

2001

Whatever Happened to "You" ? -- A Poetic Odyssey

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Recommended Citation

Strandberg, Victor (2001) "Whatever Happened to "You" ? -- A Poetic Odyssey," *Robert Penn Warren Studies*: Vol. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/rpwstudies/vol1/iss1/11>

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VICTOR STRANDBERG

I. The Genesis of "You"

In 1960, with the publication of *You, Emperors and Others*, Robert Penn Warren gave top billing at last to the most mysterious, long-lasting character in his poetic oeuvre. The origin of "you" goes back to Warren's earliest poem to appear in all four of his *Selected Poems* volumes, "To a Face in the Crowd." Dated 1923, when the poet was eighteen years old, this poem begins with a fraternal address to "you": "Brother, my brother, whither do you pass?" At this point, the main significance of "you" seems to be his power to haunt the speaker, who says "In dream, perhaps, I have seen your face before."¹ This hint that the drama of "you" will involve the unconscious ("dream") may help explain the paranormal powers of this mysterious *alter ego* in its future manifestations. And it was to be a long future. Though the last stanza says "Your face is blown, an apparition, past," that face was to return over the next four decades of Warren's verse in countless mutations.

At the end of the decade, in 1929, Warren ended his most ambitious verse to date, a seven-poem sequence called "Kentucky Mountain Farm," with a fantasy about "you." In this segment, titled "The Return," a leaf falling toward its reflection in a stream represents—again evoking the motif of "dream"—the unified self that the speaker longs for:

A richer leaf rose to the other there.
They touched; with the burning clarity of dream,
Bosom to bosom, burned on the quiet stream.

So, backward heart, you have no voice to call
Your image back, the vagrant image again. . . . (38)

Here “you” has evolved into an ego bothered by a sense of vacancy, an intuition of having lost some dimension of self that he associates with the realm of dream or underwater—which is to say, once again, the unconscious.

By the early 1940s, the predicament of “you” takes precedence as the central theme in what I consider the most richly textured and original group of Warren’s poems—the *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* (1942), which, when combined with “The Ballad of Billie Potts” (1943), could as well be called “Twelve Poems on the Same Theme.” Here the identity of “you” undergoes a radical transformation. No longer attracted to the “brother” self of 1923 (“To a Face in the Crowd”) nor to the ideal *alter ego* of 1929 (“The Return”), the “you” has now entered an advanced state of sanctimony that sees the other self as a deadly embarrassment. In “Crime,” “you” compare this psychic outcast to a toad in your basement, where “memory drips, a pipe in the cellar-dark” (68). In “Original Sin: A Short Story,” the *alter ego* first appears to “you” as a nightmare figure with “locks like seaweed strung on the stinking stone,” then evokes unwanted connections to the speaker’s memories yet again, embodied in an old grandpa, an old horse, and an “old hound that used to snuffle your door and moan.” In “End of Season,” “you” seek to wash away the polluted *doppelgänger* in a four-part water sequence: first like old grandpa, “who lolled his old hams, stained hands, in that Lethe” (the hot springs); then like John the Baptist at the Jordan River; then like Ponce de Leon seeking the Fountain of Youth; and finally like Dante, whose “*duca*, smiling in the blessed clime, / With rushes, sea-wet, wiped from that sad brow the infernal grime.” In “Pursuit,” the unwanted *alter ego* takes the form of “a little old lady in black” who “blinks and croaks, like a toad or a Norn, in the horrible light.” And in “Terror,” this unsavory presence sinks—within yet another “dream” context—into a total bestiality that foreshadows the Minotaur of *Brother to Dragons*: “the arboreal / Malignancy, with the privy

breath, which watches / And humps in the dark; but only a dream, after all” (68-70, 73, 77).

By the time this sequence reaches its climax in “The Ballad of Billie Potts,” it is “you,” not Billie Potts, who is the main character, and the trouble with “you” is a loss of identity that must finally be confronted rather than evaded (as it was in the *Eleven Poems*), inasmuch as the vacancy of “you” has at last become intolerable:

Though the letter always came and your lovers were always true,
Though you always received the respect due to your position,
Though your hand never failed of its cunning and your glands always
thoroughly knew their business,
Though your conscience was easy and you were assured of your
innocence,
You became gradually aware that something was missing from the
picture,
And upon closer examination exclaimed: “Why, I’m not in it at all!”
Which was perfectly true.

