Taproots of a Poem: The Long Foreground of “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart”

by Victor Strandberg

In *All the King’s Men*, Jack Burden makes witty use of Tennyson’s “flower-in-the-crannied-wall theory,” discovering that the “delicate little root” of a local corporation “ran all the way to New York City, where it tapped the lush dung heap called the Madison Corporation.” While stopping short of the dung heap image, we may say that Robert Penn Warren’s poems generally bear out the same theory. When plucked up for closer inspection, they display a root system often tracing back through decades of earlier verse-writing, so that we may witness the evolution of certain recurring motifs, themes, or images over upwards of half a century’s poetic handiwork. Perhaps, with Jack Burden, we may feel unprepared to say we know what God and man are, but we may reasonably hope to gain a stronger grasp of Warren’s total poetic design by a close study of one representative root system. The poem I have chosen for this purpose is one of Warren’s finest in his remarkably fertile most recent decade, “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart Encountered Late at Night When Driving Home from Party in the Back Country”—the longest and terminal poem in the 1975 collection, *Can I see Arcturus From Where I Stand?*

As we approach the poem, a brief definition of Warren’s poetic theory seems desirable, beginning with his concept of the image or symbol. “Man lives by images,” Warren has said; “They/Lean at us from the world’s wall, and Time’s.” That assertion, from “Reading Late at Night, Thermometer Falling” (in *Or Else*, 1974), makes clear not only the supreme importance of the image in Warren’s poetics, but also the manner in which images come to him, leaning at him from “the world’s wall” as though he were a connoisseur being arrested and absorbed by one painting after another while moving down the corridors of Time. From this process a set of master images...
may gradually emerge into definition, images that ascend to the status of symbols by reason of their numerous recurrences, their largeness of meaning, and their insistent emotional urgency. When functioning in this fashion, Warren says, the image or symbol imparts design and coherence to a poet’s work as a whole:

The symbol affirms the unity of mind in the welter of experience; it is a device for making that welter of experience manageable for the mind—graspable. ... It does not “stand for” a single idea, and a system of symbols is not to be taken as a mere translation of a discursive sequence. Rather, a symbol implies a body of ideas which may be said to be fused in it. This means that the symbol itself may be developed into a discursive sequence as we intellectually explore its potential.²

A bit later in the same essay, he adds a codicil describing the consistency of meaning that an image will maintain throughout the repetitions and variations of its recurring usage. Warren is speaking here of a single poem, The Ancient Mariner, but we shall find good reason to extend the principle beyond the framework of the single poem into its long foreground of earlier poems by the same author: “My reasoning is this: Once the import of an image is established for our minds, that image cannot in its workings upon us elsewhere in the poem be disencumbered, whether or not we are consciously defining it.”³ Our final precept from Warren’s poetic theory is his assertion, in his essay on Conrad, that “The philosophical novelist, or poet, is one for whom...the image strives to rise to symbol, [and] for whom images always fall into a dialectical configuration.”⁴

In “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart,” the central taproot is the epiphanic encounter with a stranger—perhaps alien would be closer to Warren’s meaning—who turns out to be a spiritual guide or even an alter ego for the Warren persona: a “Brother, Rebuker,...Philosopher past all/Casuistry,” as the old Nigger comes to be in the afterlight of Time. A decade ago, in Audubon: A Vision a similar encounter between the great ornithologist and a haglike old woman formed the crux of that major poem; and a decade before that, in Promises, the motif surfaced hauntingly in the meeting between Warren’s boy-persona and the tragically rootless wandering bum of “Dark Night of the Soul” (originally titled “Dark Night of”). That poem, in turn, drew upon Warren’s short story of a decade earlier still (the 1940’s) —Warren’s finest short story, by general consensus—“Blackberry Winter,” whose closing vignette indicates the strength of the motif’s grip upon the artist’s imagination:

³Selected Essays, p. 237.
⁴Selected Essays, p. 58.
...the tramp leaned his face down at me and showed his teeth and said: "Stop following me. You don't stop following me and I cut yore throat, you little son-of-a-bitch." That was what he said, for me not to follow him. But I did follow him, all the years.

