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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Patricia Anne Lankford Bradley entitled "The three ring self : Robert Penn Warren's circus aesthetic and southern intertextuality." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Dorothy M. Scura, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Charles J. Maland, Mary E. Papke, Ted Hipple

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council·

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W Hipple

Accepted for the Council

Associate Vice Chancellor
And Dean of the Graduate School

THE THREE RING SELF
ROBERT PENN WARREN'S CIRCUS AESTHETIC AND SOUTHERN INTERTEXTUALITY

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Patricia Anne Bradley
December, 2000

This dissertation is dedicated to
Joe,
who knows better than anyone
what finishing it has meant to me

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My family have been witnesses to and participants in the day-to-day effort a project of this sort demands My husband Joe Millichap has given me the greatest gifts of his time, energy, expertise, and understanding My daughters Jennifer, Jocelyn, and Joanna Bradley can barely remember when I have not been in school, either as a teacher or a student, I hope some day they will know to what extent this work was for them and how much they contributed to it My mother Letha Petty and my sisters Susie and Sandra Lankford have stood four-square with me in this and every goal I have pursued Finally, my grandmother Callie Lankford and my friend Bessie Bradley have steadily voiced their confidence in my abilities Mine was not solitary effort, for this, I am very grateful

ABSTRACT

The Three Ring Self
Robert Penn Warren's Circus Aesthetic and
Southern Intertextuality

This dissertation analyzes the extent to which Robert Penn Warren's 1947 novella "The Circus in the Attic" and his use therein of the circus trope establish a matrix for his fiction, poetry, essays, and literary criticism and align his canon with the selected works of several authors of the Southern Renaissance, including William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Ralph Ellison All of these authors observed the American circus in its heyday during the beginning of the twentieth century Yet, by the end of World War I, the process of the circus's cultural rehabilitation had begun; its growing conservatism was manifested by its support of traditional American values during the 1920s, through the Great Depression, and finally through World War II—years that correspond with the production of some of the greatest works of the Southern Renaissance The circus's growing conservatism was consistent with its use by writers of the Southern Renaissance as an image for the mythic, patriarchal Old South and the cultural stagnation that results from one's allegiance to it, especially in light of moral imperatives to adapt to the New South. Robert Penn Warren's canon is particularly driven and informed by the image of the circus Readers encounter its most developed use in his novella "The Circus in the Attic," although circus-related structures, themes,

and characters from the novella also appear in Warren's biographical studies, poetry, social commentary, and literary criticism

Warren's extensive use of the circus reveals an awareness of his complex personal relationships and creative goals. he is the child of the south who finds his future threatened by its historical legacy as well as the artist of the south whose clarity of vision threatens to alienate him from his region, he is an author whose artistic goals establish his affinity with the mainstream North even as they reveal his insights into the southern way of life, finally, he is a twentieth-century writer whose appropriation of the circus, an image that had already been claimed for different purposes by literary modernism, refines the image to effect his vision of southern modernism

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication ii

Acknowledgements iii

Abstract iv

Table of Contents vi

I Introduction
Robert Penn Warren's Circus Aesthetic and Southern Intertextuality . 1

II "The Circus in the Attic"
The Matrix for Robert Penn Warren's Aesthetic. 22

III The Circus as Southern Intertext
The Myth of History and Initiation into Time 55

IV The Clown, the Acrobat, and the Ring Master
Robert Penn Warren's "The Circus in the Attic" as Personal Myth . . 103

V "Pure and Impure Poetry" in the
Circuses of Robert Penn Warren and Thomas Wolfe 143

VI. Conclusion . . 176

Bibliography 200

Vita 213

CHAPTER I

Introduction:

Robert Penn Warren's Circus Aesthetic and Southern Intertextuality

> . . . *there is no* one, single, correct *kind of criticism—no* complete *criticism. You only have different kinds of perspectives, giving, when successful, different kinds of insights. And at one historical moment one kind of insight may be more needed than another. (Robert Penn Warren, "On the Art of Fiction")*

Robert Penn Warren is twentieth-century America's most distinguished man of letters He has been honored in the course of his career with a Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *All the King's Men* (1946), with two Pulitzer Prizes in poetry for *Promises: Poems 1954-1956* (1957) and *Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978* (1978), and in 1986 with the designation as America's first official poet laureate His career as poet, novelist, biographer, literary critic, essayist, editor, and teacher spanned over five decades and kept pace with this century's passage through literary, political, and cultural changes, all of which Warren observed and remarked upon in his voluminous canon Recognized steadily throughout his career as an artist of unmistakable stature, Warren has earned a central place among American modernists as well as among American authors of the Southern Renaissance

I propose to examine Warren's identity as a southern modernist through the window of the circus trope Circus and carnival references appear with arresting regularity in Warren's early prose works, including his unpublished novels, his biography of John Brown, and two of his first three published novels Especially in his 1947 novella "The Circus in the Attic," Warren develops the circus trope to a degree that gives added significance to the prose that precedes it and lends greater depth of meaning to his later novels, essays, poetry, and reminiscences Warren's use of the circus trope, including such figures as the clown, the ring master, and the girl acrobat, is formalist in that it reveals not only Warren's New Critical preoccupation with image and symbol but also his desire to establish links of influence with validating literary fathers, on the other hand, the circus trope is intertextual in that it aligns Warren with other writers of the Southern Renaissance whose experiences are culturally consonant with his own

In turn, Warren's circus trope can be read psychologically in its reflection of his characters' conflicted interpersonal relationships, these relationships are particularly meaningful when viewed through the interpretive lenses of the Freudian and Lacanian family romance, René Girard's concept of triangular desire, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of male homosocial desire, and Richard King's theory of the southern family romance Finally, Warren's circus trope is modernist in that it illuminates Warren's perception of himself as an artist whose yearning toward pure art must be informed by impure elements, in this manner, the circus trope is anti-modernist in its interrogation of elitist attitudes by folk wisdom

In Warren's canon, however, as well as in the works of other authors of the Southern Renaissance, circus references cannot always be read, as one might expect, as transgressive carnivalesque elements Cultural and historical examinations of the role of the American circus during the decades of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—decades that roughly correspond with the height of the Southern Renaissance—reveal instead how the circus supported conservative American ideologies

The Circus and the Modern South

Social and cultural historians such as John Culhane and Don B Wilmeth note that although the circus was a popular form of entertainment throughout the nineteenth century, America experienced its circus heyday during the second decade of the twentieth century The surge in popularity of this form of mass entertainment may well explain the abundant circus references in the works of American authors who came of age during that period This trend is especially evident in the works of several authors generally associated with the Southern Renaissance, which extended roughly between 1920 and 1950 Certainly the circus was a fitting modernist trope as a low culture version of traditional theatrical art forms [1] Additionally, southern writers may have identified in the circus their own post-Civil War region, forced as it was to a status of otherness and yet honored all the more by its constituents for the very qualities that set it apart from the modern, mainstream North [2]

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[1] See also David James Carlyon's dissertation on the popular clown Dan Rice, "Dan Rice's Aspirational Project The Nineteenth-Century Circus Clown and Middle-Class Formation," Diss Northwestern U, 1993 Carlyon establishes Rice's role in the formation of middle-class values during the nineteenth-century antebellum period.

A quick survey of the Southern Renaissance authors considered in addition to Robert Penn Warren in this study reveals that they either were children or actually had come of age during the crucial years of the circus heyday A brief examination of the literary effects of the circus on such authors as Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), William Faulkner (1897-1962), Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938), Eudora Welty (1909-), and Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) will further reveal the cultural relevance of Warren's use of the circus in his works, thus establishing him within a frame of southern intertextuality Furthermore, as each of these authors began in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s to effect the distinctive literary flowering of their region, the circus itself came to reflect the three defining cultural moments of the Southern Renaissance World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II

Circus historian John Culhane records that America's entry into World War I in 1917 caused a great manpower shortage among the ranks of circus workers At that time, even the two most famous circus shows, the Barnum & Bailey Circus and the Ringling Bros Circus, found their regular activities hampered when great numbers of their able-bodied male employees enlisted in the armed forces Since most shows traveled their circuits by rail, the circuses' mobility was also threatened as the military need for railroad transportation grew In fact, World War I was indirectly responsible for the formation of the "Greatest Show on Earth"—the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus—in 1919 The consolidation, effected on paper in 1918, reflected the owners' fears of a longer war and their mutual decision to pool their limited wartime resources (Culhane 177-78)

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[2] As an example of growing sectionalism, one southern circus, G. N Eldred's Great Southern Show, advertised itself in an 1856 Tallahassee paper as "Southern Men,

This loss of young men to the war effort will explain in part why, among the glittering array of performers in this history-making 1919 season,[3] women aerialists were prominent. Culhane describes one act in which three troupes of women aerialists, dressed in colorful butterfly costumes, hung and spun by their teeth from the top of Madison Square Garden Another woman acrobat, part of the Cromwell double-trapeze act, swung suspended by her feet from the feet of her male partner Still another woman, billed as Miss Tiny Kline, stood rigid on a metal trapeze in which she executed 360° swings. Finally, in an act so popular that it commanded the center ring and required that the other two remain darkened and empty (the assumption was that no one would watch them anyway), wire walker Bird Millman executed steps from popular dances of the day from one end of the highwire to the other Her showstopper was when she coyly sang "How Would You Like to Spoon With Me?" (Culhane 179) Millman's rendition hinted at the greater freedoms women would experience in the decade that followed World War I while at the same time reaffirming expectations of womanliness that existed prior to the war. Any of these performers, but especially Bird Millman, could have provided a source for

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Southern Horses, Southern Enterprise Against the World" (Chindahl 45)

[3] The debut of the 1919 season was announced on the front page of the *New York Times*. The placement of such free advertising indicates the contemporary popularity of the circus as well as the public's need for a spectacle that would reaffirm the continuity of life in the face of a devastating war.

Robert Penn Warren's often-used figure of the girl acrobat—daring but demure, capable yet vulnerable, self-determining yet fulfilling masculine definitions of womanly appeal

The death in 1931 of one of the most beloved and glamorous of the woman aerialists of the 1920s seemed timed to announce the reassertion of masculine controls on women's postwar freedom, the end of the Jazz Age, and the staying power of the Great Depression Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus billed Lillian Leitzel as "The Queen of Aerial Gymnasts," and not even her equally famous husband, trapeze artist Alfredo Codona, could draw bigger crowds than she (Culhane 186) When Leitzel died of a fall in 1931, Codona succumbed to melancholy and in 1933 suffered an injury that ended his circus career, he committed suicide in 1937 and was buried next to Leitzel's ashes beneath the twelve-foot monument he had erected in California after her death. The monument, called *The Spirit of Flight*, depicts a woman embraced by a creature with angel's wings (Culhane 199-200) It is suggestive of a minor character in Warren's *All the King's Men* who is also a psychic double for his protagonist Jack Burden This character, in mourning for his aerialist wife, the "flying angel" in a circus troupe, manifests his grief-inspired emotional paralysis by molding angels from masticated bread dough

Perhaps Warren was alluding to this character in a 1966 interview with Frank Gado about the background sources of *All the King's Men* Warren equates Willie Stark's southern depression regime with Roosevelt's New Deal, remarking that in a vacuum of power or even in a vacuum of social goods, "somebody has to provide the bread and circuses, if not, there's going to be real trouble" (Gado 78) Few are aware (although Warren's remark, despite its classical reference, suggests he may have been) that from

1935 to 1939, the federal government supported a WPA (Works Progress Administration) Circus, giving jobs to unemployed circus workers who in turn performed free shows for hospitals and poor children (Culhane 214) In this way, the circus, ordinarily considered a site for social transgression, was used to attest to the country's basic stability in the face of what many hoped would be a temporary economic collapse As one historian has put it, "the circus as 'reassuring constant' represented an era of shared values and principles, before the details of everyday life became so involved and problematic For this reason the circus would be included in the cultural nationalism of the New Deal" (Mishler 139).[4]

Conversely, another New Deal program, the PWA (Public Works Administration) provided comic fodder for Emmett Kelly, who was forced by the Great Depression to exchange his aspirations to trapeze stardom for a career as a clown (Culhane 215). His hobo persona was a fitting image for the 1930s, becoming almost as famous as Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp had been [5] Kelly captured the country's attention when a publicity still of him leaning on a shovel next to a PWA sign was published nationwide. Kelly's PWA Shovel Routine captured the attention of both disgruntled Roosevelt Democrats and gratified Republicans (Culhane 213-14), demonstrating that despite the circus's reputation for transcending "race, gender, class and occupational distinctions" (Mishler 128), it played a cultural role in shaping and reflecting social and political hegemonies Especially demonstrative of the circus's social and political roles during the 1930s were the series of strike actions staged by animal handlers and roustabouts against circus management in 1938 (North and Hatch 283)

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[4] Not surprisingly, during this time, other out-of-work artists such as Eudora Welty and Ralph Ellison swelled the ranks of various WPA programs Welty's WPA experience was responsible, in part, for her artistic fascination with the circus See Chapter III of this study

[5] Whereas Kelly's hobo clown appears to have been borrowed from Chaplin's screen persona, Chaplin's Little Tramp in turn had adapted performance elements of the circus clown and the mime These traits made his performance in the full-length film *The Circus* (1928) particularly appropriate.

By the time of World War II, the federal government realized what it had not during World War I the value of the circus in maintaining public morale during the dark days of war (Loxton 104) The rail transport restrictions of 1917 and 1918 which had severely curtailed circus activity and forced the consolidation that later became known as "The Greatest Show on Earth" were not repeated in 1941, although worker shortages were inevitable as many enlisted in the armed forces Instead, the Office of Defense Transportation, with the support of President Roosevelt, made it possible for circus trains to continue to travel the United States and thus for the circus to make its home front contribution to the war (Culhane 241) In 1943, the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus returned the favor by loaning their general manager George Smith, an acknowledged expert in circus logistics, to facilitate troop movements in the United States to various points of embarkation to the front (North and Hatch 325) In the darkest early days of the war, however, the public looked to an even more humble source of inspiration when *Time* heralded the animated character Dumbo, the circus elephant, as one of the first of the war heroes, declaring that "among all the grim and forbidding visages of A D 1941, his guileless, homely face is the face of the true man of good will" (qtd in Culhane 242) In these ways and many others, the circus proved itself a valid source for patriotic zeal

Historically, the twentieth-century circus and its performers have confirmed American nationalism and helped create American identity rather than subverting it, as proponents of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque might suggest. For example, John Culhane speculates that the antebellum clown Dan Rice, "tall, lanky, bearded, dressed in red-and-white stripes like an American flag, [and] calling himself Uncle Sam" (Culhane 47), was Thomas Nast's model for the country's unique national symbol. Rice was also a genius at what every successful clown does best—defining his audience to itself.

Fred Bradna, the ringmaster[1] for forty years, first for the Barnum & Bailey Circus and then later for the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows, recalls escorting no fewer than four American presidents to their front row seats at the circus. Woodrow Wilson (1913-21), Warren Harding (1921-23), Calvin Coolidge (1923-29) and Herbert Hoover (1929-33). Wilson actually used the occasion of his visit to the circus to announce his candidacy for reelection in 1916, literally throwing his hat into the center ring. On another occasion, Wilson was only barely dissuaded by his closest advisers and Secret Service agents from accepting John Ringling's offer to ride an elephant (Bradna 118-20)

During World War II, the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus overtly addressed the war effort in both its acts and spectacles as well as in its advertising. The combination of the show's patriotic theme and America's need for diversion and self-affirmation made 1942 the most successful year ever for the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus (North and Hatch 320) That year's finale, for example, included lowering giant pictures of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and General Douglas MacArthur into the center ring In 1943 two of the featured spectacles were entitled "Let Freedom Ring" and "Drums of Victory " Representative circus posters bragged "Coming Soon! To Tokyo and Berlin" and carried the requisite admonition to "Buy War Bonds" (Culhane 245-46)

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[1] Actually, as Bradna points out, the word "ringmaster" is a misnomer used only by circus outsiders to refer to the "equestrian director," the actual master of ceremonies. Please note that for the sake of consistency, I will defer to Warren's spelling—"ring master"—in the remaining chapters of this study.

Implicit recognition of the Ringling Bros Barnum & Bailey Circus's admirable wartime service came in 1945, after a tragic big top fire in 1944 in Hartford, Connecticut, killed 168 spectators Economically crippled by costly litigation and anticipating that the public would be too fearful to attend performances of the circus under canvas, the RBB&B management invited General George C Marshall to its Washington, D. C show, and Marshall accepted Not only was the circus the first public function Marshall attended after the end of the war, but the General also brought his grandson to shake hands with Emmett Kelly in a publicity photograph picked up by newspapers all over the country In this manner, public faith in the safety of the circus under canvas was restored and the continued economic viability of the Greatest Show on Earth ensured (Bradna 263)

The history of the circus has ever been a paradoxical mixture of the respectable with the outlandish, witnessed in countless cultural juxtapositions Consider, for example, the previously mentioned circus origins of our national symbol, Uncle Sam (Culhane 51), the experience of "Yankee Robinson," who in 1859 fled a southern mob protesting not his daily circus performances but his nightly staging of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the 1858 campaign speeches of Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, which were delivered to a gathered crowd in the tent of the Spalding & Rogers Circus (Culhane 60); "son of the circus" Henry Ringling North, whose Yale education led to his suggestion of the name "Gargantua" for the huge gorilla exhibited for twelve years by the Ringlings (Culhane 228), and, finally, the reputation the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus had in the business as a "Sunday school show" (Truzzi 533) The culmination of this steady "rehabilitation" of the circus has, in recent years, been its partnership with such respectable (and exclusively male) groups as the Shriners, Rotary Clubs and the Lions in order to facilitate community acceptance and to draw profitable crowds In just this way, the two communities—the peripatetic circus and the fixed audience it cultivates—find themselves representing and complementing the activities of the other (Sweet and Habenstein 587-88) Once considered antithetical to orderly hegemony, the twentieth-century American circus has progressively become more of a force for social balance than for social change

Bakhtin's Carnivalesque and the Circus

This gradual twentieth-century rehabilitation of the American circus somewhat discourages the cultural application of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, not only to Warren's "The Circus in the Attic" but also to other works of the Southern Renaissance in which circus references appear In fact, Warren's unmistakable tendency to seek out patriarchal influence rather than avoid it, to confirm hierarchy even as he wages an ironic rebellion against it, casts his circus in a distinctly ideological role Unlike such latecomers to the Southern Renaissance as Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor, whose circus and carnival references reinforce the grotesque and carnivalesque in their works, Warren's symbolic circus becomes the antithesis of these Bakhtinian elements

Thus, my study will foreground the tradition of the "official feasts" that Mikhail Bakhtin recognized in *Rabelais and His World* (in Russian, 1940; first English translation, 1965) as antithetical to carnival As Bakhtin noted,

> the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it (Bakhtin 9)

Starting as early as the nineteen-teens and World War I, the American circus is more and more the modern model of the Middle Ages' official feasts, upholding "the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable" (Bakhtin 9)

Robert Penn Warren's use of the circus in "The Circus in the Attic" (1947) confirms the novella's place in the tradition of Bakhtin's "official feasts " For one thing, this work lends itself to a type of literary analysis favored by many of the so-called New Critics the image study Even before the introduction of the novella's protagonist Bolton Lovehart, the circus image is a recurring and unifying element. Initially, the circus does connote war and rebellion, experienced domestically between the North and the South as well as between parent and child With the resolution of the Civil War, however, the circus develops into an expression of Bolton Lovehart's yearning for the patriarchal model that can aid the son in the assertion of his identity and in his escape from maternal domination.

By the conclusion of the novella, Bolton's circus and its major figures—the clown, the girl acrobat, and the ring master—approach a symbolic status that reaffirms the patriarchal myth of southern history, "the truth people have to believe to go on being the way they are" ("Circus" 8)

Even as Bolton seeks that patriarchal model, however, a close reading of "The Circus in the Attic" as well as of Warren's additional criticism, fiction, poetry, and memoirs reveals a multiplicity of fathers located within this most enigmatic of Warren's creations First, Warren's analyses of Nathaniel Hawthorne as an artist and a man reveal meaningful conjunctions of biography and subject matter between Warren's literary father and Bolton Lovehart On the other hand, Bolton's Bardsville neighbors neither appreciate nor understand what his attic circus has meant in terms of personal conviction and self-sacrifice. In this sense, Bolton is the image of Warren's own father Robert Franklin Warren, who was deeply loved by his son but whom, in his most fearful moments, Warren recognized as another failed artist Furthermore, the proximity in time during which Warren composed *All the King's Men* and "The Circus in the Attic," as well as their strikingly similar uses of the figure of the girl acrobat, adds a dimension of Jack Burden's distant and disaffected persona to the characterization of Bolton Lovehart Finally, Bolton reveals aspects of Warren himself since creator and creation are each a compendium of many fathers

The Psychology of the Circus

For Warren, the more vehement a son's rejection of the father, the more certain their subsequent reconciliation, be it physical, psychological, or ideological. Nowhere in Warren's canon is this trend better illustrated than in "The Circus in the Attic," in which father and son relationships are symbolically reiterated to the point that Bolton Lovehart ultimately plays both roles in the family dynamic Somewhat predictably, Warren's novella replicates Freud's Oedipal model in which the mother's initial importance to her son's life is displaced by the son's obedience to his ideological bond to the father.

Not quite so predictable is the role Richard King's idea of the "southern family romance" plays in Warren's "The Circus in the Attic " As one critic has noted in making this application of King to Warren, "Southern myths and ideologies, in both their popular and literary manifestations, are in a Freudian sense the family romances of a neurotic culture" (*RPW: A Study* 10) And yet, the key to King's southern formulation of Freud lies in a particular patriarchal response to women and black slaves Thus, not only is Warren's novella a family romance several times over in its multiplicity of mothers and fathers and sons but also in its foregrounding of the myth of southern history—one version of which King calls "the plantation myth"—through the sentimentalization of women and blacks

Without a doubt, "The Circus in the Attic" speaks to Warren's career-long troubled engagement with the gendered and racial other. Clearly, Mrs Parton is not the woman her husband Bolton thinks her to be, this ostensibly demure southern lady has a secret sensual dimension that reveals her as the death-defying aerialist in Bolton's circus Her son Jasper is an even more mysterious presence in this text His characterization as the “sinister ring master” is effected through the kind of minstrel show stereotypes that once defined “negroid” behavior, making his appearance in the novella as culturally subversive as that of the sexually liberated Mrs Parton Nevertheless, the myth of southern history triumphs in the end when each fulfills individual destinies ordained by Bolton’s circus Their sudden, untimely deaths leave Bolton to return to his attic circus, leaving unresolved the question of his greater enlightenment into their true natures

Despite Jasper’s eventual death, however, his relationship with Bolton as son to father repeatedly supercedes Bolton’s marital relationship with Mrs Parton, bringing the reader to the novella’s final reworking of the Freudian family romance This reworking comes by way of René Girard’s concept of triangular desire, which has its purest manifestation in the putative rivalry of father and son for the mother’s attention As Girard points out, however, any such sexual rivalry merely serves to mask the bond produced between the two male rivals, a bond more intense and meaningful than any that exists between either of the rivals with the female beloved Speaking of a similar bond between Hawthorne’s famous rivals Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth, Warren voices his own version of triangular desire “In the end, the two men are more important to each other than Hester is to either; theirs is the truest ‘marriage’” (“NH” 451)

Warren’s canon contains many such “marriages”· homosocial bonds created when male characters vie for a female character, not necessarily to consummate a relationship with her but to effect stronger links between themselves. In fact, Warren’s canon is a litany of the son’s search for the father—a search often hampered by the intrusive presence of the “mother.” The erotic triangle for which the ring master, the girl acrobat, and the clown provide a model appears in such Warren novels as *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), *All the King's Men* (1946), *World Enough and Time* (1950), and *A Place to Come To* (1977) as well as in such autobiographical works as *Portrait of a Father* (1988) It was a model that would command Warren's fascination for his entire career

Modernism and the Circus

When Robert Penn Warren enrolled at Vanderbilt in 1921, the news of modernism had just found its way to that small Methodist university in Nashville, among the most conservative educational enclaves of the South Allen Tate, older and more traveled than his Guthrie, Kentucky, companion, had been to England and met such literary trailblazers as T S Eliot and Ford Madox Ford Tate and fellow Fugitive John Crowe Ransom remained diametrically opposed on the issue of the viability of the modernist aesthetic Warren, however, was not slow to take up the torch His early poetry was distinctly influenced by Eliot,[7] and students and colleagues recall that he could recite *The Waste Land* in its entirety from memory (*RPW. A Biography* 71)

Warren's preoccupation with the sensibilities of the privileged white male and his conflicted depictions of the feminine and the racial other are traits consistent with the high modernist tendencies of his early career And yet, even as Warren clings to this modernist tunnel vision so consistent with his conservative southern upbringing, he is aware, as were other modernists, of the diminished stature of his men of privilege and the limited world in which they move Warren's clown/artist, the figure of the modernist hero/artist, also finds himself with a diminished capacity to connect with the rest of the world through his art Ultimately, this is the quality of Bolton Lovehart's attic circus that reveals the weakness Warren perceives in literary modernism.

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[7] For a detailed analysis of the Eliotian influence on Warren's early poetry, see Victor Strandberg's *A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington U of Kentucky P) 1965

Warren's sense of the diminished possibilities of modernism is similarly revealed in his judicious comment on fellow southerner Thomas Wolfe Commenting wryly on the romantic excesses of Wolfe's novels, Warren noted that Shakespeare was content to write *Hamlet*—he did not have to *be* Hamlet Oedipal considerations aside, Warren's remark speaks to his personal realization that the role of the artist is to speak to the "ordinary citizens of the Republic" ("Note" 214) Wolfe's admiration for the circus and circus performers is plain in his short fiction collection entitled *From Death to Morning* (1935) All the same, in *You Can't Go Home Again* (1934), Wolfe's George Webber looks on disparagingly as the artist Piggy Logan, whom critic John Idol notes is modeled after Alexander Calder, entertains his audience with a miniature circus, appropriating an icon of mass culture to pander to the jaded tastes of the *aficionados* of high culture The source of Warren's circus is much more humble and accessible, compounding his view of Wolfe's southern romanticism and speaking as well to the perceived affectations of modernism Unlike the nobly romanticized circus folk envisioned by Wolfe, the prototypes of Bolton Lovehart's circus were fashioned by John Wesley Venable, from Hopkinsville, Kentucky Venable's circus figures, currently on display in Hopkinsville's Pennyroyal Museum and in the Robert Penn Warren Birthplace in Guthrie, Kentucky, owe their fame more to the eccentricity of their creator than to his artistic ability. they are little more than cutouts pasted to cardboard

Similarly, Bolton Lovehart's fictionalized collection asserts the pitiable inefficacy of art and his weakly realized subversion of family and community. When Bolton donates the circus that has become a trope for his escape from the bonds of family and community to support Bardsville's wartime effort, the community accepts it, little understanding Bolton's creation or its cost to him They adapt Bolton's artistry to fit their own requirements for a myth of history and a truth that allows them to continue as they already are

Ironically, Bolton's privately subversive circus works in a public way to reaffirm the myth of history, to unite the community within that myth, and to reestablish the ideological tenets on which both depend In another sense, Bolton's circus creations meet the same fate of modernist art within a mass culture· the intensely private language and style of modernism removes it from popular understanding but not from a popular interpretation

The Circus: Trope or Transgression?

The pervasiveness of the circus in early and mid-twentieth century literature of the South marks it as a southern intertext Not only do circus references appear in Robert Penn Warren's fiction, but they also appear in the fiction of some of the greatest artists of the Southern Renaissance. Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Eudora Welty, and Ralph Ellison For Robert Penn Warren, however, the circus is a southern intertext constantly at war with patriarchal influence

The American circus of the first five decades of the twentieth century demonstrates what theoreticians Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, in their introduction to *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (1991), term the cultural “surround ” Furthermore, Clayton and Rothstein’s analysis of influence and intertextuality characterizes the former in masculine/patriarchal terms (“hegemonic” and “evaluative”) and the latter in feminine/matriarchal terms (“diffuse” and “inclusive”) As would befit his status as premier New Critic, Warren’s use of the circus balances this very tension between the masculine and the feminine The appearance of the circus trope both in Warren’s novella “The Circus in the Attic” and in additional essays, poetry, novels, and memoirs reveals the traditional, patriarchal influences—both personal and literary—on Warren’s artistic consciousness. For this reason, the novella’s circus trope serves not only as an intertext and matrix in Warren’s own individual canon, but it also places him most compellingly within the circus intertext of modern southern literature because it is a trope shared by a remarkable number of authors from the Southern Renaissance

Robert Penn Warren’s Circus Aesthetic and Southern Intertextuality

This introductory chapter has served the purposes of this study by providing a brief but relevant history of the American circus during the years of the twentieth century that correspond with the lives and careers of several writers of the Southern Renaissance Chapter II, entitled “ ‘The Circus in the Attic’· The Matrix for Robert Penn Warren’s

Aesthetic," will explain the centrality of Warren's novella to his canon through several key aspects. first, through the novella's publishing proximity with and thematic links to Warren's most highly regarded novel, *All the King's Men*, second, through a close reading of the novella and its major image, the circus; third, through its intertextual links with other works in Warren's canon in which circus images appear; and finally, through the discussion of the several fathers—including Robert Franklin Warren, Jack Burden, Robert Penn Warren, and especially Nathaniel Hawthorne—whose identities inform the character of Bolton Lovehart.

Chapter III, entitled "The Circus as Southern Intertext: The Myth of Southern History and Initiation into Time," examines the widespread appearance of the circus in works by authors of the Southern Renaissance. In addition to Robert Penn Warren, who had established an editorial, critical, and/or personal bond with all of these southern authors, they include Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Ralph Ellison. Although Toni Morrison is not technically part of the Southern Renaissance, she and her novel *Beloved* (1987) are also included in this chapter because of her unique handling of the same themes of the Southern Renaissance. All of these authors contrast the superficial enjoyments of the literal circus with the thematically realized image of the circus as a staging ground for learning about cultural subtleties that are particular to the South.

Chapter IV, entitled "The Clown, the Acrobat, and the Ring Master: Robert Penn Warren's 'The Circus in the Attic' as Personal Myth," provides varied but ultimately interrelated readings of Warren's triangulated characters the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master These readings are informed by the social and/or psychological narratives formulated by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, René Girard, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Richard King Readings of the novella in this chapter are reinforced by observations of similar triangular character patterns in additional texts from Warren's canon

Chapter V, entitled " 'Pure and Impure Poetry' in the Circuses of Robert Penn Warren and Thomas Wolfe," examines the materials, methods, and literary programs of two authors of the Southern Renaissance whose contrasting artistic approaches are revealed by their mutual uses of the circus in their canons. The contrast between Robert Penn Warren and Thomas Wolfe is best typified by their choices of real-life models on whom to base their fictional commentaries on literary modernism. sculptor Alexander Calder, who is the inspiration for Piggy Logan in Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again*, and the eccentric Kentucky hobbyist John Wesley Venable, who inspired Warren to create Bolton Lovehart, the protagonist in his novella "The Circus in the Attic "

I conclude this study in Chapter VI by examining why the image of the circus was a particularly compelling one for the writers of the Southern Renaissance as they considered their cultural bonds to the Old South and their moral obligations to the New South These broad-ranging considerations demand an image to which all members of the Southern Renaissance feel they have a claim and of which they can each speak with equal authority; by finding that image in the circus, these several writers achieve a southern intertext that is both diffuse and inclusive in its accessibility by them regardless of their diverse races, genders, and classes.

CHAPTER II

"The Circus in the Attic":

The Matrix for Robert Penn Warren's Aesthetic[1]

> *That has always been the appeal of the circus: it is life as heightened as imagination can make it. It is also, to be sure, life as carefully controlled as human precision can make it, but it is not special effects; it is real.*
> *(John Culhane, The American Circus: An Illustrated History)*

Robert Penn Warren's only collection of short fiction, *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories*, published in 1947, capitalized on the 1946 publication of his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *All the King's Men.* At the same time, this collection became a labor of love as Warren revised and reconfigured fictional efforts dating back a decade and a half to the early 1930s Warren would later call his work on short stories "a kind of accident," confiding "I never had the same feeling for them as I had for poems or novels" (Fisher 178) At one point, however, he admitted that he "really liked" the two stories included in the collection that were the last, chronologically, to have been composed—"Blackberry Winter" and "The Circus in the Attic" (Sale 130).

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[1] Portions of this chapter are taken from "The Three Ring Self : Robert Penn Warren's Circus Personae," *Kentucky Philological Review* 11 (1996) 14-18, and appear with the kind permission of the editor.

As it turned out, Warren's foray into short fiction was necessarily brief yet significant, the stories "Blackberry Winter" and "The Patented Gate and the Mean Hamburger," which appeared with his title novella in *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories*, have since become anthology favorites Yet, as Warren quickly recognized, the short story form appropriated many of his best poetic ideas, he noted in retrospect that "when [his poems] were tied more directly to the sort of thing that might become a short story," he would make the conscious decision to create the poetic form instead. Consequently, Warren gave up the short story form, which he claimed he had taken up in the thirties to produce "the fast buck" (Fisher 178) Since writing poetry remained Warren's first love, creatively speaking, he could ill afford the luxury of writing short stories [2]

Thus, the collection *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories* has become something of an anomaly within the Warren canon, and the title novella, like most of its companions in the volume, has languished in critical obscurity until quite recently In 1979, Allan Shepherd found "The Circus in the Attic" notable primarily for the proximity of its composition to Warren's final editing of *All the King's Men* in 1946 Writing dismissively that "in characterization, theme, style, and even, initially, in point of view, resemblances between novella and novel may be detected," Shepherd nevertheless concludes, that "even [those resemblances] cannot legitimize 'The Circus in the Attic'" (Shepherd 12) Even the title of Shepherd's article, "Prototype, Byblow and Reconception Notes on the Relationship of Warren's *The Circus in the Attic* to His Novels and Poetry," reinforces his contention that the novella is, at best, the bastard offspring of the earlier, more successful novel Randolph Runyon's 1985 analysis again posits that the significance of the novella is primarily within the collection it introduces Using a term whose multiple meanings he appropriates for his own purposes, Runyon suggests that the function of the novella is to "articulate"—to speak for, to bind together, and to send tissues of connective imagery to—the other stories within the collection Conversely, Joseph Millichap's 1992 study of Warren's short fiction grants the novella "critical consideration in its own right" by analyzing Warren's psychobiographical approach as well as his theme, the romance of southern history (*RPW: A Study* 9-10) In this fashion, "The Circus in the Attic" is revealed as a freestanding work whose richly plied allusions, symbolism, and imagery do credit to the New Critic who created it

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[2] In another interview, Warren states the case more succinctly. "Short stories kill poems" (Farrell 371) He claimed not to have written any more after 1946 Among Warren's uncollected stories are fifteen "pre-publication excerpts" from novels The most well-known of these is "Cass Mastern's Wedding Ring," which was excerpted from the work-in-progress *All the King's Men* in 1944 (Shepherd 4).

