CHAPTER VII

SELF AS LABYRINTH: A STUDY OF THE CAVE
When Ruth Fisher asked Warren whether he could give a basic framework that could be used to interpret his novels, he does not give a straight answer. Rejecting the role of an apologist for his own work, Warren says, "And I don't know how I would go about saying that there is some particular image of man that I have in mind. The books that I have written, for better or for worse, are a record of the various kinds of images of man that I have had at different times. Of course, I have changed my notions, or at least changed my feelings about my notions along the way." Elaborating the point further, he adds "writing is the process in which the imagination takes the place of literal living; by moving toward values and modifying, testing, and exfoliating older values. So, since I see the whole process as one of continuing experiment with values, I don't know how to answer that question about setting up a framework at any given moment."1 The most significant point Warren makes

1. Floyd C. Watkins and John T Hiers, Robert Penn Warren Talking, p. 139.
here seems to be that creative writing is a continuing experiment with values. Warren's creative experiment with values in the novels analysed in the preceding chapters is unmistakably articulated in a passage dictated by the old man, who Jack Burden mistook as his real father.

The creation of man whom God in His foreknowledge knew doomed to sin was the awful index of God's omnipotence. For it would have been a thing of trifling and contemptible ease for perfection to create mere perfection. To do so would, to speak truth, be not creation but extension. Separateness is identity and the only way for God to create, truly create, man was to make him separate from God Himself, and to be separate from God is to be sinful. The creation of evil is therefore the index of God's glory and His power. That had to be so that the creation of good might be the index of man's glory and power. But by God's help. By His help and in His wisdom.

Jack Burden tells us that in spite of a number of uncertainties with which his mind is preoccupied in its own way, he did believe what the old man had said. Although

the creation of evil is the index of God's glory and His power, the creation of good might be the index of man's glory and power. The novels I have analysed so far dramatically demonstrate God's glory and power in the sense that they made visible the chinks of the human frame which the Emersonians ignore. At the same time, the novels also dramatize man's capacity to create goodness which may be the index of his glory and power. This is not an answer to the metaphysic of Original Sin but an amendment of the rigidities of the puritan view associated with Hawthorne. In "Knowledge and the Image of Man" Warren argues that knowledge helps man to create good in the sense that knowledge helps man to achieve his identity which he calls the osmosis of being. In the process, man disintegrates his primal instinctive sense of unity. He discovers separateness. Separateness generates self-criticism and the pain of isolation. But as Warren says, "the pain may, if he is fortunate, develop its own worth, work its own homeopathic cure. In the pain of self-criticism he may develop an ideal of excellence, and an ideal of excellence, once established, implies a depersonalized communion with that ideal. In the pain of isolation he may achieve the courage and the clarity of mind to envisage the tragic pathos of life, and once he realizes that the tragic experience is universal and a corollary of man's place in nature, he may return to a
communion with man and nature." The preceding citation synchronizes with the publication of Band of Angels. The Cave was published in 1959. These publication details suggest a few points. Up to the writing of Band of Angels the theme of knowledge and self-knowledge is under-cut by the theme that incompleteness of knowledge may be due to imbalance and irresponsibility in the ever unfolding process of self-definition. In The Cave, Wilderness, Flood, A Place to Come To (1977) the theme of knowledge, self-knowledge and self-definition is set in a metaphysical frame. The metaphoric titles have a loaded symbolic resonance and spread in the sense that they suggest man's pain of isolation, his self-criticism from which an ideal of excellence emerges which helps man to have a depersonalized communion with that ideal. Courage and clarity of mind, an awareness that tragic experience is universal, create a liberating perspective, which may lead to the osmosis of being and facilitate man's communion with man and nature. If we examine The Cave from the perspective outlined in the preceding paragraph, it suggests that in The Cave and the novels that follow, the narrative focus is on the metaphysical frame in the sense that

here we have an effort toward knowledge which is at the same time a movement towards being in the metaphysical sense.

