knows himself through the "goldness" of his daughter. The determined affirmation of "Gull's Cry" is tempered to a more reflective, balanced vision of the world as the poet thinks not only of his daughter--at once foil to the defective child and an extension of the beautiful sister--but also of the dissolutions wrought by time and the mysterious chaos of the universe, "how empires grind, stars are hurled." Now, with an effort, the poet can respond to the "ciao" of the defective child, which is both a sign that he recognises a connection between

the child and himself and an acceptance of the attitude of the sister because it is he who has taught the child to make the greeting. "We're all one Flesh, at last," we are told in "Go it, Granny--Go it, Hog!" (SP, p. 262), and the poet's response to the child's greeting shows his awareness of how we are indeed bound together in joy and in limitation. Strandberg is at his most acute in his interpretation of the last lines of this poem:

It is a brilliant touch on Warren's part to indicate by the simple repetition of the child's greeting a major shift in the narrator's perspective, from an external attitude of pity to an internalized identification of the narrator with the defective child. This is the culmination of the ritual of brotherhood. In the ultimate view of things, considered from a spiritual perspective, the child and the narrator are one: both are tragically defective through an inadequate inheritance, both communicate only imperfectly, both are bounded by insuperable limitations and subject to the caprices of the "world's wind."⁸

Warren is not specifically concerned with the adequacy or otherwise of his inheritance until "Promises," the volume's second sequence of poems, and he would almost certainly dislike Strandberg's tendency to reduce the defective child from a real "monster" in "that purlieu of dirt" to a pre-emptively symbolic rôle. In Incarnations, the seventh poem of the sequence called "Internal Injuries" announces, "The world / Is a parable and we are / The meaning" (SP, p. 133), but the title of the sequence indicates that to hold such a view is to be metaphysically wounded. Warren's world constantly denies the proposition that "only Nothingness is real" (SP, p. 133). His landscapes seldom function in the way of the paysage moralisé W.H. Auden defines in Part Three of "New Year Letter" as a confected

⁸ Strandberg, p. 188.

⁹ The "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace" fails partly because Warren's fantastic allegory arbitrarily substitutes a paysage moralisé for the real world.

"inner space of private ownership."¹⁰ "The Child Next Door" ends with the statement, "This is the world," just as the boy in "Court-Martial" concludes his memoir with the insistence, "The world is real. It is there" (SP, p. 232). Nevertheless, Strandberg's perceptive comment serves to emphasise the degree to which the process of the Rosanna sequence has now become intellectual as well as emotional. In the fourth poem the image of the flower is used like a metaphysical conceit and the fifth is openly concerned with the problem of interpretation.

"The Flower" (SP, pp. 221-24) is the sequence's least successful poem not because of "the rambling, inconclusive organisation and thinking" which John L. Stewart finds in it--organisation and thought are kept in shape by the poet's focus on his daughter and her daily flower--but because Warren seems unable to achieve the sustained tautness of expression that characterises the first three poems. The reason would appear to be largely technical: whether rhymed or not, the short line needs more thrust or wit than this.¹¹ Warren displays these qualities in "Court-Martial," "Dark Night of the Soul," in much of the verse of Incarnations and in the "Interjections" that break into the sequence of Or Else, but the short lines of "The Flower" are

¹⁰ W.H. Auden, Collected Longer Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 111.

¹¹ In a lively and perceptive early essay on Warren's poetry, W.P. Southard refers to the verse of "End of Season" (SP, p. 297) and concludes: "That loose line is his favourite, and his best. His tight metrics mostly don't come off, they're too tight, a strain . . . He gets an easy effect, of a voice admirably accenting its various speeches, and I have a hunch he writes it that way: just talks it out, to see how the diction hits the ear." (W.P. Southard, "The Religious Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," Kenyon Review, 7 [Autumn, 1945], 653.)

at odds with the poem's uneasy combination of narrative and meditation. The short statements are often flat and monotonous, the movement jerky, the rhymes limp as in the third section, in which the poet tells how he carries his daughter up the hill to her favourite spot:

We approach your special place,
And I am watching your face
To see the sweet puzzlement grow,
And then recognition glow.
Recognition explodes in delight.
You leap like spray, or like light.
Despite my arm's tightness,
You leap in gold-glitter and brightness.
You leap like a fish-flash in bright air,
And reach out. Yes, I'm well aware
That this is the spot, and hour,
For you to demand your flower.

Warren recovers his grip of his medium in the longer, richer lines of the poem which ends the sequence. If the girl's leap of joy in the above lines is unpersuasive, a similar moment is beautifully rendered in stanzas four to six of "Colder Fire" (SP, p. 225) in which the poet not only speaks of his daughter's delight in the butterflies but, without strain, associates her beauty and innocence with the fragility of the butterflies, their shortness of flight and the transience of ecstasy:

You leap on my knee, you exclaim at the sun-stung gyration.
And the upper air stirs, as though the vast stillness of sky
Had stirred in its sunlit sleep and made suspiration,
A luxurious languor of breath, as after love, there is a sigh.

But enough, for the highest sun-scintillant pair are gone
Seaward, past rampart and cliff borne, over blue sea-gleam.
Close to my chair, to a thistle, a butterfly sinks now, flight
done.

By the gold bloom of thistle, white wings pulse under the sky's
dream.

With the waning of the season in "The Flower" the day comes when there is no bloom "worthily white" for the poet's daughter. Her pleasure in

a "ruined" flower, "as though human need / Were not for perfection," prompts the poet to rise above his own need for perfection and to accept the flux and change of the world, seeing, rather sentimentally, in the image of his daughter and her flower an intimation of the transcendent unity of life:

Yes, in that image let
Both past and future forget,
In clasped communal ease,
Their brute identities.

Charles H. Böhner's evaluation of "The Flower" as "the finest poem of the series" appears to be based on the fact that the above lines express "the controlling idea" of the volume;¹² but a strong theme--even when it is restated elsewhere--does not necessarily make a strong poem. The same "controlling idea" of the unity of life emerges much more dramatically at the end of "Gull's Cry," becomes more movingly explicit in "The Child Next Door" and grows again out of the particularities of experience in "Colder Fire" to ring out in the climax of this flawed but impressive sequence.

At the beginning of "Colder Fire" (SP, pp. 225-26) the poet admits that the despondency induced in his wife and himself by "defection of season" is wrong and that "the heart's weather should not be / Merely a reflex to a solstice, or sport of some aggrieved equinox." Man should not be so strongly affected by mere nature. As he pulls out of his mood he realises that nature affords not only butterflies for his daughter and himself to delight in but also an analogy between the delicate, ephemeral vitality of the butterflies and his daughter's mortality. As it is the butterflies' nature to

¹² Böhner, p. 138.

mount light, "As though that tall light were eternal indeed, not merely the summer's reprieve," so it is incumbent on man to seek to rise above his earthbound state, and the poet raises his eyes to the mountain, remembering the place where he and his wife experienced a transcendent sense of things. The effort involved in the ascent of the spirit to a point of adequate perspective is dramatised by the catalogue of mountain paths, terraces, trees and scarps. The "deep recess . . . benched and withdrawn in the mountain-mass" expresses once again Warren's definition of man as both a natural and idealising being, for here the poet and his wife were embedded in the nature of rock and tree and at the same time above nature as they looked out over sea and land. Warren then skilfully encloses his point of vantage and its implications within two natural images which suggest the relation of beauty to evanescence, fulfilment to mortality: close by him the "time-tattered butterflies" still dance, though now "disarrayed," no longer in formation "pair by pair," and on the branches of the pines in his remembered enclave of rock "Condensed moisture gathers at a needle-tip. It glitters, will fall." The poet's acceptance of the life cycle of a butterfly, even of a bead of condensation, is a sign that transcendent awareness of the nature of the world which is the "colder fire" within which particular joys may flame.

Addressing his daughter in the second last stanza, the poet admits to the limitation of subjectivity in his language and his vision. It is an Eliotesque gambit, like saying, "That was a way of putting it--not very satisfactory," as Eliot does in Part Two of "East Coker," before he authoritatively looses his images and ideas on the

"Mad Young Aristocrat on Beach" have Italian settings linking them to the first sequence, but most are set in the South of the poet's youth. The real connection between the Italian context and the Southern characters and images that populate most of the poems is established in "Lullaby: Moonlight Lingers" (SP, pp. 255-56). Watching his son sleeping, surrounded by the moonlit Italian landscape, the poet remembers an image from his own past:

Now I close my eyes and see
Moonlight white on a certain tree.
It was a big white oak near a door
Familiar, long back, to me,
But now years unseen, and my foot enters there no more.

Contemplating his son and speculating on the nature of the world in which the boy will pass to "high pride of unillusioned manhood" (SP, p. 249), the poet feels a need to define the world of his own youth, the types and symbols which instructed him in his maturing. The underlying reason for this need is a sense of the continuity of life: "Moonlight falls on sleeping faces. / It fell in far times and other places" (SP, p. 256). The "other places" include a recognisable, just slightly poeticised Guthrie, Kentucky, which the poet revisits in "Walk by Moonlight in Small Town" (SP, pp. 253-55). Here "each street and building holds some memory, some scrap of the past; and the poet yearns to know their meaning, to realise an ideal forever beyond the human world of imperfection:"¹⁴

Might a man but know his Truth, and might
He live so that life, by moon or sun,
In dusk or dawn, would be all one--
Then never on a summer night
Need he stand and shake in that cold blaze of Platonic light.

¹⁴ Bohner, p. 141.

What the poet yearns for is, as Cleanth Brooks observes, strictly impossible: "Man can never know his truth so thoroughly that he will not need to shake in the cold blaze of the light of the ideal."¹⁵ Man must, however, keep on trying, and in this sequence of poems the unity and continuity of life are the truths which the poet finds especially crucial to his own vision and which he therefore wishes to pass on to his son.

The last of the sequence's three "Lullabies" suggests that, as water "moves under starlight, / Before it finds that dark of its own deepest knowledge" (SP, p. 268), so his son will find his deepest knowledge in sleep. This idea, part Freudian, part fanciful, helps us to understand what the poet means when he says in "Lullaby: Smile in Sleep" that the boy "dreams Reality" (SP, p. 252). There is an assertive sentimentality about all this, but the statement that "all that flows finds end but in its own source" (SP, p. 268) has significance for the whole sequence. The source of all that flows in the boy is not only the poet himself, but also the poet's parents, the Ruth and Robert of the first poem, his grandfather--unwitting agent of revelation in "Court-Martial"--the ghostly "field full of folk" which the poet imagines behind him in the first part of "Dark Woods" (SP, p. 234) and all the idealistic, studious, lusty, violent, materialistic and pioneering men of "Founding Fathers, Nineteenth-Century Style, Southeast U.S.A.:" "For we are their children in the light of humanness, and under the shadow of God's closing hand" (SP, p. 243).

¹⁵ Cleanth Brooks, A Shaping Joy: Studies in the Writer's Craft (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 228.

The "you" of "What Was the Promise that Smiled from the Maples at Evening?" is the boyhood self of the poet who remembers his impulsive retreat into the lonely darkness away from the love and security proffered by his parents. The poet assures his son that the men and women of the past died for the purpose expressed in the last line: "We died only that every promise might be fulfilled" (SP, p. 228). The fulfillment available to any age involves the passing of the preceding one and the boy's withdrawal from what his parents can provide is a natural recoil which foreshadows the image in the first part of "Infant Boy at Midcentury" of the "rosy heel" of the poet's son learning "to spurn / Us, and our works and days" (SP, p. 249). Just as the mature poet has developed a tender respect for his parents--"their bones in a phosphorous of glory agleam, there they lay" (SP, p. 228)--and an appreciation of the relevance of their earthly effort, so he speaks to his son of the continuity of the human condition, suggesting he remember, as he advances into his "fair time," that "many among us wish you well" (SP, p. 250). There will be "modification of landscape," but it is realism, not envy of the opportunities lying open to the young, to suggest that "The new age will need the old lies" as it strives in the continuing process of "accommodating flesh to idea" (SP, p. 250). The poet has, after all, been reminded in "Foreign Shore, Old Woman, Slaughter of Octopus" of the continuity of the human heart, "that what came will recur" (SP, p. 244). If the verse of the first part of "Infant Boy at Midcentury" is forced, even raucous, the second and third parts impress by precision of thought and quiet-toned

expression. This is sentiment as distinct from the sentimentality of the "Lullabies." These poems expand the idea of life's connections beyond the scope of the family's generations and in "Mad Young Aristocrat on Beach" (SP, pp. 257-58) Warren reminds us once more that the unity of life is broader than the chronological line. The poet recognises a common human predicament in the figure of the young man, maddened by his memories and disappointments. Therefore:

We should love him, because his flesh suffers for you
and for me,
As our own flesh should suffer for him, and for all
Who will never come to the title, and be loved for themselves, at innocent nightfall.

If this is cumbersome writing, the poem does achieve a cumulative effect, engaging our interest in the strange young man so that we follow his tormented fluctuations of mood until Warren's concluding point is upon us. The point itself echoes the poet's recognition of the bond between himself and the defective child in "The Child Next Door" and anticipates many of the poems of Incarnations as well as the first of its epigraphs: "Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren" (Nehemiah, 5:5).

Recalling his discovery in 1954 of a new feeling for poetry, Warren told the writer: "The narrative sense began to enter the short poem . . . as a germ, that is."¹⁶ In some of the poems of Promises --such as "The Flower," "Gold Glade," "Dark Woods" and "Boy's Will"--the short story element is aptly described as a "germ," but in many of the best poems in this and later volumes it amounts to much more than that. Warren's rhetoric usually benefits from the restraints

¹⁶ Appendix, p. 353.

imposed by the need to keep even a slight story going. The exception in "Promises" is "Dark Night of the Soul" (SP, pp. 245-48), a variation of the story told in "Blackberry Winter." The speaker in this poem remembers a day when, as a twelve-year old boy, he found a dying old tramp in the woods. The boy's persistent curiosity compels the tramp to slouch away. Not to the boy, as in the story, but to the tramp comes illumination, "the awfulness of joy" succeeding "the absolute and glacial purity of despair" (SP, p. 248). The poem tells the story skilfully, developing the situation to the point at which the tramp looks up into the boy's face to be held by a Donne-like image if not by Donne's ecstasy: "our eyes thread the single thread / Of the human entrapment" (SP, p. 247). The tramp jerks away and the boy, now a man, follows him in imagination to the moment of his asserted illumination. This strikes the reader as presumptuous of the speaker because no reason is given--or is even deducible--for the joy which we are told the tramp finds. It is another instance of sentimentality. No such charge can be made against "Court-Martial" (SP, pp. 228-32), in which Warren develops the relationship between a boy and his grandfather further than he had taken it in "When the Light Gets Green," dramatising the boy's awakening to violence and guilt. Manoeuvring his toy soldiers in reproductions of the campaigns described by the old man, the boy idealistically undertakes "to repair / The mistakes of his old war" (SP, p. 229). As he plays, he elicits from his grandfather an account of the summary lynching of bushwhackers during the Civil War: "Brevitatem justitia amat. / Time is short--hell, a rope is--that's that" (SP, p. 230).

The boy passes judgement on his grandfather and Warren describes exactly how the old man's savour of his memories turns for a moment, as he feels the boy's eyes on him, into an involuntary pang of conscience under cover of protest:

"By God--" and he jerked up his head.
 "By God, they deserved it," he said.
 "Don't look at me that way," he said.
 "By God--" and the old eyes glared red.
 Then shut in the cedar shade.

The old man falls asleep and the boy is left with "ruined lawn" and "raw house" in a real, fallen world, no longer populated by toy soldiers or by the ideals for which his grandfather stood before the afternoon's revelation.

"Country Burying" (SP, pp. 237-38) contrasts the poet's youthful and mature responses to the locale of his boyhood. Taking his mother to town to bury an acquaintance whose name he does not even bother to ask was merely the loss of "a boy's afternoon," but life away from the familiar things of his childhood has taught him a need for the place that formed his "centre." He imagines himself returning to enter the little white church whose stillness is broken by the buzzing of a fly. The italicised last line indicates that there is a real fly buzzing in the present from which the poet looks back on his small town: "Why doesn't that fly stop buzzing--stop buzzing up there?" (SP, p. 238). The poet's irritation with the fly neatly points the new reverence he feels for his place of origin and his need to contemplate its meaning.

There are three shockers among the verse narratives: "School Lesson Based on Word of Tragic Death of Entire Gillum Family," "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme," and "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace."

The "Ballad" (SP, pp. 260-64), hyperbolically admired by Strandberg for displaying "all the visionary power that poetry is capable of,"¹⁷ is the most ambitious but the least successful of these. John L. Stewart dismisses it as "a queer sequence of nightmares of sexual fear and guilt."¹⁸ Broader concerns are discernible through the irritating opacities of the poem: a basic allegory offers the figure of Granny as representative of the human condition, the Purchaser of Part Seven as God and the hogs as devouring time itself whose remorseless appetite has us all lined up for consumption however we may protest:

. . . But look, in God's name, I am me!
 If you are, there's the letter a hog has in charge,
 With a gold coronet and your own name writ large,
 And in French, most politely, "Répondez s'il vous plaît."

(SP, p. 264)

The poem's superficial brilliance does not, however, compensate for its mixture of crude effects and sheer obliquity. Both "School Lesson" and "Dragon Country" succeed far better in using a colloquial manner to express by way of violent action the natural and supernatural mystery of life. In "School Lesson" (SP, pp. 238-40) a poor white farmer goes berserk, killing his five children, his wife and himself. With wry tenderness Warren describes the uncouth Gillums in "the real language of men" as spoken in rural Kentucky:

In town, Gillum stopped you, he'd say: "Say, mister,
 I'll name you what's true fer folks, ever-one.
 Human-man ain't much more'n a big blood blister.
 All red and proud-swole, but one good squeeze and he's gone.
 "Take me, ain't wuth lead and powder to perish,
 Just some spindle bone stuck in a pair of pants,
 But a man's got his chaps to love and to cherish,
 And raise up and larn 'em so they kin git their chance."

(SP, p. 239)

¹⁷ Strandberg, p. 234.

¹⁸ Stewart, p. 525.

There is no way of knowing why Old Gillum turns from cherishing to murder; his homespun certainties contrast with the riddle he bequeaths to his children's classmates who are left "studying the arithmetic of losses"--the facts of the event--but are too young to take up "the lesson of the sudden madness there is in things."¹⁹ Warren himself takes up the lesson in the fable of "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme" (SP, pp. 258-60) in which a dragon has appeared to lay waste the state of Kentucky. The people are not prepared to accept the presence of mystery in their lives: when a man inexplicably disappears, his family pretends that he has "gone to Akron, or up to Ford, in Detroit," and Jebb Johnson's mother refuses to identify what is left of a leg inside his boot as the remains of her son. But the poem's biggest surprise is kept until the last two stanzas in which the poet expresses contempt for the efforts of religion to deal with the danger that terrorises the land and even suggests that "the Beast" is somehow necessary:

But if the Beast were withdrawn now, life might dwindle
again
To the ennui, the pleasure, and the night sweat, known in
the time before
Necessity of truth had trodden the land, and our hearts, to
pain,
And left, in darkness, the fearful glimmer of joy, like a
spoor.

Warren's addressing his poem to Jacob Boehme prepares us for a connection between it and Boehme's philosophy of the world as involving two opposing principles, good and evil, light and darkness, both of which are aspects of God. A reading of the last stanza in terms of Boehme's belief in the necessity of antithesis might lead the reader to conclude that Warren is celebrating evil as the necessary counterpart

¹⁹ Stewart, p. 520.

of good. Warren's point, however, as Cleanth Brooks defines it, offers not a mere echo of Boehme's philosophy but a subtle and humane variation of it for which we have been prepared by the lesson of Brother to Dragons. "The 'joy' of which a 'fearful glimmer' glows in the last line comes not from evil as such but from an acceptance of the 'necessity of truth.' If one admits the element of horror in life, if he concedes the necessary mystery, if he faces the terrifying truth about it, if he admits the existence of the dragon of evil, that very facing of the truth constitutes the promise--and the only promise--of ultimate joy."²⁰

George P. Garrett sees Promises as belonging to "what might be called the grand tradition of southern writing." The ingredients of this tradition include: "a love of the land . . . a sense of its history, a strong bond of family, a sense of humour . . . and a way with language."²¹ Much of the verse discussed here supports this judgement. Warren's love of the land and the people of the South inspires, for example, "Country Burying," "School Lesson," "Walk by Moonlight in Small Town" and the short sequence, "Boy's Will, Joyful Labour Without Pay, and Harvest Home (1918)." There is great love of region behind the accuracy with which he records the exact quality of light when the storm gathers in the third stanza of "Summer Storm (Circa 1916), and 'God's Grace" (SP, pp.240-41) and a tender respect for the objects that belong to the region's way of life vivifies the description of the end of a working day on the farm in "Hands are Paid":

²⁰ Brooks, A Shaping Joy, p. 224.

²¹ Longley, p. 228.

The springs of the bed creak now, and settle.
 The overalls hang on the back of a chair
 To stiffen, slow, as the sweat gets drier.
 Far, under a cedar, the tractor's metal
 Surrenders last heat to the night air.

In the cedar dark a white moth drifts.
 The mule's head, at the barn-lot bar,
 Droops sad and saurian under night's splendour.
 In the star-pale field, the propped pitchfork lifts
 Its burden, hung black, to the white star.

(SP, p. 267)

In the first edition of Promises this poem is followed by the third
 "Lullaby" to the poet's son, then by a cryptic final poem called
 "The Necessity for Belief" which Warren omitted both from Selected
Poems: New and Old, 1923-1966 and from Selected Poems, 1923-1975:

The sun is red, and the sky does not scream.
 The sun is red, and the sky does not scream.

There is much that is scarcely to be believed.

The moon is in the sky, and there is no weeping.
 The moon is in the sky, and there is no weeping.

Much is told that is scarcely to be believed.

(Promises, p. 84)

Warren's dropping "The Necessity of Belief" from the later collections
 is consistent with his insistence on the earned vision. One can
 imagine his reproaching himself with the thought that, while there
 might be "no weeping" for him at the moment in which he conceived the
 poem, the defective child lived on in Porto Ercole and terrible things
 were still happening in Kentucky. But the concluding juxtaposition of
 pieces in the original edition is suggestive, for one feels that the
 spirit of hope breathing through this outstanding volume arises from
 a new delight drawn from the simplest of things as well as from the
 challenging joys of fatherhood.

II

You, Emperors, and Others: Poems, 1957-1960 takes its title poem from the book's two opening groups of poems, the first addressed to "You," the second dealing with Roman emperors. The latter group proclaims no mere antiquarian interest, however, as "Apology for Domitian" (SP, pp. 199-200) makes plain: "Let's stop horsing around --it's not Domitian, it's you / We mean." In "The Letter About Money, Love or Other Comfort, if Any" (SP, pp. 192-95) the speaker confesses to "a passion, like a disease, for Truth" and in the poems of this volume the search for truth focuses on the problem of identity.

"The Letter About Money" tells of a mysterious stranger who gives the speaker in his youth a letter that he must deliver "by hand only" to another stranger, the "you" of the poem. Fruitlessly pursuing the addressee across the world, the speaker finally leaves the letter under a pile of stones near the supposed hermitage of the "you," who appears to have been hunted "to the upper altitudes" to live as an outcast from society, "for you are said to be capable now of all bestiality, and only your age / makes you less dangerous." Like the nightmare figure of "Original Sin: A Short Story," the stranger to whom the letter must be delivered is invested with pitiful, repellent and subhuman characteristics, yet the strange commission must be discharged, the trust fulfilled. The speaker's concluding hope for a vision of truth and his "peace with God" evidently depends on his keeping faith with the shadowy stranger, even in his pariah-hood. The final implication of the poem, which makes it a variation on the theme common to "Original Sin," "Pursuit" and "Crime," is that the

speaker has been charged with the obligation to track his own deeper self. His "metaphysical runaround" is a journey into the mirror of "Clearly About You" (SP, p. 191) to find the undiscovered self who, though avoided by the conscious mind--"one shuns / To acknowledge the root from which one's own virtue mounts"--holds the secret of identity. The "you" of the group of poems entitled "Garland For You" is that person at whose face in the mirror we stare back with incomprehension, or it may be the stranger lurking within us who seems alien to the image we cherish of ourselves. The truth about this "you" may be reflected back at us by the remote figures of Domitian and Tiberius, by the "Roman citizen of no historical importance" who furnishes the epigraph for "Clearly About You," or by the two dead Civil War soldiers whose monologues comprise the "Two Studies in Idealism" (SP, pp. 215-16) that provide Warren's "Short Survey of American, and Human, History," illustrating man's abiding need to "know what he lives for" in the midst of "life's awful illogic and the world's stew."

"The Letter About Money," written in one breathless if not incontinent sentence held in shape by a complex but strict rhyme scheme, is a technical tour de force with undeniable cumulative power. It typifies the experimental quality of You, Emperors, and Others. The risks Warren takes in this volume were not to the taste of the book's early reviewers. Dudley Fitts damned it with condescension: "All in all, and in spite of a handful of poems that seem to be clear about the point they want to make, Mr Warren's new book is an exercise in metrical high jinks. Fairly high jinks. There's no law against a poet's taking an artistic vacation, and this binge was obviously fun."²²

²² Dudley Fitts, "Exercise in Metrical High Jinks," New York Times Book Review, 23 Oct. 1960, p. 32.

John Edward Hardy accused Warren of "stale and unconvincing posturings, assumptions of worn-out disguises" in the production of "seventy-nine pages of poems largely about nothing in the world, except a desperate striving for significance. Or, striving for you."²³ The basis for Hardy's aversion to the book is his belief that Warren "does not know . . . or indeed, I suspect, care . . . anything about mice, travelling salesmen, ladies with cancer, or you. He has written a book, apparently, out of some obscure feeling that he ought to know and care, of regret that he doesn't."²⁴

Especially coming after Promises, You, Emperors, and Others is a disappointment and no responsible critic would question Hardy's right to find fault with many of the poems in the book; but no reader responsive to Warren's work as a whole could accept the particular form of moral condemnation implicit in what Hardy says about Warren's not caring about his fellow creatures. Everything of Warren's prior to this volume testifies to a profound and energetic involvement in "the lonely / Fact of humanness we share" (YEO, p. 6). Hardy's comments overshoot the critical mark of the book in hand, giving the impression of an opportunity seized to excoriate a writer long disliked. Hardy has, admittedly, a sharp eye for a poem's faults --several of the poems he particularly dislikes were, advisedly, omitted by Warren from the later collections²⁵--but his relish in critical

²³ John Edward Hardy, Poetry, 99 (Oct., 1961), 60.

²⁴ Hardy, p. 62.

²⁵ In a recent interview Peter Stitt asks Warren about his method of selecting poems for reprinting. Warren tells Stitt: ". . . when I was preparing my Selected Poems of 1966, I consulted with Allen Tate, William Meredith and Cleanth Brooks. If two of them were strongly negative about a poem, I would take it out, unless I had my own strong reasons for leaving it in. And my editor, Albert Erskine, is very helpful." (Peter Stitt, An Interview with Robert Penn Warren, Sewanee Review, 85 [1977], 473.)

demolition precludes his seeing that even the many blemished poems in this volume have something to commend them. The analogies are too slick in "Nocturne: Travelling Salesman in Hotel Bedroom" (YEO, pp. 54-55), but the compassion underlying the Audenesque satire is evident in the poet's projecting himself into the lonely salesman's sense of missing out on life:

Far off, in the predawn drizzle,
A car's tires slosh the street mess,
And you think, in an access of anguish,
It bears someone to happiness.

This is not distinguished verse, but it is not "posturing." Despite its affinity with the early, excellent "To a Face in the Crowd," "Lullaby: Exercise in Human Charity and Self-Knowledge" (YEO, pp. 5-6) is cloyingly sweet; in this poem, as in "Man in the Street" (SP, pp. 195-96) and in much of "Ballad: Between the Boxcars" (YEO, pp. 46-50; abridged in SP, pp. 212-14), one feels that, however characteristic of Warren the themes may be, the poet is more involved with the problem of filling out his rhyme scheme than with the intricacies of his subject. There is a self-conscious cuteness about the "Nursery Rhymes" (YEO, pp. 64-70) and the nine "Short Thoughts for Long Nights" (YEO, pp. 71-99), but "Clearly About You," which Hardy condemns, provides an effectively button-holing introduction not only to "Garland for You" but to the whole book, sharply exemplifying in stanza three the kind of truth one may prefer not to know about one's origins and in stanza four the modern methods by which evasions of the deeper self may be attempted.

The book's best poems are those which strike the reader as "coming from the event,"²⁶ whether the event be real as in the first, third and fifth poems of the "Mortmain" group and in "In the Moonlight, Somewhere,

²⁶ Appendix, p. 338.

