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Vision in Robert Penn Warren's Poetry

GWEN LE COR

When I first started reading about Robert Penn Warren, I was astonished to discover that he chose to write almost by accident or, rather, because of an accident. His decision to write, if it can be called such, originated in the accidental loss of his left eye. The piece of coal that struck his eye when he was sixteen, and which permanently damaged his vision, also radically altered his career plans. It prevented him from going to the United States Naval Academy, where he had been accepted, and made him opt instead for Vanderbilt University. It was there, through his encounter with John Crowe Ransom, that he developed a taste for writing.

Over and above the biographic anecdote, writing started for Warren with a traumatic injury. On a personal level, the event left a profound physical and psychic imprint. He described himself as being "maimed" and lived in the constant fear of going blind.¹ His entire work bears the mark of this trauma.

Reading Warren's biography, and re-reading his work, I became aware of the impact the accident had on his writing. It became for him a symbolic way of recovering his lost vision. In her diary, Virginia Woolf wrote that the integrity of her being depended on the act of writing:

I thought, driving through Richmond last night, something very profound about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing.²

The same could be said of Warren; only writing could make him whole.

¹Joseph Blotner, *Robert Penn Warren: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1997), 51, 439.

²Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*; Volume IV 1931-1935 (London: Hogarth Press, 1982), 161.

“Or is it a mere poem, after all?”

Nowhere is this clearer, perhaps, than in the poetry. In “The Corner of the Eye,” a poem from *Rumor Verified: Poems 1979-1980*, the persona links vision and poetry:

The poem is just beyond the corner of the eye.
You cannot see it—not yet—but sense a faint gleam,

Or stir.³

In many ways, this late poem gives us the key to Warren’s poetry. By placing “poem” and “eye” at the beginning and end of the first line, Warren emphasizes their symmetric nature, doubling what is said on the literal level. “Or is it a mere poem, after all?” Warren’s query resonates at the end of the poem, leaving the reader to wonder if the answer is not to be found in the “Eye” of the title. The poem is the mirror image of sight, its textual manifestation.

In an essay on short-story writing, Flannery O’Connor stressed the importance of vision: “For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is an organ that eventually involves the whole personality, and as much of the world as can be got into it.”⁴ Although this statement was intended as a comment on her own work, it applies equally well to Warren’s poetry.

Colors and Glitters

The world
Is the language we cannot utter.
Is it a language we can even hear?
(421)

These lines from “Language Barrier” (*Being Here*) seem to echo Flannery O’Connor’s comment on the primacy of vision. For her, the eye literally encompasses the world. Conversely here, the

³The *Collected Poems of Robert Penn Warren*, ed. John Burt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 473. All subsequent references to the poems are to this edition.

⁴Flannery O’Connor, “Writing Short Stories,” in *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Robert Fitzgerald and Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 91.

persona suggests that speech and sound are powerless tools to describe the world. “Fiction writing,” according to Flannery O’Connor, “is very seldom a matter of saying things; it is a matter of showing things” (93). In a similar manner, “Language Barrier” proposes a world that can be apprehended only through sight. And, indeed, the opening lines are essentially visual. The landscape is conveyed through reflections and colors:

Snow-glitter, snow-gleam, all snow-peaks
Scream joy to the sun. Green
Far below lies, shelved where a great *cirque* is blue, bluest
Of waters, face upward to sky-flaming blue.

(420)

The first line of the poem conjures up the painter’s craft by emphasizing the play of light. The compressed grammar structure—“snow-glitter, snow-gleam”—defines snow as an optical device. Its unique quality seems to be to glisten. The structure of the line, based on the triple repetition of “snow” (“Snow-glitter, snow-gleam, all snow-peaks”), also suggests that “glitter,” “gleam,” and “peaks” are synonymous. It thus provides a representation in terms of light. This pictorial effect is further enhanced by the contrast between the brightness of the peaks and the “shadow” of the lower ground (“where snow / Lingers only in shadow”).

