

Accepting the “Defeat” in Robert Penn Warren’s *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce*

Takaomi KONOKI

*Department of Secondary Education, Faculty of Education
Okayama University of Science,
1-1 Ridai-cho, Kita-ku, Okayama 700-0005, Japan*

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1

The methodology of utilizing a real historical fact to find a concrete meaning for the present time is Robert Penn Warren’s typical method as can obviously be seen in *Brother to Dragons* (1953; 1979) concerning his treatment of Thomas Jefferson and his nephew who committed a murder. Warren’s narrative poem, *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* (1983), is also based on a historical character as the title suggests. The Nez Perce people, who originally lived in the north-western area of the U.S., namely present-day Washington, Oregon, and Idaho States, were well-known for their friendship between the tribe and the white people. However, after a sweeping surge of the Gold Rush in the 1860s, the Nez Perce were obliged to leave the original living area. As a result, the Nez Perce War took place in 1877, and Chief Joseph led the people to the national border near Canada over 3000km while continuing the war. Though they eventually arrived at an area near the border with Canada, Joseph surrendered to the U.S. troops after a severe battle.

The narrative of this long poem, with nine sections, can be divided into three frameworks: Joseph’s recollection in the form of monologue, objective narration of the collision between the Nez Perce and the whites from the detached point of view, and the first-person description by a narrator considered to be Robert Penn Warren’s persona. The main contents of the first chapter to that of eighth are about Joseph’s recollection of the old days, the war against the white, and its aftermath. And from the present point of view, the narrator-poet confesses his inner shock of recognition by mediating Joseph’s heroic life. This structure is shown in a chronologically embedded style: first, Joseph’s monologue and the white people in the past century, and second, the narrator’s perspective on contemporary America. The significance of this poem lies in its emphasis on the importance of preserving the cultural tradition by introducing the life of the Native American of the past through the meditative perspective of a contemporary white people. This vision becomes possible only when we can exhume, or reconstruct, the past to the present time in our inner thought.

Concerning the thematic aspects, the point of great importance is that this poem is Warren’s first attempt to grapple with the Native Americans in his literary works. *Chief Joseph* is, in this context, an exceptionally rare poetical achievement dealing squarely with the Native American as a protagonist. Tracing the trajectory of Joseph’s inner conflict before/during the war, the poet makes clear the point that superiority of the values of the Native American to that of the white people by describing selfish internal troubles among the white troops in comparison to the noble thoughts of Joseph after the surrender. Moreover, Warren’s relentless criticism of the WASP-oriented optimistic concept of the Manifest Destiny, limitless expansion to the West, can easily be detected in this poem. All of these elements are, in short, directed to debunking the deficiency of the American idealism prevalent even at the time of *Chief Joseph*’s publication in 1983. Incidentally, at the time of the publication, the U. S. was heading toward the last phase of the Cold War, emphasizing and idealizing the concept of being “strong” to fight against Communism. One example in popular culture is a Hollywood-based film praising machismo such as *First Blood*. The final chapter of this poem focuses on the contemporary age from the viewpoint of the narrator-poet, which seems to be very close to that of Warren himself.

The long subtitle of this poem, “Who Called Themselves the Nimipu, ‘The Real People’”, is also worth attention. This subtitle will lead the readers to ponder upon what the “real” signifies, which is that Warren overtly mentions the superiority of the Native American to the white people. Warren’s subversive intention to reconsider the master narrative of the age is lucidly expressed in his technique of juxtaposing three epigraphs as an introduction to the poem.

Made by the same Great Spirit, and living in the same land with our brothers, the red men, we consider ourselves as the same family... Thomas Jefferson

The more we can kill this year, the less will have to be killed the next war, ... William Tecumseh Sherman

When the Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the white men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children’s children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone... Chief Sealth of the Duwamish

(Collected Poems (hereafter CP) 489)

Typical Jeffersonian dream of harmonious coexistence between the whites and the Native Americans is amply indicated in the first epigraph. The second one, however, exposes the inner ferocity of the white people of which General Sherman is a representative. The third one, the voice of a Native American chief, illuminates the importance of recollecting and preserving indigenous tradition as a basic bond tying together all the people. Added to the epigraph part, Warren further wrote down an introductory note to the poem explaining the historical facts of the Nez Perce being deceived by the treaty with a view to endorsing the westward expansion of the white people.

The Nez Percé (modernly Nez Perce) entered history as the friendly hosts to the explorers Lewis and Clark...

...the war had begun with a shot fired on the white flag of the Indians. This occurred on June 19, 1877.