They are Singing" (SP, p. 210), or imagined as in "Two Studies in Idealism." These poems, focusing on the poet's father, on his son, on his "young aunt and her young husband" and on two representative figures from the Civil War--founding fathers of a kind--would have had a more appropriate context in the Gabriel sequence of Promises.

The long title of the first part of "Mortmain" (SP, p. 202) is part of the poem itself: "After Night Flight Son Reaches Bedside of Already Unconscious Father, Whose Right Hand Lifts in a Spasmodic Gesture, as though Trying to Make Contact: 1955." The stanzas that follow expose the inadequacy of such a bald summary, the first of them veering from the reductive factualness of the title to the grandiose alliterations of "Time's concatenations and / Carnal Conventicle" and "Ruck of bedclothes ritualistically / Reordered." But this is wrong too: "Christ, start again!" The hysterical grittiness of the expression in the first stanza dramatises the poet's difficulty in describing his experience. His emotions are turbulent and he shouts to be heard above the clangour of his feelings; only a grand style will measure up to such a moment. Then, sensing that the gesticulant manner was ill chosen, he begins again with the simple facts that he is "travel-shaken" and that he is powerfully affected both physically and morally ("gut- or conscience gnaw") by the portentous spasm of his dying father's hand. Warren manages his shifts of tone here with a skill similar to that employed in "The Return: An Elegy," but with greater economy as he juxtaposes the father's attempt to make contact and remembered snatches of the language whereby contact existed between his father and himself as a child:

. . . oh, oop-si-daisy, churns
The sad heart, oh, atta-boy, daddio's got
One more shot in the locker, peas-porridge hot.

There is no suggestion here of the factitious harshness that Morton D. Zabel saw endangering the success of Warren's method,²⁷ for the last stanza expands precisely out of these echoes of the past into a lament for the loss of self which the father's death involves.

The mysterious relation between father and son is pondered further in "Fox-Fire: 1956" and in "A Vision: Circa 1880." The success of these poems depends largely on Warren's being content, despite his passionate desire to understand, merely to convey the quality of his feelings--what he calls "the trick of the heart"--without diminishing their intensity by any of the imposed philosophising that spoils "In the Turpitude of Time: N.D." (SP, pp. 205-206). "Fox-Fire: 1956" (SP, pp. 204-205) simply offers the poignant image of the poet's holding his father's old grammar book while hearing his "small son laugh from a farther room." The mystery of the relation of father to son and to the son's son burns on as "that poor book burns / Like fox-fire in the black swamp of the world's error." Again, in "A Vision: Circa 1880" (SP, pp. 206-207) Warren allows his fantasy to speak for itself as he imagines seeing his father as a boy and longing to speak to him, to warn him, to change the course of history. As the dying Willie Stark says to Jack Burden: "It might have been all different" (AKM, p. 425). This is an effective and moving poem not because it further develops the theme of the human need for contact which is central to the "Mortmain" group--"A Dead Language: Circa 1885" (SP, pp. 206-207) is more particularly about the

²⁷ See above, Chapter Two, p. 57.

failure of idealism and seems out of place--but because, while specific to the point of locating the vision in the "cedar-dark," purling limewater and parched pastures of Trigg County, Kentucky, it hits a universal nerve. We would all like to speak to our fathers in their boyhoods, to tell them how their futures and our inheritances could be "all different," better.

Beginning with Promises and continuing through You, Emperors, and Others there is a growing preoccupation in Warren's poetry with the interdependence that exists not only between members of a family and between past and present, but between man and nature and between apparently unconnected people and events as exemplified by the excellent "Fall Comes in Back Country Vermont" (SP, pp. 52-56). This concern with interdependence is reflected in Warren's increasing tendency "to conceive of his poems in terms of sequences in which the poems are not autonomous or self-sufficient but depend for part of their meaning on the context of surrounding poems, on their place in the sequence and in the volume."²⁸ It is further reflected in the kind of interdependence he implies within the whole body of his poetry by beginning his two later volumes of selections with the latest work, arranging his poems in reverse chronological order. The reader will begin with the newest poems, but will discover that progress through the book equates movement forward with a movement back into poems which reveal origins of the poet's present sensibility. The continuing process of his poetic vision is also illustrated by the use of poems from "Notes on a Life to be Lived." This sequence begins "Tale of Time: New Poems, 1960-1966," the collection, not previously published

²⁸ Monroe K. Spears, "The Latest Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," Sewanee Review, 78 (1970), 349.

in book form, included in Selected Poems: New and Old, 1923-1966 for which Warren was awarded the Bollingen Prize in Poetry in 1967. In the foreword to Or Else--Poem/Poems 1968-1974 Warren says that the poems in "Notes on a Life to be Lived" were composed as parts of a projected long poem, similar to Or Else, which he found "disintegrating into a miscellany" (OE, p. xiii). Abandoning the project, he published the poems as they appear at the beginning of Selected Poems: New and Old, but later found that seven of them, as well as "The True Nature of Time" from Incarnations, had a place in the thematic structure of Or Else.

Without the poems of "Notes on a Life to be Lived," the "Tale of Time" collection includes little work on a level with Warren's best, although one must respect the variety of the poems: writing them undoubtedly helped Warren towards the greater openness and flexibility of style found in succeeding volumes. "Holy Writ" (SP, pp. 174-82) is a failed exercise in historical imagination written in an unpersuasive mélange of tones, contrived biblical cadences and stabbing, irregular rhythms. Comparison with "Two Studies in Idealism" points the superiority of the earlier, more narrowly focused performance in bringing the dead to life and giving them credible voices. The title sequence of the collection (SP, pp. 141-48), dealing with the death of the poet's mother almost forty years before, is perilously close to a wallow, fundamentally repetitious in its enumeration of the pains of deep bereavement and self-consciously portentous in its references to Time, Truth and History. John Edward Hardy would, no doubt, regard this as evidence that Warren did not even care for his mother, although such a judgement would be refuted by the entirely convincing "dark and swollen orchid" of the poet's sorrow in "The Return: An Elegy" (SP, p. 318).

The long-windedness of "The Day Dr Knox Did It" (SP, pp. 167-73) is somewhat redeemed in its last part, "And All That Came Thereafter," by a compelling account of how the speaker, fleeing from the implications of his neighbour's suicide, discovers that the mysterious fact of death pursues him everywhere:

My small daughter's dog has been killed on the road.
It is night. In the next room she weeps.

The speaker's daughter, too, is being instructed in the central rôle of death in the world of experience.

"Delight" (SP, pp. 183-88) is a disappointing sequence, its first poem flat, its last arch. "Love: Two Vignettes" works beautifully, the sportive gaiety of language precisely mirroring a state of sheer happiness that modulates into a concluding moment of uncertainty rendered with impeccable restraint; but the humour offered by the rhymes of "Something is Going to Happen" is laboured, and the finicking definitions of "Two Poems about Suddenly and a Rose" are irritating. Humour does contribute effectively to "Homage to Emerson, on Night Flight to New York" (SP, pp. 153-58). Warren confesses to "a pathological flinch" from the oversimplifications of Emersonianism: "when it comes down to Hawthorne and Emerson meeting on the woodpaths of Concord, I'm strictly for Hawthorne."²⁹ In the context of so many poems about death it is not surprising that the brooding effort to re-experience, to explain and to endure such losses should lead the poet to test again the comforting transcendentalism of the philosopher who "had forgiven God everything." The poet can concede that "At 38,000 feet Emerson / Is dead right," but while the luxuriously vague belief that "significance shines through everything" seems to cover the case

²⁹ Appendix, p. 342.

at such a remove from earth, it is also true that "At 38,000 feet you had better / Try to remember something specific, if / You yourself want to be something specific." Life on earth demands that you be "something specific," and the Sage of Concord has less to say about the realities of living than an old coloured man's comically superstitious mockery of the wart the poet had on his finger when a boy. At least the old coloured man recognised that, despite abstract notions of race, "You is human-kind." Just as Robert Frost declares that "Earth's the right place for love," the poet elects to descend from Emersonian altitudes, to the earth where he has friends whose "lives have strange shapes"--which Emerson would not have understood--and whom he thinks he loves:

Now let us cross that black cement which so resembles
the arctic ice of
Our recollections. There is the city, the sky
Glows, glows above it, there must be

A way by which the process of living can become Truth.

Let us move toward the city. Do you think you could tell me
What constitutes the human bond?

(SP, p. 158)

It is this "human bond," as well as how "the process of living can become Truth," which Warren is concerned to know and to celebrate.

Chapter Seven

The Flesh and the Imagination

In "Treasure Hunt" (SP, pp. 108-109) one of the simplest and best poems of Incarnations: Poems, 1966-1968, Warren urges the reader to hunt for whatever meaning may be found in the world: "The terror is, all promises are kept. / Even happiness." The implication that other promises are more likely to be kept, but that happiness may deflect us from the quest for meaning, gathers force from a context which stresses suffering and death against a recurrent background of comfortless eternity. Although felt by its author as less integral a work than Or Else, Incarnations is essentially an extended meditation on the meaning of flesh--living and dead, human, animal and vegetable--under its perpetual sentence of annihilation. Paul Valéry, confronting "the furious energies of nature" (SP, pp. 107-108) expressed in the turbulence of the sea-wind that commands white sail, white surf and white gull, is absorbed into the extinguishing whiteness by his white Panama hat, his mind turned "like a leaf." The first poem in the book warns us: "Do not / Look too long at the sea, for / That brightness will rinse out your eyeballs. / They will go gray as dead moons" (SP, p. 103). The "glorious, golden, glad sun" which for Melville was eternally "the only true lamp" has turned killer, although it is still agent of truth, in the grim iconography of "Island of Summer," the volume's opening sequence:

. . . the sun has

Burned all white, for the sun, it would
 Burn our bones to chalk--yes, keep
 Them covered, oh flesh, oh sweet
 Integument, oh frail, depart not

And leave me thus exposed, like Truth.

(SP, p. 113)

What is man's truth when his flesh is burned away? The contemplation
 of eternity brings no answer:

In the momentary silence of the cicada,
 I can hear the appalling speed,
 In space beyond stars, of
 Light. It is

A sound like wind.

(SP, p. 118)

Warren is too honest to let the problem rest on a shelf of rhetoric.
 In the last poem of the book the speaker is surrounded by a blinding
 white fog that has risen from the snow at his feet. Finding himself
 "contextless," he "Sees the substance of body dissolving" and is
 totally exposed in the anguished cry which ends the poem:

The body's brags are put
 To sleep--all, all. What
 Is the locus of the soul?

What, in such absoluteness,
 Can be prayed for? Oh, crow,
 Come back, I would hear your voice:

That much, at least, in this whiteness.

(SP, p. 138)

The poems of Incarnations are uneven in quality. Sometimes, as
 Victor H. Strandberg observes, Warren's "gamble do not pay off."¹
 "Wet Hair: If Now His Mother Should Come" (SP, pp. 121-22) is

¹ Victor Strandberg, "The Incarnations of Robert Penn Warren,"
Shenandoah, 20 (Summer, 1969), 95.

embarrassingly sentimental; the speaker's asking the cabbie in "Driver, Driver" if he knows "what flesh is, and if it is, as some people say, really sacred" (SP, p. 135) is not rescued by its context from being prosaic and banal; "The Leaf" contains the flat, unmetrical statement that "Destiny is what you experience, that / Is its name and definition, and is your name" (SP, p. 117). We regret such lapses, but forgive them in our appreciation of Warren's commitment to his theme and his refusal to lay any flattering unction to the reader's or his own uncertainly located soul. Deep in his "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" T.S. Eliot says: "The poetry does not matter" ("East Coker," Part II). It does, of course, matter a great deal, as Eliot well knows, and he can say this meaningfully only because he is in the act of producing poetry of the highest quality; but the statement tells the reader to attend to "Four Quartets" as a process by which the poet, taking risks, experimenting with ways "of putting it," hopes, eventually, to get it right. Warren's book, with its failures and successes, is also a process that moves towards the magnificent conclusion of "Fog," in which the speaker stands at last in a moment redolent of death and eternity, confessing his helplessness and his need in direct, spare, perfectly judged poetry. The implication of these lines is clearly intended to express a contrast to the orthodox Christian meaning of incarnation: "if there is a promise of salvation, of resurrection in this book, it obviously can come only through this world of ours."² We are left with paradox:

² Peter Stitt, "Robert Penn Warren, The Poet," Southern Review, 12 (April, 1976), 267.

"The world means only itself" (SP, p. 107) but "We must try / To love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, in God" (SP, p. 116). The poet's appeal to the crow to come back returns us to the world of the flesh to hunt again for the incarnate treasure of its meaning.

In "Night is Personal" (SP, pp. 125-26) the Warden is adjured to "keep that morphine moving" for the doomed convict because "we are all / One flesh." Penetrating to the heart of the physical world in "Island of Summer," the poet discovers that "the human bond," whose meaning he sought in "Homage to Emerson," is part of a larger network of connections joining man to the rest of the natural world. Warren seems to feel again the authority of the naturalism which drew him in "Kentucky Mountain Farm" and which eventually prompted him to distinguish man as separate from the natural world in terms of his need to live by an idea. The distinction seems less certain now: the world of nature and man are equally subject to remorseless laws:

. . . for history,
Like nature, may have mercy,
Though only by accident. Neither
Has tears.

(SP, p. 105)

But this is not capitulation to the indifference of the early naturalism or backsliding towards communion in Jeremiah Beaumont's "blank cup of nature" (WEAT, p. 506) for, if Warren is preoccupied with man's enclosure in his frail integument of flesh, he denies the blankness of nature by projecting human qualities into the biological world even to the point of endowing his ivy--and the wall which it assaults--with the capacity to dream (SP, p. 112). The fig experiences

"bliss" and "languor" in "Where the Slow Fig's Purple Sloth"

(SP, p. 104) and the red mullet "sees and does not / Forgive" (SP, p. 113). Illumination in this sequence comes especially from non-human flesh:

When you
Split the fig, you will see
Lifting from the coarse and purple seed, its
Flesh like flame, purer
Than blood.

It fills
The darkening room with light.

(SP, p. 104)

The fleshly flame of the mullet "Burns in the shadow of the black shoal" (SP, p. 114). The peach's flesh in "Riddle in the Garden" (SP, pp. 106-107) provides more specific illumination, becoming, as it falls, increasingly human:

. . . its pudeur
has departed like peach-fuzz wiped off, and

We now know how the hot sweet-
ness of flesh and the juice-dark hug
the rough peach-pit, we know its most
suicidal yearnings, it wants
to suffer extremely, it

Loves God . . .

Monroe K. Spears notes that Warren's images of the natural world --and especially of its fruit--in "Island of Summer" are "anti-Marvellian: concerned, that is, not with the contrast between the innocence of animals and plants and the guilt of human beings, but with the community between them, both moral and physical."³ The most obvious expression of this community is the continuous cycle according

³ Spears, pp. 351-52.

to which man eats the figs and then dies, whereby "the root / Of the laurel has profited, the leaf / Of the live-oak achieves a new lustre" (SP, p. 105). This is why, in "Riddle in the Garden," the poet warns the reader: ". . . do not / touch that plum, it will burn you . . . for you / are part of the world" (SP, p. 107). The fundamental idea of the cycle of life is unexceptional but the intensity of Warren's expression of it makes it new: we are all, it seems, incarnate in everything that lives. Warren's position is less secure when he postulates a system of relations that stretches actively backward in time as well as infinitely forward. This is the central point made in the over-syncopated argument of "The Leaf" (SP, pp. 116-118), which presents the reader with a large collection of images that fail to cohere. The last two sections assert the poet's belief in human continuity:

. . . The world

Is fruitful, and I, too,
 In that I am the father
 Of my father's father's father. I
 Of my father, have set the teeth on edge. But
 By what grape? I have cried out in the night.

From a further garden, from the shade of another
 tree,
 My father's voice, in the moment when the cicada
 ceases, has called to me.

The voice blesses me for the only
 Gift I have given: teeth set on edge.

Warren does not adequately prepare us for his principle of retroactive fatherhood. We recognise the same imagination that gives Jack Burden his paradigm of human connectedness: "I eat a persimmon and the teeth of a tinker in Tibet are put on edge" (AKM, p. 234), but Jack prepares us for this dramatic formulation by his spider's web theory of life as

universal involvement.⁴ Warren is too arbitrary in "The Leaf": atypically, his vision seems merely whimsical, unearned.

The longest poem in "Island of Summer" is "Myth on Mediterranean Beach: Aphrodite as Logos" (SP, pp. 109-12) which describes a hunch-backed old woman in a bikini who parodies Venus rising from the sea and exposes the illusions of life lived in terms of the flesh. The poet's appraisal of the woman--"A contraption of angles and bulges, an old / Robot with pince-nez and hair dyed gold"--is brilliantly ambiguous. There is nothing satirical in the description of her entry into the water:

She foots the first frail lace of foam
That is the threshold of her lost home,

And moved by memory in the blood,

Enters that vast indifferency
Of perfection that we call the sea.

Her re-emergence from the sea is a "Botticellian parody" which has a paralysing effect on the lovers she passes on the beach; but although she "draws their dreams away," she has, in heroic refutation of her own grotesqueness, realised her own dream, "And glory attends her as she goes / . . . For she treads the track the blessed know." Perhaps the human capacity to dream remains supreme after all, in spite of competition from ivy, fig and mullet.

In the two sequences given under the general title, "Internal Injuries," Warren seeks to effect our incarnation in the flesh of two suffering figures by way of the sympathy he evokes in us. In "Penological Study: Southern Exposure" the flesh is that of a convict painfully dying of cancer, and in the sequence specifically entitled

⁴ See above, Chapter Four, pp. 138-39.

"Internal Injuries" it belongs to a sixty-eight year old black woman, victim of a New York traffic accident. Both sequences immediately involve the reader by their violence and the swift pace of their narratives as well as by the intrinsically arresting human cases they present. They do not wear as well as "Island of Summer," or the two beautiful and haunting poems, "Skiers" and "Fog," that comprise "In the Mountains," the short sequence with which Warren ends his choice of poems from Incarnations in Selected Poems, 1923-1975. The most successful part of "Penological Study" (SP, pp. 119-27) is the first poem with its refrain, "Where the cans, they have no doors," providing an ironically mundane climax of humiliation which draws the reader into identifying with the doomed man in his agony and his determination to "tough it through"; but the poet's attempts to philosophise outward from the convict's predicament are heavy-handed.

"Internal Injuries" (SP, pp. 127-35) is for the most part better controlled, both sociologically and psychologically incisive. Warren keeps sentimentality at bay: the woman's loneliness is offset by the fact that she is guilty of stealing from her Jewish employer, although:

. . . there wasn't no way
To know it was you that opened that there durn
Purse, just picking on you on account of
Your complexion . . .

(SP, p. 128)

Sympathy must be resolute to remain engaged with a victim of racial prejudice, a component of whose humiliation is the fact that the Cadillac which knocks her down is just a 1957 model, driven not by

a white man but by "a spic, and him / From New Jersey." The poet defines with unnerving accuracy the way in which the woman is dehumanised, reduced to a metronomic scream and a hat lodged under the wheel of a truck, accidentally preserved for the moment because "traffic can't yet move." The poet's thought that the prowling jet "must be hunting for something" rises out of his belief that everything must now focus on the victim as he himself does from his taxi. "Defect of attention / Is defect of character," he thinks, bitterly formulating the city's judgement of the screaming woman from whom all the people in the scene are as remote as the jet, though they may stare at her with "insensitiveness" or "like a technical problem." It is the sense of total disjunction as well as his own helplessness, that induces in the poet a panicking need to escape from these crimes against "the human bond" and to "go somewhere where / Nothing is real." His very frustration and panic are, of course, indications of his absolute allegiance to that bond as an object of fact which, however it may be ignored or abused, can never be destroyed. Nothingness for Warren is no more viable an escape than Emersonianism from the pains and limitations of the flesh. In both Audubon and Or Else he turns again to the world and discovers how the faculty of imagination may help us to live in it.

II

In Part Five of Audubon: A Vision (1969) Warren writes that Jean Jacques "dreamed of hunting with Boone, from imagination painted his portrait" (SP, p. 96). The poet, in his turn, seeks to paint from

imagination stimulated by Audubon's writings, a portrait of the great American ornithologist. The poem begins by discarding the most famous of the legends about Audubon's identity---that he was the lost Dauphin--and penetrates to the heart of the man by imaginatively subjecting his consciousness to the world in which he walked. The resulting poem is one of Warren's most reverberant and compelling treatments of the theme of selfhood and of the problem of achieving happiness in a world both beautiful and brutal.

When Warren was preparing World Enough and Time he immersed himself in Americana of the early nineteenth century, including the writings of Audubon. An early attempt to write a poem about him came to nothing, but later, in the sixties, Warren did the section on Audubon for the history of American literature on which he collaborated with Cleanth Brooks and R.W.B. Lewis. The impact Audubon made on Warren's imagination is clear from the introductory note to Warren's selections from the ornithologist's works:

Audubon came very near to fulfilling his "astonishing desire to see much of the world"--at least that world that was his dream. His dream was not unique. For two hundred years, men had been dreaming of the Eden beauty of the great forests, the majestically uncoiling rivers, and the endless plains of the inner America. For some that dream had been of a land to be possessed and exploited for the use of civilisation, but for others it was of a land in which man could joyfully enter nature . . . Audubon knew that it was too late for his dream of man's sinking into nature, and he could even praise, though in somewhat ambiguous inflections, the course of history that had rendered that dream anachronistic. Now he could only hope for a faithful record, and a fitting monument, to render "immortal" the world that had once provoked that dream.⁵

⁵ Cleanth Brooks, R.W.B. Lewis, and Robert Penn Warren, American Literature: The Makers and the Making (New York: St Martin's Press, 1973), I, 1062-63.

The central incident of Warren's poem occurred early in Audubon's compiling of his record. It is the spring of 1812 and Audubon is alone on the prairie, somewhere between Ste Genevieve (Missouri) and Henderson (Kentucky). In Part Two, "The Dream He Never Knew the End Of," Warren imagines him coming on a cabin presided over by a tall, ugly woman, being put up for the night in company with a one-eyed Indian, and barely escaping the sudden violence of the frontier. The woman and her two sons would murder Audubon for his watch and he escapes only because of the timely entrance of three travellers. Next morning the woman and her sons are hanged; Audubon "continued to walk in the world" (SP, p. 93).

Warren's source for this incident is "The Prairie," the third of the "Delineations of American Scenery and Manners" with which Audubon intersperses his descriptions of birds in the five-volume Ornithological Biography. At three points Warren's recreation of the incident significantly differs from Audubon's narrative. When the woman in "The Prairie" responds ecstatically to his watch, Audubon is preoccupied with feeding his dog and himself: "Thoughtless, and, as I fancied myself in so retired a spot, secure, I paid little attention to her talk or her movements."⁶ Warren's hero is all attention from the moment the woman hangs the watch round her neck:

. . . near it the great hands hover delicately
As though it might fall, they quiver like moth wings,
her eyes

⁶ John James Audubon, Ornithological Biography; or, An Account of the Habits of the Birds of the United States of America; accompanied by descriptions of the Objects represented in "The Birds of America," and Interspersed with Delineations of American Scenery and Manners (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1831-1839), I, 16.

Are fixed downward, as though in shyness, on that
gleam, and her face
Is sweet in an outrage of sweetness, so that
His gut twists cold. He cannot bear what he sees.

(SP, p. 88)

The poem's second important departure from its source occurs at the moment of crisis. After the one-eyed Indian's silent warning, the real Audubon observes the woman whetting her carving-knife; he confesses that "the sweat covered every part of my body," but fear does not paralyse him: "I turned, docked my gun-locks silently, touched my faithful companion, and lay ready to start up and shoot the first who might attempt my life."⁷ Warren's hero experiences a sense of having entered a nightmare, "knows it / Is the dream he had in childhood but never / Knew the end of," and, although he knows what he must do to defend himself, sinks into a "lassitude" which "sweetens his limbs." Unable to act, he "cannot think what guilt unmans him, or / Why he should find the punishment so precious" (SP, p. 90). The third notable discrepancy between the two narratives is in their descriptions of Audubon's state of mind after frontier justice has been visited on the woman and her sons. In "The Prairie" Audubon does not even describe the hanging, expresses himself "well pleased" with the way things have turned out and closes his account of the incident with the observation that during twenty-five years of wandering "this was the only time at which my life was in danger from my fellow creatures."⁸

Some readers find the vision of the poem hard to accept not on

⁷ Audubon, I, 83.

⁸ Audubon, I, 84.

philosophical or artistic grounds but because of the liberties Warren apparently takes with the facts of a historical figure's life. Thomas Lask objects to the "hidden sexuality" Warren imparts to the relationship between Audubon and the woman and concludes that although "it can be argued that the poet has the right to re-create the man as he sees fit . . . there ought to be a cautionary warning to indicate the fissure between the original and the image."⁹ For Allen Shepherd, "Warren's attempt . . . to provide a moral dimension beyond the psychological is both crucial and suspect since neither unmaning guilt nor precious punishment seems to have adequate referent within the context of the incident."¹⁰

It is surprising that Shepherd lets the matter rest there, for he understands the essential difference between Audubon's story in "The Prairie" and Warren's poem: "Although Audubon may have rounded out a good story, his primary purpose was to record, not to interpret. Warren is at least as much concerned to interpret, to render dramatically an issue in this exemplum-like sequence, as he is to transcribe a narrative."¹¹ There is, too, something suspect about Audubon's narrative itself. Although he claims to have paid "little attention" to the woman's enthusiasm for his watch, he records it with succinct thoroughness: "She was all ecstasy, spoke of its beauty, asked me its value, and put the chain around her brawny

⁹ Thomas Lask, "On the Frontier," New York Times, 13 Dec. 1969, p. 37.

¹⁰ Allen Shepherd, "Warren's Audubon: 'Issues in Purer Form' and 'The Ground Rules of Fact,'" Mississippi Quarterly, 24 (1971), 50.

¹¹ Shepherd, p. 51.

neck, saying how happy the possession of such a watch should make her."¹² That the woman made a strong impression on Audubon is clear from his precise references to her gruff voice, negligent attire and ugly mouth, his calling her an "incarnate fiend" and "infernal hag," and his according her the only direct speech in the narrative. Given the amount of detail Audubon does provide, his failure to say exactly what was done to the woman and her sons must strike the reader as evasive:

We marched them into the woods off the road, and having used them as Regulators were wont to use such delinquents, we set fire to the cabin, gave all the skins and implements to the young Indian warrior, and proceeded, well pleased, towards the settlements.¹³

Such inconsistency and evasion must have suggested to Warren that the incident described in "The Prairie" affected Audubon powerfully, but that he repressed his perplexingly strong feelings towards the woman. Out of his total sense of Audubon's life and character Warren does, as Shepherd concedes, "interpret" the incident within the scope of Audubon the man and the peculiarities of his story; but the poet does not cook the books.

The whole poem develops out of its first part. In [A] Warren gives us his Audubon watching one of America's most splendid birds:

Moccasins set in hoar frost, eyes fixed on the bird,
Thought: "On that sky it is black."
Thought: "In my mind it is white."
Thinking: "Ardea occidentalis, heron, the great one."
Dawn: his heart shook in the tension of the world.
Dawn: and what is your passion?

(SP, p. 85)

¹² Audubon, I, 82.

¹³ Audubon, I, 84.

Of course Audubon's heart shakes "in the tension of the world": he lives in that tension by a defining passion for the beauty of the birds of America which involves him in killing them. Within a page's length of the Ornithological Biography he says appreciatively of the great white heron that "They walk majestically, with firmness and great elegance," and then, matter-of-factly, "It is difficult to kill them except with buck-shot, which we found ourselves obliged to use."¹⁴ The birds themselves live "in the tension of the world": Plate 281 of The Birds of America portrays the majestic heron with a fish in its mouth, and while the white-headed eagle referred to in Part Five of the poem draws praise from Audubon for its "strength, daring and cool courage" and its ability to glide through the air "like a falling star," the savagery of its attack on a swan leads him to deplore "the cruel spirit of this dreaded enemy of the feathered race" and to repine, with Benjamin Franklin, that this of all birds "should have been chosen as the emblem of my country."¹⁵ Warren has caught in his poem Audubon's responsiveness to the individual characteristics of different species: each bird--heron, crow, buzzard, eagle, goose--"selves" in the way of Hopkins's kingfishers and dragonflies. The bear, too in [B] is completely involved in its own specific creaturehood:

The bear feels his own fat
Sweeten, like a drowse, deep to the bone.

(SP, p. 86)

Watching the bear, Audubon thinks: "How thin is the membrane between himself and the world." The bear could not define itself as the above

¹⁴ Audubon, III, 547-48.

¹⁵ Audubon, I, 161, 168.

lines do, any more than the great white heron could call itself by a Latin name or the whooping crane liken the air it cleaves to "fluent crystal" or "transparent iron" (SP, p. 99). These precisions come from the human imagination, the "membrane" that distinguishes man from other creatures of the natural world.