Ultimately the encounter with the stranger-brother traces all the way back to Warren's earliest entry in all three of his Selected Poems collections, "To a Face in a Crowd," which was published in the June, 1925 Fugitive magazine when the signatures were hardly dry on Warren's college diploma. Its opening line, "Brother, brother, whither do you pass?" could—perhaps with a bit of stylistic enhancement—find easy lodging as a theme statement in any of the subsequent poems I have cited, including, at a half-century's distance, "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart.

Correlating with Warren's critical pronouncements, his own images typically fall into a "dialectical configuration." To the figure of the stranger he therefore ascribes characteristics that accentuate the stranger's alienation from the Warren persona: differences in race ("Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart"), age and family connections ("Dark Night of the Soul"), or sex, nationality, and social position (Audubon). Further emphasizing their alienation is the nature of their momentary interaction, which ranges from the anonymous and ephemeral in "To A Face in a Crowd" to the hostile in "Dark Night of the Soul," and on to the near-homicidal in Audubon and "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart." Much in the fashion of Melville's Ishmael and Queequeg, Warren's encountering figures must therefore transcend formidable interpersonal barriers before any human bond may develop between them. "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart" comprises practically a tour-de-force in this respect, its juxtaposition of opposites being extensive enough to form the essential structure of this poem: white youth vs. old Negro; speed/dance/automobile vs. slow-motion/stasis/mule cart; winter/snow/cold/Vermont vs. summer/dust/heat/Louisiana; namelessness (opening lines) vs. "holding,...in my hand, a name" (closing lines); earthly limitations—dirt, sweat, flesh, time—vs. "the high stars" ("Can I see Arc-turus from where I stand?"). To reconcile these contraries would for a fact be a task for "the philosophical poet," demanding very considerable resources in both poetry and philosophy.

What makes those resources available, for Warren, is his lifetime's work in the thought and craft of his poetic calling, giving any particular poem in his canon its indispensable infrastructure of meanings. Behind the freshly imagined material that gives each poem its individual integrity is the larger integrity of the poet's career as a whole, stamping the poem with the authority of his signature. So far as "ideas" or "philosophy" is concerned, "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart" manifests the Warren signature first of all in the dualities we have noted, secondly in the problems of identity they pose,
and finally in the (tentative) resolution of these problems via the Osmosis of Being concept. So far as "poetry" is concerned, Warren's signature discloses itself most significantly in the symbols and images that, embodying these conceptions, trace back in taproot fashion to earlier stages of evolution within the poet's developing canon.

Identity—to begin with Warren's master theme—is for him a split-level concept. Ultimate identity, as defined in his seminal essay "Knowledge and the Image of Man," subsists in the individual's union with the whole of reality, the "continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, his identity." A man wholly absorbed in Nature, like Audubon or "you" at the end of "Billie Potts," may experience this cosmic consciousness; or a person who simply falls asleep may attain it, like the woman in "Lullaby: Exercise in Human Charity and Self-Knowledge" (in You, Emperors, and Others): "Galactic milk spills down light years../ ... And your sweet identity/Fills like vapor, pale in moonlight, all the infinite night sky." In this latter instance, the woman's namelessness in sleep—"what I now bless/Is your namelessness" are the poem's closing lines—indicates her overcoming of separateness. But in the same essay, Warren goes on to describe the awareness of separateness as the basis of our conscious identities as human beings: "Despite this osmosis of being to which I have referred, man's process of self-definition means that he distinguishes himself from the world and from other men. He...discovers separateness."

