CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
INTRODUCTION

Robert Penn Warren is the most representative American writer of the present century. As Hugh Ruppersburg rightly says, "In Robert Penn Warren's sixty-five-year career, the myth of America stands as a central interest and controlling metaphor. The American nation and its land are a chimeric entity in which Warren himself, his characters, persona firmly believe. Common to that belief is a set of values linked to a particular concept of America emanating from the Declaration of Independence: freedom, individualism, community, 'pursuit of happiness.' " But when we turn to the novels we find that freedom, individualism, community, and the pursuit of happiness are interpreted in terms of a framework reconstructed from the history of the American South. The imaginative conflation of the American South and the American Dream produce a fictional world in which both are exposed to a rigorous scrutiny. In other words, the imaginative conflation creates a perspective, which seems to liberate the reader and at the same time clarify man's place in modern America, and by extension, in the modern world.

Most critics of Warren's fiction describe him as a historical and a philosophical novelist. According to C. Vann Woodward, "Warren was a historian before he was a poet or a novelist. His first book was a biography of John Brown. All of his novels and much of his poetry have dealt with historical themes or with characters and events in historical context. One of his major professional problems has been to define the relationship between history and poetry, to defend his use of both, and to reconcile the sorts of truth they seek and the kinds of sense they make." Warren himself sums up for us the fusion of history and imagination. In his "Foreword" to Brother to Dragons he says, "historical sense and poetic sense should not, in the end, be contradictory, for if poetry is the little myth we make, history is the big myth we live, and in our living, constantly remake." In Warren's fiction we find historical events like the Civil War in Band of Angels (1955) and Wilderness (1961), the political conflict between the New Court and the Old Court parties in Kentucky in the beginning of the nineteenth century in World Enough and Time (1950), the Tobacco Growers' unrest in the early years of this

century in Kentucky in Night Rider (1939). These demonstrate how Warren transformed the big myth into the little myth. All the King's Men (1946), The Cave (1959) and Flood (1964) show how contemporary events are compressed into imaginative constructs. It does not mean that Warren would like to be the historian of America. This suggests that for his own fictional concerns, Warren would like to make use of the past. Most of his characters would like to snap their links with the past and in the process suffer. In order to illustrate the point that one's acceptance of one's past is a redeeming act, which is conducive to a meaningful future, Warren has created a number of father figures (symbolizing the past) with whom his protagonists struggle. They arrive at the meaning of life when they acknowledge their indebtedness to their fathers. By stretching the point further, it may be observed that the philosophical aspect of Warren's fiction consists in man's knowledge of his place in the given scheme of things. It is his pre-occupation with man's right to knowledge that makes him philosophical in the best sense of the word. In knowledge and the Image of Man he says:

Only by knowledge does man achieve his identity. I do not mean that the mere implements of knowledge — books, libraries, laboratories, seminars — distinguish man from the brute. No, knowledge gives him
his identity because it gives him the image of himself. And the image of himself necessarily has a foreground and a background, for man is in the world not as a billiard ball placed on a table, not even as a ship on the ocean with location determinable by latitude and longitude. He is, rather, in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms his identity. It affirms it, for out of a progressive understanding of this interpenetration, this texture of relations, man creates new perspectives, discovers new values — that is, a new self — and so the identity is a continually emerging, an unfolding, a self-affirming and, we hope, a self-corrective creation.

In the above citation the significant words are "affirms," "identity," "osmosis of being," new "perspectives," and "self-corrective-creation." The word perspective often recurs in the creative and critical writings of Warren. Knowledge gives man a new perspective, which helps him achieve his identity. Achieving identity is a continuous process and the result is a

self-corrective creation, which is defined as an inevitable osmosis of being. The fictional construction of the osmosis of being can be managed and communicated not in terms of mimesis but in terms of symbolic orchestration. In his Introduction to Conrad's *Nostromo*, Warren says, "the philosophical novelist or poet, is one for whom the documentation of the world is constantly striving to rise to the level of generalization about values, for whom the image strives to rise to symbol, for whom images always fall into a dialectical configuration, for whom the urgency of experience, no matter how vividly and strongly experience may enchant, is the urgency to know the meaning of experience. For him the very act of composition (is) a way of knowing, a way of exploration." It is because Warren tries to make sense of experience itself and turns his narrative strategies to ways of knowing, he is labelled a philosophical novelist. Whatever may be the usefulness of the label in critical evaluation, it may be asserted that Warren has philosophical interests but his creative writing does not demonstrate a system of philosophy. The preceding observation may be applied to clarify the term political novelist, which is sometimes used to characterize Warren's

fictional concerns. The political climate and the events that constitute a comment on it are subsumed under a human frame which gives the climate and the event a human orientation. In other words, they are made to contribute to the protagonist's earning his own humanity and respect for life. This latter point is elaborated and explained in my chapter on All the King's Men.

