In looking at Warren’s early poetry, including his manuscripts on deposit at Yale, one could easily become distracted by a (Harold) Bloomesque anxiety-of-influence perspective. T. S. Eliot’s style, imagery, and structuring methods leave tell-tale traces throughout “Kentucky Mountain Farm” and “The Return: An Elegy,” for example, and Hart Crane’s influence (possibly via Allen Tate) is implicit in a thirty-eight-line poem by Warren, never published, entitled “Farewell of Faustus to Helen.” And Warren’s mentor John Crowe Ransom is of course a presence behind many poems of that formative period, making himself felt in the rhyming quatrain form, in the elegiac irony of tone, and in the mixture of professorial learnedness and regional folklore that both Warren and Ransom favored.

Yet, interesting as these influences are, I find the opposite perspective much more interesting: it is the gradual emergence of Warren’s original poetic vision and virtuosity that gives his early poetry its ultimate value. From this point of view, a notable feature of the early poems is the precursive appearance of poetic concerns and materials that have subsequently crystallized into the structural center of Warren’s total poetic canon. Warren’s true destiny and distinction as a poet came out of the interplay of persona and imagery that was to continue, through various

* The Mississippi Quarterly is pleased to publish here four papers on the poetry of Robert Penn Warren which were presented at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York, December 29, 1983. The papers were the program of the Discussion Group on Southern Literature, a program arranged by Thomas Daniel Young, Gertrude P. Vanderbilt Professor of English, Vanderbilt University. During the last few years Warren has devoted most of his creative efforts to poetry; it was therefore particularly fitting that the Discussion Group had as its topic the examination of Warren’s career as a poet, and likewise it was fortunate that four distinguished critics of his work were able to present papers.—R.L.P.

[Editor’s Note: Professor Robert L. Phillips, Jr., chaired the session.]
phases of modulation, over a period ranging up to six decades, as though to illustrate Warren’s classic description of the psychology of the image in *All the King’s Men*:

What happened was this: I got an image in my head that never got out... We get very few of the true images in our heads of the kind I am talking about, the kind which become more and more vivid for us as if the passage of the years did not obscure their reality but, year by year, drew off another veil to expose a meaning which we had only dimly surmised at first. Very probably the last veil will not be removed, for there are not enough years, but the brightness of the image increases and our conviction increases that the brightness is meaning, ... and without the image our lives would be nothing except an old piece of film rolled on a spool and thrown into a desk drawer among the unanswered letters.¹

It was in the light of this sort of thinking that Warren more recently commented in an interview that a man has all the images he will ever need by age twenty. From the manuscripts on deposit at the Beinecke Library at Yale, two especially engaging examples of this principle may be rendered. In 1957, Warren’s prize-winning volume called *Promises* included two companion poems entitled “Tonight the Woods Are Darkened” and “The Hazel Leaf.” The subtitle of this book, *Poems 1954-1956*, gives no indication of how far back the taproots of these poems go, but the manuscripts at Yale show that Warren was toying with this material at least thirty years earlier, in an unpublished poem called “Nocturne”:

*Tonight the woods are darkened,*
*We have forgot our pain,*
*The pain of hearts that hearkened*
*To an abysmal strain*
*Creeping up from lost stars*
*To sear our solitude*
*And brand these bitter scars*
*We wear about our wood.*

*O yes—these paths are haunted,*
*For we are each a ghost,*
*A ghost whose wraith is taunted*
*By memories it lost*
*And may not find again.*
*Before lies year on year,*
*Ruining swales of unreaped grain,*
*While from those fields we hear*

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¹ *All the King’s Men* (Bantam Books: New York, 1951), pp. 118-119.
In the wintry cawing raven
Black echoes of our pain.
For the hazel leaf once fallen
Grows never green again.

