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"The world / In which all things are continuous":

On the Unity of Or Else

RANDOLPH PAUL RUNYON

"*Or Else—Poem / Poems 1968–1974* is conceived," Robert Penn Warren tells us in a prefatory note, "as a single long poem composed of a number of shorter poems as sections or chapters."¹ To what extent is the title's assertion—both *Poems* and *Poem*—a valid claim? James Justus writes of "the directions for reading this volume playfully handed over to the reader, who must decide: is it a six-year collection of diverse poems ...? or is it a single poem conceived as a sequence? It is something of both."² Dave Smith finds that Warren "has caused his 32 poems to operate as something like panels which form a loose sequential movement In an especially canny but not unpredictable strategy—if one has noted Warren's long habit of binding poems into thematic sequences—Warren has constructed the poems of *Or Else* as reflectors, baffles, mirrors, and back-lights [I]t is through the juxtaposition and oblique continuities of remarkably varied poems that the form of *Or Else* creates a vision at once dynamic, complex, and emblematic."³

Having found evidence of a strong sequential structure in Warren's last four poetic collections (*Now and Then*, *Being Here*, *Rumor Verified*, and *Altitudes and Extensions*), as well as in his first (*Thirty-six Poems*),⁴ I have recently tried to determine if such could also be said of *Or Else*. I have found that it can, and in the space available here, I wish to present the first part of a detailed reading of that collection carried out along the same lines as those I had earlier made of the others. While the principal theme of my study is the sequential echoing structure of the collection, there is a secondary one as well, the Danae and Perseus myth that increasingly appears to me to be an essential part of Warren's personal poetic mythology.

Or Else is actually composed of two intertwining sequences: twenty-four Roman-numeralled poems with eight Arabic-numeralled “Interjections” occurring after the first, fourth, fifth, seventh, twelfth, fifteenth, eighteenth, and twenty-first poems of the first group. The first of these “Interjections” is remarkably brief:

“Interjection #1: The Need for Re-evaluation”

Is this really me? Of course not, for Time
Is only a mirror in the fun-house.

You must re-evaluate the whole question.

Is this indeed a poem, or merely a reflection on the poem it immediately follows, “I. The Nature of a Mirror”? Is it just an interjectory remark on the mirror alluded to in the first poem’s conclusion—“Time // Is the mirror into which you stare”? The “Interjections” to follow will prove more substantial than this one. But as the first of that second series it may at least be announcing something of the structure of the sequences⁵ to come, for it could hardly show in any clearer way its continuity with its immediate predecessor. Shall we take that initial continuity as a harbinger of continuities to come?

The third poem in *Or Else*, “II. Natural History,” shows continuities with its Roman-numeralled predecessor. In “Natural History,” “The mother is counting her money like mad, in the sunshine.” In “I. The Nature of a Mirror,” “the sun / ... sinks / Lower, larger, more blank, and redder than / A mother’s rage.” Both mothers are mad, though in different ways.

The mother madly counting money in the sunshine is intelligible in the context of Warren’s casting his figure of the mother as Danae impregnated by Zeus’s golden shower. Think of the stream of urine with which his last novel begins. In “the torrent of gold-bodied August sunlight, perfectly transparent but somehow as substantial as lava, pouring inexhaustibly down from the sky” on the day of his

father’s funeral, Jed Tewksbury, overhearing the conversations of the men who have come to pay their last respects, learns how his father died. Returning home drunk, Buck Tewksbury had been standing up in his wagon to urinate when he fell—“still hanging on to his dong,” as his son recalls, “and hitting the pike in such a position and condition that both the left front and the left rear wheels of the wagon rolled, with perfect precision, over his unconscious neck Throughout, he was still holding on to his dong.”⁶ The dong’s double use is apparent in the remark one of the mourners makes: ““All his r’aren and skirt-tearen round Claxford County and he ends like tryen to jack off in the middle of the night on the gravel of Dugton Pike.”” ““Naw,”” another one intones, ““he must of been standen up to piss.””

In *Wilderness*, the protagonist encounters, in the home of the man who would like to adopt him as his son, a statue “of Perseus meditatively holding the head of Medusa.”⁸ In a parallel scene in *A Place to Come To*, again with a potentially adoptive father, Professor Heinrich Stahlmann, Jed Tewksbury encounters a statue of the Discobolus, the Discus-Thrower. Jed tells us that he would spend “long hours ... alone” in that room, enraptured by “the details of Dr. Stahlmann’s domain I would examine every book and every object, trying to penetrate its inner meaning.”⁹ The inner meaning of the Discus-Thrower—and of the parallel statue in *Wilderness* of Perseus contemplating the head of Medusa—is pretty clear from the rest of the Danae myth. Danae, after Zeus’s golden shower, gave birth to Perseus, who rid the world of the petrifying gaze of the monster Medusa by cutting off her head, which he managed to do without encountering her dangerous gaze by making use of the mirroring surface of Athena’s shield. The rest of the story explains why the statue of Perseus contemplating Medusa’s severed head in one novel is paralleled by the statue of the Discus-Thrower in the other: After the Medusa episode, Perseus accidentally kills his maternal grandfather, Acrisius, by striking him with a discus he had thrown in a game. As Laius had tried to

