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“Reckoning” with America’s Past: Robert Penn Warren’s Later Poetry

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For Robert Penn Warren, an understanding of the self comes from obtaining knowledge of all parts of an individual’s past; not only personal and familial, but also regional and national. He explains this theory in *Democracy and Poetry* (1975) and in his essay “The Use of the Past” (1977), in which he credits the past for “giving us a sense of time” and describes how the past “gives us the image of a community and of a role, an identity within that community, the image of a self to be achieved.”¹ Warren also develops this philosophy of the past in his novels, poetry, and works of nonfiction that explore the historical concepts of westward expansion, the Civil War, the founders’ faultily idealistic expectations for democracy, the threats of the Industrial Revolution, and the ills of subsequent modernization. Far from a strictly “historical writer,” however, a label he reportedly “balked at,”² Warren chooses to use these historical backdrops in order to explore the American individual’s place in history. According to Warren, understanding the past fosters the development of selfhood, of individual identity, and ultimately, he hopes, incites a desire to influence history for the best.

From the very beginning of Warren’s life as a scholar, history played a large role in his academic endeavors. His fugitive roots taught him to investigate the implications of a shared “Southern heritage”³ and a collective national identity, as was demonstrated when Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, and their colleagues published *I’ll Take*

¹ Robert Penn Warren, “The Use of the Past,” in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 49, 50; first published in *A Time to Hear and Answer: Essays for the Bicentennial Season*, ed. Taylor Littleton (Auburn: University of Alabama Press, 1977).

² Hugh Ruppersburg, *Robert Penn Warren and the American Imagination* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 3.

³ L. Hugh Moore, Jr. *Robert Penn Warren and History: The Big Myth We Live* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 12.

My Stand (1930) in response to Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Though Warren's legacy evolved past the initial Fugitive label, the early-established practice of re-examining and re-evaluating history, regional and otherwise, continued to take precedence in his work. While Warren's nationalistic concerns, or at least his public expression of them, temporarily slipped into the background after his Vanderbilt days, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the bicentennial celebration of 1976 propelled him into over two decades of active involvement in and commentary upon national affairs. In this time, the primary message of his work was for Americans to understand the historical weight of contemporary issues and to respond accordingly with a moral awareness and a sense of responsibility to improve the situation at hand. In order to demonstrate Warren's "increasing vigor" and "ever-strengthening interest in the individual's place in modern America,"⁴ one may briefly consider the historically inclined, somewhat moralistic works from later in his career.

Arguably another catalyst of Warren's public commentary on national matters was the work of C. Vann Woodward, one of Warren's scholarly friends.⁵ Woodward challenged fellow historians in his book *The Burden of Southern History* to mark the centennial of the Civil War by remaining true to the facts, having a "special obligation of sobriety and fidelity to the record" so as not to "flatter the self-righteousness of neither side."⁶ Perhaps encouraged by the fact that Woodward dedicated this book to him, Warren accepted Woodward's challenge and responded by publishing *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* in 1961. This book, which names the Civil War as the greatest event in history for America's imagination,⁷ contains the seeds of what would later grow into

⁴ Rappersburg, 2.

⁵ Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 343.

⁶ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* 3rd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1993), 87.

⁷ Joseph Blotner explains Warren's reasoning in *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography*, 344: "The war gave the South the Great Alibi and gave the North the Treasury of Virtue. . . . 'By the

Warren's *Democracy and Poetry* and "The Use of the Past." In *Legacy*, Warren claims, "History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves [. . .] so that we can better face the future."⁸ For Warren, a realistic grasp of the past facilitates the development of selfhood and identity.

After Woodward's challenge was met, Warren continued to be vocal on issues of American events, past and present. *Legacy* was followed by *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965), in which Warren expands on the earlier *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (1956) and "calls on Americans to respond appropriately to the moral demands of a historical situation," encouraging them to come to terms with the past for the good of the nation's future.⁹ In 1974, Warren gave two lectures on Thomas Jefferson as part of the National Endowment for the Humanities Program which were later transformed into his book, *Democracy and Poetry*. At this time, Richard Nixon was still in the White House, denying involvement in the Watergate scandal. As America questioned its government, Warren's timely response called attention to the damaging effects of poor national leadership. According to Paul Mariani, Warren's lectures ask the question, "How are the arts to fare, then, in an America that has moved this far from the leadership afforded by a figure like Jefferson himself?" Not immune from judgment, however, the forefathers are also criticized for their idealistic vision of democracy. Mariani explains that for Warren, the "decay of the concept of self" is a result of the "unfolding of our democratic experiment over the past two centuries."¹⁰ As a way to re-build the concept of self and therefore to discover how to fit into this confused vision for America, Warren encourages Americans to "return [. . .] to a scrutiny of our own experience of

Great Alibi pellagra, hookworm, and illiteracy are all explained.' . . . The Southerner 'turns defeat into victory, defects into virtues.' For the Northerner, the Treasury of Virtue is 'a consciously undertaken crusade so full of righteousness that there is enough overplus stored in Heaven' to constitute 'a plenary indulgence, for all sins past, present, and future, freely given by the hand of history.'"