That ghost of a past self in stanza 3 was to recur, greatly enlarged upon, in "Tonight the Woods Are Darkened" in Promises; and the "wintry cawing raven" making "Black echoes of our pain" would re-emerge after fifty years in "Mountain Plateau" (in Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978): "At the center of acres of snow-whiteness," it "Uttered/Its cry . . . across the immense distance/Of the landscape of my heart."

Another engaging example of this principle of the recurring motif may be found in the most recent of Warren's Selected Poems volumes, which begins with a collection called Can I See Arcturus From Where I Stand? Poems 1975. One would not guess from that date that the terminal entry in this collection—which I consider his finest single poem since Audubon: A Vision in 1969—had its genesis a full half-century earlier, in an unpublished poem of the 1920s, which (being a sonnet) I can briefly recite as follows. (There is no title)

In late afternoon, he stops in the road's red dust,
Or the red mud, stalled there, cart's tongue, wheel's rim
(Iron or wood ruined by the rot or rust)
Broken at last; then passing, we see him
Bend, and the mule droop, and over his head
Bright leaves, if autumn, fly, or summer, the sun
Beats, winter, the rain; he stands in the red
Dust, red mud, his motion the same, the one
Motion always, which we know but cannot name
—Sudden like the flung headlight glare in dark
That seasonless gesture to mind comes, the same
Motion that stuns the eternal, empty air:
One of the poor with a cart of junk to use
For purposes which we cannot peruse.

In the later poem, "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home from Party in the Back Country," the poet cites with embarrassment the only two lines he can recall from the earlier version:

[I] remember
Now only the couplet of what
Had aimed to be—Jesus Christ—a sonnet:
One of those who gather junk and wire to use
For purposes that we cannot peruse.
As I said, Jesus Christ. (pp. 15-16)

(Regrettably, he had remembered only the worst two lines of an otherwise quite competent poem.) Clearly, he had not known where the original poem was going, having only the initial image before the veils were drawn away, but it is interesting to note that when this early sonnet is put together with another very early poem, “To a Face in a Crowd” (which terminates his three Selected Poems volumes), the result is a long stride toward the finished perfection of “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart.” The nameless alter ego of “To a Face in a Crowd”—which begins, “Brother, my brother, whither do you pass?”—turns out to be that same stranger in the mule-cart, as “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart” indicates in its closing apostrophe:

And so I say:
Brother, Rebuker, my Philosopher past all
Casuistry, will you be with me when
I arrive and leave my own cart of junk...?

Recurring images like these are of real interest in their own right, but their deepest importance lies in their subservience to the poet’s gradually evolving vision of life, which in the end must sustain whatever coherence and significance the total poetic oeuvre may claim. By tracing this modulation of certain recurring themes and images from volume to volume, we may better grasp both the individual poems and the poet’s total vision. Warren himself had revealed a strong sense of this development into new phases of creativity when he prefaced several early volumes with the remark that he had subdivided the volume in question into “Early” and “Late” segments because there was “a fundamental difference in both theme and method” that distinguished those segments. What I propose to do here is to highlight the interplay of novelty and continuity that gave each of those early volumes its own integrity while at the same time

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pointing ahead to subsequent work, so that we can—in hind-
sight—discern the seeds of each later volume hidden away somewhere in its predecessor, waiting to be nourished into new
fruition. Having already studied some random instances of this process—in the hazel leaf and the stranger on a cart—let us now
undertake a more systematic analysis.

In his “Early” period, which terminated in Selected Poems,
1923-1943, Robert Penn Warren compiled seven volumes of poetry,
three of which were published and four unpublished. His first
collection, Pondy Woods and Other Poems, was accepted for
publication by Payson & Clarke Ltd. in 1929—when Warren was
twenty-four—but never came into print because the firm went
bankrupt in the great Crash of that year. Perhaps appropriate to
that historic catastrophe, Warren laid the groundwork for his
life’s work as a poet in the poetry of the Fall that pervades
these pages, a theme that would continue to preoccupy roughly
half his poetic handiwork over the next fifty-plus years. Scattered
among the Eliotic echoes in this first volume—the cruelty of April
and a death by water in Kentucky Mountain Farm, for example—
are the regional materials that would characterize his later work
(e.g. “Alf Burt: Tenant Farmer,” “August Revival: Crosby
Junction”) together with embryonic versions of his most crucial
themes of the future, their final importance unrealized at this
time even by their creator.

