THE LEGACY OF
ROBERT PENN WARREN

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With an Introduction by James H. Justus
When I went to Japan several years ago to teach American literature at Kobe College, I was uncertain what the curriculum would be, so I thought I could best cover all contingencies by bringing with me the most recent Norton Anthology of American Literature (4th ed., 1994), on the theory that Norton editions of anything figure to be the best in the business. In Japan, a casual perusal of the book left my high esteem for it intact until I turned to the anthology’s section on Robert Penn Warren’s poetry to begin formulating some ideas, and it was at this point that I encountered what I am calling the New Paradigm—a term that I realize may sustain a variety of definitions.

In the context that I am describing, the New Paradigm is a term of reproach for inadequate or even irresponsible scholarship, and reproach most specifically for the theory of criticism that lies behind the inadequate and/or irresponsible performance. What raised the red flag for me was the assertion by the Norton editors that Warren’s career as a “major” poet “began” with the publication of Audubon in 1969, when the poet was in his mid-sixties. A closer look revealed that the only poems published in the Norton Anthology were in fact those that appeared after its 1969 time marker. Even more remarkably, neither the editorial introduction nor the book’s bibliography even mentioned a title of any Warren volume before
1968 (except for one passing mention of Promises). The injustice thus inflicted on Warren’s earlier career will be obvious to anyone familiar with the whole range of his poetry, but let me render a short roll call of major works thereby cast into oblivion: Promises, good enough to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1957 but not good enough to register with Warren’s “Major Poetry,” it would seem; Selected Poems (1944), the fruition of a quarter century of creativity, reaching from the poet’s youth into early middle age; You, Emperors, and Others (1960), the book that closed out the most dramatic development in Warren’s verse, the identity crisis involving the persona he calls “you”; and Tale of Time (1966), with its unforgettable entries occasioned by the death of the poet’s mother.

In fact, one cannot begin to give a meaningful account of Robert Penn Warren as a poet without touching upon certain crucial works that date back to his beginnings: “Kentucky Mountain Farm” and “The Return: An Elegy,” in his first volume, Thirty-Six Poems (1935); the longer entries in Eleven Poems on the Same Theme (1942); “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” the most crucial single poem in all Warren’s poetry (1943); “Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace” in Promises (1956); the “Mortmain” sequence on the death of his father in You, Emperors, and Others (1960); and the title sequence, “Tale of Time,” along with the “Delight” sequence in Tale of Time (1966). And, capping off the list, an adequate sampling of Warren’s major poetry would have to include a page or two of the best poetry in Brother to Dragons—perhaps the Minotaur segment or the coming of the annus mirabilis. Underscoring the “major” importance of these works is the fact that, two years before the 1969 time marker when (the Norton editors say) Warren “began” to publish his “Major Poetry,” Warren was awarded the highest honor an American poet could receive, the Bollingen Prize for Poetry.

Clearly, something was badly wrong with the Norton Anthology’s judg-

ment about what constitutes Warren's "major" poetry—a mishap that now raises doubts in my mind about its reliability with writers that I do not know so well. Regarding Robert Penn Warren, the question I could not understand during my visit to Japan was how, with an abundance of scholarship available, the Norton editors could consign so much of Warren's major poetic achievement into oblivion. Eventually a suspicion crossed my mind. For the first time, I consulted the Norton Anthology's bibliography at the back of the book, and there my suspicion was confirmed: the editors mentioned only a single book-length study in their bibliography, declaring this work "the best book" on Warren's poetry. That one privileged work of criticism applies its subtitle, "Robert Penn Warren's Major Poetry," solely to Warren's poetry from 1969 onward, as follows: "[Warren's] greatness as a writer [of poetry] . . . began with Audubon: A Vision (1969)." This critic is entitled to have his opinion, of course, but we are entitled to wonder why so greatly arguable a thesis gains exclusive rights in the Norton Anthology, whose opening commentary on Warren reads as follows: "In 1969 . . . Robert Penn Warren published his long poem, Audubon: A Vision, the book which announced that here was a major poet." So far as the Norton Anthology is concerned, that one critic's opinion appears to have decided the issue of what is worth reprinting from Warren's six decades as a poet, with the result that thousands of the anthology's users around the world will consider only the final one-fourth of Warren's poetic career worthy of their attention.

