CHAPTER- III

HIS CONCEPT OF THE ORIGINAL SIN
One of the most transparent concepts of Warren's poetry is his concern with the Christian concept of Original Sin. In his essay, "Inklings of Original Sin," John Crowe Ransom defines it as "the betrayal of our original nature that we commit in the interest of our evolution and progress". A.L. Clement describes it as "the darkness in the very nature of man, the partially fixed and inherited capacity for evil and irrationality." Victor Strandberg sees Original Sin as the "separation of a conscious self from its Freudian id or Jungian shadow." L.H. Moore associates it with "the violence and irrationality manifest in history." Most critics agree, however, that Warren sees it as the inescapable and ineradicable potentiality in human nature, making human beings "capable of any evil" and rendering them and their institutions imperfect and unperfectable.

Much of Warren's 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. It is quite apparent in *The Return: An Elegy*, Eliot's cryptic humour in *The Waste*
Land, about mass culture, such as 'o o o o that’s Shakespearean Rag' is paralleled by Warren’s sarcasm towards the concept of time:

Turn backward, turn backward in your flight
And make me a child again just for tonight
Good Lord he’s wet the bed. Come bring a light. *

The humour depicted in the poem is Warren’s way of saying that such an escapist view of time is equivalent to wetting the bed, like going back to the days of infancy. A more significant influence is seen near the end of the poem. The speaker’s grief over his mother’s death and his seeking in vain some spiritual sustenance in order to bless her is reminiscent of Eliot’s seeking to lift the curse in The Waste Land:

If there were water . . .
But there is no water. *


In future all textual reference shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
Warren says:

Honour thy father and mother in the days of thy youth  
For time uncoils like the cottonmouth.  
Could I stretch forth like God the hand and gather  
For you my mother  
If I could pluck  
Against the dry essential of tomorrow  
To lay upon the breast that gave me suck  
Out of the dark and swollen orchid of this sorrow (p.313)

The imagery, the rhythm, the Biblical illusion and the theme of the anguished spirit are evidently Eliotian and Waste Landian. Still, there is much Warzenian also, especially the animal image of time being compared to a cottonmouth, that gives an insight into Warren's future development into a thinker who will most probably state - from evil can come the possibility of human good - as he has actually done in such works as

**Brother to Dragons : A Tale in Verse and Voices, The Ballad of Billie Potts** and his other later poems.

Eliot's influence can also be seen in

**Kentucky Mountain Farm**, especially in the partitioning of the poem into seven sections, each with its own title and
Roman Numerals and also some of the imagery. In the first Section of Kentucky Mountain Farm, i.e., "The Rebuke of the Rocks", there are definite echoes of The Waste Land. Eliot began with the ironic renewal of life:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land.  

Kentucky Mountain Farm begins with the rocks secure in their "sweet sterility", observing with irony the springtime rejuvenation of plant and animal life:

Now on you is the hungry equinox,
O little stubborn people of the hill,
The season of the obscene moon whose pull
Disturbs the sod, the rabbit, the lank fox,
Moving the waters and the boar's dull blood
And the acrid sap of ironwood. *

* Robert Penn Warren: New and Selected Poems 1923-1985:
p.315. In future all textual reference shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
Being lifeless, the rock is happily secure
over its advantage over the living side of Nature which
is trapped in an endless cycle of reproduction and death
as the ‘obscene moon’ dictates; secure in the belief that
it has not only survived but has become permanent
in form. It triumphantly warns living Nature to give up
its futile reproductive cycle and become like the stone:

Then quit yourselves as stones and cease
To break the weary stubble-field for seed;
Let not the naked cattle-bear increase,
Let barley wither and the bright milkweed.
This image is carried over to beings also;
Instruct the heart, lean men, of a rocky place
That even the little flesh and fevered bone
May keep the sweet sterility of stone. (P.315)

As may be deducted, the phallic
connotations of the “little flesh and fevered bone”, is
another influence from The Waste Land Surprisingly,
though, in Section II, entitled, “At the Hour of the
Breaking of the Rocks”, the rocks receive their own final
rebuke. Here even the seemingly ageless, changeless rocks
are subjected to the immutable laws of change and
destruction. They too are broken into “fractured atoms”
and cast into the deeps of eternity by the very “fron
men' and 'lesser creatures' to whom they had been giving
only a short while ago:

The hills are weary, the lean men have passed;
The rocks are stricken, and the frost has torn
Away their ridged fundamentst at last.
So that the fractured atoms now are borne
Down shifting waters to the tall, profound
Shadow of the absolute deep (p.316)

