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**Saying the Unsayable:
Language and the Tension of the World in the
Late Poetry of Robert Penn Warren**

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fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

This thesis explores the turn in Robert Penn Warren's later poetry toward the problematic nature of language which he discerned in the unresolvable tension between the "sayable" and the "unsayable." Warren's struggle within this tension of language is not formulated in a clearly defined philosophy or theory; rather it is conceived through his attention to *poiesis*, to the act of poetic creation itself. Warren conceives of language as fallen, fractured, and sometimes arbitrary, but he also envisions a power within this limitation by which language enacts and actuates those things which may not be spoken. This concern for language is shaped to a large extent by his understanding through Coleridge of the role of the imagination and is evidenced by his attention in this later poetry to the voice of the world and to the act of naming. The poet, in Warren's word, "yearns" for the moment of articulation which both acknowledges the boundaries of the sayable and is empowered by the absent presence of the unsayable. The poet's quest after the unsayable is open-ended; thus, we find a poetry which resists closure and totalization through an on-going questioning of what it means to dwell in the world.

By tracing out the development of this line of thought from Warren's 1946 essay on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading," through his 1969 poem, *Audubon: A Vision*, and in his subsequent poetry and criticism, it is argued that Warren's increased attention to language as both the problem and the power within the act of poetic creation discloses a subtle but discernible shift out of a modernist critical paradigm in which language is the tool of the poet and toward a more postmodern conception of language as the endless play of difference. Furthermore, by reading Warren within a certain heritage of thought that runs from Coleridge through Kierkegaard and Heidegger, it is claimed that Warren's poetry both anticipates certain emphases in postmodern thought and contributes toward the possibility of theological articulation within the postmodern condition.

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List of Abbreviations

Note: After the first reference to the following, each will be abbreviated in notes and references.

A	<i>Audubon: A Vision</i>
AE	<i>Altitudes and Extensions 1980-1984</i>
APIM	<i>A Plea in Mitigation: Modern Poetry and the End of an Era</i>
"APPI"	"A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading"
BD 53	<i>Brother to Dragons (1953 Version)</i>
BD 79	<i>Brother to Dragons (1979 Version)</i>
BH	<i>Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980</i>
CC	<i>The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge</i>
DP	<i>Democracy and Poetry</i>
KR	<i>Kenyon Review</i>
LSUP	<i>Louisiana State University Press</i>
MHQL	<i>Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature</i>
MQ	<i>Mississippi Quarterly</i>
NSE	<i>New and Selected Essays</i>
NSP	<i>New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985</i>
NT	<i>Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978</i>
OE	<i>Or Else - Poem/Poems 1968-1974</i>
RV	<i>Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980</i>
SE	<i>Selected Essays</i>
SOR	<i>Southern Review</i>
SP	<i>Selected Poems: 1923-1975</i>
SPNO	<i>Selected Poems: New and Old 1923-1966</i>
SR	<i>Sewanee Review</i>

The secret things belong to the LORD our God,
but the things revealed belong to us
and to our children
forever.

Deuteronomy 29:29

He went like one that hath been stunned
And is of sense forlorn:
A sadder and a wiser man,
He rose the morrow morn.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Lines 522-25

Chapter One
Language as "The Matter Itself"

Robert Penn Warren's later poetry discloses an increasing understanding that the fundamental problem and power of poetry both lie within the limits and limitations of language. In a 1967 interview, Warren stated, "Most writers are trying to find what they think or feel. They are not simply working from the given, but working toward the given, saying the unsayable, and steadily asking, 'What do I really feel about this?'"¹ Whether or not this is true of other contemporary American poets, this was certainly the case for Warren, whose later poetry displays a shift away from considering language as the "given" from which the poet works and movement toward the problematic of language. Language becomes the "given" toward which the poet must unavoidably work; it is what the poet seeks to find through the act of poetic creation. Warren described himself on more than one occasion as a "yearner," a man who wanted to believe in some sort of theological creed but could not. This yearning, though, displays itself most prominently in his developing struggle with language. As a poet, he yearns to reconcile himself with the problematic nature of language so that he might make a meaningful articulation in the midst of the world. He yearns to be able to say the unsayable.

The development of Warren's understanding of language and of the act of poetic creation in his poetry and criticism may be seen as a subtle shift from a predominantly modernist poetics - in which "Form

¹ "How a Poet Works" in *Robert Penn Warren Talking: Interviews 1950-1978*, ed. by Floyd C. Watkins and John T. Hiers (New York: Random House, 1980), 90. Further references to this volume will appear in the text under the abbreviation *RPW Talking*.

(Being) is ontologically prior to temporality, identity to difference, the Word to words"² - and toward a more postmodern poetics concerned precisely with temporality, with difference, and with the ongoing and dis-closive task of "telling the story," as Warren urges at the end of *Audubon*. It is a shift from *mimesis* to *poiesis*, that is, from a mimetic narrative of reality, in which language corresponds to and represents the contents of reality, to a poetic re-creation of reality in which language illuminates our understanding of what Warren describes as "being here" and actuates the response of the reader. It is also a shift in the way of understanding the poet's relationship with language: no longer is the poet the master of language as the tool used to craft the "well wrought urn," but instead he finds himself in the service of language, listening so that he might begin to speak. Rather than simply using language to question "reality" as something that is distinct from language, the poet queries language itself so that he might understand not only the "real" but being as it discloses itself in the very fallenness of language.³ Rooted in such a de-centered and dis-closive questioning, Warren's linguistic turn shows an affinity with a postmodern poetics which remains open to the condition of "being-in-the-world."⁴ In the midst of the world, the concern of the poet is not so much communication - "What shall I say?" - as it is articulation - "How can I speak?" How does the poet say the unsayable?

Within the course of Warren's development as a poet, novelist, and critic, this linguistic turn would seem to mark off Warren's later work

² William V. Spanos, "Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature: A Preface" in *Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature*, ed. by William V. Spanos (Bloomington, IN, and London: Indiana University Press, 1979), xv. Subsequent references to this volume of essays will appear in the text under the abbreviation *MHQL*.

³ See the discussion of "The Whole Question" in Chapter Six.

⁴ I acknowledge that this is Martin Heidegger's phrase. We will use it throughout this thesis in connection with Warren's notion of "being here" to further delineate his understanding of being.

from his earlier work. This distinction must be seen, though, as reflecting both continuity and discontinuity in his development. When considering the course of Warren's work, critics usually divide his career into three distinct phases or periods.⁵ While schematizations vary, these distinctions seem to fall out according to the publication of Warren's selected volumes.⁶ The first phase would include Warren's work up to the publication of his first selected volume, *Selected Poems: 1923-1943*. Warren's poetry during this period is marked by the High Modernism of T. S. Eliot, whose poetry had impacted him as a student at Vanderbilt, and by the meters and diction of the Metaphysical poets - such as Andrew Marvell - who were regarded so highly by Eliot and other Modernist poets. The influence of both the Metaphysical and the Modernist poets on Warren's early thought is made evident in his B.Litt. thesis, completed in 1930 as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, which dealt with the satires of the Elizabethan poet and dramatist John Marston.⁷ In his study, Warren isolated two critical issues in the work of Marston which persisted as central issues for the New Critics: "the place of 'fiction' in poetry and the relation of style to content" (72). Warren's analysis of these matters both anticipates his own turn toward a more narrative voice and foreshadows his arguments regarding pure poetry in his 1942 essay, "Pure and Impure Poetry."⁸ Warren's early poetry and criticism clearly display his sense of the power of poetic language and his struggle to find his own voice. That voice is probably heard most

⁵ See Victor Strandberg, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 1-20; Randolph Paul Runyon, *The Braided Dream: Robert Penn Warren's Late Poetry* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 1-10; and J.D. McClatchy, "Robert Penn Warren: Rare Prosperities" in *White Paper: On Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 82-85.

⁶ I would therefore include Warren's last two selected volumes in his final phase, what I am referring to as his later poetry.

⁷ "A Study of John Marston's Satires" (unpublished B.Litt. thesis, Oxford University, 1930). This thesis is held in the Duke Humphreys Library of the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

⁸ In *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 3-28.

clearly in his 1944 poem, "The Ballad of Billie Potts," which is generally acknowledged to be a watershed for Warren's early work for at least two reasons. First, it was the final individual poem Warren would complete and publish for at least ten years.⁹ Second, Warren experiments with his style and with his voice, dropping the Metaphysical cadences of seventeenth century England for the popular rhythms of the Kentucky backwood's banter. But this poem also reveals the poet's growing suspicion about the unavoidable problems of language, as is suggested by the poem's attention to the problem of naming, an issue to which he returned in his later poetry.¹⁰

Following his long hiatus from short poems during the late Forties and early Fifties, Warren's second phase was initiated by the publication of *Promises: Poems 1954-1956* (1956) and included his 1960 volume, *You, Emperors, And Others: Poems 1957-1960*, and his next selected volume, *Selected Poems: New and Old, 1923-1966*, in which incorporated a new volume, *Tale of Time: New Poems 1960-1966*. This period included what Warren considered to be some of his best and some of his worst poetry.¹¹ If these poems reveal anything of the struggle of transformation within his work, they show how Warren seems to have been groping toward the problem of language, as the poem "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme" (*Promises*) suggests.

While Warren's final phase is intimated in his 1968 volume, *Incar-*

⁹ During this period, Warren wrote some of his most important critical essays and published both his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *All the King's Men* (1946), and his only collection of short stories, *Circus in the Attic* (1948). He also continued his collaborative work with Cleanth Brooks on their college textbooks, publishing *Modern Rhetoric* in 1949. It was in the midst of this "dry spell," though, that Warren published his book-length poem, *Brother to Dragons* (1953).

¹⁰ For example, Warren seems to suggest toward the end of the poem that the name bears a doubleness: as "the little black mark under your heart," it reveals the traces of both original sin and personality. See our discussion of this mark in Chapter 5.

¹¹ For example, Warren considered *You, Emperors, and Others* to be his worst volume of poetry. See Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 337-38.

Audubon: A Vision. This poem, which adumbrates several issues raised in *Incarnations* and returns to the notion of the artist which Warren explored in his Coleridge essay, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading" (1946), sets the course for Warren's subsequent poetry by raising to a higher degree of self-consciousness the poet's meditation upon the act of creation and upon the simultaneous problems and possibilities of language. It is this final period, what we call Warren's later poetry, that will concern us in this thesis.

While these divisions are helpful in understanding the course of Warren's career, we are concerned more specifically with the shift in Warren's thinking about language and the way that this shift shapes his later poetry. Our purpose in this first chapter, then, is to place this shift within both the continuity of Warren's own development and the continuity of development from the Modern to the Postmodern. Although Warren's later work is seemingly dismissed by contemporary criticism because of his involvement in the New Critical enterprise, we want to place our argument within the broader context of the development of Anglo-American poetics and Continental philosophy. We also want to sketch out the development of Warren's own thought about language and to confront the relative absence of this concern within the abundance of critical work on Warren's later poetry. Although Warren's later thought overcomes many of his early, Modernist positions, it does so in a way that is continuous with that early work. We may speak of an early Warren and a later Warren, much like critics speak of the early Heidegger and the later Heidegger; however, our purpose is not to construct an opposition between two distinct philosophies. The roots of his later concern for the problem of language and the power of poetic creation are found in this early period. It is not as if Warren overcame his early

Modernist context by defeating it once for all and leaving it behind. Rather, he seems to have overcome Modernism by incorporating its irony in his struggle with language so as to raise it to a new, "post-modern" reality.¹² By "working toward the given," Warren seems to have been drawn by a love for language and by the voice of its calling, thereby heeding the exhortation offered by T.S. Eliot in "Little Gidding":

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹³

1.1 Warren and the End of Modernism

Although this turn toward language has not been widely recognized in Warren criticism, we do receive some clear indications of this shift from Warren himself in his assessment of the end of modernism, delivered in 1966 as the Eugenia Dorothy Blount Lamar Lecture at Wesleyan College under the title, *A Plea in Mitigation: Modern Poetry at the End of An Era*.¹⁴ "We are witnessing," he declares, "...the end of a poetic era, the end of 'modernism,' that school of which the Founding Fathers were Eliot, Pound, and Yeats" (1). Warren attributes the death of modernism to the failure of insight, to the hardening of principles into orthodoxy, and to the institution of a period style (1). What began with a sense of prophetic urgency ended by recognizing the blindness of its insight, to borrow Paul de Man's phrase, and by becoming the center against which it formerly worked. The modernist emphasis upon form alone could not finally provide the ontological space within which the

¹² See the translator's note in Martin Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics" in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (London: Souvenir Press, 1975), 84.

¹³ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), 208.

¹⁴ Macon, Georgia: Wesleyan College, 1966. There has been very little critical interaction with this essay. However, for two short discussions of it, see Strandberg, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* 272-73 and Tj. A. Westendorp, *Robert Penn Warren and the Modernist Temper: A Study in his Social and Literary Criticism in Relation to his Fiction* (Delft: Eburon, 1987), 80-82.

poet, as opposed to the scientist, might resolve difference into identity and be able to speak the final Word.

It is important to notice, though, the place of language in Warren's assessment of the death of modernism and the turn toward a new poetic era, a "post-modern" age. In the revolt against the age, Warren says, "the world changes, the tonality of experience changes, and we seek a language adequate to the new experience. Except for an undefined malaise, we may not even know that language no longer conforms to experience" (1). Warren acknowledges a profound sense of the failure of correspondence and referentiality between language and experience. There is a sense of the deep divide between the one and the other, and in the balance hangs the formation of the self. How can we "discover identity...on the vast and shifting chart of being" (2) if "language no longer conforms to experience"? In the gap there is a sense of disorientation:

When we are disoriented, when we cannot thus locate ourselves, when we no longer find language adequate for defining ourselves, it is natural for us to feel angry with the last age - the age that gave us our recent language and most intimate images. We are angry with that age because it gave us language and images for only its own time and not for eternity. The age did not keep its promises. It dwindled before our eyes. It dwindled even into us, alas - and that is the hardest thing to forgive (2).

The death of the modern is marked by a sense of linguistic crisis, marked by gaps in which we "no longer find language adequate...." However, it is not as if language itself has changed; rather, there is a new awareness that language does not always perform the way that we think it should. Sometimes it will give us adequate images, but at others it withdraws and holds itself in reserve. The promises about the way that we may use language "dwindled before our eyes." But that age

and its promises "dwindled even into us," and the poet who declares the end of that age is faced with the question: how then may I speak?

This linguistic crisis, though, was simply one part of a broader sense of crisis which pervaded the modern age. Warren observes that "the most obvious fact about modern poetry is that it is an alienated art" (4). There was a type of alienation peculiar to the artist in the rapidly modernized world, to which the poet responded by exercising his "will to style" in the search for an "essential" poetry which only led to further obscurity. But, Warren points out that there was another sort of alienation which affected not simply poets but all men as they faced historical, social, cultural, and epistemological crises. The age saw "the collapse of the old order" (5), though this did not happen all at once. However,

the blood-bath of 1914-18 was the dramatic image of the end of the old order, the petering out of history, and the life-story behind all the written stories and poems was in the image of a lonely man etched against the red sky of a historical crisis" (6).

It was the first World War which authoritatively pronounced the collapse of the old order, and the effect that it had upon poetry, philosophy and theology shaped the course of all subsequent thought. Warren was not alone in recognizing this collapse so vividly portrayed in the ravaging of western Europe. The demise of "the old order" had already been announced - almost prophetically - in the ironic critiques of Kierkegaard and in the meditations of Nietzsche, who pronounced the death of God in the modern world. In the early part of this century, Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher who formulated Phenomenology as a philosophical method for opening up the realm of the pre-conceptual apprehension of phenomena, observed what he called the "crisis of European

thought."¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, Husserl's student and successor at the University of Freiburg, declared the end of the Western metaphysical tradition in his own efforts to overcome the onto-theological tradition. This same period was for Heidegger a critical time. George Steiner suggests that the two primary influences on Heidegger's development were the appearance of Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* in 1918 and the impact of the first World War with the resulting economic debacle of Weimar Germany.¹⁶ This sense of crisis, however, has persisted throughout Continental thought, seemingly reaching a culmination in the mid-Sixties - the same period in which Warren declared the end of Modernism - in Emmanuel Levinas' statement, "For everyone, this century will have witnessed the end of philosophy."¹⁷

But, this sense of crisis also opened up new possibilities. Warren remarked in a later interview that the first World War marked both a time of ferment and awakening for writers in the American South.¹⁸ During this period of crisis at the "end" of history,

There was a questioning of all sorts of attitudes, new and old, in the South, and there certainly wasn't agreement on answers. But the world of the South was changing in that generation. It woke up in many ways and discovered its past in many, sometimes fallacious, ways, but ways that generally involved real issues (Sanoff 73).

It was in the midst of this crisis and questioning that Warren was awakened as a writer. In 1921 Warren entered Vanderbilt University and soon came under the tutelage of John Crowe Ransom and the influence of Allen Tate, both of whom strongly encouraged his writing and helped to shape

¹⁵ See Spanos xi.

¹⁶ George Steiner, *Heidegger* (Bassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), 72, 74.

¹⁷ Quoted in Maurice Blanchot, "Our Clandestine Companion" in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. by Richard A. Cohen (Albany, NY: State University Press of New York, 1986), 41.

¹⁸ See Alvin P. Sanoff, "'Pretty, hell! Poetry is Life': A Conversation with America's first poet laureate" in *U.S. News and World Report*, 23 June 1986, 73.

his early critical outlook. Warren has commented on numerous occasions that one of the most significant events of this period for him was the publication in 1922 of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. "It certainly was a watershed in my life and the lives of many of my friends," Warren said in 1970.¹⁹ This single poem expressed and solidified the perspective of a generation upon their world and provided, together with Eliot's earlier poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917), a foundation for American modernist poetry. During his years at Vanderbilt (1921-25), Warren became a member of the group of poets which published the journal, *The Fugitive* (1922-25), and later became one of the Twelve Southerners who contributed to the Agrarian manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand* (1930).

The American South, however, was not the only place that "woke up" during that generation to experience significant changes. During the years prior to and immediately following the first World War, there was a significant amount of literary activity among American expatriate writers which led to the formation of a distinct Anglo-American poetics.²⁰ This poetics not only formed the core of the literary Modernism of which Warren declared the end in 1966 but also began to sketch out the primary lines of postmodern thought. The promises made by Modernist poetics were promises that it could not keep, so it carried within itself the seeds of its own demise. On the whole, it was shaped by the impact of various movements within Continental literary theory and philosophy upon American writers such as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound,

¹⁹ Ruth Fisher, "A Conversation with Robert Penn Warren" in *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, ed. by Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers and Mary Louise Weeks (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1990), 180. Further references to this volume will appear in the text under the abbreviation *Talking*.

²⁰ See Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1991), 249-68. For another helpful historical overview of the development of American poetry in this century, see Donald Hall's "Introduction" to *Contemporary American Poetry* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), 17-25.

William Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot. The fundamental influences were found in the psychoanalytical research of Sigmund Freud, who published *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, and in the Symbolist writing of such writers as Edgar Allen Poe, William Butler Yeats, and the French *symboliste* poets who flourished in the last decade of the Nineteenth century - chiefly, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud. As a result of this influence, the modernist poetry of this era is marked by a concern for the concrete quality of literary language and its power concentrated in the symbol as "the instant complex of language and image" (Ruland and Bradbury 258). However, this concern is focused upon the role of the poet as the "radical agent of culture and the measuring edge of language" (Ruland and Bradbury 258); it is the poet as craftsman who experiments with "language's own combinative and kinetic powers" (Ruland and Bradbury 261) in order to create a full intellectual and emotional impact. This emphasis upon language within symbolist theory arose in part from an awareness of a "crisis of language":

In the modern crisis of language and poetry lay the heart of the modern crisis of culture, for the relative vitality of language revealed the validity or the worthlessness of culture itself. Both Pound and Eliot acknowledged this sense of crisis; and for Pound it was the artists...who had to resolve it (Ruland and Bradbury 258).

Modernism appropriated the Romantic notion of the artist or the poet as one who is alienated from the mainstream of industrial culture - what Warren called the *poète maudit* - and by virtue of his alienation he alone is able, through his attention to the crisis of language, to resolve the crisis of culture. Warren points out that this sense of alienation and of crisis led to a radical irony which, hearkening back to Kierkegaard, "veins the whole tissue of modernity" (7). The center

did not hold and the promises were not kept. This irony was marked not only by a sense of historical or cultural irony but also by "two more specific unmaskings, the ironies derived from Freud and Marx, equally radical" (8). In both of these, Warren observes, the writer could not escape "a sad self-irony" and a "recognition of his otherness" (8). Out of this irony, there arose a deeply self-conscious poetry, concerned to a great extent with itself and with the role of the poet. In continuity with the Romantic poets, modern poets were "compelled to inspect the role of poet, and the nature of poetry" (9).

The appropriation of symbolism and the influence of psychoanalysis upon these writers not only produced a new poetry but also led to a new concept of criticism which reflected the changes in aesthetics and epistemology.²¹ The new literary theory shaped by these forces was fundamentally formalist in its doctrine. If the role of the poet was to resolve the crisis of culture through a response to the crisis of language, or to reconcile the overwhelming oppositions of life in the modern industrial world, then the power of the poem was found in its form and in the ability of form to bring about reconciliation of such oppositions.

According to Terence Hawkes,

Early Formalism built on the groundwork of Symbolism, and of the Symbolist concern with form as a viable communicative instrument; autonomous, self-expressive, able by extra-verbal rhythmic, associative and connotative means to 'stretch' language beyond its normal 'everyday' range of meaning.²²

However, the Formalist criticism developed during the Twenties and Thirties also had roots in the thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His formulation of the imagination and the symbol was appropriated by formalists because it was seen to provide a means not simply of stretching

²¹ See Ruland and Bradbury 258.

²² Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Routledge, 1992), 60.

language but more importantly of reconciling tensions within the form of the poem.²³ This Formalist criticism was developed in two distinct groups, the one being independent of - and apparently completely unaware of - the other. In Russia, the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the Petrograd Society for the Study of Poetic Language (known by the acronym *OPOYAZ*) formulated a critical theory preoccupied with the possibilities of literary structure. Roman Jakobson's work is representative of what became known as Russian Formalism and so helps us to see what distinguishes this school of thought from New Critical Formalism. According to Hawkes, Jakobson's "approach to poetry is essentially that of the linguist, and 'poetics' for him forms part of the general field of linguistics" (76). His formulation of the linguistic notions of polarities and equivalents reflects the influence of Neo-Kantian philosophy and its concern for unity in the midst of multiplicity.²⁴ However, his work also shows a degree of kinship with Ferdinand de Saussure's revolution in linguistic theory in its fundamental distinction between *langue* and *parole* and with the later development of Structuralist anthropology in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The combination of Coleridge's thought with later Symbolist theory also shaped the development of Formalist criticism during the Thirties and Forties among writers and critics in the American South and among the Cambridge Critics in England. Whereas the work of the Cambridge Critics, like that of the Russian Formalists, focused upon the philosophical issues of theory, the New Criticism, as formulated by John Crowe Ransom and other Southern writers, was distinctly the product of poets who set out not to create a linguistic philosophy but to delineate

²³ For a discussion of the influence of Coleridge upon Russian Formalism, see Emerson R. Marks, *Coleridge on the Language of Verse*, Princeton Essays on Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 19-27 and 70-71.

²⁴ For a helpful bibliography on Formalism, see Hawkes 169-71.

a way of reading poetry that both honored the poem as a *poem* and also elevated it to a form of communication which was able to rival the supposed priority of scientific language. Although critics have tended to speak of the New Criticism as a single movement, Warren was quick to point out in *A Plea in Mitigation* that "the so-called New Criticism was never monolithic. It was shot through with irremediable tensions and disagreements, both as to methods and values" (11).²⁵ There were a variety of emphases included under the single rubric of the New Criticism, both regarding how such a criticism ought to be "done" and what values ought to undergird it. However, Warren acknowledges that, on the whole, there was a sense of identity in the project: "What gave an impression, sometimes false, of unity in the New Criticism was a special application, in sharp focus, of principles derived from Coleridge - not to mention I.A. Richards, Freud, or Aristotle" (11). While it would be beyond the scope of the present discussion to examine all the tenets associated with the New Criticism, it is helpful to introduce the primary values and principles which relate to the development of Warren's struggle with language and his relentless pursuit of the act of poetic creation.

I.A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) was perhaps the earliest statement of what can be called New Critical values and method. According to Warren, Richards found "that in the 1920's [*sic*] no student at Cambridge University could make sense of a poem" (11). In response, the New Criticism revolted against the biographical and historical emphases which had predominated literary criticism by concentrating instead upon the work itself and by prioritizing the function of poetic language within the text. While New Critics focused intently upon the power of poetic language in distinction from the supposed prec-

²⁵ Warren remarked in a 1957 *Paris Review* interview that "there's no bed big enough" that would hold the variety of critics reportedly associated with the New Criticism, adding that "no blanket would stay tucked." See *Talking* 32.

edence of scientific language, they insisted that meaning is generated by the function of language within the form of the text. So, paradox was not a quality of language as much as it was an aspect of poetic structure which shapes language for its use. Of all the writers associated with the New Criticism, Ransom was perhaps the most openly philosophical in his work.²⁶ Trained in Kantian aesthetics, he sought in language a concrete means of responding to the way that logical positivism privileged scientific discourse over the poetic. William J. Handy helpfully analyzes the Kantian basis of the New Critical enterprise in his study, *Kant and the Southern New Critics*.²⁷ Handy points out what he calls the "source principle" of the New Critics:

If one principle could be singled out as basic to the theory and practice of John Crowe Ransom and his students, Tate and Brooks, that principle necessarily would be concerned with the nature of the language of literary art. Perhaps it might be stated like this: *The very core of the artistic intention is concretion, which is a 'growing together' intention, not an intention to abstract* (33-34, emphasis his).

The language of science abstracts, but the language of literary art makes concrete statements which are reconciling by nature. So, Ransom states in *The World's Body* that "the poet wants to particularize his objects in order to understand them fully, and images of this sort are habitual to our particularization."²⁸ Kant's influence upon this notion of concretion, though, was refracted through Coleridge's poetics and then again through Richards' *Coleridge on Imagination* (1934). It was the symbol - or metaphor - which the New Critics considered to be the concretizing element within the form of the poem. It is metaphor which

²⁶ For a discussion of Ransom's critical positions, see Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 30-44.

²⁷ Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963.

²⁸ Quoted in Handy 57.

leads to understanding. This impulse toward understanding identifies another central tenet of the New Criticism, that literature - and poetry, in particular - is an essential form of knowledge.

Following the reasoning emphasized by Bergson and Hulme, these critics hold that knowledge of the actual world of man's everyday experience is necessarily distorted when it is translated into the abstract notations of any scientific account....[Rather,] they believe that the artist "knows" the actual world in a much more natural state (Handy 64-5).

Thus, language within the form of the poem may be said to embody a meaning which is concrete and particular. The limitations of language are overcome by the artistry of the poet so that the poem might convey knowledge. Drawing again from Romantic poetics in general and from Coleridge in particular, Cleanth Brooks also emphasizes the organic nature of the work, within which form and content are unified so as to communicate this knowledge.²⁹ The New Critics objectified the text and called for a close reading which observes the various tensions and paradoxes within the form of the poem. Though New Critics sought to avoid "the intentional fallacy" by avoiding such things as aspects of the author's life and the question of his intention in the determination of meaning, they nonetheless placed a great deal of emphasis upon the poet as the master of language.³⁰

The New Criticism clearly played a central role in the modernist literary enterprise which Warren critiques in *A Plea in Mitigation*. Warren points out that it was a criticism ineluctably tied to the actual poetry that was being written during this period. And just as the prin-

²⁹ See Brooks entry on the New Criticism in the *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke, and O.B. Hardison, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 567-68.

³⁰ "The Intentional Fallacy" was the title of an essay by W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., originally published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1946 and included in his *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3-18.

ciples which undergirded that poetry did not keep their promises and came to an end, so did the New Criticism. Like the Modernism of which it was a central part, the New Criticism also contained within itself the seeds of its own demise.

As for what the New Criticism may have done for us, that is now a closed chapter. What was temporarily useful has served its turn and what is permanently sound has been absorbed. What was merely fashionable has become old-fashioned - the formal schematizations, the over-refinement of terms, the hair-splitting of exegesis, the academic mass production of "certified" critics, the dogmatic hardening. But such things always follow as disciples expound a revelation. We are now waiting for a new revelation (12).

By the mid-Sixties, Warren considered the New Criticism to have served its purpose and to have come to end. Its rigid emphasis upon form as a means for knowledge served its purpose, as did its rhetoric against logical positivism and scientific discourse. However, its concern for the limitations and power of language in the poem was an important contribution that has been absorbed into the very heart of critical inquiry. While analyses and assessments of the New Criticism vary in regard to the merits of the contributions of these critics, there is little disputing the role of the New Criticism in setting the course for literary criticism since. It is ironic that various forms of Post-Structuralist criticism have flourished at Yale University in the wake of the New Criticism which had earlier flourished there; critics as varied as Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man have positioned themselves, to a large degree, in opposition to the work of their older colleagues Brooks and Warren.³¹

1.2 Warren and the Post-Modern

In the waning of the New Criticism, though, Warren perceived a

³¹ See Blotner 380-81.

need for a "new revelation" which would bear a new sense of prophetic urgency and of fresh vision. Warren characterized the critical scene at the time of his lecture as being marked by a pluralism of taste and a diversity of style and voice within the poetry itself (18). And it was a time still marked by a sense of crisis. "The problems of that age are still with us," he says.

For a half century we have somehow survived new wars, new revolutions, new depressions, new failures of faith, and the corrosive effects of new knowledge. But even if we have muddled through in the sad human way, we should realize that the problems are still with us, aggravated and eating deeper under the scar-tissue of complacency....One remaining piece of high ground after another is flooded, with little said. It is true that the remnants of a period style tend to blunt perception, and we may feel the nausea of repetition, the nausea of emptiness. It is true that we can overcome that nausea only by opening ourselves to what new experience is available to us in our time and by taking the risks of our time (19-20).

One of the central "risks of our time" is the confrontation with the problem of language. Modernism was not able to seal the gaps and heal the fissures that make up language; instead, it seems to have grown more complacent to the issue of language underneath the calloused scar-tissue of its own rhetoric. To continue to mimic the style and voice of the modern would only lead to "the nausea of emptiness." However, Warren acknowledges that the only way for the poet to overcome that nausea is by constantly opening himself up to new experiences with language and by taking the risks which those experiences might call for. One of the risks the poet must take is the confrontation with the limits of the sayable and the plunge into the "unsayable." This is a decidedly *theological* task: in light of the "new failures of faith" experienced in modernity (perhaps this is the core of modernity), the poet must seek

out a "faith" which confronts the risk of failure.³² Therefore, the question of language is a theological question. As the poet continues to explore the problem and the possibilities of language, he is exploring theological problems and possibilities.

In his early poetry, Warren tended to play the role of the poet-teacher, for whom "language is the means for gaining access to reality and to truth."³³ But through his analysis of the demise of modernism and his unceasing concern for the problem of language, he assumes the role of the poet-artist, for whom language "has become the problematic and is...the new object of contemplation" (26). Warren displays this heightened sense of artistry most notably in his 1969 poem, *Audubon: A Vision*. During his later poetry, Warren's artistry approaches the distinction made by Nietzsche: "One is an artist at the cost of regarding that which all non-artists call 'form' as content, as 'the matter itself.'"³⁴ By turning to language as the matter itself, Warren appears to be seeking a new poetics, what Spanos calls "a poetics of and for our occasion" (xii, emphasis his).

Warren's analysis in *A Plea in Mitigation* of the modern crisis and its implications for the pursuit of knowledge bears certain important similarities to the critique offered by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 study, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report*

³² Compare Heidegger's statement, "It is the true task of theology, which must be discovered again, to seek the word that is able to call one to faith and preserve one in faith." Quoted in David E. Klemm, "Back to Literature - and Theology?" in *Postmodernism, Literature and the Future of Theology*, ed. by David Jasper (London: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 180.

³³ See Kevin Vanhoozer, "A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of 'Aesthetic' Theology," *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987), 26.

³⁴ Quoted in Frank Graziano, "The Matter Itself: Warren's *Audubon: A Vision*" in *Homage to Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Frank Graziano (Durango, CO: Logbridge-Rhodes, 1981), 17.

on Knowledge.³⁵ Lyotard analyzes the shift in "the status of knowledge...as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age" (3). Warren, like Lyotard, believes that such a shift will inevitably result in a change in the nature of knowledge; post-modern poetics will be distinct from the modernist poetics which had come to an end. Lyotard uses the term *postmodern*³⁶ to designate "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts" (xxiii).³⁷ At some points, Lyotard seems to place the modern and the postmodern in opposition to one another. The modern is characterized by an appeal to a metanarrative, whereas the postmodern is marked by a deep incredulity toward any metanarrative (xxiv). On the whole, though, Lyotard cannot distinguish too radically between the modern and postmodern. In the essay, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?," he states that the postmodern "is undoubtedly a part of the modern" (79).³⁸ A work of art - including a poem, perhaps - "can become modern only if it is first postmodern" (79). So, "postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (79). Lyotard associates this nascent state with a concern for the unrepresentable. The modern and the postmodern are alike concerned with the response to the unrepresentable, but they differ with regard to the

³⁵ Trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *Theory and History of Literature: Vol. 10* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). We acknowledge that Lyotard offers one perspective on the multi-faceted phenomena of the postmodern; however, his work is particularly significant for our present study because of its contemporaneity with Warren's later poetry and criticism.

³⁶ For a history of the term, see Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?*, 3rd edn (London: Academy Editions; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 8-10 and 14-16.

³⁷ For Warren, these transformations in American society and culture were rooted in the Civil War. In *The Legacy of the Civil War*, he states that the Civil War was not only "the secret school for 1917-18 and 1941-45" but more importantly was "that mystic cloud from which emerged our modernity." See Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (New York: Random House, 1961), 46, 49.

³⁸ Included as an Appendix in the 1984 edition of *The Postmodern Condition*. Page references are continuous with previous references to this volume.

nature of that response.³⁹ In this way, we might understand the continuity of Warren's work as both modern and as approaching the postmodern. His concern for language and the unsayable in his later poetry is anticipated in his earlier work, but it is distinguished by a turn away from that sort of nostalgia which would yield easy answers and would fill up the unsayable with the said.

While the New Criticism would fall under Lyotard's critique as a modernist form of legitimating knowledge, it would appear to be only a few steps removed from Lyotard's fundamental premise. The New Critics opposed the way that science seeks to legitimate itself as the grand narrative which alone provides access to truth through calculation and formula rather than through insight and creativity. Lyotard shares that incredulity toward science, though he broadens the term to include any discourse that legitimates itself and its knowledge by reference to some metanarrative. The New Critics were concerned with what Lyotard calls "the nature of the social bond" (11) and with the way that the social bond is established and legitimated. Within modernity, that bond has been legitimated according to the "language games" of scientific discourse - that is, according to its rules of legitimacy. However, Lyotard acknowledges that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative..." (7). Among the New Critics, it was Ransom in particular who called into question the supposed "totality of knowledge" of science, contending that the language of science abstracts and denies the complexities of modern life, whereas the language of poetry "seeks to remind the reader of the paradoxes and contradictions which scientific rationalism must forget..." (Jancovich 75). What the New Critics called

³⁹ We shall return to Lyotard's discussion of the unrepresentable in Chapter Six.

poetic or literary language, Lyotard calls narrative.

With regard to the question of knowledge, Lyotard proposes that narrative offers a form of immediate legitimation which is incommensurate with the question of legitimacy as scientific knowledge has formulated it (23). He points out "the preeminence of the narrative form in the formulation of traditional knowledge," so that "narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge..." (19). While Lyotard examines five qualities of narrative knowledge, the fourth has particular relevance for our discussion here. "Narrative form follows a rhythm," he says; "it is the synthesis of a meter beating time in regular periods and of accent modifying the length or amplitude of certain of those periods" (21). Lyotard's use of terms rhythm, meter and accent suggests that his notion of narrative bears a certain poetic quality. Narrative seems to open itself to those qualities of language which cannot be located strictly within the denotative, performative and prescriptive designations of "language games." It is this poetic quality of narrative that is tied in a curious way to the question of time.

It exhibits a surprising feature: as meter takes precedence over accent in the production of sound (spoken or not), time ceases to be a support for memory to become an immemorial beating that, in the absence of a noticeable separation between periods, prevents their being numbered and consigns them to oblivion (22).

It is the poetic quality of narrative which denies the reliance of a past referent to determine either the meaning or the legitimacy of the narrative. Or, as Lyotard goes on to state:

The narrative's reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality it is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation. It is the present act that on each of its occurrences marshals in the ephemeral temporality inhabiting the space between the "I have heard" and the "you will hear" (22).

The narrative is ultimately self-referential, within the repetitive act of its recitation. Its reference is found in the moment of this act. The implication of this position for language is that language bears a certain self-referentiality, but Lyotard seems to suggest that this does not necessitate the "loss of meaning" in postmodernity; rather it defines the rules and limits of meaning. For the postmodern, meaning is not established by metanarratives but is repeated and variously articulated within each separate "little narrative" (*petit récit*).

In Warren's later poetry, we find a similar exploration of the limitations and possibilities of language within the act of poetic creation. Warren's pursuit of the unsayable leads from one poem to the next, as each is a moment of telling the story, as the poet urges at the end of *Audubon*. We also find that his view of language critically informs his earlier notion of "the inevitable osmosis of being."⁴⁰ That is, he understands language to be the sphere of one's interpenetration with the world and the means of the "osmosis of being." Like Audubon's notion of the membrane between himself and the world (*Audubon I[B]*), language both separates (subverts and decenters) and connects; it is a knowledge not simply by form but by difference. This is the duality or doubleness of language opened up by the necessary tension between the sayable and the unsayable. Even as existence is always seen as "being in the world" for Warren, so the poet experiences the condition of dwelling within language. Rather than becoming an object of his contemplation, though, language is seen to be, to borrow Heidegger's phrase, the house of being. Language is the means of engagement with the world.

However, Warren's poetry approaches the postmodern in another sig-

⁴⁰ "Knowledge and the Image of Man," in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by John Lewis Longley, Jr. (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 241.

nificant way. At the heart of the postmodern critique is the issue of theological articulation: how can we speak theologically in the aftermath of the death of logocentricity? What shape can theological thinking take in the aftermath of modernity? David Klemm points out that the modern social system has defeated theology "as a voice having something to contribute....Theology has not, however, been defeated by postmodern criticism, and it misconstrues the situation if it thinks so. If theology has an adversary, it is not postmodern discourse" (181). Warren's questions about the "unsayable" are at the heart of this theological concern in postmodernity. In fact, it is difficult to distinguish between Warren's search for a way to "love God," as he suggests in "Masts at Dawn" (NSP 236), and his yearning after the "unsayable." For him, each is an absent presence, and the sense of such an absence is crucial to our reading of his later poetry. Rather than denying this absence or "emptiness," as he called it in "A Plea in Mitigation," the poet must face it in all of its potential tragedy. Klemm comments that the proper response to theology in the postmodern condition is "to face the situation, for tragic knowledge is the narrow gate through which we might rediscover 'the word that is able to call one to faith and preserve one in faith' [Heidegger]" (182). Warren's turn toward language is a turn toward theological thinking. Floyd Watkins has suggested that the consecutive shifts in Warren's poetry from the metaphysical lyric to the narrative to the meditative disclose a turn from "more worldly" concerns to more openly religious and theological issues.⁴¹ Warren's concern for the Fall and for original sin, both of which reappear throughout his poetry, must be seen as an attention to the problematic of language. If language is bound by a fall of some sort and bears a "sinful" quality in

⁴¹ See Floyd C. Watkins, "'The Body of This Death' in Robert Penn Warren's Later Poems," *KR NS* 10/4 (Fall 1988), 33.

its inabilities, then how can the poet speak of that which is other than the sayable? How can he speak of God? Warren's poetry is not overcome by any sense of tragedy but sees this as the narrow gate through which the poet might impart a stronger sense of the unsayable.⁴²

1.3 The Critical Silence

Despite the concern that we find in Warren's later poetry for language and the unsayable, this aspect of his work is relatively absent from the critical studies of his poetry. While there are studies which do consider language in Warren's poetry to a degree, there is not a single study which grapples with the *problem* of language in light of the postmodern critique and of the notion of the unsayable. Fred R. Thiemann's 1995 doctoral dissertation, entitled *Original Sin and Redemption: Philosophy of Language in Robert Penn Warren's Poetry*, perhaps comes the closest to such a study.⁴³ However, Thiemann argues that Warren had a clearly conceived notion of language "connected to his interest in Christian symbolism" (3), which envisioned language as fallen yet incarnative. Thiemann fails to come to terms, though, with the notion of the unsayable and its place in Warren's varied meditations on language. He also fails to explore the possible continuities between Warren's poetry and the course of critical inquiry regarding language through the course of this century. Thiemann is not alone in this; critics have, on the whole, failed to consider Warren's work in light of the concurrent developments in critical theory, which has consistently returned to the problem of language. While there are occasional exceptions to these statements, criticism has been largely silent about these issues.

One difficulty that has perhaps encouraged this silence is Warren's aversion to systematic, philosophical, and abstract statements.

⁴² See Lyotard 81.

⁴³ Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Microform, 1995.

Warren was not a critical theorist, nor was he a philosopher of language. Warren was a poet, and his thought consistently hovers about poetry and the role of the artist in the act of creation. Because he was not a theorist constructing a system, we must resist the temptation to root a theory of language or linguistic philosophy in Warren's poetry or criticism. Warren was himself quite wary of attempts to do such a thing.⁴⁴ He told Ruth Fischer in 1970,

I don't think of a philosophy as a finished product. Certainly not for a man like me. It's a way of thinking about your life as you live....But I am always struck by the attempt to freeze any writer in a formal philosophical position when the essence of the process of writing is to constantly modify and enrich or maybe narrow or do something to it (*Talking* 187-88).

Cleanth Brooks recognized the danger of attempting to freeze Warren in a formal philosophical position, suggesting that such a reduction would distort any understanding of Warren or his poetry. While he acknowledges that Warren's work may "form a highly unified and consistent body of work," Brooks goes on to say that it would nonetheless "be impossible to reduce it, without distorting simplification, to some thesis about human life. The work is not tailored to fit a thesis."⁴⁵ Instead of attempting to freeze Warren in a formal philosophical position or to fit his work into some thesis about human life, we want to explore the way that, through the process of writing, his struggle as a poet with language was continually modified and the way that this struggle either

⁴⁴ In a 1980 interview, Richard Jackson asked Warren about the problematics of language: "On a more metaphysical level, language is very problematic in its relation to truth....Is there, for you, a 'suspicion' about language, as some modern philosophers call it?" In his response, Warren evades any thorough-going philosophical analysis of the issue: "You have raised many deep questions here. I'll simply stick to the simplest of answers...." See Richard Jackson, "On the Horizon of Time," in *Acts of Mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets* (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1983), 58-60.

⁴⁵ Cleanth Brooks, "Experience Redeemed in Knowledge," in *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot, and Warren* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 98.

enriched or narrowed his conception of being in the world. If we are to speak of a philosophy in Warren's work, we may only do so as that which Warren was trying to work out or toward in the continually exfoliating process of poetic creation.

Another difficulty which has exacerbated this critical silence has been the ways in which Warren's poetry is generally read. It would appear that assessments of his work fall into one of two categories. On the one hand, it would appear that Warren's work is most often read within the confines of Southern American literary interests which have "canonized" Warren within the literary and critical values of that tradition.⁴⁶ Within this canonical reading, there have been a variety of emphases. For instance, some have considered aspects of literary regionalism and the Southern literary tradition within Warren's work.⁴⁷ Others have focused on Warren's role in the New Criticism, some placing Warren at the center of the movement, others finding Warren on the fringes.⁴⁸ Still others have emphasized Warren's place within the development of American letters.⁴⁹ We recognize that each of these emphases has made important, even necessary, contributions to Warren scholarship; however, we are more concerned with the mixture of psychological and

⁴⁶ Most critical volumes dealing with Warren's work have been published by Southern University presses, chiefly The University Press of Kentucky and the Louisiana State University Press. Several Southern literary journals have published special issues devoted to Warren and his work. See, for example, *MQ* XLVIII/1 (Winter 1994-95) and *Southern Quarterly* 31/4 (Summer 1993).

⁴⁷ See Joseph R. Millichap, "Robert Penn Warren and Regionalism," *MQ* XLVIII/1 (Winter 1994-95), 29-38, and James H. Justus, "Warren's *Terra*," *MQ* XLVIII/1 (Winter 1994-95), 133-146.

⁴⁸ Jancovich considers Ransom, Tate, and Warren to be the primary figures of the New Criticism. See especially Chapter Twelve of *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism*. However, D.G. Myers argues that while Warren "is not one the major critics associated with the New Criticism" (371, emphasis his), he is nonetheless an important critic. See his "Robert Penn Warren and the History of Criticism," *Midwest Quarterly* 34/4 (1993), 369-82.

⁴⁹ Three recent studies have given shape to this concern. See John Burt, *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); William Bedford Clark, *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991); and Hugh Ruppensburg, *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1990).

pseudo-theological emphases which have dominated canonical readings of Warren's poetry and the ways in which these have obscured the development of Warren's understanding of language and the unsayable as a deeply theological issue.

On the other hand, though, it would appear that Warren's work is not being read by a wider critical audience which has "excommunicated" his work from contemporary dialogues about language and poetics for the very reasons that the former group has "canonized" Warren. There has been a rejection of Warren's earlier work due to his association with Southern paternalism, to his involvement with the New Critical enterprise, and to his exhibition of metaphysical concerns. His later work, especially his poetry, has simply been ignored. While there are a few notable exceptions to this second response, this criticism on the whole seems to have excommunicated Warren without giving his later poetry a fair hearing and so has failed to understand the significant contribution that Warren makes to these ongoing critical dialogues.

Among the canonical criticism of Warren's poetry, religious or theological issues are a commonplace. As early as 1945, W.P. Southard argued that Warren is "a religious poet" whose meditations run from the loss of innocence to the yearning after salvation and the participation in some sacrament.⁵⁰ James Justus argued as recently as 1981 that the whole of Warren's work presents a vision of "an orthodox Christianity chastened and challenged by the secular faiths peculiar to the twentieth century: naturalism...and existentialism."⁵¹ However, Victor Strandberg and Robert Koppelman are significant for our present study because of the way that they mix the psychological and pseudo-theological in

⁵⁰ "The Religious Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," *KR* 7 (August 1945), 653-676. For another early look at the religious in Warren's poetry, see Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "The Eye of Time: Religious Themes in Robert Penn Warren's Poetry," *The Diliman Review* III/3 (July 1955), 215-237.

⁵¹ *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge and London: LSU Press, 1981), 1.

their reading of Warren's poetry. Strandberg's contribution to Warren criticism should not be underestimated; he has repeatedly called attention to the distinctly "poetic vision" of Warren's work. In 1965 Strandberg published the first book-length study of Warren's poetry, entitled *A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren*,⁵² and followed that in 1977 with *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*. In the twelve intervening years, there had not been another single volume devoted to Warren's poetry, though by 1977 Warren had published eleven separate volumes of poetry.

Strandberg's approach to the poetry is structured around what he perceives to be the master concept of Warren's poetry, which is the self and its yearning for identity. This approach is premised upon a psychological criticism rooted in Jung and intermixed with the language of Christian theology and mysticism. By prioritizing the self in such a way, Strandberg fails to consider the important place of language in Warren's ontological questions. In his first volume, Strandberg summarizes his position in a way that is reiterated throughout his work:

In *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*,...Warren begins to develop that synthesis of psychology and religion which was to become his fundamental and lasting solution to the dilemma of naturalism. The idea of an unconscious, undiscovered self beyond the reach of naturalistic extinction evolves here....This concept of a collective self bears striking parallels to Jungian psychology...(2).

In both volumes, he urges that Jungian psychology cannot properly be called a source for Warren's vision; however, he also emphasizes in both that Jung's thought provides "a relevant means of clarifying" Warren's poetry.⁵³ For Strandberg, the most clarifying element of Jung's system would appear to be the notion of the undiscovered self, which he terms

⁵² Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1965.

⁵³ *A Colder Fire* 78 and *The Poetic Vision* 134.

at one point as Warren's "master metaphor" (*A Colder Fire* 75) and at another as simply one of Warren's "ground themes" (*The Poetic Vision* ix).

What makes Jung's formulations so helpful for Strandberg is their theological nature (*The Poetic Vision* 186). So, for both Jung and Warren the unconscious is "a primary source of religious experience" and the repression of the unconscious is the sin of modern man, for it alone "holds the secret of ultimate identity" (*A Colder Fire* 2-3). In *The Poetic Vision*, Strandberg identifies "the Fall from Eden" as "Warren's most obsessive master theme" (43). The Fall splits the unified self into two, into the conscious self and the unconscious or undiscovered self. Redemption becomes, then, the reunification of the self. Strandberg points out, though, that Warren's brand of theology is undergirded by a reconceptualization of Romantic mysticism which envisions a sacrament capable of producing "some kind of redemption from the fallen condition delimiting the self" (*A Colder Fire* 67). Tied to an "essentially Romantic sensibility" (*The Poetic Vision* 190), Warren's theological concerns take on a mysticism which enables him to

proceed...past the quasi-Romantic trauma of the Fall...into a Blakean or Wordsworthian 'higher innocence' that might yet redeem the fallen creation. The sign of that higher innocence is the ability of the Warren persona, his inner being unified now by a reconciliation between the conscious and unconscious zones of the psyche, to connect himself vitally to the outer world, unclean and ruined as it may be, in "such a sublimation that the world which once provoked... fear and disgust may now be totally loved." (*The Poetic Vision* 190).⁵⁴

Strandberg illustrates his conception of mysticism in the later poetry

⁵⁴ Strandberg's reference to both Blake and Wordsworth is curious because each has a distinct and quite different notion of the Fall. For Blake there is only a fortunate fall and for Wordsworth nature is not truly fallen. Also, each has a unique concept of innocence.

by referring to Warren's phrase, "the osmosis of being," from his 1955 essay, "Knowledge and the Image of Man." Under this sacramental rubric, Strandberg sees Warren's poetry as finally reconciling the irreconcilable things of our experience into "an osmotic relationship that binds everything into unity and complicity together" (209). Strandberg concludes his first volume by stating, "I think we may say that Warren's whole career as a poet has been evolving towards some kind of religious affirmation" (*A Colder Fire* 276). This religious affirmation finally qualifies Warren's interest in psychology: "Warren's interest in psychology, in confronting man's darkness, is subordinate to his intensely religious concerns: knowledge of the self, of the meaning of existence, of man's fate" (277). It is Warren's penchant for "moments of mysticism," Strandberg says, that will prove the value of his poetry.