I must confess a private interest in this argument. My book The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren (1977) covers the whole career of Robert Penn Warren up into Now and Then in 1976, and I do admit to some puzzlement about being totally excised from the scholarly record in the Norton bibliography, along with other writers of book-length studies whose existence is not acknowledged, such as Floyd Watkins and Randolph Runyon. But the larger issue is the truncation of Warren's poetic career. It is

as though one could appreciate T. S. Eliot only by way of *Four Quartets*—with “Prufrock,” “The Waste Land,” “The Hollow Men,” and *Ash Wednesday* shucked off as “minor” entries—or, to follow the lead of the *Norton Anthology*, not mentioned at all. Or one might say it is like approaching Wordsworth only through *The Prelude*, with the Lucy poems, “Tintern Abbey,” and the “Intimations Ode” designated as literally not worthy of being mentioned.

In suggesting that a New Paradigm of literary criticism lies behind this short-changing of Warren’s achievement as a poet, I shall take a moment to mark three mileposts in my education in this subject. My first serious doubt about our most prestigious publishing houses occurred years ago when I talked with the first and greatest historian of the Holocaust, Raoul Hilberg, whose magisterial *The Destruction of the European Jews* was about to be reissued in a revised, three-volume edition. He had been thinking of using a university press, he told me, until he noticed that some bad books about the Holocaust were coming off the Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Oxford presses. Finally, when—in his words, and with his emphasis—“an unbelievably bad book” came off the University of Princeton Press, he went back to a commercial publisher.

My second milepost of illumination about the New Paradigm was a book by a noted feminist scholar who gained wide approval for her contention that Nathaniel Hawthorne’s high reputation was the result of a patriarchal conspiracy that puffed his work because of his male gender while suppressing more worthwhile books by contemporary women. My colleague Buford Jones, a lifelong scholar of Hawthorne, points out in rebuttal that Hawthorne’s reputation was established during his decade of total anonymity, when reviewers like John Neal and John Greenleaf Whittier praised his stories without any inkling as to whether the writer was a man or a woman.

My third milepost was a book that I reviewed, *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation*, which claimed that Faulkner’s popularity was engineered by a

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cabal of Southern conservatives and New York Jewish intellectuals (led by Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and Irving Howe) who were looking for a front man to propagate conservative values wherewith to fight the Cold War. Although admirable scholarship fills this book with regard to publishing statistics and background correspondence, the writer in his nearly three hundred pages never once considers the possibility that the excellence of Faulkner's writing might have some bearing on his reputation. Nor does he show any awareness of Faulkner's subversion of "conservative, Cold War values"—in The Wild Palms, for example, concerning family values (his heroine deserts her children and gets an abortion); in The Bear and Requiem for a Nun concerning capitalist rapacity (some of these pages seem lifted directly from The Communist Manifesto); and in Light in August and Go Down, Moses concerning racial justice. (Jean-Paul Sartre, the violently anti-American French Marxist who actually created Faulkner's reputation by contriving to get him the Nobel Prize in 1950, would be deeply indignant, I think, to find himself exposed as a purveyor of conservative, Cold War values.)

I put the Norton Anthology's maltreatment of Warren's poetic career in the same category as the above offenses. We live in an age when violations of critical due process are justified, we are told, by the larger context of social needs—the need to upgrade the status of nineteenth-century women writers, in the case of Hawthorne; the need to expose the conspiracy that perpetrated Cold War values, in the case of Faulkner; and the need (as best I can figure it out) to inflate the literary values of the present time over those of the past in the case of Robert Penn Warren—supporting, that is to say, the Provincialism of the Present Moment.

4. Lawrence H. Schwartz, Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), pp. 4 and 5: "Faulkner was seen [by his promoters] to exemplify the same values that Western intellectuals saw in capitalism which made it morally superior to communism. . . . Had anti-Communism not become prevalent, Faulkner could not have achieved renown." Contrary to Schwartz's thesis, Faulkner scholars generally acknowledge that Faulkner's reputation—in academe, most notably—soared to the heights only after he won the Nobel Prize in 1950, an event engineered in large measure by prominent European intellectuals, the most prominent of whom was Jean-Paul Sartre.
Although it is always a debatable issue to pinpoint the beginning of a New Paradigm, I believe a reasonable candidate for that designation in American literary criticism is Fredric Jameson’s essay, “Meta-commentary,” which won the Modern Language Association prize for 1971 as its best essay of the year. A professor of French who reacted bitterly (it would seem) to the failure of the May 1968 student uprising in Paris, Professor Jameson with this essay brought his program of Marxist revolution into American academe, in the hope that a new generation would adopt its precepts. And his first precept is to reject categorically the traditional bourgeois notion of literary value. “In our time,” his first sentence states with satisfaction, “exegetis, interpretation, commentary have fallen into disrepute.”

