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"The Deepest and Widest Metaphor for Life": Re -Visions of Christian Faith in Robert Penn Warren's Later Poetry

Nicole Camastra

In Robert Penn Warren's obituary in *The New York Times*, Cleanth Brooks reminisced of his old friend that he was "a valiant warrior for the truth and one of our very finest poets."[1] Part of what characterized Warren's search for verity was his quality of being a yearner, which he described to Brooks by saying, "Now I know that you are a communicant and a believer. A person like me, who is not but who finds in Christianity the deepest and widest metaphor for life, might be described as a yearner."[2] It would be foolish to assert that Warren was a committed Christian and unequivocal believer and thereby deny the considerable evidence that he was not, but a kind of tempered faith does exist in some of Warren's poems from *Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978*. Manuscript revisions of "Amazing Grace in the Back Country" and "Heart of the Backlog" reveal Warren's struggle to find faith, not his conviction of living in it. The final verse in *Now and Then*, "Heart of Autumn," points to the conscious act of surrendering to the depth of theistic conflict evident in its preceding counterparts. In the space between doubt and belief lies one of the thematic axioms of Warren's work, what he said was "the quest for religion," as poetry, for him, presented "a way to love God."[3]

In Warren's verse, exploration is emphasized over conclusion. His engagement with one of the fundamental existential questions, however, proves either evasive or uninteresting for some of his critics as they have been satisfied to grant him the status of yearner without

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[1]Obituary of Robert Penn Warren, *New York Times*, Sept 16, 1989, late edition.

[2]Lewis P. Simpson, ed., *The Possibilities of Order: Cleanth Brooks and His Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 72.

[3]Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weeks, eds., *Talking with Robert Penn Warren* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 382 and 370.

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further inquiry. Although Warren called himself a "non-believer" and a "non-churchgoer," he told Thomas Connelly during an interview that he "wish[ed] [he] were religious."[4] James Justus believes Warren to be "too much the skeptic to be Christian,"[5] and Harold Bloom asserts that Warren was "strongly *not* a Christian believer."[6] Although the evidence clearly indicates that Warren was not a "communicant," it does not warrant a surrender of the critical conversation that explores the depth of his poetic vision and his endeavor to believe. There is proof of his captivation with the desire for faith, especially through his allusions to Saint Augustine and Blaise Pascal in some of his later, more complex, and very meditative verse.

"Amazing Grace in the Back Country" signals the author's preoccupation with the Christian notion of grace, God's blessings bestowed on man. Certain key theological elements are present as a twelve year old boy witnesses a tent revival in the woods. After an "old fool dame" tries to persuade the young sinner to kneel and pray, when he realizes he is "guilty of all short of murder," he walks down a "dark street . . . / Uttering, 'lust–lust–lust'" (30-39).[7] Though "the word" may be a reference to the "brace of whores" present in the tent, it could also point to the speaker's acknowledgment of the vice which Augustine, well noted for his resistance to and struggle with conversion, had the hardest time relinquishing. Incidentally, the boy's articulation of sin may also recall Warren's freshman year at Vanderbilt in 1921. He remembers, "I tried to talk myself into some religion in my freshman year . . . but no dice. *Vice* won. But I kept on reading the Old Testament."[8] For the boy in the poem, the utterance of "lust" was "Like an invocation, out loud–and the word

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[4]*Talking with RPW*, 382.

[5]James H. Justus, *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 110.

[6]Harold Bloom, Forward to *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), xxiv.

[7]All quotations from "Amazing Grace in the Back Country" are taken from the following version: Robert Penn Warren, "Amazing Grace in the Back Country," MS and TS *Shawangunk Review* 17 (2006): 116-19.

[8]Emphasis added; quoted in Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 32.

/ So lovely, fresh-minted" (40-41). Mere pronunciation of the lexeme stirs the boy's wonder, an awe in seeming contrast with Christian grace.