When, in Part Two, Audubon sees the woman, she is a strong physical presence, a creature, albeit a less prepossessing one than the bear, peering out from her lair:

The face, in the air, hangs. Large,
Raw-hewn, strong-beaked, the haired mole
Near the nose, to the left, and the left side by
 firelight
Glazed red, the right in shadow, and under the tumble
 and tangle
Of dark hair on that head, and under the coarse eyebrows,
The eyes, dark, glint as from the unspecifiable
Darkness of a cave. It is a woman.

(SP, p. 87)

Audubon's watch immediately becomes the defining passion by which the woman is transformed: "Her body sways like a willow in spring wind. Like a girl." The change is shocking, her face "Is sweet in an outrage of sweetness," so that Audubon's "gut twists cold. He cannot bear what he sees" (SP, p. 88). Here is the extreme feeling which the real Audubon represses in "The Prairie" but which is betrayed by the inconsistencies and evasions we have noticed in his narrative.

In this scene Warren prepares the ground for Audubon's reaction to the prospect of death. Within the general context of human sin and guilt imaged by the dream of Part Two [F], Audubon is specifically unmanned by the kinship that can now be seen to exist between the woman and himself. Part Five of the poem begins: "He walked in the

world. Knew the lust of the eye" (SP, p. 96), and the lust of the woman's eye is essentially the same as his. Elsewhere, Warren says: "Audubon was the greatest slayer of birds that ever lived: he destroyed beauty in order to create beauty. Love is knowledge."¹⁶ The woman's readiness to kill in order to know and fulfil herself through beauty is the moral counterpart of Audubon's ambition "to acquire a true knowledge of the Birds of North America" (SP, p. 96). It is no mere sexual masochism that "sweetens his limbs" with "lassitude"; his "punishment" will be "precious" because it is to be inflicted by a fellow criminal.

When the woman is hanged, Audubon suddenly sees that her face is "beautiful as stone, and / So becomes aware that he is in the manly state" (SP, pp. 91-92). His sexual response expresses Warren's equation of love and knowledge, for Audubon, recognising his moral kinship with the woman, has come to know her in the intense moment of his own impending death. The woman is self-fulfilled in death and, therefore, beautiful. Her laughter, provoked by the suggestion that she might wish to pray, expresses much more than contempt for the God who may have created her executioners and herself. In the second "Interjection" of Or Else the poet warns the reader that intense concentration on a single object, even a fragment of crushed rock, may afford an unnerving experience:

. . . Not all witnesses
of the phenomenon survive unchanged
the moment when, at last, the object screams

in an ecstasy of

being.

(SP, p. 26)

¹⁶ Stitt, "Interview," p. 475.

The woman's laughter is her scream of ecstasy in the fulfilment of being, achieved through her total commitment to the transfiguring beauty of Audubon's watch which her imagination had revealed to her. Audubon does not "survive unchanged." The woman's fulfilment, in spite of her being denied the "magic" of the watch, asserts the power of imagination and challenges his sense of his own identity: "He tries to remember his childhood. / He tries to remember his wife. / He can remember nothing" (SP, p. 92). He can only "continue to walk in the world," driven by his dream, his defining passion for the birds whose self-sufficiency echoes the woman's completeness of being. As he comes to know the woman's beauty by becoming the agent of her death, so with the birds in Part Six:

He slew them, at surprising distances, with his gun.
Over a body held in his hand, his head was bowed low,
But not in grief.

(SP, p. 99)

The image of Audubon reverently bent over the bird he has just killed recalls the picture of him standing alone in guilt and awe before the mysteriously beautiful, rigid corpse of the hanged woman and yearning "to be able to frame a definition of joy" (SP, p. 92).

The poem itself seeks to express such a definition and to be a "story of deep delight" such as the poet asks for in Part Seven. The vision offered is of a world of tension in which "human filth" is complemented by "human hope," bestiality by beauty, the anguish of self-uncertainty by the triumph of self-realisation, all through the redeeming power of the imagination by which time itself may be transcended in "the dream / Of a season past all seasons" (SP, p. 98). This is Warren's answer to "this century, and moment, of mania" (SP, p. 100).

III

If Audubon implies that the synthesising power of imagination has a vital rôle to play in these maniacal, modern times, Or Else--Poem/Poems 1968-1974 reveals a poet, acutely aware of his own vulnerability to time, attempting to understand a world which is at once continuous and fragmented. "Necessarily," says the poet in the second "Interjection" (SP, pp. 25-26), "we must think of the world as continuous," for without a sense of continuity, "you wouldn't know / you are in the world, or even that the / world exists at all." But discontinuity is necessary too:

. . . only, oh, only,
 in discontinuity, do we
 know that we exist, or that, in the deepest
 sense, the existence of anything
 signifies more than the fact that it is
 continuous with the world.

The poem's mixture of continuity and discontinuity in its awkwardly syllabic verse is, no doubt, intended to exemplify the principle it asserts, just as all the poems of Or Else may be viewed as discrete units or as parts of a larger whole. Warren says of the book:

. . . it can be considered a long poem, or it can be considered a group of short poems. Some of the poems were written with my being unaware of their place in the sequence. It wasn't undertaken as a planned sequence; the true sequence grew. This kind of structure is related to how you feel your experience --I couldn't tell you exactly how, but it is related.¹⁷

The collection is readily enough felt as a sequence whose theses, elaborated by a now ageing man, re-define the world in terms Warren has made familiar. The poet's concerns are still with time and the relationship of the present to the past---especially his own---and with

¹⁷ Stitt, "Interview," p. 476.

the human need to live by an idea in a world in which innocence is inevitably lost like "the evidence" in "Blow, West Wind" (SP, pp. 24-25) or the boy's shoe in "Little Boy and Lost Shoe" (SP, p. 62). It is a world of violence and of love. In "Rattlesnake Country" (SP, pp. 45-50) an arid landscape under the "anger of sun" is countered by "One little patch of cool lawn," but this is the rattlesnake country which the night swimmer returning from the lake must take care to avoid and which Laughing Boy, the Indian yard-hand, must clear of rattlers, using gasoline and matches in deft acts of execution to make it safe for others:

. . . The flame,
If timing is good, should, just as he makes his rock-hole,
Hit him.

(SP, p. 48)

In rapid, cinematic succession images of natural energy are followed by glimpses of ruined lives and in the climax of the poem "The blue-tattered flick of white flame" associated with the rattler's death is joined to "the high sky that shivered in its hot whiteness" (SP, p. 50), signalling time's eventual execution of us all.

There is love, too, in this mingled world: love which is, perhaps, fundamental to "the human scheme of values" in "Vision Under the October Mountain" (SP, pp. 59-60); a tender passion for the beloved from whom the poet has been separated in "The Faring" (SP, pp. 57-58); the sexual yet protective love which seizes the man at the end of "Birth of Love" (SP, pp. 78-80) and even the possibility of God's love in the sixth "Interjection" (SP, p. 61). In the beautiful "Sunset Walk in Thaw-Time in Vermont" (SP, pp. 76-78) the poet's joy in the woods and waters suggests to him that he may initiate

a chain of immortality by blessing his son with the hope that he will one day stand thus in the midst of nature and bless, in turn, his own son:

For what blessing may a man hope for but
An immortality in
The loving vigilance of death.

"All I can do is to offer my testimony" (SP, p. 50), says the poet, aware that he is in a position to do so only because the clock which is "getting ready to strike forever o'clock" is still "taking time to make up its mind and that is why I have time / To think of some things that are not important but simply are" (SP, p. 43). This is disingenuous: the things Warren thinks of in these poems are all felt as important intimations of meaning, although the stance taken in a particular poem may be one of uncertainty. Whether about something important or unimportant, however, a bad poem is not made intrinsically better--although it may, warts and all, be more interesting--merely because its author thinks it has a place in a sequence. The variety of Warren's art and the process of his mind in this volume will, of course, engage the reader who has already come to love his work and believe in his vision. As Incarnations may be read as a process that moves towards the climactic lines at the end of "Fog," so Or Else works through the hopes and austerities of the Warren world to culminate in the affirmation of "A Problem of Spatial Composition." The poetry "matters" more in Or Else, however, because the failure of so many of the individual poems endangers interest in the process. Like "You, Emperors, and Others," the book contains a good deal of the worst of Warren, as well as some of the best.

The key both to Warren's method and his aim in Or Else is given

at the end of "I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas: The Natural History of a Vision" (SP, pp. 26-34):

All things listed above belong in the world
In which all things are continuous,
And are parts of the original dream which
I am now trying to discover the logic of. This
Is the process whereby pain of the past in its pastness
May be converted into the future tense

Of joy.

This frankness is very appealing: we warm to the poet in his enterprise and wish him well. After all, if he does find the "logic of his dream," thus converting the "pain of the past," we shall all be in his debt. But our faith in the likelihood of the poet's success is undermined by the very poem in which he states his purpose. "I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas" is a ponderous, self-indulgent excursion into the speaker's not especially interesting past in order to contemplate the enigma of his belonging to an inimical present which is, inexplicably, both distinct from and continuous with that past. Here, despite the free form of the poem, Warren seems trapped in his own mannerisms: there are too many imperatives, too many rhetorical questions, too many histrionic spaces, and over-insistent descriptions in lines packed too tight to breathe:

. . . Times Square, the season
Late summer and the hour sunset, with fumes
In throat and smog-glitter at sky-height, where
A jet, silver and ectoplasmic, spooks through
The sustaining light, which
Is yellow as acid. Sweat,
Cold in arm-pit, slides down flesh.

The flesh is mine.

(SP, p. 32)

Similar excesses spoil "Chain Saw in Vermont in Time of Drouth" (SP, pp. 39-41)--although the symbolic use of the saw is effective--
"Flaubert in Egypt" (SP, pp. 55-56), "Reading Late at Night, Thermometer

Falling" (SP, pp. 67-72) and "Folly on Royal Street Before the Raw Face of God" (SP, pp. 73-75) as well as "Homage to Theodore Dreiser" (SP, pp. 51-54) in which the crude sexual imagery seems gratuitous in spite of Warren's impressive insight into this indelicate, tormented man. "News Photo" (OE, pp. 67-73) is an only partially successful evocation of the tawdry idealism which leads a Southern bigot to shoot a pro-Negro Episcopalian minister. The poem is too long for its content and goes surprisingly lame when, in the last section, the man, acquitted but un-appreciated, imagines Robert E. Lee raising his hat to him and laughing. The poet knows that if Lee were alive and among the crowd craning "their heads to horn in / on the act and get in the papers," his laughter would imply recognition of the perversion of his own ideals in actions like that of the bigot whose veneration of him is an irony that would have reduced the great General to tears. A similarly perverted idealism appears in the "Ballad of Mister Dutcher and the last Lynching in Gup-ton" (SP, pp. 35-39). This is Warren at his anecdotal best: the irony of Mr Dutcher's one bid to realise his ideal is that, although a flair with the lynch-rope is his "one talent kept, against the / advice of Jesus, wrapped in a / napkin, and death to hide," the lynching is botched.

Promises remains the most substantial single collection of verse Warren has published since 1944. Under the title, "Can I See Arcturus from Where I Stand," his latest poems seem contrived and stiff--exercises by a poet dutifully keeping his hand in--with the exception of "Midnight Outcry" (SP, p. 9), a precise and tender description of "the terrible distance in love." His art of poetry has, however,

matured beyond the scope of Promises: in Audubon and the best of Incarnations and Or Else there is a deepening of vision and a new assurance of utterance marked by the absence of those often violent refractions of theme by which, in earlier poems, he seeks to convince himself and the reader that he apprehends the complexity of the subject in hand. The new qualities of voice and vision are particularly evident in "Time as Hypnosis," "Composition in Gold and Red-Gold" and "A Problem in Spatial Composition," all of which display "a high degree of expressive integration" (SE, p. 262) and are concerned with the imagination.

The life-declaring power of certain recollected images underlies the neo-Wordsworthian "unsleeping principle of delight" in the eighth "Interjection" of Or Else (SP, p. 75). This neat poem is really a salute to the imagination. A weightier testimony to human dependence on imagination is expressed in "Time as Hypnosis" (SP, pp. 23-24), aptly dedicated to I.A. Richards. The snow-covered landscape is an image of annihilation, reproducing on earth the eternal emptiness of the sky to which it imparts its dizzying light:

All day in a landscape that had been
Brown fields and black woods but was now
White emptiness and arches,
I wandered. The white light
Filled all the vertiginous sky, and even
My head until it
Spread bright and wide like another sky under which I
Wandered.

The boy's mind itself is absorbed into the annihilating whiteness: like the poet in the "absoluteness" of "Fog," he becomes "contextless." The general death, symbolised by the snow, is particularised by the field mouse's epitaph, "the single / Bright frozen, red bead of a blood-drop" at the end of its delicate tracks. Looking back at

his own tracks and ahead at "the blankness of white . . . Then the sky," the boy is set parallel to the field mouse. Death comes physically to the field mouse---a creature purely of nature---in the owl, and metaphysically to the boy in the blankness of the snowscape and the emptiness of the sky:

All day, I had wandered in the glittering metaphor
For which I could find no referent.

The hypnotic power of snow and sky has paralysed the boy's imagination, transforming it, in Wallace Stevens's phrase, into "a mind of winter".¹⁸

All night, that night, asleep, I would wander, lost
in a dream
That was only what the snow dreamed.

Obscuring the natural detail by which the boy customarily takes his bearings, the snow also represents the power of nature and eternity to deprive man of the faculty by which he maintains his hold on the world and on his own identity. "Looking into the heart of light," like Eliot's protagonist in the hyacinth garden of "The Waste Land," the boy is "neither / Living nor dead." Without imagination man's mind is, indeed, a blank, his life a desolation.

The obligation laid upon the imagination to achieve a complete vision of life is the theme of "Composition in Gold and Red-Gold" (SP, pp. 62-64). Autumn suffuses this scene with gold, binding sunlight, apples, chipmunk, girl and brook in one ideal texture. The cat adds the finishing touch:

The tail of the cat, half-Persian, weaves from side to side,
In infinite luxury, gold plume
Of sea-weed in that tide of light.
That is a motion that puts
The world to sleep.

¹⁸ Wallace Stevens, "The Snow Man," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), pp. 9-10:

It is, obviously, another case of hypnosis. The poet is mesmerised by the movement of the cat's tail and lulled by the rich perfection around him until sudden violence "unstitches the afternoon," adding the "flame-gold" at the base of the chipmunk's skull to the colours of the scene. Warren's concern is now clearly with the relationship between the imagination and reality.¹⁹ Scenery, like poetry, wants to be pure, but, in the real world, scenes do not and the poet is not allowed to rest content until the climactic colour of "flame-gold" brings the impure fact of death into the centre of this scene. Good aesthetics are concerned not just with form and colour, but with the completeness of truth. The "flame-gold" of the dead chipmunk is the most vividly beautiful as well as the most forbidding colour in the scene. The poet's imagination, now fully awake, perceives that this death "completes the composition" by making it a true image of the world, and moves beyond the scene to find in the unseen trout's determination and the vanished eagle's flight affirming images of continuing life.

The theme of the imagination is developed further in "A Problem in Spatial Composition," the concluding poem of Or Else (SP, pp. 80-81). The "problem" involves us again in the relationship between

¹⁹ Sister M. Bernetta Quinn prefers to interpret the poem as myth: "The mountain in the background, deserted by its solitary eagle after the crime, may possibly be a symbol of Calvary at the end of Good Friday; the fish leaning hidden against an icy current in the alder-shaded stream, a reminder of Christ. Here, the Promised Land ironically wears a garment of flooding gold, just as the earth in Rilke's "Evening" wraps itself in a vesture of darkness." The poem can, no doubt, carry such a reading, but hardly insists on it. (See Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F., "Robert Penn Warren's Promised Land," Southern Review, 8 [1972], 336.)

art and truth. As the poet looks westward through a high window, across a forest toward the setting sun, his eye orders what it sees in terms of the "rectangle" of the window. References to "lower right foreground," "upper left frame" and the "perspective" from which the scene is viewed stress the poet's awareness of his own act of composition. The question is whether the poet's subjective ordering of the scene to his aesthetic satisfaction results in a true picture of the world, whether truth of coherence is also truth of correspondence. The poet knows exactly how his own imagination works. The "tall scarp of stone" is a fact and continues to be one "in knowledge". The imagination turns the scarp into a "mass of blue cumulus" according to "truth of perception," but does not deny its factual existence as a scarp: the simile expands the object without undermining its original state. Fact and idea co-exist perfectly. Similarly, the poet realises that his "perspective" is responsible for the image of the branch that "Stabs, black, at the infinite saffron of sky." Perspective closes the gap between tree and sky, but the poet is aware that the gap is still there. "All is ready," then, because, as he knows, the poet has made it so, but without distortion of the facts.

The hawk brings the poem's only awkward moment as it glides down "In the pellucid ease of thought"--a strained phrase bespeaking an unassimilated idea. The hawk's element, the sky, has already been established as a legitimate symbol of "forever" and when the bird settles on "the topmost, indicative tip of / The bough's sharp black and skinny jag skyward," it brings the eternity of the sky into contact with the temporal earth. We may or may not agree with Peter

Stitt that "The hawk's instantaneous disappearance from the scene is akin to man's disappearance from life at death . . . The hawk in the poem is analogous to the spirit of man, as birds so often are in English and American poetry generally." But it is clear that "When he resumes his flight, the bird returns to the eternal realm of sky, having rested for but a moment on the time-bound earth."²⁰ More important than any specific equation between the bird and the human spirit is the fact that the bird's perching on the tree is something that happens outwith the poet's control. The bird--an object of fact--enters the composition--a matter of art--"at the upper left frame," and the poet's imagination accepts the event into his picture. His "perspective" yields the image of contact between the earth and sky in the branch that "jags upward . . . higher / Than even . . . / The Mountain"; the actual arrival of the hawk to express the same thing rewards the imagination for its scrupulousness by confirming its vision. "The Imagination," as Keats says, "may be compared to Adam's dream--he awoke and found it truth." The moment both completes the poet's account of the relation between the imagination and the world, and expresses the possibility that we may, at times, catch glimpses of the eternal on earth. If "A Problem in Spatial Composition," like the Ancient Mariner's blessing of the snakes, is "a little fable of the creative process" (SE, p. 258), it is also a compact and eloquent fable of "the tension of the world," intimating how, through the imagination, that tension may be resolved.

Wallace Stevens, one feels, would have liked this poem. In his discussion of the imagination as value in the modern age, Stevens writes:

²⁰ Stitt, "Robert Penn Warren, The Poet," p. 275.

The world may, certainly, be lost to the poet but it is not lost to the imagination. I speak of the poet because we think of him as the orator of the imagination. And I say that the world is lost to him, certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written.²¹

Whatever may be lost to Warren, it is not the world. A long and vigorous career has produced a body of poetry that includes many fine poems of the earth. How many of them are great must be, of course, a "tale of time."

²¹ Wallace Stevens, The Necessary Angel (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1965), p. 142.

Chapter Eight

Uses of Pastoral

In none of Robert Penn Warren's novels is there a clearer concentration on the theme of the self than in The Cave. It is the first of a group of novels--the others are Wilderness, Flood and Meet Me in the Green Glen--in which Warren's interests are focused and developed in a significantly rural setting. With the exception of Wilderness these novels are rich in vivid and well-defined characters who live in the imagination because Warren convinces us that they are real. Yet it may be said of Warren, as he says of Conrad:

He is no Dickens or Shakespeare, with relish for the mere variety and richness of personality. Rather, for him a character lives in terms of its typical involvement with situation and theme: the fable, the fable as symbol for exfoliating theme, is his central fact.

(SE, p. 39)

Wilderness fails because its under-nourished characters and synopsis-like fable prevent the theme from exfoliating realistically. In the three novels to be discussed in this chapter Warren goes to the country for the heart of his fable: a cave of Platonic implication which expresses the attractions and terrors of naturalism and whose darkness brings illumination; an impending flood by which the Tennessee Valley Authority conveys a man-made apocalypse to the small town of Fiddlersburg; and a green glen of love, lost and found. In each novel realistic characters live in terms of their involvement with a fable of which the expressive centre is both a fact and an

idea. Warren thus demonstrates in his art the kind of balance which his books urge us to strive for in our lives.

At times, especially in The Cave, the balance is precarious, the novel's idea almost too obtrusive, its over-view too knowing. Leslie Fiedler feels that Warren "insists, insists!"¹ and Robert Hatch, in an early review, observes: "When a novelist enfolds all degrees of good and evil into one embrace of compassionate understanding, he risks pitching his book to a lofty morality."² Warren gets away with the thematic insistence and all-embracing "compassionate understanding" of The Cave because, while his characters all clearly develop the theme of the entrapped self, they do remain individuals. Warren's insistence on the common problem is acceptable precisely because it is remarkable that characters so diverse should share so much. This is the point of the book. To find the resolution of the various conflicts artificial --as Charles E. Bohner does³--is not, therefore, to find fault with Warren's technique but to disallow his vision.

People in Tennessee and Kentucky still remember the tragedy of Floyd Collins who died in Sandy Cave, Kentucky in January, 1925. Collins was exploring in search of a potential underground tourist attraction when a boulder became dislodged and trapped his foot. The facts of this story gave Warren his opportunistic reporter--a newspaperman from Louisville actually went underground to interview

¹ Leslie A. Fiedler, No! In Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 129.

² Robert Hatch, "Down to the Self," Nation, 189 (Sept. 12, 1959), 139.

³ Bohner, p. 153.

Collins---his crowd of barely controllable spectators, the exploiting media and the hillside funeral service.⁴ By making his cave-crawler, Jasper Harrick, the centre of so many people's lives, Warren turns the Collins story into a modern variation of Plato's allegory of the cave. Like Jasper in his literal cave, each character is trapped within the figurative cave of his or her own nature, mistaking shadows for reality. In the course of the novel each is compelled to face the reality of the world in the light of self-knowledge.

Warren's imagery meticulously connects the various metaphysical caves to Jasper's physical one. Still feeling himself depleted by Jo-Lea Bingham, who "somehow robbed him, casually and indifferently, of the prides by which he lived" (C, p. 9), Monty Harrick recalls a period when "he had never permitted her to enter the darkened room of his fantasy" (C, p. 8). His need of Jo-Lea makes him vulnerable, but the discomforts of love are preferable to the annihilating inner darkness in which Jo-Lea "would suddenly become faceless, and the world . . . ashes." Self-fulfilment is achieved not by withdrawal but by living, however painfully, in terms of "the human bond" (SP, p. 158) whose constitution is again Warren's concern in this novel. Jack Harrick, virtuoso of the roistering, unexamined life, is forced to take stock of himself when he hears that the now Tillie Sumpter has prematurely delivered his child stillborn. He finds a void like the cave that becomes

⁴ In 1951 the Collins story was made into the film, "Ace in the Hole" (or "The Big Carnival"), an excellent satire on American commercial ruthlessness. Kirk Douglas played the hard-boiled reporter who delays rescue operations on a man trapped in a cave so that his story will make national headlines and his own fame. The film was directed by Billy Wilder from a script by himself and Charles Brackett, the producer.

his son's tomb: "It looked like there was a big black hole right in the middle of him where a man's thinking and feeling and living ought to be, and he was going to fall into the hole and fall forever into black nothing" (C, p. 139). Definition of the self in terms of guilt may be burned away by hectic living, but love is more commanding. Holding Celia Hornby's hand in the dark, Jack is "caught in the vertigo of his own non-being" (C, p. 387). He is attracted to Celia's apparent self-sureness" (C, p. 145), but his momentary feeling of immortality is quickly succeeded by a desolate sense of the blankness of his life: "he had been hit like a field-mouse by a hoot owl and snatched into the dark sky" (C, p. 144).⁵ Celia, in her turn, needs to fill her inner space with someone as positive as Jack seems to be. "I bet if I threw a rock down your well, I'd be listening in the dark a long time before it hit water" (C, p. 168), Jack tells her, aware that there are mysterious depths to this assured young woman. Later, he realises that he has been too pre-occupied with his own needs to attend to hers: "Yes, he hadn't cared what even she had wanted or needed, what emptiness she had to fill to be herself" (C, p. 387). An "empty ache" is "the realest thing about Dorothy Cutlick" (C, p. 40) and Nick Papadoupalous' conviction that he is doomed to be a loser is lodged "in the deep, dark, angry, tear-sodden secret centre of his being" (C, p. 41). Although MacCarland Sumpter knows he never truly possessed his wife,

⁵ The simile anticipates the images of the field-mouse and owl in "Time as Hypnosis" (SP, p. 24). The actual death of the field-mouse in the poem prompts the boy to a sense of the metaphysical blankness which is imaged in the snow and which invades his own mind. See above, p. 247.

he had so lived by his relationship to her that her death overcomes him with deprivation, "as though he himself were only an agony of emptiness, into which the blackness flowed" (C, p. 83).

There is hope for all these characters in that they long to escape from their dark inner caves of emptiness; but there is no such hope for Isaac Sumpter. For a time he supplies Rachel Goldstein with an illusion of the definition she needs as Celia needs Jack Harrick: "I want you because you are you" (C, p. 113), Rachel tells Isaac, unaware that his arrogant nihilism--"There was no God and there was no self" (C, p. 101)--reduces his possession of her to the level of "an A posted on a bulletin board" (C, p. 102). Isaac's incurable emptiness is brilliantly expressed by his intense empathy for the body trapped in the cave:

Whether it was his own body, or Jasper Harrick's, he couldn't tell. No, it was not Jasper's, it had to be his own, for if you couldn't see anything, you could still feel things, and if he knew that the body was there, it would have to be because he himself was the body in that water, and he himself was that knowledge in that absolute darkness.

(C, p. 193)

Empathy later becomes "a painful, inexorable envy for Jasper Harrick," surely not "because he had had that little Jo-Lea Bingham, who was juicy as a peach," but "because he lay in the cool, cool dark, and did not suffer" (C, p. 324). Isaac is the one character in the novel who remains essentially empty, despite his determined assertions that "Nobody is pulling the string on me . . . I am myself" (C, p. 279).

His vision of the body in the cave, followed by his envy of Jasper amounts to a fundamental evasion of the reality of self, like that evasion temporarily achieved by Jeremiah Beaumont who "had a vision of his own body, naked and faintly gleaming in the depth, flowing on

with the inner current, on and on. It was peace" (WEAT, p. 452). The picture of Isaac, "wholly himself," in New York is heavily ironic: he is lost as totally as Slim Sarrett in the last chapter of At Heaven's Gate. Disconnected from the human bond, he lacks both God and self, finding in success, Seconal, Scotch and sex the big-city equivalents of the naturalistic void the country had taught him to crave.

Warren explains Willie Stark's rise to power in terms of the politician's "faculty of fulfilling vicariously the secret needs of others" (AKM, p. vii). Jack Harrick attains his popular notoriety for the same reason. "That is Jack Harrick," Miss Abernathy tells Celia, "the hero of all the hillbillies! The tales they tell about him--just so they themselves can feel big" (C, p. 161). Jasper, a "chip off the old block," as the over-shadowed Monty realises, also provides vicarious fulfilment to the people of Johnstown:

He had that trick of being himself so completely, it looked like he wore the whole world over his shoulders like a coat and it fit. That was why everybody reached out and tried to lay a hand on him, got a word off him, have something rub off him, hold him back a minute, before he moved on toward wherever he was going.

(C, p. 19)

Ironically, all the principal characters in the novel do "get a word off him," for Jasper's entrapment in the cave supplies the imagery that defines their various states of emptiness. A further irony is that his "trick of being himself so completely" is, like his father's similar gift, an illusion, a shadow mistaken for reality. Although he is the only major character whose mind we are not permitted to

enter, he does speak once of the pleasures of cave-crawling:

It's a nice temperature down there . . . It is not summer and it is not winter. There aren't any seasons to bother about down there . . . Blizzard or hot spell . . . a lot of things don't matter down there . . . in the ground at least a fellow has a chance of knowing who he is.

(C, pp. 240-41)

As much in need of self-definition as all the others, Jasper retreats not only from responsibility and from the self-hungry others who clutch at him in their need, but also from that resolution of timeless ideal and time-bound reality which forms the basis of Warren's morality. Jasper goes underground in search of an ideal, transcendent sense of identity; but for Warren an ideal is of no use unless it will work in the world. The self one may come to know in isolation will be valueless unless it can function in the real context. Jasper, as his brother says, walks "away from everything" (C, p. 24). The ultimate irony of Jasper's fate is that what begins literally and figuratively as a self-seeking act ends in the death of the character who seemed complete, but promotes the fulfilment of so many people. Jasper does, after all, rub off on them all.

