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**Le Silence du Bonheur and the House of Forgiveness:  
Space and Silence in Flood**

AIMEE BERGER

“What is a lie? Can you call by the word lie certain words  
you utter or refrain from uttering, in order to give fullest  
scope for the deepest truth that is in you?”<sup>1</sup>

In an article entitled “On Talking about Silence in Conversation and Literature,” Katrin Meise reformulates Wittgenstein’s well-known dictum, “What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence,” in a way I find especially appropriate for a discussion of Robert Penn Warren’s 1964 *Flood: A Romance of our Time*. With respect to both conversation and literature, Meise writes, “What we pass over in silence, we must speak about.”<sup>2</sup> This thought holds true for the central characters in *Flood*, particularly the Tollivers, but also their former and future spouses. Being able to tell a true story is linked to being able to come true, as Maggie puts it, or to achieve what Warren refers to elsewhere as an osmosis of being.<sup>3</sup> The ways in which a character resists or participates in the circuit of discourse operating in this text sheds light on the success of that character to achieve osmosis.

Warren’s circuit of discourse forces characters and readers to confront the limitations of language by introducing silence as an essential part of discourse. Silence is in fact central to representation of loss and lack in *Flood*, and the Fiddler house is the locus of silence in the text. Moreover, the house is a “metaphor for interiority (in the sense of selfhood),”<sup>4</sup> and often acts as a sanctuary into which characters withdraw to re-collect the pieces of themselves, shattered as they are by the events of their lives. Just as the interior of the house is a space enclosed by a form, silence is in fact a space carved out in words, framed and enclosed by utterance. Thus, physical space and textual space, or silence, bear a close relationship, the nuances of which differ from one author and even from one work to another, but they bear particular significance in this text due to the attention directed at the professional artist. For Brad, a writer, silence has unique implications, and because the house “serves as the portal to metaphors of imagination,” it also bears on him in intense and often paradoxical ways.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly Warren’s work is dominated by ontological concerns, so pursuing the ontological significance of space and silence in this text seems worthwhile. As Leonard Casper observed, “Warren tried to be true to the solitariness of his central characters while demonstrating that they are not alone in their loneliness and, furthermore, that some degree of their sense of isolation and nonbeing is self-imposed and reversible.”<sup>6</sup> One way Warren highlights this relationship is to allow silence, the language of isolation

and nonbeing, to speak for itself. From Brad's "beautiful little book," *I'm Telling You Now* to Yasha's conviction that one must return to the past so that "all that has happened [t]here ... will flow into ... feeling ... and you will stand in the end in ... *le silence du bonheur*" (221), Warren consistently highlights the relationship between telling and silence. Likewise, the house is a metaphor for language, and the characters who are able to appropriate the space of the Fiddler house are also able to appropriate language and tell their stories, establishing a circuit of discourse that incorporates both speech and silence. Significantly, it is *Flood*'s female characters who are most successful in manifesting that relationship correctly, and thus moving beyond the house and all that it represents for them, a significant difference between Brad and the women who have passed through his life.

For the women of *Flood*, the house functions as a protective womb-space, a sanctuary for being and becoming. But for Brad, it is "filled" with emptiness, darkness and silence, a space he cannot navigate. As is the case with many characters in American literature, for Brad the house is a prison. He is as trapped in the Fiddler house as Cal Fiddler is trapped in the penitentiary situated opposite it in both the geography of Fiddlersburg and Warren's metaphorical scheme. And like Cal Fiddler, whose attempted escape from the actual penitentiary failed, Brad has been unable to escape from the Fiddler house. Inside the house, Brad experiences a kind of creative stasis or paralysis. Images of Brad as a vital artist, capable of creating the "beautiful moving picture" Yasha expects of him, focus on his activities outside the house: wandering the town, as in the scene by the Confederate monument, visiting the pen, driving his car, eating in the diner. Inside the house, Brad is virtually inert, often lying on his back in bed; standing motionless beside the window or incapacitated by alcohol, sleep, and the "shadows of the unrecollected" that haunt him.

His own past haunts him because "thanks to the house, a great many of our memories are housed."<sup>7</sup> Brad is not at home with his memories; much of his storytelling is in fact aimed at changing rather than re-collecting the past. Even his title story in *I'm Telling You Now* is an improved version of reality, an attempt to compensate for his guilt over not telling Izzie Goldfarb (or any of his "fathers" for that matter) goodbye.<sup>8</sup> When he does abide in the house alone for too long, his memories begin to emerge without the authorial filter to which he usually subjects them, as is the case with the memory of his father's funeral, a memory firmly situated in the library of the Fiddler house. In fact, so firmly is it situated there that he is able to escape it simply by closing a few doors: "Then he remembered that that episode in the dark library was, too, something to be stowed away. It was to be put in the back of the dark closet. A man just couldn't go around remembering everything" (172). Brad, like Warren, imagines memory as contained in space. But for Brad, memory is something to be escaped, whereas for his creator it is something to be embraced. Embracing the past is a crucial step toward osmosis of being, and memory then is "the process whereby pain of the past in its pastness / May be converted into the future tense / Of joy."<sup>9</sup> This view of memory is echoed by Maggie in her conversations with Yasha, and by Lettice in her letter at the end of text, but stands in direct contrast to Brad's perceptions of memory and the re-collection of the personal past.