For the boy, the most emphatic thing learned in the woods is a knowledge of darkness, and the word "dark" appears with increasing frequency toward the latter half of the poem. The physical absence of light indicates the simultaneous spiritual placement in obscurity; "Fumbling in darkness . . . and knowing damnation," the speaker looks and sees the "muted gold glow of God's canvas," which is the revival tent (56-61). Moreover, he hears the "triumph" in voices and senses the "joy" in hearts "at amazing grace so freely given" (62-63). H. R. Stoneback observes the "precision with which Warren navigates and negotiates the syntax and categories of grace: 'Amazing grace so freely found' (holograph) becomes, quite correctly, 'amazing grace so freely given' in the final version." Stoneback deftly argues that Warren's "clarifying" revisions remove "any syntactical ambiguity with regard to the darkness of grace" as represented by the "final felicity of 'moving on into darkness, / Voices sang of amazing grace."[9] Paradoxically, darkness communicates beatitude as the sonorous resonance of grace fills the woods.

The presence of darkness may also function as the mystical *via negativa,* as critic A. L. Clements affirms that there are "several expressions" of it in Warren's poetry.[10] This negative way addresses the desire to know God through what He is not, rather than what He is. In order to gain this knowledge, the individual must confront what St. John of the Cross, the famous seventeenth century Spanish mystic and poet, terms the Dark Night of the Soul. A willingness to surrender to such blind confusion marks the way for an admittance of grace and, ultimately, points to love as a means and an end to come to God. Appropriately then, the poem finally shows the believers "singing as they / Straggled back to the village, where . . . in some dark house / found bed and lay down" (65-68). Randolph

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[9]H. R. Stoneback, "The Evolution of 'Amazing Grace in the Back Country,'" *Shawangunk Review* 17 (2006), 111.

[10]A. L. Clements, "Sacramental Vision: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren," *Critical Essays on Robert Penn Warren*, ed. William Bedford Clark (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 232.

Runyon views the retirement of the singers from a skeptical perspective when he posits that "[I]n 'Amazing Grace' the narrator is struck by the fact that the grace the tent meeting affords did not really enliven the revived. Their existence would still be just a meaningless wait for death."[11] Runyon's "meaningless wait" refers to the fact that the "revived" will "rise" tomorrow "and do all the old things to do / Until that morning they would not rise, not ever" (69-70). Although Runyon's observation is ostensibly plausible, it overlooks a basic tenet of faith by asserting the futility of doing "old things" and engaging in the pathlessness of routine: the humility required by Christian doctrine depends upon a kind of spiritual simplicity. Habit encourages this particular modesty. The design of an exciting "wait for death," for example, places too much emphasis on individual volition and thereby compromises the will of God. Moreover, had the speaker realized the unavailing attempts of the singers, it would be illogical to show him reflecting on grace and his possible receipt of it at the end of the poem:

> And now, when all voices were stilled . . . I yet lay
> By the spring with one hand in the cold black water
> That showed one star in reflection, alone . . .
> Wondering and wondering how many
> A morning would I rise up to greet,
> And what grace find. (71-78)

The speaker's awe, or "wondering" demonstrates that, although the "long years" have been empty of God's gift, the desire to find it has been sustained (79).

Residual spiritual longing appears as well in "Heart of the Backlog," which was originally titled "Atheist at Hearthside." Instead of the duality represented by sin and piety, exposition of the desire to know God is made manifest through the juxtaposition of the speaker's identity with the natural world. As in "Amazing Grace," the setting of the poem is nighttime. It is dark as the speaker tries to negotiate the constraints of Time and existence: "What, ah, is Time!"[12]

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[11]Randolph Paul Runyon, *The Braided Dream: Robert Penn Warren's Late Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 177.

[12]"Heart of the Backlog," *Selected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 212-213, l. 5; hereafter cited by line number in the text.

Ostensibly, the first half of the poem is about the individual's struggle to reconcile what he knows of his being with that of which he is unsure. Fear is intimated as the narrator tries to decide if what he hears is his heart beating or the "granules of snow" on the window panes (6-8). He contemplates the burning logs in the hearth, which suggest that the "glowing" ember, the heart of the backlog, is an objective correlative for the "years unconsumed" (22). It is in the context of all-encompassing time that his thoughts turn to the "world beyond" his "warm refuge" (25).

