TIME'S GLORY
Original Essays
on
ROBERT PENN WARREN
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1986
Poet of Youth: Robert Penn Warren at Eighty

Victor Strandberg

The publication of *Altitudes and Extensions* on Robert Penn Warren's eightieth birthday—April 24, 1985—invites the "Poet of Youth" designation on three grounds. First, as though to prove his contention that a man has all the images he will ever need by age twenty, Warren continues to write extensively about his boyhood throughout the poetry of his septuagenarian years. Second, he continues in this latest volume to explore and develop the themes he first adumbrated fifty to sixty years ago, as though these last poems were designed to fulfill the prophecy implicit in his definition of the image in *All the King's Men*:

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, or the legend of meaning, and without the image our lives would be nothing. . . . (126)

And third, when in this fifteenth published volume of his poetry Warren approaches that last veil, the specific image-patterns that dominate *Altitudes and Extensions* obtain their brightness of meaning from an extraordinary impulse toward rejuvenation.

To take up these issues in turn, we may note that the poetry of boyhood comprises about one quarter of the forty-eight poems in this volume, fastening particularly upon intensely vivid first experiences. The awakening to female beauty in "True Love," for example—". . . There is nothing like / Beauty. It stops your heart" (42)—prefigures Warren's theme of epiphanies, whereas the first discovery of loneliness in "Little Girl Wakes Early" (66) calls up a host of poems about alienation. Another salient poem of youth is "Doubleness in Time" (27-
29), where grief slides over to "Precious Guilt" (29) as Warren describes the death of mother with an immediacy equal to that of "Revelation" (304-05) and "The Return: An Elegy" (311-14), his earliest and most fervent expressions of filial guilt and sorrow. In "Rumor at Twilight" (18), with his own death a not too distant prospect ("something / Like the enemy fleet below the horizon, in / Its radio blackout, unobserved"), the fireflies glow "like the phosphorescent / Moments of memory" for the insomniac whose head "Dents the dark pillow, eyes wide, ceilingward" while thinking of the lost mother: "Can you really reconstruct your mother's smile?" And doubtless the earliest conceivable memory for a Poet of Youth must be the one (in "The Whole Question" [54]) which takes the mother/child motif back to its infantile beginning: "... a strange, sweet taste and bulbed softness while / Two orbs of tender light leaned there above."

But the poems of youth go back even further than this. Though dedicated to Warren's granddaughter, Altitudes and Extensions harks back "A hundred and sixty-odd years ago" to his grandfather's prenatal life, focusing upon the spontaneous connections of that fetal condition:

"a young woman carried it
In her belly, and smiled. It was
Not lonely there. It did not see
Her smile, but knew itself part of the world
It lived in. Do you remember a place like that?" (49)

Now, in "Re-interment: Recollection of a Grandfather" (49-50), Gabriel Penn (the grandfather) is "lonely / But not alone, locked in my [the poet's] head" (49), where the ancestral "Nails dig at the skull-seam. / ... stronger and sharper each year":

I strain to hear him speak, but words come too low
From that distance inside my skull,
And there's nothing to do but feel my heart full
Of what was true more than three-score years ago. (50)

Lost somewhere among those vanished voices and faces is the innermost identity of the octogenarian poet, who is a Poet of Youth most of all because of his unrelenting pursuit of that primal ego which is recoverable only through the medium of the remembered image, or poetry. Most often the recovery of his lost self occurs through an
epiphany of the world’s beauty, as in “Far West Once” (16-17), where a starlit stream suffices to link the now and the then: “Able yet, as long ago, / Despite scum of wastage and scab of years, / To touch again the heart, as though at a dawn / Of dew-bright Edenic promise.” But the world’s beauty, and its evocation of the lost self, can also inflict pain, as when (in “Rumor at Twilight”) moonlight recalls the speaker’s summons to be an artist in his youth—“A boy who, drunk with the perfume of elder blossoms / And the massiveness of moonrise . . . cried out, / In a rage of joy” (18). Now that boy’s hunger “to seize, and squeeze, significance from, / What life is” finds a cynical reply in the adult’s poem-ending gesture: “You fling down / The cigarette butt. Set heel on it. It is time to go in.”