II

In order to read critically a corpus of fictional writing, a context and a perspective seem to be necessary, though Warren cautions the critic not to swear by the context he establishes for critical reading. He tells Ruth Fisher, "critics have to set up this contextual world in order to understand the writer in question." He elaborates the point and adds, "everybody is going to make this error sooner or later. But you have to take the risk of making it. Because a critic or a teacher of literature has to try to set up this contextual world for the work in order to see the work in different perspectives. Some of these are bound to be wrong along the way." Keeping the advice of Warren in mind, an

attempt is made in the following paragraphs to set up the contextual world in order to make sense of Warren's fiction. Warren is associated with a group of writers and critics popularly known as the "Fugitives" or the "Agrarians." These include John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Merill Moore, and Cleanth Brooks. These writers and critics were together in Vanderbilt University, in the 1920s. The group as a whole attached great significance to the South and its agrarian values like innocence, honesty, one's sense of honour, the value of the land and those who labour and live on it. They also felt that the rapid development of industry and technology would destabilize the traditional values of life. They were aware of the problems that confront a society in which relationship between the blacks and whites was always on the verge of breakdown. While opposing the society in which all values are governed by industry, commerce and business, they have advocated a society in which man is made to realize and respect his own humanity and that of others. According to them, the crucial question before man is, can the individual and science co-exist? Their conviction is that history is not bunk and man's welfare depends on a vital relation with his community. As creative writers and critics, they have pleaded for a poem or a novel that would make the
meaning emerge from experience and a critical method that would analyse a poem or a novel as it is and locate a structure of meaning in critical discourse. They have placed a very high value on the tension that is generated within the work in which contrary experiences are juxtaposed. From this brief survey of the Fugitive programme and the aesthetic, if we turn to Warren's fiction, we notice that his creative and critical perspectives are broadly in agreement with the Agrarian values and the Fugitive creative concerns.

III

It is common knowledge that there are two streams in the American literary history — the transcendentalism and the anti-transcendentalism. These are a part of the nineteenth century New England Renaissance. When Marshall Walker asks whether he would endorse the transcendentalist view of life, Warren replies that the tension in American literature is a result of the transcendentalist and the anti-transcendentalist views on man, life and art. Although his own fiction does not depend on the epistemology of either streams, Warren appears to be very explicit about his options. So he says, "By the way, when it comes down to Hawthorne and Emerson meeting on the wood paths of Concord, I'm strictly for Hawthorne. I
really have something that's almost a pathological flinch from Emersonianism, from Thoreauism, from these oversimplifications, as I think of them, of the grinding problems of life and of personality. So I'm all for the Hawthorne in the picture." Not only Warren but most writers of the Southern Renaissance are one with Hawthorne in the sense that they are not prepared to oversimplify the human condition. Commenting on the psychology of the American mind after the Civil War, Warren says, "To give things labels, we may say that the War gave the South the Great Alibi and gave the North the Treasury of Virtue." Glossing the Great Alibi he adds, "By the Great Alibi the South explains, condones, and transmutes everything. By a simple reference to the 'War' any Southern female could, not too long ago, put on the glass slipper and be whisked away to the ball. Any goose could dream herself (or himself) a swan-surrounded, of course, by a good many geese for contrast and devoted hand-service. Even now, any common lyncher becomes a defender of the Southern tradition." Continuing the argument he asks the question whether a white Southerner considers a Negro's achievement in the end, enriches "the life of the white man and enlarges his own worth as a human being?" In this context he observes, "There are,

one must admit, an impressive number of objective difficulties in the race question in the South — difficulties over and beyond those attributable to Original Sin and Confederate orneriness; but the grim fact is that the Great Alibi rusts away the will to confront those difficulties, at either a practical or an ethical level. All is explained — and transmuted." 9 The Great Alibi and its consequences for the South which Warren meticulously analyses are foregrounded in the fiction of the Southern Renaissance. The Southern novelists like Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudore Welty, Thomas Woolf and Warren himself have tried to come to terms with the Great Alibi in different ways and from different perspectives. But when we think of the Southern novel, we unconsciously recall to our mind the achievement of Faulkner, whom Warren greatly admires. In Faulkner's canon, the most significant work is Absalom, Absalom!. For a study of Warren's novels, a clear understanding of Absalom, Absalom! would be of great help, for the very simple reason that it is an imaginative reconstruction of historical material. As Cleanth Brooks observes, Absalom, Absalom! is a persuasive commentary upon the thesis that much of "history" is really a kind of imaginative construction. The past always remains at some

