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Species vs. Genus in the Romantic Novel: Warren's *World Enough and Time*

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Though at first glance a reasonable enough label, the term "romantic novel" becomes increasingly contradictory the more one examines it. The two halves of the term draw upon opposed connotations and hence seem more like contraries than the orderly relation of species to genus implied in the term. Typically, the history of the novel is thought to begin with the emergence of "formal realism,"[1] and a concern for the "details" and "particulars" of experience is assumed to be its "generic commitment."[2] On the other hand, the word "romantic" connotes a greater emphasis upon the imaginative than the rational, the subjective rather than the objective. Indeed, in the most extended treatment of the romantic novel, Robert Kiely characterizes the form as a "battleground." As he puts it, "theories, techniques of craft, and moral imperatives related to the cultivation of imagination and the supremacy of the self collided with those associated with reason and public welfare."[3]

Such a collision is familiar to students of American literature, particularly since Richard Chase's classic discussion of romance and realism. He describes romance as being dominant in American fiction and as eschewing the "ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity" in order "to plunge into the underside of consciousness" rather than remain in the daylight world of "the spectacle of man in society."[4] The combination of these two elements in the romantic novel thus gives us the conflict between the "novelistic requirements" of realism and "the cultivation of imagination and the supremacy of the self." To this conceptual tension, however, we must add an equivalent formal strain, for, as Kiely observes, "in nearly every case one has a sense of unresolved struggle, of intelligence and energy at odds."[5] In defining the "dynamic antagonism" released in the best examples of the romantic novel, Kiely notes that

although romantic novels do have structural patterns,

character types, and situations in common, their primary tendency is to destroy (or, at the very least, undermine) particular narrative conventions. Romantic novels thrive like parasites on structures whose ruin is the source of their life.[6]

The romantic novel is thus a doubly divided form fighting both a civil war among its conflicting romantic and realistic ideologies, and something like a war of colonial liberation against the ruling narrative conventions with which Kiely finds it colliding.

That such conflicts can create enduring critical problems is evident in the responses one finds to a work like *Wuthering Heights*. One hardly knows whether the first generation of characters are human or are scarcely definable elemental forces, while the second generation appear to be faint parodies of their seniors. Where in the range suggested between elemental forces and socialized beings does the self lie? Or consider Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and its proliferation of symbolic possibilities at the end, all dashing to incoherent destruction along with the perhaps enlightened protagonist, lost in the cataract at the feet of a great white figure which remains conceptually stranded between the realism of the genus and the romance of the species.

Moreover, as one thinks through various examples of the romantic novel, one finds these formal and conceptual tensions taking repeatedly the form of a single issue: the grounds of selfhood. These grounds may be located within, as in the all but mystical metaphysical sense of identity implied in *Wuthering Heights*; they may be located in Sir Walter Scott's middle ground whereon the protagonist negotiates his way among conflicting social orders; they may be located in Poe's search to relate the self to an ultimate cosmic principle. But however the romantic novelist mediates among these contending grounds of selfhood, his narrative resolution is complicated both thematically and technically by his conflicting allegiances to both genus and species. Whether the protagonist heeds an inner light, fulfills the duties assigned him by society, or subordinates himself to a higher or ultimate being, he is defined through the conflicts inherent in the romantic novel.

Though one may identify a number of fruitful suggestions towards a perspective on this perplexing form, possibly the most penetrating study is found in a novel of our own century, Robert

Penn Warren's *World Enough and Time* (1950). The passage of both literary and nonliterary history since the classic nineteenth-century exemplars introduces some ironic distance into this text, suggesting that Warren's subtitle, "A Romantic Novel," may be more an allusion than an identification, in effect quoting the tradition but with a critical difference. Nonetheless, the narrative works closely with the antinomies in this species of the novel. Indeed, Robert B. Heilman's extraordinary review of *World Enough and Time* when it first appeared clearly expresses Warren's version of the basic tension we have outlined; he describes the novel as charting

