CHAPTER- IV

HIS METAPHYSICS
Western metaphysics hangs on two myths. One, is the myth of progress through linear progress of time, and the second, is the myth of ultimate perfection of humanity, en masse. Many Western Philosophers argue that there is no escape from history and that is why it is repeated again and again. It is extrication of humanity from the clutches of history that is needed to liberate it. It has taken only 400 years from Geoffrey Chaucer to T.S. Eliot to declare the month of April from a soothing to a cruel month. From:

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote
The droughte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendered is the flour.¹

To

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire.²

In the Waste Land, T.S. Eliot has stated that being in the world can only mean tragedy and war where the April showers can only bring forth the elegiac flower, lilac, that too, on 'dead lands'.
However, Robert Penn Warren insisted that it is far far better to be a part of the Universe, where life is eternal, than in the crumpled world of sin and crime:

For the beginning is death and the end may be life,
For the beginning was definition and end may be definition,
And our innocence needs, perhaps, new definition,

Warren has said that "man must recreate for his age the image of man, and he must propagate standards by which other men may test that image, and distinguish the false from the true. But, at this critical moment when all languages are being debased by the techniques of mass control, the man of letters would have to conceive his responsibility more narrowly. He has an immediate responsibility to other men no less than to himself, for


In future all textual reference shall be to this edition and only the page number and shall be indicated in parentheses.
the vitality of language. He must distinguish between mere communication and the rediscovery of the human condition in the living arts. He must discriminatingly defend the differences between mass communication, for the control of man, and the knowledge of man which literature offers for human participation". 3

Warren was concerned with the relationships - the rhetorical, moral and aesthetic - set up between the man of letters and the world. He was interested in the vitality of language and the rediscovery of the human condition. The man of letters must know and discriminate, he must be alive to the promises of his craft and the needs of his time - and show it. And, it is this vitality and rediscovery and constant participation in the world that may be seen throughout Warren's work.

I am of the opinion that Warren has given transcendent meaning to many humdrum incidents by giving a depth and modern interpretation to traditional forms. He has used many dramatic and meditative themes to produce a very impressive sequence of poetry, which have
been finely crafted and honed to make some of the most lasting and vital poems in American Literature.

For, people who have read his poetry attentively and long, shall have found his work to have contained his commitment to language as a form of communion and knowledge - knowledge of the author, of the human condition and of the audience as individual and collective self. As we trace Warren through his writings, we find a great difference from the Warren of "Love's Parable", one of his early poems, and the Warren of The Ballad of Billie Potts, a triumph of his new voice and manner. It is in the latter poems that Warren has found his voice. It is one of the finest long poems in American literature. The mythic overtones in its tale of another Fall enacted in another 'land between the rivers' are only suggested in the background, played down by the poet's introductory note, 'When I was a child I heard this story from an old lady ...' (p. 287), and countered by the tone both of the narrative itself and the inserted authorial meditations on the action.
If one had never read any of Warren's earlier poems and has known him only as the third member of the Ransom-Tate-Warren trio, a Vanderbilt man, *The Ballad of Billie Potts* might surprise him. The ballad has behind it, the work of Lindsay, Mark Twain and J.R. Lowell. Of the poets with whom he is most commonly linked, Warren is at once the most liberal and pragmatic, in ideas and attitudes, and the most traditional in a literary sense, after his earliest volume, in choosing to work within traditions developed by earlier American writers, rather than those of the French Symbolists or the English Metaphysicals.

Warren 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 or explainable of 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. Lilburn, the murderer in *Brother to Dragons*, was peculiarly unfortunate, chiefly in having the power and the opportunity to act out his wish. However, it is also true, says Warren, that we have wished more good than we could ever accomplish.

As to the problem of evil, again Warren bridges the gap between Emerson and Melville, and Cummings and Eliot. When Job questioned God’s action, He never explained anything to Job. He merely overwhelmed him with his power and glory. Yet, Job suffered. His was a suffering that was unmerited. Similarly, Jefferson, in *Brother to Dragons*, after he has been first forced by his nephew’s crime, to loose his faith in natural goodness, and fall into despair, and then slowly grope his way back towards hope, is also an example of unmerited suffering. That he is able to bear his suffering, however unmerited, redeems him from self-pity and loss of faith.

The crucial point of life is not to obtain ease and security, as our grandsires had supposed, but to
perceive an ultimate purpose of one's existence, as Warren has all the time been saying. The mysticism of 'The Way Down' appears to be the answer to the search for ultimate meaning - a calm resolute probing of time and experience before death cuts off both:

What name 
Sustains the core of flame? ..... 
Time falls, but has no end. 
Descend! ..... 
The gentle path suggests our feet; ..... 
We shall essay 
The rugged ritual, but not of anger. 
Let us go down before 
Our thaws are latched in the myth's languor, 
Our hearts with fable gray. *

History shows a subtle but very significant shift in the poet's perspective. The concluding resolution to use the gift of life as an active search for meaning rather than

* Robert Penn Warren: *Selected Poems 1923-1943: History.* Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944. p.82. In future all textual reference shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
just yearning passively for that meaning through the death-wish, and faltering and failing before it really bears fruition; but it eventually produces Warren’s very best work. The tone of resignation and humility wherein Warren undertakes this search for ultimate meaning is particularly reminiscent of the beginning of “Ash-Wednesday”, where Eliot deliberately renounces his former bitterness of despair, though the despair itself may linger.

“History” in *Thirty-Six Poems*, is preceded by “Resolution”, a poem that further states the poet’s determination to probe ultimate reality, with particular respect to its sovereignty over reality vested in “Grape-Trader Time”. The first stanza shows a way to resist Time’s sovereignty; to love so intensely as to attain momentary timelessness. This attitude may remind us of Hemingway’s fiction:

```
Time’s secret
The huddled jockey knows;
Between the bull’s
Horns, as the cape flows,
The matador;
The pitcher on his mound,
```
Among the various themes in the poem, it is quite evident that timelessness and sexual love in Stanza 2, offer the most promise. But the exponent of the ideas is not the speaker, but a lover with whom the speaker disagrees:

I speak of Time, You said:  
There is no Time.  
Since then some friends are dead;  
Hates cold, once hot;  
Ambitions thwaless grown;  
Old sights forgot:  
And the sweeper is made stone. (p. 50)

The climax of the speaker's argument that Time is real comes with the observation that Time has separated the two people most involved in the poem - the speaker, 'I' from the interlocutor, 'you':

* Robert Penn Warren: **Thirty-Six Poems: Resolution**: The Acestis Press, New York, 1935. p.49. In the future all textual references shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
We, too, have lain
Apart. With continents
And seas between. (p. 56)

The speaker’s resolution - the title motif - asserts that there is Time, and full of respect for its existence and power, he is determined to pursue his enquiry into Time’s meaning without fear of whatever truth - even if it involves annihilation of self - becomes clear:

Ole winnower!
I praise your paced power:
Not truth I fear.
How ripe turned the hour. (p. 51)

The “Letter From a Coward to a Hero”, as the title indicates, is a letter from a coward to a hero. The main function of this letter is to celebrate the bravery of an unnamed friend who has died in war and at the same time, to comment sarcastically, on the speaker’s own fear of death, which paradoxically coexists with his death-wish:

Empires collide with a bang
That shakes the pictures where they hang
And the time is out of joint:
But a good pointer holds the point
And is not gun-shy;
But I
Rarely, you've been unmanned:  
I have not seen your courage put to pawn. *

I feel the most significant feature of this poem, aside from the fact that it reveals yet another facet of Warren's attitude towards death, is the emergence, towards the poem's end, of the uniquely tender irony that identified and set apart Warren's voice from among those of his fellow poets. The tenderness shows through first from behind a façade of sarcasm in the middle of the poem, with the speaker, unable to speak of his awareness of time and sudden death:

Clock that tick all night, and will not stop.  
Offers some advise on how to combat insomnia:  
"For sleep try love or some verenal, Though some prefer, I know, philology."  (p. 140)

Robert Penn Warren : Selected Poems 1923-1943 : Letter from a Coward to a Hero. Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944.  (p. 127). In the future all textual references shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
The reference to philology is explained in the next line, where newspaper euphemisms are insufficient to assuage the speaker's vision of horror: 'Does the airman scream in the flaming trajectory?' (p.149)

The word 'trajectory'-Latinate, impersonal, scientific military - appears to be philological euphemism which Warren rejects as inadequate for describing the real horror of the situation. By the end of the poem, the speaker's tenderness breaks through the facade of irony completely.

