CHAPTER II

AMBIVALENCE AND THE HEROICS OF THE SELF
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In most criticism of the American novel in general, and in the criticism of Warren's novels in particular, the concepts of "self" and "selfhood" often recur. Before I discuss Warren's first novel, *Night Rider*, I would like to explain the concept of self from a perspective suggested by Warren himself. In his "Foreword" to *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren says, "We simply 'live' our selfhood. But the concept of self, once scrutinized, is, as I am at least partially aware, enormously complex and problematical. A testimony to this fact is the massive literature on the subject that extends from the early days of the Greek and Hebraic words to the most recent article on 'Quickie' psychology or handbook on self-help. And I am also aware, even in my slender acquaintance with that literature, that there is no easy and ready orthodoxy. Since there is none, it may be useful, even at this date, to provide the reader with a guiding statement as to what I mean by the self: in individuation, the felt principle of significant unity." The qualifiers, "felt" and "significant," in the preceding citation are made more specific
when Warren says that, "by felt I mean that I am here concerned, not with a theoretical analysis as such, but with what a more or less aware individual may experience as his own selfhood, and what he assumes about other individuals. By significant I mean two things: continuity — the self as a development in time, with a past and a future and responsibility— the self as a moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of action worthy of praise or blame."  

From this it follows that the self consists in an awareness of one's own experience and in an awareness of the other selves also. This is possible only in terms of a temporal continuity in which the self acquires a moral identity which earns for itself the power to act. Night Rider dramatizes the fortunes of a character who fails to achieve any kind of identity, let alone moral identity.

Any reading of 'Night Rider' ought to begin at chapter nine, which is crucial. It deals with the youth, the formative years of Percy Munn before he establishes himself as a lawyer and tobacco planter. An urge to know himself and others possesses him from his student days. This inward movement is indicated in his love to watch the flocks of

grackles since his boyhood. The narrator tells us, "He would observe the sweep of the flock on the sky, the swaying but sure convolutions of the wide-flung mass like the curved and reaching and self-fulfilling forward thrust of a breaker, or the movement of a field of grain in the wind. That spectacle always spoke to him of an inevitability, a surety, a completeness beyond his grasp or, even, definition. That perfection, that victorious indifference, filled him with a loneliness which mingled insidiously with the minute tightening of his muscles and the new tingling of the blood, like a start of hope, which the sight had provoked." This suggests that Munn is overwhelmed by an idea of perfection, and in the presence of or in the contemplation of it, feels frozen or empty.

When he was studying law at Philadelphia, the sight of the grackles sweeping over the roofs captures his attention one afternoon, and unawares he follows them to a little park. "In the overmastering loneliness of that moment, his whole life seemed to him nothing but vanity. His past seemed as valueless and as unstable as a puff of smoke, and his future meaningless, unless — and the thought was a flash, quickly

dissipated — he might by some unnamable, single, heroic stroke discover the unifying fulfillment (208). A few years later, he faces this 'unnamable, single, heroic stroke,' when he goes to Bardsville to watch a rally of tobacco growers in protest against the monopolistic buyers.

