In his essay on John Ford, T. S. Eliot declared that "the standard set by Shakespeare is that of a continuous development from first to last . . . . We must know all of Shakespeare's work in order to know any of it." The same statement must be said of Eliot himself and, upon reflection, about any major artist, but it seems unusually applicable to Robert Penn Warren, and particularly to his poetry. In the following pages, I propose to offer a reading of his latest volume of poetry, Now and Then: Poems 1976–1978—an admirable piece of work in its own right. But in order to understand this twelfth volume he has published since 1935, some bare account of that "continuous development from first to last" must be given to clarify this work in its context. Through scanning that long foreground of poetic practice and drawing as well upon some of his prose writings—especially his essays about literature—we may approach that threshold which Warren himself has defined as the final limit of criticism: "My notion of criticism is that its purpose is to deliver the reader back to the work. All the study about a writer or a work, all the analyses of background, of ideas, of the structure of a work—the purpose of all this is . . . to remove difficulties that stand between the reader and the work."

The difficulties that stand between a reader and Warren's own work are primarily those he cites above, involving "background," "ideas," and "structure." We may begin to remove those difficulties first by defining a few key concepts in his work, and then by observing their function in the poetry. Of paramount importance is the concept of self. In Democracy and Poetry (1975), after tracing back to the Greeks "the notion of the self as the central fact of 'poetry,'" Warren observes that in any work of literature, "only insofar as the work establishes and ex-
presses a self can it engage us.” For Warren, the literature of selfhood begins with the discovery that the self exists. Emerson’s statement, “That discovery is called the Fall of Man,” describes exactly the central drama of Warren’s early verse, where the lapse of Warren’s persona into a world ruined by time and loss and death is the essential subject. (Similarly, Humpty Dumpty’s great fall in *All the King’s Men* was the Fall re-enacted by the book’s main characters.) Above all, what the fallen psyche suffers in its self-consciousness is a feeling of separateness: from other creatures, from nature, from any sense of permanent meaning in its life, and, ultimately, from its own deepest and truest self.

For our purposes, this lost ur-self may be defined as the *anima*, a word Warren uses in a recent poem title in *Now and Then* (“Ah, Animal!”). Like the primal child-self in Wordsworth and Dylan Thomas, Warren’s anima is the self that existed in every man’s Eden stage—and “almost everyone has an Eden time to look back on, even if it never existed,” Warren asserted in his essay on Whittier. With the individual’s awakening to moral and natural evil, the anima typically vanishes from Warren’s persona, its perfect delight in itself and in its worldly environment being replaced by feelings of dread, shame, alienation, and general insufficiency. But it does not vanish totally, a fact of paramount importance in Warren’s extended poetic psychodrama, for it is ultimately the function of poetry (meaning literature and all the arts) to restore the fallen self, in all its manifold sufferings, to psychic good health, not through any return to the original state of innocence but through entering a condition of grace (“blessèdness” is a term Warren uses) that offsets or transcends man’s tragic knowledge of evil. That poetry has this therapeutic power is Warren’s most deeply felt conviction, I should say, in *Democracy and Poetry*: “when we grasp a work . . . in terms of felt meaning—what a glorious *klang* of being awakens to unify mind and body, to repair, if even for a moment, what Martin Buber has called ‘the injured wholeness of man.’ ”

Not only is the self made whole again, it also achieves self-transcendence through the mediation of the art work which “binds our very physiological being to it in the context of the rhythms of the universe.” The feeling of separateness that is the chief legacy of every man’s “Fall” may thus yield, so long as the art work exerts its power, to a redeeming sense of vital contact, or even communion, with the surrounding world. This intuition of a “mystic osmosis of being” that binds the self to the whole of reality comprises our next key concept in approaching Warren’s verse. The early poems and essays expressed the naturalistic beliefs
prevalent in the Eliot-Hemingway era, depicting nature as a soul-less mechanism hostile to human values. In 1933 Warren published a review (in the American Review) objecting to Sidney Lanier's concept of a “union of human nature with physical nature,” the embodiment of man’s broadened love of the universe,” preferring instead Lanier’s earlier view that “nature is the tyrant of tyrants.” But in the 1940s, especially in his long essay on Coleridge, he demonstrates a profound transformation in his thinking. He speaks approvingly of “a central fact” in The Ancient Mariner, “that the world is full of powers and presences not visible to the physical eye . . . that there is a spiritual order of universal love, the sacramental vision . . . that nature, if understood aright—that is, by the imagination—offers us vital meanings.” Most significantly, those vital meanings ascend to the theistic: “the world of Nature is to be read by the mind as a symbol of Divinity . . . It might be said that reason shows us God, and imagination shows us how Nature participates in God.” In the early 1950s he stepped back a moment, saying in Brother to Dragons that “even the grandeur of Nature may not be / Our confirmation. It is image only.” But in 1955 his essay “Knowledge and the Image of Man” formally propounded his “osmosis of being” credo, a view that he poet-icized in Promises (1957) with prophetic force: “all Time’s a dream, and we’re all one Flesh, at last.” It is notable, too, that in his rewritten version of Brother to Dragons (1979), he has eliminated the passage I have cited about Nature being “image only.”

Our final key concept refers to the mode of communication, or “language,” by which the fallen self receives its redemptive insights. In the poem “Natural History,” in Or Else, the “naked old father” dancing in the rain “is singing a song, but the language is strange to me.” The nakedness of the old man, like that of “the naked old mother” smiling nearby, indicates that they have reentered Eden—in this case by their absorption, at death, into nature. (“That is why clocks all over the continent have stopped.”) And the language of the old man’s song “is strange to me,” the poem’s speaker, because his lapsarian condition has closed off his access to the “vital meanings” that emanate from nature, meanings that threaten the sovereignty of rational consciousness in the speaker’s psyche: “They [the old couple] must learn to stay in their graves. That is what graves are for.” Increasingly in Warren’s later poetry, the healing of the fallen self depends upon its grasp of a language that operates outside the realm of rational consciousness, disclosing a wholly different impression of reality. Variously appearing in dreams, in
the voices of birds and animals, in the deep inexpressible feelings men and other creatures live by, this language comes to assume urgent importance in Warren's verse—a grasp for meaning beyond the reach of any lexicon. Collectively, the subliminal voices thus in concert offer renewed contact between the fallen soul and its lost anima, diffused now through the whole of nature. Recent poems like "Trying to Tell You Something" and "Code Book Lost" (in *Arcturus* and *Now and Then*) display the truly haunting power of that theme when rendered by the poet's highest powers of articulation.

