Preface

My thesis titled "Rejection of Some Underlying Values of Human Existence: The Path to Redemption in the Poems of Robert Penn Warren", comprises six chapters. Chapter I probes into Robert Penn Warren, the man as an artist and the social milieu of his Times, when the Americans were preoccupied with America as the French were preoccupied with France and the Russians with Russia. American Literature evolved into an immense panorama of futility and anarchy. At that time, it was considered that the difference between poetry and prose was that poetry helps define that strange zone of imagination, and prose the emotions. Poetry liberates the words from their emotions and prose confirms them in it. Warren's poetry is full of metrical alterations from smooth to harsh and from light to loose lines. Lines from the powerful early poem on the death of his mother, The Return: An Elegy, illustrates some of these characteristics.
Warren's contemporary writers accept the world rather than invent it. They were not much given to fantasy, were not in the habit of questioning the assumed relationships between the narrator and the narrative, and in fact, did not question the nature of fiction itself. They usually wrote and depicted incidents as per the old rules and accepted norms of literature. Two themes are very distinct in Warren's works - the need for self-fulfilment to be achieved only through self-recognition, and the inevitability of contamination by the world when one steps out of the prison of the 'self'.

Chapter II deals with Robert Penn Warren's quest for identity. As a Southerner and a Formalist, Robert Penn Warren's writings pertain to the critic as well as a novelist and a poet with philosophical and intellectual biases - the literature of irony and ambiguity and the search for self-knowledge. The search for self-knowledge and historical identity is nowhere more clearly perceived than in The Ballad to Billie Potts. The subject of The Ballad of Billie Potts is drawn from the folk history of Warren's home country - a story, "he heard as a child from an elderly relative." Perhaps
Warren comes straight to point regarding his belief, that MAN must, per force, face his past before he can find peace and redemption. His poems, like the poems of great poets, begin in pain, progress through darkness, to death, perfectly aware of the often inexplicable violence and suffering that human flesh is an heir to its earned and integrated vision. His poems, in general, end on the note of rebirth, truth, selfhood and even joy: a progress quite evident in *The Ballad of Billie Potts* as young Billie has to scamper in pain and fear to the wild West where he is tempered in the forge of human reality. Warren’s handling of the folk rhythm, especially, in the narrative sections of *The Ballad of Billie Potts*, gives the poem a distinctive tinge of southern dialect which made him come closer to his subject, writing without any suggestion of Negro dialect that would brand it to represent a particular colour or race. Of the poets with whom Warren is most commonly linked, Warren is at once, and paradoxically, the most liberal and pragmatic in ideas and attitudes, and the most traditional in choosing to work within traditions developed by his predecessors.
rather than the French Symbolists or the English Metaphysicals.

Chapter III is my scrutiny into Warren’s conception of the Original Sin. Much of his poetry was inspired by John Donne and other English Metaphysicals, including T.S. Eliot. The influence of Eliot is especially seen in the method as well as the content in many of his poems, especially the early ones, as quite apparent in *The Return: An Elegy*. Much of Warren’s poetry deals with the loss of innocence and the desire for its restoration, as evident in his *Or Else Poems: Poems 1968-74*. It occurs as the result of worldly evils in “Rattle Snake Country”, as an experience with death in “Small White House” - all indicating innocence recaptured. In Warren’s universe, as in “Reading Late at Night”, or theological understanding of the Original Sin as in the loss of innocence is an awakening of the spirit to the mysterious force of life, death, good and evil. There are specific similarities between Jung and Warren. Jung’s view, that imitations of an immortality depends upon an undiscovered ‘self’, has a great deal of relevance to *Brother to Dragons*, when the ‘Unconscious
Self' appears as minotaurs, serpents, catfish and Lilburn Lewis. The use of the word "shadow" also indicates a subconscious and unrecognised guilt in the psyche.

