THE SEQUENCE POETRY OF ROBERT PENN WARREN

by

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(Under the Direction of Hugh Ruppersburg)

ABSTRACT

Within larger poetic volumes, Robert Penn Warren occasionally arranged related short poems under one title to form a sequence of poems. This work explores the impact of the sequence format on the content of the poems. Three specific sequences are discussed: "Promises," "Tale of Time," and "Homage to Emerson: On Night Flight to New York," all written and published between 1950 and 1970. These sequences exhibit Warren's continued effort to examine his life through his poetry and they offer insight into the different methods he employed to do this.

INDEX WORDS: Robert Penn Warren, Tale of Time, Homage to Emerson: On Night Flight to New York, Promises

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DEDICATION

For my Family.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> In the later work, story is less an occasion for swelling language with mood, mood with music and design, than a joy of experience…or a puzzle that may perhaps still be resolved, if only questioned hard enough, attacked with an unknotting bravery or anguish.
>
> — Calvin Bedient, *In the Heart's Last Kingdom: Robert Penn Warren's Major Poetry*

Robert Penn Warren considered himself a poet first and last. In an interview with John Baker, when asked what was more important to him, poetry or fiction writing, Warren says, "You're closer to trying to investigate your own values and the meaning of your own life in poems than you are in a novel."[1] Warren's poetry, especially that written after 1950, is powerful, complex, and deeply personal. Although he is better known for his popular novels, perhaps most notably,

[1] Robert Penn Warren, interview by John Baker, *Conversations with Writers*, 1977. Reprinted in Warren, Robert Penn, *Robert Penn Warren Talking Interviews 1950-1978*, eds. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 259.

All the King's Men, the writing of poetry has always taken precedent over the writing of novels for Warren.[2]

Over his career, the poetry changed and grew with the artist. During his early years at Vanderbilt, Warren took a particular liking to poetry and published a few poems at school. Later, he published *Thirty-Six Poems* (1935), *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942), and *Selected Poems of 1923-1943* (1944). With the publishing and subsequent popularity of *At Heaven's Gate* in 1943 and *All the King's Men* in 1946, his fiction career took most of his attention, but poetry was never far from his literary awareness. In 1954, after a decade without finishing a "single short poem," he reevaluated his artistic vision and began a new, invigorated phase of his poetic career.[3]

In recent years, his poetry has become an increasingly popular area of scholarship for the literary community, and the possibilities for exploration are limitless. Although Warren critics point to different volumes of poetry as evidence, most argue that Warren's career underwent a significant change during the 1950s. Calvin Bedient and James Justus note a clear departure from the imitative style echoing T.S. Eliot and John Donne alongside Warren's discovery of an original, confident poetic voice.[4] His poetry reflected explorations of his own experience rather than attempts to continue traditions or styles pioneered by other poets. Warren himself cites 1954 as a turning point in his poetry:

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[2] Robert Penn Warren, interview by Robert B. Sale, "An Interview in New Haven with Robert Penn Warren." Reprinted in Warren, Robert Penn, *Robert Penn Warren Talking Interviews 1950-1978*, eds. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 110.
[3] Robert Penn Warren, interview by Peter Stitt, 1977. Reprinted in Warren, Robert Penn, *Robert Penn Warren Talking Interviews 1950-1978*, eds. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 229.
[4] See Bedient, Calvin, *In the Heart's Last Kingdom: Robert Penn Warren's Major Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 8, and Justus, James, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 59.

> I began to see that I had in a way, too abstract a view of what constituted the germ of a poem *for me*. I mean that when I went back to writing short poems, the poems were more directly tied to a realistic base of facts. They're more tied up with an event, an anecdote, an observation, you see. They were closer to me, closer to my observed and felt life.[5]

Indeed, his poems become not only more autobiographical but also more curious about life as he lived it. Although his poetry explores oft-repeated questions on life, death, and what defines humanity, Warren's poetic skill allows him to avoid banality. While explaining his sources of inspiration, he offers a glimpse into how his poetry should be considered—as explorations rather than explanations,

> Everybody knows a hundred stories, you know, a thousand stories—the question is: Why does this story pick on you? Why this story and not that story? My guess is now this: the story or poem you find to write is the story or poem that has some meaning that you haven't solved in it, that you haven't quite laid hands on. So your writing—it is a way of understanding it, what its meaning, the potential meaning, is.[6]

Warren's mature poetry shows the full force of his ability and an insight into his investigation of self. Perhaps because of the wealth of poetry Warren published, critics like Justus and Bedient focus on broad themes that span his entire collection. They use individual poems for evidence and cherry-pick from Warren's entire collection to supplement their

[5] Interview with Sale, 121. Emphasis in original.
[6] Interview with Baker, 254

discussions. Warren, however, did not always present each individual poem as a self-contained unit available for use in a broad discussion. A recurring form, what I will call a "sequence" (short poems grouped together under a single title and numbered with Roman Numerals), appears throughout his work, and the particular formatting indicates Warren's formal decision to relate certain groups of short poems. By presenting short poems as related but not part of a single, long poem, Warren declares the poems individual pieces of a larger whole. The task here is to interpret three such sequences as unified works and explore how Warren used this form to influence or reflect the content of the poems.

The sequence "Promises," from the collection of poems *Promises* published in 1957, explores Warren's effort to fulfill his obligations as a father to his son, Gabriel. Individual poems within the sequence address different aspects of parenting and offer a wide variety of poetic styles that reflect Warren's shifting attitude towards his role as father. Issues of identity, authority, and heritage all interact throughout the sequence to impact Warren's personal development. Most importantly, the poems form a dialogue pattern that only becomes clear once they are viewed as pieces of a cohesive set.

"Tale of Time," from *Selected Poems, New and Old, 1923-1966*, addresses Warren's grief over the death of his mother. He deals with his grief in intervals represented by the separate poems in the sequence. Each poem considers his grief from a different perspective, and through the writing of the separate poems Warren finally proceeds to an acceptable resolution. The entire sequence depicts his emotional and spiritual journey through his grief. Climaxes and breakthroughs emerge when all the poems are read together, and the interrelatedness of the different methods of grieving become obvious.

Finally, “Homage to Emerson: On Night Flight to New York,” provides a broader inquiry into the nature of humanity in the modern world, as Warren considers it. The sequence models the actual flight depicted as we are taken on both a metaphorical and literal journey towards enlightenment. The poems are at once related and distinct; the abrupt shifts and shared themes work together to prove Warren’s point about the fragmented state of modern man.

CHAPTER 2

ON "PROMISES"

Warren uses the sequencing format of "Promises" to construct a question-response dialogue between short poems arising from his personal experiences and communicating his search for guidance in fatherhood. Dedicated to Gabriel, Warren's only son, the sequence takes us along on Warren's journey from uncertain to certain father. Each question Warren poses offers an insight into what issues he should master to properly raise his son. His family history, already important to Warren, becomes central in his quest to prepare the newest generation. He rifles through personal memories of his parents, grandparents, and childhood to gather knowledge and experience from previous generations, which Warren respected immensely.

Warren sets the tone by opening with a strong inquiry: "1. What Was the Promise That Smiled from the Maples at Evening?" This first short poem ruminates on the responsibilities of becoming a father. "II. Court-Martial," a collection of advice passed from a grandfather to a young boy, provides an emotional, if not literal, answer to the dilemmas posed in the first poem. The question-response formula repeats loosely throughout. "III. School Lesson Based on Word of Tragic Death of Entire Gillum Family" captures the feelings of doubt following a tragedy, and "IV. Summer Storm (Circa 1916), and God's Grace" offers a harsh, naturalistic explanation for tragedy in general. "V. Founding Fathers, Nineteenth-Century Style, Southeast U.S.A" struggles to interpret the legacy of great men of the past, while "VI. Infant Boy at Midcentury" discusses the possibilities of future generations, and, specifically, of Warren's son. "VII. Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme" explores a beast lurking in Kentucky's dark places. "VIII. Ballad of a Sweet

Dream of Peace" takes us to Central Park, where different relics, also from Warren's past, struggle in modernity. This question-and-answer exchange forms a rhythm for "Promises" as a group. The mood of each short poem builds on the previous and leads us to the next. Finally, in "IX. Lullaby: A Motion like Sleep," we are left with a poem that leads us back to the beginning of the sequence where Warren again explores his role as a father, and offers closure to his search for knowledge.