As in a painting, the contrast of light and shadow, which first attracts the reader’s/viewer’s attention, is completed by touches of color. The poem becomes a canvas on which colors can be brought out. Indeed, the line-breaks isolate the words “Green” and “blue, bluest” on the page. The effect is that of a paint brush adding touches of color to the landscape.

This double emphasis on light and colors is emblematic of Warren’s poetry. Nowhere is it clearer perhaps than in “A Problem in Spatial Composition” (*Or Else: Poem/Poems 1968-1974*).⁵ The title urges a pictorial reading of the poem, and the first line clearly stages the poem as a painting: “Through the high window, upright

⁵My analysis is indebted to Victor Strandberg’s remark that the poem “renders the effect of a painting—or even a motion picture.” *The Poetic Vision of Robert Penn Warren* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 265-266.

rectangle of distance.” The window/rectangle is the frame through which the poem/painting can be viewed. The approach is here deliberately visual. The choice of words points to its intentional nature. Characteristically, “frame” is used in association with “window” (“The hawk / Entering the composition at the upper left frame / Of the window”), and the persona seems to turn into an art critic, commenting on the “perspective” and describing a tree stub “set / In the lower right foreground.” Thus, “A Problem in Spatial Composition” can be read as a comment on the pictorial aspect of the poems.

As in “Language Barrier,” the first focus is on colors. The first section of the poem literally comes to life through a wide range of shades (green, blue, saffron, gray, black):

Over the green interstices and shambling glory, yet bright, of forest,
Distance flees westward, the sun low.

Beyond the distance of forest, hangs that which is blue:
Which is, in knowledge, a tall scarp of stone, gray, but now is,
In the truth of perception, stacked like a mass of blue cumulus.
Blue deepens.

What we know, we know, and
Sun now down, flame, above blue, dies upward forever in
Saffron. . . .

(“XXIV. A Problem in Spatial Composition” 321)

More than the range of colors, what is significant here is the way they are consciously emphasized. Stressed by their accentuated position at the beginning and end of lines, they are also highlighted by unusual poetic groupings such as the one presented in the first line quoted (“the green interstices and shambling glory, yet bright, of forest”). The fact that the language is both precise and stripped contributes further to isolate the colors until what is left on the page is a purely pictorial impression. It is the case, for instance, in “Blue deepens” or in “Sun now down, flame, over blue, dies upward forever in / Saffron.” As a result of the parataxis, the representational aspect is abandoned, leaving the reader/viewer to contemplate the work of the brush on the scenery. What we have here is a painting in progress. As in “Language Barrier,” the persona dwells on “the

blue” in the distance until he obtains the right blue, as if he were a painter trying to find the perfect hue.

Yet this use of the painter’s palette is but one of the elements that brings the scenery to life. More emblematic still than the emphasis on color is the attention paid to its ability to reflect and refract light:

and nothing moves
Across the glister of saffron. . . .
(321)

This glistering saffron is but one light materialized on the poem/canvas. “Bright,” “up-shining,” “glitter”—light is reflected across the “composition.” We touch here the core of Warren’s poetry.

By associating “gleam” with vision, “The Corner of the Eye” gives us a clue as to how to read this play of light. Indeed, the stanza break after “gleam” isolates both “gleam” and “eye” at the end of the lines, suggesting their complementariness. The initial trauma, the fear of blindness and the inevitable darkness that would follow, seems countered by the brightness woven into the poetry. “Synonyms” (*Being Here* 433-436) provides a perfect illustration of that correlation. The mention of burning “eyeballs” introduces a scene described for its glittering optical effects:

Wind tears at my oilskin, spume
Burns eyeballs, but I can yet see
White flash of glitters blown down the sky . . .⁶
(435)

Reflections and Refractions

The glitters and glimmers illuminating the poems deserve closer attention—first, because they stand out. Their prominence is due both to the sheer number of their occurrences and to the “gl” sound

⁶This passage is emblematic in yet another way. With the association “White flash of glitters,” the intensity of the visual scene is matched only by its evanescence. In a similar way, the concluding line of “A Problem in Spatial Composition” suggests this ephemeral quality of vision: “The hawk, in an eyeblink, is gone.” The canvas Warren paints, for all its bright colors, is as fleeting as an eyeblink.