Bridging the gap between Warren's two modes of identity is the experience of the epiphany, the moment when—as Warren describes it in Democracy and Poetry—"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.'" At the outset of "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart," that experience is evoked by the rhythm of the dance, which—in the opening line—has already absorbed the separate identities of the dancers into that larger pulse of being indicated by their "nameless" condition:

Flesh, of a sudden, gone nameless in music, flesh
Of the dancer, under your hand, flowing to music, girl-
Flesh sliding, flesh flowing, sweeter than
Honey, slicker than Essolube, over
The music-swayed, delicate trellis of bone
That is white in secret flesh-darkness. What
The music, it says: no name, no name!—only
That movement under your hand, what
It is, and no name, and you shut your eyes, but
The music, it stops....

In the sound texture of these lines—the five-fold recurrence of “flesh” and “music,” the pattern of recurring consonants, the strong insistent thrust of the rhythm—Warren clearly is approximating his poetic form to the motif of the dance; but more than that, he is illustrating the aesthetic principle whereby, according to Democracy and Poetry, the rhythm of an art form—of both poetry and music, in this instance—may lead toward the osmotic insight: “I must insist that even in literature rhythm—not mere meter, but all the pulse of movement, density, and shadings of intensity of feeling—is the most intimate and compelling factor.... [It] binds our very physiological being to it in the context of the rhythms of the universe.”

In Warren’s earlier poems, the dance has similarly figured as a motif of cosmic unity, evolving from a mere wish that “everything/Take hands with us and pace the music in a ring” in “The Mango on the Mango Tree” (1943) to a “moment of possibility” in “Gull’s Cry” (1955): “But at your laughter let the molecular dance of the stone-dark glimmer like joy in the stone’s dream,/ And in that moment of possibility, let gobbo, gobbo’s wife, and us, and all, take hands and sing: redeem, redeem!” In their “nameless” condition, we may say that the dancers of “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart” have realized their “moment of possibility,” submerging their singular beings in a larger consciousness. But, as T. S. Eliot ruefully observed concerning the evanescence of the epiphany experience, “And after this our exile”—which is to say, in Warren’s phrasing, “The music, it stops.” In “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart,” Warren eases his persona’s return to ordinary consciousness by allowing him to linger a bit in an intermediate stage, with “Booze in the blood,” but the main part of the poem is now given over to the individual ego that, soberly conscious of its separateness, must earn its way back toward unity with others not by recourse to psychedelic stimulants but through developing an expanded perspective. Not the quick fix of alcohol and music but a slow lifelong toil of thought, art, and imagination would be the agency through which the world’s fragmentation might be transcended, the dualities gathered, identity affirmed.

The artist at work is therefore the persona that unifies the rest of the poem, moving from “the urgency of experience”—as Warren’s essay on Conrad puts it—to “the urgency to know the meaning of experience.” Warren himself is clearly the artist-persona who is conducting that search, following the pattern he established when he installed “R.P.W.: The Maker of this poem” as the presiding figure in Brother to Dragons (1953). Apparently encouraged to some degree by the Confessional movement of the 1950’s, he intensified the personal presence in collections like Promises (1957), Tale of Time (1966), and Or Else (1974); and his latest volume, Now and Then (1978), I would judge his most poignantly personal volume of

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7Democracy and Poetry, p. 74.
8Selected Essays, p. 58.
them all. In all these works, Warren bears out his thesis that “it is not only the objective characters that serve as ‘models’ of selfhood; the work itself represents the author’s adventure in selfhood”; and further, that “the self is a style of being, continually expanding in a vital process of definition, affirmation, revision, and growth.”