elude the prophecy that he would die at the hands of his son and therefore exposed the infant Oedipus to die on a hillside, Acrisius had tried to avoid fulfilling the prophecy that a son born to his daughter would kill him by locking Danae up where no man could reach her, though Zeus did in the form of the golden shower. It seems likely, as I suggest in *The Taciturn Text*, that the wagon wheels that killed Jed's father in *A Place to Come To* are a reincarnation of that discus, as the grandfather takes the place of the father (who, after all, could strike back at Zeus?), especially because his attempt to elude the prophecy parallels that of Oedipus's father.¹⁰ Ernest Jones gives a Freudian interpretation that justifies this identification: "When the grandson in the myth avenges himself ... by slaying the tyrannical grandfather ... he slays the man who endeavored to possess and retain the mother's affections, i.e., his own rival ... the primordial father, for whom to him the grandfather is but an *imago*."¹¹

Not only in these novels, but in other poems too does Warren develop his version of the Danae-Perseus-Medusa myth. In "No Bird Does Call," in *Being Here*, the narrator retreats to a "Bowl-hollow of woodland, beech-bounded, beech-shrouded" where in autumn is spread "a carpet of gold, for then / The hollow is Danae's lap lavished with gold by the god."¹² As I wrote in *The Taciturn Text*, "It is a place reminiscent of the setting in *The Cave* near Beecham's Bluff, where the entrance to the cave lay under the roots of 'the biggest beech of all' (16), for in the poem ['No Bird Does Call'] the 'roots of great gray boles crook'd ... down / To grapple... in the breathless perimeter / Of moss, as in cave-shadow deeper and darker than velvet.'"¹³ Lying there on Danae's lap, the narrator in the poem "With closed eyes ... fell so slowly ... as though // Into depth that was peace, but not death." If the mother is Danae, then the narrator is her son, Perseus, returning to the womb. The father, source of the golden carpet lavishing her lap, is not only Zeus but the beech tree.

To return to "Natural History," we can see Danae in "The moth-

er ... counting her money like mad, in the sunshine. / Like shuttles her fingers fly, and the sum is clearly astronomical." It is astronomical in another sense too, celestial, of heavenly origin like the shower from the sky. "The money the naked old mother counts is her golden memories of love. / That is why I see nothing in her maniacally busy fingers." The identification of the money with memories of love offers further proof of the relevance of the Danae myth: The golden shower that in "No Bird Does Call" was a carpet of golden beech leaves is now a wealth of gold coins, even though the coins are invisible to the poet, as they are but intangible memories of love, recollections of the father's contribution to his origin, and all he can see is her rapidly moving hands, fingers flying "Like shuttles," as if she were weaving.

Weaving what? The other poem—the one that precedes it in the sequence if we for the moment abstract out the intervening "Interjection" as being of a different order, woven both in and out of the main sequence of *Or Else*'s poems—that other poem, "The Nature of a Mirror," does offer a possible answer in the form of a texture that may be maternal: "the sun, / ... sinks /. ... redder than / A mother's rage, as though / ... the first vagina / Had not had the texture of dream." This "first vagina" is probably in its most obvious sense the site of the narrator's first experience of intercourse. But on some other level it may be the original vagina, the one that in a later poem in *Or Else* is likewise a place where one dreams: "did we / once in the womb dream ...?" ("XIV. Vision Under the October Mountain: A Love Poem"). What we may have dreamed was of something golden, which I interpret, still in the context of Warren's reworking of the Danae myth, as the father's necessary presence: "Golding from green"—like the beech leaves in "No Bird Does Call," for this mountain's gold undoubtedly comes from its October-tinged trees—"gorgeous the mountain / high hangs in gold air ... it is // the image of authority"—a paternal trait indeed. In the womb did we "dream / of a gold mountain in gold / air floating, we in the // pulse and warm slosh

of / that unbreathing bouillon did we / dream a gold mountain, did / it glow in that faceless unfatuous / dark ...?"

If that is the "first vagina," then "the sun, / Beyond the western ridge of black-burnt pine stubs like / A snaggery of rotten shark teeth" sinking "redder than / A mother's rage" may be a *vagina dentata*, frightening thought, but not far removed from the mother as Medusa, who was known not only for her serpentine hair but also her "huge teeth."¹⁴ "The terror Medusa induces," wrote Freud, "is ... a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something [I]t occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother."¹⁵ Teeth, trees, and castration are brought together elsewhere in *Or Else*: "the saw's song ... glee of steel and the / sun-shriek, the scream of castration, the whirl-tooth hysteria / of now, now, now!" in "VII. Chain Saw at Dawn in Vermont in Time of Drouth." If the teeth through which something like a mother's rage is seen in "The Nature of a Mirror" evokes Medusa, so too is the mirrored gorgon evoked in "Natural History" when the mother's "smile sways like daffodils reflected in a brook." The teeth may be detected in that smile, or just beneath its surface; regardless, the mirror the brook affords reflects "the mirror into which you stare" in "The Nature of a Mirror," the mirror that is Time.