These philosophical questions are filtered through Warren's personal experience. The poems in the sequence, like much of Warren's work, start with a memory or an image of Warren's. In an interview with *The New England Review*, Warren discusses the strong autobiographical nature of his poetry, especially in the volume *Promises*:

> You carry some place with you in your head. For example, even a lot of those late poems are really autobiographical – things that really happened…My book – *Promises* – primarily about the Mediterranean is really half about the Mediterranean and half about the South. Our small children – babies then – were living with us in a ruined sixteenth century fortress in Italy. This tied up in my mind quite specifically with a recollected Kentucky…and my grandfather. They're all one package – contrast and identity in one package – change and continuity – the human story.[7]

[7] Robert Penn Warren, "Interview with Eleanor Clark and Robert Penn Warren," *New England Review*, 1978. Reprinted in Warren, Robert Penn, *Robert Penn Warren Talking Interviews 1950-1978*, eds. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 247.

Memories of the South feature heavily in the poem "Promises." Through the sequence format, Warren constantly changes the tone and style of the speaker, but settings, when they are concrete, always return to Warren's past.

Warren opens "Promises" with a short lyric plumbing the role of fatherhood and family. The opening lines of the first four stanzas begin with: "What was the promise . . ." This repeated question establishes the poet as seeker searching his personal memory for answers. Right away, a burden establishes the direction of the quest: "And the heels of the fathers click on the concrete, returning, / Each aware of his own unspecified burden, at sun-dip" (3-4). This burden of parenting seems particularly weighty at dusk. Each stanza, which outlines a scene, occurs at dusk: a time of change and imprecision. The speaker watches his son play in the dying light while he contemplates his own responsibility for his son's life.

Suddenly, in the middle of stanza four, the scene shifts and the speaker is brought forcefully back to his own childhood. He says: "Recollection of childhood was natural: cold gust at the back" (25). He suspends laws of time and space to revisit his dead parents, Robert and Ruth. He possesses an aerial and aquilinian view of his childhood landscape that foreshadows a discovery of knowledge:

> Earth was earth, and in earth-dark the glow died, therefore I lifted
>
> My gaze to that world which had once been the heart's familiar,
>
> Swell of woods and far field-sweep, in dusk by stream-gleams now wefted,
>
> Railroad yonder and coal chute, town roofs far under the first star (36-39).

He sees everything at once, like the hawk. The heightened vision affords him heightened understanding later in "II. Court Martial." Seeing his childhood's physical landscape from such an unlimited vantage point provides the perspective he needs to understand his responsibility as

father. His physically increased sight represents his extended capacity to emotionally and mentally see and understand the past. By returning to his parents who have successfully, or at least fully, completed the same ordeal, he can learn how he should act as a father to Gabriel.

During his flight, a female, presumably Ruth, speaks: "Then her voice, long forgotten, calm in silence, said: 'Child'" (40). Instantly, the speaker becomes a child and he leaves fatherhood for the moment. A male, presumably his father, speaks the last line: "'We died only that every promise might be fulfilled'" (42). The death of his parents allowed the cyclical nature of human life to continue, as though their departure was necessary for Warren's own independence. The poem ends on an enigmatic note with the speaker traveling towards his own childhood to discover how these "promises" work. This open-ended journey leaves the narrative thread open for the following poem in the sequence.

In "II. Court-martial" Warren appears as a small child listening to the stories of his grandfather, to whom Warren expresses profound appreciation for his role in Warren's own intellectual development.[8] The journey backwards has continued. The recurrent use of first person narration, too, reinforces the speaker's identity continued from the first poem, and we know the speaker is Warren. A new, but not altogether different, relationship between a father (in this case a grandfather) and son presents itself. Warren seeks out his grandfather or memories of his grandfather to aid him in his search for knowledge of the burden of fatherhood that he has embraced. The time of day has significantly shifted: "The afternoon stood still. / Sun dazzled the far hill" (53-4). The bright afternoon, in contrast to dusk, offers greater clarity. The memory offers insight in stark outline.

[8] Interview with Baker, 238.

The authoritative tone of the speaker indicates his powers of perception are more advanced than the child's in the poem, and we understand that Warren the adult is revisiting the scene through his child self. His grandfather's declarative confidence answers the questing tone of the previous poem, even if the specific subject matter does not. Advice given by the grandfather makes the world simple for Warren:

> Put your pickets, vedettes out, dismount.
>
> Water horses, grease gall, take count,
>
> And while the men rest and jaw,
>
> You and the lieutenants talk law.
>
> *Brevitatem justitia amat.*
>
> Time is short—hell, a rope is—that's that (70-84).

Stunningly simple, brief commands contrast sharply with the long, wandering questions and observations of the first poem. These commands provide certainty and closure for action in this world. Handed down from the grandfather to the grandson, they provide the emotional conviction that the Warren seeks.

The next two poems address death and the way to respond to loss, and Warren relates them from a less obviously autobiographical perspective. The poem "III. School Lesson Based on Word of Tragic Death of Entire Gillum Family" grapples with a tragedy through the eyes of a child. The speaker, while he relates the events of the murders, cannot meaningfully process the information. In "IV. Summer Storm (Circa 1916), and God's Grace," an even more removed narrator arrives at a sobering, but ultimately hopeful, conclusion after a sadistic God ravages the Kentucky countryside and farmers incur devastating losses.

In “III. School Lesson Based on Word of Tragic Death of Entire Gillum Family” the speaker becomes less personal and more formal. The first person appears late in the poem, stanza eleven, and is used only in the plural. This is a departure from the method of the first two poems because it allows Warren to remain part of an anonymous group within the poem. The sequencing structure, with the formal breaks between poems, allows Warren to change not only form and tempo, but also speaker persona. Addressing the audience directly through the use of second person, this speaker can include the audience in the search for explanation. Although he remains aloof, the final two lines add a new dimension to the speaker as he instantaneously shifts into a backwards, grown-up interpretation of his childhood anxiety: “*We studied all afternoon, till getting on to sun. / There would be another lesson, but we were too young to take up that one*” (53-4). He intimates that an explanation will be forthcoming, and the following poem provides not a direct explanation of the murders, but a general example on how to deal with loss. Like the first two poems, the third and fourth poems connect on an emotional rather than literal level.

“IV. Summer Storm (Circa 1916), and God’s Grace” features a similarly distant narrator that never uses the first person but depends upon use of second person. As in the preceding poem, however, the speaker sets the scene before departing from the impersonal third person. This time the use of second person turns the poem into a lesson for the reader by omitting the speaker from the episode. Like a disembodied voice from the radio, he only speaks to tell you, the reader, what happens. Warren assumes a more didactic posture essential to being a good father. The audience, however, learns by experience and watches alongside the men in the poem, not only the destruction but also the continuation of life:

> Next morning you stood where the bridge had washed out.

A drowned cow bobbled down the creek.

Raw-eyed, men watched. They did not speak

Till one shrugged, said he guessed he'd make out.

Then turned, took the woods-path up the creek (36-40).

This speaker offers the reader a look at what is necessary in order to recover from tragedy and loss, but remains outside the circle of activity. By obviously removing himself from these two poems, Warren presents his findings on life as more objective.

