CHAPTER VIII

THE METAPHYSIC OF FREEDOM IN WILDERNESS.
Concluding The Legacy of the Civil War Robert Penn Warren says:

Looking back on the years 1861-65 we see how the individual men, despite failings, blindness, and vice, may affirm for us the possibility of the dignity of life. It is a tragic dignity that their story affirms, but it may evoke strength. And in the contemplation of the story, some of that grandeur, even in the midst of the confused issues, shadowy chances, and brutal ambivalences of our life and historical moment, may rub off on us. And that may be what we yearn for, after all.¹

In Wilderness it is not an American involved in the Civil War who affirms the possibility of the dignity of life for us but a handicapped Jew who, blinded by his devotion to an ideal, stumbles on a critical moment in American history.

¹ Robert Penn Warren, The Legacy of the Civil War, p. 130.
The word "perspective" often occurs in The Legacy of the Civil War. In Wilderness, the Jew formulates the liberating perspective.

The subtitle is ironic in the sense that the image of the Civil War which is a part of American civilization and which is experienced by every American is conveyed by a character who is not an American. The entire tale is told from the point of view of Adam Rosenzweig, a Bavarian Jew. The title A Tale of the Jew seems more appropriate than A Tale of the Civil War. Adam seems to imbibe the idealism of his father and never forgets his words—there was no nobler fate for a man than to live and die for human liberty.

Leopald Rosenzweig, the Bavarian poet and liberal, who trusted not God but man and who lived for human liberty dies as a believer of the Jewish God because of the psychological pressure exerted by his brother. His father's confession sounds the death knell of his father's self, and that very moment in that very shadowy room Adam feels that, "when his father's self had died, his own self had been born" (9). Adam, who has been living in the dream of his father's heroic life, manhood and martyrdom, decides to stand—"to honor the man (Leopald) he once was" (11). He resolves to go to America, fight for freedom, and die in the cause of liberty.

Paying a deaf ear to his uncle's pragmatic advice and ignoring his limitations, he undertakes the quest for freedom and identity.

In this context it is appropriate to observe that the words "freedom," "liberty", and their analogues acquire a metaphysical significance. Moreover, they are meaningful not in terms of the collective social entity which is abstract, but in terms of a concrete, particularized individual responsibility. Tracing the history of ideas that impinge on the novel, Hugh Ruppersburg observes:

By investing the naive yet fervent Rosenzweig with some of the more extreme traits of the Northern Treasury of Virtue, by using the Civil War as a setting and focusing on the friendship of a black and a white man caught up in the conflict, Warren links the Civil War to the consequence it spawned nearly a hundred years later, the crusade for civil rights. The result is a parable whose message is that the abstract desire to slay injustice and redeem the oppressed must be accompanied by a recognition of common humanity and a subsequent humble acceptance of its meaning and obligations. The message might be specifically addressed to young and
idealistic whites like Adam Rosenzweig, who fervently believed in the moral righteousness of the movement without fully understanding or appreciating the humanness of the people it primarily involved. What Adam learns at the end of Wilderness is the meaning of his own humanity.

In the above critical observation the most significant point is the concluding line about the meaning of one's own humanity. The problematic of one's own humanity may be dramatized in terms of a religious, philosophical, metaphysical, cultural and socio-political framework. If we closely examine Wilderness, Warren seems to dramatize the theme of one's own humanity in terms of a metaphysical framework. This does not mean that the context of the Civil War is insignificant or is to be ignored. In the following analysis an attempt is made to illustrate the point.

To accomplish his ideal, Adam starts on his quest. The cleverly designed boot cunningly hides his deformity and he smuggles himself into Elmyra, a ship bound to Virginia, where the scene of action is located. Confident of finding a place in the Northern army; he is doubly sure of his ability

to march, shoot and fight. He is enthusiastic to have his share in the "just cause." As Warren remarks, "it is difficult to distinguish love of liberty from lust for blood." The Civil War which seems to be a fight for freedom to Adam appears to be something different to his aged and experienced uncle who says:

Your father fought for freedom, and you know what that freedom became? In Prague they threw out the Emperor and then turned to killing Jews. Here in Bavaria the heroes marched singing for freedom and stopped singing to save energy to kill Jews. Do you know what the freedom of the world is? ...It is freedom to kill Jews (13).

