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> Yes, you must try to rethink what is real. Perhaps
> It is only a matter of language that traps you. You
> May yet find a new one in which experience overlaps
> Words. Or find some words to make the Truth come true.
> --Robert Penn Warren[1]

Critics agree that time and identity are central concerns in Robert Penn Warren's poetic canon. As Warren turned to a confessional voice at the mid-point of his career in the 1950s with *Brother to Dragons* and *Promises,* the facts of his past increasingly became the fodder for his poems. He left behind the objective formalism of his early modernist aesthetic in favor of a more subjective, Romantic viewpoint. As Warren himself explained in an interview, his late poems tend to be "really autobiographical--things that really happened."[2] Following the publication of *Audubon: A Vision* in 1969, however, Warren's poems began to address these issues of time and identity in a more complex way, as he settled more firmly upon themes involving identity and the self's complicated and often uncertain negotiations with memory and language. As a result, Warren's view of the "self" became more unsettled and problematic in his later verse. As he writes in *Or Else, "Is this really me?* Of course not, for Time / Is only a mirror in the fun-house. // You must re-evaluate the whole question" (*"Interjection #1: The Need for Re-evaluation,"* in *CP* 271). By focusing on the nuances of the autobiographical act which renders memory into language, Warren moved inevitably closer to the conclusion drawn in his 1975 poem "Brotherhood in Pain": "You exist only in the delirious illusion of language" (*CP* 331). Warren's capacity to make such a statement places him at the thresh-

old of postmodernism.

Both Charlotte Beck and Victor Strandberg have applied the post-modern label to various aspects of Warren's writing, but I believe I have a different emphasis. Beck uses the term as an historical marker to designate trends in American poetry in the 1950s and links features of Warren's "new" poetry to these "postmodern" trends–namely, his "frankly subjective I," "looser approach to poetic form," and "composition of poems in sequences."[3] In contrast, Strandberg uses the term to describe more general philosophical assumptions underpinning various aspects of Warren's canon: "a conception of literature as an active agent for social change," "the concept of the self as a social construct that is unstable and non-unitary," and finally, a "willingness to erase the line between high art and popular culture."[4] That Beck and Strandberg use the term in such different ways illustrates the increasingly protean and ubiquitous nature of the postmodern label.

I would, however, like to extend these claims by arguing that Warren's poetic project in the last period of his career is largely informed by what is perhaps the single feature most commonly associated with postmodernism: an antifoundational perspective. Warren's late assumptions regarding the self, language, memory, and time lead to a general sense of uncertainty and instability which ultimately compromises our entire notion of truth, if by truth we have in mind some absolutely verifiable, objective, and universal truth. It is this expression of uncertainty which provides perhaps the strongest link between Warren and postmodernism. Most particularly, Warren's poetic inquiry into the flawed medium of language and its central, problematic role in defining the self led him to some of the same conclusions reached by contemporary postmodern theorists, particularly as they are outlined by Jean-François Lyotard in his influential book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, first published in 1979. I am not arguing Warren was influenced by Lyotard; rather, I believe he reached these similar conclusions quite on his own through his poetry's evolving thematic inquiries and altering perspectives.

Lyotard extends the poststructuralists' critique of language by attacking the notion of holistic, universal truth, an approach which clears the way for a greater diversity or heterogeneity of truth claims and–ideally, at least–a more pluralistic democracy. According to Lyotard, the simplest definition of postmodernism is "incredulity toward metanarratives."[5] By "metanarratives" he means the grand narratives which serve as the totalizing and legitimating myths forming the foundation for Western culture in the modern age. Of these, Lyotard singles out and dismantles the belief in continuing human liberation through progress in science and technology, as well as the assumption that we can achieve a valid form of universal knowledge. Lyotard undermines both of these myths by dismissing the traditional hierarchies of knowledge which have developed in Western culture, placing the heretofore privileged realm of "scientific knowledge" on the same plane as "narrative knowledge." Indeed, according to Lyotard, all forms of knowledge may be reduced to a matter of "language games," each of which operates under its own system of ground rules and standards for proof. In other words, the "truths" of one field of knowledge are not necessarily translatable to another, and consequently, Lyotard claims that there can be no "universal" knowledge. Instead, meaning can only be determined locally, provisionally, and temporarily, and the health of a society depends largely upon its ability to maintain a multiplicity or variety of such language games.