On September 5, 1877, Joseph surrendered to Colonel Miles, in eastern Montana. The terms given by [General] Miles were generous, but these were murderously broken by Sherman, now Commanding General of the U.S. Army. (CP 491)

This long explanation may, generally speaking, be exceptional for a poetical work, but the note clarifies significant elements necessary for reading and interpreting this narrative poem. The point to be grasped here is that: The Nez Perce were not a warlike tribe, the treaties for the land were violated and the war was triggered by the whites, and Joseph died of heartbreak. Furthermore, Warren’s basic standpoint of accusing the white-oriented perspective is emphasized, for, by attributing the deprivation of the Nez Perce’s land to the result of the westward movement stimulated by the Gold Rush, Warren’s harsh criticism is clearly directed, from the beginning, to the American innocent concept of limitless geographical expansion.

2

The opening scene of the poem portrays the land of the Nez Perce as an earthly paradise, though the conventional

literary setting of such paradisaical image is described, as is well-known, from the white's perspective. Warren's reversal of literary convention means that the nature of true humanity lies not in the white's but in the Native American's way of thinking. More significant is the Nez Perce's keen interest in the past and the solid tradition associated with the land itself. For them the past is always present:

... Each year
 They go where from seaward salmon, infatuate,
 Unfailing at falls-leap, leap great stones. They leap
 The foaming rigor of current-seeking, seeking,
 In blind compulsion, like fate, the spawn-
 Pool that blood remembers. What does our blood,
 In arteries deep, heaving with pulse-thrust
 In its eternal midnight, remember? (CP 492)

The first chapter also tells us the white people's sudden invasion to the pastoral land and cowardly betrayal of the treaty ensuring the land to the Nez Perce. Though the friendly assistance to the Lewis-Clark expedition party endorsed by Thomas Jefferson is a well-known historical fact, the white people adversely took advantage of the Nez Perce's fraternal mentality.

"I, a boy, stood and watched my father.
 His hand reached out. It made the name-mark.
 And why not? Not once had we shed white blood
 Since the first great war-chief on the blanket had sat
 With Twisted-Hair, and had named the land ours.
 Now in ink was promised the Winding Waters forever,
 Where sacred bones lay, and we knew them sacred.
 (.....)

"A promise, how pretty!—but our sacred land
 They trod. They spat on our earth. It was like
 A man's spit on your face. I, then a boy,
 I felt the spit on my face. (...) (CP 494)

The destruction of the pastoral scenery and the betrayal of the Native Americans are undoubtedly a dark side of American history. Warren's debunking description here illustrates his lamentation that the acknowledgement of the shameful past is necessary for the modern age of America.

The second chapter describes the death of Joseph's father, Old Joseph. His death symbolically bequeaths to the son the powerful tradition inherent in their land, which is the narrator's anagnorisis that one person's death makes obvious the existence of an abstract succession of beings beneath the surface.

"Into a dark place my father had gone.
 You know how the hunter, at dawn, waits,

String notched, where the buck comes to drink. Waits,
 While the first light brightens highest spruce bough, eyes slitted
 Like knife wounds, breath with no motion. My father
 Waits thus in his dark place. Waiting, sees all.
 Sees the green worm on green leaf stir. Sees
 The aspen leaf turn though no wind, sees
 The shadow of thought in my heart—the lie
 The heel must crush. Before action, sees
 The deed of my hand. My hope is his Wisdom. (CP 496)

This passage portrays the archetypal epiphany revealing Joseph's recognition of hidden meanings inherent in America. Joseph emphasizes the significance of the tradition, in the dissociated situation between the two races, expressed as his father's voice in his mind, and the preservation of the nature for the future generation. These essential conditions are deprived by the white people's policy to dispel the Nez Perce from the land called Wallowa. The tribe tried to avoid a war against the whites by hoisting a white flag ahead of the column to go to another place to live; however, the white troops shot the Nez Perce people regardless of the white flag. That triggers the war against the whites. At first, the Nez Perce's tactics are successful, shooting many of the white troops to death with the guns taken up from the dead soldiers. However, regardless of Joseph's astute tactics the Nez Perce people are cornered by the white troops, and finally he surrenders to the white troops in order to save all the members of the tribe. The words of Joseph's surrender are quoted in the poem as follows:

Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart. I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. (...) Our little children are freezing to death. (...) From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever. (CP 516)

After when Joseph accepted defeat to end the war, the point clearly emerges that the real importance of the event Warren tries to emphasize does not lie in the brave war of resistance or heroic deeds of Joseph but in the aftermath of the war and its effect on the future. This is a kind of regeneration through the defeat, a theme commonly seen among literary works of the literature of the South. As a result of the surrender, Joseph succeeded in saving the lives of the Nez Perce, and now faces the humiliating situation that the main conditions of surrender, going back to the original place Wallowa, is being broken. He looks back on the war like this:

“But later, ah, later, when men named that war
 With my name, my heart in my bosom would tighten.
 Would shrink. What praise does man want but his manhood?
 We all had manhood, we showed at Clearwater.” (CP 502)

... What right had I
 To die—to leave sick, old, young, women—merely to flatter
 My heart's pride? For a true chief no self has. (...) (CP 502)

Such extraordinary endurance finally brings him national fame: he meets President Roosevelt, and his bronze

statue is set up in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The narrator-poet, however, harshly criticizes this commemoration as a deception intending to conceal the atrocities against the Native American people in general.