To remember is for Brad "a drowning, an eternal drowning, a perpetual suffocation, a crushing weight on the chest that would never go away" (18), and part of his reluctance to enter the house and inability to function creatively inside it stems from

the fact that the very memories he most wants to avoid, having occurred there, are unavoidable within its walls: “The unconscious abides. Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are.”<sup>10</sup> This is, I think, a fine definition of the relationship between memory and spatial metaphor in Warren’s later novels. Memories exist in space, and this text, like others of Warren’s novels, attests to the impact of space on the poetic imagination. Spatial metaphor is especially important then, in dealing with those characters that by profession or temperament might be thought poetic or at least artistic. In the case of *Flood*, this points not only to Brad, but also to the movie producer Yasha Jones, the artist Lettice Poindexter, and more ambiguously to Maggie Tolliver, who turns out to be a better storyteller than her brother, if the telling of stories aims at their coming true rather than at a mere proliferation of words intended to conceal or at least disguise their truth(s).

For Maggie, the house functions as a shell into which she necessarily and, as it turns out, wisely withdraws. The real significance of the metaphor of the inhabited shell in Maggie’s case is the relationship it enables us to develop between Warren’s spatial metaphors and the circuit of discourse operating in *Flood*. By successfully completing the circuit of discourse established in the text, Maggie is able to both truly love and, through this, to truly be. Her emergence from the house to the garden marks her readiness to share herself with Yasha through the telling of her story, and is the final step in the circuit of discourse. The circuit of discourse Warren establishes here recognizes this progression: true telling proceeds from *fore-silence* to *utterance* to *after-silence*, and then, if the utterance was a true revelation of self, *deep silence*, what is referred to in the text as the *silence du bonheur*, descends.

The Fiddler house acts as a physical space through which this circuit can be achieved. It is a space that facilitates the recollection of the past, a coming to terms with and piecing together of the self. One must pass through the silence to the telling, as if passing through a room or house, in order to arrive at the deep silence, the “beautifulness.” For example, having lived through the events of October 5, Maggie retreats to the sanctuary of the house in silence. When she is ready, she speaks abruptly and definitively and only once.<sup>11</sup> The true story can only be told after the silence that explores the “mysterious inwardness,” and speaking after silence is a way of letting the story come true.

Silence is the language of the Fiddler house. Very little conversation takes place inside the house itself; most talking is done in the garden or in the public spaces of the patio, downstairs hall, and parlor. The upstairs rooms are quiet, meditative. Lettice builds a studio there, Yasha reads, Brad lies on the bed and thinks. Yasha sits in his robe and reads in bed. In order to tell her story, Maggie takes Yasha to the garden, and they will later have to leave the house and the grounds entirely to consummate their relationship.

Maggie’s redemptive monologue, coming after years of silence in the Fiddler house, is the definitive utterance, the coming true of Maggie, and exemplifies another component of the function of silence in the text:

If one focuses on utterance as a whole ... he [or she] notices that the utterance is surrounded by a fringe of silence. This is the fore-and-after silence ... fore-silence and after-silence primordially show themselves as constituting the framing for a determinate utterance .... Silence is the background against which a story stands out.<sup>12</sup>

Maggie's silence defines her story, and her emergence from the house is concomitant with her emergence from silence. The Fiddler house sheltered her silence, enabled her to come into being, and when she did emerge, it was into a true telling. This telling is her way of entering into the fellowship of humanity, and opening herself up to love through the intimacy of sharing her true story/self. In this state, she is able to complete the circuit of discourse, for "deep silence can occur only if some utterance is associated with it,"<sup>13</sup> or as Yasha Jones puts it, in order to arrive at the *silence du bonheur*, you have to come out on the other side of what has happened. Then "the time will come when there'll be no need to tell what happened—or need not to tell it. You'll be free then ... what you have here now is not freedom in a beyondness of what happened. Nor is it a plunge into what happened in order to find freedom" (287). Throughout the text, arrival at this type of silence is posited as the ultimate objective of the artist. Whether Brad achieves this is a matter of critical speculation and will be addressed at the end of this article.

Each character's silence also frames the story of another, with the silence mostly emanating from Brad. His silences act as catalysts for events, but his false tellings create an even greater emptiness and act as *impacted structured absences*,<sup>14</sup> leaving the events of October 5, as well as other events in his life, uncertain. The impacted structured absence, in brief, can be defined as a narrative situation in which so many possibilities exist that the reader cannot discern which, if any, are true. The catalytic events of the text—the evening of October 5 and its immediate aftermath, Cal's killing of Tuttle—are veiled by the impacted structured absence created by the multiple and fragmented perspectives with which these events are recounted at various points in the novel. We are never presented with a complete or objective narrative of the events. What we get instead are Brad's interpretations of these events, interspersed with trial records, Cal's statements to Brad, and Maggie's statements to Yasha. Brad's own narrative of the events of that night<sup>15</sup> "in its refusal to engage with the past (the shadow of the unrecollected) is a model of self-deception and facile handling,"<sup>16</sup> and increases the reader's sense of uncertainty. Maggie's text is in direct contrast to this, a "complex and realistic confession by a woman who heaps responsibility for the past onto herself, though she cannot quite articulate the nature of her responsibility."<sup>17</sup>

The conversation between Maggie and Yasha is a strong passage for the analysis of the circuit of discourse, as well as an understanding, by contrast, of Brad's inability to tell his story and emerge into true being. Their conversation begins with Maggie's observation that Brad's nervousness is due to a fear of being left alone with her, and "when she had said those words, it was as though she had released some chord, some hold, that had kept her from sinking entirely into that dark medium of silence .... But Yasha Jones thought there was no last backward appeal on that sinking glimmer of a face ... [he] knew that she was withdrawing triumphantly into the medium that was more truly her own than that that upper air of bright confusion" (160).

