CHAPTER – V

HIS POETICS
Robert Penn Warren's poetry is full of paradoxes. His poems are dense with specific images of the world's body. He had always wanted to more than just see the world sharply, he had wanted to understand them.¹

There is irony in Warren's poems, but more often than not, the irony is directed at the poet himself. In his poetry there is an intermixture of the colloquial, easy, assured, humorous and serious and irony, paradox, antithesis and ambiguity, in rapid shifts, moving between the folksy and the metaphysical. It takes its cadence from the rhythm of folk poetry while it gets its theme from philosophers, theologians.

Warren's poetry seeks connection between the past and the future and in accepting the gift of death gracefully, as a welcome fulfilment of release into ultimate identity. For him life is:

Afar down I see the huge first Nothing,  
I know I was even there . . . .
Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,  
For it, [my embryo] the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long cold strata piled to
rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their
mouths and deposited it with care.*

Like Warren's creatures under ice or his
sleepers who do not fear 'whatever awfulness of dark',
and as in his metaphysics, the acceptance of death comes
through the ministrations of an unconscious self,
perceiving a pattern and meaning not available to the
conscious ego. He says:

There is that in me - I do not know
what it is - but I know it is in me.
Wrenched and sweaty - calm and cool
then my body becomes, I sleep, I
sleep long.
I do not know it - it is without name
- it is a word unsaid
It is not in any dictionary,
utterance, symbol, ...
It is not chaos or death - it is form,
union, plan - it is essentially life...
(p. 147)

Robert Penn Warren: *New and Selected Poems 1923-
York, 1985, p.144. In future all textual references
shall be to this edition and only the page number
shall be indicated in parentheses.
Of Warren's symbols of congruence, the most prominent is the cedar tree, named over thirty times, and always with resonance of mortality, far beyond other trees such as the Yew and the Cyprus. Sun and moon, storm, gull and river are among his symbols of necessity, but none have the importance of the West or Promised Land.

Landscapes of Nature, dream and memory abound in Warren's writing. In his youth, Kentucky was, for him, the basis for all occasions. It remained in memories and dreams, the Eden, to which he occasionally returned, only to be saddened by its decline. He often set poems around his birthplace - Guthrie, Kentucky - subjecting them to a wide range of kaleidoscopic colours. At times he used light, especially that at the day's end, to express a complex affection for his native soil and to translate into a universal language various truths that in boyhood he half-comprehended and in manhood came to understand. Such wisdom underlined the choice of title, *Incarnation*, for his 1968 collection of verse. In other
instances, light became a tool of irony, to render foreboding, as in *Brother to Dragons*, notes a "tick on the late landscape", late, possibly meaning 'dead'.

Once he has "received" a landscape, Warren believes, "it lives for ever, or at least, as long as we do, captured in the "impeccable unspeaking line of art". Wallace Stevens voices the same intuition about permanence, in Part Three of "Peter Quince of the Clavier"; Y.B. Yeats in *Sailing to Byzantium"; and John Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

For the abundance, range, variety and high achievement in both fiction and poetry, one thinks of D.H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy for comparison with Robert Penn Warren. However, there are important differences also. Whereas Hardy wrote most of his poetry only after abandoning novel-writing. Warren, who published his first book of poems, a few years after his first novel, has continued to write in both genres throughout his lifetime. His tenth novel, *A Place to Come To*, was published in the same year as his eleventh volume of
poetry, *Selected Poems 1923-1975*, which was his third volume of selected poems.

Whereas Lawrence, who produced magnificent poetry, will always be acclaimed a greater novelist than poet, Warren may finally be considered a greater poet than novelist, especially if literary honours and awards are any sign of judgement. His first major recognition was the Pulitzer Prize for *All The King’s Men* (1946). But during the later part of his career as a writer, most of the awards have been for his poetry. He received another Pulitzer Prize in 1957, followed by the National Book Award, The Edna-St. Vincent Millay Prize, The Bollinger Prize, The Van Wyck of Brooks Award and the Copernicus Award from the Academy of American Poets, among other recognitions.

In addition to his poetry and novels, Warren has published numerous other books; a play, short stories, biographies, influential criticism and textbooks, editions of other poets, and historical work, so that some consider him the most accomplished and distinguished American Man of Letters of the time. It is
fortunate to have this other body of writing because, among other reasons, much of Warren's poetry may best be regarded in the light of his own articulate criticism.

