

2006

A Self, Out of the Wild: Wilderness in the Works of Robert Penn Warren

Alan Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, Alan (2006) "A Self, Out of the Wild: Wilderness in the Works of Robert Penn Warren," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 6 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol6/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Robert Penn Warren Studies by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

*A Self, Out of the Wild:
Wilderness in the Works of Robert Penn Warren*

ALAN MILLER

Few American writers concern themselves with history as earnestly and consistently as Robert Penn Warren. The novels *All the King's Men*, *Band of Angels*, *World Enough and Time*, and *Wilderness* all derive from historical events. This same emphasis on history informs many of Warren's works of poetry, *Brother to Dragons*, *Altitudes and Extensions*, and *Audubon: A Vision* among them. Given this historical foundation, it would seem to follow that Warren's heroes would find themselves perpetually *in medias res*, working within the context of civilization to remake the ills they find into limited successes as they move through "the convulsion of the world, out of history into history" (438).¹ Such a context, as that famous line from *All the King's Men* implies, prohibits knowing and interacting with civilization or one's self from outside the procession of human events. Yet, in surveying Warren's works, heroes emerge that do not fit this pattern; while they display a deep-seated interest in history and in creating through recorded time a worthwhile humanity, their inspiration for this humanity is found not in the causal line of history and culture they inhabit, but instead in a promise of life discovered in wilderness, a primordial state of nature that predates all human works. What results is a hero's journey, but this movement is not a journey within civilization, but instead an inspired movement out of the wilderness into civilization. This inspiration in Warren becomes an hypothesis of nature, and throughout his literature, he presents a figure who wants to create a self and a civilization that is worthy of his intimation of the wilderness. Amorphous and arguably beyond the

¹The page numbers in this study are from the following editions: *All the King's Men* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1974); *Selected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, Ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

bounds of language, the vision settles within the hero's heart as an idea of liberty.

In the opening lines of *Wilderness*, Warren's narrator relates Adam Rosenzweig's experience of the wild and, in so doing, introduces a protagonist who chooses to enact himself through that experience:

If the mountain had not gleamed so white.
If yonder, under the peaks, the snagged line of the fir
forest had not been so blue-black, against the white. . . .
If the world had not been absolute in beauty.
If none of these things had been as they were, he, Adam
Rosenzweig, might have fled inward into the self, into the
ironies of history and knowledge, into that wisdom which is
resignation. (3-4)

Through this passage, positioned as it is at the beginning of the novel, Warren presents a new first cause, one that elucidates the mind of Adam, his relation to his history, and the action he will undertake. The language here is of an ascendant beauty; it grants Adam a new sentience, a heightened vision of what the self might be that Adam himself will call a birth (9). Simultaneously, this awakening provides a new point of reference. Adam is able to see from outside that embedded "in"-ness of the causal, historical line. In this way Warren introduces a hero who ceases to be a wholly derivative figure, shaped irrevocably by the actions and failures of his forebears, and instead presents a self in dialogue with an "absolute" beauty, one that gives his hero inspiration for creating what he envisions as an absolute, perfect self, even as it frees him from a flawed historical line that, for a strictly causal man, would make perfectibility—and even the vision of perfectibility—impossible. Thus, Warren's Adam is able, through this new vision, to entertain an ambition to become "fully man" (13).

That ambition becomes the first cause of both the novel and its hero's action, preparing Adam for his journey. In his refusal to reenter the house where his dead father lay the night before and his appearance, in the next scene, aboard a ship to America, Warren quickly sketches Adam's break from his past and introduces his

movement toward a new civilization. Here, in a fascinating turn, Warren will make plain the logic that drives the quest and thereby reveal a duality that is perhaps essential to a complete viewing of the Warren hero. Explaining his presence on the ship *Elmyra*, Adam confesses, "I came because I wanted to fight for freedom" (23). The word "freedom" satisfies aesthetically the beauty of his vision of the wild and its power to lift him out of causal history, and Adam uses it to explain to himself a value he wishes to embody. It is also, however, a "freedom" to pursue that perfectibility. It is in this sense that the word bleeds and merges into that very real definition of freedom found in civilization, particularly in an 1860s America, and this challenge to enact freedom in history is one that Warren's protagonist finds irresistible. Hence, vision becomes idea, and Adam travels to the new world of America, intent on realizing through the blood of the Civil War a self of freedom. What ensues for the protagonist is a chaotic road of struggle through the United States and into Virginia, one that challenges the hero's ambition. In Adam are found elements that Warren will apply repeatedly to his heroes: a new beginning in wilderness, followed by a journey of struggle toward a perfectly free self in civilization.

Part of the allure of this figure is his ability, in a single lifetime, to approximate the complete history of humanity's movement out of the wild. The self that undergoes this travel enjoys not only the possibility of a perfect wholeness vis-à-vis the wilderness, but a whole internalizing of all of humanity's actions. Against what may otherwise seem like a monstrous other of history, Warren can in this way humanize history, granting his hero a clarity, relevance, and full culpability. Willie Stark from *All the King's Men* becomes for Warren just this sort of hero—a submerged, implicit figure who, though he never has a recorded experience of the wild and therefore never becomes for Warren a fully conscious agent, nevertheless bears in his own body a full path from wilderness to civilization. In what is essential for Warren, Stark begins as a rural farmer, an occupation spatially and chronologically closest to the wild. A democratic idealist, he then progresses to relative power in a semi-rural, agrarian community. When he ascends to state government, Stark becomes for the novel the embodiment of a 1930s American

society both in its modernity and in its failure to realize the sort of liberal democracy that Stark himself championed in his earlier closeness to the wilderness. What results is an underground and ultimately failed journey for Warren's hero, with Jack Burden continually witnessing and interpreting and Stark simply being.