"The Circus in the Attic"

A close reading of "The Circus in the Attic" reveals the care and consistency with which Warren initiated and developed the circus imagery that dominates it To be sure, the novella begins with the very image that introduces the reader to Jack Burden's hypnotic (if not hypnotized, given Jack's predilection for moral somnambulism) prose style in *All the King's Men:* an automobile gliding over a slick black highway But whereas Jack's narrative transports the reader more deeply into the political landscape of Willie Stark's unnamed southern domain, the narrator of "The Circus in the Attic" describes the literal landscape of Bardsville, Bolton Lovehart's home and "the county seat of Carruthers County" ("Circus" 4) Jack Burden takes fatalistic pleasure in imagining what would happen if the vehicle in which he is riding succumbed to a sleepy inertia (Jack's own moral tendency) and ran uncontrollably from the road He even imagines the "love vine" that would grow over the skull and crossbones marker the Highway Department would later place to commemorate the site In Bardsville, on the other hand, a "love vine" grows embracingly around the memorial of a different type of fatal inertia—the war monument raised by Bardsville's United Daughters of the Confederacy, "the defenders of ancient pieties and the repositories of ignorance of history" ("Circus" 5)

The names of Seth Sykes and Cassius Perkins are prominently etched on the monument Seth Sykes died during the now distant days of the Civil War because he was foolish enough to think himself safely isolated from the realities of time and sectional strife, preferring to stay home and farm his land as the war was fought around him. Cash Perkins, similarly honored despite his drunken confidence in his invulnerability in the face of time and war, had actually joined Bardsville's home guard, "a few middle-aged men and a rag-tag-and-bobtail of young boys who could ride like circus performers and to whom the war was a gaudy picnic that their tyrannous mothers would not let them attend" ("Circus" 6) These romantic (and later romanticized) heroes little suspect the ignominious deaths that await them, their brash ignorance is ironized by Cash's hasty, drunken retreat from the Union troops who shoot him dead and by the image of Seth Sykes's blood and brains splattered on the boots of a youthful and untried Union lieutenant According to the novella's omniscient narrator, Perkins and Sykes retain their dubious standing in history because loyal Bardsvillians, like most people, "always believe what truth they have to believe to go on being the way they are" ("Circus" 8) Consequently, Bardsville, resolutely ignorant of the facts of their deaths, prefers to consider Perkins and Sykes the heroic saviors of their hometown and their southern way of life, Warren's narrator later judges them and "all the heroes who ever died for all their good reasons" ("Circus" 61) as fitting members of Bolton's circus in the attic Thus early on does Warren demonstrate his thematic intersection of circus with the myth of history

With our introduction to Bolton Lovehart, the novella's protagonist, the significance of the circus expands to include his search for identity Bolton is caught between a passionately manipulative mother who lives only to control her child as she would "a clever puppet with beautiful chestnut curls and a lace collar on the velvet jacket" ("Circus" 16), and an austerely aloof father, whose disengagement from life dates from his experiences in the war and his consequent possession of a truth that enables him to "live past all passion" ("Circus" 18) As Bolton is alternately smothered by maternal extremes of frantic possessiveness and left neglected by paternal indifference, the boy understandably begins a search for his own truth At this point, the circus images reappear

One day, the twelve-year-old Bolton wanders from home, following the sound of singing voices to the deep spot in the creek where religious conversions are being marked by baptisms [3] To Bolton's childish eyes, the preacher's coat drips and glitters in the sunshine, and "to the shiny black cloth a few gold willow leaves [are] stuck, here and there, like spangles " Bolton's first circus ideal, the ring master,[4] begins to evolve The young convert's droopy white dress "billow[s] about her like a dancer" ("Circus" 21), and Bolton's girl acrobat is dimly realized as well Wandering too close to the drama, Bolton is himself snatched up and baptized, comically pledging himself as a clown in the circus that will grant him a measure of independence from his mother and become an integral part of his lifelong identity [5]

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[3] No doubt Bolton's age and his religious "errand" are meant to parallel Jesus's disappearance, at age twelve, in Jerusalem and his parents' subsequent discovery of him

Bolton is punished for his unseemly fall from the Loveharts' Episcopal propriety, but this early departure from the social standards set by his mother prepares him for his later flight with an actual circus when it visits Bardsville. This time, Bolton is sixteen, and he coolly plans his escape in advance As he approaches the railroad spur where the circus train is preparing to leave town, Bolton's view of the departing show folk confirms his archetypal expectations

> the tumult [was] like a flame-streaked Dionysiac revelry or like the terror-stricken confusion of a barbarous tribe, rich in colored cloths and

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receiving instruction from the elders in the temple Jesus asks them, "How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2.42-49). From this point in Bolton's life, the business of the "fathers" in the text takes on an increasingly significant circus-like aura

[4] Although the dictionary standard is "ringmaster," I will defer to Warren's spelling, "ring master," throughout this study.

[5] Appropriately for this text, cultural historian Marcello Truzzi, who himself comes from a circus family background, includes "the tented revival meetings of evangelists" in the category of circuses and carnivals (Truzzi 531)

> jangling metals and garish tinsel and savage, symbolic beasts, making ready to flee before the cosmic threat of fire or flood. ("Circus" 24)

Bolton is ill-suited for this world He hopes to inaugurate new temporal and historical directives in his life, but all he can offer to demonstrate his willingness to do so are a few of his best arrowheads, bloodless relics that, like his father's Confederate sword and faded regimental flag, are merely romanticized and idealized connections with the past To Bolton's credit, he perseveres in the face of cruel treatment, scanty food, and minimal lodgings Nevertheless, within a few days of his being hired to feed and water the circus menagerie, his suitcase is stolen and his arrowheads disappear with it, along with his dreams of joining the world beyond Bardsville.[6] His father soon appears to take him home where he becomes "for a moment, a kind of hero" ("Circus" 27) among his schoolmates

But Bolton cannot sustain the identity of the heroic circus ring master even though he clearly covets the role For example, at age thirty-three, during his two-week idyll as ticket-taker in Bardsville's old opera house *cum* moving picture house,[7] he performs his tasks with "the air of an impresario" ("Circus" 38), obviously with the forceful ring master as his model [8] Once again, his mother thwarts his yearning for a life outside the bounds of propriety and pressures him into quitting his theater job

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[6] Bolton's response to his circus experience is greatly at odds with popular circus literature of the nineteenth century Richard Flint cites the example of the anticircus tract *Slim Jack: or, The History of a Circus-Boy,* first published in 1847, in which a poor orphan boy's cruel treatment by his abusive employers is meant to make boys think twice about running away to the circus (Flint 187). James Otis Kaler's *Toby Tyler or Ten Weeks with a Circus* (1880) is a similar cautionary tale Toby comes to appreciate his church-going Uncle Daniel all the more when he falls under the control of a wicked concessions operator. Despite Toby's surprising rise to stardom as the trick rider Monsieur Ajax, his return to Uncle Daniel and into "the presence of Him who is ever a father to the fatherless" (252) ensured steady sales of this book to sober parents and their recalcitrant sons for over four decades.

[7] Once more, Warren's narrator briefly conflates the image of the circus with the related images of more traditional theatrical entertainment and religious gatherings, noting that "There had been moving pictures before, in tents, with the . tinkle of the piano like the

After long decades of lost opportunities and maternal oppression, Bolton finally stumbles across a plan that will bring the circus within his own limited sphere, secretly flout his mother's authority, and permit him his own identity Once again, Bolton sees the circus in Bardsville, but this time it is not a real circus but a child's toy circus He discovers three miniaturized figures displayed in the local hardware store window. "a ring master dressed in black cloth, a girl acrobat with a stiff little skirt and a painted smirk on her face and eyes far too large and blue, [and] a clown swathed in spotted cloth" ("Circus" 40) In this first clearly delineated description of the trio, the character of the clown now joins the cast of Bolton's circus characters His addition at this point can only mean Bolton's final acceptance that he will never become the capable ring master, instead, he assumes the subordinate role of the clown

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moment in a revival meeting when the piano strikes a few notes, waiting in the eddy of silence for the singers to catch breath and drown the music . . ("Circus" 37)

[8] One of the silent films which Bolton introduces to appreciative Bardsvillians is *Ben Hur* (1926), which was adapted from the 1880 novel by Lew Wallace (1827-1905). This work is significant to Warren's circus image since in the film version, the climactic chariot scene was filmed in a backlot Circus Maximus, whose original many consider (probably erroneously) the origin of the modern circus The conjunction of this cinematic horsemanship with the rowdy Bardsville horsemen on their way to the "circus" of the Civil War should remind the reader of the earliest beginnings of Philip Astley's British Hippodrama in 1768 and of Bill Ricketts's later American circus in 1793 (Coxe 22, 26) Their primary acts were equestrian in nature, in fact, the person modern audiences think of as the "ring master" was originally the "equestrian director" in the days when trick riding acts were the *raison d'être* of circus spectacle.

Indeed, as Bolton grows to the knowledge that he is destined to be his mother's constant companion throughout her lengthy and manipulative hypochondria, his physical appearance becomes progressively more clown-like He is strange-looking to his former school companions, who see "a lanky young man with thinning black hair and very clean unfashionable clothes that always looked awry on his nervous bones" ("Circus" 31) He is clearly more clown than impresario as he stands in the moving picture house "with his trousers too short on his bony shanks and his sleeves too short on the wrists" ("Circus" 38) Bolton's final metamorphosis into the clown is effected once he has "no hair on his head no buttons on his wrinkled coat [and] hands [with] liver spots on the thin skin" ("Circus" 16) Bolton's similarity to the storefront clown is completed, right down to the spotted "garment" of his aging skin

So it is that Bolton begins to retreat every evening behind a locked attic door to fashion with paint and wood and glue the circus figures that give his life meaning. These figures are very much at home as they line the attic shelves alongside the stamp and arrowhead collections of his childhood, articles displayed with his father's cavalry saber and faded regimental flag Mrs Lovehart, reassured that Bolton has abandoned all hope of escape from her, imagines that he is writing a book—the history of Carruthers County—and slowly the rest of Bardsville accepts this explanation for Bolton's seeming disinclination to pursue a manly and socially acceptable occupation Neither they nor Bolton realizes that history, in a form that would suit the myth-believing, monument-building Bardsvillians, is indeed his grand theme

After years of happy preoccupation with the attic circus, however, Bolton becomes uncomfortably aware of his own mortality when his mother dies. Mindful that "the hateful painted eyes of the creatures he had made" ("Circus" 45) might someday be the only witnesses to his death, and prepared at that moment to repudiate his circus creations, Bolton reenters the world of Bardsville at age fifty-nine and marries the social-climbing Mrs Parton, also taking her ne'er-do-well son Jasper into his home.

Appropriately, Mrs Parton is the embodiment of Bolton's masterpiece, "the girl acrobat, with blue eyes and a skirt of silk" ("Circus" 41) Consistent with her circus identity, Mrs Parton carries her head modestly and watches the people around her "out of the corner of her innocent, china-blue eyes" ("Circus" 47) Furthermore, Mrs Parton recognizes that Bolton's clown persona is the key to her social success he has received his standing in Bardsville as his birthright and is like the clown in the hardware store display who balances securely "on top of a ladder, held there by a slot in his wooden feet" ("Circus" 40) Conversely, Mrs Parton is aware that she must "never [take] a step before she [is] sure of her footing She [has] seen every rung of the ladder, every stage of the ascent" ("Circus" 47) [9] Marriage to Bolton Lovehart becomes the triumph of her social acrobatics In meaningful contrast to this careful self-control, however, Mrs Parton periodically retreats behind closed shades to "make herself a shakerful and drink it and go to bed and lie hot and dizzy and shaking in the dark, and feel her body flow tinglingly away from her" ("Circus" 48) These moments foreshadow her eventual infidelity to Bolton even as they reveal her unmistakably sexual self-awareness

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[9] For a similar image, see W B Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats,* ed Richard J Finneran (New York Macmillan, 1989), 346-48. As unsympathetic as Warren's portrait of Mrs Parton is, she remains the epitome of the

Jasper Parton, on the other hand, is the ring master come to life, and he, unlike Bolton, exudes a take-charge brand of sexuality The Oedipal tension between Bolton and Louise Lovehart is reconfigured in Jasper's relationship with his mother Mrs Parton, but Jasper is not one to be victimized by maternal control. He asserts himself by calling her "Old Girl," by slapping her on the rump, by marrying against her wishes, and finally by running off to the "circus" of World War II

Not surprisingly, Bolton has chosen to reenter the world at the very moment it most resembles his attic creations and the tyrannical maternity which was their inspiration Jasper's enlistment and Bardsville's fervor for war news give added meaning to Bolton's life by granting him a heightened status in the community Through his stepson's letters, Bolton basks in the reflection cast by Jasper's irrefutable authority as a participant at the European front Bardsville, newly respectful of the man who before the war had been considered an eccentric at best and a lazy incompetent at worst, now willingly salutes Bolton as an active member of their community The high point of Bolton's inclusion in the community comes when, upon receiving news of Jasper's death in Italy, Bolton reveals his secret circus and auctions it piecemeal to support the war effort. He privately considers the gift to be an "atonement . for the long lie, for all the past" ("Circus" 55-56), the reader recognizes it as an offering to the long lie that *is* the past

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person who, unlike the artist, must daily face a life of harsh experience, "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (40).

For, like Seth Sykes's and Cash Perkins's "sacrifices," Jasper's death in battle, which Bolton mistakenly perceives as a noble one, conflicts with what the reader knows of that young man's shallow and ignoble personality Gradually, with the final Allied victory a certainty, Bolton finds his street audiences inattentive and restless When Mrs Parton and her army paramour die in a fiery car crash and the end of the war is at hand, Bolton returns grieflessly, automatically, and almost relievedly to his attic and his circus illusions; "finally he had found his way back" ("Circus" 60)

Ultimately, Bolton realizes that the world cannot sustain his circus ideal. In the end, he must retreat to his attic to add to his circus "all the things by which Bardsville had lived, and found life worth living, and died" ("Circus" 62) Jasper is there, as are Simon and Louise Lovehart, the accidental heroes of the Civil War, "and all the heroes who ever died for all their good reasons" ("Circus" 61), reasons which have nothing to do with courage or patriotism or even love, but which are founded in "what truth they have to believe to go on being the way they are" ("Circus" 8)

"The Circus in the Attic": The Intertextual Matrix for Warren's Canon

Thematically, "The Circus in the Attic" confronts the myth of southern history while also addressing the role art plays in helping the artist achieve self-knowledge and a position in the world beyond that which his art grants him Confronting these issues with detailed circus personae, while fanciful, is certainly not accidental, nor is it an isolated occurrence in Warren's canon Indeed, his use of circus personae has much to say about how Warren envisioned himself as an artist and how he defined his own humanity. As critic Joseph Millichap has more recently asserted, Warren's "Circus" is a pivotal point, providing "a controlling metaphor within Warren's diverse artistic achievements" ("*CIA* and RPW's Romance" 1)

As I propose to demonstrate in Chapter III of this study, the use of the circus image by several artists of the Southern Renaissance establishes it as a southern intertext that conforms with the definition of intertextuality provided by Jay Claxton and Eric Rothstein in their introduction to *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (1991) the image of the circus among writers of the Southern Renaissance is diffuse (rather than "hegemonic") and inclusive (rather than "evaluative") because these writers all relate to the circus as an image to which they have a claim and evince a familiarity regardless of race, gender, or class On the other hand, the circus intertext also functions as Warren's individual hopeful gesture towards diffuseness and inclusivity within his own canon as the several of his works in which it appears accumulate to gradually define his aesthetic On occasion, as we will see in Chapter IV, the circus intertext will also represent Warren's attempt to understand the feminine other and the racial other, as well as his attempt to discover a balance in his own psyche Warren's ambivalence for all these tasks of diffuseness and inclusivity—indeed, his ambivalence for the circus image itself—reflects the threat as well as the promise inherent in such an undertaking To appreciate that ambivalence, however, we must first examine the texts from Warren's canon in which circus images and references appear

For example, Warren's fascination with the circus acrobat/aerialist metaphor makes an early appearance in a chapter title for *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr*

(1929) In "The Tight-Rope Act," John Brown, the historicity of whose political idealism Warren questions, journeys to Kansas not knowing whether to pursue armed conflict there or a compromise over the slavery issue. A few years later, a visiting carnival will provide a prominent setting for one of Warren's early unpublished novels, "The Apple Tree" (1930-1932), subsequently retitled "God's Own Time" (1932-1933),[10] here, the elopement of protagonist Martha Campbell Miller with a tent-show evangelist reiterates Warren's conflation of spiritual and political fanaticism in *John Brown* and foreshadows Warren's later superimposition of the circus on dramatic religiosity in "The Circus in the Attic "

In *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), Warren's second published novel, circus images make a particularly vivid appearance Socialite Sue Murdoch has exchanged both the life of moral ease her mogul father provides her and the clownishly staid boyfriend who is her father's protégé for an enlightened, bohemian life style In a climactic scene, Warren suggests Sue's suspension in time between her recent abortion of a baby fathered by a Marxist labor leader and her murder by Slim Sarrett, a rejected lover In actions evocative of Mrs Parton's periodic abandonment of her rigid social control, Sue lies on her bed in a darkened room and drinks heavily from the bottle at her bedside First, her mind slides "slowly, then swoopingly, off into blackness, and she [does] not feel or think anything "

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[10] As Joseph Blotner notes, "troubled romantic and marital relationships are presented together against scenes Warren knew from childhood the visiting carnival and the railroad depot" (*RPW: A Biography* 129) Blotner further notes that Warren salvaged three stories, later included in *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories,* from these unpublished manuscripts (*RPW: A Biography* 148), more than likely, he is referring to "Christmas Gift," "The Love of Elsie Barton A Chronicle," and "Testament of Flood "

Then, surfacing "like a diver who has gone down deep ," Sue allows herself to slip away once more,

> feeling like a trapeze performer who, at the end of a long, wonderful arc, releases her hold on the bar and sails effortlessly, superbly, royally over the lights and faces upturned so far below, the darling of the circus. . . . (*AHG* 359-60)

Slim Sarrett then joins Sue in the darkened room and strangles her as she lies on the bed After only nominal resistance, Sue's body settles back, "as though she were composing and adjusting herself" (*AHG* 361).

The circus references in Warren's next novel, *All the King's Men* (1946), however, are so similar to those in his later "Circus" novella that one could easily wonder whether the novella is merely a shorter, lesser version of the novel—its bastard child, as Allen Shepherd previously claimed—or whether the novella is instead an artistically contrived gloss on the novel that preceded it.

As in *At Heaven's Gate*, the girl acrobat provides the most overt circus reference in *All the King's Men*, while the clown and ring master can be inferred from her presence In one central passage, Jack Burden, on a "dirt-digging" expedition for Willie Stark, seeks out the Scholarly Attorney, the man he believes is his father Jack finds him attending to a mission project, a man named George who spends his time making sculpted angels from masticated bread dough George's tragedy, recounted with Jack's characteristic irreverence, is having witnessed the death of his wife, who was the "flying angel," a circus aerialist George is so traumatized by this experience that he can no longer perform his own high wire act More to the point, Jack's failure to equate George's experience with his own symptoms of psychic and moral paralysis is yet another example of his patent lack of self-awareness.

One is reminded of George and his aerialist wife as Jack later reflects on the first summer of his own strangely attenuated and languorous love affair with Anne Stanton. Anne's daring leaps from the hotel high-dive tower become a dominant image of that summer, their Freudian implications grow stronger as Jack's and Anne's desire for one another steadily increases In language recalling Mrs Parton's circus identity, Jack watches Anne climb the ladder "rung by rung," then hitting the water "as though she had dived through a great circus hoop covered with black silk spangled with silver" (*AKM* 288)

Unlike the clownish Bolton Lovehart, Jack has no need of slotted feet to hold him safely on the rungs of the high-dive ladder, he has no intention of climbing the ladder, much less of flinging himself from it Social acrobatics are superfluous for Anne, the daughter of the former Governor Stanton Instead, her dives go to the heart of Mrs. Parton's circus identity and bespeak their mutual acceptance of self, sexuality, and mortality, as well as a strangely hopeful idealism—qualities in Anne and potentially in himself that Jack will ultimately reject

His preference for observation over action, the same character flaw that keeps Bolton Lovehart literally and figuratively secluded in his attic, is the crux of Jack's failed romance In their unconsummated tryst in his mother's house, Anne allows herself to be undressed "as though she were lifting her arms for a dive" (*AKM* 294) Disconcertingly, she settles herself on Jack's bed in the unmistakable posture, as critic Randolph Runyon has observed, of "a corpse, or a figure carved on a tomb" (Runyon 79); her thus arranging herself also evokes of Sue Murdoch's settling herself into a similar death-like position The mortal dimensions of self that Anne willingly acknowledges in her sexuality, however, are the very aspects of his own being from which Jack ignominiously retreats

Although other circus references can be inferred in Warren's later novels of the1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (even when the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master are not specifically named, their triple dynamic is constantly repeated), such circus references make overt appearances in three revealing poems that appear late in his career In this sense, the circus literally becomes the matrix of his canon since it leads Warren's creative sensibility inexorably to a resolution of his conflicted relationship with his mother, the protoypical feminine other in Warren's life.[11]

The volume in which these poems appear is *Being Here: Poetry 1977-80* (1980). As its multiple epigraphs indicate, Warren's topic is time examined abstractly through art and experienced concretely in aging bones Seeming to have more to say about the personal sources for *Being Here*, and yet understandably reluctant to reveal them, Warren includes an "Afterthought" to the poems in which he admits to his reader that their "thematic order . is played against a shadowy autobiography, . an autobiography [that] represents a fusion of fiction and fact" (*CP* 441) Clearly Warren struggles with whether to privilege memory or imagination. Both elements, of course, are present in his

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[11] See Chapter IV of this study for a more detailed examination of Warren's relationship with his mother Anna Ruth Penn Warren

"October Picnic Long Ago," although certain autobiographical aspects of the poem will later be confirmed by Warren's reminiscence *Portrait of a Father* (1987, 1988).

In many ways *Being Here* could be Warren's "portrait of a mother," especially in those parts of the text that examine the intersections of self and death-bound idealism, moments represented here as elsewhere by a feminine mortality linked to circus images For example, in "October Picnic Long Ago" (*CP* 381), mingled "shadow and light" like the mingling of memory and imagination, change the familiar faces of mother, father, sister and baby "till we looked like a passel of circus freaks crammed tight / On four wheels" (7, 9-10) Here, Warren claims his circus and its implications, but not without an ambivalence revealed through the poem's several repositionings in narrative perspective Warren is observer and participant in this family tableau, unwillingly distanced from his parents' unity, "heads together as though in one long conversation / That even now I can't think has had an end" (23-24) All the same, he is joined to the mother he had once resented by a belated adult awareness that the Future, "a hound with a slavering fang," (34) bears a mortality that will be deflected neither by her optimistic "bird-note burst" of song nor her joyously swinging the baby "against the rose-tinted sky" (31-32). Older now than his parents had been at the time this poetic recollection is set, Warren realizes that not even his then youthful mother, whose death in 1931 at age fifty-six was a source of guilt and relief for her son, had anticipated the questions he now asks, even if she had, she would still not have the wisdom of his current perspective. At seventy-five, Warren can admit in the Afterthought to *Being Here* that "in life, meaning is . . more fruitfully found in the question asked than in any answer given" (441) For Warren, nearing the end of his life and necessarily coming to terms with mortality, acknowledging the question must serve

Warren poses the question again in "Ballad of Your Puzzlement" (*CP* 423-25), but unwillingly, as a note attached parenthetically to the title reveals "*(How not to recognize yourself as what you think you are, when old and reviewing your life before death comes).*" Warren's unwillingness to own his certain mortality is again demonstrated by his narrative perspective, the poetic voice addresses a second person "you" who could be the reader or the self-addressed speaker [12] In a second remove of perspective, however, that recalls Bolton Lovehart's flirtation with the cinema, the speaker notes that one's recollections of a life past are "Like a movie film gone silent, / With a hero strange to you / And a plot you can't understand" (8-10)

The "hero" Warren observes demonstrates aspects of the three personae already familiar to us through each of the stages of his life His first identity is as a man who seeks Truth passionately, and "Who, clutching his balance-pole, / Looks down at . /. the crowd swarm like ants, far below" (16-18) As a truth seeker who risks his equilibrium on "the fated / and human high-wire of lies" (19-20), he is uncomfortably aware that the watching crowd will be appalled but gratified by his inevitable fall

His second identity is comparable to that of the assertive ring master as portrayed by Jasper Parton—carnally responsive and morally numb He is simultaneously a victim of his own physical desires, "the sweetness of deathly entrapment" (34), and a sexual predator whose phallic blade "slides slick to the woman's heart" (48)

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[12] James Justus identifies this "ambiguous second-person pronoun" as a "virtual signature of Warren's poetry " He similarly suggests it is directed collectively to "the poet himself, to the individual reader, and to the corporate reader" (58)

Finally, the praying hero, presented as a "Chaplinesque" clown, yearns for fellowship with the world, which appears to him in the guise of a "loathsome beggar " Even so, the hero "stares at the sores and filth / With slow-rapt kinship" (49-50), but when he reaches out to touch the cancered cheek, he finds himself suddenly transported to a barren Beckett-like landscape and an empty "height of sky" (58)

As interesting as these late appearances of the acrobat, the ring master, and the clown are, they are even more significant because Warren claims each as part of his own identity—even the previously feminized acrobat Here they function as metaphors for three stages of human life truth-asserting youth, thrill-seeking young adulthood, and an old age in which he, having lived past both of the former two stages, recognizes and accepts their absurd manifestations and consequences As Warren concludes,

> Yes, all, all huddle together
> In your Being's squirming nest,
> Or perhaps you are only
>
> A wind-dangled mirror's moment
> That flickers in light-streaked darkness
> It is hard to choose your dream (70-75)

In a later poem in the collection, "Aspen Leaf in Windless World" (*CP* 430), Warren restates these possibilities when he speculates on the nature of the "unworded revelation” (4) awaiting him at death, the “image—behind blind eyes when the nurse steps back—” (25). Would it be the eastern sun and a smiling face? A “great, sky-thrusting menhir” (29)? Or would he see instead a vision from his long-lost childhood that speaks of age and disillusionment, “Tinfoil wrappers of chocolate, popcorn, nut shells, and poorly / Cleared up, the last elephant turd on the lot where the circus had been” (31-32)?

“The Circus in the Attic” and Patriarchal Influence

Interwoven, however, with the evidences of circus intertextuality that link Warren’s novella with his other works is an insistent patriarchal thread of influence, which is, again in Clayton and Rothstein’s terminology, evaluative and hegemonic rather than diffuse and inclusive. The title of the single written chapter in Bolton’s stillborn history of Carruthers County is “The Coming of the Fathers,” in which Bolton parrots the myths of Bardsville’s past that have established themselves as the truth that all Bardsvillians have to believe “to go on being the way they are.” And even though this written record is soon superceded by Bolton’s attention to his alternate narrative, the attic circus, both the written history and the circus miniatures speak to a patriarchal legacies of southern ideology and literary influence.

Warren’s Bolton Lovehart reflects the legacies of no fewer than four “fathers.” His precursor, as critic Allan Shepherd suggested earlier, is Jack Burden, who struggles, as the narrator of his own text, with southern ideology, history, and paternity. Bolton’s alter ego is Warren’s own father, Robert Franklin Warren, whose ambivalent relationship with Warren is figured in “The Circus in the Attic” by the tensions experienced between the clown and the ring master Because these tensions prove so difficult to reconcile, Warren, Bolton's third father, must, like his creation, ultimately father himself by crafting his art and thus establishing his artistic identity [13] Finally, however, the father whose literary influence is most meaningfully paralleled with the circus intertext of the novella is Nathaniel Hawthorne

Robert Penn Warren's "Nathaniel Hawthorne"

Robert Penn Warren's critical interest in Nathaniel Hawthorne is amply illustrated by the variety of his published treatments of his nineteenth-century forebear As early as 1928, a very youthful Warren wrote a review of a Hawthorne biography that its author Herbert Gorman had interestingly subtitled *A Study in Solitude.* In this review, Warren speaks authoritatively to the issue of "Hawthorne as a recluse" as well as to "the remote, abstract quality of his treatment of character, and the preoccupation with symbol" ("Hawthorne, Anderson and Frost" 399)

Warren's admiration for Hawthorne was manifestly evident when at a later time and for a different generation he argued that "Hawthorne *Was* Relevant" in his acceptance speech for the National Medal for Literature, delivered at the Library of Congress in 1970. Warren asserted that Hawthorne demonstrated "the writer's own grounding in his time, the relation of his sensibility to his time, and paradoxically enough, his resistance to his time" ("Hawthorne *Was* Relevant 87), all crucial elements of literary relevancy in the critic's eyes.

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[13] Chapter IV of this study will examine in greater detail the role Robert Franklin Warren plays in a psychological interpretation for "The Circus in the Attic." Chapter V of this study will trace the role played by yet another father, Hopkinsville eccentric John Wesley Venable, in shaping the fictional Bolton Lovehart

Three years later, Warren's most lengthy and comprehensive treatment of Hawthorne's life and art appeared with the publication of the textbook anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973) In his introduction "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Warren writes not only a perceptive critical analysis of his subject's literary aesthetic but also what could be read as a revealingly subjective narrative of his life Years later, recalling the pleasures and dilemmas of co-editing the anthology with Warren and Cleanth Brooks, R W B Lewis reveals what is already evident in Warren's introduction· that Hawthorne was Warren's personal hero (Lewis 589).[14] Without a doubt, Warren identified strongly with Hawthorne the man and with Hawthorne the artist Significantly, Warren gives the most space in his introduction to "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux," in which work he cites Saturnalian elements (which we would currently style as carnivalesque) in the midst of a search for a surrogate father, and to *The Scarlet Letter,* whose character dynamic mirrors the very triangularity that dominates "The Circus in the Attic "

The extent to which Hawthorne was a personal hero to Robert Penn Warren is demonstrated as early as the first paragraph of Warren's lengthy introduction In it, he captures the essence of Hawthorne, man and artist, in such a way as to reveal Warren's own artistic and personal empathy with him R W. B. Lewis quotes the entire passage in his analysis of "Warren's sense of Hawthorne's creative passion, and the palpable passion of Warren's creative affinity *with* Hawthorne" (Lewis 587) I can do no less than he to demonstrate how the passage that follows could well have been the occasion of Warren speaking on Warren

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[14] See as well Hyatt Waggoner's *The Presence of Hawthorne* (Baton Rouge LSU Press, 1979) for his analysis of the literary and psychic affinities between Warren and Hawthorne.

> He lived in the right ratio—right for the fueling of his genius—between an attachment to his region and a detached assessment of it, between attraction to the world and contempt for its gifts, between a powerful attraction to women and a sexual flinch, between a capacity for affection and an innate coldness; between aesthetic passion and moral concern, between a fascinated attentiveness to the realistic texture, forms, and characteristics of nature and human nature, and a compulsive flight from that welter of life toward abstract ideas, and between, most crucially of all, a deep knowledge of himself and an ignorance of himself instinctively cultivated in a fear of the darker potentialities of self
>
> The drama of such subjective tensions is played out objectively in the work. Hawthorne is the first American writer of fiction in whose work we can sense the inner relation of life to fiction. . ("NH" 432-33)

Having brought Warren and Hawthorne into psychic and artistic alignment, it requires but a step further to realize recreated in Bolton Lovehart the artistic qualities Warren recognized in Hawthorne Initially, Bolton comes to represent the Hawthornesque artist whose inner life is driven by his art—in Bolton's case, a fictional circus Furthermore, Warren characterizes the youthful Hawthorne as he had previously characterized Bolton—transfixed by the "contrast between the great past and the meager present" as well as by "the nostalgic appeal of a lost glory and a lost certainty of mission" ("NH" 433) Warren makes much of his perception of Hawthorne's two conflicting desires to be, like active men of his acquaintance, "'a man in society,' [learning] 'the deep warm secret' by which other people seemed to live but which somehow eluded him" ("NH" 434); and to seclude himself, like the attic-bound Bolton, "on the third floor of a house in Salem the famous 'dismal chamber' under the eaves, where he isolated himself to discover his materials, his style, and his destiny" ("NH" 435). Finally, like Bolton, Warren's Hawthorne, feeling all too deeply his fatherless state, is mysteriously bound to his mother in a relationship that is

> charged in a way which [he] himself did not even suspect until his sudden and overmastering emotion at her death released him . for the supreme effort of composing *The Scarlet Letter,* the most moving and deeply human of his works ("NH" 434)[15]

Like Hawthorne, Bolton's attic apprenticeship, followed by his mother's death, permits him—in fact, practically demands from him—a more informed and empathetic entry into the world, troubled and temporary though that entry might be Warren notes that the series of stories Hawthorne composed before *The Scarlet Letter*—"The Snow Image," "The Great Stone Face," and "Ethan Brand"—deal either directly or tangentially with an obsessed hero who, through his preference for cold observation, has "lost his hold of the magnetic chain of humanity" by "converting man and woman to be his puppets" ("NH" 445) Veering psychically from this Hawthornesque realization, Bolton reenters his community and reclaims his humanity by marrying Mrs. Parton and symbolically fathering the tragic, war-bound boys whom he welcomes into his home, Hawthorne, in his turn, writes *The Scarlet Letter.* Their artistic responses to their mutual fears of becoming alienated from humanity reveal each of them to their respective communities in ways that are unexpected, if not shocking Witness, in the case of Hawthorne, Warren's report of Emerson's murmur of "Ghastly, ghastly," Sophia Hawthorne's "grievous headache," and Julian Hawthorne's comment that "he found it impossible to reconcile the father he had known with the author of the fiction" after each had read *The Scarlet Letter* ("NH" 445-46) Correspondingly, in the case of "The Circus in the Attic," we have Bardville's belated and bemused realization of Bolton's true attic occupation, the ironic implications of which they would be unlikely to appreciate

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[15] More recent Hawthorne scholars, most prominently Nina Baym, have challenged as literary myth the long-standing narrative of Hawthorne's isolation and estrangement from his mother, nevertheless, what interests me for this study is Warren's *perception* of

But whereas this community response would be deflating enough, it is nothing compared to Hawthorne's and Bolton's mutual realizations of having failed to measure up to the standards of the fathers Again, Warren cites Emerson's evaluation of Hawthorne at the younger man's death in 1864—an evaluation in which he announced himself "sternly disappointed" in Hawthorne's work ("NH" 456) [16] Similarly, in "The Circus in the Attic,"

Hawthorne's psychic and artistic state of mind and how Warren's critical narrative of Hawthorne parallels his artistic narrative of Bolton Lovehart.

[16] If we doubt Warren's reading of Emerson as Hawthorne's "father," we have only to consult the essay "Hawthorne *Was* Relevant." In this essay, Warren envisions Emerson

Bolton's circus creations are clearly only a diminished version of what he imagines as his father's heroic Civil War service, which is later reconfigured in his inflated perception of Jasper's "heroism" in World War II

In Bolton's case, as in Warren's critical narrative of Hawthorne, the gesture toward joining the world is impossible to sustain, primarily because of the artistic materials each values and requires As Warren characterizes Hawthorne as a *"writer of romance . . . * [who] *aims at converting the past into a myth for the present"* ("NH" 459, Warren's emphasis), we are reminded of Bolton Lovehart, whose circus is inspired by but limited to the myth of southern history As Warren further notes of Hawthorne, "fiction . is a projection of his problem of relating himself to 'reality'" ("NH" 459) and discovering himself therein Unfortunately, the possibilities for self-knowledge, while promising, are threatening as well From this ambivalence, the fearful need to know oneself, arises Hawthorne's artistic commitment to symbol, which Warren passes on to Bolton. This method of relating artistically to the world produces the semblance of a connection with real life which is subverted nonetheless by subconsciously distancing oneself from it Not that Hawthorne was completely unaware of what his reliance on symbol signified; Warren agrees with Charles Feidelson's assessment that symbolism "at once fascinated and

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and Hawthorne meeting "on the wood paths of Concord, Emerson with his head full of bright futurities and relevances, Hawthorne with his head full of the irrelevant past" (86) As evocative as this scenario is of a much earlier one on the road to Thebes, however, Warren replaces violent parricide with a philosophical tone, noting elsewhere, "I'm strictly for Hawthorne I have a pathological flinch from Emersonianism, from oversimplifications of the grinding problems of life and of personality" (Walker 155) horrified him" ("NH" 459), probably in much the same way that Bolton is horrified by the prospect of his lonely death beneath the watchful, hateful eyes of his circus creations Finally, just as Bolton retreats "almost relievedly" to his attic room and his circus figures, so Hawthorne retreats more and more within himself until death becomes his triumphant escape from a life too fraught with painful, "hell-fired" ambiguities He leaves the world nothing of himself but his enigmatic tales and romances [17]

How are we to read Hawthorne's retreat to a self-imposed alienation, only perfected in death, and Bolton's final retreat to his attic? Are these men to be judged victorious over a shallow, unappreciative world or damned by the very hell-firedness they pursued? Perhaps the answer is found in Warren's refusal to take a morally critical stance against either Perhaps his failure to do so is founded in his own personal investment in the persona of the artist At this point, it is important to note Warren's summation of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in which he defends the actions of the three principals and extends the possibility not only of their redemption but also, by extension, of Bolton Lovehart's:

> men must live by the logic of their illusions, as best they can—Dimmesdale by his, Hester by hers, and Chillingworth by his What compensation is possible in such a world comes from the human capacity

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[17] Warren muses, "There is something symbolically appropriate, something consistent with the temper of his own work, in the fact that [Hawthorne] died alone, in a hotel room, in the middle of the national tragedy of the [Civil] war " ("NH" 456).