The Times Literary Supplement's anonymous review complains that "the power that moves all these people is sex,"⁶ but the successful characters in The Cave achieve their sense of identity through the discovery of love, which replaces the naturalistic mode of sex with the ideal mode of caring for others. There is, certainly, a prodigious amount of sexual activity, both performed and recalled. K.W. Gransden is withering: "I do not deny that the

⁶ "Fables for Our Time," Times Literary Supplement, Nov. 27, 1959, p. 692.

sexy bits achieve a certain functional success: they make the book more readable."⁷ Charles Samuels is overcome: "In The Cave the characters suffer not from thwarted desires for purity and coherence but from sexual deprivation. They possess not the agonised and subtle minds of Warren's typical creations but merely partake of a panting universal Id."⁸ This suggests that the sex in the novel does not refer beyond itself and that the suffering characters are essentially caricatures. Such a view is belied, for example, by the character of Nick Papadoupalous, whose mind may not be subtle, but whose agonised desire for purity and coherence does make him a typical creature of Warren's imagination. Nick's "sexual deprivation" is the context for a thoroughly Warrenesque drama of the ideal and the real. His ideal seems unattainable until he finds in Giselle Fontaine a simulacrum of Jean Harlow, the "platinum-blond, swivel-built movie queen" (C, p. 42) who lies inaccessibly at rest in Forest Lawn Cemetery. The possession of Giselle presents problems, however, because Nick cannot be faithful simultaneously to the ideal Miss Harlow and the real Giselle: his impromptu, squinch-eyed love-making is conducted in an agony of infidelity. When the glamorous Giselle reverts in her decline to the amorphous Sarah Pumfret, Nick, deprived of both the ideal and the real, is attracted to the tow-headed Dorothy Cutlick. Although he cannot bring himself to admit it, Dorothy's involuntary embraces are meaningless: squinching her eyes, she gets on with her Latin (C, pp. 60-61), parodying the charade Nick has acted out with Giselle.

⁷ K.W. Gransden, Encounter, 14 (May, 1960), 78.

⁸ Charles Samuels, "In the Wilderness," Critique, 5 (Fall, 1962), 50. For a similar opinion see Melvin Laddocks, "Warren's 'Cave,' not Plato's," Christian Science Monitor, Sept. 24, 1959, p. 9.

As he stands in a haze of non-sequiturs with his arms round Celia Harrick, Nick contemplates seduction, but knows instead the "bone-shaking happiness" of looking, for the first time, "into a human face . . . Just for the humanness" (C, p. 309). This first communion with another human being brings him a sense of his own human identity--pointed by Celia's valiant pronunciation of his real name--and sends him back, in love, to the reality of his wife.

If Warren, like Conrad, "is no Dickens," he does, nevertheless, display a Dickensian flair for caricature in such characters as Bill Christian, Duckfoot Blake, Sugar Boy, Percival Scrogg and, most of all, Nick Papadoupalous. None of these characters, however, is pure caricature, reducible to the sum of his oddities. Duckfoot Blake comes close, but as the plot of At Heaven's Gate thickens around him, it becomes clear that there is more to Duckfoot than his cynical wit, financial wizardry and bad feet. His escape from the power of Bogan Murdock is also an escape from the caricature version of himself. In The Cave two characters in particular, Nick Papadoupalous and Timothy Bingham, change in the same way. Nick is, of course, an extravagant creation; he generates much of the novel's comedy and may offend readers who would demand unfalteringly high seriousness of his creator. The discovery of "humanness" frees Nick from the obsession that caricaturises him. The man who sits by his dying wife's bed, telling her she will recover and wondering what she looked like when a little girl (C, pp. 364-65) is a three-dimensional, fully human being shown, at last, in the act of loving the woman whom

he had married and betrayed for purely sexual reasons. To judge this sentimental is not merely to reject Warren's admittedly bold method but to deny the redemptive opportunities of life.

The opening paragraph of Chapter 2 crisply introduces us to the limitations of Timothy Bingham:

Mr Timothy Bingham, chief stockholder, president, and cashier of the People's Security Bank of Jhntown, Tennessee, wore pince-nez glasses rather than plain steel rims, which he would have preferred, because his wife, between whose legs he had not managed to get in five years, thought pince-nez more refined and suited to his position, and hers.

(C, p. 36)

The TLS's reviewer finds ineptitude in the fact that the single clue we are given to the life of such a minor character as the bank manager, Mr Bingham, is a sexual one; but in juxtaposition with Mrs Bingham's imposition of pince-nez the sexual point is absorbed into the larger, comic horror of the total gulf between this man and his wife. Mrs Bingham's refinement is shown to be at least as selfish as the naturalistic satisfaction she withholds from her husband whose inability to take it by storm renders him comically ineffectual. The Bingham comedy turns slapstick when the Smith and Wesson .38 goes off in the banker's hand and Slim Cutlick falls to the floor screaming and bloody from wounds inflicted by a shattered bottle of moon-shine in his hip pocket. Later, Mr Bingham, still in a state of shock, speaks with deadly calm to the sheriff:

"Tell him if he comes back I won't be responsible," Mr Bingham said, for the wine was heady, and he felt his finger closing on the trigger, and his eyes narrowing dangerously.

"Yes, sir," the sheriff had said, and had said it with respect.

(C, p. 66)

Significantly, the comedy of this scene is absorbed into the seriousness of Dorothy Cutlick's solicitude for Bingham at the end of the book, when she watches him going to the bank in the early dawn (C, p. 399).⁹ By his inadvertent rehabilitation of Dorothy in giving her someone to care about, by his splendid routing of the refined Mrs Bingham, the banker, like Nick Papadoupalous, grows out of caricature into full humanity, achieving at last the goal that was Percy Munn's, "to be free, and himself" (NR, p. 13). The reader, like the sheriff, must learn to respect Mr Bingham.

Warren does not deal in mutually exclusive categories of characters, real people and what George Orwell calls "gargoyles." Orwell observes that Dickens "was constantly setting into action characters who ought to have been purely static. Squeers, Micawber, Miss Mowcher, Wegg, Skimpole, Pecksniff and many others are finally involved in 'plots' where they are out of place and where they behave quite incredibly."¹⁰ There is a deliberate element of caricature in the figure of Leontine Purtle in Flood and Jed Tewksbury's mother in A Place to Come To is unquestionably a bit of a gargoyle; but these characters also function credibly as human agents in the action of their novels, they are not merely side-shows. In The Cave Warren deliberately uses the reader's

⁹ Dorothy's achievement of the capacity to care for Bingham marks her release from the isolation in which she has lived, and refutes the objection that "Dorothy Cutlick who lays herself down for the friendly Greek Papadoupalous comes to nothing after a long build-up." See John Coleman, "Property Values," Spectator, Dec. 4, 1959, p. 836.

¹⁰ George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, I, "An Age Like This," ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 498.

expectations about character and falsifies them to make his point. The monstrosities in Dickens's books, Orwell says, "are still remembered as monstrosities, in spite of getting mixed up in would-be probable melodramas. Their first impact is so vivid that nothing that comes afterwards effaces it."¹¹ Nothing in The Cave effaces the memory of Nick in his squinch-eyed grapplings or Timothy Bingham in his hen-pecked diffidence; but the lingering vividness of the first impact these characters make on us serves to emphasise the change they undergo as they cross over from the realm of caricature to the realm of the real. The translation in each case dramatises the character's growth of self and his grasp of reality. Technical achievement like this makes The Cave, for Paul Engle, "one of the country's finest novels in years, by one of its finest writers in years."¹²

The climactic meeting of Jack Harrick and MacCarland Sumpter objectifies Warren's final meditation on the resolution of flesh and spirit, real and ideal, eternal and temporal. Each man has attempted a personal resolution; neither has found his sustaining. Harrick, near death, faces the knowledge that his wife has never forgiven him, that he wants his son dead and that death will destroy all he has taken pride in. Sumpter has to accept his pride (spiritual pride motivated his marriage to Mary Tillyard), his guilt (he had delighted in the death of his wife's child by Harrick), his loneliness and what he regards as his contribution

¹¹ Orwell, p. 499.

¹² Paul Engle, "The Cave," Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine of Books, Aug. 23, 1959, p. 1.

to his son's damnation. The two old friends and adversaries finally confront each other in an effort to define the meaning of their lives:

"Folks need to believe you are a good man. They got to believe somebody is. So they will pick on you and believe you."

"But the truth--" MacCarland Sumpter cried out.

"It changes," Jack Harrick said. "Truth changes. A man changes and I reckon truth changes."

"God doesn't change," MacCarland Sumpter affirmed, and again shivered.

"Well, maybe He ought to," Jack Harrick said.

"That is blasphemy," MacCarland Sumpter said.

(C, p. 384)

Both men, Sumpter the idealist and Harrick, the pragmatist, are right. To reject the timelessness of the ideal is to condemn oneself, like Isaac Sumpter, to tormented Secondal dreams in an ever-extending present. We all need an ideal, though only rarely do we feel the impact of the "collision of the dimension of Time and non-Time, Dream and non-Dream, which is what we call Truth with a capital T" (C, p. 43). MacCarland Sumpter would call it God. But the ideal must also live in the world of time and change, if it is not to be merely another shadow on the wall of the cave. For Nick Papadoupalous the performance of Giselle Fontaine is a vision of Truth: "It was as though she had risen there, pure as foam, out of some timelessness like the sea. Being out of Time, she had no past, glimmering like a dream, too beautiful to be real" (C, p. 176). It is an impossible vision, fascinating and supernal, as Warren suggests by the implicit reference to Botticelli's Venus. It cannot sustain Nick in his life with Sarah Pinfret Papadoupalous, "that bloat of blubber on the bed," in her dependence, her reality, her history. It is the absolute but human ideal which he apprehends

in the face of Celia Harrick which will sustain Nick in his remaining years of inglorious reality. The same continuing human ideal at last enables Jack Harrick, literally and figuratively, to harmonise his own death with that of his buried son, and to consign his "box" to Monty.

II

"The pastoral ideal," Leo Marx reminds us, "has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination."¹³

Washington Irving defined the most familiar archetype:

I mention this peaceful spot with all possible laud; for it is in such little retired Dutch villages . . . that population, manners and customs, remain fixed; while the great torrent of migration and improvement, which is making such incessant change in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved. They are little nooks of still water which border a rapid stream.¹⁴

In Flood Warren takes us to Fiddlersburg, a Southern Sleepy Hollow, which awaits the Tennessee Valley Authority's "great torrent of improvement." Fiddlersburg, however, has not exactly been a "little nook of still water," even if Calvin Fiddler's killing of Alfred O. Tuttle is the result of a marriage that might never have happened but for the citified Lettice Poindexter's influence on Maggie Tolliver.

¹³ Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, Galaxy Books, 1967), p. 3.

¹⁴ Washington Irving, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," quoted from rpt. in James Cochrane, ed., The Penguin Book of American Short Stories (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 13.

Frog-Eye, the swamp-rat companion of Brad Tolliver's youth, may be a shrewd judge of people and a crack shot, but he is a depraved character who would be at home in the diseased naturalistic kingdom of La Grand' Bosse in World Enough and Time. Brad's vindictive, book-burning father, Lancaster Tolliver, is, for all his solitary weeping, closer to Huck Finn's pap than any model of rustic virtue. The apparently virginal blind girl, Leontine Purtle, for whom relocation will supposedly be especially difficult, turns out to be the town's semi-professional, thoroughly knowing her way around; and up in the state penitentiary there is Pretty Boy Rountree who, "with a claw hammer of the value of six dollars . . . did with malice aforethought and against the peace and good order of the State of Tennessee, beat the pore bleeding be-Jesus out of the head of pore old Mrs Milt Spiffort" (F, pp. 294-95). These are the "cracks in Fiddlersburg" whereby Blanding Cottshill recognises the naiveté of his pastoral ideal:

A farm up-river, an office on the square, in Fiddlersburg in my case, folks squatting on their heels under the maples, swapping talk with you, the hunting and the fishing, training a bird dog, breaking a colt, maybe fooling with politics, watching the seasons change and your kids grow up and get ready to do what you were doing. I reckon a man figured it was a way of feeling all of a piece, in himself and with things around him.

(F, p. 345)

John L. Longley Jr. writes of "the ease and flow of the pastoral mode" which may disguise the "metaphysical dimension" of Flood from the common reader,¹⁵ but Warren has not regressed

¹⁵ Longley, pp. 169-170.

to a simple agrarianism. He uses the pastoral mode, but questions it too. In the words of Senator Norris of Nebraska: "Every locality in the United States has an interest in this unseen force [of electricity], which has become a necessity of life, which goes into every modern home and from the home on up to the largest factory, and which turns the mightiest wheels of commerce."¹⁶ A more demotic version of the Senator's vision is expressed by Warren's young engineer:

The dam was going to be great, the young engineer said. Going to be near a hundred square miles under water, going to back up the water for twenty-five miles, he had said, gesturing south, up-river. Most of the land not much but swamp or second-growth. And what good land there was---hell, they didn't know how to farm it anyway. But with power and cheap transportation it would all be different. A real skyline on the river, plant after plant. Getting shoes on the swamp rats too, teaching 'em to read and write and punch a time clock, and pull a switch. It was going to be a big industrial complex, he said. He liked the phrase, industrial complex.
He had said it again.

(F, p. 113)

If the last sentence of this passage ironises the facility of the young engineer's idealism, it is, nevertheless true that the dam will bring benefits. As a sample of modernism "The Seven Dwarfs Hotel" is appalling, but this is not a case of simple pastoralism versus malign modernism, the monstrous machine laying waste the unspoiled garden. Warren's novel exposes the cliché of such crude polarising. This is part of the "metaphysical dimension" of a work whose business is with the fake and the real, with clichéd falsifications of life opposed to the living issue itself. Yet it is the little town of Fiddlersburg which affords Warren's richly varied dramatis personae the apocalypse that his title leads the

¹⁶ Julian Huxley, EVA: Adventure in Planning (London: The Scientific Book Club, 1945), p. 5.

reader to expect. After the flood one looks for the dove, and Brad wonders if the perky stewardess of Yasha Jones's DC-7 will fly off and "bring back an olive branch in her beak" (F, p. 19). The olive branch does arrive on the novel's last page when Brad, at last, can formulate the lesson of Fiddlersburg: "There is no country but the heart" (F, p. 440). Knowing this is the only "way by which the process of living can become Truth" (SP, p. 158).

Early critics of Flood disliked it.¹⁷ At best it is "a clever piece of engineering,"¹⁸ and at worst "a stew of clichés."¹⁹ The Times Literary Supplement's anonymous reviewer numbers Night Rider, All the King's Men and World Enough and Time "among the most memorable novels of our time" and calls them "powerful fables." After these achievements Flood is a "saddening book" by a writer "with nothing to say." What is saddening, however, is that an adverse review based on a total failure to understand Warren's novel should, by appearing in so influential a journal, effectively decimate the book's chances of a wide readership. Indeed, Flood must be one of the most promptly remaindered novels ever published in Britain. The conclusion of the TLS review gives the book no quarter:

The characters are conceived in the terms of best-seller fiction, their problems are synthetic . . . This is particularly true of the central character, Brad, who is a comically super-typical model of the Thirties failed writer (one good book, marriage,

¹⁷ In a letter to the writer, dated July 28, 1964, Mr Warren says: "I am especially glad that you like Flood . . . All--all--the NYC reviewers loathed it with a loathing bottomless--not just didn't like it--totally loathed and hated it. I did--and most stubbornly do--put it in my top bracket."

¹⁸ William Barnett, "Readers' Choice," Atlantic Monthly, 213 (June, 1964), 134.

¹⁹ Mordecai Richler, "The Big Southern Novel Show," Spectator, Oct. 30, 1964, p. 581.

Spanish Civil War, disillusion, retreat to the South, sex, Hollywood). Near the end of the book Brad has a discussion with Calvin Fiddler in which he says gravely: "I know this is not a story conference. I know that this is the real thing. It is L-i-f-e." And the reply? "'The only one we've got,' Cal answered, very softly." In this exchange, and the many similar conversations in the book there is, alas, no trace of irony.²⁰

The reviewer's message is clear: Warren has broken his own rules; his novel offers an unearned vision, a flood of clichés. Thus, despite the warning implicit in Warren's repudiation of a stereotyped contrast between pastoralism and modernism, the reviewer has failed to see that the book deliberately uses clichés in order to expose their inadequacy.

Although Warren defines Original Sin as "a contamination implicit in the human condition . . . the sin of use, exploitation, violation" (SE, p. 69), the individual born into this condition is still to be held responsible for his actions. From Coleridge's Aids to Reflection Warren derives the view that "Original Sin is not hereditary Sin; it is original with the sinner and is of his will" (SE, p. 227). As Jeremiah Beaumont says, "it is the crime of self, the crime of life. The crime is I" (WEAT, p. 505). Brad Tolliver is a pathological user. His original sin is that he exploits his much praised book of stories, I'm Telling You Now, as a vehicle of escape. On its success he rides out of town, and out of the past which contains his identity. In New York, the protégé of Telford Lott and lover of Lettice Poindexter, he feels hollow and insecure, "like a man bleeding to death from some inner wound" which is exacerbated by the confidence of the people around him: "They all, like Lettice Poindexter, had some inner freedom

²⁰ Times Literary Supplement, Nov. 5, 1964, p. 993.

which he felt could never be his. As she seemed to move around inside herself, inside her own life, with that remarkable familiarity, so they all seemed to move through the darkness of History, with the expertness of a blind man in his own house" (F, p. 69). Brad has left whatever "inner self" he had in Fiddlersburg: he is a man "with no story," one of those described in the poem, "Terror":

. . . whose passionate emptiness and tidal
 Just swayed toward the debris of Madrid,
 And left New York to loll in their fierce idyll
 Among the olives, where the snipers hid.

(SP, p. 285)

Of course Brad's problem is "synthetic": he has made it himself. His participation in the Spanish Civil War is intended to be judged spurious. He fights not for an ideal but out of "his fear of having no story" and the War provides an off-the-peg opportunity to mix himself in defining action. Without commitment to the cause, his enlistment can only disguise his essential emptiness in the clichéd figure of the romantic hero: "He did not yet know that the true shame is in yearning for the false, not the true story" (F, p. 68).

Even after the dramatically clarifying events of the first four books of the novel, Brad is held by a false story of himself. There is no irony in Calvin Fiddler, but Brad's ironic tone and clipped, side-of-the-mouth style of speech are entirely consistent with the voice with which we have become familiar. Taken out of context his remark to Calvin about "L-i-f-e" looks soft. In context it is quite different. Brad progresses through a series of clichés which he surrounds with protective irony. In his last meeting with Calvin Fiddler he is still jumping from one cliché to another:

"... This scene--between you and yours truly-- is, as we say in my shop, mandatory. It is a must. The necessary confrontation. Symmetry calls for it. An inner logic demands it. Let us, poor human puppets that we are, surrender to the symmetry, to the inner logic, and words will spring unbidden to our lips. Meaning will evolve from--"

He stopped, abruptly.

"Christ," he said. Then: "I know that this is not a story conference. I know that this is the real thing. It is L-i-f-e."

(F, p. 406)

Brad begins by believing that his last meeting with Calvin is the necessarily symmetrical way of ending their common story: each will acknowledge the state of enlightenment reached by the other. His own habitual irony, evident here in the self-mockery of his inflated rhetoric, suddenly reveals to him that he is corrupting the reality of the moment into a treatment as falsifying as those he had offered Yasha Jones for their "beautiful motion picture." For a second he is thrown, but regains his balance and reasserts his command of the situation, again protecting himself by the irony of spelling out "L-i-f-e." He still thinks he has the "inner logic," all the knowledge required for a final assessment, but life now lifts him in two stages out of his improvised certainties. First, he is shamed into a sense of his own failure to achieve true selfhood by Calvin's genuine discovery of himself and the beauty of life; second, although Brother Pinckney sabotages Brother Potts's plan to pray with the coloured folks, the sick man's winning through to his last service demonstrates the triumph of the heart's will over even the inner logic of cancer. Both symmetry and irony yield to "the secret and irrational life of man" (F, p. 439).

Warren recognises the genuineness of Brad's difficulties.

How can the intellectual live in terms of "the secret and irrational life of man"? Will not the possession of an analysing intellect inevitably exclude a man from the unifying country of the heart, where the self lives in joyful harmony with what Coleridge calls "the one Life within us and abroad"? Brad works, "but nothing connects" (F, p. 243); he is "overwhelmed by the moving multiplicity of the world," and, therefore, guilty of what Yasha Jones calls "the sin of the corruption of consciousness" (F, p. 127). It is easy enough for the uncomplicated man of religion to "pray to know that the lives we lived are blessed" (F, p. 81), but the intellectual Brad rejects Maggie's suggestion that he should make Brother Potts the centre of his picture (F, p. 243). He cannot see that the great-hearted minister struggling with his declining body, his brave, faltering little poem and his unavoidably tense relationship with Brother Pinckney is the key to what Yasha Jones calls "the depth and shimmer" (F, p. 181) and thus to a unified image of life in Fiddlersburg.

Brad's flight from the heart begins with his youthful recoil from his father's weeping: "He wondered if he himself had had to come back to Fiddlersburg, as his father had had to go back to the swamp, to lie in the mud and weep" (F, p. 128). Returning alone to Fiddlersburg shortly before his marriage to Lettice, Brad finds himself weeping in the room in which his father had died, but his tears bring no catharsis because he "tried to appropriate the process. He tried to profit from it. He even felt, momentarily, a pride that he, Bradwell Tolliver, could stand here in the dark

house and weep. He waited for the reward, the sweetness, the relief that should come. Nothing came . . . He had been tricked" (F, p. 197). Here Brad's conscious attempt to exploit his brief, spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling is on a level with his use of the Spanish Civil War to create a synthetic image of himself. In both cases, as in the several treatments he considers for the movie, Brad "wheels and deals" (F, p. 339), substituting mere expertise for that "flow of feeling" (F, p. 127) without which his scenarios are merely "plotty" and his own life a succession of disconnected episodes that fail to form a story. This, eventually, is what he realises at the end as he tears up the telegram from Mort Seebaum--thereby repudiating the fakery of "the Tolliver Touch"--and thinks, "I cannot find the connection between what I was and what I am. I have not found the human necessity" (F, p. 439). He knows what he has to do: there is hope, after all, for Brad.

World Enough and Time is subtitled, "A Romantic Novel," which, Everett Carter reasonably suggests, tells us to expect an attempt to fuse the realm of the ideal (romance) with the world of social appearance (the novel).²¹ Flood is "A Romance of Our Time," which arouses similar expectations. "There is no use," advises Arthur Mizener, "looking in Flood for the virtue of the Marquand novel--the vivid, detailed, representative image of the everyday world; Flood has its own kind of vividness and relevance, but it is not the realistic novel's."²² Mizener is one critic who holds Flood in high esteem as a novel of ideas:

²¹ Everett Carter, "The 'Little Myth' of Robert Penn Warren," Modern Fiction Studies, 6 (Spring, 1960), 5.

²² Arthur Mizener, "The Uncorrupted Consciousness," Sewanee Review, 72 (Autumn, 1964), 691.

Nearly every important American way-station of the spirit is here with all its self-deception --complacent or suffering--and all its human pathos: our nostalgia for the imagined past; our earnest dreams of a sensible, school-lunch future; our longings for the nirvanas of manly lust and pastoral love and romantic disillusion; our delight in gadgetry and mere skillfulness; our desire for the release of war's respectable violence or of political dogma's solemn irresponsibility.²³

This eloquent and accurate account of Flood's "large and relevant" vision makes a pleasant change from the shallow opprobria generally levelled at the book, but Mizener underestimates its realism which is often "vivid," "detailed" and "representative." The Seven Dwarfs Motel, with its cement frogs, dwarfs and monstrously vulgar billboards, is an entirely realistic, detailed image of innumerable American hostelrys of the kind. It is also thematically functional. Brad is disturbed by the sight of a cement dwarf fishing in a stream which looks real: "Bradwell Tolliver wished that the water did not look real. What always worried you was to find something real in the middle of all the faking. It worried you, because if everything is fake then nothing matters" (F, p. 4). This is the doubleness of life referred to by Blanding Cottshill: Brad's irony makes him aware of it but, lacking heart, he does not know how to cope with it. A similar relation between surface realism and theme is in the description of Fiddlersburg, from the "You'll Never Regret It Café," the ruined steamboat landing and the river "heavy-bellied with silt" to the Confederate soldier, still apprehensively "staring northward." Brad's basement room on MacDougal Street, the old Fiddler house, and the microcosmic life of the penitentiary are all

²³ Mizener, p. 698.

presented in sufficient detail to make them imaginably real in themselves as well as contributions to the texture of meanings.

There is character realism too. Yasha Jones has been dismissed as an impossible philosopher king or "quasi-saint,"²⁴ but although he makes fewer appearances than Brad, he is just as fully developed. His outward reserve, courtliness of manner and exotic background make him, certainly, a more unusual figure in Fiddlersburg than in New York or Hollywood, but the account we are given of his happy marriage, the tragic loss of his wife and the discipline by which he achieves his "pure and difficult joy" (F, p. 100) offers no special challenge to the suspension of disbelief. If he is at once foil and surrogate father to Brad, he is no saint as he reflects on the rhythm of his natural desires and the techniques by which they are customarily satisfied (F, p. 104). Lettice Poindexter of the "silky hair" and "preposterous name" is one of Warren's most vivid questers. Her attempts to define herself in absolute terms all fail because they forget the "moving multiplicity of the world" and the fact of human contingency. Her deliberate association with the Spanish Loyalists leads to her brief, unplanned but consequential involvement with Dr Echegaray who, unlike Brad, has fulfilled "man's obligation to enter history" (F, p. 147); her psycho-analysis sends her rushing into marriage to a man for whom her body "had no value beyond dreary animal warmth and nervous spasm unless it could be put in a perspective of past events which had brought it there" (F, p. 67)---the very perspective of which Brad is incapable; her fanatical pursuit of physical culture ("Save the waist and save all") endorses Brad's

²⁴ Stewart, p. 501.

bias towards mere sex and leads to the ultimately disastrous meeting between Calvin Fiddler and a falsified Maggie Tolliver. The consistency here, of course, is the basic idealism, Lettice's sheer whole-heartedness, and it is in terms of this consistency that her final answer, institutionalised Christian service, is credible. Her "blasphemous" description of herself to Brad as "goosed to God" (F, p. 436) makes her just unregenerate enough to be real in her charity. Comparatively minor characters like Blanding Cottshill and Mr Budd are given their own histories and speak in appropriate accents. Even the characters in Brad's Middlersburg file spring to life from his summaries. In the terms laid down for romance by Hawthorne in the Preface to The House of the Seven Gables, Flood is an anomaly, for Warren aims at "a very minute fidelity" both to the real world and to "the truth of the human heart." Yasha Jones would approve of his creator's effort: Warren's chief concern is with "the vision," "the flow of feeling," but his picture is more than adequately documented.

Flood is, however, most obviously a "Romance of Our Time" in that it examines varieties of love in the modern world. The deepest need of all Warren's principal characters, John L. Stewart observes, "is for the love of other adults, but they cannot inspire it because they cannot face the responsibilities it entails."²⁵ Brad does inspire love in Lettice Poindexter but compulsively destroys his marriage because he cannot respond to her need for love that at once includes and transcends sexuality. Ironically, this becomes his need too, and to supply it he makes a Lady of Shalott out of

²⁵ Stewart, p. 517.

Leontine Purtle. His romantic illusion about Leontine becomes so necessary to him as a vehicle of redemption and self-fulfilment--another Spanish Civil War--that he is not even checked by the absurdity of lusting for the Lady of Shalott: "When he calls her that, Yasha Jones says, 'What does that make you? Lancelot?' and Brad says, 'It was the Queen he was getting it off.' But though he says it, he does not see it."²⁶ As the Spanish cause takes its revenge on Brad's self-aggrandising use of the War by sending Dr Echegaray to seduce Lettice, so Mortimer Sparlin is revenged for Brad's liberal condescensions when the Lady of Shalott turns into the whore of Candy Cottage. If Leontine is partly "a caricature of sentimentalised Southern Womanhood,"²⁷ she is also significantly real. With her books for the blind, her terrible divorcee friend, her crippled father and the prospect of that strangeness which will be her life in Laketown, she is a sufficiently rounded character to absorb the element of caricature without detriment to her credibility. "Being you," she tells Brad, "is like being blind" (F, p. 233). Leontine is what she is; Brad is blind indeed.

Several marriages are anatomised in Brad's sketches (F, pp. 91-92) of the townspeople. Most are bad; one is perfect. Morris Tatum married for respectability ("my wife--you know, Jane Fiddler."); Dr Tucker, with "nothing at home except moral rectitude," has engaged in a twenty-year affair with the wife of the local druggist, Mrs Sibyl Parris, whom he provides--now unwillingly and in fear of blackmail--with the dope which her husband will no longer give her.

²⁶ Mizener, p. 696.

²⁷ John Edward Hardy, "Robert Penn Warren's Flood," Virginia Quarterly Review, 40 (Summer, 1964), 486.