In all of Strandberg's meditations upon Warren's poetry, he fails to consider the centrality of language itself as a fundamental ontological and theological issue for Warren. While he correctly identifies the Fall as a "master theme" in Warren's poetry, he does not explore it as either a theological or a linguistic condition. Rather, it is a psychological limitation which consigns the self to search for its unconscious aspects. In the later poetry, though, the limitation of the self is seen to be a linguistic limitation which bars the poet from the "unsayable." While much of what Strandberg considers to be deeply psychological is evidenced in Warren's poetry prior to what we are calling his linguistic shift, he nonetheless overlooks even the early traces of this concern. In his reading of "The Mango on the Mango Tree" (*Selected Poems: 1923-1943*), he interprets "the Babel curse" as the universal isolation of the self which is resolved in the "committing of the self to the universal oneness" (*A Colder Fire* 113-14). He fails to recognize

this curse as a universal linguistic isolation which ultimately derives from the Fall. The impact of this "Babel curse" upon the self must be seen in the context of the poet's struggle with the fallen condition of language; the self's desire for identity cannot be removed from the poet's struggle for articulation before the unsayable. Redemption, then, is not the "reunification of the self" but the experience of grace in the poetic moment. It is the ability to speak in the face of the unsayable. The notion of redemption in Warren's poetry cannot be construed as a movement "past the quasi-Romantic trauma of the Fall" into any form of "higher innocence." Warren's notion of the Fall is neither "quasi-Romantic," nor does it conceive of the Fall as something that can be moved past. Instead it is inescapably confronted in the limits of the sayable. Warren avoids the final resolution, unification, or reconciliation that would move beyond this "mortal limit," as he called it in one of his latest poems. Such a movement would bring all poetry and speaking to an end. Strandberg, however, purports that the undiscovered is finally discoverable and discovered in Warren's poetry through a sort of Romantic mysticism. While he reckons Coleridge to be a primary Romantic influence, Strandberg neglects the shaping influence of Coleridge upon Warren's understanding of language as it relates to the symbolic imagination. Coleridge's notion of the symbol provided the basis for Warren's understanding of "the tension of the world" as an inescapably linguistic condition. Strandberg does discuss the relationship between the self and the world, but only in terms of the "osmotic" relationship; he misses, though, the importance of the world's voice by which it declares itself and by which the unsayable insinuates itself.

More recently, Robert Koppelman has exhibited similar concerns. Koppelman is part of what might be called the "new generation" of Warren

critics; his work acknowledges the developments in Post-Structuralist critical theory and its emphasis upon language and helpfully perceives the way that these developments have altered the landscape of critical discourse. However, he reads Warren against that discourse rather than in continuity with its development. In his *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality*,⁵⁵ he acknowledges the importance of language in Warren's later poetry but, like Strandberg, he fails to confront the issue of the unsayable by insisting instead that Warren gives way to statements of final meaning. Koppelman sets out to trace Warren's exploration of "life as significance" (4): "Warren's quest for meaning traces a spiritual process of conversion, remarkable for a twentieth-century figure who resisted religious orthodoxy but was forever returning to the language of absolute meaning: 'Truth' and 'God'" (4). This "modernist spirituality," which is "always grounded in the reality of lived experience in the world," is formed within a "commitment to literature as a faithful and honest search for meaning" and looks toward a "redemption through engagement with literature and participation in the world" (4). Koppelman describes this spirituality in a variety of ways throughout his volume: it is "a sense of identification with and connection to a power or force that is larger than one's self and that encompasses all of life..." (29); it bears the quality of "an ever-widening ripple [with] concentric circles of meaning and significance..." (34); it involves a "questing beyond the literal meaning of the words on the page..." (77). In his exploration of this spirituality in both Warren's fiction and poetry, Koppelman makes links to the Jungian notion of the undiscovered self (63, 69) and to Freudian dream imagery (69, 141).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1995. See also his "All the King's Men, Spiritual Aesthetics, and the Reader," *MQ* XLVIII/1 (Winter 1994-95), 105-114.

⁵⁶ Runyon also emphasizes the Freudian aspects of Warren's imagery and poetic sequences. See *The Braided Dream* 9-10 and 224-226.

However, what is more significant for our present study is the way that Koppelman ties this spirituality to language, evidenced by what he calls Warren's "belief in the interconnection of poetic and spiritual language" (6). Koppelman clearly acknowledges Warren's sense of the problems and limitations of language. He argues that

it is the work of Warren's last poetic phase that most vividly dramatizes his literary quest for the nature of Truth and an exploration of the linguistic means available to an artist who is seeking to articulate the unlimited possibilities of human experience and of nature itself (71).

So, in this later poetry, the poet reaches a "kind of redemption" by his sense of approach to and connection with those unlimited possibilities which are beyond the self. This process is what Koppelman terms "a spiritual aesthetic" (72). Koppelman emphasizes that "the last 'grand phase' comes closest to redeeming both the narrative self (the subject of his poetry) and the very poetic language that helps to make the redemptive vision available to readers" (72). This is available, though, only because, according to Koppelman, Warren has reached a "degree of 'belief' in something beyond the duality of language" (80). Koppelman suggests that *Altitudes and Extensions*, Warren's final volume, reveals "how Warren's lifelong struggle with language reflects the poet's desire to dramatize spiritual experience and the extent to which language limits and confines our capacity to communicate that kind of experience" (89). His understanding of language in Warren's poetry, though, still rests upon a mimetic paradigm; the power of language is found in its power to represent something other than itself, an object of contemplation. In his discussion of "The Whole Question,"⁵⁷ he argues that the speaker is seeking a language "that will better represent experience" (91). Even when representation fails, this is seen to be

⁵⁷ See our discussion of this poem in Chapter Six.

beyond the "ordinary" function of language. Koppelman opposes this view of language to what he understands to be contemporary conceptions of language in critical theory. The following quotations suggest his suspicion of these current dialogues:

Warren acknowledges both the misuse and the real limitations of language, but he seldom rests in what contemporary literary critics might seize upon as evidence of deconstructive angst. Instead, Warren is far more concerned with addressing the very genuine and intensely meaningful experiences that engrave themselves in our memories, touch the deepest core of our being, and, yet, frustrate our linguistic attempts to communicate our truest self with others. Warren's poetry derives its power and relevance, I feel, from the way it emphasizes experience and the drive toward communication of experiences when it could just as easily - indeed *far more easily* - disintegrate into cerebral if not cynical treatises on the artifice of all language (91-92, emphasis his).

...Warren's late poetry envisions the truth of human experience as a special kind of knowledge that depends upon tension and irony if it is to be approached through the medium of poetry. As has been noted earlier, Warren's uncertainty about the literal truth of language does not necessarily mean that he held the post-structuralist view that relegates all experience to linguistic constructs. Rather, irony and tension are, for Warren, crucial linguistic moves for the poet who seeks what he called an "earned" vision of human experience (104-105).

Warren's faith in literary language as a form of truth and a means toward discovering the truth is the guiding principle that underscores his participation in both literature and what Jacques Derrida called "différance," or that which cannot be represented directly by language (150).

By pitting Warren's "modernist" notion of language against the supposed postmodern conceptions of linguistic angst and critical cynicism, Koppelman fails to see what Warren's notion of language and the "unsayable" might constructively contribute to these discussions. Though he pro-

poses a "spiritual aesthetic" at work in Warren's poetry, he views language merely as the significant means for seeking truth (151). There remains a divide between theological thinking and language. Warren seems far more preoccupied with the actual experience of confronting the limits of language than Koppelman is willing to admit. As a poet, he is not simply interested in the ability of language to transport the reader to a new experience. Language is the experience. Koppelman is also far more optimistic about "discovering the truth" than Warren seems to be when he questions in *Audubon*

Why,
Therefore, is truth the only thing that cannot
Be spoken (NSP 224-25)?

Koppelman proposes that Warren's power and relevance lies in his statements and propositions about knowledge, experience, language and meaning, whereas Warren contended that meaning is, "as in life, ... often more fruitfully found in the question asked than in the answer given."⁵⁸ It is in the process of steadily asking, "What do I really feel about this?" (RPW *Talking* 90) that the poet offers himself to language, not in his constant assertion of answers. This poetic of questioning provides a perspective on theological thinking in postmodernity, calling for a sense of humility before the mystery of the "unsayable."

The predominance of such psychological and "modernist" spiritual emphases among canonical criticism of Warren has led in part to Warren's excommunication from the very sorts of discussions to which Koppelman alludes. It would appear that since the Sixties, Warren has fallen into a sort of "critical gap." Despite Strandberg's helpful survey of critical responses to Warren's poetry (*The Poetic Vision* 1-20), there is a conspicuous absence of discussion about Warren and his poetry in most

⁵⁸ "Afterthought" in *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980* (New York: Random House, 1980), 107-8.

critical volumes which deal with "contemporary" American poetry since the Sixties. This appears to be especially the case when these volumes focus upon the issue of language; Warren's poetry is nowhere to be found in these discussions. When Warren's work is dealt with, it is dismissed because of his association with the New Criticism. For example, Frank Lentricchia identifies Warren as once of the central figures of the New Criticism.⁵⁹ Apparently unaware of Warren's own reassessment of that school of critical theory, Lentricchia suspends Warren's contribution to critical dialogue after 1957. Rather, Warren is one of Harold Bloom's "dangerous precursors, the impossibly demanding father-figures who must be symbolically slain in an act of 'misprision,' or willful misreading" (319). Lentricchia points out that, despite Bloom's levelling "a variety of attacks on his New-Critical forebearers" (319) throughout his career, his own work is built upon their influence through Yale University. In a curious turn, though, Harold Bloom has turned out to be Warren's "most recent and distinctive advocate," as McClatchy observed in 1989, who holds "that alone among living writers Warren deserves to be counted with the best American poets of our century."⁶⁰ Bloom himself has written,

Before the publication of *Incarnations: Poems 1966-1968*, I would have based my judgment of Warren's aesthetic eminence primarily upon his most ambitious novels, *All the King's Men* and *World Enough and Time*. The poetry seemed distinguished, yet overshadowed by Eliot, and perhaps of less intrinsic interest than the best poems of Ransom and Tate. But from *Incarnations* on, without a break, Warren consciously has taken on his full power over language and the world of the senses. In his varied achievement, his poetry now asserts the highest claim upon us.⁶¹

⁵⁹ *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.

⁶⁰ "Robert Penn Warren: Rare Prosperities," 82.

⁶¹ "Sunset Hawk: Warren's Poetry and Tradition" in *A Southern Renaissance Man: Views of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. by Walter B. Edgar (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 59 [repr. in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Penn Warren*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 195-210].

In the aftermath of Lentricchia's reading, Bloom has seen beyond the anxious influence of Eliot and the restrictions of Southern patriarchy to consider Warren on the strength of his later poetry. Bloom refers to Warren as "a sunset hawk at the end of a tradition" who has come to terms with "the poet's agonistic striving" (78-9). If Bloom's reevaluation offers an encouraging exception to the critical excommunication of Warren, so does Richard Jackson's reading of Warren's later poetry.⁶² Jackson's work is unique in so far as it places Warren's poetry within discussions of temporality and language initiated by Martin Heidegger and carried on throughout postmodern discourse.⁶³ In fact, Heidegger is one of the primary illuminating thinkers in Jackson's studies. For example, at the end of "The Generous Time," he states, "Warren's vision of Time, finally, is one of 'generosity,' a 'handing over,' as Heidegger calls it, of the self through the language of the poem, a handing over of the history the self generates through its own verbal presences" (27). Jackson's work is also exceptional in the way that it places Warren within a context broader than Southern literature or the New Criticism. In "The Deconstructed Moment in Modern Poetry," he groups Warren together with contemporary poets such as Philip Levine, Mark Strand, Charles Simic, David St. John, John Ashbury, A.R. Ammons, and James Wright - all of whom reject a spatialized time for a moment which retrieves through language a dynamic and pluralistic temporality (307).

1.4 The Persistence of Warren's Poetry

⁶² See his "The Shards of Time: Robert Penn Warren and the Moment of the Self - A Review Essay," *Southern Humanities Review* 14/2 (1980), 161-67; "The Deconstructed Moment in Modern Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* 23 (Summer 1982), 306-22; and "The Generous Time: Robert Penn Warren and the Phenomenology of the Moment," *Boundary 2* 9/2 (Winter 1981), 1-30 (repr. in *The Dismantling of Time in Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1988), 23-64).

⁶³ In his study of Warren's novels, Barnett Guttenberg makes passing references to Heidegger and to a sort of existentialism at work in the fiction. See his *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975).

Regardless of the amount of critical work done on Warren's poetry or of the vehement denunciations of his work, we find that it is still before us. His poetry bears a quality which resists being put away as an historical artifact. When asked about the influence of Heidegger upon his own work, Jacques Derrida remarked, "Heidegger's texts are still before us; they harbor a future of meaning which will ensure that they are read and reread for centuries."⁶⁴ This futurity marks Heidegger's works as great philosophical texts: "The future of the great philosophies remains obscured and enigmatic, still to be disclosed. Up to now, we have merely scratched the surface" (113). Warren's texts, too, harbor such a future of meaning which calls for a rereading of his poetry. There is something about them that remains enigmatic and obscure, something that is yet to be disclosed. Despite the amount of criticism that has been devoted to these texts, there is something about them that urges us to begin again. Derrida says of Heidegger's texts, "No matter how rigorous an analysis I bring to bear on such texts, I am always left with the impression that there is something more to be thought" (113-14, emphasis his). Certainly there has been a laudable amount of rigorous analysis of Warren's poetry since Strandberg's first book appeared over thirty years ago. And yet, the greatness of Warren's poetry is that there is something more to be thought - not simply something about the texts themselves but something in light of his poetry. What might that "more" be?

Rather than offering a quick and simple response to this most important question,⁶⁵ we must return to Warren's work itself and ask it what it means to "say the unsayable." Our goal is not to attempt to construct a linguistic philosophy grounded in Warren's ideas; neither is

⁶⁴ See Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 110.

⁶⁵ See Derrida's response to Kearney, *Dialogues* 114.

it to attempt an exhaustive reading of all of Warren's later work, so that there will be little left to be said about Warren's poetry. Rather, our hope is to read this poetry, in the light of several of Warren's essays and of several later essays by Heidegger, so as to ask what sort of poetics it contributes to both aesthetic and theological thinking in the postmodern context. As we begin to work toward Warren's understanding of language and the act of poetic creation in his later poetry, our questioning must begin with Warren's 1946 essay, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment of Reading." Warren's linguistic concepts are rooted in and shaped by - but not limited to - Coleridge's own confrontation with the problem of language in his theory of the imagination and the symbol.

Chapter Two
Warren, Coleridge and
The Search for Language

"I could spend my life very happily studying
Coleridge..." (Robert Penn Warren, 1977).¹

2.1 Critical Introductions

Warren began working more consciously toward his later struggles with language and the "unsayable" in his 1946 essay on Coleridge's poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Originally prepared as the 1945 Bergen Lecture at Yale University while Warren was Consultant in Poetry in the Library of Congress, "A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading" provided the critical soil out of which grew his later thinking about the doubleness of language in the act of poetic creation as it brings to light the "unsayable."² While such Modernist critics as Eliot, Richards, and Ransom each appropriated Coleridge's thought in his own way, it was Warren more than any other who plundered Coleridge's aesthetic and theological formulation of the imagination and the symbol for his own critical and poetic vision. In the essay he sought to provide a reading which was consistent with this Coleridge's philosophy and which went to the heart of Coleridge's concern for the act of poetic creation. Warren's understanding of the function of the imagination and the symbol in poetic creation forms the foundation for his thinking about language in the poem. It is no exaggeration, then, to say that this essay provides a focal point for the development of his thinking about the task of the poet who confronts the limitations of language.

Coleridge's impact upon this on-going struggle for articulation is

¹ *Talking* 246.

² NSE 335-423. Subsequent references to this essay within notes will appear under the abbreviation "APPI."

obvious in one of Warren's later poems, "Fear and Trembling."³ The poem begins with an archetypal moment in Warren's later poetry:

The sun now angles downward, and southward.
The summer, that is, approaches its final fulfillment.
The forest is silent, no wind-stir, bird-note, or word.
It is time to meditate on what the season has meant.

This concrete moment in nature, unstable and turning, is neither timeless nor isolated in space but is actuated in the poet's simultaneous encounter with language and nature. It is a moment of ripeness both at the end of the day and at the turning of the season.⁴ Within this moment the speaker posits, "It is time to meditate on what the season has meant." He then continues in the second stanza:

But what is the meaningful language for such meditation?
What is a word but wind through the tube of the throat?
Who defines the relation between the word *sun* and the sun?
What word has glittered on whitecap? Or lured blossom out?

Warren's speaker senses that his own language is inadequate for a meditation upon the meaning of nature's turning. His own words are conspicuously arbitrary - "What is a word but wind..." - and so he yearns for a language in which word and thing are co-terminous - "What word has glittered on whitecap?" At the heart of his linguistic struggle is the problem of referentiality. He acknowledges that there is a "relation between the word *sun* and the sun," but who or what defines "the relation"? In light of the problem of referentiality, the speaker queries the limits of the meditation of the heart throughout the rest of the poem and probes the linguistic moment in nature:

Walk deeper, foot soundless, into the forest.
Stop, breath bated. Look southward, and up, where high leaves
Against sun, in vernal translucence, yet glow with the freshest.

³ *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980* (New York: Random House, 1981), 97. See Chapter Four for a continued discussion of this poem.

⁴ This notion of ripeness is central to *Incarnations: Poems 1966-1968*. See especially "Where the Slow Fig's Purple Sloth" (4), "Riddle in the Garden" (7), "Where Purples Now the Fig" (19), and "The Leaf" (24-28).

Young tint of the lost spring. Here now nothing grieves.

Can one, in fact, meditate in the heart, rapt and wordless?
Or find his own voice in the towering gust now from northward?
When boughs toss - is it in joy or pain or madness?
The gold leaf - is it whirled in anguish or ecstasy skyward?

Can the heart's meditation wake us from life's long sleep,
And instruct us how foolish and fond was our labor spent -
Us who now know that only at death of ambition does the deep
Energy crack crust, spurt forth, and leap

From grottoes, dark - and from the caverned enchainment?

In these stanzas Warren raises two of the issues that are at the heart of his linguistic concerns in his later poetry: the desire to find one's voice before the "unsayable" and the recognition of the outwardness of language.⁵ In his notion of "the caverned enchainment" there are also clear Platonic overtones, an issue to which he turned both in his study of Coleridge and in his later poetry. Warren intimates here that in order to speak the poet must be able to listen to language in the world and in his own heart. Only at the death of his ambition for a "pure language" will language avail itself in its fallen yet powerful speaking.

The issues raised in this poem about language and reference seem to be informed by Warren's continued interaction with Coleridge. This is especially the case in the second stanza which bears a striking similarity to a passage from one of Coleridge's lecture note fragments, contained within the volume, *Shakespearean Criticism*. Coleridge states, "The sound *sun*, or the figures *s, u, n*, are purely arbitrary modes of recalling the object....But the language of nature is a subordinate *Logos*, that was in the beginning, and was with the thing represented,

⁵ Regarding the latter, see our analysis in Chapter Six of "Myth of Mountain Sunrise" in which Warren uses the same imagery of eruption.

and was the thing represented."⁶ In a curious anticipation of Saussurian linguistics, Coleridge acknowledged the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and its reference. However, in answer to this he proposed the notion of the *logos* which was at once aesthetic and theological. In Coleridge's theory, the *logos*, that primary and personal agent of creation and revelation declared at the beginning of St John's gospel, heals the wound of the Fall which has split word and thing apart and defines the reconciled relationship between the two. The *logos* is both "with the thing represented" and "was the thing represented," making it the essential symbol for Coleridge. Coleridge draws from this three different ways of approaching language: a purely arbitrary, human language, a more fundamental language of nature, and an essential language contained in the *logos*. While Warren never proposed to espouse any orthodox Christian theology, he was nonetheless impacted both by the aesthetic sensibility and by the theological cast of Coleridge's thinking about language, the imagination and symbol.

Coleridge's influence upon Warren is also attested to by the impact of Warren's essay not simply upon the New Criticism in America but more so upon the wider field of Coleridge and Romantic studies. Of all of Warren's critical essays, this one would appear to have been the most widely read, having received a variety of responses both from critics of the New Criticism who see this as a representative text and from critics of Coleridge's poetry. Stephen Prickett in *Romanticism and Religion* regards it as the "best discussion of the *Ancient Mariner* as an artistic whole...."⁷ Stanley Cavell states that he knows "of no better discussion of the question of [the killing of the Albatross], and its

⁶ Quoted in Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Study* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 53.

⁷ Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 16.

motive, than Robert Penn Warren's...."⁸ Homer Obed Brown considers Warren's essay to be "one of the finest examples of New Critical explication, while at the same time it places Coleridge's poem in the larger context of his literary, philosophical and theological theory."⁹ He goes on to praise Warren's critical foresight:

Robert Penn Warren set up the issues for future criticism, but what is more, he provided the basis for, indeed a solicitation of further attempts at interpretive totalization, for the necessity of reading it in some sort of integrative and structurally unitary way (255).

Jonathan Arac counters Brown's argument, though, by proposing that Warren's repetition of New Critical presuppositions and exclusion of various parts of Coleridge's own theory pertains to "the whole problem of cultural reproduction" which institutionalized the New Criticism and established textual canons.¹⁰ One of Warren's earliest detractors was Elder Olson, one of the Chicago Critics who sought to counter the New Criticism through a primarily Aristotelian aesthetic.¹¹ According to Olson, the essay "seems..to be valuable principally as exhibiting what happens to poetry in interpretation, and not particularly valuable as a comment upon the poem" (138). Olson rejects Warren's argument that the poem is symbolic and maintains that "Warren's interpretation clearly makes the poem what Coleridge calls 'allegory'" (142). William Empson was also among Warren's detractors. Although he found the essay on his second reading to be "better than it seemed in my vague memory of it,"

⁸ "In Quest of the Ordinary: Texts of Recovery" in *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 194.

⁹ "The Art of Theology and the Theology of Art: Robert Penn Warren's Reading of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," *Boundary 2* 8/1 (Fall 1979), 238.

¹⁰ "Repetition and Exclusion: Coleridge and New Criticism Reconsidered," *Boundary 2* 8/1 (Fall 1979), 261.

¹¹ "A Symbolic Reading of the *Ancient Mariner*" in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, ed. by R.S. Crane (Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press, 1952), 138-144. See also R.S. Crane's entry on "The Chicago Critics" in *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 116-17.

Empson still considered Warren's work to be a prime example of Symbolist criticism, which "invites irrationalism."¹² More recently, David Perkins has attempted to point out what he calls Warren's "New Critical naivete" in his tacit assumption "that his interpretation of the poem would have been Coleridge's also."¹³ Perkins also argues that "Warren's concepts of symbolism were not drawn from Coleridge but from well-known theories in psychology, anthropology, and the arts and, in the literary milieu, from symbolisme, Yeats, Ernst Cassirer, C.S. Lewis, Susanne Langer, and so forth" (431).

Despite these praises and denunciations of Warren's critical work, the great value of this essay for our present study is found not only in his analysis of the imagination and symbol but also in the character of his experimental reading. While Warren's work displays a degree of aptitude in a kind of literary-historical scholarship, this is eclipsed by the overriding sense of the poet's ultimate concern for the nature of poetic creation. Warren's reading of *The Ancient Mariner* is filled with a high degree of self-consciousness. Inasmuch as the poem embodies what he called "the question of the poet to himself," his essay seems to pose to himself the question of the act of poetic creation in the poet's confrontation with the unsayable. In *A Plea in Mitigation*, Warren identifies the *Ancient Mariner* as one of several Romantic poems which "plagued the question" of the role of the poet and the relation of poetry and truth (8-9). He sharpens this distinction in "A Poem of Pure Imagination" by contending that, in its dealing with these issues, it was a central poem among Romantic poetry. *The Ancient Mariner* certainly is not, in his estimation, "one of the 'great formless poems' which the

¹² "The Ancient Mariner: An Answer to Warren," ed. by John Haffenden, *KR NS* 15/1 (1993), 155-56.

¹³ "The 'Ancient Mariner' and its interpreters: some versions of Coleridge," *Modern Language Quarterly* 57/3 (September 1996), 425-48.

Romantics are accused of writing, and not a poem which would fit into T. S. Eliot's formula of the dissociated sensibility of the period" (394). Warren takes the poem to be "central and seminal for the poet himself" as well as "central for its age, providing not a comment on an age, but a focus of the being and issues of that age" (394). Warren pinpoints the "focus of the being and the issues of that age" when he states that he considers the poem to be "a document of the very central and crucial issue of the period: the problem of truth and poetry" (380). Although he sees the roots of this issue in the Platonic dialogue *Ion*, Warren claims that this was "directly or indirectly, an obsessive theme for poetry itself" during the Romantic period. He suggests that these poets sought to establish "a holy alliance between poetry and truth," but this effort was frustrated by the rise of the scientific world view, so that during this period, "There were two truths, and they themselves might very well be in deadly competition: the truth of religion and the truth of science" (381). In this competition, the Romantic poets maintained "that poetry gives truth; or if they were as subtle as Coleridge, they sought to establish an intimate and essential connection between truth and poetry on psychological as well as metaphysical grounds" (381). This issue continued to be a central issue for Warren as well as for New Critics and Modernist critics who were the heirs of this Romantic vision in a similar cultural and social milieu. They struggled to create a space in which poetry might speak its truth in the midst of a world which relied upon science alone as a truth-register. Warren, however, sees in the work of Coleridge, as opposed to that of Shelley or Wordsworth, an effort toward reconciliation between all areas of thought: "But the main problem of reconciliation for Coleridge was that between poetry and religion, or morality, for since those were his twin pas-

sions, it was necessary for him to develop some vital connection between them if he was to be happy" (381). With his own aesthetic and theological concerns, Warren sought a similar reconciliation between poetry and the unsayable.

Warren's outline of Coleridge's detailed solution to the reconciliation of the poetic and the theological in the act of poetic creation indicates the way that Warren began to come to grips with the struggle to "say the unsayable." For Warren - as for Coleridge - the struggle with language centred on the problem of representation and reference. Warren worked with a great awareness of the crisis of modernity: the experience of alienation after the "death of God," in which individuals, as well as words and things, seem to be irreparably separated. This crisis, however, was the same confrontation with the linguistic consequences of the Fall experienced by Coleridge. As Warren moved away from viewing language as a tool for prying open reality and toward contemplating language itself as the problematic for the poet, the fractured and arbitrary nature of language opened up a fundamental problem for the poet: what is the nature of the poet's task if language both reveals and hides, if, like Derrida's *pharmakon*, it both heals and wounds? If, as Jefferson surmises in *Brother to Dragons*, "language betrays," then what is a poet to do?¹⁴ Is there an "adequate" language available? Does "poetic language" transcend these limits, or does it merely incarnate them all the more concretely? Does "poetic structure" coerce the recalcitrance of language into a yielding, subservient instrument? Warren's wrestling with these issues began to take shape in his study of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner;" however, this study did not yield firm answers, as much as it established for Warren

¹⁴ Near the beginning of *Brother to Dragons*, Jefferson interrupts himself and says "Yes, what was I saying? Language betrays. / There are no words to tell Truth." *Brother to Dragons: A New Version* (New York: Random House, 1979), 7.

what are the appropriate questions for the poet to ask. In this chapter we will trace out Warren's argument regarding the imagination and symbol in the light of the development of Coleridge's linguistic philosophy. In the next chapter, we shall explore the way that Warren continued to develop the central issues raised by his reading of Coleridge in his 1969 poem, *Audubon: A Vision*. It is this poem which opens up the aesthetic and theological questions of language raised in Warren's later poetry.

2.2 Warren and *The Ancient Mariner*

While Warren's essay concentrates primarily upon the function of the imagination within *The Ancient Mariner*, it also seeks to vindicate Coleridge's formulation of the imagination from previous interpretations of the poem through "an experiment in reading." He sets out to present a "new" reading of the poem, one that he considers to be consistent with Coleridge's aesthetic as a whole. But, this reading is also polemical. He strives to show the limitations and problems of several previous interpretations of this enigmatic poem, primarily those of Griggs and Lowes, for whom "...the poem is nothing more than a pleasant but meaningless dream" (340).¹⁵ Warren's objection to the readings of both critics is rooted in the priority he places upon the role of the imagination in Coleridge's overall philosophy and in the poem itself. Griggs' reading represents what Warren calls "a brand of hyperaesthetical criticism" of the poem, which he describes as inherent to a theory of "'pure poetry' - some notion that a poem should not 'mean' but 'be,' and that the 'be-ing' of a poem does not 'mean'" (337). Ultimately, *The Ancient Mariner* is for Griggs "a journey into the supernatural for the sake of the journey" (340). Warren also rejects Lowes' moralistic criticism of the

¹⁵ Warren quotes from both: *The Best of Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs (New York, 1934), and John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (Boston, 1927).

poem, summarizing his reading of the moral of the poem as, "a man should not have to suffer so much just for shooting a bird" (339). In light of Lowe's statement in *The Road to Xanadu* that the poem's "inconsequence is the dream's irrelevance" (340), Warren asserts that the poem is for him "an illusion for the sake of illusion" (340). Warren also responds to what he considers to be other fallacious interpretations based upon false critical pretences. For example, Warren wants to distinguish what he means by the "theme" of the poem from the idea of "the personal theme" which seems to have held a central position in interpretations of the poem. He cites Kenneth Burke's concern in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* for "the sexual and opium motives" in Coleridge's composition (349). Furthermore, when Warren turns to consider the nature of the Mariner's act, he strongly rejects both literalist and allegorical readings. He especially cites Gingerich's reading which attributes the Mariner's act to a necessitarian philosophy: "the Mariner does not act but is constantly acted upon, that 'he is pursued by a dark and sinister fate' after having done the deed 'impulsively and wantonly' and presumably under necessity" (356). Warren's skepticism about these various readings hinges upon their limited interpretation of Coleridge's theory of the imagination and the symbol. He says of Griggs and Lowes that "they take the word imagination here at their own convenience and not in Coleridge's context and usage" (341).

The second part of his polemic is to vindicate what he calls "a discursive reading of the symbol which is the poem" (398). Warren's experimental reading sets out not only "to establish that *The Ancient Mariner* does embody a statement" (337-38) but also "to establish that the statement which the poem does ultimately embody is thoroughly consistent with Coleridge's basic theological and philosophical views as

given to us in sober prose..." (339).¹⁶ The statement of the poem consists in the primary and secondary themes which he identifies. The primary theme -- which is not more important than the secondary but is, according to Warren, "at the threshold of the poem" -- is that of the sacramental vision or the "One Life" (348). According to Warren, this identifies "the issue of the fable," or the basic narrative of crime, punishment, repentance, and recognition. The sacramental vision of *The Ancient Mariner* brings to light the metaphysical and theological issues of the mystery of original sin and of the Fall of humanity in Adam, the primary symbol for humanity in Coleridge's thought. The secondary theme of the imagination has to do with "the context of values" which the poem "may be found ultimately to embody." These values undergird the metaphysical nature of the sacramental vision which extends his interpretation of the imagination to the theological notions of the fall and of original sin found throughout the poem. Warren's professed goal, though, is to define the way in which these two themes undergo a "final symbolic fusion in the poem" (349), because it is this symbolic fusion which reveals something about the nature of literary creation as Coleridge understood it.

Warren's emphasis upon the symbolic fusion also helps us to understand the way Coleridge came to characterize his own struggle with language. These two themes and their fusion - which Warren calls "the central and crucial fact" of the poem (380) - reveal what happens when the poet wrestles with language in order to create a poem. Warren says toward the end of the essay that he has tried "to show, by dwelling on details as well as on the broad, central images, that there is in *The Ancient Mariner* a relatively high degree of expressive integration"

¹⁶ This was the crux of Olson's objection to Warren's reading of *The Ancient Mariner*. "We may indeed worry about whether...it is not an absurdity to conceive of a poem - i.e., any imitative poem - as having a theme or meaning." See Olson 139n.

(390). He goes on to say, "For I take the poem to be one in which the vital integration is of a high order....It is, in short, a work of 'pure imagination'" (394). By looking for a high degree of "vital integration" in the poem, Warren seeks to apply Coleridge's own aesthetic, as he understands it, to the interpretation of the poem, to take his theory of the imagination and his formulation of the symbol as the most helpful perspective. Warren says that to look at this poem "in the light of the poet's lifelong preoccupations, we may come to conclude, with Leslie Stephen, that 'the germ of all Coleridge's utterances may be found...in the 'Ancient Mariner'" (394). Warren's interpretation of the poem certainly leads us to Coleridge's utterances about language and its role in his aesthetic theory. As Coleridge's stress upon the symbol shaped his own life-long struggle to validate a linguistic theory, so it was this theory which shaped Warren's own coming to terms with the problem of language.

2.3 The Imagination as Living Power

While Warren does not analyze in his essay the development of Coleridge's linguistics, he does pay particular attention to the imagination as the root of Coleridge's thinking about the symbol and poetic language. While Warren does not provide a "detailed exposition of the stages of [the imaginations's] growth and clarification" (342) but instead considers its poetic function within *The Ancient Mariner*, we want to explore these stages of growth and clarification more in depth in specific relation to the development of Coleridge's linguistic theory, using Warren's essay as our pretext. Warren begins his discussion of the imagination by quoting the "key passage" on the imagination from

Chapter 13 of the *Biographia Literaria* (1817).¹⁷ In this chapter, Coleridge expounds the idea of imagination as a reconciling and completing power in light of his attempt to construct a true transcendental philosophy. He begins from the Kantian presupposition that nature is composed of two contrary forces, "the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity..." (I.297). These are not contradictory in the sense that they "must neutralize or reduce each other to inaction" (I.299); following Kant, these are opposites or contraries which are "real without being contradictory" (I.298). If these two forces are contrary without being contradictory, then the problem of transcendental philosophy is "to discover the result or product of two such forces" (I.299). Their relationship is generative of "one power with its two inherent indestructible yet counteracting forces, and the results or generations to which their inter-penetration gives existence in the living principle and in the process of our own self-consciousness" (I.299).

That this "one power" is what Coleridge conceives to be the imagination becomes evident at the end of this chapter, where he makes his clearest distinction between the primary and the secondary imagination.

The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects)

¹⁷ *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, CC 7, ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Subsequent references to this volume will appear in the text under the abbreviation *BL*.

are essentially fixed and dead (I.304).

It is by means of the primary imagination that we are able to perceive ourselves in the midst of an intelligible world and are able to exercise a conscious will. The exercise of the human will as a finite repetition of the eternal will of God as displayed in the act of creation, is central in all of Coleridge's thinking about the imagination and is a key feature in Warren's subsequent thought. The secondary imagination, as an exercise of the creative will to idealize and unify, is an echo of the former, by which we perceive all things. This specific creative will co-exists with the conscious will, and differs only in the degree and mode of its activity. In "Appendix C" of *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge describes the imagination as that "completing power which unites clearness with depth, the plenitude of the sense with the comprehensibility of the understanding..." (69)¹⁸ When the understanding becomes "impregnated" with the imagination, it then "becomes intuitive, and a living power" (69). Apart from this power of the imagination, the understanding would function at the level of fancy alone. Coleridge says in Chapter 9 of the *Biographia* that as a result of his early relationship with Wordsworth and his reading of Wordsworth's poetry he came "to suspect...that fancy and imagination were two distinct and widely different faculties, instead of being, according to the general belief, either two names with one meaning, or at furthest the lower and higher degree of one and the same power" (I.82). Coleridge described the fancy as

no other mode than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word *choice*. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of

¹⁸ *The Statesman's Manual in Lay Sermons*, CC 6, ed. by R.J. White (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 3-114.

association (I.305).

The fancy, instead of being re-creative and unifying, is merely descriptive. In terms of his later linguistic observations, the fancy seeks to give permanence to things by formulating linguistic abstractions. In the hands of the fancy, language is used as a tool. Understanding the importance of this distinction in Coleridge's philosophy, Warren is concerned to preserve the its integrity in his reading of *The Ancient Mariner*. He rebuts the argument of several critics who confuse Coleridge's distinction:

Actually, a little reflection instructs us that the word was for Coleridge freighted with a burden of speculation and technical meaning. His theory of the imagination, upon which his whole art-philosophy hinges, 'was primarily the vindication of a particular attitude to life and reality' ("APPI" 341).

Coleridge's concern for the imagination is evident in his earliest work and bears an important relationship to Coleridge's subsequent thinking about language. He begins Chapter 14 of the *Biographia* by recounting the growth of his thinking about the power of poetry:

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours¹⁹ our conversations turned frequently to the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination (II.5).

At this early stage, Coleridge links the emotive power of poetic language to a "faithful adherence to the truth of nature" and to a commitment to the modifying power of the imagination, by which poetry dissolves, diffuses, and dissipates what is given in order to re-create. Warren quite aptly argues against any strict division of Coleridge's work into a distinct poetic or creative phase and a distinct critical

¹⁹ The year is probably 1797.

phase, which would place Coleridge's concern for the imagination as a late development, perhaps the direct result of his time spent in Germany.²⁰ In a footnote Warren appears to gloss Coleridge's comment in the *Biographia*:

First, Coleridge says flatly that he had become aware of the special power of the imagination at an early date, his "twenty-fourth year."...The whole discussion of the origin of the *Lyrical Ballads* makes it clear beyond doubt that the basic conception of the imagination had been arrived at early ("APPI" 400-401).

However, this preoccupation is apparent even as early as 1795, in his "Lecture on the Slave-Trade," in which he states,

To develop the powers of the Creator is our proper employment - and to imitate Creativeness by combination our most exalted and self-satisfying Delight. But we are progressive and must not rest content with present Blessings. Our Almighty Parent hath therefore given to us Imagination that stimulates to the attainment of real excellence by the contemplation of splendid Possibilities that still revivifies the dying motive within us, and fixing our eye on the glittering Summits that rise one above the other in Alpine endlessness still urges us up the ascent of Being, amusing the ruggedness of the road with the beauty and grandeur of the ever-widening Prospect. Such and so noble are the ends for which this restless faculty was given us - but horrible has been its misapplication.²¹

Even here, Coleridge is thinking in terms of the revivifying power of the imagination as "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." He seems to look forward from the notion of the imagination as "living power" to his later conception of language as "living words."

This passage also betrays the theological significance of the

²⁰ See Footnote 3, "APPI" 400-401.

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion*, CC 1, ed. by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 235-36.

imagination for Coleridge. His symbol of the Alpine summits which endlessly rise one above the other reveals what he conceives to be the real power of the imagination: it is by means of the imagination that we move "up the ascent of Being" and gain "the ever-widening prospect."²² Warren does not ignore this dimension of the imagination. In fact, he takes I.A. Richards to task for "casting into psychological terms what in Coleridge's thought appears often in theological and metaphysical terms..." and though Coleridge "defended the use of the word *psychological*, he was not content to leave the doctrine of the creativity of the mind at the psychological level" (345). Warren goes on to describe the theological import of the imagination in terms of the *imago dei*:

There is a God, and the creativity of the human mind, both in terms of the primary and in terms of the secondary imagination, is an analogue of Divine creation and a proof that man is created in God's image....Reason, as opposed to the understanding, is, in Coleridge's system, the organ whereby man achieves the 'intuition and spiritual consciousness of God,' and the imagination operates to read Nature in the light of that consciousness, to read it as a symbol of God. It might be said that reason shows us God, and imagination shows us how Nature participates in God (345).

Human creativity, for Coleridge, was not merely a psychological phenomenon shaped strictly by sense experience in an empirical world; rather, its roots are embedded in man's creaturely nature, being made in the image of God. Because of this, the imagination is an innate part of the human make-up by which the mind is able to "read" nature as a "symbol of God." Coleridge's insistence upon the innate nature of the imagination - based upon the analogue of the human mind to the divine - defined his understanding of language and distinguished it from the predominant mechanistic and materialistic theories of language in seventeenth and

²² Note the almost Heideggerian concern for being in its relationship to the imagination and language.

eighteenth century philosophy.

2.4 Language as Living Words

Coleridge's earliest reflections on language reveal a mixture of his philosophical, theological and poetic concerns. According to Goodson, though, poetic language was his "originating question": "In the beginning Coleridge was occupied with language in its poetic setting...."²³ These reflections on language were shaped by his interaction with the works of Locke, Hartley, and Berkeley, and were concerned with problems which the Rationalists and Empiricists sought to solve, such as the relation of thing to thought, the distinction between presentation and representation, and the differences between sensation, perception and feeling.²⁴ Coleridge was particularly influenced by the differences between the idealism of George Berkeley and the empiricism of John Locke. Coleridge adamantly rejected Locke's fundamental repudiation of the rationalist theory of innate notions, the repudiation which formed the singular presupposition of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690).²⁵ Locke proposed that such a notion was built upon a "universal consent" that

there are certain principles, both *speculative* and *practical*..., universally agreed upon by all mankind: which therefore, they argue, must needs be constant impressions which the souls of men receive in their first beings, and which they bring into the world with them, as necessarily and really as they do any of their inherent faculties (I.2.2).

Locke argues, however, that the mind is in its first being a *tabula*

²³ A.C. Goodson, "Coleridge on Language: A Poetic Paradigm," *Philological Quarterly* 62/1 (1983), 48.

²⁴ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, Vol 3: 1808-1819 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 3605n. Please note that references to the *Notebooks* are to the entry number and not to the page number. Subsequent references to this volume will appear in the text under the abbreviation *CN III*.

²⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1959). References are to the book, chapter and paragraph numbers in the text.

rasa, void of these ideas, and contends that principles only enter the mind through the use of reason by means of the senses; as he says, "the foundation of all our knowledge of corporeal things lies in our senses" (III.11.23). He states,

The senses at first let in particular ideas and furnish the yet empty cabinet; and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards the mind, proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive faculty (I.2.15).

Locke then goes on to discuss the relationship between language and ideas in Book III, "Of Words." He argues that man has by nature organs which are "so fashioned as to be fit to frame articulate sounds, which we call words" (III.1.1), but this is not to say that language is in any way innate. Words signify only ideas in Locke's theory, "those names becoming general which are made to stand for general ideas, and those remaining particular where the ideas they are used for are particular" (III.1.3). But, if the "whole extent of our knowledge or imagination reaches not beyond our own ideas, limited to our own ways of perception" (III.11.23), then language, as well as the imagination, cannot extend to have any vital interaction with things. Rather it is an obscure and unclear relation between word and thing which ultimately divides the one from the other. Locke contends that "it is a perverting the use of words, and brings unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds" (III.2.5).

This radical division between word and thing in Locke's philosophy violated Coleridge's concern for a unified vision which could sustain the identity of word and thing. For Coleridge, language is the wheels

upon which Ezekiel's chariot was carried along, as he describes it in *The Statesman's Manual*. Coleridge, therefore, states in the *Biographia* that he summarily rejected Locke's system because he could not find in it "an abiding place for my reason" (I.141). This statement is significant in light of his linking the imagination with reason. Ultimately Locke's system could not make a place for the imagination as Coleridge understood it. After his time in Germany, Coleridge continued to express his great concern over the influence of Locke's philosophy. For instance, Coleridge rejected James Mackintosh's views because of the latter's adherence to Locke's notion of the non-innateness of all ideas.²⁶ In a notebook entry from 1801, Coleridge proposed an "Essay on Locke" in which he would seek to vindicate the power, ability and role of the creative imagination. According to Coburn, Coleridge believed that the "creative human mind brings what is dim and unrealized into clarity," as is displayed most prominently in Shakespeare, as well as the Bible.²⁷ It is the living power of the imagination which vivifies and links the act of perception with the creative will. Even in 1807, Coleridge wrote in his notebook,

Time, Space, Duration, Action, Active, Passion, Passive, Activeness, Passiveness, Reaction, Causation, Affinity - here assemble all the Mysteries - known, all is known - unknown, say rather, merely known, all is unintelligible/ and yet Locke & the stupid adorers of ~~this~~ that *Fetisch* Earth-clod, take all these for granted....²⁸

In rejecting Lockean empiricism, Coleridge entertained the philosophical system of the eighteenth century English philosopher, David

²⁶ See *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, Vol 1: 1794-1804 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 634. Subsequent references to this volume will appear in the text under the abbreviation *CN I*.

²⁷ See *CN I*.930n.

²⁸ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, Vol 2: 1804-1808 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 3156. Subsequent references to this volume will appear in the text under the abbreviation *CN II*.

Hartley, who espoused the doctrine of association. Associationism, with roots in Aristotelian thought, observes in "the spontaneous movements of thought and the principle of their intellectual mechanism" a "law of association as established in the contemporaneity of the original impressions" and then seeks to center this as "the basis of all true psychology" (I.91). Abrams identifies this law as part of the overall mechanical theory of literary invention which was prevalent in eighteenth century efforts "to import into the psychical realm the explanatory scheme of physical science, and so to extend the victories of mechanics from matter to mind."²⁹ Coleridge, however, apparently saw in Hartley's formulation of this doctrine a possible response to the starkness of Locke's position. His interests in this law were naturally drawn by the question of human perception. According to Abrams, Hartley "set out to demonstrate rigorously that all the complex contents and processes of mind are derived from the elements of simple sensation, combined by the single link of contiguity in original experience" (*Mirror* 162). In Chapters 5 through 9 of the *Biographia*, Coleridge recounts the history of the law of association, tracing its development from Aristotle to Hartley. In Chapter 5, Coleridge goes back to Aristotle in order to find "the fullest and most perfect enunciation of the associative principle" (I.100) and summarizes Aristotle's "general law of association" in this way: "Ideas by having been together acquire a power of recalling each other; or every partial representation awakes the total representation of which it had been a part" (I.102-103). Coleridge is critical of what he calls the "principle of contemporaneity, which Aristotle had made the common condition of all the laws of association..." (I.110). Ultimately Coleridge saw the law of associa-

²⁹ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1953), 159.

tion as "the universal law of the passive fancy and mechanical memory..." (I.103-104), which denies the power of the imagination and the importance of its relationship to human language. Coleridge also points to Descartes as another exponent of the law of association; he sought

to establish it as a general law that contemporaneous impressions, whether images or sensations, recall each other mechanically. On this principle, as a ground work, he built up the whole system of human language as one continued process of association...As one word may become the general exponent of many, so by association a simple image may represent a whole class (I.94-95).

If impressions merely "recall one another mechanically," then the conscious will is denied its role in the act of poetic creation. If language is simply "one continued process of association," between ideas in the mind, then word and thing are still divided. The problem with the Aristotelian and Cartesian formulations - as well as those of Hobbes and Vives - is precisely this rift between subject and object, thought and feeling, word and thing.

However, Coleridge turned away from Hartley's system, especially because of its inadequate formulation of the relation between word and thing. Coleridge's early devotion to Hartley was mitigated first by his readings in the mystical and theosophical traditions - especially in Plotinus and Boehme - and then later by his reading of Kant and Schelling. Warren points out, however, that this early deference to Hartley can hardly be seen as a complete adoption of his thought as a system. Warren quotes a statement made by Coleridge "during the years immediately leading up to the composition of *The Ancient Mariner*: 'I am a complete necessitarian, and I understand the subject almost as well as Hartley himself, but I go farther than Hartley, and believe the corpore-

ality of *thought*, namely that it is motion'" ("APPI" 356). The way in which Coleridge understood himself to "go farther than Hartley" is precisely in the relationship between idea and thing, or word and thing. By specifying the corporeal nature of thought as motion, Coleridge is anticipating his later discussion of the symbol in *The Statesman's Manual*. Thought functions by symbols, which "are the wheels Ezekiel beheld." In the *Biographia*, Coleridge summarizes the Hartleyan associationism and outlines why he eventually rejected it. His rejection centered upon the system's implications for language. Hartley's theory extended the materialist tradition which had originated in Aristotle's philosophy and had impacted the eighteenth century primarily through Descartes and Hobbes. Coleridge refers at the beginning of Chapter 6 of the *Biographia* to "Hartley's hypothetical vibrations in his hypothetical oscillating ether of the nerves" (I.106) and goes on to explain why such a mechanical system is not only untenable but is not - in his opinion - properly philosophical. Hartley proposed that ideas are vibrations in the mind which correspond to external objects; so, the idea or vibration A is produced by and corresponds to the external object A. If each vibration has a distinct cause, then how could ideas be associated to one another? Coleridge summarizes it in this way:

To understand this, the attentive reader need only be reminded that the ideas are themselves, in Hartley's system, nothing more than their appropriate configurative vibrations. It is a mere delusion of the fancy to conceive the pre-existence of the ideas in any chain of association as so many differently colored billiard-balls in contact, so that when an object, the billiard-stick, strikes the first or white ball, the same motion propagates itself through the red, green, blue, black, etc., and sets the whole in motion. No! we must suppose the very same force which constitutes the white ball to constitute the red or black; or the idea of a circle to constitute the idea of a triangle; which is impossible (I.108).

In his *Observations on Man* (1754), Hartley applied his doctrine of association to language: "Words and Phrases must excite Ideas in us by Association, and they excite Ideas in us by no other means."³⁰ If the only relationship between words and ideas is a law of association which depends upon the notion of contemporaneity, then words and ideas (or things) are still divided from one another.

By 1797 George Berkeley had become Coleridge's favored muse.³¹ Warren points out that in a letter of December of 1796 to John Thelwall, we "find Coleridge saying flatly, 'I am a Berkleyan'" ("APPI" 357). Coleridge suggests on a number of occasions that he preferred Berkeley's metaphor of perception more so than that of Locke. In a notebook entry from 1809, he stated his understanding of the difference between the two philosophers: "Berkeley's Idealism may be thus illustrated: Our perceptions are impressions on our own minds standing to the external cause in the relation of the picture on the Canvass to the Painter, rather than in that of the Image in the Mirror to the Object reflected" (CN III.3605 f120v). Berkeley's system was rooted in an idealist metaphysic in which, according to McKusick, "God is an active presence in the visible universe, and the act of perception is nothing other than the apprehension of the ideas by which he manifests himself" (27). What appealed to Coleridge was the way this system subverted both the materialist and mechanistic views common to the Deism which descended from Locke. Coleridge was drawn to what he considered to be the theological possibilities of Berkeley's notion of "outness" and of his formulation of what he called the Divine Visual Language. Coleridge adopted Berkeley's notion of outness when formulating his own theory of the symbol.

³⁰ Quoted in Goodson, "Coleridge on Language" 55.

³¹ For a helpful summary of Berkeley's thought and its influence on Coleridge, see James C. McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language*, Yale Studies in English 195 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 26-32.

However, Coleridge was also deeply influenced by Berkeley's concept of nature as the Divine Visual Language, in which he surmised that nature is the primary way of communication between God and man - in this way Berkeley is able to hold that Christian faith may justly be based on sense-experience alone - and that these appearances form a kind of language which is analogous to human language.

This view accorded with Coleridge's sacramental or "organic" view of nature and reality which Warren observes to be so central to *The Ancient Mariner*. Berkeley held, however, that natural signs were arbitrary, as arbitrary as signs in human language. Coleridge seems to have agreed with this notion of linguistic arbitrariness. In a notebook entry from 1801, Coleridge writes,

It seems to elucidate the Theory of Language, Hartley,³² just able to speak a few words, making a fire-place of stones, with stones for fire - four stones - fire-place - two stones - fire - /arbitrary symbols in Imagination...(CN I.918).³³

The arbitrariness to which Coleridge refers is the assigning of the same stones different functions, and yet these symbols function powerfully - for Hartley - by means of the imagination. Coleridge distinguished, though, between such arbitrary, "human" signs and natural signs. He understood natural signs, or the language of nature, to be far less arbitrary than signs in human language. So, in the lecture fragment, "Genius and Public Taste," Coleridge suggests that, though human language so often functions by purely arbitrary modes, the language of nature is more than arbitrary because it is "a subordinate *Logos*."³⁴ Coleridge was able to make this adjustment to Berkeley's position through his interaction with various texts, not least of which was the

³² Coleridge is referring here to his son, and not to David Hartley.