(glitter, glimmer, gleam) which echoes from one poem to another. Through this game of repetition and reverberation, Warren reproduces the optical effect he describes. Indeed, the echo creates something akin to the light-play, attracting the reader's attention just as the light attracts the viewer's eye.

Moreover, if the shimmering lights single out the vision, they also refract it, thereby suggesting a multiplicity of visions and readings which is reminiscent of the effect produced by a mirror. And, indeed, the mirror is a key motif. It is inscribed from the start in the poetry with one of the earliest poems entitled "The Mirror" (published in 1925). It is also the central image of the first poem of the collection *Or Else Poem/Poems 1968-1974* ("I. The Nature of a Mirror"). This introductory position in a collection whose title suggests a single poem, and which ends with "A Problem in Spatial Composition," shows how central the image is. What I want to show here is that the refracted images in the mirror are that of the self.

The "I"

Refracted in "The Mirror" is first, then, the persona's double. This doubling of the self is conveyed through a play between the first and the third person singular:

Erect, meticulously within the mirror
My image postured, combing its black hair.

.....
A man regarding with such an anguished stare
His corpse that combed black hair across its skull.

("The Mirror" 16)

In the first lines, the "I" is diffracted by the reference to the mirror image: "within the mirror / My image." What could appear as a recognition of the self in the mirror, an acknowledgement of "My image," is in fact the first stage of a dissociation. "My image" suggests an external gaze; it conjures up an object foreign to the self, an object which entails the use of the possessive pronoun "its." As such, it is the first step towards the third person "A man"/ "His

corpse." The structure of the lines renders the refraction visible. By placing "My" and "His" at the beginning of line, Warren suggests their symmetry and provides us with the written equivalent of a mirror image. This reflected image is also shown through the slightly distorted reiteration of "combing its black hair," which becomes "combed black hair across its skull." The symmetry is rendered by the chiasmic structure which inverts "its" and "black hair" in the two lines.

The second stanza returns to the first person singular, but it is no unique "I" that Warren proposes, but rather a refracted self⁷:

What frigid and especial stars of old
Converged to lead me out into this street,
Leaving my image in the glass, to see
Again and surely in every face I meet
That accurate implacable and cold
Refraction of my own mortality?

(16)

The structure of the lines, which breaks the logic of the sentence so as to isolate "Leaving my image in the glass, to see," also suggests that what "The Mirror" proposes is an image of the self to be seen ("to see") by the reader.

The physical trauma which gave the writing its initial impulse reappears here through the mirror motif. Indeed, the affirmation of the self, the mere possibility of saying "I" in the poems, seems closely linked with the "eye."

"Garland for You," the first sequence of poems of *You, Emperors, and Others: Poems 1957-1960*, exemplifies this. In "Clearly about You," the first poem of the sequence, the mirror is the device that allows the poet to establish the self, the "you" in this case: "Whoever you are, this poem is clearly about you." This line, in which the persona is addressing an unknown "you," also suggests that the poem is about the pronoun "you." Significantly, the poetic voice's query in the second stanza—"You won't look in the mirror?"—materializes the "you." Indeed, by refusing the

⁷Significantly, the last line of the poem begins with the word "Refraction."

traditional question form (*You won't* instead of *won't you*), Warren conjures up the "You" for his readers:

You won't look in the mirror? Well—but your face is there
Like a face drowned deep under water, mouth askew,
And tongue in that mouth tastes cold water, not sweet air,
And if it could scream in that medium, the scream would be you.
(“Clearly about You” 145)

On the literal level, the reference to the mirror brings about the poetic metaphor of the scream, which announces the birth of the “you.” This birth of the self is corroborated by the structure of the stanza which stages the appearance of the “you” in so far as it begins and ends with “you.”