Great honor came, for it came to pass
That to praise the red man was the way
Best adapted to expunge all, all, in the mist
Of bloodless myth. (CP 520)

Rather, the real achievement of Joseph is his unswerving recognition of his ethnicity as a Native American and the tradition within himself. Both of the key elements are closely interconnected, for there is no line break between the descriptions.

To a height uncommon to men the head rises
In upward straightness, framed by braids fading,
The face like bronze hardened long back from the mold,
Nose thrusting, the thrust of jawbone, the downward
Decisive will-thrust of lips where they join
On each cheek-side. If you gaze at him,
Eyes you gaze into will seem but to show
The mirror of distance behind you, far
And the mirror of Time that brings you both here,
And will, in time, part you forever. (CP 519)

The narrator-poet finds close connection between "distance" and "Time" in Joseph's eyes and the concept of tradition. The numerous deaths, including that of his father, the Nez Perce soldiers, women and children in the war, finally have the narrator perceive that the tradition owes its foundation to the existence of the deceased. Thus, Warren's recognition is crucial to demonstrate that the fundamental importance of humanity lies not in the white people but in the Native American, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce. This revelatory experience is not at all surprising if we know that Warren once made clear the limit of white supremacy in his narrative poem *Brother to Dragons*, especially accusing the optimism of Thomas Jefferson. In short, Warren does not change his literary attitude of denying the white-oriented way of thinking in his major works. Furthermore, both narrative poems have in common the literary method of reviving the past in the present. In the final chapter of the poem *Chief Joseph*, the narrator-poet visits the Nez Perce reservation area about a century later after the events portrayed in the poem.

3

The narrator's visit to the Nez Perce reservation in the ninth section is not only a kind of return to the homeland commonly seen in Warren's works, but an obvious example of fusion of the past and the present, or to put it more specifically, a typically Warrenian theme of groping for the value in the past so as to make the present better. At the beginning of the final chapter, the poet introduces the detailed information of the airline he used.

La Guardia to O'Hare, American Airlines, October 9, 1981, Ticket
704 982 1454 4, Chicago. By Northwest to Great Falls. Met by two
Friends, Stuart Wright and David Quammen. (CP 522)

Though this strangely incongruous information brings out a marked contrast between the past and the present, the fusion, or reconciliation, of the past and the present time comes to appear vividly toward the end of the poem. At the beginning of the last section, during the time when the poet heads for the region by car, the poet imagines the car that "We plunge, northeast, but in our minds see / only one small black dot, / Which is the Honda creeping slow / Across a large map outspread." (CP 523) This passage well illustrates Warren's pessimism that the modern technology era is diminishing people to the level of "one small black dot." The region called "Snake Creek" now turns out to be just an alienated barren place for the poet. The contrast is evidently seen also in the following passage:

Snake Creek loops away, is hidden in thickets
Of last leaves of wild rose, now dusty crimson of leaf,
Branches studded with red hips. You tear through briars
Shoulder-high. Snake Creek is near-dry, only
A string of mossy-green puddles where Joseph,
In the same season,
Had once found water fresh for people and horse herd. (CP 523-24)

This description can be interpreted as a modern sort of a wasteland if we just compare this scene with the pastoral image of the past presented at the beginning of this poem.

However, Warren does not simply lament the diminishment of modern civilization. His real concern can be seen in the poet's epiphany of finding an affinity between the past and the present owing to his recognition of the soldiers' death by seeing the old battlefield to "find steel pipes thrust in where each man died." The pipes can be said to be a variation of sepulchral monument in honor of the deceased soldiers of the both sides. He now concretely envisions through this inner process Joseph's figure in his mind. The trajectory of the chief's life comes to be inscribed in his consciousness. Only through the acceptance of human finitude does the poet succeed in internalizing the meaning of the concrete past in his consciousness.

In now hypothetical snow,
Marking the way he had come. I,
In fanatic imagination, saw—
No, see—the old weapon
Outthrust, firm in a hand that does not
Tremble. (CP 525)

The poet puts explicit emphasis on the sense of "the past in the present," or to put it differently, Warren tries to tell us the importance of the past to better understand the present. This interconnectedness is further expressed by delineating the power originating from the passed time. The poet envisions Joseph's inner sense of responsibility.