The reason for this welcome development, Jameson claims, is that now, thanks to Critical Theory, the work of art stands exposed as a reprehensible instrument for capitalist exploitation of the reader: “its mechanisms function as a censorship whose task is to forestall any conscious realization on the part of the subject [i.e., the reader] of his own impoverishment; and to prevent him from drawing any practical conclusions as to the causes for that impoverishment and mutilation, and as to their origin in the social system itself” (122).

For our purposes, the most interesting item in the essay is Jameson’s specific condemnation of the New Criticism for perpetrating corrupt literary values (please do remember, regarding the following citation, that this essay was declared the best of the year by the Modern Language Association): “thus the concept of a symbol . . . along with the other basic components of the new-critical ideology such as irony and point of view . . . all too often encourages the most irresponsible interpretation of an ethical or mythical and religious character. . . . No wonder we feel symbolism in the novel to be such a lie: no wonder Williams’ attack on metaphor came as a liberation to a whole generation of American poets!”

Robert Penn Warren and the "New Paradigm"

A bit later, Jameson reveals what has replaced symbol and metaphor as a preferable literary practice. "And let us also mention here," he says, "that ultimate opposition of metaphor to metonymy, codified by Roman Jakobson, and similarly adopted by Lacan to describe the psychic forces" (119).

So far as Warren's reputation is concerned, I believe Jameson's preference for metonymy over metaphor provides the key for understanding the Norton Anthology's attitude. Disseminated through the power of our literary elite, for example the Yale English department, the vogue of metonymy can sometimes prove to be a wonderfully convenient literary fashion. Among the possible definitions of the term, let us consider the oldest and simplest definition: metonymy is the use of a part to represent the whole, as in "All hands on deck." If you can consider a part to represent the whole, there is no need to go through the vast labor of studying Faulkner's novels by way of analyzing his literary reputation: some letters between Allen Tate and Irving Howe could be all we need.

So, too, why bother to investigate Hawthorne's tortuous path to fame during his anonymous years, when a patriarchal conspiracy might explain his success in a more socially useful fashion? In the case of Robert Penn Warren, I would say that to render his career exclusively through the prism of his last years is an instance of metonymy, as it is commonly employed by the New Paradigm. Which is to say, if a part represents the whole, why bother yourself with the first half century of the poet's career in designating his "Major Poetry"?

Fredric Jameson's purpose in giving preference to metonymy over metaphor was avowedly political. Whereas metaphor is a mere surface feature in Jameson's judgment—an "epiphenomenon" that reflects only the internal design of a poem or novel—metonymy implies the "deep

6. Jameson does not say in this passage whether it was Raymond Williams or William Carlos Williams who attacked metaphor, but if it was William Carlos Williams, Jameson is wrong: Williams famously hoped "through metaphor/to reconcile the people and the stones" in "A Sort of Song." On the other hand, if Jameson was thinking of Raymond Williams, it is hard to imagine how he managed to liberate a whole generation of American poets.
structure” of the thing, which is its role as an agent for oppressive social forces such as “late capitalism,” sexism, racism, homophobia, and the like. Metaphor (Jameson says)—along with other literary devices like irony and point of view—disguises the ways by which literature propagates those social evils; metonymy unmasks them. Jameson’s opinions were not, of course, consciously in the minds of the Norton editors who slighted Warren’s verse, but after Jameson’s anointing by the Modern Language Association, this New Paradigm of criticism did come to pervade the profession of literature at elite levels, inevitably affecting our most prestigious publishing houses. Moreover, the temptation to metonymize a poet’s career need not have a political purpose: the gain of professional advantage or convenience has been a sufficient motive, I would judge, in many cases. And so we cannot be too surprised if Warren’s “Major Poetry” turns out to be only that which got sifted through the Provincialism of the Present Moment.