At this stage many symbols and motifs which
would be used later on throughout Warren's literary
career begins - especially the time-mysticism, the
feeling that time is the supreme mystery of existence.
Only by peering down the corridors of Time, can an
individual find the meaning of his own existence. At the
end of Section II, the river of time empties all its
contents; men, redbuds, stones, etc., indiscriminately
into the depths of eternity and everything becomes as
one. The idea of oneness becomes acceptance of universal
complicity in later poems such as Brother to Dragons. For
a long time still, the poet's voice speaks of a self in
isolation, whose only hope of self-completion must rest
in the eventual return of the self to the oneness of
Nature. This return must come through Death or, in other
words, ultimate annihilation. However, after reading his latter poetry, I find that Warren has outgrown such influences and developed a unique poetic voice of his own. He has given transcendent meaning to native sources by drawing expanded patterns out of traditional forms. This can be best seen in the blend of the dramatic and the meditative lyrics that have been constantly worked over again and again in order to bring forth highly crafted long poems.

From the very beginning Warren was preoccupied with the dialectical process by which a speaker or character emerged into a coherent and meaningful entity. More often than not, characters were evolved with a trait of over garrulousness which when analysed, revealed the internal conflicts going on in the minds of the protagonists on their path to self-knowledge. It is with their habit of talking too much that the inner conflicts of Jack Burden, Brad Tolliver and Ed Tewksbury are brought to the fore.

The dialectical quality of Warren's poetry takes several forms. In The Ballad of Billie Potts, which is Warren's triumph of voice and manner, the
The vernacular narrative which brings out the folksy rhythm of The Kentucky frontier is sharply contrasted with the voice of a modern, brooding intellectual, i.e., the 'I', who tries to interpret the implications behind the story. Similarly, in the moment of confrontation between the father and son, or, in other words, between the two rivers in The Ballad of Billie Potts, as the father crouches by the forest path to kill the stranger who ultimately turns out to be his own son, the intellectual speaker says, "And under the green leaf's translucence, the light bathes your face. Think of yourself at dawn: Which are you? What?" Thus, the narrative unfolds a story and a persona, the poet himself, who interrupts his narration to speculate on its meanings:

Big Billie Potts was big and stout

In the land between the rivers. *

In Warren's poetry, especially the longer ones, such as The Ballad of Billie Potts, Brother to

*Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices* and *Audobon: A Vision*, the past and the present are so fluidly intermingled, that transition from one to the other is unobtrusive. The past is presented in the narrative section in such a manner as to make it appear that the incidents had taken place only just the other day. The parenthetical commentaries of the past recede and blend into the background. The true nature of the poems—part legendary and part imaginative, is disclosed right at the outset, as if to say, that Warren is only unfolding history.

Much of Warren's poetry deals with loss of innocence and the desire for its restoration. In his *Or Else Poems: Poems 1968-74*, they occur as the result of worldly evils in "Rattle Snake Country", or as an experience with death in "Small White House"—both indicating innocence recaptured. In Warren's universe, as in "Reading Late at Night" or theological understanding of Original Sin as in "Loss of Innocence", is the 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. Here we have an excerpt from "Monologue at Midnight" that illustrates this aspect:

> And always at the side, like guilt,
> Our shadows are the grasses moved.
> Or moved across the moonlight snow;
> And move across the grass or snow.
> Or was it guilt? Philosophers
> Loll in their disputation ease. *

As compared to "Self-Knowledge" in Jung's book:

the evil that comes to
light in man and that undoubtedly dwells
within him, is of gigantic proportions, so
that for the Church to talk of Original
Sin, and trace it back to Adam's
relatively innocent slip-up with Eve, is
almost a euphemism. The evil, the guilt,
the profound unease of conscience, the
obscure misgivings are there before our
eyes, if only we would see... None of us
stands outside humanity's black collective
shadow. Whether the crime lies many
generations back or happens today, it
remains the symptom of a disposition that
is always and everywhere present and do
well therefore to possess some
'imagination in evil' for only a fool can
permanently neglect the conditions of his
own nature.8