Warren's 1975 book *Democracy and Poetry* expresses concerns and views remarkably similar to those outlined by Lyotard, as do many of his late poems which articulate his views on language and the "unpresentable." *Democracy and Poetry* is Warren's most extensive statement on the social significance of poetry in contemporary culture and society, and it is often cited and discussed by critics.

However, certain aspects of the text have led to a perhaps incomplete reading of Warren's views–particularly his views on the self. This can be traced most specifically to his definition of the term "self" in the book's foreword. After stating that "the concept of self, once scrutinized, is . . . enormously complex and problematical," he goes on to define the term *self* as "in individuation, the felt principle of significant unity."[6] To this definition he appends the following clarification:

> The qualifiers felt and significant demand special comment. By *felt* I mean that I am concerned, not with a theoretical analysis as such, but with what a more or less aware individual may experience as his own selfhood, and what he assumes about other individuals. By *significant* I mean two things: continuity–the self as a development in time, with a past and a future; and responsibility–the self as a moral identity, recognizing itself as capable of action worthy of praise or blame. (*DP* xiii)

Critics have often singled out this statement and made it into a governing principle in their analyses of Warren. Fred Thiemann, for instance, uses this statement to place Warren in a position contrary to the poststructuralist view of the self as an illusion constructed of language. Robert Koppelman, on the other hand, uses this comment on the self's continuity to frame his discussion of Warren's late poetry, which he characterizes as a dramatization of "the narrative self's Socratic quest for the Truth."[7] But these critics and others may be reading too much certainty and stability into this definition of the self, particularly if we consider it first within the broader text of *Democracy and Poetry*, and second within the broader context of Warren's concurrent poetic practices. Warren later in the text of *Democracy and Poetry* complicates this initial definition, first by explaining that he believes the self "is possible only in a community," which points to Victor Strandberg's assertion that Warren expresses the postmodern view of the self as a "social construct that is unstable and non-unitary."[8] Later in the text, Warren is careful to dismiss "the idea that the self is a pre-existing entity . . . like a Platonic idea exist-

ing in a mystic realm beyond time and change" (*DP* 88). For Warren, such a view is "the essence of passivity" and "absurdity," "for the self is never to be found, but must be created" (*DP* 88-89). But as his late poetry so often illustrates, the creation of the self is neither a simple nor definite endeavor. A poem like "Problem of Autobiography: Vague Recollection or Dream?" suggests that if the self is created in time and language–through memory and the linguistic representations of it–its relationship with reality and truth is ultimately compromised. As mentioned earlier, Warren in his late poetry is willing to entertain the possibility that we exist "only in the delirious illusion of language." Through his poetic treatment of the self's problematic negotiations with language and time, Warren articulates a position of far greater uncertainty than would be suggested solely by the opening comments of *Democracy and Poetry*.[9]

It is just this sense of uncertainty regarding the self which informs Warren's comments in *Democracy and Poetry* regarding science, technology, rationalism, and progress. While the first essay in *Democracy and Poetry*, "America and the Diminished Self," documents poetry's "diagnostic" function, the second of the essays, "Poetry and Selfhood," attempts to argue that poetry may also serve a "therapeutic" role in contemporary society, particularly within the context of what Warren refers to as the "Technetronic Age" (*DP* 42).[10] It would be tempting to view Warren's complaints against the world of "science, technology, and big organization" as simply a recapitulation of his early Agrarian principles, but this would be a severe distortion of his present position. For in addition to responding to a very different cultural context, Warren now has a very different view of the self, and he therefore has a very different justification for his argument in support of poetry's social value. Warren's Agrarian views held that the individual in the modern age had been cut off from the stable cultural traditions of the past, and he consequently desired a rapprochement with the past and its stable, unchanging values. Now,

however, Warren accepts uncertainty, flux, and fragmentation as the self's natural state. And instead of calling for a rapprochement with tradition which would restore the self to a sense of wholeness, he now calls for poetry which both acknowledges and documents the enormous complexity and uncertainty of the self:

> . . . The world changes, the tonality of experience changes, and we seek a new language adequate to the new experience. Except for an undefined malaise, we may not even know that language no longer conforms to experience.
> No, I should say that the malaise arises because we do not know the nature of our experience. Only the new language can let us know the nature of the experience potential in the new world around us--and know the nature of ourselves. In other words, for reader and writer alike, the need for the revolution is a need to discover identity--to locate oneself on the vast and shifting chart of being.[11]