Within that provincialism, the idea of binary opposites, such as that between metonymy and metaphor, is one of the phoniest, most condescending theories to come out of the Critical Theory movement. Radical politics aside, both metonymy and metaphor are useful figures for the artist at work, and they need not be regarded as acting in opposition. But between metaphor and metonymy, I have to admit that I favor metaphor. A major reason for this preference is, avoiding the Provincialism of the Present Moment, the classical standard: metaphor is attested by millennia of testimony. Four centuries before Christ, Aristotle, in The Poetics (chapter 22), said that the greatest thing by far, for the poet, is to be a master of metaphor; it is the truest sign of original genius, a gift that cannot be learned from others. Our great poets in English—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton—have obviously verified Aristotle’s statement, and Robert Frost, in “The Constant Symbol,” went so far as to say that “Poetry is nothing but metaphor. Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing.” I propose to indicate, through tracing the evolution of one master metaphor, how much is lost in the metonymizing of Warren’s poetic ouevre.

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In its rendition of Warren’s “Major Poetry,” all of it dated from 1969, the Norton Anthology includes the following lyric (“Tell Me a Story”) from the conclusion of Audubon:

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

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

I did not know what was happening in my heart.

It was the season before the elderberry blooms,
Therefore they were going north.

The sound was passing northward.

Clearly, this poem poses a geographical riddle: why does the poet insist on three repetitions of the birds’ northward direction? Since he “could not see them,” but only “heard them,” why does it matter what direction they are flying? Would the birds’ music not stir the boy’s heart equally well if they flew east, west, south, or anywhere? In the end, the answer to this question bears out T. S. Eliot’s observation, apropos of Shakespeare, that to know any of his work really well, you have to know all of it. Which is to say, the New Paradigm’s philosophy of metonymy, using one stage of a poet’s career to stand in for the whole profile, will not do. Quite the contrary, the geese flying northward in Audubon are explicable only in the light of Warren’s whole ouevre, including some of his fiction, in whose light it turns out that the northward direction is very significant.

When we do survey all of Warren’s poetry, we find that the geographical riddle in question extends a thread of meaning from the wild geese of the poet’s sixties to the following lines written by the same poet at about age seventeen (ca. 1922, unpublished):

As, delicate within the stone,
Pick-steel divulges to the view
The printed frond that once had grown
Greener—but perfect now as new:
So had disaster’s bluntest stroke
Cracked the heart-stone and there revealed
Within the stone the stone that spoke
Of ferned shade and summer’s field.

This poem appears to be the earliest literary expression of Warren’s lifelong obsession with the Fall from Innocence: his persona’s “heart-stone,” ossified by the world’s suffering, cracks open to reveal a fossilized lost paradise (“fernèd shade and summer’s field”). Although teenagers sometimes exaggerate their hardships, Warren’s personal suffering, even at age seventeen, certainly sufficed to motivate such a poem. Two years earlier, the fifteen-year-old Warren had lost an eye to a stone thrown by his brother, a mishap that led to a suicide attempt at college—perhaps about the time of this poem.

One effect of this deeply felt trauma—the Fall into a ruined world—was a series of bird images (usually a hawk) that kept reappearing throughout Warren’s lifetime as a poet. Typically soaring into the sunset as its earthbound alter ego looks up enviously from the gathering darkness, these birds represent the Jungian psychodrama of the lost anima, the ideal prelapsarian self that flies away when the Fall happens, leaving an empty husk of self behind. Two such images, cited from poems a half century apart, will illustrate the lifelong persistence of the trope:

The sunset hawk now rides
The tall light up the climbing deep of air.

| . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . |
| . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . | . |
| His gold eyes scan
The crumpled shade on gorge and crest
And streams that creep and disappear, appear,
Past fingered ridges and their shrivelling span.


In Warren’s Selected Poems of 1975, “Evening Hawk” makes unmistakably clear the Jungian role of this creature:

Look! look! he is climbing the last light
Who knows neither time nor error, and under
Whose eye, unforgiving, the world, unforgiven, swings
Into shadow.