⁸ Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1961), 100.

⁹ Ruppensburg, 22.

¹⁰ Paul Mariani, "Robert Penn Warren," in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 212-213.

our own world.”¹¹ Continuing with this call-to-action, Warren’s influential essay of 1977, “The Use of the Past,” takes advantage of the bicentennial as an opportunity to comment on the self-imposed, selective blindness most Americans have in regard to their history. He quips, “Americans, by and large, have had little use for the past except for purposes of interior decorating, personal vanity, or pietistic and self-congratulatory celebrations.” This observation encourages Americans to see the bicentennial as an opportunity to reflect on the past, not merely as a date for prideful and shallow national sentiment. He questions, “Are we ready to learn from our past that [. . .] there is such a thing as ‘the irony of history’? For what was once our future has now become our past—and that is the deepest irony of all.”¹²

In 1979, Warren printed an edited version of his long poem, *Brothers to Dragons*, originally published in 1953, in order to make it more historically accurate. By introducing Meriwether Lewis earlier and allowing Jefferson to see his own involvement in the “surrogate son’s tragic suicide,” he emphasizes the “awareness of human culpability rather than perfectibility.”¹³ In this revised edition, Warren’s characters acknowledge and take more responsibility for the past, therefore demonstrating the moral awareness that Warren increasingly advocated for Americans. There is a strong push for cutting through illusions to gain a realistic picture of the past within the prose and poetic works of this time period. In 1980, Warren published *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back*, in which he explains the relationship between “current conditions and their genesis in past events” and promotes the idea of “moral duty [. . .] to confront responsibility for the problems of modern day.”¹⁴ These “problems” include everything from the civil rights issue to the potential threat of nuclear war that faced modern American society. For Warren, obtaining an understanding of the past was the first step toward developing a constructive conception for positive change in these matters and for America’s future.

¹¹ Robert Penn Warren, *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975), 41.

¹² Warren, “The Use of the Past,” 31, 36.

¹³ Blotner, 448.

¹⁴ Ruppensburg, 129.

Though numerous critics¹⁵ have devoted studies to the role of the past within Warren's works and have acknowledged the strong sense of history that shapes them, many writers choose to focus mainly on the novels. L. Hugh Moore, for example, argues in *Robert Penn Warren and History*, "no one can adequately understand Warren without carefully considering the influence of history upon him and his use of it in his works, especially in his novels" (italics added).¹⁶ Lewis P. Simpson, in a similar pattern, chooses four of Warren's novels—*Night Rider*, *At Heaven's Gate*, *All the King's Men*, and *World Enough and Time*—as the main subject matter in his historically oriented article, "The Ferocity of Self: History and Consciousness in Southern Literature."¹⁷ While his novels and nonfiction provide great insight into his intellectual focus, his later poetic works—*Rumor Verified*, *Poems 1979-1980* and *Altitudes and Extensions*, *Poems 1980-1984* in particular—deserve more critical attention in terms of understanding Warren's philosophy of the past. Joseph Blotner notes that Warren's late poems were "not widely reviewed" and Mariani remarks how few of his colleagues have "kept up with Warren's [late] poetry."¹⁸ Much has been made of Warren's earlier poems such as "Pondy Woods" and "The Ballad of Billie Potts," and even of *Audubon: A Vision*, yet much remains to be explored in the poems of *Rumor Verified* and *Altitudes and Extensions*.

Readers need not look any further than the first page of *Rumor Verified* to see how prominently Warren's philosophy of the past informs his later poetry. Considering that Warren was familiar with Dante's *Inferno*, it is significant that he selects the last lines of the last canto of this epic poem for the epigraph of *Rumor Verified*. In Canto XXXIV, from which the epigraph is derived, Dante and Virgil are in the Fourth Ring of the Ninth Circle of hell, the deepest point and, most significantly, the

¹⁵ William Bedford Clark, A.L. Clements, James A. Grimshaw, Randy J. Hendricks, Mark Jarman, L. Hugh Moore, Jr., Randolph P. Runyon, Hugh Ruppensburg, Lewis P. Simpson, and Victor Strandberg, to name a few.

¹⁶ Moore, 11.

¹⁷ Lewis P. Simpson, "The Ferocity of Self: History and Consciousness in Southern Literature," *South Central Review* 1 no. ½ (Spring/Summer 1984): 67-84.