Within that world he is small, insignificant perhaps, as is the vole that "pauses, one paw / Uplifted in whiteness of moonlight" on the snowy ground (34-35). The poem shifts in meaning when the speaker's imagination turns away from the inner self. As the narrator imagines that the rodent is within the shadow of a predatory "great owl," he sympathizes that the "Little One, has neither theology nor / Aesthetic–not even what you may call / Stoicism . . . he has only himself" (38-41). The speaker acknowledges his similar isolation when he thinks,

> . . . And what do you have
> When you go to the door, snatch it open, and, cold,
> The air strikes like steel down your lungs, and you feel
> The Pascalian nausea make dizzy the last stars? (41- 44)

Warren communicates the humility of the speaker in an apt metaphor that likens man, the rational creature, to an animal in the context of intimidatory nature beyond his own thoughts. The same passage in the typescript reads:

> What do you have
> When you go to the door, snatch it open, and feel
> Cold air strike like steel down your lungs, and you *meet*
> The Pascalian nauseu [sic] *beyond* the last stars? (emphasis added)[13]

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[13]All quotations from "Atheist at Hearthside" (rev. "Heart of the Backlog") are taken from the following source: Robert Penn Warren, "Heart of the Backlog," MS and TS 171.3051-54, Robert Penn Warren Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven.

The change of diction in lines 43 and 44 is far from incidental. Rather than "meet," which connotes simply presence, the speaker must "feel," have a deep perception of "Pascalian nausea." Unlike the vole that cannot engage the central theistic question, the speaker is in a state of confusion, or "nausea," emerging from concerns that he designates "Pascalian."[14]

Pascal's Wager, derived from the seventeenth century philosopher's *Pensees*, argues for a way to find the desire for faith. It does not, however, argue for an absolute binary system: that either one believes or one does not. In the simplest terms, the Wager describes the gains and losses of wanting to locate hope. Since man cannot prove that God does not exist, then he is left with the logical possibility that He does. Thus, the profits for striving to find a theistic communion far outweigh the risks. If one should surrender to this quest only to end his spiritual existence at the grave, then there has been nothing lost as knowledge of anything beyond corporeal existence is a moot point. Conversely, if one should not seek the development of piety and he is wrong, then his death will bring a host of penalties, presumably starting with an eternity in Hell.[15]

Logically, there is no way to prove that God does not exist, which incidentally makes atheism a fallacy and perhaps coincidentally indicates why Warren may have changed the title of the poem from "Atheist at Hearthside" (typescript), connoting solipsistic indulgence in a contrived warmth of logic, to "Heart of the Backlog," which looks instead to the image in lines 21-22: "The oak ash that, tiny and talus-like, slides to unwink / The glowing of oak and the years unconsumed!" Time so far has not offered the

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[14]According to Runyon, the name of Pascal "is essential to the description of what is experienced" in this passage. He goes on to describe, however, a primary concern with "foot-tracks and identity. . . . Time's undermining of his identity" (202-03). Although identity is integral to the speaker's dilemma, it is ancillary in comparison to a Pascalian consideration. Runyon's point places "Heart of the Backlog" within the context of the collection by considering the notion of selfhood and Time, but he still avoids what is a pivotal adjective in the poem, "Pascalian," and, ultimately, a central thematic concern of Warren's.

[15]This description of Pascal's Wager has been vastly oversimplified here for the sake of brevity. The complexities of the philosopher's challenge are inextricably woven with the primary assertion of the yearning for faith as a desideratum. Ultimately, the Wager is not a moral dictum; its argument rests on mathematical, not ethical, suggestions; it makes the most logical sense to want to live as if God exists.

narrator any system with which to defend against the owl's (death's) call. The existential conundrum comes to him again. His profound perception of, rather than a meeting with, the Wager accelerates a reconciliation with his rejection or acceptance of faith. For the speaker to come to terms with his solitary state, whether by theology, aesthetic, or stoicism, the question of God must be engaged in order to facilitate an existential monologue, a way of discovering the truth about why he is here. Part of that inquiry certainly deals with Time and identity, but it must logically address the beginning of both in the concept of Creation.