For Warren, a poem is an organic system of relationships and that the poetic quality should not be understood as consisting of one or more elements taken in isolation but rather in relation to each other and to the total organization - the structure of the poem. Many years earlier he had opposed theories of 'pure' poetry, which tended to filter out of poetry certain elements that might qualify or contradict the original impulse of the poem. In an interview Warren describes his poetry as 'a vital activity ... related to ideas and life.' His essay on Coleridge records the view that '. . . The truth is implicit in the poetic art as such... the moral concern and the aesthetic concern are aspects of the same activity, the creative activity, and . . . This activity is expressive of the whole mind'.

In his essay, Peter Stitt remarked, "Warren observes that the Central fact of poetry is the concept of the 'self' which he defines as, 'in
individuation the felt principle of significant unity,' 'significant' implying both continuity and responsibility: that is: 'the self as a development in time, with a past and future' and 'the self as a moral identity, recognising itself as capable of action, worthy of praise or blame...'. What poetry most significantly celebrates is the capacity of man to face the deep, dark inwardness of his nature and his fate."

Thus his expository prose spells out what we recognise in his fiction and his poetry to be his major theme of self, time and moral responsibility, and reveals, what, for him, is the vital purpose of poetry.

With this critical focus from his own essays, we may, more clearly and pertinently, review Warren's profile and poetic career- a career that is divisible into three distinct periods: 1923-1943, 1943-1960 and 1960-1985. Many poems of each period have a decided philosophical and religious content, being preoccupied with his major tripartite theme as well as with guilt and innocence, love and the imagination, death and rebirth. But Warren fights dogmatism, often minimises
explicit commentary, qualifies ironically and balances all tensions. His poetry moves over the years towards vision and redemption.

In his criticism of *The Rime Of the Ancient Mariner*, Warren writes that there are two themes: the primary theme of the sacramental vision or ‘One Life’, and the Secondary theme of the imagination. Sacramental vision and the imagination are construed as distinguishable aspects of the same reality. He approaches the secondary theme through the symbols of different kinds of light; discussing the contrast between moonlight, symbolising the imagination and sunlight, symbolising the ‘mere reflective faculty’, which Coleridge said, partakes of ‘Death’.

Warren makes use of light imagery and the themes of the sacramental vision and imagination, though he often substitutes starlight for moonlight in his later poetry. "Warren’s concept of the imagination is precisely Coleridgian. The imagination organises what otherwise would be chaotic sensation and, contrariwise. It anchors the reason in images of sensation, so that the
imagination repeats in the mind - the eternal act of creation in the infinite 'I AM'. The primary imagery creates the world and the self. The secondary imagination is the value creating capacity."

Warren points out that in the poem, the good events occur under the aegis of the moon and the bad events under that of the sun. The issue is a bit complicated in that the operation and the effect of the imagination can be both joyous and terrifying. In his own poetry Warren makes similar use of light imagery and the themes are sacramental vision and imagination, though he often substitutes starlight for moonlight in his later poetry.

Recollections are the present imaginings of the past. In "Court-Martial", written in short couplets and triplets, the speaker recalls his grandfather's story of bushwhackers during the Civil War. "I see him now as once seen," The grandfather and the grandson sit in the shade of an evergreen tree, "withdrawn from the heat of the sun", the light of which dapples the objects under the boughs. The old cavalryman's story is itself a
recollection— a history, in one sense, the significance of which, the speaker tries to discover:

I sought, somehow, to unite
The knot of History.
For in our shade I knew
That only the truth is true,
That life is only the act
To transfigure all fact,
And life is only a story.
And death is only the glory,
Of the telling of the story,
And the done and to-be-done
In that timelessness were one
Beyond the poor being done. *

While raising questions regarding History, Truth and Time, the poem suggests that the final reality is somehow involved with the imagination. Just after the old man has concluded his story and before the poem ends, the speaker turns away and sees his grandfather, 'not old now— but young,' riding out of the sky. This is imagined in detail: the saddle, the cavalry boots, the hanged men with outraged faces taking shape behind the rider.