Silence is a state of peace for Maggie. It is recognizably her medium, but at this point, it is definitely not the medium of Yasha Jones who was also "sinking into a silence, into the deep medium of himself, which, he suddenly felt, was shadowy and shifting, suffocating" (160). Silence becomes, like memory, analogous to the water that will soon flood the town. Yasha at first objectifies and then envies but finally comes to truly listen to Maggie, unlike Brad who is unable to see her except in relation to himself and so perceives her as a living reminder and even accusation of his wrongdoings. Yasha

realizes that her ability to “stand being herself and therefore stand being with herself” (161) enables her to let things come true through the medium of silence. Through Maggie Yasha comes to experience his own silent re-collection of the past as a transformative medium from which he can emerge to love and (pro)create.

Brad, by contrast, cannot bear silence—it leads him neither inward nor toward greater understanding of self but rather feels like the catalyst for complete destruction. As he tells Maggie when she tries tactfully and subtly to silence him, “I feel myself exploding silently .... I feel the Me exploding silently into the non-Me” (161). Brad is unable to see that this explosion signifies acceptance of the osmosis of being and is necessary for salvation. The explosion of self into the world is also represented by the explosion of silence into speech and the coming true of self that is enabled by a sharing of one’s true story. As Cal puts it, when you come to know something that is true and beautiful, “then you have to find a way to say it .... You see, when you learn something like this, you have to say it” (343). The relationships of the individual to the world and to the human community are important themes throughout Warren’s work, and the inability to communicate is at the heart of the divisions and heartbreaks that these characters face because it is this inability that keeps them separate from those whom they wish to love.

Yasha’s response to Maggie ushers him into the human community, which he had abandoned in grief and guilt over the death of his young wife. Their relationship depends on a mutually arrived at conclusion: “You have to tell the truth ... the time comes when you have to if ... you want to exist” (161). Both understand that truth is arrived at silently and inwardly, but must then be shared in order to bring its bearer into fellowship with others and the world at large. For Warren, knowing the truth is not enough; one must also tell it if one is to enter the “House of Forgiveness.” Forgiveness cannot be granted to the self by the self. No character of Warren’s escapes the communal aspects of guilt and redemption. From Pretty Boy’s tearful prayer to Brother Potts’ hymn, to Cal in the pen finally speaking his truth to Brad and thus purging himself of hate, to Maggie’s poignant letter asking Brad to be happy for her happiness, and finally to Lettice’s letter, these characters are redeemed through the telling of their own true stories. To tell is to come into being, to emerge from the shell that has sheltered the coming true.

Shell creatures, the “fiddler” crab for example, provide an interesting analogy to many of Warren’s characters: “their obvious dynamism ... lies in the fact that they come alive in the dialectics of what is hidden and what is manifest.”<sup>18</sup> The characters of *Flood* come alive in the dialectic of what is recollected silently and what is revealed through telling. The Fiddler house, like the shell of a fiddler crab, protects its inhabitant, enabling it to eventually outgrow the shell and move on, as we see with Lettice, Maggie and Yasha. In terms of Bachelard’s observations on the nature of those who inhabit the house as shell, Maggie seems an exemplar: “A creature that hides and ‘withdraws into its shell’ is preparing a way out. If we remain at the heart of the image under consideration, we have the impression that, by staying in the motionlessness of its shell, the creature is preparing temporal explosions, not to say whirlwinds, of being.”<sup>19</sup> Certainly, Maggie emerges from the house a much different creature than when she first took refuge there. She enters the house for the specific purpose of gestating a new identity, or as she tells Yasha, “it was just what I had to do in order to be, in the end, myself. No, not to *be* me—to *become* me, if I could” (284).

Just as the human body can be seen as a shell that contains and protects the self, so too, the house is the shell that contains and protects the body, and thus metaphors of the house are especially appropriate to represent the self. The fear of entering a house, then, is a fear of looking at what Yasha Jones calls “the mysterious inwardness of life” (113), and the inability to navigate it, a failure to navigate the self. Brad rarely navigates the Fiddler house soberly. To him, it is only a dark house full of rooms he never enters (we only see Brad enter four of the rooms in the house). He imagines it as a lonesome place, and cannot imagine why Maggie has stayed there so long. For him, the house, like he himself, is “full of angry lonesomeness” (138), so full perhaps that he cannot navigate it at all without bumping up against the walls, so he chooses to numb himself with alcohol or work or, on the night of October 5, sex. Presumably, Brad’s father, Lank Tolliver, had similar feelings about the house. Having wrested it away from the Fiddlers only to burn its contents and rage through its halls, Lank is never at home in the house, and flees to the swamp to lay in the mud and cry, and eventually to take his own life. The house evokes a similar response in Brad, who tries several times to take ownership of it but always ends up feeling that it somehow owns him.

The Fiddler house and the state penitentiary are of course, parallel, as Brad is parallel to Cal Fiddler, and all that Mr. Budd says of solitary confinement in the pen is as true of Brad’s life as of any prisoner’s: “It is the last lonesomeness. It is the kind of lonesomeness that a man can’t stand, for he can’t stand just being himself” (138). Cal says that this is also the reason Brad shies away from Fiddlersburg: “Because you’re you in Fiddlersburg.” Brad imagines, wrongly, that the house functions similarly for Maggie, but as Yasha Jones points out, Maggie “can stand it, and therefore is not lonesome . . . she is the kind of person who can stand herself and therefore can stand being with herself” (146). In this way, she is the antithesis of her brother, and it is for this reason that Brad perceives “her whole way of being had been an accusation, louder than words. And worse, far worse than words, for words would specify. Her accusation, not specifying, therefore had been total” (325).