In the fallen world down below, which is altogether given over to time and error, the narrator of this poem can “hear . . . history / Drip in darkness like a leaking pipe in the cellar.” And in his final volume, the Selected Poems of 1985, the octogenarian poet repeats the trope yet again in “Mortal Limit”—a title that points toward his own imminent death. “I saw the hawk ride updraft in the sunset over Wyoming,” the first line reads, taking the poem toward a question: “Beyond what range will gold eyes see / New ranges rise to mark a last scrawl of light?”

The lifelong recurrence of these bird images makes it clear that our answer to the geographical puzzle in Audubon requires a careful examination of the anima psychology behind them. And that objective, in turn, requires some knowledge of the writer’s earlier literary biography. The fact that Warren began writing Audubon at the end of World War II gives us a clue as to the dense matrix of creativity out of which the poem finally bloomed a quarter of a century later. World War II was in fact the true period of Warren’s emergence as a Major New Original writer, in all three realms of poetry, fiction, and criticism. In criticism, as James Justus has written, Warren’s hundred-page major opus on Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner laid bare the fable of guilt and expiation that Warren was transmuting into his own major theme of a lifetime—a theme that even Audubon (the character) enacts as he ponders how his display of a gold watch brought about the woman’s crime and execution. In fiction, the war years saw the publication of three masterly novels, Night Rider (1939), At Heaven’s Gate (1943), and All the King’s Men (written between 1939 and 1946)—a novel that now appears certain to claim permanence as an American classic alongside such titles as Huckleberry Finn and The Great Gatsby. In poetry, the Provincialism of the Present Moment to the contrary, Warren’s emergence as a major American poet occurred with the publication, in 1942 and 1943, of Eleven Poems on the Same Theme and its companion masterpiece, “The Ballad of Billie Potts.” (For convenience, we shall call them the Twelve Poems.) These powerful, utterly original poems, in turn, set the stage for their successor a decade later,
Brother to Dragons (1953)—an American epic poem of a status comparable to Whitman’s Song of Myself and Hart Crane’s The Bridge.\footnote{Thanks to the Provincialism of the Present Moment, the original (1953) version of Brother to Dragons is no longer in print. The revised (1979) version was also out of print until Louisiana State University Press offered a reprint in its Voices of the South series (Baton Rouge, 1996). The failure of the Norton Anthology even to mention its title may be a clue as to how such a major opus can find a path to oblivion.}

The major reason why the Twelve Poems actually marked the emergence of Warren as a major poet lies, needless to say, in their combination of artistic mastery and prophetic power. It was here, in these poems, that Warren’s anima psychology found its most compelling expression. But it should not surprise anyone that these poems also represent a rich cross-fertilization with Warren’s greatest novel, which he was writing during these same wartime years. Although space does not permit an extensive exegesis of these correlations, a few of the more important ones may suggest how Warren’s undeniable emergence as a major fiction writer in All the King’s Men paralleled his emergence as a major poet in the Twelve Poems.

First, the theme of lost innocence is the “Same Theme” of the Eleven Poems on the Same Theme and “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” with the persona of “you” serving the same role as Jack Burden in the novel—that is, the role of the Humpty Dumpty figure whose fall from innocence cannot be repaired even by all the king’s men. The novel’s postlapsarian motifs show up everywhere in the Twelve Poems. Jack Burden’s general experience of alienation appears in the poem “Monologue at Midnight,” for example, and in particular his broken relationship with his mother correlates with the filial guilt of the poem “Revelation”:

> Because he had spoken harshly to his mother,
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> The peacock screamed . .
> . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> And the owl’s brain glowed like a coal in the grove’s combustible dark.

Similarly, Jack’s shame over his decrepit “father,” Ellis Burden, correlates with that of “you” toward the shabby grandfather fingerling the wen on
his forehead in the poem “Original Sin: A Short Story.” Jack’s escape into the distraction of politics parallels that of the political fanatics in the poem “Terror” who are swept up by the appeal of Franco, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. So too is Jack’s flight to California like the escape to Florida in the poem “Pursuit,” where “you simply need a change of scene.” Jack’s turn toward determinism to escape responsibility in the Great Twitch episode correlates with the same motif in the poem “Crime,” where the psychotic murderer blamelessly “cannot seem / To remember what it was he buried under the leaves.” And Jack Burden’s search for innocence in the fetal, underwater state is reflected in the water imagery of “End of Season,” where “waters wash our guilt and dance in the sun.” Even the elegant, archaic style of the Cass Mastern episode finds a correlative in “Love’s Parable,” a baroquely worded poem that, like Cass Mastern’s confession, moves away from the “sore / Of self that cankers at the bone” towards a final expiation—the “testaments / That men, by prayer, have mastered grace.” And what was once the most widely anthologized of the Twelve Poems, “Bearded Oaks,” correlates with the most intractable of all postlapsarian motifs in Warren’s novel, the existential question of annihilation. “Bearded Oaks,” that is to say, describes the state of being dead by comparing it to being under water:

Passion and slaughter, ruth, decay  
Descend, minutely whispering down,  
Silted down swaying streams, to lay  
Foundation for our voicelessness.

All our debate is voiceless here,  
As all our rage, the rage of stone;  
If hope is hopeless, then fearless fear,  
And history is thus undone.

For Jack Burden, the equivalent sense of history being undone comes through the metaphor of a baseball game that evokes the most pessimistic idea in the history of human thought, the idea of entropy bringing on the final extinction of the entire universe: “After the death of Judge Irwin . . . I felt that a story was over. . . . But if anything is certain it is that no story
is ever over, for the story which we think is over is only a chapter in a story which will not be over, and it isn’t the game that is over, it is just an inning, and that game has a lot more than nine innings. When the game stops it will be called on account of darkness. But it is a long day” (355, first paragraph of chapter 9).

In counterpoint with these postlapsarian motifs, the Fall from Innocence also evokes memories of the lost paradise in both the Twelve Poems and the novel. Paralleling Jack Burden’s lost paradise—his youthful romance with Anne Stanton—is the romance in the poem “Picnic Remembered,” and what follows the broken romance in both the poem and the novel is an explicit extension of Warren’s bird imagery into the region of Jungian psychology. That is to say, the hawk soaring in the last light of day here represents the Jungian anima, or ideal self, flying away from the fallen self trapped down below in earthbound darkness. The poem “Picnic Remembered” renders this anima metaphor by way of a question:

Or is the soul a hawk that, fled
On glimmering wings past vision’s path,
Reflects the last gleam to us here
Though sun is sunk and darkness near?

In the chapter of All the King’s Men that parallels “Picnic Remembered” (chapter 7), Warren’s anima/bird metaphor comes into play through Anne Stanton’s love songs. “Oh, Jackie-Boy, oh Jackie-Bird, it’s a wonderful night, a wonderful night,” she sings to him, making a pun on his name (Bird/Burden) before turning the motif into a nursery rhyme appropriate to the theme of primal innocence: “Poor Jackie-Bird, he is a pest, but I’ll rock him to sleep in a soft warm nest, and I’ll sing a song to Jackie-Bird, the sweetest song he ever heard, poor Jackie-Bird, poor Jackie-Bird. . . . I’ll never let anything hurt poor Jackie-Bird.”8 In the end, as we know, she does let something hurt poor Jackie-Bird, very badly, through her own affair with Willie Stark, but even before that great trauma, Jack Burden ruefully ponders “the years that had gone by since the summer when we

sat in the roadster and she sang to Jackie-Bird, and promised to never let anybody hurt poor Jackie-Bird. Well, she kept her promise, all right, for Jackie-Bird had flown away that summer, before the fall came, to some place with a better climate where nobody would ever hurt him, and he had never come back. At least, I had never seen him since" (323). Jackie-Bird’s flight to a place with a better climate is an obvious anima image evocative of those sunset hawks we saw earlier from the first and last Warren volumes. But Jackie-Bird also points ahead some thirty years to “Heart of Autumn,” the closing poem of Now and Then (1978), where the birds in the sunset turn out to be wild geese similar to those heard by the boy at the end of Audubon. Here, in “Heart of Autumn,” however, the fall has indeed come, and the birds are not flying north but south, to “a land of warm water.” There is no doubt that the anima psychology that we observed in “Picnic Remembered” and All the King’s Men extends crucially into this poem of three decades later, because the speaker contrives through his imagination to leave his autumnal world behind and join the birds in their migration back toward paradise:

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

If Jackie-Bird in All the King’s Men and the geese in this poem (“Heart of Autumn”) represent the anima escaping southward, what does it mean that at the end of Audubon the geese are flying north, as the boy states three times? The flight north means the return of the anima rather than its departure. That is why the last line of Audubon is “Tell me a story of deep delight.” The return of the anima is a story of deep delight, its joy making possible a reversal, if only for the duration of the epiphany, of the syndrome of man’s fall. Perhaps all the king’s men cannot put Humpty together again, but the world’s beauty can do so, restoring the
Warren persona to his lost paradise at least for the moment at the end of *Audubon*. During this moment, he enjoys the anima-state of being perfectly happy to be exactly who he is, living in the world just as it is. That is why he says, “I did not know what was happening in my heart.”