As Warren explains near the end of *Democracy and Poetry*, poetry cannot "give definitions and certainties. But it can help us to ponder on what Saint Augustine meant when he said that he was a question to himself" (*DP* 92). He explains that such a question is itself an indication of our "divided nature," the necessary result of our capacity for "self-consciousness" (*DP* 92, 93). Importantly, Warren makes it clear that he sees self-division as the natural and inevitable state, and not as simply the consequence of modernity:

> On that day when the hairless ape felt the first flicker of self-consciousness and self-criticism, and was first aware that something inside him was looking at something else inside him, he was doomed, as we are doomed, to live, both in the flesh and in society, in the bright irony and long anguish of the machine and the vision--for that is what we are, machines capable of vision. (*DP* 93)

For Warren, poetry can serve a therapeutic function by reminding us of these ironies and complexities of the divided self. In short, he conceives of poetry as an antidote to the myths of rationalism and positivism, which offer false promises of certainty and which feed our blind faith in science, technology, and progress. This central premise of his late aesthetic is perhaps the feature which links him most specifically with the antifoundational tendencies of postmodernism. Warren, like Lyotard, is very much concerned with the privileged status achieved by science and technology in the modern age. And Warren, again like Lyotard, attempts to undermine this hierarchy by arguing that there are *other* forms of knowledge which have equal claims to legitimacy--claims which science, operating under different rules, cannot de-legitimate. Warren asks, "Even though overwhelmed by the grandeur and apparent inevitability of the scientific project, does man, nevertheless, still yearn for other kinds of knowledge? Not in place of, but in addition to, scientific knowledge, in order to make a world more humanly habitable?" (*DP* 47). Warren at first places this question within a continuing humanistic tradition, alluding to thinkers as diverse as Vico, Kierkegaard, and Bertrand Russell. But his commentary is not simply the restatement of traditional humanist desires. Instead, his comments on multiple forms of knowledge are informed by the postmodern condition and the acute awareness of language's central and problematic role in the construction of *any* form of knowledge. Tellingly, Warren expresses a certain amount of hope for the "sequel" to the "Cartesian epoch"--quantum physics--particularly for the radical uncertainty which accompanied its cultural ascendancy. He even notes optimistically that some scientists "began referring to artists as brother symbolists with merely a different kind of net for snaring 'reality'" (*DP* 51). This potential promise of equality between the truth claims of science and those of art suggests exactly the sort of heterogeneous view of knowledge described by Lyotard. But unfortunately, as Warren points out, "the kind of technology we have does not seem to derive from the more open-ended and inclusive views which rumor instructs me are to be found in current scientific thought" (*DP* 52).

This being the case, Warren's late poetry often exposes the limi-

tations of language and its problematic role in the construction of any truth claim. Over and over again, he returns the reader to the sense that language is finally incapable of "snaring" reality–a fact which alters our sense of both scientific knowledge and narrative knowledge. Indeed, this sense of language's inadequacy becomes something of a refrain in Warren's last four collections of poems–*Now and Then: Poems 1976-1978, Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980, Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980*, and "Altitudes and Extensions," the "new" poems within Warren's *New and Selected Poems: 1923-1985*. Interestingly, Warren's repeated emphasis on language's inadequacy self-reflexively calls attention to the limitations of his own art, but perhaps more importantly, it calls into question the concept of universal truth. This may best be understood if we first consider Lyotard's discussion of the Kantian sublime. As Lyotard explains, the sublime is a "strong and equivocal emotion" carrying with it "both pleasure and pain." This results from the fact that the sublime sentiment springs from a conflict between the subject's "faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to 'present' something." In short, we experience the sublime sentiment when the capacity to conceive of something outruns our capacity to present it. Importantly, the capacity to *present* the *conceived of* is the basis of the human claim to universal truth and knowledge; consequently, the sublime sentiment short-circuits this claim. Lyotard explains:

> Knowledge exists if, first, the statement is intelligible, and second, if "cases" can be derived from the experience which "corresponds" to it. Beauty exists if a certain "case" (the work of art) . . . appeals to the principle of universal consensus (which may never be attained).
> Taste, therefore, testifies that between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept, an undetermined agreement, without rules, giving rise to a judgment which Kant calls reflective, may be experienced as pleasure. The sublime sentiment is a different sentiment. It takes place, on the contrary, when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what

is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it. We have the Idea of the simple (that which cannot be broken down, decomposed), but we cannot illustrate it with a sensible object which would be a "case" of it. We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to "make visible" this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are ideas of which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience) . . . . They can be said to be unpresentable.[12]