¹⁸ Blotner, 463; Mariani, 211.

representative pinnacle of mankind's hierarchy of sins. Dante and Virgil, finally at the end of their long journey, come across a three-headed Lucifer chewing on the three most evil traitors in history, Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius. Directly after witnessing this vilest form of evil, Virgil tells Dante, "'tis time that we depart, / for we have seen the whole."¹⁹ With Dante clinging to his back, Virgil climbs the hairy body of Lucifer to reach the center of the Earth and then both follow the path through the hemisphere to escape from hell. Once they emerge, Warren's chosen lines are given, ". . . i' vidi de le cose belle / Che porta il ciel, per un pertugio tondo, / E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle," which translate to, "I beheld through a round aperture / Some of the beauteous things that Heaven doth bear; / Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars."²⁰ These lines not only reflect Warren's philosophy of the past, they also establish a pattern for the poems of *Rumor Verified* and *Altitudes and Extensions*.²¹

In Dante's *Inferno*, the narrator is exposed to humanity's immorality as he encounters the minor and major sinners in history, and those in between. Only after Dante has witnessed this realistic portrayal of the past, horrors included, is he able to emerge from hell, return to the world, and behold the stars with new vision. While the narrators of Warren's poems do not end up in heaven, they are often awakened to a more enlightened

¹⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Dante's Inferno*, trans. Mark Musa. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): XXXIV, lines 68-69.

²⁰ *Dante's Inferno*, XXXIV, lines 136-139.

²¹ Before demonstrating how these ideas are at work within these books of poetry, it is important to make a distinction between Warren's definitions of *history* and the *past*. Moore once observed that defining Warren's philosophy of history "represents perhaps the greatest challenge for the critic attempting to study Warren's thought" (64). While it does pose significant challenges, Warren makes clear enough distinctions between *history* and the *past*. In the most general of terms, the word *history* refers to events that have been filtered through the self, while the *past* is a broader, more objective term for the composite list of all events that have occurred in time. Other critics have observed this delineation of terms; for example, Ruppensburg notes, "History for Warren is always perceived, experienced, and acted out by the individual" (21). Similarly, Moore claims that Warren uses the term history "in relation to the individual's personal past and his family heritage" (15). On the other hand, the past may be seen as something more fixed, something that can provide relative meaning to the present and the future. Knowledge of the past is necessary for understanding where and how we fit into the greater scope of our personal, regional, and national progress. Warren's poetic works render *history* and the *past* indefinitely connected. One may clearly see this theory at work in *Rumor Verified* and *Altitudes and Extensions*, as the narrator is often in the process of coming to terms with the *past* and subsequently filtering this knowledge through the self to inform his sense of personal *history*.

understanding of themselves and of the world after confronting the past. Moore explains that for Warren,

Knowledge even of the evil history, of horrible events like the gory butchering of a slave, has value. Such horrible facts, first, help the individual confront his own sinful nature. And, second, optimistic illusions perish in the fire of history, for the facts of the past will correct any such delusions.²²

In Warren's later poems, just as in Canto XXXIV of Dante's *Inferno*, "such horrible facts" as "the gargle of blood on bronze blade" ("Looking Northward, Aegeanward" line 27) and the shameful treatment of American Indians referenced in "Going West," force the narrator to "confront his own sinful nature," and/or that of his country. Reminiscent of the journey of Dante and Virgil, a reader of Warren's later poetry figuratively accompanies the narrator through his confrontation with the past and the self. Through *Rumor Verified* and *Altitudes and Extensions*, readers are not merely instructed to acknowledge their past, but instead are drawn in through poetic devices to participate in Warren's vision for an aware America. According to William Bedford Clark, Warren believes that "[Poetry] may trigger the energy necessary to effect a change, in ourselves and in the world in which we live. Poetry might thus serve to renew the democratic impulse, even in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America."²³ Unlike the one-way flow of information from author to audience that occurs when reading novels or nonfiction, the dynamic nature of poetry paired with Warren's effort to engage his audience results in a unique dialectic relationship between poet and reader.

Throughout *Rumor Verified* and *Altitudes and Extensions*, dream-like delusions are often shattered and replaced by stark, realistic images once the narrator has "awakened." As the title poem of *Rumor Verified* tells us, the "rumor verified" is "that you are simply a man, with a man's dead reckoning, nothing more"

²² Moore, 14.

²³ William Bedford Clark, *The American Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 126.

