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*"Faint Angel Voices I Didn't Always Savvy":
T. S. Eliot and the Mystical Subtext of All the King's Men*

STEVE MARSDEN

We begin *All the King's Men* chasing a "bright, flooded place like a mirage" down a white slab of highway lined with the signs marking the passage of those who had traveled the same road, and who had died hypnotized by the dazzle of reflected light.¹ Throughout the book Jack Burden continues a quest for a kind of illumination, a dazzle and a truth that he must chase but which is endlessly elusive, "always ahead." We, as readers, follow along behind him, still reading the signs, which warn, mark the path, and refer us back to the others who have followed the same road.

In *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren*, Victor Strandberg gave Jack's pursuit of that dazzle of truth (which may also be just a mirage) a central place in his reading of the novel. Shifting attention from the story of the rise and fall of Willie Stark, Strandberg makes the claim that Jack Burden's "conversion" is the most important occurrence in the novel, and furthermore, that Burden's fictional conversion parallels one "that apparently overtook its author" Robert Penn Warren "at about the time he was writing *All the King's Men* in the mid 1940's."² Strandberg, drawing parallels between the pattern of Jack's conversion and the religious psychology of William James, carried out the first in-depth study of Warren's complex and career-long relationship with mysticism.

Some eighteen years later, Robert Koppelman took up the question of Warren's treatment of spiritual themes. Koppelman, in his *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality*, agreed with Strandberg about the central importance of the element of spiritual development in Warren's work in general and in *All the King's Men* in particular. Koppelman's study, however, influenced by reader-response theory,

had shifted the focus and location of that spiritual development. Jack's pursuit of meaning, Koppelman argues, parallels a similar development in the conscientious reader of *All the King's Men*. "The primary importance of Jack Burden's story," he argues, "especially the language and form in which it is told, lies in its capacity to elicit the spiritual participation of the reader."³ Koppelman, in attempting to explain this capacity, pays special attention to Warren's use of "theological language" in Jack's narrative, and the reflexive motion of the text toward the reader: what he calls an "ever-widening ripple, concentric circles of meaning and significance."⁴

Koppelman's explanation of the structure of spiritual involvement is perceptive and convincing. However, through limiting his study's engagement with other texts, Koppelman ignores one of the prime elements of reader involvement—an element which shows that the "ever-widening ripple" of meaning does not begin in Warren's text, or is not in any event confined to it, but stretches back into other texts, passes through other readings. The intertextual echoes present in *All the King's Men* indicate the sources of many of Warren's techniques for spiritual reader involvement, and thus perhaps also the effects of Warren's own reading in the tradition of mystical poetry. Of particular value in explaining Warren's images, structures, and techniques in *All the King's Men* is his encounter with the later poetry of T. S. Eliot, especially *Ash Wednesday* and the *Four Quartets*.

I am, of course, not the first to suggest a link between Warren's work and Eliot's. In his article "R.P.W. and T.S.E.: In the Steps of the (Post) Modern Master," Victor Strandberg presents an impressive catalogue of biographical, thematic, formal, and theoretical similarities between Warren and Eliot, who appear to have led, for all their differences, unusually parallel lives.⁵ Warren admitted that he was intimately familiar with Eliot's early work from its first appearance, saying in an interview that "every Southern freshman" who was "literarily inclined, knew *The Waste Land* by heart in 1922."⁶ Harold Bloom,

in his article "Sunset Hawk," names Eliot as Warren's "prime precursor," and this seems to be the case. Though often repressed, often struggled against, Eliot's influence as "poetic father" is proving to be present throughout more of Warren's career than was previously considered.⁷

Warren's previously unpublished "television eulogy" for Eliot, recently printed as the epigraph of Ronald Schuchard's *Eliot's Dark Angel*, attests to Warren's continued interest in Eliot's later poetry, and to the importance of *Four Quartets* in Warren's own quest for meaning during the time Strandberg marks as Warren's "conversion"—the period of the gestation and composition of *All the King's Men*.⁸ In that tribute, Warren admits his fascination with the Eliot of the *Quartets*: "Even for those who doctrinally or temperamentally had little sympathy for [Eliot] the dramatic force of the implied story" of Eliot's movement "to meaning and toward peace through the ruck of the world" was "nigh overwhelming."⁹

Warren's most successful novel bears the marks of Eliot in a more overt way than much of Warren's poetry. Its pattern of demands on the reader, its technique of referentiality, its use of paradox, and its method of guided re-reading and re-interpretation (the primary means by which Warren engages what Koppelman calls the "spiritual participation" of the reader) all show both the influence of and the struggle with Eliot's post-conversion poetry. Reading the two together proves an enlightening exercise, which highlights the technique of both, and the differences that doctrine and temperament make in the telling (or the implying) of similar stories of a fitful movement towards meaning and peace.

William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, finds mystical experiences to be transient—lasting "at most an hour or two," and often fading from memory afterwards—but also notes that "when they recur it is recognized" and that "from one recurrence to another" they are "susceptible of continuous development."¹⁰ This develop-

ment of timeless moments, which gain, as James says, in “what is felt as inner richness and importance” is the central figure of organization in Eliot’s *Quartets* and what I want to call the “mystical subtext” of Warren’s *All the King’s Men*.