Likewise, Lettice Poindexter’s life might be seen as an accusation or at least an explanation of Brad’s life. Lettice Poindexter speaks “without shame of her life,” and seeks redemption through telling, even though both she and Maggie understand that telling is not just confession but also a penance and atonement, a way of “not letting yourself off easy” but rather “going back to suffer everything again to say it” (271). Brad almost never recounts the events of his own past, except to engage in a kind of “creative non-fiction,” using the events of his past as a basis for humorous or heroic anecdotes, as in the stories of his “musk-rat skinner” of a father and his false accusation of the late Telford Lott. Interestingly, after he “had special success at a party in Malibu” with his Telford Lott story, “[h]e could not bear to enter the dark house” (58) and so fell asleep on the lawn, unable to confront his own falsity in the darkness and silence of his own house. All the houses Brad encounters are likely to be perceived as “dark houses,” and he cannot enter them at moments of great shame because he does not want to be alone in the silence of that space with himself. When he rises from the lawn after this episode, “he entered the house and went properly to bed. He never mentioned the name Telford Lott again” (58). Instead of encountering himself in the silence of the house, and then emerging from it to tell a true story, he simply never speaks the name again, and Telford Lott becomes another of the “shadows of the unreclected” that haunt him. Ultimately, though, as we

will see later, Brad prefers the company of these shadows, which he can escape simply by leaving the house, to the reality of what he has become.

Lettice, like Maggie, feels no such compulsion. In fact, theirs is the opposite drive—each feels compelled to tell her story after having spent time in the silence of recollection, and each tells it in the spirit of offering her *self* up without reservation. Brad meets Lettice Poindexter during the early days of his success as a writer, following the publication of his first book, as true a telling as Brad will ever muster. The reasons for his initial attraction to her and the fact that she is an artist are both significant and reappear as themes in Brad's own development. He is, he admits, awed by her, in particular "by a sense of inner freedom that the girl seemed to possess" (58); and he goes on to equate this inner freedom with the freedom to speak, to say whatever she wants. For Brad, words are a commodity, something to be bought, sold, exchanged; something that can be owned and used for whatever purpose might profit their owner. Lettice does not use words this way—she uses them to convey meaning, not to manipulate or create meaning as Brad does. Tellingly, on their first official date, he focuses on her mouth though she isn't speaking at the time, and having described her mouth over the course of an entire paragraph, "He looked at her and felt, suddenly, that he knew her" (62).

Their early relationship, like Maggie and Yasha's, is built in the space of intimacy created by shared monologues. However, in Lettice and Brad's case, Lettice is the only participant:

... late at night she would lie by his side in the dark ... [and] offer him her life, all of it, all she knew of it, in a slow and humble way, in a ritual of love and redemption. It was as though she knew that the slightly overlong body which was Lettice Poindexter had no value beyond dreary animal warmth and nervous spasm unless it could be put in a perspective of the past events that had brought it here ... and that Bradwell Tolliver, whose breath she could hear in the dark and who would soon embrace that body, must, in the same moment be led to embrace and redeem all the past and in that process create the true, the real Lettice Poindexter. (63)

Brad's recognition that he cannot find the connection between his past and present selves is a direct echo of this truth so early known to Lettice Poindexter, and of course it is her letter that occasions this same epiphany in him. Lettice knows her true story and "speaks without shame of her life...[which enables her to] move around in her life as though it were a house she inhabited so familiarly she could find anything in the dark" (63). This level of comfort is enviable to Brad—he comments on it numerous times in reference to Lettice, Maggie, and Leontine. Meanwhile, "he would lie by her side in the dark, hearing the story unwind, and feel cramped and bound in some dark mystery which was himself, like a box" (63).

Of all the characters that experience this awareness of inhabiting the self, only Brad experiences it as bounded space, which goes far in explaining his reticence about houses. For Yasha, as we saw earlier, the self is a deep watery darkness, as it is for Maggie—vast, limitless. For Lettice, the space of the self is revealed in a dream which she describes in her letter to Maggie but which is also very sharply remembered by Brad: "I was falling into dark, and the rope was rough on my neck, but it kept coming on, longer and longer and longer, as I fell. It seemed I fell forever, waiting for the jerk" (364). This dream prefigures the reality of what her life will become when she is "goosed by God" and begins her coming true.

Like Brad, Lettice experiences memory spatially, but unlike him, she desires to enter the space of her memory and relive the emotions and intimacy that are captured there. An example of this desire is her compulsion to inhabit Brad's flat on MacDougal Street during his absence. This is the space where she had first lain with him, "the place where her past was re-enacted. The re-living happened only when she came there" (121). In this space, she also experiences shame at facing certain truths about herself, like her infidelity with Echegaray, but she refuses to lie to Brad about it by not telling him.

This is in direct contrast to his treatment of her. At several key moments of the text, she cries out in anguish, "But you didn't tell me—you never told me!" (118); later, "you wouldn't tell me ... you wouldn't even tell me" (269), knowing that telling is all that is needed for love and redemption. But she won't get that from Bradwell Tolliver, who is likely to respond, "Hell, a man can't tell everything" (119), likely to refuse to say what she needs to hear, refuse to say anything at all. The scenes prior to his driving her to the train station, and even that scene itself, are filled with silences on his part. Lettice tries in their last moments together to redeem something of what they had, begging him to speak, to help her remember them as they really were. And Brad, of course, remains silent. He won't realize until twenty years later what he was offered. Only when he reads her letter, in the silence of the hills over Fiddlersburg, will he "realize for the first time in all the years, even in the years of the contact and the clutching, of the blending of hopes and mixing of breaths, Lettice Poindexter was real to him" (365). Her words coming after years of silence reach out to offer him a last chance at redemption.