³³ See also Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Anima Poetae* (London: William Heinemann, 1895), 13.

³⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. by Thomas Middleton Raysor, 2 vols. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1960), II.185.

first chapter of John's Gospel which declares that the Logos was in the beginning, was with God, and was God. He also drew upon his reading of the eighteenth century English philologist John Horne Tooke and his deep knowledge of the theosophico-metaphysical tradition, particularly in the works of Jacob Boehme and Plotinus. McKusick, though, points out how Berkeley's doctrine provided the means by which Coleridge was able to respond to Hartley: "But Coleridge adopted Berkeley's philosophy for the sake of its idealism, as a way of emancipating himself from the tyranny of Hartleyan associationism, and he does not hesitate to press its conclusions farther than Berkeley ever dared" (29).

Prior to leaving for Göttingen in 1798, Coleridge began to interact with the work of Tooke, whom Coleridge knew not only as a philologist but as a political radical. Coleridge may well have been aware of Tooke before he was tried for treason in 1794, but it wasn't until several years later that Coleridge actually met Tooke.³⁵ It was Tooke's *Ensa Itrepeevra* or *The Diversions of Purley* (published in two volumes, 1786 and 1805, respectively) which provided an abundance of critical grist for Coleridge's deliberations about language. In the *Diversions of Purley*, Tooke states, "The business of the mind, as far as it concerns Language, appears to me to be very simple. It extends no further than to receive impressions, that is, to have Sensations or Feelings. What are called its operations, are merely the operations of Language."³⁶ That the functions of the mind are verbal was appealing to Coleridge; however, it was Tooke's concept of "winged words" which proved especially helpful for Coleridge as he sought for a non-mechanistic view of language. His own concept of *ενεα ζωνια*, or "living words," seems to have been an adaptation of Tooke's notion. In his Fifth Lecture of the

³⁵ See Coleridge, *Lectures 1795: On Politics and Religion* 19; McKusick 38-39.

³⁶ Quoted in Goodson, "Coleridge on Language" 54.

1808 "Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton," Tomalin reports,

Horne Tooke had called his book *Epea Pteroenta*, 'winged words.' In Coleridge's judgment it might have been much more fitly called *Verba Viventia*, or 'living words,' for words are the living products of the living mind and could not be a due medium between the thing and the mind unless they partook of both.³⁷

What is curious about Coleridge's enthusiasm for Tooke's linguistics, though, is that his position was primarily a materialist one. McKusick points out that Tooke was "the first English philologist to apply Locke's philosophy to the study of language" (33). It was Tooke's indebtedness to the empirical/materialist tradition - as well as his political exploits - that probably led to Coleridge's eventual disavowal of Tooke's position. Even as late as 1830 Coleridge commented on his debate with Tooke's argument: "Tooke affects to explain the origin and whole philosophy of language by what it is, in fact, only a mere accident of the history of one or two languages."³⁸ What Coleridge calls an "accident" refers to Tooke's emphasis upon etymologies and the ways in which related words break off from one another. Tooke placed this accident at the center of his argument, whereas Coleridge merely found it helpful for explaining the relationships among words. Goodson explains that this "accident, the fulcrum of Tooke's argument, is the supposed loss of the original meanings of the particles of the English language; the term includes for him all the parts of speech except nouns and verbs" (54). Tooke's resulting philology then is a mechanistic one, "effectively reducing the speaker's role in language to bricklaying" (54). It was this mechanistic simplicity, engendered by Locke's division between word and thing, which Coleridge found to be unbearable.

³⁷ Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism* II, 74.

³⁸ See Coleridge, *Table Talk and Omniana*, ed. by T. Ashe (London: Bell, 1884), 70. Also quoted in Goodson, "Coleridge on Language" 53.

While Coleridge's time in Germany during 1798 and 1799 may justly be considered a watershed in his critical development, that development was nonetheless a direct outgrowth of his earlier thinking about poetic language and the power of the imagination in the act of poetic creation. To the winter of 1799, Coleridge wrote to Thomas Poole from Germany, commenting on his life as a student there. He cites the lectures of Blumenbach and Eichhorn as particular interest. His greatest fascination, though, appears to have been the lectures of Tyschen, under whom Coleridge studied many northern languages. In Chapter 10 of the *Bio-graphia*, Coleridge says that

my chief efforts were directed towards a grounded knowledge of the German language and literature. From Professor Tyschen I received as many lessons in the Gothic of Ulphilas as sufficed to make me acquainted with its grammar and the radical words of most frequent occurrence; and with the occasional assistance of the same philosophical linguist I read through Ottfried's metrical paraphrase of the gospel, and the most important remains of the Theotiscan, or the transitional state of the Teutonic language from the Gothic to the old German of the Swabian period (I.207-209).

In the same year, Coleridge commented that he considered the older Northern languages to be the best languages for poetry, because these had an ability to express "only prominent ideas with clearness, . . . others but darkly" (CN I.383). During his time in Germany, then, we find not a privileging of his critical questions about language over his concern for poetry and the imagination, but a further blending of the two. His exposure during this time to both a different critical tradition and a different poetic tradition in Germany provided a perspective from which he could critique the work of earlier English influences such as Hartley, Berkeley, and Tooke. The full impact of this year revealed itself not in a single burst or a sudden transformation but in the grad-

ual development over the next five to ten years of his notions of the imagination and the symbol.

In the midst of his time in Germany, Coleridge was still attempting to come to terms with Tooke's influence. In a notebook entry from that period, Coleridge wrote, "Mind - min - meinen - mahnen - mahen / vibratory yet progressive motion" (CN I.378). In echoes of the Scotist tradition and its sense of concrete language, Coleridge reveals here his great interest in etymologies, an interest engendered by Tooke and probably influenced here by the teaching of Tyschen. Tooke's emphasis upon etymologies may be seen here as a critique of the notion of words as mere vibrations. He reaches back to the Hartleyan view of the law of association in which words (as ideas) are seen as vibrations in the mind which correspond to external objects. However, he also appears to be probing the nature or limits of linguistic arbitrariness, a concern raised by Berkeley. Given the arbitrariness of signs, there is nonetheless an apparent progressive motion in language in which words are related to one another; by recourse to etymologies, Coleridge attempts to show how meaning is formed in this linguistic difference. However, by 1800, Coleridge saw that both Tooke's and Hartley's systems were lacking. There still existed this radical division between word and thing. Coleridge wrote to William Godwin on 22 September of that year, urging him to return from writing drama to the work of "a bold moral thinker." The work which he proposed for Godwin was a bold linguistic project:

I wish you to write a book on the power of words, and the processes by which human feelings form affinities with them - in short, I wish you to *philosophize* Horn Tooke's System, and to solve the great Questions - whether there be reason to hold, that an action bearing all the *semblance* of pre-designing Consciousness may yet be simply organic, & whether a *series* of such actions is possible - and close on the

heels of this question would follow the old 'Is Logic the Essence of Thinking?' in other words - Is *thinking* impossible without arbitrary signs? & - how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the Law of the Growth?-In something of this order I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of *Words & Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too.³⁹

Coleridge's charge to Godwin betrays his own commitment to the power of words as "living Things." Their power comes from the exercise of passion within the will, so that these signs which may be seen as merely arbitrary are only an integral part of "the Plant." This image captures the organic nature of Coleridge's thinking, especially in his view of language. Thinking is able to realize the thing thought because both the thing and the thought are each part of the same plant. For thinking is not possible without words; so, the passion of the will transforms arbitrary signs into the parts and germinations of the plant. Thus, the "old antithesis of *Words & Things*" is destroyed because the words are elevated by the will and become a part of the whole of thinking.

Coleridge is anticipating here what he called in 1802 "the verbal imagination," a phrase which aptly describes his understanding of the relationship between language and the imagination. As he was concerned for the creative power of the mind, Coleridge's understanding of language was linked to his formulation of the imagination. The roots of his understanding of the imagination are most obviously found in the influence of Kant. Although Coleridge wrote during his stay in Germany of his great admiration for Blumenbach, Eichhorn, and Tyschen, his thinking for the rest of his life was carried on under the shadow of Kant. In Chapter 9 of the *Biographia*, after having surveyed his inter-

³⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-1971), I.625-26. Subsequent references to this will appear in the text under the abbreviation CL.

action with the doctrine of association from Aristotle to Hartley, Coleridge confessed,

The writings of the illustrious sage of Königsburg, the founder of the Critical Philosophy, more than any other work at once invigorated and disciplined my understanding. The originality, the depth and the compression of the thoughts; the novelty and subtlety, yet solidity and importance, of the distinctions; the adamant chain of logic;... [all] took possession of me as with a giant's hand (I.153).

Even as early as 1801, the preeminence of Kant is apparent. Shortly after writing his four philosophical letters to Josiah Wedgwood in February of 1801 in which he outlined his argument with materialism and empiricism, Coleridge wrote to Thomas Poole to inform him that "I have not only completely extricated the notions of time and space; but have overthrown the doctrine of association as taught by Hartley..." (CL II.706). Kant would have been attractive to Coleridge for a variety of reasons. First, Kant's thinking stands in the Platonic tradition, which would have accorded well with Coleridge's own reading of Plotinus and his own neoplatonic tendencies. Also, Kant's distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal realms as contrary but not contradictory entities provided the terms for Coleridge's own unified vision of "multeity in unity," as he stated it in the third essay of "On The Principles of Genial Criticism," the living and generative power of which is the imagination. However, Warren justly observes that it is invalid to claim that Coleridge's concept of the imagination was derived solely from Kant. "Germany gave Coleridge form and authority, perhaps, but not the basic motivation for his final views" ("APPI" 401). Kant's influence was not the only "form and authority" which Coleridge derived from Germany; the philosophy and aesthetics of the German romantic philosopher Friedrich Schelling also figured prominently in the shaping of

his thought. Coleridge seemed to have been caught for many years in a dialogue between Kant and Schelling. Frank Lentricchia suggests that this tension is responsible for what he calls "a contradiction embedded in Coleridge's philosophical identity."⁴⁰ However it would appear that such a tension - between Schelling's pantheistic, dynamic aesthetic on the one hand and Kant's more systematic, phenomenological views on the other - is exactly what shaped Coleridge's theory of the symbol.

2.5 Coleridge and the Symbol

Coleridge's theory of the imagination provided a means of breaking down the antithesis between word and thing through the exercise of the conscious will and gave birth to his conception of words as living things. This position was engendered by Kant's notion of a generative tension between contraries which does not negate reason or understanding but provides a basis for true thought. Out of this tension within the imagination, the symbol arises and forms the dynamic core of Coleridge's theory of poetic creation. Warren elucidates this relation of the symbol to his theory of composition in his analysis of the primary and secondary themes. Warren calls his experiment a "symbolic reading because of its fusion of the two themes. Aware of Coleridge's concern for precision in terminology, Warren emphasizes that the term "symbol" held a specific import in contradistinction from terms such as "metaphor" or "allegory." He cites "Coleridge's emphasis on diversity within unity" as evidence of this concern for the symbol and contends that failure to realize the centrality of this in "Coleridge's theory of composition has led a number of critics to try to read *The Ancient Mariner* in terms of a two-dimensional allegory..." (350).

Warren rejects any allegorical reading of the poem, "the sort of

⁴⁰ Frank Lentricchia, "Coleridge and Emerson: Prophets of Silence, Prophets of Language," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 32 (1973), 37.

reading which gives us such absurdities as the point-to-point equating of the Pilot with the Church and the Pilot's boy with the clergy..." (350). According to Warren, "The method of allegory - if by allegory we understand a fixed system of point-to-point equations - is foreign to [Coleridge's] conception of the role of the imagination.... Allegory is, to adopt Coleridge's terms, the product of the understanding, *symbol of the imagination*" (351, emphasis mine). By means of definitions, Warren states:

The symbol serves to combine...the "poet's heart and intellect." A symbol involves an idea (or ideas) as part of its potential, but it also involves the special complex of feelings associated with that idea, the attitude toward that idea. The symbol affirms the unity of mind in the welter of experience; it is a device for making that welter of experience manageable for the mind - graspable. It represents a focus of being and is not a mere sign, a "picture language" (352).

What distinguishes the symbol from allegory is the notion of arbitrariness. Allegory is based upon a purely arbitrary way of reading which looks for the "mere sign, a 'picture language.'" The symbol, though, cannot be arbitrary. He says that "a symbol implies a body of ideas which may be said to be fused in it" and that, therefore, "the symbol is not arbitrary - not a mere sign - but contains within itself the appeal which makes it serviceable as a symbol" (352). He states this point more strongly a little further on, saying that "the symbol...cannot be arbitrary - it has to participate in the unity of which it is representative. And this means that the symbol has a deeper relation to the total structure of meaning than its mechanical place in plot, situation, or discourse" (353).

Warren derives his description of the symbol from a number of Coleridge's own statements. In *The Statesman's Manual*, Coleridge

describes the imagination as a "reconciling and mediatory power" which "gives birth to a system of symbols, harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors" (29). Symbols are rooted in the imagination and by their nature have a reconciling and mediating effect. By "reconciling" Coleridge does not propose that two contrary forces are collapsed into one another; rather, by the mediating effect of the imagination these are brought together and held in tension, so that there is a manifest unity in multitude. The imagination is that "one power" which is "inexhaustively re-ebullient" rather than being restful or neutralizing (BF, I.299-300). The symbol then is the result of these two forces. It is "a *tertium aliquid*, or finite generation....Now this *tertium aliquid* can be no other than an inter-penetration of the counteracting powers, partaking of both" (I.300). The symbol, then, as the child of the imagination, is this "finite generation," a moment of "an inter-penetration of the counteracting powers, partaking of both." This is what he means when he states that the symbol is consubstantial with the truth it represents. The old antithesis between word and thing is broken down in the concrete "thisness" of the symbol itself. Mary Ann Perkins helpfully points out that Coleridge "rejected Kant's view of the symbol as representation which cannot put us in touch directly with noumenal reality, only with material for reflection."⁴¹ Coleridge believed that the symbol could put us in touch with noumenal reality by bringing two counteracting forces into contact and holding them in tension, the one partaking of the other. However, following Kant, these counteracting forces are contrary without being contradictory; therefore, the symbol is not a dialectical synthesis in which the two contraries are subsumed into one another, nor is it

⁴¹ Coleridge's *Philosophy: The Logos as Unifying Principle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 47.

sustained antithesis in which one is privileged over the other. This seems to fit with Coleridge's definition of the symbol in *The Statesman's Manual*: a symbol

is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative (30).

This shaped Coleridge's notion of linguistic reference: he cannot radically divide between word and thing because they participate in one another.⁴² The symbol is that reconciling and completing moment in which the two counteracting forces -- special/individual, general/especial, universal/general, or eternal/temporal -- inter-penetrate one another and partake of one another. This was the power of Ezekiel's vision for Coleridge; the symbols are the "Wheels which Ezekiel beheld" precisely because of the nature of the relationship between the wheels and the Spirit. Symbols and the truths "of which they are the conductors," "move in conjunction" with one another just as the wheels and the Spirit do in Ezekiel's vision. It is this symbolic moment, fostered by the imagination, which constitutes the poetic moment and "procure[s]...that willing suspension of disbelief *for the moment*, which constitutes poetic faith" (*BL* II.6, emphasis mine).

Warren's dual emphasis upon a symbolic reading and a sacramental vision is not arbitrary but is part of Coleridge's own understanding of the symbol. It is crucial to understand Coleridge's sacramental language in his formulation of the symbol. He says in his definition that the symbols produced by the imagination are *not only* "harmonious in

⁴² Compare Heidegger's discussion of the relation between word and thing in "The Nature of Language" in *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 86-90.

themselves" but are "consubstantial with the truths, of which they are the conductors." Coleridge's love for precision of terminology needs to be appreciated here. The symbol is not a moment of transubstantiation but of consubstantiation. The doctrine of transubstantiation holds that the substance of the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper is changed - transmuted - into the physical substance of the body and blood of the Christ. The substance of the bread and wine is lost in the new substance of the body and blood. Coleridge, however, uses the word "consubstantial." The eucharistic doctrine of consubstantiation was developed by Martin Luther and proposes that the body and blood are a presence together with the bread and wine, that they are "with, in, and under" the elements. As symbols, the bread and wine are not destroyed but are acknowledged to remain together as one with the truths of which they are the conductors. Coleridge commented upon this view in a marginal note in his copy of Charles Butler's *Vindication of "The Book"*:

The Eucharistic Act as instituted by Christ is a Symbol, i.e. - a part, or particular instance selected as a representative of the whole, of which whole however it is itself an actual, or real part. Now the Sacramentaries degrade the Symbol into a Metaphor, and that too, a Catachresis, while the Romish Superstition makes the Symbol representant, the whole thing represented, and in consequence equally with the former, destroys the Symbol.⁴³

In other places, Coleridge expresses his agreement with the sacramental views of Bucer, upon whom the renaissance humanism of Erasmus as well as the reformational theology of Luther had a profound effect. Bucer modified both Luther and Zwingli's eucharistic positions by arguing for a "sacramental union" of the elements with the body and blood of Christ; the elements co-inhere with the body and blood. Bucer was also the primary influence upon the sacramental theology in the English Prayer

⁴³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marginalia*, CC 12, ed. by George Whalley, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 862.

Book. Coleridge's thinking here reflects, then, the influence of the Anglican tradition with which he had a varied relationship. Coleridge followed Bucer and Anglicanism in the language used in a late notebook entry in which he states that identity

means One containing the power of two as their radical antecedent, or as...a point producing itself into a bi-polar Line but contemplated as anterior to this production, and containing the two Poles or Opposites in unevolved cöinherence....Be thing, however, called Identity or Prothesis, this Coinherence of Act and Being is the I AM IN THAT I WILL TO BE, of Moses, the Absolute I AM, and its grammatical correspondent is the VERB SUBSTANTIVE.⁴⁴

This sacramental notion of the "Coinherence of Act and Being" finds expression also in the *Logos*, which Coleridge understood to be the primary and essential symbol and the primary and essential language. It is in his thinking about the *logos* that we see his theory of the symbol coalesce with his understanding of language.

2.6 The *Logos* as Essential Language

The central role of the *logos* in Coleridge's philosophy is in itself a lengthy subject which has received a variety of responses. Mary Anne Perkins argues persuasively that "the *Logos* is the unifying factor of Coleridge's 'system'...and the key to understanding every area of his thought after 1805" (3). It "connects his theories of language and imagination, his philosophy of nature, his attempt to establish an epistemology based on the constitutive nature of ideas, and his moral philosophy and anthropology" (267). The development of this "unifying factor" must be seen as an essential part of the development of his thinking about the symbol and language. His *logos* doctrine must also be seen as an outgrowth of and a response to his eclectic reading.⁴⁵ There

⁴⁴ *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, Vol 4: 1819-1826 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1990), 4644. Subsequent references to this volume will appear in the text under the abbreviation *CN IV*.

⁴⁵ See Perkins 7-12.

are clearly elements from Kant in his search for unity and from Schelling in his notion of the mediating power of the logos; but there are also obvious influences of the mystical tradition and Neo-platonic philosophy. Also, McNiece observes a direct correlation between Coleridge's notion of logic and "the ancient and Christian idea of the Logos" as expressed by "several different attempts to define the appropriate relation between mind and nature."⁴⁶ Warren pays particular attention to the Neo-platonic influence on Coleridge, citing especially Plotinus' doctrine of creation as an important source for Coleridge's own thinking. Warren quotes a lengthy passage from the *Enneads* (V,I,7: *The Divine Mind*) in which Plotinus describes the monistic vision of Ideas, "veritable Being," and "veritable Essence," out of which physical creation has emanated ("APPI" 344-45). In a later footnote, Warren suggests that "Coleridge's particular doctrine of symbolism...seems to be developed under the shadow of Plotinus" (403). Plotinus' description of the universe as "a stately whole, complete within itself, serving at once its own purpose and that of all its parts..." is not very far from Coleridge's conception of the logos as the primary and essential symbol and word, "a stately whole, complete within itself."

The logos doctrine seems to have taken precedence in Coleridge's thinking between 1803 and 1805. In a notebook entry from November 1803, Coleridge proposes his "last & great work" as "The work which I should wish to leave behind me, or to publish late in Life, that On Man, and the probable Destiny of the Human Race..." (CN I.1649). He says that this work is to be "followed and illustrated by the Organum vere Organum, & philosophical Romance to explain the whole growth of Language, and for these to be always collecting materials." However, by 1805, Coler-

⁴⁶ Gerald McNiece, *The Knowledge that Endures: Coleridge, German Philosophy and the Logic of Romantic Thought* (London: MacMillan, 1992), 2.

idge seems to be pondering more specifically the role of the Logos in human language. In a notebook entry from that year, Coleridge ponders the "trinity" of the "Platonic Fathers," which he identifies as "God, his Word, and his Wisdom." As to the second element of this trinity, he writes,

Reason, Proportion, communicable Intelligibility intelligent and communicant, the Word - which last expression strikes me as the profoundest and most comprehensive Energy of the human Mind, if indeed it be not in some distinct sense *ενεργημα θεοπαροδοτον* (CN II.2445).

He says that "the moment we conceive the divine energy, that moment we co-conceive the Λογος..." so that under the work of the "*Spirit of holy Action*," "the redeemed & sanctified become finally themselves Words of the Word - even as ~~the~~ articulate sounds are made by the Reason to represent Forms, in the mind, and Forms are a language of the notions....As he is the Father, even so we in him!" Under the aegis of the logos, Coleridge brings together his thinking about language and the symbol. His concept of the logos underwent a transformation from a neoplatonist tenet rooted in triunity to the Christian notion of the trinity.⁴⁷ By 1817, then, Coleridge was able to write in the *Biographia Literaria* his proposed large and systematic work "which I have many years been preparing, on the Productive Logos human and divine; with and as an introduction to, a full commentary on the Gospel of St. John" (I.136). In other places Coleridge refers to his "magnum opus" under the term *Logosophia*. That he envisioned this to be his great and final work in his later years is apparent. However, this would mean that he had abandoned his earlier goal for his "last & great work" to be his study on "the probable Destiny of the Human Race."

His thinking about the logos brought together and gave shape to

⁴⁷ See Perkins 16-21.

his other concerns which developed in his thinking about the imagination. Coleridge sees in the notion of the logos the possible ground for a symbolic understanding of language. In April of 1805, he wrote,

In looking at the objects of Nature while I am thinking, as at yonder moon dim-glimmering thro' the dewy window-pane, I seem rather to be seeking as it were asking, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing any thing new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always and obscure feeling as if that new phenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner nature/It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! It is Λογος, the Creator! (CN II. 2546).⁴⁸

His first thoughts about the logos appear to have been in its creative and re-creative function, which perhaps correlates to his later description of the primary and secondary imagination. In the work of creation, Coleridge conceives of the Logos as the actualizing power of God. For him, "unity is manifested by Opposites" and "all true Opposites tend to unity" (CN IV.4513). So, Coleridge describes the creation of the physical universe as the "Incorporation of the Logos" by which the "potentialized Actual" is polarized into light and darkness and then the created light is polarized into life and warmth. However, in the "New Creation," Coleridge identifies the "Incarnation of the Logos" by the "polarization into divine Life and Light with Faith as the Indifference (John 1)" (CN IV.5162). Christ, then, as both incorporated and incarnated Logos, is "the *Verbum Dei*," "the fixed word, the verb in the form of the Substantive, he is *Nomen Dei*" (CN IV.4625).

The logos is the essential living word and primary symbol. His thinking about the logos drew upon his modification of Tooke's notion of "wingèd words" into his own conception of living words. In his *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, Coleridge clearly goes beyond Kantian dualism

⁴⁸ See also *Anima Poetae* 136.

when he writes that "...words are the living products of the living mind & could not be a due medium between the thing and the mind unless they partook of both."⁴⁹ Like symbols which are the "living products" of the imagination, words are "products of the living mind" and act as a medium only because they partake of both the thing and the mind. In *Aids to Reflection*, he goes on to say, "For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined and humanized" (10). Words actuate, even as the Word, the Logos, actuated all the potentialized actual in the work of creation. But this actuation is by means of symbol, for a symbol "is a sign included in the Idea which it represents" (*Aids to Reflection* 263n). Thus, language functions by the same means as the symbol; this is made clear in an early notebook entry, from the summer of 1803: "Language & all symbols give outness to Thoughts/& this the philosophical essence and purpose of Language" (CN I.1387).⁵⁰ All language and symbols give outness to thoughts, though only the Logos, as the primary and essential word, does so without arbitrariness or limit. In 1808, Coleridge wrote, "All minds must think by some symbols - the strongest minds possess the most vivid Symbols in the Imagination - yet this ingenerates a want, *tolloy*, *desiderium*, for vividness of Symbol: which something that is without, that has the property of Outness...can alone fully gratify/even that indeed not fully..." (CN III.3325). Coleridge borrowed this notion of outness from Berkeley and later described it as "but the feeling of otherness (alterity) rendered intuitive, or alterity visually represented."⁵¹

2.7 Truth and Poetry

⁴⁹ *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, CC 5, ed. by R. A. Foakes (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), I.273.

⁵⁰ See also *Aids to Reflection*, ed. by John Beer, CC 9 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 391n.

⁵¹ See *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine* X (1821), 249.

Warren begins section V of "A Poem of Pure Imagination" by stating that "the central and crucial fact" of his reading of *The Ancient Mariner* is "the fusion of the primary and secondary themes" (380). This symbolic fusion reflects what Warren considered to be the way that Coleridge reconciled the aesthetic and the theological in his thought. "His solution was, of course, one of detail and not part of the great synthesis of which he dreamed. For the age presented complications which could not, apparently, be resolved into such a system" (381-82). According to Warren, "The precarious solution which Coleridge attained was, of course, one aspect of his doctrine of the creative unity of the mind," that doctrine which encompasses his thinking about the imagination and the symbol, the logos and language. In his effort to abolish "the opposition between thought and feeling," Coleridge saw in the act of poetic creation a moment of unified perception. Warren summarizes Coleridge's conclusion "that the truth is implicit *in the poetic act as such, that the moral concern and the aesthetic concern are aspects of the same activity, the creative activity, and that this activity is expressive of the whole mind*" (382, emphasis his). With regard to the imagination, Warren is expanding here upon Coleridge's definition of the secondary imagination. Warren notes that this distinction between primary and secondary imagination is a distinction between the unconscious and the conscious will. The secondary imagination is an exercise of the creative and conscious will, drawing upon both passion and joy. With regard to the symbol, Warren sees the moment of the poetic act as a symbolic moment, which "always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible." The poetic moment is a living part of the whole which it enunciates, thus it "is expressive of the whole mind." Such a summary of Coleridge's solution to the problem of reconciling poetry and reli-

gion addresses more than just the issue of *The Ancient Mariner*. In fact, Warren states that his "argument is that *The Ancient Mariner* is, first, written out of this general belief, and second, written about this general belief" (382). In this way, Warren reads the poem as a symbol which partakes of the whole reality which it seeks to render intelligible.

Warren describes the way in which the poem is written out of this general belief about poetic creation by identifying what he calls little fables of the creative process. In this way, he contends that the poem is "in general, about the unity of mind and the final unity of values and in particular about poetry itself" (383). The first fable of the creative process is the moment of the blessing of the water snakes, which Warren describes as "the very turning point of the poem." When the Mariner blesses the snakes "unaware," Warren observes an instance of poetic genius, quoting from "On Poesy" in which Coleridge's states that "There is in genius an unconscious activity...." According to Warren, then, this moment within the poem suggests "that the writing of a poem is simply a specialized example of a general process which leads to salvation," as is instanced by the Mariner beginning the voyage home only after composing his poem of blessing (384). This accords with Warren's repeated use in his later poetry and criticism of the image of Jacob wrestling the angel and receiving both a blessing and a curse. Warren identifies in the instance of the Mariner's return home what he calls the "doubtful doubleness of the imagination" (386). The fable of the Mariner reveals that the power of the imagination rests in its holding in tension "its two inherent indestructible yet counteracting forces" (BL 164). Warren summarizes in this way:

So we have here a peculiar and paradoxical situation: the poem is a poem in which the poetic imagination appears in a

regenerative and healing capacity, but in the end the hero, who has, presumably, been healed, appears in one of his guises as the *poète maudit*. So we learn that the imagination does not only bless, for even as it blesses it lays on a curse (386).

Warren observes, however, another fable of the creative process at the end of the poem, and this is "perhaps a fuller statement of Coleridge's conception of the poet, the man with the power which comes unbidden and which is an 'agony' until it finds words..." (387). This other fable at the end is the ongoing tale of the poet, the ongoing agony of the doubleness of his position. The power which comes unbidden to the poet "wells up from the unconscious but is the result of a moral experience, and in its product, the poem, the 'tale' told by the Mariner, will 'teach' - for that is the word the Mariner uses. It is a paradoxical process" (387).

In the final section of his essay, Warren meditates further on this paradoxical situation of the poet and the nature of the symbolic blessing and curse which he bears. Warren suggests that "the creation of a poem is as much a process of discovery as a process of making" (395). This does not necessitate that the poetic process is irrational. "What comes unbidden from the depths at the moments of creation may be the result of the most conscious and narrowly rational effort in the past" (396). Warren says that ultimately what "the poet is trying to discover...is what kind of poem he can make. And the only thing he, in the ordinary sense, may 'intend' is to make a poem" (396). And once the poem is made, it partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible. Thus the power of the imagination, rendered even in its doubleness, gives rise to a power within the poem itself. In *The Ancient Mariner*, "the vividness of the presentation and the symbolic coherence may do

their work - as blessing sprang to the Mariner's lips - unawares. For the good poem may work something of its spell even upon the readers who are critically inarticulate" (398). Or, as Warren put it earlier in the essay,

...we may say that the reader does not interpret the poem but the poem interprets the reader. We may say that the poem is the light and not the thing seen by the light. The poem is the light by which the reader may view and review all the areas of experience with which he is acquainted (347).

As the light, poetry is able to reconcile "by its symbolic reading of experience..., the self-devisive [sic] internecine malices which arise at the superficial level on which we conduct most of our living" (399). It is in this way that Coleridge views poetry as a religious, salvific activity.

However, the paradoxical tension between blessing and curse remains for the poet. This paradox, which is an integral part of his search for a reconciling language, is at the core of Coleridge's understanding of the relationship between religion and poetry, as Warren points out. Jasper has also observed this coalescing of the religious and the linguistic in Coleridge:

His approach to words and language is profoundly significant of his sense of the religious experience, and thus it behoves the critic to attend to the literary and narrative techniques of *The Ancient Mariner* which contribute to its total effect and sense, and which link it with the whole corpus of Coleridge's writings on religion, even to the prose of his last years.⁵²

Within the whole corpus of Coleridge's writings, not just on religion, we may see that this paradox is specifically what Coleridge's years of

⁵² David Jasper, "The Two Worlds of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*," in *An Infinite Complexity: Essays in Romanticism*, ed. by J.R. Watson (University of Durham/Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 135-136.

pondering the question of language brought him to. This is not inconsistent with his long-standing argument with Locke or with his varied deference to Tooke. As Coleridge sought for a language in which the division between word and thing could be destroyed, in which words became not simply things but living things and living powers, he moved toward the inevitability of the doubleness of language itself. For Coleridge was well aware of the arbitrariness of human language and of the fractured nature of our utterances. But there remained for him a unified language - idealized in the *logos* - in which word and thing, or name and nature were one. According to Fulford, "Coleridge was embracing linguistic breakdown in order to dramatize the fact that the rules of ordinary language were conventional and fallible and to wrest from that dramatization a glimpse of a linguistic unity beyond such rules and such breakdowns."⁵³ Thus, "Coleridge had made the extreme of linguistic arbitrariness into a mark of the passage of spiritual knowledge" (41). At the heart of his theological understanding lay the symbolic tension between the sayable and the unsayable. The symbol is the moment of paradox in which unity and fracture are held together, paradoxically and sacramentally consubstantial with one another.

Warren himself expressed this paradox of the poet with regard to language as the poet's effort to "say the unsayable." He was well aware of the agony of the poet, that agony which seeks words which are not always there to be found. It is this paradoxical situation of the poet and the doubleness of language itself which Warren explores in his late poetry. Even as early as *Promises: Poems 1954-1956*, Warren is probing the nature of language in his poem "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme." Warren's dedication of this poem, which could not have been arbitrarily

⁵³ Tim Fulford, "Coleridge, Böhme, and the Language of Nature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 52/1 (1991), 41.

chosen, brings to light the central issue in this poem: the search for a language which transcends our finite and unstable words. In this mythical narrative, a small rural community is ravaged by an unseen dragon, whose absent presence is seen only in traces of its power. The dragon is for many a curse: it destroys a hog pen, it kills a teamster, it devours all of a man save a boot with part of the leg left inside. And yet the dragon is also a paradoxical blessing: it is the "Necessity of truth [which] had trodden the land..." and leaves "the fearful glimmer of joy, like a spoor." The dragon is never seen but only the traces of its presence. The dragon is a living power and a living thing which acts for both good and ill. It does not bring either good or ill; it brings about both in a powerful paradox which actuates being in the world. This doubleness is the doubleness of language. However, the absent presence of the dragon also draws out the incessant longing for a pure language:

We are human, and the human heart
Demands language for reality that has not the slightest
dependence
On desire, or need - and in church fools pray only that the
Beast depart.

Warren's demand here is the demand of the poet: the yearning for that language which will finally speak "reality." However, he does not seem to realize here, as he does in his later poetry, that if the unsayable were finally spoken its consequences could be unspeakable. As it is, the gift of the "fearful glimmer of joy, like a spoor," granted within our Fallen language, is what the poet must learn to cherish.

However, it is in his 1969 poem, *Audubon: A Vision*, that Warren returns most obviously and most powerfully to the issues raised in his study of *The Ancient Mariner*, the issues of poetic creation, the place

of the poet, and the nature of language itself. In this pivotal poem, Warren rewrites the myth of the Mariner, recasting the symbol into the terms of the hunter. In this way, Coleridge's aesthetic provides the ground upon which we may read Warren's later poetry.

Chapter Three
The Mariner and the Hunter: Audubon and
the Pure Imagination

"The language of poetry, then, is a language of silences, is itself constituted by traces, by words that cannot fully embrace the dynamics of being."¹

Audubon: A Vision (1969) is Robert Penn Warren's lengthiest and most forthright poetic meditation upon the nature and power of the imagination in relation to language as it shapes and modifies our experience in the world. Although critics have emphasized the historical, biographical, and psychological aspects of this poem, Warren articulates a specifically poetic vision in the seven sections and nearly four hundred lines, one that is consistently Romantic in character and tone. As such, it entertains the possibility of a poetry which does not represent the world but shapes and illuminates it so that the poet and the reader alike might continue to walk in the world and even love it. It is in this illuminating capacity that the poem moves toward the postmodern perspective which conceives of language as a living and dis-closive pattern of difference. Like *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Warren's poem is preoccupied with the precarious position of the poet and with the double-edged act of poetic creation. In "A Plea in Mitigation," Warren observes that *The Ancient Mariner* is a primary example of a Romantic poem which plagues the question of the role of the poet and the nature of poetry (9). The same may be said of *Audubon* in which Warren, taking his lead from his reading of the Mariner's fable, continues to plague this question.

Warren set out in "A Poem of Pure Imagination" to develop a cer-

¹ Richard Jackson, "The Generous Time: Robert Penn Warren and the Phenomenology of the Moment," *Boundary 2* 9/2 (1981), 24.

tain "type of critical analysis" (394) in which his primary goal was "a discursive reading of the symbol which is the poem" (398). He repeatedly states in this essay that his chief concern is not so much the presence of the two themes - the sacramental vision and the imagination - as it is the way these themes are fused. This is, he claims, the "central and crucial fact" of his reading. By emphasizing the "high degree of expressive integration" in *The Ancient Mariner*, Warren seeks to gain a vision of the creative unity of the mind in the act of poetic creation. In *Audubon* Warren returns to these themes and provides his own fusion of the sacramental vision and the imagination, as he continues to explore the nature of poetic creation. He does not rewrite Coleridge's poem by simply recasting the same narrative structure into a new context and into new terms. While there are similarities in the narrative plot, *Audubon* stands on its own structurally and stylistically. It is not immediately analogous to the Mariner myth; there is no strict one-to-one correspondence between the terms of the two poems. Rather, *Audubon* is a symbolic exploration of the thematic concerns relating to the imagination and to language. Here Warren deals with the play of tension within the symbolic understanding and with the agency of passion in what Coleridge called the "verbal imagination." In this meditation, the poet makes his way along the precarious and unstable way of language in order to approach an understanding of being in the world.

Warren began work on *Audubon* in the 1940s, just prior to and during his year as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress.² He became enthralled with the life of this early nineteenth century naturalist and artist while reading "a whole range of subliterary genres" (*Talking* 333), including journals and memoirs, in preparation for his novel *World Enough and Time* (1949). After reading Audubon's journals,

² See *Talking* 119, 163, 243-44, 333, 339 and Blotner 212, 381-82.

Warren began working on a poem during this period based on Audubon's life, but he could not finish it. Warren told Peter Stitt in 1977 that "...it was a trap; I couldn't find the frame for it, the narrative line. I did write quite a bit, but it wouldn't come together, so I set it aside and forgot about it" (*Talking* 244). However, Warren also dealt with Audubon in his 1944 essay, "Love and Separateness in Eudora Welty," in which he examines Welty's short fiction.³ Audubon figures in Welty's story, "A Still Moment," as one of three central characters who "stand for a still moment and watch a white heron feeding" (161). Only Audubon, however, "can innocently accept nature" by loving the bird "and so escape from [his] own curse as did...the Ancient Mariner" (162). The irony of such love, though, is that in order to know the bird he must shoot it. "But having killed the bird, he knows that the best he can make of it now in a painting would be a dead thing..." (162). Warren goes on to state,

He loves the bird, innocently, in its fullness of being. But he must subject this love to knowledge; he must kill the bird if he is to commemorate its beauty, if he is to establish his communion with other men in terms of the bird's beauty. There is in the situation an irony of limit and contamination (162).

Warren's assessment of Audubon in Welty's story is subtly but importantly different, though, from his own rendering of the artist in *Audubon: A Vision*. There is a clue to this differentiating factor, however, in his reference to the Ancient Mariner within this essay. According to Blotner, Warren set aside his earliest efforts on the Audubon poem in order to pursue his lecture on *The Ancient Mariner* which was scheduled

³ Robert Penn Warren, "Love and Separateness in Eudora Welty" in *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1958), 156-69. For comparative analyses of Welty's and Warren's dealings with Audubon, see Nancy Cluck, "Audubon: Images of the Artist in Eudora Welty and Robert Penn Warren," *Southern Literary Journal* 17/2 (1985), 41-53, and Lesa Carnes Corrigan, "Snapshots of Audubon: Photographic Perspectives from Eudora Welty and Robert Penn Warren," *MQ* XLVIII/1 (Winter 1994-95), 83-91.

to be presented in April of 1945. It would appear that this work on Coleridge provided two crucial factors for Warren's later work on *Audubon: A Vision*. First, it seems to have provided the frame and narrative line which was missing in his earlier efforts. While Warren makes a brief thematic connection between the Ancient Mariner and the Audubon of Welty's story, he does not explore in that essay the specific implications of killing the bird for the narrative line of Audubon's story. Second, Warren's analysis of Coleridge's notion of the imagination seems to have provided a way for the dead birds to become living things through the act of re-creation. Warren confronts in *Audubon* specifically the secondary imagination which struggles to idealize and unify in the work of dissolving, diffusing and dissipating. Warren's conception of the imagination in this poem is both vital and verbal.

Warren's return to Coleridge at this point also coincides with an important period in the mid-1960s in which he appears to have been assessing the role of the poet and the problem of language. Warren's concerns about language seem to have come to the forefront of his thinking during this period. In the poetry of these years, there is an increasingly apparent confrontation both with the powerful agency of language - as the living words which work together with the living power of the imagination - and with the "unsayable" which evokes both fear and joy in the poet. While we do find moments of questioning the power and stability of language in earlier poems, such as "The Mango and the Mango Tree" (*Selected Poems 1923-1943*), *Brother to Dragons* and "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme," these moments appear more frequently and prominently in the poetry of this period and anticipate the forthright considerations of *Audubon*. For example, in "Insomnia" (*Selected Poems: New and Old 1923-1966* 34-39), the speaker confronts the simultaneous

need for the ability to articulate the truth and the inability of truth finally to be spoken:

...Truth
Is all. But

I must learn to speak it
Slowly, in a whisper.

Truth, in the end, can never be spoken aloud,
For the future is always unpredictable.
But so is the past...(39).

In *Incarnations: Poems 1966-1968*, the volume immediately preceding the appearance of *Audubon*, Warren raises certain issues which he addresses more obviously in the light of Coleridge's aesthetic in *Audubon*. In a thematically and linguistically related series in the first section ("Island of Summer"), Warren questions the nature of the Fall and probes the extent of the sacramental union between the self, the community and nature. Warren concludes the fourth poem of this section, "Riddle in the Garden," by urging,

You think
I am speaking in riddles. But I am not, for

The world means only itself (7).

In the two concluding poems of this volume, Warren approaches the relationship between language and being. In "The Enclave," the poet explores the generative tension between what he calls the silence and the said.⁴ In the final poem, "Fog," the speaker approaches the religious dimensions of language and silence, or being and nothingness, and ends with a call which seems to invoke both the language and the themes of *Audubon*:

Oh, crow,

⁴ This poem was also included in *Or Else: Poem/Poems 1968-1974*. For a more detailed discussion of it in this latter volume, see Chapter Four below.

Come back, I would hear your voice:

That much, at least, in this whiteness.

Each of these poems anticipates a specific moment and issue in *Audubon*, but in the latter poem the struggle for articulation, the meaning of the world, the tension between the "sayable" and the "unsayable," and the voice of the world are all presented specifically in the context of the poet's agony and joy in the act of poetic creation.

3.1 Some Critical Distinctions

While critics of Warren's poetry have accorded *Audubon* a significant place in the larger body of his work, the significant relationship between *Audubon*, Warren's earlier work on Coleridge, and his later thinking about language has apparently been overlooked. Anthony Szczesiul has aptly pointed out that critics "generally seem to agree that *Audubon: A Vision* is a watershed moment in Warren's career as a poet."⁵ However, even though *Audubon* has drawn its share of critical attention since its publication, most of this criticism has neither recognized it as a further exploration of the themes which Warren identified in *The Ancient Mariner* nor considered it specifically as a central poem in Warren's ongoing struggle to understand language and the unsayable. Calvin Bedient does see *Audubon* as a pivotal poem for Warren: "His greatness as a writer began with his determination to concentrate on poetry as the extreme resource of language-knowledge, language-being - began with *Audubon: A Vision*..., forty-six years after he started publishing poems as a student prodigy at Vanderbilt...."⁶ However, Bedient's survey of Warren's "grand last phase" falls short of any thorough analysis of a struggle with "language-being." Instead of following through the impli-

⁵ For the textual history of this poem, see Anthony Szczesiul, "Robert Penn Warren's *Audubon: Vision and Revision*," *MQ* XLVII/1 (1994), 3-14.

⁶ In *the Heart's Last Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 3.

cations of his statement, Bedient's discussion of language only goes so far as to analyse the formal elements of the poetry, such as the syntactical "characteristic configurations, [or] linear voiceprints." Most significantly, he abandons in his analysis of *Audubon* any real concern for the nature of language.⁷ Instead, in a reading reminiscent of Strandberg's work, Bedient takes the psychological approach, focusing upon the development of Audubon's identity through the interplay of the conscious and unconscious, drawing out and focusing upon Oedipal images and analyzing the "split nightmare identity" of the woman in the long second section as both "Eaten Mother" and "Mother of Eating" (143).

While James Justus pays little attention to language as a recurring concern for Warren, he does recognize the broad influence of Warren's study of *The Ancient Mariner*. In *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren*, Justus identifies the Mariner's tale as one of Warren's recurring themes in both his fiction and his poetry.⁸ He finds evidence of this in Warren's use of the literary device of "the interpolated storyteller." According to Justus,

This technique for widening and deepening thematic implications through the use of alternative points of view is related to Warren's fascination with *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Among the several insights in "A Poem of Pure Imagination" is Warren's reminder of the affective structure and layered points of view of that great romantic work. The primary narrative situation in Coleridge's poem is the overlay and constant impingement of the two storytellers: the Mariner and the omniscient poet whose emotional alliance is with the Wedding Guest (25).

Justus sees a parallel between the poet and the Mariner figure, whose vision is "both to make moral sense of the experience and to retain the aesthetic power to galvanize quiescent and complacent souls to atten-

⁷ See Bedient 134-149.

⁸ Baton Rouge and London: LSUP, 1981.

tion" (25). "That double concern," Justus says, "is precisely Warren's" (25). He then discusses the way Warren uses this device of the interpolated storyteller in his early novels, from *Night Rider* through *Band of Angels*. However, Justus says that after *Band of Angels* Warren loses his attraction "for that explicit narrative vehicle and the Mariner figure whose role parallels the common dilemma of the protagonists..." (33). Instead, Warren turns in his poetry to a preference for the personal voice of the author. When Justus later presents his reading of *Audubon*, he ignores any shaping influence *The Ancient Mariner* might have had on this poem. Rather, he is concerned with the structure of the poem and with the comparisons and contrasts between Warren's *Audubon* and the *Audubon* of history and biography. At various points in his reading, though, Justus appears to be assuming the influence of Coleridge upon Warren's work, but he never makes any explicit connection in his reading of *Audubon*.

In *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*, Victor Strandberg sees movement in *Audubon* toward a more consciously developed mysticism, following Warren's ideas about the "osmosis of being" introduced in "Knowledge and the Image of Man." In Strandberg's analysis, this poem is "especially serviceable as [a] final study in Warren's mysticism because it fuses the osmosis of being theme and Warren's epiphanies into the 'Vision' declared in the poem's subtitle" (*Poetic Vision* 247). He acknowledges the influence of Coleridge on Warren and sees its appearance in the poem primarily through the sustained yearning which forms the basis of *Audubon's* - and Warren's - art. Strandberg situates the poem with *Incarnations* and *Or Else* and argues that together these poems reveal a "surprising mastery of the 'new' style" in Warren's poetry (275). But Strandberg also argues that *Audubon* is vindicated not

so much by formal technique as by "a rising and subsiding emotional intensity." Meaning does not come from the language but from the "curve of experience," and it is this experience which provides the logic of the formal ordering. It would seem that Strandberg's criticism comes close to the kind of moralistic reading which Warren himself sought to refute in "A Poem of Pure Imagination."

Other critics have pursued moralistic as well as historical kinds of criticism of Audubon. T.R. Hummer sets out to study "Warren's central conviction, the moral center of his art," which he considers to be "the deep engagement of the artist with human growth, in himself and in other men."⁹ Hummer explores that moral center in Audubon by relying heavily upon the work of Joseph Campbell and C.G. Jung in order to explore the growth of Audubon. For example, he traces the way Warren simultaneously demythifies and remythifies the figure of Audubon, creating what Campbell called the "monomyth." This monomyth provides the narrative outline for the poem,

for underneath the story of Audubon as man, as underneath the story of Warren as man and all of us as human, there reverberates the structure of the myth of self as hero. What this myth signifies is the symbolic death and dismemberment of the self, its regeneration, and its resurrection in a higher form, as Campbell demonstrates (806).

On the other hand, Daniel Duane reads Audubon in light of "Warren's life-long critique of American idealism."¹⁰ Duane describes the poem as "Warren's most dense and ironic meditation on nature and the frontier" (25) and focuses in his essay upon the way Warren characterizes Audubon by highlighting the "irony and limit" of the man Audubon as well as his praiseworthy aspects. One of the critics that Duane cites in support of

⁹ See "Robert Penn Warren: Audubon and the Moral Center," *SoR* 16 (1980), 799-815.

¹⁰ See "Of Herons, Hags and History: Rethinking Robert Penn Warren's Audubon: A Vision," *Southern Literary Journal* 27/1 (Fall 1994), 25-35.

his concern for idealism is John Burt, who devotes a chapter to this poem in his *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism*.¹¹ In that chapter, Burt traces what he observes to be the "two closely related problems" of the poem, the first being "the problem of discovering a character who is able to approach an experience of primary significance...but who...is not consumed and destroyed by that experience" (92). If the first problem is one of content, then the second is "a formal one," in which "Warren seeks to define in the snapshot method a poetic form that can be at the same time strong and articulate, that can combine the power of the ballad and the intelligibility of the commentary" (93). These concerns are not unrelated to the issues Warren raised in his analysis of *The Ancient Mariner* and Burt even uses language akin to Warren's own aesthetic: "The formal problem and the problem of defining a proper protagonist are, of course, versions of the same problem - the problem of reconciling power and form, or, in other terms, ecstasy and intelligibility, lyric and narrative, value and life" (93).

Most criticism of Audubon confronts, in one way or another, the issue of identity in the poem.¹² However, this issue is very often overshadowed by a more specific preoccupation with the relationship between the historical figure and the character of Warren's poem.¹³ There is a curiosity about the way that Warren borrowed from the personal biography of the historical John James Audubon in the shaping of the character found in the poem. For example, Bedient asks,

Would the historical Audubon like what Warren has made of

¹¹ New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988.

¹² For example, see Strandberg, *Poetic Vision* 248; Burt 92; Justus 87-88. Warren himself suggested that this was an issue in his own thinking about the poem. See *Talking* 244.

¹³ Marshall Walker describes the poem as "an exercise in creative biography...." *Robert Penn Warren: A Vision Earned* (Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1979), 174. Strandberg provides a helpful summary of criticism dealing with Audubon in *Poetic Vision* 16-17. See also Frank Graziano, "The Matter Itself: Warren's Audubon: A Vision" in *Homage to Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Frank Graziano (Durango, Colorado: Logbridge-Rhodes, 1981), 17-32.

him? This horrific, sublime substitution? Warren visits on him a violent love, a still more violent need. He stuffs Audubon's eyes with sights, fills his mind with thoughts, his sensibility with nuances and raptures, his psyche with nightmares, whose origin and stamp are unmistakably those of Robert Penn Warren, lost dauphin of the imagination's former grandeurs (134-135).

This emphasis upon Warren's use of the historical Audubon seems to suffer, though, from what Warren identified as the confusion of the fancy and the imagination in various interpretations of *The Ancient Mariner*. Coleridge distinguishes the fancy from the imagination by contending that the fancy is passive and can only mimic what is given to it, whereas the imagination is active and shapes and diffuses experience. Fancy, Coleridge says, deals in "fixities and definites" and "is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space..." (BL I.305). It is clear that the figure we find in Warren's poem is more than "memory emancipated from...time and space." The composition of the poem is governed by more than choosing which events from Audubon's life should be drawn out so that the poem might be a mirror reflecting the facts of these events. Coleridge goes on to say that "equally with the ordinary memory [fancy] must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association" (BL I.305). Rather than simply taking up the materials of Audubon's life which "the law of association" would provide, Warren has exercised the creative will in order to dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate the life of this man and to re-create by the verbal imagination a character with a symbolic role within a larger symbolic pattern. Because of this symbolic import, Warren's choice of Audubon was not arbitrary. As Warren said in "A Poem of Pure Imagination," the symbol "contains within itself the appeal which makes its serviceable as a symbol" (352). So, Warren saw *The Ancient Mariner* to

be a central poem for its own age because it did not necessarily provide "a comment on an age, but a *focus* of the being and issues of that age." It is in this way that Warren understands the poem to be one of "pure imagination" (394). In an interview soon after completing *Audubon*, Warren says a similar thing: "It's about Audubon's life as a kind of *focus* for a lot of things about humans. I hope it's the way life is. It's about his heroic solution of his problems and the problem of being a man" (*Talking* 119, emphasis mine). *Audubon* and his "fable" are symbolically rendered so as to provide not simply a picture of a man but a focus for the issues of creation and being, or the poet and the act of poetic creation.