The father, too, appears in "Natural History":

In the rain the naked old father is dancing, he will get wet.
The rain is sparse, but he cannot dodge all the drops.

He is singing a song, but the language is strange to me.

The song of the father tells how at last he understands.
That is why the language is strange to me.

The song and the language in which it is sung are strange to the son,

but such it has always been in Warren's world. It is the "taciturn text," the message the father leaves for his son to interpret in all the novels and in some very interesting poems. The poems in Warren's first and last sequences re-enact that father-son relationship, each poem trying to make sense of its predecessor, reading that inherited text and trying out a new context for its fragments. Here, in addition to the snaggle-tooth mad mother seen in Time's mirror re-contextualized as the brook-reflected smile of a mad money-counting Danae (did Perseus see his mother in the mirror when he slew the gorgon?), we have the father who understands and the son who does not understand that understanding in one poem, which may be the re-contextualization of an evidently more complete understanding: "The sky has murder in the eye, and I / Have murder in the heart, for I / Am only human. / We look at each other, the sky and I. / We understand each other" (italics added).

I think that sky is the father. Zeus, the source of the golden shower translated here (in "Natural History") as "the sum ... clearly astronomical," is the sky god par excellence. In "III. Time as Hypnosis," the next poem in the sequence, gold—the inseminating, paternal essence in the Danae myth evoked in the "golden memories of love" the mother counts "like mad" —returns in the eyes of the predator that swoops down from the sky, bringing death to a field mouse:

Have you ever seen how delicately
Etched the print of the field mouse's foot in fresh snow is?
I saw the tracks. But suddenly, none. Nothing
But the wing-flurried snow. Then, small as a pin-head, the single
Bright-frozen, red bead of a blood-drop. Have you ever
Stared into the owl's eyes? They blink slow, then burn:
Burn gold in the dark inner core of the snow-shrouded cedar.

The eyes that here "Burn gold" anticipate the dreamed-of gold mountain of which the poet asks, "did / it glow in [the] dark?" Warren will return to this scene of the owl in the cedar in "●On Into the Night," in

Being Here: “taciturn / The owl’s adrowse in the depth of a cedar / To pre-enjoy the midnight’s revel.”¹⁶ As a “taciturn ... owl,” he enacts the father’s role in Warren’s symbolic world, like “the taciturn tall stone, / Which is your fathers’ monument and mark” in the earliest poem to which he kept returning in his several *Selected Poems*, “To a Face in the Crowd.”¹⁷

That the owl in the cedar is the father—“the golden image of authority” in “Vision Under the October Mountain”—is apparent from the way the cedar returns in the next poem, “IV. Blow, West Wind,” where its association with the father is made explicit:

... O, the cedar

Shakes, and I know how cold
Was the sweat on my father’s mouth, dead.
Blow, west wind, blow, shake the cedars. I know

How once I, a boy, crouching at creekside,
Watched, in the sunlight, a handful of water
Drip, drip, from my hand. The drops—they were bright!

For three poems in a row, there have been drops. In “Natural History” the father is dancing in the rain and will get wet because he cannot dodge all the drops. In “Time as Hypnosis” the field mouse the father-owl has killed drips blood. In “Blow, West Wind” there are beads of sweat, very cold, on the dead father’s mouth, and bright water drips from the son’s hand. The son watches the water drip down “in the sunlight” and marvels at the brightness—a golden brightness, as he makes, in imitation of his father, his own golden shower. These several sorts of drops reek of both life and death, the sweat on the father’s mouth the temperature it is because his corpse is cold. They evoke the rain drops the father both dodged and danced in—a father that was supposed to stay in his grave. That father understood something but expressed it in a language the son did not understand; the poet’s insistent returning to and reworking of the drop imagery over

the course of these three poems may be his attempt to interpret it.

The Perseus myth offers another potential key. The owl is not only the father but the son, if the son is Perseus, for the drop of blood from the field mouse recalls the drops of blood from Medusa’s head that fell on the ground beneath Perseus’s flight, as he carried away his prize through the air on winged feet. This seems likely, given that Warren alludes to it in *A Place to Come To*: “‘Dugton,’” Jed Tewksbury’s mother once said to him, referring to his home town, “do you know how it came to be? ... One time there was a pigeon big as the Rocky Mountain and he stuffed his-self on all the pokeberries and cow patties this side of Pike’s Peak and the bowel movement hit him about this part of Alabama and they named it Dugton.” Later in the novel, Jed will see a purse-snatcher leap to the hood of an automobile and “stand beautifully balanced there with the purse-like Medusa’s head hanging from the hand of Cellini’s Perseus I remember thinking how beautiful, how redemptive, all seemed. It was as though I loved him. I thought how beautifully he had moved, like Ephraim, like a hawk in sunset flight.”¹⁸ Like the owl, the hawk in such poems as “Mortal Limit” and “Red-Tailed Hawk and Pyre of Youth” represent the father; Ephraim is Jed’s son. Being Perseus is evidently something passed down from father to son to one’s own son.