Eliot’s *Four Quartets* is a linked series of moments of intensity, mystical insight, or timeless vision. The *Quartets* may be considered a reiteration with development—perhaps even an unveiling (as of Jack’s vision of Anne floating in the water).¹¹ Peak moments “in and out of time” are gathered from Eliot’s experience and linked together in memory in the process of recollection. “The moment in the rose-garden, / the moment in the harbour where the rain beat, / The moment in the draughty church at smokefall” are together treated as “hints and guesses / hints followed by guesses” at an ineffable whole of which they are only fragmentary approximations.¹² These moments from the past are summoned back into presence, pointing toward a moment of revelation in which “the past and future / Are conquered, and reconciled.” As the speaker engages in the task of recollection, which is both remembering and assembling, the reader is called upon to refer to his or her familiarity with similar moments from other literatures and perhaps from experience. As the speaker of the poem tries to construct meaning out of the glimpses granted to him, the reader is called to participate in the parallel process of making sense of the poem. Eliot guides the reader through meditations on a series of experiences, from the “romantic” experience in the Rose Garden through extended meditations on time and death and a sort of *via negativa* which strips away earlier assumptions, preconceptions, and apparent answers. This pattern leads towards an acceptance of the difficulty (or even impossibility) of final vision, a re-engagement with the world, and a particular theological position that reconciles (for Eliot at least) the tensions raised in the earlier parts of the poem.

Warren too structures a portion of his novel around what Eliot called a “pattern of timeless moments.” The often-quoted statement

from *All the King’s Men* that “meaning is not in the event, but the motion through the event” indicates that for Warren, as for Eliot, what is important is pattern, motion, and the act of linking past and present (AKM, 271). There are many transcendent moments—or moments described using the usual language of transcendence—scattered throughout the novel. Even the calm that descends on Lucy Stark when she watches her family eat is described in terms similar to the glimpse of the vaguely-neoplatonic cosmic machinery that Eliot presents in the second section of “Burnt Norton.” Lucy’s calm and “faith in happiness” is like that of a sea captain

when he goes down to the engine room at night and the big wheel is blurred out with its speed and the pistons plunge and return and the big steel throws are leaping in their perfect orbits like a ballet, and the whole place, under the electric glare, hums and glitters and sings like the eternal insides of God’s head, and the ship is knocking off twenty-two knots on a glassy, starlit sea. (AKM, 34)

The most significant (and significantly linked) sequence of moments, however, involves Jack Burden’s courtship of Anne Stanton, which is recounted as he summons it back into his memory during his trip west. This sequence is best understood as an example of the sort of spiritually-informed allegory that Eliot recognized in the work of Dante.

Leonard Unger, a young Eliot critic and former student of Ransom and Brooks, published an article in the last number of the *Southern Review* that Warren would almost certainly have read.¹³ In “T. S. Eliot’s Rose Garden: A Persistent Theme,” Unger analyzes Eliot’s treatment of mystical experience, using as a touchstone Eliot’s typically self-revealing criticism of Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*. Much of Eliot’s poetry, in Unger’s reading, revolves around what Unger calls a moment of “sexual-religious ecstasy” of the same sort that Eliot found in Dante’s *Vita*, just as much of it is about the attempt to recover that lost or inaccessible experience. In his 1929 essay on Dante,

Eliot characterized the *Vita* as a sort of autobiography or allegory that reflects on “final causes”—not what Dante “consciously felt on his meeting with Beatrice, but rather as a description of what that meant on mature reflection upon it. The final cause is the attraction toward God.”¹⁴

Certainly the language in which Jack tells us about his summer-long relationship with Anne hints at more than simply a physical courtship. Jack notices that Anne seemed to feel a “rhythm, a tune, a compulsion, outside of herself” which she “devoutly followed in its subtle and winding progression” (*AKM*, 287), and indeed their relationship has many of the markings of the mystic’s proverbially circuitous path to God in which, as Eliot says, “you must move in measure, like a dancer” (*CP*, 205). As Jack’s remembrances proceed from the original vision of Anne’s face floating on the ocean, through their prelapsarian and Edenic relationship beside the sea, through moments of knowledge and near-unity, toward their misunderstanding and separation (and the mistaken purging of the memories under the Great Twitch), the metaphysical overtones develop into something that is almost allegorical.¹⁵

Dante described his meetings with Beatrice according to the final cause that he discerned in the relationship—what he decided they meant on “mature reflection.” Just so, when the post-conversion Jack describes his early meetings with Anne, it is in terms of a spiritual progression of linked moments of intensity. Anne is described in terms appropriate to immanent deity or the informing soul. She is “the flavor, the distillate, the climate, the breath, without which there wouldn’t be anything at all” (*AKM*, 278). Jack’s near-unions with Anne are marked by moments of what Unger called “sexual-religious ecstasy.” After his first date with Anne, Jack is “absolutely filled with rapture” alone in his room and feels near “knowing the real and absolute truth about everything.” This moment of rapture summons up and modifies (draws a veil from) the earlier experience of seeing

Anne’s face on the water years before. Jack makes the connection, seeing “that the moment tonight was just an extension of the moment long back” (*AKM*, 266-67). Another rapture occurs later, in Jack and Anne’s dive together, when, ascending together through the “denser medium” Jack passes the line into “a rapture like that I had had in my room the night I had first taken her to a movie” (*AKM*, 289).

