

A MAN WITH NO RELIGION

William Faulkner's claim that "no writing will be too successful without some conception of God" is exceptionally problematic when applied to Robert Penn Warren. About his upbringing in the Bible Belt along the Kentucky-Tennessee border, Warren said "I came out of it with no religion at all." [*Talking with RPW*, 381] Toward the latter end of his lifespan, as a man in his late seventies, he gave an interview indicating little change from those earlier years, speaking of himself as "a very nonreligious man." But against the emphatic force of that word "very," in virtually the same breath he also claimed "the deepest awareness of its [religion's] importance" and declared himself "a yearner. I mean I wish I were religious." (ibid, 382) Further complicating his "very nonreligious" sensibility is the "religious sense" that he expressly ascribed to his work, a phrase which he amplified with the claim that his work is "about the quest for religion." [ibid 382]

To judge from his boyhood experience, Warren's quest for religion had an inauspicious beginning. Although he read the Bible all the way through—in fact, he did it three times—he did so because his father paid him to do so, not to foster religious enlightenment in his son but because the Bible, his father said, is "a foundation of society." [ibid 287] At about the age of twelve, Warren apparently did have a religious experience of sorts, but of a misfortunately negative tenor. In his poem "Amazing Grace in the Back Country" (published in *Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978*), the boy attended a local camp meeting and "knew I was damned,/Who was guilty of all short of murder,/At least in my heart," but instead of heeding the preacher's call to salvation he went outside and vomited in the bushes. Perhaps it was from kindly concern that Warren's father changed his son's reading assignment soon after. Replacing the Bible, Warren recalled, his father "gave me Darwin to read when I was fourteen." [ibid 382-3]

From this point on, Warren's record of religious affiliation is decidedly spotty. He has said that during his first year at Vanderbilt University he tried to acquire a religious sensibility but failed. Two decades later his sojourn in Italy produced a mild interest in the Roman Catholic Church, thanks to his studies in Dante and some conversations with Catholic prelates, but he soon realized that his temperament would not allow him to follow Allen Tate's path to conversion. And yet another twenty-plus years after that, when I visited Mr. Warren at his home in Vermont in 1964, he made a comment that indicated a slight instance of Christian belief. When I asked about his reference to the Pentecostal speaking in tongues in *Night Rider* (in the Willie Proudfit episode) and in *Brother to Dragons*, where he described "the Pentecostal intuition" as a "Truth-dazzled hour when the heart shall burst/In gouts of glory—hallelujah!," he declared that the tongues are "the real thing"—a genuine religious experience of fairly common incidence

in his native region of Kentucky. The record concludes with an occasional glimmer of belief in Warren's old age--a request to his old friend Floyd Watkins to "pray for me," the practice of reading the New Testament aloud with Eleanor Clark, and, at the end, his Episcopal funeral service.

Overall, then, Warren's respect for the religious affinities of other people never opened their horizons to him, and apparently this incapacity for a living faith is what he meant when he claimed to have "no religion at all." If he were to ever satisfy his "quest for religion," he would have to find his own path without recourse to the cultural heritage that others rely on. The cultural heritage he did rely on apparently began with those early readings in Darwin, which set limits on whatever belief system he might settle upon. Among those limits, the most important was the belief in a natural, not supernatural reality. Whatever theology Warren might construe would therefore have to envision a God who inheres in nature, and it is exclusively through nature where Warren's "quest for religion" was to take him. This denial of the supernatural was probably what Warren meant when claiming to have no religion, but of course everything depends on how we define the word. The tremendous affinity for nature that keeps burgeoning through Warren's fifteen volumes of poetry, culminating in *Audubon, Chief Joseph*, and countless shorter poems in Warren's later career, bespeaks a world-view that some important thinkers have identified as religious.