> the failure of a private, subjective "ideal" realm to come to
> terms with, to be integrated with, to be married to a realm of
> public life and activity, the realm of politics and society and
> group action, of law and justice.[7]

Most critics follow in Heilman's wake, accepting as a satisfactory summary of the novel's theme the division made by its protagonist, Jeremiah Beaumont, between the "Idea" and the "World."[8] However, the work's narrative complexity and figurative variations on this theme suggest that Warren's allusion is more a troubled inquiry into the relationships between conceptual and formal antinomies than a simple reiteration of them. Indeed, the "unresolved struggle" Kiely finds throughout the romantic novel is foregrounded here in a way that challenges the assumptions of both its tributaries. Not only do we have a dark version of the American Adam trying to narrate a justification of his life, but we also have a modern historian looking over his shoulder, as it were, trying to make sense of both Jeremiah's act of interpretation and that which he anticipates on the part of the reader. Would-be swashbuckler and scholarly historian, the diary of selfhood and the study of social facts — the contraries come to the surface in anything but a peaceful integration or marriage, to recur to Heilman's metaphors.[9] Ultimately the novel plays off these contraries to redefine them in ways less naive metaphysically than the precedents to which it responds.

The narrator introduces almost immediately the concerns we have located in the nature of the romantic novel. As he is an

historian, one would anticipate his allegiance to realism, and indeed his method in general is to get the reader as close as possible to the "historical facts" of the case.[10] But he is a romantic sort of historian, much given to emotional relations with his characters and, more importantly, to figurative language that often introduces into his objective and realistic account the romantic novel's imaginative disruption of such forms. In the novel's second paragraph, for example, he muses over the project ahead of him in terms that bear directly on the problems at hand:

> We have what is left, the lies and half-lies and the truths and half-truths. We do not know that we have the Truth. But we must have it.[11]

These sentences represent a conventional gesture towards the necessary element of uncertainty as one comes to grips with historical materials like Beaumont's journal. By pluralizing and halving truths and lies, he accounts rigorously for the relativities and uncertainties plaguing the struggle to set right the record. But other tendencies of this historian also show here, for not only does he capitalize Truth as an absolute, but he visibly hungers for it.

That is, if Truth is his goal, then his difficulty in achieving it is a question of the integrity of witnesses, the abilities of the historian, and other such empirical limitations — Truth is there, it would seem, but simply a problem to reach. Such an expectation is basic to both romance and realism, though they work for it in different ways, but the assumption separates our narrator from the modern professional historian who has no naive belief that his venture is other than interpretation. This narrator, however, tells us that "we must have it." What he means by this phrase is ambiguous, and that ambiguity becomes increasingly significant as the novel proceeds and the "facts" become more difficult to ascertain. Does he mean "must" in the sense that we necessarily have it in the documents themselves (it *must* be there)? If so, he is a true believer in the word of the primary text (Beaumont's journal) and the most naive and credulous of historians, one who takes the realistic element of the "romantic novel" to its furthest conceptual extreme. Perhaps, however, "must" connotes the desperate desire to hold Truth absolute and pure (I *must* have certainty!); the very desperation here imperils the historian's

objectivity and realism, for it parallels Jeremiah's ultimately
unscrupulous pursuit of the Idea. Or, finally, does "must" refer
not to the desire to have truth at any cost, but rather to a kind of
ontological necessity to have truth as a condition of survival (as
one must have food and water)? If so, we have moved to the very
extremity of the romantic preoccupation with an ultimate nature
of man and cosmos, knowable by means of the imagination, a
pole of certainty as absolute as that of the documentary realist of
the first of these three readings, but which emphasizes the
subjective process rather than the objective record of facts.