In "Late Subterfuge", a bitter poem that uses the impersonal setting of winter to demonstrate yet once again the endless human capacity of survival through self-deception, the title motif is "subterfuge". Like the various animals we see in the poem - the grackles flying south, the fox in ground, the most obvious reality at this juncture is the prevalence of the season of death. One way to avoid such realities is to water down one's values, one's sense of need:

The year dulls towards its eaves-dripping end.
We have kept honor yet, or lost a friend;
Observed at length the inherited defect;
Known error's pang - but then, what man is perfect? *

This contrasts with the slough of despondency at the year's end, as the year had begun with the usual folly of hope and resolution:

This year was time for decision to be made.
No time to waste, we said, and so we said:
This year is time... (p.86)

"Late Subterfuge" is an important poem for emphasizing with considerable power one of Warren's own recurrent themes, the absolute isolation of the 'self' in a hostile environment. Looking ahead to Warren's later work, we may note, as measurement of his development, that two of the motifs that he treats during this period with great irony - 'from evil bloometh good' and 'we learn some strength

Robert Penn Warren : Selected Poems 1923-1985 : Late Subterfuge. Random House, New York, 1985. (p. 85). In the future all textual references shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
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. It cuts through the impersonal remoteness of newspaper accounts with an insistence on the concrete immediacy of far away butchery. Such speculations of human depravity as we see in Stanza 2 foreshadow the concept of total human complicity—and thereby of total human redeemability as depicted in *Brother to Dragons*. However, at this stage the diction is stiff and inflated:

The mentioned act: barbarous, bloody, extreme
And fraught with bane. The actors: nameless

and

With faces turned (I cannot make them out).

Christ bled indeed, but after fasting and,

Bad diet of the poor; wherefore thin blood

came out. *

* Robert Penn Warren: *Selected Poems 1923-1943: Ransom*. Harcourt Brace, New York, 1944. (p. 128). In the future all textual references shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
perhaps the reader's own or the face of the character called "you". In such random vignettes, often appearing as of marginal interest, Warren's major theme lies-dormant and waiting.

Poems like "Ransom", have rather an obscure application to the poem proper. In a poem dealing with universal rapaciousness - 'What wars and lecheries!' - the only hope of Ransom is the thin hope offered in the final stanza, which calls for a redefining of courage, not in terms of the international military battlefield, but with reference to the confrontation of self.

"Ransom" and "Late Subterfuge" aim at the wounded innocence central to Warren's artistic motivation. He does think, as he says in Promises, that the human need is for perfection - both ethical and metaphysical, and the death-wish and violence and horror in the early poems are nothing more than the revulsion of a sensitive and idealistic observer to realities he cannot bear. His continued obsession with violence and horror, such as the human vivisection in Brother to Dragons, results from the artist's perverse honesty of
intellect which holds that whether bearable or not, such infamies of past and present are real and what is more, must be confronted with the dark labyrinth of the 'self' as well as in the comfortably faraway world of newspapers.

In an article titled, "The Present State of Poetry in the United States", Robert Penn Warren puts to pen his view, which also underlined his major quest of the central issue of literature, by asking the question, "Can man live on the purely naturalistic level?" 'Naturalism' may be simply taken to mean here that nature is something like a huge computer, quite impersonal and unfeeling, having no specific aims, and whose secret reasonings can be delved only through a scientific method.

As such, man is identified as a weak, transitory part of nature's total machinery, and his dominant feeling would be, therefore, one of fear of his own extinction. He is simply a robot leading a mechanical life, as per the dictates of Nature. Such depiction of man may be abundantly found in literature with
Hemingway's sleepless men obsessed with 'nada', Eliot's man as 'fear in a handful of dust' or Kierkegaard's view of man's despair as 'the sickness unto death'. For them Naturalism must have been hard to accept.

In his earliest volume, *Thirty-Six Poems*, Warren had indicated how hard it is to live with Naturalism. These poems had highlighted such moods as despair, death wishes, stoical endurances and sometimes just occasional glimmers of religious hope. In his own writing, while writing about Joseph Conrad, Warren has written, "Man is precariously balanced in his humanity between the black inward abyss of himself and the black abyss of Nature." 5 However, by the time he reaches *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme*, he has begun to synthesise the materialistic with the psychological, in order to evolve a naturalistic solution to the dilemma of Naturalism—that of the unending and unconscious self which lies beyond the clasp of Naturalistic extinction.

According to Warren the theme of Collective Unconscious seems to be the vital source of the spiritual experience. He looks upon man's tendency to repress and
reject the Unconscious as a grave error; or even a 'sin'. Many of his later poems, especially *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme* and *Brother to Dragons*, describe the relationship between the Conscious Ego, whose ultimate fate is Naturalistic Oblivion and the Unconscious Self which holds the key to ultimate immortality.

The first three poems of *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme* explain Warren's view that it is the unknown or unconscious self rather than the conscious ego, which holds the secret of ultimate identity and which therefore, offers the best answer to the dilemma of Naturalism. In *Promises*, the answer to the problem is more clear. Here, especially in "Lullaby: Smile in Sleep", the attitude towards death is more mellowed and one of peaceful acceptance. There is no fear and no protest:

```
What if angry vectors veer
Around your sleeping head and form?
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 strong moon that is your dream's command.
```
Dream the power coming on.
Dream, strong son.
Sleep on. *

But against this hopeful thought, appears Warren’s usual argument in favour of naturalism. Thus, in You, Emperor and Others, Roman Emperor, Teberius, bursts out with; 'All is nothing. Nothing all'. **

And the speaker in "Nightmare of Man", who represents both the success and failure of Scientific Naturalism, says:

I assembled, marshalled my data ...

My induction was perfect. . .


But the formula failed in the test-tube,
Despite all my skill.  

The major theme of Warren's poems has focused on his own question - whether man can live on the purely naturalistic level. And his answers have ranged from extreme death-wishes to supernatural redemption.

According to Warren, the Soul has two dark dimensions. One is external to the 'self', ie, 'the black outward abyss of nature', and the other, 'the internal dimension of the dark side of the soul', ie, 'the black inward abyss of itself'. While the first deals with the fear that death meant the ultimate extinction of the self itself; the other aspect deals with the soul as degraded, filthy, bestial and amoral. A parallel to Warren's theory can be found in the theories of Darwin and Freud.