Warren's late poetry returns again and again to this sublime sentiment in which the poet–the generally accepted arbiter of language–attempts to present an experience which is unpresentable; inevitably, he is left to retreat to a statement of his own–and language's–inadequacy in the face of the world's reality. Consider, for example, "Mountain Plateau," from *Now and Then*:

> At the center of acres of snow-whiteness
> The snag-oak reared, black and old, boughs
> Crank. Topmost twigs–pen-strokes, tangle, or stub–fretted
> The ice-blue of sky. A crow,
> On the highest black, frail, and sky-thrust support,
>
> Uttered
>
> Its cry to the immense distance.
> I hear the cry across the immense distance
> Of the landscape of my heart.
>
> That landscape now reduplicates, snow-white, the one
> In which I once stood. At its center, too, the
> Black snag stands.
>
> A crow gleams there up-thrust against the blue sky.
>
> I can make no answer
> To the cry from the immense distance,
>
> My eyes fill with tears. I have lived
> Long without being able
> To make adequate communication. (*CP* 351)

As is the case with much of Warren's late verse, this is a poem about language–*and* poetry. On the surface the text is quite simple: the poet recalls a scene in which a crow calls from a black tree sitting in the center of a snowy landscape, and then the poet reflects on this recollection. But notice that in the third line Warren describes the twigs of the oak as "pen strokes"–an image which deflects the reader away from the concept of the referent (the real scene from which the memory derives) and back towards the words on the page. This subtly reminds the reader of the linguistic predicament: this is not the tree itself but a linguistic representation of the tree. Notice also how he isolates the word "Uttered" amid the blank white space of the page. At first, it would seem that the word's placement attempts to visually repeat, or visually present, the scene, becoming–like the tree and crow themselves–black images on the "snow-whiteness" of the page. But instead of the words of the poem becoming the tree and crow, what has actually happened is these real objects have been reduced to mere words; this is the source of the poet's pain, his sense of inadequacy. It is at the point of attempted utterance–that moment in which we attempt to *present* the *conceived of*–that we sense the way in which language alienates us from the world. Even though the scene "reduplicates" in the poet's heart, complete with the crow's cry, he claims that "he can make no answer" because the reality he seeks to present is in fact unpresentable. But this particular claim is at least partly false, for he has made an answer through the text of the poem itself; only unfortunately, it is an answer which cannot escape the text of the page. Consequently, the closing three lines are a summary not so much of this single, isolated experience as they are of the poet's entire creative endeavor: "I have lived / Long without being able / To make adequate communication." He is left finally with only a "Black snag" at the center of his heart's landscape, a snag which is nothing more than words. These words in the heart in turn become pen strokes, which in turn become the typed characters of the poem's text

which the reader sees, a text which finally fails to make visible the real scene. Being a poem which expresses the sublime sentiment, the poet's closing reflection imparts "no knowledge about reality"; instead, the poet can only reflect on his own inability to make his recollection wholly present through language–a reflection which, of course, is also subject to the vagaries of language. It is also interesting to note that this poem focuses on the mundane image of a crow rather than the more stately image of the soaring hawk so often seen in Warren's poetry. Much has been made of Warren's hawk imagery: critics such as Victor Strandberg, Harold Bloom, and John Burt have claimed that these hawk images represent everything from total knowledge and merciless truth to poetic power and necessity of being.[13] But in "Mountain Plateau" it is the utterly ordinary image of a crow–instead of the more regal hawk–which provokes the sublime sentiment of the unpresentable, a fact which further underscores the inadequacy of language–and Warren's own poetic effort.[14]

Warren recalls another sublime alpine landscape in the poem "Language Barrier." This time, his reflections suggest that the imperfect filter of language separates us irrevocably from reality; we are consequently incapable of translating–or perhaps even hearing–the world's different dialect. As the narrator contemplates the sublime alpine landscape, he asks, "Alone, alone, / What grandeur here speaks? The world / Is the language we cannot utter. / Is it a language we can even hear?" (*CP* 421). Reflecting on this "language barrier" years later, the narrator ends with a note of ironic understatement which undercuts the human belief that we hold a special, privileged place in the world:

> What,
> Long ago, did the world try to say?
>
> It is long till dawn.
> The stars have changed position, a far train whistles
> For crossing. Before the first twitter of birds

> You may again drowse. Listen—we hear now
> The creatures of gardens and lowlands.