This spread of contrary potentials in the passage repeats that
division of loyalties we have found at the heart of this genre, and
it is confirmed repeatedly as one moves on through the text. The
next sentences of this same paragraph, for example, give us two
quite crucial metaphors for the whole venture on which the
narrator is embarking, metaphors which in fact present
considerable difficulties to any effort to take them as a simple
form of signification. The narrator continues:

> Puzzling over what is left, we are like the scientist fumbling
> with a tooth and thigh bone to reconstruct for a museum
> some great, stupid beast extinct with the ice age. Or we are
> like the louse-bit nomad who finds, in a fold of land between
> his desert and the mountains, the ruin of parapets and
> courts, and marvels what kind of men had held the world
> before him. But at least we have the record: the tooth and
> thigh bone, or the kingly ruins. (3)

To be "puzzling" over remnants may well be the human
condition, but the two metaphors develop quite different contexts
for this state. The first comparison, between the historian and the
scientist, allies the historian with the equally scholarly and
objective researcher in the world of hard, measurable facts. The
analogy is not, however, without ambiguities, for this scientist is
"fumbling," and he must "reconstruct" a dinosaur from only a
tooth and a thigh bone; however well-intentioned he is, however
thorough his preparation, a great deal of imagination and many
hypotheses are going to be needed in his task. And even the
value of that task is questioned, for its object, Jeremiah, is hardly
enhanced by the comparison to a "great, stupid beast," for while
"great" indeed suggests the scope to which he aspired, "stupid" is

anything but ennobling. Moreover, to be "extinct" and destined only for a museum indicates a failure to have achieved the sort of timeless ideal that would make his search of enduring value.

The second metaphor we have for this narrator's relation to his material reverses the terms absolutely. Instead of the contemporary scientific culture-hero, we have a "louse-bit nomad" whose "fumbling" results from purposeless wandering rather than attempting the scholarly challenge faced by the paleontologist. Dweller in the fruitless desert, he is dumbfounded by the "marvels" of civilized refinement whose traces he discovers by sheer accident rather than by the meticulous dental-picking of the archaeologist. Rather than a "stupid" and "extinct" beast, his quarry is a master race dwarfing the present, romantic heroes of a lost golden age towering above the squat shapes of a degenerate age. The first image draws us to the superior position occupied by the quintessential novelist, the omniscient narrator, who surveys with wit and wisdom the expanse of the fictional world and reconstructs it for the textual museum. The second, however, introduces the romantic elements this commentary upon it has suggested, and places us at the lowest point of entry in a quest for what Kiely termed "the cultivation of imagination and the supremacy of the self," a quest whose fulfillment is embodied in that mysterious "kind of men [who] had held the world before" this conceptually nomadic narrator undertook his task. By the first image, Jeremiah's fate is the logical consequence of attempting to enact a romantic ideology in a world that runs on realism; by the second, however, he is the last of those who had the greatness of spirit and vision to attempt the great role. Both Jeremiahs are present in the novel, just as both narrators are, and in the strain between their sets of assumptions one finds that curiously destructive, parasitical quality Kiely argues as basic to the romantic novel.[12]

One result of this strain is that the narrator cannot rely fully upon either outlook as a basis for his judgments about Jeremiah's journal. Certainly he lacks the authority presumed by an omniscient novelist, but he also is diffident about deciding which of several possible readings of his sources is "right." Perhaps his interest in these ambiguities is part of his romantic focus upon the glimpses into subjectivity such passages permit. If so, he does not seem ultimately to reach any sure sense of a consciousness (his own or Jeremiah's) that would ground his interpretations and

make all the manifestations of that consciousness cohere. At one point, for example, he notes Jeremiah's stylistic preference for "terms of horror and condemnation" in his journal,

> as though he would cloak himself in the language of common report. Or did his motive lie deeper? Did that language cleanse his hands for the moment, and restore him to the society of men? Or when his own tongue condemned his act, did he relish the irony because at that moment he felt more free and secret in his inner self set off from the world? (248)