Throughout the summer, Anne and Jack pace out “the pattern of [their] hypnosis,” passing from “an acute awareness of body to a sense of being damned near disembodied . . . held captive to the ground by a single thread, and waiting for a puff of breeze” (*AKM*, 283). Finally, in the last, abortive erotic encounter of the summer, the moment that Jack thought “the great current of the summer had been steadily moving toward,” Jack’s descriptions echo the previous moments. Anne holds her hands “as if she were preparing for a dive,” and near the moment that should be union, when Jack’s nerve fails and his mind makes “crazy June-bug leaps and plunges” the moments of rapture seem “to fuse, like superimposed photographs, each keeping its identity without denying the other” (*AKM*, 294-97). It is then that Jack realizes that a merely sexual union is “not what the summer had been driving toward,” though it is not until later, after the events of the novel have been completed, that he begins to guess precisely what the “final cause” might have been (*AKM*, 294-95). Along the way, he assumes temporarily that what he once thought was love was just a “mysterious itch” in the blood, before, perhaps, coming to see something more in it, something higher.¹⁶ One of the ways in which the reader is encouraged to follow Jack’s road and intuit his final position is by following out the references made by Jack-as-Narrator (who comes to resemble Warren very closely).

Along with the repetition of, meditation on, and connection of moments from personal experience, one of the most common techniques in Eliot’s *Quartets* is the use of allusion to other works which deal with similar experiences. This allusive movement of Eliot’s sym-

bols, patterns, and language creates several effects for the reader. First, it produces a context in which the poems are to be taken. Following Eliot's allusions out to other works, the reader calls into use what reader-response critic Wolfgang Iser calls the "interpretive repertoire."¹⁷ This "repertoire" is the stock of conventions, contexts, and methods of reading that the reader has gained from reading other texts, which may be called into service to help interpret the current text in response to textual cues. This repertoire can come into play in many different ways, but in *Four Quartets* it is called upon to build a sense of context in which the text ought to be understood, and sometimes to modify the reader's understanding of the work referred to. For instance, Eliot's use of birds or bird-song to herald a moment of contact with the eternal (as the "bird" or "thrush" in "Burnt Norton," or the "early owl" in "East Coker") may call upon the reader's understanding of a similar motif in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (among many other pieces, as birdsong has become a commonplace in descriptions of mystical experience). By calling upon this item of the repertoire, the reader begins to understand a pattern—the bird's song associated with "vision, or a waking dream," the idea of the bird as an eternal voice heard throughout history, and possibly the conception of the Nightingale as an image of art or nature. The reader's understanding of the *Quartets* may also modify his or her understanding of Keats's poem. As in reference to the dove in "Little Gidding," Eliot's birds may all come to seem like images of the descent of the Holy Spirit. The associations we gain from reading the *Quartets* are a complex and constantly-shifting matrix, and may even come to affect the way we read Keats in the future.

Since many references in the *Four Quartets* are to works that Eliot seems to believe deal with the same kind of mystical moments or patterns he wants to point out (the *Upanishads*, the theology of John of the Cross, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and the like), the effect is often circular. The reader, tracing an allusion from the poem, often

winds up tracing it back to the kind of experience Eliot is talking about, to a central moment of intensity or contact. Eliot creates in the mind of his audience, through a spider's web of connections, the impression of art as a kind of nontemporal order that endlessly repeats a pattern and a moment. The repetition and unveiling is thus presented as not only a personal pattern (Eliot's spiritual development or the dramatized spiritual development of his speaker), but an historical and literary pattern: "not the experience of one life only / But of many generations—not forgetting / Something that is probably quite ineffable" (*CP*, 194). The "ever-widening ripple" of meaning and significance that Koppelman finds in Warren's work is, in Eliot's *Quartets*, a far-extending pattern indeed, spreading through time, space, and the reader's understanding of literature, making the poem a kind of echo chamber that sounds the depths of a tradition as it constructs it, and finds at the middle of it a productive emptiness.

All the King's Men also calls on the repertoire of conventions from other mystical works in order to form an interpretive context. Describing his vision of the Great Twitch, Jack makes a reference to the poem by the mystic poet William Blake, "To the Accuser Who Is the God of This World." While, as in all allusions, there is considerable room for interpretation when considering the nature of the relationship between the current text and the one that's called up, the reference to Blake's poem about the false divinity of the materialist Gnostic god, whom Blake associates with Satan, and who "dost not know the garment from the Man," calls the source of Jack's "mystic vision" of the Great Twitch into question. Jack, too, in believing that the world is only material, becomes such a "Dunce" as the adversary.¹⁸

Other references are to common conventions. Though the lover-beloved image we have already examined does not appear explicitly in Eliot's late poetry,¹⁹ most of the conventional motifs in *All the King's Men* are shared with Eliot. Bird-song, for example, accompa-

nies or precedes many of the moments of mystic vision or contact within *All the King's Men*, from the "mocking bird" that "hysterically commented on the total beauty and justice of the universe" during Jack's rapture in his room after his date with Anne, to Anne's laugh "like a bird song" on the tennis court, preceding another moment of timelessness (*AKM*, 267, 274).