As a paradigm in miniature of this intensely personal thrust toward meaning, “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart” moves rapidly toward its center of meaning, the encounter that is this poem’s version of Warren’s most profound insight: the intuition of One Flesh. That doctrine was implicit in the gathering of creatures at the end of “Billie Potts” (“The bee knows and the eel’s cold ganglia burn...”), became explicit in Promises (“all Time is a dream, and we’re all one Flesh, at last”), and found increased eminence in the epigraph to Incarnations (“Yet now our flesh is as the flesh of our brethren”). “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart” strikes up the theme in its first word—“Flesh”—which in its five-fold repetition underscores the “one Flesh” experienced by the dancing partners swaying to music. That experience in turn leads to the One Flesh of sexual intercourse (“sweat-grapple in darkness”), but this mode of self-transcendence, like that associated with the dance and the music, proves so fleetingly evanescent that “I can’t now even remember the name” of the dancer-sexual partner. Again, the quick fix of sensual experience, though it has an undeniable integrity of its own, will not suffice as a substitute for philosophical insight.

In the encounter that does evoke permanent insight, we find two motifs of long and noble pedigree within Warren’s total literary canon, both sustaining the One Flesh ideology. The first of these, in the poem, is the apparition of the mule’s head, which recalls the “judgment of the cows” motif—one of the book’s great charms, in my response to it—in All the King’s Men. There in the novel, as here in the poem, the automobile—symbol of modernity, speed, the mechanical and inhuman (Warren was a charter-member Agrarian, we remember)—is periodically reduced to an image in an animal’s eye. As Jack Burden describes a typical instance, “Now and then a pair of eyes would burn at us out of the dark ahead. I knew that they were the eyes of a cow—a poor dear stoic old cow with a cud, standing on the highway shoulder...but her eyes burned at us out of the dark.... We were something slow happening inside the cold brain of a cow.”10 Elsewhere in the novel a woman throwing water out the door of a shack or a Negro looking up from his cotton field at a car accident—“Lawd God, hit’s a-nudder one done hit!”—comprises a variation of the theme. In the poem, the mule-head caught in the headlights conveys that sense of ageless, patient, all-enduring biological identity, held in common by man and beast. “From darkness and the saurian stew of pre-Time,” Warren writes, “They blaze

9Democracy and Poetry, pp. 71, 89.
10All the King’s Men, p. 53.
from the incandescent magma/Of mule-brain. Thus mule-eyes." Immediately there follows the most significant of all those images that lean from the world's wall, the image of the human face—which in this case manifests both individual human identity and the One Flesh doctrine.

That the human face manifests individual identity is a truism that Warren has often exploited skillfully in his fiction—we recall vivid verbal paintings of Sadie Burke's face, or Tom Stark's, in *All the King's Men*, for example, as well as Nick Pappy's encounter (in *The Cave*) with "the first human face...he had ever looked into. Really looked into, just for its humanness. At that, some bone-shaking happiness broke over him...."11 In his poetry, the extension of the face motif toward the Osmosis of Being (or One Flesh) concept appears—for one example—in "Homage to Emerson" (1966), a seven-poem sequence that ends with the image of "a face half in shadow, tears...in the/ Eyes, but/...about to smile?" This is the poem's answer to the question, "What constitutes the human bond?" But Warren's most compelling conjunction of the face motif with the One Flesh ideology occurs in the context of the human creature confronting its imminent extinction; for in that moment of transition, when the individual yields back his separate identity to the biological continuum that created him, the One Flesh becomes manifest. This acceptance of personal mortality in deference to some larger collective Being first claimed major importance at the end of "Billie Potts," where the wanderer returns, after his journey in Time, to eternity's border: "To kneel/Here in the evening empty of wind or bird./To kneel in the sacramental silence of evening." It recurs in "Night Is Personal" (*Incarnations*), where the deathwatch for the dying convict evokes the Osmosis of Being motif—"for we are all/One flesh"; and it converges with the face imagery in "Interim," one of the poems about the deaths of the poet's mother and black mammy in *Tale of Time*. Most importantly, the image of the human face confronting personal extinction comprises the central episode in *Audubon: A Vision* (1969). Here the dying woman's personal identity, as expressed in her will to die bravely, emanates from her face with the force of a solar flare, drawing Audubon's own identity into her last pulse of being:

The face,
Eyes a-glare, jaws clenched, now glowing black with congestion,
Like a plum, had achieved,
It seemed to him, a new dimension of beauty.
There are tears in his eyes.
He tries to remember his childhood.
He tries to remember his wife.
He can remember nothing.