“Necessarily, we must think of the / world as continuous,” we are told in “Interjection #2: Caveat.” Certainly the world in the opening poems of *Or Else* is, as we have seen in the persistent drops and the insistent returnings to the Perseus myth. Yet in “Caveat” the narrator asserts as well that “on- / ly in discontinuity, do we / know that we exist, or that, in the deep- / est sense, the existence of anything / signifies more than the fact that it is / continuous with the world.” The case is made in “Caveat” that if you “fix your eyes firmly on / one fragment of crushed rock” at a highway construction site, that one piece of crushed rock will begin to declare its discontinuity from the

world. It will start to glitter, and then vibrate and “all things” will “seem to / be spinning away from the universal center that the single fragment of / crushed rock had ineluctably become.”

Each poem in a sequence like this demands to be the center of our attention, and may even, as the piece of crushed rock threatens to do, “scream // in an ecstasy of // being.” But the sequence too makes demands on our attention. In the immediately following poem, “V. I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas: The Natural History of a Vision,” what the narrator stares at (as he speaks of staring at the piece of crushed rock) and what becomes the essence of staring—his dead father’s missing eyes in this vision of an impossible return to Christmas morning in Guthrie—has an occult relation to the object of his gaze in “Caveat,” a relation that is only there when these two poems appear in sequence:

The eyes
Are not there. But,
Not there, they stare at what
Is not there.

Not there, but
In each of the appropriate twin apertures, which are
Deep and dark as a thumb-gouge,
Something that might be taken for
A mulberry, large and black-ripe when, long back, crushed,
But now, with years, dust-dried. The mulberries,
Crushed and desiccated, each out of
Its dark lurking-place, stare out at
Nothing.

Nowhere else has the word “crushed” appeared in *Or Else* (nor will it)¹⁹ but here and in the crushed rock that wants so much to declare its independence from the world’s continuousness. Yet, alas! it is ineluctably continuous with these father’s eyes, and Warren, it would appear, willed it so. For when he reprinted “I Am Dreaming” in the 1985 *New and Selected Poems* he chose not to reprint “Caveat”

(though he had included it in the 1975 *Selected Poems*); contemporaneously, he removed the two instances of the word “crushed” from “I Am Dreaming.”²⁰ “Caveat” gone, these two erstwhile links to a now-vanished immediate predecessor had no longer any reason to exist. Like the father’s eyes they once denoted, they are “not there. But, / Not there” perhaps they can “stare at what is not there.”

Dave Smith notes that the scream in “Caveat” is soon followed by another in “I Am Dreaming,” the next poem in *Or Else*:

in Bellevue,
In a bare room, with windows barred, a woman,
Supine on an iron cot, legs spread, each ankle
Shackled to the cot-frame,
Screams.

She keeps on screaming because it is sunset.

Her hair has been hacked short.

Smith asks, “is it the scream that is an ‘ecstasy of being’?”²¹ This is just the sort of question Warren’s sequential echoes make us ask. What might the screaming mental patient have to do with the screaming rock? The continuity between “Caveat” and “I Am Dreaming” with regard to continuity itself is readily apparent, for “Caveat” begins with the assertion that “we must think of the / world as continuous,” and “I Am Dreaming” closes with this summing up:

All items listed above belong in the world
In which all things are continuous,
And are parts of the original dream which
I am now trying to discover the logic of. This
Is the process whereby pain of the past in its pastness
May be converted into the future tense

Of joy.

If all things in “I Am Dreaming” belong in the same world of contin-

uousness, then the screaming woman may not be just any mental patient, but someone, like the parents in the opening scene, from the poet's own life. Readers of Joseph Blotner's biography of Warren may be forgiven for seeing in her Cinina Brescia, the poet's first wife, who in May 1950 was "committed ... to the psychiatric division of New York Hospital."²²

There is a tension in "Caveat" between the narrator's declaration that we must think of the world as continuous and his subsequent assertion, in the second stanza, that "on- / ly, in discontinuity, do we / know that we exist." The rock that first glitters, then vibrates, and from which "all things seem to / be spinning away" but which at the same moment becomes "the univer- / sal center" may be asserting, when it screams in an ecstasy of being, its discontinuity from the world. But whether it has achieved that discontinuity is not clear. On the one hand all things seem to be spinning away from it; but on the other, it has become the universal center.