We learn, too, that old Mrs Tolliver could never understand how or why she had yielded to Lank Tolliver, and that in her will she did her best to break his hold on their children. The death of her dope-fiend husband leaves Mother Fiddler alone, bitter and impoverished. The perfect marriage belongs to Cyrus and Matilda Highbridge, "the perennial lovers of Fiddlersburg" who, in their fifties, have been observed in various acts of combining love and sex, the ideal and the real of the marital state, not to their shame but to Fiddlersburg's: "Cyrus and Matilda still walk hand-in-hand. Fiddlersburg is watching. But Fiddlersburg doesn't quite know whether or not it wants to catch them. For Fiddlersburg, like all of us, finds true love an unsettling spectacle" (F, p. 91).

If sex without love is, predictably, futile and degrading in Warren's world, love without sex is a perversion of a different kind. Maggie Tolliver's surreptitious readings of the marriage manual and Fanny Hill imply a sexual nature unfulfilled in her marriage to Calvin. Yasha Jones has been celibate long enough. Their marriage will, presumably, echo the true love of the Highbridges, for they complement each other perfectly. Not only have both of their previous marriages ended in tragedy, but both of their careers follow the lines of that process of self-definition which Warren proposes in "Knowledge and the Image of Man."²⁸ Yasha Jones has "distinguished himself from the world and from other men;" after the death of his first wife he becomes lost in his "separateness." Highly self-critical and introspective, he has developed "an ideal of excellence," which he seeks unsuccessfully

²⁸ See above, p. 63.

to impart to Brad. In the "pain of his isolation" and "because of his very abstraction from place and event" (F, p. 100), he can envisage "the tragic pathos of life" and find it reflected in Fiddlersburg and its doom. The little town becomes an image of "the tragic experience" which "is universal and a corollary of man's place in nature." This brings Yasha Jones his "pure and difficult joy" (F, p. 100) simply because man's fundamental joy is truth itself. It is the same joy that is implicit in "Composition in Gold and Red-Gold" (SP, pp. 62-64), after the death of the chipmunk "completes the composition" by making it a true image of life.²⁹ At this stage, in possession of his "colder fire" (SP, p. 226), Yasha Jones is still separate in his awareness, and, to that extent, incomplete. Personal reflection, simple attraction to Maggie--who has also lived in the "pain of isolation"--and the outpouring of communal history stimulate in him the power to return to "a communion with man and nature."

The basic themes of Flood are all familiar by now, but, as Warren says in his essay on Hemingway, "The history of literature seems to show that good artists may have very few basic ideas . . . And the ideas of the artist are grand simply because they are intensely felt, intensely realised--not because they are, by objective standards, by public, statistical standards, 'important'" (SE, pp. 116-17). Warren's ideas in Flood are grand on both counts: they are "intensely felt, intensely realised," and "by objective standards . . . 'important.'" His splendidly fugal treatment of them makes Flood much more than "a clever bit of

²⁹ See above, p. 248.

engineering." It is "A Romance of Our Time," a vision which, with every reading, reveals more "depth and shimmer." Arthur Mizener foresees the possibility that Warren, disheartened by the book's initial reception, might use up "a great deal of creative energy both in his life and in his work, hiding from people in elaborately mannered ways," as Henry James did after "the very big tempest in a very small teapot" stirred up by his Hawthorne.³⁰ Mizener need not have worried. Not only did Warren's poetry become, in the sixties and seventies, more open and personal, as we have seen, but he went on to write A Place to Come To, the most nearly autobiographical of all his novels. Before that, however, he demonstrated his ability to stand firm under critical fire by staying close to Fiddlersburg, both geographically and thematically, in Meet Me in the Green Glen, another romantic fable about love in the country. If not to Parkerton it is to the antediluvian Fiddlersburg that Cy Grinder takes young Cassie Killigrew for a movie and an ice cream soda (GG, p. 76). It is from the state penitentiary at Fiddlersburg that Angelo Passetto comes fatefully walking down the road in the rain, and it is to the same penitentiary that he is unjustly committed to die in the electric chair for the crime of loving neither wisely nor quite well enough and for the inadvertent, tragic folly of making Murray Guilfort realise too clearly his own incapacity to love at all.

³⁰ Mizener, p. 691.

III

Meet Me in the Green Glen fares no better than Flood in the unforgiving, anonymous columns of the Times Literary Supplement.³¹ The review's heading---"Old Kentucky Style"---is inexact as well as belittling. The novel is thoroughly of Tennessee as the opening section of Chapter 12 makes plain by taking the reader from the inner truths of individual lives to the external facts of population and income statistics for the state, for Nashville and for the valley in which the book is principally set.³² The easy tag is an insult to Warren's scrupulous regard for the particulars of his chosen, intimately known region. The whole TIS review is marred by this sort of facility. The reviewer properly expects irony in the novel's title, taken from John Clare:

Love, meet me in the green glen,
Beside the tall elm tree,

but concludes that "nothing is ironic," whereas the entire book is an account of the irony that the need for love characterises us all---rich man, poor man, lawyer man, Sicilian---but that our failure to recognise this need in ourselves and in others can lead to elaborate cruelties, delusions and tragically misdirected energies. The reviewer ignores all this, preferring to make much of an obvious parallel between Warren's book and "The Virgin and the Gipsy" (What sort of monopoly does Lawrence hold?), misleadingly comparing the novel to The Sound and the Fury and finally dismissing it as "a commingling of sexual thriller with whodunit."

³¹"Old Kentucky Style," Times Literary Supplement, April 21, 1972, p. 439.

³² For the valley that gave Warren the "germ" of Meet Me in the Green Glen, see below, Appendix, p. 354.

Faulkner's great novel is also distinctly regional, even more so in that his purpose is to explore the meaning of the decay of an "aristocratic" Mississippi family while Warren's subject is love and loneliness in the kind of context described by Brad Tolliver as he contemplates the loneliness of his sister:

The South--it is full of women like that. Or used to be. Women stuck with something--the paralysed old father, the batty mother, the sister's orphan kind, the uncle with paresis, the booze-bit brother. Stuck with that--and lonesomeness. Hell, I've seen 'em. Lots of 'em built for something very, very different. Sitting it out. Lonesome in the long hot summer afternoons or fall nights, sort of storing up lonesomeness like honey, storing it up for someday, somebody. You know what I mean. That devotion, that absoluteness, just stored up for somebody. But . . . nobody comes.

(F, p. 168)

In Meet Me in the Green Glen it is the husband who is paralysed, his illegitimate and all but orphaned kid who confuses the issue of love, and Cassie Killigrew Spottwood who, in her lonesomeness, stores up absolute devotion for, as it happens, Angelo Passetto. In other words, Warren's book uses a region that is rich in certain primary colours and extreme human situations³³ to discuss universal matters. The sad consequence may be that readers who know nothing of the region may think it unreal. As Warren says of Southern writing in general: "intensities of inside effects sometimes look queer to those who are not inside."³⁴ Faulkner protected the world he made

³³ An interesting sidelight on the kind of violence often found in Warren's writing occurs in an observation he made in 1968: "I remember a murder map of the United States, in 1926 or 1927, when I first began to look at things like that. One murder map of the United States, if you take it in terms of status homicide--honour, homicide for status or for bad nerves, made Tennessee look awful black. Detroit was lily white. Chicago was lily white. New York lily white." Theodore Solotaroff et al., "Symposium: Violence in Literature," The American Scholar, 37 (Summer, 1968), 493-94.

³⁴ Appendix, p. 355.

by his stylistic habit of inflating character and action to unimpeachably mythic proportions. Warren is a much more realistic writer, and, therefore, more vulnerable; but it is depressing to find his evocation of life in that Tennessee world--a mixture of nostalgia, loneliness, tremendous private heroisms, and sheer climate--so easily dismissed. After all, George Wallace's political success there as recently as the early seventies makes the point that the region is hectic, complex and that all manner of old atmospheres still prevail. Racial feelings still persist, to be manipulated by the Murray Guilforts of this world; "a clean and energetic" black still shows "what one of them could do, if they put their mind to it" (GG, p. 347); and the gentler sects still quail before "the booming onslaught of the Church of Christ" (GG, p. 271).

In a persuasive review of A Place to Come To, R.Z. Sheppard pays tribute to Robert Penn Warren as "one of the few distinguished literary men who can aim a novel at the gut and not offend the head."³⁵ This is precisely the gift which Denis Donoghue finds lacking in Meet Me in the Green Glen: "Often in Mr Warren's longer fictions and especially in his big novels I find the relation between episode and feeling insecure, and generally the feeling is exorbitant. Feeling and interpretation flow in, but their abundance is often gross, if we think of what occasioned them."³⁶ Presumably Donoghue is not objecting to the proposition that the betrayal of love, sexual abuse, murder and the deliberate miscarriage of justice may reasonably

³⁵ R.Z. Sheppard, "Sacred and Profane Grit," Time, March 14, 1977, p. 58.

³⁶ Denis Donoghue, "Life Sentence," New York Review of Books, 17 (Dec. 2, 1971), 28.

generate powerful feelings. His particular quarrel with Meet Me in the Green Glen is that its characters "are so empty" that Warren "must himself produce the fullness of the world and give it to the narrator, the narrative voice." In other words, the novel is a failure because one cannot believe that such empty characters could, in any circumstances, experience the feelings attributed to them by the narrator. Angelo especially offends Professor Donoghue: "Poor Angelo . . . is a clod, capable of nothing . . . he cannot think in any language, his mind is as rudimentary as his English . . . but the narrator out of his own fullness gives him lavish gifts of meditation." Donoghue offers the following passage from Chapter 5 as an example of the book's vitiating narrative exorbitance:

Was this the way things always were in the end?
If all you had out of living was the memories you
couldn't remember the feelings of, did that mean
that your living itself, even now while you lived
it, was like that too, and everything you did,
even in the instant of doing, was nothing more
than the blank motions the shadow of your body
made in those memories which now, without meaning,
were all you had out of the living and working you
had done before?

(GG, pp. 123-24)

It is, in the first place, perverse and misleading to say that Angelo cannot think. Although he has had three years of practice (GG, p. 51) he still has to discipline himself not to: "The man was trying not to think of anything" (GG, p. 6) we are told when he makes his entrance. He thinks and dreams, repeatedly, of the moment in the court-room when Guido Altocchi pointed at him, crying "Treditore" (GG, p. 61); he thinks of his mother and father back in Savoca (GG, p. 124); he thinks of the girl he had been crazy

about, "who had said that life was just a bowl of cherries" (GG, p. 12) long before the perfume he gives Cassie proves to be the same as used by that very girl and thus betrays him back into the failures of his past (GG, p. 165). Absolute realism would demand a flow of internal monologue in a language compounded of immigrant Sicilian and broken American, but Warren's concern is with the profounder realism of the feelings that underlie whatever linguistic forms might inhabit the mind of such a character. The demands of the more superficial realism are met by Angelo's associative response--"Sandy Claws!" (GG, p. 7) --to the stag shot by Cy Grinder, by the halting mixture of languages he uses with Cassie, by his calculated use of Italian in the seduction of Charlene, and by the incongruity between depth of feeling and awkwardness of expression in his farewell letter to Cassie from prison.

In the second place, it is unfair of Professor Donoghue to hold up for ridicule the above passage extracted from Chapter 5. Without its sustaining context it appears to support his argument; in context (GG, pp. 122-23) it is appropriate and logical. Burying himself in the unreality of the Spottwood house as a refuge from Sicilian vengeance and his own guilt, Angelo discovers that his whole life has become a dream. He tries to remember what it would be like to be, as he once was, in a world where the music of his radio comes from, even to remember the feel of "something--anything --that had once happened to him;" but although "shapes, gestures, sounds would come into the darkened theatre of his head . . . colours, they never came." Gradually Angelo becomes aware that he has not only lost his sense of past feelings, but that "he did

not know what feelings he had now." The passage quoted by Donoghue then follows, a legitimate, psychologically credible outcome of this sequence of thought.

If this seems scarcely a "lavish gift of meditation" in terms of Angelo's established character, a comparison with Faulkner will further demonstrate Warren's restraint. On two occasions Warren describes Angelo's reaction to the power of the earth on which he lies. The first occasion occurs on the day of the hog-killing. The reduction of the hog to blood, entrails and carcass presents Angelo with a spectacle of annihilation into which he feels himself terrifyingly drawn by Cassie's nihilistic gaze of recognition that becomes "in a flash, non-recognition." The concealing unreality within which he has sought to hide himself becomes too much for him and he runs from the scene. He lies on a mat of dead cedar needles on the ground, feeling the hardness of the stone that comes up through the needles, numbing his flesh:

With that awareness, he stretched out his arms and pressed his body hard against the earth. The hardness of the secret stone seemed to reach the very bone of his body. He thought of nothing being left of his own body but bone, bone against stone. He lay there for a long time. His breastbone now ached from what pressed up against him out of the earth. There was nothing to do but get up, and go down the hill.

(CG, pp. 48-49)

Earlier in the novel we are told of Cassie's "intuited understanding of the vengeful alienation from himself" implicit in Cy Grinder's marriage to Gladys Peegrum (CG, p. 81). In the above account of Angelo's response to the feel of the earth beneath him, Warren,

without any rhetorical forcing of expression, makes available Angelo's "intuited understanding" of what he feels. It is peaceful lying on the ground, but he cannot stay there, because the earth that seems "to reach the very bone of his body" will absorb him even more completely than the unreality of the Spottwood house and its shadowy woman. At this stage Angelo craves reality almost as much as concealment and he seeks it both in Charlene, who, as she moves up the path, "flamed into reality" (GG, p. 53), and in his obsessional pursuit of tasks to do--his "flight into occupation" (GG, p. 49)--on the farm.

The second occasion on which Angelo is shown in significant contact with the earth occurs after Charlene's rebuff and the institution of the depersonalising morning couplings with Cassie which induce in him such a mixture of "anger . . . desolation, powerlessness and yearning" (GG, p. 115) that his flight into work becomes a fury and the prospect of engulfment in the earth more appealing. Here the earth offers Angelo an escape from the tensions of life like Jack Burden's Great Sleep or Jeremiah Beaumont's "blank cup of nature" (WEAT, p. 506):

. . . lying on his back with the light out,
breathing the dry, cool dustiness of that secret
earth, not drowsing, wide awake in that darkness,
he felt a lassitude creep over him, rising from
the earth beneath him, like water rising, and
then, as the deliberate flood seemed to close
over him in the dark, he knew that it was peace,
a nothingness that was, strangely, a kind of
sweetness. It would be sweet to lie here forever.

(GG, p. 116)

Absorption into the nothingness of nature seems momentarily preferable to the annihilating darkness of Cassie's non-recognition,

but when, having dozed off, Angelo jerks awake to find himself in real darkness with the "mass and weight of the house . . . over him . . . coming slowly down on him," he realises that he is not ready for extinction: "'I fix pipe,' he said to himself. 'Me, I fix'" (GG, p. 117). The principle of selfhood is more tenacious than he had realised.

Faulkner's Mink Snopes is cunning enough to kill Jack Houston in The Hamlet and Flem Snopes in The Mansion but not enough to resist Montgomery Ward Snopes's encouragement to make the attempted escape from Parchman Penitentiary which earns him a further twenty years in prison. He has what Denis Donoghue would be obliged to call "a rudimentary mind," even if it functions in redneck English and is displayed to the reader over a longer period of time than Angelo's. At the end of The Mansion Mink lies at ease on the ground which "never let a man forget it was there waiting, pulling gently and without no hurry at him between every step, saying, Come on, lay down; I ain't going to hurt you. Jest lay down."³⁷ Thus far Faulkner realistically enough conveys the flow of Mink's thought: diction and rhythm are appropriate to the mind of his character. A little later Mink's contemplation of the earth becomes ambitiously philosophical, though diction is still realistic: ". . . a man had to spend not just all his life but all the life of Man too guarding against it."³⁸ But when Mink, his struggles over, yields to the pull of the earth, Faulkner's language changes, leaving realism behind. As sleep

³⁷ William Faulkner, The Mansion (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 434.

³⁸ Faulkner, The Mansion, p. 435.

comes on him, Mink feels himself seeping into the ground which is already full of people free at last from the troubles of their lives:

. . . all mixed and jumbled up comfortable and easy so wouldn't nobody even know or care who was which any more, himself among them, equal to any, good as any, brave as any, being inextricable from, anonymous with all of them: the beautiful, the splendid, the proud and shining phantoms and dreams which are the milestones of the long human recording --Helen and the bishops, the kings and the unhomed angels, the scornful and graceless seraphim.³⁹

It is, to say the least, improbable that "inextricable" and "anonymous" were ever in Mink's vocabulary, but the words do not jar because they define the feelings that have grown in Mink in the course of the two preceding paragraphs. Equally, Warren's Angelo can hardly know the word "lassitude", or be capable of formulations like "the deliberate flood" and "a nothingness that was, strangely, a kind of sweetness;" but these expressions do give entirely credible shape to thoughts and sensations that are consistent with Angelo's character since the moment when it arrived in the rain to be subjected to the process of the novel. This is hardly narrative exorbitance. Faulkner ends his passage, as Cleanth Brooks puts it, "with a final flourish of rhetoric in which he flashes names that Mink could never have heard of . . . But if Faulkner is putting words into Mink's dying mouth, it is easy to forgive him . . . He is simply embellishing with literary terms an experience which is substantially Mink's own."⁴⁰ Warren

³⁹ Faulkner, The Mansion, pp. 435-36.

⁴⁰ Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 243.

does not go anything like so far. His business in this poetic novel, as in Brother to Dragons and Audubon, is as much to interpret the inner lives of his characters as to show them doing things. The skill--and restraint--with which he expresses the almost inarticulate feelings that form the basis for action make Meet Me in the Green Glen as technically impressive as it is thematically commanding.

In his essay on "The Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne,"⁴¹ Anthony Trollope makes a perennially valid observation: "The creations of American Literature generally are no doubt more given to the speculative,--less given to the realistic,--than are those of English literature. On our side of the water we deal more with beef and ale, and less with dreams." Sufficient unto Meet Me in the Green Glen is the realism thereof; the book deals principally with dreams. Each of the main characters is as trapped in his or her dream as Angelo in his prison or Sunderland Spottwood in his paralysed body. By the end of the story Cy Grinder, Cassie, Angelo and Leroy Lancaster have all, in their different ways, succeeded in bridging the gap between dream and world, thereby demonstrating that the green glen of love is, despite Marvell, not "begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility," but simply where you find it.

On parole from the state penitentiary at Fiddlersburg, Angelo Passetto, a figure reminiscent of the tramp in "Blackberry Winter," is "going nowhere" (GG, p. 6). Seeking refuge from the long arm

⁴¹Anthony Trollope. "The Genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne," North American Review 129 (Sept., 1879), 203-22.

of Mafia-type revenge and from a past that defines him in terms of guilt, unhappiness in youth and disappointed love, he enters the "dark hollowness" of the house of Spottwood to build his immunity to life in the deliberate cultivation of "blankness of being" (GG, p. 51). Like the speaker in "Internal Injuries" who hastens away from the travestying of the human bond that he finds in the scene of the accident, Angelo "Must go somewhere where / Nothing is real, for only Nothingness is real" (SP, p. 133). The fundamentally alien element of unreality becomes oppressive to him, however, and after his flight from the horror of the butchered hog, he senses within his inner darkness the self he would suppress: "Something had stirred in the depth of black water, for an instant glimmering white like the belly of a fish as it turns. Something had breathed in the dark" (GG, p. 49). Although he knows that he is living in a dream as the price of not dreaming about the past, existence as "the shape with no name," which he is to Cassie (GG, p. 109), even when they have technically become lovers, eventually fills him with frustration and despair.

Cassie's abandonment by Cy Grinder, her overbearing mother and crudely dominant husband have forced her to retreat into herself to such an extent that she can hardly distinguish between subjective impression and external reality. At the beginning of the novel she wonders "if there were people who always knew, right off, what was inside and what outside their head" (GG, p. 4). Angelo becomes real to her only when he has been defined "outside her head" by Murray Guilfort's warning. Now she can identify with a real man whose captivity in prison echoes her own entrapment.

Calling him by his name she offers him freedom and her hand (GG, pp. 148-50). True sexual love now supplants the "blank act" by which Angelo had felt "cheated and deprived" (GG, p. 72). Both Angelo and Cassie had mistakenly thought it possible to be fulfilled in isolated nothingness, denying the need of love in a world which seemed to offer none. Now, for a spell, both find self-fulfilment in an ideal rhythm of giving and taking.

The disintegration of this harmony is almost unbearably painful and quite brilliantly conveyed. Angelo's attentions to Cassie's appearance begin as expressions of love. Dressing her hair, making up her lips and liberating her "leetle feet" from the ungainly brogans, Angelo's celebration of the woman in Cassie is also an assertion of himself in terms of his love for another. "But nobody ever did this--not ever--," Cassie says, and Angelo replies, "But Angelo--yes! . . . Yes! And me Angelo" (GG, p. 165). This is in complete contrast to Murray Guilfort who attempts to assert himself in terms of his hatred for Sunderland Spottwood. But this is the crisis point for Angelo. The emergence of the self even by way of love entails acknowledgement of the past. As he feels Cassie's cool hand on his forehead he sees again the contorted face of Guido Altocchi and it is not enough that the voice of Cassie tells him he is innocent. Cassie takes Angelo to look upon her husband because she knows that, if she is to be loved for herself, her past must be known and faced. Angelo cannot face his past and, therefore, cannot sustain the reality of love. Instead he turns Cassie into a scarlet woman, another dream which he fuels with his presents from Parkerton and keeps intact by a

scrupulous separation of day from night (GG, pp. 170-71).

The gap widens between the world of reality--his daily tasks around the house and farm--and the new dream. He almost closes it when he comes on Cassie in the day-time reality of her old brown sweater, untidy hair and practical brogans and calls her, for the first time, by her name; but the lingering perfume brings the intolerable past into the glare of the present. As the dream Angelo has built round Cassie withers in the light of day, he goes to Charlene for a relationship which, involving no reference to the past, can only be a return to the void.

Angelo's defeat is matched by Cassie's. She had given love and, she thought, freedom: rejection is too much to be absorbed into a recultivated nothingness. As she lies on the floor outside the locked door of Angelo's room she imagines all the principal actors in her life looking down on her: " . . . they were all standing there, all of them--Sunder and the woman, Murray, the girl, Cy Grinder, and Angelo. They were all laughing. Even Angelo" (GG, p. 224). Spottwood had admitted that his virile sex had never enabled him to make Cassie "blow the cork" (GG, pp. 92-93). The lost love of Angelo succeeds where her husband's abuses failed. Her act of vengeance towards Angelo ironically fulfils the wishes of the late Guido Altocchi and makes her a truer woman than the sneering Arlita. Cassie's plan to have Angelo caught and killed for her crime marks the tragic dissolution of her love into hatred, but its success restores the lovers to each other. Cassie's confession and Angelo's "Piccola mia--piccola mia!" bring the green glen of true love into daylight at last, triumphant above the people who, Leroy Lancaster realises in his pang of jealousy, "would kill Angelo Passetto

because he had stood there in the full shining of that woman's face" (GG, p. 275). Although Angelo's letter to Cassie repeats that "it no work rite," the movement of his heart is given in the progression from "I want to love you" and "I try" to "I love you" (GG, p. 365). Thus Cassie is justified in her final illusion, that Angelo took the freedom she gave, and has gone "Somewhere far away, and he is happy. And I'm happy too, because I made him happy, for oh, I loved him" (GG, p. 359). As Murray Guilfort realises too late: "The dream is a lie, but the dreaming is truth" (GG, p. 370).

Not all dreaming is truth. Cy Grinder and Leroy Lancaster thwart themselves by adhering so intransigently to their ideas of life that they are seriously disabled when reality does not conform to their conceptions of what it should be. The young Cy Grinder lives in terms of his idea of himself as "an untarnished Adam walking the new earth with the breath of the Worldwide Correspondence School blown into him" (GG, p. 77). Until he possesses the certificate that will proclaim him recast in the mould of his ideal he will not consummate his love for Cassie, irrespective of her feelings for him. Mrs Killigrew's intervention forces him back upon the squalid reality of his drunk father, thieving brother, and whoring sister and into the sweating body which was "he deeply felt, his real self" (GG, p. 76). His love for Cassie is insufficient to help him withstand the venomous cataloguing of biographical data which he had sought to escape and the abandoned girl rightly concludes: "He loves something else better than me" (GG, p. 79). If Cy cannot have his ideal, he will have nothing, which he embraces as his destiny, consigning his books to the privy hole for the value

judgement of Old Budge's defecation and as a self-mocking tribute to the sins of the father that have made his dream an impossibility. The crowning nihilism is his marriage to the "fat, slug-white" Gladys Peegrum, whereby Cy finally plunges away from his shattered ideal into a life of mortified flesh. The passion he displays in killing the stag expresses his disgust for the nature in which he has immersed himself instead of in "the destructive element" of his dream.

Cassie jerks Cy out of himself twice in the present action of the novel: firstly, when she denies him the stag; secondly, when she commands him in the name of the past to drive her to Nashville to see the Governor, thus implicating him in the complex of events which would not have happened but for his desertion of her. On the way back from their abortive effort to save Angelo, Cy tells Cassie how she may bear the fact that Angelo is to die, and how Angelo himself may face death: "If you just don't remember nothing. Just don't wait for nothing. Just keep now in your head. A man can stand anything if it is only just that second. If a man just keeps now in his head, there ain't nothing else" (GG, p. 321). Cy's method of living differs from his technique for dying only in its admission of the future. Despite Cassie's eruption back into his life, he continues to resist the past and is pleased by the project to flood the valley: "Cy began to feel that the past itself would be flooded and he would be free to live in the contentment that was possible in the life of each day. He came to feel, in fact, that part of his own being was already under water, and he thought of the shadowy depths with a kind of cold contentment" (GG, p. 341).

But the life of each day includes joy in his daughter, thoughts of whose future project him beyond mere "now" and fill him with a happiness deeper than "cold contentment." Cy's use of his wife as a vehicle of self-mortification is part of his Original Sin as defined by Warren in the essay on Faulkner. Loving his daughter, Cy realises that the face of Gladys Peegrum Grinder is "like the face of the little girl" and he finds himself, for the first time, contemplating the mysterious otherness of the woman who "now slept in his bed and had slept there every night for now so many years" (GG, p. 376). The anguish Cy feels as the novel ends is the sign that his "redemption through love" (SE, p. 69) has begun.

Of the two principal lawyers among Warren's characters, one is redeemed, the other damned. Leroy Lancaster feels an "unnamable blankness" in himself (GG, p. 271) when the reality of his loving and Christian wife, Corinne, belies the ideal of overwhelming sexuality that had inflamed his imagination. He leads a life of respectable ineffectuality until the trial forces him to acknowledge that he "had wanted Angelo to die" (GG, p. 277) for having known the kind of passionate love that had eluded him. This access of self-knowledge stirs Lancaster to action, and although he loses the case he achieves a forceful identity in the real world, winning the office of prosecutor and the grudging respect of Murray Guilfort, and fathering, somewhat incredibly, a boy on the tender Corinne. Warren should have resisted the temptation to reward him with a son: the emphatic pointing of his fulfilment draws the reader's attention to the sketchiness of a character hastily assembled in the last act of the drama further to exfoliate its theme.

Trapped inside "the darkness of his own head" (GG, p. 29), Murray Guilfort seeks to escape from himself into a surrogate marriage that includes the romantic ideal of sex embodied first in Sophie, then in Mildred who leaves him bereft and ailing in a dream gone dead, when she disappears into reality by marrying a retired dentist. He realises his ambition to become a member of the state Supreme Court, and by the trial's revelations of his association with expensive Chicago sin and his apparent generosity toward his friend, Sunderland Spottwood, earns the image of the complete man, at once fleshly and idealistic. He is, of course, the least complete character in the novel. If Willie Stark's political success is owing to his gift for "fulfilling vicariously the secret needs of others" (AKM, p. vii), Murray Guilfort is an inverted version of Warren's demagogue: he depends on others to fulfil his own secret needs. His identification with Alfred Milbank is so strong that when Milbank dies in the middle of an assignation, Guilfort comes down "with a severe gastric disturbance, which the attending physician diagnosed, somewhat dubiously, as pancreatitis" (GG, p. 26). Although he wants Spottwood to die (GG, p. 134), he needs the sight of the once invincible, now stricken man as a justification of his own "blankness of being": he may be empty, frustrated, sexually dissatisfied, but at least he is not physically paralysed from the neck down. But his need of Spottwood goes deeper than this. In his last bitter savouring of his own hollowness he thinks:

He had always been there inside himself, and he had always been trying to get out. To be Sunderland galloping up the lane on a gray stallion, great hoofs flinging red clay like blood. To be Alfred Milbank, with his bulging eyes, leaning over the bar table in Chicago, hotly breathing out the fumes of whiskey, saying: "And as for me, I solemnly affirm that, within the hour, I shall lay out one hundred dollars for a big juicy chunk of illusion." To be a judge on the Supreme Court, so people would respect him. To be-- even--Angelo Passetto, in a dark house.