Among these motifs I would point up four in particular. First,
the lapsarian theme of passage into a world ruined by time and
loss expresses itself largely through the autumnal imagery of
poems like “So Frost Astounds,” “Croesus in Autumn,” and “The
Last Metaphor.” Second, the internal effect of the Fall—a uni-
versal sense of guilt and a craving for forgiveness—appears in
“Night Windows for Two,” an unpublished entry in the Pondy
Woods collection. Here San Francisco’s fog is likened to the
breathing of a prayer that the speaker vainly longs to utter:

Think you, hungry is the city in the fog
Where now the darkened piles resume
Their framed and frozen prayer
Articulate and shafted in the stone
Against the void and absolute air.
If so the frantic breath could be forgiven
And the deep blood subdued before it is gone
In a savage paternoster to the stone,
Then might we all be shriven.

(Some fifteen years later, "The Mango on the Mango Tree" would state a close approximation of these sentiments.) Third, the irruption of cosmic consciousness that was to answer the wanderer's quest for meaning in "Billie Potts" also appears in the Pondy Woods collection, specifically defining Warren's God at the end of "At the Hour of the Breaking of the Rocks." Warren's pantheistic "osmosis of being" (as an essay of his called it in 1955) traces back this far. And fourth, the eventual reunification of the psyche is also imaged in this first volume. In "The Return," a falling leaf meeting its perfect image on the water's surface depicts the fallen self rejoining its lost anima.

Perhaps to indicate that this reunion of the psyche cannot now be realized, Warren omitted "The Return" from his collection of the following year (1930), Kentucky Mountain Farm and Other Poems. (Apart from deleting the last five sections of Kentucky Mountain Farm, the only difference between this volume and its predecessor was the deletion of a minor poem, "Letter of a Mother.") But in his subsequent collection, Cold Colloquy in 1933, Warren not only restored the missing sections to Kentucky Mountain Farm, but also added a new section to this poem, "Watershed," where he recast his concept of the lost anima in the form of a "sunset hawk" whose "gold eyes scan" the immense landscape with a breadth of vision appropriate to the "osmosis of being" concept. Although other images of the lost anima appear in the Cold Colloquy collection—the doe fleeing the hounds in "Eidolon," and the "frail reproachful alter ego" in "Man Coming of Age"—this aviary representation of the ideal self harkening back toward Eden was to prove Warren's favorite. (The "sunset hawk" resumes this role in poems like "Picnic Remembered," "A Problem in Spatial Composition," and "Evening Hawk"—to cite poems from the 1930s to the 1970s.)

Elsewhere, the Cold Colloquy collection amplifies the lapsarian theme in clusters of poems about the encroachment of

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time and death ("Calendar," "Aged Man Surveys the Past Time," "Pacific Gazer"), about alienation from others ("Cold Colloquy," "For a Self-Possessed Friend," "Late Subterfuge"), and about the cultural/political chaos of the times ("History," "Ransom"). Autumnal imagery prevails more strongly than ever in this volume, yet its most prominent new poem, "The Garden: On prospect of a fine day in early autumn," introduces the redemptive motif of seeking a "sacrament that can translate/All things . . . From appetite [the fallen state] to innocence." This search for renewed innocence was to become a crucial subject, reaching the proportions of psychodrama, in the poetry of the next decade.