The poem concludes:

The horseman does not look back.  
Blank-eyed, he continues his track,  
Riding toward me there,  
Through the darkening air.  
The world is real. It is there. (p. 78)

History, Truth and Time according to Warren, are the functions of the Creative Imagination, with immense capacity for creativity. The external world or natural order is devoid of values. Taken by itself, there is no particularly exclusive thing in the natural order that is better than any other thing. The poem, and particularly the line, "And life is only a story", does not empty reality of its content; it makes clear that the content is given value and meaning by the imagination.

Just as in this poem of recollection, so in "Lullaby: Smile in Sleep", the theme of imagination, as a kind of ultimate, transcendental shaping force, finds expression. Lulling his infant son, the speaker says, 'You will dream the world anew'. Awake, the boy in years to come will see a violent world, the truth perverted,
and love betrayed. Thus is his obligation greater than the 'Dream perfection'. The more imperfect the world, the greater is the human need for perfection. The image serves to recreate and perfect imperfect reality and give "our hope new patent to / Enfranchise the human possibility./ Grace undreamed is grace foregone./ Dream grace, son." (p. 277). The tension of lullaby juxtaposed against images of violence is resolved in the last stanza:

There's never need to fear
Violence of the poor world's abstract storm.
For now you dream Reality.
Matter groans to touch your hand.
Matter lifts now like the sea
Towards that cold moon that is your dream's command.
Dream the power of coming on. (p. 278)

The implications are clear: as the moon influences the sea, so, the dream or the image, which is the working of the imagination, shapes inferior matter. Warren's conception of the imagination is precisely Coleridgian. The imagination organises what otherwise would be chaotic sensation, and, contrariwise, it anchors the reason in images of sensation, so that the imagination repeats, in the finite mind ... the eternal act of creation in the
infinite 'I AM'. The Primary Imagination creates the world and the self; the Secondary Imagination is the value-creating capacity; and one knows by creating.

The child, as well as the poem, is a promise. Both renew the world. In Warren's poetry, childhood has a great deal of prominence and significance. The poet has attempted to order and set down meanings wrung from earlier experiences as a legacy to the child. Though there will be modification of landscape, and expansion of the human heart, hope and scope, Warren does not sentimentally anticipate vast changes or changes which are easily effected. The poems of recollection, present images of a violent and terror ridden world; a summer storm bringing havoc to a country; the foundering fathers in their defects; some unidentifiable evil terrifying another country; a father murdering his entire family. The same dark and hidden forces that, submerged, are waiting to and actually do spring up in one generation, do not simply disappear in the next. Thus:

The new age will need the old
lies, as our own more than once did
For death is ten thousand nights—yes,
it's only the process
Of accommodating flesh to idea, but there's
natural distress
In learning to face Truth's glare-glory, from
which our eyes are long hid.

The need of finding Truth to live by is related to Warren's pervasive theme of the need for self-definition; he who has discovered and defined himself in finding a Truth by which to live an integrated life can face, 'the awful responsibility of Time'. The difficult problem of truth-finding is further complicated by the elusiveness of the meanings of experiences. Such elusiveness preoccupies several poems: "Dark Woods", "Country Burying", "School Lesson", "Dark Night of the Soul" and others. In the "Dogwood", the second section of "Dark Woods", the speaker is walking in, not merely stopping by the dark woods at night. These

Robert Penn Warren: *New and Selected Poems 1923-1985
Promises: Infant Boy at Midcentury*. Random House, New York, 1985, p.271. In future all textual references shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
were the woods of childhood. Now suddenly he comes across a
dogwood tree, 'white floating in darkness. . . white bloom
in dark air.' He experiences a mixture of feelings: first
joy, and then wrath so that he would have struck the tree
if a stick had been handy:

But one wasn't handy, so there on
the path then, breath scant,
You stood, you stood there, and
oh, could the poor heart's absurd
Cry for wisdom, for wisdom, ever
be answered?
Triumphant,
All night, the tree glimmered in darkness,
and uttered no word. *

The object of white in dark should have held the key to
the meaning; but the speaker remains outside the still
moment, not entering into intuitive illumination. As with
other tree imagery, the dogwood in the night, a contrast

Robert Penn Warren: New and Selected Poems 1923-1985
Promises: Dark Woods. Random House, New York, 1985, p.282. In future all textual references shall be to this
edition and only the page number shall be indicated in
parentheses.
of opposites, white floating in darkness, is both a symbol of reality and of the speaker's wish for insight into it. It is this insight, resulting in the silent state of being 'blessed past joy or despair', that the poems finally move towards. On the word 'blessedness', which in its different grammatical forms, appears repeatedly in Warren's later poetry. "Whatever may be the root and derivation of this word, in common language, it is now a wholly religious and mystical word, and not a part of the common naturalistic vocabulary at all." ⁶