> It may be that God loves them, too. (*CP* 421)

By instructing the reader to "Listen" to the auditory images of the stirring birds and creatures and the passing train, Warren again ironically points to the silence of the text–its separateness from the referent and its consequent inability to do justice to the reality being described. This, then, is his answer to his question as to whether or not we can "even hear" the language of the world. Instead of language bringing us closer to reality–and closer to God–it alienates us from reality. As he similarly concludes in the poem "Code Book Lost," "... message on message, like wind or water, in light or in dark, / The whole world pours at us. But the code book, somehow, is lost" (*CP* 360).

For Warren, then, language is finally incapable of "snaring" reality, and this being the case, he contends that we must begin to reconsider our entire sense of what is "real" and what is "true." Indeed, Warren makes it quite clear that we are in fact incapable of articulating "Truth," as he most pointedly expresses it in the poem of that name:

> Truth is what you cannot tell.
> Truth is for the grave.
> Truth is only the flowing shadow cast
> By the wind-tossed elm
> When sun is bright and grass well groomed. (*CP* 415)

In this poem Warren unambiguously states that we are never capable of grasping truth through language. Consequently, we can never satiate our desire for truth, a desire which he equates with "the curse laid upon us in the Garden" (*CP* 415). His focus on the shortcomings of language leads inevitably to the undermining of truth, which can only be approached through this flawed medium. As he elsewhere asks,

"What tongue knows the name of Truth? Or Truth to come? / All we can do is strive to learn the cost of experience" ("What Is the Voice that Speaks?" *CP* 420).

By directly challenging our belief in an attainable, universal truth, Warren attempts to combat the complacency of our assumptions by returning us to a vigorous inquiry into the complexity and uncertainty of our own experience in all of its ironies and limitations. These recurring statements on the inadequacy of language prompt the reader to rethink exactly what is meant by words like "truth" and "reality," and to explore the enormous assumptions contained therein. This is the focus of the poem "The Whole Question," which opens innocuously enough by stating, "You'll have to rethink the whole question. This / Getting born business is not as simple as it seemed" (*CP* 566). But the complexity Warren details goes beyond what the clichéd opening lines would indicate, as he again links the uncertainty in our lives to the fundamental issue of language and the inevitable failure of words and names to convey or capture what is real. Almost like Lacan, Warren in this poem portrays the acquisition of language as the central alienating moment in an individual's life:

> Sometimes your face got twisted. They called it a smile.

> You noticed how faces from outer vastness might twist, too.
> But sometimes different twists, with names unknown,
> And there were noises with no names you knew,
> And times of dark silence when you seemed nothing–or gone;

> Years passed, but sometimes seemed nothing except the same.
> You knew more words, but they were words only, only–
> Metaphysical midges that plunged at the single flame
> That centered the infinite dark of your skull; or lonely,

> You woke in the dark of real night to hear the breath
> That seemed to promise reality in the vacuum
> ●f the sleepless dream beginning when underneath
> The curtain dawn seeps, and on wet asphalt wet tires hum.

Yes, you must try to rethink what is real. Perhaps
It is only a matter of language that traps you. You
May yet find a new one in which experience overlaps
Words. Or find some words to make the Truth come true. (*CP* 566)

Writing of this poem, Robert Koppelman states that "the persona seems to possess a capacity for Truth, but the language of society has corrupted Truth to the point where genuine meaning is accessible only through dreams." In contrast to Koppelman, I do not believe Warren is locating the problem of meaning in the corruption of society; he is locating the problem in the very nature of language itself. Even if "genuine meaning" were accessible in dream, we could never present it through language, for the linguistic representation of dreams can never be felt with the strangeness and intensity of the dream itself, which to the dreamer always outruns the capacity for telling of it. Koppelman seems to suggest this problem later in his explication when he states that the "persona acknowledges that true self knowledge is a knowledge of experience that may be approached, but not represented, by language."[16] But Koppelman does not pursue the more radical implications of this premise, which in fact undermines our entire belief in a stable, knowable, and universal form of truth. For as Lyotard explains, in order for knowledge to exist it must first be intelligibly stated. We are consequently left again with the sublime sentiment in which the capacity to conceive of something outruns our capacity to present it, and Warren again ends his poem in an understated and paradoxical manner: how are we to make the Truth true?