Robert Penn Warren's novels - Night Rider, At Heaven's Gate, All the King's Men, World Enough and Time, Band of Angels are a part of Southern Literary Renaissance. Apart from the philosophical implications, most of the issues like self-knowledge, selfhood, identity constitute the thematic complex of Warren. In The Cave too, we have the Southernness but the stress is on knowledge and redemption. Jack Harrick, Jasper, Monty, MacCarland Sumpter, Isaac are Southern characters. Even the place. Johntown, Tennesse, is also Southern. The first five novels focus on Southern society, Southern culture, manners and morals, slavery, Civil War and its social and psychological consequences. But a certain philosophical or spiritual preoccupation is seen in Band of Angels. In a moment of crisis, the protagonist Amantha asks the question 'Who Am I?' But unfortunately the narrative does not attempt to answer the question. We notice these questions 'Who am I?', 'What am I', etcetera which may not be philosophical but spiritual, emerge to the foreground in The Cave. This novel is not a fresh start but a continuation of the themes in a new perspective.
In the five novels written prior to *The Cave*, Warren seems to be more preoccupied with the philosophical implications and issues in terms of the human frame, which he constructs in the Southern milieu. In *The Cave* these questions are to a certain extent detached from the historical and socio-political context of the South. Some sort of metaphysical quest arises as an answer to the questions posed. The human frame seems to yield its place to a metaphysical frame. Issues like "who am I" and "what am I" find their objective corelative in *The Cave*. This is implied by the citation from Plato's *The Republic* that constitutes the epigraph of the novel. A number of modern writers like Kafka, Borges, Durrell use the image of labyrinth to signify man's metaphysical uncertainties. *The Cave* is based on the tragedy of Floyd Collins trapped in a sand cave Kentucky. As Gabriel Josipovici has said:

> From the cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues of 'gerontion,' through the mazes of Kafka, Proust, Beckett, Borges and Robbe - Grillet, the labyrinth has been the favourite image of the modern literature. In place of Dante's ordered journey we find ourselves involved with heroes who wander without map or compass along paths which are endless for the
simple reason that we would not recognize the end even if we came to it. Dante emerges from his long climb and can look back, standing on solid ground over the winding uphill way, with its little figures of men and women dotted about at various stages of their ascent. But there is no emergence for the heroes of modern fiction from the labyrinths of reflecting mirrors and demonic analogy. At the end they are no nearer the exit than they were at the beginning. All they have done is to move through all the arteries of the labyrinth. Yet this, if they but knew it, is both the exit and the answer.

Although there are analogues of the labyrinth image in Warren's fiction, he uses images like cave, wilderness, and flood to signify man's metaphysical uncertainties.

The Cave has its roots in something that happened. Warren would not see it as the others saw it. He seems to have refused to take it as a sheer accident and hence, the novel. As it happened in At Heaven's Gate, here also we have interiorization. Each character tries to measure himself or herself in terms of the darkness associated with the cave. We can say, any kind of metaphysical quest is entering darkness in

search of light and life. The sort of clinical probe that we have in *At Heaven's Gate* into the individual and social evil is absent in this novel. Here the emphasis seems to be not on sin but on redemption that comes from a deeper knowledge of the self. There is no single protagonist in *The Cave*. Jack Harrick, whose son is trapped in the cave, comes near that status. As the news of Jasper's entrapment spreads like wild fire, a large number of people gather near the cave. Of these, the major characters are old Harrick, his wife Celia Harrick, his younger son, Monty Harrick, the banker Timothy Bingham, restaurant owner Nicholas Papadoupalous, local Baptist preacher, MacCarland Sumpter, and his son Isaac Sumpter. The language used to describe Jack suggests that he represents the ongoing fecundity of nature. He elevates himself to the level of a superman purely in terms of bestial energy and sexual licence. The legend that he weaves round his sexual abrasions is destroyed by age and disease. We see him on a wheel chair suffering from cancer at the beginning of the narrative.

It is only after the death of Jasper and the confession of Brother Sumpter, he feels that he too has a sense for what is good and enduring. He makes a horrid confession: "I did not want my son to come out of the ground, because somebody always has to go in the ground. If he was there,
I would not have to go. He thought: That is it. This contemplation on his son's death and the anticipation of his own death result in a self-analysis. He defines himself as "a dream dreamed up from the weakness of people... out of their need for violence, for strength, for freedom," accepts that "out of his own weakness, he had dreamed the dream of Jack Harrick." His realization that he is "an old, nigh-illiterate, broke-down black-smith" (386) and nothing more, brings a drastic but desirable change in him. His affectionate words to Jo, his concern for his wife in asking Jo to hold her hand are the result of his new awareness of life. He unconsciously expresses his wish to join his dead son. He understands that living is just learning how to die. He emerges out of his false being and starts living his life ceasing to live in a self-fabricated legend.