The various terminologies such as 'original
sin', 'guilt', 'uneasiness of conscience', 'the obscure
misgivings', 'humanity's black collective shadow',
'crime', 'imagination of evil', lifted from Jung's
excerpt appear to be the very essence of Warren's
material and are the special subject matter of the
central group of poems in Eleven Poems of the Same Theme,
where titles like 'Crime', 'Original Sin', 'Pursuit' and
'Terror' appear.
Warren’s poetry seems to indicate two paths to knowledge. One, to be opened up by the Conscious, Rational mind which leads to Time’s ocean-bottom - the knowledge of Naturalism, and the other, largely ignored by an Age of Reason - the path of the Unconscious and Intuition - leading to knowledge of intuition and instinct - which draws the entire animal kingdom together. Thus, at the end of *The Ballad of Billie Potts*, we have:

```plaintext
The bee knows, and the eel's cold ganglia burn,
And the sad head lifting to the long return
Through brumals deep,
Carries its knowledge, navigator without star.
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(p.299)

The bee knows but rational man does not know - nor will he until his 'sad head' lifts to unconscious instinct the way the eel's does.

The poems of R.P. Warren has centred on several basic themes: the problem of evil, the meaning of history, the human penchant for violence, the search for self-knowledge and the need for self-fulfilment. He has returned to these themes again and again, exploring them
with a depth of perception and richness of illustrations that have placed him among the major literary figures of his time.

Warren spent much of his time revising and polishing his earlier work. Before sending his work for publication, he used to winnow out much of the work that did not meet the expectations of his fastidious mind. In his own words, in an interview with William Packard, Warren said that he revised a great deal. It stopped when he got it published. Then when there were corrections to be made, there was a vast deal of writing before the book came out, before he got the proofs and suddenly he got started over again. He reinspected things. "I go on. A good many things that are now published in books have lain, say, for fifteen years in an unfinished condition."

Much of Warren's poetry, especially his *The Ballad to Billie Potts*, can be divided into two kinds. The first is narrative in nature and the second is reflective. The narrative element consists of the Ballad itself. It tells of a violent tale with tragic
implications. It becomes dramatic through the inclusion of frequent dialogues. The language is vernacular. The vocabulary is down right earthy. The poet does not shy from unmentionables as 'snot' and 'piss'. However, in the same poem, the diction of the literary passages is often Latin. In contrast to the vernacular 'stout', 'big', and 'wide', the adjectives used in the speculative and the introspective passages are 'fetid', 'astute', 'magnificent', etc. The poet uses various figures of speech, metaphors and poetic language to express the finer aspects of thoughts.

The use of parentheses is also another poetic device. The full implication of the Lewis tragedy in *Brother to Dragons* is not self-contained in the events. The philosophy behind the story as well as the under current commentary are required to bring the story to a height of universal significance. *The Ballad of Billie Potts*, like *Brother to Dragons* attempts to penetrate beyond the bare facts of a human event in order to grasp at general truths. They also make clear the portions that the poet has got from hearsay situations and second-hand information received from long back.
parentheses make a distinction between personal experience and hearsay.

A great deal of Warren's poetry links failure of man's perception and his inability to connect it to what is right or true, and also speak his mind, to Original Sin. Most of the poems in *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme* make this link. "In Original Sin: A Short Story", the little figure tortured its face to speak, but scarcely mewed. In *Bearded Oak*, he says:

> Passion and slaughter, rush, decay
> Descend minutely whispering down
> Silted down swaying streams, to lay
> Foundation for our voicelessness`

The same link is also made in *Brother to Dragons*. After seeing the minotaur- a symbol of Original Sin- in its disguise as the brilliant angel of light, Jefferson writes the Declaration of Independence, an instance which Jefferson feels is a failure of understanding and inability to judge the

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right from wrong, after learning of his nephew Lilburn's horrible murder of the slave boy, John. If Christianity is concerned with Original Sin, it is also concerned with redemption, a word which is central to *Brother to Dragons*. The two are inseparable. Paul Ricour has said, "It is not possible to understand one without the other... (the symbiosis of sin) is not complete unless it is considered retrospectively from the point of view of the faith in redemption."¹⁰

Redemption in Christian theology, is brought about by incarnation, specifically the embodiment of God's spirit in Christ. In *Brother to Dragons*, Isham Lewis, reading the charges against himself and his brother, Lilburn, "saw brother writ. And knew the word was me".*

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 Appropriately, the incarnative possibilities of speaking the truth are expressed symbolically in much of Warren's poetry. His *Audubon: A Vision*, knows what he will find in an old woman's cabin because he can 'read' the sign of the smoke dribbling from her chimney. "In imagination his nostrils already/ Know the stench of that lair beyond/the door puncheons."* 