(GG, p. 366)

Guilfort's supplies of money to Cassie, his carefully preserved receipts, his assertions of power over Angelo's destiny and his stage-managing of the trial are ways of arrogating to himself the living done by others which he is too empty to do. At the end there is nothing left for him but to sink into the "black inward abyss of himself" (SE, p. 55).

There is in Meet Me in the Green Glen, as in "The Ancient Mariner", a "relatively high degree of expressive integration" (SE, p. 262). As Denis Donoghue reminds us in his review of the novel, Warren's essay, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: an Experiment in Reading," refers to Coleridge's view "that when 'the imagination is conceived as recognising the inherent interdependence of subject and object (or complementary aspects of a single reality), its dignity is immeasurably raised.'" (SE, p. 207). If "Blackberry Winter" is to be approved--as it is by Donoghue--because it demonstrates such interdependence of subject and object in comparatively small compass, surely Meet Me in the Green Glen must be praised for achieving a similar interdependence over a much wider area of time and human experience.

As in The Cave the thematic relatedness of Warren's characters in Meet Me in the Green Glen is underscored by a system of imagery

which establishes the interdependence Denis Donoghue values, ensuring that the book gives, in his phrase, "an impression of being single, that is to say, single minded." The "one splotchy, sliding-down grayness" (GG, p. 3) of the landscape in the opening scene functions, like the fog in Bleak House, as an objective image of blank formlessness. It is complemented subjectively by the various inner blanknesses of the characters: Angelo's "blankness of being" (GG, p. 51) and the unreality of a life without definition in "the dark hollowness of the house" (GG, p. 109); Murray Guilfort's "dark cellar" (GG, p. 21) and the "movement of shadows" (GG, p. 143) in his featureless youth; the meaningless existence cultivated by Cy Grinder; the nothingness of Cassie's life prior to Angelo; Leroy Lancaster's "blankness" (GG, p. 271). The Spottwood house with its ravelled carpet, disintegrating Bible and flaking portrait of old Sunderland Spottwood endorses Murray Guilfort's conviction that "Everything was nothing" (GG, p. 35). Interdependence is also achieved in terms of light. Guilfort's interior darkness is lit by "a single point of acute light" (GG, p. 28); Angelo sees himself in a mirror by flickering candle-light (GG, p. 108); and Cassie feels a light at "the very centre of herself, and of the whole world that fled away from that glowing centre" (GG, p. 74). Guilfort never achieves a broader light than this, but when, briefly, love frees both Cassie and Angelo from their isolation, the light at Cassie's centre expands outward: "Everything simply was, and was shining" (GG, p. 152), and Angelo moves about his work in the January glitter. The grayness of the opening scene and his furtive, ill-lit image of himself give way

to a brightness of air in which he feels real and "all the objects of the world seemed to stand clear and separate" (GG, p. 158). On the last page of the novel the stirrings of love bring Cy Grinder out of his "inner darkness" to stand beneath "the moon, with the sky, and the whole world in its light" (GG, p. 376). By such interdependence of subject and object Warren unifies the elements of this intense, eloquent fable of love.

Chapter Nine

A Place To Come To

W. H. Auden has a corrective word for those assiduously modern readers who would refine an author out of existence. He neatly describes one aspect of our interest in a new book by a writer who has held our attention in the past:

. . . our judgement of an established author is never simply an aesthetic judgement. In addition to any literary merit it may have, a new book by him has a historical interest for us as the act of a person in whom we have long been interested. He is not only a poet or a novelist; he is also a character in our biographies.¹

Readers whose interest in Robert Penn Warren's work has made him a character in their biographies are bound to notice the similarities between Jed Tewksbury's career and his maker's. Dugton, Alabama is not unlike Guthrie, Kentucky which may have been a "hellhole" indeed to the brilliant young Vanderbilt undergraduate, especially during university vacations in the long, hot Tennessee summers. The tall, awkward youth whose physical presence made such an impact on Allen Tate² is echoed, with modifications, in an early description Jed gives of himself: "There stands the youth, well over six feet, unbarbered and with unruly dark hair, arms looking gangly because of length and the bigness of the hands hanging down (one clutching a book that in that hand seems trivial), wearing a soiled white shirt with collar open . . . long legs in blue jeans . . . feet in brogans"

¹ W.H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 4.

² See above, Chapter Two, p. 44.

(PCT, p. 34). Like Jerry Calhoun, Willie Stark, Brad Tolliver and Warren himself, Jed is, in Rozelle's phrase, "a country hick come to town" (PCT, p. 301). H.L. Mencken's withering judgement of the South as "The Sahara of the Bozart" is reflected in the pretentious mediocrity of the sculpture produced by Lawford Carrington--"Mr Nashville and Leonardo da Vinci in one package" (PCT, p. 155)--but Jed's goings home remind us that Warren's imaginative loyalty to his region in book after book is as profound and unwavering as the expatriate Joyce's allegiance to his dear, dirty Dublin. Both Jed and Warren succeed professionally, both are academics and marry twice. The redeeming gush of love Jed feels for Ephraim recalls the loving father of Promises and "Sunset Walk in Thaw-Time in Vermont." Jed's disenchantment with his "vast number of cards that measured three by five inches" (PCT, p. 399), may even represent Warren's statement that he has "ceased to have any interest in writing criticism, even though there is a new edition of my Selected Essays in preparation. I have sworn that I will never write another line of criticism of any kind."³

The Bildungsroman, then, is close to the life and will doubtless provide long-time Nashvillians with a roman à clef by which they may extend their own biographies. It is also something of a Künstlerroman. In much of his recent poetry Warren's theme is the imagination. In A Place to Come To he orchestrates his "basic ideas" into a discussion of the relationship between art and life. Recoiling from his place of origin as directed by his mother and the shame he feels in the death of his father, Jed becomes an intellectual user. His

³ Peter Stitt, "An Interview with Robert Penn Warren," Sewanee Review, 85 (Summer, 1977), 477.

"Original Sin" involves the substitution of art for life as he turns the death of the father whose life he has not learned to understand into a tall tale that buys him social success. The story is to Jed what the sculptured head of Butler is to Lawford Carrington, whose artistic talent is mercilessly evaluated by his aunt, Mrs Jones-Talbot: "Only one good thing in years--that screaming head. And that not really good--just expert" (PCT, p. 284). Like the unregenerate Brad Tolliver, Jed prefers expertise to truth: when the death of Dr Stahlmann and the moral chaos of the second World War wreck his belief in the ideal of humanist culture, he abandons the imperium intellectus and makes a "parlour trick" of his dissertation (PCT, p. 100). Unable to love the living Agnes Andresen he converts the fact of her dying into the idea of "Dante and the Metaphysics of Death," polarising his life into "laboratory findings" at Agnes's bedside and his "studies in the theory of death" (PCT, p. 106). This unblest rage for order involves him in a perversion of the right relation that should, T.S. Eliot tells us, exist between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates." Jed's suffering becomes a concern not for the dying girl but for the quality of his own response:

As I sat by the bed, I yearned for purity of feeling, for a sense of meaning in my experience, but when feeling gushed up in my heart, I caught myself asking if the yearning itself might not be the mother of self-deceit. Or, even, asking if the awareness of the clinical eye might provoke the enactment desired.

(PCT, p. 107)

Like Jed, Lawford Carrington would, no doubt, prefer to be able to love his wife; instead he casts her face in orgasm into a sculpture (PCT, p. 136) which appears to possess as much artistic worth as a

painting by Tretchikoff. Jed, in his way, is a better artist than this. His work earns him international acclaim, but it is still, essentially, as fake as Carrington's. "Hell," Jed tells Cud Cudworth, "I'm not a thinker, I'm a college professor" (PCT, p. 175), thus conceding his propensity for intellectual constructs and systematised reality. Arnaut Daniel helps him towards "some tenderness . . . some intuition" of Rozelle's "being" (PCT, p. 257), but he is basically too enclosed in his own self-consciousness to respond to the otherness of any of his women, or even to learn from his own discovery that the "living and suffering fact of Clairbelle Spaethe" (PCT, p. 138) underlies the girl on the make on the train to Nashville, with her vulgar, strident letter and cheesecake pose.

Mrs Jones-Talbot's "faculty of appreciation" (PCT, p. 282) brings art and life together as they are meant to be in her study of Dante. She appreciates the beauty and wisdom of Dante and the meaning of her life with Sergio in terms of each other, without falsifying either, reaching a deeper understanding of both. Taking his leave of her, Jed senses the value in this complementary balance of the aesthetic and the human: "It always meant something to me to come here. To see how you loved the Dante--working at it. I guess it was the best thing around here for me" (PCT, p. 286). He has not found the secret of such balance, such true relation. Incapable of love, he has retreated into the scholar's surrogate, a course in "Love in the Middle Ages: Sacred and Profane" and without understanding either love or time has toyed with the idea of doing "a study, in the Provencal and Italian poets before Dante, of the relation of the concept of Love to that of Time" (PCT, p. 256), a

project he is as unqualified to undertake as the young Jack Burden is incapable of understanding Cass Mastern. The swami's smile--and perhaps his wink--which seems to indicate to Jed "that if I didn't mess with his racket, he wouldn't mess with mine" (PCT, p. 254), implies the judgement Jed deserves. Both men are fakes: it takes one to know one. Instead of knowing the world, Jed uses his brand of art to interpret it--as Brad Tolliver does in his scenarios--heedless of Susan Sontag's warning that to interpret "is to impoverish, to deplete the world--in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'."⁴ Jed's problem is the typically modern one defined by Saul Bellow's Herzog. Man must idealise, must think in order to be Cartesianly human: "But can thought wake you from the dream of existence? Not if it becomes a second realm of confusion, another more complicated dream, the dream of intellect, the delusion of total explanations."⁵

Jed's friend, Stephan Mostoski, uses his art of physics to explain the world as "infinite motion in infinite solitude," giving a further turn of the screw to the naturalism that has always both attracted and repelled Warren. According to Mostoski's amoral model of the world, a wife is just "a soft hairy hole in the dark" (PCT, p. 380) and perfection will be achieved when men have become "enormously efficient and emotionless mechanisms that will know . . . how to breed even more efficient and more emotionless mechanisms" (PCT, p. 348). But Mostoski's explanation proves less than total when a resemblance between his wife and the bayoneted Russian prompts him to wipe his own spit from the boy's face. If this gives Mostoski

⁴ Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 7.

⁵ Saul Bellow, Herzog (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p. 166.

but "a momentary pang," his dream of intellect cannot, by his own confession, deplete the world of his love for Ephraim (PCT, p. 382). The heart, like Miss Sontag, is "against interpretation." As Warren says of McLuhan's criticism, none of the arts--Lawford Carrington's, Jed's, Mostoski's--"covers the case."⁶ Life, like literature, demands the immediate, ad hoc response to the particular thing, the individual person. "Away with all duplicates of the world," cries Miss Sontag, "until we again experience more immediately what we have."⁷

Paul Theroux, who likes A Place to Come To, finds the university parts least satisfactory: "The best moments in the book are those which have little to do with university life--memories of his southern town, Dugton, and his hatred for his father; episodes of sexual conquest and scenes from the war."⁸ In a largely unfavourable review, Bernard Bergonzi is much harder on the book as a portrait of academe: "the novel projects a quite unconvincing--and possibly unconvinced--view of the scholarly life."⁹ This is precisely Warren's intention. The point of view in the novel is Jed's. Academic life loses its reality for him and, therefore, for the reader. His recollections of discovering the magic of language and of the desperate measures by which he gains access to the enchantment of the Castle of Otranto are among the book's most vivid passages, but after Stahlmann's suicide

⁶ Appendix, p.p. 356-57.

⁷ Sontag, p. 7.

⁸ Paul Theroux, "A Lifetime of Writing," The Times, 2 May 1977, p. 11

⁹ Bernard Bergonzi, "Tales from the South," The Observer, 1 May 1977, p. 24.

Jed never recovers his scholarly illusions. The phrase "possibly unconvinced" suggests that Bergonzi has nearly got the point. For all his honours, Jed is finally so unconvinced that he tells Rozelle: "the main function of work is to kill time" (PCT, p. 361).

Whatever losses Jed sustains, he holds to his expertise until his last visit to Dugton exposes its inadequacy. "I still had one belief," he avers after the collapse of his second marriage, "held with some passion, that good technicians--and you notice my choice of the term, for what it is worth--are better than bad ones" (PCT, p. 346). As a good technician he "coldly and capably" arranges Rozelle's flight from her husband on the basis of his thesis that her life with Carrington or with himself on her money will match the fate of the two Gauls entombed below the Forum Boarium. He and Rozelle ransack each others bodies for a shared oblivion in place of their mutual Dugton past, but Jed cannot love well enough to allay his fear "of a certain situation" and Rozelle does not love him enough to risk Carrington's wrath and a life without luxury (PCT, pp. 310-12). Still the technician, Jed systematically attempts to "feel the joy of being part of the human project" (PCT, p. 335) by marrying the long-lost Dauphine and undertaking civic obligations, like Flannery O'Connor's Sheppard who, in "The Lame Shall Enter First," "stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton."¹⁰ The ineffectuality of this calculated attempt to return from isolation to life in community carries a warning about facile applications of the programme given in "Knowledge and the Image of Man." The marriage

¹⁰ Flannery O'Connor, Everything that Rises Must Converge (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 164.

fails, the do-gooding fades, and Jed is left alone with his technique, his amiable, nihilistic Polish friend and the contingent fact of his son. Loving Ephraim has nothing to do with technique and is beyond the scope of any thesis. The experience points Jed towards the past in which, perhaps, Young Buck looked down at him as he slept (PCT, p. 340), and which contains the place he must come to in order to escape from his own disastrous expertise. Return to Dugton proves the end of technique as the heart, at last, supervenes.

When Jed begins to tell us his story he has been dispossessed of his crippling flair for thesis by the events he describes. Confessional, and gingerly questing, he feels his way along the tangled lines of his life in search of meaning, not imposing it. He knows poker better than the boys of Jonquil Street with their tattered cards and Coca-Cola bottle tops, but confesses, "I do not know the rules or the values of cards in the game that I am now playing" (PCT, p. 170). His tentativeness is dramatised by his self-consciousness about the language which Warren carefully attributes to him in terms of the various stages of his movement towards understanding. After Rozelle's telephone call on his first Sunday morning in Nashville, he speculates about the sudden change in his view of the past, drawing a distinction between "fact inert" and "fact operative" only to dismiss his own pedantry as "stultifying lingo" (PCT, p. 19). A little later he supposes that the use of third person narrative reflects his shame at exploiting the circumstances of his father's death to gain social success. He refers to the magic of language (PCT, p. 62), to his own choice of metaphor (PCT, p. 93) and of tone (PCT, pp. 9, 344), fully aware of his own probing for definitions

and of the strengths, weaknesses, colourations and general provisionality of the language in which this improvisatory process goes forward. Thus Warren achieves through language the purpose Conrad Aiken finds in Faulkner's style, which is a way of keeping "the form--and the idea--fluid and unfinished, still in motion, as it were, and unknown, until the dropping into place of the very last syllable."¹¹

Puzzled by the speed with which he has written the opening account of his father's death and the haunting scene under the chinaberry tree, Jed remarks that he is "inclined to be painfully slow and careful" in his formulations (PCT, p. 9). That this part of his story has come "rushing out" underlines its importance, but Julian Symons' "heart sinks" at the language of the opening paragraph: "a particularly American verbal coarseness has been encouraged by the Revolution of the Sexual Word."¹² This is extraordinarily unperceptive. Its two demoticisms apart, the first sentence of the opening paragraph, with its measured rhythm and parenthetical phrases, is positively stately, and the second sentence sparsely registers a marvel. Both sentences roll with the "perfect precision" of the wagon referred to:

I was the only boy, or girl either, in the public school of the town of Dugton, Claxford County, Alabama, whose father had ever got killed in the middle of the night standing up in the front of his wagon to piss on the hindquarters of one of a span of mules and, being drunk, pitching forward on his head, still hanging on to his dong, and hitting the pike in such a position

¹¹ Conrad Aiken, A Reviewer's ABC (London: W.H. Allen, 1961), p. 197.

¹² Julian Symons, "In the Southern Style," Times Literary Supplement, 29 April 1977, p. 507.

and condition that both the left front and the left rear wheels of the wagon rolled, with perfect precision, over his unconscious neck, his having passed out being, no doubt, the reason he took the fatal plunge in the first place. Throughout, he was still holding on to his dong.

(PCT, p. 3)

If this came in a rush, Jed still contrived to be careful. Not only does he convey, by his scrupulous description of what happened, his own sustained wonder that it could have happened at all, but his expression accommodates the crudities of the men gathered under the chinaberry tree in order to underline the inability of academic inclination to obfuscate the affrontingly earthy truth of the matter. Jed's professional success has carried him away from Dugton into the world of the elaborate period, of "in such a position and condition that . . ." and "his having passed out being . . .," but he will not achieve identity or happiness until he can come to terms with Dugton, with "piss" and "dong" and the despair of the father who, born out of phase, could not understand why the definition of man should be himself "Setten in a wagon in the middle of the night with a bottle in his hand and looken at a mule's ass" (PCT, p. 14).

When Mr Tutwayler and his forthright associates under the chinaberry tree discuss Buck Tewksbury's spectacular demise in the vocabulary that so offends Julian Symons, they suddenly become aware of Jed's eyes on them and then of his tears. "Look," whispers Mr Tutwayler, "look--the pore little chap, and him a cryen for his daddy that's dead" (PCT, p. 7). It is not for his dead daddy that the boy cries but for the thumb cocked discreetly towards him, the wall-eyed knowingness, the whole "absurd parody of secrecy" which now has him pinned and wriggling in a dawning sense of "what the

world might be." Ridicule in the schoolyard expands this sense into "outrage at the contempt visited upon me and the anguishing awareness that it might, somehow be merited." Jed feels "rage" at the father who has brought him the contempt of the world. Defenceless, he shakes "with the discovery of hate" (PCT, p. 21) and proceeds to build his defences by developing the aggressive party piece whereby he attempts to repudiate his father and join the world. His technique is good, his performance applauded, but his repudiation is only partly successful. Vaguely identifying with Gervaise's imitation of Coupeau's last alcoholic pains in L'Assommoir, he feels "mysteriously sad and blank" (PCT, p. 22), but at the next request that he put on the celebrated performance, repudiation of the father yields to defiance of the world: "You know, I jest wonders why ain't none of you folks ever told me how any of yore fucken fathers died."

Jed runs from the house on Jonquil Street when he returns unexpectedly to find his father's place taken, and Dr Stahlmann's rôle as father is as short-lived as Jed's sojourn in the imperium intellectūs. At the Carringtons' New Year's Eve party Jed's identity is threatened by Rozelle's passionate response to her husband when he unveils the sculptured head of Butler, and by the assumptions made about his relationship with Maria McInnis. This time the story "'Bout Pap, how he got kilt" functions so successfully as self-assertion that Maria takes inspiration from "how solidly" he is himself, "like a rock sticking out of water" (PCT, p. 191), and embarks on her own programme of becoming, which will involve acceptance of her past to the end that she may live as solidly herself in the

present as she thinks Jed does. "The only thing we have to work on, or with, is our past," Jed says, "This can be a question of life and death" (PCT, p. 19). Living, his mother keeps him from his past by banning him from Dugton; dead, she brings him back by way of the simple love of Perk Simms which transcends all repudiations, contempts and ambitions. Like Leopold Bloom, Jed is weary, he has travelled. Like Odysseus he must return to his rocky isle in Dugton, Alabama, where, in Yeats's phrase, "all the ladders start" and where the fiery Elvira lies beside the father life has taught him to understand. Dugton is the beginning of his terra.

All Jed's other places fail him. He suffers what Stephan Mostoski calls "the death of the self which has become placeless" (PCT, p. 348). Dr Stahlmann rescues him from the "placelessness" of Chicago, but the Castle of Otranto falls by the great man's suicide and is ground into the ignominy of apartments by modern commercialism. The imperium intellectus itself is discredited by Stahlmann's use of it as a moral bolt-hole in which he hides from the evil of his homeland (PCT, p. 71). Time exiles a man from "the country of the young" and there is no place for the ageing Jed in "self-contained, self-fulfilling" Ripley City, S.D. Although Jed finds a temporary patria among the Italian partisans, it is of the most rudimentary kind, held in formation not by an ideal nor by the human bond, but by a mere determination to survive. Sex, for a spell, affords a place for both Jed and Rozelle to come to, in which "each is the other's hermitage" (PCT, p. 207), but proves no more of a "one-answer system" for them than it was for Jed's father. Jed's single afternoon with Mrs Jones-Talbot is a genuine relation

between two individuals, as open and dignified as the clean, ritual mating of horse and mare that precedes it. The issue is mutual understanding and abiding affection. By contrast, Jed's furtive couplings with Rozelle are a desperate plunge into a timeless non-place in which he can

. . . abolish the self that had once stood under the chinaberry tree in Claxford County, Alabama, had sat late at night with an open book and had not known why, had yearned for something and had not known what, had buried a wife on a prairie where snow now lay, and had fled in guilt, and, seeing the smiling face of Maria in the Cudworth candlelight, had had, briefly, the dream that he might enter the dream in which these people around him, in Nashville, Tennessee, seemed to live.

(PCT, p. 209)

There is more to be learned from the Cudworth candlelight than from the artificial glitter of the Carringtons' million-dollar barn. It is not the arty crowd but the friendly ex-lawyer who possesses an intuitive, unpretentious grasp of the importance of place and its relation to time and love:

. . . I was born here, in this old house, and I look out the window and know what I'm seeing, and I know some people I like to be with, and I like what I do all day long, and maybe that's all that realness is, anyway, and when Sally pops that little squawking blob of protoplasm out, I'll be feeling so real I'll yell.

(PCT, p. 174)

This is just the kind of passage unsympathetic reviewers extract for display in proof of what they regard as Warren's meretricious sentimentality. In context it is entirely appropriate to the character who speaks it when exhilarated by his wife's pregnancy and lit by generous intakes of bourbon. It is also thematically functional. The dream in which Jed thinks the people of Nashville live is an

illusion. There is meanness in the man who conspiratorially alludes to Maria's "moola;" beneath the Beardslean appearance, Amy Dabbitt is just another whore to the tips of her phthisically astute fingers; and the Carrington marriage is a charade, masking abuse and recrimination. Cudworth is just what he seems to be and although Jed is embarrassed by his candour, he must be chastened too. This man's dream is real: he has found sua terra.

Jed's life is typically Warrenesque in its involvement with the discrepancy between the ideal and the real. Although the womenfolks gathered in sympathy for the widowed Mrs Tewksbury know, perhaps biblically, the reality of the deceased, they attribute the widow's dryness of eye to shock. "With the wisdom of years" that have brought him awareness of the split between appearance and reality, Jed realises that the condoling ladies would have felt better themselves if his mother's emotions had been less determined by the truth about her husband and more by the conventions of bereavement. She should have played the game "according to the rules that everybody accepted" (PCT, p. 4). Idea triumphs over reality when the burying preacher concentrates on God's infinite mercy rather than on the individual life now ended, but later in the novel reality takes its revenge when the dying Agnes bravely rejects her God (PCT, p. 109) and again when her father, overcome by the fact of her death, cannot pray (PCT, p. 113). The magic of the Latin language promises an ideal world "that was real and different," a "mystic peephole . . . on a bright reality beyond" (PCT, pp. 26, 28), but Dauphine's expensive bohemianism and Dr Stahlmann's culture are casualties of the war in which Jed decides to participate because he would "rather be a boulder than a rabbit" (PCT, p. 77).

Dr Stahlmann's ideal paradigm of historical cause and effect does not work for Jed in the real world. "The boulder," he discovers, "has no concern whatsoever with the principles of geology or the law of gravity" (PCT, p. 85), that is, with its own nature and limitations. Preoccupied with his, Jed is both part of the landslide of twentieth-century history--from the legacy of the South's lost cause and the horror of modern war to the exaltation of the intellect and the worship of sex--and a rabbit, determined by that history, looking for a place to jump to. The idea of war is the German lieutenant's belief in the Geneva Convention; the facts of war are Gianluigi's mutilated cheek and hand and a bullet in the back of the head. The ideal of love is Agnes's "tender striving, in fear and yearning, to break out into the light and air to bloom" (PCT, p. 87), or the mirrored image of Jed and Maria McInnis dressed for a Christmas party (PCT, p. 177), or Dauphine as "an allegorical figure of Flesh Yearning for the Beyond of Flesh" (PCT, p. 337). Reality is the "devouring negativity" Jed and Rozelle find in orgasms which are, at best, "like the 'black hole' of the physicists" (PCT, p. 220), and at worst "necrophilic" (PCT, p. 313).

The pathos of imperfect reality carries Jed into his relation with Mrs Jones-Talbot. As he moves towards the stairs that lead to her bedroom he thinks that "nothing--mysteriously nothing--would have happened if I had not seen that smudge of dirt on the tan left ankle that thrust so firmly down into the beat-up old sneaker" (PCT, p. 280). A similar imperfection had converted his "passionless," "blank enactment" of sex with Rozelle into the frantic "clutch, struggle and spasm" of their stolen afternoons out of time: "The

skin of the heel must have had some small, dry scaliness, and it was that imperfection that, when the heel made, in its pressure, the slightest rubbing, demanding movement against my flesh, brought actuality, in that instant, to focus" (PCT, p. 198). The smudge on Mrs Jones-Talbot's ankle connects Jed with her resolution of past and present, the idea of Sergio and the fact of the excellent Mr McInnis. Rozelle's heel tips him into the actuality of sex out of which he forms his ideal "vacuum of time" until her repeated departures from him make the real world to which she returns something he can no longer ignore. He runs from timelessness into time itself, "for when I escaped Nashville, it was an escape into time, into its routines and nags, which make life possible after all" (PCT, p. 317). But life in an ever-extending present is inevitably futile and unfulfilling, as Warren demonstrates in the lives of Sue Murdock, Isaac Sumpter and Cy Grinder. Completeness is possible only by a marriage of the timeless ideal and temporal reality. If Jed is to have a self and a future he must look to the past for his "Truth", touch base again like Antaeus, and stand, like the poet, "in that cold blaze of Platonic light" (SP, p. 255).

Jed's redemptive journey into the past has three main stops: Italy, Chicago and Dugton. In Italy he discovers that no viable idealism has developed out of the old partisan associations. His comrades of the war have all become cynical materialists except for Gianluigi, locked in his pure, self-excoriating fantasy. There is nothing here for Jed to live by. Rozelle's assurance that "You are real and not a charade" may be her truth but it is not yet his. Her account of life with the ex-swami from Jackson, Mississippi--an example of Dr Stahlmann's "perfect existentialist man" (PCT, p. 76)--

suggests an exotic but genuine relationship in which two people face the past so honestly together that they can still belong to the South, both savouring and transcending its clichés. En route for his South, Jed finds in Chicago not the imperium intellectūs and the Castle of Otranto but the human bond that results from his attempt to rescue the old Italian lady. In a brilliant passage Warren deprives Jed of moral self-satisfaction in his act through having him respond to the beauty of the young mugger who moves "like Ephraim, like a hawk in sunset flight" (PCT, p. 387). The point here is that Jed responds positively and spontaneously both to the old lady's predicament and to the boy's beauty of movement. His feelings are not curbed by the moral system represented by the police. He does the right thing in terms of this system, but his heart expands beyond it. He finds himself, after all, bound to an Italian, and, as the old woman's figlio, ironically enacts the rôle of tesoro del cuore more immediately than he had ever done for the mother who swore she would break his neck if he ever returned to Dugton but, with maternal inconsistency, always kept his bed made up.

Dugton closes the gap between the ideal and the real. "Living with a woman like yore ma," Perk tells Jed, "is like you was living in a--a dream--and time ain't gone by, the way she could make you feel that everything kept on being the truth" (PCT, p. 394). The truth of Mr and Mrs Perk Simms has not been half-empty whiskey bottles and smeared lipstick, as the young Jed had surmised when he ran from the house, but the dream of love made real in daily living. A marriage, we may assume, like that of Willie and Adelle Proudfit in Night Rider, or the Highbridges in Flood, and like the marriage that, with certain unimportant social differences, might

have joined Agnes Andresen or Rozelle Hardcastle or Dauphine Phillips, née Finkel, to Jed Tewksbury. The husband and wife of Dugton have succeeded where all Jed's arts have failed. He has lost his citizenship of the imperium intellectūs and his simplicitas is no longer sancta; but he does know the blessedness of finding the key to that terra which consists of "the things that made you what you are and that must be lived by you because you are you" (PCT, p. 232). Jed's terra begins with the scene under the chinaberry tree and the weeping child with whom, at the beginning of the novel, he feels he has "no connection" (PCT, p. 8). Connection is made when Jed, disposed to weep again, eventually understands his father--and the symbolism of the fifty-cent sabre--better than his mother did, although her recollections of Buck in letters and her wish to be buried by him suggest that she felt more than she allowed herself--or was able--to express. Like Cy Grinder's self-mortifications, Old Buck's rampaging sexuality and blazing drunks were negative expressions of the dream he was born too late to make real:

If he had been born in 1840, he would have been just ripe for sergeant in a troop of Alabama cavalry. You could see him; high in stirrups, black mustaches parted to expose white teeth and emit the great yell, the sabre, light as a toy in his big hand, flashing like flame. Buck leading the charge, Buck breveted rank by rank, Buck the darling of his tattered wolfish crew, Buck in some last action under Forrest--say, in the last breakthrough into Tennessee--meeting lead as the sabre flashes and the yell fades from his throat.