Terminating these preliminary definitions, there remains the question of how these ideas work together to affect poetic "structure." In a review published in the *American Review* in 1934, Warren objected to "poetry of the single impulse," which, "carefully purged of all opposing stresses, ... is singularly undramatic.... [It] requires no resolution." What makes poetry dramatic is precisely its opposing stresses, that inner tension whereby "an artist's basic ideas ... prove themselves by their conquest of other ideas," as Warren put it in his essay on Hemingway. So—in "Pure and Impure Poetry"—a poem "is a motion toward a point of rest, but if it is not a resisted motion, it is motion of no consequence. ... The good poem must, in some way, involve the resistances." In Warren's own verse, these premises find expression primarily in the psycho-drama we have just been analyzing. Speaking in contrapuntal fashion, the opposing parts of the psyche strive for preeminence throughout Warren's work, their conflicting voices generating "resistances" for one another. It is another instance of Yeats's dictum that poetry is made "out of the quarrel with ourselves." On one side is the voice of rational consciousness, nobly and tragically aware—as Warren says in his essay on Conrad—"of the fact that man is a natural creature who can rest on no revealed values and can look forward to neither individual immortality nor racial survival." On the other side is the subliminal voice we have mentioned "trying to tell you something." Both voices press a valid claim to knowledge of reality, causing Warren to fit his own description of the philosophical poet as one "for whom images always fall into a dialectical configuration." In book after book, from his early verse through *Now and Then*, this ongoing "quarrel with oneself" comprises the overall structure or organizing principle, giving rise to the poet's major themes and image patterns. To illustrate and clarify these observations, we may first examine, briefly, the poetry leading up to *Now and Then*, and then analyze, more expansively, the poems in that recent volume.
In the March 1936 number of *Scribner's*, Robert Penn Warren published "Picnic Remembered," a poem whose title expresses the paradise lost theme then prevalent in his work, and whose closing stanza begins with these lines: "The *then*, the *now*: each cenotaph / Of the other, and proclaims it dead." In confronting the same problem—how to redeem the time, making it permanently meaningful—forty-two years later in *Now and Then: Poems 1976–1978*, Warren displays that sort of deepening contemplation of a governing theme that gives an artist's work its ultimate principle of coherence. (Eliot explored the same theme in an arc of development ranging from "Prufrock" through *Four Quartets*, as did Faulkner from *The Sound and the Fury* through *Requiem for a Nun*.) The fundamental terms of that contemplation appeared early on in Warren's poetry, centering particularly upon the notion of a bifurcation of the self after its plunge from childlike innocence into knowledge of time and loss and mortality. The unified psyche of an animal or prelapsarian child, perfectly happy to be what it is in the world just as it is, now becomes sundered between a fleeing anima figure, hearkening backward to the lost natural paradise, and the empty husk of identity that is left behind in the fallen world to cope as best it can with its ruined environment.

Of the many expressions of this theme in Warren's early verse, "Picnic Remembered" is perfectly representative. Its movement from paradisical *then* to lapsarian *now* evokes three images that recur repeatedly in Warren's later volumes, assuming the force of presiding motifs in *Now and Then*. First is the motif of sunset, supplanting the soul's day in paradise with several kinds of darkness: "But darkness on the landscape grew / As in our bosoms darkness, too." Second is the hollow man condition produced by this inflooding darkness:

> Our hearts, like hollow stones, have trapped A corner of that brackish tide. The jaguar breath, the secret wrong, The curse that curls the sudden tongue, We know, for fears have fructified.

The third motif is the flight of the anima—a deeper, purer self, or "soul"—from this fallen psyche trapped in gathering darkness. At the end of "Picnic Remembered" the escaping anima exhibits two charac-
characteristics of great significance for Warren's later poetry, including *Now and Then*: it is portrayed as a natural creature, in this case a hawk, and from its inaccessible distance it relays some glimmers of light, "vision," or "uncharted Truth" to its forsaken *alter ego* lost in darkness. These glimmers, though tentative as Mr. Warren's interrogative phrasing indicates, provide the final and only hope for release of the *now* and the *then* from their cenotaph:

The *then*, the *now*: each cenotaph  
Of the other, and proclaims it dead.  
Or is the soul a hawk that, fled  
On glimmering wings past vision's path,  
Reflects the last gleam to us here  
Though sun is sunk and darkness near  
—Uncharted Truth's high heliograph?

Warren's path from "Picnic Remembered" in the mid thirties to *Now and Then* in the late seventies bears the milestones of a dozen volumes of poetry along the way, not to mention the broad shelf of novels, books of social/historical commentary, and volumes of literary criticism—a corpus far too vast to discuss meaningfully in this present essay. But we may at least touch upon a few of those milestones, as a way of tracing out the development of this crucial psychodrama in Warren's poetry. In "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (1943), perhaps Warren's most important poem, our basic motifs recur in compelling fashion, with the lapse from innocence leaving "you," the bankrupt "old shell of self," without resource in the final gathering darkness "here in the evening empty of wind or bird." The only hope of redemptive insight again comes from the natural creatures whose spontaneous patterns of living bespeak submission to some unconscious direction or design governing the whole of nature:

(The bee knows, and the eel's cold ganglia burn,  
And the sad head lifting to the long return,  
Through brumal deeps, in the great unsolsticed coil,  
Carries its knowledge, navigator without star,  
And under the stars, pure in its clamorous toil,  
The goose hoots north where the starlit marshes are.  
The salmon heaves at the fall, and, wanderer, you  
Heave at the great fall of Time . . .)
In *Brother to Dragons* (1953), the natural creatures embodying this deepest mode of knowledge include the serpent under ground and the catfish under ice, both of them representing the lost anima or primeval self enjoying perfect tranquillity of being even within its death-dark environment: “The catfish is in the Mississippi and / The Mississippi is in the catfish and / Under the ice both are at one with God. / Would that we were!” Above ground and above ice, in the fallen world of time-and self-consciousness, RPW is the figure in gathering darkness at the end of this long poem regarding “the shrunken ruin, and the trees leafless” in “the last light of December’s, and the day’s declension. / I thought of the many dead and the places where they lay.”1 In *Promises* (1957)—another book that ends (in “The Necessity for Belief”) at the evening hour—the man facing darkness again receives glimmers, like the “Uncharted Truth” of “Picnic Remembered,” from the deepest matrix of nature: in “The Flower,” “The rocca clasps its height. / It accepts the incipient night”; in “What Was the Promise That Smiled?” the maples “smiled . . . at evening / . . . What language of leaf-lip?”; in “The Necessity for Belief,” the “sun is red” but “the sky does not scream.” *You, Emperors, and Others* likewise juxtaposes the bankrupt conscious identity of figures like Tiberius on Capri, the Traveling Salesman in Hotel Room, and dying woman in “Prognosis” (all portrayed against nightfall) against redemptive glimmers emanating from the innermost recesses of nature where the unfallen anima still lives in paradise. For the fallen psyche mourning the death of a father in “In the Turpitude of Time,” return to the Edenic state is conceivable only through recourse to the subliminal voices:

Can we—oh, could we only—believe
What annelid and osprey know,
And the stone, night-long, groans to divulge?
If we could only, then that star
That dawnward slants might sing to our human ear,
And joy, in daylight, run like feet,
And strength, in darkness, wait like hands. . . .