> for achieving scale and grandeur even in illusion, one might say by insisting on *the coherence of the illusion,* and from *the capacity for giving pity.*
>
> This is the hell-firedness of *The Scarlet Letter.* ("NH" 453-54, my emphasis)

The Scarlet Letter, in turn, reflects Hawthorne's own coherence of illusion as well as his capacity for giving pity The novel is his hope for redemption despite the ever widening gulf Warren's narrative reveals between Hawthorne and common humanity at the end of his life Correspondingly, Bolton's circus, lovingly crafted through years of isolation in his attic, then broken up and sold to demonstrate his commitment to his community, becomes his redemption, despite his last retreat from the world

Bolton's resemblance to Hawthorne explains Warren's tenderly empathetic treatment of him in the face of his ideologically questionable stance on the Lost Cause of the South [18] Bolton is an artist first and a man second, and art is the justification for his ideological faults To see how Warren characterizes the glory of Hawthorne's art, then, is to realize the four qualities he values in Bolton Lovehart the artist

First, Hawthorne's art, and, by extension, Bolton Lovehart's circus figures, manage to "distinguish and render images of that infinitely complicated process by which self-knowledge may be approached " Second, "out of the personal struggle, [Hawthorne] manage[s] to create images which, without losing the urgency of the individual (author or character) embodied the relevance of the typical, and which . serve as mirrors of haunting revelation to us all " Third, according to Warren, Hawthorne created an American fiction of "deeper psychology" in which "the inward and the outward dramas are intricately intertwined and constitute, in fact, a coherent dialectic" ("NH" 460-61) Warren's final critical statement on Hawthorne, however, affirms both this nineteenth-century father and Bolton Lovehart in terms that give ascendancy to their identities as artists The final glory of Hawthorne's art is that "it is art" ("NH" 461)

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[18] The path of influence proves tortuous here as well. Warren's depiction of Hawthorne's stance of racial "gradualism" in the face of the North's growing abolitionism as the Civil War approached is attuned to Warren's own youthful segregationist views, voiced in his essay contribution to *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), "The Briar Patch " Historically, both stances were proven wrongheaded, as Warren had already personally acknowledged by the time of the composition of "Nathaniel Hawthorne "

"The Circus in the Attic" and the Burden of the Patriarchy

As deeply felt as Warren's admiration for Hawthorne is, an undercurrent of sadness, of unwilling identification with his subject, runs through Warren's biographical consideration of this literary father Indeed, all of the paternal relationships revealed through the character of Bolton Lovehart bespeak the same ambivalent admiration and reluctant empathy I have previously noted the intersections of composition, character, and theme in the novella "The Circus in the Attic" and the novel *All the King's Men* that show how Bolton Lovehart has been fathered by Jack Burden, for example As surely as Warren's use of circus imagery unmistakably links the novel to the novella and one protagonist to the other, however, his change of narrative focus in the novella points to its veiled purpose providing an imaginative commentary on the creation of *All the King's Men* Furthermore, "The Circus in the Attic" was written in 1946, the same year as

Warren's final editing of *All the King's Men* (Shepherd 8)—a time when he would naturally find himself reconsidering the themes and purposes of the novel

In this sense, the novella is a "portrait of the artist," detailing the joys and sorrows attendant to Warren's creation of the novel that remains, to this day, his most highly acclaimed achievement Indeed, many details point to the autobiographical nature of "The Circus in the Attic" and its protagonist Bolton Lovehart Bardsville's similarity to Clarksville, Tennessee, a town with considerable meaning and significance for the Warren family, Bolton's real fascination for and preoccupation with history and Warren's own well-documented interest in it, and the real ambivalence that each man experiences with his native region—Warren makes an early physical escape from it but returns imaginatively, while Bolton remains physically and escapes imaginatively.[19]

To posit "The Circus in the Attic" as a portrait of the artist reaffirms the depths in Bolton Lovehart's multi-layered identity Certainly, the youthful Bolton, "his trousers too short on his bony shanks and his sleeves too short on the wrists" ("Circus" 38) replicates the gawky, young Red Warren On the other hand, the older, balding, and age-spotted Bolton, whose sacrificial sale of his circus affirms his surrogate paternity to Jasper Parton, evokes Warren's own father, Robert Franklin Warren, a once hopeful poet who had abandoned the inner creative life to embrace marriage and fatherhood Warren's loving memoir of this self-sacrificial "man of mystery" (*Portrait* 7) is no "portrait of the artist" but, instead, entitled *Portrait of a Father* (1988) Thus, Allan Shepherd's assertion that "The Circus in the Attic" is the bastard child of Warren's canon is further refuted by this fictionalized conflation of Warren's identity with his father's, the novella's compelling legitimacy emerges when, through it, Warren locates his father in himself and himself in his true father

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[19] Joseph Blotner notes that after age sixteen, Warren had effectively left his Guthrie home for good, sixteen is, of course, Bolton Lovehart's age when he stages his short-lived escape with the circus

Yet, a final and crucial autobiographical link has to do with what one critic has referred to as Bolton's identity as "artist manqué" (*RPW· A Study* 9) as well as with the details of Warren's personal life during the creation of *All the King's Men.* Bolton's imaginative involvement with the circus characters becomes so intense that he is most comfortable in the real world only when it conforms to his circus illusion When Bolton volunteers to auction away his circus figures to further Bardsville's wartime effort, the community, although surprised to learn the nature of what he has actually been creating all these years, accepts his offer The circus is broken up, parceled out, and never really appreciated for what it has meant to Bolton's survival Bolton's finally return to his attic could very well signify that he has been defeated in his attempt to convert imaginative illusion into a lasting human reality

Warren may have experienced a similar ironic reversal and some very understandable doubts at the very moment he was writing "A Circus in the Attic " He had no way of knowing that *All the King's Men,* which, as Warren later revealed, was completed in an "attic room" in the University of Minnesota library ("In the Time of *AKM"* 9), would bring him professional recognition and acclaim The fact that it did bring such recognition and acclaim must eventually have weighed heavily against the unhappy reality of his personal life, in which he was witnessing not only the steady dissolution of his long, strained marriage to Cinina Brescia, from whom he was finally divorced in 1951, but also the waning of his ability to write lyric poetry The seeming inevitability of those two failures was poised in bitter opposition to his success as a novelist. Correspondingly, in the fifty years since the novel's first publication, critics have debated the further inevitability of Jack Burden's personal failures against the possibility of a hopeful dénouement, suggested but never effected in *All the King's Men* when Jack predicts his eventual emergence with Anne into the "convulsion of the world" and "the awful responsibility of Time" (*AKM* 438) If, as I believe, Warren created Bolton Lovehart as fellow clown, outsider, and observer of history and crafted his character after the example of Jack Burden, then Bolton's eventual retreat to the safe world of artistic illusion may further signify Jack's retreat—and Warren's as well

CHAPTER III

The Circus as Southern Intertext:

The Myth of History and Initiation into Time

> *And at last, sure enough, all the circus men could do, the horse broke loose, and away he went like the very nation, round and round the ring, with that sot laying down on him and hanging to his neck . . and the people just crazy. It warn't funny to me, though; I was all of a tremble to see his danger. (Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn)*

Cultural historians note that America's circus heyday lasted roughly during the final three decades of the nineteenth century through the second decade of the twentieth century (Wilmeth 54) The surge in popularity of the circus as a form of mass entertainment may well explain the abundance of circus references in the works of American authors who came of age during that period Robert Penn Warren, of course, was one of those American authors, and his 1947 novella "The Circus in the Attic," as I have discussed in the previous two chapter of this study, reflects both the cultural distinctions of the circus during the early decades of the twentieth century as well as the literary and autobiographical significance for Warren of its most visible performers the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master.

Warren is also a figure included among the several writers of the Southern Renaissance whose selected works focus on the image of the circus Explaining the attraction the circus held for these writers is a complex task. Certainly the circus is a fitting modernist trope that proved useful to these authors for its low culture flouting of traditional art forms More significantly, southern writers may have recognized the history of their own post-Civil War region in the image of the circus, both the circus and the South have traditionally been forced to a status of otherness and yet both have been honored all the more by their constituents for the contradictory qualities that alienated them from the mainstream American culture of the North Key to the South's alienation from the North is its resolute pursuit of the myth of southern history This cultural myth of the South posits certain class, gender, and racial assumptions on which the antebellum South was founded and which the postbellum South has sought to prolong The image of the circus in the literature of the Southern Renaissance both supports and negates those assumptions, elevating the myth of southern history even as it educates its "spectators" about its flaws.

Circus stories and novels such as *Toby Tyler* by James Otis Kaler and *Chad Hanna* by Walter D Edmonds traditionally present an initiation experience of an adolescent character Correspondingly, semiotician Paul Bouissac notes that the fright and even trauma experienced by young children at the circus speaks to an ultimate appreciation for the spectacle that must be the "result of education rather than a spontaneous phenomenon" ("Semiotics and Spectacles" 144). Adults typically delude themselves with the thought that the circus is an art form created for the benefit and natural enjoyment of children, in reality, an adult status born of certain rites of initiation is a prerequisite to the full appreciation of its cultural codes. Children must learn, as adults have learned, to transform the fear they feel watching death-defying aerial acts into pleasure and to translate the pity they feel watching clown acts into laughter. Moreover, they learn to internalize the social, racial, and gender realities evoked by the circus.

This paradox of the circus as a simple and natural enjoyment versus the circus as the staging ground for a mature appreciation of cultural subtleties is exemplified in the works of such southern writers as Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Ralph Ellison, and even the latter-day southern modernist Toni Morrison Each of these authors has used circus images to project the modern dichotomy between a childlike preference for timeless historical myth and an initiation into time and adult awareness

William Faulkner

Joseph Blotner, the biographer of both William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren, notes that the two writers met only once during their lifetimes ("WF and RPW as Literary Artists" 35) although they had a longstanding awareness of each other as artists and southerners.[1] Chance has provided Faulkner scholars with two intriguing versions of an author's introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), which Faulkner wrote to be included in a limited edition of the novel planned by Random House in 1933 but never published (Bleikasten 7) The contents of one of these draft introductions, discovered by

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[1] Faulkner's somewhat off-the-cuff critique of Warren's new novel *All the King's Men* was included in a 25 July 1946 letter to Lambert Davis "The Cass Mastern story is a beautiful and moving piece That was [Warren's] novel. The rest of it I would throw away" (*Selected Letters* 239) Warren, on the other hand, was a closer and more thoughtful reader of Faulkner's work His review of Malcolm Cowley's *Portable Faulkner* (1946), published in two parts for *The New Republic* (12 and 16 August 1946)

James Meriwether in 1957, supports my assertion of the circus as a southern intertext and links Warren's and Faulkner's mutual artistic preoccupations with the myth of southern history and initiation into time

Despite having confided to Ben Wasson that he had worked on the introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* "a good deal, like on a poem almost" (*Selected Letters* 74), by late May of 1946, Faulkner's desperation to have it returned to him extended even to his volunteering to return the $500 advance Random House had paid him for the short piece eleven years earlier [2] André Bleikasten speculates that Faulkner's "strong sense of privacy" prompted his anxiety to have the piece destroyed, adding that the "introduction to *The Sound and the Fury* is one of the rare texts in which [Faulkner] reveals something about the hidden springs of his creation, and this is precisely what makes it so valuable to us" ("Introduction" 7)

What Faulkner reveals in a draft dated "19 August, 1933" is a three-way intertextual bond linking *The Sound and the Fury*, his own meditative and retrospective introduction to it, and Robert Penn Warren's "The Circus in the Attic " Beginning with the observation that "Art is no part of southern life" ("An Introduction to *TSATF*" 410), Faulkner proceeds to describe the difficult task of the southern artist, speaking in terms that Warren's Bolton Lovehart would understand and using a trope that the reader of the final two sections of *The Sound and the Fury* would recognize.

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is generally considered to have helped regenerate public and critical interest in Faulkner's works.

[2] As Faulkner included in a postscript to his 1946 letter to Robert N Liscott, an editor at Random House, after the document's return, "I'm certainly glad to have it back I knew

> . in the South art, to become visible at all, must become a ceremony, a spectacle, something between a gypsy encampment and a church bazaar given by a handful of alien mummers who must waste themselves in protest and active self-defense until there is nothing left with which to speak—a single week, say, of furious endeavor for a show to be held on Friday night and then struck and vanished Yet this art, which has no place in southern life, is almost the sum total of the Southern artist. It is his breath, blood, flesh, all Because it is himself that the Southerner is writing about . . who has, figuratively speaking, taken the artist in him in one hand and his milieu in the other and thrust the one into the other like a clawing and spitting cat into a croker sack We need to talk, to tell . . to try in the simple furious breathing (or writing) span of the individual to draw a savage indictment of the contemporary scene or to escape from it into a make-believe region of swords and magnolias and mockingbirds which perhaps never existed anywhere ("An Introduction to *TSATF*" 411-12)

Faulkner's circus allusions reveal his personal struggle with the myth of southern history and initiation into time In a further revelation, Faulkner admits attempting both the courses available to him as a southern writer "I have tried to escape and I have tried to indict in [*The Sound and the Fury*] I did both at one time" ("Introduction" 12)

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all the time I had no business writing an introduction, writing anything just for money Now I am convinced of it and cured" (*Selected Letters* 236)

Circus allusions are certainly a part of Faulkner's indictment of the south and escape from its mythic bonds, not only in *The Sound and the Fury* but also in such works as *Light in August* (1932) and "Barn Burning" (1939), in which the characters Joe Christmas and Sarty Snopes have curious links to the circus that project the entrapment of each in the myth of southern history. Ultimately, to the accompaniment of circus subtexts, Jason's niece Quentin, Joe Christmas's mother, and Sarty Snopes must escape their myth-mired families to enter a world of adult knowledge—and adult regrets

The climactic Easter weekend with which *The Sound and the Fury* ends is replete with references to "the show" that has pitched its tent in Jefferson for a Friday through Saturday run And even though he has nothing but disdain for the circus on which poverty-stricken hill farmers spend their hard-earned quarters, Jason Compson finds his own use of circus images and language as inescapable as the sounds of the band that lures the spectacle-hungry Jeffersonians to a Friday matinee The show proves no temptation, however, for Jason; as he bitterly asserts with a consciously adult sense of fiscal responsibility, he already has his own "side show and six niggers to feed" (232) Not surprisingly, Jason would view himself as the ring master of the Compson household

Clearly the Jason section of *The Sound and the Fury* describes a struggle for identity within a circus-like hierarchy Jason is intensely resentful of the elusive itinerant pitchman, a rival ring master figure complete with red tie, who squires Quentin around Jefferson while the show is in town. Even Jason is uncomfortably aware that the man with the red tie is "pitching woo" with Quentin and further blackening her already questionable reputation What disturbs him the most, however, is not his suspicion of the pitchman's sexual designs on his niece but the idea that Quentin, and not her putative lover, is the driving force behind a plot to diminish Jason's hard-won economic and familial stature "If he could just believe it was the man who robbed him" (*TSAF* 383), then Jason could attempt to maintain the ring master image of himself he has worked hard to construct

Jason's adult life centers on wreaking vengeance against his siblings Caddy and Quentin and his parents Mr and Mrs Compson by verbally denigrating and physically threatening his niece Quentin In the Compson family circus, Jason assigns Quentin the function of comic relief, spitefully remarking that "her face [was] painted up like a damn clown's" (289) and that "her nose looked like a porcelain insulator" (320) Nevertheless, try as he will to relegate Quentin to an ineffectual clown-like status, the role of the clown becomes more and more identified with Jason himself As Fred Chappell notes, Jason becomes the comic relief in *The Sound and the Fury* in spite of his best efforts to maintain the dominant role in his family (Chappell 136).[3]

Quentin, on the other hand, in a dramatic reversal common in some acrobatic performances, emerges as the unexpectedly daring heroine of the piece, claiming the role

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[3] To Chappell, Jason is comparable to "the monomaniac villain of a stage farce" (136) Additionally, he quotes Henri Bergson, who delineates the comic character "as that which acts mechanically, predictably, single-mindedly, no matter what changes occur in the outer circumstances" (qtd in Chappell 139) This quality of not being able to learn from experience is further asserted by S. Tarachow, who observes the following of clowns in general

> The clown does incredibly stupid things and never seems to learn. . . He engages in endless bickering or problems with another clown, problems and quarrels that could be settled in a moment if either clown showed an ounce of intelligence Other clowns act out the most fantastic childish indulgences There is a good

of the circus aerialist with her bold descent into life from her second-story bedroom window In his study of the semiotics of the circus, Paul Bouissac describes just such an embellishment on the basic acrobatic performance in which a clown enters the ring comically asserting himself to the audience as the most talented acrobat in the world After a series of near-disasters, which the clown seems to survive by mere chance, he removes his clownish garb, reveals acrobatic tights, and steals the show by successfully performing the most difficult stunts of all [4] Bouissac further notes that such "transformation by inversion" is common in folktales (Bouissac 25-26), we might note that this device is quite appropriate as well to the myth-based fiction of a writer like William Faulkner.

Another such "transformation by inversion" occurs in the Dilsey section of *The Sound and the Fury*, and it, too, is accompanied by circus aerialist references The Easter morning service at Dilsey's church is to be preached by the Reverend Shegog, who has been summoned from St Louis for that purpose Because of his impressive advance billing, the congregation expects to see an imposing and commanding figure; instead,

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deal of aggression as well as masochism They strike each other, quarrel, fall, trip (179)

[4] Circus historian John Culhane traces Dan Rice's adaptation of just such an act. As Culhane asserts, "many don't know that the clown Huck [Finn] sees at the circus is almost certainly Rice" (47), the nineteenth-century American clown whose adaptation of a classic British clown act is strikingly similar to the one Mark Twain describes in his 1885 novel In his routine, however, Rice played a drunken backwoodsman who first angers the crowd by his ridiculous assertions of equestrian prowess only to endear himself to them when he doffs his rags and his drunken demeanor to reveal himself as a star equestrian Quentin's reversal of fortune is just as dramatic, even to the detail of the carelessly flung clothing her family discovers in her empty bedroom This similarity between Faulkner and Twain serves only to deepen the critically remarked debt of the former to the latter

Shegog's monkey-like, "undersized" and "wizened" stature draws from them a collective sigh of "astonishment and consternation," only compounded when they note that his voice is "like a white man['s]. level and cold" (365-66).

Like Bouissac's hero clown, however, whose seemingly ludicrous claim to authority is unexpectedly affirmed by a perfect acrobatic performance, Shegog's voice compels his listeners' stunned recognition of his superiority·

> They began to watch him as they would a man on a tightrope They even forgot his insignificant appearance in the virtuosity with which he ran and poised and swooped upon the cold inflectionless wire of his voice, so that at last, when with a sort of swooping glide he came to rest . . his monkey body as reft of all motion as a mummy or an emptied vessel, the congregation sighed as if it waked from a collective dream and moved a little in its seats (366)

That this "performance" occurs on the same Sunday morning as Quentin's transformation by inversion—i e , the evolution of her role from Jason's clownish stooge to his acrobatic nemesis—unites Quentin and Shegog in a gendered and racial challenge to the myths of the white patriarchs of the old south. This hopeful challenge, however, is only ambiguously realized.

Quentin's actions, of course, mirror those of her mother Caddy, whose climb to the top of the pear tree to view Damuddy's funeral alternately thrills and dismays her clownish audience, the most annoyingly vocal of whom is the child Jason Most importantly, it permits her a knowledge of life and death denied them by their lack of courage Such knowledge will certainly be part of the reward garnered as well as the price paid for Quentin's privilege of duping her uncle Jason The knowledge of life and death is traditionally the Freudian perquisite of the circus aerialist, whose imitation of flight (note that in circus jargon aerialists are called "fliers") becomes a trope for sexuality. Quentin's and Caddy's assertions of their sexuality become an integral part of their feminist challenge to the myth of southern womanhood and the first step toward their individual initiations into time

Similarly, Reverend Shegog, who claims the knowledge of spiritual life and death, has himself escaped the bonds of southern history by physically removing himself from the South His ability to leave and reenter the South at will, suggested by his facile switch from "white" pronunciations to "negroid" intonations, voices a racial challenge to the myth of southern history and a critique of the white patriarchal south We should note, however, the double-edged qualities of Faulkner's portrayal of Quentin's feminist and Shegog's racial challenge to historic southern hegemony Quentin disappears from Jefferson and from the text of *The Sound and the Fury* without a trace, engulfed by the modern world of which she has no real understanding Shegog finds his experience mirrored in other African American characters from Faulkner's works who manage to leave the South in triumph only to return to it in infamy or through death Obviously, in Faulkner's universe, merely challenging the structure of the old world has not proven an effective means of creating a new one [5]

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[5] In her article relating the Great Migration of 1915-1928 to the events in *The Sound and the Fury*, critic Cheryl Lester suggests that Faulkner was among the many white southerners who refused to acknowledge that the mass northern migration of a million

Indeed, as the fates of Quentin and Reverend Shegog illustrate, escape from the myth of the South does not always guarantee ascendancy over it. We see this Faulknerian truism demonstrated by Joe Christmas, who is probably the product of a racially "suspect" circus pitchman and a young white woman who has challenged the cultural mores and religious teachings of her culture Despite his parents' social rebellion, Joe Christmas remains bound to the myth of southern history—perhaps even more fatally bound than are most others We see the same fatality of southern heritage in Faulkner's story "Barn Burning" as Sarty Snopes, gazing at "a tattered last year's circus poster at the scarlet horses, the incredible poisings and convolutions of tulle and tights and the painted leers of comedians" (*Collected Stories* 20), begins to accept what he has already long suspected that his father, never noble, was more horse thief than staunch Confederate during the Civil War Given the choice between his sense of justice and his sense of loyalty, his adolescent appreciation for the noble myth of the old South and his charter membership of blood in the New South, Sarty tells himself "*I could run on and on and never look back, never need to see his face again. Only I can't. I can't*" (*Collected Stories* 21) Sadly, not even a physical escape from these irresolvable forces can prevent his reliving this painful initiatory epiphany "twenty years later "

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blacks during the 1920s spoke to their ability to "participate in the historical process, act in protest against their lot in the South, and change their destiny" (129). Furthermore, Caddy and, by implication, her daughter Quentin perform as figures for "displaced feelings provoked by black migration " Lester asserts that "when [Caddy] ceases to play the Southern belle, she effectively disrupts the Southern dialectic of gendered relations, just as black migration disturbed a dialectic of racialized relations" (140)

Finally, we see the inescapability of the myth of southern history demonstrated in Faulkner's own compulsive return to the classist dilemma between the Old and the New South by way of his many fictive residents of Yoknapatawpha County Jason Compson's fate is to become part of the "sideshow" he scorns One critic notes that Jason's posture, helplessly hunched in pain as he is driven home from Mottson, mimics Benjy's as he is paraded daily into Jefferson by T P (a Barnumesque inversion of P T.?) to circle the statue of the Confederate soldier on the square (Aswell 119-20) Jason's bitterness results not only when he discovers the degree to which he has deceived himself—for, in reality, he has not accepted the requirements of living in the present—but also when he discovers that the myth of southern history (which for him includes patriarchal privilege, the attitude of *noblesse oblige* that accompanies it, and the sexual favors appropriated by it) no longer exists for him to claim. Doomed to tradesman status, he is saddled, instead, with the pitiful leftovers of a system he claims superiority to and yet yearns for nonetheless.[6]

Eudora Welty

Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* (1983) provides a retrospective self-analysis of the circus imagery she had used in earlier short stories and novels These early works suggest the necessity of becoming initiated out of the timelessness of childhood into time-bound adult awareness Interestingly, her earliest memories of the circus parallel her memories of afternoons spent at the movies with her brother, just as Bolton Lovehart's circus yearnings emerge in his brief escape as ticket taker/ring master at the local movie theatre In the darkened theatre, Welty and her brother Edward greeted the antics of movie clowns Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Ben Blue, and the Keystone Kops with delighted laughter Even darker offerings such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* prompted the two Welty children and an audience made up entirely of other unchaperoned children to "scream with laughter, laughing at what terrified us, exactly as if it were funny" (*OWB* 40).

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[6] As John Sykes notes, this is the truth behind the myth of southern history—that the noble and honorable men who supposedly represented the glory of the south were in reality so many Jason Compsons, Thomas Sutpens, and W. C. Falkners—"ruthless innocents" who aspired to the culture that actively worked to exclude them (Sykes 42-45) To some extent, all these figures, even Jason Compson, reflect Faulkner himself, caught and held in his own myth of southern history.

The Welty children's enactment of Bouissac's above-mentioned observation that appreciation for spectacle is a learned rather than a natural response seems especially appropriate in this context Welty moves quickly from this early experience of a socializing initiation into adult awareness to a particular memory of the circus's arrival in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi The author recalls that that year, a little neighbor boy, too incapacitated to attend an actual performance, was given the distinction of having the circus parade routed right past his sickroom window This unheard-of treat of course drew the envy of the youthful Welty and her friends as they imagined his privileged viewing of "the ponderous elephants, the plumes, the spangles, the acrobats, the clowns, the caged lion, the band playing, the steam calliope, the whole thing!" When afterward the little boy died of "what had given him his special privilege," even the youthful Welty knew enough to realize that "he had been tricked, not celebrated, by the parade's brazen marching . and [she] had somehow been tricked by envying him—betrayed into it." Recognition of this betrayal resulted in a very personal semiotics of the circus, and Welty directly links this incident with her subsequent artistic awareness that "an ominous feeling often attaches itself to a procession" (*OWB* 41).[7] Correspondingly, critiques of her work note Welty's singular thematic and stylistic blend of the comic with the ominous, the childlike with the adult, and the illusory with the real—all elements, by the way, of any successful circus production

Critic Jan Nordby Gretlund dates Eudora Welty's professional interest in the circus and similar arts from her assignment with the Works Progress Administration in 1931-36 In this Welty's first full-time job, she "traveled by bus and car all over the state of Mississippi, writing newspaper copy and taking photographs of various 'projects'" (Vande Kieft 5)—including those at circuses, traveling freak shows, and county fairs Not surprisingly, Welty's experiences with the WPA informed her later fiction in meaningful ways [8] Many of Welty's early unpublished stories and those later included in *A Curtain*

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[7] Welty continues this thought by noting the "distrust and apprehension" with which we greet processions and spectacles "their intent is still to be revealed (Think what it was in 'My Kinsman, Major Molineaux')" (*OWB* 41) One might note that for Welty, as for Warren, this story contained a circus subtext. See Chapter II above on Hawthorne.

[8] Speaking in 1989 to interviewers about her WPA experiences and the circus, Welty recalls

> "I always did love the fair and circuses Once or twice to photograph them, I got up early before daylight and went down to see them arrive, watch them set up the tents and the rides down at the fairgrounds. And I remember once happening to eat breakfast with some of the carnival people in the bus station. *That* was getting close to life!" (Cole and Srinivasan 197-98)

of Green and Other Stories (1941), her first published volume, contain circus and sideshow references [9]

For example, "Retreat" (1937) is about a young boy named Norris whose enjoyment of the circus is marred by the frightening bestiality of the trained animal acts and the daring sensuality of the girl high wire performer In another story, the mentally retarded title character of "Lily Daws and the Three Ladies" (1937) surprises her sober country mentors, who think her fit only for the local home for the "feeble-minded," when she runs off to marry a xylophone player with the traveling tent show Yet another character, Mr Petrie, is the freak show's "Petrified Man" (1939) He is ultimately held accountable for four rapes by the sharp-eyed Mrs Pike from New Orleans Finally, through the retrospective guilt of the protagonist of "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden" (1940), this cruelly abused "star" of the freak show is revealed as a clubfooted black man [10]

"Acrobats in a Park," the one of Welty's stories from the 1930s most integrally about circus folk, was steadily refused publication and has appeared in print only relatively recently [11] Welty readily admits that the short story failed because of her fascination with materials beyond her sphere of knowledge: " I was writing about Europeans, acrobats, adultery, and the Roman Catholic Church . in all of which I was equally ignorant" (*OWB* 93) Her characters, members of the acrobatic Zorro family, are famous for their *pièce de résistance*, the Zorro Wall, an interlocking structure made of their own bodies The story begins the day after the Zorro Wall, composed of mother, father, sons, daughter and daughter-in-law, collapses during a performance, the weakness of a single member having caused the failure of the entire unit Even from the perspective of almost fifty years after the story's composition, Welty defends the story's significance to her canon "Writing about the family act, I was writing about the family itself, its strength as a unit, testing its frailty under stress I've been writing about the structure of the family in stories and novels ever since" (*OWB* 94).

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[9] The photographic records of Welty's WPA experience are included in her *Photographs*, Jackson· UP of Mississippi, 1989, especially nos 126-42 and in her *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression. A Snapshot Album*, New York Random House, 1971 Jan Nordby Gretlund's study *Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place*, also includes Welty's photograph of a trapeze artist from 1935-36 that was not later included in the photograph collections

[10] See Welty's "Retreat," *River* 1 (March 1937)· 10-12. "Lily Daws and the Three Ladies," "Petrified Man" and "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden" appeared in *A Curtain of Green* (1941) and were later published in *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (1980) I am indebted to Gretlund's *Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place* for a summary listing of early Welty works that have circus references.

Indeed, in her first novel, Welty used the circus trope to demonstrate the fragile yet interdependent structure of family One scene from *Delta Wedding*, published in 1946 (the same year as Warren's *All the King's Men*), provides an interesting intersection of two qualities that Welty herself has observed in her work the sense of the "ominous procession" derived from her youthful ambivalence toward the circus parade and the organizing principle of family structure and dynamics. In the nearly tragic trestle-walking incident from *Delta Wedding*, George Fairchild and the Fairchild cousins seem to balance between the New South and the mythic Old South with the same equilibrist care shown by the Depression-era circus acrobats Welty photographed for the WPA.

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[11] See Jan Nordby Gretlund's "Remember How It Was with the Acrobats," *South Carolina Review* 11 1 (Spring 1978) 22-33 Cleanth Brooks, co-editor with Robert Penn Warren of the *Southern Review*, rejected the story for publication in a 1 July 1940 letter to Welty (*EW's A of P* 20) It is not certain whether Warren had also read the manuscript

In their efforts to affirm the universal themes of the novel, critics Ruth Vande Kieft and Michael Kreyling discount critical efforts "to place within the story the definite and incontestably 'real South' of economics and politics" (*EW's Achievement* 76).[12] Nevertheless, Welty's artistic skill has produced a novel irresistibly evocative of its moment—the Mississippi Delta of 1923, a time and place rich with cultural and historical significance To deny that significance would be to ignore, perhaps, not the most crucial element of the novel but one that adds flavor and essence to it. According to Joseph Millichap, the physical and geographical details of the Delta landscape which Welty includes in her novel are fictionally recreated with respect to Shellmound and its neighboring plantations, but accurate with respect to the Yazoo River's course through it and the railroad's introduction of outside elements to it ("Railroads" 6-7) The Fairchilds' near fall from the railroad tracks at the approach of the oncoming Yazoo Delta, nicknamed the "Yellow Dog," foreshadows their forced entry into modern time from the myth of history The Fairchild family's impending "coming of age"—and here we should note their infantilized patronymic—through circumstances that later develop from this circus-like incident comes through a collective initiation experience that will include them as well as other members of their Delta region

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[12] Both Vande Kieft and Kreyling seem to be voicing reactions to what they see as several unflattering misreadings of Welty's novel in which her seeming indifference to the harsh realities of the mid-1940s and her seeming nostalgia for the less socially responsible way of life of the 1920s—not to mention her departure from a traditional linear narrative—are taken to task See also Vande Kieft's *Eudora Welty*, Boston Twayne Publishers, 1962, 108-09, in which she cites reviews by Isaac Rosenfeld (*New Republic*, 29 April 1946), Diana Trilling (*Nation*, 11 May 1946), and John Crowe Ransom (*Sewanee Review*, Summer 1946)

Katherine Anne Porter

Robert Penn Warren greatly admired Katherine Anne Porter's fiction. He and Cleanth Brooks included her "Noon Wine" in their textbook anthology *Understanding Fiction*, and Warren elsewhere wrote critically important analyses of her other achievements in the short story genre [13] Additionally, in 1935 in the *Southern Review* Brooks and Warren published her short story "The Circus," which was subsequently included with a group of other stories in the significantly titled short story sequence "The Old Order" and later published in *The Leaning Tower and Other Stories* (1944) This story features Porter's recurring semi-autobiographical character Miranda, through whose consciousness the reader comes to appreciate a disquieting struggle between illusion and reality, between the myth of southern history and the initiatory force of real time.

Katherine Anne Porter began her examination of a modern consciousness by seeking "to deny the past's impingement on the present, to deny all confirming priorities" (Cheatham 159) in "The Old Order", the themes that occupied her there would find fruition in "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."[14] Of these loosely but significantly connected works, Robert Penn Warren would write that their protagonist Miranda finds "a truth that will not be translatable, or, finally, communicable But it will be the only truth she can win, and for better or worse she will have to live by it. She must live her own myth But she must earn her myth in the process of living. " (*Selected Essays* 153-54) In a feminist critique of "Old Mortality," Suzanne Jones states the issue more bluntly unlike Miranda, who accomplishes a gradual and finally less perfected "reading" of the family stories and legends that will shape her expectations of life, Porter's readers question from the outset the particularized myth of southern history that Miranda's family has claimed and by which it functions· "the myth of the Southern belle, [and] the [patriarchal] politics of its use" (179).