The next mystical convention that Warren shares with Eliot is a figure so common as to be a part of the language: the idea of "enlightenment" or "illumination." Images of sources of light and the reflection or reception of that light serve in Eliot's verse as a marker that some sort of mystical illumination is taking place, and also as a comment on the source of that light and an indication of the relationship between the source and the thing illuminated.²⁰ The "surface" of the pool in "Burnt Norton" "glitters out of the heart of light" and in "Little Gidding" the "brief sun flames the ice, on ponds and ditches." Images of reflected light accompany Jack's moments with Anne, as when they are parked by the roadside: "the moonlight lay on the slightly ruffling water like a swath of brilliant white, cold fire. You expected to see that white fire start eating out over the whole ocean the way fire in a sage field spreads. But it lay there glittering and flickering in a broad nervous swath reaching out yonder to the bright horizon blur" (*AKM*, 275). One might expect the light to spread across all the water and join in union with the glow at the horizon, but it reaches in vain. The light reflects the lovers' continued separation, as when, after the near-union in their shared dive, they arise from the darkness to the "moonlight brittle and fractured on the water" (*AKM*, 289). For both Eliot and Warren, varieties of light make a comment on a state of mind that is a state of spiritual illumination. In Warren's case, it also serves to comment on the failure of that state or a flaw in its source.²¹

In addition to scenes which invoke the reader's interpretive repertoire by presenting familiar symbols, we may find some that proceed

by verbal and structural cues, of the sort that Koppelman calls "theological language." The import of Jack's relationship with Anne is made interpretable both by structure (the few similarities to Dante's relationship with Beatrice) and cues of language. The relationship and the cues are mirrored ironically in the description of Jack's bitter relations with his first wife, Lois. Lois is from the beginning associated with the carnal appetites—eating, drinking, having sex—and Jack's estrangement from her begins to take on the appearance of symbolic purgation of the physical. Jack feels he must escape their "perfectly adjusted" sexual life, out of "the deep-seated instinct for self-preservation"; to this end, he begins what becomes a parody of meditation—studying Lois with "a clinical detachment and a sense of mystic regeneration" until she "seems to withdraw steadily" (*AKM*, 306). This practice affords him "great spiritual refreshment," he tells us, and leads to an instance of the Great Sleep, where, like the mystic descending into God he falls "towards the center of delicious darkness." The elements of birdsong and illumination are incorporated to describe these moments, as well as the sound of "children calling musically from the playground in the park"—a sound which "gives you a wonderful sense of peace . . . which must resemble the peace of old age after a well-spent life."²²

Jack's relationship with Lois may actually be a mark of yet another similarity between Eliot and Warren. The descriptions of Lois focus around the marks of devouring, her "damp, paler red expectant membranes of the mouth, and the faint glitter of a gold filling in the dark, hot orifice," and Jack recoils, threatened (*AKM*, 308). In "Hysteria," an early Eliot poem, the speaker also feels threatened (and devoured) by a woman similarly described. The speaker feels "lost finally in the dark caverns of her throat, bruised by the ripple of unseen muscles," and it is only through an act of concentration that he wishes to "stop the shaking of her breasts" so that he might collect "some of the fragments of the afternoon."²³ In both of these examples

a particular woman is being figured as a personification for those aspects of fleshly existence (loss of separate existence, perhaps, or inability to maintain detachment) that Jack and the speaker of "Hysteria" find distasteful and threatening.

Another complex of images and patterns common to both Eliot and Warren is best explained in terms of the system of thought and the tradition of theology which informs them both. The *via negativa* of Pseudo-Dionysius is a set of apophatic linguistic practices commonly used to "name" that which is unnamable or to know what is unknowable, by means of the systematic negation of false or imperfectly true definitions of the divine, until one is left in "holy silence" beyond language, discursive knowledge, and definition. Language, unable to contain its object (which cannot, by its nature, be objectified) takes part in its own undoing in order to indicate what is beyond words. In the theological and poetic writings of the 16th-Century Carmelite mystic St. John of the Cross, these practices are revised to focus on the negation of the self.²⁴ The "dark night" of St. John is a stage of spiritual practice that is characterized by the inactivity—even the paralysis—of all the faculties of the intellect and the soul, and a withering of attachments to worldly objects.