In *Tale of Time* (1966) the fallen psyche confronts major mortuary episodes, including the burial of mother, the suicide by gunblast of Dr. Knox, the death by cancer of a villager in Vermont, and the death in

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1 These passages from the 1953 version are preserved intact in the 1979 rewritten version of the poem.
battle of the Bible’s King Saul. Edenic vignettes from times past sharpen the contrast between now and then—mother’s funeral is juxtaposed against a time in her girlhood when she “lay / At the whippoorwill hour, in the long grass,” “and on noble blue now the evening star hung”; and the savage spectacle of Saul’s severed head hanging in Dagon’s temple is contrasted against Samuel’s earlier anointing of that same head, youthful and reverent in the joy of the Lord’s calling. Intimations from the heart of nature—from the rose that “dies suddenly, laughing,” in “Intuition” or the bear and the eagle (at sunset) in “Fall Comes in Back-Country Vermont”—again offset these morbid episodes, so that the anima/animal may reclaim possession of the psyche at least momentarily in the book’s closing “Delight” sequence: “Look! In that bush, with wolf-fang white, delight / Humps now for someone: You.” Incarnations (1966), too, juxtaposes its burden of mental pain in “Internal Injuries” and “Island of Summer” against the tranquillity of Fig, Ivy, Red Mullett, and Leaf (each subsisting in darkness) in the poems about those natural objects. The book’s headnote, “A man ain’t nuthin but a man,” gains extra meaning when considered in the light of “The Ivy”: “Time / is nothing to the ivy. The ivy [unlike a man] / Does not sweat at night, for . . . / it dreams a single dream. . . . / Peace is the dream’s name.”

Fragmentary though our approach has (of necessity) been, enough has been said to define the “figure in the carpet” that gives design and structure not only to Warren’s individual volumes of poetry but to his poetic canon as a whole. In his contrapuntal arrangement of two voices, one from the rational, lapsarian consciousness and the other from the anima’s subliminal region, Warren has confronted the dilemma that Joseph Campbell, in The Hero with the Thousand Faces, identifies as modern man’s most serious psychological problem: “The lines of communication between the conscious and unconscious zones of the psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two.” For Warren’s poetry, that would be an overstatement, for some communication does pass from zone to zone like “Uncharted Truth’s high heliograph,” and what does pass has the character of final significance to Warren’s lapsarian persona. But Campbell’s statement holds true for Warren’s work in that reconnecting the zones of the psyche seems to be his most urgent impulse in poetry, an impulse that deepens markedly in the recent volumes. Audubon: A Vision (1969) represents Warren’s closest approach to a reconciling vision—at least since “The Ballad of Billie Potts”—through its portrayal of a man who, in effect, has reentered Eden. More than any
other Warren persona, Audubon achieves psychic affinity with the lost anima of prelapsarian memory mainly by hearkening with all his being to the impulses from the heart of nature. Watching the bear (a recurrent anima figure for Warren) that, “daft in the honey-light, yawns,” he experiences a Wordsworthian immersion in nature: “Thinks / How thin is the membrane between himself and the world.” Wholly rapt in his passion, so that even “in my sleep I continually dream of birds,” Audubon is one who “loved the world,” perfectly content with his life and his own being. There is no divided psyche for him, who can see, “as though down a rifle barrel, lined up / Like sights, the self that was, the self that is / ... The quarry lifts, in the halo of golden leaves, its noble head” [another anima/animal image]. One effect of the poem’s “vision” is to render a transformation in its closing vignette. “Tell Me a Story” renders the typical man (in this case, boy) staring “in first dark,” but in this instance the anima figure he observes is returning, rather than fleeing—a point the poem underscores in its three-time repetition of the wild birds’ direction of flight. (“The great geese hoot northward.” “They were going north. / The sound was passing northward.”) From their invisible height they emanate psychic healing: “I did not know what was happening in my heart.” So in this case the tale of Time (“the name of the story will be Time”) may be “a story of deep delight.”

But that is essentially Audubon’s story. Although Audubon could be “simply, ... / In the end, himself,” he could not be Robert Penn Warren; nor, more importantly, could Robert Penn Warren be Audubon. So, in Or Else (1974), the Arcturus poems (1975), and Now and Then (1978), the divided psyche resumes its habitual sovereignty over the Warren persona, its twin voices asserting in richly contrapuntal accents their sharply contrasting experience of reality. At the end of Or Else, after much alternating between the voice of the fallen psyche and that of the anima (the idea behind the book’s title), Warren brings them together for a final parting. “A Problem in Spatial Composition” is nearly a dejeu-vu of “Picnic Remembered,” complete with the man staring into the evening dark (“beyond is forever”), stunned—in the book’s closing line—by the vanishing of the hawk-anima: “The hawk, in an eyeblink, is gone.” The hawk reappears in the Arcturus sequence, “climbing the last light” in “Evening Hawk,” but his anima-life in paradise (“who knows neither Time nor error”) seems irremediably distant from the hu-

2 I am most grateful to have this opportunity to correct my earlier reading of this poem in The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren (Lexington, Kentucky, 1977), p. 264.
man realm at the end of the poem, where one may "hear / The earth grind on its axis, or history / Drip in darkness like a leaking pipe in the cellar." The terminal poem in the Arcturus collection, "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home from Party in the Back Country," tries to mediate that distance through the intercession of the Old Nigger, like Audubon a figure of grace whose "face / Is lifted into starlight, calm as prayer." But as in "Picnic Remembered," the transmission of grace or vision from the subliminal psychic region to the rational consciousness rides on a question. Or rather, in this instance, on two questions, unanswered, on which the poem and the Arcturus collection end: "Brother, Rebuker, my Philosopher past all / Casuistry, will you be with me when / I arrive and leave my own cart of junk? . . . Can I see Arcturus from where I stand?"

Brief as this discussion of themes and poems has been, it should suffice to establish Warren's character as a "philosopher-poet," to use his own term; a poet "for whom the image strives to rise to symbol," and "for whom the urgency of experience . . . is the urgency to know the meaning of experience." Which is to say, he is a poet of ideas, not in the sense of propagating any settled ideology but in the sense of probing into his consciousness and experience as deeply as possible for meanings and beliefs to live by. Therein he resembles Melville, whose poems, he said, are "trying to show us ideas not as abstractions but as a function of the life-process," as well as (in Warren's words) "the philosopher-poet Coleridge, the haunting force of whose poems cannot be understood except in the light of his philosophy—not as illustrations of the philosophy but as life-thrusts toward the philosophy." Gradually emerging from his own "life-thrusts" or "life-process" in poetry, Warren's key images, such as the man staring into nightfall or the plenitude of anima figures, clearly rise to the level of symbol and archetype, manifesting in clearer and clearer outline the ideas or "philosophy" whose presence gives the poet's work—both in toto and in individual volumes—its governing structure and its final meaning.

III

Turning at last to the thirty-seven poems in Now and Then: Poems 1976–1978, we find Warren's "philosophy" recurring mostly intact, but greatly enhanced by freshly imagined material. The governing philosophy or idea that gives the book its overall structure is again the drama,
or psychodrama, of opposing stresses, the tale of two voices that traces back through *Arcturus, Or Else, You, Emperors, Promises, and Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*. In general, the two sections of *Now and Then* reflect this psychic duality, the “Nostalgic” poems portraying the life of the rational consciousness while the longer “Speculative” section plunges deeply into the anima-realm of dream, intuition, and subliminal consciousness, both human and subhuman. But, importantly, there is some interflow between the two sections, a fugal counterpoint that sustains thematic and psychological tension from beginning to end.