Another link between the third and fourth poems is structure. Each stanza in "III. School Lesson" consists of four lines and follows the same rhyming scheme: ABAB, with the exception of the final two lines. The lyrical cadence carries the reader swiftly and unknowingly into the tragic twist in stanza ten, but the structure does not falter. This structural uniformity contrasts with the varied, highly personal tone of the first two poems by underscoring the narrative performance aspect of the poem and the function of its speaker. Although the speaker draws the audience in by using second person, the rigid structure creates a more formal separation between audience and speaker necessary to lend the speaker authority. In "IV. Summer Storm" the stanzas are the same with the addition of a fifth line. The rhyme accommodates this line into an ABBAB rhyming scheme. This extra line represents the additional insight found in the fourth poem. What the child in "III. School Lesson" could not understand, why some people die while others persist, is not fully explained in "IV. Summer Storm," but the need to accept tragedy and move forward is demonstrated. Finding a way to deal with tragedy and sharing that insight with his son is an important part of Warren's development as a parent.

"V. Founding Fathers, Nineteenth-Century Style, Southeast U.S.A." and "VI. Infant Boy at Midcentury" depart from death and loss and return the explicit focus to Gabriel, to whom the

entire sequence is dedicated. The layering of two distinct time periods within these poems reflects Warren's view of history and place. In a 1969 interview with Robert B. Sales, Warren discusses the relationship between the past and the present and how their interplay pervades the Southern experience:

> You know the habits, how things were in the South. If you lived, say, in my generation, you still live in two kinds of time. The element of the past, the tale told. The things that happened before were told by older people, particularly if the older people were big in the Great War of '61-'65. A different feeling toward the present event and the past event somehow overlap in what was like a double-exposure photograph almost…the real world was there and old world was there, one photograph superimposed on the other.[9]

These two poems function, as Warren describes, like two photographs superimposed on one another but depicting opposite, though related, scenes. The first poem looks backwards by delving into the historical past. The second poem, on the other hand, looks forward into the unknown.

The poems are strongly linked through their similar construction, as if Warren simply rearranged the same poetic building blocks to arrive at two different versions of the same photograph. The first poem ends with a task for the speaker and reader to discover the past together: "So let us bend ear to them in this hour of lateness, / And what they are trying to say, try to understand" (45-6). The second poem, although discussing something unknown, shows a confident Gabriel striding into the future without hesitation. Desire to embrace the present and

[9] Interview with Sales, 115.

the future supplants the anxiety to untangle the past. The questioning tone of the former poem is silenced by the finality of the latter poem.

In both "V. Founding Fathers" and "VI. Infant Boy" the speaker uses "some" both to set a tone and offer a repetitive structure. In "V. Founding Fathers," four different stanzas begin with "some":

> Some composed declarations…(5)
>
> Some were given to study…(9)
>
> Some wrestled the angel…(26)
>
> Some prospered…(29).

Rhetorically, this construction establishes a tone of broad, sweeping observations on the history of men. Although specific historical figures are referred to, Henry Clay and Jim Bowie for example, the speaker is really relating a collective, universal story of Southern history, and dividing the "fathers" into discrete categories. In "VI. Infant Boy," sentences beginning with "some" are condensed into stanzas nine and ten. Instead of relating what some *have* done, the speaker tells what some *will* do:

> Some will take up religion, some discover the virtue of money.
>
> Some will find liberal causes the mask for psychic disturbance.
>
> Some will expiate ego with excessive kindness to servants,
>
> And some make a cult of honor, though having quite little, if any
>
> (2; 9-12).

Warren uses the same device, but in a different way. He still divides men into broad, sweeping categories defined by action, but he reverses the direction of the action, modifying it for the shift in mode from the fifth poem to the sixth.

The final stanzas, however, are hopeful and offer direct advice to Gabriel that combines the lessons of history ("You will read the official histories – some true, no doubt. / Barring total disaster, the record will speak from the shelf" (3; 4-3)) with a personal conviction of Gabriel's ability to continue in life ("Eyes will brighten to follow your brightness and dwindle of distance. / From privacy of fate, eyes will follow, as though from the shadow of leaves" (3; 23-4)). This pair of poems brings Gabriel's story into the greater context of Southern history, which was essential to Warren's writing. He directs Gabriel to the same appreciation or investigation of history that help defined him.

The next two poems, "VII. Dragon Country: to Jacob Boehme" and "VIII. Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace," stray from the question-and-answer mode, although they still form a distinct set. A searching strain pervades both, and the shared themes of the poems simulate the dialogue seen in the other poem pairs. "VII. Dragon Country," dedicated to the German mystic Jacob Boehme, offers up an account of a dragon terrorizing a small Kentucky town. The mystery remains unsolved, and the story pushes the town further and further into rural isolation. "VIII. Ballad" also offers a nightmarish vision that pits the old and rural against the new and urban in a more personal manner. These two poems unreservedly open up the South to a critical, modern view. Although Gabriel was born and grew up in the North, Warren's personal experience is tied very closely to the South, as he notes in the interview with Sale These poems are murkier than the others, and they offer only carnival-esque glimpses into Warren's thinking. Although in different ways, both poems contrast parts of Warren's Southern past with his current

life in the Northern US. Reconciling these two claims on his identity is key to Warren's ability to be a good parent. For Warren to develop a strong sense of self, and thus help his son find an identity of his own, he must address completely his past's correct place in his current life.

The Northern-Southern opposition surfaces early in both poems. The dragon, which is real to the speaker and to the people living in "Dragon Country," draws out Northern bias against the backwater South. This bias emanates from New York, a seat of Northern cynicism: "We were promised troops, the Guard, but the Governor's skin got thin / When up in New York the papers called him Saint George of Kentucky" (25-6). Through the reference to Saint George, the newspaper furthers the notion that Southerners hold outdated religious sentiments and mythical beliefs. These lines also revisit state control versus national control. It is the Governor of Kentucky that becomes intimidated and backs down from his conviction. In doing so, he fails to protect the people of his state who are suffering. In the interview with Sales, Warren refers to the Civil War as "the Great War of '61-'65," so he still considers these issues important. The "birth rate goes low" and "If a man disappears – well the fact is something to hide. / The family says, gone to Akron, or up to Ford, in Detroit" (35, 29-30). If not for the dragon, it would be the industrial North responsible for this Kentucky county's decline.

Less blatant, but still present, conflict between North and South appears in "VIII. Ballad." The old woman, the questioner's grandmother, and the other dream characters, are relegated to the woods because they "would create a furor/ If …left in the middle of Central Park" (4). The scene before the two speakers contains important, life-shaping people and objects that contributed, haphazardly, to Warren's identity. Every subsection opens with a vexed query from Warren about why these objects are "in the woods" or "in the dark and night." They are in the dark woods because they do not belong in the North; these special, albeit strange, pieces of

Warren's subconscious are something to be ashamed of in New York City. The deranged grandmother and antique furniture, representative of Warren's Southern heritage, are not suitable for the most famous public space in the Northern US: Central Park. The relics from Warren's past serve as physical manifestations of the parts of Warren's identity that he should hide in order to be presentable.

The physical worlds Warren creates for these poems share nightmarish atmospheres, and the otherworldly events link them together in strangeness. The dragon, Warren's invention, slinks through "VII. Dragon Country" without ever appearing; references to Boehme and St. George lend a mystical, legendary fancifulness to the poem. In "VIII. Ballad," bureaus have moods, blind babies bay like hunting dogs, and hogs carry gold coronets. In the final stanzas of the poems the speakers suggest that the surreal atmosphere, while strange, makes life for the people interesting. In "VII. Dragon Country," the speaker says "But if the Beast were withdrawn now, life might dwindle again / to the ennui" (45-6). And in the last stanza of the latter poem the speaker answering Warren's questions says, "There are clients, in fact, who, when ennui gets great, / Will struggle" (5). The madness both endangers and enlivens the people of the South. The madness and the theatrical parts of the South figure prominently in Warren's identity, and thus shape his role as a father. Exploring even the zanier parts of his inner person and reconciling this part of him with the part of him that now lives up North are critical endeavors for Warren to undertake if he wants to help Gabriel grow and become an adult, who must eventually construct his own identity.