St. John's discourses on the dark night serve a practical psychological purpose in its original use as a spiritual guide for the practicing mystic.²⁵ According to St. John, beginners in prayer and spiritual practice often find themselves receiving what he calls "consolations"; spiritual visitations and visions—the kind of transient states that William James might classify as mystical. After a time, however, meditation and prayer no longer offer these consolations. The concept of the "dark night" makes periods of spiritual dryness and mortification of the self an indispensable stage of spiritual growth. In the "dark night" the subjects come face to face with pain and humiliation, with paralysis of all the faculties and a knowledge of inward misery that seems beyond their ability to remedy. Sick with the love of God, they

feel themselves far from him. But in John's scheme of spiritual development, this purgation of desire and attachment through the cessation of imagination and discursive thought purifies the will of the seeker, so that he or she is worthy finally to partake in a deeper union with God, figured in John's *Spiritual Canticle* as the union of bridegroom and bride.

St. John's doctrine of the dark night, together with and at times inextricable from the less "romantic" *via negativa*, find expression in Eliot's poetry both directly in references to the writings of St. John of the Cross, through images of descent, lessening, and dispossession, and through the general motion or tendency of the sequence. The *Quartets* abound in direct references to John's prose, as in Eliot's paraphrases of John in "Little Gidding" extolling "the detachment / From self and from things and from persons" or in "Burnt Norton" III:

Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Dessication of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit. (*CP*, 179)

The *via negativa* also shows itself in the repeated images of descent into darkness toward a redemptive stillness or a greater understanding that recur throughout the *Quartets*, the repeated calls to "descend lower," and the many appeals to or admissions of the inadequacy of language throughout the sequence.

Warren, too, uses figures and language that reflect the *via negativa* and the idea of the dark night, although the presentation more often than not seems ironic in the context in which it is given. Images of descent into the darkness of truth or infinity abound in *All the King's Men*, usually associated with a terrifying loss of self or the connections that anchor a sense of selfhood. Perhaps the strongest is in the passage describing Jack's discovery of the Judge's guilt:

For the truth is a terrible thing. You dabble your foot in it and it is nothing. But you walk a little farther and you feel it pull you like an undertow or a whirlpool. First there is the slow pull so steady and gradual you scarcely notice it, then the acceleration, then the dizzy whirl and plunge to blackness. For there is a blackness of truth, too. They say it is a terrible thing to fall into the Grace of God. I am prepared to believe it. (AKM, 343)

The presentation of the "Grace of God" as drowning in the "heady race and plunge of the vortex" is perhaps also prefigured in the "Death by Water" section of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In that poem, too, drowning in the other, losing the assumptions and attachments that ground the old self, becomes a means of purification, with an eventual end in rebirth.²⁶

Jack Burden's "Great Sleep," his periods of detachment and apathy, may be seen as Warren's version of (and commentary on) the detachments of the dark night. The aspirant in the dark night falls passive into the darkness of unknowing, paradoxically moving towards the source of all light. And so it is that Jack plunges into the depths of sleep like "a diver groping downward into dark water feeling for something which may be there and which would glitter if there were any light in the depth, but there isn't any light." Though his historical project "was not a success," the partial success of his efforts at losing himself may be marked by the "name 'Mr. Jack Burden,' fading slowly" on the package that contains the Cass Mastern manuscript (AKM, 189-90).

During another period of the "Great Sleep" Jack reports that he achieved "the holy emptiness and blessed fatigue of a saint after the dark night of the soul" through a systematic meditation on the arbitrary nature of the value people place on worldly things:

I could lie there as long as I wanted, and let all the pictures of things a man might want run through my head, coffee, a girl, money, a drink, white sand and blue water, and let them all slide off, one after another, like a deck of cards slewing slowly off your hand. Maybe the things you

want are like cards. You don't want them for themselves, really, though you think you do. You don't want a card because you want the card, but because in a perfectly arbitrary system of rules and values and in a special combination of which you already hold a part the card has meaning. But suppose you aren't sitting in a game. Then, even if you do know the rules, a card doesn't mean a thing. They all look alike. (AKM, 99)

Through this kind of calculated removal of context, Jack severs his ties from the values and desires that stabilized his old self, and makes himself ready for another one.

Warren and Eliot share the realization of a fragmentary, mutable self, as Victor Strandberg has pointed out.²⁷ Both of them choose the metaphor of travel to demonstrate how much the everyday self is constructed in relationship to its environment. The faces of Eliot's train passengers in "The Dry Salvages" find "relief" in the loss of identity in the in-between time of travel: they "are not the same people who left that station / Or who will arrive at the terminus" (CP, 196). Jack, driving across country, meditates on the same realization, that "what you do, which is what you are, only has meaning in relation to other people" and thus when you're alone in the car "you aren't you" and thus can "really get some rest" (AKM, 128).

After one of his descents into the dark, Jack drops another commonplace of negative mysticism. "God and Nothing have a lot in common," Burden comments, remarking that if "You look either one of Them straight in the eye for a second . . . the immediate effect on the human constitution is the same" (AKM, 99). This may simply be taken to mean that spiritual emptying and despair are similar in their human effect, or it may be read more in keeping with the conventions of negative mysticism. William James, in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, quotes Jacob Boehme's description of God as Primal Love that "may fitly be compared to Nothing, for it is deeper than any Thing, and it is as nothing with respect to all things, forasmuch as it is not comprehensible by any of them."²⁸ Not only does God have a

lot in common with nothing, but looking in the eye of nothing and naughting the self is, in the tradition of negative theology to which Eliot and Warren allude, the way to see God.