To begin with the role of the rational consciousness, we barely get past the book’s title before realizing that this is a new version of Warren’s oldest theme, that of a fall from innocence into knowledge of tragedy. *Now and Then* is, as the title indicates, a memory book, the *Then* referring most often to images and characters from the speaker’s long ago—typically connected with the better or happier self of boyhood—which are juxtaposed against the *Now* of an older man’s regret, puzzlement, and longing. The “Nostalgic” poems deliver some splendid juxtapositions of this nature. “American Portrait: Old Style” calls up a boyhood playmate named “K,” whose talents made him a big league pitcher until defeated by alcohol; in the *now* of old age, with “some sixty / Years blown like a hurricane past” and “the arms and the pitcher’s / Great shoulders . . . thinning to old man thin,” the old fellow breaks a target with a stone: “See—I still got control.” Warren’s own persona undergoes a similar juxtaposition of *now* against *then* in this poem, the *then*-self that played soldier with K in the trench (“we held / To pour the last volley at face-gape”) giving way in the *now* of old age to the man at sunset—that recurrent figure—who returns to “the trench of our valor, now nothing / But a ditch full of late-season weed-growth,” and lies down in it to practice his grave-posture (“and I wonder / What it would be like to die, / Like the nameless old skull in the swamp, lost”). What the two American Portraits show, overtowering K’s heroic/pathetic claim of “control,” is “how the teeth in Time’s jaw all snag backward / And whatever enters therein / Has less hope of remission than shark-meat.” Another piece of shark-meat turns up in “Old Flame,” which juxtaposes the memory of a beauteous childhood sweetheart against her greeting a half-century later: “ ‘Why, it’s you!’ / Well, yes, it was me, but who was that pile of age-litter?” And “Red-Tail Hawk and Pyre of Youth” juxtaposes the speaker’s own self of long ago, ecstatic while shooting and stuffing the rare bird, against the melancholy adult who burned the time-ruined specimen years later, along with the attic-mouldy books he
had favored in his youth: Milton, *Hamlet*, Rimbaud, and sheaves of poems written by himself and his college friends. In the "Speculative" section this "nostalgic" effect is deepened by obituaries intervening between *now* and *then*—obituaries of former lovers vividly remembered and reloved in "Heat Lightning" (a title that is an image of memory's fitful illumination in the dark of the past) and "Identity and Argument for Prayer."

The great burden of the lapsarian self is thus the knowledge of time, which in its future tense—in a poem like "Departure"—evokes fear, and in its past tense converts into memory. This notion of memory as exquisite torment is nothing new in Warren's art; back in *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden mused that "if the human race didn't remember anything it would be perfectly happy." In this motif Warren shares the mood of his contemporary masters: Faulkner, whose persona Horace Benbow in *Flags in the Dust (Sartoris)* wanted to be dipped in Lethe every ten years; and T. S. Eliot, who accused April of being the cruellest month for "mixing / Memory and desire" and who later pondered the wisdom of opening the gate into the remembered rose garden. But memory is also the basis of individual human identity, as Warren defined it in *Democracy and Poetry*: "I mean two things: continuity—the self as a development in time, with a past and a future; and responsibility—the self as a moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of action worthy of praise or blame." And again: "any true self is . . . a development in time, and if there is no past there can be no future."

Concerning his own past, the Warren persona in *Now and Then* begins, in "Nostalgic," by eliciting from memory some experiences that profoundly affected the development of his identity as an artist. The growth of the artist is in fact the underlying theme in the "Nostalgic" section, each of whose poems contributes importantly to this development, their total effect greatly resembling that masterpiece about a boy receiving his poetic calling, Whitman's "Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking": "Now in a moment I know what I am for . . . / A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die." In the first poem of this series, "American Portrait: Old Style," we find the boy on the verge of discovering the source and character of all artistic power, the transfiguring imagination:

and in that last summer
I was almost ready to learn

29
What imagination is—it is only
The lie we must learn to live by, if ever
We mean to live at all.

The second poem, "Amazing Grace in the Back Country," relives the moment when the poet's imagination declared its independence, as it were. In a traumatic scene reminiscent of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the twelve-year-old boy rejected the invitation to be saved at a camp meeting—"She wept and she prayed, and I knew I was damned"—in his terror running outside to vomit in the darkness by the spring. But there he learns peace and grace of a different order, trailing his hand in the cold black water (an image of creativity in Frost's "The Pasture") and seeing in the reflection of a lone star an analogue to his own necessary isolation. The scene again resembles Whitman's late-night vigil in "Out of the Cradle":

And now, when all the voices were stilled and the lamps
Long out in the tent, and stars
Had changed place in the sky, I yet lay
By the spring with one hand in the cold black water
That showed one star in reflection, alone—and lay
Wondering and wondering how many
A morning would I rise up to greet,
And what grace find.

The following poem, "Boy Wandering in Simms' Valley," illustrates perfectly the sort of grace he found, by virtue of the awakening moral imagination. Here knowledge of courage, fidelity, and love springs from so homely a thing as "the old enameled bedpan, high on a shelf" that the boy noticed "as the last sun fell on me" (recurrent setting!) in the ruined house "where Simms, long back, had nursed a sick wife till she died. / Then turned out his spindly stock to forage at will, / And took down his twelve-gauge, and simply lay down by her side." Grace radiates with similar unexpectedness out of "Orphanage Boy," where the profane fellow named Al who "taught me all the / Dirty words I'd never heard of" also taught the true meaning of the sacred: six months after Al ran away, the poem's speaker found in the woods "a real grave" for the sick dog Al had been forced to shoot the night of his disappearance: "There was a wood cross on the / Grave. He must have come back to the / Barn for the shovel and hammer, / And back to hang them up."

Amazing Grace of unorthodox origin similarly answers the artist's
hunger for truth and beauty in the other “Nostalgic” poems. The power of beauty first became manifest, it seems, in the sweetheart of “Old Flame,” whose feet “toted incomparable glory down the street / Schoolward, for glory’s the only thing that matters.” And if that glory faded beyond recall, the beauty of “Red-Tail Hawk” proved more lasting, partly because of the ineffable ecstasy of acquisition (“I screamed, not knowing / From what emotion”) and partly because the artist’s taxidermy proved effective: “Year after year, in my room, on the tallest of bookshelves, / It was regal, perched on its bough-crotch.” But eventually even this beauty, as a physical object, went up in the “Pyre of Youth” of the poem’s title, leaving perhaps the hunger for truth—a truth to which beauty sometimes attests—as the artist’s deepest motive. The bird’s conversion into an anima image at the end of this poem, spectrally approaching “downward from sky-height / To bring me the truth in blood-marriage of earth and air,” seems to function in this way. Here at the hour of the speaker’s death, the bird’s remembered death evokes the truth of the osmotic connection, “to bind us in air-blood and earth-blood together / In our commensurate fate, / Whose name is a name beyond joy.’’