“The Self that Stares,” the last poem of the section, presents a variation on the same theme. The metonymic substitution of the eye/eyes for the mirror both echoes and completes the first poem of the sequence.

Starting with the alliteration in the title, which doubles the sounds [s] and [θ], “The Self that Stares” progresses by diffractions and reflections, bringing the reader to the conclusion of the poem and the recognition of “the human self”:

Have you seen that brute trapped in your eye
When he realizes that he, too, will die?
Stare into the mirror, stare
At his dawning awareness there.
If man, put razor down, and stare.
If woman, stop lipstick in mid-air.
Yes, pity makes that gleam you gaze through—
Or is that brute pitying you?
Time unwinds like a falling spool.
We have learned little in that *school*.

No, nothing, nothing, is ever learned
Till *school* is out and the books are burned,
And then the *lesson* will be so sweet
All you will long for will be to repeat
All the sad, exciting process
By which ignorance grew less
In all that error and gorgeous pain

That you may not live again.
What is that *lesson*? To recognize
The human self naked in your own eyes.
(153, emphases mine)

The injunction to stare into the mirror (“Stare into the mirror, stare”) seems to initiate the process, in that the doubling of “stare” renders the mirror visible. The second reference to the mirror/eyes is no less emblematic. It displaces the visual symmetry on the acoustic level: “that gleam you gaze through.” Through the alliteration [g], Warren grants the mirror a physical presence, reproducing the visual impact of the gleam through a sound effect. The poem then unfolds through a series of visual and acoustic echoes, which turn it into a poetic mirror. Be it the rimes, the anaphoric constructions (“If man”/ “If woman”; “All you”/ “All the sad”), the repetition of words within a line (“No, nothing, nothing”), the more distant repetitions in the poem (school/lesson/eye), or slightly distorted echoes (pity/pitying), the entire poem seems to be double. The anaphora “If man”/ “If woman” is a case in point. The repetition of “If” is coupled with the echo of *man* (“*man*”/ “*woman*”) to produce a perfect mirror image.

What the poem epitomizes, over and above Warren’s ability to conjure up a mirror for us to see, is that the “human self” depends on its ability to “stare into the mirror.” Only by being refracted into an unstable “you,” “he,” “we” can the self be asserted.

“and I—I stare”⁸

Vision, then, is a key motif of Warren’s poetry, first because sight is the sense through which the poetry unfolds, but also because the poetic voice, the “I” of the poems, depends on sight. The repeated juxtaposition of the “I” and “the eye” in the poems seems to indicate that they are interlaced, almost synonymous, notions. The concluding section of “Synonyms” provides a perfect illustration of this interdependence:

⁸“A Vision: Circa 1880” (159).

There are many things in the world, and I have seen some.
 Some things in the world are beautiful, and I
 Have seen some.

(436)

The passage proposes a poetic variation on the same sentence which I find particularly interesting. On the literal level, vision is what allows the "I" to say itself, to be materialized on the page. And from the point of view of verse structure, the enjambment in the second sentence isolates the "I" on the page, exemplifying the use of line breaks to emphasize the "I." The "eye," then, is the instrument through which the self can assert itself, and the line breaks are the poetic device that renders it tangible. "The Nature of a Mirror" (*Or Else*) and "Self and Non-Self" (*Altitudes and Extensions*) offer two complementary visions which lock the self and the mirror in the same motif and in which the construction of the self ("I," "you are") derives from the mention of the word "eye":

The sky has murder in the eye, and I
 Have murder in the heart, for I
 Am only human.

("The Nature of a Mirror" 271)

Shut
 Your own eyes, and in timelessness you are
 Alone with yourself. You are
 Not certain of identity.
 Has the non-self lived forever?

("Self and Non-Self" 553)

Vision is thus the very core of Warren's poetry, both because his vision is his poetry and because the poetic voice develops from the "eye."