Unmindful of what his uncle says and fully convinced that "America will want me" (15), Adam launches himself on his metaphysical quest in which so many have participated even without knowing what they were fighting for.

In the novel, values associated with the world, society and life are interwoven with the historical events. Viewed from a distance, Adam looks as one who would like to reaffirm the values in terms of the Civil War. It can also be viewed as a quest of regaining paradise. He overcomes

a number of temptations on his way. The difficulties that he faces do not deter him from his goal. In *The Great Mirage*, Conrad and Nostromo* Warren commenting on Garibaldino says, "He believes in the human bond, in a brotherhood of liberty, and has risked his life in the hope of bringing the day of liberty nearer to man; but ... his idealism is tainted with abstraction." 5 Warren's remarks can be applied to Adam too. He lives in the delusion that his services are needed and he would do something significant to make freedom a concrete reality. When the "mysterious twitch" (20) in the sea, throws him off balance, exposing his ingenious boot and club-foot at the time of inspection, he feels humiliated for the first time. The enraged inspector, Meinher Duncan, screams out, "you God-durn cheat! Stealing a free ride to the U.S.A ! Yeah, with that foot you knew you couldn't fight" (22-23). Unconvinced of Adam's words that he came to fight for freedom, they mock at him saying repeatedly, "He wants to fight for freedom. He says he wants to fight for freedom" (24). Adam's words get lost in the "general whoops and gales of laughter" (24). He feels as though he is a "victim of a gigantic conspiracy, in which the whole world participated" (21). A sailman's sympathy saves Adam from scrubbing the deck to work his passage through and escape into New York.

unnoticed. Though he is relieved of tension, the thought that "Nobody, nobody in the world, cared what he did. He could go or come, like a leaf in the eddy of a stream, like a mote of dust in the wind. This was America" (40) troubles him. He begins to doubt his belief in the human bond.

Adam's first experience in New York city proves to be bitter. Adam, who imagines himself in the role of a saviour of the black, who seems to dedicate his life for their freedom receives a jolt when he sees a black man hanging to a lamp post. The black man, who was hanged by the whites, is a victim of conscription riots. "With a gush of shame, even of desperation, he thought that as soon as he recognized the man as black, the deepest, instinctive blood-sympathy had begun to ebb. Can I be that vile? he demanded of himself. Oh, can I be? (45) Adam, who makes his father's idealism his own and who heroically speaks of fighting for the black man and die in the cause, differentiates between blacks and whites. It makes him feel ashamed of himself.

In The Legacy of the Civil War Warren describes the Civil War as"...the story of a crime of monstrous inhumanity." 6 If people like Adam stumble upon this monstrous

6: The Legacy of the Civil War, p. 308.
inhumanity cherishing an abstract ideal, some are forced into it. Adam witnesses a race riot as soon as he enters New York. In a frenzy of joy, he joins the crazy mob and even tries to knife a Negro, without knowing the cause for the blood-shed. A Negro saves him from drowning in the flooded cellar and he gets disillusioned when he comes to know that the riots are the result of the frustration of Northern whites who are against the new conscription to fight for freedom. It becomes a conflict between whites and whites in terms of blacks. Rising against the new conscription, a section of the Northern whites butcher the black men in blind fury. In spite of the disillusionment, Adam desperately tries to cling to his ideal. He faces the first temptation when his uncle's friend in New York, Aaron Blaustein, a rich old financier, who lost his son in battle and wife in sorrow, requests him to stay with him as his son. Adam's plight, his congenital deformity, and the resultant failure to get recruited instil hope in Blaustein's dry heart but Adam rejects the proposal. His palatial house, wealth, and peaceful life fail to tempt him and he decides to go. Blaustein says:

I wonder if you — you yourself-know, really know, even now, why you must go. You have to go — to understand -- to understand why you have to go. For ...
don't you know that the only way to know why you do a thing, is to do it. That is the only way I suppose, for a man to know what he needs to know (81).