In “Old Photograph of the Future,” the lost self is palpably visible in a seventy-five year old picture of the poet as an infant, but here too the impact of the past is one of reproach to the present self of the observer: “that child, years later, stands there / . . . and he in guilt / grieves / Over nameless promises unkept, in undefinable despair” (55). Perhaps the best summary poem of this lapsarian theme is “Covered Bridge,” whose title is a metaphor for the dark passage separating the un-self—“the boy, sleepless, who lay / In a moonless night of summer, but with star-glow / Gemming the dewy miles, and acres” (47)—from the insomniac adult whose bridge-crossing has meant a loss of identity: “. . . you cannot understand / What pike, highway, or path has led you from land to land, / From year to year, to lie in what strange room, / Where to prove identity you now lift up / Your own hand—scarcely visible in that gloom” (47-48).

Although nothing is more familiar to Warren’s reading audience than this theme of lost identity, it becomes re-invigorated in this volume of poems with freshly imagined materials and new intensities of feeling. At the same time, Warren’s sixty years as poet have established continuities which impose an overarching coherence linking this last volume to his earliest one, Thirty-Six Poems (1935), and its (unpublished) predecessors going back to Pondy Woods and Other Poems. The lost anima, in particular—that ideal self of boyhood that found its Edenic home in nature—correlates these latest poems with Warren’s earliest ones. In “Mortal Limit” (6) the hawk that rides “updraft in the sunset over Wyoming,” its “gold eyes” seeing “New ranges rise to mark a last scrawl of light,” traces its
genesis in this fashion to a very early poem, "Watershed" (in "Kentucky Mountain Farm"), where "The sunset hawk now rides / The tall light up the climbing deep of air" (317), its "gold eyes" scanning the darkening landscape of the mountains below. Likewise the host of wild creatures moving through time toward their mortal "home" at the end of "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (287-300)—"The bee knows, and the eel's cold ganglia burn / And the sad head lifting to the long return, / Through brumal deeps ..."—have their parallels early on in Altitudes and Extensions: in "Caribou" (8-9), where the animals "move through the world and breathe destiny" (8); in "The First Time" (10-11), where a bull elk stands with "Great head lifted in philosophic / Arrogance against / God's own sky" (11); and in "Minnesota Recollection" (12-14), where an old farmer evinces these creatures' natural dignity when he meets his death by freezing: "His [frozen] face was calm. / It had, you might say, an innocent expression" (14).

As against these anima figures of innocent expression, Warren's lifelong theme of guilt or a fall from innocence also finds strong embodiment in these latest pages. At times the guilt is singular and personal, as in "The Distance Between: Picnic of Old Friends" (41), where a clandestine sexual encounter ends in shame and loneliness, but elsewhere Warren expands the theme of the Fall to a national, historic scale—an enterprise that traces back through Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce (1983), the re-written Brother to Dragons (1979), and the books about the Civil War. In this new instance, a long poem ironically called "New Dawn" (32-40), national innocence is shattered with the blast over Hiroshima. Written with a journalistic fidelity to fact, "New Dawn" exhibits a peculiarly American psychology of innocence in the crew's willful absorption in the mechanics of their job, with only Tibbets the pilot betraying some signs of misgiving: a "taste like lead" (clearly psychological in origin, not physical) when the bomb explodes; and later, after the awards and the feasting, a sense of alienation ("Some . . . before sleep, consider / One thought: I am alone" [40]).

Among these new poems, Warren's most elaborate treatment of the lapsarian theme must be the first poem in the book, "Three Darknesses" (3-6). Set in "the zoo of Rome," Part I of this poem uses the site where Warren began writing his masterwork on The Fall, All
the King's Men, in 1939-1940. The poem's central figure, a bear that keeps pounding at an iron door in a cage, recalls the metaphor of an undiscovered self that Warren applied to Willie Stark in that novel: "... and the feet would keep on trampling, back and forth like the feet of a heavy animal prowling... in a locked-up room, or a cage, hunting for the place to get out.... And listening to it, you wouldn't be so sure for a minute the bar or board would hold" (All the King's Men 75). The second darkness, in Part II of "Three Darknesses," also evokes The Fall in its snake imagery ("Up Black Snake River, ... a snake / ... / ... slides off a bough" [3-4]) and in its theme of social isolation: "Nothing human is visible. Each of us lies looking / Seaward.... We seem ashamed / Of conversation" (3-4). (This poem also harks back to the poems of the 1930's such as "Monologue at Midnight" and "Picnic Remembered.") And the final darkness, in Part III, is a patient's thought of death while lying in a hospital: "A dress rehearsal, / You tell yourself, for / The real thing. Later" (4).