Therefore you tried to remember when you had last had whatever it was
you had lost,

And you decided to retrace your steps from that point. (88)

As was hinted in the earlier poetry, the search for what is missing now hearkens back to childhood, when the reflection in the water signified a state of innocence rather than vacancy, and now also the notion of dream reappears:

But perhaps what you lost was lost in the pool long ago
When childlike you lost it and then in your innocence rose to go
After kneeling, as now, with your thirst beneath the leaves:
And years it lies here and dreams in the depth and grieves,
More faithful than mother or father in the light or dark of the leaves.
(89)

In the end, the search for what is missing from “you” traces back before childhood even, to a primordial state of being shared by all the

world's creatures before they were differentiated in the act of birth. Which is to say, the journey back up the stream of time leads finally to the silent, motionless "high pool" of eternity, yet again associated with the word "dream":

The goose hoots north where the starlit marshes are.
The salmon heaves at the fall, and, wanderer, you
Heave at the great Fall of time. . . .

Back to the silence, back to the pool, back
To the high pool, motionless, and the unmurmuring dream. (91)

At the end of "Billie Potts," it appears that "you" is dead at last, having shared Little Billie's fate by kneeling "in the sacramental silence of evening" to the final hatchet-blow: "What gift—oh, father, father—from that dissevering hand?" (89). But ten years later, in *Brother to Dragons* (1953), "you" is back—not under that name but unmistakably identified with the character of Thomas Jefferson. In this book-length poem, based on an actual historical episode, the two antagonists reach a new extreme of discord. For the first time, the shadow self who hobbles after "you" is not merely an embarrassment, like old grandpa fingering the wen on his forehead (in "Original Sin: A Short Story"), but a figure of appalling depravity. The psychopathic action of Jefferson's nephew in vivisectioning a slave suffices to undermine the third President's conception of human identity, which lapses from Enlightenment idealism to "Marmosets in mantles, beasts in boots, parrots in pantaloons."² Given Jefferson's towering bitterness towards his nephew, their final handshake—occurring despite Jefferson's revulsion against taking a hand "with the blood slick on it" (191)—seems too contrived to resolve Warren's long-standing psychodrama about "you." Though it is a masterpiece of dramatic poetry with many superb flights of language, *Brother to Dragons* represents only the midpoint of Warren's "you" poems, not a conclusion.

So the story of "you" continues into Warren's next volume of poems, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning *Promises* (1957), which in effect picks up the thread where Warren had left it fourteen years earlier at the end of "Billie Potts." Which is to say that in Poem XVI of *Promises*, "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace," "you" reappears in that shadowy borderland between this world and the next where Little Billie and "you" were last seen kneeling to the final hatchet-blow in the "sacramental silence of evening." During the intervening decade and a half, the portrayal of "you" was deeply affected by Warren's immersion in Dante, whose canto on the Violators of Nature in the *Inferno* provided the structure of *At Heaven's Gate* (1943) and whose Purgatorio furnished the epigraph for *All the King's Men* (1946).³ So the basic strategy of these poems, as in *The Divine Comedy*, is the use of a Virgil-like guide to initiate a young man ("you") into the next world. Here the foregoing motifs of old grandpa with a wen on his forehead and the old hound that snuffles at your door become fused in the figure of a skeletal ancestor: "And your grandmother whines like a dog in the dark." Though he calls her "old bitch" and "old fool," the young fellow who is "you" eventually learns his consanguinity not only with his skeletal grandma but with all creatures in one of Warren's most visionary moments: "You fool, poor fool, all Time is a dream, and we're all one Flesh, at last" (136). Unlike the barely credible handshake between Jefferson and Lilburn in *Brother to Dragons*, the doctrine of "one Flesh" effectively advances the theme of psychic reconciliation, mainly via two eschatological moments. The first instance features the appearance of supernatural hogs who chomp both granny and "you" into one Flesh in segments 3 and 6 of the "Ballad" ("Go It, Granny—Go It, Hog!" and "I Guess You Ought to Know Who You Are"). The other moment, in the concluding segment 7—titled as a telegram ("Rumor Unverified Stop Can You Confirm Stop")—evokes a mysterious presence with divine powers who, as the "purchaser" of these woods, is expected to redeem the

world's ruins: "And subdues to sweetness the pathside garbage, or thing body had refused [i.e., death]" (135-138).