Redemption in Christian theology, is brought about by incarnation, specifically the embodiment of God's spirit in Christ. Much has been made of Warren's use of bird imagery. Victor Strandberg sees in the bird image an "aviary representation" of a lost animal, an "ideal self hearkening back to Eden." Sister Bernetta Quinn sees in it a variety of functions from simple image to an array of complex symbols. One way of looking at

The image is as symbolic of the symbol itself as defined by Warren Percy and Allen Tate. In "Picnic Remembered" from *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme*, Warren says:

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. . . . a hawk that, fled
On glimmering wings past vision's path,
Reflects the last gleam to us here
Though sun is sunk and darkness near *
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The hawk reflecting light without giving direct access to the source of light, can be seen as an instance where essences cannot be revealed but can be incarnated into a lioness. However we take the essence of Warren's poetry, it is the work of a man on the move, a seeker, of a seeker in personal memory, and personal experience, a sight of the glory that potentially is man's. Warren's writing is dense with specific images with which he does *

not just want to see the world more sharply, he wants to understand it also. It is never patrician in tone or manner. It is regional only in the sense, that Warren, born in Kentucky, returns again and again to personal memories of childhood, as he does in the series of poems called Kentucky Mountain Farm. It speaks in defence of the culture of the South as against that of some other region. It is not bookish or learned or primarily mythic. So far as it is orthodox, it appears to be a way of feeling and remembering, not just a statement for the sake of a statement.

"Love's Parable" is an early example of Warren's poetry where a good deal of obscurity has been removed. The lovers in the poem are man and God. In "Fortune Fall", the prince whose 'tongue, not understood, / Yet frames a new felicity' is Christ come to cure people of alienation from themselves as well as others. The Fall occurs over and over, in each life and each period. There is nothing ironical about this poem. The poem is open to the point of being defenceless. Its mythical quality is not merely a literary manner but an expression of a way of thinking. Like Hawthorne, War...
translates the received Faith into psychological terms. Over and over Warren retells the archetypal story of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," in which Hawthorne makes this young man confront the ambiguities of sin and sorrow, protest his innocence, discover his complicity, and finally, Hawthorne at least permits us to believe, find a more mature basis for hope than could be found in the Adamic illusion of innocence. Warren’s people, like Hawthorne’s, break out of the prison of self only when they discover what Hawthorne called 'the brotherhood of guilt.' As Warren puts it, when man sees himself as "brother to dragons", he is ready to start moving toward the glory it is his destiny to seek.

In my opinion, "Original Sin: A Short Story", a later poem than "Love’s Parable", is both less interesting for what it reveals of Warren’s chief continuing preoccupations and attitudes, and more typical of the voice we hear in Warren’s mature work. A realistic allegory enriched by personal comments and observations, it personifies Original Sin as a repeated nightmare that "Takes no part in your classic prudence of
fondled axiom" * but poisons them, never the less. Original Sin is a nightmare connected in memory with the wen which grandfather used to finger on his forehead as though he treasured the deformity, a nightmare that has grown so familiar it is no longer really frightening:

It tries the lock; you hear, but simply drowse:
There is nothing remarkable at the sound as the door. (p.302)

There is irony in this, but, as so often found in Eliot, it is directed by the speaker at himself. The speaker, in other words, Warren himself, is grateful that the nightmare figure never comes in the daylight to shame him before his friends. He thinks it has nothing to do with public experience or private reformation. Though he would like to be rid of it, his attempts to escape from it, by moving and leaving no address, have been of

Robert Penn Warren: New and Selected Poems 1923-1985
no use. Hoping to escape the past, in which the nightmare figure mysteriously originated, he finds himself taking 'a sly pleasure' in hearing of 'the deaths of friends'. But, the pleasure does not last. And the 'sense of cleansing and hope' it brings is delusory. By the end of the poem, the speaker has become Everyman, seeking to maintain his innocence by projecting his guilt, yet, denying it to be a part of his own identity.

The voice that we hear in "Original Sin: A Short Story" is colloquial, easy, assured, humorous, and serious in rapid shifts, moving between the folksy and the metaphysical. It takes its cadence from the rhythm of folk poetry while it gets its themes from philosophers and theologians. It moves away from the poetic and literary. The opening line of the first stanza sets the pattern:

Nodding, its great head rattling like a gourd... (p.301)

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 that seems to be built into the nature of things becomes a "problem", when we think of nature as teleological, or in other words, giving 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. Lilburn, the murderer in *Brother to Dragons*, was peculiarly unfortunate chiefly in having the power and opportunity to act out his wish of evil. Still, it is also true that we have wished more good than we could accomplish. Warren believes that we must accept our responsibility, despite our wish to explain away Lilburn's guilt as well as our own.