Celia marries Jack, impressed by his masculine vigour. Caught in his legend, she continues to live with him, though he breaks her heart with his wayward nature. Though she lives with him for more than twenty years, and though she becomes the mother of his two sons, she fails to love him. She feels:

... a thin, sharp sense of defraudment,

like a tiny wound bleeding its single silky thread of blood on her white skin, a wound no bigger than a pin, but as deep as life, that wouldn't stop bleeding, in daytime under your nice starched underwear, at night on the clean white sheet, the tiny shameful hemorrhage which would be life — or at least her life (294).

The above passage with its coital metaphors demonstrates the disgust associated with sex in the novel. Man-woman relationship, apart from giving momentary pleasure, seems to have no value in terms of the larger rhythms of life. The passage occurs as a reminiscence when Celia was distressed with her dear son's entrapment. She blames Jack for his blatant vulgarity, for establishing wrong standards for Jasper, for not praying for Jasper. She holds him responsible for the calamity. When he confesses that he is just an illiterate blacksmith, she feels a gush of love rising in her. She says "I never saw you before! — because I never was me before" (402) and cries out don't die — don't ever die!" (403) What is significant in these scenes seems to emerge towards the end of the novel when Jack Harrick tells his wife. "I reckon living just learning how to die," and adds, "it is just learning how to live." Nicholas Papadoupalous, a restaurant owner, is yet another character,
who refuses to learn not only how to die but how to live. He falls in love with the seedy image of Jean Harlow, a platinum-blond, swivel-built movie queen (42) of the 1930's and marries a dancer in a burlesque show, Giselle Fontaine, who reminds him of Jean Harlow. His trials to visualize Jean Harlow in his wife's place by squinching his eyes during the sex act prove futile. He feels that "Everything was the violation of everything" and he blames himself "for it was as though what was happening to Jean and Giselle was all his fault, and all had come by a defect in fidelity" (53). He finds himself trapped in an agony of infidelity" (51), as he fails to prove himself faithful either to his sweet-heart or to his life partner. Although he feels that, the two things were one thing, and its name was joy, very soon he finds "the two things — the fantasy and the real woman named Giselle Fontaine — started to fall apart" (51). The discrepancy between fact and fancy enrages him and he tries to derive some satisfaction through violent sexual outbursts. In the deep, dark, angry, tear-sodden secret center of his being" (41) he harbours an agony of despair and remorse. Caught between the dream of Jean Harlow and the reality of Sarah Pumfret, his sick and fat wife slowly dying of tuberculosis, he lands himself in mounting debts. His moral insensibility and material failure drag him to Dorothy Cutlick, a hapless
girl to whom it is just a mechanical affair with "no relation to life" (59). Enticed by the sweet words of Isaac Sumpter, Nick becomes his accomplice and tries to become rich. When he tries to exploit Celia Harrick, he realizes the significance of his degradation. Her suffering and the 'humanness' in her face bring a change in him. He considers it mean on his part to try "...to make money when her boy was in the ground" (309).

It is neither love for Nick nor Nick's love for her that prompts the dancer to marry him. Her fading health and age, assurance of a comfortable home force her to marry the man she hates. She remains stubborn for long, sits on his nerves with her demands, behaves like a rebellious parasite and makes his life a hell. Her slumbering humanity wakes up when Nick asks her to perform an abortion on Jo-Lea. Her refusal to perform abortion, even though it means her ruin, shatters Nick's illusion and makes him a real human being, and he begins to love his bloated wife and sincerely prays for her revival. He feels "... deep in him, pale and thin as the groping sprout of a potato forgotten in a dark cellar, hope, or some thing like hope" (364) rising up. He emerges out of his illusion and hopes to live in reality. His true love and his concern coupled with curiosity for his wife result in his
wife's happiness and she accepts him heartily. It is obvious that Jasper's entrapment in the cave and his imminent death make Nick think of his own self. In short, it gives him knowledge about life and death and makes suffering meaningful.

