To thread forth a central theme out of a writer’s whole corpus can be risky business: Ernest Hemingway’s resentment of the “psychic wound” interpretation of his novels is a case in point. To isolate such a theme in a writer like Robert Penn Warren is even riskier. Author of eight novels, four major volumes of poetry, four non-fiction books, and innumerable other writings, Warren is more complex and variegated than most writers, both in form and theme. Nevertheless, running through that wide scope of fiction and poetry, and even through the non-fiction studies, a central vision does stand forth. In a phrase, Warren’s theme is the osmosis of being.

The phrase is Warren’s own, articulated most elaborately in his essay, “Knowledge and the Image of Man” (Sewanee Review, Winter, 1955, p. 186): “[Man is] in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms, his identity.” It is also articulated in most of Warren’s creative writing, usually implicitly, as when a character in Promises is awakened to the book’s highest promise, “You fool, poor fool, all Time is a dream, and we’re all one Flesh, at last,” but sometimes explicitly, as when Blanding Cottshill tells Bradwell Toller (Flood, p. 353), “Things are tied together. . . . There’s some spooky interpenetration of things, a mystic osmosis of being, you might say.”

The central importance of osmosis of being in Warren’s work is seen in connection with his predominant theme of identity or self-definition. For such osmosis is the final answer to the problem of identity, and is indeed the only answer in the world, as Warren sees it. An awakening to this truth is what normally provides the structure for Warren’s fiction and poetry. For example, it is this osmosis of being that finally requires Jack Burden in All the King’s Men to accept responsibility for history; that causes Thomas Jefferson in Brother to Dragons to accept complicity in murder; that leads a long series

* Victor Strandberg, who teaches at Duke University, has done a book on Warren’s poetry and contributed articles on modern American literature to several leading journals.

1 Since I quote so widely and frequently in this discussion, I thought it best to incorporate page references into my main text and so avoid excessive footnoting. All page references refer to the books listed in my bibliography.
of Warren characters in all his novels towards acceptance of a father figure, however shabby or tainted; and that draws forth the theme of a reconciliation within the self, between conscious and unconscious zones of the psyche, in much of Warren’s poetry. And ultimately, it is this osmosis of being that imparts whatever meaning the self may have in the light of eternity; that absorbs the self into the totality of time and nature with the consoling promise, often repeated in Warren’s work, that “nothing is ever lost.”

Hence, Warren’s osmosis has moral, metaphysical, and psychological ramifications; it is his contribution to modern religious thought, having an ethic and a mystical dimension. Looking back over Warren’s career with hindsight, moreover, we may find that osmosis was there all the time, much like T. S. Eliot’s Christianity, implicit in the early works and explicit later on. Like Eliot’s Christianity, again, Warren’s osmosis is evoked in the early work by negative implication: the naturalistic fragmentation of the world is intolerable and cries out for some sense of oneness. In “Mexico Is a Foreign Country: Five Studies in Naturalism,” a poem written about 1943, a narrator watches some soldiers marching—“And I am I, and they are they,/And this is this, and that is that”—with a vain wish that “everything/Take hands with us and pace the music in a ring.” And in the fiction, likewise, osmosis of being is what Warren’s characters should be seeking, relating themselves to the totality of time and nature and society, whereas they characteristically are observed bent towards opposite ends, narrowing their identity to a basis of fame, sexual prowess, success in business, or membership in a philosophical, religious, or political sect.

To define the meaning and importance of osmosis in Warren’s work, then, I should like to examine in turn its three major dimensions: psychological, social, and metaphysical. Let us begin with the workings of osmosis within the individual psyche, where, Warren feels, something is badly wrong in the way of self-definition. What is wrong, precisely, is that the Freudian id, or Jungian shadow—which is mainly what Warren is getting at in his recurrent motif of “original sin”—this darker, more bestial part of the psyche has been denied its place in reality. An innocent, idealistic figure like Thomas Jefferson (in Brother to Dragons), seriously undertaking to remake the human project from scratch and to do it right this time; or Tobias Sears, the utopian Transcendentalist in Band of Angels; or Adam (the name is deliberately chosen) Stanton, the physician to the poor in All the King’s Men—such high-minded humanists are not about to think
themselves a brother to dragons or indeed to concede any reality to a monster-self within.