In the long passages that describe his early life with Lettice, Brad is aware of the connection between being comfortable in the self and being able to tell a true story. He recognizes her telling as "a ritual of love and redemption," and is awed by "her ability to speak without shame of her life, to move around in her life as though it were a house" (63). He perceives the relationship between inner space and the circuit of discourse, but cannot participate. He even denies that telling is unique and valuable: "'Tell—the word tell,' he said, 'Let us drop that word'" (328), and substitutes words that lack the quality of utterance, like *indicate* and *suggest*. Brad prefers to indicate and suggest as opposed to tell, preferring the shadows to the real thing. To indicate or suggest is not at all the same as to tell, at least not in the context of *Flood*, where to tell it all is to suffer it all again. Only through telling does one pass beyond mere silence into *le silence du bonheur*. This state is reached by Lettice very early, long before any of the other characters in the book. She reaches this state silently, inside the Fiddler house, but shares it with Maggie, saying "there was no need now to tell him anything" (177). Through love and the redemptive, intimate act of telling, she passes into the state described so often by Yasha as "beyondness" and "beautiffulness," a space inside the self where there is no longer any need to tell or to not tell. Lettice acts selflessly in telling Maggie about the affair with Echegaray. Her intent is to give Maggie an understanding of the connectedness of people and keep her from the lonely isolation to which the younger woman has consigned herself. This is understood by Maggie for what it is: a valuable lesson that will later enable her to redeem herself: "She was trying to say to me, even if she had to suffer everything over again to say it, that you have to make your *you* out of all that sliding and brokenness of things. I suppose something of that came over to me then" (273). But whether she understood it all then or not, Lettice's telling enables Maggie's redemption, just as her letter will later redeem Brad. In the end, Lettice Poindexter is the most

influential structured absence in the text; she never appears in the narrative except in the memory of others.

At one point in the text prior to the ending, Brad seems about to enter into the circuit of discourse that might free him. Frustrated with his ideas for the movie, Brad obtains the record of Cal Fiddler's trial. Reading the transcripts, talking to the "supporting cast" (of course, he never talks to Maggie about it—what she could tell him would be too true, leaving no room for him to wiggle around in), and reflecting on his own memories, he literally re-collects all the pieces of the story that destroyed so many lives. Once he hears Frog-Eye's retelling of the events, he finds that "suddenly he could remember all the events of that night which he never had before, over the years, been quite able to remember. He saw them all in his head" (317). This is interesting because, though one expects Yasha Jones to remember in pictures, one could reasonably expect Brad, a writer, to remember in words. In fact, most of his memories of Lettice, his father, and others from his past take the form of dialogue. But this story can only be remembered by him in wordlessness, in silence. In this silence, which takes place not in the Fiddler house, but in the swamp, where his own father went to cry face down in the mud, Brad recollects all the fragments he needs to piece together the telling from which he recognizes "something could be redeemed. Everything could be redeemed" (302). But instead of taking the next step in the circuit, he returns to the house only to fling his words at his sister in false accusation rather than sharing his new truth.

Reading the note Maggie has left on the mantel, Brad "felt an elation seize him .... He stood and marveled at the fact of his joy in her joy," but this is quickly replaced by vindication that she is "human," and like him, needed to escape the house. When she and Yasha enter the house, he feels a sudden, overwhelming "cry of yearning: he yearned for that joy in her joy" (324-26). He stands before them, characteristically motionless and emotionless, wishing he could feel something. More specifically, he realized that if he could express his yearning, "if he could utter it, that joy in her joy would come true." Not only does the utterance not come, "the joy had not come. It would never come. He stood there ... and knew that the lips were going to say something. He felt something piling up and throbbing inside his forehead, he felt a thickening in the chest, and he knew that the lips were going to say it. The lips were going to say whatever it was that was piling up inside his forehead and inside his chest" (327). He accuses her of turning Yasha against him, knowing even as he blames her that the real reason Yasha rejected his treatment was that Brad had been "crassly deafened by the clamor of mere factuality, [and could not] catch in darkness that delicate beat of ... the truth" (329). Again, Brad fails to speak truly, to utter what needs to be said, and in that suppression of truth, disables himself from entering into fellowship with Maggie, as he so often refused the communion of Lettice.

The letters from Lettice and Maggie that close the book as the waters close over and silence the town, confirm, as does Cal's final speech to Brad, that to arrive at the self, one must pass through the silence and into a "beyondness" that is the essential truth of the self and the self's journey. As Yasha advises Brad in one of their last conversations, "no matter what has happened to you, you have to come out on the other side of it and do a beautiful thing .... [then] the time will come when there'll be no need to tell it and no need not to tell it. You'll be free then" (287). But that freedom only comes once one has entered and then *passed through* the silence, represented spatially in this text as the

House of Forgiveness, a silent place of dark halls and closed doors, and “many mansions, some of which are lightless” (174). Maggie and Lettice enter the Fiddler house as sanctuary, and in that space, are able to develop and grow and then move on, like a crab leaving its old shell for a new one. Brad enters the house reluctantly and flees as soon as possible, but somehow cannot get away from it, “he himself had never, in spite of all the years of flight, escaped from the house. He felt the weight of emptiness and darkness even now, above him and around him in the house” (325). The house, his shell, is dead weight to him, a burden, and he does not even realize that it offers him something more. When Blanding Cottshill asks him if he came back to Fiddlersburg to be “made whole. All of piece in yourself and with the world around you,” he responds at first flippantly, “Hell ... I came to make a movie,” and then in outrage, “How the hell do I know?” (293). Though the house is, in Bachelard’s formulations of the ways in which a house can function phenomenologically, a shell for Brad just as it is for Lettice and Maggie, he carries it but never really enters into it, and seems to be trying to outrun it, unaware that it is part of him.