This trifurcating explanation points to different ways of thinking about the implications of Jeremiah's style. The first reading (cliche as cloak) suggests that an authentic self is lost through immersion in the language of everyday gossip. The second, by contrast, reverses this valorization of individualism and prizes the place in the community he may have regained by seeing himself through their language rather than through his own. One explanation notes a lapse from a romantic drive to selfhood, the other an attempt to enter the community of realistic assumptions about actions and their values. The third, however, is a puzzle from either perspective. That is, the romantic "supremacy of self" Kiely mentions has become a more than Byronic version of the protagonist cut off from the norm by both egoism and crime. At the same time, the normal distance implied by realistic objectivity is grotesquely exaggerated; Jeremiah's "irony" opens so cold and so extreme a space between his expression and both his "inner self" and "the world" that any sense of moral relation, either to his own actions or to the community, seems lost somewhere in the act of verbal play. It is as if each of the two views had been taken so far as to meet its contrary in a diabolic inversion of the harmonies which Jeremiah sought in his life, and the narrator in his presentation of those materials. It may well be appropriate that the inversion should be signalled by irony, the means by which language tries to escape its limits by signalling an awareness of the distance between sign and referent. That is, the irony is "appropriate" in view of the manner in which romantic novels, as Kiely points out, "thrive like parasites on structures whose ruin is the source of their life." Here, the nature of the "ruin" is the mutually destructive criticism the "romantic" and the "novel" wage against each other's extreme form — exposing the solipsism

and anti-social irresponsibility of the romantic mode, and the sterility and self-alienation of the realistic. Moreover, it is a "ruin" evident not only in the unmistakable failures of Jeremiah's life, but also in the narrator's response of uncertainty to the key elements of both Jeremiah's life and his diary. Far from synthesizing these elements harmoniously, the narrator finds that the harder he tries to specify, the more clearly the strain between them shows.

Another example indicates that this is not a confusion unique to Jeremiah's case. After Rachel's long-delayed confession of love to Jeremiah, the narrator asks,

> Had she spoken them [words of love] out of her own guilt as an expiation? Or out of pity for the very loneliness which made him reject her? Or had she spoken the truth when she said that she loved him because love was the only thing left, and you must have something, even to die? Or because the unwritten text of the drama that she and Jeremiah Beaumont acted out on their high and secret stage demanded this in the end? (377)

Though at first glance these questions seem to be the objective historian's neutral list of possible motives, they actually propose four quite different conceptions of self and cosmos jostling for dominance in the narrator's mind. Rachel as a repentant sinner implies the universe of moral struggle; as an exquisite sensibility moved by pity, she is the pathetic heroine in a cosmic melodrama; as a desperate wretch under capital sentence, she is a naturalist victim ground down to the last emotion in her repertoire; as a role player, she is a slightly ludicrous stand-in for herself in a fabulist heroic drama. We move, in other words, in a romantic framework from a drama of moral absolutes to its degenerate form of sentimental drama, and in a realist framework from an austere awareness of the individual crushed by social forces beyond her control to its satirical form unveiling the private delusions that account for deviant or foolish behavior. None of these literary zones joined in the romantic novel is a resting point, however, because they all coexist within the conceptual tensions of the form. The coexistence of incompatible elements produces the sort of "dynamic antagonism" of which Kiely warned us, and accounts for the narrator's uncertainty as he juggles these different

conceptual structures for organizing his interpretation and presentation of the material. At the junction of two cultural traditions, the narrator is almost paralyzed by the surplus of frameworks available to him.

At a few points in the narrative, he rises to something like an awareness of this dilemma, however, and tries to pass beyond the structural limits of the romantic novel. In trying to think beyond the ruin of these structures, his comments fulfill Kiely's other prediction about the genre's hostility to the forms and premises of tradition. For example, in an effort to preempt a too easy condescension to Jeremiah on the part of his readers, the narrator pauses about a quarter of the way into the novel, with implications that escape the local context:

> The gratuitous act: that was what he sought. But why did he seek it, the act outside the motives of the world? The answer is easy. It was the only way he knew to define himself, to create his world. We look back on his story, so confused and comic and pretentious and sad, and it seems very strange to us, for our every effort is to live in the world, to accept its explanations, to do nothing gratuitously. But is his story so strange? Explanations can only explain explanations, and the self is gratuitous in the end. (116)