The final, climactic appearance of "you" in Warren's verse came in the 1960 volume *You, Emperors, and Others*, in which the "you" of the title is the focus of the opening sequence, "Garland for You." Here a heightened state of anxiety attends the aging of "you" as Poem I, "Clearly About You," tells how "Things are getting somewhat out of hand now—light fails on the marshes." The poem further observes that "In the age of denture and reduced alcoholic intake. . . . You will try the cross, or the couch, for balm for the heart's ache," but neither religion nor psychoanalysis brings self-knowledge any closer: "You won't look in the mirror? Well—but your face is there / Like a face drowned deep under water, mouth askew" (145). The original face of "you," the subject of "To a Face in the Crowd" 37 years earlier, reappears briefly in these last "you" poems: "[Are you] that face in the crowd, caught / And borne like a leaf on the flood away, to which I gave one perturbed thought?" (146).

Besides the aging process, the other major characteristic in this final portrait of "you" is the sharpened sense of guilt that predominates. From the beginning, guilt has always been intrinsic to Warren's oeuvre, not just in the "you" poems but in works of history like *John Brown* (1929), which documents Brown's massacre of unarmed men, and in novels like *All the King's Men* (1946), where Jack Burden unwittingly causes the deaths of his boss, his best friend, and his father. It is worth noting, in this respect, that the two emperors in *You, Emperors, and Others* are just another appalling version of "you." "Let's stop horsing around—it's not Domitian, it's you / We mean," Warren says after cataloguing that emperor's list of crimes and follies (154—"Apology for Domitian"). Elsewhere these last "you" poems describe sexual peccadilloes—for example "the lady theologian . . . for therapy now trying a dago" in "Switzerland" ("world mecca for seekers of pleasure and health")—but the most total degradation of "you"

is found in another part of the "Garland for You" sequence, the poem entitled "The Letter about Money, Love, or Other Comfort, If Any." This work, the most significant of all Warren's "you" poems next to "The Ballad of Billie Potts," features a detective-like speaker who follows the trail of "you" across a geography of dereliction. In a remarkably sustained feat of prosody—one sentence stretched across eight stanzas (88 lines) of sonnet-like design (abbacdcdede)—the speaker picks up the trace of "you" in Nashville (Warren's college town), where "you had blown, your rent in arrears, the bathroom a sty" (150). In Dubuque (perhaps a reference to Warren's teaching stint at the University of Iowa in 1941), "your Llewellyn setter / was found in the woodshed, starved to death," and later "you" attempted suicide (as Warren did in college) "but someone smelled gas at the door / in the nick of time." Living abroad (as Warren often did after his Rhodes Scholarship period), "you fooled with the female Fulbrights / at the Deux Magots and the Flore, / until the police caught you dead to rights" (151). Toward the end, like the Frankenstein monster, "you" deteriorates into

. . . one who by dog and gun
has been hunted to the upper altitudes, for the time comes when all men
will shun
you, and you, like an animal,
will crouch among the black boulders and whine under knife edge of
night-blast . . .
for you are said to be capable now of all bestiality . . . (152)

By way of bringing the odyssey of "you" to a close, the "Garland for You" sequence posits two ways of coping with the dilemma of a degraded identity. One relies on the intuition that final identity is accessible only through the unconscious, in the realm of "dream" (so often cited elsewhere in these "you" poems)—a place beyond the limitations of the ego where something like the "one Flesh" state described in *Promises* may become manifest. Thus in Poem II of this

sequence, "Lullaby: Exercise in Human Charity and Self Knowledge," the abdication during sleep of conscious identity allows "you" to fuse with the cosmos at large (146):

Sleep, my dear, whatever your name is:
Galactic milk spills down light years.
Sleep, my dear, your personal fame is
Sung safely now by all the tuned spheres,
And your sweet identity
Fills like vapor, pale in moonlight, all the infinite night sky.
You are you, and naught's to fear:
Sleep, my dear.