But the reality of evil, though denied for a time, will finally make its presence known. As Carl Gustav Jung says, in *The Undiscovered Self* (pp. 107-8): “The evil that comes to light in man and that undoubtedly dwells within him is of gigantic proportions. . . . We are always, thanks to our human nature, potential criminals. . . . None of us stands outside humanity’s black collective shadow.” In Warren’s narratives, humanity’s black collective shadow is bodied forth in some of his most memorable characters and episodes: in the two hatchet-wielders, Lilburn Lewis (*Brother to Dragons*) and Big Billie Potts of “The Ballad of Billie Potts”; in the gradually escalating violence of “The Free Farmers’ Brotherhood of Protection and Control” in *Night Rider*; in the degrading trip to Big Hump’s island in *World Enough and Time*; in the horrific episode of the slave raid into Africa in *Band of Angels*; in the frenzied sexual orgy following Brother Sumpter’s preaching in *The Cave*; in the callous butchery of Negroes by whites during the New York draft riots of 1863 as portrayed in *Wilderness*; in the swamprat animalism of Frog-Eye in *Flood*. And actual history, as discussed in Warren’s books, adds confirming evidence. Warren’s first book, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), shows the famous abolitionist to be a murderous fanatic, an obvious forebear of Warren’s recurring fictional killers who lift rifle or meat-axe in an elation of justice, while his most recent book, *Who Speaks for the Negro*? (1965), identifies Malcolm X as the monster self in the inner dark: “Malcolm X can evoke, in the Negro, even in Martin Luther King, that self with which he, too, must deal, in shock and fright, or in manic elation. . . . Malcolm X is many things. He is the face not seen in the mirror. . . . He is the nightmare self. He is the secret sharer” (p. 266). (In saying this, shortly before Malcolm X’s assassination, Warren was thinking particularly of the Negro leader’s statement at a Harlem rally, “We need a Mau Mau to win freedom!”—p. 265)

From the beginning, Warren saw this discovery of a beast within the self as a basic structure in his work. Away back in his first novel, *Night Rider*, a piously Bible-quoting Professor Ball is heard to say (p. 142), “Yes, sir, I’m a man of peace. But it’s surprising to a man what he’ll find in himself sometimes.” What Professor Ball comes to find in himself is murder, cowardice, and betrayal, causing the death of the book’s main character, Percy Munn. And in the next novel, the masterful *At Heaven’s Gate*, Slim Sarrett likewise traces
out the melancholy curve of self-discovery. Early in the book, Slim is the artist-intellectual writing of literature and self-knowledge ("Bacon wrote: Knowledge is power. . . . Shakespeare wrote: Self-knowledge is power"—p. 191), but when his own self-knowledge comes to include the murder-cowardice-betrayal syndrome, Slim writes ruefully not of power but of a dark unbanishable being within the self:

It came from your mother's womb, and she screamed at the moment of egress.
The family doctor slapped breath in, relighted his bitten cigar
While the old nurse washed it and washed it, without complete success.

And in Warren's most recent novel, *Flood*, the main character feels a beast within himself quite literally: "Then, in the inner darkness of himself . . . the black beast heaved at him . . . that black beast with cold fur like hairy ice that drowsed in the deepest inner dark, or woke to snuffle about, or even, as now, might heave unexpectedly at him and breathe upon him" (p. 336).

And if Warren's fiction hints at a beast—a darker being or pollution of "original sin" within the self—Warren's poetry describes it much more explicitly. "And our innocence needs, perhaps, new definition," Warren said at the end of "Billie Potts," and it is pretty clear that this new definition of innocence must embrace, like osmosis, the guilt that "always and forever [will] rise and coil like miasma/From the fat sump and cess of common consciousness," as R. P. W describes it in *Brother to Dragons* (p. 64). In all his major volumes of poetry, Warren refers to this guilt in the common consciousness, which Jung calls "humanity's black collective shadow," in terms of animal imagery. *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942) takes the acknowledgment of this shadow self as its major structure. The conscious ego, sanctimonious and sure of an innocent identity, locks the shadow self out of the house of the psyche in a poem called "Original Sin: A Short Story," where the darker self acts like a loyal though rejected animal: "you have heard/It fumble your door before it whimpers and is gone:/It acts like the old hound that used to snuffle your door and moan," and later, "it goes to the backyard and stands like an old horse cold in the pasture." In "Crime," the conscious ego, finding that the shadow self simply won't go away, murders and buries it in the cellar, only to have it rise again: " . . . memory drips, a pipe in the cellar-dark/And in its hutch and hole . . . /The cold heart heaves like
a toad.” And so the *Eleven Poems* ends with “Terror,” a poem in which the shadow self that had seemed so docile and easily repudiated earlier now assumes, genie-like, terrifying dimensions in the reality of actual history (circa 1940), where “the face.../Bends to the bomb-sight over bitter Helsingfors” and “the brute crowd roars...in the Wilhelmplatz,” while “you now, guiltless, sink/To rest in lobbies.”