Within this framework of familiar themes, Warren formulates, in "Three Darknesses," some new answers to the old dilemmas. Most notably, after claiming in Part I that "Since my idiot childhood the world has been / Trying to tell me something," he proceeds past the failure of human communication in Part II to indicate, in Part III, the language in which the world speaks. It is, of course, a language beyond words and names; the world's message must inhere, as in the passage cited earlier from All the King's Men, in the image itself. Here at the outset of Altitudes and Extensions the image in question is laughably minimal, appearing in a clichéd art form ("an old-fashioned western movie") on a television screen in the sickroom, but it recurs larger and closer throughout this collection as though to profile that "brightness of meaning" mentioned earlier:

Action fades into distance, but
You are sure that virtue will triumph. Far beyond
All the world, the mountains lift. The snow peaks
Float into moonlight. They float
In that unnamable altitude of white light. God
Loves the world. For what it is. (4-5)

By designing his opening poem in this way—having the Three Darknesses end in a small patch of light on a television screen—
Warren anticipates the "old tale told" motif which is the concluding phrase in *Altitudes and Extensions*. It is true that his own "old tale told" in these poems will not be quite like the old-fashioned western, but his poems and the television movie do share one common purpose, which was best defined, I think, by William Faulkner in his Foreword to *The Faulkner Reader*: "To uplift man's heart; the same for all of us: for the ones who are trying to be artists, the ones who are writing simple entertainment, the ones who write to shock, and the ones who are simply escaping themselves. . . . He [the artist] would lift up man's heart. . . . because in that way he can say No to death" (x-xi). Warren's most overt instance of saying No to death occurs in his epigraph to *Altitudes and Extensions*, quoted from St. Augustine: "Will ye not now after that life is descended down to you, will not you ascend up to it and live?" But in addition to this epigraph these poems present collectively an imagistic expression of this theme by gradually amplifying the key images in the television picture: light, mountains, the unnamable (or unwordable), God's love.

Always a poet of dialectical impulse, Warren arranges the poems between the beginning and the end of this collection in a loosely contrapuntal pattern. The sunset hawk in "Mortal Limit" (6), for example, which "will accept the mortal limit" much like Wallace Stevens's pigeons at the end of "Sunday Morning," is played off against the airplane in the next poem, "Immortality over the Dakotas" (7), where the passenger rides securely distant from the doomed farmer looking up in the night. The theme of mortality is most intimately treated in Section II, where a pet ("Old Dog Dead"), a parent ("Doubleness in Time"), old friends ("After the Dinner Party"), and the poet himself ("Snowfall") are either dead or prospectively so; but even here a contrapuntal thread of affirmation emerges strongly. "Hope," for example, moves from "the orchidaceous light of evening" to "the promise / Of moonrise" and its "white forgiveness," pausing in the middle to savor the redemption offered by the world's beauty: "While cinders in the west die, the world / Has its last blooming. Let your soul / Be still" (22). And "Why You Climbed Up" portrays the mountains as an agency of quasi-mystical immersion in the world's beauty, from its minimal embodiment ("you will see / The tiny glint of the warbler's eye, see / The beak, half-open, in still heat gasp" [23]) to the panoramic—"on this high ridge, seeing / The sun blaze down on
the next and higher horizon.” The reward for climbing to this perspective is the mystic’s *summum bonum*, cancellation of the ego, “As though to forget and leave / All things, great and small, you call / The past, all things, great and small, you call / The Self”; but, of course, the lapse back to individual identity recurs with the descent from the mountain—“. . . stumbling, down. / Then all begins again. And you are you.” Concluding Section II, “Snowfall” moves toward a remarkably serene reconciliation with mortality. The poem first gathers a lifetime of good memories like the harvest suggested by Lear’s “Ripeness is all” (“What year will you know the fruit that is yourself?” [30]), and then portrays the snow coming over this landscape of memory as a final fulfillment—“and you / Stand in the darkness of whiteness / Which is the perfection of Being” (31).