In "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart," the parallel to this scene is another face that also, by reason of the impending car-accident, confronts its mortality: "Man-eyes, not blazing, white-bulging/In black face, in black night, and man-mouth/Wide open, the shape of an O, for the scream/That does not come." Later, having barely avoided the collision, the poem’s speaker reconsiders that last detail: "Perhaps he had screamed, after all." As a spontaneous expression from the innermost citadel of self, the scream has figured importantly in Warren’s identity-psychology. The scream of his mother upon learning of her lover’s suicide gave Jack Burden, as well as the mother, a new identity in All the King’s Men, for example; the motif also appears within the Arcturus poems in “Midnight Outcry,” where “The depths that cry rose from might shrivel a heart, or member,” in the listener-husband. And in “Ballad: Between the Boxcars” (1960) the cry of the crushed youth evokes the One Flesh theme: “And [when] our own lips utter the crazed organism’s cry,/We may know the poor self not alone, but with all who are cast/To that clobber and slobber and grunt, between the boxcars.”

In the self-portrait of the artist motif that now assumes predominance in the poem—a motif we have already traced to Warren’s “Confessional” tendency of the 1950’s—the artist’s “urgency to know the meaning of experience” rises into immediate action. On the same night that the encounter takes place, the artist begins his work, waking in the insomniac fashion long typical of the Warren persona, at “the hour when the downy/Throat of the swamp owl vibrates to the last/Predawn cry, the hour/...[when] some/Recollection of childhood brings tears/To dark-wide eyes.” This time, however, those usual night-images are displaced by the urgency of his artistic calling: “and I wake to see/Floating in darkness above the bed the/Black face, eyes white-bulging, mouth shaped like an O, and so/Get up, get paper and pencil, and whittle away at/The poem.” The art-work, initially, fails embarrassingly—“[I] remember/Now only the couplet of what/Had aimed to be—Jesus Christ—a sonnet.” But now, having evolved into “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart,” it reaches toward that concept of design which has often appeared to be Warren’s chief objective as a philosophical poet: “[In] God’s name, by what magnet, I demand/Are the iron and out-flung filings of our lives, on/A sheet of paper, blind-blank as Time, snapped/Into a polarized pattern.”

The polarized pattern, in this case, consists of the two journeys in Time that have separated the two wayfarers ever since the moment of their encounter. One wayfarer journeyed home to his shack to lapse into quiet sleep, while the other—the Warren persona—“Moved on through the years” to a faraway land, where he cannot sleep because of his hunger for meaning: “having risen/In darkness, feet bare to cold boards, [I] stare ... into/The white night and star-crackling sky over/The snow mountain.” That hunger mounts to unappeasable proportions in the ensuing passage,
where the speaker longs to immerse himself in the nightscape so as to extract its inner meaning by the main force of his desire, as it were:

...Have you ever,
At night, stared into the snow-filled forest and felt
The impulse to flee there? Enter there? Be
There and plunge naked
Through snow, through drifts floundering...

Upward and toward the glacial assertion that
The mountain is? Have you ever
Had the impulse to stretch forth your hand over
The bulge of forest and seize trees like the hair
Of a head you would master?....

What answers that deep hunger for meaning is the completion of the “polarized pattern” whereby the two wayfarers attain psychic reunion despite their vast separation in time, distance, and worldly circumstance. Seen now as the speaker’s alter ego or secret sharer, the Old Nigger provides a model of how to live and how to accept mortality. In so doing he reconciles the poem’s dualities, gathering its images into the concluding phase of their “dialectical configuration” and thereby subsuming the speaker’s restless hunger into his own final serenity. His face, just moments ago confronting death “with eyes white-bulging, mouth shaped like an O,” is now “calm as prayer.” Urinating with “soft, plopping sound in deep dust” while his face “Is lifted into starlight,” he epitomizes in that stance the range and the reach of human identity, from animal need to infinite aspirations. In the end, he reconciles individual with collective identity, passing easily from his life’s work into death’s sleep, from his cart of junk into the shack to lie down in darkness: “The last glow is reflected on the petal-pink/And dark horn-crust of the thumbnail.”

