CHAPTER – II

HIS QUEST FOR IDENTITY
"As a Southerner and a Formalist, Robert Penn Warren's writing is that of the critic as well as a novelist and a poet. His work is philosophical and intellectual. It is the literature of irony and ambiguity and the search for self-knowledge.\(^1\) His search for self-knowledge and historical identity is nowhere more clearly perceived than in one of his highly acclaimed long poems, \textit{The Ballad to Billie Potts}.

The subject of \textit{The Ballad of Billie Potts} is drawn from the folk history of Warren's home country - a story, he tells us in the head notes, "he heard as a child from an elderly relative."\(^2\) In the early nineteenth century, as the story goes, Billie Potts keeps a frontier inn in the section of Western Kentucky, between the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. He offers hospitality to travellers and then shows them down the trail where his accomplice lies in ambush, waiting to rob and murder them. Billie Potts's son, Little Billie, sent to apprise one of his father's accomplices of the approach of an affluent traveller, attempts to kill the man all by himself, only to be beaten to the draw and wounded. Little Billie then quarrels with his parents, journeys to the West and after:
ten years, returns to the old home. He is now wealthy and
complacent. He-withholds his identity from his parents in
order to "tease 'em up and fun 'em." However, Little Billie
is brutally murdered by his father who mistakes him for a
rich stranger.

Little Billie had escaped to the West, only to
return to the past homeland. Warren wants to convey that
there is no more escape from the past or the present, than
there is an escape from the 'self', for the two are
inseparable. What I feel is that Warren wants to say, that
like Little Billie Potts, modern man, must retrace the path
that he has tread, even though in seeking the source of his
life, he might, ironically, find death. The man who cannot
remember his past, is doomed to repeat it.

The Ballad of Billie Potts is a typical
instance of what had been Warren's tendency in his earlier
poetry, to mingle high and low styles and to mix up elegant
language with vulgar colloquialism. He uses one of the
oldest forms of literature - the ballad, to recount one of
the oldest themes: the relationship between father and son
or the complexities between the generations. The fact that
Little Billie’s search for identity leads him back to his father, brings to the fore religious and psychological implications. Warren has used this methodology time and again in his work. The coming to terms with a father or father-figure, is perhaps Warren’s most dominant recurrent pattern.

Little Billie’s return to his father, especially when he considers his father to be 'evil and ignorant and old', resembles the search of conscious ego for its shadow, the unknown deeper self.

Although Warren sets the story in the frontier country of America, he evokes the image of ancient times when man was in the frontier land of civilisation, by establishing his setting, 'in the land between the rivers', i.e., the Tennessee and the Cumberland Rivers or the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. Mesopotamia has long been regarded in Semantic Myths, including the Garden of Eden, as the birthplace of mankind. There is a hint, in Line two of the poem, of this origin and the result of the myth that he is creating - in terms of the New World innocence and its Fall. The importance of the phrase 'the land between the rivers', is indicated by the fact that it becomes the
recurrent refrain throughout the ballad. It brings forth the watery imagery that later emerges predominant in the poem.

In the first stanza, Big Billie Potts, an American version of Adam—already fallen, evil, ignorant and old,—but not yet aware of the tragedy that his sin will bring to his posterity—is described in uncouth and colloquial language:

His gut stuck out
Like a croker of nubbins *

Big Billie's wife has also got mythical tones. Although she may lack the grace and dignity of the first Eve, she has the same womanly cleverness as the original:

By the fire her eyes worked slow and narrow
Like a cat,
Clever with eyes like a cat . . . .
Nobody knew what was in her head. (p.287)

The comparison to Eve becomes even more clear when we see that it is the woman who instigates the murder of their disguised son:

And the old woman gave the old man a straight look. She gave him the bucket but it was not empty, but it was not water. (p. 296)

In the third stanza, Little Billie Potts, the offspring of the Senior Pottses is described as a vulnerable adolescent innocent:

And a whicker when he laughed. Where his father has a better . . . . He was their darling. The setting is ominously set. The fetid bottoms . . . . Where no sun comes, the muskrat's astute face Was lifted to the yammering jay; then dropped. (p. 296)