The final poem, "IX. Lullaby: A Motion like Sleep," does not have a companion poem. Its soothing tone lacks the anxiety or of the previous poems, and the commanding voice provides finality to the sequence of poems. The directions to "son, now sleep" offer a clear ending. We

return to the languid, outdoor setting of the first poem but at a later hour. The natural elements of the poem discover knowledge, thus alleviating the burdens of the earlier poems. The father appears secure in his role as steward for his son and the steady, repetitive rhythm reinforces a sense of control.

The first stanza signals a physical and mental slowing down:

> Under the star and beech-shade braiding,
>
> Past the willow's dim solicitudes,
>
> Past hush of oak-dark and a stone's star-glinted upbraiding,
>
> Water moves, in a motion like sleep,
>
> Along the dark edge of the woods.
>
> So, son, now sleep (1-5).

The "s" sound appears sixteen times in this relatively short stanza. Warren's alliteration soothes the reader and invites sleep. The alternating, even rhyme scheme, ABACBC, also simulates "a motion like sleep," which helps draw the poem to conclusion.

The repeated command in the poem signals the end of the sequence, too. Sleep comes at the end of the day and at the end of a cycle. Warren is suddenly powerful and sure; his command to sleep repeated again and again offers no room for hesitation or question, and this is a departure from earlier poems.

The placement of "IX. Lullaby" and other internal elements link it back to the first poem, "I. What was the Promise that Smiled from the Maples at Evening?" It is the last poem, but it self-consciously references its placement as the beginning of a circuit: "And all that flows finds end but in its own source, / And a circuit of motion like sleep / And will go as once it came" (21-

3). The entire "Promises" sequence is a circuit, and "IX. Lullaby" leads us back to the beginning. The setting returns to the starry, woodsy place of the first poem, but it is well past dusk – now it is dark and time for sleep. The rhyme schemes are similar, too. The first poem rhymes ABABCAC and the last poem rhymes ABACBC. The first poem has six stanzas and the last has five, and they are the shortest two poems of the set.

Water, the main element in the poem, and blood, the link between father and son, both follow the same circuit. The water finds knowledge in the circuit: "the water, wan, moves under the starlight, / Before it finds that dark of its own deepest knowledge" (8-9). Something tangible reaches knowledge and releases tension built up in the question-answer cycle. The blood moves in the same circuit: "And blood, in a motion like sleep, moves, gleamless, / By alleys darkened deep now" (15-6). Blood has found its dark, deep knowledge, too, and the knowledge passes through the blood connection between father and son.

No longer is the speaker anxious about his role as the father. Now Warren directs his son with conviction and even offers guidance to the world; he explains the rhythm of the natural world to his son. By lulling his son to sleep, he ensures security and comfort. Finally, he acknowledges his own mortality by describing the moment his son will replace him, like the generations discussed in earlier parts of the sequence. Warren captures the circuit inherent in the relationship between father and son.

Warren starts the sequence with an impression of uncertainty in the face of his son, and the weight of his responsibility for this small boy strikes him in full force. He begins a dialogue with himself and his memories to fully accept and understand this burden of fatherhood. As he moves towards acceptance, he asks certain questions about life—what to do in the face of tragedy or how to reconcile the past with the future—and mines answers from his collective

experience. Writing in the sequence format allows Warren to showcase the different steps of his development. When viewed in isolation, the individual poems offer meaning and insight, but when considered as pieces of a single dialogue, another dimension of Warren's poetry reveals itself.

CHAPTER 3

ON "TALE OF TIME"

"Tale of Time," from Warren's 1965 *New and Selected Poems*, chronicles Warren's grief over the death of his mother. The sequence of six poems repeats a three-part cycle: a memory poem followed by a vision or fantasy poem followed by a philosophical exploration of death and grief. The memories ignite Warren's curiosity, and he tries to connect with his mother by reliving her past. He struggles to understand her, and later the afterlife, by projecting himself into her memories or imagining her immortal life. Justus explains Warren's attempts to deal with his grief through projection:

> Warren avoids elegiac sentimentality even while retaining a conventionally reverential subject and tone by transporting the generative events into *imagined* re-creations, the most successful of which project the joy of innocence and the frustration of experience…although he can only wonder what she was thinking [.][10]

Visions lead Warren to even more intellectual contemplations of death, which result in the last poem of each cycle. The sequencing construction allows Warren to shift between different modes to most accurately relate the nature of his grief. Each poem possesses a unique mix of poetic devices that allow Warren to capture the widely dispersed aspects of his emotional

[10] Justus, 79.

journey while keeping them part of a unified whole. By the end of the sequence, Warren comes to terms with his mother's death and realizes the approach of his own mortality has begun.

At the start of the sequence, Warren is at his lowest point. His grief is dry, brittle, and almost palpable. The first cycle of poems focuses on the arbitrariness of death and Warren's acute sense of loss. There comes a turning point at the end of the fourth poem, however, and Warren's grief begins to recede as he reconciles himself to his mother's death. His focus then turns to understanding the afterlife and death as they will eventually affect him. As Bedient notes, Warren's poetry often reflects an intense desire to know death, "Above all, death is the climax, the clue, to destiny."[11] The second cycle explores these themes until Warren actually transcends his need to know and with understanding comes, finally, hope and renewal. In the end, Warren's awareness of his own eventual death sustains him.

As Warren moves through these stages, light breaks into the poem as a symbol of both knowledge and death. Throughout the sequence, light and dark work to show the balance between the known and unknown that Warren finally apprehends at the end. Appearing at different places, the use of light acts as a thread that further binds the poems together.

"I. What Happened" provides a context and a starting point for the larger collection. Immediately, Warren sets up a specific scene:

> It was October. It was the Depression. Money
>
> Was tight. Hoover was not a bad
>
> Man, and my mother
>
> Died… (1-4).

[11] Bedient, 206.

The two short sentences open the choppy and unrhymed first poem. The next sentence, beginning with "Hoover," continues for thirteen lines. The sudden crushing together of words quickens the pace and surprises the reader with Warren's intense sense of grief. After they put his mother's body into the ground, the sun sets, darkness falls and his frustration blossoms in the darkness. It is here, also, that Warren confronts his grief and presents the purpose of the sequence, to overcome the grief:

> Is this
>
> Grief? You pray
>
> To God that this be, for
>
> You want to grieve (44-47).

He closes this introductory poem with a thesis of sorts: "But all this will come later. / There will also be the dream of the eating of human flesh" (39-40).

The eating of human flesh provides, eventually, outlet means for Warren to battle with his grief through poetry. The reference is a self-conscious one, for this very poem is part of what Warren must 'eat' to conquer his grief. In his seminal 1943 essay, "Pure and Impure Poetry," Warren equates poetry with the monster that must be controlled:

> For the poem is like the monstrous Orillo in Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*…there is only one way to conquer the monster: you must eat it, bones, blood, skin, pelt, and gristle. And even then the monster is not dead, for it lives in you, is assimilated into you, and

> you are different, and somewhat monstrous yourself, for having eaten it.[12]

We know, from this explanation, that relief from his grief will come through the poetry. This excerpt also presupposes Warren's actions later in "Tale of Time." After he discusses the real events of his mother's death, he tries to relive her experience by recreating her daily routine, which is his way of making her a part of himself.

Also in "I. What Happened," Warren introduces a recurring element that appears in two key places. He describes the act of facing himself in the mirror as the catalyst for development. Initially, his experience in front of the mirror magnifies his sense of paralysis in the face of his mother's death, but it also drives him to explore his grief further. This midnight communion with self occurs during a period of darkness. The darkness of the hour reflects Warren's incapacity to understand or master his internal emotions. Facing his reflection and his inability to cope pushes him into his journey.

The next poem, "II. The Mad Druggist," opens with a different version of the mirror scene. Instead of staring at his own face, he wants to look at the faces that his mother looked at. He says "I came back to try to remember the faces she saw every day" (1). He inserts himself into his mother's skin to better remember her through becoming her; he expresses a desire to eat her memory and subsume a version of her – to assimilate her memory into himself. This vision poem offers Warren a chance to engage with his grief through, as Justus points out, "imagined re-creations."