Reading "I Am Dreaming" biographically—which Warren seems to invite us to do in the Christmas scene—we can imagine a similar tension between continuity and discontinuity in the scene of the screaming woman. The rock wanted to be discontinuous in order to know it existed (if we can read its screaming assertion of being as an exemplification of stanza two's assertion that only in discontinuity do we know that we exist); for the poet as he makes poetry of his own life, the woman on the cot was both in and out of his life. Blotner reports that Warren recalled, "I didn't feel a thing" when he learned of Cinina's death in 1969, and that he said this with "a tone of muted wonder."²³

More than the scream links the rock and the woman. After the rock starts to glitter and vibrate but before it screams, "At this point, while there is still time and will, / I advise you to detach your gaze" for "Not all witnesses / of the phenomenon survive unchanged." The fragment of rock assumes Medusan power, dangerous to look at. The

re-emergence of the Medusa theme at this point in the collection may have something to do with a detail in the scene of the screaming woman, one that almost appears added as an afterthought: "Her hair has been hacked short." Her threatening locks shorn, she is no longer quite the threat she was—appropriately so, for a piece of a rejected past that nevertheless belongs "in the world / In which all things are continuous" has been removed.

The woman on the cot and the ghostly Christmas scene are connected not only by virtue of being pieces of the poet's personal past but also through their connections to the crushed rock of "Caveat," whose ties to the father's crushed-mulberry eyes and the woman's screams are now apparent. The poem's closing assertion challenges us to find other connections between the Christmas dream that occupies sections 1-8 and the Times Square (a place-name evocative of the temporality haunting the poem) moments in sections 9-10 and the view from Nez Percé Pass in section 11.

The latter, though also important to Warren as a setting in *Chief Joseph*, may have some relation to the paternal nose in the Christmas dream, whose "Nostril-flanges" have "gone tattered" in section 2, literally a "nez percé." Such an association seems bizarre, but we are dealing, as stanza 12 tells us, with the logic of dream, in a world where not only are "all things... continuous" but "are parts of the original dream which / I am now trying to discover the logic of." Equally bizarre, yet just the sort of thing dreams are made of, is the association that may arise from the "dry fabric" of the mother's dress in section 4 and the "drawers . . . drying stiff at the crotch" of the old men coming out of pornographic theaters in section 10. Though the dry fabric of the mother's dress "droops over breastlessness" it also "falls decisively away" from her knees and the viewer's attention is drawn to her crotch, to "the shrouded femurs that are now the lap," shrouded by that same dry fabric.

"IV. Blow, West Wind" is not without its echoes (and reversals)

in “I Am Dreaming,” the poem that follows it in the Roman-numeralled sequence. In the former poem, the dead cannot speak (“the last who might speak are dead”) while in the latter, they can:

No presents, son, till the little ones come.

What shadow of tongue, years back unflexed, in what
Darkness locked in a rigid jaw, can lift and flex?

Lines 5-8 of “Blow, West Wind”—

I know how the kestrel hung over Wyoming,
Breast reddened in sunset, and ●, the cedar

Shakes, and I know how cold
Was the sweat on my father’s mouth, dead.

—find multiple parallels in this passage from section 9 of “I Am Dreaming”:

Then,
Of a sudden, know:

Times Square, the season
Late summer and the hour sunset, with fumes
In throat and smog-glitter at sky-height, where
A jet, silver and ectoplasmic, spooks through
The sustaining light, which
Is yellow as acid. Sweat,
Cold in arm-pit, slides down flesh.

The flesh is mine.

(1) “I know” becomes “Then / ... know”; (2) the kestrel in the sunset sky becomes the jet in the sunset sky (sustained in a yellow light that suggests the golden shower of paternity); (3) the cold sweat on his father’s mouth becomes the cold sweat on his own skin.

Though the last scene evoked in “I Am Dreaming” is of the “Nez Percé Pass” and in “Interjection #3: I Know a Place Where All Is

Real” the narrator speaks of “narrow and fog-laced passes,” the latter poem is more strongly tied to the one that follows it, “VI. Ballad of Mister Dutcher and the Last Lynching in Gupton.” This is typical of *Or Else*’s two intertwining sequences: The Interjections are echoed in one of the poems that adjoin them, but not necessarily both (the extremely brief “Interjection #1,” for instance, comments exclusively on the mirror of the poem that precedes it but has no relation to the one following). The Roman-numeralled poems, however, consistently rework elements of their predecessors in their series.

Access to the “Place Where All Is Real” can be gained only by escaping from murderous pursuers: “if you can manage to elude the natives of / intervening zones, who practice ghastly rites and have an appetite for human flesh.” While there are no cannibals in the “Ballad,” its story concerns a man trying to elude pursuers who are trying to kill him. They succeed, and the unnamed black man who had shot a clerk in an attempted robbery is lynched, thanks to the surprising expertise Mister Dutcher reveals about knotting a noose. The fleeing man not only did not “manage to elude” his pursuers, but at the moment of hanging “managed never / to get a good, clean drop” and so suffered a drawn-out death. Of those who make it up to the high country “Where All Is Real” some come back down, but may “die of an oppressive / pulmonary complaint” when they return to a lower elevation. A death, that is, from lack of breath—a fate met in another form in “the Last Lynching in Gupton” (emphases added in the above examples and in the ones that follow).