Taken together, these critics of *Audubon* leave unanswered some very important, even necessary, questions. First, if, as Bedient asserts, *Audubon* does reveal a concentration upon poetry as the extreme resource of language-being, then *how* does it do so? What are the implications of such a statement for our understanding of the poem itself? Furthermore, how does this poem achieve the reconciliation to which Burt alludes? Also, does *Audubon* only reveal the "surprising mastery of [a] 'new' style," as if language were for Warren merely "a substantial medium, an object to be shaped according to an established system of stylistic forms and models"¹⁴ Or, do we find in this multi-poemed poem a more obvious struggle with the nature of language, a struggle shaped under the influence of Coleridge's own linguistically-oriented formulation of the imagination and the symbol? If language has indeed become "the matter itself" in Warren's poetry, then what kind of a reading does a poem such as *Audubon: A Vision* invite? What would happen if we were to follow the lead of Jonathan Culler who suggests that the goal of a structuralist criticism is "to read the text as an exploration of writing, of

¹⁴ Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* 49.

the problems of articulating a world"¹⁵ It is the poet's exploration of writing in the moment of poetic creation and of the struggle to articulate a world and even a definable self which forms the aesthetic substance of Audubon and anticipates the vital concerns of Warren's later poetry.

3.2 The Poet and the Agony of Words

Audubon presents from the beginning the image of the artist who struggles to articulate his place in the world through the power of his imagination. As an artist, Audubon continually seeks to discover his relation to the world. His desire is not simply to represent what is in the world but is rather to recreate and illuminate an understanding of being in the world. The question of his identity cannot be abstracted from his yearning for understanding and for articulation; as a result of this "passion" he experiences both the blessing and the curse of the imagination. Like the Mariner, he knows the agony of telling his tale. Warren establishes Audubon as the artist even in his first epigraph: "Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?" (Psalm 56:8). This poem tells of the wanderings of the artist in the world and of the tears which come from both the joy and the agony of artistic creation. This poem also suggests, though, this notion of the "book" which is a silent and unsayable text behind and beyond all of the poet's utterances. The work of the poet is not simply to tell but to listen to the voice of that book which "tellest [his] wanderings."

These intertwined questions of identity, vocation, and being appear in the first section of the poem, "Was Not the Lost Dauphin," and introduce the themes and issues which recur throughout the poem. Warren

¹⁵ *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 260.

begins this section,

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

Warren immediately puts to rest the myth of Audubon's origin, which he summarizes in the head note to the poem: he was not the son of a sea captain and his first wife but was the son of a slave-dealer and his mistress. The most fantastic legend regarding his origin was "that he was the lost Dauphin of France, the son of the feckless Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette" (NSP 212). These matters help to make apparent the tension which generates the character of the poem. However, Burt suggests that these opening lines

have the air of clearing away the unessential, of listing the matters that will not be of concern. Whether or not Audubon was the lost dauphin...matters as little as whether he was a good shopkeeper; all that matters is that "his heart shook in the tension of the world" (93).

Burt's assessment, though, overlooks the way that Warren establishes Audubon as a poet. Rather than simply listing the unessential items, these lines suggest the precarious position of the poet and establish the specific and recurring motif of Audubon as the *poète maudit*, which Warren described in "A Poem of Pure Imagination" as a central image for the poetry of the Romantic age. Being base-born, Audubon is an outcast who dwells "beyond the circle of respectable society" ("APPI" 388). He does not belong either among the highest levels of society or simply among the decent. In "A Poem of Pure Imagination," Warren quotes from one of Shelley's letters which helps to define the position of the poet: "Imagine my despair of good, imagine how it is possible that one of weak and sensitive nature as mine can run further the gauntlet through this

hellish society of men" (387). Audubon makes a similar comment in a section which expands the notion of his being *poète maudit*:

Below the salt, in rich houses, he sat, and knew insult.
In the lobbies and couloirs of greatness he dangled,
And was not unacquainted with contumely.

Wrote: "My Lovely Miss Pirrie of Oackley Passed by Me
this Morning, but did not remember how beautifull
I had rendered her face once by Painting it
at her Request with Pastelles."

Wrote: "...but thanks to My humble talents I can run
the gantlet throu this World without her help."

The *poète maudit* undergoes the ordeal of human society like one being unjustly punished. As a result, Audubon experiences a communion with the natural world in which he dwells rather than finding his communion among human society. He is a wanderer in the world. We read several times throughout the poem that he continued to walk in the world, and this walking forms a narrative thread through the various images of Audubon.¹⁶

As an outsider and a wanderer, Audubon is only himself, "Jean Jacques and his passion...." This combination of name and passion further confirms Audubon's function as a poet, as one who yearns to make his name and his passion coterminus in himself. His name alone cannot provide his identity, but it must be combined with his prevailing passion for understanding and articulation. Warren's use of the term "passion" would appear to be related to two influences. First, in his 1974 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, published under the title *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren makes reference to the notion of passion in the thought of Søren Kierkegaard.¹⁷ In the second of his two essays in this

¹⁶ See Sections III, IV[E], and V[A].

¹⁷ *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 48.

volume, Warren explores the way that poetry might provide a place from which we may scrutinize "our own experience of our own world" (41). Warren goes on to describe the contemporary world, though, as one of scientific and technological predominance which denies the vital role of poetry in the formation of knowledge. He is skeptical, therefore, of the heritage of Cartesian thought which has led to abstract thinking and urges the essential place of poetry. In order to substantiate this claim, Warren points to Kierkegaard, who "affirmed that abstract thought cannot grasp the meaning of existence and that feeling - passion, as he termed it - provides the knowledge that is the key of existence and action" (48). Warren goes on to equate Kierkegaard's use of the term "passion" with the notion of the imagination held by the Romantic poets. By establishing passion as the hallmark of Audubon's identity, Warren seems to relate this to his imagination which "provides the knowledge that is the key of existence and action."

In the second place, Warren's emphasis upon passion in the artistic activity of Audubon is also related to the influence of Coleridge, which provides a helpful complement to Kierkegaard's notion of passion as a means to that knowledge which actuates existence. While Coleridge sometimes used the word "passion" to refer to the base emotions of mankind, he employed it more often in the context of the imagination, describing it as that part of the creative will by which experience is

united and modified.¹⁸ Passion, rather than passivity, distinguishes both true poetry and the genuine poet, as it discloses the character of the imagination. When Coleridge describes the nature of poetry in Chapter 14 of the *Biographia*, he does so with special reference to the distinguishing mark of poetic genius.

What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, emotions of the poet's own mind. The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination (II.15-16, emphasis mine).

True poetry and poetic genius are marked by the power of the imagination which modifies images and diffuses unity so that there is a fusion of the creative will with all the other faculties of the soul. However, Coleridge goes on to suggest in Chapter 15 that passion is the real proof of this poetic genius, pointing to Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* as the penultimate example of such genius. In the course of his analysis, Coleridge states,

It has been before observed that images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the

¹⁸ With regard to the former use of the term, Coleridge describes the way that demagogues seek to arouse the base passions of their hearers. These "political empirics" use "arguments built on passing events and deriving an undue importance from the feelings of the moment. The mere appeal, however, to the auditors...is an effective substitute for any argument at all." In response, mobs fall into a state in which "passions, like a fused metal, fill up the wide interstices of thought and supply the defective links: and thus incompatible assertions are harmonized by the sensation, without the sense, of connection." See "A Lay Sermon Addressed to the Higher and Middle Classes on the Existing Distresses and Discontents" in *Lay Sermons*, ed. by R.J. White, CC 6 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 153. This statement affirms, however, the power of the passions: while it may be helpfully employed by the imagination of the poetic genius to approach the unsayable, it can also be exercised by ideology to unspeakable ends. There is both an inherent power and an inherent danger in passion, as in language.

poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a *predominant passion*; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that *passion*; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit... (II.23, emphasis mine).

This statement illuminates Coleridge's distinction between copy and imitation, or mimicry and mimesis. The work of the poet is not simply to copy from nature by attempting to re-present in words what his mind perceives. Rather, the poet imitates, and imitation for Coleridge means "the union of Disparate Things" (CN III.4397 f50v). The genius of the poet lies in his ability to modify these images according to a predominant passion. Coleridge held that passion works to fuse in a way comparable to the imagination, stating as early as 1804 that "all Passion unifies as it were by natural fusion" (CN II.2012 f41v).¹⁹ However, in 1811, Coleridge also attributed this fusing power to the imagination, writing in his notebook of "the worth & dignity of poetic Imagination, of the fusing power, that fixing unfixes & while it melts & bedims the Image, still leaves in the Soul its living meaning" (CN III.4066). By describing the fusing power of the imagination as that which "fixing unfixes," Coleridge links this to his notion of the symbol which is sustained by this kind of paradoxical tension. In Chapter 22 of the *Biographia*, Coleridge does not make a radical division between the fusing

¹⁹ It was this modifying and fusing effect of passion that led Coleridge to link passion to meter and rhythm in verse. Coleridge distinguishes poetry from prose not simply by the arrangement of words or by the question of beauty but by the "essential difference" of metre. However, according to Emerson R. Marks, Coleridge disagreed with "Wordsworth's notion of verse as the mere superaddition of metre to an order of discourse essentially prosaic." See *Coleridge on the Language of Verse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 70. Metre for Coleridge would appear to relate not simply to order or arrangements of words but to a specific mode of expression (Marks 73). This mode of expression is generated by passion. Coleridge says that he "would trace [the origin of metre] to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion" (EL II.64). There must be in verse "an interpenetration of passion and of will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose" (EL II.65).

powers of the imagination and the passion. He speaks of "the blending, fusing power of Imagination and Passion" (II.150), ascribing to both a power which reconciles and unites. In the fourth of his "Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton" presented in 1811-12, Coleridge renders more vividly the relationship between the imagination and passion in this work of fusion:

That gift of true Imagination, that capability of reducing a multitude into unity of effect, or by strong passion to modify a series of thoughts into one predominant thought or feeling - those were the faculties which might be cultivated and improved, but could not be acquired. Only such a man as possessed them deserved the title of *poeta who nascitur non fit* - he was that child of Nature, and not the creature of his own efforts (*Shakespearean Criticism* II.63).

Passion provides a sort of agency for the imagination. It is by means of the passion that the imagination is able to reduce a multitude into a unity of effect. The agency of the passion connects it to Coleridge's thinking about the symbol and about language. The symbol making activity of the imagination is generated by the predominant passion of the poet. Furthermore, the poet's passion enlivens his understanding of language as living words by which the antithesis between word and thing is destroyed.

Coleridge's emphasis upon the role of passion in the work of the poet provides an important clarification of Warren's use of the term in the first section of *Audubon*. Above all, it establishes Audubon's role at the outset as a poet whose activity centers upon the imagination and language. Warren confirms this when he moves from the issue of Audubon's passion into the world in which Audubon walked. This world is not a world of representation, but is the world shaped by Audubon's own imagination. The scene which Warren presents is not copied from nature. Rather, the images presented are modified by Audubon's predominant pas-

sion so that the reader sees only as Audubon sees.

Saw,

Eastward and over the cypress swamp, the dawn,
Redder than meat, break;
And the large bird,
Long neck outthrust, wings crooked to scull air, moved
In a slow calligraphy, crank, flat, and black against
The color of God's blood spilt, as though
Pulled by a string.

Saw,

It proceed across the inflamed distance.

Warren introduces in these lines the two primary themes of the poem, which would appear to be derived from his reading of *The Ancient Mariner*. First, he introduces the theme of the sacramental view of the universe through his reference to the color of the dawn sky as being the "color of God's blood spilt." This sacramental vision not only links individuals to one another but more importantly unites God and nature. In "A Poem of Pure Imagination," Warren states that Coleridge's notion of the imagination is rooted in his understanding of the *imago dei*, by which "the world of Nature is to be read by the mind as a symbol of Divinity" (345). This creaturely imagination "operates to read Nature...as a symbol of God. It might be said that reason shows us God, and imagination shows us how Nature participates in God" (346). Warren develops the second and related theme of *Audubon* in the image of the heron moving across the sky, suggesting that nature may be read by the imagination, that it forms a text and that it has a voice which declares itself. Warren does not use simile in these lines to describe the motion of the bird. Rather, like the *Windhover* of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the language actuates the experience in such a way that the

experience cannot be divided from the language itself.²⁰ The bird's motion is not like a slow calligraphy; rather, that motion is a calligraphy, and it is black, suggesting the ink of writing. Warren's language here is strikingly similar to his symbol of the logos in "Myth on Mediterranean Beach: Aphrodite as Logos." The poem begins with a similar motion and image:

From left to right, she leads the eye
Across the blaze-brightness of sea and sky

That is the background of her transit.

Commanded thus, from left to right,
As by a line of print on that bright

Blankness, the eye will follow, but

There is no line, the eye follows only
That one word moving, it moves in lonely

And absolute arrogance across the blank

Page of the world, the word burns, she is
The word, all faces turn...(Incarnations 12).

Warren's poetry, here as in *Audubon*, has moved beyond the use of figures of speech to a language which is consubstantial: it is what it says, without making any claims to some extra-verbal reality. Through the agency of language, there is a re-creation of experience. *Audubon's* eye is commanded by the heron as it moves across the sky, as "the eye" in this earlier poem is commanded by the image of Aphrodite. Whereas the image in "Myth on Mediterranean Beach" is clearly that of reading a line

²⁰ There are striking similarities between Hopkins' poem and this image in *Audubon*. Hopkins is caught by the majestic motion of the Falcon as it rides the morning air. His heart seems to be stirred by a similar passion as Warren's: "My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the master of the thing!" Each poem also has a distinct religious or theological aspect which shapes the living language of the verse. See *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by W.H. Gardner and N.H. MacKenzie, 4th edn, revised and enlarged (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 69.

of print superimposed upon the the blank page of the world, in Audubon the image is that of writing. Even as Aphrodite is the word in this earlier poem, so the heron which Audubon watches is the word which writes itself upon this other page of the dawn sky. His "eyes [are] fixed on the bird" as he sees "it proceed across the inflamed distance." Warren makes it clear, though, that the concern of the poet is not representation but the shaping and modifying power of the imagination. Audubon's passion shapes what he sees so that by his imagination the bird is the word.

By its modifying and fusing effect, Audubon's passion opens to him the knowledge of the world after which he yearns. But it is not simply a knowledge of identity; rather, the imagination perceives difference and seeks to bring that "multitude into unity of effect," as Coleridge said. This knowledge by difference is established by the notion of tension which Warren explores in the second half of this section.

Moccasins set in hoar frost, eyes fixed on the bird,
Thought: "On that sky it is black."
Thought: "In my mind it is white."
Thinking: "*Ardea occidentalis*, heron, the great one."

Dawn: his heart shook in the tension of the world.

Dawn: and what is your passion?

Warren establishes here a formal pattern which he uses throughout the rest of the poem by setting up the recurring tension between black and white. He returns to this this pattern at several points in the poem, often using a chiasitic structure to make the tension concrete. This linguistic tension is at the center of the poet's imagination. Although Audubon perceives the heron to be black against the sky, yet in his mind it is white. The difference between this "black" and "white" is not simply the distinction between the knowing subject and the perceived

object. Rather the difference here is between Audubon's report of his perception and the report of his imagination. The imagination does not simply reflect what the mind perceives. Rather, it modifies the image so that the bird not only becomes "white" but is named, "*Ardea occidentalis*, heron, great one." It is the shaping power of the imagination, and not the reflective power of the fancy, which distinguishes Audubon as an artist/poet. Jasper's comment on Coleridge's notion of the imagination clarifies the importance of this power for Audubon.

The artist, abandoning the minimal role of holding up a mirror to nature, shapes the world as he experiences it, in metaphor and symbol his art a self-expression, illuminating and not merely reflecting. As it "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate," the imagination is a symbolizing activity, the symbol focusing and shaping through the very particularity of an event or object the eternal "ideas" which underlie it and of which it is a part.²¹

So Audubon shapes the world in which he moves as he experiences it.²² His vision opens up a way of understanding the world, a way to see the tension of the world and to embrace that tension rather than attempting to move beyond or around it. It is a vision of the poet's struggle after knowledge - a yearning toward unity - but that knowledge is characterized by the tension of the world. His constant need is to understand the nature of that tension. This is the poet's passion. Warren repeatedly highlights that tension throughout the poem both thematically and formally. And as a poet, Audubon is seeking after authentic utterance, the kind of utterance which is rooted in the "woful agony" (l. 579) which grasped the Mariner and was the impetus for the tale which he told. This agony, which returns again and again, is an agony which burns within the poet and provides the "strange power of speech"

²¹ Jasper, "The Two Worlds of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*" 127.

²² Note the development, through Coleridge, of Kantian notions in Warren's poetry and thought. Compare Handy 64-76.

(ll. 582-586).

The tension of the world is, for the poet, a linguistic tension which relates to the problem of articulation. The poet cannot avoid the inherent tension of language but must embrace it, recognizing within this tension the parallel doubleness of the the imagination and of language. Warren describes the working of the imagination in "A Poem of Pure Imagination" in this way:

So we have here a peculiar and paradoxical situation: the poem is a poem in which the poetic imagination appears in a regenerative and healing capacity, but in the end the hero, who has, presumably, been healed, appears in one of his guises as the *poète maudit*. So we learn that the imagination does not only bless, for even as it blesses it lays on a curse (386).

The paradox of the poem and of the poet is the simultaneous doubleness of the imagination and of language. The doubleness of the imagination inheres in the way that it both blesses by regenerating the understanding and curses by failing to give complete knowledge. Warren observes, "Though the Mariner brings the word which is salvation, he cannot quite save himself and taste the full joy of the fellowship he advertises" (386). The imagination and language, both bearing the effects of the Fall, can only function according to this tension. This tension is at the very core of the notion of an agony seeking words. For Audubon, the heron is both black and white; one demands the other, and these two are held in tension, the heron of the dawn sky and the heron of his imagination. Furthermore, though the poet may search for adequate words to articulate his vision, they will never completely suffice. His passion will never be satisfied, the agony never quenched. This is what Warren calls the "paradox of the situation of the poet," because the poet is "the man with the power which comes unbidden and which is an 'agony'"

until it finds words..." ("APPI" 387). As Audubon continues to walk in the world, he bears in himself the very blessing and curse which distinguishes the imagination and language. On the one hand, by pursuing his passion, he led a "blessed" life:

His life, at the end, seemed - even the anguish - simple.
Simple, at least, in that it had to be
Simply, what it was, as he was,
In the end, himself and not what
He had known he ought to be. The blessedness! (IV[A])

By virtue of his imagination and his passion, Audubon knew the blessedness of being "Himself, Jean Jacques, and his passion" (I[A]), rather than what he knew he ought to have been. Rather than keeping store, dandling babies and getting rich (IV[C]), Audubon knew the blessedness of seeing

...from the forest pond, already dark, the great trumpeter swan
Rise, in clangor, and fight up the steep air where,
At the height of last light, it glimmered, like white flame
(IV[C]).

By pursuing his passion, he "saw the Indian, and felt the splendor of God" (V[A]). On the other hand, the imagination cannot sustain such blessing. In section IV, Warren describes the blessedness of hearing the world declare itself in a voice that speaks of joy. But concomitant with this blessing is the realization that "truth is the only thing that cannot/Be spoken." It can only be enacted. Audubon also experienced the curse of the imagination and language through its failure or regress. He had seen and loved the great heron and the swan but "he did not know/What he was. Thought: 'I do not know my own name" (IV[E]). This inability to speak the name which provides identity is a characteristic of linguistic tension which Warren will explore in many of his later poems.²³ At the end of his life, Audubon knew the effects of this

²³ See Chapter Five below.

curse:

And in the end, entered into his earned house,
And slept in a bed, and with Lucy.

But the fiddle
Soon lay on the shelf untouched, the mouthpiece
Of the flute was dry, and his brushes.

His mind
Was darkened, and his last joy
Was in the lullaby they sang him, in Spanish, at sunset.

He died, and was mourned, who had loved the world.

This one who had known the glory of the imagination, who had understood the glimmering power of a sustaining passion, was in the end abandoned by imagination, and his mind was darkened. Though Audubon brought "the word which is salvation" by placing the images of these birds into our own imaginations (VI), he could not "quite save himself and taste the full joy of the fellowship he" had advertised ("APPI" 386).

3.3 The Sacramental Vision

The theme of the imagination in Audubon is fused together with the theme of the sacramental vision, which further characterizes the poet's experience of the tension of the world and of language. In his reading of *The Ancient Mariner*, Warren identified the sacramental vision as the "primary perspective or primary theme" (355) and linked this theme specifically to the crime of the Mariner - his shooting the albatross. The sacramental vision is "the issue of the fable" (355) because it brings to light the notions of the Fall, original sin, guilt and redemption. In his analysis, Warren dealt primarily with the nature of the Mariner's crime as a re-enactment of the mystery of the Fall. As this theme is developed in Audubon, it also deals with the nature of the Fall and with the crime of Audubon as a Mariner figure. Warren develops this theme in

his poem through two prominent images or narrative moments. In the first, the sacramental vision is intimated through Audubon's ironic act of shooting birds in order to know and to paint them. This hearkens back to the issue of the doubleness of the imagination and discloses the struggle with language in the act of poetic creation. In the second, Warren develops a parallel - and necessary - part of this theme in the long second section of the poem, which is the real turning point and the moment of blessing. Both of these involve the notion of crime as it relates to the Fall and to original sin: Audubon commits a crime upon nature in the first image which paradoxically leads to redemption, and in the second he is the victim of crime, acted upon by another person.

3.3.1 **Slayer of Birds, Slayer of Self**

Audubon's crime of shooting birds so that he might know them and in turn illuminate our imagination makes an interesting reversal of the Mariner's crime in *The Ancient Mariner*. In the third section of "A Poem of Pure Imagination," Warren probes the nature of the Mariner's transgression. He rejects any reading of the crime which views it simply from a moralistic perspective; instead, Warren insists that it be read as a symbol which "re-enacts the mystery of the Fall" ("APPI" 360). He supports this reading by tracing out Coleridge's understanding of the doctrine of original sin and of the Fall, concluding that Coleridge could not intellectualize these matters but could only accept them as an unavoidable mystery. Warren quotes Coleridge from the *Table Talk*:

A Fall of some sort or other - the creation, as it were, of the nonabsolute - is the fundamental postulate of the moral history of Man. Without this hypothesis, Man is unintelligible; with it, every phenomenon is explicable. The mystery itself is too profound for human insight ("APPI" 359).

If Coleridge held that the Fall is necessary to our understanding of the

nature of man, he also maintained that the Fall was necessary to our understanding the whole of creation. In *Confessions of An Inquiring Spirit* he states, "Not only Man, but, says St. Paul, the whole creation is included in the consequences of the Fall...."²⁴ He also held that the mind of man bore those consequences in an obvious way. In *Aids to Reflection* he states that the myth of the Fall "speaks to the Catechumen & to the Adept. - To the Catechumen it states the simple Fact, viz. that Man fell and falls thro' the separation and the insubordination of the Fancy, the Appetance, & the discursive Intellect from the Faith or practical Reason...."²⁵ The effect of the Fall was the distortion of Reason and man continues to bear that effect - he continues to fall - by elevating the fancy above the imagination. Part of the mystery of the Fall for Coleridge, however, is that it appears not only to have resulted in a curse but also to have prepared paradoxically for a blessing.²⁶ Man would be unintelligible without the Fall; however, man receives his imagination with the Fall. It is by means of the imagination that the fallen creature yearns toward a healing of the wound of the Fall.

Warren interprets the act of the Mariner as an act of sin which is original in the will of the sinner himself and which is without prior determination. He states,

The bolt whizzes from the crossbow and the bird falls and all comment that the Mariner has no proper dramatic motive or is the child of necessity or is innocent of everything except a little wantonness is completely irrelevant, for we are confronting the mystery of the corruption of the will, the mystery which is the beginning of the "moral history of Man" ("APPI" 359-360).

The corruption of the will, Warren says, is mysterious precisely because

²⁴ *Confessions of An Inquiring Spirit*, ed. by H. St. J. Hart (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1956), Letter I.

²⁵ *Aids to Reflection* 261 n. 40.

²⁶ We are not proposing that Coleridge held to any doctrine of the *felix culpa* as did William Blake. For a brief discussion of this, see Chapter Four.

of its lack of motivation and its perversity. This "is exactly the significant thing about the Mariner's act" and the thing that "flies in the face of the Aristotelian doctrine of *hamartia*" (360). As a re-enactment of the Fall, this act involves a condition of the will which is "'out of time,' and...is the result of no single human motive" (360). The Mariner's crime resulted from the abstraction of the will, and, according to Coleridge, the will in abstraction "becomes Satanic pride and rebellious self-idolatry" and characterizes "the mighty hunters of mankind, from Nimrod to Bonaparte."²⁷ Warren observes that this peculiar phrase blends "the hunting of beasts and the hunting of man" and "takes us straight to the crime of the Mariner" (360). This identification illuminates the sin of the Mariner who "did not kill a man but a bird", and the literal-minded readers have echoed Mrs. Barbauld and Leslie Stephen: what a lot of pother about a bird. But they forget that this bird is more than a bird" ("APPI" 360-61). In Warren's reading, "the hunting of the bird becomes the hunting of man" and the crime becomes "symbolically a murder..." and a motiveless one at that. In this way, the poem maintains its symbolic reference to the Fall. Warren concludes:

The poet's problem, then, was to provide an act which, on the one hand, would not accent the issue of probability or shockingly distract from the symbolic significance, but which, on the other hand, would be adequately criminal to justify the consequences. And the necessary criminality is established, we have seen, in two ways: (1) by making the gravity of the act depend on the state of the will which prompts it, and (2) by symbolically defining the bird as a "Christian soul," as "pious," etc. ("APPI" 361).

But Warren is concerned for the deeper religious symbolism and importance of the Mariner's act, arguing that "the crime against Nature [is] a crime against God" (361). This is manifested when the cross is

²⁷ See "APPI" 360. Warren is quoting from *The Statesman's Manual* 65-66.

removed from the Mariner's neck and is replaced by the dead albatross. In this exchange, there is a transference from the creature of God to God himself: "And the death of the creature of God, like the death of the Son of God, will, in its own way, work for vision and salvation" ("APPI" 362). But the Mariner's crime goes hand in hand with his regeneration, which is revealed in the moment of blessing the sea snakes. "In the end," Warren says, "he accepts the sacramental view of the universe, and his will is released from its state of 'utmost abstraction' and gains the state of 'immanence' in wisdom and love" ("APPI" 365).

While there is a similar crime committed by Audubon when he kills the birds that he will paint, this act is diffused and re-created by Warren's secondary imagination in his own poem. Like the Mariner, Audubon commits a crime against nature: he shoots birds. But Audubon's act does not appear to be motiveless under a will in a state of utmost abstraction. Audubon's crime is clearly motivated by his passion for true knowledge of the world and of the "Birds of North America" (V[A]). Warren suggests that this passion for knowledge is one name for love (VI). And yet, he "slew" the birds, "at surprising distances, with his gun" (VI). Warren commented on this paradoxical situation in 1977: "Audubon was the greatest slayer of birds that ever lived: he destroyed beauty in order to create beauty and whet his understanding. Love is knowledge" (*Talking* 244). It is precisely this paradoxical situation of Audubon's crime which re-enacts in its own way the mystery of the Fall and reveals the doubleness of the imagination necessitated by the Fall. Audubon yearns for an immediate and real knowledge that would heal the wound of the Fall, yet this knowledge is not available to him. This knowledge is what Warren the poet strives for in the "unsayable." Warren writes in V[C],

For everything there is a season.

But there is the dream
Of a season past all seasons.

In such a dream the wild-grape cluster,
High-hung, exposed in the gold light,
Unripening, ripens.

Audubon longs for that season past all seasons, but this can only be described by the language of tension and paradox: in that season the wild grape cluster "unripening, ripens." His knowledge is always marked by the tension of the world. Like truth which is "the only thing that cannot / Be spoken" (IV[E]), this knowledge of what is beyond knowing may only be approached through the enactment of Audubon's art. His crime of shooting the birds sustains the sacramental vision, though, because the crime against nature is clearly seen to be a crime against God. Warren implies that the death of the birds and their re-creation through the artistic act has an equal effect to the sacrificial death of the Son of God: it "will, in its own way, work for vision and salvation" ("APPI" 362).

Warren further qualifies Audubon's act by framing it as a crime against the self. The slaying of birds is more than a criminal act against nature, even as the Mariner's act is more than the killing of a bird. Whereas Warren observes that the hunting of the bird becomes the hunting of man in *The Ancient Mariner*, here in *Audubon* the hunting of the bird becomes the hunting of the self. In Section IV, Warren writes,

The blessedness! --

To wake in some dawn and see,
As though down a rifle barrel, lined up
Like sights, the self that was, the self that is, and there,
Far off but in range, completing that alignment, your fate.

Hold your breath, let the trigger-squeeze be slow and steady.

The quarry lifts, in the halo of gold leaves, its noble head.

This is not a dimension of Time.

In this passage there is an alignment of the bird with the self. The self is the quarry which is hunted so that the hunter might discover his own identity and be able to speak his own name.²⁸ In the "blessedness" of the imagination, the self may be re-made through this act of self-immolation. This moment may be seen, then, as a sacramental moment because the death of the self leads to vision. We learn in Section VI that Audubon's crime against nature is motivated by knowledge - he slays in order to know. The crime against the self is motivated by the same yearning for knowledge. He wants to know that self which can be finally known beyond the tension of the world. Warren told Peter Stitt that as he worked on the poem he "began to see [Audubon] as a certain kind of man, a man who has finally learned to accept his fate" (*Talking* 244). However, before he can accept his fate, Audubon must slay the self in an act of the will.²⁹ Rather than being an instance of the will in utmost abstraction -- as Warren suggested the act of the Mariner was -- here we have an instance of the will in its immanence. It is redeemed from utmost abstraction by the desire for wisdom and love.³⁰ By his recognition of a sacramental union with nature, Audubon does not display that "fearful resolve to find in [himself] alone the one absolute motive of action, under which all other motives from within and from without must

²⁸ Compare Audubon's thought in the final part of this same section (V[E]), "I do not know my own name."

²⁹ Compare the final five lines of "Fear and Trembling" (*NSP* 112):
Can the heart's meditation wake us from life's long sleep,
And instruct us how foolish and fond was our labor spent -
Us who know that only at the death of ambition does the deep
Energy crack crust, spurt forth, and leap

From grottoes, dark - and from the caverned enchainment?

³⁰ See *The Statesman's Manual* 65.

be either subordinated or crushed."³¹ Rather, his heart shakes with the passion to understand his connection with the natural realm which alone can provide the overarching motive in the act of poetic creation.

3.3.2 Dream and Blessing

Audubon's crime against nature and the self is not the only way that the theme of the sacramental vision is developed. Warren further modifies this theme in the long second section of the poem, "The Dream He Never Knew the End Of," extending the implications of the sacramental vision to the artist's connection with humanity. Warren develops in this passage what he calls in "A Poem of Pure Imagination" the "socializing function of the imagination" which was a fundamental concern of the Romantic poets. Warren refers to Shelley who argues in the *Defense of Poetry* that the poet puts "himself in the place of another and of many others" so that "the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own" (384). In this most narrative section of the poem, Audubon is given shelter for a night in a woman's wilderness cabin and is threatened during the night with his own murder by the woman and her sons. In the image of this woman, Warren fuses his concern for nature and concern for humanity. The first section of the poem introduces the sacramental vision by declaring how thin the membrane is between Audubon and the natural world. In the second half of that section, Audubon watches a bear on an autumn afternoon as it prepares for its long winter's nap:

October: and the bear,
Daft in the honey-light, yawns.

The bear's tongue, pink as a baby's, out-crisps to the curled tip,
It bleeds the black blood of the blueberry.

The teeth are more importantly white
Than has ever been imagined.

³¹ *The Statesman's Manual* 65.

The bear feels his own fat
Sweeten, like a drowse, deep to the bone.

Bemused, above the fume of ruined blueberries,
The last bee hums.

The wings, like mica, glint
In the sunlight.

He leans on his gun. Thinks
How thin is the membrane between himself and the world.

This meditation looks back to the blood-red sky of dawn across which the heron flew through its own sacramental image of the "black blood of the blueberry," even as it further illuminates the tension of the world in which Audubon's heart shook. However, these lines also look forward to the second section in which Audubon will learn how close the connection is between himself and humanity through his confrontation with the woman. If in the first section he learned that this membrane signifies both a division and a union between himself and nature, Audubon learns in this encounter with the woman that there is no membrane to separate him from the tension of the human filth and human hope which he finds in this cabin in the woods. If the poet -- whether Audubon or Warren -- can frame a definition of joy, it must be a definition which confronts this tension and embraces it. The confrontation portrayed in this second section is a necessary part of the poetic vision which seeks after a true knowledge of the world and yearns for that moment of articulation.

Whereas the first section of the poem emphasizes the glorious aspects of the tension of the world, here in the second it is revealed in all of its gritty and grimy aspects. "The Dream He Never Knew the End Of" begins at the "Shank-end of day," seemingly following on from the dawn mentioned in the first section. There is also the presence

again of a bird, a crow which calls from the distance. The call of the crow acts to announce the clearing upon which Audubon apparently stumbles.

Shank-end of day, spit of snow, the call,
A crow, sweet in distance, then sudden
The clearing: among stumps, ruined cornstalks yet standing, the
spot
Like a wound rubbed raw in the vast pelt of the forest. There
Is the cabin, a huddle of logs with no calculation or craft:
The human filth, the human hope.

Warren develops the notion of nature as sacrament here by means of the clearing, which is like "a wound rubbed raw in the vast pelt of the forest." As a wound, the clearing reveals some criminal act which has been inflicted upon the forest. However, Warren uses here an animate image: it is a wound in a pelt, the hide of an animal. The crime against the forest appears to be without motive, but it betrays the effects of humanity's presence and labor: the cabin stands among the tree stumps and the ruined cornstalks. As Audubon approaches the clearing and the cabin, he stands and thinks about the scene before him, as he did in the first section. It is a fallen scene, devoid of glory or beauty. The smoke coming out of the "mud-and-stick chimney" drains down the roof "like sputum." In his imagination, he already knows "the stench of that lair beyond / The door-punchaons." These physical signs, however, only anticipate the confrontation with fallen humanity which Audubon will face inside the cabin.

The woman who inhabits the cabin is something of a foil to Audubon. She and her voice, which is played against Audubon's thoughts throughout the section, are the manifestation of the tension between the "human filth, human hope." In her physical appearance and in her voice, there is at once a beauty - or power - and a repulsing crudity. These

two are not resolved in this section but remain in tension, and Audubon must accept both the beauty and the horror: she "is what she is" (II[J]). It is this sustained tension which not only lends to the woman a certain authenticity but also reveals the power of language whose energy resides in an unresolved tension between linguistic despair and linguistic hope. It is clear that this union of opposites, this multiplicity in unity, is the basis of the woman's powerful beauty. Her power is also intimated by the way that her image is fused with the image of a bird. In II[A], the woman's voice is paralleled with the call of the crow. The first line ends with "the call" of the crow, and the last line ends with "the voice" of her response to Audubon's greeting. This fusion is heightened when Warren introduces the woman in II[C]; the physical description resembles a description which might have been given the crow which invokes this section. Her face hangs like a crow in mid-air. It is "Large,/ Raw-hewn, strong-beaked" and her eyes, "dark, glint as from the unspecifiable/ Darkness of a cave." Only after this description is this creature defined as "woman." This combination of images confirms the symbolic role and significance of the woman in the larger vision of the poem. The blending of the woman's image with the imagery of birds affirms that Audubon's encounter in this section is not separate from his paradoxical activity of slaying birds in order to create beauty. The threat to his own life and the subsequent death of the woman and her sons correspond to the crime against the self and the crime against nature discussed above. By extending the sacramental vision through the crime against humanity, this narrative reiterates the notion of an atoning sacrificial death. Just as the death of the birds worked to bring about a sort of redemption, so the woman's death in the place of Audubon provides for the him the fullness of this sacramental

vision so that he might bless "them unaware" (*Ancient Mariner* l. 285). And if this moment of blessing is the turning point of Coleridge's poem (as Warren saw it to be), then this moment of blessing would appear to have similar significance in *Audubon*.

Audubon first recognizes the beauty of the woman in II[D], when he takes out his pocket watch and it glows in the firelight.

It is gold, it lives in his hand in the firelight, and the woman's Hand reaches out. She wants it. She hangs it about her neck.

And near it the great hands hover delicately
As though it might fall, they quiver like moth-wings, her eyes
Are fixed downward, as though in shyness, on that gleam and her
face

Is sweet in an outrage of sweetness, so that
His gut twists cold. He cannot bear what he sees.

Her body sways like a willow in spring wind. Like a girl.

This moment of beauty follows a particular instance of the woman's crudity in which she laughed at the indian, who is also staying there for the night, for having wounded his eye with his own arrow. But the glittering of the gold watch in the firelight transforms her not only from a woman into a girl but from a crow into a moth. The description of the motion of her hands and body is radically different from descriptions in the rest of this section. Her "hands hover delicately" and "quiver like moth-wings." Her eyes, which were described as dark and glinting "as from the unspecifiable/ Darkness of a cave," now are shy and are a part of the "outrage of sweetness" which has come over her face. "Her body sways like a willow in spring wind," but ten lines later she "hulks by

the fire."³² Yet this irreconcilable beauty and horror nauseates Audubon so that he "cannot bear what he sees." He cannot find in this woman the beauty which he so readily sees in the heron or the crow or the jay, a beauty which captures his passion and his love. It is the power of this tension in the woman which proves to be a threat to Audubon as much as the threat of his own murder by the woman and her sons.

However, Audubon's reaction to the immanent threat of his murder (II[E-H]) reveals his sense of complicity. This narrative moment of threat is the dream to which the title of this section refers, the dream which Audubon has had before and knows well. But it is a dream that he never knows the ending of. When faced with the threat, Audubon is frozen in passivity by "a lassitude/ [which] Sweetens his limbs" (II[G]). Rather than fighting back he lies in wait for the end of the dream. His reaction recalls the bear in I[B] which "feels his own fat/ Sweeten, like a drowse, deep to the bone." Though Audubon "knows/ What he must do," he cannot do it. And he does not understand his inaction: "He cannot think what guilt unmans him, or/ Why he should find the punishment so precious." The guilt which unmans him is an awareness of his complicity which unites him to the tension of this situation and to this woman. This is the reason why the "cold corn pone grinds in his throat, like sand" (II[I]), why there "are tears in his eyes," and why his "throat is parched" (II[L]). Audubon's inaction also seems to be motivated by the desire to know the ending of that dream "Of a season past all seasons" (V[C]). If he could know the ending of the dream, then he would know what is beyond knowing and would be able to speak the name of

³² Compare the image of the woman's body swaying "like a willow in spring wind" to the similar image in "Myth of Mountain Sunrise" (AE 85), in which the reader is asked to think "of a girl-shape, birch-white sapling, rising now / From ankle-deep brook-stones...." There is a similar mixture of innocence and power in this image as in Audubon. This comparison is heightened by Warren's reference at the end of this poem to "the old tale told" which seems to answer the imperative at the end of Audubon, "Tell me a story." See the discussion of this poem in Chapter Six.

the world. This knowledge would only come with his death, and he would then not be able to act upon it. Though he may not speak truth while he is alive, it may nonetheless be enacted "in the dream become...action" (IV[D]). Being in the world - participating in the tension and "the secret order of the world" (II[L]) - requires asking questions rather than speaking the answer:

He thinks: "What has been denied me?"

Thinks: "There is never an answer."

Thinks: "The question is the only answer."

He yearns to be able to frame a definition of joy (II[L]).

The ultimate answer or meaning which Audubon looks for is continually deferred, so he must continue to ask questions. Warren confirms this deferral of meaning in his "Afterthought" to *Being Here*: "Here, as in life, meaning is, I should say, often more fruitfully found in the question asked than in any answer given" (107-108). The definition of joy which Audubon yearns for must be a definition made up of questions, of silences and traces which "cannot fully embrace the dynamics of being."³³ In the tension of the world, the poet must continue to yearn.

When Audubon is saved by the three travelers who burst into the scene, his role in the narrative shifts from victim to witness. Although he was denied knowledge of the ending of his own dream, he witnesses the fulfillment of "the dream that, lifelong, [the woman] had dreamed toward" (II[K]). As with his own dream, the fulfillment of the woman's dream only comes with her execution together with her sons. The hanging scene enlarges the imagery introduced in the first section and consummates the theme of theme sacramental vision. In the first sec-

³³ "The language of poetry, then, is a language of silences, is itself constituted by traces, by words that cannot fully embrace the dynamics of being." Jackson, "The Generous Time" 24.

tion, in which the sacramental imagery of "God's blood spilt" colors the dawn sky, Audubon saw "Eastward and over the cypress swamp, the dawn/...And the large bird." In the second section, when dawn comes, it is gray and "Eastward, low over the forest, the sun is nothing/ But a circular blur of no irradiation..." (II[J]). Through the image of the woman Warren formally portrays the tension between white and black which in the first section revealed the imaginative passion of Audubon.

And in the gray light of morning, he sees her face. Under
The tumbled *darkness* of hair, the face
Is *white*. Out of that *whiteness*
The *dark* eyes stare at nothing, or at
The nothingness that the gray sky, like Time, is, for
There is no Time, and the face
Is, he suddenly sees, beautiful as stone, and

So becomes aware that he is in the manly state
(II[J], emphasis mine).

On a rhetorical level, Warren uses chiasmus to structure the tension which is imaginatively portrayed in the woman's face. On another level, though, he makes it clear that the language is the tension: "white" and "dark" are not referential terms but are the tension within which Audubon recognizes the beauty of the woman's face. The language creates the experience. At the moment of recognition, Audubon "becomes aware that he is in the manly state." Rather than being a gratuitous sexual innuendo, Warren's reference to the "manly state" - presumably Audubon has an erection - counters Audubon's earlier failure to understand what guilt unmanned him while he awaited the inflicting of the fatal wound from the woman. And yet this recognition of beauty takes on the form of blessing. This is made clear in II[K], in which Warren describes the hanging:

The affair was not quick: both sons long jerking and farting, but
she,

From the first, without motion, frozen
In a rage of will, an ecstasy of iron, as though
This was the dream that, lifelong, she had dreamed toward.

The face,
Eyes a-glare, jaws clenched, now glowing black with congestion
Like a plum, had achieved,
It seemed to him, a new dimension of beauty.

The beauty which he perceives is the woman's will which becomes salvific in a will-to-be. Her face takes on the bloody color of the blueberries in I[B] and in this self-sacrament, he sees "a new dimension of beauty." In her death, the woman achieves a certain wisdom, by virtue of which Audubon himself gains a fuller understanding of this sacramental vision. This vision, which has fused the crime against nature with the crime against humanity, is sealed when the crow reappears in the final line of this section to come "to rest on a rigid shoulder."

3.4 Language and Nature

The sacramental vision of life has specific implications for the poet's understanding of language. According to this vision, nature ceases to be an inanimate object which is passively available to the poet's scrutiny. In *Audubon* nature becomes an active participant in the sacramental vision, even becoming the sacrament itself at times. The poet, then, ceases to be the only speaker and becomes a participant through listening. Heidegger makes the same claim. According to Steiner,

For Heidegger, ...the human person and self-consciousness are not the centre, the assessors of existence. Man is only a privileged listener and respondent to existence....We are trying 'to listen to the voice of Being'. It is, or ought to be, a relation of extreme responsibility, custodianship, answerability to and for. Of this answerability, the thinker and the poet...are at once the carriers and the trustees.³⁴

³⁴ Steiner, *Heidegger* 36.

As the poet listens to the world, he is ultimately listening to being itself and the act of poetic creation becomes an act of answerability in which the poet offers his testimony. The sacramental vision lays bare, then, not only the tension of the world but also the tension between speaking and listening, declaration and silence, the sayable and the unsayable. Language is no longer simply a given, nor is it a lifeless substance to be shaped; rather it is a living power. So the moment of poetic creation - Warren's overt concern in his study of Coleridge and his underlying concern in *Audubon* - is a sacramental moment. Poetic creation is a process of discovery, and in the moment of creation the poem comes "unbidden from the depths" just as the Mariner's blessing comes "unaware." The sacramental nature of this moment qualifies the type of speaking which is involved in creating the poem: it is a sort of prayer which is watchful and humble in its approach.³⁵

This concern for "saying the unsayable," as the poet works toward the given within the tension of the world, recurs throughout *Audubon*. It does so primarily through the voice of the world, by which the world declares itself. This voice is heard through the call of the birds throughout the poem. The voice of the world declares itself first in Section I, when the heron is identified as moving across the dawn sky in a "slow calligraphy." What does it write upon the sky? It does not write its own name within the world - either "*ardea occidentalis*" or "heron, the great one." It writes its presence which opens within Audubon's mind the possibility of a knowledge of both the bird's presence and its absence. The world repeatedly calls to Audubon and leads him

³⁵ Compare ll. 288-291 of *The Ancient Mariner*:
The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

toward moments of understanding as he continues to walk in the world. For example, the second section of the poem is bracketed by the call of the crow which at first implicitly draws Audubon on toward his passion and in the end explicitly alerts Audubon to his new-found vision. While Audubon is in the cabin, he hears the world break its silence once again in the whisper of the stone (in [E]). In the darkness of the night, Audubon

hears

Like the whisper and *whish* of silk, that other
Sound, like a sound of sleep, but does not
Know what it is.

But this whisper alerts him and warns him of his doom. It bespeaks the tale which is "the dream he had in childhood but never/ Knew the end of, only/ The scream." As the woman prepares to murder Audubon, she sharpens her knife on the stone, wetted by her own spit. "The spit is what softens like silk the passage of steel/ On the fine-grained stone. It whispers." At the end of this second section, Audubon stands alone in the clearing, staring at the face of the woman after she is hanged. He thinks, "I must go," but he cannot as long as he is captured by this face "beautiful as stone." Then: "Far off, in the forest and falling snow,/ A crow was calling." When the voice of the world sounds, he "stirs, *knowing now*,/ He will not be here when snow/ Drifts into the open door of the cabin..." (emphasis mine).

As the poet, Audubon listens to this voice of the world which speaks in a language which he may hear but may not fully understand. This language is far more primordial than the approximating and unstable language of human intercourse. This voice of the world speaks the language of being and the poet patiently waits and listens for the voice. This is what we find in IV[D]:

Listen! Stand very still and,
Far off, where shadow
Is undappled, you may hear

The tusked boar grumble in his ivy-slick.

Here the poet demands the reader to participate with him in listening to the voice of the world. IV[D] continues: "Afterward, there is silence until/ The jay, sudden as conscience, calls." It is this call of the world, in the midst of the silence, which the poet hears. And it is in the tension between the silence and the call that the poet stands. The possibility of the world presence-ing itself is drawn out by the concomitant possibility of the world absence-ing itself in silence. It is this tension which IV[E] goes on to describe:

The world declares itself. That voice
Is vaulted in - oh, arch on arch - redundancy of joy, its end
Is its beginning, necessity
Blooms like a rose. Why,

Therefore, is truth the only thing that cannot
Be spoken?
It can only be enacted, and that in a dream,
Or in the dream become, as though unconsciously,
action,....

The poet waits upon the voice of the world and is inspired by its language. However, he acknowledges the presence of the unsayable in those things which may not be spoken. Sometimes language can only approximate meaning. The poet dwells in this tension of the world declaring itself and yet there are things which may not be spoken by man.

Having listened to the voice of the world, though, the poet can only create through the exercise of the creative will by which it "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate" (EL I.304). The imagination is not passive but is vital, Coleridge says. In Warren's

aesthetic, it is an act of violence which re-enacts the mystery of the Fall, but this violence leads to imagination, knowledge, and even love. So, Audubon's act of slaying these birds -- through whom the voice of the world is heard -- symbolizes the act of poetic creation. Just as he slays beauty in order to create beauty, the poet slays language by feigning mastery over it, dissolving, diffusing and dissipating it in the act of creation. However, this imaginative activity ultimately collapses in on itself and the poet's mastery over language breaks down so that truth may not be spoken. It must be enacted in the on-going work of creativity and collapse.

3.5 Epigraph

Audubon ends both with this image of the poet as listener and with a benediction which forms the epigraph for all of Warren's subsequent poetry. Section VII, "Tell Me a Story" both tells a story and issues the call for a certain story to be told. In subsection A, Warren speaks of a time in boyhood when he heard the voice of the world as the "great geese hoot northward." This forms a sort of bookend to the first section in which Audubon sees the great heron in the dawn sky; here, however, the speaker can only hear the goose in that "first dark" after sunset. What Audubon understood to be his great passion as he felt his heart shake in the tension of the world, the speaker here does not understand: "I did not know what was happening in my heart." The speaker's reference to the season as being that "season before the elderberry blooms" recalls the tension in V[C] between "For everything there is a season" and "But there is the dream / Of a season past all seasons." In this tension there is a wisdom to be learned by the poet, a wisdom which the world seems to know and declares to the poet who is willing to listen:

It was the season before the elderberry blooms,

Therefore they were going north.

The sound was passing northward.

Part of the wisdom imparted is that dream of "a season past all seasons," a season that never ends yet is always at its fullness. This is a season which lies beyond the effect of the Fall, a season in which the wound of the Fall and the tension of the world have been reconciled. And it is a season not out of time (*chronos*) but the season of the fullness of Time (*kairos*).

In the second subsection, Warren calls for the telling of this story which is intimated in subsection A.

Tell me a story.

In this century, and moment, of mania,
Tell me a story.

Make it a story of great distances, and starlight.

The name of the story will be Time,
But you must not pronounce its name.

Tell me a story of deep delight.

The benign imperative, "Tell me a story," which contains both a tone of urgency and a sense of yearning, expresses the passion of the poet for the tension of the world. Part of this passion is the sense of urgent need for a word or story which will provide some understanding of being in the world. This urgency is evident in the second section of the poem in which the poet cries out, "Tell me the name of the world" (II[G]), and later states that Audubon "yearns to be able to frame a definition of joy" (II[L]). This same yearning finds utterance in IV[E], in the prayerful supplication, "Tell us, dear God - tell us the sign/ Whereby we may know the time has come." This yearning to know name of the world

and to be able to frame a definition of joy both point toward the imperative in this final section of the poem which calls for that story whose name is Time. The poet senses the necessity of a story, both diachronically -- "In this century..." -- and synchronically -- "and moment, of mania...." And in between this diachrony and synchrony, between "century" and "moment," the story blooms out of language. This tale is intimately related to the world; it is made up of the world: "Make it a story of great distances and starlight." And though the name of the story is known -- "The name of the story will be 'Time,'" -- this name may not be pronounced. Like truth, the name may not be spoken because it absences itself as soon as it is pronounced or spoken. While the story may be named, it cannot be encompassed by the pronouncing of that name. The name can only approximate the reality of lived experience within the world, but at the same time it calls this experience into being. The name of the story is not abstracted from the content of the story, which is the world. While Warren shares Augustine's "thirst to know the power and nature of Time,"³⁶ there is for him no Augustinian notion of time in distinction from eternity, a tension which Augustine discusses in Chapter 11 of the *Confessions*. Rather, like Heidegger, Warren sees time as something we live. "We do not live 'in time' as if the latter were some independent, abstract flow external to our being. We 'live time.'"³⁷ Time and being may not be abstracted from one another, for it is only within time that man can find his identity. So, as long as the name of the story is not pronounced or spoken, it remains a vital presence and the story remains a "deep delight."