Tone and style shift dramatically in this poem, reflecting Warren's pleasure at having something constructive to focus on. There are eight stanzas with four lines each and a single-line

[12] Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," *Kenyon Review* 5 (1943), 228.

ninth stanza. Each stanza follows a regular rhyme scheme: ABAB, and the frenzied undercurrent of anxiety and helplessness recedes. The tone is conversational and even a bit wistful. The regulated structure represents a return to normalcy and routine. By chasing after his mother's memory, and transferring his madness to another character, Warren releases his pent up frustration.

Warren cannot, at first, successfully relive his mother's daily experience and this difficulty continues to impede his progress: "She saw them on the street, at school, in the stores, at church. / They are not here now, they have been withdrawn, are put away. / They are all gone now, and have left me in the lurch" (2-4). We imagine Warren standing in the middle of an empty town lost and resigned. He then explains why this activity is important: "Not clearly remembering them, I have therefore lost that much / Of her," (6-7). The street, school, stores, and church might still be there, but the human element, which would satisfy Warren's need to know his mother again, proves elusive. His effort to connect through experience falters initially.

He does, however, look to the natural world, immediately at odds with the unnatural town, for guidance. Warren states: "The real began where the last concrete walk gave out / And the smart-weed crawled in the cracks," (10-11). The intrusion of natural elements into the poem, and the obvious superiority of nature over man, lends Warren strength and power to understand his situation. Immediately after the two stanzas describing 'where real begins,' Warren chips away at his mental barrier. Although he does not remember the faces, he now shares some kind of insight with them: "The faces I cannot remember lean at my bed-foot, and grin fit to kill, / For we now share a knowledge that I did not have in my youth" (19-20). When natural elements appear in "Tale of Time," they signal a shift towards greater enlightenment.

Finally, “The Mad Druggist” appears and shoulders the burden of Warren’s mad grief. In the first poem, Warren cannot make sense of his mother’s death. In “II. The Mad Druggist,” the old mad man replaces Warren as the figure who cannot cope with Warren’s mother’s death. In the final stanza, Warren notes the druggist’s lasting belief that his mother should not die: “…that list-maker who / Had the wit to see that she was too precious to die: / A fact some in the street had not grasped – nor the attending physician, nor / God, nor I” (31-4). Warren creates a vision or fantasy in which someone else takes over his responsibility to struggle against his mother’s death, leaving him mentally and emotionally free to begin healing.

After this vision poem comes a decidedly colder poem from Warren. “III. Answer Yes or No” is only four lines and lacks almost any personal voice. The title and the first three lines are extremely mechanical: “Death is only a technical correction of the market. / Death is only the transfer of energy to a new form. / Death is only the fulfillment of a wish” (1-3). The initial command and the subsequent statements indicate a certainty and coldness from the speaker. Warren seems to have departed from the poem entirely until the last line. Written in italics, the question at the end, “*Whose wish?*”, is a plaintive cry in stark contrast to the hard, no nonsense discussion of death earlier in the poem.

This philosophical exploration of grief allows Warren to view his feelings from yet another angle. While he relates his memory, he exists within his emotions, and when he fantasizes about his mother’s past, he projects himself into a different person altogether. The vision poem leads him farther from his own mind, and in this poem he tries to depart entirely until he comes violently back to himself in the last line. Warren appears utterly dejected and despondent at the mid-point of the sequence.

Warren returns to personal memory in the fourth poem, “IV. The Interim.” He describes his visit to the deathbed of a black, surrogate mother figure from his past. Not only does he describe the physical scene in greater detail than his actual mother’s death, but he also offers a picture of his family’s grief over loss. The woman from “IV. The Interim” functions as a double of Warren’s real mother. Light enters the scene indicating an imminent shift closer to understanding. The repeated mention of “black,” “blackness,” and “darkness,” and its contrast to light, builds tension. As the juxtaposition of light and dark intensifies, we sense a release or transcendence coming for Warren.

As Warren walks with his family towards the black woman’s house, light first appears.

> The harvest moon, gold, heaved
>
> Over the far woods which were,
>
> On the black land black, and it swagged over
>
> The hill-line. That light
>
> Lay gold on the roofs of Squiggtown, (2; 2-6).

The black land contrasts the gold roofs of Squiggtown and Squiggtown becomes a destination offering Warren enlightenment. The harvest moon, appearing towards the end of September, links this memory poem back to the first, which takes place in October. Again, we see this woman and her death as a double for Warren’s own mother. Also like the first poem, “IV. The Interim” does not possess a regular structure or rhyme scheme. Warren’s verse is most irregular when he confronts tender personal memories. In the fourth stanza, as Warren approaches the dying woman, the blackness in the scene becomes especially pronounced. He uses the word black or blackness six times in eight short lines. He describes her blackness as “cave-blackness”

with cobwebs covering her face. Her cheek, "which is black," shocks the child with its temperature – either hot or cold, Warren cannot remember. Ultimately, the blackness of the woman is a foreign blackness of death that Warren does not understand.

In the fifth stanza light re-enters the scene and the world moves forward, mirroring Warren's own inevitable progress. As soon as they leave the house, light appears: "We stand on the streets of Squiggtown. / The moon is high now and the tin roofs gleam" (5; 1-2). Four lines later, a train passes that pulls Warren and the reader back to the present:

> The night freight is passing.
>
> The couplings clank in the moonlight, the locomotive
>
> Labors on the grade.
>
> The freight disappears beyond the coal chute westward, and
>
> The red caboose light disappears into the distance of the continent
>
> (5; 7-12).

This train enters and departs the poem in only five lines; its appearance functions to represent the passage of time and the continual forward momentum of human existence. The light on the caboose, the light that represents knowledge, disappears while moving forward and into the future. Warren must move forward to reach it.

After the train, Warren departs Squiggtown. He turns back to natural elements for insight in the sixth stanza and he comes to a turning point:

> here
>
> Is the solution, and under
>
> My window, when ice breaks, the boulder now

Groans in the gorge, the foam swirls, and in

The intensity of the innermost darkness of steel

The crystal blooms like a star, and at

Dawn I have seen the delicate print of the coon-hand in silt by the riffle

(6; 2-8).

Each natural image leading up to the last line features an intense release of energy. At the end, at dawn—the brightest light yet seen in the poem—Warren finds some solution and some sense of peace. The last line of the stanza indicates that while he might have found an emotional solution, he cannot yet own it: "I would compare it with that fugitive thought which I can find no word for" (6; 10).

Warren also comes back to and more fully explains the flesh-eating metaphor. In the final stanza he expounds on what he alluded to at the end of the first poem: "…You / Must eat the dead. / You must eat them completely, bone, blood, flesh, gristle, even / Such hair as can be forced" (8; 1-4). Warren has gained a certain spiritual enlightenment during this poem; although he does not know all the secrets of death, he knows that "eating the dead" is the first step towards knowing or growing from death. Like he suggests in "Pure and Impure Poetry," through his poetry he can eat the dead and assimilate them into himself. He is even hopeful at the end: "Immortality is not impossible, / Even joy" (8; 7-8). Prepared for the final stage of the journey, Warren proceeds with a sort of plan. His tone changes from overwhelmed by grief to searching for enlightenment. The rest of the sequence features Warren's attempt to understand death.

Armed with a more positive outlook, Warren shifts modes again in the next poem, "V. What Were You Thinking, Dear Mother?" After working through the memory of his black surrogate mother's death, he returns to the original source of the sequence: his mother.

Addressed to her, the poem asks her to share with Warren not only the secrets of her past but also the secret of death. Time is suspended as Warren the adult revisits his mother in her youthful immortality, tries to consume her knowledge or awareness, and thereby claim it as his own.

Light continues to pour into the sequence. The image most arresting is the lamplight that spills from the house that Warren cannot enter. Death is the only method of entry and the lamplight, representing knowledge of death, bathes those within. Warren's maternal grandfather, a very important figure from his childhood, sits inside: "In lamplight, your father's head bent at his book" (8). The lamps draw his mother towards the house and away from Warren. As he looks at the scene from the outside, he draws comparisons between himself and his mother, noting that eventually he will follow her.