At the heart of “I Am Dreaming” is the query, “Will I never know / What present there was in that package for me, / Under the Christmas tree?” The question remains unanswered, but the “Ballad of Mister Dutcher” reveals what lies hidden in another package, Dutcher’s secret knowledge of knots, metaphorically presented as “that one talent kept, against the / advice of Jesus, wrapped in a napkin” (kept, that is, until the day of the lynching). That wrapping

recalls the “wrappings” littering the hearth in the dream, “silver and crimson and gold, / Yet gleaming from grayness,” the color that sums up Dutcher’s outward appearance, whose face, smile, coat, and house were “gray.” Of the three packages under the tree, the narrator was “wondering / Which package is mine,” while Dutcher’s napkin-wrapped talent is “something he can call truly / his own.” That concealed talent “was what Mister / Dutcher, all the days, weeks, and years, / had known, and nobody’d known that he knew.” Through the dream of his childhood Christmas, it is as if the narrator had been carrying it with him in all the years since then, like the mad killer’s “treasure” in “Crime,” the pursuing phantom in “Original Sin: A Short Story” (both in *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme*), the “Nameless Thing” that walks the house after midnight in the poem of that title (in *Rumor Verified*), or the manuscript of the Cass Mastern story that followed Jack Burden from one rented apartment to another in *All the King’s Men*.

While the narrator of “I Am Dreaming” would like to know what he cannot know, and Mister Dutcher does not let others know what he knows until that fateful day, the narrator in the next poem, “Chain Saw at Dawn in Vermont in Time of Drouth,” would like to impart a certain knowledge to someone else, but must first discover it himself:

I must endeavor to learn what
I must learn before I must learn
The other thing. If
I learn even a little, I may,
By evening, be able
To tell the man something.

The two things to be learned are named a little earlier in the poem when the narrator lies in bed one summer morning thinking about a man he knows is dying: “I / Cannot tell him how to die because / I have not learned how to live.” The victim of the lynching didn’t know how to die, either,

for when the big
bread truck they had him standing on
drew out, he hung on with both feet
as long as possible

and consequently “managed never / to get a good, clean drop, which was, / you might say, his last mistake.”

The dying man in “Chain Saw,” reflecting on his life, “wonders / Why his boy turned out bad,” a misfortune paralleled in the preceding poem, as Dutcher’s son had “died / one cold winter night in jail, where / the town constable had put him / to sober up.” This, in turn, suggests an intriguing parallel between Dutcher’s son and the lynched man, in that both died while in the constable’s custody, and through his negligence. Having on that earlier occasion allowed Dutcher’s son to freeze to death in his cell, he now allows the lynching party to take possession of the prisoner without a fight. “The constable, it sort of seemed, / had car trouble, and there he was / by the road” with his head under the hood, when they caught up with him and his prisoner.

The parallel between the deceased son and the victim of Dutcher’s knotting prowess is enhanced by a re-emergence of *Or Else*’s motif of the golden shower and its echo a page later in a reflection on the death of Dutcher’s son. When the bread truck was drawn away, the black man “keeled over, slow and head-down, in- / to the rope, spilling his yell out / like five gallons of fresh water / in one big, bright, out-busting slosh / in the sunshine.” Spilling water in the sunshine is what the narrator recalls himself doing as a boy in “Blow, West Wind”: “once I, as a boy, crouching at creekside, / Watched, in the sunlight, a handful of water / Drip, drip, from my hand. The drops-they were bright!” Dutcher sees his progeny, extinguished through the death of his only son, as a missing drop: “with no / drop of his blood to persist in / that ... / darkness that ... is Time.” It is surely no mere coincidence that on the preceding page the dying breath

of the lynchee should be figured as a liquid spilled on the ground. Perhaps it is no coincidence, either, that at about the same time that Warren was writing the “Ballad” (first published in 1974) he was writing the opening scene of *A Place to Come To* (published in 1977), in which a man also falls to his death from standing on a moving vehicle, and as he spatters out a golden shower. It is the narrator’s father who does that in the novel, but we have now seen both father and son (the narrator as his father’s child in “Blow, West Wind”) perform that gesture in *Or Else*. “I Am Dreaming” begins with the narrator taking care not to stir up a golden shower, not to disturb the yellow dust on the bed where he was conceived:

Saw
It.

The bed.

Where it had
Been. Now was. Of all
Covering stripped, the mattress
Bare but for old newspapers spread.
Curled edges. Yellow. On yellow paper dust,
The dust yellow. No! Do not.