In 1935, two years after Cold Colloquy and Other Poems was compiled, Warren finally got a book of poems actually published, under the unassuming title of Thirty-Six Poems. Most of the thirty-six were in the first three collections we have looked at, but several of the new entries mark an interesting mid-point between convention and novelty. "Letter from a Coward to a Hero" juxtaposes a Wordsworthian sense of the lost paradise ("The scenes of childhood were splendid,/And the light that there attended,/But is rescinded") against Warren's own increasingly distinctive portrayal of the self-mocking, angst-ridden adult ("For sleep try love or veronal"). "Question and Answer" brings the Eliotic quest for meaning ("What has availed/Or failed?/Or will avail?") to a Warren-esque dead end: "For all—/Each frescoed figure leaning from the world's wall . . . /Demand in truth the true/Answer of you." And "The Return: An Elegy," a stream-of-consciousness poem in the style of Eliot's "Prufrock," portrays more compellingly than ever the theme of the fallen soul's divided psyche, here evident in the son's subliminal response to his mother's death: "the old bitch is dead/what have I said!" This inherent guilt, played off against the need for innocence, was to provoke the identity crisis that makes up the central subject of Warren's next published volume, Eleven Poems on the Same Theme (1942).

In 1938-39, Warren compiled the last of his unpublished collections, Problem of Knowledge, whose lapsarian title is borne out by the inclusion in this volume of five poems that bring the
theme of the Fall to its culmination. These five are "Bearded Oaks," a poem that intensely imagines the state of being dead; "Monologue at Midnight," a lament over the impossibility of communication; "Revelation," an expression of filial guilt towards an estranged mother; "Love's Parable," a metaphysical conceit describing a broken-love relationship (and possibly an allegory about God and man); and "Picnic Remembered," the most Edenic of these lapsarian poems. (In his novel about Jack Burden's Great Fall, the picnic-remembered motif figures strongly in Chapters Three and Seven.)

During the interim between compiling Problem of Knowledge in 1938-39 and Eleven Poems on the Same Theme in 1942, Warren invented the most original and significant innovation in all his "Early" poetry, the persona of "you." For readers not deeply familiar with Warren's total body of poetry, this motif requires a word of explanation. As we have seen, the lapsarian theme pervading Warren's earlier poetry postulates a sense of ruin not only concerning the outer world but also concerning the inner psyche's bifurcation between an anima figure fleeing back toward paradise (sunset hawk, vanished doe, lost child-self) and a fallen persona that is left behind to cope as best it can with its dread, guilt, and vacancy. In this new poetry of the late 1930s and 1940s, this lost alter ego of prelapsarian innocence becomes supplanted by a fearsome new identity, the "undiscovered self" of Eleven Poems on the Same Theme (1942) and "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (1943), as well as Warren's major fiction of the 1940s. Later, in Brother to Dragons (1953), in "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace" (the major poem in Promises, 1957), and in the Garland for You and "Emperor" poems in You, Emperors, and Others (1960), this motif was to hold central importance. Like the Freudian id or Jungian shadow, this figure of innate evil ironically rises up with hatchet in hand—like Big Billie Potts or Lilburn Lewis—to answer the fallen persona's yearning for its lost anima. Naturally enough, the appalled conscious ego—"you"—tries to deny any consanguinity with its polluted Jungian shadow.

In "End of Season," the first of the "you" poems, this effort of "you" to rid itself of Warren's version of "Original Sin" produces imagery of flight and ablution ("For waters wash our
guilt and dance in the sun”). The flight reflex is futile, of course, but it recurs in the other “you” poems, such as “Pursuit” and “Original Sin: A Short Story,” to be replaced by the motif of homicide when escape proves impossible. Thus the shadow self is slain and buried in “Crime” (only to be resurrected), while in “Terror,” the last of the Eleven Poems, and in “Butterflies Over the Map” (in the subsequent Mexico Is a Foreign Country sequence), “you” convert this desire to eliminate the world’s evil into murderous political fanaticism. The child-killing episode in “Butterflies Over the Map” reminds us that the “you” figure traces back to an actual child-killer, the fanatical John Brown of Warren’s 1929 biography.