Other poems bring forward the motif of subliminal “language” as we have defined it. In a characteristic time setting, the boy-persona of “Evening Hour” lingers in the graveyard, feeling “the crazy impulse grow / To lay ear to earth for what voices beneath might say.” And in “Mountain Plateau,” the crow that “Uttered / Its cry to the immense distance” enters “the landscape of my heart” as an image of the incommunicable: “I can make no answer . . . / My eyes fill with tears. I have lived / Long without being able / To make adequate communication.”

The two final “Nostalgic” poems have an adult persona, but they also evoke, from memory, intense experiences of growth in the artist. In “Star-Fall” the subliminal language works perfectly, the summer night’s beauty entering through all five senses until “the world is a voice, no ear needing,” and the self merges with the whole of reality in osmotic fashion, “sunk and absorbed into / The mass and matrix of Being that defines / Identity of all.” “Youth Stares at Minoan Sunset,” however, completes the “Nostalgic” series by returning us to the lapsarian theme. Here Warren makes spectacular use of his sunset motif both as visual image—a verbal painting—and as symbol:

Molten and massy, of its own weight flattened,
The sun accelerates downward, the sea
From general slate-blue, flaming upward.
Contact is made at the horizon line.

On that line, one instant, one only,
The great coin, flame-massy and with
The frail human figure thereon minted black,
Balances. Suddenly is gone. A gull
Defiles at last the emptiness of air.

That great coin with a human figure minted on it, bringing to mind an ancient wall or vase painting from the Minoan Age of the poem's title, perfectly epitomizes the poet's calling: to catch and fix the "one instant, one only" before it "suddenly is gone." When successful, he can—as "American Portrait" put it—make a day such as this last "forever / In memory's shiningness," whereas the years between are "but a gust or a gasp / In the summer's heat of Time." But sunset brings out not just the poet seeking beauty but the poet-philosopher seeking some truth to live by; not only the youth staring at sunset but the adult persona regarding the youth: "He spreads his arms to the sky as though he loves it . . . / He is so young." Terminating the poem and the "Nostalgic" series as a whole, that lapsarian note brings us from the then of long memory to the now of the "Speculative" section, where the poet's effort to redeem the time assumes its most profound and original character.

In the twenty-seven "Speculative" poems, the governing principle of structure is again the interplay of opposing stresses—the tale of two voices emanating from the rational consciousness on one side and the subliminal on the other, each asserting its claim over the psyche in terms of its own peculiar knowledge of reality. The rational consciousness, mourning its lapsarian state, appears throughout these poems, starkly engraving the portrait of the persona as a hollow man. In "Not Quite like a Top," he is an insomniac hearing the earth grind on its axis (a recurrent image of dread in Warren's poems), unable even to imagine God's existence "so that I / Might have the exalted horror of denying / Him." In "Sister Water," his insomnia stretching till dawn, he hears in "the cough and mastication of / The garbage truck in the next block" a portent of his own future. The poem's ending—"You cannot pray. But / You can wash your face in cold water"—contrasts Warren's feeble praise for "Sister Water," here the alternative to Sister Death, to Saint Francis' joyous praise for both Sisters in "Canticle of the Sun": "Praised be my Lord for our sister water, who is very serviceable
to us and humble and precious and clean. . . . Praised be my Lord for our sister, the death of the body, from whom no man escapeth."

To these morbid ruminations, "Little Black Heart of the Telephone"—"screaming . . . / Nobody there? Oh, nobody's there!"—adds the burden of solipsism, a theme dating from Warren's earliest ventures in poetry. And "Heat Lightning" cruelly diminishes life by draining a clandestine love affair, clearly remembered, of its original emotional content:

I think

Of the past and how this soundlessness, no thunder,
Is like memory purged of emotion,

Or even of meaning. I watch
The lightning wash pale beyond the night mountains, beyond

Night cumulus, like a stage set. Nothing
Is real, and I think of her, in timelessness: the clutch

In the lightless foyer, the awkward wall-propping, one ear
Cocked for footsteps, all the world

Hates a lover. It seems only a dream. . . .

Ultimately, in "Identity and Argument for Prayer," the self now seems so estranged from the self of then that it is the lack of identity which is the argument for prayer:

For that old I is not I any more . . .
This
Is the joke you must live with. Have you ever
Seen serpentine Time at the instant it swallowed its tail?

This inability to learn "the logic of years" forces men to

live only by piecemeal, like mice
On cheese crumbs—the cheese itself, of course,
Being locked in the tin
In God's pantry.

There follows the usual hollow man condition, the insomniac staring in the dark

Saying *now*, saying *now*, for
Now *now* is all, and you *you*.

At least for a minute.

This may be taken as an argument for prayer.

The effect of these poems is to firmly establish Warren's credentials as a poet of reality, one whose modest affirmations or redemptive insights may not readily be mistaken for escapism. But even this lapsarian self is not wholly without resources, as is clear in its contrast to the truly bankrupt consciousness inhabiting this book's two "warning" poems. "Last Laugh," about Mark Twain's atheism (a result of seeing his father's dissected cadaver), warns how vacant the life must be that is lived without the transfiguring imagination: "The lie we must learn to live by, if ever / We mean to live at all," in "American Portrait." In his essay on Conrad, Warren called this the "true lie," defined as follows: "[Man's] values are, to use Conrad's word, 'illusions,' but the last wisdom is for man to realize that though his values are illusions, the illusion is necessary, is infinitely precious, is the mark of this human achievement, and is, in the end, his only truth." Especially in the artist, how deadly to others (in this case, Twain's wife, Olivia) is the refusal to affirm the true lie: "For Livy loved God, and he'd show her the joke, how they lied / . . . He watched dying eyes stare up at a comfortless sky."

The other warning poem is "Inevitable Frontier," a ghastly dream-vision of what may happen (one hopes the title's "Inevitable" is wrong) when pursuit of pleasure does at last displace all other human values. Warren had already issued the same warning in *Democracy and Poetry*:

Redemption from the realm of necessity is what technology promises as the secular millennium. There will be free time for all, uncountable golden hours. But what kind of free time? Free *from* what, and *for* what? . . . Even if the communal larder does bulge . . . and the Clinic of Aphrodisiacs is open on a twenty-four hour basis, the new world may, in fact, produce a more drastic fragmentation of man than we now endure.

In the poem, that drastic fragmentation occurs when the human community found in work, communal dining, and language is dissipated in favor of public sexual ritual; and the human's long heroic struggle to
earn identity through self-knowledge, and through responsibly forging History, has come to an ignoble end:

to be happy and well-adjusted, you

Must put out of mind much you have been taught. Among others, the names Of Plato, St. Paul, Spinoza, Pascal and Freud must not be spoken, and when,

Without warning, by day or night, the appalling White blaze of God’s Great Eye sweeps the sky, History

Turns tail and scuttles back to its burrow Like a groundhog caught in a speeding sportscar’s headlight.