The use of similar conventions (and the ones I've mentioned are only what I consider to be the most prominent—the curious reader will notice similar use of seasonal and musical conventions among a variety of others) shows a variety of shared influences between Warren and Eliot. More specific echoes of the *Quartets* are detectable in *All the King's Men* as well. The most interesting is Warren's description of the old men outside the harness shop in Mason City, in its way, Warren's answer to Eliot's indictment, in "East Coker" III, of the "wisdom of old age," which is also Eliot's gesture of skepticism towards the metaphysical writers that came before him. The old men in the harness shop sit with "Olympian and sunlit detachment" and "unenvious and foreknowing irony," the classic pose of the successful mystic. Like the writers Eliot questions (and perhaps Eliot himself), the elders in *All the King's Men* "emit a land of metaphysical effluvium by virtue of which your categories are altered. Time and motion cease to be. It is like sniffing ether, and everything is sweet, and sad, and far away" (*AKM*, 52-53). The reference to ether inhalation is, as in Eliot's "East Coker" III, used as an analogue for a mystical state, when, as Eliot writes, "the mind is conscious, but conscious of nothing" (*CP*, 186). Both writers are referring to the "anaesthetic revelation," a phenomena studied by William James and referred to in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Nitrous oxide and ether . . . stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree. Depth beyond depth of truth seems revealed to the inhaler. The truth fades out, however, or escapes, at the moment of coming to; and if any words remain left over in which it seemed to clothe itself, they prove to be the veriest nonsense. Nevertheless, the sense of a profound meaning having been there persists, and I know more than one person who is persuaded that in the nitrous oxide trance we have a genuine metaphysical revelation.²⁹

Warren may thus be using his passage to take a sly jab at Eliot, who is already another "soft-voiced elder." The men in the harness shop, for all their apparent detachment speak only out of their prejudices. Claims to visionary heights may not be valid, and the words that accompany a vision may later prove to be "veriest nonsense."

The question for the reader becomes what to make of this subtext. How are we to interpret Jack's involvement with mysticism and the heavy irony with which he speaks of it? Is it God or Nothing that Jack is looking in the eye, and is there a way to tell the difference? These are precisely the questions that Warren refuses to answer directly. Warren provides us with a number of opposing possibilities, and we must strive towards our own point of reconciliation. This is a point to be reached in the process of reading, not in any one answer, but in a movement towards meaning. These demands for active participation in the meaning-making process are a mark of both Eliot and Warren's techniques. Both at various times enlist the devices of apparent direct address of the reader, the use of paradoxes and leading questions. The degree of control each exerts over the process of sense-making is, I think, indicative of the doctrinal differences between them.

Sometimes Warren's addresses to the audience take the form of a challenge, for example, when Jack, describing Lucy Stark's empty but content gaze at her husband, comments that "[a]ny act of pure perception is a feat, and if you don't believe it, try it sometime" (*AKM*, 35). At other times they appear as questions that find no adequate answer within the text, challenging the reader to work to answer them for him or herself. When Jack and the Scholarly Attorney argue whether time is progress toward knowledge, or is eternal non-movement, and whether causation is spiritual or physical, we begin to expect that these oppositions will be reconciled (*AKM*, 198-202). There are many places in the text where Jack's failures to understand are posed as opportunities for the reader to make intuitive

jumps, guided by the context created by the author. When Jack can't make a "tidy metaphor" for his relationship with Anne Stanton, he poses a paradox. For his metaphor to work, he would need to be both "the cold dead wandering moon," which "has no light of its own, but is reflected light from far away" and at the same time have "been the sun too, way back." He asks the readers what we may take to be a rhetorical question: "how the hell can you be both the sun and moon?" (*AKM*, 212). We are left to wrestle with that seeming impossibility. There is often the suggestion that the post-conversion Jack understands these paradoxical questions much better than the Jack who fails to answer them. As Cheryl Cunningham hints in her article on Bergsonianism and Warren, the reader is invited to follow the character (who perhaps follows the author) in reaching toward a more integrated understanding through working with the paradoxes and unsolved questions.³⁰

Eliot deals with a very similar set of questions in *Four Quartets*, but he presents points of reconciliation for them, albeit points that still require some deciphering and meditation on the part of the reader. Spiritual and physical causation are reconciled in correspondence in "Burnt Norton" II, when the "dance along the artery, / The circulation of the lymph / Are figured in the drift of stars" (*CP*, 177). Unity under godhead and the separate existence in the "agony of will" are reconciled, as are the seeming paradox that poses the phenomenal world as movement toward knowledge, and God as non-action, in the moment of "Incarnation" where "the impossible union / of spheres of existence is actual." For Eliot, this position offers an answer to the determinism of either the still point or the turning world alone:

Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement—
Driven by daemonic, chthonic
Powers. (*CP*, 199)

Even the paradox posed by Jack's current fallen time without Anne and his past paradisaic state with her—of being both sun and moon—finds a resolution in Eliot's understanding of the mystical state. Created beings, now only reflecting the light of the sun, may have participated in the source itself before the fall, and may even now return to union in mystical contemplation.