For some in the text, the house, like the self, is both “cell and world,” but for Brad it is only a cell. Brad alone fails to use the house as sanctuary, and when the house is destroyed, the reader wonders if he will remain a “dispersed being ... cast into the world,”<sup>20</sup> mistaking his own tears for the gleam of chrome on the highway in the distance. Opposite Brad both spatially and at this point metaphorically, Cal Fiddler sits in the pen, high above the flood, and completes the circuit by sharing what he has come to know with Brad. Cal’s final speech reveals not only his coming true, but also the nature of Brad’s failure to do so. He instructs Brad to

let the silence flow over and the real you will ride on that flood of silence like a chip on water ... and then you shut your eyes and that thing that was unthinkable blazes up around you like a brush fire. It blazes up in the dark inside your head. You realize in that flash that there is no you except in relation to all that unthinkable that the world is. And you yourself are .... [Y]ou know then that life is beautiful .... But even if you yourself haven’t had that beautiful but you know it is there, and you are happy about the mere fact that it exists, then you have to find a way to say it .... When you learn something like this, you have to say it. (345)

Brad never passes through the silence into the telling of the true story, and so remains trapped in his burdensome shell, unable to make manifest his true story, he keeps it hidden. Moreover, because his silence is not moving toward utterance, it “creates a void that is vicious in that it deprives [him] of the possibility to attribute meaning to his being.”<sup>21</sup>

One wonders, with the house destroyed and the water rising, what chance Brad Tolliver has of coming true. As Bachelard observed, the house is the only “fragment of space ... [in which] human beings can achieve silence”<sup>22</sup> and in passing from the silence of the house to the world outside (be it the ruined garden in which Maggie tells most of her story to Yasha or an old folks’ home in Chicago from which Lettice writes her letter), both Maggie and Lettice manage to reach the beyondness and become the most fully realized selves in the book. Alone on the hill with the water closing in, Brad is in some ways a helpless creature, waiting for the waters to overtake him as they overtake the town. Being not really a Fiddler, though he long carried their shell on his back, Brad

cannot dig in and wait for the tide to go out this time; fiddler crabs are best known for their ability to burrow so deeply in the sand that they can survive high tide. This option is not within Brad's ken at the moment. Brad is left on a kind of beach, with the tide rising, exposed.

Knowing perhaps that the flooding of the valley and the town would leave him in just such a situation, in the last days of Fiddlersburg he reaches out desperately in an attempt to make a connection with the last of the women in the text against whom he is juxtaposed, Leontine Purtle. Both her house and body seemed appealing sanctuaries to Brad. From his first glimpse of her walking along the street until the moment in the Seven Dwarves motel, he fancies her the Lady of Shallot. On one level he is Lancelot, and fantasizes about rescuing her from the rising waters and uncertain future of life outside Fiddlersburg, but on a deeper level, he wishes to be her, just as he wished to be Lettice—someone who could move around in the inner dark of the self, inhabiting a sanctuary instead of a box.

The use of spatial metaphors to refer to sense of self comes into play with Leontine Purtle, just as they did with Lettice Poindexter. When Brad first visits her at home, he "had that overmastering impulse. He had to see the inside of that house. He looked at Leontine and knew that he had to see the upstairs" (110), equating knowing Leontine with knowing the inside, specifically the upstairs rooms, of her house. In both psychoanalytic and phenomenological spatial analysis, the upstairs rooms of a house are equated to the privatized, intimate space of the higher self. On a less lofty note, the upstairs is most often comprised of bedrooms and the associations in this allusion are fairly clear. Brad finds the interior "precisely as he predicted" (110) and wonders what it would be like to be inside the person of Leontine instead of just inside her house, speaking of her world as dominated by a darkness not frightening but soothing, like velvet, a space of letting go. His descriptions of what this space would be like resemble those of other characters, Yasha and Lettice in particular, describing what it is to enter the self and come true. These passages are dominated by images of floating, flowing, and falling, all equated for Brad with freedom, a condition to be desired, "to be in velvety darkness which is your light, to be free of something, to fall deeper into something" (111). Part of his horror at encountering her diaphragm is that he cannot fall into her but is barricaded even in the velvety darkness of her body. He thinks he will move in her the way she moves in the dark, the way Lettice moved in the dark. His defeat stems from the recognition that he cannot really *be* inside of her.

As he was with Lettice, Brad is fascinated by thoughts of Leontine navigating familiar territory in utter darkness, and envies her ability to move through inner spaces comfortably. He sees her as fully contained in her own world, as if her house, and Fiddlersburg itself, were a womb in which she was comfortably floating. The fact that her world is one of darkness makes it even more appealing and enviable than the world of Lettice Poindexter, who was Brad's first "Lady of Shallot." His recollections of Lettice prefigure his fascination with the silent, sequestered lady of Tennyson's poem. Though Brad tags Leontine Purtle as the Lady of Shallot, he has been seeking her in every relationship he has in the text, presumably in order to play Lancelot to her. But Brad's unwillingness to engage in the circuit of discourse prescribed by the text, his preference for shadows and mirrors and fancy footwork with the truth, might make us wonder if the

Lady of Shallot is a reflection of the woman he seeks or a reflection of some aspect of himself.

The Lady of Shallot lives in a silent tower on a “silent isle” where her voice is the only sound. She spends her time weaving a “magic web with colours gay,” and prohibited by a curse she does not even know the nature of, she stays away from the windows and views the world through

a mirror clear  
That hangs before her all the year  
[in which] shadows of the world appear.<sup>23</sup>

She is content to remain in this containment, sustained by an occasional sound drifting upriver from Camelot. But when the lovers pass into her vision, she admits that she is “half-sick of shadows”; and later seeing and hearing Sir Lancelot (who is singing “Tirra lirra” by the river), she abandons the web and looks out the window, seeing the world directly for the first time. This leads to the total destruction of the web and the mirror, and then the death of the lady herself. The most interesting thing about the Lady of Shallot is that she does not go quietly. First, she inscribes her name on the prow of the boat in which she’ll drift to Camelot and

They heard her singing her last song,  
The Lady of Shallot.  
Heard a carol, mournful, holy  
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly  
Till her blood was frozen slowly  
And her eyes were darkened wholly  
Turn’d to tower’d Camelot.  
For ere she reach’d upon the tide  
The first house by the waterside  
Singing in her song she died.