Do not lean to
Look at that date. Do not touch
That silken and yellow perfection of Time that
Dust is, for
There is no Time. I,
Entering, see.

The yellow dust is Time’s perfection, but because it is on the parents’ bed it is surely also the father’s trace. In “A Vision: Circa 1880” (from “Mortmain,” in *You, Emperors, and Others*), Warren imagines his father as a boy, emerging “Out of the woods where pollen is a powder of gold,” which is another way of associating the father with a golden shower. In “I Am Dreaming,” in a beautiful and appropriate

blending of images, the father’s trace, the residue of his fathering the child who would become the poet, becomes the mark itself of Time.

The drouth-stricken landscape of “Chain Saw at Dawn in Vermont in Time of Drouth,” where “The heel of the sun’s foot strikes horribly the hill,” and a “brook goes gray among boulders,” is continuous with the landscape of “Small White House,” where “The sun ... beats down,” “hills shudder,” and “The river ... shrinks / Among the hot boulders.” Apart from this, the situation is reversed. In “Chain Saw” the narrator is inside a house when he hears, in addition to the saw, a cry come from outside: “The crow, in distance, calls with the crystalline beauty / Of the outraged heart”; while in the other poem he is standing outside the small white house of the title when “a child’s cry comes from the house.” In a third point of comparison, the saw’s “scream of castration,” in which “the present / Murders the past,” finds its equivalent in the only other event recounted in “Small White House”: “the wax-wing’s beak slices the blue cedar-berry, / Which is as blue as distance.” In “I Am Dreaming” the poet had told us that “His eyes / Had been blue,” speaking of his father; they had become berries there too, “mulberries, / Crushed and desiccated.” Crushed there, sliced here, the father’s eye suffers. The chain saw’s teeth (“the whirl-tooth hysteria / Of now, now, now!”) that castrated the tree reappears in the form of a slicing beak (attacking, metonymically, a tree).

In “I Am Dreaming” the son recognizes that the flesh down which “Sweat, / Cold in arm-pit slides” is his own. That image reappears in “Chain Saw,” suggesting a possible identification between the wielder of the castrating saw and the son: “under / Arm-pits of the blue-shirted sawyer sweat / Beads cold.” In “Last Laugh” (in *Now and Then*), Warren would return to the idea of what a saw can do to a father, focusing on what twelve-year-old Samuel Clemens beheld as he peered through the keyhole at the results of his father’s autopsy: “the head // Sawed through, where his Word, like God’s, held its

deepest den" (this peeping Tom would later, of course, invent the story of a boy Sawyer).²⁴ That the sawyer is a figure for a father-murdering son is borne out by the saw's being characterized as "the present" that "Murders the past."

As the tree suffers, so too does the landscape, in both poems. In the line just after the one in "Chain Saw" in which the sun's foot smites the hill, "the stalk of the beech leaf goes limp." The beech is preeminently the father's tree, as we know from the extensive network of associations reaching back to *World Enough and Time* and ahead to "No Bird Does Call." In light of that, what happens to the stalk of the beech leaf sounds like paternal erectile dysfunction, particularly appropriate in a poem where the scream of castration is heard. Similarly, in "Small White House" the sliced blue cedar-berry (a part for the whole of the tree, as the stalk of the leaf may stand for the beech) is associated with the sun-smitten landscape there as well, in the internal echo between the third line, where the shuddering hills "withdraw into distance" and the seventh, where the cedar-berry "is as blue as distance."

"Interjection #4: Bad Year, Bad War: A New Year's Card, 1969," like other Interjections, breaks the continuity of sequence in that it is connected to only one of the two poems it comes between, in this instance to "Forever O'Clock," which follows it. John Brown's favorite passage from Hebrews about there being no remission "without shedding of blood" is quoted in an epigraph preceding the "Interjection."²⁵ The poem is a meditation on blood and innocence, contrasting the War in Vietnam, the "bad war," with other wars, which "had been virtuous. If blood // Was shed, it was, in a way, sacramental, redeeming / Even evil enemies from whose veins it flowed, // Into the benign logic of History." The innocent sometimes must suffer "the paw-flick of / The unselective flame." The narrator adopts an ironic stance, praying God "To be restored to that purity of heart / That sanctifies the shedding of blood," to be restored to that time when, waging

happier wars, "we, being then untroubled, / Were innocent."

"Forever O'Clock" counters this nostalgia for innocence by beginning with instances of guilt—a criminal about to be executed, then what is apparently the narrator's own recollection of waking up in a hotel room with a woman not his wife. In the longest section of the poem, the narrator engages in a considerably longer and more detailed recollection; this time of innocence perceived, his glimpse of a two-year-old black child playing in the front yard of her house as he drives past.

The title alludes to the impending hour of death: "A clock is getting ready to strike forever o'clock." One can hear it getting ready to strike the way the convict about to be shot by firing squad can "hear the mind of the Deputy Warden getting ready to say, 'Fire!'" Like the remission of sin that can only be achieved through blood in the preceding "Interjection," the sound of what is about to happen can only be perceived through one's blood: "The sound is one you hear in your bloodstream and not your ear."