This linguistic dilemma is never resolved in Warren's poetry. Instead, he attempts to achieve a curiously unique balance, continually approaching the "Inevitable Frontier" at which language fails, and returning to a sober acceptance that we must nonetheless have faith in language if we are to construct any form of meaning in our lives. The point is that this meaning is anything but stable and must be continuously interrogated and reshaped. As Warren states in "Unless,"

All will be in vain unless–unless what? Unless
You realize that what you think is Truth is only

A husk for something else. Which might,
Shall we say, be called energy, as good a word as any. . . . (*CP* 356)

The poet's hesitation here over replacing the word "Truth" with "energy" points on the one hand to the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and signified, and on the other hand to our inability to communicate without some signifier. Warren accepts that we must rely on language, but he constantly reminds the reader to not become complacent in this reliance on an unstable and arbitrary system. Taken together, Warren's numerous poetic statements regarding the shortcomings of language form something of a refrain in his last four collections of poems, and these repeated statements function much like the caption in René Magritte's painting, "The Treachery of Images." Below this representational painting of a tobacco pipe, the caption reads, "This is not a pipe." Just as Magritte's caption prompts viewers to examine their assumptions about artistic representation and reality, Warren's numerous statements on the failure of language prompt readers to question their own assumptions about language, reality, and the purpose of artistic creation.

The poem "Fear and Trembling," which serves as the "Coda" for the volume *Rumor Verified*, provides what is perhaps the best illustration of the balance Warren attempts to achieve in his inquiry into language. Perhaps the first thing which should be mentioned regarding this poem is the title's allusion to Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, a text which attempts to illuminate the cold, stark, and austere nature of true faith. Through a creative analysis of the Genesis account of Abraham's dilemma following God's command that he sacrifice his son Isaac, Kierkegaard argues that true faith exists "by

virtue of the absurd": "it is not an immediate instinct of the heart, but is the paradox of life and existence." For Kierkegaard, the "knight of faith" has the "passion" necessary to "plunge confidently into the absurd."[17] Warren similarly sees our existence as a paradox which requires a qualitative leap of faith, but for him, the paradox forms around the issue of language and the problem of meaning.[18] In the poem "Fear and Trembling," he again reminds us of the arbitrary nature of the sign, while at the same time asking if meaning is possible *without* words:

> The sun now angles downward, and southward.
> The summer, that is, approaches its final fulfillment.
> The forest is silent, no wind-stir, bird-note, or word.
> It is time to meditate on what the season has meant.
>
> But what is the meaningful language for such meditation?
> What is a word but wind through the tube of the throat?
> Who defines the relation between the word sun and the sun?
> What word has glittered on whitecap? Or lured blossom out?
> Walk deeper, foot soundless, into the forest.
> Stop, breath bated. Look southward, and up, where high leaves
> Against sun, in vernal translucence, yet glow with the freshest
> Young tint of the lost spring. Here now nothing grieves.
>
> Can one, in fact, meditate in the heart, rapt and wordless?
> Or find his own voice in the towering gust now from northward?
> When boughs toss—is it in joy or pain and madness?
> The gold leaf—is it whirled in anguish or ecstasy skyward?
>
> Can the heart's meditation wake us from life's long sleep,
> And instruct us how foolish and fond was our labor spent—
> Us who now know that only at death of ambition does the deep
> Energy crack crust, spurt forth, and leap
>
> From grottoes, dark—and from the caverned enchainment? (CP 487)

The poem opens simply enough with a series of declarative statements describing the decline of the season, but as soon as the issue of meaning is introduced in the fourth line, the direct statements dis-

solve into questions and uncertainty, with the second stanza again illustrating the arbitrary nature of the sign and its irrevocable separateness from reality ("Who defines the relation between the word *sun* and the sun?"). But at the same time as he questions language's ability to capture reality, Warren also asks in the fourth stanza whether or not we can meditate on meaning *without* language. Can meaning and knowledge exist in a "wordless" form? Warren never answers this question in the poem; in fact, he can only ask more and more questions as the poem moves toward its "conclusion"—itself in the form of a question. This poem suggests that when we consider language's central, yet problematic role in the creation of meaning, any meaning we create is reduced to interpretation (do the boughs and leaves move in "joy" and "ecstasy" or "pain" and "anguish"?). And if this is the case, we can never locate an absolute form of universal truth. Perhaps Warren is saying that it is only by facing this dark, linguistic paradox that the "deep Energy" of our potential is allowed to "crack crust, spurt forth, and leap" into being. The construction of meaning requires a qualitative leap of faith in the face of this absurd linguistic predicament; the only other option would be silence.