The ultimate symbolism of Warren's poetry, as of all religious language, is the mystic of transcendental or peak experience. That this is so is clearly evidenced in the sacramental vision and the principle of inter-relatedness of the more recent poems of *Tale of Time: New Poems 1960-1966, Incarnations: Poems 1966-1974* and *Can I see Arcatus From Where I Stand?*

While a number of pieces have been moved to *Or Else Poems*, only six poems from Warren's previous four volumes have not been reproduced in *Selected Poems 1923-1975*, more than twenty of which consist of poems written
between 1960-1975, clear and accurate recognition by Warren himself of the general superiority of his later poems over his earliest work. He has been increasingly both, a more prolific poet and a remarkably better one.

Those four volumes as well as *Can I see Arcaturus From Where I Stand?*, and the ten new poems published in *Selected Poems 1923-1975*, demonstrate Warren's poetic continuity and development of a poetry stylistically more lucid, and powerful, with somewhat less tentativeness and qualification. The strokes are bolder and yet the nuances more subtle and various - usually through a directness of poetic narrative, more frequent use of the long line and added emphasis of the colloquial, even though sometimes, the language is very flat.

Warren's later poetry is less metaphysically knotty and dense than his early work but no less complex in significance. He can still delight us with the echoes of metaphysical manner, with "glittering ambiguity" and a "more complex version of his own paradox"", but that of course, was never his own major
mode so much as a part of a more various inclusive style and of his insight into a diverse range of writers and traditions. His later poetry is intellectual without being intellectualised — as the ideas are purposely substituted for image.

Exceptionally vivid descriptions and extraordinarily pleasing sounds frequently appear as integral parts of some of Warren’s poems as they progress. The later poems are generally less formally arranged in metre, line, length and rhyme. But Warren has developed enormous skill in the syntax of the sentence, the exact placement of words in the line, the use of spacing and the rhythm, thereby producing a pristine beauty all its own. While he takes radical risks in language, thought and structure, the poetry achieves seemingly stunningly simple and often powerfully direct effects.

Many of Warren’s later poems are remarkable for the quality of their last lines. They are unanticipated yet just and engaging, sometimes overwhelmingly effective and memorable. The sound, rhythm
and reason of these last lines remain in our minds long after reading and the immediate memory. Just the quoting of a few lines from his poems, does not bring out the meaning of the memorable lines because they must be taken out and understood in context, and by context is meant not only the poem of which the last line or lines are a part, but also the sequence of which the poem is a part; the volume of which the sequence is a part and the total body of Warren’s poetry of which any one volume is a part. The principle of inter-relatedness functions as the major formal and technical aspect of his later poetry as well as a major semantic dimension of his sacramental vision and the sub central themes of time, self, responsibility, love, death, rebirth and joy.

Since the publication in 1942 of *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme*, Warren has written in groups of poems, increasingly so from *Promises* onwards, as just a glance at the Table of Contents in the *Selected Poems 1923-1975* readily indicates. Not only the grouping and repetitions of subjects and themes but also full sequences with the recurrence of certain words and images add to the sense of continuity and integration. *Audobon:*
A Vision, reads as a single long poem, composed of a number of shorter poems. And in its forward, Warren has said exactly that about Or Else Poems:

This book is conceived as a single poem, composed of a number of shorter poems or sections or chapters. Simplifying slightly, or else, preoccupied with remembrance of things past, Time is the mirror into which you stare. 7

The poems begin in summer, progress soon thereafter from very frequent images of snow to thaw, and near the end of the book, from death to rebirth, from parent to self to son and blessedness:

For what blessings may a man hope for but
An immortality in
The loving vigilance of death?"
From uncertainty about the self,
Is this really me? *

In rediscovery of the self, the 'words', and 'dream' and 'see', keep reappearing, often associated with the past, the imagination and sacramental vision. Images of mountains and stars especially abound in this volume. They do so in *Can I See Arcaturus From Where I Stand?* also. In this volume, eight of the ten poems are star-lit or night-set. He employs a number of other means for indicating inter-relatedness both within and between sequences and volumes. For example, in the later poetry, he vastly increases the number of run-on lines, not only from line to line, but also between stanzas, sections and even whole poems within a sequence. Tale of Time, which asserts 'To know is, always, all,' has one poem in the title sequence that ends with the question 'What is love?'. The next poem concludes, 'You have not answered my question.' The answer, or rather, one answer comes two volumes later, in *Audobon: A Vision*, in the poem "Love and Knowledge", which tells us about the birds Audobon painted:

He put them where they are, and
there we see them;
In our imagination.