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[13] See Warren's "Katherine Anne Porter (Irony with a Center)" and Brooks's "On 'The Grave,'" both included in *Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter*, ed. Darlene Harbour Unrue, New York. G. K Hall & Co , 1997 Warren also wrote "Uncorrupted Consciousness The Stories of Katherine Anne Porter," *Yale Review* 55 (1965), 265-74, as part of a special supplement on her work Porter's regard for Warren was both personal and professional, as his was for her She considered him an "old valued friend and most-loved and admired poet and critic" (*Letters of KAP* 614), claimed to have every volume of poetry he had published, and provided him with original source materials for one of his most successful novels, *World Enough and Time* (1950)

In "The Old Order," the myth of southern history so dominates Miranda's family that even a setting as potentially transgressive as the circus becomes a site for the affirmation of their values Collectively and conservatively, Miranda's family seizes the opportunity of the circus to foreground her unsuitability to fulfill a proper womanly role In fact, one of the cruelest ironies of Miranda's ejection from the circus is its fulfillment of the prophecy of her traditionally minded grandmother, who pronounces an afternoon at the circus an inappropriate activity for one so young. The entire afternoon evolves as a patriarchal conspiracy, in which Miranda's youth and inexperience are remarked upon and confirmed Against her will, Miranda becomes a part of "the show" by demonstrating her potential for realizing the same kind of powerful, self-fulfilling family legend used in

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[14] "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" appeared in the spring and summer 1938

"Old Mortality" to categorize her Aunt Amy as a belle and her Cousin Eva as a repressed feminist Even the grotesque circus clowns, one of whom gives her a disconcertingly "true grown-up look" ("The Circus" 25), are allowed their contributions to the familial judgment of her cultural inadequacy and social naiveté This inversion of roles makes the situation all the more humiliating for Miranda and all the more ominous to the reader

Once again, Miranda's frightened response to the acrobatic clown's performance hearkens to Paul Bouissac's comment, noted above, that a person's acknowledgment of the artfulness of circus spectacle is the "result of education rather than a spontaneous phenomenon " Bouissac further reveals that "circus performers usually loathe audiences which are primarily made up of children because they cannot 'appreciate' the skill of their feats and the complexity of their act as a whole and 'react indiscriminately' to whatever happens in the ring" ("Semiotics and Spectacles" 144) This observation makes Miranda's perception that the acrobatic clown and the dwarf feel displeasure and antipathy for her a realistic element of one of the thematic layers of Porter's novella Miranda's ingenuous acceptance—indeed, at this moment, her preference—for the illusions that serve the myth of southern history.

With this same point in mind, critic Janis Stout develops a convincing link between Porter's "The Circus" and the circus episode from Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huck Finn.*[15] This link also unites Porter's use of the circus with the "hero clown" motif

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issues of the *Southern Review* respectively

[15] Stout provides a Bakhtinian reading of both Twain's and Porter's texts to establish the influence of Twain's *Adventures of Huck Finn* on Porter's "The Circus " See her "Katherine Anne Porter and Mark Twain at the Circus," *The Southern Quarterly* 36 3 (Spring 1998) 113-23.

that appears, as we have already noted, in both Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Twain's novel In an instinctive response that resembles Huck's naive reaction to the inebriated backwoodsman turned equestrian and Jason Compson's dismissive judgments of his acrobatically heroic niece Quentin, Miranda is unable to resolve the clownish appearance of the high-wire performer with his acrobatic skill Perhaps the most characteristically childlike of Miranda's initial responses to the clown's performance is her assumption that he is neither human nor bound by the physical laws humans must obey Miranda is perfectly at ease with the idea that this "creature" might be "walking on air, or flying" ("The Circus" 23), such a thought is consistent with the romantic notions of life that support her family's various roles in the myth they have made of southern history When the acrobat is revealed merely as "a man on [a] wire" ("The Circus" 24), however, Miranda shrieks in terror and real pain She has come to a sudden and unpleasant realization of the possibility of what Paul Bouissac terms the intrusion of "linear time [, which] upsets dramatically the presentation of an act in the form of an accident In those conditions, [spectators] move from the circus to the drama of real life" ("Semiotics and Spectacle" 147) [16] Miranda's sudden realization of the proximity of the one to the other proves too much for her to bear, and she becomes the primary incongruity in a circus performance brimming with grotesque representations of reality [17]

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[16] The conclusion Bouissac draws from this observation certainly applies in this context " the theme of the circus is generally used by literary works only inasmuch as it provides opportunities for dramatic accidents" ("Semiotics and Spectacle" 147).

[17] Robert F Heilman's use of the circus intertext in his analysis of Porter's style suggests the possibility of reading the acrobat's performance in "The Circus" as metanarrative "'Stylist' is likely to call up unclear images of coloratura, acrobatics, [and] elaborateness of gesture [Yet] there is nothing of arresting façade in [Porter's] style, nothing of

Furthermore, as Bouissac points out, clown acts always have at least two participants, each of whose roles determine the other's For this reason, the physical appearance of the white-faced acrobat clown declares the purposefulness of Miranda's inclusion in his high-wire act. In the recognized hierarchy of clowns, a white-faced clown, like the beruffled acrobat, is the "epitome of culture" who wears an elaborate costume and dancer's shoes and is knowing and authoritative. He acts as a foil for the clown proper, who is also called an auguste or ugly clown, and exists primarily to demonstrate the ugly clown's comic potential (*Circus and Culture* 164-65). Miranda's assumption of the ugly clown's bumbling, socially inept role is reinforced as she is led by Dicey toward the tent-flap exit There a dwarf imitates her clown-like, "distorted face with its open mouth and glistening tears" before his face unexpectedly assumes an adult look of "haughty, remote displeasure" ("The Circus" 25) Miranda's role as the ugly clown extends even after the circus is over, when her cousins' enjoyment of it is enhanced by their knowledge of what she, through her fear and inexperience, has missed Their initial reluctance at Miranda's inclusion in the family's circus outing earns unexpected dividends when her consequent exclusion allows them to compare their level of sophistication to hers

For the reader, of course, Miranda's plight is peripherally comic but basically tragic, Porter clearly intends that we identify with her, the filtering consciousness of the story Porter's intention for the character Dicey is not so well-defined. Dicey's expulsion

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showmanship. . She does not introduce herself or present herself. Much less does she gesticulate . She does not cry 'Look, ma, no hands'" (222-23) from the circus mimics Miranda's in a way that diminishes the relevance of the black servant's circus experience and thereby encourages the reader's more amused reaction to it Miranda's banishment necessitates Dicey's, and all the more undeservedly since Dicey is plainly knowledgeable of the circus behaviors in the ring as well as those in and under the trestled plank seats Her metaphorical references to the circus performers as "monkeys right here in the show" ("The Circus" 23) reminds the reader of a similar reference in "The Old Order" wherein the same metaphor is used derogatorily of a black slave;[18] this reference foregrounds the potentially transgressive social circumstances of Dicey's role as a circus spectator She is quickly reminded, however, that she is not present to enjoy herself but to see to Miranda's needs and, by extension, to the needs of Miranda's father and grandmother Comically, Dicey's ostensibly proper, ladylike disapproval of the outing changes to a plainly voiced disappointment when she must accompany Miranda home Equally comically, she projects her anger over her exclusion from the circus and from its corresponding opportunities to engage in social commentary on it to the least effectual member of that society who nonetheless has more potential for autonomy than she: Miranda Even though Miranda begins in "The Circus" the process of escaping "the bondage of the dead past to enter the freedom of the unconnected present" (Cheatham 162), a process that she will complete in "The Grave" and then reassert in "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Dicey and black characters like her will find a comparable freedom in the unconnected present more difficult to attain

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[18] In "The Old Order," five-year-old Sophia Jane claims the slave Nannie with the words

Ralph Ellison

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952), his short stories, and his essays are frequently informed by the same tensions we see in Katherine Anne Porter's works between the bondage of the dead past and the desire for the freedom of the unconnected present On the other hand, Ellison's canon illuminates the cultural and historical implications of Dicey's participation in the circus in a way that Porter is unwilling and unable to replicate His doing so while still demonstrating the comic potential of Dicey's assertion of identity—and for that matter every American's search for identity—is a defining element of his use of the circus intertext, the possibilities for which are perfected in Ellison's posthumous novel *Juneteenth* (1999)

For a black writer like Ralph Ellison, the truth of the past must be told before its influence can be negated, and even then the possibility of a present existing separately from the past is problematic From Ellison's perspective of the black experience in the 1960s—a period when the necessity for institutionalizing African American studies was still being questioned—the myth of southern history is complicated by the fact that the true history of the black experience, as far as any history can be true, has yet to be written As Ellison, speaking as a panel member to the Southern Historical Association in 1968,[19] aptly noted:

"'I want the little monkey'" (40)

[19] This panel was composed of Ellison, William Styron, Robert Penn Warren, and C. Vann Woodward Significantly, the panelists' individual comments focused, directly and indirectly, on Styron's recently published novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the historical accuracy of which had been challenged by black activists.

> Much of [my story] is not in the history textbooks Certain historians and untrained observers did their jobs, often very faithfully, but many of them have been forgotten except by scholars and historians, and the story they recorded was altered to justify racial attitudes and practices. But somehow, through our Negro American oral tradition . these reminders of the past as *Negroes* recalled it found existence and were passed along ("Uses of History" 153)

According to Ellison, this oral record is the source of the values by which African Americans have continued to live despite the contradictory messages of "official history" to which they have ostensibly accommodated themselves. Nonetheless, "the result has imposed upon Negroes a high sensitivity to the ironies of historical writing and created a profound skepticism concerning the validity of most reports of what the past was like " The value of fiction—and especially the fiction of southern writers, Ellison claims—is that it addresses what the historians will not "that part of the human truth which we could not accept or face up to in much historical writing because of social, racial and political considerations" ("Uses of History" 154) [20]

In another 1968 essay, Ellison identifies an "old slave-born myth of the Negroes" that compounds the myth of history propagated by the dominant white culture.

> not the myth of the "good white man," nor that of the "great white father," but the myth, secret and questioning, of the flawed white

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[20] Here as elsewhere, Ellison posits William Faulkner as the best example of a southern writer who will "face up" to the human truth of history.

> Southerner who while true to his Southern roots has confronted the injustices of the past and been redeemed Such a man, the myth holds, will do the right thing however great the cost, whether he likes Negroes or not, and will move with tragic vulnerability toward the broader ideals of American democracy ("Myth" 86-87)

His adherence to this Negro myth (for, as Ellison remarks, he "must be true to the hopes, dreams, and myths of [his] people") in the face of the myth of history must inevitably manifest itself in a certain artistic ambivalence, which, I will assert, is revealed in Ellison's alternating hope for and despair in the "unconnected present" and in his positing the clown as the source of each American's identity

In his study *Stages of the Clown: Perspectives on Modern Fiction from Dostoyevsky to Beckett* (1970), Richard Pearce includes *Invisible Man* among several modern novels the dramatic qualities of which can be traced to the comic structures and characters that animated classical Greek comedy and its subsequent forms In the course of this study, Pearce examines the absurdity, grotesquerie, and clownishness shared by several varieties of the modernist hero Pearce's inclusion of *Invisible Man* in his study is consistent with the novel's absurdist tendencies, and Pearce places Ellison's novel, and properly so, in a literary genealogy of the comic

Unlike most modernist writers, however, for whom the terms "circus" and "carnival" are, culturally, practically interchangeable, Ellison seems to demonstrate a more conscious division between the two. On the one hand, Ellison uses the circus on a much more pragmatic and much more intrinsically American level than Pearce suggests;

and Ellison clearly associates the circus with his sense that an inclusive American identity is more to be sought than racial distinctions. At the same time, Ellison uses carnivalesque elements to suggest the general modernist condition Thus the circus—the actual physical circus of clowns, big tops, comic props, and conscious showmanship—informs Ellison's vision of American cultural identity while his use of the carnivalesque informs modernist and racial awareness of the doubleness of history. The simultaneous working of the two, however, often creates an ambivalent tone in Ellison's work

One of Ralph Ellison's earliest associations with the circus is his realization that its unwritten laws of inclusion and exclusion are based on more broadly defined cultural terms than mere race[21] Ellison, as it turns out, was one of those thousands of young boys who every year played hooky from school to help set up the Ringling Brothers Circus—in his case, in his hometown of Oklahoma City Ellison remembers becoming the source of entertainment for the circus workers, who sent him on a "fool's errand" to find a tent wrench, a patently nonexistent item According to Ellison, the greatest lesson he learned from this initiation was its nonracial application every young worker, white or black, is inducted into service through this or a similar ritual ("On Initiation" 50) Moving from this account of a personal circus experience, Ellison then voices a theory of American rites and rituals that will provide structure to his belief that the clown is intrinsic to a collective American identity

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[21] Ellison's experience is not to suggest that the circus as an institution did not engage in racism, personal accounts such as Fred Bradna's *The Big Top: My Forty Years with The Greatest Show on Earth* (New York· Simon and Schuster, 1952) reveal that racism was common among management and performers

Ellison often uses the term "clown" in a negative sense, as when he writes in *Shadow and Act* that he, recognizing the white pillars of society as "crooks, clowns, hypocrites," turned to black jazzmen to find the heroes of his youth (xiv) On the other hand, in a more positive interpretation of the clown's cultural role, Ellison designates one of those very jazzmen as a clown:

> [Louis] Armstrong's clownish license and intoxicating powers are almost Elizabethan, he takes liberties with kings, queens and presidents, emphasizes the physicality of his music with sweat, spittle and facial contortions [and] performs the magical feat of making romantic melody issue from a throat of gravel ("Change" 52)

Here Ellison makes the case that the role of the clown follows no racial strictures but is, rather, an element of Yeatsian mask To support his claim, Ellison cites Robert Penn Warren's assertion of "the 'intentional' character of our national beginnings" ("Change" 53), such intentionality was first demonstrated by British colonists who adopted the name "American" knowing that they would subsequently be required to invent the national characteristics that would comprise that self-proclaimed identity

Furthermore, all Americans are clowns in the sense that each is an *eiron*, "the smart man playing dumb," a role that Ellison recognizes is often assigned to a black trickster figure[22] but which he describes as "more 'Yankee' than anything else [B]asically, the strategy grows out of our awareness of the joke at the center of American identity" ("Change" 54) In other words, it is a joke that grows not out of black rebellion against white stereotypical thinking but out of the American colonials' rebellion against the intransigent British "fathers." Oftentimes, the joke reveals an awareness of one's having asserted a hopeful identity without having first achieved it or of using a clownish persona to placate an anxious anti-intellectual public Ellison's illustrations of this strategy reveal a few of his own most admired "clowns": Benjamin Franklin as Rousseau's Natural Man, Abraham Lincoln as a simple country lawyer, Ernest Hemingway as a nonliterary sportsman, and William Faulkner as a southern farmer. This act, as Ellison points out, "makes brothers of us all America is the land of masking jokers We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past" ("Change" 55) Failure to recognize the brotherhood of the clown denies what brings white and black Americans together in a "dual culture " As Ellison states elsewhere, "the Negro is a member of *an American-bound cultural group* with its own idiom, its own psychology, growing out of its preoccupations with certain problems for hundreds of years, out of all its history" ("What's Wrong" 60, my emphasis)

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[22] Ellison also dismisses the significance of the black trickster figure to American identity, first because the trickster in general is too archetypally ubiquitous and second

In the essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," Ellison provides his reader with a pointedly serious example of what ignoring dual culture might result in, which he illustrates with a carnival trope He follows this example with a whimsically humorous example of what this dual culture might entail, which he illustrates with a circus trope.

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because it belongs more properly to African folklore rather than to the folklore of the American Negro to which white thinking has affixed it ("Change" 46-47)

Here, Ellison uses language dismissive of racial mysticism and black nationalism in order to assert his theory of blacks and whites united in a dual culture. Thus, he derides the anxiety-laden claims to ethnic and genetic insularity that have " helped give our streets and campuses a rowdy, All Fool's Day, carnival atmosphere" ("The Little Man" 21) Such demonstrations of insularity, he asserts, accomplish the opposite of their intended effect and serve merely as "a call to cultural and aesthetic chaos" ("The Little Man" 22) In this passage, Ellison's conjunction of the carnivalesque with the chaotic gives added significance to his subsequent alignment of circus with order.

Ellison's tone changes as he abandons his trope of the carnivalesque to describe a circus-like scene that will make his case for the dual culture with which Ellison identifies himself In a distinctly comic tone, he describes an amazing young man who bursts into his field of vision "with something of that magical cornucopian combustion by which a dozen circus clowns are exploded from [a] . miniaturized automobile " "Light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured [and] Afro-coiffed," he is dressed in riding boots, English riding breeches, a dashiki, and a Homberg hat Pulling a Japanese camera from a Volkswagen Beetle unexpectedly "decked out with a gleaming Rolls-Royce radiator," the young man takes a series of self-shots as he poses "in various fanciful attitudes against the George Washington Bridge" ("The Little Man" 22-23).

In this "willful juxtaposition of modes," Ellison identifies "an integrative, vernacular note"—

> an American compulsion to improvise upon the given His garments were, literally and figuratively, of many colors and cultures, his racial identity

> interwoven of many strands Whatever his politics, sources of income, hierarchal status he revealed his essential "Americanness" in his freewheeling assault upon traditional forms of the Western aesthetic. Whatever the identity he presumed to project, he was exercising an American freedom and was a product of the melting pot and the conscious or unconscious comedy it brews Culturally, he was an American joker . [playing] irreverently upon the symbolism of status, property, and authority, and [suggesting] new possibilities of perfection. More than expressing protest, these symbols ask the old, abiding American questions Who am I? What about me? ("The Little Man" 24)

Any Ellison character who is a seeker for personal identity is a clown in this very sense although his progress to individual self-knowledge may be neither easy nor fully accomplished Furthermore, Ellison's cultural construction of the American clown in this essay reasserts the universality of his black narrator in *Invisible Man* and reinforces some of the novel's consciously-chosen circus images, especially those from the mob scene in Chapter 25 While certainly carnivalesque, the novel's *dénouement* (if such a traditional term might be used for one of literature's most conspicuously indeterminate endings) employs a great deal of circus clown "schtick"

Chapter 25 of *Invisible Man* takes place in the midst of mindless violence that is, in the narrator's perception, both aggressive and masochistic; hence, black looters and white policemen engage in actions that traditionally comprise the byplay of the circus clown In this scene, Ellison includes several clown gag situations that depend upon surprise and juxtaposition the screaming sound effect created by an auto tire punctured by a bullet, one woman carrying a dozen dressed chickens hanging from a broomstick and another a whole side of beef on her back, Dupre's wearing three hats stacked one upon the other, several pairs of suspenders and a shiny pair of hip boots, running looters who wear blond wigs and dress coats and others who carry dummy rifles, a woman riding the top of a milk wagon "like a tipsy fat lady in a circus parade", and even the police, who dash around Keystone Kop-like in their white helmets The "topper" occurs when Ellison's narrator takes a tumble down an open manhole, his own version of the classic clown pratfall

From this safe, dark cellar the Invisible Man speaks the epilogue to the novel, a hopeful yet determinedly realistic view of what awaits him when (if?) he rejoins the outside world. Indeed, his entire narrative has issued from this underground retreat during an attenuated moment of the suspended present For this reason, the Invisible Man's final words to the reader echo those of another hopeful yet determinedly realistic young man who, at the end of his own narrative, anticipates "go[ing] into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of Time " And yet, as we have already noted in Chapter II of this study, Jack Burden's promise remains ambiguously suspended in narrative time and therefore unfulfilled—just as the promise of the Invisible Man will remain No matter how resolutely one might assert current identity, the movement of time is inexorable Time will carry Jack Burden into the Second World War, and time will carry the Invisible Man back into a culture that offers chaos rather than identity

Ellison's carnivalesque short story "King of the Bingo Game" (1944) reinforces the ambiguity with which Ellison invests the unconnected present of *Invisible Man.*[23] As long as the unnamed protagonist can keep the bingo wheel turning, he is filled with hope and a sense of life's possibilities rather than with the sense of displacement and anonymity that his move from the south to the north has produced. Ultimately, however, he is merely a "mark" in a rigged carny game that leaves him in even more desperate straits than when he began Having nothing to begin with, his prize is double nothing, the double zero on which the wheel lands, even worse, his official identity as a nonperson, symbolized by his missing birth certificate, devolves into his loss of individual identity when he forgets his own name in the excitement of the game

Ellison's "A Coupla Scalped Indians" (1956), another short story with carnival implications, presents just as ambiguous an awareness of the unconnected present, the identity it promises, and the risks inherent in asserting the possibilities of self-awareness. In the course of the story, the unnamed eleven-year-old narrator and his slightly older companion Buster experiment with a number of identities as several meaningful events in their lives converge the boys' recent circumcisions, the beginning of their self-imposed survival testing based on a discarded *Boy Scout's Handbook,* and the arrival of the spring carnival. Of the two boys, Buster is clearly the leader in his pursuit of the kind of multifaceted American identity that Ellison promotes Buster, therefore, insists that he and the narrator combine a traditionally white boys' training program with Indian scout stoicism, determines that they will make their recent surgery a further test of their manhood, turns with linguistic ease from "Indian" speech to "colored" talk, and translates the "nasty" dozens-dealing language of the distant carnival band. As in the Jason section of *The Sound and the Fury*, the carnival music provides an aural backdrop to the story—the trombone, tuba, and trumpet emit homing signals that will lead the two boys to "the further edge of town . . . [where] . . . floated the tent, spread white and cloudlike with its bright ropes of fluttering flags" (64).

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[23] Willi Real links the two works as he explores how "King of the Bingo Game" anticipates the main themes of *Invisible Man,* which Ellison began in 1945 (111-12)

Initially, the parentless narrator and his bold and imaginative friend Buster conform to the Twainian tradition of Huck and Tom, who are boyish American clowns *par excellence* and literary exemplars of the clownlike, Ellisonian figure of American identity. Ellison turns, however, from the circus certainty of this comic search to the more ambiguously carnivalesque as he introduces an overtly sexual element foreign to Twain's narratives of boyhood. For example, the narrator's inadvertently stumbling upon the shack of the reclusive and mysterious Aunt Mackie delays his arrival at the carnival even as it anticipates the grotesque challenges to his identity he is likely to find there. Looking through the old woman's window, he is shocked by the unexpected sight of "a young, girlish body with slender, well-rounded hips" (73) moving in slow, graceful dance steps. When the girl, turning, reveals a "wrinkled face mismatched with [her] glowing form" (74), he realizes she is actually Aunt Mackie, and he reveals his presence to her with an involuntary recoil from that knowledge. Ordering him inside, Aunt Mackie is alternately seductress and wise woman, virgin and hag. The boy, appalled by his uncontrollable reaction to her naked body, feels overwhelming pain, terror, and self-hatred.

Returning to the dark woods, he finds the physical world unchanged the carnival, the image of the life Buster had predicted they would find when they had left their hometown and families, awaits his arrival But Buster is no longer there to interpret "the imperious calling of the [carnival] horns" (81). Will the narrator wait to find his friend, with whom he can make a confident claim to identity? Or will he descend to the carnival of life by himself? Suddenly the magnitude of the task that lies before him is clarified The possibilities of perfection and self-definition included in his membership in the brotherhood of American jokers diminish in the light of the carnivalesque world in which they must be claimed

The circus and the carnivalesque balance again uneasily in Ellison's final novel *Juneteenth*, which he began even before the completion of *Invisible Man* in 1952 but which was compiled and published by his literary executor in 1999 Critics see the young, white-skinned Bliss as the fictional incarnation of Ellison's vision that all Americans would unite in a single multiracial culture John Callahan, who prepared Ellison's *Juneteenth* manuscript for posthumous publication, notes that Bliss's quest in the novel—to "[come] to grips with the fact that he is 'also somehow black,' as Ellison believed was the case for every single 'true American'" (Callahan xxviii)—is consonant with that desire The point at which Bliss's achievement of such self-knowledge is the most gravely threatened, however, is when he attends the circus and demonstrates under its tent his growing familiarity, even at his young age, with racial markers and distinctions.

In a way, the circus has been Bliss's very life. A racially ambiguous orphan, Bliss's black foster father is Daddy Hickman, a preacher who teaches him to use his prodigious preaching abilities to their fullest advantage in performances at camp meetings and revivals all over the south. Bliss's identification with the black community who have nurtured him and Hickman's purpose for him—to "speak for our condition from inside the only acceptable mask. . . [to] embody our spirit in the council of our enemies" (*Juneteeth* 271)—are almost completely realized when Bliss decides to take different path toward the carnivalesque

At first the circus impresses Bliss as only a larger version of their revivalist tent show Perhaps for that reason, Bliss begins to examine his surroundings curiously for evidences that the circus also shares the father and son's mutual culture—the black culture in which he has grown up Daddy Hickman answers his son's questions willingly, unaware at first that the boy's interest has a racial subtext: Bliss wonders why the African and Indian elephants can be differentiated by their ears and not by "the noses", he is caught short by the information that the African lions, obviously more powerful than their white trainer, have been "mastered" by his whip and gun (*Juneteenth* 246-47) This is a skill, according to Daddy Hickman, that the trainer probably had learned at Bliss's age, ironically, Bliss's own desire for racial "mastery" will begin with this experience of it.

Hickman begins to have a vague understanding of Bliss's purposeful questions when the clowns enter the ring One in particular, a dwarf who is the only "black" clown, is the dupe of the rest, who attack and demean him as part of the act Hickman assures Bliss that the clown is not black at all—that he wears a burnt cork mask as part of his costume—but the boy is not comforted He seems especially troubled by his father's laughter, and Daddy Hickman, taken aback by Bliss's failure to appreciate the humor of the performance, explains that the black dwarf is "just acting his part" in the routine, "[s]o when we laugh at them we can laugh at ourselves" (*Juneteenth* 250) When Bliss encounters the dwarf clown outside the circus tent, however, he attacks him viciously, fascinated by how the burnt cork blacking fades with every blow His attack proves more self-directed, on the other hand, as this experience marks his tragic abandonment not only of his life with Daddy Hickman but also of Hickman's idealistic purpose for him

Toni Morrison

On the surface, including Toni Morrison as the culminating figure in a study of authors of the Southern Renaissance whose works reject the myth of southern history and explore the initiation into time may appear inappropriate Not only does Morrison postdate that period of southern modernism shared by Warren, Faulkner, Welty, Porter, and Ellison (she was born in 1931 and experienced her first success as an author in the decade of the 1970s), but she has swung consciously wide of the claims of either southern influence or intertextuality Establishing Toni Morrison within the tradition of the Southern Renaissance is further complicated by simple geographical fact since she was born in Ohio If, however, as Morrison herself claims, "roots are less a matter of geography than sense of shared history" (qtd in Rushdy 575), then her work is just as rooted in the literary south as that of any of the writers we have previously examined This sense of shared history is most clearly revealed in her novel *Beloved* (1987), a work that has inspired feminist and African American dialogues that, in conjunction with

Morrison's own use of the southern intertext of the circus, create an intertextual bond with Robert Penn Warren's "The Circus in the Attic "

Warren's characterization of Bolton Lovehart and Morrison's treatment of her character Beloved reveal meaningful differences and similarities in the two authors' views of history, in the psychoanalytic approaches used by critics to examine their texts, and in the artistic means by which they alternately confirm and refute hegemonic structures. Morrison posits blackness as a trope, thus locating herself within the essentially modernist and traditionally New Critical On the other hand, she has distanced herself from the modernist fathers who were the darlings of the New Critics, asserting, "I am not *like* James Joyce I am not *like* Faulkner, I am not *like* in that sense" (McKay 152) No doubt she would disclaim likeness to Robert Penn Warren with equal firmness, but their dissimilarities might be read by a New Critic as juxtapositions, seemingly oppositional tensions that resolve in either a single unified meaning or an equally significant ambiguity To a post-structuralist, these same differences might be read as demonstrations of the pluralisms that produce mutually informing intertextualities Intriguingly, then, Morrison's work invites both New Critical and post-structuralist readings Morrison's continued "prosecution" of the myth of southern history, a favorite New Critical theme, is made possible by the psychological, feminist, and cultural "evidence" lately made available through post-structuralism

Just like Bolton Lovehart, who is periodically summoned from his solitude on "Rusty-butt Hill" by both actual and metaphorical circuses, Beloved's reincarnation from ghostly presence to enigmatic young womanhood is prompted by the visit Sethe, Paul D, and Denver make to the carnival While the three living inhabitants of the house at 124 expose themselves to the paradox of community and carnival, the ghostly Beloved emerges ritualistically and fully dressed from a baptismal rebirth; similarly, as twelve-year-old Bolton Lovehart rises from his creekside immersion by a Baptist preacher, the circus images that up to that point have provided merely a backdrop to the history of Bardsville come to life Conversely, however, when the thirty-three-year-old Bolton achieves the victory over his mother that his secret circus permits, he wanders Bardsville "with the happiness of a ghost who blesses out of his own steady peace the flickering joy of the living and wishes them well" ("Circus" 43) Beloved's haunting, on the other hand, confers no comparable peace, because of her, "124 was spiteful Full of baby's venom" (*Beloved* 3)

Bolton Lovehart and the character Beloved are both incarnations of the myth of southern history Bolton, of course, perpetuates mythic southern history with every circus figure he creates in his attic Furthermore, when he rejoins his community during the Second World War, he becomes the embodiment of the mythic view of history by promoting the patriotic resolve and self-sacrifice necessary to winning the war Identified alternately with his own creations of the ring master and the clown, he is both a trope for blind acceptance of historical myth and the sense of noble purpose that the acceptance of such myth produces

Similarly, the presence of Beloved also perpetuates the myth of southern history But unlike Bolton Lovehart, her existence and the myth's survival are made possible through Sethe's destructive silence about the past rather than through her imaginative recreation of it Deborah Guth's analysis of Morrison's novel confirms the important differences between character/tropes like Warren's Bolton Lovehart and Morrison's Beloved Beloved is "the spirit of the past the demon of historic distortion which cannot be simply bracketed away in the name of renewal as Morrison feels previous generations have tried to do, but demands full recognition and understanding before it can be exorcised" (589) Bolton, on the other hand, in his role as the unofficial historian of Bardsville, may evoke the spirit of the past, but he does so as a harmless eccentric, called to service to reaffirm Bardsville's misconceptions of its role in history Beloved is reincarnated by Sethe's refusal to tell a personal history that will challenge patriarchal myth Sethe's silence works to confirm the myth yet proves as psychically immobilizing for her as Bolton's compulsive reiteration of his own deeply internalized "story" proves for him Significantly, the image of the circus and the circus carnival draws these two characters together within the paralyzing myth of history

Warren's use of the circus can be read to validate what critics of his canon have identified as the Freudian themes of the search for the father and the ultimate rejection of the mother Bolton's circus begins to take shape even before his birth, when rowdy Bardsville boys, anxious to escape their "tyrannous mothers" and fight in the Civil War, are pictured as "circus performers" ("Circus" 6); one might even conceive that Bolton's own father was one of those rebellious boys since in later life he gleans his own version of truth from his war experience. As Bolton attempts to escape his own possessive mother, he runs away to an old-fashioned creek baptism, where the preacher drips with watery ring master's spangles, where a young female convert, submissive and dancer-like, hints of Bolton's ideal of the girl acrobat, and where the properly Episcopal Bolton accepts his own clown-like identity when he is inadvertently immersed Through the empty years of his dwindling youth, recurring visions of the three circus figures further reinforce Bolton's need to escape his mother and learn the answers to questions about the past from his emotionally distant father Warren's narrator, inviting the reader to look back upon the three Lovehearts from a vantage point of sixty years hence, notes that, as they pace themselves to Bolton's toddling steps, the three "hardly seem to move at all, to be fixed in a photograph in an album to prove something sweet and sure about the past" (17) In reality troubled and illusion-riddled, the Lovehearts become the perfect family only when they are frozen within the framework of that shadowy, mythic tableau.

Toni Morrison presents a similarly deceptive image of familial cohesion in *Beloved* as Sethe, her only remaining child Denver, and her lover Paul D walk the dusty road toward Cincinnati, where they plan to attend the circus carnival on Colored Thursday Sethe takes it as a good sign that although she, Denver and Paul D "were not holding hands, their shadows were" (47) Like the Lovehearts, this trio become the perfect family only within parameters defined by the dominant white culture Sethe, Paul D and Denver demonstrate the shadowy, behind-the-scenes, slave-family life which is the only one acknowledged by white masters and patriarchal myth. Sethe's hopeful but shadowy vision of family is symptomatic of her resolute denial of the past and indicative of the power the returning Beloved will later hold over the residents of 124

Unlike Bolton, who is committed to the search for the white father, Sethe's story must assert the black mother Thus, one of the most revealing analyses of *Beloved* emerges from Jennifer Fitzgerald's use of Kleinian objects relations theory Using the Freudian model to read "The Circus in the Attic" asserts a patriarchal determination of what is normative and universalized among family relationships. For a text like *Beloved*, however, which asserts the cultural primacy of black motherhood over white fatherhood, the benefit of a Kleinian reading is immediately clear instead of defining the mother according to "a very specific, restricted norm" (qtd in Fitzgerald 669) and placing responsibility and blame on her, as Freudian readings of Warren's "The Circus in the Attic" often do, a Kleinian approach demands that the reader observe Sethe's act of killing her own child with a greater cultural awareness The additional considerations of race and class permitted by such an awareness will suggest factors beyond simple murderous intent By taking into account Sethe's experiences of black slavery and their effects on her decision not to allow her children to return to a similar life, the Kleinian approach demands that readers of *Beloved* examine the white father's motives for enslavement as readily as they examine the black mother's motives for murder.

The Kleinian and Freudian approaches also place vastly different emphases on the role of community in an individual's development In the Kleinian approach, "selfhood is socially constructed through interaction with [a community of] others, aspects of whom have been internalized by the child as part of itself" (Fitzgerald 672) Appropriately, Sethe seeks out community when she and the infant Beloved join her other children with Baby Suggs in Ohio, by killing her baby and attempting to kill her other children, she demeans the value of the socially constructed selfhood provided to her by her interaction with and dependence on community At the novel's climax, Sethe is rescued from her fatal denial of time and self by the direct intervention of the black community, which act again demonstrates its proper place in the formation of her identity as a black woman and an escaped slave

Significantly, Warren's novella draws upon Freudian texts that privilege "the healthy development of individual autonomy, highly valued by white Western capitalism" (Fitzgerald 669) "The Circus in the Attic" is consistently read as having reversed the process of identity formation In that sense, Warren details Bolton's escape from familial and community influence to personal autonomy, his regressive return to community during the Second World War, and his ultimate flight from the community as he returns to his attic, his imaginative circus, and his myth of history.

Finally, a common tropic use of the circus and the carnival sideshow[24] reveals other similarities and disparities between Warren's tale of the myth of southern history compulsively retold and Morrison's narrative of the truth of history compulsively avoided Both speak to the crippling effects of the failure to claim the present because the past has not been adequately comprehended or properly implemented, a southern theme which Morrison herself has identifed by her observation that a clear understanding of the past is the only means by which one can confront the future Yet, the difficulty in achieving such an understanding is made manifest through Warren's and Morrison's

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[25] Patrick Easto and Marcelo Truzzi write that the sideshow display is the single factor common to both circuses and carnivals, which fact they note to explain the greater number of fictional treatments of the circus which focus on the sideshow They also note that the American carnival was a development of the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 (554) This fact might indicate Morrison's conscious artistic choice of the carnival despite the anachronism produced by its use

mutual uses of the circus intertext, in “The Circus in the Attic” and *Beloved,* both authors reveal a patriarchal social structure seemingly invulnerable to and even reinforced by willful transgression

Bolton Lovehart manages to escape his grasping mother by devoting his life to the secret, transgressive circus he constructs in his attic Her death frees him of the steady, accusing gaze she has used to render him guilt-ridden and obedient, yet, rather than feeling liberated and empowered, he instead imagines that his circus figures are fixing him with the same accusing gaze she had once used Formerly, he had felt no sense of loss or fear as “the painted eyes of animals and girl acrobats and riders and ring masters and clowns circled about him, [and] his world constricted to that orbit” (43) Yet, at his mother’s death, Bolton comes to an unnerving sense of his own mortality “among the hateful, painted eyes of the creatures he had made” (45).