Mr. Timothy Bingham, Chief Stock Holder and Cashier of the people's Security Bank of Johntown, Tennesee, loses his freedom once he marries the "...sickly, pertinacious, culture-hot and cold-bellied girl several years older than he" (37), Matilda Bollin. Caught in the grip of his class-conscious and high-handed wife, Mr. Bingham becomes a self-doubting ineffectual coward. When their only daughter Jo-Lea becomes pregnant and refuses to reveal the name of the person responsible for it, Binghams face a crisis. Ignoring the tender age of the soft spoken Jo, Matilda flares up and forces the daughter to come out with the name of her lover. She curses her husband who implicitly obeys her by arranging for the abortion of Jo, against his wishes. The confession of Jo at the cave, announcing the entombed Jasper as the father of the child in her womb, maddens her mother but opens the eyes of her father. Her sincere love, sagacity and audacity seize Mr. Bingham with a ferocious desire to protect his daughter. He decides to break free from his wife's stifling hold mainly for the sake of his daughter and partly to
recover his long-lost peace and live like a man and not like a slave. Bidding goodbye to his wife, he comes out of his false life and hopes to lead a real life afresh with Dorothy Cultick who loves him.

A major chunk of the novel is devoted to Issac and his girl friend, Rachel Goldstein. He strongly feels that his father was responsible for his mother's death. His failure to love his father leads to his failure to view life in the right perspective. His belief that his father is up to anything and would not mind cutting his throat, if necessity arises, creates an unbridgeable gulf between the two. The fulfilment of his initial dream of academic achievement gives him no joy. While undergoing training to become a preacher, he feels, "He was himself, and there was no God. No, he was not himself. There was no God and there was no self" (101). Though he is "awarded one of the five full fellowships for sophomores" (101), he experiences 'icy joy' and he is unwilling to share his success with his father. The first impression Goldie has of Ikey is that he hated "the whole bloody world" (106). All through their relationship we notice a contrast between Goldie's self-confidence and Ikey's lack of it. His claims on her body at the wrong time result in her outburst: "I'm not going to let you use me for some kind of Grade-A masturbation" (122).
Goldie's refusal and his being mistaken by her to be a Jew make him blind with anger. Feeling "a sense of entrapment, a sense of weakness" (125), he walks into the trap of Eustacia Pinckney Johnson. Eustacia's wanton confession to Goldie pierces her heart and she fails to forgive him in spite of her best efforts. Her dream of a happy future with Ikey dissolves and he is forced to walk out of her life. Loneliness coupled with sexual deprivation after Goldie's final rejection land him in immorality, and this student of academic aspiration gets dropped ignominiously from the university for "drunkenness and undependability" (132). Ikey's relationship with Goldie devitalizes him. Making a mess of his life, he tries to discover, if possible, its meaning, if there is any. He seems to discover one at the end of the narrative. He grows cynical, feels bored, and longs to leave his father and the place for ever, to earn money. He discovers the cave along with his friend Jasper, plans to make it a tourist attraction and make money out of it. The unfortunate entrapment of Jasper gives him a golden opportunity to launch a career in journalism and make money feeding the multitude that gathers round the cave. He capitalizes on Jasper's misfortune unscrupulously, publicizes the entrapment, rises as a hero saying," I am the guy went in. I am the guy found him. I am the guy with the face-to-face" (236).
It is true that he hadn't had to plan anything and everything had worked out (284). His introspection makes him conclude that he is merely the guiltless instrument of power, but that power, which was not himself, somehow conformed to his will, so that his will was, guiltlessly, achieved and he was filled with the exultation of power (285). Feeling the power in him, he says Jebb Holloway hung at the end of a piece of string, and was, therefore, a thing. Isaac Sumpter pulled the string and was, therefore, a man," and he confidently says, "I am myself" (279). Ikey manipulates everything to his advantage and even sacrifices his father's fame by exposing his falsehood. When his father tells the truth that Jasper was not dead when he told the lie that he was dead, he feels "the suffocating sweetness, the insidious fear of unmanment... the gush of gratitude, the welling of tears in his heart, the beginning of the terrible self-betrayal which love is" (358). But having chosen a path, he decides to move ahead.