What is it that Brad finds so compelling about this image? It seems to voice both a fear and a desire—he fears that the curse of one who has lived so long with only shadows and mirrors, making up stories, is to be destroyed by a glimpse of the real and true, but he still desires to sing his song, and envies those like Lettice, Maggie, and Leontine who dare to. What Brad most envies about the women in his life is their ability to move through their worlds, and simultaneously, to name their worlds and their place in them: “they all seemed to move through the darkness of History with the expertness of the blind man in his own home” (64).

Brad’s last attempt to create a false story, with himself as rescuer of the pure and innocent damsel in distress, leaves him stranded on the hill, overseeing but not participating in the services that will mark Fiddlersburg’s last day. He might even be, like Roderick Usher, so inexorably tied to his house that its destruction will be his as well. But there is another way to read Brad’s fate. The clue is another structured absence, a slippery though noticeable silence—Brad’s own text, the “autobiographical treatment” rejected by Yasha as being “expert” but failing to capture the essence of Fiddlersburg. In fact, it is the second such text to disappear from the pages of *Flood*. The first is the novel Brad had almost completed based on the trial, which he shelved (with almost no

objection) at Maggie's request. She later tells him that she does not mind anymore, that he can resurrect that text for his screenplay, but he does not even answer, and the text sinks entirely out of view, never to be mentioned again.

This is a reflection of another aspect of the structured absence: "Often, though certainly not always, either direct or tacit appeals to inexpressibility accompany the use of structured absences so that the art of leaving things out is subtly tied to an awareness of what cannot be said."<sup>24</sup> This is certainly the case with Brad's narrative, which points to its own absence,<sup>25</sup> but also to the impossibility of capturing Fiddlersburg in words. The fact that many things are said to "be" Fiddlersburg (the Fiddler house, Miss Pettifew's reclamation of the fetus in the jar, Izzie Goldfarb, the pen, the Confederate monument, etc.), points to the many possibilities. Such an accumulation of possibilities is aimed at creating uncertainty—if it is all of these, how can it be any one of them? "The effect ... is to suggest a number of possible explanations, each one put forward so tentatively that it cannot be wholly embraced, so that we are left wondering whether some or all, or perhaps none, of the conjectures might actually be true ... so the reader is left with a sense of partial or veiled revelation, a disclosure so tenuous that the true state of affairs, we half suspect, may well have completely escaped apprehension."<sup>26</sup> In the end, Fiddlersburg does escape apprehension—Yasha abandons the idea of the beautiful moving picture, and Brad tears up the telegram from Mort Seebaum because he knows that his treatment, though "expert," is not Fiddlersburg. He sees that Fiddlersburg is, in fact, an inexpressible *something*, and knows that to give it words would be to prevent its coming true for him. As he tears up the telegram, he trades in the lie of inauthentic saying for the truth of silence, the recognition that, at least in this instance, "under all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better. Silence is deep as Eternity; speech is shallow as Time."<sup>27</sup>

The absence of Brad's text is significant, then, on two levels. First, its absence is glaring, calling attention to itself as a "space hollowed out in the heart of the word."<sup>28</sup> Second, it speaks to the inexpressibility of what Brad was trying to capture—was it Truth? Community? Love? Home? The *feeling* of Fiddlersburg, as Yasha described what he wanted from Brad's treatment, is finally not reducible to language. Ultimately, then, for Brad, as for Warren, "the 'wholeness' of artistic vision paradoxically includes an awareness of its own incompleteness—that it is, like us, finite amid infinitude."<sup>29</sup>

To conclude, then, the Fiddler house and its inhabitants enclose multiple forms of absence. Like so many of the old Southern houses in Warren's works, the Fiddler house is a site of struggle and loss, taken from the Fiddlers by Lank Tolliver for sheer spite, later the site of Maggie's violation, Cal's betrayal, Lettice's miscarriage, and Brad's failure as a man, an artist, husband, and brother. We know that it is a "dark house" (it is referred to as such more than a dozen times in the text), but so is the House of Forgiveness. In the end, even Brad realizes that "there is no country but the heart" (368), and into this landscape he must now move. Having at last recognized that the people he had for so long thought of as characters were all along real, he has taken perhaps a step toward entering into his own "mysterious inwardness," and in the silence there he may begin to collect those shadows of the unrecollected, those pieces of himself and the stories he has tried to un-tell: "Therefore, in his inwardness, he said: *I cannot find the connection between what I was and what I am. I have not found the human necessity.* He knew that that was what he must try to find" (367).

In the end this movement toward solidarity may be what saves him. For Brad, as for his creator, “both poetic and novelistic truths as trial assessments press against the membrane of truth, in anxious hope of some future mystic osmosis. That deep, enduring yearning, the hallmark of Warren’s life work, comes from his vocation as a writer: to be both loner and lover at the same time.”<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, Brad’s recognition of the humanity of others and the shattering of the mirror as he turns from it toward the window have cast him out of the world of “pure art,” in which words were his tools, into the world from which, for Warren, art must come, and in which words and the silences that frame them are a medium of truth.