This vision poem, like "II. The Mad Druggist," signals a return to regularity through structure and style. Five stanzas with four lines each and relatively uniform line length visually and rhetorically indicate a shift in Warren's mood. This calm, pleasant scene is melancholy but also methodical. Warren has allowed himself to discuss his mother's death in a measured manner, and this return to normality points to the upwards swing of the sequence's trajectory. In a vision of Warren's creation, he can remove himself from the present and therefore release some of his grief. His search for knowledge, his effort to "eat the dead," is a goal towards which he can channel his grief.

In the last poem, "VI. Insomnia," Warren finally comes to a resolution on his grief over his mother's death, and he sates his thirst for knowledge of the afterlife. The frenzied tone and pace of this poem indicate a violent swing away from the measured order of the previous poem, but a final, bold burst of emotion is needed to push Warren to the end. Warren's repeated questions are the most overt rendering of his search for understanding. In the second stanza he

says, "…The dead, / Do they know all, or nothing, and / If nothing, does / Curiosity survive the long unravelment" (2; 1-4). At this point, his need to grieve has fully morphed into a need to understand death. If he can somehow understand what is happening to his mother, he will cease to miss her. Eventually this desire to comprehend death disappears as Warren reconciles himself to his own mortality.

Although the setting is the cedar grove of the fifth poem, the grove serves more as a symbolic representation of his spiritual state than an important physical setting. The dark cedar grove represents Warren's mortal state and the lamp-lit house represents immortality. Light, in any form, represents knowledge and in the beginning light does not enter the grove: "But no, no light here penetrates…" (2; 10). Later his mother, in her immortal form, must leave the dark woods and return to the house: "You should never have come in the woods when it's dark. / But I'll take you back home, they're waiting" (3; 13-4). Unfortunately, Warren is still trapped outside and her entrance indoors cements the separation between he and his dead mother, and also, therefore, between mortality and the afterlife:

> You move toward the house, and one instant,
>
> A door opening, I see
>
> Your small form black against the light, and the door
>
> Is closed, and I
>
> Hear night crash down a million stairs (3; 18-22).

Finally, Warren accepts that his mother is gone.

After this visual enactment of the spiritual separation between himself and his mother, Warren begins to heal in earnest. He invites the final thrust of pain that will help him move past this experience:

> Come,
>
> Crack crust, striker
>
> From darkness, and let seize—let what
>
> Hand seize, oh!—my heart, and compress
>
> The heart till, after pain, joy from it
>
> Spurts like a grape…(4; 1-6).

He transcends his grief, and he must also set aside his desire for knowledge to fully provide closure in the sequence. He confronts his urge to know when he says: "Truth, in the end, can never be spoken aloud, / For the future is always unpredictable" (4; 12-3). He has answered his own questions on the afterlife—that it cannot be known to those still living—and satisfied his thirst for knowledge. After he expels the pain from his heart in lines 1-6, Warren's speech becomes more regular and complete.

He ends with a positive image of renewal: "The stars are, again, born / They are born one by one" (4; 20-1). So light continues to exist and is present but ultimately unreachable. The stars, do, however, offer comfort through a connection with dead loved ones and the promise of eventual immortality. Warren is not, as Bedient would have us believe, consumed with a desire to know the secret of death. Instead, the existence of the secret or destiny awaiting him provides comfort. Looking at the entire sequence, we can view and feel the range of emotions Warren

experiences while grappling with his grief. Like “Promises,” “Tale of Time” tells a complete story as Warren lived it.

CHAPTER 4

ON "HOMAGE TO EMERSON"

"Homage to Emerson: On Night Flight to New York" presents a somewhat darker picture of Warren and the sequence concludes without a life-affirming resolution. "Homage" works as a meditative nightmare on the individual's relationship to a modern America. Each poem presents an image that quickly flashes to the next, and all reflect Warren's struggle to adapt to the modern situation. Warren's airborne state and the repeated mention of being "at 38,000 feet" underlie the whole sequence. Warren constantly chafes at this reality and what the ability to fly commercially means to humanity. The title of the sequence, especially when considered in light of a line from the fourth poem ("Emerson thought that significance shines through everything"), invites us to consider the juxtaposition of Emerson's philosophy and the plane as a metaphor for the difference between an older America and the modern one. The "significance" of his experience on the flight leads him to grapple with greater questions of what it means to be human, a common concern of Warren's poetry.

Memory still occupies a central place in Warren's writing. The memories are what ultimately save Warren from losing himself in the "pressurized gloom." Memories return to him control over himself. Flying in a machine at 38,000 feet in the air challenges the notion of personal autonomy. A person achieves a thing entirely impossible on his or her own—traveling across the United States in a matter of hours—but while doing it he or she forfeits a certain amount of control. Warren's fears losing himself to the energy of the plane, but he offers a solution: to "try to remember something specific" at 38,000 feet.

The memories and observations are haphazardly and hurriedly told. Occasionally, the images are tangentially related, much like in a dream. In telling them, Warren evinces a tension similar to the feeling one gets when unable to speak or talk while dreaming. Painful sensations crop up in many of the poems, especially the final few. Often, Warren is acted upon or serves as the audience in the scenes—something is always being done or told *to* him. He jumps from picture to picture without completing a story, and this rapid pace mirrors the speed of flight. In the first poem Warren makes a comment about the plane that is also applicable to the sequence, "It whistles with speed" (13). One moment Warren imagines the land below him covered by the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree that is "a billion times bigger," while an earlier poem focuses on a tiny sound agitating Warren's brain. These rapid changes in scale bombard the senses and the reader experiences his difficulty reconciling his physical location (being 38,000 feet above the ground hurtling forward at unimaginable speeds) with his individuality and humanity. Warren is mentally jostled by the enormity of the transition the world has undergone around him.

This sequence, more than the other two discussed, demands to be read and considered as a unified whole. The short length of the poems, the obviously related scene and subject matter, and the transitions in the writing overtly bond the poems together. Why then make it a sequence instead of one long poem? Each short poem presents a uniquely different scene or meditation. Some relate observations Warren makes on the plane while others detail memories that occur to him during the flight. The formal breaks heighten the fragmentation Warren feels while in the air; the frequent and untidy spaces between poems recall the abrupt changes we feel when dreaming or having a nightmare. After the reading the sequence, we feel Warren's desperate need to cling to something after having his bearings repeatedly pulled from beneath him. Each poem is Warren's new effort to stabilize himself.

The dedication of the sequence, to Peter and Ebie Blume, immediately colors our expectation of the work. Peter Blume, a well-known painter originally from Russia, specialized in magical realism. His abstract paintings feature distorted scenes of people and objects in blurred focus. He and his wife, Ebie, were in Warren's circle of friends. Warren often dedicated poems to people in his life—for example the "Promises" suite dedicated to his son Gabriel—and the dedications often help illuminate the poems. Not only is this poem an offering to the Blumes, but it is also the literary counterpart to a Blume painting; the anxiety-filled images and nightmare quality invite similar reactions from both viewers and readers.

The first poem, "I. His Smile," provides a background for the sequence because it presents the conflict between man and modernity as it first occurred to Warren. In an interview with William Kennedy, Warren focuses on the first line as an example of a poem's organic creation and the general feeling inspired by the flight:

> On a plane coming back from the West, moving over Pittsburgh at two o'clock in the morning, I happened to have some Emerson on my lap. This situation, this rather absurd, innocent man, Emerson, in this modern America with New York forty minutes away—I had the thought that over Peoria we lost the sun. I was struck by the rhythm of it. Over Peoria we lost the sun. That's not bad…Emerson, me, America, and over Peoria we lost the sun. There were two views of man in there, two views of man's nature.[13]

[13] Robert Penn Warren, interview by William Kennedy, "How a Poet Works," *The National Observer*, 1967. Reprinted in Warren, Robert Penn, *Robert Penn Warren Talking Interviews 1950-1978*, eds. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 88.