level a mystery but if we are to hope to understand in any wise, we must enter into it and project ourselves imaginatively into the attitudes and emotions of the historical figures." Although Warren makes use of the historical material in his narratives, he probes the material so skilfully that the attitudes and emotions of the historical figures are discovered but not described. Another significant point which clarifies some of the issues in Warren's fiction is the concluding passage of Absalom, Absalom! in which Quentin protests that he does not hate the South. The entire corpus of Warren's fiction deals with the South. Percy Munn, Willie Stark, and Jack Burden, Jeremiah Beaumont, Amantha Starr, Brad Tolliver, Cassie Killigrew and Jed Tewksbury are typical Southern men and women about whom Warren writes in the most sympathetic manner. This does not mean that in making meaning emerge from the character's experience of life, Warren, as the presiding consciousness of his fictional world, is devoid of ironic attitude and detachment. As his essay Pure and Impure Poetry demonstrates, in every ideal situation


and in every garden of purity there is a Mercutio who symbolizes realism, wit and intellectual complication. Warren's narrative perspective has a liberating effect on the reader largely because of the fusion of the ideal and the ironic, the imaginative and the factual, the past and the present, good and evil, the mundane and the spiritual.

IV

In order to clarify further the liberating perspective Warren employs as his narrative strategy, we may say that the early novels foreground a human frame and the later novels a metaphysical frame. In All the King's Men Willie Stark says:

Yeah, I'm Governor, Jack, and the trouble with Governors is they think they got to keep their dignity. But listen here, there ain't anything worth doing a man can do and keep his dignity. Can you figure out a single thing you really please - God like to do you can do and keep your dignity? The human frame just ain't built that way. 13


The above citation is the most crucial statement about human experience, human behaviour, and the visible world in which we live. Man's dignity does not always depend on doing what is worth doing. Man is not so perfect as Emerson would have us believe. Given the way of the world and the variety and diversity of human needs, man cannot always choose what is good to himself and to others. This is what Willie Stark seems to imply when he says, "the human frame just ain't built that way." When we look at the early novels from this perspective, it appears that Percy Munn, Jerry Calhoun, Willie Stark, and Adam Stanton, Jeremiah Beaumont, Amantha Starr launch their career with good intentions. They try to disown their past in order to make the best of the present. But they do not succeed largely because their knowledge of the self is vitiated by many conscious and unconscious compulsions. They rescue themselves from total doom by coming to terms with the chinks in the human frame. Ever since he wrote John Brown: The Making of a Martyr (1929) Warren says, "I have puzzled a great deal about this — the man had some kind of constant obsessive interest for me. On the one hand, he's so heroic; on the other hand, he's so vile, pathologically vile." Expanding the

point further, he says, "This is a strange situation; and the split of feeling around Brown makes the split of feeling in a thing like my character Stark almost trivial. Brown lives in the dramatic stance of his life, rather than in the psychological content of it; he lives in noble stances and noble utterances, and at the psychological and often the factual level of conduct was — it's incredible — brutal. Perfect self-deception — Yet 'noble'. Now, on this point, I suppose, the people I have chosen to write about — or rather, who have chosen me to write about them — are trying to find out some way to make these things work together, come together: somehow they are trying to get out of this box. This would be true of a man like the hero of World Enough and Time, who must find a cause, an ideal cause, in order to justify some of his most secret and destructive motives — no, that's not accurate — needs." 15 The preceding citation seems to be a dependable gloss on the human frame. Hence in the early novels Warren's thematic preoccupation appears to be the human frame or the box. In the citation under review, his characters struggle to get out of the box, which is made of pure and impure elements. Or to put it in a cliche, the box

is made of good and evil. In the later novels starting with The Cave, there seems to be a change in the narrative and enunciative modalities. For the convenience of the argument, we may say the later novels are foregrounded in the metaphysic of life and death. The Southern milieu as the backdrop for the novels continues. But the thematic complex is made of issues which emerge from Amantha Starr's initial question, "Who Am I?" 16 In The Cave the self matures not in terms of the human frame but in terms of the metaphysical frame in the sense that knowledge of death is essential to a knowledge of life. Entering the cave means entering the labyrinth of life and death. This labyrinthine process of acquiring the knowledge of the self is dramatized in terms of a contemporary tragedy. In Flood, for example, words and phrases like "joy," "compassion" "inner wound," "buried self," "spiritual lassitude," "house of forgiveness," "location" and "relocation," "relocating man in the life of the spirit," suggest that a secular crisis is dramatized within a metaphysical framework. In discussing the individual novels, I have tried to make this point clear. The foregoing observations do not force the conclusion that there is a hiatus, in the total corpus of Warren's fiction. The terms human frame and metaphysical frame are not mutually exclusive. What they simply suggest is a shift of emphasis and a reorientation of the perspective.

The human cry, Who Am I?, is given a metaphysical orientation in the later novels. But the thematic complex of Warren's fiction — the significance and value of the past and the interaction between the ideal and the actual in any kind of quest for knowledge and identity — binds the entire fictional corpus into a unified whole.