Among the earliest thinkers to advance this world-view was Benedict Spinoza, who in the middle of the seventeenth century was formally expelled from his Jewish community in Amsterdam for propagating heresy. In his effort to synthesize religion and the newly emerging natural sciences, Spinoza's chief insight—the essence of his heresy--was precisely that of identifying God with all of nature and then claiming that for mankind, "the highest good is the knowledge of the mind's union with the whole of nature." (Spinoza's accusers evidently misunderstood his reasoning as degrading God to the level of material reality, when what he actually had in mind was the opposite purpose, to elevate nature from a mere material phenomenon into an entity permeated with spiritual energy.) Although Warren never, to my knowledge, credited Spinoza as a source of his own philosophy, he did include Spinoza among his quartet of great thinkers in his poem "Inevitable Frontier" (*Now and Then*, CP 370). In this dystopian satire, Spinoza joins Plato, St. Paul, Freud and Pascal as a truth-teller who must be expunged from the world's reading list. At the least, Spinoza's inclusion within this company of giant thinkers indicates an affinity on Warren's part with some area of Spinoza's thinking."

Whether or not Spinoza exerted a *direct* influence on Warren's religious thought, there is no question about his *indirect* influence through his impact on the Romantic

movement. The German poet Goethe, for example, greatly admired Spinoza, particularly for the doctrine of an impersonal God: “He who loves God truly cannot desire that God should love him in return.” In English literature, the best-known cognate of Spinoza’s insight is probably Wordsworth’s familiar passage in “Tintern Abbey”:

. . . And I have felt
A presence.
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Similar lines could be cited from Wordsworth’s other poems, but for our purposes one further reference will suffice, from “My Heart Leaps Up”: “And I could wish my days to be/Bound each to each by natural piety.” With that final phrase, “natural piety,” we get an explicit connection between religion and nature which bears upon the writings of Robert Penn Warren.

Warren’s general estimate of Wordsworth appears clearly in the Blotner biography, where Warren awarded him the highest laurels of any poet, adding that “after Wordsworth, there is Hardy, and then, after that, there is a great question mark” (Blotner, p. 57). Although Warren did not explain this judgment, natural piety—a religion of nature—appears to be a factor. When, in the later 1920s, Warren launched his career with a collection of poems and a biography of John Brown, he displayed in the latter instance the danger of conventional religion—describing John Brown as a murderous religious fanatic—while in his poems he displayed the attraction of the religion that Wordsworth called natural piety.

Warren’s earliest Wordsworthian moment occurs in Part II of “Kentucky Mountain Farm,” where the poet visits

. . . 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 plow,
Knotted the flesh unto the hungry bone,
The redbud to the charred and broken bough,
And strung the bitter tendons of the stone.

Despite the negative diction of these lines—“tired hand,” “hungry bone,” “bitter tendons,” “charred and broken bough”—the identification of the spirit of the deeps with the rejuvenation of nature indicates the poet’s incipient theology.

Tracing the development of that theology through his later works, we turn next to Warren’s first published collection, *Thirty-Six Poems* (1935), where Warren attaches religious diction to Nature in “The Last Metaphor.” This title refers to the bare trees in winter that “rear not up in strength and pride/But lift unto the gradual dark in prayer.” In his second published volume, *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942), the theistic measure becomes more definite when he defines love as “a groping Godward, though blind” (“Pursuit”). And in his third volume, *Selected Poems: 1923-1943*, Warren’s major new entry, “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” the creatures who are “groping Godward, though blind” include not only the title character but the whole animate creation. Together, the world’s creatures in this poem move back to their place of genesis to confront and accept their mortality—

The bee knows, and the eel’s cold ganglia burn,
And the sad head lifting to the long return
Through Brumal deeps. . .[and]
The goose hoots north where the starlit marshes are
 . . . And you, wanderer, back . . .
To kneel in the sacramental silence of evening.” [CP 91-92]

Warren defined “The Ballad of Billie Potts” as a religious poem in his interview with David Farrell, during the fall of 1977, where he said “‘Billie Potts’ was a poem I found out something by. . . . It was primarily a philosophical poem. . . , and you can carry it farther if you want to—theological.” [*Talking*, 296] The kind of theology Warren had in mind is further clarified in light of another work of his written at about the same time as “Billie Potts,” namely his long essay on “The Ancient Mariner” entitled “A Poem of Pure Imagination.” Here Warren defines the pantheistic theology within the compass of a single sentence: “It might be said that reason shows us God, and imagination shows us how Nature participates in God.” (Warren began both “Nature” and “God” with capital letters.) [*New and Selected Essays*, Random House, New York, 1989, 345.] In this statement, both the emphasis on reason and the identification of Nature with God recall Spinoza’s union of the mind with the whole of nature. The essay on Coleridge also includes Warren’s best known formulation of the pantheistic concept—“the sense of the ‘One Life’ in which all creation participates.” [*Selected Essays*, 396]