Warren was struck by the juxtaposition of Emerson's work with the environment in which he was reading it. The degree of change that had occurred between Emerson's America and the America that could be crossed by a plane in a matter of hours started the investigation of the sequence. The mention of the "two views of man's nature" cuts to the even deeper purpose of "Homage:" defining humanity in the modern America.

Although not a religious writer in the doctrinal sense, Warren presents two different versions of God in the poem that correspond to the past and the present state of man. The first, an artificial, mechanical God, the plane creates: "…A finger / Of light, in our pressurized gloom, strikes down, / Like God, to poke the page, the page glows" (5-6). The plane exercises complete control over the passengers inside and as such, replaces the mystical God of Emerson's world. Later, Warren mentions the God that Emerson would have known: "For he had forgiven God everything" (24). The two references to God here further reinforce the changes between then and now, because they are clearly two different versions of God. The plane, and the mechanical advancements that it represents, supplant the place for spiritual mysticism.

Warren's ambivalence with change is a major philosophical issue that informs his worldview. Change between generations, also highlighted in the "Promises" cycle, surfaces in the interview with Sale. In discussing his son's life compared to his own or his father's, he says:

> But the world he's come into is so different from the one I came into. So different. My father could vote when the last Indian battles were fought with artillery. That is, he was a young man of twenty-one when the Battle of Wounded Knee was fought. Three regiments and a battery against the Sioux. And my grandfather, whom I knew well, fought the Civil War. And now my son reads

in the morning paper about the astronauts. That's no relation

between those worlds.[14]

This interview, given only a few years after this sequence was published, indicates the centrality of this issue to Warren. By mentioning such dated military technology and comparing it with the advanced technology of the present, Warren provides a profound sense of the change that society has undergone. The frontier of America has expanded from footmen on American soil to the limits of outer space. This comment also recalls Warren's experiences in "Homage" as he achieves a sort of astronaut-like status of his own on the plane.

We know that Warren is acutely uncomfortable on the plane through his painful sensory descriptions. High pitched noises and strange smells dominate the scene:

Night,

On the glass at my right shoulder, hisses

Like sand from a sand-blast, but

The hiss is a sound that only a dog's

Ear could catch, or the human heart. My heart

Is as abstract as an empty

Coca-Cola bottle. It whistles with speed.

It whines in that ammoniac blast caused by

The passage of stars, (7-15).

[14] Interview with Sale, 117.

Successive renderings of sand blasting and air hissing against glass while emitting high pitched noises painfully pricks the reader and forces Warren's discomfort upon us. The lonely image of an empty Coca-Cola bottle spinning somewhere with the night air, the sand, and an ammoniac blast is almost apocalyptic. Finally, these scenes are "caused by" the flight itself. These negative characterizations indicate Warren's essential distrust and dislike of the plane, which represents all that is different and supposedly "advanced" about the current era.

At the end of the poem Warren offers a transition to the next poem. Although the line, "When I was a boy I had a wart on the right forefinger," comes with no introduction in "I. His Smile," it introduces "II. The Wart." The abrupt introduction of this line artificially forges the link between the poems while establishing the disjointed nature of the whole sequence. In "II. The Wart" Warren first offers his solution on remaining human in the face of such artificiality: to cling to memories as a way to preserve yourself in the modern world. He says: "At 38,000 feet you had better / Try to remember something specific, if / You yourself want to be something specific" (1-3). He continues to relate a scene from his childhood in the South in which an "old colored man" jokes with Warren about the reason for the wart on Warren's finger. The old man's specific point is not as important as the implication of his statements: there are common human activities and impulses that unite us. The old man arguing this point bridges the gap between races, which had previously been considered a most insurmountable barrier. Race had, to a certain extent, proved not essentially divisive, but the plane now threatens to tear asunder human ties. Bringing race into the poem reminds us that we overcame something so critical to identity, but the human experience is now threatened by something even larger. In response to the old man's statement, "*You is human kind*," Warren replies: "At 38,000 feet that is hard to

remember" (8-9). Now that we can recognize black and white as belonging to the same group, we face a newer threat to common bonds, technology.

Spending only nine lines on "II. The Wart," Warren jumps to a new image about a spider. This quick shift from one scene not fully explained to another seemingly unrelated discussion again mimics the way we dream. One image flashes to the next without an obvious connection, and with no image ever fully explained. Warren even mentions dreams in "III. The Spider:" "I used to dream that God was a spider" (2). Later in the poem, he switches yet again and creates an image analogous to his position on the plane: "but it is easier / To dream of a funnel, and you / The clear liquid being poured down it, forever" (3-5). Like the liquid in the funnel, the passenger on the plane has no control over the course of events. Even though Warren still controls his individual actions, he has become reliant on the plane and has therefore lost a part of himself. This is not to say that before planes Warren and others were completely self-sufficient and thus completely autonomous. Rather, the rapid advancement of society, symbolized by an airplane, threatens to fragment Warren's sense of identity and basic human-ness. Warren ends with a cryptic line that indicates a certain resignation about the situation: "All you have to do is not argue." Not arguing means ceasing to resist whatever forces threaten your humanity. One would stop trying to remember something specific at 38,000 feet because it would not matter. At this moment in the sequence, Warren feels the attraction and ease of not putting up any resistance to whatever forces the plane exerts upon him.

This thought, however attractive, proves short-lived. As we turn the page to a new poem, Warren redoubles his effort to maintain his identity. Drawing the thought from the previous poem forward, he opens "IV. One Drunk Allegory" with: "Not argue, unless, that is, you are the kind / That needs to remember something specific / In order to be, at 38,000 feet, whatever you

are" (1-3). Warren launches into a renewed effort to preserve himself by sharing another memory. This time, he takes us with him as he relives a night in New Orleans. It is also here that he mentions Emerson's great importance to the poem: "Emerson thought that significance shines through everything" (24). This mention of Emerson stands alone in a stanza of a single line indicating its overall importance; Warren gives the line a poetic spotlight. The allegory within the poem comes from Warren's interaction with a crippled drunk on the street in New Orleans. The crippled man slips on the street and Warren helps him right himself. As soon as the man is standing again, he falls once more. Before Warren can help the man stand again, the man says "*do not trouble yourself / Further. This is as good a position as any / From which to watch the stars*" (18-20). The crippled man stops resisting the flow of events. As a crippled person, the man already has a limited control over his body and must rely on other people, like Warren, to help him go about his business. Like Warren did earlier, he decides it is easier not to argue.

Briefly, Warren is again moved by this logic: "And at that moment I was drunk enough to think all this was allegory" (25). But suddenly and in mid-sentence, he returns to the plane: "…it was sure-God one drunk allegory, and / Somewhere in the womb-gloom of the DC-8 / A baby is crying" (26-8). The single sentence linking the New Orleans episode to the plane ride indicates related meaning. The allegory of the man resigned to watch the stars from the gutter relates to Warren's passage on the plane, although the very act of relating the story—clinging to his memory—signals Warren's resistance to silent acquiescence. The last line of the poem cements the relevant comparison of Warren to the crippled man. Back inside the plane Warren says: "To my right, far over Kentucky, the stars are shining" (33). Both men disappear from the poem while looking at the stars, although from very different vantage points.

Warren also continues to make the audience physically uncomfortable in this poem. Earlier he describes the nagging pain caused by the crying baby on the plane:

> The cry seems to have a reality
>
> Independent of the baby. The cry
>
> Is like a small white worm in my brain.
>
> It nibbles with tiny, insistent assiduity. Its teeth
>
> Are almost too soft. Sometimes it merely tickles (28-32).

The disembodied voice brings the focus to Warren's own head. The scale has dramatically downshifted as we zoom from a street in New Orleans to a perspective inside Warren's brain. Already thrown off balance by the sudden change, the annoying pain associated with the baby's cry frustrates the audience further. We can understand Warren's own sense of disembodiment. The physical sensations within the poem show the audience what Warren feels like while on it, and the pain and the disorientation are manifestations of the threat the plane poses to Warren's spiritual self. Once more Warren moves in a new direction at the end of poem with the observation about the stars, but it serves a purpose beyond connecting him to the drunk in the street. This abrupt change transitions into the next poem, "V. Multiplication Table," without giving any warning.