And then the poem concludes:

What is love?

Our name for it is knowledge. *

Knowledge here is Audobon’s loving, creative, imaginative apprehension and rendering of his bird’s and perhaps also the viewers’, that is, ‘our’ imaginative perception.

Warren’s poetry brings forth an intense desire for seeing total reality with final certainty. His is a poetry of vision. Though his unrelenting cravings for the absolute, a thing impossible to satisfy, may by rejected for lack of proof, they can never be dismissed as trivial. It is the obsession for the unattainable that has marked him out from his fellow contemporary writers. The death imagery in Section III of *Kentucky Mountain Farm* is delicately beautiful. Untimely death is depicted by the

print of 'hound's black paw' on the new grass May. The
'laurel' symbolising the human frame and 'sycamore',
likened to a naked body, being flooded out to sea, takes
on the image of the human body submitting to the
deliciousness of death in the rush of time's water to the
ocean of eternity:

Think how a body, naked and lean
And white as the splintered sycamore would go
Tumbling and turning, hushed in the end,
With hair afloat in waters that gently bend
To ocean where the tides flow.

In this poem, the 'ocean where 'the bend
tides flow' suggests the impersonal nature of the spirit
of the absolute deeps and the 'hushed' state of the body
'in waters that gently bend' represents the submissive
and yielding characteristics of the soul's desire for

Robert Penn Warren: New and Selected Poems 1923-1985
Selected Poems 1923-1943: Kentucky Mountain Farm. Random
House, New York, 1985, p.316. In future all textual
references shall be to this edition and only the page
number shall be indicated in parentheses.
death as the only means of peace and redemption from a life of sin. In contrast to the submissive human body, Warren employs the Cardinal in Section IV to represent the unsubdued spirit that does not share the death wish of the human body. It does not wish to merge itself with its surroundings as the body merged itself with the waters. Its acceptance of life as imparted by the spirits of the deeps enables the Cardinal to live untroubled in the world of death and time. These two opposing wishes and synthesising of such opposing polarities constitute a major part of Warren's art and vision.

In its spontaneous joy of life, the Cardinal makes a striking contrast to the lizard in this poem, who, described in ironic imagery of orthodox religion, ie, devout as an ikon having an altar, blends fearfully into his background and so disappears:

What if the lizard, my Cardinal,
Depart like a breath from
its altar, summer southward fail?
Here is a bough where you can
perch, and preen... (p.317)

Such use of animal imagery shows the poet's essential
humility. Warren's concept of Nature is oneness as is apparent in *The Ballad of Billie Potts, Promises, You, the Emperors and Others* and elsewhere. He accords every creature its inviolable importance and sanctity of self and says clearly that man is only a part of nature and not the sole questioner of the mystery of life.

In Warren's later poems, the sense of human limitation is as strong as in his early poems, but the sense of the possibilities of joy and blessedness is somewhat greater. His poems point to the progress toward the joyous and blessed experience in which lies the perfect repose of silence.

Silence is timelessness, gives forth Time, and receives it again. *

Warren continues with the prayer:

*Forgive us—oh, give us!—our joy.* (p.79)

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And writes this one subsequent statement, among many, on rebirth:

There comes a time for us all when we want to begin a new life.
And near the end of the volume, the lines
"Light rises.... All, all
Is here, no other where.
The heart in this silence beats. (p. 84)

Or Else Poems contains a poem, "Interjection #8", that describes the ubiquitous and 'unsleeping principle of delight'. Audobon concludes with the perfect stillness of Audobon and the petition:
'Tell me a story of deep delight.' And Tale of Time ends with a sequence of poems entitled, "Delight." Warren's poetry, like much poetry of other great and important poets, begins in pain, makes its progress through darkness to death, and then, perfectly aware of the often inflexible violence and suffering that human beings are heir to, through their earned and integrated vision, ends in rebirth, truth, selfhood, joy and redemption.
References


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