As to the problem of evil, Warren is of the opinion, that God never explains things to anyone, just as he never did to Job in the Bible. He merely overwhelmed him with his power and glory. In the moral order, self-transcendence depends first on the recognition and acceptance of personal guilt, and then on moving towards the ideal. As Jefferson says, after he has
been forced by Lilburn's crime, to lose his faith in natural goodness and fall into despair, and then to think and feel his way back towards hope:

To find? Oh, no!
To think to find it was a given condition of man
Would be but to repeat, I now see, my old error. I have suffered enough for that.
Oh, no, if there is to be reason, we must Create the possibility
Of reason, and we can create it only From the circumstances of our most evil despair.
For whatever you create, you create yourself by it,
And in creating yourself you will create The whole wide world and gleaming West anew. (p.118)

Warren put this down in more general terms:

We have yearned in the heart for some identification
With the glory of the human effort, and have yearned
For an adequate definition of that glory
To make that definition, would be, in itself, Of the nature of glory. This is not paradox. It is not paradox, but the best hope. It is the best hope, because we have, Each experienced what it is to be men
We have lain in the bed and devised evil in the heart.
But we must argue the necessity of virtue.
In so far as man has the simplest vanity of self,
There is no escape from the movement towards fulfilment,
And since all kind but fulfils its own kind,
Fulfilment is only in the degree of recognition
Of the common lot of our kind.
And that is the death of vanity.
And that is the beginning of virtue.
The recognition of complicity is the beginning of innocence.
The recognition of necessity is the beginning of freedom.
The recognition of direction of fulfilment is the death of the self,
And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood.
Or else is surrogate to hope and destitution of spirit. (p. 119)

Warren's recent poems ask us whether it is possible, honestly, for us to reverse the trend towards rationalistic alienation that has been dominant for the past century among our poets, who are for Warren, as for Emerson, our seers and diviners. Of Robert Penn Warren,
the fugitive, it may be said that the career of this one
time member of suggests not a flight but a seeking.

Original Sin is about the personal past and
the past behind the personal past and the problems it
creates in the living world. The protagonist is in flight
from his own past, in part from some aspect of himself
connected with the past, which he cannot bring himself to
face. It may be of man's depravity, restlessly searching
for 'a new innocence... to be stayed by'. The protagonist
cannot elude the old guilt which reappears in various
guises. He hopes and believes that he has got rid of
them. But, just as he puts down his defences, believing
that everything is forgotten, it reappears. At last, he
gives up trying to lose it. He even gets a kind of gloomy
satisfaction that it will continually haunt him. By all
accounts, Warren's Original Sin seems to be related to
the origin of species. It may be tempting to assume that
the entire blame for man's depravity is entirely Adam's
and we are answerable in some formalistic sense to Adam's
ghost. However, for Warren there is no doubt about the
criminality of human beings. It is not about his guilt
that he is uncertain. He is only uncertain about man's
innocence. If the theme of Warren's writing is to be surmised in one phrase, it would perhaps be that Warren's theme is the Osmosis of Being. The phrase is Warren's own, articulated most elaborately in his essay in the Sewanee Review:

[Man is] in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being, which in the end does not deny, but affirms his identity.  

Osmosis of Being is also articulated in most of Warren's creative writings, usually implicitly, as when a character in "Promises", is awakened to the book's highest promise:

You fool, poor fool, all Time is a dream, and we're all one flesh, at last....*

but sometimes explicitly, when Blanding Cottshil tells

Bradwell Tolliver:

"Things are tied together... There's some spooky interpretation of things, a mystic osmosis of being, you, might say."

that draws forth the theme of a reconciliation within the 'Self' itself, between Conscious and Unconscious zones of the psyche, in much of Warren's poetry. Hence, Warren's osmosis has moral, metaphysical and psychological ramifications. It is his contribution to modern religious thought. Looking back over Warren's career we find that Warren's osmosis was there all the time - implicit in the early works and explicit later on. Warren's osmosis is evoked in the early work by negative implication. In the fictions, Osmosis of Being is what the characters should be seeking, relating themselves in totality to

time and nature and society. However, characteristically, they are seen to be bent towards the opposite, narrowing their identity to a basis of fame, sexual prowess, success in business, or membership in some or the other sect, be it political, religious or philosophical. To define Osmosis in Warren's work, it should be examined 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 - this darker, more bestial part of the psyche has been denied its place in reality. That is why an innocent idealistic figure like Jefferson, in *Brother to Dragons*, seriously hoping to make a noble effort to convey to all what a wonderful creature is Mankind, or Tobias Sears, the Utopian Transcendentalist in *Band of Angels*; Adam Stanton, the physician to the poor in *All the King’s Men*, - such high minded humanists are not about to think themselves brothers to dragons or indeed to concede any reality to a monster-self within. But the reality of evil, though denied for a time, will finally make its presence known. Jung says:
The evil that comes to light in man and that undoubtedly dwells within him is of gigantic proportions. We are always, thanks to our human nature, potential criminals. None of us stand outside humanity's black collective shadow.  

In Warren's narratives, humanity's black collective shadows are embodied in some of his most memorable characters and episodes. We find them in the two hatchet-wielders, Lilburn Lewis in *Brother to Dragons* and Big Billie Potts in *The Ballad of Billie Potts*; in the gradually escalating violence of the Free Farmers' Brotherhood of Protection And Control, in *Night Riders*, in the degrading trip to Big Hump's Island in *World Enough And Time*; in the horrific episode of the slaves raid into Africa in *Band of Angels*; in the frenzied sexual orgy following Brother Sumpter's preaching in *The Cave*; in the callous butchery of Negroes by whites during the New York Draft Riots in 1863 as portrayed in *Wilderness*; and the swamp-rat animalism of Frog-Eye in *Flood*. And actual history as discussed in Warren's books, adds confirming evidence. Warren's first book, *John Brown : The Making of a Martyr*, shows the famous abolitionist to be a murderous fanatic, an obvious
forbearer of Warren’s recurring fictional killers, who
lift rifle or meat-axe in an elation of justice, while
his most recent book, *Who Speaks for the Negro*,
identifies Malcom X as the monster-self in the inner
dark. Malcom X can evoke, in the Negro, even in Martin
Luther King. In fact Malcom X is many things. He is the
face not seen in the mirror . . . He is the nightmare
self. From the very beginning, Warren saw this discovery
of a beast within the self as a basic structure in his
work. In his first novel, *Night Rider*, a piously Bible-
quoting-professor, Ball, is heard to say, "Yes, Sir, I’m
a man of peace. But it’s surprising to a man what he’ll
find in himself sometimes,"*. What the professor comes to
find in himself is murder, cowardice and betrayal,
causing the death of the book’s main character, Percy
Munn. And in the next novel, At *Heaven’s Gate*, Slim
Sarrett, likewise traces out the melancholy curve of

* Robert Penn Warren: *Night Rider*. Houghton Mitton, Boston,
1939.p.142. In future all textual references shall be to
this edition only and only the page number shall be
indicated in parentheses.
self-discovery. Early in the book, Slim is the artistic intellectual writing of literature and self-knowledge. But when his own self-knowledge comes to include the murder-cowardice-betrayal syndrome, Slim writes ruefully not of power, but a dark, unbanishable being within the self:

It came from your mother's womb and she screamed at the moment of egress.
The family doctor slapped breath in, relighted his bitten Cigar
While the old nurse washed it and washed it, without
Complete success.*

And in Warren's most recent novel, Flood, the main character feels a beast within himself, quite literally:

"Then in the inner darkness of himself.... The black beast heaved at him.... that black beast with cold fur like hairy ice that drowsed in the deepest inner dark or woke to snuffle about, or even, as now, might heave

* Robert Penn Warren: Heaven's Gate. Harcourt Brace, New York, 1943 p.205. In future all textual reference shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
unexpectedly at him and breathe upon him. ”

(p. 336)

If Warren's fiction hints at a beast - a darker being or pollution of "Original sin" within the 'self', his poetry describes it much more explicitly. "And our innocence needs, perhaps, new definition," Warren said at the end of *The Ballad of Billie Potts*, and it is quite clear that this new definition of innocence must embrace, like Osmosis, the guilt that will always and forever, "rise and coil like miasma / From the fat sump and cess of common consciousness", as R.P.W. describes it in *Brother to Dragons*. In all his major volumes of poetry, Warren refers to this guilt in the common consciousness which Jung calls "humanity's black collective shadow," in terms of animal imagery. *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme* takes the acknowledgement of this shadow self as its major structure. The conscious ego, sanctimonious and sure of an innocent identity, locks the shadow self out of the house of the psyche in a poem called, "Original Sin : A Short Story", where the darker self acts like a loyal though rejected animal: you have heard/ It fumbles at your door before it whimpers and is
gone: 'It acts like the old hound that used to sniffle your door and moan,' (p.301) and later, 'It goes to the backyard and stands like an old horse, cold in the pasture.' In "Crime", the conscious ego, finding that the shadow self simply won't go away, murders and buries it in the cellar, only to have it rise again:

... Memory drips, a pipe in the cellar-dark
And in its hutch and hole...
The cold heart heaves like a toad. *

And so, The Eleven Poems of the Same Theme ends with "Terror", a poem in which the shadow-self that had seemed so docile and easily repudiated earlier, now assumes, genie-like, terrifying dimensions in the reality of actual history. In Warren's next major poetic work, Brother to Dragons, Thomas Jefferson also thinks himself 'guiltless' until his sister and R.P.W.

Robert Penn Warren: Eleven Poems of the Same Theme: Crime. New Directions, Connecticut, 1942. p.172. In future all textual reference shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