In the last and greatest of Warren’s “Early” poems, “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” this ongoing psychodrama finds its resolution in an irruption of cosmic consciousness that imparts to the hitherto fallen creation a final unity and meaning. In kneeling to the father “who is evil and ignorant and old” and thereby acknowledging his congenital guilt and mortality, the son ends the search for “innocence” that had precipitated the conflict between “you” and the shadow within the psyche. “You” are now able to recover genuine innocence not through sanctimony and separation but through merging with the gathering creatures, thereby becoming “brother to pinion and the pious fin that cleave/Their innocence of air and the disinfectant flood.” Set within “the sacramental silence of evening”—an “evening empty of wind or bird”—this scene further implies a reconciliation with mortality, and in that sense a recovery from the Fall, at the end of the son’s quest.

During the twenty years of his “Early” period, then, Robert Penn Warren achieved an original style and a coherent system of ideas which would form the basis of his subsequent career in poetry. In terms of theme, the most important development in these two decades of verse may be described as the reconstitution of a fractured personality. This development occurs on two levels: on the unconscious level through the reconciliation between “you” and the Jungian shadow, and on the conscious level through a gradual accumulation of therapeutic imperatives like those in the following excerpts: Our courage needs, “perhaps, new definition”
Collectively, these imperatives—courage, hope, love, happiness, innocence, identity—define a dialectical process by which this poetry aims to surmount its Waste Land mood and lapsarian consciousness and thereby permit some healing of the psyche. The personality that emerges from this process became in turn the chief legacy of Warren's early poetry to the later volumes. First appearing as "R. P. W." the conciliator in Brother to Dragons, Warren's poetic persona continued to impart to all the later volumes a technical continuity and psychological center not achievable in Warren's total body of fiction. (Warren himself has described this presence of his persona as the "one important difference" between his fiction and poetry: "The novels are much more objective for me. The poems have a much deeper and more immediate personal reference."4)

These concepts, however, are poetically meaningless when thus uprooted from their contexts. It is the play of imagery that breathes life into the system of ideas governing Warren's poetic canon. As my concluding illustration of this principle, I propose to show how three crucial themes—the fall from innocence, the search for the lost self, and the redeeming pantheistic insight—relate to three specific images used over a sixty-year span: a leaf and a flower and a bird. Our first instance of leaf imagery is the fern in a graceful little poem (untitled and unpublished) whose style betrays its very early vintage:

As, delicate within the stone,
Pick-steel divulges to the view
The printed frond that once had grown
Greener—but perfect now as new:

As, delicate within the stone,
Pick-steel divulges to the view
The printed frond that once had grown
Greener—but perfect now as new:

So had disaster’s bluntless stroke
Cracked the heart-stone and there revealed
Within the stone the stone that spoke
Of fernal shade and summer’s field.

This ossified memento of the lost Eden is shortly supplanted by a more commonplace use of leaf imagery subserving the lapsarian theme. The “dead leaf” hiding under the garden waters becomes “The obscure image of the season’s wreck” in “Garden Waters,” and the dying leaves of “Croesus in Autumn” provoke philosophical thought even in Croesus—“Though this grey guy be no Aurelius”—now that “green is blown and every gold gone sallow.”

With the unfolding of his lost anima psychology, Warren’s leaf imagery assumes crucial new dimensions of meaning that would carry across a half-century and more of poetry-writing. We have already noted that as early as “The Return”—the terminal segment of Kentucky Mountain Farm—Warren had used leaf imagery to portray the ideal of psychic reintegration:

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.