Bolton’s experience confirms cultural critic Yorum Carmeli’s assertion that although the circus is posited outside of history, outside of change, and outside of social time, it nevertheless has the effect of reifying bourgeois hegemony (218)—in Bolton’s case, the myth of southern history Spectators at the circus momentarily leave their traditional social constructs behind in order to enter a world that will parody or even destroy those constructs After “the show” is over, however, the spectators return to their world with a reinforced and even grateful sense of what they perceive as stable and orderly there

Correspondingly, Bolton Lovehart reenters Bardsville as it prepares to enter the circus of the Second World War There Bolton finds his girl acrobat conveniently recreated in the socially-ambitious Mrs Parton, whom he marries, and his ring master in her handsome but callow son Jasper, to whom he becomes a surrogate father During this strangely extra-cultural interlude, Bolton again finds himself outside of history, outside of change and outside of social time. Only when time and change reassert themselves—Jasper dies an uncharacteristically heroic death in Italy, Mrs Parton is killed with her paramour in a fiery automobile crash, and Bardsville begins to tire of its spectator's role and yearn for an end to the wartime circus—does Bolton return to his attic He is not reconciled, perhaps, to the reminders of mortality in the eyes of his circus figures, but he is certainly now more at home among the acrobats, ring masters, and clowns whose acts of ostensible transgression actually reinforce social order and mythic history

Sethe's experience at the traveling carnival's Colored Thursday also serves to confirm the dominant social order The members of the carnival sideshow, who are themselves clearly outcast and other, arrange the segregation of black audiences from white ones—hence, Colored Thursday. This mandate defines the black community's otherness and intensifies it by setting it alongside the otherness of the white carnival grotesques The carnival world may be "rootless, meaningless, and homeless" ("Invention" 215), but the black community, especially as it is perceived by the dominant white culture, demonstrates those qualities even more fully. As much as the black spectators anticipate "the excitement of seeing white people loose doing magic, clowning, without heads or with two heads, twenty feet tall or two feet tall, weighing a ton, completely tattooed and beating each other up," they know "none of it is true" (48). The grotesqueries the white performers assume for the carnival are less a cultural reality than the grotesqueries that are forced upon the black spectators as they accept the white community's perceptions of them As Sethe herself will demonstrate, even black self-perceptions reflect white hegemonic thought

This harsh lesson is reinforced when Sethe returns from Colored Thursday, not to make a home with Paul D and Denver as she had hoped to do but to have that home threatened by her refusal to tell her own Kentucky slave story. Beloved's appearance is announced by Sethe's symbolic reenactment of sudden labor and childbirth Shocked and shamed by her body's weakness, Sethe wonders "if the carnival would accept another freak" (51) By owning the freakishness of her race and gender that the white culture has decreed, Sethe will not repudiate the white culture's myth of southern history with the reality of her own experience

In Warren's "The Circus in the Attic," Bolton Lovehart, who cannot physically escape his region and its mythic preconceptions, attempts an imaginative escape through his circus, but even that imaginative outlet reinforces the myth he seeks to challenge. Sethe, on the other hand, achieves the physical escape that Bolton cannot effect, becoming a southern expatriate whom another—Warren himself—would have appreciated Both escaped Kentucky physically only to realize that they each must, nonetheless, return to it through memory Warren, who through memory produced his distinctive fiction and poetry, attributed moral significance to identity thus achieved: " . I do attach a significance to the way a man deals with the place God drops him in His reasons for going or staying And his piety or impiety" ("Interview" 329) Warren uses the term piety to suggest the morality in acknowledging one's own true father and impiety as the act of claiming a false father (Walker 156) Metaphorically, Warren, as a child of the South, is speaking of the moral necessity of choosing initiation into time over the myth of history Similarly, Sethe's piety or impiety depends upon her choosing either to keep a silence that will affirm the false white father and deny the true black mother, or to speak the unspeakable and challenge the mythic forces that negate self and time [25]

Sethe's and Bolton's experiences inform and corroborate Warren's conflation of history and morality Moreover, Warren's and Morrison's individual uses of the southern intertext of the circus to voice their mutual challenges to the myth of southern history disprove the words of "the smart ones" from *Jazz* (1992), Morrison's sequel to *Beloved.* These are the southern blacks of the Great Migration of the 1920s and 1930s who relocate themselves in northern cities Once there they make a hopeful claim. "There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff The things-nobody-could-help stuff The way everybody was then and there Forget that History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last" (7) Their resolute turning away from the moral task of self-definition that remains to be accomplished is, perhaps, more philosophically addressed by Warren's "Circus" narrator, who wryly notes that "people always believe what truth they have to believe to go on being the way they are" (8)

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[25] The entry into time that Bolton Lovehart is unable to effect is ultimately attempted by another Warren protagonist Amantha Starr in *Band of Angles* (1955) She, like Sethe, escapes northward, transcending enslavement in Kentucky and Louisiana, and seeks to forget her past through marriage to a white man in Ohio and Kansas, once freed, Amantha, like Sethe, also encounters her own moral discomfort with having failed first to resolve the myth of southern history

For finally, Warren's and Morrison's texts, spanning the temporal and ideological changes that separate them, speak to the viability of the circus intertext and its power to unite the authors of varying races, classes, and genders who seek to address the myth of southern history and the South's collective initiation into time.

CHAPTER IV

The Clown, the Acrobat, and the Ring Master:

Robert Penn Warren's "The Circus in the Attic" as Personal Myth

> *[The acrobat was] a beautiful little rag doll twirling far over our heads, charming her faithful, her smile filled with promise. Though then very young, I remember her very well, for I had planned to marry her right after the matinee, but forgot it during the Wild West show. (Robert Lewis Taylor,* Center Ring*)*

The narrative of Nathaniel Hawthorne's life and artistry contained within Robert Penn Warren's critical introduction of Hawthorne in the anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* reveals at every turn the critic's fascination with Oedipal triangulation This troubled psychological geometry appears first with Warren's analysis of Hawthorne's relationship with his absent seafaring father and his subsequently widowed mother, it reappears as Warren describes how Hawthorne's relationships with his wife Sophia and his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson (that ubiquitous Transcendental father) are redefined as a result of both having bemusedly read *The Scarlet Letter,* which artistically enshrines the triangulated tensions that draw Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth together emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually No matter, as Warren hastens to observe, that Hawthorne had been long dead by the time Freud's theories were published, for Freud himself insisted that his theories had already been validated by the intuitive, albeit unscientific, work of thinkers and writers whose lives and careers had predated his own ("NH" n440)

James Justus, whose *The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (1981) remains the definitive study of Warren's canon, notes Warren's disinclination to write jargon-ridden psychological criticism Despite Warren's avoidance of even the most commonly accepted Freudian language, however, Justus recognizes in his criticism the most common—and currently one of the most criticized[1]—tenets of Freudian investigation· "the psychological intricacies involved in a writer's conversion of autobiography into art" (Justus 124)[2]

Warren's introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne's works is a case in point, yet, as useful as Warren finds the ordering principle permitted by Oedipal triangulation, he readily admits its limitations for his own critical purposes In his analysis of the Hawthorne text most often explicated beneath a Freudian template, "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux," Warren registers an immediate qualification to any too-ready adoption of Freud's psychoanalytic perspective

> This Freudian meaning is only one of the several which flow into the story and clearly does not account for all the elements in it The

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[1] As Colette Soler and others illustrate, Freud's reaction to the novel is to lapse "into applied psychoanalysis, treating the artist's know-how as equivalent to what he himself called the work of the unconscious, putting artistic and literary works on the same level as dreams, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, and symptoms, all of which are interpretable" (Soler 213)

[2] Justus further notes two themes Warren discusses in his critical writings that also appear in his own fiction, and especially in "The Circus in the Attic" "the quality of success in America [and .] the thrust and drag of individualism as opposed to community" (Justus 124)

> Freudian approach deals with a natural process, presumably, but the process occurs in a social, moral, and philosophical context and, in fact, has come to exist only in such contexts ("NH" 442)

From this point, Warren peels the layers of meaning away from Hawthorne's classic tale of filial rebellion, using not only psychological but also social, historical, and philosophical contexts to do so

Much the same method can be used to extract meaning from Warren's own nod to the Hawthornesque, "The Circus in the Attic "[3] Certainly the novella reflects an insistent Oedipal triangulation, Freud's were, after all, the dominant psychological theories of Warren's time Nevertheless, the triangular character structures in the novella point also to other possible social, historical, and cultural considerations reiterated in Warren's earlier and later works, these elements encourage his readers to examine possibilities that, like Hawthorne's insights into Freud's theories-to-come, were there to be examined all along but which they are only now empowered to appreciate through the formulations of contemporary literary theories These formulations include not only Freudian and Lacanian psychology but also René Girard's concept of triangular desire, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of male homosocial desire, and Richard King's formulation of the southern family romance Applying these formulations to "The Circus in the Attic," a unique work in Warren's canon, will demonstrate its role as the matrix from which his reiterated themes, structures, and meanings emanate

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[3] See Chapter II of the study for an in-depth analysis of Robert Penn Warren's debt to his literary father

Warren and Freud

Several images foreshadow the Freudian triad which is replicated first in the family structure of the Lovehearts (Simon, Louise, and Bolton), next in Bolton's circus characters (the ring master, the acrobat, and the clown), and finally in Bolton's late-life family (himself, Mrs Parton, and his surrogate son Jasper) One such image is the photographic tableau of the Lovehearts moving slowly down their brick walk, Bolton in the middle grasping his parents' hands The most important of these images, however, becomes apparent as the faint but rhythmic pulse of old-fashioned gospel hymns draws a twelve-year-old Bolton (much as other boys his age were drawn by the circus calliope and its exciting promise) to the creek bank to witness ritual baptisms For the adolescent Bolton, this unlooked-for religious experience will symbolically confirm his need to navigate the Oedipus complex successfully and establish the role the circus metaphor will play in the rest of his adult life

Despite the solemnity of the baptismal proceedings, their tone is markedly sexual, further evidence of the Freudian in the novella The primary actor in this scene is the "tall preacher" whose glittering creek-soaked clothing creates a spangled, ring master effect As the conduit through whom his rapt followers seek salvation, he is a person of knowledge and power His first convert is a young girl whose virginal white dress nonetheless renders her evocatively dancer-like. She is as weak and uncertain as the preacher is strong and convicted, and his baptism of her, accomplished "not too gently," is recounted in terms of sexual domination·

> For an instant she refused to give over, and as he was about to place his other hand upon her face to save her from strangulation, she seized it desperately in both her own and clasped it to her breast. With that, all in one motion, she let herself go, arching her back somewhat, in surrender, and letting her head fall back, with her eyes wide to the sky . (“Circus” 21)

After having witnessed this baptism and others, Bolton moves quietly yet purposefully to the creek’s edge, ensuring that he will also be among those whom the preacher immerses His willing submission to the preacher bespeaks less a commitment to the heavenly Father (to whom the young girl convert had sent a supplicating look upward before her immersion) than to his single earthly father and multiple cultural fathers as models and guides Terry Eagleton eloquently describes this very step in the Oedipal process:

> [To the boy-child] his father symbolizes a place, a possibility, which he himself will be able to take up and realize in the future If he is not a patriarch now, he will be later. The boy makes peace with his father, identifies with him, and is thus introduced into the symbolic role of manhood He has become a gendered subject, surmounting his Oedipus complex (155)

As long as he is his father’s son in his father’s house, Bolton realizes the Oedipal necessity of his maintaining the clown’s role in the circus triad He aspires, however, to the patriarch’s role, the role of the ring master, and depends on his father, Simon Lovehart, to instruct him in achieving that role

Simon, however, whose psychic and perhaps sexual impotence is physically manifested in his limping gait, fails to enact the role that would ultimately liberate his son from his clownish boyhood. Because of his disinclination for personal conflict and his even stronger disinclination for life, Simon acts unwittingly as Louise Lovehart's ally in her campaign to possess Bolton totally and thus block his movement into a patriarchal role Simon returns her sixteen-year-old son to her after the boy runs away with the circus, later, and even more tragically, he leaves Bolton to her emasculating devices when he weakly surrenders to the fatal effects of his stroke Consigning Bolton to Louise's will—"Be good—to your mother—son" ("Circus" 29)—Simon dies without ever answering the "thousand questions" Bolton had never thought to ask until he had lost the opportunity And, try as he will after Simon's death, Bolton is continually frustrated by his mother's will when he attempts to assume the ring master role to which he aspires; instead, he becomes daily more clownlike, trapped in rather than surmounting his Oedipus complex

Thus, in Freudian terms, the novella's conflict arises from Bolton's failed struggle to assume the glorified patriarchal role for which he had, willingly and yet of necessity, sacrificed his pre-Oedipal childhood Ironically, the widowed Louise's assumption of that self-involved and pleasure-seeking pre-Oedipal state demands that Bolton join her there indefinitely, or at least for as long as she lives [4] Louise's unwillingness to acknowledge her movement beyond the Oedipal complex, as evidenced by her emotional attachment to her father's surname (Bolton) and her father's church (Episcopal), and by her consequent "disappointment in the marriage bed" ("Circus" 16), denies Bolton his own psychic movement beyond the Oedipus complex and thus beyond her influence, leaving the young man in sexual and social dormancy. Bolton's several rebellious acts counter Louise's own obsessions his first act of religious affiliation is for the socially inferior Baptist church rather than the Episcopal church; his escape with the circus is marked by his repudiation of his true name for that of "Joe Randall", finally, his seduction by Sara Darter becomes, for him, both a "victory" over and a "betrayal" of his mother; afterwards, he finds the courage for further covert gestures toward selfhood.

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[4] Widowed and bedridden after her heart attack, Louise becomes "almost pretty , young-looking, fresh, and clear-eyed" ("Circus" 31) As the years pass, she is "impervious to time [living] as though suspended in a timeless peace" ("Circus" 44)

Clearly, Simon Lovehart's sin of omission toward his son—his decision to disturb as little as possible "the powerful, vibrating, multitudinous web of life which binds the woman and child together" ("Circus" 17)[5]—has a powerful effect on Bolton's life. Regardless of his failings, however, a Freudian reading of the family romance in "The Circus in the Attic" focuses much more emphatically on the castrating effect of Louise Lovehart's sin of commission—her "intensity of egotism" that paradoxically becomes a "selfless and absorbing passion" for her son ("Circus" 16) Louise embodies all that feminist critics have decried as anti-feminist in Freudian theory in denying Bolton his patriarchal sexuality, she effectively pre-empts it, indulging her own "penis envy" in the process

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[5] Compare this passage with Cass Mastern's realization that "the world is all of one piece," cast in the image of an enormous spider web that, when even lightly touched, sends vibrations to its furthest edges (*AKM* 188) Mastern's understanding of this fact of life impresses on him the knowledge that his kinsman Jack Burden seeks to escape "the awful responsibility of Time" (*AKM* 438). That Simon Lovehart shares Mastern's awareness of the web suggests that he might also share his sense of guilt and complicity for the wide-ranging power he wields, as a man of privilege, over innocent lives Rather than live without the illusion that how they conduct their lives has no effect for good or ill on those around them, both men allow themselves to be overtaken by death

Of course, one purpose of making a Freudian reading of any literary text is to facilitate locating autobiographical details within the work—to read the writer by interpreting the work Warren's "The Circus in the Attic" seems particularly amenable to such application since, according to other biographical narratives, he had a tense relationship with own his mother Joseph Blotner, Warren's biographer, dutifully records Warren's reaction to a neighbor's report that his mother was "the most possessive . . . I ever saw"—he called it a "a damned lie" (*RPW: A Biography* 25)—yet Blotner subsequently and repeatedly describes her in this fashion On one occasion, Anna Ruth Penn Warren stymied her son's plan to make a mid-year transfer from the University of California at Berkeley, whose English program he found hopelessly conservative but where he was committed for finishing his work toward a master's degree. Her interference in Warren's scholastic affairs took the form of letters apprising the president of Berkeley and the department head at Yale of Warren's plans to "take French leave" of his commitments at the former school to accept a scholarship at the latter (*RPW: A Biography* 64) Warren was finally accepted to Yale for the academic year 1927-28 to do doctoral work, but even then, his relationship with his mother was hampered by "her possessive love [which] would never alter," even in the face of his growing independence from her (*RPW: A Biography* 81) In another of Warren's gestures toward personal agency, he secretly married his first wife, Cinina Brescia, but even in that act, Blotner sees a continuation of his mother's possessiveness: "Volatile and emotional, Cinina was obviously different from the quiet, firm Ruth Warren. But Cinina shared one thing with her she too wanted to dominate" (*RPW: A Biography* 96) Blotner's description of Warren's frame of mind at Ruth's death in 1931 is further revealing of his difficulties in dealing with Ruth Warren " his relationship with his mother was his closest one He loved her but there was ambivalence too They were both strong-willed He was ambitious as well as precocious, and she was proud and protective" (*RPW: A Biography* 120)[6]

According to Blotner, one source of Warren's filial guilt over Ruth Warren's painful final illness and subsequent death was a poem that the son had been working on even as he was receiving medical updates from his father on his mother's condition In the poem "The Return An Elegy" (*CP* 33-35), Warren writes in the persona of a man who has been called home to attend his mother's funeral Grieving?—exulting?—he declares "the old bitch is dead / what have I said!" (36-37) Blotner allows himself only speculation on Warren's authorial intentions with these words, asking "How much of this poem he regarded as a breakthrough was fiction, as he claimed?[7] Did he harbor a death wish?" (*RPW: A Biography* 120) Victor Strandberg, another Warren scholar who has written extensively on the early and late poetry, has been adamant, however, that the poem is about Warren's mother ("Poetic Afterlife" 1998). It is true that images of her last moments frequent Warren's fiction, and deathbed scenes in general are practically a commonplace in Warren's fiction. They are especially notable in such works as *All the King's Men* and *A Place to Come To*, the deathbed episodes for which resemble his memories of Anna Ruth Warren's and later Robert Franklin Warren's deaths.

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[6] Warren's relationship with his father was also played out in interesting and meaningful ways in his canon I will examine the father/son relationship later in this chapter

[7] Pursued in another direction, Warren's claim of an artistic "breakthrough" leads us back to Warren's literary father, Nathaniel Hawthorne, about whom Warren remarks that the death of his mother "made certain forces available to the labor" he subsequently put toward his masterpiece *The Scarlet Letter.* Bolton Lovehart similarly achieves his masterpiece—the integration of his disparate artistic and social selves—at the death of his mother

Warren and Lacan

Recent theorists have, of course, become skeptical of such Freudian formulations as the Oedipal complex, on which many early, classic readings of literary texts depend Meredith Skura, for example, asks whether, instead of offering the analysand a means to work through his symptoms, Freud's theories have provided him with interpretations that reinforce rather than explain the psychic illnesses he hopes to cure himself of (Skura 22). Patients' fantasies exist as self-composed narratives whose purposes are to explain violent feelings, or other evidences of psychosis, which they hope to track to their sources and eradicate In many cases, however, Freud's language is prone to the kind of inexact interpretation that permits the patient to think he is cured of his original fantasy when in reality he has merely substituted another in its place. The inclination to avoid looking at the real sources of one's psychic illnesses by creating or accepting other fantasies is demonstrated, Skura tells us, by " the oedipal child, upset by his own violent feelings, [who] makes up a story blaming everything on somebody else ('I didn't know it was wrong!' or 'My mother seduced *me*!')" (23)

Consequently, Skura recognizes in Freud's own writings a desire to structure a "scientific psychology"—a desire made suspect by his conflicting roles as "biographer, mythographer, historian, and philosopher" (Skura 19) When Warren attributes psychological vision to the fictions of Nathaniel Hawthorne, he confirms what Freud himself was fond of pointing out "The poets and philosophers discovered the unconscious before I did" (qtd in Skura 1) And yet, Skura insists that the unconscious is not so easily isolated or explained, psychoanalysts are themselves as much in the thrall of their metapsychological language as are the patients they hope to cure

This movement away from narrative and toward the building blocks that structure it—language—is one of the tenets of Lacanian psychology As Terry Eagleton explains, Jacques Lacan improves upon the Freudian view of how a child integrates himself psychically into a family structure as well as into society by adding the dimension of how a child relates to its language (Eagleton 164) Such an approach is also invaluable to a reading of "The Circus in the Attic" because it takes into consideration not only Bolton's identity as an artist who simultaneously creates a self and its world with his art but also his conflicted artistic role among signifiers and signifieds, reality and the imaginary.

Lacan's mirror stage is often used to define a child's movement from the infantile world of the "imaginary" into the "symbolic order," in which he apprehends and accepts the role he is expected to play sexually and socially, both in the family and in society.[8]

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[8] See, for example, Joyce McDonald's essay "Lacan's Mirror Stage as Symbolic Metaphor in *All the King's Men*" in *The Southern Quarterly* 34 4 (1996) 73-79, of interest here because of the novel's function as a companion piece in theme, structure, and image to "The Circus in the Attic" The similarities between the two works is more fully explored in Chapter II of this study.

Thus Lacan's mirror stage can be applied to the same baptism episode examined earlier beneath the lens of Freud's Oedipus complex with interestingly disparate results Most importantly, Bolton's Oedipal fears, accepted and succumbed to in a Freudian reading of this passage, are less apparent in a Lacanian reading; the delay in Bolton's entry into the symbolic order is attributed not to his mother's castrating fixation on him but on his own inability to see himself as a unified subject.

Lacan's mirror stage is itself, in effect, a metaphor for how an infant begins to develop its sense of self The delightful phenomenon of a baby's discovery of self in its mirror image is familiar to most adults, but the mirror represents any process in which the child finds its identity reflected Such reflections, as in the eyes and through the responses of people interacting with the child, are at first partial but eventually accumulate to form a complex self of many integrated parts

Yet, as Anthony Wilden puts it, the limitation of the mirror stage is that it is "a vision of harmony by a being in discord," whom Lacan terms the "*corps morcelé*" (Wilden 174) As long as this split, unintegrated reflection of self remains in the "sealed circuit" of the mirror reflection, the child experiences plenitude, "with no lacks or exclusions of any kind standing before the mirror, the 'signifier' (the child) finds a 'fullness', a whole and unblemished identity, in the signified of its reflections" (Eagleton 166) When the child sees itself reflected in the eyes of others, however, its understanding of the "symbolic order" begins to develop, and with it the child's sense that the self it had encountered in the mirror had been incomplete and is now insufficient to meet social and familial expectations Nevertheless, the lure of that first perfect image is difficult to abandon, as Bolton Lovehart discovers

At every turn, Bolton encounters the eyes that convict him of his role in Lacan's symbolic order Primary among them are his mother's eyes Louise Lovehart has a firm understanding of what Bolton's role in the family should be· he will perpetuate the aristocratic ideals established by her family, the Boltons, and his father's family, the Lovehearts When faced with Bolton's inevitable rebellions, Louise has only to fix her eyes on him to assert her will and ensure that he will fulfill the role she and their community of Bardsville have defined for him

Bolton is uncomfortably aware of those eyes as he wanders aimlessly toward the the revival meeting whose rhythmic hymns draw him to Cadman's Creek An old bitch hound with mournful, searching eyes follows him "like guilt" in spite of the stones and harsh words he pitches her way Her insistent presence fills him with anger Suddenly, "with the eyes upon him, he felt lost, bewildered, and friendless He felt that he had no place to go in the wide world, that nobody knew his name" ("Circus" 20) Bolton's reaction is confusing for the reader who knows that everyone in Bardsville knows his name and the social responsibilities it confers He has been marked by the Lacanian "Name of the Father"—doubly so since his name is composed of not one but two honorable patronymics—and will receive through it the knowledge of the phallus that should enable him to join the symbolic order And yet Bolton desires another name, an identity that will mark him not as his father's or mother's son but as the perfect, integrated self he envisions himself to be Psychically, Bolton still abides in the mirror stage

Thus, guiltily, Bolton retreats from the demands of the symbolic order reflected in the bitch's eyes As he approaches the religious faithful awaiting their baptisms, the narrator reflects that "if one pair of eyes had truly fixed upon him, he would have gone away" ("Circus" 20) Instead, Bolton hovers on the edges of the proceedings, more observer than observed His baptism is less a spiritual rebirth than a return to the womb As he lies smugly in bed days later, recovering from a chill and his parents' anger at his refusal of their expectations of him, his thoughts dwell again on the womblike comfort he has sought in the baptismal ritual "he wanted to lie here forever, lapped in the long, soft rhythm of day and night, like a tide " His parents belatedly plan his confirmation at St Luke's, the Episcopal church of his father and his grandfather, but one Bardsville oldtimer proclaims him "jist as Baptist as air-y mud cat" ("Circus" 23)

In the long years that follow his father's death, Bolton manages to elude his mother's eyes, the expectant eyes of Bardsville, and his inclusion into the symbolic order by escaping to his attic to create his circus figures The circus figures, through and in which he seeks a self-defined identity, reinforce the fragmented quality of that identity, they are, in essence, who he desires to be and who, albeit only in his attic, he can be Their figures, as his is over the years, are crafted and recrafted both through time and his gradually more skillful artistry—always changing externally and yet still the same inwardly in purpose and intent They people the imaginary world of self in which he manages to escape the symbolic order

Significantly, the circus figures' eyes, particularly those of the girl acrobat, which are habitually cast downward, pose no threat to him Instead, by not focusing on him, they reaffirm the Lacanian imaginary and support Bolton's illusion that his identity is his own to construct Not until his mother's solitary death does he feel the weight of the circus figures' eyes upon him, realizing that "the hateful, painted eyes of the creatures he had made" ("Circus" 45) would be the only ones to witness his own lonely death in the seclusion of his attic Furthermore, his mother, convenient, as Meredith Skura would note, as the Freudian scapegoat to whom he could attribute his seclusion from the world, can no longer "prevent" his entry into the symbolic order If Bolton remains in the attic to die there, he can hold only himself responsible, not his mother

Thus, at the age of fifty-nine, Bolton ends his childlike sojourn in the Lacanian imaginary and accepts his role in the symbolic order His satisfaction at being there is demonstrated in part by the pleasure he takes in Janie Murphy, who, as his step-daughter-in-law, fixes him with "a nice, direct look . out of her gray eyes" ("Circus" 49). Now, it is a look he welcomes rather than avoids

Bolton's move from his attic to the streets of Bardsville accomplishes the primary task necessary for the move from the imaginary to the symbolic order the acquisition of language Bolton's years in his attic are preoccupied with symbolic representations of selfhood, but his entry into the symbolic order and his acceptance of his roles as Mrs. Parton's husband and her son Jasper's surrogate father give him the literal power of speech As the situation in Europe becomes an issue of concern even for Bardsvillians, Bolton educates himself through newspapers, magazines, and books, until he is recognized as the town authority on the subject When war is declared and Jasper goes off to fight, Bolton reads bits and pieces of his letters from the front to the men he encounters on the street The reader has already discovered in Jasper a master of the self-aggrandizing narrative as he shamelessly plans how best to tell the tales of his brief honeymoon with Janey to his army buddies; predictably, his letters from the front, probably written in much the same vein, reinforce the authoritative role Bolton has accepted in the symbolic order Happier than he had ever thought he could be, Bolton must constantly remind himself "It was all real. It was real" ("Circus" 51)

Nevertheless, Bolton is unaware of the inevitable slippage that occurs between sign and signified, language and reality Bolton consistently misrecognizes his circus figures in the configuration of his new family, and he also fails to recognize repeated in his new family dynamic the very same relationships that shaped his childhood family For example, even though Mrs. Parton shares characteristics with the girl acrobat—the one that makes her most attractive to Bolton is her downcast, innocent blue eyes—her most significant quality, though hidden from him, is her familiarity with every step of the social ladder and her delicate balancing act between public propriety and private sensuality In a narrative in which patronymics are the bases of individual power struggles, Bolton's wife desires not him but his name For Bolton, this lapse in his ability to assert the Name of the Father through his legitimate offspring bespeaks not only the rift between the imaginary and the symbolic order but also between language and reality, thus creating the lack that produces his desire for his "son" Jasper Furthermore, it bespeaks the emptiness of his conjugal relationship· like Louise Lovehart, Mrs Parton's disappointment in the marriage bed is the cause and effect of her parallel desire to control her son

Conversely, without Mrs Parton, Jasper Parton, the surrogate foundation on whom Bolton bases his claim to the phallic, the patriarchy, and the paternal, could not exist Jasper Parton and his letters from the front permit Bolton to claim him before all of Bardsville as "my boy Jasper"—"my son." In a way, Jasper's letters satisfy the needs of the little boy who is left behind with "a thousand unanswered questions" when Simon Lovehart dies When young Bolton, soon to be bereft of his father, thinks in desperation of the "thousand questions" to be left unanswered, he already mourns the loss of the narrative that will prove his paternity (the identity of his father) and ensure his place in the symbolic order (his ability to be a father) As Christine van Boheemen claims, in Western culture "the role of the mother in originating the child is natural, biological, and self-evident, [but] the father's participation needs the proof of language, of story" (van Boheemen 31) Jasper's is the valued yet unreliable narrative of patriarchy that "fathers" Bolton—that is, gives him a father and makes him a father—in a much more complete sense than Bolton fathers Jasper or than Jasper needs him to This paradox of Lacanian psychoanalysis discounts Freudian narrative but confirms the use of language to construct the validating patriarchal narrative

Warren and Girard: Triangular Desire

Whether "The Circus in the Attic" is read as a Freudian narrative that validates paternal primacy or as a Lacanian narrative of language and its confirmation of the Name of the Father, it clearly relies upon an unbalanced triangular character structure that privileges male over female, father over mother Warren also notes the similar privilege granted to the masculine in his 1973 analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne and his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, written for the anthology *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*. In this analysis, Warren acknowledges that Hester is edged aside as the two men who had engaged her mind and heart—Chillingworth and Dimmesdale respectively—become locked in a mutually destructive relationship. Warren's critical voice is remarkably untinged with ironic awareness as he concludes that "[i]n the end the two men are more important to each other than Hester is to either, theirs is the truest 'marriage'" ("NH" 451) The fact that this "marriage" is driven by secrecy and suspicion might also suggest that Dimmesdale and Chillingworth's strange relationship is a dynamic of careful repression and enforced revelation worthy of that of any patient and psychotherapist—or literary text and critic

Warren's triangular character structure in "The Circus in the Attic" and his observations of a similar structure in Hawthorne are resonant of the patterns of triangular desire mapped out by René Girard in his study *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (1961, English translation 1965) As Girard observes, his concept of triangular desire "allude[s] to the mystery, transparent yet opaque, of human relations" (2-3) On this level, "human relations" translate to romantic gender relationships, and Girard quotes Marcel Proust to illustrate this basic level of triangulation

> It would fall to our lot, were we better able to analyze our loves, to see that often women rise in our estimation only because of the dead weight of men with whom we have to compete for them the counterpoise removed, the charm of the woman declines (qtd. in Girard 47-48)

On a deeper level, however, Girard sees in the mere convenience of the relationship triangle, which he admits is structurally similar to yet essentially different from the Oedipal triangle, a system for the creation of desire A subject, usually male, looks to a mediator, another male who becomes both model and rival, to determine what is or could be the object of the mediator's desire The desire for the female object that the subject detects, or imagines he detects, in the mediator is the desire that the subject will imitate since, for reasons of youth or general naiveté, he does not possess the resources from which to draw original desires Thus, the desire that the subject thinks he feels for the female object of his rivalry with the mediator is only a delusion, the subject's desire, ostensibly for the mutually admired object, is in reality for the rival mediator

Applying the theory of triangular desire to "The Circus in the Attic" reveals how readily the Oedipal triangle informs Girard's structural patterns of internal and external mediation even though the dynamic of desire is male-male rather than male-female In the case of "The Circus in the Attic," the mother and wife—Louise Bolton and later Mrs Parton—fulfill just as passive a role in Girard's narrative as in Freud's The difference in Girard's pattern, however, is that the female "object of desire" is doubly negated, as "Circus in the Attic" illustrates Bolton's real desire is not for the female object but for his rival and model, embodied first by his father, Simon Lovehart, and later by Jasper Parton [9]

Bolton's desire for the mediator is most consistently expressed in his desire to "be" the ring master, despite his more obvious and consistent resemblance to the circus clown Try as Bolton might to achieve the look and style of the "impresario," however, he can never quite carry the role off—either because he lacks or imagines he lacks some aspect or another of it Furthermore, as Girard points out, the subject imitates the desire of the mediator based not necessarily upon actual knowledge of his character or personality but upon whom the subject imagines the mediator to be. In the case of Simon Lovehart, who is almost pathologically private, Bolton garners what clues and relics he can to help him formulate the desires of his model. a tattered regimental flag and a cavalry saber. Lacking the actual wartime circumstances that would permit him to bear them in his turn, however, Bolton unconsciously pursues a debased version of the war the circus

In fact, the less Bolton actually knows about his father, the more he desires his rival and model, at Simon's death, Bolton is overcome by "a sense of discovery, the discovery of the man on the bed" ("Circus" 28). His "discovery" of what he will never know about the dying man is a simultaneous discovery that Simon is now his son's to create and, in creating, to imitate In Freudian terms, Bolton should achieve two varieties of Oedipal victory through Simon's death the first, the displacement of the father that bequeaths the mother to the son, and the second the removal of the father that confers to his heir the father's role in all other cultural and social matters In Girardian terms, however, Simon's death serves only to increase Bolton's desire for his model and rival as well as Bolton's sense that, lacking the qualities his father had possessed, he could acquire them by imitation

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[9] Internal mediation occurs when the distance between the subject and the mediator is negligible enough to allow them ready interaction, conversely, external mediation occurs when physical contact between the subject and mediator is precluded but the influence still exists (Girard 9); in Bolton's case the deaths of Simon and Jasper produce the movement from internal to external mediation.

This first pattern of triangular desire foreshadows the next, accomplished when Bolton marries Mrs Parton and welcomes her nineteen-year-old son into his home In fact, Mrs Parton fills Bolton's house with "sons" when she invites young soldiers from the army post to parties on "Rusty-Butt Hill " Tellingly, Bolton is delighted rather than dismayed by Jasper's cavalier treatment of his mother, and the single conjugal exchange that the reader witnesses between Bolton and Mrs Parton involves her son Jasper's death, like Simon's, is an epiphanal moment for Bolton, while Mrs Parton's death occurs almost as a narrative afterthought, with no record of Bolton's reaction to the news of it, in point of fact, Bolton has already returned to his secret attic occupation before Mrs Parton's death Obviously Bolton's desire is for Jasper, the recapitulation of his former Girardian model and rival, rather than for his wife, who in a Freudian narrative would have assumed the role of the traditional object of Oedipal struggle between the two men.

The pattern of triangular desire demonstrated in "The Circus in the Attic" is confirmed through its reiteration in his other works as well For example, Warren's 1943 novel *At Heaven's Gate* features the young and idealistic country boy Jerry Calhoun, whose admiration for his mentor and father-figure, Bogan Murdoch, leads him into an illconceived affair with Murdoch's daughter Sue Even though Sue ends the affair when she realizes Jerry's blindness to her father's failings, Jerry's faithfulness to this surrogate father endures, with disastrous results for the younger man. Jerry is downcast when Sue breaks off with him, but he is shattered by the revelation of Bogan Murdoch's personal and professional duplicity

In Warren's 1946 novel *All the King's Men,* Jack Burden's desire for his mentor, Willie Stark, is complicated by their mutual involvement with Anne Stanton One of the most significant moments of that novel, especially in terms of its demonstration of triangular desire, occurs when Jack confronts Anne, with whom he has had a conflicted albeit asexual love affair, with his knowledge of her sexual relationship with Stark, to whom Jack has made a near-filial commitment. As he arrives at Anne's door to confront her about the affair, the ordinarily glib Jack cannot find his voice he can merely look his question—correspondingly, Anne only nods her answer. The nature of the unspoken question, however, remains tantalizingly beyond the reader's reach: would Jack have charged Willie with Anne's seduction or Anne with Willie's? And is his debilitating grief over his loss of Anne a reflection of his desire for her or for Willie?