Though he becomes an executive with the mass media, he feels "sick and deprived, knowing that all his striving had been in vain, for a man suffered for his success only to find, in the end, that it was ashes, and that others, the shining ones, moved serenely off into their glory" (370).
Confirmed in his false life, he remains "totally himself" (372), perhaps awaiting the fate of Wilkie Barron of *World Enough and Time*.

MacCarland Sumpter, a fellow heller of Jack Harrick turned preacher, caught in his own uncompromising theological commitment, marries Tillyard, a girl deceived, made pregnant and deserted by Jack. Though he marries her to save her from infamy, he fails to forget her association with Jack. His failure to forget and forgive keeps him on par with the other mortals. He asks his son to "crawl into the ground for another. He must do something, whatever, in expiation. If he should do these things, I said, it would be the beginning of his salvation" (379). His filial love makes him blind to Isaac's cynical nature. He crawls into the cave, rearranges the evidence to substantiate his son's lie, and even tells a lie to undo the lie of his son. Fully aware of his sinful act, he shrinks from the touch of his own son and Nick. Only at the end he makes a confession of all his sins before Jack, "Long ago, I saw a son of yours dead -- a bloody nothing, a piece of something like a dime's worth of cat meat from the butcher shop. That son of yours had come from the body of Mary Tiliyard, my wife, and my heart leaped for joy that it was dead" (380). On coming to know
that Jasper is dying in the cave, he says, "my heart leaped again. In the old joy. But now I recognized it as joy. I wanted your son to die. Because.. because it was your son" (381). The mutual confessions of Sumpter and Jack appear as a labyrinth because they go round and round and reach the same point. But knowledge of death makes them aware of the exit from the labyrinth because death is the exit and death is the wages of sin. Monty, the Younger son of Jack, suffers from lack of identity. A victim of his father's legend, he tries to follow the footsteps of Jasper, "a chip off the old block" (297). He "was n't like Jasper, his Big Brother. He could n't even be himself, whatever that was" (19). He thinks that his beloved Jo "prevented him from being himself" (20). Jo's indifference robs"...him of whatever place he had had in the world before" (12). He seems to achieve identity when he exquisitely handles the guitar. He finally wins Jo to his side.

Each character comes to the cave with an unhealthy past, which negates the integrity of the self. MacCarland Sumpter and Isaac Sumpter are in search of a metaphysical certitude. Other characters like Nick, who live in a dream world, are made an integral part of the symbol. At the centre we have Jack Harrick. We do not hear much from Jack
himself, and Jack who is in the clutches of death, also becomes a symbol so that life's complement is death and death means dying to the corrupt self. Death dissolves sin and leads to rebirth in terms of the Freudian womb and tomb theory which cannot be demonstrated and which naturally is beyond proof. Even Jack in the easy chair, who may die of cancer any moment, is involved in the metaphysical quest. This is unmistakable in the discussion of the box, which, he says, Jasper "wouldn't ever leave it out all night for the dew to ruin" (186). The awareness of the danger in which his son is involved makes him not nostalgic but somewhat repentant because along with Sumpter, there isn't a sin, which he has not committed. There is also the idea that ultimately God alone can save... save if man rises and prays in earnest. The narrative is interspersed with songs. Someone wants Monty to sing "for him (Jasper) to be saved!" (225), and he sings:

All the bullets in Korea
couldn't make my Brother fear,
My Big Brother, he was brave,
But he is lying in the cave
Oh, God, bring him out to daylight
bright and clear! (317)

What is interesting about the song is that to be trapped in the
cave of the self is more fearful, more awful, more tormenting than the pain bullets give.