Other similarities between the two works are easy to find. The progress of both leads to a recognition of the necessity of accepting the past and acting in the present, whether in the form of Jack's movement "out of history into history," or the speaker of the *Quartets*' realization that "History is now and England" and his resolution to continue exploration. Both also end with a gesture towards circularity: Eliot repeats the earlier motif of return to "where we started" (*CP*, 208-209), and Warren's final lyric passage describes the future return of Jack and Anne to their starting place, Burden's Landing, "where the needles on the ground will deaden the footfall so that we shall move among trees soundless as smoke" (*AKM*, 438).

We must not, however, allow the similarities to obscure the differences in doctrine and focus between the two authors—which are considerable. Warren is never so comfortable with certain answers as is Eliot, not allowing the reader to rest in one static interpretation, insisting even more strongly, I think, on continued effort.³¹ Warren presents Jack's spiritual progress in the midst of other human stories, and that progress and those stories interact in a complex and not always positive way. It is a sore temptation to take Jack's ironic comments at their face value, and regard his tendencies towards mystical detachment and his longing for self-loss as immature, destructive, and escapist: Warren has presented the "mystic vision" of the Great Twitch as an answer that neither Jack, nor the reader, can believe in for long.³² It is also true that the sound that finally awakens Jack is not the lyric bird-song, but the wild, silvery shriek of his mother (*AKM*, 433). But careful attention to the "mystical subtext" offers the possi-

bility of another view: Jack's innocent striving towards union, his disillusion and fall, his periods of purgation and detachment, and his eventual re-integration with the social world, are all part of a process—a process very similar to that story of spiritual progress documented by T. S. Eliot.

When, after the death of Willie Stark, Jack and Anne return briefly to that progress of symbolic love they began so many years ago, they reach, finally, in careful silence, the “beautiful and precious equilibrium” they had sought years before.³³ The equilibrium cannot last, however, when it is based on a simple denial of the outside world. For Warren, neither spiritual equilibrium or textual certainty is ever permanent or easy. To seek to make it so seems to lead to parody, to falsification, and to loss of the future. The reader must struggle towards it through layers of irony and doubt, just as Jack and Warren himself must.

In closing, the following moment in the story says something significant about the relationship between the two works. It is, oddly enough, about tennis. In a moment after Anne's laugh “like bird-song,” we are presented with another image of balance:

the *absolute* little white ball [italics added] hung there like a spinning world in the middle of brilliance. Well, that is the classic pose, and it too bad that the Greeks didn't play tennis, for if they had played tennis they would have put Anne Stanton on a Greek vase. But on second thought, I guess they would not have done it. That is the moment which, for all its poise, is too airy, too tiptoe, too keyed up. It is the moment before the explosion, and Greeks didn't put that kind of moment on a vase. So that moment is not on a vase in a museum, but it is inside my head, where no one else can see it but me. For it was the moment before the explosion, and it *did* explode. The racket smacked and the sheep gut whanged and the little white ball came steaming across at me. And I missed it, like as not.³⁴

T. S. Eliot, in *Four Quartets*, tries to put that kind of moment—wholly suspended, unified, before the explosion—on a Greek vase; or in

any event, a Chinese jar (*CP*, 180). In *Four Quartets*, the emphasis is on the balanced moment in which opposing forces are reconciled. Warren, perhaps, is uncomfortable with making that moment, which he “missed,” which *did* explode, central. It remains unspoken except by indirection, a part of Warren's own “implied story of movement to meaning and toward peace through the ruck of the world.”

ENDNOTES

¹Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1996), 1. Subsequent references to this edition are cited parenthetically. The introductory passage of *All the King's Men* may be profitably compared to the first sections of "East Coker" and "Little Gidding": all three make the same gesture: "If you came this way, / Taking the route you would he likely to take." The reference to hypnosis in Warren's novel appears as well, the "you" in "East Coker" looking down the lane "in the electric heat, / hypnotized."

²Victor Strandberg, *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 27-28.

³Robert S. Koppelman, *Robert Penn Warren's Modernist Spirituality* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 28.

⁴Robert Koppelman, *Spirituality*, 34.

⁵Victor Strandberg, "R. P. W. and T. S. E.: In the Steps of the (Post) Modern Master," in *To Love So Well the World: A Festschrift in Honor of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Dennis L. Weeks (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 29-43.

⁶"Conversation: 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), 88.

⁷Harold Bloom, "Sunset Hawk," in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Penn Warren*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 209.

⁸The *Quartets* were first published together in 1943, in the middle of Warren's long struggle with the novelistic version of *All the King's Men*.

⁹Unpublished television eulogy quoted in Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot's Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), unnumbered front matter.

¹⁰William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 381.

¹¹See Warren, *AKM*, 118, for Jack's monologue on "true images."