Darwin's theory that humans are nothing more than a fragment in the evolution of animals could be compared to the naturalistic darkness external to MAN, signifying the denial of individual immortality of the soul. Freud's reduction of all human ethics and mottos to animal self-interest would relate primarily to man's inner darkness. In Warren's early verses, during the nearly twenty years of his undergraduate days at Vanderbilt University to the early years of World War II, the main theme was the darkness external to the self; the black outward abyss of Nature. The 'self' was treated as insignificant and infinitesimally small compared to Nature. His verse centred itself around the quest for finding the meaning of existence if death and annihilation was to be the final result.

In "Bearded Oaks", two lovers, 'practice for eternity' by lying side by side, totally silently and voicelessly. The man is enveloped in 'kelp-like' grasses under oaks, 'subtle and marine'. Even with his lady love so near, everything is still, emotionless and dead. If even lovers cannot talk to each other, there is little hope for ordinary friendship. Naturalism points towards
sin not because it denies orthodox beliefs but because it
renders other people as meaningless as one holds oneself.

We live in time so little time
And we learn all so painfully,
That we may spare this hour's term
To practice for eternity. *

In his *Thirty-Six Poems*, Warren makes no bones about his
standing in relation to the black outward abyss of
Nature. He is anguished over death. His definition of man
is 'Calcium phosphate lust speculation faith treachery'**
because of his being irrelevant in a world without
ultimate meaning since time the destroyer renders all
things meaningless. However, in the same poem there are

Robert Penn Warren : *New and Selected Poems 1923-1985:*
*Selected Poems 1923-1943: Bearded Oaks.* Random House,
references shall be to this edition and only the page
number shall be indicated in parentheses.

Robert Penn Warren : *New and Selected Poems 1923-1985:*
*Selected Poems 1923-1943: The Return : An Elegy.* Random
references shall be to this edition and only the page
number shall be indicated in parentheses.
glimpses of Warren's development as a thinker that from evil can come the possibility of human good and that man can redeem himself yet:

If I could pluck
Against the dry essential of tomorrow
To lay upon the breast that gave me suck
Out of the dark the dark swallow orchid
of this sorrow. (p. 312)

In Warren's earlier poems, the theme that came forth in a most cognizant manner was that all human relationships are ultimately failures. Such failures are the result of the fact that the 'self' has only the inner resources to rely upon. This is most specifically clear from the title image of the *The Return: An Elegy* - which refers not of a husband to a wife or a son to his mother, but rather, the return of the 'self' to its source of time, wherein the self's true identity lies in secrecy. The image is that of the dying leaf returning to its deeper self in time. This image is once again rendered in "The Hazel Leaf", in *Promises* - only here, time is represented by 'still' waters:

. . . Again the timeless gold
Broad leaf released the tendoned
bough, and slow,
Uncertain as a casual memory,
Wavered aslant the ripe unmoving air,
Up from the whiter bough, the bluer sky,
That glimmered in the water's depth below,
A richer leaf rose to the other there.
They touched; with the gentle clarity of dream,
Bosom to bosom burned on the quiet stream. *

The conjoining of the Temporal Self,
through death, with the Eternal Self, is a tenderly moving scene in which the poet's desire for self-completion moves him to a death-wish. In contrast, the ultimate return of the self to its own deeper 'self', is the return of the leaf to a different self, such as the return of a son to his mother which is marked by disappointment and artificiality.

At this juncture, Warren has been able to portray only the rudimentary concept of oneness of Nature

wherein the 'self' is effectively isolated and its true meaning and identity are not discernable in its relationship to other people; but only by looking inward. Thus, there is a sense of estrangement in the final sub-poem of "Kentucky Mountain Farm", perhaps between mother and son:

... And he, who had loved as well as most, Might have foretold it thus, for long he knew How glimmering a buried world is lost In the waters ruffle, the wind's flaw; How his own image, perfect and deep And small within loved eyes, had been forgot, Her face being turned, or when those eyes were shut. Past light in that found accident of sleep.*

"The water's riffle", "the wind's flaw," in contrast to the perfectly still waters that had received the leaf, indicate the passing of time which conceals or distorts the identity of the self even from those others who had once known and loved it.

The poet's voice speaks of isolation of the 'self', whose only hope of self-completion must rest in the eventual return of the self to the oneness with Nature. His desire to become one with and return to Nature, which, at this point of his poetic career meant eternal annihilation and death, strengthens his death wish and desire to join ultimate reality as Death has been the doorway to final reality in Warren's verses. In a "Letter of a Mother", Warren portrays a matter of fact scene of a young student-poet, receiving a letter from his mother. But, by the time the poem comes to an end, the mother-son relationship has been transformed into an elaborate form of death-wish. The mother, towards whom the poet yearns, is the primal oblivion of the darkness of the womb from which he came, and not his real mother. It is death, the final oblivion, that is his ultimate desire:
But still the flesh cries out unto the black
Void across the plains insistently
Where rivers wash their wastages to the sea...
The mother flesh that cannot summon back
The tired child it would again possess
As shall a womb more tender than her own
That builds not the tissue or the little bone,
But dissolves them to itself in weariness. *

Death is the ultimate, more tender mother
here and Warren makes it clear that dreams of
immortality are not only vain but unnecessary. He
says that one should be really grateful to ones natural
mother for providing the 'gift of mortality'. In due
course, one will be united with ones ultimate mother,
primal oblivion.

Throughout his earlier poems, Warren gives the feeling
that the crucial problem of life is not one


p.43. In future all textual references shall be to
this edition and only the page number shall be
indicated in parentheses.
of ease and security but that of resolving the ultimate purpose of ones existence. For him, the ultimate purpose of life is a calm and resolute probing and experience before death cuts off both:

What name sustains the core of flame?

Time falls, but has no end.
Descend!
The gentle path suggests our feet;
We shall essay
The rugged ritual, but not of anger.
Let us go down before
Our thews are latched in the myth's languor,
Our hearts with fable gray.   (p.44)

Many of the recurrent metaphors such as the 'face drowned deep under water, mouth askew' in You, Emperors and Others; the skeleton granny who 'whines like a dog in the dark', in Promises; the monster-self loathed and shunned throughout Brother to Dragons; the 'sad head lifting to the long return through Brumal deeps' in The Ballad of Billie Potts are the symbols of a repressed Unconscious Self that may be traced to the Shadow Self that has been slain and buried in the dank collar of the house of psyche in Eleven Poems of the Same Theme. Taken together, these metaphors of an Undiscovered Self are of
utmost importance because it is this Unknown Self rather than the Conscious Ego which holds the secret of identity and which therefore, offers the best answer to the modern dilemma of Naturalism.

Through his later poetry, such as "Original Sin", "Crime", "Pursuit", "Terror" and "End of Season", Warren says that if there is nothing eternal within the Self, it has nothing to do with the conscious, Rational Self— which is consigned to naturalistic oblivion. It is the Unconscious Self that is eternal.

In his later works, especially "Variation: Ode to Fear", "Mexico is a Foreign Country", "Five Studies in Naturalism" and The Ballad of Billie Potts, Warren brings to a climax the crucial issue of whether man can find meaning or identity in a naturalistic world. "Variation" and "Mexico is a Foreign Country" answer the question in the negative but The Ballad of Billie Potts gives a different answer. Billie Potts is driven, like Oedipus, to find his identity, and
to find it at whatever cost. Oedipus lost his eyes and his kingdom; Billie Potts looses his life. But, in each case, the loss is outweighed by a spiritual gain at the quest's end.