Like the Lady of Shallot, of whom Tennyson wrote, “the new-born love for something, for someone in the wide world from which she has been so long secluded, takes her out of the region of shadows into that of realities,”<sup>31</sup> Brad has finally turned to face the world and to accept that he is a part of it. In accepting Lettice as a person rather than a character, he becomes able to accept that he is only Brad, not “Bradwell Tolliver,” a character whose life and past he is constantly writing and revising.<sup>32</sup>

Sitting in the silence, gazing out over the water which was part of the waters that would soon cover Fiddlersburg, after the “goodbyes and the weeping,” Brad knows that there are no words, that he will not sell his screenplay any more than he would resurrect the novel he began in 1940; he knows that in the end, “we all experience levels of awareness that can never be adequately housed in words,”<sup>33</sup> and rather than engage in another false story, Brad “submits to the possibility that ‘the secret and irrational life of men,’ all that remains mute or inexplicable, may constitute human truth and God’s way of writing in crooked lines.”<sup>34</sup>

In this text, “Being does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself,”<sup>35</sup> and thus it becomes incumbent on those characters that seek redemption and true being to tell their true story. “Every man yearns for his story” (63), and only by passing through silence like passing through a house and coming out the back door into a whole other landscape, does one come, in the end, to stand in *le silence du bonheur* and come true. In the end, for Warren as for Brad, “the writer’s art is, finally, the arrangement of silences,”<sup>36</sup> or as Yasha Jones puts it, “art is the right not-telling” (105).

**[move endnotes to footnotes on appropriate pages. –Eds.]**

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Penn Warren, *Flood: A Romance of Our Time* (New York: Random House, 1964), 150. The words are those of Dr. Sutton to Lettice Poindexter. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup>Katrin Meise, "On Talking about Silence in Conversation and Literature," in *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 46.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "Knowledge and the Image of Man," in *Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Longley Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 1965), 237-46.

<sup>4</sup>Lora Romero, *Home Fronts: Domesticity and Its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 21.

<sup>5</sup>Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), ix.

<sup>6</sup>Leonard Casper, *The Blood-Marriage of Earth and Sky: The Later Novels of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>7</sup>Bachelard, 8.

<sup>8</sup>As many critics have noted, this text is replete with fathers and surrogate fathers, of which Goldfarb is a primary one. Not only does he act as a father-figure in terms of spending time with Brad, teaching him chess, but in terms of what it was to "be a man" because he would "speak to you as though you were a man, and later he played chess with you and did not let you win" (*Flood*, 16). He is also a lover of books, unlike Brad's biological father Lank, who can only find use for them as spills for the fire. And, as Randy Runyon points out in his book, *The Taciturn Text: The Fiction of Robert Penn Warren* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), of those in town, only Brad can identify the languages in which the texts Goldfarb keeps are written. Although *I'm Telling You Now* ends with the narrator returning to say good bye to Abie/Izzie, in truth, Brad did not even bid the old man farewell when he left for college, and never returned to say it, either. He also failed to say good-bye to Lank Tolliver and to Telford Lott; he even leaves old Frog-Eye, part Brad's contemporary, part Lank's, asleep in the swamp without a word of farewell. For more in-depth analysis of the paternal figures in Warren, please see Runyon's book, referenced earlier, and Barnett Guttenberg's *Web of Being: The Novels of Robert Penn Warren* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1975). Leonard Casper's *The Blood Marriage of Earth and Sky* also contains references to the paternal figures and their relationship to texts.

<sup>9</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "I am Dreaming of a White Christmas: The Natural History of a Vision," in *A Robert Penn Warren Reader* (New York: Random House, 1987), 400.

<sup>10</sup>Bachelard, 7.

<sup>11</sup>Though Maggie's monologue takes place over the course of a month, it is nevertheless a sustained monologue and the only speech of consequence given her.

<sup>12</sup>Bernard Dauenhauer, *Silence: The Phenomemnon and Its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 10.

<sup>13</sup>Dauenhauer, 16.

<sup>14</sup>The structured absence is a concept explored by Timothy Walsk in *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing and Emptiness in Literature* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988). In short, the structured absence is a textual absence aimed at calling attention to something missing in a "specific and recognized way."

<sup>15</sup>*Flood*, 323-35.

<sup>16</sup>Lucy Ferriss, *Sleeping with the Boss: Female Subjectivity and Narrative Pattern in Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 101.

<sup>17</sup>Ferriss, 102.

<sup>18</sup>Bachelard, 111.

<sup>19</sup>Bachelard, 110.

<sup>20</sup>Bachelard, 7 and 353.

<sup>21</sup>Dauenhauer, 353.

<sup>22</sup>Bachelard, 222.

<sup>23</sup>Alfred Tennyson, "The Lady of Shallot," in *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Alexander W. Allison, et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 1989), 2113.

<sup>24</sup>Walsh, 112.

<sup>25</sup>Lucy Ferriss constructs a fascinating argument that the extensive flashbacks contained in the text and not belonging to Maggie might actually be Brad's text, rather than externally focalized narrative. See *Sleeping with the Boss: Female Subjectivity and Narrative Pattern in Robert Penn Warren*, pp. 98-102.

<sup>26</sup>Walsh, 121.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Walsh, 6.

<sup>28</sup>Walsh, 70.

<sup>29</sup>Walsh, 25.

<sup>30</sup>Casper, 15.

<sup>31</sup>Micheal Thorn, *Tennyson* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 86.

<sup>32</sup>Lucy Ferriss notes that Brad is an autobiographically inclined writer who, for much of the text, is thinking about or writing an autobiographical treatment for the movie script. When he is clearly constructing himself, that is, during the points in the flashbacks where he is clearly commenting on that younger self, he refers to that character as Bradwell Tolliver. In fact, an interesting avenue of study might be to trace Brad's naming of himself relative to Ferriss's idea that much of the text is actually the text Brad is writing. But what I find interesting about this naming is that Bradwell Tolliver is specifically and exclusively what Lettice Poindexter calls him in the early days of their relationship. That he would choose this name for the character of himself is telling, and indicates the extent to which his love for her acts, finally, as the impetus of his redemption.

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<sup>33</sup> Walsh, 40.

<sup>34</sup> Casper, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Bachelard, 215.

<sup>36</sup> Casper, 46.