Musing on the genesis of the living world would naturally extend to the cosmos, but a "Pascalian nausea" would not be met "beyond the last stars." The final sphere that contains them would signify the frontier separating man's world from the divine. To go beyond that point would presuppose faith, which cannot be assumed for the "Atheist" of the poem. Instead, when the speaker "feels / The Pascalian nausea make dizzy the last stars," there is some moving confluence of the microcosmic and the macrocosmic that confuses the narrator's previous belief system, devoid of any paradigmatic faith. The stars themselves may offer an allusion to the potential for transformation. Constellations can serve as a beacon for the confused, or weary soul.

Warren consistently read Augustine's *Confessions*, and used certain passages as epigraphs to his verse.[16] Book IX addresses Augustine's conversion, which he experiences with his mother and which bears a resemblance to the physical star-scape present in these poems:

> As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the

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[16]Please see pages 455, 476-77 in Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997). Blotner addresses Warren's epigraphic use of *Confessions*, though he makes clear that "If a reader expected conventional religious conviction or even some clear insight into the nature of the divine, he would have been disappointed" (455). Perhaps Warren's use of Augustine is not intended to be a "clear insight" or indication of "religious conviction." Instead, the appearance of such texts in Warren points toward his increasing willingness to engage not only himself but also his reader in the theological question. Finally, the frequency of quoted passages, in addition to Warren's own developing meditation on theistic issues, creates a justified space for examining his later poems in the context of spiritual exigency.

> whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves, from which the sun and the moon and the stars shine down upon the earth. Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the while in wonder at all that you have made.[17]

The climbing motion and attribute of physical height should recall the ascension and altitude themes in several of Warren's poems. Also, the image of the great owl's flight in "Heart of the Backlog" comes to mind as well as the flock of geese in "Heart of Autumn" with their Augustinian vision of the "whole compass of material things" from their great height in the poem as "star-strider[s]" (11). Notably, the "wonder" which Augustine bears for God's world is similar to the feeling possessed by the speaker in "Amazing Grace" who, after noticing the "one star in reflection" of the "cold black water," is awed by "what grace" he would find (74-78).

The wonder of God's love provides an impetus for conversion, a subject that engaged Warren's attention. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Warren admitted, "I still believe in such things as religious conversion . . . though I'm a non-believer," and he argued that such transformation is "one of the most obvious examples" of achieving "some sense of freedom from mechanical forces." In recognizing the possibility of individual metanoia, Warren knew that it could result from a desire to find "significance" in life.[18] In "Heart of the Backlog," the potential for change calls forth the poem's most intriguing question: "Is God's love but the last and most mysterious word for death?" (50) Originally, neither "God" nor "mysterious were included here. In the typescript version, Warren revises this sequence several times, crossing out each new phrase. His final inclusion of "God's love" indicates something more than an atheist at the hearthside and signals the published title. In addition, the description of this affection as "mysterious" points to the nature of some truths, such as God's love, that can be only divinely revealed. Indeed, the revision designates the "Heart" of the matter: God's love and self love are mutually exclusive. In

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[17] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 197.
[18] *Talking with RPW,* 213-14.

order to receive the former, there must be a dissolution of the ego that facilitates a necessary humility.

This humility is presented in the image of the vole being descended upon by the owl. As the former feels the "claw-clamp through gut, heart and brain," the poet asks if "ecstasy melting with terror" will "create the last little cry" (48-49). Since the animal is devoid of logic, it cannot negotiate the Pascalian Wager and certainly does not wrestle with theology. Literally, its death could be an ecstasy that, in the end, rejoices in survival without significance. Metaphorically, since the speaker identifies himself with the "Little One" who is humbled by imminent death, this scene can be translated for him as the moment of physical demise, or "terror," that is simultaneous with the knowledge of a celestial embrace, or "ecstasy." This poetic appropriation of religious rapture is representative of a "freedom from the mechanical forces" of logic and rationality that would otherwise keep the atheist at home by his fire, engulfed in nebulous notions of solitary identity.