If Stark undertakes for Warren an implicit, unstated journey, his spectral Thomas Jefferson in *Brother to Dragons* becomes his most explicit creation, one who voices what is perhaps a most complete account of the Warren hero and his understanding of the wild in its relation to the self:

And so to hold joy you must deny mere Nature, and leap
Beyond man's natural bourne and constriction
To find justification in a goal
Hypothesized in Nature.

(59)

It is this hypothesis that leads Jefferson into a "breathless awe of vision," an "infatuate encounter" (59) that inspires his Declaration of Independence. In so doing, Jefferson fills for Warren the role of a poet-hero; bearing witness to the beauty of this hypothesis, he, like Adam, extracts from it an idea of his own self, one of liberty and unalienable right. In extending this liberty to all men (indeed, his new self's liberty is dependent upon his power to extend it to others, to create a freedom of others, and from others), Jefferson immediately travels out of the wilderness and into a self in civilization, for it is only in civilization, in the daily interaction between selves, that this exalted, hypothetical humanity can be proved. Jefferson's newly created self and his United States cannot exist apart from each other, and his Declaration becomes in Warren's hands a singular, poetical work, a frieze of that same journey into civilization Adam undertakes in *Wilderness*: the wild awakening of the self and its departure from—that "leap / Beyond"—Nature to realize its achievement and its joy in community.

Such an idealist can be seen as a native hero, one with a distinctly American vision. Reflective of a bald vitality of early American endeavor, Warren's Jefferson finds inspiration for this new life not in the writings of Europe's philosophers and political theorists, but

via another avenue by which Americans might understand themselves and their destiny—that daily immersion into the American wilderness, where they worked to create a civilization out of the frontier. What emerges is a modified agrarianism. The wild is this Jefferson's Muse, and it is evident here how the Warren hero will diverge from Dante's protagonist in *The Divine Comedy*. Whereas Dante's poet relies upon the saint and the Classical philosopher to deliver him from the dark wood, for Warren's earthbound Jefferson, the wilderness itself is that Muse, drawing the poet on into a promise of life that is an extension of the forest itself.

In an agreement with Dante, however, Warren's hero invariably encounters the dreadfulness of this path. In *All the King's Men*, the new state-built highway serves as the mirror to Stark, the man who literally and metaphorically built it. Blacktop, a work of wreckage, the road becomes for Warren not only the failed path of the self from wilderness into civilization, but also reflects the broken linkages between the individuals in society that are so necessary to the free, perfected self's creation. At his end, Stark operates through corruption, a failed ideology that makes, in the vision Warren's Jefferson lays out, the perfected freedom of himself, others, and civilization impossible. In *Wilderness*, the hero arrives at a similarly compromised conclusion; by putting on the boots of the soldier he has killed from an imperfect, illiberal motive, Adam comes to question whether the man who now walks in the South is the same one who endeavored to come.

The bulk of *Brother to Dragons* is devoted to an examination of the heroic pathway, and it is one in which Robert Penn Warren, as a fictional R.P.W. in conversation with his Jefferson, will more deliberately take part. Through the image of the maze, Warren acknowledges the complexity of the journey. The labyrinth speaks to that chaos his hero repeatedly undergoes in trying to graft each event of contemporary civilization into that perfected, ideological vision his Jefferson hypothesized. In adding to this maze the image of the minotaur, Warren couples this chaos with doubt, an admission that both humanity and the individual hero, until they complete the journey, are imperfect creatures capable of monstrous turns. Thus,

R.P.W. and Jefferson look through the events of American history—events following Jefferson’s establishment of his hypothesis in the Declaration of Independence—and find in Isham and Lilburne an account not only of slavery, but of its slide into a related and incredible sadism. The American failure to realize a perfected civil freedom makes this degeneration into evil real, and in acknowledging this, both R.P.W. and Jefferson arguably abandon the idea that full liberty is possible.

Yet Warren’s Jefferson refuses to abandon his vision of the wild:

Even after age and the tangle of experience
 I still might—
 Oh, grandeur green and murmuring instancy of leaf,
 Beneath that shade we’ll shelter.

(57)

In coupling these lines with Jefferson’s refusal to abandon his “only human” face in the work’s previous lines, Warren implies that his hero encounters in the labyrinth of his journey a dual doubt. He fears that he, along with all of humanity, has failed to overcome a monstrous illiberality within himself and is unworthy of the vision of perfected freedom the wild granted him. More subversively, however, a second doubt is present, a suspicion that the idea of freedom he has affixed to that experience is not worthy of the wild itself. Perhaps a truer Warren hero protects not an idea, but a vision. The possibility haunts both Warren’s Jefferson and Adam’s dead father, Leopold Rosenweig, living on in *Wilderness* through his poetry:

“If I could only be worthy of that mountain I love,
 If I could only be worthy of sun-glitter on snow,
 If man could only be worthy of what he loves.”

(5)