In Warren’s next major poetic work, *Brother to Dragons*, Thomas Jefferson also thinks himself “guiltless” until his sister and R. P. W. finally get him to clasp his murderous nephew’s hand and so accept oneness with Lilburn, the emblem (together with minotaur, catfish, and serpent) of man’s darker self within. The key embodiment of the shadow self in *Brother to Dragons* is borne by the serpent that scares R. P. W. in his summer visit to what’s left of the Lewis house. And though R. P. W. calls it “just a snake,” it turns out to have suspiciously human characteristics linking it to the “old hound” and “old horse” metaphors (noted above) of *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*:

> ... he reared
> Up high, and scared me, for a fact. But then
> The bloat head sagged an inch, the tongue withdrew,
> And on the top of that strong stalk the head
> Wagged slow, benevolent and sad and sage,
> As though it understood our human pitifulness
> And forgave all, and asked forgiveness, too.

(p. 35)

That last line states what the relationship between the conscious ego and the shadow self should be, but isn’t (until the very end) in Jefferson’s case: “I still reject, cast out, repudiate,/And squeeze from my blood the blood of Lilburn” (p. 62). In *Promises*, too, man’s natural revulsion towards the shadow self is implicit in the slaying of a snake by some men getting hay:

> ... a black snake rears big in his ruined room.

*........................*

*Men shout, ring around. He can’t get away.*

*Yes, they are men, and a stone is there.*

*Snagged high on a pitchfork tine, he will make*

*Slow arabesque till the bullbats wake.*

*An old man, standing stooped, detached,*

*Spits once, says, “Hell, just another snake.”*

("The Snake")
But of course the beast within the self is not exorcised by such impulsive destruction of other creatures, though men are prone to locate evil anywhere outside the self and then move ahead with the destruction, whether of snake, octopus (similarly slain elsewhere in *Promises*), or human enemies.

Warren's most recent collection of poems, *You, Emperors, and Others* (1960), speaks of a beast in the psyche in many places. The emperors Warren writes of are Domitian and Tiberius, whom the Roman historian Suetonius considered monstrous criminals for using their imperial power in the service of greed, murder, incest, and unlimited orgiastic pleasures. The "You" in Warren's title, however, is not greatly superior to the emperors, having a tainted ancestry ("Your mother preferred the more baroque positions./Your father's legerdemain marks the vestry accounts.") and a criminal character of troublesome if not imperial proportions, as is illustrated in "The Letter About Money, Love, or Other Comfort, If Any," in which the narrator pursues a beastly alter ego from place to place ("you had blown, the rent in arrears, your bathroom a sty") and from crime to crime ("your Llewellin setter/was found in the woodshed, starved to death" and "you fooled with the female Fulbrights/at the Deux Magots and the Flore,/until the police caught you dead to rights—").

The reality of evil within the self, then, is set forth in a long and vividly memorable series of vile characters, violent episodes, and beast images throughout Warren's work, and the acceptance of that reality is the first step toward psychic wholeness—an internal osmosis of being, as it were.

II.