This reminds one of David Donald quoting Andre Gide in his biography that, "it is the part of wisdom to ask not why, but how events happen." 7 Imagining his father to be a hero, following in his footsteps, clinging to the abstract ideal, knowing little about the land of freedom, he moves ahead. Though he does not know really why he wants to fight and what he wants to know, he is aware of one thing—his irresistible urge to fight for freedom. The impediments he faces on his way do not sever him from his chosen path. The information that the fury of the mob that resulted in blood-shed and burning of the black men's asylum and looting on the part of the Northern whites does not set Adam to serious thinking. The news that most Europeans came to America to become rich does not convince him. Blaustein's words, "you know, there's always a reason. That's what History is — the reason for things. That's why it can take the place of God. ... It's just that God is tired of taking the blame. He is going to let History take the blame for a while" (73) fail to make any impact on Adam.

7. The Legacy of the Civil War, p. 305.
Adam's perseverance and persistence in pursuing his heart's desire and his words, "I shall walk there. To Virginia. I shall be there" (80) make Blaustein help him. Adam's tenacity deserves admiration. The sermon that Blaustein gives to Adam not to get into the muddle, the comforts that he gets as the son of the rich Blaustein would have put an end to his pilgrimage, had he been weak in will.

Blaustein succeeds in getting Adam a job as a sutler's assistant. Though he fails to become a soldier, he supplies provisions for the Federal soldiers in the company of his boss, Jedeen Hawksworth and Mose Talbutt, the nigger who saved his life in the cellar. The Negro reminds him of the dead body hanging from the lamp post and he remembers his shame: "When, knowing the man for what he was, his instinctive sympathy for that man's death-agonies had faded" (88). Feeling grateful to Mose for saving his life once, he promises to do something for him.

Adam feels "lost in a realm of fantasies" (88). The sudden awareness that he does not know anybody, not even one in the entire world, frightens him. He is unable to understand what his life is and he decides not to know it. He tries to drill into the Negro's ears the significance of his name. "He (his father) gave me that name that I might try to
be a man in the knowledge that men are my brothers" (92). To remain worthy of his name and to forget his unworthiness implicit in his deformity, he requests Mose to call him Adam. It goes off his head and Mose insists on calling him Slew, always reminding him of his slew foot which he wants to forget about. His insignificant life at times makes Adam think of Blaustein's offer. He imagines the rich life, soft beds, and all the comforts that he has rejected. But the moment "the pain of deprivation" passes, he concludes that something else matters. He seeks the help of God to protect him from such snares and says to himself: "I am what I am. I must do what I have to do" (94).

Adam encounters the second temptation in the shape of a Jewish "woman with a stone house and two barns and two hundred acres of land" (135), whose husband is dying of the wounds he received in the war. Taking pity on the young woman, he helps her in every possible way. When something or other distracts him from his ideal, certain comments on him by others make him examine the entire perspective of his fidelity. For example, Blaustein's comment "You are the son of your father. I think I can understand why you came" (71), prevents him from yielding to the temptation. The sly remarks of Jed and Mose save him from succumbing to the
temptation of staying with the Jewish lady. Had not the Negro used the words "Sawf and juicy" referring to Mrs. Meyerhof, Adam thinks he "might not be on this wagon, moving South. He might have stayed at the farm, have been the hired hand sleeping in the attic of the house where a man was soon to die. He would have lain in the dark, waiting" (133). Adam overcomes the temptation for the first time without second thoughts. The second time the temptation proves too strong to overcome without any debate. His emotional exit saves him from surrendering to temptation. Self-deception or lack of courage prevents him from reaching out to her and live in illusions of innocence and virtue.