Perhaps the most striking example of triangular desire in Warren's canon occurs in his 1950 novel *World Enough and Time*, the fictionalized account of a sensational nineteenth-century murder case in western Kentucky Young Jeremiah Beaumont gratefully affixes his desire for a mentor/father surrogate to Cassius Fort, whose honorable instincts and successful business practices epitomize all that Jerry hopes to become When Jerry discovers that Fort has fathered an illegitimate child with Rachel

Jordan, an unfortunate young woman who has no one to redeem her reputation, he seeks her out, courts her determinedly, and lives imaginatively for "[t]he moment when he should strike Fort and the moment when he would at last take her into his arms[ ] the two acts became one act, the secret of life" (*World* 138) Consequently, the description of Fort's murder is profoundly sexual, indicating the true direction of Jerry's desire

> The blade sank deep into Fort's chest above the heart, with shocking ease
>
> Then, as the blade lifted again, Fort breathed deep, with a kind of gasp, and said, "Ah, Jerry—so you had—to come "
>
> "And come again!" Jeremiah exclaimed, and struck again with all his force " (*World* 240)

A pattern of triangular desire persists in Warren's final novel, *A Place to Come To* (1977) Jed Tewksbury's life, like the lives of so many Warren protagonists, is shaped by his desire for his absent father, distanced from Jed not only by death but by a drunkenly ignominious and fatal action that shames the boy his entire life Jed's flight from his small southern hometown is prompted by his eagerness to escape being labeled as his father's son, if he had wished to return, however, his unresolved tensions with his mother would have discouraged him For that reason, Jed's climactic reconciliation with his father's memory is effected not through the ministrations of his proudly sacrificial mother but by her widowed second husband, Perk Simms, who, as a surrogate father, welcomes Jed "home" in her place

Finally, insofar as Bolton Lovehart's biography can be construed as Warren's autobiography, Bolton's desire to know and to be his father parallels Warren's own loving regard for "the man of mystery" who was his father, Robert Franklin Warren (*Portrait* 7) Warren's lifelong preoccupation with the identity of the man who had fathered him gives an added dimension to Bolton's desire to know and emulate his father

For an author whose canon is steeped in an awareness of history, Robert Penn Warren voices an amazing ignorance of his own father's history, even just the "personal history from which that man emerged" (*Portrait* 7) Joseph Blotner dates Warren's literary fascination with the search for the father from his first published novel, *Night Rider* (1936). Yet in his 1986 memoir of Robert Franklin Warren, perhaps ironically and certainly ambivalently titled *Portrait of a Father*, Warren writes of his lifelong search for his father's identity—a search that unearths several suggestive clues but no real answers When Blotner explains the importance of such a search for Warren the artist, a greater understanding of Warren the man emerges as well· "The quest for self-knowledge—and sometimes the seeming effort to avoid it—would recur And one aspect of that self-knowledge would involve the search for the father" (*RPW: A Biography* 172)

Not surprisingly, therefore, the now-familiar pattern of triangular desire is apparent even in *Portrait of a Father*. As Warren informs us, the marriage between Robert Franklin Warren and Anna Ruth Penn, by all accounts a love match, was nevertheless one of his father's few hasty actions, since the couple married before the senior Warren considered himself properly "established" to do so This failure to ensure that he was economically grounded for marriage may have come back to haunt Warren's father in his later years, it is certain that it haunted his son The father's failure as a bankrupt businessman in the 1930s was something that the younger Warren felt deeply and sought to shield his father and himself from in the decades that followed

More disturbing, however, was the scant evidence that Warren was able to gather over his lifetime that his father had been a failed poet In *Portrait of a Father*, a title that evokes Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist*, Warren describes his childhood discovery of a great marvel a large volume of poetry containing several written by Robert Franklin Warren long before he had married and fathered children The father's reaction when his curious son confronts him with the vanity press publication is to bear it silently away—possibly, the boy thought at the time, to destroy it, but definitely never again to speak of it.[10] Warren had always known his father to aspire to intellectual pursuits; yet from this silent encounter with an unexpected artistic element of his father's personality, and one that Warren would in time share, came the conviction that poetry was an ambition that Robert Franklin Warren had "laid aside . in favor of another aspiration" (*Portrait* 50)· marriage and fatherhood. For this reason, when in later years, Warren's father quietly asserted to his son that "[t]he first thing a man should do is learn to deny himself," Warren assumed that the vanished book of poetry was the reference point for that remark and intuited that his father "was speaking of his whole life" (*Portrait* 71)

Understandably, this moment of revelation had the effect of convicting the younger Warren of "all past indulgence," of which his poetry, no doubt, was preeminent. Warren's irrational guilt over his father's failures becomes a theme of his own adult years Blotner describes Warren's "strange sense of guilt, as a successful poet, for having somehow appropriated the vocation his father had vainly cherished" (*RPW: A Biography* 207), his feeling that he had "usurped his father's career" (*RPW: A Biography* 416), and his guilt for having "somehow stolen the poetic career his father had wanted" (*RPW: A Biography* 493) In Freudian terms, Warren had indeed displaced his father to assume his role as poet, in Lacanian terms, Warren had found in poetry the text containing his own self-confirming narrative, the Name of the Father In Girardian terms, he had successfully wrested poetry, the object of their mutual desire, from his father. To do so without guilt, Warren would have had to know that what his father had gained in giving up that desire—a wife and a family—had been of equal value to the sacrifice. To complicate matters, Warren's need to know stems from his identity as both son and rival

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[10] Warren does add a postscript of sorts to this episode Thirty years later, when Robert Franklin Warren was in his seventies, he sent an original typescript of one of his poems to his son, with the scribbled admonition, "Do not answer" (*Portrait* 42)

Yet, his father's words of expiation are always just beyond Warren's reach, as *Portrait of a Father*'s (auto)biographical formulation of triangular desire reveals Time and again, Robert Penn Warren describes himself as an observant but obviously excluded third party to the love story of Robert Franklin Warren and Anna Ruth Penn as they "seemed to be engaged in a continuing private conversation" (*Portrait* 55) These moments might occur as they sat by the fireplace on a winter evening with the children tucked in bed or wandered into the woods, hands clasped and heads together, after a family picnic (*Portrait* 55) Later in the memoir, Warren returns, almost compulsively, to that "characteristic image" of his parents, "heads . . slightly bowed as though they were trapped in an interminable conversation never finished, and always there waiting to be resumed" (68-69) Warren would never know the substance or tenor of the conversation, indeed, what seems to concern him most are the simple facts of his exclusion and his lifelong ignorance Ironically, those facts never change, for even after Anna Ruth's death in 1931, Robert Franklin Warren remained a man of secrecy and self-control. Near the time of his father's death in 1955, as if to reinforce his inability ever to know his father as completely as he would wish, Warren would once more witness, again at a distance, the familiar posture as his father and Warren's wife Eleanor Clark sat together, " . heads leaning a little forward in a close and uninterrupted conversation" (*Portrait* 77)

Inevitably, this curious image had already found its way into Warren's poetry in "October Picnic Long Ago," from *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980* (1980),[11] confirming in one stroke the autobiographical nature of this particular poem and the weight of personal myth that the image of the circus carried for Warren In the "Afterthought" to *Being Here,* Warren affirms some of the poems as "shadowy autobiography" (*CP* 441), and "October Picnic Long Ago" certainly acquires more autobiographical substance when read in the light of *Portrait of a Father.* Not only does Warren describe his parents and their children as "a passel of circus freaks crammed tight / On four wheels" (9-10) as they head out of town and into the woods for a family picnic, but here too we find the "characteristic image" Warren recalled in *Portrait of a Father.*

> . Father and Mother gone, hand in hand,
> Heads together as though in one long conversation
> That even now I can't think has had an end—
> But where? Perhaps in some high, cloud-floating, and sunlit land. (22-25)

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[11] See Chapter II of this study for a lengthier analysis of this poem

Death has irrevocably removed Warren's father from him, but, in doing so, has hardly rendered him less knowable or the expiation he could have offered less attainable. Warren remains the desiring outsider in the triangle

Warren and Richard King: The Southern Family Romance

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's study of gender asymmetry and erotic triangles, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), updates René Girard's structure of triangular desire and adapts it to reflect a feminist perspective According to Sedgwick, male homosocial desire—a structure that includes "men-loving-men," "men-promoting-the-interests-of-men," or a combination of both—perpetuates the kind of patriarchy Heidi Hartmann defines as "relations between men that have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (qtd in Sedgwick 464).[12]

Viewed in terms of the male domination of women, the five examples of Girardian triangular desire in Warren's canon cited above can also serve as examples of male homosocial desire, as defined by Sedgwick The "victor" in men's struggles for power is ultimately determined by his possession of a woman, the ostensible source of their mutual "desire," but their struggle relegates the woman to the various roles of object and commodity, metaphorically speaking, her presence—although the mere idea of her is all that is required—is the “cement” which bonds one man with another For Warren, whose limited development of his women characters has made him notorious with the critics, the concept of male homosocial desire, as applied to several of his novels, explains much about the patriarchal structure that he knew and undoubtedly privileged

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[12] To forestall accusations of a homophobic agenda behind this definition of patriarchy, Sedgwick makes this disclaimer· "I am not assuming or arguing either that patriarchal power is primarily or necessarily homosexual (as distinct from homosocial), or that male homosexual desire has a primary or necessary relationship to misogyny Either of those arguments would be homophobic and, I believe, inaccurate" (477).

A further interesting detail in Sedgwick’s explanation of male homosocial desire is her positing classical Greece as an early successful blending of male homosexuality and male homosocial bonding, untroubled by contemporary Western homophobia In that culture, male homoeroticism was an accepted element of a system of mentorship; adolescent Greek boys entered into sexual and political apprenticeships with older male citizens, which in turn determined the apprentices’ later adult success and their subsequent desirability as adult mentors A specific outcome for the young apprentices was their initiation into the rights and privileges they would ultimately possess when they came of age namely, “the power to command the labor of slaves of both sexes, and of women of any class including their own” (Sedgwick 465) Sedgwick quotes Hannah Arendt’s *Human Condition* to show that an awareness not only of gender but also class fed the privileged Greek male’s view of himself: his male and female slaves and even free women existed to perform the work that the privileged male considered beneath him since his “[c]ontempt for laboring [arose] out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity and no less passionate impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy to remembrance” (qtd in Sedgwick 465)

While Sedgwick’s inclusion of this cultural model of classical Greece is intended to show the distance that Western culture has created between male homosocial and male homosexual behaviors, what is most striking about the model to a student of southern literature is its similarity, in homosocial if not in homosexual terms, to another cultural model—that of the southern antebellum plantation system The antebellum plantation system seems a *locus classicus* for male homosocial bonding in Western culture since the model often included an absent male plantation owner, who tended to seek the company of men like himself in social, political, and/or intellectual settings. For these reasons, he would leave the daily workings of the plantation to his wife and his male and female slaves

Thus the early Greek homosocial model parallels in several ways the southern antebellum plantation structure In its turn, the plantation structure provides the basis for Richard King's reformulation of the Freudian family romance into the southern family romance, which he details in *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1939-1955* (1980), King's analyses return full circle to the original Freudian triangle with which this study began

Like Warren's "The Circus in the Attic," King's southern family romance is comprised of three similar, interrelated triangular structures King's first triangular structure, like Warren's symbolic images of the ring master, the acrobat, and the clown, asserts the southern family romance as cultural construct. As King explains, the plantation legend evolved, from the first, as a "cultural compensation" for the letdown experienced nationally after the heroic Revolutionary age had ended and the crass Jacksonian age had begun (28) Despite alterations in the legend, it persisted during the Civil War, during Reconstruction, and even through World War I and the Depression, and is parleyed romantically in such novels as *Gone with the Wind*, tragically in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, and ironically in Warren's "The Circus in the Attic " Without a doubt, Bolton seeks the circus as a compensation for a heroic way of life no longer available to him

The second triangular structure is made up of the aristocratic southern white family In King, the members of that triangle are the father/grandfather, the mother, and the son, recognizable in Warren's novella as Simon and Louise Lovehart and their son Bolton Simon satisfies both of the qualities King attributes to the two paternal figures a genuine "war hero" like the southern grandfathers, he is at the same time a disappointingly "prosaic" father to his son To Bolton, Simon simultaneously embodies the glory of the Old South as well as its lamented decline On the other hand, Louise Lovehart is the desexed southern lady who, according to King, can assume diverse forms from the impossibly pure "queen[s] of the home" to "neurasthenic women, castrating bitches, spiky but asexual older aunts and grandmothers," or completely absent mothers (35-36)

Then King posits a third family structure, in which "the white father and mother assumed dominant positions, [but] blacks occupied the role of permanently delegitimized and often literally illegitimate children" (36) As King notes, this formulation was fraught with peril for the psychic equilibrium of the south on one hand, to admit black slaves into the white family romance risked investing it not only with new versions of incest taboo but with racial taboos as well For this reason, the plantation family welcomed the black men and women it had enslaved into its structure, but only as long as they could be conveniently infantilized.

Locating this third family structure of the white father, the white mother, and the black "child" in "The Circus in the Attic" requires that we examine what critic Forrest Robinson identifies as Warren's "conspicuous omission" of considerations of black slavery—indeed, of racial issues in general—from his fiction and poetry (512) Robinson claims that, like his characters, Warren betrays an "ambition to have things both ways, the competing urges to tell and to remain silent, to see and be blind" (524), especially as "telling" and "seeing" would mean admitting guilt for or complicity in black slavery in the south [13] Following Robinson's lead, then, becomes an exercise in locating racial subtexts in the form of characters who appear to be struggling to emerge from Warren's texts as the black "child" in the southern family romance

Robinson's observation that race is conspicuously omitted from Warren's work is based specifically on a critique of *All the King's Men*[14] but could apply to "The Circus in the Attic" as well The novella, whose historical context includes events of the Civil War—indeed, Simon Lovehart can trace his incapacitating physical wounding, if not his psychic wound, to his participation in the conflict over slavery—touches not at all on the war's ideological bases In this regard, King and Robinson agree that Warren's theme of the search for the father in order to effect personal identity forestalls (or does it simply preclude?) his dealing effectively with race Both critics agree that for a southerner, racial considerations are part and parcel of individual and collective identity—or, as Robinson pointedly indicates with a quotation from Warren himself, "You can't be a Southerner and not have the whole race question on your mind in one way or another. It's bound to be there" (qtd in Robinson 511)

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[13] Conversely, Richard King, who formulates the concept of the southern family romance, admits that "[t]here is little nostalgia in Warren's work for the culture of the family romance" (234) Furthermore, as I hope to demonstrate in the paragraphs to follow, Warren's characters are quickly disabused of what little nostalgia they do feel That conclusion, however, is small comfort to Robinson, who sees in Warren's persistent thematic search for personal identity a moral "evasion" of the issue of slavery

[14] Robinson faults *All the King's Men* protagonist Jack Burden, and thus Warren, for never achieving the same conviction of moral and ethical complicity in black slavery as Cass Mastern does

The "one way or another" that the race question emerges in "The Circus in the Attic" could be through the character of Jasper, whose metaphoric presence in the novella as Bolton's surrogate son is complicated by his corresponding identity as the illegitimate black child from King's southern family romance Jasper is an extension of the ring master figure, established originally in the Baptist preacher, perpetuated by Simon Lovehart, and fruitlessly aspired to by Bolton Lovehart Basic to Jasper's characterization are his confident sexuality and his equally confident approach to war and his participation in it Yet Jasper has his clownish aspects as well, as if to remind the reader of Bolton's persistent early misrecognition of himself as the ring master, and perhaps reminding the reader as well of the two male components of the Girardian triangle, who are more "married" to each other than either is to the female for whom they vie And significantly, Jasper has closer ties to Bolton than either knows the narrator reveals that if she had wished to do so, Mrs Parton might have traced her ancestry to Lem Lovehart, the same founding father of Bardsville to whom Bolton traces his privileged position on Rusty-Butt Hill Where Bolton is the recognized heir to Lovehart privilege, however, Mrs.

Parton's veins boast only "the secret blood"—her claim to Lovehart ancestry, certainly, but possibly a suggestion of mixed blood resulting from the sexual encounters forced upon enslaved black women by their white masters, acts that are the shameful, hidden legacy of the south

No wonder, therefore, that the description of Jasper is notably similar to the broadly stereotypical depictions of African Americans that were popularized by minstrel shows

> [Jasper] had curly brown hair, a wide heavy mouth, full of good teeth which he showed often in an expectant smile when he looked around after he had made some remark He laughed readily, and most readily at his own words He would say something and roll his large brown eyes like a comic stallion, and then laugh. He had the habit of rubbing his hands together, or pulling at his fingers to crack the knuckles He called his mother "Old Girl," or "My Little Chickadee," and was accustomed to slap her on the rump in playful good spirits He soon got the habit of slapping Bolton Lovehart on the shoulder, and calling him "Pop," or "Pop, Old Boy " ("Circus" 49)[15]

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[15] The minstrel show is a particularly apt allusion since it grew in popularity in nineteenth-century America alongside the circus Minstrel characters (the interlocutor, the endman, and female impersonators) correspond interestingly to circus performers (the ring master, the clown, and the woman acrobat), and minstrel blackface, like clown whiteface, is a version of theatrical mask Along these lines, cultural analyst Robert C Toll suggests that "[the] blackface mask allowed [white] performers and their patrons, to cast off their inhibitions and play out fantasies of themselves in the stereotypes of blacks" (23) Toll does not mention that the prominence of female impersonation in minstrel shows could indicate a similar acting out of gender fantasies in stereotypes of women

Whether Warren has an authorial awareness of this extra dimension to Jasper's character and his putative identity as the illegitimate black son in the southern family romance is a matter for debate Robinson would deny it by pointing out that Warren's bad faith on the issue of race has simply been subconsciously overcome by his guilty knowledge of the south's racial sins, which "will out" in unplanned and unexpected ways in his texts All the same, one should be mindful of Warren's essay submission to *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), "The Briar Patch," in which Warren resisted the Agrarian "party line," to some extent, by deliberately interjecting the issue of race, a topic that Donald Davidson had insisted that the essayists avoid (*Inventing* 34). Furthermore, as out-of-date and even racist as Warren's "The Briar Patch" views sound today, Michael Kreyling credits him for having found "some intellectually, culturally significant role for African-Americans in the (white) southern agenda" as a counterbalance to the "strident racism" of some of his fellow essayists, Davidson among them (*Inventing* 177)

At any rate, Warren's portrayal of Jasper Parton is an ambiguous one, an attitude further revealed in the narrator's consigning him, "valorously" dead but not forgotten, to Bolton's circus in the attic Jasper belongs there with all the other illusions that have been cherished by Lovehearts and Bardsvillians alike Notable among them is "the sinister ring master" ("Circus" 62), who once again calls to mind Bolton's vision of the preacher and his childish expectations of his father, but is especially evocative of Jasper Parton Warren's word "sinister," used in conjunction with the ring master only in the final paragraph of the novella, is rich with meaning. On one hand, Warren allows his characters their illusions even as he recognizes the potential harm in them—ominously, inevitably, Bardsville's illusions are "the truth they have to believe to go on being the way they are " On the other hand, the word "sinister" owes a debt of meaning to the "bar sinistre," the heraldic denotation of bastardy Thus, the "sinister" ring master is an incarnation of the illegitimate results of those stubbornly held illusions, the ideology that allows southern culture to perpetuate its most dearly held beliefs in denial of racial realities In Warren's south, seen in the microcosmic Bardsville of his novella, these illusions permit Bolton and his community to define the Civil War as a struggle over honor rather than race, to glorify their warriors as heroes rather than oppressors, and to affirm African Americans as adoptees into the southern family romance rather than as "blood kin "

The roles Bolton, Mrs Parton, and Jasper play in this third variation of King's southern family romance are reincarnated in several of Warren's later fictions One of the most bizarre examples of the triangle is played out in *Flood: A Romance of Our Time* (1963), in which writer Brad Tolliver returns home to Fiddlersburg, Tennessee, to document what remains of his small corner of the south before it is obliterated, under government mandate, by flood-waters impounded by the area's newly-built dam His hometown, however, is already more vital in his memory that in present-day actuality, as the Seven Dwarfs Motel, a modern (or perhaps postmodern) addition to Fiddlersburg's landscape, will attest. Ironically, Brad seeks sexual oblivion there with the virginal Leontine Purtle, whose physical blindness seems to promise him (as the girl acrobat's downcast eyes seemed to promise Bolton) a view of himself unobstructed by the assessments of others With Leontine, "[Brad] knew where he was And who he was" (*Flood* 302)

Brad's fantasy that he will find redemption through Leontine's purity dies with his discovery of her sexual expertise, which is later confirmed by the clownishly-dressed Jingle Bells, the black attendant and porter at the Seven Dwarfs Motel. During Brad's previous patronizing encounters with Jingle Bells, he had ignored the parodic foreshadowing of the motel's signage, on which "the bloated, minstrel-show-white lips of a benignly grinning black face" offered "BREAKFAST SERVED IN COTTAGE / TENNESSEE SMOKED HAM AND RED GRAVY / YASSUH, BOSS!" (*Flood* 10) Jingle Bells, a college student from Chicago who has taken the summer job at the Seven Dwarfs Motel "to know what it felt like to be a Negro in the South" (*Flood* 307), momentarily abandons his obsequious postures and his "expression of idiotic innocence" (*Flood* 14) as Leontine and Brad emerge from their cottage He contemptuously assures Brad that "everyone knows Miss Purtle" and effortlessly knocks the older man down when Brad automatically attempts a gesture of "Southern chivalry" (*Flood* 306)

Brad Tolliver's misreading of Leontine Purtle and Jingle Bells reflects the author's reassessment of the character triangle initiated in "The Circus in the Attic"; in *Flood*, these characters emerge even more clearly as a triangulation of the southern white male, the feminine other, and the racial other Warren's next novel, *Meet Me in the Green Glen* (1971), is a continued reassessment of the triangle in which Warren more forcefully suggests that the perception of agency cherished by the southern white male is only illusory In this novel, Warren textually marginalizes the southern white male "protagonist" and focuses instead on the relationship between his wife and a darkly ethnic young Sicilian immigrant

In *Meet Me in the Green Glen,* the youthful and inexperienced Cassie Killigrew is called to care for her dying aunt and kept on after her death to marry her widowed uncle, Sunderland Spottwood Sunder, a privileged white southern man who pursues every appetite with a single-minded self-absorption, little realizes the toll that seclusion and hard work take on Cassie After several years of marriage, Cassie finally liberates herself from Sunder's passions and vagaries when she learns he has fathered a child with the wife of his black tenant farmer Sunder's subsequent paralysis from a stroke is a further reprieve for Cassie, although it binds her to him in a different way, as his caretaker for the next twelve years

Cassie hires Angelo Passetto, a transient with a questionable past and an uncertain future, to repair Sunder's home, the rotting legacy of his southern heritage She keeps Angelo on when she realizes her passion for him and recognizes that he, like she, understands what it is like "to be locked up and lying in the dark" (*Meet* 149) Strangely, theirs is an emotional plight shared physically by Sunder, a similarity that Warren emphasizes when Cassie takes Angelo to her husband's sickroom to help him understand the desperation of her life before she had met him. There, gazing at Angelo over the body of her paralyzed but not totally unaware husband, she declares her love for him, a love that demands that she release him, nonetheless, when he eventually falls in love with Sunder's daughter Charlene, who lives with her mother in the tenant shack at the back of the Spottwood property In a tragic ending reminiscent of those of Faulkner's *Absalom,*

Absalom! and *The Sound and the Fury* in its failure to affirm either the Old South or the New, Angelo is executed for Sunder's murder, Cassie goes mad in the midst of her hopeful delusion that Angelo has escaped with Charlene, and Charlene, taking refuge in Chattanooga with her mother, drifts into drug addiction.

Warren's most ambitious element in *Meet Me in the Green Glen* is his willingness to shift the center of the novel away from the white southern male; that willingness does not carry over into his next novel, *A Place to Come To* (1977), although the triangular geometry of the white southern male, the feminine other, and the racial other recurs In this, Warren's final work of fiction, Jed Tewksbury pursues an ill-fated romance with Rozelle Hardcastle, who draws Jed in a triangular dynamic with her and a series of other men Jed hardly knows if he fulfills the clown's or ring master's role in any of these structures, but when he finally makes a permanent break with Rozelle, she becomes the lover of a man their group knows simply as "the swami " The swami is reminiscent of *Flood*'s Jingle Bells, for he, too, is a black man who adopts a persona, although in the reverse of the earlier character, rather than downplay his education by relying on stereotypical assumptions of how an African American in the south should act, the swami obscures his southern background by learning to speak Hindi, Italian, and Oxford English Notwithstanding the one-upsmanship due her as Jed's scorned lover, Rozelle's pleasure in revealing to him the success of her marriage to "the swami" reminds the reader of Richard King's conclusions on the cultural message sent by liaisons between black men and white women "To the former [were] denied power, to the latter, sexuality

Hence, as we shall see, the ultimate challenge to the [southern] family romance was the sexual relationship of black men and white women" (King 37).

Conclusion

Robert Penn Warren's use of triangularity, whether applied socially, historically, culturally, or psychologically, compels a reader's appreciation for its symbolic as well as narrative applications. As a literary critic, Robert Penn Warren demonstrates his attraction to the triangular pattern through his analysis of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, as an artist, he affirms it in his own works. Imitating Hawthorne's character structure offers Warren compelling symbolic possibilities, as in the triangulation of the clown, the ring master, and the acrobat. Additionally, it also provides the psychological tension necessary to multiple reworkings of narrative, all within the scope of a single text, "The Circus in the Attic," Warren's re-vision of and tribute to Hawthorne's themes and characters.

The richness of Warren's text—indeed, what justifies calling it the matrix for his other works—is verified by the numerous critical approaches/psychological narratives through which it proves accessible. Certainly "The Circus in the Attic" is an inward drama of self that recalls Freud's narrative of the Oedipal complex or Jacques Lacan's narrative of the mirror stage. But the novella is an outward drama of the self interacting with the other as well, reflecting gendered narratives by René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Richard King's racial narrative. As it reveals and absorbs all these approaches, we can only ask ourselves what further readings of it await us.

CHAPTER V

"Pure and Impure Poetry" in the Circuses of Robert Penn Warren and Thomas Wolfe

> *Poetry wants to be pure, but poems do not. . . . They mar themselves with cacophonies, jagged rhythms, ugly words and ugly thoughts, colloquialisms, clichés, sterile technical terms, headwork and argument, self-contradictions, clevernesses, irony, realism—all things which call us back to the world of prose and imperfection.*
>
> *Sometimes a poet will reflect on this state of affairs and grieve. (Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry")*

> *. . . you can't go home again. . . . I found that out through exile, through storm and stress, perplexity and dark confusion. I found it out with blood and sweat and agony, and for a long time I grieved. . . . (Thomas Wolfe,* Letters*)*

By 1935, Robert Penn Warren had established himself as a biographer, a fiction writer, a poet, and a literary critic His *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929), several individual short stories,[1] and *Thirty-Six Poems* (1935) were the works on which the first three of his literary identities were based His subsequent co-founding, with Cleanth Brooks, of the *Southern Review* in 1935 gave him a forum from which to validate many other fine writers of the period and to define the literary tastes of his generation

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[1] "Prime Leaf" appeared first in *American Caravan IV*, Ed Alfred Kreymborg, et al, New York Macauley, 1931, 3-61, "Unvexed Isles" appeared in *The Magazine*, 2 (July/Aug 1934), 1-10; "Testament of Flood" was published in *The Magazine*, 2 (Mar./Apr. 1935, 230-234, and "Her Own People" was published in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 11 (Apr 1935), 289-304 These short fictions were later republished in 1947 in *The Circus in the Attic and Other Stories*, Warren's only short fiction collection

Warren was becoming a literary force to be reckoned with, and his judgments as an editor and critic would, in the decade to follow, prove very helpful to the careers of such authors as Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner. Porter's and Welty's works were steadily solicited during the late thirties and early forties for the pages of the *Southern Review*; furthermore, Warren's favorable review of and insightful observations on *The Portable Faulkner* (1946) helped establish Faulkner as the premier American author of the twentieth century.

Also by 1935, Warren's changing stance on modernism, the predominant literary movement of the time, had helped him redefine his own unique artistic goals. As a student at Vanderbilt University during the early 1920s, Warren had been introduced to modernism by his friend and fellow student Allen Tate. Warren took up the modernist torch eagerly, but as he matured as a poet, he recognized his need to differentiate his work from that of his earliest poetic influence, T. S. Eliot. Moreover, Warren had by 1935 reconsidered some of the fundamental principles of modernism, such as its claim that poetry should be difficult to understand, its emphasis on image or effect rather than on meaning, and its exclusion of the reader through the use of intensely personal references.

Not surprisingly, Warren's reconsiderations of literary modernism manifested themselves in his poetry and his fiction. One striking fictional result is the novella "The Circus in the Attic," in which an artist who yearns for modernist distance from the world is drawn back into it, thus affording him an opportunity to fulfill and enrich his artistry. What makes the novella even more striking is its use of the circus trope, which is also one of Thomas Wolfe's favorite images Warren's and Wolfe's uses of that trope reveal similarities in and distinctions between the responses each has to literary modernism What Warren observes about modernism in his fiction, however, he had already observed critically in a 1935 review of Thomas Wolfe's novel *Of Time and the River.*

Warren clearly had conflicting editorial and critical responses to the fiction of Thomas Wolfe Warren the editor recognized the advisability of including an author of Wolfe's stature in the pages of the *Southern Review*, he even requested a piece by Wolfe for its inaugural issue (Donald 360) Yet, these negotiations had a critical subtext the two parties could not have ignored [2] Warren the literary analyst had already gone on record as one of Wolfe's most exacting and, as it would evolve, most quoted critics in "A Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe," his review of the prodigious writer's second novel *Of Time and the River* [3]

In this review, Warren voices both praise and disapproval for the "enormous talent" of his fellow southerner Wolfe's genius had produced, according to Warren, "fine fragments, brilliant pieces of portraiture, and . sharp observations on men and nature" ("Note" 216) On the other hand, Warren finds *Look Homeward, Angel* and *Of Time and the River* too willingly autobiographical, he objects that "the pretense of fiction is so thin and slovenly that Mr Wolfe in referring to the hero writes indifferently 'Eugene

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[2] Wolfe ultimately never took the editors up on their offer of publication.

[3] The essay "A Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe" first appeared in *American Review*, 5 (May 1935), 191-208 and later in Warren's *Selected Essays*, New York Random House, 1958, 170-83 For the purposes of this chapter, I will cite the reprint of the essay included in Leslie A Field's *Thomas Wolfe: Three Decades of Criticism*, New York NYU Press, 1968, 205-16

Gant' or 'I' and 'me'" ("Note" 206) [4] This propensity for self-reference, combined with Wolfe's overzealous attempts to communicate "the visionary moment" only to wreak "some indignity on the chastity of the vision" is among his greatest failings in Warren's eyes The poet in Wolfe, whom the poet Warren wants to admire, cannot come to satisfactory terms with his prosaic materials As Warren states the case,

> . . . [Wolfe] attempts to bolster, or as it were, to prove, the mystical and poetic vision by fusing it with a body of everyday experience of which the novelist ordinarily treats But there is scarcely a fusion or a correlation, rather, an oscillation ("Note" 214)

According to Warren, it is possible to write of the "mystical and poetic vision" and blend it with "everyday experience"; unfortunately, in his view, these two modes of writing never complement each other or even co-exist in a convincing artistic way in Wolfe's novels. In Warren's judgment, Wolfe tries to express character development poetically before the character's experience has rendered that development possible or believable In the process, Wolfe grants his characters, especially Eugene Gant, possession of an unearned, intangible "visionary truth" that has never been tested in reality or even questioned by irony. Warren implies that Wolfe is not only a writer who has allowed himself to be mastered by his own poetic yearnings but also that his commitment to this pure but unproven artistic vision renders his art inaccessible to "the ordinary citizens of the Republic" ("Note" 214) who cannot read Eugene's story without finding themselves excluded from it as part of the insensitive, prosaic world against which he struggles The title of Warren's review—"A Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe"—initially directs the reader to Wolfe's difficulty with integrating vision with reality. When, as his final word on the topic, Warren reminds his reader that "Shakespeare merely wrote *Hamlet*; he was *not* Hamlet" ("Note" 216),[5] it becomes clear that, as far as Warren is concerned, Wolfe's unreflective biographical impulse and his commitment to the unearned poetic vision are prime targets for the ironic tendencies of his readers—not to mention the more than ironic standards of literary critics [6]

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[4] Wolfe biographer David Herbert Donald confirms the reason for Warren's confusion, a reaction shared by many readers of the first edition of *Of Time and the River* At the time, Wolfe was disinclined to read his own galley proofs as carefully as he should have, due in part over his unhappiness with the massive cuts made to the manuscript For that reason, and others beyond his control, the first edition contained many confusing first person references that were inconsistent with the later decision to make the novel a third person narrative (Donald 303, 317)

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[5] Other critics were equally disapproving of Wolfe's autobiographical preoccupations and even less kind in their examinations of them In one of the most famous attacks against Wolfe's work, "Genius Is Not Enough" (see *Saturday Review*, 13 [April 25, 1936], 3-4, 14-15), Bernard DeVoto deplores "the frequent recurrence of material to which one must apply the adjective placental"

[6] It is very unlikely that Warren, who memorized huge passages of *The Waste Land* when he was a student at Vanderbilt, would not also have read T S Eliot's 1919 essay "Hamlet," in which he criticizes Shakespeare for not having established a satisfactory "objective correlative" for the puzzling behaviors of his protagonist:

> . in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked (Eliot 125).

What Eliot requests is simply that the experiential cause show more relation to the emotional effect and, further, that the cause be worthy of the effect. Eliot's request that what Hamlet has experienced in the world be consistent with his emotional response to it is not all that different from Warren's judgment that Wolfe's protagonist earn through experience the poetic stances he takes toward life The Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe, like the Hamlet of Shakespeare, is too heavily determined by emotional response (that yearning for the poetic vision in Wolfe), unconvincingly contextualized in a setting that fails to explain and validate the strength of his poetic yearning or its subsequent impassioned expression. Such intense feeling in the absence of an object, according to Eliot, "often

Warren comes at this same problem—the unearned vision that is tested by a more experientially-minded readership—from a slightly different critical direction a few years later in the essay "Pure and Impure Poetry," which he originally delivered in 1942 as the Mesures Lecture at Princeton University [7] Warren's explicit topic is poetry, but it becomes clear in this essay, as in his later essay "Democracy and Poetry" (1975),[8] that the term "poetry" is an inclusive one·

> For poetry—in the broadest sense, the work of the "makers"—is a dynamic affirmation of, as well as the image of, the concept of the self . "[M]ade things" may, of course, belong to any of various orders of art . ("D&P" 16-17)

In literature, Warren considers a poem, fiction, or drama generically poetic Thus, regardless of the art form, the weakness of the pure poem, or in the purely poetic approach, lies in its fixation on the single narrow poetic effect that disallows experience. As Warren puts it, "the pure poem tries to be pure by excluding, more or less rigidly, certain elements which might qualify or contradict its original impulse . [for] pure poems want to be, and desperately, all of a piece" ("Pure" 15) The weakness of pure

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occurs in adolescence" (126). Eliot admits that Hamlet does not have that excuse; perhaps Warren is suggesting that Wolfe does

[7] "Pure and Impure Poetry" also appeared in *The Kenyon Review* in 1943 and in Warren's *Selected Essays* in 1958 I will cite the reprint of this essay from Warren's *New and Selected Essays*, New York: Random House, 1989

[8] "Democracy and Poetry" was first delivered in 1974 as the second of that year's Thomas Jefferson Lectures It was subsequently published in the *Southern Review*, 11 (1975), 1-28

poetry is ultimately its inability to withstand the realistic application of human experience as a test of whether its vision has been earned or merely assumed by the poet

As one of several practical demonstrations of the pure and impure in poetry, Warren uses a Shakespearian model. Romeo, for example, standing in blissful isolation beneath Juliet's balcony, is the poet of the perfectly pure, with whom nature "conspires" to create the single, shimmering moment justly celebrated as the paradigm for first love Romeo speaks worshipful words about the invisible Juliet

> But soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the east . . .