But then again, there is another option, an option which Lyotard claims distinguishes the *truly* postmodern art form from the modern, *and* which finally distinguishes Warren from truly postmodern aesthetics. Lyotard distinguishes modern aesthetics from postmodern aesthetics as follows:

> Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.[19]

This, then, is exactly where we would have to draw the line between Warren and contemporary postmodern aesthetics. According to Lyotard's distinctions, we would have to place Warren in the former, rather than the latter, category. Even though Warren articulates postmodern dilemmas, concerns, and sentiments throughout his late poetry, his texts do not exhibit the more radical features of presentation which we have come to associate with someone like John Ashberry or the Language Poets, whose textual effects often demand as much of the reader as Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. Warren was in fact ambivalent about Ashberry's poetry, as may be gleaned from correspondence from Harold Bloom among the Robert Penn Warren Papers.[20] Perhaps Warren felt that a poetry such as Ashberry's *gave in* too much to the "language barrier," or perhaps he felt that this style of writing was creating a new form of elitism reminiscent of the anti-democratic tendencies of high modernism. Warren in *Democracy and Poetry* in fact addresses at some length the problems of accessibility and elitism in the arts. Unlike Ashberry, Warren approaches the "Inevitable Frontier" at which language fails, but he always returns to a faith in the word, for he believes that the possibility of a democratic community is contingent upon this faith.[21] The surreal, nightmarish landscape Warren describes in his poem "Inevitable Frontier" points to what could result if we were to entirely lose faith in the word, if we were finally to give in to the vagaries of language:

Be careful! Slow and careful, for you now approach
The frontier where the password is difficult to utter--or grasp.

Echo among chert peaks and perilously balanced boulders
Has something to do with it, not to mention your early rearing, with

Its naïve logic. For remember now, this is the frontier
Where words coming out of the mouth are always upside-

Down, and all tongues are sloppily cubical, and shadows of nothing are,
Whatever the hour, always something, and tend to bleed

If stepped on–oh, do keep mindful how
Slick the blood of shadow can be, especially

If the shadow is of nothing. As a corollary,
The shadow of something, yourself for instance,

Provides its own peculiar hazards. You may trip
On it, and start falling upward, screaming,

Screaming for somebody to grab you before you are out
Of reach. Your eyes, too, must be readjusted, for

Here people, owl-like, see only by dark, and grope by day. Here,
People eat in shamefaced privacy, but the great Public Square,

Sparsely planted, is full, in daylight, of gut-wheeze and littered with
    feces
Till the carts come, and later, *à l'heure sexuelle*, at noon, waiters wheel
    out

To the café terraces divans of ingeniously provocative designs,
While clients, now clad in filmy robes, emerge from locker rooms,
    laughing

Like children at tag. Food is, of course, forbidden, but scented drinks,
And coffee, are served under awnings. Another item:

Criminality is rare, but those convicted,
Mystically deprived of the memory of their names, are exiled

To the Isles of the Blest, where they usually end up swallowing their
    tongues,
This from boredom, for in their language *bliss* and *boredom*

Have the same linguistic root. Yes, many things
Are different here, and to be happy and well-adjusted, you

Must put out of mind much you have been taught. Among others, the
    names
Of Plato, St. Paul, Spinoza, Pascal and Freud must not be spoken, and
    when,

Without warning, by day or night, the appalling
White blaze of God's Great Eye sweeps the sky, History

Turns tail and scuttles back to its burrow
Like a groundhog caught in a speeding sportscar's headlight.
    (*CP* 369-370)

For Warren, to lose faith entirely in language is to accept a world in
which nothing is as it seems, and everything collapses into nothing.
As our belief in language fails, so too must our belief in meaning;
consequently, responsibility, ethics, value, and history all become
void, while community and democracy give way to a solipsistic pur-
suit of personal pleasure. But in the world here described, even this
pleasure loses its luster, for without a constructed sense of value,
everything is the same and bliss becomes boring. In order for us to
have a meaningful democratic community, Warren believes that we
must maintain our faith in the word, and in *Democracy and Poetry* he
argues that poetry can indeed play a vital role in creating such a dem-
ocratic community. But as his poetic statements make clear, we must
not be complacent in our faith in language; we must instead recognize
that language is a flexible rather than a frozen medium. While this
flexibility can at times be terrifying, it also makes possible what
Warren describes as one of the "most precious heritages" of democ-
racy: "The will to change" (*DP* 79). Importantly, this will to change
is finally contingent upon one's willingness to plunge into the absurd-
ity of the linguistic predicament, for just as history is recorded in lan-
guage, so too is the future anticipated in language.

ENDNOTES

[1] Robert Penn Warren, "The Whole Question," in *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 566. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *CP*.