Finally get him to clasp his murderer nephew's hand and to accept oneness with Lilburn, the emblem, together with minotaur, catfish and serpent, of man's darker self within. The key embodiment of the shadow self is the serpent that scares R.P.W. in his summer visit to what is left of the Lewis house. And, though R.P.W. calls 'it just a snake', it turns out to have suspiciously human characteristics, linking it to the old hound and old horse of *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme*:

He reared  
Up high, and scared me, for a fact. But then  
The bloat head sagged an inch, the tongue withdrew,  
And on the top of that strong stalk, the head  
Wagged slow, benevolent and sad and sage,  
As though it understood our human pitifulness  
And forgave all, and forgiveness, too. (p.25)

The concluding line states what the relationship between the conscious ego and the shadow self should be, but isn't in Jefferson's case. In *Promises* also, man's natural revulsion towards the shadow self is implicit in the slaying of a snake by some men getting hay, in "The Snake":  

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... a black snake rears big in his ruined room.
... Man shout, ring around. He can't get away.
Yes, they are men and a stone is there.
... a black snake rears big in his ruined room.
... Snagged high on a pitchfork tine, he will make
Slow arabesque till the bullbats wake.
An old man, standing stopped, detached,
Spits once, says, "Hell, just another snake". *

But of course, the beast within the self is not exorcised
by such impulsive destruction of other creatures, though
men are prone to locate evil anywhere outside the self
and then go ahead with the destruction, whether of snake,
octopus, or human beings. Warren's *You, Emperor, and
Others*, speaks of a beast in the psyche in many places.
The Roman historian, Seutonius considered monstrous
criminals for using their imperial power in the service
of greed, murder, incest and unlimited orgiastic
pleasures. The "You" in Warren's title, however is not

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greatly superior to the Emperors, having a tainted ancestry and a criminal character of troublesome if not imperial proportions, as is illustrated in "The Letter About Money, Love, or Other Comfort, if Any", in which the narrator pursues a beastly alter ego. The reality of evil within the self, then is set forth in a long and vividly memorable series of vile characters, violent episodes and beast images throughout Warren's work, and the acceptance of that reality is the first step towards psychic wholesomeness - an internal Osmosis of Being, as it were proceeding from the inner cavern of 'self', to the outer world of other people, an equally long series of technical devices may be found. Plot, character, imagery, allusion, irony and so forth, sustaining the idea of osmosis on a family and social level can be seen. The repeated reference to a father figure - felt by Sukie Christian in Night Riders, Jerry Calhoun in At Heaven's Gate, Billie Potts in The Ballad of Billie Potts, Jack Burden in All The King's Men, Jeremiah Beaumont in World Enough and Time, Oliver Cromwell Jones and Amantha Starr in Band Of Angels - is especially fundamental in Warren's work because it grounds
the Osmosis of Being in Physiological fact. As Jack Burden in *All the King's Men*, puts it:

The child comes home and his parent puts the hook in him. The old man or the woman, as the case may be, hasn't got anything to say to the child. All he wants is to have that child sit in a chair for a couple of hours and then go off to bed under the same roof.... This thing in itself is not love. It is just something in the blood. It is a kind of blood greed and it is the fate of a man. It is the thing which man has which distinguishes him from the happy brute creation. When you get born, your father and mother lost something out of themselves, and they are going to bust a home trying to get it back, and you are it. They know that they can't get it all back but they will get as big a chunk out of you as they can.*

It follows then that the true villains in Warren's work are not the hatchet murderers like Big

Billie Potts and Lilburn Lewis so much as those characters who wilfully reject the claims of osmosis. Among those truly damned are Ikey Sumpter in *The Cave* and Slim Sarrett in *At Heaven's Gate*, both of whom renounced their father, cut all their human ties, and vanished into the vicious and glittering isolation of New York City. Thomas Jefferson’s reluctance to shake Lilburn’s hand with “blood slick on it” is a case in point.

In *Promises*, Warren’s own parents, Ruth and Robert, accept the price of osmosis, willing in their deaths that the generations supplement one another. In “Child”, two skeletons tell their son in their vision at their gravesite, “We died only that every promise might be fulfilled.” Later, in *Promises*, the skeleton granny who was devoured by hogs, repeats this acceptance of this sacrificial death: “I died for love.”

Commitment to one Flesh is further enacted by a series of Christ figures in Warren’s work, such as Jasper Harrick, the youth who died in *The Caves* to “save” others and to bear guilt for their inequity— for Jasper is blamed for his young brother’s fornication. But...
Potts in *Floods*, makes the Christlike commitment, praying for a Negro convict who had spat on him, without even wiping the spit away and spending his last days, not in the fear of cancer that has already cost him an arm, but preaching that the life they had lived was 'blessed'. Clearly then, Warren’s osmosis requires acceptance of one’s annihilation. Granny’s whisper, "I died for love," means that she saw the self as a tool to be used and discarded for the advantage of a larger being that goes on and on.