Warren talks about the Civil War as something which "grows in our consciousness" and says that one is not disqualified from grasping or experiencing to the full the imaginative appeal of the Civil War. "To be American is not, as the Pole Adam Gurowski pointed out more than a hundred years ago, a matter of blood; it is a matter of an idea — and history is the image of that idea." In Wilderness we do not have mere history, but have history as an idea. Making

8. The Legacy of the Civil War, p. 299.
9. Ibid., p. 299.
Justice Holme's dictum, "the life of law is not logic but experience," his own, the inexperienced idealist, Adam, enters the world of wilderness, in pursuit of his idea. His father's repudiation of values for which he once stood, his uncle's attempts to make him live within the law, Blaustein's pathetic appeal to him to stay with him and be his son fail to change his heart. In a vigorous pursuit of his ideal, he attempts to migrate to the U.S. to fight with the Union in the Civil War. As Warren says, "the Union sometimes seemed to exist as an idea, an ideal, rather than as a fact." The protagonist runs after this idea, ignoring the real world. His crippled foot deprives him of the right to be enlisted in the army, and circumstances constrain him to become an assistant sutler. At every stage, after each encounter with people and events, Adam analyses his deeds or thoughts but willingly remains blind to reality. He deliberately misreads his experiences in support of his idealism. Though the sailor in the ship makes it clear that he planned his escape as an exercise in ingenuity and though he calls the immigrants contemptuously as common fodder and poison, Adam attributes to him sympathy for freedom. Blaustein's picture of Jed as a

10. The Legacy of the Civil War, p. 276.
11. Ibid., p. 271.
brave man who went to court unsummoned to save a black man and as one who faced a trial for trying to kill a white man makes Adam think high of him as a man with a sense of justice and love for all. His understanding of Jed proves to be wrong when Jed declares that he defended the Negro not out of love for niggers, but because "I hated them for being ashamed for my pa... And because I hated my pa for making me ashamed of him" (160). This bitter truth disillusioned him. The famous war hero Simms Purdew's cruelty increases his bitterness for the world. As a part of celebrations, he puts...a half dozen wadded greenbacks in the bottom of a washtub, cover the bills with some twenty inches of flour, and encourage five Negroes, with hands tied behind their backs, to risk suffocation in rooting for the wealth" (184). The passage makes me think of a scene in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. The narrator as a child is made to participate in a wicked entertainment. Often white Southerners make Negro Youths fight among themselves for coins. Later they are made to pick up the coins from an electrified rug. The inhuman enjoyment of Simms generates tension in Adam and his attempt to save the Negroes is thwarted by the timely intervention of Mose Talbutt. Though Simms' mission is to fight for the freedom of the black men, he treats them as slaves and as mere playthings. His illtreatment of Mose makes Adam unhappy.

Adam teaches Mose the alphabet on seeing his enthusiasm to learn at the risk of being taunted by Jed. Answering Jed's questions he says, "I don't think I love them (niggers) any more or any less than I love other people. I don't know that I love any people. It is only that I think they — the black men, I mean — ought to be free" (179). It is true that Adam deceives himself thinking that he loves and treats all alike. The moment he recognizes the body hanging from the lamp post to be that of a black man, his sympathy begins to wane. His introspection brings his self-deception to the fore but he suppresses it. Adam does not find an answer to Jed's question "Do you think I'm free? ... Do you think I am? Do you think anybody is — is free?" (180) But it sheds little light on the futility of his pursuit. The "crabbed, cranky" letters of Mose create feelings of hopelessness, aimlessness, and revulsion in Adam. When a white lieutenant brands Mose as a deserter, and when Jed confirms it exposing the mark W, stripping off his drawers, Adam loses his temper. Considering Mose's desertion the greatest betrayal, he curses him and pays a deaf ear to his frantic appeals to understand him. When Mose explains the circumstances that forced him to run away, he refuses to believe. When he expresses his desire to exchange places with the dying Negro, he brushes it off as sentimental trash. Mose's honest
confession to Adam's enthusiastic enquiry about his motives in saving him from drowning, "If'n you tried to climb up -- if'n you got to clawen and couldn't make it -- and maken a racket then all them folks might of tried to climb up that ... An that shelf, hit warn't room fer but two" (221), shatters Adam's idea of brotherhood. Refusing to be convinced, in a pale and distant voice he asks Mose "Was that it? Was that all?" (221). His conformation makes him wild and when Mose pleads with him to believe him, he bursts out calling him "black son-of-a-bitch." The mounting anger that explodes puts Mose to humiliation but when he cools down, he thinks, "I have done what I have done. I must live with what I have done. Until he forgives me" (223). The confessions of Jed and Mose blur Adam's idea of human bond and brotherhood. Exposed to the ugliness of the world, he feels "his identity draining away. Was no man, in his simple humanity, more to any other man than a stir or voice, a sloshing in the dark?" (224) To satisfy himself, he finds some justification in their deeds. Adam's distrust of Mose, his disgust with him, and Jed's ill-treatment prove enough motives for Mose to murder Jed and escape with his money belt. The moment Adam sees Jed's body, he hears his mind saying, "They will accuse me. They will hold me. Who will care what will happen to me. Innocent or guilty, who will care?" (230) He
grows wiser, buries the body in the forest, hides Jed's wagon, and proceeds to Virginia.