Proceeding from the inner caverns of self to the outer world of other people, we find an equally long series of technical devices—plot, character, imagery, allusion, irony, and so forth—sustaining the idea of osmosis on a family and social level. The repeated summons towards a father figure—felt by Sukie Christian in *Night Rider* (1939), Jerry Calhoun in *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), Billie Potts in the "Ballad" (1943), Jack Burden in *All the King's Men* (1946), Jeremiah Beaumont in *World Enough and Time* (1950), R. P. W. in *Brother to Dragons* (1953), Rau-Ru (alias Oliver Cromwell Jones) and Amantha Starr in *Band of Angels* (1955), Ikey Sumpter in *The Cave* (1959), Adam Rosenzweig in *Wilderness* (1961), and Bradwell Tolliver in *Flood* (1964)—this call to acceptance of a father is especially fundamental to Warren's work because it grounds the osmosis of being in
physiological fact. As Jack Burden puts it in *All the King's Men* (p. 39): “The child comes home and the parent puts the hooks in him. The old man, or the woman, as the case may be, hasn’t got anything to say to the child. All he wants is to have that child sit in a chair for a couple of hours and then go off to bed under the same roof. . . . This thing in itself is not love. It is just something in the blood. It is a kind of blood greed, and it is the fate of a man. It is the thing which man has which distinguishes him from the happy brute creation. When you get born your father and mother lost something out of themselves, and they are going to bust a hame trying to get it back, and you are it. They know they can’t get it all back but they will get as big a chunk out of you as they can.”

It follows, then, that the true villains in Warren’s work are not the hatchet-murderers like Big Billie Potts and Liliburn Lewis so much as those characters who willfully reject the claims of osmosis. Among these truly damned are Ikey Sumpter in *The Cave* and Slim Sarrett in *At Heaven’s Gate*, both of whom renounced the father, cut all their human ties, and vanished into the vicious and glittering isolation of New York City. Or sometimes the temptation is more subtle and human than that offered by New York, like the rich and powerful substitute fathers Bogan Murdock in *At Heaven’s Gate* and Aaron Blaustein in *Wilderness*, glamorous figures who nearly seduce Jerry Calhoun and Adam Rosenzweig from the memory of their real fathers, the stooped and shabby ones. Or maybe the sin of rejection is committed in pride of modernity, as with the brash young fellow in “Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace” in *Promises*, who keeps calling his grandma “old fool” and “old bitch” until some supernatural hogs abruptly appear to chomp them both into the “oneness of Flesh” that is the book’s mystical vision. And sometimes the osmosis is shunned not by reason of ignorance or a temptation towards wealth and glamour, but out of a fear of contamination. Thomas Jefferson’s reluctance to shake Lilburn’s hand with “the blood slick on it” is a case in point, and similar fear of contamination is delightfully portrayed in “Two Studies in Idealism,” a poem in *You, Emperors, and Others* in which a Union soldier, a Harvard graduate of 1861, complains bitterly how a filthy old geezer fighting for the other side had the gall to forgive his death at the hands of the speaker:

I tried to slay without rancor, and often succeeded.  
I tried to keep the heart pure, though the hand took stain.  

...............
But they grinned in the dark—they grinned—and I yet see
That last one. At woods-edge we held, and over the stubble
they came with bayonet.

He uttered his yell, he was there!—teeth yellow, some missing.
*Why, he’s old as my father,* I thought, finger frozen on trigger.
I saw the ambeer on his whiskers, heard the old breath hissing.
The puncture came small on his chest. ’Twas nothing. The
stain then got bigger.

And he said: “Why, son you done done it—I figgered I’d
skeered ye.”

Said: “Son, you look puke-pale. Buck up! If it hadn’t been
you,
Some other young squirt would a-done it.”

Like the serpent who “forgave all, and asked forgiveness, too” in
*Brother to Dragons,* this rebel soldier offers a human communion
transcending his loathsome appearance. To be sure, the Harvard
graduate is too clothed in the Right of the Union Cause (“Touch
pitch: be defiled” in his social creed) to accept the old geezer’s dying
gesture. But such acceptance of a human communion beyond right
and wrong is what he needs to be saved, nonetheless, as opposed to
his dependence on the “Treasury of Merit,” which is Warren’s term
for the North’s enduring sense of virtue in having fought for Right in
the Civil War.