The capital letter in “perfection of Being” relates this poem to the motif of God’s love back in “Three Darknesses.” (Earlier poems like “A Way to Love God” in the *Arcturus* collection and “Interjection #6” in *Or Else* also sanctified death in this way.) To say No to death by seeing it as “the perfection of Being” may raise suspicions of sophistry, but analogues spring to mind from impeccable sources—Whitman’s accolade to death in Section 49 of *Song of Myself*, for example: “O grass of graves—O perpetual transfers and promotions.” Warren’s own pantheistic sensibility traces back to his earliest work as a poet. In Poem II of “Kentucky Mountain Farm”—a poem of the 1920’s—a pantheistic deity receives its own worn-out phenomena returning down the stream of time:

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. . . the fractured atoms now are borne
Down shifting waters to the tall, profound
Shadow of the absolute deeps,
Wherein the spirit moves and never sleeps
That held the foot among the rocks, that bound
The tired hand upon the stubborn plow,
Knotted the flesh unto the hungry bone,
The redbud to the charred and broken bough,
And strung the bitter tendons of the stone. (316)
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The primary difference between this early poetry and that of the 1980’s is of tone rather than concept. Words like “fractured,” “tired,” “hungry,” “broken,” and “bitter,” indicative of the influence of *The Waste Land* in the 1920’s, give way to a tone of acceptance and celebration in the late volumes. Here in *Altitudes and Extensions*,

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"Last Walk of Season" (44) presents a notable instance of that celebratory spirit. Placed near the middle of this collection, it evokes the crucial motifs from the television scene—light, mountains, the unnamable love of the world for what it is—but they now assume an imminent magnitude as opposed to the small-screen image of their original appearance. As its title implies, "Last Walk of Season" is a poem of farewell, perhaps permanent, to the world's beauty: "For the last time . . . we climb / In the westward hour, up the mountain trail / To see the last light." In that last light, with "No cloud in the washed evening," a Wordsworthian immersion in nature gradually ensues as the eye again moves from the minimal ("How bright, / Rain-washed, the pebbles shine!") to an overview of a mountain lake: "Beyond it, the sun, / Ghostly, dips, flame-huddled in mist. We undertake / Not to exist, except as part of that one / Existence." At this level of intensity, the theme of the unnamable comes into play, bespeaking experience too immediate for language: "Can it be that the world is but the great word / That speaks to meaning of our joy?" And at the end the shared experience of the world's beauty counteracts the second of the Three Darknesses, solipsistic isolation. The double use of "contact" here underscores the communion experience typical of Warren's "Osmosis of Being" concept: "Scarcely in consciousness, a hand finds, on stone, a hand. / They are in contact. Past lake, over mountain, last light / Probes for contact with the soft-shadowed land."

Directly in the middle of this collection—Section V of the nine sections—are the poems of boyhood reminiscence mentioned earlier, recalling grandfather, a kindly uncle, an elderly friend of the family, and the poet himself in his Eden period. Immediately thereafter, beginning Section VI, "Muted Music" reduces the faculty of memory to something as fragile as a fly's noise in a barn: "Does the past now cruise your empty skull like / That blundering buzz at barn-height . . .?" (53) But in the end this "muted music" of the past evokes that language beyond words by which the world says something—"the song the moth sings, the babble / Of falling snowflakes (in a language / No school has taught you), the scream / Of the reddening bud of the oak tree / As the bud bursts into the world's brightness." The remaining poems of Section VI—the longest section of Altitudes and Extensions—also center upon problems of language and communication. "The
Whole Question” Portrays the child's growth into language-speaking as a regression from the reality known to the infant: “You knew more words, but they were words only,” so now “you must try to rethink what is real. Perhaps / It is only a matter of language that traps you. You / May yet find a new one in which experience overlaps / Words.”