As in the case of the other novels of Warren, in Night Rider there is a specific historical reference. The unrest among the Kentucky tobacco growers in 1905-08 and their struggle against the rich tobacco purchasers is foregrounded in the narrative. Munn's fateful encounter with Bill Christian, a director of the 'Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco' lands him in an unexpected corner. Though he protests that he has no political inclination and says that he has enough to do with his farm and law practice, he does not resist the request of Christian to accompany him and sit on the dais. Later he delivers a short but significant speech that launches him into public life. His unanticipated and unpremeditated speech brings a change in him. He joins the Association not because of any moral conviction or financial pinch but because of the ego-boosting flattery of Senator Tolliver and Christian. When Mr. Sills and Christian come to Percy Munn with a proposal to appoint him as one of the directors of the Association, he rejects the offer outright. His
instinctive refusal to accept it surprises him. But long persuasion makes him accept the offer. The impulse to rush after them to express his reluctance continues. This ambivalence in himself embarrasses him and he longs to understand his real nature, his self. Instead of analysing his ambivalent self, Munn seems to equate his participation and elevation as acts of fulfilment. With a confused mind, Percy Munn comes home to tell his wife everything with the hope that her words or expression, or even her mere presence, might help explain himself to himself." He hopes "to discover from her something about the meaning of the nameless impulse that had first prompted him to blurt out his refusal to the Senator" (35). Neither her words nor her expressions give him any clue to understand himself. His entry into public affairs increases his intense urge to evaluate himself. This urge to know his self and others, has been in him even from his student days. As a student he tries to understand Miss Ianthe Sprague, an old spinster and his mother's acquaintance. He spares his precious time to visit her. When he reads out a novel or newspaper to her, to his surprise, he finds her receiving only the fragmentary, irrelevant, and meaningless things. Sensing the logic of her refusal, he stops visiting her. "His communion with her was like the communion which a worshiper may hold with the cold, unhuman, blank, and unbending stone of the carved image " (213).
He tries to probe into the world of Bunk Trevelyans wife, when she comes to him with a request to save her arrested husband who, she pleads, is innocent. "He understood her to be complete and individual, the center of a world as real and important as the world he knew concentric to himself" (53). But this is a false assessment. Impulsively he believes in her integrity, takes it for granted that Trevelyans is not guilty, succeeds in proving a Negro to be the real murderer, and saves Trevelyans from the gallows. Whenever this inexplicable longing to scrutinize himself and others seizes him, he becomes restless. His failure to understand himself and even his love for his wife results in a growing sense of isolation and lack of meaning in his existence. He longs to "define the true and unmoved center of his being, the focus of his obligations (41) but he does not succeed. His mind becomes a prey to unending thoughts even when he holds May in his lap. He hopes to hear something from his wife, though he does not know what he actually wants to hear. But he has "expectation of discovery and fulfillment (49). Even when he listens to his clients with professional care, he is aware of something behind their words and faces — some thing that is unnamed.
Once he becomes an active member of the Association, his sense of duty overpowers him. Senator Tolliver's empty words, "You are one of those who can best help to promote the successful growth of the Association along sound and reasonable lines" (112) flatter Munn, though he curses himself for his blindness, stupidity, and vanity later. Though he struggles hard to promote the welfare of the farmers, they remain timid, cool, and stubborn and refuse to cooperate. In one of the meetings, when a sixty-year-old man, comes forward to sign his approval, convinced of Munn's words, he feels as though that moment has tremendous importance: "It had seemed as if that moment was a point of vantage from which he could survey other moments in their true perspective and worth, moments of the past and, perhaps, moments of the future " (48).

At times he finds himself poised on the brink of revelation. Unable to understand what the impending revelation is, he tries to seek the help of his wife. But he fails in his attempt to explain himself to May, and to himself " (48). He finds himself doing strange things like waking up in the middle of the night and staring at his wife's sleeping face. His failure to understand himself and others makes him conclude that "It is hard to know anybody, ...
really know them " (163). Senator's resignation from the board and the discovery that he was bought off, disillusion Percy Munn. He begins his quest, once he perceives the emptiness in him. Being impelled by some inexplicable impulse, he acts in private and public life, without any direction, without being guided by any deeply felt code. His sincere efforts to understand why he behaved in a particular way end in failure. The failure of the Association drives it to acts of violence and the establishment of an illegal terrorist organization, which conducts punitive raids on non-cooperating farmers. Reluctantly, Percy Munn becomes a member of the 'Free Farmers Brotherhood of Protection and Control.' His decision to join night riders seems inevitable, like a thing done long before and remembered, like a part of the old, accustomed furniture of memory and being " (148). To his surprise his former client Bunk Trevelyan becomes a member. Once Munn becomes the captain of a band of night riders, his downfall begins.

The Association that starts intimidating the non-members of the "Association of Growers of Dark Fired Tobacco" moves to planteed scraping to barn-burning and dynamiting the warehouses. The anarchic and immoral actions of the Association make captain Todd resign from it.
Caught in the grip of commercial and social forces, Percy Munn mechanically performs certain acts he loathes. His commitment to the Association overpowers his sense of right and wrong and sense of responsibility as a human being and as a husband. His introspection makes him understand that, "all of his actions had been as unaimed and meaningless as the blows of a blind man who strikes out at the undefined sounds which penetrate his private darkness" (114). Percy Munn does several things like a somnambulist. He is so detached from his emotions that while reading news about their own deeds, he feels... as if he were reading of something in which he had had no part, of something that had happened a very long time before" (173).

In his attempt to identify himself with the night riders, he drifts away from his wife. He no longer tries to seek her help to understand himself. He keeps her ignorant of his activities. May notices the change in him, senses the cause, and knows she can no longer reach him. Still she points out, "You've changed, Perse, you know you have. You aren't like you used to be" (159). He knows her accusation is right. But he succumbs to his helplessness. To him, his wife looks as though she lives in a different world. "A man might be to another man only the sound of a voice muffled and incoherent" (176). They remain so for quite some time.
Professor Ball's words that "Mr. Munn was serving the cause of justice. And not for hire. For the love of justice, than which there is no nobler sentiment in the human breast" (182) are doubly ironical when we look at the consequences of Munn's relations with Bunk Trevelyan. No doubt, it is his love of justice that makes him save the life of Bunk Trevelyan rendering free service. But when he comes to know later that he committed a blunder in sending a Negro to the gallows in the place of Bunk Trevelyan, the little satisfaction he had in the thought that he did justice turns to an unbearable sense of guilt. When he later shoots down Bunk Trevelyan for betraying the Association, he is aware that it is not an act of redemption.