This is Warren's final answer to the problem of Naturalism. In the hope of attaining final identity, his persona accept even annihilation, if need be, kneeling in silent submission. This has nothing to do with Warren's earlier death-wish, his initial response to naturalistic despair, but, is rather, a deliberate resignation of will, a yielding of the Conscious Self to submersion in some dark pool welling up from the Unconscious. The submission in The Ballad of Billie Potts is total enough to render the poem free of self-justifying devices as irony and bitter-humour. The poem just ends with "What gift- oh father, father, from that deserving hand?" (p. 297)

When that hand with the axe comes down on his unsuspecting neck, Little Billie has come to the end of his search and quest for identity. With one clean
sweep, Little Billie has made the ultimate sacrifice and thus redeemed himself from all his sins. Not only has he redeemed himself, but he has disassociated his family from the past Original Sin and redeemed them also. Such absolute submission of the will usually comes under the classification of religious experience. In this broad sense, The Ballad of Billie Potts is also a religious poem. Its answer to the problem of Naturalism, which Warren had identified as being central to our age, is tragic, with both negative as well as affirmative dimensions of tragedy.

Warren’s continued concern with the theme of the past in the present gives special significance to his poem “History”. The past, when looked back to, is very encouraging and significant. So long as the goal or the final is not reached, there is direction in life - a direction towards that goal. Once the goal has been reached, the pinnacle becomes an anti-climax.

Another of Warren’s theme is that of identity which man tries to maintain throughout his life. Man can always return to his lost identity and if that return has been difficult and precarious, the achievement
becomes all the more precious because through this man learns to assess his moral awareness. Warren's *Brother to Dragons* is most notable for its philosophy that poetry is more than fantasy and is committed to the obligation of trying to say something about the human condition. As in most of his poems, in this poem also, Warren is primarily concerned with the meanings of the past and the need to accept the past for a meaningful life in the present. *Brother to Dragons* is a fantastic story, a terrible and blood-chilling story. It is, however, a shamefully true story. It is a story of the past being raked up in the present, in order that it may die its ultimate death and also so that life might find its meaningfulness in the present. Therefore, though Jefferson has died a long time ago, he is compelled to say to R.P.W., the voice of the author:

Therefore I walk and wake, and cannot die.
But I will tell you __
There was a house ___ *

Just as the Ancient Mariner is compelled to tell the tale of the albatross, in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the

Wedding Guest cannot but choose to hear, Jefferson has to repeat the story and R.P.W. who cannot but listen.

*Brother to Dragons* has been called “Warren’s best book, miraculous, if somewhat overt”, by Randall Jarrell 6. Delmore Schwartz saw it as “realization of the dominant tendency of modern literature to the modern poetry, no matter how often the works in question are entitled novels” 7. He regarded the violent brutality of *Brother to Dragons* as symbolic of modern evils like the concentration camps. Though Cleanth Brooks was somewhat more cryptic, he was impressed by the grand scale of the poem. He accepted that though it was “tactless in some regards, it was ‘alive’ ” 8. Of his own work, Warren simply said, “I think it’s a poem. I don’t worry about definitions— a narrative poem—but in dramatic structures. . . . It’s not a play”. 9

What is depicted in the verse-drama is a number of disembodied voices speaking, as if they were stage directions, from ‘no place’, and ‘at any time’, voices that go back and forth over the terrible event; what may have led to it, what may have followed it, speaking as though from another world. The poem tries to bring
out what the episode might have meant or those directly involved and for human nature and human relationships in general. Chief among these voices are those belonging to Jefferson, Lucy Lewis, Lilburn and Isham, her two sons, Lilburn’s wife, Letitia, Meriwether Lewis, a kin of Jefferson and Robert Penn Warren himself.

The title of the play is from The Bible: The Book of Job, : Chapter 30. Here Job laments over, not the string of inexplicable disasters that had befallen him, but rather, the loss of standing among men. Job’s suffering was due, not to materialistic loss, but loss of pride. Once highly honoured, he is now held in contempt. He has become a “brother to dragons and companion to owls”.

Being brother to dragons and companion to owls, after all, is a fate singularly underserved for a man like Thomas Jefferson who had always walked upright and perfect. Job puts forth the question to God bitterly:

Did I not weep for him that was in trouble?  
Was not my soul grieved for the poor? 10
And all Job gets for his high minded service, rendered in absolute innocence, is ridicule at the hands of "base men viler than the earth."

They are children of fools, yea
children of base men.
They were viler than the earth.
And now, I am their song,
Yea, I am their by-word. 11

At the background of the story is the Cretan Bull, invoked early by Jefferson, who calls him "our darling brother" - the same bull who engaged in the monstrous coupling with the infatuated Princess Pasiphae, "mother of all". There is also the huge black snake, encountered by the author-character, who, as he reports in a long reminiscence, went out to western Kentucky and Smithland, with his aging father, in the summer of 1946. While making the steep climb to the old Lewis property, he suddenly espied the snake:

The scalded belly of abomination,
Which,
Rustled on stone, reared up
In regal indolence and swag
. . . Taller than any man
The swollen head hung
Haloed and high in light.
He reared

Up high, and scared me, for a fact. Then
The bloat head sagged an inch, the tongue
withdraw. (pp.24-25)

The same Cretan Bull and great snake are recalled when Letitia Lewis, Lilburn's young wife, tells of the extremely harassing sexual experience she was subjected to one night by Lilburn. It was unheard of, frightening and exciting:

His voice said "Ah!" in the dark
Then he did it.
And it was an awful thing. . .
It was so awful that folks
could do so awful. (p. 49)

And later, Lilburn, as his wife went on remembering:

And sudden rose from my side,
And stood up tall like he would fill the room,
And fill the house maybe, and split the walls,
The nighttime would come pouring in like flood
Oh! He was big and way up there,
Like 'twas the darkness of an ugly sky. (p. 52)

The lines remind the listeners of male arrogance, ferocity, assault and release.

The central figure, Jefferson's nephew, Lilburn, has a maniacal self-love and a maniacal Oedipus
complex that consume him. He, at all costs, must secure vengeance for an imputed spiteful violation of his mother's memory by John and the other household Negroes. So strong is the complex that he hates even the grass that grows over his mother's grave that would remove all traces of his mother and would, consequently, reduce his hurt about which he would like to be perpetually reminded:

Now he stares at the new grave, raw, and the pain nags.
April: the grave here six months now, and the grass
Now makes the first green gesture of reclamation.
... Nor can he bear
The sight of the grass. He knows that when that vernal
Mitigation comes back, he
Will be deprived of something,
Of some essential reality. (p.66)

The senselessness of Lilburn's crime and the sinister forces it represents, all but overwhelm the hapless idealist, Jefferson, who has never accepted the fact that there is evil in all men. Jefferson had hitherto considered man to be the epitome of all
goodness. However, eventually, though reluctantly, he does reconcile to the fusion of aspiration and reality; between what he wishes it to be and what it is in actual. As a result, he achieves wholeness of spirit.

In many of his works, and especially in *Brother to Dragons*, Warren stresses that it is the true spiritual principle that brings about a transformation from wretchedness to peace and that nefarious influence brings about only a perverted spirituality. Both Jefferson and Lilburn search for spiritual peace by grasping at abstract ideals that have nothing to do with spiritual peace, and all the time skirt the real issue.

Unable to find peace within because of the lack of inner peace and non-acceptance of religious traditions, the individual searches for it blindly from outside the self. From this outside source, he demands absolute loyalty that will further his own interested motives, whether he admits to this tacit agreement or not. When such self-centred and self-promoting paths are followed, the natural outcome is disillusionment and violence. When man starts believing in his own
omnipotence and right to set standards, he may go to any extent, even crime, to make his vision prevail. And thus we have Dostoevski’s Roskolnikov in Crime and Punishment, Lucifer in Milton’s Paradise Lost and Lilburn in Warren’s Brothers to Dragons.