By comparison with the mindless pleasure seekers of “Inevitable Frontier,” the Warren persona, though gnawed by dread and his sense of ultimate ignorance, at least has a real self to work with, as *Democracy and Poetry* defined it: “the self is never to be found [e.g., ‘I’m going to take time off and find myself’], but must be created . . . [as] the product of a thousand actions, large and small, conscious or unconscious, performed not ‘away from it all,’ but in the face of ‘it all.’” A poem like “Waiting” subjects this doctrine to a severe test by putting its “you” figure, the lapsarian self in extremis, up against near total loss of hope, love, and faith in successive vignettes, but even then “you” may be sustained by the collective human selfhood created by the fact that “remarkably, common men have done noble deeds” and that “at least, God / Has allowed man the grandeur of certain utterances” which are “sometimes true.” And endurance of pain in “When the Tooth Cracks—Zing!” and of fear in “Heat Wave Breaks” verifies the self by connecting it with reality—the internal reality of toothache and memory in one case, and the external reality of violent storm in the other, making “the world stab anew to our hearts in the lightning-stricken air.”

Beyond his rampant ironies in treating this subject, Warren does want to give the rational consciousness the dignity it has earned in its tragic world of time and loss and knowledge of separateness from other beings. But to say this is very far from justifying his epigraph from Isaiah in *Now and Then*: “let the inhabitants of the rock sing.” For the inhabitants of the rock to sing, knowing it is a rock, a waste land, implies some sort of transfiguring vision, like the Christian faith that enabled
T. S. Eliot to find peace “even among these rocks” in *Ash-Wednesday* or the aesthetic principle that led Wallace Stevens to decorate “The Rock” with poetic leaves to cover its barrenness. For Warren, as we have seen earlier, that transfiguring power finds expression in dream, intuition, and anima/animal figures. With increasing urgency these subliminal voices become manifest in Warren’s later volumes, bringing promise of psychic healing to the stricken lapsarian ego and making it possible for the inhabitant of the rock, at least in some part of his being, to sing. As the most original and momentous element in his “Speculative” poems, this theme also evokes, in the main, the poet’s purest lyrical strain and utmost imagistic power.

It is appropriate that Warren introduces his “Speculative” section with “Dream,” a poem that turns to the subliminal self—“So grapple your dream!”—for a new approach to the question of redeeming the time: “What can you dream to make Time real again?” The grappling is fierce in this poem, with Odysseus “snug in that lethal embrace” of Ajax and Jacob wrestling his angel “nightlong,” but to thus grasp for the “self of yourself”—the lost anima—is the only alternative to the hollow-man condition at the level of rational consciousness:

Yes, grapple—or else the Morning Star  
Westward will pale, and leave  
Your ghost without history even, to wander  
A desert trackless in sun-glare.

At this entering point in Warren’s dream poetry, it is well to define what he means by the term. Some of these poems, like “When the Tooth Cracks—Zing!,” include dream fragments in the usual sense, but in its larger sense the dream, for Warren, encompasses any subconscious thrust toward truth, design, creativity. For the artist, or any original thinker, this source of insight may be indispensable. In his essay on Coleridge (1946), Warren quotes approvingly that poet’s assertion that “there is in genius itself an unconscious activity; nay, that is the genius in the man of genius”; and (quoting Coleridge again): “Dreams have nothing in them which is absurd and nonsensical.” In his *Paris Review* interview (1957), he cautions that the dream will come only to the man who has prepared himself, through hard work in his conscious life, to receive it—which explains why the dream must be “grappled” nightlong in the style of Jacob and Odysseus. And in his *Four Quarters* interview (1972), Warren cites two examples of this phenomenon: Kekulé, the
chemist who dreamed the formula for the benzene ring after failing to get it during three years in the laboratory; and Coleridge, writing “Kubla Khan” from a dream. “Coleridge can dream a poem, the chemist can dream a formula; but Coleridge could never dream a chemical formula and Kekulé could never dream ‘Kubla Khan’... This [kind of dream] can happen because we, at the conscious and unconscious levels, are all one piece.”

If often the Warren persona is not “of one piece,” that is because, as Joseph Campbell stated, the “lines of communication between the conscious and unconscious zones of the psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two.” As though to compensate for this neglect of the unconscious zone, several poems make a special point—contrary to the earlier man in sunset motif—of welcoming the night. The speaker in “First Dawn Light” regards his waking with some impatience, regretful that “you must wait to resume, in night’s black hood, the reality of dream”; and the sunset watcher in “The Smile” sees in the deepening dusk “the promise that soon sleep / Will heal the soul’s identity.” But in the end psychic wholeness requires that the dream be carried over from unconscious to conscious reality, from night to day as “The Smile” goes on to say: “and dawn / May breed a dream we may dream real.” The youth in “Diver” exhibits that wholeness in moving between the two realms, from “an unsuspected depth and calm / Of identity,” underwater, back “to all the joy and anguish of / The earth we walk on, lie down in”; and the youth in “Waking to Tap of Hammer” (modeled after the poet’s son Gabriel, building a sea-going vessel) creates a unified self in his work: “He lives in a dream of his passion... He dreams / Of sail-crack like pistol, of spume.”

Two related (but not consecutive) poems present an engaging example of the dream coming to the aid of the tongue-tied poet. “How to Tell a Love Story” shows the speaker unable to tell the story, blocked by fear, ineptitude, and ignorance. Diving underwater, he seems to have it—“my chest was filled with a story like innocence”—but “I rose, rose up, and plunged into light-blaze brutal as blackness,” and his conscious artistry fails: “If only the first word would come and untwist my tongue! /... Perhaps I can’t say the first word till I know what it all means. / Perhaps I can’t know till finally the doctor comes in and leans.” In “Love Recognized,” however, the love story does get told through dream imagery: “the happening that / Is you keeps falling like snow / On the landscape of not-you, hiding hideousness, until / The streets and the world of wrath are choked with snow.” The rational consciousness pro-
tests, in the comic manner we have seen elsewhere, against the illogic of all this—"why should this happen to me? / I have always been a law-abiding citizen"—but "you, like snow, like love, keep falling" and "the world of wrath" continues to be "covered in a glitter of crystalline whiteness."

Eventually, the dream becomes identified with the work of the transfiguring imagination at both the conscious and unconscious level, answering "our yearning for . . . primal or supernal unity of being," as *Democracy and Poetry* put it. And that vision of unity is in the end the most precious gift of the dream. While the rational consciousness discriminates and knows separateness, the dream fosters "the sense of the 'One Life' in which all creation participates"; while the conscious self mourns its diminution from *then* to *now*, the unconscious intuits that "all Time is a dream, and we're all one Flesh, at last." In this volume of memorable poems, perhaps the most moving and momentous, and the most beautifully crafted, are those that strive to transmit these redeeming insights (to use a phrase from Warren's novel *Flood*) into a "mystic osmosis of being." Here the poet most nearly realizes the ideal unity of being he garnered from Coleridge: "A poet's heart and intellect should be combined . . . intimately combined and unified with the great appearances of nature"; and here also he best masters that subliminal language that Coleridge identified with objects in Nature: "In looking at objects of Nature . . . I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolic language for something within me that always and forever exists."