Because this ideal is unachievable at this point (“So, backward heart, you have no voice to call/Your image back . . .”), fallen leaves become a recurring symbol of the place where the lost child-self or its state of innocence lies hidden or buried. The earliest such usage occurs in “Cold Colloquy,” where the mother’s estrangement from her son leaves her, in the end, “pondering, as one who grieves,/Or seeks a thing long lost among the fallen leaves.” A decade later in “Crime,” one of the “you” poems, the image recurs to describe the victim of the mad killer who “cannot seem/To remember what it was he buried under the leaves”;
and soon after, in “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” the leaves reappear in connection with Little Billie’s attempt to retrieve the lost self who knelt to the spring as a child:

But perhaps what you lost was lost in the pool long ago
When childlike you lost it and then in your innocence rose to go
After kneeling, as now, with your thirst beneath the leaves:
And years it lies here and dreams in the depth and grieves,
More faithful than mother or father in the light or dark of the leaves.
As against this use of leaf imagery, Warren uses flower imagery to portray the retrieval of the lost self or the re-entry to paradise. As depicted in “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” this renewal of innocence requires a merging with rather than an escape from the natural world; the resulting “osmosis of being” (to quote his essay “Knowledge and the Image of Man”) merges “the ugly with the beautiful, the slayer with the slain” in “such a sublimation that the world which once provoked . . . fear and disgust may now be totally loved.” “Natural History,” a poem in the Or Else collection of 1974, envisions the final phase of the osmosis of being in its picture of a ghostly old couple, Edenic in their nakedness, being absorbed into nature—he into the rain, and she into the flowers: “Her breath is sweet as bruised violets, and her smile sways like daffodils reflected in a brook.” And “Loss, of Perhaps Love, in Our World of Contingency,” in the Arcturus poems of 1975, includes both leaves and flowers in its retelling of the lapsarian trauma. The Loss of Love in the title refers to the love of the world or of one’s life that was lost with the fall into the world of contingency. The poem opens with an appeal to “Think hard. Try to remember/When you last had it”—it being the love of the world—but the lapsarian moment is hard to pinpoint. Whether moving backward in time from the present, in which the fallen condition is epitomized in a shuffling old bum, or moving forward in time from the prelapsarian past (“The earliest thing you remember, the dapple/Of sunlight on the bathroom floor while your mother/Bathed you”), the moment of loss seems irrecoverable. The flower bespeaking the lost Eden is doubly buried here, under leaves and snow, but yet it waits for the return of the exile: “Violets,/Buried now under dead leaves (later snowdrifts), dream/How each, with a new-born, dew-bright eye, will see/You again pass, cleaving the blue air.”

Our final study in imagery involves a bird that denotes either the loss or the return of the anima, depending on which direction it is flying. In my own favorite passage in Warren’s poetry, the goose flies north as part of the gathering of creatures who emanate a collective identity at the end of “Billie Potts.” Here the fallen soul (“you”) partakes of their redemptive intuitions of meaning:
(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...)

Some thirty-five years later, in “Heart of Autumn” (the final poem of Now and Then in 1978), the geese flying south represent the anima in flight from (literally) the fall, leaving behind a fall-bound husk of self who yearns to join them:

—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 a great height.

Our final specimen of this recurring image shows the bird heading north again, bringing grace to Warren’s persona in the final segment of Audubon (1969). Because the direction of flight carries the poem’s whole meaning, it is thrice repeated within the nine lines of the poem:

Long ago, in Kentucky, I, a boy, stood
By a dirt road, in first dark, and heard
The great geese hoot northward.

I could not see them, there being no moon
And the stars sparse. I heard them.

I did not know what was happening in my heart.
It was the season before the elderberry blooms,
Therefore they were going north.

The sound was passing northward.

With this illustration of the relationship between Warren’s imagery and his system of ideas, I shall conclude this discussion. Many other examples could be brought forward, obviously enough, but enough has been said to verify the importance of Warren’s “Early” verse as the seedbed—and flowerbed, as his talent matured—of his more widely known later poetry. The

IMAGE AND PERSONA IN WARREN’S “EARLY” POETRY
innate coherence that links his early and later volumes suggests T. S. Eliot's remark that in order to know any of Shakespeare's work, one has to know all of it. Warren's later poetry can be fully understood only in the light of what went before it as much as a half century earlier.