(34).²⁴ Warren illustrates the destruction of “optimistic illusions” by the “fire of history” through rich, symbolic imagery in his poems. For example, the first poem of the Prologue, “Chthonian Revelation: A Myth,” contains a narrator who appears to be leaving a dream and entering a new reality:

On the soft sand he is sure
 Of the track. Then looks back
 Just once through the dwindling aperture
 To the world of light-tangled detail
 Where once life was led that now seems illusion of life
 And swings in the distance with no more identity than
 A dream half-remembered. He turns. (21-27)

The “dwindling aperture” harkens back to Dante, as does much of the imagery and word choice within these poems. However, while Dante gazes at Heaven through the aperture, this narrator looks back to a life that seemed real but is now recognized as illusion.²⁵ Within these later poems, the narrator often has a moment of awakening after reckoning with the past, only to realize that his former self had no identity, since it was formed in a world of illusion; as for this narrator, it is merely “a dream half-remembered.” In “Going West,” as in the Prologue, the narrator’s abstract view of the past is replaced with a concrete, aware vision for the future. This poem may serve as a model for how Warren uses historical backdrops to employ his larger philosophy that Americans must know and understand the past in order ultimately to develop their sense of self. “Going West” and the rest of these late poems confirm the overarching message found in Warren’s fiction and nonfiction alike: “We live in the world, and our understanding of it is of crucial importance to us. Only by trying to know our role in the world can we, in the end,

²⁴ All poems quoted from: Robert Penn Warren, *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998); *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980*, 444-487; *Altitudes and Extensions: Poems 1980-1984*, 527-584. Poems will be cited parenthetically in the text by line numbers.

²⁵ Randolph Paul Runyon, *The Braided Dream: Robert Penn Warren’s Late Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 92. Runyon suggests, “Only at the end of ‘Chthonian Revelation,’ in the very last word, does what Dante saw become what Warren’s protagonists see, through the arch (of sea cave and swimming stroke) that is the equivalent here of his pertugio, a framed, glorified, fragment of heaven.”

come to know ourselves.”²⁶

Warren has argued that the westward expansion, and the resulting brutality to Native Americans, was a frightening consequence of the time when Americans were blinded by their self-righteous quest to fulfill Manifest Destiny. He saw this move westward as a false liberation, an irresponsible attempt to escape the historical implications for the future. As mentioned above, Warren contributed an essay to the Fugitive compilation, *I'll Take My Stand*, in response to Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner's essay, which was quickly coined "The Turner Thesis" after its debut in 1893, makes the claim that the United States was not simply an extension of Europe, but instead a new and improved empire. As Michael P. Malone describes it, "Turner's frontier was a sociocultural furnace that forged a new Americanism embodying democracy, individualism, pragmatism, and a healthy nationalism."²⁷ Warren's essay represents the "colonial" or "plundered province" interpretation of Turner's Thesis that was mainly developed in the 1930's and 1940's; namely, that the West and the South were both victims of "northeastern, capitalistic exploitation of resources and population."²⁸

After *I'll Take My Stand* was published, Warren continued to harbor contempt for the negative effects of this blind stabbing westward. In "The Use of the Past," Warren concedes that America's "mission to make all things new" resulted in "an unquenchable optimism" and laments that along with this rebirth came the belief that Americans were "a Chosen People" who felt that "God's will and their own were miraculously identical."²⁹ In a 1984 interview, Warren refers to the poem "Going West" as "the bloody story of the West [. . .] one of the most murderous stories we can think of."³⁰ This poem exemplifies Warren's attempt for poetry to "[fulfill] its function of bringing us face

²⁶ Warren, "The Use of the Past," 42.

²⁷ Michael P. Malone, "Beyond the Last Frontier: Toward a New Approach to Western American History," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (Nov., 1989): 410.

²⁸ Malone, 416.

²⁹ Warren, "The Use of the Past," 32.

³⁰ Qtd. in Ruppensburg, 113.

to face with our nature and our fate.”³¹ A seemingly pleasant road trip westward takes an unexpected twist when a man is faced with his nation’s sordid past. Quite literally, “Going West” is a poem with a narrator “driving toward” his illusion of the Promised West, only to be faced “directly” with the literal blood and guts of a pheasant and the figurative blood and guts of America’s past. The poetic devices Warren employs in this poem reaffirm the false, dreamlike illusion of the West and the shocking destruction of this ideal, while drawing the audience into the poem in an attempt to encourage personal self-reflection. In particular, Warren’s use of the inclusive “you,” his vivid imagery, and the line breaks and other pacing techniques are what truly make this poem an interactive experience; much more than, for example, his nonfiction works mentioned earlier. As Warren explains, “[. . .] a good poem involves the participation of the reader; it must, as Coleridge puts it, make the reader into ‘an active creative being.’”³² “Going West” carries a message similar to Warren’s “wake-up call” in his prose, but the poetry creates a more powerful participatory experience for readers.