For the Warren persona, the end in view is not far from that which obtains, as Warren sees it, in *The Ancient Mariner*: "So we may have here, and I do not mean this too whimsically, the case of a man who saves his own soul by composing a poem." Not to speak whimsically, the Warren persona saves his soul by grappling his dream for the unitary vision that we see in "Unless," for example—a poem that declares, "All will be in vain" unless the subliminal consciousness (associated with night, "energy," a face "stripped to white bone by starlight") rescues the rational consciousness from the "Truth" witnessed in "the ferocity of daylight" in the desert (where the snake, "fanged, unforgiving," suggests the lapse from Eden). At the end of the poem, in a scene reminiscent of "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart" (in *Arcturus*), the persona's "heart and intellect"—to cite an earlier quotation—are "intimately combined and unified with the great appearances of nature"; he is swallowed into nature, joyously, in this metaphor:
The mountains, in starlight, were black
And black-toothed to define the enormous circle

Of desert of which I was the center. This
Is one way to approach the question.

All is in vain unless you can, motionless, standing there,
Breathe with the rhythm of stars.

You cannot, of course, see your own face, but you know that it,
Lifted, is stripped to white bone by starlight. This is happening.

This is happiness.

If the inhabitant of the rock—or desert—may sing in “Unless,” the rock itself sings in “Dream of a Dream.” The “stones sing,” in this most lyrical poem of the book, literally because the stream is running over them and metaphorically because the stream is an image of the benignity of Time: “What they sing is nothing, nothing, / But the joy Time plies to feel / In fraternal flux and glimmer / With the stream. . . .” In the poem’s title then, the first “Dream” is the speaker’s subliminal imagination, which evokes and clarifies the second “Dream,” nature’s grand dream of Time. To the rational consciousness in “American Portrait,” we may remember, “the teeth in Time’s jaw all snag backward,” swallowing lifetimes like “shark-meat”; to the subliminal consciousness in “Dream of a Dream” the self’s submission to Time seems easy and natural:

In my dream Time and water interflow,
And bubbles of consciousness glimmer ghostly as they go. . . .

[I] listen and wonder whence my name
Bubbled forth on a moonlit stream
To glitter by the singing stone
A moment before, whirling, it is gone
Into the braiding texture of dream.

In the end the dream confers the power, so badly needed by the rational consciousness, to accept one’s mortality gracefully, sacramentally: “—till finally, / From the twilight spruce thicket, darkening and far, / A
thrush, sanctifying the hour, will utter / The glory of diminution.” This is followed by a misgiving—“Later, / The owl's icy question shudders the air”—but it is only counterpoint to the stones' singing: “By this time the moonlight’s bright heel has splashed the stream.”

Two other poems about accepting time and mortality are “Rather like a Dream” and “Heart of the Backlog.” Here the mood is sober, even melancholy, as the feeling of loss impinges heavily, yet the vital contact with nature offers sustaining power. Autumn, making “another summer . . . now truly a dream,” and twilight, drawing “the drawstring / Of darkness . . . tighter,” threaten to make the reality of time past “rather like a dream,” but the speaker may follow Wordsworth's example: “To touch stone or tree to confirm / His own reality.” In “Heart of the Backlog” the dread-ridden speaker, who counts his own heartbeat and thinks of the backlog as years being consumed (“how many the years that burn there”), takes instruction from a splendid little creature in nature. The One Life which permits a sacramental view of the universe has its counterpart in the One Death we all die, also sacramentally rendered:

The vole pauses, one paw
Uplifted in whiteness of moonlight.

There is no indication of what angle, or slant
The great shadow may silkily accent the beauty of snow.
And the vole, Little One, has neither theology nor
Aesthetic—not even what you may call
Stoicism. . . .
Poor thing, he has only himself. . . .

The backlog burns down. You sit and

Again the owl calls, and with some sadness you wonder
If at last, when the air-scything shadow descends
And needles claw-clamp through gut, heart and brain,
Will ecstasy melting with terror create the last little cry?
Is God's love the last and most mysterious word for death?

Like “A Way to Love God”—the unforgettable opening poem in Arcurus—“Heart of the Backlog” joins its speaker with the natural creature in submission to their common mortality: “yes, lost / In the whiteness—to never look upward, or back, only on. / . . . I beg you not to look back in God’s name.”
To conclude this study of Warren’s poetic vision in Now and Then, we turn to several especially poignant examples of the Warren persona grappling the dream for subliminal revelation. “Code Book Lost” portrays the deep need to interpret the subliminal language in a series of vignettes: “What does the veery say, at dusk, in shad-thicket?”; “When white breakers lunge at the black basalt cliff, what / Does the heart hear?”; “Have you thought as you walk, late, late, the streets of a town / Of all the dreams being dreamed in dark houses? What do they signify?” In the end the hunger to know is unappeasable: “Yes, message on message . . . / The whole world pours at us. But the code book, somehow, is lost.” In “The Mission” this mood deepens in that the persona’s dream confirms rather than alleviates the morbidity afflicting the rational consciousness. Here the speaker awakes from his dream of extinction (horses standing motionless in gray sea fog—reminiscent of the sheep in “A Way to Love God”) to contemplate, consciously, more imagery of extinction: “I wake / From my dream, and know that the shadow / Of the great spruce close by my house must be falling / Black on the white roof of winter.” But he also contemplates a favorite anima image in Warren’s poetry, the bear whose hibernation bespeaks a continuing dream-life within its deathsome environment:

[I] think how,
On the snow-locked mountain, deep in a fissure
Under the granite ledge, the bear

Huddles inside his fur. . . .
He stirs in sleep, farts
Gently in the glacial blackness of the cave. The eyes
Do not open. Outside, in moonlight,
The ledges are bearded with ice, and the brook,
Black, crawls under ice. It has a mission.

Drawing the speaker out of his bad dream, the bear’s subconscious ease in his cave and the stream’s movement under ice evoke his own “lost mission”—“to try to understand / The possibility of joy in the world’s tangled and hieroglyphic beauty.”

Our final three poems define three variants of the anima image toward which the speaker hearkens with rising emotional intensity. “Memory Forgotten” calls up the child-self of the prelapsarian past—
"How much do we forget that is ourselves"—in a Wordsworthian mood of reminiscence:

Did you ever
Wake up at dawn, heart singing, and run out
Barefoot in the dew, and dew blazed like diamonds of light?
Or was it a kiss on the brow, the brush of a feather,

Just as you fell asleep? How long
Has your mother been dead? Or did you, much older,

Lie in the tall grass, and, motionless, watch
The single white fleck of cloud forever crossing the blue—. . .

What is it you cannot remember that is so true?

The other two poems, "Ah, Anima!" and "Heart of Autumn," are not Wordsworthian; set in the now of Waste Land awareness, they project an Eliotic urgency of desire to escape totally and immediately with the fleeing anima. Knowing his Christian duty to this world, Eliot tried to suppress his escapist impulse in Ash-Wednesday: "(Bless me father) though I do not wish to wish these things / From the wide window towards the granite shore / The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying / Unbroken wings / . . . And the weak spirit quickens to rebel." In "Ah, Anima!" the Warren persona feels no such qualms about his desire to escape the wreckage left by "the hurricane of Time." Gladly would he give over his fallen self, lost "on the great chart of history," for the anima's pure "nameless" being in nature—"to leave / The husk behind, and leap / Into the blind and antiseptic anger of air."