Warren’s osmosis, then, postulates an ethic of community tran-
scending self and family and tribe, and transcending too the separa-
tions worked by time or sin or ignorance. And in the end, the
Warren protagonist must accept osmosis even as Jack Burden does,
after the deep isolation of his Great Sleep and Great Twitch and
Going West periods in *All the King’s Men.* Having witnessed a pro-
cession of unsatisfactory father figures stream through his life—the
Scholarly Attorney, the Tycoon, the Count, the Young Executive,
the Judge—Jack Burden comes to accept the first (though not his
biological) father in this Whitmanesque parenthesis (p. 462): “So
now I live in the house which my father left me. With me is my wife,
Anne Stanton, and the old man who was once married to my
mother. . . . (Does he think that I am his son? I cannot be sure. Nor
can I feel that it matters, for each of us is the son of a million fathers.)”

The consummation of such osmosis of being on a social or family
level is seen most strikingly in *Promises,* in a series of lyrics called
“Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace.” Here, in a macabre transition
zone between the living and the dead, a brash young initiate is instructed in the mysteries of osmosis. In the following exchange between the initiate and his guide (whose role is much like Virgil’s in Dante’s *Inferno*), the initiate’s speech is in italics, his guide’s in regular print:

*Out there in the dark, what’s that horrible chomping?*
Oh, nothing, just hogs that forage for mast,
And if you call, “Hoo-pig!” they’ll squeal and come romping,
For they’ll know from your voice you’re the boy who slopped them in dear, dead days long past.

*Any hogs that I slopped are long years dead,*
*And eaten by somebody and evacuated,*
*So it’s simply absurd, what you said.*
You fool, poor fool, all Time is a dream, and we’re all one Flesh, at last,
And the hogs know that, and that’s why they wait. . . .

("Go It Granny—Go It Hog!")

What the hogs wait for is to chomp one and all into the “one Flesh, at last” which their most fleshly of bodies symbolize. They begin, in the above poem, by devouring the initiate’s grandma (the skeleton granny he had earlier called “old fool” and “old bitch”), and proceed thence—alarmingly—to the initiate himself, in a poem called “I Guess You Ought to Know Who You Are”:

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

Our last view of the initiate shows him submitting at last to the doctrine of “one Flesh,” as he meets the hour of his death in the traditional posture of humility—

*Now don’t be alarmed we are late.*
*What’s time to a hog? We’ll just let them wait.*
*But for when you are ready, our clients usually say*
*That to shut the eyes tight and get down on the knees is the quickest and easiest way.*

Devouring their former devourers, these supernatural hogs provide in the otherworldly dark a universal eucharist, a compulsory last supper to which the guest comes to be eaten and absorbed into a
collective final identity. This is real osmosis of being, then, its final object being a transubstantiation that merges (to return to Warren's *Sewanee Review* essay) "the ugly with the beautiful, the slayer with the slain," producing—in whoever can see this—"such a sublimation that the world which once provoked . . . fear and disgust may now be totally loved."

III.

And so we come to the third major facet of Warren's osmosis: the metaphysical dimension, which is the most momentous in its price and rewards. The immediate price of osmosis is humility, which, seriously considered (as in Thomas Jefferson's case), is not easily come by; and the ultimate price is death: a permanent consignment of self to the oneness of Time and Flesh. This may well involve a final annihilation of the conscious ego, putting an end to that temporary and prideful separation from the larger collective being, but such a condition may prove desirable, and is in any case inevitable.

Part of Warren's concern with the father-son relationship bears upon this need to accept one's extinction, for in the natural world the father always comes bearing the gift of life in one hand and (this is the final meaning of the Billie Potts saga) a hatchet in the other: "What gift—oh, father, father—from that disavowing hand?" "The father waits for the son," Warren says at the end of "The Ballad of Billie Potts," and so the son comes, at last, back to what looks like prenatal unconsciousness: "Back to the silence, back to the pool, back/To the high pool, motionless, and the unmurmuring dream." And if he understands osmosis of being properly, he will come unwillingly, when he must, to bow his head to the hatchet-blow:

> And you, wanderer, back,  
> To kneel  
> Here in the evening empty of wind or bird,  
> To kneel in the sacramental silence of evening  
> At the feet of the old man  
> Who is evil and ignorant and old. . . .