Warren's poems start by assuming that there is a real, and not just apparent "problem of evil" as well as a "problem of guilt". The problem of evil is the philosophers' and theologians' term for what is also called the "problem of pain". This means the problem of unmerited suffering. Suffering, in the nature of things, becomes a "problem", when we think of nature as teleological, or in other words, gives explanation of events by the purpose they serve. As to the problem of guilt, Warren answers with the idea of complicity. We have all wished more evil than we have been able to do. The Original Sin is about the personal past and the past behind the personal past and the problems it creates in the living world. Osmosis of Being is also articulated in most of Warren's creative writing, usually implicitly, as when a character in "Promises", is awakened to the poem's highest promise. The central importance of Osmosis of Being in Warren's work is seen in connection with his predominant theme of identity or self.
definition. And, this kind of osmosis is the final answer to the problem of identity, and indeed, the only answer in the world, as Warren sees it. His concept of osmosis has moral, metaphysical and psychological ramifications. It is his contribution to the modern religious thought. Osmosis in Warren’s work, can be defined under three dimensions: psychological, social and metaphysical. Warren feels that the Freudian id or Jungian shadow which is mainly what he is trying to get at, in his recurrent motif of Original Sin - the darker, more bestial part of the psyche denied its place in reality. Warren saw this discovery of a beast within the self as a basic structure in his work. If Warren’s fiction hints at a beast - a darker being or pollution of the ‘Original Sin’ within the self, his poetry describes it much more explicitly. The immediate price of osmosis is humility, seriously considered, and is not easy to come by. And, the ultimate price is death: a permanent consignment of self to the oneness of Time and Flesh.

In Chapter IV, I have endeavoured to formulate my views on Robert Penn Warren’s metaphysics. He insisted that it is much better to be part of the
Universe, where life is eternal than in the crumpled world of sin and crime. He assumes that there is a real and not just apparent problem of evil as well as guilt. The problem of evil is the theologians' for it may also be called the problem of pain, which means the problem of unmerited suffering - suffering that seems to be built into the nature of things when we think of nature as teleological, explainable in terms of the events by the purpose they serve. As to the problem of guilt, Warren believes that we have all wished more evil than we have been able to do.

Warren's later works, as measurement of his development, have two motifs that he treats during this period with great irony - "from evil bloometh good", and "we learn some strength from this (kiss)" - he later treats with outmost seriousness. "Ransom", like "Letter from a Coward to a Hero", seems to have been occasioned by news of International Bloodshed. In his Thirty-Six Poems, Warren makes no bones about his standing in relation to the bleak (outward) abyss of nature. He feels anguished over death.
A host of Warren's characters harbour disordered desires because of innate depravity and the 'taint in the bloodstream' - a propensity to evil, which Warren calls by its theological name, 'Original Sin'. Man is the only living being capable of questioning and seeking further knowledge. Perhaps, Warren is speculating that the victim often really gets what he wants. He implies that love and Nature are synonymous. Throughout his writing, Warren has repeatedly indicated that Man is capable of certain human values, of which virtue and self-sacrifice are what the soul is best capable of. However, he also insists that self-sacrifice is only a means to virtue and glory. It is in man's nature to sin. It is also in man's nature to seek self-knowledge and realisation.

In chapter V, I have attempted to bring out Warren's critical canons and poetics. His poetry is full of paradoxes, dense with specific images of the world's body. There is irony in his poems, but more often than not, the irony is directed at the poet himself. His poetry is an intermixture of the colloquial, easy, assured, humorous and serious in rapid shifts, much
between the folk and the metaphysical. For Warren, a poem is an organic system of relationships and 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 organisation – the structure of the poem. Many years ago he opposed the 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." He makes use of the light imagery and the themes of the sacramental vision and imagination, though he often substitutes the starlight for the moonlight in his later poetry. His concept of Imagination is precisely Coleridgean. 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 Imagination creates the world and the 'self'. The Secondary Imagination is the value creating capacity.
The need of finding Truth to live by is related to Warren's pervasive theme of the need for self-definition. The ultimate symbolicisms of Warren's poetry, as of all religious language, is the mystic or transcendental or peak experience clearly evidenced in the sacramental vision and the principle of interrelatedness of the more recent poems of *Tale of Time: New Poems 1960-1966, Incarnations: Poems 1966-1974* and *Can I see Arcturus From Where I Stand?* These volumes as well as the ten new poem 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. His later poetry is intellectual without being intellectualised - as the ideas are purposely substituted for images. Many of his 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. His is a poetry of vision. The use of animal imagery shows the poet'
essential humility. His 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 insists that MAN is only a part of Nature and not the sole questioner of the mystery of life.

Chapter VI, A Summing Up, synthesises the arguments carried out in the preceding chapters. Warren was a poet, a class in himself – a great poet whose poetry begins in pain, progresses through darkness to death, and ends in rebirth, truth, selfhood, joy and redemption.
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