The first section of twelve lines describes the dreamlike ride into the west; the poem begins, “Westward the Great Plains are lifting, as you / Can tell from the slight additional pressure / The accelerator requires” (1-3). Warren believed that “resistance” was a necessary element for successful poetry. His play with language and pace in this poem, and especially in these three lines, represents the “tension between the rhythm of the poem and the rhythm of speech” that Warren credits for enhancing poetry.³³ Along with the pressure on the gas pedal, the reader also experiences some extra strain while chugging through the dense, nonpoetic language of “the slight additional pressure the accelerator requires.” Moving on, the sun, as with much of the natural imagery in *Rumor Verified*, is personified as possessing a certain wisdom;³⁴ most likely Warren is pointing

³¹ Warren, “The Use of the Past,” 31.

³² Robert Penn Warren, “Pure and Impure Poetry,” in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1989), 25.

³³ Warren, “Pure and Impure Poetry,” 24.

³⁴ Other examples include: the “time-polished facet” of the “sand-grain” (42, 44) in “Law of

to the truth that natural elements, sun, water, earth, etc., have an advantage over humans in knowing all of the past since the beginning of time. Here, “The sun, / Man to man, stares you straight in the eye” (3-4), in a nonverbal challenge to the narrator’s vision. The presence of the poetic “you” also challenges the reader’s vision and makes him question his understanding of the past. As the car presses along, the solid imagery of “wheat stubble” (6) melts away into increasingly less tangible, less defined descriptions of “nothing but range land” (7) and the “Blur of burnt goldness” (9). The shift in imagery here signals “tension between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract” that Warren praised for bringing texture and richness to poetry.³⁵ It also reaffirms the trend in Warren’s imagery mentioned earlier; reality is associated with palpable details while illusions are aligned with abstract images.

Next, there is a long, lazy line to lure readers into a lifeless dream state, rife with nonsensical combinations of words, reminiscent of that state between awake and dreaming: “With tire song lulling like love, gaze riding white ribbon, forward / You plunge” (8-9). The lack of an end-stop in that long line makes us linger even longer on the primary stressed word, “plunge,” that finally ends the sentence in line nine. Those two simple words, “You plunge,” in line nine slow the reader down to a complete stop before shooting forth once again into a “Blur of burnt goldness / Past eye-edge on each / Side back-whirling, you arrow / Into the heart of hypnosis” (9-12). The significant shift from the long, lazy line to a series of three short, abrupt lines with alliteration, near rhymes, and word play of “eye,” “edge,” and “each” gives readers a sense of the experience of “back-whirling” and “hypnosis” as a state of mild confusion and excitement. This energetic description of “arrow[ing] into the heart of hypnosis” may hearken back to the blind “sense of being freed from the past” that Warren warns Americans against.³⁶

Attrition”; “stones wise with suffering” (21) and “the sea” that can “tell us of the blind depth of groan out yonder” (34) in “If”; and the “stream” with “murmurous wisdom there uttered” (6) in “What Voice at Moth-Hour.”

³⁵ Warren, “Pure and Impure Poetry,” 24.

³⁶ Warren, “The Use of the Past,” 32.

The next line, which demands attention by standing on its own, reveals Warren's commentary on this young man's dreamlike drive west: "This is one way to write the history of America" (13). Since Warren's views on the false escape and illusion of the west are evident, readers may rest assured that this is not the way *he* would wish to write America's history, with eyes half shut, blinded by the sun, and hypnotized by the winding road and bogus promises of new beginnings. As the narrator soon discovers, man may only live undisturbed in this mindset with his eyes half-closed, because as soon as his eyes are forced open, he cannot return to the blissful ignorance of that hypnotic dream. The tense next shifts to reveal that those first twelve lines are the retelling of a memory, and Warren presents a current working through of the narrator's thought process as he realizes the impact this event had on him. The all-inclusive "you" switches to "I" as readers join the narrator's personal self-reflection and his experience of gaining understanding from the nation's past. The narrator remembers being lured even deeper into that hypnotic state: "I had to slap / The back of my neck to stay awake, / Eyes westward in challenge to sun-gaze, lids / Slitted for sight" (15-18). His eyes, his vision, have decreased to mere "slits" as he boldly continues into the false dream of the West. This may be seen as a metaphor for the Americans who blindly pushed westward, unencumbered by the death and destruction they were causing for the Native Americans on the way.