The first third of the comment seems pure Romanticism — the supreme self developing itself through the supra-rational discourse of the imagination, a self-authenticating, self-grounding, self-creating plenitude of being. The middle sentence pictures us all by contrast as pure realists living in the world of straightforward explanations. The comment closes like a steel vise, however, crushing the two alternatives together until they are as flat as the page that gives rise to them. If "explanations can only explain explanations," then the discourse of either romance or realism embodies something like an intertextual circularity: the explanations cannot reach outside the text to the referent, to the self or the world they are *about*, rather than simply *are*. And if the self is "gratuitous," then the two meanings of that adjective become central for us. If the self is "unearned," like a gratuitous payment, then the romantic emphasis upon cultivating selfhood is unnecessary: the self is already there, paid out to the individual independent of his strivings, an act of ontological grace. If, at the

same time, the self is unjustified, like gratuitous criticism, then it cannot manifest the clear relations of cause and effect between essence and actions. The realist project of representing details and particulars in order to illustrate their implicit rationale becomes the imposition of an organic fiction upon chance contiguities.

Is this a thinking beyond the impasse of the conflicting structures within the form of the romantic novel, or is it simply a moment of despair or near inarticulateness on the part of the narrator? One indication that *World Enough and Time* ventures a step beyond the two traditions on which it draws is the narrator's reflection upon a crucial moment in Jeremiah's journal. The protagonist comes to the point at which he feels "a numbness and the knowledge without even despair that my life was nothing and all I had ever done was nothing and meant nothing." The narrator comments at length:

> He had come to the "knowledge," he says. He says that, but we can scarcely believe him, for if he had come truly to the knowledge, would he have sat again the next day at his table and written down the account of all that Munn Short had said, and all that he himself had said, and the horror of his nightmare? With that knowledge what could have been the meaning of that act of recording? But he did write it, and the words are all there before us on the yellowing, curling sheets. Or is there the paradox that even in that knowledge, even when it is truly had, man must put down the words, must make the record? For even when that knowledge of blankness comes, he is still man and must "justify"? (392–3)

For the romantic character, there could have been no "meaning of that act of recording," and for the realist narrator, there is no plausibility in Jeremiah's making the attempt. For the narrator striving to think beyond the impasse, however, there is the paradox of the alternative we have just explored — that man is a textual creature, and "must make the record" even if what he has is a "knowledge of blankness." There may only be the passion of recording, of "justifying" not in the sense of invoking transcendent or scientific laws explaining the ways of God and man, but of "justifying" the typographical margins of a life whose "selfhood" falls now between the quotation marks from opposing traditions (romaticism and realism), a textual creation of the

interpreter — in first person, as in Jeremiah's journal, or in third, as in the novel at hand. Blankness, the absence of words or of what those words attempt to embody, may be the kind of knowledge to which Colonel Fort, the novel's other "hero," comes: "There is no sadness like the sadness of a man who knows the secrets of the world and of power, for only that man is forced to face the blankness of the last secret," the secret of "the man himself" (36–37).

The narrator's speculations take us significantly beyond the heartening synthesis of romanticism and realism we might have expected from this hybrid genre, and in the "dynamic antagonism" and anti-conventional rebelliousness of its nature take "man," of whom we would expect an enriched definition, and all but lose him amidst the mutual criticism of its polar elements.

We ought not neglect entirely the working out of this dilemma in the life and narrative of Jeremiah Beaumont, for they confirm the implicit critique of literary traditions we find in the narrator's commentary. Perhaps indicative of his general state of mind is his reaction to the pledge his lawyer, Mr. Madison, makes his wife: "Beaumont will never hang."

> *Beaumont will never hang*, the words tingled in Jeremiah's mind, as he watched Mr. Madison ascend the ladder and disappear. *Beaumont will never hang, Beaumont will never hang*, like the refrain of a ballad or old song forgotten from some desperate violence of long ago, the identity of the hero lost.
> He released Rachel from his embrace, and stepped from her side. He took a few paces, and stopped, hearing the words in his head.
> But *I am Beaumont*, he thought.
> Then, *I am Beaumont, and I will never hang*. (362)

Jeremiah is disoriented, strangely lost to himself, until he has the traditional form of the ballad to give him a sense of structure, and to enable him to identify himself with "the hero" long ago in romance's golden age. The last two lines set out a defective logic of identity by which he fills the slot in the heroic ballad with his own future. But that identity, the text says, is "lost," just as

Jeremiah's is to himself. Any possibility of a direct sense of himself is displaced by the mediating textual frameworks from which he derives his self-conception.