The ominousness of the setting becomes particularly clear when it forms the background of Billie 'cramped at the swamp-edge', as he prepares for his initiation into his father's villainy.
In stanza four, we realise that Warren establishes the Time perspective of a time in the past that is under the scrutiny of a narrator in the present. This is especially clear from stanzas 7, 8, 9, and 10. Warren tells about a little incident from the past – the waylaying of a traveller:

He was already as good as dead,  
For at midnight the message had been sent ahead:  
'Man in black coat, riding bay mare with star  
(p. 289)

in a focus, suggesting some ultimate significance of the crime: some untraceable origin of it in time past and some incalculable implications throughout time in the future. So Warren says, with respect to time:

There was a beginning but you cannot see it.  
There will be an end but you cannot see it.  
(p. 289)

Little Billie Potts's death does not simply fix the blame of the death upon its immediate perpetrator. Nor does it concern itself only with violence in death. What Warren wants to trace is the ultimate source of evil in man. It is not just the murder of Little Billie. It is a
weakness recurring in successive generations, with Little Billie re-enacting his father's sin, who himself must have learnt a few things from his father and he himself from his father. And thus progressed each generation, moulding the next in its own imperfect image. The beginning or original sin or violation of moral order must date backward to the beginning of time or infancy of mankind. That is why he says: "There was a beginning but you cannot see it." (p. 289)

I feel that Warren is of the opinion that the ultimate consequence of man's failure is somewhere in the future somewhere beyond the views of modern man. To quote Warren: "There will be an end but you cannot see it." (p.289)

Antiquity cannot easily be reconstructed in toto. And there is no need, says Warren since man's existence is important as far as his conscious life is capable of discerning the horizon - in the event that man's life is important at all.

Considering tragic events of the past and analysing how circumstances have conspired for the
happening of the tragedy, is futile and less than useless, or just post-mortem. The people of the past could not see their future destiny, as they can be seen now, in the present. That is why man has to stand by helplessly, watching as if through glass, the events leading to the calamity. So, in Warren's work, self-knowledge comes too late, when tragedy has already taken place. That is why, in stanza 9, Warren describes the immobility and unchangeableness of the past, because people are "Beyond your call or question now, they move." (p.289). These people of the past who carried the burden of their destiny on their shoulders, like asses, were unaware of the significance of their burden and had no way of changing it. In stanza 10, Warren contends, "And the testicles of the fathers hang down like old lace." (p.289) The word 'testicles' suggests the carnal transmission of life in its imperfect stage like hanging lace, from the past to the present. That is why, instead of alerting his father's henchmen to commit the killing of the travellers, Little Billie decides to do the job himself as the father's villainy must be transmitted to the son. So, Little Billie awaits the unwary traveller, thinking all the while, now
proud his pap would be of him and how glad his 'mamy' would be to know what a 'thriving boy they had'. It is in this way that Little Billie is transported from an innocent little boy to a knowledgeable person. The transition is made very smoothly, from the innocent vegetable image, leaf, to an impending guilt, or crouching animal, with the reader undecided as to which is the real identity, the past or the future? Which are you?:

Land of the innocent bough, land of the leaf,
Think of your face green in the submarine light of the leaf.
Or think of yourself crouched at the swamp edge,

Think of yourself at dawn: Which are you?
What? (p. 290)

There is no external change in Little Billie so the stranger recognises him and calls out to him "Little Billie". However, Warren explains that the stranger is quick to note the change in Billie's inner character and, is prepared for Billie's moral degeneration, which has shown itself for the first time:
Just watching Little Billie and smiling and humming
But he must have had eyes in the side of his head
And when Billie said, "Mister I’ve brung hit to you,"
And reached his hand for it down in his britches,
The stranger just reached his own hand too...

(p.291)

Because of his failure, Little Billie has to leave town forthwith. While he is away, he acquires a new identity. He becomes rich and powerful. Yet, he is dissatisfied. Something pulls him back to his past. He is compelled by some unknown force to retrace his footsteps. He attains knowledge of his identity by going back into the past. And so, after trying to hide his identity in the innocent land of the West, he returns to the place of his origin. "Little Billie, like most of Warren’s protagonists, seeks psychological integrity by confrontation, exploitation and acceptance of the past. It is clear that Warren does not mean that mere passage of time will purge
or conceal guilt. Little Billie’s life is a testimony of the inescapability from time and history."^3