The next few lines—"The land, / Beyond miles of distance, fled / Backward to whatever had been" (18-21)—capture Warren's frustration with Americans who attempted to escape the reality of time by running west into untouched land, "as though space were time." James A. Grimshaw explains, "Warren suggests that time *does* exist and that it is the responsibility of those who pass through it to use it wisely, learning from the past and leaving for following generations the lessons gained from time."³⁷ In "Going West," Warren describes

³⁷ James A. Grimshaw, Jr., *Understanding Robert Penn Warren* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 15.

the West's free space as simulating the affects of a time machine, flying "backward to whatever had been" (20). This attempt was, of course, ultimately irresponsible and ineffective.

There is a hard break after this line, followed by a space, another tense change back to the present time of the accident, and then three lines, three dreamy questions, standing by themselves as a stanza: "Now do I see the first blue shadow of foothills? / Or is that a cloud line? / When will snow, like a vision, lift?" (22-24). The narrator is tricked into false excitement by "shadows," "clouds," and "visions." The questions reveal a naïve, confused narrator hopeful for the prize of the West, until, SPLAT, the narrator is forced to face the true reality of the illusory dream.

The narrator describes his moment of realization: "I do not see [. . .] / the wing burst. See only / The bloody explosion, right in my face" (25-30). Suddenly the blurry, dreamlike imagery is replaced by vivid, shocking details of impact and blood. The next line reveals that it is nothing more than a "fool pheasant" (31) that flew into his windshield, but the narrator's reaction proves that he understands this event on a much deeper level. As he sees the land "all washed in blood, in feathers, in gut-scrawl," he is coming to terms with the fact that the very dream he was chasing in this westward drive is the same illusion that lured frontiersmen and led to the "intoxicated," blinded, falsely justified mass murder of Native Americans. The poetic description of the land, "forward, forever," reveals the thought process of the narrator. This experience has "forever" changed the way he will view the West; his illusion has exploded, just like the bird's body on his windshield. With an understanding of the past, however, comes new vision and preparedness for the future.

The narrator is forced to drive off the road, literally and figuratively: "Hands clamping the wheel with a death grip / To hold straight while brakes scream, I, / With no breath, at the blood stare. The ditch / Is shallow enough when the car, in the end, rolls in" (32-35). All movement in the poem comes to a "screaming" halt and the readers are forced to stop along with the narrator to "stare" at the blood on the page and contemplate its significance. As Warren argues, the tensions in the poetry

are what force the reader to be involved and actually make this act of self reflection.³⁸ This moment, when movement ceases altogether, is one of those moments of tension that invite readers' personal self-reflection. Later, once the car is moving westward again, the narrator uses "handfuls of dry dirt" and "water at a gas station" to remove the "fried blood" (42-43) from his windshield. Masked by the illusion of progress, Americans were able to wash away the blood of the Native Americans with their modern, divine justification of destined growth and expansion.

For the narrator, the experience of directly coming to terms with the truth of the West contributes to an understanding of the past, and therefore of himself. The tense shifts again to a second reflection on that event; the line stands alone: "Even now, long afterward, the dream" (44). The narrator contemplates the moment when he was wakened from the dream, from the illusion of the idealized West. The poem ends with a three line reflection: "I have seen blood explode, blotting out sun, blotting / Out land, white ribbon of road, the imagined / Vision of snowcaps" (45-47). As the narrator realizes that the white, pure, "vision of snowcaps" in the West is nothing more than an illusion, nothing more than "the illusions of our national infancy—the illusion of our innocence, virtue, and omnipotence," his dream is replaced by the blood red reality of the past.³⁹ The new understanding of America's past birthed a fuller development and awareness of self for the narrator in this poem. While readers do not see whether or not this new awareness changes the way the narrator acts in history, the fact that he is still reflecting back on this incident years later at least proves the deep impact that it had on his thought process and on his understanding of the past.

While the content of "Going West" is focused on Warren's reaction to westward expansion, the close study of this poem may serve as a model for how Warren uses historical backdrops to employ his philosophy of the past. Many of Warren's late poems are characterized by a similar invitation for readers to join the narrator's reckoning. The poetic devices that

³⁸ Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," 24-25.

³⁹ Warren, "The Use of the Past," 34.

function to create this interactive experience in “Going West,” such as the significant integration of “you” to address the reader; tense changes; emphasis achieved through sounds of language; vivid imagery; figurative language; and notable structure choices involving varied length of lines, timely line breaks, enjambment, spacing, pacing techniques, and rhythm, can all be found achieving similar ends throughout *Rumor Verified* and *Altitudes and Extensions*. Whether the narrator is coming to terms with man’s insignificance on the larger scale of history, coping with the alienation and dehumanization that result from the Industrial Revolution, or realizing the profound ramifications of the atomic bomb, Warren’s poetry encourages personal self-reflection for the reader that will result in an awareness and knowledge of how to fit into this modern world. That is, of course, not only to identify one’s place in history, but also to actively influence history for the best, instead of being dragged along aimlessly.