The persistent undercurrents of violence in Brothers to Dragons reveal Warren’s increasingly urgent sense that the provenance of Original Sin is universal and inescapable. He decries humans for accepting human nature as it is, in its sin and ignobility. As against this, it is the positive values that man embraces, even in his depravity, that Warren celebrates in his poem, Brothers to Dragons:

Jefferson: But knowledge is the most powerful cost.
It is the bitter bread.
I have eaten the bitter bread.
In joy, would end. (p.120)

Lilburn’s is a self-generated obsession. Consumed by Oedipal attraction, he idealises Lucy Lewis and makes of mother-love, a worshipful ritual - to be carried to its extremes, irregardless of the
consequences. This intense, otherwise positive feeling, leads to crime and violence. In Lilburn we see the monstrous aspect of our belief that ‘evils done for good and in good’s name’ and a single-minded idealism can be tragic. Lilburn does not have to go so far as to make a pact with the devil. He had only to follow the good impulse - his all-consuming love for his mother, to be corrupted. If after his mother’s death, Lilburn had been humble in his sufferings, he might have escaped the degradation. But he insists that all others revere his mother’s memory, as he does – by which he converts a good impulse into an absolute form of violence and tyranny.

When the household Negroes, in particular, seem to forget Lucy Lewis, Lilburn’s fury knows no bounds. He finds, to his horror, that the love which he holds to be of paramount importance, diminishes and along with it, his own strength. In order to assert his strength, he tries to keep it intact. His fear, lest the organising principal of his life, his all-absorbing love for his dead mother, be destroyed, moves him to fiendish activity. Even after his mother is dead, he cannot bear
to hear or see any insult thrown at her — real or imagined. He imagines that her spoons and cups are being stolen and broken and that her memory is no longer sacred to the slaves. He whips himself up into great frenzy over the imagined effrontery to the memory of his mother. Even as he axes John in the meat house, he shouts in anger:

. . . . But now's the last
Black son-of-a-bitching hand that ever,
So help me God, will make my mother
grieve. (p.82)

Lilburn is the victim of self-deception about his own motives because he judges the morality of an act in terms of its advantage to himself, while all the time pretending to be dispassionate. Because he is unable to see his own limitations, he becomes autocratic and single minded in his insistence of what is good and acceptable. Such one-track, headlong advancement towards preconceived ends lead to evil and eventually, destruction.

When self-knowledge eludes Lilburn, he adheres to his mistaken ideas of the good and does the
worst. His unreasonable self-imposed love for his mother unreasonably binds him to the conception of his mother’s greatness of soul and causes him to become more and more intolerant of anyone feeling any less.

The poem’s other theme is made obvious when Jefferson, addressing Robert Penn Warren, and reflecting on snakes and monsters that inhabit the earth, says:

. . . . and know
That all earth’s monsters are simply innocent,
But one, that master-monster — ah, once,
I thought him innocent. (p. 26)

He also knew, as he insists, more than once, that men are capable of folly, lust, blind selfishness, etc., but MAN, he had so deeply believed, was essentially good. He thought of Philadelphia and the historic moment when the Declaration of Independence was signed:

Philadelphia, Yes, I knew we were only men,
Defined in our errors and interests. But I,
a man too...
And my heart cried out,
"Oh! This is man." (p. 7)

It is precisely this state of being, this blind joy, that deprives Jefferson of an actual insight
into the horrendous act committed by his nephew. When RPW ie., Robert Penn Warren, chides him for lack of certain pragmatic perspective, Jefferson replies:

What I lack, my friend, is the dream  
Of Joy I once had, and that,  
From the way you talk, I doubt  
You ever had.

RPW: Al right -  
I simply never had it.

TJ : I did.  
And that was joy until -

RPW: You mean, until Lilburn -  
TJ: Yes. (P.34)

Although Jefferson went to his grave, publicly espousing a belief in human innocence and goodness, he has, as he forces himself to say:

long since come to the considered opinion  
That love, all kinds, is but a mask  
to hide the brute face of fact,  
And that is the un-uprootable  
ferocity of self. . . (p.33)

It is for this excessive revulsion for the old optimism that RPW chides Jefferson for lacking a pragmatic perspective. Jefferson's obdurately sombre view of human nature remains unchanged as the drama-poem goes forward: the axe-murder verbally re-enacted by the
ghostly voice of Isham Lewis, the local sheriff’s issuing a warrant for the arrest of the two brothers, the death of Lilburn, who, by a trick, induces Isham to kill him, the latter days and the death of Isham and the story of Merriwether Lewis and his suicide in a frontier inn. Then in the choral climatic scene, the voices speak out in the darkness ....

Lucy begs her brother: "Oh, take Lil’s hand in the darkness."

TJ

Look. Blood’s slick on that hand! You’d have me compound that crime?

Lucy

But, you do compound it! By refusal. For what poor Lilburn did in madness and exultation, /You do in vanity.

Merriwether

Look at your arm – its lifted!/Is the axe there? Ah, the rage of virtue! At your sister now. Will you strike her down?

TJ

My son, be still a moment. If what you call my lie undid you, It has
Lucy: Brother, touch him.

Brother, touch him.

TJ: Touch him - touch him -

Yes?

Yes, look! I've touched.

Oh, may we hope to find -

No, thus create -

Lucy: The possibility of reason,

Yes. And create it only from

Our most evil despair?

TJ: Yes, what steel striking,

What stone may revoke,

In the midst of our coiling darkness. The incandescence of the heart's great flare. (P.116-119)

And Jefferson closes the scene with:

But knowledge is the most powerful cost.

It is the bitter bread

I have eaten the bitter bread.

In joy would end. (p.120)

*Brother to Dragons*, Warren sees to it that Jefferson comes to see the fallacy of his view of man. MAN, he discovers, is no good. Evil lurks behind the fairest of appearances. Jefferson falls into despair. But, later, under his sister's persuasion, Jefferson's
faith in man is renewed - but it has become a chastised faith:

Jefferson: Reason? That's the word
I sought to live by - but, oh. We have been lost in the dark, and I was lost who had dreamed there was a light. How could I now show you the light of reason When I had lost it when your blood ran out? (P.119)

Both Jefferson and Lilburn lacked the sense of limitation which is essential to the religious attitude. Both thought themselves to be superior to the common man on account of one virtue. Both felt that they were immune to debasement. Surely, God, if he was just, would never allow them to live among ... “base men...viler than the earth.”

Warren, in fact, says that, evil, at least its germ, is universal. All the characters in Brother to Dragons sin, and they all suffer because they cannot transcend their failings and emerge completely from the darkness of their inner selves. None of them are wholly
innocent and glorious, as Jefferson imagines men to be at
the beginning.