So the two wayfarers walk their last journey together: “Brother,...will you be with me when/I arrive and leave my own cart of junk/... To enter, by a bare field, a shack unlit?” Pending that moment, the Old Nigger has shown how to live, by answering a question raised in the “Homage to Emerson” poems (in Tale of Time): “there must be/A way by which the process of living can become Truth.” The way “to convert life into truth”—to use Emerson’s original phrase\(^\text{12}\)—inheres in the cart of junk, the image of every man’s life-work which is the truth that will go attesting to the life he lived after the life itself has ended. In the closing dozen pages of Democracy and Poetry, published the same year as the Arcturus collection (1975), Warren speaks of work (in this context, art-work) as the truest expression of identity, “an activity fulfilling the doer in the doing...in which the doer pursues

\(^{12}\)Emerson uses this phrase in “The Divinity School Address.”
the doing as a projection of his own nature upon objective nature." "What ...would be created in the process of work would be a self," he goes on to say—an increasingly difficult achievement in our technocratic-commercialized world characterized either by too much "free" (which is to say, vacuous) time or by work in which no personal fulfillment can be realized. The old Nigger with his mule and cart of junk is the antithesis of this unhappy futuristic vision. He fulfills the definition of work that Warren traces back to the Garden of Eden myth:

Even in this realm [after the Fall], he [Adam] might, however, still catch some painful and glorious glimpse of the old activity of the Garden—of the possibility of work as inner fulfillment ... First, by work he might sometimes impose his conception of himself—his self—upon nature in that he humanized his world. Second, what he achieved in this process—object, image, deed, or utterance—gave promise of being durable past his natural span. It was his redemption from death, the Horatian boast: Non omnis moriar. It was also a redemption into the fulfilled self.

As against the fast-paced search for pleasure at the beginning of the poem, immersing the speaker "nameless" in the dance, booze, and sex, this concluding mode of identity—which yields "a name," "A hard-won something," a "trophy of truth"—is the Old Nigger's final legacy to his secret sharer, enabling him to accept his mortality with his hunger for meaning satisfied:

Entering into that darkness to fumble
My way to a place to lie down, but holding,
I trust, in my hand, a name—
Like a shell, a dry flower, a worn stone, a toy—merely
A hard-won something that may, while Time
Backward unblooms out of time toward peace, utter
Its small, sober, and inestimable
Glow, trophy of truth.

In the poem's terminal line, "Can I see Arcturus from where I stand?," the Warren persona adopts the stance earlier taken by the Old Nigger with face "lifted into starlight, calm as prayer." In these latter two phrases, Warren evokes both the extreme dualities he wants to reconcile—the human face beholding infinity—and the subtle but essential religious attitude ("calm as prayer") that alone can reconcile the human creature to his limitations as a finite particle within the incalculable whole of reality. Both the star imagery and the posture of humility have a long ancestry in Warren's verse, their earlier manifestations comprising two vital taproots for the present poem. A star reflected in dark water remarks the deaths of Billie

13Democracy and Poetry, pp. 84-85, 89.
14Democracy and Poetry, pp. 82-83.
Potts and Audubon; more generally, the stars are only “a backdrop for/The human condition” in “Star-gazing” (1966), but they instill fear of too much reality: “And the girl is saying, ‘You do not look/At the stars,’ for I did not look at/The stars…” Brother to Dragons—both the 1953 and the forthcoming re-written versions—expresses that fear of the universe with compelling force: “The stars are arctic, and/Their gleam comes earthward down uncounted light-years of disdain”; “the huddled stones of ruin/…say the human had been here and gone/And never would come back, though the bright stars/Shall weary not in their appointed watch.”