This last section of the poem is one of Warren's "threshold moments" which Richard Jackson describes in "The Generous Time: Robert

³⁶ Second epigraph to *BH*.

³⁷ Steiner, *Heidegger* 77.

Penn Warren and the Phenomenology of the Moment," Jackson compares Warren's view of the moment to Heidegger's thinking about poetry and being: "Rather than a statically centered, purely referential moment, a moment of clear origins, there is instead the moment of traces, or rebeginnings in the shadows of the abyss."³⁸ This moment at the end of *Audubon* is not at all "a statically centered" conclusion or resolution in which the poet states the "moral" or "meaning" of the poem. Rather, it is a moment of rebeginnings which calls forth a sense of what Heidegger called "anticipatory resoluteness" which is characterized by a "waiting towards" what is beyond the poem.³⁹

As Derrida says of Edmond Jabès' poetry, "One emerges from the book only within the book."⁴⁰ Such a sentiment is not unfamiliar to this poem. When Warren quotes Psalm 56:8 as one of the epigraphs to *Audubon*, he seems to suggest that the wanderings of the poet are already written in the book, which in Warren's vision is the text of the world. It is fitting then to view this final section as Warren's epigraph to all the poetry which follows *Audubon*. This later poetry which contemplates language and the unsayable in the poet's experience of the tension of the world is the telling of that story whose name is Time. But the poetry is careful to "not pronounce its name." It cannot circumnavigate time's expansiveness just as it can never fathom the depths of language. Rather, this later poetry probes possibilities and asks its readers the question of being.⁴¹

³⁸ Jackson, "The Generous Time" 21.

³⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), 388.

⁴⁰ See Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978).

⁴¹ See William V. Spanos, "Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a Postmodern Theory of Interpretation as Dis-closure," in *MHQL*, ed. by William V. Spanos (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1979), 139.

Chapter Four
The Unrolled Yet Glorious Fragment:
Participation, Tension, and the Language of the World

In his poetry published after *Audubon*, Warren begins to tell that story made up of "great distances and starlight" by entering into the tension of the world which is declared in a "redundancy of joy." The way that he begins to do this is by listening to that "story of deep delight" in the voice of the world, within which the poet hears the voice of language itself. By listening to the voice of language, the poet bears a sense of urgency to tell his own story, as Warren indicates in "How to Tell a Love Story":

There is a story that I must tell, but
The feeling in my chest is too tight, and innocence
Crawls through the tangles of fear, leaving,
Dry and translucent, only its old skin behind like
A garter snake's annual discard in the ground juniper. If
only....¹

Warren's later poetry sheds the old skin of deliberate statement and resolution which predominated so much of his early work in order to reveal the raw under-skin of questioning and listening by which this poetry becomes the beneficiary of language and being. This later work is also marked by a relentless engagement with the world. Warren is preoccupied by the possibility of the relation of the self to the world and by the character of this relation. However, he seems to be equally preoccupied with the agency of language in this relation. As a poet, Warren proposes that language is the only means of such engagement with the world. Rather than finding that language provides immediate access or final answers in this confrontation, Warren experiences in this later

¹ *Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978* (New York: Random House, 1978), 54.

poetry the way that language in the voice of the world gives of itself on the one hand and withholds itself on the other.

Bedient claims that Warren's "greatness as a writer began with his determination to concentrate on poetry as the extreme resource of...language-being..." (3). However, it would appear that the reverse is true in Audubon and in the collections which follow it: Warren's strength in this poetry is rooted in his concentration upon language-being as the "extreme resource" of poetry. Poetry is crafted within the forge of language-being. Bedient's formulation is helpful, though, because it brings to light the inseparable relationship between language and being in Warren's aesthetic and sacramental vision. As Warren probes the limits of language, he is at the same time probing the limits of being itself. There is a very real sense in Warren's later poetry that "man finds the proper abode of his existence in language" (57) as Heidegger suggests in "The Nature of Language." The poet's confrontation with the limits of language discloses the limits and character of our existence. However, the concrete character of existence, of being in the world, clarifies Warren's understanding of language as concrete utterance within the actualities of the world. As a result, then, language is never rarefied into linguistics or into a clear philosophy of language in Warren's poetry. This is not what Warren understood to be the purpose of poetry. When Warren says at one point in *Democracy and Poetry* that "the end of poetry is to be poetry..." (42), he is not resorting to a notion of "pure poetry" or to some form of the "art for art's sake" argument. Rather, he is contending that it is the unique property of poetry to listen to the voice of being and to give utterance to this source in all its vitality.

Warren's later poetry listens to this voice of language-being as

it listens to the voice of the world. Being is, for Warren, always situated concretely within the world. It is always being in the world, or "Being Here," as he titled his 1977-1980 collection of poetry. As such, it incorporates Warren's thought about the sacramental notion of participation which he consistently explored from even his earliest poetry. The kind of participation which he envisions is that of an engagement with being through an engagement with language and the world. This engagement does not seek to reconcile the irremediable elements of existence but seeks to hold in tension the simultaneous glory and terror of being in the world. Such a view of Warren's notion of participation runs counter to that proposed by Koppelman when he writes,

Participation in nature - not because nature is a shadow of the divine, but because nature itself is imbued with divinity - is the aim of Warren's late poetry and is, as we shall see, what distinguishes his aesthetic as sacramental, or more broadly stated, spiritual (119).

Warren's later poetry does indeed aim for a participation in or with nature, but not because it is "imbued with divinity." Rather, "participation in nature" is necessary simply if one is to understand what it means to be in the world. In Warren's vision, both man and nature are bound together by and bear the marks of the Fall. Far from being divine, nature groans and aches under the curse of the Fall and, like the self, is limited and changeable. In this fallen condition, nature is fraught with irreconcilable and inescapable tensions. While nature does hold a certain power in Warren's vision, it cannot provide in itself the ultimate unity of experience and knowledge after which the poet strives. Though the heart may long for such unity, there is no way of circumnavigating the effects of the Fall in nature and no way of avoiding the consequent tension of the world. Warren never resorts to

that notion of the *felix culpa* proposed by William Blake in which the curse of the Fall becomes its ultimate blessing. For Blake, Fall and redemption become one since the imagination, which was a result of the Fall, is the only means to salvation.² Rather, Warren seems to adopt to some degree Coleridge's position regarding the Fall in which the blessing and the curse must go hand in hand. While Coleridge states in the *Table Talk* that he considers the Fall to be "the fundamental postulate of the moral history of man" without which "Man is unintelligible," he concedes that "The mystery itself is too profound for human insight." Warren holds these same two points in tension, yielding to the mystery of the Fall while he nonetheless finds in it a "fundamental postulate" regarding the being of man and of nature.

Warren explores the ramifications of the Fall in his 1966-1968 collection, *Incarnations*, by probing the condition of corporeality shared by all creation, whether a man or a plum or a red mullet. Since all things have flesh, all things have an inwardness which, when exposed to the fallen world, brings about pain. This is what it means to be part of the world, as he says in "Riddle in the Garden":

- oh, do
be careful not to break that soft

Gray bulge of blister like fruit-skin, for
exposing that inwardness will
increase your pain, for you
are part of the world....³

By aligning the flesh of nature with the flesh of man, Warren suggests that nature is another self which is equally fallen, alienated, and

² Kevin Lewis writes that Blake "has no patience with this material world other than as a *felix culpa*, the only source of vehicular imagery for his ambitiously didactic, prophetic art." See his "The Impasse of Coleridge and the Way of Blake," in *The Interpretation of Belief: Coleridge, Schleiermacher and Romanticism*, ed. by David Jasper (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 232.

³ *Incarnations: Poems 1966-1968* (New York: Random House, 1968), 7.

cursed. Rather than idealizing nature in such a way that creation is divinized, Warren sees nature as bearing all the effects of the Fall and as equally alienated from God as man is. Koppelman seems to read Warren as he might read Wordsworth, toward whom the charge of pantheism may be more readily leveled. For Wordsworth, paradise and salvation are finally achievable through intercourse with the landscape. According to Abrams, "Wordsworth's paradise...can be achieved simply by a union of man's mind with nature, and so is a present paradise in this world..."⁴ Though Warren may yearn for this kind of union, it is never portrayed as being "achieved simply" or as even being achievable apart from death. The world into which Warren moves is never a paradise.

In an interview with Peter Stitt in 1977, Warren denied that he had any spiritual essence, much less any divinity, to invest in nature. Stitt compared Warren's love for the things of this world to that of Richard Wilbur who "indicates that love by investing physical objects with an implicit spiritual essence." Warren's response, in which he denies any such spiritual investment, is significant:

I am a creature of this world, but I am also a yearner, I suppose. I would call this temperament rather than theology - I haven't got any gospel. That is, I feel an immanence of meaning in things, but I have no meaning to put there that is interesting or beautiful. I think I put it as close as I could in a poem called "Masts at Dawn" - "We must try / To Love so well the world that we may believe, in the end, in God." I am a man of temperament in the modern world who hasn't got any religion. Dante almost got me at one stage, but then I suddenly realized, "My God, Dante's a good Protestant - he was! Where have I gone?" My poem reverses the whole thing, you see: I would rather start with the world (*Talking* 243).

Rather than investing the things of the world in all of their immanence

⁴ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 95.

with a spiritual, or transcendent, essence, Warren finds a meaning - or, meanings - implicit in the things themselves. By starting with the world, he enters into the inescapable sphere of the self's being where the poet must confront language. As "a creature of this world," he cannot gain any position outside of the world from which he might put an interesting or beautiful meaning into the things of the world. Rather, he thirsts to understand the meaning of the things as they present themselves to him.⁵ He seeks to understand the temporality of their being and wants to be able to speak in response to their manifestation. Since the poet and the world are alike fallen, though, his understanding and his ability to articulate are limited, partaking of the very contrariness and tension which he observes in the world. If there is any immanent meaning to be found in the world, it will only be within this tension which generates meaning in the midst of contrariness. Warren's understanding of the way that meaning is generated by tension is informed by Coleridge's formulation of the symbol. Symbols consist in contrariness and are sustained by the tension of "the eternal through and in the temporal." It is this sustained tension which provides the energy by which symbols "are the wheels which Ezekiel beheld" (*Statesman's Manual* 30).

4.1 Tension and Meaning

The poet encounters the immanent meaning of things in the world as he participates in the tension of the world. Warren acknowledges that there can be no participation in nature without experiencing this tension. In order to participate, the poet must engage in a relentless exploration of the tension out of which the immanent meaning is manifested. This conviction forms the fabric of Warren's aesthetic. "For

⁵ Compare the second epigraph to *BE*, "I thirst to know the power and nature of time..." (St. Augustine, *Confessions* XI.23 [trans. by Albert C. Outler]).

the basic fact about poetry," Warren writes in *Democracy and Poetry*, "is that it demands participation, from the secret physical echo in muscle and nerve that identifies us with the medium, to the imaginative enactment that stirs the deepest recesses where life-will and values reside" (89). Warren explored the implications of this relationship between tension and meaning in his 1955 essay, "Knowledge and the Image of Man." Warren argues there that any concept of identity must be achieved within the knowledge of being in the world. The self 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" (241). Because this sense of identity is forged within the tension of the world, though, it is never a static presence; rather it "is a continually emerging, an unfolding, a self-affirming and...a self-corrective creation" (241). Like his understanding of the poem, Warren's concept of the self is sacramental: he says that the knowledge after which man seeks is a knowledge of "unity presupposing separateness" (242). Much like Coleridge's notion of symbols, Warren's thinking moves toward a sort of "multeity in unity" in which the self participates in but is never wholly united with the world of his being. Such an aesthetic is sacramental not simply because it seeks a complete union with nature in which the self is dissolved, as Koppelman suggests. Rather, it is sacramental by virtue of its relentless exploration of the act of poetic creation as a way of simultaneously striving toward unity while confronting the full reality of the tension of the world. The engagement of the poet is sacramental to the degree that what he creates, the poem, is consubstantial with the realities of which it speaks. Warren says that the poem offers a vision of form which "is not a thing detached from the world but a thing springing from the deep engagement of spirit

with the world" (245).

Warren's notion of tension in his later poetry translates what was strictly a formal principle in the work of the New Critics into what we may call a more consciously ontological principle. As heirs of the Metaphysical poets, the New Critics valued wit, irony, and paradox as being the most subtle and most powerful formal elements of poetry and held that meaning in poetry is generated by poetic structure. For example, Cleanth Brooks claimed that the language of paradox is the language of poetry.⁶ Paradox functions for Brooks by a heightening of tension between connotation and denotation. The language of paradox enables the poet to create a well-wrought urn which not only contains but provides truth. Such a view of language implies, however, that words are "like a grasp that fastens upon the things already in being and held to be in being, compresses and expresses them, and thus makes them beautiful" (Heidegger, "Nature" 68). By grasping upon things with words, the poet compresses them in order to express the good, the true and the beautiful in the well wrought urn. However, Warren seems to acknowledge in his later poetry that the poet must renounce his grasp on language in order to realize, as Heidegger said, that "only the word makes a thing appear as the thing it is....The word avows itself to the poet as that which holds and sustains a thing in its being" (Heidegger, "Nature" 65-66). What appears to be an implicit formalist assumption in Brooks' essay - that paradox is the nature of language - is made into a more consciously ontological presupposition in Warren's late poetry. Meaning is generated by the tension of the world, not simply by a specifically poetic use of language. The tension in the poem is not artificially created by the poet; rather, it arises from the tension of being itself which dwells within language.

⁶ See *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1975), 3-21.

Warren's attention to the inescapable engagement with the tension of the world reveals an openness in his later poetry and thought which is absent from his earlier work. When Warren gave "Knowledge and the Image of Man" as an address to the American Philosophical Society in 1955, he maintained a hope for a final reconciliation of this tension in which the "fear and disgust" which the world may provoke are conquered and sublimated by means of the form of the poem, so that "the world which once provoked the fear and disgust may now be totally loved in the fullness of contemplation" (245-46).⁷ By 1975, however, he seems to have lost any sense in which that final reconciliation is finally achievable. Instead the poem has become the image of a possibility which is always marked by struggle or tension. In *Democracy and Poetry*, he writes, "The 'made thing' becomes, then, a vital emblem of the struggle toward the achieving of the self, and that mark of struggle, the human signature, is what gives the aesthetic organization its numinousness" (69). This struggle also provides the ground of meaning, according to Warren's vision. As a "made thing," though, the poem uncovers this ongoing struggle only by means of language. It is in language that this struggle reveals itself. The poet's only recourse is to language itself, in which this struggle is so vividly seen. As Heidegger declares,

The poet experiences his poetic calling as a call to the word as the source, the bourn of Being. The renunciation which the poet learns is of that special kind of fulfilled self-denial to which alone is promised what has long been concealed and is essentially vouchsafed already ("Nature" 66).

As the source of Being, language is, for the poet, that with which he is entrusted and made heir to. When language becomes the centre of his

⁷ See our discussion in Chapter Six of postmodern poetics which no longer finds solace in the "good forms" of poetry.

concern, the self is necessarily decentred. The poet becomes then the listener to the voice of Being, as Heidegger put it elsewhere. In Warren's later poetry, then, to speak of the tension of the world is not simply a formal technique which constructs paradox out of a particularly poetic use of language. To speak of the tension of the world is to partake of the tension of the world. The poem - like the self - participates in this struggle within the tension which distinguishes being in the world. The well wrought urn begins to show cracks and fissures, gaps which are held together only by a "unity presupposing separateness" ("Knowledge and the Image of Man" 242). The poem itself is a moment of tense yearning which does not reflect this tension as a mirror or simply use figurative language to describe it. The language of the poetry is the tension of the world.

This notion of tension and meaning forms the necessary backdrop against which Warren's confrontation with language in his later poetry must be seen. In "The Enclave" (*Or Else* 61), Warren draws near to the way that meaning trickles out from the fissure of this tension.⁸

Out of the silence, the saying. Into
The silence, the said. Thus
Silence, in timelessness, gives forth
Time, and receives it again, and I lie

In darkness and hear the wind off the sea heave.
Off the sea, it uncoils. Landward, it leans,
And at the first cock-crow, snatches that cry
From the cock's throat, the cry,
In the dark, like gold blood flung, is scattered. How

May I know that true nature of Time, if
Deep now in darkness that glittering enclave
I dream, hangs? It shines. Another

⁸ This poem, the second part of a two-poem sequence entitled "The True Nature of Time," was originally published in *Incarnations: Poems 1966-1968*, but this sequence was republished in *Or Else - Poem/Poems 1968-1974*. Warren states in a prefatory note to *Or Else* that this sequence has a specific place within the thematic structure of that book which is conceived of as one one long poem. It would be interesting to study the way that the respective contexts affect the interpretation of the poem.

Wind blows there, the sea-cliffs,
Far in that blue wind, swing. Wind

Lifts the brightening of hair.

In the first stanza, Warren encounters the manifested tension between silence and saying which generates the poem. From the blankness of the page, the poem begins, the black print rising from the white page. Out of the silence of the page the poem speaks. But the poem ends and returns to the silence of the white page. It is in this tension between the silence and the said that the poem itself exists. Its being gives voice to the being of language. But the silence out of which the poem speaks is not merely a problem for spatial composition. It is a matter of time itself, for silence "gives forth/ Time..." Even in the final poem of *Or Else*, entitled "A Problem in Spatial Composition" (101-102), Warren finds that spatial and temporal concerns are not removed from one another. As the speaker in this latter poem ponders the view of the forest visible from a "high window," his vision is interrupted by the upper lintel of the window, which "Confirms what the heart knows: *beyond is forever....*" Through the window, he observes the upward thrust of "the stub/ Of a great tree, gaunt-blasted and black...." Then a hawk enters the composition, "glides....," "Hangs....," and finally "Makes contact" with the tree which "stabs...at the infinite saffron of sky." At the point where the spatial composition seems complete - "The hawk perches on the topmost, indicative tip of/ The bough's sharp black and skinny jag skyward." - the problem of time enters the picture. The poem concludes, in a single-line set off by itself, "The hawk, in an eye-blink, is gone." The problem in spatial composition is that it is never only spatial; it must also be temporal, for this is the basic tension of the world. So in "The Enclave," silence and timelessness are identified

with one another, and the said is linked to time: "Silence, in timelessness, gives forth/ Time, and receives it again..." What is said forms not an object but a moment in time, spoken out of timelessness in time. Time and the saying are like the river to which Coleridge refers in a footnote in *The Statesman's Manual*, quoting from Plutarch:

"For it is impossible to step into the same river twice, according to Heraclitus, nor is it possible to grasp twice any mortal substance in a permanent state, but in the suddenness and swiftness of its change it scatters and comes together again, or, rather, not again or later but at the same moment it takes shape and dissolves, it comes and goes, so that that which is generated from it never achieves being because the process of generation never ceases or is overcome" (20).⁹

In the poetic moment, through the tension of language, there is a scattering and a coming together, a simultaneous shaping and dissolving, a coming and a going between the silence and the saying. The moment never achieves the fullness of being *in itself*, just as the poem can never be an isolated, sealed-off entity. Rather, it is only in the between, in the relationship of one moment to the next, between the elements of the poem itself and between one poem and the next, that meaning is generated.

In the second stanza of "The Enclave," there is a parallel relationship between the darkness and the cock-crow. In the darkness, the cry is raised, even as the word is spoken out of the silence. But the wind "snatches that cry" and "In the dark, like gold blood flung, is scattered." The cry is thrown back into the darkness which receives it again. This second stanza is not simply poetry as mimesis in which Warren copies from nature a scene as accurately as possible. Nor is it purely metaphorical in that Warren is simply making a comparison between

⁹ See the editors remarks regarding the text-critical background of this quote. *The Statesman's Manual* 20 n. 1.

this moment and the first stanza. Rather, the moment here partakes of the reality of which it speaks. This is an instance of the tension of the world out of which meaning is found. The cock-crow and the word both fall back into the silent darkness, but in the moment of speaking, between silence and darkness, the utterance is made, coming and going in the simultaneous moment.

The third stanza highlights the crisis of the poet: "How// May I know the true nature of Time, if...." If time never stands still, if it never may be reified into a static picture, then how can the poet know "the true nature of Time...?" Warren is asking two questions here: first, how can he know Time if this is the case? and second, may he know Time's true nature? Is it possible? The emphasis seems to fall upon the second of the two questions, and the poem rhetorically symbolizes the answer to the question. The true nature of time is that it can never be known. Time is like truth which, as Warren submitted in *Audubon*, may not be spoken but may only be enacted. Time and Truth, in their absoluteness, cannot be spoken or known, but must be lived in the tension of the ever-changing moment. In this third stanza, the dream of the enclave "hangs" motionless and is reified in the darkness, unlike the word in the silence. The enclave of the dream shines in the midst of the darkness, but its glittering beauty is snatched by the wind just as the cock-crow is scattered in the darkness. Even the dream is not insulated from the true nature of time. Coleridge comments in the same passage of *The Statesman's Manual* on the inability of the human mind to give permanence to things, just as Warren understands here that even the dream is not permanent. Coleridge writes,

the human understanding musing on many things, snatches at truth, but is frustrated and disheartened by the fluctuating nature of its objects; its conclusions therefore are timid and uncertain, and it hath no way of giving permanence to

things by reducing them to abstractions...(20).

The meaning which is generated by the tension of the world, then, is timid and uncertain; this meaning cannot be a reductive abstraction by which the poet seeks to give permanence to things. It is a meaning tied to the concreteness of the world in which it dwells.

In "*Interjection #2: Caveat*" (Or Else 11-12), Warren casts the tension of the world and the meaning which it yields in terms of the play between continuity and discontinuity. The dialogue between the two provides the necessary understanding of our existence. The poem begins, "Necessarily, we must think of the/ world as continuous...." The speaker suggests that every man has "bled for this knowledge" in a sacrifice in which the self replaces Jesus upon the cross. If this were not so - if we did not know that the world is necessarily continuous - then we could not know that we "are in the world, or even that the/ world exists at all...." But then the speaker announces the caveat of the poem's title:

but only, oh, only,
in discontinuity, do we
know that we exist, or that, in the deepest
sense, the existence of anything
signifies more than the fact that it is
continuous with the world.

While the continuity of the world declares its existence to us, it is only within the discontinuity of the world that we know that we exist, that is, that we exist as distinct from, though bound to, the world. Existence is bound up by both continuity and discontinuity, and out of the tension between the two are we able to have a sense of meaning or being.

4.2 The Phenomena of Language in the World

Warren's concern for "the immanence of meaning in things" in the

world and for the way that this meaning is generated within the tension of the world displays an important similarity to the phenomenological approach worked out by Heidegger in his early thought. Rooted broadly in the Platonic and Kantian traditions, Warren's aesthetic seems to follow what Heidegger called in *Being and Time* the maxim of phenomenology: "To the things themselves!"¹⁰ Heidegger held that a true phenomenology must set out not so much to define the objects with which it deals but to seek a way of meeting things as they manifest themselves within the horizon of time. He stated in *Being and Time* that phenomenology "does not characterize the what of the objects of philosophical research as subject-matter, but rather the how of that research" (50, emphasis his). According to Richard Palmer, Heidegger proposed that "the mind does not project a meaning onto the phenomenon; rather, what appears is an ontological manifesting of the thing itself."¹¹ In a similar way, Warren's concern for "an immanence of meaning in things" rejects the projection of meaning onto the things in the world and seeks to apprehend the way that the world declares itself in its ontological manifestation. Such a course follows a path parallel to the phenomenological method, which consists in "letting things become manifest as what they are, without forcing our own categories on them....it is not we who point to things; rather, things show themselves to us" (Palmer 128).

Even in his early poetry, Warren displays an awareness of the way that things in the world show themselves to us. In "Revelation" (*Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*), a young man experiences a sort of moral shock-wave after speaking a harsh word to his mother and senses the repercus-

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time* 50.

¹¹ Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 128.

sions both in himself and throughout creation.¹² As a part of this shock-wave, nature manifests its awareness of the son's act and seems to voice its alarm. In the third and fourth stanzas, we find the world declaring itself:

By walls, by walks, chrysanthemum and aster,
All hairy, fat-petaled species, lean, conifer,
And his ears, and heart, should burn at that insidious whisper
Which concerns him so, he knows; but he cannot make out the words.

The peacock screamed, and his feathered fury made
Legend shake, all day, while the sky ran pale as milk;
That night, all night, the buck rabbit stamped in the moonlit
glade,
And the owl's brain glowed like a coal in the grove's combustible
dark.

The whisper and scream of the world make a certain revelation to the son in the seventh stanza, that "In separateness only does love learn definition." This knowledge is mediated, though, not simply through nature manifesting its presence but by making known its manifest separateness. That separateness is revealed when "Nature's frame / Thrilled in voluptuous hemispheres far off from his home," but the character of its difference is confirmed by the inscrutable words of the flowers' whisper. Although he "cannot make out the words," this separateness revealed to him "something important about love, and about love's grace." The only definition of love available is that which is sustained by the tension of this separateness.

In Heidegger's later essays and lectures, though, he expanded his conception of the phenomenological method to incorporate his thinking about language. In "Language" (1959) Heidegger made his claims about the power of language explicit.

Language speaks. Its speaking bids the difference to

¹² *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*, The Poet of the Month Series (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1942). Please note that this volume is not paginated. "Revelation" is the seventh poem.

come which expropriates world and things into the simple onefold of their intimacy.

Language speaks.

Man speaks in that he responds to language. This responding is a hearing. It hears because it listens to the command of stillness.¹³

The way that things show themselves to us is through the speaking of language. Language speaks so that we might understand the manifestation of the things in the world. If the poet is to understand the immanence of meaning in things, then he must begin to listen to language itself. In response to its speaking, the poet may speak by the "verbal imagination" which shapes and modifies his experience of things which are manifested in the tension of the world. It is not the poet who points to language, who calls language into being; rather it is language which declares itself to the poet and gives him his being. Any true experience with language must consist in language making itself manifest to the poet and the reader rather than in any attempt to coerce language into the poet's own service. In three lectures delivered in 1957 and 1958 and published under the title "The Nature of Language," Heidegger set out to probe "a possibility of undergoing an experience with language," specifically an experience which "is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it." When we undergo an experience with language, "language itself brings itself to language" ("Nature" 59). But, when does this happen?

Curiously enough, when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us. Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and fleetingly touched us with its essential being.

¹³ "Language," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 210.

But when the issue is to put into language something which has never yet been spoken, then everything depends on whether language gives or withholds the appropriate word. Such is the case of the poet ("Nature" 59).

Heidegger's conception of moments in which we are "distantly and fleetingly touched" by language illuminates our reading of Warren's later poetry, in which undergoing an experience with language brings the poet within the sphere of the sayable and the unsayable in the world. The poet confronts the essential being of language precisely when he cannot find the right word in himself or in the world, or when he cannot understand the word which the world speaks to him. Frequently, the speaker in the late poems hears a voice but cannot understand the language being spoken by that voice. The question the poet asks is, "What Is the Voice That Speaks?" (BH 71). But the poet also confronts language when he seeks to say the unsayable - that is, to put into language that which has never been spoken and cannot be spoken - only to find himself caught between the giving and the withholding of language.

Warren's participation in nature, then, must be understood in light of his concern for the way the world declares itself to the poet within the tension of "being here." As Warren enters into the world in his poetry he does so by opening himself to the "possibility of undergoing an experience with language." His concern for the world cannot be abstracted from his preoccupation with the power and limit of language. Both the world and language must be seen as the givens toward which Warren said the poet must work as he seeks for the moment of articulation. The poet is looking for that language necessary for articulation, a language which will finally reconcile the irreconcilable. However, every attempt to idealize his own language brings the poet back to the realization that there can be no finally reconciled language either in him-

self or in nature. This remains unsayable. What Warren considered to be "meaning" -- that is, any conceptual understanding which enables the poet and reader to confront the complexities of the world without being consumed by that experience¹⁴ -- is found not in abstract, isolated images or statements, but in concrete instances of the voice of the world which speaks with the inherent tension of the Fall. Throughout his late poetry, Warren explores the way that language gives and withholds through the voice of the world. Even as he observed the blessing and cursing quality of the imagination in *The Ancient Mariner*, Warren experiences a similar doubleness in his confrontation with language and the unsayable. In a number of these poems, Warren encounters on the one hand the curse of language in the way that it withholds itself. Language manifests its fragmentary nature as a casualty of the Fall and its inability to redeem itself. Even in the voice of the world, language withholds itself and the poet cannot find in that voice the appropriate word. In other late poems, however, Warren demonstrates the blessing of language when the voice of the world becomes the word which speaks our joy or our experience. The world forms not simply a text which may be read but a language which is not available to the poet in himself. It is in this between - the tension between the fallen inability of language and its blessing power - that the language of nature betrays the fundamental tension of the world: it is a realm of great delight which is fragmented and fractured. This is the sphere of being in which the poet listens to the voice of the world and hears the voice of being.

4.3 The Withholding of Language

In "Dragon Country: To Jacob Boehme," Warren states explicitly what is implicit in his quest for the unsayable, that the heart yearns

¹⁴ Compare Burt's statement regarding Audubon: "Warren seeks in Audubon...a character who can look upon the truth and not be silenced by it" (92).

for a language that is absolute and will give permanence amidst the fluctuating nature of experience itself. The heart yearns for a language that is unified, one in which the relation between word and world is immediate. Towards the end of the poem, he writes,

...We are human, and the human heart
Demands language for reality that has not the slightest dependence
On desire or need...

The heart demands a language which might cross the boundary of our limited understanding and experience. However, Warren acknowledges that if such language could be spoken, then life would "dwindle again/ To the ennui, the pleasure, and the night sweat" and would be devoid of "the fearful glimmer of joy" which shines in the darkness. The tension betrayed by that fearful glimmer of joy is necessary for understanding our experience in the world. This tension is demonstrated in Warren's poetry by the consistent confrontation with the limit and boundary of language - what he called in various poems the "language barrier," the "inevitable frontier," and the "mortal limit" - and by the experience at that limit of the way language persistently recedes and withholds itself.

Warren approaches this withholding quality of language in an early poem entitled, "The Mango on the Mango Tree," one of the four sections of "Mexico Is A Foreign Country: Four Studies in Naturalism" (SP 23-66 269). The setting for this poem is a post-lapsarian world in which the self and the mango share a common guilt but are nonetheless divided from one another. As another self, the mango looks at the speaker just as he looks at it. The two spy on one another and each "pours his tale into the Great Schismatic's ear." In the naturalistic vision of the poem, the speaker declares that God has ordained this alienation between the self and nature:

For God well works the Roman plan,
Divide and Rule, mango and man,
And on hate's axis the great globe grinds in its span.

I do not know the mango's crime
In its far place and different time,
Nor does it know mine committed in a frostier clime.

But the speaker then suggests through an odd reversal of the atonement that mango and man offer up their own flesh as a vicarious sacrifice to cover for God's "primal guilt." Even still, the speaker has a yearning for redemption, a hope for a sacrament in which word and action might meet:

For, ah, I do not know what word
The mango might hear, or if I've heard
A breath like *pardon, pardon*, when its stiff lips stirred.

If there were a word that it could give,
Or if I could only say *forgive*,
Then we might lift the Babel curse by which we live,

And I could leap and laugh and sing
And it could leap, and everything
Take hands with us and pace the music in a ring,

And sway like the multitudinous wheat
In a blessedness so long in forfeit -
Blest in that blasphemy of love we cannot now repeat.

Both the poet and the mango have need of a word that will enact a final pardon of such cosmic guilt. The poet yearns for the sufficient word, the redemptive word, which will "lift the Babel curse" so that all of nature might participate together in a blessedness. Under this curse, he does not know that word or the word does not exist. The nature of this curse, though, is not simply a limitation of our diction; rather it is the limitation of our power to enact the words that we might speak. In his fallen condition the poet simply cannot say the word. The Babel

curse remains and the redemption which he envisions remains only a hope. Were such a blessedness attained, it would only be in an all-consuming blasphemy, saying the word which only God can say and may live to repeat.

Warren expands the notion of the "Babel curse" in a poem from *Being Here* entitled "Language Barrier" (73). Whereas Warren appears to be more concerned in the earlier poem with the psychological condition of complicity shared by the individual and nature, he is more openly preoccupied in this later poem with the withholding of language within the voice of the world. Though the world and the self remain equally fallen, the voice of the world manifests what is withheld to the poet in his own language.

Snow-glitter, snow-gleam, all snow-peaks
Scream joy to the sun. Green
Far below lies, shelved where a great *cirque* is blue, bluest
Of waters, face upward to sky-flaming blue. Then
The shelf falters, fails, and downward becomes

Torment and tangle of stone, like Hell frozen, where snow
Lingers only in shadow. Alone, alone,
What grandeur here speaks? The world
Is the language we cannot utter.
Is it a language we can even hear?

Years pass, and at night you may dream-wake
To that old altitude, breath thinning again to glory,
While the heart, like a trout,
Leaps. What,
Long ago, did the world try to say?

It is long till dawn.
The stars have changed position, a far train whistles
For crossing. Before the first twitter of birds
You may again drowse. Listen - we hear now
The creatures of gardens and lowlands.

It may be that God loves them, too.

The poem begins with an archetypal moment in Warren's later work: the reader and poet are alike brought to a verge from which we overhear nature declaring itself, and both are silent before it. The snow-peaks "scream joy to the sun" above the green of the forest, the blue of the "bluest waters," and the "torment and tangle of stone." This is a jagged world in which mountains, sun, sky, and snow all converge in a clash of joy. This encounter carries within itself both blessing and cursing. It is a violent meeting in which all the snow-peaks "scream." However, it is a moment of immense joy, which is what they utter to the sun. Amidst this world of tension, there is a distinct communication between the various elements of the scene. It is a scene of distinct grandeur and beauty, but that grandeur is found not only in the beauty of the scene frozen in time but specifically in the voice of the world that speaks forth this grandeur. The poet's knowledge of this voice is only available to him through difference, that is, through a knowledge of separateness which brings to light his sense of alienation within this world. He is confronted by the voice which "Is the language we cannot utter." However he cannot understand what the voice says: "Is it a language we can even hear?"

What "Language Barrier" makes clear is that the poet's experience in the world finds language withholding itself in two ways. On the one hand, the poet hears and sometimes even understands a voice which speaks a language that is not available to him. It is a language which he may not utter. On the other hand, the poet is confronted by a voice which speaks a word which he cannot understand. All he can know is that he cannot finally know what the world is speaking. The relationship between these two is similar to the relationship between *langue* and *parole*

in Saussure's linguistics.¹⁵ The world forms its own *langue* or language system which is both a text and a speaking voice. But the language which the world possesses is a language that the self cannot possess. The self must listen intently to this language - or, read this text - but it may not speak its words. But on another level, the world makes concrete utterance, or *parole*, and the poet queries whether he can even comprehend the speech of the world. These two manifestations of language withholding itself are not divided or opposed in any way to one another; the one is realized in the other. According to Hawkes, "The nature of the *langue* lies beyond, and determines, the nature of each manifestation of *parole*, yet it has no concrete existence of its own, except in the piecemeal manifestations that speech affords" (21). The remainder of "Language Barrier" intimates that while the *langue* of the world remains beyond the grasp of the poet, he can nonetheless hear the *parole* of the world within the horizon of time and within the tension of the world. Having pondered whether we can even hear the language of the world, the poet offers that we may hear its manifestations as "we hear now/ The creatures of gardens and lowlands." However, he may not understand what the world and its creatures are trying to say: "What,/ Long ago, did the world try to say?" Warren returns to this paradoxical moment throughout his late poetry, as in "Three Darknesses: I" (*NSP* 3): "Since my idiot childhood the world has been/ Trying to tell me something." Here, the poet concedes that the world has been trying to tell him that there "is something/ hidden in the dark" but it does not say what that something is. In the fullness of Warren's vision, that knowledge is reserved for the wisdom that only comes with death.

Warren expands his pursuit of the language which we may not utter

¹⁵ See Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, Fontana Modern Masters Series ([n.p.]: Fontana, 1976), 29-34.

- the *langue* of the world - in a number of poems concerned with the nature of truth. The way that language withholds itself in the speaking voice of the world is necessarily related in Warren's vision to the way that truth also withholds itself so that, while it may be approached, it may never be named. Warren explores the relationship between the voice of the world and truth in "What Is the Voice That Speaks?" The title is repeated as the opening words of the first line, in response to which Warren catalogs a variety of sources for the voice: the "tongue/ Of laurel leaf," the "split tongue of *coluber constrictor* - / Black racer to you," the "blind man," the "great owl," the "wolf-howl," "my mother," the voice of the lover, and finally "I." Each one of these voices is a manifestation of the voice of the world, or the voice of being, that speaks. Also, all of them are collectively the voice that speaks. Yet each and all are limited to what may be spoken, whether it be the laurel leaf

trying

To tell how long since you lived on a mountain
 In Tennessee, free wind inspiring your wisdom?

or the voice of the "I" which responds to the question, "I thought that you loved me" with "I do. But tomorrow's a snowflake in Hell." In response to the variety of voices which speak, the poet asks, "What tongue knows the name of Truth? Or Truth to come?/ All we can do is strive to learn the cost of experience." In the same way which Warren proposes in "Language Barrier" that the world is a language that we cannot utter, so he discerns here that the human heart is unable to name Truth. Instead of speaking the Truth, we are bound over to experience within the tension of the world in which we learn "the cost of experience." Rather than finding a unified language that will answer the Truth-question, we must seek to enact truth, to live truth in the ten-

sion of experience.

Warren pursues this concern for the relationship between Truth and a language which withholds itself and cannot be uttered, in "Truth" (BH 63). In the first two sections, as in the last two lines of "What Is the Voice That Speaks?", he links utterance to concrete experience within the world:

Truth is what you cannot tell.
Truth is for the grave.
Truth is only the flowing shadow cast
By the wind-tossed elm
When sun is bright and grass well groomed.

Truth is the downy feather
You blow from your lips to shine in sunlight.

Warren approaches here the absolute nature of Truth which is manifested in the sentiment that it absolutely may not be spoken. Instead, Truth is revealed in fleeting moments of non-absolute time. Truth is the shadow and the downy feather which flow and float in the midst of the bright sunlight. These lines are reminiscent of Coleridge's statement in *The Statesman's Manual* that the mind only "snatches at truth, but is frustrated...by the fluctuating nature of its objects..." (20). As a result, "its conclusions...are timid and uncertain, and it hath no way of giving permanence to things by reducing them to abstractions..." (20). Warren refuses to reduce Truth to an abstraction which might be told or uttered. An absolute knowledge of Truth comes only with death. Instead, Truth comes in snatches within the experience of the world.

Truth is the trick that History,
Over and over again, plays on us.
Its shape is unclear in shadow or brightness,
And its utterance the whisper we strive to catch
Or the scream of a locomotive desperately
Blowing for the tragic crossing. Truth
Is the curse laid upon us in the Garden.

Truth is the Serpent's joke,...

Rather than giving permanence to truth here, Warren says that, like a mirage, "its shape is unclear in shadow or brightness." We might expect Warren to propose that the shape of truth - even a truth lived in experience - is more clear in the brightness of the sun, but here truth is unclear in both shadow and brightness. Its utterance is both a whisper we strain to hear and a scream from which we flee. Warren's allusion to "the curse laid upon us in the Garden" - presumably the Garden of Eden at the point of the Fall - suggests that it is the absolute or "unsayable" quality of truth which was the curse laid upon us. What was known in fullness before the Fall may now only be enacted within the tension of the world. Warren does not deny that there is truth, but in a fallen world, it may not be named. By "the Serpent's joke," Warren suggests the temptation to grasp Truth in its absoluteness, and so to become God. In the final stanza, Warren returns to the notion that "Truth is for the grave:"

Truth is the long soliloquy
Of the dead all their long night.
Truth is what would be told by the dead
If they could hold conversation
With the living and thus fulfill obligation to us.

Their accumulated wisdom must be immense.

Here, as in other poems, death is seen as the fullness of experience, as the moment in which there is an absolute knowledge and a simultaneous apocalypse of the self.¹⁶ In that moment, the self is dissolved, diffused, and dissipated, though reshaped into something other than what it once was. Warren avoids the vocabulary of Christian theology which might speak of some glorification or transformation at the point of

¹⁶ See for example "Better Than Counting Sheep" BH 58.

death; there is this deep sense of a radical change, though, in which the dead and the living are divided by this immense wisdom. For this reason, though the dead might tell truth, they may not "hold conversation" with the living. Death is the neighborhood of Truth; they dwell in what Heidegger would call nearness to one another, facing one another and completing one another.¹⁷

In "A Way to Love God" (NSP 165), Warren develops the relationship between the nature of truth and the withholding of language. The poem begins by observing "the shadow of truth."

Here is the shadow of truth, for only the shadow is true.
And the line where the incoming swell from the sunset Pacific
First leans and staggers to break will tell all you need to know
About submarine geography, and your father's death rattle
Provides all biographical data required for the *Who's Who* of the
dead.

I cannot recall what I started to tell you....

As in "Truth," Warren suggests that truth is never available as the "thing-in-itself," but that we may only catch a glimpse of the shadow of truth. In our experience, only the shadow, unclear as a whisper, is truth. But, if only the shadow of truth is true, then where may the shadow be seen? Here, Warren says, in the world and in the poem itself, in both of which the shadow of truth is seen. Warren subverts here both the notion that poetry contains truth and the conviction that the poet is the speaker of truth. In the poem the poet observes the shadow of truth. Warren also turns to the world which provides all that you need to know or will be required to know about this shadow of truth. Each of the subsequent sections of the poem marks experience in the world, but each moment of experience is an aporetic moment. Each section interrupts the other: "I cannot recall....," "I do not recall....," "But I had

¹⁷ See *Being and Time* 301-11 and Steiner, *Heidegger* 103-7.

forgotten...." The shadow of truth slips away and recedes like the unified word which may never be uttered. But within the discontinuity of this experience, there is a continuity: "Everything seems an echo of something else." These experiences which seem discontinuous actually reveal a continuity; each is a shadow of truth, whether it be the midnight moan of the mountains who "remember...that there is something they cannot remember," or the "hairiness of stars" in the midst of the silence, or the sheep, huddling together in a midnight mist, who "Stared into nothingness." And in Warren's vision, truth must be seen within each moment in itself, so that "You would think that nothing would ever again happen." In this recognition, snatching at the shadow of truth, he suggests, "That may be a way to love God." Warren returns here to his admitted "theological" reversal first intimated in his interview with Peter Stitt, where he referred to "Masts at Dawn:" "My poem reverses the whole thing, you see: I would rather start with the world" (*Talking* 243). Warren also seems to be developing the admission he made in *Audubon*: "What is love? // One name for it is knowledge" (VI). It may be that a way to love God is to know and understand the basic contrariness of the the world - its continuity in discontinuity - and to perceive that this is the shadow of truth. And though Truth, like the language of the world, may not be uttered, it must be pursued in the continuous walk within the tension of the world.

In Warren's experience of the withholding of language in the voice of the world, he encounters not only this unutterable *langue* but also that word or *parole* which cannot be understood. In several poems, Warren traces out this language which we cannot hear as being a code which cannot be broken, as in "Breaking the Code."¹⁸

The world around us speaks in code,

¹⁸ This poem was published in *The Southern Review* 19/2 (1983) and was not included in Warren's final selected volume, *New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985*.

Or maybe something like the old Indian sign
 Language of the Great Plains - all with a load
 Of joy and/or despair. And in all of which you must resign
 Yourself to ambiguity, or error. The road
 Markers are often missing, or defaced. Is
 The message the veery tries at dusk to communicate benign?
 Does the first flake of snow from a sky yet blue
 Mean *that* or *this*?
 Is the Owl's question - "*Who? - Who? -*
 Addressed to your conscience, and you?
 In dawn light does the scroll-mark of wind-swirl in night snow,
 Or later the bleeding icicle tip from the eaves,
 Tell you a truth you yearn to know -
 Or is it merely an index of the planet's tilt?
 And what of the beech's last high leaves
 Of hammered gold, or glint of sunlit gilt?

What is unambiguous in these opening lines of the poem is that the world speaks in a structured way which is continuous with our existence within the world. Only by virtue of this conviction can the poet even utter, "The world around us speaks...." However, the poet's understanding of what is spoken is indeterminate: it is a "code" or something like the old sign language of the Indians. As the world speaks in code, the things declare themselves and bring themselves to light, but, though this bringing to light is unmistakable, the self cannot hear, or comprehend, what is said. It is the self which struggles under a certain ambiguity or error as it seeks to understand the meaning of the sign language or the code of the world. Does the world speak with a load of joy *and* despair, or does it speak with a load of joy or despair? The self can only respond by saying that it hears both, and in this tension there is a necessary ambiguity. What complicates understanding though is that "The road/ Markers are often missing, or defaced." The language of the world is not in and of itself complete, so you never know whether "the message the veery tries at dusk to/ communicate [is] benign" or

not. Although "the world means only itself" ("Riddle in the Garden"), the world does not necessarily declare its own meaning, and the poet does not have a meaning to put there; he can only ask, "Does the first flake of snow from a sky yet blue/ Mean *that* or *this*?"¹⁹ But our own experience in the world complicates this situation so that "It is hard to break the code in our little time and space." Within the tension of the world - that is, between time and space, between time and timelessness, between presence and absence, between the silence and the saying - we will never crack the code so that we might understand the final message which the world speaks. However, Warren entertains the possibility that the message being told is that there is nothing in the end but the "index of the planet's tilt."

The coded message sometimes appears as a persistent whisper within nature. In "Summer Rain in Mountains" (RV 47-48), a "dark curtain of rain sweeps slowly over the sunlit mountain" through the course of the stanzas. There is a "whisper...moving through the wide air" of the afternoon which reminds the poet that he cannot remember something. That something could be "a nameless apprehension" which is like the dog's tail which wakes you with its thumping the floor at the foot of your bed as you try to sleep. Then,

The wild

Thought seizes you that this may be a code. It may be a secret
warning.

A friend is addressing you now. You miss the words. You
Apologize, smile. The rain hammers the roof....

The whisper of the world reminds the speaker of a nameless apprehension which persists like a code, which may be a secret warning, but he may

¹⁹ Note the way that Warren links the elements within the world with words, as the snowflake to *this* or *that*, and that all nature functions as or is structured as a language system.

never break that code in order to know. The rain storm passes, the "sun/ Emerges like God's calm blessedness..." and "You pull yourself back together. A drink helps." The code remains, but there is no meaning to put there. This tension becomes more explicit in "Code Book Lost" (*Now and Then* 43-44), in which the poet demands that there must be some meaning in the world's declaration.

What does the veery say, at dusk in shad-thicket?
There must be some meaning, or why should your heart stop,

As though, in the dark depth of water, Time held its breath,
While the message spins on like a spool of silk thread fallen?

....

What meaning, when at the unexpected street corner,
You meet some hope long forgotten, and your old heart,

Like neon in shore-fog, or distance, glows dimly again?
Will you waver, or clench stoic teeth and move on?

Have you thought as you walk, late, late, the streets of a town
Of all dreams being dreamed in dark houses? What do they signify?

Yes, message on message, like wind or water, in light or in dark,
The whole world pours at us. But the code book, somehow, is lost.

The poet feels the weight of import in the world's persistent declaration. The message "spins on like a spool of silk thread fallen." But the poet has no way of deciphering the messages which he is able to hear. There is no key which can crack the code. Ultimately, the poet must relinquish himself to the unavoidable tension: "Yes, message on message, like wind or water, in light or in dark,/ The whole world pours at us. But the code book, somehow, is lost." Though he yearns for language to speak as language so that he might be able to finally understand his being in the world, language withholds itself.

4.4 The Giving of Language

In Warren's quest for a "language for reality that has not the slightest dependence/ On desire or need," he finds that language not only withholds itself in such a way that it may not be heard or understood but also readily gives of itself in fleeting moments for the one who will listen. When the poet reaches the limit of what may be spoken, he finds that language speaks in the midst of the tension of the world. However, he also finds that it is language which speaks in his own speaking. When the poet sets forth the poem in language, he brings the poem into the light of language. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger claims that "the poet...uses the word - not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word."²⁰ It is by virtue of this giving quality of language that the poet is able to question being. In "The Whole Question" (NSP 54), the speaker suggests that "You'll have to rethink the whole question. // ...Yes, you must try to rethink what is real."²¹ The question which demands reconsideration is that of life and identity: being itself. What does it mean to be? The answer to the question though is just over the horizon, like the tortoise of Zeno's paradox to which Warren referred in "Paradox:"

Yes, far away and long ago,
In another land, on another shore,
That race you won - even as it was lost,
For if I caught you, one moment more,
You had fled my grasp, up and to go

With glowing pace and the smile that mocks
Pursuit down whatever shore reflects
Our flickering passage through the years,

²⁰ In *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 48.

²¹ See the discussion of "The Whole Question" in Chapter Six.

As we enact our more complex
Version of Zeno's paradox.²²

The trap of the paradox in "The Whole Question" is "a matter of language...." Being constantly recedes, yet it speaks from the silence. So, the poem concludes with a hopeful burst of desire that the words might yet give of themselves:

...You

May yet find a new one in which experience overlaps
Words. Or find some words that make the Truth come true.

The language in which experience and words overlap is the language of nature, and the words which enact Truth are those spoken by the voice of the world. What this language gives is not a totalized utterance or an absolute statement, but is the word which we may not speak for ourselves. This is a word which we understand and perceive in the speaking voice of the world. Only by virtue of this giving character of language can the poet and reader alike truly speak.²³ The poet finds that what language speaks is that which the human heart cannot express in itself; it is a vicarious speaking. That which speaks is the unsayable. By virtue of the way that language gives, the poet is able to speak within the contraries of the world.

Within the voice of the world, the poet is able to hear the very word to which he is unable to give utterance. In a number of poems, Warren presents speakers or participants who are unable to give utterance to the experience in which they find themselves; in this situation, though, the world speaks the "unwordable word" which they are not able to find or to sustain. This appears prominently in a late poem, "Last Walk of Season" (AE 44), where the speaker and a partner climb a mountain in the late afternoon, late in the season of summer,

²² Selected Poems 1923-1975 (New York: Random House, 1976), 8.

²³ See Heidegger, "The Nature of Language" 107.

and late in life. As they walk, the gurgling of the stream of rain water in the ruts of the old logging road "Is the only voice we hear." But, bearing burdens of their own, "We do not ask / What burden that music bears." The speaker admits that their only wish "is to think of nothing but happiness" and "The world's great emptiness." And their great desire is to participate in that world, to participate "as part of that one / Existence." Within this recognition of being bound with the world, the speaker asks, "Can it be that the world is but the great word / That speaks the meaning of our joy?" This is the ultimate union to which this poem points, rather than the union of the speaker with his partner, or of the "last light /...with the soft-shadowed land." It is this union between world and word which is symbolized in the convergence of summer and autumn and which is the source of the heart's "own delight." Language speaks the word that the speaker cannot say. In this way, it is only by means of this giving quality of language that the poet is able to say the "unsayable."