It is at this point of the ballad, I feel, that Warren comes straight to the point regarding his belief, that man must, per force, face his past before he can find peace and redemption. Little Billie returns, inevitably, as he must, to his father’s country, to his place of birth. He looks different now from the snivelling boy who fled with pee in his pants and snot in his nose, into the wild country. He is a man now with a big black beard, growing down to his guts ... “And a look in his eyes like he owned the Earth.”(p.293) He has gained prudence and knowledge of the world and he has achieved that measure of success that identifies and distinguishes a man in the eyes of the world:

Fer I bin out West and taken my share
And I reckin my luck helt out for fair.
(p. 294)

At the end of the poem, Billie’s luck eludes him and he encompasses more than his success in competing with the world. But for now, his ‘luck’ distinguishes him from his destitute parents. Joe Drew, a childhood acquaintance of Billie speaks to him about this luck:
Billie's tragic awareness operates on two levels. On the surface level, it is his changed appearance that leads his parents to unwittingly murder their own son. And on the deeper, psychological level, it is his search for total identity that brings him home to die.

The Pottses learn who their victim was through Joe Drew. The fatalism of life is clearly brought out in the lines where Little Billie stops Drew from telling his parents who he is, 'too early':

But after your supper why don't you come
But not too early fer hit's my aim
To git some fun 'fore they know my name,
And tease 'em and fun 'em, fer you never guess
I was Little Billie what went out West."

(p. 294)

How fatal was the delay! Yet, how inevitable. This is where Warren gives evidence of his deep knowledge of the need of man to find out his history. Without his ultimate sacrifice, how could he have redeemed himself as well as his parents! Warren then goes on to describe the
motives that made Billie return home - that bring all men home in one way or the other. Though Billie does not appear to be, outwardly, a spiritual person, but it is a spiritual compulsion that brings him back home after ten years of running away from his past. The theme of the poem deals with the inescapable values that even relatively bestial people live by:

Drawn out of distance, ... You come back.
For there is no place like home. (pp. 294-295)

Home is the place of one's full growth. It is the place to which one hastens when one realises that the daily existence and activities in the world in which one lives, does not include one's real essence:

Though your luck held and the market was always satisfactory,
Though your letters always came and your lovers were always true
Though your hand never failed of its cunning
And your glands always thoroughly knew of their business,
Though your conscious was easy and You were assured of their innocence,
You became gradually aware that something was missing from the picture,
And upon closer inspection exclaimed,

"Why I'm not in it at all!" (p. 295)

One begins to seek self-definition, a knowledge of what is Man and his destiny, when one becomes aware of the passage of time for ultimately one must seek one's identity and come face to face with reality. As the narrative in the poem reaches its climax, it is noted that the three main characters, i.e., the father, mother and son, have remained exactly true to character all these years. The son has maintained a false identity so long that he cannot resist deceiving the folks a little longer. The father is still the treacherous rascal he was when he was last seen though perhaps a little less prosperous, since Billie's escaping to the West as all the 'lak' had been taken away by him. The mother remains the Eve-like instigator of the crime against her progeny:

"I figgered he was a ripe 'un ",
the old man said.

"Yeah, but you wouldn't done
muthen had'nt been for me", the
old woman said. (p. 296)

It is at this point that I find the water imagery, representing time and identity, at its apex. It is
Little Billie’s request for fresh water that brings him down to the spring, to the water of remembrance. Pap, being instigated by ‘Mamy’, follows him with the bucket and heads down to ‘the spring in dark of the trees’. The mood is death like and the night birds, owls and whippoorwill, are singing, and the water is still and black as ink. The single star blinking in the water is reminiscent of the “Time’s unwinking eye” under which Little Billie began his journey ten years ago. Just before his death, the star winks out. Time is transformed into eternity. Billie takes a drink of water and has a glimpse of his face, the identity that he had come seeking, before his father’s axe cuts his head off.

Ironically, Big Billie had taught him to “Just help yourself. Then set the hatchet in his head”.

Big Billie has typically followed his own advice:

The next time you try and pull a trick, For God’s sake don’t talk but do it quick (p.292)

And looking into the dusk and dimness of the water, Little Billie realises that he had lost his identity a long time ago, ‘when childlike, you lost it’,
in some ancient period representing the youth and innocence of man. What Warren implies is that our real identity and knowledge of self still exists from the primeval time, waiting only to be discovered by the man who seeks it.