In later stanzas, this poem adds other modes of identity to its list of dispensable features, including your face ("Fair or brown, or young or old") and gender ("Male or female, bold or shy"). In the end, the "I" of this poem joins "you" in this repudiation of conscious identity: "Whoever I am, what I now bless / Is your namelessness."

This entry of this "I" into the "you" poems comprises a vital new element, necessitated by the incompleteness of the argument without it. Although the function of the unconscious is an ultimate way of dealing with the dilemma of "you," it does not suffice to answer the needs of the conscious ego here and now. Perhaps the "I" of this poem was adumbrated in the role of R.P.W. in *Brother to Dragons*, introduced among its Dramatis Personae as an artist ("The writer of this poem"). Certainly the "I" who pursues "you" is an artist in "The Letter about Money, Love, or Other Comfort, if Any." "Having accepted the trust"—the artist's mission—"so many years back," with "only a passion, like a disease, for Truth," the speaker delivers the letter to "you" in the penultimate stanza and claims his reward in the final stanza:

I stand, bewildered, breath-bated and lame,
at the edge of a clearing, to hear, as first birds stir, life lift now life's
hasp,
then see, in dawn's first drench and drama, the snow peak go gory,

and the eagle will unlatch crag-clasp,
fall, and at breaking of wing-furl, bark glory,
and by that new light I shall seek
the way, and my peace with God . . . (152)

This stanza, with its sensation of immersion in nature (anticipating the widely admired *Audubon: A Vision* of 1969) and its theological stance (seeking "my peace with God"), effectively marks the terminus of nearly four decades of "you" poems. In the quarter-century of prolific creativity that remained to him, during which he published ten volumes of poetry (representing 400 of the 584 pages in the *Collected Poems*), only one poem, taking up less than one page, devotes major space to the presence of "you." That poem, "Rumor Verified," will appear in the last segment of this discussion. But first, the author's relation to "you" needs investigation.

II. Who Is "You"?

In *Democracy and Poetry* (1975) Warren describes "the relation of the self of the author to the work created" as "the most subtle, complex, and profound relationship in literature."⁴ "The work itself represents the author's adventure in selfhood," he goes on to say, citing the view of Rilke and Yeats that "the making of a work represents a plunge into the 'abyss of the self'" (71). Thanks to the outstanding biographical scholarship of the last decade—including most notably Joseph Blotner's *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (1997), but also the volumes of letters edited by James A. Grimshaw, Jr., and by William Bedford Clark⁵—the emergence of "you" from Warren's abyss of self can be more clearly understood. In short, during nearly four decades "you" developed into a sort of scapegoat for failings pertinent to the author's life and times—failings that ran the gamut from his own physical inadequacy to the degeneracy of Auden's "low dishonest decade" (the 1930s).

The early manifestations of "you," yearning (for example) "to

call / Your image back, the vagrant image" in "Kentucky Mountain Farm," thus hearken back to the last time (in Warren's early teens) when he was physically and socially whole. By age fifteen, he had lost his eye to a stone thrown by his younger brother, an accident that left him "disqualified" and "ashamed" of his body according to his later recollection, causing in Blotner's phrase "an effect like castration" (50). (On February 7, 1934, he underwent the ultimate horror of having the eye removed to prevent the common phenomenon of "sympathy blindness," whereby a good eye deteriorates to match the blind one.) During his later teens, Warren's social life likewise suffered, Blotner says, mainly because of family problems. For one thing there was his guilt over the meager opportunity afforded his sister Mary, whose "record [in school] was as good as her brother's, but the quality of her education [in a teacher's college] would be far below his" (Blotner 44). Most painfully, there was his isolation from his parents, with whom "I never talked about anything. . . , not seriously," Warren told Allen Tate (Blotner, 52). Of the two parents it was the relation to the mother that was most troubling, evoking some harsh epithets in "The Return: An Elegy" (1934)— "*the old bitch is dead, / what have I said!*" (33)—and a towering sense of guilt in "Revelation" (1942): "Because he had spoken harshly to his mother / . . . That night, all night, the buck rabbit stamped in the moonlit glade, / And the owl's brain glowed like a coal in the grove's combustible dark" (71).