Not surprisingly, the third major work dating from this period, *All the King's Men*, has its own version of the Spinozan insight. The Cass Mastern story transmits the most familiar version of this motif: "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. . . the vibration ripples to the remotest permimeter. . . ." (188). The Cosmic Web is not the only instance of this theme in the novel. Another instance is Jack Burden's final wisdom concerning his longtime search for a father—"each of us is the son of a million fathers." And most importantly, Warren's Cosmic Web bears the imprint of America's greatest religious philosopher, William James.

That James influenced Warren's *political* thought in *All the King's Men* is an obvious inference. When Warren's listed his mentors in the Preface to the 1953 edition of the novel, including Dante, Machiavelli, Huey Long, and "the scholarly and benign figure of William James," it was natural to think of James's Pragmatism and its embodiment in the politics of Willie Stark. But James's religious thought also figures importantly in Warren's thinking with reference to Warren's Cosmic Web and its antecedents in Wordsworth and Spinoza. The passages we have cited from all three writers—Spinoza, Wordsworth, and Warren—comprise the world-view that James called Monism in several of his later writings, meaning the idea that the universe ultimately consists of a single unified entity rather than a multitude of discrete, separate things.

The choice between Monism and its opposite counterpart, Pluralism—a choice that James also described as that between the One and the Many—assumed ultimate importance in James's philosophy: "We stand here before the final question of philosophy. I said in my [previous] lecture that I believed the monistic-pluralistic alternatives to be the deepest and most pregnant question that our minds can frame." (from "Pragmatism and Religion" in *Essays in Pragmatism*). Concerning this choice, James himself sided with Pluralism because it avoided the deterministic implications that James associated with the Monistic alternative. "In the pragmatistic willingness to treat pluralism as a serious hypothesis," James said, "I find myself willing to take the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous. . . . I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is."

It is typical of Warren's approach that, given the choice between Monism and Pluralism, he chooses both. On one hand, he enlarged and strengthened his belief in the Cosmic Web in a speech to the American Philosophical Society in 1955, later published as an essay titled "Knowledge and the Image of Man." Here he coined a new phrase for the "One Life" hypothesis: "[Man is] in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being. . . [that merges] the ugly with the beautiful, the slayer with the slain." Nine years later, In his novel *Flood* (1964),

Warren added the word religious word “mystic” to his formulation when a minor character (Blanding Cotshill) declares “Things are tied together. There’s some spooky interpenetration of things, a mystic osmosis of being, you might say.” And in his poetry, Warren continued to frame new expressions of the mystic insight, among which perhaps the most compelling is a citation from “Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace” in *Promises*: “all Time is a dream, and we’re all One Flesh, at last.”

While he continued to refine his Osmosis of Being concept, however--a Monistic insight, Warren simultaneously insisted on the Pluralistic principle of individuality. That is the import of the Scholarly Attorney’s commentary about separateness as *All the King’s Men* concludes: “Separateness is identity and the only way for God to create, truly create, man was to make him separate from God Himself.” A discrete, separate identity, in turn, is what makes the idea of responsibility meaningful, as opposed to the deterministic force of the Great Twitch philosophy. As though to confirm William James’s claim that “each man is responsible for making the universe better, and . . . if he does not do this it will be in so far left undone,” Warren sends his persona Jack Burden “into history and the awful responsibility of Time” in the final sentence of the novel.

Following this crucial midpoint of his career—the period of “Billie Potts,” the essay on Coleridge, and *All the King’s Men*—Warren consolidated and expanded his pantheistic insight, especially in his poetry. The link between religion and nature animates volume after volume as we move across the poet’s later decades. The concluding poem of *Promises* (1957), titled “The Necessity for Belief,” relates its belief to the way of nature. In the opening lines the day accepts its extinction with stoic fortitude: “The sun is red, and the sky does not scream./The sun is red, and the sky does not scream.” That acceptance of the end is justified when the night brings its own beauty: “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.”