[2] "Interview with Eleanor Clark and Robert Penn Warren," in *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Floyd C. Watkins, John T. Hiers, and Mary Louise Weaks (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 332.

[3] Charlotte Beck, "The Postmodernism of Robert Penn Warren," in *To Love So Well the World: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Dennis L. Weeks (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 212.

[4] Victor Strandberg, "R.P.W. and T.S.E.: In the Steps of the (Post)Modern Master," in *To Love So Well the World*, ed. Dennis L. Weeks, 35.

[5] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv; first published in France in 1979 by Editions de Minuit.

[6] Robert Penn Warren, *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), xii. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *DP*.

[7] See Thiemann's "Politics and the Self in Robert Penn Warren's Poetry," *South Atlantic Review* 64, no. 4 (fall 1996): 84-85; and Koppelman's *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 94. Koppelman does admit much greater complexity in these issues than most critics have, going on to examine the "problematic relationship between language and spirituality," and concluding that "true self-knowledge . . . may be approached, but not represented by language" (83 and 92).

[8] Victor Strandberg, "R.P.W. and T.S.E.: In the Steps of the (Post)Modern Master," 35.

[9] I have argued elsewhere that Warren's autobiographical poems address many of the problems and dilemmas outlined by contemporary theorists of autobiography, particularly Paul de Man and Paul John Eakin. See "The Immolation of Influence: Aesthetic Conflict in Robert Penn Warren's Poetry," *Mississippi Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (winter 1998-99): 47-72, especially 63-72. For interesting comments from Warren on the competing roles of fiction and fact in autobiography, see *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 108, 296-297; and the "Afterthought" of Warren's *Being Here: Poetry 1977-1980* (New York: Random House, 1980). In the latter, Warren suggests that the self is constructed through the interplay between fiction and fact; indeed, he seems to privilege the fiction involved in autobiography over the fact. After describing the volume as a "shadowy autobiography" which consists of a "fusion of fiction and fact," Warren goes on to claim that "fiction may often be more deeply significant than fact. Indeed, it may be said that our lives are our own supreme fiction" (*CP* 441).

[10] Warren borrows this label from Zbigniew Brzezinski (*DP* 99). Also, it should be noted that by "poetry," Warren means any form of art, but his comments resonate most specifically with his own literary efforts.

[11] *A Plea in Mitigation: Modern Poetry and the End of an Era* (Macon, Ga.: Wesleyan College, 1966), 1-2. In this essay Warren dismisses both modernism and the New Criticism, and claims that "We are now waiting for a new revelation" (12). Significantly, he foreshadows his own late poetry's increasing concern with the fallibility of language and the related flux of self and identity

[12] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 77 and 77-78.

[13] See Victor Strandberg, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 60; Harold Bloom, "Sunset Hawk: Warren's Poetry and Tradition," in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 195-210; and Burt, *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 103-106.

[14] The figure of a crow functions in a somewhat similar way in Warren's poem "Fog," from the final sequence of *Incarnations* (*CP* 248-49).

[15] For a somewhat different reading, see John Burt's discussion of this poem in the Introduction of *Robert Penn Warren and American Idealism*, 5-9.

[16] Robert S. Koppelman, *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality*, 91 and 92.

[17] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), 57-58 and 44.

[18] It should also be noted that the subtitle of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is "A Dialectical Lyric"--a phrase which could very well be used to describe Warren's own poetic practices in his last four collections. Many critics have noticed the dialectical and dialogical qualities of Warren's late poems. As Randolph Runyon has exhaustively demonstrated in *The Braided Dream: Robert Penn Warren's Late Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), his last four collections may be read as a single continuous poem, with each individual poem connected to others by recurring words, images, phrases, or situations. In a sense, the poems modify one another in what Robert Koppelman describes in *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality* as a "continuing dialectic."

[19] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

[20] Bloom mentions Warren's ambivalence toward Ashberry's poetry in a letter from late 1974 (The Robert Penn Warren Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, MSS 51, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, Conn.). In the letter Bloom discusses his forthcoming *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), which includes analyses of poems by Warren, Ashberry, and A.R. Ammons.

[21] For an interesting related discussion of issues of accessibility, audience, and the relationship between southern poetry and major contemporary poetic movements, see Ernest Suarez, "Contemporary Southern Poetry and Critical Practice," *Southern Review* 30, no. 4 (autumn 1994): 674-88. Suarez also discusses the problems critics have had in placing Warren amid the landscape of contemporary American poetry.