Another burden carried by "you" down through the years had to do with Warren's sexual relations. In his letters to Allen Tate from Berkeley, the 21-year-old Warren jests about a "Hebrew" girl who for several months has given him sexual favors, but decades later a note of self-reproach affects such memories, as in *Tale of Time* (1966), where Warren laments "nor do I know, even now, the meaning / of another night, by another sea" when "salt // were the tears to my lips on the girl's face, for / she wept, and I did not know why, and thus /

entered her body" (206). There is also a more general confession in this poem ("And All That Came Thereafter") that ties the author to the guilt of "you" in many poems, particularly regarding an affair Warren carried on with a married woman (Blotner 273): "[I] have lied, in velleity loved . . . committed / adultery, and for a passing pleasure / . . . inflicted death on flies" (207). *You, Emperors, and Others* also exposes "you" as an adulterous husband in "A Real Question Calling for Solution": "When you slept with another woman you found that the letter / You owed your wife was a pleasure to write, gay now and teasy." Even in his final volume, *Altitudes and Extensions* (1980), the octogenarian poet renders a remembered scene of sexual guilt that appears too intense for pure imagination. Leaving husband and wife behind, the adulterous pair in "The Distance Between: Picnic of Old Friends" suffer a painful aftermath:

No resistance: seizure, penetration.

She sat in the rich, sap-bleeding, wild tangle of fern, and wept.
He stood by a beech, some twenty feet off, head down.

Finally, regarding Warren's personal life, there are hints that the major emergence of "you" in the *Eleven Poems on the Same Theme* in 1942 may possibly have coincided with guilt feelings regarding abortion. One such hint appears in "Crime," where fetus imagery intrudes with startling vividness—"eyes hieratic like foetuses in jars" (68). But the main evidence lies in *At Heaven's Gate* (1943), where Sweetwater contemplates his unborn child: "He seemed to see . . . the little hunched-up creature, blind, unbreathing, the tiny hands and feet formed like delicate carving. . . . How long did it take before the nails appeared, he wondered. He wondered when it got a face, a real face which you could call human. He remembered fetuses in jars, the wizened, little, simian-wise faces, . . . contorted in profound puzzlement."⁶ Sue Murdock's decision to abort the foetus evokes a none-

too-appetizing simile: "She felt like one who, after vomit, relaxes in the relief from pressure and stress. . ." (349-50). This book appeared a year after the Warrens' sojourn in Jalisco, not far from Guadalajara, in the summer of 1942 (Blotner, 189), which produced the poem sequence "Mexico Is a Foreign Country: Five Studies in Naturalism." At a time when abortion comprised a heinous crime in the United States, a trip to Mexico was not uncommon for women with problem pregnancies, and one might speculate whether Cinina Warren—whose mental fragility would have made her a very poor mother—were in that situation. In any case, whether via experience or imagination, the issue seems to have exacerbated the unworthiness of "you."

Apart from the personal life of "you," the political tone of the times appears to have contributed substantially to the malaise of these poems. In *Democracy and Poetry* Warren displays a social conscience that prefers "even Pound at his nuttiest," because of his thirst for a just society, over "those who, like Henry James, would assume art to be the justification of all life" (35, 91). "I flinch," Warren says, from those "who refuse to recognize the hard costs of mere survival for many millions of human beings, the cost in grinding effort and irremediable pain. How can anyone who has lived through the Great Depression, or even walked through parts of Appalachia or a slum, feel otherwise?" (91)