You, Emperors, and Others (1960) includes a number of poems on the religion of nature. “Man in the Street” goes so far, in its epigraph, as to enlist Jesus in its pantheistic gospel, quoting the apocryphal “Sayings of Jesus” as follows: “Raise the stone, and there thou shalt find Me,/cleave the wood, there am I.” And “The Letter about Money, Love, or Other Comfort, if Any”—one of Warren’s finest poems, in my opinion—concludes by bringing Warren’s “quest for religion” into the precinct of natural piety:

. . . I stand. . .
at the edge of a clearing. . .
then see, in first dawn’s drench and drama, the snow peak go gory,
and the eagle will unlatch crag-clasp,

fall, and at breaking of wing-furl, bark glory,
and by that new light I shall seek
the way, and my peace with God.”

In some of its more lyrical poems, *You, Emperors, and Others* goes beyond Wordsworth to something more in the style of William Blake as the natural world gives utterance. “I have heard the grain of sand say: I know my joy,” the speaker says in “What the Sand Said.” In “Mother Makes the Biscuits” the subhuman world expresses natural piety:

For the green worm sings on the leaf,
The black beetle folds hands to pray,
And the stones in the fields wash their faces clean
To meet break of day.”

And in “The Bramble Bush,” the “One Flesh” throughout creation celebrates its existence: “I heard the joy/Of flesh singing on the bone.”

The Osmosis of Being pervades *Incarnations* (1968), which begins with a Biblical epigraph from the prophet Nehemiah: “Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren” (Nehemiah 5:5), extends that idea to a dying prisoner in “Night Is Personal” (“for we are all//One Flesh”), and proclaims a theological purpose in “Masts at Dawn”: “We must try//To love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, in God..” *Audubon: A Vision* begins with a Biblical epigraph from Psalm 56 to introduce a man who did love the natural world in sacramental fashion, killing birds and holding them with “his head bowed low,/But not in grief.” The next volume, *Or Else*, also begins with another Psalm (number 78) and proceeds to affirm both sides of the Monistic-Pluralistic alternative in a poem called “Interjection #2:Caveat”: “Necessarily we must think of the world as continuous” but “on-/ly in discontinuity do we/know that we exist.” The poem ends when a small fragment of rock, singled out from miles of highway construction, “screams//in an ecstasy of//being.”

Perhaps because of his wholly secular upbringing, or perhaps because of the neo-orthodoxy propagated by influential contemporaries such as Allen Tate, T. S. Eliot, and C. S. Lewis, it appears that Warren’s concept of religion was limited to a relatively orthodox framework—a matter of creeds, sacraments, clergymen, and articles of faith, most notably including belief in the next world. By contrast, when Warren uses a man of the cloth as his own persona, he tends fix upon this world rather than the next one.

Brother Potts in *Flood*, for example, keeps insisting with something like the Ancient Mariner's zeal that the life we have lived (not the life to come) is blessed. But if Warren's religious figures tend toward the secular, the converse also applies. To a receptive eye, for example, even those childhood readings in Darwin could have yielded a religious insight comparable to Warren's Osmosis of Being. I quote from the final paragraph of *Origin of Species*:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. . . . Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on . . . , from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

The question of Warren's religious status comes down to the difference between the words "religion" and "faith." Evidently, Warren was not a man of faith, but he was wrong to call himself a man with no religion. For over half a century, his self-described "quest for religion" left too much evidence to the contrary. Beginning with his deep readings in sacred writ, which scattered Biblical citations throughout his work (he even lifted the title *Brother to Dragons* from the book of Job), and continuing with his citations from religious thinkers as varied as Saint Augustine, Jacob Boehme, and William James, Warren displayed an exceptional hunger for divine truth. That he found it in the natural world rather than on a supernatural level is no reason to call him "very nonreligious." To the contrary, his affinities with Spinoza on the mind's union with the whole of nature, with Wordsworth on natural piety, and with William James on the Monistic-Pluralistic alternative bespeak a powerful, though unorthodox, religious imagination. Returning to our opening statement, "No writing will be too successful without some conception of God," we can safely place Robert Penn Warren, along with Wordsworth and Faulkner himself, on the deific side of that dividing line.