Mediating between this cosmic immensity and the finite creature is the posture of humility that dates back, in Warren’s verse, to “The Last Metaphor” (1931), where the denuded trees of autumn “rear not up in strength and pride/But lift unto the gradual dark in prayer.” The kneeling posture, at death, of both Billie Potts and “you, wanderer” at the end of “Billie Potts” confirms the archetype, as does Audubon’s attitude toward the birds he has killed in “Love and Knowledge”: “Over a body held in his hand, his head was bowed low./But not in grief.” Rather than a meaningless waste, death now becomes sacramentally rendered, a sacrifice to the One Flesh continuum as Warren’s deceased parents, speaking “with the calm of a night field, or far star,” declare it in Promises (Poem I, To Gabriel): “We died only that every promise might be fulfilled.” In Or Else (1974), this sacramental acceptance of mortality pervades poems like “Natural History,” about two spectral parents gladly absorbed into nature, and “Sunset Walk in Thaw-Time in Vermont,” about the Warren persona’s own forthcoming entry into “the loving vigilance of death.” And here, in “Interjection #6: What you Sometimes Feel on Your Face at Night,” the mist—which is Warren’s metaphor for the state of being dead (see “Fog” in Incarnations, for example)—is God’s touch upon the face: “Out of mist, God’s/…fingers/Want to memorize your face. … God/Wants only to love you, perhaps.”

The opening poem of the Arcturus collection, “A Way to Love God,” ramifies this theme, its images of mortality—“your father’s death-rattle,” the severed head of Queen Mary of Scots, sheep staring blankly into mist—indicating anew that submission to one’s death is a way to love God. In “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart” the face “lifted into starlight, calm as prayer” effects that poem’s statement of the theme, which is further sustained by religious diction elsewhere in the poem: the twice-stated “in God’s name” and “the world’s monstrous blessedness.” Transmitted to the secret sharer in the terminal line of the poem, which in turn acts as the title image for the entire Arcturus collection, the face under starlight becomes the chief unifying, reconciling symbol for both “Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart” and the

sequence as a whole. In so doing, it performs the ultimate function of poetry as Warren conceived it at the end of his essay on The Ancient Mariner: "If poetry does anything for us, it reconciles, by its symbolical reading of experience (for by its very nature it is in itself a myth of the unity of being)...."\(^{16}\)

Elsewhere in the same essay, Mr. Warren raises the question, "on what basis may a poem be interpreted?," and answers that one must look for, among other things, "internal consistency" in the poem itself and "external consistency" in "the over-all pattern of other artistic work by the author in question."\(^{17}\) Although "all critics must fail in some degree, for the simple reason that...the discursive activity cannot render the symbolical," his use of this approach produced a masterpiece of criticism for our modern appreciation of Coleridge. Our analysis of "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart," while falling far short of that achievement, indicates that these critical principles furnish perhaps the best way to approach Warren's own poems. As we recall the prevalent images in this one poem—the dance, the encounter, the cart of junk, the scream, the polarized patterns, the face under starlight—and as we relate them to Warren's larger themes—the One Flesh motif, the no name!/name dichotomy, the artist's urgent hunger for meaning, the converting of life into truth, the acceptance of mortality—we find both "internal consistency" and connection with "the over-all pattern of other artistic work by the author in question." In this connection we also find a key reason why "Warren's greatness has been palpable"\(^{18}\) in his recent volumes, to cite Harold Bloom's judgment. As our flower in the cran-nied wall has clearly shown, this poet's late-blooming garden of verse has been nourished by the growth, in previous decades, of a dense and deep-thrusting root-system.

\(^{16}\)Selected Essays, p. 272.
\(^{17}\)Selected Essays, pp. 269-71.