But Little Billie Potts never realises this communion. He is something like the prodigal son in the Bible:

You came ...Worn with your wanderer's wife,
Weary of innocence and the husks of Time,
You come, back to the homeland of no-Time.
(p.299)

Little Billie has indeed returned to his homeland of No-Time or the eternity that produced him. But, Billie's is an Original Sin. And, he has done nothing to redeem himself from his villainous life. Originally, man is responsible for his plight. No external force, but a human arm, his own father's, has murdered him. Even in this incident, the responsibility is divided between the father and son - Big Billie, universal creature and Little Billie, himself, for it was Little Billie's final deception after years of refusing
to divulge his identity for fear of retribution, and refusal to divulge it immediately, that led to his death.

Warren favours the orthodox Christian view: he feels that man must accept his responsibility for the past before he can really know himself. He says that whether we recognise our darker nature or not, evil will ultimately force knowledge of its presence upon us. "Just as the death of Jesus projected human guilt as well as offered human absolution, Little Billie's death suddenly made his parents aware of their darkling nature, even while their love for Billie showed what redemption is for man." Mankind, like all other living creatures, is stirred by a deep urge for identity, for purpose, for home, for final destiny. But, man, having reason, encounters the additional problem of knowledge. It is not sufficient for him to journey unconsciously to his place of origin. He must know why his life has the pattern it has. For mankind the quest has tragic implications, as is evident from the death of Billie Potts. This shows that in many ways, that the beginning of our quest is the beginning of death.
In the last scene where the son kneels down to his father, in the evening desk, there is, despite the ruin and despite the encroaching dark, a hint of redemption. And, in his return home, there, at last, man's identity is finally established. Or perhaps, the end may just be the dawn after the darkness. The hatchet blow from the father - his gift of death - may yet have positive value after all:

_For the beginning is death_

_and the end may be life._

_And the father waits for the son._ (p.300)

_The Ballad of Billie Potts_ is the triumph of Warren's new voice and manner, and is one of the finest long poems in American Literature. The mystique overtones in its tale of another Fall, enacted in another 'land between the rivers' are only suggestive and played down by the poet's introductory remark: When I was a child I heard this story from an old lady. . .'(p. 289) and countered by the tone, both of the narrative itself and the inserted authorial meditations on the action.
The poem consists of two distinct parts. The folk legend itself and an enclosed, separate commentary, represented by the 'I', set off by parentheses. The speaker is the poet himself, who interrupts his narration from time to time, to speculate on its meaning. The narrative tells of the murder of Little Billie, by his parents, who did not know whom it was they were killing. The past is vividly present in the narrative portion, as little distant from us as the poet's art can make it. In the parenthetical commentaries the past recedes into the background while the present takes place in the foreground. Imaginative identification is broken as the tale is acknowledged as remote, legendary, literally an old woman's tale, containing motives and meanings we can partially understand and partially imagine. Although Ransom and other New Critics have thought that the formal unity of the poem is damaged by these breaks in the narrative through which the poet enters his own poem to address the reader directly, I cannot but feel that it is these explanations by the poet, through the 'I', that brings the past so close to
The poem's subject is man trying to discover his identity, and so to understand his destiny, by defining the nature of his guilt and his innocence. "Billie Potts is an exercise in moral philosophy, executed in a form, alternately narrative and meditative or discursive. In this poem, Warren has created a new form, involving a double focus, alternately bringing history close by imaginative identification, in the narrative parts, and then holding it at a distance so that it may be understood in the mind, in the discursive parts." 5

Between the narrative parts which involve the reader directly, with an immediate and unselfconscious identification, and the discursive parts, that turn the reader back upon himself, asking him to ponder over what he is reading and why he has been identifying himself with the characters in the poem. On close study one can find between the verses in parentheses and those outside, all kinds of linkages. For example, the following passage of the poem begins with
the ‘I’ of the poem, commenting upon the remoteness in time, culture and conditions of his own characters, and ends with his return to his narrative. The contrast is striking, but, at the same time, an identity is suggested:

Little Billie was full of piss and vinegar
And full of sap as a maple tree

(p. 289)