Similar illustrations of acceptance appear in Warren's fiction. In *The Cave*, Jack Harrick, stricken with cancer, at first resents his wife and son living on while he must die: "Old Jack Harrick wished she were dead, dead so he could love her, and not hate her as he did when he thought of her lying alone in her bed on a June night with moon
coming in the window, and... her struggling against the need for a man-shape, simply a man-shape in the dark, not him, not Jack Harrick” (p. 144) and “I wanted my own son to die” (p. 361). But Jack comes to accept his extinction after he learns of his son’s death in the cave. And in Promises, Warren’s own parents, Ruth and Robert Warren, accept the price of osmosis, willing in their deaths that the generations supplant one another. “Child,” the two skeletons tell their son in his vision at their gravesite, “We died only that every promise might be fulfilled.” Later in Promises the skeleton granny who is devoured by hogs repeats this acceptance of sacrificial death: “I died for love.”

Commitment to one Flesh is further enacted by a series of Christ figures in Warren’s work, such as Jasper Harrick, the youth who dies in The Cave to “save” others (such as Ikey Sumpter: “I’m saved, he thought, and his heart overflowed with gratitude to Jasper Harrick who had saved him”—p. 272) and to bear guilt for their iniquity (Jasper is blamed for his younger brother’s fornication). And most recently, Brother Potts in Flood makes the Christlike commitment, praying for a Negro convict who had spat on him without even wiping the spit away (“and it was running down some. It was a good gob, to run down...”—p. 202), and spending his last days not in fear for the cancer that has already cost him an arm but preaching that “the life they had lived was blessed” (p. 355). Clearly, then, Warren’s osmosis requires acceptance of one’s annihilation: granny’s whisper, “I died for love,” means that she saw the self as a tool to be used and discarded to the advantage of a larger being that goes on and on.

But if the price of osmosis is high, meaning death for the conscious ego, the rewards are also high, meaning a kind of immortality through the ministrations of that shadow self so often shunned and loathed and locked out of the house of the psyche. For the shadow self, as made known in dream or animal intuition, is perfectly at ease in that infinitude of time and space which smites the conscious mind with anxiety that man and his Earth are a bubble in a cosmic ocean. The indestructibility of this deeper self was implied in its survival through Eleven Poems, despite the murder and burial in the cellar, and this immortality seems even clearer in Brother to Dragons, with particular reference to the serpent and catfish metaphors. In having “the face of the last torturer,” the catfish is clearly associated with the “original sin” aspect of Warren’s thought, but it also has redemptive possibilities not given to the conscious ego. (The ice in the following
passage appears to divide the world of light and time and consciousness, above ice, from the timeless, totally dark world of unconsciousness—"unpulsing blackness"—under ice.)

And the year drove on. Winter. And from the Dakotas
The wind veers, gathers itself in ice-glitter
And star-gleam of dark, and finds the long sweep of the valley.
A thousand miles and the fabulous river is ice in the starlight.
The ice is a foot thick, and beneath, the water slides black
like a dream,
And in the interior of that unpulsing blackness and thrilled zero
The big channel-cat sleeps with eye lidless, and the brute face
Is the face of the last torturer, and the white belly
Brushes the delicious and icy blackness of mud.
But there is no sensation. How can there be
Sensation when there is perfect adjustment?
(p. 94)

"Perfect adjustment" despite the awful cold and dark under ice is something the conscious self, in fear of naturalistic oblivion, might well envy. Warren becomes very Jungian indeed in what follows the above passage, for just as Jung saw the deeper self as both divine and demonic ("the unconscious [is] the only accessible source of religious experience," Jung says in The Undiscovered Self, even though it also embodies "the general proclivity to evil . . . lodged in human nature itself"—pp. 101, 110), Warren sees this creature with the brute face of a torturer as being, in its total osmosis with its environment, enviably "at one with God":

... The blood
Of the creature is but the temperature of the sustaining flow:
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!