During the period of the "you" poems—from the late thirties through the late fifties—it is easy to see why a man with these views would react strongly to the crises of poverty, political fanaticism, and racism that produced the Great Depression, a world at war, and the Civil Rights struggle. Reflecting Warren's disgust with flash politics, "you" turns up as a political terrorist in "Butterflies Over the Map" (Poem I of the "Mexico Is a Foreign Country" sequence of 1943), where "you, . . . robed in the pure / Idea, smote, and fled," leaving behind a child's corpse (94). *Brother to Dragons* likewise renders its "you" figure, our third President, as robed in the pure political Idea

until reality deploys its meat-axe. The Cold/Korean wars of the early fifties did little to lighten the mood, as Warren revealed in a letter to a friend: "We are entering into a thirty years war, and going in blind. . . . The general picture is so grim that it makes all your ordinary pursuits, the business of literature and so forth, seem trivial in the face of the absolute bestial blankness of the objective world" (Blotner 267). In the later fifties, *Promises* updates the theme with a sour look back at the first Eisenhower-Khrushchev meeting in 1955: "posing for pictures, arms lined, the same smile in their eyes, / Good and Evil, to iron out all differences, stage their meeting at summit" (125).

So far as poverty is concerned, the literary context of the emerging "you" poems in *Eleven Poems* was one of severe social protest, e.g., John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Carson McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), Agee and Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and Warren's own sagas of the rich robbing the poor in *Night Rider* (1939) and *At Heaven's Gate* (1943). Regarding racism, the supreme shame for a white Southerner, the years of "you" stretched from Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) and Gunnar Myrdahl's *An American Dilemma* (1942) through the desegregation decision of 1954 and Warren's own race-centered books, *Band of Angels* (1955) and *Segregation* (1956).

Although these historic forces—war, poverty, racism—are obviously not to be blamed on "you," it seems likely that their effect on the poet's outlook combined with the personal deficiencies denoted above to carry the portrait of "you" across the decades to its sardonic culmination in *You, Emperors, and Others*. Upon reaching this juncture, however, another mystery applies: why, after four decades of dogged poetic duty, did "you" suddenly disappear? Why, after the "Garland for You" sequence in *You, Emperors*, did "you" mutate into the benign and philosophical figure whom the speaker addresses in subsequent volumes: e.g., "Do you think you could tell me / What constitutes the human bond?" (*Tale of Time*, 1966, CP, 197); "You

must learn to accept the kiss of fate" (*Incarnations*, 1968; *CP*, 233); "Time // Is the mirror into which you stare" (*Or Else*, 1974; *CP*, 271)?

Among the plausible answers to that question, three considerations especially stand out. First, as regards Warren's personal life, the end of his gruelingly bad marriage to Cinina in 1951, soon followed by marriage to Eleanor Clark and a happy if belated experience of fatherhood, seems to have effected a "born-again" spirit in the middle-aged poet, enabling a new persona gradually to displace "you" in the poet's psychic constitution. He was living out the process of conversion that he had defined a decade earlier in a conversation between Adam Stanton and Jack Burden: "When you get converted you still have the same personality. You merely exercise it in terms of a different set of values."

Second, one such new value grew out of his "Osmosis of Being" thesis, best epitomized in the cosmic consciousness that made its first appearance at the end of "The Ballad of Billie Potts" (1943) and became fully articulated in the vision that Warren described in "Knowledge and the Image of Man" (a speech at the Conference on the Unity of Knowledge at Columbia University in 1954, published in the *Sewanee Review* in 1955): "[Man is] in the world with continual and intimate interpenetration, an inevitable osmosis of being," which evokes "such a sublimation that the world which once provoked . . . fear and disgust may now be totally loved." "You," too, might be "totally loved" as the Osmosis of Being expanded through its "one Flesh" stage in *Promises* (135) to its sublimation in "Lullaby" ("Sleep, my dear," 146) and its aftereffects in books like *Flood*—e.g., Brother Potts's prayer, "Help me to know the life I lived was blessed"—and *Audubon: A Vision* (1969): "Continue to walk in the world. Yes, love it!" (261).