While he, eyes fixed on what strange stars, knew
 That eyes were fixed on him, eyes of
 Those fathers that incessantly, with
 The accuracy of that old Winchester, rifled
 Through all, through darkness, distance, Time,
 To know if he had proved a man, and being
 A man, would make all those
 Who now there slept know
 Their own manhood. (CP 525)

The eyes from the fathers are the metaphor of the power of tradition inherent in us, which figuration reflects Warren's conviction that the puissance of the deceased exhumed from the past surpasses the capitalized Time and survives even into our own time. As Joseph's awareness of the tradition was sustained by his wisdom gained through the acceptance of the defeat, he assumed dual roles; namely, one is a specific meaning: to save the Nez Perce people for assuring their future safety, and the other is a universal one: to meet the responsibility to answer the voices from the past symbolized as the preceding fathers.

4

Warren's obsessive advertence to find a meaning from the past is based on his conviction that the past must be constantly reexamined for us to live well in the present and for the future. Typical statement can be found in his enlightening essay, "The Use of the Past," contending that ". . .in a way, it[the past] "gives" us nothing. We must earn what we get there. The past must be studied, worked at—in short, created. For the past, like the present, is fluid." ("Past" 51) The reason Warren underscores the importance of the past is that he regards the past as the essential vinculum to colligate the individual in order for each one to exist as a solid constituent of American society. His fidelity to the literature itself is further clarified in his lecture celebrating the bicentennial, "Democracy and Poetry."

What poetry most significantly celebrates is the capacity of man to face the deep, dark inwardness of his nature and his fate. At the same time that we have seized and occupied our continent, our poets have explored the crisis of American spirit grappling with its destiny. They have faced, sometimes unconsciously, the tragic ambiguity of the fact that the spirit of the nation we had promised to create has often been the victim of our astounding objective success... (*Democracy* 31)

Chief Joseph's life embodies what Warren cherishes most: the respect for the past in order for us to assure the meaningful present and future. By being undeviatingly loyal to the voices of the past, he made a bitter decision to surrender with a view to keeping the Nez Perce from annihilation. Warren's critical vision finally turns to the meditation that the destiny of a society depends solely on the individual's thought. The next passage makes sharp distinction between the society and the individual, focusing on our responsibility of being aware of the past.

I heard shouts of friends, closer.
 Now soon they would go back, I too,

Into the squirming throng, faceless to facelessness,
 And under a lower sky. But wondered,
 Even so, if when the traffic light
 Rings green, some stranger may pause and thus miss
 His own mob's rush to go where the light
 Says go, and pausing, may look,
 Not into a deepening shade of canyon,
 Nor, head now up, toward ice peak in moonlight white,
 But, standing paralyzed in his momentary eternity, into
 His own heart look while he asks
 From what undefinable distance, years, and direction,
 Eyes of fathers are suddenly fixed on him. To know. (CP 525-26)

"The squirming throng" has a negative connotation, suggesting the dismay of contemporary American society. That is confirmed by the word "faceless" to "facelessness," which means the ongoing abstraction and anonymity of the individual. However, the poet finds one person in the mob who notices the eyes of the past, or the deceased people, and the poet directs his hope for the future to that person. Namely, he is a representative figure of the otherness. Warren juxtaposes here the contemporary person and the tradition of the Native American at the same time, and intends to accentuate the necessity of the past to see through the future.

Though Warren makes clear an explicit epiphanous vision of the fusion of the two races, this ideal does not necessarily mean he cherishes an optimistic view of contemporary American society. The closing part of this poem, on the contrary, impresses readers with the image of a pessimistic jeremiad. To the narrator-poet, the current situation seems caliginous, and numerous conjunctures remain to be unraveled. He now begins to face squarely up to the issues after symbolically learning the lesson from the life of Chief Joseph.

I turned to my friend Quammen, the nearer. Called:
 "It's getting night, and a hell of a way
 To go." We went,
 And did not talk much on the way. (CP 526)

5

The significance of *Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce* is in Robert Penn Warren's effort to renegotiate the notion of American imagination from the Native American's perspective. Only accepting the defeat did Chief Joseph succeeded in preserving the tradition of the whole tribe as well as the people's lives. We, however, must constantly remember in reading this narrative poem that the war he fought was his furious resistance to the act of aggression of the whites. Warren finally tells us the significance of being constantly aware of what happened in American history including its shameful, unfavorable historical facts. Warren's 1976 lecture "America and the Diminished Self" well illustrates his conviction of extracting a meaning from the past. He points out how "our poetry, in fulfilling its function of bringing us face to face with our nature and our fate, has told us, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, that we are driving toward the destruction of the very assumption on which our nation is presumably founded." (*Democracy* 31) Warren's creed that American poetry must adopt a critical attitude to American virtue is lucidly reflected in his literary achievement that fundamentally scrutinizes the founding ideals of America in the light of his awareness of human finitude and corruption. Throughout his lifelong literary pursuit, Warren's central concern has been directed to the constant reconsideration of the complex

fate of being an American citizen.

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