Warren pursues this theme of participation in the word of the world in "Star-Fall" (NT 23). In terms of the narrative of the poem, Warren returns to the vivid scenes of *Promises* in the old mediterranean fortress overlooking the sea. Though he acknowledges this to hearken back to "that far land, and time," the poem is a present experience in a moment of fullness: "There we, now at midnight, lay." But the poem itself is not a far away time, but is now, and it is not simply there, but it becomes here. As in "Last Walk of the Season," the sound of water provides the only audible voice; "the slap and hiss far below" of the sea is "the only sound to our ears." And, as in the former poem, the speaker and a partner lie next to one another, each engrossed in the moment of the world's speaking. Warren probes in this latter poem the

nature of our participation not simply with nature but with one another. The third stanza begins, "We did not lie close, and for hours / The only contact was fingers, and motionless they." But the union envisaged is not simply between man and woman or sea and land, but it is that between our communication and the voice of the world. However, Warren draws together more explicitly his concern for language and being, apparently suggesting something similar to Heidegger's statement that the being of language is the language of being. So, here, Warren ponders,

For what communication
Is needed if each alone
Is sunk and absorbed into
The mass and matrix of Being that defines
Nature of all?

That communication which is mediated by human language is shown to be fragmented and failing before the voice of the world. What privilege can human language demand when Being itself is a language and communicates what the human voice may not articulate? Warren is not denying the necessity for communication but is redefining - or, reshaping - our understanding of the nature of communication itself, moving it beyond a strict system of signs and signification. In the final sections of the poem, Warren turns to this defining "matrix of Being:"

We lay in the moonless night,
Felt earth beneath us swing,
Watched the falling stars of the season. They fell
Like sparks in a shadowy, huge smithy, with
The clang of the hammer unheard.

Far off in the sea's matching midnight,
Lights of fishing boats marked their unfabled constellations.

We found nothing to say, for what can a voice say when
The world is a voice, no ear needing?

We lay watching the stars as they fell.

As Warren turns to the being of the world, he finds that it is marked by a certain coincidence between the various elements. It is significant that he does not use the language of reflection in these final sections; the stars are not reflected in the sea, but rather find an echo in the lights of the fishing boats which are hung in the midst of their own midnight. The stars in the moonless night fall "Like sparks in a shadowy, huge smithy," just as the lights of the fishing boats mark their own "unfabled constellations." In light of this communication, or communion, within the matrix of being, what can the human heart find to say? "We found nothing to say...." This "nothing," though, is a vital presence within the poem. "Nothing" does not denote an emptiness which is a dead-end but suggests that place from which the poet might listen to the voice and the world and that place from which he might begin to speak. This contact between the poet's voice and the voice of the world is the contact to which the poet moves. Human language appears so inadequate before the voice of the world which speaks what the human voice may not say. This communication, or communion, moves beyond the understanding of words as strictly linguistic signs to be read or heard. The voice of the world is a voice "no ear needing." The final line of the poem utters the communication which the language of the world gives: "We lay watching stars as they fell."

In "August Moon" (BH 31), we find an echo of these other poems in its preoccupation with stars and in its concern for the nature of communication. However, Warren turns here to consider the nature of growth and age in light of the infinity of being. The moon of the title announces to the speaker his being bounded by time within the world.

Gold like a half-slice of orange
Fished from a stiff Old-Fashioned, the moon
Lolls on the sky that goes deeper blue

By the tick of the watch. Or
Lolls like a real brass button half-buttoned
On the blue flannel sleeve
Of an expensive seagoing blue blazer.

He then turns to the stars which "Slowly..., in a gradual/ Eczema of glory, gain definition." The world does not count the years as the speaker is tempted to do; the world moves on in its slow way of defining itself. So, the poet asks, "What kind of world is this we walk in?" to which he replies, "It makes no sense to us..." With an urgent desire to make sense of the world, we must continue to walk on in the tension of this apparent disparity.

Anyway, while night
Hardens into its infinite being,
We walk down the woods-lane, dreaming
There's an inward means of
Communication with
That world whose darkling sussuration
Night - if only we were lucky - be
Deciphered.

Here the poet dreams that there might be within himself some means of communication with the world and a way of deciphering the language of the world in its own inexorable rhythm. But a dream is not simply some illusion in Warren's aesthetics, as he learned in his study of *The Ancient Mariner* and as he expressed in *Audubon*. The dream is a specific way of enacting the truth. So his dreaming here is a means of envisaging what is in reality true, though he can only see the shadow of truth. Occasionally, the "darkling sussuration" of the world can be deciphered in glimpses of the world's being and there is a means of communication which moves beyond human words or speech. As the poet ponders what it means to count years, the world moves on and "the great owl in distance" utters his call and rescues the poet from "what they say" (the reasons

given for counting the years) by urging him to walk on. The owl call is an instance of this inward communication, but it is the voice of the world which gives and calls. The poem concludes,

The moon is lost in tree-darkness.
Stars show now only
In the pale path between treetops.
The track of white gravel leads forward in darkness.

I advise you to hold hands as you walk,
And speak not a word.

The forward movement of the "track of white gravel" into the darkness is the very means of communication which the poet sought. It is not a static perspective from which one may count the years, but it is the dynamic motion of living the years, within which there is a means of communication beyond that of human words. This is the deciphering of the world's darkling sussuration, before which the human heart must "speak not a word," for "what can a voice say when/ The world is a voice, no ear needing" ("Star-Fall," *NSP* 151)?

In a number of poems, Warren not only contemplates the way in which the world is a voice which speaks a word which says what we cannot say, but also considers the way in which the world itself is that word spoken. It is not simply that the world speaks a language which is "unsayable" to the poet. The world *is* the wordless language which gives of itself so that we might find meaning in "the secret order of the world" (*Audubon*, *NSP* 220). It is this language, as it gives of itself, that defines human language, rather than human language establishing the system of reference among the various elements of the world. Warren breaks down notions of referentiality through an understanding of language which becomes purely referential. This sense is intimated in "Last Walk of the Season" when the speaker asks, "Can it be that the

world is but the great word / That speaks the meaning of our joy?" The world and our joy converge in the speaking of language. There is no distinction between the language of the world and the world itself. In "Fear and Trembling" (RV 97), Warren is concerned to find a language that is not simply adequate but one that is meaningful so that he might "meditate on what the season has meant." But the words which comprise human language cannot define such meditation, for "What word has glittered on whitecap? Or lured blossom out?" Rather, nature itself provides the language and the text for such meditation. But he asks,

Can one, in fact, meditate in the heart, rapt and wordless?
Or find his own voice in the towering gust now from northward?
When boughs toss - is it in joy or pain and madness?
The gold leaf - is it whirled in anguish or ecstasy skyward?

While the human heart yearns for a language to be able to meditate, its words fall short, for if the boughs toss in joy or in pain, the meaning is much more than this. Human language is bound over to difference within the tension of the world. But the world provides a very real narrative for meditation:

Can the heart's meditation wake us from life's long sleep
And instruct us how foolish and fond was our labor spent -
Us who know that only at death of ambition does the deep
Energy crack crust, spurt forth, and leap

From grottoes dark - and from the caverned enchainment?

Only a meditation by means of the meaningful language that the world is may wake us from "life's long sleep" and only then may meaning be found; only at the death of the ambition of human language to circumscribe the meaning of the world will meaning "spurt forth, and leap// From grottoes dark...." This final vision is apocalyptic in character: only at the breaking up of human language is meaning revealed through the speaking of the unsayable.

In "Aspen Leaf in Windless World" (BH 87), Warren continues to meditate upon the world which is an "unworded revelation":

Watch how the aspen leaf, pale and windless, waggles,
While one white cloud loiters, motionless, over Wyoming.
And think how delicately the heart may flutter
In the windless joy of unworded revelation.

In his attention to the language of the world, Warren approaches again a language which is purely referential. The image presented in this first stanza does not enact a mimetic narrative but a poetic one in which the call to watch and think is a call to read and listen. By listening to the voice of nature, the poet is able to discern that the world is a revelation, even though he does not always know what it reveals:

Look how sea-foam, thin and white, makes its Arabic scrawl
On the unruffled sand of the beach's faint-tilted plane.
Is there a message there for you to decipher?
Or only the joy of its sunlit, intricate rhythm?

Is there a sign Truth gives that we recognize?
Can we fix our eyes on the flight of birds for answer?
Can the bloody-armed augurs declare expediency?
What does dew on stretched wool-fleece, the grass dry, mean?

Have you stood on the night-lawn, oaks black, and heard,
From bough-crotch to bough-crotch, the moon-eyed tree-toad utter,
Again and again, that quavery croak, and asked
If it means there'll be rain? Toward dawn? Or early tomorrow?

Though the revelation made by the world is "unworded," it is nonetheless revealed within the worded. The poet perceives it in the "Arabic scrawl" of the sea foam, in the sign made by Truth, and in the utterance of the tree toad. The poet and the world are bounded by language within which the unsayable speaks. There is no doubt in the poet that the world is itself a revelation, but the question is, what does it mean? Warren's allusion to Gideon's fleece in Judges 6 confirms this question;

Gideon used the fleece to test the meaning of the Lord's revelation to him. In the same way, the poet listens to the voice of the world and asks if the quavering croak of the tree toad means that there will be rain. This revelation of the world speaks joy, just as in "Language Barrier" the snow peaks scream joy to the sun. It is this joy which is the "beauty-making power" ("Dejection: An Ode"). But, does the world speak of more than simply the joy of its own rhythm? For the poet, the world does utter a message, a sign, a meaning, but these are not always completely discernible. The world is, as he says in the sixth stanza, a "shadowy world/ Of miracles, whispers, high jinks, and metaphor." It is significant that Warren does not focus on any single metaphor in this poem but lists in catalog fashion the myriad ways that the world speaks this unworded revelation. There is no longer any room in Warren's poem for metaphors or symbols because the whole poem is a metaphor - or rather, the poet's understanding of the whole world is symbolic. The world declares itself and provides the language by which we might begin to understand it and might begin to speak. But at the end of the poem, Warren asks if the world tells us of anything more than itself:

What image - behind blind eyes when the nurse steps back -
Will loom at the end of your own life's long sorites?
Would a sun then rise red on an eastern horizon of waters?
Would you see a face? What face? Would it smile? Can you say?

Or would it be some great, sky-thrusting gray menhir?
Or what, in your long-lost childhood, one morning you saw -
Tinfoil wrappers of chocolate, popcorn, nut shells, and poorly
Cleared up, the last elephant turd on the lot where the circus had
been?

What will the world reveal at death? The power of this unworded revelation is limited to itself; that is, it reveals nothing that is supernatural. When Warren comes to the very edge of the worded utterance of the

poem, he does not leap into any "transcendental Idea of infinity."²⁴ He does not propose that, having heard the unworded revelation of the voice of the world, he might now say the unsayable. Even the language used to probe the possibility of the death-image is bounded by the natural within which the unsayable speaks. And, though the language of the world gives of itself, there is no means of grasping any final image by means of human language. In Warren's vision, human language before the absolute nature of death is only "the last elephant turd on the lot where the circus had been."

4.5 Grasping the Paradox

Warren's confrontation with the unsayable within the voice of the world finally involves a vision which is decidedly paradoxical because being in the world is sustained in the radical tension of paradox. Although the poet may not say the unsayable, the unsayable nonetheless speaks within the voice of language which is given utterance in the moment of the poem. That which may not be spoken is grasped within paradox. In the first section of a poem entitled "Synonyms" (BH 93), Warren questions the power of paradox:

Where eons back, earth slipped and cracked
To leave a great stratum, snag-edged, thrust

As margin to that blind inwardness, water
Now plunges in cosmic racket, sempiternal roar,

White-splintered on masses of stone, deep-domed or spired,
Chaos of white in dark paradox. What is the roar

But a paradox in that
Tumultuous silence -

Which paradox must be a voice of ultimate utterance?

In tones and images which recall Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, Warren comes to

²⁴ CN III.4047

a place and moment of paradox at the margin of "blind inwardness" which marks off the darkness of earth from the "white-splintered" waterfall. At this margin, the water plunges with an unending roar over rocks and forms the paradox of "white in dark."²⁵ But this paradox is not simply visual; it also encompasses the juxtaposition of the roar of the water's chaos with the silence of earth. In this moment and space, Warren declares that there is a voice making an "ultimate utterance." What is it that speaks, though? It is neither the roar nor the silence which speak in isolation, but it is the paradox which speaks. The voice is heard within the radical and sustained tension of the world.

Warren's notion of the voice of language which speaks within this tension approaches a point close to Coleridge's understanding of the language of nature. In Lecture XII of his *Philosophical Lectures*, Coleridge suggests that the Book of Nature will "become transparent to us, when we regard the forms of matter as words, as symbols, valuable only as being the expression, an unrolled but yet glorious fragment, of the wisdom of the Supreme Being."²⁶ Nature functioned for Coleridge as a book alongside the Bible which is a revelation of God's power and being. Warren, however, never suggests that world is divine nor does he claim that the world is God. Instead, he consistently makes recourse to the fallenness of the world as it bears the inescapable contrariness which is the result of the Fall. While nature is not a transparent medium through which we see God's wisdom, Warren shares Coleridge's emphasis upon the world being a language which is symbolic - it partakes of the reality of which it speaks - and bears the full contrariness of being - it is an unrolled and a glorious fragment. Warren's poetry claims that

²⁵ This juxtaposition is reminiscent of Warren's repeated contrast between light and dark in *Audubon*. See Chapter Three.

²⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Philosophical Lectures*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn (London: Pilot Press, 1949), 367.

that which is more than concrete is manifested in the concrete elements of the world. So, the poet does not encounter the unsayable in some undefinable "out there" but in the "here" of the moment and the poem.

Chapter Five
Naming the Unnameable:
"Tell Me the Name of the World"

Warren's quest after "language-being" in the voice of the world throughout his later poetry did not exhaust his pursuit of the "unsayable." His persistent desire as a poet was to find that place of articulation from which he might gain access to the "unsayable" and might be able to humbly speak a unified utterance which would destroy "the old antithesis of words and things."¹ Yet, as he walked in the world, he found no such place of privileged access but only the ongoing act of speaking in the limited, fragmented and unstable language available to him. His only recourse to the "unsayable" lay in saying itself -- in the act of poetic creation -- by which the beyond is presented as within through the exercise of the pure imagination. By pressing language to its very limits, the poet found that the power of that place of articulation after which he yearned lay in its existence as an ever present, though never fully realized, possibility. As Warren confessed to Peter Stitt, his deep sense of the immanence of meaning in things could never provide that sense of final meaning to comprehend the world. In Warren's "bottom-up" sort of thinking, he "would rather start with the world" and love it as a means toward speaking and enacting that moment of possibility in which he could "believe, in the end, in God" ("Masts at Dawn").

To love the world, though, Warren must be able not simply to speak

¹ Coleridge, *CL* I.625-26.

about the world but must be able to name the world.² The nearness of naming, knowledge and love to one another in Warren's later poetry finds its precursor in the relationship between these in the Bible. It hearkens to Adam's act of naming the animals in the garden, in which name and knowledge were unified. It recalls God's naming of Abraham and of his people as an act of covenant love by which he knew them and made himself known to them. It also encompasses the renaming of Jacob through his struggle with the angel during the desert night, an image which Warren invokes in a number of places in his later work.³ Naming within the biblical literature is an act of great power and one that creates and recreates notions of identity and difference. Warren's sense of urgency to name the world brings to light his grappling with notions of identity and difference. It also brings into focus his great concern to undergo an experience with language itself. Like Jacob, the poet suffers this experience in which he seeks not simply to name but to be named. His preoccupation with the voice of the world, which speaks a language which is not available to the poet, is one way that Warren sought to love so well the world. But, in *Audubon*, we find another instance of that impulse in the poet's cry, "Tell me the name of the world." *Audubon* not only set Warren on the course of walking within the tension of the world - what he called "the secret order of the world" - but it also heightened his yearning to be able to name the world. The name of the world is the Name which, as the Living Word, encompasses the fullness of knowledge that the poet desires and actuates being within

² For discussions about naming as a theological and linguistic issue, see Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995); Peter S. Hawkins and Anne Howland Schotter, eds., *Ineffability: Naming the Unnameable From Dante to Beckett*, AMS Ars Poetica, No. 2 (New York: AMS Press, 1984); John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); and David Tracy, *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics and Church* (London: SCM; Maryhill, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

³ For example, see "Dream" (NT 29), "Youthful Truth-Seeker, Half-Naked, at Night, Running Down Beach South of San Francisco" (BH 25-26), BD 79 62 and "The Use of the Past" 47. For a fuller discussion of this image in Warren's vision see Chapter Six.

the world. However, like the name of God, that name may not be spoken apart from a moment of consummation in which all is simultaneously revealed and destroyed.

In the long second section of *Audubon*, as Audubon comes under the threat of murder by the woman and her two sons and yet feels himself lulled into lassitude, the poet himself cries out, "Tell me the name of the world." This cry is answered within the same section when Audubon thinks, "The question is the only answer," and the poet comments, "He yearns to be able to frame a definition for joy." For Audubon, who "slew [birds], at surprising distances, with his gun," the definition of joy is found in the naming of the birds which he revered. For the poet, that joy is found in the name of the world itself, a name which constantly runs ahead of or recedes from his reach. The act of naming has to do with the creative act of the poet in which he experiences joy. In "Dejection: An Ode," Coleridge links the creative power of the poet to the presence of joy which is the "beauty-making power" (l. 63).⁴ Joy is what sustains the "shaping spirit of imagination" (l. 86) in the moment of dissolving and re-creating its perception of "Reality's dark dream" (l. 95). In the exercise of the imagination in the act of naming, Warren seems to enact a definition for joy just as joy sustains him in the act of naming. In Warren's vision, the name which he pursues is a name which the world itself knows and speaks in its own language, but the poet may never articulate the name. Rather, the cry to know the name of the world is the answer to the poet's question within the contrariness of the world itself. The possibility is held out but the realization of it is never reached.

The poet faces a similar crisis when he turns and asks, "Tell me

⁴ In *English Romantic Writers*, ed. by David Perkins (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 432-34.

the name of the self." Just as the name of the world is never given but is seemingly and enigmatically present, so the name of the self is not given. The poet searches relentlessly after that place where he will be able to speak the name. But even as he yearns to know the name of the world and the name of the self - to be able to say the "unsayable" - he has a heightened awareness of his struggle within language. The question of naming heightens the poet's sense not so much of linguistic arbitrariness as of linguistic instability. To be able to name the world is to be able to grasp the world in its fullness, in its complexity and completeness. The quest for the name is the quest after the unified utterance in which word and thing finally share identity. And yet, in the poet's experience, there is no such stable word or name. Even an individual's name does not lead to stability; the identity of the individual is never fully fixed but is always being made and remade, according to Warren. Names often appear as both arbitrary and unstable. Who is it that gives the name and what makes the name "stick"? And what about entities that share a name? These, too, are crucial linguistic issues for the poet. Thus, naming also raises the problem of the poet's own linguistic inability. Even as Warren confronts the voice of the world throughout his later poetry, he is also faced with his own inability to give the Name to the world.

Tim Fulford observes a similar experience in Coleridge's aesthetic, which he supports by observations of Coleridge's reading of the German theosophical metaphysician Jacob Böhme. Coleridge was fascinated with Böhme's notion of a "language of nature," by which he referred to the unfallen Adamic, unified language of the garden.⁵ Fulford examines the way that Coleridge understood Böhme's language of nature to be a divine or angelic language in the midst of our fallen world. It was "a

⁵ Regarding the thought and influence of Böhme, see Fulford 38-42.

mystical state of spiritual knowledge"(40) which existed somehow "above language" but toward which "language was constantly aspiring and of which certain linguistic events, such as forgetting a name, were indications" (41). The forgetting of a name is, in Coleridge's understanding, an instance of linguistic instability. According to Fulford,

...to forget a name was, in Coleridge's view, to break the conventional linguistic code and to search, in the struggle to recollect it, for a unique word, a name meaning only itself, irreplaceable by another word, ungoverned now by relations to other words...Coleridge was embracing linguistic breakdown in order to dramatize the fact that the rules of ordinary language were conventional and fallible and to wrest from that dramatization a glimpse of a linguistic unity beyond such rules and such breakdowns (41).

Fulford suggests that such evidence of "linguistic breakdown" became a matter of deep spiritual knowledge for Coleridge. As language fractured and fragmented, it revealed that there was something beyond it that could only be intimated by the necessary tension of its condition. Warren's aesthetic is pierced through with this awareness of the breakdown of the conventional linguistic code, and his search for the name of the world and of the self is a search after the unique word. However, it is only in its very brokenness that language can begin to suggest that there is a meaning not so much beyond it but within it. It is not as if language were a container for the meaning but that meaning is shown in the very nature of its brokenness and fractured condition. This was for Warren, though, a concrete problem. In his search for the name of the world, he works from the concrete toward that which is more than concrete or more than real - toward the unsayable. But that which is more than concrete is not exterior but is an interior matter. The unsayable is approached in the act of saying itself. However, this approach must be negotiated through the experience of an inability to speak the name

of the world, an experience which reveals the linguistic instability which confronts the poet.

5.1 Naming as Act

Warren's concern for naming is closely related to his consistent emphasis upon the specific creative act which is a moment of experience and instancy. Warren consistently attempted to avoid what he considered the abyss of abstraction by dealing not in platitudes but with vital experience in the moment. Speaking of Truth or Happiness or Despair is pointless apart from the concrete act of the moment in which Truth is not spoken but enacted. The act gives definition not simply to an idea but to life itself in Warren's vision. During his first dialogue in *Brother to Dragons* (1979), with Laetitia Lewis, wife of Lilburn Lewis, R.P.W. states that

...every act is but a door
Between two rooms, on equal hinges hung
To open either way, on either room,
And every act to become an act must resolve
The essential polarity of possibility,
Yet in the act polarity will lurk,
Like the apple blossom ghostly in the full-grown fruit.
Yet all we yearn for is the dear redemption of
Simplicity (39).⁶

Though the act and the possibility are distinct from one another, they can never be separated. The act always dwells within the contrariness of possibility. However, though action is inescapable if one is to live at all, the act itself is not a given; it is not simply necessitated by a chain of cause and effect relations. The act is generated by the exercise of the conscious will within which the polarity of possibility lurks. The act does not destroy that tug of possibility. The polarity

⁶ *Brother To Dragons: A Tale in Verse and Voices, A New Version* (New York: Random House, 1979). For a discussion of the two editions of this poem (1953 and 1979), see James A. Grimshaw, ed., *Robert Penn Warren's Brother to Dragons: A Discussion* (Baton Rouge and London: LSU, 1983). R.P.W., listed as one of the speakers in the *dramatis personae*, is identified as "The writer of this poem."

of possibility is not resolved so that it is dispelled but is resolved by incorporating that polarity within the one moment of the act. The act incorporates the possibility just as the "full-grown fruit" incorporates the apple blossom. The polarity of possibility is not found only in binary oppositions, but in a plethora of possibilities available to the individual. In order for the act to become an act it must enter into one of the rooms available to it. But the act cannot evade an inherent doubleness similar to the doubleness the poet experiences in language. The act is never stable.

In the 1953 edition of *Brother to Dragons*, R.P.W. expounds the relationship between act and possibility. He continues in this passage,

No, that's not the thought I had meant to follow.
I had meant to say that if the act resolves
The essential polarity of possibility,
It yet will carry that polarity,
As deep in the inner flesh of autumn fruit
We trace the frail configuration of spring's flower.
But that image, with its sense of beauty and delight,
Is scarcely appropriate for my notion, and my own line
Has a sort of conventional euphony and sweetness (55-56).

Like the concrete utterance of the poet, the act always bears the tension of the world in itself, always bears the doubleness of the "essential polarity of possibility." What is perhaps most significant here is the poet's suspicion about his own ability to articulate the unified experience which he appears to be describing. Though he speaks of the polarity of possibility, his impulse is to move toward resolution and yet he must struggle against that. R.P.W. complains, "No, that's not the thought I had meant to follow." Tension is not superseded but inevitably remains. But even when he seeks to translate this into metaphor, both his own impulse and his own language fail him: the image is inadequate to convey the fullness of the experience of which he speaks

and his "own line/ Has a sort of conventional euphony and sweetness" which tames and destroys the tension. R.P.W. continues in the 1953 edition:

All wrong: For the origin of no human action,
No matter how sweet the action and dear, is ever
Pure like the flower. For if sweetness is there, then bitterness
too,
In that hell-broth of paradox and internecine
Complex of motive and murderous intensity
We call the soul, and from that
Anguish of complication any act,
Any act at all, the bad, the good, affords,
Or seems to afford, the dear redemption of simplicity:
The dear redemption in the mere fact of achieved definition,
Be what that may (56).

There is no pure act, just as there is no pure language and no pure poem, as Warren argued in "Pure and Impure Poetry."⁷ Though an act may want to be pure, it partakes of the the tension of the world: it is a mixture of sweetness and bitterness, a "hell-broth of paradox and internecine/ Complex of motive...." The poet's understanding of this tension, though, is achieved through the exercise of the pure imagination in the poem.⁸ The act bears this tension because such is the ontological condition of the human soul. The soul -- if the poet can speak of such an abstract idea -- is itself a paradox and a complex of motive, brimming with murderous intensity. Warren's mention of motive here calls to mind "A Poem of Pure Imagination" in which he dealt with the role of motive in the Mariner's act of killing the albatross. There, the severity of the crime which made it a reenactment of the mystery of the Fall was due to its apparent lack of motive. This concern for motive and act reappeared in *Audubon* where Warren redefined, in the light of *The Ancient Mariner*, the act of poetic creation as a willful

⁷ NSE 3-28.

⁸ Compare Warren remarks in "APPI" 394.

act which involved blessing and cursing and was in its own way a necessary reenactment of the mystery of the Fall. Warren's lines here in *Brother to Dragons* seem to coincide with these other instances of his concern for the act and motive. They even seem to be illuminated by Coleridge's comment from the *Table Talk* which Warren used as a sort of guiding statement for his analysis of the Mariner's act. For Coleridge, the Fall created the nonabsolute out of the absolute by which "every phenomenon is explicable" ("APPI" 359). As a result of the Fall, no human action is ever absolute, but involves a mixture of nonabsolute motives and values. No single human action can ever stand apart from other actions without any effect upon them. Though a given action may be without apparent motive, it is never an absolute and pure action. The human soul bears an "anguish of complication" in any act and this characterizes what Coleridge calls "the moral history of Man." But because each act achieves a moment of definition out of the haze of possibility, each affords a sort of redemption, a buying back of each moment, though there is no clear promise attached to this redemption. In the 1979 edition of *Brother to Dragons*, Warren qualifies his earlier statements about the act affording "the dear redemption of simplicity" by stressing that that such a redemption is "All we yearn for...." In Warren's later poetry, such a moment of redemption is looked forward to as that moment of consummation when the unified word will be spoken and knowledge will give way to death.

Warren's desire to speak the name of the world is not simply a desire to define the extra-linguistic referent of his poetic enterprise. The act of speaking the name is not a mimetic act but is a poetic one. Through his quest after the name, Warren continues his search for the "unsayable" and absolute language. It reveals his commitment to con-

tinue to act within the world as a poet through an imaginative engagement which reshapes and modifies his knowledge of the world in which he dwells. Naming is a performative act rather than a denotative or prescriptive one.⁹ However, in Warren's aesthetic, naming is never an absolute and pure act. To name something involves embracing the tension of the world. But a name is language, a specific way that language reveals itself. This concern for naming as an act helps to clarify Warren's understanding that language is not simply a medium which is neutral and pliable. Rather, language is experience itself, and vital experience at that. And poetry, to the extent that it is language, is, above all else, experience. In his conversation with Cleanth Brooks, published in *The Possibilities of Order*, Warren urges that literature be understood as "knowledge by enactment, imaginative enactment."¹⁰ One means of enactment is naming. As an act, naming bears the doubleness of language which we have observed in Warren's poetry; as such, naming both betrays and reveals, it both scatters and brings together in the same moment. Naming defines a relation of difference, a way of distinguishing one person or entity from another. But the person or entity is never isolated; neither is the name ungoverned by relations to other names or words. And naming is a specific moment of utterance. It is not simply a matter of designation, as if a name were simply a sign which designates a thing. Rather it is a word which enacts. Heidegger suggests in "The Nature of Language" that a name is more than a mere designation.

What does "to name" signify? We might answer: to name means to furnish something with a name. And what is a name? A designation that provides something with a vocal and written sign, a cipher. And what is a sign? Is it a signal?

⁹ See Lyotard's discussion of language games in *The Postmodern Condition* 9-11.

¹⁰ "A Conversation with Cleanth Brooks," in *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work*, ed. by Lewis P. Simpson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 48.

Or a token? A marker? Or a hint? Or all of these and something else besides? We have become very slovenly and mechanical in our understanding and use of signs (61).

Heidegger goes on to affirm in his reading of Stefan George's poem, "The Word," that the name, as a word, does not designate but opens up the realm of being. The hope of naming is that the name brings into the realm of being that which it names. As Heidegger probes the possibility of undergoing an experience with language, he asks,

What is it that the poet reaches? Not mere knowledge. He obtains entrance into the relation of word to thing. This relation is not, however, a connection between the thing that is on one side and the word that is on the other. The word itself is the relation which in each instance retains the thing within itself in such a manner that it "is" a thing (66).

As a word, the name does not designate a separate thing but it is the relation which brings the thing into being, into that realm of language where we can experience it. The name is simply one instance in which language speaks.

In Warren's poetry, he explores the act of naming and the status of a name in the relation that it reveals, in two primary ways. First, he pursues the cry uttered in *Audubon*: "Tell me the name of the world." Even in *Brother to Dragons* we find intimations of what he turns to in his later poetry: the elusiveness of the Name of the world according to which he will be able to resolve the tensions and the paradoxes of the world. In the second place, Warren pursues the name of the self. Does the name equal identity? If not, where is identity found and what relation does the name bear to it? Warren's quest to name the self opens up his thinking about the construction of identity and reveals the way the poem and the self are analogous in his aesthetic. His desire to know the name is another way in which he pursued the unsayable and sought to

here the voice of language speak.

5.2 The Name of the World

Warren's quest to know the name of the world is a quest after the world's primordial power or authority. To know the name of the world is to know the name which brings it into being and in which it exists as it does, full of tension and paradox. The poet does not simply want to know the name by which he can describe the world or refer to it. The name after which he seeks is in fact the unsayable. This quest, though, is ever a paradoxical one - the object of his search constantly runs ahead and when he has reached the point where it was, it has moved on.¹¹ And yet this is the poet's passion, to name the world in which he lives and moves and has his being. In the dramatic dialogue of *Brother to Dragons* (1979), R.P.W. narrates how he first came to the ruined place of the Lewis home on a hill overlooking the Ohio River valley. After climbing the hill, R.P.W. encounters a snake which slithers out from under one of the rocks. The "manifestation" of the snake "was only natural," he claims. It was not a supernatural revelation but a natural phenomena. R.P.W. then muses,

No, none of these, no spirit, symbol, god,
Or Freudian principle, but just a snake,
Black Snake, Black Pilot Snake, the Mountain Blacksnake,
Hog-snout or Chicken Snake, but in the books
Elaphe obsoleta obsoleta,
And not to be confused with the Black Racer,
Coluber constrictor - oh, I remember
That much from the old times when, like a boy,
I thought to name the world and hug it tight,
And snake and hawk and fox and ant and day and night
All moved in a stately pavane of great joy
And naked danced before the untouchable Ark of Covenant,
Like Israel's king, and never one fell down.
But when you're not a boy you learn one thing:
You settle for what you get. You find that out.

¹¹ See "Paradox," SP 8.

But if that's all you settle for, you're good as dead (25).

Warren establishes here a tension between innocence and experience reminiscent of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. This tension is found between the boyish urge to "name the world" on the one hand and the somewhat bitter voice of experience, "You settle for what you can get," on the other. To name the world supposedly means that you are able to "hug it tight," to grasp the world for what it is. The proliferation of names here is significant: as a boy, the speaker thought that to have the command of these names and distinctions was to be able to name the world. But the names, either in English or in Latin,¹² all seem to refer to the one snake, the one that is not to be confused with the Black Racer. The names do not bring him any closer to experiencing the snake as he had confronted him in this narrative. What is innocent about the desire to name the world is the expectation that he might actually be able to speak the word. In that vision of innocence, speaking the name enacts all the elements of nature "in a stately pavane of great joy" as they dance "before the untouchable Ark of Covenant..." without falling down. However, like the presence of Michal in the biblical narrative, the voice of experience impinges and R.P.W. realizes that he may not speak the final Name of the world which will set nature to dancing.¹³ Rather, he claims that you learn to accept what little bit you can apprehend about the world, and apparently the world teaches you that fairly quickly. But, the speaker's final note unveils the relentless tension of the world and the passion of the poet: "But if that's all you settle for, you're good as dead." This is not simply irony; rather this is the paradoxical situation of the poet who yearns

¹² Warren makes this distinction between English and Latin in other places in *Brother to Dragons*. For example, see BD 79 22 and 115.

¹³ See 2 Samuel 6.

to name the unnameable. Within this paradox, the poet finds that hope which sustains him in his quest after the name of the world.¹⁴

In another place in *Brother to Dragons* we find Warren returning to the necessity of this yearning to name the things in the world, or to name the condition of life in the world. During her account of her relationship with Lilburn, Laetitia Lewis describes the way that he raped her and how she subsequently fled to her brother. She states that something had changed in her relationship with Lilburn, but she could not name what that thing was. She says,

Just how it started I don't know. It wasn't
A thing to lay a name to, and I reckon
There's just no name to lay to the worst thing (45).¹⁵

Laetitia acknowledges her inability to name the thing that changed and led to the dissolving of her marriage. However, she draws together here the necessary relationship between naming and knowledge, implying that one may only name that which may ultimately be known. And when language withdraws and conceals the name searched for, then there is no real knowledge of the thing. The worst thing, like the best thing, is that which cannot be fully known and for which there is no name. And yet we are bound to experience them, though we do not know the name. Laetitia had experienced a severe violence from her husband; he had forced him-

¹⁴ Compare Heidegger's statement, "Thus, in order to name what is deployed in Being, language will have to find a single word, the unique word." Quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, ed. by Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 464. For a lengthier discussion of this passage, see Chapter Six below.

¹⁵ This passage is pared down from a lengthier passage in the 1953 version which makes "the worst thing" plural and then continues:

There's just no name to lay to the worst things,
And that's what makes them worse than anything,
For if they had a name, then you could name it.
At least to name it would be something then,
If you could bear to name it. And I think -
I mean I've come to think - that I could bear now
To name most anything if I could know,
Just only know, the name to name it with,
Even the worst (67).

self upon her sexually. But the "worst" thing to which she refers is not the brutal act she suffered, but her husband's demand that she describe the act to him. When he commands her, "Laetitia - now tell me exactly what happened," she says, "But my words wouldn't come, and my poor chest was a bigness / That hurt like something swelled there..." (50). The presence of her absent voice was the pain that she endured. It was her inability to speak that she felt so viscerally. This is made clear when she concedes to speak what she could not name. As she is confronted by her husband, she says,

And the bigness that in my chest had hurt me so
And was not words, was words now, and they came,
And some were words I never named before,
They were so awful, nor heard tell...(51).

Even though she speaks by recounting the act, she cannot name the act itself. In her state of emotional and linguistic debility, she lacks the name for this worst thing and so lacks the fullness of knowledge of the experience. The act or the experience is only brought to fullness of being when the name is spoken. Only then may it be fully known.

At another point in *Brother to Dragons*, R.P.W. tells Isham Lewis that knowing is not simply "to know a thing, / Like anything you know," as Isham had claimed. Rather, he says,

No, knowing can be,
Maybe, a kind of being, and if you know,
Can really know, a thing in all its fullness,
Then you are different, and maybe everything
Is different, somehow, too (80-81).

To be able to name the world, one must know the world. And to have that kind of knowledge of the world in all of its fullness, there is a necessary shift in being which changes the self and changes the self's perception of the world. Heidegger suggests that to be able to name means

not simply that we designate the world and its contents but that we bring the world and the self into this new understanding of being. In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger claims that poetry provides the moment in which language "brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time" (73). He goes on to state, "Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings to their being from out of their being" (73, emphasis his). Such naming in poetry is what Heidegger calls "projective saying," a notion comparable to Warren's understanding of poetry as an enactment in which the unsayable speaks. According to Heidegger, "Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the *unsayable* as such into a world" (74, emphasis mine). This notion of poetry and naming foregrounds the illuminating quality of language which shapes our "being in the world." As Warren sought to name the world in his later poetry, he encountered the unsayable within the ongoing task of saying within which the understanding of being is announced.

Warren's pursuit of the name of the world is particularly evident in his 1977-1980 collection, *Being Here*, in which we have already observed his attention to the voice of the world through which the unsayable speaks.¹⁶ In these poems, Warren constantly turns to the instancy of experience and the necessity of that experience in light of the poet's own inability to speak the name the world. In this collection, Warren continues to explore the inescapable tension of "being here," or "being in the world." Within the radical tension of the poet's experience, there is a persistent hope for that place from which

¹⁶ Randolph Runyan's thesis is relevant here: he contends that there are verbal threads which tie Warren's poems together within specific collections. This fits with our own contention that Warren moved more toward the open-ended poem which can only be interpreted in light of other poems. See Runyan, *The Braided Dream: Robert Penn Warren's Late Poetry* 1-18.

he may raise his own voice and name the world. This hope, however, is wed with an extreme sense of his own inability. The poet's experience in the world both encourages him that he might hear the unsayable speak and cautions him that that he in himself may never make that ultimate utterance. In the "Afterthought" to this volume, Warren says,

Rather early, as the book began to take shape in my mind and in some poems, I began to feel that I needed a preliminary poem and another as a sort of coda, both very simple in method and feeling, to serve as a base for the book, or better, as a bracket to enclose the dimly envisaged tangles and complications of the main body (107).¹⁷

These two poems which begin and end the collection reveal the poet's concern for the tension of "being here." In the preliminary poem, "October Picnic Long Ago," Warren introduces both the narrative voice which is heard in so many poems in this collection and the trope of memory which provides the means by which that voice speaks. This poem is the vision of a Sunday afternoon family picnic, long ago, "That being before the auto had come, or many." But even in this vision of innocence, the poet, writing from the standpoint of experience, recognizes the tension between the voice of the mother, who exclaims, "Could a place so beautiful be!", and the voice of the father who longs for more than the moment: "My ship will come in yet,/ And you'll see all the beautiful world there is to see." In the final stanza, the mother sings as the family "clop-clopped homeward while the shadows, sly,/ Leashed the Future up, like a hound with a slavering fang." But the poet confesses that, in his youth and innocence (or lack of experience), he "didn't know what a Future was...." He did not know the name of the future, nor did he know the name of the world, or even know that he lacked such knowledge. The voices of the mother and the father express

¹⁷ This is the only volume which contained such an explanatory note at the end.

the tension between the moment and the possibility, each of which name the world in its own way.

Warren then picks up this issue of the name in two early poems, "Boyhood in Tobacco Country" which is followed by "Filling Night with The Name: Funeral As Local Color." In the first of these two poems, Warren remembers "an autumn sunset" envisaged in a dream in which a tree-lined horizon is "blackened / To timelessness." "Far off" in the dream the blue smoke "from the curing barns of tobacco / ...clings" to the world's horizon. In the second stanza, the poet hears a voice in his dream:

Far past slashed stubs, homeward or homeless, a black
Voice, deeper and bluer than sea-heart, sweeter
Than sadness or sorghum, utters the namelessness
Of life to the birth of a first star,
And again, I am walking a dust-silent, dusky lane, and try
To forget my own name and be part of the world (11).

In the midst of the world, the voice "utters the namelessness/ Of life" at the moment that a first star appears in the evening sky. The namelessness of life is not defined by the specific experience of the one who utters, who is either moving homeward or is homeless. Regardless of situation, the speaker cannot utter the name of life even as he watches "the birth of a first star." In fact, his utterance here is not only nameless but is wordless, like a the melodious "bird-note" of the mother's song in "October Picnic Long Ago." In this line ("...utters the namelessness/ Of life...") the tension of the world is revealed: the speaker may give utterance to, but he may not make any final predication about, life except that it avoids such predication. The name which might be spoken is a name that he cannot speak. And yet, the final two lines of the stanza intimate that this is what it means to be a part of the world. The poet, once again walking along a country lane in his

dream, suggests that he must forget his own name before he can be a part of the world. Rather than asserting his own name, he embraces the namelessness of the world. In the first lines of the third stanza, though, the poet encounters another voice as he moves in the timelessness of the world in his dream:

...From the deep and premature midnight
Of woodland, I hear the first whip-o-will's
Precious grief, and my young heart,
As darkling I stand, yearns for a grief
To be worthy of that sound. Ah, fool! Meanwhile,
Arrogant, eastward, lifts the slow dawn of the harvest moon (11).

In the previous stanza, the black voice was "deeper and bluer than sea-heart, sweeter/ Than sadness or sorghum..." and seemed to possess a certain joyfulness in its ignorance of the world's name. The whip-o-will, however, utters its "Precious grief" and the sound of his voice defines the grief he bears; it is a grief that the poet in his youth "yearns.../ To be worthy of...." There is a sense of need for both the grief and the joy which will inevitably be encountered in his pursuit of the name of the world. In the final stanza, as the poet awakens from his dream and memory to stand once again under an autumn moon, he wonders why his perception that the moon presides over "what the year has wrought" does not give to him the knowledge that he desires.

Enormous, smoky, smoldering, it stirs.
First visibly, then paling in retardation, it begins
The long climb zenithward to preside
There whitely on what the year has wrought.
What have the years wrought? I walk the house.
Oh, grief! Oh, joy! Tonight
The same season's moon holds sky-height.

The dark roof hides the sky.

In the poet's persisting tension between grief and joy, he encounters

the limit of his knowledge in the recognition that the "dark roof hides the sky."¹⁸ Within the dark confines of that limit, though, he must continue to pursue the name of the world while the voice of the world speaks all around him.

What can neither be spoken nor understood in "Boyhood in Tobacco Country" is finally given utterance in the following poem, "Filling Night with The Name: Funeral as Local Color" (BH 12), in which the whip-o-will reappears in order to speak the word which is unavailable to man. In this poem, we see that Warren's notion of the name of the world is closely linked to his understanding that the language of the world speaks the word which the poet cannot articulate. Nature itself constitutes that word. When Warren questions the name of the world, he surmises that the name must be spoken by the world itself before he will be able to know it. Warren brings together here his longing for a unified word and his understanding of the name that the world itself gives. This poem is marked by the same narrative voice which Warren introduced in "October Picnic Long Ago" and which recounts the boyhood memory of the previous poem. The voice tells the tale of an elderly husband's learning to cope with his wife's death during the night after her funeral. But there is a clear tension in the poem not simply between the silence and the saying but between the sayable and the unsayable - that is, between the spoken word and the necessary though unutterable word. The tension is sustained between the words that seem so thoughtful and are yet spoken so easily, and the word which is necessary but may not be spoken.

It was all predictable, and just as well.
For old Mrs. Clinch at last lay gut-rigid there
In the coffin, withered cheeks subtly rouged, hair
Frizzled and tinted, with other marks of skill

¹⁸ Compare the similar problem encountered in "A Problem in Spatial Composition" (OE 101).

Of the undertaker to ready his client to meet
Her God and her grave-worm - well, Mrs. Clinch had heard
The same virtues extolled for the likes of her, word for word,
With no word, true or false, that she couldn't exactly repeat.

The speaker confronts the emptiness of the "predictable" and the virtuous before the face of death. The words of the minister in his overused eulogy reveal that the predictable words could not suffice to speak the necessary word. By their endless repetition, the words had become trite and were all predictable. Yet such words, whether true or false, fall flat before the exigency of death. Even the husband's words in the second stanza, spoken in response to "a friendly old couple," cannot stave off the reality of death: "'When a thing's gonna be,' he replied, 'git used to it fast.'" When in the third stanza he sits "down to write to his boy, / Far away," there is no word to speak what must be spoken: "But no word would come, and sorrow and joy / All seemed one..." Caught between the joy of the living son and the sorrow of his dead wife, what can he write? But Warren suggests that the word which he cannot find in himself is given by the name which the world speaks:

...just the single, simple word *whip-o-will*.

For the bird was filling the night with the name: *whip-o-will*.

Whip-o-will.

Here the name and the call converge in the one word which simultaneously speaks the husband's sorrow and joy. What cannot be spoken as a single word in human speech without privileging one word over another is given utterance in the voice of the *whip-o-will*. In the previous poem, the *whip-o-will* utters his precious grief, and here that grief is brought into the realm of being by the one unified, competent word which is both the call and the name. It is significant that this is the word with

which the poem ends; the poet has receded and given way to the voice of being itself. The name has become a call which opens up instead of closing off, and so this final word/name is not an ending but an invocation similar to that at the end of *Audubon*: "Tell me a story of deep delight."

In "Youthful Truth-Seeker, Half Naked, At Night, Running Down Beach South of San Francisco" (*BH* 25-26), Warren frames a more urgent expression of the heart's yearning not simply to name the world but to "embrace" it "in its fullness and threat...." The connection that this bears to the description of the truth-seeker as being youthful is confirmed by the boyish desire which R.P.W. remembers in *Brother to Dragons*, when he "thought to name the world and hug it tight" (*BD* 79 25).¹⁹ The desire to embrace the world incorporates the hope to engage the tension within which the poet may speak. The act of embracing the world by speaking its name calls forth that moment in which being is shaped and changed. In the thirteen stanzas of the poem, the speaker narrates his own experience many years before of running alone down the beach in the darkness. In his youthfulness, he runs away from "the glow of the city of men" into the darkness, the encroaching fog, and the sound of the surf. In the midst of his memory, he muses,

What was the world I had lived in? Poetry, orgasm, joke:
And the joke the biggest on me, the laughing despair
Of a truth the heart might speak, but never spoke -
Like the twilit whisper of wings with no shadow on air.

You dream that somewhere, somehow, you may embrace
The world in its fullness and threat, and feel, like Jacob, at
last
The merciless grasp of unwordable grace
Which has no truth to tell of future or past -

But only life's instancy... (25).

¹⁹ Compare also "Youth Stares at Minoan Sunset" in *NSP* 152.

The dream which Warren envisions here is that of being gripped by the name of the world, that "unwordable grace" through which one is able to embrace the world in the moment of instancy. This unwordable grace is related to the truth of the previous stanza which "the heart might speak" but never is spoken. There is more than a hint of his own inability in his admission that his heart may not speak this truth. Rather, the truth is spoken by the world itself in "the twilit whisper of wings with no shadow on air," which is a moment of life's instancy, a truth for the moment which is unwordable and yet gracious. This is the quality of the name of the world after which the poet yearns: unwordable and gracious. The poet continues this emphasis in the eighth stanza:

So lungs aflame now, sand raw between toes,
And the city grows dim, dimmer still,
And the grind of breath and of sand is all one knows
Of the Truth a man flees to, or from, in his angry need to fulfill

What?... (26).

The moment of instancy, in which the youth feels "the grind of breath and of sand," is the only truth that he can name, and it is a truth that a man both flees to and from. It draws him on, but it also repels by its power. But there is still the question of fulfillment which goes unanswered; there is the lack of stability for the self. As Warren asserts in *Audubon*, the only answer can be found in the asking of the question. The youth is a truth-seeker walking in the world and asking the world to speak its truth. He stares at the stars and listens with ear to the wet sand for this word or name. So, in the eleventh and twelfth stanzas, he listens:

Below all silken soil-slip, all crinkled earth-crust,
Far deeper than ocean, past rock that against rock grieves

There at the globe's deepest dark and visceral lust,
Can I hear the *groan-swish* of magma that churns and heaves?

No word? No sign? Or is there a time and place -
Ice-peak or heat-simmered distance - where heart, like eye,
May open? But sleep at last - it has sealed up my face,
And last foam, retreating, creeps from my hand...(26).

The world does not tell us the word or the sign which would speak the truth after which the youth seeks. Though there is a way of relating to the groaning of the world, there is no way to know what defines that relation. This yearning longs for the moment of articulation, a moment within time and space, where the heart may finally listen and speak. For the poet, listening and articulation are part of the same act. The heart opens both to listen and to speak. This is ultimately a moment of knowledge, as part of being itself, and is therefore necessarily related to "being here." Knowledge is tied to the concreteness of the world - whether the ice-peak or the heat-simmered distance. So, one way to say the unsayable - the name of the world - is to continue to live in the concrete realities of the world.

"Sila" (BH 37-40) is the next poem in which Warren confronts the need to name the world within the concreteness of the world, a portion of which is found in the concrete narrative itself which drives this poem forward.²⁰ The poem sketches out the relationship between Sila ("the tawny great husky, broad-chested...") and the boy or young man of the narrative. The poem highlights the sense of connection between the dog and the boy through their repeated eye contact, much like in other poems where Warren displays contact between eyes and hands and bodies. But this connection is still bounded by a degree of helplessness which

²⁰ Sila is an Eskimo word which Warren defines from *Larousse World Mythology*, which states that it "is the air, not the sky; movement, not wind; the very breath of life, but not physical life; he is clear-sighted energy, activating intelligence; the powerful fluid circulating 'all around' and also within each individual..." (37).

each bears before the inescapability of death. The narrative shows the boy and dog in the winter wilderness coming upon the ruins of a cabin and the boy ponders the exigency of death: he thinks, "*Two hundred years back - and it might/ Have been me*" (italics his). He wonders "what name the man/ Might have had" who built and inhabited the cabin, then he imagines coming back in the summer to find gravestones and even imagines a skull rotting deep in the ground beneath those stones. The boy is confronting the sheer terror and delight of the world throughout the narrative, which is made more explicit in the remainder of the poem. The husky is released from harness, frightens a doe from its thicket-cover, and ultimately pounces on and fatally wounds the deer. There is an intense section in the middle of the poem in which the boy's eyes are in contact with the dog's and then alternately with the deer's. This sense of connection betrays the sacramental quality of the tension of the world: there is no escaping the connection between the self and the world, a connection bound up in violence, blood and death. After the dog has wounded the deer, the boy decides that he cannot leave it to die slowly in the winter sunset:

So the boy's knees bend.
Break the snow-crust like prayer,
And he cuddles the doe's head, and widening brown eyes
Seem ready, almost, to forgive.

Throat fur is cream color, eyes flecked with gold glintings.
He longs for connection, to give explanation. Sudden,
The head, now helpless, drops back on his shoulder. Twin eyes
Hold his own entrapped in their depth,
But his free hand, as though unaware,
Slides slow back
To grope for the knife-sheath.

There is a clear redemptive element at work here, but it is not simply the boy's redemption envisioned but the necessary redemption of life in

the world. Together, the deer is "helpless" and the boy seems "unaware." They both participate in the act of redemption. After the boy has cut the deer's throat and watched the blood flow "Red petal by petal" onto the white snow, the poem makes the sacramental notion of participation all the more explicit:

He lifted his head, knife yet in hand, and westward
Fixed eyes beyond beech-bench to the snow-hatched
Stone thrust of the mountain, above which sky, too,
More majestically bloomed, but petals paler as higher -
The rose of the blood of day. Still as stone,
So he stood. Then slowly - so slowly -
He raised the blade of the knife he loved honing, and
wiped
The sweet warmth and wetness across his mouth,
And set tongue to the edge of the silk-whetted steel.

He knew he knew something at last
That he'd never before known.
No name for it - no!

Just as the boy had set his eyes on the dog's and the deer's eyes for a sense of connection, here he fixes his eyes on the "Stone thrust of mountain," and when he stands he seems to have been transformed by this connection, for he stands "Still as stone...."