But, as Warren quickly inserts, just outside the garden wall lurks Romeo's friend Mercutio, ready to spoil the pure moment with a bawdy joke or a clever riposte Such elements and more—"[r]ealism, wit, intellectual complication" ("Pure" 6)—force impure poetry upon poor Romeo, and when Juliet herself appears, pure poetry dissolves into a welter of practicality as she admonishes the poet/lover for his rhetorical carelessness in pledging his love by the "inconstant moon " Her logical frame of mind demands a more exact metaphor for his love ritual, inevitably, she "injects the impurity of an intellectual style into Romeo's pure poem "[9]

Warren contends that pure poetry, lacking the "dross" of the impure, is naked, vulnerable to the "recalcitrant and contradictory context" in which it must eventually find itself It must either invite the participation of the nay-saying context or risk its destructive ridicule ("Pure" 7) Shakespeare's appreciation for this fact of poetic life qualifies him for greatness, for, as Warren claims, not only is "nothing that is available to human experience to be legislated out of poetry," but "the greatness of a poet depends upon the extent of the area of experience which he can master poetically" ("Pure" 24). Warren might also have added, apropos of his previous advice to Thomas Wolfe, that Shakespeare merely spoke pure poetry in Romeo's voice, he did *not* aspire to be Romeo.

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[9] Warren neglects here the play's canny audience, who know from previous scenes that Romeo is prone to falling in and out of love with the least provocation They too demand that Romeo earn the right to his romantic but ultimately empty phrases by undertaking a more serious-minded study of the nature of love

For this reason, and others developed within the essay, Warren is as wary of poets who privilege the purity of the moment over the impurity of experience as he is of "attempts to legislate literature into becoming a simple, unqualified, 'pure' statement of faith and ideals" ("Pure" 27) Instead, he defends the "condemned" artists of the impure such as Proust, Eliot, Dreiser, and Faulkner from critical minds that are "hot for certainties," and praises them

> because they have tried . to remain faithful to the complexities of the problems with which they are dealing, because they have refused to take the easy statement as solution, because they have tried to define the context in which, and the terms by which, faith and ideals may be earned ("Pure" 27)

Pure and Impure Poetry in Warren's "The Circus in the Attic"

Warren's engaged, colloquial tone in the essay "Pure and Impure Poetry" demonstrates that this is no coolly distanced critic speaking over an insurmountable divide that separates him from artists and their readers alike. He, too, is an artist and a reader who, on the one hand, seeks to measure up artistically to his own critical judgments and, on the other hand, expects to discover moral and social as well as aesthetic applications in what he reads.

Indeed, advocates of the purely poetic ideal figure prominently among the protagonists in Warren's fiction Percy Munn in *Night Rider* (1939), Jerry Calhoun in *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), Jeremiah Beaumont in *World Enough and Time* (1950), and Brad Tolliver in *Flood: A Romance of Our Time* (1964) all seek to assert pure ideals which they have not earned the right to claim. Each, in his own way, is called from the brink of the pure poetic moment of blind idealism by what Jack Burden calls "the awful responsibility of Time " All are forced to abandon the pure poetic moment for a realistic, often harshly ironic, glimpse of self; in retrospect, each would willingly have sacrificed the purely poetic in order to join the world and become more fully human.[10]

Warren's "The Circus in the Attic" (1947), one of the least characteristic of his fictions, seems to speak even more directly to his earlier conviction that the best artistic expressions contain both pure and impure elements. Written a scant four years after the essay "Pure and Impure Poetry," the novella demonstrates one poet's instinctive struggle first to express himself ideally in his art and then to incorporate the impure into it. Bolton Lovehart's "poetry" is textualized in the painted wooden forms of circus characters that represent his limited notion of the world beyond his attic. Bolton seeks to inform his art with a broad range of human experience by attending an outdoor Baptist revival meeting, by running away with the circus, a classic gesture of childhood rebellion, and even by advocating the advent of a daring new art form—silent films—in Bardsville. When these expediencies fail to deliver him from his enforced adolescence, Bolton uses what is available to him—an idealized view of the circus and an understanding of human relationships bounded by autobiographical constraints—to construct the "pure poetry" that becomes his only recourse under his restricted circumstances

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[10] Perhaps Warren's essay reveals his own sense of struggle with pure poetry. In an interview with Warren, Marshall Walker suggests that "what is lacking in [Warren's novels] *Wilderness* [1961] and *Band of Angels* [1955] is this Mercutio in the underbrush There's something, somehow, too ***straight***, too 'pure' about them" (Walker 160) Warren

As regards his own composition of "The Circus in the Attic," Warren formally acknowledges the novella's source as a bit of local color from his home state of Kentucky, leaving it to his critics to uncover its imaginative impurities by using their own "special strategies" of "the psychological, the moralistic, the formalistic, [and] the historical" ("Pure" 2) [11] Warren first learned the history of John Wesley Venable some time in the 1930s[12] when he, Ford Madox Ford, Katherine Anne Porter, and Allen Tate visited Warren's former student, the Rev Frank Qualls Cayce, in Louisville, Kentucky Cayce recalled their conversation for a 1978 interview with Will Fridy

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does not disagree with Walker's evaluation, even though he is quick to point out other, more specific technical failings of the two works

[11] See chapters II and IV of this study for these varieties of analyses of "The Circus in the Attic"

[12] Neither Joy Bale Boone nor Will Fridy, Warren scholars who have written extensively on this Kentucky source for "The Circus in the Attic," can identify the date of Warren's first encounter with the Venable story more exactly than this.

> we were just sitting around and just telling stories about characters we knew and I got to talking about . John Venable in Hopkinsville who had a circus in his attic and sort of an eccentric life (qtd in Fridy 72)

From what both Warren and Cayce insisted was "scarcely more than a few sentences" (Boone 13) outlining Venable's idiosyncratic hobby, Warren projected a remarkably accurate account of the Hopkinsville native's life—and one that, according to one source, caused some local consternation when the novella was first published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1947 (Boone 11) [13]

Despite Warren's avowed ignorance of the details of John Wesley Venable's life, the similarities between Venable and Warren's protagonist Bolton Lovehart are, nonetheless, remarkable Fanny Moore Venable was evidently just as "fiercely possessive" of her son as Bolton's mother was of him, choosing to think of John Wesley Venable as "a writer in the ivory tower of the attic, [and] preferring that aura to any employment that she considered beneath his level of aristocracy" (Boone 11) Venable, who never said a harsh word about his mother, was described by his Hopkinsville neighbors as "an impeccable gentleman of the old school and his mother's 'escort '" Completely devoted to Fanny, he married only after she had been dead for three years, when he himself was fifty-four (Fridy 73) Unlike Bolton's circus, which is sold and scattered among the children in his community, Venable's circus, in its entirety, found a home after his death in 1976 in the Pennyroyal Area Museum in Hopkinsville, Kentucky

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[13] In this respect, Warren could certainly identify with Thomas Wolfe, whose editors lived in constant fear of libel suits Other than this initial reaction to the novella, however, neither Venable nor his family seemed interested in proceeding legally against Warren, who, after all, had the word of an Episcopal minister that he had not knowingly included uncomplimentary aspects of the Venables' home life in his novella

As a museum piece, Venable's circus, which Warren evidently never saw, is singularly unprepossessing Some of the figures are no more than magazine and newspaper cutouts mounted on pasteboard One cigar box circus wagon has bottle top wheels, and the calliope is made from old lipstick tubes. Even though Venable's circus is not accessible to every reader of "The Circus in the Attic," its shabby reality lends, for those who do know of it, a greater poignancy to Bolton Lovehart's wood and paint figures, the devotion he expends on them, and the gradually cooling attitude of Bardsvillians toward Bolton after he presents his creation to the town as a combination tribute to his dead stepson Jasper and contribution to the war effort As "pure poetry," the result of a lifetime of seclusion from the real world, the circus figures have little meaning to Bardsville other than as playthings for the town's children But for Bolton, it is "used and broken" as a "kind of atonement . . . for the long lie, for all the past" ("Circus" 56)—not merely his lifetime lie to his mother and the past he has devoted to pure poetry, but also his acceptance of a limited concept of history that made Bolton's circus sufficient to his needs for so many years This is the concept Bolton has steadily protected against the impure elements of time and irony As Warren cautions his reader in "Pure and Impure Poetry," the theory of purity "will forget that the hand-me-down faith, the hand-me-down ideals, no matter what the professed content, is in the end not only meaningless, but vicious" ("Pure" 28) Perhaps this discovery—that history must be tempered with irony—is what Bolton carries back with him to his attic

For when, at the war's end, Bolton returns to his attic to begin his circus anew, he takes with him many impure poetic elements found only in the world of experience For one thing, Mrs. Parton and Jasper have acted the logical Juliet and ribald Mercutio to his romantic Romeo, calling him back from the rarified air of pure poetry Thanks to them, he is no longer limited to the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master, pure poetic symbols that have been purged, as Warren the critic would note, of "all complexities and all ironies and all self-criticism" ("Pure" 27-28) Newly self-discovered as a potential poet of the pure *and* the impure, Bolton returns to his attic to join not only the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master, who are the three romanticized figures of his original circus, but also their more humanly realized prototypes

> . . Seth Sykes and drunken Cash Perkins and all the heroes who ever died for all their good reasons, and old Lem Lovehart, who laid himself down amid birdsong at dusk and was scalped by a Chickasaw, and Simon Lovehart with the wound and the prayer book as his truth, and Louise Bolton Lovehart with her dear, treacherous heart in her bosom ("Circus" 61-62)

"Jasper will be at home there," Warren's narrator concludes Whether Bolton Lovehart will prove his mettle there as a poet of the pure and impure remains to be seen.

Thomas Wolfe's Pure and Impure Circuses

To Wolfe's credit, he used the occasion of Warren's perceptive analysis of his literary faults in "A Note on the Hamlet of Thomas Wolfe" as an opportunity somewhat to alter his approach to his materials, he even admitted at a dinner party he attended with Warren at the 1935 Writers' Conference in Boulder, Colorado,[14] that he had learned more from Warren's review of *Of Time and the River* than from any other he had read. Warren and Wolfe enjoyed several friendly encounters after that meeting; decades later, a few years before his death in 1989, Warren would recall the remarkable generosity of Wolfe's remark (Donald 335) Vastly divergent in approach and style, Warren and Wolfe nevertheless shared many elements of a common culture, including their fascination for an image common among writers of the Southern Renaissance—the circus Throughout Warren's canon, but especially in "The Circus in the Attic," the circus is the symbol in which the dichotomy of pure and impure poetry must be resolved Similarly, in Wolfe's canon, the circus demonstrates at first the youthful artistic exuberance sometimes associated with pure poetry and later the development of impure elements in his art Two works best reveal, through his use of the circus trope, Wolfe's yearning toward pure poetry. The first is "Circus at Dawn," which is included in *From Death to Morning* (1935), the only short fiction collection Wolfe published during his lifetime The second is a lengthy dream sequence from *The Web and the Rock* (1939), the first of Wolfe's posthumous novels edited by Edward Aswell and published by Scribners

According to David Herbert Donald, Wolfe's biographer, *From Death to Morning* was the last work composed in his "opulent manner" (Donald 345); after 1936, Wolfe's works reflect his response to the critics (Warren, no doubt, among them) who quibbled over his verbosity, rhetorical extravagance, and romantic all-inclusiveness The short piece "Circus at Dawn,"[15] included in this collection, is characteristic of Wolfe's writing before he schooled himself to the critics' responses and tried to develop greater control over his materials Moreover, "Circus at Dawn" is a fine example of the early Wolfian voice, colored by wonder and singularly lacking in the ironic tones that the older, more satiric Wolfe would later develop The circus, especially early on in his canon, was one subject on which Wolfe would find it difficult to take an ironic stance, as key passages reveal, the circus bore close ties to Wolfe's devotion to his romanticized image of his father, to his idealized concept of the monumental immutability of nature, and to his own desire to create a body of work that was equally romantic and monumental Most importantly, Wolfe's "Circus at Dawn" is a prime example of what Warren would call "pure poetry," first in the respect that it embraces a single rarified and unreflective moment of effect and second in its achievement of purity through the exclusion of "realism, wit, [and] intellectual complication " Unlike Warren's preferred practitioners of impure poetry, Proust, Eliot, Dreiser, and Faulkner, Wolfe asserts "faith and ideals" to his readers as a *fait accompli* without first defining the context in which these qualities are earned

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[14] Ironically, Wolfe was invited to replace Bernard DeVoto, who had planned to attend as the conference's "visiting novelist" but had unexpectedly withdrawn. The next year, DeVoto would write his stinging critique of Wolfe's *The Story of a Novel* entitled "Genius Is Not Enough "

The distinction between pure and impure poetry as they apply to Wolfe's work is, in fact, supported by the theories of anthropologist Yoram Carmeli and the study he has made of nonfiction books about the circus in the first half of the twentieth century According to Carmeli, nonfiction books about the circus whose explicit intentions are to reveal the performers' private lives—to tell the "inside story" about these individuals—function instead as literary extensions of actual circus performance and have the effect of reinforcing the roles of the performers as objects of display The result, Carmeli concludes, is society's recovery of what it feels it has lost through modernity; in other words, "[t]hrough the performed apartness of the circus traveler, spectators in modern, fragmented society experientially conjure up a totality they have lost" ("Text" 176). In literary terms, the "performed apartness" that is initially achieved in the actual circus spectacle is reiterated in books about circus performers that purport to offer a behind-the-scenes view but actually seek to preserve what Warren would call the "pure poetry" of the performance beyond the performance itself In this way, the public's appreciation for the pure, separate, and rarified moment is extended and the comments of sensible Juliets and jesting Mercutios are excluded

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[15] "Circus at Dawn" appeared first in *Modern Monthly* in March 1935 before its publication in *From Death to Morning* in November 1935.

When applied to Wolfe's "Circus at Dawn," Carmeli's theory of performed apartness and Warren's definitions of the pure and impure in poetry complement each other in interesting ways For one thing, while Wolfe's 1935 account is technically a fictional treatment of a boy's encounter with the circus, the voice of the first person narrator and his mention of actual historical circuses—"the Ringling Brothers, Robinson's, and Barnum and Bailey shows" ("CD" 205)—lend a documentary quality to the story not unlike the nonfiction works about the circus on which Carmeli focuses. Given Wolfe's practice of including biographical elements in his fiction, it is very likely that this story is an idealized compilation of actual childhood memories While revealing his familiarity with these several circuses, however, Wolfe also universalizes his experience as typical of the mornings when "the circus" arrived in town As Carmeli notes, the general public's tendency to refer to "a" circus as "the" circus is yet another method of enforcing apartness and objectifying circus performers When the narrator's reference is to "the circus," each individual circus unites with every other in a set of cultural expectations that endows all circuses with common, generic qualities

Furthermore, the narrator's experience of the circus in Wolfe's text inhabits a single wonderful moment when nature conspires with him to effect the timelessness characteristic of pure poetry Racing to his goal through the "glorious sculptural stillness" of the first dawn, the narrator sees the moment reinforced by the town's "sculptural still square" and, even more humbly, by his father's "shabby little marble shop" ("CD" 205) The narrator's anticipation of what he will see at the circus's temporary camp site affects as well his response to nature, community, and family, including them, temporarily, in the timeless moment of perfection The mention of his father is significant because Wolfe will associate the circus with a later protagonist's desire for a more meaningful relationship with his father

Finally, in Wolfe's account, as in Carmeli's analysis, the arrival of the circus and its daylong preparations for the evening show are clearly as much a spectacle as the actual performance, which is never mentioned in "Circus at Dawn " From a respectful distance, the narrator and his brother watch the elephants drink from and wallow in the nearby river; the drivers "curse and talk their special language", circus tents appear as if by magic, and "circus toughs" drive the stakes to secure them with the speed and accuracy of "a human riveting machine." Although this final image reminds the narrator of "accelerated figures in a motion picture,"[16] it is also an example of the "magic, order, and violence" ("CD" 207) that is the mystical province not of modernity and its technological advances but of the circus

The impromptu circus "show" continues in the stage-like food tent, "a huge canvas top without concealing sides" ("CD" 208), where the gargantuan appetites of the circus performers are subject to equally close observation by the narrator and his brother Even menial workers display their circus skills as the cook flips wheatcakes in the air "with the skill of a juggler" and a waitress bears "loaded trays held high and balanced marvellously on the fingers of a brawny hand" ("CD" 209).

In the circus created by Warren's Bolton Lovehart, the figures of the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master that line his attic walls are consistent over the decades of his creation, offering Bolton the comfort of predictability and continuity that the outside world cannot offer This is pure art, the perfection that only timelessness can produce Similarly, Carmeli notes the public's perception "that circuses are conservative, that circuses never change, and that they are all the same" ("Text" 195)—in other words, that they repeat the identical creative moment with every show—and posits this public misconception of the circus as evidence of society's need to minimize the cultural fragmentation brought on by modernity Wolfe's comments on the "splendid and romantic creatures, whose lives were so different from our own, and whom we seemed to know with such familiar and affectionate intimacy" ("CD" 211) bears out both Warren's and Carmeli's observations

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[16] Wolfe's implied comparison is especially appropriate since the decline in the popularity of the circus can be directly traced, in part, to the growing popularity of motion pictures

> . the circus men and women themselves . . were such fine-looking people, strong and handsome, yet speaking and moving with an almost stern dignity and decorum . There was never anything loose, rowdy, or tough in their comportment, nor did the circus women look like painted whores, or behave indecently with the men.
>
> Rather, these people in an astonishing way seemed to have created an established community which lived an ordered existence on wheels, and to observe with a stern fidelity unknown in towns and cities the decencies of family life ("CD" 209-10)

As "Circus at Dawn" concludes, the narrator and his brother leave the circus grounds with a ravenous hunger, because they literally cannot wait to get home to satisfy their appetites, they stop in town to gorge themselves at a lunch counter Symbolically, the hunger they carry with them is for the ordered, purposeful lives led by the romanticized members of the circus community Paradoxically, however, it is their hopeful construction of the everyday life of the circus community in a "performed apartness"—as pure poetry—that momentarily satisfies their hunger, permitting them to accept the imperfections of their own lives and eventually turn homeward.

Circus life is similarly romanticized in Wolfe's next lengthy treatment of it in *The Web and the Rock* (1939) As Wolfe's fictitious alter ego George Webber stands looking at a circus newly arrived in Libya Hill, he has a vision—another of those moments sought through pure poetry—in which two images appear to him "with an instant and a magical congruence"· they are the circus and "his father's earth" (*Web* 87) In this passage, George envisions a reunion with his father that is made possible when he joins a circus and serves as its provisioner. Not surprisingly, the descriptions of the circus here recapitulate the earlier descriptions in "Circus at Dawn " For example, the skill that qualifies George for membership in this elite community is neither acrobatic nor equestrian, but has instead to do with his understanding of how great needs must be nurtured and supplied Possessed as he is of a massive symbolic hunger, he embraces the task of procuring hearty foodstuffs for the circus community, whose opulent meals are described in much the same language as Wolfe uses in "Circus at Dawn." Here, too, are the precise stake-drivers, the huge animals making their way to the river, and the larger-than-life wanderers whose everyday life is a "performed apartness " Including himself in this performed apartness confers on George a measure of stability and monumental purpose that will be confirmed when he discovers "his father's earth," the Pennsylvania farmland where he seeks knowledge of himself as yet undiscovered.

These circus people further suggest the wandering children of Israel; the primary difference, however, is that they find the land of milk and honey everywhere they stop across the broad expanse of America Wolfe's allusion to epic Old Testament wandering is soon transformed into New Testament parable as George realizes that despite his happiness with the circus, he is still overcome by "the pain of loneliness and the fierce hungers of desire" (*Web* 90) He yearns, in his loneliness and desire, for his father, and the circus serves the purpose of returning him, in prodigal son style, to his father's land in the North, which he apprehends amid "the attentive and vital silence of the earth" in "the moment just before dawn" (*YCGHA* 89)

Obviously, Wolfe shared with other southerners the perception that the American circus was run by Yankees [17] This perception becomes a personal conviction for George, who has come to associate the circus not only with his Pennsylvania-born father but also with his personal need to leave the South to pursue his artistic identity in the North In the conclusion to his vision, George is welcomed home by his father and his brothers and fed from their teeming abundance Thus, through the timeless image of the circus, George dreams his escape from his mother's family, who are "time-haunted" and "time triumphant" and realizes his goal to leap "all barriers of the here and now, and [travel] northward, [where] gleaming brightly there beyond the hills, he saw a vision of the golden future in new lands" (*YCGHA* 91)

The vision was Thomas Wolfe's, of course, before it was George Webber's, and George's disillusionment with its achievement reflects Wolfe's own George Webber resumes his pursuit of art and self when he reappears as the protagonist in *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) In this Wolfe's final novel (and the second published posthumously), George has satisfied his need to live in the North and discover himself artistically, but his loneliness and desire remain still unsatisfied. A lengthy section from

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[17] In his memoirs, W C Coup, a circus showman who at one time partnered with P. T. Barnum, recalls the regional antagonism circuses often experienced in the South, even as late as the 1890s, since they were presumed to originate in the North and to operate under northern management See Coup's *Spangles & Sawdust: Stories & Secrets of the Circus*, Washington, D C Paul A Ruddell, 1961, originally published in 1901.

You Can't Go Home Again details a lavish party at the home of Esther and Theodore Jack and remains Wolfe's most artistically balanced use of the circus because of its inclusion of contrasting pure and impure elements Certainly, it is one most readily traced to his own experience since for this sequence Wolfe has fictionalized his recollections of the evening of January 3, 1930, when he attended a party at the home of his mistress Aline Bernstein and observed firsthand one of the many documented performances of Alexander Calder's "Circus" (Idol 43) [18]

"The Party at Jack's,"[19] as this section has become known, is Wolfe's final, lengthy treatment of the circus trope, the section hearkens to his previous circus treatments, but in doing so it reflects his changing attitudes about his role as an artist of pure poetry For one thing, "The Party at Jack's" reveals Wolfe's growing awareness that even the best of his work lacks social relevance To redress what he has come to understand as a weakness in his art, Wolfe crafts this section to deal thematically with the Great Depression, the impending economic catastrophe that will overtake the effete guests at Esther's party Then, to reinforce his new socially conscious artistic goals, Wolfe claims identity with and then turns aside from the circus sculptor Piggy Logan, the character he creates from his actual encounter with the modernist artist Alexander Calder.

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[18] Examining this lengthy episode from the novel has recently been complicated by the resurfacing of an old argument in Wolfe scholarship—i e , how much of his books were the edited creations of Maxwell Perkins and Edward Aswell—and by the resurgence of interest in Wolfe's manuscripts prompted by the recent publication of *O Lost!*, the original version of *Look Homeward, Angel.*

[19] This lengthy center section of *You Can't Go Home Again* went through several transformations before, through the editing prowess of Edward Aswell, it became the anchor to Wolfe's final novel Wolfe's notebook contains references to this story line as early as 1930, and he continued to work on it off and on until 1938 (Stutman and Idol ix) It has been published in three forms· one version appeared in *Scribner's Magazine* in May 1939, one version was included in *You Can't Go Home Again*, published in September 1939, a final version, edited by Suzanne Stutman and John Idol, was published in 1995 Each version reflects the agendas of those responsible for getting them into print although it is Stutman and Idol's expressed purpose to effect the least editorial intrusion possible in the original manuscripts

In their introduction to the most recent version of "The Party at Jack's," Suzanne Stutman and John Idol take pains to posit Piggy Logan as Wolfe's literary incarnation of everything that is superficial and trivial about modernism, a movement for which Wolfe admittedly had little sympathy During his graduate school years at Harvard, Wolfe spoke and wrote dismissively about T S Eliot and The Lost Generation, as well as about "Cocteau, Gide, Morand and Proust" (qtd in Donald 77) Even though Wolfe himself frequently claimed the influence of that paramount modernist, James Joyce, George Webber is as dismissive of the moderns in *You Can't Go Home Again* as the youthful Wolfe had once been

> [n]ot to be able to discuss [Logan] and his little dolls intelligently was, in smart circles, akin to never having heard of Jean Cocteau or Surréalism, it was like being completely at a loss when such names as Picasso and Brancusi and Utrillo and Gertrude Stein were mentioned Mr Piggy Logan and his art were spoken of with the same animated reverence . (*YCGHA* 175)

Yet Wolfe's narrative contempt is reserved not for the hapless Piggy Logan but for those members of the intellectual elite who spout the meaningless jargon of "the cognoscenti—those happy pioneers who had got in at the very start of Mr Piggy Logan's vogue" (*YCGHA* 175)

> . . . Mr. Piggy Logan's fame was certainly blazing now, and an entire literature in the higher aesthetics had been created about him and his puppets Critical reputations had been made or ruined by them. The last criterion of fashionable knowingness that year was an expert familiarity with Mr Logan and his dolls If one had it, his connoisseurship in the arts was definitely established and his eligibility for any society of the higher sensibilities was instantly confirmed. (*YCGHA* 176)

Wolfe's narrator is markedly neutral about Piggy Logan the individual and even speaks impersonally of Piggy Logan the artist as a Cause, a Force, an *It* with seemingly little to do with the intellectual furor at whose center he finds himself Lionized by the world of modernity, Logan has also been commodified and dehumanized by it Yet in the midst of the tumult he has created with his circus, Piggy Logan conducts himself, to the narrator's eye, "calmly, quietly, modestly, prosaically, and matter-of-factly," and no more so than as he prepares for his circus by removing his own trousers and putting on a pair of canvas pants (*YCGHA* 178)—by Wolfe's implication, no more or less remarkably than any other man Piggy Logan's primary concern is for the circus that gives him real personal enjoyment. He is childishly pleased with the results of his creative energies and seems unaware of his critical reputation. In this manner, he resembles Wolfe himself, who had reluctantly attended Aline Bernstein's original party and witnessed the Calder circus on the strength of his standing as her lover and as the author of *Look Homeward, Angel,* which had been published just months before on October 8, 1929.

Other significant similarities between Wolfe and his Piggy Logan identity surface throughout the account The reader's first glimpse of Piggy Logan finds him encumbered with his circus creation, "two enormous black suitcases" bulging with the weight of the evening's performance (*YCGHA* 173) The parallel with Wolfe's similarly burdened state as a writer is striking his biographer reveals that the size alone of his *O Lost!* manuscript discouraged all but the most courageous of the publishers to whom Wolfe submitted it in two suitcases (Donald 175) [20] Even after the novel's publication, Wolfe was never without huge pine boxes into which he tossed drafts and fragments—anything he thought might later be publishable It was probably this practice that prompted him in 1938 to observe to his mother that "[t]his business of being a vagabond writer with two tons of manuscript is not an easy one . " (*Letters* 764)

Furthermore, Piggy Logan is as grotesque in appearance as Wolfe's first surrogate identity, Eugene Gant, and his present one, George Webber In reaction to critics who were too ready to note the resemblances between the youthful, lanky Eugene and his creator, Wolfe attempted to make George less obviously the image of himself, describing him as being of normal height but "simian" in appearance. low-browed with short black hair and long-armed with hands held palm backwards (*YCGHA* 193) Logan, similarly striking in Wolfe's earlier manuscripts, is

> a thickset, rather burly looking young man of about thirty years, with bushy eyebrows of coarse black, a round and heavy face smudged darkly

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[20] In his own account of the performance, included in his autobiography, Calder remembers that he had arrived at the Bernsteins' apartment with "five valises and a very small gramophone" (106).

> with the shaven grain of a heavy beard, a low corrugated forehead and close cropped hair of stiff black bristles . (*Party* 118)[21]

Piggy Logan is thick-fingered, ham-handed, and, in the context of his miniature circus, of gigantic proportions His ironic nickname emphasizes not only his unpoetic appearance but also Wolfe's perception of the extracultural lengths to which Esther Jack, who is Jewish, will go to trump "all of those 'rich' Long Island and Park Avenue people" for whom she feels "a patronizing scorn" (*YCGHA* 175) Her desire to have Piggy Logan perform his circus is no more informed by a real appreciation for it than is the desire of "the smart society crowd" who also claim it, in this ironic shuffle of one-upsmanship, the artist and his creation are alternately ignored and ridiculed. The only person who is genuinely pleased by the spectacle is Logan himself, who is oblivious to his audience's lagging enthusiasm for his lengthy performance

For finally, Piggy Logan's presentation of his circus emulates Thomas Wolfe's own idiosyncratically constructed texts and recalls some of the sternest rebukes leveled at them by critics of Wolfe's style and materials For one thing, Logan's circus characters are surprisingly humble and inelegant in form and execution, comprised of wire, bits of cloth, scrap metal, and painted wood,[22] they are the "found objects" that modern artists prized and of which Thomas Wolfe's autobiographical pool of characters is the literary counterpart Furthermore, Logan's grand procession of the animals and performers, accomplished as he walks each individual wire figure into the circus ring by hand, is interminable, possibly in self-parody of Wolfe's own fondness for great numbers of named characters even in some of his shorter works—the present text included[23] Finally, despite Piggy Logan's obvious engagement with his performers and their acts, his audience are often puzzled about what each wire figure is meant to be and do, and they grow restive when these artistic devices fail, the audience's failure at times to "get" what Logan is after casts doubt upon the artist's skill and execution:

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[21] One of the tasks that Edward Aswell and Wolfe's agent Elizabeth Nowell set for themselves in editing this section for *You Can't Go Home Again* was to change the descriptions of characters that were too faithful to their originals Wolfe also had a tendency to use actual or thinly disguised names in his drafts; Aswell changed several characters' names for this reason In the final novel version, Piggy Logan is described as balding with freckled hands

[22] In fact, Calder's own philosophy of the "found object" in his art is equally applicable to Wolfe's own choice of autobiographical materials to inform his fiction: "Sculptors of all places and climates have used what came readily to hand They did not search for

> when the act did begin, it was unconscionably long because Mr Logan was not able to make it work . Again and again the little wire figure soared through the air, caught at the outstretched hands of the other doll—and missed ingloriously But Mr. Logan was not embarrassed [W]hen it became obvious that nothing was going to happen, Mr Logan settled the whole matter himself by taking one little figure firmly between two fat fingers, conveying it to the other, and carefully hooking it onto the other's arms (*YCGHA* 219)

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exotic or precious materials It was their knowledge and invention which gave value to the result of their labors" (qtd in Rower 45) Wolfe also insisted (albeit somewhat defensively) that the artist's ability took precedence over his choice of materials, humble and autobiographically familiar as they may be

[23] Another of the tasks that Aswell and Nowell set for themselves in editing "The Party at Jack's" for *You Can't Go Home Again* was to cut the number of named characters

Piggy Logan's example condemns the artist who, like Wolfe, is too readily evident in his work The magic of art evaporates with the intrusion of this self-appointed *deus ex machina* who makes no effort to conceal himself from his audience—Thomas Wolfe's own greatest artistic flaw

Eagerly anticipated by Esther's guests, Piggy Logan's circus finally becomes "painful" to the assemblage, but surely no more to them than to Thomas Wolfe, who in the guise of George Webber, remains convinced that his scowling artistic presence is accepted by Esther Jack's friends merely on sufferance At the core of Wolfe's noncommittal portrayal of Piggy Logan lies the fear that art might never reflect more than personal obsession or literary fetish, thus dooming his creative efforts to what Robert Penn Warren would dismiss as "pure poetry "

For these reasons, Wolfe cannot disclaim his resemblance to an artist like Piggy Logan, but he can set higher artistic goals for himself In *You Can't Go Home Again*, George Webber plans to accomplish those goals, first by divorcing himself from his dependence on Esther Jack and the attractions of her world and second by committing himself to an art for which "love is not enough" (*YCGHA* 243)—not Esther's love for him, not Piggy Logan's love for his self-indulgent circus, and not his own love for the pure artistic vision Thomas Wolfe, of course, is like his alter ego in this resolve, but finally, the choice comes down to whether Wolfe will continue to indulge himself with pure poetry or accept the challenge of impure poetry He expresses his choice in a passage from a 1938 letter, foreshadowing the title of the novel that will document George Webber's similar resolve

> I have found out something which is, I think, the most important discovery of my whole life, and that is this you can't go home again, back to your childhood, back to your town, your people, back to the father you have lost, and back to the solacements of time and memory I found that out through exile, through storm and stress, perplexity and dark confusion I found it out with blood and sweat and agony, and for a long time I grieved. (*Letters* 707)

With this statement, Wolfe turns his back on pure poetry and voices his commitment to impure poetry by demonstrating a willingness to "define the context in which, and the terms by which, [artistic] faith and ideals may be earned "

As if to prove that Piggy Logan is not the only artist in command of a circus at Esther Jack's home that night, Wolfe acts upon his commitment to impure poetry by presenting an alternate circus Recalling for his autobiography the sequence of events that led to the infamous Bernstein performance, Alexander Calder describes how Aline Bernstein offered to let him hold the circus in her home, joking "it is often a circus here, anyhow" (Calder 106).[24] No doubt she intended this metaphor as a modest appraisal of her skills as a host, on the other hand, the comparison of her social world to the circus is serious literary business to Thomas Wolfe, whose presentation of the colorful assemblage at Esther Jack's party is a flamboyant, carnivalesque overture to Piggy Logan's self-indulgent, small-scale, and subsequently unsatisfactory spectacle.[25]

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[24] Calder was, for many years afterward, ignorant of his brush with greatness As he recorded in his autobiography, " I was never aware that the great Wolfe—that is, Thomas Wolfe, the writer—was present at my circus performance. He did not have the good sense to present himself and I only heard from him much later—some nasty remarks on my performance, included in a long-winded book" (107) Unlike John Wesley Venable's circus, currently housed in the Pennyroyal Museum in Hopkinsville, KY, Calder's circus is permanently on display in the Whitman Museum of American Art in New York

Wolfe's descriptions of the party-goers who gather at the Jacks' home establish the circus quality of the proceedings long before Piggy Logan sets up his performance In fact, when one guest discontentedly describes Logan's circus as "some puny sort of decadence" (*YCGHA* 221), his disappointment clearly stems from its not having exceeded the exemplars of modern decadence who had earlier gathered in Esther's drawing room Verging on the carnivalesque, the behaviors of Esther's guests seem deliberately chosen by Wolfe as foils to the idealistic sketches of humanity that fill his paean to pure poetry, "Circus at Dawn"

One character, for example, the notorious Amy Carleton, contrasts with the earlier circus women, who neither look like "painted whores" nor "behave indecently with the men" As Wolfe's catalogue of Amy's steady moral downfall becomes lengthier and more detailed, she proves a tragic, decadent contrast to the chaste women of the circus, marked as she is by a "look of lost innocence" and a pack of men trailing her as after "a bitch in heat" (*YCGHA* 204) Wolfe's earlier vision of the circus women praises them as marvels of stability in a transient community, but Amy is the child of modernity whose distinctively fragmented speech patterns—"I *mean*! . . You *know*!" (*YCGHA* 193)—

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[25] A textual comparison of Stutman and Idol's "The Party at Jack's" and the Aswell version included in *You Can't Go Home Again* will reveal significant narratological differences between the two Wolfe's harsh and defensive reactions to the rich and talented guests gathered in the Jack home are attributed to George Webber in the novel, but in the absence of George's filtering consciousness in "The Party at Jack's," they become more clearly Wolfe's own For the purposes of this chapter, I will not dwell on

represent her meaningless path through life She is characterized in language more commonly reserved for descriptions of circus daring:

> Her life expressed itself in terms of speed, sensational change and violent movement, in a feverish tempo that never drew from its own energies exhaustion or surcease, but mounted constantly to insane excess (*YCGHA* 196)

Next, Wolfe draws a scathing portrait of a homosexual, a popular member of the Jacks' set whom he pillories as "a cross between a lapdog and a clown " George Webber bitterly deplores "the spirit of the times that [has] let the homosexual usurp the place and privilege of a hunchback jester" and has granted him the same noble language once spoken by the "ancient clowns" (*YCGHA* 203) And in the final "act" of the carnival that precedes Piggy Logan's display, the "dignity, decorum [and] stern fidelity" to "the decencies of family life" ("CD" 209-10) that Wolfe had noted earlier among the three members of the trapeze team in "Circus at Dawn" is markedly absent in the demeanor of another threesome· Esther Jack's childhood friend Margaret Ettinger, her philandering husband, and his current mistress, whose collective presence produces first scorn and then self-recognition in George Webber [26]

Their effect on Webber is to implicate him in the carnivalesque lifestyle in which Esther revels and to remind him that, at one time, theirs was the society to which he had

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Wolfe's obvious anti-Semitism, homophobia, or misogyny, which are extensively dealt with elsewhere

[26] Wolfe's language in "The Party at Jack's" is much more blunt; this trio, whose "carnal history . [is] written with such brutal nakedness," provoke virtuous feelings of wonder, revulsion, and amusement among their fellow party-goers (*Party* 184)

aspired To give George Webber (and Thomas Wolfe) credit, he is not so blind or foolish that he thinks he will dissociate himself completely from Esther's carnivalesque friends·

> It was not so much what they did, for in this there was no appreciable difference between themselves and him It was their attitude of acceptance, the things they thought and felt about what they did, their complaisance about themselves and about their life, their loss of faith in anything better (*YCGHA* 204)

Realizing the insufficiencies of pure poetry as it is displayed in Piggy Logan's circus, Thomas Wolfe, in the guise of his alter ego George Webber, is nonetheless ill-prepared for the stringencies of impure poetry.