¹²Eliot, "East Coker," in *T. S. Eliot: Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991), 199. Hereafter, quotations from this edition are cited parenthetically in the text as *CP*.

¹³Unger had, under the supervision of Brooks, and with the support of Warren, written his Master's thesis on *Ash Wednesday* in 1938 at LSU. Leonard Unger, *T. S. Eliot: Moments and Patterns* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 3-4.

¹⁴Quoted in Leonard Unger, "T. S. Eliot's Rose Garden: A Persistent Theme," *Southern Review* 7 (1942): 668.

¹⁵It is perhaps no accident that Anne's name echoes both Poe's Annabel Lee (with the association with an Edenic "kingdom by the sea") and the Anne who was the figure of the lost anima for Romantic essayist Thomas De Quincey.

¹⁶Warren, *AKM*, 309. Jack's vision of the Great Twitch reverses Dante's figuration of human love as the sign of a more cosmic love. The way in which the post-conversion Jack writes of Anne Stanton may imply that he has come to a position closer to that of Dante.

¹⁷Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 53-85.

¹⁸Warren, *AKM*, 310. Jack misquotes the title of Blake's lyric. William Blake "To the Accuser Who Is The God of This World," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, (New York: Anchor, 1988), 269. The Accuser is likened to "the lost Traveller's Dream under the Hill"—or under the mire of history, in Jack's case.

¹⁹In the Clark Lectures, Eliot writes that the image of the beloved and lover tends after the thirteenth century (the case he's discussing is Donne) to represent not a striving for something beyond earthly love, but merely a union in ecstasy of two human souls: "Whether you seek the absolute in marriage, adultery, or debauchery, it is all one—you are seeking in the wrong place." *Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, (San Diego, Harcourt Brace, 1993), 115. Lyndall Gordon might argue that this imagery does inform the *Quartets*: her *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 1998) claims that the sequence is inspired by Eliot's love for Emily Hale.

²⁰The metaphor relating the Absolute to the sun is at least as old as Plato. An early Christian version, by Pseudo-Dionysius (on whose work Eliot took copious notes at Harvard) sheds some light on Eliot's use: "the great, shining, ever-lighting sun . . . the apparent image of the divine goodness . . . illuminates whatever is capable of receiving its light and yet . . . never loses the utter fullness of that light." Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 74.

²¹For example, in the vision of the Great Twitch, the light—neon, pulsing like blood, and covered with fog—indicates an obscurity and bias towards the physical that affects both the vision and Jack's interpretation of it.

²²Warren, *AKM*, 307. The sound of children may bring to mind "Burnt Norton."

²³Eliot, *CP*, 24. Donald Childs in *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997), 117, argues that "Woman is the symbol upon which Eliot grounds his mysticism of loathing and hatred." I find Childs's argument ignores the function that the feared or hated women in Eliot's poetry play—as reminders of body-centered existence, or social convention, both of which Eliot opposed to the Absolute.

²⁴See Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), for the clearest concise treatment of Eliot's use of the *via negativa* of Pseudo-Dionysius and St. John's ideas of the dark night.

²⁵*The Dark Night* is actually a twenty-five chapter explication of or commentary on three verses of a poem. It takes the form of an in-depth exploration of the causes, uses, and nature of the two dark nights—that of the senses, and that of the soul, for the use of other monks and nuns in St. John's order.

²⁶Eliot, *CP*, 65. Leonard Unger points out in "T. S. Eliot's Rose Garden" that Eliot associates water with "spiritual rebirth—a prerequisite of return to the obsessive experience" (670).

²⁷Strandberg, "R. P. W. and T. S. E.," 38.

²⁸James, *Varieties*, 407.

²⁹James, *Varieties*, 387. James had experimented himself with ether on at least one occasion, and was intrigued by the work of Benjamin Paul Blood, an autodidact

philosopher who believed that the anaesthetic revelation, experienced by everyone, would eventually usher in a more enlightened age.

³⁰Cheryl A. Cunningham, "Splitting the Dark: Henri Bergson and *All the King's Men*," in "*To Love So Well the World*," 249. Cunningham nicely treats the role of paradox in Warren's work, but her assumption that a Bergsonian intuition of duration is Jack's final point leads to some awkward interpretations. I would say that for Warren as for Eliot, Bergson's time-as-motion is only a part of the answer, or part of the movement toward an answer.

³¹This is not to say that Eliot's answers are simple or finalistic. Many critics, most recently Donald Childs, in *T. S. Eliot: Mystic, Son, and Lover*, find a continued dialectic of faith and doubt in Eliot even in the *Quartets*.

³²For writers on mysticism (Eliot, James, and even St. John), the possibility of false vision, misinterpreted vision, or the kind of unhelpful, "diabolical" mysticism that leads to or is a symptom of insanity, is a constant possibility.

³³Warren, *AKM*, 404-405. Note the significant emphasis on silence, in comparison to the imaginative chaos of Jack's mind in the earlier sequence.

³⁴Warren, *AKM*, 274. Notice again the shared allusion to Keats. Warren mentions tennis in an interview in connection with the instantaneous nature of inspiration in art in *Talking with Robert Penn Warren*, 176.