Experience makes him understand the selfish motives of the people and it widens the gulf between the world of reality and his idea of the world. He imagines himself to be standing on the pedestal of virtue, ready to sacrifice his life for a good cause. He tries to understand things and the world. But "Everything — everything in the world — seemed to be out of his hands" (240). Seeing nothing except the blankness of the world, he says aloud: "I don't understand anything. Oh, God, I want to understand" (232). The news of Blaustein's sudden death and Jed's advice to go there and claim what he can, make him think seriously and withdraw himself into his inner self. He questions himself whether he ever thought of going back and be his son when the time comes. The answer that, "a part of him had always assumed that one day he could go back and be rich" (193) baffles him. Reminded of his bitter feelings after running away from Elmyra, he concludes "it was only the existence of Aaron Blaustein that had made his feel real, had made him know who he was" (193). He wonders how "he can be alone and yet not alone" and "would be worth nothing and yet be worth something." Breaking his ties with the
people and the place, he decides to leave for Virginia. Suddenly he feels that "...all the past was nothing, and joy flooded his heart. He was free, at last, to go" (245).

Feeling lost in the new world of wilderness, he tells his host earnestly, "I am a foreigner. I came from Bavaria. That is, in Germany. I am a Jew. I do not care which side is which. I want to sell things" (251). He seems to forget his ideal for a while and is satisfied with the plight. Adam's host, Monmorancy Pugh, is a pacifist minister turned outlaw. His wife tells Adam of how Pugh's decision not to participate in the war and kill human beings led him to kill the conscripter and flee the place. Becoming an outlaw, he kills soldiers to eke out his livelihood. At the point of gun, he makes Pugh help him to cross over into the wilderness. His confrontation with the killer does not make him panicky. He rescues himself from the predicament by using his discretion. He reaches out and touches Mrs. Pugh who is unhappy with her inhuman partner who fails to weep over the death of their only child and who does not recognize her existence. This act of humanity saves his life. Mrs. Pugh reminds him of the Irish woman, Mollie the Mutton, and he feels as though he is on the verge of a revelation. He finds that revelation to be not about Mollie
but about the world. "The whole world. It was not about flight from the world, but about the nature of the world. He was about to put the truth into words" (253). But the revelation escapes as he falls asleep. In the wilderness, he thinks of his boyhood days and his loving mother. Feeling sad for hurting his mother with harsh words, he longs to explain to her about his love and his intention. All alone in the void, he feels lost and cries aloud that he has come to fight for freedom. Finding that some soldiers had passed that way, he remembers his deformity, and cries out "No, they did not want me ... But I had to come. I had to come, ... Because you have to know if there is a truth in the world" (288-89). He thinks of himself to be "the cold center of stillness in the storm which was the world" (290).