Poor Buck, I thought.

Then I said out loud: "Poor Buck."

(PCT, p. 400)

Jed's pity is an acknowledgement of his kinship with the father who also failed to fulfil himself in terms of the idea. Instead of

weeping for the contempt of the world, he experiences compassion for the father who begat him and in doing so finds the "human necessity" that eludes Brad Tolliver, "the connection between what I was and what I am" (F, p. 439). Dugton is, after all, his place to come to: it is there that he finds the unacademic "country of the heart" (F, p. 440) from which, now back in Chicago, he sends his humble, honest and dignified letter to Dauphine and looks out towards the possibility of a future with her and their son.

II

To read Warren entire is to become aware, as may be with any writer, of an oeuvre with its structure of consiliences and reverberations. It is also to experience, in the curving of one man's mind and art, literature as process rather than product. Reading Warren one has the sense, as Bernard Bergonzi remarks of the later poetry, "of being given successive insights into the unfolding of a poet's mind rather than of being shown a series of icons."¹³ A Place to Come To is not as impressive as All the King's Men; it lacks the endlessly fascinating central figure provided in Willie Stark, as well as the uniquely powerful blending of moral values with realistic characterisation achieved in the earlier novel. Jed Tewksbury is, however, Warren's most immediate and appealing narrative voice after Jack Burden and his story presents the familiar "basic themes" more richly mixed and more panoramically displayed than in any of the other novels. A Place to Come To is a major event in the unfolding

¹³ Bernard Bergonzi, "Nature, Mostly American," Southern Review, 6 (Winter, 1970), 209.

of the most substantial and rewarding literary mind at work in America today.

In Jed's last conversation with Rozelle he tells her: "I have never had the slightest notion of what happiness is . . . what I had thought of all my life as happiness was only excitement" (PCT, p. 361). Jed's story is, certainly, full of excitement and this points to the difficulties a Warren novel faces when it lands on the reviewer's desk. Most of the novelists currently in fashion with the intellectual establishment appear to be of E.M. Forster's party. One can imagine Barth, Bellow, Cheever, Hawkes, Heller, Roth or Updike repining, more or less in chorus, "Yes--oh dear yes--the novel tells a story."¹⁴ This is an aspect of the novel that Warren accepts and enjoys. The reviewer, however, is not prepared for this: a novel of intellectual pretension should offer not story but myth, or an extreme quality of language that draws attention to itself, or deep anxieties about being a novel at all, or an intricate symbolic order just this side of opacity, or, at least, the special refinements of Jewish sensibility. Warren's novels--as well as poems like "The Ballad of Billie Potts," Brother to Dragons and Audubon--are concerned with myth, with language, with the imagination and with the problems of the modern world. They also, blatantly and without excuses, tell stories. There are even, in the novels which employ exempla, stories within stories. The reason for this atavism seems to be that "even in the age of the Uncertainty Principle and culture fracture, Warren has not lost his sense of life as a sustained drama."¹⁵ The foreground of the sustained drama presented in

¹⁴ E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London: Edward Arnold, 1949), p. 27.

¹⁵ R.Z. Sheppard, "Sacred and Profane Grit," Time, 14 March 1977, p. 58.

a Warren novel typically offers excitements--regional, political, sexual, homicidal--which the facile eye may associate with the bids for best-sellerdom in writings by the later John O'Hara, James Jones, Herman Wouk, or Irwin Shaw, thereby missing the profounder activities that occur beneath the surface glitter. "What is love?" the poet asks in Audubon, and answers, "One name for it is knowledge" (SP, p. 99). Warren does not make Jed's mistake: his books are about human happiness and how it may be achieved by discovering love through knowledge.

Long before the American Adam found himself beyond the ruined garden with his lost innocence the Jew had become accustomed to the ways of the travelling ghetto. "Nobody lived in Eden any more," says Bernard Malamud's Fixer, Yakov Bok. He reflects:

Once you leave [the shtetl] you're out in the open; it rains and it snows. It snows history, which means what happens to somebody starts in a web of events outside the personal. It starts of course before he gets there. We're all in history, that's sure, but some are more than others, Jews more than some. If it snows not everybody is out in it getting wet. ¹⁶

Many of us today are likely to feel wet with the snow of history--as Sandor Himmelstein says in Bellow's Herzog, "We're on the same identical network" as the Jew.¹⁷ We may be tempted to seek refuge from the press of the world in Dostoevsky's underground, there to wrestle with the grammatical fiction of "I", the "me miserable" of modern culture, and to see, beyond the semantic phantom of our selfhood, the extent of our faithlessness. We may yet go on in the

¹⁶ Bernard Malamud, The Fixer (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967) p. 281.

¹⁷ Bellow, Herzog, p. 84.

silence, like Samuel Beckett's *Unnamable*, but the prospects are bleak. With greater resilience we may light out for "the territory" with Joseph Heller's *Yossarian*; or if we feel ourselves to be candidates for John Updike's dubious sainthood we may run, ah, run with his *Rabbit*. But if burial or flight seem either insufficient or too desperate remedies, we may look to a writer like Warren. His Jasper Harrick knows the underground attractions, his Jack Burden, Jeremiah Beaumont and Angelo Passetto report on the effects of opting out; Jed Tewksbury can tell us what life is like as a rabbit and the fierce, unforgiving Dr Echegaray will advise us that, however wet we may get, our obligation "is to enter history, not to flinch from history" (F, p. 147).

Pondering the unity of Warren's work, Cleanth Brooks says:

The poetry, the fiction, and even the critical essays of Robert Penn Warren form a highly unified and consistent body of work; But it would be impossible to reduce it, without distorting simplifications, to some thesis about human life. The work is not tailored to fit a thesis. In the best sense it is inductive: it explores the human situation and tests against the fullness of human experience our various abstract statements about it.¹⁸

Warren's strength, the authority of his statements about the world, derives from the belief he shares with Kierkegaard that "abstract thought cannot grasp the meaning of existence and that feeling--passion as he [Kierkegaard] termed it--provides the knowledge that is the key of existence and action."¹⁹ In a recent poem we are told to "learn to live in the world" by thrilling to the "electric

¹⁸ Cleanth Brooks, The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot and Warren (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 98.

¹⁹ Robert Penn Warren, Democracy and Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 48.

tang of joy--or pain" (SP, p. 6). In Democracy and Poetry Warren defines poetry as an affirmation of man's ability to come to terms with himself: "What poetry most significantly celebrates is the capacity of man to face the deep, dark inwardness of his nature and his fate."²⁰ It is man's mind, his intellect and his imagination, which gives him this capacity for it is man's mind that enables him to be "the form-making animal par excellence. By making forms he understands the world, grasps the world, imposes himself upon the world."²¹ Yet in his creation of forms, his imposition of himself on the world, man must never forget that reality has its own independent existence. As the boy in "Court-Martial" discovers when his dream crumbles, "The world is real. It is there" (SP, p. 232).

While he believes in feeling as the source of knowledge, Warren is alert to the distorting tendencies of sexual passion. Sex is associated with the corrupting isolationism of Percy Munn and Lucille Christian's unfulfilling relationship and with the evasion of identity implicit in Jeremiah Beaumont and Rachel Jordan's "divine frenzy and sweet blackness" (WEAT, p. 414). Jed Tewksbury uses Rozelle sexually to achieve abolition of the self (PCT, p. 209). This is not to advance the claims of abstract or spiritual love at the expense of the reality of sex, but to reject the split between mind and body which is as much a legacy of Freud as of Puritanism. There is no reason to suppose that Mr and Mrs Jack Burden will enjoy a marriage only of true minds or that Mr and Mrs Yasha Jones will, together, perpetuate the celibacy they

²⁰ Warren, Democracy and Poetry, p. 31

²¹ Warren, Democracy and Poetry, p. 72.

have known during their periods of isolation. Leroy and Corinne Lancaster's son is an emblem of grace. Warren's message is well paraphrased in Susan Sontag's account of Norman O. Brown's critique of Freudian dualism:

We are not body versus mind . . . this is to deny death, and therefore to deny life. And self-consciousness, divorced from the experiences of the body, is also equated with the life-denying denial of death . . . What is wanted . . . is not Apollonian (or sublimation) consciousness, but Dionysian (or body) consciousness.²²

If Warren's work "is not tailored to fit a thesis," it does, Brooks concedes, develop "characteristic themes." Warren is "constantly concerned with the meaning of the past and the need for one to accept the past if he is to live meaningfully in the present."²³ This theme is succinctly expressed in the rhetorical question that begins the fifth section of "Rattlesnake Country": "What was is is now was. But / Is was but a word for wisdom, its price?" (SP, p. 49). This sets Warren in contrast to Wallace Stevens who, while he would concur with much in the idea of imagination propounded in the three fine poems discussed in Chapter Seven--"Time as Hypnosis," "Composition in Gold and Red-Gold," and "A Problem in Spatial Composition"--believed that the "integrations" of the past were of no use in the present. In Stevens's view, "the poet must consign the past to oblivion to live in the only authentic time."²⁴ Warren's work in all genres presents images of the self in its struggle for fulfillment. While the historical background to this struggle changes

²² Sontag, Against Interpretation, pp. 260-61.

²³ Brooks, The Hidden God, p. 98.

²⁴ J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth Century Writers (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 265.

from work to work, the issues involved are eternal. There is no such thing as oblivion. The setting of Brother to Dragons is "No place" and "Any time," which, Warren says in the prefatory note, "is but a whimsical way of saying that the issue that the characters here discuss is, in my view at least, a human constant" (BTD, p. xiii). Warren sees the self as implicated in the particular details of history, but only as a consequence of its bid for realisation. Man's history itself becomes, as Richard Gray puts it, "a product of the continuing interchange between the human consciousness and his circumstances, past and present."²⁵ The value of Agrarianism was that on the basis of a questionable realism it managed to oppose the rationalist abstractions of liberal social idealism, constantly referring to the concrete fact of individual human experience including the fact of apprehended mystery. In Warren's vision everything rests on the experience of the self and his scepticism towards abstractions, inhumanly absolute standards, rests not upon metaphysical speculation but upon our experience of imperfection, our guilt, the pull nature exerts on us, as well as our felt need to idealise our lives. It is our experience so defined that compels us to identify with the "bloody and sentimental maniac," Lilburn Lewis and with the determinedly visionary Thomas Jefferson.

This emphasis on the self does not mean that Warren is indifferent to social values: "'Authenticity' is merely one of the two poles of action, and the other pole is a sense of objective standards, just as the individual is one pole of the existence of the self, and the

²⁵ Richard Gray, "The American Novelist and American History: A Revaluation of All the King's Men," Journal of American Studies 6 (Dec., 1972), 306.

other, society, or more specifically, community."²⁶ The end of Jeremiah Beaumont's story shows that selfhood involves participation in community; Jack Burden and Anne Stanton must leave the house at Burden's Landing to enter "the convulsion of the world" (AKM, p. 464). It is incumbent upon us to sympathise intelligently with a mad young aristocrat on an Italian beach, to feel the agony and emulate the fortitude of a condemned man dying of cancer, because their flesh "suffers for you and for me" (SP, p. 258). Although the individual self is the first consideration for Warren, his prospectus for self-realisation in "Knowledge and the Image of Man" advocates separateness only as a necessary prelude to fulfilment in the world of relations. Self-knowledge is a pre-requisite to moral action, without which such knowledge is valueless. The connection Warren finds between the self and community is illustrated by his short but important book on Southern racial problems, Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South. By the time he made this study, Warren had long departed from his early Agrarian acceptance of the South's bi-racial system and had come unequivocally to favour desegregation. The fundamental challenge for white Southerners is not "to learn to live with the Negro," but "to learn to live with ourselves." More profound than the division among men in society is the split within the individual man. The real problem in the South is that of achieving "moral identity," of living with oneself: "I don't think you can live with yourself when you are humiliating the man next to you." (Segregation, p. 83).

²⁶ Warren, Democracy and Poetry, pp. 46-47.

Warren's effectiveness as a poet and a novelist and as a commentator on socio-historical matters derives from his ability to make us sense directly both our inner selves and our selves in a historical context. In order to effect his shocks of recognition he often resorts to melodrama, a reflection, perhaps, of his belief that we have been taught to evade the inner drama too readily and that we do so, like Lucy Jefferson Lewis and Laetitia Lewis, only at the risk of self-destruction. Melodrama becomes the composite image for an inner life which is typically hectic but all too often suppressed. In World Enough and Time, Band of Angels, Brother to Dragons and Audubon the melodrama was there for Warren in the specific historical materials out of which he sought to make his image of man. The melodrama of Night Rider and All the King's Men and the implicit melodrama of the central situation of The Cave were more immediate. Recalling the Louisiana of 1934 and 1935, Warren says:

Melodrama was the breath of life. There had been melodrama in the life I had known in Tennessee, but with a difference: in Tennessee the melodrama seemed to be different from the stuff of life, something superimposed upon life, but in Louisiana people lived melodrama--seemed to live, in fact, for it, for the strange combination of philosophy, humour, and violence. ²⁷

When he says that Tennessean melodrama seemed "something imposed" on life, Warren does not mean imposed by the artist but, somehow, by the people of the region. Melodrama is a reality in both Louisiana and Tennessee, and it is a reality in his books, except when the disproportions customarily associated with melodrama in art are revealed by the failure of characters like Amantha Starr and Adam Rosenzweig to develop in the measure of what happens to them.

²⁷ Warren, All the King's Men (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974), p. xiii.

Shortly after his attempted suicide in May, 1924 Warren wrote from his home in Guthrie to Donald Davidson, requesting a paper of Davidson's on Conrad: "I am trying to do Mr Ransom a term paper on Conrad and I am in sad need of reference books for facts and criticism; have you any such?"²⁸ This marks the beginning of a life-long involvement with Conrad whose vision of man's need to "surrender to the incorrigible and ironical necessity of the idea" (SE, p. 45) helped to sustain Warren in his crisis and led him to develop a similar, though less austere, interpretation of the human condition. Conrad's view of man consorts well with more local influences. Warren is thoroughly in the American grain of Hawthorne, Melville and, despite his aestheticism, James.²⁹ Like them he recognises the existence of sin, shows the conflict between good and evil in a world of ambiguity and paradox, and dramatises the necessity of suffering in the purification of the self by the acquisition of knowledge. Warren's present is as involved in the past as the blood of Holgrave, the man of today in The House of the Seven Gables, is involved in that of the Maules. Warren's teachers and intellectuals from Professors Millen and Dalrymple to Slim Sarrett, Isaac Sumpter and Jed Tewksbury, while not uniformly unpardonable, commit the sin of Ethan Brand, forgetting, as Conrad did not, that the idea must work in the world, not collide with it. Warren's idealists are in varying degrees Ahabian in their wilful superimposition of a limiting, subjectively conceived idea on the world's body, and the conclusions of Wilderness, Flood, and A Place to Come To prompt us to call their heroes Ishmael.

²⁸ Letter dated 30 Aug. 1924. DDC, File 1.

²⁹ See Appendix, pp. 340-42 for further discussions of Warren in relation to the American tradition.

A Southerner before he was an American, Warren comes from a region which was and is the most conservative part of America. He comes from a traditional society with a religious sub-structure, a region in which there is much active and still more residual Christianity. His view of the nature of history accords with the Christian position which finds man's historical experience both meaningful and mysterious, and regards human freedom as the source of evil as well as good. Like Wolfe and Faulkner, Warren "has created a kind of fiction out of the materials of his region and its past which can and does counterpoise the despairing view of man that naturalism and realism have taken in our time."³⁰ Neither Warren's philosophy nor his voice has ever lost its Southern accent. His poetry can charge off the page like Whitman's or Pound's, and it can sweeten the line with a liturgical cadence like Eliot's. Closer to home, there are ironies and phrasings worthy of the Ransom of "Dead Boy" or "Judith of Bethulia" and vatic moments that recall the Tate of "Ode to the Confederate Dead." But the "liquid drive," as Frank Owsley called it, of Warren's most fluent expression both in verse and prose owes most to the rhythms of the Southern raconteur who, sitting on the front porch, will tell you either nothing at all over the bourbon and water, or will tell you everything in one measured, passionately monotonous and convoluted sentence. This, spiked with his learning, flavoured by his high intelligence and shaped by his craft, is the basis of style in Warren's work.

With John Brown, the Making of a Martyr Warren demonstrated the readiness to "enter history, not to flinch from history" that has typified his career. Jeremiah Beaumont is his most complete fictional metaphor for the South, with his tragically oversimplifying

³⁰ C. Hugh Holman, The Roots of Southern Writing (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1972), p. 95.

dream and his preoccupation with his own identity. In his 1961 meditations on the centennial, The Legacy of the Civil War, Warren dismantles both the Southern and Northern dreams to expose their over-simplifications. The War gave the North its Treasury of Virtue, the South its Great Alibi. The Treasury of Virtue affords the North redemption of all sins and by the Great Alibi the South explains everything:

By a simple reference to the "War," any Southern female could, not too long ago, put on the glass slipper and be whisked away to the ball. Any goose could dream herself (or himself) a swan--surrounded, of course, by a good many geese for contrast and devoted hand-service. Even now, any common lyncher becomes a defender of the Southern tradition, and any rabble-rouser the gallant leader of a thin gray line of heroes, his hat on sabre-point to provide reference by which to hold formation in the charge. By the Great Alibi pellagra, hookworm, and illiteracy are all explained, or explained away, and mortgages are converted into badges of distinction. Laziness becomes the aesthetic sense, blood-lust rising from a matrix of boredom and resentful misery becomes a high sense of honour, and ignorance becomes divine revelation. By the Great Alibi the Southerner makes his Big Medicine.

(Legacy, pp. 54-55)

The Great Alibi and the Treasury of Virtue are ways of forgetting that history is history. A moral realist, however, cannot forget history or that, within history, structures change. History brought change to the South in the Depression, the Second World War, the second period of Reconstruction, and in Who Speaks for the Negro? Warren is going home again to see what has become of the structure. The book is yet another investigation into the tangle of idea and world, stereotype thinking and intransigently messy reality.

The structure that remains in the South still includes the

split white Southerner whose striking out at change is an act of aggression toward that part of himself which "has sold out, which is the household traitor, which lusts after the gauds and gewgaws of high-powered Yankeeedom" (WSN, p. 426). But if this is a fact of the situation it is one to be acknowledged and put to use: "the recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom" (BTD, p. 214). Following Howard Zinn in his excellent book on The Southern Mystique,³¹ Warren observes: "A man may say that he is a hard-core segregationist. But how hard is that core? Is it as hard as his love for, or need of money? As his desire to have his children educated? As his simple inclination to stay out of jail? The only real hard-core segregationist is one whose feelings about Negroes take precedence over all other feelings mobilised in a given situation" (WSN, p. 409). Negro leadership-- and one would add white leadership too--is "committed to playing a most complicated tune on the strings of white desires, and convictions." (WSN, p. 409). The tune must be complicated if the desired moral order is to be established in the actual with maximum success and minimum pain. Yet "it would be realism to think that pain would be a reasonable price to pay for what we all, selfishly, might get out of it" (WSN, p. 444). It is still, no doubt, the proper rôle of the Southern intellectual to follow Warren's example and guide his countrymen in the way of that realism. It is Warren's profound and realistic sense of the obligation upon us to make our dreams work in a world of prose and imperfection that gives his works their fundamental distinction, making them ever more rewardingly a place to come to. He is a writer by whom our biographies may be immeasurably enriched.

³¹ Howard Zinn, The Southern Mystique (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964).

Appendix

Robert Penn Warren: An Interview

The conversation which provided the basis of the following text was recorded by the writer on 11 September, 1969 at Mr Warren's home in Fairfield, Connecticut. Extracts from the tapes were printed in the discontinued magazine, Scottish International, 9 (February, 1970), 3-9. Between 1969 and 1974 the text of the recorded interview was expanded in the course of correspondence between Mr Warren and the writer, and the final text appeared with Mr Warren's approval in Journal of American Studies, 8 (August, 1974), 229-45. The complete text is given here with added notes.

MW I'd like to begin with a question about the Fugitive group. Would you say that there was any special critical emphasis in these early Fugitive discussions of poetry? You have said before that there's a fallacy in assuming there was a systematic programme behind the Fugitive group.

RFW That would certainly be a fallacy. I think the best way for me to talk about it would be by referring to how the group began. It began some years before my time as a group of young college instructors and men in the City of Nashville with no connection with the University, who found a community of interest in discussing philosophy. They met at each other's houses and talked philosophy till a late hour. Bit by bit, some of the people involved began to write poetry and show their poetry to each other. By the time I came along, writing poetry or discussing it was the main interest. The group was very small, ten or

twelve or thirteen people¹ with no formal organisation, simply a matter of friendship. And then they began to publish a little magazine called The Fugitive.²

MW There was a certain resistance to that magazine, wasn't there, by the authorities at Vanderbilt University?

RPW Well, certainly, the head of the English Department³ was embarrassed by it, and begged his instructors not to do it.

MW Why should that have been embarrassing to him, do you think? Because it published a new kind of poetry?

RPW I think so. But, after all, some business men in town put up the money for it. A comic situation. Maxwell House coffee gave the prize--which, I think, Hart Crane won.⁴ That was the first year.

¹ According to Louise Cowan the Fugitives "were a quite tangible body of sixteen poets who, having no particular programme, met from 1915 to 1928 for the purpose of reading and discussing their own work." See Louise Cowan, The Fugitive Group, A Literary History (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), p. xvi. The sixteen were John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Merrill Moore, Laura Riding (Gottschalk), Jesse Wills, Alec B. Stevenson, Walter Clyde Curry, Stanley Johnson, Sidney Miron Hirsch, James Frank, William Yandell Elliott, William Frierson, Ridley Wills and Alfred Starr. Laura Riding, "in her connection with the magazine . . . functioned only as a contributor, not as a real member" (Cowan, p. 184). Andrew Lytle was a Fugitive de facto, though not by formal election. Warren joined the group in 1923.

² The first issue of The Fugitive was published in Nashville, Tennessee in April, 1922, the last in December, 1925.

³ Dr Edwin Mims, Chairman of Vanderbilt University English Dept. 1912-1942.

⁴ The prize Warren refers to was donated to the magazine in its second year by the Associated Retailers of Nashville. Only one of the three judges gave first place to Hart Crane's poem, "Stark Major," the other two placing it twelfth. The one-hundred-dollar prize was divided equally between Rose Henderson and Joseph Auslander. See The Fugitive, 2 (Dec., 1923), 162 and Cowan, pp. 138-39.

NW There is a notion that the Fugitives were a group of people who went in for close reading of one another's poems and whose critical standards were what we would call objectivist. This I take to be a fallacy.

RFW There was no theorising that I can think of around that point. If you are going to criticise individual poems you have to talk about the actual words on the page, this line or that line, this word or that word, but as I remember the discussions, they were very far ranging and all sorts of implications might come in. It was hit or miss. There were many temperaments here, and certainly some of the people were very much concerned with history in the relation of literature to the historical materials, or how one stage of history emphasises one kind of poetry. For instance, some of the people in the group were very deep in balladry which would be anything but biased toward formalism. Then there were people like Ransom who was trained in classical philosophy and often led the discussion of a poem off into the world of general aesthetics. Many lines of approach came together in particular applications, in discussing particular poems. But there was no general theorising that I can remember.

The next phase of the group's interest--several years later--moved over to the matter of society and history. So this would, in a way, refute the notion of this being a little group of formalists working out a theory of pure, limited, objectivist poetry: the group became more and more oriented--almost paradoxically--toward history (American history) and at the same time toward aesthetic theorising.

MW Your own orientation was, for a time, distinctly historical wasn't it, with John Brown, the Making of a Martyr as your first major publication?

RPW Yes it was. But this was, in a way, a question of homesickness, I guess. As long as I was living in Tennessee and Kentucky and knew a great deal about various kinds of life there from the way Negro field hands talked or mountaineers talked, what they did and what they ate, on up to the world of Nashville, Tennessee, I had no romantic notions about it. I was just naturally steeped in it and I knew that world. I also had read a good deal of Southern history and was partly raised by a grandfather who was a great reader of history and talked it all the time. He was a Confederate Veteran, a captain of cavalry with Forrest and full of that and things like Napoleon and His Marshals,⁵ and military history generally. I had a deep soaking in that as a little boy. But this didn't seem to apply to the other half of my life, in which my whole passion was John Donne, John Ford, Webster's plays, Baudelaire. Then, as soon as I left that world of Tennessee and went to California, and then to Yale and Oxford, I began to rethink the meaning, as it were, of the world I had actually been living in without considering it.

MW And this led to your first book, John Brown, the Making of a Martyr?

RPW That's right.

MW To an outsider the book also looks like part of a campaign: it seems to fit in with the whole motivation behind I'll Take My Stand. Quite apart from a simple matter of interest in this piece of history,

⁵ Archibald Gordon MacDonnell, Napoleon and His Marshals (London: Macmillan, 1934).

is it at all reasonable to see the book as an Agrarian's attempt to demythologise a northern martyr?

RPW I think that's a fair account of it, but it wasn't a conscious motive. It preceded my connection with the whole Agrarian business. As for the immediate provocation, a publisher proposed a contract to me for it, and I grabbed it. I began the book when I was a graduate student at Yale in '27-'28 and I finished it at Oxford. It overlapped with but began before I had much share in the Agrarian conversations.

MW You were at Oxford when I'll Take My Stand came out. So you weren't really in on the Agrarian conversations, were you?

RPW No, only in passing through on a visit to Nashville.

MW So the interest in John Brown was something you developed independently?

RPW That's right. But it was tied in this way. Other friends of mine, by this time, were ferociously restudying American history. I wasn't alone in this: Allen Tate was doing it, you see--

MW And Frank Owsley?⁶

RPW Frank Owsley was a professional American historian so he was doing it. In fact I didn't know Frank at that time except most casually. But this was happening to a number of people. It was part of a turning back, a turning from their interest in poetry to try to see the setting of the kind of poetry that interested them. The notion

⁶ Professor of History at Vanderbilt University, 1920-1949.

of Ireland was deep in this too, though it was not specified often--the notion of a somewhat backward society in an outlying place with a different tradition and a rich folk-life, facing the big modern machine. This notion was in the background, talked about not as a model but as a parallel somehow. There were three factors in this: on the one hand there was the new poetry--Pound and Eliot--which was appreciated very early there and read in Nashville when it was not read in New York, and then Yeats and the Irish. Young Tennesseans who had been off in the First World War, or had studied at Oxford or in Paris, seized on this parallel.

MW So that poetry was very intimately associated with the concept of a small outlying nation with its own history and its own problems?

RPW The folk and the international were the two elements that entered into it.

MW Was Yeats rather specially the poet who embodied all that these people in Nashville were thinking about, i.e. an international poetry but with a national root?

RPW The folk element for some of the Fugitives was very important and in that case, yes, Yeats would have had a special importance; but also Hardy, for instance. Ransom was mad for Hardy. So was I as a boy, and still am.

MW Could one explain that in terms of Hardy's anti-establishment, anti-religious stance, his notion of fate, his liberation from the whole nineteenth-century set?

RPW Well, I think that may be true, though I'd never thought of it.

I would single out the notion of fate: a fatalism was deeply ingrained in the Southern mind. Things could not be changed--things lay beyond any individual effort to change them. A sense of entrapment. I think you can probably make a case that Hardy touched this nerve. Another thing was Hardy's use of folk materials, his portraits of little ironies of folk life. This touched some of those people very deeply. I'm sure they touched Ransom.

MW There is a Hardy-esque quality about Ransom's poetry, isn't there?

RPW Indeed there is. It's very dramatic in the way Hardy's poetry is dramatic.

MW I'm thinking of the deceptive way in which a Hardy poem--"In the Moonlight", for example--can appear very slight, and yet contain T.N.T. Ransom is very like that, I think.