At first, Jeremiah has absolute conviction in these textually based identities, as in his feeling "that the future was beyond plan, it already existed, he would discover it step by step as he moved toward some flame, some point of light, beyond the murk and mist of things" (62). That his self is the very light of truth, pre-existent and only temporarily obscured by the "murk and mist" of daily existence, is as extreme a form of romantic certitude as one could imagine. Bit by bit, this conviction is chipped away. In one of the earliest passages in which he questions the grounds of his beliefs, he introduces the metaphor of gambling:

> And I asked myself how may we know that Justice is in the heart? There is no one to tell us. It is like a game, I said to myself, in which we place our coin upon a card, then turn the card to see if we win or lose, if on it or no is truly pictured the kingly face of Justice.
>
> Ah, but — and I put the last sad query to myself — can we ever see the other side of the card? Who will tell us? (122–3)

The plaintive tone of the final question shows how keenly Jeremiah feels this version of the epistemological dilemma: the face of truth is forever turned from us, and there is no one to "tell us" if indeed we are right.

The harder Jeremiah tries to overcome this dilemma, to wed the romantic search for selfhood with the realistic account of man in society, the closer he comes to a sense of the final failure of either effort. Jeremiah scribbles his later journal entries during an abortive return to nature that brings him closer to bestiality than to anything remotely resembling natural innocence. The narrator half summarizes, half quotes the insights Jeremiah reached struggling to come to terms with his destiny:

> But he came to know how hard it was "to know the inwardness and truth of things, for a man remembers what was the fact, but even as he remembers he knows the fact to be a fleeting shadow of something that passed, as when he looks at the ground and sees the swift shadow of a bird's

flight and lifts his eyes, but the hawk, or whatever bird it was that had swooped thus low, is gone." The truth would justify, for "if we can truly know the truth we know that it could never have been otherwise, and what we know to be true we can accept, for that is all the heart yearns for in the end." But it was hard to know. (379–80)

That unambiguous beacon of the true self has now become what the heart can only yearn for. It would both "justify" one's life and enable one to "accept" one's lot, but as Jeremiah nears the end of his narrative line, he realizes this revelation is "hard to know," even impossible. For his image of the hawk shows how thoroughly Jeremiah has come to share the narrator's insight about "explanations." Even facts, the cornerstone of realism, are interpretations — they are but a "fleeting shadow of something that has passed" into the shadow of language. Far from knowing "whatever bird" he is, Jeremiah has at best only the shadow of a flight, trace rather than face.

Moreover, the problem may be even more difficult than the effort to embody a metaphysical selfhood in the medium of language. Near the middle of the novel Jeremiah recalls the image of that point of light, but with a significant difference:

And I thought how my own words had sprung from something in me I did not know the name or meaning for, and how a man moves in the darkness of himself, more trackless than the wild country, toward a light which glimmers far away. But he does not know what the light may be. (And now that all has come to pass, do I know?) (172)

Both name and meaning disappear for Jeremiah as the self that was to be a beacon beyond time and space has become a mystery which "glimmers far away" in the "trackless" region that knowledge cannot reach. But what if the "something in me" from which these words spring is not the unified spiritual unity Jeremiah seeks, but the internalized beliefs of the culture outside him? What if "he" is blankness, as the narrator suggests, and his "words" are always only the world's? He comes close to grasping this possibility after overhearing gossip suggesting that he married for security. Shaken and shamed, Jeremiah observes in his journal that

> If a man lives by what he feels to be the truth in him, and
> discovers in a single instant that the tongue of the world says
> differently of him, there comes the fear and shame that what
> he had held to be the truth in him may not be the truth after
> all and there may be no truth for him but the terrible truth
> now given him by the tongue of the world. And if a man is
> robbed of his truth, and of a sudden, how can he know what
> he is? (164)

The six occurrences of "tongue" in this passage keep the truth of
selfhood linguistic and hence, as Jeremiah feels, relative to the
cultural consensus ("the tongue of the world") rather than to a
metaphysical "truth in him."