Beginning with a comment on the lights below, "Multiplication" relates several observations and memories. As we approach the end of the cycle, the competing images of memories and observations speed up and intensify the energy in the sequence. As Warren looks out the plane's window, he is struck by not only the lights shining in the sky but also the lights on the ground. He muses about first enlarging and then flattening all the lights on the Christmas

tree at Rockefeller Center, already a massive object, to cover the whole scene below him. To do it he needs "a steam roller waist-high to God and heavy as / The Rocky Mountains" (4-5). He rapidly changes the scale again, bringing the audience from a tiny noise to a monumental object. Being on the plane brings the monumental and the tiny into close proximity for Warren. On the one hand, he can see massive expanses of land and sky; at the same time, he hears the sound one small baby makes. This incongruous meeting assaults his sense of equilibrium, and he passes this feeling of imbalance on to the audience by jumping between the massive and the minute.

Warren calls us back to the present in the fourth stanza and indicates the approaching end of the flight: "The nose of the DC-8 dips," (16). Jolted back to reality, he notices the man sitting next to him start to recite the multiplication table; it is the man's own effort to quiet his nerves and to stave off the fear of losing himself on the plane. Reciting the multiplication table offers the man "something specific to remember" while on the plane. All around him people feel the fragmenting force that the plane exerts and they resist in an instinctual way. The neighboring passenger recites figures and the baby wails. Another source of nagging pain, this time more intense than the baby's cry, presents itself: "Far below, / Individual lights can be seen throbbing like nerve ends" (18-9). Warren ends with another persistent, nagging noise: "In a room, somewhere, a telephone keeps ringing" (23). This hurried poem, crammed with three different scenes, heightens the nightmarish atmosphere of the sequence. The scenes feature sharp, painful sensations like throbbing nerve endings, broken light bulbs, and splattered eggs. Warren strains harder to find how the human element can exist in the same reality as the plane. He says, "I have friends down there, and their lives have strange shapes / Like eggs splattered on the kitchen floor" (20-1). This line demonstrates Warren's effort to connect his time on the plane with the

world that exists on the ground. He must see himself connected to that world while still in the air.

The next poem, "VI. Wind," functions as a brief transition back to solid ground. The plane has landed, and Warren describes the assault on his senses as he exits the plane and faces the tarmac. We might expect a feeling of relief or release as he steps from the plane, but instead Warren describes successively unpleasant sensations:

> The wind comes off the Sound, smelling
>
> Of ice. It smells
>
> Of fish and burned gasoline. A sheet
>
> Of newspaper drives in the wind across
>
> The great distance of cement that bleeds
>
> Off into the blackness beyond the red flares (1-6).

The aura of physical discomfort continues, and his experience is neither welcoming nor pleasant. These lines engage all five senses. We can smell and taste the wind. We see the lonely sheet of newspaper dragged in the wind, and we feel the cement bleeding. Later we hear another persistent, nagging noise. This time it is the "infinitesimal scrape / Of that newspaper as it slides over the black cement, forever" (9-10). All of Warren's physical sensations drive him towards further discomfort. Everything associated with the plane, even leaving it, hurts him. The desolation of this poem matches the starting image of the empty Coca-Cola bottle whistling through space.

Here, too, Warren is acted upon, and in a rather violent manner. He closes by saying, "The wind gouges its knuckles into my eye. No wonder there are tears" (11). Warren leaves the

plane feeling defeated and dehumanized. The scrape of the newspaper matches the baby's cry and the ringing telephone. There are no observations on man or related memories in this poem, and it appears Warren has abandoned his mission to reconcile his views of the two different worlds. "Wind" exists as a particularly low point before Warren offers his final philosophical comment, and its overt lack of discussion indicates Warren's empty emotional state.

The final poem returns to the observational and reflective mode. The title, "VII. Does the Wild Rose?" offers the first clue that this poem differs from the previous ones. Instead of only presenting an image, this poem will explore a theme. Also, this poem explicitly states the implicit query of the sequence: "Do you think you could tell me / What constitutes the human bond?" (17-8). Although this poem departs from the earlier apocalyptic strain, it does not offer a neat answer to the question. This poem does offer dramatically softer, pleasanter images and sensations. Warren comes home to his unneeded flight insurance and says, "All had been in order" (4). The silence in this poem is not a howling one, but a summer silence: "*Does the wild rose know your secret* / *as the summer silence breathes?*" (6-7). Instead of hearing grating noises forever, he will "dream of small white stars / Falling forever in darkness" (11-2). Now the sky above the city "glows" instead of "throbbing like nerve ends." Although these are vastly more gentle images, they do not replace the horrors of the flight, for Warren is still left perplexed by his experience.

Fifteen lines into the poem, Warren muses, "there must be / A way by which the process of living can become Truth" (15-6). Here he vocalizes his efforts to reconcile living in the modern world with retaining a sense of self and of humanity, shortened to the human value "Truth." This "process of living" will incorporate man's ability to be at 38,000 feet with his other need to "be something specific." The human bond, mentioned right after these two lines, is

what this sequence seeks to redefine in the modern era. Warren, however, does not achieve this goal. The last line is a question: "Is it merely a delusion that they seem about to smile?" This question, recalling Emerson's smile of the first poem, ends the sequence on an unsettled note. The delusion and the smile suggest a trick being played on Warren, or perhaps everyone, since the question is posed to the general audience.

Inspired by the existence of Emersonian philosophy—in the form of paper copies—on a late-night flight across the US, this sequence of poems is both literal and metaphorical. Warren combines the intensely physical sensations of the plane ride with its broader philosophical implications. A question lies at the heart of the sequence: what makes us human in the modern world? Warren argues that memories enable us to retain our individuality and our humanity, but the uncertainty of the last poem undercuts that assertion. Examined together, the poems build on the situation established in the first poem and create a symbolic journey analogous to Warren's real plane flight.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Warren's poetry is, above all other things, investigations of self. He uses poetry to examine his life on both material and metaphorical levels in a vast array of situations experienced, remembered, or imagined. The three sequences discussed here start with "literal germs" of experience and weave back and forth between Warren's physical and intellectual awareness. The sequences allow Warren to engage in dialogue with himself as he examines different facets of his experiences. Too complex to solve in one poem, the conundrums that inspire Warren's sequences—the responsibilities of fatherhood, the thundering progress of modern man—require multiple poems that allow Warren to wrestle with the problem on multiple levels.

Bedient argues that Warren's poetry continually confounds the reader with unanswerable or unknowable questions:

> Yet it must be observed that the great majority of Warren's poems are passion's yearnings—will there never be an end to it? Always the question of innate meaning and the question as to why this question exists.[15]

While he correctly identifies the probing nature of Warren's verses, Bedient addresses only the singular message of many poems. By looking at the poems that form sequences as pieces of larger discussions, we see Warren's attempt to draw these feelings or investigations to conclusion. Although he does not offer definitive answers to the questions he presents, the

[15] Bedient, 160.

sequences represent a thing completely considered. In his own words, Warren explains how his poetry gives us meaning without 'solutions:'

> There is a satisfaction, a lift, a liberation in reading a good novel, seeing a good play, or reading a good poem. I feel, 'Oh, things *do* work, after all!' Most of life is a hodgepodge in which it's very hard to feel meaningful. Seeing life in some way reflected in a guise that implies order gives a heightening of energy, of relief. It's a liberation. *Not*, I should emphasize, because of particular 'solutions' offered, but because the process is an image of the possibility of meaning growing from experience—an image, that is, of our continuous effort to make sense of out lives.[16]

[16] Robert Penn Warren, "A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren," 1966 (*First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing*). Reprinted in Warren, Robert Penn, *Robert Penn Warren Talking Interviews 1950-1978,* eds. Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 85.

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