The poem ends as the speaker envisions himself running out into the isolated snowy landscape where, confronted with the fear of noises in the dark, he tells himself "not to look back, in God's name" (58). The image is one of frantic and fearful searching across desolate and quiet terrain. He must confront the cold night air that imposes the thought of the Wager on him and causes a suffocation "like steel down" his lungs. The speaker's plight is unresolved. As Floyd C. Watkins notes, "The journeys in Warren's last two volumes of poetry are usually to lonely places of natural settings by streams or field or forest. They are returns to the places of the most profound meditations of the beginnings and endings of Warren's poetic and spiritual life."[19] "Heart of the Backlog" is ultimately a meditation, as the speaker's chilly escapade is only a "thought" that has "struck" him as he sits warmly inside. While Watkins is specifically referencing poetry written after *Now and Then*, his comments on "lonely places" seem especially appropriate here, in what is a prelude to Warren's latest and most meditative poetry.

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[19]Floyd C. Watkins, "'The Body of This Death' in Robert Penn Warren's Later Poems," *Kenyon Review* 10, no. 4 (1988): 37.

The last poem in *Now and Then*, "Heart of Autumn," is particularly meditative. Its placement at the end signifies and offers some lasting thoughts on such matters as faith, hope, and a surrender to both. Typically, Nature is illustrated here by geographical lines and logical pattern: ". . . in perfect formation, wild geese / Head for a land of warm water . . ." while the narrator watches "How tirelessly *V* upon *V* arrows the season's logic."[20] The "logic" of the birds is juxtaposed with the very ambiguous questions that the speaker addresses to himself: "Do I know my own story?" and the question of "why I am here" (9, 16). Concomitantly, he contemplates "Time and distance" (16), which are only calculated measurements of existence. Ostensibly, time measures one moment to another in a linear succession, and distance counts physical strides from a point of origin. Though the traveling geese are aware of both of these factors by the light of the sun and their proximity to the "far glint of water," they are not bothered by any intellectual definition of their "path." Instead, they recognize "the joy / Of destiny fulfilling its own name" (14-15).

The speaker of the poem does not yet know such joy. He only knows that the "path of logic" and the "path of folly" are "all / The same" (17-18). In other words, a logical explanation for existence is equivalent to a foolish denial of its meaning. There must be some other way to reconcile experience with apprehension. The speaker looks "skyward" in a different direction from that of the atheist in "Heart of the Backlog," who looks "only on" but never "upward" or "back" in his frenzied striding (52). The act of looking upward accelerates some "Process of transformation" that allows the speaker of "Heart of Autumn" to surrender to the void that is created by the resignation of both logic and folly (20). Further, it is his heart and not his head that is "impacted." He feels something that cannot be uttered—perhaps God's love—in this moment of rational and egotistical death, and he flies "Toward sunset, at a great height" (24). The juxtaposition of dissolution (sunset) and ascension (great height) may be reminiscent of Icarus rising on his waxen wings only to get too close to the sun and burst into flames, falling

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[20] *Selected Poems of RPW*, 215, ll.3-4, 8; hereafter cited by line number in the text.

into the ocean below as a consequence for clinging too firmly to a desire for knowledge. The image, however, could also suggest the feeling of Augustinian altitude that comes with the surrender to God's will and love for "all that [He] has made."

The beings closest to God in "Heart of Autumn" are the geese, and the bird's eye view of creation illustrates Warren's development of the conflict between logic and mystery, knowledge and doubt. Not incidentally, the feathered aviators of Warren's poems have become icons of his creative imagination. The raptorial bird in "Heart of the Backlog" signals the association between religious rapture and the sublime terror of such a devouring force. The geese in "Heart of Autumn" function differently in that, for the speaker, they reveal the existence of a spiritual path. Lesa Corrigan believes that the "geese become the symbol of human aspiration. They exist in a fullness of being that the poet finds ideal." She also asserts that "the imagination can transport the mind into realms of supernal oneness. . . . [J]oy and strength are the ultimate rewards of the search for knowledge."[21] Although Corrigan's optimistic reading understandably places Warren within the Romantic tradition—his reverence of and debt to it is well-documented

—it denies Warren's Augustinian view of the Christian metaphor for life. The basic assertions of Original Sin and acknowledgment of Man in a post-lapsarian world suggest that redemption, like Grace, is not freely found but, rather, hard-earned. Sacrifice is necessary for redemption, and in order for "supernal oneness" to be achieved, there must be a death or forfeiture of some kind. Victor Strandberg recognizes that ". . . knowing at last who you are . . . [is] the final reward of Warren's osmosis, though its final price is the death of the conscious ego."[22] A. L. Clements similarly proposes that ". . . Warren's joyful, interrelated, sacramental vision is not an easy or facilely optimistic one but one gained through judicious qualification and hard, unblinking,

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[21]Lesa Carnes Corrigan, *Poems of Pure Imagination: Robert Penn Warren and the Romantic Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 153-54.