The problem in Wilderness is that the sustained contrast between the world — the American Civil War — and Adam's ideal does not lead to a positive conclusion. The word "emptiness" characterizing Adam's experience of the world frequently recurs in the text. But no attempt is made to populate the emptiness. As Warren himself says, "You have the strange effect of a central hollowness with a rich context, with the central character as an observer who is a mere observer. He's involved intellectually, but only
intellectually. The story is never fleshed out in enough depth so that the world of context is related to his experience in the right way."

The preceding analysis and Warren's own observation suggest that in the novel there is a metaphysic of freedom but not as a fully and convincingly dramatized thematic complex. An analysis of the ending of the novel illustrates the point. The sudden onslaught of the confederate soldiers, their looting the wagon and relieving Adam of his boot, bring him face to face with the truth and the futility of his abstraction. The appearance of the Union soldiers results in a fight between the two troops. Seeing two scarecrows attacking one man in blue, he shoots one of them and feels as though he has achieved some degree of manhood. He muses, "I have killed a man ... that is why I crossed the ocean and came all the miles. To do that" (299). Overcoming all the temptations, he comes to the wilderness to kill a man. This reminds one of Mrs. Pugh's view of freedom. To her it is "killen ... that's what they is fighten fer. They all done got the habit. They is killen fer killen. Any thing else they done long forgot" (266). In the name of the

Civil War, many atrocities are committed. It is not love of
liberty or cause of justice that draws many people to the
front. It is conscription or some other compulsion that makes
one a soldier. Adam experiences conflicting emotions, out of
which knowledge of self may emerge. He feels that all the
people including his father betrayed him. Jed's revelation of
the reason behind defending the Negro, Mose's confession of
his selfish motive in saving Adam, appear to him to be great
betrayals. Pugh's monstrosity, Simm's cruelty result in his
hatred of the people. Dissociating himself from the world,
he thinks of the defects of the people. As the soldiers take
his boots away, he removes the boots of the person, he
killed. While doing so, he questions himself why he killed
him, and something in his mind answers, "I killed him,
because his foot was not like mine" (304). Understanding his
own jealousy, for the first time he questions himself whether
he is different from others in any way. Deprived of the
boots meant for hiding his deformity, he appropriates the
boots of the dead soldier, accepts his place in the world,
and decides to do it all again "with a different heart." (310).
He realizes that it is his "hardness of heart" that
made him a killer, the destroyer of Jed, and made Mose a
murderer. Remembering his uncle's maid who restored his
prayer book, Adam feels sad for not opening the book before
her eyes. Appropriation of boots is acceptance of the world, which appeared to be impure to Adam so far, and acceptance of human limitations, especially his deformity. He discovers the significance of Blaustein's statement "The hardest thing to remember is that other men are men... But that is the only way you can be a man yourself" (67). Having tasted the misery of the human condition and having accepted human limitations, he associates himself with the world. He prays for God's mercy and hopes to pursue his quest, though with a different heart. As the epigraphs taken from Pascal and Shakespeare affirm, the protagonist at the end realizes that man's greatness lies in his awareness of his limitations and acceptance of misery.

As Leonard Casper comments, Wilderness is a poem committed to images rather than to grammar or scansion. Except chapters IV and XV, all the rest constitute a poem in which images are juxtaposed. Warren, along with the other Fugitives, John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, liked the metaphysical poetry for juxtaposition or fusion of contraries. At every point we find contradictions emerging: the radical ignorance of Adam and the experience of Jed, Leopald Rosenzweig's trust in man and his brother's absolute faith in

The structure of the novel is like that of a poem.

The word "woods" occurs a number of times in the novel. It is not a geographical location but it signifies wilderness where there is inexplicable violence. Similarly, the word 'boot' recurs throughout the novel. It is symbolically used and it emphasizes the continuance of the journey that would not stop. The club-foot of Adam is symbolic of human limitations. The flooded cellar is symbolic of the womb from which Adam and Mose emerge with a new relationship. The names, Adam and Slew, are symbolic too. At every point there is some kind of retrospection followed by analysis, and the novel looks more a lyric which can be read as an allegory of freedom.