The Council entrusts the responsibility to Percy Munn of punishing his former client Bunk Trevelyan for blackmailing another member of the Association. He executes it mechanically but with a feeling of revulsion, which is evident in his nausea and retching after the execution. He feels the impulse to flee the other members, but he rides home and rapes his own wife. Unable to share her life any more with the beast in him, she leaves for her aunt's house for good.
"Warned, like some convalescent sufferer by the flare-up of an old symptom, he withheld himself, husbanded himself, that nothing should strike him suddenly beyond his strength ... As he felt the need to protect himself from the disturbing contact of other persons, so more and more he felt the need to protect himself by denying memory, as it were, from the contact of the self he had been" (218-19). His thoughts rush back to Miss. Ianthe Sprague of his student days in Philadelphia and he tries to feel himself back across time and across the bounds of personality into her special loneliness. He recalled how, during those periods of loneliness and homesickness in Philadelphia — and he had been lonely during all those years — he had wondered how anybody could be so alone, so cut off, so withdrawn, as Miss Sprague, and still live" (215). It is in this context that Warren's words that the self is the felt principle of significant unity appear to be relevant. Percy Munn lacks the experience of continuity and moral identity.

The Night Riders commit acts harmful to their own aims and ideals of justice. Their violence intensifies and spreads in unpredictable ways. Following their footsteps, a group of poor whites resort to burning the houses of people like Tolliver and Percy Munn. In the wake of violence a
troop of soldiers reach Bardsville to suppress it. Christian comes to know of the betrayal of Munn, only when he sees his daughter in Munn's room, the night his house was burned. Lucille informs Munn of her father's shock and the resultant stroke. Her final refusal to marry him and her declaration "We can't be with each other any more" (325) make him loathe himself for the emptiness of the act he had performed: a vicious and shameful pantomime, isolated from all his life before it and from any other life, cut off in time, drained of all meaning, even the blind, fitful meaning of pleasure. He was infected by her emptiness. Or her emptiness had discovered to him his own. She had held it up to him like a mirror, and in her emptiness he had seen his own" (325).

The foregoing citation with its repetition of "emptiness" and its mirror image unmistakably suggests the thematic complex of the novel. Attaining selfhood is a continuous process in which the past and the present interact to create a meaningful and hopeful sense of future. Disowning past is disowning memory, which makes life empty of meaning. The tragedy of Munn seems to stem from his incapacity to analyse the past in terms of the present which might have helped him develop fidelity to himself and others.
In reading Warren's novels in which the entire narrative is interiorized, it may be an interpretative hazard to focus attention on the plot. But in *Night Rider* the crucial incident is the murder of Turpin. Using Munn's rifle, professor Ball Kills Turpin in his absence and conveniently shifts the crime and foists it on Munn. This twist in the plot makes Munn the night rider, who becomes a self-imposed hunter, an object of soldier's hunt for a criminal. The crime and violence which undercut the incident and atmosphere of the novel are placed in a perspective which seems liberating in the sense that the strands of narrative which are interiorized are brought to the surface. Percy Munn is not only the victim of his ambivalence but also the victim of the machinery he sets in motion. While this ambivalence paralyses him in his determination to kill his betrayer Senator Tolliver, it at the same time guides him to act resourcefully so as to save himself.

Among Warren's critics, there is a vital disagreement on the significance of Willie Proudfit's episode and its organic link with Munn's story. It seems Warren explained its narrative importance and thematic significance in the novel in a letter written to Allen Tate:

"Proudfit is a man who has been able to pass beyond his period of 'slaughter' into a state"
of self-knowledge. If he is not at home in the world, practically... he is at least at home with himself, has had his vision. It is an incommunicable vision, and no solution for anyone but himself. He is, in a way, a foil for Munn, who has tried to embrace his vision by violence ... But more specifically, as the tale relates to Munn's decision; Munn feels, as it were, that though he cannot achieve the vision, he can, perhaps, by a last act of violence, inject some rationality into his experience, he can round it out in terms that on mechanical grounds at least would be comprehensible — that is, by committing his murder ... he can in a way justify his present situation, for he is on the run for a murder he did not commit, and the murder of the Senator would be the first completely personal and private murder for him. 3

The above citation unmistakably suggests that Percy Munn is on a search for some 'unnamable, single, heroic stroke discover the unifying fulfillment" (208). In the concluding pages of the novel, the word "nothing" recurs in a reverberating fashion so as to drive home the point that there is an awakening in Percy Munn, especially when he tells

Tolliver, "I'm nothing ... But when I do it, I won't be nothing. It came to me, Do it, do it, You'll not be nothing" (457). He fails to act not because he lacks physical strength but because he lacks conviction. In other words, he could not achieve a moral identity. Hence his struggle to discover "unifying fulfillment" woefully ends in mere heroics.