RPW He's very like that and I think this is not so much a matter of modelling yourself on that, because Ransom's classical training is, I'm sure, as much behind his poetry as anything--perhaps more than any other single thing--but Hardy played right into this. His simplicities and the folk element played into it, plus this bias towards poetry as coming from the event in life rather than being a beautiful abstraction.

MW I'd like to turn now to your most famous book, All the King's Men. This is not only the most widely read and most highly regarded of your novels but also the story that has occupied you longest--from the original play in 1937 until the published version of the play in 1960; so it's something that you've been involved with for a very long time. Could you explain this at all?

RPW Let me make a slight comment on that spread of time, which I find almost embarrassing to think of--twenty-three years. The point is that a lot of the involvement with the later phases of it--the play aspect of it--came by a kind of accident. I was drawn back to it by a producer wanting to do it. With this, of course, there was my own dissatisfaction with the original version of the play--a verse play then--that preceded the novel by some eight years. The reason I never tried to produce the first version⁷ was that I never felt happy about it and in fact, the novel was written because I wasn't happy about that play. The original version of the play was a tight play about the dictator, the Huey Long figure, and the people around him. Now the theory of that play was that the dictator, the man of power, is powerful only because he fulfills the blanknesses and needs of people around him. His power is an index to the weaknesses of others. In other words his power lies in the defects of others rather than a thing existing in itself, and so he fulfills the needs of people around him. The idea that gradually developed in the course of writing the play was the contrast between the "hero" as a person and the "hero" as a reflex of history. In the original version, my politician was not named Stark, but Talos--the name of the "Iron Groom", the robot, the servant to the Knight of Justice, in Spenser's Faerie Queene.⁸ This was a sort of private joke, but it indicates the line of thought, and Talos does sound like a "Southern" name.

⁷ With some revision this version was later produced, thanks to the intervention of Eric Bentley, at the University of Minnesota, and at some twenty-five other little theaters in the country. The later prose version was first produced by Irwin Piscator, at the President Theater in New York, in 1948, with many later productions, including Frankfurt and Moscow (Note by Mr Warren).

⁸ The Faerie Queene, Book V.

But this notion did not work in this little tight play, and the choruses did not quite carry it. It was a tight personal story and I did not feel satisfied with the range of reference to the world outside, to society and to the history outside of it. And, as I say, behind that play and the book there was a sort of soaking in Machiavelli, a little Guicciardini and William James and just a lot of reading of history. Now, I don't mean to suggest that after a certain amount of reading I said to myself, "I think I'll write a play about all this." It just happened. And the biggest part of the "happening" was probably that I lived in Louisiana--that "banana republic," as I think Carleton Beals⁹ called it--at the time when Huey P. Long held it as his fief and when he was gunned down in the grand new sky-scraper Capitol which he had built to his greater glory.

But back to the original play: my dissatisfaction with it led a bit to the novel, to get some sense of the world around the man--the man as seen rather than the man as presented. The strong man should be seen through the weaknesses of others, or the needs of others rather than taken as an abstract power presented directly. That was, I suppose, the shift of interest that made the novel; but then afterwards, problems became more technical.

MW So that this is one explanation anyway of the long preoccupation. And a technical interest in getting it right as drama.

RPW Part of that, yes. And that process of being interested in the stage for a while, I'm sure, changed my poetry a great deal.

⁹ American writer on political and social conditions, especially those of Latin America.

MW Many of the themes and preoccupations, particularly in your fiction, seem characteristically American. Do you think there is any sense in seeing your work in terms of a tradition, a kind of American dialectic that runs, I think, from Hawthorne right down to the present time? To put it very crudely, you have first of all the Puritan dichotomies, then you have Transcendentalism, and for the Transcendentalists life becomes a Blakean affair: all life is holy. Emerson cancels evil out of the human algebra; Hawthorne brings it back; Melville says "No" in even greater thunder, and points out through Moby-Dick--perhaps the most eloquent of all American symbols--that truth is this doubleness of the whale. I would like to suggest that you are concerned with this kind of problem in All the King's Men, and elsewhere. Willie Stark himself is a mixed man: Jack calls him "the man of fact" and Adam Stanton "the man of idea", but virtue lies in wait for Willie just as virtue lies in wait in those lines in Brother to Dragons, "More dogged than Pinkerton, more scientific than the F.B.I."¹⁰ This seems to explain Willie's inability to stay remorseless: Willie as human simply cannot continue to be monovalent.

RPW No he can't: he says so himself at the end, "It could have been different".¹¹ This is his acknowledgement of that fact.

MW Now isn't this an acknowledgement of the truth of fusion, of the oneness of opposing categories of value and the way they inevitably cohabit? You can't split one off from the other. Ahab's great sin--his tragedy too--is that he tries to split the moral atom and

¹⁰ Brother to Dragons, p. 29.

¹¹ Shortly before he dies, Willie Stark says to Jack Burden, "It might have been all different, Jack" (AKM, p. 425).

blows himself up in the process. Now I think this notion of doubleness enters the American spiritual blood-stream. It's there in Faulkner too: Joe Christmas is really a kind of Moby-Dick. As Ahab forces the whale to become all evil, imposing the demonism he sees in the world on the essentially ambiguous hump of the whale, so the community of Jefferson forces Joe Christmas to become all Negro, all black, and thus forces him into the abyss. So they split the moral atom too. In All the King's Men Willie Stark realises--he feels it on the pulse and he feels it in the bullet--that he has to be a mixed man.

RPW I think what you're saying is perfectly true about the American system. Or not system, but the central tension in American literature, I think, is pretty well described by what you are saying. Not pretty well: it's extremely accurate, and beautifully put. When it comes down to me in this little footnote on that grand picture, I wouldn't say that anything as grand as that was in my mind. I can say that a certain kind of issue, both a moral and psychological issue that's implied by that was in my mind--an approach to it. I was not thinking of anything I was trying to do as "belonging to" anything, you see. By the way, when it comes down to Hawthorne and Emerson meeting on the woodpaths of Concord, I'm strictly for Hawthorne. I really have something that's almost a pathological flinch from Emersonianism, from Thoreauism, from these oversimplifications, as I think of them, of the grinding problems of life and of personality. So I'm all for the Hawthorne in the picture.

MW Your early book on John Brown certainly deals with a grinding problem of personality.

RPW I have puzzled a great deal about this--the man had some kind of constant obsessive interest for me. On the one hand he's so heroic, on the other hand he's so vile, pathologically vile. Some fifteen years ago, when Edmund Wilson was working on Patriotic Gore,¹² we'd meet at parties and he would say, "Red, let's go and sit in the corner and talk about the Civil War", and we always did. And the subject of Brown once or twice came up, and he once said, "But he's trivial, he's merely a homicidal maniac--forget him!" Now this is half of Brown. In a strange way the homicidal maniac lives in terms of grand gestures and heroic stances, and is a carrier of high values, but is a homicidal maniac! This is a strange situation; and the split of feeling around Brown makes the split of feeling in a thing like my character Stark almost trivial. Brown lives in the dramatic stance of his life, rather than in the psychological content of it; he lives in noble stances and noble utterances, and at the psychological and often the factual level of conduct was--it's incredible--brutal. Perfect self-deception--yet "noble". Now on this point, I suppose, the people I have chosen to write about--or rather who have chosen me to write about them--are trying to find out some way to make these things work together, come together: somehow they are trying to get out of this box. This would be true of a man like the hero of World Enough and Time, who must find a cause, an ideal cause in order to justify some of his most secret and destructive motives--no, that's not accurate--needs.

MW I think in At Heaven's Gate the most interesting character is Slim Sarrett. His ruthlessness--albeit a tormented ruthlessness--and

¹² Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore, Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (London: Deutsch, 1962).

his efforts, finally successful, to create himself, make him appear as a kind of criticism of Sartre's existentialist ideas about the nature of the self. Is this a possible influence, direct or indirect, or is it just coincidence?

RPW It's pure coincidence. I didn't know anything about Sartre at that time. Except a review of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury¹³--or some other odds and ends, maybe. As a matter of fact that character was almost a portrait of a person I knew, the closest portrait I've ever done in a piece of fiction; but I felt that he was in a way peripheral to what the book is really about. All the novels I've tried to write--published novels, anyway--are concerned, I discovered later, with some mirror thing--the mirror of the psychology of the people over against the society they are living in, so the story of the society is reflected in the personal stories, the moral and psychological stories of the individual characters, and the other way around too: society then enacts these private dramas. This book in its scheme--not in the inception of the scheme but as it developed--was much influenced by my long immersion in Dante, as I think may be obvious. There are the usurer and the homosexual--the crimes against nature: here is a society where nature is being violated one way or another, and all the characters are somehow denying nature. The relation of the father and son in the Jerry character and his father--Jerry is committing a crime against nature: he's impious.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Le Bruit et la Fureur," in Situations I (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), pp. 70-81. Originally published in La Nouvelle Revue Francaise, 52 (June, 1939), 1057-1061, and 53 (July, 1939), 147-51. English translation published in William Faulkner, Three Decades of Criticism, ed. Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 225-29.

MW He denies his father---and takes a phoney father.

RPW He takes a phoney father. He's not following the Dante scheme; it developed bit by bit--these various crimes against nature. But the usurer, the great banker, and Sarrett, the homosexual, are straight out of the Circle.¹⁴ But it wasn't conceived this way: it developed this way. If I didn't think of Dante for quite a long time, it could be back in my head, you see, because in those years I was reading him almost daily.

MW This question of the true and false father is also there in All the King's Men isn't it?

RPW I've been told, and I think it's true, that the true and the false father are in practically every story I've written. Now what that means, I do not know!

MW What is so interesting is that the alignment of the true father and the truth of the situation is very close.

RPW That's right. If I were asked (I haven't ever said this before, or even thought it, I guess) to relate that fact to what we were talking about before I should say, probably, this attempt to put the two halves of the world together, the halves being the fact and idea, or these various splits of this kind, the Emersonian and the Hawthornian, all these things we were talking about in Brown--the perfect father will do that, but the perfect father is only in heaven, of course. This story is about an attempt at finding the true model--

¹⁴ The Seventh Circle of the Inferno.

MW You mean the point where fact and idea coincide, the perfect fusion?

RPW Well, it's not in our world I guess. But we constantly want to have it in our world, and we only find it by finding a new father, I guess, beyond us, beyond this world.

MW Does this make our case hopeless do you think?

RPW No. It just makes it interesting, gives us something to talk about! But this question of finding the father, this perfect father, is, in one way or another, in the various stories.

MW I'd like to ask you a little about the process of redefinition that's gone on in your work. Part of the 1957 interview with Ralph Ellison¹⁵ puzzled me a little and I wonder if you could say something more about it. He asked you about the progression from the essay on the Negro in I'll Take My Stand to the stance of, say, Band of Angels and then, of course, to Segregation and Who Speaks for the Negro? Now, in your reply there, I think you suggest that you were writing the essay at the same time that you were writing your first serious piece of fiction. I felt that possibly you rather glossed over the question of what was happening to your own beliefs by talking about a new interest in a different form: not the form of the socio-political essay or analysis, but rather the form of fiction. Did you, fairly soon after that essay in I'll Take My Stand, begin to rethink the whole question of the position of the Negro?

¹⁵ Malcolm Cowley, Writers at Work, pp. 165-86.

RPW I didn't begin to "rethink" anything systematically. It was by accident. Put it this way: I wrote the essay on the Negro for I'll Take My Stand at the same time as I was writing a novelette--"Prime Leaf"--which was also about the South. The connection, let's say, is this: thousands of miles away in England, doing these two things--both are ways of looking back at your origins, your homeland, and all of that. They both had great emotional charges, as it were, more than I realised at the time, I'm sure. On the essay--this is part of that fatalism that was deeply engrained in the Southern mind. Nobody--except Negroes--saw anything except some system of what the sociologists then called super- and sub-ordination based on and modified by all sorts of legal guarantees of "separate but equal". This is what the Supreme Court saw. This is the way the world was. At the same time, many people were uncomfortable with it, many whites. Of course you can be damn certain a lot of Negroes were uncomfortable! But a lot of whites too. It's a question of trying to rationalise the inevitable, what seemed to be the inevitable structure of the world. Now, at the same time, in writing fiction for the first time, in this foreign country, about the world of my boyhood, the feelings then came into it, not in the essayistic frame, not in terms of a social apology, but in terms of, simply, response.

MW I don't quite follow.

RPW Not interpretative--the essay was a social apology, an analysis and an apology, but fiction involves, simply, your reseeing in your imagination a world, and this brings the problem of your immediate

response, your immediate feeling about what you are seeing, without justification, without intellectualisation.

MW Just what's to be seen there?

RPW Just what's there, and having to face it as there. Its thereness is all. Now immediately after this, within six months, I was back in the South, and the Depression was coming on. I was living in the country a great deal--not in town--and you'd see more acutely than ever, first from having been away from it for so long, second from having to think about it during the years of absence, and then seeing this starvation-poverty that was coming on for whites and blacks and also certain aspects of the brutality of the system in its psychological way, which I'd been too young when I'd lived there before, or too stupid, to be aware of. So there was this long drift for several years of looking at that world again and seeing two things, one the immediate kinds of degradation involved, personal, psychological and spiritual degradation, plus the poverty. At the same time the effect on the Southern white society became more and more obvious--the great cost, both money cost and spiritual cost. Also I made acquaintances who were aware of this. It was being talked about more. At the same time certain friends of mine, like Davidson, became more frozen in their opposition to change, and the issue became drawn for me. So I had to see it, bit by bit.

Five years later I couldn't possibly have written that essay because I had lived into the world now in a different perspective and a different age. Also, one other thing I'll say. The Depression

did a great deal to destroy the sense of historical fatalism, because you had to have action or die. There was a crisis there which demanded action. You could not accept history as finished, which is part of the Southern disease, and you had to reorder society, and this meant you had to reorder all sorts of relationships. The fact that you thought things could be reordered opened the whole question, psychologically. At the same time your acquaintance with the old, the Civil War generation, like my Grandfather--their attitude towards race had been very different from attitudes towards race in the 1900's in the South.

MW More paternalist?

RPW Well, they were more deeply aware of certain splits. My Grandfather was against slavery--at least he said that he had thought it was a bad system--but held some slaves.

MW Why would he hold them?

RPW Just like a socialist who is a banker now, you see, or hired by a business. It was the only structure of actual living. If you're going to farm you have to have labour. That was the only labour available.

MW So right in there, there was a split between fact and idea--in the Southern inheritance.

RPW Right there. In the whole question of the Southern story this split is deep, from Thomas Jefferson right on down--to take it at the grand level--to Robert E. Lee who was an emancipationist; and

Grant held the last slaves legally held in the United States, I think. There are no morals in this, it's just part of the comedy of our history; but segregationism was a very late development in the South, it only became legal quite late, and the old people had been against segregation because they didn't have that kind of racial antipathy. They might be the boss but they had no racial antipathy. It was a question of the structure.

MW The two books that seem to me to have been most adversely criticised are Wilderness and Band of Angels, leaving aside Flood, which I think has been generally misunderstood. It seems to me that there's a very considerable clue to the way your imagination quite naturally operates in the discussion of "Pure and Impure Poetry" in that early essay: this notion that an ideal or a purity has always to withstand the blast of irony. Perhaps what is lacking in Wilderness and Band of Angels is this Mercutio in the underbrush. There's something, somehow, too straight, too "pure" about them. I would like to suggest that one of the strengths of Flood, and something that has apparently been missed by the critics, is that in this novel the conversion of Lettice Poindexter is something we can accept precisely because it's earned, because throughout the whole novel Mercutio has been sniping from the underbrush. We accept this as more than mere sentimentality because of the book's continual scrutiny of every ideal posture that comes up. This kind of running scepticism is lacking in Wilderness and it's lacking in the melodrama of Band of Angels; but I think that Mercutio returns to the underbrush of your

fiction with real power in Flood. Now does this make any sense at all?

RPW I hope it does.

MW Does this notion seem to you to say anything about what happens?

RPW Well, I think it does. The problem of Wilderness involves a technical matter too. It started out to be a novelette, and began to exfoliate in terms not of the central character, but in terms of the objective world, so that the development of the central character did not keep pace with the development of the experience he went through, objectively considered. I became enraptured, as it were, with the world outside of him, the people outside of him, and he never developed to go along with this development of the story. You have the strange effect of a central hollowness with a rich context, with the central character as an observer that is a mere observer. He's involved intellectually, but only intellectually. The story is never fleshed out in enough depth so that the world of context is related to his experience in the right way. And this is partly scale: it started out to be a novelette, say twenty-five thousand words, and it winds up as a novel; but the character does not develop to fit the context.

MW Would you agree that this quality of irony--what I've said about ideal notions or ideal stances continually being undercut and evaluated by, say, the voice of a Jack Burden or by the counterpoint of an Ashby Wyndham narrative--is characteristic of the novels that are really strong?

RPW It's characteristic of many of my novels anyway, and it is not true of this book.

MW Do you think it's true of Band of Angels?

RPW Well, I think you're right about that. One thing there: the narrator is wrong. There's not enough richness and depth in the experience of the narrator--at least, it isn't brought out--and the same is true of the other book.

MW Would you say that in your writing life there have been phases in which prose or the imagination associated with prose has been dominant and other phases when poetry has been dominant? It seems to me, looking down the list, that after Band of Angels there is a poetic phase and then again after Flood a very strong poetic phase. Is this so: is it phased like that?

RPW It worked out this way as far as I can tell: poetry was my central interest for many years, up until the middle nineteen-forties. I read it all the time and worked at it all the time, and fiction was definitely a secondary interest. Of course, when you are in the middle of a novel it can't be secondary, it becomes your life for a year or so. But behind this, the novels I was writing, came the notion that somehow they might be poems: the first conception of them. All the King's Men started as a verse play, you see, and the other novels had very much the same background of feeling--came out of a sense that they might be poems if one wrote long poems like that. So the composition of novels didn't feel like a break between prose and poetry. Of course there are obviously great differences, but they are tied to the poetic interest or commitment, or whatever you should call it, in a very definite way.

Now something happened about '45. I got so I could not finish a short poem. I wrote, started many over that period of years. I never finished one--I lost the capacity for finishing a short poem. I'd write five lines, ten lines, twenty lines--it would die on me. I lost my sense of it. I was working in those years, for five or six years, on a long poem, Brother to Dragons, and that was absorbing, I suppose, all the juice. But anyway the short poems did not work out. Then, some little time after I had finished Brother to Dragons I felt a whole new sense of poetry. I felt freer than I had felt before. The narrative sense began to enter the short-poem--as a germ, that is. So in the summer of '54, when Eleanor and I and a then-baby daughter were living in the ruined fortress in Italy, there was suddenly just this new sense of release--so the short poems began to come in that year.

MW Of course a lot of the poems are about that place--

RFW --about that place, because the place and the events all tie together in this sense of a new way into poetry. Look, I could start it from the immediate thing freely, or the immediate thing might be something I was thinking about that happened twenty-five years before. This has been a whole different kind of feeling for writing poems.

MW You once made a rather Jamesian statement about getting the germ of a story in a flash. Would you be prepared to say anything about the germ of the new novel, Meet Me in the Green Glen?

RPW I don't know how I'd put it. The germ--I know exactly what it was: it was on a hunting trip with my brother, in Tennessee, some years ago. We went up a stream bed in an old army jeep. It was a wilderness, but had once been a prosperous valley. We saw the ruins of a nice house in there, and this totally abandoned valley, now a game reserve, a park, began to grow in my mind--this sense of a lost world in that valley. Then some other stories that I knew began to flow in and populate it with other echoes of episodes I had known.

MW Episodes in real life?

RPW Some, yes: and in just that way, you see, it came as the feel of a place.

MW Place is very important to you, isn't it?

RPW I think so, that's why I'm so tied to that world there--one reason. Let me say one thing on the question of start. Almost all, I guess all of the novels I've written and many of the poems get started years before they are written, many years before. In fact the Audubon book was started twenty years ago, and all the novels--Flood went back twenty odd years. Usually there's a long period of thinking the story over, staying with the story or staying with the poem. These things flow along and the actual finishing may come quite quite late after the idea, or after even the starting of the writing. It's a very slow process that way.

MW When you look at the current American novel--Bellow, Malamud, Barth, Pynchon--do you feel very much that these writers are of a different

generation? Do you feel that they're talking about a different world, concerned with different things, interested in different techniques? Do you feel apart from them?

RPW Well, one has to feel apart--I'm older--apart from them in that sense. But I feel very close in my interests: I feel very close imaginatively to Saul Bellow's work. He's a wonderful writer, a powerful imagination. And of course in one sense he's writing about a strange, Jewish world which I know only by report and through friends like Saul Bellow or through the work of people like him. But I think there's a strange kind of possibility of rapport: Jewish writing in America has a minority psychology to it, so does Southern writing. As my wife once said, "You're just like Jews, you Southerners", and I think there's some truth in that. This is reflected, I think, in the literature. There's a certain insideness of the outsider, and intensities of inside effects sometimes look queer to those who are not inside. Malamud I admire greatly, and Styron. I think Styron's last book, Nat Turner,¹⁶ is very powerful and deeply felt.

MW This caused a lot of argument about the authenticity of Negro feeling that Styron had been able to imagine. There was a lot of criticism, wasn't there, by Negro intellectuals?¹⁷

RPW Oh yes there was. This is politics. Put in its simplest form, as one black graduate student said to me when he asked me how I liked the book and I told him, "Well, it wasn't fair; he took our boy and ran with him". Simple as that. This is not the whole question--

¹⁶ William Styron, The Confessions of Nat Turner (New York: Random House, 1967).

¹⁷ See, for example, "An Exchange on Nat Turner," New York Review of Books, 7 Nov., 1968, pp. 31-36.

part of it is this, crudely stated. It's part of a historical moment, of a political moment. At the same time, deeper than that, there is the fact that the sexual treatment makes the white woman the dream girl of Nat, who refuses the black women, you see, who are available to him. Now this was offensive and you can see why. At the same time I think there are some grounds for accepting this as valid. Also--I don't want to go into an elaborate discussion of the book but this is part of this historical moment--one little item which was attacked by one of the black militants was taken by Styron out of the autobiography of Frederick Douglass--a very cunning little device of taking something out of a legitimate autobiography of a slave and a hero of the blacks and embedding this as part of Nat's story and this being singled out for attack then by blacks. By the way, my sympathies are with Black Power--as I would interpret it. The psychological need I'm deeply sym^Pathetic with, and I think Black Power, in terms of its long range meaning, is essential. I was in no sense sneering at that, except that the manifestations of it in some particular cases, I think, are somewhat short-sighted. Sometimes viciously short-sighted. I would say also, I think I know quite enough about Southern chauvinism to understand black chauvinism.

MW How do you view the contemporary scene in criticism? I'd like very much to know how you respond to McLuhan.

RPW I haven't read him enough, but I respond negatively. I think that this is not going to stick. He is a terribly clever writer--I've

read at him some--but I'm not going to have any long-bearded theories about this. I just don't think it covers the case.

MW Do you think there's anything on the critical scene that does cover the case?

RPW There's never anything on the critical scene that covers the case. I think good criticism usually is almost inevitably ad hoc in some deep sense; it's trying to make sense of some particular thing before it, in terms of values that are much broader than that.

MW Well, that's a good Coleridgian position to take. Are there any particular vivid contemporary ideas or technical notions that you feel attracted to?

RPW Well, there are certain things you can't avoid as being important whether you like them or not. What's happening to modern America, maybe the modern world, is something that is appalling and inspiring, I suppose, at the same time. My guess is that nothing has happened like this since the rise of Christianity--a fundamental change. Human sensibility, human instinct for value, is changing. Now to what, nobody knows yet. It's the world of the Roman Empire again. Things are falling apart, and we don't know quite how to define this. You can make some guesses--but at the same time that you make the big guesses I think you have to quote two authorities: one is Jefferson, that liberty is gained by inches, so you have to nag along inch by inch. And I was talking to David Riesman a few weeks ago, and he was saying that apocalyptic solutions and apocalyptic analyses and diagnoses don't interest him

really, because it's the little things, day by day, picking up the garbage in this village, that makes life work, and the values will finally take their shape from these thousands of little efforts, of little decencies, little organisations that give the ground for social continuity.

MW It's interesting that so many of the recent novels especially from America have been, in a sense, apocalyptic. One thinks particularly of books like Catch-22, which is a kind of comic apocalypse, of Thomas Pynchon's books, or of John Barth's Sot-Weed Factor.

RPW Yes, quite a wonderful book, I think.

MW They're all comic apocalypses, contemplating a total revelation, spoofed at the same time as it's presented.

RPW Yes, that's right.

MW The apocalyptic mode is something that has certainly occupied very intelligent writers recently.

RPW And politically too. For instance, Tom Kahn, the student power man--S.D.S.--some years ago, writing about the black movement said there are many young blacks who would rather fail apocalyptically than win, and be stuck with the responsibility of running society. The great tragic moment--to fail with a great bang--is more satisfying than winning and then having to hack along to put the world together.

MW So they would opt for the fire rather than the daily grey.

RPW That's right. But this is very human and it's very young. We all have this impulse in our youth and we keep it in our age. There are two aspects of this that have crossed my mind: one is, a sense of time is fundamentally so different now to what it was even thirty-five or forty years ago. What Alfred North Whitehead said in a book now forty-five years ago or whatever it was: the time sense before the Industrial Revolution and afterward--there was a crucial difference. A man had no sense of change before the Industrial Revolution: he might have a sense of vicissitude, disasters, plagues, wars, deaths, but the world did not change. It was the same world. Then the world began to change, and the change accelerated up to the time he wrote. But what's happened since is incredible: the process now is so fast that disorganisation sets in. You see this even among very young people. The shock, then, of accelerating change is a fundamental shock, it seems to me; it's something that is really disorienting. It's too much. Plus the fact that now society does not show the child the nature of life. The picture is no longer this: on one hand a babe in arms, on the other hand a grey-beard, and in between people who are more or less in the prime of life. Now we have no time sense we can recognise in terms of human experience. Nobody talks to the older people, the older don't talk to the young, even the mother and daughter, the daughter of five and the mother of twenty-five or thirty, they don't have the relation that was once there because the mother no longer teaches the child the same way, or the father the son. And this sense of a lack of continuity from one phase of life to another is part of the destructiveness (for the moment) of this change in time sense. And the other crucial thing is the hereditary attitude

towards nature which is tied to this. More and more there's no relation between physical nature and man, and man's life, and this does something to us.

MW You mean less and less garden and more and more machine?

RPW That's right. Man's rôle in nature, as being part of nature, is no longer felt and this is tied to the sudden passion now in America to save something, save a patch of green, save a few acres of forest. The "hippies", in their blundering and uninstructed way represent a protest at being uprooted from nature. Theirs is a last effort to restore not the patch of green for picnickers, but something to the soul. This effort is important; don't forget that there are many people who actually hate the idea of the green place, the hill, the woods, the stream; they hate it with a passion, loathe it because they are afraid of it, are afraid of it because they don't understand their relation to it. They hate it the same way they hate a library.

And we don't know the end of this story; but something is happening deep in the gut or the soul of modern man that we just don't know the meaning of now. The social structure is such, this impotence is so great, that you feel what's the use, why vote, why do this, why do that. The minimal activity though, is important. Bertrand Russell, years ago, was saying the only hope is to find the small organisation that will allow man to feel important, significant within it. This is the only hope. It's the inches business again.

MW Two more small points. Saul Bellow, a year or two ago, repined that the writer today has sunk, he said, from the curer of souls, which was his proper business in the nineteenth century, to the level of

the etiquette page, advice to the lovelorn, something of that sort.¹⁸ Would you agree with that?

RPW The writer now gives a hand-book of fornication--the number of positions is what the novel has, in most recent times, taken as its subject.

MW Yes, well that, I suppose, is a form of etiquette! Do you think that the writer might reasonably regard himself as a curer of souls in the twentieth century?

RPW I think he had better not take himself too seriously in that rôle. The soul he ought to cure is his own, put it that way. Literature springs from the attempt to inspect one's own soul rather than from the attempt to cure the souls of others, although it happens that good literature may cure souls; but not because it set out to do that.

MW Round about when you were thirteen, I understand, you read Buckle's History of Civilisation.

RPW Oh, somewhere around then. Later, I expect. In those days there were not many books to read.

MW But this was on every educated shelf, wasn't it?

RPW That's right.

MW And after believing for a while in Buckle's great geographical key to everything--

¹⁸ In an interview with Henry Brandon, "Writer versus Readers," Sunday Times, 18 Sept., 1966, p. 24.

RPW Everybody wants a big solution to everything. For a long time I would stop people in the street and explain to them what made the world change!

MW Well, you became disenchanted with this one-answer system. Now I wonder whether you found any describable substitute for the one-answer system?

RPW No. I didn't. Marx didn't serve. Me, anyway.

MW Has anything else worked?

RPW Neither did the church.

MW Any other contestants?

RPW No.

MW Do you anticipate finding any describable substitute?

RPW No. Hack along. Inches, again.

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