Regarding the “matter of language that traps you,” one concept in particular proves most elusive and essential: the search for identity, or self, that brings the solitary seeker beyond the boundary of words and deeply into nature. In “Why Boy Came to Lonely Place,” the problem is stated: “You say the name they gave you. That's all you are” (56); in “Platonic Lassitude,” immersion in nature frames a solution (“So, lulled, you loll in the lap of Time's wave, and the great crest, / . . . will never descend”), until the crow's call (often a voice of reality in Warren's verse) harshly ends the séance; in “The Place,” the self comes closer yet to absorption by nature (“lying on stone, / Among fern fronds, and waiting / For the shadow to find you” [61]); and in “If Snakes Were Blue” (65), the perfect day (with “clouds like pink lily-pads floating”) suffices to call back the lost anima with “the kind of promise / We give ourselves in childhood when first dawn / Makes curtains go gold. . . .” Here—tellingly—this recall of the lost anima is connected with the crucial motifs (mentioned earlier from the television screen): “True, few fulfillments—but look! In the distance lift peaks / Of glittering white above the wrath-torn land.”

Here in Section VI the immersion in nature is further amplified by a dialectical characterization of the seasons, which are both literal and a figure for the swift passage of a lifetime. In “Seasons,” a poem in two parts, the movement from spring to fall evokes the rueful irony featured in Warren's poetry of fifty years ago. Part I, “Downwardness” (58), juxtaposes the “lust for downwardness” in the snow-melt against a tentative “sacred cycle”: “But time will change, clouds again draw up buckets, / . . . And in earth-darkness moisture will climb the lattices of clay.” Part II, “Interlude of Summer” (59), employs the recurring mountain image in a memorable vignette of time's velocity:

Evening by evening, the climactic melodrama of 
Day flares from behind the blackening silhouette  
Of the mountain for the last and majestic pyre of  
What of today you can remember, or forget.

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Along the way, Warren's favorite flower (symbolizing his Eden period) suffers its own "fall" into a degenerate state: "The woodland violet that was your love is replaced by the roadside aster." And as the lapse accelerates—"The faces of the children are now hardening toward definition," "And gullet has sucked juice from the / . . . tooth-gored pear," "An old friend dies this summer"—the autumn season provokes a strategy of evasion: "But your own health is good. Conversation / Turns to New England foliage, which has begun beautifully. . . . / After all, aesthetics is a branch of philosophy." Yet conversely, "First Moments of Autumn Recognized" (62) celebrates the season, without irony, as pure epiphany:

... From brightest blue
Spills glitter of afternoon, more champagne than ever
Summer. Bubble and sparkle burst in
Tang, taste, tangle, tingle, delicious
On tongue of spirit, joyful in eye-beam.

This is the sort of beauty that can bring the anima self back from its long exile, "your being perfected / At last, in the instant itself which is unbreathing."

Section VII consists of four more poems about moments of communion without language—through the artistry of music in "Youthful Picnic Long Ago: Sad Ballad on Box" (69-70); through loving touch in "History During Nocturnal Snowfall" (71); through the train's wail in "Whistle of the 3 A.M." (72); and through a shared journey in "Last Night Train" (73-74). Moreover, these poems accentuate the nameless as well as the wordless, suggesting the kind of communion that evokes the anima condition. Whereas names distinguish and separate, namelessness fosters the "Osmosis of Being" process that Warren described in his essay on "Knowledge and the Image of Man." For the sleepers in "History During Nocturnal Snowfall" and "Last Night Train" (involving bedmates and strangers on a train, respectively), the "each alone" status of conscious thought is transcended by "the unconscious wallow of flesh-heap" to which the speaker relates himself in this latter poem. And perhaps the loss of names in "Youthful Picnic Long Ago," including that of the singer ("her name, it flees the fastest!") , finally enhances the "One Life we all live" motif that connects these poems with those of the "Billie Potts" period in the 1940's.
As the pursuit of the lost anima intensifies in Section VIII, the television images observed as tiny and distant in “Three Darknesses” assume imminent proximity. Light and mountains now fill the eye at both the literal and metaphorical level of comprehension. Metaphorically, the light of artistic imagination prevails in “Milton: A Sonnet” (75), restoring to the blind poet something like the anima’s joyful presence: “a present in which the blessed heart / May leap like a gleaming fish from water into / Sunlight . . . .” A similar light of creativity combines with mountain imagery in “Wind and Gibbon,” which portrays the great historian’s art as a refuge from the nightwind—itself a metaphor of history as chaos: “The wind / Is like a dream of History. Blows where it listeth” (77). Gibbon, of course, elicits design and order from History—“History is not truth. Truth is in the telling” (77). Through the night the “hot lava” of Gibbon’s “incandescent irony” lights up the reader’s mental landscape like the sun’s “single / Beam, sky-arrowing,” that “strikes / The mountain to dazzlement” (78) next morning.