Now that we have correlated Jackie-Bird’s flight in *All the King’s Men* (in 1946) with the geese flying south in “Heart of Autumn” (in 1977), and now that we have contrasted those two motifs with the geese flying north in *Audubon* (in 1969), one final bird metaphor will complete this brief overview of Warren’s anima psychology. Before *Audubon*, there was one earlier instance of wild geese flying north, reversing the syndrome of man’s fall, and that occurred at the end of the single most crucial poem that marked Warren’s emergence as a major poet, “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943). Here the “you” gains redemption from the fall not through recovering some spurious lost “innocence” but by joining the procession of wild creatures that make up “the one life we all live”:

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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.

Brother to pinion and the pious fin that cleave
The innocence of air and the disinfectant flood

Back [to]

The itch and humble promise which is home.
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The return of the anima in this poem, when “the goose hoots north” instead of escaping southward, correlates with the Warren persona’s calm acceptance of mortality, the universal heritage of death shared by all the creatures moving “homeward”—to eternity—at the end of “The Ballad of Billie Potts”: “Back to the silence . . . back / To the high pool, motionless, and the unmurmuring dream.” The Warren persona comes in the end to kneel “in the sacramental silence of evening” awaiting the father’s fatal hatchet blow. This scene of reconciliation with the fallen world
ranks with the grandest achievements in all of Warren's writing, combining intense visionary and aesthetic power to mark the unmistakable emergence of a Major Poet in American literature.

The crosshatch of references I have made, covering a span of fifty to sixty years, indicates the damage inflicted upon the poet's oeuvre by the metonymic approach to scholarship. Moreover, important as it is, Warren's anima psychology represents just one section of his Wagnerian-scale bird orchestra, whose total ornithology probably rivals that of John James Audubon himself. Beginning with the blue jay, cardinal, and "sunset hawk" that are given prominence in "Kentucky Mountain Farm," along with the two undertaker-buzzards of "Pondy Woods," Warren has filled his poems with prominent roles for crows, eagles, hawks, owls, sea gulls, meadowlarks, mockingbirds, whippoorwills, cormorants, herons, bull-bats, orioles, redwing blackbirds, pheasants, flycatchers, wild geese, kestrels, grackles, sparrows, swallows, thrushes, warblers, ospreys, jorees, and flamingos. As a closing instance of what he can do with just one of these creatures, let us consider the metaphor that Warren construes from two owl calls that reply to one another despite being separated by some thirty years and the Atlantic ocean. The owl of the present moment is in Italy; the one from the past in Kentucky (the "home-dark" of the poem):

This small owl calls from the moat now.
The other owl answers him
Across all the years and miles that
Are the only Truth I have learned.
And back from the present owl-call

the reply
Of a dew-damp and downy lost throat spills
To quaver from that home-dark,
And frame between owl-call and owl-call
Life's bright parenthesis.
("In Italian They Call the Bird Civetta," You, Emperors, 1960)

That closing metaphor about two owl calls enclosing "Life's bright parenthesis" indicates exactly why this poet's career must not be metonymized:
to subordinate the pre-1969 poetry is to leave us, metaphorically speaking, with only one owl call, thereby raising the question: of what use is a single parenthesis? One owl call does answer another across the range of Warren's poetry, with respect to a vast variety of motifs, and it is a reckless mode of criticism to eradicate the earlier voices from the poetic record.

No critic can hope to exhaust the entire web of meanings afforded by Robert Penn Warren's poetic ouevre or even exhaust the one entry in the web represented by Warren's elaborate symbolism of the birds. The problem with metonymy, in the sense of using the last part of his career in place of the whole, is precisely its injustice to metaphor, the career-long evolution of a texture of meanings in which each part illuminates the others. The Norton Anthology's false dichotomy between major and minor, using 1969 as the demarcation point, breaks the woof and web of Warren's poetic achievement in a finally irresponsible way.