Lucy Lewis, radiant as she is, is prevented
by pride from reaching out towards Lilburn as well as John
in their sufferings; the spontaneous gesture which would
have alleviated some of the hurt and resulted in her own
fulfilment. Similarly, Letitia is prevented from making
towards Lilburn, after Lucy’s death, the gesture of her
willingness to forgive his past violence to her, that
which would have gained his love and satisfied his
manliness. Letitia’s brother is indignant when he learns
that Lilburn had forcibly used Letitia and he proclaims
loudly how sweeping would have been his revenge if he had
known. Letitia says in return that he would not have
avenged her out of brotherly love, but out of pride at
having protected the family honour:

Letitia: Oh, your sister!
It’s not your sister care about!
Oh, sure, you’d kill my Lilburn
if you knew, Brag in the tavern
how you killed a Lewis, And how
no man could do your sister
dirty. Your sister!- Oh not
Aunt Cat, Lilburn’s coloured nanny, really loves him. But, even in her love, there is calculation manifest in the silent struggle that had continued for years between herself and Lucy Lewis, for Lilburn’s affection. To a degree, she also gets what she deserves, when at the time of Lucy’s death, Lilburn disgorges the black milk he had been nursed upon. Isham too is as guilty as Lilburn for the butchering of John … for Isham knew instinctively what Lilburn was going to do and did nothing to prevent it. Ironically, John was also half willing to meet his fate, as he was, in some part, an accomplice to the deed. He almost wills, with obscene pleasure, the fatal stroke and seems more in love with the “sweet injustice to himself”, than he is fearful of death. Even though he keeps running away, he is always drawn back hypnotically, again and again, to Lilburn and his inevitable fate.

I find that more than any other poem, Brother to Dragons represents a mature, if sometimes a muted statement of Warren’s values. From his narratives,
Warren elicits certain conclusions about human life. While for Warren, the absolutes of traditions have an independent existence, he avoids sentimentality and provides for their inevitable definition by allowing them to emerge from the circumstances themselves.

In *Brother to Dragons*, Warren is insistent upon the transforming influence of the true spiritual principal of the satanic influence of perverted influences. Both Lilburn and the early Jefferson illustrate a familiar pattern in Warren's work: the individual's search for spiritual peace by side-stepping his inner difficulties. Unable to find peace within, through his lack of internal resources and through his too easily disregard of the truth to be found in religious traditions, the individual searches for it eagerly and aggressively outside the self - in his various experiences of Nature, crime and sin.

Despite their different purposes in life, Warren shows how close Jefferson's psychology is to Lilburn's. Both seek to define humans through self-determined abstraction, and both wish to assert an
innocence consonant with it. Both lack, to a great sense, a sense of tangible realities. Both become enslaved to an overpowering vision. Both are romantic in that they tend to transform by wishful thinking, things as they are into what they are not. As with so many of Warren's misguided characters, they both want to cling to a too easily attained explanation for an essentially unexplainable world. Hate,— the result of an inborn quality in Lilburn's case, and nobility,— the result of a misguided intellectuality in Jefferson's, are but different thrusts towards timelessness in Time. The only difference between Lilburn and Jefferson is in sensitivity:

Jefferson: Look --- blood's slick on that hand!
         You'd have me compound the crime?

Lucy: But you do compound it! By refusal
      For what poor Lilburn did in madness
      and exaltation,
      You do it in vanity. (p. 116)

Both Lucy Lewis and Jefferson are educated by tragedy. Jefferson learns the more slowly because his mistaken vision is so inflexible. His conversion from a restrictive idealism to a more integral view of life is the chief situation explored in the verse-drama. Lucy
Lewis, reborn through her death, which is the result of her inability to cope with reality, redeems Jefferson by making him aware of realities outside those apparent to the intellect when it sees only what it is interested in seeing. During most of the drama, Jefferson is in the first period of his redemption - when he has become disillusioned with his earlier ideals and has come to realise the universality of evil in men. Only at the end of the poem, through Lucy's intervention, does he reach a spiritual sense of peace and the second period of his redemption - when he can acknowledge Original Sin without self-accusation.

In the first stage, Jefferson is haunted by the fact that human nature readily turns its back upon the glories of which it is capable, to revel instead in acts of evil. Like Lilburn, Jefferson lacks to a large degree, the spiritual strength, the stabilising philosophy he needs to fight against the evil which destroys his glorified vision. His total belief and immersion in his vision leads to his sense of betrayal. But, when one of his own blood commits an absolutely evil act, it is extinguished altogether. Trying to fi...
reality in accordance with his own set of standards and ideals, he fails to understand the circumstances under which he can set things right. At this point, Jefferson both over-emphasises as well as underplays the intellect. He becomes bewildered, disillusioned, almost cynical in outlook. At this stage, the pessimism is so powerful that it shrouds his earlier humanism:

I know, for I once thought to contrive
A form to hold the purity of man's hope.
...If then I had known what I know now (p.119)

In a world where evil is apparently supreme and is capable of overpowering the good, Jefferson comes to feel that violence alone can bring about truth. He now assumes that "all values are abrogated in blankness," and he reproves his sister for not having struck John after he had returned from Lilburn's beatings at the tavern. At this stage he does not understand how close his own counsel is to that suggested to Lilburn by his own unleashed nature before the crime. Yet, from Lilburn's brand of violence, Jefferson had recoiled in loathing.

The fact that redemption is often derived from violence between the polar connection, between the
strongly negative evil and the strongly positive good, does not justify the counsel given by Jefferson to Lucy. At this point Jefferson does not realise that Lucy’s inability to conquer her pride and assert the love which inwardly prompts her, is her real sin and the ultimate cause of her son’s tragedy.

In his first stage of regeneration, Jefferson cannot see past the reality of human evil, which has paralysed his soul. In his obsession with its prevalence, he is as unreasoning in his denial of aspiration as he had been devoted to it previously. At a time of crisis the inflexible philosophy of life, whether it is the outcome of demonic pride in Lilburn or angelic aspiration in Jefferson, fails to understand the complexities of experience. In rebuttal of the reality that he misunderstood, Jefferson now condemns love as “but a mask to hide the brute face of fact,/ and that face is the immitigable ferocity of self”. (p.119) Since he has had to forego his first enthusiasm of perfectionism which motivated him at the First Continental Congress, Jefferson now recognizes the “darkness of the self” and its labyrinth wilderness. At
the height of his dreams he had been realist enough to acknowledge the existence of evil, but he did really try to minimise it. He knew from his reading of history, for instance, that there lurked horror in the "farther room" and the act and the motives are not always backed by good deeds and good intentions, respectively. He also knew that all men are not innocent despite his belief in innocence as an ideal.

His disillusionment, however, makes him perceptive where he had earlier been merely suspicious. He now realises that it has a magnetic character since all things come to it and seek it out unnervingly. He sees the 'lurking beast' within us all, a 'minotaur' to be found at the last turn of the spirit's labyrinth. This beast, "our brother, our darling brother," is not, in Warren's view, to be denied by any mere effort of the will; his insidious promptings can be finally overcome by an effort of the will, if one can force himself to make it. Like Pasiphae with her unnatural lust, we can be enamoured of our evil. After Lilburn's crime, Jefferson clearly sees this. Jefferson's initial vision of man's preternatural innocence is the reverse of Pasiphae's.
She was evil, but she rationalised her evil with a fleeting vision of the innocent good, while Jefferson thought of man as innocent only to find him besmirched with evil. Thus the falsehood of Jefferson's

. . . towering definition, angelic, arrogant, abstract,
Greaved in glory, thewed with light. (p.8)

is inescapable. That earth's monsters were innocent in their lack of knowledge - Jefferson was quite aware of it. But that man, capable of knowledge and self-definition, could be a 'master-monster' and exhibit only a blank, ignorant innocence, he could not accept. Neither had his nephew, Meriwether Lewis, understood "the tracklessness of the human heart" until the facts of experience forced him to do so.

Now that his original concept of MAN had been proved wrong, Jefferson would have stressed the truth about man at all costs, he asserted, had he known then what he had later on come to learn. He would have run with the "hot coals" of that truth till they had burned through his flesh to the bone. Jefferson then concludes that evil is progressive, that one deed of
horror can poison all else. When he still tries to cling tenaciously to 'the general human fulfilment', he finds that violent evil intrudes into his thoughts and blackmails him emotionally.