We are now clearly in the area of metaphysical speculation. In its oneness with the total darkness under ice, the catfish need not fear, as the conscious ego must, the awesome infinitude of time and cosmos above the ice, where "the stars are arctic and/Their gleam comes earthward down uncounted light-years of disdain" (p. 95). The catfish's brother image, the serpent, likewise evinces intimation of an immortality transcending the naturalistic winter at the end of
the book, where the snake, “looped and snug,” survives in “earth’s dark inwardness” (p. 208) underneath the pitiful ruins of the Lewis house, those “huddled stones of ruin” which “say the human had been here and gone/And never would come back, though the bright stars/Shall weary not in their appointed watch” (p. 32). Jasper Harrick gives human embodiment to these metaphysical speculations when he describes the cave as a place resembling the catfish’s dark and timeless realm under ice: “‘It’s a nice temperature down there,’ he had said. ‘It is not summer and it is not winter. There aren’t any seasons to bother about down there,’ he had said, and laughed. . . . ‘Blizzard or hot spell,’ he had said, ‘a lot of things don’t matter down there’” (pp. 227-8). And Jasper goes on to state yet another advantage of that dark underworld: it, and only it, can yield forth the secret of final identity, the search for which has provided Warren’s most recurrent theme over the decades: “He had said, ‘Well, in the ground at least a fellow has a chance of knowing who he is’” (p. 229).

“Perfect adjustment,” being “at one with God,” and knowing at last who you are—such are the final rewards of Warren’s osmosis, though its final price is the death of the conscious ego. “And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood,” R. P. W. had said in Brother to Dragons (p. 215), but the new selfhood appears clearly superior to the old. Back in “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” Warren had indicated this supremacy of the unconscious over the conscious self in a pair of memorable passages. The first lists several modes of establishing a conscious identity as the world knows it:

Though your luck held and the market was always satisfactory,
Though the letter always came and your lovers were always true,
Though you always received the respect due to your position,
Though your hand never failed of its cunning, and your glands always thoroughly knew their business,
Though your conscience was easy and you were assured of your innocence,
You became gradually aware that something was missing from the picture,
And upon closer inspection exclaimed: “Why, I’m not in it at all!”
Which was perfectly true.

But in contrast to the unease of the conscious self on finding “that something was missing from the picture,” the unconscious—as usual,
embodied in a series of animal images—shapes the direction and meaning of life through its secret, intuitive knowledge:

(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. . . .)

Like these creatures, Billie crosses from the realm of conscious to unconscious direction in coming home to his father and thus to death and eternity ("homeland of no-Time"): "You come, weary of greetings and the new friend's smile,/ . . . Weary of innocence and the husks of Time,/Prodigal, back to the homeland of no-Time."

Like "The Ballad of Billie Potts" and Eleven Poems, You, Emperors, and Others (a book very ignorantly reviewed, for the most part) is very effective in setting off the conscious as against the unconscious identities, to the great advantage of the latter. "Lullaby: Exercise in Human Charity and Self-Knowledge," for example, is addressed to a sleeper who, being unconscious, has lapsed out of the false identity provided in his conscious life by name (Stanza 1), face (Stanza 2), and sex (Stanza 3), and who therefore, in his unconsciousness, has access to an osmosis of being blending his identity with the whole universe: "And your sweet identity/Fills like vapor, pale in moonlight, all the infinite night sky." Further emphasis on the superiority of the unconscious to conscious reality appears in the poet's advice in "A Real Question Calling for Solution," where conscious life is so chaotic that "There is only one way, then, to make things hang together,/Which is to accept the logic of dream" rather than such things of consciousness as "Night air, politics, French sauces, autumn weather,/And the thought that, on your awaking, identity may be destroyed." Warren's headnotes sometimes prove relevant, too, as when he refers to "a Roman citizen of no historical importance" and to Walter Winchell's Mr. and Mrs. North and South America. According to Warren's osmosis of being, all citizens are of historical importance—or else none are—and even Mr. Winchell's phrase, as referring to a collective self, might hold a meaning its originator never understood.

You, Emperors, and Others is especially concerned with imparting
a sense of power and vision through dream or animal intuition. “In
the Turpitude of Time” states overtly man’s need for such animal
intuition: “Can we—oh could we only—believe/What annelid and
osprey know,/And the stone, night-long, groans to divulge?” And
“Prognosis” (the prognosis is that you will die) tells quite plainly
the advantage of knowing what annelid and osprey know. Here a
woman doomed with cancer sleeps, after a horrible day, and “. . . past
despair,/Dreamed a field of white lilies wind-shimmering, slow,/And
wept, wept for joy. . . .” Fear of death, moreover, is as irrelevant at
this level of consciousness as it was to the catfish in his “unpulsing
blackness” under ice; thus the woman says of her impending death:
“and I do not grieve to be lost in whatever awfulness of dark. . . .”
Intuition ventures past the awfulness of dark in some of the “Nursery
Rhymes” like “The Bramble Bush,” where the speaker “now saw
past the farthest stars” and “heard the joy/Of flesh singing on the
bone.” The last word on osmosis of being is given by a grasshopper
in the final poem of You, Emperors, and Others. Unlike Ikey Sumpter
or Slim Sarrett, who cut all their ties and fled East (in The Cave
and At Heaven’s Gate), the insect in “Grasshopper Tries to Break
Solipsism” is trying to establish connections: his grasshopper song is
evidence of the humblest creatures’ need for each other. Solipsism,
or the theory that the self is the only existent thing, is the obvious
enemy of osmosis, and as such, merits the effort to “Break Solipsism”
with which this book of poems closes.