The motif of namelessness—correlating with the anima level of identity—continues its prevalence in this penultimate section of Altitudes and Extensions. “Whatever You Now Are” (76) asks whether the sleeper who dreams is not a truer self than the conscious ego: “But dawn breaks soon, and that self will have fled away. / Will a more strange one yet inhabit the precinct of day?” And “Sunset” (84)—the penultimate poem in this collection—imposes its ominous setting (“a dire hour”) upon the search for “your naked self—never / Before seen, nor known.” “Who knows his own name at the last,” Warren asks, having vainly “asked stars the name of my soul.” Had Warren ended his new collection here, instead of going on to one more poem, the final image behind all those veils may have turned out to be “flaming apocalypse” that consumes identity and all else in this memorable fusion of visual effect and sound-texture:

Clouds clamber, turgid, the mountain, peakward
And pine-pierced, toward the
Vulgar and flaming apocalypse of day,
In which our errors are consumed
Like fire in a lint-house—

In the end, the “divine osmosis” threading through these last poems answers the need for identity. In “Delusion?—No!” (79) this
merging of self in a collective Being occurs when the mountain-top perspective releases a familiar anima sensibility: "Yes, stretch forth your arms like wings, and from your high stance, / Hawk-eyed, ride forth upon the emptiness of air. . . ." In "Question at Cliff-Thrust" (80-81) this absorption into the world's being occurs in an undersea setting—"one great green . . . depth that steadily / Absorbs your being in its intensity." (In this case it is the bird above the surface that expresses the disconsolation of the separate ego—"once gull that screams . . . and is / Demanding what?" ) And in "It Is Not Dead" (82-83) the osmosis of being reaches beyond the animate world (where it stopped at the end of "Billie Pots") to embrace equally the inorganic. Like the soul or anima in the animate creation, the rock in the brook "has tried / To find its true nature" since its emergence out of "nameless heat under / Nameless pressure" in the earth's core. Claiming "brotherhood" with this piece of inert matter, and "Brooding on our common destinies," Warren exhibits a pantheism—or at least a vitalism—that recalls Spinoza's dictum that matter thinks. Or, closer to Warren's American heritage, one thinks of Thoreau's vitalistic vision in the "Spring" section of Walden: "There is nothing inorganic. . . . The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history . . . but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit,—not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic" (210-211). In Warren's own verse, this strand of vitalism may be traced back through poems like "Interjection #2: Caveat" in Or Else (1974), where a fragment of rock "screams / in an ecstasy of / being" (12), all the way to "Kentucky Mountain Farm," where Poem I comprises the "Rebuke of the Rocks" against sexual generation.

Warren's concluding poem, "Myth of Mountain Sunrise" (85), whose eighteen lines are distinctive enough to compose all of Section IX—is a remarkable performance as a culminating expression of Warren's themes and images. The mountain, so tiny and distant in "Three Darknesses," now envelops the observer, immersing him in stone: "No light here enters, has ever entered but / In ageless age of primal flame." Within its "curdling agony of interred dark," however, the mountain's interior thrusts toward daylight—it "strives dayward, in stone strives"—in obedience to the deepest design of nature: "But look! All mountains want slow- / ly to bulge outward extremely." Of course
the mountain is animate; more than that, it is personified and
humanized as Warren follows its course from night's dream
("Prodigious, prodigal, crags steel-ringing / To dream-hoofs
nightlong") to dawn's waking: "The mountain dimly wakes, stretches
itself on windlessness. Feels its deepest chasm, waking, yawn." Further, in its own wordless language, the stone speaks—"Words stone-
incised in language unknowable, but somehow singing"—as a leaf-
tongue verifies by answering the testimony of the stone: "Leaf cries: 'I
feel my deepest filament in dark rejoice. / I know that the density of
basalt has a voice.'"