In his near-hysteria, Jefferson looks upon Lilburn's deed as the reigning archetype of human psychology. It, to him, becomes the evil virus that infects all hope and forms a cloud of curse that envelopes the land he had once loved. To him, all social injustices and all crimes are somehow inherent in the fall of the meat-axe and the fact that his nephew could commit such a crime and other people could also commit similar crimes. Only much later does Jefferson realise that one must not only shudder at evil, but try to actively understand it, and also that suffering, in some degree, atones for it.

The second stage of Jefferson's education provides the poem with its central meaning. Under the guidance of Lucy Lewis, Jefferson adjusts his original resplendent vision of man's nobility to the actual facts of human existence, especially to the cardinal fact of
original sin. A grander nobility than Jefferson's concepts, consists, Lucy claims, in testing that concept in the world. His redemption is assured when his faith in the idea is renewed and once a "deep distress" has humanised it and once he relates it to mankind. The dream, or idea of the future requires, for its completion, the facts of the past:

Now I should hope to find the courage to say
That the dream of the future is better than
The dream of the past, no matter how terrible.
(p.118)

For without the knowledge of the past we cannot dream of the future. Since lack of self-knowledge is Original Sin in both Lilburn and Jefferson, and since complete self-knowledge is impossible, Original Sin is universal, and we are implicated in it and with each other. However, our complicity in the sin is reduced and we are redeemed to an extent when we walk in humility and self-knowledge.

In an interview with Richard Sale, Warren described his intentions in writing Audobon: A Vision. "It's about Audobon's life as a kind of focus for a lot of things about humans. I hope it's the way life is. Its
about his heroic solution and about his problems and the problems of being a man." 12

Warren elaborates on what attracted him in a later interview with Peter Stitt, saying, "I began to see him as a certain kind of man, a man who has finally learned to accept his fate. The poem is about a man and his fate. Audobon resisted his fate and thought it was evil - and that a man is supposed to support his family and so forth. But, by the end, he accepts his fate" 13:

Was not the lost dauphin, though handsome
was only
Base-born and not even able
To make a decent living, was only
Himself. . .what
Is man but his passion? *

hat Warren was often dissatisfied with his thought process is best understood from the fact that he has written, re-written and re-examined his poems so often not only

* Robert Penn Warren : *New and Selected Poems 1923-1985* :


In future all textual references shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses.
because of his exacting craftsmanship but also because of the need that he felt for changing and editing his writings to match the dynamism of life and Nature that he encountered with the passage of time. The changes in each version might be miniscule, but the effect is tremendous. The conflict of spirit and the expansion of his feeling of oneness with Nature is seen perhaps best in his *Thirty-Six Poems* and *Eleven Poems of the Same Theme*—a collection of ten long years. Time and again the poet has added or deleted something in each new version. 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’. Through his poems he never lets us forget Adam and Eve who are heavenly blissful and contented because of their lack of worldly wisdom. With the loss of innocence on account of their own wilful disobedience, they, by eating that fateful fruit of the Tree of Knowledge brought upon themselves the power to question. Man is the only living being who is capable of questioning and seeking further knowledge. He tries to rationalise all happenings around him. He tries to delve
deep into the mysteries of Nature itself. With his 'logic' he tries to analyse the 'illogicalness' of Natural phenomena. Armed with 'a little knowledge' and deficient in self-realisation, man fails to understand that he, like the worst of sinners, is a brother to dragons and companion to owls. Mac Carland Sumpter in *The Cave*, discovers that the terror of God is that he answers prayers—even unspoken ones—that spring from the inner recess of the inner self:

MacCarland Sumpter shook with his first knowledge of the dark deviousness of that God who knows how to wait. The terror of God is that God conforms His will to man's will. The terror of God is that He bends ear to man's prayer. Knock and it shall be opened unto you. and when it is opened, who can withstand the horror of that vision of prayer fulfilled?*

---

Robert Penn Warren: *The Cave*. Random House, New York, 1959. p 118. In future all textual references shall be to this edition and only the page number shall be indicated in parentheses
Yet another aspect of disordered desires deriving from a lack of self-realisation, is manifest in Warren's recurring victor-victim theme. Warren is fond of posing the question, "How innocent is innocence really? Are we not victors and victims both?" In other words, Warren is speculating that the victim often really gets what he wants. If the victim really knew his own heart, its evilness, and his own desire to relinquish all responsibility and lay down the burden of guilt on someone else, so that he would not have to admit his own guilt, he would be horrified at what he saw:

"Oh! Who is whose victim?" *

asks 'poor', 'innocent' Manty in *Bands of Angels*. Her unprotected weakness invites her rape by Hamish Bond and later she forces herself to admit that perhaps Bond was merely answering her secret and unuttered desire. Her

reluctance was probably phony.

This theme is explored in great detail in *Brother to Dragons*. Lilburn Lewis horribly hacks to death, in the meat house, before the assembled slaves, the helpless John, whose crime was to break a pitcher that belonged to Lilburn’s mother. The worst of the affair is that Lilburn had planned his brutal atrocity even before sending John to the spring to fetch water in that pitcher. Therefore, judgement had been passed and punishment decided even before the deed was done. Surely, in this case, the victim-victor relationship, the evil, appears to be one side. But actually, John wished to be hacked to death. He felt that his deed was a peculiar fulfilment for which he has so long lived and he wrecks his merciless ‘frailty’ on Lilburn. John, like most of Warren’s victims, is a lover of ‘sweet injustice to himself’. He silently gloats over his face which has gone ‘blown with pain’ and is a ‘reproach and an insult’ to the dead mother who had sent him to fetch Lilburn. He protests over the injustice. Who ever heard of a Negro protesting! Then he ran away too. Another mistake. Surely
a knowing mistake for, in those days, where 'could a
nigger run to? So we have Isham saying:

Then I knew.

Then Lilburn was shoving
the pitcher there to John.
I knew he would.

John took it and my breath came short.

I just can't say: "Look, John, don't take it!"

(p. 79)

Isham knew what was on his brother's, Lilburn's, mind when he admonished John to bring water quickly without breaking his mother's pitcher. In fact, Lilburn was goading John to break the pitcher just as John was determined to break it. Lilburn knew what was going to happen, He was getting himself ready to enact the final scene. He got his pistol ready even before John's arrival. He waited for John's return knowing very well that he was afraid of the dark and most unlikely to bring back the pitcher in one piece. Ultimately John, the nigger, was pushed into the meat house. He just fell in:
R.P.W. asks : "Did that surprise you?"

Isham's reply is: "No, twas natural-like, and no surprise, Like happened long ago.

R.P.W. adds : And John himself, no doubt, felt it as some Peculiar fulfilment he had long lived with. (p.81)

John is quite aware of what is happening to him. He wills it to happen. He does not even scream, though his mouth is opened wide as the axe falls on him again and again. Along with John, Lilburn also suffers. The sin and the punishment are identical. And therefore, both have to find their own peculiar fulfilment to be redeemed. That is why Lucy, Jefferson's sister, insists that he touch Lilburn's hand though it is slick with blood. After touching him and becoming a part of the crime, the original sin, Jefferson feels relieved because he accepts the natural; that all men are sinners and Lilburn's is not such a horrendous crime as he had earlier made it out to be. Jefferson's mistake had been to idolize nature and man with his 'own logic'.
On the other hand, Letitia, Lilburn's wife, admits that had she got water and bathed John's blood and bound up his wound when he had been beaten up by Lilburn the first time, things might have been different. The irrevocableness of the boy's gaze might have been withdrawn. Perhaps, John would not have willed Lilburn to axe him, it being the only punishment that he could bring upon him.