Ironically enough, Jasper's adventure attracts crowds, and thanks to the publicity machine associated with James Haworth, thousands of people gather near the cave. As Wes Williams says out of the TV screen,

... they love and admire him. It is not merely because he is a suffering human being, deep in the ground, a boy they knew and watched growing up in little Johntown. It is not merely because Jasper Harrick fought for his country and holds a medal for heroism on a shell-swept, hell-swept Korean hillside. It is also because he embodies one of the deepest American traits, the courage to plunge into the unknown. Jasper Harrick is the descendant of frontiersmen. He himself is a frontiersman. Not blazing new trails to lead men into this green country of Tennessee. Not fighting the savage cherokee. But plunging into the earth itself, seeking the new, the unknown. It is because he embodies that trait that opened America, that is why we honor him. But that, too, is why tonight he lies deep under*** (248).
In terms of the text under consideration, public voice and public sympathy elevate Jasper Harrick to the level of a culture hero, as one who embodies one of the deepest American traits, the courage to plunge into the unknown. But as I have observed in the foregoing discussion, it is not into the unknown the hero, his friends and relatives and the public plunge, but into the known in the sense of their past experiences which constitute the cave or labyrinth in its symbolic dimension. They enter death to purge their sins, or facing death, they plunge into their selves. Most critics of Warren overemphasize the influence of Conrad on Warren. To make the sense of a very difficult and complex narrative like The Cave, one need not necessarily bring in Conrad. What makes the narrative alive and meaningful is the symbolic spread Warren manages to create in the novel. What appears an unsuccessful novel, appears as a convincing artistic success, provided he takes into consideration the deft deployment of symbols — symbols like rope, guitar, anodyne, the sights and sounds, associated with creatures like crickets and locusts, and the symbolic overtones of the cave itself.  

In chapter x of the novel, Brother Sumpter prays for the salvation of Jo Lea with her guilty secret. While preaching he says, "... whoever lives with a guilty secret

lives in a dark cave and cannot breathe for the weight of sin" (320). The statement is contextually significant as he himself is guilty. Entering a cave is entering a dark and corrupt self, and by extension, that kind of self is a dark cave. The image itself becomes the thing. Any metaphysical quest whose object is the self is like entering the cave.

The guitar image appears in crucial contexts in the novel. Jack Harrick plays it "fer carnal flesh and jubilation" (224). When he gets baptized, he discards it as he associates it with his sinful acts. When he is about to break it, Celia stops him saying, ".... It might be sinful for him but not necessarily for somebody else..." (186). Later Jasper uses the same box in admiration of his father. Perhaps, he also rings it for the merriment of his neighbours. The younger son of Jack, Monty, rings it for glory. He plays on it to find solace in sadness and to prepare his listeners to know what death means. Jack's comments and concentration on the box, without bothering to think of his entrapped son, irritates Celia and she wishes, "I hope it's ruined — Oh! I hope so!" (186). It is only when he relives his entire past he is able to understand its significance in the sense that like life it can produce sounds of harmony and discord. The "dry, grinding, metallic sound" that seems to come from "some little
buzz saw working fiendishly away at the medulla oblongata....
the distant, pervasive, persuasive sound" (4) of the locusts
stand for the thoughts that struggle for their existence and
the suffering they cause in that process. The recurring
references to the rotting rope, hung to the white oak outside
Jack's window, made by Jack, Celia and Monty perhaps stand
for Jack and Jasper too. Jack wonders, "how long did it take
a piece of rope — good rope, too — to rot?" (5) The rope
reminds him of his past and his robust health that made him
consider himself immortal and the impending danger owing to
the decaying health. To Celia, it stands for her sweet son
Jasper, who is rotting in the cave. The presence of Dorothy
Cutlick, always indicated by the 'click - clack of the ledger -
posting machine" (37), seems to represent her mechanical
life for long, with "no relation to life" (59). Jack's initial
refusal and final acceptance of the pain-killing pill stands for
the shedding of a legendary shroud and his emergence into
real life. In the earlier sections of my argument, I have
stated that Warren's novels are poetic in terms of organization.
The narrative strategy establishes and spreads unobtrusively a
perspective that is liberating from the point of view of both
characters and readers.
Here we have to make a distinction between the liberating perspective and what we often call technique. One may say that Warren is a master technician of the novel. But technique itself does not constitute the liberating perspective. The perspective emerges as the total effect of poetic organization which includes technique. If we analyse The Cave from the point of view outlined in the preceding lines, the novel, instead of being called a failure may be called a success. The failure or success of a work of art cannot be demonstrated mathematically. It can be validated only in terms of a rigorous critical method.