IV.

It is only just that we conclude this essay with a few lines from the
master of osmosis, Walt Whitman. In a conversation we once had,
Mr. Warren expressed misgivings about Whitman’s work because
of its undue optimism—its lack of a sense of sin such as Hawthorne
and Melville often gave expression. And certainly Warren’s own
continuing preoccupation with delusion, betrayal, and depravity—or
“original sin”—makes some of Whitman’s ringing affirmations seem
innocent and sentimental by contrast. Warren distrusted Whitman, I
think, because Whitman’s osmosis has no internal dimension, no psy-
chological level of conflict and reconciliation within the self between
conscious ego and humanity’s black collective shadow. But on the
other two levels, social and metaphysical, no one has ever proclaimed
the osmosis of being with the efficacy of Walt Whitman. “And
these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,” Whitman says
in *Song of Myself* after embracing all manner of folk in a tremendous catalogue: "The pure contralto sings in the organ loft . . . The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar . . . The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,/ (He will never sleep any more as he did in his mother's bedroom) . . . The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table/What is removed drops horribly in a pail . . . The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof'd garret and harks to the musical rain . . . The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife . . . And of these one and all I weave the song of myself" (Stanza 15). Whitman's osmosis, like Warren's, embraces creatures long dead as well as those of the present: "In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powder'd bones." And most strikingly, Whitman's metaphysics are at one with Warren's in seeing one's cobweb connections to the entirety of past and future and in accepting the gift of death gracefully, as a welcome fulfillment or release into ultimate identity:

Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there,

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,

For it [my embryo] the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with care.

(*Song of Myself, Stanza 44*)

Like Warren's creatures under ice or his sleepers who do not fear "whatever awfulness of dark," Whitman is enabled by his osmosis to accept return to the oblivion that bred him:

A few quadrillions of eras, a few octillions of cubic leagues . . .
They are but parts, any thing is but a part.

See ever so far, there is limitless space outside of that,
Count ever so much, there is limitless time around that.

(Stanza 45)

And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed before a million universes.

(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and about death.)

(Stanza 48)
And as in Warren’s metaphysics, this acceptance of death comes through the ministrations of an unconscious self, perceiving a pattern and meaning not available to the conscious ego:

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.

Wrench’d and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes, I sleep—I sleep long.

I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid, It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life. ...

(Stanza 50)

Moved by these intuitions from the unconscious, Whitman can bend his will, even as Warren’s parents or old granny did in Promises, to commit his identity to the osmosis of being: “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.” And as Song of Myself ends, even greater oneness is pending: “I stop somewhere waiting for you.”

Osmosis of being, in various manifestations, is not a new idea. It obviously motivated Emerson’s conception of an Oversoul, for example, as well as Wordworth’s pantheistic mysticism, his vision of “a spirit that . . . rolls through all things” (Tintern Abbey). Ultimately, it dates back to sacred writ; an idea of osmosis underlies both the Biblical ethic of brotherhood, as preached by Isaiah and Jesus, and the Hindu metaphysics of Atman (the soul), as seen in the Bhagavad-Gita: “I am the Atman that dwells in the heart of every creature: I am the beginning, the life-span, and the end of all . . . I am the divine seed of all lives . . . Know only that I exist, and that one atom of myself sustains the universe” (Part IX—“The Yoga of Mysticism”). With the declining influence of sacred writ such as this in modern times, people look more than ever to the artist for help in finding the meaning of their lives. One could do worse, I think, than look to Warren’s osmosis of being as a possible source of meaning.

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