Some of Warren's characters, however, desire and strive for the wrong things because of insufficient knowledge of the external world. The world is extremely complex and they are unable to grasp its meaning. In order to come to terms with themselves and to make peace with their ego, they turn back to their past history, in search of their identity. Simply going back to their natural mothers is not sufficient, they must go even further back, to the mother of all, Nature.

In *The Ballad of Billie Potts*, Little Billie Potts has had to flee to the West to escape imprisonment for a crime that he could not pull off successfully. Years later, after becoming a successful
and prosperous man, his fate and destiny inevitably draw him back to his past, in search of his identity. Warren says that Little Billie cannot truly understand himself without first understanding who he really is. So, Little Billie turns back homeward.

Little Billie Potts goes back to his earthly mother, the womb that has given him birth. But, in order to know his real identity, he has to go further back, to the abyss of the unknown, his real mother, Nature. And thus, Billie must die to become one with ultimate history, Nature. In order to do that, he has to repudiate his human mother, some human values and go back to the imperial, the absolute - Nature. To absolve himself from his past crime and find redemption, he must become one with Nature.

Before he can earn his redemption, however, Little Billie must discover his identity and his past. He has to define the nature of his guilt as well as of his innocence. Through the story of Billie Potts, Warren
helps us to trace our history all the way back to the first Fall of Man, his 'Original Sin', which has been constantly reenacted through the generations, and prove the orthodoxy of evil.

Though man is able to trace his history backwards, he cannot see what is in store for him in the future. And it is this very future that will bear the brunt of his present actions, be it piety or crime. To earn a future free from evil, he must repent and redeem himself, in the present, even if he has to pay for it with his life.

Warren agrees that a part of the cause for satanic evilness is the original sin in which man is born. But, he also insists that it is not the end of the story. Not all men are devilishly evil. There are some people in the world, who, in spite of the predominantly criminal nature of mankind, overcome the temptation to do evil and turn their faces away from it. There is Thomas Jefferson for whom it is excruciatingly painful to believe, that MAN, God's own creature, is anything but noble and good. Meriwether Lewis, his other nephew, is
led to commit suicide because he is unable to compromise with the tutoring of his uncle Jefferson, that MAN is an embodiment of all that is good and upright. He could not cope with the evilness that he was surrounded by.

Lilburn is loved most by three women and a dog. Strangely enough, it is these three women, Lucy, Letitia and Aunt Cat, and the dog, that betray him at the end. Their love is not strong enough to give him support and comfort when he needs it most. And who more is to be blamed than Lilburn himself who shuts out the world and immerses himself in self-love and self-righteousness’?

It is man’s shunning of the healing balm of love and Nature that leads Lilburn to extreme ungodliness. He shuns and repudiates everything that loves him. The first person that he scorns is his wife, Letitia. Innocent and ‘angel’ that she is, she is unable to welcome the beastly sexual aggression that Lilburn imposes on her. She is unable to relate the happenings of the previous night without shame. Shaken with the experience that is abominable to her, she lies when she says that she had liked it, because of her love for him.
But, for all her devotion, the only retort she receives is:

But, "Angel", said Lilburn, "just yesterday, you were an angel and your hair was gold. And had golden stars in it, I put them there. But now . . . but now I see when angels come down to earth, they step in dung, like us. And like it." (p.52)

And Lilburn is left empty and humiliated because he sees through the lie. He feels deprived of a real 'wife'—not because he is, but because he wants to believe that he is. His answer to the hurt in his pride is a drinking bout, followed by the beating up of a nigger boy that his mother, Lucy, sent to fetch him home. And it is at this point that Lucy also repudiates him by dying and leaving him alone to fend for himself.

After Lucy's death, when Lilburn looked so little and so weak, Letitia, was not able to make that one movement of a gentle touch or a whispered word that
would have soothed him in his hour of tribulation. She simply could not budge.

It was Aunt Cat, Lilburn’s black nurse, who reached out to comfort him. Even as he was coming under the spell of her soothing words, he abruptly withdraws on hearing her say, "Chile, your Mammy’s dead. But, I’s your Mammy too." Lilburn angrily spits out his phlegm and ‘pukes the last black drop’. He repudiates Aunt Cat who wants to usurp his mother’s place. Instantly Aunt Cat realises that her battle for capturing power over her ‘Chile’, from the rival, the white woman, the real mother, is lost and she is defeated in spite of the death of the mother. While loving him still, she remembers this rejection of her overtures - a remembrance that proves fatal for him. It is she who sends Letitia away to her brother after the crime had been committed, for, ‘love of Letitia’, perhaps, but certainly to spread the word. “Hush! Hit won’t be me to tell it, him my Chile.” Yet, it is Aunt Cat who sets the scene for Letitia’s tale of how she heard a scream. In her very denial, Aunt Cat declares the truth.
Even Lilburn's hound's affectionate gaze angers him. He becomes so furious that he kicks the loving beast in its side. Thinking that there is some mistake, the hound drags itself back to its master. But, there had been no mistake. With great deliberation, Lilburn kicks the dog again. The dog flees. But, of course, it comes back and licks his hand. The hound forgives him. But it also remembers. It is the hound that unearths the jaw-bone of the nigger, half burnt, with a little nigger flesh sticking to it. The Sheriff sees it and gets it.

I am of the opinion that Warren implies that love and Nature are synonymous. Repudiate one and you repudiate the other. Take care. So long as you respect the power of Nature and acknowledge the fact that Nature has, and has always had a hold over you, you are safe and one with the world. Ignore Nature and act in contravention to her ways, life becomes bitter. There is no escape from the horrendous end that awaits you.

In his own words, Warren says:

All items listed ... belong to the world
In which all things are continuous,
And are parts of the original dream which
I am now trying to discover the logic of. This
Is the process whereby pain of the past in its pastness
May be converted in the future tense
of joy. *

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 order to reach his destined goal, he has to discover his true self. He has to make peace with himself and then make the ultimate sacrifice - that of his life, to redeem himself from the path of crime and immorality.

It is for this very reason that Lucy again and again asks Jefferson to take Lilburn’s hand so that not only Lilburn’s madness is forgiven, but Jefferson’s vanity is also pardoned. What right had Jefferson to take it on himself to declare that MAN, all MEN, were the epitomes of goodness and nobility and justice. What right had he to teach Meriwether that there was no evil in the world and then set him free to survive in a world just the opposite. In his own way, was not Jefferson as guilty of Meriwether’s suicide as Lilburn was of the hacking to pieces of John? Then what right had Jefferson to preach of the goodness of MAN and refuse to acknowledge man and the world as they truly were?

I feel that Warren is right on insisting that it is only meet that Jefferson, guided by Lucy’s wisdom, takes Lilburn’s hand and pardons him. In this way, Jefferson is also saved from complicity with evil and given knowledge of evil, the acceptance of which in itself, a kind of redemption. Jefferson realises that the dream of the future is better than the dream of th
past and that formulating a bright present, here and now, in spite of a dark past, will ultimately lead to a brighter future.

Warren says that Man can attain glory only through self-realisation and unflinching acceptance of the truth. He must accept his modest place in the Universe with humility. He must sacrifice his mistaken arrogance that he is ruler of all he perceives and take refuge in the lap of omnipresent and omniscience Nature. It is only through acceptance and sacrifice and humility that he can hope to be redeemed himself from his perilous condition.
Reference

1. Geoffrey Chaucer: *Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*. P.1


10. *The Bible: Job:30.*

11. Ibid.