The emphasis on reckoning with the past that is established immediately in the epigraph of *Rumor Verified* and in the book’s first poem, continues into the second poem of the Prologue, “Looking Northward, Aegeanward: Nestlings on Seacliff.” This poem maintains the Dantean imagery from “Chthonian Revelation,” as the protagonist “crawl[s] up” to “at last / See what you’d risked neck to see” (2, 3-4). This character, however, is not rewarded by the beauty of heavenly objects after his climb; he instead sees “The unfeathered pitiless weakness of necks that scarcely uphold / The pink corolla of beak-gape, the blind yearning lifeward” (7-8). Warren uses this image of baby birds, who are completely unaware of any past or future, to draw a stark contrast to the human protagonist who has the ability and desire to contemplate the history of mankind. After the narrator sees these birds, he stops to imagine “a tale told” (18)—the sin of treachery, the violence of murder, and the inevitable fate of a fallen city:

[. . .] That was the hour
 When roof-tree or keystone of palaces fell, and
 Priest’s grip drew backward curls of the king’s son until

Throat-softness was tightened, and the last cry
 Was lost in the gargle of blood on bronze blade. The king,
 In the mantle, had buried his face. But even
 That last sacrifice availed naught. Ashes
 Would bury all. Cities beneath sea sank. (23-30)

Following this vivid daydream of what has transpired in the distant past, the narrator's focus returns to those "unfeathered and feeble" birds, with "that blind yearning lifeward" (36-37) at the close of the poem. This significant use of repetition highlights the contrast between the ignorant birds and the knowing narrator who seems to understand "the irony of history" that Warren refers to in "The Use of the Past."⁴⁰ The comparison of the aware protagonist versus the naive birds resurfaces in the poem appropriately titled, "Cycle." The narrator notes, "Birds have no instruction in / Cycles of nature, or astronomy . . . They know only the gasping present, / Like an empire unwittingly headed for the dump-heap / Of history" (16-17, 19-21). Like the protagonist in "Looking Northward," this narrator distinguishes himself from the birds by claiming, "But I know that snow, like history, will come" (29). Like the narrator in "Going West," this protagonist concludes his reckoning with a heightened sense of the importance of the past and an appreciation for his ability to understand it.

The rest of *Rumor Verified* contains similar situations of narrators coming to terms with the past and acknowledging the significance that this awareness has for the way they live their lives. In "Another Dimension," for example, the narrator ponders, "[I] feel myself redeemed into / That world which had no meaning but itself, / As I, lying there, had only the present, no future, or past" (11-13). Much like the narrators in "Going West" and "Chthonian Revelation," this narrator acknowledges that a blindness to the past (and/or future) results in a void identity and a world with "no meaning but itself." In "Another Dimension," a moment of realization is also followed by a series of five questions that not only reflect the narrator's path to a new self-awareness but also serve as a technique to draw the reader

⁴⁰ Warren, "The Use of the Past," 36.

simultaneously into a process of acknowledging the importance of the past. “If” repeats this same strategy, as the narrator questions, “[. . .] What / Can the sea tell us of a drop we cup in the hand? / [. . .] Tell us of the blind depth of groan out yonder?” (30-31, 33) after he realizes, “If this is the way it is, we must live through it” (1). This narrator even suggests that perhaps a “new concept of salvation” is needed, one that no longer finds “Courage” to be “enough to live by” (29-30). Similar to the narrator in “Going West,” this protagonist searches for a more meaningful way to live, other than the courageous progress of those who press blindly forward. Yet another comparable poem to “Going West,” “Summer Afternoon and Hypnosis” even contains several words that are either directly repeated from “Going West” or that succeed in capturing a moment or mood of the model poem: “Lulled” (1, 6), “hypnosis” (1), “sun” (2, 5, 15), “Westward” (3), “shadowy” (8, 20), “Time” (9, 18), “Timelessness” (9), “reality” (10), “slow” (13), and “motionless” (15). In addition to similar word choice, tone, and imagery, “Summer Afternoon,” also contains a narrator who reaches clarity after emerging from shadowy illusions. The pattern of abstract images—in this poem, “the afternoon’s hypnosis” (1), “The muted music” (4), and “the infinite distance of sunlight and languor” (5)—again gives way to more concrete details of the “naked reality” (10) that accompanies the narrator’s moment of realization: “Was this / The life that all those years I lived, and did not know?” (13-14). Warren’s message, which is notably captured by these poems, is condensed into a question in *Rumor Verified*’s final poem, “Fear and Trembling”: “Can the heart’s meditation wake us from life’s long sleep?” (17)—and bring Americans to a state of awareness, a position of readiness to change their future?