The Ballad of Billie Potts makes really clear for the first time Warren’s role as a bridging figure between the Fugitives and the more persistent and rooted Romantic and Transcendental tradition of Emerson, Whitman, Lindsay, Hart Crane and Cummings. Though the story he tells us in the poem reminds us of the archetype of the Fall, the ‘Original Sin’ constantly reenacted by the generations and so of the orthodoxy of Ramson and Tate, and before that, of Eliot, the poem ends in hope, not in resignation. This poem gives me the feeling that it is not our guilt that needs definition. For Warren, it appears to be obvious enough. It is our ‘innocence’ that needs, at least in this century, a new definition:
For the beginning is death
and the end may be life,
And the father waits for the son. (p. 300)

Brother to Dragons is a reworking and expansion of The Ballad of Billie Potts, in both theme and form. The chief difference is that Warren's comments no longer form a separate poem within the poem. Instead, Warren himself, in his own person, as R.P.W., becomes one of the characters in his own tale. His commitment to his characters as well as his art, now become one. In effect, the form of the poem says, art is a process of self-discovery and self realisation, in which man and artist cannot be separated. The form applied in Brother to Dragons, brings forth the artist's double responsibility to his art and to himself as a person.

As in The Ballad of Billie Potts, and most of his novels, the central action of his poem is violent and terrible. In Brother to Dragons, Warren retells a story, which actually happened, of how Jefferson's nephew, living in the 'unspoiled west', among what ought to have been, from the Adamic point of view, the purifying and exalting influences of Nature, brutally
murdered a slave for a trivial offence. Warren departs from history only in the imagination of motives and to imagine the effect it might have on Jefferson's thinking.

In *The Ballad of Billie Potts*, as in *Brother to Dragons*, the real concern, despite the horror of the incident, is not with illustrating man's 'guilt'. Warren simply takes it for granted that we are all guilty and involved in each other's guilt. What the poem tries to discover, as the poet tells us at the end, is an inadequate definition of the word 'glory' involved in the human effort.

In Warren's "Sacramental Vision", a man in Time cannot see the end; cannot know until he is out of time. But, another edge of the irony is that a man can be redeemed only in Time. The poem remarks that the innocence associated by Warren with childhood was lost a long time ago and it concludes with the image of 'You, wanderer':

To kneel in the sacramental silence of evening
At the feet of the old man
Who is evil and ignorant and old,
To kneel . . . .
Which is your luck. (p.300)

Warren affirms the need for a new innocence, but again he does not attempt a definition. There are only hints and guesses. His recollections of his childhood in Kentucky during the early years of the century, help him to give thematic continuity to the poem’s quest for self-discovery, contemporary childhood, contrasting and interacting childhood and an interesting range of personal feelings with historical and universal implications. The need of finding ‘Truth’, to be lived by is related to Warren’s pervasive theme of the need for self-definition. He who discovered and defined himself in finding the Truth by which to live an integrated life, can face ‘The awful responsibility of Time’.

Warren’s poems, like the poems of many other great poets, begins in pain, progresses through darkness to death, perfectly aware of the often inexplicable violence and suffering that human flesh is heir to. Through its earned and integrated vision, the poems in general end on the note of rebirth, truth, selfhood and even joy. It is a progress that is
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. Once he has created a world for himself, his need of finding 'truth' and 'self', pulls him back to his origin where he is murdered by his own unknowing parents - his mysterious and sinful heritage. He is reborn through his freedom from this sinful world where he discovers the true meaning of self and eternal joy.

Billie is a young man who goes West to become a different man. He gets redeemed. He prospers in the West and decides to come back, in search of his identity. He must come back. Something calls him back. He doesn't know why he wants to come back to his true human father. He dies by his own father and by his own blood and name. When his father kills him, he accepts from his father's hand the natural gift. He is a sacrifice. He has performed the human cycle.

Warren's handling of the folk rhythm, especially, in the narrative sections of *The Ballad of Billie Potts*, gave the poem a distinctive tinge of
southern dialect which made him come closer to his subject, writing without any suggestion of Negro dialect
and would brand it to represent a particular colour or race. If one had never read any of Warren's verse and
knew him only as the third member of the Ransom-Tate-
Warren trio, a Vanderbilt man, contributor to _I'll Take
My Stand_, and Co-author of the influential critical
textbook, _Understanding Poetry_, he might be surprised by
_The Ballad of Billie Potts_, which has behind it the works
of Lindsay, Mark Twain, and J.R. Lowell. 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 earlier
American writers, rather than the French Symbolists or
the English Metaphysicals.
References