Jeremiah appears at such a moment on the verge of seeing how
completely the existence of selfhood, not to mention our concept
of it, depends upon the way men speak of it. He has learned the
discourse of realism from Colonel Fort and that of romanticism
from his philosophy and his novels, but finds himself all but lost
between their conflicting conventions. It is thus with nostalgia
that he speaks at the very end of "a way I have missed," "a way
whereby the word becomes flesh . . . [and] the flesh becomes
word." Such a union would appear to be the ultimate aim of the
romantic novel, but this narrative suggests that one cannot help
but miss a way that is less a union than the split identity of a
fictional subgenre and, ultimately perhaps, of a culture.

World Enough and Time thus appears to offer a surprising
response to the "unresolved struggle" of the traditional romantic
novel: the very project draws together two fundamental traditions
in our culture in a way that frustrates both, causing them to
publish the improbabilities of each other's assumptions. Karl
Kroeber's conclusions in *Romantic Narrative Art* give us a point of
perspective upon the generic issue. Basic to romantic narrative, he
argues, is "the experience of an individual's journey through past
errors and present confusions to a private intuition of universal
harmony."[13] This intuition, clearly, is Jeremiah's goal, but certainly
not his achievement. For framing his effort is that of a modern
historian to represent, and thus to explain, a life gone wrong.
This narrator seems to view the gap between Jeremiah's reach and
grasp as an inevitable one, and though he shares with his subject

some nostalgia for the goals of romance, he nonetheless draws out Jeremiah's own increasing doubts about its basic assumptions and adds to them his own. As we have seen, however, his realistic framework also suffers wear from these experiences, and we have not a simple reversal of romance to realism, but a recognition that they are only alternative explanations which fail to comprehend the whole territory they seek to map. That, in fact, may be the point behind Warren's elaborate narrative structure, dense with its overlapping frames, its historical data, and its double-decker commentary. Kroeber notes that romantic narrative "seems to be the mode toward which an experimenting, innovating poet, or a poet unsure of his traditions, perhaps even in rebellion against specialized literary conventions, will naturally turn. . . ."[14] That collection of attitudes towards tradition (experimentation, innovation, uncertainty, rebellion) may be the inevitable modern gloss upon the frustrations apparent in what we have in the way of a canon of romantic novels.

World Enough and Time shows us how the sanity, or wholeness, of Jeremiah Beaumont is torn apart by trying to live through the premises of both traditions at once. His effort to take both to the limit exhausts their pretensions to the absolute reference points, Self and Reality, to which they aspire. Hence Jeremiah finds only an opposition between an awesome blankness of the self (or Nature) and the confusing, often conflicting conventional perspectives with which the culture socializes its members. The reference points are cultural rather than metaphysical or natural, and hence are subject to the conceptual limitations of their underlying assumptions. We have looked closely at the passages in which Jeremiah, like Colonel Fort, discovers the final blankness of the self, and a similar emptiness characterizes the wilderness life on the island of the Grand Bosse. The pure beacon of romantic selfhood flickers down to an unreachable glimmer; the wilderness induces a bestial, nonhuman existence; and society's exemplar — Colonel Fort — turns out to be as morally ambiguous as the political issues and processes of the day. Jeremiah can neither escape into selfhood nor merge with society; neither romanticism nor realism in their pure forms can suffice.