Finally, by the late fifties the American social climate was changing powerfully for the better. Despite Warren's sarcasm toward the 1955 summit meeting in *Promises* (125), the Cold War, along with

the hot one in Korea, was gradually simmering down after the death of Stalin in 1953, and in domestic affairs the Civil Rights movement was alleviating the white Southerner's chief source of social guilt, the plight of the American Negro. With all these changes, the identity of "you" gradually modified from a shame-haunted, vacuous ego trying to evade its demons to a figure benefiting from a conversion experience. That experience, because of its crucial importance, is worth citing one last time from the end of "The Letter about Money, Love, or Other Comfort, if Any" (152), whose persona, observing the dawn, says: "by that new light I shall seek / the way, and my peace with God." His peace with God—via the Osmosis of Being—is a significant development, but no more important than its psychological corollary: being (like Audubon and Chief Joseph in future poems) at peace with "you."

III. The Future of "You"

After its apotheosis in *You, Emperors, and Others*, the "you" of Warren's long middle years became an outmoded self, an empty husk that had served its purpose and could be cast away. But as Warren had exclaimed early in his "you" period, "Oh, nothing is lost, ever lost!" (see "Crime," 68), and indeed, "you" is never lost either. Some twenty years after being last seen in *You, Emperors*, "you" makes a comeback in a poem entitled "Rumor Verified." Though it is less than a page long (457), the author thought the poem important enough to give its title to the entire volume in which it appears: *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980*.

One of the oddities of "Rumor Verified" is its echo of a poem published 23 years earlier in *Promises* under the title (in telegram format) "Rumor Unverified Stop Can You Confirm Stop." The unverified rumor in the latter poem, which is the final entry in the "Ballad of a Sweet Dream of Peace" (135-38), is that "the woods are sold, and the purchaser / Soon comes" to redeem the fallen creation ("subdues

to sweetness the pathside garbage”). In “Rumor Verified,” however, no such prospect is in sight. Instead, the rumor is that “you” have lost your carefully cultivated but phony identity (whether by death, false rumor of death, or other means is not clear): “Since the rumor has been verified, you can, at least, / Disappear. You will no longer be seen at the Opera, / . . . Nor at your unadvertised and very exclusive / Restaurant, discussing wine . . . / Nor at your club, setting modestly forth your subtle opinion” (457). Now “you” can aspire to an ideal life filled with heroic and virtuous action: “Since the rumor has been verified, you can try, as in dream, / To have lived another life . . . / . . . you pray with the sick, kiss lepers / . . . and for justification lead / A ragtag squad to ambush the uniformed patrol.” So, as in *Eleven Poems* some forty years earlier, “you” at the end of “Rumor Verified” must come to terms with your real identity: “you are simply a man, . . . nothing more.”

It is not a new lesson—for example, Part III of *Audubon* is titled “We Are Only Ourselves”—but it appears to need periodic restatement. Perhaps the reason why is best understood in terms of that once mighty prophet of psychic truth, Sigmund Freud. Though bereft in recent times of its “scientific” pretensions, Freud’s oeuvre still remains a useful model of psychic exploration, and its vast authority during most of Warren’s lifetime doubtless affected his work and thought. (“Freud on dreams” is one of the books cited in “Reading Late at Night, Thermometer Falling”—311.) So the future of “you” is predicated not merely on Warren’s own life and times but on a permanent feature of human psychology.

As regards the return of “you,” three Freudian theories appear relevant. First, Freud’s tripartite self—id, ego, and superego—finds ample verification throughout Warren’s writings. The id, or unrestrained animal self, can be seen in figures like Lilburn Lewis in *Brother to Dragons*, Frog-Eye in *Flood*, and Big Hump in *World Enough and Time*. The ego is “you,” trying to walk a precarious path

between the powerful urges of the id on one side and the superego’s demand for an ideal self on the other. For Warren, as for Freud, the superego is the most dangerous of the three entities.⁹ Where Freud detected “the role of the superego in all neuroses,” in Warren’s work the superego’s delusion of moral perfection brings forth the murderous fanaticism of characters like John Brown in the Warren biography, Adam Stanton and Jeremiah Beaumont in Warren’s fiction, and the prophet Elijah in Warren’s poetry, who “screamed . . . / Like / A bursting blood blister” after killing the priests of Baal in the “Holy Writ” section of *Tale of Time* (207).