The little girl's play, though innocent in itself, repeats in almost ritual fashion the representation in "Interjection #4" of war's destruction of the innocent as "the paw-flick of / The unselective flame." Only in the full sequence, however, which includes "Rattlesnake Country," the poem after "Forever O'Clock," does the full force of that parallel emerge.

The naked child with plum-black skin is intensely occupied.
From a rusted tin snuff can in the right hand, the child pours red
dust over the spread fingers of the left hand
held out prone in the bright air.

The child stares at the slow-falling red dust. Some red dust piles
precariously up on the back of the little black
fingers thrust out. Some does not.
The sun blazes down on the naked child in the mathematical center of
the world ...

The world whose mathematical center she occupies is that of the

three sequential poems “Interjection #4,” “Forever O’Clock,” and “Rattlesnake Country.” It is by placing the child in the center of the three that Warren makes it possible for us to see how the red dust pouring down is a reincarnation of the flame, for in “Rattlesnake Country” the girl’s behavior is paralleled by that of a “boy”—the American Indian “Laughing Boy”—killing snakes. Specifically, he “keeps a tin can / Of gasoline” (recalling the girl’s “rusted tin snuff can”) with which he will “Douse” rattlesnakes “with the left hand” (while she held her tin can “in the right hand”) and “with the nail of the right thumb, / Snap a match alight. // The flame” will catch up with the rattler before he reaches his hole, if Laughing Boy has timed it right. “The flame flickers blue” and, later, having tried this game himself and succeeded, the narrator will “Remember / The blue-tattered flick of white flame”—as we should remember “the paw-flick of / The unselective flame” in “Interjection #4.” If we do remember it, then we can appreciate how the paw becomes the girl’s hand and then Laughing Boy’s, and how the flame becomes red dust poured out of a tin can, which itself becomes flaming gasoline poured out of another tin can. Having already seen the interchangeability of a shower of gold liquid and a shower of gold dust elsewhere in the interflow of *Or Else*’s images, we can see, too, that the African American girl and the Native American Laughing Boy are repeating not just the flick of the flame but also the golden shower enactments performed by the narrator as a boy in “Blow, West Wind” and by the black lynching victim in his life’s last gasp in the “Ballad of Mister Dutcher.”

Although the poems in *Or Else* form a seamless web, I must break off here, at about the halfway point, to stay within reasonable article length. I am grateful to the editors of *RWP* for the opportunity to present a portion of my reading of this important instance of Warren’s uncanny ability to construct a poetic collection that is at the same time many and one.

ENDNOTES

¹*Or Else—Poem/Poems 1968-1974* (New York: Random House, 1974); reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 271-322. Given the large number of quotations I make from *Or Else* and because I generally take up its poems in the order in which they appear, I will refrain from giving page numbers for passages quoted from that collection.

²*The Achievement of Robert Penn Warren* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 97.

³“Notes on a Form to Be Lived,” in *Homage to Robert Penn Warren: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Frank Graziano ([Durango, Colo.]: Logbridge-Rhodes, 1981), 40, 46-47.

⁴*The Braided Dream: Robert Penn Warren’s Late Poetry* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990); “Repeating the ‘Implacable Monotone’ in *Thirty-six Poems*,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 48 (1994-95): 39-56.

⁵I write “sequences” in the plural, for there will turn out to be two structured sequences, the Arabic-numeraled one and the one that results from the intertwining of both—in other words, the sequence of each poem in *Or Else* regardless of which of the two sequences it appears in. As far as I can tell, the Roman-numeraled poems do not refer to each other in this way.

⁶*A Place to Come To* (New York: Random House, 1977), 8 and 3.

⁷*A Place to Come To*, 7.

⁸*Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War* (New York: Random House, 1961), 67.

⁹*A Place to Come To*, 61.

¹⁰*The Taciturn Text: The Fiction of Robert Penn Warren* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 225-26.

¹¹Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), 137.

¹²*The Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 417.

¹³*The Taciturn Text*, 230.

¹⁴Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Folio Society, 1996), 225.

¹⁵Sigmund Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” trans. James Strachey, in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 212.

¹⁶*Collected Poems*, 416.

¹⁷*Collected Poems*, 61.

¹⁸*A Place to Come To*, 25 and 387.

¹⁹I can make this claim with some assurance thanks to the kind assistance of John Burt, editor of *The Collected Poems*, who provided me a zip disk containing all the poems in that volume.

²⁰See Burt’s textual note to this line in *The Collected Poems*, 711.

²¹Smith, 53.

²²Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1977), 260. It was not Bellevue, but a hospital in White Plains.

²³Blotner, 383.

²⁴*Collected Poems*, 366-67.

²⁸Brown was the subject of Warren's first book, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (1929; reprint, Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1993).