But, from Warren’s writings, it is seen that if the price of osmosis is high, meaning death for the conscious ego. The rewards are also high, because a kind of immortality is also attained. The indistructivity of the deeper self is well brought out by its survival through *Eleven Poems, of the Same Theme*, despite the murder and the burial in the cellar; and this immortality seems even clearer in *Brother to Dragons*, with particular reference to the catfish and serpent metaphors. In having ‘the face of the last torturer,’ the catfish is likened with the ‘Original Sin’ aspect of Warren’s thought, but it also has redemptive possibilities. The ‘ice’ in the
passage quoted below, appears to divide the world of light and time and consciousness:

And the year drove on. Winter. And from the Dakotas
The wind veers, gathers itself in ice-glitter (p.61)

And star-gleam of dark, and finds the long sweep of the valley. A thousand miles and the fabulous river is ice in the starlight. The ice is a foot thick, and beneath, the water slides black like a dream:

And in the interior of the unpulsing blackness and thrilled zero
The big channel-cat sleeps with eye lidless, and the brute face
Is the face of the last torturer, and the white belly
Brushes the delicious and icy blackness of mud,
But there is no sensation. How can there be
Sensation when there is perfect adjustment? (p.61)

"Perfect adjustment" despite the awful cold and dark under ice is something the conscious self, in fear of naturalistic oblivion, might well envy. Warren
sees this creature, the channel-cat, with the brute face of a torturer as being, in its total osmosis with its environment, 'at one with God':


. . . . . The blood
of the creature is but the temperature
of the sustaining flow;
The catfish is in the Mississippi and
The Mississippi is in the catfish and
Under the ice both are at one with God.
Would that we were! (p. 61)

In its oneness with the total darkness under ice, the catfish needs not fear as the conscious ego must, the awesome infinitude of time and cosmos above the ice, 'where the stars are arctic and / Their gleam comes earthward down uncounted light years of disdain' (p. 62). The catfish's brother image, the serpent also evinces immortality where the snake, 'looped and snug', survives the earth's 'dark inwardness' (p. 208), under the ruins of the Lewishouse, those huddled stones of ruin which say that the 'humans had been here and gone/ And never would come back, though the bright stars/ Shall weary not in their appointed watch.' (p. 23). Jasper Harrick describes the cave as a place resembling the catfish's dark and timeless realm under ice. 'It's a nice
temperature down there', he had said. 'It is not summer and it is not winter. There aren't any seasons to bother about down there ... Blizzards or hot spell, . . . . lot of things don't matter down here'. He adds that only the dark of the underworld can bring forth the secret of identity, - the thing which Warren has been searching throughout his poetry. He says, 'Well, in the ground at least, a fellow has a chance of knowing who he is.' (p.229).

"Perfect adjustment", being ' at one with God', and knowing at last who you are - such are the final rewards of Warren’s osmosis - though its final price is the death of the conscious ego. R.P.W., in Brother to Dragons has said,'And the death of the self is the beginning of selfhood'. (p.216)

In the Ballad of Billie Potts, Warren had indicated the supremacy of the unconscious self, as given in the passage below. The first passage lists several modes of establishing a conscious identity as the world knows it:

Though your luck always held and the
market was always satisfactory
Though your letters always came and
Your lovers were always true,
Though you always received the
Respect due to your position,
Though you had never failed of its
Cunning, and your glands always
Thoroughly knew their business,
Though your conscious was easy
And you were assured of your
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!"
Which was perfectly true. (p.295)

Whereas the unconscious self on finding
'that something was missing from the picture', is uneasy,
the unconscious self shapes the direction and meaning of
life through its secret, intuitive knowledge. Thus, the
second passage states:

The bee knows, and the eel’s cold
ganglia burn,
And the sad head lifting to the long return,
Through brumel deeps, in the great
unsolicited coil,
Carries its knowledge, navigator without star,
And under the star, pure in its clamorous
toil,
The goose hoots north, where the starlet marshes are,
The salmon heaves at the fall, and wanderer, you
Heave at the great fall of Time. (p.299)

Like these creatures, Little Billie crosses from the realm of conscious to unconscious direction in coming home to his father and thus to death and eternity, the 'Homeland of no Time'.

Ultimately, like the serpent who 'forgave all, and for forgiveness, too' in Brother to Dragons, these father figures offer a human communion transcending their loathsome appearances. Such acceptance of the human communion beyond right and wrong is what is needed to be saved, nonetheless, as opposed to his dependence on the 'Treasury of Virtue', which is Warren’s term for the North’s enduring sense of merit in having fought for Rights in the Civil War.

The third major facet of Warren’s osmosis, is the metaphysical dimension, which is the most momentous in its price and its rewards. The immediate price of osmosis is humility, which
seriously considered, is not easy to come by. And the ultimate price is death; a permanent consignment of self to the oneness of Time and Flesh. This may involve a final annihilation of the conscious ego, putting an end to the temporary and proud separation from the larger collective being. Still, such a condition may prove to be desirable, and is, in any case, inevitable.
References


6. Ibid. p.63.

7. Ibid. p.63.