We might conclude, then, that in the ruin of certain assumptions about realist objectivity and romantic selfhood, *World Enough and Time* manages a form of the romantic novel in which we can see critically a cultural symbiosis of alternative

"explanations." Selfhood, the putative referent of that explanatory symbiosis, turns out instead to be its "gratuitous" product. Rather than simply repeating the contradictions inherent in the traditional form of this subgenre, *World Enough and Time* thus identifies the points at which two central attitudes of our culture overreach themselves in their efforts to establish a sense of selfhood on the grounds either of transcendental romanticism or social realism. The inability of either narrator to achieve the kind of "truth" to which he aspires is not therefore a personal failure to reconcile these conflicting conventions, but rather the necessary shortcoming of the conventions themselves, mystified by their respective philosophical naiveté. *World Enough and Time* seems to bring its reader to the very brink of a post-metaphysical vision of selfhood, but a vision that is unfortunately beyond the ability of either of its narrators to conceive. Jeremiah discovers that neither he, his "garden" in the wilderness, nor the society that begins to emerge on the frontier can function as pure ideals. The historian's efforts to wrest from documents a true order of things or of persons meets an equally final frustration, for his commitment to realism is not enough to enable that method to make the great leap from discourse to Truth. It may well be, then, that in pointing out that the romantic novel was always an impossible dream, *World Enough and Time* emphasizes the spatio-temporal limitations implicit in its title for both that genre and the culture that continues to depend upon its dual strategies for creating meaning, whether separately or, as in the subgenre, in uneasy tandem. It is too much to call *World Enough and Time* a novel to end all novels, but it seems to mark at least the fictive starting point of its own and, perhaps, of all cultural discourse.

NOTES

[1] Ian Watt's classic term in *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 32.

[2] As, for example, by David Goldknopf in *The Life of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 178.

[3] Robert Kiely, *The Romantic Novel in England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 25.

[4] Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), ix.

[5] Kiely, *Romantic Novel*, 1.

[6]Kiely, *Romantic Novel*, 2.

[7]Robert B. Heilman, "Tangled Web," reprinted in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John L. Longley, Jr. (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 96–109.

[8]See, for example, Charles R. Anderson's discussion of "Violence and Order in the Novels of Robert Penn Warren" in *Southern Renascence*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), 207–24; Robert Berner's treatment of the cultural and the "natural" in "The Required Past: World Enough and Time," in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Gray (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 67–75; Charles H. Bohner's contrast of inner and outer realms in *Robert Penn Warren* (New York: Twayne, 1965); Barnett Guttenberg on world and idea in his *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975); Marshall Walker on heritage or environment and idea in his *Robert Penn Warren: A Vision Earned* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979); and James H. Justus on dream and drama in *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

[9]In fact, the novel has been criticized precisely because it allows perspectives to "corrode rather than correct," as Leonard Casper puts it in his *Robert Penn Warren: The Dark and Bloody Ground* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1960), 148. See too Charles R. Anderson's impatience with "unresolved ambiguities" in the essay cited previously. Perhaps Harry Modean Campbell most clearly reflects the philosophical premises of this criticism by calling the book "contradictory" rather than "paradoxical," and suggesting that the latter is the province of theology — "for only theologians can successfully claim the dignity of paradox for the contradictions in their speculations" ("Warren as Philosopher in *World Enough and Time*," in *Southern Renascence*).

[10]For a comparison of the novel and Warren's actual sources, see James H. Justus, "Warren's *World Enough and Time* and Beauchamp's *Confession*," *American Literature 33* (1961–62), 500–511.

[11]Quotations come from the Vintage Books edition of *World Enough and Time* (1979) and will be noted parenthetically. The novel was first published by Random House in 1950.

[12]Most attention to these critical relations has focused upon romanticism. See, for example, James H. Justus's characterization of the novel as "a study in the pathology of romanticism," or Frederick P. W. McDowell's study of "The Romantic Tragedy of Self in *World Enough and Time*" (reprinted in the Longley collection), both of which view Jeremiah as a critique of romantic excess. Justus gives some attention as well to the "elusiveness of 'truth' in any of our accounts of the past" and to "the overwhelming complexity and difficulty of self-definition," but in the context of a critique more of "conventional scientific historiography" than of the whole realist framework of which that method is one manifestation.

[13]Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), 190.

[14]Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art*, 189.