This essay has, in effect, been an argument against the misuse of a single word. If the Norton Anthology's one favored critic had used the subtitle "Robert Penn Warren's Late Poetry," instead of "Major Poetry," I would not have had the occasion to write this paper. But his phrase "The Major Poetry" creates one of those binary oppositions that Critical Theory supposedly finds reprehensible when they are lodged in the mass mind of the bourgeoisie. In this case, the binary opposition polarizes Major and Minor, poetry that is Important versus that which is Not Worth Our Time. No one who knows Warren's entire poetic oeuvre can—or would want to—allow this binary opposition to go unchallenged. I do acknowledge, of course, that any scholar may publish any opinion he can get a publisher to print: that is not the issue. What is the issue is the mysterious way by which such an opinion, no matter how debatable, gets anointed as God's Truth by so prestigious a publisher as W. W. Norton, which additionally excludes from its bibliography virtually all mention of either competing scholarship or even competing (pre-1969) volumes of poetry by one of our great poets.

With respect to Robert Penn Warren's poetry, the Norton Anthology is not the worst in the business. That distinction is reserved to the Macmillan Anthology of American Literature (George McMichael, general editor),
whose fifth edition (1993) never mentions the name of America’s first Poet Laureate in the index to its 4000-plus pages. But we do expect the highest standards from the Norton Anthology, and the record shows a decline in its standards after the mid-1980s. Working backward through time, we find that the third edition of the Norton Anthology (1989) is identical to the fourth edition (1994) with regard to the Warren entries—that is, only what comes after 1969 matters. The second edition (1985), by contrast, at least mentions the title Brother to Dragons, which is excised from the later editions apparently in deference to the assertion of its one privileged scholar that Warren’s “Major Poetry” only “began” with Audubon in 1969. Prior to that scholar’s influence, the second edition also includes two of Warren’s important earlier poems, “Bearded Oaks” and “Picnic Remembered,” which were cited from the volume that actually announced the arrival of a major new poet, Eleven Poems on the Same Theme (1942).

I think it significant that the mishandling of Warren’s poetic oeuvre in the Norton Anthology is matched by its mishandling of scholarship about Warren. Apart from their single uniquely privileged scholar, the Norton Anthology’s only other entries for scholarship are one collection of interviews and two essay collections, a total of three books which conveniently shield their one consultant from any sustained, unified competing arguments. This paucity of references forms an interesting contrast to the anthology by Perkins, Bradley, Beatty, and Long, The American Tradition in Literature (7th ed., vol. 2, McGraw-Hill, 1990). The latter volume devotes only three pages to Warren’s verse, compared to the Norton Anthology’s thirteen pages, but in those three pages it reflects the whole chronological range of Warren’s oeuvre, with an early poem (“History Among the Rocks,” 1935); one from the poet’s middle period (“Founding Fathers, Nineteenth-Century Style, Southeast U.S.A.,” 1957); and a later entry (“Blow, West Wind,” 1966). They also, in these three pages, find the space to list all of Robert Penn Warren’s published books, and they further list,

9. The first edition of the Norton Anthology (1979), published in the same decade as Warren, Brooks, and Lewis’ own magnificent American Literature: The Makers and the Making (1973), gave no space at all to their rival anthologist, whom they apparently designated as too “minor” a poet to deserve even a mention, although Warren had already won two Pulitzer Prizes and the Bollingen Prize for his poetry.
without either favor or prejudice, all sixteen books of scholarship about Robert Penn Warren published since 1958. (Norton’s list of four scholarly books goes back only to 1982.)

Until the Norton editors show better judgment, anyone interested in avoiding the Provincialism of the Present Moment might well consider using the Perkins, Bradley anthology of American literature. Ironically, the finest anthology ever published, by common consensus, was Warren’s own *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1974), coedited by Cleanth Brooks and R. W. B. Lewis. While we lament its totally unjustified demise, anthology users would be well advised to consider the status of Warren’s oeuvre as an index to judge the integrity of all such publications. So long as the New Paradigm and its aftermath continue to shortchange Warren’s achievement, we can only expect his reputation to undergo continued attenuation. The judgment of the birds calls for resistance to that iniquity when we see it.