The closing six-line stanza of "Myth of Mountain Sunrise" provides
a glorious climax of this poem, of this collection, and of Warren's
purpose as a poet of youth/rejuvenation. Here the fusion of light and
Eros constitutes Warren's wholly original "myth" of sunrise (as he
confirmed in a phone conversation with me), yet it bears analogies to
both the Semitic "Let there be light" and the Hellenistic Zeus coupling
with earthlings. Probably the latter analogy is the more striking for
the manly vigor with which the sun's ray grasps by the haunch the
birch which stands in the brook, ready to be taken ("head back-flung,
eyes closed in first beam"):

How soon will the spiderweb, dew-dappled, gleam
In Pompeian glory! Think of a girl-shape, birch-white sapling rising now
From ankle-deep brook-stones, head back-flung, eyes closed in first beam,
While hair—long, water-roped, past curve, coign, sway that no geometries
know—
Spreads end-thin, to define fruit-swell of haunches, tingle of hand-hold.
The sun blazes over the peak. That will be the old tale told.

For "brightness of meaning"—to recall Warren's statement about image
in *All the King's Men*—it is difficult to imagine anything more striking
than this behind the final veil. What makes it all the more striking is
direct contradiction between this closure and those of all Warren's
previous volumes of poetry. Up until this volume of his eightieth
year, every published collection has ended in an image of full
darkness or declining light. To highlight the contrast, it is worth
cataloguing those first fourteen closures. In the concluding poem of
Warren's first volume, *Thirty-Six Poems* (1935), the father's grave-
stone "Ascends the night and propagates the dark"; *Eleven Poems on
the Same Theme* (1942) moves from "Monologue at Midnight" to
"Terror"; at the end of "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (1943), Little Billie and "you, wanderer" "kneel in the sacramental silence of evening"—"an evening empty of wind or bird"—in acceptance of mortality; *Brother to Dragons* (1953 and 1979) ends with Warren's meditation "In the last light of December's, and the day's, declension"; *Promises* (1957) ends, in "The Necessity for Belief," with a sunset and moonrise ("The sun is red, and the sky does not scream"); *You, Emperors, and Others* (1960) ends with a set of quatrains poems called "Short Thoughts for Long Nights"; *Tale of Time* (1966) ends, in "Finisterre," with a sunset over San Francisco ("And the last of day, it would seem, goes under"); *Incarnations* (1968) ends with "Fog" ("the luminous blindness"); *Audubon* (1969) ends with "Tell Me A Story," set "By a dirt road, in first dark"); *Or Else* (1974) ends with "A Problem in Spatial Composition," which is a verbal painting of sunset ("Sun now down, flame, above blue, dies upward forever in / Saffron"); *Can I See Arcturus from Where I Stand?* (1975) ends in the late-night setting of "Old Nigger on One-Mule Cart" ("by a bare field, a shack unlit? / Entering into that darkness to fumble / My way to a place to lie down"); *Now and Then* (1978) ends with the poet longing to join the wild geese flying southward "Toward sunset, at a great height"; *Being Here* (1980) ends with "Passers-By on Snowy Night"; *Rumor Verified* (1981) ends with the failing light of "Fear and Trembling" ("The sun now angles downward, and southward"); and even *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* ends with the narrator telling his friend, "It's getting night, and a hell of a way / To go."

Theologically, that lusty sun grasping for the world's beauty justifies in the end the pale abstraction in "Three Darknesses," that God loves the world for what it is. We may further postulate that it does something similar for the Spirit of the Deeps, seen wearily receiving the refuse of Time in "Kentucky Mountain Farm." But it is mainly a tribute to the poet's own spirit that in his eightieth year he would so exercise his rejuvenating imagination. A full two decades (and more) ago, George P. Garrett, Jr., compared Warren's "steady growth and blooming" as a poet entering his sixties to "that last astounding harvest of W. B. Yeats" (as well as Picasso and Stravinsky). At that time, Warren had not written half his present poetic oeuvre. What can be said now had perhaps best be said by
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Warren himself. In a poem in *You, Emperors, and Others* (1960) titled "In the Turpitude of Time: N.D.,” Warren wrote: “In the heart’s last kingdom only the old are young” (31). Thinking of that paramour sun with his birch lover, we can believe it.

Notes


2. Poems cited are from *New and Selected Poems* unless otherwise noted.


Works Cited


Victor Strandberg