[22]Victor Strandberg, "Warren's Osmosis," *Critical Essays on Robert Penn Warren*, ed. William Bedford Clark (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 132.

recurrent recognition, even a pervasive sense, of pain, darkness, and death."[23] The inevitability of suffering and loss seems integral to Warren's poetic vision of a meaningful life.

For the speaker in "Heart of Autumn," the geese represent a yearning for something more purposeful and can be better understood in light of Cleanth Brooks's observation that "Animal man, instinctive man, passionate man–these represent deeper layers of our nature than does rational man. . . . [T]hese subrational layers are . . . an affront to our pride in reason. But it is in these subrational layers that our highest values, loyalty, patience, sympathy, love are ultimately rooted." The speaker knows that if he wishes to move beyond logic and folly, he must use these "subrational layers" as a recourse with which to connect to something deeper and more meaningful. That connection, however, is not made clear for the precise reason that "The . . . coming to terms with reality, or with God, or with one's deepest self, cannot be stated directly, for it is never an abstract description. It can be given to us only dramatically . . . indirectly."[24] In the drama of the poem, then, it is intimated that by surrendering his rational self, the protagonist may find God's love, or at least an affection for the world that can lead him to "believe, in the end, in God."

For Warren, the ability to love creation proves necessary in the struggle to find faith. He says that he had described this quasi-religious "temperament . . . as close as [he] 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'."[25] Victor Strandberg agrees that ". . . the first requirement of a realistic religious imagination . . . is to love the world and its denizens just as they are, brimming with pain, injustice, and corruption."[26] Strandberg argues for Warren's

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[23]Clements, 232.

[24]Cleanth Brooks, *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot, and Warren* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 116-18.

[25]*Selected Poems of RPW*, 126; *Talking with RPW,* 243 and 298. The assertion in these famous lines is reminiscent of the Petrarchan trope that emphasized the progression from secular to sacred love. Petrarch, of course, developed this from Dante and his *Vita Nuova*. Warren read Dante extensively and makes references to the fact that Dante had almost converted him and had definitely converted Warren's friend and fellow poet Robert Lowell to Catholicism.

[26]Victor Strandberg, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 124.

theme of the "osmosis of being" as an integral component in acquiring such emotion. Warren's "love for the world" is part of what Floyd Watkins has noted as the "many varieties of religious experience [that] are everywhere present in the characters, the meditations, and the fiction and poetry of Robert Penn Warren."[27] In his later years, Warren did experience an "increase . . . in his faith–an increase which may find expression only in poetry."[28] He was, as Watkins asserts, "more than a mere yearner for belief."[29] Even if these notions are not readily apparent in *Now and Then,* the manuscript revisions of two poems contained therein reflect an ambiguity that struggled with both skepticism and faith. The admirable tenacity with which Warren deals with such poles of ideology is part of what Cleanth Brooks terms "man's obligation to find the truth by which he lives" as Warren's characteristic theme.[30] This "obligation" is far different from claiming to have found "the truth"; rather, Warren's endeavor to discover it marks his significance as a writer and the nation's first Poet Laureate. These late verses provide a lasting commentary on his enduring legacy of logic tempered by hope and the unrelenting desire to believe.

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[27] Watkins, "Body of This Death," 31. One early example of Warren's evolving vision of faith is that of Jack Burden when he listens to the Scholarly Attorney's tract at the end of *All the King's Men*. The tract, of course, addresses the notions of free will, evil, and grace. When the Attorney asks Jack if he knows (i.e. believes) it, he thinks, "I nodded my head and said yes. (I did so to keep his mind untroubled, but later I was not certain but that in my own way I did believe . . .)" (437). Jack's tenuous hope is characteristic of Warren's tempered religiosity. Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1996).

[28] Watkins, "Body of This Death," 36.

[29] Watkins, "Body of This Death," 41.

[30] Brooks, 118.