Altitudes and Extensions, Warren’s book of poems from 1980-1984, also creates an interactive experience for the reader and repeats similar content and structure from *Rumor Verified*. “New Dawn,” part three of a nine-part volume, receives the most critical attention due the nature of its publication. In 1983, as Warren’s role as spokesperson for national affairs continued

to grow, John Hersey asked Warren for a poem to serve as a preface to a deluxe edition of his book, *Hiroshima*. Warren consented and produced “New Dawn,” a series of poems that trace everything from the *Enola Gay*’s departure to the bomb’s explosion over Hiroshima. In the same way that “Going West” responds to the brutality committed against Native Americans, “New Dawn” responds to the epochal event of the atomic bomb. This segmented poem is characterized by an unusual straightforwardness combined with the inclusion of a chart, a numbered list, and plentiful dialogue, all of which are devices otherwise not found in *Rumor Verified* or the rest of *Altitudes and Extensions*. The narrative voice is also more disembodied in this section, as if Warren wants the horror of the event to speak for itself, yet he still strives to make readers reflect on this major event in America’s past. For example, in “Self and Non-Self,” Warren gives an imaginary account of Paul Tibbets directly after dropping the bomb, as he “sees / The slow, gray coiling of clouds” and “For an instant, / He shuts his eyes” (1-2, 6-7). At this point, the poem shifts to imperative commands:

Shut
 Your own eyes, and in timelessness you are
 Alone with yourself. You are
 Not certain of identity.
 Has that non-self lived forever? (8-12)

In line with all poems examined thus far, this poem contains a narrator in a moment of realization as he reckons with a significant piece of the past while questioning his identity. The strategic line breaks leave the reader breathless at the end of each line, highly anticipating what will come next, and the direct orders in this poem force readers to envision this moment in America’s history and experience this reflection along with Tibbets. The poem ends, “There / Is the world” (13-14), and these words ring out as a wake-up call not only for Tibbets, but also for Warren’s readers.

Aside from the unusual poetic devices found in “New Dawn,” the rest of *Altitudes and Extensions* generally follows

the patterns set in *Rumor Verified*. Narrators are once again entranced by hypnosis and false promises of illusions, only to later realize the falsehood of these dreams. In “Far West Once,” the narrator is initially described as he “carrie[s] a headful of summer” and is “lulled by the stone-song of waters” (12, 14). Later in the poem, as in “Going West,” Warren shifts the tense to reveal that time has passed and the poem is capturing a later reflection. “How long ago!” (35), proclaims the narrator, in a statement strongly suggestive of the narrator’s recollection in “Going West,” “It was that way that day—oh, long / Ago” (14-15). In another version of a false escape to the west, “Why You Climbed Up” reveals a narrator who climbs “Up the mountain’s heave and clamber, / As though to forget and leave / All things, great and small, you call / The past” (13-16); he is, of course, also unsuccessful in this irresponsible endeavor to elude the past.

For a final example of these parallels, one may look to “Platonic Lassitude” to hear Warren’s message:

And even the past dissolves like a dream of mist,
Which is a new joy, that unlike the old, cannot end.
So, lulled, you loll in the lap of Time’s wave, and the great crest,
With its tattered glory and gleam of foam-fringe, will never descend.

Or will it? To remind you
That nothing defines itself in joy or sorrow,
The crow calls from the black cliff forgotten but beckoning behind you.
Had you forgotten that history is only the fruit of tomorrow?

(21-28)

These eight lines are a condensed version of the narrator’s experience in “Going West.” The narrator begins with the same false dream of escaping the past, and enjoys a temporary, joyful delusion. The alliteration and liquid sounds of “So, lulled, you loll in the lap of Time’s wave,” are strongly reminiscent of “With tire song lulling like love” (8) from the illusion section of “Going West.” In “Going West,” a series of questions begins to rouse the unseeing narrator before his encounter with the pheasant; in “Platonic Lassitude,” the same device is repeated. After the

dreamy, tempting lines which promise that the crest of time will never descend, there is a hard line break, a change of tone, and the all-important question that inspires a moment of realization, “Or will it?” (25). One may easily imagine that instead of the beckoning crow, Robert Penn Warren himself is questioning *you*, the reader, “Had you forgotten that history is only the fruit of tomorrow?” (28). To quote once more from Warren’s “The Use of the Past,” “If literature—and in another mode, history—does anything for us, it stirs up in us a sense of existential yearning. [. . .] The truth we want to come to is the truth of ourselves, of our common humanity, available in the projected self of art.”⁴¹ After experiencing the interactive journey through Warren’s later poetry, one must agree that these poems certainly achieve their intended purpose.

⁴¹ Warren, “The Use of the Past,” 48.