This notion of sacramental participation is sharpened, though, into explicit eucharistic imagery. The blood which flowed out onto the snow like the fallen petals of a rose has now flowed into the day itself as the sun sets; above the mountain "The rose of the blood of the day" blooms.²¹ When the boy sets the blade to his mouth and partakes of the "sweet warmth and wetness," it is not simply the blood of the deer that he drinks but the blood of the day, and even mingles it with his own as he sets "tongue to the edge of the silk-whetted steel." The eucharistic union is comprehensive with life in the world, and it

²¹ Note the contrasting play on "rose" and the setting of the sun.

becomes a sort of revelation, an entry into a new knowledge. However, even though he has such new knowledge, he cannot name what it is he knows. Though the violent act is unavoidable, it holds within itself the possibility of the blessing of that knowledge which opens up being and changes the self and the understanding of the world. But the change in being which the boy experiences might be said to be paradoxical: he knows that a change has occurred but he does not have a name for it. It is unclear why he cannot name this, though; it may be because of an implicit sense of holiness of this knowledge received through this act, or it may be simply because of the inability not only to grasp the moment but also to articulate this experience. And yet, it appears that the boy finally does speak the word to name the knowledge that he has received.

He snow-cleaned the knife. Sheathed it. Called: "Come!"
The dog, now docile, obeyed. With bare hands full of snow,
The boy washed him of the blood and, comblike,
With fingers ennobled the ruff.

Then suddenly clasping the creature, he,
Over raw fur, past beeches, the mountain's snow-srag,
And the sky's slow paling of petals,
Cried out into vastness
Of silence: "Oh, world!"

He felt like a fool when tears came.

Even here Warren emphasizes that this new knowledge, limited as it is, is a sort of redemption through a washing of blood. In the former stanza, the boy washes the dog "of blood," a prepositional phrase whose antecedent is ambiguous. The dog is being cleaned from the stain of the blood on his fur, but there is also the hint that the boy and the dog and the day have all been washed in blood. In the second of the two stanzas, the sky still bears the stain of this blood in its "slow paling

petals." But such a redemption in the world is momentary and its power is found in the instancy of the experience. In this moment, the boy utters his cry in which we hear him name the only name he can utter before the silence and the vastness of the world, and that is, "world." The name of the world is, in the end, "world." For the poet, even with such a sacramental vision, this is the only name that may be named for the world and for life in the world. The knowledge that the boy received was of the character of life in the world as he confronts death. So the poem ends with his confrontation with his own death:

Some sixty years later, propped on death's pillow,
Again will he see that same scene, and try,
Heart straining, to utter that cry? - But
Cannot, breath short.

At the horizon of his own being, will he still "utter that cry" to the world? In the tension of the world, he will find that the name that he learned is what he will not be able to pronounce, because he, like the pioneer and the deer, has succumbed to life itself. His last cry of the name of the world will be the sound of his final expiration. This will be the speaking of life's name, as R.P.W. suggests in *Brother to Dragons*: "For all life lifts and longs toward its own name,/ And toward fulfillment in the singleness of definition" (BD 79 77).

In the final two poems of *Being Here*, Warren returns to the relentless yearning to name the world and so to achieve a redemption of life within the world. "Night Walking" (103), a first-person narrative, is the final poem of the section which Warren describes in his "Afterthought" as being "concerned with the reviewing of life from the standpoint of age" (107). To the degree that this poem deals with the perspective of age, it heightens the endless character of the quest to name the unnameable, which he terms here as a sort of wisdom. This poem

also ties together the various thematic elements of this collection by a kind of transference of this quest from the aging speaker to the youthful son and by its concrete rootedness in the world, the "here" of the title in which being is to be achieved, if it is going to be achieved at all. The narrative constitutes the event of the father hearing the son wake in the night and following him into the mountain forest. The narrative is not rendered in the past tense, as if it were recounting a memory. Rather, the poem is the event; the poem brings the event into the open in which it may occur. So, the poem begins by opening up the poet's own thought:

Bear, my first thought at waking. I hear
What I think is the first bear this year
Come down off the mountain to rip
Apples from trees near my window - but no,
It's the creak of the door of the shop my son stays in.

Upon seeing the son, "Now booted and breeched but bare/ From waist," standing in the late light of a full moon, the father dresses and waits, although he does not know what he is waiting for. He creeps quietly behind the son as he makes his way into the wilderness:

I crouch as he slowly walks up the track
Where from blackness of spruces great birches
Stand monitory, stand white -
Moving upward, and on, face upward as though
By stars in an old sea he steered.

In silence and shadow and in
The undefinable impulse to steal
What knowledge I, in love, can,
With laggard cunning I trail to the first ridge-crest.
He stops. His gaze
Turns slow, and slower,
From quarter to quarter, over
The light-laved land, over all
Thence visible, river and mowings,
Ruined orchards, ledges and rock-slides,
And the clambering forest that would claim all.

The world into which the father and son walk is a world full of tension: from the "blackness of spruces" the "great birches/ ...stand white...," and in the midst of "silence and shadow" there remains the "undefinable impulse to steal/ What knowledge I, in love, can...." And yet this tension is the place in which knowledge is gained. The son gazes upon the scene as if to accept it for what it is, knowing that the "clambering forest" would claim even him if given the chance. Bathed in the moonlight, though, this scene experiences a sort of redemption similar to that perceived in "Sila" in which the landscape and the boy were bathed in blood. But the son moves on to "the next range to westward" where he pauses and "lifts up his light-bleached arms." In the light he stands frozen, and the poem itself pauses in that moment before "Arms down, [he] goes on."²² The son lifts his arms to the moonlight without shame, embracing the world in its tension. After this moment of embracing the world, the son is able to move on into the world, but the father turns back at this point:

I do not guess
How far he will go, but in my
Mixture of shame, guilt, and joy do know
All else is his - and alone.

In shadow, I huddle
Till I can start back to bed and the proper darkness of
night.

In this parting of ways, there is a passing on of the quest to walk in the world and to love it. Having walked in the tension of "shame, guilt, and joy" the father does know what his son's experience in the world will be marked by. And he knows from his own experience that the

²² This moment is reminiscent of a scene in a slightly earlier poem, "Youth Stares at Minoan Sunset" (NI' 25). The boy in that poem "spreads his arms to the sky as though he loves it...."

son can only go on alone. In his own shadowed solitude, the father too must move on by turning back to "the proper darkness of night," that interior darkness into which the light of the moon cannot reach.

I start, but alone then in moonlight, I stop
As one paralyzed at a sudden black brink opening up,
For a recollection, as sudden, has come from long back -
Moon-walking on sea-cliffs, once I
Had dreamed to a wisdom I almost could name.
But could not. I waited.
But heard no voice in the heart.
Just the hum of the wires.

But that is my luck. Not yours.

The recollection takes the father to the brink of his experience which is opened up by the voice of the world. It speaks in that dream of "a wisdom I almost could name." That wisdom is what he "dreamed to." Like truth, this wisdom cannot be named but may only be enacted in a dream. This enacting of the dream invokes the presence of wisdom, but this presence holds within itself the absence of its name. The poet waits, as he has throughout the poem, upon the speaking of that name, but he hears "no voice in the heart." There is only the "the hum of the wires." The poet then admits that this absence of voice is his "luck," a word which recalls the early poem, "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (*NSP* 287-300). In that poem, Warren links the identity and name of Little Billie to his birthmark which is "Shaped lak a clover under his left tit, / With a shape fer luck..." (299). After the boy's father and mother have brutally murdered him, thinking him to be some rich traveler unknown in their region, they open his shirt to find the birthmark "shaped for luck" and realize that they have sacrificed their own son. In the final section of the poem, the poet transfers this mark of identity to "you, wanderer," to the poet himself. Having heard "the wind's

word," he kneels "in the sacramental silence of evening" with the little black mark - his name - under his heart, that mark "Which is shaped for luck, // Which is your luck" (300). The luck that the poet admits to in "Night Walking" intimates the position of the poet, the wanderer in the moonlight, who bears the joy and grief of listening to the voice of language in the world. The wisdom of which he can dream but may not name is the agony which he as poet must bear.

In the final stanza, the poet avoids resolving such tension by issuing a call to his son and to the reader.

At any rate, you must swear never,
Not even in secret, the utmost, to be ashamed
To have lifted bare arms to that icy
Blaze and redeeming white light of the world.

In this call, the father seems to recognize the only name which is available for the wisdom of which he dreamed. The wisdom which he could almost name appears here as the "icy/ Blaze and redeeming white light" which he has encountered under the name of "world." This is the only name which he can give to such wisdom because this is the name which is brought into the open by the world itself. It reveals itself in the blaze and light which the father confronted in the darkness of night. But this is not something that the father alone has experienced. There is a shift in this final section to the second person personal pronoun and to a past perfect verb tense, a shift which draws in the reader and places the name of the world on the reader's own lips. Here, it is not the father that has lifted his arms but it is the reader who stands before the blaze and light of the world as he reads the poem.

The name of the world which shines out at the end of "Night Walking" is also illuminated in the final poem of *Being Here*, "Passers-by On Snowy Night," the poem which Warren envisioned as forming a sort of book

end together with "October Picnic Long Ago" at the beginning of the collection. With a tone and voice characteristic of his later poetry, Warren engages the radical tension of the world as the language brings it into the open.

*Black the coniferous darkness,
White the snow track between,
And the moon, skull-white in its starkness,
Watches upper ledges lean,*

*And regards with the same distant stare,
And equal indifference,
How your breath goes white in steel air
As you trudge to whither from whence.*

*For from somewhere you rose to go,
Maybe long before daylight withdrew,
With the dream of a windowpane's glow
And a path trodden to invite you.*

*And, indeed, there may be such place,
Perhaps at next corner or swerve,
Where someone presses a face
To the frost-starred glass, though the curve*

*Shows yet only mocking moonlight.
But soon, but soon! - Alone,
I wish you well in your night
As I pass you in my own.*

*We each hear the distant friction,
Then crack of bough burdened with snow,
And each takes the owl's benediction,
And each goes the way he will go.²³*

Though this poem makes apparent allusions to Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" in its setting and in some of its thematic concerns, Warren's poem is not so concerned with the way that the beauty of the woods on a snowy night cannot meet the existential needs of the on-looker. Rather, we find here a poem which fulfills in part Warren's

²³ Please note that the text of this poem appears in italics, as printed here, in *BH*.

call at the end of *Audubon*, "Tell me a story, //... Make it a story of great distances and starlight" (NSP 230). It is a poem which partakes of the tension of which it speaks, yet that tension is not devoid of hope. It is also marked by a certain degree of solipsism, but its solipsistic perspective recognizes the necessary presence of others within this same tension. Both "you" and "I" are alone in our own "night," although in each night there is the black and coniferous darkness sliced through by the white snow track, and in each the same moon watches and regards "you" and "I." But within this vision, Warren betrays his hope for that place of contact and place of articulation. It is the place that each dreams of going and the place that seems to wait for each. But it is a place that is ever receding as the path continues to invite the tread of the poet's foot.²⁴ The poet walks on with the hope that "indeed, there may be such a place, / Perhaps at next corner or swerve...." And yet, all he knows of that hope is the refrain, "But soon, but soon!" These passers-by are each moving toward that place within earshot of "the distant friction" and the "crack of bough burdened with snow...." Their walk is bounded by the concrete world. But it is a world which pronounces its own benediction to these passers-by. The name of the place that each seeks recedes with the path into to distance and starlight, but in the quest the world gives its blessing as "each goes the way that he will go." The world offers the well-spoken word which is not available to each in the midst of their journey. It is significant, though, that Warren characterizes the journey as a linguistic journey, a journey defined by difference: "you trudge to *whither* from *whence*." That journey has been enacted within this volume, as "October Picnic Long Ago" suggests the whence from which

²⁴ Warren's poem bears important similarities to Georg Trakl's poem, "A Winter Evening," which Heidegger responds to in his essay "Language," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row 1971), 189-210.

the poet has walked, a place of linguistic innocence. But, through his experience here in the world, the poet continues to walk and to speak. The final poem does not name the place at which his journey ends; rather it can only name the journey in which he must continue. And that name is the world.

5.3 The Name of the Self

Warren's concern for the name of the world is complemented by his search for the name of the self, a quest whose object appears to be clearly defined so that the poet can grasp it with relative linguistic ease. However, as he learns in his confrontation with the world, the name of the self neither readily gives itself nor does it purely designate and define. The self is not a given from which he may work but that given toward which he must work. Just as his concern for the name of the world functions according to the desire to come into the being of the world and to participate in its unfolding through language, so his desire to find the name of the self involves the task of creating the self, of bringing it into being. This is one way that Warren anticipates the critiques of modernism made by postmodern thinkers as varied as Levinas and Foucault.²⁵ Although Warren never denies the existence of the self, he maintains that the self must be created and worked toward, not as a teleological goal but as an ever present possibility. Warren never contends that all reality is a linguistic construct and that language is all we may know. Rather he proposes that all reality is linguistically perceived and that the self is not free from such a condition. There must be such linguistic perception if the poet ever hopes to find the place from which he can speak. Warren clearly is exploring this urgent need in "Sunset," part of his final single collec-

²⁵ For a discussion of the different approaches to subjectivity in modern and postmodern discourse, see Charles Davis, "Our Modern Identity: The Formation of the Self," *Modern Theology* 6/2 (January 1990), 159-71.

tion of poetry, *Altitudes and Extensions 1980-1984* (NSP 1-85). The poem begins with that moment in which the self confronts the world in its tense power, and the world becomes not a thing but another self. In the terminology of Martin Buber, for whose thought Warren had a great affinity, the world is transformed from It to Thou.²⁶

Clouds clamber, turgid, the mountain, peakward
And pine-pierced, toward the
Vulgar and flaming apocalypse of day,
In which our errors are consumed
Like fire in a lint-house -
Not repetitious
But different each day, for day to day nothing
Is identical to eye or soul.
At night, at a late hour, I
Have asked the stars the name of my soul (NSP 84).

Warren envisions here an apocalypse of nature which happens each day but is never the same from day to day. Each apocalypse is unique, as individual as each day is, and each consumes our errors of the everyday. Every apocalypse is a moment full in itself and never identical to another moment. But each and all point toward the inability of the poet to speak the name of his own soul. Even as in other poems Warren listens to nature to speak the name of the world, so here he interrogates the stars to hear them speak his own name. The timing of his interrogation is significant: he petitions the stars after the apocalypse has burned up his sins like fire on the altar, after he has been cleansed so that he might hear what is spoken. In the second stanza, he states his question and receives a response:

"Oh, what shall I call my soul in a dire hour?"
But there is no answer from
Heavenly algebra, and you are left with

²⁶ "Before entering upon this topic we must, however, grant that in all times and places man has necessarily lived a large part of his life in what Martin Buber calls the realm of *It* - the realm of economics, politics, science, military activity, labor, and so on - as contrasted with the realm of the *Thou*, in which massive relations of recognition and reverence may prevail." DP 57. See also DP 36, 90-91.

the implacable gaggles and military squadrons
Of ignorance, which have no
Originality and know
Nothing but repetition, and which
We call constellations.

The poet's question is filled with a sense of urgency because of the "dire hour," that moment in which he must speak but cannot. If the day is able to consume his errors, then the night should be able to tell him what he might call his soul. But, when the poet asks the stars the name of his soul, he learns that they are unable to give him the answer that he desires. The source of this inability appears to be that the stars, unlike the daily apocalypse, are locked in a repetition from day to day.²⁷ Each night is identical to them because they do not have a soul which cries out in the dire hour. It is significant, though, that the poet is able to name this "Heavenly algebra" even when he does not know the name of his own soul. He is able to discern the constellations, and though they know no originality they speak within their unending. When the poet questions the stars regarding his own name, all he hears is their "implacable gaggles," their own unrelenting questioning which announces themselves.²⁸ The self, though, is confronted with its own originality and each day's lack of repetition. In the final stanza, the poet ponders what then is available to him in light of life's necessity:

Who knows his own name at the last?
How shall he speak to a soul that has none?
"Tell me that name," I cried, "that I may speak
In a dire hour." The dire hour
Is the time when you must speak
To your naked self - never
Before seen, nor known.

²⁷ Notice how the "Not repetitious" of the first stanza falls into pieces in the "Nothing but repetition" in the second stanza.

²⁸ Warren seems to play here upon the word "gaggle" which can be either the noise a goose makes or a flock of geese. The stars, then, hang in the heavens like a flock of geese.

The self is caught in the necessity of having to speak, but in order to speak the self must know its own name. There is an important shift from the apocalypse of the day in the first stanza to the apocalypse of the self in the final stanza. The apocalyptic moment of the self - that simultaneous time of uncovering and hiding, of scattering and coming together - is the dire hour, the moment when of necessity "you must speak/ To your naked self...." In that moment, the name is hidden from sight, but the self is revealed; what has never before been seen or known is brought to the light and made known, though the poet remains unable to give the final name for the soul.

The name of the self, like the name of the world, appears to be a significant part of that "given" toward which Warren contended the poet must work. It is not a given, just as identity is not a static and isolated entity or quality. Rather, to speak the name is to say the unsayable. But how can one do this, poet or otherwise? In Warren's vision, the self which we wish to name must be created via the imagination. But this creation is not abstracted from life in the world; the world shapes and influences, even as it is shaped and influenced. In the creation of the self, there is a sort of reciprocal relationship. Like the poem, the self is a "made thing," as he put it in *Democracy and Poetry*. We find early evidence of this line of thinking in "The Ballad of Billie Potts," in which Little Billie is made and remade, as is revealed through the narrator's emphasis upon the "new name."²⁹ However, Warren states his understanding of the creation of the self more explicitly in his discussion of Coleridge's distinction between the primary and secondary imagination in "A Poem of Pure Imagination." The connection Warren makes in this essay between the imagination and the self is not only

²⁹ For a variety of discussions on this poem, see for example Burt 84-91; Justus 57-60; Strandberg, *Colder Fire* 114-38 and *Poetic Vision* 148-63; and Walker 68-9.

crucial for understanding his later comments in *Democracy and Poetry*, but it is also an important addition to the on-going reading and interpretation of Coleridge's aesthetic. Warren's interpretation, if not quite unique, does pursue a valid line of thinking which is often overlooked in Coleridge criticism. After quoting in full Coleridge's distinction and definition of the primary and secondary imagination, Warren goes on to comment:

It is the primary imagination which creates our world, for nothing of which we are aware is given to the passive mind. By it we know the world, but for Coleridge knowing is making, for, "To know is in its very essence a verb active." We know by creating, and one of the things we create is the Self, for a subject is that which "becomes a subject by the act of constructing itself objectively to itself; but which never is an object except for itself, and only so far as by the very same act it becomes a subject."...The point, for present purposes, is that Coleridge attributes to imagination this fundamental significance ("APPI" 342).

Warren does not interpret Coleridge's primary imagination as being the divine logos or even God himself. Rather it is rooted in the *imago dei* which is revealed in the unconscious yet ever-present imagination by which we perceive all things. Thus, it is only by the primary imagination that we know the world or the self; the primary imagination creates both, and in this creation there is a fusion of the two horizons of subject and object. When Warren turns to the secondary imagination, the necessity of creating the self becomes all the more obvious. Here he is dealing not with "creation at the unconscious and instinctive level" (343) but with creation as an act of the conscious will. There is clearly an analogous relationship between the poem and self, in that they are both made things. In both cases, the act of creation is never pure in itself, free from the tension of the world.

Does Coleridge imply, however, that the poet in composing

his poem acts according to a fully developed and objectively statable plan, that he has a blueprint of intention in such an absolute sense? To this question the answer is *no* (343).

Neither the poem nor the self is created according to an objectified plan or "blueprint of intention." While the act of creation functions according to an unconscious activity, it does not deny the role of the conscious will. Warren reconciles this "both/and" argument of Coleridge in the following way:

It seems clear that the secondary imagination does operate as a function of that permanent will, and in terms of the basic concerns by which that will fulfills itself, but the particular plan or intention for a particular poem may be actually developed in the course of composition in terms of that "unconscious activity," which is the "genius in the man of genius," and may result from a long process of trial and error....In other words, the plan and meaning of the work may be discovered in the process of creation. But it is to be remembered that this process is a function of the permanent will which constantly moves to fulfil itself in consciousness (343-344).

Warren adopted this aesthetic in his own thinking about poetic creation, stating in an interview with Ruth Fisher in 1970 that "[the writer] is not working deductively from a highly articulated image, a careful scheme of values; he is trying to find the values, find the ideas, by a process of trial and error, as it were" (*Talking* 171). This process, he goes on to say, is a matter of the "test of experience" (171). In fact, "Life is a process of trial and error about our own values" (171). It is not only the poem that is created through this process of trial and error, but the self, too, is created in this way. This process is always carried out by the imagination. In the same interview, and in language drawn directly from his earlier reading of Coleridge, Warren explores the role the imagination plays in this process. He says that "the writing is the process in which the imagination take the place of

literal living; by moving toward values and modifying, testing, and extolliating older values" (171-172).

The way in which the poem and the self are related in Warren's aesthetic is confirmed in the second essay of *Democracy and Poetry*. In "Poetry and Selfhood," Warren proposes to consider the therapeutic aspect of poetry. "I am trying to indicate how, in the end, in the face of the increasingly disintegrative forces in our society, poetry may affirm and reinforce the notion of the self" (42). In the first half of this essay, Warren traces out these disintegrative forces and the way that they militate against the proper understanding of the self. He argues that a relentless

contempt of the past inevitably means that the self we have is more and more a fictive self,...for any true self is not only the result of a vital relation with a community but is also a development in time, and if there is no past there can be no self (56).

He considers those forces within a democratic society which encourage "the abolition of the self" (68) rather than the establishing of the self. These work both from without and from within, but especially through the manipulation of images in a media culture which produces an endless string of fictive selves. Against this, he suggests that poetry is one of the things which serves to make democracy possible. "For poetry - the work of the 'makers' - is a dynamic affirmation of, as well as the image of, the concept of the self" (68). As a "made thing," he argues, the poem "stands as a 'model' of the organized self" (69). He goes on to say,

The "made thing" becomes, then, a vital emblem of the struggle toward the achieving of the self, and that mark of struggle, the human signature, is what gives the aesthetic organization its numinousness. It is what makes us feel that the "made thing" nods mysteriously at us, at the deepest personal inward self (69).

The poem is not a model for the self simply because both are static and discrete entities which reflect each other. Rather, the poem acts as a model for the self because each involves an ongoing struggle toward some sort of presence. The poem bears the mark of this struggle and becomes "the human signature" for the work. The relationship between the poem and the self is not, then, simply a formal one, but is a mysterious relationship in which the two echo one another. This continues to clarify Warren's shift from formalist concerns to more openly ontological questions in his quest for the "unsayable." Warren does acknowledge a difference between the way poetry functions with regard to the self and the way other literary genres do. What distinguishes the poem is a unique form.

But the "made thing" that the poet produces represents a different kind of form from all the others we know. Its characteristic quality springs from the special fullness of the relation of a self to the world. The form of a work represents, not only a manipulation of the world, but an adventure in selfhood. It embodies the experience of a self vis-à-vis the world, not merely as a subject matter, but as translated into the experience of form....The "made thing," the "formed thing," stands as a perennial possibility of experience, available whenever we turn to it; and insofar as we again, in any deep sense, open the imagination to it, it provides the freshness and immediacy of experience that returns us to ourselves and, as Nietzsche puts it, provides us with that "vision," that "enchantment," which is, for man, the "completion of his state" and an affirmation of his sense of life (72).

The poem is a moment of the self's "being in the world." It is a moment of vital experience and enactment within the world. That experience is not simply an objectified "subject matter" which can be studied; rather the relation of the self to the world provides the basis for the form of the poem. As we have already seen in Warren's attention to the language

of the world, it is the tension of the world experienced by the self which provides the basis for the poem itself. In turn, then, the poem becomes a possibility of experience which not only "returns us to ourselves" but returns us to the world, as well. And the vision which this provides is necessary for the fullness of selfhood.

Warren says later in the same essay that the self is not "a preexisting entity" nor "a Platonic idea existing in a mystic realm beyond time and change" (88). Neither is the self "an object like the nugget of gold in the placer pan, the Easter egg, under the bush at an Easter-egg hunt, a four-leaf clover to promise miraculous luck" (88). This is, he says,

the essence of passivity, to think to find, by luck, one's quintessential luck. And the essence of absurdity, too, for the self is never to be found, but must be created, not the happy accident of passivity, but the product of a thousand actions, large and small, conscious or unconscious, performed not "away from it all," but in the face of "it all," for better or for worse, in work and leisure rather than in free time (88-89).

Warren's language here echoes his analysis of Coleridge's imagination in his earlier essay. By virtue of the exercise of the conscious will, the self must be worked towards. It cannot be found by the passive mind, "for nothing of which we are aware is given to the passive mind" ("APPI" 342), least of all the self. The actions which create the self do not form an "objectively statable plan" or "a blueprint of intention in such an absolute sense" ("APPI" 343). Rather, these "thousand actions" form that process of trial error which is life, in Warren's vision. And these actions are enacted (to use another of Warren's terms) in the face of, in the presence of, in the being of the world.

One of the necessary actions by which the self is created is the act of naming the self. In this act, the self is returned into its own

presence through the poem. Toward the end of "Poetry and Selfhood,"

Warren states,

Poetry even, in the same act and the same moment, helps one to grasp reality and to grasp one's own life. Not that it will give definitions and certainties. But it can help us to ponder on what Saint Augustine meant when he said that he was a question to himself (92).

The question of the self, and of the self's name, is really the only answer that the poet can come to, as Warren suggests in his "Afterthought" to *Being Here*: "Here, as in life, meaning is, I should say, often more fruitfully found in the question asked than in any answer given" (107-108). It is this question which accounts for so much of the fruit of Warren's late poetry. In a number of poems, Warren confronts this question of the self in a very raw and exposed way; the question is a relentless quest after what in the end may not be fully spoken. This is what we find in "Immanence" (RV 61-62). In a series of fifteen unrhymed couplets written in varying meters, Warren pursues the name of the self as it relates to identity:

Stop! Wait! Wherever you are.
Whatever your name. It may well be

At the corner of one of the Fifties and Fifth Avenue,
Where the City of Things gleams brightest, and

Your name does not matter. If you have your credit card.
But sometimes its referent is obscure to you, and then even

The card is of no help. Except, of course, for the purchase. Or
The event, in fact, may well be elsewhere, at night,

In bed, and you lost and unsure what
Bed, or breath there beside, and a crusting on

Dong. Like an orchid, now darkness
Swells, benign, benign -- or inimical --

In immanence. Yes, something
Plays cat-and-mouse with you, veiled, unrevealed, though you

Sometimes relax, pretend not to notice, thinking
You'll be the cat, and catch

It unawares. Unwary. Trapped
In your stratagem. For if

Its face is seen, name known, it,
Then powerless, like mist, may be shifted by

Whatever slight movement of air, and in anguish
Flee, with a scream of such

Desolation that a heart as horn-scabbed as yours would be stabbed
To pity. But no. You must ponder yet the teasing enigma. But

Suppose you never succeed? Or worse,
The swollen Immanence turns out to be all? Is all? And you,

Yet yearning, torn between fear
And hope, yet ignorant, will, into

The black conduit of Nature's Repackaging System, be sucked.
But that possibility is simply too distressing

To -- even -- be considered.

The beginning of the poem suggests that one's name ("Whatever your name."), if it can be known, cannot deflect the urgency of self-knowledge, nor can one's position within the world. Even where "the City of Things gleams brightest," the need for self-knowledge will find "you," even if your name does not matter there. The crux of the matter is that the referent for your name - the signified of the signifier which is your name - "is obscure to you..." Speaking the name cannot simply designate the self and then seal it off. There is still this matter of the obscurity of the self, which parallels the darkness in the middle of the poem, that darkness which swells like an orchid. The

obscurity of the darkness, though, is that it appears as benign and inimical; its intention is hidden in its own darkness so that you cannot know if it means good or ill. The poet contends that all you can know is the immanence of this darkness and obscurity. In the immanence of the darkness, "something/ Plays cat-and-mouse with you, veiled, unrevealed...." Warren uses the same image of "cat-and-mouse" in an earlier poem in *Rumor Verified*, "What Was the Thought?" (57-58). There, the cat has caught what the poet cannot catch - the elusive thought of the self that lurked the house through the night. When the speaker awakes, he is greeted by the cat, crouching at his knees and "There, blood streaking the counterpane, it lies - / Skull crushed, partly eviscerated" (58).

The "something" that plays the cat-and-mouse game in "Immanence" would appear to be the knowledge after which the self yearns. It is constantly veiled and unrevealed. If it could be unveiled and revealed so that "Its face is seen, name known," that knowledge would become powerless and would elude the grasp. Its fleeing scream would bring pity to even a "horn-scabbed" heart, the poet says. But the possibility of trapping such knowledge remains just that: a possibility. This is the "teasing enigma" of the self. As in other poems where Warren uses the notion of Zeno's paradox to portray this relentless quest, here he uses the notion of the enigma; it is the riddle of the self which the poet is trying to solve. And yet the question is the only answer he will receive. If he were to be able to name the self, the self would disappear in a consummation like the apocalypse of the "dire hour" which Warren confronts in "Sunset" (NSP 84). But the poet remains convinced that there is a *telos*, that there will be a day of unveiling and revealing. If not, then the only option is the naturalistic vision which he consid-

ers at the end of the poem. If the "swollen immanence turns out to be all," the self -- "Yet yearning,.../ yet ignorant..." -- will only be sucked into the abyss and into a blind chemical reaction. "But that possibility is simply too distressing// To -- even -- be considered." Rather, the poet clings to his yearning after the possibility that one day he will know and be able to speak the name of the self. Within the nearness of the immanence, the poet carries on the quest and in the midst of that quest the unrepresentable is presented in the act of creation.

Warren pursues this same quest in a similar poem in *Rumor Verified*, "Nameless Thing" (27-28). As in "Immanence" and "What Was The Thought?," Warren here attempts to track down the relationship of the name to the self or to identity. He is continuing to explore the matter of the referent for the name.

I have no name for the nameless thing
That after midnight walks the house, usually
Soundless, but sometimes a creak on tiptoed stair,
Or sometimes like breath screwed down to a minimum.

But sometimes in silence the effluvium
Of its being is enough, perhaps with a pale,
Not quite sickening sweetness as though left
By funeral flowers, or sometimes like sweat

Under gross armpits. It is the odor of
A real existence lost in the unreality
Of dead objects of day that now painfully try to stir
In darkness. Every stone has its life, we know.

In this poem, Warren explicitly confronts the paradox of his quest. This nameless and soundless thing evokes a vital presence within the poem through a barely-noticed occurrence. Though it is absent, it makes its being known through the experience of the speaker. Caught between the silence and the sound, it reveals itself through "the odor of/ A

real existence lost in the unreality...." This odor partakes of the paradox; it is both sickening and sweet. The image of the funeral flowers is powerful: even though the flowers might suggest life, they will nonetheless themselves die, and their death is made known through the scent of the not-yet dead flowers. The effluvium of their death points to the time when what is nameless will be finally named, in death. More strikingly, though, it is a "real existence" perceived in the "unreality / Of dead objects of day...." That which is nameless though real is made known through that which is unreal; being is announced in the midst of non-being. It is a "real existence" rather than simply an idea or a thought. The irony of the final line of the third stanza is sharp: we know that every stone has its life, and yet we cannot name that which is of the fullness of being.³⁰ But the speaker tries to hunt down the nameless thing, only to be confronted with being in the midst of unreality:

Barefoot, in darkness, I walk the house, a heavy
Poker seized from the hearth. I stand
Just by the door that seems ready to open.
I wait for the first minute motion, first whisper of hinges.

I hold my breath. I am ready. I think of blood.
I fling the door open. Only a square
Of moonlight lies on the floor inside. All is in order.
I go back to bed. I hear the blessed heart beat there.

But once, on a very dark night, it was almost different.
That night I was certain. Trapped in a bathroom!
I snatched the door open, weapon up, and yes, by God! --
But there I stood staring into a mirror. Recognition

Came almost too late. But how could I
Have been expected to recognize what I am?
In any case, that was what happened. I now lie
Rigid abed and hear namelessness stalk the dark house.

³⁰ This notion of the stone having its own life looks forward to such a poem as "Myth of Mountain Sunrise." See our discussion of this later poem in Chapter Six.

I wonder why it cannot rest.

Warren suggests here a conviction similar to what he states in "Sunset," that nature is unable to give us the name that we seek so diligently. Here, as the speaker stalks the nameless thing, he opens a door to find "Only a square/ Of moonlight" on the floor, moonlight which is unable to give the name he seeks. However, that nameless thing subtly intimates itself as he goes back to bed and hears "the blessed heart beat there." What is implied at the end of this stanza is only made explicit in the following stanza when the speaker is not simply confronted with his heartbeat but with himself. It is in the aporetic moment when "Recognition/ Came almost too late," in that moment's hesitation, that this nameless thing dwells. It creeps out from the fissure between recognition and non-recognition, between life and death, between existence and unreality. And in that moment, the speaker almost smashes the bathroom mirror, thinking to kill the nameless thing. His question - "But how could I/ Have been expected to recognize what I am?" - reveals this tension of the moment, a tension between "I have been" and "I am." And yet that is where the self lies. To know this, however, does not mean that you finally know the name after which you sought; rather it remains nameless, but it continues in its restless existence. In its namelessness, though, the self is propelled into that space and moment in which it might continue to pursue the name.

5.4 Conclusions

In his pursuit of the name, Warren's engagement with the enigmatic nature of language brought him face to face with the very nature of being itself. On the surface, his inability as a poet to perform what appears to be a very simple task - that is, to speak a name - makes obv-

ious his sense of finitude within the tension of the world. However, this radical tension declares that the poet's desire to speak not just a name but the name is never simple though it is necessary. Warren's vision of language and speaking is indeed a sacramental vision; it looks toward an ultimate blessing in the midst of the present tension. And yet this vision of blessing is endlessly deferred. He can imagine the time and the place from which he will be able to know the name of the world and to name even the fullness of his own self. But that place is only found in the consummation of the self, that moment in which the self is, in its truest and fullest sense, and in which it is radically altered. He may not know how it is altered, though, until he dies. Death is the very real horizon of life and being in Warren's vision; it is the moment when the self may know even as it is known. It is also for the poet the moment of linguistic fullness in which the sayable and the unsayable converge and are said in that one word. While there is a sort of eschatological hope in his vision, the name of that hope can never be spoken, or it will disappear into the mist. Rather than being given over to a linguistic determinism, though, Warren persists in his conviction that language is the only means of articulating that hope.³¹ Limited, arbitrary, and unstable as it is, language nonetheless provides a means of experiencing that hope of a possibility in the present moment. And it is in the poem that language speaks and provides the ground for such a hope. This is the hope given by poetry itself. Though it bears the tension of the world, that tension points to a hope beyond it. For Warren, it is the real, though undefinable, presence of the unsayable which makes speaking at all possible. At the end of *Democracy and Poetry*, Warren makes his vision explicit. If what he

³¹ Thiemann uses the phrase "linguistic determinism" in his first chapter. Compare his discussion in *Original Sin and Redemption: Philosophy of Language in Robert Penn Warren's Poetry*.

calls "the oscillation, [and] the vibrance" of the tension of the world ceases, then "life as we know it and esteem it, will cease" (93). He then quotes the end of Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1728) as evidence of this nihilistic vision:

Thy hand, Great Anarch! let the curtain fall;
And Universal Darkness buries All.

We are not, however, for all our dunce-ness, necessarily condemned to that -- even if process may be thought to be all, even if there is to be no millennium of any kind. As a last word, I'll quote again from the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine:

There is a dim glimmering of light unput-out in
men; let them walk, let them walk that the dark-
ness overtake them not (93-94).

The presence of the unsayable does not condemn us to a darkness which buries us under the limits of the sayable. Rather, it is the "unsayable" which reveals itself in the sayable as a dim-glimmering light which gives us a hope to speak at all. Bolstered by that hope, Robert Penn Warren continued to walk in the world and to love it.

Chapter Six
Warren as Witness to the
Unpresentable

6.1 The Postmodernity of Robert Penn Warren¹

In its relentless movement toward the unsayable, Warren's later poetry finds itself dwelling somewhere between the Romantic and the Postmodern. It experiences a nearness to both of these because the two are not as far removed from one another as might be thought. Coleridge's formulation of the imagination and the symbol clearly undergirds Warren's consistent recourse to the notion of tension. These matters, however, were not merely aesthetic or formalistic for Coleridge; their sustained paradoxes incorporate all the areas of Coleridge's varied thought, especially his theological and philosophical speculations. It is precisely the role of paradox in thought that brings Warren's later poetry also near to the Postmodern. Martin Heidegger's later essays on poetry and language have formed a clear sub-text running throughout this study. They have acted as a backdrop against which Warren's own thought has been brought into relief. Heidegger's thought is also bounded by Romanticism and Postmodernism, situated between Hölderlin on the one hand and Derrida on the other. In assessing the "postmodernity" of Heidegger, Richard Palmer describes his "special kind" of thought which "resists categories, so that [Heidegger] himself wishes to leave it in the nameless" ("The Postmodernity of Heidegger" 87). Palmer observes, though, some of Heidegger's "suggestive articulations of the path of thought: the step back from metaphysical thinking, the search for the

¹ Regarding the broad outlines of this argument, I am indebted to Richard Palmer's essay, "The Postmodernity of Heidegger" in *MHQL*, ed. by William V. Spanos (Bloomington, IN, and London: Indiana University Press, 1979), 71-92.

unthought within the thought, the between-character of man's existence, the importance of co-responding to the Saying of language, and so on" (87-88). Although Warren's later poetry also resists categories, we have been able to find in it some of its own suggestive articulations of Warren's path of thought: in its step back from the formalistic to the ontological, in its pursuit of the unsayable within the sayable, in its sense of being as "in the midst of" the world, and in its response to the saying of language. In Warren's movement toward a postmodern poetics, his poetry has shifted its sights from representation "as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it," to presentation in which language becomes the matter itself and the agent of poetic creation.²

Having traced the development of Warren's thinking about language and the "unsayable" in several of his critical essays and in his later poetry, we want now to trace out whatever claims are supported by these developments and modifications in Warren's poetry and to see how those claims fit within critical discussions of postmodern thought contemporary with this later poetry. Our reading of this poetry must take into consideration both the developments in Warren's understanding of language and these contemporary discussions about language and poetics. Our goal in reading Warren's later poetry and criticism in this postmodern context, however, is not to try to fit his work into a definition of postmodernism. Such an effort would inevitably subordinate the importance of Warren's contribution to questions about defining the postmodern, questions which are at best difficult. Instead we are concerned with the character of Warren's contribution toward contemporary discussions about language and its agency in aesthetics and in theological

² See Frederic Jameson's comments in his "Foreward" to Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* viii-ix.

thinking.

Warren's passion for the unsayable discloses a degree of consistency with the thought of certain postmodern thinkers contemporary with his later work, most notably with that of Lyotard, who distinguishes the modern from the postmodern in terms of the question of the unrepresentable.³ For Lyotard, the distinction between the presentable and the unrepresentable is rooted in the ontologically prior question regarding the means of legitimating knowledge. In his "Introduction" to *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Lyotard states, "Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy" (xxv). Knowledge in the postmodern condition is rooted in the instabilities of thought rather than in the presumed stable categories of metaphysics and philosophy. No longer can our knowledge be legitimated by "the expert's homology" which is rooted in agreement, correspondence, and identity. The unified word of the expert presents a discourse of calculation in which the unrepresentable may finally be presented through both progressive rational thought and the nostalgic sublime.⁴ Homology "allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents," and in the poetry of the homologous word, "the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader... matter for solace and pleasure" (81). However, postmodern knowledge is instead characterized by the paralogy of the poet. The poetic word is the unexpected and uncertain word which dwells within the tension of the incommensurable. In that poetic word there is the play of creativity by which the unrepresentable is not simply presented as the "missing cont-

³ See Chapter One for an initial discussion of Lyotard's version of what he calls the "postmodern condition."

⁴ See Lyotard 81.

ents" of our speech which are reinscribed within the sayable, but is approached within the midst of the world. According to the paralogy of the poet, then, the unrepresentable is put forward in the act of presentation itself, a move which "denies itself the solace of good forms" and "searches for new presentations...in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (81). If, according to Lyotard, the modern form of legitimation leads to narcissism and nihilism as the ends of a naturalistic and deterministic perspective, then postmodern legitimation which is indeterminate, on-going, ex-centric could lead to a hopefulness in the midst of the limitations of our knowledge and understanding.

In Warren's later work, we find both a similar concern for the effect of the unrepresentable upon human understanding and a similar distinction between the homologous word of closure, meaning, formula, and Truth and the paralogous word of the poet, which calls upon insight and creativity in its ongoing questioning and refusal of nostalgia. The poetic word does not work from a stable given but toward what might be known as language speaks through the world and through the poem itself. In a late essay entitled, "The Use of the Past," Warren rejects any means of legitimating historical knowledge rooted in the expert's homology which would seal off the past as a self-contained and absolute entity.⁵ His concern precisely for the use of the past bears similarities both to Lyotard's emphasis upon the necessity to tell our "little narrative" (*petit récit*) and to Charles Jenck's notion of the "paradoxical dualism, or double coding" of postmodernism, in which the traditions of the past are used and simultaneously transcended.⁶ Warren holds in contempt the idea of tradition "in the sense of formula"(47); rather, his recurring question is, "what is the legitimate use of the past?" Rooted

⁵ NSE 29-53.

⁶ Jencks, *What is Postmodernism?* 10, 14.

in this question is the poet's concern for the character of our knowledge not only of ourselves but also of the world in which we dwell. His contempt for tradition as formula also reflects a clear incredulity toward that metanarrative of American history which would destroy the necessary sense of temporality for living in the world. This contempt for the past ironically is bred by a discourse which has envisioned America as a new Eden in which "the dimension of space redeemed man from the dimension of time" (32).⁷ This discourse denies the relation of the self to time through an ongoing sort of nostalgia for the "Edenic moment" (36) of America's founding. "We began our great project with the notion that with the past wiped out, perfection and universal prosperity were just around the corner" (33). But Warren rejects this sort of American idealism which "runs true from Emerson's drip-dry Christianity, with no Blood of the Lamb required, to B.F. Skinner's *Walden II*" (33).⁸ Inherent in this line of thinking is a danger of "moral narcissism": "If perfection is just around the corner, and we have the blueprint, the magic word, and a Hot Line to the Most High, who can prevail against us?" (33). For Warren, however, the importance of the study of the past is not found in any nostalgia by which the past forms the given from which the poet or individual may work. Warren rejects such nostalgia and argues instead that the past must be worked toward. Only then can the past give us a sense of time within which the self may be created.

The past must be studied, worked at - in short, created....
There is no absolute, positive past available to us, no matter how rigorously we strive to determine it - as strive we must. Inevitably, the past, so far as we know it, is an

⁷ Compare Spanos' argument about the way modernism in Western literature "is grounded in a strategy that spatializes the temporal process of existence" (116). See "Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a Postmodern Theory of Interpretation as Dis-closure," 115-148.

⁸ For a lengthy discussion of Warren's quarrel with Emerson and the tradition of American idealism, see Burt, *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism*.

inference, a creation, and this, without being paradoxical, can be said to be its chief value for us. In creating the image of the past, we create ourselves, and without that task of creating the past we might be said scarcely to exist (51).

Warren's remarks about the creation of the self expand his earlier notions developed in "A Poem of Pure Imagination," as we saw in the previous chapter. Warren emphasizes here, though, that "the self...is never finally created" (51). The act of creation never ceases so that knowledge is never completed or totalized. There is, for Warren, no finally self-transparent identity of the self which may be found. Rather, the self is formed within the play of difference. "Without differences, any recognition of identity would be meaningless" (46). We need knowledge both of identity and difference, a knowledge which operates according to a symbolic understanding within the imagination.

For we need difference and identity, fused in the thing created by the imagination, to make us comprehend imaginatively our own nature and our own plight....The shifting arcades and perspectives of being and fate, the wilderness of mirrors, the ever unfolding and fluctuating ratio of identity and difference - we need these things in all their increasing complexity if we are to pursue the never-ending task of knowing the self (46).

We see here a tension within Warren's discourse: though he speaks in terms of "fusion," this must be understood as an emphasis upon symbolic understanding in which identity and difference are not finally resolved but are held together without mixture or confusion. Precisely because we cannot apprehend the fullness of identity as an infinite concept, the imagination falls back into difference, into "the wilderness of mirrors" in which there is no clear distinction between discrete object and reflection.

Warren's sense of working toward the past and the self helps to

clarify his notion of continually working toward the unsayable. He observes a similar play within the tension of identity and difference in the poet's confrontation with the sayable and the unsayable, for it is in poetry that we are confronted with these shifting arcades and perspectives of being. Poetry presents the increasing complexity and the ever unfolding quality of difference which is necessary for understanding. Just as poetry provides a means of pursuing this "never-ending task of knowing the self," so it furnishes the moment in which the poet may approach the unsayable through a persistent questioning and openness. Such poetry does not achieve closure through form but strives for a dis-closure through continual and new presentations of the un-presentable. Throughout Warren's later poetry, there is this ongoing repetition of the moment - not the recollection of some absolute and originating moment, but the repetition of moments at the borders of our experience.⁹ The word of the poet is that paralogous word which is beyond calculation and which functions through questioning to move us as readers to the boundaries of being. The poet, then, is that man described in Heidegger's "A Dialogue on Language":

H: Man is the message-bearer of the message which the two-fold's unconcealment speaks to him.

....

H: Then, man, as the message-bearer of the message of the two-fold's unconcealment, would also be he who walks the boundary of the boundless.

J: And on this path he seeks the boundary's mystery...

H: ...which cannot be hidden in anything other than the voice that determines and tunes his nature.¹⁰

In Heidegger's vocabulary, the "two-fold" hearkens to what he considered

⁹ For a discussion of Kierkegaard's distinction between repetition and recollection, see Spanos, "Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a Postmodern Theory of Interpretation as Dis-closure," 115-148.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language" in *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), 41. The dialogue is carried on between Heidegger and "a Japanese."

to be the originating issue of philosophy, that is the difference between being and beings, a difference which is never overcome nor resolved in identity.¹¹ Heidegger insists that it is language which defines the hermeneutic relation between man and the two-fold as it shows itself in what he calls "the presence of present-beings" (30). In the apocalyptic moment of the unconcealment of this relation, then, it is language which speaks. The poet is the message-bearer who walks along this boundary of the boundless which is hidden in language itself. And it is language which is the voice that determines and tunes the nature of the poet. For Heidegger and Warren alike, the poem is this moment of unconcealment -- this apocalyptic moment -- which brings us up against that mysterious boundary time and again and reveals to us the boundary of our own death. This is what Warren considers to be an important use of the past: it reminds us of our own mortality by telling "us that we, too, shall soon be part of the past" (53).

When William Spanos wrote his introductory essay for the volume, *Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature* (1979), he perceived that he was writing in a literary critical context still governed by "the continuing authority of the formalist interpretive orientation of the New Criticism in literary studies and broader semiotic contexts" (xv). He perceived that even then in 1979 New Critical formalism was "an authority in the process of being" and that it was not superseded by but was being "theoretically shored up by Structuralist poetics" (xv). In this context, he describes a postmodern poetics -- schooled in Heidegger's concern for time and language -- which is marked by

...experiments in open, or, as I prefer to call them, "disclosive" or "de-structive," forms of much of the most dynamic and powerful contemporary writing; forms whose mastered

¹¹ See David Couzens Hoy, "The Owl and the Poet: Heidegger's Critique of Hegel" in *MHQL*, ed. by William V. Spanos (Bloomington, IN, and London: Indiana University Press, 1979), 64.

irony assigns us as readers to ourselves and activates rather than nullifies consciousness of being-in-the-world as our case (xv).

Although Warren would appear to be associated by contemporary criticism with "the formalist interpretive orientation of the New Criticism," his later poetry is marked by these very "postmodern" characteristics described by Spanos. We have already observed in the last two chapters how this poetry becomes "dis-closive" and activates our consciousness of being-in-the-world through its pursuit of the unsayable in the language of the world and in the Name. As we turn to Warren's final volume, *Altitudes and Extensions 1980-1984*, we continue to encounter these concerns as the poetry presses the boundary of the boundless and self-consciously brings the matter of the unsayable to the forefront.¹² Here we find a poetry which resists closure by persisting in an openness to and an expectancy for the speaking of language in its approach to the unsayable. It is a poetry of a radically temporalized poetic space. No longer does form provide a sufficient solace in the presence of the unsayable, nor can structure wrestle time into its boundaries. Instead, we find among these poems a poetic which often subverts structure and form through what Spanos calls the "generous measure" (xii). It is a poetry of "mastered irony" which reveals its own limitations and possibilities, and in so doing, it assigns us as readers to ourselves. This is something which Warren emphasized in *Democracy and Poetry* (1975) and reiterated in "The Use of the Past" (1976): the acts of poetic creation and of reading poetry enact a plunge into the abyss of the self for poet and reader alike. But Warren follows Henri Bergson in suggesting that the power of the work is that, in the abyss, it returns us to ourselves,

¹² Published as the first section of Warren's final selected volume, *New and Selected Poems 1923-1985* (1985).

"into our own presence."¹³ Within the abyss -- the fissure or *Riß*, to use Heidegger's term -- we find the moment of possibility.¹⁴ Returned and assigned, the reader is then engaged in an on-going participation of being-in-the-world.¹⁵

This poetic is a sort of exploration as a calling into question and dis-covering (as an uncovering). It is this searching out activity that Heidegger described in "A Dialogue on Language": what we need is "to give heed to the trails that direct thinking back into the region of its source" (37). He emphasizes that these trails may not be found in our own attempt. Rather, "I find them only because they are *not* of my own making, and are discernible only quite rarely, like the wind-borne echo of a distant call" (37, emphasis his). Warren's later poetics is a searching out of these trails which leads back into the region of poetry's source, which is language itself. These trails are not of the poet's own making but are announced to him by the voice of the world. However, neither do these trails lead back to an "absolute, positive past" (Warren's phrase) or an "absolute origin" (Spanos' term); instead, these trails are the *Holzwege* described by Heidegger which lead into that forest which is the "region of its source" and soon disseminate among the trees.¹⁶ According to Miller, "a *Holzweg* is a woodcutter's path that goes into the forest and stops, peters out. It is not a way to get from here to some definite 'there'."¹⁷ The trails are working

¹³ See *Democracy and Poetry* 71 and "The Use of the Past" 46.

¹⁴ According to J. Hillis Miller, "The *Riß* is both the cleft of an abyss opening into 'nothing' (in Heidegger's sense of that word: nothingness as a manifestation of Being), and at the same time the sharp incised line, the 'trait' making a design that is a meaningful sign, whether letter or picture." *Illustration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: Reaktion Books, 1992), 87.

¹⁵ This sheds some light on the inseparability in Warren's thinking of literature and experience, or language and experience.

¹⁶ *Holzwege* is the title of the volume in which Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" was originally published (1950), together with other essays which included "What Are Poets For?"

¹⁷ *Illustration* 84.

toward what might be revealed as language reveals itself in the poem. Throughout Warren's poetry, the poet hears and heeds the "wind-borne echo of a distant call" of some bird, whether the owl, crow, or whippoorwill. As we consider several poems from Warren's final volume, we will seek to follow him along these trails back to the region of language.