Even Robert Penn Warren, however, admits the inadvisability of turning poetry completely over to the carn(iv)ally-minded Mercutio For this reason, he offers a solution to the pure poet's dilemma

> the poet should have made early peace with Mercutio, and appealed to his better nature For Mercutio seems to be glad to co-operate with a poet But he must be invited, otherwise, he is apt to show a streak of merry vindictiveness about the finished product Poems are vulnerable enough at best. [T]hey need all the friends they can get, and Mercutio . . . is a good friend to have ("Pure" 8)

Wolfe's George Webber and Warren's Bolton Lovehart have sought out their respective Mercutios and invited impure poetry into their art—George Webber by admitting his bond to people he has scorned and who have scorned him, and Bolton Lovehart by his willingness to share what he treasures most with a world that can never fully comprehend it But, as Warren cautions, discovering the terms for peace between the pure poet and his own personal Mercutio is more complicated, for it involves not merely his commitment to write poetry but also his commitment to write what he knows about living into the poetry The only acceptable peace between pure and impure poetry must begin with the poet himself who, only by inviting the cold and skeptical world into his poem, will be able to prove "that his vision has been earned, that it can survive reference to the complexities and contradictions of experience" ("Pure" 26) This is the goal Warren sets for his art, and this is his prescription for the pure poetry of Thomas Wolfe.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

> *. . . perhaps the circus seems to stand outside the culture only because it is at its very center. (Paul Bouissac, Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach)*

Robert Penn Warren was born on April 24, 1905, in Guthrie, Kentucky, a small town created only a few years earlier to serve the Louisville and Nashville Railroad and even named for the railroad's president, a United States congressman (Watkins 31). It is strange to think that Warren, whose writings are saturated with a sense of the past, sprang from a setting noted for its pastlessness[1] For most of the residents of Guthrie, Warren's parents included, the town was a place where they came to seek new lives and new fortunes—a place with no tradition of its own Warren would describe it as "a place to be from" (*RPW: A Biography* 26), a town "without a sense of belonging in any particular place or having any particular history" (qtd in Watkins 32)

Although Guthrie was a town noted for violence, Warren's recollections of its harsher aspects seem deliberately understated All the same, Guthrie's proximity to the railroad, its transient population, and the inevitability of such small-scale lawlessness as bootlegging and cockfighting were certain to influence its character and thus Warren's memories of it Violence spilled over into the schoolyard when, as Warren recalls, a schoolmate, one of the "big boys," who had killed a carnival hand with a tent-peg, was tried for and acquitted of the murder and allowed to return to school (qtd. in Watkins 33) Warren, a studious child who was judged a sissy by some of "the railroad boys" (*RPW: A Biography* 26), was the sometime target of his classmates' antagonism Floyd Watkins speculates that the rough-and-tumble of Guthrie may explain why the youthful Warren preferred long country rambles over his town activities, his later poetry would certainly reflect those childhood rambles Nevertheless, Guthrie played an important role in Warren's informal education since, as Watkins notes

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[1] Warren would, of course, seek out his past in tales told by his maternal grandfather, Gabriel Penn, and from other, more obscure sources. The fruits of his search for a personal past are revealed in his memoir *Portrait of a Father* (1987, 1988).

> [t]he variety of cultures and of economic systems in a small geographical area may be in part responsible for Warren's knowledge of widely variant Southern ways of life as well as his lack of a strong loyalty to any one kind of Southernism. (Watkins 34)

Set in the midst of the Kentucky countryside, Warren's hometown bore its own brand of cosmopolitanism Anything a train could carry came to Guthrie—including circuses and carnivals, references to which appear in such early published works as Warren's *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929) and in unpublished works such as "God's Own Time" (c1932). Then, in addition to the books that the intellectually minded Robert Franklin Warren made available to his son, Warren remembers even more wonderful possibilities at the railroad station's adjoining hotel—"a newsstand where one could buy a *Nation, New Republic, Poetry, Dial* and such—in the early 1920's" (qtd in Watkins 34) Within roughly a decade, Warren's own poetry would appear in issues of the first three of those publications "Pro Vita Sua" in the *New Republic* in 1927, "Rebuke of the Rock" in a 1928 issue of *Nation*, and "The Cardinal" in *Poetry* in 1932

For all these reasons, Warren's boyhood was a combination of high and low cultures, played out alternately in terms of his intellectual aspirations and his observations of life's raw edge, both of which he consciously and unconsciously blended in his later fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, and social commentary Warren's artistic interest in high and low cultures reflects a lifelong fascination with the interactions between the two He would address and attempt to resolve them throughout his career, but especially in his 1974 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, significantly entitled "Democracy and Poetry" In his fiction, he addresses the dichotomy of high and low cultures through the most seriously deluded of his characters who neglect the one—low culture—for their aspirations to the other—high culture As an example, when in *Night Rider*, Percy Munn's desire to enact noble ideals results in ignoble actions, he looks for guidance to Willie Proudfit's symbolic tale of his idealistically begun western sojourn and his sobering but gratifying return home; Ashby Wyndham's narrative plays a grim counterpoint to the idealistic but ill-fated dreams of Jerry Calhoun in *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), Jack Burden finds his escapist, scholarly distance is ineffectual in the face of Willie Stark's populist pragmatism in *All the King's Men* (1946); in *World Enough and Time* (1950), Jeremiah Beaumont learns that the West of his romantic imagination is, in actuality, the natural domain of the grossly amoral Gran' Boz, a misshapen criminal; and in *A Place to Come To* (1977), Jed Tewksbury seeks sanctuary in classical scholarship from his hardscrabble hometown and its associations with his father's ludicrous death, only to be drawn home again by the folksy, fatherly Perk Simms All of these characters are types of Warren's semi-autobiographical protagonist Bolton Lovehart, and their collective conflicts reflect Bolton's in the "The Circus in the Attic " Bolton's strange affinity for the activities his community dubs low culture—the Baptist revival meeting and silent movies to name two—puts an humble face on his thwarted yearning for intellectual identity Thus Warren seals the irony of Bolton's romantic aspiration to a self-defining art form by giving the most satisfying metaphor at his disposal a singularly low culture source the circus

The Circus during the Southern Renaissance

Further complicating Robert Penn Warren's and Bolton Lovehart's artistic uses of the circus image, however, is the phenomenon during Warren's lifetime of the steady cultural rehabilitation of the circus, which is discussed in Chapter I of this study Even before the consolidation of the Ringling Bros Circus with the Barnum & Bailey Circus, and the creation of the world-famous Greatest Show on Earth, the Ringling brothers had visually asserted their strong family tradition on their advertising handbills [2] The name "Barnum" hearkened just as compellingly to a decades-long tradition of showmanship and family entertainment The days when such moral arbiters as Henry Ward Beecher mourned that young people were abandoning more sober and enlightening entertainments for the circus were not completely gone by Warren's youth, but the three-ring, big top circus was well on its way to becoming a typically time-honored American custom even as early as the turn of the twentieth century

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[2] The Ringlings traded on the distinguished family ownership of their circus quite early, as seen in a series of advertising pictorials featuring the oval portraits of Alf T , Al, John, Otto, and Charles Ringling (Fox and Parkinson 44) By the 1930s, popular and effective circus bills featuring the three-quarter profiles of "the circus kings"—the five Ringling

Originally, the merging of the Ringlings with Barnum and Bailey's circus, formalized in 1918 and effected in 1919, had been meant to serve the practical purpose of pooling the two circuses' resources during the lean days of war anticipated by circus management With the Armistice, the consolidation proved economically unnecessary, but able-bodied men were still in short supply, which may explain why women artists, especially acrobats and high-wire performers, were so prominently featured in the first season of the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey's Combined Shows. Not only in the midst of war, but especially during its sobering aftermath, which would be figured by the bleak modern lifestyles of the Lost Generation, the circus was a symbol of continuity and a link to a way of life many imagined was quickly disappearing Chapter III demonstrates this role of the circus in the works of several artists of the Southern Renaissance When William Faulkner sets much of the action of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), for example, during the week "the show" is in town, he locates in the circus, which Jason Compson scornfully dismisses, a placatory, infantilizing gesture toward weary, impoverished farmers struggling with their lack of identity with the New South Similarly, Caddie's daughter Quentin and the Rev Shegog, who are both figured as acrobats in the novel, awe the reader with their daring circus virtuosity, but with

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brothers and their partners P T Barnum and James Bailey—asserted the dignity and tradition of the Greatest Show on Earth (Fox and Parkinson 48) questionable results since, in the larger Faulknerian universe, neither women nor blacks ultimately fare well When, in *Delta Wedding* (1946), Eudora Welty invokes the image of circus acrobats to indicate the solidarity of the 1920s-era Fairchild family in the face of irresistible extracultural forces, she is taking one long, last look backward to tradition and continuity before her characters acculturate to the modern Delta Finally, when in Katherine Anne Porter's "The Circus" (1935), young Miranda's behavior is deemed inappropriate even for under the big top, she provokes disapproval from two circus clowns and realizes that these citizens of a strictly structured culture are as disappointed as her grandmother by her inability to conform to traditional southern womanhood

The use of the circus as an ideological tool gained momentum in the 1930s and 1940s As one of the projects of the Works Progress Administration, the circus was encouraged to continue, although on a lesser scale, even during the Depression years, when keeping people's spirits up—and thus building their confidence in the government—was high on the Roosevelt administration's list of priorities Eudora Welty textualized her WPA experience in her photographs of southern circuses and carnivals and in her short stories of the period that allude to the circus During World War II, however, the circus came into its own as a model for patriotic fervor, as Warren's own novella "The Circus in the Attic" illustrates The novella is much more than Warren's reworking of a "good story" he had heard during the 1930s about eccentric Kentuckian John Wesley Venable and his collection of homemade circus figures It took the imaginative eye of the writer, in combination with cultural associations of the 1940s, to pair Venable's circus with the three wars that shape Bolton Lovehart's life—the Civil

War, World War I, and World War II Without a doubt, Warren's choice of the circus as the cultural image Bolton Lovehart carries with him during the greatest war of the century is perfectly consistent with the propagandistic role actual circuses played from 1941 to 1945. The circus—i e , circus management—took its job of reminding the country of wartime commitments very seriously

Indeed, the circus of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s began more and more to reflect rather than to challenge the social and cultural attitudes of those decades and, in its own way, duplicated the accepted attitudes about gender, class, and race that were dominant in America at the time For example, the ring master, who wielded a nominal authority over the show, was always a white male Women clowns were non-existent since women were limited to acrobatic and equestrian roles that ensured their visibility as objects of display. Black participants in circus spectacle, whether those imported from Africa or hired straight from Harlem to pose as tribal peoples, were showcased in such a way as to affirm Euro-American superiority, which was accepted as a matter of course in circus life just as in the non-circus world The paradox of the circus, structured itself as a rigid hierarchy,[3] is the common assumption voiced by such circus historians as Doug Mishler that it allowed its audiences to transcend race, class, and gender distinctions (Mishler 128)

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[3] The biography of Fred Bradna, who was associated for forty years with the Ringling Bros as their ring master, reveals that a strict hierarchy was observed even in as simple a thing as eating arrangements Owners ate at the first table, the ring master at the second, and so on down to the clowns, who were assigned an area distant from the rest of the show population (Bradna 40, 213).

Obviously the reality of circus structure and performance worked to affirm rather than deny those very distinctions[4]

Predictably then, in the 1940s and 1950s, American circuses continued their trend toward a more conservative identity by becoming even more socially aligned with non-circus society The circus had once been granted special status before American communities became themselves more physically and psychologically mobile Greater social mobility after the war, however, coupled with the fact that some of the larger shows experienced a series of expensive disasters, led circuses to form coalitions with fraternal and civic organizations in the many cities they visited every season With these changes, the circus found readier receptions in these towns as well as better facilities in which to perform there Many shows, like the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, had given up their big tops in favor of the safer and more permanent facilities for which groups such as the Shriners, the Lions Club, or the Rotary Club could act as guarantor

During these decades, Ralph Ellison was one of the last of the authors of the Southern Renaissance to use the circus as an image in his canon, and in his case to demonstrate how the circus, once assumed to be a site for democracy and transgression, slavishly mirrored the society for which it performed This very knowledge informs Ellison's posthumous *Juneteenth* (1999), on which he labored for decades, beginning before the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952 When Bliss, the novel's racially ambiguous preaching prodigy, goes to the circus with his black foster father, Daddy Hickman, he curiously examines the show for evidence of the father and son's mutual culture—the black culture, which the white-skinned Bliss has been encouraged to accept as his own To his chagrin, Daddy Hickman is perfectly complacent when he notes that everything African about the performance, including the elephants and tigers, has been "mastered" and "tamed" by the white performers Even the single "black" performer, a white dwarf with skin darkened by burnt cork, has been mastered by the white clowns and their comic attacks on him. Daddy Hickman, taken aback by Bliss's failure to appreciate the humor of the performance, explains that the black dwarf is "just acting his part" in the comedy, "[s]o when we laugh at them we can laugh at ourselves" (*Juneteenth* 250). Caught up short by this circus portrayal of what the black community recognizes as social reality, Bliss at first attacks the dwarf but later vents his animosity against the black community that has nurtured him

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[4] Recently organized feminist circuses attest to the patriarchal mode of the traditional circus, which was challenged in yet another way in 1998 when the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus hired its first black ring master.

Although the Ohio-born Toni Morrison is not a southerner, her novels examine and rework many southern themes, she also uses the ideologically conservative image of the circus in *Beloved* (1987) Her purpose in doing so is to reveal how insidiously a black community's sense of "double consciousness" can be heightened by even distant contact with the white community, as when Sethe and her family attend the circus freak show and, in effect, exchange roles with the freaks when they see themselves reflected through the eyes of the hostile performers Again, circus performance reflects a social reality that is defined by the dominant white culture

Robert Penn Warren's "The Circus in the Attic"

Warren's use of circus images in his canon and the interrelationships enacted by his three circus figures—the clown, the ring master, and the acrobat—reveal a broad range of interpretive possibilities for his novella "The Circus in the Attic." The circus, filled with death defying performers whose invitations to spectacle could result happily or disastrously as chance might dictate, suggests the serious business behind play, whimsy, and creativity When Warren's protagonist Bolton Lovehart seeks an artistic association with the circus, he reveals every artist's necessarily conflicted relationship with his community as he becomes alternately an object of Bardsville's admiration and a repository of its scorn

Warren's examination of Bolton's artistic role also parallels the author's literary fascination with one of the most important influences on his canon, Nathaniel Hawthorne Chapter II of this study provides, first of all, a close reading of Warren's novella "The Circus in the Attic," then draws several important links between it and "Nathaniel Hawthorne," the analysis of the life and works of his nineteenth-century forebear that appears in Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and R W B Lewis's anthology *American Literature. The Makers and the Making* (1973) Warren's thought-provoking introduction to Hawthorne's works is historically, psychologically, culturally, and critically informed, as one would expect from a scholar of Warren's stature [5] It is, however, the narrative quality of this twenty-nine page introduction—one of the longest in the anthology—that evidences Warren's personal and artistic identification with the nineteenth-century literary father on whom many aspects of Bolton Lovehart's life and troubled artistry are based

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[5] On the other hand, Warren's approach is not consistent with what many understand of the New Critical approach, for which Warren—along with Brooks, Tate, et al—is often credited (or criticized).

One aspect is Nathaniel Hawthorne's steady pursuit and, conversely, studied evasion of the "deep, warm secret" of humanity that results, finally, in his conviction that his alienation from the world was necessary to perfect his art Then, in contrast to this Hawthornesque quality of Bolton's psyche is the quality best exemplified by Warren's father, Robert Franklin Warren, who sacrificed his art to accept the burdens of marriage and family life—in other words, to validate the "deep, warm secret" Bolton's attempt to resolve the conflicts inherent in combining the role of the artist with the role of the father is an action Robert Penn Warren would value since Warren, the literary son of Hawthorne and the biological son of Robert Franklin Warren, seeks to be true to the examples of both his fathers

Hawthorne is additionally the source for the triangular geometry of the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master in "The Circus in the Attic" Their interrelationships mimic the tensions that unite Arthur Dimmesdale, Hester Prynne, and Roger Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter.* Moreover, Hawthorne's tale could itself be perceived as an essentially Freudian narrative in which the younger man displaces the older man to achieve the "prize"—the female component of the triangle Both the Hawthornesque configuration and the triangular Freudian narrative are refigured several times over in "The Circus in the Attic," not only among the original Lovehearts (Bolton, Louise, and Simon) or in the later Lovehearts (Bolton, Mrs Parton, and Jasper) but also in the primary circus threesome (the clown, the acrobat, and the ring master).

The Freudian narrative and its role in interpreting "The Circus in the Attic" is examined in greater detail in Chapter IV alongside additional psychological approaches. The Lacanian narrative, for example, relies on the same triangular structure yet permits quite a different analysis of it In this narrative, the younger man's odyssey involves a search for language that will validate not only his claim to the Name of the Father but also his ability some day to succeed the older man—with the purpose, again, of achieving all attendant patriarchal rights and privileges Precocious as Pearl's language is in *The Scarlet Letter*, only the minister's "discovery" of language at the end of the novel can resolve the double-edged mystery of Pearl's earthly paternity and Dimmesdale's heavenly paternity Similarly, Bolton Lovehart's receipt of numerous letters, narratives written by his stepson Jasper from the European front, bestows fatherhood on the older man in two ways the letters give him a father by answering the "thousand questions" that Bolton never thought to ask Simon Lovehart before he died, but they also make him a father by granting him paternal rights to Jasper and his narratives

Yet Warren's own detailed analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*, which comprises a lengthy section of his Hawthorne introduction, reads the triangular character dynamic in a way that permits contemporary critics interpretive possibilities even beyond the Freudian and Lacanian These additional interpretations, which are equally applicable to "The Circus in the Attic," emerge with Warren's insightful observation that Hester Prynne is, for all practical purposes, written to one side as Hawthorne focuses on the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth These male characters, Warren declares, “are more important to each other than Hester is to either, theirs is the truest ‘marriage ’” This aspect of the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth is less Freudian or Lacanian than Girardian René Girard’s study of triangular desire entitled *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (1961, 1965) deals precisely with how the masculine components of the triangle—called the subject and the mediator—tend to claim the narrative foreground and how the feminine component—the object—takes a subordinate role to them This dynamic is created when the subject, usually a younger man, imagines that an older, more experienced man, the mediator, is his rival for the love of a beautiful woman, the object What initially appears to be a Freudian or a Lacanian triangle, however, masks the true desire of the subject for the mediator Oftentimes the subject will create something akin to a Freudian narrative in which he imagines himself wronged by the mediator in order to exacerbate their “rivalry.” Once again, this same dynamic is the driving force behind Bolton Lovehart’s obsessive interest in Simon Lovehart and Jasper Parton, the rivals who displace Louise Lovehart and Mrs Parton in Bolton’s desire

Still another dimension of the triangular tension among Warren’s circus characters could be explained by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s study *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) Kosofsky enhances René Girard’s theory of triangular desire through her formulation of a phenomenon with cultural as well as literary manifestations From a feminist perspective, Kosofsky refines Girard’s triangular desire into male homosocial desire, which she defines not only as “men-loving-men” but also as “men-promoting-the-interests-of-men.” The implicit or explicit purpose of male homosocial desire is, therefore, to dominate women. Certainly any feminist reading of Warren’s thrice repeated character triangle in “The Circus in the Attic” would need to address some aspect of Kosofsky’s study.

The triangular character configuration in “The Circus in the Attic” becomes once more relevant in light of Richard King’s explanation of the social, gender, and racial intricacies of the southern antebellum plantation system in *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1939-1955* (1980) The Freudian family romance, one template under which this present study organized an earlier reading of the novella, is recast in King’s analysis as “the southern family romance ” In this psychological narrative, the white slave-holding “father” plays a dominant role in the psychic development of his black “slave children”—terms with literal as well as metaphoric applications

One might not even consider the possibility that Warren’s “The Circus in the Attic” could be termed a southern family romance if it were not for Forrest Robinson’s observation that considerations of black slavery are conspicuously omitted from such works as *All the King’s Men,* and especially from Jack Burden’s final epiphany, despite his heavily researched doctoral thesis on his ancestor, the repentant slave-owner Cass Mastern Because of Jack’s evasion of the issue of slavery, this racial theme “never reaches the surface of his consciousness” (Robinson 512); indeed, his evasion is a moral weakness that Bolton Lovehart shares since Bolton’s similar fascination for his father’s

Civil War service never includes a consideration of the political exigencies for which the service was required

The subtext of black slavery emerges from *All the King's Men* through the Cass Mastern tale, the moral theme of which, according to Robinson, Jack Burden manages to ignore The subtext of black slavery in "The Circus in the Attic" emerges in the character of Jasper Parton, who bears the physical characteristics of minstrel show "blackness" as well as "secret blood" from his mother's side of the family ("Circus" 48) Critically, this secret blood connects him to Bolton's blood line, but it also suggests a darker "secret" of the blood that would realize in Jasper the black son of the south who looks to Bolton as the embodiment of every white slave-holding father who abused his "paternal" privilege among his black slave women No wonder that Warren, whether consciously or unconsciously, identifies Jasper with the "sinister" ring master at the end of the novella: his heritage of illegitimacy and his true "paternity," if revealed, are serious threats to the racial complacency of the modern south, which has steadily repressed its knowledge of the "southern family romance "

The Circus and Modernism

Chapter V places Robert Penn Warren's use of the circus in his novella "The Circus in the Attic" alongside Thomas Wolfe's use of the circus in his short fiction "Circus at Dawn," in portions of *The Web and the Rock*, and as the centerpiece of the novel *You Can't Go Home Again* Comparisons of these works reveal similarities and fine distinctions between the two authors' materials, methods, and literary programs

Clearly, both authors share a fascination for and a cultural familiarity with the circus Additionally, both were greatly influenced by modernism, to which their uses of the circus pose artistic responses

Warren was introduced to the poetry of T. S. Eliot and other modernist poets by fellow student Allen Tate while attending Vanderbilt University from 1921 to 1925 In fact, one of Warren's chief complaints about the English department at the University of California at Berkeley, where he had been admitted for graduate study in 1925, was that its faculty were stodgily uninformed about literary modernism (*RPW: A Biography* 62) In *A Colder Fire: The Poetry of Robert Penn Warren* (1965), Victor Strandberg establishes that T S Eliot had a strong poetic influence on Warren For his fiction, Warren, like the poet Eliot and the novelist James Joyce, sought classical structures on which to base his early works One of the most notable examples is his novel *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), for which Warren uses Dante's *Inferno* as "intellectual scaffolding" ("RPW's Divine" 36) [6]

Conversely, Thomas Wolfe, who valued certain aspects of modernism, still had only a guarded admiration for a mere few of its practitioners James Joyce was one of those few Although the young writer's first reaction to Joyce's *Ulysses* was "whoops of joy, and happy derisive laughter" (Donald 78), he later developed an appreciation for its unusual narrative style, its use of the interior monologue, and its inventive language Wolfe was actually disappointed to learn that scholars had discovered a discernible structure in Joyce's modernist work, he preferred, no doubt, to consider himself and Joyce kindred spirits who shared Wolfe's early tendency for monumental disorder. Even so, Wolfe composed his later works with more of a conscious sense of order as he determined to become less dependent upon his editors for eliciting coherent structures and sustained effects from his amorphous manuscripts

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[6] Warren noted that *At Heaven's Gate* was his most carefully outlined novel, perhaps because of the classical source from which he borrowed its structure. The novel is also an intriguing example of how low culture inserts itself into Warren's high culture considerations since the plot line involving Ashby Wyndham, the grim foil to Jerry Calhoun, was not part of Warren's original plan; Wyndham came to the author in a "fevered dream" as he was recovering from typhus ("RPW's Divine" 36)

In spite of Warren's youthful enthusiasm for the modernist cause, by 1935 he had made some serious reconsiderations of some of the primary tenets of the movement its exhortation that poetry should be difficult to understand, its preference for image or effect rather than meaning, and its seeming exclusion of the reader through its intensely idiosyncratic quality of reference These reconsiderations of modernism begin to emerge not only in Warren's own poetry and fiction but also in his critical works on other modernists' poetry and fiction A good example of this kind of critical writing is his 1935 review of Thomas Wolfe's novel *Of Time and the River.*

Warren's stance in his review is that the poetic and the prosaic strands of Wolfe's novel should complement each other more fully, with the purpose of making the work more accessible "to the ordinary citizens of the Republic" ("Note" 214) Continuing to voice critical judgments that seem antithetical to the initial spirit of modernism, Warren enlarges upon his specific review of Wolfe's *Of Time and the River* in his more generally applicable 1942 essay "Pure and Impure Poetry " In this later essay, he provides the kind of close reading of several poems that had already informed *Understanding Poetry*, the

1938 textbook he co-wrote with Cleanth Brooks Furthermore, in the process of his own close reading, Warren implies that every reader is an active participant, although not necessarily welcomed by the artist, in determining a work's proper balance of poetic and prosaic elements Pure poetry is effectively balanced with the impure only when the poet (or novelist or dramatist) reveals the inner workings of character and the complex accommodations to an imperfect world that inform and enrich gestures toward pure poetic transcendence In an unbalanced system, however, the purely poetic is its own reason for being, leaving the reader unconvinced of its relevance in a world of accommodation and unconvinced of its consistency with actual experience

According to Warren, the weakness of Wolfe's early novels lies in their insistence on the transcendent moment when the reader is still unconvinced that the protagonist has experienced enough of the world to earn and inform that moment That Wolfe and his protagonists long to dwell in that unearned transcendent moment is revealed in his short fiction "Circus at Dawn" and in a long dream sequence from his third novel *The Web and the Rock* Both of these works romanticize and idealize the circus, an image that reveals Wolfe's need for unfettered self-expression and escape from time

Warren's Bolton Lovehart also seeks in his attic circus what Thomas Wolfe desires from his circus unfettered self-expression and escape from time. Warren's novella, however, uses Wolfe's circus image to serve a completely different purpose. to establish fictionally, as he had earlier asserted critically, that the transcendent moment must be earned and tempered by the artist's inviting impure elements into it In Bolton's case, the transcendent moment is earned when he willingly reveals his circus to the Bardsville community, inviting their response to it

Tellingly, when Wolfe finally realizes the artistic necessity for incorporating impure elements in his "poetry," he lampoons the celebrated modernist circus of Alexander Calder, in which Wolfe may have recognized some of his own early artistic deficiencies When in "The Circus in the Attic" Warren fictionalizes this same process—a pure artist's gradual acceptance of the impure into his art—he bases his depiction on an eccentric circus hobbyist, Kentuckian John Wesley Venable, who joins the series of low culture touchstones (see the aforementioned Willie Proudfit, Ashby Wyndham, Willie Stark, and Gran' Boz) who act as foils for the "purely poetic" idealism of Warren's protagonists [7]

The Circus as the South: Trope or Transgression?

The numerous creative uses of the circus in the literature of the Southern Renaissance mark it as an image heavily weighted during that era with cultural and ideological significance Robert Penn Warren's singularly consistent use of the circus in his canon makes it a significant individual image for him, yet it also links him with southern authors such as William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Ralph Ellison All of these major figures of the Southern Renaissance, and conceivably many other lesser lights of the period, find in the circus image something intrinsically southern, and they isolate the circus as a southern intertext through their mutual yet diverse uses of it

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[7] I also find it significant that Calder's circus is permanently housed in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, while Venable's circus is featured in the more humble Pennyroyal Museum in Hopkinsville, Kentucky

To think of the circus as a southern intertext is to understand it as theorists Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein define "intertext": as an image that demonstrates diffuseness rather than hegemony and as an image whose practitioners demonstrate inclusivity rather than evaluation. The southern circus intertext is diffuse and inclusive in that it is an image to which all writers of the Southern Renaissance feel they have a claim and on which they feel qualified to comment, regardless of gender, race, class, or historical moment Furthermore, it is an image that writers of the Southern Renaissance use equally meaningfully—to portray a southern tradition that is deficient in providing for personal, cultural, and ideological survival in the New South

Because of this link between the southern circus intertext and southern tradition, it is important to differentiate between the circus as a modernist image of the carnivalesque and the circus as a modern southern image of the cultural status quo Ordinarily, the circus is associated with the carnivalesque, the term for cultural transgression introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study *Rabelais and His World* (1940, 1965) Yet, in literature of the Southern Renaissance, the circus exemplifies not the kinds of carnivalesque activities that were merely permitted by the medieval church and state in Rabelais's time, but their cultural opposites, the official feasts, which were not only sanctioned but often organized by the church and the state, which had also established the dominant ideologies of the medieval culture

I have already noted in a previous section of this chapter how, during the post-World War I years up through World War II—years that roughly correspond with the height of the Southern Renaissance—the circus was slowly rehabilitated from its carnivalesque role to a role that reinforced the dominant ideology of America. In fact, the more unpredictable—one might say the more carnivalesque—social and economic conditions in the United States became during those years, the more conservative the circus became in its reinforcement of traditional values For example, as the so-called Lost Generation abandoned its faith in stability and continuity after World War I, the circuses reinforced stability and continuity by continuing their shows, despite the hardships that resulted from the harsh human and philosophical losses of the war With WPA support during the Depression, circuses continued to raise their tents, welcome audiences, and urge Americans to think positively about the country's basic values. Finally, during World War II, circuses like the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows staged huge patriotic productions that prominently featured the images of President Roosevelt and General Douglas MacArthur and urged audiences to buy war bonds Encouraged to sacrificial gestures of traditional patriotism by this newly conservative circus rhetoric, north and south united to weather successfully two world wars and a severe economic depression It is important to note, on the other hand, that when the long memory of the south casts itself back to traditional images of social and economic stability, it returns inevitably to the mythic white, patriarchal, antebellum south which, even in the early decades of the twentieth century, still had great influence over southern culture

What made the circus a compelling image for the writers of the Southern Renaissance? One might certainly speculate that, in an era of modernist thought, they would find the circus a ready-to-hand carnivalesque trope for the low-culture transgressions often charged to the south by the mainstream north. Similarly, southern writers might have identified in the circus their own post-Civil War region, forced as it was to a status of transgressive otherness and yet honored all the more by its constituents for the very qualities that, again, set it apart from the modern mainstream Conversely, based on my previous speculations on the way in which the circus mimics the medieval "official feast" in support of dominant ideology, one can easily see how the circus—an entity that had always been idealized and romanticized but now took on newly conservative qualities—was, to the literary eye of the Southern Renaissance, an especially appropriate image for the mythic old south and its essentially patriarchal ideology.

Yet, as attractive as the circus—and the mythic image of the Old South it represents—could be, both the circus and the patriarchy are images that writers of the Southern Renaissance feel they must resist In Faulkner's work, the circus provokes a sometimes regretful look backward to the familiar patriarchy of the Old South and questions what the New South can offer even when one admits the moral necessity of embracing it The lure of the majestic ideals of the southern patriarchy is strong Thus, only through the greatest of provocation does Faulkner's "Barn Burning" protagonist Sarty Snopes finally escape the cruel abuse of his father, associated as the elder Snopes is in Sarty's mind with the southern-inspired illusion of family honor. Sarty's cherished illusion of family loyalty is figured in faded circus posters of "scarlet horses [and] . incredible poisings" that are no more real than the stories the elder Snopes tells about his days as a "professional horsetrader" (*Collected Stories* 20) As for Eudora Welty, the promise of the circus is a tale told by adults, traditional keepers of myths, to avoid answering the difficult questions children ask of their uncertain world She describes in *One Writer's Beginnings* how she learned early to interpret that promise as betrayal Katherine Anne Porter's circus also represents patriarchal tradition and its insidious control over every aspect of the South; her Miranda finds southern myth affirmed even in "The Circus " In "A Coupla Scalped Indians," Ralph Ellison's circus is a masculine bastion of confident self-definition challenged by the threateningly unpredictable feminine In Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, Piggy Logan's circus reminds George Webber of the South in whose mythic simplicities he has spent an attenuated adolescence that he must now sacrifice for social awareness Finally, Warren's circus is the patriarchal image through which bloodied Civil War cavalry sabers are wiped clean, bitter war losses are repressed, and "people believe what truth they have to believe to go on being the way they are," regardless of the moral imperatives of history.

Among all these writers of the Southern Renaissance and their various works, characters, and personae, however, Robert Penn Warren, through his semi-autobiographical figure Bolton Lovehart and through his novella "The Circus in the Attic," makes the most comprehensive use of the circus intertext. Moreover, all that we have understood in this study's previous chapters to be true about Bolton Lovehart and his circus is equally true of Robert Penn Warren and his lifetime of artistry

As this study has demonstrated, Warren is not only the child of the South who finds his future threatened by its historical legacy, but he is also the artist of the South whose clarity of vision threatens to set him apart from his region. Furthermore, Warren's artistic goals establish his affinity with the mainstream North even as they reveal his insights into the southern way of life Finally, Warren's creative energies appropriate the circus, an image that had already been claimed for entirely different purposes by literary modernism, and refines it to suit his vision for southern modernism In accomplishing this final goal, Warren achieves creatively what Paul Bouissac notes culturally about the circus in this chapter's epigraph: he shifts the circus from the social periphery to southern culture's very center

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