In "Heart of Autumn," the terminal poem in the book, the anima image is a flock of geese departing from a world dying into autumn; but here, altering the archetype of "Picnic Remembered," the man in sunset responds to their subliminal language—"the imperial utterance"—by rising to join them with "heart [that] is impacted with a fierce impulse / To unwordable utterance." Transcending wordable utterance in this scene is the symbolic language that Coleridge spoke about, such that "in looking at objects of Nature . . . I seem rather to be seeking . . . a symbolic language for something within me that always and forever exists":

and I stand, my face lifted now skyward,
Hearing the high beat, my arms outstretched in the tingling
Process of transformation, and soon tough legs,
With folded feet, trail in the sounding vacuum of passage,
And my heart is impacted with a fierce impulse
To unwordable utterance—
Toward sunset, at great height.

As a way of completing his poetic vision in *Now and Then*, this passage is
final and perfect: utterly original, exactly precise in diction and imagery, significant in meaning. The greatest transfiguring image in the
book, it draws the man into nature, the fallen self into its anima, and
the heart of autumn into emancipating flight. Originally one of a group
titled “Three Poems about Dream,” later published as “Three Poems on
Time” (*Atlantic*, October 1977), “Heart of Autumn” relates Time to the
Dream in its effort to redeem the time—the heart of autumn—through
this appeal to the subliminal consciousness.4

So ends this installment of the tale of two voices. T. S. Eliot in *Ash-
Wednesday* spoke of “the desert in the garden the garden in the desert,”
meaning that men have to live on two levels simultaneously, the natural
and the supernatural. For Warren, the two levels are the rational (or
lapsarian) and the subliminal, and, short of death, there is no release
from this duality. Both poets tend at times to accept this condition with
little patience—thus Eliot’s “Teach us to sit still / Even among these
rocks” and “I should be glad of another death”; and thus Warren’s oc-
casional impatience “to leave / The husk behind” and join the anima
once and for all. But as *Now and Then* clearly illustrates, his poetry as a
whole gives magnificent expression to both of these contrapuntal voices.

**IV**

There is “no complete criticism,” Warren has said. “The real aca-
demic job is to absorb an idea, to put it in perspective along with other
ideas.” So resonant is Warren’s poetry with ideas that my criticism has
been greatly more incomplete than the poetry deserves, having had to
slight form, style, sequence, and many ideas, for that matter, in order to
produce even this fragmentary analysis of Warren’s poetic vision. At
best, the critic can only hope that Warren’s “notion of criticism” holds
true in this case—“its purpose is to deliver the reader back to the work.”

But concerning the man and his career, a further judgment may be
attempted. About the career, an impression has been gaining currency

4 The other two poems in the group, also published in *Now and Then*, were “Dream”
and “Ah, Anima!”
that Warren's verse has been ascending in excellence since the 1940s, while his fiction has been declining since the pinnacle of *All the King's Men*. If that judgment is right, the reason may relate to something Warren said in his *Four Quarters* interview: “I tend to think of a novel in the same spirit as I think of a poem. But there is one important difference. . . . The novels are much more objective for me. The poems have a much deeper and more immediate personal reference.” And later, discussing his characters, Warren says, “I never think of one as speaking especially for me. Never! Never! I feel myself as, in a way, outside of my book, my characters.” In being “much more objective” and “never speaking especially for me,” Warren’s fictional protagonists vary from his poetic persona and have, even compositely, a much narrower sensibility. Unlike the fictional character who inhabits the breadth of a single novel, Warren’s poetic persona inhabits and unifies his whole poetic corpus, illustrating Warren’s definition of the self in *Democracy and Poetry* as “a style of being, continually expanding in a vital process of definition, affirmation, revision, and growth, a process that is the image, we may say, of the life process.” In moving from poem to poem and volume to volume, the poetic persona is perfectly free to display openly, copiously, and immediately the gifts of his maker: a greatly erudite and original intelligence, a complex and subtle emotional sensitivity, a wonderfully perceptive eye and ear coupled with an exceptionally retentive memory, a prolific imagination, and remarkable powers—part gift and part craft—with the language. It is no coincidence that the novel generally regarded as Warren’s masterpiece in fiction is the one whose protagonist, Jack Burden, displays these characteristics of Warren’s poetic persona in greatest measure. Although his success in fiction must be acknowledged as enviable, it may be that the genre of poetry permits Warren to tap a purer stream of creativity through its “deeper and more immediate personal reference.” Warren himself put the distinction thus in *Democracy and Poetry*:

The posited self of a lyric may be taken as purely fictional or as a shadowy persona of a literal self, the author. And this fact leads to the most subtle, complex, and profound relationship in literature . . . the relation of the self of the author to the work created. It is not only the objective characters that serve as “models” of selfhood; the work itself represents the author’s adventure in selfhood.

About this lifetime devoted to high excellence in what, for most of us, comprises as much as anything does a sacred calling, a closing trib-
ute is in order. I shall couch the tribute in terms Warren himself has used frequently. Speaking of Robert Frost, Warren described his most recurrent theme as "the relation . . . between the fact and the dream." And in his essay on Joseph Conrad, putting those terms a little differently, Warren said, "The lowest and the most vile creature must, in some way, idealize his existence." Speaking now of Warren himself, we may say that he has portrayed the essential struggle of every artist—and of every man, really, in that even the lowliest creature must idealize his existence—to translate his dream, which is his deepest idea of himself: his identity, into fact, which is to say his work or his record of himself that gives expression to that dream. For the artist the deepest dream or emanation of self involves above all else his creative vision which he must translate, through a solitary unflagging pressure of will upon the intractable materials of his medium, into the fact of his completed art work.

No man may ever hope to join fact to dream perfectly—even Faulkner and Beethoven declared themselves artistic failures—but the record now shows that through a lifelong unrelenting assertion of will, Robert Penn Warren has so mined his talent as to secure a place alongside the finest poets in American literature. His reward will be the immortality that Art bestows upon its most dedicated disciples. But there is another reward, better, more delicious than even that. It has to do with the translating of dream into fact, ideal into reality, elusive vision into work of art. As we think of the man behind the typewriter, facing one by one the thousands of blank pages that, draft after draft, one word at a time and one line at a time, with much brow-knotting, fumbling, and decision-making each step of the way, slowly evolved into this superb canon of poetry—as we consider this, we may say that Mr. Warren already has the reward that matters most. In his twelve volumes of six decades, he has realized, page by page and line by line, the promise that Ralph Waldo Emerson bestowed upon The Poet: "And this is the reward; that the ideal shall be real to thee." And, in the sense of a quotation he once cited from Joseph Conrad, he has redeemed the time: "Our daily work must be done to the glory of the dead, and for the good of those who come after."