The second Freudian insight relevant to Warren’s “you” is the idea that civilized life depends on the ego winning its daily struggle for equilibrium between the primitive savagery of the id and the opposite claims of the superego. This appeal to the middle way was Freud’s argument in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and it resembles Warren’s social philosophy both in fiction (e.g., Willie Stark’s political pragmatism) and in major prose essays, including *The Legacy of the Civil War: Meditations on the Centennial* (1961) and *Democracy and Poetry* (1975). Just as Freud saw his role as the friend of the ego, guiding it toward equilibrium by making the unconscious conscious, Warren guides “you” toward awareness of “Original Sin” on one side and wariness regarding “Idealism” on the other, trying to balance “The human filth, the human hope,” as he says in *Audubon* (255).

Among Warren’s poems, “Two Studies in Idealism” (167-69) illustrates the lack of balance by assigning the Confederate and Union soldiers the role of id and superego respectively and directing corrosive irony at both parties. Of these two extremes, Idealism posed the greater danger. Given the world history he lived through—the two worst wars in human history, culminating in the Holocaust and Hiroshima (a target of savage sarcasm in his poem “New Dawn”—CP 549-56)—Warren had good reason to distrust ideal aspirations. Although in *Brother to Dragons* he did assert that “We have yearned

in the heart for some identification / With the glory of the human effort," he also says "The incandescence of the heart's great flare" comes only when we "strike the steel of wrath on the stone of guilt" (211, 195). So "you" are at your most vulnerable when trying to suppress the lower realms of the self in favor of the higher.

For our third and last correlation, Warren's cry that "Nothing is ever lost!" is an instance of Freud's Return of the Repressed—the idea that in the struggle for dominance among parts of the psyche, no victory is ever final: the repressed element of self merely lies dormant and waiting for its sure and certain resurrection. So the return of "you" after a long absence only shows the permanence of the psychic struggle: "you" can lapse at any time into the sorry profile of decades ago. Which is to say, the future of "you" is eternal recurrence, and whatever happened to "you" is likely to happen again at odd times and places.

From "To a Face in the Crowd" (1923) to "Rumor Verified" (1980) Warren converted this thought into one of the most distinctive features of his poetry. Even so, it is noteworthy that except for "Rumor Verified," "you" seems to have attained "my peace with God" and peace with the larger self in the later poetry of Robert Penn Warren, as though fulfilling the script laid down in *All the King's Men*: "you might have a family reunion for all the you's with barbecue under the trees. It would be amusing to know what they would say to each other" (129). Given the "Nothing is ever lost!" (or Return of the Repressed) principle, perhaps we can surmise one thing they would say to each other. To cite (slightly revised) the greatest poem by our greatest American poet, they might say: "I stop somewhere waiting for 'you'"¹⁰ In Warren's long dialectic between "you" and other parts of the psyche, that prospect may be the one sure thing his vast and various poetic oeuvre will verify.

ENDNOTES

¹Robert Penn Warren, *The Collected Poems*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 38. Hereafter references to specific pages are cited in my main text parenthetically.

²Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons* (New York: Random House, 1953), 7.

³See Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 206 and 523. Hereafter cited as Blotner

⁴Robert Penn Warren, *Democracy and Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 70-71.

⁵James A. Grimshaw, Jr., *Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: A Literary Correspondence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998); and William Bedford Clark, *Selected Letters of Robert Penn Warren*, vol. 1, *The Apprentice Years, 1924-1934* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

⁶Robert Penn Warren, *At Heaven's Gate* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1943; New York: Signet Book, 1963), chapter 22, 309-310.

⁷*All the King's Men* (1946; reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 316.

⁸*Flood* (New York: Signet Edition, 1965), 366.

⁹Theodore Reik quotes a letter from Freud in his Introduction to *The Compulsion to Confess and the Need for Punishment* (1925; reprint, New York: <n.p.>, 1958), xi.

¹⁰Most readers will recognize this citation as the last line of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*.