6.2 "Three Darknesses" and the Imaginative Regress

In Warren's final volume, we find poems which lead the reader repeatedly to that uneasy edge between the sayable and the unsayable, that continually shifting non-site where the process of generation never ceases or is overcome. This poetry brings us to the boundary of the boundless, or to the *eschatia*, which is the furthest part of being and the verge of understanding. This boundary, though, is not found in some indefinite "out there" beyond the concreteness dwelling in the world; rather this boundary is found within these concrete actualities. The boundless is encountered within the bounds of the bounded. *Altitudes and Extensions* begins with a poem which is perched at this eschatological edge.¹⁸ "Three Darknesses" (AE 3) assigns us as readers to plunge in and explore the possibility of our own abyss, confronting the darkness of the abyss from three possible perspectives.¹⁹ The first poem of this sequence is ironic, though, in that it begins at the end, only to fall back upon the supposed innocence of childhood and memory. The poem begins at the limit of the poet's thought:

There is some logic here to trace, and I
Will try hard to find it. But even as I begin, I
Remember one Sunday morning, festal with springtime, in
The zoo of Rome. In a natural, spacious, grassy area,
A bear, big as a grizzly, erect, indestructible,
Unforgiving as God, as rhythmic as

¹⁸ This poem was originally published in *Poetry Review* 74/4 (1985), 46.

¹⁹ See *Democracy and Poetry* 71. Compare Spanos's statement regarding his own preface to *MHQL*: "It is intended, that is, as a plunge in the midst: not to inform, but simply to provide a point of departure for an access into the 'open' hermeneutic circle" (xvii, emphasis his).

A pile-driver - right-left, right-left -
Slugged at an iron door. The door,
Heavy, bolted, barred, must have been
The entrance to a dark enclosure, a cave,
Natural or artificial....

The poem begins at both a moment and a place. It brings us to a place called "here," which is not located in the zoo of Rome nor in the poet's mind but is announced in the poem itself. Here is both everywhere and nowhere. This place, however, is not spatially isolated from time, locked in timelessness; it is defined temporally as the poetic moment of life in the world, what Warren called in his 1977-1980 volume, "being here." Within the space of the poetic moment, we are brought to the edge of the unrepresentable, the end at which the poet hopes to find the logic which he might trace out in order to provide a sort of wisdom for being in the world. Behind this wilful statement -- "There is some logic here to trace..." -- there is a yearning for identity and resolution, for that final place in which the poet may find the absolute origin. But as the poet approaches this edge of understanding and experience, there is the engagement of the self through the imaginative enactment, "...and I / Will try hard to find it. But...." But human effort cannot find the essential place beyond space and time; the human imagination fails to find the final logic. But this failure does not result in passivity for the poet but the active engagement in a grasping after whatever traces of meaning and truth he might find through his experience in the world.

As soon as the poet attempts to approach final meaning in identity, he is thrown back upon difference, and there is an unending deferral of meaning. We find in this poem another attempt to name the unnameable, a concern we considered in Chapter 5. The poet can neither name

the logic of his own existence nor name the place in which such a logic might be found. But it is the weight of the unnameable which bears so heavily upon the poet and the presence of the unsayable which compels him to speak. As we saw with the final poem of *Being Here*, "Passers-by On Snowy Night," the poet may not name the logic after which he seeks but may only name the journey in which he must continue as he walks in the world. This is the poet's giving heed to the trails that direct thinking back into the region of its source. He pursues these trails, though, not at the outer limit of his logic but in the world. As he tries hard to find this logic, he is thrown back into the world to a springtime Sunday morning in the zoo of Rome. It is through the poet's relation to the world in language that he is able to begin searching out the vestige or trace of this logic. Within the world, the unsayable announces itself through the rhythmic beating of the bear against the iron door.

...Minute by minute, near, far,
Wheresoever we wandered; all Sunday morning,
With the air full of colored balloons trying to escape
From children, the ineluctable
Rhythm continues. You think of the
Great paws like iron on iron. Can iron bleed?
Since my idiot childhood the world has been
Trying to tell me something. There is something
Hidden in the dark. The bear
Was trying to enter into the darkness of wisdom.

Here we move beyond the conviction that the "world means only itself," as Warren asserted in "Riddle in the Garden" (*Incarnations 1966-1968*) to the understanding that "the world declares itself" (Section IV, *Audubon*), speaking of its own mystery. The poet must listen for that which may be brought to light in the act of poetic creation as the voice of language is heard in the midst of the world. It is the sound of the

bear's slugging against this iron door that follows the poet throughout the poem; its sound and rhythm are "ineluctable." He cannot escape the repetition of the beating, just as the poet cannot escape the repetition of moments in which he presses the boundary or the eschatia. This repetition does not look back, though, but is the forward-looking movement generated by a yearning for the other.²⁰ Even so, this confrontation with the borders of our knowledge and understanding are inescapable, and in this poem the imagination provides the notion of its own failure.

The exploration of the poetic moment in "Three Darknesses: I" follows the movement of what Kant called the "imaginative regress." In "Sublimity and Theatricality: Romantic 'Pre-Postmodernism' in Schiller and Coleridge,"²¹ Linda Marie Brooks examines that aspect of Kant's notion of the sublime in which the "reconciling or connecting function of the imagination...fails," so that what remains "is the component of the imagination that makes no attempt to draw relations, that does not connect or reconcile randomness but simply engages it, unordered, in all its chaos" (945). While Coleridge's notion of the imagination is distinct from Kant's formulation, it does bear some important similarities to Kant's description of the "imaginative regress." In the moment of regress, the imagination is confronted with its own inability to fully apprehend the "manifold" character of being or reality and, after halting this effort to apprehend infinity, the imagination within a single moment comprehends multiplicity in such a way that it "is able to contain or circumscribe a type of whole, an entirety in which all the discrete entities of phenomena can be 'intuited,' in Kant's words, to 'coexist'" (946). Coleridge's description of the imagination and the symbol makes it clear that, because the imagination, unlike the fancy,

²⁰ See Richard Jackson, "The Deconstructed Moment in Modern Poetry," *Contemporary Literature* XXIII/3 (1982), 319.

²¹ *Modern Language Notes*, 105 (1990), 939-964.

recognizes this limit, the symbol becomes this means of engaging the unordered chaos. The symbol is a means by which the poet engages difference, and if there is to be understanding, then this engagement with difference is not only necessary but "ineluctable." This is the possibility presented by Warren's poetry. But this is not a possibility that resides in specific symbols; thus, our concern has not been Warren's use of specific symbols throughout his poetry. Rather, the possibility which his poetry offers rests painfully in the symbolic understanding, which is characterized by recurring moments of engaging difference through imaginative regress.

It is in the symbolic moment that the imagination grasps the multiplicity of experience. Warren described the imagination in a similar way in "A Poem of Pure Imagination": "The symbol affirms the unity of mind in the welter of experience; it is a device for making the welter of experience manageable for the mind - graspable. It represents a focus of being and is not a mere sign..." (352). It is important that Warren does not speak of the "unity of experience" but instead speaks of the "unity of mind" as that moment in which the welter of experience is grasped in all its chaos. This moment is, for Warren, "a focus of being" in the moment. Coleridge's formulation of the symbol, then, does not present a unified whole of apprehended infinity but presents what in postmodern discourse is called an aporetic moment: it does not unite but brings into light the gaps and breakdowns of language and understanding. Even here, though, the formulation of the "aporetic moment" must be seen as a radically metaphorical construction which grasps at the unsayable. It is in this illuminating function that the symbol, for Warren and Coleridge, provides a means of thinking *theologically* through the *aesthetic* encounter with a finite multiplicity. And as Brooks

points out, following Rudolphe Gasché, "what is seen in this moment of imaginative regress is the 'unseeable'" (946).

6.3 "Mortal Limit" - The Boundary of the Boundless

In "Mortal Limit" (AE 6), the second poem of *Altitudes and Extensions*, Warren continues to explore the way that poetry takes the reader to the edge of the abyss in the symbolic moment of grappling with difference.²² The poet returns in this poem to his familiar territory as he envisions the hawk set against the sunset sky. The limit that the poet confronts in this poem is that *eschatia* of language itself.

I saw the hawk ride updraft in the sunset over Wyoming.
It rose from coniferous darkness, past gray jags
Of mercilessness, past whiteness, into the gloaming
Of dream-spectral light about the last purity of snow-snags.

There - west - were the Tetons. Snow-peaks would soon be
In dark profile to break constellations. Beyond what height
Hangs now the black speck? Beyond what range will gold eyes see
New ranges rise to mark a last scrawl of light?

The poem follows the hawk's motion of rising in the first stanza and reaching the mortal limit in the second. Within this motion we confront the tension of the world, as this moment places us between day and night and between darkness and light.²³ This is again the moment not of recollection but of repetition. The hawk rises from the "coniferous darkness" of the landscape, floats past the "gray jags" of the mountains, and even passes "whiteness" and "purity" before reaching "the gloaming / Of dream-spectral light" of the twilit sky. At the peak of its upward motion, though, the hawk does not experience the pure identity of vision, but it has a view of difference: its vision is bounded by the horizon of snow-peaks that are discernible because of their dark profile against the star-light. Even the furthest point within this

²² "Mortal Limit" was originally published in the *SR* 91/4 (1983), 566.

²³ Compare the similar sort of motion in "Milton: A Sonnet," *NSP* 75.

vision is marked by the scrawl of light.²⁴ As it reaches the moment of mortal limit, the hawk finds itself in that place where it might have a wider vision, but to remain in this place would mean its death.

Or, having tasted that atmosphere's thinness, does it
Hang motionless in dying vision before
It knows it will accept the mortal limit,
And swing into the great circular downwardness that will restore

The breath of earth? Of rock? Of rot? Of other such
Items, and the darkness of whatever dream we clutch?

This moment of turning is the moment of the "dying vision." In that place the atmosphere is thin and tastes not of immortality but of mortality - death. The eschatological moment, then, is a moment which both reaches to the uppermost limits and falls into the lowest of depths. It can take the reader to the uttermost point where, after all saying has ceased, all that can be presented is the unrepresentable. And in this confrontation there is a returning to a possible new understanding. This motion toward the *eschatia* and then falling away back from it is similar to what John Burt calls "a simultaneous evasion and experience of primary truth" in Warren's poetry (Burt 112). But that truth is what may not be named or spoken; it may be known only in death. This is the limit which Warren confronted in the unnameable, as we saw in Chapter Five. Death is the horizon of being but it is also the ultimate moment of ripeness or of turning. It is a fullness which is also a consummation.²⁵

The mortal limit confronted by the hawk is the same limit that the poet confronts when presented with the unsayable and the unrepresentable,

²⁴ Compare the description in *Audubon* of the heron's hieroglyphic motion.

²⁵ Ironically, Warren's notion bears a certain similarity not only with Heidegger's conception of death but also with the aestheticism of Walter Pater, who in *Marius the Epicurean* proposes such a view of death as consummation. This is interesting, too, because of the influence of aestheticism, linked as it was with Symbolism, upon the origins of Formalism in American literary criticism.

and like the hawk, the poet too is turned back to "swing in that great circular downwardness...." The hawk does not take what Coleridge called the *salto mortale* into some existence beyond "the gloaming / Of dream spectral light above the last purity of snow-snags," but somersaults back into the material world. Coleridge wrote in his *Notebook* of the tendency for the imagination to continue adding description upon description "and as if to hide from itself its perpetual failure...it takes the *salto mortale*, and vaults at once into the transcendental Idea of Infinity."²⁶ Brooks argues that Coleridge's notion here is ironic and that, similar to Kant's notion of the sublime, his notion has in view a sort of regressive move. She describes Kant's notion in this way:

Instead of soaring upward in some transcendental flight toward the "supersensible," toward some immaterial "truth" decreed by Reason as the "ground" of thought - Wholeness, Unity, Coexistence and the like, as Kant had expected - the subject vaults, in a kind of regressive somersault or *salto mortale*, into the non-rational "substrate" or incomprehensible materiality of the negative sublime (949).

The poet's vision is not some soaring flight into the transcendental or into identity, but it is a dying vision which confronts his own finite existence with the insurmountability and intractability of the world in which he walks. In such a vision of the poet's vision, then, what is the substance of poetry itself? It is the radical materiality of life found in the concreteness of language. And it is this experience of his own limit at his own death and in the death of language that provides the grounds for his speaking in the world. It is a vision not of the blessedness of immateriality but of the possibility of understanding rooted in materiality. In Warren's vision, this *salto mortale* can be restorative within the fallen and finite experience of reader and poet, but there are limits to what can be restored. What is restored to the

²⁶ CN III.4047; see also Brooks, "Sublimity and Theatricality" 950-51.

hawk is the breath of earth, rock, rot, and other elements of this darkness in which we live. Among these concrete elements of a fallen world, the poet must find traces of the unrepresentable and vestiges of the unsayable. In this way the eschatological moment in Warren's poetry is also an apocalyptic moment; at the borders there is a pulling back of the veil so that we see our experience for what it is, even if that is "the darkness of whatever dream we clutch."

"Mortal Limit" also illustrates another critical shift in Warren's understanding of poetry and language. While modernist poetry would not deny or reject these claims about the unrepresentable or the mortal limit, it functions according to a formalism in which poetic structure might erase the boundary of the unsayable so that there might be the communication of truth. However, in this poem the poet rejects any effort to try to traverse this mortal limit by attempting to cancel it through word-play or poetic structure. He refuses the nostalgia of good forms which would contain truth through statements about language and the unsayable. But this would only be a transgression of the limit. Warren manifests the poet's confrontation with the "mortal limit" of language even in the formal structure of the poem by allowing content to subvert form. In effect, Warren defamiliarizes the familiar form of the sonnet. The poem follows the pattern of an Elizabethan sonnet in its rhyme scheme and in its division into quatrains, and yet this use of the sonnet form displays the poet's mastered irony: this "constructive" structure designed for the communication of meaning is not able to sustain the poem as it becomes de-structive and collapses in on itself. The language here is what it says it is: the mortal limit. Rather than ending with a final conclusion to the problem raised, the poem ends with a dark question that returns us to ourselves. The form is deceptive;

though there is the positive element in the rhyming of the lines, this is subverted by the question that the poet asks. Here Warren uses form as a negative means of communication, turning upside down the concern among early Formalists and Symbolists "with form as a viable communicative instrument."²⁷ If Warren's use of the sonnet form is an instance of the sublime, then it is a presentation of the negative sublime. The presentation of the unrepresentable is not attempted through supplying what Lyotard calls "the missing contents." Rather, it is only present in its absence, named only as the unnameable. The mortal limit remains.

In light of the claims that Warren makes about the act of poetic creation, we may make certain concomitant claims about the act of reading. Reading takes us to that place of the dying vision where the atmosphere is thin and we stand motionless before the mortal limit. We are taken to the verge of our understanding and ability. In this act of reading we are confronted with a paradox: in death do we find life, in the emptying of ourselves do we find fullness. The poem returns us to ourselves by bringing us as readers to the edge of this abyss and reading becomes a plunge into this abyss. But Warren does not see this plunge as being nihilistic; rather it offers the possibility of the celebration of life itself. As in the act of poetic creation, the symbolic moment in our reading is one that simultaneously shapes and dissolves, or, to borrow another phrase from Coleridge, one that "fixing unfixes."²⁸ This eschatological moment is also an apocalyptic one in which what is buried may be uncovered, and in this uncovering there is a celebration of life. The dying vision has the power to give new life to our understanding. Upon this view of reading, though, it is not the reader who operates upon the text, but it is the text which "reads" the reader.

²⁷ Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* 60.

²⁸ *CW* III.4066.

Warren states this more explicitly in "A Poem of Pure Imagination":

...we may say that the reader does not interpret the poem but the poem interprets the reader. We may say that the poem is the light and not the thing seen by the light. The poem is the light by which the reader may view and review all the areas of experience with which he is acquainted (347).

The reading of poetry, then, becomes this simultaneous and paradoxical moment of blessing and cursing which Warren observed in the poet's act of creation in *The Ancient Mariner*. To have your experience interpreted by the poem necessarily involves both a blessing and a cursing, that is, a consecration of life in the world and an affliction of the knowledge of the reader's own fallen and finite ability. In the apocalypse of reading, there is an unveiling of the incommensurate relationship of our yearning to our ability; our yearning far outweighs our ability. But it is an activity that calls for response as well; in the apocalyptic quality there is an implied ethic, a call to live willfully and not passively. So, Warren says in *Democracy and Poetry* that poetry "demands participation" through "imaginative enactment" (89). Poetry is symbolic in its call for the reader to participate through a sort of sacramental engagement.

6.4 The Whole Question of Language

The significance of Warren's contribution toward contemporary thought about language and poetics does not lie in his having formed a new linguistic philosophy or in the claim to have developed a new principle of poetic creation. Rather the significance is found in his poetry itself and in the way that it calls into question our notions of language and our understanding of "being here" in the world. The symbolic vision of his poetry suggests certain possible ways of thinking that challenge and engage the reader with the unsayable. In "The Whole Ques-

tion " (AE 54), the poet calls for a thorough questioning of "the whole question" of existence.²⁹

You'll have to rethink the whole question. This
Getting born business is not as simple as it seemed,
Or midwife thought, or doctor deemed. It is,
Time shows, more complicated than either - or you - ever dreamed.

If it can be said that you dreamed anything
Before what's called a hand slapped blazing breath
Into you, snatched your dream's lulling nothing-
ness into what Paul called the body of this death.

You had not, for instance, previsioned this terrible thing called
love,
Which began with a strange, sweet taste and bulbed softness while
Two orbs of tender light leaned there above.
Sometimes your face got twisted. They called it a smile.

We find a similar movement here as in "Three Darknesses: I"; the poet begins at the end, at the edge of the boundless. But after voicing his sense of urgent need "to rethink the whole question," there is a similar motion of imaginative regress: from the ultimate question, that of being, the poet does not make the death leap into the infinite but is thrown back upon the concrete materiality of existence within space and time. The poet finds, however, that the question of being leads him to the question of language. To rethink what is real leads one to the source of understanding the real, which is language in all of its concreteness. So Warren explores here the inadequacies and possibilities of language. On the one hand, it is the limitations of language which make it necessary to rethink the whole question. Throughout the poem, the speaker highlights the ways that we use language to try to nail down concepts of being, but he recognizes that language cannot be nailed down in order to fulfill his yearning for a final answer. In the second

²⁹ This poem was originally Published in the *American Poetry Review* 11/6 (1982), 47, together with "You Sort Old Letters" (uncollected).

stanza, he alludes to "what Paul called the body of this death" (emphasis mine). In the third, he speaks of "this terrible thing called love" and describes how the infant's twisted face is "called" a smile (emphasis mine). In these early stanzas, the poet is calling into question the ability of language to provide an adequate understanding of experience in the world by raising the problematic of referentiality. The poet's emphasis upon naming and calling has to do with the referential quality of language, but reference does not answer the question that he is asking. There is the sense in each of these statements that the reference always goes wide of the mark. The poet has a deep sense of the *hamartia* of language in its fallen and finite condition.³⁰ In light of the instability of reference, one cannot, then, attempt to understand his being in the world by virtue of vocabulary or diction. The accumulation of words still leaves you with nothing:

You noticed how faces from outer vastness might twist, too.
But sometimes different twists, with names unknown,
And there were noises with no names you knew,
And times of dark silence when you seemed nothing - or gone.

Years passed, but sometimes seemed nothing except the same.
You knew more words, but they were words only, only -
Metaphysical midges that plunged at the single flame
That centred the infinite dark of your skull; or lonely,

You woke in the dark or real night to hear the breath
That seemed to promise reality in the vacuum
Of the sleepless dream beginning when underneath
The curtain dawn seeps, and on wet asphalt wet tires hum.

Though the speaker may know more words, he cannot avoid the "times of dark silence" in which the presence of nothing announces to him the weightlessness of such accumulation of words. This negative presence

³⁰ Compare Bloom's statement: "We are given a poetic art that dares constantly the root meaning of *hamartia*: to shoot wide of the mark." "Sunset Hawk: Warren's Poetry and Tradition" 73.

persists through the years under the realization that words are only words. In this instance language collapses in its own apocalypse as it plunges "at the the single flame" of the mind. This sense of nothing, though, is countered by the seeping in of the dawn light and the humming of the tires.

There is in this poem a clear refusal to become nostalgic about language and experience. One way the poet could answer his "whole question" would be to invoke the expert's homology - to return to Lyotard's terms - by which he could then make the move to absolutizing thought, especially thought about language. This would then be a return to the logocentrism of metaphysics. But such a return would have the effect of destroying experience. To absolutize would end in death. Coleridge makes a similar point in his reading of Schelling, rejecting the way in which Schelling makes nature absolute by reducing multēity to that which may be thought rather than remaining at the level of the imagination. Coleridge writes, "It cannot be thought - the thought would destroy, annihilate. Annihilation of all reality would be the consequence" (CN 4449). It is the imagination, though, that can grasp in the symbolic moment the plenitude of multēity without annihilating it in an absolutizing thought. But this moment is not the timeless and ego-centric measure of an earlier modernist poetics but is the moment in which the self is decentered in what Spanos calls "the ec-centric measure of mortality" (xiv). Even so, Warren here brings us to the edge of the absolute without jumping into an absolutizing language and can only fall back on the limitations of language. There is in this poem a movement toward a sort of Heideggerian overcoming of metaphysics. The poet is denied access to a metaphysics of language as a presence which secures and defines reference between our words and our experience. What is not

available to him is an "aesthetics that is grounded in metaphysics."³¹

However, Joan Stambaugh notes in her translation of Heidegger's essay, "Overcoming Metaphysics," that "overcoming" has the sense of incorporating instead of defeating or leaving behind: "Thus, to overcome metaphysics would mean to incorporate metaphysics, perhaps with the hope, but not with the certainty, of elevating it to a new reality."³² Warren's vision has overcome his earlier formalistic concerns and suggests a certain amount of hope for the possibilities of language and articulation. By confronting the limitations of language, he avoids the annihilation which a nostalgia for a sort of innocent, Adamic language would entail. His hope, though, is precisely a poetic hope, that poetry can provide the moment of a possible means of recovery through language. Such a recovery would not be a recapturing of a lost linguistic innocence, nor would it be a mere rehabilitation of our own fallen language. The recovery would come from the power of fallen language to bring us to the edge of the unrepresentable and to provide, in Warren's vision, a sort of momentary but real redemption. The hope that pervades his final stanza is not simply ironic -- although it certainly involves paradox -- but it is a hope vested in poetry itself.

Yes, you must try to rethink what is real. Perhaps
It is only a matter of language that traps you. You
May yet find a new one in which experience overlaps
Words. Or find some words that make the Truth come true.

As the previous stanzas have revealed, it is precisely the limitations of language that traps us and bars us from the absolute and the pure origin of identity. It is language which obstructs any *final* rethinking of the real. But such a situation does not negate the necessity to try to rethink what is real, for it is language which offers the possibility

³¹ Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," 42.

³² Martin Heidegger, "Overcoming Metaphysics" in *The End of Philosophy*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (London: Souvenir Press, 1975), 84.

and the hope of being brought back again and again to the unsayable which makes speaking or articulation possible. Warren's hope here seems to point again to the consummating and apocalyptic moment of death in which we will find that language "in which experience overlaps / words." In that moment, we will find that death is the word which makes "the Truth come true."³³ There must be a continuation to speak even within the confines of a fallen language. What the poet has learned is that he may no longer speak *about* language. Heidegger makes this point in "A Dialogue on Language":

H: Speaking *about* language turns language almost inevitably into an object.

J: And then its reality vanishes.

H: We then have taken up a position about language, instead of hearing from it.

J: Then there would only be a speaking *from* language...

H: ...in this manner, that it would be called *from out of language's* reality, and be led to its reality (50-51).

The danger of letting language become an object of our thought and speech is that our understanding of reality - not simply the reality of language - vanishes, for both Warren and Heidegger presuppose that language defines the relation of our being in the world. But the position of the poet must be one of humility in which he listens to language and he speaks from its reality so that he might be led back to the region of the source of thinking. In this way, Heidegger calls for the very thing that Warren yearns for: saying, in the sense of letting language show itself, letting it appear and shine, letting it insinuate itself in the articulation of the poet.³⁴

6.5 Myth of Mountain Sunrise and the Agony of the Poet

In the final poem of *Altitudes and Extensions*, "Myth of Mountain

³³ Compare Robert Penn Warren, *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (New York: Random House, 1983), 5-6.

³⁴ See "A Dialogue on Language," 47.

Sunrise" (AE 85), Warren seems to have heard that wind-borne call of the voice of the world and to have followed the trail announced by that call back to the region of poetry's source.³⁵ He comes in these lines to a moment of articulation, that moment toward which the poet has striven. But in this moment, it is not so much the poet who speaks as it is language itself. This poem opens up the time of language's own saying in which it brings to light truth in the event of its own speaking. Frances Bixler helpfully points out Warren's careful placement of this final poem in *New and Selected Poems* after one entitled, "Sunset," suggesting that they appear to be "companion poems" which elucidate Warren's characteristic dark/light contrast.³⁶ In each poem we find ourselves at the borders of experience as Warren continues to overturn our notions of beginning and ending. Whereas the first two poems of this collection brought us, as a beginning, to the end of logic ("Three Dark-nesses: I") and to the edge of the day at sunset ("Mortal Limit"), so here we find the poet bringing us to an ending in "Sunset" which is overturned by an apocalyptic beginning in "Myth of Mountain Sunrise." However, the more striking contrast between the two poems is found in the distinction between the poet's striving to speak his own name in "Sunset" ("Who knows his own name at the last? / How shall he speak to a soul that has none?") and the outward bulging and announcing character of language itself in "Myth of Mountain Sunrise." In the former poem, we overhear the yearning of the poet for a way to speak, for a place in which he can articulate his own being. He longs to know his name so that he might speak "in a dire hour," and yet this name appears as the

³⁵ This poem was originally published in the *New England Review* and *Bread Loaf Quarterly* 6/3 (1984), 418, together with "Arizona Midnight" (AE 15), "Winter Wheat Oklahoma" (AE 67), and "Instant on Crowded Street."

³⁶ See "Robert Penn Warren's Varied Voices: An Approach to the Late Poems" in *To Love the World So Well: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. by Dennis L. Weeks (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 95.

unrepresentable. But this contrast is made clear in the absence of the poet's "I" in the latter poem. The cry voiced in "Myth of Mountain Sunrise" comes from language through the world.

Prodigious, prodigal, crags steel-ringing
To dream-hoofs nightlong, proverbial
Words stone-incised in language unknowable, but somehow singing
Their wisdom-song against disaster of granite and all
Moonless non-redemption on the left hand of dawn:
The mountain dimly wakes, stretches itself on windlessness. Feels
its deepest chasm, waking, yawn.

In the sunrise, there is an uncovering of a space in which the poet may approach the unsayable as he discerns the saying of language in the voice of the world. The poet finds that this concrete saying gives what he is unable to speak about. This is not a language posited upon reference or representation but upon the power of language itself in the function of the pure imagination, what Coleridge called the verbal imagination. This poem does not refer to any single mountain or to some extra-verbal notion of mountain-ness; rather, it creates and transfigures a world as a possibility. This is a poem of concrete images in which the language is what it says.

In this prodigious and prodigal poem, we are brought to a sacramental moment in which the language, the reader, and experience participate together in this striving toward the unnameable. We are reminded of the similar beginning of *Audubon*, in which the artist sees

Eastward and over the cypress swamp, the dawn,
Redder than meat, break;
And the large bird,
Long neck outthrust, wings crooked to scull air, moved
In a slow calligraphy, crank, flat, and black against
The color of God's blood spilt, as though
Pulled by a string (I[A]).

The calligraphy of the heron inscribed upon God's spilt blood is trans-

formed here in "Myth of Mountain Sunrise" into the wisdom-song of joy sung by the mountain. Just as the heron in Audubon appears to be writing what has already been written, so Warren presents here the vision of a language already written and already spoken in the concrete existence of the mountain. The mountain is brought into being by "proverbial/ Words stone-incised in language unknowable...." In this mountain we see what Coleridge called the coinherence of act and being.³⁷ But this coinherence sustains a tension between the sayable and the unsayable: these crags of the mountain are etched out in a "language unknowable" but they are "somehow singing / Their wisdom-song...." The poet is a witness to that audible song which eludes his comprehension, which cannot be reduced to thought. Even the song of the mountain participates in a sort of imaginative regress which cannot transcend the agony of the fallen creation nor does it lift its voice beyond, but it is uttered against and amidst the disaster and non-redemption. The song is a negative utterance "against disaster of granite and all / Moonless non-redemption on the left hand of dawn." In this tension the act of speaking and the condition of being inhere in the same moment; if the poet questions the one, then he must question the other.

In the second section we find a similar sort of yearning as in "Sunset," but here it is the agony of the mountain's inwardness which "strives dayward," as darkness moving toward light.

The curdling agony of interred dark strives dayward, in stone
strives though
 No light here enters, has ever entered but
 In ageless age of primal flame. But look! All mountains want slowly
 to bulge outward extremoly. The leaf, whetted on light, will
cut
 Air like butter. Leaf cries: "I feel my deepest filament in dark
rejoice.
 I know that the density of basalt has a voice."

³⁷ See CN IV.4644.

However, inasmuch as the language is what it says -- that is, if we cannot divide the mountain from the language in the poem -- it is language that participates in this agony of outwardness; language strives in its own "curdling agony of interred dark," wanting to slowly bulge outward. Even the poet's line cannot contain this outward bulging, as the word "slowly" breaks into pieces within the text's terrain. The mountain's yearning is given voice in the cry of the leaf, which, being one with the mountain and earth, feels its "deepest filament" rejoice in the dark agony of the mountain. The leaf "whetted on light," however, does not rejoice in that light but in the consummation of the mountain's striving in its own entrance into the brightness of dawn. The agony and the voice of the mountain find their destiny in the cry of the leaf: "I know that the density of basalt has a voice." But, if what is envisioned here is the yearning of language itself, then where does the agony and voice of language find its destiny? Language finds its destiny in the agony and voice of the poet, who feels his "deepest filament in dark rejoice" and who knows the density of the darkness within language. The poet perceives how language resists being contained within thought but wants to give outness to thought; he knows the slow but extreme outward bulging of language. And, like the leaf, the poet cries out in the midst of the world.

This is the poet's passion, as we discussed in Chapter Three. The poet carries with him the agony of words and of language, which is displayed in a simultaneous burden and hope. Like the Mariner of Coleridge's poem, the poet seeks that place of articulation which is rooted in a "woful agony." The agony of language is inescapable, though, if one is to be able to speak; just as the agony provided for the Mariner the "strange power of speech," so for the poet it provides his moment of

in the outward bulging of language. The image of the Pompeian glory also coalesces with the image of sexual consummation and climax: the "girl-shape, birch-white sapling" flings its head back with eyes closed while hair falls in such a way as "to define fruit-swell of haunches, tingle of hand-hold." This consummation, however, eludes the coign of fundamental perspective and the knowledge of geometry. It is a consummation found only in the blazing light over the peak. It may not be reduced or translated. And it is this irreducible moment which "will be the old tale told."

The tale which is told is the myth of the mountain's sunrise. In "John Crowe Ransom: A Study in Irony" (1935), Warren summarizes Ransom's use of the term "myth" into a working definition for his essay: "myth represents a primary exercise of sensibility in which thought and feeling are one: it is a total communication."³⁹ His notion of myth in this latest poem, though, would appear to have retained the concern for the "primary exercise of sensibility" while rejecting the possibility of total communication. By virtue of the sacramental quality of the vision intimated in this poem, we may consider this primary and irreducible tale as the logos. Coleridge proposed that the logos consists in a coinherence of act and being and forms the grammatical correspondent of the absolute I AM of the Jewish and Christian scriptures.⁴⁰ Warren, however, seems to find in this poem not the equivalent of the I AM as a total communication but the trace of the unsayable after which he sought in "Three Darknesses." He has not found a final logic which will provide the archimedean point from which he may rethink the whole question of being; rather he has found a trace of the power and energy of language through the act of poetic creation which enables thought to begin.

³⁹ *Virginia Quarterly Review* XI (Winter 1935), 93-112.

⁴⁰ *CN* IV.4644.

He has not been able to finally define the appropriate relation between mind and nature,⁴¹ but he has caught a glimpse of the energy which might possibly speak to the condition of man's being in the world. His notion of the logos here follows Heidegger's use of the term: an overcoming return to the logos not as absolute presence but as *legein*, saying. And in this movement there is a return not to Truth but to truth which uncovers what has been forgotten. Palmer states that for Heidegger, "The concept of truth...is not a matter of correspondence to an already perceived nature of a thing; it is a matter of placing that thing in the light of understanding for the first time."⁴² Truth is an event of being, and the moment of that event is, for Warren, the saying of language in the poem, in which language shows itself to be that "shaping, projecting, light-shedding structure in which every extant thing is 'announced' in a certain way as it is 'seen'" (Palmer 82). Warren makes a similar point in "A Poem of Pure Imagination" when he says that "the poem is the light and not the thing seen by the light. The poem is the light by which the reader may view and review all the areas of experience with which he is acquainted" (347). Warren's vision seems to have found the moment - the *eschatia* - from which he may speak, a site which avoids definition and is continually shifting, but one in which the logos of "the old tale told" provides the space and time for the symbolic understanding. The logos as an understanding of the power and nature of language provides a means of interpreting. Warren's vision is that of a logos which circumvents logocentricity. No longer founded upon the notion of absolute presence in language or upon the idea of final identity, this vision of the logos opens itself to new possibilities in which presence and absence mingle and in which meaning recedes

⁴¹ See McNiece, *The Knowledge that Endures* 2.

⁴² Palmer, "The Postmodernity of Heidegger" 82.

just over the horizon of your sight.

In the end, Warren's search for and yearning after the given of language brought him back in the end to the source of poetry itself. However, his logos cannot be reduced to the name or the concept, as such, of this given. Rather, it names the ongoing reading of and responding to the tale. In his seminal essay, "Différance," Jacques Derrida writes of this notion which "is neither a word nor a concept" (441). He states that the term both "indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility" and "expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a *spacing* and *temporalizing* that puts off until 'later' what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible" (441, emphasis his). In Warren's notion of logos, we find this deferral of the possible which is presently impossible. Derrida expands this tension later in this essay as he expounds his reading of Heidegger's 1946 text, "Der Spruch des Anaximander." In the context of that discussion, Derrida writes,

'Older' than Being itself, our language has no name for such a difference. But we 'already know' that if it is unnameable, this is not simply provisional; it is not because our language has still not found or received this name, or because we would have to look for it in another language, outside the finite system of our language. It is because there is no name for this, not even essence or Being -- not even the name 'difference', which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and continually breaks up in a chain of different substitutions (463).

Though language is for the poet that given toward which he works, it remains unnameable. The poet never becomes the master of language. What is called for, though, is a new conception of language which is affirmed in the play of *différance*. What is not available to the poet is a nostalgia for an Adamic language, or as Derrida puts it, "the myth

of the purely maternal or paternal language belonging to the lost fatherland of thought" (463). However, Derrida affirms that on the other side of nostalgia there may be what he calls "Heideggerian hope" in "the quest for the proper word and the unique name" (463, emphasis mine). This quest, following Heidegger's trails back to the region of thought, is carried on through persistent questioning. Heidegger states,

Thus, in order to name what is deployed in Being, language will have to find a single word, the unique word. There we see how hazardous is every word of thought that addresses itself to Being. What is hazarded here, however, is not something impossible, because Being speaks through every language; everywhere and always (463-64).⁴³

Warren's later poetry takes up this hazardous quest after the unique word with all the joy of the poet's persistent, active engagement with language. It is a joyful labor, for in the moment of poetic creation the poet hears the voice of being speak in language. Like the Mariner of Coleridge's poem, the poet's heart burns with a mixture of joy and agony as he encounters this "strange power of speech." It is joy which sustains him in the quest and joy which rejoices to return to the region of the source of thought - language itself. For language is the poet's own country.⁴⁴ When the poet has the vision of his country, he experiences joy as language speaks in the midst of silence and the silence sinks like music on his heart.⁴⁵ But the silence does not negate the poet's role as a witness to the unrepresentable.⁴⁶ Rather, as Heideg-

⁴³ Derrida's translation in "Differance."

⁴⁴ See Coleridge, *The Ancient Mariner* ll. 464-467.

⁴⁵ See Coleridge, *The Ancient Mariner* ll. 478, 80, 98-99. Compare one of Warren's earlier poem's, "Joy" (*You, Emperors, and Others: Poems 1957-1960* [1960], 76):

If you've never had it, discussion is perfectly fruitless,
And if you have, you can tell nobody about it.
To explain silence, you scarcely try to shout it.
Let the flute and drum be still, the trumpet toothless.

⁴⁶ See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 82.

ger suggests, such silence remains the constant prologue to the authentic saying of language.⁴⁷ Silence characterizes and distinguishes the poet's testimony: no longer is he speaking about language but letting language speak in order to return the reader in its light to the world in which he dwells.

6.6 Wrestling with the Angel

For Warren, the returning of the reader is one of the effects of the pure imagination which operates in poetry. The illuminating quality of language makes the reader a creative being, as it brings him within the poetic moment to the place where language speaks. Neither the poem nor language are final or complete; both bear the scar of the Fall in that fissure into which poet and reader alike are thrown. But from that fissure, in the moment of the poem, there comes a shining forth of truth. Warren seems to adhere to a notion of truth similar to that of Heidegger, for whom truth was *a-letheia*, a revelation which brings the truth into the open.⁴⁸ Truth is an event of uncovering the quest after language and of overcoming the forgetfulness which obstructs our being in the world. The poem then becomes a moment of possible authenticity for the reader, calling him to actively engage in the being of the world about him.⁴⁹ The poem moves the reader in a yearning "toward truth as experience" ("The Use of the Past" 48) so that he might continue the constant work of understanding the self in the world.

When the poet comes into his own country of language, he may not take his repose, as if he has conquered language and brought it within his mastery. Rather, he must continue to grapple *within* this sphere of language *with* language. There is no point outside of language from which he may gain an advantage on it; he is instead always within its

⁴⁷ "A Dialogue on Language" 53.

⁴⁸ See J. Billis Miller, *Illustration* 79.

⁴⁹ Compare Stanley Corngold, "*Sein und Zeit*: Implications for Poetics" 112.

boundaries. In two late texts, Warren probes this notion of the poet in active engagement with language through the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel in the desert night. In a poem entitled "Dream" (NT 29), the poet affirms the necessity of this struggle:

Yes, grapple - or else the Morning Star
Westward will pale, and leave
Your ghost without history even, to wander
A desert trackless in sun-glare.

For the dream is only a self of yourself - and Jacob
Once wrestled, nightlong, his angel and, though
With wrenched thigh, had blackmailed a blessing, by dawn.

In "The Use of the Past," Warren makes a statement which appears as his own interpretation of this poem, considering specifically the self of the writer.

He is like Jacob, who wrestled the angel all night in the place to be called Peniel and, though at the break of day he received the mystic wound in the thigh, would not let go of the mysterious stranger until he had exacted the blessing he craved and could say that he had "seen God face to face" (47).

Both of these passages provide a vital image of the inescapable confrontation between the poet and the other of language. On the one hand it is a violent meeting submerged in darkness which ends in Jacob's being wounded. On the other, this is a critical moment of blessing, exacted by Jacob's tenacious hold upon the stranger. That blessing, we learn in Genesis 32, is his name: "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (32.28). But when Jacob asks the stranger to tell him his name, to identify himself, his request is denied. The wound that Jacob receives when his thigh is wrenched by the angel -- what Warren calls the "mystic wound" -- would appear, in Warren's vision, to be "the

strange power of speech" (*Ancient Mariner* l. 587). This is a wound that is never healed but is opened afresh in every poetic act, for every poem is a moment of struggling and of wrestling. Who is the angel with whom the poet wrestles, though? In "Dream," Warren intimates that the angel is "only a self of yourself." In "The Use of the Past," he identifies the mysterious stranger as God, whom Jacob saw face to face. On one level, these are the very things that Warren's poetry has sought after: an understanding of the self and of God. He has tirelessly dealt with the agony of being in the world as a means toward finally being able to know the self and to love God.⁵⁰ But, on another level, these concerns of the poet cannot be separated from his unending confrontation with language.

The poet's yearning pursuit of language cannot avoid the ongoing wrestling with its accompanying agony. This agonistic wrestling is the heart of poetry as the poet finds himself bound by the tension of the world, which is the tension between identity and difference, and bearing the pain of finite language yearning to express the infinite. The poet must grapple if he is to work toward the given and the unsayable. Poetry is, then, an antidote for passivity, as Warren asserts in *Democracy and Poetry*.⁵¹ It involves activity and engages the pure imagination. But this activity is not merely the assertion of the poet's own will. Like Jacob as he wrestled the angel, the poet must grapple even as he is grappled with. The pure imagination curses the poet with its mark of the Fall. But, even as it curses, so it blesses the poet. Language gives of itself; or, as Heidegger said, language speaks and in its speaking it bids the poet to enter into the tension (difference) of the

⁵⁰ See "Masts at Dawn" (NSP 236). See also Warren's comments in *Talking* 243 and our discussion of this passage in Chapter Four.

⁵¹ See p. 89.

world.⁵² This is the blessing craved by the poet in his yearning toward the other of language.

⁵² See Martin Heidegger, "Language" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 206-10.

Postscript

"There's worse, I guess, than in the end to offer
Your last bright keepsake, some fragment of the vase
That held your hopes, to offer it to a child.
And the child took the crazy toy, and laughed."¹

In this thesis, I have asserted that Robert Penn Warren's understanding of language shifted in his later poetry away from a concern for the poetic use of language and toward a preoccupation with the problematic nature of language, which he perceived to be an unresolvable tension between its limit and its power, or between the sayable and the unsayable. Following Coleridge, Warren held that language is the living power and agent by which the imagination functions not only in the act of poetic creation but also in any enactment of being in the world, by which I mean the exercise of the conscious will in the creative engagement with the world. By language, Warren did not conceive, though, of simply a linguistic system made up of signifiers detached from that which is signified. Rather, like Heidegger, he understood language as that which speaks and declares the condition of our being in the world. And, as we have shown, his poetry suggests that the poet may speak only after he has listened to the speaking of language itself, which Warren apprehended in the voice of the world. The poet's experience with language, though, is marked by his continual confrontation with the limit of the sayable and by his desire for some means of articulation within that limit. His hope is not that he will be able to say the unsayable but that the unsayable will be spoken by the voice of language itself.

Warren's poetic vision was rooted in his concern with *poiesis* itself, with the act of creation. His understanding of this concept,

¹ *BD* 79 22.

though, moves beyond any static definition which focuses attention simply upon what is created. For Warren, *poiesis* is not merely the making of an object, constructed out of the material of language so that the poem becomes either a "verbal icon" or a "well wrought urn." Instead, his emphasis repeatedly falls upon the act of creation: *poiesis* becomes as much a matter of doing as a matter of making, and language itself becomes the life-giving energy which generates this act. The act of poetic creation does not cease when the poem is "completed," but it continues on through the event of reading, as well, in which the reader's activity - itself enacted by language - participates in the *poiesis*. The notion of enactment runs throughout Warren's poetry and criticism; most notably, it forms a central concern in his reading of *The Ancient Mariner* and pervades his own recasting of the poet as artist in *Audubon: A Vision*. Warren's attention to the moment of enactment in the poem helps to define the Romantic quality of his thought: the poem ceases to be a mirror which reflects and explains and becomes the lamp which illuminates.² The poetic moment does not describe another "lost" moment which is given temporal and ontological precedence before the poem itself and of which the poem at best becomes an accurate reflection and at worst can only haltingly refer through approximating language.³ Rather, the poem is the moment, not because of its mimetic capacity (*mimesis*) but because of its illuminating capacity (*poiesis*). Language has become for Warren, as it was for Coleridge, a living power by which "the things of most importance to mankind are actuated..." (*Aids to Reflection* 10). Heidegger presses this even further when he says, "The

² See M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1953), 57-69.

³ This is not to deny the place of real historical concerns in Warren's thought or to suggest that he did not draw upon biographical material for many ideas which are invariably a part of the poetry. But our understanding of the relationship between Warren's impulse toward historical thinking and his later poetry needs to be checked by our reading of his essay "The Use of the Past," where he clearly states that even "historical thinking" is creative.

word alone gives being to the thing" ("Nature" 62). As we have demonstrated, Warren's later poetry continually reenacts the moment in which language illuminates being through the exercise of the "pure imagination."

In this moment of enactment, the poem illuminates being by uncovering the unsayable within the sayable itself. When the poet asks in Audubon why "truth [is] the only thing that cannot / Be spoken?" he can simply reply, "It can only be enacted..." (IV[E]). The poem does not uncover the unsayable by reifying it into a tangible object. The poem does not become a statement of the "contents" of the unsayable. The unsayable cannot be equated with any one thing or any single statement; for Warren it cannot be reduced to the concept of truth - although truth certainly seems to be a symptom of the unsayable in his thinking. This is not to suggest, however, that the unsayable is not "real." On the contrary, it is the magnitude of its reality which presses so upon the poet and finally makes any speech or articulation possible. This would seem to be precisely what Warren means by "the real" which he claims must be re-thought in "The Whole Question." The reality of the unsayable can only be located within the void of the said, or in what Budick and Iser call "negativity."⁴ Its presence fills a non-site somewhere within what is said; like the "curdling agony of interred dark [which] strives dayward" ("Myth of Mountain Sunrise"), it is a presence which is conspicuous by its powerful absence. Just as "All mountains want slowly / ly to bulge outward extremely," so the poem bulges slowly but extremely with the presence of the unsayable. Within this paradoxical tension, the poem bears an irreducibility as it generates its own sort of hermeneutic circle. It is language as the unsayable which provides

⁴ Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

the illuminating power within the said of the poem, and yet what is illuminated is the unsayable itself. It is not the poet who finally says the unsayable. As we saw in the withdrawing of the poet in "Myth of Mountain Sunrise," it is language which says the unsayable through its own speaking. Apart from this, the poet could not speak.

The poem brings us into the absent presence of the unsayable by bringing us to the very limits of the sayable. Budick and Iser put it this way: "Once we have encountered the limits of the sayable, we must acknowledge the existence of 'unsayable things' [Wittgenstein's phrase] and, by means of a language somehow formed on being silent, articulate that which cannot be said" (xii). The poet's encounter with the limits of the sayable in the act of creation wounds him and results in an agony which cannot be mastered or finally defeated. This wound may only be healed through the continued risk of wounding which the poet takes as he wrestles, Jacob-like, with language. This is the agony which the poet continually bears. In the experience of this agonistic encounter, Warren's poetry also repeatedly presses us as readers to that edge where language bulges to the point of rupture. What is beyond this *eschatia* or limit of language is not simply "the unsayable" as an entity (the "unsaid") but that which cannot be said. When confronting the limits of language, the poet could simply choose to remain silent, in which case he has been overcome by silence. Warren, however, avoided this kind of linguistic determinism. On the other hand, the poet could deny the reality of these limits and attempt to overcome silence through a final defeat of the unsayable. Warren also denied this artistic delusion of "pure" poetry. Rather, what we find in his later poetry is a speaking which has incorporated silence in such a way that silence has become part of the substance of speech. It is an articulation rooted in lis-

tening. By continually seeking this language of incorporated silence, Warren approached a poetic in which he might articulate that which cannot be grasped without ever transgressing the limit of the sayable.

This threshold of language where the sayable and the unsayable are so vitally aware of one another bears the qualities of the sort of symbolic thought which Warren observed in Coleridge and developed in "A Poem of Pure Imagination." To borrow Coleridge's phrasing, we may say that the sayable and the unsayable display a coinherence with one another. The power of language rests in the reality of the one containing the power of two - the sayable and the unsayable. This is not to suggest that the two are in opposition to one another. Rather, this symbolic notion of language is one of "combined negations" (Budick and Iser xv) so that the resultant symbolic understanding does not finally resolve or harmonize the "tension of the world" but generates the play of thought within that tension so that the poet might speak in the presence of the unsayable. Warren's notion of the "tension of the world" brings to light this symbolic tension of language, as we observed in *Audubon: A Vision*. Following Derrida, it involves both a difference of distinction and inequality and a tension of delay and deferral, both temporally and spatially, which "puts off until 'later' what is presently denied, the possible that is presently impossible" ("Différance" 441). Thus it is the tension of language which provides the forward-moving motion of Warren's later poetry, so that the poet might continue to walk in the world. The symbolic tension calls for the persistent and repetitive telling of that story which Warren says will be the old tale told.

For Warren, this symbolic and generative tension between the sayable and the unsayable characterizes what he calls the sacramental

vision. Such a vision, though, does not propose any theology as such; rather it espouses a view of language which makes all articulation finally theological. The relationship between the sayable and the unsayable in this symbolic tension is not only one of coinherence but one in which the sayable is consubstantial with the unsayable. They are bound together in such a way that the one partakes of the other. The sayable is not lost in the void of the unsayable, and neither is the unsayable vacated by the presence of the said. The sacramental vision of Warren's later poetry insists upon the necessity of embracing the unsayable in the sayable if one is to be able to speak at all. In the experience of this sacramental tension, the "heart is impacted with a fierce impulse / To unwordable utterance..." ("Heart of Autumn," *NT* 75). The vision also longs for that place in which poet and reader alike might

...embrace

The world in its fullness and threat, and feel, like Jacob, at last
The merciless grasp of unwordable grace
Which has no truth to tell of future or past -

But only life's instancy... ("Youthful Truth-Seeker," *BH* 25).

The impulse toward the "unwordable utterance" paradoxically finds its rest in the "merciless grasp of unwordable grace" which the poet experiences in the act of wrestling language itself. Though the poet seeks to embrace the world, he finds that he is himself grasped by language, and in its merciless grasp he receives the wound of language. In this unavoidable and paradoxical tension, Warren's poetry offers the possibility of continued theological articulation under the postmodern condition. Such articulation, though, will inevitably be aporetic as it joyfully bears the wound of language as the mark of its own speaking within the limits of the sayable. It will be an articulation which does not har-

monize the tension of the world but will enter into that tension as it seeks "the word that is able to call one to faith and preserve one in faith."⁵ When such articulation is caught in the merciless grasp of unwordable grace, it may continue to tell its story, bearing the agony that brings about a strange power of speech. From this perspective, though, that story will be a poetic one: this view of theological articulation is an act of *poiesis* which does not simply create an object but calls for the continual and regenerative act of speaking in the world. For poet and theologian alike, then, language becomes the source, the power and the foil.

Warren's "last bright keepsake" which is offered to us in the postmodern context is this story of the poet's own confrontation with the unsayable which provided the moment within which he could begin to speak. Although this keepsake may only be a fragment of that vase which once held our hopes, it nonetheless engenders a hopefulness in its fragmented condition as we embark on the hazardous course of encountering language. This offering not only has anticipated certain turns in postmodern thought but also contributes a tireless voice to ongoing critical discourse. The voice speaks of the power of paradox and of the necessity of meaning without allowing either to become rarefied into an abstracted foundational concept. The voice counters any sort of nihilistic tendency in postmodern discourse by calling the reader to continue to walk in the world. The voice also reminds us that there is always something more to be thought. This is certainly true of Warren's later poetry, which harbors a future of meaning which will ensure that it is read and reread.⁶ We might even take this keepsake like a crazy toy and laugh.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, quoted in Klemm 180.

⁶ See Kearney 110.

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